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THE WAR OF THE DRAGON LADY

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CHAPTER ONE

Chihli Province, China. June 1900.

Simon Fonthill eased himself in the saddle, stood a little shakily in the stirrups – he was tired but, at forty-five and even after twenty-four years of hard campaigning throughout Queen Victoria’s empire, he remained an uncertain horseman – and looked around him. The plain of Northern China presented little to see. There had been no rain that spring and no corn had been sown. Two years of drought had sucked the moisture from the rice fields and the sun’s rays flinched back from the hard earth as though even they were burnt by the touch. In the distance the white road wound towards the roofs of a village, but no other living thing stirred: no people, no animals, not even a bird, for there were no trees or bushes to give it perch.

Jenkins urged his mount alongside. ‘Otter than bleedin’ Africa, I’d say.’ He sucked in his great moustache as though to gain moisture from it. ‘Don’t remember it bein’ as ’ot as this in the Sudan, look you.’

He sniffed. 'Can't see why we've come, to be honest, bach sir.'

'Don't let's get into that, for God's sake.' Fonthill pulled down his white topee, the better to shield his eyes, and nodded ahead. 'Should be able to find a bit of shade in that village. Stop for a cup of green tea or something.'

He relaxed back into the saddle but his mind remained on edge. It wasn't just the heat. The temperature must be well over ninety degrees, even in the shade – that which could be found – but the feeling of oppression that sat above him in the yellow sky had nothing to do with the sun. In truth, he had been uneasy since they had landed at Tientsin a week ago. China, or at least this Province of Chihli, had not been welcoming.

The teeming streets of the inland port had seemed to lack that cheerful bustle that so characterised Bombay, Alexandria or Cape Town, where white people, particularly the British, were accepted and even welcomed as traders and bringers of wealth. In Tientsin, the people had hurried by, their eyes downcast under their wide, conical straw hats and their features sullen, and the peasants glimpsed as they penetrated deeper inland seemed to share this same resentment. Fonthill had served in Zululand, Afghanistan, the Transvaal, the Sudan and Matabeleland and he recognised aggression when he met it. Here, he could almost smell it.

His unease communicated itself to Jenkins. 'There's trouble about, ain't there?' he said. 'D'you think it's them boxing blokes?'

'What, the Boxers?' He grinned. 'Well, we haven't exactly met any of them yet, have we? But something's up. I can feel it. But then, perhaps I'm imagining it. Too much sun and bloody dust.'

'Are you all right, Simon?' His wife called from the cart at the

back of which she perched less than comfortably on their baggage, trying to find shade beneath a parasol. Their Chinese servant and guide slumped on the single seat before her, letting the reins leading to the mules fall into his lap. He seemed as glad as the animals to stop for a moment.

Fonthill turned his horse and let it amble back to the cart. ‘Yes, fine, my love. I thought we might stop at that village up ahead and see if we can get some tea. Yes?’

‘Oh absolutely. Find some shade.’ She smiled at her husband.

Alice Fonthill was exactly the same age as her husband but there was very little sign of middle age in her face or figure. Dressed in a loose, white, cotton shift with sandals on her feet, she seemed neither plump nor slim but sturdy rather, with her midriff pulled in tightly by a lime-green bandana. Her face was open, her features regular and her eyes a steady grey; indeed, she could have been called beautiful if it had not been for a certain squareness to her jaw which bestowed a sense of purpose. Under her floppy white hat her hair was fair with only the lightest dusting of grey and her skin was unfashionably tanned. Not for her the protected pallor of the Raj’s memsahibs. Mrs Fonthill, known to her readers of London’s *Morning Post* by her maiden name of Alice Griffith, was as comfortable out of doors as her husband.

In fact, the two of them made a handsome couple as they smiled at each other in the heat. He was of middle height at five foot nine inches, though now he slumped in the saddle. His shoulders were wide and no fat had encroached to widen his waist, for a life spent farming and campaigning had made his body hard. His eyes were brown and normally showed traces of reserve, but not now as he

looked at his wife with a tenderness that had survived years of sadness as well as joy. The most prominent feature of his face was the nose, broken years ago by a Pathan musket and now hooked, giving him a predatory air, that of a hunter looking for his prey. Yet his mouth, though thin-lipped, was soft and betrayed sensitivity; perhaps that rarity in Queen Victoria's great empire – a warrior with a conscience?

Fonthill jerked his head towards their guide, now seemingly asleep as he sat, hunched. 'Has he said much?' he mouthed.

She shook her head. 'Not a sausage,' she whispered. 'He's not exactly sociable, is he?'

'Ah well, we can't be far from your uncle's place. This should be the last stop. Let's get on.'

He pulled on the rein and gently leant over and gave the sleeping man a prod, pointing ahead. 'We'll stop at that village,' he said slowly.

The Chinaman opened his eyes. He said nothing but he jerked the reins and flicked his whip and the two mules shuffled ahead, hardly disturbing the dust on the road.

They had ambled barely a hundred yards when they heard the noise. It was difficult at first to tell the origin; then it became clear. Voices raised, Chinese voices, of course, but with that distinctive sing-song pattern now lost and merged into a high-pitched howl. It came from the village ahead and it personified hate and anger. The communal voice of a mob.

Fonthill turned and shouted to their driver, 'Stay here.' Then to Jenkins, 'Come on.'

They spurred their weary horses into something resembling a canter and rounded the bend that wound into what seemed like the main street of small dwelling houses, more a hamlet than a village.

The place was deserted except for some dozen Chinamen who were surrounding a youth, who stood, befuddled, as abuse was hurled at him as he twisted and turned to find a way out through the ring.

The men were dressed all alike. They were barefooted and wore the loose pyjama-type garment of the Chinese peasant. But the pastoral effect of their clothing was completely dissipated by the red cloths tied round their heads, the red ribbons that fluttered from their wrists and ankles and the scarlet girdles that circled their waists. Two of them carried swords, others large sticks.

‘Boxers!’ breathed Simon.

The boy in their midst was probably no more than sixteen and he raised his hands in a desperate attempt to defend himself as the blows began to rain down on him. Then the lad went down on one knee under the force of the attack from all sides and, as he did so, two of his assailants drew their swords.

‘That’s enough,’ shouted Fonthill. ‘Stop that!’ He dug his heels into his horse’s flanks and rode straight into the crowd, scattering them. He was conscious of Jenkins riding closely behind him as he groped behind his saddlebag for some kind of weapon. He found only the end of his ash walking stick and drew it as he burst through the crowd. Wheeling his mount around, he realised that the mob had scattered only momentarily. The boy lay dazed on the ground but the Boxers now ignored him and approached the two horsemen, fanning out to surround them.

‘Watch out, bach sir.’ Jenkins’s vocal Welshness always seemed to increase in proportion to the danger faced. ‘The buggers ’ave got swords and they’ll come at our backs, look you.’

‘We mustn’t let them attack the wagon.’ The pitch of Fonthill’s

own voice now betrayed the peril of their situation. ‘Dammit. Shouldn’t have left the revolvers with the baggage. Only one thing for it. Cavalry charge. You ready, 352?’

Jenkins’s eyes were black and cold under the rim of his wide-brimmed hat. ‘Most certainly. But don’t fall off, ’cos I might not ’ave a chance to pick you up, now, see.’

‘Rubbish. I’m as good as a dragoon now. Use your stick as a sabre. Right at ’em, then – and shout. Now. Charge!’

The two lowered their sticks, put their heads down and urged their horses into a startled gallop. As they charged, they shouted – or rather, screamed. Jenkins’s was a high-pitched, Celtic cry that seemed to come from deep within him; a prehistoric place of dark valleys and hills. Fonthill’s seemed half embarrassed, more a desperate appeal for a catch from first slip on the cricket field than a battle cry. Both, however, were effective, for the Boxers broke and ran. Not, however, before one of them swung his club backhandedly at Simon’s horse, catching him on the rump and causing him to rear.

Fonthill, with only one hand on the reins, was unable to control his mount and he felt himself slip backwards and then crash to the ground, temporarily winding him and sending his stick clattering away. Within moments, as he attempted to scramble to his feet, he realised that Jenkins was beside him, a knife gleaming in his hand.

‘I just knew you’d fall off,’ muttered the Welshman. ‘On your feet, boyo, they’re coming at us again. ’Ere, ’ave my stick, it’s better than nothing. Back to back now.’

Taking deep gulps of hot air, Fonthill tried to regain his breath. The Boxers had whirled around and the two swordsmen were advancing on them now, preparing to take easy prey. Simon noticed that neither

betrayed the slightest expression as he stepped forward.

Their eyes were completely dispassionate, like those of two snakes, preparing to strike.

‘Bit of dust in their faces when they come in, bach sir,’ muttered Jenkins. ‘Might just give us a moment. If I can get close, I’ll slit their gizzards, so I will. See if you can get be’ind me, like.’

‘Certainly not. I’ll fight my own bloody battle, thank you very much.’

The partners knelt down slowly, as though in supplication, but each gathered a handful of dust in his free hand and then they rose equally slowly to face the swordsmen.

Fonthill’s mind raced. He knew that Jenkins was a superb close-quarters fighter. He had seen him confront and subdue a strapping assegai-carrying Zulu warrior, fighting only with his hands. But he himself had no such skills. The agony was that, if they were killed, Alice would be left completely defenceless in the wagon just outside the village. The Boxers would surely take it and she, too, would perish, for their guide would be useless. He must use what skills he had. The ash walking stick would become a rapier.

Slowly, he raised it and adopted the fencing *en garde* position, as he had been taught to do so many years ago at Sandhurst, the training school for young British officers. The ridiculous posture – side on, feet planted fore and aft and knees bent, while the stick was presented, horizontal to the ground, to the opponent – caused the Boxer to pause in his advance. The man stood for a moment, his mouth gaping, perspiration pouring down his chest in the gap shown by his open vest and his pigtail moving, pendulum like, as his head moved from side to side. Slowly he absorbed the situation. Then he

grinned and jumped forward, swinging his sword in a silver arc.

Fonthill moved back and immediately crashed into the posterior of the Welshman, who judging by the clang of steel on steel was now engaged in his own fight for life. Somehow, however, Simon deflected the swing of the sword with his stick, so that it passed harmlessly to his side. Moving to his left, he lunged forward classically, taking the Chinaman firmly in the midriff with the point of the stick, causing the man to gasp and fall away, holding his stomach.

Seizing the moment, Simon attacked, thrusting with his ash as though it was an épée made of finest steel. Except that, of course, it was not. With a contemptuous swipe, the Boxer swung his blade across his body, cutting Fonthill's staff in half and leaving only a shattered stump in his hand.

'Dammit to hell.' In desperation, the Englishman sprang forward and threw the sand into the face of his opponent, causing the man to clutch at his eye. Before the Boxer could recover, Fonthill thrust the stump of his stick into his face. The splintered end grazed the cheekbone, producing a cry of pain and anger.

But it was the aggression of despair, for the Chinaman was not hurt. He backed away for a moment, wiped his eye and then sprang forward, raising his sword for one last and surely fatal attack.

Suddenly a shot rang out and the man clutched at his shoulder, blood spurting between his fingers. The sword dropped from his hand and he turned and looked with astonishment at the figure of Alice, standing some twenty-five yards away, the long barrel of an American Naval Colt revolver smoking in her hand.

For a split second the scene became frozen, like some mimed tableau, all movement stilled as though the actors were waiting for

applause at the end of the drama. The rest of the Boxers were standing around in various postures, waiting for the swordsmen to end the entertainment by killing their men. The youth knelt on his hands and knees in the centre of the road, his mouth open. Jenkins had somehow turned his man and now had him from the back, his long knife at the throat of his assailant, whose sword lay on the ground.

All was still and then, as though acting on some hidden signal, the scene broke up: the Boxers ran as fast as their bare feet could take them, led by Simon's wounded opponent, clutching his shoulder as he loped away. The boy stood to his feet, swayed for a moment and then approached the two Englishmen.

Incongruously, he stood before Simon and held out his hand. 'How do you do?' he asked in impeccable, if mannered, English. 'Am I right in believing that you are English, sir?'

'Bugger that.' Jenkins's interruption was low and guttural. 'Do you want me to kill this bloke, bach sir? Might as well. He tried to kill us and I don't think I can 'old 'im much longer. Got a bit of a cut on me arm, see.'

'What?' Fonthill wiped the perspiration from his eyes. 'Good God, no. Let the swine go.'

Jenkins relaxed his grip and immediately the Boxer ducked away, like a trout returned to a stream, and ran after his fellows. In a few seconds the dusty street was deserted except for the boy and his rescuers.

Fonthill ignored the extended hand and ran towards his wife. 'Oh, wonderful shooting, Alice. I'd have been cut in half if you hadn't arrived.' He embraced her. 'Are you all right, darling? Where's the cart?'

Gently she pushed him away. She was shivering slightly, despite

the heat. ‘Perfectly all right, thank you. I am so used to rushing about China in this heat and shooting at the peasantry.’ She handed the Colt to Simon, wiped her brow and then frowned. ‘Ah, Jenkins is hurt.’

The Welshman was clumsily attempting with one hand to tie a very soiled handkerchief around his upper arm, where blood poured from a deep cut in the biceps. Alice ran to him.

‘Sit down, 352.’

‘No, missus. I’m all right, really. Just a scratch.’

‘Sit down, I say.’ Alice eased the man to the ground and knelt beside him. With a gesture of disgust, she threw away the rag, took her own handkerchief from a pocket in her skirt and folded it onto the wound, then bound it with the scarf taken from her throat. ‘Hold that tightly to stop the bleeding, and we’ll get back to the cart and wash the wound and dress it properly. Now, can you stand?’

Jenkins sniffed. ‘Course I can. As a matter of fact, I never wanted to sit in the first place, if you remember, Miss Alice. I’m all right, thank you very much.’

Alice grinned at him. Jenkins had long since lost his hat in the affray – in her experience he rarely retained a hat for longer than a couple of hours in any one day, anyway – and, now covered in dust, he looked like some labourer from a stone mine, his thick hair standing up like grey stubble and his great moustache bristling with grit. Jenkins stood at only five foot four inches but he was not a small man. In fact, he seemed almost as broad as he was tall, so wide were his shoulders and so deep his chest. It was no surprise that he had turned the tables on the Boxer. Even at forty-nine, he was as quick on his feet as a fox, and throughout his life he had fought: in his early days in British army barrack rooms, detention centres and bars

throughout the length and breadth of the Empire and then, for the last two decades, at the side of Simon Fonthill, his former subaltern, turned mentor and comrade, in a dozen adventures around the world. Formally employed now as gentleman's servant, Jenkins was part of the family. His Christian name long since forgotten, he was known as '352' – the last three numerals of his old army number, used to distinguish him from the seven other Jenkinses in his company in the old 24th Regiment of Foot, that most Welsh of army units – and he formed an essential third leg of the Fonthill stool.

Now he grinned back in gratitude at Alice as she and Simon helped him to his feet. Then Alice suddenly became aware of the Chinese youth, standing by deferentially. His shirt was torn, blood was trickling from several head wounds and swellings were appearing on his face. As she regarded him, he began to sway.

'Oh, my goodness,' cried Alice. 'Quick, Simon. He's going to fall.'

Fonthill sprang forward and caught the young man in his arms.

He lifted him easily. 'Back to the wagon,' he said. 'This chap needs a bit of shade under your parasol, darling. Here, take the Colt, Jenkins. They might come back. We need to get out of here. Alice, bring the horses.'

They hurried, as best they could, round the bend to find to their relief the cart standing at the side of the road where the mules had dragged it to find shade. Of their guide and driver there was no sign.

'E's buggered off,' panted Jenkins.

'Good riddance.' Fonthill lowered the boy onto the bags and jammed Alice's parasol so that it provided some shade for his head.

'Now, water, Alice, if you please.'

She unscrewed her water bottle and offered it to the youth's lips.

At first the water trickled down his chin and then, as his eyes flickered open, he drank.

‘Good,’ muttered Alice. ‘Now lie still and let me bathe those bruises.’

As she did so, Simon retrieved his own canteen and, removing the temporary dressing on Jenkins’s arm, began to dab gently at the wound beneath.

‘Bloody ’ell,’ swore the Welshman. ‘That’s a bit sharp, see.’

‘Don’t be such a baby. You said yourself it was only a scratch. Here, you do it. I’m no nursemaid. I’ll hitch the horses up to the wagon. We must get moving. I don’t want the Boxers back.’

Jenkins looked up. ‘Why are they called that, then? They don’t seem to fight by the Queensbury Rules, now do they?’

Fonthill gathered the reins of the horses and attached them to the rear of the cart. ‘I’m told that they’re mainly young men,’ he said, ‘all supposed to be fierce patriots who hate foreigners and who practise martial arts, though I don’t think they include boxing as we know it.’ He climbed into the seat of the wagon and cracked the whip over the mules. ‘They’ve adopted this Japanese form of wrestling, called ju-jitsu, or something. Anyway, I don’t want to fight ’em again with the stub of a walking stick.’

‘Simon,’ Alice called. ‘Have you noticed something strange about this place?’

‘Well, it’s bloody hot, for one thing.’

‘No. Despite all the noise we haven’t seen one single person from the village. No one has come out of the houses. It’s like a ghost village.’

‘Ah,’ the boy struggled up onto his elbow and spoke. ‘That is

because they frightened of Boxers. Watch from windows. They in terrible funk, you see.'

Simon grinned over his shoulder at the colloquialism. 'Goodness me, young man, your English is very good. Where did you learn it?'

'At school and at home with father and mother. They my teachers.'

'Do they live near here? Can we take you to them?'

The boy raised a smile. 'I think you go there, anyway. I think you Captain Fonthill, Mrs Alice and Sergeant Jenkins. Am I right?'

The three looked in amazement at the young man, whose smile had broadened into a grin. 'You are, indeed,' said Alice. 'Who are you?'

The lad squirmed until he was sitting upright. 'My name is Chang. There is more to it than that, of course, but it is difficult for English to say rest of name. So call me Chang.' His grin lapsed into a frown. 'But you not supposed to be here.'

'What do you mean?'

'I go to Peking last week to send you cable to ship in Tientsin, saying too dangerous to travel here because of Boxers. Cable from my father, Reverend Griffith.'

'Your *father* . . . ?' Alice was incredulous. 'My Uncle Edward is your . . . er . . . *father*?'

'Oh yes.' The boy nodded his head, the most earnest expression on his face. 'And Mrs Griffith my mother. They buy me from warlord when I was a baby and bring me up. My real parents dead. So I think we are all cousins, or something like that. I am very glad indeed to meet you all.' And he extended his hand.

They each took it solemnly.

'Well that's solved the problem of finding the mission,' said

Fonthill. 'It must be near here. What were you doing when the Boxers found you?'

'I was going to buy rice, if I could find someone in village to sell.' He looked round earnestly. 'It is very scarce, because of drought. Drought a bally nuisance, you know.'

Simon smothered a smile. 'I am sure it is. But why did the Boxers attack you? I thought they were only against foreigners, and you are Chinese.' He coughed. 'Albeit a very English one.'

The boy fingered beneath his torn shirt and produced a crucifix hanging on a chain. 'Because I am Christian, follower of Lord Jesus Christ. Boxers hate Christians in particular, and they hate missionaries most of all. Reverend Father had been warned that Boxers were coming. That is why he sent me to capital to cable you not to come. Why you come, then?'

Alice resumed her treatment of the bruises. 'Your cable must have arrived after we left the ship in Tientsin – in fact, after we left the port. Now lie still.'

'No.' Fonthill turned his head. 'Can you come up here, Chang, and show us the way? If you are feeling up to it, that is?'

The boy squirmed onto his knees and crawled across the baggage until he was kneeling behind Simon. 'Oh, I am very up to it, thank you very much. Yes. You follow this way and then, in a moment, you will turn right. I will show you. Mission about five minutes away now.'

The cart with its attendant horses slowly wound its way through the barren countryside. There was no question of distancing themselves from the Boxers, for Simon could summon up nothing from the mules

other than a slow trudge. But it seemed as if the insurgents had been deterred by Alice's pistol shot, for no one followed them and, indeed, the members of the little party felt as though they were the only moving life on that empty, dry plain.

Eventually, they meandered their way into another village, virtually a small town, for it was considerably larger than the place of their attack. The road led them into a warren of alleyways where, at last, people were evident, moving through the narrow streets and staring with a singular lack of benevolence at the cart and its exotic cargo of white-skinned foreigners. The party passed the open doorway of an indigo dye works, where rising steam obscured the workers within, and then a large, three-storey building, the smell of which confirmed to Jenkins, at least, that it was a rice-wine distillery.

Following Chang's very explicit directions – 'Now, cousin, pray take this next turning on the left' – they emerged into a small square dominated by a two-storeyed, wooden church, unmistakable from the crucifix attached above the doorway. Next to it was a small house, built, like those fronting the square, of cream-coloured mud brick and featuring ochre-coloured window shutters closed against the fierce sun and a rippling roof of purple tiles. Outside the house, looking anxiously up the street and rubbing her hands together in obvious anxiety, stood an elderly woman. She was small and dressed, Chinese fashion, in a shapeless cotton garment, her smock buttoned up to the chin and her long skirt ending just above wooden clogs. Unlike other women in the square, however, she wore no straw hat and her grey hair was scraped back into a serviceable bun at the nape of her neck. Her high cheekbones and the walnut-grained skin of her face made her appear Chinese, but the set of her eyes, distinguishable to the

occupants of the cart as it came closer, confirmed her as European.

Alice let out a cry, 'Aunt Lizzie!' and leapt from the cart before it had stopped, engulfing the woman in her arms. The two stood rocking together on the doorstep of the house before the old lady gently pushed her niece away and peered anxiously over her shoulder into the wagon.

'Oh, thank the Lord,' she cried. 'You've got Chang.' And she held out her arms to the lad, who scrambled down and embraced his adoptive mother. The two stayed locked together for a moment before Mrs Griffith let him go and stretched out her hand to Fonthill.

'And you must be Simon,' she said. 'Oh, forgive me.' She pulled up a corner of her apron and wiped away a tear. 'You must think me so rude but,' she smiled at the boy, 'I was so sure that something had happened to . . .' then her voice tailed away as she saw the cuts and bruises on Chang's face. 'Ah, I knew it. He has been hurt. What happened? Tell me.'

'Oh, I am all right, Mother. But I fear I would have been killed but for the intervention of my . . . er . . . my cousins. They were very brave. It was a party of Boxers, you see . . .'

'Enough,' cried the old lady. 'It is best to come inside, all of you. These are dangerous times. Simon, can you and your young man,' she indicated Jenkins, who beamed at the compliment, 'take the cart and mules into the courtyard through that door there. I will send someone to unharness the mules and take your bags. But it would be wise to get off the street as soon as possible. Come, dear Alice. This way. We tried to stop you coming but obviously our message did not get through. I thank God that you have not been harmed. Come in. Come in.'