

The *Intrigues of the Warring States* is a collection of stories, speeches, and historical records from the Warring States period (403-221 BC), compiled by Han dynasty scholar Liu Xiang. In this period of the Zhou dynasty states vied with each other for supremacy, and people of talent traveled to whatever state would employ them. In this brief tale, Feng Xuan is an itinerant swordsman seeking employment who uses his cunning to get what he wants.

From *Intrigues of the Warring States*

Compiled by Liu Xiang

A man of Qi, one Feng Xuan, being in a most impoverished condition, sent a mediary to Lord Mengchang to inform him that he wished to become his retainer.

“What is the gentleman partial to?” asked Lord Mengchang.

“He has no partiality,” was the reply.

“What is he especially capable of?”

“Nothing.”

Lord Mengchang laughed. “So be it,” he said, and admitted him.

From this, Lord Mengchang's attendants assumed that their lord held the new retainer in low esteem and supplied him with only coarse fare. After a time he appeared, leaning against a pillar, tapping on his unsheathed longsword and singing: “Longsword, let us return! We find no fish on our plate.” When his attendants reported this to Lord Mengchang, he told them to make Feng Xuan's fare that of his other retainers.

Shortly thereafter, Feng Xuan again sang his sword song: “Longsword, let us return! No carriage to ride in state!” The attendants laughed at him and reported it to Lord Mengchang.

“Have a conveyance made, the equal of those who have carriages,” he replied.

Thereafter Feng Xuan would ride in his carriage with his sword over his shoulder and, passing his friends, would say: “Lord Mengchang honors me as a guest.”

Still later Feng Xuan sang his sword song again: “Longsword, let us return. No support, can my family wait?”

The attendants all disliked him then, for they thought him covetous and malcontent.

“Does he have a family?” asked Lord Mengchang.

“His mother,” they replied.

So Lord Mengchang dispatched a man to supply her needs so that she might not suffer want. Feng Xuan never sang his song again.

Afterwards, Lord Mengchang inscribed a notice asking his retainers, “Who among you can keep accounts and will collect the monies owed me in my fief of Xue?”

Feng Xuan sent in his reply, “I can.”

Lord Mengchang was curious and asked who he was. His attendants told him it was he who sang the song of the longsword.

“So he has his capabilities after all!” laughed Lord Mengchang. “But I have neglected him and never given him audience.”

When Lord Mengchang received Feng Xuan, he apologized and said: “I have been much busied by affairs and vexed with troubles so that my feelings are blunted. Deep in affairs

of state, I have wronged you; yet you, sir, take no offence and are willing to collect debts for me in Xue?"

"I am."

When Feng Xuan had made ready his attire and loaded the wagons with debt-tallies, he took leave of Lord Mengchang.

"When the debts have been collected, is there anything I may buy for you when I return?" he asked.

"If you have seen something that my house lacks, buy it," replied Lord Mengchang.

Feng Xuan hastened to Xue and sent out an officer summoning all those who owed debts to come forth and match their tallies. When all had been matched, Feng Xuan feigned an order from Lord Mengchang that all debts were to be forgiven the people. The tallies were burned and the people cheered.

Feng Xuan returned to Qi without a halt and arrived in the early morning asking audience. Lord Mengchang, surprised at his haste, donned his formal robes and admitted him.

"Why do you return so speedily? Have the debts been collected?"

"They have already been collected," was the reply.

"What did you purchase on your return?"

"My lord, you asked me to see if there was anything your house lacked," answered Feng Xuan. "It was my humble opinion that your castle was filled with precious objects, that

your stables and kennels abounded in steeds and coursers, and the lower palaces with beauties. It seemed that one thing only was lacking and that was fealty. This I bought, my lord.”

“How can one buy fealty?” exclaimed Lord Mengchang.

“At the moment you hold the little fief of Xue; you do not cherish the people there as your own children, but look on them as a source of profit,” replied Feng Xuan. “Your servant took it upon himself to feign an order from you that all debts should be forgiven the people of Xue. The tallies were burned and the citizens cheered you. This is how your servant purchased fealty.”

Lord Mengchang was displeased. “So be it! You may now rest, sir.”

A full year later, the new king of Qi informed Lord Mengchang that he dared no longer use a minister of the former king. Lord Mengchang had to return and govern his own fief of Xue. When he was still one hundred tricents from the city, its people, supporting the old ones and holding their children by the hand, welcomed their lord in midjourney. Lord Mengchang turned and looked at Feng Xuan.

“Your purchase of fealty on my behalf, sir, is apparent to me today.”

“My lord,” replied Feng Xuan, “the wiliest rabbit must have three burrows before he can even preserve his life. At the moment you can scarcely rest secure with only one. I beg my lord allow me to dig him two more.”

Fifty carts and five hundred catties of gold were given Feng, and he made his way westward to speak to King Hui of Liang.

“Qi has released its great minister Lord Mengchang,” said Feng Xuan, “and he is now free among the feudal lords. The first state to welcome him will enrich itself and make its soldiery powerful.”

The king of Liang vacated his highest post by making his former minister a Marshal. He then sent emissaries, one hundred chariots, and a thousand catties of gold to engage Lord Mengchang. Feng Xuan hurried ahead of them to caution him.

“A thousand in gold is great wealth and a hundred chariots a visible entourage. We must let Qi hear of them!”

Thrice the emissaries of Liang came to Xue, but Lord Mengchang firmly refused to accompany them. Qi heard of it; ruler and ministers were sore afraid, and the Grand Tutor was dispatched with gifts of a thousand catties of gold, two ornamented chariots, and a ceremonial sword in its case. The king wrote a letter of apology to Lord Mengchang:

We are truly unfortunate! We are given ill omen in the ancestral temples; we are surrounded by sycophants; and we have offended you, sir. Truly we are not worthy to rule! We beg you, sir, for the sake of the ancestral temples, come back now to unite the people!

Feng Xuan again cautioned Lord Mengchang: “I must ask you to request him to send the ancestors' sacrificial objects here so that the ancestral temple may remain in Xue!”

When the temple was erected, Feng Xuan returned to Lord Mengchang and said, “The three burrows are complete, my lord. You may now rest secure and happy.”

That Lord Mengchang could be minister for several decades without the slightest misfortune was due to the planning of Feng Xuan.

Translated by James I. Crump

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