

Sugared Liquids

Hong Kong, June 1955:

“Why are you wasting your Saturdays here?” Chu Wing-seng asked Little Ho, as the troop started to disperse. “I have to keep up with this nonsense but you’ve already graduated.”

Little Ho, whose khaki uniform and beret displayed the insignias of Troop Leader, did not reply. After they were out of earshot, however, he said in a low, chiding voice: “You shouldn’t say things like that in front of others. That’s the reason the Scout Master has never allowed you to rise above the rank of Patrol Second.”

“Don’t give a toss! What I want to know is why you’re still in this stupid farce.”

“There wasn’t anyone to take over as Troop Leader, if you must know. The Scout Master asked me to continue. What’s wrong with that? A couple of the boys, like you, got interested in snakes. I couldn’t abandon them.”

The mention of snakes discomfited Chu Wing-seng, reminding him of his failure of nerve. Although Little Ho did help him to catch three snakes eventually, he never attained much standing or respect. He left his catches with Little Ho for fear of upsetting his mother if he took them home.

“Why not tell the kids the truth? The Brits want us nice and well-behaved, with every bit of rebellion scrubbed out of us. That’s the whole idea behind scouting, isn’t it?”

Chu Wing-seng deliberately sought to provoke, because he wanted to pierce Little Ho’s carapace of good nature.

“That’s not fair,” Little Ho answered, in a tone of sweet reasonableness. “Scouting’s supposed to help people develop character. I see nothing wrong with promoting truthfulness, honesty and consideration for others.”

“Let’s not argue. Let’s go for snacks.”

Taking snacks after assembly was a custom initiated by Little Ho. It had been an adventure for Chu Wing-seng at first, wandering through the old Western District filled with the noise of clattering trams and the pungencies of the dried seafood and poultry markets.

The shop at Centre Street Little Ho introduced him to delighted him with its mouth-watering fare, some of which he had never tasted before. Its concoctions, commonly called “sugared liquids”, included snow fungus stewed with papaya, black sesame gruel, lotus seeds cooked with lily pods, tofu jelly with syrup, red beans seasoned with dried tangerine peels and ginkgo nuts prepared with barley. Each preparation was credited by tradition with a beneficial effect to a particular part of the body. A walnut gruel, for example, was supposed to be a tonic for the brain while a preparation made with dark green lentil seeds reputedly produced a cooling effect on the blood.

The shop was close to where Little Ho lived. The route they took was by way of a network of narrow cobblestoned streets lined with stores and workshops offering a staggering array of goods and services. Wooden tubs, scrubbing boards and clogs; paper lanterns, red plaques and

banners with propitious sayings; palm-leaf fans, chicken feather dusters and coir fibre brooms; writing brushes, seal stones and seal ink pads impregnated with crushed cinnabar and oil; buttons, needles and spools of coloured threads. There were bakeries, noodle shops and small eateries, as well as the odd letter-writer, cobbler, barber, herbalist and seller of tropical fishes.

Chu Wing-seng eyed the cluttered premises with contempt. They reeked of obsolescence and unfulfilled lives. The shopkeepers sat indolent, smoking, gossiping, playing cards, listening to the radio, indifferent to promoting sales. It seemed absurd that such establishments could survive.

Chu Wing-seng was irritated by their proprietors' inability to foresee their doom. Who would want scrubbing-boards or wooden clogs a few years hence? How many would require writing brushes in another ten years? Schools were already turning to ballpoints. Stone seals! How antiquated! They were for old women and illiterates. If the articles in the magazines brought home by his father were anything to go by, market forces would soon see off such deadbeat stores.

He hated the backwardness they represented. It seemed to reflect the unprogressiveness of his race and its resistance to change. Yet their stubborn survival seemed to mock his modernizing instincts.

"They're all heading for extinction," Chu Wing-seng cried, in sudden frustration.

"What? You mean the scouts?" Little Ho was taken aback.

"No, I mean these stupid shops. They'll all die out."

"They've been here for generations. My father and I often patronize them. They're nice and friendly. Why should they die out?"

"Don't be romantic. How can you believe that crap about the unchanging East in tourism brochures? Just look at these places! They're dusty and cluttered. The war has blown our world apart and it can't be put back. We had better realize that and start doing things the American way. That's the wave of the future. That's where the big bucks are."

"Is that what your father has taught you?"

"No!" Chu Wing-seng replied vehemently. "He wants me to stay away from business. But I'm going to prove I can make more money than he can."

"Life isn't just about money."

"You sound like my parents. I may not be in university but I know is money the ultimate power."

"Not everybody looks at life in terms of money."

"Don't they? Let me tell you about one of our Filipino maids. She's a university graduate, a qualified teacher. She would rather work for us as a maid than as a teacher in the Philippines. Why? Because she earns four times more than as a teacher back home."

"Perhaps she needs the money to support her family."

"It doesn't matter whether she needs the money or not. The point is that it's available and she wants it. Wanting to have more is a basic human instinct. That's why everybody wants to be rich, because they can then buy whatever they want, whoever they want. How can the

poor compete? We want one more maid and forty Filipino kids are deprived of a teacher. That's how the world operates. You've got to make as much as you can so that you can call the shots."

"Ah Seng, you're much smarter than I, perhaps even smarter than students at university. But you make the future sound so depressing. Shouldn't people simply make an honest living and be contented with what they get?"

"Didn't they tell you in Bible class that to those who have more will be given? That means we should grab what we can. Biology taught us that only the fittest will survive. Didn't you learn that?"

Little Ho flushed. "Survival of the fittest is intended for jungles, not civilized societies. In civilized societies people have to help one another. T. P. Choy is a great believer in that."

"Who the devil's T. P. Choy?"

"He's President of our Student Union. He's been trying to start a discussion group on social questions, since political topics are out of bounds under the law. Unfortunately, not many have taken him up. Most are too busy studying or dating."

Chu Wing-seng shook his head. "A discussion group on social questions! A fat lot of good in a colony. Another dreamer! You two must be real boy scouts!"

"I see nothing wrong in that. Scouts are supposed to be helpful to others. Choy's ideas are quite stimulating. They make me think. At the last meeting we discussed the resettlement of the fifty or sixty thousand victims of the 1953 squatter fire at Shek Kip Mei. We tried to work out why it had to take such a horrendous fire for the government to start a rehousing programme. The appalling conditions in squatter areas have been known for years. The government must have anticipated the need for better housing. It had the money. Why didn't it act before? Was it?"

Chu Wing-seng cut Little Ho short. "Pragmatism. Decent conditions'll attract more refugees. We're a small place. We can't accommodate everybody from China. Misery's a useful deterrent."

"Choy says that sort of argument may sometimes be used by our foreign rulers but not by us. The refugees are our brothers, people of our own blood. Many have relatives here. Choy says relying on misery as a deterrent betrays a meanness of heart. A person facing starvation, torture or even death would still flee, even if the alternative is far from good. Civilized societies should do what they can for the less fortunate. I agree with Choy. I've given up the idea of opening a restaurant. I'm going to devote my life helping people."

It was now Chu Wing-seng's turn to flush. The words wounded him, as if this unknown person named Choy had attacked him and the ideas he believed in. But then, he was used to being misunderstood. "Don't be sentimental!" he declared. "You'll end up a loser. We're not here to solve the problems of the world. Life's a fight for survival and it's every man for himself. If you don't go after what you want, you'll get trampled underfoot."

"Lots of people are already being trampled underfoot. That's why I want to help them, to repay some of the good fortune I've enjoyed."

“You’re joking! What good fortune have you ever had, for heaven’s sake?” Chu Wing-seng’s voice rose by a couple of octaves. “You live in some grubby sub-divided tenement, sharing a kitchen and a latrine with no flush with umpteen other people. You haven’t a decent suit to put on your back and you live surrounded by muck and noise.”

Little Ho showed no sign of being upset. “Quite a lot, actually,” he said calmly. “My free place at school gave me the chance of making friends with you and Gold Star is putting me through university. Otherwise I might have followed my father to spend my life fiddling with locks. With a good education I can one day do something better for myself and for others. Isn’t that a lot to be thankful for?”

“You got a free place because your mother’s pastor wanted to convert you to Christianity, can’t you see?” Chu Wing-seng declared in exasperation. “He had an ulterior motive. Gold Star has nothing to do with your being at university. Your father made an investment and it worked out. That’s capitalism, pure and simple.”

“Can’t be that simple. Fate must have come into it. My father would not have bought Gold Star shares if it had not been for your father standing up to the Brits. One way or another, he thinks we owe somebody a debt of gratitude.”

“Tell your father he doesn’t owe anybody anything. His investment paid off. That’s all.”

“Investments need money. What about people with none?”

“They’ll have to remain wage slaves.”

“That’s not very fair.”

“Life’s never fair. You’re tall and I’m short. You’ve got good eyesight and I haven’t. What’s fair about that?” Chu Wing-seng’s voice rose again with irritation. “I don’t like to see people live in poverty any more than you do. But that’s the way the world is. The poor can only get out of poverty if they sincerely want to be rich. Stirring things up like this fellow Choy doesn’t help. You may not believe me now, my friend, but in time you’ll see that I’m right. If you continue to think the way you do, I guess I’ll have to keep an eye out for you.”

Little Ho looked bemused. “You mean you’re not going to let me be ground into the dust by the laws of natural selection?”

“You’re different. You’re my friend.”

They reached Centre Street. There were two shops selling “sugared liquids” and they headed for the one whose offerings they liked better. The entrance was flanked by a glass display case on one side and a black painted counter on the other. The glass case exhibited a wide variety of non-liquid snacks, including red bean rolls, almond biscuits, walnut cookies, coconut tarts and sesame cakes. Behind the counter sat a shrewd-looking old woman with a gold tooth. She was loud in her welcome. There were two servers inside the shop, a middle-aged man and a teenage girl. All three appeared to belong in the same family. As customers finished, the servers would cry out the sums due and the old woman collected them.

The shop was well-patronized. Three ceiling fans provided a modest breeze. The sweet concoctions attracted flies and two strips of brown fly paper dangling from the ceiling displayed many captives.

Chu Wing-seng and Little Ho had arrived just in time to commandeer a booth being vacated at the rear. They sat down and took off their khaki berets. The offerings of the shop and their respective prices were set out on coloured paper pasted on the walls.

Chu Wing-seng ordered a red bean gruel while Little Ho went for a bowl of lotus seeds prepared with dried lily pods.

Half way through their treats, Little Ho asked in a low, worried voice: "Judging from your earlier remarks, I suppose this place is in danger of going too?"

"Certainly."

"I can't see why. Business is good. People are keen on sugared liquids. I love the stuff. You and I come regularly. Why should it go out of business?"

"Just look around you. This place probably hasn't changed in fifty years. The people in charge are too dumb to realize they're cheating themselves. These premises have probably been bought by an ancestor and nothing much has changed since. Because they pay no rent, they haven't factored that into their prices. Nor notional wages. They don't advertise or do promotions. No idea of creative accounting. They just chug along, expecting the business to carry on forever."

"But the place is crowded most of the time. What's the point of advertising for more customers when there's no room for them?"

"It's not good enough to rely on steady customers. Tastes change. Western confections are becoming popular. Soon this place'll be competing with chocolate bars, milk shakes and multi-flavoured ice creams. A business has to keep winning new customers."

"Well, I still prefer the desserts here. There are some I haven't even tried."

"That's precisely the trouble. There's too much choice. That leads to inefficiencies. Soon the younger workers will get sick of learning the skills needed to prepare so many different types of specialities. They'll resent the long hours and the meagre returns. Places like this deserve to go under."

"You're always so hard on people."

"I'm not hard on anybody," Chu Wing-seng said. "I just want people to see their situations realistically. The aim of an enterprise society is to change the instinct for keeping up with the Joneses into a passion for overtaking the Joneses. Muddling along means no growth, no prosperity. Capitalism demands that everybody should want more. It's like riding a bicycle. You have to keep pedalling or else you fall off. Only with everybody going hard at it can market forces be kept efficient."

Little Ho shook his head and stopped eating. "People talk a lot about efficiency and market forces these days," he said. "I wish I could get all the arguments straight in my head. I sometimes wonder what's so good about being efficient in luring people into becoming smokers or alcoholics. Or being efficient in cutting down forests, killing wild life and manufacturing weapons

of war. It just seems we're increasingly moving away from what our forebears have taught us for thousands of years."

"The world is changing. It's now all about market forces, guided by the invisible hand of self-interest."

"But what about other forces? T. P. Choy says human dignity, social cohesion and cultural identity must be taken into account. We must care for people too weak to look after themselves. We have to create a fairer society."

Chu Wing-seng sighed. "The Communists tried to do that across the border and look at the result. Would you rather have what we've got here or what the rest of China has?"

"I get so confused," Little Ho said, meekly. "When I listen to you, much of what you say makes sense. But when I talk to Choy, I find myself agreeing with him too. I ought to get you two together. I can't hold a candle to either of you."

"By all means."

Chu Wing-seng felt elated at the prospect of a challenge. Although his opponent was a university student he was confident he could hold his own. He had had discussions with the Filipino maid and though she was also a university graduate she did not know half as much as he did.

"I don't know whether I can arrange it, though," Little Ho said. "Choy's graduating and I might not see him again. I'll let you know. We might get him to meet us here after assembly next Saturday and enjoy some sugared liquids as well."

"Fine."

The two friends made their separate ways home after the snacks, Little Ho on foot and Chu Wing-seng by taxi.