

陳少華：白髮

White Hair

By CHAN Siu Wah

Translated by Duncan Hunter

When I was getting my hair cut the other day the barber suddenly remarked, "You've got some white hair." I didn't react immediately. "Time waits for no man—if it's time for white hair it's time for white hair," I finally replied. The barber stopped his trimmers and looked at me. I realized that what I'd said must have sounded a bit odd and that he didn't know how to take it.

Actually the thought of white hair made me feel somewhat depressed for a while and in certain situations I would suddenly find myself remembering—I have white hair.

When I was at school I had a good friend. At that time we were all very keen on writing and what he liked most was drama. Of course, what we wrote was pretty immature stuff. In our free time we would debate the finer points of wordcraft sitting on the bench in the playground in the tranquil shade of the tree. We must have been in our mid-teens but even then he had white hair and quite a lot of it; he was a bit tubby as well. When he got worked up about something he would stumble over his words, so people started referring to him as 'Master' and the name stuck. Some classmates would even call him 'Master' to his face. I had assumed he would get very angry at this and start raging red-faced at them as he did with me when we were discussing our literary efforts, but not in the least—the 'Master' label didn't seem to bother him in the slightest. "White hair is white hair", he would invariably

reply. "Master is Master—so what's so special about that?" In the end he didn't become a playwright but plunged body and soul into the dense, entangled thickets of Chinese herbal medicine and never looked back. I once asked him: "So you're not writing plays, then?"

"No, I'm not. Too boring. What could be more fascinating than such medicaments as dried white yam, Chinese wolfberry, three-leaved ladybell and fragrant solomonseal?"

"He's just kidding himself," I thought.

"You've got a lot of white hair, why don't you try dyeing it," I asked him once point-blank.

"What's the point—one bucket of water and it washes out and you look just the same as before. Faking it is faking it. In time your hair will turn white as well, you know." All this in the mildest of tones.

And he was right, of course, for I do have white hair now, and it wasn't me who discovered it but the barber. The thought of it has been nagging away inside me for some time.

"Could you ask your friend if he would mind sending me some hair dye?" my aunt asked me as I was writing to Hong Kong.

In the past whenever people had asked me to buy hair dye for them, I didn't give it a thought, but now when I hear these words I have the distinct sensation of being pricked by some invisible barb: when will I have to use this stuff to dye my own hair?

Whenever I take my wife to Santa Clara she always likes to have a good look around the flower stalls and talk flower talk with the stallholders, gesturing away with them to make herself understood. They're not youngsters anymore and it's a wonder they don't get irritated, but even when no one can work out what the other side is saying everyone still has a good time. There's some shared knowledge there—the fact that everybody is talking flowers.

This is not the first time I've mentioned Santa Clara; in fact the market is not particularly up-market but it does have everything one could ask for, and rather like the Yung Shu Tau night market in Yau Ma Tei, it evokes fond memories.

One time one of the lady stallholders, who had been chatting away, suddenly broke into song—a very nice song—and pulling over my wife's cousin who happened to be with us, I asked her to tell me what she was singing.

"The words are—The flower of the silk tree is just like silver, as silver as her hair".

It was then that I noticed that the stallholder's head of white hair, which the blackness of her skin set off to perfection, did indeed gleam like silver.

"So the flower is quite white?" I asked her.

Seeming to understand what I was saying, she picked up a bloom to show me. "Very white and very pretty—just like this," she said.

I understood.

Westerners, especially the women, are reluctant to admit they are getting old, which is why we are always seeing garishly clad old people parading about town. On public holidays Carolina Park is overflowing with old parties having the time of their lives dancing away with each other. Getting old just doesn't seem to get to them at all—living to a ripe old age and enjoying it all the way seems to be their mission. And that's what really sets them apart from Asians who grow old in spirit before their bodies age.

At social gatherings when people have pressed me to join in the dancing, I've always refused on the grounds that I had no reason to make a spectacle of myself in front of so many people. Deep down, however, I have really wanted to get out there and jig about and enjoy myself. But then some cord has bound itself taut around my inclination, trussing it up so tight I never dared take the plunge.

We have a very big sitting room at home and one day I said to my wife, "If we were twenty years younger we could have a singalong and a dance here with our old classmates. That would be fun."

"You still want to sing and dance and you with your white hair!" she replied in all seriousness, zeroing in on my head till she located one.

"What's the point of pulling one out when there will be another two to take its place tomorrow," I grumbled back good-humouredly.

"Don't joke—white hair is a sign of approaching old age," she said, as serious as before.

And that's the human condition—bound up in the eternal fetters of old ideas, you harry yourself into senile exhaustion . . . despite your own reluctance to grow old.