That is why I have called this chapter “Robbers’ Paradise — Hong Kong.”

9. Strong-arm Men versus the Handicapped

If you want to see how a man can be used as a tennis-ball just investigate a social welfare case applying for a hawker licence on compassionate grounds.

But first you should know what that means. If a man becomes too handicapped to find a normal job, or a woman is unfortunate enough to lose her husband while her children are still too young to go to work, the Social Welfare Department escapes the necessity of giving adequate assistance by offering a site for hawking. The grounds for recommending the site are said to be “compassionate”.

Then the game of tennis begins. The “compassionate case” is told to go to the Hawker Licensing Office to be allocated the site for hawking. The Licensing Office gives him a list of sites that have been vacant of hawkers for years because no one can sell a thing there. The hawker, if he knows nothing of the game, excitedly rushes around from site to site to see which is best, and soon finds that he has been sent on a wild goose chase, as every one of the sites is useless. He returns to the Hawker Licensing Office and says that the sites are unsuitable for trade: he wants a place where he can earn a living. The Hawker Licensing Office disclaims any responsibility for social welfare needs and puts his name on the list for a better site which may or may not turn up in a few months. (Every hawker I have ever
met says that it is easy to get a good site quickly if you know the right people and offer the right price but the department concerned always strongly denies this.) “And how do I live in the meantime?” asks the compassionate case. “Go back to the Social Welfare Department,” he is told. So he does. “Didn’t we recommend you for a hawker licence?” he is asked by the compassionate ones. “We’ve done our best for you. Aren’t you satisfied?”

The game of tennis sometimes goes on for years.

The hawker then takes the law into his own hands, since he and his family need to eat while the game of tennis is in progress. He finds an illegal site where everyone else except himself is happily and illegally operating. But when he joins in, he finds himself with a summons. Why is it that the other hawkers don’t have to run away when the police van arrives? The answer is simple: he hasn’t yet been initiated into the method of hawking illegally with impunity. He offers good material for police statistics to prove to the public that they are “taking constant action on illegal hawking”.

Some day the game of tennis may end and a new phase begins. But I can think of one poor seriously incapacitated man who played the department’s tennis ball for about seven years before entering the next phase of the game.

It was admitted that in his case there had been several mistakes causing delay, but as the person responsible for the mistakes was dead, nothing
could be done, except to offer the handicapped man a better stall at once. (Dead men cannot defend themselves, but they make good scape-goats for the living.) Strange that on the day when this handicapped hawker was called to the office to get his licence, he was met by a notorious racketeer. No one has explained satisfactorily how the notorious racketeer obtained the information when the licence was to be given: certainly not from the victim himself, to whom he was a total stranger.

The racketeer offered him several hundred dollars to hand over his licence, after which he was to be paid a small monthly sum of money. The victim refused to give up his licence, so the racketeer resorted to threats. A handicapped man is no match for a strong-arm racketeer, so the victim signed away his rights to the stall for which he had waited so many years.

The casual reader may wonder why the victim did not report to the Department concerned, or tell some Urban Councillor what had happened. The racketeer had already forestalled such a move by explaining to his victim that hawker sites are non-transferable and any report made by him would result in the cancellation of the licence. It was months later, when the racketeer was being investigated on other complaints, that this case came to light. It was then discovered that the strong-arm bandit was terrorising several widows, ex-lepers, and mentally-handicapped persons.

One of the ex-lepers complained of intimidation.
He was told that next time this occurred he should call the police. He did. But the police arrested the victim instead of the racketeer: the latter was an ex-policeman, and still very much "one of the boys". Much of the crime of the Colony is carried on by ex-police, protected by their former buddies.

Speaking of this racketeering in hawker licences, one Government official made the brilliant remark quite recently that it would be better for handicapped persons to take jobs in industry and leave hawking to the strong-arm men who are already controlling it.

It never ceases to amaze me that in a hawker operation, several hundred vociferous and protesting though genuine hawkers can be ousted from their stalls in one morning’s swoop, yet a single strong-arm man can defy a whole police division with impunity and no one seems capable of moving him. Any scientist who wants to prove the theory of the survival of the fittest should visit Hong Kong. Because the law protects the fittest.

Another amazing thing about the hawker situation is the illogic and utter confusion of the policy. We are told that there are too many food-stalls in the streets. This sage decision is reached by the traffic men, not by those who eat at the stalls. We must eliminate them, we are told.

To eliminate the food-stalls we are advised by the hawker licensing folk to discriminate against the dead and their families. As soon as a food-stall
operator dies his stall must cease to operate: this ensures that his family will not inherit any means of making a livelihood: it is a mighty slow way of solving the problem of having too many hawkers on the streets. But it does ensure that poor people will realise they only exist on sufferance. Besides, some of the stall-holders are not going to die this century. Those who do die may leave behind a destitute widow and destitute children: a woman should know better than to marry a man who is going to die and have his only possession confiscated. "Unto him that hath shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath." This is a good motto for Hong Kong. And those who formulate the policy are those who "have."

Not all the hawkers fall into the category of the "have-nots". Some operate half a dozen stalls or more, and some are even millionaires. It would seem to be good sound common-sense to eliminate some of the stalls of these wealthy men who take the name of "hawker". But if you ask the powers-that-be why a living man should not be content with one stall and let some other poor guy have a chance while he lives, you are told in hushed tones: "That would be very VERY difficult." Dead men and widows are easier to deal with than strong-arm men. The result is that some hawkers can afford to run around in big cars and take plane trips abroad. One licencee took a plane trip from England to Hong Kong to renew her hawker licence when she was asked to appear in person.
Still, if you try to talk fairness and logic in policy meetings on such subjects, you will be defeated on a show of hands. It is so much easier to take the line of least resistance, and handicapped men and widows offer the least of that. And besides, if power is not given to the strong-arm men, where will the Government find its so-called supporters when it wants to convince the home Government in London that it has the people, even the grass roots, behind it in times of unrest?