

AN EXCHANGE OF TWO FLOWERS

by Sarah Zettel



CHAPTER SEVEN Edicts & Admonishments

I.

March 20, 1839

The Foreigners' Factories

Canton, Guangdong Province

China

“...with this thing you have seduced and deluded the people of China for tens of years past; and countless are the unjust hoards that you have thus acquired.”

Mr. Thom read the paper carefully, running his calloused and ink-stained finger down the columns of closely written characters.

Lancelot Dent stood beside the slanted clerk's desk and listened, his hands folded behind his back.

“...Such conduct rouses indignation in every human heart, and is utterly inexcusable in the eye of celestial reason...”

They were in one of the side offices of the Consoo House. Not an official part of the factories, the house nonetheless served as a meeting place for the foreign traders, especially when the various “boards of trade” needed to discuss, or argue, matters of mutual concern. Such as the doings of High Commissioner Lin.

The Consoo House was not a grand building. It had been built rough and plain, with whitewashed walls. Its offices were all bare as a whore's backside. The main hall was furnished with nothing beyond plain benches and a podium. *Bit like a Quaker meeting house*, Dent thought. Although, the language used there would surely make any good Quaker blush for shame.

Dent smiled at the idea, and realized that the translator had paused.

“The eye of celestial reason,” repeated Dent, so Thom would know he had been listening. Mr. Thom was using the high desk by the window where the light was the best, and the flies came and went with the breezes. “I like that. Do continue, Mr. Thom.”

Robert Thom, known universally as “Old Mr. Thom,” was very nearly the best translator they had in the factories. Second only to John Morrison who’d lived in China since he was twelve. But Morrison was not the man for this job. He was on Superintendent Elliot’s payroll now, and worse, he was good friends with that so-very-righteous American representative of Olyphant & Co., Mr. Charles King.

Mr. King is going to love this little missive from the High Commissioner.

“...Should I search closely into the offenses of these foreigners, in forcing for a number of years the sale of opium, they would be found already beyond the bounds of indulgence...”

The edicts — beautifully written orders direct from Lin Zexu, Canton’s new High Commissioner — had arrived with the dawn. Along with a fondness for grand language, Mr. Lin was also clearly fond of early hours. Thankfully, Dent had gotten word that the edict was on its way, so he had been on watch. Otherwise, the deputy superintendent, Emile Johnston, might have gotten the papers first, and sent them straight on to his boss in Macao by the next boat. Dent would have had to stand rubbernecking by the gates while the Chinese soldiers pasted copies on the wall, or wait even longer until whatever clerks the commissioner had in his employ distributed more copies through the bookshops.

Dent found himself wondering what Elliot was doing away in Macao, and if he’d yet realized he was on a wild goose chase. Elliot thought Lin was headed to Macao. He thought he stood a chance of getting to see the great man. But Lin was staying right here in Canton, where any word of his plans would reach Dent before they’d reach Elliot. Which meant Dent would be able to act before Elliot could. Possibly days before.

So far, it was all going according to plan.

If Elliot found out Dent had tricked him, Elliot was going to be furious. Well, if he got suspicious, Dent could always blame Howqua, or Howqua’s informants, for having gotten the wrong end of the stick.

Better blame the informants. Dent didn’t need the head of the Cohong merchants getting any angrier than he already was.

Old Mr. Thom adjusted his spectacles.

“...But, reflecting that they are men from distant lands, and that they have not before been aware that the prohibition of opium is so severe, I cannot bear, in the present plain enforcement of the laws and restrictions, to cut them off without instructive monition...”

“So very kind of you, dear chap. Thank you,” Dent murmured. Old Thom glanced at him, but Dent just gestured for the man to continue. He probably could have puzzled the whole thing out himself, of course, but time might be short.

“...I proceed to issue my commands. When these commands reach the said foreign merchants, let them with all haste pay obedience thereto. Let them deliver up to government every particle of the opium on board their store-ships...”

Why, of course, Mr. Lin. Dent smiled. *All you had to do was ask.*

“...As to those crafty foreigners, who, residing in the foreign factories, have been in the habit of dealing in opium, I, the high commissioner, have early been provided with a list of them by name...”

“Wait. Stop. Read that bit again.”

Old Mr. Thom did. For the first time, Dent felt a prickle of sweat under his collar. He remembered Howqua’s warnings when they last sat together, and how the trader had been in genuine fear of Mr. Lin.

Old Thom continued. “...those good foreigners who have not sold opium must also not fail to be distinguished. Such of them as will point out their depraved fellow-foreigners, will compel them to deliver up their opium...”

Oh, this is not good at all.

As soon as Charles King heard this little tid-bit he’d be turning cartwheels. King’s firm, Olyphant & Co. did not deal in opium. They pretended their refusal made them morally superior to those who were ready to make use of whatever openings they could find.

But let Mr. Puritan King see a chance for advantage and all those fancy morals will go right over the side, even if it means selling out his fellow white men.

“...these shall be regarded as the good foreigners. And I, the high commissioner, will at once for their encouragement reward them liberally...”

Oh, yes. Mr. King would be all too ready to give Dent over, and collect the rewards, no matter whose hand held them out.

“Damn.”

“Shall I continue, Sir?”

Dent sighed. “Yes, yes, Mr. Thom. We might as well have all of it.”

Old Mr. Thom kept on reading, and kept on, and on. An endless stream of proclamations of mercy, whereases, buts, and repeated flowery reminders of how much the foreigners owed to the grace and mercy of the Celestial Throne, and how Commissioner Lin was perfectly familiar with all their shifts and crafty ways and would not be fooled.

“...I am now about to command the Cohong merchants to proceed to your factories to instruct and admonish you...”

Howqua's going to love that bit. Probably should let him address the board of trade. That'll give him some cover with Mr. Lin. We can work out something for him to say.

Tonight, the hall's bare benches would fill with members of the Canton Board of Trade. The very grand name was given to a few score of British ship owners and the East India Company. These men's business involved bringing whatever they could into China and hauling out as much tea, silk, and porcelain as they could convince the Chinese to part with.

Dent would have to work out just what to tell them, before and after Howqua said his piece.

“...Do not indulge in idle expectations, or seek to postpone matters, deferring to repent until its lateness render it ineffectual.” With this, Old Mr. Thom began reading the signature and all its attendant titles.

“All right, we're clearly done,” said Dent. “Thank you for your help, Mr. Thom.”

“Happy to oblige, Mr. Dent.” Old Thom folded his specs and tucked them into his coat pocket. “If there's nothing else, Mr. Leeds was asking for help with a letter.”

“Of course. Mustn't keep Mr. Leeds waiting.”

Old Mr. Thom gathered his books and papers and bid him good-day. Dent returned his bow absently.

Normally Dent enjoyed Board of Trade meetings. He liked the give and take, the salty, energetic language, even the barking arguments. Here was a place where all types and conditions of men mixed — men from Dover to Hindustan and everywhere in between. He enjoyed the show provided by the varieties of character and temperament. No play in the music halls could hold a candle to the drama provided by real life.

But this time, everyone was on edge. He'd run into Mr. Paratha just last night.

“My man Kih sien says people are just tossing their opium pipes into the streets,” Paratha told Dent. “He says Lin’s already collected thousands of bowls and shut up a hundred houses. Opium confiscation to begin in less than eight days. He’s digging these massive trenches to pour the stuff into once he gets his hands on it. People are practically lining up to turn each other in.”

Stanislav Mier told a similar story. “He’s drawing up lists of who to purge from the water-forces. They say the admiral is next to be hauled in.”

So did William Williamson. “The commandant of police has whole new squadrons turning out. They even say Lin’s asking the students taking the civil service exams to make up lists of who’s buying and selling. He’s turning the whole city upside down and shaking it to see what falls out.”

With all this hurricane wind of rumor blowing through the factory, Dent was going to have to tread very, very carefully during the Board of Trade meeting.

Remind them that these commissioners all start out energetic. That we are not as alone as we seem. The Cohong merchants depend on us as much as we depend on them. They do not want any upset. We need to give Howqua and his people time to work. If the trade gets shut down for a few days or a week, it’s nothing we haven’t seen before. Mr. Lin will soon get tired. He’s only passing through. We can keep the cargo on the ships until he’s written Peking about all his progress. Howqua will give us the all clear, and business will continue. Just like always. I promise.

Best to do some work before he stood up in the meeting, though. Smooth the way a bit. He’d sideline Paratha first. He’d be willing to listen. Then, tackle Williamson. He had a hard head and always kept one eye on his ledger book. If Williamson went along, the rest would follow.

Not what you know but who. But that’s just the beginning, isn’t it? You have to know who leads, who follows, and who talks. So very useful to know who talks.

But the most important thing was to make sure the Board of Trade was settled down and seeing things in the correct light before Elliot found out he’d been rooked about where Mr. Lin was going to be headquartered and came roaring back from Macao.

“Beg your pardon, Mr. Dent?”

Old Thom was standing in the doorway, his sunburnt face positively ashen.

“What on earth’s the matter?”

“The Cohong, Howqua and Mowqua, they’re coming up the street now.

I think they're coming here."

"That's hardly extraordinary."

"Sir, they...they're in chains."

II.

Impossible.

Dent could not be seeing this. Howqua and Mowqua, on foot, stumbling up the street toward the Consoo house with a full escort of men wearing the caps and sashes of the Canton police. In front of them all marched that idiot commissioner of police, Guang Xie with his hands folded and chin up, proud as any Mandarin on parade.

And just like Mr. Thom said, both merchants wore chains. Long, iron chains looped around their hands and attached to iron collars around their throats. The ends dragged in the dust.

And all the world came out to stare. And laugh. And cheer.

This can't be.

No one touched the Cohong. Their families had ruled the foreign trade for generations. Governors and Governor-Generals dined at their tables, married their daughters, and took their cash.

A clod of pig dirt flew through the air. Howqua ducked and tripped over his chain, almost falling. Mowqua kept his eyes rigidly ahead, refusing to see, as if willful blindness could allow him to keep some kind of dignity.

Guang Xie marched both men up to the door of the Consoo house. He cuffed Mowqua on the shoulder and spoke in a rapid dialect that Dent couldn't make heads nor tails of. But he did understand Mowqua's trembling reply.

"We will not attempt to leave. I give my word."

Guang Xie nodded once and stood back.

Dent looked automatically to Howqua, and the glare he received in return was so filled with hate, he felt it like a slap in the face.

Lin's edict said the Cohong would be sent, to instruct and admonish. And now here they were.

"Well, well," Dent croaked. "I guess you'd better come in."

III.

Have to get them out of sight.

That was all Dent could think of as he led the men into the office where he'd just finished up with Old Mr. Thom.

Old Mr. Thom, who was trailing after them, with his mouth hanging open.

"All right, Thom. I'll take it from here." Dent patted the translator's shoulder, he hoped reassuringly. "And look, no need to say anything about this all right? Let me find out what's going on first."

But of course it was too late. The scene in the street had been too raucous to be missed. Everyone in the factories must know by now that something was up.

Howqua in chains. Old Mowqua paraded like a criminal through the streets.
...As to those crafty foreigners, who have been in the habit of dealing in opium, I have been provided with a list of them by name...

Dent closed the door.

"I tried to warn you Dian Di!" shouted Howqua. "You would not listen. I tried to protect you. This is what has happened!" Howqua shook his length of chain. Only his neck had been shackled. His hands were just looped together. "Now there are no more choices. You will hand over the opium. All the others will do the same."

Mowqua said nothing. He looked around in distaste, and finally circled the desk and sat in the room's only chair with a back and arms. The chain coiled like a snake below his feet, black and dangerous on the floor.

"All right, all right, it's very bad," said Dent. "Yes, I should have listened before. But the important thing is to keep the others from panic..."

"The important thing is to give over your opium and keep my sons heads on their shoulders!"

"They've arrested your sons?"

It was Mowqua who answered.

"Yes, Dian Di." Mowqua turned the Chinese formulation of Dent's name into a sneer. "Two of Howqua's sons are in Guang Xie's jail even now, along with two of my grandsons. They are not even to be allowed the dignity of being held at the academy to await their interrogations."

Dent felt his mouth go dry. The Canton police were fond of very direct, very forceful interrogations. Sometimes prisoners did not survive long past making their confessions.

...As to those crafty foreigners, who have been in the habit of dealing in opium, I have been provided with a list of them by name...

“You must come with us!” cried Howqua. “You must explain to Lin that you have read his edict, that you voluntarily surrender and admit your wrong!”

“Wait, wait! His edict said we had three days!” *He did say that, didn't he? I'm sure Mr. Thom read something about that.*

“Yes,” said Mowqua. “But his excellency has sent us to illustrate to you the advantages of acting quickly.”

Even though his head was spinning, Dent found a moment to admire the old man. He sat there, in the best chair in the room, cool as a cucumber, while Howqua hunched on the stool in the corner, clutching the iron collar around his neck, looking for all the world like a rabbit in a snare.

...I have been provided with a list of them by name...

“Well, your commissioner has to understand how we do things here,” he said. God, was that him talking? Was his voice that clipped, and shaking that badly? *Calm down, Lancelot. Not in front of the little fellow. Never in front of the little fellow.* “We have to hold a meeting to discuss our response to this...edict. And we'll have to take a vote. That takes time.”

“We are under orders from the High Commissioner now. We must stay until you are ready to return with us.”

“You can't! If the board sees you like this...they'll panic. We'll never get anything done.”

...my sons...my grandsons...not even to be allowed the dignity of being held at the academy to await their interrogations...

...I have been provided with a list of them by name...

They'd arrest him. The second he stepped outside the walls. They'd arrest him and stuff him head first into Guang Xie's jail.

Mowqua said something in Chinese to Howqua, so rapidly and softly that Dent could barely make it out.

“This is what you put your trust in? You are a fool.”

It's who you know, Lance, whispered Tom again. And who likes you. Somehow, I don't think those two like you anymore.

Before Dent could force an answer from his dry throat, a hard step fell outside the door, and the door swung open.

“Knock, damn you...!” shouted Dent as he swung around

And found himself face-to-face with the deputy superintendent, Emile Johnston, and Mr. Morrison right behind him.

“Mr. Dent,” said Johnston, but his attention was all on Howqua and Mowqua. “Mr. Morrison told me there was some kind of ruckus out here.”

Damn. Johnston was Elliot’s second-in-command, and with Elliot in Macao, Johnston was in charge of the British factory. Dent had always found him a slow, dull, man, but he was still capable of making a lot of trouble.

“Yes, well,” Dent spread his hands. “It seems our Commissioner Lin has decided to make a bit of a show. Nothing to worry about, really.”

But Morrison slipped past Johnston to bow to the traders, and all three of them began talking, so quickly that Dent couldn’t catch more than one word in three.

Damn.

He threw an arm around Johnston’s skinny shoulders and steered him into a corner of the office. “Look, Johnston, I know you’re a level-headed man.” Dent tried to force some measure of confidence into his voice. “Things are all very bad at the moment. Lin’s making a hue and cry, and it’s got people on edge. It’s up to us to keep cool heads, and do what’s best for everybody’s business, right?”

Behind him, Mowqua was saying something to Morrison. But Dent couldn’t turn enough of his attention to them to understand. He had to keep Johnston focused on him.

“Elliot’s relying on you to keep things calm and moving smoothly while he’s gone. We all need your leadership now.”

“The trials will begin as soon as Lin has the names of the men in the water-forces,” Mowqua was saying.

Thank God, Johnston had never bothered to learn the local language. The deputy relied on pidgin to communicate with the Chinese. Pidgin and Morrison.

Johnston liked the easy route. He always preferred it if someone else could do the heavy lifting. This was something Dent could work with.

“We’re old China hands, you and me, Johnston. We both know how the Emperor works. He puts men in, he takes them out again. Nothing changes. No one wants it to. The Cohong are doing very well and are pleased to have things continue. They’ve already told me not to worry, no matter what gets said next. They will find a way to work around Mr. Lin. We just need to give them a little time.”

But Johnston was not quite ready to be reassured. “Have you had a chance to read this edict yet, Mr. Dent? They’re going to search the ships! If they find any

opium at all, that ship's banned from Chinese waters for good!"

"And I'll get the board to gin up a sternly worded response at the meeting. And we'll hand that right over to Howqua to take to Lin. But we might have to put up a bit of a show of our own. Maybe hand over a few hundred chests so Mr. Lin has something to write home about."

"Have you heard about Lin's black list, Mr. Dent? Your name's on it. Right at the top."

"Yes, I know." Dent made himself smile. "And if I'm not worried, why should you be? Obviously, nobody's going to let a bunch of foreigners threaten British lives and property, are they?"

Are they?

"Listen, Johnston, you understand it's important we avoid panic. Let me get the Board of Trade settled. As soon as our response is on its way to Lin, you can write to Captain Elliot in Macao and fill him in on the whole picture."

Including how neatly you handled the whole thing. Come on, Johnston. I know you're angling for Elliot's job. Here's a chance to prove you can handle yourself without him. Might even get your name mentioned in the dispatches.

Johnston's eyes strayed back to Morrison and the traders. His gaze traced the links of the chain trailing down Howqua's chest to his hands, to the floor.

Dent held his breath.

"You're right," said Johnston. "We mustn't panic. Must we?"

"No, indeed." Dent smiled. "So glad we can see eye to eye on this, Mr. Johnston."

IV.

Charles King stood in the shadow of Hsien Di's lopsided stall and watched the little parade that emerged from the Consoo House. Deputy Superintendent Johnston came first, followed by Mr. Morrison. If he had to make his guess, King would have said that Johnston's double-time march was a deliberate effort to keep from having to actually speak with the translator.

Or perhaps Mr. Johnston was just trying to avoid the cadre of police stationed outside the Consoo House.

King waited, and waited a little longer.

Ah, there you are. Mr. Dent strode out. He lifted his hat to Commandant

Guang Xie, who gazed back, stone-faced. Dent all but ran inside the gates.

Well, goodness, gracious me. Is it possible you're actually worried this time, Mr. Dent?

King pushed himself away from the stall and strolled back through the gates. The guard on the gates had been doubled while he'd kept his little watch. There were usually four men. Now there were eight. And he didn't recognize one of them.

Goodness, gracious me.

King took his time walking down Hog Lane. He made sure he was well back from the British factory's door, so he had a good view of when it opened, and Deputy Johnston emerged in the middle of a small group of traders. Not one of them looked back to see as King slid through the door and into the superintendent's front office.

Mr. Morrison sat at his secretarial desk beneath a portrait of the old king, staring at nothing at all.

"Mr. Morrison," said King. Morrison jumped.

"Mr. King." The translator scabbled at his desk, his fingers looking for something, but finding nothing.

"Busy day," said King. "I hear Mr. Dent has managed to delay the posts."

Dent doesn't want Elliot to know how bad things have gotten. Doesn't want him to see it's out of control this time. Doesn't want anything to interfere with trade.

But you and I, Mr. Morrison, both know that Dent's trade is corrupting and killing a whole nation.

"That's not really my business." Morrison spoke the words through clenched teeth.

"Nor mine, I suppose." King took a step into the office. "And yet, there is a great deal happening."

A whole set of papers lay scattered on Morrison's desk, including the copy of the Commissioner's edict. King could see the red seal clearly.

"I can't help thinking that if he was given the choice, Captain Elliot would want to know about it all as soon as possible."

"Probably." Morrison saw where King's gaze had landed. The secretary very deliberately set a ledger book on top of the paper.

King took another gentle step closer, approaching Morrison like he might approach a skittish horse. Morrison lived here. China was his home, but China neither liked nor trusted him because he was too English. And the English neither

liked nor trusted him because he was too Chinese.

So here the man was, uncomfortably straddling two worlds. He knew all about what opium did, and yet he made his living from the men who poured it into the country.

“It’s mighty inconvenient Elliot’s not here just now,” King remarked. “Just when there’s so much being decided by Mr. Dent and his cronies. Pity nobody’s going to write to Macao and warn him.”

Morrison gave up his fruitless shuffling of papers and pens. “Mr. King, what do you want?”

King shrugged. “I don’t want anything. Except to let you know, that Mr. Johnston needs to talk to you.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

“About what?”

“I didn’t ask.”

They stayed like that for a minute; King halfway across the office, Morrison at his desk, with all the papers spread out in front of him. King would have given his right hand to know what was going on inside Morrison’s head just then, which loyalties tugged against each other, which hopes, which fears.

“Mr. Johnston told me not to send the edicts, or the news to Captain Elliot,” said Morrison. “He said my job depended on helping him keep things calm.”

“And that’s just plain sense,” agreed King. “Not that I was even talking about it. What goes on in this office ain’t no nevermind to me. Heck, I’m not even English. I’m just a little ol’ Yankee errand boy. And I’m here to tell you, Johnston’s in the square and wants to talk to you.”

The silence stretched out between them. Finally, Mr. Morrison made his decision.

“Then I’d better go see what he wants.” He stood, folding his hands into his tunic sleeves. “Thank you, Mr. King.”

“Thank you, Mr. Morrison.” Mr. King bowed as Morrison walked past him, and did not look back.

But he did close the door.

That was why no one passing in the hall saw King cross quickly to the desk, move the ledger, and fold a specific pile of papers with a huge red seal on them into a single packet, easily tucked into a gentleman’s coat pocket before he left the empty office and walked away.



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