

Darkness at Dawn

Lam Yiu-Suen tossed the notebook on top of the files and dossiers crowding his desk. He leaned back wearily against the headrest of his swivel chair.

It was hopeless, he thought, furrowing his brow. Over the years he had researched endlessly for his book, everything from the gradual rise in corporate wrong-doings to the misapplications of science and technology. Few of those travails made for happy reflection.

The notebook he had just discarded was a record of his study into the development of poison gases. China first developed one back in the Fourth Century BC, to fumigate houses and -- some centuries later -- to curb bookworms. It had taken other nations twenty-three centuries to develop chlorine, phosgene and mustard gases in suitable form for use against fellow human beings. Since World War I, even more deadly weapons had emerged. Technologically ingenious, many of them, but did a single one amount to an advance for civilisation?

His deep brown eyes veiled over with melancholy as he considered that question. But before he could really mull it over, his wife, Po-Chee, burst into his study in a state of some excitement.

“Something terrible has happened,” she cried. “I feel it in my bones. Amber should have been back ages ago.”

Amber was his wife’s Eurasian niece. She had been her ward for three years, since the death of the girl’s mother, Po-Chee’s elder sister.

Noting that the time was only five past one, he tried to make light of the situation. “Not missing long enough to be of interest to the police, my dear,” he observed, with a half-smile. His voice was sonorous.

“I’m serious! The tabloids are full of stories of youngsters getting up to dangerous pranks. Car racing on deserted roads and so forth. Many end in tragedy.”

“Amber’s quite sensible. Stop worrying so much. She’ll be

turning eighteen soon, for heaven's sake."

"No! She's only seventeen, a thoroughly unsettling age."

"When was she supposed to come home?"

"She knows full well a midnight curfew's in place during term time. I told her she could stay out a little later this evening, as the party was supposed to be last big one before finals. I never meant this late."

He looked at his wife's sallow and careworn face and realized she was genuinely concerned. It struck him as singular, nonetheless, that a lawyer capable of commanding an exorbitant hourly rate should grant a teenager a licence in such imprecise terms. Students at International Schools had a reputation for being precocious, bent on out-doing the excesses of adults.

"Why not have a cup of tea?" he offered.

Po-Chee shook her head testily and stormed into the hallway, where the house telephone was located, and began ringing the homes of Amber's friends.

He could hear her well-modulated voice making numerous apologies for ringing so late. But her efforts yielded little result. The youngsters she had managed to reach had either not joined that particular party or had gone to a different one. The parents of the rest indicated their children had yet to return.

His wife's disquiet and her comings and goings soon robbed him of all concentration. By two forty-five, he was becoming slightly uneasy himself.

By then his wife had rung no less than three times the residence of Sharlene Anderson, Amber's best friend and the organiser of the party. That girl's father was supposed to be a consul in the American Consulate-General, although he suspected that his status might be rather more equivocal, given that spies, secret agents and China-watchers abounded.

On that third call, Mrs. Anderson told Po-Chee rather tartly that she did not expect her daughter home any time soon. It was a Saturday night, she added, as if that fact alone should explain everything any modern parent or guardian needed to know about teenagers. But that information did not reassure Po-Chee.

Amber finally rolled home well after three, dishevelled and so unsteady on her feet that she had to rely on the hallway wall to keep herself upright.

He sized up the situation at once. The girl smelt of alcohol, mixed with the fumes of a more dangerous intoxicant with which he had some familiarity.

“What’s happened to you?” Po-Chee cried.

“Sorry I messed up, Auntie,” Amber replied. “Got tricked into drinking too much.”

“How come? You’re not supposed to start drinking yet.”

“There’ll be plenty of time for a post-mortem tomorrow,” Suen quickly interjected, being aware of his wife’s unfamiliarity with detecting recreational drugs. “Best get her to bed.”

Between him and his wife they got their niece upstairs. During that process, however, the fumes the girl exuded rapidly lured his thoughts back to the heady days of love in Paris, when he too had drunk fine wines and experimented with narcotics in the company of Isabelle.

By the time he got back to his study, flesh-tethered memories had taken full possession of his mind. They caused him to look longingly across his desk, at the avant-garde painting of Isabelle dominating the opposite wall. The two substantial teakwood bookcases on either side of the portrait, stuffed with the undying words of poets and scholars, appeared mere adornments to its abstracted loveliness.

Isabelle’s free spirit had indeed been captured by Phirun, that

doggedly determined Cambodian artist he had befriended in Paris. The sight of the picture reminded him how grievous the loss of both of them had been.

He studied the painting afresh, with an ache in his heart. The single blue-green eye, the minimalist splashes of honey-coloured hair, a squiggle for a parted mouth and the sparse lines conveying the full voluptuousness of breasts. How each element remained so evocative! How everything about Isabelle still stirred his blood!

Then the words she had written in her letter of parting suddenly rushed back at him. She had judged him to be “a seeker after truths” and on that account she had sacrificed their relationship to what she held to be his destiny. How could he betray her, by not living up to her expectation?

He shook his head abruptly. He did not want to return to that repository of retrospective pain. He decided he had to get away from the image looking back at him, to escape to the garden, to clear his mind with some night air.

He rose from his seat and made for the French windows which opened onto a wide verandah. He moved with that easy fluidity sometimes associated with practitioners of t'ai chi. In anticipation of a possible nip in the spring air, he pulled his maroon dressing gown closer around himself.

He found more than a chill outside, however. A thick harbour fog had arisen, which blanketed not only his family mansion and its garden but the whole of Hong Kong. Visibility had been reduced to barely four feet. The fog moved with such an insidious sluggishness that it seemed somehow charged with evil and malevolence. To add to the gloom, dark banks of low-hanging cumuli blotted out the sky.

The unexpected scene took him aback. He waved his arms as he moved across the verandah, in an attempt to dispel the mist. But the vapour merely oozed around him. When he reached the stone parapet

fencing the verandah, he felt he had to make some gesture of disapproval against its intrusion. He planted his hands on the parapet and stuck out his resolute chin, as if to underscore his proprietorship.

His hands at once encountered a chilling dampness. He uttered an exclamation of disgust in Cantonese, but kept his hands defiantly where they had been placed. He tried to think of an equivalent in English for the sensation he was feeling. But “dank” and “clammy” were the only words that came to mind. He rejected both as lacking in the piquancy of his native tongue. However, he felt in no mood at that unholy hour to grope for Kipling’s “magic of the necessary word”.

The fog seemed indifferent to his theatrics. Indeed, it appeared to mock his very claim to any title. It seized him all at once that at fifty-seven he would be the last of his line to occupy the house. In spite of the best endeavours by his grandmother and Aunt Soo-Leung, in spite of the high hopes upon his marriage to Po-Chee, he was without an heir. His failure to keep his filial vows caused a wave of dismay to wash over him.

He removed his hands from the parapet to rub them dry and then began walking along the forlorn verandah. The wind chimes along his route hung mute. Only the baleful echoes of foghorns from the harbour served as counterpoints to his despair.

The mansion was an elegant two-storeyed structure of a conventional Chinese design. It had been commissioned by his great-grandfather and boasted red brick walls and a jaunty roof of green tiles. The verandah, fenced by a stout parapet, embraced three sides of the house and provided --via sets of French windows -- outdoor connections between the various family rooms on the ground floor. Outside the sitting room, a flight of three marble steps gave access to a large, sunken garden. Apart from the French windows, the only other feature at odds with the dictates of Chinese architecture was the imitation Ionic columns embedded along

the parapet to support the overhanging upper floor.

The garden, too, was deficient in certain Chinese elements. It had no secluded nooks, no rockeries, no mossy winding ways and no body of water to reflect the mysteries of heaven and the transcendental flux of the Tao. His forebear had made too many concessions to Western taste, he reflected.

He came to a place on the verandah directly beneath Po-Chee's bedroom and paused. Was his wife now sleeping easier, with her beloved niece back home?

He recognised with a sinking feeling that his marriage was unravelling and that his love for his wife, once as fierce as that for Isabelle, was slipping from his grasp. The endearments which used to flow so readily had been replaced by awkward silences and curtailed words. He did not really need Dr. Ma, Po-Chee's personal psychologist, to warn him that the loss of their son some years back had rendered his wife capable of harming herself.

He should have noted the complicated algebra of her life much earlier. His wife's reliance on geomancers, soothsayers and astrological almanacs; her reluctance to talk about the discords within her own family; her puzzling need for solace from an impoverished elder sister; her later ambivalence towards him and their marital bed. Her cool professional exterior had been only a disguise, he realized too late, to hide the anguish eating into her.

Was it too late now to recover what they had lost? Or to restore her to beauty and wholeness? He wished the answers were more hopeful.

He resumed his pacing. Amber's impending departure for acting school in California was bound to affect his wife, for she had turned the girl into almost a surrogate daughter over the years.

Until Amber came into their home, she had lived with her

mother in dire poverty in a run-down section of Kowloon. Why should that have been necessary at all, when Po-Chee had access to enormous wealth and was so generous by nature? A conundrum. Possibly something to do with a shifty Portuguese brother-in-law. But then that man had died a good while back. And why did Amber's idiosyncratic mother keep insisting on bringing the child up as both a Catholic and a traditional Chinese maiden of the upper middle class? Another conundrum!

Amber herself, in spite of her Mediterranean good looks and a Portuguese name, might yet find no lasting refuge in America. She was a born outsider, like himself, unable to feel truly at home anywhere. America might be touted as the new land of equality but that was often a legal fiction. In some places one could still get killed for having the wrong skin pigmentation or for holding an unpopular opinion.

It was true that Amber might stand out less as an Eurasian across the Pacific than in an Eastern city bastardized by one and a half centuries of British occupation. But her upbringing would still work against her. He had tried to give her more intellectual ballast, to steady her, but he doubted if he had made sufficient headway.

He sighed over his inability to protect those nearest and dearest to him. What was the point of agonizing over the fallen state of humanity when he couldn't really help those within his own home?

By then his steps had led him more than two circuits around the verandah. He found himself at the top of the marble steps leading into the garden. The miasma obscuring the garden rendered it as uninviting as Erebus. But at the same time he could detect in the air a whiff of spring flowers. That mingling of scents cheered him a little and enticed him.

He hesitated. He knew that if he ventured down the steps, he would find a wide lawn with an hibiscus hedge at the far end. Beyond the hedge, a vertiginous retaining wall would drop onto another of those mid-

level roads hacked out of Victoria Peak. That wall marked the limits of his inheritance. To peer over it in darkness would be like staring into an abyss. Looking up would serve no better. The hills to the north, known as the Nine Dragons, would be equally invisible in the fog. So too the dishonest lights of the mercenary, pressure-cooker of a city that passed for home.

Still the hectic fragrances from the garden beckoned him. He closed his eyes for a long moment, breathing them in, trying to identify individual scents. When he opened his eyes again he saw a faint glow on the eastern horizon. It seemed the fog was at last beginning to lift.

He smiled with bitter irony as his feet took him blithely down the three marble steps. He felt the gentle bounce of the manicured lawn beneath his slippared feet. Out of the dissipating mist, he could make out the august shape of the banyan tree on one side of the garden and the rubber tree on the other, followed by a smudge of flowers. He stood still, inhaling the fragrances. The majesty of the garden shyly unfolded itself. After a while he meandered towards the hibiscus hedge and saw the lights of the city spanning indistinctly across his line of vision.

Here stretched the new Babylon, with its modern towers of Babel, he thought, with a quick wrench of the heart. If Isaiah thought cities could turn harlot, he hadn't seen anything yet! Here was the latest prototype, fashioned out of four hundred square miles of stolen China.

If "harlot" was too harsh a description for his home town, perhaps the Japanese term of "comfort woman" might be easier on the ear. The Japanese used to bring enslaved women to conquered territories for the delectation of their troops. Hong Kong, too, was conquered territory. But instead of bringing in exploited women, the British, with their muddled motives for empire, had tried to foist their attachments to pubs, ball games, horse racing, churches, social conventions and class system upon a civilisation far older than their own.

As China itself went through the convulsions of revolutions and wars, the British approach in Hong Kong -- either wittingly or unwittingly -- left the Chinese with a haven for hot funds and an opportunity to cultivate their instinct for money-making. As one of their adages had it, with enough wealth even the devil could be enlisted to do one's bidding. The locals took that maxim to heart. The net result was an enclave dedicated to practising the rawest, no-holds-barred form of capitalism. Against all odds, the colony succeeded, much to the amazement of the rest of the world.

Suen shook his head and marvelled. Somehow, the British had again muddled through. But economics and wealth weren't everything, although the imbeciles running the world and its international institutions seemed to think so. The real danger for China was that its leaders, following the myopia of Thatcher and Reagan, would be seduced by the Hong Kong model.

The omens were not good. A few years back, the chain-smoking Paramount Ruler of the country had introduced the concept of "Communism with Chinese characteristics". Getting rich was no longer a crime, he had declared, paving the way for a new form of quasi-capitalism.

Since then profit-seekers of all descriptions had been descending upon China like locusts, led by smooth-talking Hong Kong types exploiting their natural advantages of race, language, family connections and geographical propinquity.

How could Chinese leaders, forged in the crucible of the Long March, not see the dangers in jettisoning the ideals which had at least sustained them through decades of revolution and international isolation?

He saw with frightening clarity the dangers lying ahead. In ten years -- upon the stroke of midnight on June 30, 1997, to be precise -- the Union Jack would be lowered over Hong Kong in favour of the five-starred

flag of Communist China. An alienated plot of the Motherland would be reclaimed at last! But that plot had become contaminated with the money-sickness born out of commercial slipperiness. It needed to be quarantined, purified, lest the disease spread like a virus right across the Motherland.

But his was a voice in the wilderness. The China he had cherished in his youth was gradually vanishing. The values he had acquired during the years in Kunming had become outmoded, forgotten, or even ridiculed. A newer world had been born and it was passing him by. He had become an anomalous man, stuck in an anomalous place.

All of a sudden he thought of Kim, his old friend and mentor. Kim had faced a similar dilemma back in 1950, when he decided to return to a chaotic post-revolutionary China in order “to do a bit of good”.

He remembered that day well. He had insisted on accompanying his friend on that final train journey to Lo Wu because he had been filled with shameful feelings he could not express. It had been a reckless act of bravado on his part which had caused his friend to lose his job. Before walking across that wooden railway bridge into their Motherland, Kim had declared that some causes had to be fought, even in the face of certain defeat.

He had wanted then to walk across that bridge with him, to the martial blare of “The East Is Red” coming from the other side. But he -- not yet out of his teens and still enormously attached to his grandmother -- had suffered a failure of nerve. He had neither seen nor heard from Kim after that. Could he salvage his honour now, by carrying on with yet another lost cause?

He sighed, troubled by his own past, his hopeless book and the future in store for his country. A China dotted with artless and car-jammed replicas of Hong Kong, picking up every conceivable dodge from honest dealings, was anathema to him. But it seemed inevitable, with the thrust of

money pushing that way. He shuddered too over the prospect of rampant pollution, poisoned rivers, plundered forests, dangerous quarries, smoking factories, open cast mines, electric pylons. tourist tat, junk food and sugar-loaded beverages. Must his nation's heritage be thus desecrated?

He recalled from way back, during his Oxford days and at the height of the Korean War, that his dear friends Ralfie and Sanjay had considered civilisation to be in its twilight stage. Then, just as suddenly, his mind flashed back to some Taoist scripts he had gone through with Dr. Loughridge, his tutor in politics and philosophy.

The universe had emerged from nothingness, according to the Taoists, and back to nothingness it must eventually return. If they were right, then nothing occurring in-between would be worth getting excited about. Buddhists also considered the present a Dharma Ending Age. Man might be the most clever of the species inhabiting the Earth but he, too, could head for extinction through greed and limited vision.

What man-made monument has ever lasted for long? Consider the once fabled colonnades of Antioch, the multi-storeyed marvels of Saba, the frozen cosmology at Angkor or the pleasure domes of Xanadu. Even the pyramids of the Pharaohs and the Great Wall of China were at the moment being robbed and vandalised with Twentieth Century efficiency.

He chuckled. Eternity would enjoy the last laugh. Let the philistines and the parvenus do their worst. Let them construct their biggest, tallest and grandest imitation of something or other. Let them nurse their money-laden vanities with stolen treasures. Every structure would end up as less than a flicker in the eye of Time.

With that thought, he turned slowly from the hibiscus hedge to head for bed. As he retraced his steps across the garden, the faint glow of a breaking day illuminated his journey.