

CHAPTER 5

No Sure Winners

MY INVOLVEMENT WITH HORSES started many years ago, in a quite roundabout way. My initial interest was fuelled by little more than wishful thinking. Soon after I had landed my first steady job as a cub reporter with the *South China Morning Post*, I discovered my pay was perilously close to starvation level, at HK\$150 per month or five dollars per day. At the then prevailing exchange rate, that would come to around 80 American cents per day. Though I had only a secondary school education and no job experience to speak of other than washing dishes, I doubted if even proponents of a free labour market could argue that the sum amounted to a reasonable living wage. I could both hear and feel my stomach perpetually growling for food.

I therefore joined the countless thousands of indigent and desperate people by investing two dollars from time to time in one of those sweepstake tickets issued by the Hong Kong Jockey Club for one of its big races. A ticket holder was entitled — until the race in question has been run — to dream of untold riches coming his way. For the overwhelming number of ticket purchasers, however, the outcome had to be one of disappointment. The system, however, was a money-spinner for the Jockey Club, enabling it to finance its various charitable projects.

The system also provided an opportunity for some clever people to display their entrepreneurial flair. After the race, the number of the ticket linked to

the winner horse would be announced together with the figure for the prize. The word soon got around that if someone was lucky enough to hold the winning ticket, all he had to do would be to let that fact be known. Soon he could become even luckier. A stranger could approach him and offer him a sum in ready cash significantly higher than the sum announced to purchase his winning ticket from him.

The rationale for such strange losing transactions was based on sound practical considerations. Anyone appearing at the Jockey Club with the winning ticket would be issued with a cheque in his name for the winning amount. That cheque would be irrefutable proof that that person has been lucky and had come by the money legitimately. It would not be a surprise, upon closer scrutiny, to discover how lucky some police officers and others with a need to explain their wealth could be! And who could argue against luck after it had been laundered and certified by the Jockey Club?

In my own case, upon learning of what went on, I soon decided to dream without a sweepstake ticket. Moreover, reality told me that for the two dollars required to dream I could have the sure thing of two large and steaming bowls of *wonton* noodles to fill my stomach.

The government was not slow to note how readily a gambling-obsessed population was prepared to part with money for any kind of punt. In conjunction with the Jockey Club, it inaugurated a government lottery in July of 1962 to replace sweepstake tickets. On that first try, 1,712,000 tickets were sold and the top prize came to a far greater sum than for a sweepstake — HK\$684,800 to be exact.

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My first brush with a living horse came about four years later, when I was studying at Stanford. I had a friend who ran a riding stable nearby and he offered me some riding lessons. The experience of galloping over open

country at 20-odd-miles-an-hour was truly exhilarating. For a short while, I developed a different kind of illusion, no doubt one inspired in part by the Chinese comics I had read during boyhood and in part by the Hollywood cowboy films I had seen; I imagined it would be marvellous if I could spend my life riding around outlandish places on horseback, to right wrongs and to deliver justice with a fast gun.



On horseback in California in 1951.

That fantasy also evaporated the moment I returned to the urbanised setting of Hong Kong. My interest in horses remained, however, though along a more intellectual bent.

I gradually began to appreciate the symbolisms that the Chinese attached to that magnificent animal and then its representation in paintings. The Chinese way of painting seemed to bring out better the spirit of the animal than the verisimilitudes portrayed in Western art. The Chinese approach could be traced back to the eighth century rebellion in art, led by the painter Wu Tao-Tzu, against mere physical accuracy in reproducing reality. Wu's rebellion, carried on by his pupils, had far-reaching consequences and accounted for some of the unique characteristics in Chinese paintings still

much appreciated today.

In respect of horses, those two traditions came together in a painting by the Jesuit missionary Giuseppe Castiglione. He depicted them in a hybrid style, combining Western realism with Chinese composition and brushwork. His celebrated painting, *One Hundred Horses*, was much admired by several Ching Emperors and hangs today in the National Palace Museum in Taipei.

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My interest in horses continued because of my father-in-law. He punted regularly on Jockey Club races. In 1959, upon returning to Hong Kong after marrying in Singapore, I found I could not earn enough to set up a home on my own. The high rentals demanded by local landlords meant I had either to go for a sheer money-grubbing job or else fall back on accepting temporary support from my in-laws. A woolly mix of idealism and stubbornness caused me to choose the latter. But I was not to know that the “temporary” nature of that support ended up lasting nine years!

In sharing an apartment with my father-in-law, I noted his absorption with magazines and newspapers containing reports of training times of horses, their past performances in races over different distances and the selections made by various tipsters on each weekend’s racing programmes. He apparently did not have any other form of diversion, like drinking, playing *mah-jong* or keeping mistresses.

I never discovered during those years living with him whether he came out ahead or otherwise on his bets. He was a man with quite impassive features and a wonderful trait of never saying more than absolutely necessary. I noticed, however, that he sometimes returned home from a race meeting with a brighter sparkle in his eyes. I could only surmise he might have had a few winning punts. But as a guest in his household and as a son-in-law, it would not have been seemly to be inquisitive about his triumphs or defeats.

It remained a guessing game.

In pondering his obsession, I wondered whether betting on horse races was a mug's game. It was a gamble over which the bettor had not the slightest control over any of the variables. Wagering on an outcome based largely upon the performances of two thoroughly unreliable creatures — the one doing the running and the other the riding — competing against a host of other equally unreliable creatures had to be risky beyond calculation. If I had to gamble on anything, I would much rather do it in a form over which I had some control, like in a game of *mah-jong* or bridge. Horse racing thus failed to spark any inordinate interest in me.

Two or three years later, however, I was nudged into taking a greater interest in horse racing in general and in the Hong Kong Jockey Club in particular.

By then, I had joined the colony's civil service and one of my first assignments had been to serve as the secretary of the Hong Kong War Memorial Fund, a statutory body responsible for the welfare of the families of members of the voluntary armed services killed during World War II. The chairman of the Fund was a local notable by the name of Sir Sik-Nin Chau. He was the head of a prosperous Chinese bank and a senior member of the colony's Executive Council. In addition, he was also the first Chinese to be made a steward in the expatriate-dominated Jockey Club.

I must have caught Sir Sik-Nin's eye in some way because one day, out of the blue, he asked if I would like to become a member of the Jockey Club. The proposition took me aback. It was notoriously difficult for a Chinese to gain admission. Thousands wanted to join because the club's amenities, apart from horse racing, included many excellent restaurants, a country club complex and various sporting, gym and horse-riding facilities. Its dues were also amazingly modest.

But the club's byzantine rules rendered it a devil of a job to gain admission. The club was dominated by an inner core of 200 members known as Voting Members, about two-thirds of whom were expatriates. For a person wishing

to join, he must be proposed by a Voting Member and seconded by another. Each Voting Member was limited to putting forward only a single candidate per annum. Hence the maximum number of new members could only be 200 each year.

Because most of the Voting Members were expatriates, many of whom were either unknown or inaccessible to the Chinese making up 98% of the population, the local Voting Members were usually inundated with requests for sponsorship. The limitation to one nominee per annum made for long waiting lists, probably more indefinite than waiting for Godot.

Sir Sik-Nin's offer, therefore, was quite unexpected. I did not have the means, as a civil servant, to indulge in the sport of kings, but I was much attracted to its other facilities. Moreover, becoming a member meant I could get my father-in-law into the more comfortable members' stand as a guest on race days, instead of leaving him to be jostled in the overcrowded public stands. On that basis, I signified my keenness to become a member and I was duly made one by February of 1963.

Sir Sik-Nin went to the trouble of not only arranging for my membership; he went out of his way to invite me and Man-Ying regularly to lunch on race days in his Steward's Box. In that way I began rubbing shoulders with the rich and powerful. In due course, other Stewards invited us to their boxes as well and I got to meet many in that selected coterie of Voting Members and racehorse owners.

Though I enjoyed the sheer excitement of watching horses thundering towards the finishing line, what attracted me more were the sumptuous meals laid out at the various boxes. As for wagering on the outcome of races, I sometimes sought the fruits of my father-in-law's studies. But I never had the luxury of betting more than a few dollars and most of my selections were made like a blindfolded man sticking a pin into a random list of runners. Horse racing during those early years simply did not captivate me anywhere near the degree that *mah-jong* or bridge did. I mainly attended race meetings

to get to know people on the upper crust and to enjoy their fine lunches. But could that be considered — for a civil servant — as accepting advantages in meals and entertainment? There was certainly no possibility of reciprocating on civil service pay. Or should such contacts be considered as part of his social duties? Or should there be no supping with the Devil even with a long spoon?

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As the years trundled by, the number of children in my family multiplied. A routine gradually evolved whereby Man-Ying and I would take the kids for weekend outings, usually beginning with lunch. If the meal were to be in a restaurant in town, the family would walk down from Wise Mansion by way of some of the side streets I usually took to get to work at the Labour Department or the Colonial Secretariat. One of those routes went through a street-side wet market.

I soon noticed that my eldest son, Tien-Kuen, could get easily startled or frightened by fowls suddenly squawking or kicking up a ruckus in their rattan containers. That caused me to reflect on how little contact children had with birds, animals and even interesting insects in the concrete sprawl of Hong Kong. Only urban vermin and pests seemed to be left to multiply.

Most of the wildlife had been hunted to virtual extinction for food during the Japanese occupation. Farms in the New Territories were also steadily being converted to building land. My Eighth Granduncle's holiday bungalow, the Abode of Butterflies, abundant with bees, butterflies and ladybirds, had long since been flattened. Tsing Yee Island itself, where the bungalow had been located, had disappeared as well, to make way for yet more commercial or industrial development.

Hong Kong did not even have a zoo worthy of the name, only a small aviary and a few caged animals at the Botanical Gardens. Though the city is

today among the wealthiest communities in the world and is a territory with no public debt and eye-watering amounts of money in reserves, no one had apparently given much thought to installing a genuine world-class zoo for the edification of its citizens.

How deprived and restricted today's children must be from any direct knowledge of other life forms. What chance had they in an urban environment to come into contact with animals of any size? What price must they pay in terms of a crimped and distorted upbringing, just so that society could go on making money?

Looking back to when I was my son's age, my siblings and I always had our grandfather's chicken in the rear courtyard of No. 10 Blair Road to rely on for eggs and random amusement. We also had grandfather's pet canary delighting us with its chirps and those occasional forays into tall tropical grass to hunt for grasshoppers to feed the bird. Outside the home, an Indian vendor used to come by regularly with a couple of she-goats. Anyone in need of milk could get it, freshly squeezed on the spot.

Even when we were refugees in Australia, I had Jackie Sue, my bosom pal, taking me out to the bush to catch snakes and insects and to trap small game for our meals. Kangaroos and dingoes had been common sights and flocks of sheep and herds of cows were everywhere. In the case of the latter, one could see them, smell them and touch them, as living adjuncts to normal life, before man-made structures in concrete and steel ousted them from our view. To add insult to injury, multiplying strips of car-choked macadam generating pollution and grime became the normality for our everyday lives.

Another aspect of that dismal fate was brought home to me a short while later by a 16-month-old girl. Her parents had invited me for a meal in their home and her mother was anxious to display how precocious her child had been in learning about the facts of life. One of the questions she asked of the child was: "Where does milk come from, darling?"

"The supermarket," the child replied brightly.

The mother was as pleased as punch. It struck me forcefully then that the child would probably grow up in Hong Kong without ever seeing a cow. At 16 months, she was already being conditioned to the artificiality of urban living. I longed to show my children a less restricted view of reality but I was stumped as to how to do so.

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In the meantime, I chanced upon some of the novels by Dick Francis, a former British champion jockey. Francis had ridden for Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, among others. After a nasty fall in a race in 1957, he decided to exchange his riding crop for a pen. His tales, woven around the shenanigans of horse owners, trainers, jockeys, stable boys, bookies, sport writers and others on the fringes of the horse racing industry, became immensely popular.

Notwithstanding the popularity of those books and the hundreds of winners he had ridden as a jockey, Dick Francis was likely to be best remembered among horse racing fanciers for a race he did not win. In 1956, he rode the Queen Mother's horse, Devon Loch, in the prestigious Grand National. Devon Loch cleared the last fence by several lengths and looked to the world like a certain winner. But 50 yards from the finish, the horse suddenly collapsed and could not continue the race. The reason for that failure had never been properly determined and that loss went down in racing history as a shocking surprise, especially for punters who had their money on it.

In Hong Kong, horse racing was big business. The amounts wagered on the Jockey Club tote set world records, not to mention the unquantifiable sums betted with illegal bookies. Although jockeys were sometimes suspended or disciplined for "riding an injudicious race" or for "excessive use of the whip", the local extent of some of the malpractices touched upon by Francis in his novels was by no means clear. At that point in time, the local jockeys were

all supposed to be riding as amateurs; it was thus not always easy to nab anyone for throwing a race should he be slow out of the starting gates or if he dropped his whip early in a race. Or if a horse bored out and lost many lengths upon entering the straight.

As a member of the club, I became intrigued by how everything operated. I began gathering data on the economics of owning a horse. It appeared that stable charges ran to about HK\$600 per month while the winning purse for a race stood at around HK\$6,000. However, 10% of the prize money had to be given to the trainer and another 10% for the jockey. In addition, most owners also conventionally set aside another 10% as tips for the riding boy, the groom, the farrier and others associated with looking after the horse. Therefore, on a rough calculation, a horse had to win at least two races a year to pay its way.

Since I had a number of friends who were owners, I began culling information from their experiences. The first one I approached was Fung Hon-Chu, the Legislative Councillor and businessman I first met when he headed the Hong Kong delegation to the 1963 meeting of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East.

But H.C. was no help. Although he had previously owned a horse, he readily admitted he had little interest in it beyond it conferring upon him a bit of social cachet. His elder brother, Fung Mo-Ying, had been a keen racing man and he had left it to him to manage the animal. He simply paid whatever sum his brother asked him to pay for upkeep. When his brother passed away, he stopped keeping a horse.

My other friends with horses seemed as casual as H.C. over their animals. It was largely a symbol of social and financial arrival for them too, like travelling around in a Rolls Royce or having a pleasure boat bobbing about in the marina.

They no doubt relished having their pictures appearing in newspapers leading their horses into the winner's circle and receiving congratulations

from their friends. But they were all busy people, with their own businesses or professions to run. They could not afford time to manage horses. Hence run-of-the-mill chores were left to trainers. As for betting on their own nags, they did so more or less in blind faith, according to the tips and advice of their trainers and jockeys.

Finding so many owners being so hands-off in overseeing their horses, it occurred to me that there must be plenty of scope for the unscrupulous to manipulate the outcome of races at the expense of the gambling-addicted public. The rules of the Jockey Club had been framed during an era when horse racing was supposed to be indulged in by gentlemen. In the modern era, when gentlemen were an endangered species, those rules would appear to be in drastic need for review.

But I had no direct experience upon which to base suggestions or conjectures. Underlying my thinking was also another group of nagging puzzles: Was it possible for an ordinary member, through prudent management, to maintain a horse on prize money alone? What if the horse acquired was not a sound racing proposition? Would the financial implications be too onerous to bear for a mere salary-earner like myself? I did not have the wherewithal to finance any experimentation on my own. The notion that the sport had to remain a preserve for the wealthy in a city where the gap between the haves and the have-nots had become so stark did not sit well with me.

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In 1968, I was promoted to a level eligible for allocated government quarters. This advancement brought a significant change in my economic circumstances. All at once I became entitled to an apartment three times the size of the one I had been sharing with my in-laws at Wise Mansion. And instead of paying a commercial rental running into the thousands and subsidised by my father-in-law, I was only required to pay 12.5% of my new

salary of HK\$4,580 for rent.

The financial elbow room thus gained caused me to mull the possibility of purchasing a racehorse. Since a civil servant like Sir John Cowperthwaite had made a go of owning one, I did not see why I could not. After due consideration, I decided to chance my arm. But I was cautious. I did not want to shoulder the entire risk; I needed a partner.

The one who came immediately to mind was Fung Hon-Chu. He had previously owned a horse for social kudos, with little interest in horse racing itself. So I approached him. I told him that for my part, he could have all the kudos of ownership; I wanted only full control so that I could either verify or disprove certain theories I had about the viability of horse ownership as a paying proposition. He did not particularly interest on that score. So he readily agreed to share in the venture.

The Jockey Club arrangements for allowing horse ownership were at that time rather antiquated. The club usually bought about 100 yearlings of unknown pedigree from Australia each year — mainly geldings and a handful of mares. Private importation of racehorses was then not allowed.

When the geldings and mares had been passed as sound racing propositions, they would be shipped to Hong Kong and prepared for racing as two-year-olds. Since the number of club members wishing to become owners usually far exceeded the number of ponies available for allocation, a lottery had to be drawn to determine which applicants would get one.

After arrival in Hong Kong, each pony would be assigned a number and a further lottery would be held to match them with the successful winners in the first draw. Since horses had different racing potential, the law of chance determined what an owner might get.

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At around that time, I was fortuitously “elected” to fill a vacancy within the

elite group of 200 Voting Members. I did not know how the whole thing came about because I had not put my name forward. But having been chosen, I felt more duty-bound than ever to discover how things operated within the club.

H.C. and I therefore put in an application to become joint owners for the following year's draw. The cost of acquiring a racehorse was quite modest back then, at only a few thousand dollars. We were lucky enough to be selected in the first lottery and when the horses finally arrived we got assigned a lively-looking chestnut gelding. It turned out to be a very plucky and big-hearted animal.

The elaborate processes of naming our possession, designing our racing colours, engaging a trainer and overseeing its training were left largely to me. Each was a weighty matter. In naming our horse, both an English name and a Chinese name had to be found. In selecting each, the chief requirement was for the names to be capable of exploding easily from human throats, especially when the creature came thundering towards the finishing line. With a Chinese name, it also could not sound inauspicious.

For the English name, H.C. and I settled upon Free Town, as a nod to the free-wheeling business culture in Hong Kong. We wanted a Chinese name that was phonetically similar and eventually decided upon two characters which meant "flying steed", taken from an old quotation. For our colours, we chose a chocolate background with two bands in white and baby blue coming down the centre of the jockey's helmet, across the front of his jacket and down the sleeves. We figured those coloured bands would stand out enough for us to track the horse during a race.

H.C. had no interest in the rest of the arrangements and they were left entirely to me. I had a couple of friends with horses. They had stabled them with a trainer from Shanghai by the name of Cheung Hok-Man. They suggested I did the same with Free Town. They did not consider Cheung to be demonstrably better or more successful than other trainers. Their argument

was that all trainers treated owners of a single pony with little consideration. But if a trainer knew that a group of owners were good friends, he would be more careful in not upsetting any of them, lest the whole lot moved their horses elsewhere. That sounded like practical advice, so I went along with it.

Cheung was a tallish and well-fleshed man of about my own age. He had mournful and slightly diffident eyes. His Cantonese was only fractionally better than that of my *mah-jong* playing friend, Uncle Lau, and his English was nothing to write home about. He was a jovial man, however, one quite anxious to be in the good books of all owners stabling with him. This proved a handicap, as things turned out, because he kept telling owners flattering things about the potential of their animals rather than home truths. Thus it required a fair bit of cross-examination to elicit a reliable assessment. His commentaries were often better after he had a couple of stiff drinks. He seemed to have an iron constitution though, which made light of everything from whisky to vodka and *slivovitz*.

I knew little about preparing a horse for racing but I did know enough to emphasise to Cheung that I did not want Free Town to be rushed. The general expectation was that a horse would not be fully matured till it was about four; therefore it should be allowed to mature at its own pace. Its training should be confined for the time being to conditioning it to jump smartly out of the starting gates — for I had witnessed many a race lost through a bad start — and to exert itself to the utmost once it entered the final stretch.

For a jockey, both Cheung and my friends recommended an amateur by the name of Shum Kam-Sheung. Shum had previously ridden some of the horses owned by H.C. and his elder brother, so I went along with the recommendation. Shum was not the most scintillating of riders but he was simple and guileless and an agreeable companion. In ordinary life he helped his family run a poultry business.

After he had given up riding, I roped him into an occasional *mah-jong* game. I also once went with him on a stag trip to Manila with a couple of

other adventurous men and we all behaved with less than proper decorum at a variety of Filipino night spots.

One weekend, when a *mah-jong* game had been scheduled with Kam-Sheung in the afternoon, Mrs. Shum rang me in the morning to say that her husband was not feeling well and would be unable to play. I accordingly arranged for someone else to take his place. By the afternoon, he was already gone, from a heart attack. He was only in his 40s.

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I soon settled down to studying the racing game. I acquired a pair of binoculars and a stopwatch before cultivating the trust and friendship of all those having anything to do with looking after Free Town. This included the riding boy, who galloped it in morning training sessions whenever the jockey was not available, and the stable groom or *mafoo*, who tended to its feeding and its walking exercises the rest of the time.

The riding boy was a particularly helpful character. He had a cleft lip and spoke with a slur. But he knew his horseflesh and could have made a decent living as a jockey except that he was too big and heavy-boned to make the weight required. Thus he was left to scrape a living as a riding boy. He had a sound feel for the potential of every horse he took out, however, and I could readily rely on his judgements.

The handicap system of racing operated by the Jockey Club divided horses into eight classes. The higher the class, the stiffer the competition and the riskier the betting propositions. Horses in Class Eight had to retire at the end of the racing season unless they could secure a win to get promoted to Class Seven. New arrivals, sometimes called griffins, would not be classified until after they had demonstrated their capabilities in a few races. There was a natural propensity for owners and trainers to try to hoodwink handicappers to gain a lower classification.

Handicapping was, as with most things in life, not an exact science. It was a combination of mathematical calculations and subjective judgements. The theory behind handicapping revolved around the supposition that the weight being carried by a horse affected its galloping speed. Past performances therefore mattered, though other factors were also taken into account, such as the length of a particular race, the pace of the race, the condition of the ground, the age of the animal and the finishing distances relative to other horses in the race. The aim of handicappers would be to assign weights which would — theoretically — give every horse in a race a more or less an equal chance at winning. That made for not only exciting racing but also exciting betting.

In a nutshell, if a horse won, that would be a *prima facie* indication it was superior to the company it had raced against. The handicappers would then either promote it to a higher class or else add a few pounds to the weight it would carry in its next outing. The amount of weight to be added depended on the distances separating the winner from the rest of the field and on the length of the race. The rule of thumb was that three pounds would be added for every length a horse had won by in a five-furlong race, two pounds per length for an eight-furlong race, and so on. By the same token, a horse which finished well back in a race might have its weight reduced.

A common but unauthorised practice followed by some jockeys would be to stop riding out a mount should he find his horse in a hopeless position to win. The hope was that the handicappers would then take the losing distance into account in reducing the weight to be carried in a subsequent race. But such a practice was an infringement of the rules and handicappers could not be so easily fooled. A jockey who did not ride out his horse could be penalised.

One of the assumptions behind the whole system was that every runner in the race would be doing its best to win. But, as the stories of Dick Francis showed, that assumption was not always sound. Whenever big money

was involved, somebody was bound to seek opportunities to fiddle for an advantage.

Within racing circles, gossip and tall tales routinely circulated. Stories of betting syndicates planning coups and of illegal bookies trying to fix racing outcomes were often bandied about. Sometimes, one could see last-minute surges in betting on the tote on some less than fancied runner. Occasionally, simply following the betting on such splurges paid off; at other times it would just be rash money going down the drain. Those in the know often spoke of secret signals by jockeys as they left the saddling enclosure for the starting gate — in the form of a whip being held in the left or right hand or the way he would salute judges as he made his way out of the enclosure. But finding hard evidence to prove trickery or collusion was almost impossible.

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The racecourse at Happy Valley had two tracks — a grass track and a sand track. The day racing would take place on the grass track whereas the evening racing would use the sand track. Some horses preferred the grass; others the sand. Racing on grass was more variable because the going could be anything from firm to good to yielding or to heavy, depending on the weather. The sand track was more consistent. All training took place on the sand track.

Sometimes I would go down to the Happy Valley at the crack of dawn to watch Free Town in training. I would clock its runs and ask the riding boy or the jockey to test its various capabilities, such as how long it could sustain a finishing rush. I would also discuss with the trainer whether the horse would run better with blinkers or whether it needed to be armoured by another horse during training. I would carefully record such bits of information. After watching the training, I would have breakfast in the club house before walking over to my office at Hysan Avenue to start my official duties.

By entering Free Town in races over varying distances I also tried, in

conjunction with the jockey and trainer, to determine the most suitable distance and the most favoured going for the animal. Free Town turned out to be essentially a miler which preferred good going, although against a weak field it could also do well at six furlongs and nine furlongs.

During school holidays I would bring my sons down for the morning gallops, to enable them to feed Free Town with lumps of sugar or handfuls of grass. I warned them to keep their thumbs well tucked while feeding it, lest they be bitten off. They enjoyed those close contacts with a large animal. Later, I also took them to the stables at Shan Kwong Road where horses were kept.

To the best of my recollection, Free Town was initially classified into Class Six but it gradually won its way right up to Class One. It never managed to win a race in that top class, however, because it was by then ageing and had suffered a fetlock injury from which it never fully recovered.

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Since my main purpose in owning a horse was to determine whether it could reasonably be maintained on prize money alone, I set about planning Free Town's racing career with that objective in mind, while taking cognisance of the rules of racing as well.

Straight away, I came face-to-face with a range of ethical tripwires. Without a doubt, I had amassed a considerable amount of private information about the capabilities of Free Town. But what moral obligation had I to share that information with the handicappers or with the general betting public?

That prompted me to make mental comparisons with the approaches of business corporations. Coca-Cola, for instance, spent vast sums in advertising to persuade consumers to buy the beverage. Yet the company had been under no moral or legal obligation to inform purchasers about its exact make-up and the quantum of ingredients used for manufacturing the drink. They

were considered trade secrets. I, on the other hand, had never attempted to persuade the public to bet on Free Town. So why should I disclose what I knew?

Of course, that did not mean sports writers, racing tipsters and others had not recommended Free Town for a wager. Railbirds were a constant presence at morning gallops, each one assessing in his own way the potential of runners. They would naturally note Free Town's trials as well. But they would not have the detailed information I had. They would not know, for instance, my instructions to the riding boy or jockey to begin the training run at what point and over what distance. I would clock those runs myself.

The assessments and recommendations by railbirds would thus be no better than those touted by stockbrokers for companies listed on the stock exchanges — done on limited information and coloured by their own speculations, misconceptions or vested interests. Corporations were often in any case in cahoots with stockbrokers to get favourable write-ups but I wanted only a low profile for my horse. I saw no need to go out of my way to correct misconceptions circulated by others. Like all capitalists, my first responsibility must be to protect the capital investment of H.C. and myself. Indeed, could my private information not be regarded as a form of “intellectual property” to be protected by the law?

In any case, the handicappers were supposed to be there as impartial arbiters, to ensure through the weights they assigned to the whole field that each runner had an equal theoretical winning chance. If people wanted to wager on a horse based on dubious or unreliable opinions, then it was their own lookout.

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During the first two years of Free Town's racing career, it did so well that H.C. and I made a yearly profit on the enterprise. I presented the accounts

to H.C. at the end of each season, together with a cheque as dividend. As a consequence, I managed to persuade H. C. to be a partner for another horse.

We duly put in our application and were again lucky enough to draw another fine chestnut gelding. It had a distinctive white stripe right down the middle of its forehead. We decided to call it Free Lad. For the Chinese equivalent we chose two characters which meant “flying strength”.

Free Lad happily followed Free Town’s winning ways. Thus we demonstrated conclusively — at least to our own satisfaction — that an ordinary Jockey Club member with limited means could nonetheless afford to own a racehorse, provided he managed things patiently and systematically — and also enjoyed a modicum of luck.



Receiving a piece of silverware from the Stewards of the Jockey Club. The lady on my right is Grace Yam, wife of Yam Chi-Kwong, then a statistician in the Economic Services Branch of the Secretariat. Yam was to become the most highly paid central banker in the world when he was made Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Monetary Authority.



Free Town out-classing its opposition far more easily than I had calculated.

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As time passed, the Jockey Club decided to upgrade the standard of jockeyship by inviting professional riders from Britain, Australia and other places to participate in Hong Kong racing. One of those jockeys was a Malaysian by the name of Peter Cheam. After a while, Cheung Hock-Man took Cheam on as his stable jockey and persuaded a number of owners to try him out. Many owners did so, including myself.

Cheam was a young, sturdy and good-looking lad in his late twenties. There was a definite likeableness about him. He demonstrated himself to be a competent and courageous horseman. In spite of his diminutive stature, it soon became evident that he cut quite a dash among young ladies who plied their company in some of the Tsim Sha Tsui nightclubs. He, in turn, had a weakness for their expensive company.

After Cheam had ridden both my horses a couple of times and I felt sufficiently comfortable with him, we settled on a briefing routine. Whenever

he was down for riding either of my horses, we would meet up on the evening before, for a drink or a meal. We would then go through the records of the other mounts ranged against us and discuss tactics for the up-coming race.

On occasion, when we had no expectation of getting anywhere close to winning by virtue of the distance or the going or the strength of opposition, we nonetheless saw every race as an opportunity to test our horses. We might, for example, decide to test one of them on an untried type of surface or distance or to experiment with a short sprint to determine whether it could keep up with the early pace to attempt a win over a longer sprint later in the season.

After we had reached a degree of rapport with each other, I put a proposition to Cheam. I said neither Mr. Fung nor I was a big punter. We had little interest in the odds in any particular race. Our objective was to prove that a person of modest means could still own a racehorse in Hong Kong. That boiled down to the need for each horse to win at least two races per season to pay its way.

I was prepared to grant him the exclusive right to ride my ponies, I said, provided that we would plan their races together and that he would ride during each race according to our joint decision. Given the number of rumours doing the rounds about race-fixing by illegal bookies or betting syndicates, I wanted no surprises and certainly no scandals. I would expect him to be truthful about the capabilities and potential of my horses and to keep those assessments between ourselves. Cheam readily accepted my proposal.

Our arrangement worked well for a couple of seasons and Cheam was delivering the expected winners for the horses to pay for their keep. Cheung, the trainer, seemed happy with him too.

During a subsequent season, I began planning for a win by Free Lad by entering it for a mile race. The mile was its favourite distance; it had won easily over that course in previous outings. The week before, I had asked the trainer to seek the club vet's permission to give it a shot of vitamins as

preparation. I had also gone down for one of the morning gallops to seek assurance from the cleft-lipped riding boy that the horse felt fit and strong under him. I had likewise gone to the stables to ask the *mafoo* whether Free Lad was eating normally and healthily. I saw for myself when I fed it carrots and bunches of fresh-cut grass that its coat was lustrous and glowing with rude health.

After the field had been declared, everything else seemed favourable. Free Lad had drawn a good position at the starting gates and the going was expected to be firm, It was a surface it relished. It had also slipped under the radar of the handicappers, for I figured that, on the weights, it must have at least a class in hand over most of the competition. Therefore its chances ought to be very good. In the overnight betting, it was the third favourite.

It was under those circumstances that I met Cheam for dinner on the evening before the race. He was also to ride another horse in a later race which had already become the raging favourite on the overnight betting.

After we had assessed the rest of the field and agreed the riding tactics for Free Lad, I said: "It looks as if you might be having two winners tomorrow."

"There's no such thing as a sure winner in racing," Cheam replied, in a somewhat more lacklustre manner than usual. "On any given day, a horse or a rider can go off form. Lots of unexpected things can happen in a race."

I felt slightly apprehensive. "You're not trying to tell me that Free Lad's chances are not as sure as we had concluded, are you? I've told Mr. Fung the horse had a good chance and Mrs. Fung's looking to come down to help me lead it into the winner's circle."

"No, I'm confident on Free Lad," he said. "But I'm not so sure on my other mount."

A portentous silence hung between us for a moment, like a doom. I could sense he wanted to tell me something but could not quite get it off his chest. The silence stretched.

Then Cheam said: "Look, you're a man who's knocked around the world.

Do you think people like me are in this racket for our health? We have to get up at the crack of dawn for morning gallops; we starve ourselves silly to make the weights; we work like the devil in the gym to keep fit. And what do we get in return? A lousy contract as a stable jockey, a riding fee for every ride we take, and 10% of a measly purse — if we win, that is. Don't people realise that every time a jockey goes into a race he's risking his neck? Something clips the hoof of his horse and he goes flying over its neck at 35 miles an hour. The second he hits the ground, half a ton of horse flesh might land right on top of him. He could easily get killed or maimed for life. And for what?"

I felt stunned for a moment by his outburst. I was not sure what he was leading up to. Perhaps it was a request for me to lay a bet for him, something some owners have been known to do for jockeys. I had never done so, however, not only because it was contrary to the rules but also because I never had the means to splash money around like that.

Before I could work out a response, Cheam spoke again. His tone sounded more resigned. His momentary agitation had passed.

"You know, the only way a jockey can make any real money in this game is to betray everybody — the trainers, the owners, the stable boys, everybody. Sometimes it's easier to make money by losing than by winning. You've been warned; be smart, be on the lookout for betrayal by anybody who works with your horses."

"Look, you'd better ride a good race on Free Lad tomorrow," I said, sternly. "Otherwise you'd have me to answer to."

Cheam offered a half-smile and a shrug.

The air became heavy with sentiments which could not be expressed. In order to lighten it, I deliberately put on a more jocular tone. "When you run short of money, why don't you simply charm it out of those ladies you're always hanging around with at night spots at Tsim Sha Tsui?"

"What? You expect me to live off the immoral earnings of women?"

"What's the difference — you living off their immoral earnings or they

living off yours?"

Cheam half-opened his mouth for a retort but he would not find the words. Instead, he stared at me and wagged an angry index finger in my direction.

On that note, we called it a night.

* * *

After I had got home, the conversation still weighed on me. Was Cheam trying to warn me that he was going to lose the race on Free Lad the following day? I had known the man for more than two years; yet I knew so little about him and his inner configuration. I had taken him mainly as an extension or adjunct to my part-ownership of horses, as a source of information and an executor of my ambitions. Though I had shared drinks and meals with him, I had not taken him as a fellow human being, with everyday joys and sorrows and dilemmas. It had been the same with the trainer, the riding boy and the *mafoos*.

All of a sudden I felt thoroughly ashamed. How could I have gone so insensitive to the fate of others? I was supposed to be one of the elite 200 Voting Members overseeing the affairs of the club. Yet, like so many others of that group, I had merely voted for the stewards and left it to them to run things. To concentrate on making my horses pay their way had shrunk my angle of vision and caused me to slip unnoticed into an elitist attitude. That awareness troubled my sleep that night.

As things turned out, Cheam did not betray me. Free Lad won handily, as he had said it would, but the raging favourite he was on in the other race only managed to come fourth.

* * *

It was to be more than a year later, after our uneasy conversation had slipped

from memory, that Cheam blind-sided everybody by unexpectedly winning a mile and a half race at long odds on Free Lad.

It happened towards the end of the season, after both my horses had won sufficient in prize money for their keep. I then decided to enter Free Lad for a mile and a half race, not expecting it to get anywhere but in the hope of persuading the handicappers to cut a few pounds from its back for the following season. The horse had by then won so many races over a mile that the public perception was that it was an ideal miler but nothing more.

That had become my impression too. Cheam and I had previously tried the horse out over a mile and a quarter and it had faded badly towards the end. So Cheam, the trainer and everybody else agreed that it could not last out for a mile and a half. So no special effort had been made to prepare it for the race. Moreover, the going was predicted to be good to yielding, which was not best suited for Free Lad. It preferred firm ground.

The evening before the race, Cheam and I met briefly and agreed we would let Free Lad set the early pace so that after the first mile it would be well exhausted. I then went out for dinner with a friend who was also a horse owner and a Voting Member. He held the sole agency for importing a wide range of Italian household appliances.

During the course of dinner, my friend told me he would not be able to attend the races the following day because he had to fly off to Italy in the morning. But he wanted me to bet HK\$100 on both win and place on Free Lad and another HK\$100 on a quinella bet, which would link Free Lad with the rest of the field. That meant Free Lad had to come either first or second for the bet to win.

I told him to save his money because there was no chance of Free Lad being in the frame. I went into all the detailed reasoning for that conclusion, much as Cheam had set out for me, and pointed out in addition that the overnight odds were being quoted at 80 to one.

But my friend could not be persuaded.

“My dear chap, you’re talking about horse racing,” he said. “There are no sure winners or losers in that game. Anything can happen. It has been my lifelong habit to bet always that same amount whenever a friend of mine has a horse running, regardless of what he might tell me. Overall, my system hasn’t done too badly. So don’t jinx my system.” So saying, he handed me HK\$300.

Rather than arguing further with him, I accepted the money. My intention was not to place his bets but to return the money to him after his trip, telling him he should really have had more faith in my assessment.

As the race was being run, Cheam appeared to be riding to plan. He opened up a big early lead and eased Free Lad after about a mile. But as the rest of the field began catching up, Free Lad somehow found a second wind and finished strongly enough to win the race.

I watched dumbfounded. The winning odds had shortened before the off but they were still more than 60 to one. The eventual quinella payout came to a couple of thousand. On the basis of the bets I had failed to place for my friend, I owed him in excess of HK\$10,000, almost twice the net amount of prize money coming to the partnership.

I realised that Cheam must have been secretly testing out the capabilities of Free Lad over the years but had kept his findings to himself. I remembered then that the riding boy had once remarked that he felt Free Lad might do well over nine furlongs. But since the horse was such a consistent miler and had failed over a mile and a quarter, I had carelessly given no further thought to that opinion.

By the time I had recovered from my shock sufficiently to want to give Cheam a piece of my mind, the man had disappeared. The race had been towards the end of the season and he had gone back to ride in Malaysia. That was the last I saw of him.

A few years later, news came from Malaysia that Cheam had fallen off a horse during a race and had been instantly killed. I felt a great sadness

upon hearing the report. It struck me that he might somehow have foreseen his own demise. Although he had made a thorough fool out of me, he had remained a quite likeable man. In a way, I suppose he had also been as honest with me as anyone could have expected from a jockey.

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After Free Town and Free Lad, Fung Hon-Chu and I went on to co-own two more horses before our partnership ended. Neither was as magnificent or as consistent a racehorse as either Free Town or Free Lad. But overall our partnership had been profitable enough to substantiate our point about the viability of horse ownership on slender means.

Over the years, our horses amassed collectively quite a number of silver cups and trophies. Whenever it happened, I would go to the same silversmith as the Jockey Club and have a duplicate made, so that each of the partners could have his own trophy. The cost was met out of our common kitty.

The trouble with silverware was that it tarnished quite quickly. When I was living in Hong Kong, the polishing was done by Ah Duen or some other servant. I was not terribly bothered by that chore when someone else had to do it. But after I had migrated to London and had to do the polishing myself, I soon grew weary of the task.

One day, I took the cups and trophies to a precious-metal scrap dealer in Hatton Garden and sold the lot. They fetched a handy sum of over £1,000.