

## Fates Foretold

Focus! Focus, damn you!

Po-Chee felt a hot flush of irritation as she sat with her elbows propped upon her desk and her head clutched between her hands. Her slender fingers speared into her hennaed hair. She had been trying for the last half an hour to concentrate on the insider-dealing case she had been landed with. But her mind simply couldn't function.

The case involved a captain of commerce and industry, a short, heavy-jowled Cantonese, whose massive head seemed connected to his shoulders with hardly anything resembling a neck. His clothes were haute couture of course but they did not flatter a body which showed every sign of being bloated and unaccustomed to physical exertion. His hair, parted down the middle, was also too obviously dyed and slicked down. It was the hair, more than any other feature, which lent him a certain air of shiftiness.

But he was one of her firm's biggest clients. Just his requirements for far-flung subsidiaries, tax havens and corporate veils were sufficient to keep an assistant solicitor fully occupied. He had called upon her the day before, in her capacity of one of the senior partners in the firm, to complain about newspapers allegations of his involvement in an insider-trading investigation.

Insider-dealing was not a crime per se in Hong Kong. Stock market listings, mergers, take-overs, buy-outs, property developments were virtually daily machinations during the speculative booms in the colony. Gossip about such goings-on was endemic at cocktail receptions and dinner parties of the upper crust. So common were the winks and nods and knowing smiles that it would be humanly impossible to establish who had whispered what to whom at what juncture in any pending deal. And there would always be eavesdroppers among chauffeurs, servants, waiters and hangers-on, who all knew a good thing whenever they stumbled upon one.

Nonetheless, the stock exchange authorities did have the power to issue public rebukes against offenders upon sufficient evidence of wrong-doing. They amounted to little more than slaps on the wrist. No other penalty was involved. But in a culture obsessed with face and social one-upmanship, an open rebuke had to be avoided if at all possible.

Her client had been livid with righteous indignation when he was shown into her office.

“Why made me scapegoat? Everybody does it,” his voice had boomed from his ungainly body. “Your firm retained. Do something! Stop malicious rumours! What do those clowns expect? Don’t they know in competitive market everyone must exploit natural advantage?”

She had tried to stop him there, to prevent him from blurting out any intimation of a criminal lapse. She wanted to find out first exactly what the stock exchange authorities had against him. But he had rattled on, as unstoppable as a runaway express.

“It’s human nature, isn’t it, favouring friends and relatives?” he had demanded, before going on to admit advising a few family members and chosen associates to buy options and forward contracts on certain stocks and shares. “Made a small punt myself, naturally, for sake of form. Nothing to raise the roof about. A quick turn; no harm done to anyone. Don’t you ever believe others in know haven’t done same. Why so much fuss? Why pick on me?”

How stupid could the rich be, she now wondered, as she tried to devise a way out of the débâcle. Why finagle for wealth when one already had enough to last several lifetimes? No wonder the Buddhists regarded greed as one of the “Three Poisons” to be shunned. When would these high-flying entrepreneurs ever learn never to leave a paper trail when sailing close to the wind?

She didn’t like her client. But professionally, her firm was

obliged to help him. If only he hadn't admitted so much. If the authorities had limited facts, she might well have created an alternative kind of truth. Or argued an inadvertence, an understandable oversight. She was good at that sort of thing. But that stupid man had lumbered her with too much damning information. To get him off the hook she would have to rely on distortions, half-truths or even untruths. Any of that would turn herself into an accomplice.

She sat up with irritation and flounced her tousled hair back into a more respectable order.

Why should she risk her reputation for a corporate barracuda? In ancient times Mo Tzu and his martial followers hired themselves out only if what they had been engaged to do was for the benefit of the people and the country. Her professional duties were guided by no such principle. She had in fact turned into a hired gun, an intellectual whore. That must surely invite further retributions. The prospect frightened her.

Moreover, she had been powerless to help those dearest to her. She had desperately wanted Po-Chun to vacate her horrid Yaumati hole, to move back to the family home in Robinson Road.

"How can you live in a dump like this?" she had cried, aghast, during her first visit there. "Look at the disgusting walls, the cracks on the floor. Listen to the racket outside. The family home is standing empty. Move back there, for heaven's sake. Ah Ho is there to help."

They had been alone at the time, Andy having taken Amber to play in Kowloon Park.

"You're ever so sweet," Po-Chun had replied, in a sarcastic tone. "My pay as a shipping clerk isn't much more than Ah Ho's wages."

"Forget about Ah Ho's wages. I can take care of that. We can sort it out later."

Po-Chun had cast her a look of resentment. "You don't get it,

do you? You've no idea of what I'm up against. Robinson Road's only a short walk to the Club Lusitano where Andy's cronies hang out."

"So what? Surely Andy is free to go to the club at present."

"No, he's not. He's got to look after Amber, make lunch for her. There's no one else. He loves that child. That's his only saving grace. Besides, Lusitano is far from here, on the other side of the harbour, and he wouldn't be allowed to take Amber into the card room of the club with him. Can you imagine what would happen if we were in Robinson Road?"

She had put on a dumbfounded look.

"He'd ask Ah Ho to keep an eye on Amber while he went on some supposed errand. Instead he'd head for the club. His cronies would offer him a drink and then another. He'd grow merry and expansive. Pretty soon, he'd be invited to play a few hands of poker or a game of backgammon or whatever. They'd egg him on, offering to stake him, because they know he's a good loser. He wouldn't be able to resist."

Po-Chun's voice grew harsh and bitter. "Before anyone knows it, Andy would be regularly tipsy, sinking ever deeper into debt. Things would start disappearing from the house, to be sold or pawned. But that won't be the end of it. He'd keep drinking and losing till there's nothing more to be taken from the home. Then he'd demand everything I have, every cent I've put aside for Amber's education. He'd say that alcohol was his only enjoyment and if he couldn't drink and honour his debts he'd rather be dead. We'd row and he would beat me till I've handed over everything I have. That's been happening for years. Without the need to look after Amber, he would be completely out of control. That's why we can't move to Robinson Road."

That vehement rush of words had made her aware for the first time what Po-Chun had been enduring. Her sister had never hinted at such trials and beatings in any of her letters. She was moved to tears.

Po-Chun cried too.

“Andy was so good looking before, such a smooth talker,” Po-Chun had allowed, between sobs. “I lost my head. It was only some time later that I realised he married me because he thought I could get my hands on Father’s money. When I couldn’t, trouble started. I guess Father had a point about not marrying without parental permission.”

“That’s all in the past now.”

She had been stumped to suggest a solution. Since her sister had turned into a Catholic, marriage was supposed to be for life, for better or for worse.

Less than a year later, Andy’s heavy drinking had taken his life.

She had tried again to get Po-Chun to move to Robinson Road.

“The house’s yours,” she had argued. “Should have been yours all along. Both you and Amber will be much more comfortable there. I’m in Suen’s house, so it’s no use to me. We’d then be within walking distance of each other. Don’t worry about the out-goings. I’ll take care of them.”

“No!” Po-Chun declared firmly. “I’m never going to live in that house again. It’s got bad joss.”

“Bad joss? What in heaven’s name are you talking about?”

“The fung shui’s completely wrong, can’t you see? For us Leungs anyway. Have you forgotten that our mother died prematurely there? Or that our father lost his mind and killed himself? When you were a child, you were frequently sick. Remember your screaming the house down before you had your initial enema? I was led astray by an adventurer and got expelled from it. Ah Ho lost the sight of one eye. How much more evidence do you need? There’s definitely something not right with the place. I don’t want anything to do with it.”

“But you’re a Catholic!” she had cried, glancing at the Sacred Heart and the Madonna and Child hanging on one of the leprous walls.

“You’re not supposed to believe in fung shui like I do.”

“I’m also Chinese. No harm playing safe.”

“If you’re refusing to live there, it’s no use to me. I had better sell it. It’s time for Ah Ho to retire to an old folks’ home.”

“I don’t care what you do with it. I just don’t want to be tainted further by its ill luck.”

“Let me at least get you a better place.”

Po-Chun had shaken her head vigorously. “The poor are closer to God. Besides, Amber has to learn to live within her means.”

And there, in that depressing abode, Po-Chun had stayed with her daughter until cancer claimed her some years later.

\* \* \*

Po-Chee rose from her desk and began pacing the length of her office. She cut an elegant figure in her sober designer suit and stylish shoes of alligator skin. But the sallowness of her face and the frown lines on her brow detracted from the smartness of her accoutrements.

The problems of the captain of commerce and industry had by then receded before her more personal concerns.

She couldn’t help her father either. He had loved her so deeply and tenderly when she was a child and yet, when he pleaded with her to return because he was unwell, she had been sufficiently snared by Suen to stay away. She had gone on to hurt him even more, by duplicating Po-Chun’s offence of marrying without his blessing. Her elder sister had had to pay a terrible price for that lapse. In her case, suffering must have fallen on her beloved Daddy. Otherwise he wouldn’t have taken his own life.

From somewhere inside her a hot pang of guilt re-emerged. It jolted her sufficiently to stop her in her tracks. She was amazed that the

memory could still sear so fiercely, so much so that she had remained unable to tell Suen that her father's death had been a suicide.

And what of her poor husband? Another kind of pain seemed to penetrate right into the marrow of her bones. She returned quickly to her desk and sat down, for her legs appeared to be no longer reliable.

She had denied him so much, denied his ancestors too, not to mention denying herself. All because of an overarching terror of holding another dead child in her arms. She had held her husband off from trying for another, shilly-shallying from one of his attempts to the next. The mere possibility of conceiving and losing another child was enough to turn her frigid with fright. Yet the pull of motherhood remained insistent inside her. She was thirty-seven and Suen was more than twenty years her senior. Soon even the charade of making a choice would be taken away from her.

Her whole life was turning into an absurdity. She could create corporations every day, complete with all the rights and privileges of everlasting legal existence. Yet she could not preserve the life of an innocent child issued from her own loins. Would she not fail again with another? Wasn't Heaven already condemning her for wrong-doings in the past, by stripping her of parents, sister, son? Now only Suen and Amber were left. Her dutiful niece would soon be disappearing across the seas. When was she destined to lose Suen as well?

She felt doomed, like an insect trapped inside the glass jar by a cruel justice. There seemed no way out, no means of making amends. If she knew which gods or spirits to propitiate, she would gladly do so. But her culture harboured too many gods, leaving too much lore and superstitions to untangle.

That was the drawback of being sent abroad for an education at a tender age. One lost ballast. She had gone off with only a few scraps of rituals and beliefs, passed on by her Ma and by Ah Ho. At Roedean there

had been no lessons on Chinese history or Eastern cultures. Her fellow students followed a variety of faiths and Po-Chun kept writing about her new Catholic God. She had ended up all at sea. It had been only after meeting Suen that she began to claw back some of her forgotten heritage.

The bits she had re-embraced, however, had turned out less efficacious than she had expected. Suen had declared some to be sheer superstition when she had engaged a geomancer to pick an auspicious day for their marriage. It certainly hadn't turned out auspicious, for it led right away to the death of Daddy. Later the death of her son and a slow distancing from her husband. She had consulted the Tung Sing on certain days before heading for the office when she had to deal with an awkward case. But passages in that ancient almanac seemed at times too riddled with ambiguities to be of much help.

She had tried to augment her understanding of Buddhism after forming a friendship with Lucille Chu. Lucille was a woman who had also known grief. Her husband had disappeared mysteriously while on a foreign trip, forcing her to assume -- without the slightest business experience whatsoever -- responsibility for running a vast international business empire belonging to her husband's family. She had approached her firm for legal help and that was how they had met.

Lucille had turned to Buddhism through the influence of her mother-in-law. According to her, suffering and pain were inevitable when material attachments and desires consumed people. Suffering could also arise from bad or wrongful deeds committed during previous existences. It was a form of karmic retribution. To liberate oneself from such conditions, one had to search out and cultivate the Buddha-nature in the self.

Lucille said she had been trying hard to move towards that awareness since her husband's disappearance. One result was that she and her mother-in-law had decided to donate the bulk of the profits from the

Gold Star Industrial and Financial Corporation to charitable endeavours.

Her friend had later given her a copy of the Infinite Life Sutra and had advised her to study and recite it.

She had tried to emulate Lucille, by accepting more pro bono cases and by engaging in charitable work. She had even gone so far as to ask Ah Loy to prepare vegetarian meals on the first day of each lunar month. But her heart remained filled with guilt and unease. She had difficulty grasping the essence of the sutra. It was bad enough being punished for misdeed in her present life but the need to pay for bad deeds in past existences seemed too much to bear. That prospect kept depressing her and robbing her of sleep during the loneliness of the night.

She had asked Lucille, during one of their weekly lunches at a Western District tea house, if there was a quicker way to find salvation. She wanted to make things right for Suen before it was too late.

“I’m afraid there are no soft options,” Lucille had replied. “Many think they can find an easier way forward by making offerings to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas but that’s just so much superstition. Buddhism is a philosophy. Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are compassionate creatures and out of that compassion they can indicate the direction of travel. But the journey has to be undertaken by the self.”

Stymied for quick relief, she nursed her misery like a bruise. But of late she had been dogged by a presentiment of some further misfortune about to befall. It troubled her in the same strange way that animals became unsettled by the approach of a natural disaster. Her need to deal with insider-dealing allegations against a rich client seemed already an ill omen. If she succeeded in absolving the rascal, it would be an offence against justice, another blot on her conscience.

As she pondered her dilemma, she recalled attending a charity function some time back, during which some society ladies had praised the

accuracy of predictions obtained through fortune sticks or chims at a Taoist temple at Wong Tai Sin. She had heard of the temple since childhood but had never gone there. Things supernatural and otherworldly had always fascinated her.

But following her return to Hong Kong as a married woman, any thought of visiting the temple had been dampened by Suen's insistence that the true Tao, wordless, nameless, shadowy, indistinct and formed before heaven and earth, was a way of living in harmony with nature, not a religion for bored women.

At the time his description of Taoism had sounded pretty much like the mumbo-jumbo of a religious sect to her. But her husband's explanation had also made her realise how many of his attitudes still remained beyond her comprehension. It reminded her as well that vast areas of her heritage still remained unreclaimed.

But now, in the midst of a presentiment so powerful as to distract her from work, she was ready to believe anything. If a chim could offer her an inkling of the future in store, why not? A few peels of sardonic laughter from her husband would be a small price to pay.

The alternative to risking a fortune stick would be to tackle the bulging files in her in-trays and the notes she had made on the insider-dealing case. It was no contest. On that conclusion she sent for Alice, her personal assistant, and told her she would be out of the office for the rest of the day.

Out on the street, she hailed a taxi and asked to be driven to Kowloon.

\* \* \*

Wong Tai Sin was a Taoist hermit who had lived in Chekiang

Province centuries ago. He taught benevolence and morality and was said to have achieved immortality through meditation and ascetic practices.

In 1921 a temple was erected in his honour in Hong Kong. It turned into a popular place of worship after accounts circulated of the uncanny accuracy of fortune sticks drawn there. People from all levels of society had been flocking to it since, to pray and to seek divine guidance.

The taxi dropped Po-Chee at the approach to the temple which was set on higher ground. She made her way up the steps leading to the white archway in its forecourt. A fair crowd had gathered, even though it was the middle of a working day.

She approached the temple, guarded by a pair of great stone lions, with trepidation. Its yellow roofs and red pillars awed and amazed her. The golden inscriptions decorating the pillars gave her an eerie feeling of venturing into the unknown. The heady fragrance of burning incense made her head swim.

Although the public was barred from the temple itself, the ornate altar within could be admired from its entrance. A number of people, mainly women, were kneeling facing the altar on the terrace outside. They were offering prayers, lighting joss sticks or shaking bamboo containers each holding a hundred wooden chims.

A supplicant was supposed to hold the container with both hands and shake the fortune sticks with a gentle forward and backward motion. The aim was to tease out one chim -- and only one -- from the hundred. While shaking the sticks, a supplicant was supposed to make silent pleadings for divine guidance on whatever he or she wanted revealed.

If more than one stick fell out, they would have to be replaced and shaken again. If a solitary stick failed to fall out after three consecutive attempts, then that represented a sign the day was not propitious for seeking a revelation.

Each chim was numbered to relate to a poem or a legend set out in classical Chinese. The interpretation was left to one of the many fortune tellers gathered within the precincts of the temple.

Po-Chee secured a container of chims from an attendant and joined the supplicants in front of the entrance. She could see the elaborately carved altar inside, with a portrait of Wong Tai Sin at its centre. Flowers, candles, joss sticks and offerings stood before it.

But when she tried to kneel, she found that the tight-fitting business suit she had on was an encumbrance. The skirt was too snug for her to kneel comfortably. Neither did she have the foresight to bring along a prayer mat or a cushion on which to rest her knees.

After hitching up her skirt a little, she managed to assume a devotional position. But then she experienced difficulty in positioning her feet. She was wearing high-heels. A normal kneeling position caused the back rims of the shoes to cut painfully into her own heels. A more comfortable position risked scuffing her alligator skin shoes on the rough surface of the forecourt. Removing them seemed inappropriate.

Not a very good beginning, she thought, as she accepted possible damage to her shoes in exchange for immediate comfort. She had never handled fortune sticks before and found shaking them rather awkward. The rattling sounds coming from the containers of women on either side of her seemed much more rhythmic than her own.

Her first attempt to secure a chim resulted in half a dozen spewing out. The result filled her with disappointment. Fellow supplicants glanced at her as if she had committed a sacrilege. She gingerly retrieved the chims and returned them to the holder.

She began to shake them again. Her second attempt was even more disastrous. A whole slew fell out. Tension gripped her. She began to perspire. There was no shade on the terrace and the sunlight seemed

exceptionally fierce.

Suddenly, the sunlight caught the large diamond on a ring she wore. The ring had been a present from Suen before their wedding. The brightness of its sparkle startled her. The quality she had previously admired now seemed vulgar and showy before the deity whose help she was imploring on bended knees. She quickly turned the ring round to hide the stone within the palm of her hand. She then set about retrieving the scattered chims.

By now the women near her had successfully secured their fortune sticks and had gone off to get their predictions explained.

She breathed deeply to steady herself. Her knees were beginning to hurt from their unaccustomed posture on a hard surface. She should have practised the drill before coming.

She clutched her container for a while, conscious that she was facing her final chance. She was also afraid of attracting attention as the sole supplicant left. She hesitated. But when another woman came to kneel beside her with a container of fortune sticks, she plucked up courage and began shaking the container.

To her immense relief a single chim popped onto the ground. She picked it up as if it were a great treasure. She noted its number. It was eight. She took out a handkerchief to dab traces of sweat from her brow, before hurrying off to find a fortune teller to match her number to a quotation. Her knees felt sore.

Fortune tellers manned rows of individual stalls in the courtyard of the temple. They provided interpretations of chims in return for a fee. Supplicants were free to choose any of them. She decided on one of advanced years, reasoning that he was likely to be more expert.

The fortune teller chosen was a frail and bird-like man with a bald head and a wispy white beard. He wore a pair of steel-rimmed

spectacles perched precariously on the tip of a small, pointed nose. The mellowness of his years and his air of unconscious pathos suggested vast experience. She wondered if his long dealings with deities might have endowed him with second sight as well.

“I have drawn a chim,” she said. “Could the master please interpret it for me?”

“Certainly, Madam,” the old man replied, in an unexpectedly firm voice. “Please take a seat. I must relate the number of your chim to a relevant passage. What number have you drawn?”

“Eight.”

The fortune teller hesitated for a fraction of a second and glanced at her over the top of his spectacles. He then found for her the classical passage relating to the number.

“Turtledove deprives magpie of her nest;  
Neither is happy, host nor guest.  
When cypresses are ensnared by vines,  
Guess what is said within these lines.”

Po-Chee read the passage twice. Although it did not sound auspicious, she had no idea what it meant. “What does the poem portend?” she asked.

“What kind of prediction did Madam seek from the oracle?”

“I asked to know the future.”

The old man peered at Po-Chee again. “Has Madam sought a prediction here before?”

“No. It’s my first time,” she replied, with a timid smile. “Some friends recommended that I should try.”

“I see,” the fortune teller said, in the manner of a teacher beginning a lesson. “Perhaps Madam will allow me to explain. It is unrealistic to expect the oracle to provide a general prediction about the

future. A supplicant has to seek an answer on a specific issue concerning the supplicant. Or concerning a person of interest to the supplicant. In other words, one can ask about a son, a husband, a parent or some other person. The subject matter should be in relation to some everyday concern, such as health, marriage, business prospects, travel and so on. Now, what aspect of the future did Madam beseech the oracle to reveal?"

Po-Chee realized at once she had made a complete mess. She had not been aware of the requirement to be so specific. After failing to extract a single chim on her first two attempts, she had been so anxious over the final attempt that she simply pleaded for success.

Faced with the old man's question, she tried to salvage some general indication of her future. Without thinking she blurted out: "I sought an indication about travel."

The old man looked at her dubiously. "In respect of yourself or of another?" he asked.

"Someone else."

The old man studied her again. Then he said in a doleful voice: "On the matter of travel, this chim indicates that outward journeys are undesirable. The one who travels is unlikely to return."

Po-Chee gave a start, raising an involuntary hand to her mouth.

No, no, it could not be, she thought. Both of the people nearest and dearest to her had plans to travel -- Amber to America and Suen on his yearly visit to England. Which one was unlikely to return? And why? Was there to be a plane disaster or what?

She blanched and trembled. At that precise moment a bank of thick clouds passed across the sky, momentarily obscuring the sun. The sudden shadow seemed to come like another rebuke from Heaven. Her heart pounded wildly, her breathing quickened.

"Madam, there is no need to be alarmed," the fortune teller

said, reassuringly. “I think there has been a mistake.”

“A mistake?”

Po-Chee looked distractedly at him and their eyes met. The old man appeared to be able to see right through her, into her bungled attempt to deceive him.

“I failed to extract a chim on my initial attempts,” she confessed, with a stammer. “I became too anxious to succeed.”

“I surmised as much,” the old man said. “The Number Eight chim came to Madam because she failed to ask the right question. Madam should return on another day to seek the guidance of the deity properly.”

Po-Chee nodded. “Before I go, can you at least tell me who is unlikely to return from travels? Two members of my family are going on journeys. You must tell me which one is unlikely to return.”

“Madam, I’m sorry. Since your request to the oracle was confused, the response in the chim is defective. It cannot actually be interpreted to mean anything. I’m afraid I can go no further than that.”

Po-Chee stood up in a daze. She thanked the old man and handed him his fee. She walked slowly out of the precincts of the temple, her mind in turmoil. In trying to be clever she had ended up with more apprehensions. How could she find the courage to come again? A properly framed question might lead to an even more devastating answer. She could not possibly cope with that!

She reached the street. Traffic was humming by. But she continued walking aimlessly, overwhelmed by dark thoughts.

All of a sudden, she pulled up short. She found herself hemmed in all around by towering concrete blocks. She realised she had stumbled into a depressing resettlement estate close to the temple. It had been designed decades ago to rehouse some of the city’s underclasses -- squatters, refugees, those rendered homeless by natural disasters and those

living at the economic margins.

Its environment was unfamiliar, mean, and even vaguely hostile. She felt out of place in her business suit, her alligator skin shoes and her matching handbag. Some of its inhabitants were already eyeing her with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion. She was relieved that the large diamond in her ring was safely out of sight inside her hand. She quickly hailed a taxi to head for home.

The day had turned out to be a complete misadventure, she thought, once safely inside the taxi. If she related what had happened to Suen, he would no doubt rib her mercilessly and demand to know why she hadn't saved herself the trip by simply consulting the horoscope in one of the daily newspapers. A healthy dose of scepticism might be what she needed.

Then it dawned on her it was Friday. Suen wouldn't be at home. He would be out playing bridge. Only Amber would be home. Sweet, dependable Amber. But how could she explain her wild and unreasoning fears to so young a girl?