

*Near Lincheng village, Shantung Province.
0100 hours, 6 May 1923*

Sun Mei-yao leans into the cool night wind, urging speed on his stallion. Three hundred cavalry men ride with him through low hills. Most are deserters from defeated warlords who have joined Sun's bandit army because he is a skilled and formidable commander, he pays well, and he's generous when sharing loot. In return, he demands loyalty, conformity to strict military discipline, fresh uniforms, and exemplary personal hygiene.

An hour's ride away, just south of Lincheng, the rail line crosses the bridge over the Grand Canal entering Shantung Province. Sun knows that the elite Shanghai Express train must slow to a crawl so it can navigate the right-hand curve just before the canal bridge. Once clear, the train will accelerate for the gentle climb into Lincheng. It's here that Sun will make his ambush—scheduled for 0300 hours.

Earlier that day, Sun had received a coded telegram from his secret agent on board the train.

ALERT STOP There are twenty-one well armed Nepalese Gurkhas guarding the train STOP Several of the Occidental passengers appear to be wealthy and display a treasure trove of resplendent jewelry STOP Be cautious STOP Dealing with the nabob passenger Mandarin Fu Kuang-hsü requires shrewd diplomacy

Sun and his bandits reach the railroad tracks at 0200 hours. He dismounts and signals to Captain Chao Tan-keng, who splits "B" company from the main column and rides toward Lincheng. Their assignment is to neutralize the police and the Nationalist soldiers there.

Sun's engineering officer, Lieutenant Yang Hasi-peng, moves his platoon to about one thousand meters north of the bridge. They begin to rip out the fishplates on one length of the right rail. When the train hits the sabotaged rail, the rail will splay to the right, causing the train to derail.

"Sergeant Hsu, get those railroad torpedoes tied down on both sides of the tracks close to the bridge. I don't want that train going too fast when it derails. Dead Occidentals have no value—ransom is the big money."

Sun hears gunfire from Lincheng and, a few minutes later, a lamp flashes from the tower of the Methodist church. Chao has neutralized the threat from the town. He makes a mental note to reward his best officer.

Sun scrambles up a short incline and snaps orders. "Sergeant Tang, take your men to the high ground along the left side of the tracks and dig in. Be ready when the coach doors open." His infantrymen fan out and dig their emplacements. "Set up the machine gun on that mound—the Gurkha guards will be in the first car." Sun watches Corporal Ts'zo Banh load a belt of Mauser 8mm ammunition.

While some engineers toss ripped-out fishplates into the brush, others set torpedoes on the rails. Sun's scheme is unfolding on schedule. His right flank is secure, and the Grand Canal and bridge protect his left. He surveys his ambush preparations and a feeling of great pride engulfs his soul. *How stupid of Colonel Chiang Kai-shek to dismiss me for excessive cruelty to those Communist guerillas.*

Crucifixion was just punishment for those Reds. First in my class at Wampoa Military Academy—the Nationalists will sorely regret rejecting me.

The bandit commander mounts his horse to oversee the last preparations. Any moment now, he will hear the long whistle of the Shanghai Express approaching the bridge. He is ready.

*Shanghai railroad station.
Early morning, 5 May 1923 (the previous day)*

The stationmaster focuses on his pocket watch. The minute hand ticks to 0855 hours: five minutes to departure. He puts the watch in his vest, blows his whistle five times, and waves his red flag back and forth over his head. The whistle's shrill tone echoes throughout the Shanghai Railroad Station.

The fireman shovels coal into the locomotive's blazing furnace, and the engine bleeds steam that hisses loudly and engulfs the nearby area in a white cloud. Passengers scurry to locate their cars. Handlers pull large wagons full of suitcases, boxes, mail, and other paraphernalia to the baggage car. Porters cater obsequiously to the first-class passengers, and vendors on the platform hawk a mélange of wares. At 0900 hours, the British-owned Shanghai Express train will depart for its nonstop overnight run to Peiping.

Tall and ramrod-straight Sikhs in their dastars headdress guard all the station's activities. They stand at order arms holding their British Enfield 303 rifles tight at their sides.

A squad of Gurkha soldiers stands at attention before the armored coach. Their Kashmir hats are cocked rakishly. Tucked in their belts are the traditional kukri, knives with eighteen-inch blades. On command from their British officer, the Nepalese guards snap their rifles to port-arms and climb aboard. Many of the British passengers pause and smile, knowing the Empire's best will be protecting them.

Swinging aboard a first-class coach is Stephan Paskhim. He carries a leather valise engraved with the double-eagle emblem of Imperial Russia. His superior intelligence radiates from black-diamond eyes.

Mahima Rahman, the tall Madras porter, asks, "May I take your case and show you to your compartment, sir?"

"No," Paskhim replies sharply and pushes past. He snaps the door shut and pulls the shade. When he opens the valise a deep frown crosses his brow. In the passageway, Rahman brushes at the bright gold trim of his traditional shalwar kameez uniform before he raps a knuckle on the opposite door.

"Come in." Margaret Jasperson is thirty-seven and slightly overweight. She smiles at Rahman. She wears no makeup, has no outstanding features, and yet she is comely. She has drawn her long brown hair into a tight bun. A wide-brimmed hat lies on the lamp table. A matronly purse rests on her lap.

"We will be departing soon, madam. How may I be of service?"

"I am fine, thanks."

Rahman bows and backs out, sliding the door shut.

Jasperson returns to her trip report. The American Express logo features prominently on her stationery. As the senior travel agent in the Peiping office, she makes arrangements for Occidental businessmen, clergy, diplomats, and their staffs. She assesses the political and economic environment and evaluates safety conditions in the destination provinces. Her eyes wander to the door. Something about the porter's unexpected check-in does not feel right.

Unknown to her cohorts, Jasperson is a senior operative in Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, the MI6. She reports on Japanese and Soviet political, military, and diplomatic activities in China's Northern provinces, with emphasis on Manchuria

and Inner Mongolia. She has a wide network of loyal Chinese and Occidental spies who collect and report information.

Just before she boarded, an aged porter had slipped her a note sub rosa, warning her that a dangerous foreign agent might be onboard.

She digs deep into her over-large purse and retrieves her Webley .455. She rotates the cylinder to confirm it is loaded and slides the safety to "Fire."

She closes her eyes, relaxes, and reviews mental images of the passengers she has seen. None stand out. Nonetheless, she places the revolver within easy reach under her hat.

Rahman raps lightly on Doctor Todd Fleet's door. Hearing "Enter," he glides into the compartment of the young American missionary and his new wife, Laura. Fleet wears a conservative gray suit with a powder-blue tie. He has bushy black hair, dark eyes, and a weak chin.

Rahman asks, "Will you be needing anything?"

Laura wears a pink flapper dress and matching cloche hat. Rahman admires the curves of her sensuous body and her exotic blond hair. Her startling hazel eyes watch him knowingly.

"How may I be of service, madam?"

"Bring me green tea, piping hot, and scones."

"Yes, madam." Rahman bows slightly. "I will begin serving in a few minutes. I have several more passengers to settle."

Miffed, she snaps, "Hurry up. I need a refresher."

Todd arches an eyebrow, amused by his new bride's imperiousness, and considers tempering this minor contretemps, but decides against it.

Rahman smiles. "As you wish, madam." He bows slightly and backs out of the compartment. He notes, *Mao Tse-tung's Eighth Route Army could use Doctor Fleet's skills. That shrew—the crocodiles for her.*

The notorious Mandarin Fu Kuang-hsü, with his two young and titillating concubines in tow, follows Rahman to their suite. The mandarin wears a traditional, long black gown with thin red stripes down each side, and a black skullcap with a long red tassel. His first wife, the Qizi, selected these two women as babies, raised the pair, and skilled them in the erotic arts. Inside, his eyes trace their classic figures, emphasized by their fetching cheongsams. His pulse skips a couple of beats as he anticipates tonight's *ménage à trois*.

The nabob Fu is a rice merchant with a monopoly spanning several provinces. He runs that part of his business anonymously, through well-paid and ruthless intermediaries. He takes a more active hand in his multinational opium trade, a string of upscale brothels in most major cities, and a chain of opium dens in the slums throughout China. He sighs and beckons the concubines to him.

Rahman pauses at the compartment of Major Quentin Ashley-Cooper, Royal Marines, DSO, and his wife, Karina. Ashley-Cooper is en route to the British embassy in Peiping as the new military *attaché*. Today he wears the tropical dress uniform. Rahman is curious about them and wonders if Ashley-Cooper or his wife could be useful. He will signal his contact, Comrade Lin Piao.

In November 1914, Ashley-Cooper led the Commonwealth troops that attacked and captured the German treaty port Tsing-tao. He took a German round in his right leg, which has forced him to use a cane—Rahman is confident that it hides a rapier.

Karina is a shy, tall, reserved woman with large hazel eyes and long dusty-brown hair. In contrast to her hard-eyed husband, she has a ready and engaging smile. She eschews the flapper style and today wears a pale blue, light wool

dress—a frock that reflects taste and expense. Her father, Stanley Wilkerson, is a wealthy wool merchant who showers his only child with expensive gifts. This afternoon she is disturbed, but keeps up a brave front for the man she loves. She reflects, *I'm a soldier's wife, not a spy for the Foreign Office.*

But that's exactly what the MI6 operative at the British Consulate in Shanghai told Karina yesterday in an extensive, special-compartment intelligence briefing. He averred, "*Attaché* wives are expected to complement their husbands' intelligence gathering activities." She reluctantly signed an Official Secrets Act document.

Later that afternoon, in the consulate's basement, a Marine sergeant small-arms instructor tutored Karina in the rudiments of pistol techniques. As a loyal soldier's wife, and with misgivings, she hoisted the Webley Mark IV .38-caliber revolver, sighted the target, and fired six times in quick succession. To her instructor's amazement, she scored 39 points out of a possible 60—a respectable score. Several hours later, she consistently scored around 50.

"Congratulations, Madam Ashley-Cooper. You've done exceptionally well."

"I have no explanation. For reasons I do not understand, I am serenely at ease with this weapon in my hand."

"Best of fortune, madam."

Down the corridor is the compartment of Mr. and Mrs. Randolph Van Halsted. He is an American multimillionaire with a railroad empire in southern Africa and a worldwide shipping line. Not satisfied with that, he is travelling to Peiping to sign a deal authorizing his rail development in northwestern China. In his money belt is a bribe for the Minister of the Interior—one hundred newly-minted \$10,000 U.S. gold certificates.

Maureen is wealthy in her own right. Her father was a New York banking tycoon who left her a fortune, which she invested in Manhattan real estate. Following the advice of her young lover, a handsome electrical engineer, she also purchased ten thousand shares in his newly formed employer, the Computer Tabulating Recording Company. Maureen trumpets her wealth with expensive jewelry.

Mahima Rahman proceeds along the passageway. He finds this run's passengers particularly intriguing and wonders what secrets they guard.

Mae Ling-weh, a French-Eurasian social pariah, is a striking beauty with keen intelligence. The popular rumor is that the nuns who raised her found her as a newborn baby in a trash bin. Currently, she is the successful proprietress of the upscale Panda-Bamboo restaurant in Peiping. Off the menu, but easily available, is all manner of contraband—opium paste, illicit weapons, espionage, assassination, and exotic females. Rahman notices her keen interest in the other first-class passengers and speculates as to why.

Monique Harmonie is a fading French cinema star. As she approaches forty, Monique's sex appeal still oozes off the screen. According to the tabloids, her five miscreant ex-husbands have bled her bank accounts dry. Out of desperation, she has agreed to star in a racy film set in Peiping and its environs—including some scenes on the Shanghai Express.

Rahman looks forward to viewing her new movie.

Across the hall is Nani Atticus. He is a short, husky man with bright brown eyes, a receding hairline, and a square-cut jaw. He travels with Xenia De Luca, a classic Italian beauty from Florence with large smoke-blue eyes, a Roman nose, and dark olive skin. She is a posh *fille de joie* who, with exceptional sexual skills,

caters to the wealthy and well-connected. She seduced Atticus when he let slip his scheme after consuming several glasses of champagne.

Until a few months ago, Atticus was the Chief Financial Officer of Rome's Savoy Automotive. Now he is fleeing the Italian secret police, the Organization for Vigilance and Repression of Anti-Fascism (OVRA), after looting the company's treasury, abandoning his wife and three children, and stealing secret plans for a revolutionary tank. His money belt is loaded with British one hundred pound sterling notes and several million dollars in United States gold certificates. His goal is Port Arthur in Manchuria, where the Japanese Kwangtung Army has promised him refuge in exchange for the Italian tank designs.

Xenia speculates that the Japanese will renege, steal his money and the plans, and then execute him. She waits.

Ensnared in the last compartment of the car is Bridget von Cairo, a sybaritic adventuress. Today, she is traveling on a Vatican passport that she blackmailed a gullible Cardinal for. She is skirting an INTERPOL arrest warrant detailing her involvement in a scheme to sell a fake *objet d'art* purported to be a rare Crusade treasure from the Knights Hospitaller of Saint John of Jerusalem and Rhodes.

The minute hand on the stationmaster's watch snaps to 0900. He waves red and white flags and blasts his whistle. Last-minute passengers rush to find their cars. Five young American flappers, laughing and jabbering, scramble aboard.

Porters slam the coach doors shut. The locomotive's bell clangs in rhythmic syncopation. The engineer releases the brakes with a howling hiss, and billowing white steam enshrouds the scene. Amongst the screeching and clamor, the locomotive's six drive-wheels spin and spit sparks, gaining purchase on the polished steel rails. Ever so slowly, the British-owned Shanghai Express inches forward for its nonstop, high-speed run to Peiping.