

High Street Confrontation

The telephone rang at ten o'clock on Monday morning, at an hour normally far too early for Suen to accept calls. But when Ah Loy knocked on his bedroom door and reported that Mr. Su had an urgent message, Suen went downstairs to answer it.

Su relayed the news that Dum-Dum had been admitted into intensive care the previous night, suffering from pneumonia. He suggested lunching at the Lingnan Alumni Association before going to the hospital, since visiting hours did not begin till 2.30.

"Yes, yes," Suen responded. He felt drowsy and dull-witted, after only four hours of unrefreshing sleep. "How bad is he?"

"According to one of his sons, he's been drifting in and out of consciousness," Su replied. "Pneumonia's no joke for someone his age."

"All right, let's meet at Lingnan."

After Su's message, a return to sleep was no longer an option. A premonition of his friend's death took possession of him as he set about his ablutions. He could imagine Death's grim form hovering by the bedside of the former doyen of Central Magistracy reporters, ready to escort his soul to some unknown realm.

He experienced a sudden pang of sadness. He and Dum-Dum had shared many ups and downs. At the beginning they had plied their craft because they felt it had social significance. To practise it, they had resorted to bribes and other underhanded means to obtain information. Kim had consoled them by saying their motives were nobler than those of arms exporters and international corporations which paid bribes to secure contracts.

Later, Su and others joined their select band. No one thought they could actually overturn political realities. Their ventures were but little pinpricks against the established state of society. But most of them had entertained some private hope of playing a bigger role one day, in some

astounding cause célèbre. But nothing of that sort materialised. They had to settle for tiresome colonial squabbles. Their victories had been often pyrrhic, their defeats humiliating. Later still, though their paths diverged, they continued to offer each other brotherly moral support.

Suen examined his body as he showered. Neither defeats nor compromises with principles seemed to have left any telltale mark. Life seemed unfair. At least his friends had suffered financially for their ideals.

In order to make ends meet, Dum-Dum had to spend years snapping silly photographs for philistines and social climbers. Su had to endure a monk-like austerity. They had remained constant nonetheless, staying the course and being true to their commitments. They could hold their heads up high in spite of defeats.

He, on the other hand, had achieved next to nothing. In spite of being richly endowed by his ancestors, he had allowed his fifty-seven years to disappear like a puff of wind, with only three largely ignored books to his name. He might still let loose a jeremiad now and then against the entrepreneurial slipperiness of the times but such outbursts caused hardly a ripple. So what was the point of another book conveying an even more unwelcome message?

He surprised Ah Loy when he eventually emerged from his room in his street clothes -- a grey sports shirt, a seersucker jacket and a pair of dark hopsack trousers. The jacket, with blue and white stripes, looked brand new, although it had been acquired for him by Po-Chee more than ten years ago. It was just that he had had few occasions to wear it.

Ah Loy reacted with disbelief. In recent years her master rarely ventured out except on a Friday. And almost never dressed up before breakfast.

“Young Master going out?” she ventured. “Should eat something first. Can make congee in no time.”

“Body clock not ready,” Suen replied, amused that the old servant still addressed him the same way she had done since he was a child. “I’m lunching with Mr. Su,” he added.

“So early?”

“Want to take some air in the Botanical Garden.”

Ah Loy nodded. “Little Niece also skipped breakfast,” she muttered, more to herself than to her master. “Why nobody eat today?”

“Oh? Is she ill?”

“Little Niece up very late last night. Only Shiu-nai ate today.”

“I see,” Suen said, too apprehensive to ask any more questions.

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The air was fresh along Bowen Road. A shifting breeze was tempering the summer heat. Suen sauntered towards the Botanical Garden along the shaded section of the road.

He didn’t really want to go to the Botanical Garden. He simply wanted to get out of the house before running into Amber. He was on that account thankful for Su’s call. It provided him with an excuse to avoid the possible consequences of a meal alone with his niece.

Why had the girl been up late the previous night, he wondered. Had she been trying to tackle him over what had taken place? Or had she merely been up nattering to one of her classmates on the telephone? He thought he had heard someone talking in the hallway.

His body tensed with uncertainty. An act born out of mistaken identity, hallucination, lust, envy and disappointment now seemed to be spinning out of control, dragging other emotions into play. A sense of dishonour and betrayal, for a start. A sensual current long dormant in him seemed to have troublingly returned to life.

He had been more or less celibate since Po-Chee's breakdown. The only exceptions had been when his wife's need for solace overrode her inhibitions. But those occasions had been few and far between. And when they happened, they had been sad and sorry engagements, with none of the wild abandonment they had shared while living in sin at London.

Po-Chee had presented him with a golden butterfly on her initial visit to Radnor Place, but he had no idea she had been trying to signal her emotional fragilities. Swept up by the ardour of their love-making, he had taken far too long to get that message.

When he finally did get it, she had withdrawn into herself. In response, he gradually mastered the lures of the flesh. Even the magnificent bottom wriggled at him by that Anderson girl had failed to spark any interest. Yet a single misguided kiss with Amber had tipped him completely off the rails. Why? He couldn't explain it to himself, let alone to anyone else. He wasn't even going to try.

Nonetheless, the implications of what he had done oppressed him. Po-Chee would be devastated if she found out. He did not dare to contemplate possible effects.

Possibly Amber might be all at sea too, once she had cut through the fog of her hallucinations. No matter how crudely she had offered herself or how casually the younger generation might regard sex nowadays, the fact remained that she was just a kid under the influence of drugs, mistaking him for someone else. He should have protected her, not take advantage of her. Moreover, he had carried out what should have been an act of love in an utterly base and animal manner, without so much as a word of endearment or commitment, giving nothing in return. It wasn't gentlemanly and it wasn't his style. He felt thoroughly ashamed.

He had also judged her too hastily over drug-taking. What could be more natural than for a Hong Kong girl than that? The whole

damn place was founded on the opium trade. One did not even have to pretend to be clearing Blake's doors to perception or following in Baudelaire's footsteps. The courts dispensed punishments to hordes of human derelicts for narcotic offences every day. Even by the time of his birth the colony's public finances were still relying substantially on revenue from the sale of opium.

The drug cartels had globalized and grown more powerful than some governments. A logical consequence of the catch phrases of entrepreneurial nous and market forces so fashionable these days.

In Hong Kong, it was an open secret that certain solicitors were acting as fronts for drug syndicates. A number of money-changers and finance companies could launder illicit money for those with the right connections. With so many benefitting from drugs, not the least some crooked officials, it was a wonder more people were not living on a perpetual high.

His own involvement with narcotics in Paris came back to him and he smiled. Hardly the end of the world if Amber tried the same. She must be trying to work through the contradictions in her young life. Drug-taking and casual sex might just be escapes from reality for her generation.

He sighed at those thoughts, as memories of their accidental tryst flooded back with breathtaking intensity. His blood tingled as he recollected the taut youthfulness of her skin, the smell of her womanly musk and the sounds of her moans. She had made him feel so absurdly young that he immediately foresaw the danger. How could he resist reaching for such physical pleasures again? If he were thirty years younger and not married to Po-Chee, he could be smitten by a girl like her. But "if" was a very metaphysical word.

Prudence dictated he should remove himself from the source of temptation. But how? He could go back to Radnor Place, he supposed,

until Amber had safely left for America. But on what excuse? He had just returned. Any story he could concoct was bound to be full of holes. He felt like a criminal suspect without an alibi.

Upon reaching the Botanical Garden, his emotions were in disarray. He paused outside the enclosure housing some pink flamingos and studied them half-heartedly. Most of those beautiful long-necked and web-footed creatures were just standing around, many on one leg, poised, immobile and indifferent to the world. Or were they? They were migratory creatures. They must resent confinement. Beneath their surface insouciance, could they be hatching a plot for escape? Or have they become like the citizenry of Hong Kong, too accustomed to their cage of plenty to contemplate any other form of life?

Po-Chee must pass those same birds on her walk to work each morning. Did she ever pause to look at them, to speculate upon their thoughts? Or had she become too focused on take-overs and buy-outs, tax havens and corporate balance sheets? She wasn't at the top of her profession for nothing. "Pragmatic" was the word Hong Kong loved and she was fond of saying that her function in life was to be pragmatic, to adjust to the world as she found it.

The thought of his wife discovering what had taken place between him and Amber tormented him. What anguish she must go through to confront an emotional problem without a legal solution!

He sighed helplessly, unable to think clearly any more. He absent-mindedly followed the path curving down from the flamingo enclosure to the oblong space forming the heart of the garden. It was bordered by well-tended flower beds and strategically placed rest benches. It conveyed an European air of tidiness. A nondescript fountain played at its centre while a capricious breeze cast a haphazard spray upon visitors.

He did a slow circuit of the garden, lost in a chaotic jumble of

thoughts. The curse of too much imagination. Herodotus had known the vexation of knowledge without power. He was trapped in that same misery. He should have given up caring long ago. Didn't Buddhists hold that the very desire to strive for a result would itself ignite suffering? Taoists had urged a similarly belief. They held that Nature would rebalance the ails of the world in its own sweet time. Intellectualising too much could itself be a kind of trap.

He began another slow circuit of the garden until he reached a vantage point from which he could look down upon Government House. Not an altogether unpleasant sight, he conceded, given the shotgun marriage between a Victorian building and a Japanese annex! He imagined with amusement Mona and her husband partying in there.

He paused, amazed to remember that Uncle Pak had once been arrested as a collaborator for constructing that annex. How hilarious! The whole wretched city was stuffed with collaborators now, preening themselves for pictures to be taken at Government House parties. If each had to be called to account when China resumed control ten years hence, there would be hell to pay. And those who had served time in Stanley Prison for confronting the colonial police or for planting bombs at the height of the Cultural Revolution would become instant patriots and be hailed as national heroes. Only a fickle line in the imagination separated the bad from the good.

He shook his head and peered into the middle distance. A forest of high-rises spread like an unsightly rash before his eyes. They rose in brutal lines, squashed together, with sharp edges. Tinted curtain walls threw back the rays of the morning sun. They struck him as monstrosities, designed to sidestep convoluted building regulations. They had no originality, beauty or harmony. They stood merely as triumphs of the abacus over architectural dreams.

He turned away, disheartened, oblivious of the squealing children chasing after the fountain's erratic spray. The gathering heat of the day caused him to pull out a white linen handkerchief to dab his brow as he moved away from the flower-bordered oblong. Chance led him along the route to the main entrance of the garden. It was the route he normally took each Friday to his bridge game. He followed it and eventually arrived at the start of a narrow walkway known as Battery Path.

The shaded path, built during a less petulant age, had escaped the clutches of developers. It was lined with venerable banyans, palms, ferns and other vegetation. He noted with delight the traceries of sunlight filtering through their leaves. But no sooner had his eyes taken in the sight, his ears came under assault from the discords of the city -- the rat-tat-tat of pneumatic drills, the distant pounding of pile drivers and the screaming horns of gridlocked cars. His nose, too, crinkled from the smell of unclean air.

Other users of the path brushed past him with a strident vigour. They cast disapproving looks, thrown at him sideways across their shoulders, for dawdling in the middle of the path.

Embarrassed, he moved to one side. Wouldn't do to hamper the exigencies of others. There were banks, consulates and government offices in the neighbourhood, ready to negotiate letters of credit, issue visas or grant export authorisations. Time represented money. Only he had the luxury of killing it. He continued at his own pace until he reached the lower end of the path, where it merged into a busy city junction. Pedestrian traffic thickened appreciably. He spotted a group of tourists, pink and perspiring, bunching to cross the road.

Ah, mass tourism, he reflected wryly. The contagion of the epoch. A godsend for cash-strapped governments everywhere. Tourists easier to fleece than sheep, quicker to milk than cows. Priceless for

employment and GDP figures, for visa fees and the velocity of money.

He watched the sweltering tourists grimacing at the fumes spewing from crawling cars. Their local leader put on a rictus smile.

Serve them right, he thought, for wasting good money on package tours, only to return home unenlightened and lumbered with useless trinkets. Remain in Arkansas or Bavaria or wherever else you might hail from, he wanted to urge. Go admire the sunset, read a good book, spend time with your grandchildren. Acquire a paramour, if that's your inclination, but don't embark on six-day jollies expecting romance or any meaningful connection with another culture.

The lights changed and pedestrians on both sides of the street charged towards one another, like solid phalanxes of Macedonian legions. They came together at the centre, shuffled clumsily through each other's ranks, before rushing towards a waiting bus, probably to head for the noonday gun or some equally banal sight. Would tourists ever ask to visit the soulless new towns similar to their own sink estates back home? No, they all want to see unspoilt places and from that choice spark local conspiracies to desecrate them for the sake of the mighty dollar!

With the disappearance of the tour group, he turned his attention on his fellow citizens.

What an indomitable breed! Born opportunists and survivors, capable of turning every misfortune into a profit. If only they had devoted their energies and intelligence to worthier ambitions. Would they be any less capable than Kim or Ralfie of burning with a jewel-like flame?

Thinking of Ralfie turned him heartsore. His kiss at Brasenose seemed to linger upon his mouth still. Why had he panicked? A genuine friendship ought to be able to take things like that in its stride. Why did Ralfie have to die so young, leaving him no opportunity to set things right, to even say a fitting goodbye?

Why did so many good men have to forfeit their lives so outrageously? Socrates, Wat Yuen, Jesus, Gandhi, the flowers of youth sent to senseless wars. Was it to leave their sacrifices upon our collective conscience? And why would otherwise intelligent people still talk so smugly about that pernicious untruth of the survival of the fittest?

He shook his head and joined the pedestrian flowing along the narrow pavements of his home turf. The town was altering inexorably into alien territory. Virtually all the landmarks of his youth had disappeared. Colourful Chinese shop signs had been transformed into parodies of modernity, with advertisements no different from those in London or New York. They touted a mind-numbing range of products. The choice of artery-clogging junk foods, cancer-inducing cigarettes, creams claiming to prolong youth, coffee beans harvested by children who should have gone to school, garments meticulously stitched together by slum-dwellers. He snorted with disgust as the giddy chatter of Cantonese tones rose around him.

His steps eventually brought him before a branch of an international bank. The establishment next door was a brightly-lit jewellery shop. Its show-windows sparkling with rings studded with diamonds, earrings dangling with rubies, pendants dripping with emeralds, broaches fashioned out of green jade. Each establishment was guarded by a turbaned Sikh cradling a shotgun.

Both Sikhs were splendid specimens, tall and robust. Each had a profuse beard. They reminded him of Hong Kong's early days under British rule when large numbers of Sikhs were imported to help maintain public order because the loyalty of Chinese recruits were suspect. Those guards were probably their descendants.

But what captured his attention more than the Sikhs was a grey-haired woman in shabby clothes kneeling on the pavement. Her eyes

stared dully out of a gaunt and wrinkled face. In front of her lay an old biscuit tin serving as a begging bowl and a piece of yellowish cardboard covered with black characters. From time to time she would tap the tin on the pavement to attract attention. But neither the tide of pedestrians nor those patronising the two establishments paid her the slightest heed. Only the two guards kept eyeing her indecisively.

At first, he felt as much offended by that ridiculous juxtaposition of poverty and wealth as by the averted eyes of pedestrians. But, gradually, his outrage gave way to a tingle of amusement.

The poor were not without their native guile, he thought. If the beggar had squatted squarely at the front of one of the two establishments, one of the Sikhs would have chased her off. But she had placed herself, either by luck or by design, where the walls of the two businesses met, thereby creating sufficient territorial ambiguity to be left more or less unmolested.

That situation lifted his spirits. He moved closer to read the characters on the cardboard. The calligraphy was probably by some street-side letter-writer. The message was clear, however. It stated that the woman was a widow who had previously been cared for by a good and hardworking son. But that son had perished in an industrial accident more than a year ago. She had been left homeless and bereft of support since.

“Alms, kind folks. Merciful alms,” the old woman wailed, tapping the pavement with her tin.

Suen judged that in spite of her grey hair and her wrinkled face the beggar might be only in her early sixties. Not much older than himself.

He reached for his wallet, only to discover he had left it at home. He rummaged through his pockets but found not a cent. He felt utterly foolish and began casting around in the hope of seeing someone from whom he might borrow some money. But no familiar face appeared.

The beggar repeated her plea for alms in a squeaky voice.

It occurred to Suen that Po-Chee's office was just two streets away. He squatted down before the beggar and said in a low voice: "Be patient, old auntie. I'm going to get you some money. It'll take me a couple of minutes. Just stay put and I'll be back."

The woman eyed him dubiously. "Thank you, kind sir," she replied, nodding.

The spectacle of a well-dressed man squatting down to talk to a beggar in the middle of a busy thoroughfare soon aroused curiosity. A couple of passers-by paused to see what was afoot. Even the Sikhs moved closer to be in on the conversation.

Just as Suen was about to stand upright again, a couple of patrolling policemen happened upon the scene. Both were in their twenties, dressed in the khaki uniform of summer. One was a corporal and the other a constable. Each had a holstered pistol, a regulation truncheon and a set of handcuffs attached to his black leather belt. Each also had a radio communication device attached to a shoulder strap. Both seemed used to exercising the authority conferred by their uniforms.

The corporal eyed Suen quizzically before turning to the beggar. "You can't beg here, grandma," he said. "It's against the law. You'll have to move."

The beggar looked at the speaker blankly but made no reply. The presence of the police caused a few more people to gather.

"Can this elderly lady be allowed to stay for a few more minutes?" Suen interceded. "I'm going to get her some money."

"Who are you?" the corporal demanded. "You know her?"

"No, I was just passing by. The woman looks in need of help so I thought I'd give her some money."

Suen resented being questioned before a growing group of

strangers. “I just want to get her some money. That’s all,” he repeated.

“Don’t you have money on you?” the corporal asked.

“Not enough.”

“There’s a bank right here.”

Suen’s irritation increased. “Yes, I know. I’ve been in there to get her a credit card but they didn’t think her credit-worthy”

The on-lookers laughed and that discomfited the corporal.

Sensing that the policeman was unamused, Suen added quickly: “I was just joking. This isn’t my bank. I just need to go and get some money.”

“How much do you want to give?” the corporal persisted.

“I don’t know,” Suen replied, feeling wrong-footed. He gave a helpless shrug of the shoulders “I haven’t really thought about it.”

The constable now intervened with a smirk on his face. “This granny claims to be homeless,” he said to the corporal, but loudly enough for the assembly to hear. “The gentleman must intend giving her enough to buy a home.”

Laughter rippled through the crowd. The corporal laughed too.

Suen flushed, angered by both the laughter and the unhelpful attitude of the policemen.

“You ought to be careful with your money, Sir” the corporal said, with exaggerated concern. “Lots of racketeers around here. They operate in gangs, forcing the elderly and the handicapped to beg for them. People are not always what they seem.”

“I’m sorry, corporal,” Suen said evenly. “All I’m asking are a few minutes to fetch some money.”

“If the grandma really needs help, there’s the Social Welfare Department. We can arrange that. We’re drawing a crowd here, creating an obstruction. She’ll have to move right away.”

“No, wait, please,” Suen cried. “This is” He stopped abruptly. He was about to fire off some uncomplimentary comments when he realised his identity card was in his wallet and the wallet was not with him. It was an offence not to carry an identity card. Or to fail to produce one on demand. If he pressed the matter, the corporal was bound to ask him to identify himself. Far from helping the beggar he was likely to be detained, leaving him unable to meet Su or to visit Dum-Dum.

“You wanted to say something, Sir?” the corporal asked, with a fresh edge to his voice.

Suen clenched his teeth and shook his head. The muscles around his jaw twitched with suppressed fury. He was also beginning to sweat. He could feel it dampening the armpits of his shirt. He wanted to remove his jacket to cool himself but was afraid the policemen might misinterpret that as a sign of belligerence. Neither did he want to pull out a handkerchief to wipe his brow, lest that be taken as a sign of running scared.

The corporal looked at Suen sternly for a moment before telling the constable to call the case in. The constable obeyed and then helped the beggar to her feet. The corporal picked up the biscuit tin and the piece of cardboard. The two then escorted the woman away.

The crowd began to disperse. As it did so, someone muttered: “No mileage in arguing with the police.”

Suen stood frozen on the spot, breathing heavily. He felt as if he were being suffocated by fury and helplessness. Beads of perspiration trickled from his temples. He at last brought out his handkerchief to wipe his brow. He also removed his jacket and folded it over his left arm.

Why shouldn't people argue with the police, he wanted to shout. To hell with lackeys of every type! Why should human beings be reduced to the level of dogs, needing a licence to go about their business?

Though he had not uttered a sound, passers-by were beginning to eye him strangely. He looked down and saw that the front of his shirt was wet through. He felt his face burning. He must look a sight!

Shame and frustration overwhelmed him. He should have argued the toss with the corporal, taken a stand. Instead he had swallowed his pride and broken his word to an old woman who had relied upon him. He was furious with himself. Another opportunity had arisen to measure himself against his principles and he had flunked again!

An explosive mixture of anger and disgust churned inside him. All at once he wanted to shout and scream, to smash everything in sight! The importuning show-windows, the leering advertisements, the colonial lackeys, his magnificent inheritance, his precious books, everything that had conspired to reduce him to a man who could only mouth ideals but incapable of acting upon them. He couldn't even now keep a simple promise to a beggar.

He trembled and shook over his own impotence. The sarcastic words of the police constable came back to sting him further. "The gentleman must intend giving her enough to buy a home," the man had said.

Yes, that would do for a start! He would give that woman enough for a home! He could well afford it! He would like to see that constable's stupid face when he announced the news at wherever they had taken her. Po-Chee could do the necessary. He would see to it that she made them dance an uncomfortable bureaucratic jig!

So thinking, he gathered himself to head for his wife's office. He strode along Queen's Road Central hurriedly, filled with a vengeful purpose, weaving and jostling his way through the thick crowds. When he reached the junction with Wyndham Street, he was forced to join a group of others waiting for the traffic lights to change.

Wyndham Street was a steep incline which channelled one-way traffic down from the mid-levels of Victoria Peak to the centre of town. In olden days sedan-chair carriers used to ply their trade there, carrying customers up its exhausting gradient. But with the relentless growth in traffic, the authorities turned it into a down-flowing artery. Its steep slope rendered it dangerous for vehicles and pedestrians alike. A number of serious accidents had in fact occurred when brakes failed.

But Suen was not mindful of any of that. His focus was on settling scores with the smirking constable and the officious corporal. He moved forward, still fuming, as other pedestrians began crossing the street.

Suddenly, he became conscious of a general commotion and a frantic hooting of horns. He saw people scattering, yelling, screaming. He hesitated, confused, and half-turned.

Just at that moment a runaway lorry, overladen with steel construction rods, slammed into him.