

The English Secretary

by

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As Mr. Fu waited for his guests in the lounge of the Victoria Cricket Club, he wondered if he had really -- in the parlance of his English secretary -- "arrived." Pip had a way of whizzing words past him so that it took a while to capture their undertones. He pondered whether Pip was just trying to justify his decision to leave.

Over the last seven years Mr. Fu had become so dependent upon that young Englishman that his tendering of notice came as a shock.

"You see, Sir, politicians back home are bungling the future of this place," Pip explained, with that bemused candour which enlivened his steel-grey eyes. "They're very good at making others pay for their mistakes and one day people here will undoubtedly have to pay. So it's best that I move on before I get numbered among the bunglers. Besides, you don't need me any more. You've arrived."

Mr. Fu wasn't sure what was being bungled or what secret intelligence Pip possessed. Though rumours of shady dealings over Hong Kong had been circulating for years, the lease on the New Territories still had a decade and a half to run. So far as he was concerned, politicians could play whatever games they liked so long as they left him alone to make money, for only money could buy the ultimate freedom to do as one chose.

What he could not figure out, however, was why a young man of intelligence should have failed to seize upon that fundamental truth. Pip seemed contented with his salary and indifferent to business opportunities all around him. Regardless of what politicians might be up to, why not exploit the greatest wealth-creating city in the world?

The English were a curious race, he reflected. Until Pip shed light on them, they were a complete mystery. Their concepts, like the rule of law and the presumption of innocence, were brilliant. The notion that companies could assume legal identities separate from their operators was ingenious. Dicey dealings behind corporate veils, holding companies in tax havens, hot money flowing through Montserrat, Anguilla, the Turks and Caicos and other seldom mentioned places. What marvellous opportunities for enrichment! Yet, after setting them in place, the English seemed to prefer watching birds, digging up gardens or attending to the comfort of cats and dogs!

The Number One Boy in the lounge moved forward smartly to offer an aperitif but Mr. Fu waved him away with a smile. He smiled altogether too readily. When he did so, friendly rugosities would spread outwards from the corners of his soft brown eyes and downwards from the sides of his nostrils, to wreath his wide, almost simian mouth with bonhomie.

The propensity to smile was a habit developed since boyhood. It was a sort of defensive mechanism to obscure his deficient English, his lack of social polish and, most of all, his diminutive build. How could anyone project a commanding presence standing at less than five-foot-one?

Nevertheless nature had compensated him with a nose for business and a determination to succeed. Those qualities had enabled him to turn an insignificant electrician's shop inherited from his father at the age of seventeen into one of Hong Kong's real-estate giants.

His rise had been steady, his method ludicrously simple. In the course of rewiring dilapidated tenements or repairing electrical faults, it occurred to him some must be ripe for redevelopment. When he noticed an unusual number of unoccupied sub-divisions in a building, he suspected redevelopment must be afoot.

So, backing his hunch, he would scrape together enough to acquire a nook or a cubicle, in order to frustrate demolition until someone paid his price. One such successful gamble earned him more than two years of installing air-conditioning units or rewiring apartments. When such successes multiplied, he began dealing in real-estate himself. Thereafter it was just a matter of timely speculations during the Colony's successive property booms.

But acquiring wealth was one thing, gaining social acceptability was another. One could not buy the latter as one might a skyscraper or a shopping mall. The old money crowd still looked down their noses at him and he recalled with barely suppressed bitterness being black-balled twice by the Membership Committee of the Victoria Cricket Club.

Mr. Fu had no attachment to the outlandish game which ruled the passions of the club's mainly expatriate members. Moreover, he loathed its somnolent air, its red velvet curtains, its arcane traditions and its attachments to long-buried players. It was only the notion of people without a fraction of his wealth passing judgment on him that perversely steeled his resolve to be admitted. Generous contributions to certain quarters eventually secured admission.

After attaining membership, his only interest centred upon the club's spacious grounds. The clubhouse was an antiquated building, filled with useless columns Pip had once described as "mock Corinthian, designed for Victorian little Englanders."

He had no idea what that meant but he knew fortunes could be had through better utilization of a prime site at the heart of the city. He visualized the

oval being tastefully fringed with stands and a tower block to house a redesigned clubhouse with indoor recreational facilities. That would still leave room for two other office blocks for letting. Rental income would secure the finances of the club for decades to come. He would, of course, make a few dollars too if granted the right to develop the project. So he put his ideas to the Executive Committee, only to have them rejected out of hand by a lot of old fogeys.

But barely three years later, the club appointed a European consortium to redevelop facilities along the lines he had originally envisaged. It was during such moments that an unreasoning xenophobic malice welled up in him. It made him want to live long enough to see the advent of the Communists, who might expropriate that prime site for a People's Memorial Park to the forgotten martyrs of colonial oppression!

Mr. Fu's agitation was soothed by the arrival of his Canadian guests, escorted by Pip. Mr. Fu beamed his wrinkled smile and shook hands warmly. The guests were prospective partners for a Vancouver joint venture. Although he outranked them in wealth, he nevertheless felt an awkwardness speaking up to those towering a head above him.

He led the procession to the club's Gladstone Room, where Pip had arranged a quiet corner table. Once seated, however, he felt more in command. If he got waylaid by an English word or phrase, Pip could always be counted on to come to the rescue.

Since Pip came into his life, he had lost his fear of the glittering array of glasses and eating utensils confronting him in the Gladstone Room. Nor was he any longer intimidated by the unintelligible wine lists. Pip had simplified everything down to No. 17 for white and No. 43 for red. Pip had taught him to simulate wine-tasting and so long as he remembered whether it was No. 17 or No. 43 he was referring to, he could recite a remark or two about vintage, bouquet or mellowness.

The meal went swimmingly and the serious business of catering for Vancouver's demand for luxury apartments was left for the office the following day.

When Mr. Fu got home, he could not help wondering what he would ever do without Pip. Those charitable operatic evenings he was obliged to attend would revert to absolute nightmares. He couldn't tell the difference between Puccini, Wagner or anybody else. It all sounded like so much caterwauling. Worse still was the requirement to be stuffed in an evening suit like a tailor's dummy.

Pip made such evenings less intolerable by providing a synopsis to explain each story. He also supplied apt remarks to drop during intervals. They might just be "It's not exactly La Scala." or "His room in Briennerstrasse must have been something!"

Mr. Fu had not the slightest notion what the remarks meant. But they seemed to produce an awed effect.

Mr. Fu first encountered Pip when he went to London to acquire a commercial complex in the City of London and to install his youngest child, Melody, at Roedean. After completing both missions, he decided to see the sights in London.

Mr. Hanson, his lead banker, offered the services of his favourite nephew. "You'll find him extremely likeable and knowledgeable," Mr. Hanson said. "He was educated at Winchester and Oxford and belongs to a very distinguished family. But hasn't quite settled down, you know. I got him started at a stockbroker's but he found that distasteful. Then I secured him a position in one of our branches. But he got too chummy with the manager's wife. Pity. He seems to attract women like flies."

Because of his unfamiliarity with London and because the young man sounded intriguing, Mr. Fu accepted, and that was how he met Pip.

Actually, the nephew's name was not Pip at all. It was Richard Remmington-Rowe. But Mr. Fu's command of English was such that it came out as "Litchit Lemingdon-Low". The young man spotted the impediment at once and suggested "Pip", a nickname formerly bestowed by his nanny. The young man's graciousness did not pass unnoticed.

Pip impressed Mr. Fu with other qualities as well. He had a natural hauteur and cultivation which Mr. Fu envied. When passing the venerable portals of Coutts, Pip observed: "This is the place to put your money if you want to rub accounts with the Queen." Mr. Fu duly took note and opened an account shortly thereafter.

Apart from the usual London sights, Pip also introduced Mr. Fu to those remarkable little shops along Jermyn Street, studded with plaques testifying to a variety of royal patronages. Under Pip's guidance he ordered tailor-made pyjamas with monograms, a silver cigar-cutter engraved with his name, a shaving brush and mug, bath salts and a host of other items he had hitherto never felt any need for. He enjoyed himself enormously, however, for up to that point consumption had consisted largely of signing cheques for the extravagances of his wife and children.

After a couple of days, Pip introduced Mr. Fu to an institution favoured by English dowagers -- afternoon tea at Fortnum & Mason. Mr. Fu was much amused and it suddenly occurred to him that Pip might be just the man to throw light on that indolent game played at the Victoria Cricket Club.

It transpired Pip was a cricketer of considerable standing and was a member of one of the leading British clubs. Mr. Fu listened carefully to the expositions about googlies and innings and the nine ways of putting out a batsman. But what touched him was Pip's explanation of the mock cremation of English cricket following the Australian victory in 1882 and the subsequent reference to the return of the ashes. When Pip took him to Lord's, the resting place of the mythical

ashes, he appreciated for the first time that the English, like the Chinese, delighted in eccentricities.

By the end of the week Mr. Fu was so taken by Pip that he asked Mr. Hanson if his nephew might consider a job in Hong Kong.

“I’m not sure,” Mr. Hanson answered. “In another age he would be a gentleman of leisure. But primogeniture and death duties have put paid to that. Heading for the colonies used to be an alternative but nowadays all that’s left is Hong Kong.”

“Plentee money in Hong Kong still,” Mr. Fu said. “I can use good man to do diss and dat.”

“Well, I’ll sound him out, if you think the way Richard attracts women is not a problem.”

Mr. Fu thought fleeting of his wife, safely thirty years Pip’s senior. Of his two daughters, the elder was married and well on the way to producing a third child. As for Melody, she was securely cooling the fevers of puberty in the draughty dormitories of Roedean. There were, of course, the three Filipino maids. But liaisons among employees were none of his business. Thus reassured, he said: “Please let me know what he dinks.”

Within three months Pip arrived in Hong Kong. Since Mr. Fu’s children had homes of their own or had migrated and Melody was in boarding school, it was decided that Pip should stay at the under-utilized Fu mansion. Mr. Fu hoped that Pip might provide company during his morning dips in the pool. Besides, his wife’s English, more shaky than his own, could do with help.

At the corporate headquarters, Pip was assigned an office next to Mr. Fu’s. He had no formal title, however, so he gradually got referred to as “the English secretary”. His presence caused quite a stir at first, for no one knew how to handle a foreigner in a Chinese enterprise. Apart from the hurdles of language, there was also apprehension over his uncertain relationship with the boss.

But Pip gradually won everybody over with his gentlemanliness and charm. When not attending to mysterious tasks assigned by Mr. Fu, he spent his time reading books on jade, snuff bottles, herbal medicine, Taoist philosophy, Chinese history and the like. The young secretaries and female clerks soon started eyeing him with those dreamy looks usually reserved for popular crooners and unattainable screen idols. It was little different around the home. The Filipino maids fell over themselves to attend to his creature comforts.

Pip quickly adjusted to Chinese customs. He stuck gallantly to chopsticks during meals and each morning greeted Mr. and Mrs. Fu deferentially, in a manner appropriate for a member of a younger generation. In no time Mrs. Fu began treating him like a son.

It was during Pip's second summer in Hong Kong that he met Melody. She had gone on a grand tour of European cities the previous summer. She was a pretty, petite girl of sixteen and might have appeared prettier if she had exchanged her over-sized spectacles for contact lenses and softened her serious demeanour by smiling as readily as her father.

Mr. Fu took great pride in Melody. "She was top of class," he said, upon introducing Melody to Pip. He had expected Pip to offer congratulations. Instead Pip said: "I wouldn't do that again, if I were you. It's bad form to appear too keen."

After his initial shock, Mr. Fu recalled the Chinese adage about over-educated daughters ending up as old maids. How astute Pip was! What Melody needed were not academic distinctions or skills to earn a living but the qualities to attract a good husband! Her bent towards a doctorate in physics or organic chemistry or some such heady subject had to be deflected!

In due course Mr. Fu sought Pip's counsel.

"Let her finish at Roedean. Then send her for detoxification in a Swiss finishing school," Pip suggested. "After that, she should be over her Madam Curie phase. University will do no great harm if she sticks to something amusing."

Mr. Fu reflected on the passage of the years as he prepared for bed. His wife, who seldom accompanied him on business dinners with foreigners, was already fast asleep.

Thanks to Pip, Melody ended finishing school cured of further thoughts of scientific glory. She was now at the point of leaving university, where she had involved herself in dramatic productions and studying the romantic poets. A safe preparation for life, Mr. Fu concluded, and one unlikely to scare off the prospective husbands his wife was sniffing out.

The next morning Mr. Fu told his wife of Pip's impending departure. Mrs. Fu accepted in poor grace the loss of a young man who had taught her so many clever things to impress society ladies. They presented him with a platinum Constantin watch as a parting gift.

For weeks following Pip's departure Mr. Fu experienced a strange sense of disquiet, as if a centre of balance in his life could no longer be located. Soon thereafter, on his sixty-fifth birthday, he received a present from Pip in the form of a green jade pendant carved in the form of a Chinese "peach of longevity."

He felt immensely touched. But as he thought about the young man who had schooled him in so many of the modish conventions of the West, he wondered if something of the East might have rubbed off on Pip in return, things that business types like himself were progressively forgetting. He recalled an ancient sage counselling against wise men acquiring too much wealth, lest it harmed their ideals. Was that a truth that Pip had taken on board? Was that what frightened him into

abandoning Hong Kong? Was he seeking a freedom different from that provided by wealth?

A glimmer of understanding slowly dawned upon Mr. Fu and it filled him with a wistful sadness.

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