

JOURNEY TO THE WEST

WU CHENG'EN

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

On Flat-top Mountain the Duty God
delivers a message;
In Lotus Flower Cave Pig runs into trouble.

The story tells how after Monkey had rejoined the Tang Priest the four of them headed west, united in their shared determination. The king of Elephanta had escorted them beyond his capital to thank them for bringing back his daughter. From there they travelled on, eating when hungry and drinking when thirsty, moving by day and resting at night. By now it was spring.

*A light breeze ruffled the silky green catkins of willows,
And the view was splendid.
The season encouraged the birds to sing;
The flowers bloomed in the warm sun,
Making the whole world fragrant.
A pair of swallows came to the tree in the courtyard;
Now was the time to enjoy the spring.
Amid the world's red dust and the city's streets,
Light silks were worn to the sound of lute and pipe,
As flowers vied and the cup was passed around.*

Master and disciples were enjoying their journey when they saw a mountain blocking their way. "Be careful, disciples," said the Tang Priest. "I'm worried that tigers and wolves may prevent us from crossing that high mountain ahead." "As a man of religion," said Monkey, "you shouldn't say that sort of thing. Don't you remember what the *Heart Sutra* the Rook's Nest Hermit taught you says — 'If one relies on the prajna-paramita he is free in his mind, he has no fear, is rid of dreamlike thoughts of unreality and enjoys ultimate Nirvana.' All you have to do is

*'Wipe the dust off your mind,
Wash out the dirt from your ear.
Without the most terrible suffering
You cannot be a great man.'*

There's no need to be so glum. With me here you'll come to no harm even if the sky falls down, so why be scared of wolves and tigers?" The Tang Priest reined in his horse and replied:

*"When I left Chang'an on imperial orders,
I was determined to worship the Buddha in the West,
Where his golden image shines in the sacred land,
And the jade hair gleams in the pagoda.*

*"I shall search the nameless rivers of the world,
And climb all unknown mountain ranges.
I long to cross the mighty, misty waves;
But when, O when, will I find my rest?"*

When Monkey heard this he chuckled and said, "You'll have no difficulty in that. When you've completed your mission all your destinies will be over and all your dharmas will be empty, so of course you'll be able to rest then." This cheered up Sanzang, who gave his dragon-horse the rein and urged it forward. As they climbed the mountain they found it truly craggy and precipitous.

*Towering peaks,
Tapering pinnacles.
Down in the deep and winding stream,
Beside the solitary cliff.
Down in the deep and winding stream,
You can hear the serpents playing and splashing in the
water;
Beside the solitary cliff,
Amid the trees on the precipice, tigers whisk their tails.
Look up,
And the blue sky is high above the peaks;
Turn round,*

*And the heavens join the deeps in the valley.
Climbing it
Is like ascending a ladder;
Descending
Is like going into a pit.
This is indeed a weird and craggy ridge,
A wall of tapering cliffs.
On the craggy ridge,
The medicine-gatherer moves in fear;
On the sheer rock-face
The firewood-collector cannot take a step.
Wild goats and horses all run free
And many are the bares and mountain oxen.
The mountain is so high it blots out sun and stars;
One often meets evil monsters and grey wolves.
The path is hard to follow and difficult for the horse:
How will they ever see the Buddha at the Thunder
Monastery?*

As Sanzang reined in his horse to look at the mountain he saw that they had reached a most difficult spot. There was a wood-gatherer standing on the green, grassy slope, and this was what he looked like:

*On his head a battered blue felt hat,
On his body a black woollen tunic.
The battered felt hat
That kept off sun and cloud was a strange sight;
In his black woollen tunic
He was amazingly happy and carefree.
The steel axe in his hand had been sharpened till it
shone;
He cut dry wood and made it into bundles.
Spring hung from his carrying-pole,
And he was happy throughout the four seasons.
His appearance was relaxed,
And his mind free from anxiety.
He had accepted his lot throughout his life;*

Fame and disgrace never bothered him on this mountain.

The wood-gatherer

*Was cutting down dead wood upon the slope
When he saw the monk approaching from the east.
Giving his axe a rest, he came out of the trees,
And, climbing fast, soon scaled the rock-face.*

"Stop here for a moment on your journey west," he shouted. "I must warn you that there is a pack of vicious ogres and fierce wolves on this mountain. They eat travellers from the east who are heading west."

The news terrified Sanzang out of his wits. Trembling in the saddle, he turned round sharply and called for his disciples. "Did you hear what the woodman said?" he asked. "There are ogres and wolves on this mountain. Do any of you dare ask him for more details?" "Don't worry, Master," said Monkey, "I'll find out from him."

Brother Monkey hurried up the mountain, and addressing the woodman as "Elder Brother" he asked all about it. "Why have you come here, venerable sir?" asked the woodman, returning his greeting. "To tell you the truth, elder brother," said Monkey, "we have come from the east and are heading west to fetch the scriptures. That's my master on the horse. He's a bit timid, so when you told him about the ogres and wolves he sent me to ask you about them. How long have they been here? Are they experts or just beginners? Please tell me about them. Then I can make the gods of the mountain and the local deities march them off." At this the woodman threw back his head and roared with laughter. "You really are a mad monk," he said. "I'm not mad," replied Monkey, "I'm talking sense." "If you're talking sense," said the woodman, "then how can you say you'll have them marched off?" "You must be related to them," said Monkey, "putting on those airs and blocking our way to talk that nonsense to us. If you're not related to them you're either a neighbour or a friend of theirs." "This is too much, mad monk," said the woodcutter

with another laugh. "The warning I've come specially to give you is meant well. I tell you to be on your guard all the time as you travel along, but you're holding me responsible for all those demons. Never mind whether I happen to know what these demons do. How could you possibly have them marched off even if I did know. Where would you send them?" "If they were sky monsters," replied Monkey, "I'd send them to the Jade Emperor, and if they were earth monsters I'd send them to the Earth Palace. Western ones would go to the Buddha and Eastern ones to the Sage. I'd send northerners to the True Martial God of the North and southerners to the Fire God. Dragon spirits would go to the Lord of the Seas and demons to King Yama. They all have somewhere to go. I know the people in all those places, so I'd only need to write out an order for the monsters to be sent there at the double the very same night."

"You mad monk," said the woodcutter with a mocking laugh, "you may have travelled in the clouds and learnt a little magic, but even if you can expel evil spirits and bind demons you've never come up against such vicious fiends." "What's so vicious about them?" asked Monkey. "This mountain is about two hundred miles across," said the woodcutter, "and it's called Flat-top Mountain. There is a cave in it called the Lotus Flower Cave where two devil chieftains live. They are so determined to capture monks that they've drawn pictures of them and found out the name of the man they want to eat — the Tang Priest. You'll be all right provided you come from anywhere but Tang. But if you're from there, don't carry on." "The land of Tang," replied Monkey, "is precisely where we're from." "Then they'll eat you," said the woodcutter. "We're in luck," said Monkey, "we're in luck. The only thing is that I don't know how they're going to eat us." "How do you want them to eat you?" the woodcutter asked. "If they eat my head first," said Monkey, "that will be fine. But if they start with my feet, I'll suffer." "What difference does it make whether they start with your head or feet?" the woodcutter asked. "You have no experience of it," said Monkey. "If they start with

my head, they'll have it off with one bite and I'll be dead. Whether they fry me, *sauté* me, or stew me I won't feel the slightest pain. But if they start from my feet they can chew my ankles, crunch up my legs, and eat their way up to my waist with me still alive and in agony. It would be going through torment in small instalments. That's why I'd suffer." "They've been there for a long time, monk," said the woodcutter, "and the moment they get you they'll tie you up, pop you in the steamer, and eat you whole." "Even better," said Monkey with a grin, "even better. That won't be at all painful; it'll just be a bit hot and close." "This is nothing to joke about, monk," said the woodcutter. "Those monsters have five treasures that they carry about with them, and their magic powers are enormous. Even if you're one of the jade pillars of the heavens or one of the golden beams that support the sea you may well have to pass out in order to get the Tang Priest through." "How often?" Monkey asked. "Three or four times," replied the woodcutter. "That's nothing," said Monkey, "nothing at all. We all pass out seven or eight hundred times a year, so it will be easy to pass out three or four times more and then we'll be able to get through."

The fearless Great Sage, whose one thought was to protect the Tang Priest, left the woodcutter and hurried back. When he reached the horse standing on the mountainside he said, "It's nothing much, Master. It's true that there are a few evil spirits here, but the local people only worry about them because they are timid. With me here there's no need for you to be afraid of them, so let's be on our way again." Sanzang was relieved to hear this, and he followed Monkey's lead.

As they travelled along they realized that woodcutter had disappeared some time back. "Why can't we see the woodcutter who gave us the message?" asked Sanzang. "What lousy luck," said Pig. "We would have to meet a ghost in broad daylight." "He must have gone into the forest to look for some more firewood," said Monkey. "I'll take a look." Opening wide his fiery eyes with their golden pupils, the splendid Great Sage searched the mountain, but no sign of the woodcutter was

to be seen. Then he looked up into the clouds and saw the Duty God of the Day there. He sprang up there himself and cursed him for a hairy devil several times before saying, "Why didn't you tell me straight instead of transforming yourself and putting on that act for me?" The Duty God bowed to him anxiously and said, "Please forgive me for being so late with the warning. Those monsters really have enormous magic powers and can perform all kinds of transformations. You'll need all your skill and cunning to protect your master. You won't possibly reach the Western Heaven if you are at all slack."

Monkey dismissed the Duty God. He was feeling worried as he landed his cloud and went up the mountainside until he found Sanzang, Pig and Friar Sand pressing ahead. "If I tell the master straight what the Duty God said," he thought, "the master won't be able to face up to it and will start crying. But if I don't tell him and keep him in the dark he won't know how things stand, and it'll be a great nuisance for me if he gets captured by monsters. I'd better go and see Pig. I can send him ahead to fight the monster. If he wins, that will be something to his credit. If he can't do it and gets captured by the monster, I can go and rescue him, which will give me a chance to show what I can do and make myself famous." As he made these calculations he wondered whether Pig would try to slip out of it and be protected by Sanzang. He decided he would have to force him into doing it.

The Great Sage resorted to a trick. He rubbed his eyes till they watered then went up to the master. When Pig saw him he said to Friar Sand, "Put your carrying-pole down and unpack the luggage. We two will split it." "What do you mean, split it?" asked Friar Sand. "Divide it," said Pig. "You can go back to the River of Flowing Sands to be a monster, and I'll go back to Gao Village to see my wife. We can sell the white horse to buy the wood for the coffin the master will be needing when he grows old. Then we can break up instead of going on to the Western Heaven." When Sanzang heard this he said, "How can you talk such nonsense in the middle of the journey?" "Who's talking nonsense? I'll say it again," said

Pig. "Can't you see that Monkey's coming back in tears? He's a real tough guy who isn't afraid of going down into the earth or up into the sky, or of being cut, burnt, or even being boiled in oil, so if he comes along deep in gloom and with the tears streaming down his face there must be monsters and wolves on this craggy mountain that softies like us could never get past."

"Stop that nonsense," said Sanzang. "I'll ask him what he has to say. Tell me straight," he said to Monkey, "what is bothering you. Why are you crying? Are you trying to frighten us?" "The person who gave us the message just now," replied Monkey, "was the Duty God of the Day. He said that the evil spirits here are so ferocious that it will be hard to get through; besides, we'll never be able to make our way across these steep mountains. Let's go another day." Trembling with fear at this news, Sanzang tugged at Monkey's tigerskin kilt and said, "Why these thoughts of turning back when we've already done half the journey?" "It's not that I'm wavering," said Monkey, "but we'd be no match for so many monsters. 'A lump of iron in the furnace can only make a few nails.' " "You are right," said Sanzang, "it would be very difficult by yourself. As the military classic says, 'few are no match for many'. But I also have Pig and Friar Sand for you to deploy as your subordinates. Make a joint effort to clear the path and take me over the mountain. Then you will receive your just reward."

As Brother Monkey's little show had only wrung these words out of his master, he wiped away his tears and said, "Pig will have to do two things I tell him to if you're to have even one chance in three of crossing the mountain as you want to, Master. If he won't do these two things for me you'll have no hope at all." "Brother," Pig said, "if we can't cross the mountain, let's disband. Leave me out of this." "Disciple," said Sanzang, "ask your brother what he wants you to do." "What do you want me to do, brother?" the idiot asked. "Look after the master and patrol the mountains," Monkey replied. "But looking after the master means staying put," said Pig, "and patrolling means moving. You can't ask me to stay put for a bit then move for a bit. I can't do both at once." "I'm not

asking you to do them both," said Monkey, "I just want you to do one of them." "That's much easier," said Pig with a smile, "though I don't know what you mean by looking after the master or by patrolling the mountains. Tell me what you want, then I can do the one that suits me." "Looking after the master," said Monkey, "means that if he wants to go for a stroll you must support him, and if he wants to eat you must beg some food for him. If he's hungry you'll be beaten. If he looks at all sallow you'll be beaten. If he's any thinner you'll be beaten."

"That's very difficult," said Pig with alarm. "There's nothing to looking after him or holding him up — even carrying him would be easy enough. But if he sends me to beg for food in a village the people on this path to the west won't realize that I'm a monk going to fetch the scriptures. They'll think that I'm a growing wild boar come down from the mountains. A crowd of men with forks, rakes and brooms will surround me, capture me, slaughter me, and salt me down for the New Year celebrations. That would be the end of me, wouldn't it?" "Then you can patrol the mountains," said Brother Monkey. "What would that involve?" asked Pig. "You would have to go into these mountains," said Monkey, "to find out how many monsters there are, and all about the mountains, and what the monsters' caves are like, so that we can go across it." "Nothing to it," replied Pig. "I'll patrol the mountains." The idiot hitched up his tunic, grasped his rake, and proudly struck deep into the mountains. His spirits were high as he hurried along the path.

Monkey could not hold back an unkind laugh. "Wretched ape," said Sanzang, "you haven't a shred of affection for your brothers, only jealousy. You trick him into patrolling the mountains with your cunning words, and then you laugh at him." "I'm not laughing at him," said Monkey. "My laugh means something. Just you see — he won't patrol the mountains or dare to visit any monsters. He'll hide up somewhere for a while then make up some story to fool us with." "How do you know so much about him?" asked Sanzang. "It's what I reckon he'll do," replied Monkey, "and if you don't believe me I'll go and take a look at him. I can help him subdue any demons and find