

Hong Kong, January 1985:

Baxingdale sat gloomily and alone in a corner of Szeto's Bar. His thinning hair and worn Harris tweed jacket lent him an academic air. He had a pint of lager in front of him but was in no mood for solitary drinking. He was hoping Soames, Choy or some of the other regulars would turn up soon. Conversation would take his mind off his experiences of that afternoon. But it was a Wednesday and evening horse racing at Happy Valley had drained the place of regulars. Two waiters were idling near the entrance, waiting for the late night trade to pick up, while Szeto, the owner, stood behind the long bar whetting a throwing knife.

The knife was Szeto's trade mark, one of a set of six. He always carried one while working, in a sheath strapped around his waist. Its keen edge was excellent for slicing lemons and limes. It appeared suitable for more deadly purposes too and Szeto's dexterity with it often led customers to speculate what his occupation might have been prior to bar-tending. But Szeto had a charming way of deflecting enquiries. He would merely admit, with an indulgent smile, that he had tried his hand at many occupations.

Baxingdale had got no nearer to pinning Szeto down than anybody else, in spite of years of patronage and conversation. But on this particular evening Baxingdale was not concerned with Szeto's past. His mind dwelled rather on the future of his old university friend, Christopher Knight.

He had visited Knight in remand prison that afternoon, after learning of his arrest from newspapers. His friend was being held on embazlement charges, pending trial.

"How the hell did you get yourself into such a mess?" Baxingdale had asked.

"A mo-mo-momentary lapse," Knight had replied, more cheerfully than Baxingdale had expected. But the lawyer had clearly lost weight and the dullness in his eyes revealed an obvious despair.

Baxingdale had been surprised also by the recurrence of a stammer in his friend's speech.

As Knight's story unfolded, Baxingdale learned that his friend had picked up information on a pending take-over of Gold Star by an American conglomerate. The source appeared to have been Lucille of all people!

Lucille would be about the last person to know anything about Xavier's intentions for Gold Star, Baxingdale thought. It had to be a miscommunication. But Knight had not elaborated and he did not want to probe too deeply lest his own relationship with Lucille slip out.

Knight had apparently acquired his misinformation at a time when Gold Star shares were falling over fears of the company's responsibilities for deaths and injuries in a fire in a Kwangtung toy factory. The establishment was partially owned by Gold Star. The disaster resulted in increased provision for contingent liabilities in the company's Chinese joint ventures. When Xavier issued a profits warning on that account share prices started falling further.

Knight, armed with the mistaken information about a take-over, thought the timing opportune for making a fortune. He began acquiring Gold Star shares through a private off-shore company.

Then two simultaneous announcements unsettled the market further. The first was that the Chu mansion would be handed over to the city earlier than anticipated to be converted into a public museum. The second was that Lucille would be given a seat on the main board. The moves were interpreted by some as evidence of a split within the family, with Xavier Chu no longer commanding the decisive voice. Share prices fell further but Knight kept buying.

When margin calls eventually came too thick and fast, Knight first pledged his home and then Phoebe's jewellery to stay in the game. When that still proved insufficient he began "borrowing" money belonging to clients. By then he had started to panic. He could not understand why an announcement about the take-over was being withheld. He did not dare broach the subject with Xavier for fear his secret acquisition of Gold Star shares would be discovered. In order to stem further falls, he leaked the prospect of a take-over to a few shady speculators. His contacts thought he had inside information by virtue of his legal position and started buying. A take-over buzz went around the market. Prices leapt.

But, ironically, it was that very rise in the share price which led to Knight's downfall. The Stock Exchange questioned the sudden volatility and asked for an explanation. Xavier Chu responded by saying he saw no reason for the erratic movements and added that rumours in the marketplace about a take-over of Gold Star by an American corporate giant were completely without foundation. The share price collapsed again and Knight did not managed to get out in time. His misappropriations came to light.

"Couldn't anyone have helped you?"

"Who? From th-th-those who have lost fortunes because of my tip? From that ba-ba-bastard Harry Rand who had been enriching himself on my efforts for years? He re-re-refused to stand by me. Xavier wo-wo-won't touch me with a ten-foot pole. He thinks I've been playing games behind his back. If either had been willing to cut some slack, th-th-things might have blown over. Now I have to face the music."

"What about bail?"

"What with?"

"Jesus Christ, you're a lawyer! You must have known the risks you were taking!"

"It's this aw-aw-awful place, Seb, wh-wh-where wealth, power, status, all seemed to be there for the taking. You see pe-pe-people less worthy than yourself growing fat. Tycoons only get their wrists slapped for insider trading. Xavier makes piles as-as-asset-stripping and exploiting le-le-legal loopholes. And you begin to think: 'Wh-wh-why not me?' I thought I had found a way to satisfy Phoebe and the children. Wa-wa-wanted them to be proud of me. The pu-pu-punt just went horribly wrong."

"I'm so sorry. Anything I can do?"

"Wha-wha-what can you do? The evidence's overwhelming. I'll just ple-ple-plead guilty to get it over with. I wo-wo-won't be allowed to practice for a good long while even after I

get out. Tha-tha-that's not a good position to be in when you're approaching sixty. Phoebe's gon-gon-gone off with the children. She's bitter about my lo-lo-losing her jewellery and our home. Wants a divorce."

"God, I wish things had turned out differently, Chris. Phoebe always had expensive tastes. You've known that all along."

"Yes, but mo-mo-moths always fly towards the flame, don't they? Bo-bo-both of us seemed to have allowed our lives to slip by without m-m-much to show for it. You should find yourself a good woman to share what's left."

"I'm not sure that'll work. I've been a bachelor too long."

"A man has time to th-th-think in here. Give it a shot. I'm finished but there's still hope for you. Yo-yo-you used to say that to die at a time of one's own cho-cho-choosing was the greatest gift bestowed by the gods. There could be something in that."

"I didn't say that. I was merely repeating what the Greeks used to believe. Don't do anything crazy. Look after yourself. You've a clean record. The court is bound to take that into account."

Knight had nodded. "Thanks for coming. You don't know wh-wh-what a friendly face means at a time like this."

Baxingdale leaned back in his chair, trying to shake his mind free of the afternoon's interview. What a role reversal! There had been a time when he had contemplated suicide and Chris had tried to cheer him. He wished he could do something in return. But that was the story of his life. Always too impotent and powerless to make the slightest difference.

"Find yourself a good woman," Chris had said. He had found one. The trouble was she was someone's wife and somebody else's mother and also trustee to a vast fortune left by a generous old lady. How could she lay down all those entanglements? And for what? To spend time with an aging hack at the end of a precarious career? The equation simply didn't make sense.

That reality had been brought starkly home to him just the previous week, when Mr. Yue, the shipping magnate, invited him for lunch at the Evergreen Tea House. The place turned out to be the very same tea house which had refused him entry years before, during his army service. It seemed to have retained an arcane air of exclusivity and as he was taking in the atmosphere, the food and the conversation with his host, who should have turned up but Xavier, Lucille and their son!

He had never taken Xavier for a family man or one who would frequent an establishment as unfashionable as a tea house. Yet there he was, with his entire family, and with a reserved booth to boot! When the newcomers came forward to greet Mr. Yue and himself, he had felt an excruciating sense of embarrassment. He was barely able to meet Lucille's eyes and when he took Xavier's outstretched hand he couldn't help wondering if the man knew he was the one who had cuckolded him.

Perhaps there was something in that old saw about the path of true love never running smooth. The possibility of humiliation was always there. Cruel separation too awaited the most committed lovers. Romeo and Juliet, Aberlard and Heloise, the Cowherd and Weaving

Maiden of Chinese mythology. To be in the same city as Lucille, breathing the same air, and yet needing to keep his distance was a torment. He doubted if he could endure it much longer without going out of his mind.

Baxingdale allowed his mind to recall other memories of Lucille. After a long while he shook his head, unable to go on. He took a swallow from his glass and just then he saw Derek Soames striding into the bar.

The hour was late but Soames was still dressed in a suit and tie, which suggested he had come straight from the office. His florid features showed the stress of too many unaccustomed responsibilities.

Soames ordered a beer from Szeto at the long bar and brought it to the table before sitting down. "Why so glum?" he asked, after first quenching his thirst.

"Been to see Chris Knight," Baxingdale replied.

"Oh, sorry about that. Damn stupid thing to do for a man of his experience. Hell of a way to end a career. Got a clean record, I understand. Might be a plus. Don't suppose you're in the mood for more bad news, are you?"

"There's never a good time for bad news is there? What's up?"

"I've just sat in on a meeting between Reggie Boy and the visiting proprietor of your newspaper. Reggie Boy stitched you up good and proper, the swine! He told the noble Lord you were letting the side down by constantly harping on the negatives. Doesn't take a genius to see he's angling for you to be replaced."

Baxingdale shrugged.

"It doesn't matter, old chap," he said. "It has been on the cards for quite a while. My present contract runs out in three months and every sign is that I wouldn't get another. If I had wanted one I would have tempered my words. Instead I insisted on showing the great British public how its honour was being tarnished. Not that anyone cares very much or takes much notice. Perhaps it's just me, feeling guilty every time I look my neighbours in the eye, knowing that my country was selling them down the river."

"You don't represent your country."

"Maybe not. But in a democracy I'm partly responsible for putting those rascals in."

"Quinn suspects me of feeding you information too. I think he had me in on the meeting just to make that point. If he had his way, I would be on the next plane out, except that I know where some of the bodies are buried. I'll be sixty next year and the chance of getting another contract is about zero. Ah, I don't give a damn any more. I'd just as soon round up a few of my girls and open up our own topless bar. Reckon I'd make a damn sight more than spinning for the government disinformation service."

"Only if you don't drink up the profits first!"

Soames made a rude gesture and the two friends drank in silence for a while. Presently, T. P. Choy entered the bar.

“Why so glum?” Choy asked, upon joining the pair. The remark caused both Baxingdale and Soames to burst out in simultaneous laughter. “What’s the joke?” the newcomer persisted.

“That’s exactly what I said when I came in,” Soames explained. He then went on to detail the dismal happenings.

“Well, they say that misery loves company,” Choy said. “So I might as well tell my own tale of woe. I’ve just heard that an old friend of mine, a social worker, has been sentenced to five years in China for helping to spirit dissidents out of the country.”

“Oh, gosh! That’s terrible,” Baxingdale commiserated.

“It’s usually the death penalty, so my friend’s lucky. There has always been something of a Boy Scout about him. Helping others came as second nature. Too bad nobody can help him now.”

“He’s a British subject, isn’t he?” Soames asked.

Choy nodded.

“Can’t diplomatic pressue be brought to bear?”

“Not for a British subject of Chinese race getting into trouble in China. The Chinese are then left to deal with him as if he were a Chinese citizen.”

“Sounds damn racist to me,” Baxingdale said. “Is there such a provision under dual nationality laws?”

“Don’t know about nationality laws. It’s certainly practical politics. Britain wants to keep Peking sweet during the transition.”

“This isn’t right. What about the British commitment to human rights?”

“You ask Whitehall that.”

“If nobody intervened, how did your friend get off so lightly?”

“I’ve no idea. It’s a complete mystery. He must have a fairy godfather somewhere.”

“I suppose if I wrote about it I would be accused of letting the side down again.”

“Indubitably,” Soames declared. “But think of how it would get Reggie Boy’s goat!”

It occurred to Baxingdale suddenly how little wisdom and justice obtained in the world. Everything seemed to be rotting away beneath ever increasing layers of hypocrisies -- freedom, civil liberties, human rights, democracy, peace, the rule of law, the discipline of the marketplace, the public good, the national interest, wealth-generation, choice, efficiency, growth, progress, world security. All were just words. At bottom strings were being pulled by money and power and against those corrupting forces few decent individuals could prevail. People like Christopher would stumble and others would be made sacrificial lambs. But the struggle had to continue until human beings started living for something larger than themselves and their puny spans on earth. Otherwise there was no hope.

His companions had fallen silent, as if they too had become preoccupied with thought. But it was a warm and companionable silence, the kind they had been accustomed to sharing before.

At last, Choy spoke. “Has either of you seen today’s People’s Daily?”

Baxingdale shook his head and Soames said: "You seem to forget, my dear fellow, I have to rely on translated summaries of the Chinese press and they don't appear till the following day."

"Sorry. Forgot you are an illiterate gweilo! There's an item in today's issue which should interest both of you. It's about Cheng Ching."

"What's happened to him? He hasn't ended in gaol as well, has he?" Baxingdale asked, apprehensively.

"No, quite the reverse. He's been elevated to the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and simultaneously appointed Party Secretary for Anhui Province."

"No joking! Always thought he would go places. He must have done the Party some service to gain such rapid promotion."

"What do you imagine he had been doing in Hong Kong the last few years?" Soames asked. "You're the one who has been having little tete-a-tetes with him. You ought to know. Special Branch seems to have diddle on him, except for his membership in the Work Committee. I'll bet my favourite whore he's played a major role in nutting out Chinese tactics during the negotiations."

"He's certainly been studying us. Knows our weaknesses through and through," Choy agreed. "Can't imagine the old commissars in Peking dreaming up on their own slogans like "Horse racing as before, dance as much as you want." That's the stuff for calming local nerves. Madison Avenue couldn't have done it better."

"But he didn't show up at the signing ceremony," Baxingdale said. "That struck me as odd. I thought I spotted him afterwards, outside the Gate of Heavenly Peace. But the person I saw got away before I could reach him. So I'm not absolutely sure it was him. I'm glad he's got where he has in any case."

"He wasn't a run-of-the-mill Commie, was he? He's a few cuts smarter than most of them."

"Yes, he's what people might call a thinking man's Commie. When we had our chats he reminded me of those old Socialists chaps like us used to believe in and admire."

"And who disappointed us after getting into power."

Baxingdale sighed. "Politics is a desperate old game. I would give Cheng Ching the benefit of the doubt. He seems more selfless than most and he might turn out better than most."

"Only if he can resist the age-old temptation to enrich his nearest and dearest."

"So far as I can make out, the only living relative he has is a mother, who apparently still rears pigs for some godforsaken village in Anhui. By all accounts she is a true daughter of the Revolution who refuses to be pampered by her son."

"Then let's drink to true daughters of the Revolution everywhere and long may they remain so," Soames said.

"I'll second that," Choy said. "If Cheng Ching turns out as selfless as you think, it should augur well for China."

The three men emptied their glasses and ordered a fresh round.