

BARRY HUGHART

THE SEQUEL TO BRIDGE OF BIRDS AND THE STORY OF THE STONE

EIGHT SKILLED GENTLEMEN

A NOVEL



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by Barry Hughart

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*For Derk Bodde, Göran Aijmer,
and all the other pioneers
who almost got it right*

1

I have no intention of setting down the disgusting details concerning Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu. I will only say that I was half dead by the time we caught him, and Master Li had been so sorely pressed that he actually volunteered to serve as imperial witness to the execution. This was unprecedented because the old man hates to dress up in formal First Rank attire, even though he's still entitled to wear it, and he cannot tolerate the noise.

Executions in Peking are public occasions, held at the Vegetable Market that forms the western boundary of Heaven's Bridge, the criminal area of the city. A large audience always attends, and this particular Execution Day was certain to draw a larger and louder crowd than ever because Devil's Hand was going for the record. "Devil's Hand" is a generic name passed from one Chief Executioner of Peking to the other, and several centuries ago the executioner managed 1,070 consecutive clean decapitations without needing a second swipe of his great sword. Our current Devil's Hand had 1,044

consecutive clean kills, and since thirty condemned criminals were scheduled for execution the old record could fall before the day was done.

It was the first day of the fourth moon in the Year of the Horse 3338 (A.D. 640) and every gambler in the city was packed into the square, besieging the bookmakers' booths, and Master Li said he hadn't seen so much money tossed around since Emperor Yang bet the city of Soochow on a cricket fight. (The bookmakers were facing ruin since they had originally offered astronomical odds against the record being broken. I had a small wager myself, but against Devil's Hand. The pressure on him was tremendous and would get worse with every falling head, and all it would take to miss would be a bit of a bug or a slip in a puddle of blood, and anyone who thinks it's easy to hit a stationary target in the exact same spot again and again with a heavy blade is advised to try chopping down a tree.) That meant every pickpocket and confidence man in Peking was on hand, and with the audience in an unusually festive mood it was to be expected that every vender who could cram his wares into the square would do so, and the result was the shattering of uncounted eardrums. Like this:

" Sha la jen la! "

" Hao! Hao! Hao! "

" Hao tao! "

" Boinngg-boinngg-boinngg-boinngg-boinngg! "

" My purse! Where is my silver necklace! "

Meaning Devil's Hand roared the ritual, "I've got my man!" and the mob howled, "Good! Good! Good!" and connoisseurs spread credit where it was due by screaming "Good sword!" and a dealer in household sundries crept up behind me and took aim at my left ear and unleashed the traditional sound that advertised his wares: wooden balls at the ends of strings smacking viciously against brass gongs. The last agonized wail speaks for itself, and it was really very interesting to look down from my vantage point and see the victim being divested of his valuables by Fu-po the Ferret.

I was seated beside Master Li on the dignitaries' platform, sweating in the uncomfortable junior nobleman's uniform he makes me wear on such occasions and which will land me in boiling oil one of these days since I am scarcely entitled to the badges of rank. Master Li was letting an underling handle the honors until it came time for Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu to receive the sword, and was passing the time by catching up on his correspondence. He leaned over and yelled in my ear, trying to shout above the ghastly din.

"Something for you, Ox!"

He was waving a missive that seemed to consist of tracks made by a chicken after gobbling fermented mash.

"A literate barbarian!" Master Li yelled. "Fellow named Quintus Flaccus the Fourth, writing from a place called the Sabine Hills! Somehow or other he got his hands on one of your memoirs!" He swiftly scanned the chicken tracks. "Usual critical comments!" he yelled. "Clotted construction, inept imagery, mangled metaphors, and so on!"

"Nice of him to write!" I shouted back.

" *Sha la jen la!* "

" *Hao! Hao! Hao!* "

" *Hao tao!* "

" *Who has taken my bronze belt buckle and my python skin belt!* "

" *Whangity-whangity-whangity-whang!* "

That was a cobbler who had taken aim at my right ear and was advertising by smashing his metal foot-frame with a hammer. The head just chopped off by Devil's Hand, I noticed, was rolling like a ball across the cobblestones toward two little girls who were seated facing each other, playing the handclap game: clap opposing hands, clap left hands, clap right hands, clap own hands, and so on, while singing an ancient nonsense rhyme. They watched the severed head approach with large eyes, lifted their stubby legs in unison to let it roll past, and resumed clapping. Shrill happy voices reached through a momentary pause in the din:

*"Kuang kuang ch'a,
Kuang kuang ch 'a,
Miao li he shang
Meiyu't'ou fa!"*

Did barbarian children in the Sabine Hills chant something like that while clapping hands?

"Cymbals a pair,
Cymbals a pair,
The old temple priest
He has no hair!"

Master Li leaned over and began yelling again. "Ox, this barbarian is a remarkably sound critic! Listen to this. ' *Inceptis gravibus plerumque et magna professis purpureus, late qui splendeat, unus e alter adsuitur pannus, ut proicit ampullus! Parturient mantes, nascetur ridiculus mus* ' A bit prolix, but beautifully phrased, isn't it?"

I have no idea why he asks questions like that. I continued to sit with my mouth slackly ajar in flycatching position while another prisoner received last words from the junior official and was dragged to the chopping block. Master Li placed his lips back against my ear.

"A rough translation might be: 'Often on a work of grave purpose and high promise is tacked a purple patch or two to give it color, but throw away the paintpot! Your mountains labor to give birth a laughable little mouse.' "

"Very nicely phrased," I said.

"That's not all," said Master Li. "He gets better, except he still uses more words than he should and like all uncivilized writers his prose is strangled by unnecessary punctuation. I'm half tempted to send friend Placcus a manual on Chinese Poetic Shorthand. Do you know Li Po's 'Short Song'?"

'Earth too big
Sky too far
Ride six dragons
Around North Star
Crazy dragons stinking drunk
Enjoy self!'

"Think, my boy, of the benefit to the barbarian's style if he studied Li Po's technique and altered his missive accordingly.

'Purpose grave
Promise high
Mountains labor
By and by
Out creeps mouse with purple nose
Throw away paintpot!' "

"A vast improvement," I said.

I forgot to mention the venders of soft drinks. These fellows are almost alone in advertising their wares with their own voices, and the reason is that each and every one is convinced he's but a temporarily undiscovered star of Peking opera, and one of the bastards had crept up behind me and was pointing his gaping maw at both my ears. Along with the rest of it, the result was like this:

" *Sha la jen la!* "

" *Hao! Hao! Hao!* "

" *Hao tao!* "

*"Soothing syrups chilled with ice!
Try mine once you'll try them twice!
Ten cash a cup to beat the heat
With a taste like snow, but sweet-sweet-sweet!"*

" *Who has made off with my costly silk trousers! My pure velvet loin-cloth!* "

" *Clang-clang-clang-clang-clang-clang-clang!* "

That last was a scissors grinder. They advertise by clashing rows of metal discs sewn into the lining of their long, wide sleeves, and the sound has the peculiar quality of cracking the porcelain of your teeth. The latest severed head rolled to the little girls, who didn't even look up as they automatically raised their legs, and the sweet childish chant continued as the head joined the row of its bodiless colleagues, and I suddenly leaned forward and started to count: ". . . twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six." Twenty-six meant Devil's Hand had just tied the record, and the next would set a new one! I was going to lose my bet unless a miracle happened, but I didn't mind. In fact, for the first time that day I felt a glow of well-being, because I knew the next prisoner in line all too well. How delightful that the record should be set by Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu!

"Ox, here's a very interesting comment from Flaccus the Fourth!" Master Li was yelling. "He begins by bemoaning your excessive sensationalism, and then writes, ' *Ut turpiter atrum desinat in pisces mulier formosa superne* — ' "

I nudged his arm and pointed, and Master Li arose and adjusted his robes. He stepped to the front of

the platform as the bailiffs dragged the prisoner forward, and I could see the old man compose himself and begin formulating suitably dignified Confucian comments to help the hosteler resign himself to his imminent demise. Unfortunately Master Li couldn't quite attain the proper tone of serene gravity since he had to contend with the mob, the vendors, the gamblers, and two little girls clapping hands, and the result was something like this:

"Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu —"

" *Six to five! Last chance at six to five! Money-money-money!* " howled Gold Tooth Meng.

"Your crimes are debased beyond belief —"

" *Whap-whong! Whap-whong! Whap-whong!* "

That was a peddler of combs and hairbrushes who advertised by bashing a drum and a gong simultaneously.

"And were it in my power to do so —"

" *Soothing syrups chilled with ice!* "

" *Stop, thief! Bring back the lint from my navel!* "

"I would sentence you to the Thousand Cuts —"

*"Kuang kuang ch'a,
Kuang kuang ch 'a,
Miao li he shang
Mei yu't'ou fa!"*

" *Beginning with your polecat prick and baboon balls, you miserable turd!* " Master Li yelled at the top of his lungs.

Further words would be redundant. He waved to the bailiffs, who hauled Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu the chopping block and kicked his legs out from under him. Devil's Hand began his breathing exercises and prepared to hoist his sword for the record-breaking attempt, and that was when the first of the extraordinary events that were to entangle us in the affairs of the Eight Skilled Gentlemen occurred.

I wouldn't have believed anybody could scream loud enough to make the mob in the Vegetable Market shut up and pay attention, or make the Chief Executioner of Peking come to a halt with his sword raised high, but that is exactly what happened. All eyes turned to six figures that were racing into the square through the Gate of Prolonged Righteousness. The five men in the lead had wide staring eyes, faces bleached white with terror, and mouths gaping like coal bins as they emitted one earsplitting scream after another. The sixth figure was the cause of the commotion, and one look was enough to freeze my blood. I had heard tales of vampire ghouls from Auntie Hua since I was five years old, but I had never expected to see one, and this *ch'ih-mei*, as Master Li later confirmed, was a specimen so classic it could have been used to illustrate the famous scientific study by the great P'u Sung-ling, Recorder of Things Strange.

It had long greenish-white hair growing all over it, tangled and rank, dripping with decaying fungus from a tomb. Its huge red eyes glared like charcoal fires, and its vulture claws dripped with somebody's blood, and its huge tiger teeth glittered in the sunlight. The terrible thing moved with immense powerful strides and would surely have caught the fleeing men in no time if it had run in a straight line. Instead it weaved and stumbled, clawing the air with impotent fury, and when it ran into one of the vender's carts I finally realized what Master Li had grasped instantly. The monster was blind and dying. That was what Auntie Hua had always told me: "Number Ten Ox, if you are chased by a *ch'ih-mei*, run to daylight! The sun is poison to the living dead!"

The old lady had been right. The vampire ghoul stumbled around in circles, and when it started toward the chopping block Devil's Hand almost twisted himself in half. Instinctively he had started his great sword down toward the block, and then he tried to stop in mid-swing and arc the blade toward the monster, and the result was that he missed the neck of Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu by three feet and the sword shot up a shower of sparks as it struck the cobblestones.

" *Ten thousand blessings!* " screamed Gold Tooth Meng, and every bookmaker in Peking joined in an earsplitting howl of " *Money-money-money-money-money!* " because Devil's Hand had just missed his chance to break the record and the bookmakers had been saved from bankruptcy. They immediately took off after wealthy bettors they'd given credit to, joining the howling mob battling to escape from the square through the Gate of Peace and Harmony. I saw a young mother snatch up the little handclapping girls, one under each arm, and kick severed heads out of the way like calabashes as she galloped for safety. Venders' carts and stalls were flying every which way, and showers of shattered bamboo poles and brilliantly painted canvas awnings joined goods of every description that covered the square. In an astonishingly short period of time the only occupants of the Vegetable Market were Devil's Hand, Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu, bailiffs who couldn't flee because they were chained to the hosteler and had dropped the keys and couldn't find them in the litter, Master Li, a monster, and me. Master Li hopped down from the dignitaries' stand and trotted over toward the monster just as it ran into the Wailing Wall behind the chopping block and fell on its back. I ran after Master Li. Just as I got there the vampire ghoul hissed horribly, clawed the air one more time, shuddered, and lay still. Slowly the terrible fire died in its staring blind eyes, and I didn't need a medical examiner to tell me it was dead.

"Fried internally by sunlight, which penetrates putrid flesh to the vital organs," Master Li said

matter-of-factly.

Putrid flesh indeed. It stank horribly of decaying matter, and its own body was just as responsible for the reek as were the bits of flesh and gristle from the person it had recently eaten sticking to its claws and teeth.

"Absolutely lovely," Master Li said reverently. "A specimen this perfect hasn't been seen in Peking for a thousand years, and I would very much like to know why it left the safety of a grave to commit suicide in burning sunlight."

The answer wasn't long in coming, because seven more figures were running slowly and exhausted through the Gate of Prolonged Righteousness. I recognized the one in the lead, Sergeant Hsienpo of the City Guard, with six of his men behind him. They were panting like a pack of winded hounds when they reached us, and dripping with perspiration. It was clear that the sergeant was delighted to find the monster dead, and almost equally delighted to find a First Rank official to take responsibility. He saluted Master Li smartly.

"Sergeant Hsienpo, sir, from the Coal Hill Watch," he said. "Got a report that suspicious men were at the Lin family cemetery. Found five grave robbers at work in broad daylight, as bold as you please."

The sergeant made no attempt to disguise his admiration for the thieves, who had avoided the guard dogs that patrolled at night by forging a work order for a drainage ditch and marching up the hill with picks and shovels over their shoulders, whistling cheerfully. They could tunnel like moles, and by the time the sergeant and his men had been alerted by the head gardener (he was suspicious because he hadn't received his customary kickback for Coal Hill contracts) they'd already cut two side passages from the central ditch and removed the jewelry and jade burial pieces from two coffins. They were starting on a third when the soldiers tiptoed up behind them.

"So this fellow lifts the lid and freezes solid like a chunk of ice, and these god-awful *claws* come crawling out around the edge, and this horrible *thing* sits up in the coffin and lets out a roar of rage —"

The sergeant told a vivid tale. The grave robbers had taken to their heels with the *ch'ih-mei* behind them, and the sergeant had rallied his men and given chase. The monster had hurled something at the robbers, but it had bounced harmlessly off the back of one of them, and then it had been a footrace which the vampire ghouls would easily have won at nighttime, but the searing sunlight had done its work and allowed the robbers to escape.

"And a smart piece of work, Sergeant!" Master Li said admiringly. "There aren't many men who would give chase to a *ch'ih-mei*, and if a promotion isn't forthcoming I'll be the most surprised man in Peking."

I could see that the sage was wrestling with temptation, and for once temptation lost.

"Actually, Coal Hill isn't my district," he said regretfully. "That's the responsibility of Magistrate Han-shan — you'll never find a better audience for your tale than Han-shan, whose grandmother was eaten by a weretiger — and a shortcut to his yamen would be to retrace your path through the Lin family cemetery."

He had something in mind, of course. The soldiers made a litter for the dead monster from pieces of vendors' stalls while Master Li confronted an unfortunate fact concerning a fortunate gentleman. Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu could not now be executed.

Devil's Hand had swung his sword and missed, which meant that official soothsayers would have to ascertain that the phenomenon had not been caused by the will of Heaven, and the emperor would have to sign a new death warrant, but the emperor was off on another bandit-hunting expedition in Korea. So Devil's Hand and the bailiffs dragged the horrible hosteler back into the dungeon at Executioner's Tower, and then Master Li and I accompanied the soldiers and the dead monster back to Coal Hill.

We climbed the long path all the way to the top where the Lin family estate was. The grave the monster had occupied yielded a great number of gnawed bones, and some fresh bloodstains which seemed to interest Master Li.

"You say the creature hurled something that struck one of the robbers in the back?" he asked.

"It looked like it," Sergeant Hsienpo replied. "Right over here."

They searched through the tall grass until one of the soldiers let out a high sharp yell, and Master Li leaned over and took out his large green handkerchief, and when he straightened up he was carrying a man's half-eaten head.

"No wonder the monster was annoyed. Grave robbers interrupted his dinner," the sage said mildly.

The head had been ripped right from somebody's body, and a nasty tangle of tendons and part of the vertebrae dangled down, making it look like some kind of obscene sea creature. Nobody was going to identify the poor fellow. The vampire ghoul had devoured the face, and I have seldom seen a nastier mess. Master Li had the soldiers look around on the odd chance that the body might be nearby, and then he added the head to the litter and sent the soldiers on toward the yamen, with a note to the magistrate praising the sergeant's work.

Coal Hill is the domain of the wealthiest families of Peking, and when Master Li walked to the edge of the cemetery he was enjoying the most expensive view available. All the city opened up below us, and almost directly down I could see the rosy walls and emerald foliage and blue and yellow and crimson roof tiles of the Forbidden City. The old man was rocking back and forth on his heels with his hands clasped behind his back, whistling tunelessly, and I realized with surprise that he was as happy as a flea surveying the imperial kennels.

"Ox," he said, "the gods have decided to reward us for our ghastly encounter with Sixth Degree Hosteler Tu."

"Sir?" I said.

"Get plenty of brushes, ink, and notebooks," he continued cheerfully. "It might be a nice gesture to send Flaccus the Fourth an account of what's about to transpire."

"Sir?" I said.

He reached inside his elegant robes and pulled out his odorous goatskin flask and removed the plug sending an alcohol reek in my direction that caused me to choke.

"Ox, something about that half-eaten head is almost as unusual as the creature that ate it," said Master Li. "The last criticism from our barbarian friend had to do with fish stories, and unless I am greatly mistaken a great white whale of a case is headed in our direction."

"Sir?" I said.

He swilled a pint of the stuff, and I briefly wondered if a vampire ghoul could have survived it.

"A livid leviathan," he said. "My boy, the spout reaches toward the stars, and the wake rocks offshore islands as it swims toward us, circumnavigating sacred seas with the awesome inevitability of an iceberg."

"Oh," I said.

Early on the following morning a palatial palanquin draped with white cloths of mourning and trailing plumes of smoke from sacrificial incense burners proceeded up the Imperial Way toward the Gate of Correct Department, with a bonze and a Tao-shih marching in front banging a gong and a wooden fish. I had no idea why I was riding in the thing with Master Li, both of us dressed for an aristocratic funeral. My experience with the old man has taught me to keep my mouth shut when the wrinkles around his eyes squeeze up in tight concentric circles, so I waited until his mind relaxed along with the wrinkles, and then he shook himself and turned toward me.

"Ox, have you ever visited the Forbidden City?"

Of course I hadn't. I was scarcely a mandarin or member of the imperial staff, as he knew very well.

"That's where we're headed. I have reason to believe something very peculiar is going on," said Master Li.

He reached into his robe and pulled out a Fire Pearl. (I don't know what barbarians call them. They're convex pieces of crystal or glass used to focus the sun's rays and start fires, and they can also greatly magnify or diminish the image of things. In my village they're "Big-Small Stones.") Then he reached into another pocket and extracted his handkerchief, and when he unfolded it I discovered I was staring at somebody's left ear.

Where had he picked up an ear? It was neatly severed and there was no trace of blood. Then I remembered Master Li the previous afternoon picking up a half-eaten head in the Lin family cemetery, and I remembered how he had been alone when the rest of us went searching for the body.

"Yes, I took the liberty of acquiring a piece of the ch'ih-mei's victim," he said calmly. "Take a look and tell me if you see anything unusual."

I gingerly took the handkerchief and held the Fire Pearl close to the ear.

"The skin is so smooth it shouldn't be real, except it is," I said after a pause. "There's something filling the pores. It's like butter, but not quite, and there's a strange kind of glow to it." I ventured to touch the thing. "It's soft and slick, almost like soapstone, and the stuff filling the pores is just a little bit greasy."

He reclaimed the Fire Pearl and the ear.

"Excellent," he said. "I saw traces of the substance caught in the monster's claws when we examined its body beside the chopping block, and the discovery of the victim's head confirmed my suspicion. The slick stuff is an incredibly expensive compound made principally from rendered goose fat. It's called Protocol Soap, and it has the peculiar property of causing human skin to acquire a soft glow. The stuff is used almost exclusively by eunuchs and ministers in daily attendance upon the emperor, the idea being to suggest a reflection of the radiance that emanates from the Son of Heaven."

It took a moment for that to sink in, and then my eyes widened.

"Sir, do you mean that one of the ministers of state has been killed and eaten by a vampire ghoul?" said in a shocked voice.

"So it would appear," Master Li said mildly. "Even more extraordinary is the fact that no hint of anything amiss has escaped the pink walls. There isn't a place on earth more addicted to gossip and rumor than the Forbidden City, but I checked every source I could think of last night and all I could learn was that something is going on and it's top secret. My boy, it isn't possible that a state minister can vanish without causing an uproar, and keep in mind the fact that we found not one trace of the victim's bones or body. Do his colleagues have it? If so, what could cause mandarins to cover up the crime of the century?"

What indeed? A scandal on a scale to shake the empire seemed not impossible, and as we passed into the Imperial City and started up toward the Altar of Earth and Grain a line began running through my brain: ". . . monsters, mandarins, and murder . . . monsters, mandarins, and murder . . ." The priests at the altar bowed in reverence to the dead as our palanquin passed, as did their counterparts at the Supreme Temple of Ancestors (" . . . monsters, mandarins, and murder . . . monsters, mandarins, and murder . . ."), and dignified Confucian clerks touched their caps respectfully. The Imperial City is the walled enclave of bureaucratic basilicas and aristocratic residences surrounding the Forbidden City of the emperor, but those who assume our funerary progress through such rarefied surroundings was solemn and sedate have never rented palanquins in Peking. I think I may have given a misleading impression, so I will correct it.

" *Sheee-ut!* " screamed Rat-Scurry-down-the-Street from his front left bearer's pole. " *Why don't the big heavy kid sit in the middle with the scrawny old bird on his lap? This thing's as unbalanced as a raft rowed by a rat and a rhinoceros!* "

Viper-in-the-Grass had the matching position on the right bearer's pole.

" *Stop squawking, gong-head! You ain't got the brains to talk and carry at the same time, and when you open your goddamn mouth your shoulders start shaking like tits at a wet nurse convention!* "

Chamber Pot Chong and the Worm, at the rear bearer poles, did not approve.

" *Eat vinegar, you turds! You think we like having our faces sprayed with spit from a pair of polecats with hoof-and-mouth disease!* "

"Ox, from here on we should travel with decorum," Master Li said.

I stopped the palanquin and jumped out and picked up the front bearers' pole along with the bearers still attached to it, and slammed them back to earth in a manner designed to loosen teeth.

"Listen to me, *ming't'e mao tsei!* " (A very useful phrase for visitors to Peking. It means: "You mulberry caterpillar grain-eating grub thieves!") "One more squawk and I'll feed your combined remains to a gnat."

I climbed back into the palanquin and we proceeded in seemly silence between the Phoenix Towers and across the moat. Master Li has been out of official favor for years, but he still has the rank and proper credentials and the guards had no orders to stop him, and we passed without difficulty through the Meridian Gate and the Forbidden City opened in front of us.

"Now I need your sharp young eyes," Master Li said. "If I'm right, one of the senior mandarins made a meal for a vampire ghoul, and for whatever reason his colleagues are doing everything in their power to hush it up. They have to give the fellow a funeral, however, and under the circumstances they can't possibly deny him a pole."

I saw what he meant, but I'm not sure it will be clear to uncivilized readers, so I will briefly explain.

All people have two souls. The higher *hun* soul resides in the liver, and when a person dies a hole is bored in the coffin just above the liver to allow the higher soul to fly in and out when it wishes. The lower *po* soul resides in the lungs, and under no circumstances must it be allowed out. It is the seat of man's animal instincts and behavior, and it can easily go bad and wander the earth as an evil spirit. The *hun* soul must journey back and forth between the liver and the law court of the God of Walls and Ditches in Hell during the forty-nine days in which it is being judged, but when it is away from its familiar body it can easily become disoriented, and it is a great tragedy for a higher soul to get lost. It can panic and settle into a totally inappropriate body and become perverted, and when a higher soul goes bad it *really* goes bad. That is how creatures like vampire ghouls are formed, and that is why a beacon is erected to help traveling souls find their way home. It's a tall pole with a bright red flag at the top, placed outside a house where a death has occurred: left of the door for a man, right for a woman. Master Li's point was that the mandarins couldn't possibly take the chance that their colleague's *hun* soul might get lost and turn into the very kind of monster that had slain him, so they had no choice but to erect a beacon pole.

I kept a lookout for a red pole, and in a way it was a pity. This was my first trip to the Forbidden City and I would have liked to look around and ask Master Li about it, but all I learned that day was that it might better be called the Forbidden Garden. Once we left the central avenue we were in a maze of trees and shrubs and flowers artistically designed to open to delightful or surprising vistas, such as great dragons and phoenixes in ivory bas-relief upon coral walls or exotic birds that appeared to be posing for artists as they settled upon quaint rocks beside turquoise pools. It was one of those bright birds that drew my eyes away from pole searching, and it took a moment to realize that not all the brightness came from feathers.

"There!" I exclaimed.

A tall slim line lifted behind a row of pomegranates, and at the top was a crimson flag. Master Li had the bearers turn at the Golden River and pass through the Gate of United Harmony toward the

complex where he had spent twenty wasted years — at least he called them wasted — and we passed the Hall of Literary Glory, the Hall of Proclaimed Intellect, the Hall of Reverence for the Master (which is the second-greatest library in the world, the first being in Ch'ang-an), and there in the great courtyard of the Hall of Literary Profundity stood the soul pole, left of the entrance, and beneath the red banner flew the flag of a senior scholar who was entitled to display all fourteen symbols of academic distinction: wishing pearls, musical stone, good-luck clouds, rhombus, rhinoceros-horn cup, books, pictures, maple, yarrow, banana leaf, tripod, herb of immortality, money, and the silver shoe.

"That flag narrows the list of possible victims considerably," Master Li said happily. "Has there been any word that one of the foremost scholars in the empire has breathed his last? No, there has not, and now I'm beginning to think that my suspicion of conspiracy and cover-up is a certainty."

When we turned through the outer gates we saw a courtyard crammed with palanquins and carriage and sedan chairs like ours, swathed in mourning cloths. A mob of junior mandarins bowed deeply to Master Li's cap and badges, for he was wearing the whole works, including symbols of imperial office he hadn't held in sixty years, and the effect was very impressive. He marched up the steps as though he owned the place, and we entered a reception hall that was huge to the point of being grotesque. Several forests had been depopulated of wild animals to provide furs to cover the walls, along with immense tapestries and various hangings. A carpet that seemed to be made of white ermine stretched across an acre of floor to a marble dais, and upon the dais rested a huge coffin.

Senior mandarins were making their way with stately dignity up the carpet to pay their last respects to their colleague. Then somebody noticed Master Li. A sharp intake of breath caused heads to turn, and it was fascinating to see eyes widen in sequence and one elegant robe after another twitch backward as though avoiding contact with leprosy — almost a dance, and Master Li did his part by greeting each flinching fellow with a toothy smile: "Wang Chien, dear friend! How delightful that these unworthy eyes should once more bask in your divine radiance!" And so on. At first nobody else said a word, but then the silence was broken.

"Kao! By all the gods it's Li Kao! Now why didn't I think of calling you in on this mess?"

The man who was painfully working his way toward Master Li with the aid of two canes was dried and shriveled and hunched with arthritis, and older than I could have believed possible. I thought Master Li had reached the limit of a human life span, but this gentleman added a good thirty years to the limit. I noticed that his progress was followed by deep bows, and greeted by Master Li with real pleasure.

"Hello, Chang! How are you these days?" he said warmly.

"How am I? Senile of course," the shriveled antique said. "A few days ago I had a long conversation with my eldest grandson, and I was wondering how he'd suddenly grown so intelligent when I realized he's been dead for twenty years and I was talking to the parrot. Who's the big kid with the muscles and the squashed nose?"

Master Li motioned for me to step forward and bow.

"Allow me to present my former client and current assistant, Number Ten Ox," he said. "Ox, this is the Resplendent Thearch, Supreme Lord of the Eastern Aurora and Grand Subtlety, Bearer of the Cinnabar Scepter of the Highest Mystery of the Great Mystery — or, if you prefer, the Celestial Master."

I honestly think the only thing that prevented me from bouncing up and down upon the floor was the fact that my body couldn't decide whether to topple forward or backward. This was none other than Chang Tao-ling, the highest high priest of Taoism, and the only man in the empire universally acknowledged to be a living saint. In my village he was worshipped both by the abbot of our monastery and by my atheistic Uncle Nung, and it was commonly said that a list of his good deeds would cover four of the five sacred mountains, and here I was standing right in front of him. Somehow I managed a jerky bow without falling on my face.

"Kao, you're just the man we need, and I'm glad somebody had the brains to think of it," the Celestial Master said. "It was one of the weirdest things I've seen in my life, which means it might have been designed for you."

The Celestial Master was partially deaf and didn't realize his voice level was just below a shout. Master Li had to speak loudly to make his words clear, and the effect was quite strange: hundreds of people standing stone-faced and silent in a huge vaulted chamber, listening to two voices bounce between walls until their echoes began playing tag above a coffin.

"You say you saw it?" Master Li asked.

"It happened right before my eyes, and if something that horrible has to happen it's just as well the victim was somebody like Ma Tuan Lin. Awful ass, you know, and a disgrace to scholarship," the Celestial Master shouted.

From the sudden gleam in Master Li's eyes I assumed he shared the Celestial Master's opinion of the late Ma Tuan Lin, but he tried to be diplomatic.

"Oh, I don't know. Ma had some good qualities when it came to research. It was only his conclusions that were idiotic."

"Kao, you're too damn generous!" the Celestial Master shouted. "He was a donkey from the top of his head to the tips of his toes, and his self-esteem was as bloated as was his body. You should have seen them try to squeeze that hunk of lard into the coffin."

The saint swiveled painfully on his canes and glared at the rows of tight-lipped mandarins.

"Damn fools!" he yelled. "If you'd given Ma's corpse an enema you could have buried what

remained in a walnut shell!"

He turned back to Master Li.

"All right, this is your kind of thing, not mine. You're in charge, so tell me what you want and I'll try to help," he said simply.

"We'll start with what you saw, but let's get out of this mausoleum," Master Li said happily.

I felt a warm glow as the Celestial Master hobbled toward a side door. What a marvelous stroke of luck! Master Li would have been deadlier than Ma Tuan Lin if eyes could kill, but all the mandarins could do was glare. We took a corridor to a small office at the end, looking out over a small simple garden. It was a worn and battered sort of room, crowded but comfortable, with mementos from the time of my great-great-great-grandfather, and the Celestial Master gave a groan of relief as he let himself down on a cushioned bench and relaxed his grip on the canes. He went straight to the point.

"It was the night before last, Kao — morning, actually, around the double hour of the sheep. I couldn't sleep, as usual, and the moon was bright and you know how warm it's been. I got up and into my robe and grabbed my canes and made it to the dock and my boat. Rowing's the only exercise I can handle now. I get practice with the canes," he said, making cane-shuffling gestures that really were like rowing. "I rowed to Hortensia Island, where I have a special dock and path I can manage. I was taking a walk through the woods, admiring the moon and wishing my mind could still create poetry, when I heard the damnedest scream. Then I saw Ma Tuan Lin running toward me."

The saint tilted his head so he was looking down the sides of his nose at Master Li, and a faint smile tugged at his lips.

"Here comes the senile part, perhaps. I'm not sure, Kao, I'm just not sure. I can only tell you what I saw or thought I saw. To begin with, Ma was being chased by a little wrinkled man older than you, maybe even older than me, but who was running as lightly as a child, making sharp sounds that sounded like ' *Pi-fang! Pi-fang!* ' "

"What?" Master Li asked.

The Celestial Master shrugged. "No meaning, just sound. *Pi-fang!* " Ma was holding something in his hands that looked like a birdcage, an empty one, and he let loose another scream of terror that made a pair of nesting grouse come shooting up through the darkness with their wings going pop-pop-pop! and they flapped right across my face and made me fall backward into some tall weeds, and that probably what saved my life. The little old man didn't see me as he ran past. He waved his right hand and something started to glow in it, bright red, and then he hurled a ball of fire that struck Ma Tuan Lin square in the back."

Master Li choked and pounded himself on the chest. "A ball of fire?" he asked when he'd recovered

"I know, I know. The old boy's finally had the last bit of his brains turn to butter," the Celestial Master said wryly. "I'm telling you what I thought I saw. Ma was dead before he hit the ground — I didn't need an autopsy to tell me that — and the little old man ran past him, leaping lightly as a leaf in a wind, and then there was a bright flash that blinded me. When my eyes cleared there wasn't any little old man. Ma was lying there with that cage thing sticking up through tall grass beside him, and his back was smoking, and I looked every which way. No little old man. Then I heard a high distant 'Pi-fang!' and I looked up and saw a great white crane flying away across the face of the moon."

The saint drew a deep breath and spread his hands wide apart. "Think that was crazy? I haven't even started."

"I can hardly wait," said Master Li.

"Kao, beside the pavilion Ma uses on Hortensia Island there's a big pile of earth from some kind of construction project that was canceled, and it wasn't until I saw the pile that I realized I was at the pavilion," the Celestial Master said. "What made me look toward the pile was a small sound coming from it, and I knew I'd lost my mind for certain when a terrible claw came crawling out into the moonlight. Then another claw followed it, and earth fell away and something big heaved up into the moonlight, and when the dirt dropped off it I was looking at the prettiest ch'ih-mei to appear in China in a century or more. A classic vampire ghoul, Kao, and it was looking up at that crane in the sky. Then the crane dwindled to a speck and disappeared, and the ch'ih-mei looked down and saw Ma Tuo Lin. In two strides it had reached him, and I swear it ripped the head right off the body! It lifted the gory trophy and took a big bite, but I didn't see any more. I was crawling backward, sort of pushing with my canes, hoping the creature's chewing noises would drown out any sound I made, and I made safely back into the trees. Then I got to my boat and rowed back and gave the alarm, and that's all I can tell you."

Master Li nodded appreciatively.

"To whom did you give the alarm?" he asked.

"The emperor has an officer attached to my household staff. A nursemaid, I suppose, but useful at times."

"And you told him what had happened?"

"I had to," the Celestial Master said. "He didn't believe a word of it, of course."

"Well, I do." Master Li grinned and winked. "I didn't say I believe *all* of it, but I'll keep an open mind and who knows? I've come to accept some incredible things in my time."

The Celestial Master grinned back, and then winced and tapped his head.

"Tired, Kao, tired. The time I have left is about as limited as my remaining brains, and if you want anything more from me today you'd better get it now," he said wearily.

Master Li leaned forward.

"What I want," he said, speaking slowly and clearly, "is a written commission to investigate this matter and anything that may be connected with it, with the full authority of, and signed by, the Celestial Master."

Not long afterward Master Li led the way out through a series of side doors, and then around through the gardens to the courtyard and our palanquin. He was clearly depressed when he should have been exhilarated, and I looked at him questioningly.

"Well, Ox, we can forget about getting a case like a great white whale," he said.

"Sir?"

"I owe the mandarins an apology. They were hushing up the matter and hoping to cram the corpse into a tomb before busy-bodies like me came along, for the very sound reason that China's greatest living saint has confessed to the murder of Ma Tuan Lin," Master Li said sadly.

3

Master Li was getting weary, and once I had rowed over to Hortensia Island and tied the boat at a dock he had me bend over so he could climb up on my back. He weighs no more than a schoolboy, and his small feet fit easily into my tunic pockets, and I'm so accustomed to carrying the old man around

that without him I feel undressed. I took the paths he indicated toward the pavilion where Ma Tuan Lin, according to the Celestial Master, had met his death.

The island has changed beyond belief in the short time since that day. New construction is everywhere, and scarcely an acre of wooded land remains. Then it was almost totally given over to trees and shrubs and grass, and outside of the Yu (much more about which later) there was only the collection of astronomical instruments first established by the great Chang Heng and fewer than twenty secluded pavilions used as retreats by eminent mandarins. It was peaceful and beautiful, and we saw and heard nobody at all as I followed the paths through the trees. Ahead was a grassy clearing and Master Li had me stop and set him down. He reached inside his robe and pulled out his wine flask and swilled moodily, spitting the pulpy residue at flowers. I expected them to shrivel and die beneath the bath of pure alcohol, but for some reason they didn't.

"Ox, I must congratulate you on your self-control. Not one single question," he said with a wink. He knows he's trained me well. "Let's look around. I'm betting the Celestial Master actually did see our vampire ghoul remove Ma Tuan Lin's head, thus greatly improving Ma's appearance, and I'll be disappointed if proved wrong."

We'd already learned that the body had indeed been found and removed from here, and as we walked forward I saw the outline of the pavilion and then I saw a huge pile of fresh earth beside it, and finally I saw something black and moving, sharply outlined against a green background. It was a cloud of flies buzzing around sticky black streaks that had recently been red, matting the grass. We walked to the pile of earth and found signs of a very recent disturbance that might have been caused by a creature crawling out, and I found sandal prints in a soft spot in the path close to the pile. The toes had dug in and sprayed dirt backward, which would be consistent with somebody running for his life, and soon found another soft spot with a huge print on it that might have been made by a creature like a vampire ghoul.

"The Celestial Master would have no reason to invent an item like a birdcage. Let's find it," Master Li muttered.

We found the cage in tall grass close to the bloodstains. The sage picked it up and whistled appreciatively as he looked at it, and even I could see the workmanship was superb, and very old. It couldn't have held a bird, however. The bars were oddly spaced with at least one gap through which a small bird would have escaped, and a peculiar maze of wires ran across them. A single bead was strung on the wires and with a little dexterity it could be made to slide this way and that, but Master Li said one bead couldn't possibly fulfill enough functions to serve as a primitive abacus. The bars were decorated with a jumble of symbols of every description, from animals to utensils to astronomy, and Master Li shook his head and shrugged.

"I have no idea what it was used for but it's almost unbelievably ancient," he said. "Say what one will about Ma Tuan Lin, he had a gift for discovering valuable artifacts. He was a considerable collector and claimed to be an authority, and maybe we'll find something about this in his papers."

He tied the cage to his waist with his long yellow sash and stood looking around for a moment with his hands on his hips.

"My dear old friend and teacher rowed over here and took a walk in the moonlight," he said in a slow melancholy voice. "As fate would have it, he arrived at this spot just in time to see a monster chasing its dinner, meaning Ma Tuan Lin, and he did indeed see the creature rip Ma's head off. Ox, you've heard the Celestial Master. You know he couldn't stand Ma Tuan Lin. Deep inside he felt guilt for not grieving at a terrible murder, and the guilt worked through a weary mind and projected image and the result was that he really does believe his story about — pay attention — 'a little wrinkled man older than you, maybe even older than me, but he was running as lightly as a child.' All right, what kind of hat does the Celestial Master wear?"

I thought about it. "It's a white hat, tall and conical, tapering to a point," I said.

"It's called Hat of Nine Yang Thunder," Master Li said dryly. "It's meant to resemble the beak of a crane. Did you notice his robe?"

"It was a Taoist robe, except for the First Rank emblem," I said.

"Which is?"

"A crane."

"Yes indeed, and did you notice his ring of office?" Master Li asked.

"Some kind of large red stone," I said.

"It's a garnet called Ball of Retributive Lightning," said Master Li.

"Oh-oh," I said.

"Oh-oh indeed," said Master Li. "Ox, the Celestial Master projected himself as a tiny wrinkled old man who could throw away his canes and run lightly as a child as he massacred bastards like Ma Tuan Lin, blasting them with his ring of office and then transforming himself into the crane he carried on his robe and hat, flying safely away across the moon, like in dreams. The mandarins feared that the wrong people might take that tale and cause a terrible scandal, but you and I are not going to be the wrong people."

"No, sir," I said.

"We'll go through the motions of an investigation," the old man said. "If nothing else I have the Celestial Master's authentic signed commission to show for it, which is scarcely to be sneered at."

"Yes, sir," I said, and then made something of a point of shutting my mouth. ("That," I added silently, "is the understatement of the decade. After he finishes doctoring a document like that he can present a pass allowing him to wander in and out of the imperial treasury with forty mule carts, eight peasants with shovels, and a derrick.")

There was nothing more to be found at the scene of the murder, so Master Li led the way into Ma Tuan Lin's pavilion. I was rather surprised to find it was a simple austere place: one large room and a bathing chamber, opening to a small enclosed garden and a vista overlooking the lake. Master Li explained that mandarins like Ma were not allowed to build palatial establishments on the island. All the pavilions were identical, designed for peaceful contemplation, and were the property of the emperor. We looked through the mandarin's papers and collection of books and scrolls, and all we found were notes in scholarly shorthand I couldn't read and Master Li said were pure Ma Tuan Lin: idiotic garbage. The only point to the search was to see if there was any information about a peculiar old cage, so Master Li made it quick. Just as we were about to leave he stopped in the doorway.

"I almost forgot," he said. "Fifty or sixty years ago I took one of these pavilions for a week or two, and since they're all the same . . ."

He let the sentence hang in the air as he turned and walked back to the small wooden altar against the east wall.

"They showed me where to stick jewelry or whatever if I didn't trust the gardeners," he said, and he reached out and pushed a wooden panel and then slid it aside and stuck his hand into a tiny hole. "I'll be damned," he said, because when his hand came out he was holding a small thick notebook.

We sat at the table while he went through it. Not even Master Li could make sense of the entries because they were simply series of numbers and marks indicating percentages, and there was no indication what the numbers represented.

"The total goes up and up, dramatically, and all of a sudden the percentage doubles, and all I can say is if it's Ma's money he was getting rich enough to buy an estate on Coal Hill," Master Li said. Then he turned the last page and pulled something from the notebook. "Ox, look at this!" he exclaimed happily.

There was the cage we had found, in the form of a small ink rubbing apparently taken from an old stone surface. I say stone as opposed to metal because blurred and blotched places indicated a worn chipped surface, but it was clear enough to unquestionably represent the cage. Master Li hoped for some explanatory text when he turned the rubbing over, but instead he found Flying White shorthand which he translated for me.

" 'Eight! I've found all eight! Now they cannot deny me the principal share, and my bones shall lie on White Dragon Peak!' "

"Sir, do you know what that means?" I asked.

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