



Lao She
Mr Ma and Son



MODERN
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Mr Ma and Son

Lao She was born in 1899 to a poor Manchu family in Beijing. He left China in his mid-twenties to teach Chinese at the University of London, where he stayed for the next five years. *Mr Ma and Son*, serialized in 1929, was his third and final novel written during his London years. Lao She continued to teach and write upon his return to China, and became an established and respected author renowned for his humourist style. He committed suicide in Beijing in 1966, a few years after being labelled an anti-Maoist and counter-revolutionary by the Red Guards

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LAO SHE

Mr Ma and Son

Translated by William Dolby

With an Introduction by Julia Lovell



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A NOTE ON
CHINESE USAGE

IN RECENT years the international community has increasingly used Pinyin as the standard Romanization method for Chinese characters. However, in this edition, the translator's original usage of the Wade-Giles Romanization system and other earlier systems has been retained.

INTRODUCTION

BETWEEN 1924 and 1929, a young, bespectacled Chinese man called Lao She made his way in London. Almost invariably dressed in a khaki suit and cardigan, he spent his days in the east of the city, around Finsbury Circus, teaching Chinese in the School of Oriental Studies to classes of missionaries, housewives and City boys (an ability to pay fees being the only test of admission), or studying in the school's library. In the evenings he dined on tough chops and stodgy puddings in his lower-middle-class lodgings before retiring to his room to nurse dyspepsia and work on his novels.

The average Briton of the 1920s – his brain fevered by the excoriations of Chinese villainy commonplace in popular culture – would have found Lao She's sedate lifestyle a grave disappointment. For at least a hundred years before Lao She's arrival in London, the British had eagerly consumed assassinations of the Chinese character in travelogues, pamphlets, newspapers, plays and (later) film.

Distrust of China and the Chinese had its origins at the end of the eighteenth century, when George III's requests for 'free trade' had been rebuffed by the patrician emperor Ch'ien-lung. In a fit of pique, the king's envoy – Lord Macartney – had denounced China as 'an old crazy first-rate man-of-war' fated to be 'dashed to pieces on the shore'. After Britain fought and won the Opium Wars in the nineteenth century to protect the contraband drugs trade between India and China, it came to regard China with contempt (for its military weakness) and then with guilty fear.

London's small but growing Chinese migrant community, it was assumed, must be plotting revenge for Britain's past misdeeds.

By the early 1900s, the Chinese master criminal (with his 'crafty yellow face twisted by a thin lipped grin', dreaming of world domination) had become a staple of children's publications. In 1911, 'The Chinese in England: A Growing National Problem' (a hack article distributed liberally around the Home Office) warned of 'a vast and convulsive Armageddon to determine who is to be the master of the world, the white or yellow man'. After World War One, cinemas, theatres, novels and tabloids chorused hysterical visions of the 'Yellow Peril' scheming to destroy respectable white society. The British 'knew all about Chinamen', one young traveller to China in the 1920s pronounced: 'They were cruel, wicked people.' In March 1929 alone, the *chargé d'affaires* at London's Chinese legation complained, five plays showing in the West End depicted Chinese people in 'a vicious and objectionable form'.

Lao She was a living refutation of the cartoon Chinaman that the British imperial imagination had created. Yet in other respects – in his cosmopolitan nationalism – he was typical of his generation; brutal childhood experiences had schooled him in the anti-imperialism rife among Chinese youth of the 1920s. In 1900, when Lao She was one, his father was burned to death while fighting Allied soldiers during their invasion of Beijing at the height of the Boxer Rebellion. Lao She narrowly escaped death himself when Western soldiers ransacked his parents' house. It is likely that he would have been killed had he not been asleep beneath an upturned trunk. The plunderers left, having contented themselves with bayoneting the family's elderly dog. His father's death at the hands of imperialist aggression condemned Lao She to a childhood of penury, as his mother struggled alone to feed, clothe and educate three children.

As he reached his early twenties, Lao She – again, like many educated young people of his age – participated in a broad national movement for cultural reform that drew on Western philosophy and literature in its quest to remake China. He worked at a school

teaching an American-inspired curriculum ambitious to modernise China and its people. He converted to Christianity and learned English; he became devoted to foreign writers, including Shakespeare, Swift, Dickens and Conrad. He was appalled not only by rapacious imperialists, but also by China's own 'reactionary forces': the corrupt warlords ('hobgoblins and devils') who had carved the country up between themselves after the collapse of the last dynasty in 1912, blocking the creation of a functioning republic. In 1924, Lao She resolved to see England for himself, taking up a five-year teaching post in London's School of Oriental Studies. And it was there that he began his career as a writer of patriotic but complex fictions about contemporary China.

Mr Ma and Son – his third novel, completed in 1929 – was probably the first Chinese novel to confront directly British racism towards China. The tragicomedy of a father and son, whose attempts to settle in London are met by prejudice and chicanery, expresses the paradoxes of being an educated Chinese patriot in the early twentieth century. Within its pages, resentment of imperialist bigotry mixes with curiosity about the West and self-disgust for China's failure to stand up for itself in the world.

The novel is above all a passionate denunciation of the British sinophobia that Lao She knew well. 'All because,' the narrator tells us early on,

China's a weak nation, every crime under the sun is attributed to this community of hard-working Chinese, who are simply seeking their living in a strange and foreign land. If there were no more than twenty Chinese people dwelling in Chinatown, the accounts of the sensation-seekers would without fail magnify their number to five thousand. And every one of those five thousand yellow-faced demons will smoke opium, smuggle arms, commit murder – hiding the corpses under their bed – rape women – regardless of age – and commit an endless amount of crimes, all deserving, at the very least, gradual dismemberment and death by ten thousand slices of the sword. Authors, playwrights and screenwriters are prompt

to base their pictures of the Chinese upon such rumours and reports. Then all who see the play, watch the film or read the novel – the young girls, the old ladies, the little children and the King of England – firmly imprint these quite unfounded pictures upon their memories.

Thus are the Chinese transformed into the most sinister, most foul, most loathsome and most degraded two-legged beasts on earth. In this twentieth century, people are judged according to their nation. The people of a powerful nation are people; the people of a weak nation are dogs.

The casual contempt that Mr Ma and his son, Ma Wei, experience in London was part of a much bigger phenomenon. The historian Gregor Benton suggests that anti-Chinese feeling in Europe, the US and other white settler societies, at its peak in the early twentieth century, ‘was greater than that aimed at any other racial group’ – perhaps even including Jewish communities. The Chinese remain a troublingly easy target in Britain today. After the 2004 Morecambe Bay tragedy, in which twenty-three Chinese immigrant labourers drowned when they were trapped by a rising tide, a Conservative MP called Ann Winterton told a ‘joke’ in a speech about a shark tired of eating tuna that decided instead to ‘go to Morecambe Bay for a Chinese’. The right-wing television personality Jeremy Clarkson, expressing his scorn for synchronised swimming in early 2012, described it as ‘Chinese women in hats, upside down, in a bit of water . . . You can see that sort of thing on Morecambe Beach. For free’.

In the hands of a less talented comic writer, *Mr Ma and Son’s* frequent attacks on British sinophobia – however justifiable – might become repetitive. But Lao She’s pitch-perfect satire (testament, perhaps, to his reading of Dickens) keeps the novel sharp. The bigotry of the Mas’ landlady, Mrs Wedderburn, is exposed with masterful archness: waiting to meet her Chinese tenants for the first time, ‘she went and seated herself quietly in the drawing room, taking out a copy of De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* to read, so that when her Chinese guests arrived,

she'd have a suitable topic of conversation ready.' The Reverend Ely – the Mas' former pastor in Beijing and representative of the worst sort of ignorant missionary condescension towards China – is lampooned in a few well-chosen sentences.

Leaving aside the fact that he spoke Chinese very poorly, he was a walking Chinese encyclopedia. And yes, he truly loved the Chinese. At midnight, if lying awake unable to sleep, he would invariably pray to God to hurry up and make China a British dominion. Eyes filled with hot tears, he would point out to God that if the Chinese were not taken in hand by the British, that vast mass of yellow-faced black-haired creatures would never achieve their rightful ascent to the pearly gates.

Lao She is harsher still on the reverend's terrifying wife, 'whose whole being was a command . . . On no account would Mrs Ely permit her children to play with Chinese children, and she only allowed them to speak the absolute minimum of indispensable Chinese words, such as those for "Bring tea!", "Go!", "One chicken!"' Finally, Lao She turns his attention to Mrs Ely's dreadful brother, Alexander, a bellowing former doyen of the China trade. As a young man, we learn, 'Alexander had possessed flawless manners and etiquette. But when he went to China, he felt that being polite to the Chinese wasn't worth the bother, and was forever bawling and glaring at the Chinese working under him, with the result that he was now past changing even if he'd wanted to.' Lao She's gruesome family portrait summarises the smug boorishness of the Western presence in China in the early twentieth century: the bumptious missionary, his barking memsahib and the crude, profiteering merchant.

The novel excels also in its crafting of dialogue (in his later career, Lao She would be celebrated for his plays as well as for his fiction). The Reverend Ely's first conversation with Mrs Wedderburn, trying to persuade her to take in the two Mas, is a study in hypocrisy, "You and I are both Christians," Reverend Ely enjoins her, "and we must fortify ourselves with the true spirit of

Christian humility in our efforts to provide some succour for this Chinaman and his son.” Mrs Wedderburn stroked the long hair under the little dog’s neck, and said nothing for a long while. In her mind she was feverishly working out exactly how much rent she could charge.’

A remarkable scene at the cemetery, when an old woman feigns tears in order to overcharge the elder Ma for flowers for his brother’s grave, is rich in Dickensian humbug.

“The money,’ she said suddenly, at the hysteric height of her lamentations, stretching out her hand. “The money.’

Without a word, Mr Ma fished out a ten-shilling note and handed it to her. At the sight of the note, she lifted her head and peered closely at Mr Ma.

“Thank you. Oh, thank you. Yes, the first Chinaman buried here. Oh, yes. Oh, thank you. I do hope a few more Chinamen die and get buried here.’

Although understandably bitter at the treatment of the Chinese in London, Lao She is also disillusioned by the behaviour of these Chinese themselves. The elder Mr Ma is a comfort-loving buffoon fantasising about becoming an imperial official (a decade and a half after the empire collapsed in 1912). Not content with eating and sleeping away the capital he has inherited from his brother, Mr Ma is delighted to confirm the English in all their anti-Chinese prejudices, merely for the sake of ingratiating himself socially – even to the point of taking a part in a film demonising the Chinese as yobbish fiends. The younger Ma, although intelligent and idealistic, is paralysed by infatuation with his landlady’s vulgar daughter, Mary, and Mao, the student campaigner, turns out to be a loud-mouthed chauvinist. The novel echoes with a disconsolate mockery: Lao She wants to find a utopian solution to the problems that face his beloved country, but is let down by his compatriots’ lack of backbone. His abhorrence of British racism is shadowed by disappointment at the insufficiencies of his countrymen.



A curious thing happened to Lao She after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. This independent-minded patriot tried to reinvent himself as a true believer in Communism. He approved the use of mob violence, shouting at public trials for class enemies to be beaten. He jived to the baroque twists and turns of policy, denouncing the Party's targets and cheering its favourites. He churned out essays on demand about the wonders of the Communist leadership and the need to subject literature to political ends. He attacked America as a fascist state in which capitalist magnates oppressed the people like serfs. A man well versed in the glories of classical Chinese poetry, he praised, perhaps sarcastically, propagandistic doggerel ('The east is red/ The sun rises/ China has produced a Mao') as 'exquisite . . . always exquisite'.

Yet his efforts to shed his old cosmopolitan scepticism were only partly successful. Despite the panegyrics that he wrote to the dictatorship of the proletariat after 1949, the satirist in him was not yet dead. He wrote plays that exposed the corruption of the Socialist bureaucracy, or implicitly compared censorship under the Communists with repression under their predecessors, the Nationalist government. And try as he might, he could not lose his internationalism. In May 1966 he received his last foreign visitors, a British couple called Roma and Stuart Gelder, in Beijing. At the very heart of Mao's brave new world, nostalgia for imperfect England welled up in him. He asked them to tell him about 'Piccadilly and Leicester Square and Hyde Park and St James, and the Green Park . . . Beijing is beautiful, but I shall always think of London in spring as one of the most attractive cities in the world. And the people – I received great kindness in England.'

In the summer of 1966, Mao began his last purge: the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Originally devised as a means of removing Mao's enemies in the Party, the campaign rapidly expanded into a witch-hunt against anyone vaguely suspected of deviation from Mao's anti-Western, ultra-modernising dogmas.

Lao She, a writer steeped in the sights and sounds of old Beijing, and also associated with foreign places and books, was an early victim. One day in late August, Red Guards – Mao’s teenage shock troops – dragged Lao She to their headquarters at the Confucian temple and there forced him to stand for hours in the dusty heat while they harangued him for his ‘criminal, counter-revolutionary’ past. Eventually they told him to return home: ‘We will carry on with you tomorrow. That evening, Lao She left his courtyard house, made his way to the Lake of Great Peace north of the Forbidden City and drowned himself. (Some dispute the verdict of suicide, alleging instead that Red Guards beat Lao She to death then threw his body into the lake.)

Lao She’s life and death share the melancholy ambivalence of *Mr Ma and Son*. Despite the titles and honours that the Communist government showered upon him – People’s Artist, Vice-Chairman of the Writers’ Union – and despite his professions of loyalty to the regime (it was rumoured that a copy of Mao’s writings in the chairman’s own calligraphy was found on Lao She’s corpse), Lao She was incapable of allying himself simplistically with any single cause. But Mao’s China was not a place in which a Chinese citizen could harbour doubts. Perhaps it was the realisation that his country would not tolerate his non-alignment – expressed some four decades earlier in *Mr Ma and Son* – that guided his final steps to the Lake of Great Peace.

– JULIA LOVELL

PART ONE

HEADBOWED low, Ma Wei made towards Marble Arch. After a few paces, he found himself coming to a halt and standing dazedly, glancing from side to side. What at? Nothing. He was looking at nothing, and nothing was what he saw. Like runny fish-glue, his thoughts had gummed up his mind completely, leaving not even a crack for matters of the outside world to creep in, and depriving him of all mental control over his physical movements. His glance shot out and came straight back in, bringing nothing with it. He'd long since forgotten the world, and fiercely wished for it to be destroyed, and himself along with it. Right now! So why bother looking at anything any more?

He stood rooted there. It was a good two or three minutes before the scenes in front of him registered. 'Oh, yes,' he murmured to himself, 'it's Sunday today.'

On Sunday afternoons, there's always a bustle and stir around Marble Arch. All over the green lawns and gravel paths stand bunches of people. Workmen with red flags crane their necks, wave their big, rough, brown, hairy hands, and bellow at the top of their voices, like minor bursts of thunder, 'Down with the capitalists!', blaming the latter for all the ills of the world. Even last night's bad sleep was the capitalists' fault.

Right next to the red flag stands the Conservative Party with a Union Jack. The men there hold their heads very high, because they're wearing two-inch stiff collars and their necks have no chance whatsoever of slumping, and as they wave their big, fine,

lily-white, hairy hands, they're shouting with might and main, 'Down with the socialists!', 'Down with the unpatriotic traitors!', heaping blame for all the world's wickednesses on the heads of the workers. Even the fact that it rained this morning, and that the egg boiled for breakfast turned out to be a bad one, was all a consequence of the workers' troublemaking.

Right next to that group stands the Salvation Army flying a blue and red flag, bashing tambourines, blowing little pipes and singing hymns nonstop. The more ecstatically they praise the Lord, the more powerful grow the bellows of the workmen beneath the red flag. Sometimes, however, when they're filled with the Holy Spirit, they shudder all heaven and earth so much with their singing that our red-flag friends yonder are forced to resort to swearing, with words not found in any dictionary. Just next to the Salvation Army is a Catholic preacher, and, beyond him, any number of other groups with various causes to promote: independence for India, rapid elimination of China, the revival of the Liberal Party . . . and some groups not really promoting anything at all – just a crowd surrounding a wizened old man with a red beard, looking at one another and laughing.

Almost without exception, the men standing under the red flag have small clay pipes dangling from their mouths, and their hands stuck in their pockets, and they nod their heads in approval of whatever is uttered by their leader. The listeners who stand beneath the Union Jack mostly wear little black bowler hats. They nod their heads, smack their lips appreciatively and murmur, 'Hear, hear!', 'Absolutely!' Sometimes, when two of them simultaneously come out with the words 'Hear, hear!', they give each other a wink, and squeeze a tenth of a grin from one side of their mouths.

The smaller gatherings aren't as well ordered and spiritually united as these big ones. For the most part their primary raison d'être is discussion and disputation. Heads press together, like those of huddled sheep, as principles are bandied to and fro in subdued tones. In addition, there's a flock of fierce-browed fiery-eyed youths, caps rakishly askew, who circle round these little groups, cracking clever jokes and scattering quips, all for no other

motive than to make everyone laugh and to show off their own smartness. Round the outside of the groups there are bands of three or four policemen, uniformly tall and each with the same big hands and feet, as if London policemen were all brothers.

Among these crowds of people, none stand out as much or excite as much admiration as the guardsmen in their red uniforms. Their backs are straighter than a drawing board, and the creases of their trousers are as stiff and straight as if held in place by a rod of iron. Every man jack of them is spick and span, with a perpetual smile on his face to display his snow-white incisors, and with his hair cut close to reveal a blue scalp. None are listening to anything – they're just standing outside the groups, placing themselves where they attract the most attention, and letting their gazes rove all around. After one's been standing there a few minutes, suddenly some girl's pale wrist will curl around his arm, and the pair will spin sharply on their heels and go off onto the grass for a cosy private chat together.

On the lawns, the various couples sit tête-à-tête, while others are lying with their arms around one another's necks. Beside them are isolated men, sitting with an evening paper in their hands. These men's eyes are not on the newspapers but on the girls' legs. Masses of fat dogs are gallivanting about in wild ecstasy for no apparent reason. The little children present, some clad in suits of white velvet and others dressed from chin to toe in red-velvet rompers, are haring to and fro over the grass, their chubby legs waddling and tottering about. Their nurses, sporting white bonnets, chase after these little gods, grumbling and complaining all the while.

Ma Wei stood there for an age. He lacked any enthusiasm for listening to the speeches, but couldn't think where else to go. He was twenty-one or twenty-two years old, fairly tall but very thin, with a sallow complexion and a narrow face that showed a resolute willpower. His long eyebrows swept slightly upwards, and the corners of his eyes turned up a bit too. These eyes were extraordinarily black and extraordinarily bright, and that combination rendered the whites of his eyeballs paler by contrast, so that his eyes avoided the dull, lifeless-looking monochrome that

paper dolls in funerary shops have. Apart from these eyes, with their constant hint of a smile, his face would have looked quite fearsome. His nose wasn't very prominent, but it seemed to stick out just the right distance because his cheeks weren't plump. And his lips curled upwards a bit, serving in conjunction with his twinkly, smiling eyes to create an overall geniality.

He wore a grey woollen suit under his black woollen overcoat. The suit was very elegantly tailored, but it had, like his face, become drab, lost a lot of its original glow. From his looks and from his age, you'd imagine he oughtn't really to be so miserable. But with his forehead screwed up in a frown and his back slightly bent, he was missing much of youth's sprightliness. Compare him with those red-uniformed young men arm in arm with the girls, and he'd certainly seem to come off rather the worse.

He absent-mindedly fished out a handkerchief and wiped it across his face. Then he stood there in a dumb blur, just as before.

The sun was setting. Red clouds turned the green-flannel grass a purplish colour. The workmen's red flag slowly transformed into a patch of congealed scarlet blood. And each minute the speakers' audiences grew smaller.

Ma Wei buried his hands in his overcoat pockets, walked on a few steps then came to a stop, leaning against the iron railing that bordered the grass. The red clouds to the west slowly dispelled the last lingering light of the sun. In the dying rays, the sky was covered layer by layer in a pale grape colour, like the frost-blue under the grey of a wood pigeon's plumage. The grey steadily deepened and imperceptibly merged with the wisps of ground mist, and swallowed all the colours into the dark. The workmen's flag, too, became a patch of black. And the trees in the distance quietly embraced the dusky shadows and slipped off into the night with them.

The people departed in ones and twos, until they'd almost all dispersed. The gas lamps all around were lit. Big red and green buses going round Marble Arch flashed past one after the other, looking like some long, moving rainbow. There was no one on the grass now. Only one black shadow leaning by the iron railing.

Li Tzu-jung had wriggled down into his bedclothes. As he stretched out a leg to the left, and shifted an arm to the right, in the half-asleep stage, he was dimly conscious of the doorbell ringing. His eyes got to the verge of opening, but then, in spite of himself, he let his head slip back onto the pillow. He could still recall hazily that something had been making a noise just now, but . . .

DRRRRR!

The doorbell rang again. He cracked open his only just-closed eyes, then once more lowered his ear back onto the pillow.

DRRRRRR!

'Who the hell can it be, calling here at midnight! Who is it?'

He propped himself up with one arm into a sitting position, and with the other hand pulled open the curtain a bit to look outside. Although there was a gas lamp in the street, the mist hung very thick, and it was so dark he couldn't see a thing.

DRRRRRRRRRR!

This time the bell rang a little longer and louder than the previous rings. Li Tzu-jung got up, felt around for his shoes and groped them on in the gloom. The ice-cold innersoles gave him a shock as they met the hot perspiration of his feet. He felt goosepimples all over. It was April, but the nights were still chilly. He fingered for the light and switched it on. Then, wrapping his overcoat around him, and holding his breath so as to make no sound, he tiptoed downstairs. The old lady on the ground floor had gone to bed, and if he was careless enough to wake her, he could bank on a good telling-off. He gently eased open the front door.

'Who is it?' he asked. His voice was as quiet as if he were frightened of scaring off the thick mist.

'Me.'

'Ma, old chap! What were you doing, banging away at the doorbell like that?'

Without a word, Ma Wei walked in and went upstairs. Li Tzu-jung softly pushed the front door to, and silently followed Ma Wei upstairs. Nearly at his room, he came to a halt and listened. There was no sound from downstairs.

That's all right, anyhow, he mused to himself. *The old lady hasn't*

woken up. Else I'd be getting a mixture of toast and curses for breakfast tomorrow.

The two of them went into Li's room. Ma Wei pulled off his overcoat, and laid it over the back of a chair. He still hadn't uttered a word.

'What's up, Ma, old lad?' asked Li Tzu-jung. 'Been having a row with the old man again?'

Ma Wei shook his head. In the light, his face looked more sombre and sallow than ever, and his brow was knit so tightly that it looked as if he were trying to squeeze drops of water from it. There was a faint blue round the rims of his eyes, and beads of sweat hung from the tip of his nose.

'What's up?' Li Tzu-jung asked again.

After what seemed an endless pause, Ma Wei gave a sigh. Then he licked his lips, and at last spoke. 'I'm done in, old Li. Can I stay here for the night?'

'Only one bed here, though,' said Li Tzu-jung with a grin, pointing at it.

'This settee'll do me,' said Ma Wei. 'Just so I can get through the night. I'll be fit to sort things out for tomorrow then.'

'What's happening tomorrow?' asked Li Tzu-jung.

Ma Wei shook his head again. Li Tzu-jung knew old Ma's nature – if he wasn't of a mind to tell you something, there was nothing to be gained by asking him.

'Right then,' said Li Tzu-jung, scratching his head, still smiling. 'You go off to sleep in the bed, and I'll take care of this settee.' With these words, he spread a blanket over the seat. 'There's one thing, though,' he added. 'You'll have to clear out at the crack of dawn, so the old lady downstairs doesn't catch sight of you. Right then, off to sleep!'

'No, you sleep in the bed, Li, old chap. I'll stick it out on the settee for a while. That'll do me fine.' There was a speck of a smile on Ma Wei's face. 'I'll be off at dawn. Don't you worry.'

'Where will you be going?' Noticing Ma Wei's smile, Li Tzu-jung tried again to get him to speak. 'Tell me. Otherwise you can forget any hopes you've got of a good night's sleep. You've had

a row with the old man, haven't you?'

'Need you ask?' Ma Wei yawned. 'I didn't mean to come around knocking; I'd intended to leave this evening but didn't, so I had to come and bother you.'

'Where is it you're going?' Seeing that Ma Wei was determined not to sleep in the bed, Li Tzu-jung was considerably wrapping both his own overcoat and his blanket round Ma Wei as he spoke. Then he switched off the light, and climbed back into bed.

'Germany, France . . . Can't say for sure.'

'On business for the old man?'

'My father's finished with me now.'

'Oh,' said Li Tzu-jung, and left it at that.

Neither of them said any more. It was extremely quiet out in the town, with nothing but the sound of trains and steamers whistling and hooting occasionally. The clock of the church in the next street chimed two o'clock.

'You're not cold, are you?'

'No, I'm not cold . . .'

As Li Tzu-jung drifted off to sleep, he was making resolutions: *Get up very early so as not to let Ma just run off. Get up, wash your face in cold water, and write a note telling the old lady downstairs you've got some urgent business, and won't be around for breakfast. Then go out with him. See him back home. That's what I'll do. Be best to go round to their shop, though. If he meets his father there, the two of them won't have a dust-up – too embarrassing in public. Common enough, rows between a father and son . . . He's a youngster, old Ma . . . Takes things too seriously . . .*

He went rambling on and on in his dreams with thoughts like these. The rumble-trundle of the little milk carts started up, and there was a growing noise of cars on the main road. Li Tzu-jung opened his eyes with a start. The sun was already beaming a thread of gold silk into the room through a crack in the curtain.

'Ma, old chap!'

Li's blanket and overcoat were both draped over the back of the settee. There was no sign of Ma Wei.

Li got up, opened the curtain, threw on his overcoat and stood vacantly by the window. Through it he could see the River Thames. There was nobody walking along the banks of the river yet, but all the small riverboats were astir. The saplings on the banks had newly popped their light-green leaves, and an airy mist hung around the treetops. Through the thinner patches of mist, the sun's rays shone on the tender leaves, making them sparkle faintly, like little pale-green pearls freshly fished from the water. Only a few of the smaller boats on the river had hoisted their sails, which fluttered like large butterflies in quest of flowers to settle on.

The early tide was rising, the ever-rolling crests of its waves inlaid with gold scales by the sunlight. The waves surged up, hustling each other on and on, rank upon rank, crowding the shining gold to pieces. And as the shattered stars of gilded light fell back again, the next wave stirred up a heap of small white flowers, white as the soft juice new-pressed from a dandelion stem.

The furthest of the boats drifted slowly off, the waves of the river ever surging on in pursuit, writhing and rolling as if some shining dragon were chasing the little butterfly away.

Li Tzu-jung stood staring dumbly at the small boats until they turned the bend in the river, then he finally pulled himself together, walked over to the other window, which faced onto the street, and opened it. Then he got a notion to tidy up the things on his writing table. There was a small bauble on the desk, flashing and sparkling, and under the little object there was a short note. He picked up both at the same time, with a chill feeling inside him. Walking slowly over to the settee, he sat down and carefully scrutinised the note. It was only a few words, written in pencil, the strokes all haywire, showing signs of its having been fumblingly written in the dark,

My dear friend Tzu-jung, I thank you. Please hand this little diamond ring to Miss Wedderburn.

See you, Wei

PART TWO

I

FOR OUR present story, we must now go back a year from the day when Ma Wei slipped away from Li Tzu-jung's place. The Reverend Ely was an old missionary who'd spread the Word for twenty years in China. He knew everything there was to know about China, from the ancient sage ruler and demigod Fu-hsi, who invented the divination hexagrams and Chinese characters, right up to President Yüan Shih-k'ai, who'd tried to set himself up as emperor in 1915. The latter endeavour the Reverend Ely greatly approved of.

Leaving aside the fact that he spoke Chinese very poorly, he was a walking Chinese encyclopedia. And yes, he truly loved the Chinese. At midnight, if lying awake unable to sleep, he would invariably pray to God to hurry up and make China a British dominion. Eyes filled with hot tears, he would point out to God that if the Chinese were not taken in hand by the British, that vast mass of yellow-faced black-haired creatures would never achieve their rightful ascent to the pearly gates.

Dawn till midnight, Oxford Street is always packed with women. Nearly all the shops along this central thoroughfare, apart from a few tobacconists, sell things for women, and no matter what urgent business women may have, they never manage to proceed along this street quicker than two steps per minute. On display in the shops are gaudy hats, leather shoes, little gloves, dainty handbags . . . all of which exert a peculiar fascination on the eyes, bodies and souls of women.

In Oxford Street the Reverend Ely's clerical composure and religious dignity would never fail to suffer a spectacular reduction. With each big stride of his feet onwards, his prominent nose would unerringly clash with some old lady's umbrella. As he retreated, stepping sharply backwards, his large leather shoes – which for some reason he always refused to sole with rubber – would almost always land squarely on the delicate little toes of some young miss. Then, as his hands clutched for his handkerchief, you can bet your life he'd jam an elbow into some lady's shopping basket. Every time he made the journey along this street, he'd need to change his shirt and replace a couple of sweat-soaked handkerchiefs when he got home. And during the journey, he'd inevitably utter the words 'Sorry!' and 'How careless of me!' at least one hundred times.

On this particular occasion, he succeeded at last in squeezing his way into Oxford Circus. There he drew a deep breath, and let out a pious 'Thank God!' His pace increased, and he forged ahead in an easterly direction, beads of perspiration drifting down like snowflakes through the white hair at his temples.

Although he was over sixty, the Reverend Ely's back was as straight as a writing brush. He possessed little hair but what he had was pure white. His cheeks were shaven to a glazed sheen, with no whiskers at all. Indeed, but for the wrinkles, his face would have resembled nothing more than a piece of china. His eyes were large, with a pair of tiny yellowy-brown eyeballs lolling in them, and above them hung two wedges of flesh, where twenty or thirty years earlier eyebrows must once have grown. Under the eyes dangled a little pair of spectacles. Because of his large nose, there was a full two inches between his eyes and the spectacles, which meant he generally looked at things over the top of the frames, rather than through the lenses. His lips were very thin, and dropped slightly at the ends. When he preached, with his eyes aimed unwaveringly across the rims of his glasses and his mouth yanked firmly down, he set the congregation's hearts trembling without a single word. In general, though, he was exceedingly affable; a missionary who can't be

friendly will never get anywhere in this world. Reaching Museum Street, he veered left, cut across Torrington Square and entered Gordon Street.

There were quite a few Chinese people living in this street. The Chinese living in London can be divided into two classes: workmen and students. The workmen mostly live in East London, in the Chinatown that brings so much ignominy to the name of China. Those Germans, French and Americans who lack the money for a journey to the Orient always nose around Chinatown in quest of material for novels, travelogues or news articles. Chinatown has no outstanding tourist spots; nor is there anything of note to be observed in the behaviour of the workmen living there. The mere fact that Chinese people inhabit the place is enough to draw the voyeurs. And all because China's a weak nation, every crime under the sun is attributed to this community of hard-working Chinese, who are simply seeking their living in a strange and foreign land. If there were no more than twenty Chinese people dwelling in Chinatown, the accounts of the sensation-seekers would without fail magnify their number to five thousand. And every one of those five thousand yellow-faced demons will smoke opium, smuggle arms, commit murder – hiding the corpses under their bed – rape women – regardless of age – and commit an endless amount of crimes, all deserving, at the very least, gradual dismemberment and death by ten thousand slices of the sword. Authors, playwrights and screenwriters are prompt to base their pictures of the Chinese upon such rumours and reports. Then all who see the play, watch the film or read the novel – the young girls, the old ladies, the little children and the King of England – firmly imprint these quite unfounded pictures upon their memories.

Thus are the Chinese transformed into the most sinister, most foul, most loathsome and most degraded two-legged beasts on earth. In this twentieth century, people are judged according to their nation. The people of a powerful nation are people; the people of a weak nation are dogs.

People of China, open your eyes and take a look around. Yes, it's time you opened your eyes and straightened your backs. Unless, that is, you wish to be dogs forever.

The fine reputation enjoyed by Chinatown is quite naturally not very beneficial to the Chinese students in London. The bigger hotels, let alone respectable individual householders, just won't let rooms to Chinese people. Only the homes and small boarding houses behind the British Museum are prepared to. It's not that the people there have uncommonly kind hearts, I don't think. Rather, they realise there's money to be made, and so bring themselves to put on a good face and make the best of dealing with a bunch of yellow-faced monsters. A poultry merchant doesn't have to be a lover of chickens; when did English people ever let rooms to Chinese people out of a love for the Chinese?

Number 35, Gordon Street was the widowed Mrs Wedderburn's house. It wasn't very big, just a small three-storied building with a row of green railings at the front. Three white stone steps were scrubbed spotless, and the brass knocker on the red-painted door was polished sparkling-bright. On entering the house, you came first to the drawing room, behind which was a small dining room. If you passed through the dining room, took a turn, and descended some stairs, you'd come to a further three small rooms. Upstairs there were just another three rooms: one facing onto the street, and two at the back.

While still a good way off from the little red door, the Reverend Ely removed his hat. He wiped the perspiration from his face, adjusted his tie, and assured himself that he was all in order, before at last gingerly mounting the steps. He stood for a few moments at the top, then finally, with the delicate touch of a musical maestro playing a note on the piano, gave two or three raps on the door with the knocker.

A series of sharp, pattering footsteps fussed down hurriedly from upstairs, then the door opened a little gap, and half of Mrs Wedderburn's face revealed itself.

'Oh, Reverend Ely! How are you?'

She opened the door a little wider, and stretched out one of her

small white hands to lightly brush the minister's arm. He allowed her to lead him in, hung his hat and overcoat on the hatstand in the hall, and followed her into the drawing room.

This room was kept very spick and span. Even the little brass nails on which the pictures hung seemed to wear a smile. A green carpet was spread across the centre of the room, bearing two rather narrow armchairs. By the window stood a small table, crowned with a Chinese porcelain vase containing two small white roses. Two oak chairs flanked the table, each set with a green velvet cushion. An oil painting hung on the wall, with a pair of matching plates on either side. Underneath the painting there was a small bookcase holding a few anthologies of poetry, a few novels and the like. Against the opposite wall there was a small piano with two or three photographs on its lid, and on its varnished stool lay a fat white Pekingese dog. As the dog saw the Reverend Ely come in, it swiftly leapt from its perch, and, shaking its head and wagging its tail, bounded wildly around in between the old clergyman's legs.

Mrs Wedderburn seated herself on the piano stool, and the little white dog jumped up into her lap. From there, head cocked to one side, it challenged the Reverend Ely to play. He sat down in an armchair, pushed his glasses higher, and launched into praises of the dog. This went on for some time before he at last dared broach the subject of his visit.

'Mrs Wedderburn,' he began diffidently, 'are the rooms upstairs still vacant?'

'Yes, indeed,' she said, one hand securing the dog, and the other passing an ashtray to her visitor.

'Are you still of a mind to rent them out?' he asked, filling his pipe.

'Well, yes. But only to the right kind of person,' she replied in a measured tone.

'I have two friends who urgently require accommodation. I can vouch for their absolute respectability.' He peered at her over the top of his spectacles, and pronounced the word 'absolute' with great clarity and vehemence. Then he paused a while, lowered his voice, and allowed himself a small smile. 'Two Chinese fellows.'

As he said 'Chinese', his voice was barely audible. 'Two extremely nice Chinese fellows.'

'Chinese?' said Mrs Wedderburn, her expression suddenly stiffening.

'Extremely nice Chinese,' he repeated, stealing a glance at her.

'I'm sorr—'

'I vouch for them! If anything goes amiss concerning them, you can refer it directly to me.' He didn't give Mrs Wedderburn time to finish, but continued quickly. 'I simply must find them some rooms, and there's no one else I can turn to. You must help me, Mrs Wedderburn. It's a young boy and his father. And the father, you will be glad to know, is a Christian. For the sake of our dear Lord, you must . . .' He deliberately let his words trail short, waiting to see whether the mention of our dear Lord would have any effect.

'But —' Mrs Wedderburn didn't seem overly concerned about the Lord, and her face showed signs of impatience.

Again he granted her no leeway to expand upon her protests. 'You see, there's nothing to stop you asking them for a somewhat higher rent. And should you find that they don't fit in, you can turn them out to look for lodgings elsewhere, and I won't give a —' Feeling that he was on the point of adding something not quite in accord with the spirit of the Holy Scripture, he took a puff of his pipe, and swallowed his words along with his smoke.

'My dear Reverend Ely,' said Mrs Wedderburn, rising to her feet, 'You know my feelings. There are quite a number of people in this street who make their fortunes by renting to foreigners, and I am almost the only one left who would rather earn less than do such a thing. I think I may justifiably feel proud of myself in that respect. Don't you think you could find a room elsewhere for them?'

'Don't you think I haven't looked?' said the Reverend Ely, looking most distressed. 'I have asked from door to door in Torrington Square and Gower Street, but none of the accommodation offered was suitable. I feel that your three nice little rooms would be ideal, most adequate for their purposes. Two of the rooms could serve as bedrooms, and the other as their study. It would be an excellent arrangement.'