

COX
or
The Course of Time

by

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1 Hángzhōu

Arrival

Cox reached the Chinese mainland under slack sails on the morning of the October day on which Qiánlóng, the most powerful man in the world and Emperor of China, had the noses of twenty-seven tax collectors and bond dealers cut off.

On that mild autumn morning, banks of mist were drifting over the unruffled waters of the Qiántáng, whose sandy bed, which melted into several side channels, had been dredged by more than two hundred thousand forced labourers using shovels and baskets so that, in line with the Emperor's wishes, an error of nature might be corrected, and the now navigable river might link the sea and Hángzhōu Bay with the city.

Again and again the shifting fog concealed the incoming ship from the eyes of the crowd that had thronged to the place of execution by the harbour's edge. According to police reports, two thousand one hundred spectators had come to bear witness to Emperor Qiánlóng's infallibility and righteousness, many of them in their best clothes. They chatted or stood in solemn silence as they waited for the executioner to appear, and watched the three-masted barque glide towards them through the river mist, repeatedly vanishing into it and exuding greater menace with each re-appearance. What a ship!

Even some of the condemned men chained to their stakes raised their heads to gaze at the silently drifting barquentine with its deep-blue square sail and fore-and-aft rig, while those assembled around the scaffold seemed to have forgotten that they owed their attention in this world to the emperor and the execution of his will alone, to no one but the Son of Heaven, who only condescended out of benevolence to share his affection and his gaze with other humans and creatures. No flood, no volcanic eruption and no earth tremor, not even an eclipse of the sun, could warrant even a single thought to turn away

without permission from the emperor's glory and omnipotence to the events of the everyday world.

The emperor had shown with the deepening of the Qiántáng that his will was able to transport an entire city to the sea, and bring the sea to the gardens and parks of Hángzhōu. Ever since, the swelling tide had borne approaching ships to the city's quays and warehouses like an offering from the ocean, while the river, reversing its flow to the rhythms of low and high tide, could float entire fleets in a display of imperial might.

But what was an omnipotent ruler, whose laws determined every sign of life, the course of the river, coastlines, people's exchanged glances and innermost thoughts, when a previously unseen tall ship came gliding over the black waters of the Qiántáng, which stank of lime from the tanneries? And the emperor was invisible. The ship, on the other hand, was not – or was, at any rate, hidden from view for only a few heartbeats, before the banks of mist once more discharged it into unambiguous reality.

Resting in their litters or under canopies among the crowd gathered at the place of execution, some mandarins had begun to mutter recent rumours to each other, whisperings from the court's many shadowy corners of the arrival of an English sailing ship laden with precious automata and timepieces. No one pointed to the barquentine, whispered and glanced around after every sentence to check that none of the emperor's many ears was listening and none of his many eyes saw that subjects clad in embroidered cloaks or fur-trimmed robes, their names easily ascertained by a policeman or a secret service agent, harboured forbidden worries about His Majesty's plans for that morning: surely the condemned stood where they were standing because His Majesty had willed it so. Yet was it really *His* will that this enormous, blue-rigged ship should be heading for one of the most magnificent and prosperous cities in the empire?

Qiánlóng, whether invisible or shimmering in red-gold and silk, was omnipresent – a god. However, although he intended to end his inspection tour of seven provinces, with a retinue of over five thousand courtiers, in the coming

days in Hángzhou, and return to Běijīng with a fleet of thirty-five ships via the Grand Canal – a waterway dug for his use alone – none of the city’s inhabitants, not a single one of its most senior officials, had caught so much as a glimpse of him during his visit. After all, the emperor should tire neither his eyes with the sight of the nuisances of everyday life, nor his voice with conversation or speeches. Everything there was to see or to say, his subjects said or saw for him; and he saw everything, even through closed lids, and heard everything, even when asleep.

Qiánlóng, Son of Heaven and Lord of Time, was floating that morning in feverish dreams high above the towers and roofs of Hángzhōu, guarded by hundreds of armoured warriors; high above the drifting fog, somewhere among dark-green hills, where the autumn air was redolent with mild aromas, and the empire’s finest tea was picked. He lay there like a babe in a bed suspended from the red-lacquered beams of his splendid tent by four silken tresses interwoven with purple threads and perfumed with lavender and violet oil. Nightingale feathers stitched to his hanging bed’s gossamer curtains occasionally fluttered sluggishly in the draught.

The court had pitched its tents and His Majesty’s silk marquee so high above the city, thereby spurning the luxury of the palaces of Hángzhōu, which had stood empty for weeks, because on his travels the emperor sometimes preferred the wind and the transience of a fortress of canvas, lines and pennants to the apartments and walls that might contain hidden dangers or turn out to be traps set for him by conspirators and assassins. Viewed from the hilltops, though, it seemed as if Qiánlóng were besieging one of his own cities.

Surrounded by a sea of papers – solicitations, verdicts, calligraphy and poetry, expert reports, watercolours and countless still bound and sealed documents – that he was intending on this day, as on every other, to read and examine, approve, admire or reject in the early morning hours, he lay ensnared in racing dreams, from which he woke with a start when his senior valet tried to protect a valuable deed from the feverish ruler’s cramps and dry his perspiring brow with a piece of cambric sprinkled with lotus essence.

No! No! Out! Qiánlóng, a forty-two-year-old man who looked almost delicate amid the splendour of his cushions and bedclothes, turned away like an irate child. He wanted everything, even the jumble of rustling papers among which he was writhing, to be left exactly where and how it was. A barely perceptible suggestion of a wagging index finger had been enough for the servant's hands to dart back into frozen readiness.

Yet which of the silently bowing servants and physicians in attendance, all of them forbidden on pain of death to whisper a word about His Majesty's fever or other possible ailments outside this tent, and which of the soldiers of the imperial guard, still as stone in their crimson armour as they surrounded the tent like a motionless, breathing carapace, would have dared to doubt that the emperor, though he lay soaked with sweat and crippled by fever in his floating bed, was not also at this moment – simultaneously! – down below, present in the mist-cloaked city, and even present among the twenty-seven swindlers awaiting mutilation. Present, too, in the black waters of the harbour, in which an English barquentine was now running out the anchor chains with a clatter.

As if this clatter, which silenced the crowd, were his cue to appear, a scrawny man with a waist-length plait stepped wordlessly towards the first of the twenty-seven stakes before the anchor had even hit the bottom and the chains had tautened. He was the executioner. He bowed curtly to the condemned man, who began to whimper with fear, pushed up the tip of the man's nose with the thumb of his left hand, placed a scimitar against its underside and, with a jerk, sliced up through the nasal bone to just below the man's forehead.

The ensuing shriek of pain, which began with a spurt of blood from a strangely empty and suddenly skull-like face, and grew, stake after stake, in time to the executioner's progress, bowing and identical incisions to a deafening howl, interrupted here and there by a rising tide of laughter. Now, after losing face, these greedy pigs were finally losing their noses too! And this was a mild punishment – too mild a punishment – for having sold worthless bonds at the stock exchanges in Běijīng and Shànghai and Hángzhōu, and having tried to make good their scam with tax revenues – the Emperor's gold!

They should grovel on their stomachs before their judges, for in the opinion of some of those chuckling at the foot of the scaffold, they should also have had their pricks cut off and stuffed into their anuses until shit spilled into their mouths. It was a show of clemency that blood spouted only from the bastards' flat faces, and only their noses went bouncing across the boards of the scaffold like fallen fruit!

Two mangy dogs, following closely on the executioner's heels, sniffed at the skipping spoils but did not touch them. That was the work of a horde of crows, which swooped down from the roofs of a bell-shaped pagoda a few screams and breaths before the last condemned man lost his nose, eventually shunning, for inexplicable reasons, only four or five noses, which they left lying there amid a maze of bloody tracks. Did the emperor, wherever he might be in his invisibility, concur with the laughing witnesses to his justice, and smile?

As if the rattle of the anchor chains and the ensuing screams of pain from the city far below had finally released him from his tangled dreams high up among the mountain chains, the Son of Heaven sat up in his sickbed, which was still rocking gently under the impulsion of his most recent cramps. However, not even the valet kneeling beside this swaying bed understood Qiánlóng's mumbled words: 'So has he arrived? Has the Englishman arrived?'

Alister Cox, a clockmaker and automaton-builder from London, and master of over nine hundred precision engineers, jewellers and gold- and silversmiths, stood at the rail of the *Sirius* and shivered despite the morning sun that had already climbed high above the hills of Hángzhōu and was burning off the mist hanging over the dark water.

Cold. Cold. *Damn.*

During the storm-ravaged seven-month voyage from Southampton along the malaria-ridden African coast, around the Cape of Good Hope and via the malaria-ridden ports of India and South-East Asia to this stinking Hángzhōu Bay, the *Sirius* had been his sole, loathsome dwelling and refuge. The ship had suffered two broken masts on the journey and had both times – first off the

coast of Senegal, the second time in the crazed currents around Sumatra – been in danger of sinking, along with its precious cargo.

Yet, as if it were protected by an almighty hand, a Noah's Ark filled with wondrous metal creatures – jewel-encrusted silver and gold peacocks fanning their tails, mechanical leopards, monkeys and silver-furred Arctic foxes, kingfishers, nightingales and chameleons crafted from copper sheet that could change colour from ruby red to emerald green – the *Sirius* had not gone to the bottom but, after long repairs on hostile shores, had hoisted its sails once more and set course for a land full of promise and ruled by a divine emperor.

In the stormy nights during which even the captain no longer believed that his ship would withstand the crashing waves, Cox, who had never been to sea before this voyage, had developed a curious symptom, with which he had reacted to any subsequent horrendous event or threat: at the first sign of danger, even in the tropical heat of South-East Asia or Indonesia, he began to shiver. Those in his vicinity would sometimes even hear his teeth chattering. His chill on this sunny morning stemmed from a glance he had taken through the beautifully engraved telescope that he intended to present to the Emperor of China at his first audience.

The crew of the *Sirius*, and Cox too, had interpreted the laughter, shouts and beating gongs, which a rising breeze carried across the calm waters to the *Sirius*'s worm-eaten gunwales, as sounds of celebration. The Chinese emperor had ordered celebrations for the arrival of the western world's most gifted automaton-builder and clockmaker! And indeed, into the sky shot rockets of such dazzling intensity that even rainbow-coloured trails of smoke, winding their way in hurtling spirals towards the zenith in the wake of bright explosions, did not pale in the sunlight. Yet Cox's view through the telescope revealed no flower-bedecked bandstand and no flagpoles, but rather twenty-seven stakes on a scaffold – proof that this was no celebration.

Cox shivered. Again he saw before him the imperial emissaries – two men with long plaits, dressed in curiously plain-cut clothes that were nevertheless made of silk and shiny wool – who had delivered the invitation from the Emperor of

China during that disastrous autumn two years ago when his daughter Abigail – his sun, his star, a child of five – had died from whooping cough.

The emissaries had approached Abigail's bier because Cox refused to interrupt his wake and greet the noble visitors in the reception room. He had not eaten for three days and had hardly drunk anything either, and he heard the East India Company interpreter's translation of the envoys' words as if from afar. Master Alister Cox was requested in the name of the Son of Heaven and august Emperor Qiánlóng to come to the court in Běijīng as the first Westerner ever to take up quarters in a Forbidden City and create unprecedented works that fulfilled the plans and dreams of His Majesty, the greatest and most passionate admirer and collector of clocks and automata.

The emissaries must have initially thought that on the catafalque in Abigail's death room, decorated with wreathes and garlands of white Damascene roses, and lit by dozens of flickering white candles, lay not a dead child but a mechanical angel hammered from the finest metals – the world-famous automaton-builder's latest work, ready to rise up at any second at the press of a button and open its eyes.

Cox had weighed down his daughter's eyelids with blue sapphires intended for a red kite commissioned by the Duke of Marlborough. With the kite's silver wings he had covered Abigail's thin arms. On her fever- and cough-ravaged body, wrapped in white Atlas silk, even the pinions of a bird of prey shimmered like angel wings.

Cox had felt at that moment as if his skin and facial expressions were forged from metal, the temperature and slow flow of his tears like those of a statue, in whose lightless interior he was captive, when one of the two envoys, recognising his mistake, and seeing before him not an automaton but a dead child, made a deep bow and sank to his knees beside the small corpse, believing this gesture to be in keeping with the customs of a foreign culture.

In the intervening two years, Cox had thought of Abigail every hour of every day and had ceased to build clocks. He didn't wish to fashion a single cog, a single escapement, a single pendulum or balance at his workbench, if each of

these parts served only to measure fleeting time that no gem in the world could lengthen.

Five years – a mere five years! – had been granted to Abigail from the riches of eternity, and he had had every clock removed, even the sundial on the south-facing side of his house in Shoe Lane, after her small coffin had floated down into the darkness of a grave in Highgate cemetery – every clock apart from a single mysterious timepiece, which he had inserted into Abigail’s gravestone in place of a marble angel or a grieving faun.

It was only on his workbench in China that he once again unfolded the design drawings for this clock, which was overgrown with ivy and roses within months, and which he had not even shown to Faye, as he searched for a mechanism capable of turning and turning, perhaps forever, like an insect emerging from the prison of its cocoon. Cox had called the inconspicuous grave decoration, camouflaged according to the season by flowers, leaves or rosehips, Abigail’s ‘life clock’, on which he might read the passing of his own life and bind it to Abigail’s eternal rest.

If timepieces were built for royal households, ship-owners and the British Admiralty in Cox’s Liverpool, London and Manchester factories, where many hundreds of clockmakers and precision engineers could endow a chronometer with the guise and voice of a blackbird or a nightingale, trilling a different song at noon, after dusk or at night, then since Abigail’s death this had been under the supervision of his friend and companion Jacob Merlin, who had now joined him at the rail. Jacob had often stood next to him in this manner during the past seven months on board, as if he feared that he might have to prevent Alister Cox, the world’s most miserable man, from seeking his peace in the dark depths of the ocean.

‘We’re not seriously going to land at Execution Dock?’ said Merlin. He too was holding a telescope.

Once in his life Cox had seen three buccaneers hanged at Execution Dock on the Thames from especially short ropes so that the usual fall from the scaffold did not break their neck, but left them to choke slowly on their own

weight instead. The spectators had called the kicking of the men as they vainly struggled for air the ‘pirate dance’: a display of royal justice.

Cox shivered. Over the past two decades the most illustrious houses in England and on the Continent had lodged their orders in Shoe Lane, some as gifts for themselves, others to win over more powerful or unconquerable courts such as the Russian Tsar’s. But had any recipient of a gift ever asked after the creator of the clocks and automata presented to him with the request for trade clearance, customs relief or other privileges?

The Emperor of China had.

When Cox had accepted Qiánlóng’s invitation after two months of reflection, and sent draft plans, in India ink, of a kingfisher to Běijīng as a token of his consent, he had nourished high hopes that a journey to China might be an opportunity to stem the inexorable advance of time so that he might once more build automata and perhaps even clocks – mechanical creatures that would, in truth, only ever be toys. Peacocks, nightingales or leopards: toys for Abigail, twinkling with sapphires and rubies.

After the princes, billionaires and warlords of Europe, the richest and most merciless individuals of their age, now even a godlike emperor was to be allowed to *play* in his throne rooms and audience pavilions with the miraculous beasts and dolls of a sleeping angel awaiting her resurrection under a blue pine in Highgate and, in doing so, brighten his empire with a glimmer of childlike innocence.