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by William Seabrook

WOW

*"Abolish Language,"
said the vizier, "and
man will return to
primal simplicity and
happiness." . . .*

ONE summer evening, a sentinel who stood leaning on his spear at the entrance to the Han Ku Pass—for this was many years before the building of the Great Wall—beheld a white-bearded traveler riding toward him, seated cross-legged upon the shoulders of a black ox.

Said the venerable stranger, when he drew near and halted:

"I am an old man, and wish to die peacefully in the mountains which lie to the westward. Permit me, therefore, to depart."

But the sentinel prostrated himself and said, in awe:

"Are you not that great philosopher?"

For he suspected the wayfarer to be none other than Lao-tze, who was reputed the holiest and wisest man in China.

"That may or may not be," replied the stranger, "but I am an old man, wishing to depart from China and die in peace."

At this, the sentinel perceived that he was indeed in the presence of the great Lao-tze, who had sat for more than a hundred years in the shadow of a plum tree, uttering words of such extreme simplicity that no man in the world was learned enough to understand them.

So the sentinel threw himself in the ox's path, and cried out:

"I am a poor and ignorant man, but I have heard it said that wisdom is a thing of priceless worth. Spare me, I beg you, ere you depart from China, one word of your great wisdom, which may, perchance, enrich my poverty or make it easier to bear."

Whereupon Lao-tze opened his mouth, and said gravely: "Wow!"

After which he ambled westward in the twilight and disappeared forever from the sight of men.

As for the poor sentinel, he sat dumbly scratching his head, say-

ing over and over to himself in puzzled, uncertain tones, "Wow. Wow! Wow?"

For this absurd monosyllable had precisely the same meaning in ancient Chinese that it has in modern English, which is another way of telling you that it had no meaning at all.

But the sentinel, who imagined himself the possessor of some mighty incantation, went about his affairs as one demented, secretly repeating the strange word twenty thousand times a day, expecting with each breath that his wife would suddenly become young and beautiful, or that his hut would be transformed into a palace, or his spear into the ivory baton of a mandarin; until finally the exasperated captain of the guard took note of his strange mooning and muttering and had him beaten on the soles of his feet until he confessed all.

And that was the end of the unhappy sentinel, for he died from the beating, but in due time the captain reported the saying of Lao-tze to the governor of the province, and eventually it reached the ears of the emperor.

Now the emperor cared more for the happiness of his subjects than for his own ease, and was accustomed to seek wisdom that he might apply it to better the condition of his people; so when he learned that the great Lao-tze's valedictory to humanity had been "Wow," he called his vizier and bade him consider the mystery.

The vizier engaged in a holy meditation on "Wow" for forty days and nights, after which he returned to the emperor and spoke.

"O Son of Heaven, doubtless it has often chanced that while engaged in the hunt, you have seen two vast companies of lions, arrayed in martial order, maiming and slaying each other in mighty battle."

"Never in my whole life," replied the astonished emperor.

"But surely, then, O Son of Heaven, you have noticed when coursing wolves, how certain of the pack are accustomed to act as slaves and burden bearers for the others."

"You know very well that I have never seen such a sight," answered the emperor, "but what I do see plainly is that my vizier has taken leave of his wits."

"I beg forgiveness, O Son of Heaven," persisted the vizier, "but I am at least convinced that you have observed how certain animals imprison others of their kind in chains and dungeons; how certain

ones starve amid plenty; and how all the beasts of the forest, save a divinely favored few, are compelled to engage in life-long toil."

"It is with the deepest pain," interjected the emperor in a tone of exquisite politeness, "that I shall now call in the executioner to cut off your honorable head, but I am comforted by the reflection that this will probably cause you only a slight inconvenience, as you seem already to have lost the use of it."

"My poor unworthy head will be too highly honored, O Son of Heaven, but harken yet once again ere you decree my death. You have never seen such things as I have described, because the animals, whose communication is limited to 'Wow,' or 'Baa,' according to their kind, live naturally and simply as God intended; while man, who alone among God's creatures has invented speech to his confusion, is the only being afflicted with wars, prisons, slavery, poverty and sorrow.

"This is the hidden meaning concealed in the mystic utterance of the wise and holy Lao-tze:

"Abolish Language, and man will return to primal simplicity and happiness."

"A most excellent idea, and I forgive you," replied the emperor, "for while the abolition of Language may not accomplish all you say, it will at least put a stop to the incessant chatter of my wives."

So presently heralds were sent throughout all China, with an imperial decree that Language was to be abolished in the empire, beginning with the first day after the Festival of the Full Moon, and that thereafter none might say aught but "Wow," on pain of death.

The people obeyed.

And so there dawned on China an era of simplicity and peace—a Golden Age, in which wars ceased, and industrial bondage and exploitation disappeared, for without spoken or written language they could no longer exist. Desires grew fewer. Each family tilled the soil just sufficiently to supply its own simple wants. Husband and wife, father and son, neighbor and neighbor, dwelt together in harmony and peace, for none said aught but "Wow," and hence all were agreed.

Laws were no longer necessary. Though there were armor and weapons, there was no occasion for donning them. People no longer roved about, for they were everywhere content. Though there were ships and carriages, there was no occasion to use them. Where two

villages lay close together, separated only by a little hill, the voices of their cocks and dogs were mutually heard, yet people came to old age and died with no desire to go from one village to the other.

And the emperor, who had grown very old, lived as simply in his palace as his people in their villages, for his empire was no longer a burden on his shoulders, and was governed perfectly because it was not governed at all.

But in the meantime there had been born in a distant village a child with an impediment in his speech, who, as he grew to manhood, endeavored to say "Wow," but could only say "Wo." At first he was ashamed and envious, but later he persuaded himself that his incompetence was a virtue and that his blemish was a mark of superiority, and whenever he heard people saying "Wow," in the contented, old-fashioned way, he would puff out his chest and ostentatiously cry, "Wo," at the top of his voice, until finally he made himself such a nuisance that he was driven out of the village with sticks and stones.

When he arrived in the next village, where they knew nothing of the impediment in his speech, and stood in the market place saying, "Wo, wo, wo," the people arose and would have slain him, when suddenly one of their number, who like the rest had been content to say "Wow" all his life, suddenly took his stand beside the stranger and began to shout vehemently, "Wo! Wo! Wo!" And presently, strange to relate, half the village was imitating him.

Strangest of all, they immediately became discontented, and driven by an irresistible restlessness, abandoned their tranquil firesides and began to wander about the country, as in the old days, traveling in ones and twos and companies, arrogantly clamoring, "Wo, wo," spreading amazement, quarrel and dissension.

All this began in a far-off province, and did not come to the ears of the emperor, who continued to live peacefully year after year in his palace, until one day the door burst open and his ancient vizier appeared, bent with age and exhaustion, covered with dust and sweat.

The emperor was greatly astonished, and uttered an amazed "Wow," for the vizier had departed to his native village nearly a century before, and the emperor had never expected to see him again.

"O Son of Heaven," cried the old man in a trembling and unaccustomed voice, "the time for saying 'Wow' has reached an end, for a

marvelous thing has come to pass. On the great plain which lies not far beyond the palace walls are two vast armies, armed with scythes and clubs and stones—and they of one army are furiously screaming ‘Wow! Wow! Wow!’ as if they had gone mad, while they of the other army, with equal fury, are replying ‘Wo! Wo! Wo!’ Each army is trying to outshout the other, and if they come together in battle the rivers will run red with blood, for their numbers are constantly increasing, and town is arrayed against town, village against village, family against family, brother against brother.”

At these strange tidings, the emperor raised himself with difficulty from his couch, and with trembling hands lifted the lid of a massive chest from which he drew the sacred imperial robe of yellow and gold, embroidered with the emblem of the Great Dragon. His vizier’s robe of state he also drew forth, and when the two old men had vested themselves in the panoply of power and wisdom, supporting each other, arm in arm, they tottered out of the palace.

When they came to the Yang Shi Bridge, outside the wall, they saw that the waters of the river were running red.

As they stood sorrowing, they heard a confused shouting, and beheld two remnants of the battling armies, the one in pursuit of the other. And it appeared that there would be fresh slaughter at the river’s edge. But when the two onrushing bands espied the emperor and his vizier, they gave over flight and pursuit, stopped stock-still, and ceased their shouting.

The aged emperor stepped forward, raising his arms in a gesture that was at once paternal and majestic, and would have spoken. But straightway he was greeted with an angry chorus of “Wow’s” and “Wos” which were so mingled in the din that they sounded precisely alike to his astonished ears. And shouting thus together, for the moment, at least, in perfect harmony, they seized the emperor and his vizier, tied them together with a huge stone around their necks, and threw them headlong into the crimsoned river. After which, they remembered their former quarrel, and resumed their mutual slaughter.

And when the yellow moon rose, it shone, as of old, upon human strife and fields strewn with the dead, while naught remained of the emperor and the vizier and Lao-tze’s holy wisdom save a few empty bubbles floating on a river of blood.