

WU MING

Translated by Robert P. Baird

In Like Flynn

It wasn't the opium, it was everything else. The breakneck escape, the voyage, the sex and drinking during the trip, the theft, the brawl... The opium came later, and it landed in a terrain already soaked in whiskey, Spanish sherry, French wine, and beer. You should never lower the alcoholic stakes: if you start with whiskey and brandy, please don't drink wine. And for the love of God, don't drink beer.

Flynn and Erben were far gone even before setting foot in the opium den, but they deserved a night like this after all the turmoil. If a man risks ending up in the stew, is robbed, risks dying, and is followed through alleys in two different cities by men armed with machetes and daggers, then he has the right to let himself go.

Relaxed now, Flynn just wanted to talk, talk, talk. He prattled on uninterrupted for a half hour about his youth, Tasmania, England, the faggot teachers at school, New Guinea, the crocodiles, the cannibals, his cow of a mother, the crap film they made of the *Bounty*... Erben listened with closed eyes. To tell the truth, he looked dead; if it weren't for a few chuckles, Flynn would have thought he had fainted. Krauts faint when they drink—it's automatic. Not Erben, to tell the truth, but Erben was a professor before he was a Kraut: there was a method to his drinking.

There were three of them in that room: Flynn; Erben; and an unknown, short and olive-skinned with black hair. The tropical heat burdened the air. Flynn was naked as a worm except for his socks. He sat on a wicker chair with his member semi-erect, telling stories and touching himself distractedly, unrolling anecdote after anecdote. Erben, shirtless and stretched out on a small sofa, giggled from the

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Great Beyond. The short man, sitting on a mat like a fakir, was smoking, coughing, and listening attentively. Not a word escaped him. The Chinese were discreet: they appeared from nowhere, loaded the ceramic pipe, and seemed to disappear into the smoke.

“I don’t think I’ve told you this one, Sport: when I was a kid, there were ducks in my neighbor’s yard. Tasmanian ducks. They’re different than the ducks in other places, bigger, meaner. You could fight them, like they do with cocks—who knows why no one’s thought of it. If I go back to Tasmania I’ll start the racket myself. What would it take? You’ll see: in Tasmania it won’t happen like it did in Manila. Anyway, there were six or seven ducks that ate chicken feed, I was ten or eleven years old and was looking for ways to kill time. My mother was in bed with nervous exhaustion and my father was abroad studying his animals. I was studying animals in my own way—a little longer there and I would have started to catalogue pussies... Anyway, being the young zoologist that I was—the family business, no less!—I set myself to watching these ducks. Did I already say there were six or seven of them? Anyway, this neighbor also had dogs, pigs, and animals of various kinds... He came out one day with a full bowl and emptied it in the yard, along with a big piece of boiled meat, fat, greasy, and disgusting. A duck came along and *glub!* swallowed the piece whole...”

“Zee ducks don’t eat meat...” Erben said in a broken voice.

“Lemme finish, Sport. *I* know they don’t eat it, fucking hell, they don’t have teeth! But Tasmanian ducks are strange creatures, they see something and they swallow it. Then, if it’s indigestible, they shit it out. And in fact, ten minutes later I saw that duck shit that piece of meat whole, undigested, just barely spotted with dung. That’s when the idea came to me. I ran to the house and got a spool of twine, collected the chunk of meat, washed it off, and threaded the twine through it, tying it off with a knot. I threw the meat to a duck, which immediately took in its mouth and swallowed it, twine and all. Ten minutes later, look what comes out. Now the twine is going in through the mouth and coming out behind—on to the next one! The second duck swallowed it, and now the twine was running into and out of two ducks in a row—on to the third! Then the fourth, the fifth... I called it “the living necklace.” Six or seven ducks chained together with a little string. I immediately went commercial with the gimmick: kids in the neighborhood paid to see those animals all forced to walk in a line.

Flynn launched a howling laugh. At his side a Chinese materialized who filled the pipe and disappeared. The short man smiled; he liked the story. Erben slid slowly into non-existence.

“Anyway, Sport, it was my destiny to make money on birds. You’ve got to admit that thing with Satan was a brilliant idea, it was only a stroke of bad luck that sent us off course. But we could have made some good money, right?”

“You make more vith zee monkeys. You catch zem and zell zem to laboratories, for zee experiments.” It was the longest phrase Erben had spoken since they’d entered the den.

“Maybe, but then you lose that thrill the cocks give you. Sure, you risk your skin. Hell, you’ve seen it, those guys with the sticks and the fists? If they had caught us, they would have fed us to the hogs. Or to the ducks, who would have shit us out in chunks, ah! ah! ah! But we had fun, didn’t we? There’s nothing more fun than that stuff, you can’t *not* get excited, hearing all of them yell: ‘Kill it!’ ‘Kill it!’ There’s nothing you can do, it’s the instinct for blood. Sure, the money counts, but what a man wants is blood...and you can bet your balls I won’t give him mine! What was the name of that piece of shit?”

“Inosanto...” Erben wheezed. The short man, sitting at the center of a cloud of smoke, seemed to prick up his ears. “Excuse me if I interrupt,” he interrupted. Flynn turned toward him, as if realizing for the first time that he was there. He blinked and knit his brow, a slow and exaggerated gesture. An incomplete statue of the Thinking Drunk.

The short man had long sideburns, long hair tied behind his head, and crow’s feet around his eyes. He wore his fifty years poorly. Loose, threadbare European clothes, old as he was, wrapped his frame. Flynn’s face erupted into a smile: “But of course, Sport! We’re all friends here, relatives, brothers. We’re all doing the same thing!”

“Not exactly, *he’s* not fondling his cock...” Erben specified.

Flynn looked between his legs: his left hand, thumb down, held firm his now-hard penis. “Whaddya know, I didn’t even realize... It just happens, naturally...” He released his grip and put on his underwear. “I hope I haven’t offended you, Sir...”

“No ‘Sir’—Leo, just call me Leo. I was born in Italy but I’ve traveled the South Seas for twenty-five years. Weighed anchor at Genoa in 1908 and haven’t returned to Europe since. With whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?”

“My name is Errol Leslie Thompson Flynn, at your service. Call me Errol, that’s enough. My companion here is Herr Doktor Hermann Frederick Erben, a German from Germany. *Hoo eez cawming now? I am cawming, I, Erben!*”

“I am Austrian, asshole. I was born in Vienna. And I have been an American citizen for zree years...”

“As you were saying, Errol,” Leo said, “we are all the same people. My friends and relatives aren’t in Italy, they’re in the bordellos and opium dens of the South China Sea: here in Hong Kong, in Singapore, in Jakarta...and also in Manila, where I know different people. I heard the doctor say a name, a moment ago...”

“Inosanto,” repeated Erben, back in the underworld.

“You’re speaking of Manulel Inosanto, king of the whores of Manila? The man who controls the betting, the outlawed games, and all the illegal traffic on the island of Luzon? You’re speaking of...the son of a bitch who did this to me?”

He unbuttoned a strap and lifted his shirt to his navel. A monstrous scar ran across his abdomen from south-east to north-west.

“*Ach, so!*” Erben commented, lifting himself on his elbows and fixating on the wound.

“*Holy dooley, Sport!*” Flynn burst out. “I haven’t shut my beak since we’ve been here but I can see that you’ve got a story to tell, too.”

“It’s not so long, and not even so original,” Leo said. “It happened ten years ago, in a bordello in Manila. The girl I had chosen screwed everything up and made me come right away, not even a minute in. I had paid for an hour, so I asked for my money back. The madam, a decrepit Spaniard they called Carmen, wouldn’t hear it and so I made a commotion. They called the boss, this same Inosanto. He said good evening to me then took out a big knife and *zac!* I ran out into the street holding my guts in. I don’t know who helped me; in any case, I’m still alive. I’ve never gone back to Manila, but people speak of him often. I keep my ears open, I know what he does and what he doesn’t do, and sooner or later I’ll find a way to make him pay... But it’s *your* story that interests me. You were speaking of cocks, of people following you...”

“Ours is a little longer, Sport, see if you like it.” Flynn was elated. The Chinese brought some more *chandu*. Erben turned to stretch himself out and closed his eyes.

Flynn's face was a slab of obscene beatitude. His infantile temperament marked it with lines of excitation and pleasure. The strength of the opium had further loosened an already unbridled tongue. He drew from the pipe. His punctiform pupils managed, who knows how, to laugh.

"I don't know if you know New Guinea: a dangerous disgusting shithole if there ever was one. And I don't know if you know the cannibals that live there. There's business there: the bingo-bongo can be sold to the Chinese and Malaysians along the coast, but it's raw material, so to speak, risky. Anyway, I'll keep it short. The contact who was supposed to mediate with this mountain tribe died while we were going up the Sepik River. We had to exchange some prisoners of war with the usual bullshit, pots and machetes... The cannibals would renounce some Negro cutlets and take our stuff home, and we would haul off to the coast our human meat, who would of course be happy that we had saved their skin and all the rest, that fair Sport?"

Flynn's gaze fell on Erben. The Kraut's eyelids were at half-mast. "What do you mean, fair? Fair story or fair trade?"

Flynn looked annoyed. "Both, Sport, both. Anyway, the contact slipped from the motor canoe, hit his head on a rock, and lay there dead. Two seconds later came a rain of arrows, spears, and who knows what the fuck else. I turned the canoe; luckily at that point the river was nice and wide. A herd of Negroes with hard dicks—sheathed in a kind of hollow branch, I can't explain it better—and all covered in feathers, with their noses pierced and their faces painted with white and red stripes, got behind us in their canoes, paddling like madmen. And they were going fast! Holy shit, you had to see it, Sport. Arrows and spears whistling a half inch from your head... It's a thing you don't forget. I kept my eyes on the current in front of me, to make sure I didn't smash the canoe against the rocks and boulders, but in my head I had the image of Negroes paddling behind me at full tilt to let us have it, so that they could share the best pieces of our flesh over the fire, and later get drunk... Given that they had liquor, of course... But they must have had it: if not, how did they get by in the middle of the mountains and forests? Their women weren't worth a look... Yep, they would have got drunk and told how exciting the chase was

and how good the Whites tasted... Wild men with hard dicks, naked with that covering business..."

Erben commented: "A bark case would be good for you, Errol. Zee latest fashion."

Flynn looked between his legs with a tender, worried expression. "No, Sport, he's just fine as he is. Besides the clap, I mean. Anyway, what was I saying?"

Leo, attentive, suggested, "The Negroes. The chase."

"Oh, right. It had to be a kind of destiny. Let's hope it changes, since it was more or less the same thing that happened in Manila last week, and again a few hours ago here in Hong Kong."

Flynn drew a large mouthful of smoke that forced him to rest on his back. He closed his eyelids while he continued to exhale smoke from his mouth and nostrils. "Somehow or other, we left the cannibals behind. That was enough, we didn't want anything more to do with that shithole. At Port Moresby we took the first boat out, a kind of tramp steamer with two or three cabins, but first, incidentally, we saw the little Chinese on the beach who bet on cocks. When we got to Manila we went looking for whores that first night and came across the same scene: fighting cocks. If that's not destiny..."

Erben was hit with a coughing chuckle. "I can't take any more of zee birds, Errol. Vy don't you tell us about zee whore after Manila? A whore in a ship, Herr Leo, a whore who fucks *alles*, and steals our money, yes?"

Flynn was about to respond but it was Leo who spoke. "Whore in a ship? I think I know who you're talking about. A blonde, thirty-five, elegant with a melancholy air..."

"Sport, don't tell me you too..."

"Yes. I know the lines she works: Darwin-Singapore, Singapore-Hong Kong, Manila-Port Mo..."

The word was cut short in the Italian's mouth. Flynn had no intention of letting him steal the scene. "Sure, Sport, but types like her end badly, sooner or later. But going back to us."

Flynn's pinpoint eyes looked first to Erben, then to the Italian. The latter's gaze was lost in something vague, distant. Erben seemed asleep, his half-open mouth dripped viscous slobber. "You here, Sport?"

The Kraut's reply was a kind of submissive whine. Flynn took it as an affirmative. He went on: "You know Manila. A shithole, soaked

through with Yellows who gather every Sunday in church, untrustworthy Yellows, half-wild with a Spanish patina. If I had found even one who could speak it, Spanish, I mean... But there's business there. Every quarter, district, and neighborhood has its cocks, and the people who make them fight. We didn't want to take any chances, right Sport? So we bought a small but ferocious cock, black as hell, and we called him Satan..." Erben gave echo from the netherworld, lifting the index finger of his right hand toward heaven: "Sa-TAN!"

"What was I saying? Before officially opening shop, we saw I don't know how many fights: to see how they worked, how you bet, all the rest. It was an investment. At the beginning we bet to lose, but then a Swedish guy, a son of a bitch, told us: "Look, the Filipinos despise losers, and anyway what you're doing is too obvious. They're already taking you for idiots." I committed myself then, and in five or six days I rounded up a series of winning bets, and the Yellows started to look at me with respect. One night, in a very fast fight, after a few pecks and strikes of the spur, one of the two cocks stretched its legs, crowed, and died. At that point a racket erupted because, as far as I understood, the loser maintained that it was a con, and the con was poison. Then the other took his cock and started to lick it, to show that it wasn't poisoned—he licked the feathers! Then I had a moment of enlightenment: the Yellows are half-wits. The fighters use poison to cheat, but they sprinkle it on the feathers! But what's the most efficient method?" Flynn looked first to Leo then to Erben, who was white as a rag.

"The beak, or the spurs," the Italian responded. Flynn nodded.

Erben shook himself. "Efficient like hell! Zees is zee reason we nearly lost our hides, no? If zee Yellows put poison in zee feathers, zere must be a reason, and it doesn't take a fucking genius to understand..."

Erben was shaken by a spasm of vomiting. A putrid liquid burst from his mouth and nostrils.

"Christ, Sport, disgusting! Hey, come clean this stuff up!"

Two Chinese appeared with bucket and mop and cleaned the wooden planks. They lit incense in a censer shaped like the bust of Chiang Kai-Shek, lavished a series of bows, and disappeared. Erben raised himself with difficulty, set out towards a water basin, and poured a pitcher of water over his head. Flynn continued, implacable: "But

there's something else. The spurs are put on by an expert. The owner of the cock can't do it. They're razor blades six or seven inches long. You have to pay attention, they can cut off your finger or puncture your foot. But it's impossible to poison them, because the spurs are the property of the expert. If there's too great a disparity between the cocks, he sets the spurs at a more or less favorable angle to find an equilibrium.

Leo was attentive, as if something important depended on the story. Erben sat down again and spoke. "Enough vith zee color. I told you not to put poison on zee beak, it's too fast, zee other bird vill fall dead right away. It's too suspicious, and besides you risk zee skin of zee preparer..."

The Italian, interested, opened his eyes wide. His greenish irises shone dully like the bottom of a pan, but his pupils held the German fast. "Preparer?"

Erben nodded. "Yes. Zee preparer examines zee health of zee cock. As soon as zee cock takes a good hit, a dangerous hit, zee fight is stopped, like a boxing round. Otherwise it would be a huge mess, blood and feathers everywhere, zee cocks would kill each other and zee bets wouldn't come out vell. Zuss, zere is one person, zee preparer, who puts zee ointment on zee cock's wounds. He vill put zee cock's head in his mouth and, breath by breath, bring it back to life; some of zem are skilled enough to get half-dead cocks back on zair feet! A good preparer is essential! As long as a cock is alive it can fight, and if it can fight it can vin!

A light of pure joy flashed across the Kraut's cerulean eyes. He continued: "Our cock pecked the preparer on zee vrist. We risked killing him..."

"Am I telling this story or are you, Sport? The plan was perfect. We just had bad luck. But let me continue... I was saying that there's no way to poison the spurs and... *Ouch!*" Flynn slapped the back of his head to kill an enormous mosquito. "Hey!" he yelled at the Chinese, "isn't there any way to get rid of these things? With what we've paid... I've never seen an opium den so run down and so full of insects. You pay in advance and then they eat you alive..."

Erben giggled. "Zee mosquitos are attracted by zee sweet smoke of zee opium. If zey bite your dick, maybe zey'll get zee clap, and..." He didn't have time to finish the phrase before he had to slap his fore-

head. He looked in the palm of his hand and said, “And zee mosquito *kaputt!*”

Two Chinese brought a large brazier and a paper bag. They took out two handfuls of dry grass and mixed it with the lit coals. They encouraged the mix with the help of a small bellows. Acrid smoke rose up and mixed with the smoke from the pipe.

Flynn had lost the thread, and he started again at a random point: “When the ship weighed anchor we left the hold. We presented ourselves to the captain and with our winnings we bought two first-class tickets. That’s where I met the woman who bewitched me and left me dumbfounded. Eleanor. What a gal, after the whores of Manila... Not only beautiful but intelligent, too: she cited European poets...

“I know. Rimbaud, Apollinaire...” Leo said.

“Exactly, Sport. Them... But then you, too, must have gone that way, my God... Did she also tell you...”

“Please, I’ve changed my mind,” Erben interrupted, “Let’s not talk about zee whores. Even opium can’t get you past zem. Zees idiot friend of mine made a shit film in Australia and now wants to be an actor. He wants to go to Hollywood, zee biggest idiot in all of Tasmania... On zee boat he recited scenes from zee movies to impress zee whore. He pretended to be an officer of zee ship rebelling against his shithead commander...”

“Fletcher Christian, from the *Bounty!* Who better than me to play the part? I’m his great-great-grandson. You wouldn’t have imagined it, right, Sport?”

“There was an Italian on that ship as well, and I’m *his* great-great-grandson,” Leo said, smiling.

Flynn was frozen. He murmured like a suckling at the teat and then began to speak: “Now *you’re* leaving me dumbfounded, Sport! You’re not feeding me bullshit, are you?”

“Absolutely not. His name was Randolfo Mantovani, he was a botanist. He was studying the growth of breadfruit trees on Tahiti. When your great-great-grandfather took over the ship, Randolfo was among the men who left with Captain Bligh on the launch.”

“I swear I’ve never heard that... In the film there isn’t an Italian.”

“The great Jules Verne named him, too, in his story about the mutiny. But it matters little now... Before the mosquitos attacked,

you were talking about the cocks and poison...”

The same Chinese (or maybe it was another?) brought a carafe of dark liquor, three glasses, and more grass to put on the brazier. He changed the incense in the bust of Chiang Kai-Shek and then disappeared. Flynn drew another mouthful of smoke.

“You’re right, Sport. It was that woman. Eleanor. What a piece of ass! Even though she fucked me—I should say, even though *I* fucked *her*... Anyway, even though she got away with everything I had, including my father’s money, which I had sent ahead here, to Hong Kong, I can’t deny that that woman, in bed, was cra-zee. She whispered things in my ear that...”

“You acted like a desperate lunatic, Flynn. And vee ended up in shit,” Erben said.

“At least I got laid, you goddamned Kraut. I may have lost our money, but it was worth it. But you never even came close...”

“...and for that reason I didn’t get zee clap.”

“What’s the big deal? A little clap... You’re not a real man if you haven’t got it at least once. Some burning, a few syringes in the dick, and you’re good as new. You ever had the clap, Sport?”

“Of course. I’ve got it now, in fact...” Leo responded, his voice tired and gravelly.

“So what? She stole my money and the clap got me, but I had a good time both during the trip and after we disembarked at Hong Kong. That’s no little thing.”

“No, it was too much. And later, after zee theft, zee idiot of Tasmania didn’t want to sell or hock his gold watch...”

“You kidding, Sport? I’d rather hock my balls. I’d never get separated from that watch,” Flynn said. From his pocket a watch materialized in his hand. “This is an IWC Calibre 52, made in Schaffhausen, Switzerland, in 1893. This pocket watch is forty years old, almost twice my age. It’s like a father to me. Would you take your father to the pawn shop? What’s more, it was a gift. Not an entirely voluntary gift, perhaps, but you never give away a gift...”

“*Ja*, and so vee had to ask for a loan from my professor friend, who studies monkeys. And zen tonight you got zee street wrong. ‘I’ve already been to Hong Kong. I know it like zee back of my hand.’ And you took us right into zee thieves’ lair, insane Chinese thieves with knives as long as my arm, and vee had to escape...”

Leo cut him short: “Why don’t we go back to how you met Inosanto? We were talking about a cock with a poisoned beak.”

“Satan,” Erben said. He poured a glass of liquor, took a sip, and licked his lips. His tongue looked like a dirty sock. Flynn wasn’t in much better shape.

Another Chinese (or was it the same one?) brought new opium. Flynn asked for a basin of water, a towel, and soap to wash himself. “Can you hold on a second, Sport? I’m dying of sweat, and I stink. I’m making myself sick, and I don’t feel so good. I need to wash my face, recover... Hey! You have any tea here?”

Erben and Leo remained silent. They continued to drink and smoke while Flynn got himself in order. The Tasmanian put his pants on and slipped his watch into his pocket. The Chinese brought tea. Flynn filled a glass, adjusted his hair with his fingers, and finally sat down again. Only then did he realize that the other two were sleeping. He chuckled to himself, got comfortable in the seat, and sighed. After two minutes he too was asleep. A little later, the three men were dreaming.

From the top of the mountain, a rocky tooth that rose from the center of a plateau like a mad pyramid, the view was panoramic. Land of the snow leopard, vultures, and hermits. He could see 360 degrees without turning his head because he—the crystalline image of Erben, neither calm nor irate, seated at the top of the peak—had four heads. One faced north towards Ultima Thule, land of the Aryans, one west towards Berlin, one east towards Tokyo, and one south in the direction of Lhasa, the land of the gods. The vertebral column of Erben, perfectly straight and more than a mile long, was a crystalline tube grafted to the center of the *axis mundi*. The *axis mundi* entered at Erben’s *Brahmachakra*, at the top of his head, with a pleasing numbness, and left from his *Muladhara*, between the scrotum and anus, with an ecstatic sensation, pure bliss. The center of that sacred geography, Erben reflected on his condition and the *axis mundi* that impaled him. He thought it akin to the destiny of the ranks that marched many miles below him, warrior ducks under the shadow of a gigantic red flag, black swastika on a white field. Ducks in brown uniforms with visored caps and narrow, dangerous boots that covered their feet up to their knees and marched in goose-step. The ducks were made up like

worn-out whores; they wore no pants. The anal apertures of the ducks were connected one to the other with a piece of white twine: leaving the anus of the duck in front, it entered the beak of the one behind. Perfect coordination: neither the Sacred Band of Theban Queens, nor the Macedonian phalanx, nor Darius's Immortals—not even the ranks of Frederick of Prussia or Napoleon could boast such a strict cohesion. A community of destiny: the march continued, ecstatic, to the edges of the world. The dichotomies of pleasure and pain, good and evil, resolved into a pure, adamantine, martial will. They marched before Erben. Rank after rank, through a forest of outstretched arms sharp as pikes or sarissae, the faces of the ducks made up in mascara and blush turned to face him.

Erben heard a vibration fill the air of that Pure Land. It was a mantra, arranged in an appealing tonal sequence: *Duckburg, Duckburg über alles...*

A single duck with raised legs ran in front of the goose-stepping army. He was dressed like a sailor with a great mass of hair on his head (which remained stuck to the feathers of his head by a magical force). Like the others, the sailor-duck wore no pants—but he had no boots either, and he waved a flag, ripped, torn, but still perfectly recognizable. Red and white stripes, white stars on a blue field: the flag hoisted once and for all against tyranny. The gander babbled incomprehensible threats and continued to flee, hopping and losing tail feathers. The camera closes in on the starred flag.

Small white swastikas in the place of stars.

The four faces of Erben opened in a terrible smile. In all ten dimensions of space a terrible laughter was heard.

Erben sat in pure *samedhi*. Erben, born under the sign of Leo, who watched sun and moon rise and fall as high as his own asshole. When the crescent of the moon crossed his secret chakra the four faces—Erben's of the North, South, East, and West—took on a dumb expression. When the sun crossed Erben's Heart Chakra the faces contracted into a cold, warlike expression.

Leonardo Mantovani was in an Italian piazza, a medieval piazza, in the uniform of a *bersagliere*. Plumed cap, blue coat, light pants, a crimson insignia on his collar, he was sipping white wine and speaking of Afghanistan, of how the English had been routed by a

rabble of primitive mountain people. He spoke of the *bersaglieri* sent to China to suppress the Boxers: the Ministry thought China was a tropical country and sent them with light cotton uniforms, but the north of China was cold, colder than Genoa in December. People were laughing all around him; unknown men offered to pay for his drinks. General Lamarmora, drunk, pointed to one of his medals and said, "That is the Mauritian Commendation of Santa Maria di Montemagno, with hereditary rights to your firstborn, for having led your troops through the fight in desperate conditions, and for having brought back a wound that is an honor to have incised in your skin." Leo commented, "I had gone to a whore that night. With me were an actor from the Antipodes and an Austrian, a subject of the Kaiser. It was a grand night. The enemy attacked us with wild cocks, razors fixed to their feet, a single thread connecting them all, one to the next, ass to mouth. Sometimes the enemy launched them at us like Argentine *bolas*, making fodder of the young scions of the Fatherland. And mosquitos, black clouds of mosquitos fired from cannon. They followed me to the port of Caporetto, which, as you know, doesn't open to the sea. I boarded a ship and never returned. For this I earned the medal. Now I live among Chinese, rejects, and halfbreeds. I don't give a fuck for the Homeland; I am no more Italian than a koala's shit. You may call me 'Commander' from now on."

Flynn's dream-body vanished in a cloud of sperm. From the center of gravity of the open legs of a Filipina whore his consciousness bounced into mid-air, over a crowd of fluttering cocks who were trying to kill him with beaks and spurs. They struggled in the midst of dust, blood, and excrement as long as they had a single breath of life left in their body, a life resolved into pure ferocity. Every one of the cocks that were gradually being slaughtered was united to the next by a grayish fishing line, which entered at the beak and left the anus filthy with dung and coagulated blood. That idiot Erben was sitting on a thatch seat above the ring, smoking an opium pipe and touching his package. He was wheezing.

Inosanto appeared in the middle of the cockfighting arena, his face shrunk in an expression of artificial scorn. The cocks that were still alive fell silent and yielded to their boss. Now Inosanto advanced towards a stoned, unconscious Erben. Ethereal, translucent Flynn

could do nothing to intervene. He called and yelled that it wasn't worth waking the Kraut. But Inosanto now took out his *kampilan*, a short iron sword whose hilt was decorated with the hairs of his enemies. No. His pants fell and he took out his dick.

Another bounce carried Flynn's consciousness away. He found himself inside a duck's body, his spurs armed with steel beaks. He was in the middle of a huge brawl between bloody, shit-stained cocks wracked by a warlike furor, a panicked ecstasy in the face of death. Dangerous cocks.

He understood. A distinct voice rose from the base of his belly. *I am Errol Flynn, Combat Duck of Tasmania.* The cocks can go to hell. We're saving our skins.

And that's how I arrived here, in this Hong Kong opium den, near the port of Kowloon, precisely in this moment.

The three men awoke. Yawning. Stretching. Rubbing their eyes. Hitting the spittoon's bull's-eye. "What time is it?" one of them asked. "Who knows?" another responded. "Who cares, this place never closes," the third concluded. "Where were we?" one of them asked.

"We were talking about a cock with a poisoned beak, and you were going to tell me how you knew Inosanto," Leo said.

"Right, Sport, right on... I had a strange dream, it's been a long time since I last smoked, and it's mixing with everything else, the alcohol, the incense, that awful mosquito smoke... You there, Sport?"

"*Ja*, yes, I'm here. I, too, had a strange dream...but beautiful."

"Well then," Flynn said, "we studied the matter, because not all poisons are alike. The difficulty was how to poison the beak without poisoning our bird. We needed a poison that could infect our adversary's blood with just a small quantity..."

"*Ja*, somesing to provoke septicemia, like zee bite of a Komodo dragon, but faster."

"And something wouldn't poison our cock if it went down its throat. Something that worked only in the blood. We made an appointment with a crazy pharmacist-type in Manila for after his shop closed. We entered in back, climbed the stairs, he ducked into a cubbyhole and came out with a small vial of green syrup. He told us it was lethal, all it took was one drop dissolved in a glass of water or a base cream. Now we had to buy a cock, ferocious but small, black but with

a foolish air, so that no one would bet a penny on him. What's more, we would give him a sinister-sounding name so that everyone would take us for idiots. We decided to call him 'Satan.' We took everyone by surprise."

"In fact, everything turned to shit, including us," Erben added.

Flynn pretended not to notice him and continued, "The plan was perfect, what else to say? Except for one particular: at the first exchange, our adversary fell in the dirt, stretched its legs, and was dead in less than five seconds."

Erben giggled. His voice grated like a poorly tuned radio: "Strange, no? Even more strange when he doesn't tell vat happened earlier, zee story of zee great Tasmanian idiot who said, 'Let's put a few more drops in zee cream, at least ten,' and zen, 'Let's spread more cream on him, OK?'"

Erben seemed committed to the courageous and almost impossible attempt to steal the scene from Flynn. He tried to get up, tottered, and finally found his feet. He was sweating like a pig; a dense network of drops empearled the milky skin of his face. He filled his chest and continued, his voice an octave higher: "And zee story continues vith Erben saying, 'Vee'd better not, better to follow zee counsel of zee crazy pharmacist. I've got a bad feeling.' But no, vee did vat zee Tasmanian idiot said, and so our enemy died right away. Zees idiot made zee men lick our bird's feathers vile all around zey ver yelling and unsheathing knives as long as my leg. Everyone, and I mean everyone, including finally zees most idiotic of all zee idiots in Tasmania, understood exactly vat happened: zee poison vas spread on zee beak. Everyone vas yelling, and soon vee ver yelling too, and vee escaped, vee ran through zee streets like purebreds, hearts in our throats, vile people hurled insults and rocks our vay... I thought, I'm never going to see zee year 1934, but finally vee arrived in a square vere zere ver American soldiers. Damn, holy shit, I've never been so glad to see an MP!"

Erben fell into his seat, panting, as if reliving the scene of the flight had put his heart and lungs to a hard test. "And zen, seeing that zee cock belonged to one of Inosanto's men, it vas much better to leave right away. Not even time to pack our bags and *auf wiedersehen*, Manila."

Flynn looked at his companion with offended, upset eyes. "I see,

so that's what you think of me, Sport? Of your best friend?"

Erben smiled. "I think my friend is a big idiot. But very nice."

The words filled the room and had the weight of a judgment. Flynn was quiet, he looked away. He watched the walls, watched nothing, took another draw from the pipe. Smoke escaped his lips and nostrils. It became quiet.

After a seemingly endless period of time, Flynn's face opened in a smile. "Know something, Sport? I think the same thing about you."

Leo Mantovani burst out laughing, and even Erben smiled.

It was the last effort. The weight of the opium fell again on the shoulders of the three like a leaden mantle. Before falling asleep Erben thought he noticed something ambiguous in the face of the Chinese who refilled the pipe. He saw him cover Leo and Flynn with a kind of sheet. What was it in that look? A kind of promise, a threat... a vow? Were there Communists in Hong Kong? There had to be, they were everywhere. Chinese Communists: the *ne plus ultra* of incomprehensibility...

Leo Mantovani opened his eyes and sat up suddenly. He freed himself from the sheet and rose to his feet, rolled his head in one direction then the other. He bent over to touch the ground with the points of his fingers, and then he put his hands on his kidneys and bent back to look at the ceiling. He exhaled forcefully and shot a look at his companions. They were sleeping, and Flynn was snoring with an open mouth. *Never met two scoundrels like these*, he thought. *Look at them: you could kill them, if you cared to.*

He rummaged through Flynn's pants, found the gold watch, and stuck it in his pocket. In Erben's wallet there were twenty pounds sterling from the Bank of England (three five-pound notes, four one-pound notes, and one worth ten shillings), plus two US dollars and five marks from the German Reich. When he turned his back to the two sleepers, he saw a Chinese (the usual?) on the threshold. They stared at each other and then exchanged an understanding nod. Leo handed him two pounds.

A good idea, the opium den: attract the fools, fleece them, and then move the place. Yes, decidedly better than his days of highway robbery. In an opium den, nobody tries to disembowel you, there are no scars or ugly memories. Three or four basements around Hong Kong, a

small investment in opium and liquor, pass some change around to the right people... Days would pass before the sucker would set himself to rights again, and when he did (*if* he did) he would remember little or nothing.

While the Chinese faded from the scene, Leo cast another glance at Flynn and Erben. With a brief gesture he left a benediction, turned, and, full of energy, went out to meet the dawn.

In early 1935 Errol Flynn moved to Hollywood and became one of the most famous actors of the twentieth century, maybe the most brilliant star of the 1930s. Doctor Hermann F. Erben joined him a short time later and they renewed their friendship. In 1937, in the spirit of pure adventure, they traveled together to a Spain devastated by civil war. In 1941, the United States of America revoked Erben's citizenship, officially because of an error on a form. In reality, the reasons were different. Today, Erben's membership in the Nazi party and his role as a spy for the Abwehr, German military intelligence, have been established. In all probability, even the trip to Spain was the cover for a secret mission. Notwithstanding hypotheses and speculations, no one has been able to demonstrate that Flynn knew what was going on. What is certain is that in the years following, the actor distanced himself from his onetime comrade, even going so far as to change his name in his autobiography (My Wicked, Wicked Ways, 1958.) In the book, Hermann Erben becomes the Dutch "Gerrit Koets."