

[The following episode from the final part of Chapter Six: 'Going Wild in Flying-Cloud Ponds' 飞云池闹事, of Wu Shi Hui, happens after Wu Song is involved in a feud between the innkeeper Shi En and the local bully, Jiang Zhong, also called Jiang the Gate Guard Giant. After Wu Song has beaten up Jiang Zhong because of his attack on the inn of Shi En, Jiang Zhong pulls strings, so that Wu Song is wrongly accused of theft and sent to prison. The episode tells about how the guards, Wang Hong and Wang Liang, bribed by Jiang Zhong, plan to murder Wu Song on the road, but are themselves killed by Wu Song on the bridge at Flying-Cloud Ponds. Here only the introductory part of the performance is rendered.]

'Wu Song Goes Wild in Flying-Cloud Ponds'

Told by Wang Litang

1985

When Wu Song was exiled to Enzhou, the two guards were bribed by Jiang Zhong 江中 being promised altogether one hundred and fifty in cash 五十 if they could manage to kill Wu Song in secret somewhere along the road to Flying-Cloud Ponds. After they left the city, they had marched for twenty *li*, when they approached Lonely Town. Why was the place called Lonely Town? There was no round town gate on each side of it, just a single naked street. There were no shop signs decorated with golden characters, and neither were there any small teahouses or beancurd shops, incense-and-candle shops, or street kitchens. But at this moment Wu Song remembered he had heard Shi En say that when they had passed Lonely Town, they would pretty soon 不久 just after a little more than two *li* 二里 come to Flying-Cloud Ponds. His mind was completely concentrated on Flying-Cloud Ponds. How would he be in a mood to contemplate the scenery of this Lonely Town?

Second Master Wang was also secretly afraid. What was he afraid of? Because he was cowardly, his fear was that when they were to attack Wu Song in a little while, he himself might not come out of it alive. That dirty swine, Wang Hong, peered around east and west, and as a matter of fact he got a good idea. Looking around, he suddenly spotted an incense-and-candle shop to his right. The shopkeeper was a man well into his sixties, with a crab-like face and a full beard. He sat idle behind the counter, stroking his beard and chatting with another man standing outside the counter. The man outside the counter was in his forties, with a pale yellowish face

and a thin mouse-like beard. Who was he? On the doorstep opposite there was a junk stall, and this person was the owner of the junk stall. In this junk stall there was, however, nothing of worth, only a dagger. Probably this dagger had been used by somebody's child when beginning to learn swordplay, for it wasn't very long, one might put it into one's bootleg. Beside the dagger, on its sheath, a label was attached, meaning that it was for sale.

That dirty swine, Wang Hong, was strutting about and looking around and all of a sudden he caught sight of this dagger. My God! He couldn't help being startled: 'Since I'm going to Flying-Cloud Ponds where I'm supposed to kill Wu Song, and since I have no weapon with me and am totally empty handed, please, may I ask a question? If one has no knife, how is one supposed to be able to kill a man? However, if I buy this knife just now, I cannot do it in the presence of Wu Song. If Wu Song is present, he will surely become

suspicious. He will most likely say something like, that since everything is going well, why do I need to buy such a knife? And even if he doesn't get suspicious, he is sure to become very interested in that knife! Never mind! I had better follow him out of Lonely Town first and then see what I can do.'

Tsa-lang-lang-lang-lang.....Hurrying out of Lonely Town together with Wu Song, Master Wang suddenly raised his hand and ¼Xsh-sh-sh..... ¼X tugged the sleeve of his younger comrade:

"What are you doing?"

"I'll tell you something: You go on ahead together with Second Master. I'll go back to buy something, and then I'll join you again in two seconds."

"OK!"

Wu Song heard the two of them talking together.

"Master Wang!"

"Yes, ahem.....Second Master!"

"What did you say?"

"I ... I have to shit!"

"Oh, Master Wang has to go to the lavatory again! Well! Then hurry up!"

Wu Song smiled: 'A while ago in the teahouse at Heshiju, he said that he must go and shit. But you didn't go downstairs to shit, you went upstairs to eat. But now you probably feel quite bloated, so this time you are probably really going to shit!' Actually this was not so.

Flustered, Master Wang hurried back and stopped at the junk stall:

"Who has put up this stall with the dagger? Who wants to sell the dagger? What is the price of the dagger?"

He lifted the dagger and held it in his hand to look at it. Was there no owner of the stall? Who has said so? I just told you about the man with the pale yellowish face and the shrimp-like beard. He was the owner. Bad luck! When Master Wang asked him in this way, he impudently kept his mouth shut. This cheeky fellow was an unreliable scoundrel, both smart and malicious. When he saw Master Wang return and ask: "Who has put up this stall?", he was well aware that this was not to be regarded as a deal. One should not assume that this person had come to buy anything, he might just be making a show of asking. Asking who wanted to sell the dagger didn't mean business. 'If I run out and tell him how good this dagger of mine is, how cheap it is, and so on and so forth, a lot of rubbish, he can just turn round and say: "Ahem, I just asked for fun!" Well, I would lose money on that!' Can one lose money by talking? Isn't wasting breath the same as wasting money? When Wang Hong asked how much he would sell the dagger for, he might still be asking for fun, but there was a certain chance of making a deal. Why not speed up a bit? With icy coldness that fellow walked over to Wang Hong, stuck his neck out, pouted his lips and whispered one sentence into his ear:

WL[1] "Two taels of silver."

My goodness! Master Wang threw a glance at him: 'Damn it! What an ice-cold behaviour!'

"What? Two taels of silver for this dagger?"

"That's the price."

'Bad luck! What a pigheaded fellow, one can hardly begin to haggle over the price with him. If I begin to haggle over the price, he may not be willing to sell. Ahem, ahem! If I spend two taels of silver in order to buy it and kill off Wu Song, then I

don't want it any more! If I keep the lethal weapon on me without getting into trouble, then although I haven't lost the dagger, I have still lost two taels of silver.' But then he got an idea: 'Never mind, I have thought of a way out.'

"My friend, two taels of silver for this dagger of yours is not expensive at all. Unfortunately, I'm not buying this dagger for myself, I'm buying it on behalf of a friend. I don't know if my friend will consider this too expensive. I have a suggestion: Could I bring it with me and show it to him? If he wants it, I'll bring you the money. If he doesn't want it, I'll bring you the dagger!"

Do you see how mean he was! He planned to take this dagger, kill Wu Song, wipe off the blood from the knife and then hurry back and say: "Sorry to tell you, but my friend didn't find it suitable." He was not going to spend one single copper, you see, killing a man. We have a saying for this in our town of Yangzhou, it's called: 'to borrow a knife to kill a man!'

"Oh, Your Excellency is not buying the dagger yourself, you are doing it on behalf of a friend, and you are not quite sure whether it will suit your good friend or not. Therefore you want to take it to him to have a look at it. Oh, how clever! But this dagger does not belong to your humble servant. A friend of mine has sent it over to me to sell it for him. You might perhaps take it over to your good friend to inspect, since you are not sure that it is suitable, but I don't know if my humble friend would trust you."

Checkmate! My goodness! Damn it, what a clever trick!

"What? Don't you trust me?"

"It's not that I don't trust you, Master. How can you say something so unreasonable! You don't understand. I don't blame you, but it is the very first time I meet you, and I don't know your honourable name or whether the main entrance of your mansion opens to the east or to the west. Much to my surprise you ask to borrow this dagger from me. If you borrowed it and never came back, what would I do?"

"Oh, you are right. That was a fault on the part of your humble servant. In this case I might give you a cash pledge."

"Wait a bit! You'll have to pay those two taels!"

"Rest assured! That's a matter of course!"

Wang Hong stretched his hand down into his pocket and fumbled about for a long time, before he fished up a piece of silver. Hey, storyteller, this doesn't sound very pleasant! Either you might say that he took out a silver ingot, or that he fetched a

silver ingot, but why did he fumble about for a silver ingot? If this doesn't sound pleasant, it's not because of me, the storyteller. But this cannot be told without using the word 'fumble'. Jiang Zhong had given him fifty taels in one packet. The money was wrapped in one packet. If he took all of it out, he was afraid of putting all he had on display. If he didn't take anything out, it wouldn't work either. He had no choice, but to stretch his hand down into his pocket and use his middle finger to fumble with the paper wrapping for a while. Finally he managed to fish out a piece, probably too big!

"Is this silverpiece enough?"

"Oh, sure, sure! Such a lot!"

"Please, my good man, gold and silver should not be handled unless ... will you, please, weigh it on your steelyard!"

The owner of the incense-and-candle shop reached out for the silver, weighed it and looked up:

"Please, this is altogether four taels nine ounces eight coppers."

All right, five taels minus two coppers.

"Five taels minus two coppers."

"All right! I'll leave this with you!"

"Just a moment! When will I hear from you again?"

"Me? I'll be back right away!"

"It won't work right away, Master! When people are dealing with me, those who have not yet done business with me think I'm too stubborn, but those who have, understand. We take the difficulties first and afterwards things work out smoothly. Let's make a limit of three days. Within these three days it's up to you whether you want the knife or not. After three days, I'm not going to be polite to you, so whether you consider it suitable or not, the knife is yours!"

"All right, all right!"

Master Wang quickly calculated for himself: 'Why would I need three days? I'm going to hurry back and kill him, and then I'll return the knife. First I'll take the sheath, pull off the price label and throw it away. Then I'll put the dagger into the sheath. But where shall I place the dagger? If I hide it on my body, it is not so easy to pull it out.' He looked around: 'That's it! I'll put it into my right bootleg. The moment I get my chance, I'll pull it right out and stab him. Moreover Wu Song will not be able to see it. That is perfect!'

"Well, Master, may I ask your honourable name, Master?"

"My ... my name? My surname is Hong, I'm called Hong Wang!"

Wasn't he called Wang Hong? He didn't dare to say this. He imagined that if he told his name ... 'If somebody recognizes me and knows that I'm from the District Office, what a mess!' Although he had to tell his name, he made up a faked version. Then for the time being nobody would be able to guess it. Therefore he said: "My surname is Hong Wang, I'm called Hong Wang!" His name had turned a somersault, he had put it upside down!

"Well, dear Hong Wang, dear Master Hong! Please, rest assured! We agree on three days!"

"Just a moment! A short while ago you didn't trust me, and now I do WL[2] not quite trust you. You do not have a real shop here. If you had a shop here, I could come and find you in your shop. But you only have this stall. If you pack up your stall, where will I go and find you? You must also give me a guarantee."

"Oh, yes! Dear Hong Wang, dear Master Hong! When you were about to leave a moment ago, I would really say that you were not very smart in this business. You were much too rash and careless! But now you want a guarantee from me, and you are right! I don't blame you. This is called a mutual guarantee. Please, boss, will you serve as my guarantor?"

"Ah, ha, ha! No problem! Dear Hong Wang, Master Hong, I'll be responsible!"

Fine! He would be responsible. The fellow who had sold the dagger, had earned some easy money. Originally the knife was worth only two taels. Now he had earned four taels nine ounces eight coppers, he had certainly made a little extra! He had earned some easy money, but he was in for a real shock! The next day supposing the police of Flying-Cloud Ponds found out, and the local headman took the dagger with him to their place and prepared to make his report. Do you know what might happen to the fellow who had sold the dagger? You can imagine that something bad would happen! He would be involved in a murder case! When the headman had left, the shop owner would say to him:

"Look! Have you seen that dagger before?"

"Yes!"

"Wasn't it the one you had for sale in your stall?"

"Yes, that's the very thing! Yesterday a certain Hong Wang or Master Hong came here to buy it."

"Precisely! Let me tell you a thing! Let me give you a warning till next time! If you don't listen to me, there is nothing more to it! But I'll tell you: You can sell

whatever you like in this stall of yours, but please don't gamble with daggers and spears and the like. You had better listen to my advice, or else! There has been a murder case! Just in case the old master scents something and gets to know that this dagger belongs to your stall, you'll be done for. In that case he will probably arrest you. My good fellow, you'll be brought to justice with the others, and I'm afraid you'll have to taste a bowl of prisoners' food."

"For God's sake! This time it was near the knuckle! Well, I had better get off, I'll go to the countryside for a couple of days."

"No, that's not OK! You may run away, but I cannot run away. If he comes to interrogate me, what am I to do?"

"If he interrogates you, you only have to answer him one sentence. You just say that 'he has died from an acute illness'. Then he'll have nothing more to say. Then you have made a clean sweep of it!"

"A good idea! Just tell him that you have died, that will be the end of the story. Then he will be so scared!"

Well, master Wang had just bought this dagger and felt as if he had got hold of a treasure. As soon as he left Lonely Town, he took to his heels: Ha-la-la-la.....Why was he in such a hurry? 'Only because my young comrade is inexperienced. If he were experienced, he would surely not take Wu Song any further than the byroad, and enter Flying-Cloud Ponds in earnest. But in case he has taken him past the byroad, it will be difficult for me to drag him back.' Master Wang felt very worried as he walked along, looking for the others. Hey! Now he caught sight of Wu Song walking shoulder by shoulder together with his younger comrade. Ah! Finally he was able to relax. Nothing had happened! They had not yet passed the byroad ...

