

# Crescent Moon and Other Stories

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## The Soul-Slaying Spear

Everything in life is a game; this thought often occurred to me in the past; only now do I understand the truth of it.

THE headquarters of the escort agency where Dragon Sha used to work had long been converted into an inn. The time had come for Asia to wake up from its dream. The sound of rifle fire overpowered the roaring of tigers in the jungles of the Malay Peninsula and India. Half awake, the peoples of Asia rubbed their sleepy eyes and offered prayers to their ancestors and gods; but before long, they lost all of their land, their freedom and their rights. Men with different-colored faces stood outside their doors, the barrels of their guns still warm. Of what use were their long spears, powerful bows and poisonous arrows, and thick shields covered in gorgeous snakeskin? Their ancestors and the divinities worshipped by their ancestors were totally impotent. China, with its dragon banners, was no longer the great mystery it had been in the past. Now China had railroads running through its graveyards, destroying all auspicious geomantic influences. The fringed maroon banner of the escort agency, the steel sword in a green sharkskin sheath, the horse hung with a string of bells, the accumulated wisdom and argot of the escort trade as well as the code of justice and pride of repu-

tation — for Dragon Sha, all of these things, including his mastery of the martial arts and his career as a swordman — had vanished like a dream. This was the age of the iron horse, of automatic rifles, of treaty ports and of terrorism. There were even rumors about that people were out to chop off the emperor's head!

At the point in history when our story takes place, acting as an armed escort was no longer a viable profession, though this was before either the Revolutionary Party or the educationalists had begun to promote the traditional martial arts as a national pastime.

In the past, Dragon Sha was known far and wide for his short and lean figure, his agility, his powerful physique and his piercing eyes which shone like stars on a frosty winter night. By now, however, he'd put on some weight. When the escort agency was converted into an inn, he moved into the northernmost rooms in the small rear courtyard. His long spear stood in one corner of his room, and he raised pigeons in the courtyard as well. In the evenings, he would close the gate leading into his courtyard and run through the routine which had made him famous: the "Five Tigers Soul-slaying Spear". His spear, and the series of exercises he performed with it, represented twenty years of experience in the Northeast, and had earned him the name "Magic Spear Sha". In those days, he had never suffered a single defeat. Now, however, his spear no longer could confer glory upon him or win him any victories; only when he passed his hand over the spear's cool, smooth, quivering staff could he lessen his despair somewhat. And only at night, when he practiced by himself in the privacy of his courtyard, did "Magic Spear Sha" come back to life. During the daytime,

he rarely talked about the martial arts or the past; his world had been blown away by a storm.

Some of the young men he had trained as boys came to see him frequently. Most of them were unemployed. They had mastered some of the martial arts, but had no real opportunity to use them. Some of them gave performances at temple fairs. First flexing their legs, they would go through a series of exercises which would conclude with a few fancy somersaults; after such a display, they'd try to peddle some tonic pills. In this way they could earn themselves a few strings of cash. Those who couldn't afford to live in this manner hauled big baskets of fruit or beans into town in the early morning and hawked them in the streets. In those days, rice and pork were relatively inexpensive, and a man willing to do a little hard physical labor could easily earn enough to fill his belly. But this kind of life couldn't satisfy Dragon Sha's disciples. Not only did they have huge appetites; they also had to eat well — no hard buns or hot pepper pancakes for them. Moreover, they frequently took part in pilgrimages into the mountains, which included contests of "Five-Tiger Cudgels", wielding a sword at the head of the procession, and donning huge masks to participate in the lion dances. Although these pilgrimages never brought in much money — in comparison with working as an armed escort — they at least gave these young men an opportunity to get out in public and flex their muscles. These affairs were also a way of advertising one's skills. The participants had to dress up in their finest costumes: a typical outfit would include a pair of trousers made of European-style black crepe, a short jacket of fine white bleached cotton and a pair of fancy cotton

shoes, though black satin fighting boots were generally considered more impressive. They were the disciples of "Magic Spear Sha" — though Dragon Sha himself would never have acknowledged this. Public performances often meant incurring some expenses, not to mention risking the possibility of getting into a brawl. When they ran out of money, these "disciples" often came to Dragon Sha for a loan. Dragon Sha was not one to beat around the bush in such matters, and would help them out as best he could; in any case, they never went away empty-handed. On the other hand, if they wanted to learn a new fighting trick or a fancy display piece, or asked their master to show them some countermoves, such as "snatching a sword empty-handed" or "spear vs. tiger-head hooks", Dragon Sha would usually brush them off with a quip, "What countermoves can I show you? I'd sooner shoo you!" And sometimes he would simply kick them out of his house. They had no idea why Master Sha acted this way, and often left rather reluctantly.

These disciples, however, sung Dragon Sha's praises wherever they went. On the one hand, they wanted people to know that they were the inheritors of an authentic martial arts tradition and had studied under a real master; and on the other, they all wanted to stir up Master Sha's pride: if someday a particularly stubborn adversary insisted on meeting Dragon Sha in person, they wanted to be sure he would show them his stuff. Thus they boasted that Master Sha could knock a bull off its feet with a single blow, and could easily send a man flying over the roof with a single kick. Though no one had ever seen him perform these miracles, the more they spoke about them, the more

sincerely they believed they were true. They even went so far as to specify the time and place these miracles had taken place, and swore to the ends of the earth that they weren't exaggerating.

One day, Wang Sansheng — "Three Victories Wang" — one of Dragon Sha's more mature disciples, marked off a circle in the courtyard of the Temple of the Earth God and laid out his weapons. After taking a big pinch of snuff the color of tea leaves he began to swing his long segmented iron whip around his head to enlarge the circle. He put his whip down on the ground and without performing the customary bow to the assembled crowd, placed his hands on his hips and recited the following couplet: "I'm a man who's fought his way through this world; my fists have made me a hero throughout the length and breadth of the empire." He surveyed the crowd with a sweeping glance, and continued: "My good friends and neighbors, my name is Wang Sansheng. I'm no sideshow performer, but a true expert of the martial arts. When I worked as a escort in the Northeast, I met some of the best men in the business. I'm out of work now and have a bit of time to spare, so I thought I'd set up here and offer you gentlemen a chance to step into the ring with me. Anyone here who loves the martial arts is welcome; but remember, it's friendship first with me. If one of you would be so kind as to step up here, I'll be glad to entertain you. My master is Dragon Sha with a magic spear; that means my fighting is the real McCoy. Gentlemen, is there anyone here willing to join me?" He surveyed the crowd once again, but he knew that no one would have the nerve to step forward. His

speech was impressive, but his iron whip was more so, weighing some nine kilograms.

Wang Sansheng was tall and had a tough muscular face. He opened his big black eyes wide and glanced through the crowd a third time. No one made a single sound. He removed his short jacket and tightened his wide pale blue fighting belt, which aided him in contracting his stomach. Spitting into the palms of his hands, he picked up his long-handled broadsword.

"Gentlemen, first I'll give you all a little sword demonstration. I'm not doing this for nothing, mind you, so when I'm finished, if you've got a few spare coins, toss 'em this way; but if you don't, then just shout a little something encouraging. Just remember, I'm not in it for the money. Alright then, here we go."

He held the sword against his body and opened his eyes wide, stretching all the muscles in his face. His chest muscles stuck out like two twisted birch roots. He stamped his foot and raised his sword before him, its long red tassels swinging back and forth in front of his shoulders. He brandished the sword in a series of fancy movements, squatted down, and spun around. The sword revolved like a tornado with a loud whirring. Finally, he bent down and set the sword spinning on the palm of his right hand. Not a single sound arose from the crowd; all that could be heard was the tinkling of the bells attached to the tassels of his sword. With an elegant gesture, he placed his sword on the ground in front of him and stamped his foot again. Straightening up until he was a head taller than anyone in the crowd, he stood there like a black pagoda, and then resumed his normal posture. "Ladies and gentlemen!" Holding the sword in one hand and placing his

other hand on his waist, he surveyed the crowd once again. A few people tossed a few coins at his feet; he nodded in approval. "Ladies and gentlemen!" He waited a few more minutes, but the scattered bright and well-worn coins on the ground failed to grow in number, and people on the periphery of the circle began to leave. He took a deep breath. "No one appreciates me." Though he said this under his breath, everyone heard him clearly.

"Well done!" an old man with a scraggly beard shouted from the northwest corner of the circle.

"Eh?" Wang Sansheng made as if he hadn't heard the man.

"I said: You . . . performed . . . very . . . well!" The man's tone of voice was slightly abrasive.

Putting his sword down on the ground, Wang Sansheng looked in the direction the voice was coming from. No one in the crowd had noticed this old man before, but now they all turned to look at him. He was short and wiry and had a coarse blue cotton long gown slung over his shoulder. His face was wizened and his eyes were set deeply in their sockets; his beard was composed of little more than a few sparse brownish hairs. The queue resting on his shoulder seemed to be made of straw. It was about as thick as a chopstick, but much less straight. Despite the old man's unformidable appearance, Wang Sansheng could tell he possessed real fighting skills. His forehead shone with a mysterious radiance, and his pupils were like two tiny wells shimmering with a black lustre. But Wang Sansheng had nothing to fear. His ability to identify a real fighter boosted his confidence in his own fighting: he was Dragon Sha's righthand man,

"How about joining me for a few rounds, Uncle?" Wang Sansheng addressed him with due deference.

Nodding his head, the old man entered the ring. At this moment, the crowd broke out laughing at the way he walked. His arms hardly moved at all; and each time he took a step with his left foot, he had to slide his right foot along the ground to catch up with it. In this fashion, he dragged himself forward, bending over and straightening up at each step. He looked as if he had suffered from paralysis at some time in the past. Making his way to the center of the circle, he threw his gown on the ground, oblivious to the ridicule being directed at him from all sides.

"So, you're a disciple of Dragon Sha with his magic spear, eh? Well then, you fight with a spear, but what about me?" The old man came right to the point; he seemed to be itching for a fight.

All those who had started to stray from the circle came back to watch. And no matter how loudly the man with the trained bear banged on his gong, no one paid any attention to him.

"How about me fighting with a spear and you using a set of triple-sticks?" Wang Sansheng wanted to give the old man a chance to prove himself. The triple-sticks — three heavy wooden rods connected in a line with two short chains — was not the sort of weapon an amateur could fight with.

The old man nodded and picked the sticks up from the ground.

Wang Sansheng glared at his opponent and started rattling his spear. He had a very unpleasant expression on his face.

The pupils of the old man's eyes darkened and re-

ceded into their sockets; they resembled the burning tips of two incense sticks, and followed the tip of Wang Sansheng's spear as he swung it in circles through the air. Wang Sansheng had a strange feeling that the old man was about to swallow the tip of his spear with those eyes of his. The spectators surged forward to the edge of the circle until there was hardly any breathing space between them. They were all aware that the old man possessed extraordinary powers. In order to divert the old man's eyes, Wang Sansheng executed an elaborate flourish with his spear.

The old man's scraggly beard fluttered once. He said, "After you." Wang Sansheng held his spear out in front of him and lunged forward, bending one knee. The sharp point of his spear was aimed directly at the old man's throat, and the red tassels surrounding the shaft swung around with the thrust. All at once the old man came alive; leaning slightly to one side to avoid the tip of the spear, he struck the spear with a downward stroke of one section of his triple-sticks while forcing Wang Sansheng's hands upwards with the other. There were two loud cracks and Wang Sansheng's spear fell to the ground. The crowd shouted their approval. Wang Sansheng blushed deep purple from his face down to his chest and picked up his spear. With a fancy flourish, he charged forward again, this time directing the tip of his spear towards the old man's belly. The old man's jet black eyes glowed in anger. Nimble bending one leg, he parried the spearhead with one section of his triple-sticks and with another struck the spear's handle just as Wang was about to pull it away. With a bang, Wang Sansheng's spear fell to the ground once again.

More applause and cheers arose from the crowd. Wang Sansheng was now sweating all over. But this time he didn't pick up his spear; he simply remained standing there fixed to the spot, staring straight ahead. The old man threw down the sticks, picked up his gown and, dragging his right leg behind him, started walking at a somewhat faster pace than before. With his robe over his shoulder, he went up to Wang Sansheng and patted him on the arm. "You need a little more practice, boy."

"Where do you think you're going?" Wang Sansheng wiped the sweat from his brow. "Stay here a minute. I lost this one, but there's something I want to ask you. Do you dare take on Master Sha?"

"That's what I came here for in the first place." The old man twisted up his wizened face in a semblance of a smile. "Let's go. Get your things together. I'm taking you to dinner."

Wang Sansheng gathered up his weapons and left them with the magician Second Pockmarks. As they walked out of the temple, a large crowd was following them. Wang Sansheng shouted a few obscenities in their direction and they scattered.

"What is your family name?" Wang Sansheng asked.

"Sun's the name." The old man's speech was as coarse as the rest of him. "I love the martial arts, and I've always wanted to meet Dragon Sha."

"Dragon Sha's going to beat you into a pulp," Wang Sansheng thought to himself. He quickened his pace, but Mr Sun had no problem keeping up with him. Wang Sansheng knew that the old man's way of walking with consecutive leaps was characteristic of Zha Family Boxing — there was no doubt in his mind that he could

kick up a storm in a fight. But no matter how agile his legs were, he was certainly no match for Dragon Sha. Convinced of this, Wang Sansheng felt a little better inside, and slowed his pace.

"Uncle Sun, where is your hometown?"

"Hejian County.\* Just a small town." Sun seemed to be warming up a little. "You can master the cudgel in a month. You can master the sword in a year. But it takes a lifetime to master the spear. To tell you the truth, you've got a really fine pair of hands there."

Beads of sweat broke out on Wang Sansheng's forehead, but he said nothing.

When they arrived at the inn, Wang Sansheng's heart was beating wildly. His worst fear was that Master Sha would not be at home; he was very eager to get his revenge. He knew Master Sha generally avoided becoming involved in conflicts of this sort, and that many of his fellow disciples had been spurned by Master Sha in similar situations. But Wang Sansheng believed Master Sha would agree this time; first, since he was Master Sha's eldest disciple, in a different class from the rest of those youngsters who hung around him; and second, because Dragon Sha's name had come up in front of the crowd at the temple fair; he could hardly afford to lose "face" in such a situation.

"Sansheng, what brings you here?" Dragon Sha was lying in bed reading the classical novel *Canonization of the Gods*.

Sansheng blushed a deep crimson. His lips trembled but no sound came out.

\* In Hebei Province.

Dragon Sha sat up. "What's the matter, Sansheng?"  
"I got whipped."

Master Sha yawned but said nothing to him.

Wang Sansheng was very upset, but didn't want to show it; it was much more important to rouse Master Sha to action.

"There's an old man named Sun waiting outside to see you. My spear . . . he knocked my spear out of my hands twice!" Wang Sansheng knew the effect the word "spear" would have on Dragon Sha. Before Dragon Sha could say a word, Sansheng rushed out the door.

When the visitor entered, Dragon Sha was waiting for him in the main room of his flat. They greeted each other politely in the traditional manner and sat down. Dragon Sha told Wang Sansheng to make tea. Sansheng hoped they would get right down to business and start fighting, but resigned himself for the moment to making tea. Mr Sun remained silent and sized up Dragon Sha with his deepset eyes.

Master Sha was extremely deferential. "If Sansheng offended you in any way, forget about it. He's just a youngster."

Mr Sun was disappointed in this response, but knew Dragon Sha was very astute. Unsure of how to react, Mr Sun knew that a man's astuteness was not necessarily an indication of his attainments in the martial arts. "I've come to learn spear fighting from you," he spurted out.

Dragon Sha said nothing. Wang Sansheng came in holding a teapot — he was so eager for them to come to grips that he had poured the water into the pot before it had boiled.

Raising his tea bowl, Dragon Sha said, "Sansheng, go round up Little Shun and the rest of them and tell them to meet us at the Tianhui Restaurant. We're taking Mr Sun out to dinner."

"What?" Wang Sansheng's eyes nearly fell out of their sockets. He glanced at Dragon Sha. Though his heart was filled with inexpressable anger, he responded with a simple "Yes, sir!" and walked out, pouting his big lips.

Mr Sun said, "It's hard work teaching disciples."

"I've never had any disciples. Let's go now, this water isn't boiled. We'll go to a teahouse and drink tea till we get hungry." Dragon Sha picked up his waistpouch from the table, put his snuff-bottle in one pocket and some money in the other, and hung it over his belt.

"I'm not hungry. Let's not go out yet." Mr Sun's two "nots" were insistent enough to knock his little queue off his shoulder.

"We'll chat for a while longer then."

"I've come especially to observe the way you fight with a spear."

"Five Tigers Soul-slaying Spear?" Dragon Sha said, pointing to his belly. "Look how much weight I've put on."

"Here's my idea." Mr Sun looked intensely at Dragon Sha. "We don't have to fight. Just teach me your 'Five Tigers Soul-slaying Spear' routine."

"Five Tigers Soul-slaying Spear?" Dragon Sha laughed. "I haven't done that for years. I couldn't do it now if I tried. I've got a better idea. Why don't you stay here with me for a few days. I'll show you around

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town, and when you're ready to go, I'll give you a little something to help you out on the way home."

"I don't want to go anywhere and I don't need any money from you. All I want is to learn the martial arts." Mr Sun stood up. "I'll go through one of my routines for you so you can decide if I'm qualified or not." He stood up and literally leaped into the courtyard in a single bound, scaring the pigeons away. Spreading his legs in the proper starting posture, he performed an entire routine of Zha Family Boxing. His footwork was nimble, his hands full of grace; leaping and landing on one leg, his little queue remained suspended in the air and descended slowly like a kite on a windless day. Though his movements were rapid, all his postures were well balanced and a delight to watch. He circled the courtyard six times, covering every inch of space in it; all of his movements were fluent and finely coordinated. His body remained in one place while his spirit permeated every corner of the courtyard. He finished by bringing his hands together in front of his chest, shrinking back to his normal posture. It was as if a flock of swallows flying madly about the courtyard had all returned to their nests.

"Excellent! Excellent!" Dragon Sha nodded his approval from his front steps. Still holding his hands together in front of him, Mr Sun said, "Teach me your spear routine!"

Dragon Sha came down the steps and returned the salutation. "My dear Mr Sun, to tell you the truth, that spear and that spear routine are going to be buried with me when I die."

"Then you won't teach me?"

"No."

Mr Sun's mouth and beard quivered nervously for a few moments, but there was very little he could say. He went back inside, picked up his blue cotton gown and limped out. "Sorry to bother you then. Goodbye."

"Why don't you stay for dinner?"

Mr Sun said nothing.

After escorting his guest to the gate of the courtyard, Dragon Sha returned to his room and stood nodding in the direction of the corner where his spear stood.

He went alone to the Tianhui Restaurant, since he was afraid Wang Sansheng and the others were waiting for him there. But when he got there, he found out that they had not come at all.

Wang Sansheng, Little Shun and the others stopped giving performances at the Temple of the God of Earth, and no longer boasted about Dragon Sha's feats. On the contrary, they began spreading the word that Dragon Sha had thrown in the towel and was even too scared to fight with an old man. In fact, they now began telling people that Mr Sun could kill a bull with a single kick. It meant very little to anyone that Wang Sansheng had lost to him; but Dragon Sha hadn't even tried. In any case, Wang Sansheng had had a chance to test himself in the ring with the old man, while Dragon Sha was too much of a coward even to stick up for himself. Before long, everyone seemed to have forgotten about "Magic Spear Sha".

One quiet evening when no one was about, Dragon Sha bolted the outside gate and ran through the sixty-four thrusts of his entire routine. Leaning on his spear in the middle of the courtyard, he gazed up at the stars and thought back on the good old days, when he enjoyed a fine reputation in the country inns and all through the wilderness. Sighing, he rubbed his hands over the cool, smooth handle of his spear and smiled. "No, I won't teach this to anyone. I won't teach this to anyone."

*Translated by Don J. Cohn*