

19

The column crossed Black Scabbard mountain, and that night another thirty or forty soldiers deserted. Zhang discussed the situation with Rui and the other bodyguards.

"These fellows are not going to give up even though this is the main road to Lanzhou, the provincial capital," he said. "There's going to be a lot more trouble ahead, so we had better make our way round by the backroads, and cross the river at Crimson Bend."

Cao Neng had been looking forward to getting to Lanzhou so that he could transfer his burden to other shoulders, and was very unhappy with Zhang's plan. But he did not dare to disagree.

"We have lost many soldiers on the road," Zhang said. "When you get back, Master Cao, you can report that they were killed during an attack on bandits, and died courageously for their country. I will write out a note to that effect in a moment."

Cao Neng's spirits rose again. According to the military regulations, if a soldier was killed in action, it was possible to obtain a pension, and the money naturally fell into the pocket of the officer in command.

They heard the roar of the Yellow River long before it came into view, and travelled more than half a day further before arriving at the Crimson Bend crossing. At this bend on the Yellow River, the rocks along the banks are blood-red, hence its name. Dusk was already approaching, but through the evening mists, they could see the fury with which the Yellow River surged eastwards, its muddy waters bubbling and boiling against the banks.

"We will cross the river tonight," Zhang said. "The water is dangerous but if we delay, there may be trouble."

With the river running so fast, the crossing could only be made by sheepskin rafts. Soldiers were sent out to search for rafts, but they could not find any. Darkness fell. Zhang was just becoming anxious when he spotted two sheepskin rafts shooting down the river towards them. The soldiers shouted, and the two rafts edged towards the bank.

"Hey, boatman!" Cao shouted. "Ferry us across and we'll pay you well."

The big man on the raft stood up and waved his hand.

"You're a mute," said Cao.

"Damn your ancestors," replied the man in Cantonese. "If you're coming then come, if you're not, then don't. You bunch of bastards. It's a waste of time dealing with you." Cao and the others understood not a word of it. Cao ignored him and invited Zhang and the bodyguards escorting Wen to get onto the rafts first.

Zhang weighed up the boatman. His wide-brimmed hat hid half his face and it was impossible to distinguish his features clearly. But the muscles on his arms were bunched and bulging, revealing great strength, while the oar in his hands was of a very dark colour and appeared to be made of something other than wood. He felt something was wrong, and not being able to swim, he could not afford to fall victim to some trick.

"Master Cao," he said. "You go first with some of the soldiers."

Cao ordered some of the soldiers onto the two rafts. The current was rapid, but the two boatmen were highly skilled and safely delivered the government troops to the opposite bank, and then returned to take on another batch.

Cao boarded a raft with another group of soldiers, but just as they left the bank, a long whistle sounded behind them which was answered by a host of other whistles.

Zhang hastily ordered the troops to surround the carriage and guard it closely. A crescent moon hung low in the sky. Under its light, he saw about a dozen horses coming towards them. He galloped forward. "What's going on?" he shouted.

The riders formed a single rank as they approached, then one in the middle spurred his horse on and rode ahead of the others. In his hand he held a white folding fan with which he fanned himself. "Is that the 'Fire Hand Judge' Zhang Zhaozhong?" he asked.

"It is," Zhang replied. "And who are you, sir?"

The other laughed. "We thank you for escorting our Brother Wen this far, but we would not want to trouble you further."

"Are you Red Flower Society people?"

"Everyone praises the 'Fire Hand Judge' for his superlative mastery of the martial arts, but he obviously has divine foresight as well," the man replied, smiling. "You are correct. We are Red Flower Society people." He gave a long whistle.

Zhang started slightly as he heard the two boatmen on the rafts give answering whistles.

Cao, seated on one of the rafts, saw the enemy approaching on the shore, and his face turned the colour of mud. The boatman stopped the raft in midstream with a stroke of his oar.

"Thirteenth Brother!" Cao heard a crisp voice call from the other raft. "Ready when you are."

"Right!" the boatman replied. Cao raised his spear and thrust it at him, but the boatman deflected it deftly with his oar and then knocked Cao and all the other soldiers on board into the river. Both boatmen then rowed back close to the shore.

Zhang was thankful for his caution. "You have been killing government troops the whole way," he shouted. "You have committed many unpardonable acts. What is your position in the Red Flower Society, sir?"

"There is no need for you to ask my name," Great Helmsman Chen said. "Xin Yan, give me my weapons."

Xin Yan opened his bag and placed two weapons in Chen's hands. Normally, the other heroes should have fought first, but Chen was unable to resist the opportunity to demonstrate his skills.

Zhang jumped off his horse and strode forward. But just as he was preparing himself for the fight, Imperial Bodyguard Zhu ran up behind him and said: "Master Zhang, let me deal with him."

Zhang decided to let him test out the enemy first. "Be careful, Brother Zhu," he said.

Zhu lunged forward, sword raised. He chopped out at Chen's thigh. Chen jumped lightly off his horse and lifted the shield in his left hand to parry the blow. In the moonlight, Zhu saw that nine glistening, sharp hooks protruded from the face of the shield, and knew that if his sword collided with them, it would be caught in their grasp. He started in fright and hastily withdrew his sword. Chen then flourished the weapon in his right hand: five cords, each one tipped with a steel ball especially designed for hitting the Yuedao points on the human body. Terrified by the ferocious nature of this weapon, Zhu leapt backwards, but the cords circled round behind him, and he felt a sudden numbness on his back. Then the cords entwined his legs and with a tug, Chen pulled Zhu off his feet, swung him round and round, and sent him flying straight towards a rocky outcrop nearby.

If he had hit it, he would have been smashed to pieces. But Zhang, seeing that Zhu was completely out-classed, raced over, grabbed his queue and pulled him down just in front of the rock face.

"Rest for a while, Brother Zhu," he said. Frozen with fear, Zhu was unable to answer.

Zhang raised his precious 'Frozen Emerald' Sword and leapt in front of Chen.

Zhang thrust his sword at Chen's right shoulder. Chen flipped the chords towards the blade, while the shield in his left hand struck out at Zhang.

As they battled, the two boatmen, 'Crocodile' Jiang and Luo Bing, jumped ashore and ran towards the carriages, guarded by the soldiers. Jiang charged straight into the ranks, immediately killing two of the closest soldiers. The others frantically gave way. Luo Bing charged over to one of the carriages, and lifted up the carriage curtain.

"Fourth Brother, are you in there?" she called. But it was 'Scholar' Yu, still seriously wounded. Suddenly hearing Luo Bing's voice through his stupor, he could only think that it was a dream, or that he had died and was meeting her in the other world.

"You've come!" he cried happily.

Luo Bing knew that the voice was not her husband's and ran to the next carriage. But before she could pull aside the curtain, a saw-toothed sword chopped at her from the right. She parried with her sword, and looking up at her attacker in the watery moonlight, recognised him as one of the eight bodyguards who had attacked Wen and herself in Suzhou. With a surge of hatred, she redoubled her attack. Rui was aware of her ability with throwing knives and speeded up his strokes to avoid giving her an opportunity to use them. Then two other bodyguards joined the battle while the soldiers closed in from all sides.

Four more of the heroes led by 'Leopard' Wei galloped towards her through a hail of arrows. One arrow planted itself in the neck of Wei's horse, and the pain made it gallop even more furiously. The animal's hooves hit the chest of one of the soldiers, Wei flew off the horse with his hooks raised, and amid a chorus of screams, gouged them into the breasts of two other soldiers. Wei then aimed the hooks at Bodyguard Rui who was forced to abandon his attack on Luo Bing. 'Hunchback' Zhang Jin and the others also raced up and the soldiers scattered.

Free once more, Luo Bing threw herself into the carriage and hugged Wen's neck, then burst into tears.

After a while, Zhang Jin stuck his head in through the carriage curtain. "Fourth Brother," he grinned. "We've come to take you back."

He climbed onto the driver's seat and the carriage moved off northwards away from the river, and stopped by the side of a mound, from which they could get a good view of the battle.

Suddenly, Zhang broke away from his duel with Chen and ran for Wen's carriage.

Luo Bing saw him coming and brandished her sword at him. But Zhang's sword was extraordinarily tough, and as they clashed with a 'clang', it snapped her blade in two. With the rest of his strength, Zhang leapt up into the carriage and pulled Luo Bing in with him. Greatly frightened, the other heroes raced up to save her, and Zhang lifted her up and threw her at them. The Twin Knights raced over and caught her.

Meanwhile, Zhang turned and grabbed Wen, and pulled him to the carriage door. "Wen Tailai is here," he shouted. "If anyone dares to come any closer, I'll kill him!"

The cold gleam of Zhang's 'Frozen Emerald' sword was poised at Wen's neck.

"Fourth Brother," Luo Bing wailed, and tried to throw herself at the carriage, but Lu Feiqing held her back and took a step forward himself.

"Zhang!" he called out. "Can you see who I am?" Zhang and he had not seen each other for a long time and it was difficult to see clearly in the moonlight, so Lu drew his White Dragon sword, took hold of the tip of the blade, and bent the handle back so that it formed a circle. Then he let the tip go and the blade bounced back upright and swayed slightly.

Zhang grunted. "Ah, so it's Brother Lu," he said. "Why have you come looking for me?"

"You are wounded," Lu replied. "All the heroes of the Red Flower Society are here as well as 'Iron Gall' Zhou Zhongying. It is going to be hard for you to escape today with your life. But in memory of our benevolent teacher, I will give you a way out."

Zhang grunted again, but said nothing.

Suddenly they heard shouts and cries drifting over from the east, as if a thousand armies were racing towards them. The heroes were filled with apprehension, but Zhang was even more worried.

"This Red Flower Society is truly resourceful," he thought. "Even here in the northwest, they can still call up huge reinforcements."

"Release Master Wen," Lu Feiqing continued, "and I will ask the heroes, out of respect for me, to release you. But there is one thing you must swear to."

Zhang eyed the strong enemies surrounding him. "What?" he said.

"You must swear that you will immediately retire from public life and no longer be a running dog of the Manchus."

Zhang had pursued glory and wealth with fervour and he had risen in rank as fast as though swept upwards up by a whirlwind. Wanting him to give up his position was just the same as wanting his life. He released Wen from his grip, pulled at the mule's reins, and the carriage charged forward.

The heroes held back afraid of risking Wen's life, but Luo Bing could not stand it. "Release him and we'll let you go without having to swear to anything," she called desperately.

Zhang took no notice and drove the carriage on towards the ranks of Manchu troops, who had by now regrouped.

Bodyguard Rui saw Zhang approaching and ordered the soldiers to fix arrows in their bows in readiness. The roar of the approaching column was getting louder and both Red Flower Society and the soldiers were afraid that they were reinforcements for the other side.

"Brother Wei, take three others and scatter the Eagle's Claws," Chen shouted.

Wei and the others raised their weapons and charged into the Manchu ranks, slaughtering as they went.

A youngster darted out from behind Lu Feiqing saying: "I'm going too!" Chen frowned: it was Li Yuanzhi, once more dressed in boy's clothes.

When Lu met up with her again after the battle, Yuanzhi had insisted that he take her with him to help rescue Wen. Lu finally agreed, but made her promise that she would do as she was told. Yuanzhi then wrote a letter to her mother in which she said she had decided to go on ahead alone to see her father in Hangzhou.

Chen quickly issued his instructions, and 'Buddha' Zhao raced after the carriage and sent two sleeve arrows flying into the eyes of the mule pulling it along. The mule gave a long scream and reared up on its hind legs. The Twin Knights charged to either side of the carriage and flung their Flying Claws at Zhang, who fended them off with his sword. Simultaneously, Priest Wu Chen and Xu attacked Zhang's back.

"Now!" Chen shouted to Xin Yan. The two soared through the air and landed on top of the carriage.

Zhang heard Chen and Xin Yan land above and behind him and threw a handful of Golden Needles at them.

Chen saw the movement, and pushed Xin Yan off the carriage and placed the shield in front of his own body. There was a patter of metallic noises as the needles hit it, but despite the extraordinary speed of his reflexes, he heard Xin Yan cry out. Knowing the boy had been hit, Chen hastily leapt down to help him. Zhang threw another handful of the needles at Priest Wu Chen and Xu. The Priest flew out of the back of the carriage like an arrow, moving faster and further than the needles. Xu, however, only had time to lift a cotton coverlet in the carriage to block the needles. But his left shoulder was left exposed and with a sudden feeling of numbness, he fell out of the carriage.

Zhang Jin raced over to help him. "Brother Xu, are you all right?" he shouted, bending over. Suddenly he felt a great pain in his back as he was hit by an arrow, and stumbled.

"Brothers! Everyone regroup!" Chen shouted. Arrows were flying towards them like thick clouds of locusts. Zhang Jin put his left hand on Priest Wu Chen's shoulder and hit out at the arrows with his wolf's tooth club.

"Tenth Brother, don't move!" the Priest said. "Control yourself." He stopped the flow of blood from Zhang Jin's wound with a touch to the artery and carefully pulled the arrow out. Then he ripped a corner off his robes and bound up the wound.

Then they saw a pitch-black mass of Manchu soldiers surging towards them from the east.

Zhang was ecstatic at the sight of reinforcements arriving, but his breathing was becoming difficult and he knew that his injuries were serious. Chen and the others attacked the carriage once more, and he lifted up Wen's body, and swung it round and round as a detachment of cavalry charged towards the Red Flower Society fighters with sabres raised. Chen could see that Wen would certainly be killed if they attempted to recapture him by force, so he gave a loud whistle and raced behind a nearby mound with the others following.

Chen conducted a head-count, and found that Xu, Zhou Qi, Yuanzhi, Lord Zhou and Meng were missing.

"Has anyone seen Brother Xu and Lord Zhou?" Chen asked.

Zhang Jin, who was lying on the ground, raised his head and said: "Seventh Brother was injured. Isn't he here? I'll go and find him."

He stood up, but the arrow wound on his back was too serious, and he swayed unsteadily.

"Don't you move, Tenth Brother," said 'Melancholy Ghost' Shi. "I'll go."

"I'll go too," added 'Crocodile' Jiang, but Chen held him back. "You and Fourth Sister make your way to the river bank and prepare the rafts," he said. Jiang and Luo Bing, her hopes dashed again, left.

Shi leapt onto a horse and galloped off around the mound with sword in hand. By this time, the Manchu troops were everywhere. Shi rode up onto higher ground and looked around, but could see no sign of Xu and the others, so he rode into the enemy's ranks to search for them.

Not long after, Lord Zhou and Meng appeared.

"Have you seen your daughter?" Chen asked. Zhou shook his head, full of anxiety.

"My young pupil has disappeared too," Lu Feiqing said. "I'll go and look for them."

As he rode out, the ranks of the Manchu troops suddenly parted and several horses charged towards him. In the lead was Priest Wu Chen dragging Wei along with his hand. Lu started in surprise when he saw Wei, his whole body covered in blood and dirt, and immediately moved forward to obstruct any pursuers. But the Manchu troops did not dare to obstruct these ferocious-looking men and let them retreat behind the mound.

Chen quickly went to see Wei, who was delirious, shouting: "Kill the bastards!"

"Ninth Brother has worn himself out with all this killing," Priest Wu Chen said. "His mind is a little confused. Nothing serious."

"Have you seen Brother Xu and Brother Shi?" Chen asked.

"I'll go and look for them" the Priest said.

"There's also Mistress Zhou and the Master Lu's pupil," Chen said.

Priest Wu Chen mounted up, sword at the ready, and charged back into the Manchu ranks. A Manchu officer spurred his horse forward and charged at him with spear raised, but the priest dodged the spear thrust and drove his sword into the officer's heart. The officer slumped off his horse and the soldiers under his command howled and scattered in all directions. Priest Wu Chen continued his onslaught and soldiers fell wherever his sword went. As

he galloped along a stretch of the road, he saw a crowd of soldiers with 'Melancholy Ghost' Shi in the middle fighting fiercely with three officers.

"Get away, I'll cover you!" Priest Wu Chen shouted.

The two raced back to the mound, but there was still no indication of what had happened to Xu and the others. A Manchu company commander led his soldiers in an attack on the mound occupied by the Red Flower Society, but the heroes immediately killed more than a dozen of them, and the rest retreated.

Chen led his horse up onto the mound. "Brother Meng," he said, handing him the reins. "Hold it steady and make sure it doesn't get hit by a stray arrow." He leapt up onto the horse's back and stood on the saddle. Looking around, he saw the huge Manchu column surging towards them from the east. A bugle sounded and the column turned into a fiery dragon as each soldier raised a torch. Amidst the glow, he saw a large banner flowing in the wind on which he could just make out the words "Border Pacification General Zhao" written in large characters. Each soldier in the column was riding a tall, sturdy horse, and there was a clanking noise as they marched, indicating they were probably wearing armour.

Chen jumped down from the horse. "Armoured troops on the way," he shouted. "Everyone head for the river."

Lord Zhou was very worried about his daughter, but finding her among such a huge body of troops was impossible. The heroes helped up Wei, Zhang Jin and the other wounded, and galloped towards the banks of the Yellow River with the Manchu cavalry in hot pursuit. Luo Bing and Jiang punted the sheepskin rafts up to the shore and took the wounded on board first.

"Everyone get on the rafts quickly!" Chen yelled. "Priest Wu Chen, Third Brother, Lord Zhou, we four will hold..."

Before he could finish, a wave of crossbow arrows flew towards them.

"Charge!" roared Priest Wu Chen, and the four threw themselves at the first ranks of cavalry. Lord Zhou's huge sword rose and fell, cutting Manchu soldiers down from their horses, while 'Buddha' Zhao slung copper coins at the eye-slits in their armour. Although it was impossible to see clearly in the dark, he still managed to blind five or six men. By this time, everyone except Chen and the other three had boarded the rafts.

Chen spotted a mounted officer directing the troops, and sprang over to him. He pulled the officer from his horse and ran for the river bank with him under his arm. The Manchu troops rushed forward to try to save their

commanding officer, but they didn't dare to fire any arrows. Chen leapt onto one of the rafts and Jiang and Luo Bing began to move them out towards the centre of the river.

The Yellow River was in full flood and with the current powerful and turbulent, the two large sheepskin rafts flew off downstream. The hubbub of the great armed column slowly faded as the river roared around them.

The heroes set about tending to the wounded. 'Leopard' Wei's mind gradually cleared and his body was found to be free from wounds. 'Buddha' Zhao was an expert at medical treatment as well as with darts and he bound up 'Iron Pagoda' Yang's and Zhang Jin's wounds. Zhang Jin was more seriously injured, but was in no danger. Xin Yan had been hit by several Golden Needles, and was in such pain that he cried out continually. The needles had penetrated right through the flesh into the bones, and Zhao took a magnet from his medicine bag and drew them out one by one. Luo Bing rowed on silently. Not only had they failed to rescue Wen, but 'Mastermind' Xu, Zhou Qi, Lu Feiqing and his pupil had been lost as well, and no-one knew where 'Scholar' Yu had got to.

Chen roused the captured Manchu officer. "What the hell was your column doing travelling through the night like that?" he asked.

The officer said nothing. Yang slapped him on the face. "Are you going to talk?" he shouted.

"I'll talk...I'll talk," the officer said quickly, holding his cheek. "What do you want me to say?"

"What was your column doing travelling at night?"

"General Zhao Wei received an Imperial command ordering us to attack the Muslim areas and take them over before a certain date. He was afraid we wouldn't make it in the time limit, and also that the Muslims would hear of our approach and make preparations. So we've been marching day and night."

"The Muslims are very well-behaved," said Chen. "Why are you going to attack them?"

"That...that, I don't know," the officer said.

"If you are heading for the Muslim areas, why did you come to interfere in our business?"

"General Zhao heard of some bandits making trouble in this area and ordered me to lead a detail to deal with them, but the main army didn't stop..."

Before he could finish, Yang gave him another slap. "Damn your mother!" he shouted. "It's you who are the bandits!"

"Yes, yes! I made a mistake!" the officer cried.

Chen was silent for a while, then questioned the officer closely regarding the army's troop strength, route and rations. Some of it the officer didn't know, but he did not dare to hide what he did know.

"Head...For...The...Shore" Chen shouted at the top of his voice. Luo Bing and Jiang steered the rafts towards the bank and everyone stepped ashore.

Chen called the Twin Knights over.

"Travel back as fast as you can and find out what happened to the others," he said. "If they have fallen into the hands of the Manchus, they will certainly be taken back to Beijing along the Great Road. We can intercept them further east and work out some way of rescuing them."

The Twin Knights nodded and started out.

"Twelfth Brother," Chen continued, turning to 'Melancholy Ghost' Shi. "I want you to do something for me."

"Whatever you say, Great Helmsman."

Chen wrote out a letter under the light of the moon.

"Please take this letter to Master Muzhuolun in the Muslim regions," he said. "We have only met him and his people once, but they showed the greatest friendship towards us, so we cannot stand idly by. Fourth Sister, please lend your white horse to Twelfth Brother for the trip." Luo Bing had kept the animal aboard the raft throughout the battle.

Shi mounted up and disappeared in a cloud of dust. With the horse's phenomenal speed, he estimated he could overtake the army in a day and be in time to warn Muzhuolun.

Chen then directed Jiang to tie the officer's hands behind his back. They placed him on one of the rafts and pushed it out into the stream and left it for Fate to decide whether he should live or die.