

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

Sailors We

(First Fifty Pages)

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ONE

I once met Lord Nelson. He called those who fought alongside him his brave fellows. Unlike Wellington. That lofty called those who won his battles for him the scum of the earth.

If I hadn't met Lord Nelson on that day, I doubt I would have ever joined the navy, which might seem strange, considering I didn't join until fifteen years later. But I was only nine at the time and, from when I was sixteen, I worked for eight years at the village school, supposedly as an assistant to the teacher Jumpy Featherstone, but more often taking his lessons for him whenever his demons couldn't be contained. When he finally succumbed to them, the parish elders asked me to run the school until they found a replacement. Six months later they called me in to announce that a vicar's son from Winchester would be taking the position and, because he wouldn't be needing an assistant, I no longer had a job.

So, I was faced with the prospect of either looking for similar work during the economic mess that gripped the country after the war with Napoleon or working alongside my older brothers on our farm. Knowing my brothers well, that meant spending a good part of my life digging ditches and mucking out pigsties. When the weather was reasonable this was bearable work. But, when it wasn't and winter, an exchange from a play I wrote for a school concert tells it best:

"Why's that boy crying, father?"

"He lost his gloves."

"What's wrong with his hands?"

"He can't close them."

So that's when I started thinking about meeting Lord Nelson. Not so much about the meeting itself, but what resulted shortly afterwards.

He was at Portsmouth on his way back to the *Victory* before *Trafalgar*. Not that any of us had heard of *Trafalgar*. All we knew was that the fleet was about to sail, and England's fate could be decided by the outcome.

My father and I were in town delivering a load of vegetables to the dockyard. Da, as I called him, had lost a leg at the *Battle of the Nile*. But he wasn't scarred elsewhere where you couldn't see. Leastwise, not too badly. Not like old Mick and big Caliph. Old Mick had lost both legs, and big

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

Caliph was blind from being hit in the face by a blast of red-hot splinters. Whenever we took them fresh vegetables, I avoided old Mick's vacant stare and couldn't look at big Caliph's ruined face or listen to his endless chuckle without my eyes smarting. Da was ship's boatswain in the *Vanguard*, Nelson's flag at The Nile, and gun captain of a 32-pounder carronade on the upper deck during the battle. Old Mick, big Caliph and Da were all who were left alive from his gun crew afterwards. The broadside from *Le Spartiate* that cut through them was the same one that knocked Lord Nelson down and took his sight for a time.

The money Da sent home from captured prizes helped build my grandpa's farm into one the best in our parts. Mainly thanks to Captain Nelson's pluck, according to Da. I never corrected him for calling Lord Nelson, "Captain". He served in three ships with him, the longest when Nelson was captain of the *Agamemnon*. Not that Da often spoke of his time at sea.

So, that's how he with me in close tow came to be on Southsea Beach that day. We'd heard Lord Nelson was at the George and would join the fleet after breakfast. We hoped to catch sight of him at the sally-port landing. But from daybreak the streets were jammed tight with a crowd of the likes I had never seen before or since.

We had no chance of reaching the landing, so we headed for Southsea beach. Da said we'd have to settle for a distant glimpse of his barge as it headed off to where the *Victory* was anchored. Although he was tall enough to see above the crowd, for my sake we headed for the water's edge. But others with the same idea weren't keen for us to make our way between them. I suppose on account of the trouble Da had walking on the pebbles. Or maybe because of our rough farm clobber. We didn't have time to change when we heard what was happening.

Most of those about us were frock-coated gentlemen in fine top hats and ladies with their shoulders draped in fancy shawls against the morning chill who grumbled beneath their breath and refused to step aside. All of them stabbed us with icy stares and some of the men even jostled Da as we tried to pass.

Suddenly there was a commotion alongside us, and the crowd parted to reveal Lord Nelson himself. For he too had found his way to the sally-port blocked. His blue frockcoat gleamed where it was strung with medals and ribbons. *Resplendent* is how the news sheets described him. *Resplendent* is how I remember him.

Most of us were struck dumb by this shift in events, which are as clear in my mind as if they had happened yesterday. I think because I have gone over them so many times since, both what I saw and what was said. I and most of those about me stood staring at Lord Nelson open-mouthed. Because of

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

the weight of those times and that day, many of us began to cry. Some people sank to their knees in prayer.

Of all about, only Da kept control of his bearing, as calm as if they were passing each other on the way to church. “God go with you, Captain.”

Nelson stopped in mid-stride and turned back. He looked steadily at Da for a time before he spoke. “John Andrews, is that you?”

“Ay, Captain. It is indeed.”

Nelson’s face, that a moment before had been clouded in concentration, lifted and broke into a smile that in recall still takes my breath. He turned to me. “Your son?”

“Ay, Captain. Jamie.”

“Pleased to meet you, Jamie.”

“Thank you, sir ... Lord ...m’Lord,” I think I stammered.

“Are you well, John?”

“Ay, Captain. Hale and hearty.”

Again, Nelson looked steadily at Da for a time before turning back to me. “Pity I can’t take your father with me, Jamie. I and England would not be better served.” With this he touched his hat, turned, and walked to where his barge had pulled into the shallows.

Only when the barge pulled away did the crowd find its voice and begin to cheer. And the roar swept across the harbour to Gosport like a roll of thunder. Some people ran straight into the water up to their waists. Most didn’t stop cheering until he was out of sight. I doubt we could have been more charged with our feelings had he already saved us from invasion. Or had we known we’d never see him again.

When I finally took Da’s arm and helped him make his way back up the beach, those who were near drew back and waited silently until we had passed. Some removed their hats.

And when I add up all the plusses and minuses of deciding to join the navy, I believe I came out miles ahead. Not the least because, if I hadn’t joined, I would never have ended up in China and would never have encountered Charles Elliot, Owen Hobson, or indeed, Meilin Catriona MacGregor.

TWO

I first caught sight of Meilin at the food hall of the Golden Dragon Inn behind the Praia Grande in Macau. The Praia Grande was the sweep of the waterfront occupied by the Governor's palace and the foreign trading posts known as factories that were housed in western-style buildings, some with ornate facades. I had arrived from Madras a few days before in the *Andromache*, along with Lord Napier and his family and Captain Charles Elliot and his. Lord Napier was the new Chief Superintendent of Trade for China, and Charles Elliott, his Master Attendant. They had their families for company. I had the latest amendments to the navy's gunnery standing orders, a crisp single volume copy of Noah Webster's 1828 American Dictionary of the English Language – purchased from an illiterate Yankee whaler – a battered book of poems by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and a collection of Sir Walter Scott's novels, left to me by my mother.

Abandoning for a moment a natural inclination towards modesty, I had recently served at *Excellent*, the navy's gunnery school at Portsmouth, and could claim proficiency in the theoretical and practical deployment of every type and size of navy weapon from 64 and 32-pound carronade smashers through to Congreve rockets. I could accurately fire every long gun from the smallest bore through to 32-pounders loaded with the right charge strengths for single shot, double shot, treble shot, chain shot, and grape and canister shot. I was familiar with the sponge-and-load differences from rapid, point blank, hot-action fire to long distance ranging fire. I could strip and reassemble a gunlock with my eyes closed and knock a seagull out of the air with a musket or pistol when they were open. I also trained the marine instructors at *Excellent* and helped Commander George Smith, the original commanding officer, and Captain Thomas Hastings, his successor, to write and maintain their gunnery manual and the trainees' instructions cards.

So, it is probably not surprising that in the *Andromache*, I was employed as the master gunner. But what would have certainly been surprising to the senior officers, including the captain, Henry Ducie Chads, was that I had never fired a shot in anger.

Meilin MacGregor was standing at a high desk at the back of the food hall flicking through a stack of papers with one hand, while skipping the fingers of the other along the beads of an abacus. Although her looks were predominantly Asian, her dark hair had a reddish hue; so, I assumed she had Portuguese blood. I was sitting with two companions and a local British escort at a long table together with a noisy cluster of other locals where my view of her was more often obstructed than not by

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

billowing clouds of steam rising from the meals, by diners at our own and other tables coming and going and by waiters shuttling to and from the open door of the kitchen. So, I may not have taken much notice of her had she not projected the most delightful vision of unconscious loveliness that I had ever encountered during my travels on either side of the equator.

The clatter of plates and the unholy din from our own and surrounding tables made it difficult for our escort – a mid-ranking employee of a minor trading company – to hear me when I asked if he had any knowledge of her. At that point, I noticed that she had gathered up her abacas and other effects and was moving off towards the kitchen. So, I stood to watch her and was pleased beyond measure – both ridiculously and pathetically, considering I probably would never see her again – to note that she did not have the crippled feet of so many of her countrywomen. Although at that early stage of my life I already considered myself a very pillar of racial tolerance, I could never look upon that cruel practice with anything other than utter repugnance.

As she passed into the kitchen, a burst of steam ahead of her, backlit by a flaring pan, momentarily encased her entire form in a crimson halo before she disappeared. Had I been less seasoned by my travels and of a more whimsical bent, I may have read this as a sign.

After I regained my seat and weathered the taunts of my companions, our escort said that he hadn't noticed her before but would find out what he could. He then stood up before I could caution him to be discreet and walked across to speak to a portly gentleman of indeterminate race whom I assumed was either the proprietor or the manager. To my discomfort and the further amusement of my companions, the two then engaged in a lively conversation frequently punctuated by obviously amused glances in my direction.

When he returned, he told me that, the lady in question was not an employee, but carrying out an audit for the Canton-based American trading house, Olyphant and Co, which had an interest in the place. He went on to explain that, although he didn't recognise her, he did know her by reputation. She was Meilin MacGregor, the daughter of a Manchu woman with claims of nobility and Malachi MacGregor, a Scottish trader and probable smuggler, whose present whereabouts were unknown. Apparently, the last confirmed sighting of him was over a year before when he departed Singapore supposedly for either Timor or Ceylon. As the former was as far to the southeast of Singapore as the latter was to the northwest, this could be read as, *for God knows where!*

Our escort also took some delight in telling me that MacGregor was exceedingly protective of his daughter, to the extent of dealing harshly with anyone he believed took advantage of any of his absences to get close to her. In this regard, he reputedly took one potential suitor to sea and threw him overboard.

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

If he thought this would be unwelcome news, he was mistaken. In fact, it was quite the reverse. Because back then I was still young enough to draw from that unlikely tale, nothing that interested me more than discovering she was unattached. That her father chose to hang an invisible, *do-not-touch* sign around her neck, paled to an inconsequence by comparison. I did ask our escort how the daughter of a suspected smuggler could be trusted by any of the trading companies, and he explained that as well as being reputedly fluent in half a dozen languages, including English and Portuguese, she had a reputation of always being scrupulously honest, often annoyingly so for those who looked for more flexibility in her accounting, one of the reasons she regularly worked for Olyphant and Co. At this point his lip curled and he spoke disparaging for a time about the company he called Olyphants, mainly it would seem, because they trumpeted their religious and ethical credentials and – to his mind, stupidly – refused to trade in opium, the most lucrative business in the China trade. Knowing very little about opium other than my favourite poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge – he of *Ancient Mariner* fame – reputedly was an opium addict, I made no comment.

He then went on to say that the question I should have asked was not how the daughter of a suspected smuggler could be trusted with the tasks she performed, but how was it that a woman could be employed to perform a role that should have traditionally and exclusively remained in the province of a well-credentialed man. Someone such as himself, I deduced from an underlying hint of bitterness. As he then went on for far too long about how this would not have been tolerated in London, I made a silent pact with myself to seek other company in future. Life was too short to spend any of it that could be avoided in the company of a boring little unimaginative misogynist.

I next caught sight of her unexpectedly at the native market, having given up traipsing along the Praia Grande in the hope of bumping into her near where I assumed would be her main area of employment. Had I been successful, I planned to ask her for directions to the office of a customs agent I knew was in the vicinity. But now we were so far from that location, such a query would have sounded absurd. She was making her way through the crowd behind a Portuguese giant who was clearing a path for both her and a Chinese clerk who was trailing in her wake with a large stack of books carried in a net over his shoulder. Despite having no clear plan of how to arrest her attention, and with much trouble because of the crush, I managed to put myself ahead of her. As she neared, I dodged the rhythmic sweep of her henchman's shoulders to give her my best side, tip my hat and extend a cheery, "Good morning, my lady. What a beautiful day this is!"

For all the good it did me.

If she gave me more than a pitying glance as she swept past, I didn't notice. I could have been just one other chattering obstacle in the human wash that parted around her like a many-coloured bow

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

wave. I could hardly blame her. It was a typical July day for those parts, as I was soon to learn, one which only someone who had been driven insane by the heat could have described as beautiful. The sky, the sea and the hills were hidden behind a damp blanket of mist, and it was impossible to walk any distance without being drenched in perspiration.

So, I stood there with my arms akimbo looking forlornly to where I had last glimpsed her before she disappeared into the tumbling kaleidoscope of colour infused with a babbling cacophony I would one day be able to identify as the shouts and banter of a predominantly local Macanese dialect spliced with enthusiastic contributions from highland and lowland Cantonese and a spattering of Tanka and Hoklo variations from a 200-mile sweep of the coast and nearby islands.

I didn't see her again until after Lord Napier's trip to Canton.

For all the good that did him.

Because the East India Company's monopoly on trade was due to expire, he had come to Macau on route to Canton with a commission that included approaching Viceroy Lu Kun, the Governor of Guangdong Province, to discuss Britain being able to deal with China on an equal diplomatic basis and China extending the number of ports where trade could be carried out. His failure in achieving this, in hindsight, could be blamed on many factors, not the least his ignorance of, and later heated objection to, what the Chinese deemed sacrosanct in any dealing with foreigners. When we arrived at Macau, I was as ignorant as he in this regard. But whereas my ignorance was of small consequence, his was immense. Mine was likely to have a bearing only on my personal dealings with individual Chinese. His had a bearing on Britain's dealings with the entire Chinese nation, with repercussions that could bound and rebound for centuries.

The week after we arrived at Macau, we sailed with him and his entourage to the Bocca Tigris or Bogue, the entrance to a narrow 30-mile channel of the Pearl River that led to Canton, where we put him in the cutter *Louisa*, which could traverse the shallower upper reaches of the waterway. He had earlier purchased the *Louisa* from the East India Company in Macau for that purpose and, when necessary, to act as a shuttle between Macau and Canton.

The Chinese authorities were aware that Lord Napier was a high ranking British official and were infuriated that he had breached long-established protocol by suddenly appearing uninvited on their doorstep. They made much of the fact that he came to the Bocca Tigris in a British warship and had arrived at Canton after midnight in what they claimed was clandestine fashion. And they particularly objected to seeing him officiate at the raising of the union-jack the following morning outside the English factory where he had taken up residence.

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

Back in the *Andromache*, we were kept up to date with these events from the captain receiving official messages dropped off by passing British traders, and by other travellers from Canton being only too eager to inform us.

Because China conducted most of its foreign trade through either Canton or Macau, the Pearl estuary, surrounded by the steep green hills of the mainland and nearby islands, was a delight to a seafarer's eye: a seething confusion of vessels of various shape, size, and purpose. The day we arrived at the Bocca Tigris, a steady breeze had blown away the mist from the hills, and our surrounds were mesmerizing. In the distance, an Arabic dhou was skimming over the eye-smarting expanse of the bay on a rippling wash of white water, its raked-back lanteen sail slicing across the breeze like the sweep of a scimitar. Closer to shore, local craft ranged from various sized sampans to Portuguese lorchas and big ocean-going junks. The junk-like, segmented sails of the lorchas were rigged to masts stepped in western-style hulls and, in the junks themselves, from their deep waists to their long-raked sterns and high poops. Foreign vessels ranged from sloops to brigs, with cutters and smaller craft shuttling back and forth like attendant servants to and from those with drafts too deep for the upper river.

Mr Coleridge – whom I heard much later had died on this very day, it being July 25, 1834 – would have found delight in the reflections that wiggled towards me from all points of the compass.

Oh, my beautiful Meilin MacGregor, how I wish it could have been a day like this, rather than the one where I assailed you like a gormless dolt with my, "Good morning, my lady. What a beautiful day this is!"

Locals were regular harbingers of ill news, forewarning us of its imminent arrival by sailing out to surround the ship and setting off firecrackers, banging on drums and gongs, blowing bugles, and haranguing us with spitting virulence. A small junk came so close on one of these occasions, ignoring all warnings to stand off, that Captain Chads told me, if I thought it necessary, to draw a blunderbuss from the armoury and keep the junk at bay. One day, I did think it necessary. So, I loaded one with a full scoop of loose grape and blew a hole as big as the blunt end of a bull through the lower segments of its sail. I have never seen, before or since, such a raucous commotion silenced so abruptly, nor the source disperse so rapidly. Nor have I ever seen such startled expressions as displayed by those standing near me who thought I was bluffing when I brought the gun to my shoulder. The bruise I carried for ages was a painful reminder that some tasks are best delegated.

The first time we were harassed by locals – after which details of what had precipitated it were relayed to us – occurred the day after Lord Napier's arrival at Canton. John Astell, his private secretary, presented a letter at the city gate addressed to the Viceroy. The first mandarin who turned up refused to accept the letter because, among the other numerous affronts committed by the British

Barbarians, Lord Napier had the temerity to assign the task to an underling rather than present the letter himself. Also, there was no official chop affixed to it, a prime requisite for all petitions presented to the government. Astell argued that it was not a petition but simply a letter of introduction; so, a more senior mandarin was summoned. When this austere gentleman finally arrived in his four-man sedan chair and also refused to accept the letter, representatives of the Cohong – the Chinese guild of merchants, called Hong, through which all trade matters were supposed to be conducted – fearing a loss of commerce, pleaded with Astell to give them the letter so that they could submit it through proper channels. But Astell knew that having to negotiate via the Cohong, like any common foreigner, was the antithesis of Lord Napier's coming to Canton, so stood his ground. Two more officials were then called who also refused to accept the letter. Finally, after standing outside the gate for over three hours and near fainting in the blistering heat, Astell returned to the English factory.

The news of this reached us along with directions from Napier to cruise the nearby waters of the South China Sea, rather than remain where our presence might be deemed intimidatory. But when we later returned to the estuary and came across the 28-gun frigate *Imogene* waiting for us, I began to wonder if our esteemed former guest wasn't one of those travellers who, upon confronting a foreigner who doesn't understand him, thought that shouting louder would make himself better understood.

Captain Price Blackwood of the *Imogene* had earlier met with the *Louisa* off Macau with orders from Napier for both of us to sail back to the Bocca Tigris where we were to remain clear of the forts and await his further instructions. Blackwood also told us that all trade with Britain had been suspended because of Napier's continuing refusal to liaise with the Cohong. When we arrived off Chuenpi Island at the mouth of the waterway, we were met with even more disturbing news, forewarned by the size of our Chinese welcoming committee and the degree of hostility they displayed when they reached us. This included the incident where I decided that a practical demonstration of the capability of a blunderbuss would be a more effective deterrent than simply waving it about in front of people who may not have seen one.

When a boat from an East Indiaman managed to break through the fleet of protesters, we learned that Lord Napier, had attached a list of his grievances to the city gate and distributed copies printed in Chinese throughout the city. These included the warning that thousands of the Viceroy's countrymen would suffer from a loss of trade with the British, caused by what he termed "the perversity of the Chinese Government". Such a drastic move was probably provoked by three mandarins keeping him waiting for hours before a meeting they agreed to attend and, at that meeting, still refusing to accept his letter to the Viceroy. What also didn't help was losing the counsel of the Reverend Robert Morrison, a long-time China resident and his most experienced interpreter, who was ill before they left

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

the *Andromache* and died shortly after arriving at Canton. Also, his own health had begun to fail, and he may have believed he needed to expedite matters before it worsened. But regardless of the cause, he obviously had no inkling of what his action would unleash.

The Viceroy thundered that it was a capital offence to incite the people against their rulers and that he would be justified in calling for Napier's head, labelling him "a Barbarian dog" whom he said he could hardly believe had the audacity to call himself a government official. His rage was compounded by the knowledge that the "seditious papers" could not have been printed and distributed without the complicity of "treacherous" Chinese, prompting him immediately to order the arrest of the miscreants and to release an edict forbidding any Chinese interaction of any kind with the English Barbarians, sealing his proclamation with the dire, "Let all with trembling awe obey".

Word of the edict swept around the estuary as if caught in a gale. Chinese workers fled in panic from the English factories at both Canton and Macau, along with the servants of the British residents. Lady Napier herself was threatened and came close to being assaulted by the now-alienated Chinese police and had to be taken under the direct protection of the Portuguese Governor.

When a copy of the Viceroy's edict was posted on Napier's front door, and the English factory was surrounded by a mob of chanting soldiers, he went to the entrance and ordered them to disperse. This merely increased their fervour, and he was forced to retreat. When he then learned that Manchu bannermen – the more professional arm of the Viceroy's troops, often called *Tartars* by foreigners – were also gathering nearby, he sent a hasty message via his Third Superintendent, Sir George Robinson for both the *Imogene* and *Andromache* to force a passage past the forts that protected the Bocca Tigris and proceed to Whampoa, Canton's port which lay some twelve miles downstream of the city. From there, we were to send a detachment of marines to protect British interests at Canton. The *Louisa* now captained by Charles Elliot, joined us from Macau when we were preparing both frigates for battle.

Confronted by the bristling guns of the forts and the real likelihood that I was about to experience my first live action and perhaps be injured or killed, my mind was almost entirely preoccupied with pathetic concern that my lovely Meilin MacGregor might have already been harmed by the Viceroy's edict or might in the future be harmed by it.

Why pathetic? Meilin MacGregor: who had no knowledge of my existence, who would probably never have any knowledge of it, whom I would probably never meet and, if I ever did meet her, might consider me the thief of the air I breathed. Pathetic!

THREE

The shore batteries that protected the Bocca Tigris were on the islands that were clustered where the river entered the bay; Taikoktow and Cheunpi Islands at the head, North and South Wantung and Anunghoy Islands behind these, and Tiger Island further into the channel. Further towards Canton were other islands and outcrops, most of them heavily defended with forts that bristled with cannons. Where the channel narrowed, it could be closed by cables and timber rafts.

The main advantage of bombarding shore batteries mounted in forts that are built above the waterline is that you can see where your shots are landing and make necessary corrections to your fire. The main disadvantage of engaging any shore battery is that it usually has bigger guns than you, and more of them.

Not all the guns lined up against us were well above the waterline, as we were soon to discover. As we came within range, war junks in Anson's Bay, which sat between Cheunpi and South Anunghoy islands opened fire on us along with the guns on Cheunpi. And as we moved further into the channel, the forts on Wantung, Anunghoy and Tiger Islands also opened fire. With the booming blast of cannons from all around the narrow waterway roaring and rebounding like thunder in the surrounding green hills and nearby headlands, I could have easily been convinced we were under attack from a thousand cannon.

Because of the direction of the breeze, we were forced to tack from one side of the channel to the other, regularly exposing our beams to one or other of the forts. But few of the balls came anywhere near us. Some flew harmlessly overhead or fell short, but most struck well ahead or well astern of us, sending great plumes of water high into the air. But these were usually so far from us that, even when we were downwind, we were rarely touched by the spray. Although their gunners often managed to maintain a steady rate of fire and had some control over the elevation of their guns, they obviously had little or no control of bearing. So, we exploited this to the full, rarely putting ourselves within what we could determine was any direct line of fire, while pounding them whenever our own guns came to bear. From what I could determine from the sound of their guns, most were antique weapons with large or damaged vents that played havoc with their muzzle velocity. But, after running the gauntlet of the guns on Anunghoy Island and both the north and south Wantung islands, the wind suddenly dropped, and we were forced to anchor below Tiger Island.

Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down,

Twas sad as sad could be.

I wasn't feeling too chirpy myself, Ancient Mariner, becalmed as we were in the Bocca Tigris, the tiger's mouth, with its teeth very apparent wherever we looked. We hadn't been hit at that stage and were reasonably safe where we were anchored. But as soon as the breeze lifted, we would again have to pass within range of the guns on Anunghoy, both Wantungs and on Tiger itself. And compounding my unease, we could see sampans ferrying fresh ammunition and repair materials from the mainland to the islands, and droves of soldiers transporting them in ant-lines up towards the forts.

My queer feeling was well justified, because when we finally were able to get underway, we immediately came under fire again with both us and the *Imogene* being hit. The ball that struck us crashed into a larboard-side mid-ship gun, knocking it off its carriage and almost severing the leg of one of its crew before rebounding from a neighbouring gun, hitting the handspike the injured man had dropped and driving it into his chest. The ball then struck a locker and rolled along the deck bouncing off other carriages before a boy tried to trap it with his foot. His yelp of pain revealed his mistake and the patch of skin he left behind logged it. An older hand finally put an end to its rampage by trapping it under a bucket and securing it against the main's rail.

I found myself beside the injured man almost before I consciously decided to act. While his gun captain worked on his chest, I cut off the lanyard attached to the gunlock of the dismantled gun, looped it around his leg above the wound, slipped the loose end through the eye, pulled it tight and secured it with a couple of hitches. This brought the flow of blood to a trickle but by then the deck beneath me was well awash with what he had already lost. Amidst the smoke that continued to belch from the starboard guns and blow back to swirl around us, I became vaguely aware of some of the senior officers, including Captain Chads, coming to investigate the damage while standing well clear. After a man who was rushing past slipped and fell heavily, knocking himself senseless, I called for a boy to use fire buckets to slosh the blood down the nearest scupper. And when I stood up, I opened my arms and signaled for him to drench me in a similar manner. Which he did, with some success in removing the worst of the gore from my rig. An oath from the gun captain turned me back.

He shook his head and threw aside the bloodied handspike. "He's gone," I think he said. Or maybe he said, "It was forlorn," or both. My senses were ringing along with my ears at that stage, and much of what I remember of the incident I had to reconstruct and align in sensible order later.

At that moment, the ship heeled as the two helmsmen swung the wheel to execute another sharp change of course. When we steadied, barked orders from the quarterdeck soon had all the larboard-side guns alongside us, with exception of the two that had been damaged, blasting away again.

The gun captain gave me a nod, turned away and directed his remaining crew to lift their dead companion, carefully, to prevent his damaged lower limb from completely detaching. They then carried him as gently as if he were still alive to the starboard side and committed his body to the deep. I imagined they bade him farewell with some parting prayers and remarks, but these were lost amidst the roar of the guns, the curses of the nearby crews and the repeated shouts of, “Sponge and load!”

So, Able Seaman Andrew Wallis Muscat, as I was later to learn was his name – Grapey to his friends – the second son of an occasional smuggler from Trebarthwith Strand, North Cornwall, departed the land of the living without any accredited blessing. A chaplain, with whom I made a point of never passing any pleasantries again, did finally arrive to speak to the gun crew. But only when we were well clear of the forts, and all the guns had long fallen silent.

The ball that struck the *Imogene* breached the hammocks in the web-netting lashed to their forecabin, killing one man and inflicting minor wounds on two others.

Considering the narrowness of the channel and the amount of shot that had been fired at us, I suppose we should have counted ourselves lucky that only one of our own had been killed and three others left with minor injuries. But as was endorsed by later engagements, it’s hard to feel lucky when anyone on board has been lost.

The cutter *Louisa*, which had hooked onto the tail of the frigates, received only minor damage, one round clipping her mast and another knocking a hole in her jolly boat. Because of the limited size of *Louisa*’s guns – mainly 3-pounders – and the apparent inexperience of her gunners, her contribution was negligible, and by the time she passed under the forts, we had already put most of their guns out of action. Charles Elliot claimed he was nonchalantly sunning himself in a deck chair on the upper deck during the passage.

Steady, Charlie! Whether spoken truthfully or in jest, such silly remarks don’t go down well with anyone who was there. And I know well, as you know well, that despite being blooded by what you claim was real enemy action at Algiers when you were a Middy, your guy wires were stretched as tight and singing as were mine.

We had not long passed by Tiger Island when the captain of an American sloop came on board with a copy of Lord Napier’s latest manifesto, which had again been printed in both English and classical Chinese. Surprisingly so, if it were true that the locals who had assisted him before had been arrested and tortured. In light of my later-gained knowledge of aggrieved Chinese officials, this was likely. But also likely, and far more of a concern to me, were the probable repercussions of Napier’s, “*Know that the king of England is a powerful monarch, who rules over an extent of territory more comprehensive in space, and infinitely more so in power, than the whole empire of China, commanding armies which*

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

have conquered wherever they went, and navies which have traversed seas wherein no Chinese has yet dared to show his face.”

I’m not sure what thoughts he intended to instill in the minds of the Viceroy or other Chinese officials who read this boast, but “God save us all!” was the only high-minded phrase that readily came to my mind as I stood in the waist of the *Andromache* and looked about at a myriad places of concealment for any weapon of any size close abeam of us.

The American said that Napier’s health was failing, and I could well believe it. Although my knowledge of international diplomacy was limited, I couldn’t believe that in his right mind he would act in a way that seemed more likely to destroy Britain’s chances of ever bringing the Chinese to a negotiating table. And far more importantly, get quite a few of us, maybe even all of us, killed into the bargain. If he had the backing of half a dozen ships of the line and a couple of dozen lesser vessels hovering in the Pearl estuary, his belligerent stance might have been understandable. But we were a piddling 26-gun frigate, for Lord Jesus’ sake! And the *Imogene* only a couple of guns bigger. And here we were in the Tiger’s Mouth, with the river level falling, all channels strewn with sand bars, and big field guns likely to be brought to bear on us at any moment from either side.

We finally arrived at Whampoa and were able to send the detachment of marines to Canton without coming under further attack. Miraculously so, considering the virulent nature of the threats and the promised retribution hurled at us from the locals passing by on sampans and junks. We remained there for fifteen days, unable to proceed any further upstream because of the river level having fallen too far – at least without being warped around the sand bars – or downstream because we learned it was now closed off behind us with cables and barges loaded with stone. Never had I experienced a sensation of being so oppressively entombed. Not so much by the ship being trapped, at least not directly, but by the stifling heat and humidity. Only if I had been tied to a rack or squeezed in a wool press do I believe I could have felt more uncomfortable or had more perspiration wrung from my body.

I therefore sympathized with Lord Napier, whose presence at Canton we heard had become increasingly untenable as his health continued to decline. At a point where his physician, Thomas Colledge believed he might well die, he finally yielded to the Chinese demands and regrettably entered into an agreement with the Cohong. And so that the Viceroy would lift the trade ban and allow him to return to Macau, he ordered both frigates to leave Whampoa and sail back to the island of Lintin at the mouth of the bay.

After the marines from Canton arrived back on board, we left amidst an expected near-deafening cacophony of derision from the locals, which by means of a flotilla of sampans and junks, accompanied us on the entire journey down river. Because of the absence of a pilot, we were often

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

required to pull back from sand bars and force our way through the shallows. Many on board, resented the incessant noise and shouts of abuse from our escorts, and the marines comforted themselves with impotent talk of retaliation at the first opportunity. Except that it disturbed my sleep, I on the other hand, was largely unaffected by it, being more concerned that we get clear of where our lives could be forfeited in an instant, attested by the number of armed junks, fire rafts and similar water-borne ordnance that had been deployed along both sides of the river since we had previously passed.

To the disgust of Dr Colledge, Lord Napier's departure from Canton was equally noisy and inglorious. Despite assurances that he would be allowed to leave in a boat of his own choosing and be accorded the respect his rank demanded, he was placed under the charge of a civil mandarin in the type of vessel used for transporting important criminals, along with an escort of eight armed boats and two transport vessels carrying soldiers. Because of fabricated delays, the journey during which he was paraded through the western reaches of the estuary took five days, two of which were spent at the port of Zhongshan, where his fever increased and his condition deteriorated, aggravated from being kept awake by an incessant explosion of firecrackers and clamour of gongs and drums. This was a sobering lesson for all of us on the importance the Chinese place on face. And in Napier's case, how anyone of self-proclaimed importance who has lost face will be publicly ridiculed, with the bigger the perceived fall, the greater and more demonstrative the scorn.

When he did finally arrive at Macau, he was unable to leave his bed, and his wife prevented him from seeing visitors. So, when we arrived back, Captain Chads was informed of this and had to resort to communicating with him by written message. He assigned me to deliver what turned out to be the only communication he would be able to send him after arriving back. And consequently, my life took a favourable turn.

FOUR

Because of the volatile nature of recent events, I was required to have someone accompany me. So, I chose Petty Officer Owen Hobson, the gun captain whose steady way impressed me when the man from his gun crew was killed, reminding me that I had noticed him before during evolutions and gun drills.

After we delivered the message, Dr Colledge held us back for some time because he thought Lord Napier might elect to send a reply. He didn't and, by the time we left his house, it was growing dark. On the way back we had to pass through an area where I was pleased that we were armed; myself with a double barrel, smooth bore pistol tucked into the sash I had wrapped around my waist, and Hobson with a regulation navy cutlass in a scabbard on his hip. Although this was one of the more prosperous parts of the town, the twisted laneway along which we made our way was steeped in deep shadow thrown from the high walls that surrounded the houses on either side. So, I kept a close eye on the narrow passageways between the houses. Any one of them would have provided ideal concealment for the criminal gangs we had been warned operated on the fringe of the native quarter and frequently attacked and robbed careless locals, or newcomers who unsuspectingly strayed within their reach.

When we were about half-way along the lane, we rounded a bend and came upon four men attacking someone lying on the ground. All of them, the attackers and their victim, appeared to be Macanese, the mixed race that was prevalent in Macau, some of them more Chinese than Western in appearance, others the reverse. My initial thoughts were that the victim could be a criminal receiving his just deserts. But as we drew closer, and the viciousness of the beating he was receiving became apparent, I decided that even if he were a criminal, no kick to the face of a helpless man could in any way be considered just. So, I shouted, "Avast there!"

The attackers turned to look at us, straightening to full height and squaring their shoulders, their manner conveying that they were more annoyed than concerned by our intrusion. When the one who appeared to be their leader, a tall youth with a scared-face and his hair bound high in a topknot, pulled out a knife and shouted a warning or perhaps a challenge in Portuguese as he pointed it at us, I drew my pistol, believing that a blunderbuss-type demonstration might be warranted. It wasn't. Because when Hobson then unsheathed his cutlass and raised it to the *guard*, the loss of their resolve to stand and fight was reflected in the sudden change to their demeanour; not by any difference that was easy

to define but, had they been a pack of dogs, their ears were no longer pricked, their hackles no longer raised, and their teeth no longer bared. So, I gave Hobson the nod, and we went at them at the trot before they had time to recover, which sent them scurrying down the lane with their tails between their legs.

Their victim tried to struggle to his feet. From the fear in his eyes as we hurried to assist him, I could see that he thought that we might also wish to harm him. Although we had little understanding of his brand of Portuguese, nor he of our brand of English – particularly Hobson’s whose regional accent was far broader than mine – we managed to convince him otherwise, and he allowed us to help him to stand as close to upright as he could manage. He then began to wail pitifully, and displayed such feminine mannerisms, for a few moments I thought he may have been a woman dressed as a man. Hobson suggested he was one of those men – more noticeable in the Orient than at home – whose gender is blurred, and that this was possibly the reason he was attacked.

We were faced with the dilemma of what to do with him. One of his eyes was completely closed, the other was a thin crimson slit oozing bloody tears, he was hunched over as if he had at least one broken rib, and he couldn’t stand without our support. I didn’t want to leave him lying in the street, particularly after having helped him to his feet, as that would have meant callously putting him back down again. But I had no idea of where we could take him, which in his condition couldn’t be very far. Fortunately, after he had regained some composure, he came to the rescue himself by pointing to a gate in a wall on the opposite side of the lane no more than fifty yards away.

After we knocked on the gate, he spoke to whoever belonged to the soft voice behind it, and it was opened for us. The young woman who stepped aside to allow us to enter, cried out in alarm when she saw his condition. Her cry brought two older women rushing from the house to assist, followed by an old man hobbling behind them. Although the three women were now crying and the young man almost choking with emotion, he must have managed to explain how we had come to his rescue, because they and the old man then continually expressed their appreciation with soft words and – more indicative of their European than Chinese heritage – gentle pats and caresses to our hands as they ushered us across a courtyard to the house and there to a room with a bed, on which we carefully placed him. With appropriate taps to the chest, we introduced ourselves and learned that the injured man’s name was Renato. The two older women were Olalla and Lucia, whom we assumed, and later had confirmed, were Renato’s mother and aunt, and the young woman was his sister Edite. The old man whom they all called Paizonho, but introduced as Luiz, we learned later was Olalla’s and Lucia’s father and the owner of the house.

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

When we returned to the courtyard intending to leave, Lucia prevented us by taking our hands and directing us to sit at a table. She then darted back into the house where a small boy and a girl of about four or five years of age, and whom we later learned were Marco and Lili, her twin children, poked out their heads to observe us. Hobson waved a hand in greeting and the heads snapped back out of sight as if he had performed a magician's trick, a skill in which I was soon to learn he was proficient. Lucia then reemerged and placed empty cups and a plate of small cakes on the table. She indicated with a glide of her open hand that we should eat. As she was returning to the house, Edite emerged and, after they exchanged brief words, the younger woman crossed the courtyard and left by the gate.

After we discussed the recent events and agreed that Edite had probably gone to get a doctor, we surveyed our surrounds. Hobson, who had been to these parts before, if only briefly with the East India Company, said that the larger of the two trees in the courtyard was a peach and that the smaller was also a fruit tree but he wasn't sure what kind, thinking perhaps that it might be a plum. Whatever it was, it was planted beside the small fishpond that sat beneath it so that whenever the eggs of the insects its fruit attracted fell into the water, they would help feed the fish. In what had to be based more on his assumption than experience, or at least on what he had been told, he went on to say that this type of courtyard was common throughout all of China.

Because of what had happened in the laneway, I was anxious to get underway before it became completely dark. Hobson, on the other hand seemed to be of different mind, and I was becoming agitated. So, at one point, I asked him if his familiarity with the country and its customs extended to having any idea of how soon we could leave without offending the family. He said that they would lose face if we left before sharing tea and cakes with them, and I detected he wasn't happy with my impatience. Having earlier seen him taking particular notice of Edite, I deduced his reluctance to leave was not because he was feeling hungry.

Shortly afterwards, Lucia, accompanied by Lili clinging to her with her face hidden within the folds of her mother's loose trousers, re-emerged to fill two of the cups with steaming tea. She left the pot with us and was on her way back to the kitchen when Edite returned, ushering a man and a woman ahead of her through the gateway. The man, who wore a long gown and carried a small bag, was the doctor we correctly assumed she had gone to summon. Lucia led him into the house followed by Edite and the woman, whom I thought was probably the doctor's assistant. Her face was hidden from me until something in the conversation she was having with Edite caused her to turn to look back at us. It was Meilin MacGregor. I think my heart might have skipped a beat.

Her gaze stayed on me for a moment before she disappeared, but I detected no sign of recognition. This was a good thing, I told myself. Perhaps because of the clamour within which we were both

immersed when I tried to attract her attention that day at the market, she may not have noticed my idiotic performance.

When she, Edite and Luiz later emerged and came to the table, I leapt to my feet and was vaguely aware of Hobson doing the same. The old man moved ahead of the women and took one of my hands in both of his. I could see he had tears in his eyes. He tried to speak but couldn't. So, he released me and briefly took hold of one of Hobson's hands in a similar gesture, before sitting down and closing his eyes.

Meilin then spoke, introducing herself, and telling us in perfect English with a pleasant Scottish lilt that touched my ear like the chime of a bell, that Paizonho wished to thank us for saving the life of his grandson. We later learned that Paizonho was the family's affectionate name for father. I hoped I didn't appear as ridiculous as well I might have as I introduced myself and Hobson. I believe his presence helped me to keep some control over my bearing and not reveal myself as the smitten fool that I truly was. The women then sat down, and Meilin told us that she lived next door to the doctor and that Edite, who was a friend, had asked her to come back with them so she could properly convey the family's thanks for saving Renato.

Lucia arrived with more cups and another plate of cakes, and then departed again, refusing Edite's apparent request that she join us by grimacing and pointing back at the house before returning to it.

I bathed in Meilin's presence as we discussed many matters, most of which she translated for Luiz and Edite so that they were included in our conversation. She first told us that the entire family was exceedingly grateful for what she termed was our "heroic rescue" of Renato. We, of course, attempted to play down our role, claiming that anyone would have done the same and that his assailants were a weak-kneed crew who took flight almost as soon as we came on the scene. She would have none of this, telling us they were a well-known gang who had a fearsome reputation in the native quarter. We asked if the doctor had made any comment on Renato's condition and she told us that he said one rib was broken and another either cracked or broken, but he would not know how badly his eyes were injured until the swelling had subsided. She also told us that it was not the first time that Renato had been attacked, that because of what she termed his *ailment*, he had attracted many beatings, but never one that had left him so badly injured. At that point Luiz again broke down and covered both of his eyes with his hands. He was sitting within reach; so, I placed a hand on his shoulder.

I was amazed to learn that Meilin was more travelled than either myself or Hobson, not only having been to Africa, India and the Spice Islands, but also to the west coast of America and the coast of New

South Wales. We also learned that she had spent most of her early life at Penang and later Singapore and that she had been tutored by English and Scottish governesses. She explained that a Scottish sea captain who later became her grandfather had saved her mother from pirates when her mother was a child of three. Because she referred to her father only briefly, and then deftly changed the subject, I did not press her about him.

Only when she learned that we were from the *Andromache*, did her manner cool to any degree, saying that Napier's actions at Canton had put many lives in danger. I brought up this subject with her later when Hobson was occupied entertaining Edite and the twins with the magic tricks he had used to encourage the children to join us. At times he was even able to bring a smile to Luiz's lips. I noted that Edite and the twins had Luiz's eyes, making them more Asian in appearance than either his daughters or Renato.

"What was Napier thinking!" Meilin exclaimed quietly at one point, perhaps so that Edite would not realise the extent of her anger. "It was almost beyond belief that an uninvited foreigner would dare claim equal status with a Viceroy. And then add to that insult by practically demanding that China open its doors to trade on his terms or he would bring down the might of England against it."

I smiled, hoping to placate her. "I must admit that his action did strike me as a little like an armed junk sailing into the mouth of the Thames and the captain shouting, "England, stand and deliver!"

This was met with a rippling laugh that was so infectious it elicited smiles and chuckles from all those within earshot, despite none of the locals knowing what had prompted it.

We then joined in for a time with Hobson's antics with Edite and the children. But later, when we were again talking privately, she confided that what created great resentment in China was that Christians treated Chinese as heathens and not deserving of the respect they accorded to others of their faith.

"Then I take it, you're not a Christian?"

"My creed is more secular than superstitious," she declared provocatively, accentuated by the lift of her chin.

"I'm not a very good Christian, I'm afraid," I responded diplomatically. "You're probably complaining to the wrong person."

"Because you don't believe in God?"

"If there is a god, he's a bit of a joker. Or at least a teaser, certainly, in regard with what is called *coincidence*." I had uttered these words impulsively, and at that instant decided to take advantage of having done so, perhaps considering that life was too short for me to pass on what the opportunity afforded me. So, I crossed the Rubicon: "This coincidence, for instance."

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

“This coincidence! What are you talking about?”

So, I took a deep breath and leant closer, looking into her eyes. “Ever since I first saw you at the Golden Dragon Inn some ten weeks ago, you have occupied my dreams and a good part of my waking hours. And without any conscious move from either of us to bring it about, here we are now, drinking tea together.”

She was obviously thunderstruck. Her jaw dropped, and she sat looking at me without speaking. After what seemed like an age, she too leant closer. “What are your prospects?”

Now it was my turn to be taken aback. “Prospects?”

“Do you have any?”

“Not really. At least, not yet. Not on any horizon that is within my present field of view.”

She leant closer still, so close I could have easily kissed her. “Then, until you do have prospects, good prospects, whenever we are together, don’t you dare speak to me again in the manner you have just spoken.” She then drew back well clear of me.

There was not a speck of avarice in her words. Nor was there any hint of rebuff, or suggestion that she did not want to see me again. Quite the contrary. She spoke simply from the point of view of an unattached young woman with a missing father, living on her wits at the edge of China during interesting times.

And my heart sang.

FIVE

As soon as we were back on board the *Andromache*, the boatswain's mate told me that Captain Chads wanted to see me in his cabin.

"Where the hell have you been?" Chads growled the moment I entered. "If you'd been any later, I'd have had to send out a search party."

Charles Elliot was with him. Both were smoking cigars and had glasses of port in front of them. I told them how Dr Colledge held us back and why, and then about being further delayed by going to the assistance of a man being badly beaten.

He stormed on for a while about Colledge getting above his station, and then about us getting involved in a fracas between the bloody natives. I could have explained that it was unlikely a gang of thugs would have allowed us to pass by them unmolested in a narrow lane, even if we hadn't interfered. But I decided no benefit would flow from entering a debate with the captain of one of His Britannic Majesty's ships in his own cabin once he'd forcefully stated his position. Particularly when he was in the presence of a colleague and the tide was low in the decanter of port that sat on the table in front of them.

"How's your shoulder?" he asked at the point I was expecting to be dismissed.

I told him it still twinged on occasions; and he then told Elliot of the blunderbuss episode.

Elliot chuckled. "A full scoop of grape! It's a wonder you didn't break your shoulder. If there's a next time, don't use any more than half a scoop."

"If there's a next time, I'll delegate the task."

This was met with a hearty laugh from him and a wry smile from Chads, who said something along the lines of, "It didn't stop you putting a tourniquet on Able Seaman Muscat's leg a couple of days later at the Bocca Tigris." And then something about my doing it extra smartish, not that it ended up doing the poor blighter much good, or my rig.

So, I said that I wasn't feeling much pain at the Bocca Tigris, having other things on my mind.

"Didn't we all!" At about that point he raised a hand palm-down and flicked his fingers in dismissal with a curt, "On your way, Andrews."

Before I reached the door, he stopped me and asked if I had seen Lord Napier. I told him that I had, but only briefly through a partly open door.

"How did he look?"

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

“I’ll be surprised if he lasts the week.”

He didn’t. He died the following day and was buried the following week.

His funeral was conducted in the expected manner of someone of his birth and position and attended by all of Macau’s dignitary, with the Governor and five navy captains including Chads and Elliot in charge of the bier, and the guns of the *Andromache* firing the one-minute salute.

With both Meilin MacGregor and *my prospects* well entrenched at the forefront of my mind, and the *Andromache* expected to sail shortly for Singapore and probably for piracy patrol in the Malacca straits and Indian Ocean, I needed to move quickly.

We visited the place we came to call *Silveiras* as often as we could during the next few days, Silveira being Luiz’s surname. Meilin joined us on the first of these occasions, being at home when Edite went to invite her to do so. This allowed us to have her explain that, if it was all right by the others, we wanted to call on them from time to time to see how they were and how well Renato was recovering. Whether or not she accurately conveyed our message, we couldn’t tell, because it elicited obviously light-hearted banter from the older women and caused Edite to cast embarrassed glances at Hobson.

We were pleased to learn that Renato’s eyesight did not appear to be permanently damaged. Once the swelling had subsided, he was able to see clearly and the double vision, which he suffered when he could first open both eyes, was no longer evident. Whenever we called, we took the family gifts of the type they may not have been able to get for themselves, but which we were able to pick up at the foreign factories at a reasonable price. Virginia tobacco and Spanish cigars for Luiz; Madeira wine, drinking chocolate, pickled chilies and onions and preserved and candied fruits for all of them. When she was there, Meilin’s and I rarely exchanged more than a few words that did not involve the others, and her manner was more reserved than friendly. However, I did catch her watching me from time to time, which was enough for me to take the steps that would have a major bearing on the rest of my life.

Hobson must have had an inkling that I was up to something and, when I grew tired of his pestering me for details, I told him what I intended to do. He then extracted a promise that I would include him in my scheme, which annoyed me, because I thought it could jeopardize its success.

Neither I, nor Hobson wanted to stay with the *Andromache* when it left Macau, but both of us were committed to remain on board until the end of its present commission. So, the time I chose to approach Captain Chads was when he appeared to be in a good mood while performing his regular morning circuits of the quarterdeck with a telescope trapped beneath one arm in Nelson mode.

As I climbed from the waist, he glanced at me without breaking his pace. “Walk with me.”

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

So, as I broke into step beside him, I told him that I would like his permission to approach Captain Elliot in view of transferring to the *Louisa*, and if Elliot was agreeable, for Chads to release me from my present commitment to him in the *Andromache*.

He made no response; so, I took the opportunity of pressing my case, telling him that the *Louisa*'s crew consisted mainly of Indian lascars and, although they appeared to be excellent seamen, from what I had witnessed at the Bocca Tigris, their gunnery was appalling; two balls having whistled over our top gallants and another barely missing the *Imogene*'s bowsprit. "I've heard Captain Elliot intends to use her whenever he needs to visit Canton." I then pressed on unhappily against his silence. "With the Chinese in their present mood, I'd be of more use to him than to you, when it comes to gunnery."

Chads considered himself the navy's foremost authority on gunnery and because this was well known, my last remark was probably more transparent than I would have liked. But his silence worried me, and I was becoming nervous.

"So, you've got yourself an up-homers have you, Andrews?"

Rarely would you find a ship's captain in His Britannic Majesty's navy who was completely stupid. And Chads was far from stupid. An up-homers meant a friendly place ashore with female companionship. I didn't reply because the question was almost certainly rhetorical. So, I kept pace with him in silence for another three circuits. Eventually he dismissed me with, "On your way, Andrews!" while giving me something to cling to with a parting, "I'll think about it."

I paused at the break. "Petty Officer Hobson would also like to join the *Louisa*, if you agreed to release him, and I could do with his backup."

"Don't push it, Andrews. On your way!"

So that's how Hobson and I found ourselves seconded to the Trade Commission as part of the crew of the *Louisa*. Whatever way Captain Chads framed it for Captain Elliot, it worked for both of us.

With Lord Napier's death, his former Second Superintendent, John Davis, automatically replaced him as Chief Superintendent of Trade. This moved Sir George Robinson from Third to Second Superintendent and John Astell to Third. All three were former East India Company officials. Charles Elliot moved, from what he considered was the lowly role of Master Attendant, to Astell's former position of Secretary to the three Superintendents on a salary of £1500. So, he was probably too busy to give us any more time than he did when, as directed by Chads, we met him in his office at the English factory. After giving Hobson little more than a cursory once-over, he had us sign papers that already carried Chads' signature releasing us from the *Andromache*, and other papers, which he signed

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

in our presence, that committed us to serve under his command while he remained a part of the Trade Commission. No specific ship was designated, but when he dismissed us, he told us to be on board the *Louisa* at 10 o'clock sharp, three days hence.

We met him as arranged to find that he had already put in place measures for our arrival, including sending back to the Company some of the older hands who voiced displeasure at our appointment, believing it impinged on their seniority and responsibilities. He walked us around the cutter, pointing out the areas where he believed changes could be made for the better, particularly the location and deployment of the guns. Without any preamble, he then tested my seamanship, by calling to a man who was waiting at the bow to slip from the buoy and telling me to take the cutter around the harbour.

The jib was already up and luffing when we came on board, which I thought curious. It now caught the breeze and turned us into the path of a big lorcha bearing down on us at a steady rate. I snapped at Hobson to unblock the tiller and put it hard to starboard. But he was ahead of me, already doing just that. I thought to shout to the men who were standing ahead of me to haul down the jib, but when I saw the lorcha would pass a good fifty yards abeam of us, I shouted instead for them to raise the mainsail.

They first looked back at Elliot, but when he shouted, "Do as you're told!" they had it up and filled in a commendable twinkling. Once we were clear of the lorcha and had clear water ahead, Hobson handed the tiller over to the swarthy individual who came to stand at his shoulder displaying an aggrieved expression. Other than having to reef the mainsail after we almost capsized some fishermen with our wash, we made a couple of passes around the harbour without incident and, despite the wind having picked up we managed to hook back onto the buoy at our first pass.

Apparently satisfied, Elliot showed us our berths in the stern for whenever we slept on board, adding that we were to check with the quartermaster at the factory to organise the berths ashore we would normally use. After telling us he would look in on us at the end of the week to see how we were going, he left us to it. But, being Charles Elliot, and not wanting to appear overly magnanimous, he left us with the parting remark, "Didn't you notice she's also fitted with a mizzen?"

Of course, I had. But with my rusty seamanship, I was pleased to get away with working with one mast. And we had almost put a flock of fishermen in the water with the mainsail and jib drawing the breeze.

And so began a draft for which some of those whose paths I've crossed would have killed. Depending on what were Elliot's requirements at the time, we could choose to stay overnight ashore at the factory or remain onboard. While onboard, we had a cook who prepared meals to order, a

laundryman who not only washed and ironed our clothes but also repaired them when necessary, and a bootmaker.

During that first week, I concentrated on the guns. I first cleared the upper deck of all unnecessary lockers and equipment near them to give their crews the space they needed to operate them effectively; and I shipped two guns ashore. Although the outer surface of all the barrels was mostly clear of rust, the bores of most were encrusted with a thick layer. So, I had the crew working for days rearranging the upper deck and driving mops that were drenched in a mix of sand and vinegar backwards and forwards from breech to muzzle of every gun. I had others splicing and attaching new breeching ropes to the barrels, fitting new rope to the blocks, and greasing their runners and sheaves. I also had them clean and, where necessary, repair the rammers and sponges used for servicing the barrels, as well as polish the rimmers and worms used to clear the firing vents.

When Elliot came on board at the end of the week, they were still hard at it.

“You’ve shipped two guns ashore!” he snapped at me while holding a handkerchief to his nose against the stench of vinegar. “Who gave you permission to do that?”

“You did.” I then reminded him that he told me to sort out the guns and the gunnery. I explained that I could have put them down in the bilges as ballast, because that was all they were good for on board; and that while they remained on the upper deck, they couldn’t be fired without putting them where they’d interfere with the other guns’ crews. I also told him that the two I shipped ashore had damaged vents and badly chipped muzzles and were now at the back of the tea warehouse in the English factory if he wanted to see them.

He muttered something about the last thing he wanted was for *Louisa*’s firepower to be reduced. So, I told him – probably a bit more forcefully than I had intended – that, because of the changes, a greater rate of fire than before could be achieved; so, the cutter’s overall firepower had not been reduced, but markedly increased. At this point, he didn’t want any more of the argument or the stench. So, he waved a hand to signify his displeasure, turned his back on me and left.

Hobson, who had been nearby, berated me, declaring I must have been mad to risk having both of us thrown off the *Louisa* by talking to Elliot the way I had. So, I asked him if he meant in a similar manner to the way he was now talking to me.

Because we had been seconded to the Trade Commission, our shore berths were in a small two-room, top floor apartment at the back of the English factory on the Praia Grande. Similar rooms adjacent to us were occupied by clerks who were employed by the Company, one of whom, when we returned that afternoon, gave me the message that Captain Elliot wanted to see me. Given that I may have been a bit high-handed in the way I spoke to our new commander, and what we stood to lose, it

was with some trepidation that I set off for his office. If looks could kill, the one I received from Hobson would have put paid to my worries before I left.

Elliot was sitting behind a large desk flipping through a stack of papers when I entered. He glanced at me before returning his attention to the papers in front of him. “I was planning to take the family for a spin out on the bay. When will that terrible bloody stench be gone?”

I told him that we should be finished using the vinegar the following day, after which I would have the gun barrels thoroughly washed through with soap and water before they were greased, concluding with, “If there’s any breeze about, most of the smell should be gone in a couple of days.”

When he did look up, he sat observing me in silence for a time; so, I eventually asked if that was all he wanted. It wasn’t, because he then told me that he didn’t mind my speaking my mind when it came to important issues, but if I ever spoke to him like I did today within hearing of anyone else, I would regret it. For emphasis he added, “Do you hear the thunder in my voice when I say *regret it*, Andrews?”

When I replied that I did, he said something along the lines of, “If we who hold the reins are not careful, you part-educated upstarts with pretensions well beyond your station, could eventually eat into and destroy the very fabric of the culture that has served England so well for centuries and, in doing so, destroy all that we have achieved.”

He then told me to go. So, I left. I wasn’t someone who couldn’t handle a telling-off, but his *part-educated* comment rankled. He may have had a little Latin, but so did I. And like me, he probably had less Greek. But I considered myself very well-read, compliments of a good school library donated by a wealthy benefactor. And, given his likely insular upbringing, I believed it possible that I was more conversant in topics about which he would probably be ignorant or know very little. Later, when I got to know him better, I didn’t think he truly believed what he had said. It didn’t reflect his ways. I suspect he simply felt he needed to air part of his lot’s mission statement.

Hobson could have kissed me when I told him that we didn’t have to pack our kit.

SIX

So began my seven years association with Charles Elliot while he rose to become the head of the Trade Commission and then Plenipotentiary and first administrator of Hong Kong. Charles Elliot, he who secured the priceless jewel of Hong Kong for Britain, saved thousands of lives – perhaps tens of thousands – by forestalling any attempt to occupy Canton at that time, and received only condemnation and not one whit of thanks from a bellicose military and his distant, myopic masters along with the misplaced censure of later Chinese historians.

Poor Charlie!

Once *Louisa*'s guns were ready, it didn't take long to bring the lascar crew up to a reasonable level of proficiency by using empty kegs as targets under different sea conditions and putting the cutter either in line with the swell or abeam of it. To get the gun captains to allow for the time delay between pulling the lanyard and the gun actually firing – which was their problem at the Bocca Tigris – we always had them first perform two dummy runs chanting, “Pull, sizzle, bang!” before carrying out a live firing to the same count. There was nothing we could teach them about seamanship; so, life on board became an easy mix of regular excursions out into the bay to practice gunnery, occasional picnics with the Elliots, performing regular maintenance and generally bathing in our good fortune.

During our visits to the Silveiras, we gradually gained some understanding of their language, and they of ours; with Renato, Edite and the children surging ahead of us in the linguistic stakes. Even so, we remained very dependent on Meilin's interpreter skills. Not that I minded. On one occasion when she was present, the subject of Olalla's and Lucia's husbands, the brothers, Anton and Sergio Moreno, was mentioned. When I asked why they were never at home, with the permission of the sisters, who obviously felt some unease about their husbands' occupation, Meilin explained that they shared ownership in one of the opium-smuggling boats known as *fast crabs*; low-profile, shallow-draft vessels resembling cut-down junks which were capable of high speed and maneuverability from being propelled by a combination of sails and a battery of oars. And how they spent most of their time transporting opium from the Island of Lintin – where I was already aware it was stockpiled in an anchored fleet of large, heavily-armed hulks – to Whampoa and various inlets on the mainland well away from Macau. She also explained that they rarely visited Macau because the Chinese and Portuguese authorities, despite profiting from the trade themselves and usually turning a blind eye to

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

opium smuggling, occasionally paid lip service to the law by arresting smugglers and impounded their vessels.

With limited places where I could direct any funds to give at least some impetus to my prospects-related relationship with Meilin, the opium trade was of interest to me. I had been informed that it was the most lucrative activity in which I could invest and there was no shortage of advice and willing assistance available at the factories on how best to become involved. But, although the trade loomed large on my horizon, it did so worryingly. Mainly because the Chinese had declared it illegal and, despite mischievous rumour to the contrary, Charles Elliot despised it. Also, Meilin regularly chose to work for a company that refused to have anything to do with it.

Because I felt that a wrong move on my part could destroy the possibility of any future relationship with her, I clearly needed to sound her out on the subject. But, after our last conversation, I felt that any talk of my prospects was linked to such personal implications as far as she was concerned, I didn't want to raise the subject until I received some sign from her that she had at least some personal interest in me.

The sign for which I was looking was triggered by Hobson producing a penny whistle and playing a lively tune after we had shared a meal in the courtyard with the family and Meilin. This instigated an impromptu concert, during which the twins brought tears to the eyes of all of us by holding hands while singing a song they had learnt at school; Renato, his mother and aunt performing a folk dance amidst much giggling from them and laughter from the rest of us; Luiz clapping and stamping out a few staccato dance steps before falling back exhausted into his chair; Edite attempting a lilting solo until she was almost overcome by trembling nervousness, prompting Meilin to spring to her assistance and the two of them completing it as a duet; and Hobson performing a spirited hornpipe to my inadequate accompaniment on the whistle.

At that point, because of my miserable contribution to the entertainment up until then, I was brow-beaten into performing a solo act. So, I chose to recite Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*. Beginning with:

*In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree;
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.*

And ending with:

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

*His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.*

I executed a half bow and received enthusiastic applause from an audience which, with the exception of Meilin and Hobson, had little to no understanding of the words, but I suspect, some appreciation of the musical cadence of Coleridge's composition.

I may have imagined it, but when I sat back down and exchanged glances with Meilin, her eyes had a sharper glint, and her expression contained a greater curiosity than I had noticed previously. When soon afterwards, the twins were hauled reluctantly off to bed, leaving a vacant chair beside me, she moved to sit at my side.

As with most of my conversations with Meilin, particularly the early ones when we were each taking depth soundings of the other, this one is inscribed on my memory.

"That's how I feel about you." she told me quietly.

I turned my chair away from where Hobson was demonstrating to the others the different notes that could be produced from the six holes of the penny whistle.

"What is how you feel about me?"

"That I should be wary of you."

"Why?"

She smiled, moved her head closer and looked directly into my eyes. "If I were less reserved than I am, I might say, because I think that you on honey-dew have fed and have drunk the milk of paradise."

"If I were less reserved than I am I might say, not yet, I haven't." Judging from the surge of heat I immediately sensed in my own cheeks, they probably mirrored the flush that erupted in hers. "Luckily I'm not, I'm not less reserved," I stuttered, adding, "Because I would never even think of saying anything so outrageous."

She came to my rescue with, "Not so outrageous here in Macau. We are talking about opium, aren't we? I'm sure Coleridge was."

"Of course, he was." *What else?* I almost added, but didn't, trying to detach as quickly as I could from the sticky thread in which I had become entangled. Having not broken completely clear, I did say, "You don't really believe I take opium, do you?"

"I would hope not. But can't you tell I'm jousting with you?"

Her so welcome familiarity along with her mention of opium now made it easier for me to broach the subject. But first I decided to press her for clarification of her opening remark. “Why do you think you should be wary of me?”

“Because you trouble me.”

“I’m pleased, because you trouble me too.” I decided there was probably no value in pressing further on this point; so, said instead, “Tell me about opium.”

“Living where you do, I suspect you know quite a bit about opium already.”

There was truth in this. Most of the related advice I had received from my associates at the Trade Commission had been that I should convert everything I owned into either Spanish or Mexican silver dollars, and trade in opium. But I needed to know what she thought. “I’m getting mixed messages,” I told her. “Some say it’s an anathema, and others say that, because of Britain’s insatiable appetite for Chinese tea, silk and porcelain, it should either continue to trade in opium, or seriously risk depleting the exchequer’s reserves of silver.”

She lowered her brow, and her gaze intensified. “Britain should illegally continue to trade in opium, you’re saying.”

“It’s not illegal in Britain,” I responded, obviously far too hastily.

“We’re not in Britain, mister.”

With the salutation, ‘mister’ biting deeply, and wishing I could retract my hasty response, I stumbled into talking about how I didn’t really understand why the trade was illegal. “If it’s so terrible, why isn’t it illegal in Britain? It hasn’t seemed to have done much damage to Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He’s still alive and kicking and producing wonderful poetry.” Little did I know.

“Are you doing anything tomorrow?” she asked, throwing me completely off balance.

“Tomorrow?”

“It’s Sunday. I take it you’re not going to church?”

“No, no I haven’t planned anything.”

“Meet me here at ten o’clock. And come armed.”

I met her as arranged, armed with my double barrel pistol tucked into the sash at my waist and, for good measure, a cutlass on my hip. When she saw the cutlass, she frowned and said that she meant for me to bring a pistol; so, I showed her that I was carrying one. I think she was expecting a larger weapon, because she asked me to carry it higher so that the brass-capped stock could be clearly seen above the sash, which worried me. And when I told her that both barrels of the gun were loaded but I

hadn't brought any extra powder or shot, she compounded that worry by telling me that the weapons were only for show and, if I did have to use them, we would probably be killed anyway, in which case I wouldn't need any extra powder or shot. *Where in Hades were we going?* I wondered.

When she had told me to come armed, I fleetingly considered asking her if Hobson should come as well; but, as this would be the first time that I would have her to myself, I quickly abandoned the notion. Now, as I followed her deeply into an area I had previously been warned by locals never to enter, I acutely sensed the absence of anyone watching our back.

Many of the dwellings we passed were little more than shanties, some with their crumbling outside walls braced with bamboo poles, and others with holes in their roofs patched with cane latticework and sailcloth. The laneways carried a flow of human traffic, either approaching from ahead or overtaking us. At times we had to make way for coolies pushing and pulling wheeled carts – which Meilin explained were new to Macau – stacked high with bags of grain or piles of building materials, or with bamboo yokes across their shoulders balancing baskets filled with fruit and vegetables. The deeper we penetrated the area, the more regularly were we besieged by almost overwhelming smells from rotting meat and fish scraps, and from vegetable refuse that had been trapped in puddles of water.

Perhaps as a diversion from our surrounds and the troubling effect they were having on me, reflected in my expression, Meilin took the opportunity to explain how, along with other parts of the world, the Chinese had been using opium for centuries, both for recreational and medicinal reasons. But, unlike those other parts of the world, in China it had infused every stratum of society from mandarins and the privileged classes down to the lowliest coolie.

She glanced across at me as she added. “At an accelerated rate during recent times, for reasons you would be well aware.”

She was obviously prompting me to respond. But, having been previously scorched by hasty interjection, I sensibly kept my own dubious counsel and waited for her to continue.

She then went on to explain that, whereas mandarins and the wealthy smoked opium recreationally, often while reclining in their private salons fitted for the purpose, coolies more often were forced to restrict their intake to the few grains they could afford and which they usually took orally, chewing on it to ease the suffering they were forced to endure during their daily labours. And how, regardless of its perceived prestigiousness in the eyes of the wealthy – with their lacquered pipes, plush couches, and smoking salons, all often as not expensively adorned with carved or painted poppy blossoms – by the end of the previous century Emperor Kia had declared it illegal because of concern over the damage its addictive properties were causing to the economy.

At one point, a group of laughing children, most of them little bigger than toddlers and two of them naked, raced out of a side lane and would have collided with us if one of them had not shouted a warning upon sighting me. Had I been a tiger, I doubt their faces could have projected a greater collective shock, nor could they have screamed any louder in unison, or scurried back the way they had come any faster, a wailing train of tiny stumbling feet. Wakened by the commotion, a dog reared up from a nearby doorway and lunged at us, only to be checked by a rope around its throat that left it propped on its hind legs venting its rage and spraying saliva at us amidst half-choked, gasping barks. An old woman appeared behind the dog and managed with difficulty to pull it back inside. She then took its place at the doorway and hurled what sounded like similar objections to our presence as we hurried on.

I had my head turned watching her; so, was startled to find when I turned back that our path was blocked by three men.

“Stay calm,” Meilin warned softly. “Don’t make any sudden movement.”

The one who was obviously the leader, stood between and slightly ahead of the other two. He seemed as round as he was tall and stood with his arms folded, his legs spread, and his jaw raised in challenge. His gaze, from what I could see of his eyes above the pumpkin swell of his cheeks, was directed, not at me, as I would have expected if they intended to attack us, but at Meilin.

He said something to her in a low growl that he probably used in the presence of underlings as a guttural declaration of his authority. When she responded, he moved his hands to his hips, knocking aside the opening of his loose jacket to reveal the head of a large hatchet protruding from his belt. I felt as if I had suddenly been draped in a sheath of ice. He seemed to be questioning her and growing angrier with each reply. I silently pledged to myself that the moment his hand went to the hatchet I would draw my pistol and shoot him squarely in the chest. I wouldn’t give him so much as half a chance to use his weapon. But this would leave the other two and only one shot left, so I would also have to use my cutlass. But when would I use it? I found myself pondering. Would I fire off both barrels and be left with a useless gun? No, I reasoned. Better to have a loaded gun to help get us out of there. But I would have to be quick. So, I silently rehearsed what I would do to an imaginary drumbeat. One: draw pistol and shoot him. Two: change the pistol to my left hand. Three: draw my cutlass. Four: deal with the other two as required; either leap forward and chop them down or hold them at bay while we backed away. Surprise would be the key. I had to act faster than they would be expecting. I ran over the sequence again. One: draw pistol and shoot. Two: change hands. Three: draw cutlass. Four: whatever. My heart was thumping so loudly, I feared they might be able to hear it. One: draw pistol and ...

Suddenly the fat man began to laugh. I glanced at Meilin and saw that she was smiling. So were the man's two colleagues. She exchanged some more conversation with him, after which he gave me a long, searching look that I managed to match. He eventually snapped a command and, turning from us, led the others into the intersecting lane from which I imagined they had come.

Such a surge of relief flooded through me that my hands began to shake. Meilin must have noticed, because she placed her hand on my arm and told me that we were now safe, and I had nothing to fear. Until that moment I was not going to tell her what I had intended to do. Now, I pulled my arm away and snapped, "I wasn't frightened, for Christ's sake! I admit I was concerned. Concerned that after I'd killed the first two – Fatso and the man on the right – I couldn't get to the one on the left fast enough to stop him from reaching you. Concerned? Yes. Anxious? Yes. Frightened? No." I then told her my plan in detail, complete with the imagined drumbeat. "One: draw pistol and shoot him. Two: change the pistol to my left hand. Three: draw my cutlass. Four: deal with the other two as required." I sealed off by holding up my hand, which was still trembling. "That's not fear, Meilin, that's relief. Relief that we didn't have to fight for our lives. Relief that I didn't have to kill someone, maybe three someones. It's not every day I believe I might be a couple of heart beats away from killing someone."

Had I been a different man, I might have remained silent. Silent and misunderstood; had I been a never-apologize, never-explain type of hero. But life was too short to have Meilin thinking I may have been too frightened to protect her. And the silent, never-apologize, never-explain type wasn't me at any time, let alone when my heart was still racing and my hands still quivering from what might have been. She may not have felt certain that I was capable of successfully carrying out my violent plan. Bold talk was one thing. Bold action another. But at least she was now aware that I might be capable of both. As was I. Surprisingly so.

We had moved to the side of the lane to let a handcart stacked with huge bales to pass. Her eyes were on mine. "Sorry, I didn't realise." She gave my arm a gentle squeeze before we moved on.

"Who was he, the fat man?"

"That was Foo."

"Foo? Who's Foo?" I think I might have smiled, perhaps even chuckled. I know I was feeling euphoric.

"Foo, the Axe in English, is Club-fist Liu's third in command. He was annoyed that I brought you here without first getting his permission. So, I explained why I brought you and he was satisfied."

"You know this Foo? You've met him before?"

"No, but he knew me. Of me. Knew my father."

"Why did you bring me?"

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

“All in good time.”

“Why did he laugh?”

“If I tell you, you’ll only get annoyed again.”

“I wasn’t annoyed. I was ... All right I was annoyed. But tell me. Please.”

“He asked me who you were, and I said you were Eluh’s bodyguard. Elliot’s. And he said that ...”

She suddenly blushed and clamped a hand to her mouth for a moment before removing it and managing to add in a strained tone, “You Gweilos must be short of bodyguards’. Sorry!” The wonderful smile that then erupted was released with greater force from being held in check. Perhaps she too was feeling euphoric.

Sorry? She had no reason to be sorry. How could I experience anything other than delight when held within the sweet embrace of that smile?

“Why Gweilos?” I asked a little later. “That’s what some of the kids were screaming. Isn’t a Gweilo a ghost?”

“Or white devil. Around here it’s also become a popular name for Barbarian.”

“But why did he include you? You’re not a Barbarian.”

“In their eyes, I’m as much a Barbarian as you.” She waggled her head. “Well, perhaps not quite as much.”

“Who is Big Fist Lou.

“Club-fist Liu,” she corrected. “He’s the boss of Macau.

“You mean the criminal boss. The Governor is the boss.”

She smiled. “You have much to learn about China, Gweilo.” She then gave me a searching look. “And, after what you just told me, you trouble me more than when last I told you that you trouble me.”

“I’m going to look upon that as a good thing.”

“Look upon it anyway you like.”

We had been gradually making our way up-hill and, as we crested the rise, I was surprised to see, not far away, the back of the buildings on the south-western end of the Praia Grande and realised that we had almost executed a full circle. I asked her why, and she said she didn’t want me to be seen entering the area we had reached by anyone who might recognise me.

“I looked about. “What area?”

A few minutes later I found out.

An old woman led us inside the dwelling. The first thing that struck me was the pungent, slightly sweet smell which, whenever I detected it again, took me back to that place. After my eyes adjusted to the gloom, I could see we were at the head of a long room with low beds spaced at even intervals from

one end to the other. In some, people were sound asleep, untidy, motionless bundles of many shapes and sizes. In others, the occupants were propped in various reclining positions, some with their eyes open, others with them closed; but most of them as motionless as those who were fast asleep and probably as unaware of their surrounds. The ones whose eyes were open, were either holding, or had beside them, long pipes with flared bowls, and had small lamps sitting beside their beds. While I watched, one man had the bowl of the pipe positioned against his lamp and was drawing on it. I was surprised to see that some of those present were well-dressed Europeans and, at the far end, although I couldn't see her clearly, I believed was a European woman.

Meilin took my arm and whispered, "Those who don't have the luxury of a private salon come to places like this."

The old woman materialised at our shoulder and spoke quietly to her while opening her hand to reveal two currant-like black beads sitting in the palm. Meilin spoke to her in a similar quiet manner while drawing me towards the door. The woman, still speaking softly, followed us until we were back in the lane.

"Those inside were beginners."

"What do you mean?"

"They were all new to the habit. Or take such tiny amounts it hasn't yet had much effect on them."

"How can you tell?"

"They're not yet addicted. Or, at least, not badly addicted. Within an hour, you'll be able to tell as well."

She then led me to several similar premises which, as we moved further from the waterfront, contained trappings that displayed a gradually increasing degree of squalor along with occupants exhibiting an increasing degree of degradation. My besieged sensibilities finally cried out a silent "Enough!" at the last place we entered. A skeletal corpse, wearing little more than a thin cotton cloak, lay on the bare earth at the door apparently waiting to be picked up and taken to wherever such corpses were dumped. Inside, what passed as beds were all occupied by its living skeletal kin, so similar did those in various states of repose resemble their dead brother at the door. If indeed it was a brother and not a sister. I couldn't with certainty tell whether it was a man or a woman, so emaciated was the chest, so devoid of identity the face, so terrible the silent scream emanating from the gaping mouth.

While I waited impatiently, Meilin spoke for a time with the man in charge. When I finally was able to draw her away, I received the shock that had me giving voice to my previously silent, "Enough!" a whispered plea, if not dampened shout, through my clenched teeth. The corpse had come

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

back to life and was being helped to sit up by one of the attendants and draw smoke into its lungs from a pipe the attendant held against a flame.

Meilin drew me away. “What you have to understand about opium is that addicts live only to smoke. They allow nothing else in their lives to interfere with that. Their next pipe, or the few grains they can afford to ingest is their one goal. Their only escape is death or the intervention of others to drag them away and lock them up. It is physically and mentally impossible for them to break the habit themselves.”

As we came abreast of a side lane, she took my arm and directed me into it. I loved her holding my arm but forced myself to detach. “No, Meilin, no more! You’ve convinced me. I don’t have to see any more.”

She took my arm again. One last thing. And then we’ll go.”

Shortly afterwards I found myself walking past the most ramshackle dwellings I had seen that day. Those that had open doors, or no doors, as was the case with some, simply a piece of cloth flapping in the breeze, revealed occupants who looked little better than those in the last of the opium dens; women mainly, so thin that it was a wonder they were able to stay upright on legs that were little more than the thickness of the bones beneath the flesh, some of them nursing emaciated babies. Flanking the women or scattered untidily about the lane were small clusters of naked toddlers with matchstick limbs, sunken chests and swollen stomachs, most with flies crawling on their gaunt, prematurely aged faces that they were either too weak to brush away or too tired of repeating the wasted exercise.

“They were the families of the addicts, weren’t they,” was my first utterance as she thankfully led me away, my response more of a declaration than a query.

“That’s right. You have to multiply the number of addicts by five or six to get some idea of how many are affected by the trade.”

“How did you know about that lane?”

The man at the last place directed me to it.”

“He didn’t care that you saw it?”

“Care! No one in the opium industry cares. Not that man. Not any of the locals who distribute it. And certainly not the foreigners who grow fat shipping the poisonous mud from Bengal. Do you think William Jardine or James Matheson or Lancelot Dent with their pretensions of respectability, care? Do you think Dadabhoj and Maneckjee Rustomjee care? Do you think any of the less pretentious but equally scurrilous traders care? Do you think your foreign secretary, Lord Palmerston cares, with his continual pressure on the Chief Superintendent to redress the trade imbalance? None of you foreigner’s cares.

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

“I care. After what you showed me today.”

The following day, I poked my head into Charles Elliot’s office at the factory when I saw him sitting at his desk. “You’re right about opium. It’s a pestilence.”

I tried to get away before he reacted but was still well within earshot when he called me back and had me sit down.

“Tell me,” He ordered.

So, I gave him chapter and verse while he sat in silence and listened.

“You say this woman speaks several languages. Who is she?”

“That startled me. “I’d rather not say, sir. Unless she gave me permission to tell you.”

“Get her permission. I might need all the help I can get before this sorry situation is concluded. One way or another.

SEVEN

It was shortly after this that we made our first trip to Canton in the *Louisa*.

In January 1835 John Davis, the Chief Superintendent departed for England on leave. This moved Sir George Robinson to Chief, John Astell to Second Superintendent and Elliot to Third.

A day later the merchantman *Argyle* was caught in a storm and lost sails and rigging, forcing it to anchor some 50 miles from Macau. The captain sent a boat with 12 men on board for help and shortly afterwards two Chinese vessels drew alongside the ship seeking details of what was happening. A ransom demand of 500 dollars was then received at the factories. For lack of information of where the *Argyle* was, nothing was done other than seeking information from anyone who may have known. The ship eventually arrived at Macau the following week under a jury rig without the 12 men who had gone for help.

The Superintendents decided to seek the assistance of the Viceroy to secure the return of the men by submitting a written plea at Canton's Water Gate near his palace, as was done after a similar incident four years before. They also decided that Elliot should deliver the plea dressed in the uniform of a post captain.

We had the *Louisa* ready to sail when he came on board along with Captain Macdonald of the *Argyle* and Karl (or Charles as he preferred) Gutzlaff, a missionary who had prepared the plea and would act as his interpreter. Elliot was already dressed in his post captain's rig, complete with what looked like a brand-new cocked hat, expansive gold epaulets, and thick gold trimming bordering every prominent part of his frock coat. He had probably first given his family a preview to check that it fitted and didn't need adjustment and had decided that wearing it was the best method of bringing it on board.

I snapped him a smart salute and gave him my friendliest smile as he came over the brow. "You look like somebody very important, sir."

"Shut up, Andrews!" he snapped back as he headed for his cabin. Sensibly, he changed into mufti for the haul up the river.

The morning after we arrived at Canton, when he was preparing to leave for the Water Gate, I learned that he did not intend to take anyone with him other than Macdonald and Gutzlaff; so, I cautioned him that I didn't believe that was a good idea. Mainly through discussions with Meilin, I believed I had now some idea of the ways and thinking of the Chinese authorities, particularly

regarding Barbarians and official protocol. So, I told him that I thought that after the way they had treated Lord Napier, if he turned up at the Viceroy's front gate without an armed escort that had at least some resemblance of one befitting his appearance, the Chinese were likely to believe he had pretensions well beyond his station and treat him with disdain. The relative importance of Chinese officials was displayed by the size of their retinue. So, for anyone, let alone a Barbarian, to have the gall to believe he was entitled to approach the Viceroy uninvited, and then do so without an appropriate escort, was likely to attract ridicule. Or worse. I suggested that a dozen of the more-sprightly members of the crew who were half-capable of marching in step while armed with muskets and cutlasses would probably be sufficient.

But Charles Elliot, once he'd set his course, wasn't going to be influenced by some jumped-up subordinate who was forever and definitely getting above his station. He wouldn't even allow Hobson and me to accompany him to the gate and stand close by with each of us visibly sporting a pistol and cutlass. So, it was with foreboding that I watched them depart.

Well over an hour later he arrived back carrying his hat, trailed a good distance behind him by Macdonald and Gutzlaff. I noticed that he wasn't right by the way he was walking. When he crossed the gangway, I saw that his nose had been bleeding, his forehead was grazed, his lip was cut, and he had a long, angry welt on one thigh I could see through a jagged tear in his breeches. His brand-new hat looked like someone had jumped on it, he was covered in dust and most of the buttons were missing from his jacket. "Cast off as soon as the others are on board." He snapped as he headed for his cabin. I could have asked him what happened, but he was obviously hell-bent on getting out of sight as quickly as possible. Nor did I bother waylaying the others and asking for an explanation. Both looked too shocked to be particularly coherent as they crossed the brow and headed below. I noticed that Gutzlaff too, was covered in dust.

Macdonald was the first to emerge when we were well downstream. He looked as if he had recovered, so I handed over control of the vessel to Hobson and drew him aside. When I asked him what had happened, he first raised his jaw and gave me a look that suggested if anyone was going to enlighten me, it wasn't going to be him. So, I raised my own jaw and gave him a look and some words that implied that if he didn't want to have to negotiate his passage back to Macau with the captain of the next bum boat we passed, he should seriously consider being more forthcoming. The moment his gaze faltered, I suggested that he looked as if he could do with a shot of medicinal brandy, and he readily agreed. A few minutes later we were sitting so far aft that only the gulls drifting above our stern would have caught any of our conversation.

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

He told me that the moment Elliot stepped through the Water Gate and attempted to present the plea, he was immediately set upon by a group of Manchu bannermen. They jostled him with their elbows, forearms and the shafts of their lances before hurling him violently to the ground and pinning him there with the blunt end of their weapons while berating him for his insolence.

When Gutzlaff shouted for them to let him up, telling them that Elliott was a high-ranking representative of the British King, they laughed and, grabbing hold of him as well, threw him headlong out of the gate.

I had warned Elliot that they might have treated him with disdain or worse. But I had no idea that they would have attacked him in such a cowardly and humiliating manner. And I was fairly trembling with indignant fury as Macdonald continued with his sorry tale. Had Elliot been a different man, when he eventually had the whip hand himself, Canton would have paid a terrible price for what happened on that day. Six years later on the brink of the city of one million people being taken by storm, certainly sacked, and then perhaps destroyed by fire in the aftermath, he alone and in the face of fierce opposition from leading lights of what by then was *Her Britannic Majesty's* navy and army, chose to spare it.

Macdonald said that when Chinese linguists appeared, Elliot was allowed to get up and, to his credit, stated that he would talk to no one other than a representative of the Viceroy. A high-ranking mandarin did eventually arrive, but refused to accept the plea, restating Lord Napier's stumbling block that all approaches to the Viceroy had to be made by petition. Although this was the austere gentleman's official stance, at least Gutzlaff, by pleading his case, was able to tell him why they had come. And a few weeks after we arrived back at Macau, the twelve sailors were returned unharmed.

The first time I had the opportunity to speak to Elliot about what happened at the gate, I found him busily attending to correspondence in his office. I sat down and waited for him to acknowledge my presence. When he finally did, I told him that he'd been set up by Robinson and Astell; that the two former Company men would have known that by having him approach the Viceroy uninvited while dressed in a similar manner to lord Napier, most likely he would be rudely rebuffed; that they were seeking a salutary example to send back to Whitehall in support of the futility of persisting on Government-to-Government dealings with China.

He would have none of it, claiming that neither of the other superintendents would have had any inkling of how badly he would be treated.

"In degree perhaps," I conceded, "but not in kind." For good measure I told him that he might believe that the Commission's main concern was the demands of its masters at Whitehall, but hard-nosed former Company men like Robinson and Astell almost certainly believed that, for the sake of

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

Britain's security of trade with China, they were also obliged to take into account the requirements of the couple of hundred avaricious bastards who were presently residing at Canton and Macau; those whose personal livelihood depended on an uninterrupted flow of trade with China.

“And where did you come by all this worldly experience and use of such highfalutin words as *salutary* and *avaricious*?” Elliot snapped.

I smiled. “From the highfalutin company I've run up against over the past few years. That, and owning a decent dictionary.”

“Get out of here, Andrews. I have work to do.”

I paused at the door. “Was it their idea or yours for you to wear a post captain's rig and not to be accompanied by an escort of any kind?”

He sat watching me in silence. So, I left him to ponder the implications. It was not the last time that Charles Elliot would be embroiled in difficulties arising from conflict between Whitehall's demands of how trade should be conducted, the demands of those who were actually conducting the trade, and the overriding intransigence of the Chinese authorities.

Not long after that, John Astell resigned. Elliot then became Second Superintendent, on a salary of £3000, and their former secretary Alexander Johnston became Third.

Up until the last few weeks of 1835, the year was my most enjoyable at Macau. Meilin permitted me to mention her and her credentials to Elliot, after which he wanted to meet her. As a result of that meeting, he had her provide regular assistance to the Trade Commission, auditing the books of those traders he believed were too cavalier with their record keeping. Mindful of her opposition to opium, so that he would have a better idea of the actual, rather than the apparent size of the trade, he specifically had her take note of any traders she thought were disguising their involvement, and to what extent.

Because I was seeing a lot more of her, one day I decided to broach again the subject of my prospects. I told her that the only readily convertible funds that I could use for investment, and even then, with a distance-induced delay of many months, was my navy pay, which – except for the small proportion that I drew for necessities – I had the pay office at Portsmouth put aside for me. So that I would have something to fall back on when I left the navy, my father had generously bought for me a block adjacent to our farm, and I had some intention of developing it and perhaps even adding to it one day, using whatever monies I had accrued.

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

Meilin suggested that, if I wasn't totally committed to this course, at least in the near term, I could perhaps first consider investing in property in Far East Asia where there could be a greater return on my investment; in Singapore or Penang, for instance, or some other port where Britain had an interest.

For obvious reasons, as I gazed at her earnest expression, I told her that I would be far more interested in investing in property somewhere closer to where we were now. Her expression momentarily changed to a quizzically one before she explained that China didn't allow foreigners to purchase land anywhere near their coastline. She then pointed out that it still held sovereignty over Macau and allowed the Portuguese only limited control of the administration.

However – for what I hoped was to waylay my abandoning an interest in investing locally – she did concede that the situation could change. Apparently, for the sake of maintaining a prosperous trading arrangement with Britain, she said there was talk that China might one day allow Britain to purchase an island to be used as a trading base further out in the estuary away from Canton. “But that could be an unsubstantiated rumour,” she cautioned. “And, even if it did happen, Britain would have to keep a couple of her warships sitting at the front gate as a disincentive for China to change its mind.”

“That could be accommodated.” I spoke, not from being party to such matters, but being familiar with the belligerent mindset of many of those in positions of authority I had come across during my time in the navy.

Throughout a good part of that year, whenever Elliot was not completely consumed in taking up the slack caused by George Robinson – whom he considered incompetent – or repairing the other man's errors, he would bring his family out on the *Louisa* and either picnic on board or at nearby Taipa Island. His wife Clara and their children Harriet and Hughie remembered me from the *Andromache*. They also claimed to remember Hobson. But whether they did or didn't – there being a crew of some 160 in the *Andromache* – seven-year-old Harriet paid him particular attention, watching him intently when he wasn't looking and, to some annoyance of her mother, chatting incessantly to him whenever she had the chance, including when he took the tiller.

Five-year old Hughie was a regular little salt, and now had better command of the words and not just the music – as was not the case on the *Andromache* – whenever he echoed someone taking soundings:

By the ma-a-a-a-ark five! By the de-e-e-e-eeep six!

to the tune of a Lascar shanty. And much to the amusement of the crew, when similarly repeating, in a high-pitched immature shout, his father's commands from the quarterdeck:

*“Let go for’d! Let go aft! Heave away handsomely. Handsomely! I said handsomely!
Belay that! Belay that! Half starboard! Midships! Belay that! Half starboard!
Midships! Steady! Steady! Steady as she goes.”*

On several occasions, including when the Elliot family were on board, Meilin, Edite and the twins came with us. But only after Elliot had satisfied himself beforehand – for the sake of propriety because of his wife being in attendance – that neither I, nor Hobson, had a wife or a betrothed sweetheart waiting back in England.

Clara treated all the guests with friendly aplomb fitting a lady of her position. Harriet was the only one who displayed any disquiet, and then only with respect to Edite. Much to the discreet amusement of those who noticed, she shed her normally friendly and accommodating demeanour to bristle whenever Hobson and Edite were together and, on several occasions, moved between them to keep them apart. Hughie relished having the twins to order about and, from their broad grins, they too enjoyed being regularly marched around the upper deck, being instructed on Hughie’s version of gun drill, and then joining him in manning a cannon each to engage every craft that had the audacity to come within range with loud shouts of, “Boom!”

Edite was the only one who suffered any discomfort from the motion of the vessel, adding embarrassment to her self-effacing shyness. This resulted in some satisfaction for Harriet, until she realised it caused Hobson to be even more attentive to the hussy. Meilin displayed sea legs born of frequent voyages in her past, leaning naturally into abrupt changes of course and showing easy balance whenever we were rocked by a passing bow-wave. The twins seemed to be natural seafarers, as of course, after many months in the *Andromache*, were all the Elliots.

It was after one of these excursions that I met Meilin’s mother, and our relationship shifted to a higher plateau.

After we had said goodbye to Hobson and the Silveiras, I walked Meilin home. Although it was late in the day, the heat was still uncomfortable. So, at her gate, she asked me if I would like a glass of ginger beer. “I’d love one,” I replied, hopefully not too eagerly. She then moved three bricks that sat beside the gate in an intricate order that gave access to the catch behind and, opening the gate, ushered me through. The courtyard was bigger than the Silveiras’ and was flanked by a two-story Portuguese-style house and a separate smaller building which I was to learn had originally been servants’ quarters.

As with the Silveiras’ there was a fishpond, fruit trees and a table, at which Meilin asked me to sit before disappearing into the house. There was also a trellis covered by flowering plants. And it was from behind this that a woman emerged carrying a basket filled with blossoms.

I quickly stood up. One glimpse of her almond eyes, prominent cheekbones, and generous mouth, and of the elegant poise she displayed as she turned towards me, left me in no doubt that I was in the presence of Meilin's mother. I also noticed that being Manchu, her feet were not bound.

Before I had a chance to explain who I was and why I was there, her face broke into a delighted smile. "Stammy!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing here?" She walked across to me and, placing the basket on the table, took hold of my shoulders and kissed me lightly on both cheeks European style.

"I'm afraid you're mistaken. I'm James Andrews, a friend of your daughter."

"Of course, you are, Stammy." She sat down, motioning for me to do the same. "Sit, sit and tell me why you're this other person. Are the Dutch after you? Do you need to hide? You can hide here. I'll have Estela make up a bed for you." I was to learn later that her lightly Mandarin-accented English with its Scottish lilt was acquired from Presbyterian missionaries and later reinforced by her Highlander husband.

Meilin approached carrying a tray with a jug and glasses. "Estela hasn't worked for us for months, mother."

"Of course, she hasn't. I know that." She turned back to me. "My daughter thinks I'm dotty. Why didn't you tell me Stamford was coming, Meilin? I was just saying to your father the other day that it was time Stammy dropped by again."

Meilin placed the tray on the table and sat down. "This is not Stamford, mother. And you haven't spoken to father in over a year. This is James Andrews. Jamie, this is my mother, Xiuying."

"We can hide him here, Meilin. Baron Godert van der Capellen is after him."

"Mother, I've told you before that Stamford died. He died in England eight or nine years ago. And for all I know, Godert van der Capellen is dead as well."

Her mother placed both hands flat on the table and leant forward to look intently at me. "Meilin, how can you sit there and tell me that this man I'm looking at right now, died eight or nine years ago? He's as much alive as you are, as I am."

"Are we talking about Stamford Raffles?" I asked, tentatively, unsure if my place wasn't to stay out of the conversation and simply mind my ps and qs.

"Do you know of another Stamford?" Meilin's rhetorical response was a little too sharply uttered for my liking. And possible for her own, because she immediately gave me a warm smile. "You do look a bit like him. I have to give her that."

"Hopefully not at the moment, if he died eight or nine years ago."

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

This elicited a chuckle from her and, curiously, a quick smile from her mother; which caused me to wonder then, and later after similar incidents, if her dottiness wasn't contrived; or if not contrived, at least – for reasons best known to herself – exaggerated.

We drank our ginger beer while Meilin told her mother about our day on the water with the Elliots and Silveiras.

“I haven't seen the twins for ages,” Her mother lamented at one point. “Or Edite, or the lovely Renato. What a delightful boy is Renato! How is he these days? Has he recovered from his fall? Tell him to call and see me.” She placed a hand on the basket of blossoms. “He'd love to see what I've done with my wisteria and jasmine creepers.”

Meilin's turned to me with an expression that suggested she would not appreciate any related comment from me.

Xiuying was aware of the incident at Canton's Water Gate and was keen to speak with me for some time about that and other matters. However, at times she tended to confuse problems that had arisen between Charles Elliot and Viceroy Lu Kun and his replacement, Deng Tingzhen about trade at Canton, with those of Stamford Raffles and Hussein Shah of Johore about Singapore; a confusion I decided was either understandable or didn't matter and let ride. Our conversation occasionally wandered completely off-track and, whenever one or both of us lost the thread or said something that sounded too ridiculous, we were both wracked with laughter. During all of this, Meilin sat back watching us with her face creased by a perplexed expression.

Eventually Meilin mentioned that I would be caught in the complete dark if I didn't make a move soon because she didn't think there would be any moon; so, I said my goodbyes. As she walked me to the gate, she gave my arm a squeeze and told me in an uncritical tone that I was as dotty as her mother. I agreed, telling her that, for me, dottiness was often infectious. I then I asked her how well did she know Stamford Raffles.

“He was my godfather,” she replied.

I smiled. “Of course, he was. One day you must tell me about your time in Singapore.”

She replied with something along the lines of, “If you continue to behave as charmingly as you've done today with mother, whom I thought would be taking a nap when I asked you in, who knows what I might tell you.”

I told her that I liked the idea of having a bed made up for me somewhere in her house where I could hide from Godert van der Capellen.

She moved closer and punched me lightly in the ribs with a closed fist and told me to behave myself.

To return to *Synopsis*, click on the arrow < at the top left.

“I always behave impeccably,” I told her. “So, anytime you think your mother will be taking a nap, you shouldn’t have any hesitation about inviting me in to share a ginger beer with you.” She began to push me through the gateway. I turned and she was suddenly so close I couldn’t resist the temptation of leaning across the few inches that separated us and kissing her gently on the lips. “Thank you for a wonderful day, Meilin.” I drew back and, before she had a chance to admonish me, I asked, “Who is he, anyway, Barron Godert van der Capellen?”

She stood watching me silently for a moment, her jaw raised defiantly. “He was the Governor General of the Dutch East Indies.”

“Well, I’d hate for someone as important as that to be looking for me. Or Heaven forbid, find me! So, when you hide me, hide me well.” I gave her what I hoped was my most charming smile. “Thank you for the ginger beer, lovely lady.”

I turned and left, with my heart rejoicing. Because, when I had moved to kiss her, she could have easily turned her face away; and when I did kiss her, she could have clamped her lips tightly shut; and she did neither.

