

The Den

By S.C. Gordon

The first time I smoked opium was in the parlour of the Villa Luciole on Avenue Petain in Frenchtown, with Miss Louis and her house girl Anmei. It was summer and the latticed windows were open, letting warm air in with the shiver of cicadas in the banyan trees outside. If I'd known where it would take me – to a dingy room in a back alley behind the Bund – I never would have put the pipe to my lips, nor let the sweet smoke twist my senses.

"I simply refuse to believe you've never tried it," Miss Louis said as she came into the room. She had changed out of her evening dress into a purple damask robe and let down her thick red hair. As she sat beside me on the divan I averted my eyes so as not to seem improper. After six months in Shanghai, impropriety was nothing new, but it still embarrassed me. I drew my lips between my teeth and watched Anmei prepare the pipe. The housemaid was dressed in cotton trousers and a green silk jacket buttoned across her shoulder to the neck. Instead of the long braid that my own housemaid Hsiao Li wore, Anmei's hair was cropped to her chin. Unlike big-boned Hsiao Li with her manly hands, Anmei was as frail as a paper cutting.

"What would Walter say?" Miss Louis had her gaze upon me, and I felt my cheeks colour. I hardly dared think what Walter would say. My husband – a man twelve years my senior and a shipping manager – was rich from the opium trade. The drug had made his fortune, but he had forbidden me to smoke it. *It's not for us, Eleanor*, he would say. *To get involved would be to lose our power*. That night he was bound for Tientsin on business, to oversee a shipment coming in.

"Dear girl, I wonder about you," Miss Louis smiled at me, and ran the back of her finger down my cheek. I couldn't look at her. Instead I stared at Anmei's stunted feet, like pegs at the end of her brittle legs. I wondered how they looked beneath their bindings, and if they stank when she unwrapped them to pass a damp muslin cloth between their callused folds.

"Are you happy here?" Miss Louis asked.

I nodded.

As I watched the housemaid twist a nub of opium between her fingers, Miss Louis reached up and took out the jade pin that held my braid at its knot. I lifted my hand to stop it sliding down my neck, but she brushed my wrist away and unravelled me.

Anmei had taken the stained glass shade from the oil lamp on the table and was holding a long metal pin into the flame, warming it for the opium. She was kneeling now, and her satyr feet were barely inches from the divan. I watched her, my pulse treading quicker and an inadvertent bramble rash spreading on my skin from Miss Louis' touch. She was unfastening my braid, working her fingers through the strands.

"Why have you never visited without Walter?" she asked, voice dense with the rice wine she'd drunk at dinner. "Are you afraid of me?"

I shook my head.

I glanced over at Anmei but the maid had her eyes fixed on her work.

Miss Louis shifted on the divan and took the pipe Anmei held out. For the first time, I smelled opium – a strange, bitter tang that turned sweet when it met the back of the nose. *Ya p'ien*. The weed. The scourge. The plant that had won us the war, according to my husband, and Shanghai. I wondered if I would immediately be sundered by it, by merely the fumes.

Miss Louis placed the pipe to her mouth, half-closed her eyes, and drew the smoke down into her throat. Anmei knelt before her, hands ready to take back the pipe. Miss Louis drew on it again, and again. Then, she seemed to grow drowsy from it, as I'd believed she might. Her eyelids met, and her chin lifted an inch in some sort of idyll. Finally, Anmei looked at me.

“*Hao le?*” she mouthed. I shook my head. Anmei blew on the opium and passed the pipe to Miss Louis once again.

“*Miss-ah,*”

Without opening her eyes, Miss Louis took the pipe and drew on it.

The truth was that I hadn't come to see her. I had walked through the bat-swept dusk to the Villa Luciole to see Anmei, whose eyes had first locked with mine at a dinner there the previous week. Miss Louis' father was an associate of Walter's, and a summer banquet had been held on the lawn for the managers of Lambert Shipping. Anmei had joined the kitchen staff for the evening, and was charged with filling our wine glasses from a slim carafe. When she bent her head beside mine I whispered in her ear *hao mei* – beautiful. Her name meant beautiful. Quiet and beautiful.

I learned Chinese from my own housemaid Hsiao Li, who spoke it with a Chiang-su burr. She was from Nanking, but her father and grandfather had been born in the farthest north of Manchuria. Hsiao Li's wide, white forehead furrowed and her lips rounded like carp's as she taught me verb after simple, wonderful verb. I kept it a secret from Walter, my learning Chinese. I kept Hsiao Li a secret too, sending her to her room whenever he was at home.

Miss Louis passed the pipe back to Anmei and lay back against the arm of the divan.

Anmei sat on her calves and set to work preparing a dose for me.

“*Hsiao hsin,*” I whispered – *be careful* – and she looked up at me, startled. “My first time. *Ti i' tz'uh,*”

“*Aah. Ming pai,*”

She understood.

In the warm darkness of the parlour, Miss Louis breathed heavily as she dozed. The ties of her damask robe had loosened, and the pale hulk of her bosom was laid bare. I yearned to cover her, but feared my touch would wake her from her stupor and pique her attentions for me once again. Instead, I averted my eyes.

Anmei was twisting a nub of opium between her fingers. To be closer to her, and to better observe the process that enraptured me, I knelt beside her and watched her fix the wizened black stub onto the metal pin.

“Do they hurt?” I asked her in Chinese. “Your feet?”

She shook her head. “Too long ago. I don’t remember,”

I knew it was a lie; those lotus feet came at a price. I pictured her as a young girl in a marshy village, just a child, aching in the night as her bones strained and broke beneath the bindings. Never again to run, except the distances she scaled in her flicker-eyed dreams: wide, free leaps spread from heel to arch to toe, across plains and rivers, not even to stop at the far mountains.

“*Lai –*”

She had tucked the fuming ember into the end of the pipe, and was holding the mouthpiece towards me.

“I don’t know how.”

Her face was pallid in the light from the oil lamp, framed by her black hair.

“Just pretend,” she whispered, and I still can hardly believe that I understood what she said next. “That you have your lips upon my breast.”

If it was the opium that unfastened me or her words, I’ll never know. I drank it in timidly at first, but as the smoke began to change me, I sucked it down harder. I burned for her.

I burned.

And it was she who took the pipe from my shaking fingers and moved closer so her knees were at my hips. It was she who bent to kiss me, she who brought the brambles to my skin and dipped her small, cold snake tongue into my mouth to slide against mine.

“We can’t!” I tried to say. “Anmei, we can’t –”

but the opium had made heavy bricks of all my limbs, and dulled all of my faculties.

It was only Miss Louis’ voice that halted our dalliance.

“Eleanor?” she grunted, rising from her daze. “Anmei? What in heaven’s name are you doing?”

Anmei sprang away from me.

“*Pu hao i’ ssu,*” she muttered, and set about tending the pipe.

I was weighted to my spot, sprawled at the foot of the divan, unable even to speak.

“But please!” Miss Louis was foggy with the drug but her concupiscence was not blunted. “Don’t stop!”

“*Hao te, hao te,*” Anmei rushed to press more opium into a dose, but I knew that wasn’t what Miss Louis meant.

“Eleanor!” she barked, now properly irked. “I said continue!”

Not able to rouse myself but desperate to leave, I began to weep.

“Anmei! Come here! I want to see you kiss!” Miss Louis hauled herself from the divan and lunged towards me and the girl. Anmei dropped the pipe with a clatter, and the oil lamp fell onto the rug beside her. As Miss Louis pushed us towards each other my cheek collided with Anmei’s bare neck.

And just as soon, it was as if the opium had left me as quickly as a dove. I pulled myself to my feet, gathered my skirts and rushed out of the room. Miss Louis gave a horrible cry, and I heard her getting up from the divan. In my confusion, I forgot which way would lead me to the front door of the Villa Luciole and I stumbled in the darkness. As I caught my breath in the hallway, I heard Miss Louis shouting at Anmei and beating her. Anmei was crying out in pain and protestation. Just as suddenly, she came tottering around the doorframe on her half-feet, staggering and slipping on the polished wood floor in her tiny pointed shoes. I ran to her but it was too late; she had fallen, sprawled like a bird against a window, limbs outstretched.

Miss Louis appeared and I shrieked at the sight of her, dishevelled and red-faced. I seized Anmei’s wrist and pulled the girl to her feet, remembering a side door of the villa that I’d seen when I excused myself from the banquet to rest indoors. I dragged Anmei along with me through the salon and we reached the door before Miss Louis caught up with us. Through the garden we stumbled, brushing banyans away from our faces.

“*Ch’u na li?*” Anmei hissed at me when we reached the garden gate. *Where are we going?*

“*Pu chih tao!*” I had no idea.

I rattled the gate until it opened, mindful of the neighbours in the looming villa next door. To my relief, the garden backed onto a narrow lane that led to the junction of Avenue Petain and Route Cohen. There we could catch a rickshaw. To where, I was less sure. With Walter in T’ientsin on business, Shanghai felt less imposing. I could go anywhere.

∞

The tread of the opium in my blood reminded me of the laudanum my father had his doctor give to me. When I refused to marry Walter the first time, they had implied that I was mad, that I was touched by hysteria and a fool to refuse his generous request for my hand. My sister Jane was younger than me by three years, but had married before me. I was out of my mind to even consider turning Walter away. The doctor made up a tincture of laudanum to dull me into acquiescence, but still I resisted. Each evening he would call at the house to administer my dose. Each time my father asked me to reconsider Walter's offer, I said no. Laudanum turned my muscles into soft gum and made my mind swirl, but it did not change my mind.

∞

I would take Anmei to my house on Avenue Haig, I decided. There, Hsiao Li could help me determine what to do next. A passing rickshaw boy slowed to a halt beside us, and Anmei folded her bird limbs into it as I told him the address of the Villa Lascelles. It was late, and the roads were empty. Cicadas hummed in the banyans as the rickshaw boy advanced into a sprint.

“*Ch'u na li?*” Anmei asked again.

“*Wo te chia.*” *My home.*

As we set off up the Avenue Petain towards Avenue Joffre, I covered Anmei's hands with my own.

“Don't be afraid,” I said to her in Chinese. *Pieh p'a.*

“Now I have no job,” she said. “No home; no money,”

“Don't be afraid,” I said. *Pieh p'a.*

And that was the last we spoke until we reached the Villa Lascelles. I paid the rickshaw boy more than the journey was worth just for the luxury of ending our exchange, and helped Anmei down onto the path. I reached for her hand but she pulled it away.

“Come on!” I whispered. “Come inside. Hsiao Li will help you,”

This prospect seemed to placate her, and she let me take her hand. It was only then that I noticed the tears on her cheeks. How could it be that just a half hour before, life had been so different for her? For me.

I led her through the garden to the back of the villa. It was a large, looming hulk of a house that I had never liked. Walter and I had barely been married a month when he was called to Shanghai. I pled with my father to absolve me of my duties to this stranger, but there was no escape. *Walter Lumley is a wealthy man, and has good*

standing, my father insisted. Yet Walter was middle-aged and I was not yet twenty-five. He was brusque and unkind, but worst of all, he was a man.

When I still refused to marry him, my father and his doctor took me to visit the madhouse. Their threat sat about my shoulders like a heavy fur as we approached the building with its forbidding tower and barred windows. A doctor and a nurse came out to meet us, and led us in across a worn mosaic floor to meet the manager. How polite they all were. How proper and restrained they seemed as they showed us around the asylum, as if we were benefactors come to bestow a legacy upon it. We walked the long corridors and halls, pausing here and there as the doctor pointed out the worst cases. My father stooped to look through several of the windows, but I refrained. To look would be to intrude. As we reached the end of a wing, I saw the manager nod to my father, and they parted to give me access to a window in a door. *Please*, the manager said. *Take a look. She's our worst case.* And when I saw that it was Dulcie who sat inside, twirling a rag between her fingers, dressed in a dirty white gown, I knew at once why they had brought me here: not that I should end up an inmate, but that I should know what had become of her.

∞

As we made our way to the back door of the villa I noticed that the scullery lights were on downstairs. The door was locked, and when I rattled it to get Hsiao Li's attention there was a small commotion from below. Soon enough, I heard her heavy feet upon the stairs.

"*Shei'aah?*"

"It's me. Aili," I put my face close to the door. *Aili* was what she called me, since *Eleanor* was too clumsy for her tongue.

"*Aili-aah!* What are you doing back so soon?" Hsiao Li pulled open the door and stood aside for me to pass. I looked back and saw Anmei regard my house girl with a flash of contempt. While Anmei was delicate and refined with smartly cut hair, Hsiao Li was strong-boned with countryside looks. Her feet were unbound, casting her immediately as Anmei's inferior.

I made towards the steps down to the scullery, but Hsiao Li seized my arm and halted my progress.

"Wait—"

"Is someone here?" I asked in Chinese.

"Just a friend,"

"Then let's have tea,"

I shook myself from her grasp and started down the steps. Behind me, I heard Hsiao Li whisper to Anmei, but I didn't catch the meaning. As I reached the scullery door I saw a man hastily gathering what looked like vials and bottles into a leather bag. When he raised his head and saw me, he cried out *Aiy!* and hurried to close his bag.

"Hsiao Li?" I turned. The man pushed past me, and as he made for the steps I saw my house girl push something into his hand: a tael of coins.

"What's going on?" I was confused. It was as if the opium had risen again to cloud my impulses.

Hsiao Li was cowed. Usually she was quick with a reply but she was caught unawares, without an answer or an explanation. Instead of excusing what had happened – passing the man off as a relative, a friend – she hid her eyes behind her stout fingers and turned to the wall.

"Hsiao Li?"

Anmei, to my surprise, went over to my house girl and laid her hand on her shaking shoulders. As I watched with growing bewilderment, Hsiao Li began to mutter desperately behind her hands in a dialect I couldn't understand. From Anmei's reaction, it seemed that she could. From Chiang-su, both of them.

"Anmei, *tsen me shih?*" I asked. *What's going on?*

Anmei darted her eyes between Hsiao Li and me.

"*Lao pan,*" Anmei said. Her master?

"It's his fault," Anmei began to translate Hsiao Li's words for me into Mandarin from their dialect. With horror and hatred percolating up from inside me, I made sense of what she was saying.

It was only when she had finished her tale that Hsiao Li turned to look at me, her eyes dejected but fierce. Her round face was red and wet. It was Dulcie's face. The betrayal; the apology.

Walter had been visiting her in the mornings when I was still in bed, and any evening when I was not at home. She tried to fight him off but she was afraid of losing her position at the villa. Her brother in Yangchow was dying and they couldn't do without the salary she sent home. Eventually she realized she was with child, and invited a doctor to come and give her herbs to –

At the sight of her turmoil I took weak and had to steady myself on the edge of the table, knuckles translucent. Hsiao Li and my husband. The thought of his pale hands on her naked stomach, the idea of them lying together, Walter yelping into her ear in his throes. The very image bleached me of all sense.

Knowing nothing except the need to be gone from there, I summoned Anmei and bid her follow me up the scullery steps and out of the villa. She didn't ask where we were

going this time, and I was glad of it. Out on the Avenue Haig I yelled for a rickshaw, caring little for decorum.

“Do you know a place to smoke opium?” I said to Anmei as a dishevelled rickshaw boy pulled up beside us.

Her face didn't change. “*Chih tao.*”

I helped her up into the rickshaw and she told the boy where to go.

∞

The den didn't have a name, as far as I could tell. It lay near the Bund at the end of dingy North Gate Street, and was the realm of local men with shaven foreheads and long braids. The doorkeeper eyed me, but let us pass when I showed him the taels in my fist. The booth he leased to us had a tiny window smudged with brown residue. From other rooms came the sigh and shift of other smokers – addicts, men lost to the fumes and irretrievable. The air was dank with it.

Anmei and I sat down on the low *kang* bed while the doorkeeper fetched the pipe.

She muttered something to him that I didn't understand.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing.”

She reached towards the sliver of window to scrub away the residue but I intercepted her hand and laid my lips to the inside of her wrist. She made a noise as if I had burned her, and snatched it away.

“Anmei! *Kanma?*”

Why?

“*Pu yao le!*”

I don't want it.

And she pushed herself up onto her stilt-feet and hobbled out of the den.

I never saw her again. I never saw Miss Louis again, nor my husband. I left the den just once, to retrieve a small trunk of my possessions from the Villa Lascelles before Walter returned from T'ientsin.

Hsiao Li was there, which surprised me. At first I was reluctant to even look at her, but she begged me not to think ill of her. I didn't press for details as to whether the doctor's remedy had worked. There was no point. In any case, she was packing to

leave as well, her brother having died in Yangchow, and I asked her to accompany me to the den. Face to face in the hallway, with the late afternoon sun throwing a shard of dust behind us, I reminded her of our Chinese lessons in the sun room of the villa – how we sketched calligraphy upon each other’s skin with our sweat. But there was nothing I could say to convince her. With her pockets full of Walter’s money, she left to catch a barge for Chenchiang, and I went back to North Gate Street alone.

∞

The asylum staff allowed me just five minutes alone with Dulcie. They rattled the bolt so the window glass moved aside, leaving just the bars between us.

“Miss Chambers, you’ve a guest come to see you,” the nurse chirped staunchly.

I put my face to the bars and looked into the cell. Dulcie stopped twisting the rag in her hand but she didn’t lift her eyes. I stared at her. She had a cotton cap upon her head, and jagged tufts of pale hair jutted from beneath it by her temples. Her once-slender shoulders were plump and bloated, and her face was ruddy as if it had been slapped. Dulcie! What had become of her?

“I’m not mad,” she mumbled petulantly before I could speak.

“How long have you been here?”

“I said I’m not mad!”

“I know, my sweet. But when did they bring you here? Who brought you?”

“Your pa and my pa. The two of them conspired,” Dulcie scowled. “Your pa told mine just what he’d seen, and told him I’d corrupted you. Since I’ve less standing than you, it was me who had to suffer,”

“But I can get you out of here! I can ask my father!” I hissed through the bars. Even though she was not the Dulcie I had last kissed in my London bedroom all those months ago, before my father chanced upon us, I hadn’t ceased to love her.

When she finally looked up at me through the door of her cell, her eyes held nothing but scorn.

“They won’t let me out,”

“Then I’ll come here too! I’ll pretend to be mad so we can live here together!”

Slowly, Dulcie rose from her chair. She began to walk towards the door, and I thought for a hope-filled moment that she was going to kiss me. And for that moment, everything was solved. To be here, imprisoned, at the mercy of the nurses, but with Dulcie – I would have chosen it a thousand times over marriage to Walter Lumley. But she hadn’t come to kiss me. As her face approached mine from behind the bars, I saw a dreadful hatred welling behind her eyes. The nurse seized my shoulders and pulled me away just as Dulcie started to roar: a sad, sad howl that rang out through the halls as we hurried away.

∞

It was only yesterday that I thought to brush the brown stain from the window of my room in the den, and see what lay beyond.

The river.

The curve of the Bund and the tower of the Custom House. The copper pyramid atop the Cathay Hotel. The faint yellow lights of the Hongkew wharves. Now, if I narrow my eyes I can just make out the shadow of a barge aching up the Whangpoo after Soochow Creek and the low brown skeleton of the Garden Bridge, advancing past the Pootung Point and out towards the sea.