

Mao-lin, Central China. October 24, 1921

The Reverend Steven Walder felt well satisfied with the evening. He had had an excellent dinner--roast pork with apples--and a stimulating conversation with the only other intellect in the city, Dr. Schmidt, followed by sex with the inventive Mrs. Elisabeth Ramsey. It was a little after 2 a.m. when Walder tugged the brim of his hat down, turned up his collar, and stepped out into the cold Fall night, closing the Ramseys' door behind him, careful not to make a sound.

He looked up. Despite wisps of ground fog, the stars were brilliant, perfectly defined beacons in the black sky. It was one of the few joys of being stuck in rural China, he thought. No big city lights and smoke to blur his view of the sky. He only paused for a moment. "Have to hurry," Walder said to himself and smiled. He loved intrigue, living on the edge. For him it was an antidote to the boredom of living away from Shanghai. He started to whistle, but caught himself. How to get to this meeting without being noticed? he wondered. Hilltop, the foreign enclave set on a high ridge overlooking Mao-lin, was surrounded by a wall and patrolled by a private police force of Indians, all former soldiers of the British Army.

He looked at his pocket watch, angling it back and forth until it caught enough moonlight for him to read the dial. It said 2:10. He had twenty minutes to get to the abandoned Buddhist temple in the valley behind Hilltop. For a moment he played with the idea of going over the wall. There was a spot he knew where a tree grew close to the wall. But the wall was ten feet high and topped with broken glass imbedded in the brick. Aside from his bedroom exploits, Walder had done nothing athletic in years. Worse, he couldn't possibly talk his way out if he were caught by a patrol. Not that the police would arrest him. Their job was to keep the Chinese out. There would be a fuss, word would seep out, and in the little world of foreigners in Mao-lin, he would be acutely embarrassed. No, he decided, he would have use the gate.

Walder walked faster along the wide street lined with sycamore trees laid out to look like an expensive suburb in England. He went past the looming dark hulk of the Socony man's house. Walder blew out a plume of damp air. Averill, the oil man, was a dunce and his wife a bore. He'd never get that promotion to his head office in Shanghai he lusted for, and he'd never learn how to bid at bridge correctly.

At the corner, he turned left and walked even faster. Walder was sweating now. Even though he was only 41, he had put on weight in China, giving him a portly profile which he rather liked, feeling it added to his stature and dignity. He was, by far, the best known Baptist Missionary along the Yangtze River and, certainly the largest money-raiser. His last series of "Save-the-Godless-Chinese" speeches in America had brought in contributions that broke all records. By next year he was sure he would be sitting at mission headquarters in Shanghai. The thought of Shanghai made him smile.

He noted that a light was on in Mason's house. He wondered what the scrawny little bachelor was doing up this late. Walder couldn't imagine he had a woman with him. No, not Mason. He seemed to have no interest in life other than his telegraph and telephone lines. Hardly ever came to drinks parties, although one of the wives (he couldn't remember which) had told him she had seen Mason up in Hankow, gambling heavily at the Macao Casino. Perhaps that was his vice. Every man needed at least one.

"Damn," Walder mumbled to himself as he got close to the guardhouse. "Sergeant Kamila." The big black devil was the worst of them. Always just short of being insolent. If he had his way, he'd fire the lot. One day he'd have enough council votes to do it.

At the gate, the big Indian's face showed no expression, as if it was commonplace to have a resident of Hilltop appear in the middle of the night. He clicked his heels and whipped his hand up to his yellow turban in a perfect military salute.

"Good morning, sir. Is there something wrong?"

"If there was," Walder said, eyeing the stripes on Kamila's arm, "you should know without me having to come here and tell you."

"Merely inquiring, sir."

Walder glared at Kamila. He noticed another guard standing in the doorway of the guardhouse, but he ignored him. Kamila was always the bother.

"Where are you going, sir?"

"It's no business of yours."

"Rules, sir. Midnight to dawn we have to log everyone in or out."

Walder felt cold anger rising in his chest. He glared at Kamila for a moment, then said, "I'm going to my clinic. Do you want to know why?" The clinic, attached to his church in town, was the only hospital for miles around. It was his creation and he was truly proud of it. It also provided him with a wonderful excuse to be out at night.

"No, sir. But you should have an escort, sir. It's dangerous to be out alone at this time of night. Thieves and soldiers, sir. I can--."

"No. No, Sergeant. I don't need one." Walder pulled the brim of his fedora down with a sharp tug and brushed by Kamila.

"Very good, sir," Kamila called after him as Walder walked quickly away from the guardhouse and started down the steep twisting road that led to Mao-lin.

The Chinese city lay beneath him, a sprinkling of light snaking along the Yangtze from the old walled village on his right, where Mao-lin began centuries ago, to the Tortoise Hill pagoda at the eastern edge of town. Walder rarely went into the old Chinese town and then he used a

sedan chair. He didn't like the crowds and the squalor of the tightly packed streets. He felt much more comfortable in the river-side offices of the foreign companies, the town's one decent hotel, and its two passable restaurants. Everything else was just China.

The road turned to the left so that it ran parallel to the wall surrounding Hilltop. Directly below him now, in the middle of what was called the New Town, was his church and clinic. There was a light burning in the clinic. Dr. Schmidt rarely slept, Walder knew, and drank a lot, but the German had brilliant mind when it wasn't clouded by brandy. It was a weakness that made Walder feel superior to the German even when he lost to him, as he usually did, at chess.

Walder didn't look back. He knew with a few more steps he would be out of the guard's sight. He could feel Kamila's eyes on him. Did he suspect something? It took all of Walder's self-control not to glance over his shoulder.

Where the road switched back to the right, Walder continued walking straight ahead, through the scrub at the base of the wall. He would have to hurry to get around the wall and down the hill to the ruined temple in time. What was this meeting about? The note delivered by a message coolie didn't say, except to promise profit. That was interesting, but it was the faint hint of perfume on the note that aroused his curiosity. Who could it be? He had read the note several times, smelled it, fingered the paper, and finally burned it in his ashtray. No point in taking chances. His office was not safe from either his wife or the servants.

Walder glanced down at the river and stopped short. A large junk was anchored in the middle of the deep water channel near where the Nan River emptied into the Yangtze. Fog swirled around it, giving it the appearance of a mountain top surrounded by clouds. When did it arrive? He would have to find out tomorrow. He knew that General Shan, the warlord who controlled Mao-lin and the surrounding mountains, was waiting for something. Rumors of another war had been circulating for weeks. Perhaps there are guns on board. If so, mission headquarters in

Shanghai must be told. It could mean another war with General Feng, Shan's rival for the eastern half of the province. With the central government a hopeless joke, all missionary groups kept a close watch on the little wars across China. Warlord soldiers were a nasty bunch, usually hungry and almost never paid. Looting was commonplace, and rape, though never openly talked about, happened often. He felt no alarm about a war. Along the Yangtze, patrolling Western gunboats kept the missionaries safe. It was the fools who had taken posts deep in the interior who were at risk. But it would be a feather in my cap, he thought, to telegraph important news to Shanghai. Show I'm on top of things. With a final glance at the junk, he hurried on, feeling full of energy despite the hour.