

## Home to Disasters

The joy of returning to No. 33 Leighton Hill Road was greatly diminished by the untimely demise of my Eighth Granddaughter. Miu-Kwan, my sweet adversary of old, had also gone off to study at the University of Hong Kong, taking up residence in one of its hostels, Lady Ho Tung Hall.

She had in the meantime, however, softened her attitude against my mixing with her classmates. Indeed, she readily introduced me to some of them, one of whom was a Portuguese girl with a stunningly attractive figure. I dated her two or three times. But since I had no job, no income and only the few dollars I had saved from odd jobs at Stanford, I could only take her to movies. Finding employment had to come first.

My Eighth Granduncle and my father, of course, still remained at No. 33, as well as the other Chau children. But the youngsters had each grown four years since I left and had developed their own individual personalities and circles of friends. I felt more distant from them than ever. The whole atmosphere of the place was no longer the same without my granddaughter and Miu-Kwan. I made up my mind, therefore, that as soon as I had found a job I would move out. It was demeaning to keep sponging off the generosity of relatives.

But where to begin the hunt for work? Naturally, I made contact with old friends in journalism to determine the lie of the land. The rewards for journalism were as hopelessly meagre as before. I was keen to know if anyone had seen or heard from Hon-Kit but none had. There was only a rumour that he had joined the staff of the *Nan Fang Daily* in Canton.

The *Nan Fang Daily* was an organ of the Chinese Communist Party and if he had joined it then he almost certainly needed to be a Party member. Had he been one when we first met? I doubted it. A patriot, certainly; a Socialist, possibly.

In any case, knowing his temperament, I suspected he must be chafing under Communist Party discipline. If I, as someone just back from an

extended stay in an American university, were to attempt to contact him, I would only add to his problems. Since he knew I could always be reached at No. 33, and since millions travelled between Hong Kong and China each year to trade and to see relatives, I felt sure he would get a message to me if he considered reconnection opportune. So I left the initiative to him. It was to be another 36 years, however, before he called in at my office in a somewhat dramatic fashion.

As for the more immediate problem of finding employment, my friends thought it prudent as a precaution to get myself registered as a qualified secondary school teacher. In a pinch, teaching in a private school or college could be more financially rewarding than being a journalist.

Armed with my university degrees and the necessary forms, I presented myself at the Education Department. After an inordinate wait, I was ushered before a European Education Officer. After glancing at my documents, he said: "Can't register you at present, I'm afraid."

"Are my documents not in order?" I asked, taken aback.

"Well, let me put it this way," the officer said. "I've never heard of Stanford, you see. They have a lot of queer little colleges and universities over there not up to British standards. I'll have to check if Stanford is up to snuff. I'll get back to you once the situation is clear."

I left his office in some amazement. What could I do but wait?

As the days went by, I found myself back in the situation I had been in during 1947, running out of money, without gainful employment and dependent on the hospitality of relatives. With my registration as a teacher on hold and with journalism a proven dead end, I became increasingly desperate to achieve some degree of financial independence. It was then that I noticed an advertisement in the newspapers for Administrative Officers in the Hong Kong government.

Quite a bit of local lore had accumulated about that group. Its

members were supposed to be the *crème de la crème*, the elite corps at the top of government and responsible for most of its policy decisions. Candidates required a First Class Honours degree, or at worst a Second Class Upper. In addition, they had to be natural born British subjects, prepared to serve three years on probation, pass both security vetting and a test in criminal law.

Yet, the beginnings of this reputedly distinguished group had not been all that illustrious. The first three officers were from Cambridge and they had been described as cadets. They had arrived in Hong Kong in September of 1862. The colony had become self-financing by then and no longer dependent upon grants from the United Kingdom Treasury.

A very significant portion of the revenue for the colony was derived from its opium monopoly. The trade was by no means universally acceptable. Strong criticisms had been voiced against it in parliament. The Quakers had refused to carry opium on their ships. Many Christian organisations raised objections to the debilitating effects of opium on the general population and especially among the poor. The Chinese government itself had long considered the trade harmful and had banned it. It had been forced to legalise the trade by Britain, however, following its defeat in the Second Opium War. It is an irony that the drug habit which Britain had done so much to promote in China is now running out of control in most countries around the world.

It might be worth noting at this juncture that two of the other big sources of recurrent revenue stemmed from the duties levied on tobacco and liquor.

So far as could be determined, none of the original three cadets nor any of the subsequently recruited officers had thought it wrongful for their salaries to be paid from the proceeds of an opium-selling monopoly. None had objected or resigned as a matter of principle. Could it be said that an equivocal moral tone had been set by the early members in the service? This is not to say that a great many of sterling character had not subsequently served with

dedication and distinction. But it ought to be recognised that quite a number were also mediocrities.

As was normal for most colonial regimes, the service had been established on an unambiguously racist basis. No Chinese officer was allowed into the service till well after World War II. Non-European members were barred from membership in many social clubs established in the colony, such as the Hong Kong Club. European Administrative Officers had for many years been members of such clubs and in many instances had exercised a strong influence on their activities and policies. No evidence has yet been found that any of them had exerted conspicuous pressure to alter the policies of their clubs.

Realising that the world was changing, the government in 1946 introduced the Peak District (Residence) Repeal Bill to end the ban on Chinese living on the Peak. The effect was little better than window-dressing. How many ordinary Chinese could afford the fancy prices required to buy or to build a home on the Peak?

It was not till 1948 that the first Chinese was admitted as an Administrative Officer. His name was Tsui Ka-Cheung. He was studying at the University of Hong Kong when the war broke out. He immediately demonstrated his loyalty to the British Crown by joining the British Army Aid Group which mounted clandestine operations against the Japanese from China. He had attained the rank of captain or major by the end of the war. He was accepted as an Administrative Officer after the war and was sent for a year's course at Oxford before assuming duties.

My previous experience as a reporter had made it abundantly clear that the opium trade was still thriving, though now under the control of triad societies and crooked policemen.

Though the possibility of working for a foreign occupying government was contrary to my instincts, I debated whether in the dire financial situation I was in I ought to give the Administrative Service a try. I argued with

myself that throughout Chinese history many great scholars and poets had to serve bad emperors and corrupt ministers. People with high principles like Wat Yuen and Tao Yuan-Ming came to mind. Inside the government, I might at least be able to influence policies in some way. On that rationalisation, I applied to become an Administrative Officer.

After a series of preliminary interviews and tests, I found the field had narrowed down to three finalists. I was one of them. We appeared before a board of the Public Services Commission. Since the advertisement had spoken of vacancies in the plural, I calculated that all three must stand a decent chance of securing an appointment.

Apart from myself, the two other finalists were a Mr. Lau, who had recently graduated from the University of Hong Kong, and a Mr. F. K. Li, who was already serving as an Assistant Education Officer in the Education Department. If memory serves, Mr. Li was also the possessor of an American degree, from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in mathematics, I think.

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The Public Services Commission panel was chaired by a lean and severe-looking Western corporate lawyer by the name of J. R. Jones. He was said to be the acting Chairman of the Commission. He was later confirmed in that position, however. He appeared to me about as welcoming as a barbed wire fence. There were no friendly preliminaries to put me at ease. The first question he fired at me was: “Tell me the first book you’ve read since leaving university.”

“Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*,” I replied. I was not trying to be clever. It was in fact the book I was reading, to try to understand Spengler’s arguments and reasons for his determinist thinking. But the face of Mr. Jones

darkened. My own approach, if I had wanted to hire a public officer, would have been to find one who would speak the truth rather than what the interviewer would like to hear. But that was apparently not what Mr. Jones wanted. If I had had more presence of mind, I might have gained a better impression by replying Evelyn Waugh's *Put Out More Flags* or Somerset Maugham's *Cakes and Ale*. The subsequent questions from Mr. Jones indicated I had not found favour.

In due time, I was informed I had been unsuccessful. I had expected it. I later learned that Mr. Lau had not been successful either and that only Mr. Li was selected. I could not help wondering where Mr. Lau had gone wrong.

It took me quite some time to uncover from my sources within the bureaucracy that the whole exercise had not been quite on the up and up. Apparently, although there was indeed more than one vacancy, some faceless bureaucrat had determined before the start that only one local Administrative Officer would be recruited. The rest would be Europeans recruited from London. No one had the courage to make that fact plain in the advertisement. Nor was any reason given for that decision. One could only suppose that the loyalty of Chinese officers was still suspect and that it went against the public interest to have too many Chinese occupying sensitive positions.

Another fact which was not revealed was buried in a great big government tome with a red cover titled "Establishment Regulations". One of the regulations stated that when filling a public office, other things being equal, preference should be given to a serving officer.

What did such a fatuous phrase mean? Did "other things being equal" mean height, weight, department or what? Or whether the tie was knotted with a half-Windsor or a full Windsor? Other things could never be equal. I was shorter than Mr. Li but taller than Mr. Lau. I was confident my command of English was better than both of them. That catch-all phrase was

one of those bureaucratic tricks to enable an appointing officer to choose whom he liked without justifying his decision. I bear no resentment against Mr. Li for his appointment. My resentment was only against the half-baked way public affairs were being conducted.

In later years, after I had been eventually admitted as an Administrative Officer, I was to pit my wits against the provisions of the Establishment Regulations time and time again. At a still later stage, those regulations had been re-named Civil Service Regulations.

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As pressure mounted for me to find gainful employment, I was reluctantly forced back to journalism. I landed a job in October, as a sub-editor with the *Hong Kong Standard*, an English sister paper of the successful Chinese language *Sing Tao Daily*. The Chinese paper had been originally founded by the Aw brothers, famous for their popular Tiger Balm patent medicine. My job at the *Standard* paid a little over \$1,000 per month, which was about par for the market.

The editor-in-chief of the *Standard* was a Eurasian by the name of Leslie Sung. His mother was Swedish but he did not look either particularly Chinese or foreign, an odd in-between. He was quite tall, almost a six-footer, bespectacled and distinguished looking. But he tended to stoop slightly. I surmised the reason was because he was married to a pretty, cheerful and petite Chinese girl called Lorraine who was barely five-foot-two. It proved necessary for him to bend down whenever they wanted a semi-private conversation.

His family was located in Tsingtao and he had graduated from the University of Hong Kong in 1941, just before war. For some reason, he was unable to contact his family so he decided to spend the war years in Kwangtung and Kwangsi, working as a teacher.

At the end of the war he went to Shanghai where he worked as a journalist. But when the Communists came to power he moved to Hong Kong and took on the editorship of the *Standard*.

It became obvious from the start that Leslie and I were kindred spirits. He was highly intelligent and principled and commanded a ready wit. The last quality enabled both of us to appreciate each other's more subtle off-the-cuff jokes. He was also a man of considerable tolerance -- except where bad bridge-playing was concerned. His approach to the game was entirely different from mine. I wanted to play to win money at minimum risk, employing both psychology and poker tactics when necessary. I wanted to play in the simplest way possible and not waste mental energy squeezing out an extra trick of no significance in money terms.

Leslie, on the other hand, had the mental make-up of a top class tournament player. For him an extra trick might mean the difference between getting an average score rather than a top score on that board. Though an element of risk might be involved in an extra trick, he would always calculate the odds to work out whether his target could be achieved through a throw-in or a criss-cross squeeze. As was often the case between man and wife, Leslie took pains to explain to Lorraine repeatedly the intricacies of his analyses, in the hope his wife's bridge would one day approach the standard of his own.

Unfortunately, Lorraine did not have either Leslie's intellect or his passion for the game. She was just a sweet lady who enjoyed playing for the fun of it. She was also not in robust health but she was devoted to her husband and wanted to please him. Although she smiled and nodded when Leslie explained things, I could see she was not getting half of what her husband was saying.

It so happened that both Leslie and I were members of the Craigengower Cricket Club. So a routine soon developed after I had joined the *Standard* whereby the three of us would gather at the club after lunch to play

money bridge with some of the semi-retired regulars. Leslie always preferred to partner Lorraine, in order to give her pointers on the plays and defence after each hand.

But since the games involved cutting in and out for partners after each rubber, their playing at the same table meant they would sometimes end up playing against each other. I and some of the others therefore used that as an excuse to get the Sungs to play at separate tables. We thought Lorraine would enjoy the game more that way.

Leslie and I would play till around six when we would grab a bite before reporting for work at the *Standard*. Lorraine would continue to play until the games ended, when one of the players would drop her at the *Standard's* office. There she would read magazines or whatever until we finished around two-thirty in the morning. The three of us would then head for a restaurant in North Point celebrated for its duck congee to enjoy a late-night snack before heading home. It was a very companionable way of working and playing together and we became firm friends.

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As soon as I got my first pay cheque from the *Standard*, I moved out of No. 33 into a room in a men's hostel at Great George Street in Causeway Bay. I shared it with an old acquaintance from the *Morning Post* by the name of Auyang Ming who was already living there. We had not previously mixed very much because he had not been a reporter but had worked in the Advertising Department.

The room we shared was extremely basic, with each half holding a small desk, a single bed, a wash basin and a small wardrobe. Toilet and bathing facilities were communal, at the end of a long corridor. We each paid \$90 a month for our respective half of the room.

Ming was in many ways the consummate room-mate. He was a thin and loose-jointed and ambled around as if he had not a care in the world beyond selling ads. He was neat, tidy, considerate and seldom given to speech. He kept to himself much of the time and was scrupulous over not taking liberties with that invisible line which demarcated my space from his. He was about ten years older than myself and seemed very much a confirmed bachelor, although he did surprise most of his friends by marrying a youngish widow very late in life.

He was not intellectually inclined nor was he much concerned with what was happening in the rest of the world. We thus had very few topics for conversation. Indeed, for the first few months we hardly exchanged a word, for he would be fast asleep by the time I got home and I would still be chasing dreams when he left for work. Only on Sundays would we sometimes exchange a few words and perhaps engage in a game of *mah-jong* with some of his advertising friends. We thus lived together for more than two years with not a whit of unpleasantness between us.

I did continue sometimes to drop by No. 33 for lunch with my Eighth Granduncle and my father, before going over to the Craigengower Cricket Club. But I explained to relatives living farther away that it would be difficult for me to call as required by family protocol because I was working nights.

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As Leslie and I got to know each other better, I asked if I might try my hand at an occasional article for the editorial page. Just subbing was not very creative and I had an itch to write. Leslie readily agreed on the understanding no extra fee or payment would be involved. I took care not to write anything political or critical of colonial rule. What I usually did was to

find some hook in a news item and then write one of my tongue-in-cheek pieces on the inanities in human behaviour or institutions. For example, if there was some dispute over the payment of dowry in India which ended in bloodshed, I would pose the question whether modern feminists were not expecting too much in agitating for the ending of concubinage without offering more fulsome dowries in return. Would the next demand be the total control of all property by feminists, like the practice among some minority hill tribes in China?

I did not in fact write many such articles. Perhaps only one every three or four weeks. But each carried my by-line, which gave a little boost to my ego.

One day towards the end of April of 1954, Leslie did not turn up for the afternoon game at the Craigenower Cricket Club. Lorraine told me he had a meeting with top management. When I arrived at the office at the usual hour, Leslie called me to one side, handed me an envelope and said: “The management wants you to leave. I’ve been asked to pay you your month’s salary plus a month in lieu of notice.”

On hearing that news, I could have been knocked over with the proverbial feather. “Why?” I cried. “What have I done?” I had been with the newspaper for seven months and my relationship with both Leslie and the reporting staff had been good and comradely.

“That’s precisely what I’ve been trying to find out all afternoon,” Leslie said. “The only reason I got was that the government did not like you and want you gone from the paper.”

“But why? I haven’t got close enough to any high official even to spit an insult. Why am I disliked? If it’s about my articles, I haven’t attacked any official or any official policy. I’ve just been poking fun at the way the world is run. Didn’t we just finish fighting a war for the Four Freedoms, one of which was freedom of speech? Stuff much worse than mine have appeared in some Chinese papers.”

“Top officials don’t read Chinese,” Leslie said. “I’ve told the management it’s wrong to deprive a man of his living just because some unnamed official dislikes him for some unspecified reason. But the management was not forthcoming. I think it’s scared of offending the government. The only thing I can do now is to resign in protest. I’m responsible for everything that appears in the paper and for its editorial staff too.”

“Don’t be silly, Les. One scalp is enough. You’ve got a family. There’ll be better battles to fight. I’ll live.”

“I’m truly sorry,” Leslie said, with a sigh, shaking his head.

“Forget it,” I said. We shook hands and separated.

I did not want to head home to explain to Ming why I had returned at that unusual hour. So I made for the Craigenower Cricket Club. I wanted to sit out alone on the lawns somewhere and think things through. But in my confusion, I forgot that Lorraine was at the club.

“Why aren’t you at work?” she asked, when she spotted me. “And where’s Les?”

“Something queer has happened,” I replied. “You’ll find out about it when you see him later.” I then left her to her bridge, perplexed.

Outside, the sun was still blazing but it was pleasantly warm for April. I had just had my 25th birthday. I found a shady spot and ordered a tall cool drink. I tried to work out how things had been brought to such a pass.

Eventually, I came to the conclusion it must have been a recent piece I had written titled “The Nylon Curtain”. I cannot now remember exactly what I wrote but it was one of those sardonic “what if” pieces.

The Korean War had been a cruel and grinding war, I inferred, but China had stood up to its opponents, including Britain, and fought them to a stalemate. It had called for great Chinese sacrifices, though the Western media kept painting bleak pictures of all sorts of horrors behind the so-called Bamboo Curtain. Since millions travelled freely each year between China and the

colony, the Western media, with a little more diligent research, should have got a better idea of what was actually happening inside the country.

There were many hardships, to be sure. But one of the true horrors might be the international imposition of sanctions against an impoverished people trying to rebuild a ravaged country. I was thinking especially of the countless ordinary people making sacrifices there, like Hon-Kit and Frances, like my eldest aunt and her family, all trying to cope with the paradox of change and continuity -- and to stay alive in the meantime. I suppose I was being a little sentimental over my grandfather's as yet unrealised dreams of a strong and united China as well.

What if Chinese rulers were to invite compatriots in Hong Kong to join in the monumental task of building a new country, I asked, to put an end to 150 years of national humiliation. How many in Hong Kong would accept the challenge, as millions had done during the protracted war with Japan? No doubt those with right-wing inclinations would rather flee to Taiwan, still under the protection of the ships of the American Seventh Fleet. Many others, seduced by the propagated images of material plenty behind the Nylon Curtain, might prefer to live as refugees in foreign lands, without citizenship and being discriminated against because of race, language or culture.

Leslie had actually drawn a cartoon to go with the piece. It showed a man sitting on a rock in the middle of the Pacific Ocean with question marks scattered around his head. On one side of the drawing was a screen marked "Bamboo Curtain" while on the other floated a semi-transparent sheet marked "Nylon Curtain".

My thoughts then turned to what little I knew about the government system. At that time, the great age of spin had yet to arrive. There was still a large element of colonial arrogance in the air. Only a small outfit headed by a Press Relations Officer of modest rank existed, aided by a few locals. That officer, called PRO for short, was a thickset and gruff Scot well past middle

age. His name was Jock Murray, an ex-Fleet Street hack.

I had met him only once, at some general briefing. He gave me the impression of being slightly unhinged, like one of those Europeans featured in a Joseph Conrad or Somerset Maugham novel, a creature lording over natives for too long in the East. No doubt I must have struck him as an upstart too big for my breeches, especially wearing a crew-cut at the age of 25. We did not take to each other.

The management of the *Standard* had to be intimately linked to that of the much more profitable *Sing Tao Daily*. Their offices were located next to each other. Since Aw family members were not British-educated, I assumed they could not be particularly proficient in English. Hence any message of displeasure must have been conveyed in a fairly bumbling way by Jock Murray. But from where did such a message originate?

In my view, Murray was still an unreconstructed colonial, one in the mould of Colonel Blimp. If he had taken it upon himself to initiate the action, then he had grossly exceeded the authority of his minor office, not to mention the professional ethics which should still bind him as an ex-journalist.

If the instruction had originated from higher up, then it could have only been from a senior Administrative Officer. I had not met any. Demanding the dismissal of a journalist for what he had written would be a very questionable act. If he were an Oxbridge product, he must have forgotten his Milton.

I smiled to myself in the gathering evening gloom as I recalled roughly the words from *Areopagitica*:

“Though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously by licensing and prohibiting to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?”

In recalling the quotation I became filled with a satisfaction that

almost amounted to joy. Here I was, a young nobody, not even a recognised political commentator or agitator of any sort, yet I had scared a colonial government enough for it to try and silence me! And it had been done sneakily to boot, unbecoming any gentleman. What could any man be worth if he lacked even the courage to face me in a free and open encounter?

Upon further reflection, however, I saw two terrifying consequences. First of all, news circulated quickly among the press fraternity. If colleagues heard of my being fired on government instruction, there would be anger and upset. It was not that they could have done much about it; there was no union or club for journalists to speak of, except a Foreign Correspondents Club. But its members were foreigners belonging to a more elevated breed. My sacking, if generally known, would also reflect badly on Leslie and render his position untenable. I had to work out a cover story with him, of my quitting on my own accord for richer pastures or something of that order.

Secondly, we both had made a mistake about the Nylon Curtain article. We had both overlooked the fact that the Aw family of that time had been pro-Kuomintang rather than pro-China. Their roots were in Southeast Asia. The instigation from the government might have been just justification enough for them to get rid of me.

I am now told, however, that the *Sing Tao Daily* of the present has adopted a more left-leaning stance.

But the Aw family's compliance at the time left a dangerous precedent for newspapers in Hong Kong. Newspapers, to function for the public good, had to be willing to speak truth to authority and not just tamely to do its bidding. Any decision to sack a journalist on the say-so of a bureaucrat must erode media independence. Apart from the economics of survival, the obnoxious colonial licensing requirements and internal security regulations were a modern disgrace.

Colonial powers had given lip service before the United Nations

after World War II to act as trustees of non-self-governing peoples and to act in their best interests. Yet no British government, before granting independence to its former charges, had the decency to abolish oppressive laws before leaving. If any had done so, the citizens of the new nations could at least judge for themselves how far their politicians were prepared to go to rob them of their freshly-won freedoms.

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As luck would have it, a friend asked me a couple of days after my sacking whether I would be willing to teach English to a Chinese businessman at the rate of \$25 an hour. I jumped at the chance.

It transpired the man was a tailor with a small shop in Wanchai. At that time, Wanchai was the chosen habitat for hustlers and pimps, the stamping ground for sex-deprived foreign servicemen searching for synthetic romances with slinky Suzie Wongs. Symbiotic service industries naturally developed in the neighbourhood. Tailoring was one of them.

My prospective employer had noticed the large number of Americans on “rest and recreation” in the bars and nightclubs in that area. He thought he could do a decent business making suits for them if he only knew their lingo. What he desired was not conversational English but how to ask about single or double-breasted jackets, lapel widths, single vent or side vents, pleats or no pleats, cuff lengths and so forth. He would like me to be at his shop for an hour each day before business started, five days a week, to teach him such terms.

I agreed to his proposition, though I deliberately altered my intonations slightly to fit in with American accents. British servicemen, I realised, were unlikely customers because they were too poorly paid to indulge in custom-made suits.

The tailor was a serious and hardworking man. He wrote out the Chinese terms in an exercise book and had me print their English equivalents beneath. But his Eastern tongue did not respond readily to foreign words. Repeatedly correcting his enunciations prove a slow and boring process.

As the weeks went by, the subjects gradually shifted to materials -- fine Irish linen, the best British worsted, blue blazers and hunting jackets of Harris tweed. Then it was brass or leather buttons, colours of silk linings and leather elbow patches. The man had system, that had to be said for him. But at \$25 an hour who was I to complain? Although I had only one student and was earning, in total, less than half my pay at the *Standard*, I could still pretend I could earn \$25 an hour without having to edit a single badly written story. The fact I had an extra month's severance pay in my pocket enabled me to keep up the charade. I still popped by the Craigengower Cricket Club regularly to play bridge. In that respect, I had a surprisingly decent run of luck too. I sometimes continued to join the Sungs for late snacks of duck congee.

As the tailor began to get on top of the basics, he indicated he needed a running sales pitch. He wanted to get out into the street like a fairground huckster, to accost passing Americans to inveigle them into his shop. With that fresh request, I had to be inventive. It was unfamiliar territory for me. I started him with something simple, like: "Hi! G. I. Joe! How are you? I'm Hong Kong Joe, best tailor from Yokohama to Singapore. Bargains of lifetime. Finest suits in 24 hours. Satisfaction guaranteed or money back."

I warned him the spiel had to be kept on-going, once he has secured a degree of attention; it had to be evocative too for what Americans were familiar with. "You like white Fred Astaire suit, two-tone shoes? No problem. You want to look slicker than Humphrey Bogart or Clark Gable? No problem. Satisfaction guaranteed or money back. Brooks Brothers suits are nothing. Mine much better. You select own lining. Crimson, eh? Or royal purple? You'll look like million bucks down Broadway. You'll drive chicks wild.

You'll be envy of every stud."

It took a good while getting him to deliver his spiel with a reasonable flow and cadence. "If ever you get stuck," I advised, "just keep repeating 'Satisfaction guaranteed or money back.' That's always a good come-on." Then I told him he could vary things a little with black servicemen. He could say: "In my suit, you knock them dead in Harlem or Atlanta." Being a Chinese, he was hesitant about any reference to death. But I assured him that was the American way.

One morning, when I turned up at the shop, I knew instinctively that my days as a tutor were coming to an end because, after the usual pleasantries, Hong Kong Joe produced a recording machine.

"You mind recording for me words for bringing in customers?" he asked. "My English poor. Need more practice. With recording, can practise whenever free. Not waste your valuable time. Of course will contact you should I need more help."

We both knew the score. It was a manifestation of the colony's universally acclaimed penchant for enterprise. Why pay more for something which could be had for less? I made the recording, collected my \$25 and we said our goodbyes.

The real name of the tailor was naturally not Hong Kong Joe. I have refrained from using his true name so as not to embarrass his wealthy descendants, who now operate a thriving and well known gentlemen's outfitter in a very posh part of town. The walls of that establishment are covered with photographs of politicians, film stars and other celebrities who had their tailoring done there. They are also doing a phenomenal mail order business.

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As any gambling man would know, Lady Luck is the most fickle of

females. Soon after I had stopped working for Hong Kong Joe, she deserted me at the bridge table as well. Shortage of funds kept me in the hostel room far longer than I would have liked. The need to find employment robbed me even of concentration to read.

I lacked the courage to call on my relatives. When I returned with my American degrees, everybody expected great things from me. But now I was without a job again. I could not bear to reveal my humiliating situation even to my father. So I stopped visiting No. 33 as well.

In the meantime, my registration as a secondary school teacher finally came through. Stanford apparently was considered acceptable in British eyes after all. But what was I expected to teach my students? How to be good colonial subjects, how to adjust to quasi-European culture, how to be thankful they were being spared the many hardships rumoured behind the Bamboo Curtain? I felt I should have committed myself to my motherland years ago and taken whatever hardships or deprivations that went with it.

I could always land myself another sub-editor's job with another outfit. But it would be just another dead-end job, with no opportunity to voice my opinions on anything. Otherwise, the PRO might come calling again and I would be back out on the street once more. I felt so utterly trapped, without a way out of my predicament.

It was in such a dismal mood that Ming found me in our room one evening.

“Hey, why so glum?” Ming asked.

“I need a steady job. The fun with the tailor is over. But I can't think of a single job I'd care to have,” I replied.

“Come on, for a talented guy like you, there must be a million jobs out there.”

“Sure, I could sell cars to kill or injure more people every day. I could sell stocks and shares to help people lose their money quicker than in a

crooked poker game. I could sell insurance to people who don't need it or who might never collect because they had overlooked something in the small print. I could even start promoting some goo to slap on feminine faces three times a day, to guarantee they would look as beautiful as Garbo, even when they reach 95. Need I carry on?"

"Come on, don't knock advertising. It keeps the world going around. I know exactly what you need right now. We'll go out, get a couple of girls, have a slap-up meal and you'd feel a lot better."

"Where are we going to get a couple of girls just like that?"

"Just follow me."



Night Scene at Mongkok. Photo courtesy of Mike Cussons and Gwulo.com

Before I fully appreciated what was happening, I found myself inside a hotel in Kowloon. It turned out to be a front for a whorehouse.

Ming spoke with authority to the male receptionist. "Two rooms please. But fix up my young friend first."

The receptionist soon returned with a smiling and buxom girl who was probably younger than 20. There was a slightly rustic air about her.

"This is Ah Ching, one of our new ladies. Just right for your friend," the receptionist said.

I was sitting on the bed and too embarrassed to respond.

"Well, we'll leave you to it then," Ming said, cheerfully, as he exited with the receptionist.

"Has the gentleman been here previously?" Ah Ching asked, as she began to unbutton her blouse.

"No," I said, without making any attempt to undress myself.

"Where are you from?"

"The New Territories."

"You look very much like a Hakka girl."

"How did you guess?" The girl responded with a peel of laughter. That somehow broke the ice. By then she was stark naked, exposing a gorgeous pair of breasts and a set of Junoesque thighs. I undressed and we took to the bed.

Afterwards I asked her what the fee was. She said \$20 and I gave her an extra five. I told her she could go, while I waited for my friend's return.

"Thank you for the tip and come back soon," she said and left.

I felt an inexplicable hollowness inside. I had never dreamt I would lose my virginity in such a manner. I had imagined overpowering passions, exquisite waves of love and tenderness, perhaps even celestial music enrapturing the soul. And it had all come down to less than 10 minutes of clumsy grappling with human flesh and a mechanical exchange of bodily fluids.

Ming eventually returned to the room in a gay mood. “Well, how was it?” he asked.

“Unsatisfactory,” I said.

“What! You mean she didn’t give good service? The receptionist told me she always enjoys her work.”

“There was no emotional connection.”

“Hell! What did you expect? She’s a whore.”

“She’s a human being too.”

I caught a flash of incredulity in Ming’s eyes upon my response and I wondered whether he suspected the cause of my disappointment. In any case, we did not talk much over dinner.

\* \* \*

The sheer necessity of survival eventually forced me to sign up as Night Editor for the local bureau of the Associated Press of America. The title sounded grandiose but it was essentially a one-man, semi-clerical operation, aided by a couple of office boys who printed out news items and distributed them to subscribers, mostly Chinese newspapers.

I was supposed to start around six in the evening, read through the stories coming in over the teletype machines and amend Americanisms in those considered suitable for distribution. The work ended around three in the morning, when most newspapers would have gone to press. But since public bus and tram services had yet to start by then, I was left with the option of hoofing the two miles back to Causeway Bay, through streets inhabited by certain types of night people, or else pay for a taxi ride. It was back to the old routine of conversing with Ming only on weekends or during one of our *mah-jong* games.

Subbing at the *Standard* at least threw up a variety of local stories.

At the agency, it was all foreign stuff with half of it hardly suitable for the Chinese media. But there were also English newspapers with foreign readerships to be catered for. Some items, about the misbehaviour of some Hollywood starlet or a traffic snarl-up at Piccadilly Circus, would get a much fuller write-up than a famine affecting thousands in the Horn of Africa. Local instances of misbehaviour by Chinese starlets and traffic accidents naturally were left uncovered by Western agencies. Yet, if I were to spike some trivial story and a version from Reuters or UPI were used by a subscriber, the Bureau Chief would want to know why I had killed the story. The only positive thing that could be said for the job was that the pay was marginally better than the *Standard's*.

It occurred to me after a while that with mainly Western news agencies operating in Hong Kong, the population was being slowly brainwashed into thinking that only happenings in the West were of any account. The French approach to the military build-up at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, for instance, was initially hailed as a stratagem to draw the Vietnamese into a conventional battle, before inflicting upon them a single crushing defeat. Vietnamese calculations never got a mention. Did some self-styled French experts on oriental thinking work out that plan? If so, it was the French who went down to utter defeat within a few months and had to withdraw from Vietnam.

I figured that until qualified Asian correspondents started covering events happening in their region, readers would always be subliminally conditioned to accept the illusions and misrepresentations disseminated by self-interested Western governments and their complacent agencies. The awareness that I could never really challenge or amend the stuff I had been hired to distribute irritated me. It seemed inevitable that, sooner or later, the Associated Press and I would have to part company.

\* \* \*

The parting came within less than a year when a friend persuaded me to join her in teaching at a private secondary school. The pay was better than at the Associated Press, because an M.A. from Stanford counted as a premium in the rota of instructors at the school. The working hours, with school holidays, were also far more agreeable. The only snag was that the school's reputation was not exactly sterling.

The 1950's had been the golden age for commercial ventures known colloquially as "school shops". The background to this lay in the pre-war lack of effort by the government to provide for the demands for education. In 1941, there were only 649 schools in the colony with only nine of them being government schools. The overwhelming bulk -- 529 -- were private schools, with some being subsidised or aided.

After the war, the government embarked upon a commendable programme of enforcing compulsory primary education. But it still seriously underestimated the Chinese appetite for education, assuming that any demand would be limited and could be catered for by the missionary and other aided schools. When demand far outstripped supply, attempts were made to make schools bi-sessional. But the supply still fell short. The less academically gifted, failing the selection tests of the well-established secondary schools, had nowhere to go. Neither had the refugee children deficient in English.

The shortage was quickly met by enterprising businessmen who opened private secondary schools to Hoover up every male or female student who wanted a place. Admission standards, qualifications and assignment to classes might be described as flexible. So long as someone was prepared to pay the fee, every child could find a place. Such schools allegedly followed the prescribed syllabuses. They boasted experienced teachers too, whom they enticed away from established schools by paying slightly higher salaries. Pass

rates were not taken into consideration. Students who failed could always repeat. It was a sure-fire money-spinner.

One of the most successful operators was a man by the name of Wilson Wang. He started a school in a small flat in Wanchai and called it the New Method College. One of his selling points was that education was not just about classroom work but also about the development of character and other latent talents. His “new method” was to stress sports and extracurricular activities. By 1951 he had earned enough to build his first college building. He ended up with four, in different parts of the colony. At their height, the colleges had 17,500 students.

Thus it came about that I found myself recruited half-unwittingly to teach English and modern European history in the School Leaving Certificate classes at a New Method College in Causeway Bay, a mere five minutes’ walk from my hostel.

The co-educational classes were large and unruly and a teacher with a crew cut, who looked almost as young as the students themselves, must have been considered fair game. The teenaged girls occupying the front rows tended to giggle a lot, while the boys, many of whom were decidedly over-aged, congregated half-challengingly at the rear. They wore their uniforms without particular pride and gave every impression they would rather be somewhere else. Some of them certainly should have been -- in forms a couple of grades lower, if their educational attainments were anything to go by. Facing classes of that sort the first thing in the morning was not the most agreeable of experiences.

It did not take me long to conclude that many of them, particularly among the boys, would never get through the School Certificate examinations on their existing standard of English, though English was supposed to be the medium of instruction. As for European history, it must have been so remote to them that I suspected few had even bothered to open their textbooks. In trying

to explain the advent of Robespierre and the Reign of Terror, I got as many blank looks as if I were trying to pinpoint the best churches in Oxfordshire for brass rubbings.

I could not help feeling sorry for them. But there was so little I could do to get most of them up to snuff. I could not adopt the approach of Miss Nice in Canton, by going at the rate of the most backward in the class, for my duty was to prepare them for a public examination. The temptation to quit stirred in me. But that would only do them more harm, because of the disruption entailed in adjusting to a replacement teacher. I therefore decided to stick it out for the school year.

My main recreation came in the form of an afternoon or an evening of bridge at the Craigenhower Cricket Club when time permitted.

About 20 years later, while walking in Central, I was greeted by a gentleman who asked if I remembered him. I did not. I thought he must have been someone I had shaken hands with at one of the innumerable official or social functions forever taking place in Hong Kong. I apologised profusely for failing to place him.

“You used to teach me English and European history at New Method,” the man said, providing me with his name. It did not ring a bell.

“Oh, I see,” I responded. “And what are you doing now?”

“I’ve become a civil servant like you. I’m a magistrate.”

“Excellent,” I cried. “That means cases coming before you need not be handled like chicken talking to ducks.” We shook hands and parted. It cheered me that my efforts had not been totally unproductive.

The commercial school shops faded from the scene as the government and aided schools gradually caught up with demand. The last of the New Method colleges did not close till 2012. With the way land prices had been climbing over the years, the college sites must have netted someone a pretty hefty profit. I guess that must be how the invisible hand of the free

market was supposed to work, enriching a few at the expense of the many.

\* \* \*

As the school year ground beyond the half-way mark in the spring of 1956, the high-living and partying set among the bored and affluent young in the colony was struck like a No. 8 typhoon by a handsome American-Chinese from Florida. He came roaring in, with his notoriety preceding him. It had been derived from an article published in one of America's mass circulating magazines. The title of the piece was: "I Want to Marry a White Girl". The author's name was Eddie Gong.

I never read the article and cannot now remember how Eddie answered the barrage of questions the local media fired at him. How many different kinds of girls had he been acquainted with before deciding on marrying a white girl? What was meant by a white girl? A European or a white American? What was wrong with Chinese girls? How many of them had he dated? Why did they put him off? Had he come to Hong Kong to search for a prospective bride or had he already picked someone in America? And so on.

Eddie was a smooth operator, with the *bonhomie* of many Americans. He fended them off with affability and dexterity, saying nothing which could be held against him. After all, he had just graduated from Harvard Law School and was as sharp as a tack. He was soon engaged by the *Hong Kong Standard* as a reporter.

Nubile maidens of several nationalities and descriptions, as well as some who had already been around the block before, were keen to meet Eddie. So too were many young pretenders of both sexes -- those pretending to be talented in drama, music, writing, painting, dancing or other art forms. They all hoped that associating with Eddie would lead to some of his colour and high visibility rubbing off on them. The younger reporters at the *Standard* soon

began organising parties for Eddie. Because of my past connections, I was invited to some of them.

The first one I went to was indeed a bohemian affair with the usual nocturnal trivia -- drinking, dancing, romancing on half-truths, searching for an unsoiled soul or merely some sharing of guilty flesh. My focus of attention settled quickly upon two startlingly beautiful Greek sisters named Madeleine and Sophie. They had moved down from Shanghai when the Communists took over. They were both aged around 20, with Madeleine being the younger and slightly shorter of the two. She possessed a striking beauty of the Elizabeth Taylor type, a beauty so overwhelming that every male head had to turn in wonder and admiration the moment she entered a room. She was well aware of her own appeal and the advantages she could accrue therefrom. It took no time at all for her to draw Eddie into deep conversation.

I, on the other hand, was more taken by Sophie. Her beauty was far more subtle and enigmatic. She did not have her sister's perfection of face and proportions but her eyes were more gentle, more limpid and more filled with mystery. She bestowed upon me a mellifluous smile when we were introduced. And her lips appeared to be so warm and soft and sweet that I could hardly resist dreaming of stealing a kiss from them.

If my head had not held my heart so firmly in check, I would have lost the latter. How could I afford to chase after a girl, even if she were as enticing as Sophie? I only had a shared room in a man's hostel to my name and another bout of joblessness lay menacingly ahead. Once school was out, I would have to start job-hunting again.

Gradually, as the media interest in Eddie subsided, the frequency of the partying diminished and participation had solidified into the small group of regulars Eddie had befriended. A new face could still appear now and then, however, brought along by a member of the core group. To all outward appearances, it seemed that both Eddie and Madeleine had preferred each

other's company.

I attended the parties when I could, just to feast my eyes on Sophie and to exchange a few friendly words with her. Apart from job-hunting -- and when I was in funds -- I would spend the rest of my time playing bridge or *mah-jong*. By then, I had brought together Ming and Yiu-Hung, one of my closer kinsmen on the Chau side of the family, as regular players.

At one of the summer parties, I noticed that someone had brought along a teenaged Chinese girl who was years younger than the normal crowd. Her face was not unattractive, in an unripe sort of way, but she did have an impressive carriage. There was a certain lightness and grace to her movements. She spoke little and appeared out of her social depth. Someone told me she used to study ballet in Shanghai with one of the Greek sisters under the same Russian teacher.

I tried to put the girl at her ease by chatting with her but she was shy and not very communicative. I discovered she was Cantonese and had spent time in Shanghai because her father worked for the Bank of China, having been posted there right after the war. When the Communists took Shanghai, he was transferred to the Canton branch. When the Communists threatened Canton, the family fled to Hong Kong.

The girl's name was Fung Man-Ying and she was still in high school. She had been keen on ballet since childhood. When conversation dried up, I invited her to dance. She was indeed a very good dancer. Having done my good deed, I turned my attention elsewhere.

\* \* \*

Before long, I managed to land another job, teaching the same two subjects at St. Stephen's College in Stanley for the following school year. St. Stephen's was a missionary school for boys which catered to both boarders and

day students. Apart from teaching, I also had to assume the duties of a house master, which meant dining in hall with the boarders and preventing them getting up to mischief after lights out. The pay was accordingly better than at New Method. The further advantages were that I did not have to pay for my food and that I would be provided with free accommodation in the form of a small first floor flatlet in a corner of a dormitory.

Stanley is at a remote part of Victoria Island, a mere stone's throw from Stanley Prison, the main high-security prison in the colony. It was connected to the centre of town by a single bus service which ceased operating at an early evening hour. It became obvious that taking up the job would tie me inextricably to the regime of the school and that my personal freedom could be only marginally better than that of an inmate at Stanley Prison. A means of escape would come only on weekends, when some other teacher would take over my out-of-class duties.

The next party arranged by friends of Eddie Gong took place at someone's home in Kowloon, just before the new school year started. I was asked by the host if I might pick up Man-Ying and escort her over from her home in North Point. I agreed, after I had been assured that I would not have to escort her home as well.

Those were the days before the Cross-Harbour Tunnel. Getting from the island to Kowloon involved travelling to Central for a ferry to cross the harbour and then getting transport to the destination on the other side. Should the journey take place after public transport services had ceased, then crossing the harbour involved hiring a small motorboat known as a *walla-walla*.

I met Man-Ying's parents when I went to fetch her. Her father, Fung Shing-Kung, was a quiet, modest and likable man. He was working as an accountant for a small foreign firm. He had taken his decline in status and economic fortune with dignity. His wife, Helen, who had the bearing of a typical bourgeois housewife, did most of the talking. She suffered from a small

nervous tick which caused her to keep jerking her head in a small sideways movement.

My interest in the family grew when I discovered that Man-Ying's grandfather was Fung Tse-Yau, who had played a significant role in the May Fourth Movement after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. He had also written a number of books advocating China's need to modernise.

Man-Ying herself was the youngest of three children. Of her two brothers, one was a doctor who had migrated to Germany. The other had migrated to America. Her own ambition was to go to England to become a ballet dancer. Since I knew as much about classical ballet as I did about ikebana or spinal fluid, there was not much scope for cultivating a conversation during the journey to the party. After delivering her, I had other attractions on my mind.

\* \* \*

The students at St. Stephen's were of a more even standard than those at New Method but they were still not the cream of the secondary school crop. A number of them were Chinese students from Southeast Asia whose parents had sent them to Hong Kong for greater exposure to Chinese culture, or possibly merely to get them out of their hair.

Being confined to Stanley gave me plenty of time to read and to reflect upon life. Time was flying by and I had yet to find a direction. It soon came to me that I had neither the inclination nor the temperament to become another Mr. Chips. But what alternative was there? I had an itch to write but that would be to head down the road to starvation. I had been rejected for government service and journalism was out. Nothing else came to mind. I stewed in my restlessness and uncertainties.

My weekends would usually be spent playing bridge at the

Craigengower Cricket Club and staying overnight with Leslie and Lorraine before heading back to St. Stephens after dinner on Sundays.

While chatting with Leslie, I learnt he had started studying law in his spare time and that he wanted to start a family. He must have concluded that being editor of the *Standard* did not provide a very secure future.

What I did not realise till decades later was that another great worry oppressed Leslie. He had a younger sister called Greta who had remained in Shanghai. For some reason she got arrested by the Communist authorities and was accused of being a British spy. After a trial, she was given a long gaol sentence. I did not meet Greta till after she had emerged as a physical wreck from both prison and labour camps, only to be expelled as stateless from China.

The knowledge that Leslie had been studying law gave me an idea. Although I had no particular wish to practise law after witnessing some of the farce that went on in the magistracies, a legal qualification would provide an employment safety net should one ever be needed. If that were in place, I might actually risk trying to write fiction for a living.

Back in those days, being called to the Bar was a leisurely affair. One could just sit for one paper at a time, without any fixed limit on how long one took to fulfil requirements. The most crucial requirement had nothing to do with learning the law. It had to do with “keeping terms”, which meant eating a certain number of dinners each term in hall.

With my confinement at St. Stephen’s much of the time, I had little opportunity to spend money. My savings mounted quite respectably. On that basis, I applied for admission to Gray’s Inn and, upon being accepted, decided I would head for London at the end of the school year.

But I had not forgotten my unrepaid debt to my Eighth Granduncle. So I called on him one weekend and asked if I might defer repaying him until I had completed further studies in London. He readily agreed.

I was not so foolish as to imagine that I could last very long in

London on my savings alone, unless I had a supplementary flow of income. Even if I were successful in selling my fiction, I was conscious that the two short stories Robert North used in *The Pacific Spectator* only fetched me US\$35 each. I therefore started putting in place arrangements with media outlets willing to consider feature articles from me, on a per piece or per column inch basis. Among them were the North American Newspaper Alliance, the *Straits Times* in Singapore, and the *China Mail*, a sister paper of the *Morning Post*.

Since the editor of the *China Mail* and his wife were both good friends, I twisted the editor's arm to designate me as the paper's London Correspondent, although I was only a stringer being paid on a per article basis. He agreed. After all, there was more cachet to be had by the paper in running a piece described as "from our London Correspondent".

\* \* \*

When spring came, I attended another party organised by the Eddie Gong crowd. What took me by surprise was that Eddie had apparently switched his affections from Madeleine to Sophie.

Man-Ying was also at the party. She appeared somehow to be much more mature than the last time I saw her. When she saw me, she said: "I hear you'll be moving to London soon."

"Yes." I replied. "There isn't much of a future for me here."

"My parents would like to invite you for dinner before you go," she said.

"That's very kind of them but such an honour is not necessary."

"Please give us a date. They have something to ask of you."

On that basis, I went to dinner with the Fungs a couple of weeks later. During the course of the meal Mrs. Fung asked me how long I would be

in London. I replied probably for years.

Mrs. Fung then said the family was thinking of sending Man-Ying to London to study ballet when she turned 18 the following year. Since they knew no one there, she asked if I would be prepared to be nominated as her guardian. It would be just a formality. I would not be put to any trouble. I would not have to show up at her school or to accept responsibility for paying her fees or anything. Only in an unforeseen emergency would I be involved.

Put that way, I could hardly refuse. I suppose she and her husband must have concluded that I was a sober enough sort of person and unlikely to lead their daughter astray. I promised to send them my address once I had settled.

\* \* \*

Some time after I had reached London, I received the sensational news that Eddie had married Sophie and had returned to Florida to practise law and to enter politics. Well, to give the man his due, he might have been a bit slow to discern true beauty but he at least fulfilled his public declaration of marrying a white girl. He was subsequently elected to the Florida Senate in 1966.

As for Madeleine, the last I heard of her was around 1960. Apparently she had left Hong Kong to become an airline hostess for a regional airline. I have had no further news since. But I have not the slightest doubt that, if she played her cards right, she would end up with a very rich husband.