

## In a Yangchow Garden

by

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Peter Bonham heard the distant jangle of the German alarm clock in Mr. Lin's study and he knew the appointed hour had arrived for Mr. Lin to feed the goldfish. He set down the volume of Sung verse and made ready to watch the spectacle. Although the day was fine and warm, he nevertheless slipped on his blue blazer because Uncle George had impressed upon him the need for an Englishman to maintain appearances in the Orient.

His blazer, though tailored by a London outfitter of some renown, had seen service over several seasons and now hung rather shapelessly upon his narrow, sloping shoulders. One look at his own gangling image in the mirror was enough to confirm his long-held conviction that he could never become that captain of international commerce his Uncle George had declared to be his destiny. But if he had been convinced of that all along, then the acceptance of Uncle George's invitation to visit China to see opportunities for himself had to be disingenuous.

As Peter made his way through the courtyards connecting various parts of Mr. Lin's mansion, he wrestled with his feeling of guilt. The decent thing would be to make a clean breast of everything, to confess that his interest in China lay in another direction. Shocked though Uncle George might be by such a revelation, it would be the least he owed his uncle for his years of financial and moral support.

It had been money supplied by Uncle George which had

enabled him to go to Cambridge after his father died of malaria in Malacca, in service of the Crown. It had also been Uncle George, alone among all his relatives and friends, who had endorsed his decision to pursue Chinese studies. "It is a good move. Knowing a lingo and a country never does anybody any harm," Uncle George had written from Shanghai, on heavy bond paper under the letterhead of the British American Tobacco Company.

"Such knowledge would help you to exploit the vast opportunities in China. There are fortunes waiting to be made all over the East by men of enterprise and vision. Just take the tobacco business. Successful though I may be, can you imagine what fortunes can still be made if every Chinaman could be persuaded to smoke a packet a day?"

The trouble was that Peter had little interest in making fortunes or in persuading anyone to smoke a packet a day. The vast opportunities that Uncle George had alluded to all involved a price he was unwilling to pay.

He could not imagine himself leading a life tucked away in a foreign concession and treaty port, cut off from the mainstream of Chinese culture, finding solace in a sense of superiority simply because in times past one's country had committed successful aggressions against others. He could visualize the deadening routine of European exiles, drinking pink gins at sunset, dressing for dinner at pretentious clubs, going on home leave every few years and engaging in illicit affairs in the meantime to keep boredom at bay. Such a prospect was not what he wanted.

What he wanted was something totally different. He wanted the fulfilment of dreams. During his years at Cambridge he had become fascinated by Chinese civilization. He had been able to detect in the Chinese a certain mellowness and wistfulness which he found attractive. It was as if they had uncovered some deep buried secret and their whole approach to life had been coloured by it.

He could find this reflected in almost everything, in the ancient poems he had read on the banks of the Cam, in the obscure Taoist volumes he had delved into at the University Library, and in the misty landscapes he had admired in various museums. They seemed content to muse over the secret themselves, only conveying obscurely an essence in some sparse painting or a line of verse.

That secret was important to him because if he possessed it he could somehow come to terms with his own circumstances. He might then reconcile himself to a barren childhood spent in boarding schools, his physical want of appeal, the embarrassment of his impecunious state, and his utter lack of any future that suited his temperament.

Moreover, he had somehow to find accommodation with the nasty world that awaited him outside Cambridge. It was a world laid low by economic depression, stumbling ever deeper into decline under Stanley Baldwin. It was a world filled with the stench of drink and unwashed bodies, queues at the labour exchanges, peeling wallpaper and faded curtains, furtive wants and class-ridden prejudices. It was not a world for someone without patronage or connections and armed only with a degree in Chinese.

And unless he followed the mercantile path Uncle George had prepared for him, there would be no refuge for him from that world. It was a choice of evils. The very thought depressed him.

Peter passed through a moon gate leading into the courtyard outside Mr. Lin's study. The door was open but Mr. Lin was nowhere in sight. Peter told himself he would have to hurry or miss the feeding of the goldfish. It also occurred to him that if anyone could help him towards a deeper understanding of the Chinese it had to be Mr. Lin.

Mr. Lin was an unexpected find. He had never imagined Uncle George being acquainted with such a marvellous man. According to Uncle

George, Mr. Lin had been one of the first Chinese he met when he came to China as a young man engaged in the tea trade. Mr. Lin's family had been in the tea business for generations. They gradually became close business associates. When Mr. Lin finally sired a son after a succession of daughters, he had attended a banquet to celebrate the event and, during a moment of wild abandon induced by too much wine, he had agreed to become the boy's godfather.

Uncle George had seen much less of Mr. Lin since forsaking the tea trade in favour of the more lucrative one in tobacco. But an obligation was an obligation. He therefore played some role in finding suitable tutors in English for his godson and, when the boy became old enough for university, he had escorted him to England during one of his journeys on home leave. He had also helped him settle into the University of Liverpool from where the young man subsequently emerged as a qualified surgeon.

"Lin's an amusing old bird," Uncle George had declared over port one evening at his club in Shanghai. "Full of all kinds of titbits about Chinese lore and customs. Not exactly my cup of tea, mind you. When he heard I had a nephew studying Chinese and coming this way, he insisted on offering hospitality. He has a magnificent house in Yangchow. I thought you might enjoy seeing how the better class of natives live. I accepted on your behalf. Son's practising somewhere up north, I think. Lin's not really cut out to be a businessman. Too soft and too much culture. Takes more interest in his garden than his business, I'm afraid."

Then, after a pause and apropos nothing in particular, Uncle George had added: "You ought to get some sun, dear boy. You look awfully pale."

Pale he certainly was, with his pale straw-coloured hair, pale grey eyes and pale freckled skin. His whole appearance was that of a man

etiolated and in desperate need for colour. He had long wished he could project a more distinguished presence but fate had decided otherwise. It had decreed that his eyes should be shy and apologetic, his nose nondescript and his chin hopelessly irresolute. It had given him a face incapable of appearing superior or attractive. It was a face which belonged more appropriately to a post office clerk or a provincial librarian.

At last Peter came to a doorway constructed in the shape of a cherry blossom. Two Chinese characters were inscribed above the doorway. They meant "To Seek the Mysterious". Although he knew full well what awaited him inside the garden, he always felt a thrill upon approaching one of its several entrances. He knew that within the garden there lurked that elusive Chinese quality he had been trying so hard to understand. As he passed across the threshold he felt that same sense of transition he had experienced on previous occasions, as if he were passing from one world into another.

The garden occupied some three acres of ground around the mansion. It was reputed to be among the best of the private gardens for which Yangchow was famous. Its layout was totally different from that of European gardens he had known. It presented no impression of order or symmetry, no sweeping views or grand vistas. Instead it was a diffusion of crooked walks and rhythmic curves which wound around secluded nooks and marvels of landscaping. At every turn, he could enjoy a scene which reflected the simple harmony of natural things, be it in a gnarled old cypress next to a pavilion, a single chrysanthemum framed symbolically in a window or the frozen poetry of a rockery made up of eroded stones dredged up from the bottom of Lake Tai.

Peter saw Mr. Lin at a distance, standing on the humpbacked bridge spanning the narrowest part of the gourd-shaped goldfish pond. A path lined with weeping willows ran along the far side of the pond and

disappeared behind an arrangement of rocks from which a waterfall cascaded into the pond, filling the air with the gentle sound of running water. Peter quickened his steps to join Mr. Lin on the bridge.

Mr. Lin was a slim, bony man with a high clear brow topped with unruly black hair. By contrast his beard was sparse and scraggy. He was one of those orientals whose age always seemed to confound occidentals, for he could be anywhere between fifty and seventy. He was dressed in a loose fitting Chinese suit of beige silk and a pair of traditional black cloth shoes. The wide sleeves of the jacket had been rolled back for ease of performing the task at hand. He was gazing into the pond, holding a bowl of goldfish feed in his left hand and making ready to sprinkle the food into the pond with the other.

"Upon the bridge the livelong day, I stand and watch the goldfish play," Peter declaimed in Chinese by way of a greeting.

"Ah! You are familiar with Su Shih," Mr. Lin said, in a voice that was surprisingly deep and strong. "You are indeed a scholar."

"It is but a chance acquaintance with a vast literature," Peter said, with that formalized modesty so much favoured by the Chinese literati.

"I had hoped you would come, so I held up the feeding."

"You are most considerate. But please do not let the goldfish go hungry on my account."

The goldfish were already gathering beneath the stone bridge, eager for their daily meal. As Mr. Lin sprinkled the feed onto the water the goldfish thrashed about in a desperate struggle to gobble it down.

Peter watched the different varieties of goldfish jostling one another, the larger giving no quarter to the smaller, their gaping mouths working voraciously to swallow as quickly as possible. He marvelled at the different colours and shapes that the common carp could be bred into.

Many of the fish, shimmering in the sunlight, were not gold at all but boasted hues ranging from near white and pastel orange to silver and startling black. Some retained the original shape of carps but others had foreshortened bodies with enormous fan tails and huge bulging eyes.

In five minutes Mr. Lin had emptied his bowl. The two men continued to watch in silence as the goldfish became more subdued after their meal.

Then Mr. Lin spoke. "You know, I'm often amazed by certain resemblances between of goldfish and human beings. Both are far too greedy for their own good. The digestive system of goldfish is very delicate, and yet, if you let them have their way, they will eat themselves to death. That is why goldfish should be fed only once a day, at a regular time, and only with as much food as they can consume in about five minutes. They are also quite atavistic. It takes centuries to breed their gorgeous colours and their other features but once they escape into the wild their descendants revert to being common carps in a very short time. Are human beings not the same? Centuries of civilization have not really done away with our more disagreeable traits but have merely hidden them beneath a veneer of manners."

Mr. Lin's statements caused Peter to reflect momentarily upon the periodic outbursts of greed, bigotry and violence in humankind. It seemed as if the passage of the millennia had indeed left human beings as brutish and unenlightened as during the darkest ages. Mankind had moved from the savagery of the Punic Wars to the savagery of trench warfare, from feeding Christians to the lions to hunting fellow men for the slave trade. There had been the occasional voice in the wilderness, to be sure, but the carnage going on in Abyssinia and the Jew-baiting in Germany left no illusion about the bleakness of the human condition.

"Yes," he said, "it is sadly true that given the slightest

opportunity we will reveal ourselves for the brutes we are. Is that inherent in our nature or is mankind capable of change?"

"I don't know," Mr. Lin said. "All I know is that it isn't easy for people to change. I suppose each of us must try to find our own peace somehow. Would you care to stroll with me for a while?"

"Certainly."

Mr. Lin set down the empty bowl on the wide stone balustrade of the bridge and the two men descended the bridge together without further ado. Several paths branched out from the foot of the bridge. One led up a hillock with an open pavilion called "The Pavilion for Admiring the Moon". Another led into a magnificent rockery. A third skirted the rockery towards a bamboo grove growing next to a whitewashed garden wall. But the two men selected none of these. Instead they followed the path lined with weeping willows.

After a while, the serenity of the garden worked its magic on Peter and dispelled his dark thoughts. Perhaps the garden represented the means by which his host found his peace, he thought. If he had a similarly delightful refuge it would be the answer to his fondest longings.

He was glad he had come to China. Although the chance of his ever living Mr. Lin's kind of life was beyond his means, he had at least confirmed that the refined and contemplative life had a basis in reality. So thinking, he said: "I shall never be able to thank you enough for inviting me into your home and allowing me to share the pleasures of your garden."

"You are welcome in this humble dwelling at all times, Mr. Bonham. As you can see, my life is very simple and I have much enjoyed your company these last two weeks," Mr. Lin replied.

"I too have enjoyed yours and much regret that we shall have no further opportunity to meet. I'll be going back to England soon."

"But I thought you are to join your uncle here in the tobacco

business. Is that not so?"

"I don't think I am meant to be a commercial man. It's best that I go home."

"What will you do there?"

"I don't know. It's not the best of times in England."

"I assume you will be able to put your knowledge of Chinese to good use."

"That would be my aim but I am not hopeful. No one in England is much interested in things Chinese. The most I could hope for is a job as a schoolmaster."

The two men walked in silence for a while and then Mr. Lin said: "Tell me, Mr. Bonham, if there is scant interest in China in your country, whatever led you to study Chinese?"

Peter gave a timid laugh. "To tell the truth, I rather stumbled into it," he said. "You see, my father was in the Colonial Service. When I was eight years' old, he was posted to Ceylon, so my parents left me in a boarding school. You have no idea how depressing boarding schools can be in England. At the time I felt . . . well, sort of abandoned. To make matters worse, I did not fit in well at the school. I was constantly bullied by teachers and students alike. I knew there was no hope of getting away but I thought that if I could distinguish myself in something the bullying would stop.

"Unfortunately, I was pretty hopeless at all the things in which English boys traditionally make their mark, like games and sports, the school choir, the debating society and the like. Neither did I have leadership qualities or academic brilliance to compensate for my weaknesses.

"So I languished at one boarding school after another for seven years, feeling more miserable with every passing day. Then, one day, I

read a book about Marco Polo and the account of his adventures gave me an idea. It occurred to me that if one talked about things that no one else knew anything about one could easily claim to be an expert.

"I tested my theory. I constructed some hieroglyphics, and asserted they were Chinese characters I had learnt from my parents working in the Orient. Everybody believed me. Everything went swimmingly until a Chinese boy of about my age came to the school.

"The Chinese boy was put into a room with me because I was supposed to know Chinese. He was from Canton. It soon became apparent to him I was a fake. But he was a great sport and had a fine sense of mischief. After I had explained why I had pretended to know Chinese, he was more than happy to go along with my deception. He not only told me about life in China but actually started teaching me some Chinese.

"Once I got into it I found what he taught me so intriguing that I kept wanting to know more. I started reading up everything about Chinese civilization I could lay my hands on and by the time I was ready for university I could not conceive of my studying anything except Chinese."

After Peter had finished his narrative, he felt slightly surprised at himself. It was uncharacteristic of him to unburden himself to anyone, let alone to an Oriental of another generation. Yet, he felt entirely relaxed about relating the origins of his Chinese studies to Mr. Lin. Somehow he felt Mr. Lin would understand in a way that his own relatives never would.

"What a delightful story," Mr. Lin said. "And where is your friend now?"

"He is still in England, studying to become a chemical engineer."

By then their stroll had taken them outside a small kiosk containing a stone table and two stone seats, one on either side of the table.

A Chinese chessboard had been engraved upon the table. The kiosk had an open doorway flanked by large, intricately latticed windows. Stone benches had been affixed against the wall beneath each window. Upon the wall facing the door hung a set of calligraphy carved on two pieces of wood.

The kiosk nestled against a section of the garden wall overgrown with ivy and wistaria vines, so that on first impression it appeared to be built against the side of a secluded mountain. Nearby, some twisted old pines conveyed an air of grave dignity and heightened the impression of remoteness and peace.

"There is so much that I love in your garden," Peter said. "Sometimes I wish I were born a Chinese so that I can understand more fully the different aspects of your civilization and culture."

"Being Chinese does not necessarily come with birth," Mr. Lin said. "Historically, the state of being Chinese was one of culture rather than of race. The old test of Chineseness was whether a person behaved in a Chinese manner, whether he observed Chinese traditions and customs, and so on. We have been successful in turning most of our conquerors into Chinese. The Manchus were a case in point. Marco Polo, the man who inspired you into your marvellous deception, was regarded by many as a Chinese."

"Then there may be hope for me yet, because at times I feel more comfortable with Chinese ways than with the English ones."

"I'm sure you would make an admirable Chinese. Incidentally, I suppose you're aware that Marco Polo was a Governor of Yangchow for three years. Yangchow was for a long time quite an illustrious place, filled with poets, artists and writers. There used to be a saying to the effect that of all the men of learning in the land, half could be found in Yangchow. But things are different now."

"From what I have seen of your town, it's still a very cultured place," Peter said.

"Perhaps. But the tempo's not the same any more and what people want is different. Nobody has the time or the inclination to create beautiful things. Take this garden. Do you realize it has taken more than four hundred years to get it into its present state? It was started by a retired mandarin. He built a house and called it 'The Retreat of the Recluse'. Then he spent the rest of his life working in this garden. My ancestors acquired this property about two hundred years ago and it has been in our family ever since.

"Do you see that pine tree over there? My father helped me plant that fifty years ago and he taught me how to train it to grow into its present shape. I have spent forty years at it. Isn't it a lovely old tree? It has all the grace and integrity of a wise old man. It's a joy to contemplate and looking at it takes our minds off to another realm. The curious thing about a garden like this is that the work can never be completed. There's always something to refine or re-arrange. Sometimes I dread to think what will happen to it after I'm gone."

"Surely your son will want to maintain it!" Peter said.

Mr. Lin gave a slight shrug of his shoulders and his slanted eyes took on a faraway look. "Perhaps," he said. "Each generation develops its own passions. One cannot always expect one's offsprings to follow one's footsteps. Nothing lasts forever. The moon perfects itself only to wane."

"I cannot imagine anyone not being taken by this garden. Your son must surely appreciate it as much as we do. My Uncle George told me he is practising in the north. Is he still there?"

"No, Ming has just returned home."

"Oh, then can it be that I have seen him already? I recently saw

a man walking in this garden but we never got close enough to exchange conversation. Could that be Ming? If so, I would very much like to make his acquaintance before I leave."

"I will see what can be arranged. In spite of living under the same roof, Ming is not an easy person to get hold of."

What Peter did not say to Mr. Lin was that the man he had seen had been less than friendly. He recalled the dark piercing eyes and the contemptuous look. The man's dress and carriage did not appear to be that of a servant or a gardener. Yet it seemed strange that the man should disappear so quickly among the trees and hedges every time he approached.

Once or twice Peter had waved his hand or called out a greeting but that had only caused an even hastier retreat. If that stranger was none other than Mr. Lin's son, his behaviour was inexplicable. Peter wondered whether his presence in the Lin household had somehow caused offence. But he did not know how to broach the matter with Mr. Lin.

The two men continued strolling in silence till they came to a lotus pond. Jutting right out into the pond was one of the reception rooms of the mansion. It was built on a stone platform fashioned like the prow of a ship. The platform was surrounded on three sides by the pond and its profusion of lotus blossoms. The back of the reception room abutted the house and had access to the garden through a covered walkway.

"Let us take some tea," Mr. Lin said, as he led the way into the reception room. The front of the reception room was open, commanding a foreground of lotus blossoms and a pleasing view of a part of the garden. The layout of the room, with its solid blackwood furniture inlaid with marble, conveyed in contrast an atmosphere of formality.

It was the same room in which Mr. Lin had initially received Peter with elaborate oriental courtesy and from which the young man had gained his first impression of the garden. The Pavilion for Admiring the

Moon could be seen in the far distance and Peter could now identify some of his favourite spot in the garden by the cypresses, pines, elms, red maples and other vegetation which grew in their vicinity. It was also the room in which Mr. Lin had introduced Peter to the first of many delightful Chinese refinements.

Peter remembered that after some preliminary conversations and enquiries into the well-being of his Uncle George, Mr. Lin had said: "I shall prepare a treat for you to-morrow morning." In so saying, he had placed a small sachet of tea into a lotus blossom growing next to the platform. The following morning, Mr. Lin brewed him a cup of tea suffused with the fragrance of the lotus.

Recalling the experience, Peter said: "I shall never forget the wonderful cup of tea you prepared for me the morning after my arrival."

Mr. Lin chuckled softly. "It was but a small trick I learnt from the ancients," he said.

The two men sipped their tea and gazed in silence upon the lengthening shadows in the garden caused by the westering sun. Now and then the chirping of birds could be heard or a butterfly would flutter into view.

After a while, Peter said: "I shall really miss your garden when I leave. We English have our little back gardens but they are nothing like this. There is something very intimate and Chinese here. The garden exudes a certain spirit of harmony and continuity that I find very appealing, though I cannot for the life of me identify the elements which go towards producing it. It comes not just from the landscaping or the ways that plants and trees have been trained to grow. It comes from something I can feel but cannot describe. Can you explain what it is?"

Mr. Lin smiled. "How can I explain the inexplicable? You feel, and that must be the beginning of understanding. Perhaps you are

trying too hard to understand with the mind. The mind can sometimes be an enemy to understanding. How can the mind ever understand why we are Confucians in our homes and Taoists in our gardens?"

"Is that why Ch'an Buddhists always try to seek enlightenment by defeating the mind with impossible conundrums?"

"Possibly. What passes for reality cannot always be identified. Take this garden. You've strolled in it for the last two weeks and you think you know it reasonably well. But if you were to see it again in the autumn or the winter its character would be entirely different. It's quite different by day and by night. It's different again when there's moonlight and when there's none. So which is the real garden?"

"Now that you've mentioned it, I have never ventured in it at night."

"Then you must. Allow me to show you some of its delights. There will be a full moon tonight. Let us meet later in the Pavilion for Admiring the Moon. In the meantime, let us make ready for dinner."

With that the two men took their leave of each other and returned to their respective quarters.

That evening, when Peter got to the pavilion, he found Mr. Lin already waiting for him. Servants had prepared a fine Chinese wine and some tidbits of food. The moon was bright and only a few wisps of clouds floated in the sky. But the appearance of the garden had definitely been transformed by moonlight. The pale light falling upon the hedges and the winding pathways made them appear as if they were covered with hoarfrost, though the air remained filled with the whispering fragrances of summer. The rock arrangements, too, loomed like frost-speckled shades among the deep purple shadows of the trees.

Mr. Lin poured the wine and they drank several toasts to each other. The wine was a heady one and they soon became mellow.

"You are quite right," Peter said, as he looked at the bright reflection of the moon in the goldfish pond and listened to the gentle play of the fountain. "The garden takes on an entirely different aspect at night. I don't know why it never occurred to me to visit this garden at night before."

"When I was your age, I had a fine group of friends," Mr. Lin reminisced. "We used to gather at this pavilion on nights like this and have a merry time drinking and composing poems. We used to boast that we could compose better drunk than lesser mortals could sober. But most have passed on or gone I know not where. Whenever I think of them I cannot help recalling some of the lines they have written in this pavilion."

Mr. Lin sighed, and added: "Su Tung-po was correct when he wrote that all things are like spring dreams, passing without trace."

"But that is not quite true. Your friends have left you some of their poems."

Mr. Lin laughed. "Yes, let us drink to the memory of absent friends."

The two men drank steadily and got into a discussion on the merits of various Chinese poets noted for their verse and as well as for their drinking. Servants came and went at regular intervals to replenish the wine. After an hour or so, Mr. Lin suggested a stroll and the two made their way unsteadily down one of the paths leading from the pavilion. When they reached the rockery, Mr. Lin asked: "Have you seen my bamboo grove, the one next to the garden wall behind the rockery?"

"Certainly," Peter replied.

"But you have not seen it in moonlight," Mr. Lin said. "I suggest you have a look, Mr. Bonham."

Mr. Lin took Peter by the arm as he led him past the rockery. When they had reached a point a little way from the grove, he stopped and

said: "Now look at the grove from here, and tell me what you see."

Peter looked at the slender stalks, gently swaying in the evening breeze. The grove seemed to be denser and larger than he had remembered. This puzzled him for a moment until he realized that the moonlight was casting shadows of the bamboo stalks upon the garden wall behind. The intermingling of the stalks with their shadows had created the illusion the grove was denser than it was in reality.

"The bamboos and their shadows are merged!" Peter cried in triumph. "That is why the grove looks different."

"Very good! But can you tell, Mr. Bonham, where reality ends and where illusion begins?"

Peter studied the grove further. The bamboos appeared like a moving ink painting, with stalks in varying shades of black and grey. But try as he might he could not easily distinguish between the shadows and the substance. "I must confess you have me. It's not at all easy to tell," he said.

Mr. Lin laughed again. "That is another trick I have learnt from the ancients," he said. "If you want to tease the senses in moonlight with a problem like this then you must whitewash your garden wall and plant your bamboos at least a foot away from it."

While they were contemplating the bamboo grove, Peter felt a vague presence behind him. He turned and saw the face of the stranger with the dark eyes peering at him through one of the crevices in the rock arrangements.

"Come and join us in our fun," he called, with a boldness brought on by the wine. But the face disappeared at once.

Peter's call caused Mr. Lin to turn around also. "What is it?" he asked.

"There is someone in the rockery. I think it's your son."

"My son? But I don't see anyone."

"He was there, I tell you. I saw him."

"Let's find him then," Mr. Lin said, leading the way and calling: "Ming! Ming!" as he went.

They entered the rockery and wound their way along its crooked paths and among the gaunt and eerie stones. But not a soul could be seen. Neither was there any response to Mr. Lin's calls.

"Maybe you only saw a playful garden spirit. Or maybe it was just another illusion," Mr. Lin said, good-naturedly, taking Peter gently by the arm. "Let's go back to the pavilion. Another cup of wine would do both of us a world of good."

Peter allowed himself to be led back to the pavilion, where the two men continued to drink until the small hours. But Peter began nursing a resentment against the elusive stranger, both for his disappearing tricks and for disturbing his enjoyment of the garden.

The next day, although suffering from the aftermath of too much wine, Peter nevertheless roamed the garden in the hope of finding the stranger. He wanted to establish if he was indeed Ming. He wanted to demand the reason for his behaviour. But the man was nowhere to be found.

By the end of the day, Peter had become so obsessed with the stranger that he had made up his mind to devote the few remaining days of his visit to tracking him down. He found an ideal look-out in the chess kiosk. He discovered he could maintain surveillance on three paths leading up to the kiosk by hiding behind one of its latticed windows and, unless someone actually entered the kiosk, he could remain virtually undetected by anyone passing by. Having chosen his vantage point, he sat there for the next two days. But all he saw were some gardeners going about their work and Mr. Lin taking his customary strolls.

Peter dozed off from the sheer boredom of his vigil late during the afternoon of the third day. He suddenly woke to the sound of someone reciting in English. He listened attentively and heard a clear, manly voice declaiming:

"Action is transitory - a step, a blow,  
The motion of a muscle - this way or that -  
Tis done, and in the after-vacancy  
We wonder at ourselves like men betrayed:  
Suffering is permanent, obscure and dark,  
And shares the nature of infinity."

Peter peered quickly through the lattice-work and saw his quarry ambling towards him. The man was smartly dressed in a Chinese suit of pale blue silk and his hands appeared to be clasped together in front of him, in the Chinese fashion, completely hidden within the folds of broad sleeves. He was dark, sturdy and of medium build. His piercing eyes gazed out of a face that just missed being handsome and he walked with such an impressive air of confidence that Peter could not help envying it.

When the man had almost reached the entrance of the kiosk, Peter jumped out and confronted him. "May I presume that I am addressing Master Ming?" he said, in Chinese, as he had got into the habit of doing in recent weeks.

The man showed no surprise but made a slight, resigned movement of his head to indicate that the presumption was correct.

"I'm Peter Bonham," Peter said, extending his right hand in greeting. But Ming bowed instead and Peter withdrew his hand and bowed also.

"I never imagined I would encounter Wordsworth being recited in a garden in Yangchow," Peter continued.

"Nor I a Chinese-speaking Englishman," Ming replied in

English, flashing a bemused, sardonic smile.

"The Borderers is not one of Wordsworth's better appreciated poems," Peter observed, also now reverting to English.

"Yes, I know, but it suits my present mood."

"Would I be intruding if I were to stroll with you?"

"Please do. There's room enough for both of us in this garden.

I was rather surprised on my return to discover my father had invited an Englishman as a house guest. I hope we are taking good care of you."

"Marvellously!"

The two men walked side by side for several paces, in the direction of the goldfish pond. Then Peter broke the silence. "I want to apologize if my presence in this household has caused offence," he said.

"You are a guest in this house. How can you cause offence?"

"Then why have you been avoiding me?"

Ming did not answer right away. He turned his head to look at Peter without breaking stride. He looked into Peter's pale eyes and his freckled English face and he broke into another of his sardonic smiles.

"Because I did not want to disturb your illusions."

"My illusions?"

"Yes. Everybody who has anything to do with China ends up with illusions. Marco Polo, the Jesuits, the opium traders, your Uncle George, and you. You're all the same. You only see what you want to see and believe what you want to believe. Well, judging from what my father has told me, your illusions seem harmless enough and I see no reason why you should not carry them home with you if you find them comforting. That's why I've been avoiding you. But I see there's no escaping you now."

"Just what kind of illusions am I supposed to be harbouring?"

"The most starry-eyed kind. You are one of those romantic Sinophiles who first learn about China only in terms of its literature, its art

and its culture. You then build in your mind an image of a land of just rulers, dutiful children, eccentric scholars, and wordsmiths who could dash off a couplet at the drop of a wine cup. Soon you begin longing for it as a society infinitely more attractive than your own. When you finally get here and meet someone like my father, a man who spends his time messing around his garden and musing about life, your wildest imaginings are confirmed. You have found your ideal Chinese gentleman living in an ideal world."

Peter smiled indulgently, enormously amused by the supposition that a Cambridge graduate could be sent into the world harbouring illusions in his chosen field of studies.

"Well, I must confess that meeting your father and enjoying his garden have been the best things that have happened to me in China," he said. "It seems your father is continuing a great tradition. Just imagine, for four hundred years successive generations have by choice spent their lives enhancing the beauty of this garden. Together they've made it possible for us to enjoy something quite unique. In most countries a garden of such antiquity would be a national monument. Perhaps even more than that. It would be a treasure for the entire world. When I am in here, I get a wonderful sense of peace and contentment, as if I were in touch with some deep truths. Don't you get that feeling?"

"No, I feel only anger. A garden like this does not fit in with the world in which we live. We cannot afford it. It is unreal. I have said as much to my father. The best thing anyone could do would be to destroy this garden, stone by stone, tree by tree."

"I can hardly believe what you are saying! How can anyone want to destroy such a thing of beauty?"

"Because this garden is an illusion, an escape from reality for people like my father. It prevents them recognizing the dirt, the poverty,

the diseases and the great evils that constitute the the reality outside its walls."

"I concede that the world is not a perfect place. There are some horrid things going on. That fellow Hitler is stirring up a lot of hatred, for example. But the Germans are at bottom a civilized nation. They're not going to go completely off the deep end. It's just politics. It will pass. There are, of course, a lot of problems in China itself. Poverty, hunger, disease, drug addiction, unequal treaties and so on. But just because there are problems does not mean one cannot appreciate beautiful things."

Peter paused for a moment. He had never been so open with his pontifications. Nonetheless, he continued.

"On the whole I think there's cause for optimism. Things are improving. The opium trade is being curbed, feudal attitudes are changing, imperialism is less rampant and the days of Western domination in Asia have to be numbered. China, with its ancient culture, its humane and individualistic traditions, is not a likely place for great evil to take root. So I do not see the need to destroy things of beauty just to shock people into thinking that great evil threatens the land."

By then the two men had reached the goldfish pond. They continued to walk beside it, following the path lined with weeping willows towards the bridge. Neither of them spoke for a while and then Ming said: "What do you know about our northeastern provinces, that area Westerners refer to as Manchuria?"

"Not much, apart from what can be found in history books. I know the Japanese and the Russians both covet it. The Japanese grabbed it a few years back and set up the former emperor, Pu Yi, as its puppet ruler. It was naked aggression, of course, and at the time a few crocodile tears were shed by the rest of the world. But now everybody seems to regard it as a problem that China and Japan will have to sort out themselves."

"Yes, China is a far corner of the earth and the rest of the world is not much interested if it is dismembered and its people murdered. That is why the great newspapers of the world have hardly bothered to send their correspondents here. That may be just as well. Ignorance of what's going on at least has the advantage of allowing the rest of the world to go to bed with an easier conscience. Let me show you what they do to people in the occupied provinces. Up there they do things like this to doctors who try to help the injured."

Ming stopped suddenly and lifted his arms above his head. The broad sleeves of his jacket fell back to reveal two handless stumps.

Peter let out a gasp and recoiled in horror. "Oh! I'm sorry," he stammered.

Ming lowered his arms and a quick flick of his sleeves covered the stumps again. "You're sorry, my father is sorry, the whole damn world is sorry! But what is anyone going to do about it? Write a letter to the Times? Utter a few more platitudes before the League of Nations? Is this the sort of thing that gives you cause for optimism?" His voice was heavy with irony.

"I don't know what to say," Peter murmured. "How can such a terrible thing happen?"

"Much worse things than this are happening to people up there. Up there, suffering is indeed permanent, obscure and dark. Do you realize that the Japanese are using human beings as guinea-pigs in medical experiments? They are being injected with the germs of typhus, cholera and plague so that those diseases can be studied. People are being frozen to death to monitor human reaction to cold. They are being dissected without anaesthesia to test the human tolerance to pain. Sometimes they are even used as living targets to measure the effectiveness of hand grenades and other weapons of destruction. Such activities, of course, are being carried

out in great secrecy but when too many people start disappearing mysteriously the truth has a way of coming out.

"Not surprisingly, such atrocities have met with resistance. People have formed guerrilla units to fight such oppression. I wasn't a fighter myself. My misfortune was that I treated some wounded resistance fighters. When the Japanese discovered I was a surgeon, they simply cut off my hands."

Peter felt faint and weak. As they were standing by the foot of the stone bridge, he reached out for the balustrade to steady himself. "I can hardly believe what you are telling me! How can such barbaric behaviour occur in the twentieth century?"

"Atrocities can occur in any century, whenever people become indifferent to the suffering of others, whenever they place beyond their concern evil deeds done to strangers in far off places. We share a common humanity and suffering anywhere diminishes all of us. The world has forgotten some of the painful lessons from the past and I fear what's happening in the north, in Germany, in Africa, are only a foretaste of horrors to come. There is, unfortunately, not enough courage or humanity around to save us from the destiny that awaits us all."

Ming paused for a moment and then added in a gentler tone of voice: "I'm sorry if I've spoilt your visit by behaving in such a shocking manner. Please forgive me. China isn't all culture and refinement. It also has its share of absurdities. It's absurd, isn't it, that in one part of the country people can admire bamboos in the moonlight without a care while in another part people are being done to death in the most abominable manner? I suppose much of life is coping with absurdities. After all, I too have become an absurdity. I am a surgeon with no hands!"

Ming let out a bitter laugh, turned, and walked abruptly down one of the garden paths.

Peter stood rooted to the spot, covered in confusion, watching helplessly as Ming disappeared from view. After a while he walked slowly onto the bridge. As he did so he became filled with an infinite sadness. In the failing light, to the soothing sound of water cascading into the goldfish pond, the garden appeared to him as he had seen it many times before but somehow the previous sense of peace and serenity had been destroyed.

He gazed into the dark waters of the pond and saw goldfish swimming around indolently. He thought of what Mr. Lin had told him about the ease with which their descendants could revert to being common carp again. Was that the destiny that awaited mankind? He had once dreamed of a tranquil, civilized world in which he could find his repose and for one brief, trembling moment he thought he had found it in a garden in Yangchow. Now, having been shown a glimpse of another type of world, he felt his dreams crumbling all around him.

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