

Getting Married

by

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I

One might or might not subscribe to the ancient Chinese belief that only Heaven arranged marriages. But the circumstances under which Shek, a successful Hong Kong entrepreneur, ended up marrying a member of the Communist Youth League less than half his age must certainly make for reflection.

It all began when Shek was travelling along a narrow gravel road on the outskirts of the unremarkable Kiangsu town of X. The place had a population of about 200,000, bred with an uncommon dislike for outsiders. Although one of the more attractive tributaries of the mighty Yangtze River flowed through part of the town, it could not really lay claim to any cultural or scenic fame. It could only rely on a solid reputation for producing fine and durable textiles.

That fact alone was what drew Shek to X. He had secured a massive contract from an American chain store for a substantial number of cotton shirts made to exacting specifications and needed a reliable producer with high standards. X seemed a suitable choice although he had never been to the place before and only knew its reputation.

The Communist leaders of the town were as anxious to gain Shek's custom as Shek was to undertake his production there. The reason was that they had been ordered just before his arrival to implement a dramatic new shift in policy, to embrace modernization and some elements

of a market economy. State subsidies were to end, they had been told, and textile factories had to earn their way or face closure. Therefore, when Shek arrived, the leaders of X welcomed him with opened arms and immediately placed at his disposal one of the two chauffeur-driven Red Flag limousines in the town. Advantageous terms were also offered and they were such that Shek quickly signed a production contract with the No. 1 Garment Factory, the largest one of its kind in the town.

But Shek was too experienced a businessman to leave things to chance, particularly when dealing with both a new American customer and an untried Chinese supplier. He insisted upon overseeing production through regular visits. Both the leaders of the town and the Director of the No. 1 Garment Factory naturally did everything they could to please him during his visits. The use of a chauffeur-driven Red Flag became a given.

As Shek was being driven to inspect the production of his shirts, matrimony was the farthest thing from his mind. Instead he was musing over how far he had risen in the world in spite of being born without wealth or favourable connections.

His birth had almost coincided with the outbreak of the Pacific War and the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong. His early childhood was one of privations.

His father had been a small-time dealer in embroideries and Swatow laces who had migrated to Hong Kong with little more than a cardboard suitcase when the Japanese began their encroachments in China. He had reared Shek on the notion that the land of his ancestors was filled with misty mountains and eccentric poets, a place where life was civilized and unhurried and where people were gentle and bound by the Golden Mean. That description was not one a boy could grasp, particularly having never seen the place himself.

When Shek asked for fuller details of China, his father had replied: "Some things are difficult to explain. Concentrate on your studies,

my son, and obscurities will gradually clarify. Education is like doing embroidery. You start with one stitch and then another, with no idea where you're heading. But with every stitch a pattern becomes a little bit clearer. Education does the same with life.”

The reply did not quite satisfy him but he concentrated on his studies as advised. He was on the verge of completing his first year of university when his father died. That forced upon him the responsibility for looking after his mother and running the family firm.

He had noticed at once that demand for embroideries and laces was in decline. The need to branch into more popular products stared him in the face. He identified mass consumer items: ready-to-wear garments, plastic toys, transistor radios and artificial flowers. He shifted the firm's emphasis accordingly and tried his hand at exports as well. He targeted America as the most promising export market and before he was thirty-five he had, through working punishing hours, turned his barely viable patrimony into an international business with an annual turnover running into many tens of millions.

Social prominence came with economic success. He rushed into an unwise marriage which ended swiftly in divorce. Then his mother died and he found himself on his own, gnawed by a loneliness that neither wealth nor social success could assuage.

He was wondering in the Red Flag whether selling a few million shirts would make any difference to his life when the car literally bumped into his wife-to-be!

II

The streets were already clogged with two slow-moving flows of traffic that morning when Shek headed out from his hotel in the black splendour of the Red Flag for the No. 1 Garment Factory Innumerable

cyclists competed for limited road space with peasants hauling farm produce. The air rang with the agitated tinkling of bicycle bells and the chants and shouts of peasants pushing loaded carts or carrying produce on poles.

A motorized vehicle was a rarity in provincial towns at that time. In fact, except for an occasional truck or bus, the limousine was the only such vehicle on the road. Heads turned upon its appearance. People assumed that some high official on a momentous mission was being conveyed.

The driver of the limousine was in his late twenties. He had gained his job through being a member of the Communist Party. He drew attention to his status by blaring his horn while driving at speed. The peasants were too overladen by their loads to break stride but the cyclists, distracted by both the horn and the desire to catch a glimpse of the occupants of the limousine, swerved and wove dangerously.

Shek had little interest in the passing scene. He felt ill at ease riding in such a splendid conveyance along a dusty road crammed with impoverished humanity. He had been preoccupied with his own introspections when he heard a cry and caught a glimpse of a woman hurtling off a bicycle, with arms and two long pigtailed flailing in the air.

“Stop! I think we’ve hit somebody,” he cried, as the car continued on its journey.

“Not necessary,” the driver replied. “Cyclist at fault. They think they own the road. Red Flag has right of way.”

Shek was taken aback by the driver’s indifference. He was not entirely sure of traffic laws in China but suspected that failure to stop after an accident had to be some sort of crime. “You must stop! The cyclist might be hurt.”

“Just a scratch. Happens all the time. Teach them to be more careful.”

“Stop! Go back!”

The driver stopped resentfully and slowly reversed, honking his horn to clear the way.

As the limousine backed up to the site of the accident, Shek’s heart fluttered with apprehension. Although he was not responsible for the accident, he felt nevertheless involved. After all, the car had been placed at his disposal. He had ordered the driver to return to the scene. If he had no responsibility, why did he issue that order? Suddenly it occurred to him his actions might somehow be held against him. He was thankful he was not in America, where a personal injury suit was a virtual certainty.

The victim was a girl of no more than twenty. She was sitting on the road, one hand clutching a knee covered by her grey trousers. The other hand was held open with blood oozing from an abrasion on the palm. Her bicycle lay beside her. The rear wheel was badly buckled.

A crowd of cyclists gathered, offering gratuitous advice from a safe distance, but making no effort to get directly involved. The arrival of the Red Flag, which planted itself majestically in the centre of the road, provided the crowd with a rival centre of attention.

Shek alighted rapidly and brushed past the onlookers. “I’m very sorry about this. Let me take care of your hand,” he said in Mandarin, bending down next to the victim. He took a white handkerchief out from his hip pocket, remembering from his Boy Scout days that the inner folds of an ironed handkerchief were supposed to be germ-free. He attempted to take hold of the girl’s hand to bandage the abrasion but she withdrew it sharply.

“No need, no need,” she said.

Though the girl’s face was contorted with pain, Shek could see she was pretty. She had large, luminous eyes and rosy cheeks. Her hair, plaited into two pigtails reaching down to her waist, lent her an air of youthful innocence. Then he noticed something red on her blouse. At first

he thought it might be a spot of blood. But it turned out to be a red metal button with the image of Chairman Mao imprinted upon it. A rush of anxiety surged through him. He became fearful the accident might take on political overtones.

“Look, I’m truly sorry about the accident,” Shek repeated. “The car was going too fast but I wasn’t driving. I’m just a visitor. Please take the handkerchief. It’s clean. Use it to cover the wound on your hand till you see a doctor.”

The girl took the handkerchief hesitantly and pressed it against her palm.

By then the driver of the Red Flag had also alighted. He shouted at the onlookers in a harsh local dialect and made vigorous gestures with his hand. Some of the crowd around the Red Flag dispersed sheepishly, though new arrivals continued to pause as they passed. He turned to the girl and spoke in similar tones. The girl bowed her head and remained silent.

Shek could not understand what was being said but he suspected bullying of some kind. To end it, he said: “We should get her cuts attended to.”

“Just scratches,” the driver said. “She’ll be all right.”

“How can you say that? Her knee’s hurt. Might be dislocated. Her hand’s cut. Her bicycle can’t be used any longer. We should at least send her to a hospital.”

The on-lookers seemed to take delight in the exchanges between the driver and Shek and that irritated the driver. “She can’t ride in a Red Flag,” he said, surlily. “She must find her own way.”

“No!” Shek declared. Turning to the girl, he asked: “Shall I send you to a hospital?”

The girl shook her head.

“Where were you heading? To work?”

“Home. Just finished night shift.”

“I see. We’ll take you home then.”

The girl hesitated. The driver was about to say something when Shek pre-empted him. “Please put the bicycle in the boot. I want this girl taken home. If that presents a problem I’ll settle it with your Director.”

The girl gave directions to her home. It was located in a suburb of deteriorating single-storied houses linked together by paths of cobblestone and beaten earth. The dwellings were redeemed by an abundance of trees. The paths were barely wide enough for the Red Flag to negotiate. The appearance of the car immediately caused curiosity-seekers to gather and follow it. By the time it arrived at its destination a considerable crowd had assembled.

The girl’s name was Lee Ping and she turned out to be a loom operator at a weaving factory. As Shek helped her from the car, a stout woman of about sixty rushed out from the house.

“Aiyah! What’s happened, Ping? You’re hurt!” the woman cried.

“An accident, Mother,” Ping replied. “Not serious.”

“I’m very sorry about the accident,” Shek interposed. “It wasn’t your daughter’s fault. I’ll pay for any damage and medical care. Please send me the bill. I’ll be at the Peace Hotel for the next two days. If there’s anything else I can do, please don’t hesitate to contact me.”

Shek presented his Hong Kong business card.

“Thank you for bringing my daughter home,” Mrs. Lee said, accepting the card and offering a wan smile in return. “For a slight accident there’s no need for formalities.”

Shek bowed and took his leave, after offering further apologies. The chauffeur again barked something in the local dialect to get on-lookers away from the car.

As Shek continued his journey to the No. 1 Garment Factory, he reflected on how impoverished China must be. He recalled the frugality of his own boyhood. Ping's bicycle was probably the only means of transportation for the entire family, as well as representing the bulk of its assets. Although Mrs. Lee had attempted to close the matter, he nevertheless felt that compensation was in order.

He waited till the next day for repercussions. When none came, he felt a sense of relief. Nevertheless, he wanted to make a compensating gesture. He went to the local Friendship Store and asked to see the most popular local brand of bicycle. He was shown a Phoenix. It appeared ridiculously cheap by Hong Kong standards. He paid for one with Foreign Exchange Certificates designed for the use of non-residents and asked for it to be delivered to Ping's home.

III

A week after Shek returned to Hong Kong, he received a letter from Ping, accompanied by his handkerchief, laundered and ironed. After the usual salutations and expression of gratitude, the letter went on as follows:

“As to the delivery of the Phoenix to my home, it is far too generous a gift to be accepted after so minor an accident. My father is a member of the Communist Party and I am a member of the Communist Youth League. Socialists view it as wrong to seek or accept gratuitous gain. Only one wheel of my bicycle was damaged and its replacement should be all that is required.

“I have attempted to return the Phoenix to the Friendship Store but have been told it does not accept returns. It appears to have been paid for by Foreign Exchange Certificates, which admit no refund. The difference between replacing a wheel and the cost of a new Phoenix is

great. I do not know how to resolve the matter. My father and I would appreciate your views.”

Shek reacted to the letter with admiration. Such contempt for gratuitous gain in one so young was rare. He had heard often enough of Communism’s dark side, without giving much thought to what might be good. The young in China apparently still retained a measure of idealism. The difference between the attitude expressed in the letter and the profit-maximizing ethos of Hong Kong struck him. That materialism affected many of its women too and that was one of the reasons he had not attempted to remarry.

He tried to remember precisely what Ping looked like. But beyond the large eyes, the long, fat pigtailed and the face grimacing with pain, all he could summon up was a vague air of wariness and the red Mao badge on her blouse.

He felt a lift in his spirits as he penned a reply.

“I am delighted your injuries have healed,” he wrote. “I wish to apologize again for the mishap and to thank you for the return of my handkerchief. You shouldn’t have troubled over such a trifle.

“You are quite right about the Phoenix. I am sorry I have overlooked Socialist principles. It is indeed advisable for compensation to be in line with any damage suffered. Too little leaves a sense of injustice; too much dulls the edge of honesty. But physical and psychological injuries also have to be taken into account. Those can seldom be compensated in material form. Is that not why our ancestors spoke of debts of conscience? I shall be in X again in two weeks’ time. I have some pending business with the No. 1 Garment Factory. May I suggest we discuss the Phoenix at that time?

“On my next visit I should consider it an honour if I were permitted to pay my respects to your parents. In the meantime, please convey to them my sincerest regards.”

IV

Having experienced the crowds attracted by the Red Flag on the previous occasion, Shek took the precaution of travelling to Ping's home by taxi. That drew curiosity-seekers just the same, though in smaller numbers.

Shek was met by both Ping and her father, Mr. Lee, an elderly man of patrician bearing and scholarly manners. Mr. Lee was dressed in a neat but worn Mao suit of blue cotton. Everything about the man suggested modesty and cultivation. Shek subsequently learnt that Mr. Lee had recently retired as a clerk in the town's Bureau of Fuels, although he remained doubtful whether the old man's background was that simple.

"I have to thank the gentleman for his kindness in assisting my daughter during the accident," Mr. Lee said formally, as he invited his guest to take one of the unvarnished wooden chairs in a cramped room. "I regret I was absent when she was brought home. Your calling upon this humble abode places me further in your debt."

"The honour is mine," Shek replied, presenting two bottles of Scotch and two boxes of Swiss chocolates as calling gifts required by tradition. He noted that the small room, serving as both sitting and dining room, was dominated by a portrait of Chairman Mao. On display also were family photographs and a watercolour painting of chrysanthemums. The painting struck Shek as an odd counterpoint to the dead Communist leader. It was as if those few painted flowers offered solace against the established idolatries of a twisted age. The brand new Phoenix and the old bicycle with a replaced wheel were parked in a corner of the room. The whole setting spoke of frugality and hard times.

Mrs. Lee quickly served tea.

As both Mr. and Mrs. Lee proffered thanks for the gifts, Shek

was puzzled as to why neither attempted to close the door of the house. Crowds had gathered outside, standing at the doorway and peering through the open windows. Their staring eyes and their sniggering comments disconcerted him. He felt like a prize ram on display before an auction. Ping and her parents, however, seemed unmindful of that noisy audience.

“We live in an open society,” Mr. Lee said, in the face of Shek’s discomfiture. His tone was pleasant and devoid of irony. “We have no secrets from our neighbours.”

In spite of his comment, Mr. Lee nevertheless continued the conversation in more muted tones. They talked about the weather and the joys of retirement, the reputation of cloth and garments produced in X and the purpose of Shek’s visit to the town. Mrs. Lee and Ping looked on without participating.

During those exchanges, Shek stole furtive glances at Ping, sitting cool and collected in a white blouse and blue slacks. In the throes of the accident he had not fully appreciated her loveliness. He took in anew the bloom in her cheeks, the erect carriage and pleasing contours of her figure. She seemed to smile dreamily, not only with her lips but with her engaging eyes as well. The plaited pigtails lent her an endearing air of adolescent innocence.

Shek found her infinitely more attractive than the women in Hong Kong, with their Max Factored faces and hennaed hair. She was an unspoilt girl on the threshold of womanhood. There was always something heart-stirring about that. He could not give rein to further speculations, however, because of the raucous laughter emanating from the crowds outside.

“Hey, come quickly and have a look! He’s the same big shot who came in the Red Flag last time!” someone shouted.

“Old Lee must be looking over a prospective son-in-law!” someone else remarked.

“Looks like an overseas Chinese. Does anyone know whether he’s from the Golden Mountain or Hong Kong?” a third asked.

“What does it matter? There ought to be a feed for the neighbourhood just the same!”

Coarse comments and outbreaks of laughter came thick and fast.

Shek felt his face burning. He could not understand the equanimity of his host and his family. As an outsider he was embarrassed and put off-stride. He sensed it was better to endure the intrusions than to react. He did not have to live among such people and he did not wish to complicate life for his host. He longed to get away, however, because the audience was inhibiting what he wanted to say.

“This has been a most auspicious meeting, Mr. Lee,” Shek said, forcing a smile. “If Mr. Lee and his family are not otherwise engaged, it would be an honour if I could host a modest dinner at my hotel this evening.”

“Oh, there’s no need for such formality,” Mr. Lee replied. “You are a guest in our town, it is I who should be hosting a dinner. Yes, why not allow my wife to prepare dinner here, if you don’t mind our humble surroundings and our mean fare. It would be nothing to match a dinner at your hotel.”

“I wouldn’t dream of putting you to such trouble. It is in any case the duty of a junior to pay respects to his seniors first.”

After further ritualized to-ing and fro-ing, dinner at Shek’s hotel was agreed and Shek took his leave on foot. A gang of chattering children followed him till he was well out of the neighbourhood.

V

Having been deflected by the jabbering crowds outside Mr.

Lee's home, Shek realized after returning to the hotel he had neglected to ask about the number for dinner. He decided to arrange for a table for eight.

In the event only Mr. and Mrs. Lee and Ping turned up. They reciprocated Shek's earlier presents with two tins of local tea. They were obviously dressed in their best but none of their clothing was new. A red badge stamped with the image of Chairman Mao was again pinned on Ping's lapel.

Shek remembered reading about the severe cloth rationing in China and the slogan enjoining citizens to wear clothes for three years as new, three years as old, and a further three years as mended. He felt embarrassed in his custom-tailored suit of English worsted. He had brought along his Hasselblad, for he was a keen amateur photographer, but to take pictures under such circumstances seemed inappropriate.

"Are there not other members in your family?" Shek asked, quickly. "I thought there were more of you, judging from photographs at your home. I hope they're not standing on ceremony."

"I do have two sons," Mr. Lee replied. "The elder is in the Peoples' Liberation Army and is stationed in the north. My second son is in Nanking, working for the provincial government."

"Ah, you must be very proud of them, both serving the nation. Well, you must all eat a double portion then, to make up for their absences," Shek said, and everybody laughed.

The hotel restaurant was almost empty because few foreigners visited X and locals were precluded from eating there by both its fancy prices and the requirement to pay in Foreign Exchange Certificates. That suited Shek. He did not want his guests to feel inhibited by the presence of too many foreigners. He detected, however, that some of the waiters and waitresses wore the same supercilious air as the chauffeur of the Red Flag when they regarded the unimpressive clothes of his guests.

Shek had laid on mao tai, a drink made popular by the Nixon visit and normally beyond the means of ordinary people. When food was brought to the table one of the waitresses, noticing Shek's camera, asked if she could help to take group pictures.

"That's very kind of you, if my guests have no objection," Shek was forced to respond. "They would be a splendid memento of the occasion."

When Mr. and Mrs. Lee signified their approval Shek posed with them for pictures.

"Please raise your chopsticks," Shek said afterwards, in formal invitation for the meal to begin. Toasts were quickly exchanged.

"Excellent wine and food," Mr. Lee said, appreciatively.

"Mr. Lee praises excessively," Shek replied.

When Shek judged that the ice had been broken, he edged towards the subject of the Phoenix.

"I shall be visiting X regularly in future, by virtue of dealings with the No. 1 Garment Factory," he said. "It seems quite admirable that people here go about mainly on bicycles. That's much more healthy than the ridiculous road chaos we create in Hong Kong. We sit in cars stuck in traffic jams every day, steadily spewing pollutants. Then, when work is over, we pay vast sums to join health clubs to pedal on machines for exercise. That's Hong Kong pragmatism for you!"

His guests laughed politely.

"I'm sorry I've been presumptuous over the Phoenix," Shek continued. "May I venture a solution? Let me reimburse the cost of replacing the damaged wheel and resume ownership of the Phoenix. I should like to start cycling here since I can't do that at home. I don't want another accident riding in a Red Flag! Besides, the exercise will do me a world of good. I will deem it a favour, Mr. Lee, if you would permit me to keep the Phoenix at your home during my absence. In return, your family

might use it freely should you find a need. Is that an acceptable solution?”

“Since my retirement, I have little call for using a bicycle,” Mr. Lee said. “I leave the home only to exercise in the park and to buy provisions. In neither case is a bicycle required. It is only Ping who needs transportation to and from work. Her factory is a fair way away, too far to walk. It would be an advantage to have spare capacity, in case of an unforeseen defect. We shall do our best to look after the Phoenix should you wish to leave it in our care.”

“Good! It’s settled then. Let’s drink to it.”

They lifted their glasses and drank. The potent mao tai added a glow to their faces. After a round of toasts, Shek said: “If I can be informed of the cost of replacing the wheel, we can settle the matter right now.”

Ping, who had spoken little up till then, quoted a surprisingly modest sum.

“Good,” Shek said, and handed Ping the appropriate amount in Foreign Exchange Certificates.

Ping acknowledged the payment with due courtesy and began examining the Certificates, as if she had never held one in her hand before. Shek knew they were much sought after by locals because they allowed the purchase of imported items otherwise denied.

“Are Foreign Exchange Certificates required in Hong Kong for the purchase of imported goods?” Ping asked.

Her lilting Mandarin beguiled Shek’s Cantonese ears.

“Oh, no,” Shek replied. “Hong Kong’s a free market. There’s no exchange control. Our dollar’s fully convertible.”

Ping pondered the reply for a moment. “What about eating in hotel restaurants?” she asked. “Can local people do that or are such places reserved for foreigners?”

“Oh, anyone can eat at hotel restaurants. Plenty of people do

regularly.”

“Are the restaurants as good as this one or even better?”

“That’s hard to say,” Shek replied.

The restaurant in the hotel was in fact third rate by Hong Kong standards but he did not want to say so in the hearing of the staff.

“Hotels in Hong Kong fall into many categories, from the very luxurious to the quite economical,” he continued. “The best ones have many restaurants, specializing in different kinds of food. French, Italian, Japanese, Chinese and so on. Hotels at the other end of the scale sometimes don’t have a restaurant at all. There’s a great range.”

“What about the earnings of workers? We practise Socialist equality here. We all draw the same wages. Yet none of us can afford to eat in a place like this.”

“I’m afraid not everybody can afford to eat at hotel restaurants all the time in Hong Kong either, though most can afford meals there if they want to. Unfortunately, we still have a fair number of poor among us.”

“According to the People’s Daily, Hong Kong under colonialism is a den of iniquity. Workers are exploited, the poor starve to death and girls are sold into prostitution. The British have been reportedly promoting a materialistic, self-seeking and greedy way of life. Is that true?” Ping’s pleasingly modulated voice took some of the provocative edges from her words.

Mr. Lee interposed. “We’ve had an exceptional meal,” he said. “I’m sure our visitor must be weary. We should not detain him further from his rest.”

“Oh, no, I’m not the least tired,” Shek responded, speaking instinctively both out of courtesy and out of a desire not to lose the company of a charming girl. It was only after he had made his remark that he caught Mr. Lee’s intentions.

“You see,” Ping said, smugly. “Our host is not tired. An opportunity to exchange views with a Hong Kong compatriot is rare. Hong Kong’s way of life and its ultimate recovery are matters of vital concern to all Chinese. Our leaders have taught us to seek truth from facts. We should learn more about the failings of colonialism.”

Ping’s retort took Shek by surprise. He suddenly realized that Ping had been born under Communism and had known no other form of society. The traditional Chinese requirement for the young to hold their tongues before elders did not count with her. Indeed, during the Cultural Revolution the young had been positively encouraged to challenge the authority of their elders.

“I fear my daughter’s had a trifle too much to drink,” Mr. Lee said, apologetically.

“I’ve not had too much to drink, Father,” Ping insisted. She paid little attention to a restraining hand placed on her arm by her mother.

Shek wished he had not been so slow in picking up Mr. Lee’s cue, for it was clear that both the mao tai and her upbringing had affected Ping. Political subjects remained a minefield in China, in spite of the ending of the Cultural Revolution. He regretted that Ping’s attractiveness had caused him to stumble into one. The restaurant staff no doubt had instructions to report subversive comments. He thought it best to salvage the situation with a light-hearted comment.

“If we are to discuss the failings of Hong Kong society, I fear we might be here all night and all of tomorrow night as well,” he said, laughing. “You’ll miss your night shift, Miss Lee.”

“I don’t work this week,” Ping said, half-triumphantly. “I’m on holiday.”

“Oh, what a happy coincidence! I’ve been itching to try my new bicycle. Would you do me the kindness of showing me your town tomorrow? I’ll bring my camera to take pictures of the most famous sights.

That'll also give us a chance to talk about Hong Kong as we go along."

"Our's not a tourist town, just a run-of-the-mill place. But if you want to see it, we can meet at my home at ten tomorrow."

"Superb."

"Showing you the sights is the least our daughter can do to repay this excellent meal," Mr. Lee said, soothingly. "I think we must really not detain you from your rest any longer."

"A final toast then," Shek said. "We must finish off the mao tai."

They finished their drinks, after which Mr. Lee stood up and offered his thanks. The rest of his family followed suit.

As Shek escorted them to the entrance of the hotel, Mr. Lee said in an aside: "I suggest you meet Ping at the junction where our street joins the main road. That'll be more convenient than trying to find our home. I'll bring along your bicycle."

"Thank you, Mr. Lee," Shek replied. "Until tomorrow, then."

VI

A spacious park was located along one of the banks of the river running through X. The park was particularly popular and one of its paths lined by weeping willows meandered pleasantly along the river. Stone benches stood at regular intervals along the route. Elsewhere, venerable cypresses, stately maples and thick clumps of bamboos graced other paths.

Shek and Ping dismounted from their bicycles to avoid colliding with strollers. As they walked silently along the riverside path, pushing their machines by their sides, Shek noticed visitors airing caged canaries, cracking melon seeds, playing with children or huddling over games of chess. A sense of the traditional China his father had told him about crept upon him.

He had been disappointed earlier while cycling through the town. The sparkles and colours of Chinese life seemed to have faded. People were dressed in austere hues of blue, green or grey. They appeared listless and indifferent, wearing shut, impassive faces. Had the traditional lust for living been squeezed dry over the decades or had the citizenry, like Mr. Lee, merely disguised their true feelings for the sake of survival? Everything appeared so dull, poverty-stricken and rundown. Regimentation was made obvious by billboards proclaiming the latest virtues decreed by the Communist Party.

During their tour Ping pointed out locations of former temples, monasteries and historical monuments, now either destroyed or converted to other use. The largest temple in the town had been turned into offices for the local Department of Home Affairs. Only two crumbling temples remained as places of worship, stubbornly maintained by a dwindling band of monks.

As they continued along path skirting the river Shek came across a large granite rock with a couple of lines of verse engraved in red. The whimsical words spoke of the joys of retirement and watching sunlight expiring over a timeless river.

Those sentiments delighted Shek. The angry mobs of the Cultural Revolution had not got everything their way, he thought. They had failed to destroy the rock or deface the verse. Something of his father's China remained after all. He could visualize, in spite of the brightness of the day, some unknown poet of long ago penning those lines while sitting by that very river at sunset.

When they came to a shaded bench, Shek said: "Shall we sit a while? I'm afraid I haven't told you much about Hong Kong yet."

"Don't mention it. I wasn't very courteous last night," Ping replied, parking her bicycle against a tree. "My father was right about the mao tai going to my head. Got carried away. I was curious about the bad

reports on Hong Kong in our newspapers. Can't understand how people can tolerate to live like that."

"Newspapers don't always get things right."

They chatted for a while, about Hong Kong and China and life in general. Shek avoided challenging directly the allegations in the People's Daily about Hong Kong's self-serving and hedonistic way of life. Instead he described the choices individuals had, their opportunities to prosper and their ability to criticize their foreign rulers. He could see that Ping was carefully weighing his words against what she had read.

As they talked, he wondered what kind of future the new China held for someone like Ping. She was a member of the Communist Youth League and might have been a Red Guard as well. He did not dare to ask. The portrait of Chairman Mao hanging in her home and the embossed badge on her blouse were clues to her attachments. She was a child of the Cultural Revolution, a product of that distressing era of closed schools and overheated passions. But she appeared in spite of that to be intelligent, thoughtful and full of potential. It would be a waste for her to spend her life behind a loom.

"It isn't easy to summarize what Hong Kong's like. Ever thought of going there to see for yourself?" he asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"It would upset me to see compatriots under foreign yoke. Though you say things are not so bad, we've been told of many social evils. When Hong Kong is recovered I might go."

"What about other cities or countries? Is there any you'd like to visit?"

Ping gave a wry smile and then frowned. "Not sure. Maybe Paris or Highgate Cemetery."

"Highgate Cemetery? Where's that? What's at Highgate

Cemetery?”

“In England, of course. Didn’t they teach you that at school? That’s where Marx’s buried.”

Shek could barely stop himself from laughing. “Learnt a lot about England at school but not about Highgate Cemetery, I’m afraid. Just goes to show. Some schools educate students better than others. I’ve been to England many times but I must confess that visiting Highgate Cemetery has never occurred to me.”

“What a missed opportunity! The next time you go, would you do me a favour? Take a picture of the tomb of Marx for me. It must be very impressive.”

“Don’t know if it’s impressive but I’ll certainly take a picture or get a postcard for you. Ever thought of going to university? If you studied in England, you can see the tomb yourself.”

“Oh, I’d love to go to university! I’ve passed all the entrance exams, you know, but I haven’t been selected by the Party.”

“Does the Party decide everything? Can’t you go as a private student?”

“University places are scarce. They should be kept for those who can make the greatest contributions to the nation. Scarce resources should not be used to gratify individual ambitions.”

Shek wondered whether Ping had been completely brainwashed or whether she really harboured such lofty ideals. “You can study as a private student in universities overseas.”

“How can I?” A note of incredulity entered Ping’s voice. “My family is poor. An overseas education costs more than a Chinese worker’s wages over a lifetime.”

“You might find a sponsor, get a scholarship,” Shek said, affected by her innocence and naivety. Business had been good to him, he thought, and perhaps it was time he gave something back. To spend money

on developing a young mind seemed a far better ambition than adding another Rolls Royce to the traffic jam. But he hesitated to give voice to his thoughts for fear Ping might think him presumptuous. “Universities abroad offer many scholarships, some specifically for foreign students,” he added. “I can get you brochures if you wish.”

Ping offered another wry smile. “You’re very kind but going abroad’s impossible. I know no foreign language. Besides, as a single girl, I wouldn’t be granted an exit visa. That’s to prevent the young from being exploited by wicked people.”

“If you can’t get further education here and you can’t go overseas, does that mean you have to remain in a factory for the rest of your life?”

“Yes, if I want a job. Jobs are assigned by government. People go where they’re sent.”

“Can’t you even change to an earlier shift? Working nights can’t be very pleasant.”

“I can apply but that won’t make any difference unless I happen to be a model worker or have good Party connections.”

Shek nodded. He felt a great pity for the girl, caught up in a life with so little choice. The desire to help her strengthened in him. “Would you like to learn English?” he asked. “I can teach you the basics when I’m here. Can get you tapes for Mandarin learners to practise with. Simple primers too. Knowing a foreign language is a good thing in itself. Besides, there’s no harm being prepared. Dreams sometimes do come true.”

“I don’t have a tape recorder,” Ping said.

“Don’t worry. I sell those by the thousands. All you need is the desire to learn and I guarantee English will come as easily as saying one, two, three.”

“Yes, I want to learn.”

“Good. We’ll begin lessons tomorrow. That’s the least I can do in return for your bringing me to this park. I like it. There’s something appealing here. Let’s take some pictures to mark the occasion. Stand by the inscription on the rock while I find the right angles.”

Ping at once became hesitant and self-conscious. But Shek reassured her in his deep, friendly voice. He focused his Hasselblad carefully before snapping a number of shots in quick succession. A crowd of on-lookers immediately gathered and began speculating aloud on the type of camera in use and the purpose of the photographs. Ping became self-conscious again. Shek then ended the session by persuading one of the onlookers to take a couple of pictures of himself and Ping standing together.

“I’ll send you copies when they’re ready,” Shek told Ping with a calming smile.

VII

Three months passed after the photographic session in the park. In the interim Shek had made a further trip to X and had brought Ping a number of aids for learning English. Ping had expressed her gratitude with girlish delight. He had wanted to give her something more personal and womanly but did not know what might suit a young admirer of Chairman Mao. In the end he decided on a bottle of Chanel No. 5. When he presented it, Ping’s thanks were more tentative than upon receiving the learning aids.

Back in his office in Hong Kong, Shek gazed into an enlarged picture of Ping in a sterling silver frame on his desk. Her large, guileless eyes and her twin pigtails made her appear young enough to be his daughter. The thought of proposing marriage to one so much his junior seemed absurd. And yet, the longer he gazed into her open and wholesome

face, the less absurd the whole idea became.

Just because his first marriage had ended in disaster did not mean he should not try again, he told himself. His former wife had refused to have children for fear of ruining her figure. That her figure was magnificent was not in dispute. It was what flowed from that possession that ruined their marriage.

His wife had argued that there was no point having pleasing physical attributes if there were no designer clothes and fashionable accessories to show them to best advantage. And what was the point of dressing up if there was no place to go? The sort of logic had driven him into an endless round of cocktail parties, charity balls and attendances at the Stewards' Box during the horse-racing season. His wife proved popular and he was enormously envied. But he felt increasingly locked into a counterfeit life from which he derived no pleasure. Those social commitments, on top of his taxing work, left him wrung out at the end of each day like a dish rag. Divorce came as a relief.

He never quite re-adjusted to bachelorhood, however, particularly after the loss of his mother. He dated to be sure. But as time went by the sheer effort of getting a woman to share a meal or a bed proved more trouble than either was worth. In spite of the urgings of friends, he never gave remarriage any serious thought. But that changed after bumping into Ping on that suburban road in X.

Ping was different from the ordinary run of materialistic women found in Hong Kong, he thought. Notwithstanding her Socialist upbringing, she appeared to have an independent and idealistic streak. To help such a girl to realize her potential seemed a worthwhile endeavour. Moreover, he harboured at the back of his mind an unarticulated hope she might come to like and respect him sufficiently one day for him to propose marriage.

Shek toyed with that fanciful prospect and ways of achieving

that goal. He was due in X again in three days. He had secured a second American customer and was ready to finalize another big contract with the No. 1 Garment Factory. But his relationship with Ping was still in its infancy. He told himself not to be precipitous. He needed to know more about Ping and her feelings.

What else could he do beyond teaching her English to further their relationship, he wondered. Ping had not been keen about her night shift. Could he persuade the Director of the No. 1 Garment Factory to pull a few strings? Ping had said that family and other connections still mattered under Socialism. He had seen for himself over the last few months that beneath the surface rigidities there remained scope for age-old Chinese ways of getting things done. He had brought substantial business to the factory, with the prospect of more to come. The Director surely owed him a favour or two. An appropriate gift would aid the process. The trick was to pass it over without it being taken as a bribe.

VIII

They were sitting in the park, on a grassy verge separating the willows along the river bank from the path running parallel to it. Their bicycles were parked nearby. The river flowed sluggishly before them, turbid and impassive, indifferent to the human chicaneries through the ages. The sun was mild and dipping towards the West. A cat's-paw of autumn wind tickled the willows and freshened the air. Birds nesting in the park provided an accompaniment of song. The setting evoked for Shek a quiet tableau of a place emptied of strivings and at peace with itself. He was glad Ping had introduced him to it. He could actually feel some of the solace-dispensing qualities of the China his father had told him about.

"I still don't understand how you managed it," Ping said, cutting into Shek's thoughts. She had her long pigtailed dangling in front of

her. "I was completely taken by surprise when the supervisor told me I was being transferred to the morning shift. Couldn't figure it out. Hadn't even applied for a transfer."

"A lucky connection," Shek replied.

"What connection? Who? How?"

"Well, if you really want to know, I got the Director of the No. 1 Garment Factory to use his influence. You told me the No. 1 Garment Factory bought cloth from your factory. So I figured the Director must be acquainted with the managers at your factory. He owes me a favour or two. It was a chance and I took it."

"Oh, I see! No wonder. The Director's a big shot in X. He's also one of the Deputy Mayors. My parents were so pleased with the transfer! What a relief not to have to cycle to work in the dark! The road to the factory's not very good. No street lights. I've had two accidents before, not counting the one with the Red Flag."

"I certainly hope you don't get into any more. How's the English coming?"

"Slowly. Not easy learning from tapes. When I come across words or phrases I don't understand I have no one to ask."

"Well, I'm here now. Ask all you want."

"Yes, but you're here only for two or three days every several weeks. Sometimes I feel I will never reach the standard to gain a scholarship."

Shek caught the note of pessimism in Ping's voice. "Mastering a foreign language is difficult," he said, consolingly. "You have to persevere. I've an idea for speeding things up. One of the universities in Hong Kong uses Chinese as the language of instruction. Want to study there? You can polish your English at the same time. If you're interested, I'll be happy to sponsor you."

"That's very kind. But how can I get to Hong Kong? They

don't grant exit visas to single girls.”

“We could get married.”

Shek saw a look of surprise registering on Ping's face. She turned slightly away from him, as if withdrawing defensively. She drew her legs up, hugged them tightly with her arms and rested her chin on one knee. Her gaze seemed directed at the weeping willows swaying gently in the breeze.

Ping seemed so childlike and lost that Shek cursed himself for his presumptuousness. How could he blurt out a proposal for marriage like that, to a girl whose hand he had not even held, whose lips he had never kissed?

“I'm sorry,” he said. “I didn't mean to bring it out like that. Let me explain. You're one of the most charming and enchanting girls I've ever met. You're intelligent and keen on education. I'm a great believer in education. Given the right opportunity, there's no limit to what you can achieve. Unfortunately you've been denied a university place here. I want to help.

“I want you to know that my efforts have not been just to get you into higher education. I'm genuinely fond of you. I believe I can take care of you and make you happy. It'll be a great honour to have you as my wife. It's obvious I'm quite a lot older than you. I'm also divorced. But sometimes being married to a more mature man can be an advantage. I'm already firmly established in business and I'm well-to-do. You need never be in want.”

Shek's heart was pounding fast. He realized he was now trying to sell himself like a clever salesman. But having made a proposal of marriage, he continued to press his case.

“I'm not trying to use money to take advantage of you,” he said. “I want you as my wife, not a trophy or a plaything. My intentions are entirely honourable. I won't impose myself on you till you're ready.

We can sleep in separate bedrooms, if that's what you prefer.

"I have to tell you some home truths about Hong Kong, however. It's not so horrible a place as some might have you believe. It's cynical and self-centred, to be sure, and riddled with greed, ostentation and spite. It's also very crowded, fast-paced and competitive. You may find the pressures frightening. Some people never take to it. Socialist principles don't apply there. But, by and large, people are free to say what they want and are left alone to make their living in whatever way they think fit.

"At university you will be spared some of those pressures. That'll give you time to get adjusted. If you eventually find life not to your liking, I won't hold you to a marriage. You'll be free to return to China with no hard feelings. I'll be very disappointed, of course, but I'll see to it you're generously provided for."

After he had stumbled to the end of his torrent of words, Shek discovered that his heart was still pounding furiously. In the privacy of his home he had practised mentally what he would say but his unscheduled presentation had not sounded half as elegant as he had visualized. Ping, on the other hand, had remained silent throughout, though she had by now released her legs from her embrace and was toying with the ends of her pigtails.

The silence seemed to lengthen unbearably. "I appreciate you hardly know me," Shek continued, desperate to elicit a response. "If you have questions I'll be glad to answer them. If you want testimonials on my financial status, my bankers can produce them."

"Testimonials are not necessary," Ping said, at last, still fingering her pigtails. "I'm not interested in money. You have already shown kindness. I'm interested in whether you're a person who does what he says."

"Upon my honour, I mean every word!"

"Will you take me to Highgate Cemetery one day?"

“Oh, yes! And Paris too!” Shek cried. “Does that mean you accept?”

“Not exactly.” Ping looked up with a playful smile. “What it means is that I’ll give your proposal serious thought. I must talk to my parents.”

“Of course. That’s only sensible.”

“Are there things you wish to know about me? I don’t know how to cook, you know.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“But I’ve heard Cantonese men are very fussy about having all kinds of soups and tonics to accompany their meals.”

“I have a servant who can prepare them. She does the cleaning and ironing too. Anything else?”

“No.”

“Should I go to your father and formally ask for your hand in marriage?”

“We no longer live in feudal times. Nowadays a girl is quite capable of deciding whether she wants to get married. Leave my parents to me. I’ll give you my answer the next time you’re in X.”

“Why not telephone or cable the moment you’ve decided? If the answer is favourable I want to get the formalities over as quickly as possible.”

“I know. But things here are not as simple as they may appear to an outsider. It is best that we speak face to face. There will be much to discuss. Please don’t write before I see you again.”

“But would you write? I wouldn’t be able to breathe till I know your decision!”

“I’m sorry, but I wouldn’t write. Letters can fall into the wrong hands. You’ll have to wait till we meet.”

“All right. You know best” Shek felt stymied by precautions

and imperatives whose need he could not fully apprehend. He had never been good at the waiting game and he wondered if Ping was making too much heavy weather with her stratagems. But she knew how things operated in China better than he and he had no grounds for not falling in with her wishes.

“I’m hungry,” he declared, finally. “Let’s get something to eat.”

They rose from the lawn, dusted off the seats of their trousers and took off on their bicycles.

IX

They were once again sitting on a stone bench in the park, close to the rock inscribed with the whimsical poem. Ping had met him in his room in the Peace Hotel and had given him her decision. They had then embraced and kissed for the first time. But Ping had seemed ill at ease and had insisted on going to the park. In the six weeks since his last visit she had cut off her pigtails and had coiffed her hair in a simple bob. That gave her a more matured and purposeful appearance.

Shek reached out and took Ping’s hand. “How long will the formalities take? I can’t wait to get you to Hong Kong.”

Ping explained the essentials.

Shek had no idea until then of the complexities of getting married in Communist China. Neither had he any inkling of the political pitfalls faced by relatives of a Chinese citizen seeking to marry someone from Hong Kong.

Shek had been sanguine when Ping told him that in submitting their application for marriage he would have to present a certification from the appropriate Hong Kong authority to the effect he was eligible to marry, together with all the documentation pertaining to his divorce. That seemed

reasonable. But when Ping said he would also have to submit to a medical examination to guard against bringing contagious diseases to China, he bridled.

“That’s rich!” he exclaimed. “Hong Kong has a far higher standard of public health and hygiene than China. If anybody ought to be worried, it’s me. The facilities here are so primitive. Can’t I be examined in Hong Kong?”

“I don’t know,” Ping replied. “Why not try and see.”

“All right. What else do we need?”

“Three copies of a passport-sized photograph, in colour, of the two of us, taken together.”

“That’s easy. I’ve got my camera. We can do that ourselves.”

“We must be patient,” Ping said, sounding worried. “The whole thing may take longer than either of us expect. We need to be strong. Our most trying time lies ahead.”

“What do you mean?”

“You mustn’t call at my home again. My father is to write you a formal letter objecting to our marriage and demanding that you stay away from me.”

“What! I thought your father liked me!”

“He does. He knows you’re kind, decent, and can be relied on to take good care of me. But he has to object just the same, for the record. So have my brothers.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Applying to marry is one thing. Whether it will be approved is another.”

“Approved? By whom? Marriage is a coming together of two individuals. If they’re both of age and acting of their own free will, why should it be necessary for anyone else to approve? You said you did not need your parents’ permission to marry.”

Ping shook her head sadly. “People don’t live in isolation in China but within an organized society. A marriage affects more than two individuals. It involves their families, not to mention the government. Marriages considered harmful to social order are stopped. Allowing a Socialist worker like me to marry a capitalist from Hong Kong is considered a bad thing. Sets the wrong example.”

“But our marriage has nothing to do with politics,” Shek cried. “Nor am I a capitalist. I’m just a businessman trying to make a decent living. A petty bourgeois, if you like. I’m not out to convert China to capitalism or to undermine Socialist ideals.”

Ping nodded. “I know. But don’t forget that my family has to remain in this country. It has to be able to prove that the entire family objected to the marriage in the event of another rectification campaign in the future. Please understand.”

“What a pity that in present day China a man cannot meet a girl and fall in love, regardless of whether the girl happens to be a leading light in the local Communist Youth League.”

“Falling in love may be normal in other societies. Things are different here. Love has to be based on Socialist consciousness. You have to choose the right kind of person to fall in love with. I’m told that pedigree matters in other parts of the world. It matters in China also, except that the family background of a peasant or a worker is best here.”

Ping looked sombre for a moment. Then she said: “Let me tell you something about my father. When he was a young man he used to be an assistant librarian in one of the big city universities. He loved books. When Liberation came, he smelt danger. Librarians are classified as intellectuals. An intellectual is by definition a rightist or a reactionary. A person in that category makes an easy target. It takes very little to get him labelled as a counter-revolutionary or even as an enemy of the state.

“So my father gave up work at the library. He came back here

and pretended to have limited education. He took the most lowly job he could find, first as an office attendant and then as an assistant clerk in the local administration. He married my mother, who came from a peasant family, and started preparing a good political background for his children. Years of unquestioning loyalty earned him membership in the Communist Party. That eventually opened the way to good careers for my brothers.”

Ping sighed and cast her eyes skywards, as if to blink back tears. “Our marriage will be very trying for my family. All members will be risking their jobs and careers for me. I sometimes feel I have no right to ask that of them. But they want to do it out of love, for the sake of my happiness.

“After writing to you, my father will also be informing our Neighbourhood Committee and his Communist Party superiors, to put his opposition firmly on record. My brothers too.

“Consequences will follow. Our marriage will be frowned upon and everything that can be done by official organs will be done to frustrate it. My Neighbourhood Committee, my Work Unit and the Communist Youth League will all designate people to ‘struggle’ against me. ‘Struggle’ means applying mass pressure to secure a desirable result. They will manufacture slanders against us, to undermine our faith in each other. Since you’re in Hong Kong, they’ll naturally concentrate on me. I cannot ignore them or refuse to attend their ‘struggle’ sessions. The only thing I can do is to stand firm.”

“This is so unfair!” Shek cried, shaking his head with impotent rage. “Isn’t there anything we can do? Can’t I stand by your side at these ‘struggle’ sessions, argue your corner? Isn’t there any higher authority we can appeal to?”

Ping gave an ironical grin. “No, unless you happen to have good friends in the Politburo! If we are to proceed, we must learn to bend before the wind like the willows.”

“Damn their hide! Of course we must proceed! I love you,” Shek declared, squeezing Ping’s hand hard.

Ping responded with her own squeeze and produced from her trouser pocket a piece of paper. On it was written a name and an address in Shanghai. She handed the paper to Shek.

“Who’s this?” Shek asked.

“A good friend. We mustn’t write directly to each other any more. There’s little communication between X and places outside China. Correspondence to or from overseas can be easily intercepted at the post office. The authorities will be looking for evidence to use against us. The post is not safe. Neither is the telephone. There’s only one community telephone in our neighbourhood and everyone can listen in on that.

“If we must communicate, we must go through my friend. She will forward any letter I have for you. Shanghai has many international businesses and a letter to Hong Kong won’t stand out. If you have to reach me, also write to my friend. She will either bring your letter or send it by local post to another friend, who will then pass it to me. That will make for delays but there’s no alternative.”

Shek marvelled over the arrangements Ping had put into place. His heart swelled with affection and pride that she had so quickly blossomed from a simple factory girl into a strategist in an ideological game of cat-and-mouse.

“I love you,” he said. “Come what may, I shall never forget what your family and friends have to do for us.”

X

It was 5.30 in the morning and snow was falling from a gloomy, malevolent sky. Shek, accompanied by Ping, huddled in the open, at the end of a queue of about twenty people. They were waiting for the

office to open at six so that numbered tokens for blood tests might be obtained. Some of those waiting were patently ill, judging from their wheezing and their groans. The more elderly had places held for them by relatives while they squatted, wrapped in quilts or blankets, under the eaves of the building.

How awful, Shek thought. How could the sick and aged be left exposed to falling snow? There should at least be an overhead shelter of some sort. This was supposed to be the better of the two general hospitals in X. Yet it consisted of no more than an ugly Soviet-styled block of four storeys squatting in a large compound, surrounded by a haphazard collection of single-storeyed brick buildings of a more traditional design.

Shek was grateful that he was not actually sick but merely a victim of the vindictive system hampering his marriage. As Ping had anticipated, the medical examination conducted in Hong Kong had been rejected, ostensibly because a report from a colonial institution was considered unreliable. It was decreed he had to be examined in X. He wondered, however, whether the authorities had gone so far as to arrange for him to fail! He did not dare, however, to share his apprehensions with Ping.

As a Southerner, he was unaccustomed to harsh winters. The patchwork of fallen snow and frozen ground chilled his bones. He stamped his feet in a vain attempt to keep warm. His black cashmere overcoat and the Chinese fur cap with earflaps which Ping had given him were already speckled with snowflakes.

“Are you all right?” Ping asked, as he shivered. Her cheeks were rosy with the cold and her breath immediately vapourized before her. She had a thick scarf over her head and the rest of her seemed to billow out beneath layers of padded clothing.

“Fine,” Shek replied, forcing a smile. “You shouldn’t have come. I could have managed on my own.”

“I want to come,” Ping said. She slipped an arm through his, as if in silent acknowledgement of her complicity in their struggle for happiness. “You won’t be able to find the different sections if people gave you directions in the local dialect,” she added.

Shek pressed her arm tight against his side, touched by her solicitude. Although Ping had refused to provide him with details of the ‘struggle’ sessions, he knew there had been many and some of them had been vicious. She did send him, however, a clipping from a local newspaper which gave him a flavour of the pressures upon her.

The newspaper article warned young women to maintain their Socialist vigilance against the sweet talk and frivolous trinkets from outsiders. It stated that, with the opening of the Motherland to overseas trade, adventurers, carpetbaggers and other undesirables would be making an appearance. Their purposes were nefarious, either to defraud the unwary or else to lead women into immoral lives. They would make extravagant promises and proposals of marriage but those who succumbed were likely to find themselves sold into lives of vice and suffering in foreign cities. This had already happened to a loom worker in a local factory who had forgotten her Socialist upbringing.

The recollection of such nonsense made Shek shake with anger. The cold was getting to him too. In the fifteen minutes he had been standing another ten people had joined the waiting line. When at last the office opened and he had moved to the head of the queue, he noticed that the female clerk handing out the tokens had a burning brazier close to her.

After securing a token, he and Ping joined others heading for another unheated building similar to the one housing the office. When his turn came, he handed over the token and the forms specifying the various tests. The nurse in charge told him to expose his arms while she fished in a tray of surgical spirits for a hypodermic needle to fit onto a syringe. He shivered as he removed his overcoat, jacket, sweater and shirt.

He could not help letting out a cry when the needle plunged into him. He realized with alarm that the needle, though of the disposable kind, had been blunted through reuse. The nurse gave him a withering look, as if his cry reflected upon her professional competence. She took her time over the paperwork and handed back the schedule of tests sourly, after endorsing it.

“The eye, ear and throat section is just along the way,” Ping said, as she helped him into his jacket and overcoat.

They moved along a corridor. The different sections, each separated from another by moveable cloth screens mounted on metal stands, were filled with patients and accompanying relatives. Privacy was not a consideration.

At the eye, ear and throat section Shek handed in his documents again. The area reeked of disinfectant. When Shek’s turn came, a doctor examined his eyes and then told him to open his mouth and say “Aahhh.” As he did so the doctor took a wooden spatula from a beaker of purplish liquid, shook off some of the liquid and pressed it upon his tongue.

Shek almost gagged. Tears rushed from his eyes. Part of the spatula was mottled with black patches. He knew such things were supposed to be thrown away after a single use. Here they were being reused as well! His reflexes revolted against the discoloured instrument in his mouth.

After the doctor had finished his examination, he tossed the spatula back into the beaker of purplish liquid. Shek wanted to challenge him on the wisdom of such a practice. But before he could open his mouth he heard Ping saying: “Are you all right? We next have to go to the main building for the X-ray.”

Shek nodded. After he had retrieved his schedule of tests they ventured out into the snow again.

“Did you see that awful piece of wood stuck into my mouth?” Shek asked, as they crossed the compound. “It was black and disgusting. How can they reuse things like that? We throw them away after using them once in Hong Kong.”

“China is a poor country,” Ping replied, squeezing his arm affectionately.

The main building at least made a pretense at central heating. Shek was glad of that. However, the taste and sensation of the discoloured spatula lingered in his mouth and he felt an overwhelming desire to spit. He found a couple of spittoons in the waiting area outside the X-ray department and made use of one of them.

The waiting area was crowded. The dusty fluorescent tubes on the ceiling gave off a yellow, unhealthy light. It did not take Shek long to realize why the spittoons were there. Many of the patients appeared frail and consumptive and they coughed and hawked frequently.

When at last he was admitted to the room for X-rays he was not prepared for what he saw. The machine looked little more than a wooden box with two lead-lined gloves sticking out on either side. It appeared old enough to be one of the original prototypes!

The contraption probably gave off enough radiation to decimate his sperm count, Shek thought, wryly. It might reduce his chances of children. His immediate reaction was to refuse the X-ray. But the thought of what Ping had already gone through to get this far made him submit.

After being X-rayed, Shek moved on to other parts of the cheerless building, where he was checked as to weight, reflexes, blood pressure and every possible physical disorder, including piles. It was humiliating to be stripped naked, made to assume all sorts of poses and be roughly handled. The morning was gone by the time he had completed the tests.

“Should we ask when the results will be available?” Shek said, as they walked down the stairs of the dispiriting building.

“I’ve already done that,” Ping replied. “It’ll be a week to ten days.”

“I can’t remain here that long.”

“That’s all right. When results are known I’ll get word to you. I’ll then book an appointment for dealing with our marriage at the Home Affairs Department.”

As they left the hospital, apprehensions and worries curdled within Shek like decomposing milk. What if he failed the tests? To whom could he appeal? Approval for his marriage seemed to hang by a thread. Heaven only knew what germs or infections he might have picked up that morning. What other obstacles could possibly be thrown in his way?

He had never fully appreciated how utterly backward and primitive medical facilities in China were. Like most people in Hong Kong he had been too concentrated on accumulating wealth and becoming successful to give much thought to the straits of his fellow countrymen. He was pleased that, if economic gurus were right, the business he brought might one day bring a little prosperity to the common people as well.

With that thought Shek led Ping back to the comparative warmth of the Peace Hotel for their mid-day meal.

XI

Shek was eventually given a clean bill of health but because of his business travels and the impediments over communication it was spring before a date could be fixed for hearing the application for marriage. It was to be held in the converted ancestral temple housing the Home Affairs Department.

Shek and Ping turned up at the appointed hour and were

directed to the great hall which once held the ancestral tablets of a displaced gentry family. The cement floor was cracked and pitted and only the carved and painted cross beams on the ceiling remained as reminders of the hall's former purpose.

The chamber was divided into two unequal parts by a low wooden fence with a hinged door at its centre. In the smaller section a large photograph of Chairman Mao beamed down from the wall upon a long black wooden table of good quality. The table might have once been loaded with ancestral offerings but was now bare, except for three half-filled ashtrays. There were three chairs on one side of the table and two on the other. The two chairs, however, were placed some distance away from the table, with their backs close to the wooden fence.

The larger section of the hall contained a number of crude hardwood benches. They were already occupied to overflowing by a motley crowd. Most were dressed in the standard garb of workers or peasants but a few had on new clothes. Those without a seat stood smoking or chatting at the rear of the room with an air of nervous expectancy.

Shek speculated that some of the better dressed might be there for marriages. Others might be accompanying relatives or people with other business in the building. If there were to be other marriages, could a mass wedding be on the cards? That would suit him admirably. The political heat would then be dispersed. That prospect gave his spirits a lift.

He felt overdressed, however, although he was only in an ordinary Western business suit. Ping had declined to wear a pink trouser-suit he had brought from Hong Kong. She had chosen instead an ordinary proletarian suit of dark blue. She insisted also on displaying her red Mao badge. He wondered whether it was wise to introduce a political element into their application, particularly when the former Chairman was dead and gone and much of what he stood for had been repudiated. But he deferred

to Ping's instincts on such matters.

Ping's parents, naturally, had to stay away to underline their opposition. The friends who had helped them also had to maintain their distance. Shek was sorry there was no one to lend Ping moral support.

"Look! Look!" someone said in a loud whisper. "There's the local gold-digger we heard about and her Hong Kong catch."

"Wow, she certainly looks too young to be so deadly," someone else responded.

"They learn fast these days," a third said.

"Ignore them," Ping muttered beneath her breath, keeping her eyes in front of her and her head erect.

Presently, three officials entered the smaller section through a side door and took their seats behind the table. A tense silence descended upon the assembly. The official who sat at the centre had thinning grey hair and appeared in his fifties. He had friendly eyes but conveyed an air of studied weariness. His companions were obviously subordinates. They were in their late twenties and wore the self-satisfied air of those with established destinies. They carried a number of files and writing pads.

Shek's hopes of sliding through as part of a mass wedding were dashed when one of the younger men called out his name and Ping's. They came forward and the young man asked them to confirm their names and particulars. There was a murmur from the crowd when their ages were read out. After particulars had been confirmed the young man indicated they should come through the wooden barrier and take the two empty seats in that section.

The grey-haired man nodded and smiled at them. "My name is Yim," he began. "I've been asked to deal with your application to be married. Though we have had many applications concerning local citizens wishing to marry foreigners or overseas Chinese, we've had very few involving a resident of Hong Kong. I shall ask questions of each of you in

turn, to establish whether all the requirements of the People's Republic of China have been properly met and whether the marriage is being freely entered into. It is important that questions be answered with candour in order to protect the interests of all concerned. Is that fully understood?"

Shek and Ping nodded.

One of his assistants passed Comrade Yim an opened file. Comrade Yim glanced at it, flipped through a number of pages and said: "I shall begin with you, Mr. Shek. I see you have been found to be free of contagious diseases. That's at least one issue out of the way. Why do you wish to marry Miss Lee?"

"Because I love her," Shek replied.

"Why should someone from a capitalist society want to marry a committed Socialist? You're more than twice her age. You come from different societies. Your temperaments and backgrounds must be different. Is that a sound basis upon which to build a marriage?"

"Love is blind to politics and disparities in age."

A voice from the crowd called out: "Goes without saying a young wife is more fun than an old hag." Raucous laughter burst out following that remark.

Comrade Yim gave the noise-makers a stern look. He pulled out a packet of cigarettes and lighted one. He drew upon it and waited for silence to return. "It is true that love cannot always be determined by politics or age," he observed. "But you have been married before, have you not? Was that first marriage not one entered into out of love?"

Shek hesitated. "Yes, I suppose it was."

"Yet it failed, did it not? Why?"

"We didn't get along."

"What makes you think you will get along any better with Miss Lee?"

"I love her. I'm committed to taking good care of her."

Comrade blew a cloud of smoke into the air. “You loved your first wife yet the marriage failed. Miss Lee’s family doesn’t think you a suitable husband for her. Her father and her brothers, all respected members of the Communist Party, have written in stating categorically that they opposed the marriage. Why should they do that if they genuinely believed you would take good care of Miss Lee?”

“You must ask them their reasons. I can only assume they’re mistaken in their assessment of my intentions. I’ve not had the honour of meeting the brothers of Miss Lee. How can they gauge my character or my feelings towards her?”

“By your own admission your first marriage failed because you could not get along with a woman you originally loved. Would it be fair to draw the inference you’re not an easy man to get along with?”

“That’s not so. I’m sorry, but I didn’t say anything of the sort. I said my first wife and I did not get along. We discovered after our marriage that we wanted different things. So we got a divorce. That will not happen in the case of Miss Lee. We have discussed thoroughly what we both want and we are agreed.”

One of Comrade Yim’s assistants leaned over, whispered in his ear and drew his attention to a document in the file. The other assistant was busy scribbling notes.

Comrade Yim stubbed out his cigarette. “It has been drawn to my attention, Mr. Shek, that though you’ve made a contribution towards the modernization of our country, you have not always been respectful of our rules and regulations.”

Shek’s heart raced. He thought of the presents he had given the Director of the No. 1 Garment Factory to secure Ping’s transfer to the morning shift. “I have always been respectful of the rules and regulations of the Motherland,” he said. “If I’ve broken any it was completely unintentional.”

“I have here a statement from a comrade driver of a Red Flag placed at your disposal. The comrade driver states that in spite of informing you that Miss Lee was not entitled to ride in a Red Flag, you had forced him -- contrary to regulations -- to convey Miss Lee and her bicycle to her home.”

“Miss Lee had been injured in an accident.”

“The comrade driver said she suffered a few scratches.”

“I am not a physician. Neither is the driver of the Red Flag. The extent of Miss Lee’s injuries can therefore only come down to a difference in lay opinion.”

“Were you out to impress Miss Lee with your status and importance?”

“No. Why should I do that? We were complete strangers at that time.”

“Your relations with Miss Lee have developed very quickly. So far as can be determined, you have only met on a few occasions over a period of less than a year.”

“Yes, we found we shared many attitudes and ideas.”

“Have you had illicit relations with Miss Lee?”

“No!”

The sound of sniggering and titillation came from the public section of the hall. The onlookers were like a flock of scavenging birds, hoping for titbits to flow from a conflict between larger creatures. Comrade Yim glared at them again.

Shek reddened. The question was outrageous and thoroughly un-Chinese. Posed in public it violated all concepts of propriety. Yet he recalled he had once kissed Ping more hungrily than usual in his hotel room and had caressed her breasts. That had set his blood tingling. He would have gone further if Ping had not pulled away. “Please, don’t,” she had said. “Let’s wait till after we’re married.” She must have known the

dangers better than he. He was glad her prudence had enabled him to answer with a semblance of truth.

Comrade Yim allowed his silence to lengthen uncomfortably for a moment.

“According to statements by the floor attendants at the Peace Hotel, Miss Lee had visited you in your room on no less than seven occasions,” he said eventually. “The times and dates are all set out here. Do you wish to dispute the record?”

“I can’t remember the number of occasions or the dates. Miss Lee did visit my room a few times.”

“Why should a young girl visit a man so frequently in his hotel room if not for the purpose of intimacy?”

A murmur washed through the crowd again.

“Miss Lee was keen to learn English,” Shek said. “I was teaching her. We needed a place without distractions.”

“As simple as that?”

“Yes.”

Comrade Yim consulted one of his assistants, after which he turned his attention to Ping. “Miss Lee,” he began, “has your application to marry Mr. Shek been made completely of your own free will? Are you under pressure from any quarter to do so?”

“It is my own wish,” Ping replied.

“Why would you, a leading member of the local Communist Youth League, want to marry a divorced person from Hong Kong? There are hundreds of millions of young men in China to choose from, many with high ideals and bright futures. Why choose a man so much older than yourself from outside, moreover a man engaged in the sordid business of extracting profit from his fellow men?”

“He’s a kind and honourable person. Such a man is not easy to find.”

“Not among the countless millions in China?”

“I have not found one.”

“When you say he is kind and honourable, do you mean he has never made an improper advance on you in the privacy of his hotel room?”

“No, he has not.”

“If Mr. Shek is such a decent man, why should your family object so strongly to the marriage?”

“My family members are conservative in outlook. They wish me to marry someone my own age from our own town. They do not know Mr. Shek as I do. As Mr. Shek has already pointed out, my brothers have not even met him.”

Comrade Yim lighted another cigarette. “In objecting to your marriage, your father explained your conduct by stating you are wilful and headstrong. Is that a fair assessment?”

“I have acted at all times in accordance with my character and conscience, just like my commitment to Socialist principles and my membership in the Communist Youth League. Is it being suggested that those commitments had been entered into in a wilful and headstrong manner?”

“Of course not. But might there not be other unspecified reasons for your family’s objections? Some reservations concerning Mr. Shek or his stated background?”

“I know of none,” Ping replied. “I think all members of my family will grow to like and respect Mr. Shek. Of that I am confident.”

“You are undoubtedly an intelligent person but you are of a tender age. Would it not be wise to give due weight to the voices of experience?”

“Freedom of marriage is provided in the constitution of our country. I am of age. Our nation has already left behind the feudal practice of parents and elders deciding upon the marriages of their children.”

A murmur of approval rose from the crowd, particularly from the women.

“Though you have a constitutional right to marry, the government also has a duty to protect its citizens. The government must see to it that its citizens are not duped into courses of action harmful to them. Have you been tempted by Mr. Shek’s wealth? Has he promised you a bourgeois existence in return for marriage?”

“As I have said, I’m a member of the Communist Youth League. I’m committed to Socialist principles. I set no store on material things or in a bourgeois lifestyle.”

“Have you considered what might happen should you be abandoned after you’ve been taken to a strange, alienated city, removed from kith and kin, left without money?”

“I’m confident Mr. Shek will never abandon me.”

“Let’s suppose he does, for the sake of argument. What can you do? What recourse will you have?”

“Chairman Mao has taught us to be self-reliant and not to fear hardship. I have hands and feet. I am capable of earning my own living.”

Comrade Yim looked at Ping steadily for a while and then turned to consult one of his assistants in whispers. Afterwards he said: “We have noted both your statements in support of your application. The facts will be considered and a decision conveyed to you in due course.”

As Shek and Ping rose to leave, one of the assistants called out the names of another couple.

XII

Two days later Shek and Ping were asked to call at the Department of Home Affairs to see Comrade Yim. They were ushered into

a private office.

“It’s good of you to come,” Comrade Yim said, with a warm smile, as he invited them to be seated. He was alone and appeared much more genial and relaxed than at the public interrogation. “May I congratulate you,” he continued. “Your application has gone through. Cases involving people outside China are always more troublesome and time consuming. I’m sorry about that. I now have your marriage certifications, all sealed and registered.”

Comrade Yim picked up two identical documents from his desk and handed one each to Shek and Ping.

Shek and Ping could barely hide their joy. They thanked Comrade Yim profusely.

Shek examined his certificate and saw that it was crimson on one side, with bold golden characters printed on it saying “Marriage Certificate”. The reverse side was white and half the surface was taken up by a symbol commonly displayed at weddings to signify “double joy” or “double happiness”. Personal details of the parties were set out in the rest of the space. A coloured photograph of the couple had also been affixed. Ping’s certificate was identical to his own except for a different serial number.

Shek was pleasantly surprised to discover that even Communists could not free themselves from Chinese preoccupations with auspicious colours and propitious symbols.

“Thank you very much, Comrade Yim, for processing our application so expeditiously,” he said.

“It might be somewhat premature for thanks,” Comrade Yim rejoined, with a wistful sigh. “It’s more than likely you’ll find reason to curse me afterwards.”

“Oh, no! We certainly will not do that! We understand you have to be seen to be thorough during the public examinations.”

“I wasn’t thinking so much of my indelicate questions but rather the long separation awaiting you. Marriages seldom weather separations well.”

“We’re not going to be separated for long,” Ping interjected. “I’m entitled to an exit visa. As soon as I get one I shall join my husband in Hong Kong.”

Comrade Yim sighed again. “Yes, you’re entitled to an exit visa but I’m afraid you may not be fully acquainted with British restrictions.”

“What do you mean? What restrictions?” Alarm crept into Ping’s voice.

“Our country has a secret understanding with the British. The imperialist press are fond of accusing us of keeping people behind a so-called Bamboo Curtain. But it is not us who wish to keep people in. It is the British who want to keep them out. The British say they cannot cope with too many people going to Hong Kong. They have therefore pressed us to use what they called ‘administrative means’ to limit the granting of exit visas for Hong Kong to fifty per day. We had little choice but to agree.”

“I’d heard of restrictions, of course, but had no idea they were imposed by the British nor the limitation on numbers. Surely at fifty a day it shouldn’t take very long.” It was now Shek’s turn to sound alarmed.

Comrade Yim bowed his head. His body seemed to sag. “I wish that were the case. Reality is different, however. I thought you were aware of the difficulties. You see, the issuing of exit visas has been delegated to the provinces and the autonomous regions. Each has been given its own quota. China has twenty-three provinces and five autonomous regions, not to mention a number of autonomous administrations in large cities like Peking and Shanghai. Those authorities not only have to use their allocations for their own residents but also for cadres taking up permanent residence in Hong Kong for official purposes.

Where does fifty a day leave the millions wishing to have aged parents, young children and loved ones join them in Hong Kong? Although it is not generally known, in Kiangsu Province the average waiting time for an exit visa to Hong Kong is eight years. In some provinces it can be as long as twelve years.”

Shek felt his heart tightening within him. “This is unconscionable! How can family members be separated for so long?”

“Don’t blame us. You should take it up with the British. You’re a Hong Kong citizen. If you were resident in Europe or America, your wife would get an exit visa within a couple of weeks. Hong Kong presents a special problem. It is surrounded by political sensitivities. I’m genuinely sorry no one has alerted you about the waiting period. I did give you every chance to draw back from marriage. But both of you were so determined. I admired that.”

“Isn’t there any way we can speed things up?”

Comrade Yim shrugged. “What can I advise? The legal channel is clogged. This unhappily drives people into the hands of ‘snakeheads’ and smugglers. The smuggling of people into Hong Kong is illegal on both sides of the border. We take a very serious view of such activities. I’m truly sorry.”

In a sudden glint of insight Shek caught the hint Comrade Yim was dropping. No, he would never risk placing Ping’s safety in the hands of traffickers. But he detected that underneath the carapace of the Communist bureaucrat a human being was trying to make the best of the circumstances in which he and others found themselves. The mellowed, humanistic instincts of his countrymen had survived thirty years of Communism after all! The thought warmed his heart.

“I thank you for all you’ve done. I shall never have occasion to curse you,” Shek said and offered his hand.

Comrade Yim clasped it with feeling.

Ping also proffered her thanks. But she looked glum. News of the long wait for a visa had devastated her. Her normally clear brows were now furrowed and desperation haunted her eyes.

Shek caught the look and it was heart-breaking. He placed an arm around her shoulders and ushered her from the office. As he did so, he said in a low, earnest voice: “Don’t worry. I may not know anyone in the Politburo but I have good friends who do. Even if we Chinese have learnt nothing else during the last five thousand years, we’ve learnt how to get things done. I’ll get you to Hong Kong, whatever it takes. You can bet your life on that.”