

Frank Partridge and William Hesketh Lever
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A Narrow Escape

An old Chinese proverb says, 'Good luck comes after the survival of a terrible disaster.' This happened to Frank Partridge, 42, art dealer of 26 King Street, London and 741 Fifth Avenue, New York. On 1 May 1915 the *Lusitania* sailed out of New York and was torpedoed on the 7th by a German submarine U-20 off the Old Head of Kinsale, Ireland. The ship sank within 18 minutes. From 1,959 passengers and crew, Partridge was one of the 761 survivors.¹ This dramatic scene was recorded in his memoirs, 'The return I expected to be a lonely journey, so it was with pleasure that I accepted the invitation of eight dealer friends I met in New York, who asked me to make up a party with them on the ship they were taking back to England. It seemed as if the voyage would be more entertaining than I had originally thought. I was wrong. The ship we had chosen was the *Lusitania*. I was the only member of our party rescued when the ship went down.'²

The news report of Frank Partridge's narrow escape from the 'improbable event' described it as like a miracle and attracted Sir William Hesketh Lever's³ attention.

On 12 May 1915, five days after the tragedy, Partridge wrote to Lever: 'It is indeed kind of you and your letter cheered us up. While I thank God for having spared me my heart aches for those dear souls that have gone down.'⁴ One of those was Edgar Ezekiel Gorer (1872-1915), a renowned international dealer of Chinese art. Having survived the terrible disaster, Frank Partridge further stepped into the Chinese art market, took Gorer's leading role, and became a regular dealer of Chinese works of art to Sir William Lever.

When young Partridge met the Soap King

Frank Partridge (1875-1953) was born in Hertford and grew up in a family of ten children, of which he was the ninth (Fig.1).⁵ His father Robert, a boot-maker with an excellent reputation for his craftsmanship, enlarged the small shop over the years and added departments for the sale and repair of ready-made shoes. He

¹ The Lusitania Resource: http://www.rmsslusitania.info/pages/saloon_class/index.html#P

² G. B. Spencer, *The Memoirs of the Late Frank Partridge*, Essex, 1961, p. 34. Partridge's wife used to go with him to New York. Fortunately, she decided to stay in London and helped in welfare work. Partridge's family were waiting for him at home.

³ William Hesketh Lever was created a baronet in 1911 and became Sir William Lever.

⁴ Letter from Frank Partridge to William Hesketh Lever, 12 May, 1915, Partridge Papers, Lady Lever Art Gallery (LLAG) Archives, 17.4/A. Partridge 3959, hereafter cited as Partridge Papers. Five boxes are labelled: 17.4/A (1904-15), 17.4/B (1915-17), 17.4/C (1917-19), 17.4/D (1919-22) and 17.4/E (1922-26).

⁵ According to published sources: The Times, Obituary, 11 August 1953, p.8 and 13 August 1953, p.8. G. B. Spencer, *The Memoirs of the Late Frank Partridge*, Essex, 1961. UK 1881 Census On-line. CARP: <http://www.hatii.arts.gla.ac.uk/admn/php/carp/index.php>

died when Frank was six. Frank's eldest brother, Robert, 21, kept the shoe business going, but after two busy years he decided to go to Australia to try his fortunes there. The eldest sister Emily decided to continue the business. Inspired by her customers' taste or her female intuition, she added an antique department next to the big front window where she displayed the boots and shoes. In a small glass case she kept a changing array of small antique china and jewellery pieces.



Fig 1. Frank Partridge as a young man. © Partridge Fine Art Ltd.

Frank was now about eight and, leaving his small private school, he might have been impressed by his sister's business idea. However in 1883 Frank's mother, Eliza, sent him to the London Orphans' Academy at Watford. Would the high expense of a private education pay off? He stayed for six years until he was 14 years old and later recalled: 'To me practice of knowledge is as essential as a knowledge of practice if a theory is to be understood and a job done well. To emphasise theoretical knowledge to the exclusion of practice, as they did at Watford, seemed to me to be useless. Something of each I thought to be required, a little theory and a lot of practice through which to thoroughly learn the theory.'⁶

In 1889 Robert returned from Australia after six years. He had tried many jobs, but none had satisfied him as he had hoped they would. He met Doris Cohen who was the daughter of two London dealers and she introduced him to her family's shop where Robert learnt about antiques. Shortly after they were

⁶ G. B. Spencer, 1961, p.p.12-13.

married, Robert and Doris took a small shop in Great Portland Street, where they quickly attracted attention through the fine quality of their goods. Doris understood the way the markets went much better than Robert did, because she had made contacts in the trade through her parents. Robert was serving a form of apprenticeship, first with the Cohen family, and then with his wife.

Looking for a job with a 'knowledge of practice', Frank joined Robert around 1891-1892. In his memoirs he noted, 'I had to work hard with Robert. ... From morning to night I was kept busy in the shop and in the store-room, brushing the shelves, fetching trays, carrying exhibits and lifting and shifting cases of china, which Doris had managed to buy cheaply at one of the sales.'⁷

'One important aspect of antiques which I was fortunate enough to discover right at the beginning is that their genuineness can always be ascertained by he who has a real knowledge of the colours used on the originals, by the first craftsmen. It is a knowledge which can be acquired through personal experience, and not through theory; through one's own eyes and not by the books of others.'⁸

After the youngest brother, Leonard, came to join Robert's business, Frank had some time to get out and see London and to experience himself as a 'young blooded dealer'. The most vivid memory he later described was going to the Caledonian 'Cattle Market'⁹ with his brother and trying to sell things there, but without financial success. In 1893 Frank was offered a job by an American dealer from Chicago who came one day to Robert's shop and asked him if he was interested in a new career. The Chicago of 1893 was a city of superlatives.¹⁰ It hosted the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, which was much bigger than London's Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851, and even bigger than the 1889 Paris Exposition. Encouraged by Robert, Frank decided to go to Chicago to make his American dream come true and was happy to accept the conditions: ten dollars a week and free board.

Unfortunately the dream soon turned into bitter reality. Frank didn't get paid as promised, and sadly he had to leave the shop, trying to survive in several jobs such as polishing furniture for an Italian and performing as 'England's Leading Comedian' for one night in a local theatre. He convinced a German antiques dealer of his skills and reliability by cleaning his horses and worked in his shop for a while, but when Frank's sister sent some money for the passage home he left America. Emily was waiting for him in Liverpool. 'I would not be seeking out a park bench to rest on, but that instead I would be going to sleep in the bed I had

⁷ G. B. Spencer, 1961, p.19.

⁸ G. B. Spencer, 1961, p.19.

⁹ In the early 20th century, as the trade in live animals diminished, a bric-a-brac market developed which after the Second World War transferred south of the river becoming the New Caledonian or Bermondsey Market. The markets finally closed in 1963.

¹⁰ C. M. Rosenberg, *America at the Fair: Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exposition*, p. 62.

always known.' Young Frank Partridge started working again with Robert and Doris, but he had sworn one day to be a dealer himself.

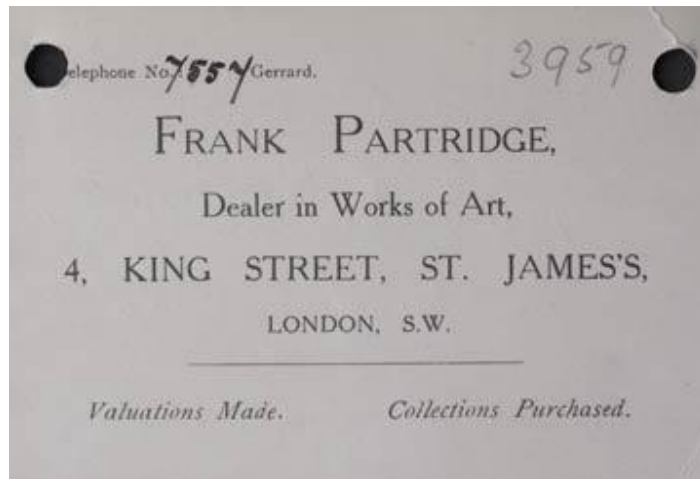


Fig.2. Frank Partridge's first business card. It reads, "Frank Partridge, Dealer in Works of Art, 4 King Street, St James's, London, SW. Valuations Made. Collections Purchased."

Frank, who was now 19 years of age, met Minnie, who became his wife in 1894. They both worked for Robert and Doris until Leo, their eldest son, was about six. They decided to take the plunge and started their own business in 1900. Their premises consisted of a small shop in 4 King Street, St. James (Fig.2), an excellent area with Christie's auction house just a stone's throw away, but they had to put some of their own furniture in the shop to make it look full and impressive.

Two days after the opening, the first customer to open the door was William Lever, later Lord Leverhulme (1851-1925).¹¹(Fig. 3) He started the conversation by asking, 'What is the price?'

Partridge: 'It is X.'

Mr. Lever: 'It is very reasonable! I haven't seen you before. You must be new here.'

Partridge: 'You don't remember seeing us when you were in my brother's shop – 19 St. James Street?¹² We have just opened two days ago but are risking everything. We have the knowledge, experience and understanding required to make a success of antique dealing, but not the cash.'

Mr. Lever: 'You must continue. Work hard.'

Partridge: 'Would you like to be my sleeping partner?'

Mr. Lever: 'I will let you know tomorrow morning.'¹³

¹¹ G. B. Spencer, p. 29.

¹² Partridge may have met Lever at his brother's shop, though Lever's only recorded purchase from R. W. Partridge, 19 St. James Street, occurred on 7th May 1903.

¹³ G. B. Spencer, p.30.

The next morning, Lever came back at the promised time. As a forthright man, he came straight to the point: 'I will not become your sleeping partner. If I join you, it would discredit you with your other customers. Once they discover that I am behind you they would assume I was taking the first choice of all you have, and so lose interest in coming to you.'¹⁴



Fig.3. Portrait of William Hesketh Lever (1897), by Samuel Luke Fildes (1843-1927). Mr. William Lever is shown as a prosperous and confident business man. (LL 3114)

He then added: 'A customer likes to imagine he is exploring virgin ground. Take away this belief and his interest is half gone. However, I will look after you as much as I can without taking up the position of a sleeping partner.' Frank Partridge expressed his gratitude for Lever's financial assistance.

Mr. Lever continued: 'What can you get for me?'

Partridge: 'There will be a large sale tomorrow. I wanted to attend but have reluctantly decided not to do so because of my shortage of capital.' Lever put his hand on his shoulder and said, 'Go ahead and buy'.¹⁵

Partridge attended the sale and bought goods to the sum of £1,500, upon which Mr. Lever commented: 'I liked it so much I bought the lot' and recommended the new shop to his friends.

¹⁴ Lever's considered views on co-partnership; see his book, *The Six-Hour Day and other Industrial Questions*, reprinted by George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1919, p.125.

¹⁵ G. B. Spencer, p.30.



Fig.4. A view of Frank Partridge's shop in 26 King Street taken on 14 Feb.1928. © Partridge Fine Art Ltd.

Partridge learnt a lesson from this man who, in his 40s, was worth millions, but who had started as a grocer's assistant with nothing in his pocket. As a result of the success and expansion of the new business, Partridge was eventually able to move to 26 King Street in 1912 (Fig.4 and Fig.5).



Fig.5. Interior of the 26 King Street shop. This view was taken in the 1920s. © Partridge Fine Art Ltd.

Mr. Negotiator for Lever: *'the collection that collected itself'*

The growth of Partridge's confidence was based on purchasing at auctions on behalf of customers such as Lever, as well as having a fine selection of antiques in his shop. His talent in negotiating with other collectors for Lever was shown in 1910. A letter from Partridge to Lever on 14 February records his expanding trade after he had returned from America, where he opened up business premises at 741 Fifth Avenue, New York. He wrote, 'I have a Client who wishes

to get him some Black Chinese porcelain and if you have any that you are willing to dispose of I can get you good prices.’¹⁶ The following day Lever wryly replied, ‘... I should not be willing to dispose of my black Chinese vases except at such extreme prices as I feel confident would make you unwilling to entertain the purchase.’¹⁷ Partridge thought that he was smart enough to negotiate, ‘I have been up to see your Black Vases and I shall be much obliged if you will let me know your lowest price for the 5.’¹⁸ Lever showed his position as a serious collector of Chinese porcelain and wrote, ‘... I am not anxious to sell the Vases. It is not possible for me to put them on offer’. He suggested, ‘If, however, you like to make an offer you are at liberty to do so. I may say, however, that there are six Black Vases you evidently did not see the Large Oviform Vase of Red Hawthorn (Fig.6: LL 6731) in the China Corridor.’¹⁹



Fig 6. Large oviform vase of red hawthorn (LL6731)

Partridge created a reputation for Lever of being a celebrity collector of Chinese Art. For example, Lever’s popular view of China was expressed in *The Connoisseur*, 1910, and highly praised by a female journalist Willoughby Hodgson.²⁰ Partridge’s strategy was to inveigle traders to spend their profits on amassing private hoards of treasures. It is interesting to speculate whether Lever was aware of Partridge’s ability for negotiating between top collectors or not; for it

¹⁶ Partridge to Lever, 14 February, 1910, Partridge Papers.

¹⁷ Lever to Partridge, 15 February, 1910, Partridge Papers.

¹⁸ Partridge to Lever, 18 February, 1910, Partridge Papers.

¹⁹ Lever to Partridge, 19 February, 1910, Partridge Papers.

²⁰ ‘Chinese Porcelain: Mr. William Hesketh Lever’s Collection of Chinese Porcelain’, *The Connoisseur, A Magazine for Collectors*, Vol. XXVIII, No.112, December, 1910, p.p.224-26.

is likely that Lever did not let Partridge sell his Chinese porcelain of *famille noire* to American collectors.²¹ There might have been other reasons, however: Lever may have been more impressed by Edgar Gorers's performance in the American market.

In 1911, a letter reports a second attempt to deal in *famille noire* porcelain with Lever. Partridge wrote, 'I have just purchased a very fine Black Chinese Vase 21.5 inches height, which I should very much like to show you if you can spare the time to call'.²² Lever rejected Partridge's proposal, 'I am not adding to my collection of China at present'.²³ Six months later Partridge again proposed another piece of china to Lever, 'I have just purchased a very fine plain white Ming Figure of Buddha. ... I would like to hear if this is of interest to you'.²⁴ Lever rejected it straight away, 'I am not a Buyer'.²⁵ In fact at that time Lever was already involved in a '*liaison dangereuse*' with Edgar Gorers and Richard Bennett.²⁶

At length the first important Chinese porcelain piece was purchased by Partridge for Lever in June 1914 for his estate at Port Sunlight: a Kangxi (1662-1722) oviform jar and cover, decorated with a formal floral design in green on a yellow ground, (Fig.7: LL 6750) for the price of £220.²⁷

This sale was definitely important for their business relationship; Lever gave up his unintentional aloofness towards Partridge and even sincerely invited Mr. and Mrs. Partridge to dine with him.²⁸

²¹ Two letters of 21 and 22 February, 1910, show that Partridge tried to meet Lever, but Lever was busy. There is no correspondence between them until 3 April, 1911.

²² Partridge to Lever, 3 April, 1911, Partridge Papers.

²³ Lever to Partridge, 4 April, 1911, Partridge Papers.

²⁴ Partridge to Lever, 25 October, 1911, Partridge Papers.

²⁵ Lever to Partridge, 26 October, 1911, Partridge Papers.

²⁶ In 1911 Lever agreed to buy Richard Bennett's collection of Chinese ceramics from the dealer Edgar Gorers. Like Lever, Bennett was a manufacturer from Bolton. The collection contained mainly Kangxi blue-and-white, enamelled and some monochrome wares. Lever was a cautious buyer. He insisted that the purchase should be anonymous. Inevitably, his name was leaked to the press and Lever refused to acknowledge the deal. After a law-suit Lever kept about one sixth of the Bennett collection. See Letter from Lever to Gorers, 25 June, 1913, Gorers Papers. For a discussion of the 'Richard Bennett Affair', see N. Pearce's Essay, *Gorers v Lever: Edgar Gorers and William Hesketh Lever*, 2009, p.p.9-15.

²⁷ Partridge to Lever, 12 June, 1914, Partridge Papers.

²⁸ Partridge to Lever, 16 July, 1914, Partridge Papers.



Fig 7. Kangxi oviform jar (LL6750)

Dealer-collector relations, 1915-1924

A shift away from traditional forms of patronage (i.e. ceramics made to special order) to the public sale of works by aristocratic collectors to the members of the affluent middle classes may help to account for the rise of the commercial art dealer in the late 19th and early 20th century. Chinese art dealing remained an unregulated market—vis-à-vis other occupations or the selling of financial instruments— such that art dealers were probably self-selected. Dealers behaved as entrepreneurs, and their self-promotion and innovation were important in becoming successful market agents.²⁹

Partridge was not from a privileged background which had a source of private wealth as a form of income. He seldom made direct acquisitions of art but operated on a commission basis between collectors, and dutifully acted as Lever's 'personal advisor' who supplemented Lever's own taste. With the money he used to 'recruit' Partridge, Lever gained cultural competence.

²⁹ See Derrick Chong, *Stakeholder Relationships in the Market for Contemporary Art*, in Iain Robertson *Understanding International Art Market and Management*, London: Routledge, 2005, p. 94.



Fig.8. Figure of a Chinese Deity (LL 61).

Partridge would answer any questions about objects Lever requested; for example, about the history of a 'Chinese Deity on a dragon's head'.³⁰ Partridge wrote, 'This figure represents the Chinese god of literature. ... I bought it at Christie's on the 29th July'³¹ (Fig.8: LL 61). The figure of a Chinese Deity seems to offer a gloss that glitters: Partridge's explanation makes china appear a superb symbolic product. The Chinese god of literature becomes the iconic souvenir of a snobbish approach of collecting – simply an object of decoration.

Founded in 1766 by James Christie, Christie's has been 'a name and place that speaks of extraordinary art, unparalleled service and expertise, as well as international glamour'.³² From 1915 to 1924 Partridge purchased distinguished collections at Christie's for Lever; collections including those of Jeffery Whitehead (1915), Sir Trevor Lawrence (1916), Alfred. W. Stiff (1916), S. E. Kennedy (1916, 1918), C. S. Holberton (1918), and Robert H. Benson (1924).

Partridge impressed Lever with his success in getting real bargains when he obtained some Chinese objects on the fourth day of the Whitehead sale, 11 August 1915. This purchase included three pieces of 'Black China' which made Lever most delighted: a deep bowl in a composite black background and a pair of square bottles cost Lever just £44. 2s. 0d including commission fee (Fig.9: LL 6734, Fig.10: LL 6735 & LL 6736). Other bargains were got at a small-scale

³⁰ A. J. H. Howard to Partridge, 7 August, 1915, Partridge Papers. Howard was the Curator of Hulme Hall Art Gallery.

³¹ Partridge to Howard, 9 August, 1915, Partridge Papers.

³² For further details see Christie's: <http://www.christies.com/about/company/>

auction sale of 'A Lady of Title's' collection on 14 March 1916, where Partridge purchased Chinese crystal and hardstone carvings for Lever.³³



Fig.9. A deep bowl (LL 6734).

Partridge treated his counselling service for Lever with caution, 'I wanted to speak to you about a pair of important Chinese figures which the owner wishes to sell, but this matter will keep until I see you.'³⁴ Partridge knew Lever's passion for Chinese blue and white vases but still courteously asked him to 'call in the next time you are in this neighbourhood.'³⁵ Partridge's role in getting people to sign the contract was to be central to the success of the agreement.

During the First World War Lever's soap business was still growing,³⁶ but he was very sensitive about prices and wrote a letter in an irritable tone, 'It is quite evident that War prices at the moment are not prevailing, but I believe that prices will come down very considerably this next year. We have not yet felt the real financial pinch of this War and people are becoming a little too optimistic. ... I am not at all carried away by the present prices prevailing for works of Art. Of course if all the works of Art are to go to America, America can pay any price but I should think even Americans will live up to their characteristic of not desiring to pay too much.'³⁷

³³ Partridge to Lever, 16 March, 1916, Partridge Papers.

³⁴ Partridge to Lever, 3 November, 1915, Partridge Papers.

³⁵ Partridge to Lever, 3 March, 1916, Partridge Papers.

³⁶ Lever was highly praised for his soap business. Mrs. Partridge (Minnie) to Lever, 17 November 1915, Partridge Papers.

³⁷ Lever to Partridge, 22 December, 1915, Partridge Papers.



Fig.10. A pair of square bottles (LL 6735 and LL 6736).

On Christmas Eve 1915 Partridge replied, 'I fail to see where you have any cause to complain with what you have bought.'³⁸ Lever explained, '... I am not complaining of 1915 and I am not complaining if the prices are high in 1916. I am like Mark Twain who was asked to speak about Heaven or Hell as to which he preferred, and he said he did not like to express any opinion as he had friends in both places. Your ideas as a dealer are centred in the Heaven of high prices, and as one who has been a collector for many years I have no reason to say a word against that point of view. Low prices may be H--I but I could be equally happy there in 1916 as I have been in 1915.'³⁹

As Lever predicted, prices of Chinese objects rose in 1916 and the objects on offer seemed to become even better in quality. The first sale of that year was the collection of Sir (James John) Trevor Lawrence at Christie's on 29 May. The son of Sir William Lawrence (1783-1867), Serjeant-Surgeon to Queen Victoria and Louisa Lawrence (1803-55), a renowned orchid grower, Sir Trevor (1831-1913) was himself trained as a surgeon, before becoming an MP and eventually President of the Royal Horticultural Society.⁴⁰ He was a well-known collector of *objets d'art*, particularly oriental, and especially Japanese art, western porcelain

³⁸ Partridge to Lever, 24 December, 1915, Partridge Papers.

³⁹ Lever to Partridge, 28 December, 1915, Partridge Papers.

⁴⁰ Sir James John Trevor Lawrence was the son of Sir William Lawrence and Louisa Senior, the daughter of a successful Mayfair haberdasher who had bought a country estate, Broughton House, near Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire. See Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sir_Trevor_Lawrence,_2nd_Baronet

and old lace.⁴¹ Some items from his collection are now in the Victoria and Albert and other museums. Partridge reported to Lever, '... all the Oriental Porcelain ... in my hands and you can rest assured I will do my very best for you.'⁴² After the auction Partridge wrote, 'One or two of the lots which we liked fetched fabulous prices; this was caused by 2 rich men bidding against one another; on the other hand most of the other lots realized about half of what I marked them. If I have spent too much money you must send me a wire in the morning and I will stop, but as I told you these opportunities do not come along very often and it is money well laid out.'⁴³ Lever was engaged in an ambiguous purchase decision and did not have adequate information; at the same time, the buying task was complex and repeat business was possible. From the Sir Trevor Lawrence sale Lever bought many examples of fine and rare imperial cloisonné enamels (Fig.11: LL 5916) and widened the scope of his collection.



Fig.11. Cloisonné incense burner with Qianlong mark (LL 5916).

One month later, through Frank Partridge, Lever bought a series of *fahua* pieces (Fig.12: LL 6067) from the S. E. Kennedy Sale on 21 June 1916. Partridge described how difficult it was to get a piece. He and rival London art dealer John Sparks⁴⁴ were bidding for the same lot 182 (Pair of Figure of Kylins): 'I'm sorry the Auctioneer did not see my bid and was knocked down for 42 gns, however

⁴¹ See Marcus B. Huish, *Catalogue of the Collection of Japanese Works of Art formed between 1869 and 1894 by Sir Trevor Lawrence*, Privately Printed, London, 1895.

⁴² Partridge to Lever, 29 May, 1916, Partridge Papers.

⁴³ Partridge to Lever, 31 May, 1916, Partridge Papers.

⁴⁴ Further information of John Sparks Ltd. CARP entry <http://www.hatii.arts.gla.ac.uk/admn/php/carp/index.php>

Sparks had a Commission for it so we should not have got it ... we were lucky to get anything at all at our prices.⁴⁵ Lever spent £1,351. 7s. 0d in total.



Fig.12. Fahua vase of double gourd shape (LL 6067).

Sydney Ernest Kennedy (1855-1933) was a senior partner in the family firm of Sydney Kennedy & Co., one of the largest dealers in the foreign railway market and a senior trustee of the London Stock Exchange. He sold most of his collection when he disposed of his town house in 1916. The Chinese porcelains were sold over two days, 21-22 June 1916 and the Catalogue was described as being 'innovative', including illustrations, and for the first time some in colour. Although consisting largely of late Ming and Kangxi period wares, the collection was considered significant at the time, some having been acquired from earlier notable collectors, such as Trapnell (Fig.13: LL 6495), Stuart (Fig.14: LL 6670), Grandidier, Huth and Revelstoke. Kennedy's label is recognised by a dolphin and SEK monogram on paper (Fig.15).⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Partridge to Lever, 22 June, 1916, Partridge Papers.

⁴⁶ CARP entry <http://www.hatii.arts.gla.ac.uk/admn/php/carp/index.php>



Fig.13. Black mirror vase (LL 6495).

Nine months after the Kennedy sale, Sparks thought that Lever might still be interested in buying one of the Ming figures and made an attempt: 'Kennedy gave the sum of £850 for the figure, but I am now able to offer you £700. Should this piece not interest you, may I ask you to be so kind as to allow one of your secretaries to send me back the coloured illustration.'⁴⁷ On 12 March Lever replied, 'I do not think it is likely to be of interest to me, therefore, do not miss a sale to anyone else by considering it is under offer to me.'⁴⁸ However, on the same day Lever also inquired of Partridge: 'Do you know anything about the figure?'⁴⁹ A more competitive dynamic was presented in Partridge's response: 'I was prepared to give £400 for it. There has been some restoration done to the head and I think the head has been off, but this could be gone into if you entertain it. I am in favour of purchasing this if it can be got at a reasonable price, as it is a very fine figure and brilliant in colour.'⁵⁰ He added: 'I often wondered where this figure had gone as Christie's deliberately told me it was sold, and it looks as though it was run up and bought in.'⁵¹ This incident suggests that the balance of negotiating power had now shifted. Partridge acted as a powerful dealer who was able to blacklist Sparks who 'threatened' him in the china market. A year later S. E. Kennedy's second sale was held on 21 March 1918: Lever obviously put his trust in Partridge.⁵²

⁴⁷ Sparks to Lever, 8 March, 1917, Partridge Papers.

⁴⁸ Lever to Sparks, 12 March, 1917, Partridge Papers.

⁴⁹ Lever to Partridge, 12 March, 1917, Partridge Papers.

⁵⁰ Partridge to Lever, 13 March, 1917, Partridge Papers.

⁵¹ Partridge to Lever, 13 March, 1917, Partridge Papers.

⁵² Partridge to Lever, 26 March, 1918, Partridge Papers.



Fig.14. Famille verte bowl (LL 6670).

In their letters Lever and Partridge often discussed the transformation of aesthetic value into economic value and Partridge included marked lists of interesting lots for Lever. On 24 June 1918 he sent two catalogues of snuff bottles to Lever and suggested, 'If you can spare £500 - I believe we can get nearly all the best ones.'⁵³ Lever was smart enough to reply, 'I think if I go up to £300 ... it will be a good start. I have generally done better when I have started slowly. If, however, the prices were extremely low, then I would leave it to your discretion.'⁵⁴ Partridge reported to Lever that he had a most successful day and bought 155 pieces which cost £445. 15s. 0d. Partridge additionally commented on their value: 'They are average about £2. 10. 0d per piece, which is exceedingly cheap. If you cannot afford to take the lot I am quite willing to keep half of them myself. I do not think such an opportunity will come along again, and as they were going so cheaply I took the opportunity of making a nice collection. They will cause you lots of pleasure when you have time to go into them.'⁵⁵ Part of the pleasure of collecting lies in competition, and the successful acquisition provides full customer satisfaction. Lever immediately replied, 'I enclose cheque £490. 6. 6 being the amount of the price paid at auction, plus 10%.'⁵⁶ (Fig.16: LL 9323)

⁵³ Partridge to Lever, 24 June, 1918, Partridge Papers.

⁵⁴ Lever to Partridge, 24 June, 1918, Partridge Papers.

⁵⁵ Partridge to Lever, 26 June, 1918, Partridge Papers.

⁵⁶ Lever to Partridge, 27 June, 1918, Partridge Papers.



Fig.15. S. E. Kennedy's label.

After the decision had been taken to build the Lady Lever Art Gallery in 1914, Lever bought some quite different Chinese objects (e.g. jade and hardstones, cloisonné enamels, and reverse paintings on glass) for his new gallery through Partridge. In 1918 Lever asked him to recommend a curator.⁵⁷ Partridge introduced a young collector, John H. Gardner who was from Witham, Essex: 'I will endeavour to get Mr. Gardner's porcelain for the £600. He seems quite a nice man and has a liking, and a slight knowledge of Works of Art. I should think he would be a good man to have as a Curator as he has spent some time at the British Museum and the South Kensington Museum. If your Lordship still wants a man, I think it is worth while seeing him and taking up his references. He has been a Captain in the Army and from the conversation I had with him I gather he would like such a job as yours.'⁵⁸ Unfortunately this deal was not successful. Lever said that he had no job for Gardner at this moment and he was not willing to buy his collection.⁵⁹ Perhaps the obligation became too compulsive for Lever. Once he wrote to Partridge: 'I am still like the small boy who has spent his Saturday penny on the previous Saturday and has on Monday to content himself with looking through the confectioners' windows at the sweeties. I still get occasional pleasure from looking through the windows, but I have no intention of buying for some time.'⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Partridge to Lever, 30 October, 1918, Partridge Papers.

⁵⁸ Partridge to Lever, 3 September, 1919, Partridge Papers.

⁵⁹ Partridge to Lever, 13 October, 1919, Partridge Papers.

⁶⁰ Lever to Partridge, 29 September, 1921, Partridge Papers.



Fig.16. Example of a snuff bottle from the Lever collection (LL 9323).

On 18 December 1922 Partridge was invited to the opening of the Lady Lever Art Gallery at Port Sunlight. The Museum was dedicated to the memory of Lever's wife Lady Elizabeth Ellen Lever who died in 1913. Partridge expressed his admiration for what Lever had achieved. He wrote, 'I must confess a touch of pride came to me at having had a good share in collecting some of them. ... most impressive sights are the Sculpture Halls and the Oriental Porcelain, which I thought looked lovely.'⁶¹ Lever replied, 'I am sorry I did not see you there, but it was all such an exciting time and so rushed that it was impossible. I enclose you copy of the speech from a Liverpool paper.'⁶² During the opening, Partridge was very sociable with Lever's guests; the next day he wrote, 'The Queen has asked me to help her in placing important pieces of furniture illustration in Mr. McQuoid's Book. ... Your Lordship must have several of these pieces, and if you could give me a list of them.'⁶³

In March 1923 a Chinese Australian merchant, Mr. William Yinson Lee⁶⁴ was probably introduced to Lever. He was a key member of the Rotary Club of Shanghai in the 1920s and wanted to sell his collection to Lever. However, Partridge acted as a monopolist in dealing with collectors and wrote, 'I have just been to see Mr. William Yinson Lee's Collection of Porcelain.... They are all very

⁶¹ Partridge to Lever, 18 December, 1922, Partridge Papers.

⁶² Lever to Partridge, 19 December, 1922, Partridge Papers.

⁶³ Partridge to Lever, 19 December, 1922, Partridge Papers.

⁶⁴ Family photographs of Mr and Mrs William Yinson Lee, On Yik Lee & Co. in Sydney, can be found in many files in the National Archives. <http://www.naa.gov.au/whats-on/online/showcases/chinese-australians/yinson-lee.aspx>

inferior pieces.⁶⁵ Lever was very surprised about this rejection.⁶⁶ Some of Yinson Lee's pieces are now shown in the Powerhouse Museum, Australia. However, Partridge proposed from the 'Tonying Collection'⁶⁷ a 'pair of puzzle teapots for £300'⁶⁸ but Lever replied, 'Not of interest to me.'⁶⁹ It seems that Lever and Partridge occasionally had different concepts of power play in the antiques market.

Lever argued, '... Cobden's⁷⁰ definition of business was buying in the cheapest market and selling in the dearest. I have such confidence in your buying that I am certain you fulfil the first requisite, and now that you have got a wider market including the United States, it is quite obvious you are able to fill the second.'⁷¹ The following day Partridge replied, 'I am always anxious to offer you pieces that I think suit your Lordship, in preference to any other Client. ... Thank you for the compliment you paid me as regards 'buying' because one knows that if the buying is wrong, the bottom falls out.'⁷²

Lever's answer followed soon: 'I do not like long-standing friendships cooling off any more than I like ices this hot weather warming off. Let us keep the ices cold and the friendship warm, but I haven't conscious now, and I should not have been your friend if I had not mentioned it, that ... I am beginning to think that Mr. Frank Partridge must be described as an Art Dealer entirely surrounded by wealthy American customers and that the poor Englishman is frozen out.'⁷³ Partridge replied forthwith, 'I promise you that it will not be through lack of desire on my part that our happy relationship should not be even more strongly united in the future, and if the Englishman is frozen out it will not be the fault of yours sincerely.'⁷⁴

In 1923 the dealer-collector relationship was already weatherproof and talking about success implied another meaning, 'If your Lordship does not make much money out of your work, you can comfort yourself with the satisfaction of knowing that you do try and help keep the world clean.'⁷⁵

⁶⁵ William Yinson Lee's list of antique Chinese porcelain contains 349 items. Partridge to Lever, 1 March, 1923, Partridge Papers.

⁶⁶ Lever to Partridge, 2 March, 1923, Partridge Papers.

⁶⁷ Partridge to Lever, 7 May, 1923, Partridge Papers. The Tonying Company was established in Paris in 1902 by Zhang Renjie (1877-1950), also known as Zhang Jingjiang, millionaire financier, Nationalist Government official and patron of both Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek. Westerners dubbed him 'Curio' Zhang. Further information on the Ton-Ying & Co., see CARP entry. <http://www.hatii.arts.gla.ac.uk/admn/php/carp/essay1.php?enum=1096638570>

⁶⁸ Partridge to Lever, 10 May, 1923, Partridge Papers.

⁶⁹ Lever to Partridge, 11 May, 1923, Partridge Papers.

⁷⁰ Richard Cobden (1804-1865).

⁷¹ Lever to Partridge, 24 July, 1923, Partridge Papers.

⁷² Partridge to Lever, 25 July, 1923, Partridge Papers.

⁷³ Lever to Partridge, 2 August, 1923, Partridge Papers.

⁷⁴ Partridge to Lever, 3 August, 1923, Partridge Papers.

⁷⁵ Partridge to Lever, 28 September, 1923, Partridge Papers.

No 'China' business but friendship in the Last Days

In a letter dated 23 March 1925 Partridge wrote to Lever, '[I] am sorry that the gathering on the 28th May will not be able to have the pleasure of your Lordship's company. Thank you very much for your kind enquiries about my family and I am glad to say they are all in the best of health. There has been quite a lot doing in the Art World since you have been away, but still there are some nice things left, and I hope I shall soon be seeing you.'⁷⁶ This was followed by another letter the next day, 'Will you kindly accept the enclosed, which I know you will appreciate? I saw it when I was dining with some friends in New York and I asked them to try and get me two copies – one of which I am keeping for my self, and trying to do it!'⁷⁷

Partridge had sent framed verses by E. A. Guest⁷⁸ and Lever replied, 'I am delighted to have them and can quite understand your wishing to possess a copy yourself after seen them in New York...It is most generous of you to send me the other copy.'⁷⁹

Guest's most famous poem is the oft-quoted 'Home'.

It don't make any difference how rich ye get t' be',
How much yer chairs an' tables cost, how great yer luxury;
It ain't home t' ye, though it be the palace of a king,
Until somehow yer soul is sort o' wrapped round everything.
Home ain't a place that gold can buy or get up in a minute;
Afore it's home there's got t' be a heap o' living in it.

Excerpt from 'Home', *A Heap o' Livin'* (1916).

⁷⁶ Partridge to Lever, 23 March, 1925, Partridge Papers.

⁷⁷ Partridge to Lever, 24 March, 1925, Partridge Papers

⁷⁸ Edgar Albert Guest (1881-1959) (aka Eddie Guest) was called 'The Poet of the People', 'Poet Laureate of the American Home' and 'America's Best Loved Poet of the Newspaper Age.' Guest penned some 11,000 poems which were syndicated in some 300 newspapers and collected in more than 20 books.

⁷⁹ Lever to Partridge, 26 March, 1925, Partridge Papers. This is likely to be the last letter Lever wrote to Partridge. On his death, of pneumonia, on 7 May, 1925, the Leverhulme viscounty passed to his son William Hulme Lever.