

## Chapter 33

Enterprise Blossoms in the Middle Kingdom  
Big Fu is Overwhelmed by Greatness

“When I heard the machine-gun I thought for sure it was the sticks,” said Asan, lighting another cigarette. His cigarettes were State Express 555, an American brand. He lit them with a gold lighter the size of a small brick.

“I was down below, looking for good hiding places. And lucky for me I found some. I found the best one, in fact—right down on the keel, under the duckboards. Up to my ass in stinking water. Well, they came poking around but they didn’t find me. I heard the machine-gun again—I guess when they were shooting at you in the water. Then it got quiet and I chanced a look out through the window in the living quarters. I saw them sailing away. I still thought they were the sticks, so when they were far enough away I figured I was safe and went up on deck. Just as the real sticks were arriving from the other side! That’s why the pirates took off—they saw the coast guard coming up. And the stupid fucking sticks, instead of going after the pirates, boarded us! I’d gone below again, but they found me. They knew I was down there somewhere, they’d seen me come up on deck.”

Hearing Asan use the word “pirate” brought everything back, all too vividly. Oddly, William had never named the pirates in his thoughts. They had seemed to him elemental, unnamable, demon spirits from another region. But of course, they were just pirates—Occupation: Pirate.

Kin to the wild but fascinating characters that had charmed him in *Treasure Island* as a child. Thus did William grasp for a moment the difference between literature and reality—a difference which is often revealed to bookish people too late, or never at all.

Asan looked like a million dollars. Natty western style suit, crisp white shirt, Shandong silk tie. Even here, in the bar of the Shanghai Mansions, he stood out. There were foreigners here—with China opening up now, there were foreigners everywhere—but most favored slacks and open-necked shirts. The Chinese were still in Sun Yatsen suits (which the foreigners called Mao suits, and which were, in point of fact, Lenin suits), though the kind of high-status Chinese who had access to the Shanghai Mansions were all smartly dressed, with decent leather shoes. Only William and Asan were in western-style suits. Asan had actually been wearing shades when he came in—a foreign designer brand, with a tiny label still stuck to the top corner of one lens—but these were now on the table in front of him, with his State Express cigarettes and gold lighter and Qingdao beer.

“Well, the sticks pulled me in. They could see I wasn’t a fisherman. It was no big thing, not compared with what happened to Little Fu anyway. I saw his head, the poor kid’s fucking head, rolling about right there on the deck. I lost my fucking lunch when I saw that, no kidding. After that I didn’t care what they did with me, just so long as they did it on dry land, away from those pirates.”

Asan paused to take a pull on his beer. The watch that appeared discreetly from under his shirt cuff as he reached for the glass was a gold Rolex.

“So what did they do to you?” prompted William.

“I got a year in a camp in Guangxi Province. What a dump! The work wasn’t bad, but Ai! the food. I was a bag of bones when I came out of there! Then after I’d done my time I was supposed to stay there. They said even though I’d done the time, the camp was my unit now. I was a free worker, but I had to work there, in their stinking quarry, for five bucks a week. Well, I said fuck that and headed back to the northeast.”

“Didn’t they try to stop you?”

“If they did, they didn’t try very hard. Well, of course I couldn’t afford to get a ticket all the way to the northeast. Shanghai was as far as I could get. Just like when we set out, you remember?”

He laughed at the symmetry, and took another pull at his beer.

“I remember very well,” said William. “And it seems you stayed here.”

“Yes. It wasn’t really intentional. Just happened. I thought it would be the decent thing to do, to call on Mrs Fu and tell her about her boy. Shit, why’d they have to do that?”

“I don’t know, Asan. They were very bad guys.”

“You got that right. You saw them do that? Take his head off?”

“Yes, I saw.” William thought he didn’t want to say anything to Asan about what the pirates had done to Little Fu before they killed him. He could see that even at this distance in time—it had been more than ten years ago—Asan was still genuinely upset about Little Fu.

“Those mother fuckers. Well, anyway, I went to see Mrs Fu. Her old man had died a few months before. Then I had to tell her her younger son was dead. She kind of knew, anyway. It had been a year and a half, and she’d heard nothing. But she’s a strong lady. Didn’t shed a tear, not in front of me, anyway. Her older son was still in the northeast, of course. So she was pretty lonely. She was glad to have me around, I guess. Anyway, she let me stay there. She was very kind. Because I’d been close to her son, I guess. She sort of felt having me around was like next best to having him around. And there was her religion, of course.”

“Oh, yes. She’s a Christian. I remember.”

“Yes. There’s a nest of them in Shanghai. They take turns to meet in each other’s houses. When they came to her house, of course I felt I had to take part. Wa! how they go on! Singing, chanting sutras, praying! It scared me to death. I mean, what if somebody heard them from the street? It’s against the law, to be a Christian. I told her right out, she could get arrested.”

“What did she say?”

“She said that would mean Yesu had chosen them to be martyrs. It would be a great honor, she said.”

“You have to admire their nerve.”

“Maybe. But *I* wasn’t going to get pulled in for counter-revolutionary activities. I’ve seen all I want to see of Reform Through Labor. So I knew I had to get out of there. Well, I’d been checking out Shanghai. It’s a lively town. Was, even then. This was, what? ’72, early ’72. I got back into the book business. Oh, there were book stashes all over Shanghai. It was easier than Flat All Around. I was going round all the units, nosing around, finding out where the Red Guards had stored the things they took. In Shanghai it wasn’t just books, it was all kinds of stuff. Paintings, porcelain, antiques, gramophone records. Shit, I had two stalls running. But Shanghai people are smart. The units realized they could cut out the middle man and sell the goods themselves. I lost my suppliers. Things were tough for a while. Then Mrs Fu got me an introduction to Old Zhang. He’s a big wheel in the Railroad Bureau. It was through him we got our tickets to the south, remember? Well, I got to thinking about how difficult it was to move around the country. Just getting a rail ticket is a killer. But there’s a big demand, you know. Aside from official business, the Cultural Revolution scattered people all over the country, so now there are more people than ever who have to travel a thousand miles to see their relatives. Most people do it through their units, of course; but there’s still a lot of folk that just want a ticket. And there are generally tickets to spare, if you don’t mind going by an indirect route. It’s just a question of connecting the buyer and the seller.”

William laughed. “So you’re China’s first travel agent.”

Asan waved this aside. “That was just the beginning. Big Fu takes care of that now. Little Fu’s brother, that is—I brought him down from the northeast. He didn’t have a residence permit, but then, neither did I. We were making so much money it didn’t matter. Now I’m working on freight. That’s the thing nowadays. This last couple of years they’ve been licensing private factories in the country districts all over. They need raw materials, and they have to move their stuff. They can’t do it through the Bureau, it takes six months of standing in line to get the fucking permits. So they come to me and I fix it. It’s very profitable.” Asan laughed gaily. “I’m a real capitalist.”

“You certainly seem to be doing well. But aren’t you afraid the wind will change?”

“So if it does, what can I do about it? Live for the moment, that’s the slogan in China nowadays. There have been many changes, Little Liang. After Lin Biao got his ticket punched in ’71, nobody cared about class struggle any more. They knew it was just a game among the leaders, with the common people as pawns. They started looking to their own advantage. You’re right, of course: if there’s another Cultural Revolution, I’ll be out of business. Well, I survived the first one, and I’ll survive the next one. At least this time I’ve got some funds squirreled away.”

“Your funds won’t help you, if the Red Guards come along.”

“Not if they’re in China, no. But if I can stash something away overseas, in America say, I’ll be more secure. I wanted to ask you about that. Do you know a way to do it?”

William laughed. “I should have known you had a proposition.”

Asan shrugged. “We have to help each other. You can’t say I didn’t help you in the past.”

“No, I can’t. All right, we’ll figure something out. It’ll be tricky, with the currency non-convertible, but there’s always a way.”

They finished their beer. Asan wanted to show William his apartment. William called the waiter over and asked for a check. The guy did a double-take, then went away. Asan was grinning.

“What? What did I do?”

“Tell you outside.”

Asan had a taxi waiting outside, an ancient black Skoda with wooden fixtures and worn leather seats. “Hired him for the whole day,” he explained to William as they got in. “He’s all right. I know him. You can say anything.”

“All right. But what did I say back there that was so funny?”

“Oh. ‘Settle the account’. You said to the waiter, ‘settle the account’.”

“That’s funny?”

“That’s *bad*. Things change fast in China nowadays, Little Liang. Things change, words change. You’re out of touch.”

“Why? What’s so bad?”

“‘Settle the account’—those are loaded words in China now. You should say ‘add it up’.”

“What’s the difference?”

“A lot of people got persecuted in the sixties and seventies. *You* know that. Now they’ve got their authority back. They’re going after the people who persecuted them. ‘Settle accounts’ means taking revenge. Also repaying a favor. Somebody gave you a break, you know, you repay the favor—that’s settling accounts, too. But mostly it means revenge. You remember the Cultural Revolution, you know what it was like. Not too many people were getting breaks.”

Asan’s apartment was very grand, inside a new-built compound with a big iron gate. There were parquet floors, air conditioners, some fine new furniture—hi-fi in brushed-chrome cabinets, a huge Japanese TV. The rooms smelt of new paint and floor polish. The door had been opened for them by a middle-aged woman with a rough peasant face.

“Housekeeper,” explained Asan when they were at ease on the balcony. “She’s ugly, ain’t she? But she keeps the place clean and doesn’t distract me. I tried having a live-in girlfriend. Forget it! Whining, arguing, spending all your money, *You Don’t Pay Attention To Me*. Who needs it? I can get fresh young pussy any time I want it, why waste time over it?”

It was a warm March afternoon. From an alley outside the compound could be heard the sound of children playing. Somewhere in the middle distance some heavy machinery was working: thunk, thunk, thunk. The housekeeper had brought them iced Pepsi before retiring. On the glass-topped coffee-table were some glossy Hong Kong magazines, and Asian versions of western magazines—including the copy of *Time* with William on the cover, which had caused Asan to write his letter. It was an English-language publication, and of course Asan couldn’t read a word of it; but he had recognized William’s face and had someone translate the article for him.

“You should start a family,” said William. “You can’t go on living like a wayward teenager for ever.”

“Why not? I like it. It suits me. A family? Hey, sure. When I retire, maybe. Ten years from now. Someone from a decent family herself, with good connections. Connections are everything, you know, Little Liang. I tell you, there isn’t an official in Shanghai who doesn’t know me. I flatter them, kiss up to them, bring them gifts, help them out with their problems, send nice clean girls over to play Kiss The Lizard with them.

And they're all connected to the other cities: Beijing, Wuhan, Guangzhou. I travel round the country, and get an Emperor's welcome anywhere I land up. I tell you, Little Liang, life is good." Asan laughed easily, and flicked his cigarette over the balustrade into the courtyard below.

Inside the apartment a telephone began to ring. Asan turned his head at the sound, but made no move. He was looking thoroughly relaxed, having removed his jacket and tie on entering the apartment. And his shoes, of course: he and William had both put on soft leather slippers, and had their feet up now on recliners. William could hear the housekeeper taking the call. She came out to the balcony. "It's Mr Hou in Chongqing," she said.

"My main contact in the interior." Asan got up to take the call. He was gone for some time. Sitting there on the balcony, looking out over the rooftops, William's thoughts drifted. He had left Shanghai a pauper, returned a millionaire. What if he were to go back to Seven Kill Stele? He recalled one of the old poems:

I left home young. Now, old, I return.  
The local dialect hasn't changed . . .

The poem had been one of Mother's favorites. Thinking of Mother, he thought of Father, and of all that had happened. He could see clearly the room he had known in the Professors' block at Hibiscus Slope Teachers' College: Mother's character scroll on the wall, Father in his chair listening to the gramophone, the window above the bed looking out to Mount Tan. The hollow behind its screen of bamboo; Yuezhū dancing in the twilight. Now the old rage burned in his stomach. He tried to turn his thoughts away from it, but could not. Such an ache, after so many years! This phrase—*settle accounts* . . .

Asan had come out through the sliding door on to the balcony, and had been standing by the door grinning down at him in his reverie.

"What?"

"How much are you worth, Little Liang?"

"Huh? Heaven, I don't know. It's all artificial anyway. On paper? Eighty, maybe eighty-five million."

“So much? Really? Wa! That means you’re probably the richest person in China at this moment.”

“Mmm. If you don’t count Hong Kong, that’s probably right.”

Asan lit a cigarette and went over to the balustrade. “Makes my little enterprises look like very small turnips.”

“Don’t say that. You’ve done amazingly well, in a very tough environment. And laid a good foundation. With all your connections, I mean. If China stays open for a few years, you’ll probably end up richer than me.”

Asan had turned and was leaning with his back to the balustrade. He smiled at the possibility. “Maybe. But you know, it’s not the money. It’s the things you can do.”

“Is it? I really haven’t thought about it. Been too busy making the money. I’m not sure you’re right, anyway. In America, what you can do is strictly controlled by the law.”

Asan laughed. “Yes. That’s your disadvantage. In China, there is no law. Only connections.”

\* \* \*

At Asan’s suggestion, they went to see Mrs Fu. She still lived in the old winding alley off Sluice Gate Road.

It was eerie to come again, after so many years, to the same door in the same wall. Seeing Asan had not been eerie because he was so transformed, from a coarse young delinquent to an individual of wealth and influence. Here, by contrast, very little had changed, except that everything seemed much smaller and dingier than William remembered. The furnishings of the reception room were just as they had been, the only exception a character scroll on the wall facing the window out into the courtyard. It was a peculiar sort of character scroll. Most character scrolls were old poems, from the Tang or Sung dynasty. Sometimes they were exhortations or maxims, from Mao or (in Hong Kong) from Mencius. This one was nothing like that. Presumably it was a sutra, a Christian sutra.

The Master of Heaven is my shepherd.  
 I lack nothing.  
 He takes me to lie down in green fields.  
 He leads me beside calm waters.  
 He restores my spirit.  
 He shows me the way of benevolence and truth—praise to Him!  
 Even if I walk through the valley of death's shadow, I fear nothing,  
 For he is with me, His strong hand comforts me.  
 He spreads a banquet for me in front of my enemies.  
 He crowns me with fragrance. My bowl overflows.  
 I know that righteousness and justice will follow me through this world;  
 And then I shall live in His Hall of Peace for ever.

Mrs Fu was exactly the same, too. You couldn't even say she looked ten years older. Same straight-backed dignity, same calm, sad face. There were other people living in the house, it seemed. A girl had opened the street door for them, a coarse young girl with a thick Zhejiang countryside accent, acting apparently as a house servant. And as they were seated talking in the reception room a very old man came in, and crossed the room without paying the slightest attention to them, tapping his way forward slowly with a stick, disappearing down the corridor that led to the bedrooms. Mrs Fu did not seem to feel obliged to explain the presence of these people, only commenting, after the old fellow had gone: He's blind, I'm afraid.

"Asan tells me you have done well for yourself in America," said Mrs Fu.

"Yes," said William. "I have been lucky."

"I hope you are sharing your good luck with those who are less fortunate. That's the right way."

"I'm afraid I really haven't done much in that direction. I have been too busy to think of it."

"It's never too late." Mrs Fu smiled at him. "The Master of Heaven is very patient."

Big Fu came over to have dinner with them. He was indeed a big fellow, square and handsome, in whose face William could see the ghost

of a shadow of Mr Fu, as he remembered him on his bed of death. He was in smart casual clothes—slacks and loafers, short-sleeved shirt in pastel blue—and sported the compulsory gold Rolex.

“We thought you had died,” he said, shaking hands. “Asan said you jumped into the sea, far from land, to escape my brother’s fate.”

“I was lucky,” said William. “I am very sorry about your brother.”

“I will consider *you* my brother,” said Big Fu, holding on a little too long to William’s hand, beaming a little too eagerly.

“For you I should have slain the fatted calf,” said Mrs Fu to William. “But I’m afraid I have lost the habits of luxury.”

They went in to dinner. The young peasant girl served table, sitting down with the others as Mrs Fu said grace, then rising again to fetch dishes from the kitchen. Mrs Fu herself helped the old blind man to his chair. There was another woman present, a plump woman of forty or so who smiled at everyone in a rather silly way, and giggled, putting a hand over her mouth, whenever anyone addressed her. These house guests paid no particular attention to William. They seemed to regard him as just another feature of the passing scene. Big Fu, however, was clearly overwhelmed by him.

“Such a great man!” he murmured, delicately placing some morsels into William’s bowl. “A Wall Street genius, sitting here at our table!”

The food lived down to Mrs Fu’s modesty: a single meat dish, some boiled green vegetables in a nondescript sauce, plain white rice, unspiced bean curd. The only drink on offer was weak red tea. Mrs Fu asked polite questions about Hong Kong and America. The plump woman giggled. The peasant girl aerated her sinuses from time to time, but was otherwise silent. The blind man said nothing. Big Fu gushed. Asan enjoyed his proprietorship of William for a while, then began to give signs of restlessness, perhaps regretting the visit. At last William was glad to get away.

Back in the taxi, which had been waiting outside for them the whole evening, Asan explained about the house guests.

“They’re just people she’s taken in. People she feels sorry for. She does that all the time. Since her old man died. I guess she’s lonely. The fat woman is some kind of retard. She suffered somehow in the Cultural Revolution, and it broke her mind. The girl is a whore. You know, these

country girls come into the city without a residence permit, looking for work, and get themselves into trouble. The blind guy I don't know anything about."

"Well, she's very kind, to take people in like that."

"Huh! You don't know the half of it. When I was living there, she used to bring beggars home. I couldn't believe it—beggars she found sleeping on the street! She'd feed 'em, wash their clothes, give 'em a dollar or two, send 'em on their way. One of them had fleas. They got away from him, all over the house. I was scratching for a week!"

"Wasn't she mad about that?"

"Not her! She said the fleas were a gift from Yesu, to teach us humility. Well, I blew up over that. I said, lady, I've been poor all my life, I don't need any lessons in humility. People like that, you know, well-born people, they never have a clue what life's like for the rest of us. They think they do, but they really don't, and never can. It's a closed door to them. If you haven't grown up poor, your life is a dream."

"You said that to her?"

"Not so much said as shouted. I was pissed off. Fleas! I spent my whole childhood picking fleas out of my clothes and lice out of my hair. Now, here in Shanghai, I finally get on my feet and suddenly I'm scratching again. I was mad."

"I'm surprised she didn't throw you out."

"Oh, that wouldn't be her way. She heard me out, then she said: 'You're right, Little Brother, we were raised in different worlds. But we are both human and we both know how to suffer. Don't reproach me with having lived a soft life. My last ten years have not been soft, you know very well. I have suffered a lot. That suffering is my own gift to Yesu. I offer it to him gladly. But you know, it will not be enough. Yesu especially favors the poor. Even in all my suffering, I have never really been poor. So I'm at a disadvantage with Yesu. By nature he loves you more than he loves me. So I have to work especially hard to get merit with Yesu. Don't blame me if I overdo it sometimes.'"

"Wa! What a strange philosophy!"

"Yes. That's how they are, the Christians. I tell you, they're a peculiar crowd. It would never do for me. Nor you, either, I'd guess, Little Liang."

But they give a good example. The world needs people like that, though I'm not sure it needs too many. Did you see how she treated you?"

"What? What do you mean? She was perfectly polite."

Asan laughed. "Yes. But that's not what I meant. Cast your mind back eleven years, little Liang, to your previous appearance at her door. What were you?"

"Why, I was a dirty kid. A beggar, in rags."

"Yes. And today you're a millionaire. Like I said: at this moment in time, you're probably the richest guy in China. Did she treat you any different?"

"I don't think so."

Asan nodded. "Exactly the same. Now, I ask you, how many people will show the same face to a millionaire as they will to a beggar?"

"Very few, I should think."

"You're damn right. She's the only one *I* ever met."

\* \* \*

The night club was an unofficial one, something Asan knew about, in the basement of a building in the old French Concession. There was a band: middle-aged men with glasses playing saxophone, trombone, double bass. They played sentimental American tunes from the forties. In front of them was a dance floor on which two middle-aged couples were fox-trotting carefully. One of the women was wearing a skirt. At a dozen little tables scattered around the room, patrons were sitting, talking in low voices, watching the dancers and the band. Men heavily outnumbered women, and hardly any of those seated were as old as the dancers, or the band. Leather jackets were popular. So were cigarettes: William's eyes smarted from the tobacco smoke. After the dash and buzz of New York, the scene seemed to him very melancholy. It was a source of great pride to Asan, though.

"The best in Shanghai," he said, leading the way to an empty table against the wall at one side. "They only let in people they know. I do a lot of business in here."

A white-jacketed waiter drifted over from the bar at the opposite side. “Anything you like,” said Asan, taking out a cigarette. “Whisky, brandy, vodka, they have everything. They can do cocktails, too.” He waved his cigarette hand breezily to indicate the scope of the night club’s facilities. “Whatever you like.”

William smiled to hear the word *cocktail* in Chinese. Asan had used the most direct translation: “chicken” and “tail”. “A scotch will be just fine,” he said. “With water, half and half.” Then: “Things are really changing.”

Asan ordered a brandy. “Puts lead in your pencil,” he said as the waiter ambled away. “I feel like getting my end wet tonight. How about you, Little Liang? I know where we can get nice clean girls. A virgin, even, if you want one—fresh from the countryside. You can poke all her holes, same price—even give her a beating, if you like.”

“I don’t think so.” William was watching the waiter make his way back to the bar, and thinking again what he had been thinking on and off since paying the check at Shanghai Mansions. “Remember when we tried to rob that stupid bank?” he said, to change the subject.

“Shit, yes!” Asan leaned back and laughed. “That asshole we woke up. *Zenme hui shi? Zenme hui shi?*” He laughed again. “Flat All Around—we’re well out of that stinking dump.”

“Did you ever go back?”

“Sure. Last year. My Ma’s still there. I want to set her up down here, but she won’t come. Oh, up there everything’s just as it was. You wouldn’t know eleven years had passed.”

Asan’s manner had changed somewhere in there. He seemed watchful, expectant. He said nothing for a few beats, letting a silence develop, bringing William out.

“This business . . .” William had to clear his throat and start again. “This business of settling accounts. What do people actually do? I mean, to the ones who persecuted them?”

Asan shrugged. “Depends. Most often, you know, people coming back from the countryside end up reinstated in the same work unit that sent them off to shovel pig shit for ten years. Then they’re working alongside the people who sent them. Of course, if they can get any

authority they'll make life miserable for those people. Criticize them, get them in trouble with the authorities, refuse them promotions, get them moved to crappy housing."

The waiter appeared with their drinks. William took a mouthful of the warm, rough whisky, and wished he had ordered a beer. He would have a headache in the morning, he knew. He had ordered the whisky just to appear sophisticated to Asan. As if, with all his wealth, with his face on the cover of *Time* magazine, he needed to prove such things! But when once two people have established between themselves which is the superior, which the subordinate, the terms are mighty hard to change.

"Whatever they can do, they do it," continued Asan, after sipping his own drink. "A lot of those people who were running the movements back in the sixties, they have kids in school or college. When they graduate, they get assigned to a work unit. Well, there are good work units and there are lousy ones. If I helped put a cap on you in the Cultural Revolution, and now you're back in your job at the Education Bureau, are you going to give my kid a good assignment?" Asan laughed. "The fuck you are. Stuff like that. But there's really no limit. Just depends who you know, and what his price is. You can have somebody killed, even. No problem! In Shanghai, a thousand bucks will do it. Or get them framed on something nasty. Counter-revolutionary agitation—fifteen years!"

William felt the liquor warm in his belly. *Settling accounts*. Yes, accounts should be settled, the balances cleared. He sat forward, elbows on the table, and caught Asan's eyes with his own.

"Asan, old comrade. You said you have good connections everywhere. All over the country. Right?"

Sure. Asan was looking at him levelly. *He knows what's coming*, thought William. *This is a guy who's bargained and dealt and negotiated himself out of the gutter. He can read faces. He knows what I'm thinking.*

"If you wanted to settle an account, I guess you could do it."

"I guess. Depends on the situation. It's a question of finding the right person. And expense—for sure that person's going to want something for his trouble."

“So let’s say this: With your connections and my money, we could nail anybody. Anybody in China.”

“That’s a fair statement.” Asan was still looking straight back at him—cool, unblinking. William could not keep eye contact. He looked down at his drink.

“Asan, old comrade. I have some accounts to settle.”