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Prologue

'AT DAWN WE sighted the coast of China. Numerous islands, small and hilly, little but rock covered with rough grass and scrub. On this grey, humid spring day an inhospitable shore, though doubtless under fine weather it would have a certain rugged, if not even noble, beauty. A sailor observed to me how clumps of trees in such sheltered places as the islands afford indicate the presence of unseen China villages, concealment being needed due in part to this being a region of lawlessness, and in part to violent summer winds called typhoons.

'It is eight months exactly since we left London, and almost with surprise we learn it is a Sunday. Here, then, is my life's destination. This is the place where I must remain for fifteen years, perhaps even twenty. It could be for all my days, as God in his wisdom knows and as I have myself seen. The graves on St. Helena—there were many names from the China station. Yet if I can prosper in this remote Cathay, and in prospering aid those dearest to me to live as it is fitting they should, this will be life well spent.

'With a favourable wind we were soon in among the islands, and at half past ten o'clock we anchored in Taipa roads amid a great concourse of shipping. Three other Indianmen had preceded us, the four of us together, the greatest ships to ride the seas, creating a fine spectacle. Among the larger vessels I noted the flags of several European nations. Under the British flag, apart from the vessels of the Hon'ble Company, the greatest number of ships are those engaged in what is termed the country trade, plying solely in Eastern waters, in particular between China and India. These are

the ships that bring opium to China.

'Taipa is an island differing in nothing from those about it save in affording excellent shelter. Ashore is little but a China customs house, though this is important, for it is here that ships are measured for dues before the Chinese permit them to enter the river and approach the city of Canton which lies some 83 miles inland from this place, or 60 as the crow flies. I shall endeavour to keep this journal of my sojourn in Cathay, not that these pages will contain anything notable concerning myself, but that it is in man's nature to leave in some permanent form a record of his passage through distant and curious places.

'I was met by my immediate senior in the Hon'ble Company's hierarchy—this is the only word for it—which is strictly an order of seniority based on the date of first arrival. The encounter was not without amusement. It chanced that I was dressing in the inner room of my cabin—I had the great cabin in the stern of the *Grenada*. Hearing a movement outside, I took it to be John, who had been acting as my servant throughout the voyage, and called his name. When no one answered I went out to find this milord—a coin of doubtful alloy—a regular Cathay buck, a kind of rough dandy. "My name does not happen to be John," he remarked superciliously. I inquired what it might then be. "George Cuming," he answered, proffering his ungloved hand, which was cool and damp. Aware of my mistake I hastened to make amends by means of a jest and by clapping him on the shoulder, but when he observed this latter intention he drew away as if fearing I might break his bones. He is a narrow-faced, thin man, more or less my age, excessively pale, and with eyes as blue as my own, though I would hope mine were never so cold in their stare as his. This Cuming is a man who does not readily reveal his motives, and these are perhaps devious. I would have been plainer with him had I not reflected that it may be my lot to have him at my side for many years to come.'

Thus wrote a twenty-four-year-old Englishman of Anglo-

Dutch parentage named Thomas Kuyck van Mierop, and there is something almost prophetic in the words he uses to describe this first encounter with the colleague whom he was indeed to have at his side throughout the whole of his time on the China coast. Moreover, in the excitement of his first day ashore he omitted to date the entry in his journal. Here the archives of the East India Company supply the missing information. The Honourable East India Company's ship *Grenada*, on this particular voyage, reached China on the 12th of March 1780.

The China they came to was an empire powerful and impenetrable, with no knowledge of, or interest in, anything lying beyond its frontiers. The handful of Europeans who conducted trade with China were kept in complete ignorance of the mysterious land whose luxurious products the Western world so eagerly sought. Under severe Chinese rules no foreigner was allowed to learn the Chinese language or set foot beyond the narrow enclave reserved for foreign residence along the Canton riverfront. In addition it was a society of men only, no European women being permitted by the Chinese to come to China.

From this exceedingly restricted life there was no such thing as leave. Once in a China lifetime an officer might have the good fortune to be sent on duty to Calcutta. This apart, a term of service on the China station was, as Thomas' journal rightly infers, a sentence of fifteen to twenty years' exile in a land so alien and remote as to defy imagination. Many never returned from this exile, or if they did so it was to die along the homeward route at some such lonely spot as St. Helena, which was used as a watering place for ships sailing on the immense voyage from China to Europe round the Cape of Good Hope. Though the foreigners lived in China surrounded by teeming thousands of Chinese humanity, their lives were in some respects as lonely and strange as had they been sequestered in a small group on the furthest uninhabited island of the Antipodes.

Foremost among the nations trading with China, their

trade outweighing that of all other foreign nations put together, were the British. The East India Company, operating under Royal Charter, with the monopoly of all British trade in Eastern seas, was the largest commercial organization on earth. In India its activities extended far beyond those of a commercial company. It had assumed full powers of government over entire provinces of India, a fact recognized in the previous year, in 1779, by the appointment of Mr. Warren Hastings as Governor-General of these Indian possessions, with his headquarters at Fort William, Calcutta. At the head of the East India Company sat the Court of Directors in London, and the attention of the Directors, as well as public interest in England, was mainly concentrated on the Company's affairs in India. In fact, however, the Company's very much smaller China station, about which the English public seldom heard anything, was in one way equally if not more important, in that it handled the Company's main source of profit, the tea trade, of which the commercial centre was Canton, the only city in China open for foreign trade, and even then only partially open—for six months each year, after which all non-Chinese had to leave. It was as a supercargo, or commercial officer, in the tea trade that Thomas van Mierop had been appointed.

His father, Martin Kuyck van Mierop, after a stern Dutch upbringing in his native Utrecht, had come to London in his early twenties, and by integrity and strength of character built himself a reputation as the most highly respected underwriter in the City of London in the days when the business of underwriting ships and their cargoes was conducted at Lloyd's Coffee House. After the long war with France, and in part as a result of the sudden ending of high profits on war insurance, standards fell at Lloyd's till the place was little better than a haunt of gamblers, and it was at this time, in 1769, that the more serious-minded and reliable underwriters gathered under the leadership of Martin van Mierop and moved away in protest, eventually leaving coffee houses behind for ever, and founding Lloyd's

of London. Martin Kuyck van Mierop was the first Chairman of Lloyd's, and remained so till his death in January 1778.

A devout Protestant and a stern disciplinarian, Martin was a somewhat intimidating father, raising his children in a God-fearing atmosphere in which application to their moral duties, to God and to society, held the foremost place. But he was just and benevolent, and Thomas, his only son, had never seriously disputed the rightness of anything his father did or said.

Thomas' mother, Elizabeth Jane Bentham, was English, attractive and intelligent, with a strain of the intellectual in her. Coming from a family whose moral tendencies made them concerned about social injustices in a complaisant age—one of her nephews, Thomas' first cousin, was Jeremy Bentham, who had recently made his appearance in the London firmament with his demands for a reform of the laws of England—Mrs. van Mierop was an accomplished hostess, attracting to the riverside family home at Twickenham men and women of liberal ideas, whose conversation was more often than not concerned with poor law administration, prison reform, the emancipation of slaves, conditions in the American colonies, and even—though this only rarely—the illegal traffic in opium to China, a subject to which young Thomas listened without realizing he would one day be directly confronted by it and obliged to reach his own personal decision.

The combination of a somewhat puritanical father and a progressive, reform-minded mother had provided Thomas with a background unusual for a young man sailing to make his fortune in the East, and though he had no advance knowledge of this, he was to prove something of a phenomenon on the China coast, being the first representative China had seen of that significant group of people who came to be known as the humanitarians.

As his journal shows, he came to China not from any particular wish to go there—few would have entertained

such a wish—but because of family duty. Though Martin van Mierop's leadership had inaugurated a new era for the London underwriters, his years as Chairman of Lloyd's were marked by a number of serious financial reverses in his own affairs, and at his death his family found themselves in straitened circumstances. Thomas was at this time working as a writer for the East India Company in London. Realizing that on his meagre salary he would never be able to support his widowed mother and his two sisters, he made application for a post in India.

The fortunes, the larger part of them illicit, made by Company officers in India were of such spectacular dimensions that vacancies in the Company's Indian service had become a preserve of the highly influential, for whom to have in gift a commission in the Bengal Army, for example, provided a satisfactory method of rewarding hangers-on whose services were becoming inconvenient, or of disposing of unruly members of cadet branches of the family. For a young man with the patronage of a marquess or a Member of Parliament, the more unscrupulous the better, the riches of India were as good as in his pocket before he left the shores of England, provided he too was sufficiently unscrupulous. The van Mierop family, belonging to the world of commerce, could not enjoy such patronage, and Thomas' application was refused; but by using such influence as the family had, they finally obtained for him a post in the Company's less lucrative China service, in which nonetheless, with opium to be reckoned with, men did not do too badly.

The journal continues:

'Accompanied by Mr. Cuming I was rowed by barge the mile or so that lies between Taipa roads and the city of Macao. This is, I am sure, a city like no other in the world, for though situate in China, and though infested—by day, at least—by Chinamen of every quality, it is of itself a part of Europe, a down-at-heel part it may be said, subdued by Roman Catholic superstitions, yet all the same it is Europe, and I rejoiced at this.

‘Macao stands on a narrow peninsula at the mouth of the river leading to Canton. The outflow of mud from the river causes its waters to be shallow, but for craft of moderate size it has two well-sheltered harbours. One of these, which I observed only from a distance, lies on a stretch of water which by riverine channels reaches Canton, but is used only by the Portuguese and by small vessels. We approached by the more spacious harbour facing the Pearl River, which is the main channel to Canton. This harbour is a majestic bay, as regular in form as a crescent moon, its shore lined with houses of great dignity, all of them painted in bright colours (by order of the Portuguese), behind which rises a gentle slope covered with gracious buildings, including numerous churches and walled gardens planted with many trees. Each hilltop, of which there are three, is crowned by a fort, the use of which would appear to be ceremonial.

‘Macao is a Portuguese possession—or so claim the Portuguese. Their claim would seem to be belied by the fact that, according to Mr. Cuming, they pay the Chinese an annual ground rent for the use of the place. They do, however, exercise a certain jurisdiction, having some soldiers and a watch force. But then, it is said, the Chinese too have a watch force, the two forces taking care about their courses in the streets of the city at night, lest they collide.

‘One would have thought that the Chinese, at least, would have *wished* for a collision. But this is apparently not the case. “Unique conditions prevail here,” said C. obliquely—he is tediously oblique—rendering it inadvisable for me to ask more.

‘The Hon’ble Company’s house (it is in fact three or four houses joined into one) dominates the waterfront, being the most splendid building in what is unquestionably a crescent of great elegance. Next to it is the so-called palace of the Portuguese governor, a more modest edifice guarded by two African soldiers wearing uniforms which I could swear are thirty years old. In general, all that concerns the Portuguese is old and decrepit. It is remarkable that they have

remained here so long. The place is priest-ridden. I have never seen so many churches for so small a population.'

In fact, this is an accurate observation. The Portuguese population of Macao at this time was about 3,000, nearly all of them of mixed race, born and bred in Macao. Only the Governor and a few senior officials were Portuguese from Portugal. To minister to the spiritual needs of this small community were some 90 priests.

'It was said in London that the Canton trade is seasonal. Now that I am here I begin to understand this. The China Government insists that no foreigner may become permanently resident. It is for this reason we are not allowed to bring women to China. The trading season at Canton is during the winter months. After this we are expected to go home to see our families—the China Government is benevolent. Having no conception of geography, however, they believe it quite possible to go to England and return to China in six months! The outcome of this misconception is that at the end of the season we merely descend to Macao, which by some inexplicable logic is not part of China for these purposes, despite the ground rent. This is no place for a lawyer.

'C. explains that the Hon'ble Company has just come down from Canton for the summer. "I need not advise you of conditions in Canton," says he, "since it will be some months before you have cause to go there." Which, being interpreted, means that we move there in September.

'It astonishes me to discover that the tea trade, immense in proportions, is handled by only fifteen supercargoes. Of these the three most senior form the Select Committee, the chief being styled the President, responsible to Fort William. I had expected to be brought to this eminent personage, but this, Mr. C. said, could wait a day or so—no one seems to be in any haste here. Instead I was advised to put my time to use by examining the possibilities of obtaining a Macao residence, it being no longer in vogue to dwell in the Hon'ble Company's house alongside ancient folk whose stock

of anecdotes ran dry ten years ago.

‘There being some evident wisdom in this, I resorted to an intermediary in this matter, an intermediary being required to deal with the Portuguese, who alone are permitted to own property in this place. My motives here were partly to be in vogue (and to there being nothing more profitable to do on a Sunday), and partly to humour this Cuming, the ambivalence of whose attitude requires study, he being a person who must be fed sometimes with sour, at other times with sweet.

‘I must confess my self-composure was somewhat exercised when I actually beheld the intermediary he recommended . . .’

PART ONE

The Decorated Side of the Screen

ABRAHAM BIDDLE'S HANDS smelt of money, and the lines about his heavy, churlish mouth expressed an intimate and practical acquaintance of sin. Thomas noted the smell of money when, a few moments after shaking hands with Biddle, he put his right hand reflectively to his chin, while listening to the man's grandiose yet Cockney flow of language, and the smell thus indirectly reached his nostrils.

Biddle's shop, if this was the correct word for it, was situated on a cobbled hillside street with stone-paved steps every ten yards or so down its descent, looking for all the world as if it were part of a small coastal town in Portugal. Only the pig-tailed Chinese in their dark brown jackets, toiling up and trotting down the street shouting in lively fashion with loads balanced on poles over their shoulders, indicated that this was not Portugal, but a land ten thousand miles away.

A sign outside the shop declared in Portuguese that the business being conducted within was that of the sons of the late João Gonçalves Sequeira; but this was as far as the shop's outward connexion with the Portuguese extended. The interior was Chinese. There were orange tiled floors, half-length swing doors of dark polished wood cunningly carved, with decorated porcelain plaques inset; and there were partitions, also of carved wood, giving reasonable privacy in what was in fact one large room stretching far back from the street. In every section of it indoor plants were growing in quaintly shaped pots and jars.

China fashion—for years had toned him into the landscape—Biddle took time to approach the point of discus-

sion, though well aware that the visit concerned the acquisition of a house. Meanwhile he studied the new gentleman of the coast.

Thomas van Mierop had wavy copper-coloured hair and blue eyes deep-set in a rugged, handsome face. He wore a buff surcoat and breeches, a plain white kerchief, and cuffs that extended no more than an inch beyond his sleeves, with only a hint of embroidery—the latest London fashion. There was a quietness, a sense of purpose, about this young man, Biddle noted. He was not like some of the other supercargoes he had seen in his time, who, albeit they were gentlemen, took time to imbibe the extremes of reserve and caution required in the tight European society of the China coast. There was honesty in him. It could be observed in the clear, almost Nordic, look of the eyes, in the firm chin, and in the strong, broad-knuckled hands. Honesty was a quality Biddle mistrusted. On the coast it was invariably a nuisance, and could be dangerous. There was strength of character too, undoubtedly; the young man's entire person expressed this; and about the mouth, the lips casually compressed, was a streak of cynicism, and much patience, an unusual capacity for patience. Taken altogether, something of a problem, Biddle concluded; something of a problem, needing careful handling.

"We'd long been expectin' yer comin', Mr. van Mierop," Biddle said, rubbing his smelly hands slowly together, "and assumin' yer were a person of certain taste—in short, a gentleman of refinement—I'd taken the liberty of makin' certain provisional arrangements which me worthy client Mr. Cumin' may 'ave mentioned to yer."

"No, he did not," Thomas replied firmly. Indeed, the existence of a premeditated plan caused him to reflect with some curiosity how Cuming should even know such a person as Biddle.

The older man was undisturbed.

"'E was possibly affected by emotion, Mr. van Mierop, since the matter concerns our lately departed and dear

friend Mr. William Urquhart, a Company gentleman of a quality such as I've known few."

About fifty years old, Biddle had allowed his hair to grow long—it was white and unkempt, with patches of what had once probably been red—though on a skull-shaped stand beside his Chinese chair of blackwood and marble he still kept a wig, a poor thing, Thomas noted, curled without artifice. From the wig he calculated that Biddle must have been out of England at least fifteen years, while as to his origin, his accent spoke for itself. In China, however, there was the difference that, as a member of the small English community, men like Biddle rose in stature. Constant dealing with educated Englishmen had polished the Billingsgate boy, till as a middle-aged man the only obvious indication of his background was his Cockney accent, which resounded imperturbably on a flow of prose sometimes worthy of Mr. Gibbon himself.

"Moral rectitude, Mr. van Mierop," Biddle was saying with a slight, rather fond, lingering of the tongue, "and hab-solute respect for the wishes of others. Without these two qualities no man can confidently remain in China in independent commerce, least of all one engaged, like meself, in business demandin' the exercise of the greatest confidence."

Concerning the nature of Biddle's business Thomas was left in uncertainty of all save that its basis was illegal. For as conversation proceeded it appeared that none but Portuguese citizens were allowed to trade in a Portuguese possession. Biddle explained equanimously that he evaded this restriction by hiring the name of the sons of the late João Gonçalves Sequeira and conducting his trade through them, as if he were an employee.

"And I take care never to ignore me employers," he added unctuously. "The gentleman yer may 'ave observed beside the front door, sir, stretched out insensible on a bed, is one of 'em. 'Is only demand is for a liberal supply of first-quality Chinese liquor—an easy demand to meet, praised be the Lord! But as a gesture of goodwill 'is nephew's

allowed to carry messages to the European 'ouses."

With a sigh Biddle then proceeded to enumerate some of the many other restrictions, Chinese, Portuguese and English, aimed at preventing the country traders from becoming permanently resident in Canton or Macao. Biddle's long survival on the coast would have assumed almost the nature of a miracle had he not, a little later on, explained that by taking appropriate measures and keeping quiet, most laws could be ignored.

Then his voice fell and became more oily, his heavy-lidded eyes lighted up.

"Our lately departed friend Mr. Urquhart was among me many Company clients, Mr. van Mierop. 'E rented from the second generation of Goncalves Sequeira a property of some distinction, situated on 'Ospital Street. It'd occurred to me, sir, that yer might not consider it an 'abitation unworthy of yerself, and 'oldin', as I do, power of attorney for Mr. Urquhart, I could arrange for yer immediate occupation of the premises, at a modest rent and fee, should yer so desire."

"When will Mr. Urquhart be returning to China?"

Biddle shook his head sadly.

"Alas! never, Mr. van Mierop. 'E departed this life at St. Helena on 'is 'omeward journey, greatly debilitated by the rigours of the climate and, it must be added, by an excessive partiality for port wine. Of the furnishin's in the 'ouse, when the will's been proved, I shall be in a position to sell such as yer may deem sufficiently elegant to keep. The 'ouse is staffed adequately, I'd say, with its own compradore, four 'ouseboys and body servants, a cook, two laundry women, two gardeners, a bell boy, and two chair bearers." Two bearers, he explained with care, was the usual number for members of the supercargoes' mess, at least for the first few years. More than two could be considered ostentatious.

The compradore, it appeared, was a Chinese merchant who provisioned and in effect managed the house.

"Should yer wish to make domestic changes," Biddle continued, "such matters should be dealt with through the

compradore, who is security for everyone in the 'ouse. This is China fashion. That doesn't, of course, apply to the late Mr. Urquhart's pensioner, for 'om yer'd become responsible if yer decide to occupy the premises. It's a point of honour in these parts, Mr. van Mierop, that when a newly arrived officer replaces one deceased or finally departed 'e continues to support that other officer's pensioner."

"It would appear to be a most charitable and proper arrangement."

A smile that was almost a sneer altered Biddle's face.

"I 'ardly think in this particular case yer'll find the pensioner in any way what one might call a burden. Shall we make an inspection of the premises?"

With this he rose, obsequiously inviting Thomas to precede him into the outer passage connecting one delicately partitioned section with another.

In the depths of the building they entered a gloomy room with only one small interior window. There was a scent of sandalwood and Chinese incense. The walls were lined with what at first looked like panelling, but which more careful observation showed to be several hundred sliding drawers built into the walls, each drawer marked with a name and secured by a small lock.

"On this side, Mr. van Mierop, the officers of the Company—the quality, as one might say. On that side, the gentlemen of the country trade. 'Ere," he said, swinging round and pointing into the darkest corner, "the deceased."

With his hand well above his head he unlocked one of the deep, narrow drawers, which he pulled smoothly out and laid on a table. The drawer contained documents chiefly—legal documents, bills of credit on Calcutta and London—and a large key, which he extracted, thereafter replacing the drawer.

"Company or country, livin' or dead, each Englishman comin' to China makes work for someone; but it's morals, Mr. van Mierop, and knowin' 'ow to keep yer mouth shut,

that brings the work in 'ere. Now let's proceed by way of the smaller streets."

Though it was past the siesta, the shutters of the high, narrow Portuguese windows of the Rua do Hospital remained shut; but as Abraham Biddle, key in hand, mounted two paved steps to a tall double front door, Thomas observed by the slight movement of an upper-floor shutter that though Macao houses sometimes wore an air of somnolence it should not be inferred from this that the people inside them were asleep. Just as small as the world of the foreign traders in China—though more settled, in that its inhabitants came and went only by birth and death—was Macao itself, a world in which it was prudent to keep shutters closed.

Before they were fully inside the hall two Chinese servants in white tunics hurried down from the upper floor, noiseless in neat black cloth slippers, the shape of which stood out markedly in the dim light against the white stockings and puttees in which their baggy black silk trousers were gathered. Without waiting for orders they began flinging open the shutters in the ground-floor rooms, although in fact there was little to see in them—being level with the street, they were conspicuously empty of possessions.

Upstairs other servants were opening shutters on all sides, filling the house with light, bringing its quiet old dignity to life.

"I needn't labour the fact, Mr. van Mierop, that these are premises fittin' for a gentleman."

They were standing in what William Urquhart had used as his living room. It was in complete contrast with the arid lower rooms, the life of a Macao house being conducted (with the exception of cooking) entirely on the upper floor. Persian carpets of appropriate sizes covered nearly every foot of floor space, out across the landings and into other rooms beyond. There were some good pieces of English furniture, but the larger cabinets and almeiras were Portuguese,

ornately carved with pilaster and acanthus, with which were blended peonies and other Chinese motifs, masterpieces of the cabinet-maker's art. The room was large, stretching from the front of the house to the back, divided centrally by an arch decorated with some Chinese craftsman's painstaking imitation of Portuguese maneline. The arch, giving the room two distinct parts, enhanced it with a subtle intimacy. Urquhart, it appeared, when not tippling, occupied himself sketching local scenes. A sketch of the broad sweep of the Praia Grande, 'the more spacious harbour', hung between two of the tall, fanlighted windows, the little panes of which were made of transparent seashells permitting a soft grey-green light to penetrate. There were pipes on a small round Spanish piperack table, and a finely carved cheroot box which, as Biddle casually opened it, Thomas saw was still half full of Manila cigars.

But it was someone else's house—not Abraham Biddle's to rent or to sell, nor yet the property of the second generation of Gonçalves Sequeira. It was William Urquhart's house. His character rested on it with quiet endurance, even from so distant a place as the cemetery on St. Helena, and from the life beyond.

"It's not every gentleman, even from the Honourable Company, that I'd bring to this 'ouse, Mr. van Mierop."

"I appreciate your sentiments," Thomas replied. "But I would not be able to occupy it as it is."

Biddle assumed an expression of innocent astonishment.

"Is there somethin' yer object to, Mr. van Mierop?"

"Object? No. But these are the late Mr. Urquhart's effects. They will be wanted by his relatives. I—"

"Set yer mind at ease on that score, Mr. van Mierop," Biddle interrupted in a sterner tone. "When I say that once the will is proved yer may purchase from me whatever furniture yer wish, I mean *just that*." He mollified his voice. "May I be permitted to explain, Mr. van Mierop, that this too is China fashion. It's the custom for a new officer in China to in'erit—if I may use the word in a not very correct

sense—the possessions of the officer 'e's replacin'."

But Thomas had made up his mind. The house was pre-eminently a home, and with fifteen years or so to consider, this was what mattered.

"At the same rental?" he inquired.

"With somethin' additional for the 'ire o' the furniture," said Biddle softly.

"Agreed."

"Yer've made a wise choice, Mr. van Mierop. May I congratulate yer. I think I may prophesy yer'll find this 'ouse satisfactory in *every* way," he said with the strange implication of sin that entered his voice whenever he was being polite; and as he smiled, with the rumour of a chuckle in it, he closed the shutters of one of the windows facing the street, thus depriving of a view two sallow-faced Macao Portuguese women whom Thomas had not noticed, but whom Biddle, even without apparently looking in their direction, had detected as they gazed, with their fixed Asian expressions, through a partly open shutter on the other side of the street.

Thereupon Biddle, obsequiously looking his client straight in the eye, handed him the key and took his leave. A moment later a deferential intake of breath at the doors to the front staircase indicated the compradore's arrival.

The compradore was a small wizened man with greying hair beginning to go thin. He had cadaverous cheeks, a few teeth missing, and wore a dark brown Chinese longcoat, with the same cloth slippers as the servants. He looked more like an ancient sage than a purveyor of fruit and vegetables. He bowed and grinned.

"Morning, Master," he began, despite the fact that it was afternoon. "My velly solly, Master, you good flen Uk Hak Master him die. Velly bad joss pidgin."

It was Thomas' first encounter with business English, as it was uncritically called, and spoken at speed it was somewhat breathtaking. He furthermore found that unless he too spoke in the same way the compradore had difficulty in

understanding him. He made a somewhat uncertain *début* in this new art, after which the compradore snapped his fingers and the servants, waiting just out of sight, came in to be presented.

"Number One, Number Two, Number T'ree, Number Four," announced the compradore, who did not trouble himself with names.

A series of pale, ivory-skinned faces, with foreheads shaven, giving their heads an unrealistically dome-like appearance, came in and bowed. Last to be presented was a short, dark-skinned lad with grey eyes.

"Him velly fool boy," explained the compradore benevolently.

"What does he do?" asked Thomas, appreciating that the house was monstrously overstaffed.

"Him open door when Master come back nightee time. But him velly fool. No talk talk."

The compradore smiled significantly. The fool boy grinned. At another snap of the compradore's fingers all withdrew.

In solitude Thomas took in the strangeness of it. It was as if, in taking the house, he was taking on the life of another person where that other life left off. He felt he was prying into the secrets of that other man, as if within these walls he himself were little more than an eavesdropper.

The light was failing, and a wind was rising from the sea. A servant quietly set down a silver tray on which were a decanter of port, a glass, and a covered silver dish which on inspection Thomas found contained shortcake. The intrusion drew his thoughts back to practical matters. There was still one more person he had to interview. He asked to see the compradore again.

"I understand Mr. Urquhart had a pensioner, whom I'm responsible for. I should also see him."

The compradore looked blank.

"No savvy."

"Pensioner," Thomas repeated. "Mr. Urquhart's pen-

sioner."

At the corners of the compradore's eyes intelligence awakened. His mouth, half open in perplexity, opened a little more.

"My savvy. Master like him come?"

"If it's convenient."

The compradore waddled away.

Thomas glanced casually at the view from the rear french windows. Immediately behind the house a granite rock rose exactly to the level of the upper floor. On the rock's flattened top was the garden, consisting solely of potted plants. A wrought-iron bridge connected it with the rear balcony, and beyond the rock, on rising land, were the grey, double-tiled roofs of a number of low Chinese houses—no walls or windows were visible—beyond which grass and rocks rose, filling the view, to the central hilltop fort, the Monte, which he had earlier seen from the sea. Observed at closer range the fort was less imposing. Despite its cannons nosed seaward over the roofs, an air of dereliction invested it, as though, not having been used for a century or so, the cannons might emit only birds' nests.

Drawn by the lonely sadness of the view, he moved nearer the windows, and as he did so became aware that in the fading daylight a figure was standing in one of the inner doorways. That it was a girl—one of the servants, evidently—he saw at once, and equally dismissed further thought about it. He had already seen below the french windows that the servants had their wives and children staying in the compound, their quarters occupying the lower parts of the hill like a small village.

From the front staircase a servant entered bearing a globe lamp with a candle in it, which he placed near the polished but empty fireplace. In the new brightness as the lamp was brought in—the candle was placed before a polished reflector—Thomas took a second look at the girl. She was younger than he had imagined. She stood to one side of the doorway, her body held in an attitude neither bold nor

timid. She seemed to have come up neither to transmit a message nor to make a request. Having neither of these motives, her presence assumed the nature of a statement of fact—a statement, he judged from the way she avoided the centre of the door, of unwilling fact.

Her eyes, up-tilted and almond-shaped, and her pale, exceptionally smooth skin suggested that she was Chinese; yet the way she wore her fine black hair, and her black dress, short and shapeless, was more European than Chinese. Still no more than a child, could she have been one of the servants' daughters, influenced in some way by the Portuguese?

"Yes?" he said, expecting to give her the confidence to speak, and moved a pace towards her.

Something in the ivory stillness of her face altered. Across her temples he noticed the pulsating of two slender veins close to the surface of her limpid, youthful skin. He went no nearer. Despite his inability to read the meaning of an oriental expression he sensed, more than saw, that her look was of fear.

Aware of something moving on his left, he glanced towards the street where, in a window of the house opposite, a lamp was passing. In the concealment of darkness those sombre Asian eyes were still watching him over there. They were excited about something.

He turned back to the girl, and as he did so, feeling suddenly hot under the collar, understood the China fashion meaning of the word pensioner.

He closed the shutters. Only when he had done so did the significance of the action occur to him. Embarrassed to a degree which even he himself was surprised by, he moved with a kind of aggressiveness over to the fireplace, leaned with hands outstretched against the marble mantelpiece, kicked the grate, and stared uneasily at a little clock which he found before him, ornate with golden flowers and birds. Just at that moment small mechanisms whirled inside it, and in silvery tones it played 'For he's a jolly good fellow' and

struck seven.

He swung away from it. The girl still stood in the far doorway. There was an instant of silence, then she said:

"You like?"

It was so simple as to be almost an affront, the voice of the streets brought into the house, and presumably it demanded politeness—and caution.

"Of course I like," he replied, "but—the circumstances are somewhat strange."

"No savvy," she said. She had a pleasing voice, he noted, and she was now staring at him—longingly, he thought, though he could not understand why this should be. It could hardly be love at first sight.

He tried some business English.

"I like. All man like. But no savvy China fashion."

"My no China girl," she answered swiftly.

"Then what are you? Portuguese?"

"My—" and she stopped. Nor was she looking at him any more, but staring into her own distance, as if struggling with some problem of her own.

It was beyond him.

"China girl, no China girl, I'm new here, no savvy anything," he replied, and in an endeavour to dismiss her returned his attention to the little clock. Its inner whirrings having ceased, it was ticking away obediently.

But she did not go.

"*O senhor fala português?*" she asked.

He switched about in surprise.

"No. I regret."

"*Que pena!*" she said with a little sigh.

He returned some way towards her. She did not flinch as she had earlier. She was no longer afraid of him.

"You're still only a child," he murmured softly.

"No savvy."

She was very pale, in the manner of the southern Chinese, and had a round little face which he now began to observe was full of determination, and she had dimples.

"You how old? Years—how many?" he asked.

The little face, turned up to his in mute trustfulness, made no sign of understanding. Placing his hand at different heights, he tried again:

"Baby—little girl—young girl—one two three four—how many?"

She caught it.

"Fourteen," she answered eagerly.

"Fourteen?" he echoed in a shocked tone. Admittedly, he noted, with a sharp eye for such matters, she was a good deal more mature than most European girls of such an age. All the same . . .

At this juncture a line of servants entered bearing some of the luggage from the ship. Methodical in his affairs, Thomas saw at once from which part of the great cabin this particular consignment had been taken, and that his continental portefeuille, a farewell gift from one of his Utrecht cousins, was missing.

"Have they brought my portefeuille?" he asked.

Number One clearly had no idea what this meant, but as Thomas asked the question the girl, who he noticed had made to leave as soon as the servants came in, turned in the doorway, her expression one of timid surprise.

"*Le Seigneur sait parler français?*" she asked.

"*Mais, Dieu!*" Thomas exclaimed. "*Combien de langues savez-vous parler, petite?*"

It was like opening a floodgate. A torrent of words poured forth in lucid French, spoken with a slight Portuguese accent.

"I am not sure I speak any very well, but I know a little, and if I had only known the Seigneur spoke French as well as he does I would have—"

"Gently!" Thomas interrupted. "I said 'How many?' Enumerate."

Joining her hands, with a little dimpled smile she subdued her enthusiasm. It was a gesture that made her seem suddenly very European.