

The First and Final Betrayal

'I, with the authority given by the Most High, found the defendant, Wujing, guilty,' the judge expressionlessly enunciated.

At the strike of the judge's gavel, Wujing closed his eyes and gasped. The whole court sprang into wild laughter and revelry.

'According to the law, Wujing will be sentenced to death,' the judge remained unmoved. In a hurry, he rose and bowed in reverence. All did likewise in giggles and chuckles here and there.

Two bailiffs grabbed him by his arms and dragged him back toward the exit. Before the door closed in his face, throngs of these spectators were still absorbed in their ridicules.

'I still can't figure out why you would do that,' said one of the guards when taking him up to the cubicle, but he only heard the echoes of his own voice in the corridor.

'Get in then,' the guard stared in disrespect. 'Silence is not always gold, moron.'

The key clanged in the keyhole and then Wujing was all alone. He lay on the dry hay, with his eyes ablaze.

A hiss. That was a familiar one. He sprang up immediately and heeded the surrounding. Out from the corner crawled a snake. It scurried through the disheveled hay, serpentine between invisibility and visibility, and then emerged again at his feet. Its forked tongue protruded again. A disquieting hiss ensued.

Wujing's eyes widened, his lips started trembling, and his throat clogged. He retrieved his legs as slowly as he could, making his movement indiscernible. The snake seemed to be half-hearted about his presence, veering away from him and slipping off through the bars.

He let out a sigh of relief. He stretched his body again after making sure there were no more snakes around. It was not long ago when he last saw a serpent.

That one was gigantic. It coiled around the trunk of an old fig tree. Its forked tongue jutted out into the air, searching in the air, searching for him.

A hiss again. On that day it drew his attention. He looked at the tree. Somehow the serpent spoke audibly into his heart.

'Hi, Wujing...'

He was not too surprised. He knew very well what it was. It could be nothing but for the embodiment of evilness itself. It dragged its minions around with it every day to look for those they could devour. Three years of being embroiled in battles with these beings he also knew perfectly well what they ultimately wanted: his master's body, synonymous with life eternal. But instead of backing off, he drew himself closer to it.

'Wujing, I need your help here,' in his mind the serpent uttered. He knew something was going awry but he was not afraid of opening this can of worms. 'I need your help here. I want you to tell me where you master is.'

Wujing furrowed his brows. Snippets of memories emerged--when his brothers were out in the battlefield he could only sit on the bench drily. When his brothers were messing around, he was going extra miles to do good for his master but got no appreciation.

He was reminded of that time when there was a shrine in the city in which they sojourned and this is place where his master was teaching. A harlot went into the crowd and elbowed her way through until Xangzhang saw her.

She knelt down and fished out an alabaster jar from her bag. She wound open the lid and perfume pervaded the room. Xangzhang smiled at her with placidity. She then gave it to him, saying that she would like to give everything if that could give her true pleasure instead of selling her own body for some gods that she did not know.

Wujing sensed the approach of an unclean human, as well as a chance for him to show his reverence for his master. He immediately stepped forward to block her from moving forward. He opined that she should give the alabaster jar to the needy instead of giving it to his master.

‘Jing,’ Xangzhang frowned, eyeing him sternly with knitted brows. ‘Why did you stop this woman from approaching me? Did I not tell you that I am here to bring ultimate peace to all who are manacled by earthly pleasures?’

Breathing hard and panting, Wujing felt choked by his master’s injustice. He had served his master for years and battled with every monster to keep him safe but now he chose a random harlot over him. He thought he had done enough to manifest his loyalty to his master. He thought his endeavors to do good could please his master. But in the end he could not even hear a word of favor from him.

Each snippet haunted him. He tried to dispel these ideas but they were just glued to his mind. It was like lice on his head. Once they dropped an egg on his scalp, it would evolve into a thousand more of its ilk.

‘You will just have to kiss his cheek to greet him when you see him,’ the serpent said. ‘Then we would have access to him.’

‘They would never know who did it. And we would give you whatever you wanted.’

On the spur of the moment, it was more about revenge than about power. Wujing clenched his fists, gritting and gnashing. He could not fathom his animosity toward them. Maybe this had been hoarded in his heart long ago, suppressed and undermined from time to time to retain his dignity before his brothers. Now it was an opportunity for it to break loose, and he craved for an opportunity like this.

‘Okay.’

It was this short and succinct reply that delivered him up to this ordeal filled with remorse and pain. Indeed, no one knew who had blown a whistle to alert his master. No one except himself. When he winked, that serpent disappeared.

He walked back to the bungalow they rented. It was like a dream to him, bewildered by his own vision of the serpent. He knocked on the door. It was Wuhung who received him.

‘Hey brother,’ he threw his arms around him. ‘Where have you been? We’ll eat whoever comes by if we delay our dinner for one more second.’

He squeezed a smile. Stepping into the house he found his master looking at him. He smiled at him warmly. A smile that could only be given to a family member. It suddenly fell ghost-silent except for his own heartbeat seeing that smile. Wujing laid down his Yue Yee Magic Staff; Bajie laid down his tripod; Xangzhang laid down his scepter. All these were essential in guarding their own safety but now they laid them all down simply because after all these years their trust in one another became insurmountable. Their interdependence became an airtight bastion against the trespasses of the evil. He would not like to smirch this beautiful picture.

Wuhung led him to his seat and tucked him in. Wujing looked at what was on the desk. Naan, curry, unleavened bread and water. No ambrosia and nectar, but only homemade dishes.

That was a very delightful meal: Bajie as usual gorged on naans and curry, sweeping everything edible into his mouth. Wuhung was on the verge of poking us with his magic stick, shrieking, “Master needs

to eat as well!’ Xangzhang laughed lightly enjoying their rapport, giggling while asking them to sit down.

‘Wujing,’ said Xangzhang, ‘ why don’t you eat with us?’

Wujing reckoned he might have been trembling when he obeyed his master and started eating. He dared not look at what sort of expression there was on his face, he could picture him slightly lowering his chin, looking at him from that angle and trying to devour him with the penetrating gaze. He always felt like his master had the perfect knowledge about what they were thinking even before they uttered a word.

‘Are you alright, Jing?’ Wuhung was worried, looking at him from across the table. Bajie held his hand still, having half a piece of naan in his mouth staring at Wujing.

He could immediately feel his face cool down and pallor crawled up his face. He wanted to say something like “I am alright. Probably I’ve caught a cold” to brush them off but he could not. He could not utter a word that contained a grain of sincerity in the face of his master.

His master came to his rescue. He stood up from his seat and went up to one corner of the hut, coming back with a pot of water.

The whole house fell into complete silence, except for the gentle jingle of the metal lid against the handle. Xangzhang slowly poised it on the ground in front of Wuhung, rolled up his sleeves and took off the towel wrapped around his waist.

‘Gimme your feet,’ Xangzhang said placidly.

‘What do you want, master?’ Wuhung asked with his mouth agape, taking his feet aback. ‘You can’t wash my feet for me. You are my master!’

Xangzhang looked up, wringing the sodden towel. ‘Wuhung, I came here to serve, not to be served; to forgive, and not to hate.’

Wuhung was silenced. He could speak no more but reached his feet out. They were filthy, speckled and bruised. Xangzhang held them still and touched on the cuts.

‘Do they hurt?’ he asked, and Wuhung nodded. He then gingerly pecked on those cuts with the towel, wiping away the filthy pocks on the side and soothing the bruised areas. Wuhung’s mien was a concoction of many feelings, from embarrassment, shame, gladness to sadness. To their bewilderment, he picked up the pot again and placed it in front of Wujing. He reached out his hands signaling him to do the same.

Wujing recalled his feet being much worse than those of Wuhung: some parts were purple and some blue. Toes were deformed and nails crooked. One side was dotted and one side blotched. Even he himself felt deterred to look at them.

But Xangzhang just held his feet gently as if they were fragile glass. ‘I came here to forgive, not to hate,’ he repeated, and then went on to clean his feet. He soaked the towel. His hands were warm but coarse. He was careful not to touch his wounds. Then he did to him the same as what he did to Wuhung. Wujing could not distinguish if that was an illusion or it really happened. When what it seemed to be a religious ritual was completed, he felt the sourness and pain slipping away.

Wujing looked at his master, subconsciously scratching at the rim of his seat pad. It wrinkled and his brows also wrinkled. This discomforted him. His master’s gentleness disconcerted him; his lowliness confounded him; his humility unsettled him. He had a sudden strong urge to push him away, but he fought back his urge.

The master then moved on to Bajie and did all the same. Wujing could not pay any more attention. His mind was tied to a spinning wheel. One thing orbiting him was the words the Serpent said to him.

“Kiss him.”

His master knelt down and washed his fellowman’s feet.

“Kiss him.”

His master soaked the towel in the pot again.

“Kiss him.”

His master stood up with the towel and pot in his arms. Wujing went up to him and hugged him.

‘Thank you, master,’ said he, pecking on the master’s cheek.

It happened so fast. Black smoke flooded the house. Wujing heard his brothers yelling, “Master?” over and over. He heard Bajie reach out for his tripod and Wuhung for his magic staff. He also heard himself screaming at the top of his throat for no reason. But he could not hear his master.

The smoke wheeled around him and dissipated in a flash. When he opened his eyes, he could only see an empty bungalow with only himself.

On the desk placed thirty silver coins. He knew it was his remuneration for betraying his master. And he realized at that moment that he was blinded all along by that serpent. All the jealousy and hatred made him the perfect decoy to lure his master into the sinister trap. He limped toward the desk and in fury swept all the coins off the desk. He looked at the puddle of water on the ground, wherein he found the reflection of an empty-headed creature controlled by temerity and vanity.

He knew where his master and his brothers would be in— the stone table, on which prisoners on death row would be executed. They would force him to eat the humble pie before eating him themselves by pushing this dignified monk, who was appointed to bust the power of the evil through learning the sacred text in India, onto that ominous table.

He had never run any faster in his life. The only thing revolving around his head was to save his master from the jaws of the devil as well as repent from his collusion with those beings. If his master would like to wash his filthy feet, he would also like to forgive his obnoxious acts.

When he got there, in his retrospect, his master was already headless. Bits of his body were distributed among those beings. The gore and blood might have benumbed his fellowmen, so much so that they could only stand there dumbfounded and ossified. The serpent was now in human form. Biting off a part of his master’s heart gave him some pleasure. As he was laughing out loud in frenzy, he spotted Wujing.

‘Thanks so much, Jing,’ he said with blood dripping from his mouth. ‘You are now half as hypocritical as your master.’

His sonorous laughter brought about Wujing’s breakdown. He sat on the ground hugging his knees. Between his knees he could only hear his own heartbeat and outcry. Only if he could completely silence the world, he could find peace. But then a deafening screech interrupted him.

He looked up. The serpent looked heavenward and started scratching his throat. His minions started to do likewise. In a few minutes the serpent’s face turned purple and with the eyes gouged out. He let out his final breath and fell onto the ground. Like domino the others fell on the ground one by one. And then all the revelry died down.

The stone table was bloodstained to save the world through the sacrifice of an innocent soul. Wujing would give up everything to be dying on his master’s behalf. He would rather to be betrayed by his loved ones instead of betraying his loved ones.

The regional authority arrived soon after. It dawned on Wujing that his master was the greatest decoy. Xangzhang was the bait leading the serpent to Wujing, and ultimately making it run headlong to its own destruction. As the perfect poison, Xangzhang assassinated the father of all killers and of all guiles. All along Wujing and his fellowmen were told by the master to look for the sacred text in the west so that the power of the evil would be busted forever and all people could be in peace. It turned out he was the word itself. He busted the power of the evil and brought ultimate peace to the whole world.

After that Wujing went back to the hut and picked up all thirty silver coins, before turning himself in to the regional authority. He confessed how he had not resisted the temptation of the evil but instead colluded with them for only thirty silver coins. His betrayal against his beloved master only earned him thirty cold coins. What an irony.

Was death his due penalty? For him it was not. In the final moment he was still plotting to blot out his master, who would like to empty himself to cleanse his defiled feet and corrupt soul. He deserved to be thrashed in hell for the rest of his life along with all those evil beings.

The key clanged again. The guards broke his remorseful reverie.

‘It’s time now.’

He went through the streets to the stone table. The crowd’s bellow of rage was earsplitting. People along the road started throwing stones at him and the guards did not bother to protect someone who was going to die a minute later. Some of the stones hit his back and some hit his head. He did not feel pain though, until he mounted the stone table and saw in his memory his master’s death re-enacted in front of him like a cursed drama script. On the stone table he could not see his brothers in the crowd. ‘They should despise me,’ he thought to himself. ‘Even seeing me disgusted them.’

The executioner stood beside him and raised his sword up in mid-air. Wujing closed his eyes ready to receive his death penalty.

In the darkness he waited a bit, expecting a sharp bolt of pain on his nape and then he would wake up in the afterlife. He only felt snaps of icy wind in the end. When he opened his eyes, his long-lost brothers leapt into visibility.

‘I think our master wouldn’t like you to die either,’ said Wuhung.

The next second, tears were rolling down his cheeks. Now even though he realized this was only a dream and he would soon wake up again in hell, he already felt contented. At least he had received the forgiveness and acceptance that he had craved for all along.

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