

CHAPTER 9

Of Love and Lust (Part II)

HONG KONG, EVER SINCE it became a British Crown Colony, has always been receptive to outsiders and to external influences and ideas. The initial waves of outsiders who came were naturally people from the neighbouring Kwangtung Province of China, compelled to move either by harsh living conditions or dreams of a better future. Among those early arrivals was my great-grandfather, a school teacher. He decided to make the then malaria-ridden place as his home. He raised six children, three boys and three girls, the youngest of the boys being my grandfather.

My great-grandfather's three sons all attended the then Hong Kong Medical College, with two of them qualifying as doctors and the third a dentist. All three migrated. My grandfather took an appointment with the British Colonial Service as a medical officer in Singapore. His eldest brother, also a doctor, migrated to San Francisco, while his dentist brother set up a practice in Ipoh in Malaya. Unfortunately, family oral history left no mention of what happened to the three sisters.

My father, born in Singapore, returned to Hong Kong for his university education and while studying there married my mother and produced me, thereby giving me my connection with Hong Kong.

Over time, for those undergoing hard economic times in their native places, the colony functioned as both a haven of hope and refuge and an enclave

offering business opportunities. During the 1960s, for example, the Vietnam War brought boatloads of Vietnamese refugees as well as vast numbers of Western servicemen on “rest and recreation” to sample the fleshpots of Wanchai and Tsim Sha Tsui.

Inside the United States, however, the Vietnam conflict gave rise to social divisions. The deployment of chemical weapons like Agent Orange and napalm (which had been secretly developed at Harvard) against civilian populations alarmed the more idealistic American students. In 1966, they began demonstrating against the war at Berkeley in California and at Wayne State in Michigan.

They sought a more harmonious and humane way of settling disputes. Under the influence of rock music and psychedelic drugs, they coined the slogan of making love instead of war. Small groups began gathering in San Francisco, with headbands, beads, tattoos and outlandish clothes. It culminated in 1967 in over 100,000 spermatozoid-fuelled and drug-enhanced people participating in a “Summer of Love”.

That mood found further expression at Woodstock in August of 1969, when a crowd of some 400,000 gathered at a 600-acre farm in the Catskills for three days of music, peace and youthful exuberance. Although the weather turned the gathering into three days of rain, mud and promiscuous sex, the participants nonetheless enjoyed themselves.

The song of sexual liberation, thus given voice, was not lost upon Hong Kong. But it was picked up in the colony initially by only middle-aged fuddy-duddies in the elites rather than by the young. The latter were probably too crushed by financial hardships and an educational system fixated upon examinations to give much thought to the great issues of war and peace or about sexual liberation. It was left to the better-off academic crowd, the legal professionals and the Administrative Officers in the government to make the running.

I only had limited knowledge of what went on in the universities and in

the legal profession. It was among Administrative Officers that my knowledge was far more extensive and direct.

* * *

Ever since I joined the Administrative Service, I had detected a covert struggle between the prudes and the sexual libertarians. The hanky-panky that went on ranged from the then Colonial Secretary all the way down to the lowest ranks. There was possibly something in Henry Kissinger's remark about power being a very potent aphrodisiac.

Upon my return from Oxford in the second half of 1971, I discovered already in existence a coven of three married expatriate Administrative Officers engaged in a lively wife-swapping arrangement. Unsurprisingly, their marriages did not survive their sexual experiments.

As for the rest of the service, adulteries and infidelities were far from uncommon at all levels. Today, more than 45 years after that period, I can still reel off from the top of my head the names of at least a dozen local and expatriate Administrative Officers, evenly split between males and females, who had engaged in out-of-marriage sex. And I do not even have to include myself in that number!

It was during such a morally equivocal period in 1971 that the Hong Kong government chose to propose outlawing the long established Chinese institution of polygamy. Up till then, both monogamy and polygamy were legally recognised, with the latter being dealt with under customary law of the Ching Dynasty.

What had possessed the government to take such an initiative has remained unclear. There had been in 1957 a petition signed by 100,000 women calling for the prohibition of concubinage. Thereafter the issue simmered, notably among feminists, church groups and expatriates who felt that their matrimonial arrangements were far superior to the Chinese ones and hence

should be adopted.

No one appeared to have bothered to organise a counter-petition to demand that the existing freedom to choose between monogamy and polygamy be retained. If one had been organised, I think a far greater number of people — including many concubines and their offspring — might have signed it. In any event, the absence of any vigorous opposition allowed the colonial administration to pretend it was following the general will towards monogamy.

The Chinese Communists had abolished polygamy when they took power in 1949. Earlier, both the Taiping rebels the Kuomintang had adopted a similar approach. The Taiping rebels had announced their position a century earlier, when they set up the Kingdom of Heavenly Peace. But under both instances, the leaders calling for change still managed to enjoy multiple spouses or mistresses.

Singapore banned polygamy in 1961. Agitation in Hong Kong for a ban had waxed and waned over time but I cannot recall demand being significantly greater during 1971. Perhaps it came from the bogus puritanism rampant at Westminster, itself an institution riddled with members selling honours, fiddling expense accounts and engaging in peccadilloes of one kind or another.

For the Chinese, the change proposed met with little enthusiasm. The status quo seemed sensible and acceptable. I might perhaps have been slightly biased because I had been brought up in a polygamous extended family with lots of aunts and step-siblings around.

The majority in Hong Kong seemed rather indifferent, due to some extent by the uncomfortable reality of many Chinese bigwigs having one or more concubines. In addition, many others had themselves been the offspring of concubines. The proposed change would impact upon their social standing, their legitimacy and their financial positions.

In China, the institution of concubinage was as old as marriage itself.

Chinese culture emphasised the importance of perpetuating the family and honouring ancestors. Male descendants were therefore required to give substance to that custom. To leave no male progeny was deemed the worst of all filial failings. Concubinage thus arose as a sort of insurance policy, to guard against such an unhappy eventuality.

Indeed, during the Ming Dynasty, married men were sanctioned to take concubines should they fail to produce a son upon reaching the age of 40. When the Ching Dynasty followed, inheritance laws were put in place to protect the status and financial entitlements of concubines and their offspring.

As I have said, I had been brought up in a polygamous family, with my grandfather maintaining a succession of nine wives. My father's mother only had two children — my father and an older sister. By the time I arrived on the scene, the older sister had already moved out upon marriage. Both I and my siblings would have had no aunt to interact with if our grandfather had not practised polygamy. I therefore gain the impression that polygamy offered a better environment for children. At least the number of adults around the home ensured children got plenty of attention.

Polygamy under the extended family system might possibly be beneficial for adults as well, given the growing number of cases involving domestic violence and even incest. Such crimes had to be more difficult to carry out with the larger number of adults around in an extended household.

There had been, of course, other grounds for recognising polygamy. Ancient civilisations had recognised the diversity in human needs and wants. The Hindus thought nothing of having a spouse to bear children, another to discourse on the Upanishads and a third to provide the delights of zither, flute or song. The prophet Hosea had recorded polygamy among Jews in the eighth century B.C. The Muslims had been accustomed to multiple wives. There appeared to be no compellingly practical or moral objection for disallowing people to choose freely the form of marital arrangement they wished, so long

as they accepted full responsibility for the children they might bring into the world.

Lest anyone should think that I am cooking the case for polygamy from a selfish male point of view, let me hasten to state that I am equally supportive of women having as many husbands as they might wish. For example, I have no difficulty whatsoever in accepting the matriarchal and matrilineal customs of the Mosuo or Na people. Nor of other tribes like them.

The Mosuos live around the Lugu Lake in Yunnan Province. They follow an agrarian form of life, cultivating crops and keeping livestock. Today they number around 40,000. Their religion is essentially animistic, mixed with elements of Tibetan Buddhism. Women head their households and inheritances flow only through the female line. They maintain extended families, with several generations sharing a communal life. When girls reach puberty and are capable of sexual intercourse, they are each given a room of their own.

That is because they practise a form of marriage known as “walking marriages” where all initiatives for having sex rested with the female. If she finds a man attractive, she indicates to him he would be free to visit her after dark. But he has to vacate her room at sunrise. If she still likes him, he could be invited to come again. Otherwise she would look for another man. There is no question of divorce in such “walking marriages” and there is no word for “jealousy” in the Mosuo language.

Such liaisons are kept secret from the rest of the community. When a woman dies, however, the men who had enjoyed her favours are supposed to attend and hold up a banner. It would only be then that her community becomes aware of how many lovers she had entertained. It has been suggested that 50 partners are not uncommon. If a hundred men turn up holding banners at a woman’s funeral, then that woman would automatically be remembered as a great beauty.

When Marco Polo wrote about the promiscuous sexual behaviour in

the kingdom of Caidu in Yunnan, he was probably referring to a tribal community similar to the Mosuos.

Any child born out of “walking marriages” belongs absolutely to the mother. It would be brought up by her family, with the males in her family playing a fatherly role. It is not easy to tell the biological father of a child under such practices. If one could be identified, and if he wishes to maintain a relationship with the child, he is free to call from time to time on the girl’s family and to bring along presents. No custody battle ever arises.

For years Communist cadres have been trying to persuade the Mosuos to convert to “normal” marriages, whatever that might mean. But the Mosuos have clung steadfastly to their traditional ways.

Puritans and pseudo-moralists need not lose sleep over the rest of the “civilised” world being contaminated by Mosuo ways. Entrepreneurs are rushing to destroy that culture. Fleets of buses head towards Lugu Lake every day, filled with tourists eager for a chance to sample a “walking marriage”. Another version of sex tourism, I suppose. The tourists would no doubt pollute both the lake and its environment as well as the culture the Mosuos in no time. It would be the loss of another very sensible way of human existence.

What I find puzzling is why feminists around the world have not rallied to defend or even to demand some of the elements of the Mosuos’ way of life. They obviously hold out advantages for women. I can well imagine the world being a better place if some of their customs were extended and accepted.

At the moment, polygamy or polyandry still co-exists with monogamy in more than 80% of human societies. There seems no good reason why that freedom to co-exist should not be further encouraged rather than rolled back. In the animal world, very few species are monogamous.

Mounting evidence suggests that the legal imposition on monogamy is not working. Divorce rates are rising in advanced countries, in some instances reaching 50% or more.

In Hong Kong in 2016, the rate was estimated at roughly one in three.

That ratio is likely to grow. More and more people appeared to be opting to live outside of wedlock as well, spearheaded by revolutionary writers and artists who, as a matter of principle, wanted to defy bourgeois marital ties. When they do get married, they not infrequently indulged in wife-swapping, “free marriages”, or other types of conjugal arrangements.

The number of children born to unwedded couples is also increasing, and likewise the number of single parents. The proper care for children is becoming a very serious social problem, hardly capable of being solved by institutions like the Po Leung Kuk. The problem is being compounded by some misguided Western countries simply lavishing welfare benefits on unmarried mothers at levels beyond what girls could normally earn by engaging in full-time employment.

* * *

The considerations I have touched upon have never been given a fair or proper airing in Hong Kong before the law on monogamy was passed. It was remiss of Administrative Officers, the supposed shapers of government policies, not to have initiated a more comprehensive public debate on the whole issue.

In addition, the problem of decriminalising homosexuality might also have been dealt with. It had been an issue upon which a blind eye had been turned for decades, because Hong Kong laws still proscribed homosexual sex although such private activities had been decriminalised in Britain in 1967. The administration, probably fearing that the bulk of the local population would be against liberalisation, chose to sweep the matter under the carpet.

Since a small number of expatriate Administrative Officers were practising homosexuals, I should have thought they would have come out in favour of more sexual freedom. But they remained silent. Another case of the abdication of leadership.

A few years later, the administration found itself in an uncomfortable

position. The police arrested two men *in flagrante delicto*, one of whom was an expatriate Administrative Officer. As the law stood, they should have been charged with a crime. But as the Administrative Officer held a senior post in the Finance Branch of the Secretariat, a prosecution would have been very embarrassing for both the government and the officer concerned. The law was somehow sidestepped, with both being released without a charge. The expatriate officer remained in his post till the end of his career.

To the best of my recollection, the short, rotund and plain-speaking Executive Councillor, Sir C.Y. Kwan, was the only community leader to speak out against the proposed ban on polygamy. He was the senior partner in a firm of solicitors and had headed the Hong Kong delegation to two plenary sessions of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East — in Australia and Singapore respectively. I had been on both those delegations and hence got to know and respect him as a sober and serious man. But his efforts failed and the ban on polygamy went into effect.

* * *

In the aftermath of that change in the law, I found myself inexorably drawn into a complicated triangular love and marital affair involving an old friend, his jolly and agreeable wife and his good-looking and street-smart mistress. In the end, two of the parties asked me to mediate a satisfactory way out of the tangle. I could hardly refuse because of my past associations with all three parties.

I shall begin the story by introducing my friend, whom I shall refer to as Y, and his wife, Mrs. Y. I first met them in the early 1960s, soon after I had joined the Administrative Service and posted to the Social Welfare Department. It had been at one of those race-day luncheons given by one of the stewards of the Jockey Club. Both had been around my own age but, because they had married much earlier than myself, they already had three

children — two daughters and a son.

Both had come from wealthy business families and both had graduated from one of the lesser known American universities. Y was the only child of a principal wife. His father's concubine managed to produce only two daughters. Mrs. Y was herself a daughter of a concubine. In religion, they were fairly eclectic, with perhaps an inclination towards everyday Buddhist practices. Intellectually, they were low-brows. Their reading materials amounted to little more than a local broadsheet, two tabloids and a scattering of gossip magazines. They followed the comfortable routines of the financially well-to-do — ballet and piano lessons for the children; golf, charity balls and some voluntary work for the adults; and a pleasure boat for family weekends.

On the face of it, there was little about Y to attract anyone's attention. He was a quiet man of medium height, without charisma and without that dynamic spirit frequently claimed for Hong Kong business types. His facial features were nondescript, conveying an impression of a dull and unimaginative salaryman. His clothing was unostentatious; a well-made bespoke suit, which somehow appeared off-the-peg on him, and a tie that did not let out a murmur. Neither an excessively expensive watch nor any diamond-studded cuff links appeared as accoutrements. If I were a stranger passing him in the street, I would not give him a second glance. I doubted if very many women would have noticed him either.

The main impression Y left with me after our initial meeting was one of incongruity. His father had considerable standing in the community. Yet he had given his only son the prosaic and unchallenging business of heading a small motor and fire insurance company within his empire, while assigning his two sons-in-law the much more substantial import and export and warehousing subsidiaries.

Insurance was the kind of activity which could produce a steady living without much effort. The law required all motorists to have third party insurance as a matter of course and fire insurance was a staple, though one

had to keep an eye out for arson. A couple of cheerful and diligent after-sales staff handling claims would have been enough to keep customers coming back year after year.

Those judgements by the father must imply something about either the father or the son. It never occurred to me to chase that line of speculation, however, because I had taken Y as a passing acquaintance I was unlikely to have dealings with afterwards.

Events turned out otherwise. When Y discovered I was in the Social Welfare Department, he invited me and Man-Ying to a fund-raising ball that he and his wife had helped to organise for a children's charity. Since the charity was one of those bodies subvented by the government, I felt it both polite and politic to accept.

At the ball, I met a number of Y's closest friends. They appeared to have been mainly his former secondary school classmates, now comfortably established in various professions. They included a solicitor, a stockbroker, a dentist, a chartered accountant and an interior decorator.

During that evening, Y intimated that he and his wife were keen on charitable projects. If government knew of voluntary groups in need of finance for starting a playroom for infants, a children's library or the like in a deprived area, he said, I should feel free to send them his way.

I followed up on Y's offer and referred one or two charities to him. He never let them down. He also invited my family once or twice to join him and his family for weekend outings on his pleasure craft. I noticed how attentive he was to the needs of his wife and children and I envied him his rapport with them. Perhaps having daughters made a difference. In any case, that was how our relationship began.

* * *

My relationship with Mrs. Y took a little longer to develop. It came about

in a roundabout way. Once I had got to know some of the friends of the couple, I learnt that the men occasionally went on a “boys’ night out”. I could well visualise their petty bourgeois notions of fun — a Tsim Sha Tsui topless bar, a bit of taxi dancing at a nightclub or, at worst, some underground live sex show. They had invited me to join in but I declined. Not only had I no interest in such diversions, I also had no money to waste so frivolously.

It was obvious that the men in the group had become fairly well-tamed husbands, from the way they saw to the entertainment of their *tai-tais* before they stepped out. Due to that consideration, Y suddenly called me one morning to ask if Man-Ying might be free that evening for a game of *mah-jong* with the wives. One of the men going out had a sick wife, so an extra lady was needed to take her place at the table. I said my wife did not know the game but I would be glad to make up the table.

In that way, I got involved with the *tai-tais*. They were, to a woman, the most awful and careless *mah-jong* players I have ever had a game with. The game was merely an excuse for them to natter about their children, their Filipino maids, the recommendations of their hairdressers, the dresses they had on order, and the latest scandals uncovered by gossip magazines. I did not mind their excruciating plays, since they worked to my advantage, even though the stakes were derisory. So I got quickly bored with being completely left out of their conversations.

After a while, I hit upon an idea. I had a fund of literary and bohemian anecdotes; so I tried a couple. I first told a story of the over-sexed writer, Anaïs Nin seducing the psychiatrist engaged to cure her of her affliction, and then another about the French poet, Gérard de Nerval, tying a pet lobster to a blue ribbon to lead it for walks along the boulevards of Paris.

Those stories apparently amused the ladies, for they had never heard their likes before. Thereafter, whenever they were short of a player, they never hesitated to ask me to make up the table. How could I refuse? Such stories became my staple — Dostoevsky’s roulette obsession; Li Po’s deftness with his

sword as well as his versifying brush; Baudelaire's drug habits; and so forth.

The *tai-tai* I got to like most was Mrs. Y. She was plump, jolly, wifely and hospitable to a fault. She was sensible, home-efficient and without airs. Her soft spot for the less fortunate in society went beyond the conventional Buddhist desire to store up merit for the next existence. She genuinely wanted to do some good.

* * *

When a marriage begins to disintegrate, certain phenomena become quickly observable. First, friends start to drop the warring duo from invitation lists. Then, when the fracture becomes patently irreparable, an irrational choosing of sides, without carefully weighing the facts. Indeed, the full facts might never be known, even to the quarrelling spouses themselves, for such is the state of modern-day matrimony. Therefore rumours, innuendoes, personal chemistry, half-truths, plain lies and perceived professional advantages came into choosing one way or the other for third parties.

When Man-Ying and I decided to go our separate ways, Y and his wife decided in my favour. They therefore did their match-making best to see me re-married. But to no avail.

One day, Y invited me to have tea with him after work. He said he was sorry that none of the ladies whom he and his wife had introduced me to had clicked and asked, with considerable diffidence and circumspection, whether my interest might rest with younger candidates.

I replied I was already 43 and could hardly be looking for a teenaged Miss Hong Kong. The most important requirement was someone to help bring up my children. My job — and its social and official obligations — did not leave me much time to be an adequate single father. Of course, I would want a practical and level-headed woman whose psychological outlook and temperament meshed with my own. But I was past the stage of grand

passions. The prognosis for landing the right kind of wife thus appeared quite grim. Some women who might otherwise be suitable also had children of their own. I could certainly not contemplate taking on both the emotional stress and the financial responsibilities for a marriage involving seven or eight people.

Y thought for a moment. "A new sub-stratum of womanhood is developing these days, you know," he said. "They used to be concubine fodder — young, pretty, under-educated, unambitious as to careers and looking only for a steady meal ticket and some home comforts. Perhaps a child or two, as bargaining chips.

"They're mainly daughters from less well-to-do urban families, either with no inclination towards higher studies or else without funds to undertake them. They get launched into working life after middle school, at 18 or 19, as receptionists in multi-national corporations, merchandisers, air hostesses, secretaries, office assistants or whatever. Unlike peasant girls, they're urbanites who consider factory work beneath them."

"Where did you pick all this up?" I asked, surprised by Y's exposition on the subject. "Surely not on the nights out with the boys?"

Y chuckled. "Let's just say I've done a bit of research. They all dream of some rich Prince Charming on a white charger coming to carry them off. Of course no Prince Charming is going to show and their jobs are dreary beyond belief. In former times they would hope for some moneybag to take them as a concubine. But that avenue is now no more, with the change in the law. They have to settle for being a mistress, at the mercy of whichever feckless man they happen to find. Or else, as age creeps up on them and their looks start to wane, they lower their sights by marrying some middle-management type.

"They're not unintelligent, these young women; they've got street-smarts. They're broad-minded, they've been around, they don't mind offering a nibble before a sale, if you know what I mean. Being a virgin at marriage is going out of fashion here, though as a father of girls I dread to consider the

implications. Virgins or not, I suppose they can still be bed-worthy and make good housekeepers, if that's what one's looking for. You feel like giving them a try?"

"I fear I've had no contact with the type of women you've been talking about," I said. "They sound like a cold-blooded lot."

"That just goes to show how out of touch some of you government officials are," Y said. "Aren't you supposed to be keeping your fingers on the public pulse? No good just looking after the destitute at one end and hobnobbing with the rich and titled at the other. It's the great silent majority that governments have to keep tabs on. Their sweat keeps this place ticking over. Why did government take notice of students only after they had rioted over Diaoyu Tai? Why did nurses have to march on Government House to demand equal pay? It's the total ignorance of what people really want that has caused the government to mess around with local marriage laws."

"Okay. Points taken. I'm culpable in failing the students. The nurses are a cock-up by the Civil Service Branch. But I'm in the dark on what led to the banning on polygamy. That doesn't affect you, does it?"

Y lowered his eyes for a moment, as if considering an awkward answer. Then, looking up again, he said: "Swear you'll never reveal what I'm about to tell you. Not to *anyone*."

I nodded, assuming it was one of those run-of-the-mill secrets doing the rounds in the gossip mill that was hardly worth keeping.

"I've had a mistress for more than half a year," he blurted out. For the first time in ten years I saw his normally bland and emotionless features take on a degree of animation.

"What!" I was almost shocked out of words. How could so uncharismatic a man, overtly devoted to his wife and family, pull off so great a deception on me? There must be some truth to the old saw about still waters running deep! On reflection, I realised I had been at Oxford when the liaison started and, since my return, I had my hands full with the Diaoyu Tai demonstrators.

Then Y unfolded his story. The girl worked in the customer service department of a leading hotel. He and his wife had booked the hotel's ballroom for one of their charity dances. The girl had been assigned to note down their requirements — the positioning of the top table, the kind of fresh flowers needed, the availability of a drum for drawing raffle tickets and so forth. After the event, Mrs. Y asked him to arrange a small thank-you present for the girl. One thing led to another, even though the girl was only five years older than his eldest daughter.

The girl was now installed in a Causeway Bay flat, presumably at Y's expense. Since she worked shifts at the hotel, she was often available during the day. Y would then meet her for a couple of hours, disappearing on the pretence of visiting an important customer.

"She's fantastic," Y enthused, in a voice that was half an octave higher than usual. "She makes me feel young and reckless again."

"Reckless, all right," I said. "You're sure it's not just a mid-life crisis? You've a perfectly fine wife and family, you know."

"When you meet her, you'll understand. She makes me feel alive! She's part of a sisterhood, all looking for husbands. You should meet some of them. You may get lucky."

"Thanks for the thought," I said, without much enthusiasm. "Have you really thought this thing through? The women are looking for *husbands*, remember? Have you considered consequences? Don't forget it's now no longer legal for you to follow in your father's footsteps."

My friend sighed. "I know, worse luck," he said. "That's why I want you to meet the girl and advise me. You're the only one I can trust to understand my situation. She has an effect on me I can't resist. It's as if a new adventure was awaiting me every day. I cannot give her up. Yet I can't see a satisfactory solution either. Why did the Brits have to mess things up by changing the law? I'll arrange for you to meet her. Then you can advise me."

* * *

The suggestion from Y filled me with apprehension. I was very leery of getting involved in other people's private affairs. The more I knew, the more complicit I would be in a betrayal of his wife. Besides, I doubted if any girl in her 20s would ever make a surrogate mother for my boys. On the other hand, I wanted to satisfy myself that my friend was not being taken for a ride by a pretty gold-digger.

Those considerations caused me to agree to having tea with Y and the girl one day after work. The girl appeared in her hotel uniform, an outfit designed to emphasise efficiency in greeting customers rather than feminine pulchritude. But there was no denying she was pleasing to the eye. She was bright, cheerful and slender, bringing with her a streak of youthful and unpractised sensuality. She had arranged her hair in a casual style resembling Brigitte Bardot's. Her figure might be as agreeable too, except it was difficult to tell beneath the conservative cut of her uniform.

She evoked an image of what an older generation of Chinese would call a *fa ping* or flower vessel, that is, of someone outwardly decorative but might not contain very much inside. For simplicity, I shall refer to her as Ping.

"I've heard so much about you," Ping gushed merrily, upon being introduced. "You must be someone special because you're the first friend of Y's I'm being introduced to."

"Nothing special about me," I replied. "Just happened to be an old family friend."

"He's a big shot in the Home Affairs Department, looking for a wife," Y interjected. "He'd be a spectacular catch for one of your friends."

"Don't be misled," I supplemented quickly. "I *am* looking for a wife but I also come with many negatives. I'm not from a rich family like Y and my salary is my only income. I have three kids from a previous marriage as well. Not anybody's idea of a prize catch."

“When a woman goes fishing, she can never be sure what she might hook,” Ping said, cheerfully. “Plenty of girls are only interested in a good and steady man. I’ll see what I can arrange.”

And so it was that a week later I had dinner with Y and Ping for the purpose of meeting one of Ping’s friends. That proved to be the start of my deepening entanglement in their relationships. I eventually ended up with three brief liaisons but, as I had anticipated from the very start, all of them proved too young and inexperienced to play mother to my children. Their bed-worthiness was a separate matter.

* * *

Meanwhile, I had begun a warm and intellectually satisfying relationship with a very attractive Canadian woman in her late 20s. I first encountered her at one of those National Day receptions peppering the colony’s social calendar. Such festivities, as usual, would be held in one of those characterless hotel banqueting halls. An abundance of buntings and replicas of that country’s flag made brave attempts to enliven the atmosphere. Snacks and drinks proffered by roving waiters were plentiful, however, and more than enough to cater to hard-drinking guests as well as to those who made a profession of gatecrashing.

Small collections of guests would form momentarily on such occasions, before dissolving to circulate and to re-form again elsewhere, engaging the while in exchanges of anodyne greetings, stale platitudes and ritualised toasts to mutual happiness and success.

I noticed, however, a cluster of buttoned-down middle-aged men in buttoned-down suits gathered rather more statically than usual in a corner of the room. The object of their interest soon became apparent. It took the form of a startlingly beautiful young lady of European extraction, dressed in a smart, form-enhancing business suit.

There was a certain gravity in her brown eyes, an assured confidence in the way her head tilted and a sardonic cast in her faintly lipsticked mouth. She stood no more than about five-foot-three. But there was grandeur in her carriage; her clothes also showed to advantage her magnificently proportioned figure. She appeared almost as enticing as if she were standing naked like Bouguereau's Venus. Small wonder so many men hovered around her, with their tongues metaphorically hanging out.

I discovered her name was Barbara, a foreign service officer assigned to the Canadian High Commission in Hong Kong. I concluded quickly that such a woman, if wrongly handled, could well become a weapon for masculine destruction. But such women intrigued me. They posed a challenge, as Everest or the North Pole might for other men. I therefore worked myself into the circle around her and introduced myself.

As an opening gambit, I went for the unconventional. I asked for her assessment of current separatist sentiments in Quebec, following the 1970 kidnapping of a British diplomat and a provincial cabinet minister by supporters of Quebec independence.

Barbara did not look the least put off by so provocative a question. She could easily have parroted the safe official line. Instead, she opined that the situation was fluid and unpredictable. Her voice was soft, melodious and slightly smoky. It was one suggestive of a capacity for whispered intimacies.

A ripple of chemistry flowed between us and a sort of mutual understanding and respect took root. By the time I left the reception, she had accepted an invitation to go night racing with me at Happy Valley the following Wednesday evening, those evening races having been introduced in 1973.

* * *

It did not take me long to discover two other very agreeable circumstances about Barbara. First, she shared with me a number of intellectual interests

in current affairs, international relations, history and philosophy. To come across a truly beautiful woman was an occurrence rare enough; to find one with that sort of intellectual interests had to be something of a miracle.

Secondly, she turned out to be a very close neighbour. She lived in Conduit Road, on the side of Victoria Peak just one street above Robinson Road. Palm Court was located on an elevated terrace and her flat was almost directly on top of Palm Court. Being such close neighbours, I fell quickly into the habit of inviting her down for a few fingers of cognac or armagnac.

She would come just a touch after nine. I had told her my children retired to their rooms by nine because they had to get up early for school. We could then chat without distraction.

There was a public path a short distance from Palm Court, connecting Conduit Road to Robinson Road. But Barbara soon found a more convenient short cut. Another building on the terrace a couple of buildings removed from Palm Court had a flight of back stairs with open access to Conduit Road, intended no doubt as a fire escape. Those back stairs were cleaner and better lit than the public path, so Barbara used them to get to my home. I would also escort her home the same way around midnight.

* * *

Every man harbours within himself multiple selves, each with different potentials for doing both good and evil. Ancient Chinese philosophers tried to explain this through the *Book of Changes* and the cosmic elements of the *yin* and the *yang* inherent in each individual. How a balance worked out between the two elements was largely a function of chance, circumstances and evolving relationships.

At the more mundane personal level, for instance, I had an interest in horses. I enjoyed riding them, feeding them, racing them, clocking them and calculating their likely performances against one another. The company of

trainers, jockeys and riding boys and their tales of racing coups were highly agreeable, as were generally the sounds and smells of horses and stables. Under those different circumstances, the *yin* and *yang* elements in me would not be balanced in quite the same way. As one waxed the other would waned.

The necessity of making a living and discharging other obligations, however, limited the time I could devote to horses. Otherwise, the imbalance in the *yin* and the *yang* might have tipped me into an obsession as insane as Caligula's. Likewise, if Hitler had been given the opportunity to develop his talent in painting, perhaps the world might have been saved a whole lot of agony by his imbalance.

My association with Barbara revolved around a shared but seldom fulfilled need — the one for tossing around ideas which few others would find interesting. We would delve into them repeatedly, sitting in armchairs set at an angle to each other and separated by a small round table upon which rested bottles of the alcohols of our choice.

This is not to say that while we talked I was oblivious to Barbara being a very attractive and desirable woman. I was as red-blooded as the next man and as open to the temptations of a truly sensual woman. But the self in me craving for intellectual and metaphysical excitement trumped the self seeking carnal gratification. Our exchanges thus remained philosophical and abstract, ranging wherever the news of the day took us. The trigger was often some dispute or proposal connected with changes in the European Union.

I often advanced the view that the European project had been started far too early. It had begun with the coal and steel industrialists trying to create an oligopoly. They sold the war-weary continent the idea that such a move would promote peace, in that no nation could re-arm in secret without coal and steel. The ruling elites then jumped on the bandwagon, seeing the possibility of more lucrative jobs for the boys in following suit in other spheres of social and economic activities. The project then grew like topsy, before the nations involved were ready for it.

The unity of the Chinese nation, in contrast, had been bruited about for at least 3,000 years. Yet, in spite of similar racial stocks and common values, identical customs, compatible religious beliefs and the same written language, the goal of unity was still far from accomplished. The Chinese had been too slow to learn the bitter lessons that whenever the country was disunited, outsiders would usually come and take advantage.

How much more difficult it must be for Europe to learn its own hard lessons, to find the right elements for unifying different races, speaking different languages, and following different religions and traditions. At the same time, they had long histories of conflicts, enmities and subjugations of each other. It would make more sense for Europeans to practise living together harmoniously first, before aiming for closer union.

Suitably lubricated by vintage brandy, we ranged over such conundrums, each with its own shifting kernel of truth. We might talk about national identity and internationalism one evening and about an individual citizen's rights versus his obligations to the state the next. Then whether the individual or the family should form the basic unit in society or the unending hypocrisies of politicians.

The self-immolation of a Buddhist monk somewhere might lead to a discussion about that religion's tenet of cycles of causes and effects and hence to the old metaphysical chestnut of whether ends, however nobly conceived, could ever justify means that were obviously obnoxious. Some harangue by a politician over the failure of immigrants to integrate might cause us to examine the trouble-free assimilation of Jews at Kaifeng, the former capital of the Northern Sung Dynasty. The only snag was that the integration process at Kaifeng took about 800 years.

"You Chinese do take your time, don't you?" Barbara remarked, when I mentioned that timeframe.

"Well, civilisation can only advance at a very slow pace and we humans do our damndest to trip it up and knock it backwards," I replied. "People did

not used to be in such a hurry as nowadays. Don't forget it took more than 1,100 years before St. Bede got declared a saint back in 1899."

Over the many months of sipping drinks and engaging in high-brow talk, both Barbara and I had stayed studiously away from personal matters. I was contented to be completely ignorant of what she did the rest of the time. She could be gathering Hong Kong statistics, penning reports on market potential in the colony for Canadian exports or bestowing her favours upon half a dozen suitors. I simply did not want to know. Neither did I share with her what I was up to with Ping's sisterhood.

Once we started to ransack each other's personal affairs, we might find it too difficult not to slip into emotional entanglements. That would be disastrous. No workable future existed for either of us. She was a bird of passage; her career and life were destined to be elsewhere; whereas I was rooted in Hong Kong, at least so long as I had responsibility for my children. It was wiser for us to remain as if we were on an intellectual archaeological dig, to be jubilant or amused by an as yet undiscovered philosophical layer buried in each of us.

Emotional involvement was a road I had travelled down before under unfavourable circumstances; I was not about to venture that way again. It had led only to separation and heartache. Besides, how could I expect someone like Barbara to bring up my sons in a Chinese fashion? For that reason, I had not even bothered to introduce them to her.

The only occasion we edged towards something personal was when she told me one evening that the first book she ever read about China was during her teens. It had been a novel, in French, by André Malraux called *The Conquerors*.

"Yes, I know that book," I said. "It came out just before I was born, I think. Set in Canton in 1925, after the slaughter by British and French troops of Chinese protesters at Shakee. A road near the spot was named to commemorate the date of the massacres — Six Two Three Road. My mother

used to live there.”

“No kidding! Must have been very evocative. Like living at Peterloo where agitators for political reform had been cut down by the British cavalry. Or living near where the Battle of Waterloo had been fought. Do you remember Garine, one of the Comintern agents in Malraux’s book?”

“Yes, an intellectual throwing his life away for a hopeless ideal. He was trying to help an unstable Chinese government in the south fend off warlords and at the same time get back at the British, by fermenting a general strike in Hong Kong.”

“He wasn’t much of a Communist in my book,” Barbara said. “He had such contempt for women. He took two Chinese girls to bed at the same time and when he was done, he told a newly arrived comrade the best way to deal with Chinese women was to sleep with them and then forget them. That was back in 1925.”

“Since arriving here, I’ve discovered that the same attitude still prevailing among expats in the commercial and financial houses. Their careers are finished once they marry a local woman. How can that remain the norm in this day and age? And your Chinese girls are so gorgeously slim and slender, not heavy and clumsy like me.”

“No, no, my dear girl. You’re absolutely gorgeous in more ways than one. But entertaining though such a topic may be, we must stick with discussing the racism inherent in colonial societies. It’s not restricted to the commercial sectors, you know. All sorts of differentials in pay, perks and entitlements have been institutionalised within the government as well. Expats usually feel the sting of that discrimination only when they fall for a local woman. I know of two cases of European officers suffering for that.”

“Really?”

“Yes. The first one was a quite intelligent chap, who got interned during the Japanese occupation. During his captivity, his Chinese girlfriend smuggled him what small comforts she could. After the war, he married her. For that,

the administration banished him to the bureaucratic backwaters, in a post much beneath his natural talents. He was left there till he retired.

“The second case occurred more recently. A promising young officer fell in love with a local girl. She was actually a star pupil of the English poet and war hero Edmund Blunden, when he was teaching English literature at the University of Hong Kong.

“When the young officer’s head of department heard about his liaison with a local girl, he sent for the lad and warned him, perfectly well-intentionally I imagined, that his career would be seriously compromised if he married her. The officer duly resigned, married the girl and pursued a career in academia instead.” *

“Good heavens! How racist!” Barbara cried. Then, after a moment’s reflection, she asked: “Would the reverse also be true?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if a Chinese officer like you, for example, were to carry on with a European woman, would you be warned that your career was being compromised?”

“Don’t know. That situation hasn’t arisen, so far as I know.”

“Want to find out?”

“What are you suggesting? I think my career has been compromised enough already.”

“Look, speculative tales of all kinds go through this place like a dose of salts,” Barbara said, with her smoky voice taking on a conspiratorial tone. Her grave brown eyes, too, sparkled with the sunny echoes of a mischief more befitting a younger age.

“Your staff at Hysan Avenue have seen me coming to your office more than once, to go racing with you,” she continued. “Your friends in the Voting Members’ Box at the Jockey Club have witnessed our dining together, and no

* The two cases have also been mentioned in a memoir entitled *Good Second Class* written by Trevor Clark, a fellow retired Administrative Officer, and published in 2004.

doubt your night watchman here must have already told all his cronies along the terrace of a European woman going in and out of your home at all hours of the night. A judicious display of mutual infatuation before an expatriate audience and a tale of a Chinese City District Commissioner being lured into sin and treason by a white Mata Hari will spread like a house on fire. We can then sit back and enjoy watching your bosses' reactions."

"Capital!" I cried, laughing uproariously. "If you're game, so am I. Come to think of it, the Administrative Officers Association will be holding a ball in two weeks' time. All the bigwigs will be there. It might shock many of them. Most of my fellow officers, however, are decent and hard-working chaps, though there remains still too many displaying their layered snobberies and Blimp-like prejudices. An Oscar-winning performance would be just the thing to put their noses out of joint."

"The sight of an Asian man blatantly enjoying the favours of a white woman would give some of the sahibs and memsahibs kittens," Barbara declared. "Let's do it!"

* * *

A fortnight later, I put on my tuxedo of midnight blue and my silk cummerbund of muted crimson to escort Barbara to the ball of the Administrative Officers Association at a leading hotel. Barbara had decked herself out in a taffeta ball-gown of powder blue with a *décolletage* so devastating that many males had their breaths taken away.

We fortified ourselves suitably with alcohol during dinner and when the music for dancing started we stepped out for our command performance.

During the slow foxtrots, we delivered to the tuneful orgasms of clarinets and saxophones all the stunts Hollywood had rendered commonplace. We displayed the gazing into the eyes, the tight clasp of body to body, and all those little gestures of obvious enchantment. Barbara caressed the back of my

crew cut head with her playful fingers and I planted the odd conspicuous kiss upon her swan-like neck. We were at our best — or possibly our worst! — during the tangos. We executed their sharp turns and sometime languishing steps of synchronised passion as if making public declarations of love.

What did we achieve through all that contrived effort? A total flop!

We created a spectacle all right. But it laid only the foundations for my reputation as a roué and caused a few British eyebrows to be raised over the unladylike dancing of women from the Dominions. Certainly no senior officer took enough notice to warn me my career had reached a dead end.

It slowly dawned on us later that we had perhaps started out on a wrong premise. We had assumed I had some kind of career left, whereas I had none! Long before our performance, I had probably already been marked out as too much of a maverick to deserve any higher responsibility. I had already adopted too many positions inimical to the bureaucratic culture; the system's usual response was a one-way ticket to the outer darkness. Although I was appointed Deputy Director for Home Affairs shortly afterwards, my fate had already been more or less sealed.

But I did gain one insight after that evening's performance. I began to understand why movie actors playing romantic roles opposite one another sometimes allowed their screen lives to intrude into their private lives. After that night of close physical contact in pretended love, the detached and metaphysical distance which had hitherto separated Barbara and myself began to shrink dangerously.

Prior to that, the only physical contact between us had been those conventional pecks on the cheek on meeting and upon parting. The intimacy of the dancing had broken an unspoken taboo. I think both of us recognised it. In my case, when I thought about Barbara, my thoughts strayed from platonic realms towards areas far less chaste.

It was just as well that soon after the ball, Barbara's tour of duty in Hong Kong came to an end. She returned to Canada to await reassignment. We

refrained from maintaining contact because we each knew we had different destinies in store.

In parting, she left me with a wistful memory of a spectacularly beautiful girl, who had spent many evenings sipping drinks and exchanging musings with me. But she also left an awkward and unanswerable question. If it had not been for the vagaries of a diplomatic posting system, would I have fallen for her and made a fool of myself again?

* * *

No sooner had Barbara departed, I received an SOS from Y. Apparently the Love Boat on which he had been sailing with Ping had hit a submerged reef, holing the vessel below the waterline. He pleaded for an emergency salvage operation.

“Ping has gone completely out of her mind,” Y complained, when I met up with him. “She wants me to divorce my wife and marry her. How can I do that? I love my wife; I love my children. I can’t get her to listen to reason. She’s threatened to complain to my father, to expose our relationship in the media. It’s insane. Please make her see sense.”

“Not sure what I can do,” I said. “Let’s get a few facts straight first. Is there any basis for her demand? Did you promise to marry her?”

“No, no, never! I only said I would look after her, give her whatever she wanted. And I’ve made good on that. Fixed her up with an apartment, bought her clothes, shoes, handbags, jewellery, French perfumes, whatever. What she’s demanding now isn’t fair.”

“Seems getting your name on a marriage certificate has been what she had been wanting all along. You went into this with your eyes wide open, my friend. Presumably, you had intended only a fling, but you should have known beforehand what Ping and her friends had on their minds. Now things are going awry. Have you told your wife about Ping?”

“Oh, no! Of course not. I’ve kept everything tight as a drum. You’re the only one who knows. No friend or office staff suspects a thing.”

“Well, I wouldn’t be too complacent about that in a place so notorious for insider trading. Best to think carefully where you wish to go before taking another step. You own the apartment where Ping’s living now?”

“Technically. The place belongs to a Virgin Islands corporation on lease to my father’s insurance company on rather outrageous terms. An entirely legal state of affairs, mind you. If people were to dig under the Virgin Islands shell — and a couple more shelf companies in other jurisdictions — they would probably discover I’m its owner.”

“Not very clever, putting a mistress in a flat owned by you and leased to your father’s company. Suppose your wife starts asking questions about why an insurance company should lease an apartment in Causeway Bay?”

“My wife’s the perfect Chinese wife. So long as the family is well-provided for, she has no curiosity about how business is conducted. Besides, everything’s on the level and above board. A little tax avoidance, that’s all. The flat I live in, as well as the homes of other members of my family, are all leased from a Panama corporation.”

“A Panama corporation? Why so many complications?”

“In my case, I am entitled to quarters as head of the insurance company; part of my terms of employment as chief executive. The Panama outfit issues bearer bonds. No names of its real owners appear anywhere. I and other family members all have some of the bonds, given by my father.

“So long as we hold those bonds, we’re all part owners of the properties concerned. In a roundabout way, we’re paying ourselves for living in our own properties. Another beautiful aspect of the scheme is that real estate can change hands through the bearer bonds, without having to pay stamp duty. If someone looks into the accounts of my insurance company, all rental payments are covered by a global sum listed under a heading of: ‘Office, Quarters and Other Rentals.’”

“What a corporate wizard your father must be! The West has been steadily elevating corporate rights above the rights of individuals and of society in general for over a century. I see that your father has not been slow in picking up the tricks of the trade. Can’t you just get him to corporatise matrimony into some form of bearer bond as well? That might be sufficient to get you out of your pickle. You wouldn’t need me to talk to Ping then.”

“Be serious, David. I need you because she has refused to talk about anything except marriage. I still love her, however, and I don’t want to lose her. You have to talk some sense into her, to stop this silly business and get back to where we were before.”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, Y, I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“You’re my friend; but your wife’s also my friend. To an extent, so is Ping. I can’t help any one friend by betraying another. It’s one thing to pretend I don’t know anything about what’s going on; quite another to actively smooth out and cover up an affair you’re having behind your wife’s back. There’s also Ping to consider. I have no idea what her views might be. Surely you do not expect her to remain your mistress for the rest of her life. That would be most unfair.

“Even if both of you can patch up your quarrel, how long do you think it will be before it blows up again? Times have changed, my friend. Polygamy has been banned. You cannot follow in your father’s footsteps, having your cake and keep eating it — even if you can afford it. You’ve had your fun. Isn’t it time to end it?”

Y kept shaking his head dispiritedly. “I don’t want to. I still love her,” he declared.

“A moment ago you said you loved your wife and your children. Ping’s a young, pretty and sexy woman, one capable of making men drool with desire. Are you really in love with her or is it just a temporary fascination? If it’s love, you must be prepared to pay the price, not just in monetary terms,

but also emotional and social terms. And those closest to you are likely to be very deeply hurt by whatever decision you make. Are you prepared for all of that?"

Y continued to shake his head. "What am I to do?" he cried. "I want her but I can't marry her. She knows that. Yet she's threatening to cause trouble for my family. I can't allow that either. What to do? You've got to help me."

"I would like to," I said, soothingly. "But I don't want to be caught in conflicting cross-currents. If you want me to negotiate a decent and reasonable end to the relationship, that's a different matter, though I'm not sure I can bring it off. For sure I'm willing to try. To do that — and assuming money's not an important consideration — I will require *carte blanche* from you."

Y remained silent for a long moment. "There's no other way?" he asked, in a pained voice.

"Not for me," I replied.

After another long moment of silence, Y said: "All right. My head tells me that's the sane and sensible thing to do. But my heart's rebelling like hell against the whole idea."

* * *

Opening a dialogue with Ping was the easy part. We met in a quiet coffee shop. It appeared she wanted my help too — to persuade Y to marry her! But it took several meetings to get across to her that love conferred not only entitlements but also demanded sacrifices.

Her side of the story went roughly as follows:

It had all started out as a bit of a lark. She was tired of having to keep putting on a smiling face for hotel patrons, always saying "Yes, Sir." or "Yes, Ma'am." She wanted to demonstrate that though moneyless, she had another form of power. So when Y — whom she knew as the only son of a wealthy family — asked her out, she accepted.

She had not meant to get so deeply involved. However, when she saw how kind and generous Y was and how ardent his declarations of love, she began falling for him. The way he got an apartment for her to avoid prying eyes showed his consideration for both their reputations. It came across as part of a more enduring plan.

As he showered her with gifts, he kept saying how much he loved her. The gifts were the kind she never dreamt she would ever receive. Designer clothes and French negligées, for example. The latter appeared completely pointless because whenever he visited her, he wanted to see her wearing only French perfume!

She realised that sex could not be the be-all-and-end-all in their relationship. As the months rolled by, she began feeling like a bird in a gilded cage. Y seldom took her out and when he did it was usually to some out-of-the-way restaurant where he was unlikely to run into people he knew. Needless to say, going dancing or to a movie together was out of the question. She began to wonder if he was ashamed of her.

He gave her money for whatever she wanted but she had no opportunity to wear the clothes she had acquired or to display her expensive accessories while going to work. What was the use of possessing nice things when one could not show them off?

She had thought of quitting work but Y was against it. He said she would become bored with too much time on her hands. He persuaded her that her existing shift pattern would enable them to fit in assignations two or three times a week. He telephoned her every day but forbade her ever to call him. He was ever so careful, refusing even to have a duplicate set of keys for the apartment lest he had to explain what the keys were.

Over the period of 15 months, they never spent a single night together, however. On the rare occasions Y could come during the evening, he would always disappear before midnight, like Cinderella before bewitching hour. She could not bear the thought of him spending the night with his wife,

while she herself had to sleep alone.

As the first anniversary of their affair rolled around, she began to fear there might be no more progress to their relationship. Although Y kept constantly declaring his love, he made no move to give it substance and permanence. She wanted to secure a position within his family, a social status of her own, so that she could start having children. She hinted strongly her desire for marriage but he only prevaricated. The harder he tried to shelve the issue, the harder she pressed. It led ultimately to her threatening to approach Y's father or to go public with their relationship.

* * *

At our second meeting in the same coffee shop, Ping urged me to help her persuade Y to marry her.

"You must have realised from the very beginning that Y was a married man," I said, tentatively. "Did you really expect him to leave his family to marry you? Surely you're not asking me to become complicit in being a home-wrecker?"

"No, but am I not entitled to a life and a family of my own?" Ping replied. "When a man keeps telling a woman how much he loves her and how his wife did not understand him, you'd expect him to do something about it, wouldn't you?"

"Did Y promise to marry you? Was that the basis upon which you began the relationship with him?"

"Not in so many words. But when a man keeps saying he would look after you and give you whatever you wanted, wouldn't that include marriage as well?"

"Not necessarily. Don't be misled by the old rhyme about love and marriage going together like horse and carriage. Royal families used to marry their children off to foster better inter-state relations. I'm offering to marry

a companionable woman now, mainly to gain help in bringing up my sons. Love doesn't figure much in that sort of deal — at least not initially.”

Ping gave me a wickedly amused look. “But you did have fun with the girls I introduced to you, didn't you?” she said. “They told me all about it. To your credit you were up-front with them. If Y had been up-front with me, that would have made a difference. Instead, he wormed his way into my affections with his lovey-dovey whispers and flashy presents. Now he wouldn't give me the one thing I want. That makes me mad.”

“Look, Ping, you're still young; you've got a lot going for you. Love is still love even if it does not end in marriage. Why not just write off this episode as life experience and let it go. I know Y loves you a great deal; he told me so. In his heart, he doesn't really want to give you up. But he absolutely cannot give you the future you want and deserve. He cannot just give up his wife and family. He doesn't want trouble for his parents either. It's really in your own interest to terminate your relationship with him. Please try and understand.”

“What does he see in that wife of his? She's old and fat.”

“Please don't be mean, Ping. It's not like you. Y's wife is a very pleasant and kind-hearted lady. She's the mother of his three children. She may be a little on the plump side, but you'd look pretty much the same 16 or 17 years down the road, after you've had three children.”

“What about me then?” Ping cried, with her voice breaking with barely suppressed agitation. “Am I not as good as she, just because I don't come from a wealthy family? Don't I have feelings? What am I left with after having given him my heart for 15 months? Am I to be tossed away like an old shoe?”

“Y wants you to be well taken care of; he told me so. He is concerned about you and is sorry things have to end this way. It's not what he really wants. Tell me what *you* want; I'll get a good settlement for you.”

“I don't want any damn settlement! I want him to marry me! Does he think he can just pay me off like some common whore? He can go to hell!”

A flood of tears began rolling down Ping's cheeks. It was just as well that the coffee shop was fairly poorly patronised at that hour.

"Please, Ping! Don't cry," I whispered, offering her my handkerchief. "I didn't mean my remark to be taken in that way. I'm sorry. I'm just trying to help both of you."

Ping ignored my offer and pulled out her own from her handbag. As she dabbed her tears, I continued: "Y and I want to do what's best for you. He's heartbroken and I'm troubled too, because you are both my friends. Otherwise I wouldn't have got involved in your private affairs. Nobody benefits from a public row."

Ping took a few moments to compose herself. Then she said: "I don't want a single damn thing from that phoney, cowardly liar. He does not even appreciate my true worth."

I shook my head slowly and sighed. "Ah, it seems Aristotle has got it right all along," I said.

"Aristotle? Who's Aristotle?"

"A Greek philosopher."

"What has he got to do with me? Why are you trying to confuse me by talking about a Greek philosopher?"

"I'm sorry. Bad habit. But he's worth listening to. He said the young always overdo things, loving too much and hating too much. He put it down to their being insufficiently humbled by experience to accept life's limitations. I, on the other hand, have been repeatedly and roundly humbled and humiliated, so I know whereof I speak. I had no choice but to become philosophical. The only other option would be to go insane with frustration. You're too young to turn defeatist or to go insane. Make the most of the opportunities that are coming your way. Do not reject them too hastily. Think each one over carefully. Let me take you to dinner a couple of days hence. I'll call you. We can talk at greater length then."

* * *

I duly took Ping out to dinner. She had appeared more reconciled to disengaging with Y by then. We went to Jimmy's Kitchen on Wyndham Street, my favourite European restaurant. I had first patronised it right after the war, when it was just a hole in the wall at Theatre Lane. In 30 years it had morphed into an up-market eatery, with branches popular with both well-heeled locals and tourists. I had often taken my sons there on special occasions. There they all acquired their taste for escargots, prepared with lots of garlic.

At the restaurant I bumped into a couple of acquaintances already having their meals. I introduced Ping to them as we made our way to our table.

After we had been seated, Ping said wistfully: "Why couldn't Y have brought me here and introduced me to his friends, instead of hiding me away all the time?"

"Because he's a married man and you're not his wife," I replied. "If anyone he knew saw you two dining together, tongues would wag. I'm different. I'm a bachelor. It's expected that I should be escorting young ladies around. In fact, I had brought one of the girls you've introduced me to here."

As our meals proceeded, I gradually got down to brass tacks. "Are you okay by yourself at the Causeway Bay apartment?" I asked. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"You mean moving my stuff out and handing back the keys?" Ping responded. "It'll take a little more time to find a suitable housemate, to get back to sharing a place like before. Space more of an issue now, since I've got more stuff than before."

"Look, there's no need for you to move out if you like the place. Y's adamant you should be properly provided for and he's authorised me to say he would buy the apartment for you, as a parting gift, if you wanted it. That way you would have a roof over your head for life, without the need for bank

loans, mortgages, rents and so forth. It's a very generous offer, given the way property prices are in Hong Kong. I would advise you to take it. I have a good lawyer friend who can act on your behalf. Y would pick up that legal tab too. What do you say?"

The offer seemed to have taken Ping entirely by surprise. She looked down ruminatively at her plate, poking her food around with a fork. Then she said: "How can I afford to pay the service charges and rates for an apartment like that on my salary?"

"Good point," I said. "I'm fairly confident something extra can be worked into a disengagement agreement. Both parties would, of course, have to refrain from disclosing all past and pending arrangements."

"What does that mean?"

"Not telling anyone what went on between the two of you and not revealing the terms of any final settlement."

"You mean I will return to being a non-person again, a nobody in the hotel's customer relations department? I can't buy that."

"I wouldn't put it like that. It simply means neither you nor Y would tell anyone about your relationship."

"He's been a part of my life for 15 months. He's been the centre of my everyday existence. Now he wants that period to be blotted out, to become a total blank? No, I can't buy that. I want some public recognition, some record of what had once existed and had been shared between us. Otherwise, it would be as if I had never existed for 15 months."

"You've lost me, Ping," I said. "What do you mean by public recognition? I thought I was supposed to help both of you wind things up quietly and privately, without recriminations and without public commotion. That's why Y's agreed to a very generous offer."

"I know you mean to be helpful, David," Ping said, "but I can't revert to being a nobody again. I need some memento to keep, to prove I could be as good as any other woman in high society. I want Y to take me to one of his

charity balls, to dance with me in front of all his friends, and for us to have photographs taken. I need him to show me he's not ashamed to be seen with me in public. Otherwise, no deal."

"But how can Y take you to a ball? He's got a wife. What's he going to say to her?"

"That's his problem. I've got photos of us fooling around in the apartment. Does he prefer for those to be shown around?"

* * *

"I told you she's gone crazy," Y said, when I conveyed Ping's demands. "She's already turned my life upside down. How can I take her to a ball? That would create precisely the kind of scandal I want to avoid."

"We've come quite a long way towards an agreement," I said. "It would be worth humouring Ping a bit more. You could invite her to a ball without actually 'taking' her, couldn't you? After I broke up with Man-Ying you've invited me to a couple of balls and I brought a different partner each time. All your intimates know I've been scouting for another wife. Ping could be passed off as one of my current candidates. Besides, your wife already knows her."

"That's just the problem. I'm not sure I can hide my feelings for her. My wife might suspect something. Or else Ping might make a scene at the table or while dancing with me."

"Well, that simply means you'll have to maintain control. Don't play the excitable lover. Just be your usual deadpan self. If you can do that, most things can be plausibly explained. You normally invite four or five couples as guests. As host, you would normally dance with the wives. So you do a couple of turns with Ping. So what? Society photographers can snap all they want and probably will. What does that matter if you're not caught in any compromising light? Of course, I will try to make sure beforehand that Ping

agrees to behave appropriately. A friendly word with her should do it. I think her word can be trusted.”

“I don’t know,” Y said dubiously, shaking his head. “I still miss her, you know. It all sounds rather risky.”

“You have a better idea to make this whole thing go away?”

Y sighed. “Okay. I guess there’s no other way out. I don’t know why love has tied me into such a knot. But I’m counting on you to save my bacon.”

“Perhaps it’s only infatuation. In any case, I’m counting on *you* not to lose your head again on the night.”

* * *

I carefully explained to Ping I had been able to get Y to agree to inviting her to a grand charity ball, but as my pretended girlfriend. So she would have to behave with dignity and show the world what a fine and gracious lady she was. I intimated that film producers and talent scouts would be present at the ball and if she played her cards right, she might well be offered screen tests and openings in other careers. After my briefing, she seemed quite enthusiastic about participating in the masquerade before society’s upper crust.

When I turned up at Ping’s door about three weeks later to escort her to the event, I was met by an entirely different woman than the one I had expected. If Y was adept in working commercial angles, Ping was superb at working the womanly curves. The image before me was one sheathed in a form-hugging turquoise ball gown displaying a physical configuration which left little to the imagination. Now rid of her usual staid hotel uniform, her hourglass figure and provocative haunches were revealed to the full. Y could hardly be blamed for going overboard.

Ping had also done her hair up differently. She must have gone to a professional hairdresser to create a stunningly fashionable pile on top of her head. Her eyes, too, had been enhanced by mascara and eyeshadow while her

cheeks had been pollened and lightly rouged. She had been transformed into one very sophisticated and desirable lady.

Around her throat she had on an elaborate but tasteful choker, with just enough sparklers to avoid being considered ostentatious.

“Wow!” I cried. “If I had known you were wearing such a bejewelled item I would have engaged a couple of armed escorts.”

“Stop poking fun at me,” Ping countered. “You know very well the jewels are just paste.”

“Could have fooled me. Paste or not, the settings have been masterfully done. Must have cost a pretty penny.”

“Yes, Y gave it to me. He explained that all the rich *tai-tais* in town only ever wear paste. The real McCoys are kept in bank vaults for fear of being stolen or misplaced. We girls are such suckers. We work ourselves to the bone to save enough for a genuine designer handbag. But when we carry it around, everybody takes it as a fake because we’re just ordinary working girls. The rich can wear fakes and yet everybody assumes they are real. It’s so unfair.”

“I’m afraid that’s just the way the world is.”

* * *

The evening went as anticipated. Ping stunned everybody with her grace and beauty. Dancing with her was a dream. Without any coaxing, she played the role of girlfriend as enthusiastically as Barbara had done, only this time it was before a local well-heeled crowd instead of largely expatriate bureaucrats. She gave an altogether convincing performance of a woman besotted with a man. When she danced with Y, on the other hand, she did it with the utmost rectitude, keeping a small air cushion between them to prevent bodily contact. If she were trying to make Y jump out of his skin with jealousy, she succeeded mightily. I was left slightly embarrassed by the play-acting, however.

By the end of the evening, Ping was in high spirits. It was as if she had

finished a *début* performance to endless encores. She had got everything she wanted. A public coming-out before moneyed society, dancing tantalisingly with Y and getting photographed more than enough for her to choose whatever prints she needed.

When taking her home, I said: "You were a complete knockout tonight. You got everybody's attention, including Mrs. Y's. She complimented you during my dance with her, you know, even asked how seriously we were getting along. She didn't suspect a thing about you and Y. I'll introduce you to my lawyer friend tomorrow to begin the legal process of transfer. You can tell him yourself how you want things done."

At the entrance to her apartment, Ping thanked me for facilitating a smooth settlement. Then she added teasingly: "Do you think I'd be any good in bringing up your boys?"

"You're lucky you've never met them," I said. "They're sure to drive you crazy. Thanks for the tempting offer. But I think I had better say goodnight."

* * *

As a consequence of Ping's performance at the charity ball, coming hard on the heels of the escapade with Barbara, rumours began to circulate of a serious romance between me and a staggeringly beautiful girl only half my age. It so happened that my father was also in Hong Kong at that time. Before long, even relatives were ringing up to ask if a wedding banquet was in the offing.

There was, of course, no substance to the gossip. When no matrimony materialised, the two episodes with Ping and Barbara sealed my reputation as a philanderer, trifling with the affections of women who had lost their heads. That impression was deepened by my continuing to be seen with a string of other ladies as part of my search for a suitable wife.

So far as Ping was concerned, in less than six months after the charity ball, her marriage to a Chinese rubber and industrial tycoon from Southeast Asia

was announced. The tycoon was a widower, about ten years older than Y. I got an invitation to the wedding. But since it was being held in a remote and romantic part of the Italian Riviera, I could not afford to attend.

To the best of my knowledge, Y had not been invited. His nights out with his friends also subsequently tapered off and ceased.

After the wedding, Ping took up residence in Southeast Asia, where her husband had his business interests. I never saw or heard from her again.