

The Return of the Native

After gaining a First, Suen decided to stay for graduation at the Sheldonian in July. His grandmother wanted to attend but lacked a reliable travelling companion. Aunt Soo-Leung, who might otherwise have accompanied her, was unavailable, having gone to America to visit Hing at a university there.

As Suen waited for the graduation ceremony, announcement came that an armistice in Korea would be finally signed on June 27. An exchange of prisoners was to follow.

He rang Kate, wanting to see her again. He suggested she might care to spend a few days at Radnor Place, hoping against hope that he might somehow steal another slice of togetherness before their pact on cutting losses took effect. But in the end, their parting took the form of a few hopeless words uttered over the telephone.

For days, he went about unable to make up his mind regarding Radnor Place. He considered briefly disposing of it but some sixth sense told him that it could serve as a retreat later in life. He eventually decided to keep it.

When he visited his solicitors to arrange for the outgoings of the house to be paid, he was alerted to the fact that he could not simply lock the place up and disappear. Many empty homes had been broken into by squatters, he was told. Getting rid of them was tedious and cumbersome, and sometimes even impossible. He therefore had to find a reliable estate manager to keep an eye on the property. That necessitated a further delay.

Just when he thought he was ready to book a flight home, his grandmother insisted that he should return by sea, because she still considered air travel to be unsafe. Though he did not relish the prospect of spending another month on a ship, he had no choice but to humour her.

To while away the time on the return trip, he read half-heartedly. More often than not, he simply stared reflectively at the sea, just

as he had done during the outward journey. Each time he did so, he experienced afresh the unsettling sense of his own insignificance. The sea seemed infinite, with strange lands and peoples beckoning from beyond the horizon. Yet, how much could anyone discover in one lifetime?

The three years in England had gone with the after-vaguenesses of a long dream. What stayed with him most vividly was not so much the formal requirements of the university but the people who had touched him. Ralfie and Sanjay juggling ideas for salvage in a world going out of kilter. Dr. Loughridge steering him towards the original obscurities of the Tao. Kate teaching him to cut losses in affairs of the heart. Yet he had hesitated and vacillated over so many things, leaving bubbles of emptiness within himself.

He arrived back in Hong Kong in late October, to a severe drought which necessitated water rationing. His eyes moistened at the sight of his grandmother and Ah Loy. His grandmother's hair had turned more grey and she had started to use a bamboo walking stick. Only Ah Loy looked unchanged.

"Ai-yeh! You've lost weight," Ah Loy pronounced, in chiding tones. "You haven't been eating properly."

"We must see to that," his grandmother agreed.

"I'm all right. I'm fine," he protested.

Nonetheless, Ah Loy's home cooking was a delight, especially her soups. He ate ravenously, overseen by both his grandmother and the old servant. He made a point of spending the first few days catching up on developments during his absence and re-establishing himself in the grand old house. His greatest joy was to re-occupy the bedroom of his childhood.

He had also brought back sufficient books to stake a claim to the study, which hitherto had been largely occupied by books and artifacts left by his father and grandfather.

As he had expected, his grandmother wasted no time in touching upon his need to find both a wife and a job. In respect of the former, he readily acquiesced because he knew that Aunt Soo-Leung would not be back from America for at least another month. In any case, he could always play that game long.

As for an occupation, he prevaricated. He reminded his grandmother that he needed time to settle down. It was in any case not customary to seek fresh employment until after the new year. In reality he could not think of any job he wanted.

When he eventually ventured out into the town, the dissonances of Chinese colours delighted him. Signboards and pillars outside tenement shops proclaimed in riotous hues their names and trades. The shops conveyed a comforting sense of disorder. Different businesses huddled together haphazardly, at the whims of departed forebears rather than to the dictates of planning authorities. A noodle restaurant might nestle between a stationer's and a maker of bridal gowns, a haberdashery next to a photographic studio. From domestic quarters above each shop, freshly-laundered clothes fluttered from bamboo drying poles, jostling for space between the forest of garish commercial signs. They looked like outlandish banners from a bygone age

His ears, too, responded to Eastern sounds. The rhythmic chants of coolies on the waterfront, mingling with the importuning cries of hawkers. The haggling of shoppers competing with the shrillness of children at play. Occasionally, the yelping of a stray dog or the lamentations of a beggar added to the medley.

The odour of newly slaughtered meat and the tang of fresh seafood assailed his nostrils as he approached the Central Market, accompanied by the clip-clop of the wooden clogs of market workers and the cackling of imprisoned fowl.

In the more westernised parts of the city, the shops offered a more cosmopolitan veneer. Their picture windows displayed imported European shoes, handbags, cosmetics, fashion accessories and fabrics, all the longed-for comforts and the foreign chic to tantalise expatriates and local tai-tais alike.

He watched pedestrians eddying around the shop windows, pointing, considering, discussing, laughing. Such harmless preoccupations had diverted them from the upheavals in China and the bloodletting in Korea. The advantages of living in a fast-paced fools' paradise, he thought.

As for himself, he felt with a stab of nostalgia that many aspects of life would never be the same again. For a start, there were many more people with non-Cantonese features on the streets. Their arrival had turned the place into one of the most densely populated cities in the world. There were more squatter areas than there used to be. He had read that a quarter of a million people now found shelter in the hovels built on arid hillsides. The fact that the colony was experiencing a prolonged drought must add to their miseries. He thought once again of Ho Yin and her children.

He noted that tall concrete structures had sprung up to dominate the more traditional buildings in the heart of the city, no doubt to meet the growing demand for office space. Above the city, on the higher reaches of Victoria Peak, modern apartment blocks were also eating into the hillside. The mania to build had been spurred by the availability of refugee capital and refugee labour. On average, construction capital could be recouped in four to five years. Naturally, scenic beauty and cultural heritage played second fiddle in such circumstances. According to his grandmother, Uncle Pak's company had already prospered beyond the dreams of avarice.

Motorised traffic had remained relatively light in spite of so

much development. There were more cars and lorries, to be sure, but stretches of roads in the centre of town could still be reserved for lady drivers who wished to park and shop. But the colony's narrow and winding thoroughfares, originally designed for sedan chairs, rickshaws and trams, increasingly had to accommodate other forms of transport.

Sedan chairs disappeared after the war. Rickshaw numbers had been steadily reducing, for want of fresh entrants to that harsh calling. A few remained outside Star Ferry terminals, however, plied by aging opium addicts to indulge the whimsy of foreign visitors. Only the green-painted trams continued to trundle like behemoths along their predestined tracks.

While economic progress was being made, political uncertainties continued. Although the uneasy Korean armistice was holding, tensions remained high at the colony's borders. A confrontation at sea had occurred just before Suen's return. A Royal Navy launch on patrol in international waters had been engaged by Chinese naval forces, leaving seven dead and five wounded among the British vessel's crew of fourteen.

Such deadly engagements were not isolated. Similar skirmishes occurred regularly between Communist and Kuomintang forces farther north, in the Taiwan Straits. Apart from Taiwan, the Kuomintang forces were entrenched on two clusters of islands close to the mainland called Matsu and Kinmen. In a bizarre twist, the two warring sides agreed to shell each other only on alternate days.

Suen wondered why such mutually beneficial schemes had not been put in place during the Spanish or American civil wars. Were the Chinese odder or less capable of putting their hearts into fighting with their own people?

Such tensions resulted in not only a robust British garrison in the colony but also a strong American naval presence in the Taiwan Straits. Tens of thousands of American servicemen came for "rest and recreation".

The traditional dance halls and nightclubs were not welcoming of foreigners, however. Their honey-voiced girls had been trained for decorous local dalliances rather than for the liquor-fuelled exigencies of Westerners. Moreover, language barriers hampered the subtleties of negotiations.

As a consequence, a crop of massage parlours, bars and other night haunts burgeoned for that new clientele. A corps of pidgin-speaking pimps and madams quickly emerged. But what stumped them still was the difficulty in differentiating between American servicemen and members of the British garrison when out of uniform. Such a distinction was a matter of commercial importance, for British troops had far less money to spend.

One madam, with typical Hong Kong ingenuity, rose to the challenge. She taught her girls to distinguish by smell. She asserted that Americans smelt like Old Spice, a popular American aftershave. That method rapidly gained acceptance as a ready test.

Another sign of economic revival was the increase in the number of banks and goldsmiths shops, some re-located from Canton. Gold had long been regarded by the Chinese as a convenient form of portable wealth, particularly during times of uncertainty. Its import had been severely restricted, however, because the colony was part of the Sterling area. Whitehall needed the earnings from Hong Kong to bolster Britain's shaky balance of payments. British ministers and Treasury mandarins were loath to waste those earnings to satisfy an alien habit in a far corner of the globe.

But gold dealers and smugglers were ingenious. They simply met the demand by smuggling gold in from Macau, which -- being legally a part of metropolitan Portugal -- had no restriction on the importation of bullion.

Suen had read of a woman arriving on a ferry from Macau with

a baby strapped to her back. She stumbled and fell while crossing the gangplank. Fellow passengers rushed to her aid and soon discovered the child was dead. When the police came they found the child, a girl, had been disembowelled and stuffed with gold bars. The woman claimed she had been engaged merely to deliver the child to her relatives in Hong Kong. She was sentenced to gaol, the gold bars were confiscated and the body of the child was sent back to Macau for further investigation.

Entrepreneurial spirit at its extreme, Suen reflected with disgust. Smuggling in Chinese rice wine and tobacco was an everyday occurrence. So was counterfeiting of everything from luxury soaps and branded milk powder to banknotes. The fixing of some of the horse races at Happy Valley was also suspected by many.

As Suen sauntered towards the Western District, the oldest part of the city, he looked forward to hearing about the latest scams from his former colleagues.

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The Blue Bird Cafe was still the late afternoon meeting place for reporters covering the Central Magistracy. When Suen turned up, he was greeted with enthusiasm and many slaps on the back. He found one or two new faces but Dum-Dum still ruled the roost. Su, now more mellowed, was also present.

“Are you going to re-enter the fold?” someone asked.

“Haven’t decided yet but it’s good to be back,” Suen replied. His spirits lifted at the sight of so many familiar faces.

Questions came at him thick and fast, on his educational experiences at Oxford and on the number of English girls he had seduced. Suen answered the former to the best of his ability and fended off the latter,

saying he had adhered to a strict regime of chastity at university. That answer met with hoots of derision.

“That’s rich!” somebody said. “Coming from the youngest among us who got so thick so quickly with Mona Shen.”

“We were just friends. Nothing serious,” Suen stressed.

“She’s no longer working at her former nightclub,” Dum-Dum interjected. “She’s found herself a patron.”

“A sugar daddy, you mean,” somebody said.

“Hey, Brother Suen, now that you’re back, you may still be in with a chance,” another voice said. “She’s quite a looker.”

“Look, fellows, that’s in the past,” Suen said. “I haven’t been in touch with that girl for almost four years.”

When the chaffing had subsided, he turned to Dum-Dum and asked: “Any news of Kim?”

The veteran reporter shook his head. A grimace exposed his rabbit’s teeth. “With so many rectification campaigns over there, he must be in the thick of them,” he said.

“Poor Kim,” someone else said. “We miss him.”

Suen nodded. “Are the Friday games still going strong?”

“Sure,” Su said. “We’ll expect you next Friday, the same old time, the same old place.”

“Are we any closer to forming a social club?”

It was now Su’s turn to pull a face. “Talk about dead hands clutching at the brakes of progress!” he spat with disgust.

“You can’t blame publishers entirely. Advertising hasn’t been good,” Dum-Dum said. “No one wants to rock the boat.”

Suen nodded again. Then, turning to Dum-Dum and Su, he added: “I’d like to have a chat with the two of you. Are you all right for dinner tomorrow?”

“Sure,” Dum-Dum said.

“I’m okay,” Su said.

“Good, let’s meet at the Parisian Grill at seven.”

Suen stood up. “Have to run, chaps,” he declared to the gathering at large. “We’ll get together again soon. Don’t want to slow your trade in information. Good to see the same old monkey tricks.”

* * *

The three friends met at the Parisian Grill, a quiet restaurant noted for its French cuisine. Its prices, though reasonable, were normally beyond the purses of Dum-Dum and Su. The three of them ate a leisurely, reminiscing meal, washed down by a fine Burgundy. When the dessert of tarte tatin was being served, Suen came to the point of his invitation.

“I need some advice,” he said. “My grandmother expects me to find a job but I cannot think of any I’d like. Any suggestion?”

“Come back into the profession, of course,” Su said, without hesitation. “You know in your bones you’re one of us.”

“Yes,” Dum-Dum concurred. “But not to reporting. You’ve invested too much in education. Aim for the editorial page.”

Suen shook his head several times. “Too inexperienced to make a good commentator,” he said. “It’s scandalous, though, that reporters should be so badly paid. The trouble is we’re not united enough or broad-minded enough to act together.”

“It’s humiliating, I know, but I’ll tell you why I’ve stuck with it,” Dum-Dum said. “Sure, I’m exploited. But I exploit my position in return. If I wasn’t a reporter, I wouldn’t have the connections to further my wife’s photographic business. That’s the truth.”

“I do it to gain a voice,” Su declared, dispiritedly.

“A voice?” Suen echoed and recalled Kim’s observation that the poor needed journalists to voice the realities of their lives. But even a million voices wouldn’t change anything here. “You think those clowns in the establishment give two hoots about what appears in the Chinese press?”

“I don’t give a damn about the Brits,” Su retorted. “They’re going to be thrown out sooner or later. What I care about are my own people, so submissive, fatalistic, ignorant, accepting everything thrown at them so long as their bellies are not too empty. I want to shake them out of their stupor.”

Su turned to look at his host beadily.

“You remember that piece you did on the plight of hawkers?” he said. “That was impressive. You articulated their sufferings, their entrapments by the British legal system. You got many wondering why things should be that way. You started a process of education. You should continue it. A number of Chinese papers would be delighted to have you write for them.”

Suen felt embarrassed. He had spoken out too quickly years earlier and his outburst had led to Kim losing his job. He was fearful of getting involved in another crusade, although he envied Su his determination to kick against the pricks.

But Dum-Dum interrupted his thoughts. “No,” the veteran reporter said. “I don’t think that meets either of Suen’s objections -- lousy pay and lack of impact. He must get back into one of the English dailies.”

“A fat chance,” Suen said. “After what happened at the Herald, I’m probably on every black list.”

“You’ll never know unless you try. I hear the Telegraph’s looking for subs on its Foreign News Desk. You’ve got the English, which we haven’t. At least a sub’s pay is more reasonable.”

“He’ll be wasting his time behind a desk,” Su objected. “He’s

meant to be in the field, investigating, analysing and exposing things like the black ops we've been talking about."

Suen looked surprised. "What black ops?" he asked.

Dum-Dum and Su eyed each other. "You tell him," Dum-Dum said. "You're more familiar with what's happening."

"We think there's something fishy going on over enforcing the embargo on trade with China," Su said.

"You mean smuggling and war-profiteering?"

"Yes, but it goes far beyond that. I didn't commit the important bits to paper, for fear of my letters going astray."

The restaurant was only half-full and the adjacent tables were empty. Nonetheless Su glanced around and lowered his voice before continuing.

"Everybody knows there are smuggling routes between here, Macau and the mainland. This place is crawling with CIA and MI-6 operatives and Special Branch agents, posing as publishers, missionaries and what-not. Nonetheless, vast quantities of strategic goods are still getting through. If the Brits were serious, why hadn't that been stopped?"

"Well, we locals are pretty clever and government officials are seldom as smart as they ought to be," Suen offered.

"Perhaps they're not so dumb either. Let me give you just one example. Cheung Chau Island's a well-known staging post. Smuggling's been thriving there throughout the Korean conflict."

"You mean the police have been paid off?"

Su pulled a face. "Perhaps something more complicated. The police presence there has been one Chinese corporal and one constable. Why, at such a vulnerable spot? Their higher-ups must have posted them there for a purpose. They can't really expect them to stop major smuggling on their own. They're completely exposed. They must expect those poor

sods to be intimidated. Or at least accept bribes, to turn a blind eye. So can the authorities be serious about stopping smuggling?”

Suen nodded in acknowledgement of the thesis. But his brow knitted in bafflement. “Anyone serious about enforcement should have assigned at least a European sub-inspector there.”

“Precisely. I can take you to Cheung Chau tomorrow and show you the heavy duty tyres, the drums of lubricating oil, equipment for field hospitals, ingots of specialised steel, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, antibiotics and so forth.”

“How does that stuff get over there?”

“Shipped over openly on ferries or cargo junks every day. Just domestic traffic. Nobody pays any attention even though the island hasn’t got a decent road or a clinic. Obviously someone is waiting for a moonless night, with favourable winds and tide. If someone like me can figure that out, why hasn’t anybody else?”

“That does sound rather intriguing. If that stuff’s going to China, why would the Brits and Yanks allow it, when the lives of their own troops are at risk?”

Dum-Dum, who had been quietly enjoying his tarte tatin, now re-entered the conversation.

“At first, we thought it was one of those typical British fudges,” he said. “They’re responsible for the running of this place and are dependent on cheap Chinese food. If they get tough, the Communists might retaliate by cutting off supplies. This place’ll be in a total mess. Food can’t be flown in because flights have to cross Chinese air space. We figured the Brits are turning a blind eye. Live and let live. But wait till Su tells you the rest of his discovery.”

Su picked up the story. “I’ve established that some of the antibiotics being shipped out are fakes, worthless, filled with chalk or flour.

I've also traced their source. They're being produced by a rascal in Wing Kut Street, right in the middle of town."

"A fraud? Why haven't the police stepped in?"

"How? For what? It's not a crime to produce capsules filled with chalk or flour. It's supply and demand. If someone's willing to pay for chalk capsules, people produce chalk capsules. It's called free trade."

"But if the capsules are being palmed off as antibiotics, that's fraud. Lives would be at risk."

"Ah, yes, but where's the proof of misrepresentation? Besides, if fakes are shipped out, only enemy lives are at risk. You're overlooking the wonders of British law. Guilt has to be proved beyond reasonable doubt. Ostensibly, the rascal's just selling chalk capsules. Let's face it, do you expect any communist agent to come before a British court and admit to buying antibiotics to smuggle to the People's Liberation Army? No witness, no evidence, no case."

"That's not the whole story either," Dum-Dum said. "My sources tell me that sand has been found in some of the lubricating oil. Some of the other pharmaceuticals are said to be contaminated. I think the Chinese are alive to such risks. After all, what can they expect when they deal with war-profiteers?"

Suen put on an acid look. "Have we sunk so low as to put lives at risk for money?"

"Well, not all of us," Su said. "There are a few patriots left. But for every one of those there are probably ten scoundrels. You can see some of the latter around town, wearing oily smiles. But the Communists'll settle scores with them in due time."

The waiter came by to serve coffee and the three friends lapsed into silence. Su began tackling his tarte tatin.

After sipping coffee and reflecting for a while, Suen said: "If

the Chinese know about the fakes, why do they still buy them?”

Su had his mouth full with dessert.

Dum-Dum answered for him. “To maintain the illusion that they don’t know.”

“What for?”

“To get some genuine stuff through. Bluff and double-bluff. If authorities here figure the fakes can do enough harm to offset the benefits, they let other supplies through as well.”

Su, after swallowing his food, added: “It’s a bit of insurance. Neither side wants an open row. This way, no loss of face is involved. The charade continues.”

“What devious webs we weave!” Suen exclaimed. “I don’t think I belong to this town any more.”

“Don’t say that!” Dum-Dum said, with a lit cigarette dangling from his lips. “You’ve been in academia too long. You need time to get back into the swing of things.”

Suen waved his hand in denial.

A loaded silence descended upon the table. After an uneasy interval Dum-Dum exhaled a cloud of smoke and said: “I’ve got an idea. If you can’t stand journalism, what about working for the government? You might find out more secrets.”

“You crazy?” Su cried. “You want Suen to become a running dog, a collaborator?”

Dum-Dum held up a hand. “Not as crazy as it sounds.”

Turning to Suen, he continued: “At around the time you left for Oxford, the authorities decided to admit a limited number of Chinese graduates with honours degrees into the Administrative Service. That’s the top cadre in government, the policy-making lot. The competition’s keen, mind you, limited to only one qualified Chinese a year, compared with any

number of Europeans. But it does offer a chance for a local to become a policy-maker.”

“Aren’t the Brits a hundred years too late?” Suen scoffed.

“Suen’s right,” Su interjected. “Too little, too late. One a year’s just window-dressing, like those obedient moneybags they appoint to the Legislative Council. They still don’t trust us. To hell with them. Let them stew in their own juices. Why should Suen damage his good name on their account?”

“Damage his name? I only suggested a civil service job.”

“My dear Elder Brother, how many decades do you figure it’ll take for a Chinese entering their service now to get into a position of real authority? Well before that happens, China would have taken this place back. Where would Suen be then? Compromised for life. I still say he should stick with us and continue the fight.”

Suen shook his head slowly. “It’s futile. We’re all just pawns in some geopolitical game.”

Dum-Dum stubbed out his cigarette and said: “Look, there’s always some contribution a man can make. He doesn’t have to set the world on fire.”

“I don’t know, Dum-Dum. I came to you chaps for advice. You’ve left me more lost than ever. I’m through with tilting at windmills.”

The waiter came by to offer cognacs and liqueurs. But it was late. The three friends decided to call it a night.

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The conversation at the Parisian Grill oppressed Suen. His home town had definitely changed. The goings-on described by Dum-Dum and Su were no longer the time-honoured thumbing of a nose at foreign

authority. Something more sinister was involved, an acceptance of harm to others for the sake of profit. Confucian scholars had been warning against that for over two thousand years. What could he do? He was impotent, useless, even in his own home town.

He went down to the Blue Bird a couple of times for tea and he rejoined the Friday gatherings for bridge and mah jong. But he felt increasingly like a man already in the process of being displaced, like one visiting a private club where his bar chits were questionable and his dues decidedly in arrears.

What did people expect from him, he wondered tetchily. He knew what his grandmother wanted. What did Su and Dum-Dum want? Each was urging him to go in a different direction, both of which seemed futile and unproductive.

Stumped for an occupation, he thought fleetingly of learning the zither. Tutor Tseng had asserted that no one could be considered a gentleman without some mastery of music. But his restless mood was against it. His calligraphy, which he had thoroughly neglected at Oxford, showed at a glance that his spirit was awry.

For days he wandered aimlessly through the streets and byways of the town, a dark cloud of incomprehension following him like a shadow. The more he saw, the more he felt trapped and out of place. People all around were getting on with their lives, working and playing, buying and selling, attending to their families and planning for the future. Only he remained aimless and unemployed, waiting for the dreaded advent of an unwelcome betrothal. Then what? Raising children when he himself felt so utterly lost?

One day, when wandering down Peddar Street in a particularly melancholy mood, he suddenly heard a woman's voice hailing him.

He turned and saw bearing down upon him a lady in a knee-

length Chinese long-gown. Her face was obscured behind a large pair of sunglasses. Her dress of green brocade set off a stunning hourglass figure. At a glance, he took in the rings on her fingers, a bracelet on one wrist, a Rolex watch on the other and an expensive handbag tucked under an arm.

Then he recognized a certain languorous swing in the hips. “Mona!” he cried in greeting. “Aiyeh! What a surprise! You look gorgeous, rolling in money.”

“Didn’t know you’re back,” Mona replied, flashing a broad smile. She spoke in Cantonese, trailing a marked Shanghai accent.

He put on his best face and manners. “Only just back,” he said.

“Wah! You look good too. Really manly and handsome.” She stood studying his person with approval. “Lots to tell you. Got time for tea?”

“Sure.”

“Let’s try the Gloucester.”

“Ah, a return to the stamping ground where we first met.”

“Oh, you can still remember? You promised to write but didn’t.”

The tone of rebuke in Mona’s voice made him feel like a cad. She was the first woman from whom he had taken his pleasure and afterwards he had all but abandoned her.

“I’m truly sorry,” he said, warming his voice in an attempt to make amends. “I had every intention of writing. But classes and one thing or another, you know. Barely time for sleep.”

“You wrote to Dum-Dum.”

The unexpected riposte caught him unprepared. “I only wrote to him because I needed something to be done,” he lied, apprehensive over how much Dum-Dum might have revealed. “I asked after you the moment I got back. Was told you were no longer at the club.”

Suen gained a momentary respite when they entered the well patronised lounge. A deferential waiter ushered them to a table.

Their entrance drew curious glances.

Mona sat down with aplomb and adroitly removed her dark glasses. Suen was startled by her bright turquoise eyeshadow.

He had always judged Mona's eyes rather unintelligent. The eyeshadow did not enhance them. Rather they made her northern features over-garnished.

The waiter proffered menus and Mona ordered tea and scones.

"How very British," Suen remarked and followed suit.

"Fashionable nowadays."

Suen glanced around the lounge. Having been caught out by Mona twice, he felt defensive. The Victoriana in the place added to his discomfiture. The crystal chandeliers, the moulded cornices, the red velvet curtains and the potted palms all seemed overbearing, grating against his disposition. "Cultural imperialism," he muttered.

Mona gave a puzzled look, not catching the thrust of his remark. After a slight pause, she asked: "You back for good?"

"Not sure," Suen replied. "Depends on whether I can find right job."

"Must be easy, having university degree."

"Not necessarily. Too much education can be a hindrance. But let's not talk about me. What about you? You're looking very successful. Have you become a star, with your own records, fan clubs and everything?"

"Dum-Dum didn't say?"

"No."

Mona hesitated but did not speak.

For one terrible moment Suen suspected Mona might be on the point of exposing another of his fibs. He wanted to keep the conversation

going but couldn't think of a thing to say. Then he noticed with a start that the bracelet on Mona's wrist was the one he had given her before he left for Oxford. He felt completely flustered, not knowing whether he should remark on that fact or not. He seemed destined to be damned regardless of what he might say. The bracelet testified to an attachment that was unmistakable. It intensified his failure to find words.

The arrival of the tea and scones fortuitously covered his embarrassment. After the waiter had left, Suen began pouring the tea and Mona started buttering a scone.

The presence of the bracelet dangling on Mona's wrist hung like an accusation against him.

"I'm getting married," she said abruptly.

"Congratulations! When? Who's the lucky man?"

"Man from home town, next year," she said.

The words then came tumbling out. "Name is Kingston Fung, very big textile man. Met him at club. Liked me and my singing right away. Wife dead, no children. Wants a family. After visiting club for a while, asked me to marry. Much older than me, of course, but treats me well. Gives me clothes, things. Last year, bought me nice Happy Valley flat, overlooking race course. He travels with customers a lot. Sees me when free. Held off marrying sooner because he wanted decent interval after loss of wife."

"Sounds a considerate chap. I'm happy for you."

"Kingston's plenty smart too. Going to become very, very rich. He says no foreigner can beat us at making money."

"Really?"

"Yes. Very simple, the way he explains. His textile factories never shut, work round-the-clock, in two, three shifts. Western factories work just one shift, then close. Same plant and equipment but much higher

output for us. Because machinery in use all the time, machines wear out quicker. Replaced by newer, even more efficient ones. Foreigners won't buy new machines till old ones wear out. They go farther behind. Can never catch up, can never compete. Keep losing markets. Their textile industries wiped out one by one."

"Bully for Kingston! He'll end up owning half the world and clothing the other half. You're a very luck girl."

Mona failed to catch the irony in the remarks and bubbled on cheerfully. "He keen on English too." As if to display her proficiency, she switched to a halting English. "Lady tutor comes for me three mornings a week."

"Your English has come on amazingly," Suen said, switching to English as well. Having escaped his blushes over the bracelet, he was beginning to lose interest in the conversation.

Mona giggled. "He said I must have good English. After marriage, we go to parties at Government House. You imagine me, at Government House? Me!"

"You'll be a breath of fresh air in that company."

"For real? Not make fool of myself?"

Suen smiled and shook his head. "How's your singing?"

Mona lowered her head and fidgeted a little. "Kingston said no more public singing. He said make me look cheap. But I miss it! Live audience really thrilling. But he's right. Now sing in bath."

"What a shame! You have such a fine voice."

Suen's memory took him back to the time he was teaching Mona to enunciate the amorous lyrics of her songs. They had crouched side by side in her Wanchai cubicle and he had been frequently distracted by the shapeliness of her breasts. She had a certain desperate innocence then and he had the same. He did not regret those fevered moments of

animal lust and of losing his virginity to her. But now, seeing her made-up and sophisticated, he no longer felt any desire for her.

“If you like to hear me sing, you can come visit me,” Mona said. “I give you address and phone number.”

Suen’s heart raced. The invitation was unmistakable. But he didn’t want to get involved again. He was stuck for a response, however, because he did not want to hurt her feelings. It took him a moment to come up with a solution.

“What a great idea!” he exclaimed. “I’ll bring along Dum-Dum and some of the others. We’ll have a grand reunion, listening to you sing your heart out. It’ll be like old times, when we were all much younger and much more foolish.”

“Yes, that would be fun,” Mona allowed flatly, before returning her attention to her scone.

Suen drank some tea.

After an interval, Mona left off her eating and said: “You think I do the right thing?”

“What? Giving up singing or having a reunion?” Suen asked, deliberately missing the point.

“No, I mean getting married.”

Suen shook his head. “I’m no expert in that department. By all accounts Kingston has shown he cares for you. I suppose that’s as much as anyone can count on.”

“Love’s funny thing, isn’t it?” Mona said, emitting a wan sigh. “Only by loving can people feel truly alive. Being loved isn’t the same, is it?”

Suen felt a tightness in his throat. She had struck a note of truth. But it was not a philosophical or spiritual truth she wanted to explore. She was appealing for rescue, to save her from a dubious marriage

and to fulfil her dreams. But he did not love her and had no wish to rekindle the embers of their affair.

His mind searched for a decent way out. He had behaved shabbily in the past and he didn't want to hurt her again. Yet he didn't know how to tell her he couldn't help her.

"Love is crazy, as the lyrics of one of your favourite songs have proclaimed," he said. "You've sung about it often enough to know that."

But he had made that pitch too quickly and too ungraciously. He felt he had been wrong-footed again. To cover his embarrassment he glanced at his watch and added: "I'd love to chew that subject with you but I'm afraid I've got to go. Got an errand to run for my grandmother. If you don't mind, I'll ask for the bill."

"No need," Mona said. "My treat. Want to sit a while, have another cup of tea."

"Fine," Suen nodded, grateful for her acquiescence. "Thanks for tea. It's been a great pleasure bumping into you. Give me your number and I'll call about the reunion."

"I can ask Dum-Dum to arrange," Mona said. "Save you trouble."

"All right. I look forward to seeing you again. Please tell your fiance that I wish both of you every happiness."

"Cannot do that."

"Why not?"

"Kingston does not know about us."

* * *

One evening in December, before Suen sat down for dinner with his grandmother, he reflected upon his predicament. Seeing Mona

again reminded him of how awkward relationships could be with a lover, let alone a wife. His heart sank at the prospect of endless rounds of match-making.

He could visualise the stiff protocols and the artificial courtesies, the sorry choices made by all parties. He was already out of sequence for girls of his own age. Those worth their salt would be married already or else spoken for. He would have to contend with either prim, immature girls or with older rejects, colloquially referred to as “oranges at the bottom of the basket”. All would bear the marks of their safe, bourgeois upbringings.

He had been spoilt by Mona and Kate. He needed qualities beyond the purely physical. Some of Kate’s feistiness would be a delight. Most certainly an intellect he could engage with.

But a Chinese Kate of his own vintage would be a fantasy too far. Vain though that hope might be, the pretence at match-making had to run its course. He owed it to his ancestors to make a show of it. His aunt’s candidates would probably regard him with similar distaste. A milksop, still tied to his elders’ apron strings. An inherited fortune but not man enough to find a wife by himself. Probably spoilt beyond redemption. A foreign graduate, yet jobless. Had to be a feudal relic, unmodernised and living in the past, under the thumb of a domineering matriarch.

He thought of Li Po’s wistful question. “In this dream-like, floating world, how often are we happy?” What was happiness anyway? Love? Success? Contentment?

Suddenly, he felt sorry for those caught up in the matrimonial game. If he could, he would tell them he was as much a victim as they.

Ah Loy had prepared bird's nest soup with a chicken stock for that evening. It was one of Suen's favourites. The concoction was made essentially from the spittle used by swallows to build their nests. The preparation was tedious work, for nests had to be soaked to remove bits of feather and other detritus. The end result was considered both a tonic and a delicacy. Suen had already gained two pounds since his return.

As he took spoonfuls of the soup, his grandmother said: "Your aunt will be back soon. Have you decided on a career?"

"Certainly. I want to change the world," Suen responded.

His grandmother smiled indulgently. "You're no longer a child. You're twenty-four. It's time to settle down."

Suen said nothing and continued to tackle his soup.

When he had finished, Ah Loy brought in the main courses, a whole sole steamed with ginger and spring onions, a pork loaf minced with water chestnuts and fresh octopus, and a plate of stir-fried vegetables.

As the meal progressed, his grandmother resumed her inquiries. "Have you thought of a vocation?"

"Not yet."

"What about teaching? It's a gentlemanly profession. It doesn't pay much but that's not important in your case."

"Grandma, I don't want to become a propagandist for the British Empire," he said wearily, as he separated out a helping of sole with his chopsticks.

"Why should propaganda be involved?"

"The British want our children to learn about their scientific achievements, their victories over the Spanish and the French, and the blessings they've bestowed upon the world."

"What's wrong with that, since such lessons show how their nation has developed?"

“It’s what teachers are not allowed to talk about that I object to -- our humiliations during the Opium Wars, the unequal treaties, the hypocrisies and crocodile tears when Japan was swallowing up our country and massacring our people. If teachers mention those facts, they’re likely to get their registrations revoked. That’s what I’m objecting to.”

His grandmother shook her head slowly and sighed. Her brow, normally smooth and serene, knitted.

“Ah Suen, it’s human nature for people not to want shameful deeds to be bandied about. Thousands of teachers manage to teach here without tripping over such issues.”

“Yes, by exercising self-censorship and swallowing self-respect. I can’t do that. Our young should know the whole truth, both good and bad.”

“Ah Suen,” his grandmother said, more sternly, setting down her chopsticks. “Hong Kong’s not a place for politics. It’s a place for making a living and minding one’s own business.”

Suen remembered suddenly that his grandmother had told him while they were travelling to England that his father had taught for a spell after returning from Leiden. Why did his father give it up? Had he become disgusted with spewing half-truths?

He wanted to say: “If my father couldn’t stomach teaching, neither can I. Whatever has happened to my country is my business and being ruled by foreigners is also my business.” But he knew that would merely upset his grandmother. So he kept silent and continued to eat.

When the meal was over, Ah Loy brought in cups of tea.

His grandmother said: “If you don’t like the idea of teaching, you might try commerce. Some of your father’s friends are still in the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank and in various British hongs. I’m sure they can find you a suitable position.”

“A friend of mine has recommended me for a job with the China Telegraph,” Suen said. The statement slipped out on the spur of the moment. He had given no thought to Dum-Dum’s suggestion.

His grandmother straightened her slender self in her chair. Her face registered surprise. She set down the cup of tea she was sipping and said: “You didn’t tell me. You said you hadn’t decided on a vocation.”

“It’s just a temporary job, till something better turns up. Nothing’s sure yet. I still need to be interviewed.”

“But I thought you didn’t like working for newspapers?”

“I don’t. But what can a person do when the terms of his existence are determined by others, in a place mortgaged to foreigners?”

His grandmother’s body stiffened and her face turned grave. She reached for her walking stick and rose from the table. Ah Loy rushed forward to assist her. Suen stood up at once, realising that the tone of his voice had been disrespectful.

“Petulance does not become a gentleman. A man of breeding should be able to accept misfortunes with equanimity,” his grandmother said, as she walked away.

“I’m sorry, Grandma,” Suen said, quickly. “I have been careless with my words. Please forgive me.” He was filled with contrition as his grandmother left him standing at the table.

* * *

December advanced upon Suen like a doom. Its days came disconcertingly, one after another, like the dripping of a tap during a night of elusive sleep. The first metaphorical drop fell loudly and clearly with the return of Aunt Soo-Leung from America. A second came when his aunt and Cousin Peony called at Bowen Road to pay their respects. After that

they continued relentlessly. Drip, drop; drip, drop.

A list of families with nubile daughters materialised. Drip. A discussion to weigh those with new or old money. Drop. Another discussion on the possibility of hidden improprieties or scandals. Drip. The elimination of Roman Catholic families to obviate disputes over religious upbringing. Drop.

Suen had a good idea of the multiple hurdles that had to be surmounted. Mutual acquaintances to sound out intentions. Exchanges of information on the year, day and precise hour of birth of those involved. Consultations with geomancers and almanacs on whether the yin and yang of a union were as propitious as they might be. The bugbear of love, naturally, was left to Fate.

He reflected on the indefatigability of his aunt in discharging her duties. Not so long ago, as the wife of a man arrested for collaborating with the Japanese, she had been practically persona non grata. But the dropping of charges and the subsequent success of her husband's business had propelled her back to the upper reaches of society. Amazing what wealth could do in a money-conscious place like Hong Kong.

He felt helpless in the farce being acted out. He had been reduced to little more than a bit player. He half-resigned himself to doing his duty, aware he could be sleepwalking into some dismal marriage, but unable to see any means of escape.

On the evening of Christmas Day, however, an enormous fire broke out at the Shek Kip Mei squatter settlement which left two dead and 53,000 homeless. It was the largest fire in the colony's history. The community immediately rallied around. His aunt suspended her role as match-maker to concentrate on raising money to aid the victims. His grandmother sent him around with donations to various relief organisations. He himself emptied the ready cash in his bank account and

donated that as well.

Ashamed at his own protracted idleness in the face of such unprecedented tragedy, he finally applied for a position with the China Telegraph.

* * *

Two weeks later, Suen presented himself for an interview with the Editor-in-Chief, a Mr. Barnett, a tall, grey, dishevelled man with a nervous tic on the left side of his face. It caused his left eye to twitch at intervals, as if he were attempting a clumsy wink.

“I’ve seen your details, Mr. Lam,” Mr. Barnett said. “But you have not specified the editorial position you’re seeking.”

“I was a reporter with the Herald some years back,” Suen answered. “Basically, I’m looking for any job I’m qualified for.”

“I see you’ve gained a First from Oxford,” Mr. Barnett observed, with an approving nod and an involuntary twitch of the eye. “Seems a waste to put you back on reporting.”

“Actually, I quite enjoy reporting. It’s challenging to depict disasters like the Shek Kip Mei fire and its human effects.”

“Not much scope for Zolas around here, I’m afraid,” Mr. Barnett responded, wryly. “I’ll tell you what: I’m short of subs on Foreign News. I’m minded to give you a try. If that works, I wouldn’t object to an odd piece for the editorial page. What do you say?”

“May I know the terms, sir?”

“Local month-to-month terms. The pay’ll be better than a reporter’s.” Mr. Barnett quoted a starting figure.

Suen considered the sum mean and inadequate. He was certain European subs were paid much more. But his interest was in investigative

reporting and he judged it best to get a foot in the door. “What about other working conditions?” he asked.

“Six days a week, from six in the evening till the newspaper goes to bed. Normally around three in the morning. One specified day off a week. Two weeks annual holiday.”

“Would it be possible to get Fridays off, sir?”

“That’s really a matter for the Foreign News Editor. But I think it can be managed.”

“When would you like me to start?”

“Soon as possible. We’re short-handed.”

“I can start in a week, right after the lunar new year.”

“Good. Come in around five, the first day after the holidays. I’ll introduce you to some of the other staff.”

Mr. Barnett’s worn out face offered another twitch of the eye as they said good-bye.

* * *

Suen’s return to journalism had several consequences. The first was immediately noted by his grandmother who raised objections. The working hours were unwholesome and unsociable, she said. She conceded, however, it was better than no job.

Reporting for work at six each evening meant that dinner at home was no longer possible. That disappointed both Ah Loy and his grandmother. The old servant asked to deliver evening meals to the Telegraph office. Suen resisted, insisting he had managed eating quite well when he was at the Herald and while in England. The newspaper had a staff canteen and that should prove adequate.

In the end a compromise was reached between the three parties.

Suen promised to have lunch with his grandmother each day and Ah Loy would switch serving her soups from dinner to lunch.

A further consequence took slightly longer to become apparent. Once Aunt Soo-Leung resumed her duties as marriage organizer, she woke up to the fact that dinners with prospective brides and their families were out of the question. She protested immediately.

“It’s impossible to arrange anything when Ah Suen’s away every night,” she complained to her mother.

“Ah Suen, you do get a day off, don’t you?” his grandmother queried.

“Yes, Grandma, on Fridays,” Suen replied.

“Good,” Aunt Soo-Leung said. “Keep that day free for meetings and dinners.”

“That’s not possible. Friday is the only day I get to see my friends. I can’t give it up.”

Aunt Soo-Leung threw up her arms in exasperation.

“Perhaps we can try lunch,” the old lady suggested, apparently fearful Suen might lapse into idleness again.

“Mother, working people have to keep office hours,” Aunt Soo-Leung said. “The lunch break doesn’t provide enough time for exchanging views or for exploring each other’s nuances. Why in heaven’s name has Ah Suen to accept an evening job?”

“What about weekends?”

“Mother, there’s horse racing at Happy Valley on Saturdays. The well-connected get invited to lunch by the Stewards of the Jockey Club. Pak and I often attend. It’s an important business opportunity.”

“What about Sunday?”

“The Westernised go to church. The more traditional attend family gatherings. This is very trying. Ah Suen ought to get a more

normal job.”

“I imagine he must, once he’s married. In the meantime, please do your best. Ah Suen needs to have his future settled.”

Suen listened to such exchanges with malicious delight. He was more than happy to allow his aunt to struggle on with her thankless mission. The mention of Happy Valley racing made him think how hilarious it would be if his aunt and uncle met Mona and Kingston Fung in a Steward’s box!

His aunt managed to arrange a couple of luncheon meetings. Suen turned up with his grandmother and played his part with adroitness and courtesy, carefully hiding his total lack of enthusiasm. But, in spite of his best behaviour, both occasions were lacklustre. The girls failed to impress, though their parents were exceedingly polite. Nothing resulted.

* * *

Suen’s duties at the China Telegraph were not onerous. He got on top of them quickly. Foreign news came in over a bank of news agency teleprinter machines. Items of no local interest were spiked, with the rest passed on to be cut to the lengths specified by the Foreign News Editor and for headlines to be drafted. Major events sometimes required amalgamation of several agency reports, or even complete rewrites to bring out local angles. Suen found the work boring.

The Foreign News Desk consisted of an editor and four sub-editors, one of whom rotated as a reserve when others were on holiday or ill. Suen was the only Chinese. The editor was an Englishman. Of the sub-editors, the most senior was a Scot, who took over when the editor was off. The other two were an Australian and a New Zealander.

Suen was irritated by the awareness he was being paid

significantly less than his expatriate colleagues, despite the fact that none of them, except the editor, had attended university. His only consolation was that his job hindered his marital prospects.

He also derived some satisfaction from the occasional article he wrote under an assumed name, for either Su's newspaper or for one of the small radical magazines. His investigative pieces were welcomed by Su, Dum-Dum and other intimates. Appearing in print rekindled their collective sense of camaraderie.

For Suen, the articles legitimised his presence at the Friday games. Those evenings plugged some of the social gaps left after leaving Oxford. But he still missed Kate, Ralfie and Sanjay.

He soon fell into the habit of joining some of the younger reporters for snacks and drinks -- and possibly a spot of adventure. After the Friday games, they would congregate at one of the roadside cooked food stalls known as "tai pai dongs". The one they frequented was located in Wanchai. They took turns footing the modest bills.

Those unpretentious establishments represented an ubiquitous feature in the colony's multi-layered life. By day they blossomed everywhere and did a roaring business in cheap, quick, commonplace meals, cooked right in front of customers. Their regulars consisted of manual labourers, clerks, office attendants and other working folk. Their service was brisk, with orders shouted out to cooks above the hubbub of conversation and the rumble of traffic. Food was delivered without frills, by men clad in little more than singlets, shorts and wooden clogs.

When Suen noticed the casual way soiled utensils were washed, he was taken aback. But his fastidiousness was moderated when Su and the others made a joke of it, dismissing potential germs as essential for building up resistance.

During evening visits, neither the range of fare nor the standard

of service was much different. But a certain subtle change in atmosphere took place. With the onset of darkness, the essential dinginess of their surroundings would become obscured. The use of paraffin and pressurised kerosene lamps provided limited lighting, reducing to fleeting apparitions the passers-by and others loitering outside the range of the lights. The popular belief that evening operations were protected by either triads or the police added the spice of curiosity and risk.

The main reason journalists and gossip columnists favoured such places late at night was that a story could always be lurking around. Once past witching hour, there was no telling who might turn up. It could be some underworld boss or a famous barrister, a group of the slumming rich or a gaggle of singers from the entertainment world. There was always the hope of catching some pillar of society at an indiscretion. Or overhearing a clue to some breaking scandal. That thrill of the unexpected also drew the young and the adventurous.

Suen enjoyed those outings. It was an opportunity to rub shoulders with night owls, prowlers and other dubious characters he would never otherwise encounter. His colleagues introduced him to a few. As he chatted and drank with them he began to learn to identify the shifty-eyed drug dealers, the young lovers, surreptitiously touching hands beneath the tables, the police informers peddling third-hand intelligence, the off-duty dance hostesses discarding their professional smiles, the chancers, the pimps, the lonely, the peripheral and the lost.

Such outings served as a tonic, allowing him regular respites from family pressures to marry and from his stultifying work at the China Telegraph. They also freed him from the well-meaning surveillance of both his grandmother and Ah Loy. He could let his hair down, drinking more than he should and, once in a while, stay away from home for the night.

* * *

Meanwhile, the new lunar Year of the Horse turned out to be exceptionally unkind to the colony. The drought continued, bringing with it more water rationing and more squatter fires. Neither was there an end to border incidents. The most notable involved the total disappearance of a police patrol launch with everyone on board. Rumours ran rife but few factual details of the disappearance ever reached the public.

Air disasters also came thick and fast. First, a Spitfire went down during firing practice over Port Shelter. The pilot's body was never recovered. Then came an accident involving a Sunderland flying boat. In July a Harvard trainer crashed, killing an instructor and a trainee. That same month saw the shooting down of a Cathay Pacific Skymaster by Chinese fighters off Hainan Island. Among those killed were a number of Hong Kong residents. Those disasters served to reinforce Suen's grandmother's abhorrence for flying.

Developments pleasing to Suen and his friends also occurred in 1954. The most important of them was the agreement between Britain and China at the Geneva Conference to exchange Chargé d'Affaires. Tensions along the border eased slightly as a result. But Suen and his friends still resented the British insistence that the Chinese government be represented in Hong Kong unofficially, through the New China News Agency.

The influx of American servicemen on rest and recreation continued. That turned into such a money-spinner that the government decided to establish a Tourist Association to promote more of the same. And when Mercedes Benz cars started to be imported, Uncle Pak acquired one of the first to arrive. Aunt Soo-Leung never stopped singing its praises.

Suen's mind, however, was not focused on such new totems of social distinction but on more personal and family issues.

* * *

The enervating heat of summer came and went. Typhoons threatened but brought insufficient rain to break the drought. Aunt Soo-Leung's match-making efforts stumbled fitfully ahead, but without success.

One day, some while after the Mid-Autumn Festival, Suen sat down as usual for lunch with his grandmother. She appeared preoccupied. A discernible restlessness hung in the air. He braced himself for trouble.

After the meal, he helped his grandmother into the sitting room in the customary way, to enjoy their cups of tea. They settled into armchairs, set roughly at right angles to each other. He noted that his grandmother, although comfortably settled, had retained a tight hold on her walking stick. She fidgeted with its handle.

Each had a teapoy next to the armchair where Ah Loy set down their respective cups. The old servant then retreated.

Suen sipped his tea and gazed idly at the sparse black and white landscape hanging on the wall opposite him. He recalled Tutor Tseng saying that landscapes were the highest form of painting. Although he had seen that particular painting many times, the artist was not known to him. His style, however, took after that of Wang Wei, the celebrated Tang poet and painter.

The technique of shading known as "broken ink" had been employed to depict misty mountains, crooked cypresses and flowing waterfalls. The only intimation of man's presence was a tiny pavilion perched on an outcrop of a distant hill. The composition evoked an atmosphere of space, time and impermanence.

Perhaps it was just a trick of the light coming from the window but the painting's sparse lines seemed to hint at life's enduring riddles.

His grandmother's voice came to him as if from afar.

"Ah Suen," she said. "Is there a way to change your shift, to less unsociable hours?"

"I've grown accustomed to the routine," he replied, irritated that his grandmother had spoiled his moment. In anticipation of what might come next, he deliberately pointed to the painting and asked: "Who acquired that landscape?"

"I don't know," his grandmother replied, without even turning in the direction indicated. "There were many scrolls rolled up in the house when I came. Both your grandfather and your father were collectors. They hung and changed them from time to time. I must confess I haven't been changing them as regularly as they."

"It's Ching, isn't it? Did Grandpa know the painter?"

"It was painted before your grandfather's time."

"That painting is trying to say something to me."

"No doubt to your grandfather and father as well. But I want to get back to the subject of your future. Your aunt has been working hard but your absence in the evenings makes things awkward. Besides, no girl can relish the prospect of a husband who is going to be away from their bed for most of the night."

Suen realized he had arrived at the hour of decision. He either had to make his wishes known or to forever hold his peace.

"Grandma, I wonder if marriage is such a good idea just yet. There's much I don't understand. I should find myself first."

His grandmother sighed. "What am I going to do with you, Ah Suen? When I look at you I see the brow and the sparkling eyes of your father and grandfather. But they each possessed down-to-earth streaks which enabled them to adjust to life. That quality is sadly absent in you."

His grandmother sighed again.

“You have too much imagination,” she continued. “Since childhood, you’ve always had questions. You’ve always asked why things had to be the way they were. It was unfortunate that your parents passed away when you were so young. Many things had been left unexplained. Ah Loy and I have tried our best. Tutor Tseng and the missionary school have also tried their best. But we were never enough for you. It’s time to set aside youthful musings. You’ll feel less restless once you’ve settled into a good marriage.”

His grandmother’s words seemed so saturated with hope and affection that it would be simplicity itself to agree. Yet something in him refused to capitulate. He teetered for a moment on the brink of indecision. Then he said: “I don’t think I can find the heart for marriage at this time.”

His grandmother’s eyes widened. “What are you trying to tell me?” she demanded.

“I’d like to go back to school.”

“But you’ve returned for barely a year. You said you’d gained a First Class degree. What need is there to go back?”

“The degree means nothing. Just a piece of parchment. There’s so much more to learn, particularly about myself.”

“There’ll be time enough after marriage, after you’ve fulfilled your duty to your ancestors.”

“Please, Grandma, I know what I need now. Marriage can wait. It’ll only be for a little while longer.”

“You think your ancestors can wait. What about me?”

A pain stabbed at Suen’s heart. He gazed at his grandmother. Her face, ageless and beatific, appeared to pale. He saw her greying hair and the slight tremor in the hand grasping the walking stick. He had forgotten how aged she was and how many tragedies she had suffered to reach the present point.

That realisation jolted him. One day, perhaps sooner than he could imagine, she would go the way of all flesh. He shivered at the thought. He saw that in framing his plea he had not given due weight to either her years or to her heavy sense of responsibility.

“Grandma, I’m deeply sorry,” he said, quickly. “You know I would never do anything to hurt you or the family. I know what is most dear to you. I will fulfil your wish as soon as I can.”

“No! You’ve completely forgotten your breeding,” his grandmother declared sternly. “I have indulged you for too long. You have formed the habit of taking your whims as more important than your duty.”

His grandmother thumped her walking stick on the floor. Her voice took on a harsher tone. “In your heart you’ve already accepted the possibility of my closing my eyes without ever holding a great-grandchild in my arms!”

Suen fell at once on his knees before his grandmother. “No, Grandma, no!,” he cried. Tears welled in his eyes. “My revered grandmother will enjoy long life and hold many great-grandchildren in her arms,” he continued, adopting, in contrition, a more formal and honorific form of address. “Please forgive the words of your unfilial grandson.”

As silently as a ghost, Ah Loy entered the room, placing a new cup of tea on the teapoy next to the old lady and removing the old cup. “Nai-nai, please have a fresh cup of tea,” the servant said. She then left the room as noiselessly as she had entered, as if the tearful man kneeling on the floor was totally invisible.

Suen continued his litany of apologies, bowing low.

Tears began trickling down his grandmother’s cheeks. The old lady brushed them aside with her fingers and took several deep breaths. She picked up the tea and took a sip. After setting the cup down again, she said with a wave of her hand: “Enough, enough! Get up, get up!”

“Your grandson cannot get up until he has been forgiven by his grandmother,” Suen replied, in a voice still choking with tears.

An uneasy stalemate reigned. The catharsis of tears eventually produced a healing effect. The matriarch heaved a heavy sigh. She then leaned forward and patted him on the head. Her fingers gently ruffled the hair on the nape of his neck.

“Go sit down,” she said, affectionately.

Suen obeyed, pulling out a handkerchief from his pocket to wipe his face. “I can leave my job to make things easier for Aunt Soo-Leung,” he said. “Grandma can then select a bride for me as she has done for my father.”

His grandmother sighed again. “How can I, when I know it’ll only make you more unhappy?” she said. “You’re all I have left.”

“I should do my duty before all else.”

“Decisions are not always easy. Let’s see what your aunt comes up with. The pursuit of knowledge is not an unworthy ambition. What had you in mind to study?”

“I don’t know, Grandma. That’s part of the problem.”

“You wish to return to Oxford?”

“Not necessarily. That choice can wait. My duty comes first.”

His grandmother shook her head sadly. “I can’t really blame you for failing to settle on any of the girls your aunt has produced. In truth, none could hold a candle to your mother. If you leave for studies, how long would I have to wait to see you again?”

“Oh, if Grandma would allow me to fly, I could come back two or three times a year.”

“Fly? Certainly not, when planes are falling so often out of the skies.”

“Flying isn’t really that dangerous, Grandma. According to the

latest statistics, travelling by plane is much safer than by car.”

“Statistics? Nothing but the same old trickery with a modern twist. What do statistics say about deaths through air journeys compared with deaths incurred through travelling on foot?”

“I don’t think they do such comparisons, Grandma. I’ve never heard of anyone dying through walking per se. A walker might die from falling off a cliff or from a heart attack. But such misfortunes cannot be ascribed to the act of walking.”

“Precisely. Walking’s much safer than flying. But they don’t tell you that.”

“But, Grandma, people can’t walk to Europe.”

“There are ships. That’s safer than going by air. The only case for air travel is during an emergency. Remember that.”

“Yes, Grandma,” Suen said, although he could not see why his grandmother should be so adamant about ships being safe when his own parents had perished in one.

From the tenor of the discussion, however, he judged that his grandmother was amenable to his search for self-knowledge once he had been betrothed or married. To that end he steeled himself to settle for any half-acceptable girl so that he might go on to discover what he was meant to do with his life.