

Alarm Bells

Hong Kong, December 1984:

Lucille was sitting at her dressing table, with one hand holding a telephone to her ear and the other fingering the string of prayer beads left by Serenity. When she was put through, she said: “Reggie, I’ve a problem. I need your help.”

“Ah! A lady in distress,” Sir Reginald Quinn’s voice, warm and indulgent, came back over the line. “How may I be of service?”

“Did Xavier tell you anything about his movements when he asked for leave from ExCo?”

“Nothing at all, except what’s been in the newspapers. Entering a monastery to mourn the passing of his mother and all that. Can’t quite remember when he left. Some time in October, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. He didn’t say how long he would be there, did he?”

“A respectable period, I should think. Wasn’t it once a Chinese tradition to mourn for a year upon the passing of a mother? Not that I expect that nowadays, of course. You mean he gave no indication? That’s odd.”

“Xavier’s not a traditionalist. I can’t see him mourning a month, let alone a year. But it has now been almost six weeks since anybody has heard from him.”

“Really? The government certainly expects to have him back in harness before long.”

“The Deputy Chairman at Gold Star rang this morning and asked if I’d heard from him. Of course, I haven’t. Xavier’s not the kind who rings home. He just does his thing. Comes back when he’s good and ready. But he’s never been absent this long without communicating with his office.”

“Well, he’s never mourned the death of a mother before, my dear. During the final months of his mother’s illness, didn’t he cancel his overseas trips? I’m not suggesting he intends to mourn for a year. It’s just that death sometimes does strange things to people. Was his office expecting to hear from him during his retreat?”

“Well, yes and no. They say he normally keeps in touch during his travels. He’s usually very hands-on. But this time nobody’s heard from him since early November.”

“Where was he when he last called?”

“In Japan.”

“Well, there you are! That’s the explanation. He’s in retreat. Probably doesn’t want to be disturbed. Can’t his office reach him at the monastery?”

“The place has no phone. It’s quite remote, deliberately cut off from the world to foster spiritual development. The regime’s very strict too, I gather. Can’t even send a telegram there.”

“Ah, a situation calling for the return of cleft sticks.” A chortle came from the other end of the line.

“Cleft sticks?”

“Sorry, my dear. Poor joke. Used to send messages across the bush in them during an earlier period of Empire. But, if the place has no phone and he called in November, that suggests he left the monastery at that time, at least temporarily. The question is: Did he go back or did he go elsewhere? Did he want to be left undisturbed or has he started picking up on unfinished business?”

“Even if he were working on deals, he should be back by now. I think he might be missing.”

“Missing? Surely not?” The Chief Secretary’s voice went up a full octave. “What makes you say that?”

“He told his Deputy he would be back to attend the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in Peking. That’s due in a few days. That’s not the kind of thing Xavier would want to be left out of. His Deputy doesn’t know what to do.”

“Oh dear! Could he be intending to fly direct from Japan? Or perhaps he might already be in China somewhere, immersed in one of his many projects.”

“No one knows. His Deputy has rung a few likely cities but no one has heard from him. Can’t you get Interpol to check on his whereabouts?”

“Interpol deals with international crime. So far there’s no evidence of any crime.”

“But he might be missing.”

“That’s possible. But no one has reported him missing. A person can’t walk into a police station in Hong Kong and report someone missing in Japan or Timbuktu. A report must be filed at the place where the person was last seen. That would be Japan. There’s no hard evidence that Xavier’s missing. Only a supposition, due to an absence of contact. There might be quite a simple explanation.”

“What if a newspaper asks about Xavier?”

There was a long pause on the line before Sir Reginald spoke again.

“Lucille, I want you to stay calm and not to worry. Here’s what I’m going to do. I’ll send an urgent signal to the Embassy in Tokyo to run Xavier down or at least to establish his whereabouts. Please don’t speak to anyone about Xavier, particularly the media. I’m sure he’s not missing. Just temporarily out of contact. This is a very sensitive time. Can’t have a lot of rumours and false alarms floating around. The Prime Minister’s going to Peking to sign the Joint Declaration. Can’t cast a cloud over that. I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about. Are you at home at the moment?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Please stay there. I’m sending someone from Government Information Services to see you. Derek Soames, the Deputy Director. Perhaps you know him. It would be helpful if the Deputy Chairman of Gold Star could be there as well. Would you and Gold Star mind the government handling media queries -- if any -- about Xavier? For the time being at least. Would that be a problem?”

“Not with me. I don’t know anything. That’s the problem.”

“Thank you. It’ll eliminate crossed wires.”

“If Xavier can’t make the signing ceremony, doesn’t somebody have to be notified?”

“That’s still a few days away. Leave that to Soames. He’ll work something out with you.”

“Will you let me know the moment you hear from Tokyo?”

“Of course, my dear. There’s not a thing to worry about. Everything’s under control.”

Everything was not under control, Lucille thought as she put down the receiver. She had told the Chief Secretary less than half the truth. The fact of the matter was that the Deputy Chairman was worried about something else.

There had apparently been a fire at a plastic toy factory in a town not far from Canton. Seventeen women workers lost their lives and dozens of others were injured. The cause of the fire in the middle of the night was unknown but the deaths were apparently caused by the exits of the quarters located above the factory being locked. The factory was a joint venture, the main partners being the town authorities and a well-known American manufacturer of toys. However, Gold Star, as the party putting together the original deal, also held a small minority stake. The Deputy Chairman needed Xavier to handle the Chinese authorities urgently, to get them to keep a lid on the tragedy. Adverse publicity could affect many other Gold Star projects in China..

But that was not the end to the tale of woe. Another disturbing telephone call, this time from the Chief Accountant of Gold Star, filled her with alarm. She recalled the conversation as she began counting off prayer beads furiously with the fingers of one hand. That activity, however, did not produce the calming effects it used to bring to Serenity.

The Chief Accountant apparently handled Xavier’s more mundane personal finances, such as paying wages to the staff at the mansion and Ah Yuen’s school fees and outgoings. She had never dealt with such matters and had no inkling of what the maids, the cook or the chauffeur were paid, let alone the cost of utilities, insurance and other necessities.

Thinking about it now she realized how much she had taken for granted. When she shopped, she merely used one of the credit cards given by Xavier. She never had to reckon the cost. In addition, a not ungenerous sum appeared each month in her bank account to take care of incidentals like facials, hairdressing, tuition fees for Madam Shek and the occasional present for her parents or brother.

The Chief Accountant’s contact was her first real indication of the vast machinery supporting her orderly life. The man explained there were insufficient funds in her husband’s private account to cover either the end-of-the-year bonuses due the staff at the mansion or the annual insurance premium for the mansion and its contents.

“How’s that usually handled?” she had asked, taken by surprise.

“What normally happens is that I pay from Mr. Chu’s private account,” the Chief Accountant had replied. “Whenever funds run low, I prepare a transfer chit for Mr. Chu to sign. Funds are then replenished from one of Mr. Chu’s bank accounts. But Mr. Chu hasn’t been

available to sign anything, so money cannot be transferred. I'm sorry to trouble you. I couldn't approach the Deputy Chairman or the Financial Director because this concerns Mr. Chu's private affairs and Mr. Chu's very strict about keeping details between just the two of us. If he finds out I have even spoken to you, he'll get very upset. Shall I inform the staff at the mansion their bonuses will be deferred until Mr. Chu's return? As for the insurance premium, I can get that deferred because the bill is from a Gold Star subsidiary."

"No, no! Just tell me the amount needed and I'll send a cheque. I want everything to function normally. What about the daily provisions, groceries, wine and so on? Do you pay for those from Mr. Chu's private funds as well?"

"That depends, Mrs. Chu. Spirits and wine come from another Gold Star subsidiary. Much of the food and the daily delivery of flowers come from yet another. From time to time, Mr. Chu allocates costs, either to Gold Star's budget for official entertainment or to his personal account. There's no problem with those at the moment because Mr. Chu hasn't made allocations. After he has done so, I pay the personal expenditure on his behalf."

"Do you handle credit card payments as well?"

"Yes, Mrs. Chu. The same system applies. All hotel bills and meals abroad go into corporate accounts. Mr. Chu then determines which items should be reimbursed as personal expenditures. All other credit card expenditure is charged to Mr. Chu's personal account."

"Thank you. I'm sure Mr. Chu will return soon. Should you run low again, please let me know. Now tell me what amount I ought to send."

She was taken aback by the figure suggested by the Chief Accountant. She had no idea outgoings were so enormous. She did not have much in the way of ready cash, except for Serenity's bequest. The amount now requested would just about wipe out her bank balance. Xavier was meticulous about everything. His mind operated like a computer. His failure to issue instructions or to make alternative arrangements worried her. It signalled some form of disaster.

What could have happened to him? He was unlikely to be still at the monastery. If he had met with a serious accident, she would have been informed by now. He was unlikely to have been kidnapped or held hostage. Japan was a very safe country, not given to such crimes. In any case, no ransom demand had arrived. Could he have gone off somewhere else? To China, America or Europe? Why the silence? The possibility he might have run off with a woman she dismissed utterly. He simply wasn't that type. There was no romance in him. Or sexual drive either. So where had he disappeared to? She couldn't work things out.

If he did not turn up soon, she would have to dispose of valuables to plug the gap. The treasures around the mansion belonged to Serenity's trusts and could not be touched. She thought of the jade seal Xavier had given her in happier times. That could raise a few bucks but nowhere near enough to ward off a further cash crisis. Besides, Xavier's name was engraved on it and its disposal would start tongues wagging.

There appeared only her jewellery to fall back on. The indignity of using them as collateral for a bank loan or taking them to a pawnbroker loomed. She hadn't a clue how to set about doing either.

Suddenly, something else came back to her. Shortly before Xavier's departure for Japan, she had noticed while he was placing some documents into his briefcase that it was stacked with American banknotes. They were in hundred-dollar bills. She had no idea what the total value might come to. The sight had surprised her, for Xavier had the habit of using plastic whenever possible.

That incident now nagged her. She had not bothered to ask at the time but what could he have been up to? It had to involve some transaction he did not want to be traceable. Was there a connection between that money and his lack of communication? She felt irritated by the mystery. Her thoughts flew immediately towards protecting Ah Yuen from whatever might be presaged by his father's disappearance, particularly so soon after the passing of his grandmother.

As trustee of Serenity's fortune she had to protect the assets of the trusts as well. But how? The bulk was in Gold Star shares. The world of business was largely alien to her. She knew enough, however, to realize that rumours would circulate once Xavier's unexplained absence became public. The value of Gold Star shares might plunge. If something untoward had indeed happened, there was no telling where things might lead.

* * *

After Soames had called and a common response to possible Press queries had been worked out, Lucille telephoned Baxingdale to ask him to dine with her. She broke her own long-standing rule never to see him unless Xavier was in town. But it was an emergency and she needed someone to tell her troubles to. Seb was the only man she could trust.

Since they ceased being lovers almost a year ago, Lucille had met with Seb on only three occasions, each time at the tea lounge on the Mezzanine Floor of the Mandarin Hotel. She had selected that public and popular venue because she wanted both of them to be on their best behaviour and not to be led into temptation. She loved him still but she also loved another -- her son. She could not possibly risk causing Ah Yuen hurt at this stage of his life. The likelihood of bumping into friends and acquaintances at the Mandarin lounge would remind both Seb and herself not to lapse from sentimentality into loss of control. For dinner that evening she had chosen Jimmy's Kitchen, a popular but cozy restaurant in the heart of town, for the same reason.

"Xavier has disappeared and I don't know what to do," she blurted out, once aperitifs had been served. She then unburdened herself of what she knew and what the Chief Secretary had said.

"There's no need to get into a tizzy quite so soon," Baxingdale said calmly. "There are some days to go before the signing ceremony. Xavier will certainly want to be there. If he doesn't show, then it'll be time enough to start worrying. Since the Embassy in Tokyo is looking into his whereabouts, I would relax for now."

"How can I relax when I face the embarrassment of not being able to pay my bills?"

"Let's analyse the situation step by step, beginning with what's obvious. Xavier couldn't have been kidnapped because no ransom has been demanded. Robbery and accidents can

also be ruled out because no police authority has been in touch. That leaves the possibility that Xavier is in a situation where he has not been allowed to get in touch with anybody or where, by choice, he doesn't want to be in touch with anybody. The first is difficult to imagine. So it's more likely to be the second."

"Xavier has never overlooked the need to provide money for his family. Never. This is so unlike him."

Baxingdale shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe so. But sometimes people change. His mother's death and going into that monastery might have triggered a reappraisal of his own life. It happened to Saul on the road to Damascus. Perhaps he just wants time for reflection."

"He could just tell people that and keep paying family expenses."

"Perhaps he's at a place he doesn't want people to know about. People have secrets, you know."

"Where can that conceivably be? He travels the world all the time and relishes the limelight."

"With that pile of cash, he might be engaging in something shady or clandestine, like an arms deal in the Middle East or a political mission in Taiwan."

"Taiwan? He never goes there. Gold Star has a liaison office in Taiwan but he never calls there. Even dealings with that office are left to the Deputy Chairman. If he's there I can ring the office and find out."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. If your husband doesn't want to be found, the liaison office won't be in the know. In any case, I'm sure your Deputy Chairman must have tried already. A call from you would merely spark rumours and draw attention to his absence."

"I just don't understand what all the mystery's about."

At that point an elderly waiter came to asked if they wanted to order. They did so.

After the waiter had left with their selections, Baxingdale said: "Look, there are more sides to your husband than any ordinary man can comprehend. When you add in political dimensions, there's no telling where that might lead. Taiwan is a distinct possibility."

"Why should he be involved in Taiwan politics? I though his main political interest was to cultivate leaders in the Chinese mainland."

"I'm only speculating, my dear girl, putting bits and pieces together. I don't know anything for sure. You must know there is a sizeable group of Kuomintang supporters in Hong Kong. The civil war between them and the Communists is not over. It is still being fought by political, economic and other means. The Taiwanese group here, though underdogs, is a committed and stubborn bunch, sustained by income from rackets of one kind or another, pretty much like the warring factions in Northern Ireland.

"What's in store for them after 1997? The British have so far tolerated them after a fashion. But would the Communists be equally forbearing after 1997? Or would they face elimination one by one? They're not going to sit around waiting for that to happen while they still have bargaining strength. They can make this place ungovernable in the run-up to 1997, unless a

deal is struck that takes account of their vital interests. Do you remember the rioting a few years back when some junior civil servant tried to tear down Nationalist flags in a resettlement estate?"

Baxingdale broke off his exposition when an acquaintance passed by the table and they exchanged greetings. He then continued.

"Not unnaturally, all parties want a quiet life before 1997, not the least the British. But the British cannot afford to be in contact with the Taiwanese, lest they are accused of engaging in a two-China plot. So what can be more convenient than using Xavier, a private individual, to broker a deal? Quinn hasn't given very much away, of course. But don't you think it's strange that he should be so keen for the Government Information Service to control the flow of information concerning Xavier's movements?"

"On the other hand, I may be barking completely up the wrong tree. It might be the Chinese or the Taiwanese who might be using Xavier for that purpose. He would in many respects be ideal, since he has access to some very senior leaders on both sides of the divide, not to mention good standing with the British and the Yanks."

"My goodness! How complicated you make life sound! If Xavier is steeped in such a political game, it's small wonder he has forgotten about providing his family with money. What am I supposed to do in the meantime? I don't even know where I'm supposed to fit in Gold Star, now that I'm the trustee of both his mother's wealth and his son's inheritance. Hasn't a trustee obligations under the law? How am I to discharge my obligations? Everything's in a mess. It's completely maddening."

Baxingdale nodded and sighed. "I'm sorry I'm no help on that score. You had better consult a lawyer but then you don't have money for one, do you? Why not have a quiet word with Christopher to see what he advises. In the meantime, I'll use the few contacts I have, both here and in Taiwan, to see what I can come up with. I would go to Taiwan to investigate myself except I'm due to leave for Peking day after tomorrow, to set up coverage for the signing. But chin up. I'm sure things will sort themselves out."

"Thanks, Seb, for saving me from going to pieces! I'll wait for news from the Embassy or wherever. I can't imagine how I can ever manage without having you to lean on once in a while."

"You don't have to imagine anything. You have the means to eliminate that dreaded possibility, you know, regardless of whether Xavier is lost or found," Baxingdale said, with an ironical smile.

Just then the elderly waiter came with their dinner.