

I have run a lot of adventures, but I have one in particular in which every time I have run it no one ever confronts the Big Bad Evil Guy in the end.

In previous AetherCons I have run an adventure for first edition AD&D called The Merchant of Kwan Lun. I have since retired the adventure, so it is safe to reveal its secrets now. The opening premise was pretty simple; an ancient-looking merchant in a local bazaar asks the party to retrieve some water from a magical pool that is purported to have remarkable restorative qualities. The pool is located in an abandoned temple not too far away. If the party will get the water for the old merchant they will be rewarded handsomely.

The twist is that the Merchant of Kwan Lun has rigged this old abandoned temple. The way that he replenishes his shop is that he asks unsuspecting adventurers to go get some water from the “magical pool” in the temple, which he has stocked with traps that are designed to separate the party from their worldly possessions. There are water traps that are designed to get the party to shed their heavy armor. There are goblins who are paid to steal from the party or knock them out and take their gear. There are some traps that are only there to mess with the players’ minds. My personal favorite has a viscous substance at the base of a set of stairs. Clever party members will examine it and discover that it is rendered bacon grease. The party will step over it, thinking that they have thwarted the trap. However, the stair treads fold downward as the party reaches the top, forming a ramp instead of stairs. Any party member that trips slides down and gets lightly coated with bacon grease. The ramp is not all that difficult to navigate, but at the top of the stairs is a trigger for a small gust of wind that blows a dust-like substance on the party which sticks to the grease. Observant party members will discover that they are now coated with a blend of eleven herbs and spices. You can imagine where their minds go from there.

The final encounter of the adventure is in the “sacred chambers” of the temple. Having navigated through the traps and guardians, a young man in acolyte robes tells the party that they have proved themselves worthy to visit the mystical pool. All they must do now is go through the ceremonial cleansing so as not to contaminate the sacred pool. I have only had one party actually get to this point. They are instructed to place their belongings in the chest against the wall, place the key around their neck, and proceed to the next room where they will bathe and be given the ceremonial robes. The acolyte is of course the Merchant of Kwan Lun, a doppelganger or illusionist (depending on the level of the party). The sacred pool is ordinary water containing a couple of water weards.

As I previously stated, I have only had one party make it to this point. The adventure is not overly deadly, but it is rather humiliating at times. But this party, having overcome a myriad of traps, robbing goblins, and a few creatures that actually wanted to eat them, reached the inner chamber and were told to put their armor and weapons in a chest and take the key with them. And they did it. One of them did manage to sneak an empty vial in with him. I didn’t ask where he was keeping it.

They were led in to the room with the sacred pool. I am fully prepared for them to put up a valiant fight, in spite of their lack of weapons, spell components, or delicate

unmentionables. The Merchant is in the next room getting the spare key to the chests so he can grab their gear and appraise it. The guy with the vial shoves it under the surface to fill it with water. The moment of truth arrives. The snakelike water creatures begin to rise from the pool.

And they run.

The party flees out a door into the woods, one of them clutching the vial. They run through the wilderness and straight into the center of town, as naked as the day they were born. Needless to say, the customers and merchants of the Bazaar find this highly amusing. The party, however, now has to come to grips with the fact that the Merchant of Kwan Lun is not there. His tent, his goods, all gone like he was never there. Eventually someone will explain that the Merchant packed his shop mere moments after the party left. And in the end, having made their way through the adventure, they are left with nothing but a vial of water.