

The University of Life

The Central Magistracy was near the top of Pottinger Street, a steep incline with protruding flagstones embedded for footholds. The magistracy was adjacent to the Central Police Station and the Victoria Remand Prison, a dungeon-like relic from another era. All three establishments fell within the embrace of streets redolent with British associations -- Old Bailey Street, Chancery Lane, Arbuthnot Road.

Stalls and shops, huddling cheek by jowl along the length of the street, offered great varieties of fare, fresh fruits and vegetables, traditional pots and pans, incense and propitious signs, herbal ingredients and tonics, haberdashery and garments, stationery, confectionery, chirping canaries and wooden clogs. Early morning shoppers had already formed a crowd, filling the air with the jabber of commerce. Where shoppers existed, so too did itinerant hawkers. They played a cat and mouse game with shopkeepers and the police alike, hoping to snatch a quick sale or two before being warned off.

Suen began his first day of work by climbing up the flagstones with his mentor to head for the magistracy.

Along the way Kim explained that there were two courts for ordinary cases and a third for juveniles. The Herald, in common with other newspapers, normally assigned a single reporter to cover all three. Such reporters were usually cubs cutting their teeth. On the present occasion, he was attending because of a committal case involving multiple murders. Testimony should be completed in another week, following which the defendants would be sent for trial in the High Court.

“You can sit through the committal hearings with me or go into one of the other courts to get a feel of proceedings,” Kim said. “Don’t worry, I won’t simply throw you in at the deep end. I’ll make sure you’re introduced to people and procedures first.”

“How can one reporter cover three courts?” Suen asked.

Kim gave a throaty laugh. “By magic, and through co-operation. A trick of the trade. The key is to sift the wheat from the chaff. The Herald doesn’t go for the same type of stories as the Chinese papers.

“Our City Editor has a Monroe Doctrine of his own -- any story that doesn’t involve a Westerner, either directly or indirectly, usually gets spiked. A pickpocket sentenced to two months for snatching the purse from a European woman in front of Lane Crawford, that’s news for the Herald. Be sure to note the victim’s name and the full circumstances of the crime. On the other hand, a pickpocket sentenced to a year and ten strokes of the cane for preying upon shoppers around a Wanchai market is not news. That’s for the Chinese press. Catering for different readerships.”

“How did a major from the British Army get to be a City Editor of a Hong Kong newspaper?”

Kim chuckled. “Talk around the office is that he was never regular army. He did a spell as a reporter in one of the British provincials before being given an information job and an army commission when war came. He joined the Herald after de-mob. His regimental tie has raised eyebrows. But, in a colony, it’s quite common for expats to fly false colours. On the whole, he’s not a bad sort.”

On reaching the magistracy, Suen discovered it had two entrances, a main one up a flight of wide granite steps in Arbuthnot Road and a side one through the courtyard of the Central Police Station. Kim selected the latter, before taking Suen on a tour of the building.

The three courtrooms were virtually identical in layout. An imposing bench set on a dais under lofty ceilings. The magistrate’s chair was beneath a large wooden canopy carved in the likeness of the St. Edward’s Crown. Two pulpit-like structures stood on either side of the bench, one being the witness box and the other the preserve of the court interpreter. A table in front of the bench provided space for a court clerk.

An oblong counsel's table and a dock stood a short way from the clerk's perch.

The dock was a square affair, with each corner marked by a stout wooden column with a small crown carved on top. Sturdy fretted panels, each two inches thick and about three and a half feet tall, had been fitted into the columns to form a pen. Each panel was topped by a set of gleaming brass bars which extended the height of the enclosure by another ten inches. There was no prisoner inside the dock, only a glowering warder. Another uniformed warder patrolled the space separating the dock from the public gallery at the rear of the chamber.

Suen had never been inside a courtroom before. The sombreness of the setting and the serious demeanour of the warders made him feel out of place. He could not help thinking that an ordinary person must feel intimidated. It reminded him of the Chinese saying that those entering the portals of officialdom did so at their own peril.

Kim ushered Suen into one of two rows of seats fashioned like a church pew in one of the courtrooms. They were located immediately next to the witness box and at right angles to the counsel's table. The seats offered a good view of the entire courtroom.

"This is the press box," Kim explained. "You're free to use it. Come and go as you wish. When the court is in session, be sure to bow to the bench upon entering and before leaving. The magistrate may pay no attention but it's a convention you should follow. Otherwise the magistrate may take umbrage. You will be excluded if the court is sitting in camera."

"When does that happen?" Suen asked.

"In cases involving the abuse of children or when a charge of gross indecency is levelled against an European."

Suen wasn't at all clear what gross indecency was or why it should involve Europeans. He did not ask for fear of showing ignorance.

“I suggest you stay here and listen to what goes on,” Kim said. “No one is likely to disturb you. Most reporters here today are likely to be at the committal hearing. I’ll meet you in the lobby at lunch time. We can eat something nearby. I’ll rustle up some contacts for you. Would you feel comfortable on your own?”

“Sure.”

“Good man,” Kim said. He gave Suen a friendly pat on the shoulder and left.

Suen took out a notebook and pencil from his pocket and surveyed the courtroom again.

Although proceedings had not yet begun, the public gallery was already filling up with shabbily dressed adults and children. They were a strange and motley crew, thoroughly unfamiliar to him. He speculated they might be bail bondsmen, defendants waiting for their cases to be heard, idle spectators or triad members out to show solidarity with particular prisoners. There was an odd air of either resignation or knowingness in their stubborn, weather-beaten faces. A few had brazen eyes, blazing with contempt. They were certainly noisy, which caused the patrolling warder to shout at them every now and then to quiet their hubbub.

Suddenly, a hush descended. Prisoners began appearing inside the dock as if by magic.

Suen soon realised there was a trapdoor on the floor of the dock, through which prisoners were being fed up from cells below. The pen quickly filled. The warder stationed inside the dock made the prisoners squat so that they remained largely hidden, except for the tops of their heads. The court clerk and the interpreter took up their appointed places, to be followed by a burly European police inspector with a walrus moustache. The inspector, clutching a pile of files, entered the room from one of the court’s two public entrances. He was obviously the prosecutor. He eyed

Suen without particular interest, before taking a seat at the counsel's table.

Presently, the court clerk cried an elongated: "Co-oo-rt."

On that signal everybody rose to their feet. A middle-aged European soon appeared through a private door by the side of the bench. He bowed to the assembly before taking his seat.

Judicial proceedings had begun.

Whenever the court clerk called out a name, either someone inside the dock would stand up or else a defendant would come forward from the public gallery. The clerk would then read the charge in English, after which the interpreter repeated it in Chinese. A plea would be asked for. For reasons not obvious to Suen, virtually all defendants pleaded guilty. The prosecutor might say a few words to draw attention to previous convictions. Thereafter the magistrate would impose a fine or a sentence.

In some cases, a collective reaction would come from the public gallery after the magistrate's decision. It might be a murmur of relief at some defendant being let off lightly or a gasp at an unexpectedly heavy sentence. There might also be calls and signals, to reassure a defendant that money for a fine was to hand. In the rare event of someone contesting a charge, the magistrate would fix a date for hearing, before remanding the accused on bail or in custody.

Suen sat listening to a steady succession of cases. A majority concerned vendors charged with hawking without a licence or creating an obstruction. Others included traffic violations, soliciting for an immoral purpose, drug-related offences, loitering with intent, housebreaking and larceny from the person.

The formality of the rituals struck Suen as incongruous. He could barely grasp the intricacies of the system. He doubted if any of the defendants understood the distinctions between fact and hearsay or the implications between making a statement from the dock and testifying in

the witness box. Yet they acted as if they knew that a guilty plea was required and that anything else would be a waste of time.

At times proceedings trundled along so relentlessly, so indifferently, that they reminded him of that ludicrous production line in Charlie Chaplin's Modern Times.

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“How did it go?” Kim asked, when they met for lunch.

“Impressed by British justice?”

“Pretty dull. More form than substance, I thought,” Suen answered. “I’m not sure the arrangements were entirely fair.”

They were sitting in a crowded noodle shop in nearby Hollywood Road. The shop was patronised mainly by office workers, petty brokers, off-duty policemen and students. Both Kim and Suen had ordered won ton noodles. They talked and ate intermittently.

“Not entirely fair? In what sense did they appear unfair?”

“First of all, the interpretations. After a charge has been read, the magistrate always asks for a defendant’s plea in a quite neutral tone of voice. But the interpreter, in turning that question into Cantonese, comes out with something like: ‘The Crown accuses you of such and such. Do you admit your guilt or not?’ The nuance is aggressively skewed. Being addressed that way is almost a throwback to imperial times, with guilt already predetermined and only an admission to be secured. Can’t anybody see that pressure on a poorly educated defendant?”

Kim smiled indulgently. “You’ve spotted a problem in communications across different languages and cultures,” he observed. “You’ve got to remember that interpreters are not professors of linguistics. They’re just high school graduates coping with a second language. How

can anyone expect a high level of competence? Civil service jobs don't pay much. Prospects are minimal. Would anyone with a perfect command of two languages go in for such work?"

Kim's voice sounded measured and conversational but Suen sensed that the older man was baiting him, playing the devil's advocate.

"Maybe not," Suen said. "There must be a better solution."

"Oh, there are many better solutions. One would be to pay more for competent interpreters. But is that a wise use of public funds? Do legal exactitudes matter in meting out punishments when wrong-doers freely admit their misdeeds? And how would paying more for interpreters impact upon relativities in the civil service hierarchy?"

Kim deftly captured a won ton between his chopsticks and ate it with uncommon relish. After enjoying his morsel, he continued:

"Another solution might be to conduct proceedings in the language of the population. But that would leave our rulers ignorant of what's going on. Of course, hearing cases in English does not necessarily mean they will know what's going on. It merely offers them the illusion they're in control. Would you surrender such a satisfying feeling if you were in their shoes?"

The question hung unanswered in the air. They ate in silence for a while. Then Kim asked: "Anything else troubling you?"

"Yes, the hawkers. There are so many of them. They're fined twenty or thirty dollars each time for hawking without a licence or for some other minor infraction of the law. Those sums must mean hell of a lot to them. Bloody hell, I'm being paid only five bucks a day! Why can't they secure licences, so that they can make a living without breaking the law?"

"There's a limit to the number of licences that can be issued. Have you any idea how many hawkers there are? According to last year's estimates, there were more than 60,000, mainly unlicensed. With refugees pouring in, that number is increasing by the day. Everybody needs to make

a living, to congregate at the busiest spots. They already bring enough chaos to the roads, leaving rubbish wherever they go. Residents are constantly complaining about noise and foul smells. Something has to be done.”

Suen drank up the soup remaining in his bowl. “Rulers are supposed to see to the livelihoods of their subjects, like fathers towards their children. If there are more than 60,000 vendors, by that same token there must be more than 60,000 families dependent upon them. Would the government rather see them as beggars or robbers?”

“Interesting question. Philosophers have been trying to answer it for ages,” Kim said, placing an arm around Suen’s shoulders. “Perhaps such questions have become outmoded in our modern world. But we haven’t time to indulge. I’ve arranged for you to meet someone. Everybody calls him Dum-Dum because he is podgy and short. His surname is also Yuen but we’re not related. He’s the doyen of the Chinese press corps by virtue of having been here since before the war. He knows all the tricks of the trade, so listen to what he tells you.”

Kim rose from the table and moved towards the counter as he continued to speak. “I’m going to nip off after introducing you. Only routine forensic stuff coming up at the committal hearing this afternoon. Dum-Dum’ll look after you. When you’ve finished, go back to the office and write up whatever you think is worth reporting. Don’t hand anything in, however. Wait for me to go over it with you. Okay?”

Suen nodded, trailing after Kim. “You’re the boss.”

“Good. Let’s go. Lunch’s on me.”

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Dum-Dum stood no more than five-foot-one. The first

impression he made on Suen was that he looked like one of those tumbler toys he had as a child, known as a “butt doe yung”. Made in the form of a small, ovoid, smiling man, the toy was weighted at its base. No matter how it might be pushed or pressed down, the figure kept bouncing back upright.

“Elder Brother Yuen!” Kim called, upon meeting Dum-Dum in the court lobby. “I want to introduce you to a young friend who goes by the name of Lam Yiu-Suen. He has, with a sad lack of foresight, ventured to join the Herald as a cub. Indeed, he aspires to become a fully fledged member of our impoverished brotherhood. I know of no one better than Elder Brother Yuen to disabuse him, to scare him out of his wits, about the pitfalls and perils of our profession.”

“How can I accept so much praise from a master of disenchantment?” Dum-Dum replied heartily, as they shook hands.

The veteran journalist was probably a shade over forty. His head was disproportionately large. At first sight, he gave the impression of being a human rabbit or hare, due to a combination of a set of wide, alert eyes, a small pointed mouth and two slightly overlapping front teeth.

After Kim had taken his leave, Dum-Dum said: “Tell me, my young friend, what other sources of income you have to supplement the pay from the Herald.”

“None,” Suen replied. He felt disinclined to elaborate on his personal circumstances to a stranger.

“You’re joking! None of us can survive on what we get. I often ask myself why we submit to the indignity of our miserable salaries. Market forces, they say, to justify underpaying us. A sensible fellow would follow another calling. But I think we can’t shake off something in the blood, some obsessive desire to see our scribblings in print.”

Dum-Dum then squinted at Suen. “You’re young, presumably

single. You can do better in almost any other calling. Why journalism?”

“The Chinese say journalists are regarded as ‘kings without crowns’,” Suen replied light-heartedly. “They can go anywhere, sound off on anything, poke fun at the stupidities of the world, as Lu Hsun and Zola have done. Doesn’t sound a bad life at all. Besides, Kim says there are things to be learnt in this line of work.”

“What illusions! No doubt you can learn a thing or two but you have to keep body and soul together first. For myself, I run a small photographic studio with my wife. Parties, weddings, passport photos, stuff like that. A nice earner. The moneybags are not slow to realise that it pays to engage the services of a studio with press connections. If a person wants to appear in newspapers in a good light, he has to invest in good photography. Films cost money. It’s just as easy to get a flattering picture in the papers as an unflattering one. Get my drift? Wives are particularly sensitive. They’ll pay to ensure a good one.”

Suen nodded. “I’ve got a little family money,” he confessed.

“Hmmm. I’m not sure that’s a good thing, relying on family money. A man’s apt to grow stale from too much safe living. He needs to be kept on edge, straining to make the necessary.”

“Well, I’m ready to earn my way. What does Kim do? I could try the same.”

“Kim writes for several magazines and teaches English to private students. Do you have publications lined up?”

“No, but I can teach English. However, I can’t see how Kim can find time to do so many things and work for the Herald as well.”

Dum-Dum gave a wink and flashed his rabbit’s grin. “Learn to walk before you run. Let’s start with basics. Court clerks are key people to get on with. They have copies of charge sheets, they know the hearing schedules. If they like you, they can tell you about interesting cases

coming up. They can leave charge sheets around for you to sneak a gander.

“The next lot of people to be on terms with are the prosecutors. They not only have charge sheets but background information. But, being Europeans, they’re more difficult to get close to. You might, since your English’s as good as Kim’s. For the rest of us, language’s a barrier.”

Suen nodded. He saw that things were not always done by the book. He felt apprehensive over what might be needed to gain the trust of clerks and prosecutors.

“Stay away from the magistrates,” Dum-Dum continued, lowering his voice a little. “They consider reporters beneath notice. They do pay some attention to the English press though. Nonetheless, they pretend that talking to the likes of us would compromise their judicial impartiality. Bollocks, I say. But there it is. Any questions?”

“None at the moment.”

“Good. Show up here bright and early tomorrow. I’ll start introducing you to the court clerks. Bring along a tin of 555’s.”

“I don’t smoke.”

“Others do, including myself,” Dum-Dum grinned. He winked and displayed his overlapping front teeth again.

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“There was, according to Dum-Dum, only one case worth writing about this afternoon,” Suen said, when he reported to Kim.

“What was it?” the Chief Reporter asked.

“Three months for a man running an opium den in an unnumbered hut in the Western District. But I don’t think he did it.”

“Why not?”

“He didn’t look physically capable. A human derelict, thin,

gaunt, empty eyes, dressed in rags. He could barely stand up in dock. Looked more an addict than a keeper. Probably consumptive too.”

“Any of this mentioned in court?”

“No. It was obvious, though he pleaded guilty.”

“Have you written it up?”

Suen handed over a typed sheet and watched Kim read it.

“Pull up a chair,” Kim said, when he had finished.

Suen did so.

“This is well written. You’ve a good eye for detail,” Kim said.

Then, lowering his voice to prevent being overheard, he added: “It would be excellent if you were writing a novel. But this is not the way newspapers want their news. A reporter must present facts in a form known as ‘the inverted triangle’. In other words, you encapsulate the key elements in a story in the opening sentence, capturing the who, what, when, where and why of the event. The less essential facts can be left to subsequent paragraphs, in descending order of importance. This method enables an editor to chop off one or more paragraphs from the end, if there are space constraints, without omitting the essentials. Understand?”

Suen nodded.

“A reporter does not editorialise,” the Chief Reporter continued. “That’s the function of editorial writers. A reporter does not speculate about guilt or innocence. That’s for the court. Quite frankly, a case like this holds little interest for the Herald. A filler at best.”

“But I can sense that something doesn’t tally,” Suen said.

“Doesn’t anybody want to know the truth?”

Kim smiled. “My dear boy, the man has pleaded guilty. The police and prosecutor are satisfied. The court is satisfied. That is all the truth the Herald is interested in. The Herald is not a crusading newspaper. It makes money selling advertising space, toeing the establishment line.

That is the kind of truth you're being paid to report."

"What about you?" Suen's voice thickened with disappointment. "Is that also the kind of truth you're interested in?"

"There are many kinds of truth. Before anyone starts digging for truth, he should know where he's heading with it. You're tempted to speculate because your eyes and your guts tell you something different. Let's assume your instincts are correct. The man's innocent. Can he be shielding a relative or friend? If so, the truth may send the relative or friend to prison, with the man remaining in custody for perverting the course of justice. Would anyone sleep better as a result?

"Or take another possibility. Suppose the local triads are running that opium den and the man has a standing arrangement with them. Because he is too sick to earn a living, he has agreed to take the rap each time the place is raided. In return, the triads provide for him, and maybe his family. If that turns out to be the truth, a triad boss may be inconvenienced but what will happen to the man and his family? Would the truth solve or worsen their situation?"

The possibilities raised by Kim had not occurred to Suen.

The Chief Reporter handed back his typescript and said kindly: "It doesn't take much imagination to think of even more depressing scenarios. The fact of the matter is that this city operates on free market principles. That means everything can be bought or sold, including truth, freedom and life itself. A truth seeker must be prepared to accept the consequence of uncovering a truth. It's one thing to be quixotic but quite another to expect others to pick up the pieces.

"Furthermore, a reporter doesn't have the luxury of time. His truth, such as it is, must be ready for the next day's newspaper. If you accept what I've said, please re-write the story, confining it to facts revealed in court. It shouldn't take more than a paragraph."

Suen headed for a typewriter to re-write the piece. It took less than three minutes.

It read: “A Chinese male, Fung Chung, 46, was gaoled for three months by Mr. Conklin at the Central Magistracy yesterday for keeping an opium den at an unnumbered hillside hut in the Western District. Fung had two previous convictions for similar offences.”

How dry and desiccated that sounded, Suen thought, as he read over what he had written. He recalled the pathetic look of Fung. His tragedy had been reduced to a single paragraph, devoid of human dimensions. It had about as much emotional content as the next day’s tide tables. What had he signed up for?

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Barely two months into his probationary period, Suen began feeling disenchanted with his job. After an initial week at the magistracy, he had been given that beat on a more permanent basis. Kim had apparently recommended it. The Chief Reporter dropped by irregularly to check on his progress, with Dum-Dum in more frequent attendance.

He met other reporters. Those from the Chinese press turned up more regularly than the ones from the English dailies. Yet the latter somehow managed to file accurate reports. He asked Dum-Dum how that was possible. Dum-Dum indicated vaguely, as Kim had done, that reporters helped one another.

When he signed up with the Herald, he had visualized being involved in covering big happenings, like the crash of the bullion-carrying Philippines Airlines DC3 into Mount Parker or the three days of food rioting inside Stanley Prison. But he soon realised he had to be content with much more mundane stuff like covering funerals, collecting results of

sporting events and reporting dreary social functions.

Court reporting was not only unchallenging but actually soul-destroying. To witness the daily parade of hawkers being fined or imprisoned grated against his sensibilities. They seemed caught in a system from which there was no escape. Yet their plights rarely got mentioned in the pages of the Herald. It was almost as if there was a conspiracy of silence.

As the days and weeks went by, he began to see lawbreakers as the natural products of a society operated on the basis of the survival of the fittest. He remembered the American pilots of the Flying Tigers risking their lives in somebody else's fight. Regardless of the reason they had done so, they had appeared as heroes in his eyes. Why couldn't people in Hong Kong be as selfless and help the poor in society?

His instincts urged him to try. But how? Far from righting wrongs, he was slowly being sucked into the very system he abhorred. Dum-Dum had taught him to cozy up to clerks and prosecutors by treating them to cigarettes and cups of coffee. Though he did as he had been advised, such acts clearly fell into the category of bribery and corruption. Worse still, he had begun telling lies to his grandmother.

"Ah Suen, have you taken up smoking?" his grandmother had suddenly demanded one day.

"No, I haven't, Grandma. Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Ah Loy told me she found a tin of cigarettes when tidying your room. What's it doing there?"

"Oh, it belongs to a colleague of mine. He left it in the office. I'm just keeping it safe till I see him again."

"Smoking's a bad habit. You're too young to take it up."

"Yes, Grandma."

His grandmother had also been appalled by his miserable salary

and, as usual, over-compensated with generous allowances. She constantly nagged him to eat healthily outside if he could not get home for meals.

“You’re still a growing boy. Be sure you eat regularly and well,” his grandmother instructed. “Always go to a good restaurant and leave a generous tip.”

“I will, Grandma. I’m having top class meals every day.”

If his grandmother had known how often he made do with a bowl of noodles or a plate of fried rice, she would become terribly upset.

The need to toady to others in some of his duties disgusted him as well. When covering funerals at one of the Happy Valley cemeteries, it wasn’t an assessment of the life of the deceased that the Herald wanted. It was the names of pall-bearers, attendees and senders of floral tributes.

“Names sell newspapers,” Kim had said when he complained. “People have little vanities. They like to see their names in print. Names sell newspapers. They translates into profits.”

On weekends, it was again names of participants that mattered. He had to sneak into expatriate clubs like a pariah to secure their cricket scores or lawn bowls results. The disdainful looks he sometimes received from Europeans enjoying their aperitifs and pink gins stuck in his gullet. How insufferably superior they appeared! How over-fed and under-informed! More than once he barely resisted telling them what he thought of their stupid ball games.

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One day, as Suen was about to complete his probation, a case arose which outraged him. It concerned an unemployed labourer with no fixed abode who had sold his seven-year-old son for \$82. The defendant followed the pattern of pleading guilty. The prosecutor said the man had

sold his son because he could no longer feed him.

The magistrate, in sentencing the defendant to six months' hard labour, said: "We live in a civilised society. We take a serious view over the selling of children. There have been too many such cases. We must make an example to deter others."

It so happened that Kim dropped by the magistracy shortly after the conclusion of the case. The moment Suen saw him, he declared: "I'm quitting. My job's a farce. These courts are a farce. Everything in this town's a farce."

"Whoa, whoa," Kim said, taken aback. "Calm down. Let's get away from the crowds. What's this all about?"

They proceeded to the courtyard outside, where Suen related the facts and the magistrate's comments.

"How can justice be done when authorities ignore issues like hunger and joblessness, the conditions leading to crime?" Suen asked.

"The man pleaded guilty," Kim responded. "He had his day in court,"

"If you discount the hectoring way the interpreter put the charge to him, yes. But his motive was so plain than even a blind man could see. He was jobless, without means of feeding his son. Why offer gratuitous comments and talk of making an example? Why not deal with the real causes of this state of affairs?"

"Magistrates are not sociologists or reformers. They deal with cases only on the basis of the evidence, although they're entitled to take judicial notice of other matters. There have been many instances of children being sold lately."

Kim placed an arm around Suen's shoulders. "I can understand your sympathy for the man. I sympathise with him too. But you're a reporter. Reporters report. It's as simple as that."

Suen lapsed into a sullen silence.

Kim, seeing his protégé unappeased, continued severely.

“Let’s be frank. You want to quit? Okay. But you’re an intelligent young man. Has it never occurred to you that those poor wretches depend on people like you to bring their existential realities before the public?

Without journalists, they have no voice. What would anyone know of their privations and sufferings? Have you ever spoken to any of those wretches paraded before the courts? Have you discovered how they earn their keep or seen what passes for their homes?

“Quitting is your prerogative. But let me remind you that you sought this job of your own free will. I agreed to show you what is happening on your own doorstep. It’s apparently been too much for you. By all means run off to England or America.”

The tough talk left Suen speechless and shame-faced.

“You don’t have to be premature over quitting, you know,”

Kim added, laughing, with a sudden change in tone. “After all, the major might terminate your probation as unsatisfactory!”

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Suen did not resign. He passed his probation and was awarded an enhanced -- but still woefully inadequate -- salary. He came to realize that, if he could earn so little, how tough life must be outside the tree-lined precincts of Bowen Road. His grandmother had always sought to shield him from the lower depths of society. That now left him troubled by guilt. He resolved to make the most of Kim’s guidance, to find out how human beings managed to survive in a dog-eat-dog society.

His first opportunity came at the Central Magistracy when he recognized a woman charged with hawking without a licence. She had

been charge and fined before. According to the charge sheet, her name was Ho Yin and she was thirty-nine.

A number of features had attracted his attention. First, just as she had on the previous occasion, she came forward to answer the charge accompanied by two small children. One was a baby tied to her back with a traditional carrying wrap. The other was a small boy of probably eighteen months held by the hand.

Secondly, her given name meant swallow. But she had none of the gracefulness of her winged namesake. She was stout and clumsy and looked nearer forty-five than thirty-nine. Beneath her thin tunic, her breasts appeared grotesquely lopsided, with one much bigger than the other. That lack of symmetry was accentuated by the four strands of the carrying wrap drawn tightly across her body and knotted in front of her chest.

She duly pleaded guilty and was fined thirty dollars, probably ten days' earnings for a hawker.

Suen was also struck by her indifference over being fined. She offered no reason for breaking the law and, in spite of being accompanied by two small children, made no plea for leniency.

When she left the court, he followed her. He found to his surprise that before leaving she had to gather from the public gallery two more children, both girls, aged probably four and five respectively.

He intercepted her on her way to the shroff's office to pay the fine. "Auntie Ho, may I speak to you?" he asked.

"What the heck for?" Ho Yin countered suspiciously, in unpolished Cantonese. The children, all shabbily dressed, crowded around them. The boy had a runny nose but no one took any notice. The baby on her back let out a wail. The woman immediately started a rocking movement and reached back with one hand to calm the child. "Have to pay fine. Got to get back to work. Already lost one day," she said.

“This will only take a moment. I’m a journalist. I’m investigating the lives of vendors, to discover why they keep working illegally in spite of heavy fines.”

An incredulous look came into the woman’s face. “You serious? You mean you don’t know?”

Suen smiled defensively. “That’s why I’m trying to find out. My newspaper will pay you for answering questions.”

“How much?”

“Thirty dollars.”

Interest lit up the woman’s eyes, as she continued her rocking movement. The baby had already returned to sleep. “In advance? Just to answer questions?”

“Correct.” Suen produced some banknotes, counted out thirty dollars and handed the sum over.

The woman asked dubiously: “What you want to know?”

The exchange of money had quickly attracted the attention of a few on-lookers.

“Let’s go outside, where it’s quieter,” Suen said. He led the way to a secluded spot along the stone balustrade fencing two sides of the yard. Ho Yin and her children followed. He noted that although the children were untidily dressed they did not appear poorly nourished. The ribbon of snot running from the boy’s nose made his skin crawl. It irritated him almost beyond endurance. He felt like taking out his handkerchief to wipe it. He had to force himself to look away.

“You’ve been fined before, haven’t you?” he said.

“Yes, a few times,” Ho Yin replied.

“Doesn’t that bother you? Why don’t you get a licence?”

“I have licence.” The woman took from one of her pockets a grubby folded document and showed it to Suen. It was a licence for an

itinerant hawker. The photo on it was of a man and the name was not hers.

“My husband’s licence,” Ho Yin explained.

“Why didn’t you bring this out in court?”

The woman waved a dismissive hand, as if her questioner was completely out of touch, and snatched the licence back. “Husband dead. Killed in accident.”

“I’m sorry. Can’t you get the licence changed to your name?”

“Why you don’t understand?” She gave Suen a reproachful look. “Itinerant licence no good. We sell winter melons, pumpkins, yams, eggplants. My husband was strong but how can I carry heavy load? Also I have children. Need fixed pitch licence.”

“You certainly have good grounds for changing from an itinerant to a fixed pitch licence. Can’t you apply?”

Ho Yin gave a hollow laugh. Her children nestled up close to her and she placed one arm around them protectively. “Sure, can apply. Very few fixed pitches. Many waiting. Have to wait long time. How to feed so many mouths? Can get quicker by paying tea money. But I have no money.”

Bit by bit Suen began to understand her predicament. His immediate reaction was to provide her with the means to secure a quicker result. But his moral compass was already so wobbly that he balked at further encouragement of petty corruption.

He still could not understand, however, why the woman failed to tell her story in court.

“If you had brought all this out in court, the magistrate might have helped you,” he said, with a note of exasperation. “He might have given you only a warning or at least a lighter fine.”

Ho Yin shook her head wearily, as if her interviewer was lacking the most elementary knowledge of life. “You journalist. Why you

don't understand? If I don't admit charge, the court will fix hearing, maybe two weeks later. If case pending, authorities hold baskets, weighing scales, carrying pole, everything. Without equipment, how to make living?"

Suddenly, Ho Yin sniffled and tears trickled from her eyes. "Soon eldest must go to school. More money," she added, brushing her tears away with a callused hand.

"I'm sorry." Suen said, embarrassed by the tears.

The children tightened around their mother and Suen noticed that the boy was rubbing his face against his mother's trousers to get rid of the snot. He also noticed that the boy was barefooted while his two sisters wore rubber flip-flops.

"According to the information given in court, you live in an unnumbered hut on the hillside above Shaukeiwan," Suen said. "Can you show me where you live?"

"No time. Must get to work," Ho Yin said. Then, gathering her children, she headed for the shroff's office. "I live in squatter area," she said on leaving. "Young sir, you don't want to go there. No water, no electricity, no toilet. Not even grass. Bad place."

"Wait," Suen cried. He took out the rest of the banknotes from his pocket and held them out to the eldest of the children with a reassuring smile. "Maybe you can buy sweets or shoes. Present from me."

The girl made no move, except to look at her mother's face.

"Say 'thank you' to the kind gentleman," Ho Yin said, whereupon the girl accepted the notes and mumbled her thanks. The money amounted to a round hundred dollars.

* * *

In spite of the discouragement by Ho Yin, Suen visited the

squatter areas above Shaukeiwan. He had made up his mind to give hawkers the kind of voice Kim said they needed. He could not locate the Ho family, however, although he wandered through a number of the settlements, built on granite hillsides too steep or unformed for normal development. He also visited other squatter areas at Diamond Hill and in the Western District. He was appalled by what he saw.

Squatter areas were little more than vast mazes of improvised hovels. Most had roofs of corrugated metal sheets and walls of plywood, planks, bricks, canvas, cardboard and other salvaged materials. They huddled together, leaning against one another, as if better to resist the elements.

Water was at a premium and had to be obtained by queuing at standpipes at the bottom of each hill. Some desperate souls risked death and prosecution to tap electricity from overhead cables. Most, however, settled for kerosene lamps and stoves for lighting and cooking, increasing fire hazards. The only sewage system consisted of foul, slime-coated ruts running haphazardly downhill.

No one knew exactly how many people lived under those conditions. Government estimates placed them at between a fifth and a third of the population. They were made up largely of refugees and the local dispossessed. They provided the human fodder fuelling the commercial and industrial advances of the city, though no one could say how long it might take for the likes of Ho Yin and her family to feel the so-called “trickle-down” effects of prosperity.

Suen felt undercurrents of suspicion directed against him as he negotiated the uneven pathways snaking through those settlements. He was obviously an outsider. He was probably being taken for an official of some sort, out to identify those responsible for the theft of electricity or to mark their illegal structures for demolition. Urchins trailed him at a

distance while stray dogs sniffed at his heels. Women looked up resentfully from their cooking or washing as he passed.

Otherwise, Suen found little in the way of gloom and despair among those impoverished souls. On the contrary, they seemed to display a certain liveliness and a dogged determination to make the best of their lot. Some huts had been turned into grocery kiosks and others into workshops for embroidery, carpentry or metalwork. Many had propitious sayings on red paper pasted over their doors. “May the Five Blessings attend this home,” said one. “May each come and go in peace,” said another. A number had tiny altars to the local earth god installed at their doorsteps, complete with offerings of incense.

The familiar sounds of mah jong tiles being shuffled and slapped on tables also came to Suen. No matter how dire their circumstances, Chinese everywhere seemed keen for a game of chance. Did that mean they still entertained hope of good fortune coming their way? Or was gambling a game of despair, for those with little left to lose?

The multifarious noises of human activities were augmented by the cackle of fowl, the howling of dogs, the laughter of children and, incongruously, the falsetto tones of Cantonese operas blaring out from cheap radios.

Suen had passed through a world he had never imagined possible from the seclusion of Bowen Road. It raised questions for which he had no answers. He subsequently interviewed other hawkers on their everyday problems. At the end of his research he produced an article on life in the most vulnerable sections of society. He handed the finished product to Kim.

“Very good,” Kim said, after reading it. “I see you’ve stuck to facts rather than editorialise. Good as it is, however, I very much doubt if the major will use it. It’s not right for the Herald. Implied criticisms of the

establishment can't be tolerated. But I'll tell you what: Translate this into Chinese and I'll get it into a local publication. The fee will be derisory but at least your research'll get an airing."

"Am I allowed to write for another publication while on the payroll of the Herald?" Suen asked.

Kim smiled wickedly. "If it appeared under a pen-name, would anyone be the wiser? I've another suggestion. Why don't you look into a related matter germane to your thesis? There's no individual income tax in Hong Kong. Only a business profits tax and a salaries tax. This means that people who derive incomes from investments and trust funds don't pay tax. On the other hand, hawkers are repeatedly fined. Would it be reasonable to regard such fines as a form of taxation on those least able to bear it?"

Suen's eyes lit up. "Why didn't I think of it?"

"Comes with experience, my dear friend," Kim said.

* * *

Shortly after Suen's article was published, Kim invited Suen for coffee at working man's cafe called the Blue Bird, located in a small side lane in the Central District.

Suen found Dum-Dum and three other magistracy reporters already there. They were drinking coffee and chatting in a rear booth.

"Now you've joined our band of subversives and malcontents!" Dum-Dum cried in welcome. The group quickly made room for the newcomers.

"What do you mean?" Suen asked.

"Your article under the 'Observer' by-line."

"How did you know it was me?"

"There are very few secrets in this town we can't sniff out, my

boy. A well-written piece. Congratulations.”

The others in the booth offered their congratulations too.

“Thanks. What are you all doing here?”

“Doing our jobs,” one of the reporters replied. “We come here around this time every day. Or at least those of us who’ve skipped court. We have to catch up on what has happened before we file our reports.”

“That’s what brotherhood’s all about. Now you’ve become an accessory,” Dum-Dum added.

Suddenly, Kim held up a hand to still the talk. “I have with me Suen’s first writing fee,” he declared.

“Coffee’s on him!” a chorus of voices demanded.

Kim produced twenty-five dollars and said to Suen: “The magazine’s editor asked me to pass this to you on his behalf.”

Suen looked at the twenty-five dollars in his hand and broke into a wide grin. “Yes, coffee’s on me, and anything else you may care to have,” he said, expansively.

He felt a glow of satisfaction. It had all been thoroughly absurd of course. He had laid out a hundred and thirty dollars and had spent days visiting squatter areas and interviewing hawkers, only to earn a fee of twenty-five dollars!

And yet, writing that article and seeing it published had been the most rewarding experience in his life. It had also taught him that without men of conscience, the poor might never get their voices heard.