

FACE PIDGIN

By JAMES W. BENNETT

The story of a Chinese lottery promoter who would rather face financial ruin than lose face

MY CLERK, a solemn-faced Eurasian, thrust his head into my office and announced mournfully:

"Li Yuan is here, sir. He will *not* go 'way."

I groaned, and the clerk groaned in sympathy. Li Yuan was by way of becoming a Number One pest. And why, out of the several American attorneys practicing law in Shanghai, he should have chosen me as confidant and father confessor, I can only describe as the working of some obscure Nemesis. I said to my clerk:

"All right, send him in. We'll get it over with."

Li Yuan entered. He was garbed in a robe of tan serge surmounted by a jacket of exquisite, leaf-brown silk brocaded with chrysanthemums—the perfect autumnal costume of the young Chinese dandy. Beaming at me, he began:

"You are my friend. You are my father. You are my dear teacher. At las', I have found life-work that will please you!"

I was not impressed. The young man had come to me with not less than forty schemes the past six months, upon each of which I had dourly poured much cold water. They had ranged from stock flotation of a perpetual-motion machine to a plan to build a stadium for the matching of fighting quail. Li Yuan's late-lamented father having been a friend of mine, I had honestly tried to prevent the youth from dissipating, in one lusty sweep, the entire family fortune. He now drew from his pocket a printed balance sheet, the statement of a firm planning to sell that profitable paper, lottery-insurance.

He said proudly: "That is my company. *I* am the Ta Ch'ing Lottery-Insurance Corporation, Limited. Ta Ch'ing—I have named it after Manchu Dynasty: 'Great Brightness.'"

I went over the statement with growing puzzlement. It was so perfectly in order that I demanded, "Do you mean that this is really accurate? Did you work it out, alone?"

"I have two other stockholder', two foreign gentlemen who know all about it. One is Jo-hon MacSmith from City of Mass'chusetts in State of

Boston. Other is Jean Clouard. He is French. But let me tell you of fine idea I have, the idea that will make our firm famous all over China. We will have a prize: a fine coffin of catalpa wood which we will give to policy-holder before death—so that he can show to admiring neighbors. Then, after death, we pay all funeral expense', including fifty-course banquet, many bags of paper money to be burn', many prayer' at Taoist temple. . . ."

Li Yuan paused. His eyes rolled blissfully upward, showing the whites in a trick that I found maddening. Then he demanded:

"Is it not mos' conservative?"

For once I had to agree. The Chinese lottery-insurance companies had been worked out mathematically along actuarial lines. The lottery features furnished the sales appeal. And their system of penalties for delinquency and cancellation gave the companies an extraordinary profit, a profit which they legitimately increased by sound investment of the funds in their control. I asked:

"How are the stock shares in your firm divided?"

"I have control, sir. I own sixty percent."

I glanced again at the balance sheet. "Your treasury seems to be well filled. How much of it is MacSmith's and Clouard's money?"

"None, sir. I do financing. But the two gentlemen are giving their exper'ence. They are men with high Western ideal. They call themselves 'Investment Committee.' They will invest our funds. But they can make no purchase unless I give—how you say?—my okayo."

"I wish you'd let me look over those investments before you do any okaying. I've one fault to find with your company: these two men have no real equity in it. Even so, that needn't be serious, if you'll watch your step!"

"I'll watch it, Mr. Parkes!" And beaming refulgently at me, Li Yuan departed.

A WEEK later, Li Yuan sent me a chit, asking me to lunch. The meal was such an elaborate

affair—being enlivened by those expensive if dubious delicacies, sharks' fins, antediluvian eggs pickled in lime, and moribund sea slugs—that I realized my young host had some unusual favor to ask of me. He began promptly:

"Mr. Parkes, what if I say that we have chance to make forty thousand dollar' profit for our company? Quick profit? You know company named Asiatic Investment? And you know what their bonds are selling at?"

"Above par. The Asiatic Investment is the strongest house of its kind in the Far East."

Li Yuan chuckled delightedly. "Didn't I tell you Clouard and MacSmith were good men? They have found man in Soochow who wants money very fast. If I buy, tonight, for cash, he will give me two hundred bonds at eighty. He needs money quick, and he must not let his creditors know that he has to sell."

I asked uncertainly: "Are you sure it's the Asiatic Investment?"

"Sure, same company! I must go to Soochow on seven o'clock express. I have taken out hundred and sixty thousand in stocks and bonds from treasury and cashed them. I have money with me now."

Li Yuan casually patted his midriff, around which, under his robe, was the girdle that is the Chinese pocketbook and carry-all.

"Your mind seems to be made up. Why do you ask me?"

"Are you not my adviser? Do you ever make mistakes?"

"Well, I hope one isn't being made now," I said unhappily. I had no valid reason to offer in opposition. Ethically the transaction was not to my liking, but this seemed to be a case of letting the seller beware. If the Soochow Chinese was willing to part with his bonds under the market price in order to keep the transaction secret, Li Yuan might as well be the gainer.

ON HIS return from Soochow, the next morning, Li Yuan brought me the bonds. They were engraved on banknote paper. On the top fold, I read: Asiatic Investment Company, Ltd., Shanghai, Hongkong, Singapore."

I opened one. Coupons had been clipped from it up to a year ago. There remained two half-yearly coupons that were overdue.

I pointed to these. "Did you have enough money

with you to pay the accrued interest?"

Li Yuan bent down to stare at the small rectangle, then he looked up with dawning surprise and delight. "Ey-yah! He forgot to clip'm! . . . No, Mr. Parkes, I pay no back interest. Man was in such great anxiousness to sell that he forgot to clip coupons."

I snatched up one of the bonds. My eye was arrested by its title: "Asiatic Investment Company, Ltd., Shanghai, Hongkong, Singapore."

Singapore. The Asiatic Investment was a British firm, but I had never known that it had extended its field as far south as the Straits Settlements. Li Yuan interrupted my scrutiny to say airily:

"I must go. I have many business matter' in town. Also I must go to broker office and sell these bonds."

"I'll join you there. I want to see those securities disposed of."

After a discreet delay, I followed Li Yuan from my office. I was distinctly uneasy over the turn his affairs had taken. My first move, I decided, would be to look up his "Investment Committee."

I paused, a half-hour later, just outside the door marked in Chinese and English: "Ta Ch'ing Lottery-Insurance Corporation, Ltd." From inside came muted voices, then laughter. I knocked. The laughter ceased abruptly. Steps cautiously approached the door. A face peered suspiciously at me, long-jawed, pale, surmounted by lank blond hair that fell over one eye. I handed him my business card. He stared at it and then said:

"Oh. . . . It's Mr. Parkes. Li Yuan's friend. Come in."

I entered the room. The side walls were covered with placards which served the double purpose of advertising the Ta Ch'ing Company and partially hiding wallpaper that was hanging in dismal shreds. On a Ningpo-varnished table were strewn strips of flimsy green paper, numbered lottery tickets. Seated at the table was a heavy-set man with small eyes and triple chin. He said, affably enough:

"Have a chair, Mr. Parkes. My name's MacSmith. This is Clouard."

Seating myself, I asked bluntly: "Gentlemen, did you investigate this last purchase Li Yuan has just made?"

MacSmith stared at me coldly. "The Asiatic Investment bonds? Wouldn't that be like investigating the Bank of England? Those bonds are selling at one hundred five." His voice grew

abruptly harsh. "Since you've taken over the job of being Li Yuan's unofficial adviser, you might try reading the financial section of the morning paper!"

I accepted the reproof. "There is just one point that puzzles me. I thought the Asiatic people were operating only in China. Have they an office in Singapore?"

Clouard drew in his breath sharply. "*Oui*—yes!" he answered.

"No!" countered MacSmith, scowling at his partner. "What Clouard meant was that they *had* a Singapore branch, a few years ago."

"I'm glad to be reassured," I said, assuming a tone of heartiness.

As I left the room, I fancied that the two men exchanged worried glances. Certainly my own forebodings were actively astir.

In the broker's outer office, Li Yuan was waiting for me, the bonds lying carelessly on the table before him. He showed an inclination to engage in amiable, idle gossip but I hurried him at once to the broker's desk.

Jackson, the broker, reached for a pencil and sales-order pad; then his eyes focused sharply upon the pile of bonds. "What's this?" he muttered. "Here! Wait a second."

"What's the matter?" I interjected nervously.

"Forgery!" he said succinctly. "I have an Asiatic Investment bond in my safe. We'll compare it with these."

He left the room, to return a moment later.

"No, it's not a forgery. The bonds you have are from another company; they read: 'Asiatic Investment Company, Ltd., Shanghai, Hongkong, Singapore.' Now, this bond from my safe reads: 'Asiatic Investment and Holding Company, Ltd., Shanghai, Hongkong.' The wording is different and there's no mention of Singapore. You see?"

"Yes, I do see!" I reached for the telephone. "Police Headquarters—quick!"

As I waited for the connection, my mind was in a ferment. I would get in touch with Tsung, a young Chinese detective, with whom I had had dealings on behalf of one of my clients. Tsung had shown himself to be a level-headed, dependable person, with an almost Occidental crispness of speech, the direct antithesis of Li Yuan who now sat staring blankly at those bonds.

At last, getting my connection through to Tsung, I told him hurriedly of Clouard and MacSmith and of Li Yuan's purchase.

"I know of them," Tsung answered calmly. "The Crown Colony police at Singapore sent us their *dossier*. We have been watching for activity from them."

"What did they do in Singapore?"

"Opened an office and sold the stock and bonds of their own investment company. People thought they were buying the original Asiatic Investment paper. Clouard and MacSmith did a—how you say?—land-offices business. And, to use American slangs, the two got away with it—"

"What!" I interrupted. "Weren't they arrested?"

"Yes. And they were tried, too. But they managed to prove that their company had a different name and that they had a legal right to sell their own stock. They left Singapore, however, soon after their trial. And here they are."

"Yes, Tsung! Here they are. And I intend to see if there isn't a little more justice to be found in Shanghai! Swear out a warrant for their arrest, charging fraud."

The voice at the other end of the wire was silent.

"Did you hear, Tsung?"

"Yes, I heard, Mr. Parkes. But does Li Yuan wish that?"

"Li Yuan? Why, I suppose—oh, of course, he does! He wants to get his money back."

"You had better talk with Li Yuan before you make any move, Mr. Parkes. You see—we were at Nantai University together, and I know Li Yuan, very well. I am not certain he will want to prosecute."

After a few more questions concerning Li Yuan's Franco-American "Investment Committee," I hung up and turned to the budding young financier who had just come such a fearful cropper.

"Li Yuan, if that pair of blackbirds think they can steal a cool hundred and sixty thousand dollars from the treasury of the very company in which they are stockholders—"

"But, Mr. Parkes," interrupted Li Yuan plaintively, "I do not believe that they stole it."

"The money's gone, isn't it? I certainly would like to test the point in court. Furthermore, you may have my services as your attorney, free of charge."

"But, sir," Li Yuan protested gently, "I do not like court. If I talk to my Investment Committee and tell them what has happen', they will surely make Soochow Chinese give me back my money."

"Bosh! In this matter, it isn't what you like, it's what is best for you. For months on end you've

come to me; you've taken up hours of my time asking my advice. Now I'm going to see that you follow it. You've got to go into court with this—and you've got to fight!"

"But—but—but—" he began. He swallowed several times, and his Adam's apple rose and fell alarmingly. "You are my friend, you are my father, you are my teacher," he said in a dying voice.

"Well, do we go into action?"

In answer Li Yuan gave a pathetic sigh.

A WEEK later, as I seated myself within the plaintiff's section of the Mixed Court, I was satisfied that we would win our case. It would be more than a technical victory, for I was convinced that we could force the two defendants to disgorge.

During my preparation of the case, Li Yuan had driven me to the verge of a well-defined attack of the jitters. He had offered objections and interposed obstacles as fantastic as ever his former perpetual-motion schemes had been. And through it all, he had continued to say with plaintive stubbornness that he did not believe in the guilt of his precious "Investment Committee."

This point, exasperating as it was, I believed I understood. It was a "face-saving" device. Since he had been foolish enough to trust them, originally, now he must show them a semblance of loyalty. This phase of the problem troubled me at moments. I had a wholesome dread of face, that peculiarly Chinese combination of inflated pride and stubborn self-respect.

The afternoon before, Li Yuan had sent me word that he would not be able to attend the trial because of illness. I had gone to his house to investigate this sudden malady. Taking him by surprise, I found him strolling in the garden of his home. He was carrying a brown song-bird in a lacquered cage. Without the slightest embarrassment, he said: "My grandmother is very sick."

"Your grandmother? But you wrote that *you* were ill?"

"My grandmother is sick," he repeated pensively. "Very, very sick."

A moving object caught my eye, at that moment. Tottering with steps incredibly swift for one whose feet were bound, an old woman flitted across an inner courtyard. She was garbed in gleaming black satin—not the costume of a servant. Chinese families, I knew, were not in the habit of

hiring servants with bound feet or dressing them in rich satins. It was unquestionably the "very sick grandmother."

I had just enough self-control left to advise him coldly that he would be present at the trial—or I would come and bear him there by force—and made my departure.

Nor had I gained much consolation from the attitude of Li Yuan's college mate, the detective Tsung. True, he had investigated the Soochow Chinese and had found that the man was not an inhabitant of Soochow. Immediately after the sale of his bonds, that individual had betaken himself to parts unknown. Also, Tsung had accepted restraining orders to hold MacSmith and Clouard in Shanghai. Finally, he had obtained space on a crowded Mixed Court docket for our trial. But this had not been done without considerable pressure on my part. I had been conscious of inertia, of that passive Oriental resistance so galling to the Occidental.

Since I am not a trial lawyer, I had engaged Tetlow, a pompous man but the most able of his tribe, to conduct our prosecution. The courtroom was crowded. Reporters were there from the three foreign dailies as well as from several Chinese news services. The thought lodged that if nothing more happened, at least the thimble-rigging of Messrs. Clouard and MacSmith would be thoroughly aired.

All that week, I had hoped that—rather than let the trial begin—they would offer a compromise. But no such offer had come. Apparently they were going to take the line of injured innocence. They now sat across the room, conversing calmly with their attorney. If each defendant felt perturbed, he did not show it.

But Li Yuan—who had heeded my threat of the afternoon before—sat looking, as gloomy as a prisoner awaiting sentence. Nor was the young detective, Tsung, seated at Li Yuan's side, in any happier mood.

THE Chinese policeman detailed to act as bailiff appeared at the door leading to the judge's chambers. In a singsong voice he intoned: "The magistrate and the assessor are about to enter the courtroom. All will arise."

The first to enter was the Chinese magistrate, striding heavily and flapping his long, gray-silk robe. He was a powerfully built man with an

impassive face. He was followed by Riddick, the assessor, an American consul detailed to act as associate judge. Riddick was the antithesis of the magistrate, a thin, weary-eyed man, with an irascible mouth. He was known for his quick judgments and for his heavy hand with swindlers of the MacSmith-Clouard stripe.

After the usual preliminaries, Tetlow rose and stationed himself under the judges' dais, just in front of Li Yuan. In leisurely fashion he began his argument, beginning with the formation of Li Yuan's lottery-insurance company.

Tetlow had proceeded—with somewhat windy eloquence—to the point where his client was contemplating the purchase of the Asiatic Investment bonds, when Li Yuan reached forward and plucked at his elbow. Without looking back, Tetlow dislodged the hand and said:

"My client was told by the said Clouard and MacSmith that—"

Again Li Yuan tugged at his elbow.

Tetlow looked around. "What is it?"

I could not hear Li Yuan's words but I caught the attorney's angry whisper:

"Don't you dare interrupt me again!"

I muttered to Tsung: "For Heaven's sake, keep Li Yuan quiet!"

"He knows what he is doing, sir," Tsung replied solemnly.

"But he'll ruin Tetlow's argument!"

The attorney made a third attempt to go on, only to have his aim again caught by Li Yuan. This time, the tug was so vigorous that the attorney visibly tottered.

Riddick, the assessor, spoke acidulously: "Mr. Tetlow, if your client will permit you, the court awaits your argument."

The lawyer lifted a face, suddenly beet-red. "He will not let me continue, sir. Has the court the power to remove the plaintiff until I can finish? If so, I should like to urge—"

"The court has no such power!" snapped Riddick. "What's the trouble?"

"My client says that the case has gone far enough, sir. He wishes to withdraw his receivership petition."

"What!"

From the tone of that monosyllable, I could read the assessor's condemnation of this insane proceeding. I guessed that he had been prepared to make an example of the two confidence men.

I jumped to my feet and faced Li Yuan. He met my accusing look with a firmness unusual for him.

"Sorry, Mr. Parkes! I know you start all this to help me, but I do not want trial. I stop it now."

"But it's too late, Li Yuan! The case has already started!"

"No, this is the Mixed Court. The magistrate is Chinese." Abruptly, Li Yuan wheeled about and faced the Oriental judge. "I appeal to you, Most Eminent and Prior-born, to dismiss my case. I do not wish it to go on. My good name is involved. Is not my good name worth more than any money I might recover in court today?"

As each eager phrase fell from Li Yuan's lips, the magistrate nodded his head as though in approval. He picked up the gavel which he was in the habit of using just before announcing a verdict. Then, apparently recalling that his colleague must be consulted, he turned to Riddick.

The assessor was scowling. "This is ridiculous!" he snapped. "The time of the court has been needlessly wasted! I am of the opinion that the magistrate should charge contempt. Mr. Parkes, you are responsible for the docketing of this. What have you to say?"

"Will you please allow me a moment, Mr. Assessor? This is as surprising to me as it is to the Court."

Receiving Riddick's grudging nod, I appealed to Tsung:

"Stop these antics of Li Yuan! Get him out of the courtroom!"

The young Chinese detective regarded me gravely. "I agree with Li Yuan, sir. The case must not go on."

"But how about his money? This loss about wipes him out. How is he going to pay his death benefits, his lottery prizes?"

"You forget, Mr. Parkes, that if this insurance company of Li Yuan's is thrown into the hands of a receiver, every policy-holder will have to be told why. Li Yuan's future will be ruined. His pride—"

"I see! His pride!" That subconscious fear which had been in the back of my mind ever since I had taken over the management of the case, now came squarely out in the open. I was facing a barrier, too thick and tall to surmount: Face Pidgin. I turned to Riddick:

"It appears that my client will not let the trial proceed. I am helpless in the matter. It is purely a misunderstanding and no contempt of court is

intended.”

Riddick looked at me stonily. “Very well, Mr. Parkes; we shall drop the contemplated charge of contempt.”

He turned and began a whispered conference with the Chinese magistrate. The judge nodded, lifted his gavel and brought it down sharply. His voice boomed portentously:

“The petition of Li Yuan for the receivership of the Ta Ch’ing Lottery-Insurance Corporation, Limited, is hereby dismissed. Plaintiff will bear”—he paused for emphasis—“*treble* the costs of the action.”

I gasped. It was a signal victory for the two defendants. More than that, it was a slap in our faces. “Treble the costs!” No wonder the assessor had dropped the charge of contempt. . . .

I looked at Li Yuan. He was smiling—a radiant smile of supreme relief. Deftly side-stepping a group of Chinese reporters, his head thrown back at that angle I had grown to recognize when he was particularly proud of himself, he whisked from the courtroom.

I AM a stubborn man. Li Yuan might yet be reasoned with. There were still criminal courts in China. This civil court victory did not free Clouard and MacSmith, if Li Yuan could be persuaded to bring charges against them of embezzlement. I determined to follow him.

As I entered the lane that led to his compound, I

became aware of a press of people before his outer gate. I caught a series of thin but penetrating cries, and halted at the edge of the crowd.

A small but ancient figure in rich black satin jacket and trousers was perched astride the tiled roof ridge of the gate house, some fifteen feet from the ground. It was Li Yuan’s grandmother. Having chosen this lofty but characteristic position, she was indulging in that form of racial Chinese insanity known as a fit of *ch’i*, or “wrath matter.” In other words, a repressed people’s method of blowing off steam.

To the accompaniment of sobs and shrieks, she advised the world how a foreign devil—one of that snail-eyed, leprously pale-skinned tribe of demons from across the sea—had attempted to bring shame upon the hitherto honorable house of Li. In order to recover some money, this ghoulish monster had tried to force her grandson into an act that would have roused the family ancestors in horror from their graves. In order to recover some money, the demon had tried to make her grandson lose face. Money—that could be replaced in part by selling Li Yuan’s Small Wives who were shameless hussies at best and lacked in proper respect for the elder members of the family. But in spite of the wily foreign demon—who went about disguised as a lawyer—her grandson must keep his face!

I turned—to walk as fast as dignity would allow—away from the Li domicile and from this yelling valiant beldame.