

No Through-Train

It had just touched four o'clock when, within minutes of each other, Suen and Dum-Dum entered the club premises of the Lingnan University Alumni Association. The two friends of forty years' standing had both arrived early out of habit. They enjoyed chatting privately before the rest of the Friday crowd turned up.

An attendant brought them customary cups of tea.

The two friends soon settled into an easy-flowing conversation, about the issues of the day, old friends and former times. Now and then they would lapse into a companionable silence. Decades of association had blessed them the ability to communicate without words.

At eighty, Dum-Dum's hair had turned into a silver-grey but he still retained his mischievous rabbit's grin. He had prospered from the photographic studios he had operated with his wife, all of which had since been passed on to their sons. Though in retirement, Dum-Dum still described himself on his visiting cards as a "Public Relations Consultant".

"Can't beat our moneybags," Dum-Dum said, apropos nothing in particular. "When it comes to sniffing out profits they're tops."

Suen grunted. "The defining characteristic of our town -- turncoats who turn at every turn."

He and Dum-Dum, together with Su, were the remnants of those journalists who had protested against a highly controversial piece of colonial legislation back in 1947. The rest had long since drifted away to other professions, to other places or to existences beyond the grave. Though fresh recruits had joined the convivial weekly gatherings for mah jong and bridge, the passions of 1947 had cooled.

After sipping tea for a while, Suen asked the question which kept cropping up with regularity. "Any news of Kim?"

Dum-Dum shook his head. About ten years previously, a contact in China had established that Kim had been banished to a labour

camp in Sinkiang following the Anti-Rightist Movements of the 1950's. He had apparently expressed some inconvenient opinions. Since then every attempt to gain further information had proved futile.

“One would have thought that most ‘rightists’ would be rehabilitated by now,” Dum-Dum said wistfully.

Suen sighed one of those deep, involuntary sighs forced out by inner torment. “I landed him in it, out of sheer arrogance.”

Dum-Dum sighed as well and shook his head vigorously. “Don’t blame yourself. We were all to blame. I should have known better. But, like everybody else, I got carried away.”

“We got him sacked from the Herald, to rot in some labour camp,” Suen declared vehemently. “How can anyone survive for nearly forty years in such a hellhole? Our world’s gone completely bonkers. Everything is meaningless. Black is white, freedom is slavery, and truth is a bundle of lies. China’s rushing into the contradiction of contradictions -- a capitalistic form of Communism. Or is it supposed to be a communist form of Capitalism?”

“It’s now called Communism with Chinese characteristics.”

“I’m losing track. Confusion worse confounded. Or should it be Confucius worse confounded?”

“We both know what Kim’s like. Even if his gaolers were prepared to release him, he would probably refuse to leave until they had admitted the error of their ways!”

The two friends laughed thinly at the weak joke.

Ten years without news, Suen reflected. The possibility his old mentor might have perished hung over him like a doom. Yet he could not put his apprehension into words, even before Dum-Dum.

He should have gone to Sinkiang to look for him, back in 1979, he chided himself. He had promised he would, once the through-train

service was resumed between Kowloon and Canton. But fear of what he might discover stopped him. Ignorance at least offered the illusion of hope.

Dum-Dum's voice cut through his reflections. "Didn't see you and the missus at that Fung-Liu 'wedding of the year' last weekend."

"We weren't invited."

"What! You mean Mona didn't invite you to the marriage of her eldest son?"

Suen shrugged. "I was in Europe when she married Kingston Fung. After I came back with Po-Chee, there was the death of my father-in-law to attend to. Thought it best to let sleeping dogs lie."

"Yeah, I guess. Mona's quite a society hostess these days. My boys keep her and her family in the public eye."

"Yes, I've seen your fingerprints all over the society pages."

Dum-Dum chuckled with satisfaction. "Remember when I fixed you up with Mona, for that Tung Wah ball?"

"How can I forget, you old rascal! You led me astray and fed both of us a pack of lies."

Dum-Dum laughed gleefully. "At least I got you two started. For a while I thought it might lead to something."

"That was a very long time ago. I was only seventeen."

"Ah, where have all those years gone?"

Yes, where had all those years gone, Suen wondered. His introduction to Mona Shen had marked the start of two of the most fateful years of his life. But that had been forty years ago. The passage of the decades had merely added to his gathering guilt.

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Not long after Suen had completed his probation at the Herald,

he had been assigned to cover the annual Tung Wah charity ball.

“What a waste of an evening,” he had declared, during one of Dum-Dum’s cigarette breaks at the Central Magistracy. “Listening to a bunch of dressed-up social climbers mouthing platitudes.”

“I’m covering that too. We can sit together,” Dum-Dum offered. “I relish charity balls. Volunteer every chance I get.”

“What for? More overtime without pay?”

Dum-Dum flashed his rabbit’s grin and mimed the lifting of a camera to his eye and the clicking of a shutter.

“Well, I’m not a peddler of celebrity photos,” Suen sulked. “I resent being kept up late writing that drivel.”

“Oh you poor, innocent lamb! Hasn’t Kim taught you how to handle such functions? Some government bigwig always officiates. He utters pleasantries. The Chairman of Tung Wah makes his annual report, followed by a pitch for donations. Those who aspire to directorships take out their cheque books. Speeches are available in advance. Cull out a sentence here and there and you’ve got your piece before you start. Name the big donors and VIPs and you’ll get into their good books. That’s it.”

“How do I know beforehand who’s going to pledge what?”

“Contacts, dear boy, contacts. Everything is settled in advance at such jollies, to guarantee success. The public pledges are just a bit of theatre. Leave a blank space in your piece for the total sum raised and ring your Night Editor with it. Piece of cake. I’m bringing the missus to keep tabs on the people snapped by my photographer. You’ll have no such distraction. Just bring a girl along, have a good time.”

“Don’t have a girl.”

Dum-Dum scratched his head. “Hmmm. Give me another cig and let me think.”

Suen offered his tin of 555’s.

Dum-Dum extracted one and lit it. After a couple of puffs, he said: “I think I’ve got it. Know a refugee with oomph from Shanghai. I’ll bring her for you. She wants to learn English but has no money. She’ll make a good partner for the evening.”

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The ball was held at the Gloucester Hotel. It was in that Victorian setting that Suen was introduced to Mona Shen. She looked stunning, sheathed in a form-hugging turquoise long-gown with high side slits. The cut of the garment accentuated her voluptuous breasts and revealed a pair of shapely legs. Her face was pleasant, just missed being beautiful, with long, slanted eyes, high cheekbones and a generous mouth. Her hair had been professionally coiffed. She was a shade taller than the average Cantonese girl.

She was more than Suen had expected. She was obviously older than himself and that placed him on the defensive. Her Cantonese was heavily accented with a northern pitch. Since he had no command of the Shanghai dialect, they settled upon Mandarin, which he had mastered during his years in Kunming.

Mona had apparently left Shanghai to try her luck as a singer of Western songs, even though she knew no English. She had met Dum-Dum when she went to his studio to get some promotional photographs taken.

“Why not stick with Chinese songs?” Suen asked.

“Haven’t you heard that old saying -- local ginger lacks tang?” Mona replied. “Only old folks like Chinese songs. Young ones want Western music. I learnt English songs listening to records. But don’t know what I sing. Need English teacher.”

Suen made sympathetic noises. He didn’t want to commit

himself, not knowing whether Dum-Dum was up to one of his pranks.

As the evening progressed, he warmed to Mona. He didn't need Dum-Dum and his wife to egg him on. Mona danced well and was easy to talk to. He discovered that she was twenty-two, single and an only child. Her father was a tailor.

During one of their dances the band struck up "I'm in the Mood for Love".

"I know that," Mona said. She began crooning its lyrics. She was a throaty contralto, with good enunciation. She reminded him of Frances Langford, who had turned that song into her signature tune.

As they danced cheek-to-cheek, Mona sang softly and Suen fell into a romantic mood. Teaching her English didn't seem a bad idea.

The evening passed in a haze of music and dancing and extravagant laughter. At the end of the evening, he escorted her home.

Mona lived along Jaffe Road in Wanchai, in one of those dilapidated tenements with a shop on the ground floor and two or three floors of domestic dwelling above. There was a time before the Japanese occupation when those premises represented a modest prosperity. But the war had sent many of their owners tumbling towards the lower margins of the middle class.

At the staircase leading to the upper storeys, Suen offered his thanks. "It's been a real pleasure meeting you," he said.

"Pleasure all mine," Mona responded.

"I can explain the lyrics of your songs, if you like. Just let me know when you're free."

"Free most time. Don't work till four."

"Oh, where do you work?"

"Close by. Sing in small band, in dance hall. Pay next to nothing, but can get noticed."

Suen felt a tingle of alarm. Although Mona was obviously a girl who knew a thing or two, Dum-Dum had given no indication she worked in a dance hall. His grandmother would be horrified. But having made a half-promise, he felt obliged to honour it.

“Look,” he said. “Why don’t I take you to lunch tomorrow? We can look at your records after that.”

“You very kind. Hope no trouble.”

“No trouble at all. I’ll wait for you right here at 12.30 tomorrow. Or, more correctly, today. It’s already one o’clock.”

They both laughed and bid each other goodnight. Suen watched Mona climbing the dim-lit tenement staircase, before merging into an alien darkness.

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Meeting Mona again after a break of a few hours proved a let-down. She no longer exuded sensuality and glamour. Her physical assets, now well hidden beneath a loose-fitting grey cotton suit, had lost their allure. Her face had been freshly scrubbed and bore no make-up. Although she remained smiling and friendly, she appeared little different from the thousands of young women working as receptionists or shop assistants.

They ate at a nearby restaurant.

During the course of the meal Mona told him she was only a sub-tenant in her flat. The main tenants were a pair of middle-aged sisters selling factory-rejected garments at a street stall in the heart of town.

When he entered Mona’s home, he was appalled by the lack of natural lighting and how flimsy and closely packed the cubicles were. He had no idea people lived that way in tenements.

Mona’s cubicle was the smallest of three, measuring only about

ten feet by ten. Each cubicle was marked out by seven-foot high wooden partitions with wire netting enclosing the gaps between the top of each partition and the ceiling. Mona's was at the rear, next to a gloomy kitchen. It had a tiny window overlooking an air well. Of the other cubicles, one was for storage and the other a bedroom for the two sisters. The corridor connecting all three extended into a bright sitting room at one end and a communal kitchen, bathroom and toilet at the other.

Mona's bed consisted of three wooden boards resting on trestles. They were covered by an inch-thick mattress, with a woven rattan mat on top. Underneath the bed were several cardboard boxes, a suitcase and a collection of shoes.

A small table was beneath the window, squeezed between the partition and the bed. Its top was crowded with jars of cosmetics, some costume jewellery, a gourd-shaped water container, a small electric fan and a table lamp. The lamp was the main source of illumination, for the air well window admitted little light. A wardrobe stood against the partition opposite to the table. Next to it, a wooden stand supported a gramophone. The partition above the stand featured a montage of faces of popular singers cut out from magazines and pasted on the wooden wall.

"Snug and cosy but not much privacy," Suen observed, when Mona offered him the only chair in the place.

"For me, ideal," Mona replied. "Hardly see principal tenants. Workplace just round corner, in Lockhart Road. Don't finish till midnight. Normally go for snack afterwards. Don't get home till one; sisters fast asleep. When they leave after breakfast, I still sleep. They return after dinner but I already at work. Have flat to myself all day. Can practise singing without disturbing anyone."

Mona then took out one of the cardboard boxes from under her bed. It was full of records by Frances Langford, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank

Sinatra, Nat King Cole and others. Songs included “Embraceable You”, “All or Nothing at All” and “I’ve Got You Under My Skin”.

Teaching Mona English proved a challenge. She had no inkling of the alphabet. She had mimicked Western songs as a Chinese child might recite classical texts, without understanding their meanings.

He began teaching her the alphabet. At the same time he spelt out words recurring frequently in her songs and their meanings. The approach seemed to work, for Mona soon began recognising words. He fell into a routine of lunching with her twice a week, to be followed by lessons in her cubicle. Dum-Dum covered for him at court and he soon became an integral part of the Blue Bird crowd.

As the mugginess of summer intensified, Mona’s clothing became more skimpy. She took to wearing open-necked blouses and shorts. Because the table was so cluttered, transcribing lyrics had to be done kneeling before the bed. Mona often crouched beside him. When she did, her blouses sometimes revealed a cleavage as tantalising as Jane Russell’s in The Outlaw. Her movements, too, proved distracting. They seemed to ooze sensuality, even in the simple act of re-winding the gramophone or changing a record.

Tutor Tseng had told him that in ancient times, in order to prevent boys from having improper thoughts, they were made to learn the lesser arts and etiquette from the age of eight. Then made to study ceremony, literature and the greater arts. He had studied harder than most. Yet the nearness of Mona kept provoking improper thoughts.

One afternoon, as he was about to start a lesson, Mona suddenly leaned over, placed an arm around him and kissed him on the mouth. It was his first kiss. That sudden pressing together of lips seemed more wondrous than he had ever imagined. When their tongues entwined, he allowed his hand to stray upon her breasts. It met no resistance.

Their bountifulness fired him with desire tinged by caution and fear. He did not know how far his licence extended. He dreaded a scandal. If he went too far, what responsibilities would be entailed? He tussled with his fear until he heard Mona murmuring: "I want you, I want you."

Their clothes came off in a frenzy and he surrendered his virginity to a girl who seemed to know much more about love than he did.

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The intermittent conversation between Suen and Dum-Dum was interrupted by the arrival of Su, now a lean, bespectacled man of sixty with thinning hair. He had become the editor of a left-leaning Chinese newspaper and his early arrival surprised the other two.

"I'm glad you chaps are already here," Su exclaimed. "I thought I would have to sit by myself till after five. Just finished a meeting nearby and decided to come straight here."

"Nice to see you early for a change," Dum-Dum said. "We've just been talking about how we got together back in '47. We're the last of the Mohicans. What firebrands you and Suen used to be."

Su adjusted his spectacles. "I've mellowed," he said.

"Mellowed or wearied?" Suen said. "Or has our fire gone?"

"We've accepted life's limitations, I think. Some things simply can't be hurried. Chou En-Lai had been right in saying that historical problems should be left till the time was ripe. We had been too impatient. With the Joint Declaration, this place now reverts to the Motherland in another ten years. All without fuss, except for toadies still bleating about how terrible things might become with their British masters gone."

"If we hadn't been impatient then, we wouldn't be enjoying our weekly games today," Suen rejoined.

“You’re right,” Su said. “And I would have been the poorer all these years without Dum-Dum’s generous subsidies at mah jong.”

“We’ll see about that!” Dum-Dum cried, and the two began chaffing each other on their respective deficiencies in that game.

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Suen’s affair with Mona followed a well-trodden path. He couldn’t get enough of her initially and grew lax over his duties. The perfunctoriness of his submissions did not pass unnoticed by Kim. A few pointed comments were enough to haul him back on the strait and narrow. At least for a few days.

One day, three weeks into his relationship with Mona, Suen insisted upon accompanying her to her place of work. He knew it meant missing the usual briefing at the Blue Bird but he was gambling that nothing important had transpired at court that afternoon.

He had never been inside a dance hall, though he had heard of their steamy reputations.

Her place of work was called The Red Chamber, no doubt to suggest the opulence detailed in the Ching novel Dream of the Red Chamber. It was located on the first floor of a large tenement building. Neon signs directed customers to an entrance guarded by a burly doorman and a set of thick red velvet curtains. Beyond them, Suen found a voluptuous darkness laced with feminine perfumes.

All the windows inside had been blacked-out and curtained. A four-man band was playing a sentimental song about unrequited love. The main sources of light seemed to come from the band’s music stands and a few seemingly mysterious pinpoints.

Mona led him by the hand, as if he were blind, and seated him

somewhere, before retreating backstage to change.

As his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he realised he was seated in one of a series of intimate booths and alcoves, created out of high-backed sofas, broad-leaved plants and strategically placed lattice screens. A sorry excuse for a lamp sat on a low table in front of him, seeping light from a bulb fashioned like an opaque flame-head of a candle. The pinpoints of light originated from such lamps. A small dance floor, with two couples dancing, occupied the space in front of the bandstand.

A waiter brought him a cup of tea and a dish of melon seeds. He was, however, too busy studying his surroundings to drink or eat.

After an interval Mona emerged, wearing a dress glittering with sequins. A small spotlight came on as she mounted the bandstand. She made a few cheerful remarks before beginning a number. It was “All or Nothing At All”.

With the improved lighting, he could see that the place was well patronised. The afternoon session was known as a “tea dance”. Hostesses could be booked for ten minutes at a time, a period known euphemistically as “a small hour”. Fees were lower than during evening sessions. The aim was to lure men out of offices for stolen moments of manufactured romance. Responses from hostesses varied, depending on the number of “small hours” purchased. Other favours were negotiable.

As Mona continued her bitter-sweet song, it seemed as if her lyrics were directed at him. He felt increasingly out of place. He could detect giggling and importuning whispers from adjacent alcoves. It struck him that, behind the facade of dancing, the club was little more than a place for traded sex. Businessmen, otherwise hard-headed, were paying good money to get girls young enough to be their daughters or granddaughters to dangle their youth and beauty before them. Could a singer remain a singer for long in such an environment?

His own feelings towards Mona were confused. Until he met her, his focus had been on university in the autumn. How did lessons in English turn into feasts of sexual pleasure? He liked Mona well enough. The magnificence of her body bewitched him, dulling his ability to think beyond the present. A chivalrous instinct told him he should help Mona free herself from her demeaning life. But how? He had no money. His grandmother controlled his inheritance.

One day, after he had received his monthly salary, he went to Lane Crawford, the city's premier department store, and bought Mona an Italian silk scarf. When he presented it, she was ecstatic. She gave him his usual reward.

Afterwards, as they lay in each other's arms, he asked: "Is there anything I can get for you?"

Mona smiled dreamily and squeezed him tightly. "All I want is you," she whispered. "Got present for you too."

She bounced out of bed, went to her wardrobe and brought back a photograph of herself, dressed in a low-cut ball gown which displayed an extravagant amount of cleavage. The photograph bore an inscription: "With all my love, all my life."

"It's beautiful. Thank you. Rather daring, though," he said, uncertain of how he should respond to the inscription.

"This what Red Chamber wants," she explained, as she climbed back onto the bed. "They want big picture out front, with my name and everything. They think will draw customers."

"I'm sure it will. They'll come in droves."

"Hope talent scouts will see. Maybe employee from your family."

The statement so baffled Suen that he sat up with a start. "Employee from my family? What do you mean?"

“Dum-Dum said your family in entertainment business.”

Suen’s jaw dropped. “Dum-Dum was just playing the fool. Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

“Didn’t want to push. Thought if you care for me, you help without asking.”

“You’re absolutely right,” he lied. “I’ve been making enquiries on your behalf. But first, let me tell you the truth. My family has never had anything to do with show business. My father was a compradore in a Dutch trading firm. My parents have passed away. I’m being looked after by my granny.”

“Oh, so sorry to hear,” Mona said. “Didn’t know.” A mixture of sympathy and disappointment registered in her voice.

Suen added quickly: “That’s all right. My parents died a long time ago. I’ve just finished school and I’m in my first job. So I don’t know many people. But my colleagues have contacts. I’ve already asked them to sound out singing opportunities for you.”

“Oh, you so kind,” Mona said and nestled closer to him.

The conversation left him in no doubt about Mona’s expectations. He had not thought in terms of an enduring relationship. The least he could do was to find a way of boosting her career before disengaging. In the meantime, he had a bone to pick with Dum-Dum.

After the briefing at the Blue Bird that day, he pulled Dum-Dum to one side and demanded: “Why did you tell Mona my family’s connected with the entertainment business?”

Dum-Dum grinned. “You didn’t have a partner for the Tung Wah ball. What’s a white lie or two to get you one?”

“You didn’t tell me she sang in The Red Chamber either.”

Dum-Dum shrugged. “You were looking for a dancing partner, not a wife.”

“She expects me to help her with her career. You’d better think of a way.”

“Can make some calls.”

Dum-Dum was as good as his word. Two days later he had arranged an audition for Mona with a hotel band. When Suen passed on the news, Mona was rapturous. But he still couldn’t bring himself to reveal his plans for university at the end of summer.

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When Suen next arrived at the Blue Bird Cafe, he found his colleagues agitated and talking all at once. Some were waving pieces of paper in the air.

“Hey, what’s up?” he asked.

“It’s an outrage, an insult!” Su cried.

“Look at this,” somebody else said, and thrust two sheets of paper into his hand.

It was an announcement by Sir Alexander Grantham, the newly appointed Governor of Hong Kong, proposing a Municipal Council for the city. The Council was to consist of thirty members, half to represent the Chinese population and the other half the non-Chinese. Representatives had to be able to speak, read and write in English and to have resided in Hong Kong for at least ten out of the preceding fifteen years.

“Our population is 99% Chinese,” Su shouted, his voice quivering with rage. “Why should one per cent of the population have the same number of representatives as the other 99%? Why the requirement for English, when everybody knows the vast majority don’t use that language? They just want to pack the council with stooges.”

“Obviously!” another reporter chimed in. “Requiring English

ensures that lackeys get the posts. If they're honest about representative government why not start with the Legislative Council?"

"Look at the way council members are to be selected," a third cried. "Only two-thirds to be elected, the remainder appointed. A person has to be over 25, a resident for years, a property owner, on the jury list and so forth before he is even qualified to vote. Not one in ten will qualify. All of us will be disqualified by age alone. We're all under 25, except for Dum-Dum."

"A total fraud!" a fourth said, bitterly. "How marvellous to give us a say over street sweeping and rubbish collection! Those selected under this system are guaranteed to be without the slightest knowledge of street life. What would merchant bankers and corporate chairmen know about triad protection, police corruption, the daily trials of ordinary folk?"

"It's all a farce!"

"A stitch-up!"

"We can't allow this rubbish to get through," Su declared.

"Quite right! Quite right!" A chorus of angry voices erupted.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Dum-Dum cried, stilling the hubbub. "Except for young Suen, we work for Chinese papers. Our criticisms won't bite. First of all, our publishers won't allow us to go into print. They've got advertising revenue to think of. Secondly, the Brits don't read our papers. We've got to get the English press involved."

"Fine," Su said. "We need them, as well as colleagues who know the Brits. Any ideas?"

"I can rope in Big Brother Lo, my City Editor," Dum-Dum said. "He has vast experience, sensible too. We should also get Kim."

"Yes, let's involve Kim," someone seconded. "But he's a hard man. Doesn't suffer fools gladly. Who's going to approach him?"

"His disciple, of course," another reporter suggested, pinning

that responsibility on Suen.

“I can try,” Suen said. Like his colleagues, he felt his sense of justice violated by the announcement. He was eager to join the fray.

Apart from enlisting Kim, it was agreed that Su would book a large room at the Lingnan University Alumni Association for a meeting two evenings hence. In the meantime, everyone was to spread the word and get as many colleagues as possible to attend.

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Only about forty-five out of the hundreds of Chinese journalists in Hong Kong turned up for the meeting. A respectable enough number, considering the general political apathy and the professional duties detaining many. But what the meeting lacked in numbers was more than made up for by passion. The atmosphere crackled with expectation.

Suen felt intimidated by the presence of so many colleagues he had never met. The cross-conversations underscored the deep unpopularity of the Grantham proposals. From a seat at the back of the room Suen watched Dum-Dum gingerly assuming the chair, followed by the panel of three -- Big Brother Lo, Kim and an editorial writer named Yip.

In calling the meeting to order, Dum-Dum flashed his customary grin and said: “I guess I’m here because I’m the only one foolish enough to take on this task. . . .”

Loud applause, cheers and barracking interrupted him.

“But I’m not as foolish as you think,” he said, with another grin. “I’ve found myself a panel of three wise men to bear the brunt of your disaffection. They’ve agreed to listen to your views and to offer their advice. Someone like to start?”

Su stood up. The lenses of his spectacles sparkled as they

caught the light. “Colleagues and friends,” he began. “We’re here because the colonial authorities have proposed a Municipal Council hedged around with many obstacles and designed to perpetuate colonial domination. We have just finished a protracted war in the name of freedom. Our sacrifices have been recognised by a permanent seat on the Security Council of the new United Nations. We are heartened by Chapter XI of its Charter. We understand the geopolitical considerations which have left us temporarily under British rule. We are not happy, but we can bear it for now.

“That’s no reason, however, to rub our noses in our humiliation. We’re not a Stone Age tribe in New Guinea. We are a people with five thousand years of civilisation. Why stir up resentments by this pretence at devolving power? It is a retreat from the one floated before the war. It’s a provocation! We should resist!”

Loud clapping and cries of “Good stuff!” and “Bravo!” resounded around the hall.

Others followed Su, picking on the various illogicalities and inequities. They hammered away at the bias towards property owners. Cries of support punctuated every accusation of British duplicity.

After members of the assembly had had their say, Dum-Dum turned the meeting over to Big Brother Lo, the most senior professional on the three-man panel.

“We’ve listened to your comments and appreciate the strength of your feelings,” Big Brother Lo said. “However, Dum-Dum’s reference to ‘three wise men’ is a misrepresentation. We claim no wisdom. We have discussed the issues among ourselves and can only suggest an alternative way of looking at the situation. I propose that my fellow panel member, Mr. Yuen of the Herald, present our considered views.”

With that, Big Brother Lo yielded the floor.

Suen watched Kim getting to his feet. His mentor faced the

assembly with a studied calm. He appeared as cautious as a boxer entering a ring for an important match.

“Gentlemen, I agree with virtually all the criticisms you’ve levelled,” Kim began. His voice was robust but measured. “The defects in the Grantham proposals are patent and serious. But, with great respect, a clear alternative has yet to be advanced to remedy them.

“Let me illustrate. You think it unfair that the Chinese population should be allocated only half the seats on the council. But what is fair, given the demographics of our city? We all know the result of applying the democratic principle of one-man-one-vote. So do the British. They have massive investments here. How are they to be protected? No doubt they feel a reversion to their ancient system of power flowing from property ownership would suit. But that can hardly fly in this day and age. Thus they have to maintain control through the back door, leading to the present rigmarole over qualifications.

“The Grantham proposals are in fact a well constituted plan. The Brits expect complaints and criticisms. Indeed, it’s vital that there should be a fuss because then they can make concessions. But does it really matter if a few more seats are allocated for the Chinese or if simultaneous translation is installed or if the voting age is lowered from 25 to, say, 21? Where does that leave us? Can we claim victory? The Brits certainly will claim their scheme had been endorsed after public consultation.

“On the other hand, if opposition proves too intense, they can throw up their hands and say how sad it is that people should refuse to take responsibility for their own affairs. They’d loudly lament the white man’s burden and carry on as before. Would we be better off?”

A middle-aged man in the audience stood up and raised his hand. He was a sub-editor from one of the other English dailies.

“I’ve studied in England and have many British friends,” he stated. “They’re on the whole decent and fair-minded. They have none of the overt racial superiority of some of their countrymen here. It’s hard to understand why they should make such outrageous proposals.”

Kim smiled. “British people are decent and fair-minded. But the Grantham proposals do not come from the British people. They’re from their government, and a Socialist one at that. Governments are quite another entity. They have a record for duplicity and double-dealing stretching back centuries. The imperial policy of divide and rule never changes. I warrant that in the next hundred years, the roots of half the conflicts in the world will still be traceable to British imperial policies.”

Loud murmurs of agreement met Kim’s assertions.

The sub-editor from the English paper made another observation. “Since the British are fair-minded, shouldn’t we acquaint them about the unfairness of the Grantham proposals? They can put pressure on their parliamentarians to make concessions.”

Kim smiled again at the questioner. “The problem is that British people are in the same state as we are,” he said. “Their economy is in tatters; there are shortages of every kind. They are struggling to regain normality. They have enough problems of their own, without worrying about what’s happening on the other side of the globe.”

“What would you have us do then?” someone cried.

“Nothing.”

Su jumped to his feet. “I’m sorry, Kim,” he yelled. “I can’t agree with that. I’m not yet 25 but I’m a graduate of Lingnan, just like you. I find it insulting for anyone to imply that I’m intellectually, politically or educationally incapable of casting a vote in a lousy municipal election. It’s also an insult to give us such a derisively low level of representation. This must be remedied.”

Kim remained unflustered. “There’s no need to apologize, my friend,” he said. His deep voice took on a harder edge. “The Grantham proposals are indeed insulting, to you, to me and to the entire Chinese nation. But so what? We’ve been roundly insulted for over a hundred years by every Tom, Dick and Harry. We’ve grinned and borne it. What’s so different now?”

“Have we already forgotten how recently we’ve accepted a far greater insult from the British? The Chinese government wanted to establish an official mission in Hong Kong, a mission on our own soil, mind you. But the British refused. They said they would only tolerate an unofficial presence, one without diplomatic status and disguised behind an innocuous facade. Well, the New China News Agency opened its office here as recently as May to represent the Chinese government. Did any of us get hot under our collars?”

An uncomfortable hush descended upon the room. Kim passed his gaze from one side of the room to the other. He waited for a response but none came. The bubble of anger had been punctured.

Kim resumed his exposition.

“My brothers, we have an essential job to do as journalists, to expose injustices in our society and to shine a light on the hardships of our people. We have to report on the strikes in our factories and transport systems, on the food riots inside Stanley Prison, on why the average wage for a manual worker is still only two dollars a day. That sum is hardly sufficient to survive on, let alone support a family.

“Under such conditions, would people care about implied insults in some convoluted document? Let those who like to curry favour with their colonial masters, who covet their MBEs, join their new talking shop. The rest of us must get on with the business of survival.”

Kim paused again. There was some fidgeting and shuffling of

feet but no one attempted to speak.

“I sense that some of you still disagree with the response I’ve suggested,” Kim continued. “You think there’s sufficient anger around to act. Well, I suggest an experiment. Let us adjourn and meet again in this room two evenings hence. During that interval, talk to your families, your relatives, friends, neighbours, anyone you like. Ask them what they’re prepared to do against the Grantham proposals. Action speaks louder than words. Find out if they’re prepared to organize meetings, demonstrate in the streets, picket Government House, send delegations to Westminster. Prove me wrong. If one in ten is prepared to act, I will form a task force to plan a programme of protests. But I fear most wouldn’t give a damn.”

Suen was surprised by the roller-coaster atmosphere of the meeting. He had not expected Kim to pour so much cold water on collective action. But as he listened, he had to accept grudgingly the force in much of what his mentor had said. The meeting was ending in an anti-climax.

Big Brother Lo stood up. “Mr. Yuen has made a pragmatic proposal. It deserves to be tested. Unless anyone disagrees, I suggest we adjourn till Friday.”

The sullen participants dispersed in dribs and drabs, some shamefaced, some resentful, others reflective. The three panellists left together. Suen waited till the room had virtually emptied before suggesting to Dum-Dum and Su to dine together.

* * *

When the meeting reconvened on the appointed day, only half the previous number turned up. Most looked crestfallen. They reported a general lack of appetite for direct action. It seemed that the rich were too

busy making money and the poor were too occupied keeping their heads above water. It was as Kim had predicted. Nobody had much to say.

Su sat morosely in a corner, dangling his spectacles from one hand and massaging his temples with the other. Kim and the other panellists talked among themselves in low voices. After fifteen minutes of to-ing and fro-ing, Dum-Dum proposed an end to the meeting.

“So this is it?” Su asked. “We roll over like poodles, without so much as a whimper?”

“Relax,” Kim said. “Just let the Brits tie themselves in knots. My guess is that the project will eventually collapse under the weight of its own contradictions.”

“You may be right,” someone responded. “But we’ve already paid for the hire of this room and we’ve nothing to show for it. Why not make a night of it by playing mah jong?”

Suddenly everybody perked up.

“We can play bridge too,” Kim said, cheerfully.

Big Brother Lo and a few others excused themselves on the basis of other commitments. Fourteen people remained, however, more than sufficient for two tables of mah jong and one of bridge.

While attendants went about setting up card tables, prospective players sorted out their preferences.

Kim asked Suen which game he intended to play.

“Don’t know either,” Suen replied.

“Oh, you must learn bridge. It’s the most fascinating card game you’ll ever encounter. You’ll be addicted in no time. Sit behind me and watch. I’ll teach you the basics.”

The evening had turned out so enjoyable that there was a spontaneous demand to make it a regular affair. That was how the Friday games began.

* * *

The two frustrating meetings at the Lingnan University Alumni Association added fuel to Suen's nascent discontent. When he was in Kunming, he had read John Steinbeck's tale of impoverished farmers in the Oklahoma Dust Bowl and Jack London's accounts of urban injustices and oppression. At the time he had not been able to figure out how such things could happen in the richest and most modern society in the world.

After joining the Herald, however, he began to discover that beneath the surface in his own home town injustices and suffering also flourished. He had seen for himself unfortunates like Ho Yin and the young women in the Red Chamber. How much injustice could a society endure?

He felt he faced a choice. He could either continue his blinkered life, delving into poetry and the classics, or he could take up a cause. The American pilots joining the Flying Tigers came to mind. Going to university seemed an evasion. He had no need for more book-learning. He needed engagement. But how to convince his grandmother?

He knew his grandma dreaded his disappearance abroad for several years. She had accepted that need, however, for the sake of his future. To attempt to defer his education further would not go down well. To get his way, he needed to manipulate her weaknesses.

After due consideration, he broached the subject over dinner one evening. While they were enjoying one of Ah Loy's delicious soups, he let drop that he had difficulty deciding on a university in the right country. The only Americans he knew were those he had met in Kunming and the only Brits he had encountered were those at the Herald, at the Central Magistracy and in the police. Both groups seemed to have strengths and flaws. Could Grandma choose for him?

“Rather difficult,” his grandmother replied. “Some British universities have excellent reputations but I don’t know about the people. The foreigners I’ve met were mostly Dutch.”

“I’ve heard that foreign colleges rag freshmen mercilessly,” he said. “They make them do dangerous tasks. There have been instances of serious injuries, even accidental deaths. I suppose I’ll be picked on, not only because I’ll be among the youngest but also because I’m Chinese.”

His grandmother’s eyes narrowed with concern. “I’m sure university authorities wouldn’t allow ragging to get out of hand,” she said.

“Actually, I’m worried more about being so far away from you and Ah Loy. You’re both so dear to me. Not seeing either of you for years is hard to take.”

His grandmother set down her soup spoon, clearly moved.

“Pity the war took away so many faculty members from the local university. Otherwise, starting here might have been a better option.”

He judged that the moment had arrived to make his pitch.

“Would it matter much if I were to delay university for a bit? Lots of young men in Britain and America went on military service during the war, returning to studies only later. I’m enjoying work at the Herald. Got a wonderful mentor. You should meet him. He’s taught me much more than I could ever learn in a classroom.”

“Journalism isn’t a very attractive calling in Hong Kong.”

“You’re right. But there are compensations. It serves an important social purpose. I’m not saying I would want to do it for the rest of my life. A couple more years could broaden my outlook. I’m only seventeen. In two years I’d only be nineteen, more mature and able to look after myself. I could use that time to learn the zither which I didn’t get the chance to do in Kunming. What do you think, Grandma?”

His grandmother had finished her soup while he was speaking

but she didn't reply. She just picked up her chopsticks to eat.

He took care not to disturb the silence.

After a while, his grandmother said: "You have a duty towards your ancestors. The future of the Lam family rests entirely on you. The sooner your education is finished, the sooner you can start a family. I want to hold a great-grandson in my arms before my time comes."

Her voice cracked slightly as she finished the sentence.

He felt a pang in his heart but he had gone too far to retreat. He had already prepared his next move.

"Grandma, actually that's been on my mind too. What chance would I have of meeting a suitable Chinese girl in England or America? Most girls I meet would be Westerners. If I got seriously involved with one, what would my ancestors think?"

An uneasy silence descended again.

He saw his goal in sight and pressed on. "Because I've been away for so long, I hardly know any local girls. I've had the good fortune to meet one recently, however. But any chance of making anything of it would go up in smoke if I were to go abroad now."

"Who's the girl?" His grandmother's eyes brightened. "What's her family background?"

"Her name's Mona. I met her when I was covering the Tung Wah ball. Her father's a businessman, I think. She's about my age and still in high school."

"I'd very much like to meet her. Invite her for dinner. Invite her parents too."

"We've only just met. I haven't even invited her to a movie."

"Did you get a ball picture taken with her?"

"Sadly, no." His heart skipped a beat. He was glad Mona's photo had been safely locked in the box containing his parents' pictures. If

his grandmother ever saw it, the game would be up.

The rest of the meal proceeded with a minimum of conversation. Eventually, his grandmother sighed.

“Life’s so complicated,” she allowed. “I suppose deferring university is possible. I’ll think it over and consult your aunt. I’m not sure what she intends for Ah Hing.”

Hearing those words was enough for him. He knew his plan was well on its way to success.

* * *

Suen began bridge lessons with Kim after work and turned up every Friday to kibitz. He soon became captivated by the game.

On most Fridays enough people turned up to fill two tables of mah jong and one of bridge. The alumni association had a great round table capable of seating sixteen for dinner. During meals participants would exchange news and gossip.

Following two weeks of lessons after work, Suen was encouraged by Kim and others to take part in an actual game. He did so and enjoyed it enormously. Mistakes at the table had to be paid for in hard cash, however. Kim said losses should be regarded as tuition fees.

* * *

No sooner had Suen got on top of his game, the Chinese Engineers’ Institute called a strike. It was the most serious stoppage of the year because the Institute had 11,000 members. The dockyards, the cement factories, the wharf companies and some government services were affected. Soon taxi drivers, bus workers and fish market employees also

came out. The general demand was for a 150% increase in wages. Employers naturally refused. So the strikes dragged on and lumbered reporters with extra work. The lack of progress in conciliation caused tensions at picket lines. The strikes re-ignited the simmering discontent among journalists over the Grantham proposals.

“Why shouldn’t we strike as well?” Su demanded one evening. “We’re all on starvation wages. Look at us! We pride ourselves in belonging to the second oldest profession in the world. Yet we have to survive in ways that would put the oldest profession to shame.”

“How can we strike?” a reporter named Ching asked. “We don’t have a union, not even an association of journalists. This Friday gathering is the closest we have to a fellowship group.”

“Let’s start a union,” Su suggested.

Dum-Dum waved his hands in the air. “Oh, no! Don’t you youngsters get me involved again,” he declared. “I’ve got a wife and children to support. I can’t afford to get fired.”

“The right of association is a basic human right,” Su countered. “So is collective bargaining. Why should you get fired?”

Dum-Dum shook his head wearily. “Let’s face facts. Our bosses don’t need a reason to fire us. Indeed, I don’t think they even need us very much. They’d fill their columns with reprints from the Shipping Gazette if they thought advertisers wouldn’t notice.”

“Dum-Dum’s right,” Kim said. “If reasons are needed, they’ve got plenty. You think they don’t know about the collusion over court coverage? They’re well aware of the moonlighting, the tea money, the unwarranted puffs, the peddling of ads and insurance on the side. They’ve turned a blind eye because they’re paying peanuts. But if they feel threatened, they’ll show no mercy.”

“So this is the wonderful British rule of law?” Su sneered. “We

have to knuckle under rich men's laws."

"It's reality," Kim said.

"So it's doing nothing again, isn't it?" Ching asked, dejectedly.

"Just stand back and hope for the survival of the fittest."

Before Kim could reply, Suen intervened: "Why don't we form a social club? We've got the nucleus here."

"Publishers are not fools," Kim cautioned. "They'll see it as the thin end of the wedge."

"It's worth trying," Ching allowed. "What kind of creatures are we, that we can't even have a social club?"

"Starting a club's hellish," Dum-Dum said. "Articles of association, satisfying the Registrar of Societies, keeping minutes and accounts, electing office bearers and having a legal address. Hell, just thinking about that palaver makes my head ache. Who's got the time?"

"I've got time," Suen declared, quick as a whistle.

"This isn't your problem," Kim said, sharply. "You'll be off to university soon."

A sudden mixture of rebellion and resentment welled up in Suen. His mentor was forever treating him like a schoolboy. It was bad enough having verbs and adjectives blue-penciled as editorialising, or getting ticked off for playing truant, but to see cold water continually poured upon those seeking to overturn injustice upset him beyond endurance. He hadn't let on his grandmother had already agreed to his deferring university. In a rush of bravado, he declared: "For a noble cause I'd happily put off university."

"Oh?" Kim's voice rose half an octave.

That single syllable brought Suen down to earth. A dozen other considerations suddenly exploded upon his consciousness. He saw he had gone too far. He had become a reporter to kill time. But for the rest,

journalism was their livelihood. To egg them on could endanger their jobs. He was not risking his own skin for a principle, but merely posturing and putting other people's livelihoods at risk.

The need to retract his declaration pressed upon him. The hush that had descended following Kim's interrogative "Oh?" seemed unbearably long. He felt his face burning. But before he could open his mouth Su spoke. "Hurray for Suen!" he said. "I support him."

A quick ripple of approval rose from around the table.

"All right, count me in," Dum-Dum said, after gauging the mood of his younger colleagues. "I'm sick of living like a con artist."

Suen sat flabbergasted. Across from the table Dum-Dum flashed him the merest hint of a grin. It was a gesture of solidarity, to spare him humiliation, and his heart swelled with gratitude.

Kim looked incredulously around the table. After a while he burst out laughing. "Since everyone has gone soft in the head, I might as well join this company of fools," he said. "If our young rabble-rouser here will draw up a list of things to be done, we can look at it next Friday and share out the tasks."

On that note the group returned to their games.

The various strikes in the city lasted for almost a month. The government intervened with mediation, which resulted in a general increase of 50% in wages. It was still a far cry from the 150% originally demanded but the unions lacked the resources to continue the fight.

* * *

From the very beginning, discussions about a social club were plagued by differences over a host of technical and substantive issues. Arguments raged for weeks over whether membership should be restricted

to locals or open to expatriates, a viable level of dues, sanctions for non-payment, eligibility to stand for office, the number of office bearers and so forth. No sooner had one issue been settled, another emerged. The task of keeping a record fell naturally upon the most junior -- Suen.

After months of debate, Dum-Dum said: "This is a big headache. I know it's intended as a subterfuge, to lead to a proper union. But these definitions and arguments are too damn much."

Kim had remained unruffled throughout. Indeed, at times he seemed positively to relish watching the debates. After the issues had been batted nearly to death, he said: "We've done all we can. We need a paper setting out the issues and options for colleagues outside this group. Since there are Indian, Portuguese and Eurasian journalists on local terms in the English papers, we'll need both a Chinese and an English version."

"Who's going to do that?" Su asked.

Suen saw at once the way the wind was blowing. Apart from Kim, he was the only one fluent in both languages. Moreover, he was the instigator of the whole exercise and was the one keeping notes.

"I'll have a shot," he volunteered without enthusiasm.

The drafts went through several versions, each throwing up fresh ambiguities. It was halfway through 1948 before both were ready.

Then a fresh issue arose over the authority for circulating the drafts. Some of the younger reporters felt that they should be sent out under the names of everybody in the Friday group. But two or three with families thought otherwise. They didn't want to be named, suggesting instead issuing the drafts under the name of a "Preparatory Committee". The more robust objected. Heated words were exchanged. That so soured the atmosphere that discussions had to be suspended for a couple of weeks.

It fell to Kim to put forward a compromise. He felt that a document without a name lacked gravitas. On the other hand, names could

put careers at risk. He suggested using his own name, under the fictitious title of “Chairman of the Preparatory Committee”.

Suen saw through Kim’s attempt to protect him and the others and he objected. He had done the initial drafting of both documents, he declared, and if anybody’s name was to be used it should be his. He could with equal justice claim to be the “Secretary to the Preparatory Committee”. It would be no skin off his nose if he got sacked since he intended quitting anyway. But he appreciated that his name was virtually unknown outside the Friday group and the Herald.

It was finally decided that the names of both Kim and Suen would be used, with the respective titles suggested.

The documents caused a stir within the profession and among publishers. Reactions remained muted for a time, however, because the collective attention of the colony during 1948 was claimed by a succession of major disasters.

Huge losses of life were suffered in two air crashes -- a Catalina flying boat and a CNAC Skymaster. There were also two major fires, one on a river steamer and the other in a godown in the Western District. The godown fire alone left 173 people dead. There were, in addition, the usual squatter fires which rendered thousands homeless.

Suen covered some of those tragedies. His accounts were considered sufficiently well-written by Major Monroe to merit a by-line.

During the respites between those misfortunes, comments on the drafts trickled in. The Friday meetings dealt with them as best they could. Some wanted the articles of association to include a statement on the social purposes of journalism. A more radical minority wanted to drop the pretence of a social club to propose a proper trade union instead. Re-drafts were produced to try to bridge the differing points of view.

The drafts, and the names of two of their employees appended

to them, alarmed the publishers of the Herald. They hesitated over taking action, however, hoping the project would die a natural death.

The management of the Herald had concluded that Kim was the moving spirit. But acting against him was difficult. Mr. Meadows, the Editor-in-Chief, held him in high regard. He had joined the paper five years before the war and had been among the first to report for duty right after the Japanese surrendered. Moreover, he commanded great esteem throughout the profession.

Suen was a different matter. He was a freshly-appointed nonentity with less than two years' service. Nonetheless, Major Monroe did pull Suen aside one day early in 1949 and said: "Look here, young man, you've got the makings of a good journalist. Don't ruin things by getting mixed up with agitators. In the present climate, every organization gets infiltrated by subversives. We have to be careful."

"A few of us are just trying to form a social club to play bridge and mah jong," Suen replied.

"Well, you've been warned," the major said.

Suen reported the interview to Kim.

"It's not too late for you to bail out," Kim said.

"Why should I?" Suen replied. "We're all in this together. I'm not going to let the others down."

Kim gave an easy laugh. "Good on you," he said. "I've always believed that causes already lost are the only ones worth fighting for."

"But surely we haven't lost?"

Kim placed an arm around his shoulders as it had become his habit to do and smiled. "Perhaps not," he said.

Soon whispers began circulating of the displeasure of the Herald's management with those attempting to form a club.

* * *

Suen also came under pressure from another quarter. Whilst his grandmother was pleased he had earned by-lines for some of his reporting, she drew attention to the fact that he was nineteen and ought to be in university. “You must prepare for the future,” she said.

Suen was only too aware that the original acquiescence to a deferment had been predicated upon the fiction of his developing relationship with a respectable girl. His dissembling tales were wearing thin and his grandmother was beginning to insist upon meeting Mona. He had no choice but to put an end to the charade. He confessed they had broken off recently, because of differences in temperament.

His grandmother reacted with deep disappointment. Suen soon found himself being invited to a succession of dinners by Aunt Soo-Leung, designed to introduce him to suitable girls. They all seemed mousy and insipid, either over-protected or unripe. They had none of Mona’s sensual magnetism and his spirit couldn’t engage. After a few abortive dinners, his grandmother made plain that, regardless of whether Aunt Soo-Leung’s efforts met with success or not, he had to begin university in 1950.

With the political landscape of his country shifting rapidly and with the Kuomintang ruling only in name, he suspected his grandmother wanted to get him away before any fallout from the Chinese civil war reached the colony. He was loath to tear himself away, especially when history was being made. But having bamboozled his grandmother for two years, he did not have the heart to frustrate her further. He duly wrote off to Oxford to secure a place.

As for the real Mona, he continued to see her and to instruct her in English. But his heavier duties made the lessons more irregular.

More than a year into their relationship his ardour had begun to wane. The thrill of anticipation had somehow dissipated. Making love to her had turned into just a pleasurable routine, like having a nice dessert after a meal. Each encounter niggled him with guilt. He knew he was behaving badly.

Mona, however, remained as loving and passionate as ever. That only served to make him feel worse. He could not envisage a future with her. Yet the sexual pleasures she offered retained a hold on him. The honourable thing would be to cease trifling with her affections. But he did not know how to break off without hurting her. Nor could he turn his back on the English lessons he had promised just when they were beginning to bear fruit.

He waited until one of Dum-Dum's contacts had secured a spot for Mona with a bigger band in a popular nightclub. It was an improvement on The Red Chamber but less than what she had hoped for. He then told her his grandmother was sending him abroad for university. He would continue to give her lessons until his departure.

Mona took the news philosophically. Perhaps she had expected it. She neither cried nor made a scene. She merely asked how long he would be gone.

"I'm not sure. Possibly three or four years."

"I should still be around," Mona said.

"We must keep in touch. I shall miss you."

After that conversation, Suen gathered up whatever money he managed to save from his salary and his allowances to buy Mona an expensive bracelet. He presented it on the eve of his departure.

It was on a brooding October day in 1949 when news arrived that Communist forces had taken control of the Chinese border with Hong Kong. One of the immediate manifestations of the new order was the suspension of the through-train services linking the colony to Canton, the capital of Kwangtung Province.

The Kowloon Canton Railway had been operating since before the war, when passengers could board a train at the Tsim Sha Tsui terminus and travel the 183-kilometre journey direct to Canton.

Following the suspension, travellers had to make the trip in two stages, by first taking a train to the border town of Lo Wu, 36 kilometres away, before alighting with their luggage to walk across the wooden railway bridge connecting Lo Wu to the Chinese town of Shum Chun. They then had to submit themselves to customs and immigration formalities before boarding another train for the rest of the journey.

That alteration in arrangements raised apprehensions. As increasing numbers of refugees from Kwangtung and Shanghai flooded into the colony, tensions began to rise. Uncertainty crackled in the air. No one was sure what might come next. Some with the wrong political allegiances abandoned the colony. Others began re-aligning themselves.

Members of the Friday group were kept busy over the next few months reporting on the rapidly changing political and social realities. The mushrooming of shanty towns housing refugees resulted in frequent fires and tragedies. The recognition by Britain of the new Communist government in China in February of 1950 led to disputes between Kuomintang and Communist supporters. Clashes between British forces and those of the new regime erupted both at the land border and in the waters around Hong Kong, resulting in a number of deaths. Each incident ratcheted up tension another notch.

In the meantime, forming a social club took a back seat. Talk

on each Friday focused increasingly on the political situation.

During dinner on one Friday in March, Kim casually mentioned he had been dismissed by the Herald.

Gasps of astonishment rose around the table.

“You didn’t even tell me!” Suen cried, in disbelief.

“I was sent for by the General Manager less than two hours ago,” Kim replied. “I barely had time to collect my things before coming here. One thing’s obvious. It wasn’t an editorial decision. Otherwise Old Meadows would have handed me the letter.”

“Why didn’t they sack me too? My name was on the drafts.”

“They didn’t fire me because of the drafts. They wanted to send a message. One scalp was enough.”

“I’m going to resign.”

“You don’t have to.”

Su intervened. “Nobody should resign. We should organise another meeting like we did over the Grantham proposals. We must fight.”

“It’s no use,” Kim said. “The political climate has changed. I’m sure publishers have already worked out a united strategy.”

“How can a man lose his job for trying to organise a club?” Su cried. “Don’t the years you’ve put into the Herald count? Doesn’t loyalty mean anything? What about common decency?”

“I wasn’t fired for organising a club,” Kim reiterated.

“For what then? What reason did they give?”

“Publishers don’t have to give a reason,” Dum-Dum interjected, with a note of irritation. “We’re on month-to-month terms. We’re entitled to a month’s notice or pay in lieu. That’s all.”

Kim nodded. “Dum-Dum’s right.”

“It’s bullshit!” Su fumed. “This is why we need a union.”

“Are we going to persevere with a social club?” Ching asked.

“We’ve spent over a year arguing about it.”

Nobody offered an answer. Futility hung in the air.

After a few moments, Ching turned to Kim and asked:

“What’re you going to do now?”

“Return to my bridge game, if you clowns would let me,” Kim replied, rising from the dinner table.

* * *

Kim’s dismissal rankled with Suen. He knew he could not remain with the Herald. He sent in his notice a week later. But he held off telling his grandmother about either his acceptance by Oxford or his decision to quit. In some strange way, he still didn’t believe his life was about to change fundamentally.

Both he and Kim continued to turn up at the Friday gatherings. Both offered to withdraw should the others wish to discuss the club project further. But they got shouted down.

It was clear the project was reaching its end. The older journalists had lost what little enthusiasm they had. Ching announced his resignation from his newspaper shortly thereafter, to pursue further studies. Su alone stayed disgruntled and unappeased.

Suen asked if anyone wanted his notes. No one did.

Towards the end of his period of notice, Suen took afternoon tea with Kim and told him of his plans to go to Oxford.

“You’ve made the right choice,” Kim said. “British universities are more suited to the Chinese temperament than American ones. When you get there, get drunk on books. The Bodleian’s excellent. Sometimes it’s only when a person is drunk enough with books that he can begin to see a little light.”

“What are you going to do yourself?” Suen asked.

“I’m heading for China next week.”

“What! Why? The situation’s very unstable,” Suen said. “The country’s in chaos.”

“Chaos offers chances for new beginnings. Where else to find another lost cause?”

“Why not right here? There are injustices everywhere, just beneath the surface. You know that better than anyone.”

Kim shook his head. “I’m done here. Been a journalist too long. No English paper will touch me now with a bargepole. The Chinese press, sadly, has no impact upon the ruling elites. My guess is that the situation here will not alter for some decades. I need to find fresh windmills to tilt at.”

“Where exactly in China are you heading?”

“To where I’m needed.”

“What’ll you do when you get there?”

“A bit of good, I hope.”

Suen felt a knot of guilt gathering in the pit of his stomach. “I’m responsible for this mess,” he blurted out, his voice cracking. “Please forgive me.”

“Nothing to forgive, my friend. You’re not responsible for anything. Lost causes are my speciality.”

“Can I see you off next week?”

“Sure, if you like. I’ll be taking the train to Canton.”

* * *

A week later, the two men met at Tsim Sha Tsui terminal. Kim had put on one of his oldest and least serviceable suits. It was a poor fit. It

made him look like a journeyman in some pedestrian trade. He had only one small rattan suitcase as luggage.

When the time came to board the train, Kim extended his hand to say farewell.

Suen ignored the hand. Instead he grabbed Kim by the arm. "I'm accompanying you to Lo Wu," he said. "I've got my ticket."

As they sat down opposite each other in a half-empty carriage, Suen's heart remained oppressed by sentiments he could not express. He had thought that, given time, he might find the words to voice his regrets. He wanted to tell Kim that he had learnt a lot from him, that he admired him and that he was a good man. But that would sound utterly banal. He wanted somehow to prevent his friend from going because he feared for his safety. But what conceivable argument could he employ? Kim had already lost the job he relished, the job which gave him the chance to shape a new generation of journalists in an as yet unredeemed part of China.

For Suen, parting from Kim was more wrenching than parting from Tutor Tseng. It was worse because he had things to be ashamed of.

In that terrible predicament, he could only pretend to gaze out of the window, to avoid Kim's eyes. Huddled dwellings, factory chimneys and power pylons hurtled by outside the train. Then, as it rumbled into the New Territories, hardy shrubs, Burmese rosewood, flowering bauhinia and patchworks of Chinese fields offered up varying depths of green.

It was Kim who broke the silence. "I guess we won't be playing bridge together for a while," he said. "Remember what I've taught you. Anyone can develop good declarer play but to become a champion you must be sharp on defence."

Suen turned towards his friend. "Must you go?" he asked.

Kim nodded.

"Wherever you're going, I wish I were going with you."

Kim smiled. “Don’t be in a hurry. Your time will come.”

There seemed nothing more to be said. Silence clanked down like a shutter between them. The train slowed as it reached Lo Wu and stuttered to a stop. The two men alighted and walked together to the British end of the bridge.

“When will you be back?” Suen asked.

“Can’t say. If the fates are kind, perhaps when through-trains start running again.”

“Is that a promise?”

“As much a promise as anyone can make in these troubled times.”

“I’ll be waiting for you, right here, when the first through-train arrives. You’d better be on it. If not, I’ll come looking.”

“I’ll try not to disappoint.”

Suen shook his friend’s hand and hugged him.

The bridge linking the two jurisdictions measured about a hundred paces. Yet, as Suen watched Kim walk across it, carrying his small rattan suitcase, his friend seemed to be crossing into another world a thousand miles away. From the Chinese end of the bridge he could hear the loudspeakers blaring out the stirring notes of “The East Is Red”, seemingly to welcome Kim or perhaps to warn the capitalists of Hong Kong.

* * *

Suen and Dum-Dum made their way out of the Lingnan University Alumni Association together at the end of the evening. Both had pocketed modest winnings from their respective games.

“Will you be going to England again this summer?” Dum-Dum asked, as they took the lift.

“I’ll be going earlier this year, in about two weeks’ time,” Suen replied. “My niece’s going off to study in America in the autumn. I thought I should stick around this summer on that account. Once she’s gone, I may not see her again for a good long while.”

“That’s good. We’re always short of players in summer.”

They emerged into a half-deserted street. A cold moon was casting a merciless light upon the town. Cleaners were already out, hosing off the remnants of another hectic day. News vendors squatted at strategic corners, sorting out piles of early morning editions. Chauffeured limousines, black as hearses, lingered outside private clubs and night spots, waiting for their owners to emerge from their fun and games. The last trams lumbered towards their resting places in Causeway Bay, swaying like tipsy dowagers on their steel tracks.

Suen glanced up at the lighted office windows and the neon signs grinning at him from all around. Capitalism was a twenty-four hour business, he thought. The lyrics of one of Mona’s song used to suggest that night time was the right time for kissing and reminiscing. But in Hong Kong it could also be the right time for plotting and double-crossing. The local stock and bullion exchanges might be officially closed till morning but there was nothing to prevent understandings from being reached over a drink or a wink. Besides, as the markets closed here, others were opening elsewhere. Zurich, London, New York, Chicago. Infinite opportunities for dawn raids, take-overs, buy-outs, arbitrage, insider-trading and asset-stripping.

Suen felt a nip in the evening air as he and Dum-Dum waited to hail taxis. “Feels like spring’s still here,” he said.