

## Chapter 48

Discontent in Wealth, High Above the City  
An Old Acquaintance Has Taken Poetic Advice

William found he could less and less bear to be in his suit at the Pierre. He had installed full connectivity there, with every financial screen service known to man, as well as in-house terminals for the firm's own systems; but now the screens scrolled their contents mainly to thin air, and he worked through the long hot days of July and late into the nights at his office high over Park Avenue—which was, of course, similarly equipped. Yet even there, with nothing to distract but the miniature cars crawling silently along the avenue far below, he felt himself losing his concentration.

Something was missing in his life, and William knew all too plainly what it was. He had thought Lionel was filling the void, but could see now that that had been an illusion born of wishful thinking.

Yet what to do? It seemed absurd, to be possessed of so much wealth and yet unable to solve such a straightforward problem. He nursed his pain, staring unseeing out over the night-time city. This ache, this desperate melancholy—he knew what it was, he knew what was missing in his life—what had once been there, and now was gone. Looking out at the hundred thousand lights of the city, still alive at two a.m., he allowed himself to think of it. The light, quiet apartment in Kowloon, his math books, the kitchen all so clean, the smell of the city as you stepped

outside in air-conditioning season, that characteristic Hong Kong smell—food, joss, garbage and the sea.

And of course Gordon. Gordon's irreverent smile, his sly humor, his large strong hands on William's naked shoulders, the beer on his breath. Gordon on late shift, lying in bed till noon, Gordon on the beach at Repulse Bay—they had ventured out a few times—lying back on the sand laughing loud and unrestrained at some joke now forgotten.

But surely this was something that could be managed. There are very few things, surely, that wealth cannot adjust. A few, perhaps, but very few. Late one night, from his eyrie there up above the city, William picked up the phone and began calling.

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The agency he settled on was remarkably fast. Twelve days; and a call, in the middle of the night, from the Emperor hotel in Bangkok, Thailand. The Thai consul was obliging, and the visa came through that afternoon, and William was on a flight that evening. He checked into the President, which the guide book rated highest, and booked a car and driver through the front desk.

It was an all-day drive from Bangkok. The clogged, raucous streets of the capital gave way to straight, level country roads bordered by fields. Then the land began to fold up in contours, and stretches of forest appeared. The road was narrower and emptier now, little country towns drowsing in the August heat. Confused by the change of time zones, and somewhat sluggish from a mild but tenacious influenza-like infection that had been dogging him for some weeks past, William himself slept, stretched out on the back seat of the limousine.

It was late afternoon when they arrived. The driver was patting him gently on the shoulder. "Sir! Sir!" The dirty brown faces of children were all around, staring at him. Every child in the town seemed to have come to see the big shining Mercedes. When William stirred and sat up they breathed a collective sigh, as if of wonder. The driver shouted at them in Thai, and they backed off a foot or two.

"This is the place?"

“Yes, Sir. Nong-khlan. Main town in this district.”

William got out of the car, the children parting in front as he advanced. The heat was not as bad here as in Bangkok, though still heavy after the air-conditioning in the car. He took off the light summer jacket he was wearing and threw it onto the back seat.

A few yards down the street was a little store or food parlor open to the sidewalk. He could see some men at the tables in the shade, looking at the car, leaning back on their chairs to look, one standing.

“Ask those men where the foreigner lives.”

The driver went off and came back. “He live on outside part of town, Sir, next river. That way.”

They drove half a mile. Here the road turned to run parallel with a small turbid river fringed with trees. On the river side of the road was a quite imposing temple, with a white stupa rising from behind a wall, and the gilded head of a large Buddha statue visible. Further along were some houses, each on its own plot of land, each surrounded by a wall. The limo pulled up outside one of these houses. Through an open-work wrought-iron gate in the wall could be seen a small courtyard or garden, shaded by a single large fig tree, with a stone table and little barrel-shaped stone seats set out. Two small boys were playing marbles on the ground. When the limo driver called to them from the gate they scampered inside calling “*Por-por! Por-por!*”

Gordon appeared in the door of the house as William approached the gate. He was naked from the waist up, wearing a floor-length sarong made from a single strip of maroon cloth. He was plump and brown, much heavier than William remembered, his waistline quite gone; but still unmistakably a foreigner among the Thai, familiar mats of tight-curling hair on his chest and arms still mostly dark, though now beginning to be streaked with silver.

“Guid Lord,” he said. “It’s ma sweet William.”

Gordon opened the gate and took him through a narrow hallway to the back of the house. There was a woman here, a Thai some way into her thirties, William guessed, dark-skinned and starting to be plump, but pleasant-featured, and with a flowing grace of movement as she rose to greet him. She put her hands together, palms flat together in front of her as

if praying like a Christian, and bowed her head over them in the gesture called *sawat-di*. Gordon spoke some words in Thai, and they passed on to an open verandah at the back of the house, looking down onto and across the river.

The river was brisk, up here in this hill country, swirling and churning its way down toward the plains. Gordon sat William in a wicker armchair, and took another alongside him. The woman came out with drinks for them—iced coffee made with condensed milk, in tall glass tumblers. She spoke to Gordon in Thai and made a merry little laugh, then knelt down to light a mosquito coil. The two boys who had been playing marbles were now watching from the back door of the house, and had been joined by three or four other children of various sizes and genders.

Gordon turned his head to look across at William. He laughed; then turned back to contemplate the river.

“How ever did ye find me?”

“Detective agency in Singapore. They have branches all over South-east Asia. Don’t worry, they’re very discreet. I think there’s some kind of statute of limitations, anyway.”

“Och, I’m no worried. I’ve enough guid contacts here tae keep me out of trouble.”

“Is the lady your wife?”

“Ay, all fine and legal, and sanctified by the bonzes at yon temple there.” Gordon turned to smile at William again. “I’ve nae more tae do wi’ boys now. I’m a reformed character, William, and very well content wi’ it.”

“Are the children all yours?”

“Indeed they are. Seven, I believe—or is it eight?” Gordon laughed easily. “I will take some savage woman, she shall rear my dusky race.’ I took my cue from the poet, ye see.”

Gordon laughed again, the same carefree laugh. He was plainly very much at ease with his circumstances. His hair was graying now at the sides, William noticed, but his face was unlined, the mouth and eyes full of humor. William asked how he lived, in this remote place.

“Och, it’s nae that remote. Did ye come up from Bangkok?”

“Yes.”

“Ye could have flown in to Chiang Mai, saved a few hours on the

road. It's only eighty miles away. Perfectly civilized, there's an excellent English bookstore. The bus tae Bangkok is ten hours each way. How long did it take ye in yon car?"

William looked at his watch. "Six, six and a half."

"Ay, the bus doesnae go direct. That's how I found this town, ye know. I had someone at the terminus in Bangkok put me on an up-country bus. Then I sat on the bus for as long as I could bear. Och, it's a filthy ride. Peasants with live chickens in sacks, a platoon of drunken soldiers throwing up in the aisle, a brace of American hippies, God rot them all. Worse than Princess Street at Hogmanay. Well, when I could stand nae more of it, I got off. It was a week before I even knew the name of the place."

"Was that right after you left Hong Kong?"

"Ay. Well, a few weeks. Malaysia was my first choice—but the British authorities are a wee bit too present there, though the country is independent. I thought Thailand would be just the ticket, and bless me I was right. I came out here, set maself up as a teacher of English—just for cover, d'ye know, with what I brought from Hong Kong I'd no need tae work, then or ever. Pranee" (he pointed back to the house with a movement of the head) "was one of my pupils. Very bright she was, too, though I never did get much English intae her pretty head. One thing led tae another, and next thing I knew, I'd all these bairns scampering round my feet." Gordon laughed the same easy laugh. "Difficult to move much, wi' a tribe of kiddies."

"But isn't it dull here? So quiet. Nothing to do."

"Not at all, laddie. I'm well involved wi' the local gentry. Though I didnae get much English intae the wife, she taught me good Thai. I'd always an ear for languages, and it's no much different from Cantonese in the sounds—and only five tones instead of seven. Alphabet's a mean bitch: the vowel sometimes to the left of its wee consonant, sometimes to the right, sometimes above, sometimes below, sometimes on all sides at once. I clubbed it intae submission, though, and I can dash off a business letter as sweet as ye please the now. We go visiting, and we've one or two wee business ventures on the go, joint enterprises with our local friends. And then there's excellent hunting up in the hills. This is the last of the cultivated land here. Northward"—Gordon waved with a hand to indi-

cate the other side of the river—"it's hardwood forest all the way tae China. Ye've tae watch ye don't venture into the Golden Triangle, of course. Certain roads, certain towns, ye'll run intae someone's private army and they'll use ye for target practice if the spirit moves them." Gordon chuckled. "But the boundaries are well known, and there's plenty of room. First-class fishing, no permits or licenses required thank ye very much. Game birds, any number of varieties. Deer, hares. A sort of wild pig that cooks up very nicely, if ye like a bit of crackling. Tiger, if ye're very lucky. I've a tiger-skin rug in the house I'll show ye. Full-grown male, shot him maself in the mountains over by the Burmese border in '78. Pranee cured the skin, she's a very capable woman. Och, I'm quite the country gentleman."

The lady of the house appeared with the limo driver hovering in the door behind her. William had forgotten all about him, left him outside in the car.

"He wants to know could he go and get dinner," Gordon interpreted. "Ye'll be staying the night wi' us, I'll hear no argument about it. There's a wee hotel in the town yon driver can put up in. It's no much, but they'll give him a bed, a mosquito net and a whore for the night."

William pulled from his pocket the stack of bills he had exchanged at the hotel. He peeled off a random half-dozen and gave them to the driver, who backed off bowing and gibbering in Thai, his English quite swept away by gratitude.

Gordon was chuckling quietly. "With what ye gave him," he said when the man had left, "he could buy the whole blessed hotel. It seems ye've done well for yourself, sweet William."

"Yes. In fact, I'm rich." William gave a brief account of his success on Wall Street.

"I was quite a sensation when I first struck gold," he concluded. "Picture on the cover of *Time* magazine, written up in all the papers. Someone wanted to write a book about me, but I set my lawyers on them."

"Aye." Gordon frowned, not altogether in earnest. "It wouldnae do to have them dig too deeply into your past."

The frown turned to an odd smile. William's hand was resting on the

arm of his wicker chair. Gordon put his own hand on top of it for a moment, then withdrew.

“We had some happy times, sweet William, did we not?”

“Yes. Very happy. I often think of them.”

Gordon looked out across the river. Dusk was falling. Inside the house a light had gone on.

“I’m sorry I had to leave ye like that. I hope the money was enough tae tide ye over.”

“What money? What do you mean?”

“Why, the money I left in the kitty for ye. Twelve thousand Hong Kong dollars, it was. All I had to hand when I left the flat. I was in somewhat of a hurry, d’ye understand. D’ye mean tae tell me ye didnae find it?”

“The police were there already when I got home. I had no chance to get anything. They took me away immediately.”

“*What?* Ye poor wee laddie! How did ye manage? Och, dinnae tell me, I dinnae wish tae hear.” Gordon covered his face with his hands.

“No, I was all right. I went to Papa Wu. He helped me find a foster family from his own clan. They were very kind to me. I wasn’t in any hardship at all.”

“Thank God for that. I had a vision of ye selling your sweet bottom on the streets of Kowloon. Ye had no recourse tae such things?”

“No, not at all.”

“For this relief much thanks.” Gordon smiled at him again. “But it was wicked of the corruption squad tae take your money, as I’m sure they did. Corruption squad!” Gordon threw back his head and laughed.

“Were you really mixed up in corruption yourself, Gordon?”

Gordon nodded. “I was taking bribes from the triads, certainly. So much the less for them tae spend on their nefarious activities. And no very much, compared tae what was going on elsewhere. A hundred thousand here, a hundred thousand there. But I never took money from honest people, as many did. My conscience doesnae trouble me, laddie. There now, she’s calling us tae dinner. Come, I’ll show ye ma tiger skin.”

After the tiger skin had been admired they took dinner at two circular Chinese-style tables, each with a lazy susan in the center. Gordon and his

wife sat at one table with William and two of the smallest children, the younger of whom was still in a high chair. The other children sat at the second table, the eldest keeping them in order. A woman William hadn't seen before—a maid, Gordon explained, a relative of his wife—brought in the food and helped with the youngest children. A ceiling fan moved the heavy evening air, and opera played from the next room. The food was varied and plentiful, with a lot of hot spice. Gordon asked for news of the outside world, of which he seemed remarkably ignorant. He did not know the result of America's 1984 election, nor of Mrs Thatcher's trip to China and the agreement on Hong Kong.

"Havnae read a newspaper for months," he explained. "Lost all interest, tae tell ye the truth. Unless it concerns one of our wee business ventures, there's little I care tae know. Newspapers only get ye worked up about things ye cannae help. We're very quiet here, and I've come tae like that. I've a radio since they put in the electricity three years ago. I suppose I could get World Service, but I've never bothered. What's it tae me, things that are happening in America or Europe? I've nae interest at all."

Faintly, from the temple a hundred yards away, there was the sound of a bell—a single tone, repeated a dozen times. It was followed by human voices chanting.

"Let the traffic of the world yield to silence and peace," said William in Chinese.

"Ah, that would be your man Du Fu. 'Night in the Pavilion', if I'm no mistaken."

William was impressed. "You have a terrific memory," he said. "You still remember your Chinese."

"Memory nothing. There's a Chinese family in the town, run the local hardware store. I'm guid friends with them. Often get over there for a chat. They're Chaozhou people, of course, like most of the Chinese in Thailand, but the old fellow has beautiful Mandarin, he was a colonel in Chiang Kaishek's army. And I often read the old poems, ye know. Very calming to the mind."

"Very suitable to your situation too."

"Oh? In what way d'ye mean?"

"Well, you're like a retired gentleman in old China, aren't you? Liv-

ing out in the country, studying Taoism, practicing poetry. Almost like one of those tiny figures in a Chinese painting. You know, living in a little hut up on the mountainside.”

Gordon chuckled. “I’d never considered that. But aye, there’s something in it. At a certain time of life your mind turns to such things. Of course, I’m lucky. I’ve no work tae do, no very great responsibilities. The wife’s no great burden, the wee bairns look after themselves for a’ I can see. I’ve my books, my music of course.”

“Yes. You still listen to opera.”

“Aye. The tragedy of ma life is, I cannae see it in performance. I often think I’ll take maself off to Sydney for a holiday, they’ve a beautiful opera house there. But if I did it once I should have tae do it again, and I’m no so rich I can afford such gallivantings. So all I can do is listen. It’s wonderfully soothing to the spirit, even so. I couldnae live without it. And you yourself, ma sweet boy, did I fire a wee spark of love for the opera in ye?”

“Not really. I’ve never heard any since. . . since you left.”

“Ye should take it up, laddie. Ye live in New York, do ye not? Why, ye’ve two first-class companies right there, and half a dozen smaller outfits. It’s food for the soul, William, and the soul needs nourishment.”

Gordon’s wife had been watching them. Now she said something in Thai, nodding her head at William.

“She says ye’re a handsome fellow,” translated Gordon. “Dinna fear, she knows nothing of what passed between us. She’s not wrong, though. Ye turned out very well, Willy boy. Are ye married yourself?”

“No.”

“Och, I hope I didnae make a buggie out of ye. Tell me it’s not so.”

William could not bear to speak the truth. “No,” he said. “Not at all.”

“Then ye should get married. It’s the natural state of affairs. Ye’re well able to provide for kiddies, so it seems. Find an honest woman, no one of yon American sluts. An oriental girl would be best for you, I believe.” Gordon laughed. “Och, maybe Pranee here has a relative.” He addressed some words in Thai to his wife, who responded. They both laughed.

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Lying in his bed waiting for sleep, listening to the faint occasional chirp of the geckos on the wall, the mosquito netting over him dimly luminous in the moonlight, William reflected on his naivety in thinking that the past could be recreated, and on the different paths he and Gordon had followed. He, to success and wealth in a great city; Gordon to tranquillity and contentment in this remote hill town. *Let the traffic of the world yield to silence and peace.* He himself often wished for that silence and peace—much more often, he thought now, than he had ever realized. Yet how could he ever attain it? He had gone too far in his solitary mathematical obsessions, spent too much time in front of his flickering screens, poring over his tables and charts. They had penetrated his soul, those tables, those charts. They, and the ancillary things, too: the conferences and meetings, the parties where people sought him out and flattered him, yet where he never felt at ease, the speed with which routine daily chores could be disposed of when one had an infinite supply of cash. Lionel had been right, in a way: he was hardly fit for human companionship. Party pooper.

Yet he knew he could not live Gordon's life. Not that it wasn't attractive to him in the abstract, to his Chinese blood. A hut on a mountainside in Taiwan, perhaps, a smiling unobtrusive wife, a gaggle of half-naked children. Hunting in the woods, listening to opera, "eating the air and drinking the dew". But no—he would be bored to distraction. The screens, the charts, the flattery had poisoned his spirit.

Yet perhaps he might turn himself, slowly, toward that Taoist ideal. Perhaps there were small daily exercises he might do to liberate his spirit. Certainly he could go to the opera. Finding a wife should present no problem, either, though it needed to be a wise choice—not one of those keen-eyed American huntresses who sometimes plagued him at parties. Of course he could not go on living as he had been.

So William slept, schemes of self-improvement stirring restlessly in his brain. In sleep the thin chirruping of the geckos on the wall seemed to be human voices in a room, a room he knew well, and whose interior he could see in perfect detail, yet seen from above at the end of a long black

tunnel, immensely far away: Gordon in his policeman's uniform seated in front of the hi-fi, voices coming from the hi-fi, chirruping, chirruping.

Gordon wanted him to stay a week, but William was reluctant to spend too long away while the Teaneck deal was under negotiation. So after breakfast Gordon's wife was dispatched to fetch the limo driver from his hotel, all the children old enough to be relied on for such a mission having gone to school. When the car arrived Gordon walked down the path with him across the garden, past the little stone table and stools, the frangipani and scarlet hibiscus, to the door in the wall. The door had been left open by Gordon's wife, who had said her farewell with another graceful *sawat-di* at the house doorway, where she still stood smiling, three of the pre-school children clustered behind, peering around her simple floor-length shift.

"I wish you would come and visit me in New York," said William. "Everything on me. I'll fly you out first class."

Gordon smiled, shaking his head. "It wouldnae do, laddie, ye know it too well. I'm verra well settled here the now, I'll no be traveling any more. We'll always be glad tae see ye, though. Remember ye can fly in to Chiang Mai nowadays, it'll save ye a few hours on the road."

They shook hands at the door. A trishaw—tricycle rickshaw—was passing on the street outside; cyclist and passenger both turned their heads to stare at the large shining limousine. William caught Gordon's eyes.

"Ye were the love of my life, sweet William," said Gordon softly.

As the limousine accelerated away along the river road, before turning off toward the center of the town and the main highway to Bangkok, William did not look back. There was no point. Blinded as his eyes were by a film of tears, he would not have been able to make out Gordon's dwindling figure. But with his inner eye, the eye of the spirit, William saw all too clearly the horrid irretrievability of the past. *The wood has been made into a boat*: and the stony impossibility of ever returning to what once had been, of ever restoring or redeeming it, was a pain in his soul that would not stop, would not stop.