

SHERIFF OF  
WAN CHAI

*by*

Peter Mann

**BLACKSMITH BOOKS**

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## CHAPTER TWO

### *Arrival in Hong Kong*

I ARRIVED IN HONG KONG on a warm October afternoon in 1976, a few weeks after the death of Chairman Mao. In those days it was a twenty-eight-hour flight via Rome, Bombay and Bangkok, and the famous landing at Kai Tak involved a hair-raising last minute right turn over the rooftops of Kowloon City before the plane thumped down on the runway stretched out into the harbour. As we disembarked from our British Airways jet and took leave of the stern and matronly stewardess who had glowered at us during the journey, we blinked in the strong sunshine and speculated coarsely on the source of the odour issuing from what looked like a stagnant waterway beside the runway. When Bob Hope first arrived in Hong Kong and made a similar comment, he was informed that the cause was basically shit. ‘Yes,’ he replied, ‘but what have they done to it?’

Having cleared Immigration and Customs, our band of young opportunists was met by an impressive chief inspector, elegantly turned out in a crisp, green summer uniform replete with shining black leather Sam Browne belt. Our eyes lingered for a moment on his service revolver. ‘Right lads,’ said he, ‘let’s be having you in the bus for the Police Training School.’ The old blue Bedford transport lurched out of Kai Tak Airport and was soon threading its way through the densely-packed streets of Kowloon. As we paused at a traffic light on a busy intersection, a fat Chinese hawker dressed in a T-shirt and shorts, selling some dubious-looking foodstuff, looked up at my alien white face, gave a guffaw of laughter and spat a definitive wad of mucus onto the pavement. So this was Hong Kong!

Ramshackle tenements with shops at street level pushed and bullied themselves into prime positions along the roadsides. Above them a multitude of colourful signs of different shapes and sizes advertised all sorts of products and wares. One that made me wonder about the local weather and the suitability of my attire was the Lee Kee Boot Company. Higher up, I could see row upon row of washing drying on poles. The other thing one noticed was the crowds. Both pavements were heaving with humanity, most of them wearing T-shirts, shorts and flip-flops. The girls were pretty and sported long, lustrous, black hair. I wondered idly why the Asians had better hair than us. Although it was nominally autumn, it was still hot and humid. The humidity was cloying and sweat-inducing. Suddenly the bus braked sharply, causing us to grab the seats in front. The driver uttered an incomprehensible Cantonese oath as a red taxi in front of us turned left without a signal. As I settled back before the next veering swerve, I took comfort in the reassuring familiarity of the English road signs, red pillar-boxes and urban layout.

Even though the Cross-Harbour Tunnel had recently been opened, the chief inspector explained that it was policy to take the cheapest route, which meant crossing the harbour on the Jordan Road Ferry. It was also good luck, evidently, to arrive by sea. Moments later, we drove up a ramp onto a large ferry boat. Scrambling off the bus in the twilight, we crowded together at the bow to survey with astonishment the choppy water of the blue-green harbour, dotted with junks and shipping, and the impressive bulk of Hong Kong Island, festooned with dazzling skyscrapers, all lit up and twinkling, the New York of Asia. It looked like a huge dynamo or pulsating beehive radiating energy and prosperity. 'That's the Connaught Centre, headquarters of Jardine Matheson and the tallest building in Asia,' our guide announced authoritatively, pointing at a glittering steel tower which appeared to be covered in portholes. 'In Chinese,' he added wryly, 'it's known as the building of a thousand arseholes.' He did not clarify whether this referred to the building's appearance or the people who worked in it.

Having made our first crossing of Victoria Harbour, we drove off the ferry towards Central District, which was the headquarters of business and government. Our guide pointed out the impressive colonial buildings: the Indian-inspired General Post Office, the majestic Hong Kong Club and classically colonnaded Supreme Court. There was also the imposing Hongkong and Shanghai Bank protected by two snarling imperial lions, still bearing scars from Japanese shelling, and next door the Bank of China which, for reasons of face, had to be just a little bit taller.

Then we headed up the hill for Wong Chuk Hang, which means 'Yellow Bamboo Stream', near Aberdeen on the south side of Hong Kong Island. Entering the impressive main gate of the Police Training School, which was flanked by turreted pill-boxes (a relic of the '67 leftist disturbances, we were informed), it was something of a surprise to see a number of young men lying face down in the compound with their hands clasped behind their necks. In answer to our anxious questions, we were informed that these cadets were being disciplined.

While digesting the ominous import of these words, we were shown to our dormitory where we dumped our suitcases and began to unpack. Just as we were beginning to relax after our long journey, we heard the sound of angry voices and boots pounding up the stairs. Moments later, the door was kicked open and in burst a half-dozen officers in full uniform.

'What do you think this is, a bloody tea party?' shouted their leader, a dark-haired Scotsman with a missing front tooth and ruddy face. They then proceeded to upturn all of our cases, dumping our precious belongings on the floor. The Scotsman noticed a girlie magazine lying amongst the junk.

'Right, whose is this?' he bellowed, his face purpling with anger.

No one moved.

'I think it's time you jokers were taught a lesson,' he added unpleasantly.

Still wearing our clothes from the plane, we were marched straight out into the compound to be drilled for a good hour in the warm tropical evening. Then, to see what we were made of, we were put over an assault course complete with ropes to climb, ditches to

ford and trenches to wriggle through. The poor fellow next to me was asked to do fifty press-ups and he did his best before collapsing.

'Pathetic!' said the drill sergeant, 'my granny could do better than that.'

As we stood gasping and sweating in the humid air, the Scotsman started to warm to his theme.

'You guys thought this would be easy, didn't you?' he asked rhetorically.

'You thought this would be a Sunday school picnic, eh?'

As he ranted, he walked up and down our bedraggled ranks, fixing one or another of us with a withering, basilisk stare. He leered into my face.

'Did you hear what I said?'

'Yes sir!' I replied.

He stretched his ugly, implacable face very close to mine.

'Do you see those blocks over there?' he growled.

My eyes flicked away to take in the high-rise public housing estate on the other side of the camp.

'There are ten thousand Chinese over there, and they all hate your guts!'

By this time, our disorientation was complete. In unfamiliar surroundings, exhausted and jet-lagged, we were at their mercy.

Then an older gentleman appeared who was introduced as the force chaplain. The Scotsman saluted him and said, 'Seems like London have let us down again, Sir! A pathetic bunch, a complete rabble.'

The chaplain spoke to each of us in turn, asking about our religious convictions and alluding darkly to the moral problems we would face if we fraternised with the local Chinese girls. He then asked whether any of us had had sexual relations with another man. We stood silent in an ecstasy of embarrassment. He took a step forward and looked me in the eye. The Scotsman poked me in the chest with his swagger stick.

'Answer the chaplain,' he barked.

'Er . . . no, sir,' I stammered. The chaplain leaned forward and gave me a big wink.

'Feel free to come and see me if you have any problems,' he beamed.

Then he asked if any of us could sing as there was a service the next morning and he was short of choir members.

‘Squad, take two paces forward!’ barked the Scotsman. ‘They all volunteer, Sir!’

‘Right you lot,’ he said. ‘Sing *Onward Christian Soldiers!*’

And we did. We all sang *Onward Christian Soldiers* at the top of our voices.

After another hour of being drilled and harangued, a large tropical moon rose in the night sky, under which we were marched to some steps outside a darkened room. I thought I caught the sound of stifled laughter from within. We were given the order, ‘About turn!’ At that moment, the room suddenly blazed with light and a torrent of guffawing cadets poured out of the door, each bearing pints of beer. The whole thing had been an elaborate colonial initiation ceremony. After an hour or so, we were all taken down to the bars of Wan Chai to get properly drunk.

I should add that one of our group, another surly Scot, later confided in me that he had been profoundly disappointed that our training was not to proceed in the fashion of the initiation. His favourite film was *The Hill* with Sean Connery and Harry Andrews set in a prison.

‘Life’s too soft, these days,’ he sighed.

On Monday morning we went for a run up Brick Hill, which was at the back of the school near Ocean Park. I was feeling fit and led the pack up the hill. As we climbed higher, I looked out over the coastline of green bays and was suddenly struck down by wave after wave of appalling vertigo. I don’t know whether it was the humidity or alien terrain, but I had to sit down and wait for the worst to pass, enduring the jeers of my squad-mates as they passed me. That week we toured the colony (or ‘territory’ as it was euphemistically called), were issued with uniforms and kit, visited Police HQ and played a bit of cricket. There was also rowing at Middle Island.

At the weekend, we were lucky enough to see the annual ‘Beating of the Retreat’, which was held on our parade ground. Attended by the great and the good, including His Excellency the Governor in full colonial rig topped by his ostrich plumes, the ceremony commemorated the surrender of Hong Kong to the Japanese on Christmas Day 1941. It was a splendid occasion, like a tattoo, with

two marching bands; one of Chinese bagpipers, who criss-crossed the square under the illumination of coloured spotlights. We all stood as the Union Jack was lowered to the strains of the *Last Post*, and a piper came forward to sing the *Twenty-third Psalm* in a beautiful tenor voice. Then, far away on the mountainside, a lone piper played *Amazing Grace*. There was scarce a dry eye on the parade ground that evening. I was half expecting ghostly Imperial Japanese troops to emerge in the moonlight.

Over the next few months we learned Cantonese, criminal law, firearms and drill. I thought I would hate the drill but actually it was quite relaxing and, like rowing, once the squad was up to speed, there was an exultant feeling of many people moving in unison. The only problem was that we had to drill without shirts so sunburn was always a threat. Later in the course we inspectors were required to drill an unfortunate squad of constables. It was quite a challenge getting them from A to B on the parade ground, requiring planning and anticipation to give the right command at the right time. Some of us made an absolute hash of it, leaving the poor constables in a complete mess. At our passing-out parade, we asked the bandmaster to play the Souza march made famous as the theme to *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. It was great music to march to, while we enjoyed the subversive undertone.

In the evenings, we would congregate in the officer's mess for a few pints or gin-and-tonics. The fans whirred overhead and outside the cicadas clicked in the tropical foliage. It all felt very Graham Greene or Somerset Maugham. Occasionally, there were female visitors who were doubtless flattered by the attention they received from all the single men. It was not a good idea to take your girlfriend there lest she be devoured by lustful male eyes. In any case, especially on Fridays and Saturdays, most of the expatriate inspectors were by 9 p.m. preparing to depart for the fleshpots of Wan Chai for a so-called nightcap.

Our Chinese colleagues were friendly but had (what appeared to us) some strange habits. Early in the morning we would have the 'dawn chorus' – loud hawking of mucus in the bathroom to get rid of what the locals called 'the evil spit monster'. We would also find shoe-prints on the toilet seats as most of them still used 'squat



and drop' facilities at home such as one might find in parts of Europe. They were strictly forbidden from gambling at the school, which must have been difficult as most Chinese will gamble on anything at the drop of a hat. Not as accustomed to drinking as us, they would often turn red-faced after a glass of beer as most East Asians lack the enzymes to metabolise alcohol. The advantage of this condition was that there was less chance of alcoholism, whereas this was a major problem for many Europeans in the tropics. It took us a while to get used to sleeping in the heat as we only had fans, air-conditioning being regarded as extravagant.

As for spoken Cantonese, it is very difficult to master a language that has eight tones. Foreigners (or *'gwai lo'* – ghost people – as we are known) are forever getting the tones wrong and it is only by constant practice that we can become nearly fluent. I will not even go into the concept of 'classifiers' which are used to designate various categories of noun. Many is the time I have been certain that what I have said is correct only to be greeted by a gawping stare of complete incomprehension. Indeed, our teacher impressed upon us the importance of first saying, *'M Goi'* or 'Please!' whenever we attempted to speak to cue the listener that a foreigner was attempting to speak the vernacular. The pitfalls are legion. As Cantonese has a limited range of phonemes, meaning is signified by subtle variations in tone, which can be very confusing to foreigners. One must avoid talking about crabs or shoes as these words sound very much like a part of the female anatomy. Similarly, if one mispronounces the words for nine or dog, then one is referring to a part of the male anatomy. One day at a formal dinner I tried to tell a conservative Chinese matron that I had been diving and succeeded in communicating that I had been 'shitting in the sea'. The best thing about the lessons was that we had one very pretty female teacher, and we all mooned over her.

Our Cantonese instruction books had been written by a venerable Chinese gentleman called Sidney Lau. They contained some marvellous old sayings and proverbs, such as 'A man will not cry until he has seen his own coffin'; whereas a crafty person would 'pose as a pig to eat a tiger'. Then there were obscure proverbs like 'Three monks will not drink water', the explanation being that one or two

monks can carry water but three will argue endlessly over who does what. The Chinese have some very colourful expressions, often delivered in two parts with the meaning given as a pun, 'An African monk – an annoying person', where the second part of the expression sounds like *'black man'*.

While Cantonese can be very eloquent and subtle, it also has a profound store of profanity related to people's mothers and ancestors and dropping dead on the street, enough to make a navy blush, as anyone riding on a bus or tram in Hong Kong and listening in on seemingly casual conversation will attest.

The written language is also complex and fascinating. It is best learned early and Chinese children normally start at five or six years old with an hour's homework a day. The simple pictographic characters become increasingly and accumulatively more complex, some being written with as many as twenty different strokes. You need to know about 2,000 of them to read a Chinese newspaper. Many are surprisingly expressive – for example, the character for an 'official' has two mouths.

Towards the end of our course, each of us was given a Chinese name. There was a special section in the Language Division that undertook this task. The aim was to provide a convincing Chinese name that was similar to the sound of the English name, but not a simple transliteration. These names were so authentic that if they appeared in a local newspaper report, a reader could assume that the bearer of the name was a local officer. My Chinese name is Man Pui-dak, 文沛德, which means 'Man of Great Virtue'. Although I make no comment on its aptness, local people all seem to appreciate the sound of this name.

In my study of criminal law, I had the misfortune to have an instructor who not only looked like an octopus but also appeared to be permanently hung over and was therefore extremely cantankerous. My being an Oxford graduate led to theories that I was a plant for the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) so I was given a particularly hard time. 'Let's ask smarty-pants,' he would drawl, 'Mann, define "conspiracy"!' No matter how well I did, he was always finding excuses to fail me and put me on guard duty for the weekend, which I accepted philosophically.

On the other hand, weapons' training (or 'musketry' as it was called) was a lot of fun. Following the riots of 1967 when the Cultural Revolution spilled over the border into Hong Kong, the police had established riot squads that consisted of a platoon with four ranks, each representing an increased use of force, to meet the threat of serious civil disturbance. In the front rank, police carried batons and rattan shields; in the second, Webley Smoke Pistols firing gas canisters (but watch the wind direction or it might blow back on you); in the third, Federal Riot Guns firing baton shells (which bounced off the ground and broke legs); and finally a rank with alternate Remington pump-action shotguns and AR15 assault rifles (semi-automatic versions of the M16) for rooftop snipers. We had to fire all these on the range, in addition to the Colt 38 which was the standard police handgun. We also learned to fire Sterling sub-machine guns, which had an alarming tendency to rise up as they were discharged. This was all good *Boy's Own* stuff.

Another highly enjoyable exercise we carried out was testing airport security. The challenge was for us cadets to find ways of breaching security at the airport, thus exposing any flaws that might exist in the present system. In those pre-terrorist days you could get away with almost anything whereas today we would have been cut down in a hail of machine gun fire. Probably the best training for this sort of thing had been my undergraduate days at Oxford when we prepared to crash a college ball. My tactics were fairly simple. I arrived at HAECO (the aircraft engineering facility next to the airport) wearing my tropical business suit and holding a briefcase in which I had secreted a pair of blue overalls, a clipboard and a toy gun. Approaching the security guard with confidence, I informed him that I had a meeting with a member of staff whose name I had found in the telephone directory. I was asked to wait so went for a little stroll. I could see the runway outside so I walked out and ducked behind a wall where I opened my briefcase, took off the suit and put on the blue overalls.

With the clipboard in my hand, I looked just like an airport worker. Feeling very pleased with the way things were going I walked over to the nearest plane and up the steps into the aircraft. Walking to the front, I arrived at the cockpit where a pilot was

doing a pre-flight check. His surprise turned to alarm when I raised my toy gun and said, 'Luckily for you this is just a drill!' Moments later I heard the wail of sirens and the airport police arrived and boarded the plane. I put my hands up and was rather roughly handcuffed and escorted off the aircraft. I shall never forget the look on the tourists' faces as I was dragged through immigration controls by a posse of angry policemen.

The high spot of the month was payday. We would grab our few thousand dollars and head for town. The most popular shopping attraction was the newly opened Ocean Terminal which had a plethora of shops selling cameras and electronic goods. Coming from an austere UK, our jaws dropped at the incredible selection of consumer goods. We all emerged clutching the latest stereo and Pentax or Nikon. We also quickly learned about Chinese food and that quintessential Hong Kong gastronomic experience, *yam cha* (literally 'drink tea') where many small, delicious dishes known as *dim sum* (little bits of heart) served in bamboo steamers were wheeled around on trolleys by ladies who would call out their melodious names (*ha gau, siu mai, ma lai go*) before plonking them on your table and noting the details on a slip of paper, while you drank many cups of tea, or in our case bottles of San Miguel beer. Chinese restaurants are brilliantly lit, often with screaming children running wild. We soon discovered that the Cantonese are probably the noisiest people on the planet and that just a few of them can make a truly extraordinary clamour.

We also made expeditions to the garish, crimson Jumbo Floating Restaurant in the middle of Aberdeen Harbour, which had caught fire a few years before with some loss of life. Based on Tanka (boat people) wedding boats, her exterior was a riot of writhing dragons with flashing eyes and inside was a maze of multi-coloured dining halls and private rooms complete with panelling, scrolls and ceramics. She even had her own pier on the shore and a ferry service provided by boats which were small replicas of the mother vessel. Once seated at our table, the waiters would bring a half-dozen bottles of cold San Miguel beer and two plates heaped with big juicy steamed prawns, followed by more seafood. After our meal, we would hire a sampan and tour the typhoon shelter to marvel at

the boat people living on hundreds of vessels, with families cooking under awnings, dogs and chickens wandering around the decks and young children tied to ropes to stop them falling over the side. This was the end of an era as within ten years, most of the boat dwellers were rehoused on dry land.

On Friday nights, after a few drinks in the mess, we would jump into taxis or cars – there were no breathalysers in those days – and head down to Wan Chai. One time we nearly didn't make it as my friend crashed his MGB into a lamp post on the way down the hill. The police were called and I had to hide in the bushes with a handkerchief tied round my head to staunch a cut brow, looking for all the world like a left-behind Japanese soldier. We were lucky as traffic fatalities were not uncommon. There were still many girlie bars on Lockhart Road (named after an intrepid colonial administrator) and in the seventies the US fleet was frequently in town. The Vietnam War had ended with the fall of Saigon in April 1975 and Pol Pot was rampaging in Cambodia. The bars were all playing the Eagles' new hit single *Hotel California*. One of the great sports of the time was bar brawls between British soldiers (known as squaddies) and American sailors. However, the white-clad American shore patrol was always quick to arrive and restore order.

We all had our favourite bars and sweethearts: there were, for example, the Pussycat, Ocean, Winner and Back Door. One of our favourite tactics was to head into a back street, buy a bottle of cheap Chinese wine from a store and knock it back quickly, thus getting well tanked up before we hit the bars, where beer was more expensive and the price of girlie drinks exorbitant. You had to be careful not to get too drunk or your friends would take you across the road to the Pinky Tattoo Parlour to get a nice tattoo. For each girlie drink you bought, the girl got 40 per cent, the bar kept 40 per cent, and the Mamasan 20 per cent. The Mamasan was the boss of the bar, would match the girls with customers and her word was law. The 'bar fine' to buy a girl out went to the bar but the girl could keep extra tips. Most of the girls came from poor backgrounds and were working to support their families.

Other favourite watering holes were the Godown, which had a Shandong doorman with a bulldog and a back bar with a live

Filipino band, and the Bull and Bear, which was the first Western-style pub in Hong Kong and was run by an old English harridan with a beehive hairstyle. She was a racist and disliked Chinese customers. When you brought in a local girl she would watch you like a hawk and if you laid a hand on the girl, or heaven forbid, kissed her, then you were both unceremoniously thrown out. After a heavy night out, you inevitably became hungry and there were a number of enterprising places serving early-morning greasy breakfasts to sop up the alcohol. One of these was called the Horse and Groom, which we referred to as the 'House of Doom'.

On Sundays, when not on guard duty, some of us would go to ride trial motorbikes at the Castle Peak Range track on the western side of the New Territories. We would ride with our bikes in the back of an old police Bedford lorry. It was a long journey and we would tell stories in the back and laugh as we passed the Freezing-Hot thermos flask factory in Tsuen Wan. The bike track was near the Castle Peak Firing Range used by the army so we needed to check first that no firing practice was going on. The art of trial-bike riding is to negotiate a vertiginous circuit of steep hills and gullies, putting your foot down for balance as little as possible. I was not a very skilful rider and one time I managed to jar the bike into my groin, much to the amusement of my laconic Scottish friend close behind.

'Ow, my balls!' I wailed.

'You haven't got any!' was his cheerful reply.

One of the highlights of our training was the traditional Mess Night. Resplendent in our uniforms of short white mess jackets with silver insignia and black trousers with buff stripes, we sat down to a fine dinner with plenty of beer, wine and speeches. The only problem was that you were not allowed to leave the table until after the loyal toast at the end, which was a serious issue if you had had a couple of pints before you sat down, so the old hands would have an empty bottle handy under the table. The high point of the evening was the 'Trooping of the Duck' which was our regimental mascot. The duck, dressed in his own little mess jacket walked along the tables and had to be kissed by all the females present. Afterwards there was the usual singing and jokes and much later, when I

staggered upstairs, I found that my bed had been moved by some friends down to the parade ground, where I went and simply got in and fell asleep. No matter what you had been up to the night before, however, you had to be on parade bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for roll call at 7 a.m. sharp, and woe betide those who were late.

There was a very nice touch at Christmas. As we single Brits had no family in Hong Kong, there was a quaint tradition where families from the *hongs* (the old trading companies, like Jardines and Swire) volunteered to invite young inspectors to their homes for lunch on Christmas Day. I went to a beautiful apartment in the upmarket residence called Tregunter where I was treated to a delicious lunch with an expatriate family and also given a present. I have never forgotten this kind gesture. I was also invited to dinner with another senior civil servant who had been at Monkton Combe. He reassured me that I would soon settle down and get the hang of things.

Before we passed out of the training school we went on a camp in the wilds of the Sai Kung Country Park. We put up our tents in a remote paddy field and set off for long marches in the pouring rain. There were huge mosquitoes there but luckily we had plenty of incense coils to keep them at bay. One evening we went to the local village for some noodles and discovered that they had a fridge full of Tsingtao beer. One of the Chinese inspectors had never drunk beer before. After three or four bottles, he amazed us by doing a perfect handstand against the wall before rushing out and vomiting copiously. The toothless old Hakka woman who ran the store thought this was hilarious.