

The Colonel and the Professor

by

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The fateful hour, the hour without shadows, was fast approaching and the atmosphere was alive with tension. The chanted slogans of the last three days had been replaced by a low, menacing murmur, like the growling of some lurking beast. The tranquil pagodas, glistening crimson and gold under the punishing sun, provided an incongruous backdrop to the unfolding drama between stern-faced soldiers with G-3 automatic rifles and the massed citizenry of the capital demanding an end to the Junta.

The Colonel, dressed in battle fatigues, was filled with bitterness as he surveyed the crowds from behind barricades around the parliament building. He had a stiff, military bearing, reinforced by a brooding concentration born of the habit of command. His dark eyes flashed angrily between his high-boned cheeks and his mouth, normally gentle and attractive, was compressed in frustration. He focused his field glasses on the multitudes gathered seventy yards or so beyond the barbed wire perimeter and cursed under his breath.

The crowds had swollen to over three hundred thousand, perhaps even four, during the last three days, as if sheer numbers could secure for them what had long been denied. They stretched as far as the eye could see, jostling high-spiritedly across roads and pavements, waving from balconies and windows, huddling expectantly on rooftops and every other vantage point.

They seemed oblivious of the sweltering heat preceding the monsoons. They simply waited for the noon hour set by their leaders for breaking their fast and marching on parliament, anxious to participate in a great historic event even if only as witnesses. In their innocence, they expected to topple the Junta by storming the parliament. Some of the demonstrators clutched portraits of ancient heroes and martyrs in remembrance of past sacrifices. Others displayed emblems of universities and civic associations. A great many wore red or white headbands inscribed with reckless commitments to success. A forest of flags, placards and banners trumpeted their demands. Freedom, democracy and an end to corruption and dictatorship!

How naive they were, the Colonel thought, exasperated. Had they learnt nothing from the bloodbaths staining the history of their country over the past thirty years? Did they really think the Junta cared about people shouting slogans? He pitied all the well-meaning people gathered in front of him, monks in saffron robes, doctors and nurses in hospital gowns, lawyers in judicial dress, children in school uniforms, businessmen, hawkers, film actresses, peasants, housewives, trishaw drivers, junior civil servants and the rest. Most of all he pitied the Professor, his respected friend and former teacher, for leading so many to certain disaster. The Junta could never be dislodged by mere demonstrations.

It had been fortuitous that the protest had not been suppressed already. A visit by the head of a European government to sign an arms supply agreement had caused the Junta to stay its hand. It could not afford to embarrass one of the few remaining countries still prepared to turn a blind eye to its record of abuses. But now that the dignitary and his entourage were safely out of the way, it was ready to act. A dawn to dusk curfew had already been proclaimed as a prelude to more drastic action. But the crowds, embolden by a false scent of victory, had chosen to ignore it.

They would soon pay the price, the Colonel thought, for there would be no safety in numbers. The larger the protest, the more ruthless the response. He dreaded the massacre to come. "Unsavoury and lawless elements must be taught a lesson. Shoot all curfew breakers," the Junta had decreed.

The Colonel was well aware of what the Bren guns mounted on armoured personnel carriers and the automatic rifles cradled by his men were capable of. What a carnage it would be! He felt sick to the stomach and silently cursed the Professor and his associates for placing him in such an impossible position. They had upset his own deep laid plans and left him teetering on the edge of disaster.

He had been so patient, so careful, so wary of the secret police and spies planted everywhere. For years he had sought out the most onerous commands, enduring the hardships at primitive border regions just to avoid brutalizing unarmed students and civilians. Lest fellow officers mistook his manoeuvrings for greed -- because the pickings from smugglers and opium traders in the border areas were rich indeed -- he made a point of passing on the "taxes" and "fees" to his superiors.

His successes in pacifying bandits and insurgents and his regular tributes soon caught the eye of the Junta. The generals began accepting him as one who knew how to play the game. As a consequence he rose rapidly through the ranks and his recent appointment to a command in the capital had placed him within an ace of the real levers of power. It was just his luck to have to deal at once with the largest mass protest the city had ever seen. That threw him right into the firing line. He either had to do the dirty work of the Junta or see the ruin of his plans.

The Colonel searched for the Professor through his field glasses and spotted him sitting on a straw mat under a large umbrella. Like the other leaders, he was dressed in a white shirt and a white sarong. His eyes were closed and his face serene. He seemed to be holding up well in spite of three days on nothing but glucose and water. He was sitting cross-legged, with his delicate hands resting comfortably upon his thighs and his fingers curled in the traditional posture of meditation. He looked older and thinner but otherwise still exuded that old aura of moral authority.

Poor loveable dreamer, the Colonel thought. He should have gone into a monastery to become an arhat, passing his days intoning sutras and fingering prayer beads. Instead he had to involve himself in the rotten business of politics. He had always been too naive and trusting, too ready to believe in man's capacity for reason and compassion. He should have lived during the legendary age of philosopher kings and not when more and more of mankind was falling under the yoke of the likes of the Junta.

The Colonel remembered the Professor declaring during one of his lectures: "Napoleon, though a military genius, once held there were only two powers in the world -- the sword and the mind. He concluded that ultimately the mind always conquered the sword, because of the mind's ability to renew indefinitely such human ideals as freedom, justice, courage and compassion, against which the sword is helpless. A sword can only kill people, not ideals, and given enough time swords will rust.

"Therefore, though the age seems benighted, do not despair. Rule by the sword cannot endure because it lacks legitimacy. It will collapse eventually from its own moral decay. There is no need to take up arms. Peaceful and steadfast resistance is enough. Remember we are Buddhists. The use of violence is a sin, not to mention the taking of life. Besides, the means we use are every bit as important as the ends we seek. Evil methods breed evil in their users, even when used against evil men."

There had been a time when the Professor's words found resonance with his own inclinations. They had shared a common upbringing, although a generation separated them. Their education, by tradition, required spending several weeks a year in monasteries, serving monks, reciting sutras, begging for food and learning humility and compassion. Buddhism and the contemplative life seemed ideally suited to their gentle and easy-going race. Indeed, there was still a part of him which longed to live in tune with the seasons, to enjoy the abundance of nature and to find contentment in a begging bowl! But that sort of life became increasingly unthinkable under the Junta.

For a time he thought it a mere aberration, caused by the ineptitudes and bickerings of politicians and by a people unbalanced by the temptation of material things. The Junta would fade away once things got back on an even keel. Instead he saw the media brought increasingly under control and foreign journalists expelled. A puppet parliament was installed to lend an air of legality to the Junta's every wish. Then the repression and the killings began. Those suspected of opposing the whittling away of freedoms were rounded up, many never to be seen again. After two of his best friends had been beaten to death for writing satirical verses in a university magazine, he judged it necessary to oppose the Junta by fair means or foul.

It baffled him how, after all that had happened around the world, the Professor could remain so firm in his belief in the essential goodness of man. Man had to be judged by his actions and what had man brought about in the last hundred years?

Two World Wars and countless lesser ones. Nazi gas chambers and Communist labour camps. Regimes everywhere murdering in the name of patriotism and justifying lies on orders from the state. Bombs capable of laying waste to whole cities and missiles capable of delivering them half a world away. Instruments of slaughter bartered for profit or political favours. Populations decimated for the sake of oil, a sphere of influence or some petty mercantile advantage. Hatreds stirred up because of differences in race, colour, caste or creed. Food routinely destroyed in accordance with "market economics" while people starved elsewhere. Tyranny, cynicism, inhumanity and greed spreading everywhere like uncontrollable diseases.

No, he could not remain optimistic. Each day that passed saw the sword enhancing itself with machine guns, tanks and all manner of weaponry. Its obscene triumphs, in the form of blasted bodies, severed limbs, walking skeletons and mangled corpses, bludgeoned the world through newspaper pages and television screens.

Against that how could the mind prevail? It had only be numbed by a surfeit of horrors and drugged by self-interest and greed. If Napoleon's dictum had once been true, it was now -- like Euclidean geometry -- obsolete. He saw mankind slipping inexorably into a new dark age. If man had to return to living by the sword, then let him wield it with a measure of justice and fairness. It was that belief that had driven him to enlist in the army.

Yet, years of killing bandits and criminals, sinning against his religion and putting up with unthinkable excesses, were about to come to nought. His stratagems and plottings had only brought him face to face with a blank wall!

"Message from Headquarters, Sir," a Major came up and reported. "We can start action. The main routes have been sealed and reserves are in position. Are we to act before the march?"

The Major had the dull, unimaginative face of a peasant, but the Colonel knew him to be a loyal and reliable soldier.

"There's a lot of them," the Colonel replied. "We don't want to be hasty. Although we have fire power, the Chinese have a saying: Even an elephant can be overwhelmed by ants, if there are enough of them."

"There's no fear of that, Sir. They're not like the rascals at the frontiers. They have no heart for a fight. The first volley will have them scattering like frightened rabbits."

"The Professor must not be harmed. Our orders are to take him for a treason trial. He is too well known internationally and it will go down badly if he gets killed."

"We can shoot into the wings, away from the ringleaders."

"No, the Professor may still get trampled in the panic. Let me try a ruse. I used to know him quite well. I'll go and talk to him. That will separate him from his followers. I can then grab him before anyone knows what's happening. Have a platoon ready to bring him in when I signal."

"But, Sir, that's dangerous! You'll be very exposed. What if something goes wrong? They are getting smarter. Some now carry slings and stones. You may get hit by a rock or bottle. It will be worse if they get their hands on you. You'll be torn apart!"

"That's a risk I'll have to take. Broadcast another warning that curfew breakers will be severely dealt with. If anything does go wrong, you're in command."

"Yes, Sir!"

The Colonel removed the field glasses from around his neck and picked up a loud hailer. The armpits of his fatigues were already stained with sweat and a fine film of perspiration dampened his brow. As he stepped from behind the barricades his body was stiff and tense, for he dreaded the massacre that was on the cards. He had only one chance in a million of averting it and that depended on the Professor.

He knew the troops would have no compunction about shooting. They had been too well indoctrinated. Their religious scruples and human instincts had been systematically expunged. The Junta had taken simple peasant lads and elevated them into a privileged class. It had paid them better than the rest of the population and plied them with imported luxuries at a fraction of their market value. Officers enjoyed "extras" in the form of permits and licences for their families and relatives. Regional commanders got cuts in the income from illegal logging and other contraband trades. Soldiers were encouraged to rape, pillage and kill during missions, partly to terrorize opponents and partly to bind their destinies to that of the Junta. Once they had committed atrocities, their fates and those of their masters became inextricably linked.

The Colonel recalled the attempts to indoctrinate officers at the elite Defence Services Academy. A British lecturer had been used for the purpose, a gentleman with a superior way of speaking through his nose. He had expounded on law and order being a primary responsibility of the state, something to be maintained at all cost. Once a state failed to provide security for its citizens and their property, it would forfeit its mandate to rule, the lecturer had declared.

The Colonel smiled ironically in recollection. It had all sounded plausible enough at the time. He now wondered whether that British expert had ever confronted three hundred thousand angry citizens and whether he considered shooting them a fitting way of ensuring their security.

After the Colonel had moved thirty yards into no man's land, he called on his loud hailer. "I am the commanding officer. I would like to talk to the Professor." His announcement was greeted by a chorus of abuse and some scattered rocks and stones. But the missiles fell wide of the mark.

"Professor, this is Nyi," the Colonel continued, ignoring the initial response. "It is important that I talk to you."

After a brief interval there was a stirring among the ranks of the demonstrators and eventually someone assisted a frail white figure unsteadily to his feet.

As the Professor moved forward slowly, with an uplifted arm to curb further missiles, an eerie hush descended. After the Professor had travelled twenty yards, the Colonel dropped his loud hailer and moved briskly to narrow the remaining distance between them, in full awareness that every step he took increased his danger. When he met up with his old friend he placed his palms together and lifted them to his forehead in traditional greeting and the Professor reciprocated.

"Is it really you, Nyi?" the Professor asked with a smile. "It is good to see you again after so long. I thought you were up-country."

"I have just been assigned here. I'm sorry not to have called to pay my respects," the Colonel said, removing his helmet as a gesture of respect and as an indication to the demonstrators of his peaceful intentions. His hair was stiff and closely cropped and there was an anxious and haunted look in his eyes. "There is not much time, Professor. You must ask your people to disperse."

The Professor smiled again. "Is that your uniform speaking, my dear boy? Since when have we been divided into your people and my people? Are we not one people?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it that way. You must trust me and get the people to leave. Quickly, but without causing panic."

"I cannot. They are all worked up, united as they have never been before. In five minutes they will march on the parliament. They mean to put an end of the tortures and the killings once and for all. Even the Junta must realize this is not a protest by a handful of students. It is a display of universal disapproval. There are similar protests in a dozen provincial towns. Even the most evil of men must retain a shred of conscience and human decency. They must see they are not wanted and should leave rather than spill more blood."

"You do not know the generals as I do. They rule by the sword and can only be removed by the sword."

The Professor sighed. "The sword! It is always the sword. That has already been tried and what has that achieved? Cycles of killings as unalterable as our cycles of rebirth. Successes with the sword can only arouse passion and lead to more bloodshed. There must come a time for killings to stop, for forgiveness and reconciliation to be given a chance. If sinners see no hope of redemption, what else is there for them to look forward to?"

"This is not the time for moral philosophy. You must abandon the march. Please get the people to disperse while there's still time. Avoid the main thoroughfares. They have already been blocked. Use the side lanes. The Junta means business. I have orders to shoot."

"What has happened to the man I used to know, Nyi, the one who once harboured such lofty dreams? Would he shoot me also without a qualm? I cannot believe he has thrown in his lot so completely with the Junta."

"You know I will never do that. But there is no time to explain. The people must leave at once or thousands will die."

"Not even the Junta can contemplate a massacre on such a scale, in the heart of the capital, in broad daylight. There are holy monks and abbots among us, women and children. Join us, Nyi, to end the torment of our nation, for the good of our people. Tell your men to lay down their arms and the nightmare will be over."

"I wish it were that simple. My men will obey no such order. They know what they're here to do. They will shoot to kill."

"The Junta can't kill everybody in the capital."

"Not everybody, but enough to cow the population. The streets will run red with blood. I promise you the soldiers will shoot. I beg you to disperse before it's too late."

A bewildered look came into the Professor's eyes, as if he could not believe his ears. He searched desperately in the Colonel's face for some hint, some shadow of reassurance, that it was only a nightmare. But the Colonel's serious demeanor confirmed the truth of what he had said.

"Merciful Buddha! What have I done?" the Professor cried. "How can they disperse? The streets are packed!"

"Do your best . I will hold off action as long as I can. Trust me. I'll explain everything later."

Suddenly the Professor swayed and raised a hand to his brow. "I think I'm going to faint," he gasped.

The Colonel grabbed the Professor by the arm and shook him roughly. "No!" he hissed through clenched teeth. "You can't faint! You must go back to get them to disperse!"

But the Professor was already slumping towards the ground. As the Colonel picked him up, he saw a number of protestors hurrying forward. A tight knot of tension gathered in the pit of his stomach. Even without a backward glance he knew a platoon was already racing towards him. All he had to do was to make for the safety of the soldiers with the Professor. In a matter of seconds he would be covered in glory and his own scheme for power would come closer to realization.

But he could not do that. Although the bloodletting could not be stopped for the present, one day it would have to stop, if there was to be hope for his tormented land. He realized at the same time that his way forward would only perpetuate rule by the sword. There would be no other way of satisfying the thirst for revenge and for settling debts of blood. Was it possible that only someone as impossibly idealistic as the Professor stood a chance of taming the sword?

It was a slim chance but the only one on offer for healing the wounds of the nation. So thinking, he ran towards the demonstrators carrying the frail old man, yelling the while: "Run! Run! They're going to shoot!"

Even as he ran he heard the rattle of automatic fire.

The Colonel and the Professor has appeared in **Short Story International** in the United States and has been broadcast by the **British Broadcasting Corporation** on **Radio 4** in Britain and by **Radio Eire** in Ireland.