



Stephan Thome
God of the Barbarians

Novel

(Original German title: Gott der Barbaren)

719 pages, Clothbound

Publication date: 10 September 2018

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Sample translation by Alta L. Price

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3. In the Mouth of the White River

Aboard the HMS *Furious*

May 1858, in the Gulf of Chihli

Here they lay, somewhere in China, awaiting war. Heavy fog hung over the water, a gray wall through which the west wind blew without stirring it in the least. About twice a week it lifted to reveal a flat coastline that looked as one might imagine the world did on the third day of creation. Not a single town, tree, or bush in sight, nor any trace of human settlement apart from the walled-in forts. Cromwell-era cannons stood atop the battlements, and during a reconnaissance he had peered through the telescope and spotted some small silhouettes scampering about like ants, gesticulating with their hands as if to try and shoo him off. They were soldiers of Imperial China, England's foreign enemy, for whom he felt not enmity, but rather—what? For three weeks they had been anchored at the mouth of the Peiho, and there was no sign of an end to this farce. The war they were waiting for hadn't come.

James Bruce—Eighth Earl of Elgin, Twelfth Earl of Kincardine, and Special Envoy of the British Crown—stood on the *Furious's* quarterdeck, shaking grains of sand from his thinning hair. If anything could be considered abundant in this wasteland, it was sand. It blew

here from a desert several hundred miles inland only to rub the pharynx raw, set the eyes afire, and combine with the boredom those on board already felt to trigger an all-encompassing mood of irritability. Today the fog was so dense that Lord Elgin was reminded of the snow-blindness he'd experienced back when he was stationed in Canada. Not even the main mast of the *Audacieuse*, moored half a mile to the east, could be made out in this grainy nothingness. From time to time shots were fired, but only because soldiers whiled away the hours firing at seagulls. The *Slaney* was close enough that he could hear orders being barked from its bridge, and three days ago the *Pique* had emerged, mirage-like, from amid the white veils. It was enough of an event to be talked about at dinner. The flagships of the American and Russian envoys were also anchored somewhere nearby, but this shallow bay didn't leave any of them enough water under the keel, so they were forced to bob on the waves nine miles offshore and let the Chinese believe they held back because they were frightened by the ancient coastal fortifications.

"Such absurd forts," he mumbled, peering through the telescope and recognizing nothing. Back in Jamaica, after the death of his first wife, he'd got into the habit of talking to himself, and as long as Frederick was gone, he had no conversation partner on board anyway. An invitation from the French envoy gave him hope that the evening might offer interesting conversation; aboard the *Furious* the best one could expect was that the eccentric views of his private secretary might provide some intellectual distraction. Sighing, Lord Elgin set down the telescope and wondered if he should take Maddox along for dinner aboard the *Audacieuse*. The young man would consider it an honor, and besides, it could be amusing to observe how he initially wouldn't let on—and would then have to try and hide the fact—that he doesn't understand a word of French.

"*L'eau peu profonde de la Chine.*" Twenty-five feet, according to the latest reading, but this morning Captain Osborn had suddenly proclaimed that the water would rise as the week wore on, such that the *Furious* would be able to sail over the bar and into the estuary. The same couldn't be said for the *Audacieuse*, which promptly sparked a debate over who would need to be resettled where on board in order to accommodate the French delegation—as if they hadn't just managed to leave the bar in their wake, but had taken the forts, too, and were already on their way to the Chinese capital! "Forced inactivity is a poison." As Lord Elgin craned his neck and looked up at the rigging, he remembered the emaciated bodies of the

opium addicts he'd seen in Singapore. Couldn't the decaying realm off whose coast they lay be considered a warning of how lethal it can be when reality meets wishful thinking? In the morning he hadn't even found it necessary to ask Osborn what his confidence was based upon. Did he suppose the sea level would suddenly rise solely because England wished it so?

Now it was eleven o'clock in the morning. After his morning calisthenics, Lord Elgin had eaten breakfast alone, served by his cabin boy. He had then written to his wife; this epistolary journal replaced their evening conversations at home, and had become his only anchor in this ocean of imponderables. A year had passed, and still there was no agreement in sight. Whether the emperor even knew an enemy fleet awaited just off his coast was highly uncertain, and what conclusion might that suggest, anyhow? Peking clearly wasn't ready to make any kind of decision, preferring to shirk responsibility this way and that, until everyone reached the hoped-for goal—namely, forgetting entirely that a decision had to be made. How could one wage war against a country that didn't even recognize it was at war? A country that, strictly speaking, didn't even believe it was just one country amongst others, but rather felt it was God's sole chosen land, the only country in the entire world. Maddox had warned him of this. Therefore he, Lord Elgin, had to show the Chinese that the world was indeed rather larger than they'd previously believed, especially to the West. But in order to do so he needed someone to receive the message and pass it on to the emperor—the emperor who, in turn, believed himself God's sole chosen son, no mere earthly sovereign amongst others, but ruler of the whole world, who was therefore unlikely to be eagerly awaiting any such message.

He had set off last April. A merchant ship had taken him through the Strait of Gibraltar to Alexandria; the weather had been fine, the seas calm, and there had been a sufficient degree of novelty to keep his homesickness in check. When he went ashore he enjoyed the hospitality of local governors and pashas, and during one of their many sumptuous meals—in Cairo, if he weren't mistaken—he had quite a realization. Although, as a British diplomat, he was ostensibly there in the service of progress, his real reason for being there was to pay respect to the majestic self-assurance of these rulers' sheer antiquity. Indeed, they were his Oriental equals: decadent and cruel as they may be, they were no less majestic—to the contrary, this made them all the more majestic. Whereupon Mary Louisa had written that the trip—meaning his putting distance between himself, Broomhall, and his shattered finances—was clearly doing him good. He'd particularly liked the Nile Delta: even the camels and donkeys

appeared to be more alive there than anywhere else. They had then traveled across the desert by rail and boarded a P&O steamer in Aden. It all began somewhere in the Indian Ocean—to this day, he couldn't find the words for the grim sense of foreboding that had taken hold of him. It grew worse by night, when he often awoke breathless. He couldn't help thinking of Hamlet: "It is not, nor it cannot come to good." What could a man hold onto when surrounded by nothing but water for weeks on end? For the first time in his life he felt old. The Blue Books documenting the disaster incompetent diplomats had wrought in China lay on the desk in his cabin. Never in the history of England had a war been started for lesser reason; the *Arrow* scandal not only outraged him, it downright disgusted him. Governor Bowring and Consul Parkes didn't seem to know where their powers ended, nor were they familiar with diplomatic convention. Sir Bowring had forwarded a letter to London informing Parkes that the *Arrow's* registration had expired and ordered him to hide that detail from the Chinese! It was obvious that the Union Jack had been dishonored not by the Chinese, but by the captain who used his own ship to conceal illicit activities. But as Lord Palmerston once said, if a child falls into a well it is rescued, not reprimanded. The prime minister didn't want to drop a deserving governor merely because he'd stepped on the toes of a few half-savages, so the irresponsible representatives in Canton and Hong Kong got precisely what they had wanted: war.

Hong Kong, he thought bitterly, the imperial backwater. No man of stature had ever served there; as for Bowring, nature had clearly gifted him with everything but common sense. As his overzealous consul was busy starting a war, he found plenty of free time to translate Hungarian poetry and invent new letters no one needed; he even considered his own lyrical output too good to deny readers its publication. "In the cross of Christ I glory / Towering o'er the wrecks of time . . ." As for Consul Parkes, he'd grown up in China but had also been taken under the wing of a flighty German missionary, so could hardly be called an Englishman. Under other circumstances Lord Elgin would've rejoiced at the possibility of tidying up in the Far East, but as it now stood he couldn't shake the feeling that this venture was tantamount to donning shackles. Everyone knew what it was all about, but nobody dared say so. The ship that had brought him from Ceylon to Borneo reeked of the 1,500 cases of opium it carried below deck. He knew nothing about the country he was to negotiate an agreement with. Nobody in London knew anything. What was China, anyway?

The whole thing, every little bit of it . . . it all reeked to high heaven!

In early June they'd gone ashore in Singapore to wait for the *Shannon*. His lodgings were perched two hundred feet above a glorious bay that greeted his gaze each morning. Houses with vibrant red roofs nestled between old trees, making that part of the city look like one vast ornamental garden. The other part of the city, beyond view from his residence, housed sixty thousand Chinese, and he was astonished to find there wasn't a single white man in Singapore who understood their language. Compatriots he'd spoken to claimed the Chinese were hoarding weapons in order to slaughter all the Europeans at the earliest opportunity. Voicing his doubts in that regard, his words were met with indignant expressions. He was naive, their looks implied, but he'd soon learn: the Chinese were unsurpassed when it came to cunning and ill will. Virtually every day he was told that violence was the only language they understood.

But instead of the *Shannon* came a merchant vessel bearing bad news from India. Mutiny had broken out—the Indians had murdered their British officers and gone on to massacre countless women and children in Kanpur. Lucknow was besieged by fifteen thousand insurgents. He didn't hesitate for a moment, quickly diverted all his troops, and sailed straight to Hong Kong to mobilize more soldiers before continuing on to Calcutta. His selfless conduct brought him admiration, but he sensed that he'd later pay the price. In the eyes of the Chinese, it must have looked as if he were afraid of entering their territory, and violence would be the only way he'd be able to shake them of that belief. He wrote Mary Louisa that circumstances were forcing him to act on principles he considered wrong, in order to achieve results irreconcilable with his own conscience. Back home, no one had even informed their French allies of the plan to legalize the opium trade.

The rejoicing that greeted him in Calcutta lessened his discomfort only briefly. His accommodations were in the Governor General's Palace, where he was surrounded by three hundred servants in white uniforms who fulfilled his every request before he'd even expressed it. Lord Canning was so busy that he entertained only in the evening. Fresh tales of horror kept pouring in from Kanpur, detailing what the English women and children had suffered: gang rape, severed limbs and breasts—he couldn't recall ever hearing such conversations at the dinner table. But even more shocking than the grisly details themselves was the prurience with which they were shared; it was as if the gentlemen secretly yearned to talk in the open

about severed breasts and fantasize about how to take revenge on the insurgents. Drenched in sweat and red in the face, they demanded a merciless crackdown on the “niggers,” a word he’d last heard in Jamaica. The more time he spent in Asia, the less he understood what was going on—not only with his compatriots, but perhaps also with himself. Buckingham Palace was a barrack compared to the palace of the Governor General. He spent his days on a shady veranda, drinking gin instead of reading. Even more than their uniforms, he realized, it was the servants’ puzzling ingenuity that made them all look alike. They neither looked at him nor looked away, they never smiled nor showed any other emotion—indeed, they didn’t even seem to breathe the same air as the punkahs they so gently moved back and forth in order to send a breeze in his direction. He wondered how one should behave toward such non-beings. A dog could be petted if obedient, or kicked if it barked, but these dark-skinned liveried servants were neither obedient nor did they bark. A glass appeared in front of him, and when it was empty it disappeared again. When he tried to describe these impressions to his wife, the sentence just slipped out: the existence of these servants and the behavior of their masters combine to contradict the presumption that *all* men are God’s children. It was an idea that presumably contained equal parts melancholy and gin—an idea which, incidentally, even he himself didn’t quite understand. Back home the term *neighbor* could be applied to miners and kitchen maids because one knew where they came from and how they celebrated Christmas, but here . . . Evening after evening the guests ranted and raged—gentlemen bearing medals on their own jacket breast spoke of their willingness to cut off the insurgents’ genitals with their bare hands. From the mouth of a clergyman he heard words to the effect that it would be a mockery of the Sermon on the Mount to show such beasts mercy.

Lord Elgin drank gin and watched the liveried servants grow more sinister by the day. What did they talk about amongst themselves? Were there any local newspapers? And if so, did they, too, sing the praises of Colonel Neill, who had captured prisoners, bound them, lined them up, and shot them to bits? When he boarded the ship and resumed his mission after five full weeks ashore, he couldn’t read *The Deserted Village* without his eyes growing teary. “To distant climes, a dreary scene / Where half the convex world intrudes between . . .”

By mid-September he was back in Hong Kong. Since a hoard of belligerent merchants invariably awaited him onshore, he stayed aboard. He even managed to escape for a few days

in Macau, where there were gorgeous parks and he could tend to what he was now obliged to attend to: waiting, writing letters, threatening the Chinese with war, and hoping for better weather. Just once he brought a pair of binoculars to his eyes, only to see an opaque wall of fog, and quickly set them back down again. Down south, it had once rained for sixty hours straight. His instructions from London were so vague that they could be summed up thusly: he was to do whatever he thought right. He had to make his sabre-rattling compatriots believe he had nothing but the honor of the crown in mind and that he thought, just as they did, that their prestige would rise along with the wealth of their nation's opium traders. Frederick was his sole confidant, but was usually needed elsewhere. The only other man left on board was Maddox, his secretary—who now stood ten feet behind him, waiting to be noticed. Maddox wasn't prone to sabre-rattling but nevertheless posed an annoyance all his own. He was a well-read young man of means, which made it impossible for him to put his talents to use in any real kind of career. A pharmacist's son from Sussex, he'd studied in Munich, of all places! But after a decade in China he had himself become Chinese and could spend hours on the steps to the wardroom—utterly still and utterly silent—without attracting anyone's attention. His most Asian quality, however, wasn't his mute servitude, but the stubbornness that lay behind it. When offered the post of personal secretary, Maddox—who until then had served Queen Victoria as court translator—insisted he could only do the job if his local assistant helped him. And he, Lord Elgin, had accepted this condition. Indeed, here they were at the mouth of the Peiho, with a bona fide Chinese on board. His name was Wong, the front of his head was shaved, the rest of his hair was worn in a long braid and, fortunately, he hardly ever left the cabin he shared with Maddox! When the latter left the wardroom table, he took his assistant's food with him. People wondered what the queen would say if she knew what was going on aboard her ships. The rest of the crew found it hilarious.

After ten minutes, Lord Elgin was fed up with the game. “Oh hell, Maddox,” he exclaimed, without revealing the relief this distraction brought him. “I know you're standing right behind me, so go on—say something, at least!”

“I didn't want to disturb your Excellency, Sir.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that. May I ask, was there anything else you wanted?”

“It seems another message has arrived, Sir, just now.”

“In writing?”

“In person, Sir. In fact, there are two envoys asking permission to come aboard.”

“Do they have the relevant credentials?”

In the ensuing silence, Lord Elgin turned his head so as not to miss the vexed expression his secretary so persuasively assumed each and every time. Instead of answering, Maddox took two hesitant steps towards him. This particular intrusiveness was yet another way he resembled the natives—as was his peculiar dress. He had a simple brown robe, and the only reason Lord Elgin didn’t forbid him from wearing it was because such a restriction would mean there’d be less laughter in the wardroom. Keeping the sabre-rattlers entertained was important, and Maddox’s ridiculous garb helped a great deal in that respect. In a way, China’s fate hung on that humble brown rag, but one would need a refined sense of irony indeed to appreciate such a fact.

“About the credentials, Sir. Your Excellency will recall the conversation we had just a few days ago . . . ?”

Nodding, Lord Elgin waved his secretary closer. There was no reason he shouldn’t have a bit of fun in the meantime. “Maddox, do tell: might you happen to own a uniform?”

“Sir?”

“A uniform. You see . . .” He reached out with his right arm and almost grabbed Maddox’s shoulder, as he did with his children when he wanted to give them a bit of fatherly advice. He lowered his arm as this memory surfaced, and for a moment nearly lost his composure. Five children awaited him back home, and the youngest two would barely remember him when he finally returned. To rid his mind of the thought, he gazed into the mist enshrouding the estuary as if it were the gateway to Hades. The wood and ropes of the ship’s rigging creaked. “If we go ashore in the next few days to negotiate—if we go to Peking and hopefully meet the Emperor, or his highest officials, at least—well, what will you wear then, Maddox? I’m afraid I daren’t even take you aboard the *Audacieuse* for dinner as you’re currently dressed.”

“I own a suit, Sir.”

“Ah, indeed. And might you tell me where it was tailored?”

“In Munich, Sir.”

“In Munich, eh? My dear Maddox, you’re lucky that my brother is set to arrive in just a few days and will be bringing a tailor from Shanghai along with him. This entire affair is

taking longer than planned, and in this climate . . . Take a look at my uniform. We'll use the time we have to spend waiting, anyway, to turn you into a worthy representative of the crown. What do you say?"

"I don't exactly understand, Sir, what it is you're getting at."

"Well then, I'll explain: my brother, myself, and you, Maddox—we're a minority here. Unlike the merchants and military, we don't believe that the greatest relentlessness on our part leads to the best possible outcome for our mission. We do not intend to bring the Chinese to their knees solely because we can. We are also not about to make an example of anyone. We respect their customs and traditions, even if we don't understand them. The parts we find difficult to respect, we overlook. For instance, the feet of the women you told me about, and a few other things . . ."

This time Maddox merely nodded, instead of voicing his approval, and for a moment Lord Elgin himself wasn't sure what he was getting at. "What we intend to do instead is lay the foundations for our countries' peaceful cooperation in the future. Trade for mutual benefit and influencing Chinese society through contact with us, that's our mission. Unfortunately, the other party doesn't seem to put much of a premium on these things. I remember our conversation about the relevant credentials, Maddox. There is no one in all of China who can speak for God's sole chosen son, because that would be what we call sacrilege. Fine, we must accept that—but then what? Shall we turn back and be forced to tell our compatriots the same thing Lord Macartney was forced to tell them? No. Times have changed, Maddox. It would be cowardly to abandon our goals merely because the Chinese don't recognize their value. After all, history has its own course—a course no country can easily refuse to go along with. Look around: there are four hundred million people here, most of them dirt poor. It is our Christian duty to help them, even if we have to act against their purported wishes. One day they'll be grateful. Then, and only then, will our mission have been successful. I hope we'll still be around to experience it. Your chances are better than mine."

An uncomfortable silence ensued, in which Lord Elgin realized that he had not only grabbed his secretary by the shoulder, but pulled him in rather close, almost as if to embrace him. And tears had welled up in his eyes. It had been a long time since he'd seen his task so clearly, and so concretely felt that, despite the unworthy motives, it remained a noble mission—but just how should he pursue it? Arrogance wouldn't protect anyone from Enfield

rifles, that was the lesson they'd learned from the carnage in Canton, and one day disaster was destined to reach even Peking. It all depended on whether the emperor had the necessary sense or reason to be as stubborn as the Mandarins who had hitherto paid them their respects. In order to save the mission something had to happen in the minds of the Chinese, and all their military might was now aimed at making it happen. Hence it was a problem of dosage. It wouldn't work without violence, but a rebellion was already under way in the Yangtze Valley. The government in Peking was between a rock and a hard place—an untenable position, which made prudent thinking impossible. Should they give the emperor more time? Was a little patience all it would take to save the mission? In other words, was he the one who had to keep his pride, and that of his warmongering officers, in check? Question after question came up. Had they known even a single thing about the Chinese, everything would've been easier. But no one knew a thing.

“We were left with no choice in Canton, weren't we?” For a few minutes questions of this sort had been pressing him, and as he asked it Lord Elgin looked his secretary in the eye. Maddox was good-looking, tall, and slender, with a fine line at the corner of his lips which betrayed that he felt a higher calling was in store for him. Whether he had what it took was another matter.

“Presumably not, Sir,” was his somewhat anguished response.

“You disagree?”

“Sir, the two envoys who wish to speak to your Lordship . . .”

“They can wait, Maddox. The Chinese are patient, you know that better than anyone.” These were matters of great historical weight, and he'd like to have believed Maddox understood that. If he did, then one day the Chinese would, too.

“Wouldn't it be better, Sir, to at least bring them aboard?”

“It's not yet decided whether I'll let them aboard. Do you disagree, Maddox? Now is the time to tell me. I need to know where you stand.” He had waited three months in Hong Kong, and made several attempts to establish official contact in writing, without receiving a single satisfactory answer. The Chinese always played the same game—it wasn't a question of content, it was a question of protocol. The Governor of Canton, a notorious butcher named Ye Mingchen, had perpetually pledged good intent while at the same time insisting his hands were tied. He couldn't grant anything the emperor wouldn't agree to. In December Lord Elgin

had sailed up the Pearl River, and after Governor Ye had issued his final ultimatum, he ordered the occupation of the city on Christmas. “*Un carnage mélancolique*” the French ambassador had called the one-sided attack. The defenders had returned their fire with outdated jingals, which was tantamount to simply betraying their location to the British gunners. It was just like 1841, when the *Nemesis* had shot down the enemy fleet within a few short hours, and it raised the question of whether or not the Chinese were capable of learning from past mistakes. Maddox claimed they worshiped tradition more than any other nation, but those who staunchly worship tradition never get beyond it. Change was the name of the game—the very essence of history. By the time he and Baron Gros landed and strode ashore on New Year’s Day snowfall had covered the charred ruins, painting a sad picture. A city of one million inhabitants, half the size of London, was now a ghost town with gray ash blowing through its streets. Apart from the Governor’s Yamen and a few temples, not a single civic structure remained. In their place rose a dreadful stench. There were corpses everywhere, and as they were hauled off some even moved. How could one control his soldiers in such a situation? For weeks they had waited for marching orders, and now they disappeared into the streets to search for spoils. “To *loot*,” he wrote Mary Louisa—it was a new verb, a term imported from India, that sounded like a harmless prank played by frolicsome children. *Are those little rascals looting again . . . ?* As soon as the phrase came to Lord Elgin’s mind he felt like spitting over the railing, down into the murky water. Why had he been sent to lead this dishonorable war?

Maddox didn’t say a word. Or had he just answered?

Governor Ye, by the way—the fattest, most cunning Chinese Lord Elgin had ever encountered—hadn’t fled as the shells fell. Upon his arrest he showed not even the smallest sign of surprise, but merely asked whether he would be executed immediately or later on. Even Prime Minister Palmerston had called him a monster, but in the end he’d resembled no such thing—he seemed like a man of consummate courtesy. He was reputed to have executed tens of thousands of rebels and had their ears cut off as proof. Huge cases filled with ears were delivered daily to his enemy’s office—it was hard to imagine, although one couldn’t help but try. Did said enemy come through the door each morning and ask if the ears had already been delivered? Those who deal with such individuals tread a fine line between diplomacy and something else, something Lord Elgin couldn’t quite put a name to. His secretary could

consider himself fortunate that he never seemed to ponder how one might maintain one's humanity amid such circumstances.