



WHEN RUNNING, KNOW HEAD FROM TAIL (FALL 1885)

Victoria, British Columbia

Three in the morning, and it was time again to squeeze through the walking corpses.

Before the hordes of jobless railway men jammed into town, I had kept peace with a free hand. No one doubted my clout. Boss Long let me do as I pleased in the game hall. Taller than most men, I never feared a fight. Boss Long and his crony merchants craved every penny held by the coolies but shuddered to think of them smashing store windows, shouting with glee, and looting the stock. The size of the rabble meant that no one, not even squads of redbear police and soldiers, could stop a riot. Last week, my turtle-head boss had ordered me to go easy on his shit-don't-stink customers and forgive their little sins.

Today, I shrugged when someone pounded the plaster wall into shards.

I looked away when men spat out green slime and rubbed it underfoot.

I walked off when louts pissed on the wall and not into the pails of the wet room.

The stink slid under the decent smells. The incense for the house gods was fragrant while pompous big-shots blew out spicy cigar smoke. Men oozing whisky and Ningbo liniment puffed sweet tobacco in gurgling water pipes. In a hall with no windows, these smells thickened through the night. Eager guests entered the storefront door, guarded by the ever-watchful Pock Face, before strolling past my post. During police raids, they dropped their swagger, scooted out the back, or dived through trapdoors into mud.

Shouting gamblers raised their clasped hands and pleaded for the dice and *fan-tan* coins to favour them. They had no shame, showing their panic to everyone. But these cockheads posed no threat. No, the risky ones had pinched faces and gaunt hands poking from threadbare clothes. They shut their eyes and muttered to gods and ancestors as the crowd jostled them. Their last bets each night played to the volcanos in their guts.

Jeers rang from the boss's *fan-tan* table. I peered through the haze. Oil lamps dangled over tables and swayed from the sudden smack of winners. The players noticed a man riding a lucky streak and tossed their bets onto the cloth to mimic his.

"Three!"

Winners pounded the table and jangled the *fan-tan* coins.

Boss Long scowled and paid out. He swept the coins under the lid and then heaved his belly onto the table.

"You played me clean." He displayed an empty cigar box, its cover showing a shapely woman with bare, creamy shoulders. "This table is closed."

He had slipped money into his pockets when the men were distracted.

“Screw!” The winning player blocked the way and lifted his jaw. “You never quit when the cash is creeping up your shit-hole.”

His crooked nose was part of a stranger’s face. A rail hand, for sure.

“You lose, you leave.” Boss Long shrugged. “Same rule for me.”

“Show me your pockets.”

I thrust the tea basket at his back. “Honoured guest, have a drink!”

He turned just enough to let Boss Long grab his rice-sack stomach and sprint. The door at the foot of the stairs slammed. A bar thumped into place. If the shit spread, he could toss a rope out the window that, from the street, looked like layers of nailed boards, and then shimmy to the ground.

The winner yanked in vain at the door. Players shouted for Boss Long to show his ugly face.

“Better leave now.” I held up two cups for the winner. “Cookhouse closes soon.”

Everyone knew the custom. At closing time, each night’s big winner took his fellow gamblers to dine, to share his windfall and assure Heaven that he was humble and big-hearted and therefore deserved future favour. The size of his win let him choose good-luck foods: fish, oysters, and black-hair seaweed. These dishes were costly and sparsely served, so hangers-on snatched them and filled their mouths with rice. Then they slept, pigs at peace, dreaming of hosting the next such feast.

“Lick your mother!” The winner pulled at the door again. “Show your face!”

The crowd surged and goaded him.

Didn't the fools know they were too late? By now Boss Long had emptied his pockets.

"Honoured guest, let me toast you." I lifted two cups, tilted them, and let tea spill onto my head. One stream slipped by my ears and spine to my waist. The other passed my forehead and nose and ended on my chest. I flexed my shoulders and let my shirt absorb the liquid.

The crowd laughed. One man raised a candle to let people see the tea was real.

I lifted my pigtail to give him a better view and grinned. "I bathe to smell nice for Rainbow."

The winner fetched two cups too.

"Dirty bastard, nothing can clean you!" He pitched tea into my eyes.

I grabbed and slammed him into the wood, letting the doorknob punch his back and rupture something. I bent my knees and waited. He winced and pushed himself along the wall. His eyes narrowed but gleamed. He rose into a crouch, legs out for balance, hands and arms sliding into a fighting stance.

He was stupid, showing that he knew *gong fu*. Before he could move, Pock Face seized him from behind. I grabbed the gambler's feet, and we swung the cursing, kicking fellow through the hall and heaved him onto the road.

Stray dogs barked.

The crowd streamed out, eager for a fight. Only the first ones saw the gambler run at us and get his head bashed by Pock Face's bat. He dropped to the ground, senseless. The witnesses fled, knowing it

was time for order to resume. In a riot, any man could get maimed, easy as borrowing fire.

“Go!” I lit a lamp to move people along. “Nothing to see.”

Railway men spat at my feet. I noted their faces for future pay-back. Friends clapped my shoulder. The slowpoke was Old Iron, self-declared spokesman for the rail hands. He glared at me with his one eye. When Pock Face shouted the all-clear, I slid heavy planks over the plate-glass windows and locked the wood into place.

Inside, the door to the stairs was closing.

“Boss came down?” I asked.

Pock Face was packing dominoes, clicking them like abacus beads. “Old Iron called you a traitor for beating the rail hands.”

“The bloated beggars want this, want that.”

“Old Iron said you look down on them.”

“I get them to America.”

“Not now.” Triumph lifted his voice. Even he was gloating. “Your boats carry ghosts. Old Iron told the boss to fire you. Otherwise, they boycott us.”

“And Boss said?”

“Limp off, rotted corpse.”

“Best!”

Later, I went upstairs, treading softly to acknowledge the boss’s nod of support. I sipped whisky and let its heat embrace me. I swore to crumple Old Iron’s eye patch and thrash him soft and spongy. I was no traitor, not me—I didn’t even hold grudges. I was just doing my job. That cockhead Old Iron didn’t see the ground crumbling like sand under him. When San Francisco merchants sent funds to ship railway workers home, Council gave the first tickets to the

stir-the-shit-sticks. You want to get home quickly? Then shout for more handouts and proclaim the end of the world. Too bad rail hands were turtles with their heads tucked in.

Two months ago, sternwheelers had started landing the vermin here. The end of our stay in Canada thrilled the redbeards, gave them Christmas in July. When the first ship bound for China clanged its bells and lifted anchor, throngs of white men, women, and children cheered at the docks. They could only blow shiny whistles; the flags and marching bands that formed their usual parades weren't present.

The merchants of Chinatown, those kicked-in dogs and sons of concubines, crept home and murmured their secret charm: seven thousand, seven thousand... At any single moment, the Company listed that number of coolies on its payroll.

The king-high eyes of merchants had foreseen that road building would take a decade. Too bad the bottom dropped out four years ahead of time. Last year, they put up seven brick buildings in Chinatown and forecast booming rents. This year they let them at beggar rates to rail hands who carried in planks and sawhorses to make beds. The vermin ate at Chinatown's cookhouses and vowed to pay later. But when ships set sail for China, the men failed to board. They lacked passage money. Kicked out of their lodgings, they napped in back alleys and scuttled for shelter under the raised sidewalks. We laughed: *Maid-servants had gotten fatter than their mistresses.*

Our Chinese Council claimed the rail hands were no threat to city peace, even as they spread bedrolls and stoked campfires on the lawns of Beacon Hill Park.

“Ignore them,” said our leaders, “they await ships for home.”

Good thing the redbeards had complained; if not, no merchant would have dumped stocks of useless canvas tents on an empty city block. Those cloth walls now housed 1,000 men. Once sheltered, the vermin pressed their advantage and leaned on the merchants for free food.

Council demanded donations, but local residents couldn't be squeezed for cash they didn't have. Merchants deducted “gifts” from payrolls, which caused even more honest folk to resent the rail hands. Council begged the swelling mass of coolies to see that the mess was far beyond local means; even grand firms with twenty-five years of history in Gold Mountain crumbled at the iron road's end. On Cormorant Street, the Council president climbed onto a crate and used his oily mouth to praise the workers for battling cold and disease, sharp rock and black powder. I expected him to urge the gods to change the vermin into Immortals who could glide over the ocean on fans and palm leaves.

Council never gave me food or clothes. In China, one blind beggar tapping along the street was easy to dismiss. Not so when fifteen of them walked in a line, droning like pious monks, each one clutching the pigtail of the man ahead. When they massed at a store, its owner made quick payment to get rid of them. A plague of vermin had landed on Gold Mountain, but we didn't have enough hoes to smash them.



Stubborn banging awoke me in the morning.

“Open the door! Repay the money!”

I yanked a pillow over my head. Boss Long’s flunky was still on the mainland. These blockheads would have to wait. Then I heard wood cracking and leapt from bed.

Boss Long’s bedroom was also the office. The chamber-pot stink swirled with the sour of ancient leftovers. Today, the ratty long underwear was gone from walls and chairs. The boots, one black pair and one brown, each worn every other day, left a gap by the door. Papers and account books slid lopsided to the floor. I stumbled down the stairs, shouting for calm. The boss had bolted on four scabby legs to America on a rival’s boat.

I raced to the back but stopped. Vermin were waiting outside to thrash me. Then they would brag to all of Chinatown that their mighty farts had hurled me to a back-door retreat.

I went and unlocked the entrance. Smirking, I lifted the first plank from the window. “Boss isn’t here. He ran off.”

They charged in. Across the street, shopkeepers and clerks peered from half-open doors, ready to slam them if my callers turned rowdy.

I squinted at the expanse of morning light, a golden glow that beamed behind clouds. The tang of ocean salt and fresh-caught fish rose from the harbour. Fearless, screeching seagulls swept down on massive wings before folding their flaps. They strutted to the corner where the cookhouse chef, during better days, had left buckets of swill for the hog farmers. A heavy wagon clattered by, pulled by two brown horses trotting side by side, straw-yellow manes as bright as their tails.

In the boss's room, the coolies were hurling chairs and dishes. I shrugged at the thumping and shattering. The boss had nothing worth pawning.

A shove sent me sprawling onto the road. "Where's your cock-head boss?"

"Don't know." Bony knuckles rapped my skull.

"You wipe his shit-hole, of course you know."

They started to kick me. I covered my head but left my spine exposed. I wouldn't surrender to puny vermin whose courage came from you-first-then-me-too numbers. I could battle three or four men at once but not a dozen. Fighting was crucial in this wretched life. Redbeards murdered us in America. We drowned in black waters at the border. Decent men such as me choked every day on the bile of our pride. If these fools killed me, then my ghost would stalk them all their luckless lives. They would never know a full night's sleep, no matter how powerful a god they prayed to.

When another horse and wagon approached, I started to uncoil, but suffered another ruthless kick in the gut. That heavy boot could have served a better purpose: pawned for passage home.

A sharp crack cut the air. Another. And another.

"Stop!" yelled a rail hand. "Ow!"

Wong Jun the stable keeper snapped his whip at the man, who cupped his cock and hopped about, dodging the snake.

Smack the road and die, I thought.

"Ten kicking one. Is that fair?" Wong demanded.

"That cockhead Boss Long owes us," someone said. "His book-man deducted return passage on each payday. Now they say no such money was ever taken."

“This one, he sleeps under Boss Long’s bed.” Wong pointed to me. “He knows nothing.”

He cracked the whip. The men backed away but vowed to return. “Boss Long can’t hide. *The tide drops and rocks emerge.*”

Wong crossed his arms and watched me get up. “Your vile boss ran off, and still you defend him.”

“If they were just six turds, I would have squashed them flat.”

He boarded his wagon and snapped the reins. “Your boss cheats them, you beat them, and your boatmen drown them.”

Wong Jun truly pitied the railway hands, so it was my good fortune that he scorned unfair matches. Last month, unending rains churned the tent site into mud. You could hardly blame the residents for stealing wood from a nearby lumberyard to use as floors. Next morning, the enraged owner sought payment but refused the return of soggy planks. His workers led drunks and rabble rousers into the tent city to stake out battle lines. We had more men but our teeth had fallen out. We knew that if just one redbear got even slightly bruised, then lines of guns from the naval base would blast out and chop us down. The hooligans needed only a small excuse to set Chinatown on fire. Wong had jumped on a crate and called for peace, offering payment to the lumberman at wholesale prices.

A cat slinked by, twitching its whiskers. Behind rain-streaked windows, store clerks watched me.

Screw your mothers, I thought, holding my head high and refusing to limp.

On the plate glass, gold-leaf words glinted from the light.

Bow Yuen, Import and Export. Its bank accounts were empty.

Kwong On Tai, General Merchants, fired all its porters two weeks ago.

Tai Wo Chong Kee, Dry Goods and Cereals, “donated” its last shipment of rice to the vermin.

Fook Lee Lung, Provisions and Supplies. Its head clerk went to the mainland to pursue accounts. Waste of time, as well as the steamer fare each way.

My business had failed too. I hired Native fellows, expert boatmen, to smuggle China men into America, onto empty islands and lonely bays in Washington. My oarsmen became rich overnight. Ticket sales were brisk until swine, rebeard and China men alike, started rival ventures. Two weeks ago, six bodies washed up on a beach near Port Townsend. Four of them had pigtails. It was my bad luck to have sold them passage. The other two were boatmen. Chinatown’s wide-mouth know-alls warned of angry spirits rising to haunt me. But my passengers and I had done an honest trade, so I figured that burning incense and spirit money wasn’t needed.

Then a week of fierce rain battered the town. Water gushed through the swollen ravine behind Chinatown and blocked our way to the downtown. In the rarely unruly harbour, stiff winds rose up and swept high tides over the piers. It was easy to imagine swollen hands reaching for me from the murky depths. I swallowed my losses and took to the pier some red apples, a simmered hen with head and legs intact, and six bowls of rice plus chopsticks and wine cups. Temple Keeper said four settings were enough, but I ignored him. Why not honour the boatmen too? This wasn’t China; I could do rites any way I wanted. The persistent rain flattened the smoke from the sputtering candles, incense, and spirit money. Then the

food offerings were cast into the water. Later that day, the clouds parted and the winds calmed. I slept well, but my business collapsed.



Wet Water Dog stepped from the teahouse, a cigar at his mouth. I pulled him aside. "When's the next ship?"

"Fleeing bad luck, Hok? Aren't you the one who has no fears?"

"Shall I go buy elsewhere?"

"Day after, and then one on Friday."

"Which is cheaper?"

"Friday. But the first boat is bigger. The ride is not so rough."

"I'll see you after I eat."

"Why didn't you get here earlier? I would have treated you to tea." When he waved his cigar in farewell, I grabbed it and inhaled my first bit of warmth this morning.

"Come," I yelled at his broad back. "Your fat stomach has plenty of room."

Not only was his trade booming, but he also spent his profits freely. One of the few men in Chinatown whose wife and children lived here, he didn't need our whores. Wet Water Dog had brought over his Second Lady, a woman of his choice and not his parents'. She was never seen on the streets, but rumour said she was elegant enough for Wet Water Dog to make good money by offering her to the brothel, if he wanted. That was good fortune: to have real choices.

The loud talk and dish clatter in the teahouse stopped for a moment. I blew cigar smoke into the meaty steam of the kitchen. Then, halfway across the hall, I exhaled at the men crammed at the window. They had dashed outside to watch with eager eyes as soon

as those cockhead rail hands started banging at my door. The last public fight involving money and blood featured two whores cursing and clawing over a wealthy gold miner who enjoyed taking two women at once. Everyone in Chinatown had seen that.

A waiter slammed down a cup and filled it, holding the kettle high above my head, letting the distance cool the hot tea as it traveled down.

“Don’t see you much these days,” he said.

The lout had never been friendly, but now he wanted to know all my troubles and explain me to the rabble. I let the marble tabletop dull the pain in my hand and fingers. There was dried blood on my nose but no cracks in my skull, only soft craters. Another waiter shuffled by with a tray of leaf-wrapped sticky rice. I raised my hand through an aching shoulder. I could have called out, but that was for low-class men.

At long last, I was homeward bound. Time to perform a reverse salute: turn my back on Gold Mountain, bend forward, and release a caustic fart. I was no railway worm, trapped here without means to leave. I could go at any time. I wasn’t a child, but men like me deserved coddling and comfort. I pictured Grandmother brewing old-fire soups to renew my strength, weaving sandals that fit me snugly, and scraping wax from my ears. She would thank the ancestors for my safe return and make sweet and salty puddings and dumplings for the altar. Villagers with clumsy excuses to visit would be greeted by my grandparents, fretting and ill-at-ease due to the rareness of guests. People would finally show my family some respect.

My thoughts were interrupted when a Native woman in a long

skirt came to my table to beg, a child in tow. I shook my head and cursed the slipshod cashier who let them in.

“Yang Hok.” A familiar voice spoke the right tones. Then, in Chinook: “I am Mary.”

I was on my feet.

My lips were moving but no words came out.

Yes, I recalled her. But why was she here?

She needed no invitation to sit and call for tea. The waiter grinned and gave me a knowing look. I nodded, trying to assert myself.

No doubt the fox wanted money. She would get none.

If only I had twisted away, declared “no” to my name, and shouted “no” to her. Then I would be soaring and cawing like a cocky crow. I should have shoved them aside and let the cashier evict them with his broom. Diners were watching, ears perked, awaiting my next round of shame.

Screw their mothers. They’d get no pleasure from me.

Bones jutted from Mary’s taut, thin skin. Her face had lost much flesh. I hardened my heart. Her tattered shawl reeked of animal grease and wood smoke as she moved closer. I fought the urge to back off. Sipping hot tea with a toothy smile, she mentioned a brother-in-law bringing her from the mainland, a hardworking husband at home, and a third child on the way. She turned sideways to show me the bulge under her skirt. When I stayed quiet, she spoke of raising cattle during a dry summer.

I slid my food over. The rough under-edge of the plate grated against the marble.

She sniffed it and fed the boy, who grinned and swung his bare feet.

"Your son?" These were my first words, which I regretted.

"*Your* son." She pointed at me. "Peter."

She urged him to say the Chinese words for father, but he refused.

I shook my head.

No.

Was it possible?

How could I be sure?

She had said nothing to me three years ago. Now I wouldn't trust her even if she was the god that I prayed to. Of course the boy looked Chinese. Our two races shared black hair, small noses, and colour of skin and eyes. But she could have spread her legs for any number of China men, dogs in heat chasing Native women. I was just a handy basket for dumping the brat. The fox had likely heard about my steady job. But there would be no distracting me, no matter who the father had been. I was going home to get married. My children would be Chinese, not mix-blood.

"Want money?" I asked.

She nodded. "No food at home."

"Give you tomorrow."

"Thank you."

"Where do you live?"

"Lytton." And in her language, "Kumsheen."

"At the two rivers?"

I only knew about the Chinese temple in that railway town and the two great rivers flowing into each other, one blue and clear, the other milky and muddy. A know-all once proclaimed, "When you see those two rivers, you will know the soul of this land."

I waved to the waiter. While my guests stuffed their mouths, I could leap up and run. The eager diners could rush off to blab inflated versions of my panic. I didn't care: this bowl of water had been spilled already. In the end, all these men would stand side by side to champion me, even though they would never defend me aloud. The right thing to do was to take home all earnings. Nothing was more important than one's family. No Native woman should scoff at a China man. That demeaned our homeland.

"Trouble?" asked Mary. "Those men, they beat you."

The boy slurped oily juice from the saucers. When Mary told him to take rice, he gripped the spoon in a baby fist. No proof of me showed on the boy's face, so Mary couldn't plead her case by pointing to my forehead. Lucky me, I had no striking features, just faint eyebrows, even eyes, and a flat nose. The boy's teeth were white and solid; mine were piss yellow. People at home said Younger Brother was better-looking, so the two of us never got along. They said to him, "You're so handsome, you don't need a mirror."

Trying to learn how the fox had tracked me down would only waste my time. Native traders always passed through Victoria's Chinatown, where many people spoke Chinook. Finding me would have been easy. I cursed Heaven for choosing to help her. A few more days and I would have flown the coop. She must have noticed the great retreat of rail hands in the canyon and thought the boy too could go to China. Three years ago, she had vanished without a word. I went to call on her, but the engineer's missus had slammed the door in my face.

The boy was squeezing his crotch with both hands.

Mary pointed to the side door. "Hole?"

A chance to run. Not to Boss Long's; no doubt Mary had shrewdly tailed me for a while. In our days together, as soon as I mentioned the head, she smiled and knew the tail. She had also been learning to read English. Uncle See could hide me; she would search Chinatown in vain.

A teahouse customer stopped the mother and boy. "Someone squats there."

The boy moaned and hopped from foot to foot. Mary frowned.

"I buy clothes for you," I said.

She nodded and danced the boy to the outhouse. I ran to the cashier, paid, and bolted.

All my money was marked for China. It was clear as rainwater in a barrel: I needed to buy gifts, after bragging too much to Grandfather about my success in hawking boat tickets. My years away had let ugly rumours fester in the village. Only lavish gifts and loud talk could restore the family honour. Cascades of shiny copper coins, scattered like fistfuls of chicken feed, would brighten Grandmother's lifelong gloom.

Heading to Uncle See's store, I cursed Mary. How dare she suddenly appear like this? I needed to dig up my caches of money and go demand payment of debts. Some borrowers would show a short memory while mine proved very long. Yes, I would prop my feet on the table and gloat over friends snared in Gold Mountain shit. I debated seeing Rainbow one last time, as well as the strutting need to buy her a farewell gift. If only I had fled the teahouse as soon as Mary had appeared. She wasn't the first woman to come chasing after the father of her child. At those times, even I had joined the lively taunting.

“Go wed a long-sighted girl. She won’t see the boy’s face.”

“Let the mix-blood one grow a pigtail and learn Chinese. But will he eat stinky tofu?”

“Falling leaves land on the roots.”

After the railway, I had gone to a town where redbear and Native women sold their bodies to men. Not Mary. She kept house for a railway engineer and his family in a neat little cottage. Her hands got callused from chopping wood and washing clothes. Her employer, an oddly thoughtful fellow, told her to take the household linens to the laundry. The first time she lit up the dowdy wash-house, my boss had caught me eyeing her and warned me not to meddle.

On reaching Uncle See’s, I slumped into a dark corner of the loft and fumbled under the cot for his opium pipes. The lamp was easy to light, but my hand shook while mounting the sticky black drug. Finally I stretched out, raised myself on one arm, and set the pipe over the lamp. Sweet fumes floated me into dreams and scenes where each moment was pleasing. The pain and shame from the vermin’s beating and kicking eased as my mind and face loosened.

I’m with Mary, on a Sunday morning while her boss’s family attends church. She puts away a huge breakfast to be re-served as the midday meal. I nibble at smoked fish and fried meats, kidneys, and pork chops. Eyeing the cutlery on the white cloth, I ponder which piece to steal.

We enter her tiny room and close the door. She giggles at the speed at which I strip off my clothes, the thrust of my eagerness. My lips press her ears and neck. She flings a ruffled underskirt at me and flees. I chase her, my cock a flagpole. Laughing, she dashes

to the dining room and keeps me at bay across the table. She dodges each time I dart to one side. We knock over a chair. In the big bedroom, we land on the bed's satiny covers. We stand and stare at the mirror. We're brother and sister with our tan skin and dark hair. We're man and wife, mulling over our bridal bed and the number of children yet to spill forth.

We hear the front door slam and then the voices of the engineer and his wife. They're bickering. We rush to Mary's room. I duck under the bed, and she leaps into the blankets. The lady of the house comes to summon her. I poke out my head to watch Mary dress. After a while, I leave by the back door when the family is busy eating. On my next visit, Mary pulls me under her bed onto a blanket. Our bodies twist on the hard floor.

Dusk was falling when I went down to Uncle See's storefront. The cat scampered away from me, mewling. The boarders loitered on the sidewalk, bent over water pipes and pails of bubbling water. Boxes of vegetables were laid out for men returning from farms and brickyards. A stray dog crept close to the entrance.

"Yang Hok!" someone called. "Where did you run to? Your landlord nailed planks over every door and window at your place."

"I return to China." I basked in the murmurs of envy.

"Taking your son?" The waiter from the teahouse lurked in the shadows. He thrust the boy forward.

"What's he doing here?" I demanded.

"The woman pushed him at me. She said one word, 'China,' then she ran. She must have told the boy that more food was coming because he didn't follow her."

"You didn't stop her?"

“She was weeping in a loud voice.”

I grabbed his collar. “You idiot, I’ll make you weep.”



The next day, late in the afternoon, I went to the fancy headquarters of the Chinese Council, ruled by the slick talk of our merchant princes. Last year, they finally addressed the frightful mess of our streets. Hatchet-men chased runaway whores and threatened decent folk who sheltered them. Pickpockets plagued the game halls. Storekeepers fended off burglars. Every ship from China landed bumpkins with feet dancing in the clouds. They fell for oily words promising jobs and leads. Soon they were begging on street corners. Ancient grudges got settled with knives and guns in dark alleys. Worried travellers bypassed Victoria or cut short their stays. That dropping trade panicked the merchant princes.

They formed the Council to deal with shady China men and foreign bullies. The Council paid rewards for catching killers and quashed petty feuds. It bailed out the wrongly jailed and hired lawyers. Council preened itself like an actor singing the virgin’s role as the redbear police visited Chinatown less often. But this good work devoured stacks of cash. Council then levied a fee of two dollars on every China man, payable upon his boarding a homebound ship, the moment when he was most likely to have cash on hand. Taking money from hardened sojourners was trickier than extracting their diseased teeth, so the Council sent burly guards to the docks. Every man had to show a receipt for two dollars before being allowed to board. No receipt, no departure.

The Council managed its affairs from Tai Yuen, a general store with branches on the mainland. The grand old firm didn't bother with street trade, so its storefront was a stately parlour with brushwork scrolls on the walls. Rosewood chairs and tables, carved and gleaming, replaced bins and barrels. All was for show, because the tycoons met at teahouses and sealed deals there.

I joined the straggling lineup at Tai Yuen to pay my two dollars.

"My money is my blood," one man said. "Who needs Council?"

"I asked the police about this extortion. They call this a China-town matter."

"Did you see the guards at the docks?" asked a third man. "Bigger than Shandong men! No one gets by them."

No one dared voice the biggest complaint. Why didn't the bigwigs put in more of their money? All they did was sit and brag about their farts while scraping profits off the backs of coolies.

Of course, anyone who challenged those tyrants would get no help from Council should he ever land in trouble. The merchant who represented him on Council by virtue of surname or home ties gave a twisted warning: "If redbeards see that we China men don't stand as one, then for sure they will kick us even harder."

The business kings never figured that the rail hands would turn around and use that same phrase to extort food and shelter from them.

Mister Secretary, the old boor, was on duty. In the streets, he chased men for whom he might pen a letter or explain its words from far away. For him, any other fellow who could read and write was a deadly rival. He always chortled and asked for my teacher's name, well aware that my small-town tutor was known only as

“Teacher.” Mister Secretary bragged about his learned bloodline being centuries long and studded with royal appointments.

“Clever boy, Hok!” A sly smile wormed out of his face. “You gained a son and saved the bride price.”

“The woman ran before I could ensure he was truly mine.” I held out two dollars, keen to leave, tempted to wave in his face my other wad of cash, just amassed for the trip home.

“Where’s the boy?” He rested his brush and leaned back. He enjoyed making us wait; it was the only time a scrawny scholar held sway over the rabble.

“Mission School.” I pointed at the lineup. “Hurry, here’s my two dollars.”

He took a sip of tea. “Didn’t the Pastor tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“That Pastor is a coward.” Mister Secretary stretched his words. “You have three choices. To leave the child at the Mission School, you must pay it fifty dollars. If you want to save your money, then you take the child to China, or return the child to the mother. If the latter, you must bring back a letter witnessed by a manager of a Tai Yuen store.”

“Fifty dollars? That’s a man’s life!” I turned to the men behind me. “You ever hear of this?”

“Council and Mission School work jointly now,” Mister Secretary said. “You won’t get a receipt until you settle matters about the boy.”

“Dogs don’t chase mice! The child is none of your business!”

He dismissed me with a wave of his hand.

“I just bought passage from Wet Water Dog!” I protested. “My ship leaves tomorrow.”

The old man pushed himself up. He stroked the straggles under his chin. I wanted to use them to bounce his head like a ball on the table.

“We Chinese are a refined people,” he said for all to hear. “It’s best to not mix with lesser races, but if men cannot control themselves, then they must shoulder the burden of sons and daughters born in foreign lands. Council aims to restore order for everyone here; therefore all those children must be cared for.”

Pompous ass. Before reaching the front door, I knew exactly how to sidestep him.