

THE SHANGHAI

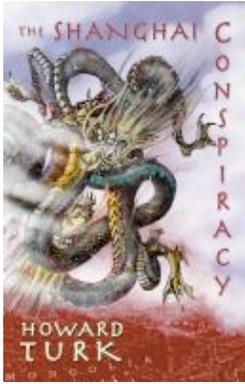
CONSPIRACY



HOWARD
TURK

M O N G O L I A

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China, 1926. Jake Greenberg, an American living in Shanghai, arrives in Manchouli, a dusty little city straddling the Chinese-Russian border. Jake's mission is to smuggle two Russians across the border into China. They have a secret that the communists can't allow the world to know. But, as soon as he crosses the border, he senses something is wrong. Soon, the secret police are at his door and Jake and the Russians are on the run.

The Shanghai Conspiracy

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Howard Turk

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First Edition

Two

Northwest China, October, 1926

Jake Greenberg huddled in his coat and stared out the train window at the flat, desolate Manchurian countryside, wondering if he was a bigger fool than Kamakoff. Or whether they were both simply a pawns in a game the British were playing against the Russians. Well, no matter now. He was in it and he'd know soon enough. Why Kamakoff asked for his help was a complete mystery. Back in Shanghai, they rarely talked of Russia. That was ancient history. And Jake made it his business to stay away from the Sons of Russia, Kamakoff's exile organization. There were just too many true believers and crazies and sinister characters mixed up in it. He blew on his hands, then stuffed them back in his pockets.

Wind and bits of snow whipped through a broken window and out into the corridor through a sliding door that wouldn't close. Nothing worked on this miserable train. The car was filthy and the toilet was beyond dreadful. But sometime today, he thought, they would reach the Chinese-Russian border at Manchouli, and he would be free of the wretched thing. He had been on the train for three days, sharing what was called a first class compartment with Engineer Wong, a smiling middle-aged Chinese elf in a Western suit a size too big, who was returning to Moscow to continue his study of dams. For Wong's sake, with another five days to reach Moscow, he hoped the Russians ran a better train on their side of the border. That is, Jake thought, if he really is an engineer going to Moscow. There were moments when Jake had his doubts. Engineer Wong spoke English far too well to be who he claimed. But, he consoled himself, Wong

THE SHANGHAI CONSPIRACY

could be anything. China was full of people who did more than shade the truth a little for their own purposes. Himself included.

By afternoon, the off and on snow showers had given up. The sun was winning its battle with billows of heavy gray clouds that rolled across the sky and met the endless, almost featureless plain at the horizon. Jake knew there were people out there, but he had seen no sign of life aside from watering stations since they had taken on more guards at Tsitshar yesterday. They were crossing bandit territory now. Jake poured some hot water into his tea cup and stirred the leaves. No more sugar. On the Chinese Eastern, you carried your own supplies or bought what you could from scruffy vendors at stations.

Engineer Wong held out his cup and Jake filled it with the last of the hot water.

"I do hope your business in Manchouli is successful, Mr. Burns," Wong said with a smile. "Selling wine in such a complicated city may be difficult. There is not much culture and so many different peoples. And you have come so far."

Charles Burns was the name on Jake's Canadian passport. "As I said, my company wants the Trans-Siberian authorities to try out some of our wines in their dining cars. We'll see how it goes," Jake said by rote. They had had a variation of this conversation every day of the trip.

"What do the Bolsheviks know about wine?"

"Careful, Engineer Wong. I might be with State Security."

Wong blinked. He nodded diffidently and turned up the collar of his coat. "I would not think so. You are far too pleasant a man for that work."

"Ah, that's who they employ."

The eye-shocking rays of the afternoon sun, momentarily clear of the clouds, slanted through the train windows like searchlights, then began to move sideways.

Howard Turk

Wong took out his compass, then consulted a map spread out on the table between them. "We are finally turning from northwest to north. We should be in Manchouli in an hour."

Jake looked at his watch trying to keep from showing his nerves. The border crossing would be the first test. Maybe the last, he said wryly to himself. He pressed his hand against the hem of his coat and felt the pound notes and the extra passports inside. Then he picked up his book and began to read, but hardly saw the words. Instead, he went through his instructions on contacting Kamakoff in Manchouli. He didn't like any of it. Back in Shanghai, British Intelligence had not impressed Jake. Sir Anthony Brown's men seemed casual and amateurish. Not at all reassuring for a man crossing this border. He was at the edge of telling them to forget it more than once. His girlfriend, Claire Turner, and his partner, Kuan, told him he was crazy to do it. Maybe he was.

The first indications that they were approaching Manchouli were the mean sod huts and battered tents and knocked together shacks spread out along the rail line. Off in the distance, around a slight curve, Jake could see small hills and the walls of the Chinese city.

"Refugees," Wong said before Jake could ask. "White Russians--the anti-Bolsheviks--and Chinese from the Russian side. This is as far as they could get for some reason. Probably their money ran out. Imagine surviving the winter here in those things." He gestured toward the refugees camping along the track. "They are desperate people, Mr. Burns. Watch yourself. People here have nothing to lose."

"Across the border. Is it better on the Russian side?"

THE SHANGHAI CONSPIRACY

"Better and worse," Wong said, smiling brightly, showing a full set of very bad teeth. "They have less crime, perhaps, but the Secret Police are hard men. The Bolsheviks are very serious about their border."

Jake stood up and stretched. He pulled down his suitcase from the rack over the door and began to organize his departure. He stuffed his book, magazines, and an extra sweater along with his tea cup into the second hand suitcase he had bought used in Shanghai to fit his salesman persona. He offered the remains of his food supply to Wong, who gratefully accepted. When that was done he sat down again.

"Why are the Russians so serious?" Jake asked. "They won the war. The Whites are all exiled, dead, or in prison." He knew very well that the border areas were not secure, but he wanted to see what Wong would say.

"The Russians fear subversion, anti-government action by the exiles. It is only six years since the civil war. They think their hold on the country is not so strong." Wong leaned across the table, wagging his finger at Jake like a schoolmaster. "Insecure men are the most dangerous." The train suddenly slowed to a crawl, entering the old city of Manchouli through a gap in the ancient city wall. Jake glanced up at crumbling watch towers flanking the track, then at the shops on both sides of the street. The train track went down the center of the town.

"This street is called China Street," Wong said. "Everything goes on here. You can buy anything on China Street...anything at all. As long as you use gold or silver coins or paper money from America or England. People here don't trust anything else. Even on the Russian side, they prefer dollars and pounds to rubles."

China Street throbbed with activity and color. Perhaps, Jake thought, it was an antidote to the dead, dun-colored plains surrounding the city. Brightly gowned Chinese merchants tended

Howard Turk

their wares in front of their shops. Even the old men sitting on benches smoking long pipes wore bright scarves around their necks. Caucasian and Chinese women favored pink and lavender and smart straw hats, despite the cold weather. Coolies of every description--pole carriers, wheelbarrow men, and rickshaw pullers--hurried this way and that. Dusty camels tied head to tail in a long caravan stood in majestic disdain as the train passed them. Blue-coated Russian soldiers and stiff backed Cossacks with scarlet capes strolled the wooden sidewalk looking into shops. Russian workmen in red and green shirts circulated in the crowd. Tough-looking Buriats, bearded half-Russian, half-Mongols, who might be bandits or herdsmen or both, stared at Jake as if assessing his worth. And through the crowd, soldiers of the local Chinese warlord, rifles slung across the backs of their dirty mustard colored uniforms, were forcing a passage for an official being driven in a one-horse trap. "Quite a show," Jake said. He tried to open a window to look ahead, but the one that wasn't broken wouldn't budge.

"A very interesting city," Engineer Wong said. "Too bad I won't be staying long. My train leaves for Moscow in a few hours. The last time I was here I had to stay three days. Waiting for a train. All sorts of peoples mixed together. The natives, of course, but also soldiers, and refugees, tradesmen...like yourself, and travelers going or coming from Moscow and Peking. One day in the dining room of my hotel I counted six different languages being spoken. It--"

The train jerked to a stop.

"We must have our bags carried to the Russian side," Wong said with authority, clearly enjoying the role of experienced traveler instructing a novice. "It is only a few steps, but don't let the baggage coolie out of your sight. They are all thieves."

THE SHANGHAI CONSPIRACY

Jake smiled at him, despite his nerves. "Lead on, Engineer Wong."

"Are you armed?" Wong suddenly asked.

"No," Jake lied. "Should I be?"

Wong nodded, his mouth pulled down at the ends as if he was in thought. "Many travelers carry a weapon."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Come," Wong said after a pause. "First, you must give the money to the official waiting outside the car. He has a green uniform. No more than five dollars. Chinese officials must be paid. Then, we go to the Russian side. They call their side of the border the Manchurian Station, but it is all Manchouli." He put his serious expression on his face "Be careful paying squeeze to the Russians. They require much more..." Wong squinted as he groped for the right word in English. He failed and said a word in Shanghai dialect.

"Subtlety," Jake translated.

Wong bobbed his head. "Yes, subtlety." He looked around the compartment. "I hope your papers are in order."

"So do I," Jake said grimly. It had been six years since he and Kamakoff left Russia in the dreadful winter of 1920. He still had nightmares about that time.

Colonel Ivan Blok stood in the shadows on the second floor balcony watching the train passengers line up for passport inspection on the stone floor below. Two security service officers sat behind a wooden table taking their time inspecting papers. Aside from the table and two chairs, there was no other furniture in the room. The building, which had once been a warehouse, had seen service as an army barracks and stable during the great civil war that followed the revolution. Now,

with its walls whitewashed and the stone floor scrubbed clean, it was headquarters for State Security in the province. The authoritative voices of the passport officers and the careful, sometimes nervous, replies of the passengers echoed off the thick walls and stone floor. The sound reminded Blok of prison. That image pleased him. He was a great believer in planting images in peoples' minds.

Blok was a stocky man, so wide in the shoulders that he appeared shorter than his true height of 5' 9". His dark blond hair was cut close to his skull, military style, revealing a deep scar running from his forehead back along his scalp. The scar, which came from being entertained by the Czar's police, was now his trademark in the Party. The scar topped a square, hard face channeled by deep squint lines around piercing black eyes, a flat blunt nose, thin lips, and prominent cheek bones that spoke of the steppes of central Russia. He had considered wearing a military uniform, but decided on his usual Moscow outfit--a plain gray suit, gray coat and gray fedora. At Lubianka, headquarters of the Security Service, he was called Gray Scar, but never to his face.

Blok spoke to the man behind him without taking his eyes off the scene below. "Kushka. Has any more information on Greenberg come in?"

Kushka stepped up and leaned his tall, extraordinarily thin body forward so he was close to Blok's ear. Kushka had a long oval face, bushy black hair, and bright black eyes. "No, Colonel," he said quietly. "Moscow Center says it has nothing more. I received the telegraph message this morning."

Blok grunted. He was not surprised. Idiots ran the Center now. Political hacks. Loyalty to whoever was in favor was all that was needed. He shook his head and clamped his hands behind his back. In many ways, field work away from the

THE SHANGHAI CONSPIRACY

infighting in Moscow suited him. Maybe, he said to himself, he should go to China. That is where the action will be in the future.

"So all we know about Greenberg," Blok continued, "is that he was with Kamakoff and his sort on the great retreat from Omsk in 1920."

"He probably left from Vladivostok with the other Americans, the Czechs, and the Whites. But, we have nothing to confirm that. His file is very thin. The next we knew of him, he was in Shanghai where most of the Whites now live."

"Are you presuming he works with the Whites?" Blok asked sharply.

"I suppose we must."

Blok was silent for a few moments. "Nothing more about Kamakoff and his man?"

"No, sir. We have searched again."

"We know they are in the area. Why can't they be found? Manchouli is not a large city."

"They are trying, Colonel."

Blok did not press the man further. His attention was on the train passengers below. Wong came through the door first, followed by a big Westerner. Blok's eyes followed the little Chinese. Wong took off his hat and held it by his side in his left hand, then he turned and said something to the White man. Blok studied the Westerner. The man was 6' 2", husky build, early to mid 30's. Blok waited until the man took off his hat. "Good," he whispered to himself. Dark brown hair, worn short. Handsome man, the report had said. Regular features except for a minor scar over his left eye. Blok narrowed his eyes trying to see if the Westerner had a scar. He couldn't, but he could see the hazel brown eyes. He was sure it was Greenberg. The Shanghai apparat had sent Moscow Center a detailed description and the man with the little Chinese fit.

Howard Turk

Blok motioned to Kushka to come closer. "That man. The big Westerner behind the Chinaman. Just inside the door."

"The one in the brown suit? Talking to the Chinaman?"

"Yes. That is Greenberg. Go down and tell the passport man to look through his bag carefully. But pass him through without problems. Take three of your best men and keep him under surveillance." Blok flashed a stern look. "Don't let him know he is being watched. Remember he is the bait, the small fish. It is Kamakoff we want. I want to know who contacts Greenberg. Everyone. Act only if Kamakoff appears and then try to take him alive. If that is not possible, kill him. It is very important that he doesn't cross the border. Understand?"

"Completely, Colonel."

Blok nodded. Kushka was the chief of security here and seemed competent, Blok thought. Certainly he was eager, possibly far too eager. He reminded Blok of a bow pulled too tight. Kushka, Blok knew, saw capturing Kamakoff as a way out. Why was he here in this rat hole? His file in Moscow said the transfer from Kiev was to broaden his experience. How many times had he seen that one? Perhaps it was the usual political business. Something said in confidence could get you sent away, or maybe the man's ambition made his superior uncomfortable. Some of the best had done that and had ended up in places like Manchouli or dead. "Pick up Greenberg outside the building and don't let him out of your sight."

"Name," the passport officer asked brusquely as he scanned Jake's papers. The man was swarthy and thin.

"Charles Burns," Jake said.

"Born?"

"Toronto, Canada."

THE SHANGHAI CONSPIRACY

The passport man's eye focused over Jake's shoulder for an instant. Was the passport officer bored or looking at someone on the second floor? Jake had sensed people up on the balcony, but had fought back the urge to glance up. He waited, trying to act the patient commercial traveler who had crossed borders endless times.

The officer's eyes dropped to a list. Then Jake saw his eyes shift to the second man at the desk for an instant before he turned back to him.

Alarm bells started going off in Jake's head. Something was going on.

"Open bag, please."

Jake put his coat and hat on the table. He slowly undid the two leather straps and flipped open the top.

The passport officer stood up. He was shorter than he appeared sitting down. The second passport officer also stood up. He was a dumpy Asiatic man with a drooping black mustache. The thin one reached into Jake's bag and moved clothes and wine samples, slipping his hand deep into the bag at one point and then another, then a third place like a hungry bird pecking for worms. "Wine?"

"Samples. I am in the wine business," Jake said very slowly. "I am selling wine in Manchouli. Both sides of the border."

The passport officer glanced into the bag again. He eyed the gold coin Jake had left on top, then closed the bag. "Good," he said, scribbling a letter with caulk on the top near the handle. He stamped Jake's papers. "You can go."

Jake fastened his bag with a growing sense of apprehension. The guy should have pocketed the coin. Why didn't he?

Wong was waiting outside the inspection room. "Are you staying at the Stein Hotel?" His question startled Jake, who was still thinking about the baggage inspection.

Howard Turk

"Ah, yes. Is it the only hotel in town?"

"The only one where an Occidental would stay." Wong chuckled. "We Chinese call it the "Red Meat Hotel." He paused for effect. "Old Stein is also a butcher...the best in this town." Wong's chuckle accelerated into a giggle. "Fifty nightclubs and houses of ill repute, but only one good butcher."

Jake forced an answering smile. Wong's giggle had a tense quality to it that he had not heard in the last three days.

"Come, I'll show you the way," Wong said. He led the way through a crowd of rickshaw coolies. Ignoring their clamor for business, they crossed a large rectangular square filled with meandering shoppers and farmers selling produce from wagons, and merchants offering jewelry, used clothing, swords, and knives all laid out on ground sheets spread over the packed dirt of the square.

Jake felt good stretching his legs after three days on the train. Their baggage coolies, two dirty-faced Mongols, strode along several paces behind. Jake looked over his shoulder as if he was checking on them. The coolies smiled happily at him no doubt thinking about their pay. Jake nodded and glanced past them. Too many people around to spot anyone following.

When they reached a quiet nook on the far side of the square, Wong said, "The Stein Hotel is just down there. In the old town." He pointed down a narrow street at the end of the square. He swung around and aimed his finger at a road much wider than the others that was busy with cars and trucks and horse-drawn wagons. Two and three story buildings lined it, and its wooden sidewalks were crowded with pedestrians. "That is China Street on the Russian side. Not as colorful as the China side during the day, but at night it becomes most interesting."

Jake looked back at a brick building at the edge of the square. It must be the city hall or the jail. Everything else in

THE SHANGHAI CONSPIRACY

town was made of wood. He glanced around the square. It was a beehive--people, horse-drawn wagons, and barking dogs. "I didn't think Manchouli would be this active."

"This border brings much money, Mr. Burns, since the Bolsheviks have taken over Russia. There are many soldiers here now and many refugees who want to cross to China. So interesting things come up for sale in the market at very good prices."

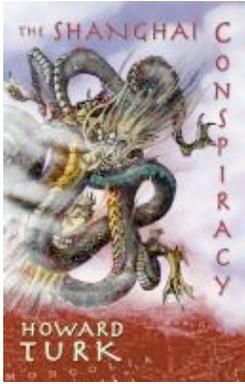
"Like gold and family heirlooms?"

"Oh yes," Wong said. "Much of that. And, of course, there is smuggling, and bandits and the railroad. Farmers and woodsmen," he added as an afterthought. "It is hard to believe, but there is good land for crops and water in some of the valleys and, of course, endless forests to the north. All of it centers on Manchouli." He smiled. "There is no place else for big distances."

"How about a farewell drink, Mr. Wong? I'd bet the Stein has a bar."

Wong bowed his head. "Unfortunately, I must confirm my passage to Moscow. The new Russians are not as business-like as the old ones. We must part here."

Jake put out his hand and Wong shook it. He seemed genuinely sorry to be going on alone. As they exchanged platitudes of travelers taking their leave, Jake felt the loss of the little man's company. Whether he was an engineer and heading to Moscow or not, he was a pretty good traveling companion. As Wong walked away, Jake suddenly felt very much alone in this strange city.



China, 1926. Jake Greenberg, an American living in Shanghai, arrives in Manchouli, a dusty little city straddling the Chinese-Russian border. Jake's mission is to smuggle two Russians across the border into China. They have a secret that the communists can't allow the world to know. But, as soon as he crosses the border, he senses something is wrong. Soon, the secret police are at his door and Jake and the Russians are on the run.

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