

22

Xu followed Chen's secret markings to Kaifeng and met the heroes at the home of the local society leader there. The heroes were very happy to see that he was all right, and a banquet was held to welcome him. By this time, Zhang Jin, 'Leopard' Wei and Xin Yan had all recovered from their wounds. 'Melancholy Ghost' Shi had not yet returned from the Muslim border regions and the Twin Knights were still trying to find out what had happened to Wen.

Xu did not mention anything about Lady Zhou or Zhou Qi to Lord Zhou. He was afraid that if questioned closely, it would be difficult to word his answers. And anyway, he thought, they will be here within a day. So he only told the heroes about what he had heard of 'Scholar' Yu: that he was badly wounded and travelling with a girl dressed as a boy. They discussed the matter for a while but could not think who the girl could be. They were all worried about his safety, but Yu was quick-witted and they were confident he would be all right.

Early next morning, Zhou Qi arrived by herself and her father and the others were delighted to see her. After greetings were over, she said quietly to Xu: "Come with me. I have something to say to you."

He walked slowly after her. He thought she wanted to berate him for leaving them behind, but he was wrong.

"My mother won't come to see my father," Zhou Qi whispered. "Think of something."

"Well, ask your father to go to see her," said Xu, surprised.

"She still wouldn't be willing to see him. She goes on and on about the death of my brother, saying my father has no conscience."

Xu thought for a moment. "All right," he said finally. "I have an idea." He quietly gave her instructions.

"Will it work?" she asked.

"Definitely. You'd better go immediately."

Xu waited until she had left, then returned to sit with the other heroes. When the appointed hour arrived, he quietly said to Lord Zhou: "I understand the Bamboo Garden restaurant next to the Iron Pagoda Temple is famous for its excellent wine. Let us go and try it."

"Good idea! I will be the host," replied Zhou, who was always interested in wine. "We can all go and drink our fill."

"The eyes and ears of officials are numerous in this city. It would not be a good idea for all of us to go," Xu replied. "Perhaps if just the Great Helmsman and I accompanied you, what do you think?"

"All right," Zhou replied. "Once again, it is you that thinks things out most carefully."

After speaking to Chen, the three went directly to the Iron Pagoda Temple. The Bamboo Garden was as good as its reputation. The three men talked, ate Yellow River carp and drank wine until they were drunk.

Xu raised his cup to Zhou. "I drink to you, Lord Zhou, in honour of your being reunited today with your daughter," he said.

Zhou drank a mouthful and sighed.

"You are not happy," Xu continued. "Is it because Iron Gall Manor was burned to the ground?"

"Wealth is not a part of the flesh. Such a thing as Iron Gall Manor is not worthy of regret," Zhou replied.

"Well then, you must be thinking of your deceased son?"

Zhou said nothing but sighed once again.

"Seventh Brother, let us go," said Chen. "I've had enough wine."

Xu ignored him. "Why did Lady Zhou leave home?" he asked.

"She blamed me for killing the child. Ah, where could she have run to, all alone? She loved him as much as her own life. I have truly failed her. I had no intention of killing him. It was just a slip of the hand in anger. Once we have rescued Master Wen, I will search to the farthest ends of the earth to find her and bring her back."

As he spoke the door curtain parted and Lady Zhou and Zhou Qi walked in.

"I heard what you said," said Lady Zhou. "I'm glad to see you're willing to admit your mistake. I'm here now, so there's no need to go looking for me."

Zhou was so startled and delighted at the sudden appearance of his wife that he was momentarily speechless.

"Brother Chen, this is my mother," Zhou Qi said. "Mother, this is Great Helmsman Chen of the Red Flower Society." The two greeted each other formally.

"Father, what a coincidence this is," the girl added. "I had heard that the wine here was good and decided to try it. Mother didn't want to come and I had to drag her along. Who would have guessed that you would be here too?"

They all laughed and drank, Zhou Qi was exuberantly happy, and without thinking, she began to talk elatedly about how Lead Escort Tong had been killed and the death of her brother and the burning of the manor avenged. Xu surreptitiously tried to stop her, but she took no notice.

"Brother Xu was very clever to think of a way to deal with them," she exclaimed. "After all the Lead Escorts had passed out, we jumped in through the window and saved mother. Then he lifted Tong up and let me kill that villainous bandit myself."

Zhou and Chen toasted Xu.

"You have saved my wife and taken revenge on my behalf," Zhou said to him. "I am eternally grateful to you."

"How did you two meet up on the way?" Chen asked, and Xu faltered along for a few sentences trying to explain.

"Damn! Damn!" Zhou Qi thought to herself in distress. Her face flushed and an unintentional movement of her arm knocked her chopsticks and winecup to the ground. The winecup smashed loudly, increasing her embarrassment.

Chen examined both their faces carefully, and when they had returned to the residence, he called Xu over to one side.

"Brother Xu, what is your opinion of Mistress Zhou?" he asked.

"Great Helmsman," Xu replied hurriedly. "Please don't mention what she said in the restaurant to anyone. She is a good person and has a pure heart, but if other people knew and added a touch of filth, we wouldn't ever be able to face Lord Zhou again."

"I think Mistress Zhou is an extremely nice person too," Chen said. "How would you like me to be your match-maker?"

"That's impossible," said Xu, jumping up. "How could I be good enough for her?"

"You must not be so modest. You are the 'Kungfu Mastermind', renowned throughout the fighting community. Lord Zhou always speaks of you with the greatest respect."

Xu stood dumbfounded for a second.

"What do you think?" Chen repeated.

"Great Helmsman, you don't know. She doesn't like me."

"How do you know?"

"She said so herself. She said she hated my peculiar ways. We have been quarrelling and arguing ever since we met."

Chen laughed. "So you're certain?"

"Great Helmsman, there's no point talking about it. We cannot risk being turned down."

Just then, a servant entered.

"Master Chen," he said. "Lord Zhou is outside and wishes to speak to you."

Chen smiled at Xu and walked out of the room. He saw Zhou pacing up and down the corridor with his hands behind his back and quickly went up to him.

"Lord Zhou, you should have called for me. Was it necessary to come personally?"

"It's not important," Zhou replied, and with a tug on Chen's arm, led him into a reception room and sat down.

"I have something on my mind and want to ask your help," he said. "My daughter is nineteen this year. She has been a good-for-nothing since she was born, but she is basically a good and sincere person. Her faults are the result of my teaching her something of the martial arts. She has wasted much time and still has no husband." He hesitated a moment before continuing. "Everyone respects your honourable Society's Master Xu. I would like to ask you to become a match-maker and arrange for my daughter's betrothal to him. But I am afraid that with her bad temper, she would not be good enough."

Chen was delighted. "Leave this matter completely in my hands," he said. "You are the Taishan Mountain and North Star of the fighting community, Lord Zhou. It is a great honour for the Red Flower Society that you are willing to give up your daughter to one of our brothers. I will go and see to it immediately."

He ran to Xu's room and told him the news. Xu was so delighted, his heart beat wildly.

"Well," Chen said. "Are you willing?"

"Why wouldn't I be willing?"

"I didn't expect that you'd be unwilling," Chen replied with a smile. "But there is something else. All of Lord Zhou's three sons are dead, and the youngest died because of the Red Flower Society. It looks like the Zhou family line is finished. I wonder if you would be willing to make a concession and become not only his son-in-law, but his son as well?"

"You want me to become a member of the Zhou family?"

"Yes. The first of your future sons would be surnamed Zhou, and the second Xu. It would be a small repayment of our debt to Lord Zhou."

Xu agreed. The two went round to Zhou's room and also asked Lady Zhou to come over. Unaware of what was happening, Zhou Qi followed her in. As soon as Zhou saw the expression on the faces of Chen and Xu, he knew the matter was decided.

"Daughter, go outside," he said with a smile.

"You are trying to deceive me about something," she replied accusingly. "I won't have it!" But despite her words, she turned and left.

Chen brought up his idea of Xu becoming a member of the Zhou clan, and Lady Zhou and her husband beamed with delight.

"We are away from home and I don't have anything worthy to present to you," Zhou said to Xu. "But later I will teach you how to use the Iron Gallstones."

Xu was overwhelmed. He had gained both a beautiful wife and a wise teacher, and he knelt down to kowtow in thanks.

As soon as the news leaked out, the other heroes came to offer their congratulations. That night, a great banquet was held to celebrate, but Zhou Qi hid herself and refused to come out.

During the drinking, 'Melancholy Ghost' Shi returned from his journey to the Muslim regions with Muzhuolun's answer to Chen's letter.

Chen took the letter. Just then, 'Crocodile' Jiang raced in shouting: "The Yellow River's broken its banks!"

They clustered round and questioned him on the extent of the disaster.

"The river's already broken through at seven or eight points. In many places the roads are completely impassable," he replied.

They were all concerned about how the peasants were faring. Furthermore, the Twin Knights had still not returned to report on Wen's situation.

"Brothers, we have already waited here several days," said Chen. "Conditions on the road ahead have probably changed, and I am afraid the floods will have ruined our plans. What do you all think we should do?"

"We can't wait any longer," Zhang Jin called out. "Let's get on to Beijing quickly. Even if they are holding Fourth Brother in the Heavenly Prison, we'll still get him out."

The others voiced their agreement, and it was decided to start out immediately. They thanked the local society chief and headed off eastwards.

While on the road, Chen opened and read Muzhuolun's letter. In it, he thanked the Red Flower Society for its warning and said he had called his tribe together and was preparing for war, determined to fight the enemy to the end. The mood of the letter was tragically heroic and Chen's anxiety showed on his face.

"Did Master Muzhuolun have anything else to say?" he asked Shi.

"He asked after Fourth Brother. When he heard we had not yet rescued him, he expressed great concern."

"Did you meet Master Muzhuolun's family?" Chen asked.

"I met his wife, son and two daughters. You know the eldest daughter. She asked after your health."

Chen hesitated. "She didn't say anything other than that?" he asked slowly.

Shi thought for a second. "Just before I left, there appeared to be something else she wished to say to me, but she asked only about the details of our attempt to rescue Fourth Brother."

Chen was silent. He put his hand into his gown and felt the dagger that Huo Qingtong had given him. The blade was eight inches long, bright and dazzling, and the handle was entwined with gold thread. Judging by the amount that had been worn away, it was of great antiquity. Huo Qingtong had said that a great secret was supposed to be hidden in the sword. He had examined it closely over the past few days, but had been unable to find anything unusual about it. He turned and looked back westwards. The host of stars were shining brightly, and he wondered whether on the great flat desert, the same stars were now shining on Huo Qingtong.

They travelled all night, and when morning broke, they were already close to the places where the Yellow River had broken through. The great plain had turned into a vast lake. The fields and homes of people in low-lying

areas had long since been submerged. Many people were camping out in the open on the hilltops.

The heroes made their way round the flood, keeping to the high ground and heading eastwards. Occasionally, they spotted a cluster of corpses bobbing along beside pieces of driftwood. That night, they lodged out in the open, and the next day had to make a long detour.

Zhou Qi had been riding with Luo Bing the whole way, but suddenly she could restrain herself no longer. She spurred her horse on and caught up with Xu.

"You're the one with all the ideas," she said. "Think of a way to save these people."

During the two days since they had become engaged, the two had been too embarrassed to speak to each other. Now, the first thing Zhou Qi did when she opened her mouth was to present him with a problem of mammoth proportions.

"It's all very well to say that, but how can we possibly help so many refugees?" he replied.

"Why would I come and ask you if I knew of a way?"

"First thing tomorrow I will tell all the others that they are not to call me 'Kung Fu Mastermind' anymore. Then you won't be able to put me on the spot like this."

"When did I ever put you on the spot?" Zhou Qi asked quickly. "All right, I was wrong. I would be better off if I didn't say anything." She pouted silently.

"Sister, we are all one family now. We cannot continue to argue like this," Xu said. Zhou Qi ignored him.

"It is I who is in the wrong," he coaxed. "Forgive me this time and give me a smile." Zhou Qi turned her head away.

"Ah, so you won't even smile. You are so bashful in front of your new fiancee."

She burst into laughter. "You talk such nonsense," she said, raising her horse whip.

The road was filled with refugees, dragging their sons and carrying their daughters, crying and wailing as they went. Suddenly a horseman appeared, galloping towards them fast. The road was very narrow and as the rider careered from side to side, he knocked a woman carrying a child into the

water. But he took no notice, and continued to gallop on. The heroes was furious, and as the rider passed by, 'Leopard' Wei pulled him off his horse and punched him solidly in the face. The man screamed and spat out a mouthful of blood and three teeth.

He was a military official.

"You bunch of bandit hooligans," he shouted as he scrambled to his feet. "I am on important official business. I'll deal with you when I come back." He mounted his horse but Zhang Jin pulled him off again.

"What important official business?" he roared.

"Search him," Chen ordered. Zhang Jin frisked him quickly and found an official document which he handed over.

Chen saw the document had a singed corner and a chicken's feather stuck to it indicating that it was an urgent report which the courier would be required to travel day and night to deliver. On it's wrapper was written the words: "Extra Urgent Dispatch for Border Pacification General Zhao." He broke the seal and took out the document.

The courier went white with fear. "That's a secret military document," he shouted. "Aren't you afraid of execution?"

"If anyone's going to be executed, it's you," replied Xin Yan with a laugh.

Chen saw the letter was from a certain commander in charge of provisions reporting to General Zhao that rations for the Great Army had reached Lanfeng, but that because of the floods, there might be a delay of several days before they could be delivered.

Chen handed the letter to Xu. "It has nothing to do with us," he said.

But as Xu read the document an expression of delight filled his face. "Great Helmsman," he cried. "This is truly a great treasure delivered to us on a plate. With this, we can both assist Master Muzhuolun and save the refugees."

He jumped off his horse and walked over to the official and tore the document up in front of him.

"What are you going to do now?" he asked. "Isn't losing a military document a capital offence? If you want to live, it would be best to run."

The official was startled and angry, but he saw the truth of Xu's words. He took off his military uniform, threw it in the water, then ran off, melding into the mass of refugees.

"Steal the provisions and hand them out as disaster relief, and we can kill two birds with one stone," Chen said, nodding. "The only problem is that the provisions for the Great Army are bound to be heavily guarded, and we are few in number. What ideas do you have, Brother Xu?"

Xu whispered a few words in his ear, and Chen nodded in agreement.

"Good, we'll do it that way," he said, and ordered the heroes to disguise themselves and disperse.

Their instructions were to spread rumours.

The next morning, tens of thousands of refugees suddenly descended on Lanfeng. When the county magistrate, Wang Dao, saw the extraordinary situation, he ordered his officers to seize several refugees and question them. They all said they had heard there would be a distribution of relief money and provisions in the city that day. Wang immediately ordered the city gates to be barred, but by then, a huge crowd of refugees had already gathered inside with many more outside. Wang sent someone to announce to the crowd that there would be no distribution of relief, but the crowds continued to grow. Beginning to feel nervous, he went personally to see the Provisions Commander Sun, who was stationed in the Stone Buddha Temple in the eastern part of the city. He asked if some of the commander's troops could be assigned to help control the situation in the city.

"I have my orders from General Zhao," Sun replied. "Any slip-up, no matter how small, before these provisions reach the Great Army will be a capital offence. It is not that I am unwilling to help, but my responsibilities are heavy. Please forgive me, Master Wang."

Wang pleaded with him, but Sun was adamant. Back on the streets, he saw the refugees creating an uproar everywhere.

Night fell, and fires started simultaneously in several parts of the city. Magistrate Wang hurriedly dispatched men to put them out, and in the confusion, an officer ran in to report.

"Master! There's trouble," he cried. "The west gate has been forced by the refugees and thousands more are streaming into the city."

Wang could only rant in despair, completely at a loss for what to do.

"Prepare a horse!" he shouted frantically, and led his guards towards the western part of the city. But before they had gone half a street, they found the way completely blocked by refugees. He heard someone in the midst of the crowd shout: "The food and money are to be distributed at the Stone

Buddha Temple! Everyone to the Stone Buddha Temple!" The refugees surged forward.

Wang could see the way was impassible. He decided there was nothing for it but to go to the Stone Buddha Temple and seek refuge there. When he arrived, the temple gate was already tightly shut, but the guard recognized him and let him in. Outside, the refugees had already surrounded the temple. Someone in the crowd shouted: "All the relief cash and food issued by the court have been swallowed by the dog officials. Hand out the cash and food! Hand out the cash and food!"

The mass of the refugees took up the chant and their roar rattled the roof tiles.

Wang shook uncontrollably. "Rebels!" he bellowed. "Rebels!"

For a military official, Commander Sun was quite brave. He ordered his soldiers to place a ladder next to the wall and climbed up on top.

"Those of you who are peaceful citizens, leave the city quickly and do not put faith in rumours," he shouted. "If you do not leave, we will be forced to fire on you with arrows."

The two officers led a group of archers onto the top of the wall and a roar of defiance went up from the crowd.

"Fire!" shouted Sun. A wave of arrows shot out and a dozen or more refugees fell to the ground. The crowd turned and fled in panic and the cries of women and children could be heard as the refugees trampled each other.

Sun laughed out loud. But before the laugh ended, someone in the crowd threw two stones at him, one of which hit his cheek. He felt a sharp pain and rubbed the spot only to find his hand covered in blood.

"Fire! Fire!" he ordered in a great rage. The archers shot out another wave of arrows and another dozen refugees were hit.

Suddenly, two tall, thin men leapt up onto the wall, grabbed several of the archers and threw them to the ground. Incensed by the way they had been fired on, the refugees surged back and began beating the archers viciously.

The Red Flower Society heroes in the crowd were greatly surprised by the sudden re-appearance of the Twin Knights. More of them jumped up onto the wall and into the temple courtyard, and a moment later, the temple gates opened and 'Crocodile' Jiang ran out.

"Everyone come and get some food," he shouted, beckoning to the refugees. But the soldiers were many and the refugees did not dare to press in too close. Commander Sun's great sword danced as he fought desperately

along the top of the wall, retreating steadily. Suddenly, his arms went numb, and his sword clattered to the ground at the foot of the wall. Someone forced his hands behind his back, and he felt an icy coldness on his neck.

"You Turtle!" the man behind him shouted. "Order the troops to throw down their weapons and retreat inside the temple!"

Sun hesitated for a second and he felt a sharp pain on his neck as the man lightly moved his sword, breaking through a layer of skin. Not daring to disobey further, Sun shouted out the order. Seeing their commanding officer had been captured, the soldiers did as they were ordered and retired inside the temple as the refugees roared their approval.

Great Helmsman Chen walked into the main hall of the temple and saw the altar piled high with bags of food and cash. 'Melancholy Ghost' Shi pulled County Magistrate Wang in for Chen to dispose of.

"Are you in charge of this county?" Chen asked.

"Y-yes...your Majesty," Wang replied in a quavering voice.

Chen laughed. "Do I look like a king?" he asked.

"I deserved to die. I spoke incorrectly. What is your honourable name, sir?"

Chen smiled slightly and ignored the question. "Since you are an official, you must have some scholarship in you," he said. "I will give you the first line of a couplet for you to match." He lightly waved his fan. "If you are able to match it, your life will be spared. If you cannot, then I will not be so polite."

The refugees gathered round, forming a circle of thousands of eyes all focussed on Wang's face.

"Now listen," said Chen. "The first line is: 'How long must we live for the Yellow River to be clear of mud? Rather ask if officialdom can be cleared of corruption.'"

Wang's face was covered in sweat. He was a competent scholar, but in the midst of his fear, he could think of nothing.

"Sir," he finally said. "Your first line is too difficult. I...I cannot match it."

"That's all right," Chen replied. "Let me ask you plainly. Which would be easier: to clear up the Yellow River or officialdom?"

Wang suddenly had an idea. "I consider that if all officialdom were clear, then the Yellow River would be clear too," he said.

Chen laughed. "Well said. I shall spare your life. Call together your guards and distribute the money and food to the refugees. Oh, and Commander Sun, you can help too."

The refugees cheered thunderously for the Red Flower Society heroes. As they filed past to collect the food and money, they jeered and laughed at Sun and Wang, who pretended not to notice.

"Brothers and sisters, listen!" Chen called out. "If the authorities should send people to investigate, you can say it was the Commander and County Magistrate who personally made the distribution."

The refugees shouted their approval.

The heroes supervised the operation late into the night until all the food and cash had been distributed.

"Brothers!" Xu then shouted to the refugees. "Take the soldiers' weapons and hide them in your homes. If the dog officials know what's good for them, they'll leave you alone, but if they should come after you, you can fight them."

Strong men came forward and collected up the swords and spears that had been discarded by the soldiers.

Chen walked out of the temple with Commander Sun and the other heroes as the refugees roared their thanks. They mounted their horses and rode out of the city. After travelling a few miles, Chen pushed Sun off his horse.

"Commander, thank you for your help," he said. "The next time you escort provisions, be sure to write to me." He laughed and saluted, then galloped off in a cloud of dust with the other heroes.

"Do you have any news of Fourth Brother?" Chen asked the Twin Knights after they had ridden on a little way.

"We found a message left by Brother Yu which said he was being taken to Hangzhou," one of them replied.

Chen was greatly surprised. "Why is he being sent to Hangzhou and not Beijing?" he asked. "I thought the Emperor wanted to question him personally."

"We thought it strange too. But Brother Yu always handles things very carefully. It's certain to be reliable information."

Chen told the others to dismount, and they sat round in a circle and discussed the situation.

"Since Brother Wen is being sent to Hangzhou, we should head south and try to work out some way of saving him," Xu said. "Hangzhou is our territory. The power of the court is not as great there as in Beijing, so it should be easier to rescue him. But we should still send someone to Beijing to see if there is any news, just in case."

The others agreed. Chen looked over at Shi. "I wonder if I can trouble you to go once more, Twelfth Brother," he said.

"All right," Shi replied. He headed off northwards alone towards Beijing while the other heroes rode south.

Chen enquired further of the Twin Knights about Yu's movements, but they said they had no further information. They had returned to report as soon as they had seen the markings. Passing through Lanfeng, they had come across the refugees and met up with the other heroes.

"With the provisions gone, Sister Huo Qingtong and her people should have no trouble beating the Great Army," Zhou Qi said.

"That girl's sword style wasn't bad, and she was a nice person too," added Priest Wu Chen. "She deserves our help. I hope she does beat them. It would be something everyone could rejoice at."