

Shanghai, 1923. Jake Greenberg, an American expatriate, is nearly gunned down on the steps of his fashionable casino. Inches away, a powerful warlord is killed. The police show little interest. Looking into the murder, Jake meets Claire Turner, a savvy and attractive newspaper reporter. They agree to work together. But soon others are killed, including a close friend, and both Jake and Claire are in grave danger as they home in on the killer.

The Second Enemy

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THE SECOND ENEMY

HOWARD
TURK

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One

Shanghai, International Settlement, May 1923.

The telephone rang at five-forty. Jake Greenberg checked his watch. Twenty minutes to go. It rang a second time before he picked it up. "Greenberg here."

"We are on time," the voice said. "Is everything safe?"

"Okay here."

"Good," the voice said and hung up.

Jake pushed his chair back away from his desk, straightened his tie, and left the office. Walking slowly down the stairs to the first floor, his eyes swept from left to right--the bar, the foyer, the entrance to the gaming room--all seemed normal. There were only two customers at the bar, both he knew. He crossed the white marble foyer and looked over the players. Nothing unusual about the early evening mix of well-dressed Westerners and Orientals clustered around the green baize roulette tables or playing twenty-one. Many of them were regulars. He watched for a few minutes, standing away from the crowd close to the Chinese dragon mural that ran the length of the wall. Then he wandered back to the foyer and paused at the bottom of the staircase. What could go wrong? Jake thought. Plenty, plenty, he said to himself in Chinese. But all seemed right so far. He looked around one last time and went up the stairs to wait.

In the book-lined office on the second floor ceiling fans whirled, moving the humid air without cooling it. Jake loosened his tie and watched the sun settling low over China for a moment, then he sat down at his desk and began to deal cards for solitaire. He didn't feel comfortable being a go-between. It was a role he accepted

Howard Turk

reluctantly, but he wanted to help. If the meeting worked, it could change everything in China.

Jake heard a car pull into the casino's tiny back yard, its tires crunching over the gravel. Right on time. He threw down his cards and went to the window. While he slid his tie back into place, Jake watched the old man get slowly out of his car. So far, so good. He glanced at the alley behind the casino. No one lurking there. He looked down once more at the old man and headed for the hallway door.

* * *

Sun Yat-sen climbed the narrow back steps without making any noise, taking each step carefully. His stocky bodyguard stood close behind him ready to help if Sun faltered. When he reached the second floor landing, he was breathing hard and sweating heavily. Despite the muggy weather, both Sun and his bodyguard, Wu-chi, wore heavy black suits with vests and old-fashioned stiff collars.

"Is he here?" Sun asked as he came forward to shake Jake's hand. Greenberg, two inches over six feet tall and thick in the chest and shoulders, towered over him.

"Not yet." Sun's hand felt spongy to Jake, as if it had no bones to support it. Far different than Wu-chi, Sun's bodyguard, whose hand seemed cobbled together with rough plates.

Jake led Sun across the hall to a small room where the big money poker games were played. The room had bright red wallpaper, the Chinese color for good luck. In the middle of the room were a round mahogany table and five plush leather chairs.

Wu-chi followed Jake and Sun into the room, closing the door silently behind them.

The Second Enemy

"How are you feeling?" Jake asked Sun.

"Well enough," the old man said, sinking into one of the chairs.

It saddened Jake to see the Sun's health decline. He knew that his stomach hurt all the time now and doctors had been unable to help. With his small pale face and thin turned-down black mustache, he looked depressed and fragile.

Sun's bodyguard and advisor, Wu-chi, had also aged. His classic Mongol face--prominent cheek bones, slashes for eyes, and yellow-brown skin--seemed to have more wrinkles every time Jake saw him. Shielding Sun Yat-sen from his enemies as well as protecting him from his own missteps was a hard job even in the best of times. In the last few years, it had become almost impossible.

"Was Canton bad?" Jake asked.

"Terrible," the old man said. "I had hoped that we could restart the movement down there. But the Southern Warlords turned against me. Again."

"We barely escaped with our lives," Wu-chi added. "They burned his house down. We had to throw on peasant clothes and run like fools through the alleys. It was hard for him."

"Well, maybe this meeting will help," Jake said. He marveled at the tenacity of the man. Sun had led the revolution that brought down the Manchu dynasty in 1911. But instead of uniting the country, the revolution had fragmented China into warlord-controlled territories and endless little wars. It was Sun's life's work, his dream, to end the bloodshed and create a strong, united China. To Jake, Sun was a great man with a big heart, but his time was running out. His body was failing him.

Howard Turk

"Thank you for arranging this," the old man said.

"General Xi came to me," Jake said. "I did very little. If you can get the warlords up north to work together maybe we can prevent another slaughter like Ning-feng."

"Yes, yes," Sun said, looking off across the room as if he was replaying it in his mind. "You saw it, didn't you?"

"Only the result," Jake said. "I was on the train going to Peking. The soldiers had moved on by the time my train arrived at the village. I hadn't seen such mindless killing since the civil war in Russia."

The old man nodded.

They fell silent for a minute or two. Sun seemed to be studying the grain of the table, running his hand over its smooth surface. "Do you trust him?" Sun asked suddenly.

Jake paused. "I like him. Sometimes he's a pompous ass. A lot of it is show. In private he has a sense of humor. Trust him? It depends. I've trusted him to pay his gambling debts. He has, without problems. In larger matters, I don't know. He didn't gain control of southern Hopeh Province with sweetness and light. He told me deceit was his silver bullet. He wasn't joking. Now he claims to represent a group of Northern Warlords who want to support you. Do I trust him at that level?" Jake shook his head. "If I were you, I'd be very cautious."

"What do those people want?" Wu-chi asked.

"He never mentioned terms with me and I didn't ask," Jake answered. "That's your department."

Sun sighed. "I have nothing to offer except my name."

The Second Enemy

"Don't under value it," Jake said. Although counted out by many Chinese and Westerners as a man whose time had passed, Sun was, nevertheless, revered throughout the country as China's greatest patriot.

"Maybe they are not as greedy and power-hungry as the southerners," Sun said.

Don't be so sure, Jake thought.

Just after 6:30, Jake heard the rumble of a heavy car gearing down out front. He moved the shade to look down Woosung Road toward where it joined Bubbling Well Road. "Here comes the General," Jake said, hoping his relief did not show.

"He's late," Sun said.

"The General once told me unreliability kept him alive."

Jake watched the black Buick touring car glide up Woosung Road following a car bristling with armed soldiers. Two soldiers rode on each running board, hanging on with one hand and brandishing a pistol with the other. Jake looked up and down the street. Just the usual flow of rickshaws and cars. Yet he couldn't shake the feeling that all was not right.

As the Buick eased to the curb in front of the casino, the bodyguards jumped off the running boards and stood with their backs to the car. Their leader, a six foot, broad-shouldered northerner named Lao-tang, looked over the street traffic and the small crowd of curious Chinese that had gathered. He waved his hand. The General stepped out of the car, followed by a slim, ash-blond beauty. They sauntered up the steps to the wide front door.

The Wheel House Casino, once the home of a British merchant, was a square two-story red brick building at 23 Woosung

Howard Turk

Road. The casino was one of the few spots in Shanghai where Chinese and foreigners socialized freely. Most Westerners came after dinner parties or dances and before they went on to the smoky dives and jazz clubs that stayed open until the small hours of the morning. The Chinese, on the other hand, were the serious gamblers, coming early and staying all night.

"I'll bring up the General as soon as I can," Jake said as he slipped on his dark blue suit coat tailored to cover his shoulder holster. "Lock the door behind me."

When Jake came downstairs the General and his lady were admiring the tear-shaped crystal chandelier that lighted the foyer. "Welcome back to the Wheel, General," Jake said. They shook hands. The General wore a white parade uniform with gold epaulets; his companion filled out a clinging black silk gown that showed every curve. "What will it be tonight, General, roulette or poker? We have a high stakes game upstairs."

"Perhaps poker, but a little later. First I want to introduce my lady to the joys of an honest roulette wheel. It is an honest wheel, isn't it, Jake?" Xi puffed himself up, playing to the half dozen people in the foyer. Then he turned and winked at Jake.

Give him an audience and the little man did his act. "Shall we?" Jake escorted them to roulette table number one. The conversation faded as the crowd around the roulette tables turned to watch General Xi and his companion. Jake nodded to his partner, Kuan, who was standing with Hsiang, the floor boss of the gaming room. Hsiang slipped a stack of gold-colored chips into the woman's hand while a maid took her black silk stole.

Unlike most of General's ladies, this one looked bored, Jake thought as he watched her play under Xi's tutelage. She was beautiful. Although that was not unusual--the General changed women often and they were all were beautiful--most were vivacious and friendly.

The Second Enemy

This one was a cold fish. The General, however, laughed and pointed out which numbers to play, seemingly having a fine time. Maybe she had more private talents that made up for her lack of personality.

Ten minutes went by. "Time to go, General," Jake whispered.

"Yes, yes, Jake," he said. "Play well, my dear," he said to his lady, running a possessive hand down her back. "I would like a few hands of poker with the big boys."

Jake whispered to the General as they left the gaming room. "My partner will be at the bottom of the steps. Sun's bodyguard and I will be across the hall in my office. There won't be any one else up here. Sun's in the poker room. He came in the back way and he'll leave that way."

General Xi smiled up at Jake. "One would think you have done this kind of work before."

"I was a boy scout back in America."

Xi looked puzzled for a moment, then grinned. "A joke, yes?"

Jake smiled at him. "A big joke."

Kuan waited at the top of the stairs. He was a trim, handsome young Chinese of medium height dressed in a pearl-gray pin-striped suit, blue-and-red club tie and a white shirt.

"You've met my partner, General?" Jake asked.

Kuan and the General shook hands. "Always a pleasure, General," Kuan said. "I hope you can stay and play afterwards."

Jake smiled to himself. Kuan loved to see Xi at the Wheel. The General was a poor gambler but always paid his bills with good

Howard Turk

grace. He was what Kuan called an annuity--a regular who could be depended on to play any game badly.

"He is much too Western to be a real Chinese," the General muttered sourly, watching Kuan go down the stairs.

"Under all that American education, he's still pure Chinese."

Xi looked skeptical. "Where in America?"

"New York. Columbia University. Business degree, plus a little post-graduate work." Jake didn't mention that Kuan's postgraduate work was with his uncle's gang in Chinatown. Jake knocked twice.

The key turned in the lock and Wu-chi opened the heavy wood door. Like an old actor getting his cue, Sun Yat-sen seemed to throw off his fatigue. He walked briskly across the room to shake Xi's hand. Jake made the introductions.

"It is a great honor to meet China's George Washington," Xi said.

"And for me to meet the famous Little Dragon of the North."

"I hope this will be useful to both of us," Xi said.

"But more important, for China, a united China, once again strong."

"Ah yes, for China."

"Wu-chi and I will be across the hall in my office," Jake interjected. "There's writing material in the desk if you need it and tea on the table in the corner."

The Second Enemy

Jake waited until he heard the click of the door lock before crossing the hall to his office. He hung his jacket over the back of his chair and began another game of solitaire on the Blackwood partners desk he shared with Kuan. The door was open, giving him a view of the stairs as well as the door to the meeting room.

Wu-chi paced the office, smoking steadily. At the end of the room he stopped. "You read these things?" he asked, studying the titles of the leather-bound English classics in a large oak bookcase.

Jake looked up. "It's the closest I'll get to a decent education. Borrow anything you want."

"Don't read English that good." Wu-chi shook his head and continued pacing, trailing smoke as he went.

* * *

There were five of Wu-chi's cigarette butts in the ash tray when Jake heard the key turn in the door across the hall.

"Too soon," Jake said, as he reached for his coat. Grimly, Wu-chi stubbed out number six.

General Xi was first out the door. "We meet again in a week, Jake. I'll need the time to convey Doctor Sun's terms to the others. Can we use your room?"

"Of course, General. Is that okay with you, Doctor?"

"Next week is agreeable," Sun said.

Neither man showed any expression. Two old negotiators playing the game, Jake thought.

Howard Turk

"Next week, same day, same time, same drill." Jake waited, both Sun and Xi nodded. "Doctor Sun, if you would stay here with Wu-chi, please. After you, General." Jake followed Xi down the stairs.

In the gaming room Xi's girlfriend, standing beside a stocky, middle-aged Oriental man, was in good spirits now, laughing at something the man said. Light from overhead shone on her blonde hair as she stretched across the table to place her bet, showing cleavage and pulling her gown tight against her well-formed bottom.

Xi watched her for a moment. "*Pao-shin!*" he spit out, pivoting toward the door. A thin young Chinese man wearing thick glasses, called Student by everyone at the Wheel, was waiting in the foyer with Xi's white military cap and cane. A tiny Chinese maid stood behind him holding his girlfriend's stole. "Get that bitch moving!" Xi snapped at Student. Turning to Jake he said, "Thank you for the arrangement. I don't think it will work with Sun. He's not practical."

"Give it time," Jake said. He wasn't going to take sides.

Xi sighed. "Time is a valuable thing, Jake. None of us has too much of it."

Jake walked Xi to the door. "Can you tell me who is in your group?"

"I'm sorry, no. We decided it would be best that our identities remain secret until negotiations are further along."

Not surprised, Jake said nothing.

"I can say," Xi whispered, "we all have powerful armies. Together, with the famous Sun Yat-sen as our...leader, we could

The Second Enemy

control the north." He paused for a moment. "We call ourselves the Northern Coalition."

At the door they shook hands. "See you next week," Jake said quietly. "Maybe it will go better."

Xi nodded and started down the steps to the street. His bodyguards, who were lounging around his Buick smoking homemade cigarettes, sprang to life. A small number of Chinese drivers, neatly dressed in black pants and fresh white shirts, had gathered in a group at the foot of the stairs to pass the time while waiting for their employers. A crowd of about a dozen curious Chinese was also standing on the sidewalk. One man, a heavy-set, bald Oriental, was waiting to take a picture. Aly, the Wheel's big, amiable Sikh doorman, threw the General a full military salute.

Smiling at the crowd, the General touched the brim of his cap. The crowd applauded, the photographer pressed forward, raising his camera.

Jake started to close the door.

Suddenly two pistol shots boomed like canons in quick succession. Aly spun around, clutching his left side. The General stiffened and stepped back as if a giant hand were pushing against his chest. He fought to keep his feet, waving his arms and trying to speak, but his legs gave way and he collapsed against the steps, grunting the air out of his lungs. He looked puzzled by the spreading red stain on the front of his white uniform.

Instinctively going into a crouch, Jake reached for his Colt. A third shot ricocheted off the brick just above Jake's head sending a burst of chips into the air. Xi's guards looked about wildly, trying to locate the source of the shots. Then Jake saw a wisp of gray smoke coming from the camera in the photographer's hands. For a heartbeat, the photographer's gaze met Jake's. The beefy Oriental lifted his

Howard Turk

camera to aim at him as Jake raised his gun. The photographer hesitated, then bolted through the crowd toward the unpaved alley along side of the Wheel.

"Kuan! Student!" Jake shouted, "Help Aly and don't let anyone in...no one!"

Jake raced down the steps, gun in hand. An instant later, a smoke bomb exploded with a distinctive, ear-splitting crack near General Xi's Buick, sending thick black smoke billowing up around the cars.

Bent over to avoid the rising cloud, Jake could see the photographer, still clutching his camera, turning into the alley. Jake put on more speed, trying to close the gap. The photographer's arms were pumping; his feet splashed through mud puddles, making good time over the packed dirt. As he was closing the gap, a small bantam rooster of a man stepped out of the shadows, waited till the photographer ran by, and rolled a second smoke bomb toward Jake. The bomb exploded seconds after it hit the ground. Jake snapped off a half-aimed shot and dodged to the side to avoid the worst of the acrid cloud. They're very good, he said to himself.

Just as Jake passed through the smoke and started running again, Lao-tang, Xi's chief bodyguard, burst out of the dark cloud and together they charged down the alley, stride for stride. Lao-tang fired his big Webley revolver wildly as they ran, taking chips off the brick wall lining the alley, but not a single bullet hit its mark.

The photographer and his back-up man turned the corner. When Jake and Lao-tang reached the end of the alley, Jake could only see a large black car working its way into traffic far up Bubbling Well Road.

He stood there, breathing hard, watching the black car until it was out of sight. "God damn it," he said more to himself than to Lao-

The Second Enemy

tang. "Did you recognize either of those guys?" He pushed the safety on and put his gun away.

Lao-tang shook his head.

"We need to get back," Jake said sharply. But he knew there was no hope for Xi. The little man had taken a hit square in the chest. Judging by the sound of the shots, the gunman had used a large-caliber gun. Jake had seen too many of those chest wounds in France to have any hope for him. Aly was the one who had a chance. He may have been hit in the side.

"You think Xi hurt bad?" Lao-tang asked.

"Very bad."

Lao-tang grunted, his hard flat face expressionless. He concentrated on reloading his revolver and slipping it into the big wooden holster hanging from his Sam Browne belt. Although Lao-tang had been Xi's head bodyguard since the General had been coming to the Wheel, Jake knew almost nothing about him. Attempts at conversation had been rebuffed by the big Northerner. Even the extroverted Aly could not draw him out.

Jake ran up the front steps. Kuan was holding a pile of white towels while a Western man dressed in a tuxedo was tending to Aly, who had his eyes squeezed shut and was breathing in short pain-laced gasps. "How is he?" Jake asked.

"The doctor here thinks he'll make it," Kuan said. "An ambulance is on the way."

"Horton's the name," the doctor said looking up from Aly. "Your man got lucky. Single shot. Bounced off his ribs and through his upper arm. Bloody, but it could have been a lot worse. Nothing

Howard Turk

vital hit. The tourniquet on his arm will hold till we get him to Shanghai General."

Horton stood up and eased his back. "Mr. Kuan, keep pressure on the ribs please." He turned to Jake. "He was bleeding pretty badly."

Jake bent down to Aly. "Hang on Aly. We'll get you to a hospital soon."

Aly opened his eyes, nodded, and tried to smile.

"Take your time getting well. Your job's here when you're okay. Understand?"

"Thank you, Boss," he whispered.

Jake knew that it was important to Aly. Shanghai was a hard city in many ways. Manpower was cheap, and few employers cared about their workers. Get hurt and you were out on the street.

"Any chance the General will make it, Doc?" Jake asked even though he knew the answer.

"You see action in the war?" Horton asked.

"Two years on the Western Front."

"Then you've seen that kind of wound before," Horton said.

Jake nodded. "Just hoping."

"Lung shot, massive damage to the upper chest. There isn't anything anyone can do for him except make him as comfortable as possible."

The Second Enemy

Jake went down to the sidewalk and pushed his way through the crowd of blank-faced soldiers and curious Chinese. Xi's white uniform jacket was crimson. His eyes were shut and his mouth open, weakly gasping for breath. A tiny stream of bright red blood had reached the curb and was spilling into the gutter. Jake bent over Xi, probing his wrist for a pulse. It was so weak it was almost nothing.

"Did he say anything?" Jake asked Lao-tang, who translated the question into Hopeh Province dialect. General Xi's troops didn't speak Shanghai dialect. They shook their heads.

The soldiers didn't care about Xi, Jake thought. He's only their latest paymaster. Later, maybe tomorrow, when they've drunk and whored their money away, they'll hire themselves out to someone else or take their guns into the interior and become bandits.

"I take him to house," Lao-tang said. "Better die at home." He ordered several of his men to lay their uniform jackets on the back seat of Xi's Buick. The soldiers reluctantly complied. "No need get blood in car," he said to Jake, shrugging his shoulders. "Car belong to me soon."

Jake watched four soldiers lift the General into the car as if he were a rag doll and dump him on the gray-green jackets. Lao-tang got in next to the driver. As the Buick started up he looked past Jake toward the casino's door. Jake followed his gaze. Just behind Aly, the General's girlfriend stood in the doorway, silk stole casually draped over one arm, watching the Buick drive away. When she noticed Jake looking at her she brushed back a loose lock of blonde hair and examined him with cold blue eyes. Then she turned and went back inside.

A few minutes later the ambulance from Shanghai General Hospital screeched to a stop, red and blue lights flashing. Jake had a few words with the ambulance doctor, making sure Aly would be

Howard Turk

admitted and get the best possible treatment. Indians, like Chinese, were rarely accepted as patients at the better hospitals.

Back in the Wheel, Jake ordered free drinks for the house and \$50 dollars' worth of chips for Doctor Horton. He called his floor boss, Hsiang. "Get some people out front and clean up the sidewalk," he whispered. Catching Student's eye he signaled him over. "Stand by the steps to the second floor. Look casual, but don't let anyone up until I tell you."

Kuan was waiting for Jake at the top of the stairs. "We better call the police."

"Phone up Central Police at the Municipal Council Building. That'll delay them for another fifteen minutes or so." Jake went over to Wu-chi, who was standing by the door of the poker room. "How's the old man doing?"

"Not good. This really hit him hard."

Sun was sitting at the poker table staring at the window, his mouth a tight, thin line.

"I have bad news, Sun Wen," Jake said. "I don't see how the General can survive. In France, men with such wounds as his almost always died. There is nothing that can be done."

"I thought we might have worked out an agreement."

"Did Xi say who else is in his group?" Jake asked. "He said they called themselves the Northern Coalition."

Sun shook his head. "Not a single hint, but I need to contact someone in that group quickly."

The Second Enemy

"I'll contact some friends who know the north. That would be a start."

"No one must know I am involved."

"I understand, but that may not always be possible."

Sun nodded. "Jake, I must know who killed Xi. It is very important."

"The police can do much more than I can. I'm no detective."

Sun glanced at Wu-chi for an instant, then turned back to Jake. "The police will not act. I know the police." He took in a deep, weary breath and let it out slowly. "This is secret. Two days ago, a man from the Russian government came to me. He offered me everything I need--money, modern weapons, and people to train an army. If this is their doing, I must know. Everything we have worked for...China's very future now depends on trusting them."

"Who knew you were coming here?"

Sun looked at Jake for a moment. "No one. Only Wu-chi and my wife."

Two

It was 10:00 when Jake closed the front door behind Officer Tong, a rumpled, slightly overweight, but very intelligent cop. Jake made a mental note of his name. There were not many bright guys among the International Settlement Police. He signaled Student to follow him up to the office. "Find Li, the rickshaw man," Jake said. "Tell him to be here in fifteen minutes. He's probably at the corner, on Bubbling Well Road."

He turned to Kuan. "Who was the target? Xi, Sun, or us?"

"If someone's trying to close us down, it's out of the blue. There's been no warning or threats. No sign of trouble. I'd vote for Xi or the deal they were trying to hatch."

Jake walked to the end of the room. "I sure as hell hope we aren't facing another round with the Green Gang." He stopped at the window and looked down at the yard and a tiny Japanese garden at the back of the building. "Ever hear of a bunch of warlords called the Northern Coalition?"

When Kuan said he had not, Jake told him about Xi's partners and the Russian's offer to Sun.

"If they're the really big guys up north," Kuan said, "it should be no problem. They'll send somebody else to contact Sun. But the Northern Coalition could be just hot air. Something Xi made up for leverage."

"What about the Russians?"

Kuan shook his head. "I don't know what to think about that angle. It's possible the Reds did it, but if they were offering Sun a bundle why not wait to see if he goes for their deal?"

The Second Enemy

Jake nodded. "That's good logic. Does it apply to politics? I'm going to Xi's house. Maybe I can find out something. Maybe even get Lao-tang to talk a little. For all we know this was a palace coup."

"But why on our front steps?"

"Hell, I don't know. There must have been a thousand easier places to do it. One thing is sure. If there's a chance to find out anything, it's now. By the time the police move, if they really work this case, it'll be too late." Jake paused. "You know, I'm going to miss that funny little bastard."

"I'll make some calls. See if the Greens are up to anything," Kuan said. He reached for the phone and stopped. "Whatever happened to Xi's girlfriend?"

"I was just about to ask you the same thing. The last I saw of her was in the doorway when Lao-tang drove off with Xi. Maybe Student or Hsiang saw her leave."

Student told Jake he had not seen her leave, but Hsiang, the gray-haired, unflappable gaming room boss, said he had. "She left when you went back upstairs."

"Did you see what she did? Walk away, hail a rickshaw?"

Hsiang shook his head. "I remember that she walked out the door. There were several people leaving at the same time."

"Who else left when she did?"

"A Western couple, older people, and the man she was standing with when General Xi came downstairs."

"Was the man Chinese?"

Howard Turk

"Japanese. Short, big shoulders, with hair cut like a military man."

"Right," Jake said as he recalled the scene at the roulette table. "Tough looking guy. About forty or fifty. Gray hair. Have you seen him before?"

"He's been once or twice a week during the last few months. Plays small. Roulette mostly. Never wins or loses much. His name is Yamamoto. I heard him once say he was in the export-import business. He's never been a big player so I haven't bothered with him. I gave him the standard thousand dollar limit, but he's never come close to losing that much."

"When Yamamoto comes in again, let me know. I want to talk to him."

* * *

Li was waiting for Jake at the curb outside the Wheel, squatting between the traces of his rickshaw and smoking a stained cigarette butt. He was whipcord-lean with skin browned by the sun. His long thin face was lined with deep squint mark that spread from the corner of his eyes like a river delta. Thirty years old, or so he claimed. Jake believed he lied about his age. He looked a lot older. Li was wearing his usual outfit--patched, faded gray shorts, cheap sandals, and a white shirt. It was a wonder that Li kept himself as clean as he did. Jake knew he slept under his rickshaw in an alley off Nanking Road, with others from the Rickshaw Guild. That was the only way he could be sure that his rented black deluxe would not be stolen.

"Have you eaten today?" Jake asked in Shanghai dialect. It was the Chinese version of hello.

The Second Enemy

Li held down the traces to let Jake board the rickshaw. "Good evening, Big Nose Boss. Yes, I have eaten. And not your rotten foreign food. Where we go?"

"General Xi's house in Frenchtown, Route Vallon."

"Much talk about *ch'iang-pi*, the execution."

"What are the people saying?"

"Warlord kill warlord. Always same." Grunting, Li leaned into his traces and started away from the curb. Soon his rhythm was established and they were padding along through pools of light from the street lamps to Li's chant of *He-ho, he-ho, he-ho*. At Bubbling Well Road, they turned left toward the Bund, Shanghai's wide boulevard along the Whangpoo River. After a short way Bubbling Well became Nanking Road, the Broadway of the International Settlement.

Lights from a thousand garish neon signs lit up the wide street. After ten, when the Sikh traffic police stopped work, the orderly flow of traffic turned chaotic. Tonight the hated two-wheel carts were the problem. Overloaded with huge bolts of cloth and heavy wicker baskets filled with merchandise for the stores along Nanking Road, they were hauled slowly by gangs of coolies. The line of carts had traffic backed up and angry drivers behind it, honking and shouting at the coolies to get out of the way. Jake leaned back and watched the show. It was pure Shanghai.

Li weaved in and out of the jumbled traffic, keeping up his pace. When they reached Fokien Road, a thin ribbon of a street used mainly by rickshaw pullers, he turned right and jogged along until he crossed Avenue Edward VII to tree-lined Avenue Joffre. They were now in the French Concession.

* * *

Howard Turk

General Xi's mansion was at 58 Route Vallon. Li pulled up to it, set the traces on the ground, and mopped himself off with a rag while he and Jake looked over the house. It was a large elegant building with a white-columned front set back from the road at the end of a curved drive. A high black wrought iron fence with pointed finials surrounded the property. Every window was ablaze with light. Soldiers hurried in and out of the house, loading up carts and trucks with rugs, lamps, and rosewood furniture. A chattering crowd of curious Chinese had gathered by the fence to watch.

"Xi's dead," Jake said, thinking he probably died before he got back to his house. "His soldiers are looting the house."

"So-so."

"Li, do you speak their dialect?"

"Yes, Boss, I come from same place as General Xi and his people, Hopeh Province."

"I need you to come into the house with me to talk to the soldiers. Will you do it?"

Li nodded. "When big man die, soldiers are problem, Boss. Often not paid for long time."

Jake led Li through the crowd. At the gate a pair of nervous peasant-boy soldiers dressed in dirty gray-green uniforms were on guard. They slipped their rifles off their shoulders and held them hip level pointing at Jake and Li as they approached the gate. The two boys watched Jake warily. A white foreigner, Jake knew, was a strange and powerful person to them.

Following Jake's instructions, Li told the soldiers that he was an important man who had been invited to meet with Lao-tang, General Xi's chief bodyguard. The soldiers looked doubtful until Jake

The Second Enemy

stepped forward and put a silver coin in the dirty hand of each soldier. Smiling happily, they waved Jake and Li up the driveway.

Up close, the looting was more organized and complete than it appeared from the street. Officers directed the soldiers to put the more valuable items in trucks; the remainder went into carts. Jake, who had been a guest at several of Xi's elaborate parties, could hardly recognize the mansion. At his core Xi was a conservative Chinese, but he liked to present himself as a man more modern and sophisticated than the average provincial warlord. The mansion was his stage. In the short time since the shooting, the house had become a shell. Anything that could be sold, from Xi's carefully selected Western furnishings to light fixtures and plumbing was being dragged out the door.

An officer told them they could find Lao-tang in the kitchen, and Jake and Li shouldered their way down the center hall past smelly, sweating, half-drunk soldiers toward the back of the house.

Lao-tang was leaning against the sink, waving a whiskey bottle and shouting at a group of coolies carrying a large table toward the front door when Jake pushed his way into the kitchen.

"Careful idiots!"

Lao-tang bellowed. He turned to Jake. "What you doing here, and who that?" He pointed at Li.

"I came to see how the General was," Jake said. It was as good an opening line as any. "He," indicating Li, "is my translator. I didn't know if you would be here or not."

"General dead. In basement to keep cold. Bad for him, good for me."

"Did you question your people?"

Howard Turk

Lao-tang shrugged. "No. No one knows nothing."

"How many people knew Xi was going to my place?"

"Many. Few. I don't know. Why you care? He dead. Dead men don't gamble." Lao-tang brayed out a harsh laugh.

"My man has been shot. No one hurts my people," Jake said looking hard at Lao-tang, feeling his anger rising. "And," he said slowly, "a good customer, a man I liked, has been killed on my doorstep. I don't like that either. Understand?"

Lao-tang considered for a moment, then nodded and took a slug of whiskey. "I don't know who killed Xi, but is good for me."

"Have you seen the girlfriend? Maybe she knows something."

"She not here. Good riddance. She greedy pig."

"Why do you say that?"

"All time want big jewels and fancy clothes. Xi tell me."

"Was someone after him? Maybe someone from Hopeh?"

Lao-tang shook his head. "Many people want Xi dead."

"Who is number one?"

"Many people. Hard to say."

"Have you heard of the Northern Coalition?"

"What?" Lao-tang asked, then belched.

The Second Enemy

This is hopeless, Jake thought. "Where is Xi's office? I want to look through his papers. It could be that I'll find something valuable for you."

Lao-tang swayed on his feet, his brow furrowed in thought.

"Paper?" Lao-tang asked.

"Yes. Something valuable in his papers that you could sell. It would all be for you. I just want to look."

Lao-tang took another drink from his bottle. "You look, but take nothing. Understand?"

"Right," Jake said, hoping to get out before Lao-tang drank much more.

A grim young officer with a wide ugly whip scar across his forehead strode into the kitchen. He eyed Jake and whispered in Lao-tang's ear. Lao-tang nodded. The officer glared at Jake.

"That guy could be a problem, Old Man," Jake whispered to Li. Jake had seen that death-to-foreigners look in the countryside too many times when he was selling guns up the Yangtze. All the warlords had their share of crazies and true believers. They were one of the hazards of the trade, usually kept in check by the warlord's need for Western equipment, but it was a delicate balance.

In the serving hall just outside the kitchen, soldiers began shouting. They seemed to be arguing, but Jake couldn't understand them.

"Remember," Lao-tang said to Jake, "take nothing." He glowered at him for a moment then put the bottle to his lips. Finding it empty, he threw the bottle across the room, smashing it into the

Howard Turk

white porcelain sink. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and turned to the scar-faced officer. "Show the foreigner Xi's office."

Jake, with Li trailing behind, followed the officer up the wide center stairway to the second floor. At the top of the stairs he pointed down the long hall cluttered with furniture and milling soldiers. "There, Foreigner."

Xi's office was a large room with red velvet walls and a brightly polished rosewood desk too large to be easily hauled away. Jake took off his coat, as much to show the .45 in his shoulder holster as for comfort. He collected the General's papers which had been strewn about the floor, added them to the pile on the desk and began working.

Li passed the time talking to a small group of peasant soldiers in frayed uniforms who stood in the doorway, rifles slung over their backs, watching Jake.

Jake ignored them. They probably had never seen a foreigner close up. As he sorted through Xi's papers, the events of the night played through his mind. Was this just a warlord assassination? It was common enough, especially in Shanghai where a lot of warlords came to relax and play. Xi was a talky little guy. He may have given away the meeting. Who gained? Lao-tang clearly did, but he could have killed Xi anytime. A rival from Xi's province? Another warlord lusting for Xi's territory? The Russians? With Xi dead, they would have no competition to worry about while they bargained with Sun. Or maybe the attack was directed against the Wheel? When they first opened, they had had plenty of problems with Shanghai's underworld. First it was the Blue Gang working the protection racket, then the more powerful Green Gang. Even the local cops tried to squeeze too much. He and Kuan had taken care of the cops with petty cash and had fought off the gangs. Was this another try? What ever the reason, killing Xi on our doorstep will scare the hell out of our customers.

The Second Enemy

Suddenly a man shouted. Another screamed a response and a pistol shot shook the house. Jake looked up at Li.

"Scar-face find soldier stealing. Shoot him," Li said.

The soldiers at the doorway laughed uneasily and poked each other as though it were a very funny joke.

Jake went back to the General's papers. A buzz went through the crowd of soldiers as the scar-faced officer smelling of cordite strode into the room. He sat down heavily on an upholstered chair, threw one leg over the arm, and began to pick his nose with his left forefinger. His oversized revolver was held loosely in his right hand.

Time was running out, Jake knew. Someone, either Lao-tang or this guy, had decided that it made no sense to let him go through anything. He might as well go, Jake thought. He had found nothing of interest and scar-face wasn't going to get any friendlier. As he turned over a file folder, a red passbook of the Sino-Asian Banking Corporation fell on the desk. *Treasure!* Jake tried to look casual. He flipped through a few pages. There was a series of large deposits made in the last year. Xi was a very rich man. As he tossed it carelessly back on the pile of papers and books, the officer watched him closely.

Jake shuffled through the papers hoping the guy would get bored and go away. But he didn't move.

"Go away," the officer shouted at the soldiers crowding the doorway, but kept his eyes on Jake.

The soldiers moved away, and Li was left standing alone in the doorway.

Jake's left hand drifted near the passbook while his right riffled papers busily. Then abruptly, as if in response to a noise, he

Howard Turk

whirled around and looked out the window. The officer's eyes followed him. In that second, Jake palmed the bank book and slipped it under his shirt.

The heat and humidity of the night seemed suddenly much more oppressive. Jake glanced at Li, then stood up and walked to the window. Light spilling from the tall downstairs windows illuminated the loading scene below. The young officer came to the window and looked down at soldiers tossing an Empire-style sofa onto a two-wheel cart.

"Time to go," Jake said to the officer. "Nothing here of any importance."

The young officer turned from the window and raised his gun, aiming at Jake's chest. "Give me red book, and put your hands up. You think I foolish clod like Lao-tang?"

Jake reached into his shirt and pulled out the book. "It's of no value to you. You can't get Xi's money out of the bank. Everyone knows he's dead. It may be of interest to me. Look at it."

"You lie." He stepped back, still holding his gun on Jake and with his free hand opened the book upside down, pretending to read.

"Look, I'll read it to you," Jake said, instantly knowing it was a mistake.

His face drawn into a snarl, the officer stepped forward so that his gun was only inches from Jake's face. Jake could smell his foul breath and body odor.

"I need no foreign devil help...ever." The officer's hand tightened on the gun, his forefinger pressured the trigger. Then a sound came from behind him. It was Li moving along the wall from

The Second Enemy

the doorway. The officer's eyes shifted toward the noise for an instant.

Jake knocked the gun away from his face. A short hard right from the shoulder with all his weight behind it buckled the officer's knees, sending the gun clattering across the floor. As the officer fell, an automatic left hook follow-up caught him on the side of the head. "Close the door," Jake whispered.

"Big trouble, Boss. He mean rascal."

"So am I, Elder." Jake picked up the officer's pistol, dumped the bullets on the floor, and stuffed the gun into a desk drawer. Then he dragged the unconscious officer into a closet and locked it.

"Boss," Li said nervously. "We go soon?"

"Interesting," Jake said more to himself than Li as he examined the big numbers listed in the passbook.

"Boss?"

"Okay. We'll go now." Jake stuffed the bankbook into his pocket.

They stepped into the noisy hall and closed the door behind them. Taking a sweating soldier by the arm, Jake said, "Li, tell this fine young man that the officer wants to be alone. Tell him to guard the door and let no one in."

Li did as he was told.

The soldier grinned, happy to be off work detail. He took up his position in front of the door and began rolling a cigarette.

Jake saluted him.

Howard Turk

The soldier's grin widened.

"Let's move it," Jake said over his shoulder to Li. Five minutes, he thought, before the officer is awake and kicking out the closet door. Ten at the outside. Enough to be out the gate if they didn't run into Lao-tang.

* * *

At three in the morning the last customer was eased out the front door of the Wheel and Jake locked away the day's receipts. Leaving Hsiang and the night guards to close up, Jake took a taxi home to the Astor House hotel.

Crossing the semi-dark lobby, the click of his heels on the gray and white marble floor echoed in the emptiness. The night clerk, Juan, a lean hawk-nosed man, checked Jake's box and said that there was no mail, as usual.

"Señor," he murmured, glancing around the deserted lobby, "there were two men here tonight inquiring about you."

"What did they want?"

"They asked if you were at home. I told them that you were not in and asked if there were any messages. They said no. They would get in touch with you another time."

Trouble. Of what sort Jake had no idea, but something was stirring. It had been quiet times at the Wheel for over a year. Now it looked like the smooth sailing was over. "What did the two men look like?"

"One was tall and thin and had a long narrow face, the other was bigger, a very large man with a thick neck. He looked like a wrestler."

The Second Enemy

"Orientals?"

"Yes, but I could not tell if they were Chinese. The thin one spoke English, the large one only spoke Chinese, but rough Shanghai dialect. They were clean and wore suits and hats, but they did not seem like gentlemen."

"How about gangsters? Is that a word that would fit?"

"Yes, Señor," Juan said without expression.

"When were they here?"

"About midnight."

"Did you see them leave?"

"Yes, I made sure they left. They got into a car and drove toward the Bund."

"Thank you, Juan."

Jake crossed the lobby and went into the Palm Garden, a large U-shaped covered veranda that held tables and a bar. In the middle of the U, down five steps, was a garden that was a secluded meeting place favored by lovers and politicians. As he walked along the veranda, Jake saw only one couple, a young Western man and a beautiful Chinese girl at a table surrounded by palm trees and potted flowers. They held hands and spoke in whispers, oblivious to anything but each other. Best of luck, kids, he thought, you'll need it.

Sliding onto a bar stool, Jake ordered a local beer, a dark brew called Chefoo, from Chang, the old bartender.

"Honored Uncle," Jake said in local dialect, "two men were looking for me tonight. Did you see them?"

Howard Turk

"Yes, Nephew. This old bar boy saw them," he said sarcastically. Every time Westerners called him "bar boy", he had once told Jake, it burned his insides. "They looked around but did not stay. I asked what they were looking for and they told me to shut up. They spoke Pootung dialect, dock-coolie talk. They are probably gang men."

"Could you tell which gang?"

Chang shrugged. "Hard to tell, but I would guess Greens."

"Another question, Uncle. I've heard of a group of warlords called the Northern Coalition. What do you know of them?"

In the days of the Manchu dynasty Chang had been a Mandarin of the coral button, the second highest rank in the civilian government. Although the overthrow of the Manchu took away his income and status, he never lost his interest in politics or his fierce nationalism. Jake and the wrinkled little man had often talked until dawn as Chang unraveled the tangled web of Chinese politics for him. Chang knew the players, some personally, from his days as an official. He wiped the bar with a small white towel for a moment, then he shook his head. "It is not a name I've heard of. Do you know any more? An individual perhaps?"

"General Xi mentioned the Northern Coalition to me a few minutes before he was killed. Nothing more."

"I heard he was murdered at your establishment. That Xi. He changed with each blow of the wind. Indeed, a devious man. But, no, I've not heard of that group."

Jake had hoped that Chang could offer some clue. Well, scratch that idea, he thought.

The Second Enemy

"I'm sorry not to be more help, but these alliances come and go very quickly. The Northerners are proud men and they don't trust one another. There has been much fighting between them. It is hard to picture them working together."

At almost four in the morning Jake drained his glass, signed the chit, and said good night to Chang. It was time to face the music. Juan had seen the gangsters leave, but did they circle back? With a few picks and a little talent, anyone could find a way into the hotel.

When he stepped off the elevator, Jake checked the dim hallway in both directions. It was empty and so quiet he thought he could hear his heartbeat. He flicked off the switch for the overhead light and slipped his gun out of his shoulder holster. At his apartment door, he listened hard, but couldn't hear a thing. Ah shit, he thought, and scenes of house to house fighting in France flashed through his mind. That was the worst part of the war for him. Worse than the trenches, which were cold, muddy, and full of rats. Worse than the mind-numbing artillery barrages or crossing the wire into no-man's-land.

Jake took a deep breath. Okay hero, either go in or stand in the hall all night. He carefully inserted his key and turned the lock. The tumblers fell with a solid click. He grimaced. Without wasting another second, he twisted the handle and flung open the door, jumping sideways out of the line of fire. Nothing. After counting to twenty-five he slid into the dark living room, crouching low. Several seconds passed. The only sound was the ticking of the mantel clock. Moonlight flowed through the window, giving enough light to see that the room was empty. Jake stood up and slowly let out his breath. He wiped his gun hand on his pants leg before he slipped into the bedroom. No one was in the closet or under the bed. Only the bathroom remained.

Jake paused at the open door. Did the shower curtain move? Or was it just the moonlight? He stepped carefully onto the bathroom

Howard Turk

rug holding his gun out aimed at the curtain, his finger pressing against the trigger. One step, then another. Finally he was close enough. He reached out slowly until his fingers could touch the curtain. In one motion he grabbed the curtain and yanked it aside.

No one. He stood looking at the empty bathtub for a moment then sat down on the edge. Suddenly he felt exhausted and his hand began to shake. He pushed the .45's safety to on and put it on the floor between his feet.

He sat there for several minutes trying to get his nerves to stop quivering. Finally Jake rubbed his hand over the stubble on his jaw and slowly got up. He went back through the bedroom to the living room, locked the door, clicked on a floor lamp, and eased into his chair. He was bone weary, but far too wound up for sleep. Picking up a magazine he leafed through it without much interest, prickled by a feeling that something was not right. Jake glanced around the room and went back to his magazine. But the feeling persisted. He got up and went back into the bedroom and looked around again. Seeing nothing unusual, he returned to the living room. As Jake picked up the magazine he realized what it was. The light reflecting off a silver picture frame was bouncing into his eyes. Someone had moved the frame. In three quick steps he was at the picture. Although he was not very attentive to household details, it seemed to him that the picture was about the right spot. Only turned slightly so it reflected the light from the lamp.

Was yesterday cleaning day? No. The only person in the apartment was the maid to make the bed. She could have moved the frame, but she had never touched anything except the bed and bathroom. The room boy cleaned the rest.

He switched on all the lights in the living room and went to his desk. Nothing looked out of place. Jake tried to conjure up an image of exactly where things were yesterday when he worked at the desk, looking carefully at each item on the cluttered desk. Yes. The

The Second Enemy

pattern was there. Things were slightly out of place: the letter opener was not where he usually kept it, the paper weight wasn't quite in the right place. He opened the wide top drawer. The jumble of notes, pencils, pens, clips, an address book, and a handful of newspaper articles clipped to read when he had the time were all there. But a notebook that he hadn't looked at in some time was on top.

Someone had been here.

"Son-of-a-bitch!" He stood up and opened the hallway door. There were a couple of tiny scratches where a pick scraped the outside of the lock. "Son-of-a-bitch!" he repeated as he pushed the door closed and locked it.

Jake poured himself a brandy and went back to the bedroom and found signs that room had also been searched. What in the hell is going on? He said out loud to himself. Back in the living room, he poured himself another brandy, and sat down heavily in his chair by the window.

He was still there when the first light of day showed at the edge of the China Sea and he could see shadowy sampans crisscrossing the Whangpoo.

Shanghai, 1923. Jake Greenberg, an American expatriate, is nearly gunned down on the steps of his fashionable casino. Inches away, a powerful warlord is killed. The police show little interest. Looking into the murder, Jake meets Claire Turner, a savvy and attractive newspaper reporter. They agree to work together. But soon others are killed, including a close friend, and both Jake and Claire are in grave danger as they home in on the killer.

The Second Enemy

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