

# A Bridge of Birds - The Original Draft

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## PART ONE: THE DRAGON

### Chapter 1: THERE IS A SLIGHT FLAW IN MY CHARACTER

FAT Fu, One-Eyed Wong, Cut Off Their Balls Wang, and other eminent persons having asked me to set down the entire story of the Bridge of Birds from beginning to end, keeping back nothing but the locations of the duke's treasure troves, since there is treasure still to be lifted, I take up my writing brush and begin my account on the fifteenth day of the eighth moon in the Year of the Dragon 3,337 (A.D. 639) when I walked for the last time toward the outer gates of the Monastery of Sh'u. The abbot was waiting for me. It was the morning of my nineteenth birthday, and he thought for a long time before coming up with the proper words of congratulation. For the last time I watched the familiar flush spread across the abbot's face, and the familiar finger waggle in front of my nose.

"Li Kao," said the abbot, "you were born to be hung."

"Hanged," I said.

"I mean the gallows!" roared the abbot, who had turned quite purple in the face. He went on to say that the flaw in my character ran too deep to be explained by unfortunate parentage, and that in some previous incarnation I must have been a rabid jackal, or a scorpion, or even the notorious East Idiot Ruler of South Tsi. The abbot became rather upset as he reviewed the career of the notorious East Idiot Ruler of South Tsi.

"...and cut off their hands and feet!" yelled the abbot, poking a finger against my chest.

"Venerable One," I said politely, "I could not possibly have been the Notorious East Idiot Ruler of South Tsi. I would have cut off their noses as well."

"...burned right down to the ground!" the abbot bellowed, kicking me in the shins.

"If you must do something, do a thorough job," I said approvingly.

"...every last man, woman, and child!" screamed the abbot in a spray of spittle, as he pounded me upon the shoulders.

"Wasteful," I sighed. "Some of the girls must have been pretty."

Actually I was very fond of the abbot. When the dear old boy began to froth at the mouth and turn blue I picked up the bucket of water which I had thoughtfully brought along and dumped it over his head. "Ten thousand graces for sparing me a heart attack," he sputtered, and after I dried him off he was able to continue in a calmer vein.

"Li Kao, on the occasion of their nineteenth birthdays the novices of the Monastery of Sh'u are presented with the saffron robes of our order, and take the vows of poverty, piety, chastity, and obedience. On this, your nineteenth birthday, I present you with a begging bowl, the robe of a mendicant, and a warning."

The abbot paused for effect.

"There are no accidents in the Great Way of Tao," he said solemnly. "Nothing is wasted, nothing is without purpose, and surely the gods had a reason for placing a rogue such as yourself upon the red dust of earth. I have thought long and hard about this matter, and I have come to the conclusion that somewhere in the world there is a task which can only be performed by a consummate criminal who is completely unburdened by moral principles. If I am correct, you will be called. Mark my words, Li Kao! You will be called, and when you are called you must follow, no matter how difficult and dangerous the path may be. It is my fervent prayer that the path you take will lead you ten thousand miles from the Monastery of Sh'u. Preferably," said the abbot, "to the moon."

And with those comforting words the abbot tottered back into the monastery for a medical examination and I

skipped blithely out into the great land of China to make my fortune. To be specific I skipped toward the bustling little city of Peking. The moon and I share the same birthday, and there is no better place and time to make one's fortune than in Peking during the Moon Festival.

What a glorious day for a festival! "A spring wind is like wine," wrote Chang Chou, "A summer wind is like tea, an autumn wind is like smoke, and a winter wind is like ginger or mustard." The breeze that blew through Peking was tea with a touch of smoke, spiced with the fragrance of plum, poppy, peony, plane tree, lotus, narcissus, orchid, wild rose, and the sweet-smelling leaves of banana and bamboo. The breeze was also full of messages, of course: the twanging of a long tuning fork meant that a barber had set up shop, and a porcelain spoon rapping against a bowl meant that little dumplings in hot syrup were for sale, and clanging copper saucers advertised soft drinks made from wild plums, or sweet and sour crabapples. Crabs, chrysanthemums, melon seeds, chestnuts - each vendor had his special sound, and only a country bumpkin would resort to using his vocal chords. One such was just ahead of me. He was an old peasant who led an ancient ox that pulled a cart that belonged in a museum: a stone-wheeled cart.

"Manure!" he yelled in a high cracked voice. "Fresh manuuuuuuuuuuure!"

"Stone wheels?" another voice faintly said. "Stone wheels?"

The shutters on a window in the second story of a shabby unpainted house crashed open and a man stuck his head out. He had a pair of glittering little pig eyes, a bald and mottled skull, a sharp curving nose like a parrot's beak, the loose flabby lips of a camel, and two huge drooping elephant ears from which sprouted thick tufts of coarse gray hair.

"Great Buddha!" this apparition gasped. "They are stone wheels!"

His head disappeared. I heard his feet clattering down the stairs and his voice bellowing: "Cook! Cook! Don't waste a second!" Then the door crashed open and the fellow dashed out followed by the cook, and they started trotting behind the ancient cart. They carried armloads of kitchen cutlery, which they sharpened against the slowly revolving stone wheels.

"What a bonanza!" the fellow cackled.

"At least two copper coins saved, Master!" cried the cook.

"A million mortifications!" wailed a voice from above.

A young woman had appeared at the upstairs window. She was extremely pretty, and she wore a cheap often-patched dress and an expression of despair as she gazed at the scene below.

"Cook, bring more cutlery!" the fellow screamed. "Bring the hoes and shovels too!"

"Manure!" yelled the peasant. "Fresh manuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuure!"

"One hundred horrible humiliations," the pretty young woman moaned.

Outside the front door, I noticed, cheap incense was burning before cheap statues of the Immortal of Commercial Profits, the Celestial and Venerable Bringer of Lucrative Legacies, the Celestial and Venerable Discoverer of Buried Treasures - all thirty-two greedy deities of the Heavenly Ministry of Wealth.

"Li Kao, you must definitely pay this household a visit." I said to myself, and I made a careful note of the address before strolling on down the street. The cries of the old peasant and the cackles of the greedy miser faded behind me, and the cheerful cacophony of the Moon Festival took over.

I shouldered through the crowds clutching the begging bowl that the abbot had so kindly given me. Men and women laughed and wept in open air theatres, and gamblers screamed and swore around the dice games and cricket fights. Gentlemen basked in the practiced admiration of sing-song girls, or tiptoed into the Alley of Four Hundred Forbidden Delights if they wanted more action. In brightly painted tents beautiful young girls banged drums with sticks as they chanted the Flower Drum Songs, and on every streetcorner I heard professional storytellers raise high-pitched voices:

"Aiiieeeee! Aiieeeee! Come closer, my children! Spread ears like elephants, and I shall tell you the tale of the great Ehr-lang, and of what happened when he was devoured by the hideous Transcendent Pig!"

I hated to tear myself away from the Moon Festival, but I was in a hurry to make my fortune so I asked for the address of the worst wineshop in town and made my way down a dark alley, stepping over dead cats and snoring drunks and other refuse, toward the tattered blue flag that waved above the wineshop of One-Eyed Wong. I stepped through the door and jumped aside, just in time to avoid being struck by a wine jar that hurtled through the air and smashed against the far wall. A thug with a very good jade earring dangling from one chewed earlobe apparently did not approve of the local product.

"You Peking weaklings call that watery piss wine?" he yelled. "Why, back in Soochow we make wine so strong that it knocks you out for a month if you smell it on somebody's breath!"

"We must add more cayenne, my turtle dove," said One-Eyed Wong to his wife, who was mixing the stuff behind the counter.

"Two hundred and twenty-two transcendent miseries!" wailed Fat Fu. "We have run out of cayenne!"

"In that case, O light of my existence, we shall simply substitute mustard flavored with engraving acid," One-Eyed Wong said calmly.

"Truly yours is genius of the highest order, O noble stallion of the bedchamber," cooed Fat Fu.

One-Eyed Wong and Fat Fu play only a tiny role in this account, but they have since become my closest friends.

"You Peking weaklings call these things flies?" yelled the thug with the earring, who was lurching around the room slashing the air with a dagger. "Why, back in Soochow we grow flies so big that we clip their wings, hitch them to plows, and use them for oxen!"

"Perhaps a few flattened flies might add bouquet," One-Eyed Wong said thoughtfully.

"A splendid idea, but we must be careful not to overpower our famous flavor of crushed cockroaches," cautioned Fat Fu.

"I shall leave the blending to your exquisite taste," purred One-Eyed Wong.

The thug with the earring did not approve of me and my begging bowl.

"You Peking weaklings call these midgets men?" he yelled. "Why, back in Soochow we grow men so tall that their heads brush the clouds while their feet are planted on the ground!"

"In my humble village," I said meekly, "we grow men so big that their upper lips lick the stars, while their lower lips nuzzle the earth."

The thug thought about it.

"And where are their bodies?"

"They are like you," I said. "All mouth."

The thug grabbed my begging bowl in order to hit me over the head with it. He was rather surprised when a pair of fake hands and a shoulder harness came along with the bowl. He was even more surprised when my real hands reached out. I sliced off his left ear, and prepared to have a little fun.

"Notice this boy's balanced posture, my pet!" cried One-Eyed Wong.

"Notice how properly he hods his dagger, prepared to strike upward with the thumb alongside the blade!" cried Fat Fu.

"Notice how he turns so that the sun is at his back!" cried One-Eyed Wong.

"Notice how his free hand scoops up a bowl of pepper to fling into the eyes!" cried Fat Fu.

"Mark my words, this boy will be emperor one day!" cried One-Eyed Wong.

I bowed politely.

"My surname is Li and my personal name is Kao and there is a slight flaw in my character," I said.

"My ear," the thug sniffled, and he sat down at a table and began mopping blood.

## Chapter 2: GOATS, GOLD, AND MISER SHEN

AS you have seen I am telling my tale truthfully, leaving out nothing, not even the most embarrassing details, and I will continue in the same fashion by freely admitting that a number of purses and a pearl necklace had somehow fallen into my pockets as I had made my way through the crowds, clutching my begging bowl with a pair of fake hands. I had a use for the pearl necklace. I was rather disappointed to find no more than twenty or thirty gold pieces in the purses, but I also had the thug's jade earring, which was why I had sliced off his ear, and I dropped it on the counter.

"A lovely thing," I said.

"Trash," sneered One-Eyed Wong.

"Cheap Imitation jade," scoffed Fat Fu.

"Worst earring I ever saw," said One-Eyed Wong. "How much?"

"It is yours for a song," I said. "Meaning an elegant suit of clothes, the use of a palatial palanquin, bearers - suitably attired, of course - and a goat."

One-Eyed Wong did some mental addition.

"No goat," he said.

"But I must have a goat."

"This is not that good an earring."

"It does not have to be that good a goat."

"No goat."

"But you not only get an earring, you also get the ear which is still attached to it!"

This added a new dimension. One-Eyed Wong and Fat Fu bent over the counter and examined the bloody ear with great interest.

"This is not a very good ear," One-Eyed Wong said after due deliberation.

"It is a terrible ear," said Fat Fu.

"Absolutely the worst ear I ever saw," said One-Eyed Wong. "Besides what use is it?"

I pointed to the thug, who was still sniffing and mopping blood, and said:

"Look at that vile creature. Imagine the filth that has been whispered into his ugly ears. Now: we will assume that you have an enemy."

"Enemy," said One-Eyed Wong.

"He is a wealthy man, with a country estate."

"Estate," said Fat Fu.

"A stream flows through that estate."

"Stream," said One-Eyed Wong.

"It is midnight," I whispered. "You climb the fence and cleverly elude the dogs. Silent as a shadow you slip to the top of the stream, and you take this revolting ear from your pocket and dip it into the water. Words of such vileness will flow forth that you will poison the fish for miles! Cattle and oxen will drink from the stream and drop dead on the spot! Lush fields of grain irrigated by the stream will wither into bleak desolation! Your enemy's little children will bathe in the stream and acquire leprosy! And all for the price of a goat."

"Ten thousand blessings upon the mother who brought such a boy into the world!" roared Fat Fu, while One-Eyed Wong wiped his eyes with a filthy handkerchief and sniffled: "Sold."

We made quite a splendid little procession as we paraded through the streets. One-Eyed Wong led the way as major domo, resplendent in robes of purple, with a golden girdle. Fat Fu was elegantly yet simply attired in the fashion of

the upper class nursemaids who invariably accompany effete young lords. She rode beside me on the palanquin. "The heat," I moaned. "The stench. The noise." Fat Fu patted my hand and purred, "There there, we shall find a place to stop and rest." As we approached the house I had noted earlier, with the thirty-two statues of the Heavenly Ministry of Wealth propped outside the door, Fat Fu acquainted me with my target.

"Miser Shen owns six different houses in six different cities, eight flourishing businesses, one carriage, one sedan chair, one horse, ten savage guard dogs, three cows, twenty chickens, seven half-starved servants, and one young and beautiful concubine named Pretty Ping. He acquired all of them by foreclosing mortgages. Pretty Ping owns one cheap dress, one cheap coat, one cheap hat, one pair of cheap boots, one pair of cheap sandals, one cheap tin ring, one cheap tortoise shell comb, and enough humiliation to last fifty lifetimes," said Fat Fu.

"I shall do my best to enliven her miserable existence," I said. "Wong, shoot our pigeon down."

One-Eyed Wong banged on the door with a gold-tipped staff until it opened and Miser Shen stuck his unlovely head out.

"A thousand blessings have descended upon you, for Lord Li of Kao is weary and has condescended to rest in your miserable hovel!" bellowed One-Eyed Wong.

"Eh?" said Miser Shen.

I was elegantly attired in a tunic of sea-green silk secured by a silver girdle with a border of jade. The jeweled pendants that dangled from my fine tasseled hat tinkled faintly in the breeze, and I raised anguished aristocratic eyes toward Heaven as I languidly waved my gold-spattered Sze-ch'uen fan.

"The heat," I wailed. "The stench. The noise!"

"Our lord must rest!" Fat Fu cried angrily. She pointed to Miser Shen, and said to One-Eyed Wong, "Pay him something, booby!"

One-Eyed Wong opened a bulging purse and grandly placed a glittering gold piece in Miser Shen's hand.

"Eh?" said Miser Shen.

"Give the knave two gold pieces, since Lord Li of Kao shall also require a suite for his goat," said Fat Fu.

Miser Shen trotted out to the street and gaped at the mangy goat that was tied behind the palanquin, and at the fellow with a bloodstained bandage around his head who pushed a wheelbarrow load of garbage and who kept whimpering: "My ear."

"Eh?" said Miser Shen.

"Give the silly old fool three gold pieces!" snapped Fat Fu. "What does money mean to Lord Li of Kao?"

Miser Shen gaped at the three glittering gold pieces in his hand. He bit them. They were real.

"Your master must be made of gold!" he gasped.

"No," One-Eyed Wong said absent-mindedly as Lord Li of Kao and the mangy goat marched grandly through Miser Shen's front door. "But his goat is."

"Eh?" said Miser Shen.

I waited until I felt a pair of little pig eyes peer at me through a crack in the curtains. Then I fed my goat a shovelful of garbage. This was followed by a pint of castor oil, and shortly an appalling stench arose. I delicately raked through the mess on the floor with a pair of silver tongs, and extracted the two gold coins that had been concealed inside a fish head. I was not pleased.

"What! Only two gold coins?" I cried. "Miserable beast, do not arouse the wrath of Lord Li of Kao!"

I gave Miser Shen time to recover from his swoon, and then I fed my goat another shovelful of garbage and another pint of castor oil. Another appalling stench arose, and this time I extracted four gold coins from the mess.

"What! Only four gold coins? Insolent animal, you know very well that Lord Li of Kao requires four hundred pieces of gold per day in order to live in the style to which he is accustomed!"

After Miser Shen regained consciousness I tried again.

"Six? Six pieces of gold!" I squawked. "Cretinous creature, have you never heard of geometric progression? Two, four, eight, not two, four, six! I shall sell you for dog food and return to the Glittering Glades of Golden Grain for a better goat!"

I gave Miser Shen five minutes, and then I strolled out to see if by any odd chance I could find someone interested in buying a goat. It was so easy that it was boring, but I had not forgotten my promise to enliven the existence of Pretty Ping, and she made a lovely picture indeed as she sat up startled in bed.

"Who are you, sir?" she cried.

I bowed politely.

"My surname is Li and my personal name is Kao and there is a slight flaw in my character," I said.

"But what are you doing in my bedchamber!" cried Pretty Ping.

"I am preparing to spend the night," I said.

"But where is Miser Shen?" cried Pretty Ping.

"Miser Shen is preparing to spend the night with a goat," I said.

"A goat?"

"A very expensive goat."

"A very ex ... but what are you doing?"

"I am undressing."

"I shall scream!" cried Pretty Ping.

"I sincerely hope so," I said, as I clasped the pearl necklace I previously mentioned around her lovely throat.

"Help," said Pretty Ping.

I had left enough gold concealed in the garbage to keep Miser Shen occupied all night, or so I thought, and since we had plenty of time we decided to warm up by playing Fluttering Butterflies, since that is a splendid way to become acquainted with one's partner, so to speak. ("Eat!" screamed Miser Shen from the room below.) After a leisurely discussion of relative merits we decided to proceed with the Kingfisher Union, because it is impossible to perform the Kingfisher Union without becoming close friends. ("Gold!" screamed Miser Shen.) We paused for a cup of wine before cementing our friendship with Phoenix Sporting in the Cinnabar Crevice. ("Eat!" screamed Miser Shen.) By the time we had galloped through Hounds of the Ninth Day of Autumn we were practically soulmates. ("Gold!" screamed Miser Shen.) But I had underestimated Miser Shen, and it was barely midnight when my pigeon began to suspect that he had been plucked.

"What on earth is that appalling stench, most perfect and penetrating of partners?" said Pretty Ping.

"I rather believe that it marks the approach of Miser Shen, O beauty beyond compare," I sighed as I strapped on my moneybelt and stepped into my trousers.

"And what is that angry noise, most tantalizingly tender of tigers?" said Pretty Ping.

"I rather believe that Miser Shen is arming his servants with clubs, O rarest of rose petals," I sighed as I donned tunic, hat, sandals, and gold-spattered Sze-ch'uen fan.

"Buddha protect me! What is that ghastly thing oozing obscenely through the doorway!" howled Pretty Ping.

"I rather believe that it is a mound of goat shit," I sighed, "beneath which you will find Miser Shen. Farewell, O seduction of the universe!" I yelled, and I dove headfirst through the window.

A BRIDGE OF BIRDS - THE ORIGINAL DRAFT

### Chapter 3: A WHISTLE IN THE NIGHT

I had scouted the terrain, of course, and I landed quite safely in some soft shrubbery, and then I was up and away and laughing through the night. To be young and in China! Better yet, to be young and rich in China! I raced through alleys and vaulted fences and climbed over the city walls. I dove into a river and emerged dripping and triumphant on the other side - and it was then that I began to suspect that the love of money could work miracles. It was impossible, yet a head broke water right behind me.

"Bring back my five hundred pieces of gold!" screamed Miser Shen.

I raced through a valley and over a hill, across another valley and up the side of another hill. The sun rose, and a shaft of light shot through the morning mist and sparkled upon a tiny figure jogging determinedly in the distance.

"Bring back my five hundred pieces of gold!" screamed Miser Shen.

I began to climb up a mountainside, and for hours I twisted and turned through dense forests and wriggled through dark ravines. When the sun was high overhead I climbed a tree and peered back. I saw no sign of pursuit, but I heard a strange sniffing noise. Then Miser Shen came crawling on his hands and knees through the underbrush, sniffing the trail like a bloodhound! His eyes stopped at the trunk of the tree, and then moved slowly up, inch by inch. I crashed down, bouncing from branch to branch, and took to my heels again while Miser Shen screamed: "Bring back my five hundred pieces of gold!"

Evening shadows fell, and the clouds turned crimson, and I climbed higher and higher in the mountains. Miser Shen was finding it hard to keep up. Now and again I would see his tiny figure far below me, and I would faintly hear, "bring...back...my...", but he fell farther and farther behind, and when the sun set and the moon rose I had finally lost him.

By then I was lost myself. I was somewhere in the mountains, but I did not even know which mountains. I was sitting on a rock catching my breath. Above me a silver moon drifted through ten thousand miles of blue-black sky, like a dark pond with a plate of white jade floating across it, as Yang Wan-li once said, and the silence was unnatural. I was wondering what had happened to the crickets and the owls and the small scurrying night creatures when I became aware of a tiny noise. It was so faint and far away that I had to strain with every nerve to make it out.

Someone was whistling. Three notes, two short and one long, repeated over and over, and while I could not explain it I knew precisely what those notes meant. They penetrated to my very soul.

"Come ... to ... meeeeeeeeeeeeeee ... Come... to...meeeeeeeeeeeeeee..."

I suppose that I should have remembered the parting words of the Abbot of the Monastery of Sh'u. "You will be called, and when you are called you must follow, no matter how difficult and dangerous the path may be." I should have remembered, but I did not. I only knew that someone was calling me, and that I must obey, and I slipped my dagger into my hand and stalked the whistler like a tiger stalking a deer.

"Come...to ... meeeeeeeeeeeeeee ... Come...to...meeeeeeeeeeeeeee..."

All night long I followed that strange sound. Sometimes it seemed to be ahead of me, sometimes behind, sometimes to the side, but the whistler never stopped whistling and I never stopped stalking. Then the whistle was close, straight ahead of me. Morning mist was rising. I could barely see my hand in front of my face.

"Come ... to ... meeeeeeeeeeeeeee ... Come ... to ... meeeeeeeeeeeeeee..."

I took two steps forward, and with the third step I walked right out into space. I remember the sensation of falling from a great height, and blows that knocked the breath out of me as I struck the branches of trees, and then there was a terrible crash and everything went black.

When I awoke the sun was shining brightly. I could not understand what seemed so peculiar about that sunlight until I realized that it came from low in the west. The sun was setting, and I had been unconscious for nearly a day. I looked down and discovered that I was lying upon the red-tiled roof of a large building. I looked up and saw the broken branches of the trees that had slowed my fall rising fifty feet up the side of a cliff, and I said out loud:

"Li Kao, it is a miracle that you were not killed!"



The sound of my voice made me aware of a tremendous hustle and bustle all around the building, and when I crawled to the edge of the roof and looked down I found that I was gazing at a truly horrifying spectacle. In fact it was the most terrible scene I had ever witnessed in my life.

Everywhere I looked I saw young men about my own age who were being forced to work like demons! It was like a lunatic outdoor classroom where learned voices incessantly droned: doctors in field hospitals, veterinarians in stables, architects, surveyors, engineers - it was bedlam. Boys hoed furiously in fields and hammered insantly in carpenter shops and pounded like madmen in smithies. There was even a river where one group of boys built a dam while another built a bridge, and as I gaped in stunned disbelief they tore the things down, traded places, and started all over again!

"Faster, you lazy dolts!" roared the slavemasters. "Faster! Faster!"

A dread suspicion tried to creep into my mind but I shoved it aside. I needed more evidence. I found some heavy vines and climbed down the wall and crawled through a window, and I found more evidence than I wanted.

I was in the most ghastly room I had ever seen. It was long and narrow, with two rows of beds lining the walls. The beds were impossibly neat. The chamber pots were aligned with geometric precision. Not one wrinkle could be found in the towels. The desks were spotless. The writing brushes were placed precisely six inches to the left of the inkstones. Nothing in that inhuman room was so much as a quarter inch out of line, and that included the neatly lettered signs that covered the walls: Kung-kuo-yo, tables of merits and demerits. I walked over and examined one of them.

Each Demerit Is To Be Punished By One Stroke of The Birch Rod

Exciting lustful thoughts in oneself 5

Showing one's nakedness when easing nature at night 1

Lewd dreams 2

--If such a dream occasions a lewd action 10

Singing frivolous songs 5

Studying frivolous songs 10

Not yielding the way to a woman in the street 1

--If at the same time one looks at the woman 2

--If one looks longingly at her 5

--If one conceives lewd thoughts about her 10

Entering women's quarters without warning 2

Telling a woman about some love affair 5

--If done in order to excite lustful thoughts 10

Telling smutty stories to a woman 10

--Exception: if one tells such stories in

order to develop the woman's sense of shame none

That dread suspicion was now a certainty, and I felt my heart sink to my sandals, and I slumped weakly to the floor and buried my head in my hands.

"Li Kao," I sobbed, "you were killed in that fall. You are in Hell!"

I will admit that I wept like a baby for a minute or two, but then I managed to get hold of myself. Tales were told about hundreds of heroes who had wound up in Hell but had managed to escape, and if they could do it so could I. I hopped to my feet and tiptoed out the door. As I made my way past the classrooms that lined the long hall I began to get a more favorable impression of Hell. Snatches of lectures reached my interested ears:

"...local customs. Never wear a Confucian hat when passing through Legalist territory. When a Legalist sees a

Confucian hat he promptly snatches it from the wearer's head and pisses in it. Furthermore--"

Invaluable information for spies, I thought.

"...closest attention to scandal. The senile and lecherous Magistrate of Ho, for example, who is well past one hundred and has not a tooth left in his head, employs a small army of beautiful and buxom young mothers and lives entirely on milk. It is also rumored--"

Blackmailers would find that worth knowing, I thought.

"...and our founder's formula for the Fire Drug may be enhanced by the addition of five ounces of dried aconite tubers, five ounces of langtu, two and one half ounces of pitch, one ounce of bamboo fibers, and two ounces of arsenic oxide. If it is necessary to destroy an army of bandits it is permissible to build our founder's terrible flame throwers, Meng huo yu, which--"

What glorious relief! This admirable institution was not Hell at all, but a school for assassins, blackmailers, and spies. It also occurred to me that such a place was bound to have something worth stealing, and an hour later I slipped out a side door with my belly filled with an excellent congee which I had found untended in the kitchen, a huge jar of Mao-t'ai (seventy-three percent alcohol) which I had found untended in the cellar, and a large sack filled with very expensive silver candlesticks which I had found untended in the chapel. The place still swarmed with young men who were working like crazy, but I saw a fence that circled a willow grove on top of a hill and I spied a path on the other side. I climbed the fence and started up the path. In the center of the willow grove I found a clearing which was filled with strange objects. In the center of the clearing was a perfectly round pool of clear spring water. I walked over to the pool and looked down. Lying on the bottom was a bleached white skull, which grinned up at me in a friendly fashion.

Now I knew where I was. Anyone in China would have known. I was gazing at the skull of a man who had been dead for five hundred years, but whose fame would never die. In life he had been one of the greatest geniuses in human history, and in death he had left a mystery which would make him immortal. I was gazing at all that remained of the great Chang Heng.

## **Chapter 4: THE STORY OF CHANG HENG**

ONE-Eyed Wong has traveled to the ends of the earth, and he tells me that in the lands of the barbarians the great Chang Heng is quite unknown. I find this incredible, but it will do no harm to set down the facts for the convenience of barbarians. Civilized people may proceed to the next chapter.

Chang Heng was born in the Year of the Horse 2,776 and beheaded in the Year of the Tiger 2,837 (A.D. 78-139), and he passed the years between by becoming a poet, a painter, a philosopher, an astronomer, a mathematician, a chemist, an inventor, an engineer, and several dozen other things besides. Chang Heng invented the seismograph. He computed the value of pi. He perfected the science of latitude and longitude, and revolutionized navigation and cartography. He built a kite that could carry a man, and then built a two-seater so that the emperor could fly with him. He even built a flying machine called the Bamboo Dragonfly that was self-propelled, the propelling agent being another of Chang Heng's inventions, the Fire Drug. \*

He served the emperors of the Han Dynasty as Jack-of-everything for many years, but then he wearied of public life and retired to the country, where he began to display a talent for eccentricity that was worthy of his genius. The business about clouds, for example.

The poet Yang Wan-li paid Chang Heng a visit and was delighted to report that "Master Chang" as he was known locally had become interested in the emotions and mental processes of clouds, and had built a cloud-watching platform on a cliff above his house. He was aided in his research by the village idiot, a lad called Number Ten Ox. Chang Heng was convinced that Number Ten Ox had been an exceptionally keen-nosed dog in a previous incarnation, and on days of good omen the genius and the idiot would climb the path to Cloud Nest and sit cross-legged upon the platform. Sooner or later Ox's nostrils would twitch, and he would point to a perfectly clear patch of sky and say:

"Clouds."

Ox was never wrong. Clouds would immediately drift into view, and Chang Heng would say:

"Where have they come from, Number Ten Ox?"

This caused a furious twitching of nostrils.

"Camphor wood...cedar...cinnamon...catalpa...gold...tin...lead... pearls...cinnabar...tortoise shells...elephant tusks...hides...rhinoceros horn..."

"Aha! Clouds visiting us from the province of Kiangnan!" the great Chang Heng would exclaim. "The area south of the Yangtse, of course."

Then they would rise and clasp their hands together and bow, and courteously invite their visitors to stop and rest on Cloud Nest. Number Ten Ox would explain what the clouds were thinking and feeling - he was never wrong - and Chang Heng would jot down the salient points in his notebook, and then he would try to release his soul and send it soaring to the sky, and imagine what he would think and feel if he were reborn as a cloud. When the sun began to set the genius and the idiot would say farewell to their guests and pick some wildflowers and open a jar of wine, and this is the song they sang as they danced back down the path.

"Master Chang of Orchid Stream

ate orchids every day and drank water from the stream.

But his lotus-leaf robe was getting dusty,

so he moved to the west, west of Dragon Mountain."

Then they would do the dragon dance, strewing wine and wildflowers hither and yon. This was Ox's great moment. He was totally uninhibited and Chang Heng swore that you could actually see flames spurt from the boy's nostrils as he bounded over boulders, and that his dragon screech could curl hair a mile away.

"One clear morning he put on straw sandals

and climbed to the mountain top;

there he saw a shred of cloud emerging from a rock.

Quickly he grabbed the cloud like a ball of cotton  
and stuffed it in his shirt so it couldn't get away.  
But a moment later the cloud escaped,  
expanded, and filled the clear sky.  
Then the Cloud God began to tease Master Chang,  
spreading it out like a huge curtain,  
drawing it together like a robe.  
He took Master Chang by the hand and led him to the Cloud Nest  
where there was no sky above, and no earth below.  
Suddenly the Thunder Goddess cried out!  
Astonished, Master Chang saw that the Cloud Nest had disappeared.  
So he went home and built a nest of his own,  
and every night the clouds came there to rest."

Chang Heng was also interested in rocks.

The great artist Mi Fei reported that Chang Heng was walking in the hills one day and came face to face with an exceptionally craggy and powerful boulder. Back came Chang Heng, racing like a greyhound. He hastily changed into full ceremonial robes, scooped up incense and offerings, raced back, prostrated himself before the boulder, banged his head against the ground three times, and bellowed: "Ten thousand delights to see you again, Great Grandfather!"

A genius who talked to clouds and kowtowed before boulders and danced with village idiots was bound to become a folk hero, but Chang Heng went one step farther when he founded his academy.

This was an age in which education was reserved for the privileged and was viewed as a path toward wealth and power (nothing much has changed, come to think of it) yet the Academy of Chang Heng took in poor but intelligent peasant boys at no charge, and educated them in skills which had practical applications. They were taught law, medicine, accounting, engineering, farm management, animal husbandry and so forth, and when they graduated they were given simple scholars' robes and a few instruments and were sent out to aid the peasants of China in any way they could, asking in return nothing but a meal and a bed. To the illiterate peasantry these wandering scholars came straight from Heaven, and Chang Heng the folk hero became Chang Heng the folk deity.

When a folk deity dies it is the duty of the peasants to invent a story about him that will keep his memory alive for a thousand years. In the case of Chang Heng they came up with a masterpiece.

One day the great Chang Heng was flying over China on his magical kite (so the story goes) when he saw a group of weeping peasants in a valley below. He landed and asked what was the matter.

"O great and mighty Master Chang," they wailed, "the terrible White Serpent who lives in the Mysterious Mountain Cavern of Winds has carried off sixty-six beautiful virgins! We can do nothing about it, because the White Serpent is the most powerful creature on earth!"

"We will see about that," said Chang Heng.

The great man mounted his magical kite and flew to the top of the mountain and sailed into the Mysterious Mountain Cavern of Winds, roaring a bloodcurdling battle cry. It was a terrible fight and several times Chang Heng was nearly bested, but at last he taunted the beast by saying that it was too clumsy to perform the simplest tasks, like putting its tail in its mouth. The White Serpent promptly did so, and in a flash Chang Heng whipped off his belt, tied the terrible jaws together, and rolled the reptile down the mountain like a hoop. The White Serpent gouged a path across China that later filled with water and became the Sungari River, hit a bump, sailed clear across Korea, and landed with a monstrous splash in the Yellow Sea.

No one can possibly doubt the truth of the tale. The Sungari still flows, and the mound of mud beneath which the

White Serpent lies is the island of Cheju, which you can see with your own eyes sitting off the coast of Korea to this very day.

Chang Heng freed the sixty-six cheering virgins and sent them back to their families laden with treasure from the White Serpent's hoard, but he did not return with them because he had found something interesting. At the rear of the cavern was a staircase that led down to Hell. Chang Heng descended the 116,787 1/2 steps (the earth is a square 233,575 steps in diameter) to the principal city of Feng-tu, and in the Court of the First Yama King he discovered Nieh-ching-t'ai, the Mirror of Past Existences before which the dead must stand, and which reveals the details of their previous incarnations and allows the Yama Kings to judge whether they have deserved Heaven, Hell, or another spin around the Great Wheel of Transmigrations.

Chang Heng studied this mirror with great interest. Then he climbed back up the steps to the Mysterious Mountain Cavern of Winds, mounted his magical kite, and flew back to his academy.

High on a hill behind the Academy of Chang Heng was a willow grove, in the center of which was a perfectly round pool of clear spring water. The great man set to work, and in no time he had transformed the pool into a Mirror of Past Existences of his own! He was delighted to discover that his assistant headmaster had once been a mentally deficient hyena, and even more delighted to discover that he himself had once been the most popular singsong girl in Hantan. But genius is never satisfied, and Chang Heng decided to improve the Pool of Past Existences.

Now the stories vary. Some say that Chang Heng improved his pool until it could show future as well as past existences, and informed a group of visiting peasants that the academy's cook would be reborn as a three-toed sloth, while an exceptionally irksome mosquito was destined to become "the loathsome Dog-Meat General of Wusan!" Other stories deny this, but all agree on one thing: the great Chang Heng fiddled with his pool until it could also be used as a mirror, and that mirror reflected nothing less than Heaven itself.

Chang Heng gazed into the mirror. He recoiled in horror, "Something has gone wrong in Heaven!" yelled Chang Heng. What did he mean? No one knew, but apparently what had gone wrong in Heaven could be set right on earth, because the great Chang Heng packed some food and wine and mounted his magical kite, and flew off into the sunset with a very determined expression on his face.

Now the mystery begins.

A month later he was seen in a tavern near the Castle of the Labyrinth. The table was covered with incomprehensible mathematical formulae and geometric designs, and he was asked what he was doing.

"I am searching," said Chang Heng, "for a little crystal ball."

Two months later he was seen in north China, near the terrible Desert of Salt. He was studying a collection of mazes that he had constructed from loose Salt, and he was asked what he was doing.

"I am trying to find a small bronze bell," he said.

Three more months passed. Then the great man was seen sitting upon a tombstone in an abandoned cemetery near the Great Wall. "What is alive is actually dead, and yet it isn't," he was muttering. "What appears to be a dwelling is actually not, and yet it is." He was asked what on earth he was doing.

"I am looking for a tiny silver flute," he said.

The next time he was seen he was in a foul mood.

"This is ridiculous," he snarled. "How can I possibly find a single raindrop hidden in a thunderstorm? A single petal hidden in a field of flowers? A single grain of sand concealed among a billion on a beach?"

He addressed this to a Buddhist monk whom he encountered upon a mountain path, and he shook his fist and yelled to the startled bonze: "But I will never give up! Never! In your prayers kindly inform the Emperor of Heaven that Chang Heng is on the trail, and that Chang Heng will not give up!"

The great man walked on. Then he stopped, turned, and said quietly:

"I swear by all that is holy that the sky will fill with falling stars when we see the beautiful Bridge of Birds."

That baffling comment is the next to last that Chang Heng is known to have made. Three weeks later the Duke of

Ch'in came roaring from the Castle of the Labyrinth with his entire army. The Han Dynasty prepared to fight for its life, but the duke was not after an empire. He was after a man, and he found him. Apparently Chang Heng had come nearly full circle on his mysterious quest, because the duke's soldiers caught up with him as he was drinking from a well not twenty miles from his academy. The duke was so eager to see that the executioner made no mistake that he squatted in his gray gauze-covered litter practically on top of the chopping block, and to this day the peasants of China swear that when the executioner raised his axe the great Chang Heng turned scornful eyes to the Duke of Ch'in and uttered these memorable last words:

"I hope I splatter blood all over you, you son of a sow!"

The axe fell. The severed head of Chang Heng was carried back to his academy and pitched into the Pool of Past Existences. The academy was burned to the ground; the teachers and students were massacred. Then the Duke of Ch'in went snarling back to the Castle of the Labyrinth and that, it would appear, was that.

But not to the peasants. Chang Heng may have lost his head, but he was still a folk deity. As the years passed the succeeding Dukes of Ch'in lost interest in the Academy of Chang Heng and it was rebuilt. Once more the graduates were sent out to aid the peasants of China, and the peasants responded in the only way they could.

"Chang Heng is not dead!" they said. "His spirit still lives in his marvelous pool, and one day he will complete his mysterious quest. Chang Heng will find the crystal ball and the bronze bell and the silver flute. He will find the raindrop in the thunderstorm and the petal in the field of flowers and the grain of sand concealed among a billion on a beach."

Nothing on earth is quite so stubborn as a Chinese peasant. For five hundred years they told the story of Chang Heng to their wide-eyed children, and for five hundred years they slammed their fists on tables and yelled: "And the sky will fill with falling stars when we see the beautiful Bridge of Birds!"

The beauty of the story was that it was unfinished. The idea was to keep the memory of a folk deity alive, and how could you forget Chang Heng so long as his mysterious quest was incomplete? It would certainly remain incomplete throughout eternity. Four days before he died Chang Heng sat at a table in an inn, and in the first light of dawn he wrote a little song. It is the last thing that he is known to have written. Remember that he tried to find a single raindrop hidden in a thunderstorm, and that he failed. If Chang Heng could not find a raindrop, who could?

"The river is clear and calm;

    a fast rain falls in the gorge.

At midnight the cold splashing sound begins,

like thousands of pearls spilling onto a glass plate,

each drop penetrating the bone.

"In my dream I scratch my head and get up to listen.

I listen and listen, until the dawn.

All my life I have heard rain,

and I am an old man;

but now for the first time I understand

the sound of spring rain

on the river at night."

\* Black powder. One cannot help wondering what the history of the world might have been like had Chinese civilization continued to build upon the foundations laid by Chang Heng, but China experienced Dark Ages that made those of the West seem enlightened. When the famous Jesuit missionary and amateur astronomer Matteo Ricci entered China in the late sixteenth century he was astounded to discover astronomical instruments far in advance of anything known in Europe which had been invented by Chang Heng fifteen hundred years before. He was even more astounded to discover that not one person in China knew how to use them, or even what they had been used for. The list of Chang Heng's accomplishments, incidentally, is absolutely true. In fact it is incomplete,

because a full list of his inventions and discoveries would fill ten pages.

## **Chapter 5: THE WORST DAMN MONGREL IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD**

GREETINGS, most noble and illustrious and very probably crazy as a hoot owl Chang Heng!" I said. "Have you been whistling for me?"

Of course I did not really believe that the skull of a man who had been dead for five hundred years had produced that strange sound. Somebody had been whistling and when I found him I was going to cut out his tripe - after all, he had nearly killed me - but at the moment I had something more important to think about.

I had stumbled upon a fortune!

The Pool of Past Existences had become a shrine to the great Chang Heng. His famous inventions and designs were placed all around the clearing, and they had been constructed without regard to cost: copper, bronze, gold, silver, the most exotic steels - even the designs for his man carrying kites and for the Bamboo Dragonfly were engraved upon sheets of the purest copper I had ever seen. Priceless! I dropped my sack of silver candlesticks and raced around the clearing trying to lift those treasures, but I could not budge them.

"A thousand curses! I shall need at least twenty men, some carts, oxen, and a derrick!" I snarled.

There was nothing I could do about it at the moment, so I took a slower circle around the clearing. The extraordinary thing about Chang Heng's inventions was the simplicity of concept, I decided. Even the Bamboo Dragonfly was simple - although damned dangerous - and the kites could be built by anybody who had some silk and a few pieces of bamboo for the frames. I will describe one invention in detail in order to give an idea of Chang Heng's workmanship.

His famous seismograph was a large copper kettle about eight feet in diameter, with a finely detailed map of China engraved upon the lid. Eight bronze dragon heads were placed around the rim of the kettle facing the eight points of the compass, and each dragon held an iron ball between its movable jaws. Beneath the dragons, eight bronze frogs lifted their gaping mouths, and inside each frog was a bell. Inside the kettle was a delicately balanced pendulum, which was connected by levers to the jaws of the dragons. When an earthquake occurred the pendulum swung, the levers opened the mouth of the dragon that faced the direction of the tremor, and the metal ball fell into the mouth of the frog and rang the bell.

At the Monastery of Sh'u I had been taught that Chang Heng's seismograph was the world's first delicate scientific instrument which was self-operating and permanently in place. It did not even need to be watched, so long as someone stayed within earshot of the bells. It was so delicately balanced that it could register a shock clear across China, and then the attendant simply aligned the dragon's eyes with the map of China on the lid and asked the authorities to send help to whichever province was in trouble. Copies of the seismograph were placed in every corner of the empire, and over the centuries they were said to have saved more than ten million lives.

I strolled back to the pool. "Chang Heng, you were quite a man," I said admiringly, and the skull grinned up at me through the water. "You cannot possibly have enjoyed nothing but water for five hundred years," I said. I opened the jar of wine I had stolen and poured some into the pool. "Kan pei!" I said, ("dry cup!") and I sat down and lifted the jar to my lips. I felt no inclination to leave.

A warm fragrant breeze rustled the leaves. The clouds turned crimson and gold, and birds sang sunset songs, and I felt a rather pleasant melancholy settle upon my soul as I watched the sun go down and the moon come up. After sipping wine for an hour or so I felt the need for intelligent conversation.

"My surname is Li and my personal name is Kao and there is a slight flaw in my character," I said to the skull in the pool. "Oddly enough we have something in common. You were beheaded by a Duke of Ch'in and I was orphaned by a Duke of Ch'in. The Dukes of Ch'in, in case you are curious, continue to squat in the Castle of the Labyrinth like huge venomous toads."

I rather liked the phrase and repeated it several times, but Mao-t'ai can do strange things to your tongue. Sometimes it came out "huge venomous toads" and sometimes "tuge henemous voads". I preferred the latter.

"Mine is a very touching story, and wonderfully dramatic," I said. "Picture, if you will be so kind, a dark and



stormy night. The wind howls and rain falls in torrents. Lightning streaks the sky, and thunder growls like ten thousand dragons. A wagon drawn by two mules clatters at a suicidal rate down a mountain path, and behind the wagon comes the most dreaded sound in China: the high-pitched hunting horns of the horsemen of the Duke of Ch'in. Have another drink."

I poured more wine into the pool. Oddly enough I could still see the skull quite clearly even though it was night. The pool shone with some strange inner light. "Phosphorescence," I said to myself, for although I had never seen that phenomenon I had heard of it.

"Suddenly a volley of arrows shoots into the night!" I said. "One of the mules lurches, and the wagon crashes into a ditch! A wounded man and a pregnant woman crawl from the wreckage. Apparently the duke's soldiers are after the large canvas sack that the woman carries, because the man attempts to take it from her - hoping that she can escape while the soldiers attack him, no doubt - but the woman is equally brave, and refuses to relinquish the sack. They are still tugging back and forth when the soldiers ride up. Another volley of arrows kills the man outright, and the woman is forced to drop the sack and crawl away with an arrow protruding from beneath her left shoulderblade. Mother!" I sobbed. "Father!"

Had I pleased them? Did their spirits consider me to be a dutiful son? I rather thought that my parents were proud of me, but it would be nice to be sure.

"My mother crawled up a narrow path that led to the Monastery of Sh'u," I sniffled. "She carried her passport with her, because the arrow beneath her shoulderblade was stamped with the tiger emblem of the Duke of Ch'in, and the monks would do anything to help an enemy of the duke. And so it came to pass that with the first light of dawn the thin faint wall of a new-born babe lifted above the solemn gray walls of the Monastery of Sh'u. The midwife had worked a miracle to save me, but nothing could be done for my mother. The abbot wiped the perspiration from her brow and said:

"Brave soul. Brave rebel against the evil Duke of Ch'in."

"The midwife held up my tiny wailing form and said:

"A thousand blessings, my lady. You have given birth to a healthy son.'

"Mother's nostrils twitched. She opened her eyes. With an incredible effort she raised a hand, and pointed to the midwife and said" 'Kao...Kao...Li...Li...'

"I understand, my daughter,' said the abbot. 'Your son shall be named Li Kao.'

"Kao', my mother whispered. 'Kao...Kao...Li...Li...'"

"I hear, my daughter,' said the abbot. 'Here in the Monastery of Sh'u your son shall be safe from the Duke of Ch'in. I shall raise Li Kao as my own, and I shall place his tiny feet upon the True Path. Li Kao shall be instructed in the Five Virtues and excellent Doctrines, and at the end of his blameless life he shall pass through the Gates of the Great Void into the Blessed Regions of Purified Semblance.'

"For a moment my mother's eyes blazed with a strong emotion which strangely resembled fury, but her strength was spent, and her eyes closed and her hand fell back to the bed, and a moment later her spirit passed from the red dust of earth. The midwife, who was overcome with grief, reached into her robes and whipped out a goatskin flask and drank deeply, which seems like a very good idea."

I poured more wine into the pool and lifted the jar to my lips.

"When the abbot smelled the odor from the midwife's flask," I said, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, "he was suddenly beset by doubts. That horrible smell could only come from one of the most effective paint removers ever invented: a wine called Kao-liang. Repeat: Kao-liang. Was it possible that the dying woman had not been naming a baby but demanding a snort? Indeed it was possible, and it further transpired that my parents had been pursued by the duke's soldiers not because they were rebels, but because they had stolen the regimental payroll. They were the most notorious crooks in all China, and mother could have escaped quite easily if she had not battled father for the loot. When these facts were learned the monks advised exposing me upon a hill for the tigers, but the abbot had vowed to raise me as his own, and he stood by his vow. I fear that the dear old boy regretted it."

Heredity is a remarkable thing, I thought. I had never known my parents, yet at the tender age of three I had stolen the abbot's silver belt buckle. When I was five I stole the abbot's jade inkstone. When I was seven I stole the gold tassels from the abbot's best hat, a feat of which I am still proud since the abbot was wearing the hat at the time. When I was eleven I stole the abbot's bronze incense burner, slipped off to town and traded it for a jar of wine, and got royally drunk in the Alley of Flies. When I was thirteen...

"You know," I said thoughtfully, "the Abbot of the Monastery of Sh'u does not believe that the slight flaw in my character is caused by heredity in the normal sense. He believes that in some previous incarnation I was a rabid jackal, or a scorpion, or even the notorious East Idiot Ruler of South Tsi".

Mao-t'ai is very dangerous wine indeed.

"The abbot is a very wise man," said a voice that came from nowhere and from everywhere, "but you were far more faithful than a rabid jackal, and far more dangerous than a scorpion, and far more important than the East Idiot Ruler of South Tsi, and I have been calling you for five hundred years."

I hastily heaved that deadly wine jar away, but the damage had already been done. As I gaped at the pool I saw the skull of Chang Heng slowly disappear, and the surface of the pool turn shiny, and my own pop-eyed face reflected. Then another face began to form around mine. When the picture became complete I jumped indignantly to my feet.

"That is not even a good dog!" I yelled. "Its ears are chewed, its tail has been bitten off, one eye has been gouged out, and its body bears the scars of a thousand bloody battles in back alloys! Is somebody suggesting that I was once the worst damn mongrel in the history of the world? Outrageous!" I yelled. "Out-rageous!"

The stars were whirling around in sickening circles, and I was in great danger of being beamed by the moon. The next thing I knew I was lying flat on my back on the grass, gazing groggily at the branch of a tree. But that murderous wine had only begun to befuddle my brain. Poof! The branch had turned into a man.

He had a thin intelligent face and a finely hooked nose and a long gray beard. His eyes shone with some strange inner light. He wore tall Confucian hat and an old-fashioned robe with sleeves big enough to hold a couple of barrels of wine, and he was laughing his head off. He looked down at me and laughed until he choked, and he gasped:

"Never in five centuries have I dared to hope that you would turn out this well. Li Kao, you are perfect!"

Finally he got the laughter out of his system. This hallucination looked down at me rather sadly, and said:

"Li Kao, I can only guide you. I cannot help you. You alone in all the world can find what I could not, and it is a difficult and dangerous path you must follow. There are terrible perils, and heartbreak, and horror, but at the end of the path lies beauty. Beauty beyond mortal imagination, and glory beyond comprehension. Li Kao, I am going to send you to a dragon, and you must follow that dragon."

The figure began to fade, and the quiet voice faded along with it:

"Follow the dragon...follow the dragon...follow the dragon..."

Then I was gazing at the branch of a tree. The soft breeze rustled the leaves, and crickets chirped, and an owl drifted across the face of the bright yellow moon. Far above me the Great River of Stars sparkled like a necklace of diamonds draped around the black velvet throat of the sky.

"Outrageous," I muttered, and then I passed out cold.

## **Chapter 6: AT THE HOUSE OF THE ANCESTRESS**

I awoke to a hot sun, a head like a smithy, and a mouth like a glue factory. "Wine!" I croaked, as I crawled toward the jar. Fortunately there was quite a lot left in the jar, and after the tenth swig the hammers stopped pounding inside my skull. I had more sense than to try an eleventh swig.

"Worst damn mongrel in the history of the world," I growled, glaring at the skull in the pool.

But it was not the fault of a skull that I had hallucinated. I made a careful note of the manufacturer of that wine, and vowed to pay him a visit some day. The thought of slitting the bastard's throat cheered me up immensely, and my recovery was complete when I remembered the treasure that stood all around me, just begging to be lifted. I poured the rest of the wine into the pool.

"I promise to bring a better brand of wine when I return with twenty men, some carts, oxen, and a derrick," I said to the skull of Chang Heng. "Kan pei!"

I scooped up my sack of silver candlesticks and skipped back down the path without a care in the world. The masters and students of the Academy of Chang Heng were still killing themselves with productive human activity, and it was no great trick to slip past the damn fools and climb a winding path to the top of the cliff. Then I set off across the hills.

A storm was brewing. In an hour the sky was completely dark, and then a heavy rain began to fall. I needed to find the nearest town where I could rent a derrick, and when I peered through the rain and saw a carriage and a group of people on a road at the base of the hill I was crossing I decided to go down and ask for directions.

I have only the haziest recollection of what happened then. The rain had turned the hill into slippery mud, and half-way down I slipped, scooted over the mud like a sled sliding over snow, hit a bump, sailed out into space, and landed with a terrible crash right in the center of chaos. Meaning that I landed right in the center of that carriage, which was filled with half-naked women who were screaming their heads off. I was admiring a very pretty jade pendant - as well as the pair of very pretty pink-tipped breasts that the pendant was dangling between - when a club bounced off my shoulder. I belatedly realized that the young lady and her friends were merely being robbed and raped by a gang of highwaymen, and I yelled: "Stop! Friend! Friend!" But the thugs paid no attention, so I had no choice but to grab the heaviest of the silver candlesticks and begin flailing in all directions.

"Base-born knaves!" I roared. "You dare to attack the greatness of Lord Li of Kao?"

I believe that I did quite a lot of damage in the following few minutes but I have no memory of it. The next thing I remember is waking up in a very expensive bed in a very expensive room surrounded by a bunch of very expensive women who were battling for the honor of bathing the bump on my skull.

"He wakes!" they shrieked. "Lord Li of Kao opens his divine eyes!"

"If you do not stop that ghastly racket Lord Li of Kao will strangle you with his divine hands," I groaned.

The babble continued, and I gradually began to realize that I had held off the bandits until help arrived, and that the high esteem in which I was therefore held was not diminished by the fact that I was attired in a tunic of sea-green silk secured by a silver girdle with a border of jade, and a fine tasseled hat, and a gold-spattered Sze-ch'uen fan, and wore a moneybelt which held fully five hundred pieces of gold, and carried a sackful of expensive silver candlesticks. Pious offerings, no doubt, to the temples that I passed on my travels. I was slightly confused by the word "bridegroom", and I was about to ask what they meant by that when the women suddenly fell silent.

They turned deathly pale. Then they fell on their knees facing the door and began banging their heads against the floor, and I heard heavy footsteps approaching and I whiffed a revolting odor of rotting flesh.

The door crashed open. The woman who plodded into the room weighed approximately five hundred pounds and possessed sixteen chins, tiny glittering eyes encased in folds of fat, bad breath, and a large moustache. This obscene creature marched up to me and grabbed my chin with fingers like decayed sausages and examined my face.

"Satisfactory," she wheezed.

She jerked the covers down and prodded my biceps.

"Satisfactory," she wheezed.

She jerked the covers down farther and poked my chest.

"Satisfactory," she wheezed.

She jerked the covers all the way down and examined my private parts.

"Satisfactory," she wheezed.

Then she stepped back and leveled a finger at me.

"They call you Lord Li of Kao," she grunted. "I have never heard of Kao. Probably it does not exist. Probably you are some sort of low criminal. No matter. You are acceptable to my granddaughter. It appears that you saved her from rape and ruin, and I want great grandchildren. As soon as you recover from your wounds you will wed my granddaughter and present me with seven great grandchildren. They will be boys. I intend to overthrow the T'ang Dynasty and restore the Sui, and boys are more suitable for the purpose. After the wedding you will leave this miserable little farm and accompany me to my palace in Tsingtao. In the meantime you are not to annoy me by showing your silly face any more than is absolutely necessary, and you are not to speak in my presence unless ordered to do so. One those rare occasions you will address me as Ancestress. Insolence in my household is punishable by decapitation," she wheezed, and then she plodded back out to the hall and slammed the door behind her.

In an instant I was out of bed and climbing out the window. The view made me pause. This "miserable little farm" as the Ancestress called it stretched for miles in all directions. I counted at least eight ornamental lakes decorating eight fantastic pleasure gardens, and the grooms in the stables - which could have supplied a regiment of cavalry - wore the sort of clothes which I had always associated with royalty. There were six lesser mansions and quarters for two hundred servants, and I hopped back into bed and pulled up the covers.

"Li Kao," I said to myself. "Someday all this will be yours!"

As the days passed my dream of marrying for money began to take on the aspect of a nightmare. The first warning came from my future father-in-law, whose name was Ho Wen.

He was the palest little fellow I had ever seen - even his eyes were a pale watery gray - and he was a mass of nervous twitches and terrified jerks. He was entitled to wear the little gold rose, which meant that he had passed first in all China in the imperial chin-shih examination, but was he addressed as Master Ho? Venerable Scholar Ho? Most-Learned-Of-Mortals Ho? Not exactly. He was addressed as Henpecked Ho, his status was slightly lower than that of the boy who carried away the night soil, and he lived in mortal fear of the Ancestress, his wife, her seven fat sisters, his daughter, and most of the servants. What this did to his scholarly mind may be judged by the answer that I received when I asked the name of a nearby mountain. Ho took a deep breath.

"The sacred mountains are five in number: Hengshan, Changshan, Huashan, Taishan, and Sungshan, with Taishan leading in rank and Sungshan in the center," he said. "Mountains not sacred but very distinguished include Wuyi, Wutang, Tienmu, Tienchu, Tienmuh, Niushu, Omei, Shiunherh, Chichu, Chihua, Kungtung, Chunyu, Yentang, Tientai, Lungmen, Kueiku, Chiuyi, Shiherh, Pakung, Huchiu, Wolung, Niuchu, Paotu, Peiyo, Huangshan, Pichi, Chinshu, Liangfu, Shuanglang, Maku, Tulu, Peiku, Chinshan, Chiaoshan, and Chungnan. Since the mountain you refer to is none of these--"

"Ho," I moaned.

"--it might not be too rash to assume that it is Kuangfu, although I would not wish to be quoted in the presence of the Ancestress since the slightest mistake can mean instant decapitation."

I decided that I had to risk another question.

"Ho, I am a trifle worried about the sanity of the Ancestress," I said. "Have I gone deaf or did I hear her say that she intended to overthrow the T'ang Dynasty and restore the Sui?"

"But she is quite serious, dear boy. In her day the Ancestress was the Sui Dynasty," said Henpecked Ho. "To be precise she was Emperor Wen's Number Three Wife. But one day the emperor refused to buy her something that she wanted, so she poisoned him, strangled his other wives and concubines, decapitated all but the youngest of his

sons, elevated that weakling to the throne as Emperor Yang, married him, and settled down behind the scenes as the real ruler of China. Her reign was brief, but gorgeous.

"The Ancestress set about bankrupting the empire by decreeing that whenever a leaf fell in any of the imperial pleasure gardens it must be replaced by an artificial leaf fashioned from the costliest silk. When she decided that she needed a suitably imperial pleasure pond for her imperial pleasure barge - 230 feet long, four decks, 120 cabins decorated in gold and jade, and a three story throne room - she conscripted 3,600,000 peasants and had them link the Yellow and Yangtse Rivers by digging a ditch forty feet deep, fifty yards wide, and six hundred miles long. The Grand Canal has since proved to be invaluable for commerce, but what the Ancestress liked about it was that a half million men dropped dead in that ditch in one summer alone, and the total death count, counting starvation among the peasants who were forced to feed the workers, approached three million.

"When the canal was completed the Ancestress invited a few friends to accompany her on an important mission of state to Yangchow. The fleet of barges stretched stem to stern for sixty miles, was manned by 9,000 boatmen, and was towed by 80,000 peasants, some of whom survived. The important mission of state in Yangchow was to watch the famous moonflowers bloom. Poor little Emperor Yang did not see the moonflowers. He realized that the deeds of the Ancestress were being performed in his name, and he spent the entire trip gazing into the mirror which his faithful old nurse held ready at all times. 'What an excellent head,' he sobbed. 'I wonder who will chop it off?' The chopping was performed by the great hero Li Shih-min, who adopted the Imperial name T'ang T'ai-tsung and who sits up on the throne today. T'ang shows every sign of becoming the greatest emperor in history, but I must humbly insist that he made a grave mistake when he assumed that the excesses of the Sui Dynasty were the fault of little Yang, and allowed the Ancestress to retire in luxury."

Henpecked Ho paused to catch his breath. Then he said thoughtfully:

"I often think of poor little Emperor Yang. While the Ancestress was amusing herself by bankrupting the empire, the emperor was amusing himself with the only recreation she allowed him: writing songs. He was becoming quite good at it when he lost his head," said Henpecked Ho, and he lifted a high quavering voice:

"Spring tarries here In Loyang:

in all quarters there is Spring's radiance in plenty.

The willow leaves are beginning to fade;

the peach blossoms are falling, but not yet scarce;

darting under the eaves the swallows quarrel for entry;

deep in the woods the birds fly in disorder -

but for those on duty at the frontier passes

the steaming dew even now soaks their garments.

"Rather sad, isn't it? The little fellow who wrote songs will go down as one of the most extravagant and vicious rulers in history, but no one will say a bad word about the Ancestress."

I began to wonder about heredity.

My bride-to-be was called Fainting Maid, and I discovered the reason for this unusual name on the occasion of our first stroll together in the garden. (Normally a groom does not see his bride until the wedding, of course, but since I had seen practically all of her already an exception was made. She was the one in the carriage with the jade pendant and the pretty pink-tipped breasts. Besides, we were chaperoned by Henpecked Ho.)

"Hark!" cried Fainting Maid. "A cuckoo!"

"Nay, my beloved, It is a magpie," I said.

"It is a cuckoo," she insisted.

"Precious one, it is a magpie which is imitating a cuckoo," I said, pointing to the magpie which was imitating a cuckoo.

"It is a cuckoo!" screamed Fainting Maid.

"Magpie," I sighed.

"O, thou hast slain me!" she wailed, and with that she clutched her heart, staggered backward, lurched to the left, and gracefully swooned.

"Two steps backward, six to the left," said Henpecked Ho. "Precisely two back, six left. She never varies by so much as an inch. And now, dear boy, you are to bathe her delicate temples and beg her forgiveness for your intolerable rudeness. My daughter," he said, "is never wrong. I might add that never in her life has she been denied anything she wanted."

When I think back to those days I hear a babble of voices - Henpecked Ho's wife and her seven fat sisters gabbling in the Garden of Forty Felicitous Fragrances; Fainting Maid and her ladies in waiting sipping tea in the Gallery of Precious Peacocks; the unspeakable Ancestress on the Terrace of Sixty-six Serenities with a servant who had dropped a cup:

"Gabble-gabble-gabble-gabble-gabble...O, thou hast slain me!... Off with his head...gabble-gabble-gabble-gabble-gabble...Forgive me, my lady! Of course the Book of Porcupine Cookery was written by Confucius!...Deposit the corpse in the pigsty."

What finished me off were not the lovely ladies. It was the butler. As the grandson-in-law of the Ancestress I would be responsible for maintaining the etiquette of a great houses so I was turned over to the butler for instruction. He was a cadaverous creature with a gray complexion and granite features, and his droning voice was completely without inflexion. Here is a sample.

"When the meat is cooked on ceremonial days the left shoulder, upper and lower foreleg, thigh, lower hindleg, spine, ribs, divided lung, three pieces of pork for the offering taken from over the breastbone, and one lung for the offering, are placed on the top tripod; nine fish, pike and carp, and placed in the middle tripod; in the lowest tripod are placed the game and the left half of the carcass, only without the rump: the cook hands the guest a ladle with an engraved handle and a stand which is placed west of the tripods, and the guest, grasping the left edge of the stand in his left hand and holding the stand straight out from himself, takes the handle of the ladle with his right hand, palm inward, and lays the ladle alongside the stand and goes and stands, facing east at the west of the tripods, to receive what food is to be his lot, which is determined by his attire beginning with his state umbrella: those of First and Second Rank officials have yellowish-black gauze covers, red raw silk linings, three tiers and silver spires; Third and Fourth Rank umbrellas are the same except that the spires are red; the umbrellas of Fifth Rank officials have blue gauze coverings, red raw silk linings, two tiers and silver spires; those of Sixth through Ninth Rank officials have blue, oiled, raw silk coverings, red raw silk linings, one tier and silver spires: the belts of First Rank officials are jade, those of the Second Rank are rhinoceros horn, those of the Third Rank are inscribed gold, those of the Fourth Rank are burnished gold, those of the Fifth Rank are inscribed silver, those of the Sixth Rank are burnished silver, those of the Seventh through Ninth Ranks are plain horn: First Rank officials, properly displaying their jade belts and yellowish-black gauze covered umbrellas with silver spires, are first served the Grand Soup, which is placed to the north of the snail stew--"

I decided to run for my life.

## **Chapter 7: DANCING GIRL**

IT was not going to be easy to get out of that place. The estate was circled by parallel walls about fifty feet apart, and the corridor was patrolled by armed guards during the day and packs of savage dogs at night. But Henpecked Ho might know of some exit, so one night I slipped out and made my way to his dingy workroom.

Ho had one joy left in life. He had discovered a pile of ancient clay tablets - shattered, scattered, and illegible - and he had set himself the impossible task of piecing them together. After sixteen years of unremitting labor he had gone far enough to guess that the tablets told some sort of folk tale, and if he lasted another sixteen years he hoped to decipher the first sentence. So much for the joys of scholarship.

For once he was not working with microscopic fragments of clay. Henpecked Ho was holding a cheap silver comb in his hands, and he was weeping. His grief was really terrible to see. I began backing out the door but he held up his hand and stopped me, and eventually he recovered enough to tell me his story. He needed to share it with someone, and we had become good friends.

"A few years ago," said Henpecked Ho, "I managed to please the Ancestress in some way, and she graciously allowed me to take a concubine. I am only a poor scholar with no money of my own so I could not aspire to a lady of quality, or even the maid of a lady of quality. I chose a dancing girl from Hangchow. Her name was Bright Star, and she was very brave and very beautiful, and I loved her with all my heart.

She did not love me, or course, since I am old and ugly and something of a worm, but I was kind to her and I believe that I made her reasonably happy. I bought her this silver comb as a token of my love - as you can see it is not a very good comb, but it was all I could afford - and she wore it in her hair to please me. I had never been in love before, and in my foolishness I thought that my joy would last forever."

Henpecked Ho paused to wipe his eyes again.

"Do you know anything about the Sword Dance?" he asked me.

"I have tried it a few times," I said.

"Bright Star had become a legend in Hangchow because of her genius at the Sword Dance," said Henpecked Ho.

"One night the Ancestress entertained some officers from the fort, and among them was a young captain who came from a family so distinguished that it was common knowledge that the Ancestress would choose him to wed Fainting Maid. He was a very famous swordsman. He had heard about Bright Star in Hangchow, and he said that he would give anything to meet such an opponent, so the Ancestress ordered Bright Star to perform. I could not bear to see my beautiful dancing girl displayed like a piece of meat for the soldiers to leer at - sword dancers wear nothing but loincloths, of course - so I did not attend. I know only that the judges refused to declare a winner, saying that only gods had the right to choose between gods, and that their Sword Dance is talked about to this day with awe. I also know that Bright Star fell in love.

"Late that night I listened to her sobs. She was only a dancing girl, and the captain was the second son of a very great family, and it was unthinkable for a man of his rank to take a dancing girl for a wife, or even for a concubine. I told you that I loved Bright Star with all my heart? Well, the next morning I went to the fort to see the captain. I found that he had not slept all night because whenever he closed his eyes he saw the face of Bright Star, and when I returned I brought with me a beautiful pendant of jade upon a golden chain. It was the token of the captain's love.

"Was I not a worm to play panderer for the woman I loved?" said Henpecked Ho. "All that mattered was Bright Star's happiness, and I had discovered that there was a period at sunset and again at dawn when the corridor between the walls was empty. At sunset when the guards went off duty the men in the kennels waited for a minute before releasing the dogs, and at sunrise the guards refused to enter the corridor until they were positive that the dogs had been locked up. There used to be a door in the inner wall at the north end of the estate. I stole the key and gave it to Bright Star, and that night at sunset I gave the signal when the corridor was clear. The captain scaled the outer wall and raced across, and Bright Star opened the door. At sunrise he returned the same way, and for a month Bright Star and her captain lived in Heaven. I lived in Hell, of course, but that was not important."

Henpecked Ho fiddled nervously with the comb in his hands. He appeared to be reliving a terrible moment.

"One evening at sunset I heard a scream," he whispered. "I ran to the door in the wall and discovered Bright Star

frantically pounding on it. She had opened the door as usual, but then someone had approached and she had been forced to hide, and when she returned the door was closed and locked and the key was gone. I raced toward the kennels to try to stop the men from releasing the dogs, but I was too late. The young captain was trapped in the corridor, and while he killed a great many dogs he could not kill them all. Bright Star was forced to listen to the death of her lover, and when I returned I found that she had taken her own life. There was an old well beside the door, and I found the body of my beautiful dancing girl floating in the water.

"Who could have done such a thing? It had been impossible to keep the affair secret. People knew that the captain was crossing the corridor. Who could have been so cruel as to lock the door and take the key? It was crueler than death for Bright Star."

Henpecked Ho wiped his eyes and looked at me shyly.

"Dear boy, have you been taught how to see ghosts?"

"I am willing to learn," I said.

He led the way to the north end of the estate. The moon was very bright, and I could see that the old well which had claimed the life of Bright Star had been covered by heavy planks, and that the door which had claimed the life of her captain had been ripped out and the hole had been bricked up solid. Faint in the distance I could hear the watchman's wooden knocker rap three times: midnight, the third watch.

"Li Kao, I want you to look very carefully at the patch in the wall where the door used to be," said Henpecked Ho. "I want you to try to see something which you should not see."

After a few puzzled moments I said:

"Ho, I may be crazy but I think I am looking at a shadow which should not be there. It cannot possibly be caused by the moonlight shining through the leaves, or the stars, or anything else."

"Yes. That is a ghost shadow," said Henpecked Ho. He placed a hand on my shoulder and said, "Li Kao, what I am about to say will sound silly, but it is not. Whenever you see a ghost shadow you must try to think of it as a blanket. A soft comfortable blanket. You must empty your mind of everything but that blanket. Then you must imagine that you want to cover yourself with that blanket. It is easy to do. Be totally relaxed. Calm your heartbeat and breathe slowly and easily. Simply reach out with your mind and pull the blanket gently...gently...gently..."

"Ho, the patch is gone and I see the door!" I cried. "It is standing open. The old well is now uncovered, and I see someone moving through the trees. And I hear music. It is a flute, but it is not like any flute I have ever heard before."

Henpecked Ho sat down on the grass and motioned for me to sit beside him.

"Now you are going to see something very beautiful, but it is beauty that will break your heart," he said quietly.

A ghost was dancing toward us through the trees. I gasped out loud at her beauty. She wore a long white robe embroidered with blue flowers, and every step, every gesture, every subtle swirl of the robe gave meaning to the word perfection. I cannot describe the grace and delicacy of her slow stately dance, yet even then I sensed that something was wrong. It was perfection but it was mechanical. She was doing something magnificent, but she was doing it without pride or joy, and as she danced closer I could see that her lovely face was anguished, and that her haunted eyes were fixed on the wall behind me. I turned my head and my heart sank to my sandals as I saw that the door was closing. Closing very slowly, but just slightly faster than the steady music of the flute. Bright Star was trying to reach her captain, but she was not going to make it.

"Faster!" I prayed. "You must dance faster, Bright Star!"

But she could not. Her ghost was chained to the rhythm of the flute. It was many minutes before she reached the wall. Her hands reached out eagerly, desperately, and too late. An inch in front of Bright Star's fingers the door closed shut. For a moment the beautiful dancing girl stood gazing at a cruelly closed and locked door that had no key, and I felt a wave of anguish blow across the grass like a gust of winter wind. Then the ghost faded, the door faded, and I was gazing at a bricked up patch in a wall. The flute played one last slow note, and then all was silent.

"She dances every night at the third watch," Henpecked Ho said quietly. "Every night I pray that she will dance



through the door before it closes, but she never does. She cannot dance faster than the flute. What can I do, Li Kao? What can anyone do?"

"You can steal a drum and a couple of swords," I said.

## Chapter 8: SEVENTH LEVEL MANUEVERS

I should have had the sense to specify dull swords. When Henpecked Ho met me the following night beside the old well he had the drum and the swords all right, but the blades were sharp as razors. It was too late to do anything about it. If I tried to dull the blades against a rock I would wind up with jagged edges, which would be suicidal. "Li Kao," I said gloomily to myself, "you are going to slice your quivering little body to pieces."

Perhaps I should explain that Chinese sword dancing is very dangerous. Many emperors have tried to ban it on the grounds that it kills or maims hundreds of people every year, but they might just as well try to ban the rising of the sun: the Sword Dance is grace and pride and beauty and strength and courage rolled into one, and masters of the art live for nothing else.

There are two contestants, three judges, and a drummer. The drummer sets the pace, and once the drum begins it is forbidden to stop, or to break the rhythm in any way. The contestants begin fairly far apart and are required to perform six mandatory maneuvers in sequence, each with a higher level of difficulty. The maneuvers are performed while leaping - both feet must be off the ground - and each requires precise slashes over, under, and around the body, which the judges grade according to grace, accuracy, closeness of the blades to the body, and elevation of leap. These six maneuvers are very important, because the judges watch for a mismatch very carefully, and if one of the contestants is clearly outclassed they will refuse to allow the dance to proceed.

With each maneuver the dancers move closer together, and at the end of the six mandatory maneuvers they are practically face to face. If the judges agree that the contestants have performed the six levels of difficulty satisfactorily they signal for the drummer to sound the beat of the seventh level, and now the fun begins.

The seventh level is free form. Here the dancers can express their souls, since the only requirement is that their maneuvers must be higher than the seventh level of difficulty. The fun lies in the fact that once a dancer has completed a seventh level maneuver he is perfectly free to clip the hair from his opponent's head, if he has time to do so before his feet touch the ground, and the opponent is free to block the stroke only after he has completed his own seventh level maneuver - and can do so before landing. A sword dancer is immediately disqualified if he makes a slash or parry while so much as one toe is touching the ground. The great masters of the art disdain such easy targets as the hair on an opponent's head, and try to barber his beard and moustache if he wears such adornments, and the loss of an ear or a nose is considered to be an occupational hazard of no great importance. The real danger lies in panicking and breaking the rhythm of the drum, because you will leap up when you should be coming down, and your opponent will aim for your hair and cut off your head. This adds a certain spice to the entertainment.

It is a great privilege to watch a pair of consummate masters go at it. Their bodies seem to float effortlessly into the air, and to hang suspended in space. Their swords are mere blurs and the flash of steel can be blinding, particularly in torchlight. Swords clash together with the din of a hundred festival gongs, each brilliant maneuver inspires a counter maneuver that is even more brilliant, the audience screams - but the contestants laugh out loud - when a stroke slips through and blood spurts, and then the sand clock runs out, the drummer stops, and even the judges rise and cheer as the contestants embrace.

Of course if you are not really up to seventh level maneuvers you have no business attempting the Sword Dance. You will be very lucky if you merely chop off one of your toes and your nose, because your enemy is not your opponent but your own clumsy self.

Need I say that I was seared nearly to death? My fingertips felt like ice as I stripped down to my loincloth, and each sword seemed to weigh fifty pounds. Henpecked Ho positioned himself behind some shrubbery with his drum. He had great faith in my plan, and surprising faith in his own abilities as a drummer. So far as I knew the old scholar's only talent lay in piecing fragments of clay tablets together, yet his voice was strong and confident as he said:

"I practiced all day, Li Kao. I think that I have it down perfectly."

"Splendid," I said, without much enthusiasm.

Somewhere an owl hooted hollowly, and in the distance a dog howled, and the wind through the trees sounded like mocking laughter. Then I heard the three raps of the watchman's wooden knocker, and I turned to the patch in the

wall to look for a ghost shadow. This time I found that I could draw it over me with ease, practically without thinking about it. Once more the door stood open, and I turned to face Bright Star.

The flute began to play its slow inexorable song. The beautiful dancing girl moved through the trees in her long white robe with the blue embroidered flowers. Moving beautifully, delicately, mechanically, without joy or pride or hope.

"Begin," I said. My voice was like the caw of a crow.

The moment Henpecked Ho touched that drum I knew that if anyone failed it would not be him. Somewhere he had learned to play like a master, and his hands were strong and confident as he played the music he had learned through a hundred sleepless lovesick nights: the heartbeat of a dancing girl.

"Louder," I said.

The heartbeat grew in volume, calling insistently, challenging the ghostly flute for command, and I began to see a puzzlement, a wonder, a growing awareness in the eyes of Bright Star.

"Sound the challenge," I said.

Henpecked Ho pounded the challenge to the Sword Dance. Over and over he repeated it, subtly weaving the challenge in and out of the beat of Bright Star's heart, louder, more insistent, leaning his whole weight into it until the heartbeat and the challenge shook the leaves of the trees. I saw Bright Star's eyes begin to sparkle. Still she moved slowly, to the flute that chained her, but not even death could erase the memory of that glorious challenge to the most dangerous dance in the world.

I stepped forward, directly in the path of the beautiful ghost, and raised my swords in the salute. Bright Star saw me. Her hands moved to the clasp at her throat. On and on she slowly danced, still chained to the flute, but her long white robe fell to the ground and she danced toward me slim and straight and proud, wearing nothing but her loincloth and the jade pendant which her captain had given her on a chain between her small firm breasts.

Suddenly two ghost swords flickered in her hands, and I consigned my terrified soul to Heaven.

"First maneuvers," I said, and Henpecked Ho wove the rhythm of the six mandatory maneuvers in and out of the heartbeat of Bright Star.

If judges had been present they would have yawned at my mandatory maneuvers. I performed them reasonably competently but there was nothing imaginative about the Tiger, the Kingfisher, the Swan, Dragon's Breath, the Serpent, and Night Wind. As I had hoped Bright Star did not bother to outclass me. She seemed amused, but she went along with it and performed similar classroom exercises. I could see in her haunted eyes that she could scarcely wait to get to the seventh level, and all too soon that dread moment came. I had nothing to fear from her ghost swords, of course, but nothing on earth could persuade Bright Star to continue the Sword Dance if I failed to perform my seventh level maneuvers, and my own swords would probably kill me inside of three minutes.

"Seventh level," I said. Henpecked Ho pounded the beat of free form, and we went at it.

I sent a prayer to Buddha and leaped into the air with Seventh Drake Under the River Bridge - seven slashes with each sword around my body and under my legs - and Buddha must have heard me because for the first (and last) time in my life I managed to complete it without chopping a hole in my left thigh. Bright Star seemed to approve. At least she did me the honor of trying to top me, and I very nearly fainted when I saw that beautiful girl lift into the air, float there like a leaf, savagely slash her swords in the nearly impossible Ice Falling From a Mountaintop, and still have time to take two playful swipes which would have trimmed my eyebrows if her blades had been real before touching ground.

I glanced back. The door was closing. It was now or never. "Go!" I yelled, and I desperately launched my body into Three Stallions on a Golden Meadow.

Bright Star's eyes widened with shock and horror as she saw the impossible happen. I was performing an acceptable seventh level maneuver, but I was backing away, retreating from the reach of her swords, and the judges had not stopped the contest! The drum beat louder, shaking the clearing, forcing her to continue the dance - but how could she continue when my cowardice was plain for all to see? The only explanation was that the judges had been bribed, and she wavered and almost stopped until I sneered: "Are you afraid to continue, base-born dancing girl?"

That did it. I was making a mockery of the Sword Dance and she was going to make a mockery of me. Bright Star uttered a scream of rage. Her lithe body shot into the air, and her swords swept around her body like tongues of flame as she pursued me down the path performing seventh level maneuvers never before seen by man. If her blades had been real I would have lost my nose and ears in ten seconds flat, and I puffed and panted and danced backward as fast as I could, chopping holes in myself while the ghost pursued me as gracefully as a gazelle.

Bright Star still does me the honor of coming to see me now and then in my dreams, and once again I see her swords flicker like lightning and her eyes fill with fire and her fury cause her hair to stand up like that of a big beautiful cat as she dances in the moonlight. I truly believe that I have been fortunate enough to have competed with the greatest sword dancer in the history of the world.

"Faster!" I yelled, and Henpecked Ho's hands began to spurt blood as he pounded that rough sheepskin drum with every ounce of strength that he had, and I was beginning to look like something dragged out of a slaughterhouse, and my lungs were full of fire and I saw black spots before my eyes. "Faster!" I squawked. "Faster! Faster!"

Bright Star laughed as her swords flashed through absolutely impossible maneuvers and flickered around my exhausted body like the tongues of fire-breathing serpents. My own swords got all tangled up as I attempted Sixth Dive of the Blue Heron, and I backed into a log on the path and tripped and fell. The beautiful ghost leaped clean over me, pinning my cowardly face to the ground with her swords - the ultimate humiliation of a sword dancer - and landed like a cat on the other side.

It took her a moment to realize that the log I had tripped over had been placed in front of the door in the wall, and that the door had not yet closed, and that she had vaulted right through it. She gazed at me with wonder, and then her eyes grew large as soup plates as she saw Henpecked Ho come running from the shrubbery. His face was transfigured by joy, and when Bright Star turned she saw her captain.

He was a tall handsome ghost, and he must have been quite a hero in life, for he was able to force himself to raise his clenched fist to Ho and myself in a soldier's salute, and to hold it for the full fifteen seconds before he took Bright Star in his arms. Then the ghosts faded away, and the door faded, and Henpecked Ho and I stood there in the moonlight looking at a bricked up patch in a wall.

"What a dancer!" I kept saying over and over as I limped back down the path.

"What joy!" cried Henpecked Ho.

We laughed all the way to Ho's workshop, where he had confidently made preparations for the ceremony. We were rather bedraggled dignitaries for so solemn an occasion, but we doubted that anyone would mind. We cut paper silhouettes of the happy couple. Henpecked Ho spoke for the bride, and I spoke for the groom. We chanted the prayers and marriage vows, and burned paper money for the dowry, and burned food for the guests and sprinkled wine upon the ground. Thus Bright Star married her captain, and when the sky grew pale and the cock crowed we thanked the happy couple for the banquet, and let them go at last to the bridal bed.

All in all it was a very satisfactory night.

## Chapter 9: A TRAGIC ACCIDENT DEPRIVES ME OF A BRIDE AND PROVIDES ME WITH A DRAGON

IT was definitely time for me to go, but it would scarcely be good manners to leave without saying farewell to my fiancée. The following afternoon, after making a few preparations, I went for a stroll with Fainting Maid and her father. Henpecked Ho was rather surprised when I took the path toward the old well beside the bricked up patch in the wall.

"Roses! My favorite flowers!" squealed Fainting Maid, pointing to some petunias.

"Beautiful roses indeed, but as Chang Chou has so charmingly pointed out, women are the only flowers that can talk," I cooed. "The loveliest flowers in the world fade beside the glory of a beautiful woman, particularly when the light strikes her properly. Stop!" I cried. "O my beloved, stop right here with your exquisite little feet against this mark on the path, for here the light is perfect, and never has your beauty been more breathtaking!"

Fainting Maid posed prettily.

"Perfection!" I gasped. "A lovely lady in a lovely setting - one can scarcely believe that such a serene spot could have been the scene of a tragedy, yet I have heard that here a door was locked and a key was taken, and a handsome young man and the girl who loved him lost their lives."

"A stupid soldier and a slut," sneered Fainting Maid.

"A stupid soldier indeed. Why, it was almost certain that he was to marry you, O vision of perfection, yet he dared to prefer a lowly dancing girl. He even gave her a valuable jade pendant, which should rightfully have been yours, as a token of his love. Odd that they did not find it when they pulled the girl's body from the well," I said. "I mean she would scarcely have bothered to remove it before jumping to a watery death. Of course, somebody may have hired some goons to give her a little help."

I grabbed the gold chain around Fainting Maid's neck and jerked out the jade pendant that I had seen in the carriage. I had seen it again in ghost form, around the neck of Bright Star.

"Tell me, my precious, do you always wear this pretty trinket right next to your sweet little heart?" I purred.

Henpecked Ho was gazing at his loathsome daughter with shock and revulsion and imminent murder written all over his face, and Fainting Maid decided that I was safer.

"Surely you do not mean to suggest--"

"Ah, but I do!"

"You cannot possibly suspect--"

"Wrong again."

"O, thou hast slain me!" wailed Fainting Maid as she clutched her heart and staggered two feet backward and six to the left.

"Certain sticklers for accuracy might tend to agree with you," I muttered. Then I turned to her father. "Ho, you are perfectly free to hear whatever you want, of course, but what I hear is a magpie which is imitating the sounds of a scream and a splash."

"Clever little creature," said Henpecked Ho. "Now it is even imitating somebody yelling 'Help! Help!'"

"How on earth does the little magpie produce such effects?" I said admiringly. "That thrashing-in-the-water sound! The gurgle that sounds for all the world like someone descending to the bottom of a deep pool!"

"Nature is full of the most remarkable talents. Yours, for example," said Henpecked Ho.

"There is a slight flaw in my character," I said modestly. "And now I think that I shall erase the mark on the path, lest some busybody wonder why it is precisely two steps in front and six steps to the right of an old well."

"From which someone has rashly removed the cover," said Henpecked Ho. "Ready?"

"Ready."

The grief-stricken father and the bridegroom-that-now-would-never-be raced back toward the mansion, rending their garments and tearing out hair by the handful.

"WOE!" we screamed. "WOE! WOE! WOE! POOR FAINTING MAID HAS FALLEN INTO A WELL!"

All in all it was a very successful afternoon.

An odd thing happened when we fished Fainting Maid from the bottom of the old well. Her limp hand fell into mine, and something passed from her fingers to the palm of my hand. I was giving a magnificent performance and I made the most of it.

"Look!" I wailed. "Our love is immortal, for even in death my fiancée brings me a gift!"

"I would change 'even in' to 'only in,'" Henpecked Ho muttered. "Never gave anybody anything in her life."

The object was encrusted with algae. I dried it off and dropped it in my pocket and forgot about it.

The arrangements were made in a few days. As the bereaved fiancé it was my duty to escort the coffin containing the body of my beloved to her final resting place in the family vaults at the palace of the Ancestress in Tsingtao, taking a barge downriver to Ch'in, and hiring a boat for the last stage of the journey. Henpecked Ho and I parted rather tearfully. He sadly surveyed the unspeakable Ancestress, his gabbling wife and her seven fat sisters, and he said:

"Dear boy, in your strolls around the estate did you happen to discover any more old wells?"

"I would advise using an axe," I said.

"An axe. Yes, an axe by all means. Chop-chop!" said Henpecked Ho.

The boatmen pushed off into the current. I waved goodbye to the old scholar, and as he dwindled in the distance I could faintly hear him chanting: "Chop-chop! Chop-chop-chop-chop-chop!" Then the barge swept around a bend in the river, and I retired to my cabin to get drunk.

I sat down on the couch and felt something in my pocket and pulled it out. It was the object Fainting Maid had brought up from the bottom of the well, and I began cleaning off the algae between swigs of strong wine. I felt wonderful. I opened the curtains and sang:

"The wind blows from the north,  
then it shifts to the south.  
I blink - and we've traveled from the Yellow Fields  
to Hsieh's Lake.  
The shadow of a mountain floats past my cabin;  
I lift the curtain and see purple cliffs.  
I pour two cups of clear wine,  
then open the cabin door.  
Here are ten thousand wrinkled mountains  
that no one ever sees,  
the highlights picked out for me by the setting sun."

The object was a locket. A very ancient locket, and quite pretty: a green jade dragon winding through holes in red coral. There was a rusted metal catch, and after more cleaning I was able to open it. The inner chamber was empty, but there were three small grooves that had been designed to hold something-or-other. I remembered that I had a silver chain in my luggage, so I attached the locket and hung it around my neck. Somehow it felt as though it belonged there. I opened another jar of wine.

"The fisherman poles his boat across Hsieh's Lake.  
My eyes watch him closely,  
until he does something strange:  
he turns into a wild goose, standing on a reed."

Even as I sang I felt something tugging at a corner of my mind. Turns into a wild goose, standing on a reed...

Yes. That drunken night at the Pool of Past Existences. I had been looking at a branch of a tree, and it had turned into a man. The hallucination wore an old-fashioned wide-sleeved robe and a tall Confucian hat, and it looked down at

me with strange shining eyes and said: "I am going to send you to a dragon. You must follow the dragon."

I lifted the locket and looked at it again. A green jade dragon, winding through holes in red coral.

Five hundred years ago, the peasants said, the soldiers of the Duke of Ch'in caught up with the great Chang Heng when he was drinking from a well not twenty miles from his academy. Five hundred years later, I thought, Fainting Maid came up from the bottom of an old well not twenty miles from the Academy of Chang Heng and dropped a dragon locket into my hand. I had a sudden vision of a man with a wide-sleeved robe and a tall Confucian hat watching some soldiers ride up, and taking a locket from around his neck and dropping it into the well...

"Nonsense!" I snorted.

Night had fallen rapidly, and it had begun to rain. A thin rain from thin clouds playing tag with the moon. I polished off a fifth and sixth jar of wine.

"It is raining; the curtain blocks my view.

I raise it, and the scene becomes even more beautiful.

Tall pines stand like writing brushes on the bank,  
their cold reflections rippling into snakes.

Then a silver mirror floats out of the clouds,  
and rays of moonlight glitter on the jade sand.

I lean out the window and gaze into the distance  
at range after range of moon-swept mountains."

I lay back on my couch and closed my eyes. The rain pattered rhythmically upon the cabin roof: follow the dragon, it whispered, follow the dragon, follow the dragon, follow the dragon...

"Nonsense!" I yawned, and then I rolled over on my side and fell asleep.

## Chapter 10: THE ART OF PORCUPINE COOKERY

OBVIOUSLY I had no intention of accompanying that coffin to the palace of the Ancestress in Tsingtao. The barge docked in Ch'in, where I was to hire a ship for the last stage of the journey, and in Ch'in they collected shipping taxes on everything, including corpses. As I was waiting in the warehouse I saw a tantalizing sight indeed: an enormously fat merchant was paying an emperor's ransom to ship a collection of wooden cases, and those cases were guarded by a small army of grim-visaged soldiers who were armed to the teeth.

I had to find out what those cases contained.

I followed the fat merchant to the best restaurant in town and watched with growing excitement as he consumed a light lunch which began with four tureens of pimento and dumpling soup, and proceeded with three bowls of mussel stew, a pound of pickled mallows, a pound of pickled snails, three servings of soft shelled crabs which were gently steamed in rare spices and sweet rice wine, sweetmeats, fruit, honey cakes, and a gallon of green tea flavored with walnuts and pine kernels.

No one is easier to fleece than a glutton. It took but a few minutes to find an unscrupulous alchemist who was willing to sell me some knockout drops and a vile concoction called the Elixir of Eighty Evil Essences, and when the fat merchant waddled back inside the warehouse a truly pathetic scene met his eyes. An Innocent boy with a guileless and grief-stricken face was draped artistically over a coffin, and the boy's servants were sprawled and snoring all over the place.

"Woe!" I wailed. "Woe! Woe! Woe! My beloved bride is dead! My servants are dying! I am feeling rather fragile myself! A million maledictions upon the chef who persuaded me to serve porcupine at our wedding feast!"

The merchant was at my side in an instant.

"Porcupine? Did you say porcupine?"

"Porcupine," I sobbed.

"But my dear tragic boy, did you not know that porcupine can be fatal unless properly prepared?"

"I supervised the preparations myself," I wailed. "Every single step was taken according to the instructions of the great Li Tsening!"

"Surely not! Li Tsening wrote the Book of Porcupine Cookery!" the merchant cried.

I refrained from mentioning that the sweet little girl in the coffin had insisted that Confucius wrote the Book of Porcupine Cookery. Instead I brushed the merchant away and continued my heartbroken howls.

Porcupine is considered to be the delicacy of all delicacies, although rather dangerous, and the merchant's gluttonous eyes glazed, and saliva flowed in streams. But his self-control was admirable, and it was a full minute before he lunged forward, grabbed my shoulders, shook me vigorously, and yelled:

"Was it young, fresh, porcupine?"

I looked up startled from my pious bereavement.

"Barely a year old, and trapped the day before," I said.

A mighty spasm shook the merchant's frame. "From Yushan?" he whispered.

"Straight from the river," I sniffled

The poor fellow tottered over to his armed guards and collected a large sack. He extracted a pickled carp, devoured it noisily, and staggered back.

"The paste!" he gasped. "The porcupine paste was made one year before?"

"Precisely," I sniffled. "And only the purest yellow beans were used."

"You are positive that all black and brown beans were removed? The slightest trace of such imperfection can be fatal!"

"All black and brown beans and those with purple markings were removed by hand, and the remainder sifted fifteen



times and carefully scrutinized!" I said huffily. "I was aware of the danger!"

"My dear boy, I am not accusing you," the merchant said contritely. "But I need scarcely point out that some mistake must have...ah...your poor bride...and now your servants...and you say you are feeling somewhat fragile?"

"More so every minute," I moaned.

"Is it possible that rice flour was used?"

"Rice flour would have killed every single guest at our banquet!" I said angrily. "Only the purest Hua wheat flour was used, mixed with a little salt and exposed precisely six hours to the sun--"

"With a veil to keep out the dust? Dust can be fatal!"

"With a veil to keep out the dust. Then placed into a jar which was in turn covered by an earthenware basin and sealed with lime, and I need scarcely mention that all washing was done with pure river water, for the slightest trace of well water would have been fatal."

"I cannot understand it," the merchant whispered. "Everything done properly...wait! What month was it?"

"Do you take me for a fool?" I snarled. "To prepare porcupine paste in any month but June is to commit suicide."

"Extraordinary! Everything done according to the instructions of the great Li Tsening, yet the porcupine proved fatal after all."

It was dawning on the merchant that if no flaw could be found then he himself could never again safely enjoy the delicacy of all delicacies.

"We must find the error!" he wailed. "My dear boy, I beg you to describe the precise method by which your chef cooked the porcupine itself."

"He began by removing the eyes, stomach, internal organs, and embryos, if any were present," I said solemnly. "Then he slashed the spines and cleaned out all the blood. While he cut the meat into pieces I myself cleaned any remaining clot of blood from each piece with a pin. Then he boiled the meat in pure river water--"

"With the skin still attached?"

"With the skin still attached. He then removed the meat and placed it upon a cutting board--"

"A wooden cutting board?"

"I am perfectly aware of the fact that a metal or ceramic cutting board can prove fatal," I said coldly. "Then he picked out every quill and bristle with fine pinchers, cut the flesh and skin into smaller pieces - and I assure you that they were square pieces - and sautéed them in pork fat. Then and only then did he mix in the bean paste and fry the mixture in hot oil. He took infinite care to keep dust from the pot, and when the meat was done he dipped a paper roll into the sauce and held it to the flame of a candle. Only when the paper caught fire easily did he remove the porcupine from the pot and serve it to the guests."

Not a flaw. Not one single error. The merchant's gluttonous world was crashing down around his ears, and he buried his ashen face in his hands.

"How many died?" he sobbed.

"Only my poor bride!" I wailed. "She alone among two hundred! And I myself supervised the preparations! It was I who selected the porcupines! It was I who picked off the remaining clots of blood with a pin! It was I who selected the choicest piece to present to my bride! It was I--"

"Wait!" screamed the merchant. "When you cleaned off the blood, what kind of pin did you use?"

"What kind of...why, I don't remember."

"But you must remember, dear boy! Was it or was it not a silver pin?"

"Yes it was," I said thoughtfully. "Now I remember clearly. It was a pin of the purest silver, although as I came to the final piece of meat the pin slipped and fell to the floor, so I had to use another pin."

"Silver?"

"Gold."

Actually that merchant was quite a decent fellow. His own world had just been saved, but he had it in him to pity the disaster of others. Tears trickled down his cheeks; his vast belly shook with sobs:

"Oh my boy, my poor tragic boy, the slightest contact between porcupine and gold is fatal! And by the curse of some evil spirit you lovingly chose the one contaminated piece of meat, and placed it upon the plate--"

"Of my bride!" I shrieked. "Woe! Woe! My stupidity has slain the woman I loved!"

I fell across the coffin in a dead faint. This allowed me to slyly open the jar that contained the Elixir of Eighty Evil Essences, which I had concealed on the other side. When I regained consciousness I was overcome with the horror of what I had done.

"To think that I myself was responsible for such a ghastly death!" I whispered.

"I have often heard of porcupine poisoning, but I must confess that I have never seen it. Is it very terrible?" the merchant said in hushed tones.

I noticed with satisfaction that the merchant's guards and the customs officials had gathered around.

"She began by breaking out in bright red spots, which spread until every inch was covered," I whimpered. "Then the redness began to turn green. Ghastly glaring green."

The Elixir of Eighty Evil Essences was performing splendidly. As the fumes reached the nostrils of the guards and customs officials they began to turn as green as the supposed victim in the coffin.

"Come to think of it," I added, "my poor servants began to turn green while carrying my beloved's coffin, and then they collapsed."

"Gllgghh!" gagged the Chief of Customs.

"The smell that began to exude from my dear one - I dare not describe that ghastly smell!" I wailed. "And then the glaring green color of her skin began to turn black!"

"Black?" the merchant choked.

"Well, it was a greenish-purplish black which tended to run at the edges," I said thoughtfully. The Elixir was performing magnificently, and the guards began staggering out to the pier and vomiting over the rail. "The hideous smell of my bride grew even worse!" I shrieked. "Guests began to run for their lives! I reached out to touch my dear one, and I cannot describe my horror when my fingers actually entered her beloved body! For her supple skin had become soft oozy jelly from which thick green and yellow corruption spurted, and the smell...the smell...the smell..."

For some reason I seemed to be alone.

After five or ten minutes I staggered out and joined the others at the rail - allow me to inform you that the Elixir of Eighty Evil Essences can make a stone vomit - and when the others had sufficiently recovered they voted to toss me and my cursed coffin into the sea before the corruption killed them all. I appealed to their patriotism by pointing out that if they dumped that coffin into the sea they would destroy the Chinese fishing industry for at least three thousand years, and a compromise was reached. I was provided with a wheelbarrow for the coffin, a shovel, the directions to the lepers' cemetery, and a terrified priest who led the way banging a gong and bellowing: "Unclean! Unclean!"

At the cemetery the priest took to his heels. I gazed back toward the port and saw the merchant and his precious cases hastily sailing away, and I waved gaily and yelled

"Farewell, Fainting Maid!"

Of course I had used the time when I was alone in the warehouse to switch the funeral decorations from the coffin to one of the wooden cases. I eagerly pried the lid open and gazed with disbelief at a small bag of pins lying on top of a canvas cover.

"Pins?" I muttered. "Why on earth was he guarding cheap iron pins?"

I pulled back the canvas cover and very nearly had a heart attack. Compasses. At least five hundred Chinese magnetic compasses for which barbarians will sell their very souls.

"Ten pins!" I prayed. "Buddha make them pure enough to hold ten pins!"

Eight...nine ... ten... eleven... twelve... thirteen...fourteen... fifteen...sixteen...seventeen! I had five hundred compasses so pure that each could hold a chain of seventeen inch-long iron pins attached end to end. The value could scarcely be measured in gold. I was not rich, I was the wealthiest young man in China, and I was standing on the outskirts of the most luxurious pleasure city in the world!

I will confess to a slight qualm as I looked up at the great gray shape of the Castle of the Labyrinth, but I was not going to get involved with the Duke of Ch'in was I? Of course not. I reached into the chest and ran my fingers over wealth beyond the dreams of avarice.

"NAMO KUANSHIYIN BODHISATTVA MAHASATTVA!" I roared, since that is the Buddhist way of bellowing hallelujah.

## **Chapter 11: CONCERNING CASTLES, DUKES, AND KEY RABBITS**

AGAIN at the suggestion of One-Eyed Wong I will provide some basic information for barbarians which civilized people may skip.

The correct name for the only completely civilized nation on earth is Chung-kuo, which literally means the Central Country, and which figuratively means the only country in the world that lies directly beneath Heaven. China is a barbarian term which is derived from the first Duke of Ch'in, who conquered the country in the Year of the Rat 2,477 (221 BC) and who was a remarkable reformer. Mass murderers are usually reformers.

"We are being strangled by our past," said the Duke of Ch'in. "We must make a new beginning."

He then proceeded to erase the past by burning every single book, with the exception of technical works, in all China. The Burning of the Books is the single most infamous event in Chinese history, and since the scholars were burned along with the books whole areas of skill and knowledge simply vanished from the face of the earth. The duke disapproved of certain religious cults: temples, priests, and worshippers went up in flames. The duke disapproved of frivolous folk tales and popular myths: professional storytellers were beheaded. The duke disapproved of the teachings of Confucius (a barbarism for Kung Fu-tse), the leading Confucianists were decoyed into a ravine and crushed by falling boulders, the disciples were strangled, and the penalty for possession of one line of the Great Learning was death by slow dismemberment.

(Years later when it was safe the few surviving scholars split into two groups: the first began writing down the Confucian texts from memory; the second began pulling out hidden manuscripts that they proclaimed to be originals. An astonishing number of those "originals" turned out to be clever forgeries designed to advance the scholars' pet theories in the name of the Master, and the dispute over the authenticity of Confucian texts will probably rage throughout eternity.)

But burning and beheading and strangling and crushing and dismembering take time. They are not efficient methods of getting rid of large numbers of people, and the Duke of Ch'in loathed inefficiency. His solution was a masterstroke.

"I shall build a wall!" he cried.

The intellectuals and religious leaders and anyone else who disagreed with the duke were herded into work gangs and marched off to the desolate north where they died by the millions laboring on a monument which barbarians call the Great Wall of China, and which Chinese call the Longest Cemetery in the World. Still more millions were whipped and starved to death as they constructed the duke's private residence: the Castle of the Labyrinth, which was actually thirty-six castles connected by intricate passageways. The idea being that the duke would have thirty-six imperial bedrooms to choose from, and assassins could never know where he slept.

Mystery and terror are the bulwarks of tyranny. There was a vast labyrinth carved by the tide in the cliff beneath the duke's castle, and the duke encouraged tales of a terrible monster that stalked the passageways, devouring everything in its path. The duke even went so far as to order the greatest craftsman in China to fashion him a frightening mask: a great golden mask of a snarling tiger. He wore the mask on all public occasions. The terrified peasants called him "the Tiger of Ch'in", and so effective was that mask that the succeeding Dukes of Ch'in continued to wear it for eight hundred years. (One-Eyed Wong tells me that the barbarian rulers of Crete wore the mask of a bull for the same reasons.) For fourteen years China was one vast scream, but then the duke made a bad mistake. He raised the peasants' taxes to the point where they had no choice but to rebel. He had confiscated their weapons but he had not confiscated their bamboo groves, and when the Duke of Ch'in saw twenty million needle-sharp bamboo spears marching toward him he hastily abandoned the empire and barricaded himself in the Castle of the Labyrinth. There he was invulnerable. It was tacitly agreed that Ch'in was a state within the state, so emperors came and emperors went, but the dukes seemed destined to go on forever.

The first Duke of Ch'in had been attempting to replace all previous philosophies of government with one of his own, and all one needs to know about it is contained in the famous first paragraph of the duke's Book of Legalisms "Punishment produces force. Force produces strength. Strength produces awe. Awe produces virtue. Thus virtue has its origin in punishment." The dukes that succeeded him cared only for money, and their methods of acquiring it were crude but effective - the annual tax trip, for example. Once a year the reigning duke chose a village at random

and burned it to the ground. A collection of severed heads was placed upon the ends of pikes. Then the army set forth through the villages of the duke's domain with the severed heads leading the way, and the eagerness with which the peasantry lined up to pay taxes was a source of great gratification to the Duke of Ch'in.

Some three hundred years after the first duke lost his empire the reigning duke had a vision. It is said that he suddenly jumped from his throne during a meeting with his chief ministers, shot a hand into the air, and bellowed the immortal words:

"Corpses cannot pay taxes!"

This divine revelation produced a change in the moneymaking techniques of the Dukes of Ch'in. They still carried severed heads around on pikes, of course, but instead of stealing the money of the wealthy they persuaded the wealthy to give it to them. Like all great ideas it was simplicity itself. The Dukes of Ch'in transformed their gloomy coastal town into the greatest pleasure city in China. Every luxury and vice known to man was available in Ch'in, and fifty percent of every transaction went into the coffers of the dukes. In every place of business there was an iron chest with the duke's tiger emblem stamped upon the lid, which was placed beside the cashbox. Half of the customer's money went into the cashbox and half into the chest. Of course somebody had to collect the duke's share: his position was the Assessor of Ch'in, which had to rank high among the most miserable jobs in the whole world, and that leads me to a very important character in this account.

When I arrived in Ch'in the assessor was a little fellow who was festooned with chains of keys which jangled as he walked, and who had watery pink-rimmed eyes and a long pink nose which twitched in permanent terror. Of course he was called the Key Rabbit.

"Oh dear oh dear oh dear oh dear!" he whimpered as he trotted into wineshops and gambling dens and brothels. The Key Rabbit searched through his thousands of keys for the right one, opened the iron chest, counted the coins, checked with spies to make sure that no cheating had taken place, checked the records to make sure that the amount was not suspiciously low, pocketed the loot, relocked the chest, and trotted off to the next place of business. It was generally agreed that if the duke's share was off by so much as a penny the Key Rabbit's head would also be off.

"Oh dear oh dear oh dear oh dear!" whimpered the Key Rabbit as he pattered down the street. He was followed by a platoon of soldiers and two carts: one to carry the sackfuls of loot and the other to carry the massive volumes that listed every law, rule, and regulation of the duke's domain. He needed them. Magistrates could impose sentences, but only the Assessor of Ch'in could impose fines, and it was generally agreed that if the Key Rabbit missed a fine point of law that cost the duke a penny he would shortly be missing his head.

"Oh dear oh dear oh dear oh dear!" whimpered the Key Rabbit as he trotted at sunset toward the Castle of the Labyrinth. The duke's clerks counted the loot, but more often than not the Key Rabbit would be forced to stay in the treasure chambers all night, recounting what the clerks had counted in order to make sure that none of them had pocketed a penny. And when the duke set forth on his annual tax trip who accompanied him to determine how much was owed by each village? The Assessor of Ch'in, of course, and it was generally agreed that if the Key Rabbit failed to squeeze the last possible grain of rice from the peasantry he would also fail to keep his head.

One would think that the Key Rabbit had enough to worry about. But no: in a moment of insanity he had married, and it was the wife of the Key Rabbit who was to steal my heart. And break it, as you shall see.

## Chapter 12: LOTUS CLOUD

TO be young and rich in Ch'in! It was a world of flowers and incense and exotic perfumes, flutes and gongs and silver bells, tangles of luscious bare limbs, and endless streams of gold pouring into greedy hands. Screaming crowds thronged the boat races and cricket fights, and magnificent banquets in upper-class restaurants were followed by magnificent riots in lower-class wineshops. Brightly painted brothel barges floated like butterflies upon endless ornamental lakes. On emerald islands pallid priests with twitching hands and flabby faces sold the most peculiar things in strange pagodas. Every vice known to mankind was in full flower in the glorious pleasure city of Ch'in, and there I was right in the middle of it with a seemingly inexhaustible fortune! I rode through the streets in a palanquin so huge that it was carried by sixty swearing servants. Naked dancing girls were draped around me. I dipped a jade cup into a cask of rare wine, and with the other hand I scooped silver coins from a brassbound chest and hurled them to the lower classes.

"For the love of Buddha, buy clean clothes!" I yelled. "Get rid of your loathsome lice! Sweeten your foul breaths with decent wine! Bathe!"

And the adoring mob screamed:

"LONG LIVE LORD LI OF KAO!"

The enemy of dissipation is boredom, and I was saved from yawning ennui by the most unlikely source imaginable. Early one morning when the sky was just turning pink I was returning alone from yet another orgy - everyone else including my servants had passed out - when suddenly I stopped in my tracks. A woman was laughing on the other side of a low garden wall. Something about that carefree laughter drew me like a magnet, and I climbed to the top of the wall and peered over at a modest house, and at a modest garden that ran down to the edge of one of the ornamental lakes that were scattered around Ch'in like jewels. A young woman was standing at the water's edge. I could not make out her features, but my heart told me that she was beautiful. Then she reached down and picked up a small flat stone and wound up and let fly, and that throw told her history. Only a peasant girl who had been the terror of crows could throw like that. The stone skipped seven times across the water and sailed smack into its target: a gross bullfrog upon a lily pad that had been admiring the center of the universe, meaning itself.

"Bwork!" squawked the frog as it plopped indignantly into the water.

The young woman laughed again. Then she yawned, stretched, scratched, spat unselfconsciously, plucked a young bamboo shoot, and strolled back toward the house chewing on the stem.

"To hell with perfumed beauties!" I said to myself. "Li Kao, what you want is a yawning, spitting, rock-throwing peasant girl!"

Old Mother Wan, the procuress, knew everybody.

"Why, that is the house of the Key Rabbit" she said. "The young woman can only be his wife, and I feel duty bound to warn you that there is a slight flaw in her character."

"You don't say!"

"I do say. The Key Rabbit married her in a moment of insanity and has regretted it ever since," said Mother Wan.

"Lotus Cloud is a dear sweet girl, but she suffers from greed. Her greed is quite insatiable. Everyone knows that the Key Rabbit has not one penny to call his own, and in his madness he married the most expensive woman in the whole world. Why, he cannot even breathe easily when his wife finds a wealthy lover, for she is certain to bankrupt the fellow in a week! The Key Rabbit is convinced that he committed some horrible crime in a former incarnation, and is being punished for it now by being married to Lotus Cloud," said Mother Wan.

I considered my inexhaustible wealth and decided that it was my charitable duty to brighten the existence of the Key Rabbit.

The easiest way to meet the Assessor of Ch'in was to incur a whopping fine, and since I was renting a small palace that belonged to the duke I trotted home and set fire to the place. I was roasting a goose over the embers when the Key Rabbit arrived.

"Oh dear oh dear oh dear oh dear! Regulation two hundred and twenty-six, palaces, rented, accidental destruction

thereof--"

"Willful," I yawned. "I found the view boring."

"Regulation two hundred and twenty-seven, palaces, rented, willful destruction thereof: full value plus fifty percent, plus fire fighting costs, plus wreckage removal costs, plus triple the standard fine for disturbing the peace, plus twenty-five percent of the total for defaming the view provided by the duke, plus--"

"Great Buddha!" I roared. "Stop babbling and give me the grand total!"

I thought that the little fellow was going to die. He rolled his pink-rimmed eyes toward Heaven and shrieked: "Nineteen thousand seven hundred and sixty-six pieces of gold!"

"Take one of those chests over there, one of the blue ones," I sighed. "Actually the blue ones each contain twenty thousand pieces of gold, but I simply cannot be bothered with change."

It took quite a few minutes to revive him, but the Key Rabbit grasped the possibilities as soon as he regained consciousness. Lord Li of Kao now had no place to stay, and while the Key Rabbit's own miserable hovel was scarcely suitable it might do for one night, and since the Key Rabbit had to spend the night counting the duke's money his dear young wife would be all alone, and women require protection.

"Protection among other things," he said, kissing the hem of my robe. "Such as pearls," he sobbed. "Jade!"

"May I offer you some roast goose? My own recipe," I said, "marinated twenty-four hours in the lees of fine wine, with honey and crushed apricots. After a light repast we shall visit the nearest jeweler, and purchase a wheelbarrow load of pearls and jade, for in the immortal words of Chang Chou: I prefer my own cooking, but other people's wives."

"Joy!" squealed the Key Rabbit.

Late that night I leaned against a tree in the Key Rabbit's garden.

The path of pearls and jade that I had strewn over the grass sparkled prettily in the moonlight, and I felt a breathless excitement as I watched Lotus Cloud approach. Surely the most expensive woman in the world must also be the most beautiful. She uttered little cries of wonder and delight as she trotted toward me picking up the expensive baubles, and then she came close enough for me to make out her features.

"Li Kao, you have been robbed!" I said indignantly to myself.

She was not beautiful. She was not even pretty. She was pure peasant: short thick legs, big feet, strong arms and shoulders, large square hands, and a broad flat face. I was just about to cut my losses and get out of there when she saw me. I decided to make the best of it so I stepped forward.

"My surname is Li and my personal name is Kao and there is a slight flaw in my character," I said with a polite bow.

Lotus Cloud regarded me with interest. Her eyes were narrowed and her head was cocked a little to one side, and it occurred to me that she looked precisely like a farm girl who was deciding whether or not to buy a pet at a country fair. Then her eyes said, "Yes, I think I will take this cute little thing home with me," and she grinned.

I cannot describe that grin. It was unearthly. It was as though all the hope and joy and love and laughter and sheer delight in being alive that there was in the universe came together, gathered into a fist, and reached out and belted me right over the heart. The next thing I knew I was on my knees with my arms wrapped around her legs and my face pressed against her thighs, and her fingers played with my hair and she said in a soft laughing voice:

"I shall call you Boopsie."

If I cannot even describe her grin, how can I describe the rest of her?

"Key Rabbit," I said a few days later, "I seem to have lost my mind. Your wife is not witty. She is not wise. She can barely read. She has no social graces whatsoever. She is not even pretty, and I worship the ground she walks on."

"That is what all her protectors say," sighed the Key Rabbit.

It was a mystery, and I decided that beauty was a highly overrated commodity.

"Key Rabbit, allow me to bore you with a comparison of your wife and a beautiful woman," I said. "In the morning a beauty must lie in bed for three or four hours gathering strength for another mighty battle with Nature. Then, after being bathed and toweled by her maids, she loosens her hair in the Cascade of Teasing Willows Style, paints her eyebrows in the Distant Mountain Range Style, anoints herself with the Nine Bends of the River Diving-water Perfume, applies rouge, mascara, and eye shadow, and covers the whole works with a good two inches of the Powder of the Nonchalant Approach. Then she dresses in a plum-blossom patterned tunic with matching skirt and stockings, adds four or five pounds of jewelry, looks in the mirror for any visible sign of humanity and is relieved to find none, checks her makeup to be sure that it has hardened into an immovable mask, sprinkles herself with the Hundred Ingredients Perfume of the Heavenly Spirits who Descended in the Rain Shower, and minces with tiny steps toward the new day. Which, like any other day, will consist of gossip and giggles."

I paused to catch my breath.

"Lotus Cloud wakes up, hops happily from bed, plunges her head into a pail of ice cold water, bellows "eeeeaaaaAAAARRRRGGGGHH!", runs a comb through her hair, looks around to see if there is anyone handy who feels like making love, hops back into bed if that is the case or into some clothes if it is not. Then she dives out the door - or window, it doesn't matter - to see what wonders the new day will bring, and since Lotus Cloud views the world with the delighted eyes of a child everything is equally marvelous. She makes the beauties seem so pale."

"I know precisely what you mean. How I wish that I could afford my dear wife for myself," sighed the Key Rabbit.

"Nobody can afford your dear wife," I sighed.

At an early age Lotus Cloud had become a specialist. Diamonds did not interest her. Emeralds bored her. I once gave her an ivory chest filled with gold and she promptly gave it to a girl friend.

"Why?" I howled.

"Because she wanted It, Boopsie," said Lotus Cloud, and it was clear that she thought it took a moron to ask a silly question like that.

But fill that same ivory chest with pearls and jade! Never have I seen anything to match her reaction. Her eyes grew wide with wonder, a soul- wrenching desire transformed her face, her whole body shook with an indescribable longing, the sheer force of her greed practically knocked me off my feet, and when I persuaded her that the stuff was a gift, that it was really hers, she dissolved into torrents of happy tears and threw herself into my arms and vowed to adore me forever.

A man would do almost anything to produce a reaction like that. That was the trouble. Before the day was out Lotus Cloud would forget all about my wonderful gift, and if I wanted to produce another spectacular reaction I had to produce another spectacular chest of pearls and jade.

"Like all great swindles it is simplicity itself," I said. "I greatly admire it even as it drives me toward bankruptcy."

"That is what all her protectors say," sighed the Key Rabbit.

The end came sooner than I had believed possible.

"Another wheelbarrow load of pearls and jade?" said my supplier, a splendid fellow who has since become one of my closest friends, and whose name is Cut Off Their Balls Wang.

"I will settle for the address of the wealthiest miser in town, the use of a palatial palanquin since I seem to have pawned mine, and a goat," I sighed.

Poetic justice is a loathsome thing. An hour later Cut Off Their Balls Wang rapped upon a door with a gold-tipped staff. "A thousand blessings have descended upon you, for Lord Li of Kao is weary and has condescended to rest in your miserable hovel!" he roared, and the door crashed open revealing a gentleman who possessed a pair of glittering little pig eyes, a bald and mottled skull, a sharp curving nose like a parrot's beak, the loose flabby lips of a camel, and two huge drooping elephant ears from which protruded thick tufts of coarse gray hair.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH MY FIVE HUNDRED PIECES OF GOLD?" screamed Miser Shen, who, I belatedly remembered, also possessed six different houses in six different cities.

Poetic justice is loathsome because it never knows when to stop. Cut Off Their Balls Wang escaped quite easily



with the goat and the garbage, but when I dove off the palanquin I landed right on top of the Key Rabbit. Somehow a chain around the Key Rabbit's neck became wrapped around my neck as well. The key at the end of the chain was shaped like a flower and had sixteen points, each of which had to make contact with just the right amount of pressure before the lock would open, and since a pressure lock costs a fortune I was probably entangled with the key to the duke's front door - and that was why the Key Rabbit kept walling "Oh dear oh dear oh dear!" as he pulled on the chain with all his might. So the Key Rabbit nearly strangled me while his startled soldiers descended, and Miser Shen and his servants descended, and I was nearly smothered by the howling mob. The next thing I knew I was in court.

"Ridiculous!" I scoffed as Miser Shen bellowed accusations. "The man is mad!"

Since Cut Off Their Balls Wang had escaped with the evidence Miser Shen could prove nothing, but my last coins had been concealed inside that garbage and I was not in a position to pay the mandatory fine for disturbing the peace. The penalty for not paying a fine in Ch'in, and thus depriving the duke of part of his income, was death.

"Woe!" screamed the Key Rabbit. "Woe! Woe! Woe! To think that I should be partly responsible for the beheading of Lord Li of Kao, the most generous protector my dear wife has ever had!"

Eventually he calmed down enough to look at the bright side.

"During the trial I was able to determine that Miser Shen is the wealthiest man in town, so you do not have to worry about Lotus Cloud," he said comfortingly. "I shall simply invite Miser Shen to my house to have tea and to meet my dear wife, and in no time Lotus Cloud will be rolling in pearls and jade."

"Splendid," I said.

Then they chained my wrists behind me, clamped a heavy yoke around my neck, linked me to a long line of prisoners who had also been sentenced to death, and marched us off to the Castle of the Labyrinth to amuse the Duke of Ch'in.

## Chapter 13: THE SWORD THRUST, THE LABYRINTH, AND THE DRAGON

THE Castle of the Labyrinth lies in ruins now, a vast pile of stone slabs scattered across a cliff overlooking the Yellow Sea. There the tide is the strongest in China, and the cliff shudders with the force of the waves. Vines have covered the fallen stones, lizards with rainbow bellies and turquoise eyes cling to the shattered walls, spiders scuttle through the eternal shadows cast by banana and bamboo. The spiders that currently occupy the Castle of the Labyrinth are huge, hairy, and harmless. The previous occupants were not so harmless.

I remember the castle as I first saw it: vast, turreted, moated, and impregnable. I remembered being marched through a pair of monstrous iron gates that made men look like ants, and across a drawbridge that could have held fifty horsemen riding abreast. An enormous pair of bronze doors creaked open, and we entered the inner fortress where towers rose a hundred feet into the air and a thousand crossbows pointed through slits carved in massive stone blocks. I remember the heavy tread of marching feet, and the clash of weapons, and the harsh commands. We were herded down a long tunnel past checkpoints where soldiers demanded passwords and secret signs. A pair of huge golden doors swung silently open and our footsteps echoed across a vast floor of lapis lazuli toward a massive gold throne.

The Duke of Ch'in was huge. I could not tell his exact size because he was sitting down, but his shoulders matched the bulk of the huge and terrifying golden tiger mask that concealed his face. He wore a long cloak of feathers. The chopping block and a stone basin to catch the blood and severed heads were placed directly in front of the throne. The executioner - a massive fellow stripped to the waist - carried an axe almost as big as he was. Rows of dignitaries flanked the throne, and a regiment of soldiers lined the walls.

From my point of view the ceremony proceeded with unseemly haste. The soldiers removed the yoke and neck chain of the first prisoner in line, dragged him forward, kicked his legs out from under him, and stretched his neck across the chopping block. The executioner spat on his hands and raised his axe. There was a flash of steel, a dull thud, a spurt of blood, the sound of the first severed head plopping into the basin, some snickers from the soldiers, a polite patter of applause from the dignitaries, and a little whinny of delight from the Duke of Ch'in.

"You metal-masked freak, you murdered my parents," I thought. "I cannot possibly get out of here alive, but I am certainly going to try to take you with me!"

Then I fainted. The idea was to reach down to my left sandal. I always keep a selection of lock picks in the hollow heel of my left sandal, and the lock on the chain that bound my wrists behind my back was easily accessible. I was jerked back to my feet and held upright before I could select the right pick, however, and I had to work with one that was slightly too small. It took too much time, and I was still working on that lock when they dragged me forward and kicked my legs out from under me. Then the strangest thing happened.

As the executioner lifted his axe I had a vision that was almost blinding in its clarity. I saw another executioner lifting another axe, and I saw the victim turn scornful eyes toward a gray gauze-covered litter. He wore a tall Confucian hat and an old-fashioned robe with sleeves wide enough to hold a couple of barrels of wine, and he opened his mouth - and before I knew what I was doing I had turned my eyes toward the Duke of Ch'in, and I found myself yelling:

**"I hope I splatter blood all over you, you son of a sow!"**

I was really quite surprised when the words burst out. I was a good deal more surprised when a sudden silence fell upon the throne room, and the executioner lowered his axe. Then the Duke of Ch'in lifted a finger.

The soldiers jerked me to my feet and dragged me up to the throne. They shoved my face forward until I was almost touching the terrible golden mask. I saw a tiny trickle of saliva dribble from the corner of the tiger mouth, and the voice that filtered through the mask was a voice of metal.

"For five hundred years it has been forbidden to mention the name of Chang Heng in the presence of the Duke's of Ch'in, yet you dare to quote his last words," the duke whispered. "Let us see what sort of fool attempts such insolence."

I could feel the concealed eyes boring into mine, reaching right into my brain. I could also feel the lock pick

concealed in the palm of my hand press against the lever, and I could feel the lever sliding back.

"I see nothing," the duke whispered. "I see no understanding. You quote Chang Heng, yet you know nothing. But there is something deep inside you which I do not understand. Something savage. Perhaps you might be dangerous after all."

"More dangerous than you think," I said sweetly.

I jerked the look open and swung my arms backward, lashing the soldiers' faces with the chain. With practically the same motion I jerked a sword from a scabbard and struck the Duke of Ch'in with all my might. The sword bounced off his cloak of feathers as though it had struck the hardest steel! I roared with rage and struck again, and this time the sword entered his body. I felt a slight metallic scrape and then it plunged through, right through his evil heart, up to the hilt.

"Mother! Father! You are avenged!" I yelled, and then I turned and folded my arms and prepared to die nobly. What I saw made me doubt my sanity.

The soldiers were laughing. The dignitaries were laughing. Even the executioner was laughing. I whirled around and the Duke of Ch'in was laughing - he sat upon his throne with a sword rammed clean through his heart, and he was laughing!

"Little one, forgive me for thinking that you might be dangerous," he chortled. "You are only a boy, fit for nothing but bouncing balls and playing games. Very well, we will play a little game."

His fingers closed around an ornament on the arm of his throne. "You might even win. Five hundred years ago, someone did," he snickered, and then the floor dropped out from under me.

I toppled down into blackness, head over heels, and just as I thought I would fall forever I landed with a mighty splash in a pool of icy water. I plunged to the bottom, scraped against stone, and popped back to the surface gasping and choking. Far above me I heard faint laughter. Then the trap door I had fallen through slowly swung shut, and I heard the sound of a heavy bolt sliding through metal brackets and a sharp click as it fastened.

There was a faint flickering light. I swam to the edge of the pool - about forty or fifty feet, and climbed out and made my way to a single torch that burned in a bracket on the wall. I picked it up and swung it around. I was in a cavern carved from black stone. Ahead of me was an archway, and on the other side I saw an infinity of tunnels that twisted crazily in all directions. When I stepped through the archway I discovered that I was walking upon human bones. I saw skulls that had been crushed and mangled, and heavy thighbones splintered like bamboo twigs. I remembered the tales of the monster that stalked the duke's labyrinth devouring everything in its path, and above me in a throne room sat the duke himself, laughing his head off with a sword rammed through his heart.

I am not ashamed to admit that I lost my head completely. I raced in blind panic through that maze until I ran into a blank wall. Then I ran back until my flickering torch showed another tunnel opening and I turned into that. Again and again I reached dead ends, and in a few minutes I lost all sense of direction. I was fleeing from a monster whose imagined shape grew more terrible with every minute, and I did not come to my senses until I crashed into another blank wall and fell to my knees. As usual I was looking down at human bones, but there was a terrible odor of rotting flesh and I thought: "Where are the bodies?" Bones but no bodies, so what was causing that smell?

Something dripped upon my hand. I watched my fingers gradually turn red. Then I jumped up and lifted my torch as high as I could and I saw them. The bodies were wedged in cracks in the ceiling; half of a face stared down at me; a dangling leg dripped blood - and something else.

"Seaweed!" I said out loud. "Li Kao, the monster that stalks this labyrinth is nothing but the tide, and if the tide can get out so can you!"

Now I started off with a purpose. I held my torch to every tunnel opening, looking for the slightest flicker in the flame that would indicate air blowing in from the sea. I searched for a pattern in the way the rocks were worn, trying to find the direction the tide took.

My cautious cleverness brought me back right where I had started, and I gazed with a sinking heart at the pool and the inaccessible trap door high above. Black snakes slid across the floor and licked at my feet - water. The tide was coming in.

"Think!" I said to myself. "Use your stupid head!"

I thought until my head hurt, but the only thing that happened as

I concentrated was that I became aware of a tiny sound: very faint, very far away, yet strangely compelling. I stopped breathing entirely and strained with every nerve, and then I heard it. It was a voice that was vaguely familiar, like a voice from a half-remembered dream.

"Follow the dragon, Li Kao," the voice said quietly. "Follow the dragon."

The voice faded, and then it was gone. I walked back to the archway and gazed at the maze of tunnel openings. Water rose around my ankles, and I heard the tide begin to rumble through the labyrinth. I took a chain from my neck and gazed at a green jade dragon that wound through holes in red coral. The dragon passed the first three holes on the left and turned into the fourth hole on the right.

"Li Kao, you have most certainly lost your mind," I said, and then I began to run.

The rumbling sound became a roaring sound and then a screaming sound. "Fourth right...first left...fifth left...second right," I panted as I raced through the labyrinth. The water was trying to knock my legs out from under me, and bones were rattling against the walls. "Third right...first right...sixth left..." Water was up to my shoulders. I was bleeding from the impact of hurtling bones. "Third left..."

What a fool I had been to dream that the dragon locket would lead me to safety! I had run into a blank wall, a complete dead end, and when I turned around the tide struck me like an avalanche. Flying bones smashed against the wall all around me; the torch was ripped from my hand. I stood terrified in total blackness, clutching a useless locket, and my fingers told me what my eyes had not. The dragon entered that last hole and then turned up. Straight up.

I still didn't believe it, but there was nothing to do but surrender to the tide and let it carry me to the ceiling. My fingers frantically felt for an opening. The water was over my head, smashing me against the rocks, and my lungs were bursting. I felt an opening! It was a small chimney climbing through the stone, and I barely managed to squeeze through. I braced my legs against the sides and began to climb; my head broke water and I gulped air; my fingers reached over the edge of the chimney. I made one last effort and managed to pull myself up and over, and then I was lying on the floor of a small cave overlooking the Yellow Sea, and the sun was shining, and birds were chirping, and a fisherman far below was singing a song as he headed back to shore with his catch.

I lay there like a log, gazing numbly at a locket where a green jade dragon wound through holes in red coral. Images spun round and round in my mind: a laughing figure with a grotesque tiger mask and a sword through his heart, Bright Star dancing like a goddess in the moonlight, Fainting Maid's limp fingers dropping an object into my hand, a branch turning into a man with a tall Confucian hat and an old-fashioned robe who told me to follow a dragon.

"Chang Heng?" I whispered.

Then I passed out.

## **PART TWO: THE BALL, THE BELL, AND THE FLUTE**

### **Chapter 14: I RESIGN MY COMMISSION, BUT MY PAST CATCHES UP WITH ME NONETHELESS**

WHEN I opened my eyes it was night. The moon was huge and orange-yellow, and the sea surged against the base of the cliff far below the little cave. My mind was filled with a rather pleasant fog, and I had no idea where I was or how I got there, or whether I was awake or asleep. I closed my eyes and drifted back into dreams, and the Abbot of the Monastery of Sh'u was standing before me. "There are no accidents in the Great way of Tao," he said solemnly. "Nothing is wasted; nothing is without purpose." I opened my eyes again. The moonlight was reaching the top of a pile of something at the rear of the cave, casting shadows on the wall, and one shadow had no right to be there. I giggled. Henpecked Ho had told me just what to do with ghost shadows, hadn't he?

"It is a blanket," I told myself sleepily. "A soft comfortable blanket. Reach out with your mind and pull it over you. Gently...gently...gently"

I sat up with a start.

I was gazing at the ghost of a peasant girl who was dressed in the fashion of a thousand years ago. Blood stained the front of her gown where a blade had pierced her heart, and never had I seen such an agonized expression on a human face. I could not explain it but somehow I realized that the effort she was making to appear in her ghost form was causing her pain beyond mortal comprehension; that she was battling some terrible force. Her anguished eyes were fixed on mine, and her hands cupped some small object.

"Take pity upon a faithless handmaiden," the ghost whispered. "Is not a thousand years enough? I swear that I did not know what I had done!" Tears trickled down her cheeks, and mingled with the blood on her gown. "O take pity, and exchange this for the feather. The birds must fly," she sobbed.

Then she flickered, and was gone.

I sat there shaking my head groggily. The fingers of moonlight reached down, and I was gazing straight at the Duke of Ch'in! Even as I reached for the dagger which I no longer had I realized that it was not the duke at all, but a copy of his great golden tiger mask which was hanging on the rear wall of the cave. Then the moonlight reached farther down, and I gasped in disbelief.

I had not imagined that there was this much treasure in the whole world! Gold, silver, diamonds, emeralds, rubies, tons of pearls and jade! I crawled forward and ran my fingers through the glorious stuff. It was real! I was not dreaming!

"How Lotus Cloud would love this place," I said reverently, for pearls and jade were piled almost to the ceiling. But then I thought: "If this is real...if it is not a dream..."

I turned to the place where the ghost had been. I reached out and picked up the tiny object her hands had cradled. It was a little crystal ball. It was no more than an inch and a half in diameter, but the moment my fingers touched it it began to glow, and then it began to grow! As I gaped in disbelief the ball grew until it was a foot in diameter, and in the center I saw the image of a pretty little cottage.

An old woman was snoozing in a chair. Then an ant scuttled across the floor carrying a tiny piece of cheese. A roach began pursuing the ant. A rat joined the chase, pursuing the roach. This caught the attention of a cat, who raced after the rat. A dog barked loudly and charged after the cat, knocking the old woman's chair over in the process. She woke up, cursed most imaginatively, hopped to her feet and grabbed a broom. Round and round they went: woman after dog after cat after rat after roach after ant, charging out the door, climbing back through the window, smashing through the flimsy wall, reappearing through a hole in the ceiling - the variations appeared to be endless, each more comical than the one before, and the lunatic chase did not end until I put the crystal ball on the floor and withdrew my hand. Then the glow faded, the ball shrunk, and once more it was simply a plain crystal ball no more than an inch and a half in diameter.

"I am supposed to exchange this for a feather?" I yelled at the empty space where the ghost had been. "The birds must fly?"

I began working things out on my fingers, badly spraining two of them in the process. Five centuries ago a genius named Chang Heng had exclaimed, "Something has gone wrong in Heaven!", and he had set forth upon a mysterious quest. He had been seen near the Castle of the Labyrinth.

"I am looking," he said, "for a little crystal ball."

Then he had looked for a bronze bell, and a silver flute. Then he said he was trying to find a raindrop in a thunderstorm, or a petal in a field of flowers, or one special grain of sand concealed among a billion on a beach. He had sworn by all that was holy that he would never give up, and that the sky would fill with falling stars when we saw the beautiful Bridge of Birds. Then he was beheaded and his head was pitched into the Pool of Past Existences.

Five hundred years later a mysterious whistle had drawn me to the skull in the pool. I had imagined that I had seen my previous incarnation as the worst damn mongrel in the history of the world, and that a gentleman with an old-fashioned robe and a tall Confucian hat and strange shining eyes had said that he was going to send me to a dragon, and that I must follow the dragon.

I ran out of fingers and took off my sandals to have some toes to work with.

Immediately after leaving the pool I had encountered Henpecked Ho, who had taught me to see ghosts. If I had not been able to see ghosts I would not have seen Bright Star, and if I had not seen Bright Star I would not have sent Fainting Maid to the bottom of the well, and if I had not sent Fainting Maid to the bottom of the well she would not have brought me a dragon locket, and if I had not had the dragon locket I would not have escaped from the labyrinth of the Duke of Ch'in, and if I went on with this I would go mad.

I hopped to my feet and shook my fist at nothing in particular.

"Chang Heng, if you really expect me to continue your lunatic quest you are even crazier than I think you are!" I yelled. I ransacked my mind for the scant medical education provided at the Monastery of Sh'u. "You are suffering from a horrible case of woolsorters' disease!" I yelled. "What I am going to do is elope with Lotus Cloud and live happily ever after, and if you try to stop me I will return to your goddamned pool with a bottle of goddamned ink and watch your goddamned skull turn blue!"

I was about to pitch the crystal ball into the sea, but then I realized that the comic chase would make Lotus Cloud laugh for a month. I always wear a smuggler's belt. The one I had on was studded with large seashells, some of which were fake. I found that the ball would not grow if I held it with only two fingers, and it fit perfectly inside one of the fake shells. I filled my pockets with pearls and jade and marched with considerable dignity to the mouth of the cave.

The sea glistened two hundred feet below. The cliff was vertical and to try to climb down without a rope would have been suicidal, but there was one small calm pool nestled between jagged rocks beneath me, and the reflected moon seemed to be smiling up in a friendly fashion, which I took to be a favorable omen. I turned around.

"Chang Heng, I will not pretend to be sorry that you wasted five hundred years whistling for nothing. You know very well that there is a slight flaw in my character," I snarled, and then I turned back to the sea, held my nose, and jumped.

The wind whistled around my ears as I plunged down toward the reflection of the moon. I was also plunging toward a jagged rock that I had not noticed. "Left! Left!" I squawked, flapping my arms like a bird. The reflected moon grew so huge that I half expected Chang-o and the White Rabbit to stick their heads out and shake their fists at me. I missed the rock by half an inch, and the warm waters of the Yellow Sea embraced me like a long-lost friend.

(Insanity? Favorable omen or no favorable omen it had been madness to attempt that dive. I was not mad. In the back of my mind I had a good reason to try it. I will not explain it now. It becomes important a good deal later on, and you will see that there was a horrible flaw in my reasoning, but for the moment I will skip my reasons and proceed with my actions.)

I should have had the sense to realize that the tide that floweth in also floweth out, and two days later I was picked up far out to sea by a fishing boat. I was clinging to a piece of driftwood, half-starved and half-drowned. Fate seemed determined to keep me from Lotus Cloud because we were promptly caught in a storm and spent a couple of weeks drifting off the coast of Korea. It was a month before we returned to Ch'in, and by that time the duke had

departed on his annual tax trip, the Key Rabbit had accompanied the duke, and Lotus Cloud had accompanied the Key Rabbit. I finally caught up with the duke's party in Chefoo, and then I had some good luck for a change.

The Duke of Ch'in and the Key Rabbit were out scouring the countryside for every grain of rice they could squeeze from the peasantry and Lotus Cloud was all alone, staying at the palace of the duke's provincial governor. Unfortunately Lotus Cloud's apartment was high in an unclimbable tower - no vines and no footholds, nothing but smooth vertical stone - and soldiers guarded all the entrances. The soldiers did not bother to guard walls that could not be climbed, which meant that their education had been sadly neglected.

When I had been a promising lad of nine or ten I had received some lessons in creative criminality from a consummate crook that had been forced to flee the fabled land of Serendip.

"Li Kao," this worthy intoned, "the successful criminal is a keen student of natural history. Consider, for example, the behavior of the humble ant. When an ant discovers something of value it grabs a sample and dashes back to the colony screaming: 'Awake! Arise! Beat the drums! Sound general quarters! I have discovered wealth beyond the dreams of avarice!' Then the whole colony returns with the scout - but are they content to take what they can see? Not if it is on a trail of something. When an ant finds a trail of something it likes it will follow that trail until it reaches the source. It will follow it over mountains. It will follow it halfway around the world. It will even follow it into Hell, because nothing can stop an ant from seeking the source of something it likes. If you are incapable of putting such behavior to good use you will never rise higher in life than a master pickpocket," said the crook from Serendip. "My purse, if you please."

I bribed a maid to bring a jar of honey and a message to Lotus Cloud (a verbal message; I did not trust Lotus Cloud's reading ability), and slipped over the walls on a dark night and made my way to the base of the tower. I positioned myself beneath her high window, and in due course I saw the trickle of honey come sliding down the wall. Then I opened a jar and sent my colony of ants after the honey, holding back the biggest of the bunch. I tied a featherlight gauze thread to this monster and then I sent him after the others. What a champion! In three minutes flat he made it over Lotus Cloud's windowsill, and I saw her hand wave. I tied a light string to my end of the thread and hooted like an owl, and Lotus Cloud began to pull. I tied a light cord to the end of the string, a light rope to the end of the cord, and a heavy rope to the end of the light rope. Lotus Cloud tied her end of the heavy rope to something inside the apartment and tugged three times, and in a few minutes I had climbed an unclimbable wall.

"Boopsie!" Lotus Cloud squealed happily as I flopped over the windowsill.

"Do I have a story to tell you!" I panted as I dragged her toward the bed.

I still gnash my teeth when I think of the frustration that followed. I was just stepping out of my trousers when footsteps approached the door. "A thousand curses!" I snarled. I pulled my pants back on and barely had time to swing back out the window before the door opened and some lout staggered inside carrying an armload of pearls and jade. It was the duke's provincial governor. He dropped the treasure in front of Lotus Cloud, fell to his knees, wrapped his arms around her legs, buried his face against her thighs, and moaned: "My surname is Chia and my personal name is Chen and I have worshipped you ever since you grinned at me in the garden this morning."

Lotus Cloud's eyes devoured the pearls and jade. Her fingers played with the fellow's hair and she purred happily:

"I shall call you Woofie."

Is there no justice? Is there no sense of fair play? I had been sentenced to death, stabbed a duke who laughed at me, escaped from a terrible labyrinth with the aid of a man who had been dead for five hundred years, encountered a mysterious ghost, taken a lunatic swan dive into a tiny pool between jagged rocks, climbed an unclimbable wall - and now this oaf was going to claim my reward!

"Great Heavens!" he exclaimed. "There is a rope tied to your bed!"

"Rope?" Said Lotus Cloud. "What rope?"

Well, there I was dangling on the rope when the provincial governor stuck his head out the window, and under the circumstances there was nothing I could do but smile in a friendly fashion and wave.

"Great Buddha, a burglar!" he cried. "Fear not, my beloved, I have my trusty sword!"

Then the bastard cut the rope.

I had plenty of time to survey the landscape as I plunged toward earth. In the courtyard below the guests departing from a banquet were stepping into carriages or reclining upon sedan chairs, and I was hurtling down toward one of the latter. He was, thank Buddha, an enormously fat fellow, and I landed right in the middle of his bloated belly. There was something familiar about the fellow, and as I bounced up and down I thoughtfully examined the dinner which was spewing into the air, course by course.

The fat man sprayed the landscape with pigeon egg soup to which had been added flour balls made from lotus root and stuffed with crushed pine seeds, followed by lamb kidneys sautéed with crushed walnuts, followed by turtle meat fried in pork fat with ginger and cinnamon, followed by ducks' tongues cooked with mushrooms and bamboo shoots in sesame oil and flavored with sweet white wine, followed by the ducks themselves - at least three - which were stuffed with shellfish and steamed inside a cover of hardened bean curd, followed by honeycakes, fruit, and sweetmeats, followed by Ginseng Digestive Tonic, followed by Seven Spirits Regulating Tonic, followed by Fragrant Fire Vitality Tonic, followed by hiccups, followed by a pair of hands which clamped around my throat.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH THAT CASE OF COMPASSES?" screamed the porcupine merchant.



## **Chapter 15: IN WHICH AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE AND I ATTEMPT A DAREDEVIL FEAT**

I can scarcely blame the provincial governor for being furious at me. I had delayed his entrance into Lotus Cloud's bed, and I rather sympathized with his exasperation.

"Since you appear to enjoy climbing my tower I shall expose you on top of it, and brick the door shut. You may choose between starving to death slowly, or dying quickly by jumping to your death," the governor snarled. "At least you will have company."

So they led me to the top of the tower. While the masons waited for my fellow prisoner before bricking the door shut I examined my surroundings. The tower was about fifty feet across, and it was a good one hundred-foot drop to the cobblestones of the courtyard. I already knew that the wall could not be climbed without a rope, and soldiers patrolled constantly below. The only things on top of the tower were a flagpole from which fluttered the tiger flag of the Duke of Ch'in and the wreckage of an old bamboo pigeon coop. I decided that I was in bad trouble. Then the soldiers led the other prisoner to the top of the tower and the masons began bricking up the only exit.

I was beginning to suspect that coincidence had ceased to exist the moment I had arrived at the Pool of Past Existences, and I was not so surprised as you might expect when I took inventory of a pair of tiny pig eyes, a bald and mottled skull, a sharp curving nose like a parrot's beak, the loose flabby lips of a camel, and two huge drooping elephant ears from which sprouted thick tufts of coarse gray hair.

"Would you care to buy a goat?" I said.

As I say I was not all that surprised to see Miser Shen, but I was quite astonished when he ran across the tower with a huge happy smile, seized both my hands, and began pumping them vigorously.

"Dear boy, dear boy!" he cried. "I had feared that I would never have the opportunity of seeing my benefactor again, and thanking him in person!"

"Thanking him?"

"For saving my life, dear boy! Had it not been for you I would not have been forced to reveal my wealth to the Key Rabbit, which means that I would not have met Lotus Cloud, and if I had not met Lotus Cloud I would still be the stingiest and most miserable miser in China. Lotus Cloud," said Miser Shen, "made a new man of me."

"Let me guess," I said. "She bankrupted you in a week?"

Miser Shen drew himself up proudly, and cried:

"Great Buddha, no! Such was the extent of my wealth that it took the dear girl nearly a month to reduce me to abject poverty. Of course I owe a good deal to luck," he added modestly, "After she ran through all my money I was able to get extraordinarily good prices for my six houses, my eight flourishing businesses, my carriage, my sedan chair, my horse, my three cows, my five pigs, my ten savage guard dogs, my twenty chickens, my seven half-starved servants, my...do you happen to remember my concubine, Pretty Ping?"

"Vividly," I said.

"Well I was extremely lucky there. I managed to buy three more days of Lotus Cloud by selling Pretty Ping to a very nice young fellow in the brothel business. Lucky for Pretty Ping too, because one of her customers fell in love with her and made her his Number Three Wife, and I am told that he showers her with the gifts and affection which she never received from me. Poor girl. I treated her terribly, but then I was not truly human, since I had not yet met Lotus Cloud."

This was really very interesting. "And what did you do when you had nothing left to sell?" I asked.

"Why, I turned to crime, of course!" said Miser Shen. "I am particularly proud of my performance during the Dragon Boat Festival. As you know it was originally a somber ceremony honoring the great statesman Ch'u Yuan, who drowned himself as a protest against corrupt government, and the boats raced for the honor of being the first to sacrifice to his spirit. Lately it has become nothing but a boat race, with vast sums wagered on the result, and it occurred to me that Ch'u Yuan could not possibly be pleased at such sacrilege."

"I began by hitting a few people over the head in dark alleys in order to get money for my equipment," said Miser Shen. "My boy, you would have loved every minute of it! There came the Dragon Boats skimming across the water while the crowds went wild. There floated the Betting Boat, with all the officials and bookmakers on board. And there I came, walking right over the surface of the water. It was a shallow river and I was on stilts, of course. I wore the kind of ceremonial robes that Ch'u Yuan might have worn, and I had a long black beard and a staff.

"Insolent dogs!" I roared, shaking my staff. 'You dare to turn my honorable death into a sporting event? I call upon the gods to smite you with plagues and earthquakes!'

"It was very effective because I had covered my face and head with protective ointment and my fake black beard with pitch," said Miser Shen, "and at that moment I set fire to my beard. So I marched across the surface of the water thundering terrible curses, with a halo of flames around my head, and of course everyone on the Betting Boat dove into the water and swam for their lives. Then I cut the anchor rope, climbed aboard, and poled off with all the money. I spent every cent for pearls and jade and followed Lotus Cloud here, but they caught me before I could reach her, and since fifty percent of the bookmakers' profits were to have gone to the Duke of Ch'in I was sentenced to death, and here I am."

This was Miser Shen? This vibrant fellow with sparkling eyes and a superb natural talent for crime? Now it was my turn to grab both his hands and pump them vigorously.

"Miser Shen, as soon as we escape from here we must go into partnership," I said. "Inside of three years we will own all China!"

"I think that is an excellent idea. But how are we going to escape from here?" said Miser Shen.

"I have concluded that the only way is to fly away like a couple of birds," I said. "So we will fly away like a couple of birds."

"Splendid," said Miser Shen.

"Of course we will probably be killed," I cautioned.

"I can well believe it," said Miser Shen.

We began work at sundown and finished at midnight. The bamboo poles from the old pigeon coop were strong and light and made an excellent framework, and the duke's tiger flag was first-rate silk, but I was a trifle worried about the design. At the Pool of Past Existences I had spent only a few minutes studying Chang Heng's man-carrying kites, and for some perverse reason I had paid more attention to the one seater than the two seater. Besides, I had completely forgotten Chang Heng's steering mechanism. Still, it would have to do.

"If this doesn't work I will ask the Yama Kings in Hell to allow me to be reborn as a three-toed sloth," I said. "I could use a long rest."

Miser Shen thought about it quite deeply, and then he said:

"I would like to be reborn as a tree. During this miserable existence I have done nothing but grub for money, and I would like to spend the next one providing free fruit for the hungry, free shade for the weary, free roosts for the birds, and when I am old and worn out free wood for woodcutters."

Miser Shen flushed with embarrassment. "You see, I come from peasant stock, and peasants name their favorite trees. It is the fondest wish of stingy Miser Shen to be known as 'Old Generosity'."

"Save a branch for a three-toed sloth," I said.

"I shall be honored to have you as my guest," said Miser Shen with a polite bow.

The wind sighed mournfully around the tower. Far above us a few silver clouds drifted across the face of the yellow moon, and far below we heard the hollow echo of the soldiers' boots as they patrolled the courtyard. There was no point in waiting. We lifted the kite over our heads.

"Ready? One...two...three...go!

We raced across the tower, hurled ourselves into space, swung up upon the seats, and plunged toward earth like a couple of rocks. Down, down, down, down - I could see the startled faces of the soldiers as they looked up and ran

for their lives.

"Farewell, tree!" I yelled.

"Farewell, sloth!" yelled Miser Shen.

Down, down, down...up! We were lifting! The fingers of the wind grabbed hold of our kite and pitched it up into the air, and we shot up so fast that we feared we might collide with the moon. Then it leveled off, and we floated through the night like a couple of ants upon a leaf, gently drifting upon a balmy breeze.

"We must not forget to stop somewhere and collect a few pearls," I said.

"And jade," said Miser Shen.

"Lotus Cloud!" we cried as one, and we sailed on through the summer night beneath the bright yellow moon and a billion trillion twinkling stars.

I had intended to conclude the chapter at this point, but on second thought I would like to add something. Miser Shen and I both wanted to get back to Lotus Cloud more than anything else on earth, but he was afraid that I might think badly of her for accepting the love of someone so old and ugly as himself. So he told me his story in a shy and halting voice, and I would like to pass it on to you. I will stick to his own words as far as I can remember them.

"Many years ago I was a happy man. I was a peasant and I was poor, but I had a wonderful wife and the most adorable little daughter in the whole world, and we had a roof over our heads and enough to eat. I never dreamed of asking for more. But then the Duke of Ch'in - the father of the present duke - doubled the tax on our village. We could not possibly pay such a tax. So we drew lots, and I was the unlucky one who was sent to plead with the duke.

"There were many peasants at court who had come to plead for lower taxes, and it was a long time before I was granted an audience. I fell upon my knees and I told of the flood that had broken our dikes, and of the sickness that had killed our pigs. I told of the drought that had come in the two years before, and of the bandits who bullied us and stole our rice. It was a long story and a true one, and I had practiced it for a long time and I know that I told it well. When I was through the duke looked at me with his terrible tiger mask flashing in the torchlight, and he said,

"Shen Chunlieh, today I have heard many tales of poverty, but yours alone rings true. Because I truly believe that you cannot pay my tax I have decided to grant you a very special favor. Not only shall I remit your taxes for this year, but I shall further decree that your village need never pay taxes again. My word is my bond, Shen Chunlieh, and you should remember my words when slanderers say that the Dukes of Ch'in are merciless.'

"I cannot describe my joy. I kissed the floor and crawled backwards from his presence. My feet had wings as I ran home with the wonderful news, and with each step I sang the praises of the Duke of Ch'in. When I climbed to the top of the last hill and looked down, I looked down upon smoldering ruins. 'Your village need never pay taxes again', said the Duke of Ch'in. His word was his bond. A village too poor to pay taxes was no use to the duke, so he had destroyed it as an example to others.

"By a miracle my wife and quite a few others survived. They had been at the lake fishing - the men fished and the women salted and dried the catch - but do you remember that I told you I had a little daughter? Her name was Ah Chen, and I loved her more than anything in the world. She had been left behind in the village, so she had been killed with all the others. I nearly went out of my mind with grief. I saw her face everywhere, and in the middle of the night I would hear her cry in the woods, and I would stumble through the darkness shouting: 'Ah Chen, your father is here!' They said that I would feel better if I sent a prayer to my little girl in Hell where she had gone to be judged. I could not read or write, so I went to a priest and he wrote down my prayer for me, and we burned it with food and paper money and sent it to Ah Chen. But I did not feel better.

"One day a traveler told of a great man who lived at the end of Bear's Path, high in the Omei Mountains. 'He is the wisest man in the world,' said the traveler. 'He is called the Old Man of the Mountain, and he knows all secrets, and he can surely bring your little girl back to life. But you must bring money,' said the traveler. 'You must bring much money, because the Old Man of the Mountain does not sell his secrets cheaply.'

"I had no money, so I set out to make some. Like everyone else who sets out to make money I lied and I cheated and I stole and I ruined my friends, but only the money mattered. I had to bring my little girl back to life. When my wife fell ill I scarcely noticed. I was too busy making money, and when they dragged me to her deathbed she said:

'Shen Chunlieh, beloved husband, you must forget about money. You must let little Ah Chen rest in peace. If you go on this way you will surely lose your mind.' When she died I wept, but I went right on making money.

"I was not aware of losing my mind. The years passed, and gradually I forgot what I wanted the money for - oh, I would remember the Old Man of the Mountain now and then, but I would tell myself that he would ask a tremendous price to bring Ah Chen back to life and that I did not have enough. The money mattered, only the money. I could not get enough of it. I could not spend any of it. I must make more and more and more, and I must bury it in chests. So I became Miser Shen, the greediest and stingiest and most miserable of men, and I would have remained that way until I died if Lotus Cloud had not bankrupted me and brought me to my senses.

"Li Kao, there are women who can see right into the heart of a man. Perhaps you will feel better if you realize that Lotus Cloud never accepted the love of Miser Shen. She accepted the love of a poor peasant who loved his little girl too much, and who went insane."

## Chapter 16: THE HAND

WE flew all night, drifting with the wind toward we knew not where, and as the sky grew pale we began to descend. When the sun lifted over the horizon we discovered that we were floating across a beautiful valley toward a range of snow-capped mountains. We drifted through fleecy little clouds that glowed pink and orange against the turquoise sky, and tiny wisps of smoke lifted from the valley below where farmers were burning weeds. The leaves of the trees had turned red and gold, and all the world was filled with the fragrance of autumn, and the tangy breeze that brushed our faces was crisp and marvelously refreshing.

"Li Kao, this is the only way to travel," Miser Shen said solemnly.

"And the only country worth traveling through. Miser Shen, we Chinese are unfairly accused of arrogance when we point out the obvious," I said as I pointed out the obvious, meaning the boundary of the Yellow Sea. "Yet nowhere else on earth can one find valleys like this: lush, ordered, harmonious, perfect. Beyond that ocean lies nothing but the bleakness of unspeakable barbarism, where the ingredients of a perfect valley are haphazardly scattered hither and yon in the pathetic disarray of mindless anarchy."

"How can barbarians tolerate such deformity?" said Miser Shen. "Notice that the mountains just ahead of us are not too tall and not too short; rocks piled neatly but not too neatly - Li Kao, I am not an educated gentleman like yourself. My poor halting tongue has never learned to express my feelings. But at least I am Chinese, and thus I know in my bones that a perfect mountain must have artistic imperfections properly placed to delight the eye and inspire the mind, such as those impossible cliffs where fantastic trees precariously perch with branches spread to capture wisps of clouds, and to weave them into the patterns of dreams."

"Miser Shen, beneath your repulsive exterior beats the heart of a poet! I said warmly. We were flying through a mountain pass so narrow that I was able to reach out and scoop two handfuls of snow from the side of a cliff. I gave one to Miser Shen, and we sampled it delicately.

"Perfection," sighed Miser Shen.

"Pure Chinese snow," I agreed. "Carefully manufactured in Heaven and deposited where it can best refresh the palate of the traveler and reinvigorate his jaded taste buds."

"Everywhere in China one finds the fingerprints of the gods," Miser Shen agreed.

"Beauty," I said.

"Harmony," said Miser Shen.

"Serenity," I said.

"Tranquility," said Miser Shen.

"Fertility," I said.

"Merciful Buddha, what the hell is this?" howled Miser Shen, for we had drifted through the pass and had emerged from the other side into the landscape of a nightmare. Stretching endlessly in front of us was a horrible white desert. The glare of reflected sunlight nearly blinded us; blasts of merciless heat scorched our bodies; angry whirlwinds whipped stinging particles against our faces. I tasted some. It was salt. We were flying above a terrible Desert of Salt which appeared to stretch on and on without end. I was quite speechless, but Miser Shen rose superbly to the occasion.

"Li Kao, our beloved China is Heaven on earth, but there cannot be a Heaven unless there is also a Hell," he said. "Obviously this place is the lid on top of Hell, and the gods have very considerately placed it at the farthest corner of civilization, so that it may usually be avoided by the Chinese and enjoyed by the barbarians, who no doubt consider it suitable for summer vacations."

"Well spoken," I said.

"Do you know how to turn this thing around?" said Miser Shen.

I didn't have the slightest idea, but I decided to try by tilting the kite a trifle. It promptly shot straight down, completely out of control. At the last possible moment it straightened out, and a horrible blast of heat grabbed us

and tossed us angrily back up into the air, and then we were sailing straight ahead in precisely the same direction as before. I helped Miser Shen unwrap his legs, which had somehow become tangled around his neck. "Li Kao," he wheezed when he was able, "if this thing insists on continuing in this direction I do not believe that we should argue with it."

So we sailed on and on. The mountains vanished behind us, and then there was nothing but the desert where the hot wind howled horribly, and whirlwinds danced in mad patterns, and multiple images of the sun glared through orange and violet halos which spun round and round through the salt-streaked sky.

"I shall be sick," moaned Miser Shen.

It was something of a relief when the mirages began. We were able to control our terror somewhat by comparing notes. I would clearly see a castle with a bright silver dome standing in the center of an emerald lake. Miser Shen would say: "No no! It is a large rock in the middle of a green river, and the rock is covered with birds. Seagulls of some sort. And there are rows of beautiful palm trees all along the banks."

Then the mirage would dissolve into nothingness, and we would gaze again at an endless emptiness of salt. We saw cities and palaces and armies arrayed in battle formation, and always there was the green oasis, and always the oasis melted away like a dream. How many hours passed I cannot tell, but it seemed an eternity before Miser Shen leveled a trembling finger and cried:

"Great Buddha! Just look at that ghastly mirage!"

I examined the mirage with a sinking heart.

"Tell me what you see," I said.

"Well, I see the usual green oasis, but it is standing in the middle of a mess of shattered stones," said Miser Shen. "There is a horrible stench of sulfur, and geysers of steam are hissing up from the bowels of the earth. A sickening sort of bubbling sound is coming from somewhere. The whole mirage is circled by a broad belt like a moat, which is filled with some sort of fiery liquid."

I had been afraid of that.

"Miser Shen, I see precisely the same thing," I said gloomily. "We have been approaching the ghastly hallucination for several minutes but it has not vanished. And since when do mirages stink and hiss and bubble? I am greatly afraid that this is not a mirage."

No sooner had the words escaped my lips than the cursed kite began to descend.

"Up!" I yelled, pounding the frame of the kite. "Fly up, you silly son of a syphilitic silk worm!"

"Up! Up! Up!" screamed Miser Shen.

The kite paid no attention. It drifted silently down from the sky and gently - very gently - landed right in front of the fiery moat.

For several minutes we just sat there with silly expressions on our faces. At last I cleared my throat and said:

"Well, at least there is a real oasis somewhere in the center of this mess."

"And there seems to be a bridge across this terrible moat, and unless I have gone mad I see a pair of enormous bronze gates which are standing open," said Miser Shen. "Li Kao, this place used to be a city."

He was right. We were outside the ruins of a great walled city that had been smashed to pieces by some horrible catastrophe. The moat that encircled it had once sparkled with blue water, and small golden fish, and graceful white swans. Now it was filled with a fiery red-black substance so thick that it was barely liquid - lava.

"There must have been some great volcanic eruption," I said,

"I believe it is the lava what makes that awful bubbling sound," said Miser Shen. "Do you think that we dare cross that bridge?"

"We have to reach the oasis or die," I replied.

Actually it proved to be much easier than we thought. The bridge was very narrow and built of stone, but the stones

were not as murderously hot as I had feared. We took off our tunics and trousers and wrapped them around our sandals, and then we raced across the bridge with smoking feet and lungs stinging from the sulfur fumes. It only took a minute. Then we stamped out the smoldering spots in our clothes and put them back on, and slowly walked through the huge open gates into the ruined city.

We found ourselves standing on what must have been the central thoroughfare. It was a broad avenue that ran straight as an arrow toward an enormous mass of tumbled stones.

"Probably the palace of the king," said Miser Shen.

"Yes, and I think we had better climb to the top of the ruins," I said. "We cannot see the oasis from here and we need a high vantage point."

I cannot describe the horror and desolation of that tragic city. Our feet made clear prints in the fine salt that covered the avenue as we slowly trudged toward the fallen palace. A lunatic tangle of side streets branched from both Sides - if one could still call them streets since not one building remained standing. We gazed between the rows of tumbled stones and saw angry geysers of steam shrieking through cracks in the earth, or heard the heavy bubbling sounds that meant pools of lava. The wind howled through the ruins, and I have never heard a more mournful sound in my life. We finally reached the palace and began to climb, and as we neared the top we saw a stone barricade a circle nearly thirty feet high and five or six times as broad. The stones were neatly fitted together.

"Miser Shen, someone must have built this wall after the disaster, using the fallen stones of the palace," I said.

"What worries me is that someone else came along and knocked a hole in it," Miser Shen muttered.

The hole was torn right in the center of the wall. Some unimaginable force had jerked out enormous stone slabs and tossed them aside like pebbles. We stepped through the hole rather timidly, and when we did we stepped upon bones. Skeletons were everywhere. A small army had barricaded itself behind that wall, and there it had perished. And not pleasantly.

"Li Kao, I swear that these poor souls were chewed!" gasped Miser Shen.

I had reached the same conclusion. Nothing but monstrous grinding teeth could have mangled men and armor like that. I looked glumly at the scattered weapons and finally saw something that cheered me considerably.

"Miser Shen, these weapons and armor are museum pieces!" I cried. "Whatever happened probably occurred a thousand years ago! All we have to worry about is finding that oasis."

I climbed up to the top of the barricade like a monkey.

"I see it!" I yelled. "I can see the tops of the trees, but the entire back of the palace is nothing but a lake of lava. We will have to go back and try to get through one of the side streets to the oasis."

"Li Kao, I have found something! I think it is writing!" cried Miser Shen from below.

"What does it say?"

I looked down at a face turning scarlet.

"I must shamefully confess that I never did learn to read or write," sighed Miser Shen. "I was too busy working when I was a poor farmer, and when I became a miser I was too busy making money."

I scrambled back down. Time and the wind had made much of what had been written on a large rock illegible, but enough remained to make the hair stand straight up on my head.

"Miser Shen, it begins with a prayer to some gods I have never heard of, and then there are a number of words missing. Then it says: '...punished for our pride, and the earth opened with a great roar, and flames engulfed us, and fiery black rock ran forth like water, and then the horrible Hand That No One Sees crawled up from the deepest bowels of Hell.'"

"The what did what?"

"The Hand That No One Sees crawled up from the deepest bowels of Hell. Don't ask me what it means. Then there are more missing words, and then it says: '...sixth day, and we labor on the main fortress but we are faint of heart. We make sacrifice and pray to the gods. Our supplies of food and water are low.' Then there are more missing

words, and then it says: '...the queen and her ladies have chosen the easier death and have jumped into the lake of fiery black rock. We did not try to stop them. The Hand That No One Sees moves closer. Our spears are hurled at nothingness, and bounce away from nothingness. We watch the prints of the horrible fingers as it crawls toward us through the salt. The first stone has fallen. The Hand---'"

I stood silently for a moment. "That Is all there is," I said, and we stood there with the lonely wind-howling around our heads thinking of an invisible hand that crawled up from Hell, and smashed stone walls to pieces and chewed armored men like bamboo shoots.

"Whoof!" said Miser Shen. "I don't care how many centuries ago that happened. This place makes me nervous. Let's go find that oasis."

We retraced our steps to the main avenue, but we soon discovered that getting to the oasis through the side streets was not going to be easy. We labored through a maze of tumbled stones, and we kept coming to dead ends where lava bubbled and murderous geysers of steam hissed high into the sulphurous air. We were not the only ones to reach those dead ends. Again and again we came to more pathetic piles of chewed skeletons and armor.

"Whatever that thing was, it certainly ate well," said Miser Shen with a shudder.

"Look here, Shen, it may be that we cannot reach the oasis at all," I said. "As a last resort we can get our kite and carry it back to the palace. If we launched it from the top of the barricade there might be enough of a drop to get it airborne."

"If this humble one might make a suggestion, I think we should go get the kite at once. If one of those whirlwinds hits it we will never see it again," said Miser Shen.

We had barely started toward the gates when we stopped dead in our tracks and gazed speechlessly at a miracle: those enormous bronze gates must have weighed tons and there was nothing to press against them but the wind, yet they were slowly swinging shut! As we stood rooted to the spot the gates crashed together with a great metal crash. Now we were trapped inside that devastated city and what happened next made the hair rise straight up upon our heads.

"Do you see what I see?" I yelled.

"I wish I didn't!" howled Miser Shen.

A huge mark had appeared in the salt that covered the avenue. It was like the print of a gigantic thumb. Another mark followed, like a fingerprint. Then three more fingerprints. Then a broad path appeared in the salt, sliding behind the fingers. Our eyes insisted upon a fact that our brains refused to believe: a huge invisible hand was sliding toward us, dragging the heel and palm behind the crawling fingers!



## Chapter 17: ONCE MORE I ENCOUNTER A GHOST

MISER Shen and I reacted like sensible people, meaning that we lost our heads completely, took to our heels, and did not stop running until there was no place left to run to - meaning that we had raced back to the ruined palace and plunged through the hole in the barricade. Then our sanity returned.

We were hopelessly trapped. In front of us was a lake of lava that completely covered the other side of the palace. Behind us was the Hand That No One Sees. The tangle of streets on either side of the avenue had led us to nothing but dead ends where lava bubbled, and scalding steam shrieked up from cracks in the earth. We turned and watched with terrified fascination as those monstrous fingerprints moved toward us through the salt. Both of us realized that our only hope lay in finding a path to safety through those deadly side streets, but which way should we go? The devastated city had become a labyrinth...

A labyrinth? I concentrated with all my might. Was I hearing a faint familiar voice telling me to follow the dragon? Was I imagining it? I jerked the dragon locket from around my neck, and my fingers found the place where the dragon had stopped after leading me through the labyrinth of the Duke of Ch'in.

"Miser Shen, I have almost certainly lost my mind, but one way to die is no worse than another - under the circumstances. I want you to get behind me," I said. "Grab hold to my belt and hold tight. We are going to run like hell and we will be making sudden turns."

Miser Shen was a very brave man. He was pale and trembling, but he did as I asked without question.

"I am ready, Li Kao," he said in a surprisingly calm voice.

Then we ran. We raced back down the toppled stones of the palace and panted along the avenue. What terrified me most was the fact that the dragon passed the first six holes in the coral locket and turned into the seventh on the left, and those horrible fingerprints were nearly at the entrance to the seventh side street. What saved us was that the monster stopped crawling. I believe that it expected us to attack with puny sword thrusts - surely some of the heroes of the city must have tried it - and when we suddenly turned about twenty feet in front of the enormous fingerprints and lunged into the side street we heard the thing make its first sound: a thin high shriek of rage.

"Seventh left," I panted, "third right...second left...fifth left..."

I glanced back. The invisible hand was crawling faster and faster; it was gaining on us.

"First right ... second right...third left..."

"I see palm trees, Li Kao!" yelled Miser Shen.

"Third right ... first right ... Merciful Buddha!" I howled.

We skidded to a halt. There was that green oasis, right in front of us, but it was completely encircled by a bubbling moat of fiery lava, and there was no bridge! At the edge of the moat was the only building we had seen which remained upright - some sort of watch tower, apparently, very tall and narrow and teetering precariously upon a single jutting stone slab - and at the base were still more mangled skeletons and armor and weapons.

I grabbed two ancient pikes and handed one to Miser Shen and ran to the tower. "We have to pry this stone out!" I yelled. We set to work with all our might. At last the stone slab slid out, but the tower still stood! "Fall, damn you, fall!" Miser Shen roared. We raced around to the rear of the tower and began shoving as hard as we could, and slowly the tower began to tilt, and then it dissolved into a shower of stones that toppled into the fiery moat and began to sink - but very slowly, since the lava was nearly as thick as the stones. "Climb on my back!" I yelled. Miser Shen wrapped his arms around my neck and his legs around my waist, and I ran to the edge of the moat and jumped. I just made the first stone.

"Bravo, Li Kao!" cried Miser Shen.

I hopped from stone to stone with scorching feet and smoking sandals. The last stone had nearly sunk out of sight. I consigned my soul to Buddha, jumped, touched the top of the stone with the tips of my sandals, and vaulted as far as I could. Buddha must have heard me, because the next thing I knew I was lying on the grass of the oasis, and Miser Shen was happily pounding my shoulders.

We heard another thin high shriek of rage, and sat up and watched the stones sink one by one beneath the molten surface of the lava. The Invisible fingers angrily paved the salt, but they did not move away. The Hand That No One Sees was waiting.

"Li Kao, how did you do it?" said Miser Shen when he had regained his breath. "You ran through that maze of streets as though you had a map! It was unbelievable!"

I laughed without much mirth. "Let's try to find some food and water first," I said, and we got to our feet and entered the greenery of the oasis. The trees and shrubs dripped with luscious fruit, and there was a pool of spring water - slightly sulphurous, but drinkable. When we had refreshed ourselves I said: "Miser Shen, do you happen to know the peasants' story about Chang Heng?"

"Of course. I was a peasant myself," said Miser Shen.

"Where was he first seen after he set forth on his mysterious quest?"

"Near the Castle of the Labyrinth."

"And what was he looking for?"

"A little crystal ball," said Miser Shen.

I opened my smuggler's belt and took out the little crystal ball. Miser Shen's eyes grew as large as soup plates as he watched it glow and grow, and he found himself laughing out loud as he saw the lunatic pursuit: woman after dog after cat after rat after roach after ant.

"I could have made ten thousand fortunes peddling such trinkets!" he cried. "Peasant girls would sell their very souls for such things!"

That was an Interesting thought.

"Miser Shen, where was Chang Heng seen next?" I said.

"He was next seen near a terrible...merciful Heavens, the great Chang Heng was next seen near a terrible Desert of Salt!"

"Precisely. And what was he looking for?"

"A small bronze bell."

I finished eating a handful of grapes and got to my feet. "Well, let's go collect it," I sighed.

"Eh?"

"The bronze bell, Miser Shen. I will be greatly surprised if it is not on this island," I said. "Assuming that there is a pattern we should keep our eyes peeled for a pile of treasure, a copy of the tiger mask of the Duke of Ch'in, and a shadow where no shadow should be. Along the way I will amuse you with a rather remarkable story, and you will be interested to learn that you play a part in it."

As we walked through the oasis I told Miser Shen everything. I told him how his incredible pursuit had chased me up a mountainside, close enough to hear the mysterious whistle. I told of the Pool of Past Existences, and of the hallucinations, and of the gentleman with the shining eyes and Confucian hat and old-fashioned robe who had told me to follow a dragon. I told the story of Henpecked Ho and Bright Star, and of how Fainting Maid brought the dragon locket up from the bottom of the old well. I showed the locket to Miser Shen, and we wondered together about the three little grooves on the inside. Then I told of my incredible adventure with the Duke of Ch'in who laughed at sword thrusts, and the labyrinth, and the voice, and the dragon leading me to treasure and a mysterious ghost and a crystal ball.

"And so the dragon has led me through one more labyrinth, and as sure as you are born I have been brought here to collect a small bronze bell," I said in conclusion. "And if we ever get off this island I would advise you to take to your heels. Get as far away from me as possible, Miser Shen, because I am a dead man. Next it will be a silver flute, and then I will be sent to find a raindrop in a thunderstorm, or a petal in a field of flowers, or a single grain of sand concealed among a billion on a beach, and I will be very lucky if I am merely chewed to pieces by the Hand That No One Sees."

I had been growing more and more depressed as I recounted my adventures. I discovered that I was very close to tears.

"If you should manage to get back to Lotus Cloud," I sniffled. "Ask her if she ever thinks of me."

To my astonishment Miser Shen fell upon his knees in front of me and began banging his head upon the ground.

"O most-favored-of-mortals Li Kao, all peasants worship the memory of the great Chang Heng! To think that he called you for five hundred years!" bawled Miser Shen. "To think that even now his spirit follows you across China! This unworthy one has been granted the honor of pursuing you toward the Pool of Past Existences, and I beg to be granted the greater honor of dying at your side!"

I must confess that I was rather flattered. "Well, if you want to commit suicide I will not stop you," I said. "But I doubt that it is up to me - or to you. If Chang Heng has a use for you he will see that you accompany me whether I like it or not, and if he wants to send me somewhere alone he will do just that. We will just have to wait and see what happens, but in the meanwhile we had better keep looking for the bronze bell."

So we continued through the oasis. Once this island had been a pleasure garden, as fallen pagodas and the remnants of paths and pools attested. Lanterns had sparkled in the trees, and silver bells had tinkled from branches swaying in a breeze that had been fragrant with flowers and incense and wine. We could imagine intricately carved red wooden bridges with green dragon heads on the posts spanning a pretty blue moat where goldfish swam - and then the eruption, and the invisible monster that crawled up from Hell.

"Some great sin must have been committed by this city, although I cannot imagine a sin so great as to deserve the Hand That No One Sees," said Miser Shen.

Something was sparkling in the light of the setting sun. The glitter came from an ornamental grotto square in the center of the little island, and when we stepped through the entrance Miser Shen nearly fainted, for there was even more treasure piled inside than I had found in the cave beneath the Castle of the Labyrinth. A copy of the duke's tiger mask glittered upon the wall.

"You miserable bastard," I said conversationally to the mask.

"How Lotus Cloud would love this place!" cried Miser Shen, as he gaped at ten or fifteen tons of pearls and jade.

I was looking for a shadow where no shadow should be, and I found it. I did not know what to expect when I pulled it over me like a blanket. For a startled moment I thought that I was looking at the same ghost of the agonized peasant girl, but then I saw that it was a different girl, although she was dressed the same way and had the same bloodstain where a blade had pierced her heart. Again I sensed an incredible effort on her part to appear in ghost form, again I saw hands cupped around a small object, again I saw beseeching eyes fixed upon mine and again I heard the mysterious words: "Take pity upon a faithless handmaiden. Is not a thousand years enough? I swear that I did not know what I had done! O take pity and exchange this for the feather," she sobbed, and her tears mingled with the blood on her gown. "The birds must fly."

"Wait!" I yelled. "Don't go! Tell me what the feathers mean! Tell me what you mean by the birds! I do not understand!"

But she was gone.

Miser Shen was staring at me with frightened eyes. "Are you all right?" he said.

"I don't suppose you happened to see a girl with a bloodstained dress," I sighed.

"I saw nothing but you, Li Kao, yelling at empty space."

I picked up the object the ghost's hands had cradled. Of course it was a small bronze bell. Like the crystal ball it was no more than an inch and a half in diameter, and it did not appear to be anything unusual. I was willing to bet that it was like no other bell on earth, however, and I held it out toward Miser Shen and gently rang it, and instead of the sound of a bell we heard the high-pitched wail of a professional storyteller:

"Aiiieeeee! Aiiieeeee! Come closer, my children! Spread ears like elephants, and I shall tell you the tale of a girl named Beauty, and of her wicked stepmother and of her good fairy godmother, and of the little slipper that fell from Beauty's foot and led her to a handsome Prince!"

Never have I heard it told better - the magic fishbone and the pumpkin that turned into a coach and all the rest of the tale that has delighted Chinese children for three thousand years - and when I rang the bell again the storyteller began another marvelous story, and when I stopped the clapper of the little bell the voice ceased.

"Miser Shen, do you think that a simple peasant girl would sell her soul for a trinket like this?" I asked.

"Unquestionably," said Miser Shen.

I gazed sadly at the spot where the anguished ghost had been. "Is not a thousand years enough?" she had pleaded. Apparently it wasn't.

## **Chapter 18: THE BAMBOO DRAGONFLY**

THE next day we explored the little island from one end to the other and discovered that it was completely encircled by the moat of lava. There was no way to build a bridge or a boat that wouldn't either sink or burn, and waiting on the other side was the Hand That No One Sees.

"What luck!" I said. "I shall spend the rest of my life on this delightful oasis sipping spring water and eating fruit. No more ghosts, no more monsters, no more laughing dukes, no more lunatic quests--"

"And no more Lotus Cloud," sighed Miser Shen.

He had a point there. Life without Lotus Cloud seemed to be no life at all, but what could I do about it? The only way to escape would be to fly away, but this time we had no materials for a kite, and no place to launch it from anyway. I decided that the only man in the history of the world who could have escaped from this island was Chang Heng, which made me wonder whether he actually did. What started me on that train of thought was the seed that blew against my face: a sycamore seed. I caught it and held it out for Miser Shen to examine.

"Did you ever hear the story of the great Chang Heng and a seed like this? They say that one day the great man was sitting on the grass like we are, with his back resting against a tree, and a sycamore seed blew in front of his eyes. Then two or three more followed, and he caught one and studied the design. Chang Heng decided that he could build a flying machine designed like a sycamore seed, but he would need some sort of propelling force. So he filled tubes with a special type of Fire Drug - the burning rate was slowed by adding resin - and attached them to a wheel around a revolving pole. At the top of the pole he fixed fan-shaped arms like those of a sycamore seed, and that is how he came to build the marvelous Bamboo Dragonfly. I saw the plans at the Pool of Past Existences," I said. "A very interesting design, although terribly dangerous."

Miser Shen examined the sycamore seed, and the circle of fan-shaped arms that spun round and round so that the slightest breeze could lift it and send it flying for miles. There was an extraordinary variety of trees on that little island, and Miser Shen happened to be leaning, against a giant palm. He pointed up.

"You know, the leaves of this tree are very large, very light, very strong, and fan-shaped. If you put a circle of them together you would have an oversized sycamore seed," he said. "Of course you still could not build the Bamboo Dragonfly. For that you would have to have tubes of the Fire Drug."

"Simplest thing Chang Heng ever invented," I yawned. "Nothing but sulfur, saltpeter, and charcoal. There are natural deposits of saltpeter in every corner of China, probably on this very island. The lava is full of sulfur, and we would be idiots indeed if we could not make a little charcoal. Then some resin which is all around us, bamboo tubes, reed fuses - nothing to it."

"Of course it would be suicidal," said Miser Shen.

"No hope of survival at all," I agreed.

"Insanity," said Miser Shen.

"Total madness," I agreed.

"Not even the faint chance of getting back to Lotus Cloud could justify such lunacy," said Miser Shen.

"Of course not," I agreed.

"Not even the faint chance of seeing her reaction when we brought her a ton of pearls and jade," said Miser Shen.

We got to our feet.

"You build a fire for the charcoal and I will try to find some saltpeter," I said. "We had better hurry, because it will probably take us three months to build the thing."

"Three years," said Miser Shen. "I shall almost certainly die of old age before we get finished."

It took us three weeks, but I doubt that Chang Heng would have approved of the result. The Palm leaves made an excellent imitation of a sycamore seed; the blades whirled very nicely around the revolving bamboo pole; the basket which Miser Shen made from reeds attached to a bamboo framework was very comfortable to sit in; but the tubes of Fire Drug left something to be desired. We had never been able to make the test samples burn evenly and both of

us were scorched and blackened from tubes that had exploded. Besides, I could not remember Chang Heng's steering mechanism for the life of me, and we could only hope to steer the thing by shifting our weight in the basket.

"This is moronic," Miser Shen said gloomily, as he climbed into the basket.

"We are obviously deranged," I agreed. I picked up a rock and hurled it across the moat to see if the Hand That No One Sees was still waiting. The rock bounced away from nothingness and the monster shrieked with rage.

"It sounds almost like an insect," Miser Shen said thoughtfully.

"I see what you mean," I said. "A cicada might sound something like that if it were twenty or thirty feet tall and weighed a couple of tons." I lit the fuses and climbed into the basket beside Miser Shen. "Farewell, tree."

"Farewell, sloth," said Miser Shen.

We closed our eyes and covered our ears and waited for disaster. The first tube of Fire Drug began to spurt flame and smoke, and the Bamboo Dragonfly shuddered. More and more tubes began spurting in sequence, and the wheel to which they were attached spun round and round. The pole revolved rapidly and the palm leaves flashed around in a circle and the grass bent beneath a hard downward wind - and then the Bamboo Dragonfly lifted straight up into the air!

"Miser Shen, we are rising!" I yelled.

"Li Kao, we are falling!" howled Miser Shen.

And so we were. We had lifted about a hundred feet into the air and now we were dropping back down, straight toward the molten lava.

"Lean back!" I yelled.

We shifted our weight and at the last second the Bamboo Dragonfly straightened out, and now we were flying across the moat straight toward the invisible hand! "AAARRRRGGGGGGHH!" we howled as we shot toward our doom.

The hand nearly got us. An invisible finger slashed the air and ripped off one of the whirling palm leaves - which proved to be a blessing because the Bamboo Dragonfly stopped shuddering and began performing very nicely indeed, except that it was flying around in circles. So we flew round and round the ruined city, and below us we watched the fingerprints crawl quickly over the salt as the Hand That No One Sees scrambled after us. Suddenly I realized what the monster was doing.

"Miser Shen, that cursed thing has a fiendish plan!" I howled. "It is scuttling toward the ruins of the palace, and if it climbs to the top of the barricade and we keep circling like this we will run right into it!"

Nothing could persuade the Bamboo Dragonfly to change course. Around and around it flew, spurting flame and smoke, and with one more circle the hand would have us!

"Take off your tunic!" I yelled. "Try using it as a rudder!"

We spread our tunics behind us to catch the wind, and by the grace of Buddha it worked. We suddenly veered to the left, just beyond the reach of the invisible fingers, and zoomed out over that lake of lava behind the palace.

"Look! The barricade is falling!" cried Miser Shen.

The Hand That No One Sees had made one last furious snatch at us, and that had been a bad mistake. The stone slabs teetered and tottered and toppled down into the lava, and they were followed by a monstrous splash as a great invisible creature plunged into the molten rock. "Ehr-lang protect me!" gasped Miser Shen as the thing rose to the surface.

What had been invisible was now covered with lava. We saw a huge hairy hand - perhaps sixty feet long - palm up, with clenched fingers, and then the monster shuddered and the fingers jerked convulsively open. They were not fingers at all. They were the legs of an enormous spider! A round crimson mouth opened just above the bloated sac behind the fingers, which we had taken to be the heel and palm of the hand, and we saw a terrible circle of gigantic pointed teeth. Then the spider screamed so horribly that we covered our ears, and lava poured into the gaping

mouth, and the Hand That No One Sees sank forever beneath the fiery surface of the lake.

We flew on in silence for quite some time. "You know," I said at last, "I would guess that it was simply an oversized relative of the common trap-door spider."

"Yes, and invisible because it lived underground before the eruption where there was no need for sight perception. Nature is astonishingly adaptable," Miser Shen said thoughtfully. "There are many sea creatures which have become transparent to the point of invisibility, and a few insects."

"A remarkable specimen in many ways," I said. "Nonetheless, I do not think that we shall mourn its passing."

So the Bamboo Dragonfly clattered on across the Desert of Salt, belching cheerful spurts of flame and clouds of black smoke, while the palm leaf blades whirled round and round, just like sycamore seeds. Hour after hour we flew above the whirlwinds and scorching heat and glaring white salt, but in the last light of the setting sun Miser Shen pointed to a faint dark line ahead of us and cried:

"Look, there are trees! The desert is coming to an end!"

The best proof of that observation was that black clouds were covering the rising moon, and the air smelled of rain. I watched lightning flicker in the distance. We were in for a thunderstorm.

"You know, if this basket we are riding in fills with water we may be in bad trouble," I said.

So we pried two pieces of bamboo from the bottom of the basket. This not only gave us a nice drainage hole, but also provided us with poles for umbrellas. Bamboo strips taken from the circular rim of the basket made very good frames, and our tunics and trousers served as covers. We finished just in time, because rain began to fall by the bucketful and lightning darted across the sky like the tongues of snakes - pssst!- and thunder roared baroom-aroom-aroom!, and in the bright flashes we could see the branches of trees far below waving frantically in the wind. But we clutched our umbrellas and flew through the storm as dry as could be.

"I have always wanted to fly through a thunderstorm!" yelled Miser Shen above the crash of thunder.

"Magnificent!" I shouted.

We were rather disappointed when the storm passed and the moon and stars came out, but we passed the night singing songs and telling stories while the palm leaves whirled steadily overhead and flame spurted out behind from the tubes of Fire Drug, and when the sun rose we found that we were clattering over lovely green fields and forests that looked as though they had been soaped and scrubbed and left outside to dry. About three hours after sunrise the Fire Drug began to sputter and fizzle, and the palm leaves whirled slower and slower, and we began to descend. We came down directly over a small village, and you may be sure that the peasants gathered from miles around to watch this fire-breathing bird descend from Heaven. The palm leaves twirled lazily, clickety...clickety...clickety, and the Fire Drug produced one last puff of smoke and spurt of flame - boom! - and then we settled down as gently as a falling leaf. We stepped grandly from the basket clutching our umbrellas, tastefully attired in loincloths, moneybelts, and sandals.

"My surname is Li and my personal name is Kao and there is a slight flaw in my character," I said to the awestruck peasants, with a polite bow. "This is Old Generosity, formerly known as Miser Shen. We hereby donate the Bamboo Dragonfly to your delightful village. Build a fence around it! Charge admission! Your fortunes shall be made. And now you may direct us to the nearest wineshop, for we intend to stay drunk for a week."

## Chapter 19: THE CAVERN OF BELLS

ACTUALLY we only stayed drunk three days. Just as we were warming up on the morning of the fourth day a traveler entered who told us that the Duke of Ch'in and his party were heading toward Chunking, and the local fishermen told us that if we dared to run the terrible Ts'ao-tai Rapids we could get there ahead of the duke. So we bought a small boat and loaded it with food and wine, and a flute for me and a drum for Miser Shen.

"Good luck!" said the fishermen as they shoved us out into the current. "Remember that it is wise to be very drunk when you reach the Ts'ao-tai Rapids!"

The peculiar color of the river helped us to get drunk quickly. The Glass River runs through areas where the earth is bright yellow clay, which colors the water after the heavy summer rains and gradually washes away. In winter the water is deep crystal blue, and when we set forth the river has half blue and half yellow, which had a rather dizzying effect. We were in splendid shape when we reached the junction with the Yangtse. We hit a current like a wall, whipped around, and began racing downstream with our little boat bucking like a wild horse. We bolted past the Yenyu Rocks where the spray resembles a woman's hair swirling in the wind, and Fairy Girl Peak, which is shaped like a lovely nude nymph. We made it safely past the Frog, a huge boulder shaped like a bullfrog with water spewing from its gaping mouth, and we made it through the Shiling and Chutang Gorges without incident. Ahead lay Yellow Buffalo Mountain and the terrible Ts'ao-tai rapids in Wu Gorge.

Day turned to night as we shot into a gorge where sheer cliffs rose several hundred feet on either side, and which was so narrow that only at noon could one see the sun slide across a thin ribbon of sky. The compressed river hurtled us along at nearly one hundred miles an hour, and the howl of crashing water was like the screams of ten thousand dragons rending each others' flesh. We bounced up and down upon thudding fists of current, hard as rocks, and at times we bounced straight over sharp-fanged boulders that tried to snatch the bottom from our boat. The noise was incredible. I could not even hear my howls as I committed my soul to Heaven. Then there was a sudden blaze of sunlight, the gorge widened, the current slackened, and we shot out upon a broad and placid expanse of water.

The danger was over. There gazing serenely down at us was the Great Stone Buddha of Loshan, 360 feet high, carved from the safe side of Yellow Buffalo Mountain. Miser Shen was rather disappointed, since he had enjoyed the ride immensely, but he consoled himself with another jar of wine.

After that our river journey was the most peaceful trip either one of us had ever experienced. The time passed with such happy serenity that we decided to write a song about it.

"Today there is no wind on the Yangtse;  
the water is calm and green  
with no waves or ripples.  
All around the boat  
light floats in the air  
over a thousand acres of smooth lustrous Jade.  
"Li Kao wants to break the silence.  
High on wine he picks up his flute  
and plays Into the mist.  
The clear music rises to the sky -  
an ape in the mountains  
screaming at the moon;  
a creek rushing through a gully.  
Miser Shen accompanies on his sheepskin drum,  
his head held steady as a mountain peak,



his fingers beating like raindrops.

"A fish breaks the surface of the water  
and leaps ten feet into the air."

I was quite proud of the result, and Miser Shen rashly declared that it was not unworthy of Yang Wan-li. We passed many famous landmarks as we drifted downstream, and one day Miser Shen pointed ahead and said:

"Li Kao, that cliff rising from the river bank is called Stone Bell Mountain. They say that small boats can sail right inside it to a place called the Cavern of Bells, which is some sort of temple now, the Temple of the Peddler I believe they call it, but the important thing is that when the water rises - as it is rising now - the waves strike strangely shaped stones which make beautiful music. I would greatly like to hear that."

"And so would I!" I said.

When our little boat drifted inside the entrance of the cavern we cried out in wonder and delight, for it was like one of those undersea palaces in Buddhist fairy tales. Golden sunlight bounced off the deep green water and struck crystals embedded in the walls, and the walls exploded with every color of the spectrum. It was a world wrapped in rainbows. The cavern bristled with the strangest rocks I had ever seen: some rising straight up from the cavern floor and others pointing straight down from the ceiling. They were like spears, except that the ends were bell-shaped rather than pointed. In the center of the cavern was a large black boulder that must have been formed from very soft rock, for the water had worn hundreds of tiny holes right through it.

The floor sloped sharply up. Soon we scraped bottom, and we tied our boat to one of the bell stones and climbed a flight of steps to a level floor, which was smooth rose-colored rock. We saw a small altar where incense burned, and some tables. Two of the tables were covered with jars of wine, and around one of them stood four monks who were scratching their heads and muttering worriedly. Three of the monks wore robes of crimson. The fourth, a little fellow with a black robe, came trotting up to us.

"I am the custodian of the Temple of the Peddler," he said. "My three brothers belong to a different order nearby. Please explore my temple as you wish, but will you forgive me if I do not accompany you? My brothers and I are confronted with a rather baffling problem at the moment."

He pointed to a long passageway that led to a small chamber where torches burned.

"Back there you will find the painting of the deity we honor. It is a very ancient painting, and very mysterious. I myself do not profess to understand it, and I live in hope that some day a traveler will be able to explain it to me. May you be the wise travelers I seek," he said with a polite bow.

We strolled down the passageway toward the small chamber, which was very dark except for the painting on the wall that was lit by the torches. I stopped dead in my tracks.

"What is it, Li Kao?" said Miser Shen.

"The painting!" I gasped. I started to run toward it. "Miser Shen, I am seeing ghosts!"

I was indeed. There were four people in that painting, and two of them I had seen before. The first was the ghost who had given me the crystal ball. The second was the ghost who had given me the bronze bell. Beside them was a third girl who I did not recognize but who was dressed like the others, in the peasant fashion of a thousand years ago. The three girls faced the fourth person in the painting, whose back was to the viewer.

He was an old peddler whose robe was decorated with colored pearls and lotus blossoms - symbols of Heaven - and whose hands were held out to the girls. Miser Shen goggled at the three tiny trinkets that the peddler held in his right hand.

"The crystal ball!" he gasped. "The bronze bell!"

"Yes, and the third item Chang Heng sought five hundred years ago: a tiny silver flute," I said. "And see what the peddler holds in his left hand! Three small white feathers. The ghosts begged me to exchange the trinkets for the feathers - but why?"

Miser Shen grabbed a torch and held it closer and I went over the painting inch by inch. It was very ancient. Much

of the paint had peeled away, and the top right corner was missing completely. But there was one more figure in that painting. At the lower right, gazing up wistfully at the missing patch of paint:

"Son of a bitch!" I snarled.

"Well, yes it is," said Miser Shen. "It does not appear to be a very good dog," he added thoughtfully.

"It is a terrible dog."

"Flawed."

"Right down to the core."

"We may safely assume that this mongrel compounded the errors of its unfortunate parents by traveling in rather low company," Miser Shen said disapprovingly. "One eye has been gouged out, its ears are chewed, its tail has been bitten off, and its body bears the scars of a thousand bloody battles in back alleys."

I bowed politely and sighed: "At least I am traveling in better company now."

"You?"

"Me. Miser Shen, I saw that dog in the Pool of Past Existences! It was one of my earlier incarnations, and for some reason Chang Heng spent five hundred years whistling for the worst damn mongrel in the history of the world, and now he has brought me here to look at myself. This is insanity. He drags me through a landscape littered with dukes who laugh at sword thrusts and deadly labyrinths and invisible hands and incomprehensible ghosts and Buddha knows what else, but he will not tell me where I am going or what I am looking for or why. It is lunacy! When you send your little dog to go fetch you make sure that he knows what to fetch, and if you send him halfway across China to look at himself you make sure he knows why. Miser Shen, I hate to say nasty things about a folk deity, but five hundred years in that pool have left the great Chang Heng with water on the brain."

Miser Shen cleared his throat and said humbly:

"Li Kao, somehow the Duke of Ch'in is mixed up in all of this. Suppose he had looked into your eyes and seen that you did know where you were going and what you were looking for and why. Isn't it possible that he might have chopped off your head on the spot, rather than give you a chance in the labyrinth? Perhaps Chang Heng is keeping you in ignorance in order to save your life."

That was something to think about.

"And another thing," said Miser Shen. "I have no idea what these three little feathers in the peddler's left hand are supposed to mean, but I am willing to bet that they would fit perfectly into the three little grooves inside your dragon locket."

"Miser Shen, Chang Heng chose the wrong man to run his errands," I said admiringly. Then the stupidity of that comment struck me and I added: "Come to think of it, he did choose you. You may be sure that he has a purpose for Miser Shen, just as he has for the worst damn mongrel in the history of the world."

"Oh, not the worst mongrel, Li Kao!" said Miser Shen, who was a true and loyal friend. He pointed to the dog in the painting. "You may have had a variety of ancestors, but at least one third of you was pure shar-pei, the greatest of all fighting dogs. Never in history has such a dog been known to give up, and it is no small honor to be related to the breed. Even as a cousin. Besides, you knew what was once depicted here," he said, pointing up to the missing patch of paint. "Perhaps that was what Chang Heng was looking for, and when he could not find it he called you. There are times when a dog can find what a man can not, and it may be that you are the only person in the world who can find what Chang Heng tried to find, and who can recognize it for what it is."

Just then a terrible racket broke out in the cavern behind us, and we ran back to see what was going on.

Never have I seen a more ludicrous spectacle. The three monks in the crimson robes were banging their heads against the stone walls. The little monk in black was running around in circles bellowing his despair at the top of his lungs. "WOE!" shrieked the little monk. "WOE! WOE! WOE!" bellowed the leader of the monks in crimson. The little monk staggered up to us and clutched our tunics. Tears streamed down his face.

"The most terrible thing has happened!" he wailed. "What tragedy! What misery! You see, we support our poor orders by salvaging goods from boats which do not survive the Ts'ao-tai Rapids, and today we salvaged wine." He

pointed to the wine jars on one of the tables. "Half of what we salvage goes to me, and the other half is divided among my brothers according to rank. The leader receives one half, the second in rank receives one third, and the lowest in rank receives one ninth."

His relative calm deserted him.

"But there were thirty-four jars of wine, so I have taken seventeen, and now my brothers must divide the other seventeen!"

The leader of the monks in crimson decided that the stone wall was too soft and began banging his head against the sharp edge of the table instead.

"SEVENTEEN!" he howled. "I MUST DIVIDE SEVENTEEN INTO ONE HALF, ONE THIRD, AND ONE NINTH! I WISH I WAS NEVER BORN!"

This would never do. In another moment I would go deaf, so I dropped a coin into the little monk's hand. "Allow me to purchase one of your jars of wine," I said. Then I scooped up one of his jars, marched over to the crimson-robed monks, slammed it down on the table beside their seventeen jars, and began to divide.

"You get one half," I said to the leader, and I slid nine jars across the table.

"You get one third," I said to the second monk, and I slid six jars across the table.

"You get one ninth," I said to the last monk, and I slid two jars across the table.

"Nine and six and two make seventeen, so I will take my jar back," I said, and I scooped up the eighteenth jar and marched back to Miser Shen.

I instantly regretted that act of mercy. The leader of the monks in crimson raced up and wrapped me in a foul embrace. Never had I smelled such a loathsome body odor. If I hadn't known better I would have sworn that the fellow had been dead for a month.

"My savior!" he bawled. "You must visit our monastery! We shall feast you and honor you and carve your sacred image and burn incense before it! Tonight is our great festival, and you shall be our guest of honor!"

The lout was holding me so tightly that I couldn't move, and what's worse he was planting toxic kisses upon my cheeks. The second-ranked monk was embracing Miser Shen, whose green complexion suggested that he was receiving a similar body odor, and the little monk in black was skipping around the room chattering: "...nine and six and two...he took his jar back...seventeen, by all that's holy!...that boy could make a fortune as a moneychanger...never know what hit you!..." I saw to my horror that the last monk in crimson had climbed into our little boat and was paddling it away!

"We cannot take no for an answer!" bellowed the loathsome leader. "It is but a short walk to our monastery, although a long way by river, and my brother is bringing your boat to our lock. What fun you shall have at the Festival of Laughter! Food and wine! Singing and dancing! The joyous release of the bats in honor of the God of Happiness! The ceremonial tour of Inspection! The triumphant sacrifice!"

I sadly watched our boat float out the mouth of the cave.

"It would never do to miss the joyous release of the bats," I sighed. "But surely you cannot ask such dignitaries as Miser Shen and Lord Li of Kao to walk to your monastery. Quick, go fetch sedan chairs so that we may ride in the style befitting our rank!"

"At once! We shall return in an instant!" the foul fellow squawked, and he grabbed the second monk and the two of them trotted up a flight of stone steps and out a door to the side of Stone Bell Mountain. I grabbed the little monk in black.

"Is there a back exit?"

"Oh yes. Back by the painting. I will show you."

The tunnel was hidden in the shadows at the rear of the chamber where the painting glowed in the torchlight. The little monk gave us two of the torches and told us that it was a long tunnel and dark, but that it would lead us up to the west side of the mountain. Then he pointed back to the main cavern where the water was lapping around the

black boulder in the center. "You will be able to hear the music of the bells at its best," he said. "The water is almost to the proper level, and soon it will ring the bell stones and rush through the little holes in the black boulder. As you go down the tunnel you will see passageways that slope down to the water, and there are similar boulders and bell stones in all of them. The larger passageways will allow you to go down for a closer look at the miracle, if you choose, and you will see that only the gods could create such beautiful instruments."

I made a generous donation to his temple, and Miser Shen and I picked up our torches and stepped into the blackness of the tunnel that led away from the Cavern of Bells.

## **Chapter 20: A PRAYER TO AH CHEN**

MISER Shen muttered to himself as we walked down the passageway. He had a sour look on his face, as though he had eaten a green persimmon, and his eyes peered warily into the shadows.

"Those monks cannot possibly be real." he snarled. "If they really wanted to divide seventeen jars of wine why didn't they pour the stuff into a vat and start from there?"

"Too simple," I said.

"Li Kao, they were acting like players in a farce," said Miser Shen. "During the years when I lived only to make money I often played the fool. The best way to cheat people is to convince them that you are a half-witted fool and that they are very clever. After practically begging you to demonstrate how clever you were they stole our boat. They practically forced us to run away from them, and that meant going down this dark tunnel, and I don't like this one bit."

"Miser Shen, you are imagining things. Those monks were just as stupid as they looked," I said.

That reminded me that I still had the jar of wine I had purchased from the little monk, but no sooner did I open it than Miser Shen snatched it from my hand.

"Listen! Do you hear a soft slapping sound?"

I faintly heard it, and I told him so.

"That little monk is wearing slippers, and that is the sound we are hearing. But he is back by the painting, nearly two hundred feet away!" hissed Miser Shen.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that the painting could have been a trap. That place is some kind of echo chamber, and every word we said there could have been overheard! I would not trust any of those monks, Li Kao, and I most certainly would not drink their wine."

"Miser Shen, I tell you that you are imagining things, and I am thirsty enough to drink paint remover!" I said angrily.

Miser Shen looked at me steadily. Then he raised the wine jar to his own lips. "Forgive my insufferable insolence," he said softly. "You have been chosen by the great Chang Heng, and I am only Miser Shen. But perhaps Chang Heng has a purpose for me too, and if we are to go down this tunnel I believe that I should go first, and I believe that I should taste this wine first."

Then he tilted the jar and drank deeply. I examined him with interest.

"Stomach cramps?" I said. "Ringing in ears? A deathly chill creeping across the extremities? The world spinning round and round before your rapidly glazing eyes?"

Miser Shen suffered none of those terrible symptoms so I grabbed the wine jar and took a swig. "Mei Kuei-lu," I said when I stopped coughing. "Not too bad, if you care for a wine which is eighty-eight percent alcohol and smells strongly of fish." I handed the jar back to Miser Shen, and we passed it back and forth as we proceeded down the tunnel. Miser Shen insisted upon walking in front of me, which made normal conversation a bit awkward, but conversation became unimportant when the music began.

It was the most magnificent thing that I had ever heard. Deep down inside the passageways that sloped from the main tunnel the rising water slapped the bell stones that rose from the floor, and they began to ring with exquisite delicacy. A phenomenon which Cut Off Their Balls Wang has since explained as "sympathetic resonance" caused the stones that pointed down from the ceiling to respond with softer and lower bell sounds of their own. More and more bells chimed in, and then the rising water began to rush through the tiny holes in the black boulders, and it was as though the bell music was accompanied by a thousand strumming lutes and a million murmuring bees.

"How beautiful!" I cried.

"I do not trust it," Miser Shen said gloomily.

We passed countless passageways, and after an hour we came to one larger than the others, and down in the blackness the bells were playing as never before, with sounds almost like silver bells and sibilant gongs.

"I have never heard anything like it!" I gasped. "Miser Shen, we must go down this passageway and see what could cause such music. It is irresistible!"

"Yes, it is irresistible and that is what worries me. I cannot explain it, but I know that there is danger here," said Miser Shen.

"Perhaps it is the effect of the wine," I said. "Do you feel up to forty-four dead stone lions?"

"Forty-four dead stone lions," said Miser Shen.

"Sober as a Confucian!" I cried, and indeed it was indisputable because we were speaking Mandarin, and in Mandarin forty-four dead stone lions comes out as *ssu shih ssu ssu shih shih*, if it comes out at all.

I started down the passageway, but Miser Shen jumped in front of me. "A thousand pardons, but if you insist on going down here this humble one must go first," he said firmly. "Lead on!" I laughed.

The flickering torches cast grotesque shadows upon the walls as Miser Shen took four steps forward. The fifth time his loot touched a stone on the floor the stone tilted, and from the blackness came a harsh metallic whang! Miser Shen coughed. He fell back into my arms. Blood trickled over my fingers, and I stared stupidly at the iron bolt of a crossbow that protruded from his chest.

I reacted without thinking; diving to the floor of the passageway and whipping out my dagger; listening for the slightest sound and searching for the tiniest movement in the shadows. I heard nothing and saw nothing, and finally my brain registered the stone that had tilted beneath Miser Shen's foot. I lifted my torch and swung it around until I found what I was looking for: a permanently fixed crossbow mounted on the wall, aimed straight at the center of the passageway.

Permanently fixed crossbows must be oiled and loaded; the triggers must be reset. That little monk in black and his brothers in crimson must keep very busy servicing the death traps in the passageways, I thought. They would be waiting if I tried to go back. All I could do was go forward and trust to luck.

"Miser Shen, if only I had listened to you!" I sobbed. "Forgive the foolish friend whose life you have saved."

He was unconscious, but still breathing. I carefully pulled out the iron bolt and bandaged him as best I could, and then I managed to get him on my back. I used our belts to tie his arms around my neck and his legs around my waist, and then I crawled back to the tunnel and got to my feet and started down it once more, with my torch in one hand and my dagger in the other. The tunnel sloped gradually upward, and from the passageways on both sides the seductive music of the stone bells sweetly beckoned the traveler. After an hour the music faded away, and as I trudged up the sloping tunnel there was no sound but the scuffle of the sandals and my harsh breathing. Miser Shen was not heavy, but finally I had to stop and rest. I untied his hands and feet and propped him against the wall. I peered back into the blackness, but I could sense no pursuit. I stuck the flickering torch into a crack in the stone floor, and when I looked up I saw that Miser Shen's eyes were open. They were strangely bright. I touched his hand and found that he was burning with fever. Miser Shen looked at me in a puzzled fashion, as though he was trying to remember who I was and why he was there. Then his eyes cleared, and he said:

"You are the priest? I am looking for the priest, and they said he would be here."

It seemed to be important to him, so I said: "Yes, I am the priest."

"My little girl has been murdered by the Duke of Ch'in," said Miser Shen. "They say that I will feel better if I send a prayer to her, but I do not know how to write."

For Miser Shen it was fifty years ago, just before his grief had driven him mad.

"I shall write down your prayer for you, my son," I said.

Miser Shen's lips moved silently in the torchlight, as though he were rehearsing something, and then he said in a high nervous voice:

"Alas, great is my sorrow! Your name is Ah Chen, and you have been taken from me, and now I will never see you

again. When you were born I was not truly pleased because you were a girl and I am a farmer, and a farmer needs strong sons to help with his work, but before a year had passed you had stolen my heart. You grew more teeth, and you grew daily in wisdom. You said 'Mommy' and 'Daddy', and your pronunciation was perfect. When you were three you would knock at the door and then run back and ask: 'Who is it?' When you were four you played the host when your uncle came for a visit. Lifting your cup you said 'Ching!', and when the wine was poured you said 'Kan pei!' We roared with laughter, and you blushed and covered your face with your hands, but I know that you thought yourself very clever.

"Ah Chen, they tell me that I must try to forget you, but it is very hard to forget you. You carried a toy basket, and sat at a low stool to eat porridge. You repeated the Great Learning, and you bowed to Buddha. You played at guessing games, and romped around the house. You were very brave and when you fell and cut your knee you did not cry, because you did not think it was right. Whenever you picked up a piece of fruit or some rice you first looked at peoples' faces to see if it was all right before putting it in your mouth, and you were very careful not to tear your clothes. But then one day the Duke of Ch'in raised our taxes, and your foolish father was sent to plead with him. Do you remember how worried we all were when the flood broke our dikes and the sickness killed our pigs? I told the duke of these things, and many more, and the duke believed that we really were too poor to pay our taxes. Peasants who cannot pay taxes are useless to the Duke of Ch'in, so he destroyed our village as an example to others, and it was the foolishness of your father that led to your death.

"Ah Chen, now you are all alone in Hell waiting to be judged and I know that you must be very frightened, but you must try not to cry or make loud noises. By some evil fate neither your mother nor myself was killed, but do you remember Auntie Yang, the midwife? She was also killed, and she was very fond of you and she has no little girls of her own to look after, so it is all right to try to find her and to offer her your hand and ask her to take care of you. When you come before the Yama Kings you should clasp your hands together and plead to them: 'I am young and I am innocent. I was born in a poor family and I was content with scanty meals. I never wasted a single grain of rice, and

I was never willfully careless of my clothing and shoes. If evil spirits bully me, may thou protect me!' You should put it just that way, and I am sure that evil spirits will not harm you.

"Ah Chen, I have soup here for you! I am burning paper money for you to use! Now the priest is setting down my prayer because I cannot write, and I will burn it and send it to you although you cannot read, for that is the custom. If you hear my prayer will you come to see me in my dreams? If fate so wills that you must yet lead an earthly life I pray that you will come again to your mother's womb. Meanwhile I can only cry, 'Ah Chen, your father is here!' It is very hard to forget you, and I can but weep for you and call your name."

Miser Shen fell silent for a long time. Then he looked up at me with fevered eyes and said:

"Did I say it right? I seem to be confused in my mind, and something seems to be wrong, but I practiced my prayer for a long time and I wanted to say it right."

"You said it perfectly!" I told him, and he seemed greatly relieved.\*

Miser Shen spoke no more. His eyes closed and his breathing grew faint, and in a few minutes he gave a little sigh, and the spirit of Miser Shen passed from the red dust of earth.

\* The priest kept a copy of Miser Shen's original prayer, and those interested in the textual changes that a lapse of fifty years can bring are referred to "Sacrificial Prayer to Ah Chen" in Lin Yutang's The Importance of Understanding, World Publishing Co., 1960, pp 134-7.

## Chapter 21: NIGHTMARE

THIS is a dark chapter that is not for the squeamish. I find it very painful to write, and I would certainly skip it were it not important, and had I not vowed to tell the whole truth about my adventures.

Do you remember that I said I had a reason for attempting that suicidal dive into the ocean? And that there was a terrible flaw in my reasoning? The reason and the flaw only became apparent to me as I knelt beside the body of my friend in that dark tunnel and I clasped my hands together and wailed:

"O Miser Shen, forgive me! I did not listen to your warnings, because deep in my heart I suspected that our story was only a dream!"

Indeed I had, right from the moment when I stabbed the Duke of Ch'in and he laughed at me. My error was subconscious, but no Chinese gentleman could conceivably consider that to be an excuse. Almost anything can happen in China and usually does, and skepticism is a fatal disease.

"How could I have been so foolish?" I sobbed. "I allowed a dark corner of my mind to tell me that what was happening was impossible, but only a barbarian could believe that anything is impossible! Only a barbarian would dismiss the evidence of his eyes and call it a dream! Is it a dream when the characters weep real tears, and shed real blood, and feel real agony, and die? O Miser Shen, forgive your foolish friend!"

In my heart I knew that Miser Shen forgave me, but I also knew that I had not even begun to pay for my lapse into barbarism. Those who confuse dreams and reality must pay for it in nightmares, and a Chinese nightmare is not to be compared with the pallid imitations of the West. As you shall see.

I tried to pull myself together. Miser Shen was dead, and now those murderous monks would be after me. I arranged the body of my friend as decorously as I could, and I prayed:

"Miser Shen, great is your joy! Now you are free from the prison of your body, and your spirit is reunited with that of your wife and little Ah Chen. Surely the Yama Kings will allow you to be reborn as a tree which the peasants will name Old Generosity, for there is no more generous act than to give your life to save the life of a foolish friend."

I could think of nothing more to say, and there was nothing more I could do. I could not bury him in the hard rock. So I stood up and picked up the torch and bowed deeply to Miser Shen, and even as I did so I heard a soft sly voice behind me that snickered:

"A very touching scene, Li Kao."

I whirled around. The little monk in the black robe was standing at the entrance to one of the passageways! Even as I lunged forward my common sense screamed at me, "You idiot! Have you learned nothing from the death of Miser Shen?", and I tried to stop, but it was too late. What appeared to be solid rock in front of the little monk was nothing but a cleverly painted reed mat and I crashed through like an elephant stepping on thin ice. I tumbled head over heels down into a black pit and landed with a crash that knocked the breath from my body. If I had not been able to roll as I landed I might have been killed. When I regained my senses I heard the rattle of a chain above me, and the sound of sliding iron. My torch had fallen into the pit beside me, and in its fitful light I saw that the little monk was leaning over the edge of the pit pulling upon a heavy chain. To my horror I saw that the chain was attached to a flat sheet of iron which was sliding across the top of the pit like a lid!

I drew my right hand back behind my ear. "A present from Miser Shen!" I yelled. I do not usually miss with a dagger, and the flashing blade shot up through the air and buried itself to the hilt in the little monk's throat. He dropped the chain. His clawing hands clutched the handle of the dagger and tried to pull it out. He gurgled horribly, and blood spurted, and the front of his black robe turned red. Then he toppled down into the pit, straight toward me, but he never landed. His feet became entangled with the chain and he suddenly jerked to a halt, and then he was swinging back and forth in the air just above my head, and the creaking of the chain was like mocking laughter. For when I looked up I saw that his weight had pulled the iron lid all the way across the top of the pit!

I stuck the torch into a crack in the rock floor, took a deep breath, spat on my hands, grabbed the dangling monk's arms, and began climbing like a monkey. I scrambled up the chain and shoved against the lid with all my might, but it was hopeless. Even with good leverage I could not have lifted that sheet of Iron, and dangling in the air as I was



made the idea laughable.

I climbed back down. I was in a pit about eight feet wide and fifteen feet deep. The walls were made of massive stone blocks, fitted tightly together. The floor was solid rock. The lid was unmovable iron. The little monk swung back and forth on the iron chain, dripping blood, and the sulphurous torchlight cast his grotesque shadow on the walls of my prison. I was buried alive.

I have a horror of small closed places. In my will I have directed that my body be burned and my ashes scattered to the winds - a practice repellent to most Chinese, but anything, as I see It, is better than a coffin. My legs turned to water and there was a lump of ice in the pit of my stomach.

"Son of a bitch!" I whispered.

I sat down and buried my face in my hands, and I stayed like that until the fumes from the torch made me choke. I lifted my head and gazed at it. The flame was still burning yellow, but soon it would burn orange and then blue, and then it would not burn at all. Even if I extinguished it and endured the further horror of blackness how much air would I have left? Enough for two hours of life? Three?

"Well don't just sit here, Li Kao!" I told myself, and I hopped to my feet and began examining my prison inch by inch.

I missed it the first time. The second time around I saw that all but one of the stone blocks in the wall were perfectly cut and joined, but the exception had a tiny strip of mortar around the edges. I needed a strong blade to work with, and the dangling monk had very kindly brought one to me. I reached up and jerked my dagger from his throat.

"Many thanks," I snarled, ducking a jet of blood.

It took me half an hour, and when I had finished I was in no better shape than before. The mortar was gone and the stone was loose, I could feel it shift in the hole, but I could not shove it in and how was I to pull it out? The narrow crack around the edges where the mortar had been was too small for my fingers. They were bloody from trying. Somehow I had to work that stone loose with my dagger, but I knew it was hopeless and on the tenth try I heard the sound I had dreaded. I slowly withdrew the hilt. The blade had snapped right off, and now it was lodged in a narrow crack where I could not reach it.

I turned around. My throat contracted and I could hardly breathe. I felt the walls closing in on me, and I foolishly pushed against them. Then I sat down and held my head between my knees until the nausea passed.

"Snap out of It, Li Kao!" I told myself sternly. "All you have to do is pry a stone out of a wall. Why, a little problem like that would not have bothered the great Chang Heng for more than ten seconds! So the question is: what would Chang Heng have done?"

I thought until my head ached, and that was the only result I achieved. The dangling corpse seemed to be laughing at me. "You miserable little bastard!" I yelled, and I hurled the useless hilt of my dagger against his body, and the chain creaked mockingly at me as the monk swung back and forth, back and forth, back and forth...

I took a deep breath.

"Chang Heng," I said slowly, "would have asked this splendid fellow to pull the stone out for him, that is what Chang Heng would have done."

I jumped to my feet. When I swung the little fellow over to the stone I found that his small fingers fit into the cracks as though they had been made for them. Then I extinguished the torch - I needed it for something other than light. It was difficult working in the dark, but eventually I had the corpse the way I wanted it: one end of the torch holding the little monk against the stone, and the other end braced against the opposite wall. I pressed the small cold fingers into the cracks at the sides of the stone and the thumbs into the crack at the top, and squeezed thumbs and fingers together as hard as I could. How long I stood there in the darkness holding the dead monk's hands I do not know. It seemed like several eternities before the flesh was icy and rigid. I knew that I would not get another chance - the air was almost gone, and my head ached and my lungs labored - so I said a little prayer to every deity that I could think of, and then I kicked the torch free.

The corpse slowly swung back upon the creaking chain. The rigid fingers clutched the stone in a grip of iron, and the stone slid cut with no effort at all.

For a moment the monk dangled there with the massive stone block in his hands; then the stone slipped and fell to the floor with a crash, and I dared to breathe again. When I did I breathed fresh air! I grabbed my tinderbox and relit the torch and stuck it back into the crack in the floor. Once more I used the monk and the chain as a ladder, and when stuck my head through the hole where the stone had been I saw a long narrow tunnel, sloping up toward the surface, and at the end there was light! In a flash I was through the hole and crawling up the tunnel.

It was night. When I stuck my head from the hole at the end of the tunnel I saw the light of hundreds of torches which were stuck in brackets on the walls of buildings. I was on the side of a low cliff, looking down at some sort of ceremony that was taking place in a courtyard.

It was very strange. In the center of the court a figure wearing ceremonial robes was seated upon a wooden throne. Since he wore a smiling paper mask with a little curly beard I guessed that he was dressed as Fu-hsing, God of Happiness. To his left was a large copper urn which was filled with parchment scrolls, and to his right stood an assistant who was also dressed in ceremonial robes, but without the mask and beard. At least a hundred monks dressed in scarlet robes stood in a circle around the throne, and the odd thing was the silence. No one spoke; no one moved so much as a finger. The only sound was the faint hiss of the torches.

Just as I was beginning to think that I was looking at a bunch of statues my hand dislodged a pebble, which rolled down the hill, and the moment it clattered upon the stones of the courtyard the figure seated upon the throne raised his hands in benediction, and bellowed deafeningly:

"Let the festival begin! Let there be bells and gongs! Let there be dancing and laughter!"

Bells and gongs began ringing all around the monastery, for that is what I decided the place must be, and the monks began capering awkwardly around and around the throne.

"Dance!" screamed the assistant. "Dance and laugh on this day of rejoicing!"

"Ha ha ha!" laughed the dancing monks. "Ho ho ho!"

"Release the bats!" bellowed the figure on the throne. "T'ien-kuan-ssu-fu!"

"Well well well," I said to myself. "T'ien-kuan-ssu-fu. So the Agent of Heaven brings Happiness, does he? You are going to make me very happy indeed when I cut your heart out, you miserable murdering bastard!"

I could recognize that bawling voice a mile away. I didn't even need a whiff of his body odor to know that it was the leader of the monks in crimson, who had taken our boat and tricked us into going down that tunnel. He was just as responsible as the monk in black for the death of Miser Shen, and he was going to pay for it.

I turned and crawled back the way I had come. I dropped back into the pit, and fondly patted the little monk's icy cheek.

"You are turning out to be very useful, little man," I said.

It was messy work, but when I had removed the monk's black robe and covered it with the blood which he had scattered around the pit it could pass for crimson in flickering torchlight. The worst part was putting it on. Then I knelt and took off my right sandal and slipped out the little blade that I always carried concealed in the heel. It was a Damascus blade - I hate to admit it, but such steel is unmatched even in China - very sharp and flexible, and while it was scarcely suitable for prying stones out of walls it had other uses. I unsnapped the false heel of the sandal. It had a hole bored in the hard leather, and the base of the Damascus blade was round and threaded. I screwed the blade into the hole. The heel was designed to fit perfectly in the palm of my hand. Then I climbed back out the hole and slithered up the tunnel once more.

"Dance!" the assistant screamed. "Dance for the God of Happiness!"

"Let there be more laughter!" bellowed the monk on the throne. "More bells! More gongs! Release more bats!"

Bells and gongs made a deafening din and thousands of terrified bats swooped through the air. (Bats are the symbols of Fu-hsing, God of Happiness, because both bat and happiness are pronounced "fu" in Mandarin.) The monks danced frantically in a circle, coiling in toward the throne in the center.

"Ha ha ha!" they laughed. "Ho ho ho!"

As each reached the throne he embraced the leader and received one of the parchment scrolls from the copper urn. He then danced on to the assistant who unrolled the scroll and read the Wish for Happiness in a loud braying voice. Nonsense wishes without wit or imagination - to be pickled in a cask of rare wine, for example, or to be reborn as a pillow in a brothel - but the monks received each stupid jest with roars of laughter.

I waited until the last monk had danced past, and then I slid down the side of the low cliff and joined the procession at the end of the line. After all, I had been asked to be the guest of honor at the Festival of Laughter, hadn't I? "Ha ha ha!" I laughed. "Ho ho ho!" The flickering torches cast the eerie shadows of dancing monks upon the monastery walls, and bells and gongs nearly deafened me, and bats swooped around my head. Around and around I danced, closer and closer to the throne, and finally it was my turn to embrace the God of Happiness.

The paper mask smiled at me. The foul body odor of the monk behind the mask made me gag. "A present from Miser Shen," I whispered, and I slammed my hand flat against his chest. The Damascus blade slipped through his black heart as easily as a pin sliding through a ball of cotton. I swiftly unscrewed the sandal heel, snatched up a scroll, and danced merrily on to the assistant. With the heel removed the little blade was invisible. There was scarcely a trace of blood. The paper mask concealed the face of the corpse and the throne held him upright. With any luck I could be halfway to Serendip before they noticed that anything was wrong.

"The God of Happiness grants that the last shall be first!" the assistant screeched as he read my scroll. "Our belated brother shall have the honor of carrying Fu-hsing upon his tour of inspection!"

Great Buddha! I looked around for the carriage, but when they began to lift the body of their leader from the throne I realized with a sickening sensation that they followed the old ritual, and I was to carry that corpse on my back! "Surely they will realize that he is dead!" I thought, but they did not. The light was poor and the paper mask stayed in place - besides, the bells and gongs and dancing monks made so much noise that it was difficult to think. The next thing I knew the dead monk was on my back, with his arms dangling down on either side of my neck, and his head lolling upon my right shoulder, and his legs held in my arms. The monks cleared a path in front of me.

"Dance! Dance!" the assistant screamed. "Our Lord of Happiness makes his tour of inspection!"

The laughing monks pressed from behind, and I lurched forward. It was a sick parody of my journey through the tunnel carrying Miser Shen, but the monk was heavier than Miser Shen and soon I began to puff and pant.

"Ha ha ha!" laughed the monks as they pressed behind me, "Ho ho ho!"

The body was setting with unbelievable swiftness. The flesh was ice cold, and the arms on either side of my neck were becoming as stiff as iron oars. The lolling head bounced up and down on my shoulder and the mask slipped off! Now they had to notice that their leader was dead! The bells and gongs rang madly, bats swooped through the torchlight, and the arms were squeezing my neck, choking me! I tried to loosen them, but nothing less than a crowbar could have budged those rigid limbs. The assistant moved closer; he uncoiled a whip.

"Our Lord of Happiness greets our honored brother!" he shrieked.

The lolling head slowly lifted from my shoulder. One eye popped open, and winked at me. The mouth opened, and carrion breath nauseated me. "My savior!" snickered the dead monk. "How kind of you to be our guest of honor at the Festival of Laughter."

Chiang shih! I had fallen into the trap of the rigid corpse that crawls from the grave at night and strangles wayfarers! Never in history had anyone been known to have escaped the strangler's grip! I dropped the monster's legs and let them bounce along behind me on the ground as I wrenched at the murderous arms. I could not budge them. The assistant raised his whip and slashed my legs.

"Dance!" he screamed. "Dance for the God of Happiness!"

I was approaching the main avenue that ran through the rambling monastery. Side streets branched in all directions. I strained at the iron arms, and they pressed tighter. The rigid corpse opened his other eye, and winked both of them in sequence.

"Which way?" the monster snickered. "There are many delightful places to visit on our tour of inspection, and what a marvelous addition you will make to my monastery! You will love it here, Li Kao. You will never want to leave. Just like your brothers - look at them! See how they enjoy themselves!"

Suddenly the buildings seemed to shiver, and the spell was lifted and the veil was removed from my eyes, and I saw what I should have sensed all along. The monastery was a dank decaying cemetery. The buildings were tombs. The monks were corpses.

"Ha ha ha! Ho ho ho!" laughed the corpses as they danced at the will of their master. Their faces were fixed in the permanent grin of death; their eyes gaped wide in eternal horror.

"Which way, Li Kao? There are so many delightful places to visit," the rigid corpse snickered once more, and the arms pressed tighter and tighter and tighter.

The paths between rows of graves twisted crazily away from the avenue. It was a labyrinth...I stopped trying to breathe. I concentrated with all my might. Was I imagining it? Was I really hearing a faint voice saying, "Follow the dragon, Li Kao!? I managed to pull the chain and reach the locket; my fingers found the place where the dragon had stopped after leading me to the oasis.

"I can scarcely wait to tell my master of your conversation at the painting," said the rigid corpse as I staggered forward. "To think that you have been guided by Chang Heng! To think that you found the crystal ball and the bronze bell! My master will reward me richly for such information, and you too will be rewarded. You will laugh and dance for me forever in the Festival of Laughter. For ever and ever and ever."

"Dance!" howled the assistant as his whip lashed my legs. "Laugh! Let merriment reign in the Festival of Laughter!"

Second right...third right...first left...fourth left...My eyes were blurred and my breath hissed thinly from my lips. I could not go much farther. My fingers felt the holes in the locket. First right...second right...sixth left ...Corpses capered around me, bells and gongs battered my brain, bats squealed thinly as they flashed through torchlight. Second left...

My fingers reached the end of the locket! The dragon had run its course! But had it taken me far enough? Ahead of me was a small square with a stone pillar in the center. Torches flickered in brackets on one side of the pillar, and two ceremonial axes were crossed in a bracket on the other side. In front of the pillar was a bloodstained sacrificial altar, and beside it stood a huge stone basin filled with ceremonial oil. I just made it.

I plunged headfirst into the basin of oil and rolled over until the monster was beneath me. I braced both feet against the bottom of the basin and grabbed the iron arms of the rigid corpse. I pulled them apart as hard as I could, and suddenly jerked my head down. Slowly the oily arms slid up my oily neck, up the sides of my head, and with a loud pop I was free! I staggered to my feet and tumbled over the edge of the basin to the ground, and the monster climbed out and followed me, with arms lovingly spread.

"Come back, Li Kao, we have not finished our dance!" the rigid corpse laughed.

I made it to the pillar and grabbed an axe from the brackets. When the monster was in range I whipped the axe with all the strength I had and chopped its legs off at the knees. The torso fell upon the altar, and I raised the axe above my head.

"Such a clever boy," the rigid corpse snickered. "Are you going to chop me to pieces? If you plan to divide me into one half, one third, and one ninth, you must remember to make eighteen pieces. Seventeen is such a difficult number."

I took aim and chopped that grinning face right in two. The two halves of the horrible face continued to grin at me. "Quite," said the left half, "Useless," said the right half. I chopped the hands from the arms and the arms from the shoulders and split the torso in two, and then I dropped the axe and staggered away. "Ha ha ha!" laughed the capering corpses. "Ho ho ho!" The assistant's whip wrapped around my legs and I fell to the ground. "Our Lord of Happiness prepares the sacrifice!" the assistant screamed.

I lay there paralyzed with exhaustion and horror as the severed hands crawled over the rim of the basin and scuttled toward me like crabs. They climbed my legs. They crawled up my chest. They clamped around my throat, and not until the horrible hands began strangling me could I force myself to move.

I crawled back to the basin and plunged my head in the oil, and pried the oily fingers apart. I dropped the clawing hands back into the oil and raced to the pillar and grabbed a torch. Flames spurted twenty feet into the air when I

stuck the torch into the basin. Again I staggered away, and again the assistant's whip dropped me to the ground. "Ha ha ha! Ho ho ho!" laughed the dancing corpses, and a pair of flaming hands crawled over the rim of the basin. The bats fluttered through the torchlight, bells and gongs played madness music, and the flaming hands crawled closer.

Fiery fingers reached out and clawed the air. A hissing jet of greasy flame enveloped the hands, and they stopped crawling. Fingers began to fall off, and the bones began to fall apart. There was a final spurt of oily fire, and then nothing remained but a small black patch of greasy charcoal.

I became aware of a strange silence. The bells and gongs had stopped. The corpses stood like statues, gazing at nothing with their horrified eyes. The assistant stood rigidly, whip half raised. Only the bats continued to move, fluttering through the torchlight.

I tried to stand. My hands were pressing down upon small sharp objects. They were diamonds. I turned and saw gold and emeralds and rubies, and enormous mounds of pearls and jade. I saw the great golden tiger mask of the Duke of Ch'in glittering above the treasure, and I saw a shadow where no shadow should be.

It was the third girl in the painting.

"Take pity upon a faithless handmaiden," she sobbed. "Is not a thousand years enough? I swear that I did not know what I had done! O take pity, and exchange this for the feather." Tears trickled down her cheeks and mingled with the blood that stained her gown. "The birds must fly," she said. And then she was gone.

I reached up and took the small object that her hands had cradled. Five hundred years ago the great Chang Heng had been seen near an abandoned cemetery. "I am looking," he said, "for a tiny silver flute."

I gazed dumbly at the silver flute. I did not even try to make my mind work. I had paid dearly for my lapse into barbarism - but the point is I had paid. Chinese nightmares are not for dreamers. My head fell wearily to the ground and I closed my eyes and I slept like a baby. I did not dream at all.

## **PART THREE: THE PRINCESS OF BIRDS**

### **Chapter 22: DOCTOR DEATH**

ON the fifth day of the first moon in the Year of the Dog 3,339 (AD 640) a talented young man with a slight flaw in his character was sitting on top of an enormous mound of treasure, above which hung a copy of the great golden tiger mask of the Duke of Ch'in. Some very unpleasant corpses were standing rigidly around a bloodstained altar, and the tumbled tombstones of an abandoned cemetery stretched out in all directions. I was examining a tiny silver flute.

Like the other trinkets it was no more than an inch and a half long. Like the others it did not appear to be anything special. I lifted it to my lips and blew into the miniature mouthpiece, and I heard the slow sad beat of a drum. Then a girl with a sweet young voice began to talk, breaking into song at the dramatic moments. She chanted and sang the famous story of the great courtesan who grew old, and was forced to marry a businessman. I covered one of the holes in the flute. The sad song stopped, the drum picked up tempo, and the girl's voice lifted to the sky as she joyously sang the hilarious story of the Stone Monkey who challenged the gods. Another hole produced the song of Pi Kan, who had been put to death because a half-witted emperor wanted to find out if it was true that the heart of a wise man is pierced with seven openings. I covered all the holes and the music stopped. Then I sat there staring blankly at the thing.

A crystal ball that showed a comical chase through a miniature cottage? A bronze bell that told marvelous fairy tales? A silver flute that sang the Flower Drum Songs? I jumped to my feet and shook my fist at nothing in particular.

"Chang Heng," I yelled, "may you be reborn as a beautiful mirror in the hands of an ugly owner!"

Now that was stupid. Miser Shen had been very ugly outside and very beautiful inside, which brought me back to the matter at hand.

Chang Heng and his lunatic quest could go hang. What mattered was avenging Miser Shen. He had given his life for me, and while I had taken care of the little monk in black and the monster in crimson I had not taken care of their master, and their master had to be the Duke of Ch'in. So long as he lived Miser Shen would be unavenged, and while he might laugh at sword thrusts there had to be something that would do the job. I needed a poison so deadly that one drop would fell an elephant, which meant that I needed to find a deranged alchemist.

"Duke," I snarled to the tiger mask, "you don't know what you are up against. I may be a mongrel, but Miser Shen said that a third of me is pure shar-pei, the greatest of all fighting dogs, and never in history has such a dog been known to give up!"

I put the flute inside a fake shell in my smuggler's belt, along with the ball and the bell, and filled every pocket with pearls and jade. Then I set forth to find an alchemist who had lost his mind.

China is overstocked with these unfortunate creatures. Taoism and alchemy do not mix very well, and when you add personal bereavement the result is a deranged scientist whose quest for eternal life winds up massacring everything in sight. I struck gold in the first town I reached.

"A thousand pardons, Adoptive Aunt, but this humble one seeks an eminent scientist who may be living nearby. He is a devout Taoist, rather wild of eye and somewhat seedy in appearance, and I am willing to bet that his house is placed halfway between a slaughterhouse and a cemetery."

"You seek Doctor Death!" the old lady screeched. She gazed in terror at a ramshackle house teetering on top of a hill, and made signs to ward off evil spirits. "None but the criminally insane dare climb the path to his House of Horrors, and few ever return!"

Almost certainly a gross slander. Besides, it was a perfect day to visit a House of Horrors, and as I climbed the crooked path black clouds muttered dark spells over the mountains, sulphurous lightning streaked the sky, the trees in the cemetery moaned in the wind like mourners, a dog howled horribly behind the slaughterhouse, and the old house upon the hill creaked and groaned most satisfactorily as a cold gray rain began to fall. The moment I walked through the door I sensed that Doctor Death was going to exceed my fondest expectations. Cauldrons burped and kettles bubbled and vials emitted greenish-yellow vapors, and a little old man with a bloodstained beard was trying

to install a heart into a cadaver. A man's body but a pig's heart, I noted with interest.

Corpses and carcasses stolen from the cemetery and the slaughterhouse littered the tables and the floor, but I might explain that the scene was not really frightening. This was not a chamber of horrors, it was simply a laboratory, and the purpose for it appeared to be the coffin at the far end of the room. The coffin was set up as a shrine, with candles and incense and offerings, and beside it was a prayer mat that was faded and worn with use. The little old man arranged the pig's heart to his satisfaction inside the chest of the cadaver and sprinkled some yellow powder on it.

"Beat," he said. "Beat beat beat." He sprinkled some purple powder on it. "Beat," he said. "Ten thousand curses, why won't you beat?" He turned toward the coffin and yelled, "Don't worry, my love, I'll have you out of there in no time!" Then he noticed me. "Who you?" said Doctor Death.

"My surname is Li and my personal name is Kao and there is a slight flaw in my character," I said with a polite bow.

"My surname is Wu and my personal name is Chan and I am rapidly losing patience with a corpse that absolutely refuses to be resurrected," sighed Doctor Death. "And if I cannot resurrect this stubborn corpse, how can I resurrect my loved one?"

I nodded toward the coffin. "Your wife?"

Like most deranged Chinese alchemists his face was as gentle as a snowflake and as innocent as a banana. He brushed unself-conscious tears from his eyes and said softly:

"She was not pretty, you know, but she was the most wonderful wife in the world. Her name was Chiang-chao. We were very poor, but she could make the most delicious meals from a handful of rice and the herbs that she picked in the woods. She sewed dresses for wealthy ladies to help pay for my studies, and she sang beautiful songs to cheer me when I was depressed. We were very happy together, and I know that we will be happy together again. It is only a matter of finding the right formula, although it has been very discouraging so far. I simply cannot understand it. I have used all the proper prayers and incantations. I worked so hard to make the powders from ten pounds of peach fuzz--"

"Ten pounds of tortoise hairs," I said sympathetically.

"Ten pounds of plum skins--"

"Ten pounds of rabbit horns--"

"Ten pounds of the membranes of living chickens--"

"One spoonful of mercury--"

"Two spoonfuls of arsenic--"

"For the toxin generates the antitoxin--"

"In death there is life as in life there is death."

"A colleague!" yelled Doctor Death, as he raced up and wrapped me in a bloody embrace. "Tell me, dear friend, have you heard of some better formula? The classic method is bound to work sooner or later, of course, but it has been such a long time, and I am sure that my dear wife is growing weary of her coffin."

"Alas, I have never studied the intricacies of resurrection," I said. "My specialty has been the Elixir of Life, and I have come to you because I foolishly left home without a proper supply."

"But how fortunate! I have just completed brewing a fresh batch." Doctor Death cried happily. He rummaged in a cabinet and pulled out a greasy vial filled with a greenish-black liquid. "One spoonful after each meal and two at bedtime and you are certain to live forever...although I need scarcely point out to a colleague that occasionally there are unfortunate side effects, and it is best to try it first on a rat."

"Or a cat," I said.

"A crow," said Doctor Death.

"Or a cow." I said.

"And if you should happen to own a large ox--"

"Actually I had planned to try it first on an elephant," I said.

"A very wise decision," Doctor Death said approvingly.

I poured some gold coins on a table, between somebody's lymph glands and lungs.

"A small donation to help in your work," I said. "May I suggest that you hire some professional grave robbers? Digging up corpses must be very hard work, and I would think that the fresher the better."

"But how kind of you! Success is certainly just around the corner now that I can afford a better grade of corpses...oh dear!"

Doctor Death wrung his hands and trotted back to the cadaver on the table. "I did not mean to insult you," he said contritely. "I am sure that you will do splendidly. Perhaps you will come to life if you realize how important it is."

He had forgotten me completely. As I tiptoed to the door I heard the gentle voice of Doctor Death reciting his well-worn litany to the corpse.

"She was not pretty, you know, but she was the most wonderful wife in the world. Her name was Chiang-chao. We were very poor, but she could make the most delicious meals from a handful of rice and the herbs that she picked in the woods. She sewed dresses for wealthy ladies to help pay for my studies, and she sang beautiful songs to cheer me when I was depressed. We were very happy together, and I know that we will be happy together again. Beat," said Doctor Death. "Beat beat beat."

I walked back down the path in the rain. I had taken it as a very good omen that there was an elephant in a pen right at the base of the hill. The poor old beast was used to haul logs to the sawmill, and its master was not kind. There were cruel goad marks, and open wounds on the elephant's shoulders where the harness rubbed.

I climbed the fence and put one drop - no more - of the Elixir of Life on the tip of my dagger. The weary beast looked at me sadly.

"Do you consent?" I whispered.

The elephant's eyes clearly said: "For the love of Buddha, release me from this life of misery and return me to the Great Wheel of Transmigrations!"

"So be it," I said, and I gently pressed the tip of the dagger against an open wound.

The elephant looked surprised for an instant. And then - I swear by all the gods! - it hiccuped, hopped high in the air, landed with a mighty crash, turned blue, and peacefully expired.

"Genius!" I cried, and as I raised reverent eyes to the House of Horrors upon the hill I heard the cracked and crazy voice of Doctor Death singing sadly through the rain"

"In front of our window

are the banana trees we planted,

their green shadows fill the yard.

Their green shadows fill the yard,

their leaves unfold and fold as if

they wish to bare their feelings.

"Sadly reclining on my pillow

deep in the night I listen to the rain,

dripping on the leaves.

Dripping on the leaves -

that she can't hear that sound again

is breaking my heart."



A BRIDGE OF BIRDS - THE ORIGINAL DRAFT

## Chapter 23: THE WORLD'S GREATEST MASTER OF THE WEN-WU LUTE

I caught up with the Duke of Ch'in in Tsingtao. He was staying at the palace of an enormously wealthy woman whose oldest son-in-law served as the duke's provincial governor. Security was so tight that a flea couldn't have slipped in, but the governor was a fanatical amateur of the lute and it was no trick at all for the greatest lutinist in the whole world to be invited to the palace to perform at a banquet. The fact that I had never learned how to play the lute did not bother me for a moment. It is not ability that impresses amateurs. My old teacher, the consummate crook from Serendip, never tired of telling me "Li Kao, a fool will study something for twenty years in order to become reasonably competent, but a wise man will study for twenty minutes and become an expert. It is not ability that counts, it is authority."

My entrance was rather impressive.

Ten flunkies in royal attire marched through the door, raised their trumpets, and blew a mighty blast. Then a parade of priests marched through the door, chanting hymns in praise of the Master whose talent had been personally bestowed by Buddha. Next were two apprentices (fabulously wealthy noblemen who had abandoned all worldly goods in order to sit at the feet of the Master) who marched through the door carrying a silver chair. Two more apprentices (princes of the royal blood who had abandoned thrones to sit at the feet of the Master) marched through the door carrying a simple unadorned lute upon a silver tray. Then a troupe of acolytes pranced prettily through the door, scattering rose petals hither and yon. Not until the suspense had become nearly unbearable did I shuffle slowly through the door, leaning upon a crooked staff of unpolished oak.

I appeared to be at least ten thousand years old and semi-divine. My face was as wrinkled as a relief map of Korea. My enormous snow-white beard brushed the tips of my simple straw sandals, and my white robe was crudely woven from coarse peasant cloth. The apprentices gently lowered me into the silver chair, and for nearly three minutes I sat motionlessly in the awed silence of the room. Then I slowly raised a wrinkled finger, and my ancient voice wheezed like the drone of a pedagogical bee:

"The Wen-Wu lute was invented by Fu-hsi, who saw a meteor streak through the sky and land in a tung tree. Shortly thereafter a phoenix streaked through the sky and landed beside the meteor. When the meteor fizzled out with a melodious hiss and the phoenix flew away with a contrapuntal cry Fu-hsi realized that he had been granted a sign from Heaven. He felled the tung tree, which was precisely thirty-three feet in length, and cut it into three pieces precisely eleven feet long. He tapped the top piece and found that the pitch was too high. He tapped the bottom piece and found that the pitch was too low. He tapped the middle piece and found that the pitch was just right. This piece he soaked in running water for precisely seventy-three days, one fifth of a year, and then he summoned Liu Tzu-ch'i, the greatest artisan in China, and commissioned him to carve the piece into a musical instrument."

One of the banqueters coughed. I raised my awesome white eyebrows and frowned. Flunkies, priests, apprentices, and acolytes descended upon the wretch and heaved him out the door. After a full minute of glowering silence I condescended to continue:

"The finished instrument was precisely thirty-six inches in length, corresponding to the three hundred and sixty degrees of a circle. It was precisely eight inches wide at the front end and four inches wide at the rear end, corresponding to the eight festivals and the four seasons. It had a uniform height of precisely two inches, corresponding to the generating forces of the universe, yang and yin. Originally there were twelve stops, which corresponded to the twelve months of the year, but Fu-hsi eventually added a thirteenth stop to account for leap year. Originally there were five strings, which corresponded to the five elements: metal, wood, water, earth, and fire; the five temperaments: quietude, nervousness, strength, hardness, and wisdom; and the five pitches: kung, shang, chueh, cheng, and yu."

One of the banqueters sneezed. I raised my awesome white eyebrows and frowned. Flunkies, priests, apprentices, and acolytes descended upon the wretch and heaved him out the door. After another full minute of glowering silence I condescended to continue.

"When King Wen of Chou was imprisoned at Chiangli, his son, Prince Pai-yi-k'ao, was so grieved that he added a sixth string to express his sorrow. This is called the Wen string, and it produces a low melancholy sound. When

King Wu launched a military campaign against King Cheo he was so pleased at the prospect of going to war that he added a seventh string to express his joy. This is called the Wu string, and it produces a high heroic sound. Thus the lute of seven strings is called the Wen-Wu lute. The proper tone of the Wen-Wu lute possesses eight qualities: clarity, wonder, remoteness, eloquence, sadness, manliness, softness, and extensibility, but the tone will suffer damage under any of six climactic conditions: bitter cold, extreme heat, strong wind, heavy storm, noisy thunder, and swirling snow. In the hands of an accomplished performer the Wen-Wu lute can tame the most ferocious beast. In the hands of a performer of genius it can soothe the most anguished ghost. In the hands of a performer such as myself it can raise the dead."

The apprentices sank to their knees and handed me the lute. I was not quite sure which end was which, but I managed to pluck a string at random: plink! I plucked a second string at random: plonk! I returned the lute to the apprentices and impaled the cowering assembly with glittering eyes.

"It is forbidden to play the Wen-Wu lute under any of seven circumstances: mourning the dead, simultaneous playing with orchestra, preoccupation with worldly matters, uncleanness in body, untidiness in costume, failure to burn incense in advance, and lack of an appreciative audience. As it happens I am currently mourning my wife, children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, concubines, servants, and favorite parakeet, all of who perished in a typhoon. The snoring of those louts in the corner constitutes an orchestra. That moron with the blue robe and the leer on his face is more interested in dancing girls than in art. Half of you have not washed in a month. The other half have spilled soup on your robes. I fail to perceive the slightest trace of incense, and to imply that this collection of cretins could constitute an appreciative audience would be to provoke the gods into howls of hysterical laughter. However--"

I tottered to my feet and clutched my staff.

--my period of mourning ends in twenty-four hours, and if the other factors are rectified by then I may grant you a performance. In the meantime you may direct me to my suite. See that I am not disturbed, for I wish to contemplate the phenomenon of human fallibility."

Flunkies, priests, apprentices, and acolytes escorted the Master of all Masters from the room. At least four people fainted.

"Old Savant of Serendip, you would have been proud of me!" I sang as I removed eyebrows, beard, wig, and age wrinkles. I made sure that the vial of the Elixir of Life was in my pocket, and then I slipped out the window of my suite and caught hold of the heavy vines that covered the walls of the palace. Some of the vines were wild rose, and I had to watch out for thorns. About twenty feet up and ten to the left I saw a pair of curtains flutter from an open window and wave in the moonlight. A good sign. I had scouted the place, of course, and that was the imperial apartment of the Duke of Ch'in.

Then the wind shifted, and an unmistakable scent drifted from another window. In an instant I had forgotten all about the duke, and I swung across the vines as fast as I could go. "Lotus Cloud!" I sang in my heart. "Your beloved Boopsie approaches with pearls and jade!"

Ten million maledictions! I had been concentrating on killing the duke, not rejoining Lotus Cloud, and I had left my pearls and jade behind! I rummaged through my pockets and fished out a few priceless diamonds - quite useless; diamonds did not interest Lotus Cloud - and finally I came up with a single pearl. It would have to do, and fortunately it was a beauty and very rare: jet black, with one small white star-shaped flaw. I cautiously peered over the windowsill.

Praise Buddha, she was alone! My heart turned somersaults as I saw Lotus Cloud sitting at a table doing needlework. I reached down and rolled the beautiful black pearl across the floor toward her feet.

"In a moment she will see it," I thought happily. "She will turn to the window, and she will nearly blind me with that grin of hers, and she will cry 'Boopsie!', and all my cares will vanish when I am in my beloved's arms!"

Just as I started to climb through the window I heard footsteps approaching the door - staggering, it would appear, under a heavy load and a happy voice bellowed:

"Fear not, my turtle dove! Your beloved playmate approaches with yet another hundred pounds of pearls and jade!"

It would appear that the provincial governor was a connoisseur of more interesting things than lutes. The door crashed open and the governor lurched inside and dropped his armload of treasure right on top of my black pearl.

"Pooh-Pooh!" Lotus Cloud squealed happily.

Pooh-Pooh? This was outrageous. Pooh-Pooh? There was no justice in this world. There was nothing to do but climb across the vines and assassinate the Duke of Ch'in, and I consoled myself with the thought that after I fed the duke the Elixir of Life I would get a gallon or two for Pooh-Pooh.

Fate must have intended me to concentrate upon the duke, because when I peered through his window I saw the miserable bastard writing letters at his desk, all alone. The moonlight gleamed upon the great golden mask, and his long cloak-of feathers shimmered softly in the glow of the candles. So far so good, but now I had to figure out how to poison him. If I climbed through the window he would be halfway down the hall before I reached the door, and the corridors were sure to be guarded. A throw? I could dip my dagger into the Elixir of Life and risk a throw, but clinging to the vines as I was gave me little leverage, and I would probably miss. The best way would be to persuade him to poison himself, and since he lived only for money that should not be too difficult.

I selected the largest of my diamonds and found a tangle of vines just above the windowsill where the thorns were sharp as needles. I placed the diamond in the center - puncturing my fingers quite painfully in the process - and turned the gem this way and that until the moonlight struck it perfectly, and it exploded with blue-white brilliance. Then I doused the diamond and the thorns with the Elixir of Life. At a conservative estimate that was enough poison to assassinate all China, and have enough left over for Korea and Japan. Then I swung to one side and concealed myself behind heavy vines and began scratching the stone wall with my fingernails. A very annoying sound. Nearly a minute passed. Then I heard the scrape of a chair, and the heavy footsteps of the Duke of Ch'in as he approached the window.

I held my breath as the glittering tiger mask leaned out the window. His hand reached out and hovered above the diamond. "Grab it, you misbegotten monstrosity!" I prayed.

He grabbed it. I clearly saw at least seven thorns puncture his greedy fingers, and I waited for him to turn blue. He did nothing of the sort. The Duke of Ch'in caressed the diamond as though nothing had happened! "Cold," he whispered, and in his metallic voice there was an unmistakable note of pleasure. "Cold...cold...cold..."

I was so astounded that I forgot to hold on, and I fell like a rock toward the courtyard. I managed to grab some vines and stop my fall at the last possible moment, but then I was dangling about ten feet above a bunch of soldiers who were leaning against the wall swapping war lies. Thank Buddha for a cloud! A big black cloud drifted across the bright face of the moon, and in an instant I was swinging across the vines toward another open window. I swung over the windowsill and landed as lightly as a cat.

The room shook with heavy snores, and it was so dark that I could barely make out the shape of a massive figure beneath the covers of a bed. I tiptoed across the floor and cautiously cracked the door open. Damnation! Soldiers everywhere, patrolling the corridors. When I closed the door and turned back to the room I realized with a sickening sensation that the snores had stopped.

I froze like a statue. I could hear the creak of the bed as the massive figure slowly sat up. Then I smelled the revolting odor of rotting flesh, and I recalled that the duke was staying at the palace of an enormously wealthy woman...

"No, it can't be," I told myself.

The cloud proved me to be a liar by moving away from the moon at that moment, and I stood there in the bright moonlight while the Ancestress leveled a finger like a decayed sausage and roared:

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH THAT COFFIN?"

## Chapter 24: A FAIRY TALE

THE Duke of Ch'in was terrified.

Once more the soldiers held my face close to his; once more the eyes behind the mask gazed deep into mine. The metallic voice quivered with fear. "The crystal ball!" he gasped. "The bronze bell! The silver flute! And still I see something deeper...something strange and savage which I do not understand..."

But he began to see something more reassuring.

"But you do not understand," he whispered. "There is no understanding at all in your eyes. You are a fool who has found important things without knowing why they are important. You have followed a path that cannot be followed, defeated guardians who cannot be defeated, escaped from places where escape was impossible, and yet you have not had the slightest idea where you were going or what you were looking for or why. You have been a very lucky fool and you have annoyed me. With every scream you utter you will pay for annoying the Duke of Ch'in."

The glittering mask lifted to the soldiers.

"Take him to the Shirt of Iron," the duke whispered.

Miser Shen had been right. Once more my ignorance had saved me from instant decapitation, but I cannot honestly say that I felt like rejoicing. The Shirt of Iron is a tunic made from iron mesh that can be uniformly tightened by means of a screw in back. It is tightened to the point where small patches of the victim's flesh bulge through the holes in the mesh. Then the torturer picks up something rough - a rock will do - and slowly scrapes the mesh until there are no bulges. He carefully stops the flow of blood, and the next day the procedure is repeated. And the next and the next. A competent torturer can keep a victim screaming in the Shirt of Iron for a month, and the only hope the victim has is that he will go mad fairly early in the game.

Unfortunately I was not in a position to argue with the duke. They had loaded me with so many chains that I could barely breathe, much less move, and the soldiers puffed and panted and predicted horrible hernias as they carried me down to the lowest dungeon. I counted twenty-two flights of stairs, and soldiers stood guard on every landing. The torture chamber at the bottom was not reassuring - blood and entrails all over the place - and the torturer did not view me with friendly eyes. He had a bright red nose, a bald skull, four yellow teeth, and a grievance.

"Work work work!" he snarled as he bustled around me with a tape measure. "Do you realize that every single Shirt of Iron must be individually tailored for the victim? Do you realize how long it takes? It takes two full days, but the duke wants yours ready in two hours! And then I have to put it on you and give you your first scraping, and that takes another two hours! And there is another prisoner in the Death Cell who has to be drawn and quartered, and a first class job of drawing and quartering takes three and one-half hours! When am I to rest, I ask you?" whined the torturer. "Is there no concern for the welfare of the working man?"

The soldiers were highly indignant.

"What about our welfare?" they yelled. "The duke tells us that we have to stand guard in this slimy hole until the poor bastard dies, and it may take a month! Look at those cockroaches! Look at those leeches! Look at that slimy water dripping from the rocks! There is fever down here as sure as you're born, and even if we live to get back to our wives what good will it do us? The duke orders us to load this poor bastard with so many chains that he can't move, and then he orders us to carry him down twenty-two flights of stairs, and now we're all eunuchs with quadruple hernias!"

It was a day for grievances. Feet pattered down the stairs and an old acquaintance trotted into the torture chamber.

"Woe! Woe! Woe!" wailed the Key Rabbit. "The most terrible thing has happened! The duke has ordered me to be present during the torture sessions of Lord Li of Kao, and to return with a full report of his sufferings! How can the duke do this to me?" the little fellow sobbed. "I become violently ill in butcher shops. I faint when I cut my finger. I threw up all over a very distinguished nobleman when he introduced me to his blood brother. I disgraced myself at a state banquet when I was informed that I was eating blood pudding. And now I must watch the most generous protector my dear wife has ever had die by inches in the bloodiest way known to man. Woe!" wailed the Key Rabbit. "Woe! Woe! Woe!"

When the torturer finished with his measurements they carried me into the Death Cell and dropped me on the floor in a crash of chains. Ten thousand sickly white cockroaches scuttled out of the way and the door slammed behind me. I shifted in my chains as best I could to see what grievance my fellow prisoner had on his mind.

"Great Buddha, what are you doing here?" I cried.

"At the moment I am eating my last supper," said Henpecked Ho. "Good afternoon, Li Kao. It is a great pleasure to see you again although one regrets, of course, the circumstances. Would you care for some rice? They have even allowed me a small jar of wine. Very decent of them, don't you think?"

"Wine, by all means," I said.

Apparently the duke did not consider Henpecked Ho to be very dangerous because he was only attached to the wall by a leg chain, which was long enough to allow him to reach me and pour some wine down my throat. Wu-fan. Some people prize it highly but I am not among them. It is jet black and so thick that it tastes like molasses flavored with engraving acid.

"Did I hear that fellow say that you were to be drawn and quartered?" I said when I stopped coughing.

"Yes indeed. It is a rather distressing story," he sighed. "By any chance do you remember that I was trying to fit the fragments of some ancient clay tablets together?"

"Some kind of fairy tale, wasn't it?"

"Precisely, and I had labored on it for sixteen years. But one day soon after you left I figured out the key to the problem, and I could not believe how quickly the pieces began to fall into place. I was so excited that I almost felt young again. Then one night I entered my workshop and it was gone, every single piece was gone. I ran around weeping and wailing and tearing my hair until my dear wife told me to stop making a spectacle of myself. She had taken the tablets."

"Your wife had taken them?"

"Taken them and thrown them in the river. The Ancestress had remarked that fitting fragments of clay together was a frivolous hobby, so my wife ordered her servants to throw my tablets into the river."

"I would have slit her miserable throat!" I snarled.

"Indeed you would have, dear boy!" said Henpecked Ho. "I thought about you a great deal. I remembered that you had advised using an axe, so I stole an axe and went after my dear wife."

"Did you get her?"

"I chopped her to pieces. Then I chopped her seven fat sisters to pieces. It was a delightful experience. Then I came here in pursuit of the Ancestress, and my only regret is that the soldiers got to me before I could get to her. But I suppose one can't have everything," said Henpecked Ho.

"Ho, you did splendidly!" I cried.

"Well, I suppose that most civilized people would consider my behavior rather gross," he said dubiously. "But what maddened me beyond bearing was the fact that I had only been able to piece together half of the tablets, and it was a very interesting story, and now I shall never know how it came out. It was particularly interesting to me because it involved a god and a goddess who I had never heard of, and part of my chin-shih training consisted of memorizing the entire Heavenly pantheon."

"Tell me, Ho, is a deity called the Peddler part of the pantheon?" I said. I had been thinking of the painting in the Cavern of Bells that had been a trap, and of the fact that Miser Shen was still unavenged, but I regretted that question the moment it escaped my lips. Scholarship can be a terrible curse. I saw the gleam in Henpecked Ho's eyes and braced myself.

"The Peddler is not one of the six hundred named gods, but of course the named gods barely scratch the surface of the pantheon," said Henpecked Ho. "We must also consider the gods of the ten directions, the secondary officials of the ten directions, the stars or the five directions, the secondary stars of the five directions, the fairy warriors and sages, the ten extreme god kings, the gods of the sun and the moon and the nine principal stars, the gods who guard

the four Heavenly gates, the thirty-six thunder gods who guard Heaven itself, the twenty-eight principal stars of the zodiac, the gods for subjugating evil ghosts, the god king of Flying Heaven, the god of the great long life of Buddha, the gods of Tien Kan and To Tze, the great sages of the trigrams and Nine Stars, the gate gods and the kitchen gods, the godly generals in charge of the year and the month and the day and the hour, the gods and spirits in charge of the four seas and the nine rivers and the five mountains and the four corners, the gods in charge of the wells and the springs and the ditches and the creeks and the hills and the woods and the lakes and the rivers and the twelve river sources, chang huangs and their inferiors, the local patron gods, the gods of minor local officials, the gods of the roads and bridges, the gods of trees and lumber, the spiritual officers and soldiers under the command of priests, and all spirits in charge of protecting the taboos, commands, scriptures, and the right way of religion."

Henpecked Ho took a deep breath.

"The Peddler," he said, "is not one of those either."

"Ho," I moaned.

"But our knowledge of the pantheon must necessarily be incomplete because of the first Duke of Ch'in." said Henpecked Ho. "He not merely burned the books of China, but also destroyed the temples and priests and worshippers of religious cults that annoyed him. Perhaps the Peddler is one of the deities whose worshippers perished, and who is now forgotten by mankind. I am morally certain that the first duke destroyed the cult of the two deities mentioned in my clay tablets. Not even the peasants remember them today, yet it is impossible that the peasants would simply forget a tale that involved the most beautiful girl in the world and the handsomest god in Heaven."

"Impossible," I agreed.

"Not to mention the beautiful Bridge of Birds," said Henpecked Ho.

"What!"

"The beautiful Bridge of Birds," said Henpecked Ho.

Five hundred years ago the great Chang Heng had vowed that he would never give up. "I swear by all that is holy that the sky will fill with falling stars when we see the beautiful Bridge of Birds!" he had yelled to a startled bonze upon a mountain path. And he has not given up.

"It is really quite a pretty story. Would you care to hear it?" said Henpecked Ho. "I was not able to finish it, but I can remember the part that I pieced together almost word for word."

"I cannot think of a better time and place to listen to a pretty little fairy tale," I sighed, and so I lay there almost crushed beneath the weight of my chains, while sickly white cockroaches crawled over me, and slimy green water dripped from the black stone walls, and curses and hammering drifted from the next room as the torturer tailored my Shirt of Iron, and the gentle voice of Henpecked Ho recited a very pretty tale indeed.

"During the rainy season in Heaven when the Great River of Stars is filled with raging water," said Henpecked Ho, "the Star Shepherd must stride through the waves day and night, guiding the frightened stars to safety with his long shepherd's crook, but during the dry season when the Great River is calm he is free to travel as he pleases. One day the Star Shepherd decided to visit earth. He floated down from Heaven and landed outside a tiny peasant village, and wandered around for an hour or two admiring the sights. Eventually he came to a small grove of bamboo. It was the loveliest place for miles around, but the peasants avoided it like the plague because a strange sound had been heard there one midnight a thousand years before, and the story of the strange sound had passed from old crone to old crone down the centuries, and the old crones had added horrifying details, which is the proper occupation of old crones.

"The place is haunted!" they screeched. "The pool in the center of the bamboo grove is filled with water demons, who wait to snatch little children and drag them to the depths! Shan hsiao, the terrible woodmen ghosts with the bodies of men and the claws of vultures, lurk in every tree!"

"Almost everybody said that the old crones were right. The exception was a brave and high-spirited girl named Jade Pearl, and what Jade Pearl said was 'Nonsense!' She could not believe that so lovely a place could be haunted, particularly when there was a beautiful pool of blue water in the center, where tiny fish of crimson and gold swam

without a care in the world. So Jade Pearl often went to the bamboo grove to bathe in the pool, while the old crones muttered spells against evil spirits, and predicted terrible things.

"The Star Shepherd found a path and walked into the cool shadows of the bamboo grove. In the center he found a clearing where wildflowers of many colors bloomed among the green grass, and in the center of the clearing was a beautiful blue pool, and in the center of the pool was Jade Pearl, who was the most beautiful girl in the whole world, although she did not know it. Her skin was like ivory brushed with honey, and her eyes were like almonds of ebony flecked with gold, and her hair was like a cloud of soft swirling smoke, and her lips were full and bursting with sweetness, like plums. There were many other items of interest about Jade Pearl and you may be sure that the Star Shepherd did not miss any of them.

"Jade Pearl saw a figure reflected in the water. 'Oh!' she cried, and when she turned around the most beautiful girl in the world gazed straight at the handsomest god in Heaven, and one thing led to another as it usually does.

"Time had wings, and one day an old retainer who had been granted the right to fish in the Great River of Stars came panting into the palace of the Emperor of Heaven, the August Personage of Jade, and demanded an audience. 'Your Heavenly Majesty, the rainy season is upon us but the Star Shepherd has not returned from earth!' he wailed. 'The Great River is filled with terrified stars careening upon the wild waves and crashing against the great black rocks! Many stars have been badly damaged, and some have even sunk!'

"The August Personage of Jade could not believe that his favorite nephew would so neglect his duties, but he knew that the old retainer was a pillar of honesty who had never told a lie in his life, so he rushed out to see for himself. When he discovered that it was just as the old fellow had said, if not worse, he uttered a great roar of rage and flew down to earth and landed in the center of the bamboo grove with a terrible clap of thunder.

"Back to your duties, you Insolent puppy!' he screamed. 'I swear upon the sacred name of my predecessor, the Heavenly Master of the First Origin, that never again shall you be allowed to visit earth!'

"The emperor grabbed the Star Shepherd by the hair and swung him round and round like a toy on the end of a string, and pitched him clear up to the constellation Aquilla. Then he turned his rage toward Jade Pearl. 'On your knees, strumpet! Face the wrath of Heaven!' he yelled. So Jade Pearl knelt before the August Personage of Jade and clasped her hands together. 'Your Heavenly Majesty, there is no need to punish poor Jade Pearl,' she sobbed. 'I have given my heart to the Star Shepherd, and if I am never to see him again I shall die.'

"The emperor looked at Jade Pearl, and found himself remembering that he too had once been young. He took a second look, and remembered that only -recently he had insisted that the Star Shepherd had more common sense in his little finger than the rest of his nephews had in their whole bodies. He took a third look, and began to think deep thoughts about his beloved wife, the queen Mother Wang, who used more makeup with less effect than any woman he had ever known. He took a fourth look and muttered, 'Ten thousand curses!' and then he sat down beside the pool and patted the grass with his hand. 'Come sit here beside me, my child,' he said.

"So the peasant girl sat down beside the Emperor of Heaven, and they dangled their feet in the water and watched the little fish swim between their toes like brightly painted snowflakes, and after a long silence the emperor said: 'Jade Pearl, I have sworn a mighty oath that the Star Shepherd shall never again be allowed to visit earth, and so it must be.'

"Jade Pearl began to cry. 'You should have seen what that boy did to the Great River of Stars!' the emperor yelled, but Jade Pearl continued to cry. The August Personage of Jade watched the tears trickle down her cheeks for several minutes, and then he sighed and muttered: 'I am going to regret this. I feel it in my bones.'

Then the Emperor of Heaven reached into his right sleeve and took out a small golden crown. He reached into his left sleeve and took out three small white feathers. 'Jade Pearl,' he said, 'since the Star Shepherd cannot visit you on earth I am going to allow you to visit him in Heaven.'

"Your Majesty honors me beyond my worth!' cried Jade Pearl.

"That is precisely true, and I dread to think what will happen when my beloved wife, the Queen Mother Wang, finds out about it. However, you have at least confirmed my suspicion that the Star Shepherd is the most sensible of my nephews, and Heaven could use a little brightening up.' The August Personage of Jade placed the three small white feathers around the rim of the golden crown. 'These are the three feathers of the Kings of Birds, and so long



as you wear these feathers you will be Princess of Birds, and all the birds of China will be your loving subjects,' he said. 'Today is the seventh day of the seventh moon. On this day and on this day forever after you will summon the birds, and they will build a bridge so that you may climb to Heaven and rejoin the Star Shepherd.'

"The emperor wagged his finger in front of Jade Pearl's nose to emphasize the seriousness of what he was saying.

"But it is Illegal for one who has not completed the full cycle around the Great Wheel of Transmigrations to spend a full year in Heaven,' said the emperor. 'On the first day of the first moon you must call the birds again, and they will return you to earth. On the seventh day of the seventh moon you may once again climb the bridge to Heaven, and thus the cycle shall continue throughout eternity, for if the Star Shepherd does not give you the Peach of Immortality he is a greater fool than I think he is. Jade Pearl, do not forget the seventh day of the seventh moon!' the emperor said sternly. 'If on that day you fail to return to the Star Shepherd you will pass from the protection of Heaven. Then none but a mortal could restore you to your lover, and the odds against a mortal pulling off a trick like that are, conservatively speaking, one in ten trillion.'

"Your Majesty, I hear and obey,' Jade Pearl whispered.

So the Emperor of Heaven rose to his feet and Jade Pearl knelt before him, and he placed the little crown upon her head. 'Arise, Princess of Birds!' he cried. 'Call your subjects!'

"When Jade Pearl stood up she was astonished to see that she shone with a divine light. She called to the birds of China, and then she cried out with wonder and delight as a great song arose, and the bamboo trees swayed in a wind or wings. All the birds of China came flying toward her with green twigs and branches held in their beaks, and with these they built a bridge that reached to the stars. Jade Pearl climbed to Heaven upon the beautiful Bridge of Birds and fell into the arms of her lover, and the Star Shepherd married the Princess of Birds and gave her the Peach of Immortality. True to her word they parted with many tears on the first day of the first moon, and the birds returned Jade Pearl to earth.

"Heaven saw to it that her little village lacked for nothing, so that the Princess of Birds could pass her time on earth singing songs and weaving daisy chains. Still she thought that the seventh day of the seventh moon would never come, but she had a goat and a cat and a little dog and three handmaidens from her own village named Snowgoose, Little Ping, and Autumn Moon, and they helped her to pass the time. Then the great day arrived, and all the peasants stood outside and cried out with wonder as the beautiful Bridge of Birds climbed to the stars. Once more the Princess of Birds fell into the arms of the Star Shepherd, and they lived..."

Henpecked Ho paused.

"Happily ever after? You see that is as far as I had gone when my dear wife threw the tablets in the river," he said. "But if they lived happily ever after, I do not understand why fully half the tale remained to be told. What do you think, Li Kao?"

"Almost anything is possible in China," I said gloomily, "but it is not possible that the Star Shepherd and the Princess of Birds lived happily ever after. Ho, now I know too much and I know too little, and I will never survive another interview with the Duke of Ch'in. We must escape from this place at once!"

"I think that is a splendid idea," said Henpecked Ho.

## Chapter 25: THE TRIUMPH OF HENPECKED HO

THE first part of my plan was quite simple. It consisted of three factors: the sweet black wine called Wu-fan is invisible when traced upon black stone; white cockroaches are very visible indeed upon black stone; and Henpecked Ho's leg chain allowed him considerable freedom of movement. The second part of my plan was not simple at all, because Henpecked Ho was required to give a dramatic performance unmatched in the annals of contemporary Chinese theatre. You may judge for yourself how well he did.

Try to imagine that you have been forced to stand guard in a ghastly torture chamber twenty-two stories beneath the earth. The reek of blood and intestines blends with fetid feverish odors, and slimy green water drips from the black stone walls. Suddenly you hear a ghastly scream! The Key Rabbit topples over in a dead faint, and you dash into the Death Cell where a horrible scene meets your bulging eyes.

An aged gentleman of scholarly mien lurches in lunatic circles. Loathsome black splotches cover his face and hands, and he claws insanely at his throat. Suddenly saliva spurts from his ashen lips, his blotched black tongue protrudes most unpleasantly, his eyes roll toward the top of his head until only the whites are visible, he reels to the end of his leg chain, does a complete somersault, and lands flat on his back. His hands spastically pound the floor. He bounces up and down about twenty times, turns perfectly rigid, and comes to rest as stiff as a board.

There is another occupant of the Death Cell; an exceptionally winsome and dimpled lad who oozes honest candor from every pore, and who is loaded with so many chains that he cannot move. His terrified eyes are fixed upon a horrifying phenomenon.

"The cockroaches!" he screams. "For the love of Buddha, look at the cockroaches!"

You cannot possibly realize that the aged gentleman's spastically pounding hands have uncovered a trail of sweet black wine that has been traced across the black stone floor toward a black stone wall. Very well: what will your reaction be when fifty thousand white cockroaches make a mad lash across the floor, climb the wall, and frantically move across it following invisible lines which spell out the following message from the Board of Health?

"RUN FOR YOUR LIVES!

IT IS THE PLAGUE OF

THE TEN THOUSAND

PESTILENTIAL PUTRESCENCES!"

You say that you will stand there and make learned comments concerning the calligraphy of insects?

Bah.

Once more everything depended upon Henpecked Ho, and his timing was perfect. As the torturer turned to flee Henpecked Ho suddenly jerked his leg chain taut. The torturer tripped over it and fell, and was promptly pounded to jelly by the fleeing feet of the soldiers. "Run for your lives!" they screamed. "It is the plague of the ten thousand pestilential putrescences!" They crashed into the torture chamber and scooped up the Key Rabbit, who had just regained his consciousness and his feet, and carried him up the stairs like a minnow riding the crest of a tidal wave. The pounding feet and wailing voices grew fainter and fainter, and then we were all alone in peaceful silence.

Henpecked Ho took the keys from the flattened form of the torturer and removed his leg chain. He appeared to be quite worried as he went to work on the mass of chains that covered me.

"Do you think that I overdid the saliva, Li Kao? I was afraid that the final spurt and dribble might appear to be in poor taste," he said.

"Perfection. When you do it again don't change a single spurt or dribble," I replied.

It was very pleasant to stand and stretch. Then we strolled into the torture chamber and selected some weapons. I chose a sword and a dagger, and Henpecked Ho made a beeline for the monster axe used for executions. He was very disappointed to discover that he could not even lift it, but eventually he settled for a small double-bladed model.

"If I miss swinging forward I may still connect on the backswing," he explained.

"Very wise," I agreed.

We strolled unhurriedly up the stairs. "Why rush?" I said. "The screaming mob will have collected the soldiers on the landings, and by the time they burst into the palace the mob will have become a small army. The soldiers in the palace who were not trampled to death will have turned the small army into a large army. The soldiers in the courtyard will have turned the army into an avalanche, and when we reach the walls I doubt that we will find a stone left standing. I dread to think what will have happened to the city when the citizens joined the soldiers, and I would not be at all surprised if we have to walk all the way to Soochow before we find another living soul."

There was a flaw in my reasoning. I had completely forgotten that among the inhabitants of the palace was a creature you would not have blinked an eye at if the South China Sea had suddenly turned into soy sauce. We climbed the last flight of stairs and strolled into the throne room. Soldiers closed in behind us. More soldiers appeared on both sides. Still more soldiers flanked the throne, and the monster seated upon it leveled a rotting finger.

"There is no such thing as the plague of the ten thousand pestilential putrescences," the Ancestress wheezed. "Soldiers, chop these dogs to pieces!"

I was paralyzed, but Henpecked Ho did not pause for an instant. He uttered a mighty whoop of joy and charged straight toward the Ancestress whirling his axe around his head so fast that if he had belched a little flame and smoke he would have looked just like the Bamboo Dragonfly. Of course he ran right into the spears of the soldiers, and I gave him up for dead, but in the confusion I was able to stab one soldier with my sword and cut the throat of another with my dagger. I grabbed a fallen spear, vaulted clean over the throne and the unspeakable Ancestress, and took to my heels. It was a wild chase through the deserted palace - every one else had fled the terrible plague, including the Duke of Ch'in - and I was able to account for three more soldiers by dropping heavy vases on their heads from upper landings, but I was bound to make a wrong turn sooner or later. I dashed into an anteroom and raced toward the heavy brass-bound door at the end. It was locked. I turned around. The captain of the Ancestress's bodyguard and his eight remaining soldiers stood in the doorway, and the captain was not in a friendly mood.

"You," he hissed, "are going to die."

I was forced to agree with him, and as the nine men moved toward me with leveled spears I committed my soul to Heaven. Just then an elephant lumbered through the door and squashed the captain flat. I say an elephant because that is what I thought it was for a moment, but then I saw that it was the Ancestress. She was pursued by an axe-waving scholar who had no right to be alive. Blood spurted from countless wounds every time Henpecked Ho took a step, but he kept on taking them.

"Chop chop!" he yelled. "Chop-chop-chop-chop-chop!"

The scene became rather confused. Henpecked Ho whacked everything in sight as he pursued five hundred pounds of screeching Ancestress, who galloped in circles squashing everything she stepped on, and I crawled through the carnage slitting throats. It was all over in a few minutes. Bodies littered the floor, and I knelt in tears beside Henpecked Ho whose life was draining away in the red rivulets that ran down his tunic.

"Did I get her?" he whispered.

"Ho, there are pieces of that vile creature scattered all over the place," I said truthfully.

A peaceful smile spread across his gentle face. "I am so happy," he whispered. "Now my ancestors will be proud of me, and they will not be ashamed to greet me when I get to Hell. Perhaps I may even be allowed to see Bright Star again. Do not weep for me, dear boy. It is no tragedy to return to the Great Wheel, and I have grown so weary of this life."

His eyes closed and his breath grew faint. I leaned down and put my ear close to his lips to hear his last words.

"Immortality is only for the gods," he whispered. "I wonder how they can stand it."

And then he was dead. I clasped my hands together.

"Henpecked Ho, great is your joy!" I prayed. "Now you are free from the prison of your body, and even now you are being greeted with great honors by the Yama Kings in Hell. You have rid the world of a woman who was an

abomination in the eyes of men and gods alike, and your scholarship has been honored beyond earthly limits, for you alone among the scholars of China were chosen by the great Chang Heng to piece together clay tablets that could not be pieced together. Surely you will be reunited with Bright Star, and your next incarnation will be far happier than your last."

I could think of nothing more to say. I stood up and saluted my friend.

"Forgive me for leaving you without proper ceremony," I said, "but time is growing short and I must travel halfway across China to find the key to a mystery, and the method of killing the Duke of Ch'in. When you see Bright Star will you ask her to come and see me now and then in my dreams? I know I am not a very good sword dancer, but I did my best, and I would give anything to see her dance again."

I bowed deeply, and then I turned and walked away. But I returned as soon as I found an ox and a cart and looted the palace of everything of value. I needed to buy some secrets from a man whose secrets were not sold cheaply.

## Chapter 26: THE OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN

IT is wisely said that in order to ask an intelligent question you must already know nine tenths of the answer, and thanks to Henpecked Ho I was ready to ask an intelligent question. Thanks to Miser Shen I knew who to ask the question to, assuming that the wisest man in the world still lived in a cave at the end of Bears' Path, high in the Omei Mountains. I had not forgotten Miser Shen's story of how he went mad, and I had not forgotten my vow to avenge his death.

It was a long journey. Winter melted into spring as my ox and I plodded across the immensity of China, and spring turned back into winter as we reached the Omei mountains and climbed higher and higher, leaving the warmth and green grass and flowers far behind. Except for the Desert of Salt I had never seen a more depressing landscape in my life, and I swilled wine from a goatskin flask and sadly sang:

"Skinny rocks - verdigris green;

putrid water - bile yellow.

Here there are no hoofprints;

the twisting trail has run out.

"Now the path starts again,

rougher than anything ever dreamed of.

Even with cold scraping my face,

sweat pours from me like sauce."

Higher we climbed, and steeper, and just when I thought my ox could not pull that cartload of treasure one more foot the path leveled out, and we crossed a small clearing covered with weeds toward the gaping black mouth of a large cave. In front stood a wooden post upon which hung an iron hammer and a copper gong, and chiseled in the stone above the cave entrance was a message that I read with interest:

I AM THE OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN.

RING AND STATE YOUR BUSINESS.

MY SECRETS ARE NOT SOLD CHEAPLY.

IT IS PERILOUS TO WASTE MY TIME.

I took another swig of wine and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. A duke who laughed at swordthrusts and the Elixir of Life... a fairy tale... three anguished ghosts who swore that they had not known what they had done ... Yes, there could only be one question to ask. I picked up the iron hammer and struck the gong. Birds flapped into the sky with startled cries, and the echoes bounced back and forth between mountain peaks and gradually faded away. I took a deep breath and yelled:

"Old Man of the Mountain, come forth! I am Lord Li of Kao, and I have come to you for the Secret of Immortality!"

For many minutes I stood in silence, listening to the chatter of squirrels and the sigh of the wind. At last I heard a scuffle of sandals, and a voice that sounded like sand scraped across a sheet of iron muttered:

"Immortality, immortality, why must everyone ask for Immortality? I have so many secrets to sell. Beautiful secrets, ugly secrets, happy secrets, horrible secrets--"

The creature who shuffled from the blackness and blinked in the bright sunlight looked like the oldest and ugliest monkey in the world.

"--lovely secrets, lunatic secrets, laughing secrets, loathsome secrets. I can teach you how to turn your enemies into cockroaches, or your friends into flowers. I can teach you how to transform yourself into anything you like, or how to control the monsters that lurk in the black bowels of the earth, or how to steal the spirits of the dead. Why must you come to me for the Secret of Immortality, which is so simple that it is scarcely a secret at all?"

"I will give you everything I have for that one secret!" I cried, and I scraped the cover of straw from the cart and

revealed the treasure I had looted from the palace of the Ancestress.

The Old Man of the Mountain shuffled up to the cart and plunged a dirty hand into the glittering pile. "Cold," he whispered, and his voice was thick and clotted with pleasure. "Cold...cold...cold..." His robe and beard were stained with spilled food. He had pieces of straw tangled in his matted hair. His face was seamed and pitted and old beyond measurement, but the eyes that turned to me were young, and the light that danced in them was the light of mockery.

"Why not simply fly to Heaven and eat the Peach of Immortality?" he snickered. "Of course if you find it difficult to go to the gods you can always wait for the gods to come to you. At the Festival of the New Year, for example, when they descend to earth to make their tour of inspection."

He wiped his dripping nose with the tip of his beard.

"You know the seamless robes they wear? The jade girdles? The silver scepters and golden crowns? Any of those items will do. Steal one of them, Lord Li of Kao, and so long as you possess it you will never age. I stole a scepter myself, six or seven thousand years ago. Unfortunately I was approaching two hundred at the time, and not even the Old Man of the Mountain has discovered the secret of restoring youth,"

He looked at me slyly and said: "Now I think that I have answered your question so far as you understand the question. I would advise you to go away at once and collect more treasure. You will need a great deal more than this when you come to see me again. My secrets are not sold cheaply, and it is perilous to waste my time."

The Old Man of the Mountain stamped his foot and a huge crack appeared in the earth! My poor ox bellowed with terror as it plunged down into blackness, dragging the cartload of treasure behind! I heard a sickening crash far below the surface of the earth, and then the Old Man of the Mountain waved his hand and the crack closed as though it had never been!

"What an interesting reaction!" he exclaimed when he turned around. "Those who do not faint are usually ten miles away by now, yet here stands Lord Li of Kao in a fighter's crouch, with a dagger in his hand! Let us see what sort of hero has come to the Old Man of the Mountain."

He beckoned. My feet moved against my will. I found myself walking meekly up to him, and I could not stop until we were face to face. His eyes gazed into mine, and far deeper. Twice the Duke of Ch'in had looked into my mind, but it had been nothing like this!

"What!" cried the Old Man of the Mountain, who seemed to be quite insulted. "A dog? A dog has come to see the wisest man in the world? You are not even a good dog!" he snarled. "One eye has been gouged out, your ears are chewed, your tail has been bitten off, and your body bears the scars of a thousand bloody battles in back alleys!"

He was so angry that for a moment I feared that he would turn me into a cockroach, but suddenly he stopped short. He looked again into my eyes and whispered:

"A ball ... a bell ... a flute...three murdered maidens and a billion wings rising toward the stars..."

Then he began to laugh. The Old Man of the Mountain laughed until he cried, and then he wiped his eyes with his hand and gasped:

Chang Heng! Trust Chang Heng to find the one dog in the world capable of continuing his quest! I must admit that this is really very clever of Chang Heng - doomed to failure, of course, but clever - and I should have guessed that he would never give up. Stubbornest man I ever met. Chang Heng came to see me five hundred years ago, and I was quite impressed with him. One longs for a little intelligent conversation after several thousand years of solitude, and I even offered to make Chang Heng immortal free of charge, and to fix him up in a cave next to mine. He laughed at me. Me, the wisest man in the world!"

Again I feared for my life, but again the rage of the Old Man of the Mountain turned into laughter. This time he laughed until he choked, and then he wheezed:

"Chang Heng said that he wanted to go to Heaven, and that the only way to get there was to die, and do you know what happened when he did die?" giggled the Old Man of the Mountain. "He refused to go to Heaven! Why, they practically built a golden staircase for the great man! The Yama Kings were running around like frightened flunkies stamping his passport, or whatever they use for Heavenly travelers, but Chang Heng just glared at them and said

'Kindly inform the Emperor of Heaven that Chang Heng may have lost his life, but he is still on the trail, and he will never give up!' Then he tied his soul to the Pool of Past Existences and refused to budge. So for five hundred years a damn fool skull has been lying at the bottom of a damn fool pool, and now he has sent a damn fool dog to continue his damn fool quest!"

When the Old Man of the Mountain finally stopped laughing I saw something in his eyes which I recognized: greed. An all-consuming greed, and I dared to hope that I might learn something useful after all. Filthy fingers clutched my tunic, and the wizard whispered:

"Little dog, Chang Heng will never let you go. He will send you out to find a raindrop in a thunderstorm, or a petal in a field of flowers, or one special grain of sand concealed among a billion on a beach. What chance do you think you will have? I am the only one who can save you," whispered the Old Man of the Mountain. "Go back and steal something belonging to a god. Then return to me with treasure. At least ten cartloads of treasure, because you will need to buy another secret, and my secrets are not sold cheaply."

"But if I stole something belonging to a god I would never age," I said. "Why would I need to buy another secret?"

"You would never age, but what good is that when you could still be killed? You could be finished off in an instant by the bite of a mosquito or a slip upon the stairs," snickered the Old Man of the Mountain. His eyes sparkled. His hands twitched with excitement. A trickle of saliva drooled from his lips and he wiped it off with his beard. "Little dog, listen to me! You realize that anything with a heart can be killed? That is the secret, you see, that is the real secret. That is why the rulers of the world have come to the Old Man of the Mountain for five thousand years, and that is why they will come to me five thousand years from now. I alone have discovered how it can be done! Look, little dog, look!"

O Buddha, I cannot describe my horror when the Old Man of the Mountain opened his robe! I saw the hole where his heart had been! I looked right through him, and saw the copper gong behind, sparkling in the sunlight!

"No!" I cried. "A man without a heart is not a man, but a monster!"

"Indeed? And what do you call a man without a soul?" snickered the Old Man of the Mountain. "Little dog, the only way to perfect the soul is to complete the cycle around the Great Wheel of Transmigrations, but you will not complete it. Oh no. You are going to steal something belonging to a god, and then you are going to return to me with ten cartloads of treasure because I can see that you are a very intelligent little dog. I will remove your heart, and then you will be safe from Chang Heng! Not even his lunatic quest can kill you, so long as your heart is safe!"

His tongue licked his lips and his fingers pinched my arm and he winked, as though we were sharing some private joke.

"A man without a heart likes things cold, and there is nothing colder than treasure," he whispered. "Bring me treasure. I can see in your eyes that you are a bright little dog, and when I remove your heart you will hide it well. Some of my pupils have been incredibly stupid. One dolt - may Buddha strike me if I lie! - actually hid his heart inside the body of a lizard, which was inside a cage, which was on top of the head of a serpent, which was on top of a tree, which was guarded by lions, tigers, and scorpions! Another moron actually thought that he was being clever when he concealed his heart inside of an egg, which was inside a duck, which was inside a basket, which was inside a chest, which was buried beneath a tree, which was on an island, which was in the middle of an uncharted ocean! Both of those clods were easily destroyed by the first half-witted heroes who came along, but you will not be so stupid. You will live so long as your heart lives, and you know that nothing is worse than death. Nothing!" hissed the Old Man of the Mountain.

I tried to keep the revulsion from my voice, but I failed.

"Some things are far worse than death," I said.

The Old Man of the Mountain gazed at me with eyes like adders. His words were icicles. "It is perilous to waste my time," he said. Then he pressed to fingers to the corners of his lips and blew.

I was scooped up by a howling gale, and I whirled head over heels down the mountainside. The wind shrieked and dust flew and branches broke and I thumped down slope after slope. It seemed forever before I finally came to a halt by crashing into a tree. Then I passed out cold,

When I came to it was late afternoon. I felt for broken bones and found nothing but bruises. I also found my goatskin flask and set to work getting drunk. After the tenth gulp of strong wine I felt strong enough to examine my surroundings, and I saw that the tree I had crashed into had saved my life, because I was perched on the edge of a high cliff. Far below I could see a small village half-hidden by trees, and a shallow river shining in the sunset, and a boy standing motionless on the riverbank. A chilly wind sighed down from snowcapped peaks, and birds swooped high and low, and somewhere a woodcutter sang a slow sad song as he split logs.

A deep melancholy settled upon my soul. I took another swig of wine and sang:

"One blast of cold wind,

and the clouds part above the mountains.

It is evening:

the woodcutter's song becomes even sadder.

The boy calls to his friends on the other bank;

they come to him, riding a water buffalo across the stream."

What was I going to do? The Duke of Ch'in had no heart, so how could I avenge the death of Miser Shen? I swilled more wine and lapsed into self-pity. Only a few months ago I had been nineteen years old and free as the wind, happily setting forth to seek my fortune, and now I was nineteen going on one hundred and six, surrounded by dukes without hearts and monsters and labyrinths and skulls in pools that sent me all over creation to look for balls and bells and flutes and grains of sand. All I wanted to do was elope with the woman I loved and live happily ever after! "Lotus Cloud, Lotus Cloud!" I cried in my heart. "Will I ever see you again?"

Probably not. But was I going to give up?

I saw the face of Miser Shen in my mind, earnestly telling me that I was related to the greatest of all fighting dogs and that never in history had such a dog been known to give up. I saw Henpecked Ho, hurling himself against the spears of the soldiers in order to get to the Ancestress. I imagined Chang Heng telling the Yama Kings that he had no intention of giving up, alive or dead.

"What a world, what a world," I sighed. Then I swallowed the rest of the wine at a gulp and lurched to my feet. As the sun sank behind the mountains I memorized the landmarks. Tonight I would sleep where I was, but at the crack of dawn I would have to set forth once more into the great land of China.

"Duke, you don't know what you're up against!" I yelled, and the echo that drifted back was as thin and pathetic as the whimper of a frightened puppy. A puppy trying to kill a tiger.



## Chapter 27: CHANG HENG GIVES ME A CHOICE

SPRING gave way to early summer as I climbed hills and skirted mountains and forded rivers and crossed valleys. I will admit that I was drinking a good deal more than was good for me during my journey, and when I finally arrived at my destination I was quite drunk, even though it was only ten o'clock in the morning. I lurched through an outraged crowd of teachers and students, trampled the headmaster's flower garden, kicked the headmaster's cat into the compost heap, banged an assortment of heads with a heavy jar of wine, and staggered up the path toward the fence around the willow grove. The Headmaster of the Academy of Chang Heng, a suety sort of fellow with quivering jowls and watery eyes, got there first. He blocked the gate and held up an imperious hand, and bellowed in his very best headmaster voice:

"I order thee to halt, thou dissipated and degenerate youth! None but those who pass the tests of purity, poverty, and piety are allowed to enter this sacred grove!"

Pompous ass.

"Chang Heng," I said quietly, "it is Li Kao. I must talk to you."

The fence bowed down to the ground. It was a remarkable effect and I admired it. Students, teachers, and headmaster fell flat on their faces and began bawling prayers and banging their heads against the ground, and I placed a foot upon the headmaster's rear end, walked over him and the fence, and climbed the path to the clearing. Behind me the fence gracefully lifted and settled back in place.

It was a beautiful morning. Bees buzzed among the wildflowers and butterflies flickered above the green grass, and a soft breeze rippled the clear water of the Pool of Past Existences. I sat down and opened my jar of wine. The skull of the great Chang Heng grinned up at me in a friendly fashion.

"I promised to bring you a better brand of wine. This is genuine Haining Autumn Dew, fit for the gods," I said. I poured some into the pool. "Kan pei!"

For several minutes I sat there sipping wine and admiring the wildflowers. Then I said:

"Chang Heng, a thousand years ago the Duke of Ch'in tricked the three handmaidens of the Princess of Birds. He murdered them - I think I know why he murdered them - and he stole the crown of the princess. So long as he possessed it he would never age. But he could still be killed. So he brought ten cartloads of treasure to the Old Man of the Mountain, and the Old Man of the Mountain removed his heart. Then he was immortal and invulnerable, so long as his heart was safe. Five hundred years later you got on his trail."

I paused and gazed at the skull with open admiration.

"How on earth did you do it?" I said. "Nobody gave you a dragon locket. Nobody helped you. You had nothing but your brain to guide you, yet you found the ball and the bell and the flute, and you defeated the labyrinth and the invisible hand and the rigid corpse! How did you do it? Of course you never had a chance, because you still had to rescue the Princess of Birds. The duke could not kill her since she had eaten the Peach of Immortality, but he bought many secrets from the Old Man of the Mountain and he could transform the princess into anything he liked. So you went looking for a raindrop hidden in a thunderstorm, or a petal in a field of flowers, or a single grain of sand concealed among a billion on a beach. It was an impossible task, of course, and you lost your head. Have another drink."

I splashed more wine into the pool. "I have vowed to kill the Duke of Ch'in or die in the attempt," I said. "But you want me to do more than that. You want me to try to rescue the Princess of Birds, and the Old Man of the Mountain says that you will never let me go until I lose my head just as you lost yours. I am greatly afraid that the Old Man of the Mountain is right, and as soon as I can collect my thoughts am going to plead for my life."

I sipped wine for quite some time. Every argument I could think of seemed to have holes in it. It seemed a bit ridiculous for me to argue my case on the basis of morality, but what else could I do?

"Morality is scarcely my strong point," I sighed, "but I seriously doubt that you have the moral right to force me to commit suicide against my will. Why should I risk my life to help the Star Shepherd? What does it matter to me that a minor god I never heard of lost a minor goddess I never heard of either? Unless I consent to be sacrificed my

death will be cold-blooded murder, and if you can persuade me to be sacrificed you are a greater genius than I think you are. You know very well that there is a slight flaw in my character. There is also a slight space left in my hollow leg, so I think we should have another drink."

I am not bragging when I say that I did not even blink when I heard the voice. After all I had been through, why should I blink? I poured more wine into the pool and a familiar voice that came from nowhere and from everywhere said:

"That really is excellent wine, Li Kao, and I cannot tell you how much I appreciate it after five hundred years of water."

"I'm glad you like it, I said. "But the point is: are you going to force me to try to rescue the Princess of Birds?"

"Oh no. The choice was always yours to make," the voice said quietly. "I would have allowed you to make it at the very beginning, but in order to choose wisely you had to learn something of life and loss and love and loathing. And other things. Now you are ready to choose, but first I would like to tell you something. Li Kao, no matter what choice you make I will always honor you. I could only guide you, but you had to fight your own battles, and you have been magnificent. Believe me when I say that your ancestors take great pride in having produced such a fighting dog. Even the most distant and illustrious of your ancestors, the founder of the breed, is not displeased with your performance, and he is the greatest fighting dog who ever lived or ever will live. So great that he is divine."

The pool flickered, the skull was gone. I was suddenly gazing into a mirror, and the scene it reflected knocked the breath from my body and the wine from my brain.

I was gazing at Heaven.

I gasped at the beauty of the concubines of the Emperor of Heaven, who were laughing and splashing in a rainbow of rose petals where the River of Flowers cascaded down the Cliff of the Great Awakening to the Pool of Blissful Fragrances. I gaped at paths made of pearls, and palaces of jade. I saw the golden groves where the Queen Mother Wang grows the Peach of Immortality, and the seven terraces with the seven rows of trees whose branches are formed of precious stones, which sound musically when the wind stirs them. Everywhere birds of many-colored plumage and divine voices sang so beautifully of the Five Virtues and excellent Doctrines that I began to suspect that virtue might have something to offer after all.

Then the scene shifted and I was looking at a lake in the Land of Extreme Felicity In the West, and before my very eyes the leaves of a lotus slowly opened, and a purified sinner who had completed his cycle around the Great Wheel of Transformations stepped from the flower into the shining light of Buddha.

Suddenly I cried out in wonder and delight, for the scene had shifted again and I was gazing straight at my most illustrious ancestor: T'ien-kou, the greatest fighting dog who ever was or will be.

"What shoulders!" I cried. "What jaws! What teeth! What a murderous expression!"

The great dog sat silent, unmoving, eternally watchful, eternally ready to spring. Beside my magnificent ancestor stood the great Ehr-lang, a warrior so valiant that he had been able to battle the stupendous Stone Monkey to a standstill, and it had taken Buddha himself to defeat the beast.

The Celestial Dog and the Second Lord are the bodyguards of the Emperor of Heaven, and the August Personage of Jade was seated between them upon his throne. The left arm of the throne bore the symbol of the Heavenly Master of the First Origin who preceded him, and the right arm bore the symbol of the Heavenly Master of the Dawn of Jade of the Golden Door, who will someday succeed him. The emperor's robe was embroidered with dragons, and he wore a hat like a flat board from which dangled thirteen pendants of colored pearls on red strings. He had long whiskers and a tuft of beard, and his crossed hands rested upon the Imperial Book of Etiquette. The eyes of the August Personage of Jade were grave and sad, and his fingers fiddled restlessly with the book on his lap. I began to realize that the eyes of Ehr-lang and my great ancestor were also sad and grave, and just as I was wondering what they could possibly be looking at the scene shifted and I saw what they were seeing.

"Namo Kuanshihyin Bodhisattva Mahasattva!" I yelled, for I was looking at the greatest athlete in all the annals of eternity. I was looking at the Star Shepherd.

It was the rainy season in Heaven and the Great River of Stars was filled with raging water. Terrified stars tumbled

and splashed through waves that roared like ten trillion tigers, and great black boulders thrust through the foam like giant teeth, but not one star crashed into a rock or bounced over a bank, because the Star Shepherd was at his post.

He bounded across the boulders with the force of a rhinoceros and the grace of a gazelle, he leaped high in the air and twisted, and guided one flying star back to the water with a bare hand while the long crook in his other hand herded three more stars around a deadly rock. His grace was effortless, his leaps and twists and turns were pure poetry, and for all the power of his movement his crook caressed the stars as gently as a mother handling a baby. He was stripped to the waist and barefoot, and his long shepherd's crook was cut from the branch of an enormous tree, and his trousers were spun from simple peasant cloth, and I thought:

"God or no god, that is a real shepherd!" And then I thought: "Great Buddha, I would give anything to see the Star Shepherd do the Sword Dance with Bright Star!"

No sooner had that thought passed through my brain than I began to see why the eyes of the Emperor of Heaven and his bodyguards were so sad as they watched the magnificent Star Shepherd. There was something mechanical about that magnificence. He was not moving as Bright Star had moved in the Sword Dance. He was moving as she had moved when she eternally danced toward a door that eternally closed: beautifully, perfectly, but without joy or hope or pride. For some reason I found myself thinking of Miser Shen, for the Star Shepherd was doing his work as though he was not even aware of doing it, just as Miser Shen had been condemned to go on making money long after he had forgotten why he wanted it.

I was grappling with that rather muddy thought about Miser Shen when the scene shifted once more. I was gazing straight into the face of the Star Shepherd, and I cried out:

"Doctor Death!"

Again it was hard to put my finger on it, but the face of the handsome young god was also the face of the heartbroken old alchemist: totally innocent, completely vulnerable. The eyes of both were the puzzled, wondering, agonized eyes of trusting children confronted with cruelty for the first time.

Miser Shen was dead. His spirit was reunited with little Ah Chen. Doctor Death would die. His spirit would be reunited with the most wonderful wife in the world. But the Star Shepherd was immortal, and of course he moved without hope or joy or pride: what he did was magnificent but never again would the Princess of Birds be there to see him do it. Not through all eternity. And the August Personage of Jade could do nothing but gaze sadly at his favorite nephew and fiddle with the book on his lap, because the Imperial Book of Etiquette is unyielding and beyond challenge: a vow had been made, a vow had been broken, and the Princess of Birds had passed from the protection of Heaven. Heaven does not accept excuses.

Suddenly I was gazing at the Star Shepherd from a great distance, watching his shining form leap and turn and bound and twist with impossible grace, and as I did so I heard a voice whispering in my ear, and my blood ran cold. It was the snickering voice of the rigid corpse.

"You will dance for me forever," the monster laughed, and once more I felt the strangling arms and saw the ghostly capering corpses. "For ever and ever and ever," said the monster

The dance of the Star Shepherd in the Great River of Stars gradually faded away, and then I was looking straight down at the face of a dying friend, and instinctively I leaned closer:

"Immortality is only for the gods," whispered Henpecked Ho. "I wonder how they can stand it."

The sun was shining, and the birds were singing, and the breeze was fragrant with wildflowers, and a bleached white skull was grinning up at me from the bottom of a pool, and I took a deep breath and bellowed at the top of my lungs:

**"YOU DIRTY CROOK!"**

I had been set up step by step and plucked like a pigeon. The hook had been baited with the Celestial Dog himself who was "not displeased" with my performance, and now if I did not try to do what he was forbidden to do I would disgrace my most illustrious ancestor. It was unfair! It was a swindle! It was superb.

"Chang Heng, it is a tragedy that you wasted your life on good works," I sniffled. "You could have become the greatest crook in the history of China." I wiped my eyes and poured more wine into the pool. "You win. I will try to

rescue the Princess of Birds, and with any luck the Duke of Ch'in will pitch my head into your pool and the two of us can stare at each other for the next million years. Kan pei!"

"Did you say that this wine was made in Haining?" said the voice. "If so they have learned a great deal since my time."

"They call it Autumn Dew." I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. "Believe it or not a Haining merchant discovered the secret of making it in a savage barbarian backwater called Aquitania."

"I have heard of the place. I believe that they also produce a truly loathsome byproduct of spoiled milk called cheese."

"That is the place."

I split the rest of the wine and sipped my share in silence for a minute or two, and then I sighed and stood up.

"Chang Heng, it is very pleasant chatting with you but the Duke of Ch'in is probably scouring the country for me and I suppose I had better get going. It seems to me that I should concentrate on finding his heart. If I could find it I might be able to force him to produce the Princess of Birds by threatening to slice the slimy thing to ribbons."

"And if he produced the princess?"

"I would slice the slimy thing to ribbons. All I would need then to restore the princess to Heaven would be her crown and the three feathers of the Kings of Birds, and I already know where they are. You could not have found the duke's heart when you were alive, because you would have done the same thing," I said, "but you have had five hundred years to think about it. Can you point me in the right direction?"

"Follow the dragon, Li Kao," said the quiet voice.

"Follow...but Chang Heng, the dragon wound all the way to the end of the locket when it led me to the basin of oil in the cemetery! How can I follow the dragon?"

Behind me something metallic went clang! I whirled with drawn dagger, but the clearing was empty. Then I saw what had caused the noise, and I walked over to Chang Heng's marvelous seismograph. One of the dragonheads around the rim of the kettle had opened its jaws, and the metal ball had fallen into the mouth of the frog below.

"Thank you," I said.

I aligned the eyes of the dragon with the map of China engraved on the lid and memorized the general path I should take. Then I took a deep breath and walked straight toward the trees, in the direction of the dragon's eyes. The trees leaned aside and spread their branches apart. I walked through the gap and found a faint path and started down it, and the trees closed silently behind me.

As an interesting footnote to this episode I later discovered that the Headmaster of the Academy of Chang Heng had climbed the tallest tower of the school in order to spy upon my impious actions at the Pool of Past Existences. When the willow trees spread silently apart his students heard a loud scream, and when the willow trees closed behind me the students heard a sickening thud. The headmaster was buried with great ceremony, but to this day the local peasants swear that on moonlit midnights you can see his ghost bouncing up and down upon the ground beneath the tower. Only a fool would question the ghost stories of the peasants of China.

## **Chapter 28: AT THE LAKE OF THE DEAD**

THE path wound higher and higher toward mountain peaks. It was cold and still in those mountains. I sometimes climbed for an hour without seeing the movement of a squirrel or hearing the song of a bird. The chill that gripped the mountainside was dead and stale, as though it came from a monstrous iceberg that had been scooped up and deposited on top of a mountain, where it had lain lifeless and unmelting for a thousand years. For several days I had been hearing the sound of falling water, and finally I reached the source.

A waterfall was splashing down the side of a cliff, and when I climbed to the top I saw another waterfall far in the distance trickling down a higher cliff. Between the two stretched a lake. Uncounted years ago an enormous rockslide had cut a valley right in two, and the lake had formed behind the dam. It was the coldest, grayest, and most unappetizing body of water I had ever seen, and warning bells rang in my soul. Something evil lay beneath the surface of that lake. The problem was getting to the bottom, and I soon discovered that it was not going to be easy.

I made a bamboo raft and paddled out to the center and tried to reach bottom with a stone tied to a rope of vines, but after adding vines until the stone had gone down nearly two hundred feet I decided that for all practical purposes the lake was bottomless. I paddled back to shore and sat down to think.

I could not possibly get to the bottom of that lake. The rockslide that had caused it was so vast that it would take a hundred years and a hundred thousand tons of Fire Drug to blow a hole in the dam. I was wasting my time - besides, I was probably imagining things when I sensed that something evil lay beneath the surface. "Stop worrying about things you can do nothing about," I told myself. "Get going, Li Kao!" I started off again, and as I began to climb the soaring cliff at the far end of the lake I saw why there had been a rockslide. The cliff was mostly shale held together by clay, and when I reached the top I discovered that the river that fed the lake ran through almost the only bed of solid rock there was. On either side were deep ravines carved by rainwater in the spongy earth.

I sat down to catch my breath. Nearly five hundred feet below, almost straight down, the gray lake gleamed dully in the sunlight. I shivered. I knew that the signals coming from my heart were more intelligent than the signals coming from my head, but what could I do about it? Nothing. So I set forth once more, climbing down the other side of the mountain. As the lake faded behind me I began to hear the chatter of squirrels again, and the song of birds, and in a week I saw the first sign of human habitation. It was a small village, but it had an inn and they were delighted to see someone from the outside world. I answered questions for a good four hours before I had a chance to ask some of my own.

They knew that gray lake, and they did not like it any better than I did. They called it the Lake of the Dead, and swore that not even fish lived there. They told tales of strange sights and sounds, and swore that once a year a mysterious caravan would be seen moving toward the lake, and then it would vanish as though it had never been. That set them off on ghost stories. They asked me if I knew any good ones. I told them that I did not believe in ghosts.

Late that night I sat by myself at a table in my room. I had a jar of wine, but I did not really feel like drinking. I stared without thought at the table and the straw pallet and the wine jar and the vase of flowers that decorated the little room, and I felt a deep melancholy. I know that I was going the wrong way. I know that I should go back to that lake. But what good would it do?

"Old and young, everyone's asleep.

The cold lantern, flickering at midnight,  
is my only companion.

The two flowers I've been looking at become dragonfly eyes;  
the single flame, a jade vase hanging in the air."

Singing did not help either. The only thing that would help would be to get to the bottom of the Lake of the Dead. Very well, I would get to the bottom.

"You are wasting time, Li Kao," I told myself sternly. "Chang Heng sent his little dog to go fetch, so go fetch!"

In the morning I asked the headman to assemble the villagers. It took a bit of persuading, but the gold in my

moneybelt was more money than they had ever hoped to see in their whole lives and all but the very young and very old followed me back to the lake. We worked like demons. First we dug a trench from the river on top of the cliff to the deepest ravine, and then we dug connecting trenches to the smaller ravines until we had a ditch that ran from one end of the cliff to the other. Next we felled trees to make a dam. It was not easy to persuade the river to move into its new home, but eventually it roared angrily into the ditch, and since I could not think of anything else that might work I sent the villagers home to tend to their crops. They were happy to leave - in fact most of them ran.

I moved to a safer place with a tent and supplies, on the other side of the mountain across from the soaring cliff, and settled down to wait. I passed the time by building crude pearl diver's equipment in case my plan worked. A family of wild pigs provided me with air tanks made from pig bladders and breathing tubes made from intestines, and I sharpened a wooden spear and fixed a belt to hold rocks for weights. It took a month before it happened, but when it did it was spectacular.

I awoke to a rumbling smashing grinding sound, and felt the earth beneath me buck like a wild horse. I jumped to my feet and gazed across the lake to the cliff, and in the bright moonlight I saw it move. I had never dreamed that half the mountain would go, but it did. The angry river had tunneled so deeply into the spongy earth and flimsy shale that the entire cliff separated from the side of the mountain and plunged five hundred feet straight down into the Lake of the Dead.

A huge mass of water, silver in the moonlight, rose into the air like a cloud. I felt a blast of icy wind. The water seemed to move very slowly through the air toward the end of the lake, and then the monstrous liquid mass dropped over the side of the dam and smashed into the valley below. I saw a forest turned instantly to pulp, and enormous boulders scooped up like grains or sand and hurled into the distance. The whole mountain shuddered; rocks deep beneath the surface ground together and screamed; an icy mist covered everything. I clung to a tree for dear life.

Finally the roar of water faded away in the distance and the earth stopped bucking and -hp icy mist -11sbursed, and I gazed down upon a lake that was nearly empty. Silver moonlight glittered upon an incredible sight. A huge forest of towers and turrets and domes and spires was rising through the surface of the cold gray water. An entire city had been buried beneath the Lake of the Dead!

"Well well well," I said happily to myself. "What a lovely place to hide a heart!"

In the morning I paddled my raft out to the center of the lake and covered myself with pig grease to ward off the cold. I adjusted the rocks in my belt and picked up my wooden spear in case I ran into something nasty. Then I slipped over the side. The water was cold but bearable, with the exception of one icy current that lashed my flesh like a whip and which I soon left behind, and after dropping several rocks from my belt I attained the proper balance and was able to swim comfortably about fifteen feet beneath the surface, slowly sucking air from the first of my pig bladders. I had thought that I would be swimming blind, but the water glowed with a rather unpleasant greenish-white phosphorescence. A half-hour later I climbed back upon the raft and sat down to think.

That rockslide had been no accident, and the lake had filled with miraculous swiftness. The city had drowned in an instant, and so had the inhabitants. Everywhere I had looked I had seen skeletons - men, women, children, animals, no one had escaped. Only the Duke of Ch'in could have committed such a calculated massacre, and I said to myself: "Li Kao, that metal-masked monster must have the coldest heart in the whole world!"

The coldest heart in the world...

In a flash I was back in the water and swimming toward that strange icy current I had encountered. I began following it to its source, which appeared to be a large domed building with four stone towers at the corners. A boulder had crashed through the dome, and unless I was imagining things the current was flowing up through the hole. I had to return to the raft to get more rocks for my belt, and then I dove down once more and drifted down in the eerie green glow toward the heart of the Duke of Ch'in.

Could it really be this easy? I thought of the villagers' tales of the mysterious caravan that approached the Lake of the Dead once a year, and it occurred to me that it would be at the conclusion of the duke's annual tax trip when his coffers would be crammed with treasure. It also occurred to me that the duke was not very bright. Only a moron would trust monsters to guard his treasures, rather than fortresses and armies, and perhaps the Old Man of the Mountain had been slyly telling me something about the Duke of Ch'in when he said that some of his pupils were idiots.

I squeezed through the hole in the dome and worked my way down around the mass of the boulder. It had come to rest against one of the stone towers. It had also come to rest beside a pile of treasure so vast that it dwarfed the duke's other treasure troves put together, and the copy of the tiger mask that hung on the wall was immense. The tiger teeth were parted. I saw that there was a small niche in the wall behind the mouth of the mask. As I swam closer I saw that the choicest gems were piled there, and on top of them was a small golden casket. I moved my hand back and forth in front of the mouth: the icy current came from that casket.

"Duke, you are a dolt!" I laughed to myself.

I reached out. Fortunately my common sense grabbed hold of me in time, and I hastily jerked my hand back. Those huge parted tiger teeth were made of steel. After a moment's thought I swam down to the base of the boulder and felt the wall. As I had imagined the boulder had also cracked a hole in the wall of the tower, and with my wooden spear as a lever I was able to pry out a huge stone slab. With great effort I managed to lift it to the mask, and carefully - very carefully - I placed it between the two rows of glittering teeth.

The teeth snapped viciously shut. They ground furiously against the stone slab, and I reached inside the mouth and jerked out the casket just in time. With a horrible screech that seemed magnified by the pressure of the water the teeth ground right through the slab, and pulverized particles of stone turned the green water gray. I dropped the casket into the sack that I had tied around my waist. Even as I did so I wondered whether the closing teeth might have set off some sort of alarm, and when I turned around my heart nearly stopped beating.

"Lotus Cloud!" I thought.

But it was not Lotus Cloud. The long black hair had fooled me. The body that was moving toward me through the eerie green glow was that of the handmaiden who had given me the crystal ball. Then I saw the body of the handmaiden who had given me the bronze bell. Then I saw the body of the handmaiden who had given me the silver flute. The three white bodies, uncorrupted after all the centuries, moved through the water with strange jerky motions, wriggling like fish. Their long black hair drifted through the water like black clouds; their dead eyes gazed at me like dull pearls.

Suddenly three heavy coils of wet hair slithered toward me like snakes and wrapped around my face! Hair clogged my nostrils and blinded my eyes. The breathing tube was ripped right out of my mouth!

I turned turtle and dove. I jerked out the second of my pig bladders and inserted the breathing tube, and then I flipped over and swam back up, savagely thrusting with my spear. I was wasting my time. The bodies were inert weights, and a spear was useless against hair. Again the hair reached toward me like a deadly mass of black seaweed and ripped the breathing tube from my mouth. Hair clogged my mouth and coiled around my neck, and I just managed to break free and turn turtle and dive.

I inserted the breathing tube from another bladder. It was my last one. I had to break through that deadly curtain of heavy hair or die. I whipped out my dagger and swam up, slashing furiously. I could not even cut a single strand, for the hair gave way before the blade and closed in behind, reaching once more for my face. Again my breathing tube was jerked out, and I gazed at the three white bodies as they moved in for the kill. For a moment I was paralyzed; then I turned turtle again and dove, and made my way to the hole in the base of the tower and began prying with all my might at another stone slab. It seemed an eternity before it slid out and drifted slowly down through the water. Now the hole was large enough, and I squeezed through into the tower and began dropping rocks from my belt.

Up, up, up - my lungs were bursting and my eardrums were exploding and I saw red and orange stars flashing in front of my eyes. I felt as though I had swallowed fire. Up, up, up - suddenly I broke through! I shot to the surface and gulped air, and screamed as it touched my tortured lungs. I gulped again and screamed again, and at last I was able to breathe normally. It was pitch black inside the tower, but when I felt around and above me I discovered that the air pocket was only a foot or so from a flat roof, and that one corner of the wall had almost crumbled to nothingness. In a few minutes I managed to pound a hole in it, and I slithered out and hauled myself to the top of the roof. I lay there gasping in the sunlight like a beached fish.

I sat up. The bodies of the handmaidens were swimming round and round the tower like sharks. The shore was a half a mile away - but at the moment I had something else to think about. I untied the sack from my belt and

dumped the contents on the roof, and when I picked up the casket I felt the beat of a heart! Of course it was locked, but my lock picks were in the heel of my left sandal and I set to work with a will.

It was hopeless. That was the most difficult lock I had ever encountered, shaped like a tiny flower with sixteen tiny petals, and the only way it would ever be opened was with the right key. I tried smashing the casket against the stone parapet, but I could not dent it. I tried to force it with my dagger but I could not even scratch the surface. I hurled the cursed thing to the roof and sat there gazing at it, with my chin cupped in my hands. Apparently I had scooped up more than the casket from that niche in the wall, because glittering in the sunlight beside the casket were three priceless gems, an enormous diamond, a flawless emerald, and an extraordinarily rare pearl.

There are moments of illumination so sudden and unexpected that it takes many minutes for the confusion of messages to force their way through the brain, and when the meaning of those gems finally reached my consciousness I felt my mind shake loose from its moorings.

I knew everything. I knew what sort of face was concealed behind the great golden tiger mask of the Duke of Ch'in, and I could even guess what sort of dreams haunted his sleep. I understood why he guarded his treasures with labyrinths and invisible hands and rigid corpses and murdered maidens. Above all I knew where the Duke of Ch'in had hidden the Princess of Birds, and I knew that he had won. He had placed one final peril in my path, and I could not overcome it.

"Chang Heng, I cannot rescue the Princess of Birds!" I cried. "It would be the death of me! It would be worse than death!"

Chang Heng did not reply. He had done his best to civilize a mongrel, and now the mongrel had to make its own decision. I sat there wrapped in misery, gazing at a locked casket, and in the silence I could hear the evil heart of the Duke of Ch'in: thump-thump...thump-thump...thump-thump...

Another message was creeping into my mind. I raised my eyes and looked with pity and terror at the bodies of the murdered handmaidens. They moved jerkily through the water, circling the tower. They were jerking to the beat of the heart! The Duke of Ch'in had tricked them into betraying their mistress. Then he had murdered them. Then he had cast a spell and tied them to his heartbeat, and they were forced to guard the life of their murderer. "Take pity upon a faithless handmaiden...Is not a thousand years enough?" No, it wasn't. The duke fully intended to live forever, and they would suffer forever. As would the Star Shepherd. The Duke of Ch'in specialized in eternal damnation.

Even a mongrel has some small sense of decency. I jumped to my feet and tried to recall the names in the tale Henpecked Ho had told me.

"Snowgoose!" I yelled. "Little Ping! Autumn Moon! Listen to me! I know where the Duke of Ch'in has hidden the Princess of Birds! I know where he has hidden the crown! I know where he has hidden the feathers! Let me pass, and I swear to you that the birds will fly! I swear it! The birds will fly!"

I have been privileged to see bravery beyond mortal comprehension. No words escaped those dead lips, but I felt a wave of pain that practically scorched the flesh off me, and in my heart I heard the agonized screams of the handmaidens as they battled the spell that bound them. I saw their bodies spin round and round in the water, and at first I thought they were spinning out of control, but then I realized that they were wrapping their hair around their bodies. I dropped the casket and the gems back into the sack and tied it to my waist, and dove into the water. I swam between the agonized whirling bodies and made for shore, and those girls did not give up their terrible fight until I had crawled up on the bank.

I had very little practice at it, but I faced the three murdered maidens and managed a fairly graceful kowtowing position. I banged my head against the ground three times, and then I got to my feet and took to my heels. A long road lay ahead, and I had no time to waste.



## **Chapter 29: THE FACE BEHIND THE MASK**

IN the late afternoon of the seventh day of the seventh moon a fitful storm approached the pleasure city of the Duke of Ch'in. Thin black clouds raced across the sky, and a light scattered rain began to fall. Seagulls made harsh lonely cries as they soared like snowflakes against the dark sky. The setting sun sent shafts of amber light between the clouds, and the Yellow Sea glittered like a huge bubbling vat of molten gold.

I stood on the shore across the bay from the Castle of the Labyrinth, and I sensed that Buddha was with me as I watched a small object drifting toward me over the glittering water.

"It is a tiny fishing boat, light as a leaf;

no voices are heard from the reed cabin.

There is no one on board -

no bamboo hat,

no raincoat,

no fishing rod.

The wind blows the boat, and the boat moves."

I climbed aboard and turned it back to sea, and the sharp wind caught the red sails and sent me skimming toward the great gray mass of the duke's castle. The sun set, and a pale moon flickered between the scudding clouds. There was no point in mooring the little boat since it would surely be smashed to pieces when the tide roared in, so I slipped over the side with my climbing gear and shoved the boat back into the waves and returned it to Buddha. I paddled to the base of the cliff, hurled my grappling hook as high as I could, and began to climb.

An hour later I heaved myself over a ledge, and crawled into the little cave where I had found the crystal ball. The tiger mask glittered upon the wall; the treasure lay there as brilliant as fire and as cold as death. Again I fixed my ropes and grappling hook, and I let myself down the narrow stone chimney into the labyrinth of the Duke of Ch'in. I took out my locket and followed the dragon backward to the pool of water beneath the trap door in the floor of the duke's throne room.

By standing order the throne room was locked at sunset, and no one but the duke was allowed to enter. I was not afraid of the duke's soldiers, but I had something else to fear and I gazed nervously at that little trap door far above me.

"Li Kao," I said to myself, "if that bolt doesn't work from this side you are going to look very messy splattered all over the ceiling."

I tied one rope to a jutting rock on one side of the pool, and another rope to a rock on the opposite side. I tied both ends around my waist with slipknots that could be released with a jerk. Then I waited for the tide. The water roared in and I was buffeted from all sides, but the ropes held and I rose steadily upward. I whispered a prayer and reached up as high as I could. Praise be to Buddha the bolt did work from my side, and the trap door fell open. I jerked the knots and released the ropes from my waist, and pulled myself up into the throne room of the Duke of Ch'in.

The duke was seated upon the throne. His mask glittered at me in the moonlight as I walked toward him. He did not move a muscle.

"Empty shell," I muttered.

The moonlight shone through the eyeholes to the back of the throne behind. Just a golden mask and a long cloak of feathers, propped upon a framework. I ran my fingers over the cloak, trying to remember where I had stabbed the duke the first time. My sword had bounced away as though it had struck steel, and now my fingers paused at three tiny white feathers, concealed in a cloak of feathers.

"Feathers that stop swords?" I muttered.

I tried to pull them out, but they could not be pulled. I tried to cut them out, but they could not be cut. I opened my smuggler's belt and took out three small trinkets. I placed the crystal ball upon the arm of the throne.

"Snowgoose returns the ball in exchange for the feather," I whispered, and I pulled out the first feather of the Kings or Birds as easily as pulling a straw from butter.

I placed the bronze bell upon the arm of the throne.

"Little Ping returns the bell in exchange for the feather," I whispered, and the second feather of the Kings of Birds slid easily into my hand.

I placed the silver flute upon the arm of the throne.

Autumn Moon returns the flute in exchange for the feather," I whispered, and the third feather of the King of Birds practically jumped into my fingers.

I opened the dragon locket. The three feathers fit perfectly into the grooves, just as Miser Shen had said they would. Then I walked back to the trap door and waited for the tide to begin flowing out. I listened to the heavy stamp of marching feet outside the throne room, and the clash of weapons and harsh commands. The soldiers were only guarding the duke's costume, although they did not know it. The duke preferred to guard his body with mystery and magic, and if I was to kill him I was going to have to have help. Fortunately I knew just where to find it.

The tide went out, and I jumped down into the water. I followed the dragon back to the stone chimney and climbed up to the cave, and then let myself down to the sea. An hour later I climbed dripping and shivering from the water and made my way through the din and dissipation of the city toward a modest little house. There were guard dogs in the garden but they knew me well, and after a pat or two they made no complaint when I climbed through a window.

Sometimes you can find help in the strangest places.

"BOOPSIE!" Lotus Cloud yelled happily, and the Key Rabbit fainted.

It took quite some time to revive the Key Rabbit, but after I persuaded him that I was not a ghost he was delighted to see me, and we made quite a cozy little family group as the three of us sat around a table sipping wine. "I am going to need you help, both of you," I said. "but first I have to tell you a rather long tale. Lotus Cloud will enjoy the first part of it anyway, because it involves the handsomest god in Heaven and the most beautiful girl in the world."

"And her wicked stepmother!" said Lotus Cloud with shining eyes.

"This may be the only story you have ever heard that does not have a wicked stepmother," I sighed.

"Thank goodness!" said the Key Rabbit. "Wicked stepmothers scare me to death. Come to think of it, most things do," he added sadly.

Then I told them the story of the Princess of Birds and the Star Shepherd, just as Henpecked Ho had told it to me. Lotus Cloud made a perfect audience for a tale like that. She hopped up and down with excitement when the August Personage of Jade placed the crown upon the head of Jade Pearl, and she applauded when the Bridge of Birds soared up toward Heaven. Even the Key Rabbit seemed to enjoy the story, and he was moved to open another jar of wine and fill cups all around.

"And now we come to the villain." I said. "Who he was and where he came from I do not know, but a thousand years ago he went to see the Old Man of the Mountain, the wisest man in the world, and he asked for the secret of immortality. The Old Man of the Mountain told him that if he stole something belonging to a god he would never age so long as he possessed it, and that if he removed his heart he would be invulnerable so long as his heart was safe. This slimy fellow did not object to having his heart removed. But first he needed to steal something belonging to a god, or a goddess, and the easiest target was the Princess of Birds."

"Oh no!" cried Lotus Cloud. I could see in her eyes that she had been dreaming that she was the most beautiful girl in the world, and that she could climb a Bridge of Birds to Heaven. "Oh yes," I sighed. "And he went about it in a very cruel way.

"The Princess of Birds had three handmaidens: Snowgoose, Little Ping, and Autumn Moon. They were simple peasant girls from Jade Pearl's own village, so the villain bought three trinkets from the Old Man of the Mountain. No peasant girl in the world could have resisted those trinkets. He disguised himself as an old peddler, and he

showed the marvelous things to the handmaidens. They could have them, he said, if only they would do him a small favor. Then he took out three small feathers. They were exact duplicates of the three feathers that the

Princess of Birds wore in her crown. If the handmaidens would simply switch the feathers and bring the real ones back to him, he said, the wonderful trinkets would be theirs."

"They would never do such a thing!" Lotus Cloud said indignantly.

"Did the girls know what the real feathers were?" the Key Rabbit wondered.

"The Key Rabbit has put his finger on it!" I said. "They did not know that the real feathers were the feathers of the King of Birds. Remember that this was a thousand years ago when feathers were used to decorate all sorts of headgear - even crowns - and the maidens simply assumed that those feathers were decoration. Besides, the old peddler probably told them some tale. That he worshipped the princess from afar, for example, and would give anything to have something that had belonged to her, no matter how humble. At any rate he addled the wits of the three innocent girls and they agreed to do as he asked, but they made the peddler swear a binding oath that if for any reason the princess wanted the original feathers back he must return them in exchange for the trinkets. He took no chance of that happening. One by one they returned with the feathers. One by one he handed them the trinkets. And one by one he stabbed them to the heart."

"Poor girls," Lotus Cloud sniffled. "Poor faithless handmaidens."

"And poor Princess of Birds," I said. "I would imagine that the villain committed his crimes on the seventh day of the seventh moon, so that the princess would have no time to appeal to Heaven." I sipped wine moodily, and sighed: "My heart breaks when I think of Jade Pearl running around crying, 'Snowgoose! Little Ping! Autumn Moon! Where are you?' And midnight was approaching, and she had to return to Heaven. So she called to the birds of China. But she no longer wore the feathers of the Kings of Birds. No longer would the birds hear and obey her. Poor little princess - turning around helplessly, calling birds that could not come, gazing desperately up at the Great River of Stars. And the watchman rapped the third watch, and the seventh day of the seventh moon had come and gone, and the Princess of Birds had not returned to the Star Shepherd. She passed from the protection of Heaven, just as she had been warned by the August Personage of Jade, and then it was very easy for an old peddler to steal her golden crown. So long as he possessed it he would never age. He returned to the Old Man of the Mountain, and the Old Man of the Mountain removed his heart. Now he was invulnerable. He bought many secrets from the Old Man of the Mountain and his power grew, and eventually he became the Duke of Ch'in, and he has been sitting on that throne for a thousand years, concealed behind a tiger mask. Lotus Cloud, I think that you had better catch your husband before he injures himself."

The Key Rabbit had turned a sickly shade of green, and Lotus Cloud caught him just before he crashed to the floor. When the little fellow recovered he whispered "Everything about the Duke of Ch'in terrifies me, and now I am more frightened than ever. O Buddha, to think that behind that mask is a face that reflects a thousand years of evil! I will help in any small way I can, Li Kao, but I beg you not to make me look at the horrible face of the Duke of Ch'in!"

"Yes, I would imagine that a very strange face indeed is concealed behind that mask," I said. "A strange face for a strange man, and the closer you look at the duke the stranger he becomes."

I played host and poured more wine all around.

"Let us take a good look at the Duke of Ch'in," I said. "He conquered the empire and burned the books of China. He said that he was trying to destroy Confucianism and impose Legalism, but why did he have to destroy priests and temples and worshippers and even professional storytellers? Clearly it was not Confucianism that worried him. The Duke of Ch'in was trying to cover up his crimes by destroying all memory of the Princess of Birds and the Star Shepherd, and he very nearly succeeded. But the question is: why bother? He massacred millions, but the Princess of Birds had already lost the protection of Heaven. Tyranny is not so persuasive a motive as terror, and it would appear that the Duke of Ch'in was acting in blind panic. Then he built the Castle of the Labyrinth and equipped it with thirty-six imperial bedrooms so that assassins could not know where he slept. Why? He was invulnerable! Assassins could not harm him! The closer you look the stranger the duke becomes - here is a man who lives only for money and who amasses great hoards of treasure. Does he guard his treasure with stone walls and iron vaults and armies? He does not. He guards it with monsters. Terrible monsters to be sure, dangerous monsters, but not

very effective monsters. Great Buddha, any half-witted staff sergeant could plan better defenses!"

"Do you think that the duke is crazy?" Lotus Cloud whispered.

"I think that he is cowardly," I said. "If you consider the duke to be a great and terrible tyrant he makes no sense at all, but if you consider him to be a little man who is afraid to die he begins to make a great deal of sense. He makes even more sense if you think of him as he once was: a frightened little boy lying sleeplessly in bed at night, starting with terror at every noise, and seeing monsters in every shadow. A boy who would grow up to be so afraid of death that he would willingly have his heart removed, or even sentence innocent people to eternal damnation, if it would prevent him from having to return to the Great Wheel."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the three breathtaking gems I had collected along with the casket: the enormous diamond, the flawless emerald, and the rare pearl. I shoved them across the table.

"Look at this stuff," I said. "Key Rabbit, why does the duke employ you? This is what he lives for: treasure. But he employs you to collect the stuff, and store it and count it. He gives you the keys to all his strongboxes. He sends you to his treasure chambers to make sure that his clerks don't steal a penny, and more often than not you have to stay there all night counting and recounting the loot. You and you alone are empowered to assess fines. He takes you on his tax trips to determine how much is owed by each village. This strange ruler lives only for money, yet you are forced to spend more time with the duke's money than he does! It is incredible! But there is one way in which it would make sense - everything: the money, the monsters, the apparent panic in his actions, all of it."

I did not trust the Key Rabbit's fainting spells but I trusted those jewels: his fingers caressed them; his eyes were riveted to them; he did not see me edging closer.

"Everything would make sense if concealed behind the mask of a tiger," I whispered, "was the face of a frightened rabbit."

I jumped upon the Key Rabbit's back and jerked a chain up over his neck. It was a chain with which I had once been entangled, and at the end of it was a pressure key shaped like a flower. I jerked from my pocket a golden casket that was secured by a pressure lock shaped like a flower. I tossed the casket and the key across the table to Lotus Cloud and yelled:

"For the love of Buddha, open that casket!"

Lotus Cloud screamed. She stood petrified with terror, screaming her head off, because all of a sudden I was not riding upon the back of the Key Rabbit at all. I was riding upon the back of a roaring, clawing tiger. I had expected it and I was in the best position I could manage: my arms wrapped around the neck of the beast and my legs wrapped around its belly and my teeth buried in the back of its neck. I spat out a mouthful of fur and roared:

"OPEN THAT GODDAMNED CASKET!"

Lotus Cloud was pure peasant and pure gold, right down to the core. She had received a shock that should have felled an elephant, yet that marvelous girl took a deep breath, stood perfectly still in the center of chaos, and went to work on that lock. It was not easy. The sixteen tiny points had to make contact with precisely the right amount of pressure before the lock would open, and Lotus Cloud labored with a frown on her forehead and her tongue sticking out - looking for all the world like a little girl trying to thread a needle for the first time.

The Old Man of the Mountain must have counted the Duke of Ch'in among his most stupid pupils, because the duke lost his head entirely. When he discovered that he was not going much damage as a tiger he transformed himself into a huge serpent, and then a wild boar, and then a giant ape, and all the while I was praying: "O Buddha, see to it that this moron does not transform himself into a scorpion!" I could almost feel the lethal tail whipping over and impaling me like a bug on a pin. "Cleanse his mind of thoughts of giant porcupines!" I prayed. "Not to mention pools of quicksand, and hideous carnivorous plants!" The Duke of Ch'in did not think of any of those terrible things, but what he did think of was almost as bad. He transformed himself into a boulder.

A tooth broke off as I tried to bite the hard rock. Then the boulder crashed to the floor and rolled over on top of me and began to crush me to death. Deep down in my soul a voice growled: "Never let go!" I held on. A pair of pink-rimmed Key Rabbit eyes appeared in the rock. A pair of pale Key Rabbit lips opened.

"Of course," whispered the Duke of Ch'in. "That is what I saw deep in your soul! I remember you well, little dog,

but it did you no good to fight me then and it will do you no good now. I ran grow heavier. Heavier and heavier and heavier."

The room swam before my eyes. I could not breathe. "What sort of fighting dog are you?" growled the voice in my soul. "Are you going to disgrace your ancestors? Never let go!" I held on for dear life. I squeezed that rock as though I was trying to twist it in half.

Lotus Cloud screamed! The casket fell to the floor, and she screamed with horror as a wet throbbing heart slid out! In an instant the boulder had become the Key Rabbit. He lunged for his heart, but I held on. I was too weak to keep him on the floor, but I locked my hands around his ankle and he had to drag me with him, and that gave Lotus Cloud time to recover.

What a woman! She looked at her husband, dragging me over the floor. She looked at the loathsome heart. She reached down and scooped up the slimy thing. Then she wound up like a peasant girl who once had been the terror of crows and hurled the heart out the window to the dogs, who were making a terrible racket outside, and the dogs descended upon it, and the Key Rabbit stopped in his tracks.

The man who had given his name to China turned toward Lotus Cloud, and his lips moved silently, and one hand reached out - almost tenderly. I do not know if the Duke of Ch'in was trying to touch her, or what he was trying to say. I only know that the flesh withered on his face, and then there was no flesh and an ancient skull was perched on top of an ancient skeleton. Then even the white bones dissolved into the dust of centuries and an empty robe slowly crumpled to the floor.

The Yama Kings had been waiting a long time. I would imagine that the Duke of Ch'in received a very warm welcome in Hell.

Lotus Cloud looked at me with eyes like saucers. The wonder of what she had seen had driven away the horror. "Did you know all along that my miserable husband was the real Duke of Ch'in?" she whispered.

I managed to stagger to my feet. I lurched to the table and grabbed the jar of wine. I was going to need it.

"No," I said after the tenth swig. "I suppose I should have guessed, but to tell you the truth I did not realize that the Duke of Ch'in was the Key Rabbit until I realized that you were the Princess of Birds."

## Chapter 30: A BRIDGE OF BIRDS

LOTUS Cloud thought I was joking, of course, and she even managed a small laugh, which was not an easy thing to do under the circumstances.

"Me?" she scoffed. "The Star Shepherd fell in love with the most beautiful girl in the world, not with a girl with thick legs and big feet and a flat face!"

"Mere literary convention," I said with an airy wave of a hand. "If the Star Shepherd wanted beauty he had all the young goddesses in Heaven to choose from. He wanted a peasant girl whose eyes held all the hope and joy and wonder in the whole world, and whose grin could fell an ox at fifty paces. I applaud his good sense. I am something of an expert on the subject since I have had the honor of falling in love with you twice: once as Li Kao, and once a thousand years ago when I was your little dog."

I poured myself more wine and offered a cup to Lotus Cloud. She waved it away with a nervous gesture. I am afraid that she thought that I had lost my mind.

"I was not a very good little dog," I said rather sadly. "In fact I was the worst mongrel in the history of the world. But I loved the Princess of Birds and the Princess of Birds loved me, and I am sure that I did my best to protect her. The Duke of Ch'in was afraid of me, and I probably gave him a thorough chewing before he managed to get rid of me - poison, I suppose. I doubt that he would have dared to go after me with a sword. At any rate the duke killed me and captured the Princess of Birds, and five hundred years later when a very great man named Chang Heng tried to find the princess and failed he decided to call for her dog. A dog could find what a man could not, he reasoned, and I'll bet he kicked himself when I trotted right to the duke's back door and laid my heart at your feet."

"What are you talking about?" Lotus Cloud yelled angrily.

"I am talking about greed," I said. "You see, the great Chang Heng wasted his life on good works, and as a result he understood everything in the world except greed. He knew that the Duke of Ch'in could have transformed the Princess of Birds into anything he liked, so Chang Heng searched for a single raindrop hidden in a thunderstorm, or one certain petal in a field of flowers, or a special grain of sand concealed among a billion on a beach. But the duke would never have transformed to princess into something like that. He lived only for money, so he would transform her into something that would make money. I do not believe that he was very bright, but here he showed a flash of pure genius. The Duke of Ch'in realized that he could make ten thousand fortunes if he did not transform the Princess of Birds at all."

I picked up one of the three jewels on the table. It was the rare pearl: jet black, with one small star shaped white flaw.

"This is what finally opened my eyes," I said. "Lotus Cloud, this is a very rare pearl. There cannot be another one exactly like it in the world. One night I leaned over a window sill and rolled this pearl across the floor toward your feet, and the next time I saw it, it was in a treasure trove belonging to the Duke of Ch'in. So I started to wonder how he got it. I knew that you forgot all about a gift of pearls and jade five minutes after you received it, but I had never before wondered what happened to the stuff. It struck me quite suddenly. What if the duke had not transformed the princess at all? What if he had merely extinguished her divine light and removed her memory, and given her a false set of memories? It would have been child's play for a student of the Old Man of the Mountain."

"I do not understand one word you are saying!" Lotus Cloud snarled.

"Can you understand that the Princess of Birds would have still been a goddess?" I said. "That is why the duke showed genius. It is the nature of men to worship a goddess, and it is the nature of a goddess to accept their worship. The men are not being lecherous and the goddess is not being promiscuous. It is the nature of men to bring valuable offerings to their goddess, and it is the nature of the goddess to accept their offerings. The men are not handing out bribes. The goddess is not being greedy. They are merely acting out roles that were ordained at the beginning of time, and as a result you have collected - to my own certain knowledge - more pearls and jade than the duke's entire army. And every bit of it has wound up in the treasure troves of the Duke of Ch'in."

I opened another jar of wine. "I should have realized that you were divine the moment I realized that I was not jealous of Miser Shen," I sighed. "Miser Shen was not jealous of me. None of your lovers was ever jealous -

annoyed, perhaps, if they were prevented from getting to you, but not jealous. Now that total lack of jealousy is completely inhuman if the emotion involved is love, but it is very human indeed if the emotion involved is worship. One is not jealous of a fellow worshipper."

Lotus Cloud did not believe me, of course, but she was getting worried nonetheless. She watched me with uncertain eyes as I walked over and gazed down at the Key Rabbit's robe.

"I stabbed the duke twice," I said more to myself than to Lotus Cloud. "The first time my sword bounced off three feathers, and the second time I felt a metallic scrape before it plunged through his body. So long as he held the crown of the Princess of Birds he would never age, and what better place to keep it than in the hole where his heart had been?"

I reached into the robe and pulled out a small golden crown. Then I opened my dragon locket and took out the three feathers of the King of Birds.

"We have only a short time together," I said quietly. "It is growing late. Soon the watchman will rap the third watch, and the seventh day of the seventh moon will have come and gone. You must be back in Heaven before then."

My beloved Lotus Cloud began to tremble when she saw tears trickling down my cheeks. Those small salty drops were more convincing than a billion words.

"I weep because when you are once again the Princess of Birds and safely back in Heaven you will forget me," I sniffled. "A man can stand almost anything, but he cannot bear it if he is forgotten by his goddess."

"But this is all nonsense!" cried Lotus Cloud. "I would not want to leave you even if I were the Princess of Birds!"

"You don't know what you want," I said. "But I know what you want. Whenever you see pearls and jade your whole body shakes with a longing that comes straight from the soul. When your hands reached out to pearls and jade you were reaching for something that you could never quite remember, but never quite forget. I have seen Heaven. The paths are made of pearls. The palaces are built from jade. But you were reaching for something more important than your home in Heaven; you were desperately trying to reach yourself. The name of the Princess of Birds," I said gently, "was Jade Pearl. And now it is time for Jade Pearl to return to the Star Shepherd. He has suffered long enough, and he will be very glad to see you."

Lotus Cloud was terrified. She tried to hold on to the only life she could remember, and she cried: "But you cannot want this to happen! I love you, and you love me, and you cannot want to send me away!"

I carefully placed the three feathers around the rim of the golden crown, and walked slowly up to Lotus Cloud.

"Yes, I love you and you love me. Ours is a perfect love, and a perfect man would never abandon a perfect love. But I am not a perfect man. There is a slight flaw in my character," I said, and I placed the crown of the Princess of Birds upon the head of the woman I loved.

The world being what it is you may very well be called upon to rescue a goddess one of these days, and I will offer you a piece of advice: beware of her Divine Light. The moment I placed the crown upon the head of Lotus Cloud I was nearly blinded. I fell to my knees and covered my stinging eyes and gazed at flickering black spots and exploding orange pinwheels, but even then I could see that Lotus Cloud had moved away from me. (I saw her in my heart, and if you do not understand that sort of vision I cannot explain it to you.) When I dared to open my eyes I found that they had adjusted to the unearthly glow, and I saw my beloved Lotus Cloud, Princess of Birds, standing at the open window. A shimmering nimbus surrounded her, and the golden crown upon her head flickered like fire. I heard her make a low cry - not a song, not a whistle, something that was both and neither and then she opened the door and stepped out into the garden. She paid no attention to me.

"Already she has forgotten her little dog," I thought, and I got to my feet, quite mindlessly, and walked over to the table and opened another jar of the Key Rabbit's wine. Those of you who have suffered a severe shock may understand my reaction. Through the open door I could see the guard dogs crouched over the tiny pile of dust that was all that remained of the evil heart of the Duke of Ch'in. The dogs were listening to something, entranced, and then I heard it.

The music of birds was rising from every corner of China. The beautiful song rose higher and higher, yet deepened in pitch as the chorus swelled, and then they came: a million birds, a billion, a trillion, soaring across the face of the

moon. The great Phoenix, mightiest of all, led the way. I saw his flaming crown of feathers streak across the sky like a meteor. Behind him flew the Eagle, King of the Birds of the Land, and the Albatross, King of the Birds of the Sea. Behind the mighty three flew the owl, Prince of the Birds of Night, and the lark, Prince of the Birds of Day, and the swan, Prince of the Birds of Rivers, and the parrot, Prince of the Birds of Jungles, and the crane, Prince of the Birds of Marshes, and the petrol, Prince of the Birds of Storms, and the raven, Prince of the Birds of Prophecy - I shall not give the entire list; Henpecked Ho might have drawn it up since it covers twenty pages - and behind the officers flew their legions. Every single bird in China including those who had been forced to break out of cages was flying through the moonlight, and the air was fragrant with the green twigs and branches that they held in their beaks.

I saw the room vibrate with the mighty song, and the curtains swing back in a wind of wings, and several pieces of porcelain break right in half. I took another sip of wine. I heard the Princess of Birds make another low cry, and the great falcon, Prince of the Birds of War, slid silently down from the sky and landed beside her in the garden. It was as big as a horse. Its talons glittered like giant swords, and its wise old yellow eyes burned like torches. The Princess of Birds turned and looked straight at me, and I found myself walking toward her.

To my numb astonishment I found myself climbing upon the falcon's back. Lotus Cloud leaned toward me; her lips brushed my cheek.

"I shall never forget you, Li Kao. Not through all eternity," she whispered. Then she stepped back.

The great falcon spread its wings, pumped twice, and suddenly I was airborne, flying away through the night sky, flying away from the Princess of Birds. I looked back and saw that a billion birds were building a bridge with the twigs and branches in their beaks, and I saw Lotus Cloud step upon the first rung.

The moment her foot touched the bridge the last spell was broken. I heard a mighty roar, and I turned to see the Castle of the Labyrinth shudder as though a giant hand was squeezing it. Then the monstrous mass of stones broke to pieces, and great slabs fell like scattered grains of sand, and I was flying through a cloud of dust and debris. The falcon lifted from the cloud and I gazed back at a beautiful Bridge of Birds that was soaring toward Heaven, and I saw the shining light of the Princess of Birds climb toward the Great River of Stars. Never again would I see Lotus Cloud; never again would I hold her in my arms.

The great falcon turned its mighty head. Its eyes glowed like coals. "Li Kao, why do you weep? For a thousand years men and ghosts alike have waited for the beautiful Bridge of Birds," said the falcon. "It is time for rejoicing. Look down."

I looked down, and I saw a tired old man trudging away from a cemetery with a corpse on his back. Doctor Death was holding the corpse's head up toward the glorious Bridge of Birds. "You see? Anything is possible in China!" cried Doctor Death. "If the birds can do that surely you can come back to life, and it is so very important. You see, she was not pretty but she was the most wonderful wife in the world. We were very poor, but she could make the most delicious meals from a handful of rice and the herbs that she picked in the woods. She sewed dresses for wealthy ladies to help pay for my studies, and she sang beautiful songs to cheer me when I was depressed. We were very happy together, and I know that we will be happy together again."

The falcon swooped down. Its mighty talons shot out. Doctor Death fell silently to the ground, and I saw his ghost lift from his body, and then I saw another ghost running toward him with open arms and tears of joy, and Doctor Death and the most wonderful wife in the world embraced beneath the beautiful Bridge of Birds.

On and on we flew, and above me the glorious bridge climbed higher and higher, and the great falcon turned its head. "Must you still weep, Li Kao? Look down."

Henpecked Ho was in his element. His ghost stood between the ghosts of Bright Star and her captain, and they were according him the respect that was due the foremost chin-shih scholar in China. They gazed wonderingly up at the glorious sky and back down at Henpecked Ho, and the gentle scholar grandly recited: "...and so the August Personage of Jade placed the crown upon her head. 'Arise, Princess of Birds!' said the Emperor of Heaven, and when Jade Pearl stood up she was astonished to see that she shone with a divine light..."

Faster we flew, zooming over low hills and fertile valleys, and everywhere I looked I saw peasants standing outside with their little children in their arms. Their eyes were filled with joy and hope, and they said: "You see? No matter



how bad things seem you must never give up. The great Chang Heng refused to give up, and now he has completed his mysterious quest!" The children said: "But didn't Chang Heng promise that the sky would fill with falling stars?" Their parents said: "Be patient. Chang Heng said that there would be falling stars, so there will be falling stars!"

We soared up a mountainside. I heard a great cry of joy that shook the skies and I looked up, and I saw the shining light of the Princess of Birds climbing toward Heaven, and I saw another shining light as the Star Shepherd hurled his crook away and raced across the Great River of Stars toward his bride. No child in China could have anything to complain about now. Stars spilled over the banks and streaked down toward earth: showers of stars, torrents of stars, great glorious waves of stars that turned night into day, and the whole world was bathed in the fragrance of green twigs and branches while the song of a billion birds thrilled the air. "Look down," said the falcon.

I looked down, and I cried out:

"But surely they have paid for their folly!"

The bodies of the three handmaidens still floated upon the cold gray water of the Lake of the Dead, and the great falcon turned its head and said:

"In life they were faithless, but in death they were faithful beyond belief. Their courage has been brought to the attention of the Yama Kings, and even now the Judges of Hell are making their decision."

I saw the bodies peacefully dissolve into dust, and I saw the three ghosts lift into the air, and I felt an indescribable wave of joy as Snowgoose and Little Ping and Autumn Moon flashed past us through the sky, and followed the beautiful Bridge of Birds to rejoin their mistress in Heaven.

We hovered above another high peak where the Old Man of the Mountain gazed up at the sky outside his cave, and then we swooped down to another valley.

"Look down," said the great falcon.

"Miser Shen!" I cried, for the ghost of my friend was standing with the ghost of his wife, and in his arms he held a beautiful little girl. He was telling her a story, and her eyes were full of wonder as they stood beneath the Bridge of Birds.

"...so I said; 'Li Kao, I am a peasant and all peasants worship the memory of the great Chang Heng! This unworthy one has been granted the honor of pursuing you to the Pool of Past Existences, and I beg to be allowed the greater honor of dying at your side!'"

"You were very brave, daddy," said little Ah Chen.

The falcon pumped its wings and we soared up the side of another mountain and over the top. Down swooped the falcon, drifting silently toward a willow grove on top of a hill. We landed light as a leaf beside a perfectly round pool of clear spring water, and I found myself climbing from the falcon's back. Three times the falcon bowed to the pool, and then the glowing yellow eyes turned to me.

"Is it not enough to know that you will never be forgotten by the Princess or Birds?" said the Prince of the Birds of War. "That is as close to immortality as men can get without going mad. Besides, you would be miserable in Heaven. So would I. There is nobody there to fight."

The great bird spread its wings and lifted to the sky; for a moment the shadow blocked out the moon, and then the falcon was gone.

I walked over to the pool and gazed down at the white skull. "Are you still there, or have you gone to Heaven?" I said.

"I would not leave without saying goodbye to you," said Chang Heng. "Besides, I think it would be pleasant to lie here for a while and sip some wine with a friend, and gaze up at the beautiful Bridge of Birds."

I was quite surprised to find that I still clutched the last jar of the Key Rabbit's wine. I sat down and poured some into the pool and lifted the jar to my lips. "You know," I said as I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, "I would not be at all surprised if the seventh day of the seventh moon becomes a festival in China. Of course the priests will have to invent a story to go along with it. Something pious and pretty - all about a little goddess who

weaves seamless robes and a little god who milks cows, for example, with a few magpies thrown in for comic effect - and if the story is innocuous enough the Koreans and Japanese will adopt it as their own, as they always do. The real story would not appeal to them at all, because the real story is not actually about gods -and goddesses. Or mongrels, for that matter. It is a story about two kinds of wisdom, and it begins with the great Chang Heng and ends with the Old Man of the Mountain."

"Did you see my old adversary?" said Chang Heng.

"I did indeed. The falcon hovered over his cave so I could get a good look. The wisest man in the world was standing outside gazing up at the Bridge of Birds. His eyes were like a couple of rocks. Then I saw an expression of great pleasure cross his face, and I was just thinking that it might not be so bad after all to lose your heart when I noticed that he had taken some jewels from his pocket. His fingers were caressing them, and his voice was thick with greed. 'Cold,' he whispered. 'Cold...cold...cold...cold...'

"And then the wisest man in the world turned his back upon the beautiful Bridge of Birds and shuffled down into the darkness of his cave. Would you call that a good ending to our story?"

"It might not be very good, but it is certainly Chinese," said Chang Heng.

Falling stars crashed all around us, but apparently the August Personage of Jade was willing to forgive his favorite nephew for deserting his post because all Heaven exploded with bells and gongs and the blast of joyous trumpets as the Princess of Birds stepped from her bridge and fell into the arms of the Star Shepherd. I poured half of the remaining wine into the Pool of Past Existences and raised the other half to my lips.

"Kan pei!" I said.

**THE END**