

Picking Up The Pieces

Hong Kong, August 1965:

It was a Sunday afternoon. The French windows offered a vista of sunlit lawns and blossoming flowerbeds but Xavier Chu Wing-seng was oblivious to them. He was hunched over his father's desk, furiously taking notes from balance sheets spread before him. Stacked around was a mountain of files and financial documents.

Only twenty-five, he thought, and in charge of a conglomerate comprising seventy-nine companies. His father had never had such an opportunity at that age. Mastering so many inter-company relationships was infinitely better than merchant banking at Morgansteen, Dillon and Preston. Digging through Gold Star's corporate maze was like playing simultaneous games of three-dimensional chess. He felt exhilarated as he absorbed the intricacies of his inheritance.

His father was a genius, obscuring the financial strength of Gold Star from prying eyes through inner reserves, cross-holdings and inter-company loans. He noted with surprise that the once highly profitable supermarket chain had been sold and no longer part of the group. Then he remembered what his father had told him about being accused of causing the deaths of an old couple.

Among the documents he found a bill for meals taken at the Evergreen Tea House during the previous three months. It had been sent over from the office together with other personal papers by Mrs. Leung, his father's secretary. She could throw no light on it, however, except to say that such bills had previously been settled personally by his father. But how could that latest bill be possible? According to the dates, it was for meals consumed months after his father had died. And the amount demanded seemed grossly excessive.

He recalled his father offering more than once to take him to the tea house, to sample its selection of famous teas, but he had never taken him up on it. Unlike his father, he never developed a taste for tea and hence never found the need to delve into the Cha Ching or Book of Tea written thirteen hundred years ago. To him tea was just a beverage made with dried leaves. He couldn't understand why his people made such fuss over it or spend so much time investigating its taste, aroma and supposedly health-giving properties. He had got used to coffee and Coca-Cola in America. It seemed he would have to visit the tea house after all, to discover if someone was trying to pull a fast one. In any event, the bill might reveal something of his father's hidden life.

Poor Mother. She had spent her life sloughing off worldly attachments. He wondered how she really felt about his father's death. On the surface she appeared unperturbed. Her only outward signs were some loss of weight and a slight greying of her hair. But she must have loved him in her own way.

What an ordeal for a woman who rarely left the home to cope with. The death had caused a scurrilous Press to write articles full of insinuations and libels. Some actually went so far as to allege relationships between his father and various women, hinting at lovers' quarrels, a suicide pact and even murder.

Those allegations had offended him. Though his mother had dismissed them with indifference, they had left him with a lingering doubt. He was in the dark concerning much of his father's life. The connections with rascals like Buck-toothed Fung and with scholars like Teacher Tam demonstrated what a complicated man his father was. In death he remained a conundrum. What secrets had he taken to the grave? The bill from the tea house could be the beginning of a trail of discovery.

The coroner's findings left further mysteries. He needed explanations but where could they to be found? His mother was tighter than a clam.

He glanced idly around the room, wondering if he had overlooked clues. Nothing seemed fundamentally changed from eleven years ago, when that traumatic after-dinner discussion with his father took place. The only thing missing was the miniature potted pine. His mother had commandeered it for her own quarters.

Otherwise, everything was much the same. Half-opened and unopened boxes were still stacked everywhere. Teacher Tam's scrolls of calligraphy hung as before. The words of the Tang poem sounded more silly than ever. Who had time for bright moons and gentle breezes? He had enough trouble getting through his father's business papers.

Across from the scrolls, the glass-fronted bookcases stood against the wall on the opposite side of the room. He got up to examine their contents. They were not showy and leather-bound like those in the library. Both the English and Chinese volumes were well-thumbed. They lacked order in respect of subject and language, however: Homer, Socrates, Milton, Marx, Adam Smith, Bernard Shaw and Bertrand Russell. Spengler's The Decline of the West and Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire stood like pillars in some temple of knowledge.

The Chinese works included the Books of Mencius, the analects of Confucius, the writings of several Taoist sages, collections of Tang and Sung poems and a number of volumes on Buddhism. The Painting Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden was there, as was an ancient encyclopaedia entitled A Discussion of the Essential Criteria of Antiquities.

He remembered his father showing him The Painting Manual after their return from Taiwan but he quickly got bored with it. As his eyes moved from one Chinese title to another, he discovered he had barely heard of most of them, let alone read them. He searched for books on macro and micro economics, on management and corporate case studies, over which he had pored at Princeton and at Harvard. He found none.

What struck him also was that nothing in the room celebrated his father's life as a tycoon. No Rotary Club plaque, no Chamber of Commerce trophy, no photograph taken with the high and mighty. It was as if that part of him never existed. The study exuded an air entirely alien to business and high finance.

He was distracted by a timid knocking upon the half-opened door.

"I'm not disturbing you, am I?" Serenity asked, in her gentle, musical voice. Her smile radiated affection and kindness. Her hair was done in a chignon and she was dressed in a loose Chinese suit of rough mourning grey. She had a string of prayer beads in one hand and something he could not make out in the other.

“Not at all,” Xavier replied, rising to remove a pile of documents from a chair to make a seat for his mother.

“What a mess this is! All those crates and boxes! Your father never found time to deal with them. You sure you have enough room? You can use the library until some of the things are removed.”

“It’s all right, Mother. I’ve enough room.” He was pleased to see that his mother’s face still had that old beatific look of a person in a state of grace.

“I’m sorry I had to call you back,” Serenity said. She glanced around the room and let out a sigh.

“It’s all right, Mother. No big deal,” Xavier said, as he resumed his seat. “Merchant banking’s a dreary business anyway.”

“In ancient times Confucians held that a filial son had to retreat from the world upon the passing of a parent, to leave his hair uncombed and his beard unshaved. On the other hand Buddhists believe the physical self is but a shell, a carcass, to house the spirit as it journeys from one existence to the next. To slough off a temporary casing is of little significance. Both points of view seem to make sense. I suppose I’m more Buddhist than Confucian.”

“I’m glad.”

“I’ve brought you your father’s watch.” Serenity opened her hand to reveal the thin gold watch with the black face. “I’m sure your father would like you to have it.”

“It’s a lovely watch, full of class. I’ve long admired it.” Xavier took it and turned it over in his hands. “Yes, I’ll certainly wear it with pride.”

“I wouldn’t have sent for you if I could have coped. I hope you understand. Many of your father’s papers are in English. I couldn’t make anything of them. I trust I haven’t done anything wrong. I wouldn’t want anyone in Gold Star to lose his job because of me.”

“You did fine, Mother. Father was a genius. He left everything ticking over like clockwork. Built up massive cash reserves. Gold Star’s solid as a rock.”

“That’s a relief. We must decide what to do soon. It has grown too big. I don’t want you working day and night like your father.”

“We don’t have to deal with that now. You must have been run ragged the last few weeks. Let things settle down first.”

Xavier looked into his mother’s gentle eyes. He felt sorry for her life, wasted on useless religion. At the same time he suspected her inclinations might work against his grand designs. Donating her stake in Gold Star to charity would probably be uppermost in her mind. That would be disastrous. He needed her holdings to maintain control. He would have to secure his succession first and bide his time. Whether her affection for him was sufficient to bend her to his wishes remained uncertain.

“I hope you’ve not been hurt by the rubbish in the papers,” Serenity said, misreading her son’s silence. “Your father was a good man. A great tree often draws the whirlwind. Don’t take idle gossip to heart.”

“Oh, no, I was thinking of something else,” Xavier said. “I’m still trying to fit all the bits of the jigsaw into place. Our family has never been very good at telling things to one another, has it?”

“What do you want to know, Ah Seng?”

“Did you accept the coroner’s findings? They don’t make sense to me. Good heavens! I’ve seen Father drink! A few pegs of whisky to him would be like raindrops on a desert. How could he fall into the sea and drown?”

“Yes, your father certainly could hold his drink. But what could anyone do? The coroner concluded it was an accident.”

“The facts just don’t add up, Mother. Father would at least have cried out if he were in difficulties. The crew didn’t hear a thing. There was no sign of a struggle. There has to be something more.”

“I’ve told the coroner all I know. Your father decided on an evening at sea after dinner. Nothing unusual in that. He never came back. They found him drowned the next morning. The coroner’s verdict might not explain everything, but what else can we do?”

Xavier’s eyes narrowed. “Why should Father be in bathing trunks?” he asked. “When the boatswain took me to the spot where they anchored, he said Father told him and the other crew member to go to sleep. Father said they wouldn’t be returning to town till dawn. He left Father happily drinking and taking the breeze, fully clothed. Father’s not the sort of man to go swimming alone at night, in the middle of nowhere. The coroner seemed to have ignored that and seized upon the fact that Father’s clothes and personal belongings were in the cabin. I’ve had that ex-detective in Gold Star’s security department -- what’s his name? Chan, isn’t it? -- sifting through the evidence again but he couldn’t come up with anything either. That fellow’s getting too old for his job. I ought to get rid of him.”

“Your father always allowed long-serving staff to leave of their own volition, unless a person has been seriously dishonest. If you want to let him go, at least give him a pension.”

“Pension? Nobody at Gold Star gets a pension. They’re all on month-to-month terms, including myself, for that matter.”

“That may be the case but your father always saw to it that long-serving staff could enjoy a contented old age. Detective Chan has given your father good service. He deserves some sort of reward. If Gold Star cannot provide it, please arrange a pension to be paid by me.”

“All right, Mother, though I’m not sure he deserves one. He failed to come up with a single logical explanation to the questions I had about Father’s accident.”

“One cannot always find unplanations. Some things cannot be explained.”

“I doubt if that’s true. I hate loose ends. You didn’t notice anything bothering Father before the accident, did you?”

Serenity gave a laugh: “The only thing he fretted about was your adopting a foreign name. He went on about it for weeks.”

“I know. He telephoned me. I tried to explain that ‘Wing-seng’ didn’t carry the right ring. The guys at Princeton and Harvard kept asking me what it meant. I felt stupid telling them it

means 'Forever Successful'. Everybody is supposed to be successful in America. Xavier, on the other hand, makes a neater statement. It gives the impression that your money is safe with a person so named. A banker needs a reassuring name rather than one that trips over the tongue. Father didn't accept that. I've never heard him so upset."

"I should think so! When we chose your name, we intended you to be forever successful as a decent and upright human being, not as an accumulator of wealth."

"You never told me that. I just wanted to follow in Father's footsteps, to make Gold Star a name to be reckoned with. He almost ordered me to stick with my Chinese name. Sent me a jade seal."

"He showed me. A really exquisite piece of Burmese jade. I loved the lion carved on top as the grip. He went to a lot of trouble to find it and engaged a master craver in Taiwan to do the engraving. He had it done in ancient script to remind you of the best of Chinese traditions when you use it. Have you been using it?"

"Mother, a person can't use a thing like that on Wall Street. It's messy. You need a vermilion ink pad to begin with and it's also too big to lug around. People'll think I'm cranky."

"Why be put off by what others think? Seals have been in use in China for thousands of years. Vermilion is the colour of life, of eternity. If foreigners do not know our ways you should explain things to them, not shy away from following tradition."

"Mother, Americans don't accept an imprint from a seal as a binding signature on a contract."

"That's strange. I remember your father telling me during the early days of Gold Star that he had to get corporate seals made for it and for its sister companies."

"Corporate seals are of a different order. In any case, I've given my seal to Lucille as a keepsake."

"Your father would be heartbroken if he knew. You might use it now that you're back here. Lots of people still use seals instead of signatures. An imprint with well-formed characters can make a very impressive statement."

In order to turn the conversation away from the subject, Xavier said: "I ought to call on Uncle Yue and some of Father's other associates. I'll need all the support I can get until I'm firmly in the saddle. Do you think Uncle Yue would help me make my number with the rest of the Evergreens?"

"Why are you so interested in the Evergreens?"

"Why shouldn't I be? A number of them have business connections with Gold Star. We ship garments to America on Uncle Yue's vessels, we are partners in construction projects with another uncle, we buy machinery from a third. It seems logical to preserve such relationships. Did Father eat frequently at the Evergreen Tea House?"

"He used to breakfast there three or four times a week. Sometimes lunch as well. I would rather you distance yourself from those people. They were good friends of your father's but they belong to the past. They've made too much money too quickly. There's gossip about them, manipulating land prices and things like that."

“Nothing wrong with being quick-witted or stealing a march on others.”

“That depends on how it’s done. We are rich enough. You don’t have to make more. I’d rather you spend more time with your family. When is Lucille bringing my grandson home? I’m longing to see both of them.”

The switch in topic came as both a relief and an annoyance to Xavier. It seemed his mother had an instinct for touching on matters embarrassing to him.

“I’m sorry we didn’t bring Ah Yuen for the funeral,” he said. “He had been ill on and off since birth. We didn’t think the long flight and the noise and wailing at a Chinese funeral would do him any good. We left him in San Francisco with Lucille’s parents. Lucille’ll bring him as soon as she’s negotiated a release on the lease of our New York apartment.”

“Good. Dr. Chow will look after him once he’s here. Doctors don’t come any better than Dr. Chow. Should I start looking for a nanny for Ah Yuen as well?”

“Thank you, Mother. I’m sure Lucille will appreciate that.”

“You sure Lucille will be comfortable here?”

“Certainly. Why not? This is one of the best houses in Hong Kong, far better than anything she’s been used to.”

Serenity hesitated for a moment. “I didn’t mean physical comfort,” she said.

“Lucille’s American, but I sense she’s not very comfortable with our ways, living with a mother-in-law. She asked a great many things about our customs, particularly about mourning rites, after the funeral. She seemed anxious not to put a foot wrong.”

“I presume you told her the minimum necessary for the sake of form, Mother. That should be good enough. She’s born and bred American. Let’s keep her that way. Don’t confuse her with mushy Chinese customs and ideas.”

“I don’t mean to interfere, Ah Seng, but you must help her adjust. She doesn’t know any characters and does not even speak Cantonese. She has only a smattering of Toi Shan village dialect. People may make fun of her.”

“Mother, please let her be,” Xavier pleaded.

If his mother got Lucille started, Xavier thought, there was no telling where it would end. With his father gone he did not want to be reminded any more of his own disinterest in Chinese ways. He was a modern man, used to the get-up-and-go of Americans. If his mother started giving pointers to Lucille on what was or was not in the best Chinese tradition, domestic life would become more complicate. He needed the time and freedom to pursue his own ambitions, not to have both eaten up by a wife badgering him about Chinese obscurities.

“Please don’t complicate Lucille’s life,” he continued. “She already has a hang-up about her heritage. She can speak English. The Filipino maids understand English. That should be enough. It took me years to get rid of the rubbish they taught me at school. Just look at the stuff around this room. Mouldy old books and antiquated knick-knacks. Americans have things better organized. They’re not weighed down by their past. If Father had freed himself from all this stuff, he might have made more of his life.”

“Made more of his life?”

“Yes. He might have become richer and more famous.”

Serenity rose from her chair, shaking her head. “I’m going to the Meditation Room. Has it ever occurred to you that your father might have seen through the illusions in life, except that for him it was too late to turn back? He had accumulated too many obligations, done too many things he could not undo. For you, it’s not too late. Please reflect upon what I’ve said. Perhaps I should have left you in New York and tried to handle Gold Star in some other way.”

Xavier watched his mother head for the Meditation Room across the hall. He felt sorry for upsetting her. He was only trying to be honest and not mealy-mouthed. He could imagine her kneeling before the great bronze Buddha in the Meditation Room, with her head bent to the ground, praying for the salvation of her unrepentant son.

He leaned back and recalled his father’s mesmeric voice recounting the conversation between Mencius and King Hui of Liang. Why were people so fond of telling others how to lead their lives? First his father, now his mother. He did not have the heart to tell his mother it was his father’s opposition to his adopting “Xavier” as a name that had driven him into a spur-of-the-moment marriage. He had wanted to be modern, to assert his right to do whatever he wished.

In doing so, he had not been entirely fair to Lucille. She had asked for it, however, flaunting her physical attractions and allowing herself to be seduced in his hotel room in New York. His father’s criticisms had come when he was in the middle of a bout of loneliness. To shake it off he had invited Lucille to join him for a weekend in Las Vegas. Once there Lucille’s charms again got the better of him after a few drinks.

To compound that mistake, he had sired a sickly son. Lucille had spoken of having many children. That had not been in his calculations, at least not till his career had settled. No sooner was his son born than his father died. Was that an omen? If so, of what? Of ill-luck to come or of an accelerated opportunity to rise in the world? Only time would tell.

Meanwhile, he had to get to the bottom of the bill from the Evergreen Tea House. His mother had spoken of manipulation of land prices by the Evergreens. It would be worth getting the inside dope on that. He would give Uncle Yue a call.