

## Farewell

### Hong Kong, March 1985:

The hour was late. Diners at both of the main restaurants at the Victoria Cricket Club had dribbled away. Even in the more popular of the two, only a table of three remained. Those stragglers consisted of Derek Soames and his guests, Sebastian Baxingdale and T. P. Choy.

Soames had been drinking copiously since the start of their meal but still felt stone sober and out of sorts. His companions had drunk less but were mellowing into a touching melancholy. Perhaps it was the two cups of coffee after dinner that had taken away the effects of the wines, Soames thought. Damn silly. He wanted to be drunk tonight of all nights, to be forgetful and irresponsible. But it was not happening.

He saw the anticipatory glances of the waiters and knew it was time to leave. They were into their third snifter of Connoisseur cognac and the last two inches of their Cuban cigars. But he did not want the evening to end. After all, it was a farewell dinner for a friend he might never see again.

He and Baxingdale had become chums in spite of their differences in temperament and upbringing. What first drew him to the journalist was the fellow's sense of justice and distaste for cant. He had seen at once that those qualities marked him as another potential outsider among the colony's expatriates. It did not take long for them to strike up a friendship, to become fellow conspirators in exposing cock-ups and social prejudices in the colonial system.

His friend's departure would rob his own life of much colour and purpose, he reflected gloomily. He hoped they had done some good during the last eighteen years. Things would never be the same again.

"When are you actually flying out?" he asked gruffly, jolted out of his thoughts. His voice sounded over-loud in the echoing emptiness of the room.

"Monday," Baxingdale replied, tapping ash off from what remained of his Davidoff.

"Couldn't you stay?" Choy chipped in. His voice was coloured with resignation.

"Not without a job. And who would employ a Jeremiah at a time like this?"

"Didn't you tell me Mr. Yue, the shipping tycoon, had been hinting at his need for someone to help with English documents? That's his way of offering a job, you know."

"Yes, but I'll be no good at dealing with flags of convenience or piracy in the Straits of Malacca. Wouldn't be earning my keep and it wouldn't be fair on Mr. Yue. Writing's the only thing I know."

"Intend to work for another newspaper then?"

"No, not immediately. Might try writing a book first, until my money runs out."

"A book? You never told us you were planning a book."

"I wasn't planning anything. The idea just came to me."

"What'll it be about?"

"Hong Kong."

“That figures, but in what form? Personal reminiscences, a social and political analysis of colonial rule, a novel or what?”

“Don’t rightly know yet. So many extraordinary things have happened to me here. I’m not sure whether I should recount them factually, polemically, philosophically or through fiction.”

“Forget the philosophical approach. It’s self-defeating,” Soames pronounced. “Everything here’s a metaphysical contradiction. Just write about the shenanigans of the rich and powerful. Pick up the current gossip and embellish the details. Everyone has skeletons in the cupboard -- the heads of princely hongs, High Court judges, bankers, diplomats, senior bureaucrats, venerable local families and even your left-wing contacts. That is what will tickle the public fancy.”

“Much of that stuff would be libellous.”

“So what? Dirt sells. It’ll make you a million. Worry about the libel suits afterwards. Dare the rascals to sue. They would only lose more face.”

“If that’s such a good idea, why don’t you do it and make the lolly yourself?”

“Beyond me, old boy. After twenty years of churning out government handouts my prose has gone stiffer than a wooden spoon. Besides, given my own peccadilloes, it wouldn’t be sporting for a pot to call the kettle black.”

“Don’t be put off, Seb,” Choy said, leaning closer to Baxingdale in a gesture of solidarity. “A good book about Hong Kong is long overdue. This place deserves one and you can do it justice. But why not write it here, where everything has happened? The flat you’ve got can’t be too expensive. I can find you a cheaper one, if you like, on one of the outlying islands.”

“Thanks, but what money I have is likely to go further living in an English garret. Besides, I need a bit of distance. I need to see this place more objectively than I can now.”

“I shall miss you,” Choy said, dispiritedly. “I shall always be grateful for your intervention which allowed my godson to get away with a suspended sentence for resisting arrest. He’s been teaching for the last ten years in Canada. No Englishman has ever fought our corner as tenaciously as you have.”

Baxingdale waved self-deprecatingly with the hand holding his cigar.

“Hey! What about me?” Soames snapped, in deliberately quarrelsome tones. He had picked up an altered timbre in Choy’s voice and was fearful of the evening descending into sentimentality. “I’m an Englishman too. Half the stuff Seb churns out are based on leaks from us. Don’t give him all the credit. We put our backsides on the line too every time we spill the beans to him!”

“So what do you want?” Baxingdale asked, surprised by the outburst. “You want every leak acknowledged in print?”

“No!” Soames declared, sitting up haughtily. “We want justice. We want recognition for all the times we’ve saved those uppity colonial arseholes from themselves. We want to know why we’ve been denied gongs for services above and beyond the call of duty.”

“Yes, yes! And nothing less than the Garter would do,” Choy agreed.

The exchange brought a lighter mood to the table and the three friends emptied their glasses in a series of high-spirited toasts. Soames then signalled for replenishments, much to the dismay of the weary restaurant staff.

After fresh pegs of Connoisseur cognac had been poured, Baxingdale said, reflectively: "You know, I'm going to miss this place like the devil. It's amazing how it has thrived, in spite of so many political and economic storms. To a large measure the credit rests with us British, but not in any sense that our Westminster's tribes would understand. British ineptitudes and misconceptions are so bloody marvellous, when you come to think about them. They've leave our mandarins with the illusion they're in charge, while allowing locals to go about their business in their own way.

"Take our blind faith in the law. We think that simply passing a law would alter society and human behaviour. It must be a great source of amusement to locals. We've banned the Communist Party for donkey's years, yet there's hardly a Chinese who doesn't believe that the Communists have already penetrated every segment of our society. We've enacted labour legislation to conform to the highest standards of the I.L.O. but all I've got to do is to go out onto my balcony to see every provision ignored. It's all a tremendous joke!"

"The girls in Wanchai are grateful beyond words for our ineptitudes," Soames said. "If our administration were half-way competent, most of them would be in the Po Leung Kuk and their families would be starving. And pimps would lose their commissions, Yankee sailors their recreation and drinking establishments their customers."

"Profits from tourism would go down, mortgage payments would be in arrears, property prices would drop and the stock prices would fall," Choy chipped in.

Baxingdale entered the spirit of things. "There would be bankruptcies and foreclosures. Banks would find their deposit base squeezed, their liquidity ratios breached and the velocity of money slowing to a crawl!"

"And those moneybags allegedly representing our community in the innermost councils of government would be up in arms because their profits are disappearing and their investments are turning shaky!"

The friends were by now laughing boisterously and emptying their snifters with extravagant toasts.

Soames signalled for another round and the maitre d' and a waiter approached with an air of disapproval.

"Please get me the bill also," Soames said soothingly, when he saw their downcast faces. Then, as if by way of an excuse, he clapped a hand on Baxingdale's shoulder and said: "My friend is going to leave us for good. We have to give him a proper send-off."

"Of course, Sir," the maitre d' said, appeased. "Please take your time."

After the attendants had retreated, Soames said: "Speaking of moneybags, do you know Xavier's gone walkabout again, as the Aussies would say?"

"Really?" Choy said. "Saw nothing in the Gazette."

"It wasn't gazetted, thanks to another stroke of genius by our Chief Secretary."

“I heard something last night,” Baxingdale confessed, “when I rang Lucille to say goodbye. She said Quinn had been ringing her to find out where Xavier’s gone. What’s going on?”

“Did she say where her husband is?”

“No, she doesn’t know. Xavier seldom tells her about his movements. She thought he might have gone to China to sort out problems connected with his organ transplant project.”

“Well, the inside story is that towards the end of last month Xavier asked to be excused from the next ExCo meeting. Reggie Boy took it upon himself to agree and to mention his absence at the meeting, thinking that the gazetting palaver was unnecessary for just one meeting. But Xavier has now been absent for three meetings and has neither written nor telephoned. The Governor is less than pleased and there’s growing pressure from other ExCo members for an explanation and for an announcement to be made. The trouble is that nobody seems to know where Xavier is. An announcement under such circumstances might spark another fiasco on the stock and financial markets. Reggie Boy wants me to prepare for a salvage operation, just in case.”

“Good grief! Not again!”

“His so-called disappearance could be calculated,” Choy observed, blandly. “I first met that bugger thirty years ago, when I was still in the university and he was only in high school. I detected a ruthless and calculating streak in him then and nothing he has done since taking over Gold Star has suggested he has changed his stripes. With the signing of the Joint Declaration, the colonial administration must become increasingly a lame duck. If he were to lead a movement to distance local bigwigs from the Brits, it might earn him kudos with our future masters. Temporary market chaos wouldn’t matter to him. They would be just a bit of added theatre to underline his importance and the steadying effect of his presence on the market. They would also provide him a further opportunity to fish in troubled waters.”

Baxingdale shook his head in dismay. “Quite honestly, I’m sick of his scheming. I’ll be glad never to clap eyes on him again.”

“Well, don’t be disheartened so quickly. I’ve only put forward one theory. There could be another equally plausible one.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been following the propaganda war between the Nationalists and the Communists in their newspapers. Following recent pronouncements from Peking about cracking down on corruption, a report appeared in the KMT alleging that a number of senior cadres in Canton have been arrested in a clean-up operation. There has, of course, been no confirmation from Peking.

“But for every cadre who is corrupt there first has to be a corrupter who is equally guilty. Suppose that in the course of his activities in China Xavier has crossed the wrong palms or backed the wrong faction. That’s well within the realms of possibility in the present political climate. He has to be pulling strings to bring teams of doctors and public security officials here for training attachments. Suppose he’s been nabbed in that clean-up operation and is being used as a proxy in some wider political struggle. Suppose he’s being held incommunicado somewhere and . . . .”

“Holy Moses!” Soames exclaimed. “There’ll be fun and games all right! Reggie Boy’ll have a lot of mealy-mouthing to do.”

“You’re right! The possible ramifications can be shattering,” Baxingdale said. “If Xavier’s in trouble, I will hate to think what might happen to the local stock market. He won’t be just another Chinese social worker that the Brits can wash off their hands.”

“Certainly not!” Soames cried. “I can already visualize the fizz going out of Reggie Boy’s retirement party! The night’s still young. Let’s explore Choy’s intriguing theory further at Szeto’s.”

“Why not?” Choy said. “Drinks on me.”