

A Dusty Road

March 15:

The ides of March seems as good a day as any to begin a journal. Visits required by protocol have run their course and flowers and "get well" cards have dwindled to a trickle. Astringent hospital smells have reasserted themselves over the sickly odours of expiring blooms. The nurses and attendants remain over-considerate, however, continuing to move about like wraiths.

I am embarking on this exercise with no thought of putting a gloss on my life or of leaving a record for posterity. I simply want something to take my mind off the boredom and the recurring pain. There is in fact no one to leave anything to. My parents have been long dead. So has my only brother, Lamerocke, lost over Hamburg without so much as a bone for interment. We had been very close as children, growing up amidst the moaning winds and crashing waves of Cornwall, not far from Tintagel. Our father, a publican, was obsessed with Arthurian legends. Hence Lamerocke and Percival. I, supposedly, am the one to see the Holy Grail!

Lady Gillian, my ex-wife of thirty years ago, is unlikely to take to deathbed musings. Her interests were not cerebral. Accounts of her escapades, marital and otherwise, used to make headlines in British tabloids. Following our divorce, I used to cringe on overhearing oafs exclaim: "I say, Lady Gillian's in the news again. There's a picture of her half-naked in a fountain in Rome. Wasn't she married to Benson at one stage?" Now, thankfully, hardly anybody remembers that connection.

As for friends, a potted history of one's life is hardly a thing to inflict on such a precious handful. In any event, a Chief Secretary, like any occupier of high office, gathers few friends. He attracts allies, supporters, subordinates, supplicants, sycophants, informers, critics, rivals, enemies, conspirators and other less agreeable specimens but, alas, rarely friends.

Intimates always expect the inside gen. They regard it as a test of trust. But a Chief Secretary, with responsibility for the welfare of five million people, must be circumspect. That often imposes strains upon relationships.

To make matters worse, holders of high office nowadays have to be cautious over the company they keep. A prying Press can easily distort the most innocent of relationships into a public scandal. For that reason, I have refrained from visiting Szeto at his congenial bar, because it is located in the heart of the red light district. I suspect he has declined my invitations to Victoria House for similar reasons.

I miss those days when I could misbehave with impunity! How marvelous they were! The best of life was there, waiting to be lived, perfumed by promises of advancement and love. Only the terrifying dark room at the back of Szeto's Bar counselled restraint. Imagine the media getting a whiff of the nights I had spent there! Or worse still, imagine being captured on camera with my arms around Jenny!

Lines by Tao Yuan-Ming, the Fourth Century Chinese poet, come to mind whenever I think about Szeto, for he introduced me to Tao's poems during my depression after Jenny left. I have been so taken by them that I now keep a volume by my bedside. Last night I read the following and its aptness matched my mood:

"Quietly I stay in the eastern room;
Alone I drink the clear spring wine.
My good friend is now away;
I scratch my head and contemplate."

In spite of the passage of years, Jenny remains as fresh in my memory as ever -- the perfect ellipses of her Eurasian eyes, that "bad luck" mole hanging like a black teardrop beneath one of them, and that resigned, melancholy face which appeared vaguely European one moment and curiously Eastern the next. I cannot think of her without a dull, unforgiving ache. I had hesitated when I should have been decisive. I had allowed myself to be deflected by ambition, to be side-tracked by a self-righteous sense of mission. My mission should have been Jenny. People discover these things too late. Jenny left only a shattering message for me with Szeto, without even giving me the chance to say good-bye. I wonder where she is now. I would give anything see her again.

March 16:

A private ward in Queen Mary Hospital is one of the privileges of high office. The hospital sometimes gets so overcrowded patients have to sleep on canvas cots in the corridors.

The Hospital Superintendent makes a point of coming with the consultants each morning. Everyone is very deferential and slightly awed. They seldom deal with anyone of my status. They are therefore fearful of putting a foot wrong. They also dread my insistence on knowing the amount of time I have left.

The question is, of course, unanswerable. But I ask it nonetheless to put medical gurus on the spot. I enjoy watching them squirm and waffle about mental outlook, the will to live and the rest of their rigmarole. I get a kick out of seeing them scurry for cover behind inquiries about bowel movements, nausea and sleeping

difficulties. They are pathetic. They try to deflect me by stressing that relief from pain is only a bell button away.

The day nurse, a pretty little thing named Suzy, smiles sympathetically while the charade goes on. Her large eyes and timid smiles remind me of Jenny.

After having my fun, I allow the white coats to leave. They are visibly relieved. They obviously fear for their careers, not realising I have already lost all power over them. Whatever authority I retain hangs by the most slender of threads. A telephone line to be precise, connected to a black, ugly and indestructable instrument resting on the cabinet next to my bed.

That private telephone is another privilege of office. It links me to Mrs. Merriweather, my Personal Secretary of many years. She is lean and hatchet-faced but efficient beyond words. She watches over my interests as indefatigably as a mother and chastises everyone who does not present papers required by me in double-quick time. She still carries with her the authority of the Chief Secretary's office and those used to receiving her crisp instructions are unlikely to question their *bona fides* just yet.

It is to her that I turn to cancel appointments, decline invitations, send off notes of thanks and generally to set my affairs in order. She also passes me gossip about the Acting Chief Secretary and other senior colleagues, although I am beyond caring. I suppose it's her way of lulling me into believing I am going to get well again. She has attended to my needs for so long I will be quite lost without her. Perhaps she will also become lost without me.

March 17:

Fictional characters often face death with fear, courage or deep remorse. I suppose toting up the debits and credits in the book of life can be unsettling. My accounts are probably badly in the red, because in spite of generally decent instincts and the seeming power of my official position I have failed to achieve anything that really mattered. There is no incremental good, no singular defeat of evil, no impediment against the abuse of power or money that I can point to and claim credit for. I have also, wittingly or unwittingly, hurt and let down people I have cared about. Jenny, in particular, weighs upon my conscience. Hence the prospect of death comes as something of a relief, like being rid once and for all of a tedious file with an intractable problem!

After the war, I was unsure of what I wanted to do. The prospect of returning jobless to a room above my father's pub did not appeal. As a boy I had wanted to be a painter, to capture the landscapes and seascapes of Cornwall. But,

with the world embroiled in fresh quarrels, I felt I owed it to those who had sacrificed their lives to engage myself in something more constructive.

Both Lamerocke and Tom Carpenter, the boyhood chum with whom I faced my baptism of fire on some cratered beach in Normandy, thought they were fighting for a better world. But the world hardly seemed improved by their sacrifices. I judged Britain played out, with the old verities slipping away. The country could hardly cope with the problems of national reconstruction, let alone the clamours for independence rising around the empire.

I thought it right that people should be free to run their own affairs. After all, we had fought a long war to free ourselves from Hitler. I decided the best way to contribute to a saner world would be to join the Colonial Service, to help prepare colonial peoples for independence. In order to equip myself for that task I entered Cambridge upon demobilization, to read history at Jesus.

I began my career in Kenya, arriving there with my sympathies firmly on the side of the ruled. But when the Mau Mau troubles began, I got a rude introduction into political realities.

The descent into savagery and barbarism was swift on all sides. I was trapped in the machinery of subjugation, appalled by the official lies, the sanctioned beatings and the counter-murders at camps like Hola. I was quite powerless to influence any side in that bitter struggle, though I did manage to curb some brutalities and deter the more arbitrary arrests in my district. Ten years and twelve thousand deaths later, Britain was forced to close another inglorious chapter in its messy retreat from empire.

Perhaps I have learned the wrong bits of British history or perhaps those who enter Westminster or Whitehall have a tendency to forget the bits I learnt. Our sense of decency and fair play, our commitment to justice and humanity, seem to have declined with our influence in the world. Now we only retain a penchant for sticking our heads in the sand and ignoring inconvenient abominations like Hola.

In the case of Hong Kong we are stumbling towards further ignominy. We are supposed to be running this place in the interests of its people, most of whom came here to flee from Communism. But as 1997 looms, when the 99-year lease on most of the territory will run out, we are already preparing the ground for betrayal.

The latest move, served up with a welter of humbug, is an amendment to the British Nationality Act. The objective is to ensure that British subjects with the wrong skin pigmentation cannot find ready haven in Britain. The local implications are enormous but my attempts to voice them have met only mealy-mouthed evasions. The whole issue is premature, London says. It disgusts me and makes me glad that death will spare me from any part of what is to come.

Thus a lifetime of public service, entered into with noble intentions, ends up as helpless farce. One discovers too late that the slow creep up the Precedence List, the medals and honours, the privileges and pomp of high office, are mere fig leaves to hide the pointlessness and futility of one's chosen career. It is not a happy note on which to end one's life.

Tao Yuan-ming once lamented man's headlong rush down a dusty road to empty fame. I have travelled down that road. If I had appreciated sooner what lay at the end of it, my whole life would have been lived differently. I certainly would not have allowed myself to lose Jenny.

March 18:

Over the last few days, my thoughts have drifted back to the people inhabiting my boyhood, to my father dressed up as Merlin for parties and my mother toiling over her delicious bread-and-butter puddings. They also swirled around Lamerocke, the consistent victor in our bicycle races, and Tom Carpenter, who shared my first stolen cigarette. But I cannot for the love of me recall the face or the name of that precocious village lass who initiated me into the mysteries of the female sex organ when I was eleven! How the mind plays tricks. It all seems like yesterday.

Lamerocke was an older version of myself. We both have the same sandy coloured hair, grey eyes and determined jaw inherited from our father. But Lamerocke was always the sensible one, whereas I tended to be an erratic dreamer.

Tom I have known since we were toddlers. He was a neighbour, a school chum and finally a comrade in arms. We were the same age and, since the time of that first shared cigarette, we had participated in more mischief and adventures than can be recounted. Regrettably, we also had the misfortune to face together the horrors of carnage and war.

Lamerocke and Tom both died young. Could that be a blessing? The ancient Greeks held that the dead enjoyed a state superior to the living. Life's limitations certainly became more obvious as we grew older. There is something to be said for living intensely and then perishing like a pure, uncontaminated flame.

When the war came, Lamerocke became a navigator in the Royal Air Force. Tom and I were also anxious to join the fray. We thought that the patriotic thing to do. But we were only fifteen. It took us more than two years to get into the army. By chance we ended up in the same infantry battalion.

I hated the army once my misguided enthusiasm for fighting for King and country had worn off. Although we were supposed to be fighting for freedom and democracy, our superiors treated us like feudal serfs. I soon discovered there was neither glory nor romance in war, because war traded upon the worst human instincts.

Tom's presence made things more tolerable. He was more than a comrade, more than a friend. He eased my homesickness in camp and curbed my blind excesses during leave. Most importantly, he was there to steady me on that unknown beach assigned to us on a military map. When news came of Lamerocke's death, I ranted at the futility of it all. I wanted to throw my rifle away and let the Army or the enemy do their worst.

"We just have to fight, Benny," Tom had once said, soothingly. (He always called me Benny after my surname because he thought Percival too pompous.) "The politicians may be lying to us, the Army may be abusing us, but we know for sure that Hitler is evil. We've got to get rid of him first. Then we deal with our own rascals. We have to make sure the youth of the future don't get sucked any more into this sort of dustup."

I still suffer retrospective pain when I think of Tom and the other comrades who fell. They paid dearly for every inch of pebble-strewn beach and every uninviting clod of alien earth. After surviving the firefights at Normandy we pushed towards the medieval town of Bayeux. The German panzers counterattacked. It caught us by surprise. Our retreat was a desperate affair. Tom got hit in the stomach. I scrambled to reach him and had to disable two enemy tanks to do so. I carried him on my back for half a mile before discovering he was already dead.

I was subsequently awarded the Military Medal, which only showed the dimness of those to whom we entrusted our lives! Tom's death left me suicidal for a while. I didn't care if I died. So I took unwarranted risks, charging ahead at every engagement. As luck would have it, I survived unscathed. My efforts simply got me another medal! What brass-bound asses our leaders must be!

March 19:

Suzu is a delight. She comes in first thing every morning to stick a thermometer in my mouth and to take my pulse. The tactile contact gives me a thrill. She senses my eyeing her flirtatiously and she occasionally allows a hovering smile. In different circumstances, I could take to a girl like her. As things are, I can only use my imagination!

I have an undeserved reputation as a Lothario. I do not deny my share of passing flings, with corporate executives, university lecturers, civil service colleagues, Fleet Street journalists and even a woman legislator or two. But none of them were memorable. I'm seldom lucky with women. I tend to end up with those capable only of making love with their heads. Even as they fake their ardour and their orgasms, I sense them calculating where things might lead, what they might get

out of it and how much of themselves to give. They seem quite incapable of enjoying the pure pleasure of love-making in the way Gillian and Jenny could.

Gillian came into my life at Cambridge. She was at Girton doing modern languages. She looked as if she had just stepped out of *Country Life*. She had ash blonde hair and a face suffused with high English colour. She was graceful and willowy, with the kind of undernourished figure Twiggy was to popularise twenty years later.

I had never met anyone as beautiful and aristocratic. Her father had inherited an ancient dukedom, so she represented a world I had only read about, a world of coming-out parties and weekends in country houses, grouse-shooting and riding to hounds, hereditary rights and connections in high places.

When she began flirting with me, I was both puzzled and flattered. I could not figure out what she saw in me. I was not unattractive in a rugged sort of way and I was a blue in rugby. But beyond that I had nothing to recommend myself. I did not belong to her class and had no money to speak of. I was a mere publican's son trying to make something of himself.

When she started showering me with ties, cuff links, cologne and other gifts bought from those stores in Jermyn Street boasting royal patronage, I became distinctly uncomfortable. I was in no position to reciprocate. I thought of beating an unmanly retreat. But she represented such a delicious morsel that I was filled with curiosity. It was only when she introduced me to her father as "my war hero" that I realized what she was about. She must have learnt of my decorations and wanted me as a trophy, like those giant antlers hanging in her ancestral mansion. Little did she realise she had picked a fake!

I decided then that any woman who treats me with so little intelligence and respect deserves what she gets. I encouraged her advances and, after a particularly riotous party at her family's town house in Mayfair, the inevitable happened.

Gillian opened my eyes about upper class women! Up to that point, except for the fleeting revelations gained at the age of eleven, my sexual experiences had been confined to furtive liaisons in Soho or along Bayswater Road. But Gillian made love with a passion that was truly frightening. She screamed, she scratched, she thrashed about in apoplexies of pleasure. Her insatiable appetite tested me to the limits and her energy far exceeded anything imaginable in so slender a frame.

Our studies suffered as a result. What was particularly worrying was Gillian's dismissive attitude towards precautions. I was then still old-fashioned enough to hold that a man ought to do the decent thing by any woman he gets into a family way. It was that sense of responsibility which led me into our brief and unfortunate marriage.

March 20:

The day began badly. I've had no bowel movement for four days, so an enema was ordered. I would not allow Suzy to administer it, however, and insisted on a male nurse. My modesty amused Suzy. The enema did its work but left me humiliated and in a foul temper. One does not relish being poked in the backside at such a late stage in life!

It was unfortunate for Rawlins, the Establishment Secretary, that he should choose to call soon after my ordeal. The poor fellow caught the sharp edge of my tongue.

"Well, are we feeling better today?" he had asked with forced cheerfulness as he entered the ward. His fruity voice and too-familiar tone irritated me.

"Don't be fatuous, Rawlins," I snapped. "Can a man ever feel better when cancer is eating him up?"

I have never liked Rawlins. His vague watery eyes, his fleshy, indecisive mouth and his unreliable chin epitomised the worst qualities of the civil service. He had an abundance of charm, however, of the kind that often signalled some serious deficiency in character.

"I'm sorry, Sir. I didn't mean it that way," Rawlins corrected himself. "It was just a manner of speaking. The Governor wanted me to appraise you of your options."

"Please thank H.E. for his concern. As for options, I would like to get well, to go on living, to draw my pension. Are those available options?"

"I'm sorry, Sir, I'm putting things rather badly today. It's just that we've been looking at financial implications and it appears early retirement will be advantageous for you. You see, Sir, as a bachelor, you will lose financially by passing away in service, as it were. If you had a wife and children they would get a death gratuity equal to your commutable pension and later enjoy a regular Widows' and Orphans' Pension. But as you are single, no one will benefit.

"On the other hand, if you were to retire early, you will be able to commute a portion of your pension into a lump sum right away, to dispose of as you see fit. Being single at the time of retirement, you will also be refunded your past contributions to the Widows' and Orphans' Pension Fund, plus accrued interest. That will come to quite tidy sum, if I may say so. If you are minded to retire early, H.E. can arrange for speedy approval by the Secretary of State."

I knew Rawlins was trying to be helpful, but money was the farthest thing from my mind. Whatever savings I have I had already bequeathed to Amnesty

International and other charities. I had, however, given no thought to the financial implications of early retirement.

"There's also a housekeeping item, Sir," Rawlins continued. "I have checked your next-of-kin card and it seems in need of up-dating. Currently, your next-of-kin is given as Miss Jenny Mackenzie, a cousin. However, her address in Wanchai no longer exists. The building was torn down some time ago. I wonder if you have a current address?"

The mention of Jenny sent a stab of pain through my heart. It took me a while to compose myself. "My cousin married some years back and migrated to Australia. I'm afraid we've lost touch. I don't know where she is. For all practical purposes, you can regard me as having no next-of-kin.

"As for early retirement, I'll think about it. There is a pretty little nurse here whom I wouldn't mind turning into Lady Benson. We don't want to be precipitous, do we, Rawlins? It wouldn't do to leave a widow without a pension, would it? Let me think it over. I'll give you an answer in a couple of weeks."

The expression Rawlins allowed into his deficient face made clear he did not think I could afford a couple of weeks. But to his credit he just said: "Very well, Sir. I'll inform H.E."

March 22:

Damn Rawlins! Why did he have to disturb my final days by bringing up the ghost of Jenny? Am I not suffering enough? Why must I be exposed to more gratuitous pain? Ever since his visit, images of Jenny and our time together have been tumbling around in my mind like changing patterns in a kaleidoscope. I was so upset yesterday I could not muster the will to write.

I ended up dreaming about Jenny. Actually it was only partly a dream, fused with fragments of memory. It was all very confused and distorted, with bits of both flitting in and out of my consciousness. Some episodes were distinctly pleasurable, like those of Jenny massaging me with *tsubaki* oil from the camellia tree or of our making love in our borrowed apartment.

Other bits were less so. There was an ugly scene with Jenny's heroin-dependent mother which never happened in real life. But in the dream she kept cackling in her broken English: "Why you no melly Jenny? Why you no melly Jenny? She makee velly good wife."

Then there was a thoroughly distorted interview with Sir Geoffrey Heathcote, the Chief Secretary of the time. "I've had good reports on you, Benson," Sir Geoffrey seemed to have said, with a knowing look. "You're being groomed for higher responsibility. You're to get your own department. Don't blot your copybook

by going native. Continue with your good work, keep your nose clean, and you may end up with a gubernatorial sun helmet, complete with ostrich feathers."

The most vivid images in that dreamy recollection were of a visit to the Wong Tai Sin Temple by Jenny. I don't know why I visualised everything so clearly because Jenny actually went on her own, to have her fortune read by her favourite soothsayer, Old San. She only told me what happened afterwards.

Nevertheless, I somehow saw the yellow roofs and the crimson pillars and the garish altar decorations inside the temple. I experienced the press of anxious supplicants, heard the drone of chanted prayers and smelt the overpowering fragrance of smouldering incense. I saw Jenny kneeling with eyes closed, in fervent petition to unknown deities, shaking a wooden container holding the hundred "chims" or fortune sticks.

Each "chim" relates to a classical quotation which Old San interprets in return for a small fee. Divine guidance is supposed to cause that one "chim" out of a hundred to jump out when the container is shaken by the supplicant. His predestined fate is thereby sealed.

As I dreamt of Jenny shaking the container, the rhythmic clicking of the "chims" filled me with foreboding. It took a long time before one fortune stick disengaged itself from the rest. When it was presented to Old San, he shook his head and declared Jenny's fate inauspicious. He intoned the quotation, the first two lines of which went as follows:

"With blood and tears the cuckoo weeps,
Full of grievance and sorrows deep."

Then he explained the significance of each part of the quotation. "According to your fortune stick, you are entering a period of ill luck," he said. "Mishaps will befall you and plans and aspirations will come to nought. Marriage should not be contemplated for it is bound to prove disastrous. This is also the Year of the Dog and a blind year besides. The mole beneath your eye predestines a life of sadness. You should be cautious at all times. Every precipitous act can bring unhappy consequences which cannot be undone."

The next moment Jenny was in tears and I was furiously shouting: "It's all damn superstition! Just marry me and I'll prove it's all stuff and nonsense!"

I awoke to find Suzy dabbing my brow with a wet towel. "You have been shouting, Sir. Are you in pain or was something frightening you?" Little does she realise how close she came to the truth.

March 23:

I had another bad night last night. The stemetil and morphine proved less than effective. I woke up to both nausea and pain. After vomiting, I hobbled out to the balcony to get away from my own stench. The pristine vistas which greeted me took me by surprise. I had forgotten how lovely parts of Hong Kong could be.

For almost nine years, since moving into my official residence at Victoria House on the Peak, I have watched from my garden the relentless spread of urban ugliness. First, there was the extension of the airport runway, poking like an obscene finger of stone into a hapless sea. Then the tasteless tower blocks spreading like some vile eczema across the face of the city. Stolid industrial complexes followed, spewing out black emissions like insults to the world at large. Then those ultimate eyesores, gigantic neon signs, intruding into every natural view with some importuning commercial message.

The view from the hospital balcony was of a totally different order. Its intimations were those of peace and serenity. Dawn had just broken. The air felt ether-cool against my feverish skin. Beyond the hibiscus hedges marking the borders of the hospital, a few scattered homes nestled amidst the kindly greens of banyans, Burmese rosewood, palms, ferns and creepers. Here and there yellow oleanders, purple bougainvillea, flowering bauhinias and dew-wet frangipani added little eruptions of colour. A faint breeze was dispelling the final traces of mist, bringing at the same time hints of dew, pollen and spoor.

Above, frail clouds brushed across an azure sky. A sea eagle glided majestically through its haunted silence. In the middle distance the sea was a shimmering expanse of aquamarine and gold and upon that mottled surface junks with bat-winged sails rested like indolent moths. On the far horizon, the unfathomable ocean and the boundless sky seemed to unite seamlessly into a mysterious universe.

There was something in that scene which was pure and triumphant, simple yet intense, peaceful yet expectant. Everything seemed distilled down to the bare essentials, as in a Chinese painting. For one mystical moment, I was seized by an encompassing apprehension. It came like an echo from a bygone age, resonating with goodness and innocence, beauty and truth. I felt strangely moved and stood lost in the wonder. I wanted desperately to set down in words what I was experiencing, to share it with others. But I knew at the same instance it would require a bard rather than a bureaucrat to communicate the incommunicable.

That moment of grace slipped away, as suddenly as it came, upon a call by Suzy to begin our morning ritual.

March 24:

With each passing day I tire more easily. The pain recurs with greater frequency and I encounter more difficulty getting to sleep. Nonetheless I refused my sleeping pill last night. What I had experienced in the morning filled me with an unaccountable lust for life and I did not want to lose that memory to sleep. I kept recalling the majesty and grandeur of youth and re-living all their exigencies and flavours.

Somehow, I can never think of my youth without thinking of Gillian. She had coloured them indelibly, notwithstanding that our marriage had less to do with love than carnal desire, compounded by an antiquated sense of honour.

Our marriage happened out of the blue. I had just graduated and we had celebrated uproariously. After our physical desires had been sated, Gillian said: "Let's elope."

"You've got a year to go at Girton and I haven't got a job," I replied.

"Sod Girton! Daddy'll get you a job."

"You're not pregnant, are you?"

"You don't flatter a woman, do you? Is pregnancy a precondition for marrying me?"

"Of course, not. You know I love you. It's just that this is so sudden. We should talk things over, wait a bit to see how my interview at the Colonial Office turns out."

"If you love me there's nothing to talk over. Let's go."

Men are such cowards when their love is called into question. In my case an unarticulated sense of guilt also came into it. In the event, I allowed Gillian to drag me off to Brighton in her car, where we duly married in a public registry. I was filled with secret terrors. I was convinced she was pregnant, because of the recklessness and frequency of our love-making. I had no home, no job, no money and no inkling of how to cope with becoming a father!

Immediately after our marriage my father-in-law set about securing me a position in the City. I was saved by an offer from the Colonial Service, which I accepted with alacrity. I was posted to Kenya as an Assistant District Officer. Gillian took the news better than I had expected. She packed our bags without fuss and we sailed for Mombasa.

I was assigned to a district in the centre of the country, among the Bantu-speaking Kikuyu people and a considerable way from any significant town. The Kikuyu in my district had been reduced largely to subsistence farming because the most fertile lands had been lost to European settlers. They were a proud people and their grievances were not without merit. I felt I was on the threshold of doing things for them, even if I could not right all the ancient wrongs. I was quite comfortable

with their ritualistic traditions and was even moved to pick up brush and palette to capture their dances and their magnificent clothes.

It soon became apparent, however, that Gillian was not meant for life in the bush. She remained a creature for revelries, nocturnal excitements and flowing champagne. She found it taxing to live in the middle of nowhere. The insects irritated her and the singing silences of the African night drove her to distraction. Though she put on a brave face, she soon pined for London.

Her restlessness confronted me with a dilemma. Although it came as a relief to discover she was not pregnant, I nevertheless saw that a sexual nexus was no basis for an enduring marriage. We wanted different things and it made sense to go our separate ways. But I did not want to hurt her. Divorce also had drawbacks for me. At that time, it was conventional to bar divorced persons from representing the monarch. Thus divorce meant an end to gubernatorial aspirations.

Gillian, sensing my dilemma, opened up the first serious conversation we ever had.

"Darling, you're such a ninny," she said. "Don't you know that I made you marry me out of spite? I knew you didn't really love me. You were too anxious to make something of your life, to improve the world or something impossibly idealistic. I resented that because all I wanted was to enjoy myself. So I decided to bring you down to my level, to corrupt you with debaucheries. It was sheer capriciousness and it was unfair. I think it's time I stop messing with your life."

At the end of that discussion I felt closer to her than I had ever been. If she had asked me to chuck Kenya and return to England with her, I probably would have done so. But she did not ask and, selfishly, I did not offer. We ended up going our separate ways. It turned out for the best because soon after she left the Mau Mau troubles began.

After two years of separation, we got a divorce. But long before then she was receiving the attention of the tabloids. The ink was barely dry on our divorce papers when she married an Italian count. That did not last either. Neither did two other marriages that followed. After that I stopped counting, although once in a while I am still stirred by the remembered splendour of her love-making.

March 25:

After nine years in Kenya, during which both my parents passed away, I was transferred to Hong Kong. I was more than ready for a change because almost a decade of bloodletting had turned my stomach.

I did not know a soul in Hong Kong. After the open spaces of Africa, the press of people and their tempo of life required getting used to. What was most

surprising was the almost total apathy towards self-government or independence. What a relief that was! People seemed contented to be left alone to make money.

I was appointed Deputy Director in the Agriculture and Fisheries Department, a post hardly meant for setting the world ablaze. Given the pressures on only four hundred square miles of territory, agriculture was both insignificant and uneconomical. Paddy fields were being increasingly converted to growing vegetables and flowers and rearing chicken and pigs.

Fisheries, on the other hand, was -- and has remained -- a thriving industry. Much effort was devoted to modernizing the substantial fishing fleet. The department had a special research vessel for studying marine resources, aquaculture and the environmental impact of fishing. Joining the vessel for an occasional cruise in the Gulf of Tonkin or the South China Sea was a pleasant break from office routine.

One day, a colleague invited me for a beer after work. We ended up in a newly-opened establishment in the heart of the red light district of Wanchai. It was known simply as Szeto's Bar. There I met Szeto, its owner, who later became the first Chinese to befriend me. Subsequently he also befriended Jenny.

Szeto was a baffling personality. He served behind a long bar but he projected none of the bonhomie common to bartenders. He was courteous and served drinks expeditiously. When occasion demanded he would listen to tales of woe with a degree of sympathy. But on the whole he did not encourage conversation. His piercing eyes seemed to warn customers that idle chatter was not his strong suit. When not otherwise occupied, he would toy with a sharp throwing knife and study his clientele like a hawk.

Szeto was of average height for a Cantonese, which meant he was a full six inches shorter than myself. But what he lacked in stature was made up by a wiry frame suggestive of great physical strength. His movements, moreover, were smooth and graceful, like those of a gymnast or ballet dancer.

The establishment reflected Szeto's personality. The ambiance was down to earth and the decor unpretentious. The bar opened at six in the evening and stayed open as long as a sober customer remained. It soon became a haunt for workers on night shifts, such as newspaper sub-editors and police inspectors. Its reasonable prices also attracted a circle of regulars, made up of writers, civil servants, academics and the more serious minded among the local and expatriate communities.

Like most bars in that area, it was invaded from time to time by Americans on rest and recreation, either from the Seventh Fleet or from Vietnam. A few among them appeared too clean-cut and too intent upon being inconspicuous to be other than people engaged in intelligence work.

Since I had no friends, I became a regular at the long bar. Although that gave me ample opportunity to pass the time of day with Szeto, talk tended to be frustratingly one-sided. Szeto remained laconic.

One day, some months after I had been frequenting the bar, I was invited, as a government representative, to officiate at a celebration of the Tin Hau Festival at a large fishing village. Tin Hau is supposed to be the Queen of Heaven and Protectress of Seafarers. She is widely worshipped by fishing folk and has numerous temples dedicated to her throughout Hong Kong. Imagine my surprise when I found Szeto among the welcoming committee!

"I'm here under false pretenses," Szeto whispered at the first opportunity. "My family lives here and owns a fishing junk. But I haven't fished for ages. I've just been conscripted because I'm the only one who speaks English!"

The explanation seemed too plausible. "Perhaps you are some kind of fisher of men," I replied, half-jokingly.

I knew a lot went on across sea boundaries surrounding Hong Kong -- smuggling, espionage, piracy, gun-running, illegal immigration and political games of cat and mouse. I had no idea what, if anything, Szeto might be involved in. He did not strike me as a criminal. Although he kept his political sympathies to himself, it would not surprise me if he were involved in helping dissidents escape from Communist China or in sneaking CIA or Taiwanese spies in. I did not care to probe.

Following the Tin Hau ceremony, Szeto gradually warmed towards me. We conversed more and from time to time we discussed subjects as diverse as Buddhism, carpentry, herbal medicine, poetry, modern dancing, Asian martial arts and different aspects of science. The catholic nature of Szeto's tastes led me to conclude he was far too well read for a simple bartender. I began speculating about what he was up to. Later, after I had become Chief Secretary, I kept an eye out during the Friday meetings of the Security Committee for anything involving Szeto. But nothing surfaced.

March 26:

Szeto's Bar was indirectly responsible for bringing Jenny and I together. In order to reach the bar, I had to pass the numerous tourist traps littering the neighbourhood. At that time, topless bars were making an appearance and they advertised the attributes of their hostesses through large, revealing photographs outside.

One such establishment was known as The Pink Parrot. Among the photographs displayed was one of a girl in her late teens by the name of Jenny. Her picture intrigued me, not so much because of her perfectly rounded breasts or the

extraordinary head of hair piled incongruously high on top of her head, but because, in spite of a smiling face, there was a peculiar air of melancholy about her, conveyed through a pair of large, soulful eyes and a mole which hung like a teardrop beneath one of them.

The photograph was intriguing for another reason. I could not quite make out whether she was Chinese. Her nose certainly appeared more straight and elevated than was normal for a Chinese. Each time I passed the photograph, the eyes seemed to send out an appeal. One evening, I gave way to impulse and braved The Pink Parrot.

Inside I found an arrangement of brightly lit mini-bars, clustered at the centre of the room like the petals of a peach blossom. Each bar, bracketted by six stools, was served by a girl dressed only in a skimpy bikini bottom. The outer edges of the room, equipped with sofas and small tables, were cloaked in a cozy penumbra, to provide greater intimacy for those preferring to drink there. Although the air-conditioning kept the room comfortably cool, it failed to dispel the lingering odour of stale cigarettes.

It was relatively early in the evening, so patrons were few. Only a solitary Chinese drinker graced Jenny's bar. I headed straight for it and discovered that Jenny was even more lovely in the flesh than in her photograph. Her skin was smooth and delicate and her figure well-proportioned. She had loosened her waist-length hair and draped it over her breasts. This partial concealment only served to make them more tantalising. Unlike her photograph, she was not wearing a smile and that accentuated the dolefulness in her face.

I ordered a drink. But before I could engage her in conversation, a shriveled-up hag with a cigarette dangling from a corner of the mouth emerged from the surrounding gloom. She spoke sharply to Jenny in Cantonese before retreating back into the darkness. Jenny made no reply but the incident made her appear even sadder than before.

I saw the Chinese drinker smiling during the outburst. Being ignorant of the language, I asked: "What was that all about?"

"She told the girl not to wear a face like a bitter melon," the man replied, with a chuckle. "She said if men wanted to look at sour faces they could stay home and look at their wives."

I had assumed that the disagreeable woman was some sort of supervisor. So by way of starting a conversation, I said: "Pay no attention to that old hag. You look fine to me."

Jenny responded with a slight, musical laugh. "That's my mother you're talking about!"

March 27:

I had to interrupt writing my journal yesterday because I was in so much pain. The pain is now so frequent that the doctors suggested round-the-clock morphine injections. I refused, although I realise each break-through of pain will necessitate a larger dosage to ease it thereafter. I prefer individual injections because pain represents an awareness of life. I do not want death to sneak upon me unawares. I want to see it coming and to meet it with a semblance of dignity.

I must have fallen into a deep sleep after the morning ritual because when I woke Suzy told me that a gentleman by the name of Szeto had come to visit me. But he did not want to disturb me and left after half an hour, saying he would call again.

Szeto! How I long to see him! I can hardly wait for him to come again. There is so much I want to say to him. I got Mrs. Merriweather to convey my apologies for being asleep during his visit and to urge him to come again.

Szeto's visit seemed to have given me a fresh burst of energy. I wanted to go out on the balcony again, to savour anew what I had experienced a few days ago. But I was too weak to move unaided. Having Suzy or someone else there, supporting me and plying me with indulgent chatter, would destroy the magic. So I contented myself with more recollections of Jenny.

I visited The Pink Parrot whenever I could afford it, which was not too often given the salary of a middle-ranking bureaucrat. It soon became obvious Jenny was not cut out to be a topless waitress. She was too shy and too embarrassed to display of her body. She simply lacked the knack for weeding outrageously-priced drinks out of customers, although those drinks were meant to provide the bulk of her income. She was constantly chastised by both her mother and the nightclub manager as a result. I felt increasingly sorry for her.

One evening, when the Seventh Fleet was in town, some sailors with a few too many under their belts wandered in. Two of them sat at Jenny's bar. After they have had a couple more drinks, one of them said: "Hey, baby, I'm paying to see boobs. Why don't you remove all that hair and give us a good look."

When Jenny ignored him, the sailor grabbed hold of her arm and made to brush her hair aside. I caught his arm and said: "That's enough, buddy. If you want boobs try the next bar."

"A wise guy, hey?" he said, releasing Jenny to take a swing at me. I ducked and a small shove was all it took to unbalance him and send him tumbling off the bar stool. His companion then pounced on me and a fight ensued.

Within seconds a full scale brawl was in progress. The girls yelled and screamed, as the nightclub bouncers and other sailors joined in. I had not meant to

start a riot. I knew the police and the Shore Patrol would be on the scene in no time and it would mean disgrace to be arrested under such circumstances.

Just then, I felt someone tugging my shirt from behind. I turned, prepared to lash out. But it was only Jenny's mother beckoning me to follow her. I did so and she led me out through the back door. It was just in the nick of time, because the police and the Shore Patrol were already charging through the front door.

That incident altered my relationship with Jenny and her mother. I became a sort of friend instead of just another customer. I discovered the times when business was slack and went during those periods to chat with Jenny. Her mother was always there, however, hovering in the shadows, watching over her daughter like a mother hen.

Although Jenny hated her job, she had no alternative. Her mother, a former salesgirl, had fallen in love with a Scottish officer stationed in Hong Kong as part of the garrison. They became lovers and the officer, a Major Mackenzie, promised to marry her. Shortly after the officer had ended his tour, she discovered she was pregnant. When her family found out, it disowned her. She left home to struggle on with her old job till she gave birth to Jenny. She named her after her father, in the hope he would one day return. But he never did.

When the income proved insufficient to support herself and a child, she drifted into prostitution. As her looks went, she found herself on a downward spiral. She ended up in one of those low dives along Temple Street in Yaumati. She resorted to drugs to ease her self-disgust and that made matters worse. But to her credit she managed to get Jenny as far as the second year of secondary school. As her ability to attract customers went, she was forced to put Jenny to work at The Pink Parrot.

That tale brought me face to face with the hidden side of Hong Kong's prosperity. My heart went out to the losers in the scramble. If I had had money I would have gladly given it to Jenny to free her from her degrading life. But I had none. All I could do was to buy her an occasional coloured drink and to commiserate. I also slipped her mother a few dollars once in a while and urged her to seek help at the methadone treatment centre.

After a few months, Jenny whispered one day: "Why do you keep wasting your money here? They are just cheating you."

"How else can I get to see you?" I replied.

"You could see me during the day, before I come to work."

"I have to work during the day, except for the weekends."

"We could meet then, if mother allows."

We thus began seeing each other away from The Pink Parrot. We did pedestrian things, like taking the Peak Tram to the top of Victoria Peak or walking in the New Territories. We sometimes took in a movie or stopped at Szeto's Bar for a

drink before Jenny reported for work. But for the most part we simply relished the opportunity to be together and to talk.

We soon realised we were falling in love. The notion of Jenny exposing her body to the gaze of strangers became increasingly intolerable. I wanted her to leave The Pink Parrot but, on my salary, there was no way I could support her and her mother. It was a problem which defied solution. As I wrestled with it, I drank excessively. As a consequence I got shut up on more than one occasion in Szeto's dark room.

March 28:

One evening, when I was on one of my binges, Szeto said: "Look, Benny, you've been keeping us up too often of late. It is not that I mind taking your money, but you're too big for me to haul into the back room by myself. So my staff have to stay around and that is costing me in overtime. I don't normally stick my nose into other people's business but I regard you as a friend. Is something the matter?"

Szeto had taken to calling me Benny as well because, like Tom Carpenter, he thought Percival too pompous. I told him I was depressed by Jenny's predicament.

"You can't save the world," Szeto said.

"I'm not trying to save the world. I only want to save Jenny. She hates her life. She's decent and hardly grown up. I can't bear to see her being degraded. I don't want her to end up like her mother," I said.

"Girls sometimes have to grow up very quickly around here and you can't help her by getting drunk every other night."

"I know. It's just that I feel so utterly helpless."

"I suppose you're in love with her?"

"Yes."

"Loving any girl from this neighbourhood is a high risk venture. They don't normally trade in anything as ethereal as love."

"Jenny's no whore, Szeto. You've seen her. You can judge for yourself. It's a crying shame she has to be trapped like this."

"That's *laissez faire* capitalism for you, Benny. Blame it on the government you serve."

"I would marry her if I thought that a solution!"

"Steady, my boy. Don't let the alcohol do your thinking. The government may not send you home in disgrace, like some of the British hongks do when their young executives step out of line. But marrying Jenny can't do your

career any good. A wife has to participate in official duties. Gossips are bound to put it around that she once earned her living by displaying her tits. How can you function properly with that kind of talk around?

"I'm not trying to tell you how to live your life, Benny. All I'm saying is that you should consider all possibilities. You're not ready to kiss your career goodbye, are you? Why don't you go home and sleep on what I've said. I'll put on my thinking cap and see what I can come up with."

A week later Szeto made a proposal.

"I've got a friend who runs a garment factory," Szeto said. "He is willing to take Jenny on as an apprentice. The starting pay's abysmal, about a quarter of what she's earning now. I've another friend who has gone off to Saudi Arabia on a contract with still about fifteen months to run. He's got a small empty tenement apartment, just down the road. Jenny and her mother can stay there rent-free till his return.

"But Jenny's income won't be sufficient to support two persons, let alone one with a heroin habit. How to bridge the gap is something you'll have to work out. The whole thing may not work even then. The women may not be willing to take the plunge. Drug addicts are not the most reliable of people. But if they're prepared to have a try, you'll have at least a year to find out if you love her enough to want to face the world with her."

I calculated the amount I could spare as a subsidy and made a proposal which included a commitment by Jenny's mother to seek treatment for her habit. I had no difficulty gaining Jenny's acceptance. Her mother was more difficult. She wanted to know whether I intended to marry Jenny. I told her it was too early for promises. In the end she accepted but, like any scheming mother, saw to it that Jenny and I had ample opportunity to be alone together. That resulted in our becoming lovers.

Jenny's love-making was superlative. It transcended the purely physical. She was then the first woman with Eastern blood I had made love to. The silky smoothness of her skin and the musk of her person sent my blood racing. When we coupled, the exquisiteness of our surrenders was almost painful. I became so convinced we were destined for each other that I entered her name in government records as my next-of-kin.

In spite of the primitive facilities in the borrowed apartment, the months that followed were like paradise. We had nothing to give each other except love and we did that unstintingly. Jenny grew even lovelier under the magic of its influence. As she gained in self-respect, she lost some of her shyness. Some of her sadness went too. When we visited Szeto's Bar, which was only a stone's throw away from our love-nest, she drew admiring glances all round.

Szeto took to Jenny as if she were a younger sister, encouraging her to study and suggesting self-improvement books for her to read. He sometimes acted as an interpreter when Jenny's English was insufficient to take in the nuance of what I was attempting to convey.

Jenny and I often talked about marriage. I wanted to take her back to England for a fresh start, in spite of the rising unemployment there. That would, unfortunately, involve leaving her mother behind. But Jenny could not grasp the issues. She thought my being an official in Hong Kong meant I could return to England and be an official there. She also never understood why her mother could not go with us. She had crazy notions of reuniting her mother with the elusive Major Mackenzie.

To her, the blessing of the gods was all that mattered. So long as they smiled upon us, everything would turn out for the best. To that end she went to the Wong Tai Sin Temple to have her fortune told. She came back devastated. Nothing I could say or do could convince her otherwise.

At about that time, two other developments conspired to bring matters to a head. First, Szeto told us that his friend would soon be returning from Saudi Arabia and needed the flat. Secondly, I was sent for by the then Chief Secretary and informed that I was soon to be appointed Director of Social Welfare.

My mind was in a whirl. The appointment was a significant step up the bureaucratic ladder, with greater prizes still to come. The Director of Social Welfare was required by law to be a protector of women and young persons in moral danger. That would afford me a chance to do something for girls like Jenny. But anyone occupying that office could hardly slink in and out of the red light district at night, frequenting bars and conducting an affair with a former topless waitress. Much less could he marry one whom he had a duty to protect.

The alternatives were stark. I had to give up something -- either my career or Jenny. The two could not be reconciled. She was dead set against marriage because of what the fortune teller had told her. She was fearful of her bad luck rubbing off on me. Neither was she prepared to leave Hong Kong without her mother. She simply wanted things to continue as before, although I tried to explain that was not an option. Every time the subject was broached it ended in floods of tears.

In the end, as my tenure at the Agriculture and Fisheries Department drew of a close, I told Jenny I was going to join the department's research vessel on an expedition to the South China Sea. I told her I wanted her to think matters over during my absence and to discuss them with her mother. Upon my return, in approximately two weeks, a decision would have to be made, one way or the other. Things could not continue as they had been.

But by the time I got back, Jenny and her mother had disappeared. Jenny left me a message with Szeto. She indicated that since we could not continue as before, her mother had insisted she should either return to the Pink Parrot or marry someone else. Her mother had found through a matchmaker an Australian Chinese looking for a bride. So, in preference to returning to The Pink Parrot, she had agreed to marry the Australian man.

Although I had myself advanced the choice of either giving up my career or giving up Jenny, when it came to the crunch I realised it was a false choice. It was impossible for me to live without Jenny. I tried desperately to find her, at The Pink Parrot and elsewhere, but failed. Even Szeto, with his well-connected sources, found no trace of mother or daughter.

The days that followed were dark beyond believe. I could not reconcile myself to the loss. I resorted to the bottle, in spite of knowing there was no real escape that way. If it had not been for Szeto knocking some sense into me, I would have ended up an alcoholic.

March 29:

Szeto turned up bright and early today, soon after the consultants had completed their rounds.

"Hello, Benny," he said, as he entered the room. He looked little changed, except for a slight thinning of his hair. He still exuded an air of alertness and controlled energy.

"I'm sorry I was dead to the world when you last called. You should have woken me," I said, taking his hand.

"You looked so peaceful it seemed a shame."

"What brings you here, after so many years? I thought you had abandoned me."

"Szeto never abandons friends."

"Then how come you never accepted my invitations to Victoria House?"

"Friendship is sometimes best preserved by knowing one's place. I didn't want to embarrass you. What have I got in common with the merchant bankers and the captains of industry who grace your table?"

"Nothing. That's why you make such exceptional company."

"As for why I have come, I read in the newspapers you had entered Queen Mary for a check-up. When nothing appeared afterwards about your resuming work, I surmised something must be wrong. I rang your Mrs. Merriweather but got only polite evasions. So I thought I had better get at the truth."

"I'm dying, Szeto. Cancer."

Szeto nodded sympathetically. "Yes, you've lost weight. But we're all dying, Benny, only at different rates and from different causes."

"Thanks for the cheery consolation! How has life treated you?"

"Not too unkindly. The bar is doing steady business and I'm scrapping a living. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes. If you ever see Jenny again, tell her I love her and tell her I'm sorry."

"Why don't you tell her yourself?"

"Jenny?"

"Yes, she's here. She contacted me recently when she saw the newspaper reports about your entering hospital. She wanted to know if she could come and visit."

"When did she get back? I thought she married and went to Australia."

"No, I'm afraid she never married. Neither did she go to Australia."

"What in God's name has she been doing then?"

"I'm sorry, Benny. It seems I'm always the one to bring you distressing news. Jenny ended up like her mother, in Temple Street."

"My God! Oh, my God!" I broke down and Szeto allowed me time to regain a grip on myself.

"I'm really sorry, Benny," Szeto said, tightly squeezing my arm.

"Have you known this all along?"

"Not at first. I learnt of it much later, after you had been installed as Director of Social Welfare."

"Why didn't you tell me, for heaven's sake?"

"What good would that have done? I'm not in the business of interfering with other people's lives. I get plenty of hard luck stories every day. You could have found Jenny if you had looked hard enough. You were the Director of Social Welfare. You were supposed to know what goes on in Temple Street. Besides, if Jenny wanted to see you she could have contacted you. You were not invisible. Your face was appearing regularly in newspapers and on television.

"I tried to help her and her mother after I discovered the truth. Believe me, Benny, I really tried. But one cannot deal sensibly with a heroin addict. Neither can one help people who have already given up hope. After a while, I had to give up also."

"How did it all come about?"

"I don't know the details. The mother died and Jenny went to pieces. You had better hear it from her direct."

"Please have her come, as soon as she can. I haven't got much time."

March 30:

In spite of pain and nausea, I have been as skittish as a kitten all morning, waiting for Jenny to turn up. I must look a sight with my sunken cheeks, feverish eyes and sagging skin. I got Suzy to shave me and to make me as presentable as possible.

"Oh, Benny!" Jenny cried when she saw me. She broke into tears and fell upon my breast, heaving great sobs.

"Don't cry, darling, or you'll have me doing the same," I said.

Time had taken an unfair toll on her. Although she was still in her early thirties, her formerly lithe figure had grown prematurely stout. Her whole body seemed to sag with shame and self-disgust. Dark rings of weariness added to the natural sadness in her eyes while signs of exhaustion were etched all over her face.

My heart felt like breaking. "What has happened to you, Jenny?" I said, fighting back my tears while clasping a coarsened body which bore no resemblance to the one I had previously held. "Why did you run away? Why didn't you wait for my return? Why didn't you come to me when you needed help?"

"It's hard to explain, Benny. Life's complicated. How can a person struggle against Fate? Heaven had already settled my destiny. After you left, Mother told me I had either to marry or return to The Pink Parrot. There was no other way. I couldn't marry you and taint you with my ill fortune. You've been so good to me. You made me feel like a real lady.

"But you had set your mind against carrying on as before. That left me no choice. I didn't want to go back to The Pink Parrot. So when a matchmaker approached Mother about an Australian Chinese wanting a bride, I agreed. Later, when I thought more about it, I could not go through with it. So I tried to kill myself by drinking lysol.

"Unfortunately, Mother found me in the nick of time. By the time I had recovered, we had a mountain of debt and the interest on it was mounting faster than we could pay. I was in such a state The Pink Parrot did not even want me back. I was given over to the moneylender as collateral. Then Mother died. Oh, I don't want to talk about it any more!"

Jenny wailed so loudly that Suzy and other attendants rush in to see what was the matter. I waved them away and said: "Darling, never mind about the past. It's all over. Everything is going to be all right. We're going to get married. You need not fear bringing me bad luck now. I'm beyond that."

"I cannot do that, Benny. You are an important man, respected by everybody. I'm a low woman. So was my Mother. I cannot bring you such shame."

"Listen to me, Jenny, please! It is I who should feel shame for not standing by you. Let me do this one small thing to make up for it. Forget about what people may say. You have endured life's misfortunes with fortitude. So has your mother. There is no shame in that. Once you become my wife, you will be provided with a generous pension for life, plus a substantial lump sum, when I die. You'll be rid of Temple Street forever. If I have no wife, no one will benefit. The money will just be kept by the government."

Jenny looked at me incredulously for a moment. "You're not going to die, Benny! You can't leave me again! You're going to get well."

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, darling," I said. "The most I have is a few days. Please let me do this for you. There's no time to lose."

"I have a daughter. She's six years old."

"You have a man, then?"

"No, just the moneylender who held me as collateral. It's finished now. He used to beat me for not bringing back enough money. When he started beating the child, we ran away."

"Let me adopt the child, to make sure she's provided for also. If you do not want to marry me for yourself, do it for the child. Make sure she never has to be in want."

Jenny at last tearfully nodded her agreement.

March 31:

I'm getting married tomorrow, on April Fool's Day! That seems entirely appropriate. Life's dusty road may lead only to empty fame, but along the way one can occasionally find an opportunity to do some good. I am thankful for the chance to do something for Jenny and her daughter. Such an act will not rate a mention in the bloodless paragraphs destined for the obituaries page of *The Times*. But who cares? I feel better for what I'm about to do than most other things I have done, so much so that even my pain seems to have taken a vacation.

I have summoned up the last vestiges of my authority to arrange for the wedding. Mrs. Merriweather has persuaded the Registrar of Marriages to exercise his discretion to dispense with the usual statutory period of notice for marriages and to conduct the ceremony himself at my bedside. Mrs. M. has also arranged for the Social Welfare Department to draw up, post haste, adoption papers for Jenny's daughter.

It should be quite an affair. Szeto will be my best man and Mrs. M. will make a very unconventional matron of honour. Suzy and Jenny's daughter will serve as bridesmaids.

A deathbed wedding, between a Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire and a harlot of the lowest rank! Somebody ought to be able to dine out on such a tale for months. I can well imagine the insipid features of Rawlins facing the Governor, mincingly reporting the forthcoming marriage of his Chief Secretary to a Temple Street whore, one moreover who had been officially recorded as his cousin. There will be merry hell to pay.

My funeral ought to be hilarious. How I wish I could witness it! The Director of Protocol will be assailed by excruciating indecisions. Should the funeral service still be held in St. John's Cathedral? Should the Bishop still officiate? Should the Governor offer his condolences in person or sit with the widow during the service? If so, how can the media be prevented from taking embarrassing photographs? Will any of the designated pallbearers pull out?

The local notables will also be in a quandary, caught between their curiosity over a once-in-a-lifetime event and their desire not to be tainted by consorting with the new Lady Benson. Society wives, overbearing and over-rouged, will no doubt want to see the fun but appalled by the prospect of having to shake publicly the hand of a Temple Street tart!

Too bad I shall miss all of that. I suppose imagining the havoc and the punctured pride is about as close as I can get to enjoying the last laugh.

A Dusty Road has appeared in **Short Story International** in the United States.