

Ralfie

When Suen arrived at Dr. Loughridge's home on the outskirts of Oxford, he found a dozen guests already gathered. They were scattered over a sizeable lawn fringed with a coy scattering of beeches, yews and elms. In spite of post-war austerity and rationing, an oblong oak table displayed a variety of sandwiches -- cheese, corned beef, cucumber and sardine. There were also slices of home-made fruit cake.

The guests appeared to be largely Dr. Loughridge's past and current students, plus a few academics from other disciplines. Suen had met a few of them previously, during lectures or at one of the earlier tea parties. The only friendship he had developed, however, was with an Indian by the name of Sanjay, a sociology student doing a doctorate.

The moment Suen turned up, Dr. Loughridge came forward to shake his hand. "Let me introduce you around," the don said.

They made a slow circuit of the lawn. Along the way, Suen exchanged greetings with Mrs. Loughridge, a lady of sizeable proportions, and made some new acquaintances. He eventually reached Sanjay, who was chatting under an elm with a tall Englishman. The Indian was wagging his head whimsically, in his habitual way.

"Confirms our worst fears, doesn't it?" he was saying, in a distinctive Indian lilt.

The Englishman was dressed in a blazer, a pair of grey trousers and a Brasenose tie. Suen had little experience at judging the ages of foreigners but he assumed the man to be in his mid-twenties and probably a postgraduate student.

"Hope we're not intruding," Dr. Loughridge began, half-apologetically. "I'd like to introduce Mr. Lam from Hong Kong. Sanjay you've met. This is Mr. Fenton, who's tenuously related to me. I'm not sure if there's a precise term to define our blood relationship. His mother, Lady Fenton, and my wife are cousins, thrice removed. What does that

make the two of us?”

“Confused,” Fenton offered, smiling and extending his hand.

“Our families haven’t been in contact in years till Ralfie -- that’s what everybody calls him -- turned up,” Dr. Loughridge explained.

“His family moves in rather more exalted circles and”

“He means in circles more mummified and starved of intellectual oxygen,” Ralfie interrupted.

“Those aren’t my words,” the don protested. “Even now we see too little of Ralfie. He’s a man of all seasons -- the cricketing season, the London season, the Ascot season, the hunting season, the grouse-shooting season and all the other seasons that the upper classes create for themselves. Sometimes I’m curious how he finds time to study.”

The men broke out in polite laughter.

After it had subsided, Dr. Loughridge said: “Ralfie’s very dear to my wife. He willingly makes up a fourth at bridge with erratic housewives. He’s an exceptional player, miles above them. Can’t imagine what pleasure he derives from their company.”

“The pleasure of fulfilling one’s duty as a relative and a gentleman,” Suen ventured, entering the spirit of the banter.

“Do you know the game, Lam?” Dr. Loughridge asked.

“I’m only a beginner, Sir.”

“I’m sure Mr. Lam is responding with Eastern self-effacement,” Ralfie interposed deftly. “I’ll wager he knows a thing or two about criss-cross squeezes and Vienna coups.”

Suen gestured self-deprecatingly. “I really am a beginner.”

“The only difference between a beginner and an expert, my dear chap, is the latter’s longer record of bad bidding and atrocious misplays. I might add that Mrs. Loughridge’s friends are most charming. Should you ever play with them, you’ll find them not the least erratic.

‘Innovative’ perhaps, or possibly ‘sui generis’.”

Dr. Loughridge held up a hand. His bushy eyebrows rose in tandem. “Before getting involved in character assassination, I must get Lam a cup of tea. We don’t have Chinese, I’m afraid.”

“English’s fine.”

“Milk and sugar?”

“Some milk and one sugar, please.”

As the host went off, Ralfie remarked with a chuckle: “I see we’re turning you into a barbarian already.”

The other two responded appropriately.

It transpired that Sanjay also played bridge. The three began discussing the tactics used in rubber as opposed to duplicate bridge.

Suen soon formed the impression that Ralfie was courteous, intelligent, charming and eminently likeable. He also had bodily grace. In short, Ralfie appeared to epitomise an English gentleman. His features came together pleasingly, except for a broken nose acquired during rugby. It had healed a fraction crookedly. In an odd way, that flaw lent character to an otherwise too handsome face. There was also an intimation of the Mediterranean in his dark hair and his sparkling eyes.

During the conversation that followed, Suen discovered that Ralfie was the only son of Sir Matthew Fenton, a well-known industrialist with a base in Birmingham.

Ralfie, in spite of his age, was still an undergraduate in his second year. He had finished Eton in time to join the war. He had participated as an infantryman in the Normandy landings and had suffered a minor wound. When his first term of service ended, he extended, in spite of his father’s wish for him to enter university.

Dr. Loughridge brought Suen’s tea and almost immediately excused himself to attend to another guest.

“You two seemed to have been deep in discussion when we intruded,” Suen said. “I hope we haven’t interrupted anything.”

“We were talking about the beastliness of the war in Korea,” Sanjay said. “Appalling carnage.”

“My dear fellow, after the last dust-up, nothing should shock us any more,” Ralfie said. “We’re perfecting killing on an industrial scale. Soon, that would pass for normality, like breathing out and breathing in.”

Suen detected a certain seriousness behind the Englishman’s off-handed remarks. But before he could respond, Ralfie spoke again, concentrating his gaze on Suen.

“No doubt you think I exaggerate. We’ve swallowed too many fashionable ideas but unleavened. Moral indigestion and intellectual paralysis have set in. Just think -- the survival of the fittest, the pursuit of self-interest, the expropriation of surplus value, the free market, might making right, rugged individualism, Smilesian self-help, the competitive spirit, the ego and the id, religion as an opiate and the old saw of ends justifying means. Is it any wonder we’re in a mess?”

Suen saw Sanjay nodding as the Englishman spoke.

“That’s a lot to take in!” Suen said, tentatively. “Fascinating set of ideas, though. Can we explore them a bit?”

“A Trinity tea party’s hardly the setting, old chap,” Ralfie answered. “We should arrange a proper chinwag some other time.”

Suen nodded. “I’d welcome that.”

Before the conversation could pick up again, Mrs. Loughridge descended upon the trio like a battle-cruiser.

“My darling boy!” the hostess exclaimed, quickly slipping an arm through one of Ralfie’s. “I’ve been telling everybody about you.”

“Nothing too defamatory, I trust,” Ralfie fired back.

“Oh, darling! You are a card.”

After exchanging a few pleasantries with the other two, the hostess commandeered Ralfie to serve sandwiches to guests.

After Mrs. Loughridge and Ralfie had moved out of earshot, Sanjay said: “Amazing fellow. Damn good cricketer. Play friendlies with him some weekends. An original thinker too.”

“Known him long?”

“A couple of years, since he’s been at Oxford.”

“Is ‘Ralfie’ derived from ‘Ralph’ or something similar?”

Sanjay emitted his lilting laugh. “No, it’s derived from the initials of his full name -- Richard Alfred Leslie Fenton. For some reason he doesn’t like any of his given names. Hence Ralfie.”

“He manages to sound at once carefree and pessimistic.”

“His enjoyment of ease and wealth amidst the Cold War, the Mau Mau in Kenya, the communal violence in India, the running sore of Palestine and the rest of the horrors bothers him.”

Sanjay’s words pricked Suen’s conscience. He too had been lucky in the lottery of life. He hadn’t done a stroke of work apart from the Herald, yet substantial sums found their way into his bank account every quarter. He couldn’t help feeling undeserving.

“Certainly a lot is wrong with the world,” Suen allowed.

“What can anyone do?”

“Ralfie thinks if we had a million Mahatma Gandhi’s we might stand a chance. But we had only one and we killed him.”

“So where do we go from here?”

“Road to perdition, I suppose,” Sanjay said. “We thought Marxism might be an answer at first. Then we saw its flaws and learnt of the ghastly goings-on behind the Iron Curtain. A terrifying paradox seems to attend successful revolutions. The brave and the idealistic sacrifice themselves for principles, only to leave the incompetent and the dishonest

holding power. A classless utopia is now more distant than ever.”

Suen nodded ambiguously. “I have to confess I know practically nothing about Marxism.”

“You’re pulling my leg!”

“No, it’s true. During the war, I was in Nationalist China. Marxism was considered subversive. In Hong Kong the British wouldn’t even allow modern Chinese history to be taught, let alone Communism. So there are real gaps in my education.”

Sanjay gave a lilting laugh. “We were luckier in India. We allowed the Brits the illusion of control and just did what we wanted. We all read Marx. But human nature is strange. When something isn’t prohibited, few bothered with it. I warrant that not one in a hundred thousand in India ever ploughed through Das Capital.”

Some other guests wandered over to join them and the conversation drifted to other topics.

When the party was on the point of breaking up, Ralfie came up to Suen and said: “I’ve got a group of friends who play penny bridge a couple of times a week. They’re pretty good. You might care to join us. The next game’s Sunday afternoon.”

“How kind of you. I’m always keen.”

“Good. You’re in college, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Christ Church.”

“Ah, yes, the House. I’ll come by the Porter’s Lodge to fetch you at two-thirty. Is that all right?”

“Excellent.”

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Ralfie’s friends turned out to be serious tournament players.

Penny bridge was intended to hone bidding and defensive skills. To that end, post-mortems followed every unusual hand.

By contrast, Ralfie just played for fun. He had great flair and an amazing card sense. His game at times bordered on the brilliant. Small wonder his friends relished practising with him. But he treated winning or losing with total indifference. His style reminded Suen of Kim.

Suen enjoyed that initial session immensely. The grounding given by Kim stood him in good stead. He lost a few shillings but he didn't mind. The group considered him a worthy participant and invited him to join the following week's session. He accepted. By then, it was approaching the end of term.

"Why doesn't Sanjay join these games?" Suen asked, as he and Ralfie left together at the end of the second session.

"He can't afford to lose," Ralfie replied. "Difficulties with exchange control in India. What are you doing over summer?"

"My grandmother has a place in London. I'll stay there, to catch up on my reading. What about you?"

"I'm obliged to go to Italy with my parents. They've a villa near Naples. After they leave, I intend to stay and learn some Italian."

"So we'll have to leave our chinwag till next term."

"Looks that way," Ralfie said.

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As Suen began his holidays in London, he reflected on the two mass campaigns being waged in China. The Three Anti's Campaign, started at the end of 1951, was for eliminating corruption, waste and bureaucratic attitudes. It was followed by the Five Anti's Campaign early in 1952 to root out bribery, tax evasion, theft of state property, illegal

building activities and espionage. While their purposes appeared unexceptionable, those in power often used them as smokescreens to eliminate political opponents and to weed out the independently minded. He feared for Kim's safety.

Those mass movements sent more refugees into Hong Kong. Tension along the borders increased. The UN embargo on trade with China also brought new hardships to the colony. Suen felt utterly cut off. He had escaped the Japanese occupation. Now, as fresh turmoil engulfed friends and family, he was once again out of harm's way.

He decided to spend the summer broadening his understanding of Taoism. It was obvious Dr. Loughridge was more familiar with Taoism than he was. He took himself to the great round reading room of the British Museum library to study Chuang Tzu, Lieh Tzu and Liu An.

Their writings baffled him as much as the Tao Te Ching. The more he read the more the Tao seemed incapable of being set down in syllogisms or sliced up like a specimen under a microscope. It might sound like profundity. Equally it might mean nothing at all.

Unable to make headway, he decided to switch to Marx, whose ideology already dominated a third of the world. It struck him, as he waded through the turgid volumes of Das Capital, how Marxist inevitabilities collided with Taoist obscurities. It didn't take him long either to notice that some of Marx's predictions had already gone awry. China's revolution, for example, had been sparked not by an exploited urban proletariat but by impoverished landless peasants. When he discovered that Marx was buried at Highgate Cemetery, he made a visit to see how he was being remembered. The modesty of his gravestone disappointed him. Sic transit gloria mundi.

Such readings and musings occupied Suen throughout summer. By the time autumn rolled around, he had accumulated a number of

questions about Marxism to put to Ralfie and Sanjay.

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Another development occurred after the start of Michaelmas. A letter came from his grandmother instructing him to call on a firm of London solicitors. She said she wanted the title of the house at Radnor Place to be transferred to him as her present for his twenty-first birthday. She also indicated that she had asked solicitors in Hong Kong to pass his trust inheritance to his own control, according to the wills of his parents.

That sudden control of wealth and property marked his coming of age. He had joined the moneyed class but he didn't know what to do with wealth. He still had to rely on his grandmother for guidance on all the important issues in life.

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The first time Suen and Ralfie met up again in the new term was at a session of penny bridge. When the session was over, they chatted about what they had done over the holidays.

“I read Marx,” Suen said.

“How dreary!” Ralfie exclaimed, pulling a bronzed face.

“I'm ready for our chinwag.”

“I've a better idea. What are you doing Tuesday evening?”

“Nothing much.”

“Good. Come to a meeting with me. Sanjay and I belong to a small informal study group. It meets the third Tuesday of every month, to chew over political issues. Roughly half the members are students. The rest include watered-down Fabians, unreconstructed Trotskyites, trade

unionists, Labour Party activists, would-be revolutionaries. Maybe even a card carrying Commie or two. Interested?”

“Why not, if they can illuminate the denser bits of Marx?”

Even as Suen accepted the invitation, he felt a twinge of nervousness. He wondered if he might be expected to express views on British colonial rule or the conflict in Korea.

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The study group met in a borrowed room in a local branch of a national trade union. When Suen and Ralfie arrived, a motley group of ten had already gathered, sitting on metal folding chairs arranged in a circle. There was no sign of Sanjay.

“Hello, everyone,” Ralfie called merrily, as he ventured inside the circle. “I’ve brought along a friend from Hong Kong. His name’s Lam Yiu-Suen. I’m keen to demonstrate that we Brits can be fun-loving and frivolous, not constantly obsessed with the fortunes of our football clubs.”

Ralfie’s remarks were met with polite laughter.

Suen, who had followed his friend into the circle, offered a series of half-bows in towards the various sub-groups formed. He was welcomed with some clapping and a murmur of acceptance.

Ralfie steered him to an empty seat and he found himself next to a tense but conservatively dressed woman in her late-twenties. She was smoking furiously and appeared down in the dumps. Ralfie introduced her as Kate, a grammar school teacher whose husband, an army reservist, had recently been called up for Korea.

“Peter didn’t become a reservist to fight against people who’ve done us no harm,” Kate complained, as they shook hands.

Suen offered commiserations. He noted that behind the haze of

cigarette smoke Kate was quite attractive. He also noted that, apart from a brooding Ceylonese, the rest of the participants were all Europeans.

Ralfie quickly got entangled in a discussion elsewhere. Snatches of talk about the inadequacies of Attlee's nationalisation attempts and the war in Korean came from around the circle.

"Keep an eye on that burly man over there," Ralfie whispered, as he sidled back. "He's a trade unionist. Usually controversial."

The meeting struck Suen as haphazard, with neither agenda nor chairman. Apparently, anyone could raise a topic for discussion. If the subject failed to spark interest, people went back to talking in sub-groups.

Two more people soon arrived, both students. One was a girl called Tina, who had a pretty freckled face and ginger hair. The other was tall and pimply and went by the name of Simon. He was patently more interested in Tina than in political issues.

Shortly after the arrival of Tina and Simon, the meeting gained cohesion when the burly trade unionist declared his opposition to the number of West Indians entering the country.

"They're depressing wages," he stressed. "Difficult enough to negotiate decent pay without foreigners undercutting us."

"They fought with us during the war," Kate offered. "They're British subjects. They've a right to come here."

"I agree," Tina said, in a soft voice. "If British workers don't want public transport jobs, no reason why others shouldn't have them."

"Workers of the world are supposed to unite, not pick on one another," Simon said, casting Tina an admiring glance.

"They're not the same as us," the burly man persisted. "Would you want neighbours shrieking at the top of their voices all the time?"

"Trade unionists on strike are not always models of decorum," Simon countered, to a ripple of laughter.

The face of the trade unionist reddened. “People who learn Socialism from books can laugh all they want. Before anyone knows it, foreigners will be practising voodoo rites and producing half-castes.”

A storm of disapproval erupted.

“Are you a Socialist or a Fascist?” a woman cried.

Ralfie jumped to his feet. “Comrades! According to our constitution, personal insults have to be exchanged by appointment only. Immigration’s a topical issue. Let’s seek illumination, not heat.”

After decorum had been restored, a bearded man spoke.

“Migrations are a fact of history,” he said, in a provincial accent unfamiliar to Suen. “Also a long-standing part of British imperial policy. African slaves to the American colonies, Chinese coolies to the Straits Settlements, indentured Indians to Fiji. Successive governments have met demands for labour without considering long-term effects. Our own country has now become a target for migrants. We have to limit intake. The character of our society is being lost.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” the Ceylonese said, gesticulating as he spoke. “Introducing large numbers of people of one race or culture into a different society must lead to problems later.”

“Races with different religions or tribal affiliations have lived together and thrived,” someone said.

“Yes, but only in small numbers until someone lights a fuse.”

“You mean by their occupiers introducing democracy, just when they’re about to leave?” Ralfie asked, breezily.

“Something like that,” the Ceylonese said.

“Democracy is what Britain stands for,” a middle-aged woman called Olivia intervened. She was a teacher and spoke like one. She wore black-rimmed glasses and had a pinched, angular face.

The Ceylonese shook his head. “One person one vote is a

recipe for trouble in societies with significant cultural, racial and religious differences. It leads to either unstable governments or a minority denied power forever. Look at the mess in India. Partitioning will keep bitterness alive for a very long time. The same problem in Ceylon, because of Tamils brought in by plantation owners. Now they don't want to leave and are demanding special treatment. Nothing but deadlock and strife in store."

"I wish Sanjay were here to talk about the partition of India," someone said.

"Partitioning or not, it's not our problems now," Olivia said, with a toss of her head. "We've washed our hands. If people want independence, let them sort out their own problems."

"We created them," Kate said, evenly.

"Yes, yes," the Ceylonese concurred.

Olivia gave another toss of her head and looked down her nose. "We can't deal with other people's problems," she pronounced.

"Your position might be more tenable if we were prepared to allow the Koreans to deal with theirs," Kate added.

Olivia adjusted her spectacles irritably. "Korea's different," she snapped. "We're part of a UN force to defend Korean freedom."

"To defend all their freedoms?"

"Certainly."

"Including their freedom to eat dog meat?"

"Certainly not! Dogs have a special place in our culture. If we're shedding blood for them, the least they can do is to respect our sensitivities. The practice is abhorrent."

Ralfie broke into the exchange. "Lam, the Chinese eat dog too, don't they?" he asked.

Suen was surprised to find himself thrust into the centre of such an argument. "Yes," he said, hesitantly. "Some do. Mainly chow pups,

preferably black. Their meat is supposed to keep people warm in winter.”

The statement startled Olivia into crying: “Black pups! Keeping people warm! Hasn’t that practice been stopped ages ago?”

“The Hong Kong government did ban the sale of dog meat but it didn’t do much about enforcement. The odd prosecution, when a case is stumbled upon. For the most part, people just continued to eat as before, though with greater circumspection.”

“That’s scandalous!” Olivia fidgeted in her seat. Her body language bristled with disapproval, as if such a barbaric practice should never have been allowed under British jurisdiction.

Suen resented her attitude. He personally did not care much for dog meat but he did not see the difference between eating one kind of animal as opposed to another. He couldn’t suffer the woman’s manners.

“Actually,” he added, with feigned innocence, “many British officials have developed a taste for dog meat.”

“How disgusting! I shall complain to my MP.”

Laughter greeted her outburst, with Kate laughing louder than most. Leaning closer to Suen, she whispered: “Can’t stand that woman.”

The bearded man regained the floor and said: “We’re getting away from immigration. In a way, though, this dog meat touches the heart of the issue. Politicians talk blithely about integrating immigrants. They forget that what is considered reasonable in one culture may be regarded as obnoxious in another. Integration can only succeed if the immigrants or the host nation is willing to forego a part of its traditions. Without compromise the seeds of conflict will be sown. Even if foreigners adopt our ways, they will still stand out by virtue of the colour of their skin. We’ve all heard them referred to as ‘wogs’.”

Ralfie intervened at once. “Let me assure my Asian friends that none of us present here ever use such a pejorative term.”

Some clapping and cries of “Hear! Hear!” met his remark.

Suen smiled towards the gathering and nodded his acknowledgement of the group’s sentiments. In truth, he did not mind being called a “Westernised Oriental Gentleman”. That was precisely what he was -- an Easterner enjoying temporarily hospitality in a foreign land.

“We often welcome foreigners,” Tina declared. “Many European cities host Chinatowns and Jewish quarters, leaving them to follow their own customs.”

“The very existence of such enclaves represents a failure of integration,” the bearded man replied. “That is toleration at best. Look at places where co-existence is being marred by repeated bloodlettings, between Hindus and Muslims in India or Jews and Arabs in Palestine.”

“Jews are a special case,” Ralfie observed. “Some were prepared to be secularised after the Napoleonic wars but the majority felt integration robbed them of identity. They keep clinging to their own culture and dreaming of an ancestral homeland in Palestine. That’s part of the reason they haven’t been welcomed in most countries. Well, they’ve now created -- by hook and by crook -- the state of Israel. Let’s see if they can treat outsiders any better than they’ve been treated themselves.”

“That’s just the problem, isn’t it?” the Ceylonese said. “People shouldn’t dream about lost homelands or what their forefathers once had. Otherwise, irredentist upheavals will never end. In the case of Palestine, what are the displaced Arabs supposed to do? Wait another two thousand years before reclaiming their homes?”

“All this talk of homelands and ancient history is a diversion,” someone cried. “If we believe in Marx, the entire world will become everybody’s homeland when a classless society has been achieved.”

“What if Marx is wrong?” a student asked.

An ominous hush descended.

The student glanced self-consciously at the disapproving faces around the circle. “To be scientific, we should consider all possibilities, shouldn’t we?” he asked. “According to Marx, there are only two great economic forces in the world -- capital and labour. The rich nations want to be able to invest their capital freely everywhere. But workers from poor nations cannot freely go to sell their labour in high-wage economies. That appears like a conspiracy against workers. The socialist countries won’t let them out, the capitalist ones won’t let them in. The Soviets are retreating to talk about socialism in one country rather than world revolution.”

“That’s revisionism!” someone shouted.

“Stalin has betrayed the revolution,” a Trotskyite yelled.

Uproar followed. Arguments flew thick and fast. They were at times acrimonious and at other times barely coherent. No consensus was reached by the time the meeting broke up.

Afterwards, Ralfie said: “Well, now you’ve sampled Marxism in its various guises, from high purpose to low farce.”

“It has been an eye-opener,” Suen replied. “That student’s observation about the lack of symmetry in the movements between capital and labour is worth thinking about.”

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The week after the meeting of the study group, Suen and Ralfie played bridge and both won a few shillings.

“Let’s go for a pint,” Ralfie suggested.

“I don’t drink,” Suen replied.

“What? I thought Chinese poets and painters were prodigious drinkers. Some of the most celebrated were reputedly incapable of inspiration unless drunk.”

“I’m neither poet nor painter.”

“Well, you have to start somewhere. Become a drinker first and art might follow.”

Ralfie clasped an arm around Suen’s shoulders, in the way that Kim had previously done, and steered him towards the Cornmarket, explaining that British pubs were social gathering places, each with a core of regulars. The one they were heading for hosted an assortment of aspiring novelists, poets, composers and painters.

“This particular lot,” Ralfie warned, “also thinks the artistic life cannot properly begin until one is good and soused.”

Suen noticed at once on entering the pub that Ralfie was as welcomed there as at the study group and the bridge sessions. He was greeted by a group of men in their thirties. Several hugged him and two or three planted kisses on his cheeks in the continental fashion.

When Ralfie introduced Suen, the crowd reacted with curiosity. Several studied him surreptitiously out of the corners of their eyes, as if uncertain of the affiliation between Ralfie and his guest.

When Ralfie announced that Suen was about to be introduced to alcohol, there was a stir. A stranger to alcohol was apparently rarer than a blue moon to them.

One of them, a lean, middle-aged man wearing a goatee, grabbed Suen by the shoulders without ceremony and appraised him at arm’s length. “Very fine features,” he declared. “I should gladly record them for posterity, in the manner of Hogarth, before and after the passage of demon drink between his lips.”

“Naughty, Maurice, naughty,” someone cautioned. “How discourteous to imply that our guest might turn either harlot or rake.”

“Implied nothing of the sort,” Maurice protested. “The gentleman strikes me as an Eastern scholar. Whether he can withstand our

excesses is a matter of some interest.”

“You’re holding up the business at hand, Maurice,” one of the group cried. “If we have to wait for you to finish yelping before drinking, we’ll all die of thirst.”

“Who would want to be painted by a mere illustrator of children’s comics?” another teased.

Maurice ignored the ribbing and turned to Suen. “I request your kind permission to paint you, Sir,” he said.

Suen felt under pressure. He had no particular wish to be painted by someone he had just met. But the request was obviously friendly and he felt obliged to respond accordingly. “I should be honoured, Sir, if you consider me a suitable subject.”

“There!” Maurice declared, triumphant. “Let me treat you to your first pint.”

“Not so fast,” Ralfie cut in. “The gentleman is my guest. The first pint’s my prerogative.”

When the drink arrived, Suen was assured by the group it was their tradition for the first pint to be drunk in one go. He suspected they were making sport of him but he entered the spirit of the occasion. He emptied the mug to the accompaniment of cheers. The beer made him feel heady and bloated, though the taste was not unpleasant. A second mug soon appeared and it dawned on him he had been admitted into their company.

He settled comfortably among his new companions, enjoying in particular their arguments over literature, the theatre and the arts. Many subjects were unfamiliar to him but they quickly captured his interest. In that way he became acquainted with the Impressionists and the works of D.H. Lawrence and George Orwell.

The agreement to pose for Maurice was not forgotten. Each

time he and Ralfie visited the pub, he would make a prior appointment to pose for Maurice at the latter's workplace. All three would proceed to the pub together. The artist, however, never allowed him to see the work in progress.

By the end of the Michaelmas, Maurice had completed his project. One day, by appointment, he showed Suen and Ralfie a set of four pen and ink drawings, done in the detailed style of Hogarth but with considerable artistic licence. They purported to record Suen's various visits to the pub, depicting him acting contrary to tradition by wearing a black commoner's gown and a Mao cap. He always appeared in the midst of an inebriated bedlam.

Suen thought the representations lacked Hogarth's satirical bite, but good manners dictated ritual compliments. It soon became clear that Maurice expected more than praise. He was left in a quandary.

Chinese artists refrained from associating their work with monetary considerations. Gifts were deemed the only appropriate currency between friends. Though Maurice was not a close friend, offering payment appeared unseemly. The appropriate amount to offer also foxed him.

Before he could decide on how to respond, Ralfie defused the situation. "They're very good, Maurice," he said, in the indulgent tones of an expert appraiser. "What do you want for them?"

"Why haggle between friends?" Maurice replied. "If you like them, just pay me what you think they're worth."

Ralfie handed Maurice ten pounds which seemed to satisfy him. They then went together to the pub.

At the end of an otherwise agreeable evening, Ralfie said: "I sensed you were not much taken by Maurice's pictures."

Suen signalled his ambivalence.

"Mind if I keep them?"

“By all means. You’ve paid for them.”

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By the time the Hilary term came around, Suen and Ralfie had become firm friends. Ralfie suggested it was the done thing to keep some sherry in his room to entertain visitors. Suen complied. They then fell into visiting each other’s rooms to chat over glasses of sherry, with Sanjay joining them from time to time.

Suen was sometimes confounded by Ralfie. The only clear thing he could detect after associating with him for a year was that he seemed the hub of a fantastic wheel, with spokes radiating in all directions -- cricket, rugby, bridge, political studies, pub visits, balls and social activities too numerous to list. Dr. Loughridge had hit the nail on the head. How did the man ever find time to study? But he appreciated the activities his friend had brought into his life. They helped to keep loneliness at bay.

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Around the middle of Hilary, Ralfie and Sanjay visited Christ Church for drinks. On that very same morning, Suen had received from Su some Chinese newspaper cuttings accusing America of dropping bacteria, insects and decaying animal parts over Korea and northeast China, causing civilian deaths from plague, anthrax and encephalitis. America denied the allegations, branding the confessions from captured airmen as fakes, obtained under torture.

“Heard about the allegations of germ warfare?” Suen asked.

“I did spot a report in one of the broadsheets,” Sanjay said.

“Whether true or not, we’re a step closer to the Apocalypse,

dear boys,” Ralfie said, light-heartedly, as he accepted a glass of sherry. “Quite the in-weapon these days. We Brits have been hard at it at Porton Down, with seized Nazi data. We’re definitely in the twilight of civilisation.”

“How can people deploy such awful weapons against fellow human beings? How can decent scientists be parties to developing them?” Suen cried with dismay. “Plato had warned against practising science without virtue. What’s happened to his warning?”

“Gone with the wind,” Ralfie said. “The game’s up. Science and technology have outstripped man’s capacity to handle them.”

“Can’t anybody see we’ve got enough weapons to destroy the world several times over already?” Suen cried.

“Ah, if only we were living under philosopher-kings,” Sanjay said. “But the world hasn’t been blessed with too many of them.”

“Isn’t democracy supposed to be the best alternative?”

“We need neither democracy nor philosopher-kings.” Ralfie interjected. “What we need is for every age to produce enough individuals who can set examples, people as incorruptible as Fabricius, as true to their word as Regulus. Unfortunately, our modern education seems to produce mainly those seeking Easy Street.”

China, too, once used to produce men of integrity like Wat Yuen and Ngok Fei, Suen thought. But only slogan-shouters and time-servers seemed to rule the roost nowadays.

Suddenly, he heard Ralfie chuckling.

“Cheer up, old chap,” his friend said, as if he could read his thoughts. “Whatever reform you’re mulling, you’re at least a couple of generations too late. Not much hope of turning things around. The twilight age is upon us. Only hedonists stand half a chance of coping. In that spirit, another glass of your most excellent sherry, if you please.”