

Crippled Sunday

The Honourable Leung Shing-chee, OBE, JP, member of the Executive and Legislative Councils, epitomised the kind of entrepreneurial success that Hong Kong loved. The only son of a neighbourhood grocer, a drop-out from secondary school, lame in one leg and without apparent resources, he nevertheless managed within a span of 30 years to claw his way to the top of the colony's commercial and social heap. Some wondered occasionally whether the grocery business really provided the launching pad for such spectacular success. Others hinted at less creditable -- and even criminal -- beginnings. But with the passage of time, the respectability conferred by wealth and the deft dissembling of kinder versions of events a veil was thrown over the exact truth.

By the time Mr. Leung burst into prominence ten years back, he was already a man of substance. The deed that catapulted him into the limelight was a controversial dawn raid on a sleepy British trading giant. That foray not only paid off handsomely but secured his reputation as a native son whose commercial daring had to be reckoned with. A dazzling succession of acquisitions and mergers followed. They electrified the stock exchanges and stunned the corporate world. His timing was uncanny, almost psychic. His moves always came just before boardroom quarrels, difficulties with credit lines, desertions by customers or other troubles confounded resistance. Even failed takeovers triggered fluctuations in share prices which brought him quick profits.

Each foray added to his personal fortune. Magazines catering to that vulgar interest in the assets of celebrities had assessed him as among the top hundred in the world. His admirers credited him with an unbeatable combination of business acumen and luck. Since luck was something every Chinese hankered after, they scrambled to hitch their fates to his enterprises.

The great man did not disappoint them. Bonus shares, increased dividends or enhanced share values were the order of the day. But he regarded those who sought to ride on his winning streak with contempt, as ignoramuses with no inkling of how men of destiny arranged their own luck. Had it not been said that even the devil could be brought into service for enough money? And what better use was there for the devil than to fix the odds? At that moment Mr. Leung was engaged in his greatest endeavour and he was certainly leaving nothing to chance.

Notwithstanding his disdain for the common herd, Mr. Leung was conscious that popularity was essential to his ambitions. He took pains, therefore, to cultivate influential segments of the community. He donated generously to the pet charities of society ladies. Hardly a year went by without his endowing a new hospital wing, a school for the deaf or a university chair.

For business associates on the way up, he lent his prestige by accepting directorships in their firms or by taking small equity stakes in quite uninteresting ventures. To bankers, underwriters and others of that ilk, his acquisitions, restructurings and debt instruments represented rich pickings. To journalists, he dispensed quotable quotes and periodic invitations to gourmet meals. To colonial mandarins, he offered absolute dependability, which simply meant toeing the government line and not asking awkward questions. He knew a knighthood would be a just reward.

To add to his public appeal, he affected a self-effacing manner, as if he were underclass for his elevated estate. His voice, warm and well-modulated, was hesitant in speech. He made public pronouncements only in Chinese, although his English was quite adequate. That endeared him to the more chauvinistic elements of the population.

His squarish face, marked by a foreshortened brow, often flashed a smile which tilted one corner of his mouth more than the other. The configuration of his hair was unique. Closely cropped on the sides, a thin gray thatch seemed to gather at the top like a much abused barrister's wig. That quaint effect, taken together with his crooked smile and his garlic bulb of a nose, lent him certain comic aspects that were not without appeal. As if all that were not enough, he also took to exaggerating his limp to emphasise the punishment endured by his uneven legs.

It was small wonder, therefore, that few begrudged Mr. Leung his success, as he had patently achieved it against the denial of formal education, the cruelty of physical impairment and the impediments of alien business practices. It was only in the tea houses and food stalls frequented by the lower classes that there would be whispers about the man commonly referred to as "The Cripple". Such secretive exchanges would be conducted in hushed tones, as if those involved feared being overheard.

To apprehend the hidden side of the honourable councillor, it would be necessary to observe him on a Sunday, the day set aside for dealing with henchmen and underlings. The transformation would be startling. Except for the telltale arrangement of hair, he would be practically unrecognisable.

Gone would be the conservative Western suits in pinstripe or grey. Instead he would wear a Chinese suit buttoned all the way down the front, usually of pongee or cotton in summer and worsted material in winter. A pair of black cloth shoes would complete his accoutrements, except for a collapsible paper fan carried during the hot season. Such traditional attire, loosely fitted around his huge frame, would accentuate his comfortably protruding stomach and lend him the appearance of a small-time merchant or a broker in some pedestrian trade.

But it would be the changes in his features that would be most remarkable. His whole being would convey an impression of superiority and

cunning. His eyes, hardened by cynicism, would insinuate vast experience with lies, deceit and betrayal. The crooked smile would disappear, together with any suggestion of humility. His wide mouth, compressed and ruthless, would hint at familiarity with the entire range of human weaknesses. His ill-shaped nose would lose its comic qualities and complement the brutal cast of his mouth, especially when the nostrils distended and relaxed with excitement, like those of a prize-fighter on the point of achieving a knockout.

On a certain Sunday in early summer, "The Cripple" emerged unrecognized from that magnificent edifice of glass and steel known as the House of Leung. His Sunday expression was in place as he limped briskly towards the old quarter of the city. His demeanour conveyed a hint of annoyance. The visit to his corporate headquarters, necessitated by some last minute changes to a contract of some importance, had intruded upon his Sunday affairs. He resented being deflected from other preoccupations, which, in the present instance, included a report he had insisted on receiving that afternoon. If it contained what he wanted, his greatest hope would be fulfilled. Not even a knighthood would come close as a prize!

The corporate wizard was at heart a traditionalist, harbouring deep attachments to roots and continuity. During his travels, whenever he encountered a sign like "Firmin and Sons, Buttonmakers since 1677" or "Randolf and Sons, Gunmakers since 1791", he would be moved beyond words. There seemed to be something hallowed about an enterprise flourishing long after its founder had disappeared from the scene. That sort of immortality seemed a fitting tribute to its founder. He had built his pitiable inheritance into an international conglomerate worth billions and he, too, hungered after recognition by future generations. After all, those surnamed Kung still took pride in tracing their ancestry back to Confucius.

But he could hardly achieve that without an heir. The ancients had rightly regarded not bringing a son into the world as the worst of filial failings, for how else could ancestors be honoured? His wife had died after bearing three daughters, none of any account. Each was now wedded to a weak and spineless husband. He could not possibly entrust his place in history to them. He might have done dubious things to get where he was, but no more than necessary in a cut-throat world. His achievements had to be worthy of remembrance. Thoughts of having no son to perpetuate his name, of the House of Leung crumbling after him, or of his empire being taken over by a Chan or a Lee or, worse still, by a foreigner with an unpronounceable name, was anathema.

For the last two years, therefore, his energies had been devoted to the problem of succession. Perhaps he should have attended to it sooner. But he had been too busy carving out his empire. Each battle for control of a company was more absorbing than any woman and each victory more sweet. Marriage was in any case a chancy affair, with no guarantee of a son. He had to have certitude. The

arrangements he had put in place had to produce the desired result. Even at that very moment he was waiting for confirmation of success from Pang, his most trusted lieutenant.

That thought sent him hobbling more swiftly towards his destination. His eyes seemed to sparkle with anticipatory excitement while a twisted, self-satisfied smile dissolved the concentration of meanness around his mouth.

Mr. Leung loved the old Western District, not so much because that was where he had begun his climb to fame and fortune, but because of its stubbornly Chinese flavour. He felt at ease amid its familiar sights, sounds, colours and smells. He felt reassured by the anarchy of shoppers and pedlars, the chaos of children at play, the rhythmic chants of coolies rending the air, the laundry fluttering everywhere like Manchu banners, the lively dissonance of eastern colours, and the sudden aromas of sesame cakes, bubbling noodles and other mouth-watering fares. Everything spoke of a life that was good, fecund and enduring.

A sudden pain in his left ankle alerted Mr. Leung that he had been moving too fast. The pain accentuated his limp and brought back memories of its origin.

It had happened when he was five. He was fond of playing in his father's grocery store which had a cockloft overhanging the rear half of the premises. The cockloft was eight feet high and was accessible by a perpendicular wooden ladder fixed to the wall. He had often climbed the ladder, pretending he was scaling a sacred mountain nurturing rare life-enhancing herbs.

One day he was on the point of climbing down from his imaginary mountain when his father addressed him. "Wait," his father had said. "Do you want to learn to fly? I'll teach you. Stand at the edge of the cockloft, flap your arms and jump. With practice you can fly like a bird."

"I'm afraid, Father," he had replied. "It's so high."

"Why be afraid? I'm your father. Do you think I will let you get hurt? Look, I can almost touch you where I am. I'm here to catch you if things go wrong. Just jump."

He obeyed. But in the split second after jumping he saw his father stepping back and dropping his arms. "Faa-the-err!" he had screamed, before crashing onto the concrete floor.

His next recollections were those of pain and tears, of his mother's agitated fuss, foul-tasting herbal concoctions and his left ankle swollen like a melon. Two other elements stood out in his memory. One was his father's quiet and unfailing presence and the other was his own bewilderment over that inexplicable betrayal.

Some days later, after the tensions of the household had subsided, his father spoke to him. "I'm sorry you hurt yourself," his father had said, stroking his

head with tenderness. “You trusted me and I let you down. I did that to teach you something important. We live in treacherous times. It’s dangerous to put too much trust in anyone. Even those closest to you are capable of betrayal. Remember that always.”

“I will, Father.”

“Good. Now rest. Your ankle will soon be good as new.”

But his ankle never became good as new. The joint had been fractured and neither bonesetters nor soothing compresses could repair the damage. Thus his deformity came about. In the beginning he felt ashamed when other children teased him. But now he was proud of it, like a veteran displaying a war wound meritoriously acquired.

At last Mr. Leung reached the large, open-fronted grocery where the drama had occurred half a century ago. The red characters of the wooden signboard merely said “Leung’s Store”. The premises had remained unchanged since his childhood, except for the addition of a three-foot fence across the front of the cockloft and the replacement of the ladder by a set of stairs. The cockloft now served as an office, furnished with an old mahogany desk, some chairs and stools and a small safe.

The store was a veritable cornucopia. Metal bins and wooden containers were heaped with lotus seeds from Kwangsi, black dates from Peking, red beans from Tientsin, edible fungi from Szechuan, dried shrimps from Amoy, polished rice from Thailand, ginkgo nuts, dehydrated cole, jellied eggs, dried mushrooms and an endless variety of other items. The air was suffused with rich and appetising smells.

Mr. Leung stood momentarily before the store and noted the number of customers inside. It was what a grocer’s shop ought to be like, he reflected, inhaling the pungencies. People should be able to feel, smell and taste their groceries. Although his empire included an enormously profitable chain of supermarkets, he disliked their sterilised cleanliness, with everything vaccum-sealed, cellophane-wrapped and untouched by human hands. He regretted the spread of foreign habits passing for progress.

Mr. Leung’s appearance brought Old Ting scurrying forward in greeting. Old Ting was a wizened old man with a face brown and furrowed like a walnut. He had been with the store for more than forty years. He followed his employer to the cockloft and poured him a cup of tea.

The sight of Old Ting reminded Mr. Leung that the years were catching up with them. Time was running out. That thought stirred again the vexed problem of succession. “Business seems steady,” he said nonchalantly, as he placed the collapsible fan on the desk and sat down.

“Providence has been kind,” Old Ting replied. There was a porcelain drum stool next to the desk but Old Ting resisted the temptation to sit and chat about

old times. He knew visitors would soon arrive. "I had best go and lend a hand," he added.

Mr. Leung nodded. "Send Pang up the moment he comes," he said, as Old Ting disappeared down the stairs.

How astonishingly easy it had been to turn adversity into triumph, he thought, as he spread his fan to cool himself. His father had fallen ill during the Japanese occupation and that had necessitated his leaving school to run the store. The lack of proper food and medicine exacerbated his father's illness and he died two years later.

He was only sixteen at the time. The situation was desperate. Although the war was winding down, food was in short supply and those who had it were reluctant to exchange it for occupation currency of diminishing worth. By the time peace came the store had become a hollow shell, with only Old Ting in attendance. His father's funeral expenses had exhausted resources which might have otherwise gone into revitalising the business.

The prospect of destitution gnawed at his vitals like termites. His ambitions, driven by the need to compensate for his crippled limb, had been extravagant even then. He had dreamt of manufacturing products that would turn his name into a household word, of creating a commercial and industrial conglomerate as powerful as the great international combines. But impoverished and deprived of the guidance of his father, he saw his dreams fading away. To make matters worse, even the modest livelihood for himself and his mother was in jeopardy. He felt cheated and aggrieved.

Then an opportunity came. Civil war broke out in China and the import of luxuries was banned. An acquaintance suggested that big money could be had for smuggling in items craved by the rich. The free port of Hong Kong was ideally situated. It was only a matter of getting goods across a boundary drawn on the sea. What harm was there in supplying French perfumes or nylon stockings to fashionable ladies? Of American cigarettes and Napoleon brandy to the well-to-do? All that was required was a junk and a crew familiar with the South China coast. Since junks brought in Chinese foodstuff, could a master with a taste for easy money not be found?

The desperation of his circumstances rendered him receptive to the overture. He knew just the junk master for the job. He was himself no respecter of politics. Businessmen were supposed to be risk-takers, responding to demands in the marketplace. He wanted more than anything else to become a great businessman. If a few laws had to be bent to bring that about, the price had to be paid.

So he threw himself into the venture. He soon became expert at falsifying manifests, bribing custom officials and judging the right balance between risks and rewards. He also spotted opportunities for importing cheap foodstuffs on

the return trips. If he sometimes evaded duty on native wines or brought in rice in violation of government quotas, that just represented icing on the cake. The money flowed in and the sums exceeded his wildest expectations.

The conflict in China intensified when the great powers began taking sides. Uncertainty, corruption and rampant inflation led to a demand for gold. Political enemies, local warlords and the underworld alike were anxious for more powerful weapons of slaughter. The partners seized those fresh opportunities for profit.

In the meantime Mr. Leung's grocery trade prospered and the number of outlets multiplied. A calculation of his cashflow and capital convinced him he had sufficient to make a go at legitimate business. So he became less active in the smuggling syndicate and devoted his efforts to catching the first of the great Hong Kong economic booms. It then became a simple matter of vertical and horizontal integration.

Becoming less active and no longer going on smuggling runs proved fortunate for Mr. Leung. A number of his erstwhile partners met untimely ends. During one voyage they were intercepted carrying weapons to the wrong side in the civil war and were summarily executed as traitors. For a time, rumours circulated linking Mr. Leung's name to some sort of betrayal. But his conscience was clear.

With the demise of most of his partners, Mr. Leung inherited the intelligence system and the shady connections that had been built up and he adapted them to business purposes. The network of informers, made up of servants, office cleaners, messengers, chauffeurs, pimps, telephone operators and others at the lowest levels of society, became his eyes and ears. They brought him intercepted messages, scraps of discarded documents and snatches of overheard conversations, as only those occupying menial positions of trust could. They revealed to him the family quarrels, the secret vices and the private weaknesses of the great and the mighty.

Information thus gleaned was used with telling effect in corporate struggles. He rewarded informants generously. As his empire expanded, he promoted the most trusted underlings and allocated to them the job of sifting the growing torrent of information. It was these key underlings who reported each Sunday at the store.

Mr. Leung's reminiscences were interrupted by Old Ting ushering up the first of his visitors. Thereafter his henchmen came at regular intervals. But he only listened half-heartedly to their reports before dismissing them with impatience. The only report he wanted was the one by Pang. But Pang was late. It was unlike him. That struck him as ominous.

What could possibly go wrong? His plan was simplicity itself. It involved locating a poor but conservative family with a virgin daughter of child-bearing age and then offering a million dollars for the daughter to bear a child. The

identity of the father would remain secret until marriage, which was conditional upon a male child being conceived. Otherwise, the family could keep the money and the child, with no further obligation on either side.

Mr. Leung smiled to himself over the perfection of his scheme. The sum offered was attractive enough for middle-class families. The more conservative families would understand that marriage was a business arrangement and what he was seeking was a human brood mare and not romantic love. The virgin status, certifiable through medical examinations, would avoid being foisted with a harlot. Masks and blindfolds would protect his identity. Should a male child be conceived, what family would balk at a union with him? The negotiations, the timing of nocturnal assignations, the staffing of a secluded villa, the attendance of doctors and nurses after conception, the security and other arrangements were matters Pang was perfectly capable of handling.

The first woman located had unfortunately turned out a failure. She conceived a daughter. Pregnancy had been confirmed in a second woman. Determining the sex of the foetus was all that was required. But the doctors were over-cautious about making tests, not realising he could not afford wasting precious months to discover what he had sired. In the end he had instructed Pang to insist on tests and to report by the weekend.

At long last Pang arrived. He was a stocky man in his mid-forties. He appeared pale and breathless. "I'm sorry, boss. Unhappy tidings." were the first words he uttered.

"Not another girl?" Mr. Leung thundered.

"it was a son, boss, but"

"But what?"

"I was about to bring you the test results, boss, when the lady took sick. I had to take her to hospital. That's why I'm late. I'm sorry, boss, but she lost the child. The doctors say it was not their fault. They had warned of the risk of extracting fluid from the womb."

Mr. Leung banged his fist on the desk and shook with agitation. He felt like screaming. For the first time since the age of five fear churned through his bowels. But the fear was not the kind thrilling a child before a risky adventure. Instead it was insidious and relentless, devouring him like some terrible maw. His heart pounded wildly against his chest and the bitter taste of doom parched his throat.

Aloud, he croaked: "We must start again! Quickly, at once!"