River of Smoke: An Introduction for students in HIS 251 by Sanjay Joshi

1. The most important thing to keep in mind is that this is a NOVEL, a work of fiction, of imagination. It is a story. Although it is based on real events, and has in its pages some real historical characters, it IS a work of fiction, a product of the author's imagination. The author, Amitav Ghosh, has done an extensive amount of research before writing this book, so there should not be glaring errors, but all said and done it needs to be read as a work of fiction.

2. So why am I asking you to read a work of fiction for a history class? Because history alone gets boring, often does not capture the sort of texture of everyday life that makes the study of the past so fascinating. Novelists are not bound by the same sort of rules as historians. They can paint an imaginative picture in words. Some novelists do try to tell an imaginative history, keeping real events, people, chronologies of events in mind. Ghosh has done so, and extremely well, in this novel.

3. The novel is primarily the story of one character, an Indian opium trader named Bahram Modi. Through this story, though, Ghosh is able to bring to life the connections between colonialism, India, and China, in a way that no history book I have read ever has. We can see the urge to financial profit that drives traders like Modi, his subordinate place in the world of opium traders, how he battles with his own conscience, fails, and the price he ultimately pays for this. The novel tells us about the events that led up to the Opium Wars. At the same time, the novel brilliantly illuminates the world of foreign traders and *fanqui*-town in Canton (as it was then called, now Guangdong), and exposes very well the hypocrisy of the ideology of "free" trade that was used to justify the drug trade in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Some have also read the book as a critique of the celebration of free markets and globalization we are seeing in our own day.

4. If your budgets and your interests allow it, I would urge you to buy the entire book, but if not, do read the extracts below with the following in mind:

a. These ARE extracts. I have used pages 58-71; 81-89; 120-126; 160-166; 169-191; 216-229; 293-312; 319-327; 331-341; 373-380; 429-439; 458-465; 476-486. These are all from the John Murray (UK) edition.

b. The *River of Smoke* is the second part of a trilogy of books, often called the *Ibis Trilogy*. The first volume was titled *Sea of Poppies*, and the third, *Flood of Fire*. Here is a video with Ghosh talking about the trilogy, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XpeDiTC1yU

5. I also want to give you a brief introduction to some of the characters you will encounter in the book, as you don't have the advantage of the entire book to read.

A. Bahramji Naurojzi Modi (called **Bahram** through the novel, and also referred to as Mr. Barry Moddie by the British and American traders in Canton) Born to a family that fell on hard times, Bahram married into a rich family of shipbuilders, the Mistries, and singlehandedly built up the China (read Opium) trade as a lucrative subsidiary for his in-laws. To gain his independence from his in-laws he risked everything, took a huge loan, and acquired his biggest

ever supply of opium. In what we read, he then gets stuck in Canton at a difficult time. We also learn about his second family in Canton, and about his estranged son, Ah Fatt, or Freddie.

B. **Neel**. From the first novel of the trilogy we know him to be a rich, somewhat spoilt, landowner (zamindar) who falls foul of the new system put in place by the British in India. He is accused of forgery and sent for "transportation" that is to work as an indentured laborer overseas. He escapes, along with Ah Fatt, and in this novel is appointed Bahram's *munshi* (more confidante and general manager than a scribe or clerk – which is the literal meaning of the word *munshi*).

C. The "General" you read about on pg. 160, is Napoleon Bonaparte. The scene is actually a flashback to 1816, when Bahram and his friend **Zadig Karabedian**, an Armenian watch-maker and a philosopher to boot, met "the General" when their ship landed in St. Helena. Napoleon was exiled there after his defeat at the battle of Waterloo.

D. "*Puggly*" literally means "the mad woman" but it is a term of affection used by the artist **Robin Chinnery** (half-Indian son of a European artist, born and raised in Calcutta) for his childhood friend, **Paulette Lambert**, daughter of a French botanist. Robin's letters to Puggly from Canton are a device Ghosh uses to describe *fanqui*-town in Canton from the eyes of someone new to the place.

E. Then there are various real historical characters who populate the novel, such as the influential opium traders such as **Jardine**, **Dent**, and **Burnham**, officials such as **Captain Elliot**, and, of course, **Commissioner Lin**. You will read about some of them in Vohra's book.

For more on the novel, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/River_of_Smoke
For more on the Ibis Trilogy, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibis_trilogy
For more on the author http://www.amitavghosh.com/

Also by Amitav Ghosh

The Circle of Reason

The Shadow Lines

In An Antique Land

The Calcutta Chromosome

The Glass Palace

The Hungry Tide

Incendiary Circumstances

Sea of Poppies

River of Smoke

Amitav Ghosh

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3

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For my mother
On her eightieth

Three

For many years Bahram had regarded the fledgling township of Singapore as a junglee joke.

In the old days, when sailing through the Straits, Bahram had made a point of stopping not at Singapore but at Malacca, which was one of his favourite cities: he liked the location, the severe Dutch buildings, the Chinese temples, the whitewashed Portuguese church, the Arab souq, and the galis where the long-settled Gujarati families lived – and food-lover that he was, he had also developed a great partiality for the banquets that were served in the houses of the city's Peranakan merchants.

In those days Singapore was just one of many forested islands, clogging the tip of the straits. On its southern side, at the mouth of the river, there was a small Malay kampung: ships would sometimes drop anchor nearby and send their longboats over for fresh water and provisions. But the island's jungles were notorious for their tigers, crocodiles, and venomous snakes; no one lingered any longer than was necessary.

When the British chose that unpromising location for a new township, Bahram, like many others, had assumed that the settlement would soon be reclaimed by the forest: why would anyone choose to stop here when Malacca was just a day's sail away? Yet, as the years went by, despite his personal preference for Malacca, Bahram had been forced to yield, with increasing frequency, to his ship's officers, who claimed that the port facilities were better in Singapore – Mr Tivendale's conveniently situated boatyard was especially to their liking: they frequently cited it as the best in the region.

It was to this boatyard that the *Anahita* made her way after the

storm: although she had lost her jib-boom and her figurehead, her other masts were intact and she was able to cover the distance in less than a week. Because of the lingering effects of the raw opium he had ingested, Bahram was unable to stir from his bed through this part of the voyage. For several days afterwards he suffered from opium-induced nausea: the attacks were more intense than anything he had ever experienced before, worse than his worst bouts of sea-sickness. Once or twice every hour his stomach would be knotted by spasms that made him feel as if his body were trying to eject his guts by pushing them out through his mouth. These seizures were so enfeebling that at times he could not turn on his side without Vico's help.

When the *Anahita* reached Singapore Bahram was still too weak to leave his bedroom; he chose to remain on board while the ship was being repaired and refurbished. This was no great trial, for the comforts offered by Mr Dutronquoy's hotel, the only respectable hostelry in town, were far exceeded by those of his own surroundings. The Owners' Suite on the *Anahita* was perhaps the most luxurious to be found outside a royal yacht: apart from a bedroom it also included a salon, a study, a bathroom and a water-closet. Here, as in many other parts of the *Anahita*, the bulkheads were decorated with motifs from ancient Persian and Assyrian art, carved in relief upon the wooden panels: there were grooved columns like those of Persepolis and Pasargadae; there were bearded spear-carriers, standing stiffly in profile; there were winged farohars and leaping horses. In one corner of the cabin there was a large mahogany desk, and in another, a small altar, with a gilt-framed picture of the Prophet Zarathustra.

The suite's bed was one of its most luxurious features: a canopied four-poster, it was so placed that Bahram could look out at the harbour through the cabin's windows. He was thus able to appreciate, as never before, how quickly Singapore was changing.

The Tivendale boatyard was situated at the mouth of the Singapore River, between the port's inner harbour, which was in the estuary, and the outer anchorage, which was in the bay beyond. Being anchored between the two, the *Anahita*'s stern tended to swing with the flow of the tides: when it faced outwards, hundreds

of bumboats and tongkang lighters would come into view, swarming around the ships anchored in the bay. On their way back to shore the boats would sometimes pass so close to the *Anahita* that Bahram would hear the voices of the Chulia boatmen talking, shouting and singing in Tamil, Telegu and Oriya. When the *Anahita*'s stern came about, a panoramic view of newly built godowns and bankshalls would appear in front of him. Sometimes the *Anahita* would sweep so far around that he would even be able to look upriver towards Boat Quay, where the smaller 'country boats' discharged their goods and passengers.

The activity was unending, the boat traffic constant, and in watching it Bahram began to began to understand why several businessmen of his acquaintance had recently bought or rented godowns and daftars in Singapore: it seemed very likely that the new settlement would soon overtake Malacca in commercial importance. This evoked mixed emotions in Bahram: he had a suspicion that this British-built settlement would not be an easy-going place like the Malacca of old, where Malays, Chinese, Gujaratis and Arabs had lived elbow to elbow with the descendants of the old Portuguese and Dutch families. Singapore had been so designed as to set the 'white town' carefully apart from the rest of the settlement, with the Chinese, Malays and Indians each being assigned their own neighbourhoods – or 'ghettoes' as some people called them.

What would become of this odd new town? The one thing that was for sure was that it would be a good place for buying and selling: the reports Vico brought back from his forays ashore confirmed that bazars and markets were springing up all around the settlement – Vico's particular favourite was a weekly open-air mela where people came from near and afar to sell and exchange old clothes.

From Vico's accounts, as from his observations of the traffic on the river, it was clear to Bahram that Singapore was rapidly evolving into one of the principal waystations of the Indian Ocean: this was why he was not greatly surprised to learn that an old friend of his, Zadig Karabedian, was in the city – Vico had run into him as he was walking down Commercial Street.

Arré Vico! said Bahram. Why didn't you bring Zadig Bey back with you?

He was going somewhere, patrão. He said he would come as soon as possible.

What's he doing in Singapore?

He's on his way to Canton, patrão.

Oh? Bahram sat up eagerly. Has he booked a passage already?

Don't know, patrão.

Vico, you have to go and find him, said Bahram. Tell him he has to travel with us, on the *Anahita*. I won't take no for an answer. Tell him to come aboard as soon as possible. Go na, jaldi!

Zadig Karabedian was one of Bahram's few true intimates. They had met twenty-three years before, in Canton. Zadig was a watchmaker by trade and travelled often to various ports in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, to sell clocks, watches, music-boxes and other mechanical devices – known collectively as 'sing-songs', these articles were in great demand in Canton.

Although Zadig was Armenian by origin, his family had been settled for centuries in Egypt, where they lived in the old Christian and Jewish quarter of Cairo. Legend had it that one of Zadig's ancestors had been sold to the Sultan of Egypt as a boy: after rising in the Mamelouk ranks he had arranged to bring some of his relatives to Cairo where they had prospered as craftsmen, tax collectors and businessmen. Since then they had developed close business connections with Aden, Basra, Colombo, Bombay and several ports in the Far East, including Canton.

Zadig, even more than other members of his clan, was an inveterate traveller, and was fluent in many languages, including Hindusthani. He had a great talent also for something that Bahram liked to call *khabar-dari* – keeping up with the news – and it was partly because of this that their paths had crossed in Canton.

The year was 1815, and the first reports of the French defeat at Waterloo had reached southern China in late November. The news was received with great relief by most of the European community. Many merchants who had delayed their return to Europe because of the war, now changed their minds and decided to make their way back; this caused all kinds of disruption, not the least of which

was a shortage in bills of exchange. Because of the greatly increased demand it became especially hard to obtain bills that were payable in India: all of a sudden Bahram found himself faced with the prospect of having to travel to England in order to realize his profits for the season.

To Bahram this was no great disappointment: he had never been to Europe before and the prospect of travelling there was exciting beyond measure – but on trying to obtain a berth, he discovered that westward passages were in critically short supply. It was then that a Parsi friend put him in touch with Zadig Karabedian.

Being an avid student of Continental politics, Zadig had foreseen the outcome of the Hundred-Days War and had even found a way to profit from it. It so happened that he too was travelling to England, and having guessed that there would be a great demand for westbound passages that season, he had reserved the other bunk in his cabin, in the expectation of making it over to a travelling companion, someone who would be both congenial and willing to pay a substantial dastoori. After some hard but amicable bargaining, he and Bahram were able to settle on mutually satisfactory terms and they boarded the Hon'ble Company Ship *Cuffnells* at Macau on 7 December 1815.

Zadig was tall, with a long, thin neck, and a face that had the look of being permanently frost-bitten because of the webbing of cracks that radiated outwards from the twin spots of colour on his bright, pink cheeks. Once under weigh, Bahram and Zadig found themselves spending most of their time in each other's company: their cabin was deep in the vessel's bowels, and to escape the stench of the bilges the two traders spent as much time as they could on deck, leaning over the rails and talking, with the wind in their faces. They were both in their mid-thirties and they discovered, to their great surprise, that they had more in common than would seem reasonable for two men who had grown up continents apart. Like Bahram, Zadig had risen in the world as a result of an unequal marriage – in his case he had been chosen to marry the widowed daughter of a wealthy family that was related to his own. He too knew what it was to be regarded as a poor relative by his in-laws.

One day as they were leaning over to watch the *Cuffnells*' frothing

bow-wave, Zadig said: When you are away from home, living in China – how do you deal with . . . with your bodily necessities?

Bahram was never at ease discussing such things and he began to stutter: *Kya?* . . . what do you mean?

There is nothing shameful in this, you know, said Zadig; it is not just the jism that has its needs but also the rooh, the soul – and a man who feels himself to be alone in his own home, does he not have a right to seek companionship elsewhere?

Would you call it a right? said Bahram.

Right or not, I don't mind telling you that I – like many others who must travel constantly – have a second family, in Colombo. My 'wife' there is a Ceylonese burgher and although the family I have had with her is not mine by law, it is as dear to me as the one that bears my name.

Bahram looked at him quickly before dropping his eyes. It is very hard, isn't it?

There was something in his tone that made Zadig pause. So you have someone too?

With his head lowered, Bahram nodded.

Is she Chinese?

Yes.

Is she what they call a 'sing-song girl' – a professional?

No! said Bahram vehemently. No. When I met her she was a washerwoman, a widow. She was living on a boat, with her mother and daughter; they made their living by taking in laundry from the residents of the foreign enclave . . .

Bahram had never talked about this with anyone: to speak of it was such a release that having started he could not stop.

Her name was Chi-mei, he told Zadig, and he, Bahram, was a newcomer to Canton when he met her; as the youngest member of the Parsi contingent he was often asked to run errands for the big Sethjis; sometimes he would even be sent to the waterfront to inquire after their laundry. That was how he first came across Chi-mei; she was scrubbing clothes in the flat stern of her boat. A scarf was tightly tied over her hair, but a few ringlets had escaped their bindings and lay curled on her forehead. Her face was pert and lively, with glinting black eyes, and cheeks that glowed like

polished apples. They locked eyes briefly and then she quickly turned her face away. But later, when he was about to head back to the factory he glanced at her over his shoulder and caught her looking in his direction again.

When he was back in his room, her face kept coming back to him. This was not the first time that Bahram had been plagued by fantasies about the girls who worked on the waterfront – but this time his longings had a keener edge than ever before. Something about the way she had looked at him had lodged in his mind and kept pulling him back towards her sampan. He began to visit the laundry-boats on invented errands and it happened a couple of times that he saw her blush and look away on catching sight of him: this was his only way of knowing that she had come to recognize him.

He noticed that her sampan seemed to have only two other occupants, an old woman and a little girl: there were never any men around. He was obscurely encouraged by this, and finding her alone one day he seized his chance: 'You name blongi what-thing?'

She blushed: 'Li Shiu-je. Mistoh name blongi what-thing ah?'

It wasn't till later that he understood that she'd told him to call her 'Miss Li': at that moment it was enough to know that she was fluent in Fanqui-town's idiom.

'Me Barry. Barry Moddie.'

She rolled this around her tongue. 'Mister Barry?'

'Yes.'

'Mister Barry blongi *Pak-taw-gwai*?'

Bahram knew this phrase: it meant 'White-Hat-Ghost' and was used to refer to Parsis because many of them wore white turbans. He smiled: 'Yes.'

She gave him a shy nod and slipped away into the sampan's cabin.

Already then, he knew that there was something special about her. The boat-women of Canton were utterly unlike their land-bound sisters: their feet were unbound and often bare, and there was nothing demure in their demeanour: they rowed boats, hawked goods, and went about their work with just as much gusto, if not more, than their menfolk. In monetary matters they were often

unashamedly grasping, and newcomers like Bahram were always warned to be careful when dealing with them.

Unlike some of the other washerwomen Chi-mei never asked for cumshaws or bakshish. She bargained vigorously for her dues but was content to leave it at that. Bahram tried to overpay her once, pushing a few extra pieces of copper into her hands. She counted it carefully then came running after him. 'Mister Barry! Give too muchi cash. Here, this piece catchi.'

He tried to give it back but this only made her angry. She pointed to the gaudy flower-boats that were moored nearby. 'That-piece boat sing-song girlie have got. Mister Barry can catchi.'

'Mister Barry no wanchi sing-song girlie.'

She shrugged, dropped the coins in his palm and walked away.

He was a little shamefaced when he saw her next and this seemed to amuse her. After the washing had been handed over, she whispered: 'Mister Barry? Catchi, no-catchi, sing-song girl?'

'No catchi,' he said. And then gathering his courage together, he said: 'Mister Barry no wanchi sing-song girl. Wanchi Li Shiu-je.'

'Wai-ah!' she laughed. 'Mister Barry talkee bad-thing la! Li Shiu-je no blongi sing-song girl ah.'

The strange diction of pidgin was still new to Bahram, and it added an inexplicable erotic charge to these exchanges: he would wake up and find himself talking to her, trying to explain his life: 'Mister Barry one-piece wife have got; two-piece girl-chilo also have got . . .'

When he next went to pick up some clothes he found a way of inquiring into her marital status. Pretending that the bundle was too heavy for him, he said: 'Li Shiu-je have husband-fellow? If have, he can carry maybe.'

Her face clouded over. 'No have got. Husband-fellow have makee die. In sea. One year pass.'

'Oh? Mister Barry too muchi sad inside.'

Soon after that Bahram also suffered a bereavement. He received a letter from his mother telling him that his youngest sister had died, in Gujarat. She had been ill for months but they had thought it best not to inform him since he was so far away and would worry

to no good effect. But now that the unthinkable had happened there was no reason why he should not know.

Bahram had doted on this sister and he became so distraught that he could not bring himself to share the news with any of the other Parsis in Canton. He retreated into his cubicle and neglected the duties he was expected to perform for the senior members of the Bombay contingent. One day he was berated by a senior Seth for not having paid proper attention to the washing. At the end of the tirade the Seth handed him a torn turban-cloth.

Look – this is all your fault; see what has happened!

Bahram was in no state of mind to argue with the Seth: he walked out of the factory and headed for Chi-mei's sampan. It was after nightfall but he found his way to the sampan without difficulty. For some reason she was alone.

'Mister Barry, chin-chin. What thing wanchi?'

'Li Shiu-je have done too muchi bad thing.'

'Hai-ah! What thing have done ah?'

'Have cuttee cloth.'

'What-place cloth have cuttee ah? Mister Barry can show?'

'Can. Can.'

The only lamp in the sampan was inside the cabin: it was a cramped, low space, but there were so few possessions in it that it did not feel crowded. Sitting crouched under the hooped roof, Bahram unfolded the fabric, looking for the part that was torn. The turban-cloth was many yards long, and soon it was all over them, tangled around their arms.

Profanities began to pour from Bahram's mouth – *bahnchod! madarchod!* – and suddenly she caught hold of his arms.

'Stop, stop, Mister Barry. Stop.' Raising a fold of the fabric, she wiped something off his face.

'Mister Barry trouble have got? Blongi sad inside?'

His throat was dry but he managed to say: 'Yes. Too muchi sad. Sister have makee die.'

She was sitting close to him, with her shoulders half turned in his direction. He dropped his head on the curve of her neck and to his astonishment she did not push him away. Instead she began to stroke his back with one hand.

Never before had he taken so much comfort in being touched: desire and love-making were nowhere in his thoughts; what he felt above all was gratitude.

Soon it became clear that she had come to some kind of decision in regard to him. She whispered in his ear, telling him he could not stay now, because her mother and daughter would be back in a few minutes. But she would send him word soon, through a messenger: 'He boy-chilo – my relative. He name blongi Allow.'

Two days later Bahram felt a tug on the hem of his choga. He turned around to find a little boy standing behind him. A drop of mucus hung pearl-like beneath his nose, and he was wearing a dirty tunic and ragged pyjamas. He looked like any of the urchins who wandered around the Foreign Enclave, begging for coins and offering to run errands.

'Name blongi Allow?'

The boy nodded and began to walk towards the waterfront. He had a tripping gait and seemed often to be on the point of falling over on his face: his walk was so distinctive Bahram had no trouble keeping sight of him in the dark. They came to a sampan that had no lights burning inside. Allow gestured to Bahram to climb in and he clambered over the foredeck. Chi-mei was waiting in the darkened cabin. She motioned to him to be silent and they sat quietly next to each other while Allow undid the moorings and rowed the sampan upriver, towards White Swan Lake. Only then did she unroll a mat.

'Come, Mister Barry.'

He had never been with any woman other than his wife: to almost the same degree that he was assured and combative in his business dealings, he was shy and reticent in all matters intimate or personal. His previous undressings had been solemn and silent; here Chi-mei kept giggling as she helped him take off his turban, slip off his choga and untie his pyjamas. When she tried to pull off his sacred waist-strings he whispered: 'This piece thread blongi joss-pidgin thing. No can take off.'

She uttered a yelp of a laugh. 'Waa! Joss-pidgin thread also have got?'

'Have. Have.'

'White Hat Devil have too muchi big cloth.'

'White Hat Devil have nother-piece thingi too muchi big.'

The cramped space, the hard edges of the timbers, the rocking of the sampan and the smell of dried fish that percolated up from the bilges created an almost delirious urgency. Love-making with Shireenbai was a clinical affair and their bodies seemed hardly to touch except where necessity demanded. Bahram was utterly unprepared for the sweat, the stickiness, the slippages and mistaken gropings, the sudden fart that burst from her when he least expected it.

Afterwards, when they were lying in each other's arms, they heard the sound of fireworks and thrust their heads out of the covering. Something was being celebrated in a lakeside village and rockets were arcing through the sky. The blazes of colour above were so brilliantly mirrored upon the dark surface of the water that the sampan seemed to be suspended within a glowing sphere of light.

When the boat turned shorewards, Bahram was not in the least surprised to hear her say: 'Now Mister Barry give cumshaw. Lob-pidgin have makee do. Eat chicken must pay. Mister Barry must give daaih-big cumshaw.'

For half an hour they bickered over how much money he would part with – and the bargaining was sweeter than any love-talk could possibly have been. It was the language he knew best, the language he used all day, and he was able to say much more with it than he could have with endearments. In the end he gladly gave her everything he had.

When he was about to go ashore she said: 'Mister Barry must give Allow cumshaw also.'

Bahram's pockets were empty, and he laughed. 'No more cash have got. Later can give Allow cumshaw.'

The boy had followed him back to his lodgings, and Bahram, in a fit of generosity, had rewarded him with a gift that had brought a beaming smile to his face: he had given him half a cake of Malwa opium and told him to sell it immediately. 'Buy shoes, buy clothes, eat rice. *Dak mh dak aa?*'

Dak! Mh-goi-saai! The boy had run off with a delighted grin on his face.

After that Bahram and Chi-mei had begun to meet regularly, once or twice a week. These 'lob-pidgin' sessions were always arranged through the boy, Allow. Bahram would see him running around the enclave, with the other lads, and all it took was a raised eyebrow, a glance. He would go to the waterfront in the evening and there she would be, in the sampan.

From the first Bahram tried to be generous, even extravagant, with her. At the end of that season, before leaving for Bombay, he asked her what she wanted and when she said she needed a bigger boat he gladly agreed to pay for it. When he returned at the start of the next season he came laden with gifts. At the end of each sojourn he made sure that she had enough for herself and her family – her daughter and mother – to live on until his next visit. Not for a moment did it occur to him to wonder whether she took other lovers when he was away: his trust in her was absolute and she never gave him any cause to doubt her faithfulness.

In March 1815, a few days before Bahram's departure for Bombay, Chi-mei took his hand and put it on her stomach: 'Look-see here, Mister Barry.'

'Chilo?'

'Chilo.'

He felt just as joyful as he had when he learnt of Shireenbai's pregnancies: his only concern was that she might try to abort the baby. To make it easier, he paid for her to leave Canton and go downriver, so that it would be possible for her to tell people that the baby had been given to her to adopt.

Such was his excitement about the child that he only spent four months in Bombay that year, returning to China at the end of the monsoons. On reaching Macau, instead of waiting for a passage-boat to take him upriver he hired a 'fast-crab' to whisk him to Canton through the back-channels of the Pearl River delta.

And there was the baby, swaddled so as to leave the genitals proudly exposed: when she put the child in his arms he had hugged him so tight that a warm jet had shot out of the boy's tiny gu-gu, wetting his face and dripping off his beard.

He laughed. 'He name what-thing?'

'Leong Fatt.'

'No.' Bahram shook his head. 'He name blongi Framjee.' They had bickered amicably for a while without reaching an agreement.

This had happened only three months before Bahram met Zadig. The exchange was still fresh in his mind when he was telling his new-found friend the story. When he came to the end he began to laugh and Zadig chuckled too: So what is the boy's name?

She calls him Ah Fatt. I call him Freddy.

Is he your only son?

Yes.

Zadig gave him a congratulatory pat. Mabrook!

Thank you. And how many children have you had with your other wife?

Two. A boy and a girl: Aleena and Sargis.

Zadig became pensive as he said the names. Resting his elbow on the deck rail, he put his chin on his fist: Tell me, Bahram-bhai, do you ever think of leaving your family – your legal family – so that you can live with your other family: Chi-mei I mean, and the child she's given you?

The question shocked Bahram. No, he said. Never. I could never think of it. Why? Is it something you've considered?

Yes I have, said Zadig. I think of it often, to tell you the truth. They have no one but me – and my other family, in Cairo, they have everything. As the years go on, I find it harder and harder to be away from those who really need me. It wrings my heart to be away from them.

The gravity of his tone surprised Bahram; he could not imagine that a responsible man of business would seriously contemplate breaking his ties with his family and his community: in his own world such a step would, he knew, bring not only social disgrace but also financial ruin. It amazed him that an apparently sound man, a husband and a father, would even admit to entertaining such a schoolboyish notion.

You know what they say, Zadig Bey, he said in a teasing tone. No sensible man will let his lathi rule his head.

It isn't that, said Zadig.

So what is it then? Is it a matter of – what do they call it – *ishq*? 'Love'?

Call it *ishq*, call it *hubb*, call it *pyar*, call it what you will. It's in my heart. Isn't it the same for you?

Bahram thought about this for a bit and then shook his head. No, he said. For me and Chi-mei it's not love. We call it 'lob-pidgin' and I like it better that way. The other thing – I wouldn't know how to say it to her. Nor could she say it to me. When you don't have a word for it how can you know if you feel it?

Zadig gave him one of his long, appraising glances.

I feel sad for you, my friend, he said. In the end, you know, that is all there is.

All there is? Bahram burst out laughing. Why you're mad, Zadig Bey! You're making a joke, no?

No. I am not, Bahram-bhai.

Well then, Zadig Bey, said Bahram lightly. If that's what you think then you'll have to leave your first wife, won't you?

Zadig sighed. Yes, he said. Some day that is what I will have to do.

Neither then nor afterwards had Bahram believed that Zadig would actually do it – but so he had, a few years later. He had settled a large sum of money on his other family, in Cairo, and had bought a spacious house in the Fort area in Colombo. Bahram had visited him there soon after: his mistress was a matronly woman of Dutch descent and so far as he could tell, their children were happy, healthy and well brought up.

The following year Bahram had taken Zadig to meet Chi-mei and Freddy, in Canton. Chi-mei had served them a fine meal and Freddy, who was a toddler then, had charmed Zadig. After that Zadig had made it his practice to visit them every time he travelled to China. On his return to Colombo he would often send Bahram news about them.

It was through one of these letters that Bahram had learnt of Freddy's disappearance and Chi-mei's death.

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Like other boat-children Ah Fatt grew up with a bell attached to his ankle, so his family could always keep track of him; like them he had to sit in a barrel when the boat was moving; like them, he had a wooden board tied to his back, so that he would float if he fell in. But the other children lost their boards and bells when they were two or three – Ah Fatt's stayed on till long afterwards, making him a target of mockery. On the Canton waterfront little boys would earn money by diving in the river to amuse the Aliens, fishing out the coins and trinkets they threw in the water. Ah Fatt too wanted to do these things, to swim with the boat-children, to dive and earn coins – but to him alone, these things were strictly forbidden because of the spectre of the lurking dragon-fish.

But Yee Ma must have known also that it would be impossible to keep a child of the *seui-seung-yan* from the water.

'From time they – we – are little, we float . . .'

Ah Fatt broke off as bowls appeared before them, with balls of minced chicken swimming in a clear broth: using his chopsticks, he pointed at one of the bobbing morsels. 'Like that we learn to swim. The *pun-tei* – the land-people – they mock us and say we have fins instead of feet. Me too, I learn to swim, when Yee Ma is not there; sometimes I also go to dive for coins with others. Then one day she find out, and she pull me from the water. Beat me, shaming in front of everyone. So much shame, I think I throw myself in the river, and if dragon-fish comes, that also good. I think: she doing this because I have no parents. I think: if I her child, she not beat like this. I think: better run away. I make plans, I speak with beggar-men, but Older Sister find out. Then she tell me everything: that Yee Ma not aunt, but Mother. That 'Uncle Barry' not kai-yeh, but Father. I could not ask Mother because I know she beat Older Sister for telling me. I wait until Uncle Barry come next time, and when alone, I ask: Is true you are Father, and Yee Ma is Mother? At first he say, no, not true. But I ask again, and again, and then he begin to cry and admit everything. He say, yes, all true; he Father and he have other family in Bombay.'

Ah Fatt fell silent and gestured to Neel to pick up his cup. After they had drained their liquor Neel too was silent for a bit. It was only after Ah Fatt had filled the cups again that he said quietly: 'It must have been a shock? To find out about all this? In that way?'

'Shock? Yes. Maybe.' Ah Fatt's voice was flat and emotionless. 'At first I just want to know. Know about Bombay. About Elder Wife. About sisters. You can think how strange for me all this. When I small, we live in boat like this one; we also poor people, like these. Just poor boat-people, sometime no food, we eat wind. Then one day I hear my father *hou-gwai*, rich man, rich White-Hat Devil. Now I think I know why my mother beat me – I not real China-yan, I her secret shame, but still she need me, because of money Father give. But does not matter now. Have got another family. I want know all about it. I ask Father, but he say nothing. Does not like to speak of it. He tells about Malacca and Colombo

and London, but not Bombay. I read in books that "Western Island" – India – have gold and magic and I want to go – I want fly there like Monkey King. But this in my head – my feet in kitchen-boat, where I live. So when I hear of Father's ship, *Anahita*, I am mad to see it.'

'Did it come to Canton?'

'No,' said Ah Fatt. 'Big ships can-na come to Canton – just like they can-na come up this river. Too shallow. They must anchor at Huang-pu – Whampoa in English. Many boats go up and down so I know about ship: I know has set record for season – seventeen days from Bombay to Canton. When Father come, I say: take me, take me to your ship, and he turn red, shake head. He afraid if he take me then ship will carry news back to Bombay. Elder Wife will find out about me and there will be trouble. Ship not his, he tell me; belong to father-in-law and brothers-in-law. He like paid servant and must be careful. But this mean nothing to me; I do not care. I tell him I want to go, or I will shame him. I will go Whampoa myself. So then he says, yes, he will take. But he sends me with Vico, his purser – does not go himself. Vico shows me ship, tell me stories. And it is like I saw in my head – a palace, better even than mandarin-boat. You cannot believe till you see . . .'

He broke off to point to the *Anahita*'s raised quarter-deck, which was lit by the glow of a binnacle lamp. 'Look, near stern – third mast, what do you call it?'

'The mizzen-mast?'

'Yes. That mast like tree. Around its roots, on quarter-deck, there is carved bench, where people can sit. Grandfather built like that, to be like banyan tree in village. Vico tell me that. Afterward, when I see *Anahita*, always I think that *my* bench . . .'

Again now the cook interrupted, placing bowls of steaming rice on the plank, along with the rest of the chicken, prepared in a half-dozen different ways. The smells were tantalizing, but Neel was so absorbed in Ah Fatt's recollections that he paid no mind to the food.

'Did you go back to the ship again?'

'No – did not go, but saw many times. At Lintin Island.'

'Did you go there to see your father?'

'No. Father never in Lintin.' Seeing the puzzlement in Neel's eyes, he said: 'Look-see here, I show you . . .'

Using his chopsticks, Ah Fatt expertly dismantled a piece of chicken and picked out the wishbone. Laying it on the plank, he pointed to the yawning jaws: 'This like mouth of Pearl River, which lead to Canton.' Then, picking some grains of rice from his bowl he scattered them across the gap with his chopsticks. 'These like islands – have many here, like teeth rising from sea. Teeth very useful to pirates. Also to foreign merchants, like Father. Because foreign ship cannot bring opium to Canton. Forbidden. So they pretend they do not bring to China. They go here' – his chopsticks moved to point to a grain of rice that lay halfway between the jaws of the wishbone – 'to Lintin Island. There they sell opium. When price is settled, dealer send out boat, quick boat, with thirty oar – "fast-crab".' Ah Fatt laughed, and his chopsticks flashed as he flipped the wishbone into the water. 'That how I go to Lintin – in "fast-crab".'

'Why? What were you doing there?'

'What you think? Buying opium.'

'For whom?'

'My boss – he big opium-seller, have many fast-crab, many leng work for him, many hing-dai. We are one big gaa and he is our Daaih-go-daai, Big-Brother-Big, for our family. We call him Dai Lou. He Canton man, but he travel everywhere – even to London. He stay there long time and then he come back to start business, in Macau. He have many like me to work for him; he like to hire my kind.'

'What do you mean your kind?'

'*Jaahp-júng-jai* – 'mixed-kind-boy'.' Ah Fatt laughed. 'Many like that along Pearl River – in Macau, Whampoa, Guangzhou. In any port, any place where man can buy woman, there is many *yeh-jai* and 'West-ocean-child'. They too must eat and live. Dai Lou give us work, treat us well. For long time he like real Elder Brother to me. But then we have trouble. That why I have to leave Canton, run away. Can-na go back.'

'What happened?'

'Dai Lou, he have woman. Not wife but . . . how do you say?'

'Concubine?'

'Yes. Concubine. She very beautiful. Her name Adelina.'

'Was she European?'

'No. Adelie also 'salt-prawn-food', like me: she also half Cheeni, half Achha.'

'Achha? What do you mean by that?'

'"Achha" – that what Canton-yan call you people. You Hindusthanis – there you all "Achha" '.

'But "achha" just means "good". Or "all right".'

Ah Fatt laughed: 'Is opposite in Gwong-jou-talk. Ah-chaa mean 'bad man'. So you are Achha to me and Aa-chaa to them.'

Neel laughed too. 'So your Adelie was half Achha? Where was she from?'

'Her mother from Goa, but live in Macau. Her father Chinese, from Canton. Adelie very beautiful; she also like smoke opium. When Dai Lou travel, he tell me to look after. Sometime she ask me bite the cloud with her. We both half-Achha, but never seen India. We talk about India, about her mother, my father. And then . . .'

'You became lovers?'

'Yes. We both become *din-din-dak-dak*. Crazy.'

'And your boss found out?'

Ah Fatt nodded.

'What did he do?'

'What do you think?' Ah Fatt shrugged. 'Just like country have laws, gaa have rules. I know Dai Lou try to kill me so I hide with mother. Then I hear hing-dai come for me, so I run away. Go to Macau, and pretend to be Christian. Hide in seminary. Then they send me to Serampore, in Bengal.'

'And Adelie?'

Ah Fatt looked into his eyes and then pointed his chopsticks at the muddy waters of the river.

'She killed herself?'

He answered with a barely perceptible nod.

'But that's all in the past, Ah Fatt: don't you ever feel like going back to Canton now?'

'No. Can-na go back, even though Mother is there. Dai Lou have eyes everywhere. Can-na go back.'

'But what about your father then? Why don't you go to see him?'

'No!' Ah Fatt slammed his cup on the table. 'No. Don't want see Father.'

'Why?'

'Last time I see him, I ask him to take to India. I want go away. Away from Chin-gwok, away from Canton. I know if I stay, something happen with me and Adelie. And I know also, Dai Lou can find out and then he can do anything – to her and me. So I go to Father one day. I ask him to take to India, on *Anahita*. But he say: No, no, Freddy, cannot go. Impossible. After that I angry too. Very angry. I never see Father again.'

Despite the vehemence of Ah Fatt's tone, Neel could sense that the ship's influence on his friend was strengthening, its magnetic field growing steadily more powerful. 'Listen, Ah Fatt,' he said. 'Whatever may have happened between you and your father is in the past. Maybe he's changed: don't you think you should find out if he is on board the ship?'

'No need find out,' said Ah Fatt. 'I know. He is there. I know he is there.'

'How?'

'See flag? With columns? Is only up when Father there.'

'Then why don't you send him a message?'

'No.' The word came out of Ah Fatt's mouth like a small explosion. 'No. Don't want.'

Looking up, Neel saw that Ah Fatt's face, which had shown very little emotion so far, had suddenly crumpled into a stricken mask. But almost immediately Ah Fatt straightened his shoulders and shook his head, as if to clear it. Then, swilling back a shot of liquor, he said: 'Mister Neel, you make me talk too much. Now no more talk. We go sleep.'

'Where?'

'Here. In this boat. Lady say we can stay here.'

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Within a minute of stepping on board, Neel saw that it was no exaggeration to describe the *Anahita* as a 'palace-boat'. Not that

she was exceptionally large, or imposing in size: at a mere hundred and twenty feet, she was smaller than many of the long-keeled European and American ships that were anchored in Singapore's outer harbour. But these larger ships, well-trimmed and trusty though they might be, were all workaday trading vessels; the *Anahita* had more the appearance of a pleasure yacht, a rich man's folly. Her brass fittings gleamed in the sunlight and her holystoned decks glowed with polish. Except for the absence of a figurehead, no sign of the damage she had recently suffered was anywhere to be seen. Not a rope or hawser was out of place, and a newly fitted bowsprit jutted proudly from her prow.

As he looked around the main deck, Neel's eyes were drawn to the bulwarks: from the outside they had looked like solid lengths of timber, but now that he was on board, he saw that they were ornamented, on the inner side, with a series of panels that featured motifs from the art of ancient Persia and Mesopotamia: winged lions, fluted columns and striding spear-bearers. He would have liked to examine the designs more closely, but there was no time for Vico kept hurrying him towards the poop-deck. 'Come, Munshiji. Patrão waiting.'

With its saloons, cabins and staterooms, the poop-deck was by far the most lavishly appointed part of the vessel. During the day, much of it was lit by a soft, natural light, filtering in from above through a series of ornamental skylights. As a result, the interior was free of the gloomy dankness that was so common inside wooden ships: instead it had a spacious, airy feel. The main corridor was panelled in mahogany and was hung with framed etchings of the ruins of Persepolis and Ecbatana. Here too Neel would have liked to linger, but Vico moved him briskly along until they came to the door that led to the Owners' Suite. Then he raised a hand to knock.

Patrão, the munshi's here – Freddy sent him.

Bring him in.

Bahram was at his desk, dressed in a light cotton angarkha and jootis of silver-threaded brocade; the beard that framed his jaw was neatly trimmed and he was wearing a simple, but impeccably tied turban.

In the Seth's face, with its fine, high-bridged nose and dark brow, Neel could see the provenance not only of Ah Fatt's good looks, but also of some of his other attributes – his sharp-eyed intelligence, for instance, as well as a certain element of will: a determination that bordered upon ruthlessness. But there the resemblance ended for in Bahram there was no trace of Ah Fatt's wounded vulnerability: his manner was voluble, good humoured and disarmingly effervescent. This, Neel could see, was no small part of his charm.

Arré, munshiji, he cried out, gesticulating with both his hands. Why are you standing there like a tree? Come closer, na?

The cadences of his voice instantly dispelled Neel's memories of his meetings with his father: he saw at once that Bahram bore no resemblance at all to the old zemindar – or indeed to any of the wealthy and influential men he had known in his previous life. In Bahram there was none of the world-weary boredom and sensual exhaustion that marked so many of those men; on the contrary, his restless manner, like his rustic accent, spoke of an energetic and unaffected directness.

'What is your good-name?'

Neel had already decided to name himself after his new trade: Anil Kumar Munshi, Sethji.

Bahram nodded and pointed to a straight-backed chair. Achha, munshiji, he said. Why don't you sit on that kursi over there, so we can look each other in the eye?

As you wish, Sethji.

In stepping up to the chair, Neel had a vague intuition that this was a test of some kind – a gambit which Bahram used in interviewing certain kinds of employees. What exactly was being tested he could not think, so he did as he had been instructed and seated himself on the chair, without preamble.

This was evidently the right thing to do, for Bahram responded with an outburst of enthusiasm. Good! he cried, giving his desk a delighted slap. *Ekdum theek!* Very good!

What exactly he had done right, Neel did not know, and it was Bahram himself who enlightened him. 'Glad to see', he said in English, 'that you can manage chair-sitting. Can't stand those floor-squatting munshis. In my position, how to put up with

daftari-fellows who are always crawling on the ground? Foreigners will laugh, no?'

Ji, Sethji, said Neel. He bowed his head deferentially, mimicking the manner of the munshis he had himself once employed.

'So you have seen the world a little, eh munshiji?' said Bahram. 'Done a chukker or two? Tasted something other than daal-bhat and curry-rice? Munshis who can manage chair-sitting are not easy to find. Can you handle knife-fork also? Little-little at least?'

Ji, Sethji, said Neel.

Bahram nodded. 'So you met Freddy, my godson, here in Singapore, is it?'

Ji, Sethji.

'And what you were doing before that? How you arrived here?'

Neel sensed that this question was intended not only as an inquiry into his past, but also as a test of his English – so it was in his clearest accents that he recounted the story he had prepared: that he was a member of a family of scribes from the remote kingdom of Tripura, on the borders of Bengal; having fallen out of favour with the court, he had been forced to make a living in commerce, working for a succession of merchants as a munshi and dubash. He had travelled from Chittagong to Singapore with his last employer who had died unexpectedly: this was why his services were now available.

The story seemed to hold little interest for Bahram, but he was clearly impressed by Neel's fluency. Pushing back his chair he rose to his feet and began to pace the floor. 'Shahbash munshiji!' he said. 'Phataphat you are speaking English. You will put me to shame no?'

Neel understood that he had unwittingly put the Seth on his mettle. He decided that from then on he would use Hindusthani whenever possible, leaving it to Bahram to speak English.

'You can write nastaliq, also?'

Ji, Sethji.

'And Gujarati?'

No, Sethji.

Bahram seemed not at all displeased by this. 'That is all right. No need to know everything. Gujarati I can manage myself.'

Ji, Sethji.

'But reading-writing is not all it takes to make a good munshi. Something else also there is, no? You know about what I am talking?'

I'm not sure, Sethji.

Bahram came to a halt in front of Neel, clasped his hands behind his back, and leant down so that his eyes were boring into Neel's. 'What I am talking is trust – shroffery – or sharaafat as some would say. You know the words no, and meanings also? For me munshi is the same as shroff, except that he deal with words. Just as shroff must lock the safe, so must munshi lock the mouth. If you are working for me, then everything you read, everything you write, all must be locked inside your head. That is your treasury, your khazana.'

Then, Bahram walked around the chair, placed his hands on Neel's neck and turned his head from side to side.

'You understand no, munshiji? Even if some dacoit tries to twist your head off, safe must stay closed?'

The tone of Bahram's voice was playful rather than threatening, yet there was something in his manner that conveyed a faint sense of menace. Although discomfited, Neel managed to keep his composure. Ji, Sethji, he said. I understand.

Good! said Bahram cheerfully. But one more thing you should know: writing letters will not be the biggest part of your job. More important by far is what I call 'khabar-dari' – getting the news and keeping me informed. People think that only rulers and ministers need to know about wars, politics and all that. But that was only in the old days. Nowadays we are in a different time: today a man who does not know the khabar is a man who is headed for the kubber. This is what I always say: the news is what makes money. Do you understand me?

I'm not sure, Sethji, Neel mumbled. I don't understand how the news can be of help in making money.

All right, said Bahram, pacing the floor. I will tell you a story that may help you understand. I heard it when I visited London with my friend, Mr Zadig Karabedian. It was twenty-two years ago – in 1816. One day someone took us to the Stock Exchange and pointed out a famous banker, one Mr Rothschild. This man had understood the importance of khabar-dari long before anyone else, and he had set up his own system for sending news, with pigeons and couriers and all. Then came the Battle of Waterloo – you have heard of it, no?

Ji, Sethji.

The day the battle was fought everyone was nervous in the London Stock Exchange. If the English lost, the price of gold would fall. If they won it would rise. What to do? Buy or sell? They waited and waited, and of course this banker was the first to know what had happened at Waterloo. So what do you think he did?

He bought gold, Sethji?

Bahram gave a belly-laugh and clapped Neel on the back. See, that is why you are a munshi and not a Seth. Arré budhu – he began to *sell*! And when he started to sell everyone thought, wah bhai, the battle is lost, so we'd better sell too. So the price of gold went down, down, down. Only when the time was right did Mr Rothschild step in to buy – and then he bought and bought and bought. You see? It was just that he knew the news before anyone else. Later some people told me the story is not really true – but what does it matter? It is a story for the times we live in, na? I tell you, if I had had the courage, I would have gone up to that man and touched his feet. You are my Guruji! I would have said.

Bahram had been pacing all this while, but now he came to a stop in front of Neel: So do you see munshiji, why khabar-dari is important for a businessman like me? You know, no, that we are going to Canton? When we get there you will have to be my eyes and ears.

Neel took alarm at this: In Canton, Sethji? But how? I don't know anyone there.

Bahram shrugged this off. You don't need to know anyone. You can leave that part to me. What you have to do is to read two English journals that are published in Canton. One is called the *Canton Register* and another is the *Chinese Repository*. Sometimes other papers also come out but you don't have to bother with them – only these two are of interest to me. It will be your job to go through them and make reports to me. You must cut out all the phoos-phaas and just give me what is important.

Here Bahram reached over to his desk and picked up a journal. Here, munshiji, this is a copy of the *Repository*. My friend, Mr Zadig Karabedian, has lent it to me. He has underlined some bits – can you tell me what they say?

Ji, Sethji, said Neel. He ran his eye over the lines and said: It seems that these are excerpts from a memorial written by a high-ranking Chinese official and sent to the Emperor.

Yes, said Bahram. Go on. What does he say?

'"Opium is a poisonous drug, brought from foreign countries. To the question, what are its virtues, the answer is: It raises the animal spirits and prevents lassitude. Hence the Chinese continually run into its toils. At first they merely strive to follow the fashion of the day; but in the sequel the poison takes effect, the habit becomes fixed, and the sleeping smokers are like corpses – lean and haggard as demons. Such are the injuries which it does to life. Moreover the drug maintains an exorbitant price and cannot be obtained except with the pure metal. Smoking opium, in its first stages, impedes business; and when the practice is continued for any considerable length of time, it throws whole families into ruin, dissipates every kind of property, and destroys man himself. There cannot be a greater evil than this. In comparison with arsenic I pronounce it tenfold the greater poison. A man swallows arsenic because he has lost his reputation and is so involved that he cannot extricate himself. Thus driven to desperation, he takes the dose and is destroyed at once. But those who smoke the drug are injured in many different ways.

'"When the smoker commences the practice, he seems to imagine that his spirits are thereby augmented; but he ought to know that this appearance is factitious. It may be compared to raising the wick of a lamp, which, while it increases the flame, hastens the exhaustion of the oil and the extinction of the light. Hence the youth who smoke will shorten their own days and cut off all hope of posterity, leaving their fathers and mothers and wives without anyone on whom to depend; and those in middle and advanced life, who smoke, will accelerate the termination of their years . . ."'

Stop! Bas! Enough.

Bahram snatched the journal out of Neel's hands and tossed it on a table.

All right, munshiji, it is clear that you can read English without difficulty. If you want the job it is yours.

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Bahram and Zadig had their first glimpse of the General as they came around a corner: Bonaparte was standing amidst a copse of trees, surveying the valley below. He was a thick-set man, a little shorter than Bahram, and he was leaning forward a little, with his hands clasped behind his back. He was much stouter than Bahram had been led to expect: his belly was a sizeable protuberance and seemed scarcely to belong on someone whose life had been so extraordinarily active. He was dressed in a plain green coat with a velvet collar and silver buttons, each imprinted with a different device; his breeches were of nankeen, but his stockings were of silk, and there were large gold buckles on his shoes. On the left side of his coat was a large star, emblazoned with the Imperial Eagle, and on his head he was wearing a cocked, black hat.

At the approach of his visitors, Bonaparte removed his hat and bowed briskly, in a manner that might have seemed perfunctory in another man, but which in his case seemed merely to indicate that time was short, and there was nothing to be gained by wasting it on superfluous niceties. It was his gaze, most of all, that Bahram was to remember, for it was as penetrating as a surgeon's knife, and it cut into him as if to lay bare the flimsy nakedness of his bones.

Once he began to speak it was evident that the General, military man that he was, had been at some pains to inform himself about his two visitors: he clearly knew that Zadig was to be the interpreter for it was to him that he turned after the introductions had been completed.

You are named 'Zadig' *hein*? he said, with a smile. Is it taken from Monsieur Voltaire's book of the same name? Are you too a Babylonian philosopher?

No, Majesty; I am Armenian by origin, and the name is an ancient one among my people.

While the two men were conversing with each other, Bahram took the opportunity to observe the General closely. His build reminded him of one of his mother's Gujarati sayings: *tukki gerden valo haramjada ni nisani* – 'a short neck is a sure sign of a haramzada'. But he noted also his piercing gaze, his incisive manner of speaking, his sparing but emphatic use of his hands, and the half-smile that played on his lips. Zadig had told him that Napoleon was capable of exerting, when he chose, an extraordinary charm, almost a kind of magic: even the barriers of language, Bahram saw now, could not diminish the power of his hypnotic appeal.

Soon it became apparent that Bahram himself was now the subject of the conversation, and he knew, from the General's darting glances, that he was going to be in for a lengthy interrogation. It was odd to be spoken of without knowing what was being said and Bahram was glad when Zadig turned to him at last and began to translate the General's words into Hindusthani.

It was in the same language that Bahram answered – but Zadig was by no means a passive interpreter and since he was more knowledgeable than Bahram about many of the subjects that were of interest to Napoleon, the conversation was quickly triangulated. For much of the time Bahram was merely an uncomprehending spectator. It wasn't until much later that he was to understand everything that was said – yet in retrospect he remembered it all, with perfect clarity, as though he and Zadig had been listening and speaking with the same ears and the same tongue.

Napoleon's first set of questions, Bahram recalled, were of a personal nature and embarrassed Zadig a little: the scourge of Prussia had declared that he was forcibly impressed by Bahram's appearance and could see in his face and beard, a resemblance to the Persians of antiquity. In his costume, however, he saw no such similarity, for it seemed to be of the Indian type. He was therefore curious to know what aspects of the civilization of ancient Persia had been preserved by the Parsis of the present day.

Bahram was well prepared for this question, having often had to deal with similar queries from his English friends. The General was

right, he answered, his clothing was indeed mostly that of Hindusthan, except for two essential articles: his religion required every adherent, male and female, to wear, next to their skin, a girdle of seventy-two threads called a kasti, and a vestment known as a sadra – and Bahram was wearing both of these, under his outer garments, which were, as the General had rightly surmised, no different from those which any other man of his country and station would have worn upon such an occasion. This adaptation in outward appearance, accompanied by the preservation of an inner distinctiveness, could also be said to extend to other aspects of the life of his small community. Where it concerned matters of belief Parsis had clung faithfully to the old ways, making every effort to adhere to the teachings of the prophet Zarathustra; but in other respects they had borrowed freely from the customs and usages of their neighbours.

And what are the principle doctrines of the Prophet Zarathustra?

The religion is among the earliest of monotheistic creeds, Your Majesty. The God of its holy book, the Zend-Avesta, is Ahura Mazda, who is omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent. At the time of Creation Ahura Mazda is said to have unleashed a great avalanche of light. One part of this aura submitted to the Creator and was merged into him; the other part turned away from the light and was banished by Ahura Mazda: this dark force came to be known as 'angre-minyo' or Ahriman – the devil, or Satan. Since then the forces of goodness and light have always worked for Ahura Mazda while the forces of darkness have worked against Him. The aim of every Zoroastrian is to embrace the good and to banish evil.

Napoleon turned to look at Bahram: Does he speak the language of Zarathustra?

No, Your Majesty. Like most of his community, he grew up speaking nothing but Gujarati and Hindusthani – he did not even learn English until much later. As for the ancient language of the Zend-Avesta, it is now the exclusive preserve of priests and others versed in Scripture.

And what of the Chinese language? the General asked. Living in that country, have the two of you made any attempt to familiarize yourselves with that tongue?

They answered in one voice: No, they said, they spoke no Chinese, because the common language of trade in southern China was a kind of patois – or, as some called it 'pidgin', which meant merely 'business' and was thus well suited to describe a tongue which was used mainly to address matters of trade. Even though many Chinese spoke English with ease and fluency, they would not negotiate in it, believing that it put them at a disadvantage in relation to Europeans. In pidgin they reposed far greater trust, for the grammar was the same as that of Cantonese, while the words were mainly English, Portuguese and Hindusthani – and such being the case, everyone who spoke the jargon was at an equal disadvantage, which was considered a great benefit to all. It was, moreover, a simple tongue, not hard to master, and for those who did not know it, there existed a whole class of interpreters, known as linkisters, who could translate into it from both English and Chinese.

And when you are in Canton, said the General, are you allowed to mix freely with the Chinese?

Yes, Your Majesty: there are no restrictions on that. Our most important dealings are with a special guild of Chinese merchants: it is called the Co-Hong, and its members bear the sole responsibility for conducting business with foreigners. In the event of any wrong-doing it is they who have to answer for the behaviour of their foreign counterparts, so the relationship between the Chinese merchants and the others is, in a way, very close, like a partnership almost. But there exists also another class of intermediaries: they are known as 'compradors' and they are responsible for supplying foreign merchants with provisions and servants. They are also charged with the upkeep of the buildings in which we live, the Thirteen Factories.

Zadig had said the last three words in English, and one of them caught the General's attention: Ah! 'Factory'. Is the word the same as our *factorerie*?

This was a subject that Zadig had inquired into and he was not at a loss for an answer: No, Your Majesty. 'Factory' comes from a word that was first used by the Venetians and then by the Portuguese, in Goa. The word is *feitoria* and it refers merely to a

place where agents and factors reside and do business. In Canton, the factories are also spoken of as 'hongs'.

They have nothing to do with manufacturing then?

No, Your Majesty: nothing. The factories belong, properly speaking, to the Co-Hong guild, although you would not imagine this to look at them, for many of them have come to be identified with particular nations and kingdoms. Several even hoist their own flags – the French Factory being one such.

Striding briskly on, the General gave Zadig a sidewise glance: Are the factories like embassies then?

The foreigners often treat them as such, although they are not recognized to be so by the Chinese. From time to time Britain does indeed appoint representatives in Canton, but the Chinese do not countenance them and they are allowed to communicate only with the provincial authorities: this too is no easy thing, for the mandarins will not receive any letters that are not written in the style of a petition or supplication, with the appropriate Chinese characters – since the British are reluctant to do this, their communications are often not accepted.

Napoleon laughed briefly and the sunlight flashed on his teeth: So their relations founder on the barriers of protocol?

Exactly, Your Majesty. Neither side will yield in this matter. If there is any nation that can match the English in their arrogance and obstinacy, it is surely the Chinese.

But since it is the English who send embassies there, it must mean that they need the Chinese more than they are themselves needed?

That is correct, Your Majesty. Since the middle years of the last century, the demand for Chinese tea has grown at such a pace in Britain and America that it is now the principal source of profit for the East India Company. The taxes on it account for fully one-tenth of Britain's revenues. If one adds to this such goods as silk, porcelain and lacquerware it becomes clear that the European demand for Chinese products is insatiable. In China, on the other hand, there is little interest in European exports – the Chinese are a people who believe that their own products, like their food and their own customs, are superior to all others. In years past this

presented a great problem for the British, for the flow of trade was so unequal that there was an immense outpouring of silver from Britain. This indeed was why they started to export Indian opium to China.

Glancing over his shoulder, the General raised an eyebrow: Started? *Commencé?* You mean this trade has not always existed?

No, Majesty – the trade was a mere trickle until about sixty years ago, when the East India Company adopted it as a means of rectifying the outflow of bullion. They succeeded so well that now the supply can barely keep pace with the demand. The flow of silver is now completely reversed, and it pours away from China to Britain, America and Europe.

Now the General came to a halt under a tree with strange hairy leaves: plucking two of them he handed one each to Bahram and Zadig. You will no doubt be interested, he said, to learn that this tree is called the 'She-Cabbage Tree' and exists nowhere else on earth. You may keep these leaves as souvenirs of this island.

Zadig bowed and Bahram followed: We thank you, Majesty.

They had come quite a distance from the house by this time, and the General now decided to turn back. For a moment it seemed – somewhat to Bahram's relief – that his attention had wandered from the matters they had been discussing before. But once they began to walk again it became clear that he was not a man to be easily distracted.

So tell me, messieurs, do the Chinese perceive no harm in opium?

Oh they certainly do, Your Majesty: its importation was banned in the last century and the prohibition has been reiterated several times. It is in principle a clandestine trade – but it is difficult to put an end to it for many officials, petty and grand, benefit from it. As for dealers and traders, when there are great profits to be made, they are not slow to find ways around the laws.

Napoleon lowered his gaze to the dusty pathway. Yes, he said softly, as though he were speaking to himself: This was a problem we too faced, in Europe, with our Continental System. Merchants and smugglers are ingenious in evading laws.

Exactly so, Your Majesty.

Now, a twinkle appeared in the General's eye: But how long do you think the Chinese will suffer this trade to continue?

It remains to be seen, Your Majesty. Things have come to a pass where a cessation in the trade would be a disaster for the East India Company. Indeed it is no exaggeration to say that without it the British would not be able to hold on to their Eastern colonies; they cannot afford to forgo those profits.

Quelle ironie! said Napoleon suddenly, flashing his visitors his arresting smile. What an irony it would be if it were opium that stirred China from her sleep. And if it did, would you consider it a good thing?

Why no, Your Majesty, responded Zadig immediately. I have always been taught that nothing good can be born of evil.

Napoleon laughed. But then the whole world would be nothing but evil. Why else *par example* do you trade in opium?

Not I, Your Majesty, said Zadig quickly. I am a clockmaker and I play no part in the opium trade.

But what of your friend? He trades in opium, does he not? Does he believe it to be evil?

This question caught Bahram unawares and he was temporarily at a loss for words. Then, gathering his wits, he said: Opium is like the wind or the tides: it is outside my power to affect its course. A man is neither good nor evil because he sails his ship upon the wind. It is his conduct towards those around him – his friends, his family, his servants – by which he must be judged. This is the creed I live by.

Napoleon directed his piercing gaze at Bahram: But a man may lie, may he not, because he sails upon the wind?

The thought withered on his lips for Longwood had come into view, and an aide was seen to be hurrying down the path in search of the General.

Bonaparte turned to Zadig and Bahram and swept his hat off his head: *Au revoir messieurs, bonne chance!*

Part II

Canton

Seven

Nov 7, 1838
Markwick's Hotel, Canton

Dearest Puggly, I am *transported*! Canton, at last – and what an age it took! I came in a passage-boat – a *most* curious vessel, shaped like a caterpillar and just as slow. How I envied the rich fanqui shipowners who went breezing past us in their fine sloops and sleek yawls! I am told the fastest of them can make the journey from Macau to Canton in a day and a half. Needless to say, it took our caterpillar more than twice that length of time, and at the end of it we found ourselves in Whampoa which is yet some twelve miles from Canton.

Whampoa is an island in the Pearl River, and the waters around it serve as the last anchorage for foreign ships. These vessels are not permitted to approach any closer to Canton so here they must stay while their holds are filled and emptied. This is a sore trial for their poor crewmen because there is little of interest in Whampoa other than a fine pagoda: I have the impression that the village is to the Pearl River what Budge Budge is to the Hooghly – a ramshackle cobbily-mash of godowns, bankshalls and customs-khanas. Bored sailors and lascars, marooned for weeks on their stationary ships, occupy themselves by counting the days till their next shore leave in Canton.

Fortunately one need not tarry long in Whampoa, for there are ferries to Canton at all times of night and day. The river is crowded here with vessels of curious shapes and fantastical designs yet you do not immediately have the impression of approaching a great city. To your left lies an island called Honam:

being laid out with gardens, estates and orchards it is exceedingly pastoral in appearence – this too is reminiscent of the approaches to Calcutta where the fields and forests of Chitpur lie across the river from the city. But the number of sampans, lanteas and salt-junks have been increasing all this while and soon there are so many of them lying at anchor on both sides of the river that they are like a continuous barricade, blocking the shore from view. Then, above the masts and sails, appear the city's ramparts – immense walls of grey stone, capped, at intervals with watch-towers and many-roofed gateways. Calcutta's Fort William seems *tiny* in comparison with this vast citadel: its walls run for miles and miles; you can see them rising up a hill and coming together to meet at a majestic five-storeyed tower. It is called the Sea-Calming Tower (is that not the most *poetic* name?) and I am told that the soldiers who guard it will allow visitors to enter if offered a satisfactory cumshaw: the view is said to be extraordinarily fine, with the whole city lying spread out beneath your feet, like an immense map. It takes only an hour or two to walk to the tower, skirting around the city walls, and I am determined to go – otherwise I will see nothing at all of the citadel. It is utterly *forbidden* for a foreigner to step through any of the city gates – which does *so* make one long to go in! Oh well . . . there is more than enough to see and paint anyway, for all around the city walls there are suburbs – the citadel is but the flagship of the city of Canton and it has a flotilla of lesser vessels anchored around it.

You may not credit it, Puggly dear, but the greatest of Canton's suburbs is the river itself! There are more people living in the city floating bustees than in *all* of Calcutta: fully *one million* some say! Their boats are moored along the water's edge, on either side, and they are so numerous you cannot see the water beneath. At first this floating city looks like a vast shanty town made of driftwood, bamboo and thatch; the boats are so tightly packed that if not for the rolls and tremors that shake them from time to time you would take them for oddly-shaped huts. Closest to the shore are rows of sampans, most of them some four or five yards in length. Their roofs are made of bamboo, and their design is at once very

simple and *marvellously* ingenious, for they can be moved to suit the weather. When it rains the coverings are rearranged to protect the whole boat, and on fine days they are rolled back to expose the living quarters to the sun – and it is *astonishing* to observe all that goes on within them. The occupants are all so *busy* that you would imagine the floating city to be a waterborne hive: here in this boat someone is making bean-curd; in another, joss-sticks; in that one noodles, and over there something else – and all to the accompaniment of a great cacophony of clucking, grunting and barking, for every floating manufactory is also a farmyard! And between them there are little watery lanes and galis, just wide enough to allow a shop-boat to pass; and of these there are more than you would think could possibly exist, for they are manned by hawkers and cheap-jacks of every sort – tanners, tinkers, tailors, coopers, cobblers, barbers, bone-setters and many others, all barricking their wares with bells, gongs and shouts.

Fanquis say the floating city is a rookery for bandits, bonegrabbers, sotweeds, bangtails and scumsuckers of every sort – but I confess that this makes me all the more eager to explore it. It is so very *eye-catching* that I long to try my hand at a few nautical paintings, in the manner of Van Ruysdael perhaps, or even Mr Turner (but that would never do, alas, for Mr Chinnery turns positively *green* at the very mention of that name).

And so at last to the foreign enclave – or 'Fanqui-town' as I have already learnt to call it! It is the farthest extremity of the city, just beyond the citadel's south-western gate. In appearance Fanqui-town is not at all as you might expect: indeed it is so different from what I had envisioned that it fair took my breath away! I had imagined the factories would be prettily primped with a few Celestial touches – perhaps a few curling eaves or pagoda-like spires like those that so beguile the eye in Chinese paintings. But if you could see the factories for yourself, Puggly dear, I warrant they would remind you rather of pictures of places that are very far away – Vermeer's Amsterdam or even . . . Chinnery's Calcutta. You would see a row of buildings with columns, capitals, pilasters, tall windows and tiled roofs. Some have colonnaded verandas, with the same khus-khus screens you

see in India: if you half close your eyes you could think yourself to be on the Strand, in Calcutta, looking at the bankshalls and daftars of the big English trading houses. The colours are quite different though, brighter and more varied: from a distance the factories look like stripes of paint against the grey walls of the citadel.

The British Factory is the largest of the thirteen; it has a chapel with a clock-tower and its bell keeps time for all of Fanqui-town. It also has a garden in front and and an enormous flagpole. Some of the other factories have flags flying before them too – the Dutch, the Danish, the French and the American. These flags are larger than any I have ever seen and the poles are immensely tall. They look like gigantic lances, plunged into the soil of China, and they rise high above the factory roofs, as if to make sure that they are visible to the mandarins within the city walls.

As you may imagine, already on the ferry, I was thinking of how to paint this scene. I have not started yet, of course, but I know it will be a stern challenge, especially where it concerns the matter of depth. The factories are so narrow-fronted that to look at them you would think they could scarcely accommodate a dozen people. But behind each façade lies a warren of houses, courtyards, godowns, and khazanas; a long, arched corridor runs the length of each compound, linking the houses and courtyards – at night these passageways are lit with lamps, which gives them the appearance of city streets.

Some say the factories have been constructed in accordance with a typically Chinese pattern of building, where any number of pavilions and courtyards may sit within the walls of a single compound; but I've also heard it said that the factories are a bit like the colleges of Oxford and Leiden, with halls and houses grouped around many linked quadrangles. Were I a painter of Persian miniatures, I would paint the façades head-on, and then I would create an angle behind them such that the pattern of the compound's interior would be made visible to the eye. But it is not to be thought of, for it would be a great *scandal:* Mr Chinnery would be horrified and I would have to spend *years* doing exercises in perspective.

I am getting ahead of myself: I have yet to bring you to Fanqui-town's landing ghat, which is called – and this is true I swear – 'Jackass Point' (the fabled Man-Town must, in other words, be entered through the Point of Jack's Unspeakable). Yet this suppository is no different from our Calcutta landing-ghats: there is no jetty – instead there are steps, sticky with mud from the last high tide (yes, my darling Puggleshwaree, the Pearl, like our beloved Hooghly, rises and falls twice a day!). But even in Calcutta I have never witnessed such a goll-maul as there is at Jackass Point: so many people, so much bobbery, so much hulla-gulla, so many coolies, making such a tamasha of fighting over your bags and bowlas! I counted myself fortunate in being able to steer mine towards a lad with a winning smile, one Ah Lei (why so many Ahs, you might ask, and never any Oohs? On the streets of Macau too you will come across innumerable young men who will pass themselves off as 'Ah Man', 'Ah Gan' and the like, and if ever you should ask what the 'Ah!' signifies you will learn that in Cantonese, as in English, this vocable serves no function other than that of clearing the throat. But just because the bearers of the 'Ah' are usually young, or poor, you must not imagine that they possess no other name. In their other incarnations they may well be known as 'Fire Breathing Dragon' or 'Tireless Steed' – whether accurately or not only their Wives and Friends will know).

Ah Lei was neither dragon nor steed; he was less than half my size. I thought he would be crushed by my luggage but he hoisted it all on his back with a couple of flicks of his wrist. 'What-place wanchi?' says he to me, and I tell him: 'Markwick's Hotel'. And so, following my young Atlas, I stepped upon the stretch of shore that forms the heart and hearth of Fanqui-town. This is an open space between the factories and the river-bank: the English speak of it as 'The Square', but Hindusthanis have a better name for it. They call it the 'Maidan' which is exactly what it is, a crossroads, a meeting-place, a piazza, a promenade, a stage for a tamasha that never ends: it is a scene of such activity, such *animation*, that I despair of being able to capture it on canvas. Everywhere you look there is something utterly strange and ever so *singular*: a storm of chirruping approaches you, and at its centre is a man with

thousands of walnut-shells hanging from shoulder-poles; on closer inspection you discover that each walnut has been carved into an exquisite cage – for a cricket! The man is carrying thousands of these insects and they are all in full song. You have not taken more than a step or two before another tempest of noise approaches you, at a trot; at the centre of it is a grand personage, perhaps a Mandarin or a merchant of the Co-Hong guild; he is seated in a kind of palki, except that it is actually a curtained sedan chair, suspended from shoulder-poles; the men who carry the chair are called 'horses without tails' and they have attendants running alongside, beating drums and clappers to clear the way. It is all so new that you stare too long and are almost trampled underfoot by the tail-less stallions . . .

And yet it is a *tiny* place! All of Fanqui-town – the Maidan, the streets and all thirteen factories – would fit into a small corner of the Maidan in Calcutta. From end to end the enclave is only about a thousand feet in length, less than a quarter of a mile, and in width it is about half that. In a way Fanqui-town is like a ship at sea, with hundreds – no, thousands – of men living crammed together in a little sliver of a space. I do believe there is no place like it on earth, so small and yet so varied, where people from the far corners of the earth must live, elbow to elbow, for six months of the year. I tell you, Pugglissima mia, were you to stand in the Maidan and look at the flags of the factories, fluttering against the grey walls of Canton's citadel, I am certain you too would be *overcome*: it is as if you had arrived at the threshold of the last and greatest of all the world's caravanserais.

And yet, in a way, it is also so familiar: Everywhere you look there are khidmatgars, daftardars, khansamas, chuprassies, peons, durwans, khazanadars, khalasis and lascars. And this, my dear Puggly, is one of the greatest of the many surprises of Fanqui-town – a *great number* of its denizens are from India! They come from Sindh and Goa, Bombay and Malabar, Madras and the Coringa hills, Calcutta and Sylhet – but these differences mean nothing to the gamins who swarm around the Maidan. They have their own names for every variety of foreign devil: the British are 'I-says' and the French are 'Merdes'. The Hindusthanis are by the

same token, 'Achhas': no matter whether a man is from Karachi or Chittagong, the lads will swarm after him, with their hands outstretched, shouting: 'Achha! Achha! Gimme cumshaw!'

They seem to be persuaded that the Achhas are all from one country – is it not the most diverting notion? There is even a factory that is spoken of as the 'Achha Hong' – of course it has no flag of its own.

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Neel's days began early in the Achha Hong. Bahram was a man of settled habits, and his retainers and employees had to arrange their time to suit his will and convenience. For Neel this meant that he had to rise while it was still dark, for it was he who bore the responsibility of making sure that Bahram's daftar was cleaned and made ready in exact accordance with his wishes. The Seth would not tolerate any imprecision in this matter: the room had to be swept at least half an hour before he made his entry, so as to give the dust time to settle; Neel's desk and chair had to be placed exactly so, pushed against that corner of the far wall and nowhere else. Making sure of all this was no mean feat, for it involved waking and chivvying many others, some of whom were not at all inclined to take orders from a munshi as young and inexperienced as Neel.

The daftar was as strange a room as any Neel had ever seen: it looked as though it had been transported to China from some chilly part of northern Europe – its ceiling was high and raftered, like that of a chapel, and it even had a fireplace and mantel.

It was Vico who told Neel how the Seth had come into the occupancy of his daftar. In his early days in Canton, Bahram, like most other Parsi merchants, had resided in the Dutch factory: the story went that in the distant past in Gujarat, the Parsis had been of great help to merchants from the Netherlands – later they, in turn, had offered the Parsis shelter when they began to trade with China. Back in Surat, Bahram's grandfather too had once had a trading partner from Amsterdam, and it was this connection that had first brought Bahram to the Dutch Factory. But Bahram had never much cared for that hong; it was a dull, solemn kind of place where a loud laugh or raised voice could fetch disapproving glares and even dumbcowings. Besides, as one of the youngest members of

the Bombay contingent, Bahram had almost always been assigned the dampest and darkest rooms in the complex. Nor did it add to his comfort that so many other Parsis were living in that hong – including many elders who believed it to be their duty to keep an eye on him – so when he learnt that a fine apartment had become available in another building, he had wasted no time in going to take a look.

It turned out that the establishment in question was the Fungtai Hong, which was a 'chow-chow' or miscellaneous factory. The Fungtai's frontage was modest by comparison with some of its neighbours. Like all the factories it was not really a single edifice, but rather a row of houses, connected by arched gateways and covered corridors, each building being separated from the others by a courtyard. The houses were not all of the same size: some were small, while others were large enough to be divided into several apartments, each with its own kitchen, godown, daftar, khazana and living quarters. The houses at the rear were generally the least desirable: being separated from the Maidan by numerous corridors and courtyards they were darker and dingier than those in front; some were like tenements and their cell-like rooms were occupied by the poorest of Fanqui-town's foreign sojourners – small-time traders and money-jobbers, servants and minor daftardars.

The most desirable lodgings in Fanqui-town were those that looked out on the Maidan, but these were few in number since the buildings were so narrow-fronted. They were considered a great luxury and were priced accordingly but even then it was very rare for an apartment with a view to become available. So when Bahram saw that he was being offered a suite that looked out on the Maidan he was quick to put down an advance. Since then, he had rented the same suite on every subsequent visit, adding a few more rooms each time, to accommodate his growing entourage of shroffs, khidmatgars, daftardars and kitchen staff.

Later, following Bahram's example, many other Bombay merchants had started to gravitate towards the Fungtai, which was how the factory came to be known as the 'Achha Hong'. But the distinction of being the first Parsi to move there belonged to Bahram, and now, having sojourned there for more than two

decades, he occupied the best rooms in the building as if by right: his establishment included a godown, a kitchen, a khazana, and several small cubicles and dormitories to accommodate his entourage of fifteen employees. His own apartment was on the top floor, and it consisted of a spacious but gloomy bedroom, a frigid bathroom and a dining room that was only used on special occasions. And then, of course, there was the daftar, with its fine view of the Maidan and the river – over the years, its mullioned window had become one of the minor landmarks of the foreign enclave and many an old resident had been known to point it out to newcomers: 'Take a dekko up there; that's where Barry Moddie has his daftar.'

But Bahram was not, of course, the only merchant ever to use that room: in years when he chose to remain in Bombay over the trading season, it was rented out to others. Several of the apartment's former occupants had left behind traces of their tenancy, for it often happened, at the end of a season, that a merchant would find himself burdened with more possessions than he could conveniently carry home: in those circumstances, the easiest thing to do was to leave them behind. In this fashion a large collection of miscellaneous objects had accumulated in the daftar: waist-high figurines with nodding heads, pagodas carved out of wood, lacquered mirrors, a silver urn that was actually a nutmeg grater, and a glass bowl with a perpetually circling, goggle-eyed goldfish. Many of these things belonged to Bahram, including an enigmatic boulder that sat in one of the room's darker corners, blanketed in dust: it was large, grey and so pock-marked with holes that it looked as if it had been eaten from within by maggots.

'You know who gave that thing?' said Bahram to Neel one morning, pointing to the boulder. 'It was Chunqua, my old comprador. One fine day he comes here and says he has brought a present to do chin-chin. So I said, all right, why not? So then six fellows come up carrying this rock. Must be some joke, I thought: the fellow has hidden some jewel or something inside – now suddenly he will pull it out and make a big surprise. But no! He tells me his great-great-grandfather has brought it from Lake Tai, which is famous for stones – (just imagine, hah? for rocks also

these Chinese fellows have 'famous places' – like laddoos and mithais for us). But after the rock was brought back to his house, his forefather decided the damn thing wasn't ready yet. See, no, how these fellows think? God had made this rock long ago, but that is not enough. So what they did, you know? They placed it under their house roof, so water could fall on it and make patterns. So much time these fellows have, hah? Not like you and me: no one is doing jaldi-jaldi and chull-chull. Ninety years the bloody rock sits under the roof, and then Chunqua decides it is ready at last and he brings to me as a chin-chin gift. Arré-baba, I thought to myself, what I will do with this damn-big rock? But can't refuse also or his feelings may be hurt. And can't take home either, or Beebeejee will dumbcow. "What?" she will say: "nothing else you can find in China, you are bringing me sticks and stones? What sort of budmashee you are learning there?" So what to do? I had to leave here.'

The rock was not the only object in the room to be imbued with a private significance for the Seth: his desk was another. This was, without a doubt, a beautifully made piece of furniture, a polished assemblage of red-tinted padauk wood and gleaming Paktong hardware. The front opened out to reveal a double row of arched pigeonholes, separated by columns that were carved to look like gilded book-spines. Below the writing surface lay nine solid drawers, each fitted with a brass handle and keyhole.

The desk's keys were all in Bahram's safe keeping, except for the largest which opened the front – Neel too was entrusted with a copy of this one, for it was his job to unlock the desk in the morning and to make sure that it was stocked with Bahram's chosen writing materials. The goose quills that the Seth professed to like were not hard to supply – but ink was a different matter, for Bahram would not put up with anything ordinary. While in Canton, he insisted on having at his disposal a finely carved inkstone, a couple of high-quality inksticks, and a little pot of special 'spring' water – all this so that he might, if the need arose, grind his own ink, in the patient, meditative fashion of a Chinese scholar. Given the fidgetiness of Bahram's disposition, this was the unlikeliest of conceits, but no matter – the ink-making materials, like the quills, had to be

placed in exactly the same spot every day, near the top, left-hand corner of the desk. The irony was that neither the desk nor the ink-making materials ever saw much use since Bahram rarely sat down while he was in the daftar; his time there was spent mainly in pacing the floor, with his hands clasped behind his back; even when he had to sign a document, he usually did it standing by the window, with one of Neel's well-worn quills.

Only when he was eating his breakfast did Bahram make extended use of a chair. This meal was an elaborate affair, a ceremony that had evolved over many years: it was presided over by Mesto the cook, and it was served not in Bahram's private dining room, but on a marble-topped table in a corner of the daftar. Shortly before the Seth entered the daftar, Mesto would cover the table with a silk cloth; then, once Bahram was seated, he would lay before him an array of little plates and bowls, containing perhaps some *akoori* – eggs, scrambled with coriander leaves, green chillies and spring onions; some shu-mai dumplings, stuffed with minced chicken and mushrooms; maybe a couple of slices of toast and some skewers of satay as well, and possibly a small helping of Madras-style congee, flavoured with ghee, and a small dish of *kheemo kaleji* – mutton minced with liver. And so on.

Bahram's breakfast always ended with a beverage that Mesto claimed to have invented himself: the drink was made with tea leaves but it bore no resemblance to the *chàh* that was commonly served in Canton – indeed it was considered so revolting by the Achha Hong's Chinese visitors that the very smell of it had made a couple of them vomit ('Just look,' said Vico, disparagingly, 'these fellows are happy to eat snakes and scorpions but milk they cannot take!').

Although it was Mesto who prepared the beverage, the responsibility for procuring the ingredients fell to Vico – and this was no small matter, since one of the drink's most important requirements was milk, a commodity that was harder to obtain, in Canton, than myrrh or myrobalans. The foreign enclave's main source consisted of a few cows that belonged to the Danish Hong; since many of the European merchants could not do without cream, butter and cheese, the Danes' entire supply was spoken for as soon as it had

squirted into the pail. But the tireless Vico had discovered another provider: directly across the river from the foreign enclave, on Honam Island, lay an immense Buddhist monastery which housed a sizeable contingent of Tibetan monks. Being accustomed to buttered tea and other comestibles that required milk, the Tibetans kept, as a substitute for yaks, a small herd of buffaloes: these were the animals that provided the milk for Mesto's beverage. He boiled it with a measure of dark Bohea leaves and a sprinkling of cloves, cinnamon and star anise – all this was rounded off with a few handfuls of cheeni, the refined Chinese sugar that had recently become popular in Bombay. The resulting confection was called 'chai', or 'chai-garam' (the latter being a reference to the garam-masala that went into it): Bahram could not do without it, and tumblers were brought to him at regular intervals, providing the punctuation for the passage of his day.

Chai was the beverage of choice not just for Bahram but for the whole of the Achha Hong, and everyone in Bahram's entourage listened keenly for the voices of the peons who came through periodically, chanting: Chai garam, chai garam! Particularly eagerly awaited was the mid-morning tumbler of chai, which was usually served with a snack. Of these the one that was most commonly provided was a Uighur speciality called a *samsa* – these were small triangles of pastry, stuffed usually with minced meat: baked in portable tandoors they were sold hot in the Maidan and were easy to procure. Being the ancestor of a popular Indian snack, they were consumed with much relish in the Accha Hong and were spoken of familiarly by their Hindusthani name – *samosa.*

Like everyone else in the Achha Hong, Neel too was soon looking forward eagerly to his mid-morning samosa and chai-garam. But to him the sound of these unfamiliar words was just as savoury as the items that bore their names. He found that he was constantly learning new words from the others in Bahram's entourage: some, like 'chai', came from Cantonese, while others were brought in from the Portuguese by Vico – like 'falto' for example, meaning fraudulent or false, which became *phaltu* on Achha tongues.

Even as he was settling in, it became clear to Neel that No. 1

Fungtai Hong was a world in itself, with its own foods and words, rituals and routines: it was as if the inmates were the first inhabitants of a new country, a yet unmade Achha-sthan. What was more, all its residents, from the lowliest of broom-wielding kussabs to the most fastidious of coin-sifting shroffs, took a certain pride in their house, not unlike that of a family. This surprised Neel at first, for on the face of it, the idea that the Achhas might form a family of some kind was not just improbable but absurd: they were a motley gathering of men from distant parts of the Indian subcontinent and they spoke between them more than a dozen different languages; some were from areas under British or Portuguese rule, and others hailed from states governed by Nawabs or Nizams, Rajas or Rawals; amongst them there were Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Parsis and also a few who, back at home, would have been excluded by all. Had they not left the subcontinent their paths would never have crossed and few of them would ever have met or spoken with each other, far less thought of eating a meal together. At home, it would not have occurred to them to imagine that they might have much in common – but here, whether they liked it or not there was no escaping those commonalities; they were thrust upon them every time they stepped out of doors, by the cries that greeted them in the Maidan: 'Achha! Aa-chaa?'

To protest the affront of this indiscriminate lumping-together served no purpose: the urchins cared nothing for whether you were a Kachhi Muslim or a Brahmin Catholic or a Parsi from Bombay. Was it possibly a matter of appearance? Or was it your clothes? Or the sound of your languages (but how, when they were all so different)? Or was it perhaps just a smell of spices that clung indifferently to all of you? Whatever it was, after a point you came to accept that there was something that tied you to the other Achhas: it was just a fact, inescapable, and you could not leave it behind any more than you could slough off your own skin and put on another. And strangely, once you had accepted this, it became real, this mysterious commonality that existed only in the eyes of the jinns and jai-boys of the Maidan, and you came to recognize that all of you had a stake in how the others were perceived and treated. And the longer you stayed under that roof, with the Maidan at your door,

the stronger the bonds became – because the paradox was that these ties were knotted not by an excess of self-regard, but rather by a sense of shared shame. It was because you knew that almost all the 'black mud' that came to Canton was shipped from your own shores; and you knew also that even though your share of the riches that grew upon that mud was minuscule, that did not prevent the stench of it from clinging more closely to you than to any other kind of Alien.

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The familiar sound of the chapel clock was as reassuring to Bahram as the view from his daftar's window: when he looked outside, at the Maidan, the scene was much as it had ever been – teams of touts swarming about, trying to find customers for the shamshoodens of Hog Lane; sailors and lascars pouring in through the landing ghat at Jackass Point, determined to make the most of their shore leave; bands of beggars standing under the trees and at the entrances to the lanes, clattering their clappers; porters scuttling between godowns and chop-boats; barbers plying their trade at their accustomed places, shaving foreheads and braiding queues under portable sunshades of bamboo matting.

Yet, despite the appearance of normalcy, it had been clear to Bahram from the moment he entered the Pearl River that things had indeed changed in China. In the past he would have left the *Anahita* at Lintin Island, at the mouth of the river: this was where cargo ships always went, on making the voyage over from India. But this time there was not a single ship to be seen at the island, only two old receiving hulks, one American and the other British. In years past it was from the decks of these mastless vessels that opium had been spirited away by fast-crabs. To watch those slim, powerful boats shooting through the water, sixty oars rising and falling in unison, had once been one of the most thrilling sights of the Pearl River. Now there was not a single fast-crab anywhere to be seen on the estuary. The hulks, whose decks had been hives of activity in the past, were abandoned and seemed almost to be keeling over.

Having been forewarned, Bahram had left the *Anahita* at Hong Kong, anchored in the narrow strait that separated the island from the headland of Kowloon. This too would have been inconceivable

in the past, for ships had usually avoided that channel for fear of piracy. This year the whole opium fleet was anchored there, so there was at least the comfort of knowing that they would be able to provide some security for each other.

The conditions at the river's mouth had led Bahram to expect that Canton too would be drastically changed: he had been heartened to find Fanqui-town carrying on more or less as usual. It was only when his eyes strayed towards the floating townships of the Pearl River, as they did now, that he was reminded of one important respect in which the city was irrevocably changed, at least in relation to himself. By force of habit his eye went straight to the place where Chi-mei's boat had always been stationed: it was off to the right, where the Pearl met the North River to form a wide expanse of water known as White Swan Lake – over the last couple of decades Chi-mei had somehow succeeded in holding on to that mooring-place, even though she had changed vessels several times. In the early years, when her kitchen-boats were nondescript and modest in size, Bahram had been hard put to pick them out from the hundreds of vessels that were moored along the riverbank. But with the passage of time her boats had become bigger and more distinctive, and the last had been so eye-catching that he had been able to spot it without difficulty from the window of his daftar: it was a brightly painted vessel, with two decks and a stern shaped like an upcurved fishtail. His eyes had become habituated to seeking it out when he went to the window: when there was smoke spiralling up from the cooking fires, he knew that Chi-mei had lit her stoves and the day's work had begun – it was as if the rhythms of that boat were a mysterious but necessary counterpoint to those of his own daftar.

On arriving in Canton Bahram had half-hoped and half-expected to find Chi-mei's boat still in its accustomed place; it was, in a sense, his own property too, since he had contributed liberally to its purchase: he would have liked to be able to dispose of it himself.

The matter had been much on his mind during the last leg of the journey, from Whampoa to Canton, and he had intended to take it up with his comprador, Chunqua, at the earliest opportunity. But when he arrived at Jackass Point, Chunqua's familiar face was

nowhere to be seen: Bahram and his entourage were received instead by one of Chunqua's sons, who went by the name of Tinqua. It was from him that Bahram learnt that his old comprador had died some months before, after a long illness – and as was the custom his sons had inherited their father's clients.

Bahram was shaken by the news: Chunqua had been his comprador for a long time; they had started working together when they were both in their twenties, and they had accompanied each other into prosperity and middle-age. The bonds of trust and affection between them had been very deep: they had known each other's families and when Bahram was away it was Chunqua who had looked after Chi-mei and Freddy; he had kept an avuncular eye on the boy's upbringing and it was through him that Bahram had sent them money and gifts.

The loss of Chunqua meant the severing of yet another of Bahram's ties to Canton: he had known his comprador's sons since their childhood but he could not imagine any of them taking their father's place – least of all Tinqua, who was a flighty young man, with little interest in his work. When Bahram asked him about Chi-mei's boat he replied off-handedly that it had been sold – to whom he did not know.

Every time Bahram stepped up to the window now his eyes would stray automatically to the place where the boat had been moored in the past – and when they didn't find what they were looking for, a twinge would shoot through him, making him flinch.

It was strange that the absence of a single vessel could create a gap in such a densely crowded landscape.

The other pole of Bahram's life in Fanqui-town was not visible from his window: it was the Canton Chamber of Commerce, which had its premises inside the compound of the Danish Factory.

The Chamber was a more significant body than was suggested by its name: not only did it regulate and speak for the merchants of the foreign enclave, it also controlled the heartbeat of Fanqui-town's busy social life. Many of the foreign merchants in Canton had spent time in India and were accustomed to the amenities offered by the Byculla Club, the Bengal Club and the like. There being no similar establishment in Canton, the Chamber of

Commerce had become willy-nilly the nearest equivalent. It occupied one of the largest buildings in Fanqui-town: House No. 2 in the Danish Factory. On the ground floor were the Chamber's offices and the Great Hall, which was large enough to accommodate meetings of the entire General Body. The social facilities were on the floor above: this part of the building was known as 'the Club' and those members who were willing to pay the extra dues could avail themselves of a smoking room, a taproom, a library, a reception room, a veranda, where tiffin was served when the weather permitted, and a dining room with windows that looked out on a tidal sandbank called Shamian.

The building had yet another floor, above, where lay several sumptuous suites and boardrooms. These were closed to all but a few – the President and the members of the powerful Committee that ran the Chamber. Officially this body was known as the 'Committee of the Chamber' – but in Fanqui-town everyone spoke of it simply as 'The Committee'.

There was one respect however in which the Chamber differed quite markedly from the Bengal and Byculla clubs: the exclusion of Asiatics was here a matter of discretion rather than procedure. This policy was necessitated by the peculiar circumstances of the Canton trade, in which a very large proportion of the incoming goods were shipped from Bombay and Calcutta. Since many of the supply chains, especially of Malwa opium, were controlled by Indian businessmen it was acknowledged to be impolitic to enforce too rigidly the racial norms that were followed by the clubs of the Indian subcontinent. Instead the Chamber's dues were fixed at very elevated levels, ostensibly to discourage undesirables of all sorts. It was the custom moreover for the Committee to include at least one Parsi – usually the most senior member of the community then in residence in Canton. Among the Bombay merchants this was a hugely coveted appointment, a coronation of sorts, because the Committee was in effect the foreign enclave's unofficial Cabinet.

Bahram had been in Canton only a week when Vico came up to the daftar with a letter that was stamped with the seal of Mr Hugh Hamilton Lindsay, the current President of the Chamber of Commerce and thus also the head of the Committee. Being

well-versed in the conventions and usages of Fanqui-town Vico had a fair idea of what the letter was about. He grinned broadly as he held it up: Look, patrão, see what has come!

The letter was not unexpected, of course, but Bahram was still conscious of an almost childlike thrill when he cracked the seal. This was what he had dreamt of when he first came to Canton, decades ago: to be recognized as the leader of Canton's Achhas.

He smiled: Yes, Vico – I've been invited to join the Committee.

Accompanying the letter was a hand-written note inviting Bahram to a dinner where several other members of the Committee would be present.

Bahram looked up to find Vico grinning as though the triumph were his own. Arré patrão! See what you have become now? You are a Seth of Seths – a Nagar-seth, a Jagat-seth! The whole world is at your feet.

Bahram tried to shrug off the tribute but when he glanced at the letter again his chest swelled with pride: he folded it carefully and slipped it into the chest-pouch of his angarkha, where it lay close to his heart; it was proof that he had now joined the ranks of such great merchants as Seth Jamsetjee Readymoney and Seth Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy; it was confirmation that he, Bahramji Naurozji Modi, whose mother had made ends meet by embroidering shawls, had become a leader amongst a group that included some of the world's richest men.

The next morning, Zadig walked into the daftar, with his arms wide open: Arré, Bahram-bhai! Is it true that you've been invited to join the Committee?

It did not surprise Bahram that Zadig was abreast of the news. Yes, Zadig Bey, it's true.

Mabrook Bahram-bhai! I'm really glad.

Oh it's no great thing, said Bahram modestly. The Committee is just a place for people to talk. Behind the scenes it'll be the same people making all the decisions.

Zadig answered with an emphatic shake of his head. Oh no Bahram-bhai. That may have been true in the past, but it's going to change very soon.

What do you mean? said Bahram.

Haven't you heard? said Zadig with a smile. William Jardine has decided to leave Canton. He is going back to England!

This took Bahram completely by surprise: William Jardine had been for at least a decade the most influential man in Fanqui-town. His firm, Jardine, Matheson & Company, was one of the largest players in the Canton trade and he had for years been pushing aggressively to expand the Chinese opium market. In India, too, Jardine had an extensive network of friends and was idolized by many: within Bombay's business circles Bahram was one of the few to be less than smitten with him. This was because Jardine had close ties with a rival Parsi firm and this alliance had caused Bahram many headaches in the past. For Bahram, Jardine's departure was a thing so fervently to be wished for that he could not believe that it might actually happen.

Are you sure, Zadig Bey? Why would Jardine leave for England? He hasn't been home in years.

The choice isn't his any more, said Zadig. The Chinese authorities have come to know that his company has been sending ships to the northern ports of China, looking for new outlets for opium. The rumour is that they're planning to throw Jardine out of the country. Rather than face extradition he will leave on his own.

With Jardine gone, said Bahram, everything will change in the Chamber.

Yes, said Zadig with a smile. I think you'll find yourself making many new friends. In fact I wouldn't be surprised if you received some overtures even from Mr Dent.

Dent? Lancelot Dent?

Who else?

Lancelot Dent was the younger brother of Thomas Dent, who had founded one of Canton's most important business houses: Dent & Company. Bahram had known Tom Dent for a long time: a Scotsman of the old school, he was thrifty, modest and unpretentious; he and Bahram had always got on well with each other and for some years they had worked as partners, competing successfully with the formidable Jardine, Matheson combine. But some nine or ten years ago, Tom Dent's health had begun to fail and he had returned to Britain, leaving the company in the hands of his

younger brother – and Lancelot Dent was an entirely different kind of man, glib of tongue, nakedly ambitious, resentful of his competitors and dismissive of those he considered less gifted than himself. His friends were few and his enemies legion, but even the worst of them could not deny that Lancelot Dent was a brilliant and far-sighted businessman: it was public knowledge that under his leadership the profits of Dent & Company had overtaken those of Jardine, Matheson. Yet, despite his commercial successes, Lancelot Dent had never commanded much influence in Fanquitown; unlike Jardine, who was charming as well as ambitious, he was an awkward, abrasive man, with little talent for endearing himself to others. He had certainly never gone out of his way to befriend Bahram – and for his part, Bahram too had kept his distance, for he had had the impression that the younger man regarded him as a quaint old character with superannuated notions.

I've hardly exchanged a word with Lancelot Dent since Tom left for England.

Zadig laughed. Yes, but you weren't on the Committee then, Bahram-bhai, hai-na? You wait and see. He'll be chatting you up very soon. And nor will he be the only one.

Why do you say that?

The Angrezes – and I mean by that the Americans as well as the British – are not all of one mind right now. There's a lot of confusion about what has been happening here these last few months. Jardine and his party have been pushing for a show of force from the British government. But there are other views too: there are some who think this is just a passing phase and the opium trade will soon be back to what it was.

But that is possible, isn't it? said Bahram. After all, the Chinese have made noises about putting a stop to the trade before. For a few months there's a big tamasha about it and then it all goes back to normal.

Zadig shook his head: Not this time, Bahram-bhai. It's different now; I think the Chinese are serious this time.

Why do you say that, Zadig Bey?

Just look around you, Bahram-bhai. Did you see a single fast-crab on your way down to Canton? When they were first seized and

burned some people said it was only a gesture, and new boats would be back on the river in a couple of months. But no. Some of the retailers did try to rebuild their crabs, and the mandarins burned them again. In the last few weeks they have arrested hundreds of opium-dealers; some have been thrown in prison, some have been executed. It's become almost impossible to bring opium ashore. It's reached a point where the fanquis have started doing something they had never done before: they have begun transporting the drug themselves. They hide it in their cutters and pinnaces and send it upriver with their lascars. That way, if the boats are caught, they'll pass it off on the lascars.

But the risk is slight, no? said Bahram. After all, the Chinese don't usually interfere too much with boats that belong to foreign ships.

But that too is changing, Bahram-bhai, said Zadig. It's true that the Chinese have always been very careful in dealing with us foreigners: they've avoided confrontation and violence to a degree that is hard to imagine in any other country. But in January this year they stopped an Englishman's boat and when they found opium inside it, they confiscated the goods and expelled him from China. And you know of course what happened when Admiral Maitland came here with his fleet? The Chinese would meet neither the Admiral nor Captain Elliott, the British Representative. It was the usual business about protocol and kowtowing and all the rest. The fleet left having achieved no purpose other than to provoke and anger the Chinese. Now on both sides there is confusion and anger. The Chinese are determined to stop the opium trade but they are divided on how to do it. And the British too are not sure of how to respond.

Zadig gave Bahram a smile. That is why I am glad I'm not in your place, Bahram-bhai.

Why, exactly?

Because the Committee is where these battles will be fought. And you will be in the middle of it. You may even be the one who sways the balance. After all, the opium that is traded here comes almost entirely from Hindusthan. Your voice will carry great weight.

Bahram shook his head. You are putting too much on my shoulders, Zadig Bey. I can only speak for myself – not for anyone else. Certainly not for all of Hindusthan.

But you will have to do it Bahram-bhai, said Zadig. And not just for Hindusthan – you will have to speak for all of us who are neither British nor American nor Chinese. You will have to ask yourself: what of the future? How do we safeguard our interests in the event of war? Who will win, the Europeans or the Chinese? The power of the Europeans we have seen at work, in Egypt and in India, where it could not be withstood. But we know also, you and I, that China is not Egypt or India: if you compare Chinese methods of ruling with those of our Sultans, Shahs and Maharajas, it is clear that the Chinese ways are incomparably better – government is indeed their religion. And if the Chinese manage to hold off the Europeans, what will become of us, and our relations with them? We too will become suspect in their eyes. We who have traded here for generations, will find ourselves banned from coming again.

Bahram laughed. Zadig-bhai you've always been too much of a philosopher; I think it's because you spend so much time staring at those clocks of yours – you look too far ahead. You can't expect me to make decisions based on what might happen in the future.

Zadig looked Bahram straight in the eye. But there is another question too, isn't there, Bahram-bhai? The question of whether it is right to carry on trading in opium? In the past it was not clear whether the Chinese were really against it. But now there can be no doubt.

There was something in Zadig's voice – a note of disapproval or accusation – that made Bahram smart. He could feel himself growing heated now and having no wish to provoke a quarrel with his old friend, he forced himself to lower his voice.

How can you say that, Zadig-bhai? Just because an order has come from Beijing does not mean that all of China is for it. If the people were against it, then the opium trade wouldn't exist.

There are many things in the world, Bahram-bhai, that do exist, despite the wishes of the people. Thieves, dacoits, famines, fires – isn't it the task of rulers to protect their people from these things?

Zadig Bey, said Bahram, you know as well as I do that the rulers of this country have all grown rich from opium. The mandarins could stop the trade tomorrow if they wanted to: the reason they have allowed it to go on is because they make money from it too. It's not in anyone's power to force opium on China. After all, this is not some helpless little kingdom to be kicked around by others: it is one of the biggest, most powerful countries on earth. Look at how they constantly bully and harass their neighbours, calling them 'barbarians' and all that.

Yes, Bahram-bhai, said Zadig quietly. What you say is not untrue. But in life it is not only the weak and helpless who are always treated unjustly. Just because a country is strong and obdurate and has its own ways of thinking – that does not mean it cannot be wronged.

Bahram sighed: he realized now that one of the ways in which Canton had changed for him was that he would not be able to speak freely to Zadig any more.

Let's talk about other things, Zadig-bhai, he said wearily. Tell me, how is business?

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forget. What he cares? He is Emperor, no, busy with his wives and all? Mandarins will not tolerate any change – or else where they will get cumshaw? How they will fill their pipes? Those bahn-chahts are the biggest smokers of all.'

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Bahram had known Hugh Hamilton Lindsay, the current President of Canton's General Chamber of Commerce for many years. A rubicund man with a silken blandness of manner, he was connected to the Earls of Balcarra, a prominent Scottish dynasty. He had been in China some sixteen years and was widely liked, being universally regarded as a good fellow who never gave himself any airs. Bahram had dined with him many times and knew him to be an excellent host: what was more, he knew him also to be a discerning judge of food.

It was thus with a pleasurable sense of anticipation that Bahram picked out his clothes for Mr Hamilton's dinner. In place of an angarkha he chose a knee-length white jama of Dacca cotton: it was discreetly ornamented with jamdani brocade, and the neck and cuffs were lined with bands of green silk. Instead of pairing this with the usual salwar or paijamas, Bahram settled on a pair of black Acehnese leggings, shot through with silver thread. The weather being still quite warm he picked, as an outer garment, a cream-coloured cotton choga embroidered with silver-gilt *karchobi* work. The ensemble was completed by a turban of pure malmal muslin. Then, as Bahram picked up a slim cane with an ivory knob, the valet-duty khidmatgar misted the air with a puff of his favourite *raat-ki-rani* attar; after lingering in the fragrant cloud for a moment, Bahram made his way to the door.

The dinner was to be held in the Chamber's dining room, which was only a five-minute walk from the Achha Hong. But it was the custom, in Canton, for people to hire lantern-bearers to light their way when they were invited out to dine, even if they were going only a short distance. Bahram had employed the same bearer for decades: known to foreigners as Apu, this man had an uncanny ability to divine when he was needed. He also seemed to possess some occult faculty of persuasion that enabled him to keep at bay the cadgers and chawbacons of the Maidan. This evening, as on so

many before, Apu arrived punctually, just before sundown, and Bahram set off shortly afterwards: with his embroidered choga flapping in the breeze, and a paper lantern glowing above his white turban, he was about as striking a figure as any – but such were his lantern-bearer's powers that he was the only passer-by not to be besieged with importuning cries of 'Cumshaw, gimme cumshaw!'

The bustle and noise of the Maidan transported Bahram's spirits, taking him back to his earliest days in Canton: he paused to look around him – at the looming bulk of the Sea-Calming Tower, in the far distance; at the grey walls of the citadel, running like a curtain, behind the enclave; and at the narrow-fronted factories, glowing in the last light of day: the hongs' arched windows seemed to be winking at him, their colonnaded porticoes smiling as if to greet an old friend. The sight made Bahram's chest swell in proprietorial pride: after all these years it still thrilled him to think that he was as much a part of this scene as any foreigner could ever hope to be.

At the gates of the Danish Hong, two turbaned chowkidars were standing guard. They were from Tranquebar, near Madras, and they bowed when they saw Bahram: as the doyen of the Achha community of Canton, he was well known to them. Murmuring salaams they ushered him through the gates and into the factory.

Crossing the courtyard that led to the Chamber's premises, Bahram could see that many of Mr Lindsay's guests had already gathered in the Club: the reception room and the dining room were both brightly lit and he could hear voices and the clinking of glasses. At the entrance to the reception room Bahram paused to peek in: few colours other than black and white could be seen on the men inside and he knew that with the candlelight sparkling on the silver and gold threads that were woven through his garments, his entrance would make a considerable impression; he ran a hand over the skirt of his choga, fanning it out so as to show it off to best advantage.

On stepping in, Bahram met with a warm reception. He knew almost everybody present and greeted many of them with hugs and even kisses. He knew there was no danger of being rebuffed: such exuberance might be looked upon askance in a European but in an Oriental of sufficient rank it was likely to be seen rather as a sign of self-assurance. As a young Achha in Canton Bahram had noticed

that such effusions were almost a prerogative of seniority amongst the Seths; he had noticed also that his elders often imposed their physical presence on others as an expression of their power. It was oddly satisfying to know that he too had arrived at a point in his life when his hugs and thumps and kisses were universally welcomed, even by the starchiest Europeans.

Now the host, Mr Lindsay, appeared at Bahram's side, murmuring his congratulations and welcoming him into the Committee. Soon Bahram was led off to admire the full-length portrait of Mr Lindsay that was now hanging amongst the pictures of the Chamber's past presidents.

'You will recognize, of course,' said Mr Lindsay proudly, 'the hand of Mr Chinnery.'

'Arré, shahbash!' said Bahram, dutifully admiring the painting. 'So nicely he has done, no? Put sword in your hand and all. Like a hero you are looking!'

A glow of pleasure suffused Mr Lindsay's rosy face. 'Yes, it is rather fine is it not?'

'But why so soon, Hugh? Your time as President is not over, no?'

'Actually,' said Mr Lindsay, 'I have just a few months left.' Now, leaning closer, he whispered: 'Between the two of us, Barry, that is the occasion for this dinner – I intend to announce the name of my successor.'

'The next President?'

'Yes exactly . . .'

Mr Lindsay was about to say more but he happened to look over Bahram's shoulder and immediately cut himself short. With a quick 'Excuse me' he took himself off and Bahram turned around to find himself facing Lancelot Dent.

Dent's appearance had changed considerably since Bahram had seen him last; a slight man, with a narrow face and receding jawline, he had grown a sandy goatee, probably to extend the length of his chin. He was now brimming with an affability that Bahram had never seen in him before.

'Ah Mr Moddie! Congratulations on your appointment – we are delighted to have you amongst us. My brother Tom sends you his very best wishes.'

'Thank you,' said Bahram politely. 'I am extremely glad to have your blessings and good wishes. And of course you must call me Barry.'

'And you must call me Lancelot.'

'Yes. Certainly, Lance . . .' The name was not easy to say but Bahram managed to get through it in a rush: 'Of course, Lancelot.'

The gong rang, to summon the guests to the dining room, and Dent immediately slipped his arm through Bahram's. There were no place cards on the table, and Bahram had no option but to take the chair next to Dent's. Seated to his left was John Slade of the *Canton Register*.

Slade had long been a fixture on the Committee so his presence at the dinner came as no surprise. Apart from editing the paper, he also dabbled in trade – although without much success. He was reputed to have run up significant debts, but such was the fear inspired by his acid tongue and scathing pen that rare indeed was the creditor who attempted to reclaim a loan from the Thunderer.

But there was no thunder in Mr Slade's mien now as he greeted Bahram: his large, flushed face creased into a smile and he muttered: 'Excellent . . . excellent . . . very pleased indeed to have you on the Committee, Mr Moddie.'

Then his eyes wandered across the room and his face hardened. 'Which is more than I can say of the Bulgarian.'

This completely baffled Bahram. Following Slade's gaze he saw that the Thunderer was looking at Charles King, of Olyphant & Co.: this was an American firm, and Bahram knew for sure that Mr King was an American himself.

'Did you say "vulgarian", Mr Slade?'

'No. I said Bulgarian.'

'But I thought Mr King was from America. You are sure he's Bulgarian?'

'It is not impossible, you know,' said Slade darkly. 'To be both.'

'Baap-re-baap! American and Bulgarian also? That is too much, no?'

Here Dent came to the rescue and and whispered in Bahram's ear: 'You must make some allowances for our good Mr Slade: he is a stickler for proper usage and has a great detestation of corrupted words. He particularly dislikes the word "bugger", which is so much

in use among the vulgar masses. He believes it to be a corruption of the word "Bulgar" or "Bulgarian" and insists on using those instead.'

This further deepened Bahram's puzzlement for he had always assumed that 'bugger' was the *anglice* of the Hindusthani word *bukra* or 'goat'.

'So Mr King is having goats, is he?' he said to Mr Slade.

'It would not surprise me at all,' said Mr Slade mournfully. 'It is common knowledge that a congenital Bulgar will Bulgarize anything that takes his fancy. *Amantes sunt amentes.*'

Bahram had never heard of anyone keeping goats in Fanqui-town, but it stood to reason that if someone did it would be a representative of Olyphant & Co. – for that firm had always been the odd one out in Fanqui-town, choosing to do business in eccentric, money-losing ways. What was more, the firm's managers had even had the effrontery to criticize others for refusing to follow their lead: not surprisingly, this did little to endear them to their peers.

Bahram was one of the few tai-pans who was actually on good terms with Charles King – but this was because he usually discussed things other than business. He knew very well that the Olyphant agent inspired deep hostility within the upper echelons of Fanqui-town, and was astonished to see him amongst the members of the Committee.

Bahram turned to Dent with a puzzled frown: 'Is Charles King also on the Committee?'

'Yes indeed he is,' said Dent. 'He was invited to join because he is a great favourite of the mandarins. It was felt that he would be able to represent our views to them. But it must be admitted that it has not turned out well: instead of advocating our issues to them, he unfailingly does exactly the opposite. He is forever trying to bully and hector us into obeying his Celestial patrons.'

At this point the Club's stewards entered with the first course. The stewards were all local men, with braided queues, round caps and sandalled feet. Their tunics were in the Club's colour, blue, and were worn over grey, ankle-length pyjamas.

Unlike the stewards, many of the Chamber's cooks were from Macau: when freed from the obligation of producing the kind of fare that was most in demand in the Club's dining room – roast beef,

Yorkshire pudding, haggis, steak-and-kidney pies and the like – they were capable of serving superb Macahnese food. Now, looking at the plate that had been set before him, Bahram was delighted to see that it contained one of his favourite dishes: a bright green watercress soup called Caldo de Agrião. With it was served a variety of condiments and sauces, as well as a fine Alvarinho wine from Munçao.

Bahram was absorbed in savouring the wine and the soup when Mr Slade's voice boomed across the table. 'Well Mr Jardine, since no one else will dare ask, it falls to me to bell the cat. Is it true, sir, that you intend soon to return to England?'

The soup was suddenly forgotten and every head turned to look towards Mr Jardine who was sitting at the other end of the table, between the host and Mr Wetmore. A quizzical smile appeared on his unlined face and he said quietly: 'Well Mr Slade, I was planning to make my intentions public at the end of the evening, but since you have presented me with this opportunity, I will seize it. The answer is, in short: Yes, I am indeed planning to return to England. The date has not yet been decided but it will probably be in a month or two.'

A silence fell, leaving many spoons suspended in the air. Before anything else could be said Mr Lindsay broke in, speaking in his usual rounded, measured tones: 'The urge to seek the joys of marriage and fatherhood is powerful in all men. We cannot expect Mr Jardine to forever defer his happiness in order to provide us with his unrivalled leadership. We are fortunate in having had him with us for as long as we have. It behooves us now to wish him luck in finding the bride he deserves.'

This was met with nods and a quiet chorus of Amens and Hear-hears, which Mr Jardine acknowledged with a smile: 'Thank you, gentlemen, thank you: I will certainly need your good wishes. I have so little experience of the petticoat company that I should consider myself fortunate if I succeed in finding a lady who is fat, fair and forty. It is as much as a man of my age has a right to expect.'

Amidst the roar of laughter that followed, the soup plates were whisked away and a number of dishes were laid upon the table. Inspecting them closely, Bahram recognized many of his favourite Macahnese specialities: croquettes of bacalhao, boulettes of pork, a spiced salad of avocado and prawns, stuffed crabs and a fish tart.

The food did not long distract Mr Slade: having made quick work of a couple of glasses of wine and several platefuls of crab, codfish and pork balls, he again addressed Mr Jardine: 'Well sir, since so many of us at this table are old bachelors and perfectly content with our lot – as indeed you too seemed to be until quite recently – you will perhaps forgive us for wondering whether the attractions of the marital bed are the sole cause of your departure from our midst.'

Mr Jardine raised an eyebrow. 'Pray Mr Slade, I am not sure I understand you.'

'Well sir,' said Mr Slade in his booming voice. 'Let me put the matter plainly then: it is widely rumoured that you have drawn up a detailed war plan and are hoping to persuade Lord Palmerston, the Foreign Secretary, to make use of it. Is there any truth to this?'

Jardine's smile did not waver in the slightest: 'I fear you overestimate both my foresight and my influence, Mr Slade. Lord Palmerston has not called on me for advice or assistance – although you may be sure that if he did I would not hesitate to offer it.'

'I am glad to hear it, sir.' Mr Slade's voice grew louder. 'And if you should happen to meet Lord Palmerston I beg you to speak your mind to him, on behalf of all of us.'

'What exactly would you have me say, Mr Slade?'

'Why sir,' said Slade, 'my views are no secret: I have stated them repeatedly in the *Register*. I would have you tell His Lordship that he has disappointed us, at every turn. He is no doubt a man of exceptional ability so we had hoped he would understand the importance of trade and commerce to the future of the Empire. Yet every measure he has taken so far for the protection and promotion of the British trade to China has failed utterly and disgracefully. I would urge him to recognize that it was a mistake to appoint a man like Captain Elliott to be the Representative of Her Majesty's government in China. Captain Elliott has attained his position solely because of his connections in Society and Government – he understands nothing of financial matters and as a military man he can never adequately appreciate the principles of Free Trade. It follows therefore that he cannot honestly represent the interests of men such as ourselves. Yet it is we who, through our taxes, pay the salaries of men like him – a class of official parasites that seems to be forever increasing in number. This is unconscionable, sir, and it must be made plain to His Lordship. I would urge him to change his policy; to stop reposing his trust in soldiers and diplomats and other representatives of the government. This is a new age, and it will be forged and shaped by trade and commerce. His Lordship would do better to make common cause with men like us, who are here and who are acquainted with the conditions of this country; he should trust our leading merchants to represent our own best interests. His Lordship should be cautioned that if he intends to proceed as he began, then the future for British subjects in this country is gloomy and dark indeed: if not for his inaction, the situation here would never have come to the present pass. He should be warned also that if he continues along his present path he himself will not escape opprobrium. He will find that he has paid too dear for his ministerial whistle if its price is the sacrifice of the honour and interests of his own country.'

There was a dazed silence, which helped the stewards to serve another course: even though Bahram's attention had been distracted by Mr Slade's thunderous peroration, he did not fail to recognize that the dish that had now appeared on the table was the great glory of Macahnese cuisine – *Galinha Africana* – grilled chicken, napped with a coconut sauce that was redolent of the spices of Mozambique.

No one else paid any attention to the chicken. From the other end of the table, Mr Lindsay directed a frown at Mr Slade. 'You must consider yourself lucky, John, that you were born in England. In some countries a man might well lose his head for taking such a tone with his leaders.'

'Believe me, sir,' said the Thunderer, 'I know very well the value of my freedoms. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to see them conferred upon the uncountable millions who groan under the yoke of tyranny – most notably the wretches who suffer the rule of the Manchu despot.'

'But Mr Slade!' It was the voice of Charles King. 'If freedom is merely a stick for you to beat others with, then surely the word has lost all meaning? You have blamed Lord Palmerston, you have blamed Captain Elliott, you have blamed the Emperor of China

– yet you have not once taken the name of the commodity that has brought us to the present impasse: opium.'

Slade's heavy jowls quivered thunderously as he turned to face his interlocutor. 'No, Mr King,' he said. 'I have not mentioned opium, nor indeed have I spoken of any of your other hobby horses. And nor will I until your Celestial friends candidly admit that it is they who are the prime movers in this trade. In supplying them with such goods as they demand we are merely obeying the laws of Free Trade . . .'

'And the laws of conscience, Mr Slade?' said Charles King. 'What of them?'

'Do you imagine, Mr King, that freedom of conscience could exist in the absence of the freedom of trade?'

Before Charles King could respond Jardine broke in. 'But all the same, Slade, you're coming it a bit strong, aren't you? I cannot see that it will serve any purpose to address the Foreign Secretary so harshly. And as for Captain Elliott he is merely a functionary – we should not ascribe to him greater consequence than is his due.'

Slade opened his mouth to respond, but was distracted by the entry of the dessert, which was a rich and creamy 'sawdust pudding' – *serradura*, topped with a crisp layer of toasted crumbs.

Mr. Lindsay was quick to seize this opportunity and struck his knife upon his glass.

'Gentlemen, in a minute we will drink to the Queen. But before that I have some good news to share with you. As you know, my term as President of the Chamber runs out in a few months. It is of course the custom for the outgoing President to name a successor. I am happy to announce that our next incumbent will be someone who will ensure that Mr Jardine will remain with us in spirit even after his departure. For he is none other than Mr Jardine's dearest friend: Mr Wetmore.'

Many hands began to clap and Mr Wetmore rose to his feet in acknowledgement.

'I am moved, deeply moved, to be trusted with the responsibilities of leadership at a time like this.' There was a catch in his voice and he paused to clear it. 'It is some consolation, if I may say so, for the loss of Mr Jardine.'

This too was answered with a burst of clapping. Even as he was joining in the applause, Bahram noticed that his two neighbours were exchanging smiles and glances that seemed to say: 'Did I not tell you so?'

Under cover of the noise Dent leant close to Bahram's ear: 'You see, Barry, how things are disposed of amongst us?'

Bahram decided to answer cautiously. 'Pray, Lancelot, what is your meaning?'

Dent's voice, although low, became very intense: 'We are at a critical juncture, Barry, and I do not think we have the leadership we need.'

He cut himself short as Mr Lindsay rose to his feet, glass in hand. 'Gentlemen, the Queen . . .'

After the toasts had been drunk Mr Lindsay declared that the evening was not over yet, far from it. At a signal from him the sliding doors that connected the dining room to the reception room were thrown open: inside were three fiddlers, setting up their music stands. They struck up a waltz and Mr Lindsay gestured to his guests to rise. 'Come, gentlemen, this would scarcely be a Canton evening if it did not end with some dancing. I am sure Mr Jardine and Mr Wetmore will lead the way, as they have so often in the past.'

Now, as the guests began to pair off around the table, Bahram realized that he would have to choose between Mr Slade and Mr Dent. He turned hurriedly to his right: 'Shall we dance, Lancelot?'

'Why certainly, Barry,' said Dent. 'But can I have a minute of your time before that?'

'Of course.'

Linking his arm with Bahram's, Dent led him out to the wide balcony that adjoined the dining room. 'You must know, Barry,' he said in a low voice, 'that we are facing a crisis of unprecedented magnitude. It should come as no surprise that the Grand Manchu has decided to demonstrate his omnipotence by prohibiting the entry of opium into this country. It is in the nature of tyranny for tyrants to be seized by fancies, and it is clear that this one will stop at nothing to enforce his whim: arrests, raids, executions – the monster is willing to use every instrument of oppression that is available to him. None of this is perhaps surprising in a heathen

despot – but I am sorry to say that there are some in our community here who would gladly march to the tyrant's tune.'

'Are you referring to Charles King?' said Bahram.

'Yes,' said Dent. 'My fear is that in Mr Jardine's absence he will attempt to seize control of the Committee. Fortunately he has little support and Mr Jardine's adherents will not allow them to prevail. Yet, the means by which Mr Jardine and his people propose to solve our problems are not much different: they speak of Free Trade and yet their intention is to invite the armed intervention of none other than Her Majesty's government. To me this is not merely a contradiction of the principles of Free Trade, but a mockery of them: it is my belief that whenever governments attempt to sway the Invisible Hand, whenever they attempt to bend the flow of trade to their will, then must free men fear for their liberties – for that is when we know that we are in the presence of a power that seeks to make children of us, a force that seeks to usurp the sovereign will that God has bestowed equally on all of us. A pox on both their houses I say.'

Bahram's instinctive suspicion of abstractions was now aroused. 'But Lancelot, what would *you* do about the present situation? Are you having any definite plan?'

'My plan,' said Dent, 'is to trust in the Almighty and leave the rest to the laws of Nature. It will not be long before mankind's natural cupidity reasserts itself. I hold this to be Man's most powerful and most noble instinct: nothing can withstand it. It is only a matter of time before it overwhelms the proud ambitions of those who seek to govern from on high.'

Bahram began to fidget with the hem of his angarkha. 'But Lancelot . . . see, I am an ordinary man of business; can you please explain what you are trying to say in a simple way?'

'All right,' said Dent. 'Let me put it like this. Do you think the demand for opium in China has abated merely because of an edict from Peking?'

'No,' said Bahram. 'That I doubt.'

'And you are right to doubt it, for I assure you it has not. The absence of food does not make a man forsake hunger – it only makes him hungrier. The same is true of opium. I am told that the

price being offered for a chest of opium in the city is now in the region of three thousand dollars – five times what it was a year ago.'

'Is it really?'

'Yes. Can you imagine what that means, Barry? The cumshaws that every mandarin, guard and bannerman received a year ago are now also potentially many times higher.'

'That is true,' said Bahram. 'You have a point.'

'How long before the mandarins see reason? If the Emperor's edicts and prohibitions are not rescinded, what is to hold them back from fomenting rebellion? If he does not disavow his whim, what is to prevent lesser men from rising up against the power-maddened Manchu, who is not even of their own race? How long can it be before they see where their own interests lie?'

'But that is the problem, Lancelot,' said Bahram. 'Time. Let me be frank with you. I have a shipful of opium anchored off Hong Kong and I need to dispose of it quickly. I do not have much time.'

'Oh I understand very well,' said Dent with a smile. 'Believe me I am in exactly the same position – even more so because I have more than one shipload to dispose of. But ask yourself this: what is the alternative? If the Olyphants have their way then we will lose our cargoes in their entirety; if Jardine and his people win out what will it profit us, you and me? It will be a year, or perhaps two, before an expeditionary force arrives. Do you think the investors who have entrusted us with their capital will wait quietly while an English fleet sails halfway around the world?'

'No, it is true; they would not wait that long,' said Bahram. 'But tell me, Lancelot, what is *your* solution? What would *you* do about this problem?'

'It's quite simple,' said Dent. 'You and I need to be able to dispose of our opium at our convenience and it is essential that the Chamber does nothing to stand in our way. It is vital that we do not allow it to become a shadow government seeking to usurp our individual freedoms. But to make sure of this I will need your help. In the months to come we will face tremendous pressure. Governments on both sides of the world will attempt to bend us to their will. At this time, above all, it is essential that we prepare to resist – and unless we stay together we will all be swept aside.'

He placed his hand on Bahram's arm. 'Tell me, Barry – can I count on your support?'

Bahram dropped his eyes: he could not see himself aligning either with Jardine or with the representatives of Olyphant & Co. – yet there was something about Dent that led him to doubt that he would be able to carry the majority of his peers with him.

'Tell me, Lancelot: do you think you are having as much support as will be required?'

Dent was silent for a moment. 'I own I would be more confident if Benjamin Burnham were here already. I could certainly count on him and I do believe that with his help and yours I would be able to sway the Committee.'

'Mr Burnham of Calcutta?' said Bahram. 'Is he also on the Committee?'

'Yes,' said Dent. 'As you know, it is the custom to include one representative from the Calcutta agency houses. I was able to ensure that the seat was kept for Benjamin: he and I understand each other very well. He is on his way to Canton now and once he is here, I will feel far more confident.' He paused to clear his throat. 'But of course we will still need you, Barry – and you are, after all, an old ally of Dent and Company.'

Bahram decided it was far too early to show his hand. 'I certainly hold your company in the highest esteem,' he said in a non-committal way. 'But as for these other matters I will have to do some thinking.'

There was a break in the music now, which provided Bahram with an opportunity to end the conversation. Cocking his head towards the reception room he said: 'Ah, waltz is over! Now polka is starting. Shall we go in?'

If Dent was put out by the abrupt change of subject he did not show it. 'Certainly,' he said. 'Come. Let us go in.'

As they stepped inside, Bahram spotted a large, hulking figure leaning negligently against the sliding doors of the reception room with a tankard of beer clutched in one hand.

'Why, it is Mr Innes,' said Dent.

'Was he invited? I did not see him earlier.'

'I doubt that Mr Innes would be stopped by the lack of an

invitation,' said Dent with a laugh. 'He will brook no hindrance from anyone but the Almighty Himself.'

Bahram had only a nodding acquaintance with Innes but he knew him well by repute: although well-born he was a wild, wilful character, who did exactly as he pleased. He was a brawler, forever getting into fights, and in Bombay no respectable merchant would deal with him for he was regarded as an inveterate troublemaker. As a result he was forced to obtain his consignments of opium from petty dalals – and thieves and dacoits too, for all that anyone knew.

He was surprised now, to hear Dent speaking of Innes with approbation.

'It is men like Innes who will resolve our present difficulties,' Dent said. 'These are the free spirits who will thwart the designs of tyrants. If there is anyone who can be considered a crusader in the cause of Free Trade it is he.'

'What do you mean, Lancelot?'

Dent's eyebrows rose in surprise. 'Are you perhaps unaware, Barry, that Innes is the only man who is still transporting cargoes of opium into Canton? He believes it to be God's will, so he continues to bring the chests upriver in his own cutters, defying the Emperor's ban. It wouldn't be possible of course if he did not have local allies – everyone is paid off on the way, the customs men, the mandarins, everyone. He has had no trouble so far – it is proof that the natural cupidity which is the foundation of human freedom will always prevail against the whims of tyrants.'

Dent leant closer to Bahram's ear. 'I will tell you this in confidence Barry: Innes has disposed of several dozen cases for me in the last few weeks. I would be glad to speak to him on your behalf.'

'Oh no,' said Bahram quickly. It made him cringe to think of what would be said of him in Bombay if it ever came to be known that he was dealing with a man like Innes. 'Please do not trouble yourself, Lancelot. That will not be necessary.'

To Bahram's alarm, Innes seemed to have guessed that he was being talked about for he turned around suddenly, with a scowl on his face. All of a sudden Bahram was seized by the notion that Innes would ask him to dance. This so panicked him that he grabbed Dent's hand: 'Come, Lancelot,' he said. 'It is time to dance.'

One morning, while Bahram was toying with his breakfast, Neel began to read out an excerpt of an imperial edict, issued in Beijing: '"The Controller of the Board has reported that the habit of smoking is on the increase even though the Viceroys and Governors of every Province have been authorized to conduct raids and make seizures of Opium. Alas the mandarins are careless and manage matters unskilfully. If they have seized any Opium it is only a miserably small quantity and I fear they are not all upright . . ."'

What is this? snapped Bahram.

Sethji, it is a hookum-nama issued by the Son of Heaven, in the capital: a translation has been published in the last issue of the *Register*.

Pushing aside his unemptied plate, Bahram rose from the table: Go on, munshiji. Let me hear the rest.

'"After this the Viceroys and Governors of every province must sternly and distinctly demand that their people obey the commands; and they must also order their civilian and military officers to vigorously search all traitorous merchants who are engaged in the traffic of Opium. And all people who keep Opium shops in the Cities must be apprehended and brought before the Tribunals."'

Glancing up from his notes, Neel saw that on rising from the breakfast table Bahram had done something that was very rare for him – he had seated himself at his desk.

'Why you have stopped?' said Bahram. 'Carry on: what else does Emperor say?'

'"The Viceroys and Governors of every Province must exert themselves to eradicate the evil by the very roots; a single person must not be allowed to slip through the net of the law; if they dare to wink at, or conceal, or lose opportunities of apprehending, or other evils of that sort, then they will be punished by a new law, and further their sons and grandsons will not be allowed to appear at the examinations. If, on the other hand, the district Mandarins show intelligence and ability in conducting this business they will be promoted according to the new law. Let this be promulgated through every Province for the information of all people. *Respect this!*"'

Here Neel was interrupted by a curious grinding noise, like the gnashing of teeth. Looking up in surprise, he saw that the sound was emanating not from Bahram's mouth, but rather from his hands – he had positioned his carved inkstone in front of him and was furiously kneading his long-neglected inkstick. Whether this was to give release to his agitation or to calm himself, Neel could not decide, and a moment later the inkstone, unsteadied by the increasing violence of Seth's motions, went hurtling off the desk. A jet of black ink flew up, drenching the Seth's immaculate choga and splashing all over his papers.

Bahram jumped to his feet, looking down at himself in horror. 'What bloody nonsense! Who has told these Chinese fellows to make ink like it is masala? Crazy buggers!' Turning a pair of angry, disordered eyes at Neel, he pointed to the inkstone: 'Take it away! I never want to see it again.'

Ji, Sethji.

Neel was moving towards the door when it flew open of itself: a peon was outside, a sealed note in hand.

An urgent chit had just been delivered, the man said. The bearer was downstairs, waiting for a reply.

From Bahram's response it was clear that he had long been awaiting this note. All thought of the inky mishap was instantly erased from his mind, and his voice turned brisk and businesslike: 'Munshiji, I need you to go down to the khazana. Kindly ask the shroffs to prepare a purse of ninety taels: tell them to pick out number-one first-chop coins'. And tell them also: none of the coins must carry my mark.

Ji, Sethji. Bowing out of the daftar, Neel headed quickly down the stairs.

Like every other counting-room in Fanqui-town, the Seth's khazana was on the ground floor. A small airless room with a massive door, it had only one heavily shuttered window, with thick steel bars. This was the exclusive domain of the firm's two shroffs and no one else was allowed inside: here they would sit shroffing for hours, creating an unceasing metallic melody, with streams of coins tinkling through their hands.

Fanqui-town's most commonly used coin was the one that had the widest currency in the world: it was the Spanish silver dollar, also called the 'piece of eight' because it was valued at eight reals. The dollar contained a little less than an ounce of fine silver and was embossed with the heads and arms of recent Spanish sovereigns. But among the pieces of eight that circulated in Canton, very few retained the designs that had been stamped on them at the time of their minting. In China, while passing from hand to hand, every coin was marked with the seals of its successive owners. This practice was considered a surety for buyers as well as sellers, for anyone who complained of a bad coin could be sure of having it replaced so long as it could be shown to be marked with the seal of its last owner.

When space ran short, more was created by flattening the coin with a hammer. In due time, the cracked and battered coins would be broken into bits, to be kept in bags and placed upon the scales when a transaction required silver of a certain weight. As coins aged, they became more and more difficult to pass off, even when their content of silver remained unchanged; new coins, on the other hand, were called 'first-chop dollars' and were so prized they were valued above their weight.

Although ubiquitous, the Spanish dollar was used principally for small everyday exchanges; commercially important transactions were usually conducted in Chinese coinage, of which the smallest was the 'cash' (or *chen*). Made of zinc and copper these coins had a square hole in the middle, and could be strung together in large numbers: a string of a hundred cash was known, in English, as a 'mace' and when people went shopping they usually carried one or two of these, wearing them like bangles on their wrists and arms.

The cash was a beautiful coin, to Neel's eyes, but it was too heavy to be carried in bulk and counted for little, being worth even less than an Indian paisa. The tael was the Chinese coin that was of real value: it contained about a third more silver than the Spanish dollar and was the unit most often used for the purposes of large-scale commerce.

The fact that Bahram had asked for a purse containing taels rather than dollars was significant in some way, Neel knew, but he could not quite surmise what: the sum was not large enough to pay for a significant quantity of goods but was yet much too big for an everyday purchase.

To discuss the matter with others in the hong was unthinkable, of course, so Neel assumed that the answers to these questions would remain forever obscure to him. But a little while later, after he had delivered the ninety taels to the Seth's bedroom, encased in a leather purse, he went to the daftar to fetch his papers and found an oddly encrypted message on his desk. A scribble had appeared on the sheet of paper that he used as an ink-blotter: a closer glance showed it to be in the Seth's sloping hand.

Evidently, his own desk being splattered with ink, Bahram had decided to make use of Neel's. After penning a reply to the note he had received, he had dried the ink on the blotting sheet. Now, peering at the sheet, Neel was able to decipher a few words:

. . . Innes . . .

. . . to confirm . . . will bring purse . . . Eho Hong at eleven . . .

Yrs Bahr . . .

*

Bahram knew exactly what he had to do that morning; Vico had coached him carefully on the details. He was to go over to James Innes's apartment, which was in the Creek Factory. The money was to be handed over only after the delivery of the first set of crates: it wasn't intended to be Innes's fee – that would be paid later – it was meant for cumshaws, to be distributed to the local officials who had made the shipment possible. The first delivery was to be a trial run and Vico would not be accompanying it; he planned to stay back, in Whampoa, to make sure that the next set of crates was properly transferred, from the yawl that had brought them down from Hong Kong, to a pair of cutters.

Vico had planned everything so that Bahram's presence in the Creek Factory would only be required for an hour or so – not a great length of time, certainly, but Bahram had never much cared for the Creek Factory and he would have been glad if his vigil were shorter still. Although he had never lived in that hong himself he had a more-than-passing familiarity with it for it adjoined his first place of residence in Canton, the Dutch Factory. The two buildings were separated only by a wall but they could not have been more different. While the Dutch Factory was sombre to a fault, the Creek Factory was a boisterous, freewheeling place inhabited by determined and headstrong Free-Traders – men like Jardine and Innes.

The Creek Factory was spoken of as such because it was flanked by a narrow waterway: it was the last building on that side of Fanqui-town – on the other side of the creek lay the godowns of the Co-Hong merchants. The creek gave the hong a distinctive character because many of its lodgings had little quays of their own, providing direct access to the river.

The Creek Factory's residents often said they liked it because of its proximity to the water, but this had never made any sense to Bahram. The so-called creek from which the factory took its name, was really just a nullah – a combination of open sewer and tidal stream. The nullah was one of the principal conduits for the city's refuse, and at low tide, when it shrank to a trickle and its banks were exposed to plain view, a more noxious sight was hard to imagine. The tides would often deposit the carcasses of dogs and piglets in the refuse-clogged mud and there they would lie, buzzing with flies and creating a vomit-inducing stench until they swelled up and exploded.

This 'view' had never held any appeal for Bahram and he could not imagine that it did for many of the factory's other residents either: it was perfectly clear that for men like James Innes the Creek Factory's attraction lay rather in the fact that the nullah gave them direct access to the river; they all lived in apartments that were furnished with docks as well as godowns, so that shipments could be delivered to their doors without having to be carried across the Maidan. The fact that the offices of the chief

Canton customs inspector was situated close to the entrance of the Creek Factory, at the very mouth of the nullah, made no difference: the customs men – or 'tidewaiters' as they were called – would all have been taken care of well before the arrival of the shipment.

Bahram knew that such shipments were delivered regularly to the Creek Hong so the chances of anything going wrong were very small – but he still could not stop fretting, about things large and small. He pulled out an almanac that Shireenbai had given him and looked to see if the day and the hour were auspicious – it disquieted him further when he saw that they were not. Then he looked at the fine clothes that had been laid out for him, on his bed, and decided that they were too elaborate for the task at hand. With his turban and choga he would be conspicuous anyway, and the last thing he wanted was to draw attention to himself with unnecessary finery.

After some thought he settled on a nondescript old caftan that he hadn't worn in years. Then, while his turban was being tied, it occurred to him that it might be a good idea to loosen the tail-end, so that it could be pulled across his face, if needed – an absurd little precaution perhaps, but at that moment he was not in a mood to dismiss any measure that might provide a little peace of mind. But nor could he bring himself to ask the khidmatgar to do it – everybody on his staff knew that he always wore his turban tightly tucked; if word got out, the whole hong would be talking about it – so he decided to do it for himself and asked the fellow to step out.

And of course the dolt took it as a reprimand and began to wring his hands and moan – *Kya kiya huzoor?* What did I do wrong?

At this, Bahram's temper snapped and he shouted: *Gadhera!* You think I can't do anything for myself? Just go, *chali ja*!

The man backed away, whimpering, and Bahram felt the sting of a painful twinge of regret: the fellow had been with him a long time, maybe twenty years; he'd come as a boy, he remembered, and now already there were wisps of grey in his moustache. On an impulse, he reached into the chest pocket of his angarkha and took out the first coin that brushed against his fingers: it was a whole dollar, but no matter – he held it out to the man.

Here, he said. It's all right; take this. You can go now. I'll do the rest myself.

The man's eyes widened and then filled with tears. Bowing low, he took hold of Bahram's hand and kissed it. Huzoor, he said, you are our *maai-baap*, our parent and sustainer. Without you, Sethji . . .

Bas! said Bahram. That's enough; you can go now. Chal!

Once the door was shut, Bahram turned to the looking-glass and loosened a fold of his tightly wound turban. He was about to tuck it back in, lightly, when he saw that his hand was shaking. He stopped and took a deep breath; it was alarming to see how frayed his nerves were, how brittle his temper – but then, who would have thought that a day would come when he, Seth Bahramji Naurozji Modi, would be reduced to fashioning a veil out of the tail-end of his turban?

Before leaving his bedroom Bahram decided to wrap the leather purse inside the folds of his cummerbund: it weighed heavily on his waist but was safely hidden, under his woollen choga. As he was about to open the door, it occurred to him that it might be a good idea also to carry a cane: he armed himself with a stout Malacca, topped with a porcelain knob. His eyes fell on his watch and he saw that it was almost eleven. He stepped quickly out of the room and found the munshi waiting at the top of the stairs.

Sethji, is there anything you want me to do this morning?

No, munshiji. Bahram came to a stop and gave him a smile. You've been working hard of late. Why don't you take the morning off?

Ji, Sethji.

On reaching the bottom of the staircase, Bahram found several members of his staff milling about and whispering in the hallway.

. . . huzoor shall we come with you?

. . . do you need any help, Sethji?

Bahram knew that if he was not firm with them, they would follow anyway, so he held up a finger and wagged it sternly: No. No one is to come with me – and I don't want anyone trailing after me either.

At this, they dropped their eyes and slunk off and Bahram made

his way to the door. Once he was outside, in the fresh air, he took some comfort from the everyday bustle of the square: the barbers were hard at work, shaving foreheads and braiding queues under their portable sunshades; clouds of fragrant smoke were rising from the barrows of chestnut-sellers and a troupe of travelling acrobats was performing for an audience of wide-eyed jais. Looking towards Jackass Point Bahram was relieved to see that it was less crowded than usual. This sometimes happened when there was a long interval between dockings, so he thought no more of it and set off at a brisk pace, swinging his cane.

Between the Maidan and the creek lay the British and Dutch Hongs. These two factories had gobbled up the patches of land in front of them and turned them into private gardens. As a result, all foot traffic between the Maidan and the creek was funnelled through a narrow lane – this crowded walkway was known to Achhas as Chor Gali, 'Thieves' Alley'.

Bahram had personal experience of the 'claw-hands' of Chor Gali: once, many years ago, while making his way through the lane, he had been robbed of fifty dollars; the purse had been cut out of the lining of his choga while he was battling the crowds, the job being done so neatly that he hadn't even noticed until he was at the customs office. Passing through the alley today he was careful to keep a hand on his purse, as a surety against the sharping-tribe.

On reaching the end of the lane, Bahram glanced quickly towards the customs office – it was a modest brick building, right at the mouth of the nullah. Adajacent to it was a yard of beaten earth. The yard was quiet today, with only a few coolies and vendors loitering about: from where Bahram stood, nothing could be seen of the river, which was screened off by the office. He toyed momentarily with the idea of walking up to the bund to make sure that nothing untoward was under way on the river. But on thinking the matter over, he decided it would be better not to draw attention to himself. Swinging his cane, he headed straight for the Creek Factory's entrance, a few feet to his left.

Several years had passed since Bahram had last stepped into the Creek Factory but nothing seemed to have changed: a long dark corridor lay in front of him, smelling of mildew and urine. Innes

had taken an apartment in House No. 2 and the entrance to it lay on the right. Striding up to it, Bahram rapped on the door with the knob of his cane. There was no answer so he knocked again. Shortly afterwards the door swung open and he was ushered into Innes's apartment by a manservant.

Ahead lay a long, narrow room, of the sort that served as living quarters for many a small-time trader in Fanqui-town – except that this one was in a state of wild disorder: dishes encrusted with stale food lay piled on a small dining table and the chairs and settees were heaped with soiled bedclothes. Grimacing in distaste, Bahram turned his eyes to the far end of the room.

As with many apartments in the Creek Factory, this one had a small balcony that overlooked the nullah: so strong was the smell of stale food and unwashed clothing that Bahram decided that this was one instance in which the smell of the creek might actually be preferable to the stench of the room. He was about to step outside, on to the veranda, when Innes came running up the steep staircase that connected his living quarters with his godown, on the floor below: his face was unshaven and he was wearing a jacket and a pair of breeches that looked as though they had not been changed in several days. Glowering at Bahram he said, without preamble: 'I hope you've brought the brass, Mr Moddie.'

'Why, of course, Mr Innes,' said Bahram. 'You will have it after the shipment is safely delivered.'

'Oh, it's a-coming all right,' said Innes.

'You are sure? Everything is all right?

'Yes, of course. It has been ordained and will surely come to pass.' Innes stuck a Sumatra buncus in his mouth and raised a match to the tip. 'The tide is coming in so they should be here any minute.'

Bahram found himself warming to Innes: there was something heartening about his brutish self-confidence. 'Your spirits are high, Mr Innes. I'm glad to see it.'

'I am but an instrument of a higher will, Mr Moddie.'

There was a sudden shout from below stairs: it was Innes's manservant. 'Boat! Boat ahoy!'

'That'll be them,' said Innes. 'I'd better go down to see to the

unloading. You can wait on the balcony, Mr Moddie – if you don't mind a bit of a stinkomalee that is. You'll get a good dekko of everything from up there.'

'As you wish, Mr Innes.' Bahram opened the door to the balcony and stepped outside.

With the tide in flood, the nullah had filled with water and was now at a level where a boat could easily be docked beside Innes's godown. Glancing downwards, Bahram saw that Innes and his servant had stepped outside, and were standing on the quay, craning their necks to look up the creek. Turning his gaze in that direction, Bahram saw that a boat had slipped in from the river and was moving slowly down the narrow waterway, past the Hoppo's office: it was a ship's cutter, rowed by a lascar crew, and guided by two local men.

Even with the tide running high, the creek was so narrow that the cutter's progress was painfully slow – or so at least it seemed to Bahram, whose forehead had begun to drip with sweat. When at last the boat pulled up at the quay, he breathed a deep sigh and wiped his face with the tail-end of his turban.

'You see, Mr Moddie?'

It was Innes, standing astride the dock, triumphantly puffing on his buncus: 'What did I tell you? All delivered, safe and sound. Is this not proof that it was predestined?'

Bahram smiled. The gambit had paid off after all; all things considered, it was remarkable how easy it had been to arrange the whole thing – and with so little risk too, without the opium ever even entering his own hong or passing through his godown. His one regret now was that he had not contracted to send more cases.

Bahram raised a hand, in congratulation. 'Shahbash, Mr Innes! Well done!'

*

It wasn't often that Neel had the morning to himself, and he knew exactly what he was going to do with it: it had been a while since he had last paid a visit to Asha-didi's kitchen-boat, and his mouth began to water at the very thought of it.

This eatery was an institution among the Achhas of Canton: visiting it was almost a duty for the innumerable sepoys, serangs,

lascars, shroffs, mootsuddies, gomustas, munshis and dubashes who passed through the city. This was because Asha-didi's kitchen-boat was the one establishment, along the entire length of the Pearl River, that provided fare that an Achha could enjoy with untroubled relish, knowing that it would contain neither beef nor pork, nor any odds and ends of creatures that barked, or mewed, or slithered, or chattered in the treetops: mutton and chicken, duck and fish were the only dead animals she offered. What was more, everything was cooked in reassuringly familiar ways, with real masalas and recognizable oils, and the rice was never outlandishly soft and sticky: there was usually a biryani or a fish pulao, some daals, some green bhaajis, and a chicken curry and tawa-fried fish. Occasionally – and these were considered blessed days – there would be pakoras and puris; even vegetarian fare could be cheaply obtained at Asha-didi's if suitable notice were provided – and hers was not the bland stuff of Canton's monasteries, but as chatpata as anyone might wish.

Some Achha visitors to south China subsisted for weeks on boiled greens and rice for fear of inadvertently ingesting some forbidden meat – or worse still, some unknown substance that might interrupt the orderly working of the bowels – and for them Asha-didi was a figure who inspired not just gratitude but the deepest devotion. But Neel had another reason to frequent her eatery: for him the foods of her kitchen were spiced by an additional reward: the pleasure of speaking Bengali.

Asha-didi's fluency in Hindusthani and Bengali often came as a surprise to Achhas for there was nothing about her to suggest a connection with their homeland. Slim and straight-backed, she dressed in the simple work-clothes that were commonly worn by Cantonese boat-women – a blue tunic, calf-length pyjamas, a conical sun hat and perhaps a quilted vest, to ward off the winter cold. When seated on her stool, with her fingers flicking through an abacus, and a time-stick burning at her elbow, she fitted so neatly into the setting of Canton's waterfront that Achhas were often taken aback when she greeted them in a familiar tongue – Hindusthani, perhaps, or Bengali, both of which she spoke with perfect ease. Often, their mouths would fall open and they would ask how she did it, as

though her fluency were a trick, performed by a conjuror. She would answer with a laugh: You know there's no jadoo in it; I was born in Calcutta and grew up there; my family is still settled there . . .

Asha-didi's father had moved to Bengal soon after she was born: he was one of the first Chinese immigrants to settle in Calcutta – a rare Cantonese amongst a largely Hakka group. He had originally gone there to work as a stevedore, in the Kidderpore docks, but after his family came out to join him, he had entered the victualling business, setting up a small enterprise that catered to the Chinese crewmen of the ships that passed through the port, supplying noodles, sauces, pickled vegetables, sausages and other provisions that were necessary to their well-being.

The making of the victuals was done at home, with the help of every member of the family, including the children, of whom Asha-didi was the eldest. One day, when she was not quite a girl but not yet a woman, Asha-didi happened to open the door for a young sailor called Ah Bao, who had been sent there to top up his ship's provisions, in preparation for making sail the next day. It was a busy morning, and she was powdered with flour and garlanded with wet noodles; Ah Bao's mouth had fallen open when he set eyes on her. He had mumbled something in Cantonese and she had responded in kind, telling him to say what he wanted and make it quick – *faai di la!* Her response, if not her appearance, should have caused him to disappear for ever – but the next day he was back again: he had jumped ship, he explained, because he wanted to offer his services to the family.

Of course Asha-didi's parents knew exactly what he was up to, and they were none too pleased – partly because they guessed from the boy's speech that he was a boat-fellow by origin; and partly because they had long had another, more suitable, groom in mind for their eldest daughter. But despite all that, Asha-didi's father had decided to take him in anyway, and not out of charity either, but only because he was a shrewd merchandiser who prided himself on his business acumen. He reckoned that the young sailor might have something valuable to offer, something that was vital to any shipchandler's business: the ability to take a boat out on the river, to vie for the custom of newly arrived ships. Until then, he had

handled this job himself, but he was no boatman, and had always had to hire Hooghly River khalasis to operate his sampan, being regularly cheated in the process. Could it be that this young fellow would know how to manage the boat, on the crowded river? The answer was by no means self-evident, for the sampans of the Hooghly were quite different from the craft from which they took their name: the 'three-board' *saam-pan* of the Pearl River. Being upcurved both in stem and stern, the Hooghly version of the vessel was more like a canoe in shape and handled quite differently.

But Ah Bao was born to the water, and rare indeed was the boat that could defeat him: the sampan posed no challenge to him and he conquered it easily. Nor was oarsmanship the only useful skill that he had learnt on the Pearl River: the ghat-serangs and river-front thugs who tried to put the squeeze on him found that he had dealt with their like all his life; and those who yelled jeers and taunts at him – *Chin-chin-cheenee!* – discovered that he was no stranger to budmashing, barnshooting and galee-gooler. He quickly gained the respect of the other boatmen, and became a familiar figure on the waterfront: people called him Baburao.

Soon Baburao was so indispensable to the family business that no one could remember why he had been considered an unsuitable groom for Eldest Daughter: objections evaporated, messages went back and forth between the families and matters were arranged to everyone's satisfaction. After the banquet, which was held on a budgerow, the couple settled into a room in the family compound and that was where Asha-didi gave birth to five of their nine children.

Although Baburao settled into his new life with gusto, Calcutta was not to him what it was to his wife. He had grown up on the vessel from which his family made their living; a junk that plied the coastal trade routes around Canton, with his father as its *laodah*. Theirs was a small craft, and even though it was neither speedy nor especially comfortable, to Baburao it was home. When it came to his ears that his father was thinking of selling the junk he did not hesitate for a moment: letters and gifts travelled regularly between Calcutta and Canton by way of the sea traffic between the cities; Baburao went from ship to ship until he found an

acquaintance who could be trusted to persuade his father to hold off for just a little while longer. The money for passages was raised with the help of the community and a few months later the couple set sail for China with their children.

After the move, it was Asha-didi who found herself in the position of having to communicate with her family through nautical go-betweens, and when a serang or a seacunny showed up, bearing gifts and messages, it seemed only natural to offer him something that she herself was often homesick for – an Achha meal, of the kind she had grown accustomed to eating in Calcutta. As word of her cooking spread, more and more Acchas began to seek her out, not just lascars, but also sepoys, sentries and daftardars. As the number of visitors grew, so did the costs of feeding them and a day came when Baburao said, in exasperation, that if they were going to be feeding so many people they might as well make some money from it. The more they thought about it, the more sense it made: after all, Baburao's junk could be used to procure supplies from Macau, where masalas, daals, achars and other Achha comestibles were easy to find, because of the sizeable Goan population. And did they not have before them the example of Asha-didi's parents, who had done well by filling a similar need, providing foods that were hard to procure in a foreign place?

The success of the eatery had allowed Asha-didi and her family to set up other business ventures, but for herself the kitchen-boat remained her principal passion; she was never more content than when seated at her accustomed place – between the cash-box and the cooking-fires.

Having always seen Asha-didi in that seat, that was where Neel's eyes went when he stepped on to the prow of the boat and passed through the pavilion that formed the eatery's entrance: for him, one of the pleasures of seeing her was that each meeting was an occasion for a fleeting renewal of the jolt of surprise he had experienced the first time she greeted him in Bengali, with some perfectly casual phrase, something like *nomoshkar, kemon achhen?* – words that would have seemed banal in a Calcutta alleyway, but had the sound of a magical mantra when pronounced on a Canton kitchen-boat.

But today, within moments of stepping on the boat, it became

clear to Neel that the surprises that awaited him were of a different order: not only was Asha-didi not in her usual place, a couple of her daughters-in-law were bustling about, pulling the windows shut: it appeared that the eatery was being closed down – even though it was only mid-morning and the day had just begun.

Low-slung and rectangular, the kitchen-boat was a barge-like vessel with raised pavilions at both ends; in the middle was a long shed, with benches running along the sides and a single, common table in between – this was where meals were served. Looking through the doorway, Neel saw that Asha-didi was at the back of the boat, helping to put out the cooking-fires. She happened to look up and was evidently startled to see Neel, for she came hurrying down the length of the boat. Her first words, when she reached him, were not those of her usual greetings: instead, with an abruptness that was almost rude, she said: *Ekhaney ki korchhen?* What are you doing here?

Neel was so startled he could only stammer: I just came to eat . . .

Na! She cut him short. You shouldn't be here now.

Why not?

The authorities have just sent word, telling us to shut down.

Oh? said Neel. But why?

She shrugged: They just want to make sure there's no trouble around here.

This puzzled Neel. What kind of trouble? he said. I just came through the Maidan and I didn't see anything amiss on the way.

Really? She pressed her painted lips together and raised an eyebrow: And did you look towards the river?

No.

Look then.

She put a hand on his elbow and turned him around, so that he was facing the river: he saw now that the open channel in midstream, usually so busy at this time of day, had emptied of traffic. All the tubs, coracles and sampans had scattered to either side to make way for two war-junks that were converging on Fanqui-town from different directions.

War-junks were rarely seen in this stretch of water and they

made an arresting sight: they had castellations at either end and were strung with a great number of flags and pennants. One of them was quite close, and as it approached Neel saw that it was bearing a sizeable contingent of troops – not the usual soldiery to be seen around the city, but tall Manchu guardsmen.

What is happening? said Neel. Do you know?

Asha-didi looked over her shoulder and then gestured to him to bend lower.

I don't know for sure, she whispered, but I think there's going to be some sort of raid. On one of the factories.

Suddenly alarmed, Neel said: Which one, do you know?

She smiled and gave his arm a reassuring pat: Not yours, don't worry. It's the farthest one: do you know it?

Do you mean the Creek Factory?

She gave him a nod and then added: Yes. The Eho Hong.

It took a moment before the words registered. What was that? he said. Is that what you call the Creek Factory? Are they the same?

She nodded again. Yes. That is the Eho Hong; they are the same.

*

Standing on the balcony Bahram kept careful watch as the lascars unloaded the crates from the cutter. Those that belonged to him were only a small part of the consignment, but he was able to recognize them from afar because they still bore the stains of the storm. He began to count them, and had just reached six, when a sudden banging of gongs drew his attention away from the dock and back to the river. Spinning on his heels, he found that he could not see past the creek's mouth any more; the opening to the river had been blocked by a huge vessel – some kind of junk – which had silently positioned itself at the entrance to the nullah.

Then he saw why the gongs had suddenly started to beat: they were the accompaniment for the debarkation of a platoon of Manchu troops; the soldiers were filing off the junk and forming a column in the yard of the Hoppo's office; the ranks in the lead had already begun to run in the direction of the Creek Factory.

Could it be a raid? For a moment Bahram stared in stunned immobility. Then he managed to say: 'Innes! Innes! Look . . .'

The sweat began to pour from Bahram's brow, soaking his

turban. His breath was coming in gasps, and he could no longer think; all he knew was that he had to get away. He brushed his hand against his cummerbund, to make sure that his leather purse was still in its place. Then, pulling the end of his turban across his face, he stepped away from the balcony and hurried through the apartment. As he passed the staircase, he heard Innes's voice, downstairs, railing at someone – the lascars or his servant – he couldn't tell who.

How would Innes cope with the soldiers? Bahram couldn't think, and it didn't matter anyway; Innes had no family and no reputation to lose; he was a hardened budmash; he'd manage perfectly well – and even if he didn't, he could count on being backed up by British gunboats. He, Bahram, had no such surety, and could not afford to linger another moment.

Stepping into the courtyard Bahram hurried over to the arched gateway that led to the inner recesses of the factory's compound. As he was passing through it, he glanced over his shoulder, in the direction of the factory's entrance. Through the gateway he caught sight of a troop of guardsmen, trotting across the customs yard, advancing upon the Creek Factory at a run.

Turning away, Bahram began to walk quickly in the other direction. Along with the Fungtai and a few other hongs, the Creek Factory had a rear entrance that opened out on Thirteen Hong Street. Bahram knew that if he could cross the next couple of courtyards without being seen by the soldiers he'd be able to make his escape from the hong.

The soldiers' boots could be heard now, coming through the factory's entrance. As he was stepping into the next courtyard Bahram stole a backwards glance and caught sight of half a dozen soldiers, silhouetted against the light: with their pointed plumes they looked unnaturally tall, like giants.

No time, no time . . . as he walked along the corridor, Bahram could hear the soldiers hammering on Innes's door with their weapons. Now other doors were opening and people were pouring out to see what the commotion was about. Bahram checked his pace, measuring his stride with his cane, keeping his head low, as people ran past him in both directions: some were hurrying away

from the noise, and others rushing towards it. He kept his eyes down and watched the paving stones, with the end of his turban between his teeth, paying no heed to those who jostled his shoulders and elbows. So careful was he to avert his gaze that it was only when his shadow appeared under his feet that he realized that he was out of the compound.

He was standing on Thirteen Hong Street, which was lined with shops, many of them familiar to him from past visits; he knew that if he went into one of those establishments he would be able to sit down and steady himself. But even as he was thinking of which way to go, he saw that the shops were emptying and people were rushing out to see what was happening in the Creek Factory.

Nearby lay a stone bridge that crossed the nullah at a right angle, overlooking the Creek Factory. This was where most people seemed to be heading, and Bahram allowed himself to be carried along by the flow. On reaching the bridge, he braced himself against the parapet and found that he was looking in the direction of the little balcony that he had been standing on, just a few minutes before. The balcony was empty now, but the dock below was swarming with people, most of them soldiers: Innes was at the centre of the throng, his face red, the buncus still glowing in the corner of his mouth, shouting, waving his arms, trying to bluster his way out of the situation. You had to give it to him – he didn't lack for gall or guts, that fellow – but he was having a hard time of it; that was clear enough. Beside him a soldier was prising the top off a crate – one of his own, Bahram realized. When the planks came off, the soldier plunged his hands in and triumphantly lifted up a spherical black object, about the size of a cannonball – a container of the British Empire's best Ghazipur opium.

Bahram could feel himself choking. He raised a hand to his throat and tugged at the neck-cord of his choga as though he were struggling against a noose. As the choga loosened, so did his cummerbund; he could feel his purse beginning to slip and he let go of his cane so that he could fasten his hands upon his waist. People were surging all around him and he was being pushed towards the parapet. The purse was about to drop from his fingers when he felt a steadying hand upon his elbow.

Sethji! Sethji!

It was the new munshi, what was his name? Bahram could not remember, but rarely had he been so glad to see a member of his staff. He pulled the munshi close, and slipped the purse into his hands: Here hold this; be careful, don't let anyone see.

Ji, Sethji.

Bracing his shoulders, Bahram pushed against the crowd.

Come on, munshiji; come on.

Ji, Sethji.

Breaking free of the throng, Bahram began to walk towards the Fungtai Hong. Wrung out as he was, Bahram could only be grateful that his munshi had not troubled him with any questions – but he knew also that word of his presence at the melee was sure to get back to his staff. Better to think of some explanation right now, something that would scotch rumours and speculation before they got out of hand.

Bahram cleared his throat and slowed his pace. When Neel caught up with him, he put his hand on his elbow.

I was on my way to Punhyqua's hong, he said. To make a payment, you understand . . . for some silk. Then this commotion broke out, and I got swept along. That's what it was. That's all.

Ji, Sethji.

Fortunately, the lane that led to Punhyqua's town house was close by, which lent some credence to the story. But now, as Bahram turned to look in that direction, he encountered a spectacle that all but knocked the breath out of him: it was Punhyqua himself, marching down the lane, flanked by columns of soldiers. He was dressed in a fine *long pao* robe of maroon silk, with brocaded clouds above the fringed hems, and an intricately embroidered panel on the chest – but yoked to his neck was a heavy wooden board. The plank was large enough to make his head look like an apple, sitting upon a table.

Punhyqua's gaze caught his, for a brief instant, and then they both dropped their eyes.

The cangue! Bahram whispered in shock. They've put a cangue on Punhyqua! Like a common thief . . .

Behind the soldiers, further down the lane, Bahram could see

members of Punhyqua's family – his sons, his wives, his daughters-in-law – standing in clusters, weeping, covering their faces. He had a vision of himself, in Punhyqua's place, being led out of the Mistrie compound on Apollo Street in the same way, under the eyes of his daughters and sons-in-law, his servants and brothers-in-law – with Shireenbai looking on – and his heart almost seized up. He could not imagine that he would be able to survive so public a humiliation: and yet, he knew also that if it came to such a pass, he, like Punhyqua, would have no choice in the matter; mere shame could not, after all, be counted on to provide the escape of death.

In a daze Bahram began to walk towards the Achha Hong, with Neel at his heels.

A cangue on Punhyqua! Bahram shook his head in disbelief. A man worth at least ten million silver dollars? The world has gone mad. Mad.

*

Bahram had thought that the Committee's special session would be held in the Great Hall, on the ground floor of the Chamber's premises. But on presenting himself there he learnt that the venue had been changed, at the express request of the Co-Hong merchants: in view of the confidential nature of the proceedings they had asked that it be moved to more sequestered surroundings. Mr Lindsay had then decided to hold it in the President's personal salon, on the third storey – this floor contained several private offices and meeting rooms and was closed to all but the President, the Committee and a few members of the Chamber's staff.

As he was approaching the salon, Bahram heard a raised voice, echoing out of the salon: 'No sir, I will not leave Canton and you cannot make me do it! Let me remind you that I am not a member of this Chamber. I am a free man, sir, and I obey no mortal voice. You would do well to bear that in mind.'

It was Innes, and the sound of his voice made Bahram check his stride.

Bahram had for days been dreading the thought of coming face-to-face with either of the two men who had it in their power to implicate him in the Creek Factory affair: Allow and Innes. But Allow had providentially disappeared – Vico had heard a rumour

that he had fled the country – and as for Innes, this was the first time, after that day, that he and Bahram would be in the same room. Before stepping inside Bahram took a deep breath.

Charles King was speaking now: 'Mr Innes, if you value the freedom you boast of, then you must accept the consequences of your own actions. Do you not see what your exploits have led to? Do you not understand that you have brought disaster upon Punhyqua – and indeed on all of us?'

The President's salon was a large, well-appointed room, with windows that commanded fine views of White Swan Lake and the North River. On the marble mantelpiece stood two magnificent Ming vases, and between them, facing each other, a pair of lacquered snuff-boxes. The members of the Committee had gathered at the far end of the room, around the mantelpiece: they were all seated, except for William Jardine, who was standing with his back to the mantel. Although Mr Lindsay held the title of President, it was clear from Jardine's attitude of command that it was he who would be presiding over the proceedings. A hint of a smile appeared on his smooth face now as he listened to the exchange between Innes and King.

'Punhyqua's plight cannot be pinned on me,' cried Innes. 'It is the mandarins who are to blame. You cannot hold me responsible for their idiocy.'

Everybody was so absorbed in the argument that only Dent seemed to notice Bahram's entry. He greeted him with a brisk nod and gestured to him to take the empty chair between himself and Mr Slade.

As he was sitting down Bahram heard Jardine intervene, in his usual placid, equable tones: 'Well Charles, you must admit that Innes has the right of it there. The Celestials have made a great muddle of it all, as always.'

'But sir,' responded King, 'the present situation has arisen solely because of Mr Innes's actions. It is in his power to resolve it – all he has to do is to leave. Considering the suffering and inconvenience his presence is causing surely it is only reasonable that he should depart immediately?'

This drew a forceful response from Mr Slade who had been

stirring restlessly in his seat. 'No! Mr Innes's fate is not the only thing that is at stake here. There is a more important principle at issue and it has to do with the powers of this Chamber. Under no circumstances can this Chamber be allowed to dictate to any free merchant – that would be an intolerable encroachment upon our liberties.'

Dent had been nodding vigorously as Slade was speaking and now he spoke up too: 'Let me be perfectly clear: if the Chamber attempts to set itself up as a shadow government then I shall be the first to resign from it. This body was established to facilitate trade and commerce. It has no jurisdiction over us and it is of the utmost importance that this principle be preserved. Or else the Celestials will attempt at every turn to use the Chamber to bend us to their will. This is clearly why they have asked to meet us today – and in my opinion that gives us a very good reason to stand together in support of Mr Innes.'

'Support Innes?' A note of disbelief had entered Charles King's voice now. 'A crime has been committed and we are to support the perpetrator? In the name of freedom?'

'But nonetheless, Charles,' said Jardine calmly, 'Dent is right. The Chamber does not have jurisdiction over any of us.'

Charles King raised his hands to his temples. 'Let me remind you, gentlemen,' he said, 'of what is at stake here: it is Punhyqua's head. He has been a good friend to all of us and his colleagues of the Co-Hong are coming here to plead for his life. Are we going to turn them away on the grounds of a legalism?'

'Oh please!' retorted Slade. 'Have the goodness to spare us these Bulgarian melodramas! If you were not so wet behind the ears it would be evident to you that there are more . . .'

'Gentlemen, gentlemen!' Jardine broke in before Slade could finish. 'I must appeal to you to restrain yourselves. We may have our differences on this matter but this is surely not the time or place to air them.'

As he was speaking a steward had come in to whisper in his ear. Jardine gave him a nod before turning back to the others. 'I have just been informed that the Hongists have arrived. Before they are shown in I would like to remind you that no matter what our

personal opinions, it is Mr Lindsay who must speak on our behalf – he and no one else. I take it this is clearly understood?'

Jardine's gaze swept around the room and came finally to rest on Charles King.

'Oh, is that how it is to be then?' said King, with an angry glint in his eye. 'You have already settled the matter between you?'

'And what if we have?' said Jardine calmly. 'Mr Lindsay is the President. It is his prerogative to speak on behalf of the Chamber.'

Mr King made a gesture of disgust. 'Very well then. Let us be done with this charade. Let Mr Lindsay say what he will.'

A steward entered now to announce the arrival of the Co-Hong merchants and everyone present rose to their feet. The delegation consisted of four merchants, led by the seniormost member of the guild, Howqua. All of them were wearing their customary formal regalia, with buttons, panels and tassels of rank displayed prominently on their robes and hats.

At any other time there would have been a great deal of chin-chinning between the Hongists and the fanquis but today, as if in deference to the gravity of the situation, the members of the delegation stood at the door, wearing severe, unwavering expressions, while their servants rearranged the seating in the salon, placing four chairs side-by-side, in a row, facing the rest. Then the magnates marched straight in and seated themselves in stiffly formal attitudes, with their hands lying invisible on their laps. Their agitation was apparent only in the occasional fluttering of their sleeves.

Now, without any of the usual preambles and speech-making, a linkister stepped up to Mr Lindsay and handed him a roll of paper. When the seal was broken, the writing inside was discovered to be in Chinese – but Mr Fearon, the Chamber's translator, was at hand and he took the scroll off to an anteroom to make of it what he could.

In his absence, which lasted a good half-hour, very little was said: the elaborate refreshments that had been prepared for the visitors – syllabubs, cakes, pies and sherbets – were waved away by the Co-Hong merchants who sat immobile all the while, looking directly ahead. Only Charles King attempted to make conversation but such was the severity of the Hongists' expressions that he too was quickly quelled.

Every man in the room could remember exchanging toasts and gossip with the magnates of the Co-Hong, at innumerable banquets, garden parties and boat-trips. Everyone in that room was fluent in pidgin and they had all, on occasion, used that tongue to discuss things they would not have talked about with their own wives – their lovers, their horoscopes, their digestions and their finances. But now no one said a word.

Sitting on the left was the thin, ascetic Howqua: it was he who had presented Bahram with his beloved desk. On the extreme right was Mowqua, who had once entrusted Bahram with the job of purchasing pearls for his daughter's wedding; in the centre, was Moheiqua, a man so trustworthy that he had been known to refund the cost of an entire shipment of tea because a single chest had been found to be substandard.

The ties of trust and goodwill that bound the Hongists to the fanquis were all the stronger for having been forged across apparently unbridgeable gaps of language, loyalty and belonging: but now, even though the memory of those bonds was vitally alive in everyone present, no trace of it was visible in the faces that confronted each other across the room.

When Mr Fearon returned, the air seemed to crackle in anticipation of his report. Addressing himself to Mr Lindsay, the translator began by saying: 'I fear I have not been able to translate the communication in its entirety, sir, but I will endeavour to provide the gist. Fortunately it repeats some parts of the Co-Hong's earlier communications with us.'

'Please proceed, Mr Fearon. You have our full attention.'

Mr Fearon began to read from his notes: '"We, the merchants of the Co-Hong, have again and again sent to you gentlemen copies of the laws and edicts that regulate our trade in Canton. But you, gentlemen, thinking them of no importance, have cast them aside without giving them the least attention. A seizure has recently been made by the government of some opium which Mr Innes was endeavouring to smuggle into the city. In consequence of this one of our colleagues has been sentenced to the punishment of publicly wearing the cangue. You, gentlemen, have all seen or heard of this."'

The words sent a shiver through Bahram: the sight of Punhyqua, labouring under the weight of the cangue, still festered in his eyes. How many palms had Punhyqua greased over the years? How many beaks had he wetted? Over his lifetime he had probably distributed millions of taels amongst the province's officials; even the men who had come to arrest him had probably profited from his largesse at some time or another. And yet, it had not served to prevent his arrest.

Across the room Mr Fearon was still reading: '"We have established hongs for trading with you, gentlemen, in the hope of making a little money, and to ensure that all things go on peacefully and to our mutual advantage. But foreigners, by smuggling opium, have constantly involved us in trouble. Ask yourselves, gentlemen, whether in our places you would be at ease? There are surely some reasonable men among you. Trade has been suspended and now we are forced to demand some new conditions before reopening it, being determined no longer to suffer for the misdeeds of others. Hereafter, if any foreigner should attempt to smuggle opium, or any other contraband article into the factories, we shall immediately petition the government that such may be dealt with according to law, and that the offenders may be turned out of their lodgings. Furthermore, the foreign merchant, Mr Innes, being a man who clandestinely smuggles opium into Canton, His Excellency the Governor has directed, by edict, that he be driven out of this city."'

Inadvertently Bahram's eyes strayed towards Innes, who was looking out of the window with an oddly stricken expression on his face. The sight inspired a rush of sympathy in Bahram: if not for this man's silence he knew that he too might now be facing the prospect of a permanent exile from Canton.

What would it mean, never to see the Maidan again? To be forever banned from setting foot in China? He realized now, as never before, that this place had been an essential part of his life, and not just for reasons of business: it was here, in Canton, that he had always felt most alive – it was here that he had learnt to live. Without the escape and refuge of Fanqui-town he would have been forever a prisoner in the Mistrie mansion; he would have been a man of no account, a failure, despised as a poor relative. It was

China that had spared him that fate; it was Canton that had given him wealth, friends, social standing, a son; it was this city that had given him such knowledge as he would ever have of love and carnal pleasure. If not for Canton he would have lived his life like a man without a shadow.

He understood now why Innes was so insistent in professing his innocence: in this lay his only hope of being able to return to China, to Canton – to implicate others, as he could so easily have done, would have required an acknowledgement of guilt and thus an acceptance of permanent exile.

Across the room, Mr Fearon's voice rose: '"In case Innes perversely refuses to leave, we must pull down the building in which he lives, so that he may have no roof above his head. No foreigner must give him shelter, lest he himself become involved in trouble. We have to request that you circulate this amongst you and send it to your newspapers for publication. Know that all this is in consequence of an edict we have received from the Governor, in which he has threatened that all of us, merchants of the Co-Hong, shall wear the cangue unless Innes leaves Canton immediately. Time is short. If you do not act to expel Innes from the city the Governor is certain to carry out his threat."'

Here Mr Fearon stopped, and an uncomfortable silence descended upon the room.

It was Innes who broke it. 'Let me say once again, I am not guilty – or perhaps I should say rather that I am no more guilty than anyone else in this room, including these fine gentlemen of the Co-Hong. I see no reason why I alone should bear the blame for a situation and circumstance that has come about through the mutual consent and connivance of all of us. I will not be made a scapegoat and I will not leave to suit anyone's convenience. And nor is there anything the Chamber can do about it. You had better explain that, Mr Lindsay.'

Many pairs of eyes turned towards the President of the Chamber who now rose to address the Hongists.

'I would be grateful, Mr Fearon, if you would inform our esteemed friends and colleagues of the Co-Hong that the Chamber is powerless in this matter. As it happens Mr Innes is not even a

member of this body: he is here today at my express invitation, but it must be noted that the Chamber has no jurisdiction over him. Mr Innes protests his innocence of the charges levelled against him. As a British subject he enjoys certain freedoms and we cannot make him leave the city against his will.'

Bahram smiled to himself as he listened: the arguments were marvellously simple yet irrefutable. Really, there was no language like English for turning lies into legalisms.

Scanning the room, Bahram saw that he was not the only one to be favourably impressed: Mr Lindsay's rejoinder had met with widespread approval among the fanquis. But on the other side of the room, as the import of Lindsay's words sank in, expressions of appalled disbelief began to appear on the faces of the Co-Hong merchants. They held a hurried consultation among themselves and then whispered again to the linkisters, who, in turn, had a brief palaver with Mr Fearon.

'Yes, Mr Fearon?'

'Sir, this is what I have been instructed to convey: "By the obstinate defiance of this one man, Innes, the whole foreign trade is involved in difficulties, the consequences of which may be truly great. We earnestly beg of you gentlemen to endeavour, by reasonable arguments, to make Innes leave Canton today. We have known each other for many years; you have done business not only with us, but also with our fathers and grandfathers. Should we be obliged to wear the cangue our reputations will be indelibly seared. With tainted characters, how shall we ever again be able to carry on the trade, either with natives or with foreign merchants? Ask yourselves, in the name of our long friendship . . ."'

Here the translator's rendition was cut short by Innes who jumped noisily to his feet. 'I have had enough of this!' he cried. 'I will not be defamed by a caffle of yellow-bellied heathens. They point their fingers at me, and yet heaven knows that they themselves have no equals in sinfulness and venery. They've slummed the gorger out of us at every turn; if they could put the squeeze on us this minute they'd do it in the twinkling of a bedpost. Why, I would not cross the room to spare them the cangue! It will only be a foretaste of the fate that awaits them in the afterworld.'

Innes's tone was so expressive that his words needed no translation; nor did the Co-Hong's delegation ask for any – Innes's defiance was self-evident.

One by one the Hongists rose to their feet, bringing the meeting to an abrupt end. The one exception was Howqua: at his advanced age he was too infirm to rise quickly from his chair. As his retainers were helping him up, he glanced at some of his fanqui friends, Bahram among them. On his face was an expression of mingled bewilderment and disbelief: his eyes seemed to ask how this situation could possibly have arisen.

There was something about the old man's uncomprehending regard that quieted even Innes. The foreign merchants stood in silence as the delegation withdrew.

They were not long gone when Innes turned upon the others: 'Oh look at all of you, sitting there with long faces while the stench of your hypocrisy fills this room! You who preside over the Sodom of our age dare to look at me as though I were the sinner! Between the lot of you there is no sin left uncommitted, no commandment unbroken – your every act is shameful in the eyes of the Lord. Gluttony, adultery, sodomy, thievery – what is exempt? I have only to look at your faces to know why the Lord willed me to bring those boats into this city – it was to hasten the destruction of this city of sin. If that purpose has been advanced then I can only be glad of it. And if my continuing presence brings the hour of retribution any closer, why then, I would consider it my duty to remain.'

He paused to look around the room and then spat on the floor. 'There's not one amongst you doesn't know that in comparison to all of you fine fucking gentlemen, I am an innocent – an honest man. And that, let me tell you, gentlemen, is the only reason why I might choose to leave Canton: it's because there's not one amongst you deserves to keep company with James Innes.'

*

December 12

I cannot believe, dearest Puggly, that this letter has been sitting helplessly on my desk for so many days. But so indeed it has, because I have not been able to find a boat to take it to Hong

*

Neel was walking out of the Danish Hong, where he had gone to deliver a letter, when he was halted by an unexpected sound: a synchronized thudding of feet, accompanied by drums, gongs and exploding firecrackers.

Drawing abreast of the Danish Factory's cattle pen, Neel waited to see what would happen. A minute later a column of troops burst out of the mouth of Old China Street. Their rhythmically stamping feet sent a cloud of dust spiralling into the air as they trotted towards the tall pole that bore the American flag.

As it happened the flag was hoisted not in front of the American but the Swedish Factory for it was in that compound that the residence of the American Consul was located. Between the Danish Hong, which was at the far end of the enclave, and the Swedish, which was in the middle, lay six other factories: the Spanish, the French, the Mingqua, the American, the Paoushun and the Imperial Hong. It took only a few minutes for the sound of drums, gongs and firecrackers to penetrate to the interior of those factories. Then all at once, traders, agents, shroffs and merchants came pouring out.

It was ten in the morning, the busiest time of day in Fanquitown. The early ferry-boats from Whampoa had arrived a couple of hours before, bringing in the usual contingent of sailors on shore leave. On reaching the enclave the lascars and lime-juicers had gone, as was their custom, straight to the shamshoo-shacks of Hog Lane, so as to get scammered as quickly as possible. Now, as word of the troop's arrival spread, they came running out to see what was

under way. Neel could tell that many of them had taken on full loads of the stagger-juice; some were reeling and some were leaning heavily on the shoulders of their shipmates.

With the crowd swelling fast it took Neel a good few minutes to push his way through to the American flagpole, where a space had been cleared and a tent erected: a mandarin, ceremonially robed, was seated inside, with assistants hovering at his elbow. A few yards away, right under the flag, a squad of soldiers was nailing together a strange wooden apparatus.

Now again there was an outburst of gongs and conches and the crowd parted to admit another column of troops. They were carrying a chair that was attached to two long shoulder-poles. Tethered to this device was a man in an open tunic, bareheaded, with his hands tied behind his back. He was thrashing about, flinging his head from one side to another.

As the crowd churned around him, Neel picked up snatches of an exchange in an eastern dialect of Bengali.

Haramzadatake gola-tipa mairra dibo naki? . . . Are they going to throttle the bastard?

Ta noyto ki? Dekchis ni, bokachodata kemni kaippa uthtase . . . What else? Look how the fucker's shivering . . .

It turned out that Neel was standing shoulder-to-shoulder with two lascars from Khulna, a tindal and a classy. The tindal had a bottle in his hand: delighted to have come across a fellow Bengali, he put his arm around Neel's neck and held the bottle to his lips. Here, have a little sip, won't do you any harm . . .

Neel tried to push the bottle away but this only made the two lascars more insistent. The spirit trickled past his lips and left a burning trail behind it as it percolated through his body: he knew from the taste that the liquor had been especially doctored to produce a quick and powerful effect. Opening his mouth, he stuck out his seared tongue, fanning it with his hand. This hugely amused the two lascars, who put the bottle to his lips again. This time Neel's resistance was much more feeble: the heat of the shamshoo had risen from his stomach to his head now, and he too was suffused with a comradely warmth. They were good fellows these two, with their cheerful rustic accents; it was wonderfully comforting to speak

Bengali with these friendly strangers. He flung his arms around their shoulders, and they stood three abreast, swaying slightly on their feet as they watched the preparations for the execution.

The shamshoo had made the lascars garrulous and Neel soon learnt that they were both employed on the *Orwell*, an East India Company ship that was presently lying at anchor in Whampoa. Their last voyage had been bedevilled by bad weather and they had escaped to Canton at the earliest opportunity, hoping to put it out of their minds.

The slurred voices of the lascars' limey shipmates could be heard over the hum of the crowd.

'. . . look at old Creepin Jesus over there . . .'

'. . . they's never going to nail him to no cross!'

'. . . bleedin blasphemy is what I call it . . .'

The movements of the condemned man, in the meanwhile, had grown even more frenzied than before. His head was the only part of his body that was not lashed to the chair and his unbraided pigtail was whipping from side to side; thick strands of hair were stuck to his face, glued fast by the drool that was dribbling from his mouth. Now, at a word from the presiding official, an attendant opened a box and took out a pipe.

'Fuckinell! A nartichoke ripe?'

'. . . and I'll be blowed if it in't yong that's going into it . . .'

'Opium? But in'that why he's gettin the horse's nightcap though?'

The prisoner had caught sight of the pipe too now, and his whole body was straining towards it, the muscles of his face corkscrewing around his open, drooling mouth. As the pipe was put to his lips a silence descended on the crowd; the sound of his thirsty sucking was clearly audible. He closed his eyes, holding the smoke in his lungs, and then, breathing it out, he fastened his lips on the pipe again.

The eerie quiet was dispelled by an indignant cry: 'Sir, on behalf of my fellow Americans, I must protest . . .'

Turning his head, Neel saw that three gentlemen, attired in jackets and hats, were approaching the mandarin in the tent. Their words were lost in the ensuing hubbub, but it was clear that the

exchange between the mandarins and the Americans was a heated one and it was lustily cheered by the sailors.

'. . . that's the ticket, mate! Donchyoo stand for it . . .'

'. . . you tell'im – put the squeak in his nibs . . .'

'. . . in't he ever so pleased with his little self?'

The dispute ended with the three Americans marching over to the flagpole and hauling down the flag. Then one of them turned to the crowd and began to shout.

'Do you see what is happening here, men? It is an outrage the like of which has never been seen in the history of this enclave! They are planning to stage an execution right under our flags! The intent is perfectly clear – they are pinning the blame for this man's death upon us. They are accusing us of being his accomplices! Nor is that all. By doing this here, in the Square, they are linking our flags with smuggling and drug running. These long-tailed savages are accusing us – the United States! England! – of villainy and crime! What do you say to that, men? Are you going to stand for it? Are you going to allow them to desecrate our flags?'

'. . . not on yer life . . .'

'. . . if it's a bull-and-cow they want, they can'ave it . . .'

'. . . got a porridge-popper waitin for whoever wants it . . .'

While the voices in the crowd were getting louder, the condemned man had fallen so quiet that he appeared to have become oblivious to his fate: his head had slumped on to his shoulders and he seemed to have lost himself in a dream. When two soldiers untied his bindings and pulled him to his feet, he rose without protest and went stumbling towards the apparatus that had been erected for his execution. He was almost there when he tipped his head back to look at it, as if for the first time. A choked cry bubbled up in his throat and his knees buckled.

'. . . don't he look like a dog's dinner . . .?'

'. . . like a birchbroom in a fit . . .'

The voices were right behind Neel. Turning to look, he saw a burly seaman with an empty bottle in one hand. Slowly the man drew his arm back and then the bottle went curling over the crowd. It exploded near the soldiers, who spun around to face the crowd, arms at the ready. Their raised weapons elicited a howl from the sailors. 'Fucking peelers!'

The shouts of the two lascars were loud in Neel's ears: *banchod-gulake maar, maar . . .!*

Neel too was shouting obscenities now. His voice was no longer just his own; it was the instrument of a multitude, of all these men around him, these strangers who had become brothers – there was no difference between his voice and theirs, they had joined together and the chorus was speaking to him, telling him to pick up the stone that was lying at his feet, urging him to throw it, as the others were doing – and there it was, one amongst a hailstorm of stones and bottles, flying across the Maidan, hitting the soldiers on their helmeted heads, raining down on the mandarin in his tent. They were running now, taking the prisoner with them; the mandarin was fleeing too, sheltering behind the soldiers' upraised weapons.

Elated by their victory the sailors began to laugh. 'I say, Bill, we don't get such a lark as this every day!'

Having driven the execution party away, the mob now fell upon the things the soldiers had left behind – the wooden cross, the tent, the table and the chairs – and smashed them all to bits. Then they piled the remnants together, poured shamshoo on them and set the heap alight. As the flames went up, a sailor ripped off his banyan and threw it upon the bonfire. Another, egged on by his shipmates, tore off his trowsers and added it to the flames. A rhythmic clapping began, urging the half-naked sailors to dance.

The triumph of foiling the execution was no less intoxicating than the liquor, the flames, and the howling voices. Neel was so absorbed in the celebration that he could not understand why his new-found lascar friends had suddenly fallen silent. Even less was he prepared for it when one of them tugged at his elbow and whispered: *palao bhai, jaldi* . . . Run! Get away!

Why?

Look over there: it's a mob . . . of Chinese . . . coming this way . . .

A moment later a shower of stones came pelting down. One of them struck Neel on his shoulder, knocking him to the ground. Raising his head from the dust he saw that dozens, maybe

hundreds, of townsmen had come pouring into the Maidan: they were tearing up the fences that surrounded the enclave's gardens, arming themselves with uprooted posts and palisades. Then he caught a glimpse of some half-dozen men running in his direction with upraised staves. Scrambling to his feet he raced towards the Fungtai Hong; he could hear footsteps pounding behind him and was grateful, for once, that the enclave was so small – the entrance was only a few paces from where he had fallen.

He could see the doors being pulled shut as he ran towards them. He did not have the breath to call out but someone recognized him, and held a door open, beckoning, gesturing, shouting: *Bhago munshiji bhago!* Run! Run!

Just as he was about to go through something struck him hard on the temple. He staggered in and collapsed on the floor.

He came to consciousness in his cubicle, on his bed. His head was throbbing, from the shamshoo as well as the blow. He opened his eyes to find Vico peering at him, with a candle.

Munshiji? How are you feeling?

Terrible.

His head began to pound when he tried to sit up. He fell back against his pillow.

What time is it?

Past seven at night. You were out for all of it, munshiji.

All of what?

The riot. They almost broke in, you know. They attacked the factories with battering rams.

Was anyone killed?

No. I don't think so. But it could have happened. Some of the sahibs had even brought out their guns. Can you imagine what would have happened if they'd shot at the crowd? Fortunately the police arrived before they could open fire. They put a quick end to it – cleared everyone out of the Maidan in a matter of minutes. And then, just as it was all settling down who should arrive?

Who?

Captain Elliott, the British Representative. He got word of the trouble somehow and came hurrying down from Macau with a team of sepoys and lascars. If the mob had still been in the Maidan

his men would probably have opened fire. Who knows what would have happened then? Luckily it was all over by that time.

So what did he do, Captain Elliott?

He called a meeting and gave a speech, what else? He said the situation was getting out of control and that he was going to see to it personally that British boats were no longer used to bring opium into Canton.

Oh?

Sitting up slowly, Neel put a hand to his head and found that a bandage had been wrapped around it.

And Sethji? Is he all right?

Yes. He's fine. He's gone to the Club to have dinner with Mr Dent and Mr Slade. Everything's quiet now, the trouble's over. Except for the uprooted fences and broken glass in the Maidan, you wouldn't know it had happened.

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'It is going exactly as I had predicted,' said Dent gloomily, looking at his plate. 'Instead of protecting our liberties Captain Elliott intends to join hands with the mandarins to deprive us of them. After his speech of today there can be no doubt of it; none at all.'

A steward had appeared at Dent's elbow as he was speaking, bearing a tray of Yorkshire pudding: Bahram was no lover of this concoction but it did not escape his notice that the version being offered today was quite different from the dining room's usual soggy staple – it was steaming hot and freshly risen.

Bahram had never known the Club's staff to be as solicitious as they had been that evening: it was as if they were trying to make amends for the chaos of the day. Earlier, one of the stewards had come up to him and whispered in his ear: knowing of his fondness for Macahnese food he had offered him items that were not usually served in the Club – crisp fritters of bacalhau, char-grilled octopus and roast-duck rice. Bahram had accepted gladly but now that the rice was in front of him, topped with succulent slices of mahogany-coloured duck, he found he had lost interest in it.

Slade's appetite, on the other hand, seemed only to have been whetted by the riot: having already wolfed down an enormous helping of roast beef, he now helped himself to some more.

'It is unconscionable, I tell you! Completely and utterly unconscionable that Captain Elliott should take it upon himself to issue these fiats. Why, it seems to be his intention to offer himself to the Celestials as the chief officer of their police and customs!'

'Shocking, is it not,' said Dent, 'that he should direct his strictures specifically at British traders?'

'It is but proof of his ignorance of the situation in China,' said Slade. 'He seems to be unaware that this so-called system of "smuggling" was pioneered by the Americans. Was it not a Boston schooner, the *Coral*, that first sent her boats upriver with opium?'

'So indeed it was!'

'And in any case Captain Elliott has no legal authority to issue extravagant pronouncements on our behalf. There has never been any express diplomatic convention between England and China. *Ergo* he is not invested with any consular powers. He is assuming powers he does not possess.'

Dent nodded vigorously. 'It is appalling that a man whose salary we pay should take it upon himself to impose Celestial misrule upon free men.'

Bahram happened to be facing a window and he noticed now that several brightly illuminated flower-boats had appeared on the misted waters of White Swan Lake; one passed close enough that he could see men lounging on pillows and girls plucking at stringed instruments. It was as if the turmoil of the day had never happened; as though it were all a dream.

Even at the time, as the events were unfolding under his own window, Bahram had found it hard to believe that these things were really happening: that a gibbet was being erected in the Maidan; that some poor wretch was to be executed within sight of his daftar. The semblance of unreality had grown even more acute when the condemned man was carried in. At one point, while twisting and writhing in his chair, the man had turned his head in the direction of the Fungtai Hong. Very little was visible of his face because of the hair that was matted on it, but Bahram had noticed that his eyes were wide open and seemed almost to be staring at him. The sight had shaken him and he had stepped away from the

window. When he returned, the melee was already under way and the execution party had disappeared.

'What happened to that fellow?' Bahram said suddenly, interrupting Slade. 'The one they were going to strangle? Was he let off?'

'Oh no,' said Slade. 'I believe his reprieve lasted only an hour or two. He was taken to the execution grounds and quickly dispatched.'

'Sorry little wretch,' said Dent, 'he was nothing but a minion; a tu'penny ha'penny scoundrel like hundreds of others.'

Bahram glanced out of the window again: somewhere on the other side of White Swan Lake a village was celebrating a wedding with a display of fireworks; rockets were arcing upwards, each seeming to travel on two planes simultaneously, through the sky, and over the misted mirror of the lake's surface. Gazing at the spectacle, he was reminded of that night, many years ago, when he and Chi-mei had lain beside each other in a sampan that seemed to be suspended within a sphere of light; he remembered how he had reached for the silver in his pocket and poured it into her hands and how she had laughed and said: 'And Allow? Why no cumshaw for Allow?'

Bahram could not bear to look at the lake again. He glanced down at his plate and saw that the fat had begun to congeal on his untouched slices of duck. He pushed his chair back. 'Gentlemen,' he said. 'Please forgive me. I am not feeling quite pucka tonight. I think I should retire.'

'What?' said Slade. 'No custard? No port?'

Bahram smiled and shook his head: 'No, not tonight, if you please.'

'Of course. A good night's sleep will give you back your appetite.'

'Yes. Good night, Lancelot. John.'

'Good night.'

Bahram went quickly down the stairs, pulling his choga tight around his shoulders. On stepping outside the Chamber's premises he paused, of long habit, to look around for Apu his lantern-bearer. Ordinarily Vico, or someone else, would have made sure that Apu

had been sent to fetch him – but today was no ordinary day, so he was not surprised to find the courtyard empty of lantern-bearers.

Setting off at a brisk pace, Bahram emerged from the Danish Hong to find himself alone on the Maidan, with a thick fog rolling in from the river. The waterfront was already obscured as was much of the Maidan, but pinpricks of light could be seen in the windows of all the factories.

In the distance, on the far side of White Swan Lake, fireworks were still shooting into the sky. On exploding the rockets created a peculiar effect in the fog, sparking a diffuse glow that seemed to linger in the tendrils of mist. During one of these bursts of illumination Bahram caught sight of a gowned man, some ten paces ahead. He could only see his back but there was no mistaking his walk.

'Allow?!'

There was no answer and the fog had gone dark in the meanwhile. But then another rocket exploded overhead and Bahram caught sight of him again. He raised his voice: 'Allow! Chin-chin! What-for Allow no speakee Mister Barry?'

Again there was no answer.

Bahram was quickening his pace when he heard Vico's voice, echoing out of the fog: Patrão! Patrão! Where are you?

He turned to see a lamp bobbing in the gloom.

Here, Vico!

Stay there, patrão. Wait.

Bahram came to a stop and a couple of minutes later Vico's lamplit face loomed out of the fog.

I was coming to fetch you, patrão, said Vico. The lantern-walas weren't around today and what with the fog and all I thought you might need a light. I was on my way to the Club when I heard your voice. Who was that you were speaking to?

Allow, said Bahram.

Who? Vico's eyes suddenly grew very large: Who did you say?

Allow. He was right in front of me. Didn't you see him?

No, patrão.

Vico put a hand on Bahram's arm and turned him in the direction of the Achha Hong.

It couldn't have been Allow, patrão. You must have seen someone else.

What do you mean, Vico? said Bahram in surprise. I'm almost sure it was Allow. He was just ahead of me.

Vico shook his head. No, patrão. It must have been someone else.

Why do you keep saying that, Vico? I'm telling you. I saw Allow.

No, patrão, you could not have seen him, said Vico gently. See, patrão, Allow had not run away as we had thought. It turns out that he had been arrested.

Oh? Bahram ran a finger over his beard. Have they let him off then? How is it that he was out on the Maidan?

Vico came to a stop and put his hand on Bahram's arm.

That was not Allow, patrão. Allow is dead. It was he who was to be executed in the Maidan this morning. The authorities have just announced the name: it was Ho Lao-kin – that was what Allow was called, remember? After the riot he was taken to the execution grounds. He was strangled this afternoon.

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In the latter part of January, as the date of William Jardine's embarkation for England approached, a consensus emerged amongst Jardine's friends and followers that his departure could not be allowed to look like a defeat, or worse still, an admission of guilt (for it was no secret that the 'Iron-Headed Rat' was regarded as an arch-criminal by the Chinese authorities). As a result, the preparations for his farewell dinner took on a defiant exuberance: long before the date arrived it was evident to all that it would be the most magnificent event ever seen in Fanqui-town.

The dinner was to be held in Company Hall, the largest and grandest venue in the foreign enclave. The hall was in the 'Consulate' which was the name by which House No. 1, in the British Factory, was known to foreigners.

The Accha Hong was separated from the British Factory only by the width of Hog Lane, and the approaches to the Consulate were clearly visible from Bahram's daftar. Although Bahram was not an intimate of Jardine's, he was by no means immune to the excitement caused by the upcoming dinner: so noisy and visible were the preparations that they even helped him overcome his growing aversion to the view from his window. Looking out again now he spotted, on

several occasions, long lines of coolies, winding their way through the Maidan with buckets of vegetables and sacks of grain. One afternoon, hearing a sudden outburst of grunting and squealing, he rushed to the window and saw a herd of pigs racing through: the animals disappeared into the British Hong and were never seen again. The next day he was privy to an even more extraordinary sight: a long line of ducks was waddling through the Maidan, bringing all foot traffic to a halt; before the last bird had stepped off the duck-boat, at Jackass Point, the first had already reached the Consulate.

The very appearance of the British Hong began to change. Attached to Company Hall was an enormous, colonnaded veranda that extended over the entrance, overlooking 'Respondentia Walk' – the fenced-in garden in front of the factory. For the purposes of the dinner the veranda was to be turned into a temporary 'withdrawing-room': a team of decorators went to work, covering its sides with huge sheets of white canvas. After nightfall, with dozens of lamps glowing inside, the veranda became a gigantic lantern, glowing in the dark.

The spectacle was striking enough to draw sightseers from all over the city: Chinese New Year was not far away now and the illuminated Consulate became one more attraction for the growing number of pleasure-boats on the Pearl River.

In the meanwhile Bahram too had begun to make his own preparations for Jardine's farewell. As the doyen of Canton's Achhas he deemed it his duty to ensure that the community did not go unnoticed at the event – if for no other reason then merely to remind the world that the commodity that had made Jardine rich, opium, came from India and was supplied to him by his Bombay partners. He came up with the idea of buying a farewell present for Jardine, by common subscription of the whole Parsi community. In a few days he succeeded in raising the equivalent of a thousand guineas: it was agreed that the money would be remitted directly to a famous silversmith, in England, with orders to prepare a dinner service, complete with Jardine's monogrammed initials. The gift would be publicly announced at the dinner, and the accompanying speech, Bahram decided, would be given by the most fluent English-speaker in the Bombay contingent – Dinyar Ferdoonjee.

By the evening of the dinner, expectations had been roused to such a pitch that it seemed impossible for the event to live up to its promise. But on entering the Consulate Bahram could find no cause for disappointment: the grand stairway was decorated with silk hangings and soaring floral arrangements; upstairs, in the improvised 'withdrawing-room', Jardine's initials glowed brightly upon the canvas hangings; in the hall, the Doric columns were garlanded with colourful blooms; the chandeliers overhead were ablaze with clusters of the finest spermaceti candles and the gilded mirrors on the walls made the room look twice as large. There was even a band: the *Inglis*, a merchant vessel anchored at Whampoa, had contributed a troupe of musicians: in celebration of Jardine's Scottish origins, the diners were regaled with a succession of Highland airs as they filed in to take their places.

Bahram had, from the first, taken charge of the Parsi contingent and he was gratified by the impression made by their white turbans, gold-embossed jooties and brocaded chogas. But so far as seating was concerned, he had decided that it would not be appropriate for a tai-pan like himself to be at an ordinary table, with the rest of the Bombay group. He had arranged to be seated with the Committee, at the head of the room.

On arriving at his table he found he had been placed between Lancelot Dent and a newcomer, a tall, stately-looking man with a glossy beard that covered half his chest. He looked familiar but Bahram could not immediately remember his name.

Dent came to his rescue: 'May I introduce Benjamin Burnham, of Calcutta? Perhaps you've met before?'

Bahram had only a nodding acquaintance with Mr Burnham, but knowing him to be an ally of Dent's he shook his hand with cordial enthusiasm. 'You have come to Canton recently, Mr Burnham?'

'A few days ago,' said Mr Burnham. 'Had no end of trouble getting chops. Had to wait a while in Macau.'

Mr Slade was seated to Burnham's right, and he broke in now with a satirical smile. 'But your time in Macau was not ill-spent, was it, Burnham? After all, you did make the acquaintance of the exalted Captain Elliott.'

On hearing the British Representative's name, Bahram threw a

quick glance around the room. 'Is Captain Elliott here with us tonight?'

'Certainly not,' said Slade. 'He has not been invited. And even if he had been, I doubt very much that he would have deigned to break bread with us. It seems that he regards us as little better than outlaws – why, he has actually had the temerity to write to Lord Palmerston describing us as such.'

'Really? But how did that come to your ears John?'

'Through Mr Burnham,' said Slade with a wink. 'By a stroke of singular genius, he has secured copies of some of Captain Elliott's recent dispatches to London!'

Mr Burnham promptly disclaimed the credit for this coup. 'It was my gomusta's doing. He's a pucka rascal but not without his uses. He is a Bengali, as is one of the copyists in Elliott's daftar – I need say no more.'

'And what does Captain Elliott say in his letter?'

'Hah!' Slade pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket. 'Where should I begin? Well, here's a fine little sample. "It is clear to me, my Lord, that the opium traffic will grow to be more and more mischievous to every branch of the trade. As the danger and shame of its pursuit increases, it will fall by rapid degrees into the hands of more and more desperate men and will stain the foreign character with constantly aggravating disgrace. Till the other day, my Lord, I believe there was no part of the world where the foreigner felt his life and property more secure than in Canton; but the grave events of 12th December have left behind a different impression. For a space of near two hours the foreign factories were within the power of an immense and excited mob, the gate of one of them was absolutely battered in and a pistol was fired, probably over the heads of the people for it is certain that nobody fell. If the case had been otherwise, Her Majesty's government and the British public would have had to learn that the trade with this empire was indefinitely interrupted by a terrible scene of bloodshed and ruin. And all these desperate hazards have been incurred, my Lord, for the gains of a few reckless individuals, unquestionably founding their conduct upon the belief that they are exempt from the operation of all law, British and Chinese."'

Slade's face had turned red as he was reading and an exclamation of disgust now burst from his lips. 'Pah! This from a man who is supposed to be our own Representative! A man whose salary we pay! Why, he is nothing but a Judas – he will bring ruin upon us.'

'John, you are too ready to take alarm,' said Dent calmly. 'Elliott is nothing but a functionary, a catspaw. The question is only whose purpose he will serve, ours or the mandarins'.'

A roll of drums now announced the arrival of the first course, a rich turtle soup. As it was being served the band struck up a lively tune, and under cover of the music Bahram turned to his neighbour: 'I believe, Mr Burnham, the market has fallen very low in Calcutta. Were you able to make any significant purchases?'

'So I was,' said Mr Burnham with a smile. 'Yes – my present cargo is the largest I have ever shipped.'

Bahram's eyes widened. 'You are not concerned then about these recent attempts to impose a ban on the trade?'

'Not at all,' said Mr Burnham confidently. 'Indeed I have sent my ship, the *Ibis*, to Singapore to buy more. I am quite confident that the attempts to ban opium will wither in the face of growing demand. It is not within the mandarins' power to withstand the elemental forces of Free Trade.'

'You do not think the loss of Mr Jardine's steady hand will affect us adversely, here in Canton?'

'On the contrary,' said Mr Burnham. 'I think it is the best thing that could have happened. God willing, with our support Mr Dent will step into the breach. And Mr Jardine's presence in London will be a great asset for us. Being a man of extraordinary tact and address, he is sure to gain Lord Palmerston's ear. And he will be able to exert influence on the government in other ways as well. Jardine knows how to spend his money, you know, and has many friends in Parliament.'

Bahram nodded. 'Democracy is a wonderful thing, Mr Burnham,' he said wistfully. 'It is a marvellous tamasha that keeps the common people busy so that men like ourselves can take care of all matters of importance. I hope one day India will also be able to enjoy these advantages – and China too, of course.'

'Let us raise a glass to that!'

'Hear, hear!'

This was the most encouraging conversation Bahram had had in a long time and it greatly increased his enjoyment of the evening. The morbid humours that had beset him of late seemed to evaporate, leaving him free to lavish his attention on the meal – and the food was, without a doubt, the finest that had ever been served in the British Hong, with one excellent course following after another. By the end of it Bahram had done so much justice to the food and wine that it came as a relief when Mr Lindsay rang a bell and raised his glass.

The first toast was to the Queen and the next to the President of the United States.

'As a father glories in and rejoices over the strength, talents and enterprise of its children,' said Mr Lindsay, holding his glass aloft, 'so does Great Britain glory and rejoice in the healthy and growing vigour of her Western progeny!'

There followed a number of tributes to the departing Jardine; at intervals, in keeping with the festive mood, there were rollicking songs – 'Money in Both Pockets', for example, and 'May We Ne'er Want a Friend or a Bottle to Give Him'. Then the band struck up 'Auld Lang Syne' and when the last notes had died away Jardine rose to speak.

'I rise,' said Jardine, 'to return my sincere thanks for the manner in which my health has been proposed. I shall carry away with me and remember while I have life your kindness this evening.'

Here, overcome by emotion, he paused to clear his throat.

'I have been a long time in this country and I have a few words to say in its favour; here we find our persons more efficiently protected by laws than in many other parts of the East or of the world; in China a foreigner can go to sleep with his windows open, without being in dread of either his life or property, which are well guarded by a most watchful and excellent police; business is conducted with unexampled facility and in general with singular good faith. Neither would I omit the general courtesy of the Chinese in all their intercourse and transactions with foreigners. These and some other considerations . . .'

At this point, it became clear that Jardine was deeply affected:

his eyes strayed in the direction of his closest friends and his voice broke. Not a sound was heard in the hall, as Jardine struggled to regain his composure. After dabbing his face with a handkerchief he began again: 'These are the reasons that so many of us so oft revisit this country and stay in it for so long. I hold, gentlemen, the society of Canton high, yet I also know that this community has often heretofore and lately been accused of being a set of smugglers; this I distinctly deny. We are not smugglers, gentlemen! It is the Chinese government, it is the Chinese officers who smuggle and who connive at and encourage smuggling, not we; and then look at the East India Company: why, the father of all smuggling and smugglers is the East India Company!'

A storm of applause now swept through the hall, drowning out the rest of Jardine's speech. The noise continued even after he had sat down, and it took much bell-ringing and gong-banging to restore order. Then it was Dinyar Ferdoonjee's turn to speak, and as soon as he began Bahram knew that he had been right to entrust him with the speech: his announcement of the farewell gift was couched in rounded sentences, and perfectly delivered. The end was particularly impressive: 'Much has been said about the East India Company having showed us Parsis the way to China; this is undoubtedly true, but it was a mere circumstance of the time, of the age; for does anyone pretend to say that if the Company had never existed the spirit of Free Trade would not have found its way hither? No! We should most certainly have found our way to China long ago; and being now here, against much opposition, we want no extraneous aid to support us; for the spirit of Free Trade is self-dependent and all-sufficient for her own wide-extended, extending and flourishing existence!'

A great cheer went up, and one young man was so carried away by the passions of the moment that he jumped on a bench and proposed a toast to 'Free Trade, Universal Free Trade, the extinction of all monopolies, and especially the most odious one, the Hong monopoly!'

This was received with tumultuous acclaim, and nowhere more so than in the corner of the hall where Dent and his friends were seated. 'To Free Trade, gentlemen!' said Dent, raising his glass. 'It

is the cleansing stream that will sweep away all tyrants, great and small!'

The ceremonies now being concluded, the stewards rushed in to clear a space for dancing. The band struck up a waltz and the crowd parted to allow Mr Jardine and Mr Wetmore to walk through the hall, arm-in-arm. On no one was it lost that these two old friends, who had grown grey in each other's company, might be dancing together for the last time. When they took their first turns on the floor there was scarcely a dry eye in the room.

Even Mr Slade was moved to shed a tear. 'Oh poor Jardine,' he cried. 'He does not yet understand how much he will miss our little Bulgaria.'

Seldom had Bahram been in such a mood for dancing, so he had already bespoken Dent's hand for the waltz. But what should have been the perfect conclusion to the evening, turned instead into a cause for confusion and embarrassment. Just as Bahram was about to seize Dent by the waist, an altercation broke out in a corner of the hall. Bahram turned around to discover that the Bombay contingent was embroiled in some kind of quarrel. Hurrying over, he saw that some of them were about to come to blows with a half-dozen young Englishmen. Fortunately Dinyar was not among the disputants. Between the two of them they were able to restore order. But seeing that feelings were still running high, Bahram decided it would be best to lead his contingent out of the hall.

Only when they were outside did Bahram stop to ask: What happened? What was going on in there?

Seth, those haramzadas were calling us all kinds of names. They said this was no place for monkeys and we should leave.

They were drunk, na? Why didn't you just ignore them?

How to ignore them, Seth? We gave all that money for the dinner and then they call us monkeys and niggers?

Fourteen

February 20, 1839, Markwick's Hotel

My dear Maharanee of Pugglenagore – your servant Robin is proud to announce a Discovery! A most *astonishing* discovery – or perhaps it is only a conjecture, I cannot tell, and it does not matter, for along with it I also have some news – at last! – of your pictures. But I must start at the beginning . . .

The first part of this month flew by because of the Chinese New Year – for a fortnight nothing was done: the city was *convulsed* with celebrations and the lanes rang to the cry of 'Gong hei fa-tsai!' Scarcely had the festivities ceased when who should appear but Ah-med! You will remember him as the emissary who took me to Fa-Tee to meet Mr Chan (or Lynchong or Ah Fey or whatever you wish to call him). It had been so long since I last heard from Mr Chan that I had almost given up hope of seeing him again. That is why I was quite *inordinately* pleased to see Ah-med. I will not conceal from you, Puggly dear, that all my hopes in regard to the task Mr Penrose has entrusted to me are invested in Mr Chan – other than him I have not met a *soul* who has anything enlightening to offer on the subject of this mysterious golden camellia; no one has seen it, no one has heard of it; no one understands why anyone should think it worth a *smidgeon* of their attention. Indeed, so fruitless have my inquiries been that I had begun to wonder whether I ought not to consider returning the money Mr Penrose so generously advanced to me (but it really would not *suit*, dear, for it is already spent – a few weeks ago Mr Wong, the tailor, showed me an *exquisite* cloud-collar, trimmed with fur, and no sooner had I set eyes on it than I

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Bahram was among the last to enter the boardroom. Mr Wetmore was already in his seat, at the head of the table: his grooming, Bahram noticed, was as fastidious as ever, but his face was lined and weary, and at one end of his mouth an odd little tic had appeared, tugging his lips into spasmodic grimaces.

Bahram went to his usual place and was surprised to see that the chair beside his was still empty. He leant over to Mr Slade and whispered: 'Where is Dent?'

Mr Slade shrugged. 'Probably detained by some urgent business – it's not like him to be late.'

With everyone else present, Mr Wetmore waited for only a minute or two before asking for the doors to be closed. 'Gentlemen,' he began, 'I am sorry Mr Dent is not here yet, but I fear we cannot wait any longer: our time is short and I am sure you are all eager to know the outcome of our recent visit to the Consoo House. I beg your indulgence if I have tried your patience in this regard, but as you will see, certain documents needed to be translated before we could meet. These I will presently circulate, but let me begin by providing you with a brief account of what transpired. On entering the Consoo House we were met by several of our friends from the Co-Hong, among them Mowqua, Punhyqua, Mingqua, Puankhequa and others. They were, I might add, in a state of extraordinary perturbation – something akin to terror. I think Mr King will bear me out on this.'

Charles King was seated at the other end of the table; turning to look at him Bahram saw that his face too was drawn with fatigue. His voice, however, was firm and clear: 'I have had the misfortune

before of looking into the eyes of men who have been seized by mortal fear. I cannot convey to you, gentlemen, how painful it was to see that very look in the eyes of these old friends of ours – friends at whose tables we have supped, friends who have made us rich and to whom we owe the comforts we enjoy.'

These words were still hanging in the air when the door opened to admit Dent.

'Gentlemen, my apologies – please excuse my tardiness.'

'You have come in good time, Mr Dent,' said Mr Wetmore. 'I am sure you will be interested in the document I am about to read out.' He picked up a sheet of paper and looked around the table. 'This is the edict the Imperial Commissioner has served upon the Co-Hong guild: it is this document that has struck terror into their hearts. I think it behoves us, gentlemen, to give our attention to the Commissioner's own words.'

Mr Wetmore looked around the table: 'With your permission, gentlemen?'

'Go ahead.'

'Let's hear what he has to say.'

'"While opium is pervading and filling with its poisonous influence the whole empire, the Hong merchants still continue to indiscriminately give sureties for foreign traders declaring that their ships have brought none of it. Are they not indeed dreaming, and snoring in their dreams? What is this but to 'shut the ear while the jingling bell is stolen?' The original Co-Hong merchants were men of property and family and would never have descended to this stage of degradation; yet all now are equally involved in the stench of it. Truly I burn with shame for you, the present incumbents of the Co-Hong: with you there seems to be no other consideration than that of growing rich.

'"The utter annihilation of the opium trade is now my first object and I have given commands to the foreigners to deliver up to the government all the opium which they have on board their warehousing vessels. I have called on them also to sign a bond, in Chinese and in foreign languages, declaring that henceforth they will never venture to bring opium into China again; and if any should again be brought, their property shall be confiscated by the government. These commands are now given to you Co-Hong merchants, that you may convey them to the foreign factories and plainly make them known. It is imperative that the forceful character of the commands be made clearly to appear. It is imperative for you Co-Hong merchants to act with energy and loftiness of purpose to unite in enjoining these commands upon the foreign merchants. Three days are prescribed within which you must obtain the required bonds and merchandise. If it is found that this matter cannot be resolved by you immediately, then it will be inferred that you are acting in concert with foreign criminals, and I, the High Commissioner, will forthwith solicit the royal death warrant and select for execution one or two of you. Do not claim you did not receive timely notice.'

A murmur of disbelief went around the table now. Bahram, who thought he had misheard, said: 'Did you say "execution", Mr Wetmore?'

'Yes I did, Mr Moddie.'

'Are you are telling us,' said Mr Lindsay, 'that the Commissioner may send two Hongists to the gallows if we do not surrender our goods and furnish this bond?'

'No, sir,' said Mr Wetmore. 'I mean they will be beheaded, not hung. And our friends Howqua and Mowqua are persuaded that they will be the first to die.'

A collective gasp was heard around the table. Then Mr Burnham said: 'There can be no doubt of it: this Commissioner Lin is a monster. None but a madman or monster could have such scant regard for human life as to consider executing two men for such a crime.'

'Indeed, Mr Burnham?' It was Mr King, speaking from the other end of the table. 'You are evidently greatly solicitous of human life, which is undoubtedly a most commendable thing. But may I ask why your concern does not extend to the lives you put in jeopardy with your consignments of opium? Are you not aware that with every shipment you are condemning hundreds, maybe thousands of people to death? Do you see nothing monstrous in your own actions?'

'No, sir,' answered Mr Burnham coolly. 'Because it is not my

hand that passes sentence upon those who choose the indulgence of opium. It is the work of another, invisible, omnipotent: it is the hand of freedom, of the market, of the spirit of liberty itself, which is none other than the breath of God.'

At this Mr King's voice rose in scorn: 'Oh shame on you, who call yourself a Christian! Do you not see that it is the grossest idolatry to speak of the market as though it were the rival of God?'

'Please, please, gentlemen!' Mr Wetmore thumped the table in an effort to restore order. 'This is not the time for a theological debate. May I remind you that we are here to consider the High Commissioner's ultimatum, and that there are lives at stake?'

'But that is exactly the problem, Wetmore,' said Mr Burnham. 'If Commissioner Lin is what I believe him to be, a monster or madman, there is nothing to be gained from dealing with him, is there?'

Before Mr Wetmore could speak, Mr Slade broke in: 'Here I must beg to differ with you, Burnham. In my view, the High Commissioner is neither a monster nor a madman, but merely a mandarin of exceptional craftiness. His intention is to intimidate us with threats and braggadocio, so that he may boast of his exploits to the Emperor and earn himself a brighter button for his hat. For myself, I do not credit any of it – neither the menaces of the Commissioner nor the professions of terror on the part of our friends of the Co-Hong. It is obvious to me that the Co-Hong is thoroughly in league with the High Commissioner – they are clearly enacting this little pantomime together. The Hongists have assumed these masks of terror in the hope of getting us to part with our goods at no cost to themselves: that is all it is – a charade like those we are treated to every time we cross the Square. It is the usual Celestial humbug and we cannot be taken in.'

'But what do you propose we do, Mr Slade?' said Bahram. 'What are your suggestions?'

'What I propose,' said Slade, 'is that we stand fast and show that we are not to be budged. Once they understand this, Howqua and Mowqua will sort out the matter soon enough. They will dole out a few cumshaws and grease a few palms and that will be the end of it. Their heads will remain on their shoulders and we shall still be

in possession of our goods. If we show signs of softness we will all lose: this above all is a moment when we must cleave to our principles.'

'Principles?' retorted Mr King in astonishment. 'I fail to see what principle can underlie the smuggling of opium.'

'Well then, you have chosen to blind yourself, sir!' Mr Burnham's fist landed loudly on the table. 'Is freedom not a principle as well as a right? Is there no principle at stake when free men claim the liberty to conduct their affairs without fear of tyrants and despots?'

'By that token, sir,' said Mr King, 'any murderer could claim that he is but exercising his natural rights. If the charter of your liberties entails death and despair for untold multitudes, then it is nothing but a licence for slaughter.'

Mr King and Mr Burnham were both on their feet now, staring at each other across the table.

Mr Wetmore thumped the table again. 'Please, gentlemen! May I remind you that this is a matter of the utmost urgency? We do not have the leisure to conduct debates on abstract principles. The time at our disposal is so short that to speed matters along, Mr King and I have taken the liberty of drafting a reply to the Commissioner's edict, on behalf of all of us.'

'Have you indeed?' said Dent with a quizzical smile. 'Well, you have certainly been busy, Wetmore! And what does your letter say?'

'In essence, Mr Dent, it seeks to assure the High Commissioner that we are willing to accede to his terms, but with certain reservations.'

'Does it now?' said Dent, smiling thinly. 'So are we to understand, Mr Wetmore, that you and your little friend Charlie have taken it upon yourselves to write a letter on our behalf but without consulting us? A letter that pledges to end a trade that has existed since before any of us were born? A trade that has conferred enormous wealth upon yourself and your friends, not least Mr Jardine?'

The reference to Jardine seemed to rattle Mr Wetmore, and his voice grew a little shaky. 'Well,' he said, 'our letter explains, of course, that there was, in the past, some ambiguity in regard to the Chinese government's position on the opium trade. At one time it was widely believed that the government might even legalize the

trade. But whatever doubts may have existed in the past have certainly been removed by the Commissioner's deeds and words. There is no reason now to hesitate in providing the pledge that he demands.'

'Oh really?' said Dent with silky smoothness. 'And what of the ships that are already anchored around Hong Kong and the other outer harbours? Are we to meekly empty their holds and send the contents to the Commissioner?'

'Not at all,' said Wetmore. 'Our letter explains that while the ships might belong to us, their cargoes do not. They are in effect the property of our investors, in Bombay, Calcutta and London. To surrender the cargoes is impossible: what we will do instead is send the ships back to India.'

For Bahram, this was the prospect most to be feared. 'Send our cargoes back to India?' he cried in alarm. 'But you know, no, Mr Wetmore, the price of opium has fallen to the floor in Bombay? And production has increased like anything. Where will our cargoes go? Who will buy? To send them to India will bring ruin.'

Bahram looked around the table and it seemed to him that many eyes had narrowed at the sound of the last word: if there was one thing he knew about the English language it was that nothing was more harmful to a merchant's credit than the word 'ruin'. He hastened to undo the damage. 'I don't mean any of us here, of course. We are all amply supplied with capital and will manage to get by. But what about small investors? We have to think of them, no? Many have put in whole life-savings. What of them?'

'Exactly!' cried Slade. 'It seems to me from the sentimental tenor of what I have heard here that the vision of the Hongists' blood spilt on the ground has blinded some of us from contemplating the consequences of surrendering our cargoes. Mr King and Mr Wetmore are so considerate of the sufferings of the Chinese that they are willing to drag down all those engaged in the opium traffic. But what of the ruination and destitution of those who have invested their savings in our shipments? What of their fall in station and society, leading perhaps to debtor's prison, to workhouse alms and probably death by starvation?'

'But surely, Mr Slade,' interjected Mr King, 'you are not

suggesting that your investors are people of meagre means, who are in danger of being packed off to debtor's prison? Why would a man who is on the brink of poverty sink his last few pennies into a speculation in a commodity such as opium? In my experience, no one invests in such ventures unless they have capital to spare – they are no more likely to be forced into the workhouse than you or I. This is indeed the cruellest aspect of this trade – that a few rich men, in order to grow richer, are willing to sacrifice millions of lives.'

Slade threw up his hands. 'It is exactly as I suspected: Mr King's heart bleeds for his Celestial friends, but he is utterly indifferent to the sufferings of his fellow merchants and their investors. And for what this readiness to plunge his fellow merchants into certain and immense loss of property? Why forsooth! Because Howqua has said at a private meeting at the Consoo Hall that his head would be taken off if we did not do his bidding. But Howqua, as we well know, is a consummate businessman, and he will say whatever is necessary to protect his own profits.'

Mr Wetmore broke in wearily: 'I assure you, Mr Slade, Howqua believes with all his heart that his will be the first head to roll. It wrung my heart to see him at the Consoo House – I have never seen a more piteous picture.'

'Oh please, Wetmore!' snapped Mr Slade. 'Spare us these Bulgarian vapours! You must remember that you are the President of this Chamber, and not some old biddy presiding over a congress of dowagers.'

'Your language, Mr Slade, is unbecoming of a member of the Committee,' said Mr Wetmore stiffly. 'But I will let it pass because of the urgency of the matter at hand. But of this you should have no doubt – that Howqua, Mowqua and several other Hongists were indeed utterly struck down with fear when we saw them at the Consoo House.'

'Howqua?' Dent interrupted with a shrill, somewhat forced laugh. 'But I saw Howqua this very morning, on Old China Street: that was what delayed me in coming to this meeting. He said that he and his colleagues of the Co-Hong had received certain threats from the Yum-chae, but these were just threats and no more than

that. Howqua is an uncommonly shrewd man and I suspect he greatly exaggerated his fears for the benefit of Mr King and Mr Wetmore, knowing them to be, shall we say, somewhat softer in nature than most men. He would not of course attempt anything like that with me, or indeed most of us. When I ran into him a short while ago he appeared to be in perfectly good spirits – this Committee has my word on that.'

A silence fell on the table as everyone tried to absorb the import of this. Then Mr King, whose face had turned red, declared: 'That is a bald-faced lie, Mr Dent!'

Now an audible hiss issued from Mr Slade's lips. 'If I were you, Miss King,' he said, 'I would watch what I say. There are certain words, you know, that entail a form of shorthand called pistolography.'

'Be that as it may, sir,' said Mr King, 'I shall not, for fear of it, silence myself. I too have but recently seen Howqua, and I assure you that his apprehensions were not factitious but real; I saw with my own eyes that he was crushed down to the ground by his terrors. I give you my word that the Hong merchants are in instant fear of their lives and properties. It is not my part to defend despotic measures; I wish only to remind you that once a chain of events is set in motion, it is not in our power to make reparation or atonement. I beg you to remember that the property lost under the present dispensation can easily and in a short time be put together again – but blood once shed is like water spilt upon the ground and can never again be gathered up. The present circumstances are directly destructive to the lives of our fellow creatures; we may occasionally have called the Hongists hard names but they are still our friends and neighbours. What reasonable man could conceive of putting the pocket of an investor in competition with the neck of a neighbour?'

Mr King had invested his words with great passion but their effect upon the Committee was to a considerable extent blunted by Dent, who through the duration of his speech had been looking around the table as if to count heads and assess his support. When Mr King had finished, he said, matter-of-factly: 'Well, it is clear that we have a profound disagreement. Mr King is of the opinion that Howqua and his ilk are in mortal fear of their lives; I, on the other hand, am equally convinced that this is just another instance of Celestial chicanery. It is my opinion that our friends of the Co-Hong are working upon the feelings of those of us who are not, by nature and inclination, imbued with the usual degree of masculine fortitude.'

'What does masculinity have to do with it?' said Mr King.

'Masculinity has everything to do with it,' said Mr Burnham. 'It is surely apparent to you, is it not, that effeminacy is the curse of the Asiatic? It is what makes him susceptible to opium; it is what makes him so fatefully dependent on government. If the gentry of this country had not been weakened by their love of painting and poetry China would not be in the piteous state that she is in today. Until the masculine energies of this country are replenished and renewed, its people will never understand the value of freedom; nor will they appreciate the cardinal importance of Free Trade.'

'Do you really believe,' retorted Mr King, 'that it is the doctrine of Free Trade that has given birth to masculinity? If that were so, then men would be as rare as birds of paradise.'

Now Mr Wetmore broke in again: 'Please, please, gentlemen – let us keep to the matter at hand.'

'I agree,' said Dent. 'There is no point in letting this matter drag on. Let us not waste any more time: Mr Wetmore has informed us about the contents of the letter he has drafted. I have an alternative to propose: it is my suggestion that we write to the Co-Hong in general terms. Let us assure them that we too are persuaded of the need to eventually bring a halt to the trade in opium; let us tell them that in order to determine how best that end might be achieved we will set up a committee. This will amply serve all our purposes; the High Commissioner will have a pretext for ceasing his oppressions and we will have yielded nothing.' Dent stopped to look around the table and then turned to Mr Wetmore. 'So there you have it, Mr President, your resolution against mine. Let us put it to the vote.'

Mr King too had glanced around the table, and seeing that Dent's words had met with many nods and murmured ayes, he gripped the edge of the table and pulled himself to his feet.

'Wait,' he said. 'I beg that you allow me a few more minutes for

one last appeal. This is a matter that cannot be decided merely by a show of hands – not only because we are about to take a step that will have consequences far beyond this room and beyond this day, but also because there is present among us someone who sits here as the only representative of a very large population – he is indeed the only man here who can speak for the territories that produce the goods in question.'

Mr King turned now to Bahram. 'I refer of course to you, Mr Moddie. Amongst all of us it is you who bears the greatest responsibility, for you must answer not only to your own homeland but also to its neighbours. The rest of us are from faraway countries – our successors will not have to live with the outcome of today's decision in the same way that yours will. It is your children and grandchildren who will be called into account for what transpires here today. I beg you, Mr Moddie, to consider carefully the duty that confronts you at this juncture: your words and your vote will carry great weight in this Committee. You yourself have spoken to me of your faith and your beliefs. More than once have you said to me that no religion recognizes more clearly than yours, the eternal conflict between Good and Evil. Consider now the choice before you, Mr Moddie; I conjure you to look into the precipice before which you stand. Think not of this moment but of the eternity ahead.' He paused and lowered his voice: 'Who will you choose, Mr Moddie? Will you choose the light or the darkness, Ahura Mazda or Ahriman?'

The last words struck Bahram like a thunderbolt. His hands began to shake and he withdrew them quickly into the sleeves of his choga. Really, it was unfair, profoundly unfair, that Charlie King should pull such a trick on him; to speak not only of continents and countries, but of his faith. And what did continents and countries matter to him? He had to think first of those who were closest to him, did he not? And what conceivable good could result for them if he brought ruin upon himself? For his children, his daughters and Freddy, he would gladly sacrifice his well-being in the hereafter: indeed he could think of no duty more pressing than this, even if it meant that the bridge to heaven would forever be barred to him.

By force of habit, his right hand slipped inside his angarkha, to seek the reassurance of his kasti. He took a deep breath and cleared his throat. Then he raised his head and looked Mr King directly in the eye.

'My vote,' said Bahram, 'is with Mr Dent.'

Now the dusty, dimly lit godown was crowded with people as well as objects. Seated in the centre, on a dainty Chippendale love-seat, was a glowering, stiff-backed mandarin, with a scroll in one hand and a fan in the other. On one side of him loomed the stuffed head of an enormous rhinoceros; on the other side were Howqua and Punhyqua. The two Hongists were crouched on the floor and both had chains around their necks. Their tunics were so begrimed that they looked as if they had been dragged through miles of dust. Their caps were conspicuously devoid of their buttons of rank.

Bahram could remember a time when mandarins would appear before Howqua and Punhyqua as supplicants: the sight of these two immensely wealthy men crouching beside the Weiyuen, like beggars, was so incomprehensible that he felt compelled to look more closely, to see if they were really who they seemed to be.

Only after several minutes had passed did Bahram realize that Dent, Burnham, Wetmore and several other foreign merchants were on the other side of the room, standing clustered around Mr Fearon. He made his way over and was just in time to hear Burnham say: 'Jurisdiction – that is the principle we must cling to, at all costs. You must explain to the Weiyuen that he does not have jurisdiction over Mr Dent. Or any other British merchant for that matter.'

'I have tried, sir, as you know,' said Mr Fearon patiently. 'And the Weiyuen's response was that he is acting on the authority of the High Commissioner, who has been invested with special powers by the Emperor himself.'

'Well, you must explain to him then,' said Burnham, 'that nobody, not even the Grand Manchu himself, can claim jurisdiction over a subject of the Queen of England.'

'I doubt that he will accept that, sir.'

'But nonetheless, you must make this clear to him, Mr Fearon.'

'Very well.'

As Mr Fearon stepped away, Dent ran a hand over his face. Bahram saw now that he looked pale and ill; his fingernails were bitten to shreds.

'My dear Dent!' said Bahram, extending a hand. 'This is terrible. What do they want of you?'

Dent was evidently too shaken to speak, for it was Burnham who answered. 'They say they want to escort him to the old city, to ask him a few questions. But it is likely that their real intentions are quite different.'

'The rumour', added Wetmore, 'is that the Commissioner has asked that a cook, specializing in European food, be provided by the Co-Hong.'

'What does it mean?' said Bahram. 'Are they planning to keep Dent? Put him in jail?'

'Perhaps,' said Burnham with a grim smile. 'Or it could be something worse still – maybe they're planning to throw him a Last Supper.'

'Oh please, Benjamin,' said Dent, wringing his hands. 'Must you speak of that?'

'Sir!'

Mr Fearon was back now. 'The Weiyuen says it is clearly stated in the Emperor's decrees that all foreign residents in China must abide by Chinese law.'

'But that has not been the custom,' said Wetmore. 'In Canton, it has always been understood that foreigners would conduct their affairs according to their own laws. Please explain that to the Weiyuen, Mr Fearon.'

'Very well, sir.'

Mr Fearon was hardly gone before he was back. 'The Weiyuen asks that you approach him. He wishes to address you directly.'

'Approach him?' cried Slade indignantly. 'So he may rub in our faces the degradation he has inflicted on Howqua and Punhyqua? Why, it is the most abominable impudence!'

'He insists, sir.'

'We had better go,' said Dent, 'there's no need to provoke him.'

The others followed him across the room and positioned themselves so they could address the Weiyuen without being directly confronted with the two chained Hongists.

'The Weiyuen asks if in your country foreigners are exempted from observing the laws of the land.'

'No,' said Mr Wetmore. 'They are not.'

'Why then should you consider yourselves exempt from Chinese law?'

'Because it has been the custom for the foreign community in Canton to regulate itself.'

'The Weiyuen says: this custom holds only so long as you do not flout the laws of the land. We have given you warning after warning, issued edicts and proclamations, and yet you have continued to bring opium ships to our coast, in defiance of the law. Why then should you not be treated as criminals?'

'Please explain to the Weiyuen,' said Mr Wetmore, 'that as Englishmen and Americans, we enjoy certain freedoms under the laws of our own countries. These require us to be subject, in the first instance, to our own laws.'

This took a while to explain.

'The Weiyuen says he cannot believe that any country would be so barbaric as to allow its merchants the freedom to harm and despoil the people of a foreign realm. This is not freedom – it is akin to piracy. No government could possibly condone it.'

Mr Slade's patience had worn thin by now, and he had begun to tap his cane loudly on the floor. 'Oh for heaven's sake!' he cried. 'Can we not dispense with this mealy-mouthed cant? Please tell him, Mr Fearon, that he will know what freedom means when he sees it coming at him from the barrel of a sixteen-pounder.'

'Oh I cannot say that to him, sir,' said Mr Fearon.

'No, of course not,' said Dent. 'But I do believe Slade has a point. The time has come when we must seek Captain Elliott's intervention.'

Mr King had been listening to this exchange with a wry smile, and he broke in now: 'But Mr Dent! It is you and Mr Slade who have always wanted to keep Captain Elliott at a distance from Canton. Am I wrong to think that it was you who said that the

involvement of a government representative would be a perversion of the laws of Free Trade?'

'This is no longer a matter of trade, Mr King,' said Dent coldly. 'As you can see, it now concerns our persons, our safety.'

'Oh I see!' said Mr King with a laugh. 'The government is to you what God is to agnostics – only to be invoked when your own well-being is at stake!'

'Please, sir,' Mr Fearon broke in. 'The Weiyuen is waiting. What am I to say to him?'

The answer was provided by Mr Wetmore. 'Tell him that it is impossible for us to do anything without consulting with the English Representative, Captain Elliott, who is currently in Macau. Please inform him that we have sent word to him. He will be here soon.'

Absorbed in this exchange, Bahram had become totally oblivious to everything else that was going on around him: he was startled when he heard Zadig's voice in his ear.

Please Bahram-bhai, can I have a word with you?

Yes. Of course.

They retreated to a quiet corner, behind a huge armoire.

There's something I must tell you, Bahram-bhai.

Yes. What is it?

Zadig leant closer. I have it on good authority that your name was also on the arrest warrant.

What warrant? What are you talking about?

The same warrant that has been served on Dent. I have it on good authority that your name was on it this morning. You too were to be arrested. I believe your name was removed just before the Weiyuen set off to fetch Dent.

Bahram's eyes opened wide in disbelief: But why would they want to arrest me? What have I done?

They are evidently well informed about what has been going on at the Chamber. Clearly they know that Dent has been opposing the surrender of the opium. Perhaps they have learnt of your opposition too.

But how could they know? said Bahram. And if they do, then why did they remove my name?

Perhaps they felt the Chamber might give you up in exchange for Dent.

Bahram's voice fell to a whisper. But the commitee would not allow it surely? he said. Would they?

Listen, Bahram-bhai, you are not an American or an Englishman. You don't have any warships behind you. If the Chamber had to surrender you or Dent, who do you think they would pick?

Bahram stared at him: his throat had gone dry but he managed to say: What shall I do then, Zadig Bey? Tell me?

You had better go back to your hong, Bahram-bhai. And maybe you should stay out of sight for a while.

Although not entirely persuaded, Bahram decided to follow Zadig's advice. He slipped away and on the way back he had the distinct impression that the guardsmen were scrutinizing him with special care; while crossing the Maidan his instinct told him he was being watched. Everywhere he looked, eyes seemed to be following him: although he strode along as fast as he could, the two-minute walk seemed to last an hour.

Even the safety of his daftar brought little comfort to Bahram: it was as if the familiar surroundings had become a cage. When he looked out of the window, squads of guardsmen seemed to appear out of nowhere, to return his gaze; when he sat at his desk, he began to wonder what would have happened if his name had remained on the warrant. What if Howqua and Mowqua had come to the Achha Hong, with chains draped around their necks, to beg him to give himself up to the Yum-chae? He could almost hear Dinyar and the other Parsis clicking their tongues and whispering at a safe distance: Poor Shireenbai . . . husband in the chokey . . . just imagine the shame . . .

That night even laudanum failed to have its usual effect: the draught he took was strong enough that he was able to shut his eyes, but the sleep that came from it was neither continuous nor untroubled. At one point he imagined that his *fravashi*, his guardian spirit, was taking leave of him, abandoning him to make his way alone through the rest of his days on earth. He sat up to find the room plunged into a funereal darkness: even the lamp in his altar had gone out. He got groggily out of bed and kept striking

matches until the divo lit up again. Barely had he closed his eyes – or so it seemed – when he was visited by another, even more disturbing vision: he saw himself stepping on to the bridge of heaven, *Chinvat-pul*; he saw that his way was barred by the angel of judgement, Meher Davar; he heard himself mouthing the words *Kâm nemon zâm, kuthrâ nemon ayem?* – 'To which land shall I turn, where shall I go?' – he saw the angel's hand turning to point to the darkness under the bridge; he saw himself tumbling off the edge, falling into the fathomless chasm below.

He woke to find himself drenched in sweat – yet never had he been so glad to wake from a dream. Reaching for the bell-rope he pulled on it so hard that Vico came running up the stairs.

What's the matter, patrão? What happened?

Vico – I want you to go to the Paoushun Hong. See what you can learn about what's going on with Dent. And take the munshi with you too.

Vico looked at him in surprise. No work today, patrão?

No. I don't feel well; tell them to bring my breakfast to the bedroom.

Yes, patrão.

Through the rest of the morning, Vico and the munshi took it in turns to keep Bahram informed: now the Hongists were at Dent's house; now they were at the Chamber pleading with the members to persuade Dent to give himself up.

'But we do not possess the authority to coerce any of our members,' insisted the Committee.

'What is the purpose of a Chamber then,' responded the Hongists, 'if it has no influence over its members?'

In the early afternoon the munshi reported that he had just seen Zadig Bey – he was accompanying a delegation of translators and mediators; they were on their way to visit the mandarins.

A few hours later, Zadig dropped by himself, looking exhausted but also strangely exhilarated.

What happened? Where did you go? To the Consoo House?

No, said Zadig. We went into the walled city – for the first time ever in my life . . .

They had entered by the Choolan Gate and were taken to the

temple of Kuan-yin. They had seated themselves in the first courtyard, in the shade of an immense tree. Soon they were led into the temple's interior, to the courtyard where the priests lived, and there they were served tea, fruit and other refreshments. After a while several senior mandarins arrived, including the treasurer of the province, the salt commissioner, the grain inspector and a judge.

Some of them had hoped, and some had feared, that the Yum-chae would be there too – but such was not the case; only these other officials were present.

They were asked their names, their countries and so on, and then the mandarins said: 'Why doesn't Mr Dent obey the Yum-chae?'

It was Mr Thom, the translator, who spoke for them: 'The foreigners are convinced that Mr Dent would be arrested and detained if he went into the old city.'

It was the judge who answered. He said: 'The High Commissioner's eyes are very sharp and his ears very long. He knows this Dent to be a very rich capitalist. The High Commissioner holds positive orders from the Emperor to put down the opium trade; he wishes to admonish this Dent and also to inquire into the nature of his business. If this Dent does not consent to come before him, he shall be dragged out of his house by force. If he resists he will be killed.'

To this the delegation made no response so the treasurer said: 'Why do you continue to shield this Dent? Is the trade with China not dear to you foreigners?'

'Yes,' answered Mr Thom. 'But Dent's life is still dearer.'

And then, said Zadig, a very strange thing happened, Bahram-bhai. They liked Mr Thom's answer so much they began to clap! Can you believe . . .

Before he could finish, Vico burst in. Patrão – look out of the window!

With Zadig beside him, Bahram went to the window and looked down: a crowd had gathered around the entrance to the British Factory. Visible over the heads of the milling spectators were the turbans of a paltan of sepoys; some of them had guns on their shoulders and the man in the lead was carrying the Union Jack.

'Captain Elliott,' said Zadig. 'It must be him!'

'Oh thank God, thank God,' said Bahram. Closing his eyes, he murmured a prayer of gratitude; for the first time in many days he felt safe; having the British Representative nearby was like being granted a reprieve.

*

Next morning a notice, addressed to Bahram, was delivered to the Achha Hong by Captain Elliott's personal secretary. It was an urgent summons to a meeting at the Consulate. It could not be ignored so Bahram quickly changed his clothes and made his way to the doorway of the hong.

Although he had not been outside in the last few days, Bahram had observed the activity in the Maidan from his window and had some idea of what to expect – and yet, once at ground level, he realized that the atmosphere of the Maidan had changed even more than he had thought. He had never imagined that a day would come when he would find Fanqui-town empty of swadders and buttoners. Like many other foreigners he had always regarded the enclave's cheap-jacks as something of a nuisance and had often wished them gone – it had not occurred to him that their absence would leave the enclave so much diminished in spirit.

It was true, of course, that it had not been easy to cross the Maidan when it was a-swarm with mumpers and mucksnipes – but to do it now, under the frowning gaze of guardsmen, was more unpleasant by far. What made it worse still was that Bahram knew by sight many of the guards who were now patrolling the enclave with staves and pikes in hand. One, for instance, was a steward from the Club: it was strangely disconcerting to be stared at, as if you were some kind of escaped jailbird, by a man who had just the other day appeared at your elbow with a plate of roast duck. This

was, in a way, the most unsettling part of it: it was as if the hidden mechanisms of Canton's economy had suddenly been laid bare for all to see; even the lowliest servants and tradesmen – people who had, in the past, fallen over themselves to please the fanquis – now had a look of judgement and appraisal in their eyes.

Nowhere was the cordon of security tighter than around the British Factory: ever since Dent had entered the Consulate, the whole compound had been kept under close watch, to prevent his escape. The Co-Hong merchants too had stationed themselves there, as if to shame their erstwhile partners into giving up their goods. To reach the entrance, Bahram had to step past their chairs; they nodded stiffly at each other, their faces unsmiling and impassive.

On entering the British Factory, Bahram was met by a detachment of sepoys: they were aware of who he was and one of them led him to the Consulate's library, where the meeting was to be held. This was a large, elegant room with tall shelves of leather-bound books ranged against the walls. At the far end, under a gilded mirror, was a fireplace and above it, a mantelpiece. The room was already full when Bahram arrived: glancing around it, Bahram saw that every member of the Committee was present and many others besides.

Captain Elliott was standing with his back to the mantelpiece, facing the gathering: he was dressed in full naval uniform and cut an imposing, soldierly figure, with a sword at his waist. He knew Bahram by sight and they exchanged nods as Bahram took a seat at the back.

The tip of the Captain's sword now rattled against the fireplace, as if to call the meeting to order. Holding himself stiffly erect, Captain Elliott said: 'Gentlemen, I have invited you here today so that you may be informed of the outcome of my attempts to negotiate with Commissioner Lin. I addressed a letter to the provincial authorities two days ago, asking that travel permits be issued to all of you. I stated also that if this was not done, I would reluctantly be driven to the conclusion that the men and ships of my country had been forcibly detained and would act accordingly. I noted further that the peace between our two countries has been placed in

imminent jeopardy by the alarming proceedings of the authorities in Canton. At the same time I assured them also that it was my desire to keep the peace. My letter was duly transmitted to the High Commissioner. I am now in receipt of his reply.'

This roused a murmur of surprise, for all present were aware that the provincial authorities had long refused to communicate directly with the British Representative. Several people asked whether Commissioner Lin had addressed his letter to Captain Elliott himself, departing from past custom. The Captain shook his head and said that the reply had been communicated to him indirectly, by lesser officials, in a letter that quoted the Commissioner at great length.

'I thought', said Captain Elliott, 'that you should hear at first hand what Commissioner Lin has to say. So I asked my translator, Mr Robert Morrison, to choose a few passages. He has done so and will read them out aloud.'

Yielding the mantel, the Captain went to sit down while the translator rose to face the gathering. He was a stout, sober-looking man in his late twenties: the son of a famous missionary, he had spent most of his life in China and was regarded as an authority on the language and culture of the country.

Now, producing a few sheets of paper, Mr Morrison smoothed them with the back of his hand. 'Gentlemen, these are Commissioner Lin's own words; I have tried to render them to the best of my ability.

'"I, High Commissioner Lin, find that the foreigners have, in their commercial intercourse with this country, long enjoyed gratifying advantages. Yet they have brought opium – that pervading poison – to this land, thus profiting themselves to the injury of others. As High Commissioner I issued an edict promising not to delve into the past but only requiring that the opium already here should be entirely delivered up and that further shipments should be effectually stopped from coming. Three days were prescribed within which to give a reply but none was received. As High Commissioner I had ascertained that the opium brought by Dent was comparatively in large quantity and summoned him to be examined. He too procrastinated for three days and the order was not obeyed. In consequence a temporary embargo was placed on the trade and the issuing of permits to go to Macau was stayed. In reading the letter of the English Superintendent I see no recognition of these circumstances, but only a demand for permits. I would ask: While my commands remain unanswered and my summonses unattended, how can permits be granted? Elliott has come into the territory of the Celestial Court as the English Superintendent. But his country, while itself interdicting the use of opium, has yet permitted the seduction and enticement of the Chinese people. The store-ships have long been anchored in the waters of Kwangtung yet Elliott has been unable to expel them. I would ask then what it is that Elliott superintends?'"

As the reading proceeded, Bahram had the odd impression that he was listening not to the translator, but to some other voice that had taken command of the young man's mouth and lips, a voice that was at once completely reasonable and utterly implacable. Bahram was astounded by this: how could the voice of this remote and distant figure, Lin Tse-hsü, have seized control of this youthful Englishman? Was it possible that some men possessed so great a force of character that they could stamp themselves upon their words such that no matter where they were read, or when, or in what language, their own distinctive tones would always be heard?

Who was this man, this Lin Tse-hsü? What gave him this peculiar power, this authority, this unalloyed certainty?

'"I have now merely to lay on Elliott the responsibility of speedily and securely arranging these matters: the delivery of the opium and the giving of bonds in obedience to my orders. If he can take the opium that is on board the store-ships and at once deliver it up, it will be my duty to give him encouragement. If he has aught to say, and it be not inconsistent with reason, let him make a clear statement of it. But if he speaks not according to reason and imagines, amid the darkness of night, to abscond with his men, it will show the conviction within him that he can have no face to encounter his fellow men. Will he be able to escape the meshes of the vast and wide net of heaven?"'

Here, Mr Morrison lowered his notes in some embarrassment: 'Shall I continue, Captain Elliott?'

Captain Elliott's face had reddened a little but he answered with a nod: 'Yes. Please go on.'

'"It needs to be enjoined upon Elliott that he should come to have a fear of crime and a purpose to repent and amend; that he should give clear commands to all the foreigners to obey the orders, requiring them to speedily deliver up all the opium that is on board their store-ships. Thenceforward all the foreigners will conduct a legitimate trade, rejoicing in the exhaustless gains thereof. But if, assuming a false garb of ignorance, Elliott voluntarily draws troubles upon himself the evil consequences will be of his own working out, and where shall he find a place of repentance afterwards?'"

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Bahram had shut his eyes and on opening them now he was glad to see that the translator had finished reading and was returning to his seat.

Captain Elliott went again to stand by the mantelpiece. 'Well, gentlemen,' he said in his dry, unemphatic way, 'Commissioner Lin has had his say. There can be no further doubt that he intends to use every possible means to force the surrender of the opium that is currently stored on your ships. He knows very well that it would be impossible for him to seize your cargoes by main force – your ships would have no trouble in beating off an assault by his naval forces. So he intends instead to hold us hostage here until the opium is surrendered. And the truth is there is nothing we can do about it. Escape is clearly impossible: we are surrounded on all sides and under constant surveillance; our boats have been beached so we would not be able to get away even if we were to fight our way down to the river. A failed attempt would lead only to injury and humiliation. Nor at this moment can we contemplate the use of force: we have no warships at our disposal and no troops either. To assemble a suitable expeditionary force will take several months. And even if we did possess the necessary strength, an attack on Canton could not be contemplated at this time because it would place all our lives in jeopardy. Clearly no assault is possible until we are evacuated from this city, and to accomplish that in a manner that ensures the safety and security of all of Her Majesty's subjects is now my principal concern. I need hardly add that it is perfectly

clear at this point that we will not be allowed to leave until the Commissioner's demands are met.'

Captain Elliott took a deep breath and ran a finger nervously over his moustache. 'So gentlemen, I am afraid the conclusion is inescapable: you will have to surrender all the opium that is currently stored on your ships.'

There was a stunned silence and then many voices began to speak, all at once.

'It is robbery, sir, plain robbery. It cannot be tolerated!'

'Are you aware, Captain Elliott, that you are speaking of goods worth many millions of dollars?'

'And what is more, they do not even belong to us. You are asking us to steal from our investors!'

Captain Elliott let the voices roll around him for a few minutes. When he broke in it was on a conciliatory note. 'Gentlemen, I do not for a moment dispute the truth of your arguments: that is not at issue here. The question is merely one of securing our release. The Commissioner has set his trap and we are caught in it; there is only one way in which we can escape his clutches and that is by surrendering the opium: there is no other option.'

This only added to the clamour.

'No option? For subjects of the world's most powerful nation?'

'Why, sir, you are a disgrace to your uniform!'

'Are we Frogs that we should throw up our arms in surrender at the first hint of trouble?'

With a grimace of resignation Captain Elliott glanced at Mr Slade who rose at once from his chair. The clamour continued as he went to the fireplace, cane in hand.

Then Mr Slade unloosed a roar: 'Gentlemen! Gentlemen, as you well know, no one is more in sympathy with you than I. But this is an instance when we would do well to recall the words *fallaces sunt rerum species*. We must pay heed to the immortal Seneca; we must look beyond appearances.'

Bahram understood now that Captain Elliott was far cleverer than he had thought: knowing that he commanded little authority in Fanqui-town, he had evidently taken the trouble to recruit some influential voices to speak in his support.

'A moment's reflection will reveal to you, gentlemen,' said Slade, 'that by seizing our property under threat the Commissioner is doing us a great service. For he is thereby offering Lord Palmerston exactly what needs in order to declare war: a *casus belli*.'

At this, the protests began to fade away and quiet descended on the room.

'I have looked into the matter,' continued Mr Slade, 'and even a brief inquiry reveals several instances where the seizure of property belonging to British subjects has provided the grounds for a declaration of war. It happened after the massacre of Amboyna, in 1622, when the Dutch seized the property of the English residents of that island and subjected them to unspeakable tortures. Extensive reparations were later exacted. Similarly, the government of Spain has also been forced to indemnify British subjects for the seizure of their property on at least one occasion. But let me emphasize: I cite these examples only as precedents, because the history of commerce does not exhibit any instance of so extensive a robbery as is being contemplated now by Commissioner Lin – and that too on a specious plea of morality.'

'But Mr Slade!' The interjection was from Charles King who had risen to his feet. 'You have neglected to mention a crucial difference between these precedents and the case at hand – which is that the property in question here consists of *smuggled goods*. The prohibitions of Chinese law against opium are of nearly forty years standing and their existence, and steadily increasing severity, is well known to all. Need I remind you, by way of comparison, that British law states that any person found harbouring prohibited goods shall forfeit treble their value? Need I add further that British law also states that any person who is found guilty of the offence of smuggling shall suffer death as a felon?'

'And need *I* remind *you*, Mr King,' said Mr Slade, 'that we are not in Britain but in China? Nothing remotely comparable to the processes of British law obtains here: no proceedings have been brought; no arrests made.'

'Ah! So that then is your objection?' retorted Mr King. 'Because instead of arresting the contrabandists and seizing the prohibited goods by force of arms, the Commissioner has, after repeated

warnings, merely demanded their surrender? Because he has treated the owners not as individual felons but as a community in open insubordination against a regular government? But you would do well to note, sir, that the system of collective responsibility lies at the very heart of Chinese processes of law.'

Mr Slade's face had turned colour and his voice rose again to a roar. 'You disgrace yourself sir,' he thundered, 'by comparing English law with the whims of despots! If you, as an American, wish to submit to Manchu tyranny that is your business. But you cannot expect free men such as ourselves to join you in accepting the vagaries of Celestial misrule.'

'But . . .'

Before Mr King could say any more an outcry ripped through the room.

'. . . you've said enough already sir . . .'

'. . . don't even belong here . . .'

'. . . prating Yankee hypocrite . . .!'

Mr King cast a glance around the room and then, pushing back his chair, he quietly exited the room.

'. . . good riddance . . .!'

'. . . grow a long-tail sir, it'd suit you well . . .'

When silence had been restored Mr Dent rose to his feet and went to join Captain Elliot and Mr Slade at the fireplace. Turning to face the room he said: 'I am completely of a mind with Mr Slade: Commissioner Lin's demands amount to a straightforward act of robbery. But as Mr Slade has pointed out, there is a silver lining: if the Commissioner persists in this course he will present Her Majesty's government with an excellent opportunity to avenge the humiliations to which we have been subjected – and that while also placing our commercial relations with China on a sounder footing. What years of attempted negotiations have failed to achieve will be quickly settled by a few gunboats and a small expeditionary force.'

Mr Slade, not to be outdone, thumped his cane on the floor again: 'Let me remind you, gentlemen, of what King William the Fourth said when he sent his commissioners to the Canadas: "Remember, the Canadas must not be lost!" Needless to add that

the British trade with China is of vastly greater commercial importance to Britain than the Canadas. It reaps an annual revenue of five million pounds and involves the most vital interests of the mercantile, manufacturing, shipping and maritime interests of the United Kingdom. It affects, in an eminent degree, the territorial revenue of our Indian empire. It must not be lost by any wavering imbecility in meeting the present difficulties.'

Now, seeing the tide turn in his favour, Captain Elliott permitted himself a smile: 'It will not be lost, gentlemen, I can assure you of that.'

Mr Dent nodded: 'If it comes to a passage of arms, as it surely will, no one who has any familiarity with the state of China's defences can doubt that our forces will prevail. Nor can there be any doubt that once the outcome is decided the British government will ensure that we are repaid for our losses, and at rates that are to our advantage.' Now, steepling his fingertips, Dent looked around the library. 'We are all businessmen here, so I need hardly explain to you the implications of this. In effect we will not be giving up our cargoes to Commissioner Lin.' Here he paused to flash a smile at his listeners: 'No, we will be extending him a loan – one that will be repaid at a rate of interest that will serve both as a punishment for his arrogance and a reward for our patience.'

Glancing around the room Bahram saw that many heads were nodding in agreement. He realized suddenly that he was alone in being utterly dismayed by this turn of events. His alarm grew deeper when not a single voice was raised in protest, even when Captain Elliott rose to his feet to say: 'I take it there are no further objections?'

To speak in public, in English, was not something Bahram had ever liked to do, but he could not stifle the cry that now burst from his throat. 'Yes, Captain Elliott! I object.'

Captain Elliott's face hardened as he turned to look in his direction. 'I beg your pardon?' he said with a raised eyebrow.

'You cannot give in, Captain Elliott!' cried Bahram. 'Please – you must stand fast. Surely you can see, no? If you give in now, this man will win – this Commissioner. He will win without harming a hair on our heads, without touching a weapon. He will win just by writing these things –' Bahram pointed at the papers in the translator's hands – 'he will win by writing these, what do you call them? Hookums? Chitties? Letters?'

Captain Elliott's face creased into a smile. 'I assure you, Mr Moddie, the Commissioner's victory will be short-lived. As a naval officer I can tell you that battles are not won by letter-writers.'

'And still he has won, hasn't he?' said Bahram. 'At least this battle is his, is it not?' He had no other words in which to express his desolation, his sense of betrayal. He could not bear to look at Captain Elliott any more: how could he ever have imagined that this man would somehow conjure up an outcome that was favourable to himself?

Mr Burnham had swivelled around in his chair, and he broke in with a broad smile.

'But Mr Moddie, don't you see? The Commissioner's victory – if such it is – will be purely illusory. We will get back everything we give up, and more. Our investors stand to make handsome profits. It is just a matter of waiting.'

'That is just it,' said Bahram. 'How long will we have to wait?'

Captain Elliott scratched his chin. 'Perhaps two years. Maybe three.'

'Two or three years!'

Bahram remembered the angry letters that had been accumulating in his office; he tried to think of how he would explain the circumstances to his investors; he thought of the reactions of his brothers-in-law when the news reached them; he could almost hear them exulting, in their discreet way; he could imagine what they would say to Shireenbai: We warned you; he's a speculator, you shouldn't have let him squander your inheritance . . .

'Surely your investors would wait, Mr Moddie, would they not?' Burnham insisted. 'It is just a question of a little time after all.'

Time!

Every man in the room was looking in Bahram's direction now. He was too proud to tell them that time was the one thing he did not have; that a delay of two years would mean certain default; that for him the results of Captain Elliott's betrayal would be ruin, bankruptcy and debtor's prison.

None of this could be said, not here, not now. Somehow Bahram managed to summon a smile. 'Yes,' he said. 'Of course. My investors will wait.'

The heads nodded and turned away. Once freed of their scrutiny Bahram tried to sit still, but it was impossible – his limbs would not obey him. Gathering the skirts of his angarkha together, he slipped noiselessly out of the library. With his head down he walked blindly through the Consulate's corridors and out of the compound. He passed the Co-Hong merchants without sparing them a glance and was halfway across the Maidan when he heard Zadig's voice behind him: Bahram-bhai! Bahram-bhai!

He stopped. Yes, Zadig Bey?

Bahram-bhai, said Zadig breathlessly. Is it true that Captain Elliott has asked everyone to surrender their opium?

Yes.

And they have agreed to do it?

Yes. They have.

So what will you do, Bahram-bhai?

What can I do, Zadig Bey? Tears had come to his eyes now, and he brushed them away. I will surrender my cargo, like everyone else.

Zadig took hold of his arm and they began to walk towards the river.

It is only money, Bahram-bhai. Soon you will recover your losses.

The money is the least of it, Zadig Bey.

What is it then?

Bahram could not speak; he had to stop and choke back a sob.

Zadig Bey, he said in a whisper, I gave my soul to Ahriman . . . and it was all for nothing. Nothing.