

Bombs and Banquets

Hong Kong, September 1967:

The atmosphere was surreal, Sebastian Baxingdale thought, as he waited in the lobby of the Victoria Cricket Club for Derek Soames. Out on the streets, bombs were going off, people were being maimed and policemen were under attack. Communist newspapers were screaming for armed insurrection. An assassination list of people deemed either too pro-British or too anti-Chinese had been published. The first victims had been a radio commentator and his cousin. In Peking, the Reuters correspondent had been placed under house arrest since July and an officially-inspired mob had sacked the old British Embassy building.

Yet, so far as the Victoria Cricket Club was concerned, those events might have taken place on another galaxy in another age. The quiet, dated charm of its lobby was reminiscent of clubs along St. James's. Columns of dubious architectural lineage and acres of red velvet curtains exuded an air of solidity and uninterrupted tradition. Although the Club had long since been fitted with air-conditioning, wooden-bladed ceiling fans still churned overhead to retain the illusion of an earlier era.

A mahogany newspaper rack, standing as stolidly as a Grenadier, paraded copies of British newspapers like the Telegraph and the Times, though the Daily Globe was not among them. Included on the rack were copies of the two local English dailies, the South China Morning Post and the Hong Kong Standard. A long oak table displayed two neat, fan-shaped arrangements of magazines, including the Tatler, Country Life, the Economist, the Spectator and a variety of regional publications.

A steady expatriate traffic passed on its way to one of the many dining rooms and bars. Some men were in dinner jackets and their ladies wore dresses clearly traceable to Knightsbridge or New Bond Street. Two Chinese waiters in starched white jackets and white gloves stood attentively by. Every sparkle of the crystal chandeliers, every swish of taffeta, suggested affluence and social order.

Baxingdale settled himself in one of the Queen Anne chairs in the lobby. He felt desperately weary. Was there to be no respite, he wondered. He had just endured three years of the Apocalypse in Vietnam. Now he had been selected for an even more bloodcurdling assignment, to recount the horrors of a quarter of the world's population gone berserk. Because Britain was in such bad odour with Peking, however, visas were unavailable for correspondents of British newspapers. That meant being spared, for the moment at least, the blood and gore of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. But the sideshow in Hong Kong was sufficiently unpleasant.

He asked a passing waiter for a dry sherry. While he waited, he speculated on why Derek Soames had invited him to the club. He had developed a certain fondness for that frequently inebriated mouthpiece of government. There was a gentle chemistry between them, as if each recognized in the other a fellow outsider, compelled to live a life not of his own choosing.

Unlike less forthright publicists, Soames did not lie about unpalatable facts. He simply neglected to mention them, though he always came clean when the chips were down. For that reason Baxingdale considered Soames a source worthy of cultivation.

Baxingdale's thoughts were interrupted by a woman's voice crying: "Seb, darling, fancy seeing you here!"

He found Phoebe Knight bearing down on him. She had grown plumper in the intervening years but still attractive in pink. Christopher Knight was in tow. Phoebe quickly proffered hand, cheek and décolletage.

Baxingdale took the hand, kissed the powdered cheek and kept his eyes clear of the décolletage. There were memories buried there he had no wish to revive. "You look very well, Phoebe," he said. "Motherhood must agree with you."

"Liar! I know where the extra inches are. Chris told me you had arrived. I wish you had come before all this awfulness."

"I only get sent to places where awful things are happening, I'm afraid. Is there some gala going on? Everyone seems dressed to kill. I can hardly believe there's a crisis."

"Stiff upper and all that. People are popping by for a drink before Tosca at the City Hall. Behaving normally, Chris calls it. I'd rather take the children home till this blows over. But can't even do that. Been roped into government service."

"What? A British Mata Hari? Has it come to that?"

"Stop being wicked, Seb. It seems the Minister of State at the Colonial Office is coming to show the flag. He's a friend of Daddy's and the government thought I might help organize a banquet for him. Oh, dear! Have I said something I shouldn't? The trip is supposed to be hush-hush for the moment."

"You certainly have, my dear," Christopher Knight interjected. "But so long as the Minister displays a flag that isn't white we should be all right." Then, turning to his old college friend, he asked: "What are you doing here? At this club, I mean."

"Waiting for Derek Soames."

"That old soak!"

"He's my minder."

"Come and have a quick drink with us. We have to rush or we'll miss the curtain."

"Thanks, I'll pass. I'd best wait for Soames."

"All right. I'll be in touch."

"Darling, you must come to dinner and meet the children," Phoebe Knight said, proffering cheek and décolletage yet again, before heading for the bar with her husband.

As Baxingdale watched his friends leave he wondered whether it was British phlegm or sheer lack of imagination that ruled the behaviour of expatriates. He had already finished his sherry when Soames arrived.

"Sorry, old chap," Soames cried, rushing up with an extended hand. He looked tired and uncharacteristically tense, his nose a shade redder than usual. "Got frightfully held up. More bombs, I fear. Fortunately, no one hurt. Let's get lubricated. First things first."

The two men made their way to the Members' Bar. It was almost empty now that the opera crowd had dispersed. They took a corner booth. The walls were cluttered with images of long-departed cricketers frozen in postures of bowling or batting. There were photographs of former Interport teams from treaty ports up and down the China coast. The most striking ones were sepia coloured, taken more than half a century ago, of hirsute players and hatted ladies sipping tea in different pavilions.

"What'll you have?" Soames asked, signalling for a waiter. Baxingdale ordered another sherry, Soames a gin and tonic.

"You've lived here before, haven't you?"

"Yes. In the army. A long time ago."

"Then I don't have to tell you what a screwed-up place this is. Screwed-up mainly by us, mind you."

"Can't be more screwed-up than Vietnam. How's London reading the situation?"

Soames made a face.

"Hear they're sending out a Minister."

"Where did you get that?"

"A little bird."

"Shit! This place leaks like a sieve! Nothing's firm yet. Just in the preparatory stage. Depends on how things develop. Appreciate your keeping that under your hat for the time being."

Baxingdale nodded. "Look, I know you're supposed to accentuate the positive but you don't have to soft-soap me. What I want is the genuine low-down, of how things stand. What has the Special Branch got to say about the current chaos? Who is in control on the other side? Of is anyone in control at all?"

"I'm not senior enough to have access to SB assessments, not that they're much good in the best of times. My guess is that a power struggle's still going on, among the central authorities, the provincial overlords and the local cadres here. The boys at the centre probably wants to keep a lid on but can't count on being obeyed by local hotheads. Things a bit iffy, I reckon."

"I'm supposed to be in China. Waiting for a Chinese visa. But if things are going to hot up here, I might as well hang around for a while."

"You'll have to hang around, I fear. They won't give you a visa when Sino-British relations are in their current state. Even if they did, they'll restrict your movements so you won't see a thing. I wouldn't be saying this to anybody else, but my advice is for you set up shop here. You may get a better idea of what's happening in China here than over there."

"How can that be, unless you rely on speculation and the usual rumour mill? Most of the killings and chaos are across the border."

Soames took a drink and eyed Baxingdale for a moment, as if weighing him up. "Refugees," he said.

“How can I possibly reach them? They’re rounded up near the border and shipped back before anyone can say ‘Boo!’ I’ve been on those sort of details in the army.”

“Things have moved on since then. There’s a secret Anglo-American intelligence operation going on, right inside the Immigration Department. Each refugee is being quizzed exhaustively, on where he comes from, what has happened in his town or village, the numbers killed or injured, what he has seen on the way and so on. When you put thousands upon thousands of those eyewitness accounts together, you begin to get a pretty good idea what’s going on in China. Now, I have no access to those reports. But if you’ll do something for me, I just might be able to put you in touch with someone with access.”

Baxingdale saw at once that Soames was a smarter operator than others had given him credit for and that he was pursuing his own agenda. “What do you want me to do?”

“The international media haven’t been particularly helpful in our present difficulties” Soames said. “They’re after headlines and have blown things out of proportion. The injuries and deaths here have actually been fewer than the number on any given day caused by drunken driving in London or street crime in New York. But their alarmist articles are shaking confidence. I’m sure you can see that. I’ve come across some of your pieces on Vietnam. They were good, fair and constructive. What I would like you to do is something similar for Hong Kong. I don’t think our masters in Whitehall know what they’re doing and I think the people here deserve better.”

“I like the people here too. If Whitehall is leading them up a gum tree, I’ll be glad to say so.”

“Fair enough. Those Whitehall weasels haven’t a clue. They’re despatching diplomatic notes like farts. Their usual rubbish, filled with ifs and buts and blame-shifting clauses. If they knew their onions the embassy in Peking wouldn’t be up in smoke. They reckon they can read the Chinese like an open book, except the book they’re using has been devoured long ago by the flames of revolution!

“Whitehall’s ambivalence is giving vested interests here cold feet, particularly foreign ones. One major American bank has panicked and pulled out. A couple of the British hongs followed. Then the hot money boys and some local bigwigs started screaming for exchange controls. Unless stopped, that rot will spread. Fortunately, our Financial Secretary is standing firm. And with some success.”

Soames stopped talking when a waiter brought the drinks. “Cheers,” he said, gulping down half his gin and tonic and immediately ordering another. He smiled broadly. “Don’t often get to drink at government expense.”

“Saw a lot of black ties and evening gowns earlier. Does that signal steady confidence?”

Soames laughed. “That lot’s probably too far gone to be scared. They’re shining examples of those who have learnt nothing and forgotten nothing. Probably expecting a replay of the Boxer Rebellion, with John Wayne riding in at the head of an international force.

“We’re never going to get out of the hole we’re in until we marshall the locals. The population, by and large, don’t like the chaos, neither here nor across the border. There’s no

question they prefer us to the Communists at this point in time, if only because our intrusions into their lives are as nothing compared with the other side. Yet they're reluctant to support us openly because they don't trust us. We've dumped them in it too many times before. They also see that we don't trust them. They're not blind. They know we suspect them as potential enemies.

"Look at the schoolchildren demonstrating against us. You may say they've been misled or brainwashed by radical teachers. But what about their parents? No father would expose a child to tear gas and baton charges unless he harbours some genuine resentment against us. But we're not getting the message."

"What do you think the administration must do?"

"To begin with, give some real power to the more senior local officers. Make it obvious they can really speak for the administration. They can reach the local population in ways that we can't. See our waiter and his chums behind the bar? You think they'll ever talk heart-to-heart with a gweilo? Yet they've got their ears much closer to the ground than some of our so-called China experts. Most important of all, the administration has to convince locals in its midst it intends to end racism and discriminatory practices."

"It's all down to making local officers feel they have a stake in what's going on, isn't it?"

Soames nodded and waved to the waiter for another round.

"What about the solid citizens? Will they be prepared to stand up and be counted too?"

"It's a question of finding someone to take the lead without appearing a British stooge. The bosses in my department are adverse to risks. They operate at the mental level of traffic lights. They feel more comfortable with stooges, so they can't get the message across. We need somebody independent, like you, to shake some sense into them, to interview a few community leaders willing to speak out in favour of public order and an end to violence. Would you?"

"Have you people in mind?"

"There's a young Turk by the name of Xavier Chu. Do you know him?"

"No, but I've heard of him. Isn't he the son of that tycoon who built that lovely mansion up the Peak after the war?"

"That's him. He came back from New York a couple of years ago, after his father died in a boating accident. Took over Gold Star, the family firm, and made quite a splash. Got many admirers. He's got balls. When some of the foreign firms started pulling out, he jumped in and bought them cheap. He's got to be either one hell of a gambler or he's got foresight. I'm not saying you have to like him. But if you could get him to go public on why he thinks this place still has a future, that would be a tremendous boost for confidence. He might well be the evolving face of Chinese capitalism."

"Isn't he a bit young?"

"Yes, but he's got a good track record and good pedigree. His father had a reputation for being anti-British. That's why my bosses shy away from the son. The father turned Gold Star

from nothing into one of the most popular names. The son picked up where the father left off. The younger Chu, however, sprouts that type of business school claptrap that flies over the heads of oldies like me. In a sense that's a plus because Americans are partial to that stuff and the United States is our biggest market."

"What else makes him worth interviewing? There must be dozens of successful business school types around."

Soames ordered another round although Baxingdale had not yet touched his last glass. "This one's dangerous. He might turn around and bite you. He's got the balls to play both ends against the middle. I haven't figured out what his deeper game might be. But he's at least putting in money here when others are pulling out.

"Let me tell you a couple of stories. When Xavier Chu got back from the States, one of the first things he wanted was to join this club. So far as anyone could tell, the bugger hasn't even a nodding acquaintance with cricket. There's a crusty old sod on the Membership Committee, a solicitor by the name of Harry Rand, who doesn't fancy Wogs at all. He blackballed Chu. Not once but twice. Our boy somehow found out. Instead of kicking up a fuss, he simply got hold of Rand's partner and offered the firm a retainer for a number of his companies. The partner, a chap named Christopher Knight, accepted and -- surprise! surprise! -- the next time Xavier's name popped up, no blackball."

"I know Christopher Knight. Just bumped into him and his wife here. I was at Oxford with him."

"Small world. No doubt you can get the gory details from the horse's mouth."

Though Soames's known capacity for alcohol was impressive, he nevertheless surprised Baxingdale by ordering a round of brandies.

"Mixing your drinks?"

"You must try this and tell me what you think before my second story."

When the brandies arrived, Soames downed his in one go while Baxingdale sipped his.

"Well, how do you like it?"

"Good cognac, smooth on the throat, enjoyable."

"Does it put lead in your pencil?"

Baxingdale laughed. "No, don't think so. What has that to do with the second story?"

Soames stared reflectively at the bottom of his empty glass. He ordered another and perked up. "Everything!" he said, smiling. "It goes like this. Years ago, the elder Chu secured the sole agency for Connoisseur cognac. The brand sold steadily for years, but nothing spectacular. After Xavier took over, sales shot up. He ran an ad featuring a local film star with many known concubines and a reputation for womanizing. The ad showed that actor clutching a beautiful model with one hand and a glass of Connoisseur cognac in the other. The text had the actor saying that Connoisseur gave him zest for life. The message was unmistakable, brilliant. It got the job done. Nobody could accuse anybody of false advertising or making misleading claims.

“At the same time, hostesses in the red light districts began spreading stories about men showing increased sexual prowess after a few snorts of Connoisseur. No prize for guessing who put them up to it.

“Hong Kong now has the highest per capita consumption of cognac in the world. Throughout Southeast Asia, wherever there are concentrations of Chinese, consumption has shot up. Of course they often mix it with such unspeakable stuff as Coca-Cola and Seven-Up! But just imagine the possibilities when China opens up. If I were you, I’d invest in cognac without delay. The whole thing has been such a howling success that the Frogs are thinking of awarding Chu the Legion of Honour for services to French exports!”

“What a story! I suppose that’s marginally better than peddling carbolic smoke balls!” Baxingdale laughed. “If he’s considered a top entrepreneur, how does one distinguish between that and a spiv?”

“By using your imagination. That’s why Xavier Chu’s a dangerous customer. He’s not afraid of skating on thin ice if there’s money in it.”

“Well, he might be worth immortalizing in the Globe. I’ll have to get him to say something like: ‘The troubles will blow over. Let the fainthearts run. I’ll buying them up. The good times are bound to roll again.’ Has he the balls to say that?”

“If you can convince him that the Brits won’t forget a good deed done in a time of need. He’s a young man in a hurry. If he thought the Brits might give him some sort of official appointment in return, he would go for it. Something like being made a Justice of the Peace, for example. There’s something else he’s got balls for.”

“What?”

“His wife, Lucille. She’s got half the men in this town panting after her. She’s from San Francisco, American-born Chinese. Amazingly easy on the eye, particularly when she appears in a low-cut ball gown. Some wag once said hers was the bosom that launched a thousand wet dreams! I’m afraid that has stuck. Chu’s got to have something to be able to keep such a woman under control. You may get to meet her as a bonus.”

“On that note, I had better go home and dream about coming attractions.”

“Come on, the night’s still young. I’m still thirsty. I can show you interesting places which have popped up since your last stay. There’s a bar in Wanchai I guarantee is right up your street. Szeto’s Bar. Intellectual types gather there for good conversation and cheap drinks. It has turned into a watering hole for academic and artistic types, political activists and some senior local civil servants. You’ll get a completely different slant on our colonial administration from them.”

“Sounds interesting. I’ll take you up on that when I’m better settled.”

“Hey, don’t put off till tomorrow what you can do today. If you’re more into flesh and blood, I can fix that too. There are fascinating worlds out there, some the average white man hasn’t even dreamt about.”

“I know. Dangerous too. But tonight’s not the night for adventure. I have a piece to write.”

Soames shrugged and asked for the bill. After he had signed it, the two men left the Members' Bar, making their way back to the lobby down photograph-adorned corridors.

At the club entrance, Baxingdale said: "Thanks for the drinks and the background briefing. I'll follow things up. Be sure not to step on a bomb, wherever you're heading."

"Don't worry," Soames replied. "Don't you know an angel protects those who've tiddled a wee dram too much?"

Baxingdale watched Soames enter a taxi before he began his short walk home. An anomalous man in an anomalous town, he thought. Perhaps he himself was one too.