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**Opening Extract from...**

# Jack of Spies

Written by David Downing

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# JACK OF SPIES

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*To Nancy*

## The Blue Dragon

At the foot of the hill, Tsingtau's Government House stood alone on a slight mound, its gabled upper-floor windows and elegant corner tower looking out across the rest of the town. Substantial German houses with red-tiled roofs peppered the slope leading down to the Pacific beach and pier; beyond them, the even grander buildings of the commercial district fronted the bay and its harbours. Away to the right the native township of Taipautau offered little in the way of variety – the houses were smaller, perhaps a little closer together, but more European than classically Chinese. In less than two decades the Germans had come, organised, and recast this tiny piece of Asia in their own image. Give them half a chance, Jack McColl mused, and they would do the same for the rest of the world.

He remembered the Welsh mining engineer leaning over the *Moldavia's* rail in mid-Indian Ocean, and spoiling a beautiful day with tales of the atrocities the Germans had committed in South-west Africa over the last few years. At least a hundred thousand Africans had perished. Many of the native men had died in battle; most of the remainder, along with the women and children, had been driven into the desert, where some thoughtful Hun had already poisoned the waterholes. A few lucky ones had ended up in concentration camps, where a doctor named Fischer had used them for a series of involuntary medical experiments. Children had been injected with smallpox, typhus, tuberculosis.

The White Man's Burden, as conceived in Berlin.

McColl had passed two descending Germans on his way up the hill, but the well-kept viewing area had been empty, and there was no sign of other sightseers below. To the east the hills rose into a jagged horizon, and the earthworks surrounding the 28cm guns on Bismarck Hill were barely visible against the mountains beyond. Some magnification would have helped, but an Englishman training

binoculars on foreign defences was likely to arouse suspicion, and from what he'd seen so far the guns were where the Admiralty had thought they would be. There was some building work going on near the battery which covered Auguste Victoria Bay, but not on a scale which seemed significant. He might risk a closer look early one morning, when the army was still drilling.

The East Asiatic Squadron was where it had been the day before – *Scharnhorst* and *Emden* sharing the long jetty, *Gneisenau* and *Nürnberg* anchored in the bay beyond. *Leipzig* had been gone a week now – to the Marianas, if his Chinese informer was correct. Several coalers were lined up further out, and one was unloading by the onshore staithes, sending occasional clouds of black dust up into the clear cold air.

These ships were the reason for his brief visit, these ships and what they might do if war broke out. Their presence was no secret, of course – the local British consul probably played golf with the admiral in command. The same consul could have kept the Admiralty informed about Tsingtau's defences, and done his best to pump his German counterpart for military secrets, but of course he hadn't. Such work was considered ungentlemanly by the fools who ran the Foreign Office and staffed its embassies – not that long ago a British military attaché had refused to tell his employers in London what he'd witnessed at his host country's military manoeuvres, on the grounds that he'd be breaking a confidence.

It was left to part-time spies to do the dirty work. Over the last few years McColl – and, he presumed, other British businessmen who travelled the world – had been approached and asked to ferret out those secrets the Empire's enemies wanted kept. The man who employed them on this part-time basis was an old naval officer named Cumming, who worked from an office in Whitehall, and answered, at least in theory, to the Admiralty and its political masters.

When it came to Tsingtau, the secret that mattered most was what orders the East Asia Squadron had for the day that a European war broke out. Any hard evidence as to their intentions, as Cumming had told McColl on their farewell stroll down the Embankment, would be 'really appreciated'.

His insistence on how vital all this was to the Empire's continued well-being had been somewhat undermined by his allocation of a paltry £300 for global expenses, but the trip as a whole had been slightly more lucrative than McColl had expected. The luxury Maia automobile that he was hawking round the world – the one now back in Shanghai, he hoped, with his brother Jed and colleague Mac – had caught the fancy of several rulers hungry for initiation into the seductive world of motorised speed, and the resultant orders had at least paid the trio's travelling bills.

This was gratifying, but probably more of a swansong than a sign of things to come. The automobile business was not what it had been even two years before, not for the small independents – nowadays you needed capital, and lots of it. Spying, on the other hand, seemed an occupation with a promising future. Over the last few years even the British had realised the need for an espionage service, and once the men holding the purse strings finally got past the shame of it all they would realise that only a truly professional body would do. One that paid a commensurate salary.

A war would probably help, but until Europe's governments were stupid enough to start one, McColl would have to make do with piecemeal work. Before his departure from England the previous autumn, Cumming had taken note of his planned itinerary, and returned with a list of 'little jobs' that McColl could do in the various ports of call – a wealthy renegade to assess in Cairo, a fellow-Brit to investigate in Bombay, the Germans here in Tsingtau. Their next stop with the Maia was San Francisco, where a ragtag bunch of Indian exiles was apparently planning the Empire's demise.

A lot of it seemed pretty inconsequential to McColl. There were no doubt plenty of would-be picadors intent on goading the imperial bull, but it didn't seem noticeably weaker. And where was the matador to finish it off? The Kaiser probably practised sword strokes in his bedroom mirror, but it would be a long time before Germany acquired the necessary global reach.

He lit a German cigarette and stared out across the town. The sun was dropping towards the distant horizon, the harbour lighthouse glowing brighter by the minute. The lines of lamps in the warship rigging reminded him of Christmas trees.

He would be back in Shanghai for the Chinese New Year, he realised.

Caitlin Hanley, the young American woman he'd met in Peking, was probably there already.

The sun was an orange orb, almost touching the distant hills. He ground out the cigarette, and started back down the uneven path while he could still see his way. Two hopeful coolies were waiting with their rickshaws at the bottom, but he waved them both away and walked briskly down Bismarck Strasse towards the beach. There were lights burning in the British consulate, but no other sign of life within.

His hotel was at the western end of the waterfront, beyond the deserted pleasure pier. The desk clerk still had his hair in a queue – an increasingly rare sight in Shanghai, but common enough in Tsingtau, where German rule offered little encouragement to China's zealous modernisers. The room key changed hands with the usual bow and blank expression, and McColl climbed the stairs to his second-floor room overlooking the ocean.

A quick check revealed that someone had been though his possessions, which was only to be expected – Tsingtau might be a popular summer destination with all sorts of foreigners, but an Englishman turning up in January was bound to provoke some suspicion. Whoever it was had found nothing to undermine his oft-repeated story, that he was here in China on business, and seeing as much of the country as money and time would allow.

He went back downstairs to the restaurant. Most of the clientele were German businessmen in stiff collars and spats, either eager to grab their slice of China or boasting of claims already staked. There were also a handful of officers, including one in a uniform McColl didn't recognise. He was enthusiastically outlining plans for establishing an aviation unit in Tsingtau when he noticed McColl's arrival, and abruptly stopped to ask the man beside him something.

'Don't worry, Pluschow, he doesn't speak German,' was the audible answer, which allowed the exposition to continue.

Since his arrival in Tsingtau McColl had taken pains to stress his sad lack of linguistic skills, and this was not the first time the lie had worked to his advantage. Apparently absorbed in his month-old *Times*,



he listened with interest to the aviation enthusiast. He couldn't see much strategic relevance in the news – what could a few German planes hope to achieve so far from home? – but the Japanese might well be interested. And any little nugget of intelligence should be worth a few of Cumming's precious pounds.

The conversation took a less interesting tack, and eventually the party broke up. McColl sipped his Russian tea and idly wondered where he would dine later that evening. He glanced through the paper for the umpteenth time and reminded himself that he needed fresh reading for the Pacific crossing. There was a small shop he knew on Shanghai's Nanking Road where novels jettisoned by foreigners mysteriously ended up.

More people came in – two older Germans in naval uniform who ignored him, and a stout married couple who returned his smile of acknowledgement with almost risible Prussian hauteur.

He was getting up to leave when Rainer von Schön appeared. McColl had met the young German soon after arriving in Tsingtau – they were both staying at this hotel – and taken an instant liking to him. The fact that von Schön spoke near-perfect English made conversation easy, and the man himself was likable and intelligent. A water engineer by trade, he had admitted to a bout of homesickness, and delved into his wallet for an explanatory photo of his pretty wife and daughter.

That evening he had an English edition of William Le Queux's *Invasion of 1910* under his arm.

'What do you think of it?' McColl asked him, once the waiter had taken the German's order.

'Well, several things. It's so badly written, for one. The plot's ridiculous, and the tone is hysterical.'

'But otherwise you like it?'

Von Schön smiled. 'It is strangely entertaining. And the fact that so many English people bought it makes it fascinating to a German. And a little scary, I have to say.'

'Don't you have any ranters in Germany?'

Von Schön leaned slightly forward, a mischievous expression on his face. 'With the Kaiser at the helm, we don't need them.'

McColl laughed. 'So what have you been doing today?'

'Finishing up, actually. I'll be leaving in a couple of days.'

'Homeward bound?'

'Eventually. I have work in Tokyo first. But after that ...'

'Well, if I don't see you before you go, have a safe journey.'

'You too.' Von Schön drained the last of his schnapps and got to his feet. 'And now I have someone I need to see.'

Once the German was gone, McColl consulted his watch. It was time he visited the Blue Dragon, before the evening rush began. He left a generous tip, recovered his winter coat from the downstairs cloakroom, and walked out to the waiting line of rickshaws. The temperature had already dropped appreciably, and he was hugging himself as the coolie turned left onto the well-lit Friedrichstrasse and started up the hill. The shops were closed by this time, the restaurants readying themselves for their evening trade. The architecture, the faces, the cooking smells, all were European – apart from his coolie, the only Chinese in sight was a man collecting horse dung.

It was quiet too, so quiet that the sudden blast of a locomotive whistle from the nearby railway station made him jump.

The coolie reached the brow of the low hill and started down the opposite slope into Taipautau. The township was almost as neat and widely spaced as the German districts, and in the cold air even the smells seemed more muted than they had in Shanghai. They were halfway down Shantung Strasse before McColl could hear the beginnings of evening revelry in the sailors' bars at the bottom.

The Blue Dragon was open for business, but not yet really awake. The usual old man sat beneath the candlelit lanterns on the rickety veranda, beside the screened-off entrance. He grinned when he recognised McColl and cheerfully spat on the floor to his right, adding one more glistening glob to an impressive mosaic.

McColl was barely through the doorway when an old woman hurried down the hall towards him. 'This way please!' she insisted in pidgin German. 'All type girls!'

'I'm here to see Hsu Ch'ing-lan,' he told her in Mandarin, but she just looked blank. 'Hsu Ch'ing-lan,' he repeated.

The name seemed to percolate. She gestured for him to follow, and led him through to the reception area, where 'all type girls' were

waiting in an assortment of tawdry traditional costumes on long, red velvet sofas. Some were barely out of puberty, others close to the menopause. One seemed amazingly large for a Chinese, causing McColl to wonder whether she'd been fattened up to satisfy some particular Prussian yearning.

The old woman led him down the corridor beyond, put her head round the final door, and told Madame that a *laowai* wanted to see her. Assent forthcoming, she ushered McColl inside.

Hsu Ch'ing-lan was sitting at her desk, apparently doing her accounts. Some kind of incense was burning in a large dragon holder beyond, sending up coils of smoke.

'Herr McColl,' she said with an ironic smile. 'Please. Take a seat.'

She was wearing the usual dress, blue silk embroidered in silver and gold, ankle-length but slit to the hip. Her hair was piled up in curls, secured by what looked like an ornamental chopstick. She was in her thirties, he guessed, and much more desirable than any of the girls in reception. When they'd first met she'd told him that she was a retired prostitute, as if that was a major achievement. It probably was.

He had chosen this brothel for two reasons. It offered a two-tier service – those girls in reception who catered to ordinary sailors and the occasional NCO, and another, more exclusive, group who did house calls at officer clubs and businessmen's hotels. The latter were no younger, no more beautiful and no more sexually inventive than the former, but, as Jane Austen might have put it, they offered more in the way of accomplishments. They sang, they danced, they made a ritual out of making tea. They provided, in Ch'ing-lan's vivid phrase, 'local colour fuck'.

She was his second reason for choosing the place. She came from Shanghai, and unlike any other madame in Tsingtau, spoke the Chinese dialect McColl knew best.

She pulled a bell cord, ordered tea from the small girl who came running, and asked him, rather surprisingly, what he knew of the latest political developments.

'In China?' he asked.

She looked at him as if he was mad. 'What could matter here?' she asked.

‘Sun Yat-sen could win and start modernising the country,’ he suggested. ‘Or Yuan Shih-kai could become the new emperor and keep the country locked in the past.’

‘Pah. You foreign devils have decided we must modernise, so Yuan cannot win. And you control our trade, so Sun could only win as your puppet.’

‘Yuan bought one of my cars.’

‘He thinks it will make him look modern, but it won’t. It doesn’t matter what he or Sun do. In today’s China, everything depends on what the foreign devils do. Is there going to be a war between you? And if there is, what will happen here in Tsingtau?’

‘If there’s a war, the Japanese will take over. The Germans might dig themselves in – who knows? If they do, the town will be shelled. If I were you, I’d take the boat back home to Shanghai before the fighting starts.’

‘Mmm.’ Her eyes wandered round the room, as if she was deciding what to take with her.

The tea arrived, and was poured.

‘So what do you have for me?’ McColl asked.

‘Not very much, I’m afraid.’ The East Asiatic Squadron was going to sea at the end of February for a six-week cruise. The *Scharnhorst* had a new vice-captain, and there’d been a serious accident on the *Emden* – several sailors had been killed in an explosion. The recent gunnery trials had been won by the *Gneisenau*, but all five ships had shown a marked improvement, and the Kaiser had sent a congratulatory telegram to Vice-Admiral von Spee. And a new officer had arrived from Germany to set up a unit of flying machines.

‘I know about him,’ McColl said.

‘He likes to be spanked,’ Ch’ing-Lan revealed.

McColl wondered out loud whether verbal abuse might sting the Germans into indiscretions. Maybe the girls could deride their German clients, make fun of their puny fleet. What hope did they have against the mighty Royal Navy?

As she noted this down a swelling sequence of ecstatic moans resounded through the building. Ch’ing-lan shook her head. ‘I’ll have to talk to her,’ she said. ‘The others do the same because they

think their tips will be smaller if they don't, and after a while no one can hear themselves think. It's ridiculous.'

McColl laughed.

'But I do have some good news for you. I have a new girl, a cousin from Shanghai. She speaks a little English and now she's learning a little German – she knows that a lot of the men like someone they can talk to.'

'That sounds promising.'

'And more expensive.'

'Of course – I have no problem paying good money for good information.' He thought for a moment. 'She could be worried that her officer might be killed in a war. The British are so much more powerful, yes? She could ask for reassurance, ask him how he thinks his fleet can win.'

She nodded.

'And the flying machine man. I'd like to know how many machines, what type, and how he intends to use them. Between spans, of course.'

She nodded again. 'Is that all?'

'I think so. I'll come back on Friday, yes?'

'Okay. You want girl tonight? Half price?'

He hesitated, and saw Caitlin Hanley's face in his mind's eye. 'No, not tonight.' He smiled at her. 'You're still retired, right?'

'You couldn't afford me.'

'Probably not.' He gave her a bow, shut the door behind him, and walked back down the corridor. Bedsprings were squeaking behind several curtained doorways, and several girls seemed intent on winning the prize for most voluble pleasure. Out on the veranda the old man gave him a leer, and added another splash of phlegm to his iridescent patchwork.

It was enough to put a man off his dinner.

\*

The following day was clear and cold as its predecessor. McColl rose early and took breakfast in the almost empty hotel restaurant, conscious that half a dozen Chinese waiters were hovering at his beck and call. Once outside, he made straight for the beach. A westerly wind was picking up, and he could smell the brewery the

Germans had built beyond the town. The ocean waves were studded with whitecaps.

As he'd calculated, the tide was out, and he walked briskly along the hard sand towards the promontory guarding the entrance to the bay. The field artillery barracks he'd noticed on the map were set quite a distance back from shore and, as he had hoped, only the roofs and tower were visible from the beach. He was soon beyond them, threading his way down a narrowing beach between headland and ocean.

Another half a mile and he found his path barred by a barbed wire fence. It ran down slope and beach, and some twenty yards out into the water, to what was probably the low tide mark. He had first seen barbed wire corralling Boer women and children in South Africa, and finding it stretched across a Chinese beach was somewhat depressing, if rather predictable. There was no *Eintritt Verboten* sign, but there didn't really need to be. Only an idiot would think the fence was there to pen sheep.

McColl decided to be one. A quick look round failed to detect any possible witnesses, so he took off his shoes and socks, rolled up his trousers, and waded out and round the end of the fence. The water was deeper and colder than he expected. After drying his feet as best he could with a handkerchief, he wrung out his trouser bottoms, inserted his sand-encrusted feet in the dry footwear, and ventured on down the forbidden beach. I went paddling in the Yellow Sea, he thought. Something to tell his grandchildren, should he ever have any.

As he approached the end of the headland the stern of a passenger ship loomed into view. It had obviously just left the harbour, and was already turning southwards, probably bound for Shanghai. McColl found himself wishing he was on it, rather than seeking out German guns with a pair of cold wet trousers clinging to his thighs. He'd already earned the pittance that Cumming was paying him. What did the man expect from a brief visit like this one? A serious spying mission to Tsingtau would need a lot more time – and a lot better cover – than McColl had at his disposal. Cumming's favourite agent Sidney Reilly had lived in Port Arthur for several months before he succeeded in stealing the Russian harbour defence plans.

He stopped and scrutinised the view to his right. The guns were up there somewhere, and this looked as good a spot as any to clamber up the slope. If he ran into officialdom he would play the lost tourist, afraid of being cut off by the incoming tide.

Five minutes later he reached the crest, and got a shock. The gun emplacements were up there all right, just as the Admiralty had thought they would be, but so were watching eyes. McColl was still scrambling up onto the plateau when the first shout sounded, and it didn't take him long to work out that dropping back out of sight was unlikely to win him anything more than a bullet in the back. They'd seen him, and that was that.

Two soldiers in *pickelhaube* helmets were running across the grass. He walked towards them, his mind working furiously. The lost tourist act already seemed redundant – an Englishman this close to German guns was surely too much of a coincidence. But what was the alternative?

One of their guns went off, and for a single dreadful moment he thought they were shooting at him. But it quickly became obvious that one of them had pulled his trigger by accident. Seizing what seemed like an opportunity, McColl lengthened his stride, shook his fist and angrily asked in German what the hell they thought they were doing.

'No civilians are allowed up here,' the older of the soldiers insisted. He looked a little shamefaced, but had not lowered his rifle. 'Who are you? Where have you come from?'

'My name is Pluschow,' McColl told him impulsively. There were two thousand soldiers in the garrison, and it seemed unlikely that these two would have run into the aviation enthusiast. 'Lieutenant Pluschow,' he added, taking a guess at the man's rank. 'I am sorry – I did not realise I had strayed onto army territory. But I can't believe your orders are to shoot first and ask questions later.'

'That was an accident,' the younger man blurted out. He couldn't have been much more than eighteen.

'And no harm done,' his partner insisted. 'But you still haven't explained what you're doing here.'

'I'm surveying the area. Tsingtau needs an aerodrome, and I'm getting a feeling for the local air currents.' He reached for his packet of cigarettes, and held it out to the soldiers.

There was a moment of hesitation before the older one extended a hand and took one. His partner happily followed his lead.

‘If I need to come up here again I will get permission from army command,’ McColl promised. ‘Now is there a supply road back to town?’

There was, and they were happy to show him where it started, on the other side of the emplacements. Walking past the latter, he took in the ferro-concrete installations, heavy steel cupolas and lift-mounted searchlights. And the guns were new-looking 28cm pieces, not the old 15cm cannons on the Admiralty list. ‘Our base seems well-protected,’ he said appreciatively.

He thanked the soldiers, promised he wouldn’t mention the accidental discharge, and left them happily puffing on his cigarettes. He managed to cover a hundred yards or so before the urge to burst out laughing overcame him. Moments like that made life worth living.

Fifteen minutes later he was skirting the wall of the barracks and entering the town. In the square in front of the station a bunch of coolies were huddled over some sort of game, their rickshaws lined up in waiting for the next train. McColl walked the few blocks to Friedrichstrasse and wondered what to do with the rest of the day. Tsingtau in winter was worth a couple of days, and he’d been there for more than a week. Like an idiot he’d forgotten to bring any reading, and the two bookshops on Friedrichstrasse had nothing in English. A German book on his bedside table would rather give the game away.

It occurred to him that the British consulate might have books to lend, and indeed they did. Just the one – a copy of *Great Expectations* some careless English tourist had left on the beach the previous summer. But the consul was out playing golf, and the English-speaking Chinese girl left in charge of His Majesty’s business was unwilling to let the salt-stained volume out of the building without his say-so. It took McColl fifteen minutes and no small measure of charm to change her mind. And all this, he thought bitterly, for a book he already knew the ending to.

Still, Pip’s early travails kept him entertained for the rest of the morning and half the afternoon. He then ambled round the German



and Chinese towns before dropping anchor in the bar of the Sailors' Home down by the harbour. Through the window he could see the huge grey ships straining at their chains in the restless water.

What would this fleet do if war was declared? It could hardly stay put, not with England's ally Japan so close at hand, with ships that outmatched and outnumbered the Germans. No, if the East Asiatic Squadron wasn't already at sea when war broke out, then it soon would be. But sailing in which direction? For its home half the world away? If this was the intention, then whichever direction it took – west via the Cape of Good Hope or east around Cape Horn – there would be ten thousand miles and more to sail, with uncertain coal supplies, and the knowledge that the whole British fleet would be waiting at the end of its journey, barring its passage across the North Sea. And what would be the point? More than five cruisers would be needed to tip the balance in home waters.

If McColl was in charge, he knew what he'd do. He'd send the five ships off in five directions, set them loose on the seven oceans to mess with British trade. That, he knew, was the Admiralty's nightmare. Each German ship could keep a British squadron busy for months, maybe even years, and that *might* tip the balance closer to home.

Whether or not the Imperial Navy had such suicide missions in mind, neither he nor the Admiralty knew, and he doubted if any of his current drinking companions did either. He bought beers for a couple of new arrivals, traded toasts in pidgin English to Kaiser and King, and eavesdropped on the conversations swirling around him. But no secrets were divulged, unless Franz's fear that he had the French disease counted as such. Most of the ratings had their minds on home, on babies yet unseen, on wives and lovers sorely missed. No one mentioned the dread possibility that none of them would ever see Germany again.

McColl stayed until the sun was almost down, then walked back through the town as the lamplighters went about their business. Guessing that von Schön had not yet departed, he looked in on the hotel bar, and found the young German sharing a circle of armchairs with several fellow-countrymen. Seeing McColl, von Schön smiled and gestured him over. 'Please, join us,' he said in English, 'we need your point of view.'

He introduced McColl to the others, explaining in German that the Englishman was also a businessman. They raised their hands in greeting.

‘What are you all talking about?’ McColl asked von Schön.

‘Whether a war will benefit Germany,’ the other replied.

‘And what’s the general opinion?’

‘I don’t think there is one. I’ll try and translate for you.’

McColl sat back, careful to keep a look of non-comprehension on his face. One middle-aged man with a bristling moustache was making the argument that only a war could open the world to German business.

‘If we win,’ another man added dryly.

‘Of course, but we haven’t lost one yet, and our chances must be good, even against England.’

Several heads were nodding as Schön translated this with an apologetic smile, but one of the younger Germans was shaking his head. ‘Why take the risk,’ he asked, ‘when we only have to wait a few years? The biggest and fastest-growing economies are ours and America’s, and the rules of trade will change to reflect that fact. It’s inevitable. The barriers will come down, including those around the British Empire, and their businesses will struggle to survive. In fact if anyone needs a war, it’s the British. It’s the only way they could halt their decline.’ He turned to von Schön. ‘Ask your English friend what he thinks. Would British businessmen favour a war with Germany?’

Von Schön explained what the man had said, and repeated his question.

McColl smiled at them all. ‘I don’t think so. For one thing, most businessmen have sons, and they don’t want to lose them. For another, it’s only the biggest companies who make most of their profits abroad, and who benefit most from the Empire. If the rules change, they’ll find some way to survive – big companies always do.’ He paused. ‘But let me ask you something. After all, it’s governments that declare war, not businessmen. How much notice do the Kaiser and his ministers take of what German businessmen think?’

It seemed like a good question, if the wry response to Schön’s translation was anything to go by. ‘This is the problem,’ one youngish

German responded. ‘The old Kaiser understood how to rule. Like your Queen Victoria,’ he added, looking at McColl. ‘A symbol, yes? And an important one, but above politics. It didn’t matter what his opinions were. But this Kaiser ... We Germans have the best welfare system, the best schools; we have given the world Beethoven and Bach and Goethe and so much else; our businesses are successful all over the world. We have much to be proud of, much to look forward to, but none of that interests this Kaiser. He grew up playing soldiers, and he can’t seem to stop. In any other country this would not matter a great deal, but because of our history and our place at the heart of Europe, the army has always occupied a powerful position. I agree with Hans that we can get what we want without war, but when the crucial moment comes – as we all know it will – I think the Kaiser and his government will follow the army’s lead, not listen to people like us.’

It was a sadly convincing analysis, McColl thought, and, as von Schön translated the gist of it, he listened to the others muttering their broad agreement. These German businessmen had no desire for war, but they realised that their opinions counted for little with their rulers. The one named Hans might be right in thinking that Britain was in decline, but only in an abstract, relative sense. And while it might be in a few traders’ interests to fight a war of imperial preservation, it wasn’t in anyone else’s. As far as most British businessmen were concerned, peace was delivering the goods. McColl himself was thirty-two years old, and he’d been born into a world without automobiles or flying machines, phonographs or telephones, wireless or moving pictures. Everything was changing so fast, and mostly for the better. Who in his right mind would exchange this thrilling new world for battlefields soaked in blood? It felt so medieval.

War would be a catastrophe, for business, for everyone. Particularly those who had to fight it. He was probably too old to be called up, but you never knew – with the weapons they had now, the ranks of the young might be decimated in a matter of months. Whatever happened, he had no intention of renewing his acquaintance with Britain’s military machine, and finding himself once more at the mercy of some idiot general.

It rained that evening, and for most of the next two days, a freezing rain which rendered the pavements and quaysides treacherous, and which obstinately refused to turn to snow. McColl divided his time between cafés, hotel lounge and room, following Pip on his voyage of discovery, and engaging all those he could in conversation.

On two occasions he slipped and slithered his way to the edge of the new harbour, drawn by some pointless urge to confirm that the fleet was still there. It was. The occasional sailor hurried along the rain-swept decks, but no tenders were moving, and the bars on the quayside were shuttered and closed.

On Friday morning a note arrived from the consulate reminding him to return the book, which seemed somewhat gratuitous. The beautiful mission-taught writing was clearly the work of the Chinese girl, the overwrought concern for property more likely the golf-playing consul's. He decided to have the note framed when he got home.

The weather changed that afternoon, the clouds moving out across the ocean like a sliding roof. He went for a long walk down the Pacific shoreline, ate dinner alone, and, once darkness had taken its grip, rode a rickshaw across town to the Blue Dragon. The old man was still hawking up phlegm, but the girl who'd rushed to greet him in the lobby was busy in the reception area, hovering over a young and nervous Kriegsmarine lieutenant. He was having trouble choosing, and seeing McColl, politely suggested he jump the queue. 'If you know which girl you want.'

'English,' McColl explained, shaking his head and gesturing that the other should proceed. The German threw up his hands, sighed, and turned back to the line of waiting females. 'This one,' he said eventually, pointing at a child of around fifteen. McColl could almost hear the eeny-meeny-miney-mo.

The child took the German's much larger hand in hers and led him away like a horse.

The other females all sat back down in unison, reminding McColl of church. 'You want see Hsu Ch'ing-lan?' the girl asked McColl.

'Yes.' After making sure that the German was behind a curtain, he walked down to the madame's room.

Hsu Ch'ing-lan was just the way he'd left her, sitting at her desk, holding a cigarette between two raised fingers, wearing the same

blue silk. But this time she was reading an ancient copy of *Life* magazine – he recognised the cartoon of Woodrow Wilson.

She smiled when she saw him, which seemed promising.

They went through the usual ritual, exchanging small talk until the tea arrived, before getting down to business. ‘The girl I told you about,’ she began, ‘my cousin from Shanghai. She is very intelligent. She has been with an officer on the flagship, and persuaded him to talk about their plans.’

‘How?’ was McColl’s immediate reaction.

‘How do you think? There are many men – most of them, I think – who like to talk about themselves after sex. They feel good, and they want the woman to know how important they are.’

‘But –’

‘Let her tell you herself.’ Ch’ing-lan rang her bell, and told the answering girl to bring Hsu Mei-lien. ‘You will see how intelligent she is,’ she told McColl while they waited.

The girl who arrived was still a child, but every bit as bright as her cousin had said she was. She began in halting English, then switched to quick fire Shanghainese when Ch’ing-lan told her that McColl spoke that language. Her officer’s name was Burchert, and they’d been together the last three nights. If she had understood him correctly, he was an *oberleutnant* on the *Gneisenau*. Once he was in the mood, she had started by saying how she’d seen the big English battleships in Shanghai, and how brave she thought the Germans in Tsingtau were to think of fighting them. But surely just sailing out to meet them would be foolhardy. They must have a better plan than that.

And that was all she’d had to say – after that, nothing could stop him talking. As far as he was concerned, it was all about coal. They could keep their ships together if there was enough coal, while the English who were hunting them would have to split their fleet to search an ocean as wide as the Pacific. And that would give the Germans their chance to destroy them a piece at a time. But only if they had the coal.

‘And where will they find it?’ McColl wondered. ‘Did you ask him?’

She gave him a derisive look. ‘I don’t ask questions,’ she said. ‘I just let him talk. If I ask a question like that he will suspect something.’

‘Yes. He probably would.’ McColl smiled at her – she really was quite remarkable. But had she told him anything new and useful? The East Asiatic Squadron’s dependence on limited coal supplies seemed obvious enough, even for the British Admiralty. Where *could* the Germans find coal in the Pacific? If Japan entered a war against them, then not from the home islands or Formosa. Supplies from Australia and New Zealand would be cut off once war was declared. And the Germans would know that any colliers loading up in a time of deepening crisis would be followed. So they would have to build up stocks on various islands while peace continued, stocks that the Royal Navy would have to seek out and burn if and when a war broke out. ‘Anything else?’ he asked her.

‘He says their gunners are better than the English.’

‘I wouldn’t be surprised.’ He smiled at the young girl. ‘Thank you.’

Hsu Ch’ing-lan dismissed her. ‘Clever, yes?’

‘Very,’ McColl agreed. Too clever to be working in a Tsingtau brothel. But then millions of Chinese seemed to be short-changing themselves, biding their time. ‘How about the man with the flying machines? Has he booked another spanking?’

‘Pao-yu is seeing him tonight,’ Hsu Ch’ing-lan told him.

‘Then I’ll be back tomorrow.’

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As it happened, he saw her sooner than that. It was still dark on the following morning when a hand shook his shoulder and he woke to the smell of her perfume.

She said something in a dialect he didn’t understand, and the gas light flared to life. More words, and a familiar-looking member of the Chinese hotel staff slipped out of the door and closed it behind him.

‘This is a nice surprise,’ McColl said, hauling himself up onto his elbows. She was wearing a long black coat over the usual dress.

‘I don’t think so,’ she said coldly. ‘Pao-yu – the girl who spans the flying machine man – has been arrested.’

‘When? Who by?’ He swung himself out of bed and reached for his trousers.

‘The Germans, of course. Her questions must have made the man suspicious, and they took her to their police building. Last night.’

‘But they haven’t come to the Blue Dragon? I wonder why.’

‘Because the girl hasn’t told them anything. Not yet. A friend came to tell me they have her. She knows not to say anything, but she’s not as clever as my cousin – they’ll trick it out of her. So you must leave. There’s a train in an hour.’

‘Oh. Yes, I suppose I should.’ He found himself wondering why she had come to warn him. ‘What about you?’ he asked. ‘Will they arrest you?’

She shrugged. ‘I shall say I know nothing. If you are gone, then all they have is guesses.’

‘I see.’ And he did. She was afraid he would be caught, would implicate her, and that once the white folks had patched things up between them, she would be left as the scapegoat. Given the history of the last century, it was a reasonable enough assumption for a Chinese to make. ‘Well, thank you. But what about the girl?’

‘I can probably buy her back, but I will need money.’

‘Ah.’ He reached for his wallet on the bedside table, checked the contents, and handed her a wodge of notes, thinking that he had now given her more than Cumming had given him. Some businessman. ‘This won’t be enough,’ she said.

‘I’ll need the rest to pay my bill and reach Shanghai.’

‘All right,’ she agreed reluctantly, stuffing the notes into a coat pocket and walking towards the door. When she turned with her hand on the knob, he half-expected her to wish him luck, but all she said was ‘Don’t miss the train.’

He hurriedly crammed his few belongings into the battered suitcase, happily realised that there wasn’t time to return *Great Expectations*, and headed for the door. It was only when he opened it that he heard the commotion downstairs. One voice, male, German and coldly insistent, was demanding a room number; the other, Hsu Ch’ing-lan’s, was angrily protesting a client’s right to discretion. She was almost shouting, presumably for McColl’s benefit.

He hesitated for a second, wondering whether he should just walk down and bluff it out. He decided against it. If he was arrested, the Germans could probably make a case against him, and some sort of punishment would doubtless follow. Best not to give them the chance.