

Letter From the Blue

Hong Kong, August 1952:

It was not the best of times for Chu Tung-po, the Chairman of the Gold Star Industrial and Financial Corporation. China's involvement in the bitter conflict in Korea depressed him and the United Nations embargo on trade that resulted had disrupted business for both himself and his friends. His son, Wing-seng, had apparently been acting up in school. Serenity had asked him to contact the Scout Master to resolve the boy's failure to fulfil certain requirements for proficiency badges. Problems big and small seemed to be piling up. The last thing he needed was to be accused of causing deaths. And yet, there it was in front of him, the accusation in damning black and white.

"You are responsible for the deaths of my parents," the letter read. "You have pushed them into a corner, tormented them with the slow ruin of their lives. You gave them no quarter. Capitulation or death. They have chosen death. I hope you have profited mightily. Some may regard you as a pillar of society but I know you for what you are -- a disgrace, a blood-sucker, a destroyer of innocent lives!"

Chu Tung-po knitted his brows as he read on. He sometimes received missives from cranks but this one seemed to carry the ring of truth. It purported to come from a young man named Yam Tin-chee, though it gave neither the names of his parents nor his own address. It stated that his parents once owned a grocery store, inherited from a previous generation. They sought only a decent living and sufficient income to send him, their only son, to university. They were on their way to achieving their goal when Gold Star came along.

When Gold Star opened a supermarket across the road, the business of his parents suffered. They soon found it impossible to compete. They worked harder, stayed open longer, shaved their margins. But it remained a hopeless struggle. The old folks should have sold out and be done with it. He had urged his father to do so. His father was proud, however. He had spent his life preserving his patrimony and he did not want to be taken for a quitter. He felt an honest man had a right to make an honest living. It shouldn't be taken away for no reason. He would not accept defeat. He mortgaged his premises to the hilt and when that proved insufficient he started using money set aside for his education. He sank deeper and deeper into debt. When the bank foreclosed his parents swallowed arsenic and died in each other's arms.

Chu smoothed out the pages of the letter on the glass top of his mahogany desk and looked across to the four paintings on the opposite wall. They had been done by a local artist he admired. The painter had used plants to symbolize the seasons, pink plum blossoms to denote spring, orchids to represent summer, then golden chrysanthemums and pliable bamboos.

The paintings, with their insinuations of eternal things, evoked in Chu a peculiar sadness. Seasons came and went but the old dilemmas remained. Deaths were eternal. He thought he had finished with them until his own came along. Now another two to justify. Everything he had done had been with good intentions, to succour those he loved, to improve the temper of the

times. He had no need for more wealth. Money was only a means to an end, a counterpoint to the political power held by others. It was to enable his views and those of his close associates -- dubbed "the Evergreens" by the popular Press -- to be taken into account. Had he not allowed Serenity to give whatever she wished to charities? Had he not himself been unstinting in support of worthy causes?

He had tried to play the game according to the rules. He never set out to harm anyone. Every move he made seemed an abstraction, a figure flashed on a dealing screen, a barely noticeable blip in the hurly-burly of the marketplace. For every winner there had to be a loser. He had taken losses with good grace on many occasions. Why couldn't others do the same? Why should losers take their own lives? That was not playing the game. How could he be blamed? If Serenity knew of the letter, it would distress her enormously.

He ran the fingers of his right hand through his fluent hair. It was a gesture he had first made years before, out of nervousness during his first Press conference as Chairman of Gold Star. One of the women journalists told him afterwards that the gesture gave him an appealingly casual air. That mannerism gradually developed into a habit.

His thoughts turned to a response to the letter and he pressed a button on the underside of his desk.

Mrs. Ada Leung entered, notebook and pencil in hand. She was a middle-aged woman wearing black-rimmed spectacles and a dark, loose-fitting business suit. Her hair was unfashionably permed. She gave the impression that no secret could be extracted from her even under torture.

"Any commitment this morning?" Chu asked.

"No, Sir, not till 12.30, when you are to lunch with Mr. Chambers of the Chartered Bank at the Victoria Cricket Club."

"Good. Get Mr. Wong at Gold Star Insurance on the phone and then run off a copy of this letter for Detective Chan. Stamp it confidential and ask Detective Chan to come and see me after he has digested it."

"Yes, Sir." Mrs. Leung disappeared from the room.

A good, dependable woman, Chu thought. One of the few nowadays who took loyal and discretion to heart. It was not that he was paying her excessively. It was just part of her character and he wished there were more like her in the company.

A few moments later one of the three telephones on the left side of Chu's desk rang and Mr. Wong was on the line. "Good morning, Mr. Chairman. You wish to speak to me."

"There's a young man named Yam Tin-chee. His parents died recently. I want him made beneficiary of an endowment policy sufficient to get him through university. Shouldn't be too generous, but not too mean either. Something normal and comfortable. Make it appear his father had taken it out before he died. Not through Gold Star, however. Nothing must appear in our books. Call in a favour from one of your shadier confreres. I'll pick up the tab personally, plus whatever commission deemed necessary. Payment should not be traceable back to me. Got it?"

“I’ll need more details, Sir. What is the father’s name and where can the beneficiary be located?” Mr. Wong asked.

“Don’t know. Will let you know the moment I do.”

“I’ll work on it right away, Sir. I understand your requirements.”

The moment Chu put down the telephone, there was a knock on the door. Mrs. Leung entered.

“Detective Chan is out of the office, Sir,” Mrs. Leung said. “I’ve left a message for him to come the moment he returns.”

Chu nodded and Mrs. Leung retired.

Left to himself, Chu looked with distaste at the pile of documents and files in the in-tray. Payments to approve, cheques to sign, proposals to read, contracts to study, inter-company squabbles to settle. How intolerable it was all becoming. And to add to everything a libellous letter and more deaths on his conscience.

He pushed back his chair and walked to the window. His suite was on the penthouse of the Gold Star Plaza. He stood before the tinted glass with his hands clasped behind his back, taking in the panoramic view of the harbour and the Kowloon peninsula.

Cranes, gantries and pile drivers were everywhere. Putting up more characterless tower blocks, he thought. Cutting corners as well. He shook his head slowly. Some of them belonged to him or at least to Gold Star. Land was scarce, population bloated, demand high and profits good. A steady stream of refugees had been flooding in since the end of the Pacific War. The government chanted the mantra of development, prosperity and progress. Investment bankers, stock brokers and shareholders chanted “More! More! More!” It was so easy to get carried away.

He looked with dismay at the spreading canyons of concrete and steel into which the sun scarcely shone. The devouring of green and open spaces seemed unstoppable, the decimation of old buildings a forgone conclusion. Traffic lights and road signs sprouted where trees had once been and urban muck lay where grass and spring flowers would never grow again. It was a blight, a disfiguration, a corruption, eating into a society where the God of Wealth smiled too readily. What could anyone do? People needed somewhere to live and to earn a living. In some areas of Kowloon the population density was the highest in the world. If he stopped building, someone else would pick up the slack.

Beyond that dispiriting sprawl loomed the eroded hills of the New Territories, marking time, awaiting the pleasure of developers and speculators. And beyond those hills, lay his ancestral home and reminders of unspeakable guilt. But goodness was also buried there. Traditions, truths, myths, songs of the soul, links with the past, commitments to the future. That beloved land and the burial plots of his ancestors were now barred to him by cruel politics and outrageous fortune.

He caught a reflection of himself in the tinted glass, sporting his hand-made clothes, seemingly debonair and without a care. Women fawned upon that handsome image. It was a mirage. The only woman he loved was Serenity, wife and keeper of his conscience. He could

visualize her face, so heartbreakingly beautiful and serene. Yet looking at it inevitably reminded him of what they had once shared and lost.

Why was it so difficult to be a decent man, to lead an untroubled life? He sought simply to be a good son, a good husband, a good father, a good employer, a worthy custodian of money entrusted by others. Yet accidents and exigencies perpetually conspired against him. An unresisted temptation, a small bending of the truth, some convenient rationalizations here and a few white lies there, and suddenly the whole moral balance was askew. One found oneself pounding ever faster on the treadmill of competitive pressures, simply to avoid tumbling into the abyss. Things done could obviously not be undone. But was there really no way to recapture any of the simple hopes and aspirations of youth?

The letter from Yam posed those conundrums anew. He was the originator of the very concepts which had driven Yam's parents to suicide. The claim of offering wider consumer choice was a sham from the start. Had he not laid down the rules for targeting affluent neighbourhoods with existing traders? Had he not expounded on economies of scale, promotional items, loss leaders, snappy advertising, financial muscle and lower borrowing costs? Even now, was he genuinely trying to make amends or was he merely mounting a salvage operation?

His mother used to take him to a neighbourhood grocery in Canton. The owner knew everybody and would pass the time of day with regular customers, chatting about births and marriages, ailments and misfortunes. He remembered the owner particularly, a jolly old man who always asked him about his studies. If he could recite a new poem the owner would reward him with a piece of candy or a liquorice plum.

Why had he eliminated that human element in his supermarkets? Prices and quantities were fixed. Goods standardized and pre-packaged. Transactions quick and anonymous. A few punches on a keyboard were all that was required. Efficiency and profitability were the watchwords. No staff would ever ask a child about his studies, let alone reward him for progress. If anyone paid attention to children at all, it would be to try and catch them pilfering.

What a cold and bloodless world he had helped to create! How could that represent prosperity and progress? He feared Wing-seng was already being lured by the riches and glamour of modernity, like a fish being lured by a brightly coloured fly. That was why he had tried to distance himself from his son's upbringing, hoping that his wife would be able to teach him Buddhist virtues and help him understand the duality of things, the negative and the positive, the soft and the hard, the deeds hidden in shadows and those in the light. But the auguries were not good.

A telephone rang and the Chairman returned to his desk.

"Detective Chan is here, Sir," Mrs. Leung said.

"Show him in."

The door opened and Detective Chan offered his greetings. He was of medium height and solidly built, with a head of short, iron-grey hair. His face was lined and his features rough and peasantlike. He had retired from the Police as a Detective Sergeant after thirty-five years of service and had been engaged by Gold Star a couple of years back as Deputy Head of Security.

Chu was glad he had engaged the man. He had turned out to be another loyal and trustworthy employee. At the time people in the Personnel Department had expressed reservations about the man's suitability. They claimed he was old, an ex-copper who had spent his life on the streets, and was unlikely to know anything about installing infra-red security devices, positioning surveillance cameras or debugging rooms. What they had overlooked was that Detective Chan was street-wise and had contacts in useful places. He had lived up to those expectations.

"Please take a seat. What do you make of the letter?"

"Doesn't seem to be an attempt at extortion, Sir. More like a desire to let off steam, as I see it. Can't recall having read about a double suicide or any inquest into such. Could have passed unnoticed, as routine. The boy's been stewing on this for a while, I reckon. Can't judge whether he'll do anything else though, like writing to the Press."

"I agree. Have to end it before it goes any further, regardless of whether he has a legitimate gripe or not. Run this through your connections and see where it leads. Is the inquest over or is it pending? Find the names of the parents, where the boy is staying and as many other details as possible. But don't make contact. Whatever you find out, pass it to me or Mrs. Leung and not to anybody else. I need to get your assessment before determining whether to get lawyers and others in the company involved."

"Understood, Mr. Chairman. I'll get on it right away."