

Little Buddha's Big Miracle In Lai-Shan Road

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BEYOND 'PRIDE AND PREJUDICE' : LYDIAS LIVES

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SOMEBODY mentioned miracles the other day. A barren Thai woman claimed to have had an affair with a jungle ghost while her husband was away up country – and some months following this miraculous event the woman had twins. After having a great deal to say to his wife about miracles, at the very top of his voice, the husband took his machete and went searching for the ghost in the jungle – and was never seen again.

Well, the lads and ladies at our local bar got down to discussing whether miracles really do happen. Most said they were either faked or there was a rational explanation. Two or three said it wasn't so – some miracles were genuine. It finished with Titch Murphy yelling at Angus Campbell, a dour Scot who had never been known to agree with anyone about anything: 'If there are flaming miracles, command that ever-loving ceiling fan to stop!' It did stop. The manager had switched off the juice and produced a miracle by getting us all out of a sweltering bar by 11 pm.

Me? I kept quiet. I *know* that miracles happen.

Who am I? The name is Gillette, once known to many from Tangiers to Tokyo as Trusty Blade or Rusty Razor. Now I'm retired, head of a widely scattered, numerous band of grandchildren, and constantly in demand as their tribal storyteller.

Once upon a time, whenever asked what I did for a living, my response was: 'I do the best I can.' My *best* included outback ranching in Oz, crew work on cargo ships in all the world's oceans, a little innocent smuggling, playing cards and rattling dice, and occasionally acting as tour guide in Oriental parts – when compelled to do so by empty pockets and empty belly.

I have never hidden the fact that I would have preferred to have been born rich and raised to a life of idleness. Unfortunately, my papa lost of all of *his* inherited wealth buying

shares. His speciality was acquiring shares worth their weight in gold when he bought them – and worthless 24 hours later.

That's me, Bertram Gillette. Late of Hongkong, Sydney, Tokyo, Honolulu, Singapore and 20 other cities. The last of a dying breed of men.

It was in Singapore, more years ago than I care to remember, that I saw the miracle begin at the Humming Bee Hotel in Lai-Shan road.

Involved in this miracle was a little Chinese cabaret hostess by the name of Mei, one very big professional wrestler from Australia, Mad Mick McGurk, myself in the role of spiritual adviser – and the little Golden Buddha.

The Humming Bee is and was everything that a hotel shouldn't be according to the standards of Mr Hilton and the Ritz. It was run by a Chinese gentleman called Kwok, it had 20 rooms, it was dirty, and the walls were so thin you could poke your finger through the plaster. In fact, most guests did this until an enraged Austrian knife thrower targeted the finger of a would-be Peeping Tom. The entertainment rating at the Humming Bee fell off for a while after that – until an enterprising restaurant waiter took to selling discarded chopsticks to replace fingers as wall drills.

Despite its drawbacks, the hotel provided good food, the rates were very low, and it was very quiet when the police inspector wasn't brawling with his mistress in Room 12.

I hear things haven't changed much. The inspector moved away after marrying his mistress.

The hotel has a little walled garden that is an oasis of peace, despite the fact the bazaar streets are only a few yards away. In a corner of that garden squats the little fat Golden Buddha, sitting in his own niche, smiling serenely into eternity.

The story of the miracle began one Monday night as I laid on my bed in shorts, drinking several pints of beer which were almost instantaneously converted into gushing rivulets of sweat. To keep my mind off the heat I was talking to the resident gecko lizard, who regularly spent time hunting mosquitoes across my ceiling.

‘Little lizard on the peeling ceiling, have you not an ounce of feeling? A conversation I would try, and all you do is stare at flies.....Not flies, mosquitoes, really. But mosquitoes and moths don't scan.....’

‘Who you talk to, Mr Rusty?’ said a sing-song voice. And standing at my door was Mei, who lived two doors down the passage.

‘I would like to talk to you, my dear. But in your absence I had asked that gecko to come down from the ceiling and join me in a drink. It didn't even RSVP. Very rude those lizards.....Talking of drinks, would you care for one?’

She shook her head. ‘You same all foreign devils – crazy. All *gwai-lo* have funny head.’ She sighed. ‘I not so happy tonight.’

Now this was a very unusual state of affairs. For in addition to being one of the shapeliest of China's 900-million odd people, the owner of a face that had sent many a wealthy Singapore merchant searching for his silver bags, and a set of teeth that poets and errand boys could with truth describe as pearls, Mei had a disposition so sunny that her entry into my room usually brought with it the scent of spring roses. Probably her perfume. But there it is.

‘Well, well, well,’ I said in my usual bright fashion. ‘What is the trouble tonight? You should always be smiling. Out of 100 hostesses at the Moon Jade club you are far and away the most popular – you can become a millionaire's mistress tomorrow, if

you want, and there are a thousand handsome young men who would marry you tonight if only their ancestors and beady eyed mothers weren't watching.'

She shook her raven capped head at me impatiently and her large limpid brown eyes, which were usually soft, glared at me. 'You know I want one thing. Not millionaires. Not husbands. I want be greatest dancer and film actress of China!' she sobbed. 'And now I lose big chance!'

'How come?' I asked.

'Same trouble as before. I'm very good dance with customers. But when on stage to dance alone and sing solo – no good. I am too shy up there. And this week young Mr Tsin coming Moon Jade to see dancers. He looking for – how you say – new faces. Maybe one, two, good girls go Hongkong to work films.'

I think I am probably not the first man to ever say it – you never can tell with people. Here was this lovely girl, five-foot-two of delight, popular with everyone, and on top of the world in her job dancing with the customers. But when she had to perform solo, which she only ever did once – she froze with fright. And I could understand her misery. The Tsins are the wealthiest family in Asia – merchants, newspaper publishers, shipowners, theatre owners and film makers. The Moon Jade is a very tiny cog in their machine, indeed, and the chance of any Tsins visiting the cabaret again within three or four years was remote.

I sipped my beer and cogitated while Mei wiped her eyes and repaired her make-up. 'Tell me, have you made any offerings to the Golden Buddha lately?' I asked.

'I pray him many times long before. I go before start work, pray hard, offer food. Then come home early morning – but only bits food gone. I modern girl – I know only rats take. Not Buddha. He not take food – so I know he not help me.'

‘I see. But perhaps you put the food there at the wrong time,’ I said. ‘Perhaps he wasn’t hungry. The best thing to do is to change the time – give it another go. You arrive home in the mornings about 4.30 – he might be hungry then. So buy something tonight, say your prayers when you come home, and leave some food.’

She thought about it. ‘OK. I try. I buy apples tonight.’

Just then there was a terrific clang on the pathway beneath my window.

‘What that?’ asked Mei.

‘Nothing at all,’ I said. ‘It’s just McGurk dropping his barbells again. He sometimes trips over himself in the dark. I think I’ll go and have a word with him.’

This McGurk had for a while earned a lot of money and popularity when he and an Ozzie partner did a speciality act – when they fought there was a lion in the ring with them. The act, for the short time it lasted, was a money spinner. But then the authorities stopped it on the grounds of animal cruelty. Somebody, it was alleged, was doping the lion’s daily meat rations with a strong sedative.

After that, McGurk fell on hard times. And so he was most attentive when I spoke to him about the lovely Mei.

Next morning the Buddha *was* hungry. Mei came running into my room at the unearthly hour of nine and flung her arms around my neck. ‘He eat! He eat! Everything. Come see!’

Sure enough the Buddha sat fat and contented, his hands folded on his lap, his gilt paint glistening in the sun. There wasn’t a sign of an apple, no pieces, not a core. ‘Well, it wasn’t rats this time,’ I pointed out. ‘They’re messy eaters.’ Mei’s eyes were gleaming. ‘Yes. I feel better already. Tomorrow I bring eggs home.’

She did. And the following day it was fish. Then chicken. The morning of the big day it was a suckling pig. They all vanished – and the Buddha seemed to get fatter and fatter. And he repaid Mei – he gave her confidence.

Young Mr Tsin praised her dancing highly. He took her to Hongkong and made a film star of her – and today you'll see her face on posters all over Asia. What's more, Mr Tsin took her for his bride.

I suppose you might call that a miracle. But you *might* be wrong. Because the little Buddha had some assistance. McGurk, who had 260 pounds of brawn to feed, was always hungry. And McGurk always went to the garden to exercise at 5 am. I merely suggested that he get there fifteen minutes earlier each morning – for it's the early wrestler who beats the rats.

McGurk's lean days were soon over – in more ways than one. And, as his manager, I didn't do too badly myself. The Tsins controlled everything, Mei wasn't forgetful – and McGurk had regular bookings on the Asia wrestling circuit for some years.

Not much of a miracle, you might say. But I didn't say it was a miracle. McGurk *is* the miracle.

Within six months of rising to the top of the Asian wrestling circuit he lost every hair on his body, and despite all his exercising his waist expanded to a terrific size. He is now the fattest and the slowest wrestler in the ring – but still manages to beat all of his opponents with the enormous strength in his arms and legs. And hundreds of thousands of Chinese refused to call him anything but The White Buddha – a name that came out of nowhere.

But what really had me chewing my lips every time I saw him, was the fact that what used to be a brown, hairy muscular man with the face of a bad tempered ape, was not only round and white, his face was always wreathed in an eternal, sweet smile –

and for some reason it was the *smile* that terrified his opponents as soon as he stepped into the ring.

Now *that's* something of a miracle, you might say. *I* didn't say it – but most everybody else in Asia did.