Father Cures a Presidential Fever
Pardee Lowe

FOCUS: AUTOBIOGRAPHY

How I came to be infected with presidentitis even now I find somewhat difficult to explain. That it was not congenital was amply demonstrated by Father’s matter-of-fact superiority over such divine foolishness. And Mother, bless her realistic Chinese soul, never affected awareness of such mundane matters until the political clubs of our neighborhood (we lived in the toughest one in East Belleville) celebrated under her very nose with torchlight parades, drunken sprees, black eyes, and cracked skulls the glorious victories of their Men of the People. Whenever this happened she would exclaim, “My, my, what queer people the Americans are!”

The first time Father discovered how long the firstborn man child of his household had been exposed to the ravages of this dread disease, he was horrified. “Unbelievable!” he stormed. But Mother, who had a strong will of her own, flew right back at him. And when she cried aloud, with Heaven as her witness, that she did not know how I caught it or how she could have prevented it, Father recognized the justice of her remarks. She couldn’t. Kwong Chong, our own neighborhood dry-goods store, household duties, and two new babies kept Mother so harassed that she had no time to chase us about the streets or down the back alleys. Later, to still her flow of tears, Father even grudgingly admitted his full responsibility. By moving our family to an American neighborhood, according to Mother, he had needlessly exposed us all to the malady.

That this was the source of the trouble, probably no one knew better than Father. When the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire consumed all his worldly goods and forced him to flee Chinatown with his wife, two babies in arms, and a motley feudal retinue of kinsmen to an American neighborhood, according to Mother, he had needlessly exposed us all to the malady.

Lowe describes the characteristic Chinese sense of responsibility for the extended family, which is compared to the feudal economic system of landholding that existed in Europe from the 9th to 15th centuries. In this system, a vassal — a subordinate or servant — lived and worked on land owned by a lord and received protection in return for service and allegiance to the lord.

What does the author mean by “infected with presidentitis”?
A. He means that as a young boy he was possessed by the desire to become president of the United States.

Humorous exaggeration continues in the first sentence of this paragraph as Lowe describes his father’s horror at the discovery that his child has “been exposed to the ravages of this dread disease.” The humor is furthered by the mother’s denial of blame for her son’s “condition” and the father’s final acceptance of responsibility.

“Motley feudal retinue of kinsmen”: in this rich, concise phrase, the author describes his extended family as a diverse entourage of people who still adhere to a family code that involves a hierarchical network of family allegiances, much in the manner that vassals once owed loyalty and service to their lords in the feudal system of property in medieval Europe.
What is the significance of the simile “like a phoenix”?
A. The author uses this simile to explain that even though his family had to flee Chinatown during the earthquake, his father hoped to build their future anew, rising from the ashes in East Belleville, an American neighborhood in the city.

What does the narrator mean by “a hyphenated world”?
A. He means that they would assume a dual identity. They would become Chinese-Americans, American citizens who retain their native Chinese cultural lifestyle.

What is out of Father’s control in the upbringing of his son?
A. Father has no control over what happens outside his household — for example, what his son learns in school.

Why does the teacher pronounce the students’ names “clumsily”?
A. The students are predominantly children of immigrants and their names are foreign to the teacher.

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On April 18, 1906, a major earthquake caused severe damage in San Francisco. The rupturing of gas lines and electric cables resulted in explosions and fires that devastated the city. Broken water mains meant the loss of water pressure, making it almost impossible for firemen to control the flames. Some buildings were dynamited to create a fire break — a bare area the fire could not cross. Fires raged through April 20, destroying numerous buildings. In some cases, entire neighborhoods were destroyed, and many people were forced to relocate.

At long last the visions and dreams for his offspring, present and potential, would be realized. His family would rub shoulders with Americans. They would become good American citizens albeit remaining Chinese. They would inhabit a hyphenated world. By some formula, they would select only the finest attributes of each contributory culture. They would reflect everlasting credit on him and on the name of Lowe.

(Meaning of the name Lowe.)

From Father’s point of view, we children were to be raised at home according to the old and strict Chinese ideal. But in that ever-widening circle of American neighborhood life beyond the narrow confines of our home, Father had no control. A daily commuter to his shop in San Francisco’s Chinatown, an hour’s ride away by steam train and ferry, he was never fully apprised of our actions until too late.

He was ignorant, for instance, of what transpired in the large wooden public school situated some three short blocks from our home. He was confident we were in good hands. If he had only known what was awaiting his son there, he might not have been so eager to have me acquire an American schooling.

When at the age of five I entered the portals of this mid-Victorian architectural firetrap,* surrounded by its iron-spiked fence and tall trees, for the first time, I recognized it as an international institution in which I was free to indulge my own most un-Chinese inclinations — and, unintentionally to be sure, to undermine Father’s high hopes.

I can still vividly remember the strange excitement of the first morning roll call, which was to be repeated daily for many years to come. Clumsily, the teacher pronounced our names. As we rose, she checked our nationality.


HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

phoenix — a legendary bird that consumes itself by fire every 500 years and rises again from its own ashes.

firetrap — a building which is a fire hazard.

Lowe uses a very concise and well-worded phrase to convey a rich visual image. He describes the school as a “mid-Victorian architectural firetrap,” conjuring up an image of an old-fashioned building which, in spite of its elegant design, is quite unsafe.

You may wish to point out that each student courteously rises as his or her name is called so that the teacher can familiarize herself with, and identify, the students.