

FORGING THE SWORDS

Lu Hsun

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I

Mei Chien Chih had no sooner lain down beside his mother than rats came out to gnaw the wooden lid of the pan. The sound got on his nerves. The soft hoots he gave had some effect at first, but presently the rats ignored him, crunching and munching as they pleased. He dared not make a loud noise to drive them away, for fear of waking his mother, so tired by her labours during the day that as soon as her head touched the pillow she had fallen asleep.

After a long time silence fell. He was dozing off when a sudden splash made him open his eyes with a start. He heard the rasping of claws against earthenware.

"Good! I hope you drown!" he thought gleefully and sat up quietly.

Getting out of bed, he picked his way by the light of the moon to the door. He groped for the fire stick behind it, lit a chip of pine wood and lighted up the water vat. Sure enough, a huge rat had fallen in. There was too little water inside for it to get out. It was just swimming round, scrabbling at the side of the vat.

"Serves you right!" the boy exulted. This was one of the creatures that kept him awake every night by gnawing the furniture. He stuck the torch into a small hole in the mud wall to gloat over the sight, till the creature's beady eyes revolted him and reaching for a dried reed he pushed it under the water. After a time he removed the reed and the rat, coming to the surface, went on swimming round and scrabbling at the side of the vat, but less powerfully than before. Its eyes were under water all that could be seen was the red rip of a small pointed nose, snuffling desperately.

For some time he had had an aversion to red-nosed people. Yet now this small pointed red nose struck him as pathetic. He thrust his reed under the creature's belly. The rat clutched at it, and after catching its breath clambered upon it. But the sight of its whole body sopping black fur, bloated belly, worm-like tail struck him again as so revolting that he hastily shook the reed. The rat dropped back with a splash into the vat. Then he hit it several times over the head to make it sink.

Now the pine chip had been changed six times. The rat, exhausted, was floating submerged in the middle of the jar, from time to time straining slightly towards the surface. Once more the boy was seized with pity. He broke the

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reed in two and, with considerable difficulty, fished the creature up and put it on the floor. To begin with, it didn't budge; then it took a breath; after a long time its feet twitched and it turned over, as if meaning to make off. This gave Mei Chien Chih a jolt. He raised his left foot instinctively and brought it heavily down. He heard a small cry. When he squatted down to look, there was blood on the rat's muzzle it was probably dead.

He felt sorry again, as remorseful as if he had committed a crime. He squatted there, staring, unable to get up.

By this time his mother was awake.

"What are you doing, son?" she asked from the bed.

"A rat

He rose hastily and turned to her answering briefly.

"I know it's a rat. But what are you doing? Killing it or saving it?"

He made no answer. The torch had burned out. He stood there silently in the darkness, accustoming his eyes to the pale light of the moon.

His mother sighed.

"After midnight you'll be sixteen, but you're still the same so lukewarm. You never change. It looks as if your father will have no one to avenge him."

Seated in the grey moonlight, his mother seemed to be trembling from head to foot. The infinite grief in her low tones made him shiver. The next moment, though, hot blood raced through his veins.

"Avenge my father? Does he need avenging?" He stepped forward in amazement.

"He does. And the task falls to you. I have long wanted to tell you, but while you were small I said nothing. Now you're not a child any longer though you still act like one. I just don't know what to do. Can a boy like you carry through a real man's job?"

"I can. Tell me, mother. I'm going to change. . . ."

"Of course. I can only tell you. And you'll have to change. . . . Well, come over here."

He walked over. His mother sat upright in bed, her eyes flashing in the shadowy white moonlight.

"Listen!" she said gravely. "Your father was famed as a forger of swords, the best in all the land. I sold his tools to keep us from starving, so there's nothing left for you to see. But he was the best sword-maker in the whole world. Twenty years ago, the king's concubine gave birth to a piece of iron which they said she conceived after embracing an iron pillar. It was pure, transparent iron. The king, realizing that this was a rare treasure, decided to have it made into a sword with which to defend his kingdom, kill his enemies and ensure his own safety. As ill luck would have it, your father was chosen for the task, and in both hands he brought the iron home. He tempered it day and night for three whole years, until he had forged two swords.

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"What a fearful sight when he finally opened his furnace! A jet of white vapour billowed up into the sky, while the earth shook. The white vapour became a white cloud above this spot; by degrees it turned a deep scarlet and cast a peachblossom tint over everything. In our pitch-black furnace lay two red-hot swords. As your father sprinkled them drop by drop with clear well water, the swords hissed and spat and little by little turned blue. So seven days and seven nights passed, till the swords disappeared from sight. But if you looked hard, they were still in the furnace, pure blue and as transparent as two icicles.

"Great happiness flashed from your father's eyes. Picking up the swords, he stroked and fondled them. Then lines of sadness appeared on his forehead and at the corners of his mouth. He put the swords in two caskets.

"You've only to look at the portents of the last few days to realize that everybody must know the swords are forged,' he told me softly. 'Tomorrow I must go to present one to the king. But the day that I present it will be the last day of my life. I am afraid we shall never meet again.'

"Horried, uncertain what he meant, I didn't know what to reply. All I could say was: 'But you've done such fine work.'

"Ah, you don't understand! The king is suspicious and cruel. Now I've forged two swords the like of which have never been seen, he is bound to kill me to prevent my forging swords for any of his rivals who might oppose or surpass him.'

"I shed tears.

"Don't grieve,' he said. 'There's no way out. Tears can't wash away fate. I've been prepared for this for some time. His eyes seemed to dart lightning as he placed a sheath on my knee. 'This is the male sword,' he told me. 'Keep it. Tomorrow I shall take the female to the king. If I don't come back, you'll know I'm dead. Won't you be brought to bed in four or five months? Don't grieve, but bear our child and bring him up well. As soon as he's grown, give him this sword and tell him to cut off the king's head to avenge me!'"

"Did my father come back that day?" demanded the boy.

"He did not," she replied calmly. "I asked everywhere, but there was no news of him. Later someone told me that the first to stain with his blood the sword forged by your father was your father himself. For fear his ghost should haunt the palace, they buried his body at the front gate, his head in the park at the back."

Mei Chien Chih felt as if he were on fire and sparks were flashing from every hair of his head. He clenched his fists in the dark till the knuckles cracked.

His mother stood up and lifted aside the board at the head of the bed. Then she lit a torch, took a hoe from behind the door and handed it to her son with the order:

"Dig!"

Though the lad's heart was pounding, he dug calmly, stroke after stroke. He scooped out yellow earth to a depth of over five feet, when the colour changed to that of rotten wood.

"Look! Be careful now!" cried his mother.

Lying flat beside the hole he had made, he reached down gingerly to shift the rotted wood till the tips of his fingers touched something as cold as ice. It was the pure, transparent sword. He made out where the hilt was, grasped it, and lifted it out.

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The moon and stars outside the window and the pine torch inside the room abruptly lost their brightness. The world was filled with a blue, steely light. And in this steely light the sword appeared to melt away and vanish from sight. But when the lad looked hard he saw something over three feet long which didn't seem particularly sharp in fact the blade was rounded like a leek.

"You must stop being soft now," said his mother. "Take this sword to avenge your father!"

"I've already stopped being soft. With this sword I'll avenge him!"

"I hope so. Put on a blue coat and strap the sword to your back. No one will see it if they are the same colour. I've got the coat ready here." His mother pointed to the shabby chest behind the bed. "You'll set out tomorrow. Don't worry about me.

Mei Chien Chih tried on the new coat and found that it fitted him perfectly. He wrapped it around the sword which he placed by his pillow, and calmly lay down again. He believed he had already stopped being soft. He determined to act as if nothing were on his mind, to fall straight asleep, to wake the next morning as usual, and then to set out confidently in search of his mortal foe.

However, he couldn't sleep. He tossed and turned, eager all the time to sit up. He heard his mother's long, soft, hopeless sighs. Then he heard the first crow of the cock and knew that a new day had dawned, that he was sixteen.

II

Mei Chien Chih, his eyelids swollen, left the house without once looking back. In the blue coat with the sword on his back, he strode swiftly towards the city. There was as yet no light in the east. The vapours of night still hid in the dew that clung to the tip of each fir leaf. But by the time he reached the far end of the forest, the dew drops were sparkling with lights which little by little took on the tints of dawn. Far ahead he could just see the outline of the dark grey, crenellated city walls.

Mingling with the vegetable vendors, he entered the city. The streets were already full of noise and bustle. Men stood about idly in groups. Every now and then women put their heads out from their doors. Most of their eyelids were swollen from sleep too, their hair was uncombed and their faces were pale because they had had no time to put on rouge.

Mei Chien Chih sensed that some great event was about to take place, something eagerly yet patiently awaited by all these people.

As he advanced, a child darted past, almost knocking into the point of the sword on his back. He broke into a cold sweat. Turning north not far from the palace, he found a press of people craning their necks towards the road. He heard the cries of women and children in the crowd. Afraid his invisible sword might hurt one of them, he dared not push his way forward; but new arrivals pressed him from behind. He had to move out of their way, till all he could see was the backs of those in front and their craning necks.

All of a sudden, the people in front fell one by one to their knees. In the distance appeared two riders galloping forward side by side. They were followed by warriors carrying batons, spears, swords, bows and flags, who raised a cloud of yellow dust. After them came a large cart drawn by four horses, bearing musicians sounding gongs and

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drums and blowing strange wind instruments. Behind were carriages with courtiers in bright clothes, old men or short, plump fellows, their faces glistening with sweat. These were followed by outriders armed with swords, spears and halberds. Then the kneeling people prostrated themselves and Mei Chien Chih saw a great carriage with a yellow canopy drive up. In the middle of this was seated a fat man in brightly coloured clothes with a grizzled moustache and small head. He was wearing a sword like the one on the boy's back.

Mei Chien Chih gave an instinctive shudder, but at once he felt burning hot. Reaching out for the hilt of the sword on his back, he picked his way forward between the necks of the kneeling crowd.

But he had taken no more than five or six steps when someone tripped him and he fell headlong on top of a young fellow with a wizened face. He was getting up nervously to see whether the point of his sword had done any damage, when he received two hard punches in the ribs. Without stopping to protest he looked at the road. But the carriage with the yellow canopy had passed. Even the mounted attendants behind it were already some distance away.

On both sides of the road everyone got up again. The young man with the wizened face had seized Mei Chien Chih by the collar and would not let go. He accused him of crushing his solar plexus, and ordered the boy to pay with his own life if he died before the age of eighty. Idlers crowded round to gape but said nothing, till a few taking the side of the wizened youth let fall some jokes and curses. Mei Chien Chih could neither laugh at such adversaries nor lose his temper. Annoying as they were, he could not get rid of them. This went on for about the time it takes to cook a pan of millet. He was afire with impatience. Still the onlookers, watching as avidly as ever, refused to disperse.

Then through the throng pushed a dark man, lean as an iron rake, with a black beard and black eyes. Without a word, he smiled coldly at Mei Chien Chih, then raised his hand to flick the jaw of the youngster with the wizened face and looked steadily into his eyes. For a moment the youth returned his stare, then let go of the boy's collar and went off. The dark man went off too, and the disappointed spectators drifted away. A few came up to ask Mei Chien Chih his age and address, and whether he had sisters at home. But he ignored them.

He walked south, reflecting that in the bustling city it would be easy to wound someone by accident. He had better wait outside the South Gate for the king's return, to avenge his father. That open, deserted space was the best place for his purpose. By now the whole city was discussing the king's trip to the mountain. What a retinue! What majesty! What an honour to have seen the king! They had prostrated themselves so low that they should be considered as examples to all the nation! They buzzed like a swarm of bees. Near the South Gate, however, it became quieter.

Having left the city, he sat down under a big mulberry tree to eat two rolls of steamed bread. As he ate, the thought of his mother brought a lump to his throat, but presently that passed. All around grew quieter and quieter, until he could hear his own breathing quite distinctly.

As dusk fell, he grew more and more uneasy. He strained his eyes ahead, but there was not a sign of the king. The villagers who had taken vegetables to the city to sell were going home one by one with empty baskets.

Long after all these had gone, the dark man came darting out from the city.

"Run, Mei Chien Chih! The king is after you!" His voice was like the hoot of an owl.

Mei Chien Chih trembled from head to foot. Spellbound, he followed the dark man, running as if he had wings. At last, stopping to catch breath, he realized they had reached the edge of the fir wood. Far behind were the silver rays of the rising moon; but in front all he could see were the dark man's eyes gleaming like will-o'-the-wisps.

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"How did you know me? . . ." asked the lad in fearful amazement.

"I've always known you." The man laughed. "I know you carry the male sword on your back to avenge your father. And I know you will fail. Not only so, but today someone has informed against you. Your enemy went back to the palace by the East Gate and has issued an order for your arrest."

Mei Chien Chih began to despair.

"Oh, no wonder mother sighed," he muttered.

"But she knows only half. She doesn't know that I'm going to take vengeance for you."

"You? Are you willing to take vengeance for me, champion of justice?"

"Ah, don't insult me by giving me that title."

"Well, then, is it out of sympathy for widows and orphans?"

"Don't use words that have been sullied, child," he replied sternly. "Justice, sympathy and such terms, which once were clean, have now become capital for fiendish usurers. I have no place for these in my heart. I want only to avenge you!"

"Good. But how will you do it?"

"I want two things only from you." His voice sounded from beneath two burning eyes. "What two things? First your sword, then your head!"

Mei Chien Chih thought the request a strange one. But though he hesitated, he was not afraid. For a moment he was speechless.

"Don't be afraid that I want to trick you out of your life and your treasure," continued the implacable voice in the dark. "It's entirely up to you. If you trust me, I'll go; if not, I won't."

"But why are you going to take vengeance for me? Did you know my father?"

"I knew him from the start, just as I've always known you. But that's not the reason. You don't understand, my clever lad, how I excel at revenge. What's yours is mine, what concerns him concerns me too. I bear on my soul so many wounds inflicted by others as well as by myself, that now I hate myself."

The voice in the darkness was silent. Mei Chien Chih raised his hand to draw the blue sword from his back and with the same movement swung it forward from the nape of his neck. As his head fell on the green moss at his feet, he handed the sword to the dark man.

"Aha!" The man took the sword with one hand, with the other he picked up Mei Chien Chih's head by the hair. He kissed the warm dead lips twice and burst into cold, shrill laughter.

His laughter spread through the fir wood. At once, deep in the forest, flashed blazing eyes like the light of the will-o'-the-wisp which the next instant came so close that you could hear the snuffling of famished wolves. With one bite, Mei Chien Chih's blue coat was torn to shreds; the next disposed of his whole body, while the blood was instantaneously licked clean. The only sound was the soft crunching of bones.

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The huge wolf at the head of the pack hurled itself at the dark man. But with one sweep of the blue sword, its head fell on the green moss at his feet. With one bite the other wolves tore its skin to shreds, then next disposed of its whole body, while the blood was instantaneously licked clean. The only sound was the soft crunching of bones.

The dark man picked up the blue coat from the ground to wrap up Mei Chien Chih's head. Having fastened this and the blue sword on his back, he turned on his heel and swung off through the darkness towards the capital.

The wolves stood stock-still, hunched up, tongues lolling, panting. They watched him with green eyes as he strode away.

He swung through the darkness towards the capital, singing in a shrill voice as he went:

*Sing hey, sing ho!
The single one who loved the sword
Has taken death as his reward.
Those who go single are galore,
Who love the sword are alone no more!
Foe for foe, ha! Head for head!
Two men by their own hands are dead.*



The king had taken no pleasure in his trip to the mountain, and the secret report of an assassin lying in wait on the road sent him back even more depressed. He was in a bad temper that night. He complained that not even the ninth concubine's hair was as black and glossy as the day before. Fortunately, perched kittenishly on the royal knee, she wriggled over seventy times till at last the wrinkles on the kingly brow were smoothed out.

But on rising after noon the next day the king was in a bad mood again. By the time lunch was over, he was furious.

"I'm bored!" he cried with a great yawn.

From the queen down to the court jester, all were thrown into a panic. The king had long since tired of his old ministers' sermons and the clowning of his plump dwarfs; recently he had even been finding insipid the marvellous tricks of rope-walkers, pole-climbers, jugglers, somersaulters, sword-swallowers and fire-spitters. He was given to bursts of rage, during which he would draw his sword to kill men on the slightest pretext.

Two eunuchs just back after playing truant from the palace, observing the gloom which reigned over the court, knew that dire trouble was impending again. One of them turned pale with fear. The other, however, quite confident, made his way unhurriedly to the king's presence to prostrate himself and announce:

"Your slave begs to inform you that he has just met a remarkable man with rare skill, who should be able to amuse Your Majesty."

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"What?" The king was not one to waste words.

"He's a lean, dark fellow who looks like a beggar. He's dressed in blue, has a round blue bundle on his back and sings snatches of strange doggerel. When questioned, he says he can do a wonderful trick the like of which has never been seen, unique in the world and absolutely new. The sight will end all care and bring peace to the world. But when we asked for a demonstration, he wouldn't give one. He says he needs a golden dragon and a golden cauldron. . . ."

"A golden dragon? That's me. A golden cauldron? I have one."

"That's just what your slave thought. . . ."

"Bring him in!"

Before the king's voice had died away, four guards hurried out with the eunuch. From the queen down to the court jester, all beamed with delight, hoping this conjuror would end all care and bring peace to the world. Even if the show fell flat, there would be the lean, dark, beggarly-looking fellow to bear the brunt of the royal displeasure. If they could last till he was brought in, all would be well.

They did not have long to wait. Six men came hurrying towards the golden throne. The eunuch led the way, the four guards brought up the rear, and in the middle was a dark man. On nearer inspection they could see his blue coat, black beard, eyebrows and hair. He was so thin that his cheekbones stood out and his eyes were sunken. As he knelt respectfully to prostrate himself, they saw a small round bundle, wrapped in blue cloth patterned in a dark red, on his back.

"Well!" shouted the king impatiently. The simplicity of this fellow's paraphernalia did not augur well for his tricks.

"Your subject's name is Yen-chih-ao-che, born in Wenwen Village. I wasn't bred to any trade, but when I was grown I met a sage who taught me how to conjure with a boy's head. I can't do this alone, though. It must be in the presence of a golden dragon, and I must have a golden cauldron filled with clear water and heated with charcoal. Then when the boy's head is put in and the water boils, the head will rise and fall and dance all manner of figures. It will laugh and sing too in a marvellous voice. Whoever hears its song and sees its dance will know an end to care. When all men see it, the whole world will be at peace."

"Go ahead!" the king ordered loudly.

They did not have long to wait. A great golden cauldron, big enough to boil an ox, was set outside the court. It was filled with clear water, and charcoal was lit beneath it. The dark man stood at one side. When the charcoal was red he put down his bundle and undid it. Then with both hands he held up a boy's head with fine eyebrows, large eyes, white teeth and red lips. A smile was on its face. Its tangled hair was like faint blue smoke. The dark man raised it high, turning round to display it to the whole assembly. He held it over the cauldron while he muttered something unintelligible, and finally dropped it with a splash into the water. Foam flew up at least five feet high. Then all was still.

For a long time nothing happened. The king lost patience, the queen, concubines, ministers and eunuchs began to feel alarmed, while the plump dwarfs started to sneer. These sneers made the king suspect that he was being made to look a fool. He turned to the guards to order them to have this oaf, who dared deceive his monarch, thrown into the great cauldron and boiled to death.

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But that very instant he heard the water bubbling. The fire burning with all its might cast a ruddy glow over the dark man, turning him the dull red of molten iron. The king looked round. The dark man, stretching both hands towards the sky, stared into space and danced, singing in a shrill voice:

*Sing hey for love, for love heigh ho!
Ah, love! Ah, blood! Who is not so?
Men grope in the dark, the king laughs loud,
Ten thousand heads in death have bowed.
I only use one single head,
For one man's head let blood be shed!
Blood let it flow!
Sing hey, sing ho!*

As he sang, the water in the cauldron seethed up like a small cone-shaped mountain, flowing and eddying from tip to base. The head bobbed up and down with the water, skimming round and round, turning nimble somersaults as it went. They could just make out the smile of pleasure on its face. Then abruptly it gave this up to start swimming against the stream, circling, weaving to and fro, splashing water in all directions so that hot drops showered the court. One of the dwarfs gave a yelp and rubbed his nose. Scalded, he couldn't suppress a cry of pain.

The dark man stopped singing. The head remained motionless in the middle of the water, a grave expression on its face. After a few seconds, it began to bob up and down slowly again. From bobbing it put on speed to swim up and down, not quickly but with infinite grace. Three times it circled the cauldron, ducking up and down. Then, its eyes wide, the jet-black pupils phenomenally bright, it sang:

*The sovereign's rule spreads far and wide,
He conquers foes on every side.
The world may end, but not his might,
So here I come all gleaming bright.
Bright gleams the sword forget me not!
A royal sight, but sad my lot.
Sing hey, sing ho, a royal sight!
Come back, where gleams the bright blue light.*

The head stopped suddenly at the crest of the water. After several somersaults, it started plying up and down again, casting bewitching glances to right and to left as it sang once more:

*Heigh ho, for the love we know!
I cut one head, one head, heigh ho!
I use one single head, not more,
The heads he uses are galore! . . .*

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By the last line of the song the head was submerged, and since it did not reappear the singing became indistinct. As the song grew fainter, the seething water subsided little by little like an ebbing tide, until it was below the rim of the cauldron. From a distance nothing could be seen.

"Well?" demanded the king impatiently, tired of waiting.

"Your Majesty!" The dark man went down on one knee. "It's dancing the most miraculous Dance of Union at the bottom of the cauldron. You can't see this unless you come close. I can't make it come up, because this Dance of Union has to be performed at the bottom of the cauldron."

The king stood up and strode down the steps to the cauldron. Regardless of the heat, he bent forward to watch. The water was as smooth as a mirror. The head, lying there motionless, looked up and fixed its eyes on the king. When the king's glance fell on its face, it gave a charming smile. This smile made the king feel that they had met before. Who could this be? While he wondered, the dark man drew the blue sword from his back and swept it forward like lightning from the nape of the king's neck. The king's head fell with a splash into the cauldron.

When enemies meet they know each other at a glance, particularly at close quarters. The moment the king's head touched the water, Mei Chien Chih's head came up to meet it and savagely bit its ear. The water in the cauldron boiled and bubbled as the two heads engaged upon a fight to the death. After about twenty encounters, the king was wounded in five places, Mei Chien Chih in seven. The crafty king contrived to slip behind his enemy, and in an unguarded moment Mei Chien Chih let himself be caught by the back of his neck, so that he could not turn round. The king fastened his teeth into him and would not let go, like a silkworm burrowing into a mulberry leaf. The boy's cries of pain could be heard outside the cauldron.

From the queen down to the court jester, all who had been petrified with fright before were galvanized into life by this sound. They felt as if the sun had been swallowed up in darkness. But even as they trembled, they knew a secret joy. They waited, round-eyed.

The dark man, rather taken aback, did not change colour. Effortlessly he raised his arm like a withered branch holding the invisible sword. He stretched forward as if to peer into the cauldron. Of a sudden his arm bent, the blue sword thrust down and his head fell into the cauldron with a plop, sending snow-white foam flying in all directions.

As soon as his head hit the water, it charged at the king's head and took the royal nose between its teeth, nearly biting it off. The king gave a cry of pain and Mei Chien Chih seized this chance to get away, whirling round to cling with a vice-like grip to his jaw. They pulled with all their might in opposite directions, so that the king could not keep his mouth shut. Then they fell on him savagely, like famished hens pecking at rice, till the king's head was mauled and savaged out of all recognition. To begin with he lashed about frantically in the cauldron; then he simply lay there groaning; and finally he fell silent, having breathed his last.

Presently the dark man and Mei Chien Chih stopped biting. They left the king's head and swam once round the edge of the cauldron to see whether their enemy was shamming or not. Assured that the king was indeed dead, they exchanged glances and smiled. Then, closing their eyes, their faces towards the sky, they sank to the bottom of the water.

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[Note: golden dragon] The ancient Chinese emperors, to bolster their prestige, often called themselves dragons. The dragon in Chinese legend was divine.

IV

The smoke drifted away, the fire went out. Not a ripple remained on the water. The extraordinary silence brought high and low to their senses. Someone gave a cry, and at once all called out together in horror. Someone walked over to the golden cauldron, and the others pressed after him. Those crowded at the back could only peer between the necks of those in front.

The heat still scorched their cheeks. The water, now as smooth as a mirror, was coated with oil which reflected a sea of faces: the queen, the concubines, guards, old ministers, dwarfs, eunuchs. . . .

"Heavens! Our king's head is still in there! Oh, horrors!" The sixth concubine suddenly burst into frantic sobbing.

From the queen down to the court jester, all were seized by consternation. They scattered in panic, at a loss, running round in circles. The wisest old councillor went forward alone and put out a hand to touch the side of the cauldron. He winced, snatched back his hand and put two fingers to his mouth to blow on them.

Finally regaining control, they gathered outside the palace to discuss how best to recover the king's head. They consulted for the time it would take to cook three pans of millet. Their conclusion was: collect wire scoops from the big kitchen, and order the guards to do their best to retrieve the royal head.

Soon the implements were ready:

wire scoops, strainers, golden plates and dusters were all placed by the cauldron. The guards rolled up their sleeves. Some with wire scoops, some with strainers, respectfully they set about bringing up the remains. The scoops clashed against each other and scraped the edge of the cauldron, while the water eddied in their wake. After some time, one of the guards, with a grave face, raised his scoop slowly and carefully in both hands. Drops of water like pearls were dripping from the utensil, in which lay a snow-white skull. As the others cried Out with astonishment, he deposited the skull on one golden plate.

"Oh, dear! Our king!" The queen, concubines, ministers and even the eunuchs burst out sobbing. They soon stopped, however, when another guard fished out another skull identical with the first.

They watched dully with tear-filled eyes as the sweating guards went on with their salvaging. They retrieved a tangled mass of white hair and black hair, and several spoonfuls of some shorter hair no doubt from white and black moustaches. Then another skull. Then three hairpins.

They stopped only when nothing but clear soup was left in the cauldron, and divided what they had on to three golden plates: one of skulls, one of hair, one of hairpins.

"His Majesty had only one head, Which is his?" demanded the ninth concubine frantically.

"Quite so. . . ." The ministers looked at each other in dismay.

FORGING THE SWORDS

"If the skin and flesh hadn't boiled away, it would be easy to tell," remarked one kneeling dwarf.

They forced themselves to examine the skulls carefully, but the size and colour were about the same. They could not even distinguish which was the boy's. The queen said the king had a scar on his right temple as the result of a fall while still crown prince, and this might have left a trace on the skull. Sure enough, a dwarf discovered such a mark on one skull, and there was general rejoicing until another dwarf discovered a similar mark on the right temple of a slightly yellower skull.

"I know!" exclaimed the third concubine happily. "Our king had a very high nose."

The eunuchs hastened to examine the noses. To be sure, one of them was relatively high, though there wasn't much to choose between them; but unfortunately that particular skull had no mark on the right temple.

"Besides," said the ministers to the eunuchs, "was the back of His Majesty's skull so protuberant?"

"We never paid any attention to the back of His Majesty's skull. . . ."

The queen and the concubines searched their memories. Some said it had been protuberant, some flat. When they questioned the eunuch who had combed the royal hair, he would not commit himself to an answer.

That evening a council of princes and ministers was held to determine which head was the king's, but with no better result than during the day. In fact, even the hair and moustaches presented a problem. The white was of course the king's, but since he had been grizzled it was very hard to decide about the black. After half a night's discussion, they had just eliminated a few red hairs when the ninth concubine protested. She was sure she had seen a few brown hairs in the king's moustache; in which case how could they be sure there was not a single red one? They had to put them all together again and leave the case unsettled.

By the early hours of the morning they had reached no solution. They prolonged the discussion yawning, till the cock crowed a second time, before fixing on a safe and satisfactory solution: All three heads should be placed in the golden coffin beside the king's body for interment.

The funeral took place a week later. The whole city was agog. Citizens of the capital and spectators from far away flocked to the royal funeral. As soon as it was light, the road was thronged with men and women. Sandwiched in between were tables bearing sacrificial offerings. Shortly before midday horsemen cantered out to clear the roads. Some time later came a procession of flags, batons, spears, bows, halberds and the like, followed by four cartloads of musicians. Then, rising and falling with the uneven ground, a yellow canopy drew near. It was possible to make out the hearse with the golden coffin in which lay three heads and one body.

The people knelt down, revealing rows of tables with offerings. Some loyal subjects gulped back tears of rage to think that the spirits of the two regicides were enjoying the sacrifice now together with the king. But there was nothing they could do about it.

Then followed the carriages of the queen and concubines. The crowd stared at them and they stared at the crowd, not stopping their wailing. After them came the ministers, eunuchs and dwarfs, all of whom assumed a mournful air. But no one paid the least attention to them, and their ranks were squeezed out of all semblance of order.

October 1926