

CHINA

What gave Doc this great influence in high places? The fact that he had spent many years doing secret service work. When all this was I don't know, as I never heard it from him, but only from my mum, and my knowledge of it is very sketchy. The secret service work that had to be done, it seems, was in China, and in order to do it Doc had to learn Chinese - it is a difficult language so this took a year or so of intensive learning. I do remember him telling me about his teacher, who was called Lau Yip Ping. For this teacher Doc had the greatest respect. I also know that when the time came they had great difficulty finding anyone to examine his proficiency. His mission - whatever it was - took him wandering all over China. I had always wondered how he coped with all the various dialects of which I know there are many.

It is only recently that I discovered that if a Chinaman could speak Mandarin then he could manage almost anywhere in China. Doc taught me to ask for a cup of tea in Chinese and I think it goes something like this "Ning pouie cha li" with the pouie going up somewhat in scale. Best no one quotes me however, as if you get even the slightest inflection wrong, you could be saying something quite rude! I wonder if the 'cha' part of it is responsible for the cockney word cha for tea. There is one story that my mother told me however. One night Doc awoke to find an unwelcome intruder about to enter through his window, so he merely took his knife and chopped off the offenders fingers that were gripping the windowsill. Offender fell to ground outside, one supposes, and fingers inside onto floor. I always wonder how he explained away the ten or so fingers in his ashtray in the morning! My mother found this story quite scary, and when Doc was having a bad dream, she said, she would always wake him in case he turned around in bed and mistook her for a Chinese bandit. This always amused me because my mother at no time resembled a Chinese bandit. Another story was to do with a Chinese cook who for some reason was speaking English when he asked Doc if he would like clab for lunch, on being asked again and again what clab was he said "he walkie walkie sideways, cook in own pie dish."

Doc brought many artefacts back from various places and from China he brought five beautiful embroidery pictures, four I remember, depicting the four seasons and the fifth with real gold thread incorporated. These pictures, and many other such things, got hopelessly damp and mildewed hanging on the walls by the coast in South Devon. Doc also brought back a Buddha beautifully carved out of one piece of wood; he had blue eyes of some precious or semiprecious stone. He was supposed to be a god of laughter, so why he had a many-tailed whip over his shoulder, I never could tell. Also, of course he brought back the Chinese vase still in our possession. This vase also has a story. Chinese vases often have two ears on the neck part of them, and it seems this one had. The Chinese cleaning boy, knocked one off, much to the chagrin of Doc who created something awful, whereupon the said cleaner took the vase down the road to the people who paint the vases. There he had the two scars where the handles had been painted over so that the scars didn't show, which can be seen on inspection. The other things that we had at Gabberwell from distant parts were wicked looking knives. One I remember with a curvy blade, and more than one Malayan Kriss complete with scabbard.

Once or twice shipments of Japanese prisoners of war were brought to Plymouth, and Doc was sent for to go and interview them to ascertain that there were no spies among them. I don't know how we came to believe that there was a machine gun secreted somewhere on the property but my mum and I spent much time looking for that gun, which I have often thought since was most probably a figment of some ones' imagination! The only other thing I know about the secret service bit is that Doc would receive post addressed to Colonel Ridgway. When I asked my mum how that could be seeing that he was not, nor had ever been, in the army, she said that was the only way that they could rationalise the pay cheques that they sent to him.