

Chapter 27

Holly and Ivy Prompt Certain Significant Changes
Christmas Feasting Recalls a King of Ancient Times

The policeman's name was Gordon. Weilin's first instinct about him had been correct: he was a kind man.

Instinct notwithstanding, Weilin fully expected that first morning to be put back on the street. In fact he awoke to an empty apartment. On a small table in the kitchen was a set of keys, two hundred Hong Kong dollars in cash, and instructions for finding a breakfast, written in good Chinese characters, neat and square, if somewhat ill-proportioned and childish-looking. After checking carefully to make sure the keys did indeed open the apartment and house doors, Weilin went out into the city in his new clothes, the ones he had bought to visit Fourth Uncle in, but now with a pocket full of money and a spirit full of confidence, luxuriating in his new-found security, however temporary it might prove. In fact it proved not temporary at all, as earthly things go: he lived with Gordon three years.

Gordon's work was organized in shifts, and he took turns at all shifts. When Weilin first arrived he was doing late night shift. Two weeks later he changed to daytime shift; then after several weeks more, to early morning shift. At first he did not spend much time at home, when not working or sleeping. There was a club, some kind of policemen's club, which occupied most of his spare time. Weilin never went to the club, and never got a very clear idea of what went on there. Drinking, certainly;

when working daytime or early morning shift Gordon came home smelling strongly of beer, though never actually drunk. Some small sports, too. There was one called *darts*, which Gordon occasionally practiced at home, using the peculiar target in the main room, standing several feet away and hurling little fletched missiles at it. Another was *cribbage*, a card game Gordon eventually taught to Weilin for their own pleasure, and which Weilin at once recognized as a grander, full-scale version of *kebizhi*.

Such little time as he spent at home those first weeks Gordon occupied with cooking, listening to western-style opera, reading or—very occasionally—watching TV. He was a skillful and ingenious cook, when he bothered, and could make both western and Chinese dishes with equal facility. The opera was on a large collection of long-playing discs in a cabinet beneath the hi-fi. There were certain parts Gordon liked to listen to very intently, during which he would allow no interruption, nor any noise or activity of any kind. During the other, less critical, parts he would wave his arms in time with the music, or sing along in a not unpleasing bass baritone, or explain the story to Weilin. For TV he seemed to have little inclination. The only time he watched with enthusiasm was for something called *Calcutta Cup*, a game—a real game—of *rugger* that was played every spring in London.

Gordon seemed to have an endless supply of money. The Hong Kong dollar was, at this point in the Colony's history, trading at twenty U.S. cents. One of these dollars would get you a simple meal at a street stall, ten a shirt, twenty a hand-made shirt, a hundred a custom business suit. The ferry from Kowloon to Hong Kong Island cost a quarter. For five dollars you could ride a taxi all the way out into the New Territories. Gordon seemed never to have less than five hundred on him, always stuffed carelessly into his trouser pocket. Four or five days after leaving the two hundred out, he left another four hundred in the same manner. Weilin, who had not yet spent a quarter of the previous amount, felt it would not be right to go on taking such large sums from him, and said so frankly that evening. Gordon said he would put money in a certain jug in one of the kitchen cabinets. Weilin could use it as he pleased, and if the pot got empty Gordon would refill it. So they went on like that; but there was never less than two hundred in the jug.

It occurred to Weilin, of course, that he was being paid for services rendered, and that this was, to put the kindest possible interpretation on it, ignoble. This irked him for a while—for some weeks. Of course, such a thing could be excused by the press of necessity, but he resolved to put his life on a proper, moral footing as soon as he saw a way to do so. Gradually this resolution dimmed. Gordon's kindness and consideration, the indirect method of emolument, and the ease and comfort of his new life made Weilin feel that, after all, he could have done much worse.

Gordon's games were by no means restricted to two players. On their third night together, which was a Saturday, Gordon came home very late, bringing with him another boy. The boy was Cantonese, two or three years older than Weilin and rather coarse-looking. They all got undressed and showered together, then played the *rugger* game, for which purpose Gordon seemed to have an inexhaustible inventory of shorts, shirts and socks in different sizes. During the game it became clear to Weilin that the boy was taking every opportunity to embrace him, be on top of him and slip his large, rough hands into Weilin's shorts. After *rugger* Gordon's idea was that they would all play the other game together. But Weilin had been disgusted and intimidated somehow by the boy—by his rough groping, by his staring, which had something slightly malevolent to it, like a small but very hungry carnivore, by his bad breath and his guttural Cantonese. Weilin began to cry. This made the boy laugh. The boy's laughing, in turn, made Gordon angry. He shouted at the boy in Cantonese. There was an argument. The boy got dressed and left, after another argument about the handful of bank notes Gordon thrust at him, and Gordon sent Weilin to bed, switched off the light and let him fall asleep alone.

Nothing happened for two days after this. Then there was a precise repeat of the first night. Then nothing for three days. Weilin lapsed into insecurity. He felt sure that Gordon had had enough of him and that he would soon be sleeping in the park again. And then, what? It would be winter, and too cold to sleep in the park.

The next day, the Saturday following the incident with the boy, Gordon came home very late again. This time he had two girls with him. The girls were small and brown, black-haired but not Chinese. They were very

merry, laughing and giggling. Gordon introduced them as Holly and Ivy, which names Weilin heard as *Ali* and *Afei*. In Mandarin *li* means pretty, *fei* means fat, and *a-* is a general diminutive prefix for personal names; and since Holly was slightly the prettier of the two and Ivy slightly the plumper, the names seemed to Weilin entirely apt. They were *filipinas*, said Gordon, but Weilin had no idea what this meant and thought it might be impolite to ask.

Holly and Ivy were fun. First they inspected the apartment, paying particular attention to the kitchen. They tried the burners on the range, the extractor fan, the blender. They opened the washing machine and turned the drum. They examined the contents of the refrigerator and freezer, giggling and pointing at bottles of ketchup, wedges of cheese, trays of lettuce. They fiddled with the stereo, hi-fi and air conditioners, gibbering all the time to each other in some language not Cantonese. At last, satisfied with the amenities, they shut themselves in the bathroom, emerging twenty minutes later stark naked.

They put on a show in the bedroom, writhing around together on the bed, kissing and fondling each other, interlinking their legs so that their private parts were touching then rubbing each other by making jiggling motions with their bottoms. Weilin watched all this with interest, surprised to see that even women with women could do *tongfang*, in spite of lacking what had heretofore seemed an essential accessory.

Group activities followed, everybody naked, Gordon and Weilin sitting on the edge of the bed with the girls kneeling in front of them. Weilin was paired with Holly, the prettier one. He understood by now what it was that he could not do, not yet being old enough. He dearly wanted to do it, to be part of the fun; but for all Holly's efforts still could not. He lay back on the bed at last; but instead of sinking into gloom, now he disconnected somehow from the proceedings. His mind, after some aimless wandering, settled on an image of little Han Yuezhu, in the bright flowered bathing costume they had handed out the day the foreigners came to South Lake Park. The old anger came up, and he was beating her with a bamboo wand. She screamed and screamed. The swimming outfit was shredded and she was bleeding. The blood flew from her as he beat her, tearing her pale smooth flesh, great blobs of blood flying through the air.

Suddenly Weilin felt a terrific electrical charge running through him, starting at the point where Holly was still toiling away and running very fast out along the *qi* channels to every part of his body, to the ends of his fingers and the tips of his toes—the most wonderful, thrilling feeling. Something was swelling, bursting, and then there was a rapturous relief. Holly was shouting something, shouting and laughing. Ivy chimed in, and Gordon uttered something in his own language that sent the girls into hysterics.

They were all very happy after that. Gordon went to the kitchen and came back with a very grand-looking bottle of wine, the top all wrapped in glittering silver foil. Under the foil was a fat cork with wire round it. When Gordon pulled off the wire the cork flew out with a bang, making Weilin jump. Some white froth spilled out of the bottle, falling on the carpet. Gordon made a remark about this and the girls collapsed in mirth again. They drank the wine from odd-shaped glasses, shallow on a long glass stem. The wine was carbonated to the furthest degree. To Weilin it seemed to consist of nothing but its violent effervescence.

Weilin felt no more insecurity after that. Everything with Gordon was very easy now. Sometimes they played the *rugger* game, sometimes they did not. Sometimes they just played it, without anything following. At weekends Gordon would bring girls home, most often just one girl, and they would all do *tongfang* together. He never again brought a boy home. Weilin always hoped that Holly and Ivy would make another appearance, but they never did. He had liked them, and thought them real fun. Gordon said they were dancers from the Philippines (showing the country to Weilin on an atlas), touring around southeast Asia—a few days here, a few days there. Impossible to locate them again, unless by chance. These weekend participants were, in fact, a feature of the first few months only. At first it was every weekend; then twice a month, then once, and at last it was just Gordon and Weilin and the *rugger* ball.

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As time went on, in fact, Weilin saw a slow change in Gordon. As well as the falling off in weekend visitors, there was just more of Gordon around.

He stayed home more, he cooked more, he spent more time listening to his opera. Though never demonstrative in the normal way of things, he sometimes said very tender words, words that made Weilin feel at once thrilled and ashamed.

Weilin's days were all delicious freedom. He wandered the city, rode the ferry to outlying islands, climbed Victoria Peak and Diamond Hill. The throb and bustle of the place had no terrors for him now. When he was hungry he ate rice gruel or noodles from one of the street vendors. When he tired of the streets and islands he went to a movie. The movies were easy because they were all in Mandarin, with Chinese characters along the bottom for the local people to read. [Though they cannot understand each other's speech, the Chinese all use the same written language for most purposes.]

It was in the third week that Gordon raised the subject of education. Weilin was reading a book he'd bought at Swindon's bookstore on Nathan Road, a Chinese translation of an American book. It was a popular account of some mathematical topics—paradoxes, antinomies, geometrical wonders and fallacies. Weilin had been reading the book while Gordon prepared the evening meal—some strips of beef cooked Chinese-style in a black bean sauce, with boiled green vegetables and rice. While they were eating Gordon asked to see the book. He seemed impressed.

"This is quite advanced. Can you understand it?"

"Yes. It's all explained very well. They make everything interesting."

"They'd have to work hard to make it interesting to *me*."

Weilin felt pleased. "I've always liked math."

Gordon was thoughtful for a while. Then: "You should be in school."

"Is it possible? But I wouldn't understand what the teachers are saying."

Gordon laughed. "Then you'd fit in very well. The decent schools teach mostly in English. I doubt many of the Chinese students can follow the lessons well. They depend on their books mostly, I think."

"But I couldn't even talk to my classmates. My Cantonese is terrible."

"Oh, that will come quickly. A little ear training and you'll hear the Mandarin coming through. It's English we should do something about."

“What can we do?”

“Send you to Blitzer. They’ll take care of you.” He laughed. “They’ll have you declaiming *Shakespeare* in your sleep.”

“*Bo-li-ce?* Who is it?”

“Intensive language training. Hong Kong civil service use them, and all the big hongts. They’re very intensive, though. You’ll be scared to death. But stick with it and they’ll get the job done all right. I’ll sign you up.”

Gordon could be efficient when he chose to be. This conversation took place on a Thursday. The following Monday morning at ten o’clock Weilin presented himself at Blitzer, who had the top half of a building in Hollywood Road, in the streets leading up the hill behind Central. The office seemed supernaturally clean and grand. It was all carpeted in rich deep green. The furniture was dark wood with brass handles and fittings. All the windows had venetian blinds. Air conditioners whispered, soothing music played very faintly from somewhere, and the people coming and going all wore smart, fashionable business clothes. Weilin felt like a bumpkin. He filled in a form and handed over three hundred dollars cash for a day’s instruction, and was shown into a small windowless room ventilated from a grille in the ceiling. In the room was a desk. There was a single chair on one side of the desk. On the other was a stern-looking foreign woman. She nodded to the chair. Weilin sat.

The woman held up a card from a stack in front of her. On the card was a picture, a pleasant color drawing, of two people meeting. “Good morning,” said their speech balloons. “Good morning,” said the lady, slowly and emphatically.

This was no surprise. The common English greeting was pretty well known to Chinese people, who made a joke of it: by twisting the sounds very slightly it could be rendered as *gou dai mao niang*—“dog catches lady cat”, with slightly salacious connotations to a Chinese ear.

“Good morning.”

“Good MORning.”

“Good morning.”

“GOOD MORNING.”

This went on for what seemed like ages, the woman’s voice getting louder all the time, stressing different sounds at each repetition. They

moved on to *What's your name?* where Weilin discovered that his English name was William. He supposed they had got his Chinese name from the form he had filled out and just taken the nearest English sounds.

This repetition of elementary exchanges went on for fifty minutes. There was a break, after which the woman was replaced by a man with another set of cards. Are you English? No, I'm Chinese. Are you Chinese? Yes, I'm Chinese. It continued the whole morning. In the afternoon things got worse: the first woman side by side with a new man, a fierce-looking elderly party with a tobacco-stained white mustache. More cards, the scenes depicted getting more complex. A house. A car. The railway station. The airport. A plane. After six hours of this Weilin's brain felt like bean curd.

Next day was worse. He had forgotten half the responses from the previous day. The instructors were relentless: shouting, cajoling, bullying, prodding. Have you got a ticket? Yes, I've got a ticket. What's the fare? The fare is twelve dollars.

Back at the apartment Gordon began addressing him in English. This confused things somewhat, as Gordon spoke a dialect of English quite different from the one Weilin was being clubbed through at Blitzer. The vowels, the consonants, even some of the vocabulary and grammar were all different. Still, after a week Weilin was surprised to find that he could cope with some simple sentences. After a month he was making halting conversation: and at ten weeks, when Blitzer's entire inventory of flash cards had passed before his eyes, and fifteen thousand dollars of Gordon's money into Blitzer's bank account, he was watching the English channel on TV.

Gordon was delighted with him. "Ye're a very smart lad," he said over dinner, a day or two after Weilin finished at Blitzer. "I knew it, first time I saw ye. Ye'll go far in this world, young William."

"I hope so. Hope I can make a fortune and pay you back."

"Och, nonsense, laddie. It's recompense, after I took advantage of ye like that. The thing is to make something of yourself. D'ye have any ambition for your future life? Any profession in mind?"

Weilin shrugged. "The only thing I really like is mathematics."

“Hm. Well, nobody ever got rich from mathematics. Though I suppose ye might do well as an accountant. But ye must go to school, William, ye must go to school. Education is everything.”

So it was arranged that after the Christmas holiday Weilin would go to school.

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Christmas itself was an entire novelty to Weilin. He had never even heard of Christmas. The local Chinese did not bother about it much, their hearts being set on Lunar New Year (they never said “Spring Festival”), some weeks later; but there was a public holiday and some of the stores in lower Kowloon and Hong Kong side decorated their windows. Weilin came to recognize the Christmas god, a cheerful old foreigner in a red coat and white beard, associated somehow with fir trees, colored lights and snow. The fir trees and snow made Weilin think of the far northeast, of Flat All Around and his first terrible winter there. The kindly face of the Christmas god seemed to deny all such evil connotations, however.

Weilin might have learned more about the precise nature of the ceremonies appropriate to this god (called Old Man Christmas by the locals), but Gordon had relatives coming to visit from Scotland, and Weilin had to live elsewhere for two weeks.

Elsewhere was Chungking Mansions, a vast warren of a building down at the end of Nathan Road, a short walk from Star Ferry. A broad flight of metalled steps led up from the street, through the main entrance into a long arcade. The arcade was full of seedy stores selling clothes, toys, cheap electronics, umbrellas, briefcases, costume jewelry. There were other arcades branching off, so that you could easily get lost, at any rate for fifteen minutes or so, right there on the first floor. In the rear areas were some stores catering to the inhabitants of the Mansions: locksmiths, food stores, shoe repairs, a laundry, numerous *daaipaidongs*—stalls selling cheap cooked food, with a big wok heated by charcoal or calor gas and three or four folding tables set around.

Hidden away at the ends of short branch arcades were elevators to take you to the upper floors, of which there were seventeen. Some of

these upper floors were purely residential. Others contained guest houses, letting out rooms by the month or week—or in a few cases (according to Gordon) by the hour. The business card he had given Weilin had the name of a guest house on it, English on one side, Chinese on the other:

WASHINGTON GUEST HOUSE

Chungking Mansions, C Block, 13th Floor

Mr H.K. Wu, Prop.

Single and Double Rooms, All Air-Conditioned

With/Without Bathroom

TV Lounge, Full Kitchen Facilities

Papa Wu came to the door when Weilin rang. It was a glass door with the same name painted on it in the same two languages, and a translucent net curtain fixed to the inside. Papa Wu peered through the curtain at him, then opened the door. It led into a lounge, with a tank of tropical fish, a large TV set, and sofa chairs all round the walls. Two corridors led off from the lounge. A large plain teenage girl was sitting on one of the sofas eating boiled rice from a bowl while watching TV. She only moved her eyes to glance at Weilin when he came in, then back to the TV.

Papa Wu was jovial. “Friend of Mr Macleod, ha? Mr Macleod’s a good guy, done some favors for me. Always good to have a friend in the force. Consider yourself one of our family. Don’t be polite! You can eat here, in the main guest house with us. But your room’s in the other place.”

Papa Wu was a Cantonese of fifty or so, with fluent Shanghai-accented Mandarin. He owned the guest house, which was in two parts. In this part Papa Wu himself lived with his wife and five children. The children were surprisingly young, or else Papa Wu looked older than his age: the youngest only nine, the eldest eighteen. They all ate together in the lounge every evening, watching TV. One of the corridors was the family quarters, the other was guest rooms.

The “other place” was across on the other side of the elevator lobby. Same glass door with same painted characters: *Huashengdun Zhaodaisuo*, but this time no English. The TV in the lounge was smaller, and only one corridor led back from the lounge. There was no-one in the lounge; but as

Papa Wu was leading Weilin to his room, a door opened further along and a foreigner came out. He stood aside to let them pass. He was thirtyish, handsome and smartly dressed with a leather jacket, and had dark brown skin. He nodded at Papa Wu and stood aside to let them past.

“Most of the guests here are *achas*,” said Papa Wu, trying keys in a door. “From India or Pakistan. Decent people, you’ll be all right. Any difficulty, just come to see me.”

The room was large and clean, and had its own tiled bathroom attached. There was a big double bed with sheets and a quilt, and an air-conditioner which of course was redundant at this time of year. The single large window looked across to the back of another building, or perhaps one of the other blocks that comprised Chungking Mansions—to an identical window from which, then and at all the hours of all the days and nights Weilin spent in Washington Guest House, issued the chattering of mahjong tiles.

Weilin got to know the *achas* well during his two weeks at Chungking Mansions. The first he struck up an acquaintance with was Harry. Harry was short, bald and overweight, though no more than thirty. Weilin met him the second day, going into the lounge. Harry was sitting on a sofa in the lounge with a large cardboard box at his feet. He was pulling colored plastic toys out of the box one by one—pulling one out, scrutinizing it, sometimes making clicking noises with his tongue, putting it back. Weilin sat down to watch TV, but his eyes kept straying to the toys Harry was pulling out of his box. Seeing this, Harry made a little laugh.

“It’s rubbish,” he said, “but it sells.”

All the *achas* seemed to be in some small business like this, buying and selling things. “Import-export” was what Harry always called it. Harry himself did business with the toy factories in the New Territories. Lal sold bags and briefcases from an alcove in one of the arcades at the Mansions’ street level. Chandu, who shared a room with Lal at the end of the corridor, was something to do with jewelry, though unlike Harry he never brought his merchandise to the guest house. Ranesh—the handsome man with the leather jacket—seemed to be concerned with textiles, import-export.

Ranesh was by far the best looking of all the *achas*. His skin was dark, but he had rectilinear European features, deep still eyes, a tall, well-formed physique, and a brooding intensity of manner that made Weilin think he must have endured some shattering personal tragedy; though in fact, according to Harry, it was nothing but worry about his business, which was not going very well.

Weilin liked the *achas*. Their manner was very free and open, and they easily admitted him into their confidences. Even Ranesh emerged from his self-absorption sufficiently to explain *letters of credit* to Weilin, and to pass some scathing remarks about the business climate in the Colony.

“The locals hate us *achas*,” said Ranesh, who by this time knew that Weilin was a recent immigrant from the mainland. “They call us ‘hairy monkeys’ in Cantonese” (which was regrettably true, though “*acha*” was much the commoner epithet). “They complain that if the Chinese can sell something for a dollar, the *achas* will start selling it for ninety-nine cents.”

“Ranesh, dear fellow, do not abuse the poor boy’s own countrymen in front of him. We must all struggle to make a living.” This was Chandu, who always took an eirenic line on every topic. “After all, why are we here? Because the business climate in our own country is quite impossible, is it not so? Just as it is in mainland China, insofar as there can be said to be any business climate at all in that most distressful country. So let us be thankful that this splendid colony is here in which for us to exercise our entrepreneurial talents. And let us be grateful to the British authorities for making these opportunities available to us.”

“British authorities—*cha!*” said Lal scornfully. Lal was a cynic and a pessimist, though a cheerful one. “They’ll sell us down the river without a thought, if old Mao puts the screws on. Or run for their lives, leaving us to face the People’s Liberation Army and the vengeance of the locals.”

The *achas* always referred to the Hong Kong Cantonese as “the locals”. They did not mix with them much, though Harry and Lal could both speak passable Cantonese. Weilin thought they looked on Chungking Mansions as something of a refuge from “the locals”. However, they did not seem to regard Weilin as a local. With his poor Cantonese and now-excellent English, and sensing that he was somehow under Papa Wu’s

particular guardianship while in the Mansions, they made him an honorary *acha*, and took him along for meals at the cheap *acha* restaurants on the second floor. Weilin thought the *acha* food textureless and limited in range, but he liked his new friends too much to say so.

On Christmas Eve Weilin sat up with the *achas* in the guest house lounge, watching a special Christmas variety program on the English TV channel. The *achas* had got in a good supply of San Miguel beer and had a lot of food sent up from the second floor. They talked in a sentimental way about their homes in India and laughed at the jokes of the English comedians, which Weilin couldn't understand at all. They let him taste the beer, though only a single small glassful.

At midnight Harry brought out a bottle of whisky—Scottish whisky, he said, which everyone knew was the best kind. They all drank a tiny glass of whisky, toasting each other. There was a debate about whether Weilin should be given whisky, with Harry and Ranesh in favor, Lal opposed, and Chandu making the case for universal harmony. At last it was allowed, and Weilin took one of the tiny glasses, the liquid scorching his throat and making his face red. The *achas* all laughed good-naturedly, and drank another toast. Weilin felt very happy. The fact of the whisky being Scottish made him think of Gordon, who he knew was also Scottish, and of his kindness and tenderness. He reflected on the comfort and ease of his new life, and the horrors of a mere few months ago. He thought of an old poem:

The King is at home, at home in his capital,
Content and happy he drinks his wine.

The poem had been taught him by Mother, sitting at the table in their apartment in Seven Kill Stele while Father played chess with Lecturer Wang Baojiang. He could remember the moment clearly—so clearly!—though it seemed as remote in time now as the King whose loving subjects had made the poem twenty-two dynasties ago—three thousand years as the crow flies. In the morning, however, Weilin found that the whisky had given him a splitting headache.