

**Hong Kong, July 1971:**

“Tried reaching you last night. Looked everywhere. At Szeto’s too,” Sebastian Baxingdale said, plaintively, standing before the desk of the City District Commissioner.

“Sorry. Had to deal with the aftermath,” T. P. Choy replied, in a voice full of weariness.

“Christ, T. P.! Why did you let it happen? All those kids hurt, dozens arrested.”

“I didn’t let anything happen. If people participate in illegal assemblies they have to take their chances. The police are there to uphold the law.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it! The establishment provoked the whole thing. It sent the kids on a bureaucratic merry-go-round, then unleashed the storm troopers!”

Baxingdale leaned over and brought his fist down on the teak desk as he spoke. He was presuming upon his friendship of four years with the Commissioner. The blow, however, produced nothing more than a shudder from an empty out-tray. The desk, like the rest of the furniture in the office, had been made by prison labour and designed for rough usage.

“They were just students, for heaven’s sake, not criminals,” Baxingdale continued. “They wanted to make a legitimate political point. No call for violence. Don’t know how many got hurt but Tony Tao was certainly beaten. Saw it with my own eyes. One moment he was briefing me quietly and the next he was being bludgeoned. He’s probably lying in a stifling cell right now, unattended, waiting to be charged!”

The Commissioner allowed his wide, pugnacious mouth to form into a conciliatory smile. “Have a seat, Seb. I know you’re upset. But this administration’s not as machiavellian as you might suppose.”

“I don’t want a damn seat.”

“The government didn’t trick anybody into a demonstration. It was just wanted to preserve public order. Local newspapers gave conflicting figures on the injured. For the record, of the twenty-two persons arrested, only four required medical attention. Unfortunately, Tony Tao was one of them. He’s not lying unattended in some stifling cell, as you put it, but in a remand hospital. Six stitches on the face and under observation for concussion.”

“And he’s probably half-blind too!” Baxingdale took the remnants of Tony’s spectacles out of his pocket and placed them on the Commissioner’s desk.

Both men stared at the mangled remains as if they were a mute reproach against the violence visited upon them.

“I’ll get them to his parents,” Choy said.

Baxingdale finally sank into a chair. “I want to testify,” he said. “Tony’s had a raw deal. I’ll get him a lawyer. I know a friend who used to work for the Director of Public Prosecutions.”

“You mean Christopher Knight? Why such concern over a virtual stranger? Tony merely invited you to a demonstration. What do you know about him?”

“Not much. Struck me as an engaging and idealistic young man.”

“He was one of the prime movers of the illegal assembly.”

“He organized things pretty well then. It had been a totally peaceful gathering till the police tried to break it up. A policeman was trying to drag Tony’s girl friend to her feet and in the process just about ripped her blouse off. Tony tried to stop him, as any gentleman would, and was beaten to a pulp right before my eyes. That’s not the behaviour of a British administration I’d want to account for.”

“You don’t have to account for it,” Choy said, tartly, his eyes narrowing in his broad, squarish face. “You’re a journalist.”

“I don’t like seeing police brutality or students being treated like criminals. That’s not British justice. I’m certainly going to tell my readers what’s going on here.”

“That’s your prerogative.”

“Why the hell did you encouraged me to attend? The whole atmosphere was almost like a carnival till the police intervened.”

“You’ve forgotten to mention that the gathering was unlawful and that the crowd failed to disperse when ordered to do so. I did encourage you to attend because you told me you wanted to observe how the rule of law operated here. Now you’re upset by what you’ve seen.”

“You knew there would be trouble, didn’t you?”

“I knew nothing of the sort. I knew a radical trade union leader by the name of Yam would be addressing the gathering. He’s a powerful speaker. Passions are bound to be aroused with him haranging people on an emotive issue. The police couldn’t take chances. They set conditions for a legal demonstration but the organizers failed to comply. Yet they insisted on a demonstration. The police had no choice but to break it up. Regrettably, things got out of hand.”

“And kids like Tony paid the price. It’s not fair. I want to see justice done.”

“Just leave Tony be, Seb. Otherwise you’ll ruin him.”

“Me? Ruin Tony? That’s rich! I’m not the one who’s given him concussion or had him locked up.”

“Testifying’s a bad idea. Are you going to give evidence on behalf of the other twenty-one detainees as well? And what about those who got away?”

“I didn’t see what was done by others. I saw people being clubbed and kicked indiscriminately, including girls. Most of them were just sitting on the ground, terrified, like Tony’s girl. I don’t know who were actually rioting. Fighting was spilling all over the place, in Victoria Park, in Causeway Bay. I had no way of telling who the rioters were.”

“Precisely. Over a thousand people disturbing the peace and you concentrated on the behaviour of one boy. How convenient! If I were Tony’s companions I’d smell a rat. Why should a gweilo journalist, looking into a sea of yellow faces, focus his attention on a single individual? And come forward afterwards to testify on his behalf no less! Was the gweilo a genuine journalist

or a Special Branch operative in disguise? Was Tony an informant passing on intelligence or fingering his associates? It's not difficult to visualize how minds might work."

"I observed Tony because I had been talking to him shortly before trouble started. He handed me an account in English of the history of the dispute."

"That settles it then. He was obviously an informer. Things would only go worse for him if he were defended by an Englishman who also happens to have been an ex-government lawyer."

"I can't believe this! This sounds like something out of Orwell!"

"Just let Tony be, Seb. If he's only charged with illegal assembly he'll probably plead guilty and do his two or three weeks. Let him enjoy his martyrdom. The memory might warm him in his old age. He'll be paying enough for his misguided ideals. Give him that one shining memory to keep, that moment when he spurned the blandishments of the world to do what he thought right."

"How can you, of all people, be so cavalier about a young person being beaten up and tossed into gaol? Chalking up a criminal record to boot. How can you defend the excesses of last night?"

Choy stared into the palm of his left hand, rubbing his thumb slowly against his fingers. "You call them excesses. I don't know that they were. I wasn't there. In any event, I have to defend them. That's my job. I'm part of the colonial establishment, remember? So are the police. That ties us together. Anyway, no one got killed. So far as I can tell, no one except Tony was even seriously injured. By colonial standards that's pretty benign."

Baxingdale shook his head vigorously in disbelief. "You're one of the most senior Chinese officers in this damn administration. Its only legitimacy is derived from a few pieces of paper extracted by force of arms. There's no election or democratic accountability here, even though the people are among the best educated and most intelligent in the world. Except for unique historical and political circumstances they would have been independent long ago. Since they've been denied a voice, they have a right to look to officials like you to look after their interests. It's bad enough you didn't prevent yesterday's disaster. Why play the running dog to defend colonial brutality now?"

"Running dog? You think I'm a running dog after all the time you've known me, after all I've told you about British double-dealings and cock-ups?" The Commissioner's nostrils flared and he waved his arms dismissively at his visitor. "You've no inkling of half the things I'm forced to do. You talked at our gatherings about each individual's duty to become engaged in social issues. What does that mean? Writing an article once in a while for a newspaper on the other side of the world?"

"That's better than nothing!" Baxingdale retorted. "Yes, you gripe over your beer but where's the action? How convenient to hide behind alibis of not rocking the boat, not upsetting the apple cart and playing up the Communist bogey! Didn't it use to be a Chinese tradition for upright officials to resign or even to commit suicide rather than become accomplices to disgraceful deeds? What has happened to that hallowed tradition?"

As Baxingdale continued his verbal attack he rose from his seat and leaned over the desk again, with eyes blazing. He locked them onto those of the Commissioner.

The Commissioner glared back and barked: "That tradition was meant for another time, for a different society. Officials used to be chosen through imperial examinations for their mastery of our classics. They absorbed their moral contents in the process. Resignation or suicide was a gesture, a self-sacrifice to prick the conscience of a harsh ruler. Here the British have introduced the culture of the iron rice bowl and the obedient servant. No one ever resigns or gets off the gravy train over a principle. For every man of principle in this administration there are a hundred time-servers with none."

At that point the Commissioner's secretary, in a remarkable feat of timing, entered the room with two cups and a pot of the Commissioner's favourite Chinese tea. The two men disengaged their eyes and Baxingdale resumed his seat.

"Would you prefer Lipton's?" the Commissioner asked, with consummate civility, as the secretary set out the cups.

"No, Chinese's fine."

After tea had been poured the Commissioner picked up the damaged spectacles and handed them to the secretary, instructing her to get them to Tony Tao's father.

The men sipped the hot brew and that commonplace act somehow restored their equanimity.

After the secretary had retired, Baxingdale said: "T. P., I'm sorry I shouted at you. I had no right to call you a running dog. I know you're not. That was thoroughly uncalled for. I was just angry with myself for being so useless yesterday. You want to know what happened? For a split second, when I saw the policeman laying into Tony, I almost attacked the police myself. But I hesitated and drew back. Prudence, cowardice or failure of nerve? I don't know. I've been hating myself since. I guess I just needed to vent my frustrations on somebody."

"I'm glad you curbed your impulse. Otherwise I would have to worry about getting you out of a stifling cell as well! Forget the name-calling. What are friends for if they can't insult each other once in a while? I've said wounding things too. Yesterday was a bad business all round. I was more affected by what happened than I let on. I haven't told anybody before, Seb, but Tony's my own bloody godson."

"What!" Baxingdale was dumbfounded by the disclosure. "Jesus Christ! Why didn't you tell me before? I've been talking way out of turn! I feel like a complete ass. Ought to kick myself. You must be worried sick!"

"Don't feel badly. How were you to know?"

"Can't you at least get him away from the police, pull some strings to get charges dropped?"

The Commissioner shook his head. "That wouldn't be very proper. Justice, even if it's only British justice, must be seen to be done. Got to wait for the medical results first and then find out what he's going to be charged with."

Baxingdale shook his head in despair. “Jesus! What a mess! This might be being wise after the event, but couldn’t you have stopped him from going?”

“Could I have stopped the thousand other participants too?”

“Tony’s your godson, for heaven’s sake. You knew the risks and the attitude of the police.”

The Commissioner nodded his head and sighed. “I knew more than I’ve admitted, my friend. You’ve hit the nail on the head without realizing it. I was partly responsible for what happened last night. I was a running dog.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Baxingdale realized on a sudden how deeply troubled his friend was. He had lived long enough among Chinese to know about their preoccupation with “face”. They always lived a part of their lives in the shadows. Behind their ritualized civility and unfailing good manners, they hid failures and defeats, suppressed vices and abandoned dreams. His friend, on the surface a tough and urbane civil servant, was no different. The man had secrets bottled up inside, though he now appeared exposed and vulnerable. If he were a Catholic, he would probably be heading for the confessional.

“Tell me what you’re driving at,” Baxingdale said, gently, in the face of his friend’s lack of response. He wanted to help him unburden himself.

“My job as City District Commissioner is to smooth out awkward situations,” Choy began eventually, in a subdued voice. “I’m supposed to assess grassroots sentiments and come up with solutions. Doesn’t mean, however, that my advice is always followed.”

All the fire previously smouldering inside the Commissioner seemed to have been brought under control. He continued: “The Diu Yu Toi issue, as you can imagine, raises troubling echoes of events in the previous century. The police have been stirring up additional resentments by breaking up Diu Yu Toi signature campaigns and arresting demonstrators. Though the row is over a pile of rocks in the East China Sea, it nevertheless taps into unhappy Chinese memories. If people got too fired up they might soon direct their anger at the British in Hong Kong as well. The situation therefore had to be defused.

“Knowing Tony’s involvement, I asked him to set up a meeting between myself and the other organizers as a step towards finding a solution. I let it be known that the authorities would consider issuing permits for future demonstrations if certain conditions were met. Tony managed to convince his associates that I was serious and a man whose word could be relied upon. The meeting duly took place.

“It became obvious at once that I was not dealing with a bunch of anarchists or rabid radicals. Most were sober, patriotic students, like Tony, who felt -- rightly or wrongly -- the big powers were ganging up on China again. The authorities trying to silence them merely reinforced the suspicion there was indeed an international conspiracy. If being British meant anything, the organizers of the demonstrations asserted, then it should mean the same right to organize peaceful public meetings in the colony as in Britain itself. They pointed to the repeated arrests as evidence of a conspiracy.

“I judged the organizers pragmatic enough not to want to destabilize the colony and, because I was Chinese and spoke their language, I managed to allay some of their fears. I then engaged them in some pretty tough but constructive negotiations. In the end we hammered out a whole range of conditions to be fulfilled before the granting of a permit. They would apply for permission in good time, restrict the demonstration to a designated corner of Victoria Park, limit the duration of the gathering, accept a modest police oversight, cut back on the number of speakers, appoint sufficient number of stewards for crowd control, disperse peacefully afterwards and so on.

“On my advice, those became the stated requirements of the police. I thought I had the makings of a deal. If those conditions could be fulfilled, much of the heat would go out of the situation. I believed in the peaceful intentions of the organizers and I recommended the granting of a permit under those conditions.

“But the police, after agreeing, had second thoughts. They were afraid of creating a precedent. Because the demonstration was quasi-political in nature, they got scared. They tried to dodge the issue by imposing an additional condition. It was, of course, technically within their right to do so under existing public order legislation. They told the organizers that since Victoria Park was under the control of the Urban Council, they must first secure permission from the Urban Council. Such a request was also a precedent for the Council. So it dithered. It suggested alternative sites out of the public eye, on the grounds that demonstrating in the park would disrupt the activities of other users of the park. The organizers soon suspected they were being played for fools.

“I was naturally furious. I protested to my superiors and the dispute ended up at Government House. To cut a long story short, that fear of setting a precedent hardened before the Governor. It was decided that the demonstration should be banned and that the police would take all steps necessary to maintain public order and uphold the law. I felt as helpless and outraged after that meeting as you did at the park yesterday.”

“Jesus! That’s cutting the ground from right under you. That’s adding fuel to fire. How could those clowns be so blind to Chinese realities and sentiments? Didn’t your Chinese colleagues support you?”

“What Chinese colleagues? I was the sole Chinese there! We are very few at senior levels. Just window-dressing. Hewers of wood and drawers of water with fancy titles. The debacle last night is certain to be regarded as further justification for keeping us down. After all, arguing for political demonstrations to be allowed and failing to defuse a simple situation must reflect on both the loyalty and competence of Chinese officers.”

“How idiotic, even for Blimps! If they value your talents so little, why don’t you quit? Leave them to stew in their own juices. There are fortunes to be made in the private sector. Just look at chaps like Xavier Chu.”

“That’s what I’m terrified of, turning into a man who cares more about his own enrichment than the welfare of his community. He’s an Anglo-American product, stuffed with the mouthings of Adam Smith and robber barons. The trouble is that most people in the West have forgotten the educational part of Adam Smith’s teaching and concentrated on the self-interest bit.

That allows corporate sharks and stupid governments to exploit his ideas. Actions and ideas now have repercussions far beyond narrow national borders. Can't people see where the uncurbed pursuit of self-interest is leading? Can't they see crony capitalism and corruption taking hold, not only in colonies and pseudo-colonies but in the very hearts of the most advanced free market economies as well?"

Choy paused and picked up his tea cup to drink.

Baxingdale was familiar with the Commissioner's social and economic theories. They've had many absorbing discussion on the whys and wherefors. But he sensed his friend had not yet finished talking and he did not want to divert him. He therefore remained silent and drank some tea as well.

"I can't quit, Seb," Choy said, finally, still nursing his teacup. "I chose a side a long time ago and, no matter how bad things get, I'm stuck with that. At the time there were qualities I had read in books about the British which I loved -- their tolerance and libertarian traditions, their wry humour and sense of fair play, their eccentricities and ability not to take themselves too seriously. I also thought I could do something for my community working within a colonial framework, so I swore an oath of allegiance to the British Crown. An honourable man must be bound by his word, must he not, let alone his oath?"

"I didn't realize till later that most of the British qualities I loved never got transplanted here. For some inexplicable reason your countrymen seem to leave them behind when they come East. Out here they put on the mask of unearned superiority. I also never realized till much later that oaths of allegiance and fealty only worked in one direction so far as ministers of the Crown were concerned. I fear acquiring an empire has not brought out the best in your countrymen."

"You can say that again! Thank God we're in the end game."

"End game or not, they still have the power to be spiteful. That's what I'm afraid of. The police may throw the book at Tony, for the sake of setting an example. Assaulting a police officer, resisting arrest, participating in an illegal assembly, conspiracy to create public disorder, the works."

"If they do you must let me testify. Ah, I'm beginning to see why you wanted me to attend the demonstration. You were counting on the presence of foreign correspondents to deter the police from being too heavy-handed. And even if things went wrong, you figured there would be independent witnesses. That's right, isn't it?"

Choy smiled.

"You old rascal! No wonder the Blimps don't trust you. You keep trying to rescue them from their blockheadedness."

"My manoeuvre didn't prevent Tony getting hurt. If he ends up with permanent damage or if the police throws the book at him, I wouldn't know how to face his parents."

"No point crossing that bridge till you come to it. What about a pre-emptive strike? I could do a human interest piece about Tony for the Globe. Give my eyewitness account of a peaceful demonstration being turned into a riot by unnecessary police brutality. Explain how

Chinese around the world perceived the handing over of the Diu Yu Toi islands by the Americans to the Japanese as a fresh encroachment upon China's territory. Finally, a young idealistic lad lying injured, his hopes and dreams in ruins, simply because he was trying to protect his girl friend from police assault. Details of Tony's injuries and criminal charges. That should touch the hearts of a few back home, perhaps spark a question or two in Parliament. The red faces resulting might foil the harsher inclinations of the police."

"Could also provoke them further."

"True. We've got to take that chance." Baxingdale fished for a notebook from his pocket and added: "I'll need details of Tony's family, his school attainments, how you and he are connected and so on."

The Commissioner lowered his head and sighed again. "All right, I guess there's no better alternative. I only hope it works. My wife and I adopted Tony some ten years back. His father and I were good friends at secondary school. We had often talked of entering university together. But Tony's grandfather, who used to own a small factory making canvas shoes, went bankrupt. So university was out for him. He had to get a job and he became a book-keeper in a small trading firm. We kept in touch. The grandfather died a couple of years later. Eventually we both got married. Tony's father married a textile worker and they started producing one child after another. Tony was the first.

"After the first two kids, the wife had to quit work to look after them and the father was forced to moonlight as a cashier in one of those late-closing tourist shops in Tsimshatsui to make ends meet. The father's ambition was to send his children to university, to give them the education he missed. To that end he's been working sixteen hours a day for the last fifteen years. Still does.

"I wanted to make things easier for him but he was too proud to accept money. Since my wife and I never managed to produce a child we decided to adopt Tony, according to Chinese custom, as an indirect way of easing the family burden. We paid Tony's fees, bought him books and things like that. Tony has turned out a marvellous boy and a promising student."

"Splendid," Baxingdale said, scribbling furiously in his notebook. "Where do they live?"

"In a multi-storeyed block in a resettlement estate. Eight in a room -- grandmother, parents, Tony and four brothers and sisters. You know the standard allocation. Twenty-four square feet per person, including kitchen, 192 square feet in all. You talked about a stifling cell just now. Tony's been in one all his life. Try sleeping eight in a room that size in this heat and you'll get an idea what I mean."

"Great, great! I know that scene. Derek sent me on one of those horrid press tour when I first arrived. Hideous concrete! Metal gates enclosing each unit. Like penitentiaries with inmates keeping their own keys. Communal bathrooms and latrines. Washing standing up and shitting squatting over trenches. Peeping toms and molesters. Graffiti on walls. Thugs lounging in stairwells. Long corridors like virtual streets, floor upon floor, menaced by shadows after dark. No policeman ever ventured through them, day or night. Not half as easy as bashing students and

kicking girls in the park, that's for sure! Yes, Tony rising above that mean environment only to be literally beaten down again."

Baxingdale rattled off his thoughts and jotted them down as if dictating to himself.

"The party line is that those estates are monuments to the administration's public housing achievements," Choy observed.

Baxingdale snorted. "I've done my research. The fact of the matter is that colonial administrators hadn't a clue what to do with refugees flooding in after the Pacific War. They sent soldiers like myself to the border to round them up and ship them back, to labour camps or worse. Ours was not to reason why. It was the good old Nuremberg defence. We slipped it on as neatly as a glove and came away with clean hands. But not clean consciences, I'm afraid.

"But in spite of everything guards did on both sides of the border the refugees kept coming. Whitehall began referring to them as economic migrants to justify sending them back. Those who managed to slip through became squatters in hillside shanty towns without any basic amenity. Those settlements multiplied like a rash. It took the Shek Kip Mei fire to force the authorities into some sort of rehousing programme. And those miserable estate blocks were all they could come up with.

"You know something, T. P.? We could have done so much better for these people if only we had the will or the foresight. We the Brits, I mean."

All of a sudden Baxingdale felt an overwhelming desire to join his friend in purging himself. He wanted to do it not only for the honour of his nation but also for himself, for failing to do nearly enough as a decent human being.

"We Brits had been too full of ourselves," Baxingdale continued. "Too insular and frightened of our own economic decline. So we resorted to every dirty trick to stem it. We didn't fulfil our duty as trustees. We pissed away the reserves of your people to defend sterling, extracted spivvy defence costs from them, restricted imports of their goods and all the rest of it. We didn't even do our duty as decent human beings. You are right about Adam Smith and the perversions of his latter day disciples. Self-interest has to be curbed, not encouraged, in an inter-dependent world. Otherwise the rich and powerful will grow more so and the impoverished will descend into a new form of slavery.

"You know something else, T. P.? The more I travel around this region the more I'm convinced that one of these days the yellow races -- the Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Vietnamese -- would overtake the West. They had all been bombed out and devastated by years of conflicts. Yet look at them today. They have risen, or are about to rise, like the phoenix. They'll soon leave Europe behind because they've got that gritty determination to make something of their lives no matter how bad things get. They've also retained a remarkable faith in learning and are willing to make sacrifices to secure it for their young. Tony's father is a case in point. Fifteen years of hard slog without ever wavering. Continuity and the future mattered to people like him. You've got to take your hat off to that. We in the West have lost that kind of faith, that dedication to the future. We've gone soft, living off the intellectual achievement of our forebears and the accumulated fat of empire. All we seek now are material abundance and life served up on a plate."

“Human affairs have ups and downs,” Choy interjected. “We’ve had our dark ages, our dynastic cycles. Great civilizations can sometimes endure by renewing themselves. It all depends on whether they’re fortunate enough to come up with the right leaders at the right time.”

“I doubt if right leaders will emerge again in my country during my lifetime. I find little to be hopeful about. I look at my father’s diminishing congregation and the rising number of school dropouts and despair. The British thirst for learning is fast disappearing. People now just want their places at the trough.”

“There has to be hope, Seb. Otherwise we might as well go and slit our own throats.”

“Perhaps. At least Tony has given me a chance to redeem myself, to involve myself in a cause that is just. But back to work.”

Baxingdale continued to elicit further details about Tony and his family. After a while he shut his notebook. “I’ve got enough, I think. I imagine it’s pointless to ask the police for permission to interview Tony?”

The District Commissioner made a face.

“Pity. I guess you’ll have to find out the extent of his injuries and what the police intend to charge him with. Shall we meet at Szeto’s for an up-date? Say, around six? I can then finalize my piece and send it off tonight.”

“Certainly. We should both have worked up a mighty thirst by then.”