

# TWO-GUN & SUN

—A NOVEL

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THE FAMOUS MAN | 43



We set out, and the skies opened.

You want this? Vincent handed me a folded newspaper.

Night had fallen, and in his other hand he carried a lamp to guide us. No headlamp for him, and I remembered why. No holes.

I walked between them, the newspaper a tent over my head, rain-drops tapping. I glanced up to see if I could read the columns but as Parker had said, they were in Chinese print, except for the masthead *The Chinese Times*.

I turned to Morris, curious, newspaper crinkling about my head, and found him to be shorter than I had expected, our eyes almost level.

I saw you earlier, I said. Twice, actually, when your friends were carrying you, and when you were being prodded down the street by what looked like a posse. This must have been after that fight? So, it was about something else?

Yes, it was another matter entirely.

I had fed him that answer, and scolded my careless self.

I swivelled around to the printer, but he was gazing at the sky.

My next comment wasn't aimed at anyone in particular, though the sight of him looking up had prompted it.

Black Mountain is an odd place, I said, always in darkness.

Black Mountain, Morris remarked, is no darker than the streets of New York or the alleys of London. Where we have hills, they have tall buildings. And don't forget their pea soup.

The great mists of Shanghai, Vincent added. It's built on a bog.

However, this is no city, Morris said. Careful, or you'll wind up bushed.

I'm from a small place, I replied.

He nodded. Yes, but that was home, you had distractions. Dinners and parties. A theatre, perhaps?

Now I was nodding. There isn't even a library here, I told him.

And your home, it was where?

Nelson, I said. In the Kootenays.

Doukhobor country!

His response had the effect of a set of truck headlights, turned suddenly onto John and me by the factory doors.

Good God we were never so glad as when they left Saskatchewan for your Kootenays. Prancing around, naked as jaybirds. Shedding their worldly possessions to be closer to God.

The Shanghai Russians were nothing like that.

The printer's voice, incredulous, and I turned to him.

No, no, I said. That was just one sect. The radicals. Freedomites. Most aren't like that.

But what an eyeful those few gave us! Have you seen one of their protests, my dear?

—No, I said.

Because I had and I hadn't.

Count yourself lucky, Morris said. I've never beheld such a spectacle. No wonder the Russians kicked them out.

It was a mutual agreement, I said, because they're pacifists.

Naked as the day they were born.

Only in Canada, not Russia. They didn't begin those protests until Saskatchewan. I don't think so, at least.

Lucky us. It would be one thing if they were young and beautiful. But a group of grannies in the altogether, their ancient husbands, too, stripped bare!

As abruptly as his outburst had begun, Morris switched to a new topic entirely.

Well, I'm off on a mission, he said. Vincenzo will see you the rest of the way.

Wait. I thought you would—

But he turned sharply, nose in the air as he set off, on the hunt for dinner, I presumed, while I was left with the image of flickering flames and nude limbs and a package the length of a rifle.

In my mind I picked through my pockets for something sharp. The tip of a pencil. A jab to the eye, if needed.

We walked in silence until I asked, Morris Cohen, he's a good friend of yours?

We reached the end of the next stretch of shacks before he answered. He's an okay guy. He's got our respect.

Like your national leader?

I could feel a smile in his pause. No, he said, not like him. Us Chinese think of Morris as a good buddy. One of our own. It was a Chinese, a restaurant owner, who was being robbed this time, and Morris came to the rescue. Knocked the guy out with a punch. Not many white guys who'd do that. And he likes to gamble, Morris. So do the Chinese, so we get along.

You, too?

He shifted. I could hear the movement of his arms.

Coming here was a gamble.

He could have been referring to himself, or to me, coming to Lousetown today.

He continued, Morris says he's no hero, and not much of a white man, either. He says, I'm a Jew. To an Englishman, I'm as good as Chinese.

From under my newspaper I could see that Vincent had captured

even the mannerisms of his friend, raising his shoulders and lifting his palms as he spoke.

Just look at *them*.

His chin indicated the surrounding shacks and their occupants. Chinese labourers, I gathered.

I figured a printer like me who could read and write in English and French could do better, could get a job anywhere in the west.

How did you learn?

Doesn't matter. Here I am, printing Chinese.

And some English.

He laughed a harsh laugh. Menus!

More than that, if you came to the *Bullet*.

I stepped around a puddle, newspaper held high, before I realized what I'd said. Did I really want him as my printer? Quickly, I asked, What part of China were you from?

His answer wouldn't have mattered. I knew little about the country. Rain spattered onto the newsprint. Beneath the dampening sheets that smelled of ink and something like the ocean, I listened as he continued.

All over. My pop was a baker. Trained with the Portuguese. So did his father, but old pops was the tops. No Chinese could bake bread like he did, European-style. He was a hit with the western bosses. He worked in their kitchens and we followed them as they spread up the coast, from Hong Kong to Swatow, Amoy, Foochow, Ningpo. Finally Shanghai.

He paused and said, It's a great city, full of internationals, French, Russian, German. American and British. Japanese, too.

American. That was it. I could hear it in his manner of speaking, a casualness, and in his vowels, slightly drawn-out, flattened. Another accent in there as well. He said *too* as though it were *terww*. French or Chinese, I wasn't sure.

His arms and hands moved high and wide as he described. The French Concession has houses big as museums. Trees up and down the streets. Our leader lives there, when he's in exile. In other parts of China they want him dead.

I lifted the page to study him. What a complicated man, with his modern thoughts and traditional hair, and now his clear love of the foreigners in Shanghai. Weren't they the very bosses who made his father cut his hair? Weren't they the people his leader wanted out of China? His leader's struggle was the sort of news I was after for *The Bullet*: far-reaching, thought-provoking. There had to be a way to write about

him without risking his safety. I'd have to work on that.

Some parts of Shanghai aren't so swell, he said. Some look a lot like this. Shacks. Laundry poles. No streets, just a dirt path on a dirt bank sliding into a stream. Watch that water.

He reached for my wrist, then pulled his hand back just as I recoiled, newspaper crushed at my waist as one hand plunged into my pocket for the pencil.

We stared at each other for a moment, my swollen eyes fully exposed now, but they were the last thing on my mind.

The main creek's farther up, he said. It's clean. This one's a slop bucket. You want to find your own way back—follow its stink.

I didn't reply, wasn't sure he was expecting me to. He kept walking and so did I, dropping the crumpled paper into the dirt. The rain had lightened to a drizzle, anyway.

We heard this place was better, he said, but nope. Just another treaty port. English on that side, us, here. Crazy, isn't it? To go to all that trouble to drag the worst of Shanghai here, to Black Mountain.

His outpouring had left me feeling wrung dry.

We were approaching the pithead now, its shithouse shape spilling dung beetles into the night. I could hear their muttered accents on the wind, see the eerie sight of their headlamps beaming fuzzily in the fog, blotting out the bodies that walked beneath them. I had left my own headlamp at home, not expecting to be out this late, and in strange company, not wanting the ridiculousness of one on my head.

He said nothing more to me than the simple words, Monday, then. In a flash he had darted back into the jumble of shacks.

So, it was decided. I had my printer.