

Excerpt from *A Most Immoral Woman*

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*In Which, Following a Useless Day, Our Hero Finds Himself Irresistibly*

*Drawn to Trouble*

The ravishing Miss Perkins, eyes luminous, unfurled her sultry smile. 'The famous Dr Morrison,' she purred. 'We meet at last.'



The day had not begun with so much promise. George Ernest Morrison had awoken in a second-rate hotel in the Manchurian town of Newchang, oppressed by a thick, cotton-wadded quilt and a sense of futility. The whistle and crack of whip birds in a sun-drenched dream of the Antipodes resolved into the hard smack of a crop on a horse's flank, and the crunch of eucalyptus bark underfoot gave way to the clatter of cart wheels on cobblestones. Morrison blinked open his eyes. His rheumatism frisked in the cold; he scissored his aching legs under the covers. Through the window he saw that the sky lay low and gunmetal grey. It was the last day of February, 1904.

A donkey brayed. A child cried. A man swore softly. Morrison lifted his head, still heavy with sleep, and listened. Even after seven years of living in China, his Mandarin was not perfect. But it did not take linguistic genius to comprehend profanity or despair. The first refugees, he guessed, of the war.

The Russo-Japanese War had broken out three weeks earlier when Japan's navy staged a surprise attack on the Russian fleet at Port Arthur, the deep-water port on the tip of Manchuria's Liaotung Peninsula. The news had delighted Morrison. As the China correspondent for *The Times* of London and a loyal colonial, George Ernest Morrison was convinced that it was in Britannia's interests to see its ally Japan chase the Russians out of northern China. In his telegrams for *The Times* he had agitated at length to sway world opinion in favour of the Japanese cause.

Since the war had taken off, however, Morrison's life had unexpectedly ground into stasis. Months before, he had written to his editor in London,

Moberly Bell, to say he was thinking of leaving China on account of poor health. His complaints, which he did not hesitate to enumerate, included arthritis, a persistent catarrh, and occasional nasal haemorrhages due to a spear wound that had nearly killed him when he had attempted to tramp across Papua New Guinea as a young man. So when the war — his war — had finally broken out, Bell assigned other men to cover the conflict and ordered Morrison to remain in Peking. There he could help the other correspondents and cover the big picture without further endangering his health — or employment. How Morrison regretted the querulous moment of nose-bleeding, joint-aching weakness that had prompted his complaint to Bell.

Bored, Morrison had broken away from Peking to come to Newchang, a neutral port on the northwestern corner of the contested peninsula, hoping to find information and excitement. After two days he'd found little of either, only too many Russian soldiers and the perfidious British profiteers who supplied them with coal and arms.

Morrison threw off the fusty quilt and stretched. His long legs were cramped from the effort of sleeping in a bed made for a much shorter man. It was a familiar problem and one he considered a metaphor for his life of late. He cleared his throat and called out for his Boy.

Even at this hour, Morrison's voice rang resonant and muscular. Pepita, Spanish señorita and his lover when he had worked as a surgeon in the mines of Rio Tinto, once told him that it was the voice of a matador. The description pleased him. For several years after Morrison left Spain, Pepita had proclaimed her undying love in purple ink on perfumed paper. He only ever answered the first letter. He hadn't thought about Pepita in recent times but in his mind's eye he now saw black, fragrant hair swinging over a supple waist; slender forearms; brown, eager nipples. As much as he tried, he could not remember her face except in parts: a flash of smile, an arched eyebrow.

At forty-two, Morrison was old enough to know how quickly red-hot passion could turn to ash, but still young enough to find it astonishing. Pepita had captured his affection not long after he recovered it from Noelle, a Parisian grisette who had escaped not only with his heart but his money and pride as well. There had been women before them, of course, and many since. His most

recent affair, with the wife of a British customs official from Wei Hai Wei, had been of a relatively calm and cynical nature. He had not experienced feral attachment in a long while.

*Pepita. Sweet Pepita.*

The door squeaked open. It was not the time to think about Pepita.

Morrison watched Kuan, his Boy, move about the room, stoking the fire and refreshing the wash basin with hot water. Kuan laid out his master's clothes and gave them a quick brush, his movements an economical blend of grace and efficiency. Morrison took comfort in the familiar sound of Kuan's felt-soled shoes padding over the carpets, and the swish and rustle of his quilted robes. He liked his servant; Kuan was clever, curious and resourceful, his English more than competent. Morrison wondered sometimes where Kuan's life might have led if he had not been a foundling raised by missionaries to serve in foreign homes. He marvelled, not for the first time, at the young man's inborn poise and dignity. Sometimes he felt like a clumsy giant in comparison.

'Kuan. Go outside and learn what you can from the refugees, especially those from Port Arthur. What they've seen — number of Russian and Japanese ships, type of guns, how many supply wagons, how many dead. Whatever they can tell you.'

'*Ming pai*. I understand.' Kuan quickly finished setting out his master's razor, strop and flannel. His long plait had been coiled around his neck for warmth and convenience whilst he performed his chores. Now that he was going out, Kuan unwound it so that it hung straight and proper down the back of his long robe. 'Oh,' he added, 'Colonel Dumas is already at breakfast.'

Morrison acknowledged this with a nod. Charles Merewether Dumas, a British military attaché whose job, not unlike his own, was to gather intelligence, was Morrison's friend and travelling companion. 'Tell him I'll be down shortly.'

Scraping the light ginger stubble from his chin, Morrison noticed that the once proud lines of his jaw were softening. Though his complexion was still the colour of the sun and sand of his native land, grey was starting to pepper his beard and temples. Less than a month had passed since his forty-second birthday, yet his neck, like his waist, was already beginning to thicken. Morrison caught his own gaze in the looking glass. It was pale and merciless.



'You're looking chipper this morning,' Dumas observed as Morrison joined his table in the breakfast room.

'I don't feel chipper,' Morrison replied, 'so it's quite remarkable that you should say so. In truth, I was feeling rather downspirited. As I regarded my figure in the looking glass, I concluded that although I remain a bachelor, I'm fast acquiring the body of a married man.'

Dumas laughed.

Morrison narrowed his eyes reproachfully. 'I'm pleased to have so amused you — even if it is at the expense of my own pride.' He surveyed the menu, feigning annoyance.

'I wasn't laughing at you. In fact, I'd assumed that my own rather teapot-like physique was the basis for your observation about married men. I'm only two years your senior and wedded but ten, yet I'm an exemplar in this regard.' Dumas twirled the tip of his moustache around his finger; he had magnificently luxuriant whiskers and a habit of playing with them as though they were a small and attention-starved pet. 'You ought to know that my wife says that of all the Western men in China, you are still the most handsome. She is not promiscuous with her compliments, either. Handsome is certainly not a word she has ever used in relation to my good self. You really do need to find yourself a wife.'

'Now you sound like Kuan. He insists that 1904, being the Year of the Dragon, is propitious for marriage. But you both forget one crucial detail. I have no prospects. Your own wife appears to be my only admirer, and she is taken.'

'That is a matter for debate,' Dumas replied with a doleful expression. 'But seriously, I cannot credit for a moment that you would have any difficulty finding a wife if you really wanted one. The Dr Morrison. Hero of the Siege of Peking. Renowned overlander, author, medical doctor, eminent China correspondent of *The Times* of London. Respected, influential, etcetera, etcetera.'

'You're mocking me.'

'Not at all. I should think eligible maidens would be queuing up.'

'Piffle. I'm a man of restricted means and poor health. The only maidens who ever show any fondness for me are elderly rejects with yearnings and false teeth

— the sort who suffer from indigestion and clammy hands and feet.’

Dumas chortled. ‘That is not what I hear, and you do not believe a word of it, either. On the basis of the stories you’ve told me yourself, I believe that you have made more conquests than Britannia. Were you not relating a most amusing story about a Brunhilde to me just a few months ago?’

‘I have never gone with a woman called Brunhilde.’

‘Yet there was a German actress whose private performances you enjoyed with astonishing frequency over a period of two days whilst her dunderhead of a husband conducted his business in the same city. Melbourne, wasn’t it?’

‘Her name was Agneth. And it was Sydney. But your power of recall is otherwise frightening. Remind me never to tell you anything I do not myself wish to remember. The point is, of all these women, not one still shares my bed. Those whom I found most amusing always returned to their husbands in the end. The others turned out to be boring and spiritless — a pity, for they were the only ones guaranteed not to turn into faithless neurotics after marriage. To be perfectly honest, I would not mind a steady supply of affection and sympathy in my life. It does not, however, appear to be forthcoming from available sources.’

‘Oscar Wilde once said — and nothing in my own experience would disprove it — that marriage is the triumph of imagination over intelligence. Maybe you just need to apply less intelligence and more imagination to your prospects.’

Morrison regarded the plate that the waiter placed before him. ‘Do you think these are duck eggs?’

‘No, just the eggs of very small chickens. It’s wartime.’

‘The war only broke out two weeks ago. Hardly enough time to affect the growth of chickens.’ He pushed aside his plate. The subject of marriage pained him more than he let on. He extracted his fob chain from the pocket of his waistcoat and checked the time. ‘We’d better hurry. We are nearly late for our first useless appointments of the day.’

‘Remind me,’ the soldier-diplomat sighed. ‘My excellent memory does not extend quite as well to our shared professional concerns.’

‘I am to see a Japanese who will treat me with the utmost courtesy but who will tell me nothing. You will call on an uncivil Russian who will share with you all manner of intelligence as interesting as it is mendacious. Following that, we

will both meet a Chinese who will, with great anxiety, ask us what is going on in the war being fought by the other two over the northern portion of his own country. Then Kuan will convey to us the unreliable testimony of excitable refugees. Finally, having been denied permission to go to the front by our Japanese friends, we will catch a train back to China proper, stopping at Mountain-Sea Pass for the night. Along the way, we will exchange notes and ruminate on the futility of it all. I shall wonder what I can possibly write in my telegram for *The Times* and you will contemplate, with equal despair, your report to the Foreign Office.'

The morning's activities transpired as Morrison had predicted. By early afternoon, the correspondent, the military attaché and the servant stood on the platform at Newchang Station. Morrison's nose burned with cold and his toes ached numbly inside his thick woollen socks and leather boots. The saturnine sky began to dissolve into snow just as a whistle announced the train's arrival.

The journey took most of the afternoon. The men read aloud from their notebooks: missionaries were withdrawing their womenfolk from the peninsula; Russian troops had threatened to torch an entire town if the Chinese army, which had arrived to protect the frightened residents, did not leave immediately; two hundred and ninety-eight mines set by Russians and Japanese to blow up one another's armadas were adrift in open water, threatening shipping.

'A stupid day,' Morrison summed up, 'spent in the accumulation of petty detail.'

Dumas grimaced. 'What will you focus on in your telegram?'

'It hardly matters. Whatever I write, those peace lovers in Printing House Square will indubitably temper it before publication.' Morrison knew that it was not just out of consideration for his health that Bell had given the task of reporting on the war to other correspondents. His editor was wary of his partisanship. Japan might be an ally of Britain, but Britain's official stance was neutral and Bell was determined to see *The Times's* coverage reflect that.

By the time the train pulled into the old garrison town of Mountain-Sea Pass at the eastern terminus of the Great Wall, the men were fatigued into companionable silence and the sun had set on an undulating white landscape.

Outside the station, a row of flickering lanterns indicated the presence of ricksha men. As the train disgorged its passengers, the runners jumped to their

feet, shaking out their legs and shouting for custom. A Japanese invention, the ricksha had taken off in China where the press of more than four hundred million people in a parlous economy made men cheaper than horses. Now Kuan was trying to procure three of them for even less still.

At last the three men were bouncing along on the thinly padded seats towards their hotel outside the walls of the Chinese town, rough blankets tucked around their knees for warmth. Morrison glanced over at his companions. The lanterns swinging at their feet illuminated their faces from below like characters from a ghost story and captured his runner's breath as a long, thin cloud. The runners' felt boots, bound with rope for traction, slapped the frozen ground. Icicles hung from the curlicue limbs of a scholar tree and a dog barked beside a gloomy farmhouse. Ahead, the full moon was rising over the crenellated parapets of the Great Wall. If Morrison were a different sort of person, he might have remarked that the night seemed full of poetry, mystery and magic. But his mind was filled with more prosaic thoughts of war, dinner and the prospect of a good night's sleep.

The runners came to a balletic halt on bent knees at the entrance to the Six Kingdoms Hotel, a neat, relatively new, two-storey brick building with a front veranda gaudily painted green, blue, red and gold in the Chinese style.

Dumas raised one eyebrow as he surveyed the façade. 'Like a marriage of military barracks and Chinese temple.'

'What I like about it,' said Morrison, clambering out of the ricksha, 'is that the exterior exclaims, "You are in the Extreme Orient," whilst the interior whispers, "You can still relax like a European." And I, for one, am most assuredly looking forward to that.'

Once they'd checked in, Morrison threw his swag on the bed and made a note of his reluctant tip to the hotel boy as well as the money spent on rickshas. (As the son of a Scottish schoolmaster who'd gone to the Antipodes after what he called 'a run of bad luck in the mother country', Morrison had inherited a seemingly unshakeable sense of financial insecurity and the habit of counting pennies.) He then quickly sponged off the dust of the journey and changed into fresh clothes. Collecting Dumas from his room, he strolled with him down to the modest dining room.

As the maître d' busied himself accommodating a large and fussy party of German engineers, Morrison looked around with mild curiosity and low expectations. The room hummed with polyglot conversation punctuated by the clink of silver on porcelain. A warm fug of wood fire with notes of roast meat and port filled his nostrils. At linen-covered tables set in the Western manner were seated missionaries, military attachés, railway men, traders in arms and supplies, dull men and their bony wives — the usual crowd, with one heart-stopping exception. *Now here, Morrison thought, is excitement!*

Seated at one of the tables was a young woman of exceptional allure, whose eyes flashed with both mischief and promise, and whose style suggested that she had just stepped off Fifth Avenue or the Champs-Élysées, not some dusty street in north China. Morrison did not know enough of couture to recognise that her outfit was a confection of Worth's of Paris. But it did not take a student of the fashion plate to observe how stylish were the lines of her dress, how rich were its fabrics and how eloquently they hugged her curvaceous body. Similarly, Morrison was mesmerised by the glitter and grace of her lively hands despite it being lost on him that her rings were fabricated by Lalique. She radiated sex and money. He was drawn, sailor to siren, moth to flame.

Tearing his eyes off her, he turned to Dumas. 'Who is this?' he whispered, each syllable a compendium of wonder.

Dumas stroked his moustache and bit his lip. 'This,' he stated, 'is Trouble.'

'I fear I am much drawn to Trouble.'

'I think Trouble has noticed. She was just looking at you. Ah, she has looked away again. Perhaps Trouble is not drawn to you, after all.'

'Trouble is always drawn to me. Women are another thing. Do you know her?'

'Actually I do.' Dumas's answer was slow, cautious. 'She stays in Tientsin.'

'Tell me all.'

'Her name is Miss Mae Ruth Perkins. She's had all of Tientsin aflutter since her arrival some weeks ago. She is the daughter of the self-made millionaire, shipping magnate and US senator from California, George Clement Perkins, previously governor of that Wild Western State.'

*Millionaire? Senator? Be still my beating heart!* 'Pray tell, what is such a precious gem doing so far from its setting?'



'One rumour is that she has come to China to escape scandal. Others say she has come to create it. The missionaries are hiding their daughters. Young Faith Biddle has reportedly already thrown over the Kingdom of God for the worship of Miss Perkins, causing her parents no end of consternation.'

'Where does she stay?'

'With the American consul.'

'Ragsdale?' Morrison made a face. 'That's like a brass mount for a diamond.'

'Indeed. But I'm sure you've heard that as the publisher of the Sonoma County *Daily Republican*, Ragsdale obtained his post, and his escape from a howling pack of creditors stretching from Iowa to the west coast, thanks to a Party connection. That connection was apparently Miss Perkins's father. And so Mrs Ragsdale has the interesting duty of acting as the young lady's chaperone. That is her now at Miss Perkins's table.'

'So it is.' Morrison had not registered Mrs Ragsdale's presence. Although not quite fifty, Mrs Ragsdale had the unsexed appearance of a woman who had been married and thence neglected for a span of centuries. Whilst some women would have struggled against such a fate, Effie Ragsdale appeared to embrace it as Destiny.

'Will you introduce me?'

'To Mrs Ragsdale? With pleasure,' Dumas replied dryly.

At their approach, Miss Perkins looked up. 'The famous Dr Morrison. We meet at last.'

*In Which Is Noted the Difficulty of Overheating a Room in North China in  
Winter*

Morrison was still fumbling for a reply when Mrs Ragsdale, laying plump hand on ample bosom, effused in a voice notably less burdened by gravity than either her chin or chest that it was a great, no, the greatest, honour to encounter the esteemed Dr Morrison at such an outpost. Morrison, she informed Miss Perkins, was the most brilliant, the most famous, the most respectable of men. As she spoke, Mrs Ragsdale inflated with nervous excitement, as though with a noble gas. Morrison grew mildly concerned that she might burst.

Mrs Ragsdale flapped on in this manner until Morrison, sinking into his boots, began to wish she really would burst. A vision from a London dinner party once held in his honour came suddenly into his head. His hosts had been so mindful of the esteem in which he was held that, as he later recorded in his journal: *they seated me next to a grim old duchess long past the climacteric whilst a beautifully bosomed woman of lax morality languished at the other end of the table.*

Respectability was well and good, but it had its place. He would not have endured Mrs Ragsdale's ballyhoo were it not for the ravishing creature with the chatoyant eyes seated at her side. 'You are too kind,' he insisted over and over, as if his words, stacked high enough, might dam the flow of her own.

Finally Miss Perkins spoke up in a voice like warm chocolate. 'I have heard much about you, Dr Morrison, even before tonight. You are a most celebrated man. Many have spoken to me of your great heroism four years ago during the Siege of Peking by the Boxer rebels. They say you rescued Mrs Squiers and Polly Condit Smith from the Western Hills and saved many hundreds of Christian converts when the Boxers laid siege to the cathedral. They say you were the bravest of all the men there.'

'It's true I did go to check on the American minister's wife and her guest in the Western Hills. I was trying to figure out how to convey them, three children and some forty servants back to the city and into the Legation Quarter, or at least fortify the balcony of their holiday home, when Mr Squiers arrived with a Cossack loaned to him by the Russian minister. So I cannot take sole credit. Were we not between us heavily armed, I may not have accomplished my mission. As

for the converts, had I abandoned them I'd have been ashamed to call myself a white man.'

Miss Perkins's eyes sparkled. Mrs Ragsdale clasped her hands to her breast. Her own husband had distinguished himself during the Boxers' xenophobic and murderous rampage by writing a maudlin letter to the besieged in Peking telling them that he'd had a dream in which they'd all perished. The letter and Ragsdale himself were roundly maligned. News of a dispatch of US Marines was what they craved, not an outpouring of sentiment. Morrison had heard that Mrs Ragsdale was mortified when she learned that her husband had managed, once again, to become a laughingstock.

'What an extraordinary experience it must have been,' murmured Miss Perkins.

'As we should probably only meet with one siege in a lifetime,' Morrison replied, his eyes glued to her own, 'it was just as well to have a good one whilst we were about it.'

Miss Perkins laughed merrily. Mrs Ragsdale looked askance at her.

'The Boxers were very fierce,' reproved the older woman. 'They killed many people. It was no joke at the time.'

'True,' Morrison said. 'But they were little more than rabble, coolies and laundrymen. They'd been whipped into a frenzy by rumours that Christian missionaries were feeding on Chinese orphans' blood and that the foreign churches had caused drought by bottling up the rain in the sky. Old Napoleon could have settled them before lunch with a whiff of grapeshot. It was the soldiers of the Imperial Court standing behind them who worried us more. You might say the Empress Dowager was the Boxers' true leader. Which occasionally worked to our advantage.'

'Really?' Miss Perkins leaned forward and rested her chin on her hand in a most fetching manner. 'How so?'

'For instance, when they started shelling the cathedral, the Old Buddha — that's what she's called — was picnicking at the North Lake behind the Forbidden City, not far from there. The gunfire was giving her a headache. So she ordered a halt to the firing. As much as it proved her connection to the whole business, we were grateful for the respite. It gave us our chance to rescue the

converts.'

Miss Perkins shook her head. 'How complex these politics are! It's no wonder that all the world relies on your reports to understand the Chinese situation, Dr Morrison. I don't know how many times I've said to my friends Mr Egan and Mr Holdsworth that if they failed to introduce us at the earliest possible opportunity I should be most horribly cross with them. Martin — Mr Egan — lent me the book you wrote about your overland journey from Shanghai to Burma. It was wonderful. So I feel like I know you already. I do admire your wit and courage. Not another man I have met here would undertake such a journey alone. And I've heard it was this book that led to *The Times* appointing you as their China correspondent.'

Morrison felt a blush, that congenital curse of the fair-skinned, spread across his cheeks. He'd always envied the American readiness to catch a compliment and keep it. Personally, he was hardly averse to flattering remarks. But there was something deep in his Australian soul that caused him to squirm under their impact. Besides, to hear such blandishments coming from a mouth as kissable as Miss Perkins's was disconcerting. It was he who ought to be complimenting her, but he couldn't do so now without seeming reflexive or disingenuous.

'And so it was,' she continued, 'that when I was in Peking a few weeks back, I asked Mr Jameson to invite you to a luncheon he hosted for me. I was crestfallen when you sent word that you could not attend.' Her eyelashes batted a Morse code of disappointment.

Morrison was filled with horror. C.D. Jameson, a tedious, rum-soaked old duffer and long-term resident of Peking who dabbled in commerce, mining and journalism, was forever inviting him around. Morrison routinely sent his regrets. He had a few more of those now. 'If he had only informed me of your presence and told me of your request,' he said, 'I could hardly have refused.'

'Mr Jameson assured me he told you.' She widened her eyes.

'I am so terribly sorry. I do not recall ...' *That confirmed masturbator*, Morrison thought, certain that Jameson had never mentioned anything about a Miss Perkins. But he knew that it wasn't the time to go into Jameson's perfidies, which were myriad.

'Mr Jameson explained what a very busy man you are, Dr Morrison, so please don't trouble yourself about it. Oh, goodness!' A look of sweet concern came over

her face. 'You've gone quite red. Perhaps the dining room is a trifle overheated.'

It was impossible to overheat any room in north China in winter. Morrison could feel the maddening blush spreading to his ears. He extracted his handkerchief from his pocket and patted his forehead.

'Mae, dear,' Mrs Ragsdale admonished, 'Dr Morrison has more important things on his mind than meeting young ladies.'

'No, no, not at all,' Morrison rushed to say, plunging himself back into a sea of awkwardness.

Mrs Ragsdale, oblivious to both his discomfort and the fact the conversation had moved forward, took up her panegyric afresh. 'Mae, dear, you may not know this but when it was believed that Dr Morrison had died in the siege, *The Times* published a most beautiful obituary. A magnificent tribute.' Her eyes misted over.

'And what was even better, he was alive to enjoy it,' Dumas chortled.

Miss Perkins giggled. 'What did it say?'

'Oh, I can't recall the exact words,' Morrison demurred. In truth, he could have recited them by heart. *No newspaper ... has ever had a more devoted, a more fearless, and a more able servant than Dr Morrison ... he was characteristic of the best type of Colonial Englishman ...* 'It did rather distress my parents, and I understand the good citizens in my hometown of Geelong lowered their flags to half mast. But, just as your Mark Twain once more famously remarked, the report of my death had been greatly exaggerated. Like him, I am apparently still enjoying ruddy good health in the afterlife, if this be it.'

Miss Perkins's laughter was musical.

*Perhaps this is the afterlife. Heaven would have such angels.*

The maître d', masking impatience under an equable smile, took advantage of the pause in conversation to inform the gentlemen that their table was ready.

Reluctantly, Morrison followed Dumas and the maître d' into what already felt like a kind of exile.

He had only just taken his chair, however, when he jumped up again. He rushed back over to the ladies' table and stammered out a suggestion that they all take coffee together in the drawing room after dinner.

'That would be most agreeable,' Miss Perkins said.

*In Which the Number of Courses in a Western Meal Passes Without Remark and Miss Perkins Demonstrates One Way to Eat a Boiled Pheasant*

Once they had given their orders to the waiter, Dumas leaned in towards Morrison. 'Eminently squeezable that one.'

'She thinks me self-important,' Morrison replied gloomily. 'And so I acted. I could kick myself for mentioning the flags of Geelong flying at half mast. All that Hero of the Siege business doesn't help either. I might as well go a-courting with the medals I received from Queen Victoria.'

'Young men woo with charm, energy and looks. Older ones woo with their wealth or, if that is lacking, their accomplishments.'

'I don't find that very reassuring.'

Dumas shrugged. 'I believe she likes you. Perhaps you have prospects for the Year of the Dragon after all.'

'Tosh. Even if that were true, I could hardly afford to keep an heiress.'

'That's the good thing about heiresses. They keep themselves. If you will not have her, perhaps I will. Not that she noticed me. When I spoke up just then, she looked over as though trying to remember who I was.' Dumas made mournful eyes at his champagne and then tipped it down his throat.

'I thought you learned your lesson. Your wife, if I recall correctly, has only just agreed to return to you.'

Dumas grimaced. 'I must watch my step. I am rarely allowed to forget the high position my father-in-law holds in the Foreign Office. My wife is currently threatening to have him return us to India, despite being well aware that I am in the toils of the native money-lenders there. But with regards to the tasty Miss Perkins, a man can dream, can he not?'

'Feel free,' replied Morrison, affecting indifference. 'I myself am neither a dreamer nor a poet.'

'Though,' Dumas pointed out, 'you dress like one. With your soft collars and all.'

'This conversation has degenerated from gossip to fashion. Before we mutate into a pair of old hens, I move that we discuss something of more pressing

import. The number of Japanese troops surging up the Korean peninsula towards the Yalu River, for example.'

'Granger says —'

'Granger?' Morrison exclaimed, so piqued he forgot entirely about the ravishing young lady at the other table. 'That little dwarf's a deuced fool. He has managed to get closer to the action than any of my newspaper's other correspondents and yet every sentence he writes is of dubious veracity. He admitted that the information about troop movements conveyed in his last telegram was gleaned from a Chinese carter. Next he will be reporting the gossip of ricksha pullers. What's more, he echoes whatever the Russians tell him; he will swallow any wild claim so long as it is washed down with enough vodka. I have had to field complaints from the Japanese Legation. They know I am *The Times's* senior correspondent and so they blame me for his telegrams.'

'And yet,' Dumas noted, 'as we saw again this morning, our Japanese friends are not entirely forthcoming either.'

'Indeed. They have obliged us with a war but not with any worthwhile information about its progress.'

'The Japanese tell you more than they tell anyone else; of that, at least, I am certain.'

'Sparse comfort.'

Dumas snapped his fingers. 'I forgot to mention that the Japanese consul in Tientsin claimed to me that his army had already sunk fifty Russian ships off Port Arthur.'

Morrison shook his head. 'I doubt it. The entire Russian fleet consists of only seventeen vessels.'

'Surely not.'

'The part that is not tied up in the Baltic Sea awaiting the thaw, most assuredly so.'

Dumas popped a sugared almond into his mouth and chewed. 'Granger. Is he really a dwarf?'

Morrison shrugged. 'He's short.'

Dumas barked with laughter. 'And you're tall. Henceforth I will call you a giant.' Reading his companion's expression, he added hastily, 'Which, of course,

you are.'

'Making sense of this war requires background and experience,' Morrison grumbled. 'The motley collection of roustabouts whom my editor has hired as war correspondents have neither. They have spent most of their time, as far as I can see, re-creating naval battles in bars up and down the China coast, sinking a battleship with every beer. Those who've actually made it to Port Arthur spend most of their time investigating the syphilitic marvels of Maud's Brothel. The rest are still in a complete cloud as to where Port Arthur even is. One old veteran, Tulloch, recently landed in Chefoo, on the Shantung Peninsula, armed to the teeth and mistaking the treaty port for the front! We're lucky he didn't fire on the British officers' mess. And yet *The Times* has made the decision to anchor me to Peking to act as an exchange clerk for these incompetents and their dispatches. It is incomprehensible.' Morrison neglected to mention that his employer's decision had been, at least partly, in response to his own belly-aching on the subject of his health. 'I have told Bell that I really must see some action myself, and not to send any more men.'

'You are most severe in your judgment of others. It makes me quite fear to leave the room. You may have wondered why you find me sticking so doggedly by your side.'

'Clever chap, Dumas. I have never thought otherwise. But you of all people should know that I reserve my harshest judgment for myself.'

'Don't we all?' Dumas's expression grew serious. 'I did wish to ask your opinion on something. I know that in all your telegrams and public statements you are sanguine about an early victory for Japan. But aren't you worried that if the war drags on, Britain, as an ally of Japan, might be dragged into the conflict? As you know, the Boer War depleted our military resources. My superiors fear that should the Russians be defeated in Manchuria —'

'Which they will be ...'

'— the Tsar may invade Afghanistan and upset the balance of power on the subcontinent.'

'Balderdash. You might as well say that if the Japanese succeed in displacing the Russian sphere of influence in Manchuria, they will go on to occupy all of north China.'

'Perhaps not. But surely, following victory, Japan could possibly grow to rival



Britain in commerce. People are saying —'

'People will say anything.'

Dumas bowed his head to the pigeon-egg soup.

Morrison regretted his brusqueness. 'I don't need to tell you that of course. You are no fool.'

Dumas, heartened, drew his hand over his beard, which rained crumbs.

Morrison grew aware of a sensation on his cheek like the tickle of sunshine. Out of the corner of his eye, he looked towards the ladies' table. With a prick of disappointment, he allowed that he might have been mistaken. Miss Perkins appeared absorbed in her conversation with her chaperone.

The waiters removed the men's soup bowls and placed before them anchovy on toast, broiled chicken and salad à la Russe.

Over at the ladies' table, Miss Perkins rearranged her skirts. One fashionably narrow boot peeped out from under her hem. Whether it had been revealed by accident or design was a question that taxed Morrison. He imagined a pale foot, smooth toes, a delicate but firm arch, finely turned ankles.

He wrenched his attention back to Dumas. 'I am glad that we came,' he insisted in a tone that implied his companion had suggested otherwise. 'It is poor work sitting in a drawing room in Peking whilst battles are raging in the neighbourhood.'

'Indeed,' Dumas concurred, patting his mouth with his napkin. 'Though I don't think you need to fear being accused of poor work as far as this war is concerned. You have done so much to advance the Japanese cause in the public mind that I've heard a number of people referring to the conflict as "Morrison's War".'

Morrison pretended to be surprised. 'Is that so?'

'You can't fool me.' Dumas watched the waiter top up their glasses before turning back to his friend. 'You're flattered.'

'It is not every man who has a war of his own,' Morrison conceded with a quicksilver smile.

Just then, Miss Perkins erupted in laughter. Morrison was stabbed by anguish. Had she overheard? As if she does not already think me self-important enough. But if she had been the least bit cognisant of the men's conversation, she gave no sign of it. He was torn between disappointment and consolation.

The waiter placed before the gentlemen a platter of cold baked ham with an accompaniment of tomatoes and candied yams. Across the room, the ladies were partaking of boiled pheasant.

Morrison's eyes met those of Miss Perkins. Holding his gaze, she speared a morsel of pheasant with her fork and conveyed it to her mouth. Fluttering her lashes and pursing her lips with a burlesque air, she inhaled the gamy scent of the meat, her bosom swelling over the line of her corset. As she exhaled, her throat, encircled in black ribbon, seemed to vibrate with pleasure. 'Mmm.'

She did not so much nibble as seduce the meat off the tines. Chewing slowly, she tipped her head back to let it slide down her throat. Her lovely round cheeks flushed and perspiration beaded her top lip.

Mrs Ragsdale observed her charge with palpable unease. 'Mae, dear, people are looking.' Her voice rang into the hush that had fallen over the room. Morrison, clearly, had not been her only audience.

Miss Perkins's astonishing reply, made after she had patted her glistening lips with her napkin, was thus heard by all. 'Yes. I suppose they are. I am so very glad I made an effort with my toilette.'

Dumas let out a squeak of laughter, which he parlayed into a cough.

'Mae!' gasped Mrs Ragsdale. She opened her mouth to say something else and then closed it, as though realising it was no use. Morrison felt he could almost see a homily wilting on her tongue.

'Quite a performance,' Dumas whispered.

Morrison was too lost in inner turmoil to reply.

The men's pudding arrived.

Not long after, the women finished their meal and passed out of the room, Miss Perkins with the air of an actress taking leave of her fans.

Swallowing down a final spoonful of tapioca and cream, Dumas patted the swollen mound of his stomach. 'If I lie down on the floor right now, I'd look like the Fourteenth Ming Tomb.'

'Raise the dead,' said Morrison. 'It is time to join the ladies.'

Dumas studied his companion for a moment. 'Is the great G.E. Morrison falling in love?' he asked.

'Love does not come into the equation, my dear Dumas.'

Morrison could be powerfully persuasive. He almost believed himself.