

THE CROW ON THE WALL

By David Mason

During the 1980's I spent three years working in Sri Lanka as manager of a rural development project on a remote site in the SE part of the island. The Muthukandiya project was a joint Australian and Sri Lankan venture and my first point of contact in most matters was with a Sri Lankan Government official equivalent to myself. Most of the decision making occurred in the Capital of Colombo located on the coast 300 kilometres by road NW of the project. It is here that the majority of government agencies are located. I would spend one week in Colombo where I lived with my family and the next week at the project where I would implement the decisions made the previous week. As good fortune would have it I was back in the relative security of my home in Colombo when civil war erupted between the Tamils and Sinhalese one Sunday night in July 1983.

The project office in Colombo was a two-story building, the top floor of which was a 'Rest House' with the office area on the ground floor. Visiting officials and short-term consultants from Australia stayed in the rest house while they were in Sri Lanka on project business. All staff directly under my control was Sri Lankan. My office took up a third of the down stairs area and ran the full depth of the building. Both ends of the office had concertina doors, which could be fully opened to provide airflow in the room. My desk was located at one end and I could get up from my desk and in a few paces be out in the small garden at the back of the building that was bounded by high cement rendered walls. Joseph Shariz was the project's accountant and his office was next to mine. Joseph was a Muslim. He like me, sat with his back to the outside garden his view of which was through small double windows

The kitchen was directly above my office and a narrow verandah off the kitchen that overlooked the garden protected my office from the rain thus eliminating the need for me to close the doors during the sudden tropical downpours. The verandah ran the full length of the building. The kitchen was the domain of George whose job was to run the rest house, which also meant preparing the meals.

George was from the era of the Raj. He had served in many fine expatriate homes over a long period of time and despite my asking him to address me as Mr Mason, because he would have been affronted if I asked him to call me by my Christian name, he insisted that he address me as "master". George was well respected by all, particularly within his own social strata and family. For one thing he had a healthy growth of hair on his ears indicating wisdom, and for another he had two big toes on each foot indicating he had his feet firmly planted on the ground. George was a Buddhist.

George believed in reincarnation, which is fundamental to the Buddhist religion. When I asked him why he fed the crows that sat on the high wall behind me he replied, "Because they call out to me". I asked, "Why do you feed them because they call out? He said, "Because they may be one of my past relatives and I am obligated to feed them". The trouble was that the crows would make such a racket I found it very hard to concentrate let alone have a phone conversation. The word quickly spread amongst the crow population of Colombo that there was a good feed on at the office address. Even George began to think that he was being taken advantage of. No one could have so many relatives in this particular stage of spiritual evolution.

I did not want to cause him any concern in respect to fulfilling his obligations to those crows he believed were his relatives. I did however want to reduce the problem by discouraging those crows that were not in any way related to him. George and I discussed how we might deal with the problem.

I said "George, there must be some way in which we can make the crows who are not your relatives feel unwelcome. Is there anything that you can do that will frighten those crows that don't know you, unlike your relatives who do know you? He replied, "What you mean Master?" "Well, what do those crows which are related to you know about you that you could do which would not frighten them but would frighten away those crows that are not related to you?" George thought

for a moment and said, "All my relatives know I like making a big bang with the fire cracker. They know that I would never hurt them but I laugh when I let off the big cracker and they nearly jump out of their skins. The crows that don't know me will get a big fright and not come back. I think in this way only my relatives will come". This seemed like a good idea to me. If it worked as I hoped it would there was a distinct possibility that the office would become crow free. If on the other hand Buddha had got it right it was likely that only a few crows would come around.

The firecrackers that George was talking about were huge hand made bungers that could be purchased down at the city markets. I sent him down to the markets and he returned with two packets each containing 12 bungers. I said to him "George, when the crows come around and start to annoy me I will call out to you and ask you to throw a cracker. You then light one and throw it into the garden. Those crows that know you will think you are just having some fun. Those that don't know you will get a fright and fly away. Do you understand?" George waggled his head from side to side which indicated that he did.

A few days later I was in the office when five crows landed on the wall and began cawing to attract George's attention. I called out "George throw a cracker". I heard him reply from upstairs "Yes Master" and I began to brace myself for the loud bang that would shortly follow. I waited I waited.....and I waited. Reasons for the delay began to fill my head such as: 'maybe the matches are damp, or he is warning the other staff of the impending explosion'. In the meantime the phone rang loudly on my desk and as I reached for it I heard the crows fly away. The noise of the phone and my movement had scared them off.

The caller was the female First Secretary to the Australian High Commissioner. She was inquiring on behalf of the High Commissioner, who had been approached by the Sri Lankan Cricket Board, if Sir Garfield Sobers the famous West Indian cricketer could stay at the rest house. He had been contracted to coach the Sri Lankan cricket team on a short-term basis. The thought of having such a cricket great staying in the building impressed me to no end and I was just about to express that sentiment to the First Secretary when something happened which would see the colour of my face change initially to white through sheer terror and then to deep red through acute embarrassment.

As I listened on the phone George lit one of the bungers. Having lit it I can only presume that he discovered that the crows had departed. Sri Lankans have a common expression which I feel sure came to George's mind at this point, "There is a problem-what to do?" George solved his problem by dropping the potential hand mutilator over the verandah so that it landed about one metre from the back of the chair on which I was sitting.

All surfaces of the office were cement so when the heat hit the powder it went off like a bomb. George's solution to his problem provided me with a huge problem.

I rose from my chair with my mouth open so wide I was lucky I didn't swallow the handpiece. I released a loud four-letter expletive down the line directly into the ear of the unfortunate woman at the other end. The intensity with which I said that word may have given her the impression that I didn't like the idea of Sir Garfield staying. Certainly she could not have interpreted it as a crude invitation to a romantic liaison. It never occurred to me for a moment that she had been unreasonable for hanging up.

Some time later when I had collected my wits I rang a friend of mine at the Commission to tell him what had happened and to discuss how I might salvage some dignity from the situation. I had no desire to be shipped back to Australia in disgrace and what's more I really wanted to meet Sir Garfield. After my friend had stopped laughing he said that he would go and speak to the First Secretary and see if he could organise for me to come and explain to her what had happened. A short time later he rang me back and I was able to go around to the Commission and make my apologies.

I relieved George of his pyrotechnic responsibilities. I think he felt as good about that as I did. I began to keep a stock of bungers in the top right hand drawer of my desk and when the crows came around I would

take one, light it and throw it over my shoulder into the garden outside. Over the next few weeks this activity of mine began to change way people behaved in the office

I noticed that when the crows began to caw outside on the wall the tempo of the office staff increased significantly. A nervous energy permeated the building. The typing rate from the reception area went up by at least 20 words per minute; Rajah, the young Tamil house cleaner began to scurry around the place cleaning everything in sight and generally leaving a trail of destruction; the local dogs would begin to howl and the security guard on the gate into the office area would stir from his slumber and on occasions actually woke up. At one stage I noticed that George was throwing food at the birds in a convoluted attempt to shoo them off.

It was one of those hot, humid and generally unpleasant days that make life in the tropics very difficult for people of European extraction. I was sitting at my desk struggling with a problem of how to get around some of the bureaucratic barriers that are part and parcel of working in developing countries. My humour matched the day and was not enhanced at all when a solitary crow landed on the wall directly behind me and began to call out to George.

In a fury I reached into the draw, pulled out a bungler and lit it. A characteristic of these instruments of terror was that the rate at which the wicks burnt varied from bungler to bungler. Some burnt slowly in which case I would hold onto them until the wick was burnt down before I would throw them to increase the element of surprise for the crows. On this day the wick burnt at high speed so in my anxiety to get rid of it I threw it forcefully over my shoulder. It exploded with a bang louder than normal.

Another feature of these bunglers was that a huge pall of smoke would rise from where they exploded and small pieces of paper would float to earth for some time after. When I turned around there was no sign of smoke or paper. It puzzled me as to what had happened and I came to the conclusion that I had thrown it with such force that it had gone over the high wall and exploded in the garden next door.

A short time later Joseph came limping into my office holding his head, moaning and groaning. Joseph had a liking for very hot chilli chutneys that his wife made. His stomach did not have the capacity to placate his taste buds and I presumed that the cause of his discomfort was due to an over indulgence which he was prone to do. He sat down and said "David I am seeing stars. My head is going round and round". My initial thoughts were that he had really had a chutney binge although that didn't explain why he was limping as well. I asked him "What's the problem Joseph? Have you been eating too much of your wife's chutney?" "No" he replied, "I was sitting at my desk working on the calculator when from under my chair came a massive bang. I lifted from my chair and only the desk top stopped me going through the ceiling".

As it turned out what had happened was that when I threw the bungler over my shoulder it had hit a lip that ran along the bottom of the verandah and had bounced through the open window of Joseph's office and under the chair on which he was sitting. Joseph was a very conscientious worker and he would have been in deep thought when the thing went off. I asked one of the drivers to take Joseph home and told him not to come back to work until he had fully recovered.

I was beginning to have second thoughts about the strategy I was employing to deal with the crows. It was having more of a detrimental effect on the human element of the office than the target audience.

One day a group of crows came around and were making a real commotion. The crows that use to come around on a regular basis had got to the stage where one of them would stand on the wall directly behind me and watch me whilst the others concentrated on trying to get George to give them their dinner. At the slightest hint that my hand was moving towards the drawer where the bunglers were kept the guard bird would tell the others and they would fly away. It became a real battle of wits. I resorted to activities that disguised the action of opening the top drawer and lighting the bungler.

There was quite a degree of tension and apprehension with this as there is with any activity requiring deception. On this particular day I had successfully got the drawer open without the guard crow picking what was happening. I lit the wick and this time I had a slow burner. Half way down the wick it suddenly became a fast burner and in my haste to get rid of it, coupled with my apprehension, I inadvertently dropped it into the drawer with at least 10 other bungers. Strangely enough the thing that came to my mind was "I have a problem - what to do?" I flung the draw closed and leapt into the garden just as a series of massive explosions took place in my desk.

After that I abandoned the bunger strategy. George, thank goodness of his own accord, stopped feeding the birds. It didn't take long for the message to get around amongst the Colombo crows that the food was off at the office address and they stopped coming around.

Whist civil war raged in parts of the Island at least within the office boundaries peace reigned.