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Opening Extract from...

French Concession

Written by Xiao Bai

Translated from the Chinese by Chenxin Jiang

Published by Point Blank

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FRENCH CONCESSION

Xiao Bai

Translated from the Chinese by Chenxin Jiang

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This is a work of fiction. While, as in all fiction, the literary perceptions and insights
are based on experience, all names, characters, places, and incidents either are prod-
ucts of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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And walked like an assassin through the town,
And looked at men and did not like them,
But trembled if one passed him with a frown.

—W. H. AUDEN, *In Time of War:*
A Sonnet Sequence with a Verse Commentary

In fact, when the moment came, power had not so much to be seized as to be picked up. It has been said that more people were injured in the making of Eisenstein's great film *October* (1927) than had been hurt during the actual taking of the Winter Palace on 7th November 1917.

—ERIC HOBBSBAWM, *The Age of Extremes:*
The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

This story is set in 1931, or Year 20 of the Republic, the twentieth year after the revolution that overthrew the Ch'ing Dynasty and created the Republic of China. It takes place in the foreign concessions established by Britain, France, and the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, extraterritorial jurisdictions in the heart of Shanghai. The British and American settlements were soon combined to form what was known as the International Settlement, whereas the French Concession remained independent. Both concessions were returned to the Chinese government during or shortly after the Second World War.

Spelling of Chinese names throughout mostly accords with the Wade-Giles system in use at the time, except where certain conventional names or spellings (such as the Whampoa) are more widely used.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

- Weiss Hsueh/Hsueh Wei-shih, a French-Chinese photojournalist who becomes an unofficial detective for the Political Section of the French Concession Police
- Therese Irxmayer/Lady Holly, a White Russian firearms dealer and Hsueh's lover
- Leng Hsiao-man, a member of a revolutionary cell and Hsueh's lover
- Ts'ao Chen-wu, Leng's second husband
- Wang Yang, Leng's first husband
- Ko Ya-min, a member of the cell
- Lieutenant Sarly, head of the Political Section of the French Concession Police
- Inspector Maron, head of a detective squad under the Political Section of the French Concession Police
- Ku Fu-kuang, leader of the revolutionary cell
- Park Kye-seong, a Korean member of the cell and Ku's right-hand man
- Lin P'ei-wen, head of one of the cell's units
- Ch'i, an ex-prostitute and Ku's lover
- Zung Ts-Mih, Therese's business partner from Hong Kong
- Yindee Zung/Ch'en Ying-ti, Zung Ts-Mih's sister
- Ah Kwai, Therese's maidservant from Hong Kong
- Tseng Nan-p'u, a functionary in Nanking's Central Bureau
- Cheng Yün-tuan, a secretary at Nanking's Investigative Unit for Party Affairs

Secretary Ch'en, a senior member in the Communist Party and former leader in the student movement

The poet from Marseille, a member of Inspector Maron's detective squad

Commissioner Martin, an English commander at the International Settlement's Municipal Police

Baron Franz Pidot, Luxembourg United Steel Company's chief representative in Shanghai

Margot Pidot, Baron Pidot's wife and Therese's close friend

Brenen Blair, Margot's lover

Consul Baudez, the French consul in Shanghai

Colonel Bichat, head of the Shanghai Volunteer Corps

Sergeant Ch'eng Yu-t'ao/Pock-faced Ch'eng, head of North Gate Police Station

M. Mallet, Chief of the French Concession Police

Sawada-san, First Secretary at the Japanese consulate

Li Pao-i, a newspaper reporter at the *Arsène Lupin*

Tao Lili/Peach Girl, a prostitute at Moon Palace Dancing Hall

Barker, an American

The Boss, head of the Green Gang

Morris Jr., prominent member of the Green Gang

Ch'in Ch'i-ch'üan, a member of Lin's unit

Fu, a member of the cell

Li, a member of the cell

Chou Li-min, a member of the cell

Pearl Yeh, a famous actress

Yan Feng, a cameraman at the Hua Sisters Motion Picture Studio

Pierre Weiss, Hsueh's father

Mr. and Mrs. Romantz, proprietors of the restaurant Bendigo

Hugo Irxmayer, Therese's deceased husband

P R E L U D E

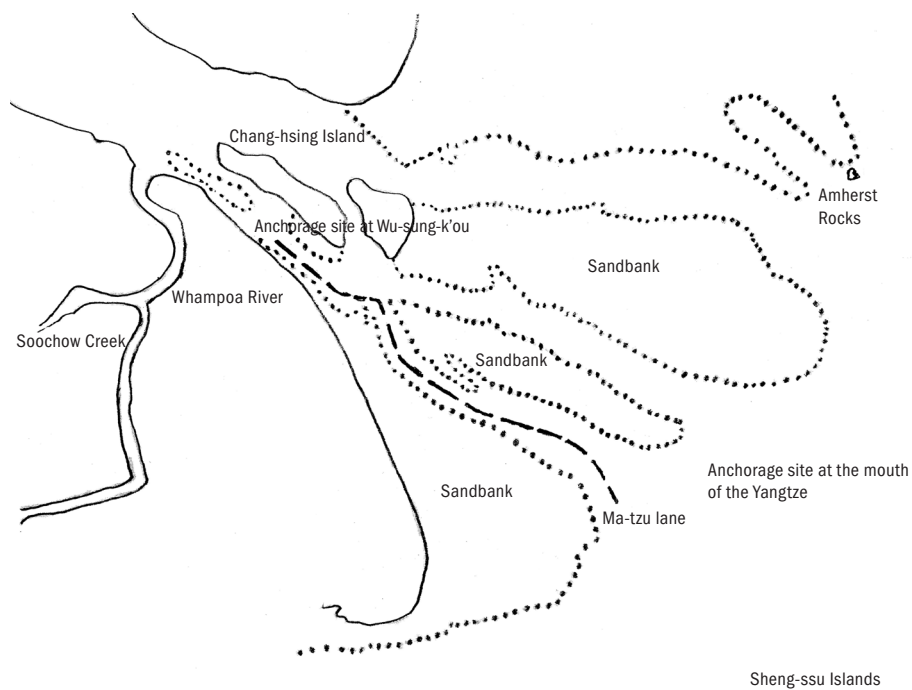
M A Y 19, Y E A R 20 O F T H E R E P U B L I C .

2 : 2 4 A . M .

The walls of the cabin were trembling. A steam whistle piped two short blasts. Hsueh opened his eyes. He still had the covers pulled over his head, and the ebb and flow of waves sounded like thunder in a distant world. The world beneath the covers was warm and rocked gently. Therese's naked back shivered in the darkness. The ship's engine must be restarting.

A thick fog had blotted out the stars. Going out onto the deck right now would be like stepping into a freezing dark dream. The deck would be treacherously slippery, and he would have no sense of direction—he would barely even know where his own hands and feet were. He would hear the waves but be unable to see them in the endless darkness. He might see a buoy flickering dimly several hundred yards away, as if through uncountable layers of black gauze.

The *Paul Lecat* set off at full steam. In only a few hours, it would be high tide on the Yangtze, the only time when a large ship could sail safely through the Astraea Channel. There was a sandbank on the northern side of the channel, and the whole channel was sandlogged. When the tide was at its lowest, the shallowest stretches of river would be less than twenty meters deep. The *Paul Lecat* weighed 7,050 tons, and displaced about twenty-eight meters of water. It thus had two hours to reach the next anchorage site at Wu-sung-k'ou, the mouth of the Wu-sung River.



Sea lanes at the mouth of the Yangtze River

Halfway through the journey up the river, it had a close brush with disaster. A German cargo ship sailing out to sea passed it very narrowly—"pass port to port" was the entry the pilot would make in his logbook that day. The river was foggy. The pilot did not hear the other ship sound the horn at its bridge, and by the time he saw the red light on its port side, they were on course to collide. The *Paul Lecat* hastily turned fifteen degrees starboard to let the other ship pass. In so doing, it was nearly forced out of the channel and onto the muddy sandbanks.

With the door just a crack open, a sliver of red light filtered in. Hsueh opened the cabin door and was immediately terrified by the sight of the other ship advancing toward him like a huge building.

He crept back under the sheets. Therese was sleeping like a mother hog, her snores long and gentle.

His fingernails brushed across the cloud-shaped purple birthmark between her shoulder blades.

Although they were traveling together, he knew little about her apart from her name. After all, she had engaged his services as a lover, not as a spy.

She likes to chain-smoke, especially in bed. She knows a lot about antique jewelry. Her ink green garnet stone has a pattern like a horse's mane. She knows some mysterious people in Hong Kong and Saigon. Granted, some of these were his own inventions—strangers always stimulated Hsueh's imagination. He was a photographer, and he made his living peddling photographs to all the newspapers and magazines in Shanghai. If he was lucky, a single photograph of a burglary-murder scene might fetch fifty yuan.

The first time they had met was at the scene of a shooting, standing over the corpse. The second time was at Lily Bar in Hongkew, next to a massage place with lanterns outside that read *PARIS GIRLS*. She wasn't all that different from the Paris girls inside, he thought.

In fact, only recently had he learned her name, in the Hotel Continental in Hanoi, when he heard that man call her Therese. Before then, all he knew was that people called her Lady Holly. He gradually worked out that she was White Russian and not German, as she was

said to be. She fascinated him. They spent their nights in places like the Astor House Hotel in Shanghai or the Hotel Continental in Hanoi. Spacious balconies, wide corridors, electric ceiling fans whirring discreetly. The air would be thick with the lascivious smell of overripe tropical fruit. The wind would blow open the pale green curtains and dry their glistening backs. He was almost in love with her.

It was now low tide, and the *Paul Lecat* would have to be moored in a temporary anchorage for twelve hours, until another pilot boarded the ship at the next high tide and navigated it into the Whampoa.

He yanked off the sheets, leaped out of bed, and got dressed. Only when he stepped outside did he realize that they were nowhere near their destination. The horizon grew bright, and the wind pierced his shirt. He decided to go to the restaurant for a cup of hot tea.

The railing, starboard side. Another first-class cabin. Leng Hsiao-man was about to steal out of bed. She could not risk disturbing Ts'ao Chen-wu, sound asleep beside her. According to the plan, she had to go to the telegraph room and send a telegram.

Ts'ao, her husband, had been sent to Hong Kong on a secret mission to arrange the visit of an influential man in the ruling Kuomintang party. He was now returning to Shanghai to meet that man in the French Concession, and accompany him back to Canton via Hong Kong and Shen-chen.

Ts'ao's snores rose and fell, like his temper. He was brusque and yet gentle, hard to pin down. She was in a pensive mood, though not because of him. She had scoured her memory of their life together, struggling to find things she loathed about him, good reasons for hating him, yet nothing she could think of justified what she was about to do. But surely she had to have a higher cause to live for.

*Anchored Wu-sung-k'ou await high tide STOP onshore before ten
STOP pier as agreed Ts'ao*

The telegraph operator sent these words to a Shanghai wireless shore station with the call letters XSH, to a Mr. Lin P'ei-wen, who

identified himself as the man responsible for welcoming the delegation. Half an hour later, at the Telegraph Office on 21B Szechuen Road, the night shift operator opened the glass door and went up to the counter. He handed the telegram to Mr. Lin, who had been waiting there for more than two hours.

The door to the main dining room was shut. Hsueh returned to the room, where Therese was still sleeping. In Hanoi, he had rushed out of the hotel toward the pier in a rage. He had made up his mind to ignore her, to stop sleeping in her room or her bed. But even when he booked himself a berth in third class, all she did was mock him. At the pier, he realized he had stepped on a piece of chewed-up betel nut. Standing beneath a palm tree, he looked at the Vietnamese hawkers dressed in black on the pier, and the stench of sweat made him feel queasy. He found himself wandering back to the hotel.

She hadn't bothered to pursue him at all—she had known he would come back of his own accord. He was young, and she was seven or eight years older. She had the upper hand. Who is that man? Who is he? he had asked. Mr. Zung, she said. In Hong Kong, she had gone out alone and left him at the hotel all day. At first he assumed she had gone to meet more of those White Russians forced to sell their last few pieces of jewelry. Then on the journey from Hong Kong to Haiphong, he'd seen this Mr. Zung on the boat. Therese pretended she didn't know him, but he had traveled with them all the way to Hanoi. In the hotel lobby, as he was coming downstairs to buy a packet of cigarettes, Hsueh overheard that man call her by her name—Therese—and saw her slip into his room. She had not come back to the room until midnight. He had questioned her angrily, pushed her against the wall, torn her skirt and silk drawers off, and reached his hand in to touch her. She had not even bathed. She kept smiling at him until he asked, Who is he? Why has he been following us since Hong Kong?

She brushed him off, laughing at him. Who do you think you are? she asked. He thought he was in love with her. He loved the way she smoked. Instead of using one of those agate or jade ciga-

rette holders, she would let the tobacco stain the bright curve of her lips, while her short black tousled hair cast flickering shadows on her pale face.

Now he was sitting on the side of the bed while she slept. Her handbag lay on the bedside table, and he opened it. He had never looked through her things before. A ray of early morning light sliced through the cabin window, illuminating a dark metallic outline. He put his hand inside the bag. It was a pistol—

The bag was snatched from his hands, and someone kicked him so hard he thudded to the floor. It was Therese, sitting on the pillow. The gray sky outside had turned a shade of vermillion, and she sat looking at him, backlit by the morning sun, her bare shoulders almost transparent. His eyes watered. He got up, snatched up his camera, and went outside.

The fog had lifted, and the river was sparkling. The white deck was stained bloodred with the dawn. He went down to the lower deck and toward the front of the ship. Coils of rope, sheets of canvas, and all the odd-numbered lifeboats were lined up toward the front of the boat by number, with the odd numbers on the starboard side while the even numbers were on the port side. A crowd had gathered by the railing to watch the sunrise.

There were a handful of tables and chairs, but the canvas seats were wet, and no one was sitting down. The bow of the ship was even windier, and it was empty. He leaned against the railing. Eight ships were anchored here in a fan-shaped formation, each with her bow pointing southwest toward Wu-sung-k'ou. An American passenger liner, the *President Jefferson*, was moored nearby. Waves beat on the ship, water droplets spattering its orange body just above the waterline. They looked like beads of sweat on a massive, hairless beast. Floating garbage collected near the surface of the water, while the gulls circled, looking for rotten food. He cursed aimlessly at the sky, and his self-pity turned into anger.

A shadow floated by. It was a silk handkerchief, dancing just beyond the railing like a white jellyfish swelling in the wind. He turned and saw a woman leaning against the railing. She wore

a black wool coat, beneath which her dress, a green-and-white-checked cheongsam, peeped out. The sun shone onto the port side of the ship from beyond the Yangtze, glinting off her hair. Her face was wet with what looked like tears. He had seen her somewhere before. She was pale, and the light shone into her eyes so that her tears glowed. He must have seen her in a movie, but which one? He couldn't stop himself from staring at her.

The bell rang for breakfast. Leng Hsiao-man wiped her cheek with the back of her hand. She glanced at the irate stranger, and as she was about to leave, she noticed a camera hanging from his long shoulder strap. The lens cover sprang open, and a finger pressed down on the shutter button. She hurried away.

The pilot boarded at 8:30 A.M. from a ladder mounted on the port side of the ship. He was responsible for navigating the ship into the narrow mouth of the Whampoa through Ch'iang-k'ou Channel. The ship would sail a little farther along the Whampoa to its destination, Kung-ho-hsiang Pier, just east of Lokatse on the northern shore of the Whampoa. He was not the only man getting ready to board the ship. At the floating pier just outside the port commissioner's office, four men in short sleeves were boarding a speedboat bound for the *Paul Lecat*—most likely gangsters, as they were carrying guns.

When the men sent by the Green Gang arrived at his cabin, Ts'ao had breakfasted and was fully dressed. Two of the bodyguards lugged his trunks out onto the deck. He reclined on the sofa in the cabin while Leng stood by the railing outside. He had no idea why Leng didn't just stay home. She insisted on traveling with him, but when she came she always had that mournful look. She shivered, went up to the trunk, opened it, and retrieved a red scarf, which she tied around her head.

The *garde municipale*, the police force of the French Concession, had been notified of Ts'ao's secret mission, but he would also need the Green Gang's protection. So instead of disembarking at Kung-ho-hsiang Pier in the International Settlement, he took a speedboat to Kin Lee Yuen Wharf, south of Lokatse. That was in the French Concession, within Green Gang territory.

Two boats were let down from the ship at the same time. One carried a Frenchman, a messenger who regularly traveled from Hanoi by train and sea via Haiphong to Shanghai, with documents that had to be personally signed for by the head of the Political Section of the French Concession Police. The other boat carried an important member of the Nanking government, his wife, his own bodyguards, and four bodyguards sent by the Green Gang. Before long, his wife started complaining of seasickness and insisted on sitting at the cabin window to get some air.

The sky was bright. Lin P'ei-wen was sitting on a rusty ladder that dipped below the waterline. The waves foamed around the pier, while bits of wood and leaves floated downstream. From where he was on Fishermen's Pier, he could see the porters on Kin Lee Yuen Wharf wearing their copper badges—only registered workers were allowed onto piers permitting overside delivery. He looked out to Lokatse, a bit of land on the eastern shore of the river that jutted out where the river took a sharp turn south. Someone said that it was called Lokatse because there used to be six families living there—*lok* meant six. But there were far more than six families there now. All the foreign trading houses were claiming land along the waterfront and building warehouses there. The few remaining rapeseed fields between dirty black walls looked like gaps in a mouth full of rotten teeth. There's no way I can keep track of all the boats rounding the corner past Lokatse, Lin thought. The papers said that the authorities were planning large-scale works to fill in deep fissures in the riverbed there.

Lin had collected a telegram in the early hours of the morning using forged identity papers. He had reported the contents of the telegram to Ku: their target, the hero of the day, would be arriving as planned. In a sense, Lin and his associates were merely the supporting cast.

In the early morning, Ku Fu-kuang had been at Mud Crossing in Pu-tung, waiting to cross the river with two other men. The Concession authorities prohibited boats other than the licensed Chinese- and Western-run ferries from taking passengers across

the river, but there were always boatmen willing to risk the passage across the narrow, winding river for a fee.

Now they were sitting in a chestnut-colored Peugeot sedan parked at the entrance to Kin Lee Yuen Wharf.

Lin saw two boats round the corner, one after another. A woman stood at the entrance to the cabin of the speedboat, the chrome-plated railing glinting in the sunlight, her red head scarf flapping in the wind. Slipping out of Fishermen's Pier from a hole in the wire-mesh fence, he went up to the Peugeot and waved.

Ko Ya-min jumped out of the car and melted into the crowd. The entrance of the wharf led out onto the crowded Quai de France. Lin immediately picked out the reporter Li Pao-i, whose shifty air gave him away.

The *Arsène Lupin* had never employed more than three people at a time. It was printed once every three days, and each paper consisted of a single broadsheet folded up into a tabloid paper, so calling Li Pao-i a newspaper reporter was a stretch. But he had somehow gotten a tip and arrived early to get a piece of the action. This was a big scoop, and he didn't have the nerve to hog it, so he had also sold the tip to a handful of more reputable newspapers whose reporters he saw regularly at the teahouse. Now they were standing next to him, while men with cameras waited about ten meters away.

Sergeant Ch'eng Yu-t'ao strode through the entrance to the wharf with several of his men from North Gate Police Station. Someone important was disembarking today. The Green Gang had undertaken to protect him, and the sergeant's job was to shoo busybodies away and seal off the floating dock connected to the jetty, so that the motorcade could drive directly up the jetty onto the dock. When the cops arrived, the Peugeot drove slowly away from the entrance to the wharf.

Ku was now standing on the southern end of Rue Takoo with a Browning No. 2 pistol tucked under his shirt, in the left pocket of his gray serge trousers. The pocket had been specially sewn on, and it was extra deep so his gun would fit snugly inside. The strange

windowless building behind him was a cold storage warehouse belonging to Shun-ch'ang Fish Traders. Ku was frantic. He realized the flaw in his plan. The jetty had been sealed off and no one was allowed to enter the floating dock. If the party had a motorcade, or if the blinds on the cars were drawn, then all was lost.

Lin P'ei-wen was standing at the opposite corner and looking toward him. Behind Ku, a narrow street called Rue de la Porte de l'Est ran south along the Quai de France, two blocks from Rue Takoo and parallel to it. On the side that intersected with the Quai de France, there was an iron gate with a police guard post. Farther south, where the French Concession ended and Chinese territory began, the road was called Waima Road, and the building on the intersection where the Quai de France became Waima Road was the headquarters of the Shanghai Special Marine Police Branch. Lin's job was to watch those two buildings closely. Ku himself was standing at the spot with the best view, and he had a clear view of the entrance to Kin Lee Yuen Wharf. The Peugeot was parked on the other end of Rue Takoo, near Rue du Whampoo.

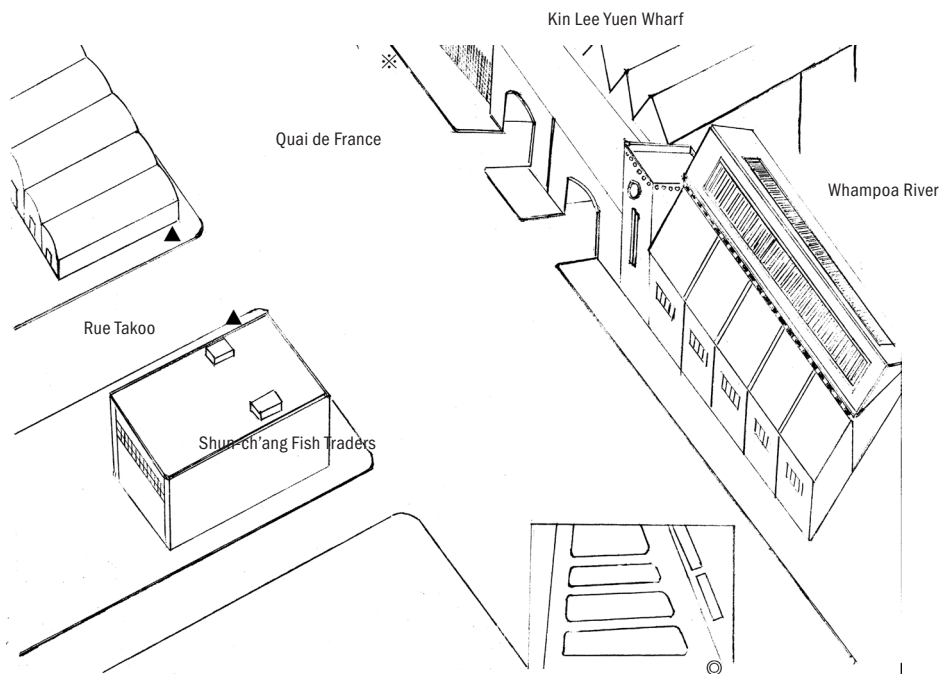
Leng had already disembarked. She too realized that things had not gone according to plan. There were three eight-cylinder Ford sedans waiting for them, and they got into the middle one, with Ts'ao sitting next to her. She did not know whether anyone could tell which car they were in, and the blinds were drawn.

She made a decision without thinking twice.

Sergeant Ch'eng Yu-t'ao was standing on the floating dock to welcome his guests. He had Ts'ao's personal bodyguards hand over their Mauser rifles. Civilians were not allowed to carry unregistered firearms in the Concession, and what mattered was that they had the Green Gang's protection.

The car drove slowly up the jetty, turning past a building toward the entrance to the wharf.

It was just past ten. Li Pao-i would claim that he had heard the clock at the Customs House chime, or at least that was what he later told Hsueh at the teahouse.



The assassination at Kin Lee Yuen Wharf

Just then, a string of firecrackers exploded with a deafening boom behind the rickshaws lined up on the northern side of the entrance. Later, the police confirmed that a string of firecrackers had indeed been hanging on the iron fences surrounding the wharf. The ground along the wall was strewn with tiny bits of paper, and the place stank of nitrates and sulfates. The Concession Police had developed a conditioned response to firecrackers—although harmless, they had often been used in recent protests and riots to sow chaos at the scene.

A rickshaw broke out of the lineup, cutting off Leng's sedan. Its window was open. Leng rolled her window down and stuck her head out. She poked her finger down her throat, and began to throw up the milk she had had for breakfast on the ship. The car stopped abruptly, her head jerked, and vomit splattered onto the body of the car. She did not see Ko Ya-min waiting behind the rickshaw. The door to the car was yanked open, and she fell out onto the ground. The gunfire pierced her eardrums like a screwdriver.

Firecrackers were echoing all along the tall buildings on either side of the wharf. But Ku had no time to enjoy the spectacle—he was focused only on witnessing its effect. As he watched Leng fall out of the car, he thought he could imagine how she must feel.

When it was eventually decided that Ko Ya-min would be the assassin instead of Leng, no one breathed a sigh of relief for her. Leng had argued that she was every bit as brave as Ko Ya-min, and the cell believed this man, Ts'ao Chen-wu, had in all likelihood ordered the murder of her ex-husband in prison. Ts'ao had been an officer in the Kwangsi Army, and he was now head of the Military Justice Unit for the forces occupying Shanghai. But Ku chose Ko as the assassin. His priority was to make sure that Ts'ao's execution took place in public, in a highly visible location. Luckily he had not planned to have Ts'ao shot on the floating dock itself, or the police blockade of the jetty would have thwarted his plan. Ku knew why Ko Ya-min had fought so hard for this task. Wang Yang, the man who had been shot in prison on Ts'ao's orders, was not only his half-brother and mentor, but also the person who had definitively conquered Leng's heart, especially now that he was dead.

Ko reached his hand into the backseat of the car to fire. All three bullets hit Ts'ao, and the last one penetrated his temple.

For Ts'ao, that bullet was the final blow. But for Ku, it was only the first blow, the first of a series of powerful signals he planned to send to the Concession and to Shanghai.

The Concession Police stood by. Later, at a meeting to discuss the incident, they would say that everything happened too quickly for them to react.

The eight bodyguards sent by the Green Gang were also caught by surprise. They had just gotten into the other two cars in the motorcade. Just as an audience relaxes for a moment when the curtain falls and before the applause begins, they let their guard down as they settled into the car, and the assassin had seized his chance.

An investigative commission representing the Nanking government in Shanghai also began to look into the incident. In one of their internal meetings, someone suggested that there was something fishy about the fact that the police had demanded Ts'ao's bodyguards hand over their rifles. Others suggested an investigation into the Green Gang bodyguards—who else could have known when Ts'ao was due to disembark, and how was this information leaked to the assassin? But all these speculations petered out when they discovered that Ts'ao's wife had sent a telegram from Wu-sung-k'ou when the liner was anchored there. Investigations into her quickly revealed one startling piece of evidence after another: her unusual background, the telegrams she had sent to Shanghai from Hong Kong, her red head scarf, and the vomiting. The woman herself had disappeared. Her photograph appeared in all the newspapers, and the Concession tabloids made a big show of using many question marks to suggest something scurrilous had happened.

Someone brought in the form that the man who collected Leng's telegram had filled out at the Telegraph Office, but they could not identify him, and the trail went cold. The tabloid reporter called Li Pao-i was a more promising lead, but there was little Nanking could do about that. As a resident of the French Concession, the man lay within the jurisdiction of the Concession Police, and the

interrogation reports they sent to Nanking had clearly been doctored. One Sergeant Ch'eng from North Gate Police Station had written a report stating that Li had nothing to do with the assassins, and that Li had simply received an anonymous phone call at the newspaper's editorial offices, as well as a brown paper envelope that afternoon after the incident took place. But Li had connections to the Green Gang and was known for his cunning. He had tipped off several other newspapers, and sold his story and the contents of the envelope to several of the most reputable newspapers in the Concession instead of printing them in his own small paper, so he wasn't technically in breach of press regulations. No one in Nanking gave much thought to this setback, as they were already in the process of making plans to cooperate with the Concession Police.

And neither Nanking, nor the Concession Police, nor even the Green Gang could get anything out of the assassin, because after firing three shots at Ts'ao, he aimed the gun at his own temple and fired. The police coroner later found that the man had also bitten through a wax cyanide pill under his tongue. The bullet was just a safety measure.

CHAPTER 1

MAY 25, YEAR 20 OF THE REPUBLIC.

9:10 A.M.

The Morris Teahouse was decorated like the interior of a ship's cabin. This was not unusual in the foreign concessions, where middle-aged European businessmen liked to install portholes and ship wheels in their houses, and style themselves captains. To be more precise, the teahouse looked like a floating hexagonal pagoda with its narrow stairs and copper-plated railings. The third floor had large windows on three of its walls, through which the Race Course could be seen, northeast of the teahouse.

The teahouse was as raucous as a stable. In fact, the building had housed a stable before being converted to a teahouse. Two large pieces of iron shaped like horses' hooves hung on the door, and Li Pao-i touched them every time he went inside.

The Morris Teahouse was where all the smalltime journalists in the concessions met to trade tips because it was so near the Race Course. On a clear day, if you stood at one of the windows facing north, you could see all the way to the ticket booth and even make out the colorful numbers announcing a raffle or listing betting odds. The crowds waited by the entrance, milling about in threes or fives. Li looked out onto the racecourse. On the inner dirt track where the horses warmed up in the morning, a stable hand was taking a small black mare for a lazy walk. When nuggets of horse shit dropped from her round ass, the stable hand would snatch them up as though they were worth something and put them in his bamboo basket.

Pppft! Li spat tea leaves out of the corner of his mouth. Even the tea here tasted like horse piss. The previous Saturday, the North Gate police had barged into his room early in the morning. Li lived in a tiny room above the shared kitchen, which meant his room always stank of fried salted fish. He was still half asleep when they dragged him outside and shoved him into the dingy backseat of a car. And then they dragged him out of the car and threw him into a room with white walls. It was true he could lock the door at night. But why should he? It wasn't as though he owned anything valuable. And how had they burst into the courtyard and marched straight through the kitchen and up the squeaky wooden stairs, all without waking meddlesome Mrs. Yang downstairs? Granted, they were cops, unstoppable in their uniforms, with whistles and batons, and police badges on their lapels.

That was why he had slept soundly right up until the moment when his visitors pulled the covers off and asked him politely to get dressed. The car made several sharp turns and pulled up in front of a red brick building. Only when he was pushed roughly out of the car did he think to ask: who are you anyway?

And then they stopped being polite. One man punched him on the back of the head. He recognized the man waiting inside as Sergeant Ch'eng of the North Gate police. He knew old Pock-faced Ch'eng. Like Li, Ch'eng was a Green Gang man from a wealthy Shanghai family. Unlike Li, the sergeant was a big shot. Li tried playing the gang card, mentioning his capo, but they kept kicking and punching him. He was forced to tell Ch'eng everything he knew. Except that he didn't know anything. He certainly did not know ahead of time that a man would be killed or he would have told the police—he was a good citizen. Ow! All right, he wasn't a good citizen, but he still wouldn't have had the nerve to keep that secret. He'd gone to the Kin Lee Yuen Wharf because an anonymous caller had told him at seven in the morning that something big was going to happen there. But what was he doing in the newsroom so early? Li said he hadn't gone home in the first place—he had spent the night playing mah-jong. And why would he believe a single anonymous caller? What

made the other reporters believe him? Here Li hesitated, and his interrogators pinned him down by the shoulders. Maybe it was the other man's tone of voice, which had sounded deadly serious, like cold air emanating from the phone receiver. But then how had he convinced the others? Oh, that was a piece of cake—he got another punch in the head, apparently Sergeant Ch'eng's men didn't like it if you sounded too casual—aren't reporters ready to believe anything in case there's a scoop in it for them?

Sergeant Ch'eng let him go. He did warn Li that if it weren't for his capo, and if it weren't for the fact that Li had been clever enough to sell the manifesto to other newspapers instead of printing it in the *Arsène Lupin*, he would be spending the next couple of years in jail at Lunghwa Garrison Command. The media had had a field day covering the Kin Lee Yuen shooting, and many newspapers had printed a manifesto addressed to Shanghai residents by the assassins, without the slightest regard for the authority of the Shanghai Party-Government-Army Press Censorship Bureau, which was housed in the East Asia Hotel.

The teahouse began to fill with people, and he sat at a window facing north. Hsueh sat opposite him, while his camera lay on the small table.

"Where were you that day? I spent all night looking for you. I even came here to catch you in the morning, but you weren't anywhere to be found!"

Li Pao-i was telling the truth now. He had not told the truth to Sergeant Ch'eng.

Hsueh seemed to regret missing out on the scoop. Of course, Li then had simply sold the tip to someone else. Hsueh flipped through the photos again. Several of them had already appeared in the newspaper, but there were a few others that Hsueh hadn't seen. These were the ones by the *China Times*, and the photographer had developed a set for Li to keep.

Hsueh's favorite subject of photography was the crime scene. Here, the gunman's corpse took up the right-hand diagonal half of one photo, lying beneath the spare tire that hung at the back of the

car. There were black pools of liquid and a gun on the ground. *Shun Pao* identified it as the semiautomatic Mauser C96 rifle, while other papers used its nickname, the box cannon gun, to make it sound scarier. Another photo was a close-up of a cop's face. Beyond the rim of his cap and his raised tin whistle, which was so near the lens it looked like a wilted black flower, you could see the door swung open and the body on the backseat. The corner of a black coat peeked out beneath the door. It belonged to the woman, the victim's wife. One photo captured her vacant expression as she lay there, propping herself up with her hand and struggling to lift her head, with vomit on the corner of her mouth. Li had seen another photo in *Millard's Review*, an old photo from the newspaper announcements of Mr. Ts'ao's wedding. Word was that Ts'ao's death had had something to do with his wife, who was now wanted by the police department.

"I saw this woman on the ship. I've got a photo of her that's much better than this one. That guy did a shoddy job. His camera won't do, and his technique is terrible," Hsueh said critically. In the chaos, the *China Times's* photographer had clearly been unable to keep his subject in focus.

"Show it to me."

"No, I don't think I will." Hsueh sounded a little distracted. "You'd have to pay me. Fifty yuan."

Li promptly lost interest. The assassination was old news. A whole week had passed, the Concession newspapers had devoted pages and pages to the story, and now everyone was getting tired of it. Only Hsueh was still enthusiastic about it.

"So, this woman. Was she really a Communist?" Hsueh said. "How did they find you anyway?"

"They stopped me on the road and asked me to get into a car with them." Li was lying again. He had been walking down the street when a woman had slapped him in the face and started hurling abuse at him. Then someone had stopped to break up the fight and shoved him into a car. He had been kidnapped. But he didn't want to admit that—it was a little embarrassing.

"What did they look like?"

“What do you think, they all had red hair and green eyes? Haven’t you seen a Communist before? Only a few years ago they were on every street corner.”

Just thinking about that man made his skin creep. The man had been forty or so. He always had his top hat on, even indoors. His eyes pierced through you from beneath the rim of his hat, and he smoked one cigarette after another. Li wouldn’t dare mess with him—he could see that this man was much more dangerous than the police. He didn’t have to ask what you were thinking because he knew. And the more polite he was, the more terrified Li became, as if he could be shot for one wrong word. The man put the gun on the table.

He warned Li not to go getting any ideas, not to even think about tipping the police off quietly. Li was to comply fully with his demands. At nine in the morning he was to show up at the Kin Lee Yuen Wharf, watch carefully, and write a good story. The next time we visit, we’ll bring you something, he said. But instead of visiting, they merely sent him a brown paper envelope containing a manifesto announcing the execution of the counterrevolutionary element Ts’ao Chen-wu, signed by the Special Operations Unit of the Chinese Communist Party in Shanghai and Their Comrades of People’s Strength. A bullet lay in the envelope, proof that his correspondent meant business. He could have sent two bullets, but would two bullets say anything that one didn’t?

He dared not simply print the manifesto in the brown paper envelope, so he pulled an old trick and sold it to several of the more reputable newspapers, reasoning that he had more than complied with his visitor’s request. Of course he made a tidy profit—that was his job. He even managed to sell the tip to a foreign newspaper. The Communists couldn’t object to getting some international attention. The wealthy Chinese in the Concession only read foreign newspapers, paid for monthly by check. They all had servants who would retrieve the paper from the letterbox and bring it to the living room in the morning. If they came after him, he could reasonably claim that having the Concession’s foreign newspapers print their manifesto was the equivalent of loosening a screw on the

Press Censorship Bureau's gates. The next day, it would be in all the Chinese papers. Wasn't that exactly what these men wanted?

He didn't tell Hsueh all this. It was time they forgot about this story. It was stale news by now, and he was quite sure his visitors would leave him alone. Apart from Hsueh, no one else had come over to ask him about it all morning—and Hsueh was clearly more interested in the woman than the story. When he left, he asked Li Pao-i to give him the photos of this woman, even though he thought little of the *China Times's* cameraman. Sure you can have them, it's old news. Have them all if you want. I've already made more than eighty yuan off this story. Care to know the woman's name?

"I know, she's called Leng Hsiao-man."

Hsueh turned and walked quickly down the stairs.

CHAPTER 2

MAY 25, YEAR 20 OF THE REPUBLIC.

10:50 A.M.

As Hsueh walked along, he could not stop thinking about that woman. She looked like someone he knew, but he still didn't know who she was. All the movies he had seen starred Western actresses. Maybe it was a certain expression, a scene, a line of dialogue she reminded him of. He hadn't even spoken to her. Now that her photo had been in all the papers, he could barely tell whether the face he imagined was the one he had seen by the railing.

On Mohawk Road, someone thumped him on the shoulder. His shoulder strap slipped, and he quickly hooked his arm to catch his camera. It was Barker.

Barker was American. He had fat fingers covered with layers of skin that made them look like Cantonese sausages, and his fingernails were dull.

"Acetic acid," Barker had told him one day in the bar.

He had spread his hands, palms facing downward, on the little round table in the bar. The tablecloth was stained with tea, as if he had just rubbed his hands on it. You could invent an alias or grow a beard, but you could not swap out your fingertips. The police had a new way of dipping your fingers in ink and pressing them on a piece of paper, which would go in a big book in a filing cabinet. Then you would never be able to get in trouble again—the cops would find you wherever you went. It's not as though you could cut off your

fingers. Soaking them in vinegar worked and didn't hurt, but it took a couple of weeks. When Barker was telling him all this in the bar, they had known each other for only about a month.

Hsueh had met him at the roulette table in the saloon. When gambling was outlawed in the International Settlement, all the dice joints and gambling dens had migrated to the narrow alleyways of the French Concession, but foreigners hardly ever came to this kind of place. Barker hovered by the tables, tall and lanky with long arms like a mantis. He stuck out. Hsueh made a point of being inquisitive in the Concession, which he considered his territory. He kept tabs on anyone who stuck out.

A wanted man in America who had fled across the Pacific, Barker now stood in the saloon with the air of a diplomat fresh off the ships. His right elbow was cupped in his left hand, and he was ostentatiously tapping his forehead with his right index finger, like a British public school boy.

Barker pulled Hsueh into the Race Course. Word was that the final steeplechase had been fixed, said Barker, and the horse owner himself was said to be betting against the Cossack jockeys. The jockeys had decided to trap Chinese Warrior between two other horses to prevent it from reaching full speed, and Black Cacique, a literal dark horse, would win. The crowds crammed between the iron gates and the viewing deck were hysterical, as if the Lord himself had decided not to wait for Judgment Day and was judging the saved from the damned on the basis of their betting slips.

A whistle blasted, and the loudspeakers on either side of the viewing deck began to crackle. Someone was making an announcement in English followed by Shanghainese dialect: "The Race Club Committee hereby announces the hosting of an additional steeplechase race this afternoon."

Cheering, the crowd rushed toward the viewing deck. In the frenzy, a single cry could create a maelstrom that would suck the whole crowd in.

Hsueh changed his mind abruptly. He did not want to join them after all. He bid farewell to Barker, and walked toward Avenue

Édouard VII. He would lunch at the Manor Inn, and later that afternoon, Therese would be waiting for him at the Astor Hotel, in a fourth-floor luxury suite that cost twelve yuan a day.

Hsueh was the illegitimate son of a Frenchman who had boarded a boat in Marseille with a suitcase full of tattered clothes. The Frenchman had loitered in bars in Saigon and Canton, bragging about his exploits, until he found a job in Shanghai. It was the best time of his life. Hsueh's Cantonese mother had a dull complexion. She wore a traditional jacket with dull patterns, her curls jabbing into its stiff collar. She had never worn clothes like that before meeting Hsueh's father, and she then refused to wear anything else. She rattled constantly around Hsueh's pale collarbone, in an egg-shaped cloisonné box that he wore on a heavy silver chain around his neck. The chain had long been stained black with his sweat. Even when he was at his least self-conscious, whispering dirty phrases in Therese's ear in Chinese she didn't understand, his mother was still rattling between their bodies.

Moved by a passion he had never experienced until then, Hsueh's father rushed to the trenches at Verdun during the Great War, leaving behind in Shanghai all his possessions, his Chinese lover, and Hsueh. He never returned. Hsueh was only twelve years old. But it could not be said of Hsueh's father that he did not love his family. He wrote to them from the battlefield, and the letters that reached them from across the oceans often contained a small package of photographs. In one of them, a Zulu regiment was performing a religious ceremony. Hsueh's father had never seen that many black men in his life. Wearing nothing but a piece of cloth around their waists, they waved their sticks, dancing with rapt expressions. Hsueh's favorite one was of his father smoking a pipe in the trenches in summertime, his chin covered with stubble, shirtsleeves torn short at the shoulders. In another photo, a man posed stark naked at the entrance to the shower cubicles while his uniform hung on the wall. It was his father, grinning at the camera with one hand covering his pubic hair. His mother had stashed this photo away, so he did not see it until after her death. There was a line in French on the back: *Poux—Je n'ai*

pas de poux! Lice—I have no lice! He suspected this photo was partly responsible for the fact that his mother never remarried.

That winter, his father posed for a photo next to a row of corpses. He wore his jacket and a water canteen slung over his shoulder. There were so many corpses that it looked like a slaughterhouse. Some were laid out side by side, while others were piled on trucks like garbage. In fact, the injured looked even more horrific than the dead. One man was wrapped from head to toe in bandages, excepting three holes for his eyes and nose.

Not only had his father's amateur photography influenced Hsueh's choice of career, but the very photos that he sent them from the trenches were also an artistic inheritance that had shaped Hsueh's tastes. Hsueh's penchant for snapping photos of dead men, crime scenes, maimed, stabbed, and bullet-ridden bodies, frenzied gamblers, drunkards, and all forms of human perversity could likely be traced to the photos his father sent home.

When she died, Hsueh's mother had left him a small sum of money, most of which he spent within a month. He had an American firm on the Bund order a camera from New York for him, a 4x5 Speed Graphic with a 1/1000s Compur shutter, the best press camera to be had. It could capture the instant before a bullet pierced a human skull.

Before he met Therese, photography had been his greatest love, with gambling only a distant second. Then Therese had nearly replaced photography in his affections until he tried combining his two loves and found that they were both the better for it.

He had fallen for her right away, that night in Lily Bar.

"Half a glass of kvass topped off with vodka. Hey you, Duke! You know what I want." She had been a little tipsy. Duke, the waiter she was shouting for, was the White Russian owner of the bar.

Her voice was husky and tender, a voice made for old songs. While the Victrola turned slowly on the bar table, she sat at a table by the window. The black of the wrought iron grilles stood out against the blue diamond-shaped glass, and a naked woman was engraved in yellow on the glass. It was raining, and the pavement had an oily red

sheen. When the song ended, she would clap hysterically.

He had thought he was seducing her, so he was startled to find that she had turned their relationship on its head, conquering both him and his camera in the space of a week. His own passive tendency to go along with what other people wanted was to blame.

This afternoon, Therese would be waiting for him in her suite on the fourth floor of the Astor. She might even be in bed, if she had already spent enough time soaking in the bath, warm like a mug of cream swirled with pink fruit juice. Like a filly clambering out of a pond, she would climb out of the bath and skip right into bed. She had an aristocratic air that the White Russian men who claimed to have been dukes or navy admirals rarely possessed. Their huge bodies cowered in the dark corners of the Concession's bars, members of a defeated northern tribe. Therese, on the other hand, pushed Hsueh onto the bed, had him lie straight, and sat astride him, swaying and waving one arm, as though she were waving a Cossack dagger.

If he didn't love her, he wouldn't be losing his temper or interrogating her. He imagined the sultry Southeast Asian breeze whetting her appetite. One day she would decide he couldn't satisfy her. She would slip out of the hotel room and into someone else's room. He pictured the man in the other room as an old friend, whereas he himself was only a fling. He imagined her lifting her legs under someone else's body. The very idea tormented him.

He began to think he didn't love her after all. He preferred thinking of himself as a dandy taking advantage of the fact that Therese was both wealthy and generous. That made him feel better.

But he still wanted to know whom she had met in the hotel. She would not tell him. If he began to ask, she would get mad, or pounce on him, or even pretend not to hear him and ignore him altogether. He began to daydream about investigating her, but he wouldn't know how to start. He had no wiles. Li Pao-i might, but Hsueh did not.