

# AN EXCHANGE OF TWO FLOWERS

by Sarah Zettel



## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Consequences of a Chance Conversation

#### I.

*March 13, 1839*

*The City of Canton, Guangdong Province  
China*

Captain Charles Elliot, Superintendent of British Trade in Canton, began the morning as he did so many — by walking along a wall.

Around him, the factories of the foreign section were all just starting to open up for the day. The slap of opening shutters mixed with shouting voices. Men recognized him as he passed, and — depending on their rank and nationality — called out their greetings, or simply bowed. The river breeze blew through the narrow alleys, clearing out some of the stagnant air that had settled during the night.

Elliot passed the first gate and found it had already been thrown open. A line of Chinese men with barrows and bundles streamed through, each of them earning a bored nod from the guards.

He'd made this walk a morning habit since he'd first gained permission to make his headquarters in Canton. Just to check that all was well, that the gates were still open, and the guards were still bored.

The factories were not truly unpleasant. They were narrow, but still airy. Their gaily painted fronts and neat tile roofs were a sight to lift the heart of the tired man sailing into harbor. During the day, the riverbank and the adjoining square was alive with persons of all descriptions. They streamed in and out of the arched entrances of the two hotels. Human shouts, the bawling from the livestock, and the cries of the river birds all blended together into an invigorating cacophony that rose up with the smoke from the braziers and cook fires.

Such lively surroundings were perfectly familiar to Elliot. He'd walked through market districts very much like this in Haiti, and Guiana, and Bombay. One could even see the likeness to Covent Garden, or wherever else men gathered to do business with one another. Only the colors and goods were different. The crowds, the bargaining, the banter, the need to know the man in front of you, that all stayed the same.

The only real difference between China, and St. Croix, and Covent Garden, was this blasted wall.

Elliot passed the second gate. The soldiers were talking with a man who carried a series of bamboo cages on a long pole. Small brown chickens clucked and squabbled inside. The man said something Elliot couldn't catch and all the soldiers laughed, and the man passed through.

All as it should be. Elliot walked on.

He was as familiar with city walls as he was with city squares. By now, he'd spent half his life in port towns. Every one of them was bounded by walls and gates and studded with watchtowers. He'd stolen his first kiss from his wife Clara in the shadow of that rough stone wall in St. Croix. The wind filled with the scents of sea and spices, and the tropical air wrapped around them like a blanket.

But all those other walls had been intended to keep invaders out. This one — stoutly built, neatly whitewashed — was built to keep him in. His very existence had been deemed dangerous to the men on the other side. That nagged at him, and he could not even have explained why. He supposed it outraged the school boy in him — the little chap who wanted to leave simply because he'd been told to stay put. But there was more to it than that. That wall had been created before anyone knew a thing about him. He'd been judged by this place before he'd even been born.

That was a grudge as familiar as the bustle in this square and the scream of the gulls overhead.

He understood the prejudices of the men who built this wall weren't on the same level as those belonging to the fat fools in London who kept him and Clara out of their parlors and their clubs. Those men didn't care for Elliot's parents. They cared less for Clara's. That was personal. The segregation of foreigners was simply a part of the Chinese Imperial protocol. Elliot knew a thing or three about ridiculous protocol. After all, he'd gone into His Majesty's (*Her Majesty's* now, he reminded himself), navy at fourteen years of age. When it came to convoluted rules and traditions, the Chinese couldn't begin to match the admiralty. Or Whitehall.

What mattered was not whether the rule made sense, but that it represented a *system*. As long as there was a system, it could be worked. It was as natural for the Chinese to insist on their protocols as it was for the British to insist on theirs. This was, after all, their country. And it was actually fairly easy to learn their ways, if you bothered to pay attention.

Of course, Elliot's opinion was not shared by the Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, much less by men like that blasted nuisance of a trader, Lancelot Dent. All they saw was goods to be acquired — primarily tea, silk and porcelain. The fact that the Chinese were in no great hurry to hand the stuff over to whatever Englishman showed up on their coast seemed the height of unreason to all these men.

That, and the fact that unlike India, China had a centralized government, and an Emperor who had control of a single, well-coordinated, and very large, army. There was no possibility of playing one petty prince against another here, much less picking provinces off piecemeal. That seemed to confuse and irritate Whitehall, endlessly. Palmerston and his ilk took the position that if the heathens wouldn't hand over what was wanted, then good Christian Englishmen were within their rights to take it.

Which, if you stopped to think about it, was the kind of behavior that made the factory wall not only reasonable, but a positive necessity.

There had to be a way to get past it. Some way to win the trust of the men on the other side. Whitehall, not to mention the East India Company, called that "opening" China. It was the holy grail of trade. The man who "opened" China... such a man wouldn't need family or connections to rise in society. People would be clamoring to know him, to lend his sons a helping hand, and to marry his daughters.

The man who pried open the gates of China wouldn't need to drag his family to the bottom of the world to try to make some kind of future.

*Stop it, Charles, you fool. You're not going back there. The debts are cleared, and as soon as you've made your nut, it's off to Tasmania with you. That's a place where a man can rise on his own merit, and there won't be any toffee-nosed bitches to look down on Clara and the children.*

But that thought trailed him as he turned down the little alley called Hog Lane. Elliot dodged shopkeepers and their children, and their goats, and the old women with baskets and brooms. At the end of the alley, he came out into the square, but that was hardly less crowded than the lane. Stalls and raree-shows

had been set up wherever there was an inch of ground. Porters, sailors and traders bustled back and forth with boxes and bundles and more cages. The smell of charcoal fires and cooking rose to compete with the less savory odors that came from too many people and animals jammed into too small a space.

*To be the man who pried open the gates of China...*

*Aye. And wasn't that who our late, lamented Lord Napier thought he was going to be?*

Napier had been superintendent before Elliot got the job. Well, all right, before Robinson got the job, but Robinson hardly counted. Napier had also decided he was going to open China by force of will. When he got word the provincial Governor was having a celebratory banquet in his palace, he was dead certain his time had come.

Elliot had been a junior secretary at the time. Feeling like an absolute fool, he'd put on his evening clothes and piled aboard the ship along with a cadre of other excited, bewildered men. They'd all waited below decks, smoking cigarettes until the close hold filled with blue smoke. Napier didn't linger with them. Oh, no. His lordship stood on the quarterdeck, pretending to be in command while they barged up the river, in broad daylight, flying their colors right under the hillside forts.

Napier wasn't having any nonsense.

Napier was going to show the Chinese that an English lord would not be fobbed off on underlings. An English lord would not bow, or humbly submit petitions to a bunch of jumped-up shopkeepers. He would deal with his equals, and only then on terms of absolute equality.

It had not gone well.

Elliot's chest and his knees still hurt when he remembered the blows the soldiers dealt. Those were dull, hard aches compared with the bright pain that flashed through him when he hit the tiles, biting his tongue so hard his mouth filled with blood. Or the humiliation that flashed just as sharply when the soldier's foot came down in the small of his back.

They'd all been tossed down the steps and had to run for the boats. Napier raged while his personal aides tried to hustle him aboard. The whole way, his lordship screamed threats and demanded apologies from men who couldn't understand a single word he said.

This was the man they put in charge. Ignorant to the end. Napier had died trying to get home, and no matter how many times Elliot's wife Clara reminded him

of Christian charity and duty, Elliot couldn't muster up any feeling of regret.

"Captain Elliot!"

A nasal, and unmistakable American accent cut through the crowd's babble. Elliot swallowed a groan and turned to see Charles King emerging from Hog Lane.

"Can I walk with you a second?" King asked. "I got some news."

"What is it?"

"I've just been talking with some of the outside traders." King gestured back up the alley. The shopkeepers who operated their businesses inside the factory's alleyways were called "outside traders" because they functioned outside the system ruled by Canton's Cohong families, in a small way at least.

The Cohong made sure it stayed in a very small way.

"They're real excited," King went on. "They say this new High Commissioner, Mr. Lin is already starting to shake up the city."

"Already?" It wasn't possible. Commissioner Lin had only arrived, what was it, two days ago? He should still be greeting dignitaries and choosing his headquarters. The others had taken weeks to settle in.

"You heard me. Our Mr. Lin is wasting no time!" King cried delightedly.

"Seems the rumors about the guy are all gold-plated, one hundred percent truth."

King's air of happy superiority slid underneath Elliot's skin. King worked for Olyphant & Co. Not only were they one of the few firms that never dealt in opium, King himself was a fanatic on the subject and wrote pamphlets excoriating the trade.

"Seems Mr. Lin's already got the Governor and the Cohong running around like chickens with their heads cut off," King went on. "My guys say he's absolutely incorruptible. And —" here King paused dramatically "— he's been sent with special Imperial powers to stop the opium trade dead in its tracks."

"Yes." Elliot made sure his tone stayed bland and bored. "I've heard something about it. Is there a point?"

"Are you going to help him?"

Now Elliot was the one who stopped dead in his tracks. "What did you say?"

"Are you going to help him? I mean, after all, you're the man at the helm, aren't you? You know who's bringing the damned stuff in. You could hand Lin a list of names and..."

"And I might as well hand him the head of every English trader on a silver platter!" Elliot shot back. The penalty for buying or selling opium was death.

Elliot remembered the cross-trees in the square, the soldiers, and the freshly

strangled man with his head lolling against his chest. Oh, yes. Mr. Lin and the Governor, and the Governor-General, would all love to get their hands on the English merchants who actually brought the opium into China.

He remembered the feel of the soldier's boot coming down hard on the small of his back.

King sighed impatiently. "Elliot, you're a good Christian. I've heard you speak out against the practice of slavery, and I know you hate the opium trade as much as I do." This much King had absolutely correct. Elliot had seen what opium did to men. It was a vile, pernicious trade, and the sooner the British washed their hands of it, the better.

"Look," said King. "The Emperor wants the opium stopped. This man Lin wants it stopped. You and I want it stopped. Why can't we all work together?"

It was a good question, which only made it all the more irritating.

"You forget, Mr. King, unlike yourself, I am not a private individual. I may hate what I choose, but I must carry out my orders, and my orders are to see that nothing interferes with British citizens and British trade."

"Not even Chinese law?"

"Especially not Chinese law."

King was clearly getting ready to argue the point. Elliot felt his temper crack. Then, it all got worse.

"Hello, Mr. King, Superintendent!" Lancelot Dent's cheery cry rose over the square's chaos. "I was just coming to find you both. You've heard the news, I suppose? About Mr. Lin?"

"What news is that, Mr. Dent?" asked King.

King and Dent faced each other, smiling brightly, but glaring daggers. King was a crusader against opium. Dent was one of the largest smugglers of the drug, if not the largest. Surely, the men must be natural enemies, but Dent just seemed to find King as amusing as he found everything, and everybody, else.

In this moment, with the heat of the day rising around them, Elliot wasn't sure which of the men he hated worse.

"It's bad news for you and your little anti-smoke crusade, I'm afraid, Mr. King. I've been talking with Howqua. Seems Mr. Lin's not planning on staying in town after all. This is strictly a courtesy stop to hobnob with the Governor-General and his men. A little bird has told him Lin's going to be working his mischief from Macao."

"Is Howqua sure?"

“Sure as sure,” replied Dent easily. “You know he’s got all sorts of clever ways, does our friend Howqua. Apparently they include the occasional interference with the mails. And he’s not above sharing the results.” Dent reached into his pocket and flashed a folded letter.

Elliot’s mind raced. Macao was a day’s sail away. It might be firmly in the hands of the Portuguese, but it was also a mandatory stop for any trading ship bound for Canton. If Lin was looking to shake up the system — say, institute an inspection of all trading ships, or insist that cargo be unloaded into native boats at Macao rather than being allowed to sail directly into Canton — he’d go there to get things done.

It’d take Portuguese cooperation of course, but that wouldn’t be hard to get, especially if they could wrangle some concessions for their own boats...

“Captain? Did you hear what I said?”

“Gentlemen, you’ll forgive me, I’ve got work to do.”

Elliot strode away without looking back. He had to get to the office. Now.

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The facades of the factories might look like any you’d find in England or at least Europe, but the insides were pure Chinese in their conception. They were airy and plain. The floors were matted and the windows screened with the rattan and bamboo that seemed to be turned to every purpose. Elliot was not inclined to fault this arrangement, especially when the heat beat down like a hammer and the only relief was the river breeze.

Elliot dropped behind his desk and tossed his hat on the corner. “Mr. Johnston!” he roared for his deputy. “Johnston!”

Johnston poked his head in from the back room. “Sir?”

“Get me Mr. Morrison. Now.”

Elliot tried to lose himself in his paperwork, but he soon gave it up. Instead he paced to the window and back again.

If Lin was in Macao. If Elliot could get to him...talk with him. Convince him they could work together. Get him to see that he, Charles Elliot, was not like the others. He wasn’t blind. He wasn’t a fool. He was better than those arrogant, titled gents.

*To be the man who pried open the gates of China...*

“You wanted to see me, sir?”

Elliot startled. This was no good. He hadn’t even heard Morrison come in. Eyebrows lifted when Elliot took Morrison on as a secretary and translator.

He was a permanently sunburnt young man with dark hair that he wore slicked back on his head. He'd been brought to Canton by his missionary parents and hadn't set foot on British soil since he was twelve or so. Even in the factories, he wore the native costume of black tunic and trousers. *More a Chinaman than an Englishman*, said the ones who dismissed him. They seemed to forget that that was exactly what made him useful.

It was Morrison who'd explained to Elliot why the Cohong, and the rest of the Chinese bureaucrats were so insistent on their petitions. China, Morrison pointed out, was not one great solid block. It was a hundred different cultures stacked on top of each other, and those hundred cultures had a hundred languages. More, especially when you counted all the countries on their borders: Tibet and Russia and Mongolia, not to mention Japan and India and all the other places that came to do business here. Even the language of the court was different from the dialects spoken in the cities, never mind the countryside.

But there was only one system of writing.

The Chinese might not be able to understand each other when they spoke, but every man could understand the other when they *wrote*. So writing was the chief form of official communication, and it was important that it be clear, so that orders, edicts, deeds, and all the daily business of life would be uniformly understood.

A misplaced pen stroke meant a mistaken character, meant a misread order, or petition.

"Close the door, Mr. Morrison."

Morrison did, and came to stand in front of Elliot's desk.

"What do you know about this new commissioner, Mr. Lin? Have you heard anything about him possibly going to Macao?" Morrison was soft spoken, and mild, but he was deep, and those large, soft eyes missed very little. If something was going on among the Cohong, Morrison would know.

"As a matter of fact, sir, I have. I saw Howqua at the Consoo House yesterday afternoon." The Consoo House was a kind of meeting hall for the traders of the various nations in the factories. The name came from a kind of bastardization of the Chinese *kungtse*, as well as the English "council." It stood just outside the factory wall, so that meant it was a place where the Cohong could go without sacrificing any stand on ceremony.

"Howqua was saying that Commissioner Lin plans to sail for Macao before the week's out. Apparently Governor-General Deng can't wait for him to get gone,"



Morrison added.

“Has anyone said why Macao?”

“Well...you understand, he wasn't talking directly to me...”

Elliot gestured for Morrison to go on. This was the real reason to keep Morrison on staff. He spoke like a native, and that made him one of the very few reliable eavesdroppers in the whole of Canton.

“Howqua seemed to think Lin wants to find out if the Portuguese will cooperate with the new measures he's planning against the opium trade.” He paused, and added. “Apparently, he also wants to get a closer look at the size of the fleet.”

Elliot let out a long, slow breath. “Thank you, Mr. Morrison. That will be all.”

Once Morrison left, Elliot started drumming his fingers against the desk. A breeze blew through the window, rattling the blinds and ruffling the papers. A fly circled low, looking for somewhere to land.

Elliot had never met Prime Minister Palmerston, but he'd met plenty like him. He thought of the men who smiled and shook his hand and congratulated him back when he shipped out as a new junior secretary. All that, and all the time they knew he was being shipped off to the end of the world.

And how those same men knew that he'd got his current job because he represented a cost savings.

Not that any of them told him that straight out. Oh, no. It wasn't until after he'd signed on that Elliot found out that he was making half what Lord Napier did.

The blinds rattled again. The papers curled and rustled. The fly landed on the inkwell and began nosing about. Not so long ago, this office had represented progress. Elliot had been able to get official sanction to stay on the mainland, when Napier'd been relegated to Macao. But once again, Palmerston hadn't seen this as enough. Palmerston wanted him to talk to the Emperor. Face-to-face. Palmerston insisted. This was the most important thing. This was what Elliot was supposed to make happen. Everything else was secondary.

But Palmerston was two years away as the mail flew. Elliot was the one in charge here.

Maybe this once, Elliot could get something out of this situation that would be genuinely useful, and that Lord Palmerston be able to appreciate.

How many times now had Elliot heard that Lin was different? That Lin was energetic, and honest. If that were true, here, finally, might be a man Elliot could

deal with. If Lin really had the Emperor's ear, if he had permission to enter the Forbidden City, then the line between the coast and the court might just have gotten much shorter, and much straighter.

That is, if matters could be handled properly by someone who understood the way the Chinese worked. If Elliot could insert himself into a moment where protocol had a crack. Say in Macao, where there was no wall. Where there was a European governor who might be convinced to get Elliot into the right room at the right time.

*To be the man who pried open the gates of China...*

To be the man who did what no one else had done in a hundred years of trying. To prove once and for all he was a better man than all the ones who lied to his face. The same ones who cut him from their guest lists and blackballed him from their clubs after he had the poor taste to go and marry a Creole woman.

“Right then,” Elliot murmured. “Macao it is. Mr. Lin, I’ll see you there.”



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