

Snake Catching

Hong Kong, July 1952:

School was out for the summer. The colony was smothered by a damp, sapping heat, a harbinger of the more severe ordeal to come in August. The sky was cloudless and empty, except for two kites circling in search of prey. Below the city spread like a thick, discoloured garland of concrete around Victoria Harbour. Here and there, on both sides of the harbour, small squatter settlements erupted like eczema on the indifferent faces of distant hills.

Chu Wing-seng, walking behind Little Ho, took off his horn-rimmed spectacles with his right hand and wiped his brow with the short sleeve of his white shirt. He did so without breaking stride with his Patrol Leader. His shirt was already sticking to his body and the long khaki trousers, the thick cotton socks and the sturdy shoes recommended by his leader were adding to his discomfort. His left hand was clamped around a four-foot walking staff.

The haversack on his back seemed increasingly burdensome, though it contained only a bottle of mineral water, a packet of Jacobs' tea biscuits, a First Aid kit and a white cotton face towel. His mother had packed them in the belief he would be practising some woodman's craft for a Boy Scout proficiency badge. If she had known he was out to hunt venomous snakes she would have been deeply distressed, both for exposing himself to danger and for going against one of the Buddhist notions she held inviolate.

His mother believed life to be sacred, even if it were that of a mosquito or a fly. An insect might be the reincarnation of an unfortunate person, she explained. Doing harm in one existence attracted retribution in the next. It was therefore always essential for a person to accumulate merit by living well and doing good deeds.

Chu Wing-seng found some of his mother's ideas irrational. If nobody took a life, how could there be meat and fowl to eat? Not everyone could be a vegetarian like her. Besides, why shouldn't harmful pests such as lice and gnats be eliminated? DDT had been invented for that purpose.

If his mother had meant to broaden his mind, she should dwell on more practical matters, he reflected, as he gazed upon the city. There, on the waterfront, in the heart of the business district, stood his father's new and gleaming Gold Star Plaza. It dominated the cityscape like a symbol of victory because it was the first building in the colony to be constructed after the war that had risen to twelve storeys. One day it would be his. Or would it?

A furtive shudder of apprehension went through him. He greatly admired his father, not only for his fame and success but also for his handsomeness. His father was as elusive as a monkey, however, when it came to explaining how Gold Star worked. Nor was he at all keen about his following in his footsteps.

His mother's game was equally baffling. She had a disconcerting way of reminding him that there were other ways of making a living besides business.

Such parental attitudes had driven him to the conclusion that he had to depend on himself to make his way in business. To that end he assiduously went through the magazines on construction, banking and economics his father sometimes left around the house. He also tried to eavesdrop on conversations conducted in low tones between his father and his closest associates when they came for dinner or for a game of mah jong. His mother, however, always seemed to have the knack for sending him off on untimely missions -- to fetch her a handkerchief from the bedroom or to get one of the Filipina maids to replenish the tea.

As Chu Wing-seng trudged through the rough, wooded hillsides near Pokfulam, he recalled some of the recently overheard remarks. They centred on the war in Korea -- balancing politics, profits and patriotism, exploiting loopholes in the United Nations embargo, using trans-shipments with ambiguous particulars. He couldn't make head or tail of much of it, though he gained the impression that deception was at the heart of those discussions.

He was not averse to deception himself. The afternoon's escapade was a deception. He loved his mother and did not want to worry her. But deception seemed a fact of life.

Actually, he had been in two minds over the present outing. He had a natural fear of snakes. They made his skin crawl. They were associated in his mind with evil and treachery. The story of Lady White Snake showed how a snake could change form and seduce a man. His teacher in Bible class talked about of the serpent in the Garden of Eden and his English teacher had explained the meaning of the term "snake in the grass". The only thing he liked about snakes was their meat, made into soups and taken steaming hot with chrysanthemum petals, slivers of lime leaves and dough crispies. His father could be counted on to provide such treats when friends came for mah jong or bridge during winter.

Chu Wing-seng's fear of snakes was part of a wider fear over his own inadequacies. He was undersized for his age and that bred physical timidity and aversion to pain. Twice in the course of primary school he had been hit by a bigger boy and twice he had slunk away, even though he had right on his side. He had represented his retreats as turning the other cheek, practising the Christian behaviour recommended by his teachers. But in his heart he knew his retreats had been caused by terror and he suspected his classmates and fellow Scouts knew it. He soon gained the reputation of being a brainy little sissy. His mother didn't help by being overly protective when she turned up for Parents' Day.

It was to slough off such general perceptions that he had manoeuvred Little Ho into teaching him to catch snakes. His Patrol Leader had once brought a Banded Krait pickled in methylated spirits to a troop gathering. That immediately transformed him from a colourless, accommodating lad into a popular hero. Everybody -- including the Troop Leader and other Patrol Leaders -- gathered around with faces radiating admiration. They wanted to hear the characteristics of the creature and how it had been caught. They wanted to see other specimens and when Little Ho brought in a bright green Bamboo Snake the following week, his reputation was made.

Getting Little Ho, a boy almost four years older than himself, to teach him to catch snakes was not at all difficult. Little Ho believed the best about everybody. He behaved in the exemplary manner expected of Boy Scouts, being always ready to put himself out for others. In

Hong Kong people with such a nature were rare and Little Ho seemed genuinely comfortable with his nature.

As Chu Wing-seng stumbled his way along the hillside, he felt slightly guilty over misleading the older boy. He glanced at the harbour, crawling with motor launches, cargo junks, car ferries and ocean-going ships, and the tenements of the Central and Western Districts below. The buildings appeared like distempered blocks from some discarded toy set. He wondered how he might one day leave his mark.

“Hey, Little Ho, we’ve been walking for an hour. How come we haven’t found anything yet?” Chu Wing-seng called out.

Little Ho halted and retraced his steps. He had a pleasant, open face and a pair of friendly brown eyes. He was sixteen years old and a head taller than his companion. He too had a haversack on his back and a staff with a fork in his hand.

“You have to be patient. You can’t be sure of always finding a snake,” Little Ho said, good-naturedly. “You see, during the Japanese occupation, lots of people were starving and many came to these hills to hunt for food, including snakes and lizards. I used to come with my father. A lot of wild life disappeared as a result. It’s rare nowadays to come across a civet cat or a barking deer. Snakes are still plentiful, however, so it’s just a matter of being patient. If you’re tired, we can have a drink of water and rest a while.”

The two boys found a shady spot and sat down on some granite rocks. In the midst of that parched landscape, where neither wild flowers bloomed nor birdsong sweetened the air, they took off their haversacks and helped themselves to water and biscuits.

“When you hunt snakes, you must always remember to include a clean, sharp razor blade in your First Aid kit,” Little Ho said, between bites on a tea biscuit. “Should you get bitten, don’t panic. Cut across the fang marks with the razor blade and squeeze or suck out the blood. But don’t suck if you’ve got a cut or an ulcer in your mouth. Let the blood flow freely and then head for the nearest clinic. Cutting your own flesh may sound gruesome but, if you do it with a quick stroke, it shouldn’t be very painful. I’ve done it. A bit of pain is better than dying.”

“I thought you said most snakes in Hong Kong are not poisonous,” Chu Wing-seng said.

“That’s correct. But unless you know them well enough to know which is which, it’s better not to take chances.”

“What made you hunt snakes? It’s not something very many people do.”

“I’m not sure. At the beginning it was probably because I felt sorry for them, with everybody hating them and giving them a bad reputation. I wanted to show people they were not horrid and that many of the myths about them were untrue. They never attack people unless provoked or cornered. They are in fact quite useful in keeping down rodents and pests. Their gall bladders provide a popular tonic, their venom can be used for medicines and their meat makes delicious soup. I thought if I mastered handling them I might one day open a snake soup restaurant and make a good living.”

“Not a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“People only take snake soup during winter because snake meat warms the blood. No one wants to warm their blood in summer. Besides, winters are quite short in Hong Kong. You’ll have no business for most of the year. It’s better to open an ordinary restaurant and put snake soup on the menu during winter.”

“Gosh, never thought of that. I’ll have to think again. No wonder everybody says you’re smart, that you’re going to end up as successful as your father. You’re only one form behind me, aren’t you? You must have got double promotions in primary school.”

“Yeah. That’s kid stuff. Does everybody at school know about my father?”

“Sure. They read newspapers. My father’s an admirer.”

“Really? How come? Does he do business with my father?”

“No, my father’s a locksmith. He runs a small roadside stall in Western, near where we live. A few years ago he read about your father building a mansion up the Peak where the gweilos used to keep out Chinese. He was over the moon. He thought it was time someone showed gweilos we Chinese couldn’t always be kept under their thumb. He went out and put his savings in Gold Star shares, not that he had very much, mind you, or knew much about what Gold Star does. When I told him you were in my patrol, he was very pleased.”

“My mother told me we used to live in Western during the war. Strange thing, I can’t remember much about that. We might have been neighbours.”

“Unlikely. Your family must have lived in one of the rich neighbourhoods. Our whole family lives in one room in a tenement building, right along the tram tracks. The place is so old it doesn’t even have a flush toilet. We have to use metal buckets, which are taken away at night by night-soil collectors. The contents get shipped by barge to China to be sold as fertilizer.”

Those descriptions nudged some blurred, pre-memory impressions buried deep within Chu Wing-seng. “Really?” he said. “How awful! My father still frequently goes for breakfast in Western, you know, at some place called the Evergreen Tea House. Has your family ever eaten there?”

“The Evergreen is very old. I think it started out as an ordinary local tea house but it has now become too expensive for us.”

“It can’t be that expensive, can it? My father has offered to take me there but I’ve always thought it was one of those crummy old places he goes to for sentimental reasons.”

“It may not be exactly posh but you don’t know what you’ve missed. The food there is supposed to be excellent. Its teas are particularly renowned.”

“Well, I don’t care much for tea. The next time my father offers, I’ll ask if I can invite you along. If your family is so poor, how did you manage to get into our missionary school? Fees are high and there’s a long waiting list.”

“My mother’s a Christian. She went to her pastor for help and he got me a free place. Otherwise I would never be there. Come on, let’s see if we can’t catch you a snake.”

The boys resumed their walk, with fierce sunlight riding high upon their shoulders once again. Black granite rocks erupted through the thin top soil here and there and radiated heat like furnaces. Little Ho, walking in front, systematically turned over rocks and fallen branches.

“Sometimes, when you spot a bit of sloughed-off skin, you can count on a snake being around somewhere,” Little Ho explained, as he continued to poke into nooks and crannies. “The outer layer of skin has a pattern but no colour. The pigment cells are in the deeper, living layer of skin. There are no really big snakes here, like the anaconda or the African rock python. Those grow to well over thirty feet. The biggest snakes we have are the hooded Chinese Cobra and the King Cobra, both growing to around fifteen feet. Most snakes can put away large meals and live for a year without eating. Not enough is known about their life-spans, however. Some have lived in captivity for over thirty years.”

After a while Little Ho turned over a rock and immediately lifted a hand to deter Chu Wing-seng from approaching. He then took aim with his forked staff and pinned a snake to the ground.

“It’s a Many-banded Krait,” Little Ho said. “Quite deadly.”

Chu Wing-seng approached and saw a two-foot snake with black and white bands twisting around with its head pinned on the ground.

“Quite young. Not a good specimen,” Little Ho said, bending to catch the snake by the base of its head.

The reptile thrashed about in an attempt to free itself. When that failed it wound itself around Little Ho’s arm.

The snake’s jaws were opening and closing. Chu Wing-seng could see its fangs and white throat. His own throat went dry and he took a step backwards.

“If you grip it as I’m doing, it can’t bite you,” Little Ho said, seeing his companion step away. “Don’t be afraid if it winds itself around your arm. It’s not a python or anaconda. It can’t hurt you. Do you want to hold it and get a feel of handling a snake? You’ve got to start some time. If you’ll hold it, I’ll get a container from my haversack. Or, if you prefer, I’ll hold it while you get the container.”

Chu Wing-seng’s heart thumped wildly as he caught the insinuation in Little Ho’s words. He either had to prove his interest in snakes or reveal himself as a coward and a fake. “I’ll hold it,” he said, after a slight hesitation.

Little Ho unwound the Many-banded Krait from his arm with his other hand and held the creature out to his companion like a sceptre.

Chu Wing-seng reached out with trepidation. Little Ho told him where and how to hold. After Little Ho was satisfied with the grip, he said: “That’s right. You’ve got it. Are you comfortable enough for me to let go?”

“Yeah.”

Little Ho released his hold and immediately the snake began thrashing about. Chu Wing-seng’s heart pounded. The creature’s jaws were working menacingly. Its coils felt cold and clammy around his skin and its undulating movements seemed unbearably disgusting. Suddenly, a

mixture of fear and guilt took possession. The notion of being bitten and dying an agonizing death frightened him. He remembered his mother's admonition against taking life. What if the snake was really the reincarnation of a person? Killing it might lead to his being condemned to a similar fate. Besides, could the evil in snakes be transmitted through its coils?

That jumble of thoughts caused him to disengage the coils hurriedly with his other hand as Little Ho had done. With a cry he flung the snake away with all his might.

"What's the matter? Have you been bitten?" Little Ho asked, rushing to his side.

Chu Wing-seng recoiled from where he had thrown the snake and held up his hands in disgust. He slowly shook his head. His face had gone white and he was on the verge of tears as he watched the reptile slither away into the undergrowth. He was trembling and sweating as Little Ho examined his hands and arms for a possible bite.

"Never mind. You haven't been bitten. It wasn't much of a specimen anyway," Little Ho said, at the end of his examination. "Let's sit down and have another drink of water. We'll catch a more splendid one next time."

"There won't be a next time, will there?" Chu Wing-seng responded, still breathing heavily and wiping his hands and forearms on the seat of his trousers.

"Why not?"

"Because I've let you down. Everyone will be laughing at me for being frightened. They will laugh at you too for taking someone like me to hunt snakes."

"How would anyone know whether another person has been frightened, unless that other person chooses to say so? I don't know whether you were frightened. All I know is that you held a living Many-banded Krait in your hand. It was a highly venomous snake and you decided to free it for some reason. Perhaps to spare a life. Not a single member of the troop or a single student in our school has ever held such a dangerous creature with his bare hands. Apart from us, of course."

Chu Wing-seng looked at the older boy and marvelled at his goodness. Here was a person in possession of damning information about a lapse by another. It bestowed upon him the power to ruin a reputation or to exact a price for silence. Yet he was exploiting neither.

Chu Wing-seng judged his secret safe. But he couldn't figure out whether Little Ho was acting out of genuine friendship or whether he was just too simple-minded for his own good. In either case he owed his companion a debt of gratitude. He was determined that one day, after he had become as rich and powerful as his father, he would repay it.