

AN EXCHANGE OF TWO FLOWERS

by Sarah Zettel



CHAPTER TWO The Arrival

I.

March 11, 1839

*The City of Canton, Guangdong Province
China*

“Welcome, High Commissioner Lin Zexu! Welcome, sir!”

Lin Zexu climbed from his sedan chair. Deng Tingzhen, Governor General of Guangdong Province stood on the steps of the academy and bowed. Beside him, Governor Yi Ling bowed, and all the people lined up with them did the same. The young-looking man in the scholar’s robe was doubtlessly the headmaster of the Yua Hu Academy who had been displaced from his quarter by Lin’s mission, along with all his students. It was all correct, gracious and beautiful. The sun shone on the greening yard as if to bless it and Canton’s officials, who waited in long lines to honor his arrival.

But all Lin Zexu felt was exhausted.

They had made the journey of almost forty-thousand *li* from Peking to Canton in just sixty days — despite the storms, despite the boat losing its mast on the Yellow River. While the men struggled their utmost to keep in motion, Lin struggled to begin the task he had been set. It was his work to do what no one had, and he could not idle away his time while he travelled. He read letters, edicts and dispatches and dictated more at each inn and house where they stopped. The most important declarations, Lin wrote himself to send ahead in faster boats and on faster horses. He tried his best to stay out of the men’s way and allow them to do the work of ensuring he, his papers, and his mission arrived at Canton in one piece.

For Lin Zexu was now High Commissioner Lin, and it was his work to end the trade in foreign opium.

Now that he was finally here to catch up to the words he'd sent on from the river banks, all he wanted to do was drop onto a bed — any bed — and not move for forty days.

This, however, was not allowed for a man under orders from the Emperor.

So instead, he raised his voice and mustered his manners. "I thank you for this gracious welcome, Governor-General Deng Tingzhen. Will you do me the favor of showing me your excellent preparations?"

"Thank you, sir. I would be honored to guide you."

The Governor-General led Lin inside the main building. Lin followed, and looked over all he was shown, as well as the man who showed it to him. He murmured polite comments when appropriate, but his tired mind could not attend, and kept straying from what he saw to what he knew.

And what he knew was not at all appropriate to say out loud. Yet.

"The whole of the academy is open for your use, High Commissioner," The Governor-General told him. Deng was an aging man and yet he breezed lightly ahead of Lin. The ruby button of rank on his cap flashed in the sun, distracting Lin's tired eyes.

"The students will continue their studies at the Wei Shi academy..."

Will they study the number of foreign ships anchored off the coast you oversee? Or only the number of your boats that scuttle out to meet them after dark?

Lin had never met Deng Tingzhen before today. He'd read his official letters, though. They were stiff and correct. In person, Deng was expansive, and clearly pleased with all that had been done. He clearly expected Lin to be the same.

"...these are the classrooms. They were deemed most suitable for the clerks. Already, sir, you see we have begun to compile the records you asked for..."

Do these include the records that say the importation of opium has tripled since you became Governor-General?

"...these are the examination rooms, sir. Our commandant of police, Guang Xie, has said they will be most suitable for writing warrants and recording arrests. Here, this office can be used for questioning the most important of the vile, native traitors..."

Did you consult the commandant as to which opium dealer was best to execute right in front of the foreigners and drive them to riot?

“...this humble house, sir, has been set aside for your private use...”

Are you even once in all this praise of your preparations and condemnation of traitors going to speak of opium?

Inside the “humble house,” — which probably belonged to the silent headmaster who did not even cross the threshold with them — there was food on the table, along with a jar of wine. A tea pot warmed on the brazier. Deng watched Lin take all this in.

You wish me to acknowledge that all is correct and as it should be. Except nothing is as it should be, or I would not be here.

“Will you sit with me, sir?” Lin asked, even though his eyes swerved greedily toward the passageway leading to the bedroom. “There is much to discuss. We should begin at once.”

He did not want to talk with Deng Tingzhen. He really wanted to talk to the trader, Wu Bingjian, head of the Cohong families whose public name was Howqua. The Cohong merchants were the ones who dealt directly with the foreigners. Everything the foreigners bought or sold, all the servants and assistants they hired, all varieties of business they conducted in Canton were done through the Cohong. But for Lin to speak with merchants before he spoke with the province’s highest official would be a gross upending of precedent and privilege. For now, at least, it was prudent that he follow the steps dictated by protocol.

“Of course, sir. Thank you.” Deng bowed. “The tea is ready. Or would you prefer wine?”

Lin settled onto the bench beside the table and let the Governor direct the servant to pour him tea.

The men ate and drank. Lin asked after Deng’s family, his parents, and his sons, making certain he observed the expected courtesies. He also watched the Governor-General — how he ate greedily and drank even more so. Deng had chosen the sturdy rice wine rather than the delicate tea, and drank off each cup almost as soon as it was filled. Either he was very thirsty or it was very good wine, or both.

Or, perhaps, he is only very nervous.

Lin set his cup down and waved back the servant who came to fill it.

“You must know, Governor-General, I understand the difficulty of your position. I have held your office.” Before his appointment as High Commissioner, Lin had served as Governor-General of Hunan and Hubei. “As well, my family is from Fujian and any man who has lived along the coast must despair at the shifting

and conniving ways of foreigners.”

The Governor-General bowed his head in respectful acknowledgement, but Lin could feel the waves of relief coming off the man. Deng signaled for more wine.

The tiger withholds his claws. We must drink to that.

“But you have observed the foreigners much more closely than I,” Lin went on. “And much more recently. I would like your opinion of them, particularly the English and this man, this Yi Lu, *Captain Elliot*, who the English have placed at the head of their people.”

Deng appeared to consider as he drank. “Allowing always for the defects of the foreigners, Yi Lu, who bears their title of *superintendent* —” he waded carefully across the strange string of syllables “— He is a diligent man. He also seems to be mostly honest, although angry.”

This was the first time since they sat down that Deng said something to surprise Lin. “Why is *Superintendent* Yi Lu angry?”

“It is believed he has had some misfortunes in his own land, and that it is his failures which caused him to leave.”

This did not make sense. “If his failure was severe enough to send him into exile, why would his government give him a position of such responsibility at the center of the world?”

“That is difficult to ascertain. It always is with the English. They are unlike any other tribe. They are here, there, everywhere.” Deng stabbed his finger at the air to punctuate each word. “There is the company, the army, the king, the governors, all tangled together. Then come these ships that seem to have no master whatsoever but wander the world at will. At any moment, we might hear from any one of these by any means, through any mouth, or,” he added quickly, “through any mouth that *claims* to speak for them. We cannot know what is true.”

“So, you say we know this man is in charge of the English, but have not yet ascertained exactly which English.”

“You misunderstand me, sir. Of course we know that. He is an official of their government. We know this. We do. I only meant it was difficult to trace the chains and branches of the English government. Of course that is what I meant.”

Lin nodded once to acknowledge this, and move Deng along before he began to babble in earnest.

“Perhaps we have a clearer understanding of what Yi Lu’s position is in relation to the English smuggling opium?”

Here, Deng seemed to be on a more certain footing. “Yi Lu’s orders, as far as we have been able to ascertain, are to make sure there is no interference with the English traders, no matter what their cargoes.”

“And no matter what the law may be?”

“Yes, sir.”

Lin maintained his silence until he could be certain of his voice. “And how well does this diligent, honest, angry man carry out these orders?”

This time, Deng remembered to pause and consider before he spoke.

“I think Yi Lu does what he must, and no more. Unlike his predecessor, Lord Napier, however, Yi Lu displays respect for custom and protocol.”

“But Yi Lu accompanied that predecessor when he forced his way up the river without regard to law or custom.” Some years ago, the English had actually fired on ships of the water forces while they made an unsanctioned voyage up the Pearl River from the Bogue. Then, they barged into the antechamber of the governing palace, without so much as a letter sent beforehand to announce themselves, let alone petition for an audience with the governor’s representatives.

But when the soldiers confronted them like the intruders they were, the English appeared entirely surprised. They also resisted. It did not go well for them, something that also surprised them.

The English were always difficult to comprehend.

“Yi Lu does not speak of the incident, but it may be what taught him something of the importance of correct behavior.” Deng shrugged. “Despite their slippery nature, the Englishmen remain merchants. Their desire is the same as merchants of any tribe. They want to make as much money as they can.”

A sad and common failing. “Then you believe we may safely disregard any larger question of what drives the English? There are those who believe more lies behind their particular arrogance and absurdity than just greed.”

Those who have spoken to men who come from Calcutta, and Katmandu, and Crimea.

But Deng just signaled for the wine. “Sometimes the wise wander too deep into the forest of their own ideas.”

It was a labored allusion, but Lin smiled anyway. “Then you and I will keep on the straight and sunlit way. We will talk only of English trade as it touches this province. We will start with their trade in opium.”

There it was. The flicker in his eyes. The hesitation in his manner as he

raised his cup to his lips.

“Governor-General, it is possible you may not yet have had time to read the letter I wrote to you from the Forbidden City,” Lin went on. *Sixty days ago*. “I know there have been persistent rumors that the opium trade is on the cusp of becoming legal. But despite the efforts of some at court, opium remains illegal now and will remain so in the future. The Emperor is entirely unmoved by other arguments.”

The Emperor in fact, nearly choked on his anger when he spoke of the matter.

Deng’s answer flowed as quickly as the wine into his cup. “Good, good. I knew it would be so.”

“And so knowing, you have of course already taken many measures to cut off the trade,” said Lin. “You will, I’m sure, be able to produce many detailed memorials about them. It is only bad luck that has increased the number of chests brought into this country.”

By tens of thousands each year.

“Oh, it is more than bad luck,” replied Deng, and for the second time, Lin was surprised. “The foreign smugglers have bribed many of our countrymen to aid them. The complexity of the coastline itself aids them. Our water forces patrol diligently, but the foreign smugglers are aided too much by pirates and traitors, who know every cave and grotto. You have seen my reports?” A hint of anxiety crept into the governor’s voice.

Irritation bubbled up inside Lin. “I have seen them. You make much of the inscrutability and duplicity of foreigners.” *Especially for a man who just told me how essentially simple they are. Which is it, Governor-General?*

Deng leaned forward, his eyes shining with an eagerness much brightened by the wine. “The English have shown they neither respect nor understand the law, let alone the concept of right behavior. They must be clearly shown the consequences of their contempt and ignorance.”

“With an execution on their doorstep?” suggested Lin.

Deng pulled back. “Sir, you will have heard that was a demonstration of...”

“I heard about the riot that followed your demonstration. The foreigners were gravely upset.”

“The foreigners are *always* upset. Especially the English. They go to bed dreaming of new complaints.”

“And new ways to evade the Emperor’s law,” Lin gave him another smile. “For all their simplicity, they also appear to be very clever, and constant in their

disobedience to the Emperor's officers in this province. It is quite remarkable how they can be so little and so much at the same time."

Deng hesitated, clearly uncertain whether Lin was truly sympathizing with him this time or not. "As you so rightly remark, sir..."

"*You* remarked on bribes, just this moment. I would ask you to expand on this remark. Do the Cohong merchants take bribes to assist the smugglers?"

Deng stared, as startled by this shift as if Lin had slapped him.

"Do they?" asked Lin. "Does the Governor, Yi Ling?"

"Sir..."

"Do you, Governor-General?"

Deng closed his mouth.

"That question does not come only from me," Lin said. "It is also from the Emperor. He has been wondering this for some time."

This was an exaggeration, but Lin judged it necessary. It was certainly effective. Deng had turned as white as any Englishman.

Lin kept his face still and his voice steady. "The Emperor understands that the opium trade flourishes because some men in power are more concerned about profiting from their offices than executing their duties. Such men write reports that minimize or obfuscate the most serious problems, even when there is a genuine crisis in front of them. They do this in the hope that the Grand Council may pass the matter by and leave them free to administer their responsibilities without interference. The Emperor understands this as well, and he communicated his extreme displeasure when he issued me my orders."

Deng's gaze flickered to his empty cup, but, belatedly, decided taking another drink was not a good idea.

Instead, he asked, "Is this particular message for my ears only?"

"No. You may be sure it is for Governor Yi Ling, and Brigade General Han Zhao Ch'ing of the Water Forces, and all his captains as well. The Cohong families, I will address separately." *And this English Superintendent, Captain, Whatever-He-May-Be, Yi Lu as well.*

"I see." Deng let his head wobble as he bowed. "Thank you, sir, for allowing me to be the first to receive your most exalted address."

Lin ignored his tone. *I will be hearing worse soon.* "The formal edicts will be given to your secretaries as soon as they are copied and sealed. I trust you will give your utmost attention to this matter."

Deng assured him he would, with many repetitions, each more sour than the last. The appropriate bows were made and the Governor General left. His step, Lin noted, was no longer so light as it had once been.

With a sigh, Lin got to his feet, and finally, *finally* he walked into the plain, but comfortable sleeping chamber. The servants removed his outer robes, shoes and cap and at long last, he cast himself onto the bed.

“Wake me in one hour,” he muttered to whoever might be nearest. His first day in Canton was far from finished, but he could not so much think of another word without sleep.

As soon as sleep closed over him, though, Lin plunged into dreams. He was back aboard the river boat, the distant sounds of the street turned to the shouts of the men and the roar of the current in the storm. He sat, clinging to the rail of his bench, aware that the boat would tip, it must tip, that he was already lost. He could spring to his feet and run, he must run, must get out. But there was nowhere to go.

Lin woke before the hour was over and stared at the ceiling for a very long time.

II.

He should not have drunk so much wine. Deng knew that. He had known as he guzzled it. *Guzzled*. In front of the high commissioner.

But Lin Zexu’s eyes were like daggers. No, arrows. His words, his looks, were a constant rain of arrows. Deng had needed to give himself somewhere to hide, and like a fool, he chose the wine. Now, he was half drunk and returning to his house with his head adrift in a private fog.

If he’d had any choice, he would have concealed himself in his private rooms until the fog lifted. But fool that he was, he had commanded the chief Cohong merchant, Howqua, to come to his house. He had wanted the two of them to confer as quickly as possible once he’d taken Lin’s measure.

But what had happened was that Lin had taken his.

Howqua, whose personal name was Wu Bingjian, stood in Deng’s entrance hall, his hands neatly folded, his face quietly expectant.

The sight of Wu Bingjian’s calm twisted the fog in Deng’s mind. He did not dare let himself speak until Wu had followed him through to his private offices, and all the servants had left them.

Wu did not bother with even the least of courtesies. "How bad is it?"

"As bad as it could be." There was tea and Deng poured himself a cup. He must rise above this fog, and his fear as well as Lin's silent arrows and pointed words.

But reason slipped away and all Deng could grasp was anger.

"When I took up my office, Howqua, I allowed the management of the foreigners and their trade to remain in your hands," he said, and the words grated against his throat. "You swore you understood these English, and the others. You swore you could contain their illegal activity. You have failed your responsibilities in every way!"

Wu Bingjian remained perfectly calm. "The expansion of foreign crimes is not the fault of the Cohong families. It is the fault of the English company. It lost its hold on the trade of the coast — its *monopoly* in their language. Without that *monopoly* there is no limit on the number or kind of English traders who pour in. The lure of our riches has meant they are now joined by the Dutch, Portuguese, these new Americans..."

Deng cut him off. "It has been five years since the influx began. It is four since you came to me, begging and whining to be left in your position as the head of the merchant families. Why have you not stabilized the situation?"

"With respect, sir, there was no need. The trade was to become legal shortly. Am I to take it...?"

Oh, yes, Wu Bingjian. Now we come to the one thing that can reach you. "High Commissioner Lin brings us word from the Celestial Court. Opium will remain illegal. The trade in it will remain a crime punishable by death."

The weight of Deng's declaration settled onto Wu's shoulders. Slowly, inexorably, it bent his stiff neck.

"What will you do?" Wu asked.

"What will I do!" Deng stabbed a finger at him. "I will remind the commissioner it is *your* business to control the foreigners!"

"Again, with so very much respect, sir, it is your business. I am but a humble merchant. You control the police, and the land forces, and the water patrols."

It was the sneer in the merchant's voice that undid him. Deng stalked forward. The floor tipped under his feet, but he could not tell whether it was the wine or his anger, or his fear that caused the shift. All he knew was that this man had sworn that he could keep the opium trade under control until the reasonable men at court had time to change the law.

But those reasonable men had failed and there was no control on the trade at all.

“Understand this,” Deng said, the words falling crookedly from his mouth. “We are all in danger now. I will not let your failures give Lin an excuse to take my head!”

Wu Bingjian bowed his own head in a show of humility, but there was no contrition at all in his voice. “Sir, my family has spent generations maintaining the balance between our natural duties and the ways of the foreigner. If the high commissioner is a sagacious man interested in his future and reputation, as he is reported to be, he will be anxious to fit into that balance as well. Some chests of opium may be sacrificed to this end. Some silver will doubtlessly be contributed toward his continued success. Please be assured, sir, that the Cohong will work closely with the high commissioner, and do all that is necessary to satisfy his inquiries.”

“I trust this is so. Otherwise it will go very badly for you, and your sons.”

Again, the merchant bowed his head humbly. Deng meant to dismiss him then, but Wu spoke before he could.

“Sir, may I be permitted to speak one more word?”

“And the word is?”

“My sons and nephews — who are usually so lazy and disrespectful — have been stirred to unusual activity by the commissioner’s arrival. Of late, they have spent much time conferring with friends who sail the coast.”

Pirates, thought Deng. Smugglers.

“They came to me with reports of a gross and scurrilous rumor.” Wu’s sigh was as theatrical and meaningless as his show of respect. “It seems there are people abroad — liars and scandal-mongers and traitors, all of them — who say that the boats placed at the mouth of the Pearl River to deter the native smugglers carrying opium from foreign ships do not attend their duties. In fact, they take bribes to look the other way. Even in broad daylight.”

Deng said nothing.

“And, though it makes me sick to speak the words, I must also report these scurrilous men say that the bribe money somehow finds its way to this house.”

Deng said nothing.

“Of course this is a terrible lie,” Wu went on. “Only the irresponsible and ignorant repeat it. Our problem is that Commissioner Lin comes from many *li*’s

distance. He knows but a few of our families, and has no connections of blood or marriage with any of us. He will be forced to spend so much time wrestling with the intractable English that he might not have time left to separate truth from such lies.” Wu bowed. “I thank you, Governor-General, for your courteous attention to this matter.”

Wu bowed one more time and left the governor alone, with the fog settling more deeply across his thoughts.

“Well, Wu Bingjian,” Deng whispered. “We have both made ourselves clear. Now, we will see who can make himself safe from the storm that is Lin Zexu.”



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