7. Gold-Digging

Probably no place in the world changes as rapidly as Hong Kong. If variety is the spice of life, Hong Kong must be rated one of the spiciest places on earth. It is not just a matter of ships coming and going and the ever changing population: that is another story. Fortunes too change overnight, often because of gold-digging.

Take the roads, for example. A motorist finds life excitingly dangerous and variegated. Pedestrians need not be mentioned, since they officially do not exist.

Drivers find that the roads never tire of changing: closed today, open next year. That would be a fair way of describing most of the major roads, especially in Kowloon.

I once heard a rumour, I am sure it must have been a rumour, that the digging up and setting down of road surfaces is intended to make sure that labourers always have work to do. Or is it to make sure that contractors are always in contract? If the good of the labourers is the cause, taxpayers might even feel happier about it, though a similar experiment during the French Revolution in the end pleased neither the taxpayers nor the labourers. But I have a feeling that the truth could be even more sinister than the rumour.

Someone who knows Hong Kong pretty well has said that certain personnel in certain depart-
ments have keen eyes to observe what needs repairing: they notice when shabby Government buildings need a face-lift, when wires look dangerous and should be replaced, or when roads need re-surfacing. It is a comfort to know that we have people looking out for aesthetic improvements and remedies for public dangers.

My informant, however, is too cynical. He says that on every job there is an additional thirty per cent commission charged for distribution to middle men and Government servants. The cost to the taxpayers of course would be enormous, but that is what income tax means: they pay their little bit to the public purse but never know if they are being rooked.

Suppose my cynical friend were right: he should be, since he works in the very department he criticizes so cynically.

In 1967 the Public Works Department’s programme cost the public a fell five hundred million dollars. If it is true about that thirty per cent squeeze, it would mean that one hundred and fifty million dollars went down the drain — half the total amount spent on education for our more than a million school children.

My cynical friend sounds malicious, yet I cannot help remembering a lucky building contractor who, after having a drink too many at a dinner party, confided to me that for a big Government building job he had to allow a million dollars in squeeze.
To back this up, I have in front of me an account for a certain resettlement block. Large amounts are listed for "entertainment" and "commission". These two items equal the pay owing to some of the workers, who went unpaid. No wonder there are strikes, discontent and rioting.

Gold-digging, of course, is not confined to roads, repairs, building and decoration. You can find it in the most unexpected places, even at the seat of law itself.

Several workers have told me how this racket works. A man cuts off his finger, or injures his leg at work. The labour laws fix the rate of compensation according to the degree of disability, but the rate is not over-generous: it must be remembered that "these people" cannot be allowed to imagine they are very valuable, certainly that yellow limbs are not as valuable as white ones. Paying too much for a worker's limb is a "dangerous precedent" — a term applied whenever anyone veers towards treating ordinary people as human beings. But truly, three thousand dollars is not much to offer a man who has lost that most useful member, his right index finger and partially lost the use of the whole hand, or for a man who has lost his whole forearm. But to the more rapacious employer, this is far too much to pay a man who is no longer an asset to him. If the case ends up in court, more often than not the employer will be told to pay up or else...

At this point the game of hide-and-seek begins. The victim may be told that if he pays some of his
compensation to a bailiff he will get help from that all-powerful person. The bailiff then finds the employer is also willing to pay to "disappear", though the employee swears he has not disappeared at all. Chasing the missing man can in the end eat up all the compensation, and the victim may even gain by forgetting the whole thing. The police, we are told, are not responsible in any way for arresting a man who ignores a court order in a civil case. The victim is told that it is up to him to find ways and means of catching the employer and making him pay up. He is even warned that if he does catch the employer and the latter is sent to prison, he will have to pay for his keep in prison. For this information I am indebted to a friend who worked in the bailiff's office and was glad to quit.

I said at the beginning of this chapter that pedestrians do not legally exist. Perhaps that statement needs clarification. Have you ever tried to cross a road at a crossroad? It really is a game of guessing, intuition and daring. When you see the cars rushing past you at right angles, it is obvious that somewhere there is a red light against you as a pedestrian. You watch carefully to see when these cars slow up because then you can tell that it is STOP for the cars and GO for you. Or is it for you? If you are very lucky the cars now standing may have left you enough space to cross, but more often you are not so lucky. You begin to stumble across with crowds of other feet all trying to reach the other side of the road before the next onslaught of traffic. The chances are that you will not reach further than the half-way mark of the road. Then
begins the bewilderment. Which way is the traffic moving? The filter left traffic will be racing at you on the far side of the road, and by the time you have rushed back to avoid being knocked down by that, the lights will have changed again (you can only guess at this as the lights are not shown to you, being only intended for cars — remember, you don’t exist!), and you find yourself being barged at from the rear by right-turning traffic that has been waiting in the side-lines to rush at the change of lights. The drivers, of course, are angry at your stupidity in imagining you had any right to cross at all, so mad that they wouldn’t think twice about knocking you down to show what a menace you are on the roads. And you are so mad with these road-hogs that you would just love the chance to overturn one of their cars. Then, to cap all, when you open your newspaper you find that the Transport Chief has called you an “idiot pedestrian”. You want to call him an idiot for not offering you a place to cross in safety.

But if you do get knocked down and killed in Hong Kong, your relatives will almost certainly get no compensation. The roads were not intended for your use, so if you get knocked down you can only have yourself to blame. With almost all traffic lights set up only for drivers, it must be your fault, and the driver could never be wrong. Besides, there are gold-diggers who can make sure that even if you were on a pedestrian crossing, the whole thing can still be fixed up to benefit them and not your family. No driver likes to spoil his driving record, and there are plenty of men who, for a consideration,
will help him to keep his record clear. Who cares about the sorrowing widow and children of the victim?

But we have been neglecting our gold-digging.

I used to hate stories about gold-rushes. They made me see man at his lowest, like an animal hunting weaker animals in the jungle, killing for survival, selling his soul for fleshpots, hating his fellow-man for that muck in the ground, losing heaven for the dirt under his feet. Hong Kong does all of these things: it grabs, sells itself, hates, and in the end loses all its sense of values.

Anyone can see how gold is heaped up in Hong Kong. Some are not content with a million dollars: they want another, and another, and another. There is no satisfying them. And how unhappy they are with it all too! Imagine spending a whole lifetime thinking about how to make money, and more money! Think of losing one’s touch with people. If there is a life after death, how sudden the change must be for those who have lived for nothing but the sight of dollars! They say there is no money in heaven. But even if there is no life after death, what is the use of this store of dollars anyhow? A man can only eat enough for a man; he can only wear one set of clothes: at a time. He can only watch one television set at one time. But what harm he can do to his fellowmen in the quest for money that he can never use!

It is hardly necessary to mention that some will
kill for gold, even for a single dollar. Some do it by cold-bloodedly taking a knife and sticking it in another man he intends to rob. That is naked violence and one can almost pity the fool who uses that clumsy method; he may not enjoy freedom to spend what he has stolen. But there is a more subtle way to commit murder for money. George Bernard Shaw could have written another "Major Barbara" on the subject of how Hong Kong murders for money without using knives. Take T.B. for example. An average of thirty people die of this every week, and over two hundred new cases are reported. How many of these deaths resulted from undernourishment? Or look at drugs. They are outright murder, slow, brutal murder, and not just one by one, but mass murder, and all for gold. There are some pretty powerful people committing this murder daily; if not, how could such large quantities of drugs escape detection? Whether at the import end or the distribution end, whichever way you look at it, it is surely mass murder of the lowest, most inhuman and criminal kind. But, as Shaw would say, some of these murderers, when they have made their money, appear as public benefactors: you may even find their names on the Queen's Honours List. The Queen will never know that part of the story.

Look where you like in Hong Kong and you will find men on the quest for gold, gold that has seared their souls until the light of the soul has died from their eyes. As their gold increases their hearts harden proportionately, until, like Midas, they find that everything they touch turns to gold; gold becomes their sole preoccupation. But not many are as lucky
as Midas in returning to flesh and blood, even for the love of a child.

In the days of Charles Dickens, Victorian gold-diggers could be touched by tales of Oliver Twist and Little Nell: gold-diggers in those days seemed at least to have some sentiment. But those days have gone, and our modern Hong Kong gold-diggers decry emotion and sentiment. Even democracy is suspect here, and we seem to be travelling along the road to fascism. We are tired of human rights that limit our laissez-faire; we are tired of sentimentality that pricks our consciences; we are tired of conscience itself. Let us worship the golden calf. Let us indulge our senses only. Let us forget the laws of God and man. So are the thoughts of gold-diggers. And they remain deaf to the cries of the poor, the fatherless, the leper, the blind, the sick and the widow.

If you are a gold-digger, shut these unfortunate people out of your mind. Your must — or else you must give up your gold-digging.