

## Illusions Shattered

As had been normal up till then, a new stage in my life began with another sea voyage. For the first time, I avoided the discomforts of travelling in steerage, by sharing a twin cabin on an Italian passenger liner bound for Genoa. The trip lasted almost four weeks. It first took me back to Singapore, before continuing to -- among other places -- Penang, Calcutta, Colombo, Bombay, Aden and Suez.

As the journey progressed, I could not help thinking that going in some style on a sea voyage must be a very civilised way of getting from one place to another. And that was well before I had been subjected to the hassles of airport security checks and the discomfort of jet lag, neither of which can very many contemporary travellers escape from these days.

The immensity of the oceans, the rhythm of waves slapping against the hull, the inhabited darkness after sunset, the heavenly canopy of stars and unknown galaxies, all provided scope for reflecting on the mysteries and vastness of our own planet and man's insignificance in the ultimate scheme of things. It was like getting a foretaste of the infinite, even of eternity, and realising how little a man can know compared with the vastness of what he does not know.

Among the travellers were two women and a man from Hong Kong who were travelling to Italy for training in Italian opera. I made friends with them and wrote an article about them which I prosaically titled "Three Coins in a Fountain", after a film of that time.

On board there was no end of diversions -- dances, films, cabaret acts, deck games, tombola and a choice of bars. There was also a constant flow of interesting passengers getting on and off the ship at the intermediate ports, including two lovely Indian sisters boarding at Bombay to head for London to become models. The highlight of the voyage was a fancy dress ball towards the end of the trip, when I, while least expecting it, won the first prize dressed up as a tramp carrying a copy of Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. The voyage was all in all

tremendous fun.



Dressed as a tramp for a fancy dress ball on board an Italian liner bound for Genoa in 1957.

After landing at Genoa, I made an unhurried journey across Switzerland and Germany in the company of the Indian sisters, before cutting back to France at Calais to catch a cross-Channel ferry to Britain.

In London I found a room at Radnor Place, a quiet little street tucked amidst the great undifferentiated sprawl of dwellings lying somewhere between Marble Arch and Paddington Station. The building was a town house occupied by a tall, middle-aged dealer in Louis XIV furniture. The man was in his late forties and looked uncannily like Basil Rathbone in one of his more morally ambiguous roles.

The ground floor was cluttered with the appropriately rounded forms of gilded commodes, bureaux, cabinets and stands. Mirrors with elaborately ornamented frames hung everywhere. I could not tell whether any of the stuff were the real McCoy or mere reproductions.

There were two rooms with wash basins on the first floor. I occupied the front one overlooking the street, at a rent of five pounds per week. It was quiet enough for writing. The rear room was rented to an English girl of about my own age who worked as a hostess in a West End nightclub. She was not bad-looking, except when appearing tired in the morning and without her make-up. Then she would look somewhat wilted and shop-soiled from her nocturnal occupation. I noted that a male friend called on her every now and then. Between the two rooms was a bathroom and toilet which we shared. Not at the same time, naturally.

The Rathbone lookalike lived alone on the top floor, amidst another clutter of French Baroque furniture. He was a sharp operator. The rooms rented out were equipped with gas heaters. But when heat was required, tenants had to feed them with shillings. A standard call box telephone had also been installed in the passageway outside our rooms, so that both the English girl and I could receive calls. Neither of us received very many. Outgoing calls had to be paid for in the normal way.

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Once I had settled myself, I worked on a plan for survival. I had a small sum of money saved during my year at St. Stephen's and I decided to become my own banker. I set myself a target of never allowing my capital to fall below a certain point. That meant I had to achieve a respectable inflow of cash from whatever I did. It was a case of swimming or sinking. I was on the opposite side of the world and there would be no refuge or safety net like No. 10 Blair Road or No. 33 Leighton Hill Road.

Priority was accordingly given to feature articles which were bound to be used without much ado, albeit for very modest fees, like how Chinatown first developed at Limehouse, the imprisonment of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen at No. 49

Portland Place, and about Chinese people studying unusual subjects or pursuing unusual professions. Normally, I would do two or three such pieces each month before devoting time to writing fiction.

One of the earliest interviews I conducted at Radnor Place was with a Chinese woman painter named Fang Zhao-Ling. That was well before she became famous for her evolutionary style in Chinese paintings, many of which now hang in museums and galleries around the world. In appreciation of my writing about her, she presented me with one of her works. It had a floral theme and I liked it enormously.

But because of my itinerant life, I did not get the painting mounted for hanging. I kept it folded inside a suitcase, together with other treasured documents. Decades later, when I took it out to be mounted, I discovered to my horror that cockroaches or other insects had eaten a big hole in it.

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In order to widen my contacts, I registered my bona fides as a correspondent of the *China Mail* with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Those were more relaxed and laid-back times. Only a letter from the editor was sufficient to gain accreditation. Its public relations officers were also quite accommodating. They helpfully asked whether there were aspects of British life I particularly wished to delve into.

Whereas most newly arrived foreign correspondents might ask to watch the proceedings in the Houses of Parliament or to witness an investiture ceremony at Buckingham Palace, I asked to be shown a working coal mine.

The reason for my request was because I had read Zola's *Germinal* and had been touched by the fate of the horses sent hundreds of feet down the pits as foals, only to spend their entire lives hauling coal wagons and never seeing daylight again. Their eyes would grow blind after a year or so in the

dimness and they would never feel again sunshine or fresh air upon their hides. There was something grim and grieving in the picture Zola had painted. I had felt saddened to visualise how some of the animals might dimly recall life before entering the pits or cling to slivers of memory about being able to run free once upon a time.

The miners too, I thought, must be harnessed as meanly to life within a mining community. Some had to start working as children and if the mine owners judged a person to be a troublemaker, that person could be denied employment for years. I wanted to get a feel of that sort of life. I might even write about it.

A visit was eventually arranged for me to go down a mine in Wales, at Ebbw Vale. Being brought down hundreds of feet into the bowels of the earth in a wired cage, and then walking with a stoop for more than a mile along ill-lit and claustrophobic tunnels to reach the coal faces, was an unsettling experience. Seeing smudged-face men hacking away at the black gold by the frail lights attached to their helmets brought home to me what a harsh and dangerous calling they had to endure. The caged canary was a symbol of their entrapment. A sudden cave-in and they could be buried alive. It so happened no pit ponies were found in the mine I visited.

Ebbw Vale was the constituency of Nye Bevan, the great architect of the British National Health Service when he was Health Minister in the post-war Labour government. He had himself begun working in a mine at the age of 13 and his father had been a miner as well. The colliery company did not like the lad and he was left without a job for years. When he finally achieved political power and launched the National Health Service, he declared that a free health service was pure socialism and as such was opposed to the hedonism of capitalist society.

I had been an enormous beneficiary of the National Health Service during the 20 years I lived in Britain, having been successively operated upon for

appendicitis, enlarged prostate, skin cancer, lens replacements for cataract and pancreatic cancer. I can only be saddened by its threatened collapse today, due to poor management, political posturings and the steadily rising costs of running it.

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Moving to London did not cut me off entirely from family ties and Hong Kong associates. Mr. Henry Ching had retired from the *Morning Post* and I met him when he was on his way back to Australia. He had routed his journey by way of Britain in order to visit his son, Henry Junior, who was studying at Oxford. I had always thought Mr. Ching a pretty tough bird, but I was surprised by his reluctance to travel with me on the Underground when we had to go somewhere. He said going down the escalators gave him the impression of descending into the nether regions.

Miu-Kwan was also in London in 1957, finishing her studies in library administration at the University of London. She was then keeping company with a paediatrician named Hu Shih-Chang who was also undertaking further studies there. But I managed only to see her once before she left for America to visit her various siblings, prior to returning to Hong Kong to get married.

Shih-Chang, apart from turning into an excellent physician, had also developed a passion for the studying and collection of Chinese lacquerware. Well before his passing, he had already been recognised as a leading world authority on the subject.

In London too was my youngest brother, Tzi-Seng or Herbert. He had gone there in 1955 to finish his secondary education. He then entered the University of London to study chemical engineering. By the time I got there, he was living in digs with some other students in Sussex Gardens, which was just

around the corner from Radnor Place.

It was a shock to discover what a terror at poker my little brother had become in the space of two years. He would go from time to time to Malaya Hall at Bryanston Square, a hostel meant for students from Singapore and Malaya, to join a seemingly perpetual poker game there.

Tzi-Seng, with his gentle and sleepy eyes behind an unfashionable pair of spectacles, had a natural air of hesitancy and innocence which became prime sucker bait. He could often walk away from the table with more pocket money than he ought to have. I joined him for a few poker sessions but got cleaned out each time.

I quickly decided I ought to stick with bridge. To that end, I joined the Hamilton Club and the Curzon Club in Mayfair. The former was strictly a playing-for-money bridge club whereas the latter only had a bridge room among other gaming facilities. A regular crowd of *aficionados* circulated between the two clubs. It was for the most part made up of rich retirees and titled ladies who fancied themselves good at the game. Or else addicted to it.

Sometimes, international players like members of the famous Italian Blue Team and the dominant European woman player of her day, Rixi Markus, also dropped by for a session. A couple of cool and never ruffled professionals would also be present at the clubs almost every day, to earn their living.

The standards of the regulars were uneven and generally not very high. If one kept one's head and factored in the strengths and weaknesses of individual players, it was not difficult to come out ahead. Since I was only after money, I always played a conservative game. If I knew a partner was weak at declarer play, I would not push him or her into a dicey slam; merely settling for a cast-iron game instead. Commiserating noises could always be made with fulsome apologies afterwards, should overtricks arise.

It was sometimes bracing to walk home at two or three at night with winnings in the pocket along a fog-bound Park Lane. One's own footfalls could

resound with jauntiness in the deserted stillness. Those were much more halcyon times, when the fear for personal safety had not become so widespread. Should one meet a stranger along the way, a polite “goodnight” might be all that was called for. On the other hand, after a losing session, the trudge home in the cold could seem inordinately long.

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It was during this period that my old Stanford friend, Mike Zinck, the man who put on more than 25 pounds of muscles onto my bony frame, paid a visit to London. Mike’s presence was memorable in many ways. Up till that point, I had been too preoccupied with earning money to spend much time absorbing the sights and historical monuments which made up such an attractive range of offerings in London. Mike dragged me out to enjoy what the city had to offer. In particular, if it had not been for him, I would probably have placed visiting the Tower of London and getting my picture taken with a Beefeater very low on my list of priorities.

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Being accredited with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office must have caused my name to be circulated more widely in other quarters, for I began receiving invitations to participate in BBC discussion panels -- for a fee, of course -- and to a variety of functions and receptions of various kinds. I confined myself to accepting only those which offered some potential for a usable article or for a free feed.

One of those I had accepted was to a large reception at the Soviet Embassy to mark some important Communist occasion. Perhaps it was the launching of the Sputnik into space in October of 1957, I cannot recall exactly. I

was shepherded and introduced around by a large, ebullient Assistant Cultural Attaché of around 40 who conformed neatly to the stereotype of a soulful, vodka-swilling Russian. It was hard not to like him, however. So when he telephoned me subsequently to invite me to dinner, I readily agreed.

I was surprised when he suggested going to a Chinese restaurant in Soho, on the basis he would like my judgement on the authenticity of its food. He ordered a potent greenish-coloured Chinese spirit called “Bamboo Leaf Green”. It was not exactly to my liking but he quaffed prodigious amounts of it.

The dishes were good and I gave my opinion on each, though I expressed my doubts as to whether they had reached the standards set down by the Court Dietician, Hu Szu-Hui, as fitting fare for emperors when the Mongols ruled China. Hu, like most Chinese, had emphasised balance and the medical aspects of nutrition but also took account of the eclectic nature of Mongolian food.

When I mentioned the name of another Chinese restaurant in Soho which served good quality Chinese food, however, he said: “Ah, we should be careful to dine only among friends. That place is operated by Kuomintang sympathisers.”

It had never occurred to me that politics was a consideration where eating was concerned. I also had no idea of the allegiances of the various Chinese eateries I had patronised. In order to reassure him I was a friend, I casually mentioned that my grandfather had been a revolutionary and that my mother had once worked for Borodin, the Comintern agent sent to ferment a socialist revolution in China.

He displayed no reaction to my revelations, probably regarding them passé and ancient history. But he did suggest that he might show me another friendly restaurant in Soho the next time we met. I was not too proud to eat at the expense of the Soviet state, so I accepted.

By the time the next meal came around, I had a pretty shrewd idea

that the man -- whose name I have since unfortunately forgotten -- was not taking me to dinner because he wanted my opinion on Chinese food or because I was scintillating company. He was probably a KGB recruiting agent.

At the second meeting we talked about pastimes and hobbies. We discovered we shared one -- rummaging through the plethora of second-hand book stores which used to abound in London. I was interested in unearthing early translations of Chinese works. I found, for example, that the Germans were the first to translate many Chinese medical books into their own language. During those browsing missions I managed to acquire for myself a translation of some Chinese poetry by Ezra Pound and an English translation of *The Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, which first appeared in China in 1679, dealing with the key concept of “accord” between the heart and the mind in Chinese painting.

The Attaché told me he was interested in old books which reflected the English character.

“The English are a unique race, you know,” he said. “What other people would concern themselves with carrying a grand piano across the Hindu Kush and then writing about how it had been done? *Na zdrowie!*” With that he emptied his fourth glass of Bamboo Leaf Green.

“To your health too,” I said, taking only a sip from my glass.

We had a third meal together. By then he must have concluded that I wore my heart too much on my sleeve, that my likes and dislikes were too transparent to make a good spy. Furthermore, my actual position as stringer in the journalistic food chain would mean I was unlikely to gain possession of any information of real importance.

I must have got by far the better bargain in our relationship because I had three free meals and had learnt the political allegiances of some of the Chinese restaurants in Soho. I had learnt in addition another amazing nugget of information -- that the Moscow telephone directory was considered by the

Soviets to be a “classified document”! He, on the other hand, got nothing of the slightest intelligence value from me.

We parted pledging eternal friendship between the Chinese and Soviet peoples. That was the last I saw of him. No more meals at the Soviet Union’s expense. In a way, I quite missed the company of that very convivial man.

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In my quest for income, I signed up as an extra for a Hollywood film being shot in North Wales. It was called “The Inn of the Sixth Happiness,” starring the Swede beauty Ingrid Bergman. The story line was based on the life of a British maid, Gladys Aylward, who went to China to become a missionary. She led a group of Chinese children to safety across mountains at the time of the Second Sino-Japanese War.

Gladys Aylward was deeply dissatisfied with the way Hollywood had embellished her life. She was short, dark-haired and spoke with a cockney accent, whereas Ingrid Bergman was tall, fair-haired and spoke with a Swedish accent.

There seemed to be that curious paradox in Hollywood productions. No expense would be spared on getting certain historical aspects of props correct, such as, whether a sword or a chariot in a period film actually resembled those in use at the time depicted. In the case of “The Inn of the Sixth Happiness,” the producers scoured the Chinese community in Liverpool and elsewhere to recruit enough Chinese children and adults for the crowd scenes.

However, where larger historical facts were concerned, if they stood in the way of box office appeal Hollywood frequently gave them short shrift. For instance, the Chinese romantic interest of Gladys Aylward, Colonel Lin Nan, was peremptorily turned into a Eurasian played by Curt Jürgens, while Robert

Donat took on the role of a Chinese mandarin.

I had thought that by signing on as an extra I would get a chance to get close to Ingrid Bergman and watch her in action. Perhaps even to exchange a few words with her. But I was to be disabused. Most of the time of an extra was spent simply hanging around with other extras, waiting for the director to shoot a scene. It was the most boring kind of work imaginable, probably akin to serving as a lookout for an illegal gambling establishment or an opium den. Although I only ever caught a glimpse of Ingrid Bergman at a distance during shooting, I could not complain. The money was good, much better than from writing.

As it happened, when the film was released in Britain, it became the second most popular film for that year. But that did nothing for my ego. I could not even boast that I had appeared in a film with Ingrid Bergman because I could not identify myself in a single scene in the end product. All the crowd scenes I had been involved in must have met their fate on the cutting room floor.

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During the year I was in London, I managed to complete a total of four short stories. At various times, one or all of them did the rounds of magazine offices collecting rejection slips. Back then, a writer had to type up each story and submit it with a stamped self-addressed envelope for its return, in the event of the normal dreaded rejection. It was always a disheartening sight when the post arrived each morning to find an envelope with one's own handwriting delivering yet another rejection slip.

When at last I got an acceptance and a cheque, I made a rough mental calculation and concluded that the fee received just about covered the amount of postage I had spent on submitting the four stories, with postage paid envelopes for their return. It was a mug's game.

I had to face the reality that the acceptance by Robert North of my

two initial stories had to be a fluke. It was no good deluding myself with following an artistic life in the face of legions of would-be writers getting nothing but rejection slips. Many subsequently successful writers initially got them too. In other fields of artistic endeavour the situation was hardly more promising. It was cold comfort to think of Cézanne never selling a single painting during his lifetime or of Van Gogh selling only one -- to a relative.

It sank into me gradually that I might not be suited to being a writer after all. Those who work with fiction had to wait till long after they had gone for the judgement of history. That was the only judgement that mattered. To write bestsellers was not necessarily to attain posterity. Many such authors were often forgotten within a generation of their demise.

As Somerset Maugham, an enormously popular playwright, novelist and short story writer, was modest enough to point out, no vast importance should be attached to his writing. And he has been active in the world of letters for more than half a century, since 1899. His self-assessment was realistic, for he was a writer who had used his immense talent to track and keep in touch with the fickleness in public taste. Just consider the number of past winners of the Nobel Prize for Literature whose works have sunk virtually without trace.

I, on the other hand, wanted people to act on what I wrote, to attend in some way to the imperfections found in our society. I was more a polemicist, particularly after visiting Ebbw Vale. Posterity held little attraction for me. I was more interested in why millions of men and children around the world still had to labour under such dangerous conditions. Did people no longer care about the plight of others? To share in the joys and sorrows of others was to be human. How many even bother to read *Germinal* nowadays?

To be a polemicist, I needed to be economically secure first, to be free from the necessity of making a living. Survival had to be the order of the day. But I was clearly not paying my way. My capital was shrinking steadily towards the danger level I had set for myself. Accordingly, I gave up writing

fiction to devote my time instead to attending lectures on criminal law and contract and tort at Gray's Inn, with an intention of securing a professional qualification. The same problems of the world were sure to persist even a hundred years from now.

The three remaining stories I had written in London did not see the light of publication for another 40 years.

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In the spring of 1958, Man-Ying arrived in London to enrol at the Ballet Rambert at Notting Hill Gate. Her arrival felt like something of an encumbrance because I was enjoying the occasional company of the Indian sisters who cooked fine curry dinners for me. I had also linked up with a number of female Singaporean students whose company was enjoyable. But I had accepted my responsibility and had to discharge it.

After Man-Ying had been registered and installed in a hostel, I began what I regarded as my minimum duties as a guardian. I met her on weekends to take her for a Chinese meal, to break the monotony of what must be very strange and boring English boarding house food. Showing her the conventional sights was also done -- Buckingham Palace, Downing Street, the British Museum, the National Gallery, the soapboxes at Hyde Park Corner, Waterloo Bridge, Oxford Street and Regent Street, and the various flea markets at Petticoat Lane, Portobello Road and Camden Town. I would either fetch her at her hostel or else she would come to meet me at Radnor Place.

She appeared to have matured further but was still not very talkative. I gained the impression she was more interested in the gamut of *bric-à-brac*, antique jewellery and silverware at the flea markets than the historical objects and paintings in museums and galleries. I could not afford to take her to plays or other performances where an admission fee had to be paid.

One weekend, a couple of months after her arrival, she turned up at Radnor Place visibly out of sorts. I asked her what the matter was but she just shook her head, refusing to answer. After I had persisted for a while, she said: “My dancing’s finished. All my life, I’ve only ever wanted to dance. Now it’s all over.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, perplexed. “You’ve only just arrived.”

Gradually, the story was teased out. It appeared that she noticed she was the only Asian student there. Neither were there African or Middle Eastern students. So, earlier in that week, she had asked her teacher how long she would have to study before being given a chance to join the Rambert Dance Company. She was told there was no chance at all. She was a good dancer, the teacher had assured her, but she could not possibly blend into an ensemble or a chorus. She was smaller than the other girls and her Asian face would stand out darkly against the many paler ones. If she wanted to dance, she should go home to form her own company.

I grasped all at once the nature of her crisis. How could I divine how vast or unrealistic any teenager’s dreams might be? Perhaps she had dreamt of becoming a *Prima Ballerina* like Margot Fonteyn or sharing the stage with all the greatest male dancers in the world.

I tried to comfort her, explaining how difficult it was for dreams to be realised. I recounted my own disappointments and how I had to come to terms with my own limitations. I had come to London with thoughts of establishing myself as a writer. But after the better part of a year, I had collected nothing but rejection slips. In the arts, success often followed what audiences would accept. Hence Westerners played the roles of Chinese in *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* and of Japanese in *The Mikado*. Life was that way.

And in that process of consoling her, I put an arm around her shoulders and she quickly collapsed against my shoulder. Somehow, we ended

up making love.

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In the weekends that followed, Man-Ying and I made voracious congress. I was not sure what it all meant for her, the gasps, the moans, the contortions of her strong, well-shaped legs seemed part of an agonised *adagio* in a bizarre *pas de deux*. Probably normal reaction for a virgin trespassing the gardens of Eros for the first time.

But for me, it was mind-blowing. It represented a release from the curbs that poverty had imposed upon my sensual inclinations. And during those moments of madness, I had allowed pure lust to turn upside down some of my cherished principles.

After the weekend trysts, after the telltale pungencies of fornications had faded from my bed, I could only look with alarm and guilt upon the whole terrible situation. I had violated not only a ward I had a duty to protect but also the trust of her parents.

It was no good trying to shed my responsibilities by pretending that the liaison had been freely and mutually entered into. Man-Ying was too young and inexperienced for such a relationship. She had no awareness of its possible consequences. If she had gone along, it could only be as a diversion from the pain of her shattered dreams, whereas I, who should have known better, had exploited her during a moment of vulnerability. There was no getting around it. The whole thing had to stop before a pregnancy forced our hands. But how?

I could not abandon her to her own devices, for I could tell she was already losing heart in her studies. Left alone, she might fall to pieces, get involved in bad company, take to drink or drugs, or become promiscuous. There was no telling where she might end up.

Neither could she return home after only a few months. That would

spell failure and loss of face all round. And she had lost her precious virginity besides.

I recalled some lines from the *Odes*:

“A man may do a wrong, and Time  
Will fling a cloak to hide his crime;  
A woman who has lost her name  
Is doomed to everlasting shame.”

No, what was left of my conscience would not allow her to face the music alone. And yet, what could I do? My hand-to-mouth existence in London was not sustainable for much longer. Sooner or later, I would have to head back East to put myself in harness, like one of those poor pit ponies in Zola's novel.

I wrestled desperately with the possibility of marriage, the only thing which was in my power to offer. I was by no means confident she would entertain such a proposal. She might well have larger ambitions -- a husband richer than Croesos, brainier than Einstein, handsomer than any *matinée* idol. Who knows? If a modern day Li Po were presented, she might approve of his gallantry but not his drinking habits or appreciate the subtler shades of his poetry.

I was filled with reservations myself. I had no money, no profession and no future, only the dubious shield of a name to give. Though I had known her in the biblical sense, the rest was uncharted territory. We had only communicated sexually. There were elements missing from the heart and the mind, akin to what had been missing when coupling with the Hakka girl. Only worse. I felt as if I were trying to cover up some crime. In a society as conservative as Hong Kong's, marriage would be the only way of doing penance and expunging my guilt. Moreover, 11 years in age and probably about 500 years of history stood between us. I could not visualise how our marriage would get anywhere.

But did marriages have to get anywhere? They were only a socially approved convenience, not a public conveyance. Anna had given birth to four of my father's children without his marrying her. The way he disappeared to Hong Kong for 10 years, on top of a separation of more than four years due to the war, suggested that love had very little to do with their marriage in 1957, the same year I headed for London. In former times, brides were picked by parents. It could be no worse than that.

When I eventually screwed up enough courage to put my proposal to Man-Ying, she showed neither enthusiasm nor dismay. She merely listened as I explained the ramifications. Marriage would spell only a lean life for the foreseeable future. But it would at least provide a cover for returning without attaining any glittering success.

I explained that I was running out of money. I could not remain in London. One way or the other I would have to leave. If we were to marry, I would first need to earn some money for starting the rudiments of a home. I suggested she should continue to study at Ballet Rambert for a year, for sake of appearances, especially when the fees had already been paid. I wanted to give her a goal to aim for, to keep her in check, though I never put it to her that way. All such issues should be carefully considered with her parents before making a decision, I stressed.

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Man-Ying duly accepted my proposal, with the blessing of her parents, and I flew immediately to Singapore. The only item of any material value I had with me was a Stanford Class of 52 gold ring set with a red stone. I gave that to Man-Ying as a token of our agreement but I cannot recall ever seeing that ring on any of her fingers after our marriage. Nor do I have any knowledge of what ultimately happened to it.

I had, in the meantime, secured through my brother Francis a job as sub-editor with the *Straits Times*. I had chosen to work there instead of Hong Kong because the pay was better and the Straits dollar was worth, if memory serves, about three or four Hong Kong dollars. Besides, my extended family was there to provide free accommodation.

Even before the time I left for England, the family had left Blair Road to live in a bungalow in the Serangoon Gardens Estate. For the first time, I found four generations living under one roof when I got there. That was because Francis had married a lovely and extroverted girl called Beatrice and they had produced an infant son.

The size of the family had been much reduced, however. All the aunts have gone their separate ways. My sister Helen had married a man named Jack Chew and had set up house in another bungalow in the Serangoon Gardens Estate. Though my other sister Pauline was still in Singapore, she was at the local university and staying in a hostel. She only dropped by occasionally on weekends to see the family. Tzi-Seng, of course, was in London.

Hence the family now comprised my grandfather, still very spritely at the age of 82; my father and Anna, growing old gracefully; Uncle Yan-Wing, who had begun a career in banking; and Francis and Beatrice with their infant named Terence.