

AN EXCHANGE OF TWO FLOWERS

by Sarah Zettel



CHAPTER EIGHT

The Demands of Trade

I.

March 21, 1839

Macao

“Captain Elliot! Pleased to make your acquaintance, sir!”

Lord Ramsey conformed exactly with Elliot’s worst ideas of his type. Red-faced and portly, he heaved himself out of his chair to make his bow and plopped down again at once. Sweat gleamed on his speckled brow, even though he’d unbuttoned both coat and waistcoat. For all that, his little eyes glittered sharply as Elliot took his own seat.

We must be careful, my dear, Clara’s voice whispered from the back of his mind. *We may not like them, but we cannot anger them. Not while we still depend on them for our family’s living.*

She’d said that to him when he’d found out that his rate of pay as Superintendent of Trade in Canton would be half his predecessor’s. He’d been set to curse them all and throw the appointment back in their faces.

Now he clung hard to the memory of Clara’s admonishment, along with the strength of his own plan.

“Cup of tea?” Lord Ramsey asked. “Or something stronger?”

“Tea would be most welcome, thank you.”

Ramsey rang his bell, gave his orders and settled back in his chair, his hands folded across his paunch. His house was large and airy, being built in the Spanish style like many of the European-occupied homes in Macao. But Ramsey’d filled the place with English furnishings and carpets. The result was fussy, and stuffy, even though the French doors were open to the garden and the sea breeze.

“I’ve always read your dispatches with great interest, you know.” Ramsey shifted his enormous backside in an attempt to get more comfortable. “We can rely on Elliot, I’ve told the board. He’s a man of understanding. Said that once, said it a hundred times. Elliot’s not like that idiot Robinson, or poor Napier. Good man, Lord Napier, of course. Best of men. But not exactly...large minded if you see what I mean.”

Elliot bowed.

The dark-coated Chinese houseboy brought the tea tray. Of course Lord Ramsey took his tea like an Englishman with a handled cup and a saucer. And like a good Englishman, his lordship preferred the cured stuff to the green, and took it strong. Elliot, who’d grown used to the gentler mainland brew, made himself drink the harsh beverage and smile.

Ramsey slurped his tea, and smacked his lips in satisfaction. “Now. I heard this new man in Canton’s really kicking up the dust.”

Wait for your opening, Elliot.

“I’m afraid so, Sir.” Elliot set the cup down. “And the situation has become slightly delicate. As you know, the court at Peking is...” *Carefully, Elliot, carefully.* “...in one of its periodic moods about the opium trade.”

“Moods? Ha! Very good! Excellent description! May steal it from you! What’s in the wind, then? Probably means to stop trade, I shouldn’t wonder. Well, I’ll talk to the governor here, and get word to Calcutta. Make sure everybody knows what’s coming. It’ll be a nuisance, of course, but it’s nothing we haven’t dealt with before.”

Ah. Now.

“Sir,” said Elliot. “What if I told you I know how to make sure trade not only continues uninterrupted, but expands? I’m talking about new opportunities, new ports, a whole new landscape of trade. Nothing less than a historic shift.”

“Well, you’ve certainly got my attention, Elliot. How do you propose to work this miracle?”

“Stop the opium trade.”

Ramsey blinked. “Eh?”

“Stop the opium trade,” Elliot repeated eagerly. “Cut it right off at the source. The Company may have lost its monopoly on the China trade, but the opium comes in from India, and the Company controls the provinces where most of the production happens. The Company can stop the traffic at any time.”

Lord Ramsey shook his head in good-natured dismay. “Not quite that simple, I’m afraid.”

Elliot leaned forward. “But it is just that simple. We make China out to be a great deal more complicated than she is. She wants one thing.” Elliot paused for effect, and to make sure he had Ramsey’s full attention. Ramsey gestured for him to continue.

“China,” said Elliot, “wants stability. That’s all. We see the Chinese as a great solid block. They’re not. They’re a conquered nation, and those on top live in fear of an uprising of those on the bottom. Of *instability*.” Ramsey said nothing, so Elliot plunged on. “The Emperor has come to see opium as increasing the amount of instability he has to manage, and us as the agents of instability. *That’s* what makes us the enemy. It’s not the fact that we’ve got white skin and round eyes, or are Christians, or any other damn thing the righteous and the ignorant prattle about. If we stop the opium, and point out those who are continuing the trade — the Americans, for instance, and the Portuguese and the Dutch — we separate ourselves from the rest. We go from increasing instability to helping ensure complete stability. We become trusted. Reliable. Other trade gets stopped, but not the Company’s. *We* may come and go as we please.”

Ramsey slurped his tea.

Come on. You can see it. I know you can, you fat, old...

“You know what Palmerston and his friends will say,” Ramsey gestured toward the open doors. “He’ll say that trying to stop the opium trade is tantamount to *kowtowing* to the Chinese emperor.”

Because Palmerston’s another aristocratic fool desperate for the dividends his Company shares bring in.

“It’ll be a year before Palmerston even finds out what’s happening,” said Elliot. “By then, the new agreements will be in place.”

“What agreements in particular?”

“New ports for the British. An increase in tea exports.” Elliot picked up his cup as if he meant to toast his lordship with tea. “Pretty much anything we want.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Because Commissioner Lin’s been given free rein to do whatever it takes to stop the opium trade. His whole future hangs on getting this done.” Probably. Given the way things tended to work. Elliot knew he was hanging his argument on a slender thread, and saying more than he strictly knew to be the truth. But it didn’t

matter. What mattered was getting Ramsey to believe him. “Now, I’ve had word that Lin is coming to Macao in a couple of days. If I can get to him with a letter saying that you as the Company representative are willing to negotiate a halt to the opium trade, he will agree to just about anything we ask. And!” Elliot plunged on before Ramsey could interrupt. “Palmerston will finally have what he’s always wanted. A representative of the British government will meet with a man who has the Emperor’s ear.”

Come on, come on. There’s no way to lose here. Doing things the same old way hasn’t worked. This can work. If you’ll just listen.

“New ports are only good if we can sell as well as buy,” said Ramsey. “The Chinese say they’ve no need for our — whatdidtheycall’em — ‘curious goods.’”

Elliot waved this away. “The Emperor and his representatives said that. Not the people themselves. Once our traders reach the interior and start setting up shop, I guarantee you, the common man will buy all the goods British manufacturing can turn out.”

Lord Ramsey beckoned the houseboy who’d been standing by the fireplace. The boy came to refill his lordships cup from the silver teapot. Ramsey slurped, and studied the depths of the cup.

“My aunt claims she can tell the future from the dregs of a cup of tea,” he said. “Says an old gypsy woman taught her, or some such rubbish.”

“Sir...”

“Makes a great game of it at parties. Sets the ladies all in a fine twitter I can tell you. Can’t count the number of times one of ‘em’s believed her and gone off and done something absolutely dim-witted.” He swirled his cup. “But it makes one think, doesn’t it? How the future can be set by the smallest of events. The fall of two leaves, the discovery of the use of two weedy flowers — the tea bush and the poppy.” He raised his cup. “The words of two men in private.”

Elliot’s breath caught in his throat. *I’ve got you.*

“It’s got merit, this idea of yours. Even, dare I say it, a certain elegance.”

Come on, you old fool. Come on. Think about the shareholders. The revenues for the government. The new ports, a whole new country of people waiting to buy and sell, all with the great and glorious British East India Company. They’ll be singing your praises in Parliament.

“You’ve thought it through, and no one is going to argue but that you’ve demonstrated a unique understanding of Johnny Chinaman and his little ways.”

Got you. Got you. Got you.

Lord Ramsey drained the cup, turned it over on the saucer, picked the whole thing up and shook. "This is how my aunt does it."

Elliot had never worked so hard to keep himself from moving.

Lord Ramsey lifted the cup and looked at the formation of leaves on the porcelain saucer. He chuckled and shook his head. "No idea. Perhaps she should turn novelist. Perhaps I should." He set cup and saucer aside.

"Well, Elliot. I have to say. I like your scheme. I like it a great deal."

Got you!

"But it won't work."

A roar of disbelief rose up in Elliot's throat like bile. He swallowed it in one hard, painful lump.

"Forgive me sir, but it will. All we need to do..."

Lord Ramsey raised his hand. "As far as it goes, it's an excellent scheme. If we'd tried it fifteen years ago, even ten, or I dare say even five, it would have worked a treat.

"But since the Company lost its monopoly, everybody and his uncle's had a chance to see that opium is the one reliable way to get goods, and silver, out of China. So we have the Portuguese, and the Dutch, and the Americans plying the waters, and every last one of them has a stake in Indian poppy and Indian opium."

"But I've accounted for that! All we have to do is turn them in. We garner favor with the Chinese *and* we reduce competition..."

"Yes, yes." Ramsey waved his words away. "And as I say, if we'd tried it earlier, it might have worked. But after all that competition, and years of low prices, the Company's in some serious trouble, isn't it? India's proving devilishly expensive to keep pacified. While the Company could keep a hand on the tiller to keep prices up, it was all fine, but now, well, it's not."

"But in time...!"

"Nobody's interested in time, Elliot. They're interested in right now. And right now the Company can't figure out how it's going to pay the bills for the soldiers who are keeping India in line. So, our clever gents came up with a solution of their own."

"I don't...I don't understand."

"Oh, I expect you do, Elliot. You're a smart man. You just haven't had a chance to think this part of it through. Look. Where in India are most of the opium

poppies grown?”

“Malwa,” answered Elliot at once.

“Correct.” Lord Ramsey beamed like a proud headmaster. “And where are most of those opium poppies processed and packaged?”

“Calcutta,” said Elliot. “But...”

“And who controls the roads between Malwa and Calcutta?”

“The Company.”

And with that, all the jagged pieces dropped into place.

“My God,” whispered Elliot. “This disaster is about *road tolls*?”

Now the look Ramsey turned on him was positively pitying.

“Elliot, you’ve knocked about enough to know that no matter what you’re looking at, there’s always something else in back of it.” Ramsey sighed. “We thought that Indian cotton would keep the Company afloat, but those damned Americans with their slave plantations and their clipper ships can get their cotton from New Orleans to Manchester cheaper than we can get ours in from Calcutta. So, that was no help. But tolls! Now, there’s a reliable source of income.” Ramsey tapped the side of his red nose. “Move twenty thousand chests a year, valued at about six million pounds, comes out to something like a million pounds per annum in usage fees that we get from the Americans, and again from the Dutch, and again from the Portuguese. That’s not to mention that the value of the opium the Company shifted itself is something like sixteen million pounds. Per year, mark you, per *year*.” Lord Ramsey grinned. “That’s a lot of guns for India, and a lot of revenue for Whitehall, and a bit leftover for the rest of us.

“So you see, Elliot, I’d like your scheme to work, but it can’t. The Company’s not abandoning opium. Not for all the tea in China.”

II.

“Charles. These arrived while you were gone.” Clara held out a bundle of papers tied in string.

Elliot stood in the doorway of his front parlor and stared at his wife.

We’re leaving.

That’s what he’d meant to say to her. He’d dismissed the carriage from Lord Ramsey’s door, and walked the whole long way down the hill. He didn’t remember anything about the route he took. All he remembered was the red haze of anger.

I will not prop up these men any more. Pack the children's things. I will write out my resignation letter and visit the bank.

But now that he faced her, he couldn't move any further. He couldn't speak the words he'd intended. Because what he'd really be telling her was that he'd failed. Again. This had been his last chance, and he'd failed her, and their children. And himself.

But here now she stood here with yet more business for him to do. It never stopped. It never would.

We're leaving.

Confusion creased her clear brow. Clara came forward with the packet in both hands. Elliot received it with numb hands. His eyes — as dazed by his failure as the rest of him — made out the direction only slowly. Even more slowly, he realized something strange.

The direction wasn't in Mr. Johnston's writing as it should have been. Or even in Morrison's.

Clara covered his hands with hers. "Charles, will you tell me what's happened?"

Elliot did not answer. Instead, he moved to undo the string. Clara's hands fell down to her sides.

Apologize, he told himself. At least say something, damn it!

He unfolded the papers and scanned the first page.

The first thing he saw was Lin's name, and his full title, right at the top in Old Mr. Thom's tidy handwriting.

It was the edict. The one Elliot had known must come. The one that would indicate how serious the high commissioner really was. It was long and it was flowery, and he skimmed, looking for the pertinent phrases. Phrases like:

...Let our ports once be closed against you, and for what profits can your several nations any longer look?

"Damn," he breathed.

"What is it?" asked Clara.

"I don't...I'm sorry. I have to read these through..." he was already heading to his study.

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

He kicked the door shut behind him and shuffled the papers.

...I proceed to issue my commands...Let them deliver up to government every particle of the opium on board their store-ships...

Someone was knocking on the door. "Charles?"

Clara.

"Charles, tell me what's happened."

He did not answer her. He just kept reading.

...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...

In the margins beside this, someone had scrawled: *Howqua and Mowqua in chains. Morrison says Lin has warrants ready. Guang Xie bringing in more men. Dent's head first for the block.*

Dear God.

It was happening. The exact thing he'd always feared. The Chinese were out of patience. Canton was being mustered against the foreign invader.

There were two hundred or more men in the factories right now, trapped between a wall and a mile-wide river.

They'll be sitting ducks.

"Charles!"

Have to get back. Elliot dropped the papers, crossed the study and threw open the door. Clara was standing right on the other side, her fist raised to knock again, her face flushed and frightened.

"What's wrong?" she demanded. "What's happening?"

"I have to get back. ...I have to write Palmerston, copy out this edict...damn, damn, damn!" He held up both hands. "It's nothing to fret yourself or the children over. Just...I just have to get back."

"Is it another execution?"

Elliot stopped. "You know...?"

"Of course I know!" Clara threw up her hands, appealing to heaven in the face of her husband's blindness. "I read about it, and the riot, in the *Quarterly Review*. I had hoped you would tell me about it yourself."

"I meant to keep you and keep the children from worrying."

Clara strode across the threshold and Charles fell back. She shut the study door and locked it. When she turned again, she spoke low and sharp.

"I am a daughter of islands, Charles. You will not soil some imagined

innocence in me by telling me danger lies off my shore. Neither do you protect me, or our children with silence!”

He looked at her and saw her as she was, not as the ballroom lady or modest matron. She was his Clara, the strong, straightforward, beautiful woman he married.

He loved her for herself.

But he wanted her to be all those other things, and he could not stop trying to make her that way. Just as surely as she could not stop being who she was.

What the hell have I done to us?

He swallowed. “Lin’s going to try to arrest Dent, and probably some others. I have to get back before anybody tries anything drastic.”

Her jaw trembled, and somehow that was more devastating than any burst of temper could have been. “Don’t do this, Charles. If the Chinese force their way into the factories...”

“I’m sure that’s not going to happen,” he said, even though that was the fear at the front of his mind. “It’s only Dent and his lot I’m worried about.”

She stared at him, knowing how badly he had just lied and letting him see how badly that hurt her.

“I’m sorry, Clara.”

She did not forgive him. Her silence told him that. Maybe she never would. He could not let that matter.

“There are hundreds of men in the factories,” he reminded her. “I can’t abandon them. This isn’t about trade or the Company.” *Or my pride.* “No one else can give the orders to evacuate, if it does come to that, or bring in the navy. This is my command.”

Down by her waist, Clara’s fingers brushed restlessly against her skirts, working at nothing. He used to think it was a random, nervous motion, but across the years he’d come to realize what she was doing.

She was telling her rosary.

“Of course,” she said. Because along with all the other things Clara might be, she was an officer’s wife. “But if this is what it’s come to...Charles, we have to send the children back to England.”

“What?”

Her eyes were closed off. Her face hard. “If you go back to Canton, the children go to England. I want them away from whatever is about to be unleashed.”

“Clara...”

“Do not try to tell me it will be all right, Charles. Do not treat me as a fool. You do not know what will happen next and neither do I, and that is why they must go.”

“Very well. I must get a dispatch about this on the next packet ship back to England. Can you make the children’s arrangements?”

“I will begin at once.”

He kissed her cheek and felt it was cold. He stepped away and saw her standing there, her hand pressed against the swell of her belly. She was with child. He was sure. She had not told him. She did not tell him now. She would not wield the one weapon that might have kept him from leaving her. She just stared over his shoulder, out the window, toward the ocean, and the mainland and whatever waited there. She looked like a statue of marble and onyx and in that moment, Elliot did not know her at all.



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