

BETRAYAL IN SHANGHAI



HOWARD TURK



Shanghai, International Settlement, 1925. At a Chinese opera, Jake Greenberg, an American expatriate sits in a choice private box. Suddenly the door opens, gun fire booms out, and two people with him are dead. But the police cannot go beyond its borders to find the killer. Jake steps into that breach. The search for the killer leads to a half-crazy Chinese warlord, a glamorous film star, and a yet-to-be famous Communist leader, Chou En-lai.

Betrayal in Shanghai

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Howard Turk

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First Edition

Dedication

As always, for Karen, my most special person

ONE

Shanghai, the International Settlement, 30 May 1925.

They were everywhere. On the sidewalk and in the street, pushing between the cars, blocking all traffic around the cobblestone plaza called Louza Square. Nothing had moved for ten minutes and nothing was likely to, but he kept the Buick's engine running. Just in case. Some of the strikers glanced at them without expression as they hurried by, others shook their fists and swore, their faces dark with hatred. Jake Greenberg forced himself to breathe normally and appear at ease, but the steering wheel was slick with sweat under his hands. He had been caught in a riot last year at Nanking, and all the elements were here again: too many strikers, not enough police, and far too much anger. In Nanking the mob had swept into the foreign district like a forest fire out of control, burning and destroying, killing fifteen Westerners and countless Chinese. There would have been one more dead round-eye if a Chinese shop owner had not taken him in. He had been alone that time. This time, escape would not be so simple.

Except for a space in front of the police station, the drab square was filled to overflowing with workers. To his right, Jake could see a single line of police facing them. What were the strikers doing here? They were supposed to be gathering at the Municipal Building in the center of town. There was nothing for them at Louza: no strikers were in jail here, there were no council members to hear their protests. Just a police station. Something was very wrong.

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The afternoon sun was heating up the humid air inside the car. Jake rolled down the window. Claire Turner, in the passenger seat, did the same. She shot him a quick look but said nothing. Claire knew. Her niece, Jane, visiting Shanghai from America, was in the back seat. No point in scaring her, the older adults agreed silently. Maybe nothing will happen.

In the middle of the square, a young man wearing the black uniform of a university student got up on a box and began yelling slogans at the crowd.

"Why are they so angry?? Jane asked.

"Strikers," Claire said. "Three of them were shot to death at a silk factory two days ago. Some people say they attacked the guards, but others claim it was the other way around--the guards shot them without provocation. No one knows for sure, but now almost all the textile workers are on strike, along with some of the students."

"This must be what I heard about this morning. One of our tour guides, the younger one, said something about it, and he acted very angry. But the other one, the older one, whispered something in Chinese and then they both refused to answer our questions about it." Jane had moved forward, leaning her forearms on the front seat's back and resting her chin on her clasped hands. "What's he saying?"

"He wants justice for the workers and higher pay, and he wants the Communists to run the country," Jake said as he watched the strikers, trying to assess their mood. He left out the part where the university boy had urged the crowd to throw all foreigners into the sea, starting today.

"There's always a lot of stuff about the Communists in the papers back home, but nobody takes it seriously."

"It'll be a while before Shaker Heights gets worried about them." Claire turned to smile at Jane, then watched the crowd.

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"Dad told me you'd say something like that. You're not a Communist, are you?"

Claire laughed. "No, not at all, but things are very different here. Sort of like our big cities back home, except more dangerous."

"You're doing it again," Jane said.

"What?"

"Acting like a mother hen. I'm twenty-two and a college graduate. When you were my age you were working for a newspaper in Kenya."

Claire smiled again and put up her hands. "You're right."

Jake studied the crowd and the police line. What to do if it blew? Try for the police line? No. There were not enough cops out there to hold back this crowd.

The police line. Suddenly Jake realized there were no Chinese cops here, only Westerners and Indians, Sikhs from northern India in green turbans. Didn't the police trust the Chinese cops to handle the strikers? He glanced at the shops in the little streets off the other side of the road, gauging the distance. They could make a run for it if they had time, but would a shopkeeper let them in? The guy who'd saved his skin in Nanking had been scared to death. That was an iffy plan at best. Merchants were already scurrying into their shops and locking their doors. No, better to stay in the car. If the workers turned into a mob, they'd be defenseless in the street.

The workers were on strike for good reasons. Shanghai was booming, prospering because of cheap labor, and the workers certainly deserved more. As much as Jake loved the city, he knew what a hard place it was for the poor, white or Chinese.

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In the sea of demonstrators, the young man on the box was losing his audience. Some strikers were drifting away, others were heckling him, calling him a big-word boy.

"Look," Jake said.

Three or four shabbily dressed young men had rushed out of the crowd and now pushed the young Communist off his box. An old man wearing the cheap blue pants and blouse of a worker stepped up in his place and began to speak to the crowd, quietly at first, then with increasing passion and force.

He was good, and he was drawing the strikers to him. "You may be late for the tea dance," Jake said to Jane. "This could go on for a while."

"It doesn't matter. It's just a bunch from the tour group getting together. Anyway," she added, "an engaged young lady is not supposed to be dancing with other young men. As long as we make it to the theater later, I'll be happy."

"It--" Claire had started to speak, but Jake touched her arm.

"Throw the foreigners out of China," Jake translated silently from the speaker's Shanghai dialect. "They are the cause of all your problems. China's problems."

The old man pointed at the police, and Jake took Claire's hand. "The old man just said follow me."

A roar of approval exploded from the crowd as they pushed toward the police line. Over the din, Jake could barely hear the shout, "Draw your weapons." He reached across Claire and pushed down the door lock. "Jane, roll up your window and lock your door."

Claire's eyes were full of fear. "It's happening."

"Maybe not." He heard Jane gasp.

The crowd surged close to the police, screaming at them.

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"Aim your weapons," a red-faced police sergeant bellowed.

The crowd backed away and the shouting lost its bite.

Jake felt hope rise, then plummet. Someone began shouting a slogan. The crowd slowed its retreat.

"What's he saying?? Claire asked.

"Kill the police," Jake said quietly.

The strikers picked up the chant and began rolling back toward the line of khaki uniforms, shaking their fists and shouting louder than before. As they got close to the police, someone threw a stone. Jake thought it was one of the scruffy men who had pushed the university boy aside, although he couldn't be sure. He could feel the hatred of the crowd. More stones followed, flying around the police. A Sikh policeman fell back holding his head, blood gushing down his face from under his turban. The crowd closed in.

Suddenly the sergeant leveled his revolver and fired point blank into the crowd. His men followed with a ragged volley. Gunfire mixed with screams as the strikers scattered wildly, falling over each other in their desperate scramble to get away.

"Get down, Jane," Claire shouted.

Jake reached over and pulled his Colt .45 from the glove compartment. As he worked the slide to chamber a round, the panicked strikers were on them. The car was pummeled by bodies fighting to get around the Buick, which rocked sharply side to side, like a ship on an angry sea. There were more shots, and then the strikers were past, streams of humanity running in all directions away from the square.

Jake took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. He felt as if he had just managed to lift a weight from his chest. "Damn fools! Why didn't the police pull back and call for help? They

didn't have to do it that way. A little talk might have cooled them down."

"Do you really think so?? Claire's face was chalk white.

He paused and shook his head. "No, maybe not. Maybe it was too late for that."

Jane sat at the window wide-eyed, one hand covering her mouth as she watched the police check the bodies that lay in the square while the wounded wandered aimlessly, dazed with shock. Her face too had lost its color.

"You okay?" Jake asked.

"Those poor people."

"Life is so cheap in China," Claire said. "It makes me sick sometimes."

Jake thumbed on the .45's safety and returned it to the glove compartment, relieved that he hadn't had to use it. If pushed, he knew he would have. He had done it before.

With the strikers out of the way, traffic started to inch forward. First the horde of rickshaw pullers scrambled to find openings, then slowly the cars and trucks began to move, alongside two-wheeled carts pulled by nearly naked coolies. The whole mass crept along Amoy Road. Merchants who had pulled in their goods from the sidewalk when the demonstration started now cautiously opened their doors. A few stood on the sidewalk and watched the police and strikers, but most ignored them, busy getting their merchandise ready for sale.

"Need to go to work?? Jake asked Claire.

She nodded. "I have to get this story in for the evening edition."

He turned the Buick east onto South Soochow Road, along the muddy creek of the same name, and accelerated toward the Bund, Shanghai's wide riverside boulevard in the heart of the city.

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"Jake," Jane said, "I don't feel much like a tea dance now."

"Would you like to go back to Claire's?"

"That would be good," Jane said.

"You can relax a bit and we'll meet you at the theater, say at eight."

"Do you really think they'll have the opera after what happened today?"

"I'm sure they will," Claire said.

"Not much stops the party in Shanghai," said Jake. "If those were foreigners getting shot, it would be different. Poor Chinese don't count for much, I'm afraid. Not even to the Chinese." He shrugged. "That's the way it is here."

Opposite a part of the creek called the Mud Flats was the Mae Lee Market, one of the biggest in the city. Traffic slowed on Soochow Road and Jake moved the Buick forward at walking speed. "When you're ready," he went on, "go to the Medhurst Hotel and take a taxi. The doorman there makes sure all the taxi drivers are safe."

"I'll see you there at eight. And I will be careful," Jane said quietly. "Jake," she added with a pale little smile, "you're getting to be as bad as Aunt Claire."

The incredibly tiny side streets that made up the market were crowded with Chinese shoppers looking over butchered hogs and chickens hanging outdoors on hooks, live fish and eels in large tanks, vegetable stalls, and uncounted merchants of every product new or used. Knife sharpeners, doctors, dentists, barbers, letter writers, and entertainers worked the streets. Everyone was hawking their wares. It was a daily carnival, an overload of noise and color where enticing odors from food-vendor carts did battle with those of meat left too long in the sun.

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Over the market to the east, Jake could see dark clouds building to a massive gray-black thunderhead out over the China Sea. Ordinarily he did not believe much in omens, but today he looked at the storm clouds and said to himself, *Big, big trouble coming*. Later he would think he had been right about that, but so wrong about the direction it was coming from.

Not a job for a lady, her mother had cautioned when she'd taken her first reporting job. That thought often ran through Claire's mind when she stepped into "the pit," the room where the reporters for the *Shanghai Daily* put out two editions a day. Of course, her mother hadn't said that exactly; Claire had translated it in her mind. What Mother had said was that it was not suitable.

Claire was tall and slender with intelligent blue-gray eyes set wide in an oval face. She knew her mother longed to tell friends that her beautiful daughter was married to a lawyer, doctor, or banker, happily homemaking and having her grandchildren. That was the only occupation Mother considered suitable. Claire smiled grimly. Not much she had done with her life pleased her mother, and Mother didn't even know the worst of it. To be single at age thirty was bad enough, but to be living in China and working with low-class newspaper men was far more than Mother could understand. One of these days, Claire thought, she would break the news about Jake. For the moment she was pleased to have the Pacific between them, especially since her father had died. He had been her only support in the family and she missed him.

The pit was a big rectangular room with glass offices around the perimeter. There was a field of desks in the middle and a hazy cloud of cigarette smoke overhead. To the outsider, the room looked seamless, row after row of cluttered desks. To

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Claire and the other reporters, there were clear divisions, fiefdoms and borders that delineated their work.

Claire waved over her editor and sat down at her desk in National, which handled the city and China news. The *Daily* was the largest English-language newspaper in the city, and, next to the *South China Post*, the largest on the China coast. Claire was one of four female reporters at the *Daily*, the only one who wrote hard news. She had tried to tell her mother how rare that was, how she had made a worthwhile career for herself, but she had never been able to get through to her and had stopped trying a long time ago.

It was late in the day for the evening edition; many of the reporters had already turned in their copy and left.

"You aren't on today, Turner." Huxberry, her editor, was smoking his usual unbelievably cheap and smelly cigar.

"I was at Louza." She rolled a sheet into her Royal typewriter. "Got any other eyewitnesses?"

"Hell no! Nothing but police pool. Gimme something fast. I'll hold the run."

"What do the police guys say?"

"I'll get you the dope. Write." He headed back toward his office trailing smoke.

It took her half an hour of furious typing to get the story to her satisfaction. Now comes the battle, she thought. She hurried over to Huxberry's office and handed him her copy.

Almost immediately he started shaking his head and reaching for his blue pencil.

"Read the story first!"

"Too much Chinese," he mumbled, but he kept his pencil off the copy. When he was finished, he said, "No. No. No. I just want the facts . . . strikers, cops, bang, bang. None of your why and softy stuff. Our readers don't care why."

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"Damn it, Huxberry, they should know why the strikers were out there. Just a little of what's going on. We give more space to sports and afternoon teas than we do to the Chinese. This is China!"

"They don't care. I don't care."

"They don't know and they should care," Claire retorted. "And you of all people should care."

"Management won't buy it, Claire. They'll kill the story and use the pool reporters."

"Try!"

In the end they compromised, as they usually did. She got some background into her story, about as much as she had expected. She knew Huxberry would push for it at the senior level, probably using her arguments. She liked Huxberry. He was a solid, old-time newspaper man, and they worked well together. But she was prickly with him. Not as prickly as she had once been, but she took no nonsense. Nor did he, and that was the way it had to be. It had taken Claire a long time to work up from society reporting to a byline, and she expected--and got--respect for her views. She had never relied on being feminine and trying to make nice, which did not work with newspaper guys anyway. That part of it Mother had exactly right.

TWO

In a city notorious for its oppressive summer weather, it turned out to be an unusually pleasant night. At dusk a cool wind had blown in from the China Sea, chasing off the humidity, snapping flags to attention, and whirling through the oaks in Garden Park.

The refreshing breeze barely registered on Jake. Weather was just weather; he tried to ignore it as much as possible. Jake was a burly man, thick in the chest and shoulders. His hair was dark, dense, and cut short. His eyes were an intense walnut brown set in a well-proportioned face, unmarked except for squint lines and a scar over his left eye, a souvenir of a teenage boxing career. He sat in the back of a rickshaw with his arm around Claire, monitoring the passing traffic and feeling not so much uneasy as watchful. He had a natural wariness that came with living in the most wide-open city on the China coast.

Since the killings at Louza that afternoon, a palpable tension had been growing in Shanghai. Jake and everyone else in the city felt it, except of course the tourists, who flocked mindlessly off the cruise ships. To them Shanghai was just a carefree open bazaar of entertainment.

The tourists didn't know about the workers who drifted into the International Settlement from the Chinese city at night, preying on foreigners like hungry wolves. Sometimes their motive was robbery, but often it was only to terrorize. None of the widely read English newspapers carried the stories. Management refused to print them. Big business, which ran the Settlement, wanted nothing to scare off investors or tourists. But the locals knew what was going on, and Claire knew in gory detail. She had interviewed many of the victims.

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Jake and Claire had jammed themselves into one rickshaw. They had been lovers for two years, a recognized couple in the city. In better times they would have taken separate rickshaws, but tonight Jake was not about to have Claire ride alone, even with a trusted rickshaw puller. Two in a rickshaw, especially two foreigners, was a load, but it was safer that way, and they knew and trusted the rickshaw man. Li was a friend--a skinny, very independent man whom Jake had known for years, long before he had met Claire.

Claire cuddled against his shoulder, eyes closed, enjoying the breeze as Li pulled them along with silky smoothness on new rubber tires and freshly greased springs.

Jake knew she had fought a battle over the story. Finally he asked, "How bad was it?"

She laughed and opened her eyes. "The usual hassle. But I bitched enough and Hux got it through. I hate that part of the job."

"How many were killed at Louza?"

"The police reports were pretty garbled, but I think it was seven killed and nineteen hurt. Those are the numbers I used, but they may change by tomorrow morning."

"It could've been a lot worse. Some of the cops must've fired over their heads. There was a lot more shooting than that, and even Settlement cops couldn't miss at that range."

At Canton Road Li turned right, pulling the rickshaw at a relaxed lope along the uncrowded street until he reached Hoo Peh Road, where a slight rise made him lean into his traces.

Claire turned to Jake looking ill at ease. "Is this too hard for Li?"

"Old Man," Jake said in a raised voice, "tell Claire we're not too heavy."

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"All okay. Big Nose Boss pay triple for two. New rickshaw easy," he said.

Claire smiled, but Jake knew she never really felt relaxed being pulled along by another person.

"Tell me about Yang," she said. "Is he an old friend?"

Jake thought about that for a moment as they neared four surly looking Chinese men--three in their twenties and the other about forty--standing on the dark sidewalk. Not good. He watched them carefully as their eyes met in a heavy, charged silence. The four turned away, and then they were past them. Under his arm he felt Claire's shoulders relax. Ahead were the bright lights of Upper Canton Road, an open-air restaurant in the evening, lined wheel-to-wheel with food-vendor carts and Chinese crowds overflowing the sidewalk.

"Yang was never what I'd call a friend," Jake said. "He was a business partner when I was running guns up the Yangtze. More like a trench buddy--a good man to have beside you in a fight. Except for the warlords not many people liked him. And for good reason. But he was always straight with me." As they passed the food-vendor carts, he breathed in the pungent scent of soy, sizzling meat, and fresh-cooked Jasmine rice. To him, this was the smell of Asia. He loved it.

"Probably afraid you'd come after him."

"Old Yang wasn't afraid of much. Not even an oversized foreign devil. That's what was so surprising when he called this afternoon. He sounded worried and said he needed to talk to me right away. More than that he wouldn't say over the phone. We'll talk at the theater. Besides, it's a chance for you and Jane to see a Chinese opera. It's about time you saw one."

"I'm looking forward to it, but it's more culture shock for Jane. Cleveland will never be the same for her."

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"Is she going to take after her aunt and get the travel bug?? To Jake, the pretty, vivacious twenty-two-year-old, only ten years younger than he was, seemed far younger than her years and innocent beyond belief. She made him feel creaky, ancient, cynical, and crusty. Well, maybe he was.

"No," Claire said slowly, drawing it out. "I don't think she'll follow in my footsteps, but who knows. She's on her own for the first time in her life and loving it. It's her tiny bit of complete freedom between college and marriage. And believe me, when Jane gets back her mother is going to put the pressure on to set a date for her wedding."

"And the good life in Cleveland with the banker."

"The golden cocoon is more like it, but that's in the future. Tonight should be fun and interesting. A box seat at a Chinese opera and a chance to meet the infamous Yang."

They rode in silence for several minutes.

"You know," Jake said, "the reason he got on so well with the warlords was that he was just like them. It was definitely not healthy to get between those guys and what they wanted. Yang was tough and he knew how the warlords played the game. Without him I'd have been dead a half dozen times. I thought I was a pretty hard guy, but I was a babe in the woods."

"How did you two get together?"

"You mean why did he put up with a dumb round-eye?"

She smiled.

He shrugged. "Simple. I knew guns, from the war. Light stuff, rifles and machine guns, what the warlords were buying then. And I knew some people who were selling at a good price. Yang had the contacts with the warlords."

Once, Yang had to promise to marry a river pirate's daughter to get them through his territory. How had they gotten out of that one? But Claire interrupted his thoughts.

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"I hate it when you smile to yourself."

He chuckled. "Just thinking about the old days."

"Do you think he wants to go back into gun running?"

"I can't believe that. He's legit now. If it's the gun business again, it's going to be a short conversation."

"I asked around the office. Everyone at the *Daily* has a story about him. He's quite the party boy, I heard, and he likes the ladies and makes no attempt to be coy about it. There are all sorts of stories in the paper. Seen at this opening with beauty X or showgirl Y. His wife must be one understanding lady."

"I liked her. Old-style lady with bound feet, but she was okay . . . smart and tough. He was an up-and-comer, but she was class." He paused, wondering how they were getting along these days. "They were pretty close in the gun-running days. Could be that's all changed now that he's rich."

Li turned left onto tiny Pak Hoi Road, then right onto Avenue Edward VII, the boundary street between the International Settlement and the French Concession, the twin enclaves that made up foreign-controlled Shanghai. Jake scanned the sidewalks. Good. No stray workers hanging around. The Edward VII was as empty as he had ever seen it.

"Seems like strike worries have spilled over into Frenchtown," Claire said. "Not a stroller in sight."

Li turned right into Yunnan Road and worked through the heavy traffic to the curb in front of the theater.

"Thank you, Elder of the Rickshaw Guild," Jake said in Shanghai dialect. "No need to wait. We'll get a taxi back."

Li bowed just enough to acknowledge the statement, then picked up the traces of his rickshaw. "Rich sharks," he said quietly to Jake, moving his head toward the opulently dressed Chinese streaming into the theater. "Living off the little fish."

"Always," Jake said.

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"Watch pocketbook inside," Li added. "You round-eyes not very bright." He laughed and trotted off at a slow pace past his fellow rickshaw men, who noted that no money was paid him and that Li did not join the others waiting to scramble for another fare.

"He must have an arrangement with the foreigner," Jake heard one of them say. Another nodded. "Fortune has smiled on him."

"Ready?? Jake said to Claire.

"Let's go." She took his arm.

He smiled at her. She looked stunning. Her shining black hair, cut short, accented her blue-gray eyes, which matched her silk crepe dress. Only four inches shorter than his six-two, Claire had a slim figure that wore clothes well.

The Strand Theater was an ornate building of brown and gray brick that had a touch of India in the elegant curves of its upper-floor widows. Across the marquee, its name was spelled out in neon, in Chinese, Japanese, and English. In a city that worked and played equally hard, entertainment was big business and it was making Jake and his partner, Kuan, rich. Their casino, the Wheel House, was where the wealthy of the city gambled.

As they walked into the outer lobby, he was struck by the heat, the noise, and the cigarette smoke. It seemed to rush at him all at once, and it sounded like everyone in the room was talking at the same time. He saw Jane as soon as they stepped inside: she was the only Western woman in the lobby. Like Claire, Jane was tall and slender. Her blond hair was like a beacon in the Chinese crowd.

They waved to her, then plunged into the crush and began edging toward her. The lobby was packed with the top level of Chinese society. There was a mixture of withered little men in heavy brocade gowns, old women swaying on tiny bound

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feet, younger men in top hat and tails, and stylish women wearing form-fitting cheongsams, the famous side-slit dress that had originated in Shanghai. There were even a few short-skirted Chinese flappers smoking cigarettes in long holders.

Finally they arrived at Jane's side. "When the Chinese come out, they really come out," Jake said.

"They sure do," Jane answered with a laugh. "Except for those men," she added, pointing to a dozen beefy Chinese men in dark business suits standing along the side of the lobby.

Jake had taken no notice of them, but they were as common a sight in the city as was the Whangpoo River. "They're private guards. All the wealthy folks have them."

"Just like back home," Jane said, smiling at him.

"Sure it is." The gangsters in the States were amateurs, Jake thought, compared with the big Chinese mobs in Shanghai.

He turned to Claire. "Well, let's see what our boy has in mind."



Shanghai, International Settlement, 1925. At a Chinese opera, Jake Greenberg, an American expatriate sits in a choice private box. Suddenly the door opens, gun fire booms out, and two people with him are dead. But the police cannot go beyond its borders to find the killer. Jake steps into that breach. The search for the killer leads to a half-crazy Chinese warlord, a glamorous film star, and a yet-to-be famous Communist leader, Chou En-lai.

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