

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

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

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

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

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

'Oh, Reverend Ely! How are you?'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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