

Down and Out in Hong Kong

The Japanese occupation was a harsh experience for Hong Kong's 1.6 million inhabitants. For three years and eight months, martial law gave the Japanese great latitude in dealing with civilians and in permitting atrocities to go unchecked. Summary executions were common. King's Park in Kowloon was turned into an execution ground. No precise record had been kept, however, of the numbers who had been beheaded, shot or bayoneted there. Of rapes of women and girls, an estimated figure of 10,000 had sometimes been cited. But Chinese victims, like my aunts in Singapore, often preferred to swallow their violations in silence. Those bound by an even less forgiving concept of womanly virtue frequently took their own lives.

The Japanese swiftly abolished the Hong Kong dollar and pegged its conversion to the Japanese Military yen at the rate of four dollars to one, igniting hyper-inflation and impoverishing the entire population. The Hong Kong currency thus garnered was used to finance the Japanese war effort elsewhere. By the end of the occupation, the Military yen was worthless.

A large number of jobs also disappeared with the occupation. Established banks were ordered to close, to be replaced by two Japanese ones. Ten pre-war newspapers were cut to five and stuffed with pro-Japanese propaganda. Imports needed by the retail and other trades were severely curtailed. Electricity supplies faltered for want of fuel. Curfews further restricted business and social life. A food rationing system was imposed, with dietary levels set below those needed for sustaining long-term survival. Prices for black market food soon rose beyond the means of most. At one stage, cases of cannibalism were reported. Starvation, malnutrition and disease spread.

Yet, at the same time, medical and health facilities previously available to the public were withdrawn. All the main hospitals were taken over for the use of Japanese military personnel. One of my granduncles, a doctor, was ordered to enlist in the Japanese army to look after Japanese soldiers instead of attending to local patients. That edict forced him and his family to flee to the

mainland. To add insult to a growing catalogue of injuries, the authorities started arresting the jobless and deporting them to China. Faced with such circumstances, all those who could flee made their way to the interior of China or to neutral Macau. Those who could not, suffered or died.

Through such policies the Japanese managed to reduce the population from the 1.6 million at the start of the war to about 600,000 at the end of it. They followed a grim logic, a desire not to waste energy and resources feeding an alien population. The fewer civilians around, the better.



Japanese troops on parade in Hong Kong during the occupation

— courtesy britishempire.co.uk

In spite of their harshness, the Japanese never managed to establish full control over the 400 square miles of territory. Resistance fighters continued to operate on Lantau Island and in the New Territories, especially along the border regions with Kwangtung Province.

After the war, the Japanese-appointed Governor of Hong Kong was found guilty of war crimes and executed. It was far from perfect justice, to the extent that victims had virtually no say in the arrangements. It became essentially a matter of punishment being erratically dished out by one lot of winning imperialists upon another lot of defeated ones.

Unlike Singapore, the harshness of the Japanese regime did not provoke quite the same demand in Hong Kong for an end to British colonial rule. Local sentiments were more ambiguous. While Manchuria and Taiwan were quickly regained from Japan and most Western concessions granted elsewhere in China under “unequal treaties” were brought to an end, a Chinese civil war was also in the making. That prospect tempered the local enthusiasm for national reunification and an end to British rule.

Foreign powers, noting that developing situation, were not slow in pursuit of their own interests by playing off different Chinese political groups against each other. Hong Kong and Macau thus became pawns in a more complex geopolitical game.

British intentions were made clear by Winston Churchill, the sitting Prime Minister, when he spoke in the House of Commons on March 17, 1943, about the future of the British Empire. He said: “The government is convinced that the administration of British colonies must continue to be the sole responsibility of Great Britain.” What was implicit in his statement was that at the end of World War II the victorious powers would retain their colonies whilst the defeated ones would have theirs dismantled. Those words also highlighted an unreformed imperialist hypocrisy, that while it might be proper for Europeans to fight for freedom from Nazi oppression, there was no question of allowing people of darker hues in India, Malaya and elsewhere to seek freedom from British rule.

The Portuguese, after a period of tenuous neutrality in the war, were prepared to give up Macau but the British pressured them not to do so, for fear

the surrender of that enclave would expose further the anomaly of Hong Kong. Convoluted horse-trading then occurred at various levels, from the diplomatic to the criminal.

Eventually, the new Chinese Communist government somehow agreed to sidestep its long-standing stance on “unequal treaties”. It announced with a straight face that problems left over by history would be solved when “the time was ripe”. This approach came as a mighty relief to both foreign investors and the local moneybags in Hong Kong and Macau.

Those two colonies, bucking the hectic decolonisation trend elsewhere in the world, remained under alien flags till almost the end of the twentieth century. They thrived under an unregulated form of laissez-faire capitalism which overlooked a number of traits peculiar to the Chinese people and their culture.

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I arrived in Hong Kong in the earlier part of 1947, unnerved by my experience in Canton and uncertain of what the future might hold. Compared with Canton, the colony appeared to have a more lively tempo. Its population numbers had been restored to almost pre-war levels and the pace of life seemed more brisk than in either wartime Perth or post-conflict Singapore. They gave every indication of a kind of zest and restlessness, as if they were in a perpetual hurry, to scrape a living or to turn a penny.

Years later, a flamboyant colonial bureaucrat, in a flash of inventive genius, coined the term “noonday pace” to describe the ubiquitous scurrying gait of the citizenry. The very vagueness and imprecision of the term generated its own appeal and it found its way into official literature. Before long, it was being waved around like a flag by all and sundry, to proclaim the verve and dynamism of the city.

I too moved with noonday swiftness to nail down the offer of hospitality from my Fifth Maternal Aunt. I presented myself at her pleasant apartment in a residential part of Kowloon City with my rattan suitcase. It was near the then Kai Tak Airport, far removed from the business hub strung out along the northern fringes of Hong Kong Island.

I had no real recollection of my Fifth Maternal Uncle before my visit, beyond the fact that he wore a dandyish moustache. My aunt, on the other hand, conformed to the image of her I had lodged in my memory -- a more cheerful and extroverted version of my mother. She was, however, even broader in the beam than my mother, through having brought into the world a brood of nine children -- seven boys and two girls.

Having a great number of relatives was considered one of the more treasured features of Chinese life in those days. But the necessity to remember a great many names, their appropriate titles, honorifics and proclivities could sometimes be tiresome, like having to be mindful of the rare circumstances under which a few perverse French nouns changed their gender.

My attachment to my Lam cousins naturally gravitated towards John more than the rest, for we had already developed good rapport during his brief visit to Singapore. John was the second son. He had a round guileless face and a most genial temperament. He was on the point of starting his training as an aircraft mechanic when I arrived but he nonetheless took time out to help me to gain my bearings.

At the beginning, I had difficulty adjusting to such a strange and mongrel place. Although I was a native-born son, I had no real feel for the colony. It seemed to bristle with peculiarities and contradictions. I could only regard what I saw with an outsider's eye.

Scattered around Kowloon were remnants of a less harried age. There was still a crumbling walled city of indeterminate status close to the home of my relatives. Some major thoroughfares, like Nathan Road, were still graced

by trees dispensing a measure of shade, beneath which two or three rickshaw pullers could often be seen, squatting beside their red and green conveyances, quietly smoking or chatting among themselves. The last of a dying breed. Whether they were waiting for custom or merely for extinction was anybody's guess.



Nathan Road in the 1920s, when trees decorated both sides of the street. Today there is only concrete, macadam and neon signs.

Photo courtesy of David Bellis and Gwulo.com.



A row of rickshaws waiting for customers in a Kowloon street.

Photo courtesy of Mike Cussons and gawulo.com

In the main business centre on Hong Kong Island, transplanted anomalies like those already written about by Noel Coward and Somerset Maugham abounded. The booming of the noonday gun; the haughty Victorian buildings; the streets bearing the names of forgotten colonialists; the red-painted pillar boxes reminiscent of an era when letter-writing was still practised as a minor art; the green trams swaying like dowagers along their pre-determined tracks; the sedate cross-harbour ferries offering -- like the trams -- First and Third Class travel. It could only be presumed the two classes were made available to cater for lingering class prejudices and differences in economic circumstances. Nobody seemed able to explain the illogicality of skipping a Second Class.

English ladies and gentlemen foregathered for afternoon tea in dated hotel lounges, imagining themselves at Claridges or Fortnum & Mason. Chinese imitators, in the form of bored housewives and the idle rich, aped those pseudo-pleasures, no doubt assuming that such rituals conferred some longed-for classiness or chic.

That quest for otherness extended to the possession of foreign things, ranging from motor cars and briar pipes to nylon stockings, uplifting bras and other intimate items of feminine apparel. Department stores with brightly-lit show windows attracted die-hard shoppers and loiterers alike. Elsewhere, advertisements importuned the imported delights of Craven “A” cigarettes and Lea & Perrins Worcester sauce. Ladies with “functional troubles”, whatever that might mean, could rely on a remedy known as Apioline Chapoteaut. That mysterious product, coming straight from Paris, was said to be available at any good chemist.

Westwards from the city centre, the throb and ferment of more traditionally Chinese life re-asserted itself. Steady streams of shoppers thronged unfashionable establishments displaying every conceivable staple. Nostril-tickling aromas wafted in the air while the dissonances of Eastern colours challenged the eye: incense and lanterns, herbs and spices, sesame cakes and steaming noodles, sun dried shrimps and duck liver sausages, slippers and clogs, camphor balls and balms scented with the musk of deer, sandalwood fans, embroidered bridal gowns, salted fish, black moss, gold ornaments, dried scallops, face powders, bamboo baskets, desiccated sea-horses.

In the midst of such copious offerings, suddenly a sleepy stationer’s shop, selling writing brushes, sticks of ink and traditional vermilion seal pads in lacquer containers could be spotted. It was as if it stood in defiance against the onslaught of the fountain pen and the rubber stamp.

On the waterfront, a short distance from the shops, the odours of human toil would become more evident. Coolies, with glistening half-naked

bodies, loaded and unloaded cargoes between godowns and junks with bat-winged sails: sacks of rice and beans, bales of cotton, great wicker containers bulging with freshly harvested vegetables. Some bore their loads precariously upon their shoulders while others used the standard bamboo carrying pole. At times the loads seemed too much for any human being to bear and yet they were borne. In doing so, the toilers emitted deep, rhythmic chants that sounded like cries for deliverance dredged up from the innermost recesses of their souls.

The various sights, sounds, smells and moods swept over me like an intoxication. My attempts to form a coherent impression of the place remained jumbled and elusive. It was only when I visited the New Territories a couple of days later that yet more aspects of the complex colony unfolded themselves.

The New Territories, which took up by far the largest part of Hong Kong, had been wrested from China in 1898, on a 99-year lease, after a further contretemps with Britain. I had caught glimpses of rural areas during my train journeys to and from Canton but their evocations of country life did not make themselves felt until I was actually there on the ground.



A farming family at Lok Ma Chau.

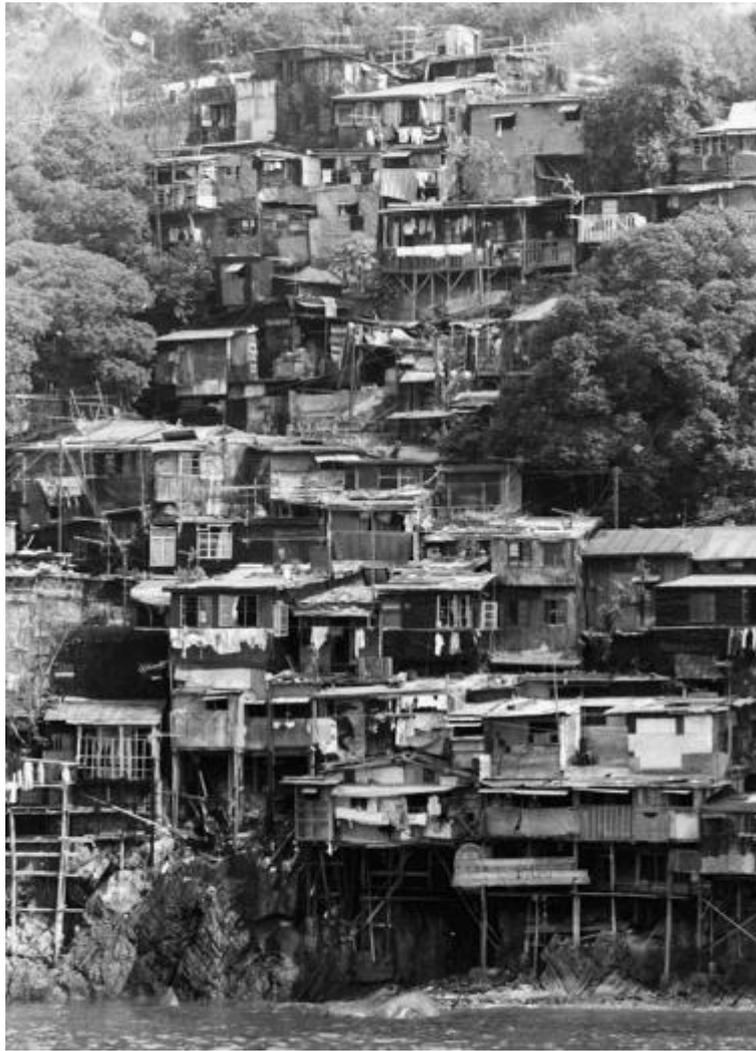
Photo courtesy of Mike Cussons and gwulo.com.

They came in small ways -- a boy riding a water buffalo in wondrous unity, like an image captured in slow-motion; a peasant woman sheltering beneath a Hakka hat, ageless and timeless; rays of sunlight quavering through a bamboo grove; or a village hugged by sodden fields, forming a patchwork almost as old as eternity.

There were other intimations too, of elements of nature yet unsubdued by man -- the twitter of sparrows, the chirping of unseen crickets, the erratic flight of dragonflies, the lazy glide of a fork-tailed kite searching for prey, a fitful summer breeze carrying a faint scent of Mother Earth. Each unremarkable in itself, yet touching something intimate and surreal. They excited me sufficiently to think of Hsin Hui, the forsaken home of my ancestors, a place conjured up only in my imagination. Would Hsin Hui, with its fabled oranges, harbour similar mysteries?

“Yes, it could be exactly like that,” the spirit of some unknown ancestor seemed to whisper to me. The die was cast. I had no choice but to throw myself into the perplexities of the colony, in spite of a threatened spillover of the civil war from China. The steady tide of refugees arriving gave substance to that fear. They sheltered themselves helter-skelter, in hovels and huts clinging precariously to the sides of bleak granite hills. The occasional sight of a Nationalist deserter among them, still in a dishevelled uniform, amplified the concern.

What weight could really be given to boundary lines scratched long ago on a map by pettifogging diplomats? When would the time be ripe for putting a complete end to all the unequal treaties imposed upon China? Refugees naturally elicited my sympathies, since I had been one myself. But they were now less fortunate than I, because relief agencies were much more embryonic in Hong Kong than in Perth. What chance had any of them of securing real help?



Squatter settlements below Mount Davis.

Photo courtesy of Ian D. Johnson.

While so thinking, a recollection of my *Ah Yeh* rose like a ground mist from the depths of my memory. “Anti-foreign rioting has started in Kowloon,” he had muttered in an undertone, with a shaking of his head. “When will it ever end?” He had been reading a newspaper item at the time while I was preparing for my School Certificate examinations. Apparently the rioting had started after a peanut vendor had been killed by the police who were attempting to clear illegal hawkers from a street in Yaumati. The disturbance spread and lasted for several days.

Why should Chinese people still be killed in 1946 for trying to scrape an honest living, I had thought resentfully at the time. But I had been too preoccupied with my own woes to give further thought to news from a place then unknown to me.

Recalling that incident spoilt my earlier mood and brought to mind a more recent initiative by a new Governor called Sir Alexander Grantham. He proposed setting up a municipal council of 30 members, with 15 to represent the Chinese population and 15 to represent the rest. Since the Chinese made up more than 98% of the total, the proposal was wildly out of balance. Moreover, those representing the Chinese had to be able to speak, read and write in English and to have been resident in the colony for at least 10 out of the preceding 15 years. The whole idea sounded like a deliberate provocation, a backhanded slap across the face of all Chinese. Why should a people be dictated to by foreigners on their own soil?

The whole scheme seemed ridiculous, unfair and riddled with hypocrisy. I could not abide it. My brief stay in Canton had dislodged the layers of British education heaped upon me throughout an impressionable decade. The deep-buried seeds of patriotism and identity had been disturbed, bringing uncomfortable complications. Yet I could do nothing. I was just a stranger in an unfamiliar place, a cypher, a big zero, powerless to make the least bit of difference to anything. A dry, helpless resentment tightened around me like a vice. As I wound my way back towards the centre of the city with John, I vowed I would make something of myself.

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Once I had found my bearings, I lost little time in scouring the “Wanted” sections of newspapers for a job. My finances were running dangerously low. There seemed no shortage of opportunities, except that I

lacked the skills or qualifications for most of them. There were openings for quantity surveyors, nurses, teachers, pharmacists, mechanics, hairdressers, shipping clerks, lorry drivers, piano tuners and even instructors in ballroom dancing. Shroffs and cashiers were in demand too, though applicants were expected to put up sureties or guarantors. There were in addition openings for insurance salesmen working on commission only. Vacancies for typists and stenographers were numerous, though most specified a preference for females. Perhaps I should not have spurned my mother's offer of a course in typing and shorthand.

Something was cockeyed. There appeared to be no dearth of employers wanting to hire staff while at the same time masses of people like myself were anxious for work. Some grievous mismatch seemed to exist between skills required and labour available. There were economic contradictions as well. Even if I were willing to work as a waiter, as I had done in Perth, the circumstances in Hong Kong were such that it would mean descending to the level of the coolie or rickshaw puller, living in what was commonly called a "bed space" with toilet facilities limited to a communal bucket to be taken away by night-soil collectors once every two or three nights.

Even if I had done what my mother had suggested, I would still be unable to break out of secretarial work. The conclusion was clear. I needed to go to university to equip myself with broader and more flexible skills. That further implied I should write to my father for money to get home, to confront him about my education.

But I was far from being reconciled to such a course. I had woven a web of deception from which I could not extricate myself. The whole situation was also hampered by an overweening adolescent pride. I had had a limited taste of financial freedom in Perth and I was loath to admit it had only been a mirage. If I were to ask my father for funds, I would be obliged to answer questions I had no wish to answer. They would include how I managed to get to China, the

slightly unsavoury origins of my nest egg and why I could not have asked my mother for a return ticket. So I opted for the unreal, the fanciful, the neat evasion, hoping like Micawber that something would turn up.

After two weeks of failing to secure even an interview for a position, I saw the prospect of eating humble pie looming ever larger. Spending money on moving around the city and eating the odd meal out had reduced my resources to an unacceptable level. Writers have often described characters that play their cards close to their chests. I had no cards to play, except perhaps a couple of jokers which did not belong to the game. Yet I wanted to remain secretive, deceptive.

In the end there was no avoiding an approach to my aunt and uncle, for contacts who might help me. I still could not resist dissembling to them, however. To tell any semblance of the truth would have caused both my parents and myself to lose face. Gossip and speculations would arise as to why both parents, though long divorced, should leave their son in financial limbo. That would give rise to suspicions of some scandalous failing on my part. Simply too many awkward questions would arise.

So I fed them a half-plausible story. I told them I had been so intrigued by Hong Kong that I wanted to defer university for a year to get to know it better. But it would be unfair to impose any additional financial burden on either of my parents. Hence I needed a job. I must have picked up considerable skill in dissembling by then, for my aunt and uncle apparently swallowed the tale.

“Why not try Bishop Halward?” my aunt said. “He would be just the man, very sympathetic. He knows most of the people at the top.”

My uncle nodded his concurrence.

“Who’s Bishop Halward?” I asked.

“A great friend of the Mok family. He’s the Assistant Bishop of the diocese of Hong Kong and South China. Concurrently also the Colony

Commissioner of the Boy Scouts.”

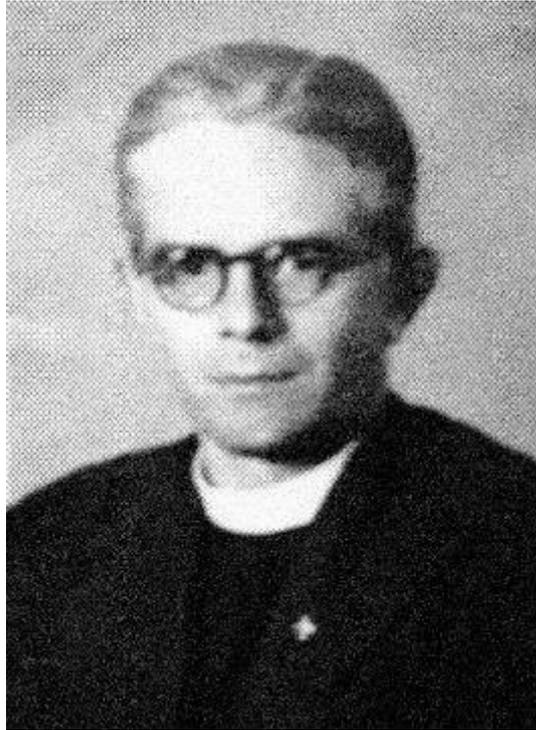
“I’ve never met him. He wouldn’t know me from Adam.”

“Of course you’ve met him, when you were little. You just don’t remember. If you tell him you’re the Singapore grandson of Bishop Mok, he’ll place you all right. I’ll phone him. You can then make an appointment.”

I reacted with a singular lack of enthusiasm. I had kept mum to them over my growing reservations about the existence of a Christian God. Such a radical departure from Mok family orthodoxy while I was still their guest would disconcert them no end. And I could hardly in good conscience ask a churchman for help when I was entertaining real doubts over the entire basis of his calling.

But my aunt took my hesitancy for shyness and rattled on about the bishop. He came to China as a pastor in the early 1930’s, she said, and had worked for a time with my *Kung-kung*. The man was also a war hero, decorated for gallantry in the First World War. My interest was stimulated by that last remark, being reminded of the other war hero I knew, Jackie Sue. I pressed for details. But my aunt could remember neither the circumstance of his brave deed nor the name of the decoration awarded.

“Just go and talk to him,” my aunt said. “He can tell you what you want to know. He’s at Bishop’s House, on Hong Kong island.”



The Right Reverent Victor Halward,
Assistant Anglican Bishop of Hong Kong.

My aunt was wrong in one respect, however. The bishop, I subsequently found, had no disposition to talk about his past. It took me a while even to discover he had been the recipient of a Military Cross, for gallantry in action near Fleurbaix in 1918. Whether he had led an audacious attack or mounted a brilliant defence I was unable to find out. How much spilt blood did he have to cope with, I wondered. How did he reconcile any killing in battle with one of the injunctions in the Ten Commandments? I was keen for the details, to learn what actually went through his mind at the time of the fighting and afterwards. But I thought it was not good form for a youth like myself to ask too openly about such matters. So I held my tongue.

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After I had met yet more failures in securing a job, I reluctantly made my way to Bishop's House on one hot and inglorious morning. The three-storeyed building, with a tower on one corner, was located at No. 1, Lower Albert Road, sitting on a slight rise in the centre of town. It was a grand and well-designed affair. Work on it had begun in 1843 and was completed in 1848. It housed both ecclesiastical offices and service apartments for visiting dignitaries. Today it is a listed historical monument, one of the very few of any vintage to survive the colony's craze for redevelopment.



Front view of Bishop's House at Lower Albert Road.

Photo courtesy of Annelise Pedersen Connell and Gwulo.com.

The Right Reverend Victor Halward was a man well into his fifties, dressed in a purple short-sleeved shirt with a white dog collar. The purple denoted his rank as a prelate. Around his neck was a simple chain connected to an unostentatious pectoral cross. He had a head of iron gray hair, neatly combed back from a broad brow, and his features were thoroughly patrician. Behind his dark-rimmed glasses, his eyes were steady, kindly and friendly. But a vague shadow seemed to veil his eyes, as if they had witnessed things he would rather not have. His complexion exuded rude health nonetheless, while the corners of his mouth dimpled readily with good humour. He gave every indication of being a decent and compassionate man.

I concluded quickly I should not beat about the bush with such a man. It was patent he knew considerably more about the Mok clan than I did. He also revealed himself *au fait* with the split-up of my parents, so I had no need to be circumspect on that score. I told him straight off I was one of my maternal grandfather's more wayward grandsons, for I had grave doubts about the existence of the Christian God he had devoted his life to serving. But I needed a job, so that I could maintain myself in Hong Kong without relying on either of my parents. I hoped the bishop could see his way clear to help me, in spite of my having abandoned the church.

The prelate smiled engagingly. "I have known your family for a long time," he said. "The fact you have lost God does not mean that God cannot find you. Let's attend to your temporal requirements first, before your spiritual ones. Let me see your papers."

I presented my meagre collection of certificates and references. He read through them, nodding here and there.

"I see you have gained top marks in Religious Knowledge," he observed, referring to my School Leaving Certificate. I squirmed, as if I had been caught committing an apostasy.

When he had finished reading, he said: "Why don't you write up a

résumé and I'll see what I can do."

"The only qualification I have is the Cambridge School Leaving Certificate," I said.

"You have rather more than that, my dear boy. You are, for instance, a qualified air raid warden."

"Yes, but nobody needs an air raid warden these days."

"Maybe not. But a person reading your résumé may well have served as an air raid warden himself and that may prove just sufficient for him to grant you an interview. Besides, you have been a Boy Scout of some distinction, with a slew of proficiency badges, including one for first aid and another for woodcraft. In our world, it is sometimes necessary not to hide our light under a bushel. So why don't you type up something I can send to people."

"I don't know how to type."

The bishop smiled again, even more broadly. "Dare say I could get you access to a typewriter, if you were staying here," he said. "You're with your aunt right now, aren't you? Must be quite a squeeze, with so many cousins."

"Yes, sometimes there does appear to be more of them than their actual number."

The bishop chuckled. "Look, you're more than welcomed to bunk here for a while, if that suits. It'll be more convenient than Kowloon if you were called for an interview at short notice. I have a young man staying here at the moment, waiting for a visa to get to Latin America. You can share a room with him. Move in any time you consider convenient."

"You are most kind, Sir. I shall speak to my aunt."

When I relayed the unexpected invitation, I made sure all the credit for gaining it accrued to my aunt. She sounded delighted. As a parting gift she presented me with a book of ten luncheon vouchers issued by a newly-opened continental restaurant called Jimmy's Kitchen. I suspected she might have won the vouchers at some church raffle. Each one was stated to be worth HK\$2.50,

entitling the presenter to a three-course meal -- a soup of the day, a plate of the day and a cup of tea or coffee.

I discovered that Jimmy's Kitchen was a modest eatery located in Theatre Lane, only a stone's throw from Bishop's House. Today Jimmy's Kitchen is the brand name for a chain of up-market restaurants, popular with both Western tourists and well-heeled locals.

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I shared a room at the rear of the ground floor of Bishop's House with a quiet, nondescript young man who was two or three years older than I. I have forgotten his name and what he looked like. What has remained was only his inordinate interest in different makes of motor cars. Since I had about as much interest in cars as I had in poison ivy, we were bereft of common topics for conversation. Our joint presence in our room happily coincided only when we were both ready for sleep.

The room was of a moderate size, with more depth than width. Furnishings were sparse. Two single beds had been positioned against opposite walls, parallel to each other, leaving a passageway of about seven feet between them. At the head of each bed was a small cupboard or cabinet for personal belongings. I had nothing beyond the contents of my rattan suitcase. The room had two exits. One was through a stout door, usually locked, which led into an interior hallway and from there to the main entrance of the building. The other was through a set of French windows, opening onto a spacious verandah. Since no air conditioning had been installed for our room, my roommate and I normally slept with the French windows wide open to capture every vagrant breeze. A short flight of steps close to our room connected the verandah to the garden of the house which, in turn, gave access to Lower Albert Road.

In halcyon days before thievery and crime became so prevalent, the

verandah used to be entirely open and without security features. At some point, however, break-ins must have caused the installation of a metal fence to enclose it, resulting in an imprisoned atmosphere. The head of the stairs leading to the garden, too, had been closed off with a strong wooden partition, which included a locked door with a small transom window over it. My roommate and I were each supplied with a key. That door became our normal route for ingress and egress at Bishop's House.

One evening, after barely a week in Bishop's House, a dramatic event occurred during the small hours of a Sunday morning. I had gone to bed at a reasonable hour but my sleep was soon disturbed by a vague sense of a presence near the head of my bed. I had removed my spectacles, so my vision was poor. I thought it might be my roommate, searching for something he had dropped.

"What's the matter?" I asked, with no undue alarm. "What are you looking for?"

A shadow flitted immediately past my bed, heading for the verandah.

"Thief! Thief!" I cried instinctively, as I jumped out of my bed to give chase.

The intruder had forced the transom above the door to gain access to the balcony. By the time I caught up with him, he had a leg and half his body through the transom. But I managed to grab his other leg.

"Thief! Thief!" I kept yelling. I had a hand around an ankle and my other arm was wrapped farther up the leg, in the kind of death-grip a drowning man might have thrown around a floating log. I was trying to pull the intruder back onto the verandah; he was kicking furiously to set himself free.

My tug of war was not assisted at all by the arrival of my roommate and some other residents. They could not lay hands on any part of the culprit without first going through to the other side of the door. But I was leaning hard against it, to leverage my grip on the intruder's limb, thus preventing the door

from being opened. If I were to release my hold for a second, the rascal would be off and away before anyone could get through the door. The smell from the captured leg, tucked hard against my face, was far from agreeable. But I had no choice except to hang grimly on.

My roommate resorted to blowing a whistle, the normal means for summoning patrolling constables. Eventually two of them responded and arrested the intruder. It appeared I had tumbled on his presence before he could lay hands on anything. I would have provided poor pickings in any case, for I was down to my last 10 dollars.

The constables asked me to go to the station with them to lodge a formal statement. I changed accordingly and went along. The Central Police Station was only a five-minute walk away. In the dim glow of street lamps, I got my first real look at the would-be burglar. He was in his late thirties, hollow-chested, around my height and nearly as thin. He appeared dispirited, with all the fight knocked out of him. I suspected from the tremors he displayed while walking he was either very frightened or else he might be an opium addict in dire need of a puff. I almost felt sorry for him.

As the arresting constables were booking the suspect at the reporting counter, a European duty inspector came among us. He was a hefty six-footer, with a bloated beer belly. The expression on his face was surly, as if our arrival had imposed upon him some unwanted work.

“What’s he up for?” he asked.

“Broke into Bishop’s House,” one of the constables replied.

The inspector turned to the arrested man and said gruffly, in accented Cantonese: “Ah, you want to rob Bishop’s House, do yeh?” Then, without the slightest warning, he smashed a fist into the captive’s solar plexus. The prisoner staggered a couple of steps backwards before being halted by the reporting counter. He then whimpered and slid slowly to the floor. The two arresting constables hauled him to his feet. But before I realised what was happening, the

inspector hit him again in the solar plexus. The man collapsed onto the floor once more, groaning and clutching his stomach.

A volatile mixture of shock, fear, confusion and incredulity churned inside me. In that instance all the theories about the rule of law and fair play acquired during my education collided with the stark reality of colonial power. I had detained an intruder, to place him before British justice, not to be beaten by a European policeman twice his size. I deemed such an attack unchivalrous, cowardly, and certainly not cricket.

My heartbeat accelerated and a mixture of fear and uncertainty surged through me. I was not sure what was going to happen next but my instincts told me I would have to make some response when witnessing a defenceless person being beaten. Yet, I did not know what to do. I had never been inside a police station before. I did not know its power equations or its rules. The behaviour of the Chinese constables suggested that beatings might be a run-of-the-mill occurrence. If I were to interfere, might I be manhandled by the inspector as well?

The prospect of being beaten did not worry me as much as being charged with some probable criminal offence, like obstructing a police officer in the execution of his duty or being a vagrant without any visible means of support. My aunt and uncle and Bishop Halward could certainly vouch for me but I would end up as the centre of an unseemly scandal just the same. And if I were to remain silent, a mark for cowardice would taint me forever. The memory of running away from that drunken Australian in Perth was already a recurring image in my mind.

All those considerations must have flashed through my mind in a matter of seconds. But it seemed like an eternity. I became torn by indecision, while the two constables tried to get the groaning intruder back on his feet. Fortuitously, some other development in the station required the attention of the duty inspector and he was called away.

The intruder, whose surname was Cheung, was booked for breaking and entering into Bishop's House. I was assigned an officer to take down my witness statement. After my statement had been completed, the officer said: "Please turn up at the Central Magistracy at 10 o'clock Monday morning. It's right next door. Court No. 1. The prisoner will be formally charged. You may be required to give evidence. Chances are you won't. The bugger probably will plead guilty."

"All right," I said. "By the way, what's the name of the inspector with the big belly?"

"Engleston," the officer answered.

I thanked him and left.

* * *

Dawn was about to break by the time I got back to Bishop's House. But there was no chance of getting back to sleep. My mind was in turmoil. I was the one responsible for Cheung's misfortunes. There was no getting away from that. I half-wished I had let him escape. His suffering pricked my conscience. How could I make amends?

Time was of the essence. I could consult Bishop Halward and lodge a complaint against Inspector Engleston for police brutality. But that might result in Cheung getting more rough treatment in his cell. Besides, a colony was a gossipy place, especially among its ruling elites. A complaint by a teenager from Singapore against a seasoned European inspector would soon do the rounds. Western heads of companies would not be disposed to take into service a young man with so little common sense as to take the side of a criminal. I wrestled with such possibilities throughout Sunday.

By the time I headed for the Central Magistracy on Monday, my mind was made up. I resolved, regardless of consequences, to back up Cheung

should he complain about his mistreatment. As expected, Cheung pleaded guilty. He uttered not a syllable about being abused by anyone. He was sentenced to one year hard labour for breaking and entering and he displayed only indifference to his fate.

Though I had been spared from having to stand up to be counted, I felt badly over the whole affair. I told no one about the ill treatment visited upon Cheung, not even Bishop Halward. I had no wish to advertise my failing. Ironically, among the residents of Bishop's House, I acquired an undeserved reputation for bravery, in single-handedly apprehending a burglar. I made a vow to myself: if ever I were in a position to do Englestone a bad turn, I would not hesitate.

* * *

While waiting for Bishop Halward's efforts to produce results, I occupied myself by exploring the different parts of town. One day, right in the middle of Queen's Road Central, I came across an incongruous sight. Striding down the street, bold as brass, was a rotund man wearing a neat black jacket, a pair of stripped trousers and a bowler hat tilted at a self-assured angle. He was also swinging a tightly furled black umbrella as haughtily as any money-juggling *habitué* of the City of London. He appeared inordinately proud of his get-up. If he were an Englishman walking around London, nothing would be extraordinary about him. But it was a case of a Chinese walking around Hong Kong. The man must have been educated in Britain and had subsequently attained success in some profession like banking or law. Could he be wanting to show off his sartorial elegance back in his home town?

Whatever his motive, the spectacle disconcerted me. It was akin to coming across Attila, "the Scourge of God", in a local tea house, still wearing his bearskin while quietly imbibing a thimbleful of Fukienese tea. It reminded me

of how much I myself had absorbed British mores and attitudes -- the stiff upper lip, playing the game, not letting the side down and so forth. Shakespeare certainly rolled off my tongue more readily than Mencius or the Sung poets. The sight of someone else masquerading so obviously as an Englishman sent a shiver through me: I could easily turn into an even greater absurdity. A Chinese too conditioned to behaving like an Englishman to behave like a Chinese. Upon that thought, I resolved that if ever I got a chance for higher education, I would avoid another British or colonial institution. I did not want to acquire any more attachments to Anglo-Saxon snobberies, prejudices and idiosyncrasies than I already had.

* * *

As the days rolled by, I became increasingly desperate over my deteriorating financial circumstances. Bishop Halward's initiatives had yielded only two interviews, both of which had been with Western commercial companies seeking local interns for potential careers. I had no interest in a career; I was just after enough bucks to get back to Singapore.

The vouchers for Jimmy's Kitchen had been a godsend but they were soon exhausted. In any case, the lunches were not filling enough for someone with my appetite. I often had to supplement the meal with a bowl of *wonton* noodles or suchlike at a roadside hawker stall. As the money situation became more acute, I sometimes had to limit myself to a single bowl of plain congee for a meal. Hungry and desperate, I resorted to calling on my aunt and uncle late in the afternoon, in the hope of an invitation to stay for dinner.

But this stratagem could only be employed sparingly. I had plenty of other relatives, like the many siblings of *Ah Mah*. Though I must have had contact with them when I was an infant, especially during the period when *Ah Mah* was living in Hong Kong, I had no memory of them. My shyness, my lack

of self-confidence and my impoverished state deterred me from picking up those threads of kinship though I was quickly approaching the end of my tether. My resources had dwindled down to a single dollar. I was in a worse state than a mendicant monk, for I did not even have a begging bowl! The need to swallow my pride and to approach my father for money tightened around me like a noose.

Then, suddenly, a miracle happened. During a visit to my Fifth Maternal Aunt and Uncle, they told me they had heard on the family grapevine that my father was actually in Hong Kong. They had few details. Rumours indicated that my Eighth Granduncle, a younger brother of *Ah Mah*, had invested in a Chinese middle school in Kowloon and had invited my father to become its headmaster. My father had reportedly accepted and was at that very moment residing at my granduncle's home in Happy Valley.

When the British first arrived, Happy Valley was nothing more than a malarial swamp. Their interest in horse racing soon caused the swamp to be drained for the installation of a racetrack. Gradually the area elevated itself into a desirable location for up-market housing.

Another nugget of gossip was that my father, prior to taking up residence in Hong Kong, had visited Canton to see his sister Chuek-Yim. During his stay, my aunt had arranged a small dinner in his honour and had invited my mother. But my mother declined and sent Tzi-Choy instead.

Such an encounter, between an aloof father and an insecure son of not yet 15, must have been pregnant with unpredictable possibilities. But my aunt had no further gossip to offer.

The reasons for my father taking up an offer of employment in Hong Kong were not difficult to see. The Blue Willow must have degenerated into a money-devouring monster. Openings in journalism in Singapore could not have been easy to come by. Meanwhile, my grandfather's pension and Anna's salary might have progressively become insufficient to maintain the normal living standards the family, let alone to cater for my father's extravagant habits. There

was little alternative to seeking employment elsewhere.

Why my granduncle, a doctor who had graduated from the University of Hong Kong in 1916 and who was now enjoying a flourishing practice, should want to acquire a Chinese middle school was baffling. It made no financial sense. Public demand and job opportunities had shifted decidedly in favour of a Western type of education. Those without some knowledge of English were increasingly left with only poorly-paid and dead-end employment.

My own problems, however, denied me the luxury of speculating too long on the motives of others. In spite of the lateness of the evening, I hightailed it to my granduncle's home at Leighton Hill Road.

No. 33 was one of a row of graceless and unimaginative tenements slapped down in various parts of the colony before the turn of the century. Just as at Blair Road, their interiors were so devoid of inherent attractiveness. One could not help suspecting that builders of warehouses had merely switched to providing shelter for human cargo instead.

By the time I got there, dinner was well and truly over. I found my father and members of my granduncle's family engaged in convivial postprandial conversation.

My granduncle's name was Chau Wai-Cheung, a portly man who gave every impression of being a man of substance in more ways than one. He had an easy-going disposition and responded readily to jokes and clever repartees. When he laughed, his thick-lipped mouth, his comfortable double chin and his generous belly all seemed to participate. For that reason, his mirth was contagious. His hair, combed straight back without any parting, was just the right shade of gray to confer distinction without belabouring his years. A pair of horn-rimmed glasses added to his genial image. He had a literary bent too, for he bought up rare books from hard-up refugees and stored them in cabinets on a couple of staircase landings of the four-storeyed building near the top floor and the roof. He maintained his surgery on the ground floor of the building.

His wife was a plump, serene lady to whom I was instinctively drawn. Her face and her person radiated more warmth, kindness, tolerance and benevolence than most statues of the Goddess of Mercy. Traits both maternal and unflappable, presumably acquired through bringing up seven children, were much in evidence. Her voice was soft and gentle and she moved with a quiet dignity. Her name was Kwok Yee-Hing, part of a group of three sisters. I think she was just 50 or 51 at the time I called.



My Eighth Grandaunt, Kwok Yee-Hing, taken in 1948.

She reminded me of *Ah Mah*. She immediately bestowed upon me a welcoming look, albeit edged with an element I took to be pity. I was not smartly turned out. I had left Singapore with only three shirts and the one I had on was much worn and wilted. My shoes were scuffed, because I had been unwilling to spend the few coppers necessary to get a street-side bootblack to give them a going-over. I could feel my face reddening under her appraisal.

My Eighth Grand aunt must have also detected in me an ill-disguised hunger, for she lost no time in asking servants to bring me some of the dessert the family had just consumed. A bowl of sweet soup made with lotus seeds and dried *longan* duly materialised. I polished it off, with perhaps more haste than was decent. I just could not help myself.

* * *

Once the formalities before the elders had been completed, my father directed me to follow him to his room. My mind was churning with opening gambits for tackling him about going to university. But my father had other ideas.

Once we were alone, he began in a reproachful tone of voice: “You have failed to visit your eldest aunt and uncle while you were in Canton. Neither have you seen fit to call on your granduncles and aunts here until now. This is no way to behave. You may think it just tedious etiquette but observing customary forms is a means of strengthening family bonds and goodwill.”

I could do nothing except bow my head, take the scolding and make contrite noises. I had without doubt failed in the duties demanded by kinship. The excuses I had given to myself would cut no ice with my father. After taking my chastisement, the initiative still rested with my father. I waited for him to make the running. Eventually, he asked: “What are you doing here? What’s going on? You’re staying with one of your maternal aunts?”

“No, I’m staying at Bishop’s House,” I replied. “I’m looking for a job.”

“A job? You’ve already picked a career? What kind of job are you after?”

“No, I haven’t decided on anything. I’m just looking for a way to maintain myself for the time being. Until something turns up.”

“Doesn’t sound very clever.”

“I have a plan,” I blurted out, a little defiantly, agitated by his probing questions. “It is to go to university in America.”

“Your mother agreed to this?”

I shook my head. “She offered me a course in typing and shorthand. I didn’t take it up.”

“So your stay at Canton did not work out the way you had expected?”

I shrugged. My father nodded and emitted what sounded like a sigh. After a pause, he said: “You’re the eldest. If you want to go to university, that may be workable.”

My heart immediately leapt to the heavens. My emotions soared. I was home and dry! My father did not ask what I wanted to study nor why I had specified America. If he had done so, I would have been unable to give a coherent answer. But I did not care. I had achieved what I had long dreamt about. He had declared university possible.

Before I could respond to my father, he spoke again. “Our family is not as well placed financially as before,” he said, wistfully. I could tell it was a difficult admission for him to voice. “You also have a lot of brothers and sisters coming after you,” he continued. “Sending you to America can be managed but it has to come with a condition. If you go, you must promise to help all your brothers and sisters get through university afterwards.”

His words pulled me up short. My mind went momentarily blank, as

if I had suddenly banged into a stone wall. When it started to function again, I made some rapid assessments: I had met with no success in landing a simple job and the prospect of securing a plush one after university could not be counted on; Herbert was ten and a half years younger than I; and my father might decide, like *Ah Yeh*, to produce more children later in life. I could be shelling out for the education of my siblings until I was middle aged. My father's proposal sounded like a very raw deal. I could not accept it.

With what little calmness and good grace I could muster, I said: "I'll let it pass, Dad. Thank you. I appreciate the offer but I'd rather find my own way. Just save the money for the next one."

My father nodded wanly. He offered no easier option, no word of consolation. Neither did he urge me to reconsider.

An uncomfortable silence seeped between us. An old grievance resurfaced out of my disappointment and hurt. I no longer cared about observing the habit of deference and restraint which I had hitherto shown all my elders. With bitterness in my voice, I let off steam: "Dad, why did you give me the name Tzi-Ki? How did you come up with so silly a name? I have been ridiculed for it for years."

"You haven't figured it out?" my father replied. His voice contained a note of genuine surprise.

"Figure what out?"

"What are the names of your brothers?"

The explanation flashed before me in a matter of seconds: Our four names formed a maxim which, roughly translated, meant: "Even a genius requires diligence to succeed."

The snag was that the Chinese word for "genius" or "prodigy" was a compound word made up of two characters -- "strange" and "talent". Since I was the eldest, I got the first character and came to be known as the Strange Son, whereas my brothers were called respectively the Talented Son, the Diligent Son

and the Successful Son. The explanation only brought a marginal improvement to my disposition. As I fidgeted to leave the scene of my rout, my father said: “How are you for money?”

I gave a shrug. Only a single dollar stood between me and starvation but that seemed a minor inconvenience compared with the loss of all hope for a university education.

My father must have noticed my less than happy state. He took out his wallet, emptied its contents and handed me the notes.

I accepted his gift and muttered my thanks. The sum came to a round \$600, which at the then rate of exchange was roughly US\$100. That gift represented the only money I was ever to receive from my father in his entire life.

I left the house at Happy Valley richer by \$600 but with all bridges to a higher education comprehensively burnt. Now that my father was in Hong Kong, returning to Singapore to lick my wounds was a non-starter as well. My grandfather would still be there but so too would Anna. I had no wish to be caught in another cold war.

As I made my way back to Bishop’s House, I wondered if the mauled and defeated German troops retreating from Stalingrad had felt as dejected and embittered as I did.

* * *

Characteristically, my father let nothing slip during our talk about his meeting with my brother. I surmised it must have gone without mishap because about three months later Tzi-Choy paid him a visit in Hong Kong. I was not privy to what they had talked about on either occasion. About 60 years later, it came to light that my brother had been holding a grudge against me for most of that time.