

TALES OF SLEEPING DRAGONS

伏龍傳

Key to Characters

As Chinese names are written with the family name first, I will present the characters in alphabetical order based on family name.

An Pan

Jinfang's premier seller of buns. Notoriously unreliable rumour-monger.

Chin Yong

Sheriff. Had an easy life under the previous magistrate (Xiong), and doesn't get on well with Fan.

Ding Kui (Moonface)

One of Black Hou's henchmen. Converted to Buddhism and is now a monk at the Pearl Gorge Monastery.

Fan Xu Li (Magistrate)

New administrator of Jinfang. Young, smiles a lot but seems to be a sadist at heart.

Gui Hua, *see* Yang Gui Hua

Hou (Black Hou)

Former assistant to Magistrate Xiong of Jinfang, and sorcerer. Tried to sacrifice the inhabitants of the *yamen* in order to gain godlike power, but was defeated by Zhao Yu. Now imprisoned within a bottle gourd in the Pearl Gorge Monastery.

Jiang (Mrs)

Yang Gui Hua's manageress. Occasionally nags her charge, but seems reasonably happy with the lucrative set-up by which Gui Hua works for Zhao Yu.

Lai (Snakeskin Lai)

One of Black Hou's henchmen. Posed as Hermit Ran (whose son he was). Killed very violently by Tornado.

Lei Ma

The Seer. Lost popularity during the Black Hou era because of his strange readings (most of them true!). Becomes Pan's master.

Li Jin Lao

Scholar and ward chief of Jun County, to the north of Jinfang. His life was saved by Zhao Yu, for whom he arranged a lucrative supply of woven silk.

Lu (Magnate)

Wealthiest inhabitant of Jinfang. Known to Zhao Yu through a mutual friend, Lu Ban (no relation). Engages Scholar Zhang to teach his children.

Mo (Hermit)

Benefactor from the vicinity of the Pearl Gorge Monastery. Helped defeat Black Hou. Hides his facial features. Voice resembles that of Spreading Willow.

Monkey-Face

Term of abuse used by Tao Wu Shu. For a long time it was thought that there actually *was* somebody nicknamed 'Monkey-Face'.

Mu (The Ox)

One of Tong's lackeys. Big, but none too clever.

Niu

Pang Shan's agent.

Ou (The Sixth)

Bodyguard hired from the Capital by Mrs Jiang, worried by the events in Jinfang and the dangers involved in being part of a secret society.

Pan (The Shadow)

Gentleman thief from Huainan. Supremely self-confident. Unremarkable appearance.

Pang Shan

Jinfang's premier fish merchant (and only fish distributor). Not very nice.

Ran (The Deep River)

Hermit and seeker after truth, murdered many years ago by Black Hou. Impersonated by his son, Snakeskin Lai.

Rui (The Eagle)

Tong's best fighter. Poses as a medicine pedlar. Severely injured by Tao Wu Shu, he is now unable to walk properly.

Scarface

One of Tong's men. Works with Mu the Ox and supplies the 'brains' of the pair, if you can call it that.

Shadow, *see* Pan

Shang

Leatherworker threatened by Pang Shan

Shen (Prefect)

Danzhou's administrator, and thus Magistrate Fan's direct superior.

Spreading Willow

Abbot of the Pearl Gorge Monastery.

伏龍傳

Tan (Major)

Old soldier, retired in surprising opulence.
Daughter murdered by Black Hou, son simple.

Tan Yin

Tea Merchant. Short, but with a remarkably bushy beard, which he attributes to the quality of his merchandise.

Tao Wu Shu

Wandering Taoist. Murdered Magistrate Xiong.
Considered to be mentally unstable by many.

Teng Ai

Zhao Yu's long-suffering bodyguard.

Tong

'Carpet Merchant' who runs a thievery and piracy operation along the Yellow River. Took over Jinfang briefly but was captured by an Imperial Censor.

Tornado, *see* Wu Dong.

Wei Xi Shanyu (White-Eye)

One-eyed physician from the Miao tribe. Induces an odd feeling in those he meets. Uses strange Miao healing methods including the laying on of hands. They seem to work.

White-Eye, *see* Wei Xi Shanyu

Wu Dong (Tornado)

Powerful, simple-minded fellow who helped in the defeat of Black Hou. Passed by mistake through Black Hou's escape route, and has been wandering the grey plains of the Otherworld ever since.

Xiao Fu

Jinfang's best butcher. Runs a busy shop with a large staff, and helps out needy people when the opportunity arises.

Xiong Kun Ling (Twisted Grass)

Former magistrate of Jinfang and collector of religious paraphernalia. Killed over breakfast by Tao Wu Shu in an argument over Confucianism.

Xu Mang

Sick merchant who seeks aid from Zhao Yu.
Travelling with his two younger brothers, neither of whom has a distinctive mottled facial birthmark like Mang.

Yang Gui Hua

Singing girl from the Capital. Far more assertive than most of her profession. A good singer, and quite artistic, too. Sings only occasionally now, but works in Zhao Yu's silk shop.

Zhang (Scholar)

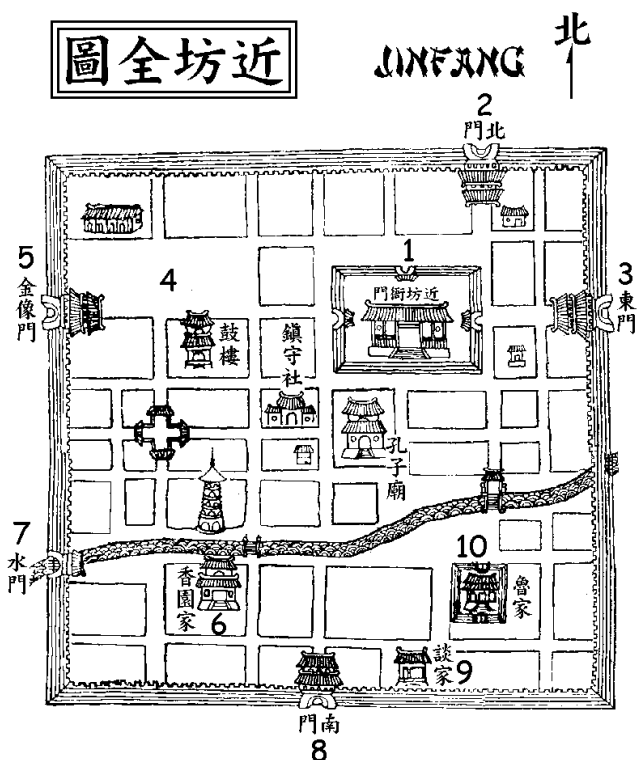
Tutor of Magnate Lu's children. Delivered a public lecture on the occasion of the inauguration of the Haven of Sleeping Dragons.

Zhang (Talisman Seller)

Former pupil of Ran the Deep River and seller of magical talismans in the marketplace.

Zhao Yu

67 year old merchant from Huainan and founder of the Haven of Sleeping Dragons. Runs a silk shop in Jinfang.



Map Key

1. The yamen. A sort of fortified town hall which contains the administration, the jail, the court, and the magistrate's residence. In this town it also contains the office of the Sheriff, although for reasons that will emerge in the course of the story, he doesn't spend much time in it.
2. The North Gate.
3. The East Gate.
4. The Marketplace. Jinfang is a thriving market town.
5. The Golden Idol Gate. Unfortunately the Golden Idol is long since gone.
6. The House of the Perfumed Garden. The most up-market provider of flower girls in the town.
7. The Watergate. Currently free from scandal.
8. The South Gate.
9. Major Tan's mansion.
10. Magnate Lu's mansion.

伏龍傳

第一回

The chief fiddled with the studded bands about his wrists. The other leaders waited expectantly. All eyes were focused on the man in the guest seat. He was obviously ill at ease. There was a long pause before he spoke.

'Yes, I was there at the start,' he said.

The chief leaned forward in his seat. 'So tell us then, Brother Teng, what happened?'

Brother Teng cleared his throat, and began.

I suppose it really started when the Master arrived in Jinfang. But you've heard that story. You know that the Master had decided to settle in Jinfang. He started building a mansion outside the East Gate, a little way from the town, and he also bought a shop a block away from the *yamen*. He was always a practical man, the Master. I think he had decided that after all that had happened in that town, nothing worse could befall him. He'd suffered a lot on account of saving the life of a young ward chief, and since this obligation enabled him to obtain a lucrative supply of fine silk from the ward chief's county, I suppose he felt he might as well make the most of it.

So he sent word to his household in Huainan for more retainers to come to Jinfang. I doubt his wife was pleased. Perhaps that was another reason for settling in Jinfang? He knew his wife would never leave Huainan. This way he didn't have to put up with her, and he could enjoy himself a little more in his last years, sharing the company of that pretty singing girl, Yang Gui Hua. Oh, but don't get the idea that anything funny passed between them! No, it was all very proper. Anyway, the Master was too old by that time.

That's not what you wanted to hear, though, I can tell. I just wanted you to understand that the master was still a merchant, and still in business, even while he was setting things up.

He didn't explain it in much detail to me, but he did tell me a few things. As you know, all his life he'd had a low opinion of bureaucracy. All he'd ever known was clerks on the make, constables on the take, and magistrates either incompetent or sadistic or both. In Jinfang, though, the realisation hit him. You could do things without them. In the matter of Black Hou, the authorities were useless, but he, Zhao Yu, had made a difference. If he'd done it once, by accident, why couldn't he do it again, on purpose, and again, and again?

He also remembered the stories of the Three Kingdoms heroes. Zhao Yu had liked those stories since he was young. But now he felt he finally understood what they were all about. You'll remember the most famous scene near the beginning, when the Three Brothers, Liu Bei, Guan Yu and

Zhang Fei, resolve to *do something* about the chaos facing China, and so swear brotherhood in the Pact of the Peach Orchard. That made a big impression on him.

The Master was no swordsman, though. He fenced a little for sport, it's true, but I daresay he wouldn't stand against any of you fine fellows for more than a half-dozen rounds. So his favourite character in the stories was Zhuge Liang, the Sleeping Dragon. Who could ever stand against Zhuge Liang's strategies?

That's why he started the society the way he did: with a public lecture. He persuaded Scholar Zhang to address a gathering on the subject of the Three Kingdoms heroes.

The next thing was to get people to attend. On the one hand, there were certain people he would invite, such as Magnate Lu, and of course the old soldier Major Tan, whose daughter had been murdered by Black Hou. On the other hand, he wanted to attract certain other types of people. That was why he made it a public lecture, and put notices all over the town.



伏龍
隱
的
頭

The notices announced the public lecture, and its subject, and mentioned that it would be held at the Blue Orchid restaurant. They were signed 'The Hidden Head of the Sleeping Dragon'. The Master wanted to see what sort of person would respond to such a strange invitation.

At that time Jinfang was recovering from its recent problems. It had just about got used to the presence of Imperial Soldiers, and many people were looking forward to the arrival of its new magistrate. It needed some good news, or at least some better news than it had had recently, and the Master's mysterious notices provided a talking point.

When the day finally came round, there was a

伏龍傳

good-sized assembly at the Blue Orchid. There were people from all walks of life. In the restaurant's large banquet hall we had arranged seats without paying too much attention to the protocols of seating. Important guests like Magnate Lu, Major Tan, and Chin Yong the Sheriff, were seated at the front, while others had to fend for themselves on the benches nearer the back.

The Master stood up and said a few words of welcome. He then had Yang Gui Hua sing a song 'to get people in the right mood'. After that he welcomed Scholar Zhang to the front, and the lecture began.

To be quite honest with you, I thought Scholar Zhang's talk itself was rather dull. I like a good story myself, but the old fellow just rambled on about history or something, so I ignored him, and turned my attention to the audience.

There were a few people I recognised. They might have come because they'd heard something. There was the old talisman seller from the market place, for example. There were some others who I think had come along for social reasons. They'd heard that bigwigs like Magnate Lu and Major Tan were there, so they tagged along. There was Sikong Wan, for example, Warden of the South-East Quarter, and a bit of a slimy fellow if you ask me.

There was also Scholar Yuchi, who has a little school. He was there out of politeness to Scholar Zhang, I suppose.

It was the others who interested me more. Xiao Fu the Butcher came. I think the Master had invited him because he'd heard that Xiao Fu often helped people in trouble. Lei Ma the Seer was there, and so was Madam Shang of the House of the Perfumed Garden, who seemed to get on quite well with Zhao Yu.

These may just be names to you, but they all had their part to play.

So did White-Eye Wei. He was the travelling Miao physician who Zhao Yu had heard about and invited in to treat Major Tan and Rui the Eagle. I always felt there was something strange about him. Let's be honest, there *was* something strange about him, and not just that blank white eye he had. Maybe because of that, he was a damn good physician. That Rui the Eagle eventually got back on his feet was probably all White-Eye's doing.

And finally, let's not forget Pan. You've met him, haven't you? There are some people who, you meet them once, and they are unforgettable. Pan's not like that at all. Can any of you remember what he looks like? I can't. It was at the lecture that Zhao Yu first met Pan, but he was very careful not to introduce him to anybody else at that point. I once heard someone call Pan 'The Shadow', and that's what he was like. In those early days I was occasionally there when Pan would slip in and exchange a few words with the Master. In and out he'd come, just like your shadow

魏白眼
西單于



White-Eye Wei Xi Shanyu, the Miao Doctor. A very strange fellow, but he got on well with Gui Hua.

shifting as you turn a corner.

So anyway, after the lecture there's some food and wine brought, and it becomes a sort of social gathering, with Zhao Yu the host, moving among them, but really he's sniffing them out, seeing if any of them seems to be interested in the more 'political' parts of the story. That's how Pan got involved, though he actually came up to Zhao after the talk, having spotted what the Master was up to.

So that's really how it all started: with Scholar Zhang's talk.

Shortly after that the new magistrate turned up, and a right nasty piece of work *he* was. I can still remember the first session he had. He was quite young for a magistrate, and all smiles, full of that 'Father and Mother Official' stuff that they're always spouting when they're in a self-righteous mood. The first case, as I recall, was two rough good-for-nothings arguing about which of them owned a 1000 cash promissory note. If you ask me it belonged to neither of them. They'd probably robbed some merchant and then fallen out when the proceeds couldn't be divided.

Anyway, Magistrate Fan, he was all smiles, ticking them off as if they were children, and then taking the note and giving them 500 each (less court costs). Just when everyone thought it was finished, and the two were turning to leave, though, he says to them, still smiling:

'Oh, and I'd also like to give you a little lesson about what it means to trifle with the law.' At that he throws down ten bamboo stalks apiece, and the lictors are on them, whacking away with those staves, as the two men wail and scream like there's no tomorrow.

I looked at the magistrate while this was happening, and he was lapping it up. That smile, like a favourite uncle's, never left his face the whole time, but his eyes,

伏龍傳



影子 潘

*Pan the Shadow.
You'll hear more
about him. Of
course, no one but
me and the Master
knew about him at
first.*

his eyes were smiling a different smile.

The Master noticed it too. As we came out afterwards he said he thought the sleeping dragons might be needed soon. The magistrate had asked for anyone with evidence about Black Hou, and the murder of the magistrate, to come forward, and offered a reward for information, but after what he saw that day I knew the Master wasn't going to be up there volunteering. Anyway, what did he need a reward for?—he was rich as it was.

So that was how we got started. In the beginning there wasn't really an organisation. There was just an idea. The Master wanted his society to be a way that people who felt the same way he did about the authorities, and about right and wrong, could work together to get things done. Of course, it had to be kept secret.

The first thing the Haven of the Sleeping Dragon did was help out a leatherworker. Not many people knew about this, but it only happened a couple of weeks after the talk. A leatherworker called Shang came to Zhao Yu. He'd been at the lecture, and was interested by some of the things the Master had said after the talk. In the last couple of months he'd been under a lot of pressure to sell his shop to a fish merchant by the name of Pang Shan. He'd never actually met Pang, but Niu, Pang's manager, had been round trying all sorts of threats. Shang turned him down, and the next week his son was set upon by street thugs and beaten up. Luckily Shang had a friend from Kong village by the name of Hao, with two strong sons. They moved in, and the threats stopped for a while. But a few days previously the two lads' father had arrived, wringing his hands and making excuses. He'd been threatened too, and worse, so had his granddaughter. The two Haos moved out, and Pang Shan's man turned up again.

Shang lost his temper and threw him out, waving his deed of entitlement to the land.

The next morning Shang woke up to find a knife embedded in the wall above his head, and the deed gone. A rap at the door announced a functionary from the *yamen*, who said that he was being taken to court by Pang Shan for failure to pay rent.

How often did this sort of thing happen without anyone there to help? Too often, we felt. This time we could do something about it, and so we did.

第二回

Teng paused. He had been talking for a while and his throat was obviously dry. The chief gestured to one of his underlings, who quickly fetched a jug of kumiss, the fermented mare's milk that these desperadoes favoured.

Teng took a large draught.

'So what did you do to Pang Shan?' asked the chief. 'Sounds like he was angling to set up a rival organisation, or something. I'd have had him grabbed at night, cut up, and delivered in bits to his followers.'

Teng grimaced. 'It wasn't like that at all.' He took another swig of the kumiss and continued.

You have to remember that no one had been killed. It was all threats and bullying. If we'd killed anyone, after all the business with Black Hou, and the carpet merchant, we'd have had the Imperial Guards back before you knew what was happening. No one wanted that.

It worked out much simpler the way the Master did deal with it. Remember, Pang Shan had stolen Shang's deed of entitlement. That deed was one of the ones drawn up when the town was first walled, towards the end of the glorious Tang Dynasty, and it had been handed down in Shang's family. As long as Shang had the document, he had a guaranteed claim to his shop, and Pang Shan couldn't really do much, however much he paid the clerks at the *yamen*. With the deed out of the way, however, he started a court case. He must have known that Shang wouldn't be able to contest it. The legal threat was just a message to Shang, telling him to abandon his shop and get out. No one wants to go to court at the best of times, but after the new magistrate's first session it was clear that this was a man who liked to see people thrashed.

There were also rumours going around of some strange devices that Magistrate Fan had brought in from the capital. There was one called a 'wooden steam cake'. I heard that Fan used it on prisoners for fun. Very nasty it was, too.

Anyway, the Master thought this was a good opportunity to make use of Pan. I didn't hear the full details, but I do know that the day after Zhao Yu

伏龍傳

asked Pan to sort things out, he was able to give the deed back to Shang. The court case was quickly dropped. The pressure on Shang stopped.

I think this worked out so well because everything was kept secret. Pang Shan didn't know who he was facing. He'd been shown that whatever he did to Shang could be done to him—the difference being that while we knew who he was, and where he lived, he didn't know who we were. He later worked it out, but that's much later.

The Master worried a lot about this in the early days. On the one hand, to operate effectively, the Haven of the Sleeping Dragon had to be secret. On the other hand, it had to get a reputation, both so that good people could support it, and bad people could fear it.

The next problem was Rui the Eagle. The Master had decided to offer Rui the Eagle a place in the society. Rui might have been crippled, but he was still a master swordsman. He could still teach. That was why the Master got White-Eye Wei, that peculiar Miao, to treat him.

After a while he broached the subject. Rui was enthusiastic. After the shame of his self-inflicted injury, he didn't really want to work for Tong any more. The problem was, however, that Tong was incarcerated in the *yamen* under sentence of death, waiting for the sentence to be ratified by the Metropolitan Court. Rui owed it to Tong to try to rescue him.

The Master came up with a solution. Tong would be rescued from jail. Thus Rui's duty would be discharged, but because the rescue would actually be done by the Haven of the Sleeping Dragon, Tong would owe Zhao a favour. Zhao would claim the release of Rui as his favour.

Simple, eh? So all that had to be done was to spring Tong from the *yamen* jail. Pan was confident that he could do it, but then Pan was confident that he could do anything. Zhao wanted to try another approach, and give White-Eye Wei a chance to show what he could do.

White-Eye's suggestion was quite drastic. There was a certain resistance to it at the start, but Wei was pretty insistent. His idea was to poison Tong!

When we thought about it a little, it did seem that Wei had a point. We'd been thinking of daring schemes to get in the *yamen*, deal with the guards, and break out with Tong. On reflection, though, such schemes would not only be fantastically dangerous, but after all the recent troubles they'd bring a company of soldiers down on the town faster than you could skin a rabbit. No, Wei was right. It had to be done cleverly.

It took a bit of preparation, but eventually everything was sorted out. We got the jailers accustomed to deliveries of food by Mrs. Jiang. Zhao Yu arranged for a little boat trip with a couple of acquaintances, including

the town's coroner, Weng Fei Wo, followed by a pilgrimage to the Pearl Gorge Monastery. I went along with him, of course, but I heard what happened when we got back.

Actually that boat trip was my first chance to exchange a few words with Pan. Turned out he was quite interested in Taoism, and was travelling in search of a teacher, though I was relieved to discover he didn't seem to have any of Tao Wu Shu's more unpleasant habits. Talking of whom, there had been no sign of Tao Wu Shu for a while. We decided that while the Imperial Guards were in control, he had been lying low in case he was caught and had the magistrate's murder pinned on him.

So the business in town was going to be handled by Wei, Gui Hua's manageress Mrs. Jiang, and Ou the Sixth, a fellow from the capital who Mrs. Jiang had employed as a bodyguard.

So anyway, you want to hear about how Tong was sprung, don't you?

Some herbal preparation that White-Eye had concocted was mixed in with his evening meal. The next morning, a messenger arrived at the Seven Lotuses and handed Wei an instruction to attend the *yamen*. Wei pretended to be surprised and went along. The messengers had tried to summon the district coroner, only to find him off on a pilgrimage. In his place they had come for the talented Miao physician about whom so many people had been talking.

White-Eye was taken straight to Tong's cell, from which a foul smell and an immobile form portended nothing but bad news. The jailer and clerk who accompanied Wei were obviously worried, but that was nothing compared to how they felt after Wei examined the body. It was a highly contagious disease, he said. Tong was undoubtedly dead, and everybody in the *yamen* was at risk. All that could be done was to remove the body as soon as possible and burn it: preferably outside the town.

The clerk was now frantic. This was a prisoner

歐小六

On the Sixth, Gui Hua's bodyguard. A good fellow, in his way, though he never went drinking.



伏龍傳

under sentence of death, and yet a death in custody was a serious matter. And what of this disease that threatened everyone? Wei insisted that the body should be burned, but it was well known that cremations were illegal, except in special circumstances. Wei thunderingly pointed out that if these weren't special circumstances, what were?

Finally, mollified by being able to write a report and get Wei's mark (Wei not being literate) on it, the clerk relented. A cart was requisitioned to transport the body, and two constables came along too.

At first they were very careful, sticking close to the cart and arguing with Wei's instructions to head out of the North Gate and towards a wood. As they walked, however, White-Eye explained in more detail what this disease would do to a man, and how dangerous it was to come close to someone suffering from it. He then went on to describe in detail the ritual that he would have to perform once finished with the body, in order to be rid of the *yin* influence. It wasn't pleasant. The constables moved away from the cart, and accepted Wei's instructions.

So they ended up in a little clearing in the woods. Wei got the constables to fetch firewood, while he chatted with the clerk. The clerk was eager to get things over with, so Wei deliberately kept him there. By the time the wood was ready, and Wei announced that just to be on the safe side he'd better perform a full autopsy, the clerk was begging to be excused. Wei finally relented, asking the clerk and constables to wait for him with the cart outside the wood. When he burned the body, the smoke would be dangerous, so it was safer if they waited at a little distance. After a few hours, Wei would return, to check that the body was consumed, and collect some bones as evidence. The clerk and constables gladly acquiesced.

So it all went as planned. It takes quite a while to burn a body, so they had quite a wait. Eventually the plume of smoke had thinned to a wisp, and Wei went

back in to the wood, returned soon after with some charred scraps of clothing and a couple of blackened bones.

So, everything would have been fine if that had been all.

Unfortunately, on the way back to Jinfang, they ran into two likely fellows. Scarface and Mu the Ox were two of Tong's more devoted henchmen. As soon as news reached them of Tong's capture they must have hurried to Jinfang. They were probably planning some scheme themselves to spring Tong from jail, but we'd beaten them to the punch.

There was quite a hairy moment when those two ran into White-Eye, the clerk, and two constables on the road. Scarface didn't beat about the bush.

'Where's Tong?' he demanded. Wei held up a charred piece of bone.

The conversation wasn't very friendly after that. So unfriendly was it, in fact, that the clerk quickly made his excuses and left—which is to say that he fled as fast as his legs could carry him, closely followed by the constables.

Eventually, however, Wei managed to calm down Scarface and Mu, explaining that Tong was fine, and safely hidden back in the woods. Of course, the two desperadoes insisted on going back there with Wei.

Meanwhile, Ou the Sixth and Mrs Jiang were making their way back to the clearing, following the plume of smoke. Ou was more than a little disconcerted, on arriving, to discover that an extremely disorientated, and naked, Tong, was not unconscious as expected, but most definitely, and loudly, conscious. He had to calm the fellow down, and proffer the clothes he'd brought, before he was believed.

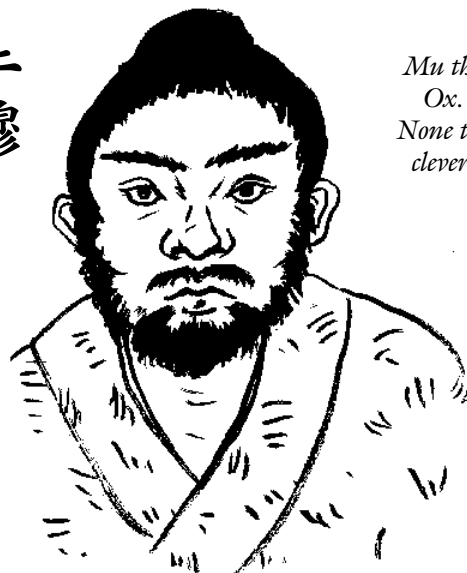
Finally, in a touching little ceremony, the two loyal followers were reunited with their leader. White-Eye Wei was none too impressed by the gruff nature of the thanks he received, and made a couple of pointed

傷
痕
面



*Scarface, one
of Tong's
more
unpleasant
lackeys*

牛
穆



*Mu the
Ox.
None too
clever.*

伏龍傳

allusions to the dangers involved. Sadly, Tong was too groggy for the niceties of etiquette. Before heading off in the purloined cart with his two men, he assured Wei that he'd be giving Jinfang a wide berth in future. While technically true, this was by no means the last Jinfang heard of Tong the Carpet Merchant.

And that was how Tong the Carpet Merchant was saved. The magistrate was none too happy, of course, for deaths in custody look very bad on a magistrate's record. The coroner, having returned from a pleasant trip to Pearl Gorge Monastery, had to examine the death certificate, and, finding it useless because it was dictated rapidly by Wei to an incompetent clerk, interviewed Wei. Wei gave a very convincing explanation of the disease (luckily there was no one present to compare it with the actual symptoms) and the coroner concurred with the verdict.

The poor fellow whose cart had been stolen received compensation; the constables and clerk didn't want word of their cowardice to spread.

And funniest of all, perhaps, was that the last earthly remains of the man Gui Hua had called a pig were, indeed, those of a pig.

第三回

In the great hall of the outlaw stronghold, Teng continued his story. He had already explained how Zhao Yu had begun a secret society called the Haven of the Sleeping Dragon, and how he had managed to help a threatened leatherworker, and arrange the escape from jail of a fellow by the name of Tong. His hosts seemed interested to learn more about the founding members of the society.

Of course, the business of springing Tong from jail didn't end there. In fact, there were several big surprises awaiting us as a result of it. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The Master got summoned to see the magistrate shortly after the Tong incident. The invitation specified that he should bring his retinue. I went along, and so did Gui Hua and Wei, but Pan was still keeping in the shadows at this point.

It was obvious that the magistrate was very suspicious about the whole Tong business. He had discovered that Wei was operating from Zhao Yu's silk shop, and the coincidence that Zhao Yu should have been off on a boat trip with the coroner when the services of an able physician were required did not escape him.

On the other hand, his own jailer had declared that he had found Tong dead in his cell.

Matters were complicated by the arrival from the

capital of the Metropolitan Court's judgment on the Tong case. Inexplicably, they had revoked the death sentence and replaced it with permanent exile with hard labour to Shaman Isle, the worst hellhole in the Empire. I don't know why myself, but I suppose either Tong was powerful enough to influence the Metropolitan Court, or someone there had examined the records carefully and noticed that Tong hadn't actually killed anyone, but had stepped in and run the town moderately well for a while after the previous magistrate was killed. If the latter, then he owed Zhao Yu another favour, for when the Censor tried to pin the murder of the magistrate on Tong, Zhao Yu steadfastly refused to go along with the lie.

So anyway, the present magistrate tried to have quite a chummy chat with the Master. Magistrate Fan, as I mentioned, always seemed to be smiling, but had a sadistic streak a *li* wide. Zhao Yu was polite with him, but carefully maintained a distance. The magistrate seemed to have been talking to somebody about the expedition to the cave in which we beat Black Hou. We decided afterwards that Major Tan had been feeding him a carefully edited version of events. There was no mention of Moonface (who is now a monk at the Pearl Gorge Monastery), and Fan seemed to have the idea that Black Hou had escaped.

Indeed, the more I thought about what the magistrate said, the more it seemed to me that he was actually pleased to have Black Hou on the loose. At the time I couldn't for the life of me make out why this should be the case.

Anyway, we made it out of the *yamen* unscarred by one of the magistrate's rumoured torture devices, and headed for the restaurant to cheer ourselves up. Talking to the magistrate was like cleaning fish: it left a nasty, slimy feeling that you wanted to get rid of as soon as you could.

A little while later we got a clue as to why the magistrate should be happy to have Black Hou on the loose. Chin Yong, the sheriff, had come to Zhao Yu's public lecture, and he turned up at Zhao's shop one day with a couple of constables in tow. He left the constables outside, and came in for a chat. We thought something was up, and we were right, but not in the way we thought. Chin Yong was there to talk to the Master about the magistrate. He started quite indirect, but the Master managed to draw him out.

'He's threatening me with a beating if I don't catch Black Hou before winter,' Chin Yong explained glumly. 'But how can I investigate properly when he keeps sending me out on patrols, and dumping paperwork on me when I get back?'

I don't have a lot of sympathy for sheriffs in general. After all, they are officials, and what's worse, the lowest level of officials. Chin Yong seemed a likeable enough fellow, though, perhaps because he'd had to

伏龍傳

*Xu Mang:
the trouble he
caused us!*



許
芒

do so little work in the days when Black Hou and his lieutenants kept the district free of crime.

After he left, Zhao Yu seemed quite upset that the poor fellow was heading for a beating. He couldn't tell him that Black Hou was trapped in a gourd, sitting on a shelf in the Pearl Gorge Monastery. I mean, for one thing he wouldn't have been believed. So poor old Chin Yong had to leave the Master's shop without any promise of assistance.

Anyway, the next thing that happened was that White-Eye Wei, who was getting quite well known in town, got invited to treat some fellow from the Capital by the name of Xu. I wouldn't mention this, of course, except that it led to a whole lot of trouble, that's still going on.

Xu was travelling with his two brothers. He seemed to have the manners and bearing of a scholar, but he claimed he was a merchant. They were staying in the best hotel in the town. Wei went along there and had a look at him. Turned out he had the 'flu, chafing from riding, and a few other problems. In short, he was a bit of a physical wreck.

Wei's suspicions were aroused by a certain sense of furtiveness in the behaviour of Xu and his two brothers. 'And another thing,' he told Zhao Yu, 'he doesn't resemble his brothers at all. I don't trust those two in the least.'

Zhao Yu put Pan on the case. By now Pan was well installed at the Seven Lotuses, getting all kinds of information from the maids. Now he had to traipse all the way up to the North Gate to find out about Xu. His contacts at the Seven Lotuses proved useful, though. Another two 'merchants' from the Capital had turned up there, and were making enquiries about someone that sounded very like Xu. Although he'd been careful to shade his face, Wei had noticed when

examining him that Xu had a strange purple mottled birthmark, a little like a spider's web, on the right side of his face. Who were all these suspicious types from the capital?

Well, the master decided to take matters into his own hands a bit. He arranged a meeting with Xu, which ended with him inviting the fellow to stay at his silk shop. The place was getting a bit crowded by now. I was still staying at the Seven Lotuses with the Master, but in addition to Deng, the Master's retainer, there was Wei, and now this fellow Xu.

It was clear that Xu was afraid of someone or something, and it didn't take the wit of a sage to work out that the two fellows staying at the Seven Lotuses were involved. Pan, thanks to his contacts, had managed to search the baggage of these two, and had found some distinctly unmerchantlike things: sharp, pointy things. Soon after that the two left the Seven Lotuses, and Pan's network of maids revealed that they were moving to the same hotel as Xu had been staying at.

Did I mention that Tao Wu Shu showed up around this time? It was obvious that he had been in hiding while the Imperial Guards were in control, though he, of course, denied this, asserting that he wasn't afraid of anything in any of the three worlds. His disguise as a Buddhist monk rather gave that game away, though... For a hiding place, he had settled with characteristic cunning on the very pagoda in which that bastard Black Hou had hidden, and worked his sorcery on me to turn me against the Master. It wasn't a place I cared to visit a second time, so it was lucky that I had no intention of paying Tao Wu Shu any friendly social visits.

Gui Hua had different ideas. Superstitious by nature, she thought that Tao's alleged mystic powers might be of use. I also noticed that she'd had a long conversation with Xu Mang, the contents of which she didn't see fit to divulge to the Master.

Later on she explained what happened. She went to the Pagoda late one evening to talk to Tao Wu Shu. Foolishly, she went unguarded, Ou the Sixth having been sent off on some errand to the Capital. Gui Hua's plan was that Tao should talk to the spirits, and persuade them to lure the two 'merchants' to Zhao Yu's silk shop. I don't believe such a thing can be done, myself, but Tao Wu Shu was confident as ever, and started a little ritual, which must have impressed Gui Hua, as she described in some detail the mumblings, gestures, shakings of fists and spitting of wine.

Having delivered his little performance, Tao Wu Shu assured Gui Hua that the merchants would be at the silk shop before the night was out.

Having set the wheels in motion, Gui Hua headed off for the Seven Lotuses to fetch the Master and me, while Tao Wu Shu went straight to the shop in case the

伏龍傳

‘merchants’ turned up early.

Now let me tell you right now that I don’t have a very high opinion of Tao Wu Shu. To this day, Gui Hua believes that the Taoist’s spell was tremendously effective—if anything, *too* effective. Me, I’ve thought it through a bit and I still don’t believe it. For all the Taoist babble, I don’t think that the spirits can make people go somewhere they weren’t already planning on going.

Anyway, in Zhao Yu’s silk shop, White-Eye Wei was woken by a sound. Drowsy as he was, he couldn’t quite be sure what it was, but it seemed to be coming from the roof over his head. Suspicions aroused, he got up quietly and peeped out of the door. It was dark out, and the dim luminance of the moon was obscured by clouds. Tip-toeing out into the courtyard, he heard a sound from one of the buildings at the far end of the courtyard. Wei froze. It had been the beginnings of a scream, swiftly stifled.

This was too much for the Miao. Burglars were bad enough, but murderers! Straight to the gate he ran. The night watch had to be summoned as quickly as possible.

Out in the darkened street, Wei looked both ways, hoping to catch sight of a lantern. Instead, from the right, up ran a weird-looking Buddhist monk. On arriving at the shop he stopped, and glared at Wei.

‘You Wei?’ he snapped. Wei nodded, and started to explain, but the monk ignored him. ‘They’re here already then...’

He strode through the gate and into the courtyard. Wei considered following him, thought better of it, and decided to head for the Seven Lotuses, so that he could rouse Zhao Yu.

He’d only gone two blocks when he met up with a breathless Gui Hua.

‘Zhao Yu and Teng Ai are on their way,’ said the singing girl.

‘But... how did you know something was up?’ asked Wei. Gui Hua, however, was hurrying back in the direction of the shop.

When Gui Hua reached the shop, all was still. She paused at the gate, and peered into the courtyard. A break in the clouds allowed a little moonlight to illuminate the scene. She couldn’t see the whole courtyard, and was reluctant to step in alone before Zhao and me arrived. Looking back down the street, she saw Wei, and further away two indistinct figures. Hoping that they were us, she stepped into the courtyard. She had gone a few paces when she became aware of a dark shape behind the water barrel at the far end of the courtyard. The water barrel lay between the building which housed the retainers and the low outhouse in which Xu and Wei had been staying. The shape moved slightly.

Another pace, and she became aware of another dark shape, lying over to her left. This dark shape,



Tao Wu Shu to the rescue!

however, lay still. Beside it was what seemed in the indistinct light to be a large necklace, or... prayer beads.

Gui Hua was now standing in the middle of the courtyard. It was still quiet. How long would it take me and Zhao Yu to arrive? She swirled her skirts and peered in an exaggerated manner towards the rain barrel. Whoever had dealt with Tao Wu Shu might do the same to her, especially if she seemed to present a threat. What should she do?

Her decision was made for her. The dark shape behind the water barrel straightened up and came towards her. It was a nondescript figure in dark clothing. She could see its eyes glinting in the night. Better still, she could see that it was empty handed. The fellow walked up to her with an ingenuous smile on his face, while Gui Hua opened her fan and idly fanned herself.

I’ve not spent much time dallying with the flowers myself, but I still wouldn’t underestimate a singing girl. I’ve heard tales of some of the entertainers in the capital, who put weights in their sleeves, and swing ’em about like flails. After what Gui Hua did that night, I’ll stay careful.

It must have been about this time that Zhao Yu and I arrived. We came in through the shop rather than via the courtyard. The Master took a lantern out into the courtyard, sending me through to the kitchen. I got my sword out, and no sooner was I through the door than there was a *zing!* and a throwing spike was sticking out of my left arm. It was a good thing I’ve got quick reactions and had twisted out of the way or else it would have been sticking out of somewhere

伏龍傳



Lethal weapon...

more important.

Well, as you can imagine, this made me pretty angry, so I was after the bastard as quick as I could. I wasn't going to give him any more chance to stick one of his little darts in me.

When I caught up with him he'd pulled out a long knife. I suppose he put up a reasonable fight, but I had a sword and it was only a matter of time before he went down. I resisted the temptation to finish him off, knowing that it would only lead to trouble, and anyway, we wanted to know who he was.

When I made it out into the courtyard there were two inert forms. One of them was Tao Wu Shu. He'd obviously presented a good target to one of the two bastards, and had taken a spike in his upper lip. The other was the partner of the one I'd downed. There was a puddle of blood around him, slick and black in the moonlight, which seemed to come from a wound in his neck. I didn't give him much chance of survival, but White-Eye turned up and sorted him out all right.

'Check out the other buildings, Teng!' said the Master, so there was a further delay in the satisfaction of my curiosity. I didn't find any more intruders, but I did find Deng, Zhao's retainer. He'd been garrotted. It looked to me like he had put up a bit of a struggle. I later learned that it must have been his strangled scream that alerted Wei. Poor sod. Didn't have any children either.

To my surprise I found Xu safe and sound and, even more incredible, fast asleep. I didn't wake him up.

He was eventually woken up when the constables arrived. Luckily the sheriff was in town, so we didn't have to put up with some half-educated ape stomping about the place, helping himself to whatever he fancied. The sheriff put two men on the gate and one on the side door and said he'd conduct a full investigation in the morning. The two intruders, having been kept alive by Wei, were carried off to the jail.

I bet you're wondering what happened to the one in the courtyard, aren't you? As the fellow stepped up to Gui Hua, he whipped a garrotte out of his sleeve and went for her.

What a fool! A garrotte's no weapon to take

someone from the front unless you're *very* confident of your skill. And what the fellow hadn't realised was that although he thought he was getting the jump on her, she knew she was getting the jump on him. Even before he was making his move, she lashed out with the fan in a roundhouse swing that caught him right on the neck. Have you ever noticed that paper's pretty sharp? Gui Hua's fan sliced him open. I saw the blood. If it hadn't been for Wei the fellow would have been kneeling in front of Yan Luo, Horse-head and Ox-head before the sun rose.

So that was that. Now all we had to do was survive the court case.



第四回

'Ho! A woman with a bit of fighting spirit!' said the chief. 'Sounds like our Mrs Qin. She'd chop you up and serve you in dumplings as soon as look at you.' Teng remembered seeing a woman when he entered the stronghold. Now that smile she had flashed him took on an entirely new significance. He licked his lips nervously. He may be sitting in the guest seat, and they may be calling him Brother, but he still wasn't certain of his safety. These outlaws were notoriously mercurial. His mind raced forward to the rest of the story he had to tell them. Would it please them? What if it didn't? Should he embroider parts of it a little? Put in a bit more blood and guts, and maybe someone being chopped up, to please the chief?

Oh yes, that Gui Hua was a vicious one. She'd learned martial arts in the capital, presumably from a lover, though I never asked her myself, and she could do Phoenix Spreads Its Wings, Golden Chicken Enters The Cage, Swallow Flies Over The Water and several others. She may be named after a flower, but she fights like a devil. When we'd taken on Black Hou and his gang of acolytes, before the Haven was founded, Gui Hua killed four of them with her bare hands, and I only killed seven myself!

伏龍傳

So those two assassins who broke into the Master's silk shop didn't have a chance. They may have managed to take down Tao Wu Shu with a lucky shot, but Gui Hua and I made short work of them.

We were grateful to White-Eye Wei for keeping them alive. If we'd killed them there might have been some unpleasantness. We might even have got ourselves exiled. As it was we were probably lucky to avoid imprisonment, and we were barred from leaving the town during the course of the legal proceedings.

Before the preliminary hearing, we got together in Xu's room in order to decide what to do. It was a dark night, and none of us expected Tao Wu Shu to stagger in the way he did. He'd been unconscious, despite Wei's ministrations. In the middle of our conference he suddenly burst into the room, wild eyes staring this way and that. Xu nearly jumped out of his skin.

'What's all this, then?' bellowed the Taoist, like some vengeful ghost. Then his face paled, and he tumbled forward.

Our conference continued with Tao Wu Shu lying unconscious on the floor. None of us wanted to move him. The Master had confirmed (from Pan) that the two assassins were the same pair who had been enquiring after Xu Mang and his brothers.

The magistrate was up to some sort of funny business, I could tell. I noticed it from the way he arranged the preliminary hearing. When he had a little conversation with me before the hearing he seemed to be telling me what I should say. Actually it happened to coincide with what we had decided to say, so I went along with it. The thing was we didn't want to make the magistrate suspicious of Xu by suggesting that he was the target, so we decided to claim that the two were burglars who got violent when cornered. After all, murder in the course of burglary is still going to get your head cut off, so there was no need for us to go for a worse crime.

The preliminary hearing seemed to go off without a hitch. The magistrate even gave me and Gui Hua rewards for capturing the criminals. I've heard that magistrates are entitled to do this, but I'd never seen it before, so it made me even more suspicious. The assassins were brought forward and quickly confessed, and the magistrate arranged for us all to go to the prefectural court in Danzhou. Well, all of us except Tao Wu Shu and Xu himself, neither of whom were really fit enough to travel. Both of them would be kept in the prison at Jinfang.

This was a problem for us. We weren't very keen on having Xu Mang in prison, but as we got on with the coroner we managed to arrange for him to visit and look after the patient, and we hoped that this would be enough to keep Xu Mang out of serious trouble until we returned.

The case in Danzhou was almost as straightforward as in Jinfang, although at one point it was clear that

Prefect Shen started to doubt the report he was being given. Nevertheless, he wasn't able to obtain a better explanation, so the two murderers were sentenced to death for robbery by force, and we were ordered to return to Jinfang, and to remain there until the sentence was confirmed by the metropolitan court.

So we ended up back in Jinfang, which was particularly trying for the Master, as he'd been planning a trip for a while. We were concerned about Xu Mang, but after a couple of days a message came from the magistrate enquiring why we hadn't come to pick him up. So Xu Mang was returned to the Master's, and Tao Wu Shu also got out of jail. I would have expected him to be relieved, but he didn't seem so. Worse still, no sooner was he out of jail than he shacked up with a very strange looking lad. The two of them stayed in the ill-starred pagoda, since people seemed to be avoiding it. Tao celebrated his release by sending his new apprentice off to buy meat from the market. I can't think of anyone worse at impersonating a Buddhist monk than he, but perhaps that was how he got away with it. There was a story of one occasion when he wandered into the market in full Buddhist regalia and ordered the largest cut of meat a stall had, and plenty of wine. A party ensued. I suppose in a way it was clever. If you were looking for a fake Buddhist monk you would never imagine that anyone would be so stupid as to make themselves that obvious!

Personally I think the slight lisp he acquired from his injury affected him deeply. In any case he left Jinfang soon after.

'Taoist with a lisp and a young apprentice, you say?' said one of the bandit leaders. 'That rings a bell. If you'll have a drink and rest your voice, let me tell you a tale.'

It was after I'd killed the tiger on Jinyang ridge, and then got involved with that scumbag Ximen Qing, who had my brother murdered by his good-for-nothing wife. You know I killed both of them and handed myself in, as I still thought there was justice in the land.

I ended up in Mengzhou jail and, to cut a long story there, got involved with more treacherous bastards, by the name of Zhang, who I had to kill. After ridding the world of their poison, I was not in a very good mood, and wasn't even sure of where to go, but the Vegetable Gardener Zhang Qing, and his wife the Night Ogre, recommended I come here. They were the ones who gave me this pilgrims' garb, and my two moon-steel swords.

Anyway, I chose a lonely road to come by, and headed off. It was winter, and night drew in quickly. I was going up a hill when I heard laughter from a clump of trees up ahead. *Strange*, I thought, *who would be laughing on a night like this?*

伏龍傳

So I went a bit closer and I found a small family shrine. Through a window I could see some fellow having his way with a woman. After all I'd been through it riled me to see someone who was supposed to be holy carrying on like that.

So I went up to the gate and banged on it. After a while a cheeky young lad popped out of a side door. 'Who are you, making such a nuisance of yourself in the middle of the night?' he said.

That was too much for me. I shouted: 'This bloody acolyte's going to get what's coming to him' and hewed his head off.

There was a roar from inside, and out leaped a wild-eyed fellow with two sabres. It didn't take very long for me to finish him off, and soon his head was lying in the dirt next to his acolyte's.

I fetched the woman out and she told me the story. She was the daughter of Squire Zhang who lived at the foot of the hill. She said the priest had turned up one evening and spent the night with her family, saying that he was an expert in magic, the spirits and *feng shui*. Although he claimed to be called Wang, she heard his acolyte address him as 'Master Tao'. Her parents had made the mistake of asking him to go out and check the siting of their family shrine, up on the hill. He seemed to take a liking to it, and invited himself to stay. Within a few months both the girl's parents were dead, and she had been kidnapped and forced to live with him at the shrine. The hill was called Centipede Hill, and Wang apparently liked that, and started to call himself Taoist Wang, The Flying Centipede. But I sorted him out all right. Gave his money to the woman to set herself up with a new life, and burned the shrine to the ground.

So I suppose his bad joss caught up with him in the end.

Teng Ai finished his slurp of kumiss and wiped his mouth. He nodded at the bandit who had just spoken.

I never knew that was how he ended up. You were probably lucky his temper was bad, as his magic was much more dangerous than his swordplay.

Anyway, before he left for good he did do one thing for us. He sneaked out of town with his acolyte and went to Danzhou. There he managed to get into the jail somehow and talk to the two assassins. When he came back he told Zhao Yu that they had been sent by someone in the Capital called Ban, though he was probably not the source of the problem, but just the employer of the assassins. Then he left Jinfang.

Now all we had to do was wait for the death sentence to be confirmed, and everything would be fine. Or so we thought.

You'll remember I told you the incident about how Tong the Carpet Merchant was sprung from jail, mainly through the efforts of White-Eye Wei? Well Tong's a



Wu Song sorts out the Flying Centipede

man who pays his debts, and his agent turned up in Jinfang to do two things. The first was to say it was all right for Rui the Eagle to stay in Jinfang and work for the Master, given how bad his injury was. I think there was also some bad feeling between Rui and Scarface, or something. The second thing was a little present for White-Eye.

I suppose, being a Miao, White-Eye wasn't much accustomed to town life, money, and so on. But he was certainly well pleased by the amount of gold he got from Tong. He already had some silver from some rich patients he'd managed to look after, so now he got it into his head to set up shop. It took a while to find a suitable shop, as Wei insisted on having it in the east of the town, close at hand for the wealthier type of patient. Then there was the paperwork, but the Master managed to clear that with a sympathetic clerk he had been cultivating at the *yamen*.

So Wei opened his new clinic, and decided to throw a big party. He invited all the richest and most influential people in the town, and also laid on some food in the courtyard for the less financially significant members of the community. There was a bit of a fuss because a lot of beggars turned up, including one who we later discovered was Old Rag Doll, the Beggar Chief of Jinfang. Worse than the beggars, though, was the arrival of the magistrate. He turned up after the banquet had been going for a while. I was on the gate, and I tell you, when his little procession came into view my first thought was that we were all for the chopping block. He was in a palanquin, and had a runner going on ahead with the banner 'Magistrate of Jinfang', and he was treating it like a major ceremonial.

Into White-Eye's banquet he marched, that grin never leaving his face, and launched straight away into a speech.

伏龍傳

Magistrate
Fan



范公

'I am here as Father and Mother Official of this Town,' he said, 'to offer congratulations to Wei Xi Shanyu on the establishment of his new medical practice, which will be of considerable benefit to our citizens. And...'

He paused, significantly.

'To formally invest the aforementioned Wei Xi Shanyu as the Assistant Coroner of this Town?'

You could have knocked us down with a mulberry leaf. Wei didn't know what to make of it, but in the circumstances he couldn't really refuse. He was going on about it for the next week or so. Half the time he'd be cursing the magistrate as a sadistic, meddling paper-pusher, and the other half he'd be on about how much this would help his practice and enhance his burgeoning reputation.

'You know why the magistrate did it?' said the Master, who had plenty of experience of the twisted minds of bureaucrats. 'He wants a convenient scapegoat if there are any problems arising from the death of Tong. Your name was on the death certificate, so if you are Assistant Coroner it's not quite so embarrassing for him if the death is questioned in any way.'

I don't think Wei appreciated this comment very much, but luckily there was no comeback on Tong's death. At least, not in the way the Magistrate seemed to be expecting.

第五回

Teng Ai has been telling his hosts, the bandits of Double Dragon Mountain, about how his master, the merchant Zhao Yu, formed the Haven of the Sleeping Dragon. This secret society was created to help those whom the justice dispensed by the Imperial bureaucracy had failed. The story seems to be striking a chord with the bandit leaders.

At around this time, rumours started spreading in Jinfang that Zhao Yu's silk shop was cursed, and that

his silk would bring bad luck to all who bought it. Given the business with the assassins, it wasn't surprising that people would believe such things. Pan, who was good at digging in the dirt, declared that the rumours were actually being spread by Pang Shan the Fish Merchant. He set to work on spreading rumours of his own.

What *did* surprise us was when the final ruling on the assassins case came through. The Master had been impatient for this. We all traipsed up the prefectural *yamen* again to hear the verdict. We could see that the Prefect himself was surprised, but all the same he had to announce that although guilty of attempted burglary, the killers were deemed to have acted in self-defence, and therefore their sentences were commuted to permanent exile, without amnesty, to Shamen Isle, the hellhole off the north coast of East Jingdong. This was very fishy indeed. When the same thing happened with Tong, I could understand it. He hadn't killed anyone, after all. But these two were plainly murderers.

The Master clearly now viewed this as a matter of face. Two assassins had murdered one of his retainers, and now looked as if they were going to get away with it. For the honour of the Haven of the Sleeping Dragon, we couldn't afford to let them get away with it.

The Master visited the butcher Xiao. We'd heard that Xiao was a good man, and had a good reputation. We thought perhaps he might know some gallants from the rivers and lakes who we could employ. Sure enough, he introduced us to a fellow called Zheng Tianshou. He was originally a silversmith from Suzhou, which suited us well, for both the Master and Pan were Huainan men themselves. This Zheng was called White-Faced Gentleman, and he used a staff or a spear.

Zheng then introduced us to another fellow he'd met. This one, called Sun Xi, was a southerner, who'd been a ship's captain or something. Quite a rough fellow, if truth be told, but he seemed to be honest, and he was polite towards the Master.

We found another fellow ourselves. He was a travelling knife merchant by the name of Wu Dong. He was from the Northern Capital, and liked to be well-dressed—even more so than the White-Faced Gentleman, who had struck me at first as a bit of a dandy. Wu Dong came to the silk shop to see if there was anything good on offer, and seemed to be surprised by the quality. It was too good an opportunity to miss. The Master did a deal with him, offering some fine silk if Wu Dong would accompany a caravan up to the Northern Capital.

That was how the caravan took shape. The Master's idea was to establish a more direct route up to the Northern capital for raw silk woven in the local area. Up to now, the silk had mostly been sent to the

伏龍傳

Eastern or Southern Capital, sticking to the easy roads. Master Zhao felt that there was a better market to be had in the Northern Capital, and that a direct route north from Jinfang would get the silk there early, to catch the best prices for a new season.

First, though, he had to test out the route. There was no main road leading up north, and there was also the Yellow River to be crossed. Both of these presented dangers. Rumour had it that a large group of bandits had congregated in the marshes around Mount Liang, and were preying on travellers in that area. Also crossing the Yellow River was risky.

The Master had solutions to both these problems. The Yellow River wasn't so much of a worry, as Rui the Eagle told him which boatmen worked for Tong, and the secret words to guarantee safe passage across the river. To see what a problem the bandits were, Zhao proposed to send a party of pretty tough fighters.

The caravan would be led by Pan, and included the White-Faced Gentleman, Sun Xi, who later came to be known as Tiger Shark, and Pretty Boy Wu Dong. They also travelled with a swordsmith by the name of Song Fu Fei, who was on his way to the Northern Capital to visit relatives, and who was not only

陸
滕



*Lu Teng.
Er, good with
animals, I seem
to remember*

travelling with a consignment of swords, but two apprentices and a hunting bird.

The caravan wasn't just about trade, though. We knew that the route from Danzhou to Shamen Isle was likely to be due north, up to the Yellow River. The secret mission of the caravan, known only to Pan at first, was to intercept the two assassins being escorted to prison, and see that justice was done.

So the departure date of the caravan was based on information obtained by Pan from the prefecture about when the two prisoners would be sent off for

Shamen Isle. We watched it set off, with its porters, donkeys and apprentices, and saw the members starting to squabble with each other as soon as they'd left the gates. The caravan did eventually reach the Northern Capital, after a number of adventures along the way, including a visit to Wang Lun's outlaws at Liangshan Po, but that's another story which I can't really tell as I wasn't there.

After Pan and co left, things quietened down a bit. It was getting colder by this time, and we wondered whether they'd be back from Daming before the Great Snow, or whether they'd winter there. A new fellow turned up and came to work for the Master, recommended by Tong the Carpet Merchant of all people. This fellow was called Lu Teng, and he was the only person I ever met who was less noticeable than Pan. Nice enough chap, though.

The bad rumours about Zhao Yu's business were really annoying him, especially after Pan told us that he thought they were being spread by the Fish Merchant. He decided he had to do something to regain a bit of face in the town. The public lecture at which he had started the Haven had worked pretty well, but he couldn't do that again. For one thing, he felt Scholar Zhang was a little too boring. But a theatrical display—that was a different matter altogether.

So a grandiose scheme was born: to entertain the town and infuse them with a little bit of the spirit of justice that we get from the heroes of bygone days.

The problem was who would do the performance. For several weeks we worked on preparations, eagerly listening for any tales of travelling performers.

Then we heard of a troupe who had arrived in the south of Jinfang, and I went down with Gui Hua to see them. Their leader was a bullnecked individual with a ready smile, happy to do anything.

'Watch this!' he said to Gui Hua after she'd told him that her boss might be interested in hiring them. He clapped his hands, and his group formed a circle. Another clap, and they ran together. For a moment it looked like they would all collide, but then with a dodge, and a leap, and a leg up, they piled up on each other's shoulders until a single, slightly precarious, human tower stood there.

'Very impressive,' said Gui Hua, indulgently. 'But we want a performance of episodes from the *Three Kingdoms*. Do you think you can manage it?'

'Liu Bei, Cao Cao—all that stuff? No problem,' replied Mr Bull Neck. 'We can do anything! We've performed in every quarter of the Empire. You just tell us what you want, and we'll do it.'

Gui Hua asked them to come round to the silk shop the next day, and perform for Master Zhao a few selected episodes from the *Three Kingdoms*.

伏龍傳

Next day, Master Zhao sat on a stool in the courtyard while the performers got ready. He seemed to be looking forward to the entertainment.

Mr Bull Neck stepped forward and announced in a stentorian voice:

‘Gentlemen and Ladies! Your attention please. My humble performers will now amaze and enthrall you with scenes from the classic stories of the Three Kingdoms!’

He clapped his hands, and his troupe separated into two groups. Another clap of the hands and they sprang into action. Jumping, leaping and cartwheeling, the acrobats climbed on each others’ shoulders, forming themselves into two swaying inverted pyramids. The Master stared at them dumbfounded.

‘What’s this then?’

Mr Bull Neck beamed at him. ‘Here, Sir, we see the Peach Garden in which the three heroes Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei swore brotherhood.’

He clapped his hands once more, and the acrobats jumped to the ground, forming themselves into two groups again. One group then formed a line, kneeling down, while the others started leaping back and forward, over their backs.

‘Now before our eyes the battle of the Red Wall is refought!’ said Bull Neck.

By this time the Master was drumming his fingers impatiently. When he saw Mr Bull Neck about to clap his hands once more, he raised his hand.

‘Thank you for your performance,’ he announced, getting to his feet. ‘Here is a small token of my appreciation.’ Reaching into his sleeve he took out a couple of small ingots and passed them to Mr Bull Neck before making his way indoors.

The bemused acrobatic troupe sorted themselves out and left, but not before Mr Bull Neck had enquired of Gui Hua whether their services would be required again.

‘I’m afraid not,’ she replied.

Finally Lu Teng put us in touch with a proper troupe of actors, and preparations got under way. The Master went himself to check the performance the actors put on in some open land on the south bank of the river, and declared them fit for the job. He arranged with them two performances: one which would be put on in the market place, and open to the public, and another which would be held in the courtyard of his silk shop, and to which he would invite the notables of the district. The first would be held on the last day of the Ninth Moon, while the second would be on the first day of the Tenth Moon.

The Master consulted with the Director of the troupe, to arrange the various plays and scenes they would perform at each show. Even though there wasn’t much time, we managed to spread the word and get the town excited at the prospect of this

*The actor
playing Guan
Yu, in his
makeup*



entertainment.

The public performance went very well. The Master had had a conversation with Old Rag Doll, Jinfang’s bandit chief, and so there was no embarrassment caused by an army of beggars, as had happened at the opening of White-Eye Wei’s Pharmacy. Beggars there were, but many of them were an enthusiastic part of the audience.

The Master made a short speech before the performance started, just to make sure that the moral lessons about to be imparted wouldn’t be lost on those of a somewhat doughbrained nature in the audience.

There was quite a lot of variety in the evening’s entertainment, with a tragic love story, some comedy and even a bit of fighting. But most of it followed the Master’s request in demonstrating the upright and chivalrous nature of Liu Bei. Scholar Zhang’s talk had contained a lot about the Master Strategist Zhuge Liang, so this time the Master thought it best to concentrate on that most loyal and heroic of warriors: Cloud-long Guan Yu.

You’ll remember the story of how Guan Yu agreed to be captured by Cao Cao in order to save his Lord’s women, and how Cao attempted to persuade him to join him, finally keeping his promise and releasing him to return to Liu Bei. The actors performed the scene where Cao Cao, defeated in battle, flees the field, and runs into Guan Yu. Who would imagine that anyone could be so noble as to honour a favour received, and allow Cao Cao to pass unmolested? Truly a paragon among paladins!

The next night, a select group of bigwigs assembled in the courtyard of the Master’s shop, in which an impromptu stage had been erected. Unfortunately the fortune which had smiled on us the previous evening seemed to have flown. A steady, driving drizzle made of the courtyard a sorry field in which to let the

伏龍傳

imagination roam. Still, we had to make the best of things. Food had been laid on for the usual suspects, including Magistrate Fan, Magnate Lu, and Major Tan, and the poor weather made it all the more important that their wine cups be kept well filled, and that the supply of tasty tidbits be constant.

On this occasion the Master refrained from making a speech, feeling that to do so in front of the Magistrate would be *lèse majesté*. Fan therefore seized the opportunity himself, blathering about the importance of respecting the classics, and how the morals of a town depended on the upright behaviour of its distinguished citizens.

The Master was very worried about how the show would go, and it seemed that the actors were too. The inclement weather must have dampened their spirits, for somehow this night's performance was lacking the gusto and verve of the previous night's. Still, everything ended without mishap and the honoured guests, starting with the Magistrate, climbed into their palanquins to be carried home. All that was left for us was clear up the wreckage. I was annoyed to note that Lu Teng seemed to have skipped off before the work. In fact, I never saw the lad again.

Next morning we discovered that Major Tan had been brutally murdered on the way home, while crossing the bridge across the river. A lone assassin had engaged the Major and his party, incapacitating but not killing Tan's retainers, and then slaying the Major himself. With the sudden shock of the attack, and what with the rain, the retainers said they did not get a clear look at their assailant.

Magistrate Fan presided over the session of the tribunal with a markedly less avuncular air than was his wont. He was clearly embarrassed by the fact that Tan had been murdered on his way back from a function which he, too, had attended. Another source of embarrassment soon emerged. On the body had been found a letter, obviously planted by the assassin. A very strange letter it was too. In form, it resembled a will—the will of Tong the Carpet Merchant. It announced, somewhat improbably, that Tong had discovered that Major Tan was responsible for the death of his younger brother 15 years earlier, during the border clash with Western Xia in which the Major acquired both his reputation and his fortune. However, since Tan had disposed of the body in enemy territory, there was no evidence and therefore no case to answer. This sorely grieved Tong, said the will, and he was forced to let the matter rest, but when his 50th birthday passed with him still without a son, he determined to make a will in which he arranged that his fortune be spent on obtaining posthumous revenge upon the murderer of his younger brother. He wished it known, his will finished, that all responsibility for the murder lay with Tong, and he

would happily stand trial for his crime in the Underworld.

This was a most uncomfortable outcome. Fan, I am sure, did not like to be reminded of one of his prisoners who had died in custody. Of course, his fury would have known no bounds if he had known that Tong wasn't dead at all.

The Master was deeply suspicious of the note, and inclined to believe it was a fake. But a fake by whom? Major Tan was hardly a popular man, but we didn't know of anyone who seemed to hate him enough to kill him.

Luckily the subsequent weeks, as autumn turned to winter, were less eventful, and by-the-by the murder of Major Tan was forgotten.

Those, then, were the early days of the Haven of the Sleeping Dragons. Things entered a new stage when the slimy fish merchant Pang Shan was made Sheriff. It got pretty hairy for a while afterwards. But that's a different story...

'One for another evening, perhaps?' the bandit leader said, standing up and stretching his joints until they cracked. 'Still, Brother Teng, you've spoken well. I can see that your Merchant Zhao is a man of chivalry, a true friend to us virtuous brothers of the greenwood. You can go back and tell him that we'd be glad to let his caravans pass by Double Dragon Mountain unmolested. One man like him, or the Small Whirlwind Chai Jin, or Squire Kong, is worth an army to the true friends of justice. Talking of which, did you hear that Chao Gai the Heavenly King has fled to Liangshan Po and been invested as leader? Apparently Lin Chong put an end to that rascal Wang Lun once and for all and...'

Continuing his gossip of recent events among the rivers and lakes fraternity, Sagacious Lu, along with Tiger Killer Wu Song and Blue-face Yang Zhi, led Teng Ai from the hall.

The End