

AN EXCHANGE OF TWO FLOWERS

by Sarah Zettel



CHAPTER SIX A Moment's Deceptive Peace

I.

March 20, 1839

Macao

Charles Elliot had come home.

At least, he had come to the low white house that was home for now. Home enough, because Clara and the children were there.

“Father! Father!”

No trouble from his work, no threat from High Commissioner or Chinese Emperor could wipe away the delight that lifted Elliot’s heart as Harriet and little Hugh came barreling down the garden path. Hetty’s ribboned pigtailed flew behind her. Hugh’s blue sailor jacket flapped open and crooked.

“Why what’s this?” Elliot crouched down, arms out, and let his children slam against him. “These are not children! They are much too sweet! It’s a couple of sugar plums come to greet me at my gate! I must eat them up at once!” He hoisted them both up in his arms, and rained kisses down on the tops of their sun-warmed heads, reveling in their squeals of delight.

“No! No! It’s us, Father! It’s us!”

“Is it? Oh, bless my soul, so it is. How are you my dears?” He hugged them both close and set them down. “And where is your mother?”

Together, they grabbed his hands. Both shouted about a dozen different, terribly important, entirely disjointed things that had happened since he’d last seen them. They also pulled, pushed and generally bundled him into the front parlor.

And there was Clara. Dressed in a modest, dark gown in the European fashion with a lace collar and round crinoline skirts. She heard the children’s

boisterous arrival, and was standing up, laying aside her embroidery. Her raven hair was pulled into a tidy knot, her warm skin clean and smooth. Her black eyes shone in quiet welcome.

“You little mischief makers!” Elliot gently shook himself free of the children. “You’ve hidden away your mother and left a fairy queen in her place! Your Majesty!” He swept off his hat in an elaborate bow.

“Oh, stop it, Charles!” As always, Clara’s low voice sent a thrill through him.

“Her Majesty refuses the supplication of her humble servant! He is crest-fallen! Heartbroken! But surely, he may beg a dance nonetheless? For are not all fairies fond of dance?”

He seized her around the waist in a spirited waltz, humming some air that sounded Viennese, if one listened close enough. She smelled of vanilla and lavender and salt air and he breathed deeply. The children laughed, delighted at this chance to, quite literally, run rings around the roses, or in this case, the parents.

“All right! All right!” Clara laughed, putting her hands on Elliot’s shoulders to still them both. “That’s quite enough. Children, run along and find Señora Almeida. It’s time for your tea and I want to talk with your father. Go!”

The children galloped straight down the tiled passage toward the kitchen. The possibility of tea and buns far outweighed any delight there could ever be in an extra moment with their father. Clara watched them go, shaking her head in loving despair.

“They look so beautiful, Clara. You’ve done wonders with them.” Charles took her hand and kissed it. “You look beautiful too.”

“Thank you, my dear.” She drew him to sit beside her on the sofa. “You are just in time. Manuelo will have our tea shortly.” Of course she’d had word brought as soon as his ship had been sighted. Clara attended to details like that. “Now, what is it that brings you home to us so suddenly?”

“That can wait. I want to hear all your news first.”

Clara returned one of her quiet, knowing looks, but did not protest. Instead, she began a cheerful stream of chatter, about the visits from Señora de Guadalupe, and Mevrouw Aikenvuld, and Frau van Stresse.

Do not interrupt, Charles admonished himself. *Let her talk and tell me how all is well.*

Manuelo brought in the tea, and Charles noted this time the tray was much more neatly laid out than last. Although he preferred to take his tea fresh and green

as the natives generally did, all the rest was arranged in the proper English fashion. Last time, Clara had noted his disapproval, and had clearly worked to correct the boy. Manuelo glanced at her nervously as he made his bow before retreating.

Very good. I will not interrupt.

Clara filled the cups, and passed Charles his tea, along with a plate of sandwiches — not little finger triangles, but heartier fare for a man just come from sea. There was pie as well, and cheese.

Thank you, my dear. You've arranged it all beautifully. I will not interrupt.

Clara told him how Harriet was taking drawing lessons from Senora Delgado who had come just this month from Almeda aboard her husband's ship. She talked about the dinner party that went so splendidly, with the artist from Castile, and the painter from London, and the historian, Mr. Finlay. Although there was some little worry when Mr. Finlay and Mr. Kingston got into an argument...

"And Lady Davenport?" Elliot asked abruptly. "Does she invite you yet?"

Clara laughed. "Oh, Charles, you know how I hate those crushes she plans. Twenty people to sit down to dinner, and another twenty-five coming in afterwards to stand about drinking and arguing about people I don't know and places I've never been. I'd much rather dine at home."

No, then. "Or Lady Winston?"

Clara's cheeks flushed. She set her cup down and folded her hands in her lap. "Please stop, Charles. You promised me you would not badger me about society."

He did promise. He should apologize. But the words would not come. "They have no business snubbing my wife when..."

"Your wife, Charles, is Catholic and Creole." Her voice was soft, almost a whisper. "That has not changed, and will not. M'Lord and M'Lady have no reason to look past these facts. I accept this. I am happy to be in the company of those who are glad to see me. The children, as you have seen, do very well among good, educated people. It is enough, Charles."

M'Lord and M'Lady have no reason to look past these facts. Because her husband had no fortune, and no influence.

You are worth a thousand of those fine ladies, and I am still powerless to raise you to the place where you belong.

"It doesn't matter, Charles," she told him, as she always did. "We're not staying here. We're going to Tasmania and start again. That is your plan."

Yes, of course. His plan. That was why he had brought Clara and the children

here. So he could take them yet further away. It had seemed such a good idea, back in England, with the walls of debt closing in. Out here at the end of the world they could live on next to nothing, save whatever salary the lords deigned to grant him, pay off the bankers, and save what was left, all so they could run further away.

It really had seemed like a good idea.

“You’re right, of course,” he said as brightly as he could. “And it’s not as if we don’t have many more pleasant things to discuss.” He took her hand, delighting, as he always did, in the feel of her long, slender fingers as they twined around his. Clara smiled up into his eyes, and he turned her hand over to kiss her wrist.

#

Much later, Charles stood in his shirtsleeves at their bedroom window. Clara slept in their bed, curled into a tidy bundle. The habit, she said, came from sharing a bed with her three sisters as a child. Night was settling over the world, clear and dark and magnificent. The house was still. The children were safe and sound, tucked in their own beds. Outside, the crescent moon grazed the edge of the silver ocean.

And he could see none of it. Feel none of it. All he could feel was the endless, creeping parade of slights crawling across his skin.

He did not want to be this man. He wanted to be strong and content. He prayed to be made grateful for what he had, like Clara was. What did it matter what a few fat men back in London, or their puppets here in Macao thought of him? What mattered was that he had work, a chance to make his way and was able to provide decently for his family.

And yet it did matter. No matter how far he went, there’d be one of those fat men frowning at him, or worse, laughing, and not just at him, but at his sons, and his daughters.

And Clara.

All because he had no power.

But if Superintendent Charles Elliot became the man who opened the gates of China, the man who *controlled* the gates of China...that would change. He would have power, and influence. And money.

Let us not forget the money. Elliot leaned both hands on the windowsill. A salt breeze stung his cheeks. *We can never forget about all the money.*

He looked back at Clara, curled in around herself, her black hair spilling across her naked shoulders. There was a swell to her stomach that hadn’t been there a month ago. She hadn’t said anything yet, and he didn’t ask, but something in her

scent, in her skin and the shine of her eyes told him the truth. She was with child again.

Another child. Another life to protect and provide for. Charles's heart squeezed with love and fear.

Tomorrow he had an appointment with Lord Ramsey, a member of the East India Company's Board of Control, newly arrived from Calcutta on his way back to London. The invitation had met him at the docks as soon as Charles had debarked from the *Louisa*. Ramsey had stopped in Macao to look over what he was pleased to call the "rising difficulties" in the China Trade. He'd be happy, the note said, to hear Superintendent Elliot's views on the subject, as soon as he was available.

Charles had had this conversation before, with the steady parade of company officials, all blundering men who couldn't see over the edge of their own ledger books. Ramsey would be no different.

What was different was that this time Charles would offer Ramsey a solution to those "rising difficulties." And the real irony was, they'd both have High Commissioner Lin to thank. Commissioner Lin, who according to Morrison's intelligence should be arriving at Macao soon himself, which put him as far away from his own turf as a man of his rank would come.

Out here, it was the Europeans who controlled the houses of business and bureaucracy, and the invitations, and the meetings. Once Elliot secured Lord Ramsey's agreement with his plan, Ramsey could help Elliot with the governor and the other officials, both Portuguese and Dutch. Elliot would be able to thread the needle between the worlds, and get himself in front of High Commissioner Lin. He could break the wall the Emperor set up to protect the purity and power of the mandarins.

This was Elliot's chance to open the gates.

Even if it was only a crack, it would make all the difference. All he needed was for Lord Ramsey to understand. Fortunately, such men thought with their pocketbooks, which was exactly the place he meant to appeal. All he needed was time and opportunity.

And just a little help from the legend of High Commissioner Lin.



Find your next chapter at
<http://www.arbortejas.com/SummerReads/>