

## When Old Friends Meet

### London, March 1960:

Sebastian Baxingdale came out of Knightsbridge Underground Station and ran straight into the heavy tourist traffic swirling around Harrods. The press of people reminded him of Hong Kong, though the pewter skies promised yet another drizzly English March day. He was wearing a much abused mackintosh, with a button missing and a torn pocket. Underneath he had on a heavily stained Shetland sweater and a pair of tattered jeans. His hair had grown to shoulder length. A beard, crying out to be trimmed, hid much of the gentleness around his mouth and extinguished all remnants of his military past. His eyes were bloodshot.

Across the road, outside the side entrance to Harrods, he spotted Christopher Knight waiting. A prematurely receding hairline had eaten into his friend's unruly mop during the last few years but his chin now conveyed a more confident cast. He had put on weight. A developing paunch, snugly encased in the waistcoat of a three-piece suit of charcoal grey, bestowed gravitas. The only element missing from that picture of settled prosperity was a gold watch chain.

Baxingdale stood studying his friend for a moment, assessing whether his altered appearance was due to marriage to Phoebe Sweetman. The wedding had taken place four years earlier, in a village church in Dorset. He had been best man. He might have been the one walking down the aisle with cozen-eyed Phoebe instead of Christopher, if she hadn't realized in time that a clergyman's son had little to offer in terms of material needs and social aspirations.

He crossed the road and extended a hand to his friend. "Hallo, Chris. Where's Phoebe?"

"Jesus Christ, Seb! What's happened to you? I hardly recognize you with all that hair!"

"My Bohemian phase. Where's Phoebe?"

"Back in Hong Kong. I'm here on a quick business trip. Leaving the day after tomorrow."

Baxingdale nodded.

"What's going on, Seb? You look awful! You're my best friend. You don't answer my letters. You don't respond to our Christmas cards. I had to contact your father to locate you."

Baxingdale was surprised his friend had lost his stutter. Marriage must agree with him. "I just dropped out for a bit, that's all. I'll fill you in later."

Christopher Knight shifted his weight uncertainly from one foot to the other. "I've booked at Marco's, just round the corner in Brompton Road. Hope that's all right."

"Sure, if the headwaiter doesn't kick a fuss. If he does, you can say you're entertaining the greatest Austrian poet of the twentieth century."

"Why Austrian?"

"Because the blighter might actually know the leading French or British ones."

"Are you really writing poetry?"

“Not exactly.”

“Are you still teaching then?”

“No.”

“Well, what are you doing?”

“Contemplating my navel.”

Christopher Knight shook his head in exasperation as they reached Marco’s. The headwaiter took custody of Baxingdale’s mackintosh with a distinct lack of enthusiasm.

Baxingdale ordered a beer while Knight opted for a dry sherry.

“Is Phoebe well? Have you got children?”

“Phoebe’s fine, throwing herself into the Hong Kong social whirl. No children yet, but in the planning stage.”

“Glad to hear that. Still in the Public Prosecutor’s Department?”

“Seb, I wrote to you three years ago telling you I would be leaving for private practice.”

“Did you? Guess it never registered. So now it’s game warden turned poacher, is it? When you were swotting up Roman Law you said you intended to devote your life to fighting injustices. What’s happened to that?”

“When one’s a child one speaks of childish things.” Knight shrugged to indicate a disinclination to pursue the topic. After a pause, he added: “You know what Phoebe’s like. She’s got grand ideas and none of them fits in with a civil service salary. Besides, someone made me an offer I couldn’t refuse.”

“Oh?”

“There’s an old codger named Harry Rand who’s worked up a nice practice in conveyancing, company law and wills and probates. Not the thing to set the world on fire but good bread and butter stuff. He’s got a passion for Chinese snuff bottles. Since he’s made money, he wants to devote more time to his passion rather than his practice. He has three quite good Chinese solicitors in the firm. But he’s a bit conservative. Can’t quite reconcile himself to a Chinese partner just yet. So he offered me a partnership.”

“You mean the chap’s a racist.”

“Well, I wouldn’t put it like that. He’s not a bad sort. Just a bit odd. Now you’re looking at a partner in the flourishing firm of Rand and Knight, making more money than I’ve ever dreamt possible. What about you? What have you been up to? When I got married you were teaching at some ghastly secondary modern in inner London.”

“Hackney. Ended two years ago. Couldn’t have stood it a moment longer. The head was a twit. One of those avant-garde types who believe in allowing children to develop at their own pace. Giving rein to their creativity, as he put it. The result was chaos. Lessons became geared to the pace of the least gifted. I had my hands full dodging ink pellets and coping with rowdiness and vandalism.”

Christopher Knight chuckled. “I can imagine you looking very unflappable amidst that chaos,” he said.

“Something happened that wasn’t funny at all. I reported one of the most obstreperous lads, a fourteen-year-old. The father was a bricklayer. The father stomped into the classroom one day, clouted the lad in front of the whole class and dragged him out by the ear. ‘I said school’s a bloody wasta time,’ he shouted. ‘You stick with yer trade, lad.’ That was the last I saw of the boy. I had unwittingly ruined his life. I had not accounted for his low self-esteem and had completely misunderstood his behaviour. I couldn’t continue after that.”

“You can’t blame yourself.”

“But I do. Has it ever crossed your mind, Chris, that some people are just not meant to do good? They only make things worse. Perhaps I’m one of them. Perhaps I’m meant only to be an onlooker, to watch with folded arms as the world rushes towards the Apocalypse, to bear witness to greed, drug addiction, perversions, sexual promiscuity and war without being able to act.”

“Tell me quick, where’s the sexual promiscuity? My neighbourhood’s dull as dishwater, hoity-toity all round,” Knight said with a laugh. After a slight pause he added: “Come on, Seb, you can’t be so pessimistic. The fact you went into teaching implies a degree of faith in the future.”

“Awfully easy to misread motives. Haven’t you noticed there’s no queue forming to hire someone with a degree in modern history and a few years of military service? I needed a job, that’s why I went into teaching. I knew I couldn’t do anything about the world going to pot.”

The chicken marsala they had both ordered arrived, together with a bottle of Chianti.

“So what have you been doing since?” Knight asked, between mouthfuls.

“Philandering with tobacco, exercising my spleen through my typewriter.”

“You mean you’ve become a writer?”

Baxingdale allowed himself a hollow laugh. “Collecting rejection slips doth not a writer make.”

“Gosh, Seb, I didn’t realize things had been so bad. Macmillan says people’ve never had it so good. Things have been booming nicely in Hong Kong, so we thought it must be the same over here. Why don’t you go back East?”

“I’ve thought about it, except I don’t have the language.”

“Don’t talk nonsense. English is the official language. I do quite well with only a few phrases of Chinese. You shouldn’t have difficulty getting.”

“That’s the trouble. I don’t want to just get by. The population is overwhelmingly Chinese. Yet we make them deal with us on our terms, under our rules. Not knowing their language conveniently absolves us from finding out what they’re actually thinking and what their real aspirations might be, though we’re supposed to be running the place in trust, on their behalf.”

“They’re being well governed. You needn’t lose sleep over that.”

“Are they? Isn’t the government making such a virtue of *laissez-faire* because it doesn’t know what to do? In any case, what can I do back in Hong Kong? Guard the borders again against ‘economic migrants’ fleeing starvation or persecution? Join one of the princely hongs of

reformed dope dealers? Or become a police inspector to put the squeeze on hawkers and street walkers?"

"Don't underestimate yourself. There are plenty of jobs you can do."

"No, if I ever go back I'd want to have a good command of the language. I'd want to get into the soul of the city, to connect with its people. There's something unique there. It's full of enigmas, contradictions and strange beliefs. It's alive with notions that steal into one's psyche -- auspicious or inauspicious days and numbers, geomancy, hexagonal mirrors hanging outside buildings, acupuncture, herbal cures, praying to ancestors, the notion of being rewarded or punished in the next life, all that and more. When Buddhists talk about 'the wisdom of the other shore,' I know there's something there but I can't quite grasp it. It's infuriating. I never managed to get beneath the surface the last time. I was cut off because I couldn't speak or read the language and being in the army didn't help. In the end I never managed to decide whether I loved the place, hated it or feared it."

"Don't romanticize. Hong Kong's just a mongrel city, a new Babylon, more freebooting by the day. It's entirely market driven. The realization of everything that Adam Smith wrote about, except the emphasis on education. Between now and 1997 there're fortunes to be made for those with enough gumption to find their own niches."

"For any dog willing to eat dog."

"Do you remember a chap named Chu Tung-po? He was already making quite a splash when you were there."

"Yes, vaguely. Wasn't he the one who built a magnificent home on the Peak and put a lot of expat noses out of joint?"

"That's him! There are plenty of others like him now, all coming up fast. They want membership to our clubs and before you know it they'll be stewards in the Jockey Club. A frightening thought! It just demonstrates what money can do. We may not abide their outlandish ways -- slurping their soup and talking too loudly. But they're on everybody's invitation list now."

"Yet behind our backs they call us gweilos or foreign barbarians and gab about their ancient traditions. Perhaps old Spengler did stumble onto a thing or two about the yellow races. Just look at the way the Japanese have picked themselves up from atomic devastation! If we don't want to be elbowed out, we need to counteract the eastern races in some way. Or at least make what we can while the going's good."

Baxingdale took out a packet of cigarettes. "I'm not sure I'm cut out for money-grubbing," he said, exhaling a cloud of smoke.

"Sooner or later you've got to start earning a living. You can't continue forever writing stuff nobody wants to publish."

The remark cut Baxingdale to the quick. His money was indeed running out and he couldn't contemplate falling back on his parents. He did not have the courage to breathe to anyone that he had been cleaning windows for the last six months to make ends meet. If more gainful employment did not turn up, he would soon not have the wherewithal to pay his rent, let alone

enjoy the kind of meal he had just finished. But the wine was beginning to make him carefree. "Something'll turn up," he said.

"What if something doesn't? What then?"

"Kill myself, I suppose."

"Come on, Seb! I mean, seriously."

"I am serious. Don't worry, Chris, I've discovered it isn't so easy to kill oneself. Since you're paying for lunch, the least I can do is to earn my meal with an amusing story. You know, I've got a gas cooker in my bed-sitter. My landlord has hooked it up with one of those wretched coin meters which swallows shillings like a whale. You have to keep feeding it. I've discovered that the maximum number of shillings that can be put into that infernal machine remains grossly insufficient for a lethal dose! The moral of that story is that one should attempt suicide only in a more respectable class of digs. Otherwise it's a waste of money."

"Don't tell me you've tried!" Christopher Knight exclaimed. "Look, Seb, I've got an idea. You're a smart chap. Why don't you muck into law for a couple of years, get qualified and join me in Hong Kong? The name Rand, Knight and Baxingdale has rather a nice ring to it."

"Thanks. I've read enough Dickens to be put off."

"No, Seb, be serious about my suggestion. It would be marvellous seeing you back in Hong Kong."

Baxingdale stubbed out his cigarette, lit another and sighed. "My father wants me to spread the gospel to dark corners of the world. My mother wants me to take up the pen like Zola. You want me to practise law. Well, you know, D. H. Lawrence once said something about our getting rid of our sicknesses through books. That's what I'm trying to do. I rather enjoy pouring venom out of my typewriter."

Baxingdale picked up his wine glass absent-mindedly and discovered that it had already been drained. He eyed the empty glass with disappointment.

Christopher Knight reached for the Chianti bottle, only to discover that it too was empty. "Care for more wine?"

"No, I was just fiddling. I've had enough."

"Look, Seb, I'm not sure I know how to say this. But what's the point of bashing away at your typewriter if no one gets to read what you've written? If you have a yen for writing, why not try journalism? I would hate to see you . . ."

"Turn into a bum?" Baxingdale interrupted.

"No, I was going to say 'wasting your talents'. Look, my mother has a distant cousin who's married to one of the senior editors at the Daily Globe. My mother could set up an interview. Maybe there's an opening."

"The Globe might not contain the abominations of the gutter press but it's still a pretty low-brow sort of rag, isn't it?"

"It's got two million readers and that's not to be sneezed at. I don't suppose you can count on anything very grand to begin with. Probably chasing ambulances, hanging around

magistrates' courts, covering coming-out parties and that sort of stuff. I'm going to try and set something up."

"Thanks, but I don't think so, Chris. Finding gainful employment is my problem, not yours."

"Seb, I'm not going to argue with you. I'm going to put my mother on to you and you can argue with her. And that's final."