

THE SPARROW SHALL FALL

LAST year, on the nineteenth of March, I received a cable from Peking. It said that my father had died the previous afternoon, and that the Family wanted me to return from my home in Singapore. The journey to Peking follows a route well known to those French, English, Swiss, and German businessmen who go in and out of the Chinese mainland once or twice a year, soliciting trade with China. The starting point is Hong Kong—listening post, peepye, refugee-crowded island on a tightrope between two worlds, now much prospering in its precariousness. I flew at once to Hong Kong, to arrange for my visa and tickets. The Communist China Travel Service is on the first floor of a building on Queen's Road; on the door there is a large brass plate surmounted by a Red Star, and inside, in a long hall, a hundred-odd employees process China-bound people with remarkable efficiency. Mr. Lam, the manager, functions in a tiny cubicle at one end of the main hall, sitting in a revolving chair in front of a small glass-topped desk with nothing on it but two telephones and an empty tray. Mr. Lam keeps everything in his head.

"Hi!" he said to me. "Good morning. Welcome back to little old Hong Kong." Mr. Lam speaks excellent Hong Kong English.

I sat down in the visitor's chair, and told him my father had died in Peking and that I had to go back.

He became ceremonious, condolatory, in the old-fashioned ways of courtesy. These switches from one layer of personal expression to another happen often among us Asians. We have undergone so much revolution within ourselves, as well as in our externals, during the past few decades that we are able to encompass a range of several centuries of behavior and platitudes and rituals of social exchange, depending upon the situations we confront. We have become as stratified as onions,

in eras of time and layers of culture.

"The Exalted Severity of the Family," said Mr. Lam, referring to my father, in hyperbole, "has joined the thousand ages of yore. A loss to the country and the people." The second sentence, more modern-sounding than the first, nimbly brought us back from archaic patterns of grief to the present-day utilitarianism of sorrow.

We held fifteen seconds of silence, and then Mr. Lam stretched a brisk hand toward his telephone. "You want a visa," he stated. "I shall ring up Canton about it. Come back tomorrow afternoon."

"Do you think I shall have it so soon?" I asked.

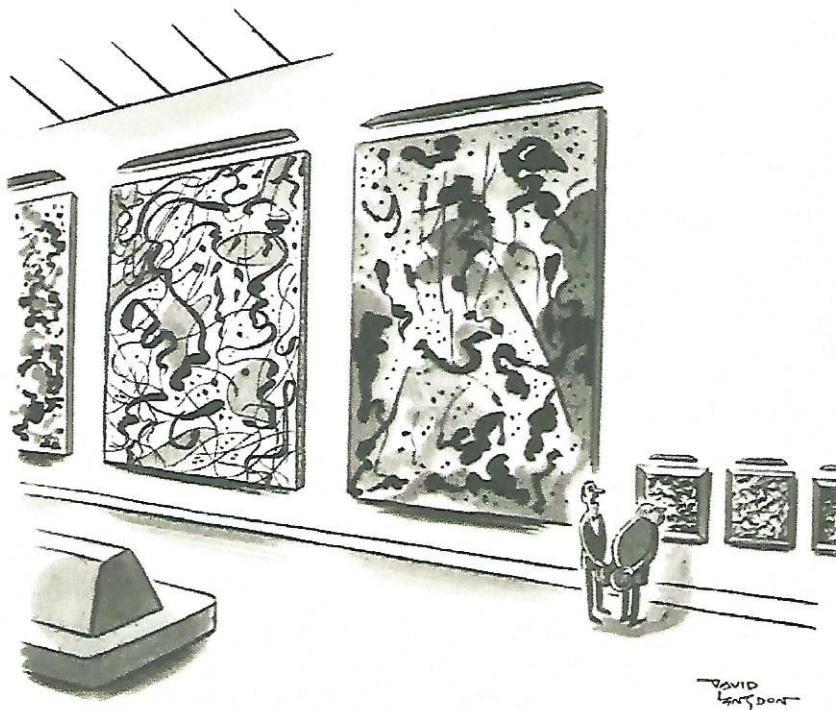
"Certainly. This is a case of family relationship. Family troubles *always* have top priority," he replied.

Four days later, at noon, I left by train for Canton. It was my third trip in three years, for each year I go to visit the Family. Every time, I have the same feeling of leaving one skin and entering another, of traveling into another planet, of breathing a different air, of being forcibly put through a shift of identity.

One changes trains at the frontier. We walked across that famous black steel bridge spanning a narrow river between the peninsula of Kowloon (which is the mainland port of Hong Kong) and China, and after half a mile of dusty path arrived at the platform of the Chinese railway station. There was the wait for the Chinese train, the customs, the check on currency, and, four hours later, I was in Canton. The next day, an airplane flew me to Peking.

It had been muggy warm in Hong Kong, but in Peking it was still half winter, or, rather, the violent, cold spring of North China. Our plane landed at the new airfield on the tail end of a sandstorm that had swept against us for some hours, ever since we had crossed the Yellow River. There was a pale sun filtering through the bright-yellow dust. Sky and earth were yellow with sand; sand got into everything—collar and shoes, ears and teeth, and into one's nostrils. I started to cough, and I didn't stop coughing for the next five weeks.

There were only two cars waiting at the airport, and one of them was a Volkswagen belonging to my Indian friend Garan, to whom I had sent a cable from Canton asking him to



"I think it was along about here that he slipped a disc."

meet me. All the members of the Family would be busy working, and not one of them had a car.

Garan was muffled in a fur-lined coat, and he informed me wheezily that the dust storms gave him asthma, but he was glad to see me. "It's been terrible, the sandstorms," he said. "And we've all been planting trees—millions and millions of trees." He was studying Chinese at Peking University, but he told me that for the last fortnight all the staff and students had been away at the Ming Tombs, thirty-five miles from Peking, laboring, along with fifty thousand other volunteers, to finish a river dam. "It's to purify their thoughts through manual work," said Garan.

The sand buffeted the closed windows of the car, and we sped away in a yellow blur. "It's fantastic, I tell you," wheezed Garan, "how they do get things done here. It's unbelievable, but it's true."

Already the hysteria of China at work was upon me—the passion of a whole people's labor coming steadily at me through Garan's breathless words. Fifty thousand volunteers, eight hundred thousand villages, ninety-nine per cent enthusiastic response, five million demonstrators, a hundred million young saplings planted—a pelting avalanche, a relentlessness of bigness, masses, numbers.

"And now," said Garan, "two hundred thousand schoolchildren are engaged in a campaign against spitting and throwing litter. That's the current campaign, and—let's see—a couple of weeks from now we'll have the sparrow war. We're going to exterminate all the sparrows in China."

At that moment, I didn't pay much attention. I was watching the road, noticing how many more trees there were than the previous year. As we went through the first hutings of the city, those intestinal ducts of gray dust between grav walls that are the small streets of Peking, I could see saplings everywhere—planted at corners, on both sides of doors and along house walls, and bristling in rows on the sidewalks of the main streets. The areas round the large outer gates, as old as the Moguls and still standing, though the ramparts on both sides had now



"Honest, I don't have a cent. I'm just a college boy."

come down to make room for the expanding city, were also planted with knobby thin wands that would be trees one day. On the sidewalks, I could see the Comrade housewives, dusty and unkempt, as they always are in Peking, with tin cans in their hands. The older ones still had bound feet. They were all watering the shoots they had planted in front of their houses. Garan told me that each household was responsible for its bit of sidewalk and road.

The following weeks were taken up with many things pertaining to family affairs and my father's death. There were six houses left to be disposed of. There was my father's small savings account at the bank; there were visits to the burial ground, the choosing of an appropriate gravestone; there were relatives to see, and visits of thanks to friends and to the department where my father had worked. I had to go about the city a good deal, chiefly on foot, to visit various departments and to see many people, and so it was that I had a full view of the three-day sparrow war in Peking. It was repeated everywhere over the land in the same way, but Peking set the tone.

WE knew of the sparrow war a few days before it started, because the radio and the newspapers announced the campaign, which had been planned in minute detail, and loudspeakers on street corners told us what would happen and what we should do, each one

of us—even those, like myself, who were merely visitors.

"Sparrows are one of the four pests," the loudspeakers announced. "Each sparrow eats an average of seven catties of grain per year. Fifty million sparrows will eat as much as will feed three million people for a year. Therefore, we must eliminate the sparrow and save that much grain to feed the people."

A sparrow could be killed in several ways, and all were to be used in this struggle to the death. It would be poisoned, caught in nets, shot at, and trapped with bait. Its nests would be destroyed. The town sparrows might flee to the countryside, but they would be destroyed with poisoned food and water

there, or caught in nets and traps or with glue spread on tree branches. In the city itself, every human being would participate in this contest. Three million people, in one way or another over the next three days, would be fighting the sparrow war.

My father's old female servant, Hsueh Mah, did not like the war. The Street Committee official, Comrade Wong, a sweet-faced and steel-souled girl of twenty-three, was very patient with her but could not enlist her cooperation. I went back to the old house every day from my hotel to see Hsueh Mah. Actually, it was because of her that I stayed in a hotel. The first week, I had slept at home, but Hsueh Mah would not leave me in peace. She would moan and groan and go into swoons and weep all night, in order to show proper grief for the death of her master. These loyal sobs made it impossible for me to sleep, and I moved to the hotel, explaining to her that it was easier to go from there to the housing authority and to the cemetery, and to see the many friends who had mourned my father. But every morning or afternoon, I passed by the house to see Hsueh Mah. After all, she was sixty-eight years old and had served us thirty-seven years. During the years when my father had worked on the railway and the war lords took all the money, he was not paid, so she did not get any salary, but she did not complain. Now that my father was dead, Hsueh Mah turned

her full devotion to the house and the objects in it. She had an enormous sense of sacredness of family property. This was out of place in Peking in 1958, and I grew irritated with her for refusing to part with old shoes and tin cans and other rubbish that had accumulated in the rooms.

"Hsueh Mah, don't fuss about things so much," I said. "It's people who matter now."

But she would not listen. "I will not have a lot of rough men and heavy boys and girls climbing on the roof of your father to catch the sparrows," she said one day. "What would the Second Venerable One [my father] have said to this? Only last year he paid a hundred and seventy-eight dollars and fifty cents to get that roof repaired."

She took me to the front garden. There were new scarecrows, made of rags and bamboo, hanging in the acacia trees my father had planted twenty years earlier. Bells were attached to their arms, and strings trailed down from them to the ground.

"The Street Committee Comrade Wong wants me to stand here at five in the morning and pull on those strings if I see any sparrows," Hsueh Mah said indignantly. "Pull on the strings! It will be bad for the trees. I won't have anyone climbing those trees."

"You must cooperate," I said. "Promise you will?"

But her stubborn, buck-toothed face was set in anger.

At this moment, a loudspeaker truck outside the house began to deliver the latest set of instructions. "Our scientists have discovered," it blared, "that after two hours' flight a sparrow is exhausted and drops to the ground, where it can easily be caught. Our tactics in this noble struggle against this public enemy are to prevent its resting its feet anywhere—on roofs, on walls, on trees. *Keep the sparrow flying!* For this, Comrade housewives, you will tie bells to scarecrows and place them at vantage points in houses and gardens, in trees and on chimneys. Comrade students, arm yourselves with poles, with strips of cloth flapping at the end, and stand in high places to chase the sparrow. Other Comrades, in squads, will hang gongs and tins and shout at the top of their voices to make the sparrow rise from its resting places and keep it flying. The shock battalions of our army against the sparrow pest will spread in the countryside and in the fields, and similarly attack the enemy there."

The loudspeaker was turned off and

the truck in the narrow street rolled away. "The young student who came to tie up that scarecrow in the acacia nearly fell into your father's vine," said Hsueh Mah sombrely. "What would the Venerable have said if he knew? He loved that vine so much! Every autumn he would get grapes from it—black grapes, round like fat pearls. He would ponder upon them, put them in a dish on the table, and eat them slowly. Sometimes he would send a bunch to Fourth Daughter and her husband. Your father every spring would look at the grape to see if it had passed the winter well. Wait till I tell him someone nearly fell into his vine—"

And then she clapped a hand to her mouth and uttered a great scream, for she remembered that she would never speak to my father again.

I went back to the hotel, leaving Hsueh Mah and her articulate grief, which my silent one could not bear. At the hotel, the Comrade room servant came in, discreetly tapping, to tell me that the war would begin at five the next morning.

"There will be a great deal of noise,

and we hope the guest Comrade will not be unduly alarmed," he said.

I thanked him for his thoughtfulness.

"If you wish, you may join us in our struggle," he said.

IT was with a shriek of sirens, a stridency of whistles, a banging of gongs, and a rattle of shots that the battle began, at 4:45 A.M. I went to my large window, which gave onto the street. There was a hospital just opposite, with geranium pots in its windows, and I could see the patients inside, lying under blankets. Beyond, there was a small flower garden, and I remembered that this was where the ancient polo ground had been, in the time when the Western legations held a large square of land in Peking. They had maneuvered troops there when not playing polo. Now, in the street, under my window, about ten girl students came by, in mufflers and padded jackets and slacks, holding long bamboo poles with rag streamers at the end. There were young men with them—students, too—with small shotguns, which they rested tenderly against their left arms, much



"Let's not deride any shibboleths tonight, David. Let's just have a good time."

as one holds a small baby. Other groups were placing ladders against the walls of buildings. Along Hatamen Street, to the right, upon the roofs of low, two-story shop houses, I could see many moving heads, like black blobs, and here and there, dangling on gibbets and dancing in the wind, the scarecrows. The noise was bringing out the birds. Out of the trees and eaves of houses, into the swift-growing gray light they flew, to be greeted with clamors and whoops and the banging of drums.

At first, the sparrows flew in little groups, but soon they began to scatter. They went back into trees, where the scarecrows waved their arms at them and the tree-watchers banged drums. Out they came, circling high and then settling on the telephone wires, and girls with long poles ran to dislodge them. They went higher, to the roofs, to be scared off by gongs and drums and people shouting. Back they went into the sky, in ones or in pairs, whirling, obviously looking for hiding places, for refuge. In a lull, a gun sounded, and there was a long roaring shout of "*Hao, hao!*" as the shot brought down the first sparrow.

I dressed and went up to the hotel dining room, on the top floor. From there one could see the great Gate of Hatamen, a Tartar gate once flanked by the wall that had encircled the city. Much of the wall had been breached to allow for broad new streets.

The tower gate, however, stood monumentally intact, surrounded by traffic and telegraph poles. Now the sparrows, flying higher, soared up toward the old indestructible glazed green roof of the tower, headed for its ornamented eaves of carved wood, where many thousands of chinks and corners and holes and crannies would give them safety.

But there, too, there was no peace, for I could see, along the great spine of the roof, a string of human beings, tied together with ropes, armed with bamboo poles, shotguns, gongs, drums, and small firecrackers, and all shouting. There were more people along the lower terraces, to shoo the sparrows away as they attempted to settle below the eaves. Once again the sparrows went off, leaving the old tower, wheeling out into the open. And now they were not alone, for the swifts, disturbed in their nests, came out, and the crows were up, too, and the magpies—mobs of birds, in flight, distraught, and near desperate.

On the roof of the hotel, the waiters

banged drums and laughed with the students who had joined them. The Comrade waiter who served me explained the tactics. "The war has only begun," he said. "The sparrows are full of strength. At first, we can only tire them out by keeping them flying. Have you ever eaten sparrows, Comrade?"

"No, I haven't, though I've eaten other birds."

"They're not good to eat," the waiter said solemnly. "The flesh is not sweet."

By eight o'clock, the drumming, the shouting, the occasional shots, the rattling of the bamboo poles, and the clang of gongs made an uninterrupted cacophony from all sides. At nine o'clock, I went down the hotel stairs and into the dusty streets. Outside the hotel, beside their car, I saw a British diplomatic couple I knew. They waved to me. The man was dressed in flannels and the woman in slacks.

"Are you joining the sparrow hunt?" I asked.

"Indeed we are," they replied, with that rotund, exuberant jocularity that people exhibit when they are trying much against the grain to be sociable.

"We're chasing them in our own compound," said the woman.

A trishaw man—the operator of a tricycle with a chair on the back, on which one sits—drove me home by way of the Gate of Heavenly Peace. Like everyone else, he chatted about the sparrows.

"I was up this morning for an hour on my roof shooting them before I came to work," he said.

At this moment, some hooting arose on our left, and a single sparrow soared from behind a wall, crossed the street, and disappeared into the garden opposite.

"It's gone there!" roared my trishaw man, pointing the direction to five or six men in pursuit.

"Up and scale the wall, O Comrade!" one of the men sang as he ran across the street. One of the group had a butterfly net.

"They'll catch it," the trishaw man said, laughing. "Hateful things, these sparrows, eating seven catties of grain a year each. Who could imagine such a small thing would have such a devilish hunger?"

We passed the painted, red double-leafed gates of the British Embassy. Above the compound wall there were large trees, their boughs already well in leaf.

"They must be full of sparrows,"

said the trishaw man. "The *yang kewitzze* have been requested to fight the enemy in their own compounds." He was an oldish man, and he used the old term for Europeans, "Occidental devils," instead of the new one, "Western peoples."

The streets were tumultuous with wind and roaring loudspeaker vans. The wind stiffened and threw handfuls of dust about, and the voices of the loudspeakers went with the wind from one corner to the other of the echoing squares. There were loudspeakers on the Ministry buildings, too, and on the building of the headquarters of the Communist Party. This last is a large cube of glazed white tile. Atop its walls, on the tenth of October and the first of May, twenty enormous red flags with gold stars are flown, flapping with a noise like claps of small thunder. Today the flat roof was spiked with watchers of the war.

My trishaw man pedaled into the quieter small streets. He was excited, enjoying it all, joining in the choruses of hoots, whoops, and cheers whenever a sparrow was brought down onto a roof or into the street. More and more were falling now; we could hear cheers from all sides. We went down the street called Tung An Men, deafened by drums, and finally arrived home. The hutung was animated, but it was far enough from the main streets to seem comparatively silent.

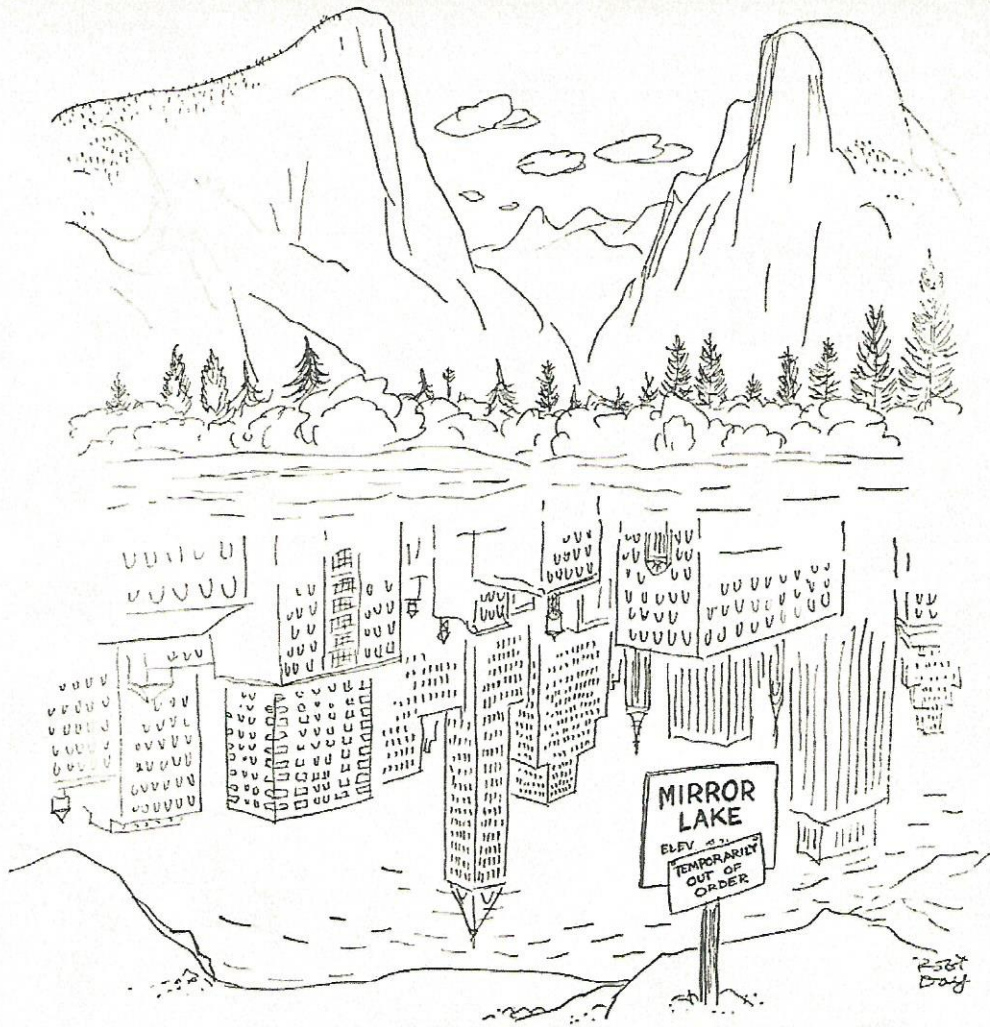
A minor meeting seemed to be going on in front of my father's house. Standing before the closed, dilapidated door, with its two little brass knockers in the shape of lions' heads, was a small group of young people; Comrade Wong, of the Street Committee, was among them.

I paid the trishaw man and walked toward them, and, in a fluid, tactful way, they dissolved the group by walking away, as if on errands, just as I approached. Comrade Wong remained. She responded to my greeting with a courteous "Good morning, Comrade," but the smile on her face was not the motherly, widespread smile she usually gave to the people living on her street.

"How is the campaign going?" I asked.

"Very well," said Comrade Wong. "Our Comrade housewives have been bravely carrying on the struggle in their own courtyards ever since early this morning. In fact—" And here the new frankness broke down the old barriers of tact and courtesy. "In fact, the only unsatisfactory sector of our front against the enemy is *your* house," she said bluntly. "We are encountering obstruction-





ism and property-mindedness from Hsueh Mah, your Comrade servant."

"How is that?" I asked.

"Hsueh Mah is more worried about property than about people," said Comrade Wong. "She worries about your Venerable Father's property. But this is a time of national emergency. We must fight the enemy sparrow with all our power, Comrade, and Hsueh Mah will not allow the young people to climb on the roof any more. She stopped us after one of them made a big hole in it this morning by stepping on a weak spot."

"Oh," I said. "I hope this young man was not hurt?"

Comrade Wong beamed then, happy again. "That is what I told the oth-

ers!" she cried. "Surely, although you come from the capitalist world, I said, you cannot be altogether property-minded. Your concern for the person instead of your property honors you. Hsueh Mah gave us an altogether different impression. 'Wait till the mistress comes,' she told us. 'She will be very angry that you have destroyed her father's roof.'"

"I am not angry," I said.

And Comrade Wong, now smiling, came with me into the house. Hsueh Mah was just behind the door; she must have been listening to our conversation, for there was a guilty look on her face.

"Hsueh Mah?" I said.

"Ah, Third Mistress!" she said. "Third Mistress, see what they have done!"

"It doesn't matter," I said. "Hsueh Mah, don't worry—we can repair the roof."

"But what would your father have said?" cried Hsueh Mah. "I knew it, I knew it. The Venerable One's roof, which he spent a hundred and seventy-eight dollars and fifty cents repairing last year, and such a to-do it was, with the workmen coming only when it pleased them, and so rude, too."

"Hsueh Mah," I said when she had done, "I am sure my father would not have objected at all. The whole town is fighting sparrows, and you

must cooperate. Never mind the roof."

"She is old," said Comrade Wong. "She does not understand the importance of what we are doing."

"In my time," said Hsueh Mah stubbornly, "there was no such thing as fighting sparrows. I am a countrywoman, and we only caught sparrows to eat in time of famine."

"There will be no more famines now," snapped Comrade Wong, and marched away. I followed her. We assured each other again that Hsueh Mah was old, that her brain was weary, that it was difficult for old people to change their ideas. We were both anxious to keep in harmony.

"I'd like to see the young man who fell through the hole," I said, "to be sure he is not hurt." I felt that I had to make up for Hsueh Mah's stubbornness.

"It was a girl," said Comrade Wong. "A young Pioneer. No, she is not hurt. Just a scratch on the leg. She is valiantly continuing the battle. There she is, on the roof of Comrade Uncle Ting."

We went to see the hole, and there met Comrade Uncle Ting, an old friend of my father's, who immediately ran up to us, effusively crying, "Comrade Wong! Third Niece!" Uncle Ting is a former landlord, and now takes every opportunity to prove how modern-minded and progressive he is.

"Comrade Wong, Third Niece, I have inspected the damage," he said. "It is nothing—nothing at all. I told Comrade Wong that you would be only too happy to know that the fight was so valiant, the battle so intense that your roof suffered slightly. It was a glorious sacrifice indeed for the country."

Comrade Wong turned to join a chorus of whoops from a roof near us, greeting the death of yet another sparrow, and then gave us her attention again. "Hsueh Mah is old," she said. "There is no more misunderstanding between us."

And that settled it. I threw a perfunctory look at the hole. Comrade Wong said she would notify the Public Works Department to repair it free of charge when the sparrow war was over, and I went back down to Hsueh Mah, who was sobbing quietly in the kitchen with a dish towel wrapped around her head.

"Come," I said, "I'll pull on the scarecrow for you. You'd better rest."

I stood in our courtyard and pulled on the strings for a while, making the bells ring and the scarecrow shake. As I pulled, I looked at the last dahlias against the wall, remembering their autumn splendor when I was a child, and



"The success of this campaign, gentlemen, depends upon something new and vital, something even radical, if you will . . ."

at the vine, my father's favorite. "The vine passed the winter well," he had written in his last letter to me, "and now is full of small young buds."

SO went the afternoon, rank with noise and dust and cheers as the sparrows fell and loudspeakers announced the scores—twenty sparrows in such a street, forty in another, a hundred and twenty-seven round the Eastern Peace Market. Then dusk, and the first day of the battle was over.

At four forty-five the next morning, the blast of sirens catapulted us once more into the war. I had many errands that day, so I was often on the streets, among the hurrying office and factory workers. The morning newspapers, pasted up on newspaper boards on street corners, gave us the score of the first day: nearly two hundred thousand sparrows killed in Peking and in the nearby countryside. There was more loudspeaker noise than ever. One loudspeaker near the Eastern Peace Market, clearer than the rest, bellowed out: "Battalions and shock fighters of the war against sparrows! The enemy we have to deal with is cunning and tricky, and has evolved new devices to evade elimination. The enemy first beat a major retreat from the city to the countryside, in order to escape, but there squads of our Comrade students, peasants, workers, and intellectuals from the universities joined in the fight. Many sparrows were trapped and killed there."

As I walked about, hearing the cheers as the sparrows fell, I began to have a sensation that there was a perpetual sparrow in the sky just above my head. I looked up. This was the second day, and it was already obvious that there were fewer sparrows. They now flew singly, and there was something wrong with the flying; it was erratic, in short bursts—a climbing thrust, a few wing-

beats, and then the bird, to rest itself, attempted to glide away like a swift or a swallow. In the Central Park, this sparrow (by now I believed that there was only one single, collective sparrow, just as there seemed to be but one single bobbing-headed, screaming, cheering, drumming, shooting, arm-waving whoop of a human being spread across the roofs of Peking) kept bursting out of trees, fluttering behind bushes, or falling to the ground and struggling to get up from dust. Then it would be netted and strung by a cord around its neck, to join the bundles of strangled sparrows carried by sturdy little boys and girls with the red scarves of Pioneers. And still the sparrow flew and fell, rose and struck wind and dropped, all through the long, sun- and dust-drenched windy second day.

By afternoon, the enemy had again contrived to change its tactics, with an ingenuity that I would have felt like cheering, if cheering the sparrow had not become a crime. It now hid in the nests of swifts, crows, and magpies; it went underground in burrows and drains and rain pipes. It flew low, instead of high, and dragged itself in the dust to fake death, and then hid between bricks and in cracks and crevices all along the old walls of Peking.

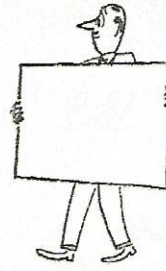
But by now it was spent. More and more of its numbers fell to the ground, unable to rise, to be caught easily. Motor vans now moved through the streets, piled with thousands of bodies of sparrows. The sides of the vans were gaily decorated with large characters painted in red, saying, "FIGHT THE SPARROW TO THE DEATH!" "BRAVELY STRUGGLE FORWARD, ELIMINATE THE SPARROW PEST!"

People climbed to the tops of walls to drop brooms tied to ropes down on hidden nests. Rain pipes were flushed to get the sparrows out. Firecrackers were exploded to scare the birds up out of

2



"So with that end in mind, Mr. Kile, our art director, is here to present his answer to our problem."



We stood unhappily together. "I don't really know if it's right," said the first. "Sparrows are useful, too. They eat insects and other things, don't they?"

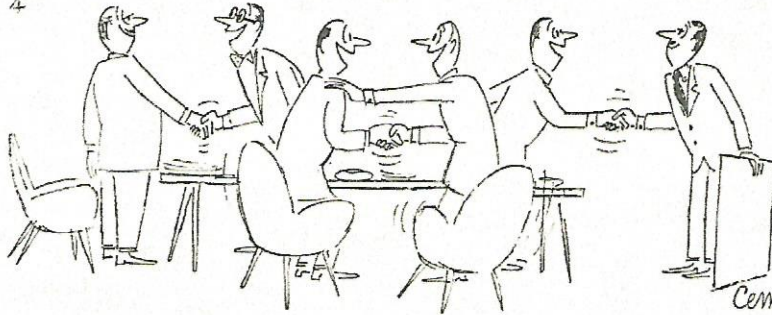
We turned away from each other. There was nothing to do except hope the sparrow would die quickly, which, indeed, it did. There was no torturing, no sparrows wing-tied and pulled about on a string by little boys, as I had seen done before. Here was scientific extermination, not cruel play.

3



There were vastly fewer sparrows about, and it was a quieter day; people were tiring, too. The last sparrows were being rooted out of drainpipes and tree boles. Even an old Buddhist temple courtyard provided no asylum. Small acolytes used prayer gongs to frighten away one last exhausted bird, which persisted in flitting among the silk banners hanging about the gilded-wood face of the Buddha. At last, the bird flew out into the courtyard, winging straight as an arrow for the sky above it, then fell plump down on the stones of the courtyard.

4



Cem

That evening I had a big quarrel with Garan—the one and only quarrel I have ever had with him. He came to fetch me at the hotel at about six, an hour before the sparrow war was to end. The roads were full of tumbrils—carts with sparrows heaped inside them. In the newspapers appeared photographs of hillocks of sparrows that would be used for manure. Processions of schoolchildren carrying banners telling of the number of sparrows their units had killed marched between the carts. In the hutongs, the housewives combed their hair and gossiped on the doorsteps, returning to their ease, waiting for the dark and the end.

Garan came into my room. Three dusty and sunny days had made his

abandoned piles of bricks and derelict buildings. One foreign embassy was found remiss in fighting the sparrows that had taken refuge in its garden, and a squad of volunteers came to help the embassy staff in its struggle. The embassy did not appreciate the gesture. It was found that some people had been cooking and eating sparrows, and the loudspeakers quickly went into action: "People must not eat sparrows. Many sparrows have been poisoned. They are unfit for human consumption. We shall dump them in large holes, and later they can be used as fertilizer, but not as food."

So ended the second day. The score

was now six hundred thousand sparrows.

On the third shrieking, booming, death-dealing morning, beneath my eyelids the sparrow fled, its erratic wings beat in my ears, its heart tick-tacked like a metronome gone mad. Whether I opened or closed my eyes, it was the same.

I met two Australian news correspondents in the corridor. I think my nausea showed in my face, because they stared. They did not look happy, either.

"We've been on the roof helping to catch sparrows," said one, assertive, falsely jocular.

"Very interesting," said the other.



J.B. McNeill

"Maybe you haven't been drinking, but I have."

asthma worse. He began to speak about the sparrows. "I've never seen anything so ridiculous," he said. "Total, absolute waste of time. Three million people all chasing those little birds. I think the Chinese are really absurd."

I flared up. I said many things. I said he had no right to speak, for in his country millions of cows roamed the countryside eating food and crops while millions of humans died of famine, and no one did anything. And flies bred in filth in the slums, and children died of cholera while the flies prospered and multiplied. And so on and so forth.

Garan looked at me with an obstinate expression, not really listening. He was not going to lose his temper. I had no way of knowing whether my arguments penetrated his Hindu belief that the life of a sparrow was equal to the life of a human baby, that the soul of a fly or a mosquito was equal, in the eyes of God, to Garan's soul or my own. Because I was myself unhappy about the sparrows, I protested too much, finding their killing necessary, essential, arguing it a good, a sensible thing, and the more I spoke the more unhappy I became.

We went to the house of Indian friends of Garan's, Ayesha and Parit, for dinner. And, of course, the sparrow

was talked about. What else could one talk about?

"We had one in our courtyard this afternoon," said Ayesha. "It was so tired. But clever, still clever. It came slinking in, keeping to the walls, hopping a little at a time, until it reached the outdoor water tap. I was watching it from the window, not moving. It stood right under the mouth of the garden water tap and opened its beak. I wish that I hadn't put a new washer in two weeks ago. There wasn't a drop of water dripping out of that tap. The poor thing went on and on, opening its beak again and again in a frenzy and sticking out its tongue, and not a sound came out. It even flew up to the mouth of the tap, thinking there might be water inside, but of course there wasn't anything."

"Why didn't you turn on the tap?" I asked.

"How could I?" said Ayesha. "The Chinese take these things seriously. My servants might have reported me. I can't do that and stay in China."

"Aid and comfort to the enemy," said Parit, her husband, who wasn't sentimental, like Ayesha and me. "The Chinese are right, eliminating pests, no quarter given. It seems harsh, but it's essential, I think."

"It's terrible," said Garan. "Upsets

the balance of nature. It's absurd and cruel and hopeless."

"The cook saw the sparrow fly up to the tap," Ayesha went on, "and he came out and picked it up. The sparrow didn't have any strength left. It didn't even move when the cook picked it up."

The next day, the newspapers announced the great victory: eight hundred thousand sparrows had been killed. I forget the estimates of how much grain would be saved. Everybody was happy, rejoicing. Soon the campaign against the rats would start. But first there would be a rest of a few weeks. Things were back to normal. Toddlers from the kindergartens—fat, healthy, and good-tempered, with those wonderful rosy apple cheeks so often found in North China children—walked their uneven, crocodile queues among the almond trees just beginning to bud. It was a very lovely day, warm, and the wind was down.

I left Peking, and in due time I arrived in India, on my way to London. In Calcutta, the sky was full of birds; there were crows' nests on the telegraph poles. By the side of a main street, I saw twenty vultures eating up the corpse of a cow. In the slums, people like skeletons sat along the hot mud walls. Some children played in the filthy water from a sewer. And though all the logic in me said that human life is more precious than any other, still I could not persuade myself. All I knew was that I never wanted to see a sparrow war again. But then, I never wanted to see these starving skeleton forms again, either. Was it true that one or the other had to be, that the sparrow must fall so that man might live? Was it true that always, somehow, in Asia one had to choose? I did not know.—HAN SUYIN

IDYLL

Within a quad of aging brick,
Behind the warty warden oak,
The Radcliffe sophomores exchange,
In fencing costume, stroke for stroke;
Their bare knees bent, the darlings duel
Like daughters of Dumas and Scott.
Their sneakered feet torment the lawn,
Their skirted derrières stick out.

Beneath the branches, needles glint
Unevenly in dappled sun
As shadowplay and swordplay are
In no time knitted into one;
The metal twitters, girl hacks girl,
Their educated faces caged.
The fake felt hearts and pointless foils
Contain an oddly actual rage.

—JOHN UPDIKE