

PINGREE-PANPIPER PRODUCTIONS

present

a

film

by

James Coburn

Bruce Lee

Stirling Silliphant

THE SILENT FLUTE

written

by

Stirling Silliphant

October 19, 1970

PRODUCTION NOTE

I have elected to write this script in the European, rather than the American, form.

Scene breakdowns, indications of time and place, opticals and cuts, camera movements - all have been virtually eliminated - so that the script reads more like a narrative than the blueprint of a film.

But what follows, in spite of the form chosen, is a precisely designed shooting script worked out shot by shot by its creators, that is, by James Coburn who will direct, co-produce and act in it; by Bruce Lee, who will stage and direct all the combat sequences and also appear in the film as Ah Sahn, as the Monkey Man, as the Rhythm Man and as Death, the Panther Man; and by Stirling Silliphant who will co-produce and who has written the screenplay.

THE SILENT FLUTE will be shot in three locations - Thailand, Japan and Morocco.

-- Stirling Silliphant

"THE BOOK":

"The Book", the bible of martial art, supposedly contains the innermost secret doctrines of empty-hand combat. Every ten years a contest is held to select the "Keeper of The Book", if any Seeker can survive the Three Trials and find his way to the Island.

CORD - THE SEEKER:

(JAMES COBURN)

A martial art die-hard who makes martial art a goal rather than a process, an end rather than a means. He lives martial art, he breathes martial art. He swears to obtain "The Book" and become the best martial artist. This story is about the journey to his soul - an Odessey, a Quest - from the first meeting with Ah Sahn, the Blind Man, to the duel with the Rhythm Man, to the rejection of "The Book" and his final confrontation which brings him enlightenment.

THE BLIND MAN -
AH SAHM:

(BRUCE LEE)

A blind Chinese who can feel where sighted people cannot see. An enlightened man who has transcended martial art and is the mirror reflecting the soul of a man - he is Cord's subconscious self, Cord's alter-ego - his face before birth.

RHYTHM MAN -
CHANGSHA:

(BRUCE LEE)

A skillful master of martial art. He has rhythm in broken rhythm and vice versa. His explosive emotions and his dependence on external musical instruments for "turning on" eventually lead to his defeat.

THE MECHANICAL
MAN - SHABANI:

Cord's brother monk who leads him - though unwillingly - into the first of the Three Trials.

THE MONKEY MAN:

(BRUCE LEE)

Cord's first terrifying opponent. Ego - the First Trial.

TARA:

A girl who conducts Cord through the love ritual of Tantric Yoga - and teaches him the ultimate meaning of Love - the Second Trial.

THE PANTHER MAN:

Death - the Third Trial.

(BRUCE LEE)

YAMAGUCHI:

The Keeper of "The Book". He symbolizes organized religion (e.g., the Pope, the Catholic Church, or any institutionalized Faith).

FOREWARD

Three swordsmen sat down at a table in a crowded Japanese inn and began to make loud comments about their neighbor, hoping to goad him into a duel. The master seemed to take no notice of them, but when their remarks became ruder and more pointed, he raised his chopsticks and, in quick snips, effortlessly caught four flies on the wing. As he slowly laid down the chopsticks, the three swordsmen hurriedly left the room.

The story illustrates a great difference between Oriental and Western thinking. The average Westerner would be intrigued by someone's ability to catch flies with chopsticks, and would probably say that has nothing to do with how good he is in combat. But the Oriental would realize that a man who has attained such complete mastery of an art reveals his presence of mind in every action. The state of wholeness and imperturbability demonstrated by the master indicated his mastery of self.

And so it is with martial arts. To the Westerner the finger jabs, the side kicks, the back fist, etc., are tools of destruction and violence which is, indeed, one of their functions. But the Oriental believes that the primary function of such tools is revealed when they are self-directed and destroy greed, fear, anger and folly.

Manipulative skill is not the Oriental's goal. He is aiming his kicks and blows at himself and when successful, may even succeed in knocking himself out. After years of training, he hopes to achieve that vital loosening and equability of all powers which is what the three swordsmen saw in the master.

In every day life the mind is capable of moving from one thought or object to another - "being" mind instead of "having" mind. However, when face to face with an opponent in a deadly contest, the mind tends to stick and loses its mobility. Stickability or stoppage is a problem that haunts every martial artist.

Kwan-in (Avalokitesvara), the Goddess of Mercy, is sometimes represented with one thousand arms, each holding a different instrument. If her mind stops with the use, for instance, of a spear, all the other arms (999) will be of no use whatever. It is only because of her mind not stopping with the use of one arm, but moving from one instrument to another, that all her arms prove useful with the utmost degree of efficiency. Thus the figure is meant to demonstrate that, when the ultimate truth is realized even as many as one thousand arms on one body may each be serviceable in one way or another.

"Purposelessness," "empty-mindedness" or "no art" are frequent terms used in the Orient to denote the ultimate achievement of a martial artist. According to Zen, the spirit is by nature formless

and no "objects" are to be harbored in it. When anything is harbored there, psychic energy is drawn toward it, and when psychic energy loses its balance, its native activity becomes cramped and it no longer flows with the stream. Where the energy is tipped, there is too much of it in one direction and a shortage of it in another direction. Where there is too much energy, it overflows and cannot be controlled. In either case, it is unable to cope with ever-changing situations. But when there prevails a state of "purposelessness" (which is also a stage of fluidity or mindlessness), the spirit harbors nothing in it, nor is it tipped in one direction; It transcends both subject and object; it responds empty-mindedly to whatever is happening.

True mastery transcends any particular art. It stems from mastery of oneself - the ability, developed through self-discipline, to be calm, fully aware, and completely in tune with oneself and the surroundings. Then, and only then, can a person know himself.

-- Bruce Lee

THE SILENT FLUTE

The night had brought little relief from the heat.

Now at dawn a hot gust of wind blows across the mountains.

Sunlight creeps down the highest peak. Its point emerges from darkness, emerging upward with slow majesty.

Thin-sounding, unearthly, a flute calls from the peak where the blind man - AH SAHM - blends with rock and pine.

Dawn seeps slowly into the valley, touches a neighboring peak. It too rises upward into new day.

The Seeker - CORD - is poised at its top. Like Ah Sahm, he appears so much a part of the mountain he might be stone, not flesh, until abruptly he surges forward, crashes down mindlessly, as though compelled toward the flute, runs down through brush, crackling and tearing his way toward the wavering of the distant flute.

The chanting of monks replaces the wail of the flute.

Subliminal blurs of color, inter-swirling reds and yellows, replace the precipitously running figure of Cord, then glimpses of impassive Oriental faces - flashing fists, feet sweeping club-like and punishing slaps, thuds - crimson and yellow shifting, reaching high, ducking low, circling, stalking, enveloping each other.

The colors part. Two combatants face each other in classical empty-handed stance, on a mat in the courtyard of a Buddhist temple.

Between them stands a referee. Four corner judges are positioned, all with red flag in one hand, yellow in the other. On either side kneel the teams of the yellow robe faction and the red robe faction. On an elevated platform three monks dominate, one in red robe, another in yellow, side by side, and above and between them the Wisest of the Monks in pure white robe. On all sides of the square, far back from the center of combat, mass the chorus of monks chanting.

One of the combatants - the Mechanical Man - SHABANI - shuffles in his strong stance, his opponent compensating methodically. Both wear the same rigid expression.

The red robe combatant lunges toward Shabani with a classical Mae-geri (front kick). Forcefully Shabani knocks the kick aside, returns his own front snap kick and follows with a Gyaku-Zuki (reverse punch) which scores.

Yellow flags are raised by two corner judges. The referee stops the bout to acknowledge the scoring point. Beyond, the chanting monks hush their chorus until the referee gives the signal to resume. The two contestants bow to him, then once more face each other with the same wooden look of determination and bow to each other. They assume their classical stance. Once more the chanting rises.

Shabani feints. Red Robe takes the bait, lunges with a Yoko-Geri (counter side snap kick), but Shabani outtimes him, scoring with a solid counter punch to the mid-section, followed instantaneously with a controlled face punch.

Yellow flags thrust upward. The referee declares Shabani the winner. The monks' chanting cuts off.

The combatants bow to each other, then to the referee. They approach the head monk on the elevated level, bow to him, return to their own teams.

Cord's name is called. He unfolds upward, tall and eager and lean, from the squatting faction of red robe contestants, the only Caucasian among the Orientals of this sect.

He virtually forces himself to wait until he hears Shabani's name called, then he strides toward the elevated platform, there joins with Shabani in ceremonial salute to the masters above him.

He and Shabani proceed to the combat mat, salute the corner judges, the referee, each other, assume fighting stance.

Again, Buddhist chanting.

Shabani sneaks in with a front snap kick. Cord blocks with flashing speed, counters with a Mawashi-Geri (round-house kick). Shabani retreats, but Cord pursues him with a Kekomi (cross-over side thrust kick) which Shabani blocks and counter-attacks with a spinning back kick Cord easily evades.

The two men separate, stalk each other. The chanting rises even louder.

Cord begins to initiate an attack but sensing Shabani's poised counter-attack, aborts it, shuffles into new position, Shabani instantly compensating.

Cord snaps out a high front kick, follows with a reverse thrust punch, Shabani retreating from the kick, blocking the punch and preparing to launch his favorite reverse punch, but Cord frustrates the blow by stepping back into stance.

Shabani's face remains wooden throughout. Cord's features mirror his growing impatience, his hunger to attack without regard to rules.

Shabani attempts a foot sweep. Cord counters with a round-house kick. Again, no contact. The chanting by now is deafening.

Suddenly, Cord screams with all the power in his lungs, lunges forward with a leg obstruction, causing Shabani's counter kick to crash unfeeling against the outthrust bottom of Cord's foot. Cord forces forward, running straight into Shabani's reverse punch to his stomach.

Cord ignores the scoring point and connects to Shabani's head with two unorthodox left and right hooks, driving Shabani back and down to the mat where he lies crumpled within his yellow robe, knocked senseless by this non-permitted "hard" contact.

Shocked by so flagrant a violation, the chanting monks stop their chorus.

In the silence of their condemnation, Cord stands above the unconscious man.

Four yellow flags are held up by the corner judges in indictment of the red-robed Cord.

Yellow-robed teammates try to revive Shabani. They slap the bottom of his feet.

Cord watches his teammates rise in mass disgrace because of his unprecedented hard contact and file out without so much as a glance in his direction.

Shabani is raised to his feet and led, staggering and groggy, to the platform of White Robe where he is awarded the symbol of victory.

The central courtyard continues to empty until only Cord, standing in deep thought on the mat, and White Robe on the platform, remain.

Cord stares across at the serene face of the aged patriarch.

Cord speaks in Thai. (NOTE: Throughout this film various languages other than English will be spoken, all of them known to and spoken by Cord. Over these scenes sub-titles will be used. Through the use of spoken Thai, Cantonese, Arabic and Japanese, an added dimension in sound will be achieved.)

CORD

Shabani did not win. I won.

WHITE ROBE

He who is chosen must be able to bind an elephant with a spider's web.

CORD

I am that man!

WHITE ROBE

What is the good of a wonderful milk yield from a cow which kicks the pail over?

CORD

I won!

WHITE ROBE

Your fist was able to strike down your opponent, but not yourself. You are no match for Yamaguchi.

CORD

Is Shabani?

WHITE ROBE

He has control over himself. You do not. I have chosen him to face the Three Trials.

The aged monk rises.

Cord bows, knowing there is no appeal beyond the judgement of the patriarch.

The monk disappears into the shadows of a doorway.

Cord plunges down the mountain slope, stumbles, falls, rolls. He checks his fall, gets to his feet, peers across the valley at the stark morning brightness of the neighboring peak from which the flute calls.

He begins again to run, continuing his headlong rush.

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Outside the monastery Cord squats in the gutter of a Bangkok street. Cars and pedestrians stream past him. But he does not see them.

His attention, all his being, is beamed at the closed gates of the ghat he has departed in disgrace.

He does not hear the traffic sounds. He hears only the brothers from which his impatience in combat has severed him. Their soft chanting carries to his ears.

He assumes the position of meditation and in accordance with the teachings of long months of training, his mouth forms silently the echo of their ritual chanting.

The sun sets, another dawn comes, the patterns of traffic ebb and flow throughout the intervening hours, but Cord never moves from his position, neither to eat, to evacuate his bowels or kidneys, nor to relieve the cramped position of his muscles. He appears disembodied, his being linked solely to the monastery gate which opens after dawn and discharges a stream of monks with their begging bowls. But this is not what he is waiting for.

They ignore him, disappear down the street. But his eyes do not track them. They return later in the morning. But he does not remark them.

The second night rain drenches him, but he is unheeding. Water plasters his hair, weighs down his robe, but he does not move.

His eyes. The gate. Nothing else in the universe.

That second day he continues without movement, without sleep, without food. Children pass him, tourists, lovers, delivery trucks, even the Blind Man - Ah Sahm - of whom he takes no notice (except sub-consciously).

Ah Sahm comes toward him from far down the avenue wearing a black robe and carrying a bamboo staff. As Ah Sahm comes closer his toe bell emits a faint tinging.

But Cord appears not to hear it. Ah Sahm passes, is lost among the teeming mid-day crowd streaming around the immobile Cord.

At mid-afternoon of the second day the gate again opens.

Shabani comes out, resolutely, stolidly, sets forth in search of The Book as the appointed seeker for the monastery.

Cord rises like a panther flexing itself, adjusts the shoulder strap of the rough hide pouch he carries at his hip.

He seems to be revitalized, keenly alive now. He follows Shabani as though the two are linked by an unbreakable chain.

MAIN TITLE, CAST and CREDITS are SUPERIMPOSED OVER the progress of Shabani, far in the lead, Cord following, through the city, into the countryside, the world opening up and becoming Cord's unwall'd monastery as he flows outward from the restricted microcosm of the ghat he has left forever.

The two men walk until darkness. When Shabani sleeps, Cord sleeps. When Shabani awakens, Cord awakens. When Shabani eats rice from his bowl, Cord takes a rice ball from his hip pouch and he too eats.

And they walk...beneath the lacework of coconut palms along the sand of the ocean shore, through hamlets of fishermen and taking care not to step on nets drying in the sun, along the ridges which criss-cross paddy fields, through the ruins of an ancient city long overrun by green jungle, past gigantic dagobas and bell-shaped brick buildings from which monkeys chatter at them, down endlessly long dirt roads along which now and then carts drawn by quick-trotting bullocks rumble, from shadow to sun and back to shadow through stands of banana leaves with their broad overhanging leaves... Shabani's sandals and Cord's tirelessly pace after pace against the rose-red earth.

Shabani has been aware since he first left the monastery of Cord's unprecedented behavior. That he is being followed is more than merely annoying. It is a matter of palpable disgrace which will have to be rectified.

Shabani stops to ponder this. Cord too stops and waits.

Shabani resumes his trek. Cord continues to maintain the dogged half-mile which separates them.

Down a long narrow roadway Shabani sees a village ahead, the sun hovering just above its huts at day's end. He turns back, strides toward Cord, stops measured yards away.

He speaks to Cord in Thai.

SHABANI

Why do you bring this shame upon us?

CORD

I bring no shame.

SHABANI

You follow me.

CORD

You are my only link to Yamaguchi.

SHABANI

I have been chosen - not you - to face the Three Trials.

CORD

You can not defeat Yamaguchi. I can.

SHABANI

I will stop you.

CORD

You can not.

Threateningly, Shabani moves toward Cord, but Cord retreats.

Shabani makes another charge toward him. Again Cord slides back too swiftly for Shabani to reach him.

SHABANI

Fight me!

CORD

I do not wish to kill you.

Shabani turns back toward the village. Cord follows once more, maintaining his distance.

In utter frustration, Shabani stops, seats himself ponderously on a rock, his back to Cord, to consider his dilemma. If he can not fight Cord and if he can not lose him, what must he do?

From the village a man wearing a black robe and carrying a bamboo cane appears. As he comes toward Shabani and Cord the tinkling of his toe bell can be heard. The man is Ah Sahn.

He passes first Shabani, then Cord. Cord observes that the man is blind.

Yet Ah Sahn moves with surety, showing none of the guardedness of the blind.

Fascinated by the bearing of the blind man, Cord watches his figure become smaller as Ah Sahn passes in the direction from which Cord and Shabani have come.

Ah Sahn enters the forest, already deep in the gloom of dusk.

For a moment Cord thinks he has seen a sudden flickering of torches among the trees, but they vanish, even as the blind man vanishes in the dusk.

Cord turns back to consider the hunched shoulders of the brooding Shabani.

A violent commotion from the forest strikes Cord's ears. He hears shouting - violent, primitive, bestial.

Involuntarily, he starts toward the hidden strife, but stops to look back at Shabani. Shabani has not moved.

Cord hesitates. If he follows his instinct and goes, Shabani may take advantage of his temporary absence, flee him and break the trail to Yamaguchi. Yet...

A high scream carries to him, the last exhalation of a dying man.

Cord runs down the road toward the forest.

Shabani glances warily over his shoulder, sees Cord running off. He gets up, speeds in the opposite direction toward the distant village.

Cord enters the forest. A thug, bare to the waist, is impaled on the broken end of a low branch

jutting from the trunk of a tree. Another lies, face crushed, amidst a broken bush.

Beyond, through the trees, Cord sees eight other thugs armed with clubs and spears confronting the blind man who stands within their encirclement, his head down, his body motionless. The thugs have thrust guttering torches in a rough circle about the clearing. Ah Sahm appears to be the embodiment of neutrality. The circling thugs, on the contrary, appear symbolic of all the negative emotions which victimize men - greed, fear, hate. The leader of the thugs stands slightly out of the circle with his Oriental bodyguard.

Cord eases through the trees. He sees one of the thugs sneak forward, raise his club overhead as he tries to move soundlessly upon the blind man. The attacking thug motions the others to remain still.

The thug approaches Ah Sahm until he is almost directly in front of him and within striking range. The thug, holding his breath, slowly raises his club. It would seem that any second the club will smash down and split open the blind man's head.

Cord begins to shout a warning, but before he can utter it, the thug swings, the sound of wood through air so sharp and clean Cord can hear it even at his distance. Ah Sahm's evasion is swiftness within swiftness, as though his motion is timed to the sound, not so much anticipating it as reacting to it and catching up to it and surpassing it with his own speed, like a bullet overtaking an arrow in flight. His evasion and counter-attack are virtually simultaneous.

Cord sees a right eagle claw grasp the thug's throat while Ah Sahm's left hand ensnarls the thug's hair and snaps his head backward.

Clutching him so, Ah Sahm leads the thug along for several steps, the thug gasping for air, the club slipping from his fingers.

A second thug rushes Ah Sahm from the side. Instantly Ah Sahm releases his throat grip, pushes the first thug to his right even as he left side-kicks the rushing second thug in the groin. Before Ah Sahm's left foot has retouched the earth, he has leapt higher and kicked the already groggy first thug in the head, snapping his neck and dropping him lifeless to the ground. The second thug writhes on the ground, doubled in upon himself, his genitals destroyed.

The rest of the mob moves to attack en masse,

but Ah Sahn turns toward them and they disperse, once more fanning out, though diminished in number, around him. Ah Sahn approaches the writhing man, kills him casually with a right crescent kick.

Cord is impelled closer, drawn by the incredible ability of the blind man, a martial arts performance surpassing anything Cord has ever believed possible.

Suddenly three thugs attack Ah Sahn with a combination of weaponry - sharp bamboo lances and clubs. In quick succession, Ah Sahn smashes the kneecap of the closest adversary, snatches the bamboo stick from him as he crumples and stabs the fourth thug directly ahead of him, then thrusts backwards to impale the fifth man about to club him from behind. The impaled man remains standing only because Ah Sahn continues to hold the bamboo stick aloft from where he has back-thrust it under his left shoulder.

The body of the man Ah Sahn has stabbed has fallen on the thug with the shattered kneecap. Crab-like, sidling, sobbing for his life in terror of this silent victim who has turned out to be an impersonal, avenging god of the trees, the injured thug struggles to drag himself away.

A sixth thug, crazed by the killing, abandons all caution, screams at the top of his lungs and flings himself toward Ah Sahn. The blind man turns, swinging himself around so that the body of the thug on the bamboo spear is between himself and the charging man. Ah Sahn thrusts the spear deeper, so that its suddenly protruding point pins the charging man. Like two roasts on a spit, the two dead men make a frightful set of twins. Ah Sahn shoves them toward the flailing man on the ground.

Even with this motion, Ah Sahn suddenly sidesteps as the leader's Oriental bodyguard flies past him overhead from behind, missing him by the least fraction of an inch with a flying side kick.

As he lands, he spins around, faces Ah Sahn in a classical fighting pose.

Cord, close now to the combat, yet still sheltered by trees from sight of the three remaining thugs, can see that this man facing Ah Sahn is superbly trained in the art of empty-handed combat.

The bodyguard begins to move around Ah Sahn. But Ah Sahn shifts with him, his movement less perceptible than the movement of the hour hand on a clock, yet

miraculously he is always facing his opponent. The man makes a few feints, but draws no response from Ah Sahm. His calf ligaments tense as he prepares to attack. He fakes, then changes into a reverse turning heel kick. Ah Sahm ducks out of SHOT as the bodyguard completes his turn and is facing into CAMERA. His expression changes. His lips let a sickening sound escape. He slides out of SHOT as Ah Sahm rises into CAMERA, his face pleasantly composed, unperturbed, the smile of a bronze Buddha.

Only the leader and the crippled man are still alive to oppose him.

The leader pulls a knife from his sash, hefts it, prepares to throw it into Ah Sahm's chest.

Cord steps from behind the tree, his hand has disappeared into his pouch, reappearing with a shurken (a star-shaped disc-dart) in his palm.

Cord calls to the leader of the thugs.

The man whirls. He raises his arm to heave the knife at Cord, but Cord's flinging of the shurken is swifter than sight.

The thug leader stands transfixed, the shurken lodged deep in his forehead between his eyes. The brain bursts suddenly through the split bone.

Cord watches the man tumble down. He turns to Ah Sahm, but the blind man is not there. Only the flickering torches. And the deep black forest.

Cord ignores the whimpering thug on the ground, runs to where he last remembered seeing the blind man.

Ah Sahm has vanished.

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The mountain peak which has risen into daylight now looms directly ahead of Cord, its long slope stretching high - and from its peak the delicate beckoning of the flute.

His breath in tatters, his chest heaving, the dusty, ragged Cord has stopped in the still-dark valley to stare up at his objective.

The moving edge of day, like a gently rolling

current, overlaps the darkness at the bottom of the valley and brightens Cord.

He hurls himself toward the upward slope.

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Nowhere in the village can Cord find Shabani.

He asks from hut to hut. Nobody has seen any stranger passing, not since a blind man strode through at sunset.

Cord drinks from the village well as he considers alternatives - continue along the way he's been proceeding and hope to catch up with Shabani - if indeed the monk has gone that way - strike off across the fields as he is sure Shabani thinking to evade him would have done - but which field? - or even more compelling an idea - seek the Blind Man - surely of all martial artists the peer - from whom he can learn what must be staggering secrets.

Cord returns to the dark forest. The torches emplaced by the thugs have burned out, stand like monuments to the lifeless men strewn about the clearing.

Cord moves deeper into the forest, seeks some marking of the blind man's passage - broken twigs, imprint of sandal.

The full moon lights his way, but he can find no trace of Ah Sahm's passing.

He climbs a tree, settles himself into the fork of bole and branch, sleeps.

At sunlight he is startled by a leaf falling on his hand.

Instinctively, his hand darts into his pouch, comes out palming a shurken. He peers above him for the threat.

On a higher branch a troop of monkeys are playfully lobbing leaves at him.

Cord drops the shurken into his pouch, straightens, breathes in Yoga fashion to rekindle his body, letting his stomach balloon with air, then exhaling and sucking his abdomen deep into his rib cage. After a series of such inhalations and exhalations, he drops through the

branches to the earth with cat-like grace.

He begins performing the Kata, but there is too much ritual in this martial arts exercise. He shows the formality and rigidity of his training, in opposition to his own natural ease. His expression is fixed and determined as he tries with his body to explore a freer form and to duplicate some of the attacks he watched Ah Sahm deliver the night before.

Then, almost imperceptibly, he hears the flute.

He looks to the source of the sound, but is able to discern only a rock formation and a few hovering birds.

Cord approaches until he discovers the blind Chinese blending with the rocks. Birds are settled around him. On the ground. On his shoulder.

Cord comes closer. The birds wheel away. Ah Sahm ceases playing, puts down the flute. Almost in the same gesture, so that one can not separate the two motions, he throws a pomegranate to Cord. Cord catches it.

Ah Sahm meanwhile splits open a second pomegranate with one suddenly closing hand, begins to eat its crimson fruit.

AH SAHM
(in English)

Eat.

Cord tries to crush the fruit in one hand, as he has seen Ah Sahm do, but the fruit yields without splitting, remains whole. Cord is forced to rip part of the tough skin loose with his teeth. He finally succeeds in breaking the pomegranate in half.

CORD

Upon you peace.

He eats. As he does, he sees that Ah Sahm has finished, put his pomegranate away, and now sits motionless, virtually death-like.

CORD

Where did you learn such stillness?

AH SAHM

From a cat. He watched a mousehole with even greater

AH SAHM (cont'd)
concentration than you see
in me.

Cord spits out the pulp.

CORD

I am seeking a Way - and a
man known as Yamaguchi - the
Keeper of The Book. He is said
to be of all men the single
master of martial art. Yet
last night I saw you perform
wonders. If Yamaguchi's skills
excel yours - then I am doomed.
With all my training - and with
both my eyes - I could not
survive one second against you -
even with your blindness.

AH SAHM

My skill is not there for you
to be impressed by it. It is
there for its own reason.

CORD

Could it be you are Yamaguchi?
That I found you without
undergoing the Three Trials?

AH SAHM

Whatever you think me to be -
I am.

Cord stares, fascinated, at the blind man.

CORD

(finally)

You do not appear to be a
keeper of books.

Ah Sahm rises.

CORD

Will you explain your craft
to me, so that I too may
practice it?

AH SAHM

Tie two birds together. They
will not be able to fly, even
though they now have four
wings.

He walks away.

CORD

Then may I at least follow
you and learn from observation?

Ah Sahm gives him no answer. Cord pursues him, catches up, walks along with him into the trees again. The chattering of monkeys grows more strident.

Ah Sahm turns his face up to the branches. Cord looks up, sees the mass of monkeys perched above them, scolding downward.

Just ahead a troop of monkeys drops to the ground and scurries toward them.

Ah Sahm stops. His body seems to slump ever so slightly, his head to tilt as he listens to the whisper of their oncoming feet across the ground.

One monkey, larger, bolder than the others, eases playfully toward the blind man, sidles around him. Cord is astonished to see how Ah Sahm turns without seeming to turn so that his face is always toward the monkey. The creature screams at Ah Sahm and dances away in frustration.

CORD

Is that the secret? Always
to turn with the opponent?

AH SAHM

There are no secrets.

CORD

But I watched you - just now -
with that monkey. You kept
turning as he tried to circle
you.

AH SAHM

The way of the monkey is to
play the fool. While you
laugh at his antics - he bites
you from behind. Unmask his
ego - you expose a coward
disguised as a monkey.

CORD

I have no reason to fight
monkeys. This lesson has no
value.

Ah Sahm begins to move off toward a tree, as though it is a matter of total indifference to him what has and does not have value.

AH SAHM

(as he moves away)
One is taught in accordance
with his fitness to learn.

Cord meditates. When he has looked up again, the blind man has vanished. Cord runs to the tree Ah Sahn had been approaching. Ah Sahn is neither behind it or in its branches.

From every side monkeys set up a deafening screech. A man bursts out of a nearby thicket, staggers toward Cord.

It is Shabani - scratch marks rising scarlet from each eye, furrowing up and across his forehead. His eyes are bloody hollows where they have been gouged out.

He weaves past Cord, smashes into a tree, recoils. Cord sees that his back is torn open, his neck lacerated by deep bites.

From nearby branches monkeys leap up and down in a frenzy of blood-lust. They scream down at the man, bare their fangs.

Shabani succeeds in regaining his feet. He tries to run off.

In Thai Cord calls to him.

CORD

Shabani! Wait! It is your
brother!

Piteously, the man turns toward the sound of Cord's voice, stumbles toward him, arms out in entreaty, like a lost child.

Shabani slumps within Cord's embrace. Cord lowers him to the ground. Shabani speaks in a whisper - in Thai.

SHABANI

I have brought shame upon
our Brotherhood.

CORD

Yamaguchi did this?

SHABANI

Never will I find Yamaguchi...

CORD

Then who did this to you?

SHABANI

Never will I bring The Book
to our Brotherhood.

CORD

Shabani! Answer me! What
caused this?

SHABANI

The First Trial.

CORD

What is this First Trial?
Where is it?

Shabani tries to point - back the way he's come -
but he is too weak.

SHABANI

(voice almost gone
now)
Monkey...

Cord looks up at the branches.

Nightmare faces, bared fangs, lips screeching,
barbaric eyes of an alien species.

SHABANI

Help me die...

Cord unsheaths his knife, places the handle in
Shabani's palm. But Shabani can scarcely manage to grip
the bone handle. He tries to speak, but he has lost his
voice.

Cord understands the need to die swiftly in the
moment of one's deciding. He helps lift Shabani onto
his knees and into classic hari-kari position.

He kneels beside Shabani during the rite. He
puts his arm around him to support him, closes his hand
over Shabani's gripping the handle, assists the first
plunging entry into the abdomen, the slashing cross-tug,
the final pull down.

Gently, Cord lets Shabani ease forward, rejoining
the earth.

But Shabani still twitches in spasms of pain,
yet restraining himself from letting the moans escape his
lips.

Cord retrieves his knife, places its point at the base of the brain of the fallen man, thrusts it home to end his agony. In that instant the monkeys become silent.

Cord rises with the knife in his hand, stares up at the creatures in the trees above.

He cleanses the blood from the blade of his knife with leaves from the ground, returns the knife to its sheath, then sets off through the brush to follow the zig-zag trail the fleeing Shabani has broken through the brush.

As he progresses deeper into the forest, he hears again the ringing of monkey voices. Somehow these are different in tone. They seem heavier, more organized, more ritualistic, more rhythmic - somehow human.

The voices grow nearer. Cord stops, sensing ahead the nature of the terrain. He circles to one side to approach on its periphery an ancient village and a Buddhist temple overgrown by jungle.

Cord conceals himself among the trees on a slope overlooking the village.

Below he beholds a weird ceremonial cluster of monkey-like men chanting insanely as they watch their leader JUNGAR - The Monkey Man - accept the credentials of another martial artist - a CHINESE - out seeking The Book and presenting himself to Jungar for the First Trial. The kung foo man is accompanied by a train of three attendants. The Chinese and Jungar, once the formalities have been dispensed with, face each other in combat. The Chinese is a kung foo expert with a low fighting stance.

The village of monkey-men increase the tempo of their chanting as Jungar and the Chinese each use their own style of salutation. Suddenly Jungar leaps in with a double flying kick the Chinese narrowly escapes.

Immediately, the Chinese attacks with classical foot technique in an effort to bridge the distance between him and gyrating, teasing and chattering Jungar. The effort - to come close enough to employ kung foo hand techniques - appears more and more hopeless because of the Monkey Man's speed and circling evasiveness.

The kung foo man stops his pursuit, gets into an extended arm pose. The Monkey Man, continuing his ever-flowing movements, squats low, straightens with a

high hook kick. The Chinese blocks it with his forearm, retaliates with his own combination, but Jungar has moved away too quickly.

From his hillside position, Cord absorbs every move of the Monkey Man.

His posture, his gyrations, his circling and flowing are, it strikes Cord - as he recalls Ah Sahm and the circling monkey - exactly like those of the monkey Ah Sahm defeated so easily by exposing its "monkeyness", by stripping away the animal's ego, its image of itself.

Jungar continues his sinuous movements, his supporters increasing the tempo of their rhythmic screaming. The kung foo man remains fixed in his deep stance, his arms extended. Jungar sneaks in with an incredibly fast upward snap kick, breaking the Chinese's extended wrist.

The kung foo man, right arm useless, retreats. Jungar presses his advantage, hook kicks the Chinese to the head. The man staggers. Jungar leaps high, lands on his shoulders, grips his face, rips out his eyes, all the while screaming animalistically.

Cord falls back in quick, stabbing fear, but forces himself to stop. He compels himself to go back, peer down at the hideousness.

His thoughts become a series of instantaneously overlapping images: the remembered vision of Shabani erupting from thicket...Shabani's violated face...Shabani crumpling in the slowest of motion, taking forever, to touch forehead to earth as he crumples down in the release of hari kari, the final shuddering of his frame transmitting itself in tiny shock waves through Cord's hands gripping him mercifully...Ah Sahm facing the belligerent monkey... Ah Sahm saying, "The way of the monkey is to play the fool...Unmask his ego, you expose a coward disguised as a monkey"...Himself asking Shabani, "What is this First Trial?"...Shabani pointing into the trees and whispering, "Monkey"...Ah Sahm turning, without seeming to turn, always facing the dancing, circling monkey...

Cord steps from behind the tree.

The chanting stops.

Monkey faces peer up at him.

The Monkey Man leaps from the mutilated Chinese, permitting the man's attendants to carry him away.

The Monkey Man watches the tall Caucasian lope down the slope toward him.

The chanting of the villagers begins, linked to Cord's pace as he enters the village.

By the time Cord has stopped ten paces from Jungar the pitch and beat of the monkey chanting has become frenzied.

Until Jungar begins to speak. Then instant silence from the surrounding monkeymen.

Jungar addresses Cord in Thai.

JUNGAR

From which sect do you come.

CORD

From myself.

JUNGAR

What is your acknowledged style of fighting?

CORD

My style.

Jungar begins to circle him, more in curiosity than to attack. Cord begins to use Ah Sahm's way of turning, but he finds it difficult, even awkward. Cord's turning is obvious, overly defensive, exposing his inner anxiety and his own uncertain ego.

JUNGAR

Why do you come?

CORD

To face the First Trial.

JUNGAR

You think I am that Trial?

CORD

I know you are.

JUNGAR

Why should you wish to face any Trial?

CORD

To find Yamaguchi.

Jungar has completed the circling of Cord. He has returned to his original position, the massed monkeymen of the village arrayed behind him.

JUNGAR

These are your choices: Go back the way you came - in peace. Or fight me.

CORD

I do not want to go back. Nor do I want to fight you. I want only to seek Yamaguchi.

JUNGAR

He is far away - on the other side of me. To seek him - you must pass through me.

CORD

What if I simply walk around you?

JUNGAR

That is not in the order of things.

CORD

Then I will have to fight you.

Pleased, Jungar begins his style of salutation. The chorus chants wildly.

Cord nods, abandoning the stylized salutation he has been taught in the monastery at Bangkok.

Jungar begins his gyrations, circling leaps, hands and feet weaving insane, hypnotic patterns, screaming and chattering at Cord as he moves around. But Cord remains dedicated to the nucleus, constantly facing Jungar who plays around the circumference.

Jungar circles faster and faster, now and then feints an attack, but Cord persists in his waiting game. When Jungar drives in earnestly, Cord blocks, then hurts him with a smashing side kick.

The spectator monkeymen begin to sound more dismayed than frenzied as they behold their leader baffled by his opponent's surprising simplicity.

Jungar more and more loses his monkeyness. His projected image of terror, his deceiving ego, is stripped

away by Cord's maintaining of the center line. Jungar becomes self-conscious, tied-up in self-doubt. Screaming, he drives in recklessly and Cord, accepting him into close quarter, double punches him, smashing his face with one blow, inflicting internal injury with his snapping forearm with the second, both blows struck in instantaneous sequence, followed by a knee to the groin.

Jungar drops at Cord's feet.

The monkeymen's chorus is stilled.

Cord waits, hesitating to kill his opponent. He stands, totally composed, taking on something of Ah Sahn's composure. He envisions Ah Sahn's posture in his memory - Ah Sahn surrounded by thugs, standing amidst them as though he were asleep. He hears Ah Sahn's voice answer his: "Where did you learn such stillness?" "From a cat."

Jungar revives himself. Painfully, he rises. His smashed nose and bloodied teeth do little to improve his wild, long-maned appearance.

CORD

(in Thai)

Now will you show me the way?

JUNGAR

There are as many ways as
there are Seekers.

CORD

My way.

JUNGAR

Let the arms of the south wind
embrace you until you come to
a wilderness. There seek a
rose.

CORD

A rose? Seek a rose? Is that
the Second Trial?

JUNGAR

That is for you to decide.

CORD

What of other Seekers? Are
there many ahead of me?

JUNGAR

You are the first to pass.
I defeated all others. But
other Seekers have other
First Trials. They go their
separate ways. Their Second
Trials are different than
yours.

Jungar motions the silent monkeymen aside.
Reluctantly they part to permit Cord to pass through. He
goes.

+++

On the mountain peak Ah Sahm plays the silent
beckoning flute while the sun in morning ascent obliquely
grazes the earth.

Far down the steepness, climbing out of the
valley, the minuscule figure of Cord struggles upward.

+++

Cord soon leaves the jungle at his back and
lets the south wind carry him along.

Its warm air visits his neck, gently turns
aside the collar of his open tunic.

Under the vast dome of sky he falls into stride
until he becomes more and more incorporated into the
landscape, until his going becomes magnetic and the
drunkenness of open air claims his being.

He listens to the undisturbed silence of his
heart and hears eloquence for the first time.

From the point of a distant rolling cloud to
himself he feels the tugging of a linking thread pulling
him along lightly.

He enjoys the down of thistle floating by him
on the breeze.

He savors the call of a solitary crow filling
all the miles of air with sound and enlivening the
solitude.

He begins to laugh, then to sing aloud. Then

he leaps and skips along, finally runs, letting himself strain to run away from himself, until at last he drops, delighted with his exhaustion, near a dried-up stream cutting a brown course through a belt of wild, rolling and treeless earth. Here the grass has turned starveling and thin, variegated with channels and starry openings of whitish sand.

He drinks sparingly from a water flask in his pouch, moistening his mouth, then swallowing.

He gazes across a wilderness blending with the horizon. He settles on a bleached-out bank to plot the direction of the wind, observes the fine-grained sand dancing in its thrust. He watches another bird soaring on thermal drafts, tracking its direction for his own guidance through the ordeal ahead. He waits through the afternoon while his shadow stretches into dusk and the slanting sheets of sunlight darken.

He sits through the night and plots the stars.

In the sand at his feet he draws a map of their position and in the reflection of the moon he exposes to the film of his memory the position of the constellations.

At dawn he returns the way he has come until he finds what he remembers having passed: a stand of coconut palms. He climbs a bole, knocks down a dozen coconuts. Using the fiber of the tree and his knife he pleats a long rope from which he weaves a shoulder necklace of coconuts, six to each side of his body. From the bark he fashions long over-shoes resembling small skis with thongs. He improvises protection for his eyes by cutting slits in a long curving piece of bark to which he attaches a headband of tree fiber.

He fills his water flask from a stream.

He returns to the edge of the wilderness by the time the sun stands at the peak of day.

He burrows into the sand bank, shielding himself from the sun, and sleeps.

At dark he comes out of the sand bank, re-examines his morning's work, the flask, the linked coconuts, the over-shoes, the eye-protectors. Satisfied, he sets off into the desert on a deliberate zig-zag course to afford him the widest possible ranging back and forth in search of his Second Trial - a rose in the wilderness.

He does not hurry. He examines every bush along his path. He uses the map of the stars to guide his way.

At sunrise he stops, breaks into the first of the twelve coconuts, drinks some of its milk, returns it to its place in the fiber link.

He ties on the over-shoes to protect his sandals from the rocks and the sands which will turn fiery as the sun ascends. He brings the shoulder flap of his tunic over his head, ties the slat over his eyes, so that he can see through the slit, and resumes his search.

By noon the desert shimmers with heat. Through his eyeslits the sand appears sheer white, emerging from a vast collar of mist as the south wind stings it against his back or against his profile as he traverses on a slant here, comes back on a slant there to criss-cross the land.

At sunset the sun creates a rosy ambience which brings him to a thoughtful stop. A rose in the wilderness! Could this be what Jungar had meant? The sunset?

Cord turns slowly to make a complete survey of the desert around him.

He hears - or thinks he hears - a faraway tinkling of bells and cymbals. But the more he strains to hear it, the more the sound escapes him. The wind has increased. Sand flares up toward him like rising tide.

He digs into the sand, sleeps through a night of storm, emerges from his mound at sunrise to continue his search.

In the witch-air wafting off the crest of dunes and in the shifting mirages Cord sees only beauty, not danger. His sun-cracked lips smile at the barren world around him as he enriches it with his presence. He strides down dunes, across bleached cuts of earth not in fear, but in joyousness.

Once more at the second sundown he hears bells and cymbals. They sound closer this time. But he can not determine their source.

The moon rises full. He uses its cast to brighten his search. But nowhere is there even the hardest plant life, let alone a rose bush.

By the fifth sunset his shoulder necklace of twelve coconuts has been reduced to two, one on either side. His fiber boots are worn to shreds.

Exhausted, he lowers himself to the sand, lies on his back and stares up at the stars.

They burn like distant fires. Yet they give off a strange music. Clearly now he can hear their laughter and their clanging.

He sits up. The sound is not from the stars but off behind him, he discovers.

Out of the depths of the wilderness a strange caravan has appeared and unknown to him encamped less than half a mile beyond.

He rises, sees dark silhouettes of desert tents against campfires.

He steals toward the encampment.

He stops in the darkness beyond the perimeter of the lush tent world which seems to have sprung from nowhere.

Campfires burn by the score. As far as he can see there are richly dressed people from the Orient and Africa - Arabic, African, Chinese, Japanese, Mongolian - an international caravan of inexplicably inter-related people. Servants bear silver trays of food from tent to tent. Armed mercenaries are stationed at intervals around the encampment. Concubines and laughing slave girls run from tent to tent. Clowns are to be seen.

Cord is drawn deeper into the labyrinth of tents by the insouciance of the people. Even the guards are more involved with naked girls who tease them than with the gravity of their duties on the periphery of the caravan. Music and laughter and bells and cymbals. The smell of hashish. Paradise passing, stopped for a moment in the wilderness.

Cord enters past a guard who smiles at him as though he knows him and is expecting him.

Persian carpets are strewn about the sand. Fruit hangs in clusters from racks. Skins filled with iced water and others with wine are there to be used.

Cord drinks, breaks free a bunch of grapes, pops them into his mouth as he explores the tent world, watches the bizarrely costumed polyglot people swirling past him, all smiling as though they know him - dwarfs, hunchbacks, men on six-foot high stilts, clowns, jugglers, acrobats on trampolines, tumblers, scarcely clothed girls, naked beauties whose black and brown and yellow skins glisten in the light of myriad campfires, men and women coupling openly, groups dancing, others singing - musicians in seated groups, musicians strolling about, music everywhere

and cymbals and bells ringing.

One tent is richer than another, low couches and cushions scattered about their carpeted floors, incense burning in brass braziers.

Cord tries to stop somebody, anybody, to inquire about the nature of this place, but everybody is in motion, too involved in the immediate pursuit of pleasure to waste a second in so serious a discussion.

He finds only one man who seems to be occupied at something useful - an Oriental with a fierce lock of hair growing from his otherwise shaved skull. But aside from the shock of hair the Oriental seems placid and benign. He is massaging the huge shoulder muscles of a black bull who stands with lowered horns and snorts with pleasure.

Cord approaches him, starts to speak, but the man smiles at him and departs.

A naked girl comes to Cord, begins to peel his tunic from his shoulders.

He picks her up, tosses her onto a nearby trampoline. She giggles as she bounces upward and spreads her legs invitingly. Instantly a tumbler leaps from the sand onto the trampoline, disrobing himself as he too bounces in concert with the girl. They begin to couple with each other as they continue their rhythmic up and down.

Cord discovers the Oriental with the shock of hair just ahead. He is filling goatskins with wine. Cord hurries to him. The Oriental smiles at Cord, motions him to open his mouth. Cord obeys. The Oriental pours red wine in until it overflows, then hands Cord the goatskin and moves off to accomplish his other duties. Cord takes another deep swallow, hangs up the gourd and turns away.

He sees the bull which had been massaged moments before has now been slaughtered and halved and is already being placed on gigantic spits over a roaring fire in a deep pit. A crowd of merrymakers applauds the moment of fire searing flesh.

Bedouin horsemens ride in, let their horses rear, fire their rifles into the air.

Nobody seems alarmed. The demonstration is applauded.

Then repeated.

Again applauded. The horsemen wheel away, ride off to another part of the encampment where they perform their ritual for others.

Baffled by the people and the non-related sequence of events, Cord sits down on a carpet to meditate.

When he becomes conscious of being watched, he looks up, his meditation broken.

A slim girl in a rose-colored kaftan, her face covered in purdah, only her kole-touched eyes seen, is staring at him.

He smiles at her. She disappears.

He rises, sees a black giant, hugely muscled, naked except for a red loin cloth, striding by.

He follows the giant into a vast tent, easily five times more spacious than any of the others.

It is overflowing with people seated on cushions on three sides. Servants place food on golden dishes before each guest.

At the central dais the Oriental with the black shock of hair is seated. There is an unoccupied cushion on either side of him.

The black giant moves without hesitation to one cushion, seats himself, smiles at the Oriental who smiles back. Servants instantly begin to serve the giant, but he deliberately refrains from eating.

Cord pauses in the opening, discovers that the Oriental is beckoning to him. He comes in, crosses the tent, is waved to the one unoccupied cushion to the right of the Oriental. This is RHYTHM MAN - CHANGSHA - leader of the caravan people.

Cord tries to speak, but servants block his view of Changsha as they spread food and wine before him.

Dancing girls run in, dance naked for the guests. Other girls come in, make love to each other.

Behind the Oriental, twelve girls, all robed, faces all covered, suddenly appear. Among them is the rose-robed girl Cord had seen moments before.

He can sense her presence behind him.

He turns to look at her.

Her eyes seem to burn out at him from the concealment of the silken veil over her lower face.

Cord feels other eyes on him. He turns back to see that Changsha is considering him impassively.

Suddenly the Oriental smiles.

Cord too smiles.

CORD

(in Cantonese)

Upon you - peace.

CHANGSHA

It is my wish to provide what is needed. What is it you need so that I can find happiness by providing it for you?

CORD

I seek a rose in the wilderness.

He glances back at the slim figure of the girl behind him in the rose-hued robe.

CHANGSHA

Her name is Tara. My ninth wife.

CORD

Forgive me. I did not know.

CHANGSHA

You may have her.

CORD

You honor me. But I have taken an oath of chastity.

CHANGSHA

Taking her will become a twin sacrifice - her - of her vows to me - you - of your vows to yourself.

Before Cord can reply, Changsha has turned his dark eyes to watch the movement of the black giant. Throughout, the man has not touched food or drink. Now he rises and lights a red candle. He holds it before him ceremoniously, strides out of the tent with it.

Unaccountably, at least to Cord, everyone except

Changsha and his wives jumps up and follows the giant out of the tent.

Amazed, Cord watches the swift exodus. When he looks back as though for explanation, Changsha and his wives have vanished.

Cord hurries out.

A huge Persian rug covers the center of the outside area and torches light the central place where the crowd gathers. Musicians take their places, clowns theirs, jugglers theirs, tumblers theirs, concubines and naked slave girls theirs, warriors theirs, robed and veiled women theirs. The black giant is alone on the carpet, going through a martial arts kata. The crowd is hushed, the musicians poised.

Changsha's wives reappear, position themselves behind an elaborately carved throne-like chair, obviously intended to seat the Oriental, though he is nowhere to be seen.

Cord stares at Tara. Her eyes return to him her reflection of his image.

Changsha leaps from the dark, one hand gripping a red candle, flame pressed back by the wind of his leap. He lands on the carpet opposite the black giant, holds out the candle.

A warrior takes it from him, places it next to the one the giant had lit as a challenge.

Changsha faces the giant black. Both are wearing red sashes around their heads.

CHANGSHA

(in Arabic)

This is your need - to test
yourself against me?

GIANT

It is my need.

CHANGSHA

I do this only because you
require it.

GIANT

I am grateful.

CHANGSHA

I give you your need - with
love.

The giant slowly but alertly moves into fighting stance.

Changsha continues to regard him with a smile. A loud drum beat throbs from where the Oriental has placed his musicians.

The giant reacts to the beat, but resumes his concentration. Changsha observes him wryly for another moment, then slowly the Oriental begins to move in tune with the slow-beating drum.

Suddenly, from this slow but fluid movement, Changsha explodes with a loud scream preceding a lightning-like advance. The giant jumps back, retaliates with a barrage of kicks and punches in a magnificently timed sequence of delivery.

Changsha eases back from the assault, but never more than a fraction of an inch beyond the outmost reach of the giant and always to the rhythm of the music, always in a sort of madly stylized dance.

The giant realizes his attacks are not driving home. He stops, repositions himself. Changsha instantly fakes a few attacks which the giant tries to counter and once more he is led into Changsha's rhythm, again chasing the Oriental but not once managing to touch him.

The giant lashes out with the last kick of his combination attack and the drum stops. Changsha, in that split second, retaliates with a combination of his own, the snapping of which sounds sharply in the now grave silence. Changsha's final kick strikes the giant's shoulder, driving him down and back, almost to the ground.

But the giant recovers, resumes his balance and prepares to counter-attack. The drum beat sounds again, unnerving him even more, while Changsha watches coldly.

This pattern of attack and counter-attack continues three times more, each time Changsha attacks the drum falling quiet, so that the mere silence of the drum becomes for the giant the signal of Changsha's punishing kicks and punches.

Cord sees that Changsha is deliberately playing a mental, more than a physical game with his opponent, slowly gaining control over him by the use of sound and the timing of his movements to the beat.

The giant's composure is finally shattered. He leaps at the Oriental with a desperate round-house kick.

Changsha ducks it and thrusts both hands into the giant's stomach with incredible speed and penetrating force.

The giant gasps, stares down at Changsha's muscular forearms knotting, then twisting. A crackling, ripping sound is heard. The giant's bowels come out in Changsha's hands. Blood geysers onto the chest of the Oriental as the giant screams, drops to his knees, Changsha helping lower him to the carpet which wells with the gusting blood of the dying man.

Changsha walks to the two red candles. With a controlled punch which travels less than an inch he buffets out the flame of the candle the challenger had lit.

Shocked by the manner of the killing, Cord watches Changsha's warriors place the dead giant on a platform erected to one side of the carpeted area. Torches are put to the pyre beneath the platform.

The drums sound - and the bells - the cymbals.

The people of the caravan gather around the flames enveloping the defeated man.

Changsha conducts a ceremony in Cantonese. Neither shame nor sorrow is in evidence. On the contrary, the ceremony praises the total dedication of the departed, his self-realization, the gratification of his deepest need.

Cord realizes that the dead opponent is being respected and admired for his sacrifice, that he is being burned as a hero. Changsha speaks to the burning man.

CHANGSHA

(in Cantonese)

You are now on the threshold of truth. While you were here among us, you knew nothing of yourself. You were like wax in the honeycomb. What does it know of fire or guttering? Only when it gets to the stage of the waxen candle and when light is emitted, does it know. Similarly, you now know that when you were alive you were dead and only thought yourself alive.

Slowly, the people move off, disappear into tents. One by one they go until only Cord is left. He stands alone watching the fire whipped by night wind consume the body.

He feels a touch on his hand. Tara has come to his side. He lets her guide him through the passageways between tents until she has brought him to the edge of the encampment.

No sentries are to be seen. The torches have all been extinguished. Only the flickering of the burning platform with the dead man lights the night. No music is heard. No song. No laughter. No sound.

Yet Cord sees a light in the wilderness beyond the main encampment. Tara leads him across the sand to the light - a lantern burning in the open flap of the most silken of tents. She enters with him.

Tara blows out the lamp, drops the outside flap of the tent.

The only illumination within the tent comes from a lamp which produces a deep violet hue.

Tara removes her veil. Her face is so exquisite, her eyes so dark, her lips so full, cheekbones of such high perfection, Cord is awed by her beauty.

Only one thing compels him to take his eyes from her - his discovery of a vase of red roses.

He crosses to the vase, stares at the blood-red roses.

TARA
(in Urdu)
They please you?

CORD
They are what I seek.

Slowly, he turns, stares at her. Suddenly he smiles, shakes his head.

CORD
Could it be?

TARA
Could what be?

CORD
That you are my Second Trial?

She does not answer him.

CORD
Your husband - is he Yamaguchi?

TARA
He is Changsha.

CORD
He is not Keeper of The Book?

TARA
I do not understand.

CORD
Then this is the Second Trial.
But what? Must I fight Changsha?
Is this why he sent you?

She comes to him, takes his hand.

TARA
No harm will come to you. My
husband has sent me to you
openly.

CORD
Why?

TARA
Because I asked him if I
might come.

CORD
Did he not tell you I have
sworn to be chaste?

TARA
The sadhana will not violate
your vow. The desired fruit
of maithuna may be enjoyed
without consummation, as one
enjoys the breath of God
without having to die.

She leads him to a festive board on which various
articles, food and drink, have been arranged, together with
two glass tumblers and a pitcher of drinking water and a
decanter of wine.

TARA

The elements of the universe. Wine - representing the element fire. It signifies prakriti - creative cosmic energy which brings us joy and dispels our sorrows... Meat - the second tattva - to stimulate growth of body and development of mind - signifies the element air. It also represents all animal life upon the earth... Fish - related to the element water, stands for the generative powers of the body... Parched cereal unites one with all vegetable life. The cereal embodies the element earth... These seeds are of the cardamom - the source of all creativity.

She drops her robe. Her skin glows along the long, clean lines of her youth. She takes the pouch from Cord's shoulder, opens his tunic. They stand facing each other in their nakedness.

Then she leads him to a place in the tent covered by a curtain which she draws. A long, low basin filled with water is revealed. She steps into it, holds out her hand to him. He comes into the bath.

She bathes him, he letting her and watching her firm breasts near his lips as she soaps him.

He kisses one nipple.

TARA

It is forbidden during the bath.

CORD

I did not intend the kiss as a sexual overture. It was a kiss of pure admiration.

She bathes herself, steps from the bath, dries herself and him with scented towels.

Then she anoints herself liberally with a perfume heavy with civet and dons a negligee of thin silk the color of China rose, the symbolic flower of Tantrism.

She helps Cord into a dressing gown of white silk and leads him into the bedroom chamber next to the table altar.

She lights the candles, seats herself in a posture of meditation. Cord follows her example.

She empties the residual air from her lungs and equalizes her breath, bringing it under control by inhaling seven times, holding once, exhaling seven times, holding once.

Cord does the same.

Tara leads him into the ceremony known as the panchikarana. With the index finger of her right hand, she taps the wine decanter even as she exclaims:

TARA

Phat!

Then she utters the seed syllable:

TARA

Hung!

She makes a gesture as though veiling the decanter. This done, she sits back and regards the wine for a moment with unblinking gaze. Thereafter, she joins the thumb and ring finger of her left hand and gestures toward the decanter:

TARA

Namah.

She removes the stopper, grasps the decanter in her left hand. Closing her right nostril with her right hand, she brings the wine close to the left nostril and inhales the aroma from the vintage.

Turning her head away from the decanter, she exhales through the right nostril.

She repeats this smelling procedure three times, then intones the following mantra:

TARA

Devata bhava siddhaye.

She fills the glasses two-thirds full of wine and passes one glass to Cord. They lift their glasses in unison and drain the contents.

Thereupon Tara refills them, but again only

two-thirds full. She takes a small piece of meat from the plate, holding it between thumb and third finger of the right hand and motions Cord to do the same. He obeys.

TARA

I purify my gross body with
atma-tattva.

He repeats the phrase after her.

Each consumes the piece of meat.

This is followed by wine, the glass being held between the thumb and third finger of the left hand.

Tara once more refills the wine glasses.

Now a small portion of fish is taken in the same manner as the meat.

Then the parched grain. And the wine.

Tara now fills their glasses with water. This is used to rinse their mouths thoroughly.

From the shuddhi-patra (ritual plate), Tara takes a cardamom and passes it to Cord, placing it into the palm of his left hand. She then takes one for herself. Both partners break open the husk.

They meditate upon the bivalvular grain revealed within - two halves forming a unity within the enfolding sheath.

TARA

Looking at the two halves we recall that all creation is likewise a unity which appears to be a duality when viewed through the veil of prakriti. This duality constitutes a polarity and this same polarity is present within us.

She takes out the cardamon seed and chews it to sweeten her breath. Cord does the same.

Tara rises, moves the lamp with the purple light closer to the low cushioned bed platform. She disrobes and seats herself upright on the edge of the bed as Cord stands before her.

The soft violet light flows over her skin.

TARA

This, my lower part, is the
sacrificial altar. These
hairs the sacrificial grass.
My skin the soma-press.

She parts with her fingers the lips of her vulva.

TARA

These two labia are the fire
in the middle. Verily, as
great as is the world of him
who performs the Vajapeya
sacrifice, so great is the
world of him who, knowing
this, practices sexual
intercourse. He turns the
good deeds of the woman to
himself. But he, who without
knowing this, practices
sexual intercourse, his good
deeds women turn to themselves.

Cord gazes upon her with awe and admiration, as
one pondering the mystery of creation and the infathomable
secret of being.

TARA

What do I seem to you - now
that you see me?

CORD

The begetter of all that is.
Of all that becomes - and dies -
and is born again. Of infinite
maternities.

She appears pleased by his answer. She guides
his fingertips to her body, taking the index and middle
fingers of his right hand and placing them lightly first
on her heart, then on the crown of her head, then against
her three eyes, that is, the center of her forehead and
against her two eyelids, in the hollow of her throat, left
and right ear lobes, breasts, upper left arm, upper right
arm, navel, thighs, knees, feet, finally the mons of her
yoni.

She reaches up, takes off his robe, falls back
onto her back as he descends toward her. She assists him
onto the bed so that he lies on her left side and faces
her.

She tutors him into the maithuna position by
raising both her legs, bending her knees and pulling them

upward toward her chest. He then swings the upper portion of his body away from hers and brings his penis into close contact with her vagina. She then lowers her legs and he places his right leg between her legs. This brings the sex organs of the ritual partners into close contact.

Lying thus fully relaxed, she parts the lips of her vulva and partially inserts his penis. He begins to thrust for deeper penetration, but she stops him gently.

TARA

We will lie thus for a while, letting ourselves imagine the flow between us, not in a forced manner, but in a somnolent way. Gradually, each of us will become aware of a rising tide of pleasurable sensation, growing in intensity until we are prepared for the inexpressible experience of unity we call samarasa when time and eternity become one...

+++

Sand blows into Cord's upturned face, awakening him. He sits up. He is still naked, but he finds himself inexplicably alone, Tara gone, the tent gone, the ritual table - everything. Only his tunic, sandals, pouch, knife and sheath are to be seen, though already half-covered by the blowing sands of morning. Above him the sun is climbing cruelly.

Cord gets to his feet, covers his eyes and peers toward the place the caravan had encamped. Nothing can be seen but sand dunes from which spumes curl in the wind.

He dresses himself, ties on his sandals, tries to orient himself by staring directly up at the sun's position.

He lets himself go with the wind, sand flurries striking his back and blowing off both shoulders as he goes.

He trudges up a sand dune, head bent in meditation, so that he does not see the sacrifice at the top of the dune until he is almost upon it.

Tara's naked body is crucified on a cross, legs lashed together at the ankles with her red silk sash, each

arm extended and tied to the cross with red sashes.

She has been beheaded.

Bending in the wind, a single long-stemmed red rose has been thrust into the case of her severed neck.

Cord's mouth gapes. Unearthly sounds come from his throat.

He kneels involuntarily, stunned to his knees, stares dumbfounded at the girl on the cross, sand whipping furiously around him.

He rises, screaming his protest, flails about insanelly for some object on which to vent his shock.

He sees the caravan on the horizon, its camels luminous in the white glow of noon, its jugglers and clowns dancing on the sheen of an endless inland sea, cymbals clashing, bells tinkling distantly.

He charges it, screams at it, until he falls within the mirage, plowing sand in his frenzy to clutch the image of that which is not there.

All that day and night he stumbles and reels through the wilderness in numb panic, falling countless times, finding all beauty gone, seeing in its place only evil, the scorpion on the rock, the hawk in the sky, the thorn of struggling desert plants, fleeing their menace.

He drives himself without pause until the second morning and until he has left the wilderness and plunged into the forest.

He searches among the trees until he hears the sound he seeks, the whisper of water across rocks, and he tracks the broad stream along its way until the thundering ahead causes him to run toward it needfully.

He finds the waterfall, crosses the slippery ledge of rocks beneath and behind it until he has come to the exact center where the river tumbles down with purging force into the deep pool at its base.

He gives himself to the cascade, letting its force strike him on head and shoulders, beat and buffet and pound him, drive all thought from his brain, all feeling from his flesh.

Then he begins to hear the faint sound of a flute.

Through the curtain of water he discovers Ah Sahm walking toward him in the middle of the stream. Ah Sahm places his feet on the surface in a strange manner before he shifts his weight with each step, advancing slowly, experimentally. He puts the flute away.

Now as he takes each step, he talks to himself aloud.

AH SAHM

You cannot do it...you cannot do it...

Inexplicably, despite the roar of the falls, Ah Sahm's voice, soft as it is, carries clearly to Cord's ears - or at least into his mind.

Fascinated, Cord watches the progression until Ah Sahm enters deeper water and stops.

Ah Sahm turns sightless eyes toward the waterfall as though fully aware Cord is there.

Cord steps from behind the fall, comes around the bank of the surging pool at the base of the falls.

CORD

(shouting against
the thunder of
the falls)

You can't do what?

AH SAHM

Step twice on the same piece
of water.

Ah Sahm moves along a pathway climbing around the falls. Cord goes after him.

Cord catches up with Ah Sahm. Ah Sahm listens to the stream. Then he continues to follow it upstream along its banks.

Cord is still haunted by his experience in the wilderness and bursting to ask the Chinese if he might know its meaning, but Ah Sahm is so intent on the sounds of the forest and of the stream that Cord is aware his words will not reach him.

Without haste, Ah Sahm follows against the course of the water, listening to its flow, sensing its plunge among boulders, its slide over tilting ledges, its fanning into quiet pools.

Ah Sahm leaves the trail and once more advances into the stream, Cord following.

Ah Sahm steps from rock to rock, miraculously avoiding wet patches of moss slippery as ice. Stepping-stones up a river, this is Ah Sahm's way, Cord sees, progressing slowly, stopping often, with no goal except enjoyment, listening to the murmuring of the water or the warblers and jays everywhere about in the branches, finally stopping where a shelving rock of gray slants down above a small waterfall.

Below it he wades into the pool and blends with the water, remaining so still for so many seconds Cord wonders if he has even taken breath.

Ah Sahm's hand becomes part of the pool, then emerges with a fish wriggling in the net of the blind man's steely fingers.

Ah Sahm comes out of the pool with the fish, holds it within the embrace of his two strong palms, comforting it as it dies of air.

AH SAHM

A fish saved my life once.

CORD

How?

AH SAHM

I ate him.

Ah Sahm holds out his hand to Cord.

AH SAHM

Give me your knife.

Cord gives him the knife. Ah Sahm skins the fish, cuts raw chunks from its flesh, shares them with Cord.

Ah Sahm tilts his head, listens to Cord's ritualistic chewing.

AH SAHM

Why do you do that?

CORD

Do what?

AH SAHM

Chew twenty-one times on the left side of your jaw,

AH SAHM (cont'd)
twenty-one times on the right,
before you swallow.

CORD
I was taught that in the
monastery.

AH SAHM
Does it serve a purpose?

CORD
It exercises the jaw. It
prepares the stomach to receive
the food. It extracts the
essence of each mouthful.

AH SAHM
Yet a hungry man, disciplining
himself in this manner, might
starve to death while still
counting.

Ah Sahm rises, having eaten. Cord is still
chewing - and counting.

Ah Sahm continues upstream, this time along the
bank and with more apparent purpose.

Cord hurries after him.

CORD
I do not even know your name.

Ah Sahm does not provide him with one.

CORD
Yet I owe my life to you.
That lesson with the monkey
prepared me to face the First
Trial. I wish you might have
helped prepare me for the
Second.

Ah Sahm remains silent.

CORD
I have lost all purpose. I
do not care to go on. I do
not care to go back. Yet I
know I cannot stay without
motion. What am I to do?

AH SAHM
What have you done?

CORD
Found a rose in the wilderness -
and lost it.

But Ah Sahm chooses not to answer. Instead, he increases his pace so that Cord, for all the advantage his longer legs afford him, is hard pressed to keep up with the blind man.

The trail is steeper now, climbing, rock-strewn, and around every bend more and more precipitous, but Ah Sahm moves upward simply and effortlessly, like a mountain goat which for all its apparent inability seems to be able to go anywhere.

At last they reach a mountain top.

Beyond, the sea slants out to meld with the descending sun.

Ah Sahm sits on the highest rock and faces the sunset.

Cord finds his own rock. He too sits.

Cord begins his meditations.

Both men sit throughout the night without moving or speaking.

When the sun rises, Ah Sahm rises, faces the east and the rising light, then sits again.

Cord does the same.

In the new light Cord's features lose their tightness. The tension leaves his body. His eyes are clear now, wide again, seeing into the new day.

He rises, moves toward Ah Sahm.

CORD
I have passed through the
Second Trial. I sought a
rose in the wilderness. I
found it. Then I lost it.
Or so I thought. I see now
that I did not lose it. It
is within me - the love Tara

CORD (cont'd)
taught me. When she came
to me, she knew she would
be killed. Yet still she
came. The love she taught
was not taught by the
togetherness of our bodies,
but by her willing death
for me.

Ah Sahm rises. He starts away, but Cord hastens
after him.

CORD
Wait! There is still the
Third Trial!

Ah Sahm moves down the mountainside with infinite
ease while Cord scampers after him, dislodging rocks and
only managing by sheer good luck to avoid falling to his
death.

CORD
(calling after
the blind man)
I realize now that you are
my Hidden Teacher. If I am
ever able to survive the
Third Trial, I must be
allowed to follow you and
to learn.

AH SAHM
You will not be able to
endure it.

CORD
Yes!

AH SAHM
You will not have the patience
to stay in contact with the
pattern of events.

CORD
Which events?

AH SAHM
You will try to act in obvious
ways instead of learning.

By now they have come to a ledge overlooking a
steep precipice.

CORD

I will exercise patience. I will learn from whatever happens without acting in accordance with existing prejudice.

AH SAHM

You will give up chewing twenty-one times to the left, then twenty-one times to the right before you swallow? You will simply swallow?

CORD

Even that - yes!

AH SAHM

Then I make one further condition - and that is you must ask nothing about any event - until such time as I myself give you an answer.

CORD

It will be done.

Ah Sahn climbs down the face of the precipice. Cord looks down the sheer drop, but braces himself, and taking extreme care, follows the blind man over the cliff and down toward the valley floor below.

+++

At the bank of a wide, swift-flowing river Ah Sahn approaches a ferry boat linked by cable to the far bank. The ferryman is an old Japanese.

Ah Sahn walks onto the boat and waits for the man to take them across.

CORD

(to the old man
in Japanese)

What is the fare - for the two of us?

FERRY MAN

Youth - if you could give it to me. Health - if you had that to spare. I have neither - and need both. But - since that is impossible - and since

FERRYMAN (cont'd)

I am too old and too much in pain to pull you across, you may pull yourselves across without charge. Someone on the other side wanting to cross will bring it back.

CORD

Upon you - peace.

Cord casts off, begins to tug on the winch attached to the overhead cable.

The ferryboat crosses the river.

As its bow touches the opposite bank, Ah Sahm strides ashore. Cord ties the boat to the worn tree which obviously has served for years to hold the boat at this position.

Ah Sahm side-kicks the bow, caving in the ancient wooden hull. Water pours into the boat.

CORD

(shocked and displeased)

Why did you do that?

For answer, Ah Sahm smashes the opposite side.

The small boat quickly fills and begins to settle.

CORD

Is this the way you repay an old man's generosity? Destroy his livelihood? Leave him stranded across the river?

AH SAHM

(mildly)

I told you, did I not, that you would not be able to avoid jumping to conclusions?

CORD

I will admit your action made me forget my promise. Forgive me. It will not happen again.

Ah Sahm sets off down a trail through a forest of bamboo trees, Cord keeping pace with the unspeaking blind man.

Ah Sahn stops in the middle of the trail. He kneels, places one ear to the earth.

He rises, hurries into the brush at one side of the trail and conceals himself. Cord remains staunchly in mid-trail.

CORD
(calling to the
brush)
I never thought I would see
you hide.

From the undergrowth Ah Sahn's voice carries to Cord.

AH SAHM'S VOICE
The bow needs the bentness
as well as the straightness
of the bow string.

Now Cord hears the pounding of hooves. Far down the trail, emerging from around a turn, a band of twenty horsemen appear, gallop toward Cord. He can see their swarthy Japanese faces beneath leather helmets and colorful head bands, their bows and naked swords.

He can hear their banzai screams.

AH SAHM'S VOICE
(without alarm)
Ah, they have seen you.

Ah Sahn eases away through the brush.

An arrow whistles past Cord's ear, thwumps into a tree behind him. He speeds into the brush in pursuit of Ah Sahn.

The horsemen turn in after Cord, fan out in a wide ranging search group, handicapped by the thickness of the growth, slowed by the need to hang over their saddles to avoid occasional low branches.

The most advanced of the band is thus bent as he passes the place Cord, panting for breath, has momentarily concealed himself.

Cord hook-kicks him, snapping the man's neck, dropping him from the saddle.

An arrow buries itself in a tree an inch from Cord's back.

Cord whirls, hand coming from pouch, the shirken flashing off and lodging deep in the windpipe of a second horseman, a bowman about to launch his second arrow at Cord. The horse bolts. The dead man juggles up and down in the saddle twice before the branch of a tree obliterates his face and drops his lifeless body.

Cord bounds after Ah Sahm, scarcely seen far ahead. The pursuing horsemen call to each other in Japanese, press their hunt.

Cord manages to catch up with Ah Sahm who has stopped at a broken stone wall sheltering a hut. A Japanese woman gathers her three small children into her arms, rushes them into the house and bolts her door.

Ah Sahm sets about, seeming in no particular haste, to repair the wall. He lifts a stone from where it has fallen, replaces it in the wall.

Cord stares with disbelief at the blind man laboring to repair a wall while not more than a few hundred yards away crazed horsemen are beating the forest to kill the two men.

CORD

This is no time to repay
evil with good. If you are
feeling remorse for what
you did to the ferryman's
boat, can you not select
another time, another place,
to make amends?

Ah Sahm appears unhearing - and unconcerned. He proceeds to search out more rocks, lift them, bring them back to the part of the wall which has fallen away, and restore the wall to its strength.

Three horsemen spot their quarry. Screaming, they charge with raised swords.

Ah Sahm heaves the rock he carries straight into the chest of the first horseman, catches the sword the rider drops before it touches the ground and cuts the second horseman in two just above the waist, so that the man's lower half, still in saddle and stirrups, rides away, leaving his chest and head behind.

The third horseman chases Cord toward a stand of bamboo trees. Cord pulls with all his strength, drawing two stout trees back and whipping them toward his attacker at the precise moment, knocking him from his saddle.

Before the man can scamper to his feet, Cord strikes him with his fist from behind, at the base of his neck between his shoulders, shattering his spine and breaking his neck.

Cord turns back to Ah Sahm, discovers the blind man is once more repairing the stone wall.

The crashing of the main band of horsemen seems even closer now.

Desperate, but seeing there is no persuading Ah Sahm, Cord rushes to help him carry the last few stones needed to complete the repairs.

The horsemen spot Cord and Ah Sahm even as Ah Sahm settles the final stone in place. They spur their horses through the forest toward the two. Ah Sahm begins to run now, Cord right alongside, into deeper and deeper growth, finally into a rocky area pocked with caves. The thrashing of horses among branches is scarcely heard in this place Ah Sahm has led them to.

Ah Sahm seems to blend with the rock.

Cord tries to emulate his assimilation.

Cord discovers that Ah Sahm is sleeping.

In a while the horsemen have crashed away in another direction.

The forest is still for a moment.

Then birds resume their songs.

Ah Sahm awakens.

He rises, starts off again, Cord rising and following.

CORD

I am beginning to think I will learn nothing from you except madness. There is no lesson in what just happened except that I am mistaken about your being an enlightened man. Only a fool lingers among assassins!

AH SAHM

You are judging me from your fixed position of prejudice. If you can not overcome yourself, how can you overcome the Third Trial?

CORD

You know what it is! Don't you?

AH SAHM

The sword cannot cut itself.

CORD

Tell me what you think it is!

AH SAHM

A path and a gateway have no meaning or no use once the objective is in sight.

+++

The day has almost ended when Ah Sahm and Cord enter a village built on stilts along an inland sea.

Fishermen are hanging small octopus on drying racks. Women are preparing the night meal.

A group of children run out from the village to surround Ah Sahm and Cord.

They begin begging. Cord smiles at them, rumples their hair. But Ah Sahm stops, faces one of the boys. Cord looks at the boy.

He is incredibly beautiful. His eyes are wide, almond-shaped, darkly glittering. His skin is magnificent. His bearing is princely.

Ah Sahm approaches him, feels his face with one sensing hand, then the contour of his proud neck and shoulders.

Suddenly Ah Sahm picks him up bodily, swings him into the air until he is gripping him by the ankles, whirls him around and spatters the boy's head against a wall, spilling his brains.

The other boys run off.

Cord recoils with shock and disbelief.

Ah Sahm moves off calmly enough, as though nothing has happened.

Cord rushes after him, reaches roughly for Ah Sahm's shoulder, but Ah Sahm moves just enough so that Cord's hand can not grasp him.

Cord discovers that Ah Sahm is facing him - the same way he faced the thugs - and the monkey - head slightly tilted, body almost listless-looking.

Cord backs away.

CORD
(agonized)
Why?

Ah Sahm says nothing.

The villagers begin to gather. But, curiously, there is no menace in their gathering. It is as though they are accustomed to sudden violence, as though they are not strangers to death. Some of them carry the dead boy away. Others wash the blood stain from the wall.

CORD
(savagely)
You can teach me nothing
but insanity! I will never
follow you again!

Ah Sahm nods, as though expecting this reaction, begins to go, the villagers parting without hostility to let him pass. But Cord can not endure not knowing. Once more he goes after Ah Sahm, but taking care to stay out of range.

CORD
Since I am no longer following
you, I am free to ask questions.
Before you leave me, will you
explain your actions with the
ferryboat, the wall - and that
poor child.

Ah Sahm stops. He does not even turn back to Cord. He speaks, if anything, to the setting sun.

AH SAHM
Of the two of us, you are the
blind one. Blinded by the
things you see. You think -
therefore you stand apart
from the things you try to

AH SAHM (cont'd)
understand.

(a long pause)

The boat I damaged can be repaired. If it had not been damaged, it would have been confiscated by the war party of horsemen and the old man killed. Thus I saved his life.

CORD

I did not know.

AH SAHM

In the stone wall there was a hoard of gold partly exposed. If I had not repaired the wall and thus concealed it from the war party, they would have stolen the gold and left the widow and her three children without means. At the risk of my life, I chose to prevent that.

CORD

Why didn't you tell me?

Ah Sahn does not deign to answer.

CORD

How then can a man of such charity seize a child and brain him against a wall?

AH SAHM

He was too beautiful. He would have grown up to be a tyrant.

Ah Sahn appears to blend with the dusk.

Cord turns back to the ring of faces of the fishermen, their wives and unspeaking children.

Before Cord's scrutiny the people melt away.

Darkness comes swiftly and he is alone in the village.

He finds rice still cooking in one pot abandoned by a family. He fills his bowl, walks onto the strand where fishing boats are moored. He squats in the sand and begins to chew.

He remembers his promise to Ah Sahn. He swallows, eats the rest of the rice without counting or ritual.

He notices in the fringe of the delicately lapping tide a wash of dead fish. Then further up the sand a scattering of dead sea birds.

Curious, he rises from his haunches, explores from hut to hut.

A crow darts at his face, cackling at him as it whips by.

He sees other crows on the thatched roofs. Their beady eyes watch him.

Now when he moves they swoop toward him, screaming at him.

He stumbles over a sheep. Its throat has been ripped. Blood wells from the fresh wound.

The crows create an overwhelming racket.

He comes around the corner of a house, directly into the claws of a pouncing crow. It barely misses taking out his eyes. The scratch marks run scarlet down his cheek.

Cord runs from the village, the crows beating down at him in pitiless clouds.

But they stop at the opening of a narrow path into the trees, as though they themselves do not dare go further.

Cord finds relief from the nightmarish screeching of the birds which have driven him from the village. Here among the trees he listens to the soft night sounds of forest insects and nocturnal birds.

His path becomes narrower and narrower, the trees seeming to lean in more and more oppressively upon him. Even their leaves seem to be like hungry mouths, making rustling, sucking noises.

Then, abruptly, he stops. For now he can hear nothing. Neither insects nor birds nor wind rustling. The silence is absolute.

He senses the presence of some ominous, stalking force. He begins to fall back, but collides with the trees. The path behind him seems to have closed. Or else he has lost his way.

He begins easing forward again, but looking to all sides, up and behind him.

A blood-curdling scream shakes him. Something leaps at him from on high. Only his explosive reaction, his subliminally swift reflexes, save him from the unseen creature. It bounds off into the darkness with an incredible, non-human leap before he can fire a dart after it.

He finds blood streaming into his eyes from a slash across his forehead. He wipes away the blood, discovers that a claw has made a huge circle on him, from forehead, down one arm and across his thighs.

Cord cleanses his wounds with water from a pond. He hears the croaking of a frog.

He looks over. A bullfrog is puffing nearby.

Cord rises stealthily, vanishes into the trees.

A moment later his hand darts out, captures the frog. He puts it into his pouch. Then he catches a second frog. Finally a third.

Watching the trees and the space above him he continues through the dense forest until he comes to a small clearing. He stakes the three frogs in a triangle around the clearing, using long grass to form thin cords which he secures around one of their rear legs, then in turn secures to the base of a tree.

He places a dart in each hand, lies down in the dead center of the clearing, face up toward the ringing overhang of trees.

In a while, the frogs begin calling to each other, croaking their protest. Their rasping calls give him a sense of security, for he knows that as long as no one approaches they will continue calling and that only in hearing somebody coming will they fall still, thus alerting him. He permits himself to sleep, but in a degree just below waking, one ear listening to the frogs.

He is awakened by the sudden silence of the frogs. Mist rises from the soggy forest earth. It is the time just before dawn, not yet day, not still night.

Cord sees bushes sway to one side of him.

He gets to his feet, adjusts the shurken in his palms.

Something leaps an incredible distance across the space in front of him, but he can not see what it was. Now the bushes sway to the other side of him.

He turns. A lithe black figure comes screaming through the air toward him. He launches both darts, one hand after the other, but misses, then he kicks straight out at the attacking creature and is knocked backward by the force of its charge. He whirls over on the ground, the earth ripped open by something slashing by, tries to regain his feet. By the time he is up again the figure has once more disappeared into the brush.

Cord discovers two things. He has been cut again, this time the exact reverse of last night's wound, another circular slash, from forehead to arm to thighs, but this time from left to right, rather than right to left.

The creature slashing him apparently is proceeding by design. But not without itself being marked in return.

For Cord holds a handful of black hair he has snatched from it as it whipped past him.

Cord sees it bound once more - higher than the trees - deep in the thicket - going away from him.

CORD
(shouting after
the creature)
What are you?

He examines the hairs. They are long and fine.

CORD
Or does it matter what you
are? Or what shape you have?
The fineness or the coarseness
of your hair - what difference
does it make?

He blows the hairs from his palm, returns to the pond, once more cleanses his wounds.

As he squats by the pool, using its reflection not only as a mirror in which he watches any threat of attack from behind or above but as the mirror of himself, he detects the face of Ah Sahm staring up at him from the water.

AH SAHM'S VOICE
Of the two of us, you are the
blind one. Blinded by the
things you see. You think -

AH SAHM'S VOICE (cont'd)
therefore you stand apart
from the things you try to
understand.

CORD
(a long silence -
Ah Sahm's remembered
image has vanished
from the pool)
Death? Is this the Third Trial?
Does one have to die to meet
Yamaguchi?

Slowly Cord rises, looks about the trees.

CORD
(shouting)
You! Are you still there?

There is no answer.

Cord moves back to the clearing. He releases the
frogs, watches them hop away.

CORD
Of course you're here. Death
is always there. So why was I
afraid? Your leap is swift.
Your claws are sharp and
merciful. What can you take
from me which is not already
yours?

He seats himself in full lotus position, wraps
himself in meditation. Now we hear his thoughts, although
his eyes are closed, his lips stilled. His vision of the
trees around him clouds, blurs, then turns grey.

CORD'S THOUGHT VOICE
Everything I have done until
now has been fruitless. It
has led to nothing. There was
no other path except that it
lead to nothing - and before
me now there is only one real
fact - Death. The truth I
have been seeking - this
truth is Death. Yet Death is
also a seeker. Forever
seeking me. So - we have met
at last. And I am prepared.
I am at peace. Because I will
conquer death with death.

When Cord permits his mind to refocus on reality, he beholds a three-petaled flower growing from a cluster of plants near his feet. He touches the petals with the tips of his fingers.

Then he rises purposefully and searches for a stand of bamboo. He finds one, sets to work with his knife fashioning a dart. He fills one of its compartments with earth to give the dart some substance.

His work with the dart completed, he practices picking two shurken from his pouch with one hand, clenching the flat darts between thumb and forefinger, the second between his fourth and little finger.

When he masters this, plucking and placing and firing within a split of a second, he goes on to his next inexorable exercise, practices it throughout the day, hour after hour.

In this exercise, he not only brings forth the two shurken, but the bamboo dart as well, grasping it with his middle finger and cushioning it against his forefinger, so that after a while he is able to clutch and control three darts in one hand - two shurken, heavy and jagged, one bamboo sliver, lighter than the others, and longer.

For a short time only, since he has practiced this maneuver for years, he uses his left hand to pluck and throw shurken with equal dexterity to his right hand.

Prepared now, he goes forth at sunset along the narrow pathway through the forest from which he can find no outlet and calls for Death to come to him.

A cold north wind has blown up. It comes now through the trees, pressing them toward Cord, causing them to bow at his approach.

Yet he walks for the first time without fear. He does not even bend to the wind, for he is determined to meet Death in test of himself, and he is without fear.

He calls out, but the wind tears the voice from his lips, so that the sound is swept away.

He stops, sensing that he is not alone. Slowly he turns. From a tree the Panther Man, Death, leaps with certainty, not at Cord, but yards in front of him. The Panther Man appears to be enjoying Cord. This is the first opponent he has found with whom he can toy, someone to challenge him.

He deliberately takes his time, flipping long curving blades onto each finger as he approaches Cord.

Cord, using his left hand, dips into his pouch, whips out two darts, heaves them at the Panther Man.

Almost indolently, as though the darts are scarcely worthy of his attention, the Panther Man flicks them aside with his steel claws.

He is clothed in a long hairy robe. His eye teeth curve over his lips. His eyes give out black fire.

Cord watches him without fear, almost with pity.

CORD

Why are you so ugly?

The Panther Man creeps toward him, flexing his claws.

CORD

Or have you a different face
for every man?

The Panther Man screams, streaks toward Cord.

Cord's right hand dips, comes out with the three darts, two shurken, the bamboo - hurls them at the onrushing figure.

The hurtling bamboo dart follows the heavier metal shurken in a slower, delayed trajectory.

Its slowness confuses the Panther Man in the split second of his warding off the two shurken. Flick - he diverts one of the heavier darts in front of his face - flick - the second shurken coming in low - but confronted with the third dart for which he had not been prepared, arriving just behind the other two - he has no defense. It strikes him in the windpipe and his dying scream blends with its whistling.

He falls at Cord's feet, his claws still trying to take Cord's life.

Cord stares down at him for the longest time. Then he kneels beside him and lifts the ugly hulk into his arms and begins to weep.

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Cord hears the flute high above him now as he climbs painfully straight up the precipice.

The sun is burning directly above him.

Sweat burns his eyes.

His fingers are torn and bloody from his effort.

But he persists upward in his quest to reach Ah Sahn on the peak.

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A pulse of drums brings Cord out of the jungle to the beach.

Campfires burn along the strand as far as he can see.

He is drawn to the nearest collection of tents.

He recognizes their familiar appearance. These are the tents of Changsha.

The same sentry smiles the same smile.

Clowns and slave girls and tumblers still run through the encampment in endless pursuit of pleasure.

Cord finds Changsha massaging a giant bull.

CORD

(in Cantonese)

I heard your drums. They recalled a time in the wilderness.

CHANGSHA

The man I entertained in the wilderness is not the man I see tonight.

He strikes the relaxed bull an immense killing blow with his fist. The animal slumps, drops to its knees, rolls over. It is dead.

Servants drag the bull away to slaughter it.

CORD

I am no longer that man.

CHANGSHA

What more do you want of me?

CORD

Yamaguchi? Do you know
where I may find him?

CHANGSHA

He is near.

CORD

Do you seek him too?

Changsha points at the myriad campfires along
the beach.

CHANGSHA

They do. Martial artists of
every school. From every
part of the world. Those
who have survived their
Three Trials.

CORD

Must I confront each of them?
Is Yamaguchi so pitiless he
faces only one survivor among
us all?

CHANGSHA

There remains only that you
confront me.

CORD

I have no quarrel with you.

CHANGSHA

Did I not behead Tara?

CORD

She gave me the gift of herself
knowing I would never understand
love unless you did behead her.

CHANGSHA

Then confront me with love.

CORD

I am unable to do otherwise.

CHANGSHA

At daybreak. Along the beach.

Servants lead Cord to a tent where he rests and meditates until sunrise.

He leaves his tent at dawn and goes to the beach. Changsha's people are there, his musicians, his wives, his concubines, his circus performers - all of them - waiting silently around the edges of a wide Persian carpet.

Cord enters upon the carpet to discover that Changsha is already waiting there.

Cord bows to him. Changsha returns the bow.

With Changsha's first motion, the drums and the music of the Rhythm Man's entourage begins. Changsha moves slowly, economically, opening his stance by extending the same two claw-like hands which had disemboweled the black giant in the wilderness.

Cord gets into position instinctively, but into a more relaxed posture than he has ever used and there seems to be some slight approval in Changsha's observation of Cord's stance.

Changsha's extended claws reach higher and higher, then he begins a dynamic dance to the music, his hands exhibiting stroking, deceptively tender fingers, ever flowing, ever changing.

Cord becomes tensely involved with the movements of the Rhythm Man, letting himself become a part of the other man's facade, once more falling into the trap of projected ego, despite the lesson of the First Trial.

The hands of Changsha dance hypnotically before Cord's eyes as the music softens to a whisper. Cord is drawn closer and closer.

Now it is no longer Changsha Cord sees, but the remembered image of Tara and her caressing hands drawing him to her.

Suddenly from out of the memory a violent side kick is thrust toward Cord's chest. Changsha, not Tara.

Cord leaps back, the crushing out-thrust foot grazing rather than smashing his chest.

The music becomes louder, more and more dominant.

Changsha splits into three opponents, Monkey Man to his left, Death, the Panther Man to his right, and all three confront Cord with broad flowing movements as the music flows with them.

Monkey Man leaps at Cord with double flying kicks.

Cord dodges.

Monkey Man begins to circle. Instinctively, Cord assumes his nucleus stance. He watches Monkey Man dance around him and he turns with him until the creature advances square on, feints, spin kicks, the kick slashing past Cord's face. Cord backs up, but the kick has reopened the wound on his forehead.

As the Monkey Man completes his spin and turns back to face Cord he has vanished and is replaced by Changsha, moving to the music, flowing in and out, constantly adapting himself for position.

Suddenly a black hairy ball leaps over Cord who ducks low.

The attacker recovers on the far side, whirls back. Changsha has become the Panther Man.

Cord fires three darts as he did in the forest, two ringing ahead as the silent bamboo one follows.

The Panther Man grasps the two with his hands and the third appears to strike him in the throat. He drops backward.

Cord approaches, but the corpse leaps up, and now it is no longer the Panther Man but Changsha, with two darts in his hands and the bamboo clasped between his teeth.

The music builds insanely as Cord faces either three opponents at one time or even more defeating one opponent ever changing form.

Cord is virtually ensnared within the style of the three enemies, literally at their mercy, moving as they move, dictated to by them, not dictating to them.

But a cool piercing sound reaches his innermost ear - the wavering of Ah Sahn's silent flute - heard only by Cord.

The sound of the flute dominates Cord's mind, blocks out the sound of Changsha's music and Cord sees that Changsha has now lost his accomplices. Monkey Man and the Panther Man are merging back into Changsha.

The fight becomes equalized. Both combatants are highly sensitive to each other, yet their moves are

economical and their combat is a fighting without fighting as they flow in and out toward each other, Cord's silent flute occasionally dominating Changsha's drum, Changsha's drum at times overpowering Cord's silent flute.

But when the two instruments are equalized and play in concert, the combat becomes equalized and both combatants are as one, linked to each other, incapable of defeating each other, matched equally and perfectly.

Changsha's face relaxes. He smiles at Cord, who is also smiling, though exhilarated and bewildered.

Changsha steps aside, holds out his hand to point the arrival of a dragon-prowed boat being rowed into the beach by a dozen young monks.

CHANGSHA

(in Cantonese)

The Way is across the water.
You are the Chosen.

Cord steps aboard the boat. Changsha's warriors push it free of the sand.

The young monks row backward, fill and turn, set the dragon-prow on a course toward an island barely visible across the water.

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Cord has reached the plateau at the top of the mountain.

His tunic is torn, his body streaked with sweat and dust, his hands torn and bloody, he stands panting, gazes at Ah Sahn on the highest rock of the plateau.

Ah Sahn's face is upturned to the sun as he plays the flute.

+++

On the Island Cord is led up a rocky path from the sea to the crest of the cliff on which a Japanese temple and many luxurious structures are set about in gardens among trees and flowers.

At the entering arch he is met by a coterie of young monks wearing golden-hued koromo.

They conduct him to private chambers where he is bathed and arrayed in ceremonial robe of silk.

Then he is led to the Zendo, a resplendent building centering around a jeweled Meditation Hall.

Within the Hall, seated on a silken mat, Yamaguchi waits for him.

He is an old man nearing seventy, but his presence is magnificent.

He motions for Cord to join him.

Cord sits opposite him across a low teak table inlaid with ivory and jade.

Young monks bring tea.

Cord waits for Yamaguchi to speak.

The old man smiles at Cord and sips his tea.

YAMAGUCHI

(finally)

It is a tea grown only on this Island.

CORD

It is a very delicate tea.

They continue tasting the tea.

A peacock enters the hall and struts past them.

YAMAGUCHI

How unfortunate!

CORD

On the contrary, I am pleased by its presence. I have spent many hours meditating upon the meaning of the peacock. It represents aspiration, celestial beauty, hence knowledge of the higher things.

YAMAGUCHI

Yet this particular peacock of all the one hundred upon the Island is the least beautiful...Which flowers do you favor?

CORD

I do not discriminate among flowers. Each has its separate fascination.

Yamaguchi rises, claps his hands. Instantly young monks hurry in bearing two magnificently carved sedan chairs.

Yamaguchi climbs into one. Cord is ushered into the second.

The monks carry them outside into a faultlessly clear morning and through grounds of sparkling beauty.

Young monks are everywhere at work tending the plants.

They bow to Yamaguchi as he and Cord are borne past them and Yamaguchi makes a sacred sign of blessing in their direction, scattering it indiscriminately among them as he goes.

The sedan chairs are carried into a rose garden.

Cord finds himself staring at one bush and the single red rose growing tall above the leaves. In spite of himself, he looks away, troubled by the memory of Tara.

YAMAGUCHI

At this hour the wind arrives from the east. It is the best hour of the day to enjoy the scent of roses.

Yamaguchi waves the monks forward on the tour he is obviously giving Cord.

They approach an ornate temple. A group of monks comes out, bow en masse to Yamaguchi.

YAMAGUCHI

These are the Near Ones. Here in the temple of the Pillar of the Universe they study the perfecting of perfection.

CORD

Who teaches them this?

YAMAGUCHI

The teacher and the taught
together produce the teaching.

Now the chairs are borne to the far point of
the Island.

From here the view of the inland sea and of
the rocky mainland is staggering.

Yamaguchi steps from the sedan chair, moves to
a canopied chair set on a rock facing the seascape.

Cord watches him narrowly.

YAMAGUCHI

This is the seat of harmony.

CORD

I have seen nothing but harmony
since I was brought here.

YAMAGUCHI

Here universal harmony permeates
all.

CORD

There is no more struggle?

YAMAGUCHI

The other face of struggle is
peace. You have evolved out
of struggle into the sweet and
timeless spirit of everlasting
peace.

He rises, almost too eagerly.

YAMAGUCHI

Sit in the chair which will
soon be yours. Cast your eyes
across the view which will
never fail to calm your soul
in the years to come.

Hesitantly, Cord sits.

YAMAGUCHI

Is it not indeed the very
center of timelessness and
placelessness?

Faintly, then, Cord hears the silent flute. The music grows within him so dominately he looks around, thinking to see Ah Sahn.

But he observes that Yamaguchi has heard nothing.

Instead, the old man is preoccupied with his private thoughts. Puffing slightly, for he is overweight, he climbs into his sedan chair.

YAMAGUCHI

We will go now to the temple where you will be rehearsed in the ceremony which precedes your becoming Keeper of The Book. It is an elaborate ceremony and requires hours of diligence to commit it to memory.

CORD

Then we do not have to fight - you and I?

YAMAGUCHI

(shocked)

Here - on this Island?

CORD

It is said that until one has overcome Yamaguchi in face to face combat, he cannot become Keeper of The Book and therefore not the world's supreme martial artist.

YAMAGUCHI

(with some impatience)

The legend becomes more curious with each succeeding year. I have even heard rumors there might be five Trials instead of three. It will be impossible for any human being to qualify, then there would never be any relief from the responsibility.
(confiding in Cord)

My son, I am happy for both of us that you came through your ordeals. For age has overcome me. Age and the weight of office. I have passed years yearning to see the outside

YAMAGUCHI (cont'd)
world before I die. Once
more to feel pain, know
suffering - to be confused
and uncertain - to experience.
In short, to live again.

Cord leaps lightly from his sedan chair.

Puzzled, Yamaguchi motions the monks to stop.
They lower his chair.

CORD

Forgive me, I do not need
The Book - nor want it.

YAMAGUCHI

How do you know? You have
not yet looked upon it. It
brings paradise within your
everyday reach.

CORD

I wish neither to possess nor
to be possessed. I no longer
covet paradise. More important,
I no longer fear hell.

YAMAGUCHI

But you have endured much.
The Book is just over there -
in that temple - the holiness
you aspire to, the reward for
which you have so grievously
suffered.

CORD

The medicine for my suffering
I had within me from the very
beginning, but I did not take
it. My ailment came from
within myself, but I did not
observe it. Until this moment.
Now I see that I will never
find the light unless, like
the candle, I am my own fuel,
consuming myself.

Yamaguchi looks down at the earth near Cord's
abandoned sedan chair.

The rich ceremonial robe of silk lies on the
earth.

And Cord, naked as at birth, runs back the way he has come.

+++

On the mountain peak Ah Sahm senses Cord's presence.

Ah Sahm puts the flute from his mouth.

He stands.

For a moment he is silhouetted against the rising sun.

There is no sound.

Until lightly the wind is heard.

A butterfly flutters between Ah Sahm and the waiting Cord.

A hawk wheels high above.

Ah Sahm seems to glow in the morning light. The sun radiates from his body, the aura blazing out toward Cord in lasting and searing embrace.

Cord plunges toward Ah Sahm even as Ah Sahm moves toward him until both are blended by and lost within a golden flash of light.

The circling hawk looks down on the glowing peak, then wheels away on a long glide, letting the wind carry it where it will, on a course which has no seeking.

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