

The Prisoner At Portland Place

by

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Comrade Chang looked harried. The exigencies of his office and the stepped-up demands of his political study group had of late left him with barely enough time for sleep. And sleep was what he carved, particularly the kind that was healing and dreamless, that knitted up the ravelled sleeve of care.

It was strange how such lines came back to him so readily following his arrival in London. When he was studying comparative literature at St. John's University in Shanghai, the British writers had always been his favourites. Indeed, he had once had some literary claims himself, publishing articles on social issues shortly before the collapse of the Kuomintang regime.

But he had long since put aside his desire to become a writer. To be a real writer meant making a commitment to search for truth with integrity, even though truth might not turn out to one's own liking. Such a commitment was difficult enough to honour in the best of times. In the jangled atmosphere of the present it would be downright impossible. No, it would be much safer to remain a lowly Third Secretary in charge of Cultural Affairs, an inconspicuous cog in the vast bureaucracy of China.

Comrade Chang was a chubby man of medium height. He was in his late forties. He had thinning hair. A furrowed brow hovered over a pair of despairing eyes. The worry lines on his face had become more apparent during the last two years, since his enforced separation from his family. His nose was broad, with flared nostrils, but his mouth did not quite fit in with the rest of his features. It was too sensitive and well-formed, almost feminine in its delicacy, suggesting secret weaknesses and a want of resolve.

When he smiled, which was not often, he would reveal an irregular set of teeth discoloured by tobacco. He was dressed in a dark blue Chinese suit with a buttoned-up collar. It was customary for him to dress in that orthodox fashion whenever he had a public duty to perform. The overall impression he conveyed was that of a decent man somewhat careworn and oppressed by his lot in life.

His office was located on the second floor of No.49 Portland Place. That venerable building had served as the Chinese Embassy in London since the Ching Dynasty. It had seen its share of history and drama. In 1896 the revolutionary hero now revered as the Father of the Chinese Republic, Dr. Sun Yat-sen, had been kidnapped off the streets of London and held prisoner there for twelve days. He was to have been shipped back secretly to China for execution. But he managed to get news of his plight to friends and a stiff diplomatic note from Lord Salisbury secured his release.

The status of the building had been reduced in recent years, however. Following the Communist take-over, a number of intractable disputes had kept diplomatic relations frozen at the Charge d'Affaires level. Hence the building could no longer be regarded officially as an embassy.

Comrade Chang shared a room in the building with two assistants. He occupied a desk at the far end of the room, close to the window, while the desks of his assistants stood facing each other near the door. One desk was unoccupied. At the other, an assistant was busy on the telephone.

After a while, the assistant covered the mouthpiece of the telephone and called over. "The Szechuen acrobats begin their tour in Liverpool this evening. They want to know if they should chant the thoughts of Chairman Mao before each show."

"Tell them the British would find it odd if they did not behave in the manner expected of them," Comrade Chang said, leaving his meaning unclear.

Comrade Chang's intercom rang. The Charge was on the line wanting to know whether the Peking Opera Company had left for Scotland.

"They left on the ten o'clock from King's Cross," Comrade Chang reported.

"Have extra precautions been taken? Artistic types are not reliable."

"I've sent Auyang with the group."

"Good. We don't want an incident at a time like this," the Charge said, and rang off.

Before Comrade Chang could replace the intercom the other telephone on his desk rang. The plaintive voice of Miss Robinson was on the line. "Good morning, Mr. Chang. I've been trying to reach you for two days."

"I'm sorry I haven't been able to return your calls, Miss Robinson. I've been run off my feet. How can I be of service?" His English was pleasant but accented.

"You remember when we met at the Sino-British Friendship Association we discussed the possibility of a summer tour for our university chamber music group to coincide with our holidays. Well, we now fear that things might get too hot and sticky by then."

"The summer is rather hot and humid in most parts of China," Comrade Chang replied. "Most hotels lack air-conditioning. We're a backward country, you know. The autumn would certainly be more pleasant."

"I'm sorry, but we were not thinking so much of the weather. It's the other problem."

"The other problem?"

"You know, the demonstrations, the anti-foreign sentiments, the general upheaval."

"Oh, you mean the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution! True friends of China need not fear that, Miss Robinson."

"But the newspapers are full of accounts of terrible happenings. The Red Guards are beating people up and even high officials are being paraded through the streets with placards around their necks. Now they are holding the

Reuters correspondent in Peking. No one seems to know what they might get up to next."

"You should not believe everything you read in newspapers, Miss Robinson. My two sons are Red Guards."

There was a long silence from the other end of the line and then Miss Robinson said: "It must be quite worrying for you."

"Worrying? What is there to worry about when they are in the bosom of the Motherland?"

"The newspapers say factions are forming and they are fighting among themselves. People are getting killed."

"Newspapers exaggerate. The young people are just learning to make revolution. An essential part of socialist education."

"I dare say teaching some participatory politics may be no bad thing in Britain. But making revolution would be going too far. If it is not an awful bother, we would prefer to let our project simmer."

"If that is what you prefer, I will let the Ministry of Culture know," Comrade Chang said, grateful that another thankless chore was being deferred.

After Comrade Chang had replaced his telephone, his assistant came up to him. "I sent a chaser yesterday about the itinerary for the Shakespearian company. But there's still no confirmation. I fear they may be having second thoughts because of the current situation."

"Send them another signal. It may catch them before they leave work. We have to have a decision one way or the other."

"Yes," the assistant said and left for the Cypher Office.

Left to himself, Comrade Chang lit a cigarette, drew greedily upon it, and blew a cloud of smoke into the air. He then leaned his head against the tall back of his chair in a gesture of despair. The whole damn world was out of kilter, he thought. What was the point of continuing the charade of promoting art and culture when everything of artistic or historical value was being destroyed? What

was the point of anything when people were being beaten senseless and killed in orgies of violence?

How had things come to such a pass? At the beginning everything had seemed so simple. When the Communists swept into power they had vowed to establish a new society and to create a new Socialist man. Of course omelettes could not be made without breaking eggs. Traitors and enemies of the people had to be eliminated. Exploiters deserved what they got. If occasionally a mistake occurred, that was regrettable. But a revolution was not a tea party. The ends justified the means.

On that line of reasoning he had lent his energies to the creation of a brave new world. He joined the Communist Party. But as the blood flowed endlessly through one mass campaign after another, as friends and comrades disappeared in purges and power struggles, he realized that a great gulf lay between ideals and reality. By then it was too late. He discovered he had no power to alter his own destiny, let alone that of others. The only course open to him was to drift with the prevailing tide.

The trouble was that the prevailing tide in the Cultural Revolution was by no means clear. Everything was being turned upside down, inside out. The traditional organs of authority were disintegrating and different groups were struggling for power in the chaos. Whereas past campaigns had specific targets, the latest upheaval hit out at everything and everybody. Not even the history of the nation and the roots of its culture were being spared.

All that was old in the way of ideas, culture, customs and habits were under attack and in desperate attempts to save themselves wives were turning against husbands, children against parents, neighbours against neighbours and comrades against comrades. Heroes of the revolution became traitors and revisionists overnight and lifelong friends suddenly turned out to be deadly enemies.

From the vantage point of London, the Cultural Revolution seemed to

him to be something unreal and unbelievable, something too grotesque and ridiculous to be taken seriously. How could an entire nation be obsessed with chanting slogans and waving clenched fists? How could millions go around waving little red books of banal quotations as if they were magic talismans? It all had the makings of a horrible farce.

But farce or not, people were suffering and living in terror. He could sense the fear in the letters from his wife, as their sons rampaged around the country for a cause they could not even understand. He himself lived in dread that at any moment a telegram would arrive informing him that one or the other of them had given his life for the revolution.

He could not understand why the great heroes of the revolution were participating in the demented rituals. They were all patriots. Surely they could not want suffering and chaos to overtake the country. If so, why were they doing nothing to stop the madness? If they would speak out they would provide rallying points for the forces of sanity. Yet they were remaining silent or even collaborating with the perpetrators of disorder.

Even someone as respected as Premier Chou En-lai was behaving in such an uncharacteristic manner. What was the explanation? Was he turning a blind eye to truth because he was trapped in some sinister power struggle or was it simply the convenient thing to do to protect his own skin? If leaders found it impossible to live with personal integrity, who could blame a lowly cadre like himself?

Comrade Chang finished his cigarette and immediately lit another. Thank goodness for diplomatic privileges, he thought. Otherwise the cost of smoking would be prohibitive.

At that moment someone poked his head around the door and asked if he would care to have an early lunch in view of the protest in the afternoon. The invitation caused him to look at his watch and he was surprised at how quickly the morning had flown.

But he did not feel hungry. If there was anything he really wanted it was a breath of fresh air. So he declined the invitation, saying that he wanted to go for a walk instead. But even as he uttered the words he realized he had made a mistake. Some day he would be called to account for his refusal. In his world a man who preferred solitary walks to the company of his comrades was obviously a man not to be trusted.

He waited for a decent interval for his colleagues to disperse before he left the building himself. He stood indecisively outside for a moment. To his right lay the smart shops of Oxford Street and the merry mayhem of Carnaby Street. He was in no mood for crowds, however. So he turned left and headed for Regent's Park.

He strolled down the broad sweep of Portland Place and passed the fine stucco houses along the Outer Circle. On reaching the park his spirits became gradually soothed by the shady chestnuts and elms, by the old folks taking in the sun and by the sight of toddlers playing with their nannies near the boating pond. Everything conveyed an impression of stability and order, of things being right in the world.

What was the secret of the British, he wondered, which enabled them to live on their crowded island without blood-letting and turmoil? What was keeping everything in place? Was it the rigidities of their class system or their insufferable smugness or their exaggerated notions of their own importance? Or was it the lessons learnt from their writers and thinkers about the importance of the rule of law, the advantages of maintaining a marketplace for ideas and the habits of a truly human tradition?

Certainly the British were free to follow their prejudices. They could walk up to any news-stand and purchase publications which suited their politics. They could stand up at Hyde Park and preach revolution, ridicule religion and denounce the government of the day. If a latter-day Karl Marx were to turn up to attack the very basis of their society, they would probably still offer him the

facilities of the British Museum library to flesh out his arguments.

He could not conceive of very many nations showing such tolerance, certainly not any which purported to be Marxist in outlook. Perhaps that was the real British secret. They were a people so convinced that truth could not be worsted in any free and open encounter that they remained unbothered by eccentricity and unpopular ideas. It occurred to him on a sudden that Britain was the kind of place where people like him might find refuge.

The thought of defecting flashed across his mind. He could easily walk into the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and ask for political asylum. But what secrets would he have to trade? The itinerary of the Peking Opera Company? Or the membership of Miss Robinson's chamber music group? Those well-mannered Whitehall types would have difficulty keeping their faces straight. And what about his wife and children in Shanghai who served as hostages to his good behaviour? How could he bear to cause them any additional suffering? No, there was no escape.

Comrade Chang sighed and looked at his watch. The appointed hour was drawing near, so he headed back towards his office. It dawned on him that a man did not have to be locked up to become a prisoner. He was a prisoner of the system he served and the system was in place because at crucial moments in the past people like him had averted their eyes when evil was practised in the name of some high-sounding principle or some mindless orthodoxy.

No.49 Portland Place was now more of a prison for him than it ever was for Dr. Sun Yat-sen. At least Dr. Sun had hope. When Dr. Sun scribbled pleas for help and threw them out of the window wrapped around shillings and pennies or when he appealed to the Christian charity of the English servants to pass on messages, he had entertained an expectation of deliverance.

But he had no such hope. He had condoned evil things for too long and had tried to shed his own responsibility by hiding behind the decrees of the Party. All that remained for him now was to suffer the long midnight of madness

and self-disgust.

On reaching his office, Comrade Chang saw that journalists had gathered outside with television cameras. Inside, some of his colleagues were already assembling. He went quickly up to his office, took from his drawer the little red book of quotations by Chairman Mao and joined his colleagues.

At the appointed hour the Charge led them out into Portland Place in a body. The cameras clicked and whirled as they began their protest. When Comrade Chang shouted "Down with British Imperialism!" and the other slogans he had rehearsed, the hatred in his voice was real. But it was there not because the British police in Hong Kong had cracked a few Chinese skulls in suppressing anti-colonial demonstrations. It was there because the British had shown him a life that could never be his and because their writers had taught him to recognize what he had to become.

The Prisoner At Portland Place has appeared in **Short Story International** in the United States.