

## Red, Amber, Green

"Your mother's . . . !" the young man sitting next to Old Mak cursed.

Old Mak did not pay any attention. His face, lined and weather-beaten like the bark of old oak, remained lifted towards the small barred window set high up in the wall of the underground cell, while his timid brown eyes, drooping at the corners, continued to stare at the grey November skies outside. His whole being was absorbed in the marvel going on, in the subtle changes in colour accompanying the slow unravelling of the dawn.

The sight brought back with nostalgic vividness the days of his childhood and early youth in a village in Kwangtung Province. It brought back the Pearl River, flowing sluggishly and silently by, the lonely monastery on a distant hillock, the friendly noises of farm animals, the comforting warmth of fresh congee and the pervading fragrance of the country air. It also brought back the fields, friendly and eternal, the source of all life.

"Your mother's . . . !" the young man cursed again. A distracted mop of black hair reached over his forehead and clawed at his bright, aggressive eyes, whilst some unruly strands sprung up at the back of his head like the sickle feathers of an agitated young cock. "It's just my luck to get arrested the very day I stock up. Now my oranges and pears are going to be confiscated again. Your mother's . . . !"

The other occupants of the police cell, some fifteen or sixteen in number, began to stir, awakened by the cursing of the young man. One or two of them stood up and stretched themselves. The cell was small. Its air, already stale with human odours, was made worse by the smell from a wooden toilet bucket standing in a wet patch in one corner. The inmates tried to steer clear of it while sitting and dozing on the cement floor, with their backs against the walls or against the steel bars which made up one side of the cell. Consequently, a chaos of limbs covered the centre of the floor. Old Mak's were gnarled and covered with

varicose veins.

It has been a long, long time since he had witnessed the breaking of the dawn, Old Mak thought, as he watched the sky turning a light translucent blue. The cubicle in the lodging-house, where he had occupied one layer of a three-tiered bunk for years, was windowless. Day and night were undistinguishable, except through the comings and goings of the other occupants of the cubicle, to take up their shifts as coolies, street sweepers, night watchmen or whatever. In a police cell there was at least sunlight.

"They squeeze you till there's no way out, those lackeys of foreign devils," the young man said, with a note of righteous complaint in his voice. "If you cannot afford to line their pockets, you cannot get a licence. If you sell without a licence, you're breaking the law. Then they put you in gaol and confiscate your goods. How is a man to live?"

Old Mak turned towards the young man. He noticed that he had long ears, with large fleshy lobes, just like his own. To the Chinese, long ears were supposed to mean longevity, and he wondered if the young man ever found any pleasure in the thought. He himself had once. But that was forty years ago, when he first came to Hong Kong, when he was filled with hope of crossing the seas to the Golden Mountain to earn enough money to buy back the family land. Now, worn out, kinless and without hope, a long life seemed a cruel and unnecessary burden.

Old Mak sighed, shut his eyes and rested his head against the wall. His close cropped hair, cut almost like that of a bonze, contained a liberal scattering of grey. Although he had spent so many years in the city, he had not yet learned to mask his feelings. His simple peasant face displayed bewilderment for all the world to see. His sad drooping eyes, his broad flat nose and his apologetic mouth all confessed his helplessness and despair.

He reflected upon the woes that had befallen him one after another and the circumstances that had brought him to Hong Kong. It seemed his whole

life had been one long chronicle of woes. They began in the year of the great drought, when his two sisters had to be sold to a fate he had never quite discovered. A couple of years later a typhoon had devastated the village and had killed many people, including his father. The funeral expenses, coupled with the loss of the crops, had forced the sale of the small family plot. Thereafter he and his mother had had to work as casual farm hands. When he was eighteen his mother also died and nothing remained thereafter to bind him to the village.

It was around that time that he heard stories about the fortunes being made in the new land across the seas, through building railroads or panning for gold. He decided to head for Hong Kong to earn his passage to the Golden Mountain. But once in Hong Kong he found making a living hard for someone without connections or education. Since his only advantage was his peasant strength, he became a rickshaw puller.

For six years he pounded the hard city streets between the shafts of his red rickshaw, with his feet protected only by sandals cut out of old rubber tyres and held together with strips of cloth. But in spite of the exhausting work, the years had not been altogether unsatisfactory. There was little in the way of motorized transport in those days and the rules of the road were simple. The sudden spring and summer showers always generated plenty of business and when there was no business there was never want of other rickshaw pullers with whom to pass the time of day.

At the end of that period he had saved enough for his passage. One of his fellow lodgers offered to arrange a discount on his fare with an American shipping company. He handed over the money in hope; but he never saw that lodger again.

So it was back to pounding the streets, to dreams of opportunities in a distant land. As the days merged into years, life gradually became harder. More motor vehicles appeared and their mean horns berated anyone not getting smartly out of their way. The rules of the road also increased and became more strict. It

became more essential to carry passengers only along the left side of the street and to first extend his arm before making a turn. Although the number of rickshaws plying for hire progressively declined, so too did patronage. It simply became more and more difficult to put away those hard-earned coppers.

He became troubled by the thought he was not meant for life in the city. The city seemed to suck vitality out of him like a leech. The dead asphalt jarred his bones, sapped his energy and gave nothing in return. It was not like the good, brown earth back on the farm. There he had been in touch with the very substance of life itself, with the vital currents of the earth which replenished and rewarded him for his labours. He had been able to feel communion with something eternal in the soft ooze of mud between his toes and to find pride when the fields rippled with golden grain. In the city the only return he got was the dull clink-clink of copper coins.

More years drifted by before he managed to accumulate sufficient passage money again. But by then his longing to return to the land had become intense. The prospect of further years of exile in a foreign country was more than he could bear. So, during a moment of dark desperation, he took his entire savings to a gaming-house. He would leave his future in the hands of the gods. He would either win enough to buy back his land or reconcile himself to being trapped in the city for the rest of his days.

He lost. And from that moment hope began ebbing from him like blood seeping from a troublesome wound. The seasons came and went and he lugged his rickshaw with indifference, like some docile beast, without purpose and without dreams. He no longer kept track of the years, except that with each passing year the streets became more congested and traffic regulations multiplied. Licences had to be renewed by a certain date, rickshaws had to be inspected annually for road worthiness, right of way had to be granted to pedestrians at zebra crossings, and so on.

He submitted to such impositions with resignation. Nothing seemed

to bother him any more, not the pointlessness of his life nor even the rumblings of a spreading war.

When the war did come and the Japanese occupied the city, life became harder still. Not only did the enemy soldiers take rides without paying but, as often as not, they handed out beatings for good measure. As the occupation wore on, food became scarce. He felt half-starved most of the time and it was then that he developed a cough and a pain in his chest. By the time the city was liberated, he had become a pale shadow of his former self.

His appearance no longer inspired confidence and his stamina deserted him. If he were lucky enough to win a fare, he would find difficulty maintaining a steady trot. Every breath he drew seemed to light a fire in his chest and every exertion triggered a spasm of coughing.

Nothing prepared him, however, for the even crueller world that awaited him after the war. The whole tempo of life suddenly quickened and speed became of the essence. Motor vehicles crowded the streets and pushed into obsolescence the more sedate forms of transportation. More traffic regulations were proclaimed. Streets became designated only for one-way traffic and he had to learn new routings to get to old destinations. Familiar places where rickshaw pullers used to congregate for fares suddenly became no parking zones and no stopping zones. The drivers of motor vehicles showed little tolerance when he got in their way.

Worst of all, traffic lights began appearing at street corners like ugly mechanical monsters, with eyes forever blinking red, amber and green. He had to learn to stop or run on the command of those lights. If he were tardy in obeying, horns would scream at him or else he would receive a tongue-lashing from some uniformed guardian of the law.

He became bewildered by all the new tensions and restrictions and watched helplessly as fellow rickshaw pullers abandoned the trade one by one. He could not afford that luxury, however, because he knew of no other way of

making a living. During moments of despair he often wished he could simply go to sleep and never wake up. But the gods obviously had a worse fate in store for him, for here he was -- locked up in a police dungeon! Perhaps he was destined to die in the company of common criminals. His heart chilled at the thought.

A fresh torrent of abuse from the young man shook Old Mak out of his reverie. All the inmates of the cell were now awake but none paid any attention to the young man's recital of his grievances. Each seemed to have troubles enough of his own.

Old Mak felt sorry for the young man. So, as a gesture of sympathy, he asked: "Will you have the capital to start again?"

"That can be found," the young man said, "but the whole vicious cycle will just repeat itself. We hawkers try to help one another by organising ourselves. That is the only way we stand a chance. A man can no longer live alone in this world. Every time they raid us, a few stay behind. We block the way while others escape with their carts and goods. They can arrest us and confiscate our goods, but those who got away will help us pay the fines and make another start. That is the only way to survive." The young man's voice lost some of its anger as he spoke.

A sudden spasm of coughing seized Old Mak. When it had subsided, he said: "That is good. At least you can start over again."

"And you, old uncle, what are you in for?"

"I am not sure. For smoking, I think."

"You mean smoking opium?"

Old Mak nodded.

"Oh! How can you allow yourself to fall into such a trap? They are cunning, these foreigners. Before the war, they encouraged everybody to smoke. They sold opium at government depots. Then, when people have caught the habit, they changed the law and imposed fines for smoking. It is just their way of squeezing money from you. One day all this will change. We will throw them

out. Anyway, you should not smoke opium, uncle. It's not good for you."

Old Mak caught the subtle note of reproof in the young man's voice and he felt ashamed. He wanted to explain that he was not just an old idler living on pipe dreams. He wanted to tell him about the forty years of pounding the streets, about his unbearable longing for his land, his endless struggles and his desire merely to ease the pain in his chest. But he knew that explanations would be pointless, just as his whole life had become pointless. So he accepted the reproof and remained silent.

Just then the early morning sun suddenly emerged from behind some clouds and shot a ray of sunshine through the small barred window. It stamped a golden oblong upon the wall above Old Mak. The sight of the sunlight stirred Old Mak in a way that he could not explain. He rose unsteadily to his feet, a pathetic figure in a grey cotton jacket which had grown too large for his shrunken body and a pair of baggy black shorts which exposed his grotesque legs. He stood so that the sunlight fell upon his weather-beaten face and his bony frame. As he soaked in the warmth he felt comforted for the first time since his arrest.

Presently, some wardens came, read out the names of selected inmates and took them from the cell. When Old Mak's turn came, the young man called out: "Don't be afraid of them, uncle. Don't let them bully you."

"Thank you for your concern," Old Mak replied, as he was being led away.

After Old Mak had been taken from the cell, he was made to join a small group of detainees from other cells. They were marched along a long corridor until they arrived at the bottom of a narrow flight of stairs. There, attended by a number of wardens, they waited.

Every now and then one or more people would come down from the stairs and be led away by wardens. Then an equal number of detainees would be selected from the group and sent up the stairs. Old Mak observed the proceedings with a degree of nervousness and that made him cough more than usual. He could

sense that the warders and the detainees were conducting themselves in accordance with rules he was totally ignorant about. He wondered whether the rules might be as uncompromising as the lights which went red, amber and green.

When Old Mak's turn came, he proceeded up the stairs with trepidation. At the top of the stairs he found a surly warder standing in an enclosure filled with people, huddling like animals in an overcrowded sty. All around him rose the hum of voices, some speaking loudly and others in whispers.

"Squat down!" the warder ordered, and Old Mak struggled to find a space in the congested enclosure. Eventually a sickly-looking man with a bandaged left hand moved over to find space for him.

The enclosure was in fact the dock located in the centre of a large courtroom of archaic design. It was a small square affair, with a forty-inch high wall made of sturdy hardwood panels affixed to stout posts at each corner of the square. The panels were topped by sets of polished brass grilles with perpendicular bars set six inches apart. The curtain of brass bars added another ten inches to the height of the enclosure, making a happy compromise between appearance and security of inmates.

Immediately in front of the dock was a long mahogany table for the use of prosecutors and defending counsel. Beyond the table, on a dais, an imposing magistrate's bench stood beneath a wooden canopy fashioned as a large replica of some sort of crown. To the left of the bench was the witness box whilst to the right a similar structure provided accommodation for the court interpreter. Behind the dock was the public gallery crammed with a mixture of human fare.

By raising himself slightly from his squatting position Old Mak could survey the court from behind the gleaming bars. The strange environment, with its peculiar sights and sounds, left him agape with awe. The blue-eyed foreigner with fair hair sitting beneath the wooden crown reassured him a little, for he appeared to have a kindly face. He looked just like one of those young tourists who would ask to have his picture taken sitting in his rickshaw and then reward

him exorbitantly for the privilege.

But the other solitary foreigner sitting at the long table with his back towards him intimidated Old Mak by his sheer bulk. He had a very broad back and was dressed in a police inspector's uniform. His neck was short and thick like a bull's and his hair was red. When he stood up to address the young man on the bench he towered over everything like a giant and he spoke with a deep booming voice. From these observations Old Mak imagined that his face must be something fearsome to behold.

"Squat down!" the warder snapped, and Old Mak almost jumped with fright. He sat down on the floor with a thud and broke out in a spasm of coughing. That only earned him another stern look from the warder.

"There are rules here, old uncle," the man with the bandaged hand whispered. "You have to squat down until your case comes up. There's no change in getting people upset with you."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know," Old Mak whispered in return.

Old Mak settled down to follow the proceedings as best he could. He noted that names would be called out from time to time and then someone would stand up from within the dock or else come forward from the public gallery to present himself or herself. Thereafter the court interpreter would read out the charge, the defendant involved would plead guilty, an exchange of conversation in a foreign language would take place between the inspector with the booming voice and the young foreigner on the bench, and finally the interpreter would convey the court's decision of a fine or a term of imprisonment.

What baffled Old Mak as he listened to the proceedings was the variety of offences that people could be charged with. He had never heard of most of them. Nor could he figure out why some of the activities should be considered crimes at all. For example, people were pleading guilty to loitering. Yet he himself had often loitered, especially among the food stalls when he could not decide on the kind of meal he wanted. Had he, unwittingly, been committing

a crime as well?

Again, there appeared to be a crime known as larceny by finding and another of possessing an instrument fit for an unlawful purpose. How could finding something be a crime? And surely, any instrument could be used for an unlawful purpose if its owner were so minded. He thought of the spanner and the screwdriver which he kept under the seat of his rickshaw for emergency repairs. Would they constitute instruments fit for an unlawful purpose? If so, could he be held responsible for two more crimes? It all seemed beyond him. Most puzzling of all was the fact that all defendants appeared to admit their guilt and accepted their punishments without ado. They must be know something he did not. They must be bound by a set of rules which operated like the lights which went red, amber and green.

Finally, Old Mak's case came up. "Case number one-six-seven-one-three," the interpreter intoned in a bored voice. "The Crown versus Mak Wai. Who is Mak Wai? Mak Wai, come forward."

Old Mak stood up uncertainly. He rested his arms on top of the brass grille for support.

"Stand up straight!" the warder snapped. "Put your hands to your side!"

Old Mak complied and looked from the magistrate to the interpreter. The interpreter was a thin, bird-like man with a partially bald head and a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles perched low over his small, pointed nose.

"Are you Mak Wai?" the interpreter asked, shooting Old Mak the barest of glances over the top of his spectacles.

Old Mak nodded.

"You are 59 years of age, a native of Kwangtung Province and a rickshaw puller by profession?" the interpreter continued.

Old Mak nodded again.

"It is charged that you, Mak Wai, on the twenty- eighth day of

November, 1952, in an unnumbered hut on a hillside at West Point, in the Crown Colony of Hong Kong, did have in your possession an opium pipe fit for smoking, such possession being contrary to Section 8, Subsection 4 of Ordinance No.127 of 1946. Do you plead guilty or not guilty?"

Old Mak struggled to grasp the meaning behind the charge. He perceived dimly that he was being accused of possessing an opium pipe instead of smoking opium. Perhaps under the rules of the strange world in which he now found himself, the two amounted to the same thing, for it stood to reason that a man could not smoke opium without an opium pipe. However others might put it, to him the truth was the truth, and he wanted to tell the truth to the young foreigner sitting in judgement over him.

"I went there for a smoke," he began. "It was late in the afternoon and my chest was hurting something terrible. I know . . . ."

The interpreter cut him short by a wave of his bony hand. The movement was as listless as his voice, but it had the effect of reducing Old Mak to silence.

"Do you plead guilty or not guilty?"

"I want to explain. I only wanted a smoke . . . ."

Again the interpreter motioned him to silence. Then, turning to the magistrate, he said: "Your Worship, the defendant is trying to make a statement."

"Explain to the defendant that he will be given a chance to speak in his own defence later. Right now we are only interested in his plea," the magistrate said.

"You can tell your story later. For now, just plead guilty or not guilty," the interpreter said.

"I want to tell the truth. I only went there for a smoke."

"The defendant persists in making a statement, Your Worship. He said he went there for a smoke."

"All right," the magistrate said, evenly. "I'll take that as a denial of

guilt. Inspector, please call evidence."

A police sergeant was called to the witness box and he testified that, acting on information, he led a raiding party to an unnumbered hut on the hillside at West Point. On entering the premises, he found the defendant sitting on a bed clasping an opium pipe to his chest with both hands. There was a strong smell of opium in the air which suggested that opium smoking had recently taken place. No other person except the defendant was found. The defendant appeared somewhat dazed and, when asked if the opium pipe belonged to him, he replied in the affirmative. A total of three opium pipes, three opium lamps, still warm, and a quantity of opium dross had been seized.

The sergeant then identified the opium pipe found in the possession of the defendant from among the court exhibits.

"The defendant may now cross-examine the witness," the magistrate said.

"Do you have any question to put to the witness?" the interpreter said.

"I only went there for a smoke. I rented a pipe from the owner of the hut and he told me I would be held responsible for it," Old Mak said, still anxious to relate everything that had happened.

"The defendant said he went there for a smoke and hired the pipe from the owner of the hut," the interpreter said.

"Tell the defendant that he must cross-examine the witness only on material points in his testimony. The witness cannot give evidence on what transpired before the witness arrived on the scene. The defendant can tell his side of the story later and call evidence in his own defence if he wishes," the magistrate said.

"You can tell you story later. Do not waste time now. Just ask the witness questions on what he has said. He does not know what happened before his arrival," the interpreter said.

Old Mak broke out in another spasm of coughing. The whole

proceeding was incomprehensible to him. He could not understand why no one wanted to hear the truth. If no one heard the truth, how could justice be done? He merely wanted to tell them about the terrible pain in his chest which led him to seek a smoke. He wanted to explain that when the alarm was raised by the look-out, the owner of the hut and the other smokers ran away. But he did not know what to do. He had rented the pipe and had been made responsible for it. If he ran away with it, the owner might accuse him of theft. If he abandoned it, the owner would hold him responsible for its loss. What the sergeant said was true but it was not the whole truth. He thought that the young foreigner with the kindly face would give him a fair hearing but it seemed that he too was not interested in his explanations. Had he violated some rule or other by trying to explain? Had he condemned himself already by failing to plead guilty like all the others?

"Do you have any question to put to the witness?" the interpreter repeated wearily.

Old Mak shook his head, convinced of the futility of attempting to explain further.

"That is the case for the prosecution, Your Worship," the inspector said.

The magistrate told the police sergeant to step down from the witness box and then addressed the interpreter: "Tell the defendant that he may now speak in his own defence. Explain to him that he may give evidence under oath in the witness box or he may make a statement from the dock. If he testifies under oath, his words will carry more weight with the court, but he will also have to submit to cross-examination by the prosecution. If he elects to make a statement from the dock, his words will carry less weight, but he will not be subjected to cross-examination. Of course, he may also remain silent."

"You can speak now," the interpreter said. "You can speak from where you are or you can speak from the witness box. If you speak from the

witness box, the inspector can ask you questions. If you speak from where you are, no one will ask you questions. If you speak from the witness box, your words will be more believable. If you speak from where you are, your words will be less believable. You can also say nothing, if you like. What do you wish to do?"

The instructions from the interpreter filled Old Mak with confusion and panic. Speak now, speak later! Speak from here, speak from there! Speaking from one place more believable, speaking from another place less believable! The rigmarole made no sense. The truth was the truth. How could it be more believable when uttered from one place as opposed to another? All the restrictions he had endured in the city over the years had been irksome enough but the demands of the court seemed far more terrible.

Life might be hard on the land but at least a man was free to live according to his own rhythm. If he walked about his village at night to admire the brilliance of the moon or to enjoy the song of the cicadas, he would not be accused of committing a crime. Why should the city be different? In so thinking he suddenly realised how much his life had been diminished by the city. It had taken away his hopes and his dreams, his health and his strength. It had made him submitted to rules he could not understand and forced him to follow the dictates of lights which changed from one colour to another. And now, it was requiring him to squat or stand or speak at the command of others. Something deep down inside him rebelled against such an imposition. He would not be reduced further, to the level of a circus animal performing to the cracks of a whip. No, enough of the oppression of the city! He would free himself from its clutch and return to the life-giving land, even if it were the last thing he ever did.

"Speak up," the interpreter said. "What have you decided?"

"I want to go home!" Old Mak cried. There was a desperate and heart-rending quality in his cry, like that of a lost child or a wounded beast. But mingled with the bewilderment and the hurt there was also a note of defiance.

The cry so startled those in the room that a great hush descended upon

the court. The inspector turned around in surprise and Old Mak saw that he had bulging eyes, flaring nostrils and a red, bristling moustache. He looked like one of those fierce images which guarded the wings of temples back home. But Old Mak was no longer afraid of anything.

"It is now your turn to speak. Do you not wish to tell your side of the story?" the interpreter asked, a note of incredulity livening his voice for the first time.

Old Mak shook his head. "I want to go home," he repeated.

"The defendant does not wish to make any statement, Your Worship," the interpreter said. "He states that he wishes to go home."

"If the defendant does not wish to enter a defence then, on the evidence as presented, I have to find him guilty as charged," the magistrate said. "Is there anything known about the defendant?"

"The defendant has no previous conviction, Your Worship," the inspector said. "But if I may make an observation, Your Worship. The defendant does not appear to be a well man. It may be a kindness for Your Worship to consider banishing him from the Colony since he appears anxious to go back to where he came from."

"Yes," the magistrate said. He scribbled his findings into the court records and then announced: "In consideration of his clean record, the defendant is sentenced to two months' simple imprisonment. At the end of that time he is to be banished from the Colony. The opium pipes and implements are confiscated for destruction."

"You go to gaol for two months and then you will be banished from Hong Kong." the interpreter said.

"Does that mean I can go home?"

"Yes, you'll be sent back to Kwangtung," the interpreter said.

"Thank you, thank you," Old Mak said.

As the warder ushered him down the stairs back to the cells below,

Old Mak felt as if he had regained something that had been lost to him. Two months, he thought, and he would be free of the city forever. By then it would be spring.

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**Red, Amber, Green** has appeared in **Short Story International** in the United States and has been anthologized in **City Voices: Contemporary Hong Kong Writing in English** published by the **Hong Kong University Press**.