



Yankee Mandarin

(Excerpt)

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Prelude

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“Have a small heart tonight – be careful,” said the *lodaai* – the old-great, the junk master. “I smell seaweed rotting on rocks above the tide, over here, and over there I hear the crashing of surf.” He leaned out over the bow and whispered to the junk. “We are in dangerous water, and the sky will soon be black. Do you see what we search for? Look hard.”

The junk's old eyes, wasted and worm-eaten beneath new paint, had sailed over empires of ocean. In their youth, the eyes had gazed down into the sea for quarry, like an archipelago fisher, but years of drought and famine had passed since this predator wanted fish. Now they peered straight ahead, searching for dragons disguised as mountains beneath the sea, for grasping shoals haunted by drowned ghosts waiting to clutch at passing prey, for shifting eddies that betrayed swift tidal currents and shallow depths. For imperial war junks, too – and British gunboats.

Two days earlier, she had slaughtered the passengers and crew of a lorcha in Blackwall Pass, west of Chushan Island, and now she thirsted for the blood of an American clipper ship departing Ningpo for Shanghai.

“Do you see it yet?” the *lodaai* murmured. The swollen eyes made only the sound of water rushing against wood. The *lodaai* was not troubled that there was no answer.

The *lodaai* was short and slender, clad in cotton slippers and brown quilted cotton trousers and jacket. He had the round face of the Cantonese, with pinched features, a clean-shaven forehead, and black hair braided into a long queue down his back. His name was Lay Wah-duk, Honorable-conduct Lay, a native of Canton whose family had lived on a junk and fished in the Pearl River delta. When he was fifteen, a typhoon destroyed the family junk and drowned all aboard except Lay. A northbound trading junk picked him up, but that ill-fated vessel was attacked and burned by pirates on the approach to Ningpo. The pirates gave Lay Wah-duk the choice of becoming a pirate himself, or death, so he became a pirate. Years later, he joined a gang of pirates gathered from disbanded imperial troops and ruled by a renegade English sailor.

Lay Wah-duk's skill at handling junks of any class won for him the rank of fleet admiral, and he became leader of the Cantonese faction of the Englishman's gang. Lay was the *lodaai* to his colleagues, and highly regarded – he talked to junks.

I am your ears and nose, he thought, but you are my eyes. The *lodaai* glanced back nervously at the grisly cargo on the deck amidships. “Pay no attention to those things,” he told the junk. “We soon will be far away from them.”

This junk was a weathered old Ningpo trader prowling in the China Sea, scudding over ocean the color of dried blood. Her grimy deck stretched aft eighty feet, from a low stem to a high, turret-like deckhouse perched above the stern. Bright blue eyes bulged under her bluff prow – one eye grafted to each side so she could find her way when her feckless pilots could not. Each huge oculus, hand-carved from camphor wood, had a stark white iris midst its lustrous blue orb. Her stern was painted blue with red facings – but without the lawful inscription for port of registry. A black-bordered red flag flew atop the tallest of her three ancient masts, and she

displayed the rare extravagance of hand-carved teak railings. In the twilight, the junk's brown and yellow sails, tall and slender rectangles of woven rattan matting and bamboo battens, were silhouetted black against the orange afterglow of the sunset.

The junk slowed, brailed up the foot of her lugsails, spilled wind, settled into her wash, and skulked silently past Show Island into the shadow of the East Volcanos. The four stark basalt crags of East Volcano Island loomed black over the old hulk as it wallowed in the quiet shallows of the narrow channel.

The thump of heavy boots approached from behind the *lodaai*.

“Are you talkin' to the fokin boat again you bloody half-wit!” bellowed a voice. “You see anything yet?”

The Cantonese spun about to face a tall, heavy, florid-faced Westerner clad in black boots and trousers and a loose, long-sleeved white Crimean shirt open at the throat.

You stupid pig-shit demon, thought the *lodaai*, drown in your own piss.

The foreigner was the English freebooter Fokie Tom, notorious from Peking to Canton as a savage spoiler of the trade routes through the East China Sea. His ice-blue eyes glinted coldly from beneath bushy eyebrows and a mat of long hair as yellow, Chinese might have said, as the rooftop tiles of the Forbidden City.

“Boat see plenty, massah,” Lay Wah-duk said. “Look for *bu-yi*.”

Fokie Tom was born Thomas James Babbington, second Earl of Suffolkshire, but his father's hopes for Thomas at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst were broken when his young son struck a drill sergeant and Thomas was drummed out of school. Preferring hell's fires to hearth fires and his father's wrath, Tom went to sea and learned gunnery aboard HMS *Wellesley*, a 74-gun ship-of-the-line, at the blockade of Canton, the sack of Tanghai, and at the mouth of the Peiho during the first China war.

“Listen here, Lay, first, we tries to ‘oist the buoy and carry it inshore, but if it's too ‘eavy then you jump into the fokin sampan with the cold chisel and ‘ammer and fetch that fokin chain up and cut it in two.”

Navy discipline suited Tom no better than discipline at Sandhurst, and he deserted at Whampoa to join Chin A Po's pirate fleet as a gunner. He survived twelve years of debauchery among Chinese pirates and pursuit by British gunboats, smoking as much opium as he robbed and sold, and drinking the land dry of every kind of thrice-fired rot-gut *samshu*, Shaohsing wine and Kaoliang whiskey. He whored with every village girl that came to hand and every captive woman that fell into his clutches, as if intent on populating south China with a new race of half-breed little blond Toms. All his whelps that actually came into the light were drowned, or had their brains bashed out before the mother jumped into a well or was thrown into the Pearl River. Eventually, when age caught up and he sobered a little, he drifted north into the Chushan Archipelago and Ningpo, and began to rebuild the broken empire of his pirate mentor Chin A Po.

“Can do, mastah!”

Fokie Tom turned away and went to the waist where three wooden coffins stood side-by-side against the rail. Lay Wah-duk swallowed hard when he saw the Englishman approach the coffins – the pig-shit demon called up the dead for a terrible task. The coffins were large in the Chinese fashion, lacquered bright red, and hewn from ironwood that would sink in water. Fokie Tom loosened the rope securing the cover of the first coffin and lifted the lid.

“Mastah, mastah! What do, mastah? Mus' not open box!” The Cantonese rushed toward the coffins, but stopped several feet away.

“Go to hell you superstitious little bastard.” The lid fell off and revealed a purple corpse still recognizable as a Westerner despite gaping cuts, lacerations and burns. The *lodaai* screamed, ran to the other side of the main deck, and scampered up the ladder to a small shrine before the deckhouse. A dozen Chinese were already there, on their knees before a clay figurine of the goddess of the sea, Ma Tzu Po, their hands pressed together in front of their faces, muttering urgent prayers of supplication. Repeatedly, they reached beneath the altar for bills of the mock money used for ceremony – joss money – to kindle in a small red votive lamp on the altar and burn in an ash-filled bowl before the image of the goddess.

“Lay, get to the bow and watch, you goddamn little shit!”

“Mus' pay plentee *chin-chin* joss, mastah. Make god keep 'way hungly ghos'.”

“Get to the bow!”

Lay Wah-duk's face turned squally with anger and fear. He fetched up wads of joss money from beneath the altar and threw them into the bowl of flaming paper. He grabbed more handfuls of joss money, scrambled down from the poop to the main deck, ran to the coffins, and threw the joss money over the rail.

“Pay *chin-chin* joss,” he hissed at the pig-shit demon. Then he ran down the deck past the last coffin and threw the other handful of joss money over that rail before slinking back out to the bow.

“There now, Archie,” Fokie Tom muttered to the corpse in the first coffin, “we’s even providin’ you with travel money, see?” Come to wish you *bon voyage* I have, he thought. You allus was my dearest friend. Moved up together in the world, from cutting purses to cutting throats, didn’t we? Paid our dues loading down the bloody fokin imperial war junk captains with spoils, and freighting the bleedin’ fokin mandarins with Mexican dollars. Had a high time then, chasin’ down so many fokin opium schooners, them high-and-mighty British admirals and merchant princes spit blood. Cut out the middleman you allus said, or cut ‘im *up*. But then you went and spoilt it all, Archie. Tried to cut me out, too. You turned out to be an old-school company man, didn’t believe in newfangled notions like free-market competition, had to monopolize it all. You’d never’ve tried to do me in, you swine, if you had sense enough *to let the wretch who toils accuse not, hate not, him who wears the spoils*. Murderin’ me would’ve exceeded your bloody fokin commission. Byron’s probably wasted on you, too.

Fokie Tom was apologetic. Each of the corpses had been people useful to him. When the fury of his blood lust passed, he was sorry he had murdered them. Their absence was an inconvenience. Bringing them aboard for one last employment was a reprieve in Tom’s view, a final opportunity for each of them to make up for their shortcomings in life and the bother they had caused him. Lay Wah-duk had pleaded to simply bring aboard another anchor to do the job Tom wanted done, and bury these bodies back on the pirate’s island base. The Englishman threw a tankard of ale at the *lodaai*, shouting that an anchor was too heavy and unwieldy, and that there was no goddamn poetic justice in a fokin anchor. Rare fokin commodity justice, he said to himself, and rarer still the chance to be dishin’ it up instead o’ being served it out.

Tom hefted four 12-pound cannon balls into the bottom of the coffin, replaced the lid, took up hammer and nails from a box beside the rail, and nailed the coffin shut. Then he opened the second coffin and glared down at the body of a Fukienese sailor with a bullet hole in his forehead.

Yes, it’s me you heathen josser, it’s Fokie Tom, *whose very name appalls the fiercest of his crew*. Come to give you final orders, I have, and these orders you *will* obey. There’s a big marker buoy just ahead, a nun buoy shaped like a cone and red and white like a bleedin’ Yankee flag. We’ll cut it from its mooring and drag it inshore under those volcanoes, where it’s ever so much shallower. Then, to be sure it stay’s there, we’ll chain the three of you to the buoy, in your shiny red ironwood coffins, weighted with big black cannon balls. Tomorrow when you sees that big flappin’ goose of an American clipper ship, *Essex* they calls ‘er, come waddling up the channel, you’re to pull that ship over to the buoy and run ‘er aground. She’ll be chock full o’ gold and guns, bars of fine gold worth thousands, and fine new brass field guns, 6-pounders they are. And there’s a sweet little lady, too – a white-skinned, blue-veined, pretty little bitch. She’ll be all warm ‘n juicy and too young yet to know how hot a woman gets for a man, but I’ll larn her. Rip off ‘er rags, lay ‘er over a big gun, strap her ankles to muzzle and cascabel, an’ larn her good, just like I did all them others. It’ll be easier’n swallerin’ tiger’s milk ‘cause we’ve got our own man hired aboard as pilot. After that, you can drag down into the briny deep as many Christian souls as you can get your bony fingers into, ‘cause there’ll be lots that’s past carin’.

Tom loaded four cannon balls into the second coffin and nailed it shut. He opened the third coffin and dropped heavy shot in beside the naked, blood-streaked body of an adolescent Hakka girl who’s sunken features, except for the gash across her throat, were still gauntly attractive even in death.

Ah, Judy, he thought with a long sigh. Such a sad end for a swell tart. I never enjoyed a little laced mutton as much as I enjoyed you – at first. If you’d just stopped crying and shown a little passion. That whimpering on and on just got on me nerves – made me so angry, that’s why I threw you down into the hold for the crew. All your screamin’ must have made them angry too. Look what they did to you. Tsk, tsk. Well, now you’re going to be in good company with Archie here. He was always partial to little southern girls.

Tom watched as dragon’s blood filled the sky above the western horizon. The dark red flame kindled ablaze water yellow with windblown loess from Mongolian deserts and ochre loam from the Yangtze River watershed, transmuting the sea into a revelation of ruin. Sanguinary light sallied over battlements of turbulent clouds and suffused the salt air with forebodings of violent death.

Fokie Tom nailed shut the third coffin.

