The Quest of Noel Croucher

Hong Kong's Quiet Philanthropist

Revised Edition

Vaudine England

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Island Origins

> Some people are curious to know something about their ancestors, without any idea of being snobbish. — Noel Croucher[1]

In the early 1950s, a dashing Englishman in his sixties hired a smart sports car to motor down the coast of the Isle of Wight through the quiet towns of Shanklin and Ventnor. He was Noel Croucher, successful businessman and philanthropist from Hong Kong, taking time for a sentimental journey back to the villages of his father's family. Few people realised he even had a family. But as Noel ambled over the steep hills and gullies he knew, as usual, exactly what he was doing.

His smart car brought him to the island village of Shanklin. Here he paused, collected his bearings and drove to the exclusive girls' boarding school nearby. He was to pick up the daughter of one of his closest business friends from Hong Kong, the legendary Richard 'Dick' Lee. Noel Croucher was here to show young Deanna Lee the sights in style.

At this stage in his life, Noel Croucher was rich and well known, entrusted by tycoons with their daughters. The young student he visited that day, now Dr Lee Rudgard, remembered her girlfriends envied her the flashy car and escort:

> During those years (1952–57), in the summer, 'Uncle' Noel would visit to take me out to lunch or afternoon tea. He had an Aston Martin. We'd have a nice lunch and he impressed all the girls with the car. I know my father got on very well with Noel, because only very good friends were introduced to me at school.[2]

There was another reason why Noel would visit this area. He wanted to make a connection between his fascinating life in Hong Kong, the city where he rose from poverty to the Peak, and the homely groups of cottages back in England where he knew his roots lay. In passing through Ventnor in his sports car, he was discovering his ancestors.

Noel Croucher was established in the colony of Hong Kong as a rich mixture of old China hand, ancient mariner and Scrooge. No one knew where he came

from, but many were the long evenings at the Bowling Alley Bar of The Hong Kong Club when rumour swirled about the true story of Noel Croucher. Some said he was an orphan, a Jew or an officer's son. Others insisted he first got to Hong Kong in a travelling circus. Those who know of the namesake of Chater Road, Sir Paul Catchick Chater, recounted the story of how young Noel impressed Sir Paul over a shares purchase and so won a place under the great man's wing.

Noel could have been or done all of these things, but in fact, he did perhaps one.

He was indeed an old-timer on the China Coast, arriving from England near the turn of the century and living to a ripe old age on the Peak. But much of him was a mystery. When he died in 1980, he was regarded with fascinated awe, and occasional distaste. Alongside his undoubted business acumen, Noel's character had quirks which defied expectations.[3] Worth a fortune by anyone's standards, he lived alone, frugally, and rarely bought a round of drinks. Known widely as tight-fisted, he frequently, and in secret, gave immense amounts of money and time to his chosen causes. Though a charmer, well-groomed and debonair, he could not find a partner with whom to share his life. Money mattered more than mere class in a colony, yet Noel was looked at askance.

In his public life, he hobnobbed with taipans, the self-styled merchant aristocracy of the China trade. He talked with governors, knew Chinese warlords and was a firm fan of Joan Fontaine. When Noel was not sailing in the harbours of Hong Kong, his strong personality led the market in the Hong Kong Stock Exchange.

But little was left to show from this life – a miscellany of loose papers, letters and pictures to fill just three brown envelopes, an old contacts book and the casual hyperbole of hearsay recounted by those who knew him. Which of the many legends was true? What, apart from the money, did it all add up to?

* * *

Walk along St Catherine's Street in Ventnor today and a more different world to Hong Kong can scarcely be imagined. Here on the southeast cliffs of the Isle of Wight fresh winds bluster the walker, the sun shines on clumps of trees, waves are crashing below. A car can hardly squeeze along the street, and it's so quiet the local radio from the back of a house a block away can be heard distinctly. Narrow little houses stand side by side, with names like Sea Breeze or Providence Cottage. It's a five-minute walk to the centre of town, where a couple of streets offer a rare books shop, a tourist office, novelty stores and tea rooms.

Few people are about nowadays, although the young woman stacking deck chairs on the beach is hoping for a summer onslaught. Back when Noel Croucher's father was growing up there in the mid-1800s, Ventnor on the

southeast coast was just becoming known as a fresh, healthy resort. There were beneficial sea breezes on the Esplanade and curtained changing pavilions on the sand for respite between morning and afternoon teas. Many came to Ventnor as consumptive convalescents, to stay at the pioneering Royal National Hospital on the cliffs. As the *Ward Guide Book* to the Isle of 1906 declaimed, 'Ventnor, like the familiar garden flower, turns always to the sun.' Made alluring by the title 'The English Madeira', Ventnor was snug, secluded, even stylish.[4]

Karl Marx retired to Ventnor under treatment for headaches and bronchial trouble. Swinburne, Keats and W. S. Gilbert lived here, as did Dickens, who, appropriately, started writing *Great Expectations* here. The Isle of Wight gained new allure when Alfred Tennyson made it his home. Then Victoria came.

Queen Victoria, Prince Albert and five children found the pomp of Windsor an impediment to domestic bliss, notes Lytton Strachey's astringent biography of the Queen. So they removed themselves to the estate of Osborne on the Isle of Wight, where family cares and delights could be indulged to the full. 'The middle classes, in particular, were pleased. They liked a love-match; they liked . . . the regularity, the plain tuckers, the round games, the roast beef and Yorkshire pudding of Osborne . . . duty, industry, morality and domesticity triumphed . . . The Victorian Age was in full swing.'[5]

Noel Croucher wondered if his family was part of the Huguenot diaspora – many Crouchers of Hampshire and the Isle of Wight did arrive in that way.[6] His fascination with family history is seen in the letters he wrote to people such as the vicar at Yarmouth in 1969. He explained that his papers had been lost during World War II, 'and I don't think I shall be able to get a record back to 1440 when John Croucher was Dean of Winchester Cathedral'.[7]

Noel was onto his trail, albeit without all the clues or tools to hand. Importantly, to Noel and to our story, his roots were deep in English soil. Not all of the Isle's many emigrants ever managed to return. But Noel Croucher loved to revisit the Isle of Wight. He told friends of how he came from near Carisbrooke Castle, where King Charles I tried in vain to escape from a meeting with Cromwell's axe in London. The castle stands, in glorious countryside, and Crouchers lived in its lee.[8] Noel Croucher, the millionaire yachtsman of Hong Kong, also kept photos in his office of friends on their yachts at Cowes. He enjoyed the aristocratic yachting crowd there, knowing his humble start just round the coast at Ventnor.

* * *

Here then lived Noel's forebears. His father, Rowland Russell Croucher, came from a strong line of seafarers, on an island with a rich history in shipping, smuggling and piracy.[9] Rowland was the son of John Croucher, the ship's captain and

hotel keeper, also of Ventnor, who we can trace all the way back at least to James Croucher (c. 1760–1833) and his wife Mary Lancaster. Indeed, most Crouchers on the Isle go back to James, mariner of Yarmouth. He was a respectable man, being church warden in 1795–1796. Half a dozen different Crouchers live on the Isle today, and there are recollections of Croucher's Post Office.[10]

Rowland's mother was Jane Ann Russell, daughter of Jacob Russell of Whitwell, 3 miles (5 kilometres) inland from Ventnor. Trade directories for 1857 through 1891 list Jacob Russell as shopkeeper, grocer and baker, Maurice Russell as dairyman and James Russell as grocer. Modern-day Whitwell has but one shop left. Residents recalled the milk delivery from Russell's farm in milk pails hung from a yoke and the cheese made at Russell's dairy, known locally as 'rock', due to its hardness. The Russells also walked into Ventnor with baskets of eggs.[11] Few strangers passed through the village in those days, 'one of the quietest, drowsiest, prettiest spots on the Isle'.[12]

On Christmas Day 1860, John Croucher married Jane Russell in the Anglican parish church of Whitwell. They lived for at least a decade on St Catherine's Street, Ventnor. After the ninth child they moved house almost yearly, in and around Ventnor. John had branched out from his family's maritime past to be a baker, so his son Rowland, born in 1864, was able to learn the craft of baker and confectioner. He was probably the lad who delivered bread to the hospital on the hill – where he was soon to be dazzled by a redhead.

Beyond the steep and narrow roads of the town are Ventnor's botanical gardens, basking in the sun. Here, before its demolition in 1964, stood the Royal National Hospital. Opened almost a century earlier by Arthur Hill Hassall, it was built on the then novel concept of having separate rooms for tuberculosis sufferers. Patients were to have such unfettered access to fresh air, unsullied even by cooking smells, that the kitchens were built underground.

Here, in 1881, worked a sharp, determined young woman christened Florence Emma Stockley, known to her friends as Floss. She was born at 4 Cavendish Grove, just off Wandsworth Road, South Lambeth, London, on 21 July 1863, back when her father was an engine driver at the nearby railway works. She became housemaid at the hospital at the age of 17, and her boss was Dr Sinclair Coghill, who had worked for several years at the Shanghai General Hospital.[13] Perhaps his stories of the East were the first inkling that Noel's mother had of life outside England. The hospital was also host to performing troupes and travelling players – an apparently friendly community of staff and patients, a village on its own.

Vivacious Floss soon met sensible Rowland. Indeed she was pregnant when they married on 21 March 1887 at his family's little house on the cliffs of Ventnor. Their first child, Wallace Oliver, arrived on 19 April, thereafter to be known as

Gordon,[14] then Rowland Henry Basil (known as Basil) arrived on 30 September 1888.

It was time for the young family to move, so off they went to the mainland where new opportunities for work were beckoning. The railways had just come to Eastleigh, a newly developing area north of Southampton, and conveniently, it was Eastleigh where Floss's family was based. Here, on Christmas Eve 1891, Noel Victor Croucher was born.

* * *

Eastleigh Railway Station, signs of progress all around, still relies on the original metals poles of 1841 to hold up the platform shelter.[15] Along the main Leigh Road, skirting the park with a band stand in the middle, is a statue of a railway man, the roots of the town's early prosperity. The old Salvation Army Hall is now the museum, which traces the rapid growth of Eastleigh from a manor farm into the bustling town of today. The key fact about Eastleigh soon becomes clear – it is relatively new, less than 200 years old, with few feudal dynasties or traditions. By the time of Noel's birth, Eastleigh had only just graduated to a town of 6,000 people. Reports of the bustling community insist: 'Victorian values shone through everything.'[16]

With the opening of the London–Southampton line in 1840, Eastleigh was already an important railway junction. But the move of the London and South Western Railway's Carriage and Wagon Works to the town in 1891 made it a magnet to new labour and young families. Rowland Croucher got a job as a permanent way inspector, checking land where new tracks would be laid. His father-in-law, Henry Stockley, had driven trains to the same station.

Housing was in short supply, 'and controversy centred on the deplorable state of the unmade streets and lack of street lighting, and the lack of adequate drainage and sewerage in the town'.[17] But the young family managed to find a home in the terraced houses of the time, at 6 Wykeham Villas, on the High Street.

Anecdotes suggest Noel Croucher well remembered his maternal grandfather, Henry Stockley, whose white beard in later years gave him an imposing air of distinction. Born in the village of Mottisfont, near Winchester, in 1834, Henry descended from a long line of Stockleys who, at various stages, appeared quite well-off, with landholdings to pass on for generations.[18] One William Stockley, who died in 1744 in Kings Somborne Hampshire, had a freehold estate, including meadows, a malthouse, orchards and estates.

Five generations later, Henry Stockley's first marriage was to the well-educated plumber's daughter Elizabeth Cartwright. It produced, amongst others, one Florence Emma Stockley, known to us already as Floss. Elizabeth died when Floss, her daughter, was only 6 years old. Within a year Henry married again.[19]

Noel wrote in 1971: 'When my mother [Floss] died [in 1947] she gave my brother Basil a family Bible which he gave to me. It is a large one and was presented to Elizabeth Cartwright . . . in 1856. I think she was a Sunday School teacher and was born in 1826. It is rather dilapidated, but the names of her children and when they were born are entered there. I believe she was a cultured lady and played the piano very well – how she got married to Henry Stockley, Lord knows, he must have had a way with him.'[20]

Floss's family, led by the redoubtable Henry Stockley, had moved down to Eastleigh in the early 1860s, presumably for the railways.[21] When Noel was born on the High Street in 1891, his maternal grandparents, the Stockleys, lived at Market Street just around the corner. Judging by where marriages and births took place, both sides of Noel's family, the Crouchers and the Stockleys, appeared to be Bible Christians, a society which later formed part of the United Methodists.

Noel first learned about upward mobility from old Grandpa Stockley. Henry's father, Charles Stockley, was a publican and gamekeeper, and for some reason Henry grew up with his maternal grandparents, Joseph and Frances Holloway of Mottisfont. At the risk of getting ahead of the story, Henry, like Noel, was working by the age of about 16. Henry appeared in the records as an engine man and commercial traveller, but within a decade he was recognised as a 'gentleman'. Hunting and shooting, visiting the racetrack and sporting clubs of Chandlers Ford, Henry Stockley became a big man in Eastleigh. He liked to walk down the middle of the road.

'Oh golly, he thought he was the earth,' remembered his granddaughter, Betsy Treadgold, chatting decades later in her sun room at home in Devon. 'He was like Floss you know – terrible! When I knew him he was a bookmaker and he used to go hunting and he used to go fishing and he used to go to all the race meetings, and that's why he moved from Southampton to Eastleigh because Eastleigh was a big junction, and you could get to Salisbury Races, get to Dene, he had shoots in Dene, he had shoots in Bishopstoke.

'Always, if he wasn't at a race meeting he was at a shooting. He had his own shoots, he and a few friends, and he had a keeper and a keeper's cottage. I used to go there when I was a child. He used to rear pheasants and have a shoot after. My grandfather, he belonged to several hunts. And we had all these jolly stuffed animals all round the place, a stag, a hare, a fox, he had a case of 'em, a hall full of 'em, pheasants, partridge . . . My mother got fed up with it.'[22]

By the end of the nineteenth century Henry had built three houses in a row, numbers 65, 67 and 69 Leigh Road, one of which became the Labour Party office of Eastleigh. One of Henry's brothers, Peter, was head gamekeeper to the Marquis of Bath residing at Longleat House. The other, Joseph or Josiah, was gamekeeper to the Duke of Somerset's riding estate at Stover.

Henry achieved a state in which he no longer needed to work. His recreational pursuits were engrossing, perhaps aided by the 'pass' available to former workers on the railways. But Henry was a strict and cantankerous father. He horsewhipped his sons and locked up his daughters, and when his wife Frances was poorly in 1905, he insisted the band playing in the park be keep silent until she recovered. The newspaper notice of 21 July 1905 reads: 'Mr Henry Stockley begs to apologise to the inhabitants of Eastleigh for being the cause of the Band not playing in the Recreation ground on Wednesday due to serious illness in his house.' Notwithstanding these efforts, Frances died the next month.

'I thought Grandpa was Master of the Hursley Hunt, or maybe the whipper-in,' wrote Noel Croucher decades later. 'I remember all the hounds in front of the house and I was only about six at the time and wore a red pinafore. Aunt Flo Wilkins [half-sister to Floss] and her husband would come for a visit and your mother [Muriel Evelyn Amor Stockley] of course was there – she had lovely fair hair and a good figure.'[23]

A certain imperiousness marks memories of Grandpa Henry, and he was an autocratic landlord. 'Our villa was the third one up,' said Betsy Treadgold. 'We had quite a decent garden [on Leigh Road]. But my grandfather also had to have a stable. So instead of the poor people next door having a decent garden, half of their garden was where Grandpa built his stable. They had only half a garden. So we had a stable, and horses. I know Mother used to say the horses used to come up on Easter and have a hot cross bun at the back door and that sort of nonsense. We only left the villas, sold them, in 1958 or 60, and they're still there.'[24]

Betsy added that Grandpa Henry was a regular at the Conservative Club just down a lane from their house on Leigh Road. 'My grandfather and me, aged 4 or 5, and two retriever dogs, used to go there every morning for him to have a "two of Scotch" while I played ball there with the dogs. I have been told some members objected and Grandpa threatened to buy the place and turn them out! The "Con Club" as it was known is still the same . . . the large building at the end used to be a Wesleyan Chapel but was bought by the Eastleigh Masons and became the Masonic Hall. They used to hold meetings in the Council Chamber and my grandfather was a member, also my father and my husband.'

Floss, Noel's mother, was one of the few who dared to stand up to her father, Henry Stockley. She was the wild, rebellious one. She answered back, she fought back and it seems she eventually fled, displaying a determination and a dramatic streak which were to stand her in good stead in the years that followed. 'The only thing I remember about Floss', said Betsy Treadgold, 'is my mother saying, "Oh Floss is terrible, she wants to rule everybody." And then Floss disappeared from view.'

Betsy also recalled a story told her by Floss about the latter's alleged attendance at a reception given to mark then Princess Elizabeth's wedding. It cannot,

unfortunately, be true as the wedding took place after Floss's death. But for the insight it gives into how Floss was regarded by her relations – as they clearly believed the story easily – here it is:

> I tell you what SHE says she did, and I quite believe her . . . the Princess was wed, and spent her honeymoon at Mountbatten's place in Romsey, 6 miles from Southampton. Floss was going to the wedding. They had a church service, and the queen spent her honeymoon at Romsey Abbey, and had a reception, all with tickets. So Floss said she was going! We didn't take much notice. Anyway she turned up and 'Oooh, it was marvellous,' she said. I said, 'You can't get in, how could you get in?' She said, 'Of course I got in!' She always dressed in black satin, all in satin, and one of these hats with a feather you know, and she had a walking stick, and she turned herself up and if somebody said something to her she said, 'Out of my way man!' and man got out of way for Floss! My mother said, 'That's Floss all over.' She was a big woman, tall.[25]

In 1891, a year the census was taken, Florence Croucher could be found described as the head of her household, with two young sons: Wallace Oliver (aged 3) and Rowland Basil (aged 2). She was then pregnant with Noel, although she might not yet have known it (the census was taken on 5 April 1891). They lived, for some unknown reason, in two rooms in Eling, New Forest, just across the River Test from Southampton city. Her husband, Rowland the young baker, can be found in the same census living with his father-in-law back in Eastleigh. Perhaps that's where he could work and Floss refused to stay within her father's orbit. Sadly, Rowland Croucher barely makes it into this story. Two years after young Noel was born, he died of jaundice.

Here began a difficult time for young Floss – she had given birth to Noel by now, also back in Eastleigh and was three months pregnant with her fourth child, a daughter named Muriel Irene (known as Irene). Irene's birth is a rare clue to Floss's whereabouts following her widowhood. The address from which she registered Irene's birth, on 6 January 1894, was 105 Pyle Street, Newport. Why she went there is a mystery.[26] Irene was brought up by relatives on the Isle and certainly Noel, her brother, knew little of her.

Noel's early childhood in a new, growing town, with a grandfather of personality and an elusive mother, was profoundly disrupted by the death of his father.

Vague family memories suggest that Floss was living in Southampton by the turn of the century. These are confirmed by the 1901 census, which shows Florence working as a housekeeper to 81-year-old Martha Core at 17 Vincent Street, Shirley, Southampton. A short walk away, listed at 10 York Road, were Basil, Noel (now 9) and Irene Croucher, with two other boarders and a housekeeper. Where older brother Wallace Oliver had got to is a mystery. Clearly Floss had to work, and the only kind of job she could get was one where she could not

keep her young children with her. They had to fend for themselves in a boarding house.

Going back to Eastleigh to rely on her family was apparently not an option for Floss, and one reason was probably the stern character of her father, Henry Stockley.

'Oh, my mother had a frightful time,' said Betsy Treadgold of Muriel Stockley, Floss's half-sister. 'She was brought up so strict. Grandpa was terrible. I think that's probably why the girls left, you see. I think they probably fled the so-called nest, because their father was so strict. They went off the rails.'[27]

Of course that's not quite how the Eastleigh newspaper put it in an obituary published on Henry Stockley's death in 1916:

> Death has removed another of Eastleigh's oldest residents, Mr Henry Stockley, who passed away on Friday last at the ripe old age of 82. He was well known and greatly respected. For many years he has resided at 'Moreton', Leigh Road. Up till a few years ago, he was a keen sportsman with his gun and a follower of the Hursley Hounds for many years. Familiarly known as Harry, he had a wide circle of friends while he was also a Freemason.[28]

* * *

Noel's formative years were thus spent under the influence of two strong personalities – his mother's and his grandfather's – and his childhood memories were focused on the Solent, stretching north to Eastleigh and south to the Isle of Wight. These are the areas he chose to visit, decades later, as a successful man of Hong Kong.

A key point of this upbringing was its instability – the early loss of his father, the apparent moves from place to place and the lack of a steady education. Certainly Noel learned his 'three Rs' somewhere, how to go to church regularly and to dress smartly at all times. According to existing records, he was not placed in an orphanage or home or workhouse – at least his family background was solid enough to save him from that.[29] But whatever caused his mother's rupture with her father's household, it seems likely that Noel's schooling and sense of security would have suffered.[30]

Anecdotes later recounted by Noel Croucher suggest he did spend some early years back on the Isle of Wight – one meeting he had there stayed in his mind throughout his life. This was the encounter which he told special friends about, his meeting with an old woman on the beach of Ventnor. He was a lad of about 6 years old (circa 1897), playing on his own in the sand. It was a blustery, lonely sort of day. The woman had a dog at her heels and her short, stocky form was swathed in vast cloaks of black. The mysterious woman chatted with the

young boy, probably about the dog or the weather, then moved on. Later, Noel was told he'd been talking with Queen Victoria.[31]

A chat on the windy beach one morning is not all that Noel absorbed from Queen Victoria's reign. He grew up with notions of Victorian propriety mixed with a heavy dose of survival instinct. He became what his own family felt to be a Victorian patriarch – God-fearing, intimidating, forever impossible to please.

How deeply such attitudes had sunk into his make-up can be seen in the gift he made to his son, Richard, in the 1930s, when Richard was about to be sent off to school. It was the book called *John Halifax, Gentleman* by Dinah Maria Mulock Craik,[32] a bestseller in the mid-1800s. It is an epic based on the fine upstanding character of John Halifax who overcomes all manner of disadvantages through sheer, dogged hard work and triumphs by becoming a rich and respected patriarch in a manor house, forever admired for his moral uprightness and business acumen.

Moral tone and keen determination are key themes. At one point pondering how to get through a dense yew hedge, which is 15 feet high and 15 feet wide, John Halifax, our hero, 'smiled – there was no "giving up" in that smile of his. "I'll tell you what I'd do – I'd begin and break it, twig by twig, till I forced my way through, and got out safe at the other side."'[33] Chapter One opens with pithy, preaching dialogue: 'Sir, I want work; may I earn a penny?' asks the impoverished but very proper John Halifax. 'Lad, shall I give thee the groat now?' the man of affairs replies. 'Not till I've earned it, sir,' says John.

John Halifax is the archetypal self-made man constantly striving to improve himself and his station. The book applauds the egalitarianism that allowed a poor boy to get ahead. It also upholds the old-fashioned notion of nobility wherein a gentleman had not only money and power but also a deep sense of responsibility to the community, a commitment to 'his people'. In Robert Denniston's introduction to Craik's book, he notes, 'So far from being a forerunner of the Classless Society he is rather a messenger of hope to those who try to raise themselves from the station to which they were born.'

The book is steeped in the characteristic paradox of Victoria's reign. It extols honesty and hard work, for capitalist gain, defending a cruel hoarder of flour during a famine, for example, in the name of private property. It also shows our hero, John, risking the lives of his own children in order to aid an ailing servant child in his home. The message made its mark on Noel Croucher. In the fly leaf of the book, specially for his son, Noel had written: 'Good Better Best, Never Let Me Rest, Till my Good is Better, And my Better Best.'[34]

John Halifax got ahead only partly through his own probity and perseverance – it also mattered that originally his family was respectable. Noel Croucher was keen to discover his family history, corresponding with many over the years on the subject, yet he had no time for snobbery. Certainly, in the large figure

of Henry Stockley and the Crouchers of the Isle of Wight, he had little to be ashamed of.

Another key to John Halifax's success was education. His ability to teach himself to read and write was the secret to his rise in stature and wealth throughout his life. The idea was that men could better themselves. 'Self-help, self-reliance, entrepreneurship, individual charity (rather than a state dole), law and order, family discipline and a stricter sexual morality were the principles that enabled the Victorians to make hitherto undreamed of progress.'[35] As the nineteenth century progressed, men believed in tradition, in 'Merrie England' and in noblesse oblige, at the same time as they found ways to harness science, technology and labour for a better future. The England Noel was born into was riding high on the glories of empire and ambition.

* * *

However cheerful Noel's early years might have been, life changed dramatically when Floss took another bold step. On 6 November 1902, she married again. This time she had found a man called Alexander (or Alec) Vernon Parker, listed as an actor on the marriage certificate. Parker is the most mysterious character of all. He appears, plays a brief but crucial role, and he disappears. It is to him that we owe Noel Croucher's arrival in Hong Kong, but in ways Alex Parker could hardly have imagined.

As for Floss, she had done it again – she was pregnant when she married Alex Parker. Indeed, the marriage record shows Floss living at the same address as Alex Parker and two others. Betsy Treadgold said: 'I remember Mother saying "Oh, Parker wasn't anything, just an out-of-work actor." Why Floss ever married him . . . ! She was very very close, Floss, frightfully autocratic. Oh dear. I had an idea what she was like!'

Quite what Alex and Floss lived off is anyone's guess. How did she meet this man? And where did he come from? In 1891 he was a 19-year-old pawnbroker's assistant, boarding in a house in Clapton Middlesex. He doesn't feature in the 1901 census because he was, as he put it, 'on tour' with General Buller's Column in the Boer War.

A series of witty announcements in *The Stage*, the acting profession's newspaper, suggest that Parker sailed for the front from Liverpool on 10 February 1900, most probably as a private, in the 18th Hussars (Reserve). His small announcements were usually prefaced by the lyric 'He's an absent-minded beggar' and a line of music notation to fit. He managed to authorise small but regular donations to the Actors' Orphanage Fund even while he was at war and, perhaps in absentia, was voted on to the council of the Actors' Association in February 1901.

By August 1902 he was advertising his return to England and availability for roles as military characters or juveniles. In September 1902 he was 'rather ill' but a month later was again open to offers of work.[36] In November he was well enough to marry Floss.

The family legend is that Alex Parker joined the army as an officer and was posted to Hong Kong with his family. Alas, the lists of officers (army and navy) held by the Public Records Office at Kew feature no A. V. Parker. What happened first was the arrival of Gerald Vernon Ephraim Parker, a half-brother to Noel. He was born to Floss and Alex Parker on 26 June 1903, in Southampton.[37] He was the only relative, apart from Noel's wife, whom Noel was to list in his will.

The Croucher-Parkers were still in England in late 1904, according to a press cutting kept by Betsy Treadgold in Devon. This reports her mother's wedding in Eastleigh in August 1904. Among a list of Stockleys and other guests were Mr and Mrs A. V. Parker, attributed with giving a silver teapot to the married couple.[38] One more clue to the family's whereabouts comes from a letter Noel Croucher wrote in which he recalled seeing Betsy Treadgold's grandmother, that is Henry Stockley's second wife, Frances, lying in state after her death in August 1905.[39] She died and was buried in Eastleigh, so Noel at least believed he was still in the Southampton neighbourhood in late 1905.

Parker does not seem to have been such a good actor as his new wife. Able to put on airs and graces, she could perform on life's stage with no tremor of fear. She would not be down and out, and she could talk her way out of anything bad and sweep her way into anything good. She knew the impact of appearance, of a straight back and a bold mien. Noel got his unconventional start in Hong Kong from his stepfather, but he learned style and quickness of eye from his mother.

According to surviving family members, Alex Parker did enlist, but in the ranks, and was indeed sent out to Hong Kong. One version has it that he might have found Flossie a bit too hot to handle as he did not leave her any address where she could find him in the East (or had it just slipped his mind in the rush?). Some women would have taken the hint, but not Florence Emma Croucher Parker. The story goes that she 'upped and offed and followed him!'[40]

One stray shipping record notes that an A. Parker sailed from Southampton to Hong Kong on 1 December 1904; he was described as 'Single'. This may or may not be our Alex Vernon Parker.

However it happened, a carefully posed photograph has survived which tells an almost convincing story. It shows a well-dressed Floss with Alex Parker and the various children, appearing to be settled for life in Southampton. The direct eyes of young Noel show little inkling of the dramatic changes in store.

La Cigale, built 1897, bought by Noel in 1919.

Noel holding the Croucher Cup in May 1952 with, from left: A. G. Dalziel of Blair & Co., then commodore of the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club; Norman Marsh of ICI; and Gerald Carey, assistant shipping manager at Jardine Matheson & Co.

The good old days in Hong Kong. Noel is second right.

Noel Croucher with Governor David Trench.

Noel Croucher with Lady Hogan, wife of the then chief justice of Hong Kong.

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Note: The letter 'n' after a page number indicates the endnote number.