

Radnor Place

Suen belched as he emerged from the Indian restaurant in Praed Street. The Madras curry had been exceptional and he had over-eaten. The meal had crowned a fruitful day at the British Museum library, researching the rise and the decline of ancient civilisations.

A crisp, pleasant evening greeted him in the street. A spring sun was mellowing in a cloudless sky. As he turned into Sussex Gardens, a light breeze fanned the sycamores and horse chestnuts, sending shifting tracteries of light onto the deeper greens of the clipped hedges beneath.

Suen tried to remember the character of the neighbourhood on his first visit to London thirty-seven years ago. It used to be sleepier, more insouciant, lined with bed-and-breakfast establishments. Beyond the redevelopment of a couple of bomb-damaged sites, he was hard put to be more specific on changes. He couldn't recall the cafe-bar at the corner of a side street nor what had stood there in previous decades.

The years seemed to have passed in a flash, like fleeting ripples on a stream, lost beyond recall. What had he to show for their passage? Where now his high hopes and hunger for knowledge? Revealed finally -- juvenile conceits. Three books and a flurry of articles had been all he had to his name. None had set anyone on fire. Indeed, one uncharitable critic had characterised his outpourings as half-Jeremiah and half-Polonius.

A fourth book, gestating for years, was refusing to be born. He himself had found its repeated drafts sounding more and more like the bleating of an anchorite, about an age in which he had no part. Herodotus had asserted that knowledge without power was the most hateful of torments. That old historian had it on the button.

Lost in such reflections, Suen found himself at his own front door. His appetite for more work had ebbed with the day. Better a stiff drink and some music, he decided, as he inserted his key.

He switched on the lights in the sitting room and drew the

beige and blue curtains Po-Chee had installed. On the mantelpiece were two other reminders of his wife -- a golden butterfly in a square perspex box and an antique clock bought at Portobello Road. Its hands stood incongruously at twenty past two because he had never bothered to wind it.

He glanced around the room. So many items bore associations with his wife. It was as if she had left a bit of herself on each of them, to remind him of the joyous times they had once shared, before her undercurrents of unhappiness set in.

Should he have left her alone at the start? Her beauty and intelligence had been arresting. Had he started out after a pleasant diversion or a serious relationship? A part of him had remained raw after the loss of Isabelle. The death of his grandmother had also weighed upon him. In order to forget both, he had slipped into the sterile life of a rich exile, playing bridge for high stakes at Mayfair clubs, attending Kensington soirees and engaging in flings with titled ladies with the inclinations of wantons.

It had been in that frame of mind that he had invited Po-Chee for tea. He soon discovered, however, she was made of different clay. She had a fetching innocence and goodness of heart. She was one of that rare breed -- a girl of twenty untouched by the ploys of love and romance! That had challenged his protective instincts. He could not take advantage of her. But he had not expected them to be ensnared so quickly by love either.

Suen went to the sideboard to pour a brandy.

How often had he and Po-Chee spent time in this very room! He shut his eyes, visualising them on the sofa, listening to music, discussing the political scandals of the day. Or simply indulging in the horseplay of lovers, snuggling close, delighting in the texture of her hair and skin, the intoxication of her kisses.

He swayed, suddenly dizzy with a rush of retrospective desire.

Sheer craziness, he thought. He shook his head and found himself still holding the decanter in one hand and a brandy snifter in the other. He headed for an armchair with his drink.

An ache of longing, magnified by denial, pursued him. He recalled their favourite way of sleeping after love, lying fitted together like spoons in a drawer, her magnificent buttocks snug against his belly. She had a way of pinning one of his arms under hers, as if she feared he might slip away while she slept.

In the end it had been she who had slipped away, taking from him her heartbreaking loveliness and her childlike gaiety. Her miscarriage, followed by the loss of Yun, had turned her into an injured creature, lost and wary. He had not realized how emotionally fragile she was, until Dr. Ma warned him.

He sighed and bowed his head. If he had stayed in their room after Yun's birth, their son might still be alive. As her depression deepened, he knew he had to turn her around or lose her. He employed every stratagem he could think of. The Far Eastern cruise didn't work. Neither did pleadings and more loving attention. Appeals to reason met with a stubborn wagging of the head. She became so adverse to physical contact that another attempt at starting a family proved all but impossible.

What distressed him most was to discover that she shied away from him, turning instead to Po-Chun for comfort in her moments of need. Although she had never uttered a single word of recrimination, he wondered whether in the secret recesses of her heart she held him responsible for the loss of Yun. He calculated that if they could be together again in London, where they had first fallen in love, their sense of oneness might be rekindled. So he had kept urging her to accompany him on his annual trips.

But she had kept offering excuses. She had an important case

to prepare, she had said on one occasion. On another she had only a week's holiday left and a long journey wouldn't be worth it. More recently, she said she wouldn't leave Amber by herself.

“Why not bring her along?” he had countered, perhaps a little more sharply than he had intended. “There's plenty of room in the house.”

“She's got to prepare for matriculation.”

“We can postpone the trip till summer. London will be broadening for Amber.”

“I've asked Lucille Chu to introduce a good family in Los Angeles to keep an eye on her. A prospective couple's visiting this summer. We have to be here to meet them.”

And so it went.

He had kept racking his brains to find a way to regain what had been lost. But with the passage of time, it had probably become too late for children. He was already fifty-seven. What man of conscience would bring a child into the world without any real prospect of nurturing it into adulthood? Fate had already deprived him of parents at the age of six. To some extent, Po-Chee and Amber had suffered similarly. He could not possibly allow that to befall any child of his.

Helplessness welled up in him. Vows unfulfilled, duties consigned to dust. He stared dully into his brandy glass.

He was glad the presence of Amber had cheered Po-Chee. The thought that the two of them could care for each other after he had departed comforted him. But Amber would be leaving for America soon. Moreover, the possibility their niece might be developing a drug habit worried him. How would Po-Chee cope? Perhaps his wife already knew something he didn't. Was that why she had become unsettled when he announced he was bringing forward his London trip? Did that also spark that fortune-telling venture to a Taoist temple? And what of the proposal for a trust fund?

“Amber’s only seventeen,” he had opined. “Why not wait till she comes of age?”

“It’s best to settle the issue before Amber leaves,” Po-Chee said. “Actually, I was thinking of turning over everything left by Father. After all, I don’t need the money. I have an income from my practice and your trusts bring in more than we can ever spend.”

“I don’t know enough about the ins and outs of your family, my dear. But giving money away isn’t going to alter the past.”

“I know. But Po-Chun and Amber have had such hard lives. The least I can do is to make Amber financially independent.”

“What kind of money are you talking about?”

Po-Chee gave an estimate.

He emitted a low whistle. “Didn’t know your old man left that much.”

“Wasn’t that much originally, even including the sale of the Robinson Road house. But rising stock prices and re-investments, you know. Your trusts have swelled even more, with property prices going up both here and in London.”

“Good heavens! Can’t keep piling up unearned wealth like that. You must get rid of what we don’t need. Give it away, to the charities you’re involved in.”

“I will, once I’ve settled Amber’s future.”

“I suggest doing it the other way round.”

“Why?”

“Because the needs of the poor are always immediate. There’s no hurry over Amber. She’ll never need as much as you intend to give. She’s an intelligent girl. She’ll make plenty of money of her own. Until then, remember the ancients. They say too much wealth harms the ideals of the wise and magnifies the faults of the foolish.”

His remarks caused a distracted look to enter Po-Chee's eyes. The subject was left in limbo.

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Suen took a sip of brandy and resolved to telephone his wife more frequently to allay whatever anxieties she might be having. Then his mind darted about tangentially, like the flight of a dragonfly, confused over where it wanted to go. Gradually, he became aware of the silence in the room and realised he had forgotten to put on music. He got up, selected a tape of zither tunes and started the cassette player.

On returning to his seat he closed his eyes as the first sad, quivering notes of the zither filled the room. His imagination conjured up pines and bamboos, flowing water, mountain settings and secluded places. How marvellous to leave the corruptions of society behind. Small wonder scholars like Tao Yuan-Ming sought the absolute "quiet" of music from a zither without strings. As the music continued, he felt a fleeting desire to toss away his notes and files, his accumulation of facts, suppositions and theories, to put an end to the futile task bedeviling him.

His thoughts went to others with different beliefs and different dreams -- Tutor Tseng, Kim, Su, Dum-Dum, Ralfie, Phirun. They had tried to live according to their convictions, in some cases even to die for them. Could he do any less?

Isabelle had judged him to be a "seeker after truths" and had urged him to pursue his quest. What a price she paid! The truths he ended up with amounted to little more than those already proclaimed thousands of years ago. He had clambered on to the shoulders of sages but had seen little more than they. Their wisdom had not prevented mankind from mutating into a tribe of technological giants and moral dwarfs.

He emitted a deep sigh. Better to see to his own flaws. He had

left them slumbering like bats in a dark cavern. It was time for penance.

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The day after Suen had seen Kim off at Lo Wu, he told his grandmother he had been offered a place at Christ Church in the autumn. His grandmother was naturally delighted, for the original two-year moratorium on university had stretched into a third.

“Good,” his grandmother said. “You working till then?”

“I’ve already quit,” Suen replied.

“What? In that case we can go at any time.”

Suen shrugged. “The year doesn’t begin till autumn.”

So despondent had he been over Kim’s departure that he felt adrift, deprived of a mentor he would probably never see again. The sense of loss and guilt tormented him. In Oxford he would have to fend for himself, without Kim’s steadying hand. Would the British there display the same bloodless air of superiority as their compatriots in Hong Kong? Would he have to swallow his pride for the sake of getting an education?

It was customary for Aunt Soo-Leung to bring her children to Bowen Road for lunch on the first Sunday of every month. That occasion fell two weeks after Suen had revealed his intention to attend Oxford. While lunch was being served, his grandmother appeared in sparkling form. She announced that passages had been booked for herself and Suen to sail to England, leaving in ten days’ time.

The announcement took everyone by surprise.

Aunt Soo-Leung was the first to react. “Mother, I had no idea you intended going with Ah Suen,” she said. “Is that really necessary? That country is damp and dreary, bad for rheumatism. The news there is unremittingly grim. All kinds of shortages. Many essentials rationed.”

“Hardships are a test of character,” the old lady said.

Suen at last found his voice. “Aunt Soo-Leung’s right, Grandma. There’s no need for you to take such a long sea voyage. I’m old enough to make my own way.”

“What do you know about buying properties in London? Or about lease conditions?” his grandmother responded dismissively.

“Properties? Nothing. I never thought . . .”

His grandmother shook her head. “You thought studying abroad was simply a matter of attending lectures. That is not the case. In a foreign land, a man represents his culture and his family. He must do nothing which reflects poorly on either. Having a fitting home is essential for spending holidays and making foreign friends.”

The idea surprised Suen again. He had never thought of a home away from home. “I appreciate the thought, Grandma, but that must be an extravagance. I would be at Oxford most of the time.”

His grandmother waved him into silence. Turning to Aunt Soo-Leung, she asked: “Is that friend of yours, Amy, still in real estate?”

“Amy’s married now. Coping with kids.”

“I imagine she still has connections. Please ask her to help us contact a reliable property firm. We’ll be at the Dorchester.”

“Yes, Mother. I’ll get on to that right away.”

Suen listened to the arrangements with grudging admiration. He had never imagined his grandmother to be so knowledgeable about things in England. In order to discover what else she might have planned, he asked: “What would we do after looking at properties, Grandma? Michaelmas doesn’t start till the autumn.”

“We’ll go sight-seeing, assuming you’re willing to act as my interpreter,” his grandmother replied. “I once spent a week in London with your grandfather. Not nearly enough. Since there’s time before your term starts, I’d like to see more of that country. In particular, I want to examine

the place where you will be spending the next few years. Have I surprised you with my plans?"

"Nothing about my Grandma surprises me!"

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Seasickness affected both Suen and his grandmother for the first three days of their journey towards the first port of call at Singapore. By the time the ship headed up the Straits of Malacca, both had gained their sea legs. They began enjoying the voyage and the languor of shipboard life. Suen's mood of being at odds with himself gradually faded as his anticipation of a new life in a new land took its place.

He and his grandmother adopted a routine of pacing the decks for half an hour after breakfast each morning and of sitting on deck-chairs to enjoy the splendour of tropical sunsets each evening. His grandmother's habit of wearing an elegant loose-fitting Chinese long-gown and her uncertain age caught the curiosity of fellow passengers. Her unlined face and her grace of movement suggested a relatively young person but her greying hair, done up in a chignon, indicated otherwise. The fact that she was constantly escorted by a handsome young man caused some fellow passengers to assume they were mother and son. When their true relationship became known, their devotion to each other elicited much admiration.

One day, as the two were taking their morning constitutional, Suen turned pensive. He had been studying the itinerary of the ship and tracking its progress. That was giving him a measure of the world and the stretch of the British Empire. The ports of call seemed to be mainly British. Colombo, Karachi, Aden, Limassol, Malta, Gibraltar.

But within that vast domain, struggles for independence were

erupting. It puzzled him how a small island race could control for so long such a far-flung empire. Naval power was naturally part of the equation. But the British in Hong Kong had not impressed him, either with their intelligence or their organising skills. Yet, militarily, they had humbled China time and time again.

His country had remained weak and fractured for too long. His countrymen had concentrated on the arts and history, on refining their civilisation, rather than on providing for its own defence. Even as China teetered on the brink of defeat by the Japanese, Tutor Tseng was still drilling him on the Book of Rites and on Confucian concepts of righteousness. It was only later that he realised that the classics he had been required to learn by rote had shaped his nation in a certain way, bestowing upon it a set of values and a method of engaging with the world that was humanistic and uniquely Chinese.

But the unprecedented savagery of the Second World War suggested that humankind seemed to be regressing. All sides had prosecuted the war without distinction between combatants and civilians. Total war justified the slaughter of a quarter of a million in Nanking in 1937, the carpet bombing of ancient European cities, the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, along with horrific concentration camps, gas chambers and using prisoners for experiments with germs and diseases. Such acts robbed both victors and vanquished of honour. The so-called Cold War suggested that another hot one might not be far away.

All at once, he understood Kim's reason for returning to China. What remained of their civilisation had to be defended against the atavistic forces rising all around the globe. Logic dictated that those who valued China's heritage had to defend it, even by developing the same awful weapons already in the hands of possible future enemies.

In keeping with that line of thinking, he should be studying one of the sciences at Oxford instead of PPE. Or at least one of the engineering courses. But science ought to go hand in hand with ethics, to be pursued for serving mankind. No true scientist should pervert his skills to create killing machines even if the survival of his civilisation depended on it because he would become de-civilized during that process.

Lumbered by such considerations, he consulted his grandmother. “What should I study at Oxford, Grandma?”

“Whatever you like,” his grandmother replied, as they strolled arm in arm. “According to your grandfather, the subject does not matter. It’s a young man’s mind that has to be trained. Confucius held that men were seldom without doubts till forty. That had been true of your father. He studied mathematics at Leiden but couldn’t decide what he wanted to do afterwards. He tried teaching for a spell. In the end he followed the family tradition and entered service with the Dutch.”

Suen doubted the continuing validity of that idea, however, although Tutor Tseng had made the same point. Life had accelerated. People had to settle on a career earlier than forty. His former colleagues at the Blue Bird had embarked on journalism at half that age. Having worked for a spell, he was impatient to return to the world of affairs. But out of respect for his grandmother, he refrained from disputing the point.

The two fell silent as they continued to pace the deck. After another circuit, Suen felt his arm being affectionately squeezed.

“It’s a pity your grandfather did not live to see you enter the world,” his grandmother said. “He would have loved you and you would have loved him. You two are very much alike. You’re lucky you don’t have to worry about filling your rice bowl. You should choose a calling of benefit to society.”

“I will, Grandma,” he replied.

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One afternoon, when he was idling on a deck-chair, the immensity and imperturbability of the ocean overpowered him. It seemed to stretch as far as he could see, empty of activity except for some flying fish scurrying over its wrinkled surface and the ship he was on. There seemed something mysterious and palpable in its sparse immensity. It reminded him of the two Chinese landscapes hanging in the living room at Bowen Road. The profound simplicity of nature seemed to be presenting itself, inviting him to lose himself in it. Or, indeed, to become part of it.

Suddenly, his grandmother's voice cut across his musings. He had almost forgotten she was sitting in the deck-chair next to his.

"Sometimes I'm saddened you're still unbetrothed approaching twenty," his grandmother said. "Your father was engaged well before that. Pity you didn't hit it off with that girl you met at the Tung Wah ball. I've forgotten her name. What was it?"

"Mona."

"Yes, Mona. Never got a chance to meet her. She might have been suitable. I should have had someone look into her family background to help things along. Your aunt says you've been very fussy over girls."

"Grandma, marriage's the farthest thing from my mind."

"Oh? What was on your mind then, when you started keeping company with Mona? Some impropriety? That's more worrying. I know a thing or two about young men."

Suen flushed. Those remarks brought back memories of those torrid sessions with Mona. "Don't worry, Grandma. I'll be concentrating on my studies in England, not girls."

"You would say that, wouldn't you? Still, I should have settled

a match for you before leaving. That would have given you focus. Your grandfather said foreign girls can be very free and easy. You shouldn't get mixed up with them. A foreign bride, not understanding our language and our ways. is no good. A betrothed would have deterred temptation."

"Grandma, I had never given a thought to foreign girls, let alone marrying one. Besides, we are living in the middle of the Twentieth Century. Arranged marriages are no longer fashionable."

His grandmother turned and eyed him with cool disapproval. "My marriage to your grandfather was arranged by our parents," she said, sharply. "Your grandfather and I arranged the marriage of your parents. Also your aunt's. All of us have found love, affection and happiness. What's wrong with that?"

"I didn't say arranged marriages were wrong," Suen responded, conscious of his faux pas. "Society's changing. People nowadays want romantic love. They like to choose their own spouses."

"A fine mess they're making of it! More and more divorces and more and more cohabiting on the sly, ignoring family responsibilities. Children being scattered to the winds. Utterly deplorable."

"Arranged marriages can fail too. Probably as frequently as the self-selected kind."

"Not so. Arranged marriages are more lasting, more stable."

"Why should that be?"

"Because everybody tries harder. Personal pride isn't so much to the fore. Arranged marriages are unions between families as well as individuals. Wiser heads come into the picture. More is known about the background, the social standing and the reputations of the parties before a wedding takes place. No leap in the dark. When difficulties arise, elders step in to knock some sense into the young, as happened in the case of your parents. They . . ."

“What! My parents had difficulties?” Suen interrupted.

The revelation took him aback. Memories of his parents had been happy ones, particularly those of his gentle and sweet-smelling mother. How could there be difficulties? On reflection, it occurred to him he had seldom seen his parents together. His mother and Ah Loy had been his main attendants. They would have him in bed by seven, well before the grown-ups sat down for dinner. His glimpses of his father had been confined to early mornings, when he was in a hurry to leave. His father rarely returned before his bedtime. To learn of difficulties challenged one of his most cherished impressions of childhood.

“What difficulties did my parents have?” he persisted, in the absence of a response.

“Nothing more than usual,” his grandmother said. “An act of thoughtlessness here, a flare of temper there, wrong words uttered in anger. They never amounted to much, just normal tiffs. For the most part your parents resolved difficulties themselves. Only once was a council of elders summoned. Each had a say and the elders came to a decision. Your parents saw the error of their ways and patched up. Isn’t that more sensible than traipsing off to a divorce court?”

“Divorce? Must have been serious. What was their argument about?”

His grandmother puckered her brow. “Such a long time ago,” she allowed. “Can’t remember precisely. The important thing was that the dispute was solved in a fair and satisfactory way.”

“Fair and satisfactory to whom?”

“To everybody.”

“How can a decision be fair and satisfactory to everybody? It’s bound to favour one party over another. One of my parents must have had to give way more than the other.”

His grandmother shook her head. “In family matters, everyone gives way. Your parents may have had their points of view but elders also had theirs. They speak for the family, as well as for children like you whom they have fed, cuddled, played with and tended in sickness and in health. Preserving a harmonious family is a collective duty. The passing passions of individuals are secondary. Without families, there can be no society. Without families, there will not be sufficient love and attention for children, no elders to teach them right from wrong, to provide them with an assurance of security and to extend helping hands when misfortunes fall. One can rarely manage as a lonely individual adrift in a troubled world.”

Suen fell silent. He understood his grandmother’s arguments. He knew the advantages of an extended family. He remembered clearly that as a child he was never left alone. On the other hand, he couldn’t get up to much mischief either, without somebody stopping him right away.

He stared unseeingly at the ocean as he thought about the past and speculated about the future. He visualised marrying a girl like his mother, beautiful and gentle. But he would never find one at Oxford. Chinese girls must be a rarity there. No hope till he got home.

When he focused on the ocean again, it appeared as vast and mysterious as before, totally unaffected by his concerns. He searched for the flying fish but they had disappeared.

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Soon after Suen and his grandmother had taken up rooms at the Dorchester, an estate agent presented himself. Three weeks were spent viewing properties. A townhouse in Radnor Place was eventually decided upon, due mainly to its nearness to Paddington, the train station for Oxford.

The purchase of the property coincided unhappily with the

outbreak of the Korean War. Aunt Soo-Leung cabled, reporting rising tensions along Hong Kong's border with China, and advised her mother to stay put until further notice. The old lady reacted phlegmatically, however, turning her attention to renovating and furnishing the new acquisition.

Suen was less sanguine. He had an immediate premonition that the war would eventually involve China. Its borderlands were all in turmoil. India had unsettled boundaries with China and it was in chaos after partition and the assassination of Gandhi. A struggle for independence was raging in Vietnam, which too had unsettled boundaries with his homeland. The border clashes near Hong Kong merely echoed other clashes with the Soviet Union in the north. Following Truman's order to the American Seventh Fleet to prevent any attack on Taiwan, newspapers often featured wild talk about a Kuomintang invasion of the Chinese mainland. It seemed his nation was surrounded by instability.

Those worries rendered his adjustment to Britain more difficult. The London weather dismayed him. Pollution, fog and damp blackened his nostrils. The sunlight seemed so frail that it virtually expired upon hitting the ground. The atmosphere of the city itself was unremittingly gloomy, heightened by the miseries of bombed-out buildings, rationing, food shortages and rising unemployment. Some of the faces of its inhabitants seemed really to fit William Blake's description of faces bearing marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In the midst of his despondency, he came across a newspaper article about someone named Sir Percival David donating a collection of Chinese ceramics to the University of London. The article stated that among the items were forty pieces which once belonged to the Chinese Imperial Collection.

He had never heard of Sir Percival but knew a little about the Imperial Collection. Its magnificence was legendary. He asked his

grandmother how a part of it could have fallen into foreign hands.

“That’s a blot on our nation,” his grandmother explained, shaking her head with regret. “Your grandfather tried to salvage a few pieces but failed. Too many murky dealings were involved.”

According to his grandmother, when the Empress Dowager fled the Forbidden City during the Boxer Rebellion in 1901, she raised funds by pledging part of the Imperial Collection to the Yuin Yeh Bank. Subsequent governments never redeemed that loan. The bank got tired of waiting and, around 1927, rumours circulated that some pledged items were on the market. A mad scramble by both Chinese and foreign collectors ensued. Some foreigners gained a few pieces, others were scared off by death threats. Most of the items ended up in private collections or museums. The forty pieces in question must have originated from those sales.

“Any Chinese aware of their history must gaze upon their beauty with humiliation,” his grandmother said.

He felt devastated by the tale. Would the British Crown sink so low as to put its art collection in hock for ready cash? How could China’s rulers reduce the nation to such a pass?

His years at Kunming had given him a sense of national identity. His return to Hong Kong reminded him he was an anomaly, a displaced Chinese in an alienated bit of China. An accident of birth had made him a British subject, but it was clear that the British regarded him as belonging to a lesser breed without the law.

The irony was that he was also tainted in the eyes of the new Communist rulers of China. He had been born into wealth and as such was a natural class enemy. Kim had gone back to present his bona fides, both as a caring human being and as a patriot. Su was demonstrating his commitments by attacking inadequacies in the colonial system. But he, Suen, was now running away, on the alibi of furthering his education.

The truth was that he couldn't stand his ground, even on a minor matter like setting up a social club for journalists. He had allowed himself to be bullied into surrender. Perhaps the Communists had got the measure of the Hong Kong bourgeoisie. They were spineless, fit only to serve as petty clerks and running dogs.

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The refurbishing of Radnor Place was completed in a month. An Irish housekeeper was engaged to run the premises. Suen was glad when his grandmother was finally ready to begin their trips around Britain.

While the house was being made habitable, Suen busied himself with books from Foyles about the places they intended to visit. His grandmother's priority was to see Oxford. But Suen persuaded her to leave that till last. He wanted to discover as much as possible about Christ Church and the university before setting foot there.

When they eventually began their programme, they travelled in easy stages, a few days at a time, and then returned to London to rest before the next outing. They visited historic cities, stately homes, the idyllic countryside and the wilder reaches of Wales and Scotland.

One effect of those travels was the softening of Suen's antipathy towards the British. He discovered that ordinary folk had little of the sniffiness of their countrymen in Hong Kong. They were more friendly and helpful, particularly those in the smaller towns and villages. Indeed, he gradually realised that they shared many of the same attributes as the Chinese. They were fair-minded, tolerant, humane, idiosyncratic, fond of nature and strongly attached to their families and to tradition.

At the same time, they were not above cocking a snook at authority, as exemplified by the well-dressed spivs doing a roaring black

market trade along Oxford Street. They also had that wonderful ability to laugh at themselves. The British quickly grew on him.

When at last Suen and his grandmother arrived in Oxford, they stayed for five days. After checking into their hotel, he took his grandmother to Carfax. There, spreading his arms, he said: “Well, this is the centre of Oxford.”

His grandmother, dressed in her usual long-gown, looked dubiously at the weather-beaten stones around her. The pair of them, foreign-looking and ill-matched, drew curious glances.

His grandmother said nothing as her eyes travelled from the grim remains of St. Michael’s Tower to the untidy conjunction of streets at that point. He sensed that his grandmother had found the university less resplendent than she had expected from the photographs she had seen.

“Most beautiful things are inside the colleges,” he consoled.

“Hmmm,” his grandmother allowed.

Aunt Soo-Leung had presented him with a Leica camera as a going-away gift. An obliging passer-by helped them take some pictures together. He then escorted his grandmother to Christ Church.

He had devoured enough from the guide books to venture a running commentary. As they entered through Tom Tower, he commented on the magnificent quadrangle started in 1546 and the Mercury fountain at its centre. Then on the latticed windows inside the cloisters and on the stern faces of mediaeval men staring down from paintings in the halls. They peeped into the Common Rooms and living quarters, with Suen explaining that servants known as “scouts” tidied the rooms for students.

“You mean you will have a British man as your servant?” his grandmother asked with surprise.

Suen nodded.

“It would be the day when they come bearing tributes to our

imperial court again. You must pay him generously. He must not be allowed to regard Chinese as skinflints.”

“He will be paid by the college.”

“Give him generous tips then.”

Upon leaving, amused by his grandmother’s surprise over college scouts, he told her that the bells of Christ Church used to ring at nine in the evening to summon students back to the college.

“You should not be away from college after sunset,” his grandmother observed, missing the point again.

On subsequent days they visited the Bodleian and some other colleges. They took in the cloistered calm at Magdalen and strolled down Addison’s Walk. When crossing Magdalen Bridge, he pointed out that on the first morning of every May, Oxford undergraduates would jump, fully-clothed, from the bridge into the shallow Cherwell below.

“What for?” his grandmother asked, in amazement. “Some kind of initiation? Part of the ragging you spoke about?”

“No, just celebrating May Day.”

“Are they Communists?”

“Of course, not. Just high-spirited students, out for a lark, probably after an all-night party.”

“Do they get hurt?”

“Sometimes.”

His grandmother shook her head in disbelief. “Risking life and limb for a lark? You’re not to attempt any jumping,” she ordered.

“Of course I won’t, Grandma. I’m twenty years old, not still wet behind the ears.”

His grandmother raised her eyebrows good-naturedly and smiled. “You’re my only grandson. If I didn’t think you could behave sensibly I would never have allowed you to stay here on your own.”

He subsequently showed his grandmother other notable features of Oxford. He suggested she visit a famous museum called the Ashmolean but she indicated she would rather see the surrounding countryside. A chauffeur-driven car was engaged for that purpose.

The final tasks undertaken in the company of his grandmother were the opening of an account at Blackwell's and the purchase of a black commoner's gown at Shepard & Woodward. He explained, again to his grandmother's bewilderment, that a gown had to be worn when attending lectures, tutorials and other functions.

At the end of the visit his grandmother declared herself satisfied with the facilities at Christ Church and its surroundings.

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One weekend, shortly after the start of Michaelmas, Suen escorted his grandmother to Southampton to begin her homeward journey. As he bade her farewell, his grandmother made him promise to write home at least once every fortnight and not to get involved with foreign girls.

* * *

When Suen reported at Christ Church, one of his first contacts had been his tutor in Politics and Philosophy, Dr. Andrew Loughridge.

The don was tall, lean, slightly stooped and in his fifties. He occupied a wainscotted room cluttered with books. He had an unruly head of grey hair, very bushy eyebrows and a long neck. The skin around the neck was flabby, like a turkey's wattle, suggesting that he might have been stouter in his youth. A curved pipe, the kind associated with Sherlock Holmes, was clasped in a mouth filled with large, tobacco-stained teeth.

He had hazel eyes, which sparkled with good humour.

“You’re the first Chinese student I’ve ever had,” Dr. Loughridge said, when Suen presented himself. They shook hands warmly. “Your countrymen usually aim for more practical degrees.”

“We Chinese are supposed to be pragmatists, sir, but my grandmother says I was born impractical,” Suen replied, in a half-jocular vein. “I hope PPE’s the right choice for me.”

“We’ll soon find out. Oxford’s ideal for people uncertain about their futures. Our oddities and traditions will add to their confusion. This is a place for long thoughts. Knowledge is somehow scratched out, to bring a little enlightenment or benefit to mankind. Character gets moulded as well. Unlike American universities, Oxford does not seek to prepare students for employment. We try to prepare them for life. After a few years you’ll either be fit to run an empire or to become thoroughly unemployable. The choice is yours.”

“I’m not sure I’m aspiring to either, Sir,” he said, warming immediately to both his tutor and the tenor of his words.

Dr. Loughridge chuckled. His eyes crinkled and sparkled beneath his bushy brows. “Well, time will tell. My sphere’s political thought. We can start with the Greeks. Here’s the reading list.”

He pushed several sheets of paper across the desk.

“You can read as much or as little of it as you wish. But I imagine it would take a genius to produce the essays I require without some reading. You’re not a genius, are you? They’re always such a bother.”

“I assure you I’m no genius, Sir.”

“Well, we’ll wait and see. I hold weekly tutorials. More often if you wish. Lectures you’re free to attend or not. Any questions?”

“No, Sir.”

Dr. Loughridge lit his pipe, drew on it and blew a cloud of blue smoke into the air. “Mr. Lam, I see you’ve been a journalist for three years. That’s splendid. Rubbing elbows with the real world.”

Suen nodded, politely.

“I imagine most Chinese are Confucians,” Dr. Loughridge continued. “Confucian ideas have had considerable influence among Western thinkers, notably on Voltaire and Leibniz. Are you one?”

“I’m not exactly sure. Confucian and Taoist ideas are suppose to colour our lives. But my family’s not entirely strict. We don’t keep ancestral tablets in the home, for example. It has been said we’re more or less Confucians in our homes and Taoists in our gardens. And then there’s the strong influence of Buddhism. We get muddled at times.”

Dr. Loughridge nodded and puffed on his pipe for a moment. “If you wish to be muddled further, there’s no end of Christian mutterings here.”

“We’re already partly Christian, because some Christian ideas are similar to those of Confucius. Some of the Ten Commandments, for instance, not to mention the Golden Mean.”

Dr. Loughridge nodded vigorously, causing the folds of skin around his neck to wobble. “I suppose in the same way Plato might be considered part Confucian by holding that the young ought to respect the aged,” he said.

After a pause, he continued. “I’m fascinated by Taoism. I’ve been reading the Tao Te Ching recently. Its ideas seemed to challenge Plato’s concept of the plurality of Forms. The fluidity of a nothingness which cannot be named. Ah, there’s a teaser for you. Yet I can appreciate the importance of nothingness when it is pointed out that a room is given its utility only by the emptiness of the holes in its walls.

“I recently discovered that Taoism actually pre-dates Lao Tzu.

It goes back to a chap called Yang Chu, about whom little historical record is available and not much translated from Chinese. His basic idea seems to be to preserve life and to maintain what is genuine in it, without getting tangled up with things. I wonder if you can throw some light on the gentleman and perhaps explain some of the ambiguities in the original Chinese.”

“I can give it a go, Sir, but my knowledge of Taoism is less than rudimentary. I had never even heard of Yang Chu. When I was a boy, I asked my Chinese tutor to explain the Tao Te Ching after I had chanced upon it at home. He told me to leave it alone because I was too young. He said Taoism could best be appreciated during the autumn of one’s life because things that could be put into words had no importance.”

The tutor chuckled again and nodded. “At least I’m in the right age bracket. Perhaps we can share a bit of fun tackling its conundrums.”

An understanding was thus established. After tutorials the two settled down to picking through some of the obscurities in Taoism.

In reading the Tao Te Ching for the purpose, Suen came across the following passage in which Lao Tzu tried to describe the Tao:

“There is something obscure which is complete
before heaven and earth arose;
tranquil, quiet, standing alone without change,
moving around without peril.
It could be the mother of everything.
I don’t know its name, and called it Tao.”

The passage resonated with feelings he had experienced when gazing upon the ocean during his journey to England. He hadn’t been able to put what he had felt into words then. The quotation heightened the sense of something elemental but tantalisingly elusive.

As he delved more deeply into the subject, he was amazed to

discover the massive attention foreign scholars had given to Taoism. It made him ashamed he was going into it so late in the day.

His scout, Miller, turned out to be an efficient fellow, not given much to speech but with an instinctive grasp of his needs. Suen soon felt comfortable enough to delve into Taoism and even to think of finding a local bridge club to keep up with his game.

Then, suddenly, a series of events ruptured his equanimity.

The first occurred on a visit to the Ashmolean. He was surprised to find seals and other items once owned by the Emperor Chien Lung on display. He had not known they were there. How did they end up so far from home? Did they constitute more booty from the Boxer Rebellion or had they been stolen and sold by eunuchs? Or had they found their way to Oxford by paths as murky as the ceramics from the Imperial Collection? He felt upset and frustrated.

But worse was to come. In October, the thing he feared most came to pass: China entered the Korean conflict. Chinese leaders had warned that they would not tolerate the invasion of North Korea by United Nations forces. But General MacArthur ignored the warning by advancing towards the Yalu. China duly responded.

That intervention filled Suen with consternation. He was technically a British subject. But British forces were fighting his countrymen. His instinctive sympathies were with his own race. Yet his compatriots battling the British had been trained to regard people like him and his family as natural enemies. Feudal oppressors, class enemies, rich exploiters, collaborators with foreigners. Whose side should he stand on? The very fact of hiding away in the honey-stoned precincts of Oxford seemed like evading responsibilities, consorting with undesirables.

Dr. Loughridge must have sensed his angst.

“I can fully understand China’s intervention,” the tutor said,

after a tutorial. “Your country has strategic interests in Korea. The West has no business meddling there. The age of imperialism is over. Asia should be left to settle its own affairs. But people like Senator McCarthy keep ranting about Communist subversion and MacArthur is itching for a fight. If we’re not careful, another world war may erupt.”

He appreciated Dr. Loughridge’s kindness. The don’s remarks alleviated his distress, though others at Oxford appeared reluctant to discuss the war in his presence.

His relief was short-lived. America reacted against China’s entry into the war by imposing an embargo on trade which included Hong Kong. The British went lamely along. He felt outraged over Britain acting as if it had no responsibilities under the United Nations Charter for non-self-governing territories. There seemed no justice in the world.

Letters from Dum-Dum spoke of rising unemployment and a slump in his wife’s photographic business. Su reported the growth in war profiteering. His grandmother, however, only reminded him to study hard and return as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, the ferocious slaughter in Korea intensified. To make up for their technological inferiority, the Chinese employed human wave tactics, sacrificing men to overwhelm enemy positions through sheer numbers. Although that had succeeded in pushing back UN forces, he couldn’t imagine the human cost in such sacrifices.

He thought of the Japanese “kamikaze” pilots towards the end of the Pacific War, flying their suicide missions against superior Allied forces. His countrymen were doing the same in what they perceived to be their patriotic duty. By contrast, he was squatting safe but embittered and impotent, writing ridiculous essays about dead Greek philosophers.

He slept badly, often lying awake for hours trying to find a way out of his predicament. He had recurring nightmares of putting on his

quaint university gown to join a flock of crows to peck at the entrails of the dead in Korea.

He had half a mind to give up university. But he would sound absurd trying to explain his feelings to his grandmother. Moreover, the horror of an arranged marriage awaited him at home. He wondered if his father ever had to face such dilemmas.

Fearful his misery might spill out in unguarded words, he turned reclusive. Apart from lectures and tutorials, he hid himself away in his room or at the various libraries. Even his discussions with Dr. Loughridge about Greek philosophers and Taoism lost some of their sparkle. He took care to disguise his state of mind in his letters home, however, for fear of worrying his grandmother.

He turned progressively solitary. He gave up all thought of playing bridge. The only social engagements he permitted himself were the tea parties hosted by Dr. Loughridge and his wife at their home once every term. It was at such a party during Trinity that he had met Ralfie, an Englishman who extended him the hand of comradeship and taught him more about politics and life among the British upper classes than he had ever dreamt possible.