

*HODGSON'S CHOICE*



Trevor Hughes

The sun was sinking lower now and despite his broad-brimmed hat Hodgson had to narrow his eyes to see. It was hot and humid and tranquil. The Hong Kong Club building was asleep in the afternoon sunshine. The pavilion cast a long shadow obliquely and to his left. The spectators perspired even in the deep shade. Hodgson tried to steel himself, to will himself to go on. He was very close now.

The bowler began to run towards him, young and fit and athletic, and he gripped the handle of his cricket bat and peered into the sun and patted nervously his bat on the brown baked strip of the Hong Kong Cricket Club and waited.

The ball was fast, moving a little off the pitch and he played it easily down to long leg: a comfortable single. On the scoreboard an ancient Chinese patiently posted the score, changing the numbers painted on metal plates with a long hooked wooden pole.

It was the end of the over. Hodgson had kept the bowling. At one end was the young fast bowler, at the other his old rival Krishnan Lal patient and cunning, like an Afghan bandit in his bright green turban and ferocious moustache, flashing his splendid teeth in the Hong Kong sunshine and Hodgson looked again at the scoreboard. Number five, ninety runs. Ten more for his hundred.

He saw through the trees two rickshaw-wallahs trotting down past the Butterfield building, bald heads glistening with sweat in the hot damp afternoon. When he had first arrived it had been a common sight but was becoming increasingly less customary now. He turned back, the sun slanting over his shoulder and waited patiently at the crease as Krishnan Lal curled the ball towards him and watched

intently, nervelessly, as the ball dropped on a perfect length and spun away. Ten runs to go.

When his wife had died he had been stunned, not by grief but by the feeling of pain that his reaction was not of sorrow but of a total overwhelming relief, a feeling as if he had left his confessional, a sense of absolution, of penance for his sins. They had buried her in the European cemetery, the sun sparkling down and glancing off the blue waters of the harbour, his friends shaking his hands and patting his shoulder as he tried to feel the conventional emotions which should attend the ending of a relationship of twenty years, but he had felt nothing.

“Grieve,” he told himself, “grieve, for it is right and proper that a man should grieve for his lost wife,” but he had been unable to summon up any hint of sorrow or loss. He was a correct man, narrow and righteous but he had forbidden himself utterly to acknowledge that which inside himself he would not admit. Not sorrow, but joy, thankfulness. She was gone and he was glad, though he would never impart this to anyone, least of all to himself.

He squinted into the afternoon sunshine; the pavilion clock showed a quarter past four. Almost three hours he had stood, sweating and stolid, inscrutable as a Chinese, patiently compiling his century. Concentrate now, he told himself. Concentrate.

She had nagged him mercilessly for twenty years. If the sun shone then the weather was too hot as she fanned herself pitifully and viciously with her magazine.

“We should never have come here,” she would say as she had said in India, Malaya.

If the day was cool she would invite his comment upon the cloudy skies and remind him that the tropics were supposed to be hot as if by some magic he could summon up a cloudless sky and the sun.

“It is all your fault,” she would say, “that we should sit here in this sweltering nowhere on the bounds of a heathen China.”

“Then let us go home,” he would reply, “let us pack and leave.”

“What? Go back to cold and boring England? Are you mad?”

He moved forward and stroked the ball square of mid-wicket and they ran two runs to the spare polite applause of the few spectators. Ninety-two now and eight runs to go. In his youth he had played well but he had never known a day when he had seen so clearly as today. His innings had been faultless; his strokes utterly fluent; his timing immaculate. He was forty-six years old and had played this game for many years, but this he knew was his own, individual day. On this day nothing could defeat him, not youth, not craft, not the hot low blinding sun, nor the grief which weighed on his shoulders and gripped at his heart.

He played a straight defensive stroke: the ball rolled away to be fielded by first slip. He had been eight years in Hong Kong and three times he had been in the nineties. His highest score was ninety-four and he had been bowled then playing all around a simple slow straight delivery. “Ninety-four,” he had told his wife mournfully.

“And I suppose you’ll be in a bad mood for weeks now,” she had replied. “Mabel Thorpe’s husband hit one hundred and fourteen, she told me,” she had said with much satisfaction. “You’re just too old.”

Four days later she was dead.

Krishnan Lal tossed the ball high towards him and he took a half pace backwards and smashed the ball through the covers for a perfectly struck four runs. There was applause. He was four runs away now and the hundred was the thing he wanted most in his life; or so he thought. He mopped his brow with his sodden handkerchief.

She had been simply a young maid whom he had employed to assist his complement of domestic servants after they had buried his wife as he stood, hat in hand and felt nothing. His friends, later had poked him in the ribs and made sly comments for she was young and undeniably she was beautiful but Hodgson was not a man to play fast and loose with a servant so even now as he stood waiting for the final delivery of Krishnan Lal's over he could not understand how it had happened.

He had awoken with a slight hangover following another witless, shuffling diplomatic cocktail party and she had brought him his breakfast on a tray. She was from Formosa, small and slight and beautiful. She spoke slow and halting and imperfect English and George Hodgson had opened his weary eyes, had squinted against the sunshine leaking between his curtains, had looked at her grave sad smile and had reached for her.

She had given him a love he had never known, had crept shyly into his bed and offered him joyously, easily that which had been withheld from him or tendered mockingly, indifferently for twenty married years. And now he would send her away.

Concentrate, he told himself savagely, think only of your hundred, as Krishnan Lal delivered the ball. He played hesitantly forward. The ball spun from the edge of his bat and fell to the ground inches in front of the grasping hands of first slip.

“Come on George, concentrate. Four runs and you’re there.” said the other batsman, his friend.

He looked at the clock. Four-twenty. Four runs. Ten minutes.

It was of course impossible for a man in his position. To carry on with a servant girl was unthinkable. He was a reasonably high-ranking civil servant; he was even in a minor way a representative of the British Government, and so, regretfully he had bought for her a ticket to return to Formosa, to her family. The taxi would call for her at four-thirty and take her away forever out of his life. In his position he had permanent usage of a car and chauffeur but he had balked, somehow at this final and somehow intimate act, so his car waited for him now beside the cricket pavilion, while an anonymous, impersonal taxi moved slowly along the streets of Hong Kong on the road to the Peak to take her finally away from him.

The sun boiled down on the cricket square in the heart of Hong Kong’s commercial district. He could see the ferry moving slowly from Kowloon, the cars driving down Connaught Road and to his left Victoria Peak glowering splendidly in the sun. The young fast bowler swept past him and his partner played an edgy stroke which bounced away wide of the wicket-keeper. It was an easy single but Hodgson stood his ground, lost.

“George!” his partner shouted, running towards him, and without a look at the ball or the state of play Hodgson raced panic-stricken to the far wicket. His bat touched down a short moment before the fielder’s throw broke the stumps. He stood sweating and furious. Twice he had almost been out with only four runs needed for his hundred. He grasped the bat firmly. “Concentrate,” he said, “Think of your cricket. She is a servant; she means nothing to you.” And he could have wept.

He gripped again the handle of his bat and willed himself to look into the blue heat-hazy distance. The bowler ran in and Hodgson played a fluent and easy stroke to mid-wicket. He had never in all his life seen as clearly as he saw today.

For three months he had been conducting his shameful affaire. “I love you,” she had told him shyly, hesitantly and he had hardly understood what she meant. “And I you,” he had whispered and hardly had he understood what he meant.

The bowler turned, ran in, delivered a short fast ball and Hodgson turned on the balls of his feet and pulled it towards the boundary. The fielder at long leg dived and grasped the ball inches short of the boundary rope but Hodgson and his partner ran two easy runs and now Hodgson needed only two more runs to achieve the thing he wished most in his life.

When he had told her that she must go she had looked at him with pained and astonished eyes. She had not wept but had simply turned away like a loving old trusted family pet which has received, unexpected and unexplained a vicious kick from its owner. He had handed her her ticket and asked her to leave by to-morrow – today – and he had spent the night at the Hong Kong Club not wishing to see her anguished face.

The bowler ran in. Hodgson played an effortless defensive shot. He could not believe that he could see so clearly. They had taken the ferry to Canton and stayed in a Chinese guesthouse. In the day they had walked, eaten, laughed and she had nestled in his arms and spoken to him softly and been amazed and delighted and happy like a child with all the things they had seen, had done. In the evening she had been passionate and hesitantly bold and he had seen the next day the natives of Canton

look at him with anger and at her with scorn for her role with this man and he had looked at them and known their thoughts and had cared not one whit. In Hong Kong of course it was different. He could not be seen with her.

He looked at the clock. Five minutes and she would be gone. The bowler delivered the ball fast and hard and moving away from the off stump. Hodgson dabbled the ball delicately down to Third Man and another single. Ninety-nine. There was applause from the spectators, the men in shirtsleeves drinking beer, the ladies in long cool dresses of pink and white. "Come on George," shouted someone whose voice he did not recognise.

In a high-ceilinged house on The Peak a young woman sat with her hands in her lap, expressionless, a small suitcase before her which contained all of her earthly possessions. From her seat she could see the telephone on its stand in the hall, but it did not ring.

Hodgson took up his position at the far end and his partner played out the over. Suddenly he was struck by a wave of grief for what he was about to lose, to throw away.

"For God's sake, George," he said, "pull yourself together. Stop acting like a child. In three minutes she will be gone. You need one run for your hundred. Forget her." The bowler moved in.

He thought of her slim body. In his youth he had, as all do, thought of love. He was not a romantic but he dreamed sometimes of the girl he would marry. He would come home and she would greet him fondly, and after he had made his century she would grasp him by the arm. This man is mine she would say to her friends and they



would walk away together. Instead his wife had scorned his accomplishments, mocked his deficiencies, slighted him before their friends, spurned him in their privacy.

“Why did you ever marry me?” he asked her once, bitterly.

“Everyone has to marry someone,” she had said. “It was my bad luck to get you.”

He thought again of the young, loving woman who would now be waiting for her taxi. “Concentrate!” he said, bitterly, fiercely as Lal turned, hefted the ball in his right hand and ran slowly in to bowl. Hodgson could see the stately trees that shaded the mid-wicket boundary, and through the trees the tall Victorian buildings lining the northern side of Connaught Road; in the distance the green hills of Kowloon. I have never seen as clearly as I see now, he said to himself deliberately.

He saw the sweat on the face of his old adversary, the hairs on the back of Lal’s brown strong finger, the seam of the cricket ball as it floated towards him through the still air. With all the time in the world at his command George Hodgson watched the ball bounce slowly a little short of a length, straighten slightly towards him and leaning back, George Hodgson played the finest shot of his cricketing career. He stepped backwards and lobbed the ball slowly and perfectly back into the hands of the bowler.

Even as the spectators rose to applaud and to commiserate Hodgson was running from the field, not to the cool of the changing rooms but to the Club bar, to the telephone. He still had two minutes.

As George Hodgson ran for what he really wanted most in his life the scorer looked at the sheet of paper upon which she had patiently charted Hodgson's long innings. She shook her head in sorrow and made her final entry: 'Hodgson, caught and bowled Lal, 99'.

One short of his hundred.