

Between Two Worlds

The Hong Kong Border, September 1953:

What was he doing here? How could he endure such soul-destroying duties? Lieutenant Sebastian Baxingdale of the First Battalion Light Infantry asked himself, as he trained his field glasses on the border. He was in charge of one of the four border posts manned by the British Army, the rest being the responsibility of the local police. The land border meandered for some twelve miles between Sha Tau Kok and Man Kam To and his job was to detain illegal immigrants crossing it and hand them back to the Chinese authorities on the other side.

The people being rounded up, including women and children, were officially classified as economic migrants but he knew in his heart that they were simply desperate folk fleeing poverty, hunger, disease or persecution. They chanced their lives by either floating across the Sham Chun River with inflated tyre tubes or transversing the treacherous terrain of the border zones in the dead of night. And to what purpose? What awaited the successful was usually a precarious existence without piped water, electricity or sanitation and preyed upon by fires, typhoons, landslides and diseases. For most, the only succour available was from hard-pressed charities.

What had happened to human compassion, Baxingdale wondered, when people seeking so little had to be turned back to uncertain fates? The whole exercise grated against his British instincts. Local rules seemed idiotic as well. If a refugee managed to evade border patrols and reach the urban area, then he or she would be allowed to stay. It seemed an arrangement designed for corruption and rackets. The best estimates suggested a quarter of a million had slipped through since the establishment of the Communist regime in 1949.

Guarding the border in battle fatigues struck him as a charade, a farce. His men joked that Chairman Mao could take Hong Kong without a single soldier. All that was needed was a telephone call. The withdrawal of the People's Liberation Army from the border would send tens of thousands of refugees swarming over. Three divisions couldn't stop them, let alone the handful of men under his command. In any case, what British officer in the middle of the Twentieth Century would order his soldiers to fire on a bunch of unarmed and half-naked peasants? Those days were happily long past.

Earlier that day, among the dozen of illegal immigrants caught by his patrol was a young woman. What made her different was the look of utter desperation in her eyes. She was bleeding from cuts sustained while climbing through barbed wire barriers and perilous terrain and she had every appearance of a trapped animal at the end of its tether.

"This one looks all in, Sir," Corporal Fuller had said, leading her past him. "Got a couple of bad cuts too."

With the aid of an interpreter from the District Office, Baxingdale discovered she was trying to reach a brother in Hong Kong to tell him their father was dying in China and had

asked to see him. He felt sorry for her. But it was not his job to pronounce on the veracity or urgency of her story.

“I’m sorry,” he said, as kindly as he could. “Can’t let you through. You’ve got to apply through proper channels and get exit papers. There’s a quota. You’ll have to follow the rules.”

Even as he got the interpreter to convey that message, he knew his words were an evasion, a betrayal of his own instincts. It would take years for an application to wind its way through the bureaucratic maze and by then the woman’s father would be long dead. It would then become academic whether the brother ever saw his father again.

The woman had appealed to him with her tearful eyes and her pitiful face. Those features seemed to say: “You have it within your power to show a speck of human kindness. Let me reach the urban area. Others have done it with bribes but I have no money. Please, for mercy’s sake, look the other way.”

But he did not. Instead he said: “Get her cuts attended to and put her with the rest.”

As Corporal Fuller led her away, tears streamed down her face and she screamed in Chinese.

Baxingdale felt diminished. Even without a translation he divined what the screaming was about. He had not joined the army for such heartless work and he hated having to smother his humanity because of fatuous rules.

His father, the Reverend Alistair Baxingdale, never did that. His father, a self-effacing man with socialist and anti-imperialist inclinations, was vicar of a parish in the East End of London. When Baxingdale was quite small, he remembered a parishioner seeking his father’s help to clear the name of a son shot for cowardice during the First World War. His father had responded with gusto. So had his mother, shouldering the paperwork. But their efforts got nowhere, and that failure caused them to vent their dismay over the bone-headedness of officialdom at the family dinner table.

Had his father sired a moral coward? Other memories came in the form of his parents’ opposition to the appeasement of the Nazis and their treatment of the Jews. In later years they marched with Bertrand Russell, Canon Collins and others in support of nuclear disarmament, the end of apartheid in South Africa, the abolition of the death penalty and a miscellany of other causes.

His parents had lived out their principles. He had yet to take a stand over his. He felt ashamed. The case of the boy shot for cowardice had left him with a secret fear of being branded a coward himself. A clear nexus developed in his mind between being decent and being brave. To live his principles, as his parents had done, might invite derision and ridicule. One had to be brave enough to bear that. To do the decent thing also meant a willingness to sacrifice oneself for some larger purpose, like Leonidas at Thermopylae or Regulus before the Carthaginians.

He was conscious of his own bookish habits and refined manners. To compensate, he had taken up boxing and rugby. He had a modest talent for both but had lacked the killer instinct to be outstanding at either.

Dogged participation resulted in three fractured ribs and a broken nose. He did not regret the latter, however, because it added a more pugnacious cast to a face otherwise too dreamy and handsome. He had always thought the sandy hair, the pale grey eyes and the soft mobile mouth inherited from his mother lacked heroism.

A vague notion that he might prove his courage by seeking a career in the army grew on him. When the Second World War erupted, he was only nine years old. He was nevertheless determined to display his lack of fear. Much to the consternation of his parents, he refused to be evacuated from London along with other children. Even the prospect of going off to faraway Australia or Canada did not interest him. The war filled him with an excitement bordering on happiness, as he lived through the blitz and the doodlebugs. He absorbed Churchill's exhortations to fight for freedom like verbal iron for the soul. It mattered little that the exhortations were exaggerated. Peace came as a complete anticlimax.

He continued with boxing and rugby at Oxford, but he was never good enough at either to become a blue. He had just finished a degree in modern history at Christ Church as the Korean War broke. When the United Nations decided to resist the invasion of South Korea, he immediately volunteered for National Service. He never saw action, however. By the time he had finished training, the confrontation in Korea had bogged down into a war of attrition and his battalion was posted to Hong Kong instead.

Baxingdale scanned the horizon again with his field glasses. Nothing much was moving on the other side. Everything seemed peaceful. He saw the yellow poincianas, flames of the forest and sweet gum trees sprouting here and there. The paddy fields appeared normal, tended by only a few farmers and the odd water buffalo. There was no obvious sign of impending intrusion. Just below his outpost, the familiar barbed wire fence, accompanied by a patrol path, snaked along the boundary for as far as the eye could see.

A small unit of the People's Liberation Army sauntered unexpectedly into his line of vision. They were apparently on patrol, dressed in their shapeless green uniforms and crumpled green caps. How ill-trained and unkempt they appeared! Yet it would be a mistake to underrate them. They were, after all, the victors in a civil war which had raged for a quarter of a century. In a sense that conflict was still in progress, for the vanquished had withdrawn to Taiwan to mull over the possibility of a counter-attack under the protective shield of the United States Seventh Fleet.

Units just as motley had also fought the combined might of the United States, Britain and fourteen other nations to a standstill in Korea. Their steadfastness under fire and their human wave tactics had left Western allies gasping. It was reputed that, before truce talks began at Kaesong in 1951, they had lost half a million men. It was a horrendous price to pay for pushing back Western forces from the Yalu. One had to regard with awe men capable of such sacrifices.

What was it, he wondered, that made them so capable of absorbing punishment, so scornful of death? What were they laying down their lives for? Perhaps for an illusion similar to his own. Would they too end up one day discovering that their country had played them false? He had signed up in support of a saner world order, not to guard a piece of stolen territory. None of it squared with his democratic instincts or his sense of decency and fair play.

Baxingdale put down his field glasses and lit a cigarette. He felt hot and uncomfortable and he longed for a cold beer. On a nearby flagpole the Union Jack over the command post hung as limp as a damp dish rag.

There was so much about Hong Kong that confounded him. Its merits were obvious, as were its defects. It wasn't a single society but a myriad of societies, each distinct and separate, all rubbing against one another like beans in a sack, co-existing without merging or integrating. They might have produced friction had it not been for the ready lubricant of money. As an officer of the garrison, he did not really belong in any of those societies, Chinese or European.

The expatriate top brass seemed to live in splendid isolation, oblivious of the fact that ninety-eight per cent of the population was Chinese. He, however, felt troubled by that isolation. He wished he knew Chinese, so that he could discover what made them tick and how they thought British rule impacted upon their lives.

During days freed from duty, he took to wandering through the old Chinese quarters. Each excursion was an education. The streets seemed alive with energy and exotic sounds, smells and colours. The garish hieroglyphics of shop signs teased him with their incomprehensibility, with each establishment offering its own weird and wonderful fare. There were dried sea cucumbers, ginkgo nuts, back scratchers, ear cleaners, wooden clogs, herbal ingredients, coffins from Lanchow and live snakes kept for their gall bladders. Bargaining housewives, importuning hawkers, chanting coolies, playful children, hooting traffic and yelping dogs all created a maelstrom, jostling, colliding, laughing, arguing.

He remembered in particular an excursion to the old Western District on Hong Kong Island. It was an area where few Westerners or gweilos ventured immediately after the war. In one of its narrow streets he had come across a traditional Chinese tea house. Its name appeared in five characters over the entrance, though he could not read them. The place looked quite pleasant and inviting. As it was by then well after midday, he thought of sampling its fare. But when he made to enter, a waiter smilingly and courteously barred his way and indicated he should go elsewhere.

He could not understand why his patronage should be turned down. He saw, on closer examination, that the tea house was in fact half-empty. Was his money not good enough or was it a kind of reverse prejudice? Or perhaps a form of resistance to the foreign rule which he had been taken to represent? Was a demand for an end to colonialism also taking shape in Hong Kong as well?

He and the waiter looked at each other for a moment in mutual incomprehensibility. Then he walked away, smiling in return.

He raised the subject subsequently with his old Oxford friend, Christopher Knight, when they met for drinks at the Victoria Cricket Club.

"The chap probably ca-ca-can't cope with foreigners. The lo-lo-locals know what's good for them. They may have their resentments but we have rights un-un-under international treaties," Christopher Knight replied.

Knight was a heavy, ungainly and tow-headed lawyer. He came from a family of undertakers. Self-consciousness about his roots probably accounted for the slight impediment in his

speech. He had built a reputation as a wag when he was studying law at Oxford. He had joined the Public Prosecutions Section of the Hong Kong Legal Department after his articles and had since begun to assume a more sober air.

“Yes, but the Chinese regard their treaties with us as unequal, just scraps of paper extracted under duress. If people resent our presence, what’s the point of staying? It is not as if they needed us. They can probably run the place themselves better than we can.”

“The Ya-Ya-Yanks won’t let us leave. They need us to halt the spread of Communism, wha-wha-what with Korea on their minds and the Taiwan Straits ho-ho-hotting up.”

“That’s just the point. We’ve seen what the Chinese are capable of in Korea. If they turned nasty, we won’t stand a chance. We have no idea what the locals really think of us. Would they turn on us? Would they want to pay us back for the century of humiliations and defeats they’ve endured and the snobberies they’re still enduring?”

An attentive waiter, noting that their beer tankards were empty asked if they wanted another round. They did.

“It’ll ne-ne-never come to that, old boy. The Ya-Ya-Yanks would face down the Chinese soon enough. Good old Sen-Sen-Senator McCarthy’ll see to that.”

“What? That maniac! He’ll have us fighting World War III if he had his way! I don’t think America is crazy enough for a land war in China. It held back from doing so for Chiang Kai-shek. That’s why McCarthy has been ranting about subversives in the American government who -- in his terminology -- lost China.

“Do you realize that every nation which tried to swallow a part of China got Sinized for its troubles? The Eastern Huns, the Hsiungnus, the Khitans, the Manchus, the whole lot. The only ones to escape were the Mongols and that was because they had the good sense to withdraw in the nick of time. I’ll need a lot of convincing that the Americans will step in to save our bacon, special relationships and McCarthy’s ravings notwithstanding.”

Baxingdale was by then in full flow and Knight made no attempt to interrupt him.

“And it’s not only races that get absorbed and transformed in China,” Baxingdale continued. “Also ideas. Just look at what happened to Nestorian Christianity and Buddhism. Communism is bound to go the same way. There’s something both admirable and frightening about the Chinese. The world is littered with the rubble of fallen civilizations. Where is the Babylon that once astounded Herodotus? Look at the decline and fall of mighty Rome. By contrast, Chinese civilization simply marches on and on, adapting and re-shaping itself around a central core of values and beliefs. It’s amazing.”

“I see you’re back on your old ho-ho-hobby horse -- the decline of the West and the rise of the yer-yer-yellow races,” Christopher Knight said. “Spengler’s quite out of fa-fa-fashion, you know. I don’t see much to support his theory. In any case, the Chinks’ll never get anywhere till they stop their disgusting ha-ha-habit of spitting all over the place.”

“Well, most races have a few bad habits. But look at how energetic they are, the way they’re transforming Hong Kong. We’re largely irrelevant.”

“Like it or not, Britain getting out of Hong Kong wo-wo-won’t happen till long after my retirement and that’s th-th-thirty years away.”

“How can you count on that sort of time horizon? The People’s Liberation Army could barge in here tomorrow. What would you say to them then?”

“I’ll tell th-th-them this club is for mem-mem-members only and ask them to leave!”