

Triumph

Edward McNulty

THE man sat alone with his head bowed, in the cell reserved for those condemned to death for political crimes. A guard walked by, stopped, and cast him a stupid, uncomprehending look. He shook his head and walked on. This one was different; he had seen men before condemned by the state—in fact every day some non-conformist faced the firing squad—but they had all been wild-eyed, bomb-throwing idealists and revolutionists. Not that this man was not an idealist—on the contrary; but there was something unnerving about his calm, unassuming manner. Why, if one had not been educated and disciplined against such temptations by the state, one could easily be captivated by this man and even subscribe to his dangerous anarchic doctrines. The guard's thoughts trailed off as he saluted the Secretary of Education and the Secretary of Internal Order, who were passing by.

The two officials stopped, ordered one of the many guards to open the cell door, and entered. The prisoner was praying, an act which was frowned upon by the state. He continued for several minutes more, disregarding the two impatient officials. He then looked up and smiled. "What is it that you want?"

The Secretary of Internal Order scowled defensively; he did not know how to handle this man who had every reason to hate him and yet did not. "We ourselves have come to give you one last chance to recant," he said. "The state bears you no ill will; it does not wish to destroy you. Retract your statements and ideas publicly, and you will be pardoned. The President himself assures me of this."

The prisoner shook his head and replied, "The state does not possess the power to destroy me—or my ideas; only God has that power. And I can no more stifle my conscience and do as you say than I can consciously stop my heart from beating. When I began to spread my convictions, I realized that I might be called upon to pay the supreme price for those same convictions, but I could follow no other course. I have fulfilled my purpose and am ready to face death. Many times in the past when darkness seemed to be prevailing, a small spark rekindled the torch."

"And you believe yourself to be that spark?" the Secretary of Education scornfully queried. "Come now, listen to reason."

"Reason? What reason? The reason that commands you to say black is white and white is black? The reason that teaches the doctrine of conformity, of unquestioning submission to an authority which every faculty of your mind tells you is decadent and repressive? The reason that divides men into classes and races, draws a line and says, 'This is your group which the State has chosen for you.

Do not question the decision or try to step beyond the boundary'? The reason which retards the progress of mankind by placing him on a level equal to or below that of cattle? Because I am a rational, thinking being, I could never listen to what you call 'reason'!"

The Secretary of Education smarted under this retort as if he had been slapped. He knew that the man—confound him—had directed his retort at him. As head of the Bureau of Education, it was his job to issue and spread the government propaganda and see that the people followed it.

He hastily replied, unconsciously imitating his adversary, "Rational? Do you call it rational to stubbornly refuse to conform—to throw your life away for nothing?"

The prisoner stood up and looked down—he was over six feet tall—at the Secretary. "But am I throwing my life away? I think not, and I believe that you feel the same way. Otherwise you would not be here. The State—that mighty, impregnable state—is worried!" He paused a moment for the two men to absorb his words. Seeing the effect on the officials, he knew that he was right and continued, "The people are stirred up. They no longer swallow your propaganda or follow your orders as unquestioningly as they once did. If you will pardon my using a rather antiquated phrase, you have seen 'the handwriting on the wall' and realize that the days of the present order are numbered."

"You are implying that the masses will revolt and seize control of the government? You seem to forget that we control the army."

"Since you have read my writings, you know better than that. I have unleashed a force far more powerful and deeply rooted than your violence, than all your guns or cobalt bombs—love, the basis of Christianity. Because the people have at last begun to grasp it and its implications, they will not overthrow your tyranny by force. Our method is far more effective and constructive. It has been called many things—passive resistance, non-cooperation. Gandhi called it 'soul force'; psychologists have called it 'mental jiu jitsu'; Christ called it 'love.' It has been used many times. The early Christians triumphed because of it; India gained her independence through it; the labor unions of the early and mid twentieth century used it in a changed and modified form. They called it a strike. No, we will not use violence, yet our triumph will be complete."

"You overlook the fact that there are over sixteen million trained and well equipped men in the army ready to put an end to your 'glorious movement.'"

"True, you have sixteen million trained men, but for what are they trained? War and violence! Your entire indoctrination process conditions the men against an enemy who fights back in the same manner as they do—violence. What will your men do when they come up against an enemy who will not return violence for violence? They will be completely confused; faced with an entirely new situa-

tion for which they have not been prepared, they will turn to their superiors, who will be just as confused. You can shoot a large number of the people, but you cannot shoot all of them. Sixteen million men, trained only for killing, cannot run a nation which is normally run by almost a billion people. Where would the government be if a majority or even a fourth of the people stopped working in the factories, in the fields, in the transportation and communication networks, in the laboratories? As I said before, you can try to drown the movement in a sea of blood, but for every non-conformist you shoot, a dozen or more will desert your side and take his place. This will be different from the mass murders of the Second and Third World Wars. Then the militarists could justify their actions by the fact that their victims hated them and would do the same thing if their positions were reversed. But it is hard to shoot a man who bears you no ill will—indeed, who loves and pities you—and, while awaiting death, prays for you. Even your most efficient propagandists will find it impossible to convince your soldiers that it is just to kill such people. Before long they will start thinking, and then the state will fall, since tyranny cannot maintain itself when its tools are able to think and judge its doctrines and practices.”

The Secretary of Internal Order turned to the Captain of the Guard, who stood just outside the cell, and said, “It is useless to reason with this fanatic. Proceed with your execution orders!” He looked at the prisoner to see what effect his orders had on him and immediately regretted it.

With an expression full of pity and forgiveness on his face, the condemned man said, “When the Master was on the cross, he forgave those who inflicted on him a far more horrible death than the one to which I am going. I can do no less. May God go with you.”

The Secretary of Internal Order turned and hurried from the cell; he did not want his subordinates to see the effect the man had on him. Blast him! It did not seem human to forgive the man who had just sentenced you to death. It just was not done—and yet this man had done it!

A moment later the Secretary of Education caught up with him. Both men walked down the corridor in silence. They left the cell block and came to the guards’ recreation room, where light from several windows broke the dismal prison gloom. The Secretary of Internal Order stopped at one of the windows and looked out. Several stories below was the plaza, where a machine gun squad was setting up its weapon. Twenty yards away stood a stone wall, its surface scarred and stained a brownish color. A huge crowd had gathered; it covered every square inch of ground except that within the plaza itself where a cordon of armed Security Policemen stood guard. The Secretary noticed immediately that this crowd was different from any that he had ever seen. There was no pushing or jostling, no gossiping or shouting—only silence and an expectant

waiting. For the first time in his life the Secretary felt akin to them; he wanted to rush down and join them. A yearning to be free and follow the ideals of the man—the fanatic as he had called him—arose in him and broke through the hard shell of hatred and brutality which the state had imposed on his mind. Feeling nervous and unsure of himself, he glanced around to see if anyone was watching him. Good, the Secretary of Education had gone on without him and no one else was in the room.

His mind went back to a poem—or was it a song?—that he had heard as a boy back in the '70's before the state suppressed it:

"In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me;
As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on."

Strange that it should come to him now. As he thought of the poem and the words of the man to whom he had just spoken, and who was even now being led out onto the plaza, he knew that never again could he enjoy the luxury of a sound sleep or a stifled conscience as long as the present order prevailed. He looked away from the window as the sound of the machine gun broke the silence.

The Secretary left the room and entered the corridor leading to the elevators. Fifty feet from him stood the Secretary of Education gazing out a barred window—no doubt enjoying this triumph of the state as he had so many others. Not wishing to confront him in his present state of mind, the Secretary started to walk quietly past the man, but something made him stop. Two tears glistened in the eyes of the propagandist. He sensed the other's presence and turned from the window to face him. There was a softness in his eyes that had never been there before. There was no need for words; their eyes told each other everything. Both of them now realized who had really triumphed.

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HUMILITY

Barbara Irwin

Contact with virgin nature is to me
An antidote for human flattery.
Trees do not step aside or bow;
The rose regards me glance for glance,
Affecting no delighted trance
To see me pass. The waters go
With musical indifference and show
The face I bring with ever careless art;
And stars return my gazing with a glance,
A twinkle only; they do not pretend
A joy they do not feel, or condescend
From heaven's height to claim a humble friend.