

TALES OF MOONLIGHT

BY PAUL MASON

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Where should I start my tale? With the chance by which Merchant Zhao saved the life of Li Jin Lao in a wayside inn, earning his gratitude, and the hatred of the moon-faced would-be assassin? Or perhaps with the arrival at the same inn of the Taoist named Tao? A story is like a tree, sending down roots into the past, and reaching up with green-bedecked branches to the overarching future. The roots you cannot see, but the trunk... ah, the trunk it is that supports everything. And the trunk of this story is the town of Jinfang.

In those days the magistrate of Jinfang, Xiong Kun Ling, was a very successful man. Not personally popular—outside his earshot he was known as Twisted Grass—but successful. He had a reputation for being merciless and abrupt, but he got results. In his two years at Jinfang he had prosecuted the perpetrator of every crime that had been committed within his town's boundaries. As a result, criminals no longer dared to disturb the peace of the Empire within Magistrate Xiong's jurisdiction.

What was this man's secret? I can assure you that it was not through the efforts of the Sheriff. Chin Yong, who had assumed the post five years ago, had shown no greater ability at catching evil-doers in the early days than did any other dogshead official of West Jingdong circuit. After Xiong's arrival in the second year of the Great View period, accompanied by a short, pale fellow by the name of Black Hou, things changed... as if by magic.

Merchant Zhao was an old man. Old and bitter. He sometimes felt that he had spent the better part of his 67 years hammering against that great, faceless wall labelled officialdom until his fists and arms were raw and bloody from the effort. It was no use pointing out to him that he had a successful business spanning three circuits. He would simply scowl and tell you that it could have been all 24 circuits of the Empire were it not for the deliberate efforts made by one petty functionary after another to hamper his every move. He would regale you with the story of the time he tried to set up shop in Ganxing, a

conveniently placed town on the Grand Canal just a couple of hundred *li* south of the Yellow River. Of how he had been forced to return every day of ten to the magistrate's *yamen* to obtain a new set of seals on a new set of documents. Of how, once he had finally submitted all the papers, bought the property, wined and dined the local dignitaries and paid substantial inducements to all and sundry, a smug-faced clerk had turned up and told him that the Registrar had noticed that he wasn't born in Ganxing, and that he therefore was not permitted to start trading there until he had been resident for the statutory 2 years, and entered on the households register.

Perhaps what made Zhao Yu most bitter was that he had finally given up. He certainly didn't admit it to anyone else, and we cannot know whether he admitted it to himself, but he had, at last, started to behave as if the officials had won. He had taken an interest in his nephew Zhou Li, but his efforts towards the 15 year old's education seemed to push more for an official or military career than that of the lifeblood of the Empire—trade.

Zhao arrived in Jinfang in strange company. His retainers Cao and Deng, and his bodyguard Teng Ai, they weren't strange. But the wild-eyed Taoist with two sabres ineptly concealed on his back—he was certainly strange. And the young, serious-faced scholar was no less out-of-place than the pretty singing girl with the overly delicate manners, and her anxious manageress. Zhao wasn't really happy travelling with this crowd. But he had saved the scholar's life and become embroiled, along with the others, in the scholar's mission.

It turned out that in the impossibly law-abiding town of Jinfang a crime *had* been committed. A murder. A foul and shocking murder at that. The daughter of a rich, retired soldier, Tan by name, had been spirited out of the city and killed with such savagery that each person you talked to had a new, grisly detail to add to the tapestry of gore.

True to his reputation, Magistrate Xiong had the culprit up before him within a few days. Cai Shou, a farmer from Jun County, in the north of the district, was brought to book and, at a packed session, confessed. He described details of the crime



Zhao Yu, the merchant

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that could be known only, announced the Magistrate, to the investigating authorities and the perpetrator of the act. A provisional death sentence was applied, following the referral of the case to the Metropolitan Court in the Eastern Capital.

That was how Li Jin Lao got involved. As a Ward Chief of Jun County he was shocked to hear from Cai's family that they knew for a fact that he hadn't committed the murder, as he was helping to put out a small fire in an outhouse that night. Weighing up the chances of Magistrate Xiong taking action based on this intelligence, Scholar Li opted instead for a dash to the Capital, where, with the help of a family friend who held the post of 5th Rank Mandarin, he might be able to bring these facts to the attention of the great and good of the land and, if, necessary, the August Emperor himself.

This he had done, though on the way a night visitor robbed him of the life of one of his retainers, and very nearly his own. He had been saved by the timely arrival of Zhao, a light sleeper at the best of times, who banged on his door in order to get him to shut up a bit and let old men sleep, only for the door to swing open on the moonlit sight of a moon-faced man throttling Li with a chain. Moonface, whom they had met earlier that evening in the common room, escaped by the window. A travelling Buddhist monk from the monastery on Songshan was able to keep Li's *po* spirits within his body.

And so Scholar Li, and his benefactors, made it to the Capital, and set the bureaucratic wheels in motion. That should have been an end of the matter. Something had piqued Zhao's curiosity, though. It could have been the possibility of an official even worse than those who had plagued him in the past, or it could have been the prospect of an exclusive deal on the silk produced in Li's County. So he ended up in Jinfang in strange company.

The singing girl, Gui Hua, had been at the inn when Scholar Li was attacked. If anything, she had shown a greater determination to bring Moonface to justice than anyone, and had drawn portraits of the man which had earned her a little money from the authorities to which the murder was reported.

The Taoist had come along later. His first act had been to insult the monk who had revived Li. The monk, without any fuss or bravado, had invited him to step outside. Those still tending Li heard a swish, a sharp crack,

followed by a dull thud, and the monk rejoined them a few seconds later. They didn't dare ask, but when Gui Hua came in several minutes later, she asked if they knew anything about the unconscious Taoist lying slap bang in the middle of the courtyard with a sabre in each hand.

The monk was gone soon after, but Tao Wu Shu, as the blunt-spoken Taoist proved to be called, hung around. Gui Hua developed a healthy aversion to him, especially after an incident in which the Taoist interrupted one of her songs by shouting out to her to wriggle like a snake, and she promptly obliged. She wasn't entirely sure what had happened there, but she resolved to get her hands on some protective talismans as soon as she could find a reputable seller.

Over the course of the next few days, Zhao increasingly came to curse the day he had passed through the Golden Idol gate into the town. It wasn't just the realisation that something very nasty was going on at the *yamen*. Everything seemed to conspire to make his life a misery. There were increasing reports of strange sightings. A pig's head on the butcher's block was said to have spoken to the terrified apprentice. 'Something' at the bottom of a well had turned a young man's hair grey. And the final straw was the face that bulged out of the wall of Zhao's own room at the hotel, fixing him with watery eyes and demanding 'When? When?'

As if that wasn't enough, there was the problem of the Taoist. He seemed to have no idea of how to behave in public. He went through bizarre mood swings, occasionally seizing on complete strangers and demanding whether they knew of the location of a Taoist icon. When someone mentioned the name of the gate by which he had entered the city, he rushed out there, and started climbing the gate to try to obtain the golden idol, to the amusement of the gate guards. When he fell to the ground, and

picked himself up, dusty and bruised, the gate guard helpfully pointed out that the golden idol hadn't been in the gate for centuries. Tao stared malevolently at the guard for a full 30 seconds before stalking wordlessly off.

The only fortuitous event was the discovery that one of the wealthiest inhabitants of Jinfang, Magnate Lu, was a good friend of Lu Ban, the Mandarin who had helped Zhao's family, until his support for Wang Anshi's reformers had led to his early retirement. Lu's son was being tutored by Scholar Zhang, a



Gui Hua's portrait of Moonface

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former Academician, and this gave Zhao the idea that he might engage Zhang to tutor also his nephew.

Oh, and there was also that small matter of the potential silk supply to be gained from the silk weavers of Jun County. Apart from that, though, it was bad and getting worse.

Tao Wu Shu, ever erratic, finally allowed his quest for Taoist icons to take him to the magistrate. Twisted Grass was well known as a collector of curiosities, especially religious ones. He welcomed Tao with uncharacteristic conviviality, even taking the extraordinary step of inviting the Taoist to stay in one of the guest rooms of his official residence. It proved a fatal mistake.

Exactly what happened the next morning isn't clear, for a number of reasons connected with later events and court cases. A friend of the wife of one of the constables who was present had the following tale to tell. By this account Magistrate Xiong and Tao Wu Shu took breakfast together, and seemed in good spirits, continuing a discussion of relics which they had apparently been having the night before. As they munched on their oil cakes, however, the conversation took a different turn, to the philosophies underlying the relics. The magistrate quoted a little from Confucius, and this seemed to have a disconcerting effect on the Taoist. His good-natured banter gave way to a repudiation of Confucius so bitter that the Magistrate too lost his temper. He had barely started on a criticism of the irresponsibility of the Taoist masters, however, when Tao leapt to his feet and, grabbing hold of Xiong's neck, rammed his chopsticks up the magistrate's nostrils.

I cannot imagine that there have been many more weighty pauses than the one during which Xiong Kun Ling's lifeless body slid off his chair and to the floor. At the end of it the surprised constables mastered themselves and dived at the Taoist, finally managing to restrain the raving priest and drag him to a cell.

This story, for all its outré elements, has the ring of truth. For some reason this dastardly murder was later blamed on another, and the constable's official story accommodated that change.

There is one detail missing from this account that I must confess I would like to know. That is, whether Tao Wu Shu met Black Hou while he was within the *yamen*. If he did, I wonder what passed between them?

I am getting ahead of myself, as usual. Always scrabbling for the higher branches when I should be working my way up steadily.

While Tao Wu Shu had been paying his fateful visit to the magistrate, Merchant Zhao and Gui Hua had been enjoying the hospitality of Li Jin Lao in a village half a day's ride to the north of the town. As well as viewing the rather appealing silk of the area, and observing the preparations for the imminent Festival of the Hungry Ghosts, they had spoken to Cai Shou's family. It was evident to any who cared to look that this was not a family of fiends. When they said that Shou had been with them on the night of the murder, you could be sure that he had been. Zhao didn't even need to see the evidence of the burnt outhouse to be convinced of Cai Shou's innocence. So why had he confessed? By all accounts there was no sign of torture on him when he admitted the murder in open court.

Zhao resolved to find out. He had realised that his hopes of returning home for the Hungry Ghosts Festival were pointless. He would be stuck in Jinfang for at least another couple of days. He had to visit Cai Shou.

It took the better part of the next day to make the arrangements. He would be bringing food in from Cai's family, and would have a chance to see and speak to the young man.

Gui Hua managed to talk herself along. She was curious to see the accused farmer. Whether from a fierce devotion to see an injustice righted, or from the *frisson* that comes from meeting the very evil, we cannot say for sure. In the company of Zhao Yu and his three retainers, she found herself in the dingy gaol, peering into the cells to try to find Cai Shou. Imagine her surprise when a familiar insolent, if a little bleary, glare greeted her. Tao Wu Shu was exhausted, but as rude as ever. Gui Hua quickly moved on.

It all started to go wrong when the jailer disappeared. A few moments earlier he had been in the guard room, but now he refused to respond. Zhao sent Deng along to fetch him, and soon there was no sign of Deng, too.

Zhao didn't realise that he had arrived in the yamen just as Black Hou put into motion his plan, a crime to dwarf Tao Wu Shu's little act of random violence. He reacted with blank amazement, then, when shambling towards him down the corridor came the desiccated remains of a man, leering at him from sunken eye sockets, and stretching out claw-like fingers for his throat...



Tao Wu Shu

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How impoverished my manners are. Here I have been regaling you with these improbable stories of goings on in the town of Jinfang, and I have not even had the decency to introduce myself. I will rectify my fault forthwith.

The worthless peasant who so impertinently presents himself to you is a disgrace to the family name of Gai. His longsuffering ancestors no doubt daily rue the day that one of this line with the personal name of Long was inflicted upon a virtuous and overly-indulgent mother.

By profession, as such a wise and perceptive (and no doubt also generous) audience as your good selves will have noted, this Gai Long suffers from the delusion that he can entertain the public at large by the telling of stories. The threadbare nature of his clothing, and the entirely underplump concavity of his belly are perhaps the most eloquent testimony to his fitness for this calling, but he nevertheless persists.

Why? I hear you (with admirable timing) enquire. What is there in these stories that will benefit us?

I fear, not being one of those charlatans in the marketplace who sells good luck charms (from which category I exclude, of course, the estimable Hua Ying, whose talismans are most efficacious), I am loath to make sweeping claims regarding any benefit that may or may not accrue from any stories I present you with. Such claims, like the waste materials disposed of upstream by the household living downstream, have a habit of returning to one's profound regret and discomfort.

I will say, however, that the stories I relate have the signal distinction of being true. While many of the marketplace tales you have no doubt heard, such as those of that inveterate swindler and monkey-tormenter Wang, are deliberately constructed in order to make some moral point, or perhaps hammer home some slender witticism, my own make no such claims. Rather I make it my business to relate simply and accurately (where possible) the true details of events. If there is something to be learned from them, some moral point to be understood, or even some morsel of humour to whet the palate of your emotions, then I leave it to your marvellous discernment to extract it.

When I last spoke, I rather impolitely left just as Zhao Yu had come face-to-face with one of the denizens of the Otherworld: the shambling remains of some wretched individual, gone who knows how many years, and now brought back to walk, of all places, the corridors of the Magistrate's *yamen*. In hastening on to this moment of tension there were

several other points which I had forgotten to tell you, even though they have a bearing on later events.

When Zhao Yu and his little party entered the *yamen* that day, they did so in the company of a number of others. One group was that of a carpet merchant by the name of Tong, whose carpets must have been of surpassing quality judging by the number of burly clerks, runners and attendants surrounding his person. Also in the queue to see the Magistrate or his flunkys was a medicine pedlar whom Zhao had met and chatted to earlier. Like many of his profession, this pedlar attracted custom with a display of martial prowess, twirling his staff and leaping about with shouts and yells. Quite what this had to do with patent medicines was anybody's guess, but it kept the crowds amused.

Zhao had bought some of the man's medicine, for he had been feeling under the weather for a while, and the ghostly apparition that had appeared on the wall of his hotel room hadn't helped matters. When questioned about where the medicine came from, the pedlar was typically tight-lipped. It was hard to tell whether the medicine did any good or not, but for various reasons that will soon become evident, I doubt it.

These people shouldn't have been let into the *yamen*, of course. The Magistrate was dead, slain, as I have previously claimed, in a fit of pique by Tao Wu Shu. For some reason, however, the news of the Magistrate's death had been suppressed, and those who had business at the *yamen* were nevertheless allowed in. A sheepish-looking Assistant Magistrate handled the legal cases, while the clerks and other administrative personnel went about their business more or less as usual. Quite improper, of course, but there was a reason for it all, and that reason was what Zhao Yu came face to face with in that narrow jail corridor.



Zhao Yu's opponent
in the *yamen*

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What do you do when some monstrosity from the grey plains reaches out a clammy hand for you? No doubt this thought loomed large in Zhao Yu's mind. Sad to say, however, a satisfyingly exact answer did not occur to him. Instead he attempted to ward the thing off. As its hand grasped his arm, a cold jolt ran through his body, and he began to feel that he was being pulled, as if by some improbably icy quicksand.

The grasp was quickly broken, however.

'Back where you came from!' said Tao Wu Shu from behind the bars of his cell. His voice rang with authority, and Gui Hua, the singing girl, noticed with distaste the same glint in his eyes she had last seen when she had felt a strange compulsion to 'wriggle like a snake'. But this order was not directed at her. The apparition, with surprising celerity, turned and retreated down the corridor.

Tao Wu Shu sagged against the bars of his cell. He really did look exhausted. Gui Hua turned to Zhao Yu; though his arm still bore the numbing sting of that creature's foetid touch, she knew that he had been spared a worse fate. In order to free Tao she would have to follow the creature's retreat, to the guardroom. As that was the only way out, she braved it, tiptoeing like a child stealing loquats. To her heartfelt relief, the room was empty, and the keys to the cells were in place on the wall. There was even a sword conveniently abandoned, which she picked up to give to Zhao.

Tao Wu Shu was quickly released. He didn't seem able to explain what was going on, and didn't look in any condition to repeat his performance with the creature earlier. The only other occupant of the cells, Cai Shou the farmer, was also found and freed. Seeing the strapping young farm boy, Zhao Yu handed him the sword. Eyeing it dubiously, Cai politely refused, but Zhao Yu insisted. If nothing else it was a gesture of faith that this boy was not a crazed murderer. It also kept the sword out of Tao Wu Shu's hands...

Out in the main courtyard of the *yamen* a fearful scene presented itself before them. The Otherworldly creature which had reached out for Zhao Yu was not alone. Several of them were shambling around, chasing clerks and other unfortunates. One poor scribe was too slow to escape, and he squealed pitifully as his shape became indistinct, like ripples on a pool, before finally vanishing altogether. On the far side of the courtyard a battle raged as the employees of Tong the carpet merchant fought against a surrounding mob of dead things. Tong's men seemed to have got weapons from somewhere, and were putting up a good fight. The medicine pedlar was fighting with them, his leaps and shouts no longer mere entertainment. A long, slender blade in his hands

streaked back and forth, hacking limbs off the advancing corpses, and they seemed to have the good sense to avoid him.

Zhao Yu hadn't reached 67 years of age without a highly developed sense for self-preservation.

'Get the gate open!' he hissed. Before the dead things could block their path, he and his group rushed for the gate. As the creatures turned, distracted, the medicine pedlar too seized his chance and leapt for the gate himself.

The gate of a *yamen* is a heavy wooden thing, but I'll wager the mat upon which I sit that none has ever been opened as rapidly as that one. Unfortunately, the hope that had fuelled such exertions was quickly dashed. Beyond the gate, rather than the Jinfang square, was an altogether too dusty and grey vista, above which a black sky brooded improbably low. Details were hard to make out, as what light there was seemed to hang heavy and reluctant in the very air, but the shapes of shambling figures could be made out around the edges of a pit, from which desperate moans could be heard.

Zhao Yu recoiled in disgust, but a faint voice from the pit reached his ears.

'Zhao Yu! Zhao Yu!' It was Deng, his retainer. As he made his decision, Gui Hua and the medicine pedlar too passed through the gate, into the grey Otherworld. Behind them strolled Tao Wu Shu, seemingly oblivious to both to the extremity of the situation and the revenants heading towards him.

As they approached the pit they started to realise that they had misjudged the distance. In fact, they seemed to have misjudged the direction, too, for they found themselves heading off into nowhere. More surprising was that the erratic Taoist had somehow contrived to pass them. As they redirected themselves at the pit, they caught sight of another structure looming behind it. A few paces seemed to

The
medicine
pedlar



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bring it clearly into focus: a pyramid of skulls, atop which an unkempt figure sat, apparently holding a bottle gourd. If there was a source for this madness, this was it.

The hunch seemed proved as Gui Hua and the medicine pedlar changed direction and headed for the pyramid. The dead things around the pit, which had not seemed to care too much about their presence, now sprung to life and shambled towards them. As they approached Gui Hua, they seemed repelled, as if by a stench worse than their own. Could those talismans bought in the market place to protect against Tao Wu Shu be useful against ghosts too? It seemed so. The medicine pedlar, meanwhile, was hacking and slashing like a mad thing, slicing rotting limbs left and right. The figure on the pyramid sat oblivious, and as they neared the base, they could hear his chant, an unnerving, unwavering drone.

Then a figure appeared beside Gui Hua. It was Tao Wu Shu, a spark of renewed energy in his eyes

'He has a relic!' he cried, pointing at the bottle gourd. Gui Hua wasn't sure that Tao's interest stemmed from a desire to save the day, but it was useful nevertheless.

'Get the gourd!' she shouted to the medicine pedlar, and whether he heard her or not, he set his sights on the top of the pyramid, and fought on.

Meanwhile, back at the pit, Zhao Yu was faced with a half dozen dead creatures. Although three of them seemed to be staring after the medicine pedlar, and turned to shamble after them, the situation still looked grim. Zhao Yu started to dance. Well, he later referred to it as a dance, but I am doubtful as to whether a more expert judge of such matters (Gui Hua for example) would have recognised it as such. In any case, he lurched first one way and then the next. He had been hoping for assistance from Cai Zhou, but the farm boy seemed to have been trapped back in the *yamen* courtyard. So he continued to dance. As he did so, the strangest thing happened. The more erratic his lurching became, the more difficult it was for the dead creatures to approach. Indeed, he suddenly found himself on the far side of the pit, and was able to help his retainers out of the pit as the dead things shambled round to him. His dance then started again, as his retainers started to help free the other captives. It was not an easy job, as the experience of being sucked bodily into the Otherworld had drained much of their strength. But with the dead creatures hopelessly confused by the old man's gyrations, they made good progress.

On top of the pyramid, meanwhile, Black Hou, personal assistant to the late Magistrate of Jinfang, continued his chant. According to one story I have heard, his eyeballs turned glassy black and revolved



Black Hou

in their sockets. I know this to be a ridiculous elaboration by someone who wasn't present, however, for how could you see eyeballs revolving if they were black? No, it was Hou's heart that was black, not his eyes.

Such fancies are, in any case, unnecessary. For me it suffices that Black Hou was sitting on the top of a pyramid of skulls, having conjured a rift between this world and the next, and that having deployed his evil minions to round up a number of ... sacrifices? ... he was in the process of something even more despicable.

The medicine pedlar, who I'm sure you realise to be something of a hero, had run into a problem. As he fought off the last revenant, and prepared to climb the pyramid, the skulls upon which he stood jumped up and fastened their brownish teeth upon him.

Black Hou's chant shifted up a pitch, and Gui Hua joined in the frantic attempts to dislodge the skulls from the pedlar's anatomy. Luckily her talismans seemed to be of use here, as by touching them to the skulls she could make them fall away inert. But doing so consumed the talismans, and she only had a few left. How many skulls were there in a pyramid? How could it be climbed?

Tao Wu Shu did not apparently ponder this question. He ambled up as if on a country walk, and picked up one of the fallen skulls. Staring into its empty sockets, a twisted smile crossed his face. Then, turning, he launched it into the air.

A tumbling arc of bone it flew, seeming to speed as it went, until it tumbled out of the gathering gloom onto the bottle gourd cradled in Black Hou's lap.

The chant stopped abruptly. The gourd wobbled and rolled, and suddenly there was no Black Hou on top of the pyramid. There was just a gourd.

Next instant, with its binding force gone, the pyramid collapsed upon itself, skulls bouncing in all

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directions. Dodging the falling skulls, the medicine pedlar rushed back to the pit and helped Zhao Yu shepherd the former sacrifices back to the gate. Tao Wu Shu had other ideas, however. He dived among the skulls and started rummaging around. Gui Hua moved to the far end and imitated him.

By the time the sacrifices were back through the gate, it was clear that the rift was closing. The medicine pedlar stood by a closing gap and yelled at Gui Hua and the Taoist, but to no avail. Shrugging his shoulders he stepped back into the *yamen* courtyard.

It was Gui Hua who found the gourd. Hefting it with a yell, she started to run towards the now rapidly closing portal, with Tao Wu Shu in hot pursuit. It was three feet across when she jumped through, and shrinking faster than ever. Tao Wu Shu dived through a two-foot hole, which then sealed itself.

The view through the gates was now the square in front of the *yamen*. Across the square, An Pan the bun seller was wheeling his stall slowly toward the gate.

Tao Wu Shu looked up from where he had landed in a heap.

'Here's your relic,' said Gui Hua, looking down at him, and passing him the gourd. Tao clutched it to his chest and sunk back to the ground.

The only corpses remaining in the *yamen* courtyard were now reassuringly immobile. Tong the carpet merchant surveyed the tattered remnants of his bodyguard, and was relieved to see that Rui the Eagle, his best fighter, had made it back through the gate. Apart from him, the only people left in the courtyard were the old man, his retainers, the farmer lad clutching a sword, the singing girl, and a heap on the floor that was apparently the Taoist. It was time to take control.

He ordered his men to secure the area, and check the buildings for more survivors. The Assistant Magistrate promptly emerged, though he wouldn't reveal where he had been hiding. Not an assertive man at the best of times, the current situation brought out the worst in him and he quickly caved in beneath Tong's browbeating.

There was one obstacle, however. Gui Hua had taken a dislike to the way Tong was ordering people around, as if he were something more than just a carpet merchant.

'Tong? Sounds like a pig's name, if you ask me,' she said sniffily.

Tong didn't have time to waste. He could only lose face by trading insults with a singing girl. He turned to Rui.

'Kill her.'

第三回

When last I sat before you on this, my old, ragged, Storyteller's mat, I told you the surprising story of how a magistrate's assistant by the name of Black Hou hatched a devilish scheme to advance himself in his mastery of the occult arts. Trapping the occupants of the *yamen* by placing a portal to the Otherworld at its gate, he commanded the hungry ghosts who are let out of Hell every year for the Hungry Ghosts festival. They were to drag all the mortals in the *yamen* back with them into the Otherworld.

Black Hou's scheme, as I understand it, was inspired by the bottle gourd that had come into his possession. The gourd, a Taoist relic, was capable of sucking human lives into it. It would enable one skilled in the Taoist arts to harness the *qi* of those imprisoned within it. By all accounts, the gourd's original purpose was somewhat more benevolent. The use which Black Hou had found for it was to draw into it at one go all the captured occupants of the *yamen*, and with the power thus released to imbue himself with the ability to transcend the barriers of existence. He would have become able to flit easily between the realms of Heaven, Earth and Mankind, going wherever he pleased, doing whatever he cared to do.

Unfortunately for him, among those trapped within the *yamen* that day were Zhao Yu and his travelling companions. Black Hou no doubt felt safe, seated atop his pyramid of skulls, chanting the spell which maintained control of the hungry ghosts and kept the portal open. No one could ascend the pyramid, for the skulls would assault anyone who tried. Arrows, too, posed little threat, for the strange distortions of the Otherworld would surely lead astray any missile of the Mortal World.

Ignorant of these matters, however, Zhao Yu set about releasing the captives. Meanwhile Tao Wu Shu, a rival Taoist, taking one of the skulls that had been enervated by Gui Hua's talismans, lobbed it at Black Hou. Luck was with him. A thing of that Realm, it flew straight, and not only knocked the gourd from Black Hou's hands, but turned the opening of the gourd upon its owner. Black Hou was sucked within, and that was that.

Back in the *yamen* courtyard, however, a new problem arose. An alleged carpet merchant by the name of Tong was busy brow-beating the *yamen* staff. His task was hardly a difficult one. The Assistant Magistrate was weak-willed. The constables were either dead or exhausted from being dragged into the Otherworld by ghosts. And Tong was supported by a number of tough-looking 'clerks' and 'porters', all armed, in addition to the obviously highly talented Rui, a medicine pedlar who had

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assisted in the attack on Black Hou.

Gui Hua rather unwisely attempted to argue against Tong's assumption of power. Tong's response was swift. Turning to the medicine pedlar, he ordered him to kill Gui Hua.



Tong the 'Carpet Merchant'

Rui's face fell. Hefting his sword, he advanced on Gui Hua, mouthing the words: 'I'm sorry.'

His blow never landed. A black shape fell out of nowhere, right on top of him. Gui Hua didn't pause to see what had happened, but turned and ran.

Zhao Yu had seen it all, though. Tao Wu Shu had pointed the gourd in the direction of Rui, and muttered an incantation. The black shape that emerged, flew through the air and knocked over the medicine pedlar was none other than Black Hou. Picking himself up, he scanned the courtyard, alighting on Tao Wu Shu, apparently nonplussed by his failure to harness the power of the gourd in quite the manner intended.

'I'll have my gourd back, *thank you!*' rasped Black Hou.

Tao started to say something, but broke off as he realised his opponent was charging at him, chanting as he came. 'Hah!' he spat out, reaching for one of the twin sabres on his back.

He was still grasping for the non-existent sabre when Black Hou crashed into him. The two tumbled over in the

courtyard dust, scrabbling after the gourd.

While all this was going on, Gui Hua had rejoined Zhao Yu and his retainer, and they edged their way to the *yamen* gate. Just outside stood An Pan the bun seller, peering through the gate at the strange spectacle within.

'Here's a silver ingot for all your buns!' cried Zhao. An Pan quickly obliged.

Passing a handful of buns to his retainer, and to Gui Hua, Zhao Yu started to hurl a rain of buns upon Black Hou. But it was too late. As they scrabbled in the dust, Black Hou's hand briefly brushed the gourd and the next instant it wasn't there.

Pausing only to laugh in the face of Tao Wu Shu, Black Hou leapt to his feet and, dodging the hail of buns, made for the gate. Rather than suffer the same fate as Tao Wu Shu, Zhao Yu's little band of bun-throwers hurriedly pulled back on either side of the gate. To their surprise, Black Hou didn't stop to attack them but carried on across the square, slowing down after a while, when a glance to his rear confirmed that he wasn't being pursued.

Then they noticed another figure lurking in the mouth of an alley on the opposite side of the square. A figure with a round, moon-shaped face, especially clear to Gui Hua, who had drawn twenty copies of a portrait for use on wanted posters. At last, they had gained confirmation that the murderous attack on the scholar, which had led to them banding together in the first place, was related to all this supernatural shenanigans.

Moonface bowed slightly to Black Hou, as a student to his master, and the two disappeared down the alley.



Bunfight at the Jinfang yamen

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Back in the yamen courtyard, Rui the Eagle was in a foul mood. It was bad enough that his boss had ordered him to kill the singing girl. But to be shown up in front of everybody by being jumped by the villain (though how, he wasn't quite sure)—that was too much to bear. The villain in question had made his escape, but the other Taoist, who seemed to have something to do with it, he was still there.

Rui the Eagle was not a man to be slighted. As he had demonstrated in a sparring match with Zhao Yu's bodyguard Teng Ai, he had the sort of mastery of the sword that enables the total control of a lesser skilled warrior. The legendary swordsman Zhang Zhong had trained him, and it showed. Tao Wu Shu didn't have a chance.

It just wasn't Rui's day. He closed on Tao Wu Shu, the latter standing muttering furiously to himself. At the last moment, it seemed, the Taoist became aware of Rui's intent. Staring him full in the eyes, with a voice of malevolent fury made sound he said: 'Kill yourself!'

It isn't easy to kill yourself with a longsword, but Rui made a good stab at it. A look of blank horror gripped his face as he reversed his blade and ran it into his own belly. Tao turned, and stalked off.

Even Tong, who had seen some things in his time, watched the Taoist walk off with stark fear. It didn't even occur to him to tell his men to give chase.

Thus ended the day's business in the *yamen*. Zhao Yu had by now resolved to get out of town as quickly as possible; Gui Hua had resolved to rid the town of Black Hou; Tong the Carpet Merchant had resolved to be very careful in dealing with Taoists; and Tao Wu Shu? What had he resolved? I daren't imagine.



After foiling Black Hou's plot to sacrifice the inhabitants of the Jinfang *yamen*, Merchant Zhao just wanted to get out of the accursed town, and make his way back to his home in Huainan. Gui Hua persuaded him against it. Tong the carpet merchant had seized control of the town, and Black Hou was on the loose.

'What can I do?' Zhao asked her. 'I'm just an old man.' But Gui Hua insisted. He had, after all, saved a lot of people from Black Hou. What was more, there was the matter of Cai Shou. It now seemed clearer than ever that the murder which had led to them all getting involved in the affairs of this town was something to do with Black Hou.

Truly it is said: save a man's life, and he is your responsibility as long as you live. Zhao Yu had saved the life of Scholar Li, and now the obligations incurred by this act seemed to be settling around his neck like the cangue on a felon.

With obvious reluctance, Zhao returned to the residence of Magnate Lu, and obtained an introduction to Major Tan. It was Tan's daughter who had been murdered, and the murder pinned on the innocent farmer Cai Shou. If Cai Shou was truly to be exonerated, then the real murderer had to be found. With the town in disarray, and Tong in control of the *yamen*, the matter could hardly be left to the authorities.

Major Tan's mansion stood along the south wall of town, close by the South Gate, not far from Magnate Lu's residence. The Major had clearly made quite a success of his military career. The wall around his mansion compound was tall and well kept. The sign above his gate gleamed brightly. When Zhao, Gui Hua, Teng Ai and a still pale and exhausted Tao Wu Shu presented themselves at the gate, they were met by a major domo with manners—and supercilious expression—more appropriate to the capital than to a small district in West Jingdong. Tan must have had a successful career indeed to have retired in such style.

When the major domo returned from conveying Magnate Lu's introduction to his master, he had undergone a transformation. Zhao and his little party were now ushered within with all due ceremony and attentiveness. While by no means as opulent as Magnate Lu's residence, the interior of Major Tan's mansion matched its impressive exterior. The major domo ushered them into a large chamber, gorgeously appointed with elaborately carved wooden furniture. The walls were decorated with battle scenes, presumably from the border clashes with the forces of Western Xia in which Major Tan must have seen service.

The old soldier himself showed every sign of revelling in his retirement. He stood to welcome his guests before seating himself at the head of the room in the manner of a provincial governor. His punctilious major domo seated the guests paying careful attention to their apparent prestige, and wrinkled his brows with distaste when Tao Wu Shu shuffled his chair forward a little.

Major Tan's undyed mourning clothes were by no means the poorest garments Zhao Yu had ever seen. Nevertheless, as Zhao Yu opened the conversation by expressing his condolences on Major Tan's loss, the old soldier showed every sign of distress. The major domo had returned with tea for all, and in amongst the formalities, both Zhao and Gui Hua were able to complement Tan on the quality of his tea with heartfelt honesty.

When Zhao Yu tried to explain to him about Black Hou, however, the Major banged the table in anger.

'I was at the trial! It was that damn peasant—the scoundrel had been chasing my daughter, and,

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knowing that I wouldn't tolerate it further, did away with her! The wretched eater of dirt confessed in open court!

'We believe that the confession may have been obtained by sorcery,' said Zhao.

'Sorcery? Mumbo-jumbo! You don't expect me, an educated man, to believe all that nonsense? As Confucius himself said: "Worship the gods, but keep them at a distance." The same is...'

'Confucius was a...' Tao Wu Shu started to growl, but Zhao Yu had anticipated the danger and interjected:

'We can offer you proof!'

The proof in question turned out to be Tao Wu Shu. According to Zhao Yu, Tao would perform the same magic on Major Tan's major domo.

Tao stood up and started gabbling mystic phrases. His brows knit tightly, and he clasped his hands together, index fingers outstretched, pointing wildly around the room. Major Tan smirked indulgently.

Tao's fingers shook and then, with a jerk, were still. 'I can't draw the power through from the Otherworld,' he said, quietly.

Major Tan harrumphed.

'I don't seem to have enough vital energy,' said the deflated Taoist. 'Someone will have to volunteer to give me theirs.'

His gaze swept around the room, alighting on Gui Hua. She looked at him as if he were mad, but Zhao Yu hissed 'Do as he says, otherwise we don't have a chance of persuading Tan.'

Tao Wu Shu placed his palm on Gui Hua's forehead. 'You must allow me to take your vital energy...' he said.

'How do I do th...?' said Gui Hua, stopping in mid-exclamation. It seemed she had felt something. For a brief moment a particularly unpleasant smile flickered across Tao Wu Shu's features, then disappeared as his weariness reasserted itself.

When he withdrew his hand from Gui Hua's forehead, he went back to his muttering and gesturing. This time there seemed to be a more confident timbre to his voice. The major domo maintained the same supercilious expression as Tao stepped up, fixed him in the eyes and said:

'Confess that you are a murderer!'

There was a frozen pause.

'Why ever would I do such a thing?' said the major domo.

To give him credit, Zhao Yu made a brave attempt to overcome his embarrassment in front of Major Tan. Apologising for his own credulity, he quickly changed the subject, advising the Major of how Tong had taken

over the *yamen*. This caught Tan's attention.

'I always said that Assistant Magistrate was a weakling, and I've no doubt the Sheriff was off gallivanting around some village or other, as usual. Well, in such circumstances it is up to us upright citizens to do something. I will investigate the situation myself, and if necessary send a man to alert the Prefect in Danzhou.'

Thanking Tan for his hospitality, Zhao made his excuses. As the major domo conducted the little group out of the hall and in to the courtyard, Gui Hua was surprised to see a face regarding her curiously from behind a pillar. Seeing that Major Tan had already retired, she detached herself from the group and sidled closer. She had heard that Major Tan had one other child, but people seemed to be reticent to speak about the matter.

As she approached, the face grinned at her with utter innocence, and yet Gui Hua quickly realised that it belonged to no child, but a youth. As the major domo noticed her and called out she was already turning and hurrying back to the gate.

There was little conversation as the group returned to their place of lodging, the Seven Lotus Hotel. Tao Wu Shu, wan of face, and slouching along as if dragging a lead tortoise, was understandably reluctant to discuss his failure, and Zhao Yu was clearly bottling up some emotion. Gui Hua, however, was thoughtful.

The next day the singing girl paid a visit alone to Major Tan. Despite the problems of protocol, she



Gui Hua pays another visit to Major Tan

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managed to manoeuvre her way past the major domo, perhaps with her expansive knowledge of fine tea.

Major Tan was, understandably, a little thrown off balance by the visit. Today he was not wearing mourning. Gui Hua made no mention of the supernatural, instead inquiring gently about the Major's children. In the course of this conversation she learned the secret of Tan's 'simple' son, and through flattery, even managed to snatch a few words with the lad. Unfortunately, as Tan had warned her, his son was touched in the head. Gui Hua asked him about the night of the murder, a night on which Miss Tan had somehow been spirited from the mansion and out of the city. Although he seemed to understand the question, Gui Hua could make no sense of the replies. Then he fixed her with a quizzical look, wiggled his fingers, and repeated: 'Scaly scaly!'

The words turned over in her mind as she returned once more to the Seven Lotuses.

'Scaly scaly'

第四回

Here I am once more, Gai Long, the itinerant storyteller, to recount for you a tale woven from the threads of human lives. If truth be told, it is a strange fabric to be sure, made up as it is here of silk, here of hemp, and still here of some coarse string that perhaps once saw life upon the back of a recalcitrant donkey.

Such, however, as all the great Sages of the past will tell, is the nature of life. For did not Lao Zi himself write:

'When the whole uncarved block is divided,
The pieces become instruments and in need of
their names.

When there are already many names,
It is also necessary to know their limitations.'

Gui Hua had persuaded Zhao Yu that they ought to do all they could to find and capture Black Hou. Her main argument was fear. As long as Black Hou was on the loose, and knew who they were, they couldn't be sure he wouldn't come after them. As had been demonstrated by the murderous attack on the Scholar Li Jin Lao, Black Hou was quite prepared to send his minions out on evil business if he felt his plot was being threatened. The only way to feel safe from Black Hou's revenge was to see justice done as soon as possible.

Zhao Yu, rather half-heartedly, suggested that justice was the responsibility of the authorities. It was obvious even as he said it that he knew Gui Hua's response: that the authorities were hardly likely to be able to do very much when Jinfang's

yamen had been taken over by Tong the Carpet Merchant. Furthermore, as the discussion with Major Tan had demonstrated, persuading people of the danger of Black Hou's sorcery presented problems. While most people visited fortune-tellers, and bought talismans to ward off evil, the idea that the likes of Black Hou (and Tao Wu Shu, on a good day) wielded such power over the spirits was just too frightening for them to believe.

Already, rumours of the strange goings-on at the *yamen* were spreading through the town, but it was noticeable that for once the rumours *understated* the case. Certainly, there was talk of ghosts (hardly surprising, since tales of spectral visitations had been common in recent weeks), but no mention was made of pyramids of skulls. Those who had been dragged through to the Otherworld by the ghosts retained only a hazy, dreamlike memory of their ordeal, which they seemed eager to forget. Only Zhao, Gui Hua, Tao Wu Shu and Rui the Eagle were direct witnesses of Black Hou's crimes.

After his embarrassing failure at Major Tan's, Tao Wu Shu had disappeared. Rui the Eagle, as far as anyone knew, was either dead or severely injured. That left Zhao and Gui Hua.

Already impressed with the efficacy of the talismans sold by Zhang in the market place, Gui Hua returned there to consult him again. This time she wanted more than mere talismans. She wanted someone who could match Black Hou, spell for spell. Someone who was a bit more reliable than Tao Wu Shu.

Who had taught Zhang how to write the talismans by which he now made his living? A hermit by the name of Ran the Deep River. Zhang hadn't seen his master in years, but a little persuasion from Gui Hua elicited a letter of introduction and rough directions to the hermit's haunt.

The next problem was how to visit him. Gui Hua still wanted to enlist Major Tan's assistance, and hit upon a means of enlisting his co-operation. In the course of the foul murder, Miss Tan's heart had been removed from her body and had never been found. Gui Hua pointed out to Major Tan that with her body incomplete in such a fundamental way, Miss Tan would be suffering great discomfort in the world beyond. A noted sage like Hermit Ran, she argued, might be able to ascertain the location of the heart.

Manipulated in this way, Tan rapidly seized on the idea of an excursion to the hermit's cave, and went so far as to invite two of his friends, Qiu and Wang, along for the trip. The little party assembled on horseback just outside the north gate, and was able to make good progress to the village indicated by the talisman seller.

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Actually, the main reason why Gui Hua had been so keen to enlist the services of Major Tan was that she was afraid of what Black Hou might do. As she explained to Zhao, once they left the protective walls of the town they would be vulnerable to ambush from the sorcerer and Moonface. With Tao Wu Shu gone there would only be Zhao's bodyguard Teng Ai to offer protection. With all due respect to Teng Ai, he wasn't by any means as good a swordsman as the medicine pedlar, and look what had happened to *him*.

Gui Hua's nervousness became worse as they entered the village which supposedly lay closest to the hermit's cave. The villagers looked to her to be a suspicious and shifty lot, eyeing the riders from the town with poorly-disguised animosity. Zhao managed to quietly obtain directions to the hermit's hut, and the intelligence that Ran was occasionally to be seen, though he never had dealings with the villagers.

Following the indicated route up into the hills, the party soon found it sensible to dismount. Teng Ai was left to look after the horses as the others picked their way further up the valley.

As promised, they came upon a rough hut, leaning against a cliff wall. When Major Tan's peremptory calls of 'Master Ran' remained unanswered, he shoved through the door, quickly followed by Gui Hua. Inside was a plain room with only a couple of mats on the floor and a rough low table. Another room to the rear was accessible by a curtained off doorway. More calls obtained no response, and the Major pulled the curtain aside to reveal a small, empty sleeping chamber.

'You stay here with Wang,' Tan told Zhao and Gui Hua, 'while I scout around with Qiu. Maybe the old duffer is off meditating under a waterfall or something.'

Although they were not happy at dividing their forces, Tan's tone admitted of no argument, so Zhao and Gui Hua resigned themselves to the wait. Strangely, however, after Tan had been gone for a minute there was a sound from within the hut.

'What is it that you want?' enquired a surprisingly youthful voice. Startled, they turned to see a wrinkled, ancient face peering at them from the hut entrance. Despite the decrepit state of its features, this figure's eyes sparkled with a youthful vigour. 'Come in, come in.'

Tan and Qiu were nowhere to be seen. Master Ran's apparent materialisation out of thin air was unnerving. Perhaps he was a *xian*, an immortal who had transcended earthly restraints? This might mean he had the power to help against Black Hou, but immortals were notoriously reluctant to muddy themselves with the mundane realities of the Mortal World.

Once they were inside the hut, and Ran had sat down on the other side of the table, Gui Hua reverently handed over the letter of introduction, using both hands to signal her respect.

'We are sorry to bother you Master, but we have a letter from your student Zhang.'

Ran took the letter, opened it and, after glancing



Ran the Deep River

momentarily at its contents, tossed it onto the table in front of him. Gui Hua noticed that the letter was upside down.

'Tell me about the matter for which you have sought me,' said Ran.

It all spilled out of Gui Hua then, with occasional corrections from Zhao Yu. Perhaps, more than anything, she just wanted to tell someone and be believed. At her mention of Black Hou, Master Ran had started.

'You know of him?' asked Gui Hua.

'Er, slightly,' replied the hermit.

At the end of her story, Ran paused briefly, then announced:

'I must meditate on this. Please wait outside.' He turned and shuffled through the curtain into the rear chamber.

Shortly after, Major Tan returned with Qiu. On learning that the hermit had turned up, he insisted on seeing him at once. When his calls were unanswered, he pushed into the hut, emerging a few seconds later.

'There's no one there,' he said glumly.

'He went into the rear chamber to meditate,' explained Zhao Yu.

'I looked in the rear chamber, but it was empty,' said Tan. 'Are you sure he didn't slip out?'

More than ever convinced of the hermit's

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mystical powers, Zhao Yu persuaded Tan to wait a while. A minute later Ran reappeared at the door, and invited them back in. This time Tan insisted on pushing in, so Wang had to wait outside.

'I am Major Tan, former commander in the army of General Peng. If you really are a man of knowledge then tell me this: where is my daughter's heart?'

Ran fixed him with his ancient but youthful eyes. 'Her heart was eaten by her murderer.'

Tan clenched his fists. 'That wretched farm boy! I should have carved him up myself!'

'It wasn't Cai Shou!' interjected Gui Hua. 'The murderer was Black Hou, wasn't it, Master Ran?'

Ran paused, then slowly replied. 'Yes, the murderer was Black Hou.'

Zhao Yu cut in, as Major Tan was dumbstruck. 'Where can we find Black Hou?'

'I cannot tell you where he is now, but I *can* tell you that in exactly one week, at midnight on the night of the dark of the moon, he will be in Jinfang, to pay a visit to the House of the Perfumed Garden.'

'How can we protect ourselves from his sorcery? Should we buy talismans?'

'Black Hou is too powerful: you should not wear talismans, for he will turn their power against you. Instead you may protect yourself by killing a chicken at noon, mixing its blood with ash, and daubing your skin with it. The, ah, house of Chicken will enlist the Great Spirit of Bai Fu in your defence.' Ran's head bowed. 'Now please leave me, for I am tired and wish to rest.'

Major Tan, his emotion coming in fits and moods, thought of something else to ask Master Ran shortly after leaving the hut. He plunged back in again, only to emerge yet again, ashen-face.

'Pulled his damn disappearing trick again.'

Back in Jinfang they took their leave of Major Tan. The Major seemed downcast, and Gui Hua had found it difficult to conceal her satisfaction at the result of the visit to the hermit. Now they had something positive to work on, and they could prepare an ambush to catch the sorcerer unawares and bring him to justice.

She hurried to the marketplace to offer her thanks to the talisman seller, and told him what had transpired. Zhang's face paled at the mention of Black Hou, and his brow creased at the news that his talismans would not be required. When told of the chicken blood-and-ash protection, he stroked his chin.

'I am aware that pig's blood may have protective properties, especially against certain animal spirits, but I had never heard of chicken blood being of use. I don't recall Master Ran ever mentioning such methods to me, but then I only ever acquired a tiny fragment of his wisdom.'

Over the next week there were only a few distractions from preparations. Zhao met and talked with a strange southerner who had the air of an official about him, but who seemed to be searching for someone. The southerner left the town on foot one day and never returned. His abandoned horse was to prove useful later.

There was also a travelling physician to whom they chatted about the state of the town. In a lowered tone Zhao Yu advised him that the *yamen* was in the hands of rogues, but that quite frankly things didn't seem to be much worse than usual. Nevertheless he wondered whether the authorities would do something. Presumably once Tong and his cohorts had finished doing whatever it was they were up to with the *yamen* they would leave, and if they were to be captured the authorities would have to act soon.

When Gui Hua demanded a treatment from the physician for her stiff shoulders, he initially narrowed his eyes at her. Then she waved a *tael* of silver in front of him. With what appeared to be some reluctance he finally agreed to treat her in her room. Gui Hua was not impressed by his ministrations. 'That was the worst *tael* I ever spent,' she was later heard to complain.

The *tael* of silver was later returned to her, though you'll have to wait to find out how and why.

As the dark of the moon drew near, Zhao Yu began to prepare the ambush. Major Tan had lost the vigour with which he had started the trip to Master Ran, but he agreed to join in. The House of the Perfumed Garden lay on the southern bank of the stream which flowed through Jinfang, directly opposite an ill-tended pagoda. Following the example of Zhuge Liang, famed strategist of the Three Kingdoms, what he lacked in muscle, Zhao Yu proposed to make up for with guile.

TALES OF MOONLIGHT: INTERLUDE

月光志 外傳

'Master Ran' hurried back along the tunnel. Black Hou was waiting for him in the chamber with the ancient stone sarcophagi, and would want to know whether he had managed to fool the visitors. He had already been subjected to a grilling when he had mentioned the letter, and Black Hou had questioned him in detail about what he did with it. Since he was illiterate, he couldn't say exactly, but he was fairly sure that he hadn't made a mistake. Black Hou could be quite unforgiving.

As he entered the chamber, Black Hou emerged from behind a sarcophagus. 'Well, Lai? Do you think they will go?'

'I believe so, Master. Both the girl and the old man seemed quite happy with what I said. And there was a different fellow with them this time. It was—'

'Major Tan. I know. What about the talismans?'

Snakeskin Lai covered his disappointment. He never seemed to be able to surprise his Master. 'I told them exactly what you said, Master. And I explained how the Great Spirit of Bai Fu would protect them and—'

'Idiot!' Black Hou slapped Lai's scaly, prematurely aged face with the back of his hand. 'Never attempt to improvise when it comes to occult matters! Ding Kui may know a little, but you have no talent for it. Stick to what you *can* do!'

Snakeskin Lai hung his head in shame, but offered no defence. Ever since Black Hou had saved his life ten years ago, when he was hardly more than a wild animal, he had followed this mysterious little man like a son. He had even been pleased when Black Hou had suggested that his appalling skin condition made him the ideal person to impersonate Ran the Deep River. Ran was an ancient hermit who had lived in the area. Lai vaguely remembered the old fellow, who had treated him very kindly, so he considered it a sign of respect that he should keep the hermit's name alive.

What Black Hou hadn't told him was that Ran the Deep River was Lai's father: hence the resemblance was closer than even Lai realised. Black Hou had discovered the secret child whom the eccentric Ran had allowed to grow up in the wild and without family attachments, hoping thereby to cultivate a man truly in tune with the Tao. Befriending him by deception, he obtained some of Lai's blood and hair, with which he was able to penetrate Ran's occult defences and slay him. The presence of Ran provided the perfect cover for his hideaway.

Black Hou waited a while, to ensure that

Snakeskin suffered the full shame of his mistake, before continuing: 'Are you absolutely sure that the Taoist wasn't with them?'

'He didn't enter the hut, and he wasn't waiting outside when I looked. He might have returned with Tan but waited outside.'

'It seems unlikely. He didn't strike me as the bashful sort. Still, there were enough of them that we couldn't be certain of winning. It's better this way. The best traps are always those set for one who thinks he is the hunter.'

'Who said that, Master?'

'I just did, cretin.'

Black Hou didn't imagine it would be easy to slip unnoticed into Jinfang. He also had to ensure that Ding Kui, whose moon-like face adorned wanted posters drawn by that wretched singing girl, got in without drawing any attention to himself.

The three of them entered the town separately. In the event it was much easier than they had anticipated. The gate guards weren't the regular fellows. Indeed, although they wore the insignia, they looked more like rogues of the rivers and lakes. What was going on at the *yamen*? Black Hou wondered. Was it something to do with that Taoist?

When he had first met Tao Wu Shu in the *yamen*, he had wondered for a moment if 'They' had sent someone after him. He quickly realised it wasn't the case. No one 'They' sent would just blunder right into the *yamen*, and then fail to recognise him—fail even to recognise a fellow sorcerer. His second thought was that someone had traced the gourd, and this seemed to have been borne out by Tao Wu Shu's behaviour in the Otherworld, though it still didn't explain why he should have murdered the magistrate.

Even stranger to explain was that first encounter. The man had tried to inveigle him with the Eyes of the Snake. His first impulse was to fling the spell right back, but some intuition made him instead pretend to be ensnared, just to find out what Tao was after. He was told to lead on to the magistrate's private quarters and, upon reaching it, to go in and kill the magistrate. Pondering why this should be, he had entered the magistrate's room and waited for Tao Wu Shu to follow up. A few minutes later, when he put his head round the door to check, the peculiar Taoist was gone.

Tao Wu Shu was Black Hou's main anxiety, even though all the readings he had taken said that he would not oppose Black Hou's plans. The others were just an annoyance. There was, however, a strange poem that had come up when he tried

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Zhuge Liang's Spirit Calculation:

*An old merchant sees his enemy.
The room around you has no windows.
The arrow flies straight, transfixing the target.
Smoke rises from incense in a temple.*

Try as he might he couldn't see where it pointed, although the 'old merchant' suggested that bun-thrower Zhao Yu, and the line about incense gave him an unpleasant feeling.

Black Hou and his two lieutenants set up watch in the old pagoda north of the river. From the third floor they could clearly make out the lights of the House of the Perfumed Garden on the south bank. This vantage point proved to have unexpected benefits. Some time after nightfall, the three became aware of people hanging about by the base of the pagoda. Ding Kui crept down to find out and returned to report that it was two of Zhao Yu's retainers. Black Hou's face lit up. He stuck his head out of the window and peered down at them. Muttering an incantation he passed his fingers over his eyes, then pointed downwards.

'They're festooned with protective talismans,' he said, his voice tinged with disappointment. He glanced over at Snakeskin Lai who bowed his head in shame.

'I'll go and kill them, Master,' Lai offered. He strung his little hunting bow and nocked an arrow, then slipped out of the window. Hou marvelled once more at the deftness of the fellow. He really did seem to be able to move like an animal. He discharged an arrow, slithered down the outside of the pagoda like the creature from which his nickname derived, and leapt after the uninjured retainer. Although he had taken up the bow, he'd never really got on with hand-to-hand weapons, but he was plenty dangerous unarmed. He must have learned to fight by wrestling tigers or something, for he fought without mercy or deliberation of any kind.

Snakeskin Lai dragged the bodies of Zhao Yu's retainers into the pagoda.

The three resumed their vigil. The summer was long gone, and the night was chilly, but that didn't bother them much, Snakeskin Lai least of all. As midnight drew closer, they became aware of someone else near the base of the pyramid. This one seemed to be a little more careful, but they soon worked out that it was Teng Ai, Zhao Yu's bodyguard. Better still, he was free of talismans, and was carrying two buckets, one containing chicken blood, and the other ashes.

Black Hou slipped down and sidled up to him. Teng Ai was clearly expecting to meet someone, as he failed to react quickly enough to Black Hou's

approach. A single word from Hou put him to sleep. They dragged his unconscious form into the pagoda and lay it with the bodies of the other retainers. Hou then brought him around and inveigled him with the Eyes of the Snake once more. He would sleep until disturbed, at which point he would rise and attack whoever had touched him. They sprinkled him with chicken blood and splayed his limbs around to make him look a more convincing corpse, then retired to the second floor.

'I'm enjoying this,' Black Hou confided to his lieutenants. 'Though it makes me wonder just how they thought they were going to catch me.' For a moment a look of horror crossed his face, and he glanced down at Teng Ai and the two corpses. Then he shook his head, and his expression returned to its usual impassivity. 'For a moment there I feared... but no, those two are definitely dead, aren't they, and there's no spirit ward among the talismans.'

'I had planned on ambushing them after they gave up waiting for me in the House of the Perfumed Garden, but they have kindly presented me with an alternative. Once they miss their comrades they will come and look for them. With luck they will enter the pagoda, see the bodies, and rush to them anxiously... at which point this fellow jumps up and starts attacking. We should hide *outside* the pagoda, and then we can either ambush them on the way out, or set the place alight or something—whatever seems appropriate. Do you both understand?'

Ding and Lai both bowed their agreement.

The plan *almost* worked. Later that night Black Hou ruminated on whether it was his improvisation that was at fault, and whether he would have been better off sticking to the original. Still, it was of no matter. Teng Ai had sprung up as instructed and attacked Major Tan. Chaos broke out. Who would have ever supposed that Zhao Yu would have managed to persuade Teng Ai to throw off the enchantment and together race back to the House of the Perfumed Garden? Black Hou sent Ding Kui after him, but there was no opportunity for ambush—Zhao returned with a procession of women from the House of the Perfumed Garden, all bearing lanterns.

Hou weighed up the prospects: he could just kill the principals, allowing the women to witness it. Or he could attempt to kill them all, and take the risk that others would be drawn by the uproar. On balance it seemed better to cut his losses. Telling Lai and the returned Ding Kui to make themselves scarce he sauntered up to Zhao Yu.

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'A dark evening for a stroll with ladies, is it not, Sir?' he sneered. 'This town can be dangerous at night. Perhaps you will find better business elsewhere?'

Zhao Yu started, and seemed almost to be on the point of using his sword. But Hou was already off, disappearing down the street into the shadows. From the other direction came the sound of the night watch, no doubt attracted by the shouts and lanterns.

Back at the cave the next day Black Hou put a brave face on the less than perfect success of his scheme.

'Major Tan is badly injured, two of Zhao Yu's retainers are dead, and we've given them a fine fright. Zhao Yu knows he's no match for us, and I wouldn't be at all surprised if he didn't get out of town. After all, the *yamen* isn't going to do anything about it. Did you find out what was going on there, by the way, Ding?'

'Yes, Master. This fellow Tong runs a gang of thieves and pirates up and down the Yellow River. We nabbed three of his men a little while back. My guess is that he'd come about them. The medicine pedlar you told me about was one of his. The Taoist apparently injured him very badly after you'd left the *yamen*.'

'Really?' Hou rubbed his chin, reflectively. 'Maybe Tao Wu Shu was more of a friendly rival than an implacable foe. 'And where is the medicine pedlar now?'

'That I am afraid I don't know, Master. He's not in the *yamen*, though. Tong seems to be running things while cleaning out the coffers. It's hard to tell how long he'll stay, but his men are on the gates and if forces come from the prefecture my guess is that he would hold the gate while sneaking out the other side of town, or possibly out of the water gate.'

'Interesting.'

Black Hou sat thinking, kicking his feet against the cold stone sarcophagus. The other two knew better than to interrupt him.

'If he can hang on in the *yamen* for ten more days, it will suit our purposes admirably. We may have lost the hungry ghosts, but there were plenty killed there, and their *gui* should still be wandering around. In ten days' time the stars will be aligned again, and I can perform the ritual once more while ridding the world of a bunch of crooks into the bargain.

'Ten days. I wonder if he'll stay here that long? We'll have to keep an eye on the road to the prefecture and see if we can't intercept a messenger or two. This Tong helped interfere with the ritual the first time. It is only fitting that he be an integral part of it the second.'



Zhao Yu meets Black Hou a second time

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第五回

Ah, there you are. I noticed your absence at my last sitting. Humble storyteller that I am, I would never consider chiding my honourable audience, but word has reached me, wending its way sinuously through the alleys of human intercourse, until finally enriching the ugly and ill-proportioned annularity of my ears, that you have been patronising the ill-pected Wang, a man of dubious ancestry and improbable habits, the thickness of whose mat is inversely proportional to the wealth of his vocabulary; in truth a rogue akin to his legendary namesake Wang Mang, who tested his food on new-born babes and once had the entire palace kitchen staff pulled apart by wild mares because of a case of wind.

An unworthy spinner of fables such as myself would never dare to impugn in even the most gentle manner the taste of such excellent and star-kissed worthies as your good selves, but it should be remembered that finer witnesses than I have seen Wang *eating raw food*. His bibulous nature is also notorious, and his preference for fermented mare's milk has led many to dub him with unkind names which would never, of course, escape the lips of a nonentity such as Gai Long.

But I can see that you are chastened and wish to hear no more of such a piffling bunhead. I will return to the tale for which you have been kind enough to appear before me. And I will attempt to live up to the copious and irreproachably spendable generosity which you have previously bestowed upon me in the undeserved hope that such munificence may prove to be entirely unlike the fabled ox of Ling Qiu, which one day, in the midst of ploughing a field, suddenly stopped in its tracks and subsequently resisted with suicidal perversity all attempts to get it moving once again.

What you would have heard, had you refrained from patronising that egregious and ill-kempt whelp, would have been how Zhao Yu set an ambush for Black Hou, but found the tables turned on him. Two of his retainers lay dead, and Major Tan badly injured by an ensorcelled Teng Ai. Truly, Zhao Yu had ridden the mudslide to the very bottom of this particular valley of despair.

Yet he who rapidly descends a slope may find himself borne some way up the other side. So it was with Zhao Yu. By now he didn't even need the constant encouragement and persuasion of Gui Hua to put steel in his determination. A lifetime of frustration at the hands of petty officialdom had bent back this old man like the arms of a crossbow, and Black Hou was leaning against the trigger.

Meanwhile, events in Jinfang continued apace. One day, its inhabitants awoke to rumours of a dawn

raid by soldiers. Sure enough, drawing near to the *yamen* they found it buzzing with activity, with grim-faced guards on the gate. Within, more soldiers could be seen in the courtyard.

It transpired that the 'doctor' who had given Gui Hua such an unprofessional massage was an Imperial Censor. Unconventional in his methods, he had decided to investigate for himself, in disguise, the impeccable district which had sent such an unusual murder case to the capital, occasioning the intervention of a member of the Imperial Bureaucracy. Upon arriving, he discovered that the magistrate who had judged the case in question was dead, and that the *yamen* had been seized by rogues.

Knowing that the rogues had lookouts ready, and would make their escape as soon as soldiers were spotted approaching the town, he returned to his Imperial Guard squad's encampment, drew up a plan and put it into effect. The four finest guards donned disguises and slipped into the town. Just before dawn the next day they seized control of the Golden Idol Gate and killed the lookouts before warning could be sent to the *yamen*. The gate opened, the remainder of the squad marched in and made its way to the *yamen* where, with deception and brute force, they re-established Imperial Rule.

The surviving bandits, including their leader, were flung into the cells, and the Censor assumed the temporary position of District Administrator.

For the next few days inhabitants of Jinfang were given occasion to ask themselves privately the forbidden question of whether the Emperor's enlightened rule was inevitably to be preferred to any other alternative. With Tong the carpet merchant in control, precious little had changed in the daily lives of the townsfolk. Paperwork fell a little behind, it is true, but there was no descent into immediate lawlessness, as one might expect. Tong's men proved to be hardly any worse as constables than those formally invested with the job, an unflattering comparison that was not lost on Jinfang's inhabitants. With the Imperial Guard in command, however, fear descended on the town.

Laws are a little like snow. It is thickest at the top of the mountain, but as you descend into the valley it lies ever more lightly, providing no more than an attractive covering. When snow falls so heavily as to bury the valley under a thick blanket, people curse it, and life moves slowly. Jinfang was now caught under a heavy snowfall. Any slight infraction would be seized upon with an unforgiving thoroughness. The attitude of the soldiers seemed to be that every last inhabitant of Jinfang shared a part of the responsibility for Tong's usurpation.

At the gates, queues formed in the mornings as everyone attempting to enter or leave the town was checked with fanatic thoroughness.

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The trial of Tong was a spectacle that attracted the largest crowd yet seen in the *yamen*. Sitting just below the Censor at the front of the court was an array of worthies of the town, including Zhao Yu's acquaintances Major Tan and Magnate Lu. Their unprecedented placing seemed to be designed to impress upon Tong that the full weight of the town was against him, in addition to that of the Censor and his soldiers.

The trial did not go as planned, however. In an interview with Zhao Yu beforehand, the Censor rehearsed him in what to say, but when his time came the old merchant did not feel in any mood to co-operate. The Censor attempted to pin on Tong every crime that had been committed in the town, including the atrocities in the *yamen* and the murder of the magistrate. Zhao Yu wasn't having any of it. The scowling Censor cut short his testimony and instead pressed on with the main charges, soon finding Tong guilty. It didn't take much torture to secure a confession from Tong, and he was duly sentenced to death. As he raised his head to look at the Censor after sentence was passed, his eye was caught by the row of dignitaries. Spotting Major Tan among their ranks he started to yell something, but was quickly beaten into submission by the constables.

Zhao Yu left the *yamen* rather quickly in the company of Gui Hua. The Censor was not pleased, and it wouldn't do to get in his way. Anyway, he had a trip planned: to the Pearl Gorge Monastery, a day's journey south of Jinfang.

Two of Zhao's retainers had been killed, and although their bodies were to be sent back to their home district, Zhao felt very strongly the importance of making offerings for the calm repose of their spirits. They had, after all, died in extremely unpleasant circumstances and their spirits would be greatly disturbed. The last thing Jinfang needed after the last outbreak of hauntings was another couple of ghosts causing trouble.

Zhao also promised the injured Major Tan that he would burn joss for the Major's daughter. This mollified the old soldier somewhat, but it was clear that his experiences in the pagoda had almost put him off the old merchant for life. It was, perhaps, only the evident fact that two of Zhao Yu's retainers lay dead that held his worse instincts in check.

Zhao kept his promise on arriving at the temple. He dutifully burned incense for all the victims, and as the smoke coiled upwards through the air, he imagined their souls rising to heaven, escaping the cycle of rebirth. He had other business there too, however. Requesting an interview with the Abbot, Spreading Willow, he stated quite frankly that he had incurred the enmity of an evil sorcerer, and wished for spiritual help in defeating him. As he

had expected, the Abbot dissembled, explaining that such matters were not the concern of his temple, which was devoted to monastic seclusion. When he started to press the case, Spreading Willow surprised him by insisting that no member of the Buddhist clergy could do anything to help him rid the world of Black Hou. What surprised him was not the denial, but the name. He had made no mention of the evil sorcerer's identity.

The Abbot noticed his reaction.

'Of course I am aware of who it is you oppose,' he explained. 'Though we are in seclusion, we are not ignorant of what is happening in the secular world. You must understand, however, that the Buddhist church cannot help you. We are subject to pressures both political and spiritual. There are many in the world who would seize with relish on any case of us meddling with justice, and turn it to our disadvantage.'

Zhao started to interrupt, but was cut short.

'But there are those who may be prepared to help you. To defeat your foe you need two things: the strength of Earth, to overcome his physical guardians; and the power of Heaven, to counter his occult force. Both of these you will have to find for yourself, but I will tell you this; in this area there lives a hermit by the name of Mo who occasionally helps out the poor and needy. He is rarely seen, but I know of a grove a little way from here, which he sometimes visits. If you go there today and carve your name in the bark of a tree, perhaps you will be able to meet him tomorrow.'

Zhao gave the Abbot a long, hard, look. The last hermit he had met hadn't helped him in the slightest. Then again, if Black Hou's power was such that he could corrupt and control even a Buddhist temple, then Zhao didn't stand a chance anyway. He might as well trust the Abbot.

So the next day, on their way home, Zhao, Gui Hua and retinue met Hermit Mo in a grove. Hermit Mo seemed a shy fellow, remaining beneath a tree with his face shadowed by a hood. His voice was friendly, though, and promised aid. He would come to Jinfang in seven day's time, and together they would hunt out Black Hou and rid the world of him.

Hermit Mo's voice sounded confident. It also sounded uncannily reminiscent of the Abbot's... Did he have the power of Heaven? Zhao certainly hoped so. Back in Jinfang, Zhao turned his attention to the strength of Earth. His first thought was the medicine pedlar, who had aided them in their first victory over Black Hou. By a strange chance, while attempting to set the abortive ambush for their enemy in the House of the Perfumed Garden, Zhao had happened to catch a glimpse of the injured swordsman in one of the rooms. He wasn't sure why the man was not in the

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yamen with his boss, Tong, but it worked out well in the end, for Tong and lackeys were flung into the cells when the Censor took over.

Rui the Eagle, as the swordsman was called, was happy to talk to Zhao. He was quickly assured that Tao Wu Shu was no particular friend of Zhao's, but merely a travelling companion. Although at the mention of the Taoist a grim light appeared in Rui's eyes, it was obvious that he was in no condition to supply the strength of the Earth. Despite his attempts to disguise it, it was obvious that he was in constant pain. Worse, he was unable to walk.

Major Tan, though less badly hurt than Rui, was also far from fit. When told about a plan to finish off Black Hou, though, he did promise to come along and offer what assistance he could.

The strength of the Earth, then, would have to be found elsewhere. Strangely enough, it turned up as soon as Zhao stopped looking for it. Having scoured the town for strong men, Zhao gave up and made his way to the most exclusive restaurant in the town. It was nothing special, but it was enough to distract him from things, if only briefly.

As he sat munching on a rather highly seasoned francolin, a large man strode into the room. The man was dressed roughly, with a hooked nose and tufts of hair protruding improbably from his head. You didn't have to be the major domo of a fancy restaurant to know that the man was trouble. In a flash the major domo was on him, but the big fellow simply demanded food, ignoring all protests to the contrary.

In such circumstances, most restaurants have the same policy: call the cook! Out he came, a mountain of fat, wielding a cleaver and hissing at the newcomer like a steam kettle. A few seconds later and he was picking himself up from the broken remains of a table across the room, and surveying the dent in the wall off which he had just bounced.

Silence had fallen in the room. Well-dressed diners sat frozen in their seats, praying to the most potent ancestors to which they could lay claim that they would not be the next to be accosted.

The big man turned once more to the major domo, who stood quivering like the grass on the steppes or a reed in the marshes.

'Perhaps the gentleman would care to join us for some lunch?' came a voice. The shocked major domo turned incredulously to look at the old merchant who had uttered the invitation. Although he was accompanied by a bodyguard, the bodyguard didn't look *that* tough. Still, he nodded assent.

The big man proved to be a simple fellow by the name of Wu Dong, who had been nicknamed 'Tornado' for as many years as he could remember (not very many, it seemed to Zhao). Though getting on in years, he was still full of vigour, and he sat



Wu Dong, 'Tornado'

telling Zhao happily of all the trees he had uprooted, oxen felled, and mountains headbutted. Even allowing for the understandable exaggeration, his casual swatting of the cook had demonstrated that he was a man of no mean strength, though exceedingly mean temper. Zhao treated him very carefully. He got him drunk.

The trick was simple, a drinking game in which the loser of a throw of the dice must down the cup. Since the competition was between Tornado on the one hand, and Zhao and Teng Ai on the other, and Zhao was careful to take every opportunity he could to cheat, Tornado was soon happily soused. The other diners had seized the chance to flee, and the waiters were careful to supply all the demands of their remaining customers.

Just as Tornado seemed to be about to fall asleep, he suddenly lurched to his feet, and staggered out of the restaurant. Caught by surprise, Zhao decided to be cautious and not follow him. 'I was going to call some constables to get him put in jail,' he told Teng Ai, 'but maybe it's better this way.'

A few days later, the party assembled. There was Zhao Yu, now with a hunting bow, and a sword carefully wrapped. There was Gui Hua, unarmed, but determined to be in on the kill. Major Tan was there too, wincing at the pain of his bound wounds, but dressed in his old uniform and with his weapons and armour also packed. Teng Ai was there, of course, and finally the hermit Mo. All save the hermit were festooned with talismans purchased from the redoubtable Zhang.

The weaponry would have to be kept under wraps, of course, until they were out in the countryside, but still there was an air of determination about them that spoke of a grim battle ahead.

Zhao Yu saved his surprise for them till just before they left the town. Tornado seemed cheerful, having been promised a good fight. As they passed

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through the gate and made their way up country, he entertained them with the story of how he had visited a food stall somewhere in the south-west quarter of Jinfang. It showed all the signs of having been damaged, and two of the customers spoke woefully of a bully from whom they couldn't escape. When the bully turned up, Tornado got on with him famously, and they had gone on a three day drinking binge together.

When they drew near their destination they unwrapped their weapons, and Major Tan offered Tornado a sword.

'Pah!' exclaimed Tornado. 'What would I need a sword for?' He waved his fists under the major's nose. 'These are good enough for me!'

Zhao and Mo had hatched the plan, though if you asked Major Tan, he would be sure to tell you it was his idea. Mo was certain that Black Hou was to be found behind the false hermit Ran. A search among the bushes down the valley from Ran's hut uncovered the entrance to a tunnel, and Mo proclaimed that it led to Black Hou's hideout. He and Tornado continued up to the hut, to draw out the false Ran, who had never seen either of them, while the others made their way cautiously, and lightly, along the tunnel.

Progress was slow, for every step had to be preceded by careful feeling of the right hand tunnel wall, and testing of the floor for pits or sharp stones. Major Tan had insisted on going first, while Zhao Yu told Teng Ai to bring up the rear, so as to protect Gui Hua if necessary. After a while, though, faint sounds reached them from up ahead, and a slight glimmer became evident. They were nearing their prey.

The tunnel gave out into a chamber in which could be discerned a number of large regular shapes. Now the origin of this strange subterranean lair became evident. They had stumbled across the mausoleum of some ancient dynasty. The shapes were the sarcophagi of ancient rulers, now desecrated by the presence of Black Hou. Is it too much for me to suppose that the spirits of those long-dead kings were watching as Zhao Yu's little band arrived?

Certainly luck was on their side. Both Black Hou and Moonface were there, the former apparently snoozing atop a sarcophagus, while the latter concentrated on a book, holding it close to the light of one of several lanterns.

The next part of the plan demanded that they wait quietly until either Mo and Tornado turned up, or an alarm was raised and Black Hou and Moonface headed down the tunnel towards the hut. Of course it didn't work out that way. No sooner had he seen Black Hou than Major Tan charged into the chamber, shouting.

第六回

Fear not, my most philanthropic and munificent listeners, there is little of my story left to tell. Merchant Zhao Yu and his band of avenging angels have already penetrated the mausoleum in which Black Hou, a small man with a vaunting ambition, makes his lair. They have found their enemy himself asleep atop a sarcophagus, while his moon-faced apprentice pores over a tome of some sort. It only remains to dispatch the villain and the matter will be settled.

Such, we may imagine, were the thoughts of Zhao Yu, preparing to spring the ambush as planned. As Black Hou had discovered earlier at the Pagoda in Jinfang, however, even the best-laid plans sometimes fail to run as smoothly as you would like.

Major Tan, no doubt overcome with emotion at this confrontation with the killer of his daughter, charged shouting into the chamber. It was only a brief warning, but it was enough. Hou adeptly rolled off the other side of the sarcophagus, disappearing from sight. Ding Kui—for such was the name of Moonface—dropped his book and whipped out a knife from either sleeve. When Major Tan reached the sarcophagus, no opponent awaited him, and worse: from his left a glittering knife flew towards him.

Tan managed to avoid the first knife, thrown in haste, but the second struck him in the left arm. By now, however, Teng Ai had charged in to provide assistance, and Ding Kui ducked down behind another of the sarcophagi.

Zhao Yu was most discomfited. He nocked an arrow to his bow, but no target presented itself. When Black Hou stood up again, shouted an incantation, bowed three times to the West, and stuck a yellow talisman on his chest, he tried to take aim, but Major Tan and Teng kept getting in the way. Teng climbed over the sarcophagus while Major Tan went around the side, keeping a careful eye out for Ding Kui's knives. While they did so, Hou pulled out the bottle gourd from somewhere and started chanting and gesturing again.

Zhao Yu and Gui Hua looked on aghast as Tan and Teng closed on the sorcerer. As their swords descended on him, he barely seemed to flinch, waving at the swords vaguely while continuing to gesture. Although the weapons seemed to bite, no blood appeared, and Hou continued chanting. Tan faltered.

At about this time, Hermit Mo and Tornado burst into the chamber from a tunnel in the opposite wall. Now things happened thick and fast. Ding Kui's head popped up over a sarcophagus and took aim with another knife. This one buried itself

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in Teng Ai's side, and he doubled up in pain. Hermit Mo, seeing this, performed the Mudra of Turning the Wheel, and started to recite in some religious language from the West. Ding Kui fell back. At the same time, Black Hou turned from Teng and Tan, and started to move towards an open area of the chamber. From the opposite direction, however, Tornado came charging.

Tan recovered his wits, and swung again at Black Hou. Tornado, halfway to Black Hou, suddenly vanished from sight, as if he had passed through an invisible door. And finally Zhao Yu found he had a clear shot at his villain.

It's not clear exactly what happened. Tan's blow seemed to land, and yet at that moment Black Hou disappeared, just as he had on the top of the pyramid of skulls. The gourd hung in the air for a fraction of a second before Zhao Yu's arrow passed right through it.

There was a moment of silence, and then the gentle thud of the gourd hitting the floor.

Tan moved cautiously round to tackle Moonface, but there was no need. His prostrate form lay in foetal position behind the sarcophagus, faint groans escaping his lips. Hermit Mo slowly approached, continuing to chant his Buddhist litany. Tan started to heft his sword but, glancing at the Hermit, thought better of it. There was no sign of Tornado.

After catching breath and treating wounds there was a little time for explanation. Mo ceased his chanting and told of how he and Tornado had entered the hut and called for Ran the Deep River. When the false hermit emerged, Tornado leapt on him and buried his fists in the man's face. When his violent frenzy subsided, a bloody pulp was all that was left. In the back room of the hut they had examined the rear wall and found that it could be moved. Mo had just worked out how to lift it when Tornado lost patience, and smashed his way through the middle. Behind, a tunnel led into the cliff side. Pausing only to make a flame to light their way, the two hurried along it.

Mo also explained what he had done to Ding Kui, who by now was coming to. He had, he said, sent Moonface's souls on a visit to the Courts of Hell, where he received a preview of the torments awaiting him. Thanks to the distortions of time between various realms, Moonface had spent several hours suffering the most exquisite torture. The listeners were sceptical, but when Ding Kui came around there was something in his expression that lent weight to Mo's claims. He seemed perfectly willing to be bound and taken back to the town to face justice.

The little group headed back into the daylight. On the way, Ding Kui directed them to a small side chamber, and a cunningly concealed hole in the wall, in which several bars of gold and silver were

secreted.

It was only when they had emerged from the tunnel mouth that they noticed Teng Ai was missing. Back into the tunnel they went. Poor Teng, who had been drawing up the rear, had passed out from the pain of his wound, and had to be carried out. He came round a little while later, receiving sympathy from all but Major Tan, who apparently still bore a grudge over the Pagoda incident.

They then had to decide what to do. Snakeskin Lai, the fake Master Ran, was dead. Black Hou, Hermit Mo confirmed, was imprisoned within the arrow-impaled gourd, hovering between the realms of life and death. Ding Kui seemed to have undergone a conversion.

And then there was the matter of the treasure. Eyes had widened at the sight of so much wealth, and desire for gold hung almost palpably in the air. The problem, of course, was how to divide the treasure fairly. Here Zhao Yu's financial expertise came into its own. He explained a complex system by which the total treasure would be divided into a number of shares, which would then be distributed according to merit. No one seemed entirely happy with Zhao's division (especially as Zhao's own share seemed to most to be on the large side) but it was the only solution that could be agreed.

Then there was the matter of Ding Kui. At first, it had seemed obvious that he should be handed over to the Jinfang authorities. During the discussion over treasure, a new idea emerged. Perhaps it was connected to the fact that handing over Ding Kui would also necessitate handing over the treasure? Or perhaps I am being unnecessarily dismissive of the sincerity of Buddhist belief evinced by those present. They believed that Ding Kui's conversion was genuine, and that rather than simply ending his life, it would be better for all concerned if a share of the treasure were used to buy a certificate so that he could become a Buddhist monk. Ding Kui himself seemed ecstatic at the prospect. Major Tan protested for a while, but finally conceded when the financial advantages of this arrangement were spelled out.

As for the gourd: well, what could be done? Wasn't it better for all concerned to keep Black Hou in there? Again, Major Tan protested, but when challenged to suggest an alternative he could think of nothing. The idea of burning the gourd was, Hermit Mo insisted, rather too dangerous. So it was decided. The gourd, too, would go to the Pearl Gorge Monastery, where it would be carefully guarded among all the other relics.

Back in Jinfang, Zhao Yu considered the future. He seemed to be tied to this town by some fate. For now he had won, and ideas for business were occurring to him. There was a mansion which he

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was thinking of building outside the East Gate (and now he had a little spare cash to get started), and if his *guanxi* with Li Jin Lao of Jun County was worth as much as he thought it was, there was the prospect of a good supply of silk. Why not open a silk shop in Jinfang? There were worse ways to end one's days, and Magnate Lu, probably the wealthiest inhabitant of the town, agreed that it might be a good prospect.

Behind all this another scheme, too, was brewing. A scheme to do with justice, the ineffectuality of the authorities, and the ways in which those with ability might use their skills for the good of those in need. A scheme to bring out the sleeping dragons.

In the Pearl Gorge Monastery a new monk goes about his duties. His round face seems strangely calm, and some of the other monks comment that it sometimes seems to possess a pale light of its own. All agree, however, that he is a dedicated monk, diligent in all the duties and rites.

On a shelf in the monastery's reliquary sits a bottle gourd, transfixed by an arrow. A plume of smoke coils up into the air from an incense burner on either side.

The End

The story continues in *Tales of Sleeping Dragons*