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The
Long
Way

BAAA! PRESS

This is an advance review copy of *The Long Way*.

For publication information visit:
<http://www.baaapress.com>



Published by Baaa! Press

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Chapter One

The Second Ugliest Girl

Leung Chi-Yen had only ever learned one useful lesson from her mother, but for twelve treacherous years it had served her well.

“Chi-Yen,” her mother had whispered long ago, “beautiful Chi-Yen. To live a happy life, you must strive to always be the second ugliest girl in the house.”

Chi-Yen had never forgotten those words, even though she remembered little else of the woman who spoke them. Some days while running errands through the humid, sticky streets of Canton, she would detour to the water's edge to look out past the crowded merchant barges, past the junks and the sampans nudging their way through river traffic, to the ornate flower boats anchored and tied together off shore. If she were lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the

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ladies on board—lovely sirens calling out for customers, enticing the men their way—she would wonder: Is that her? Is that?

For Chi-Yen had been sold as a slave at the age of four, and her memories of the time before were few. She had a new mother now—Old Mother—and a hard life in one of Old Mother's several boarding houses. In truth these houses offered little in the way of board and somewhat more of entertainment for rough men whose idea of fun exceeded that permitted by law. Sailors and soldiers, farmers and government officials, businessmen, smugglers, pirates, and gangsters—they all came as customers to Old Mother's doors.

These were men best avoided, and so as Chi-Yen swept and scrubbed the steps, as she washed and hung the laundry, as she cut the vegetables and ran to market and back in her bare feet, she always kept her head low and always, always endeavored to remain the second ugliest girl in the house.

The trouble with being beautiful was that you drew too much attention to yourself. The girls who spent time before the mirror—the ones who painted their faces, who shaped their eyebrows, who combed their hair and perfumed their bodies—these were the girls who attracted the notice first of Old Mother and then of Old Mother's clientele.

Any young girl deemed pretty enough to bring a profit to the coffers would first have her feet forcefully bound. This early form of cosmetic surgery involved breaking the toes and arches, then folding them under and wrapping them with tight cloth. The procedure ensured that the feet would never grow into the ungainly, callused working pads of a peasant woman. The girls were trained to dance on these delicate, lotus-like stubs—although walking was difficult enough—and to sing and play musical instruments and to

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flirt and engage in witty conversations designed to separate a man from his money.

But Chi-Yen preferred to run, and she liked her feet the way they were. She liked them ugly. Chi-Yen was fast for a girl, and for that at least Old Mother did notice her, as on the morning our story begins:

“Worthless slave. Look at this mess!”

Old Mother dragged the tip of her index finger across the surface of a carved teak desk that Chi-Yen had just finished polishing for the third time in a week. She held the spotless finger up as an example of indolence for her other twelve girls, Chi-Yen’s sisters in bondage, who watched with relief that it was Chi-Yen in trouble again, and not them.

“Useless bigfoot half-breed! I curse the day I paid good silver for the lazy daughter of a whore too ugly for any man to love. Go! Buy two roosters and deliver them to the barbarian house.”

Old mother threw several coins at Chi-Yen, and Chi-Yen dropped to her knees to pick them up from the floor.

“Quick-quick! Hurry! Complete this task and if you are lucky I will beat you only half as hard when you return. Run fast on your filthy giant’s feet!”

“Thank you, Old Mother. Thank you,” Chi-Yen said, bowing low as she backed out the door, then turning to run as fast as she could, which really was quite fast.

Old Mother’s number one house was located within the walled Old City, conveniently near the treasury and the bunkhouses of visiting Imperial Guard troops, who spent freely and provided a measure of protection for Old Mother’s less legitimate business interests. When Chi-Yen ran, her first goal was to put as much distance as possible between herself and these soldiers, whose tongues were as sharp as their swords.

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“Blue-eyed devil,” they cursed her as she hurried past. “Spawn of a poxed father! Traitor to the Empire, have you no shame? Return to face us and feel the full force of our arms!” But the stones they hurled fell harmlessly far behind Chi-Yen as she extended the distance between herself and her tormenters.

It was the same every day. These soldiers, their morale at its lowest and their futures uncertain following years of humiliating defeats under the punishing guns of invading British warships, now sought easy victories wherever they could find them. Threatening a twelve-year-old orphan girl was most often the best they could do.

Chi-Yen continued her run down the main street known as the Avenue of Benevolence and Love, slowing when necessary to thread her way among crowded market stalls. Her right hand clutched the coins as beggar children accosted her from all sides. The filthy black rags they wore barely covered their bodies, but they came at her with the confidence of citizens who owned the street, the city, the nation—who knew that Chi-Yen was a plague on their land, that she was the cause of all their troubles and their poverty. They grabbed at her clothing and her hair and tried to pry her fingers open, but her momentum carried her through their cluster until she slipped free and left them scrambling in her wake.

“Dead ghost girl!” they called her. “Go die with your ocean mother!”

Chi-Yen dodged to her right to avoid a crowd noisily bartering for sacks of rice. She leaped over a stream of raw sewage coursing the center of the street, dodging to avoid a collision with a sedan chair traveling at high speed in the opposite direction. The chair—an enclosed shoulder carriage with golden silk curtains hiding its occupant—was

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supported by two long wooden poles, which were carried in turn by uniformed servants front and back, their shirts drenched in humidity and sweat. The passenger likely was a local mandarin, an important city official. The odds were good that he was headed to Old Mother's house, perhaps on official business to collect a bribe or to confiscate and destroy her opium inventory—or perhaps to purchase time and a mat upon which to smoke the drug himself.

As the sedan chair cleared her view, Chi-Yen passed on her right the Temple of the Six Banyan Trees with its tall Flowery Pagoda rising high above the city. The temple grounds were older than a hundred Chi-Yens, but during her own troubled age they had seen nothing but neglect, with absentee caretakers letting the gardens run wild to devour statuary and reach their tendrils deep into buildings, fracturing walls and collapsing ceilings. The epiphytic banyan trees that had given the temple its peaceful new name more than seven hundred years earlier were now the seeds of its slow-motion destruction, having planted themselves in building crevices and sprouted through windows and even from the high rooftop of the monumental pagoda itself.

This was China in the two-hundred-twelfth year of the Qing Dynasty—by the lunar calendar a year of the dragon—or, as the uncivilized barbarians called it, the year 1856 A.D.; this is what had become of the empire.

The fall of nations was nothing new. They rose up and collapsed with the cycles of the ages. Romans followed Greeks followed Egyptians. Aztecs and Incas dropped to conquistadors and disease. China herself had witnessed the ebb and flow of the dynasties Zhou, Han, Jin, Tang, Liao, and Ming, among others. And now in the time of the Qing, ships had begun arriving from across distant seas, their

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holds packed with chest upon chest of sticky brown opium and their decks bristling with powerful cannons, and the Chinese people had soon enough given over their riches of tea and silver in exchange for the drug's intoxicating vapors.

One in five men now neglected his duties in favor of fleeting, addictive dreams. Government officials grew fat with bribes. Farmers forgot to collect their harvest. Soldiers loaded their opium pipes to relieve fears before battle, and as a result were slaughtered by rebel forces. Even the monks, supposed spiritual leaders of the people, gave themselves up to clouded hallucinations.

Chi-Yen saw the evidence around her every day: in the decay of the Six Banyan Trees and the stone-built suburbs of the city's southwestern Manchu quarter; in the abandoned echoes at the Temple of Emperors; in the filth piled against the walls outside the Temple of the God of War; and in that pathetic, lazy monk from Seven Dragons who spent his days half-conscious on a mat in Old Mother's common room as she swept the floors around him.

But all that meant nothing to Chi-Yen. All that mattered—all that could matter at that moment, on that day, to a slave of Old Mother—was to trade the coins for roosters and to deliver the birds to Old Mother's second house, a low-rent brothel dedicated to servicing those same British and American invaders who had coaxed her country to the edge of ruin.

Within the rules forced upon her, though, Chi-Yen over the years had developed some room to maneuver. And so she ran past the first poultry merchant, the one favored by Old Mother, and then again past the next farther down the avenue, and she passed through the West Gate outside the walls of the Old City. She crossed the bridge over the first stinking canal, turgid with effluent, and through the Fourth

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and Fifth Wards into the quieter western suburbs, and here at last she began to slow.

Here she knew old man Fong had roosters to sell—on a good day almost the size of the finer birds in the better markets—and without much effort he could be bargained into including one or two of the fresh pork buns cooked by his wife in a bamboo steamer behind their home.

Chi-Yen arrived to find Fong squatting on the stoop before the entrance to the small mud-brick dwelling. He smoked tobacco through a long, thin, and well-worn reed pipe. He drew the smoke into his lungs and ignored her approach, taking all the pleasure he could from his meager supply of the noxious weed. He smoked until the fire went out, then removed the pipe from his mouth and peered into the tarred nickel silver bowl at its end. He tapped the pipe with the palm of his hand, frowned, and set it aside.

“Dirty half breed,” he said, finally turning his attention to Chi-Yen. “Here again to take advantage of a feeble old man?”

“I need two roosters,” she replied. “At a fair price.”

“Fair price? Fair price? You pay half what my birds are worth. Good birds, too.”

“Good birds? If I wanted good birds I would buy in the city. I buy from you because your birds are low quality, and the drunken barbarians don’t know the difference.”

Fong grumbled and spat at the mention of the foreign devils, but he smiled at Chi-Yen’s insolence. He was sixty years old but could have been a hundred judging from the hard lines on his face, the leathery bald head beneath his black silk skullcap, and the thin wisp of a white beard dangling from his chin.

“You speak of the barbarians as if you know their minds,” he said. “Almost as if you know the name of your own fa-

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ther. But we both know your father is a hundred syphilitic English sailors. Your mother knew every smuggling pirate in the southern seas." He spat again for emphasis. "My birds are good."

"Should I tell your wife that my mother knew you also, old Fong? And your birds have lice."

Still tucked into his squatting position, Fong stomped his right foot and gave the impression of being a frog about to launch. "All birds have lice!" he shouted.

All this was the usual prelude to the real negotiation—the price for the roosters—which in the end came out as it always did, with Chi-Yen exchanging her coins for two dead birds and a pair of dumplings, which she wrapped in a white folded cloth that she pulled from her pocket.

"If your Old Mother finds out you are cheating her, she will have your head, young Leung Chi-Yen," Fong warned. "Or worse than that."

Chi-Yen knew he was right, but she also knew that Old Mother would have her head one way or another. There was no escaping it. She had done well so far to avoid the worst of the punishments. The occasional beatings were a small price to pay, and something that Chi-Yen sometimes even actively sought out. After all, a good strike to the face resulting in a swollen black eye or a split lip could go a long way toward disguising the natural beauty that more and more threatened to reveal itself to the world.

Her real mother's words continued to haunt her: "To live a happy life, you must strive to always be the second ugliest girl in the house."

Second ugliest. That was the catch, and it was something Chi-Yen was reminded of every time she approached the wards surrounding the factories of the wealthy foreign visitors. These factories rose up high and immaculate with

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straight white walls and pillared porticos, with spiked iron fences surrounding manicured riverfront gardens and paths—which Chi-Yen would never, ever be allowed to visit—and the flags of distant nations flying proudly, impudently, for all to see.

Standing in stark contrast to these rich barbarian monuments was the mass of China piled all around: the shops and homes of the native Chinese stacked side by side and one upon another, the wooden shanties of the workers and the servants and the merchants who serviced the foreign traders. The streets here ran thick with sludge and sometimes blood. The reek of sweat and urine and dung—human and animal—overpowered. Steam rose and flies and mosquitos buzzed and every man carried a bamboo fan that he used to clear the air and wave wildly about as he made his point in arguments with other wildly gesticulating men.

And then there was Old Mother's second house. Not at all secluded from the surrounding chaos, it distinguished itself from its neighbors only by the frequency with which foreign-born sailors approached its doors. English and American, mostly, they arrived sober and cautious, but flush with fresh pay, only to stumble out dead broke an hour or a day later, sick on cheap wine, more than a little in love, and vowing to return as soon as they could scrape together a few more coins.

Chi-Yen stood across the street from the house, working up the courage to enter. She held the dead birds in her left hand, dangling them by their feet, and she checked her pocket to make sure she still carried the warm pork buns. She watched as a foreign sailor made himself sick in the gutter while his two friends laughed and prodded his stomach with the tips of their black boots.

“Choke it up, Finnegan,” said one of the upright men to

his fallen companion. "Cap'n sees you like this the night before we sail, you'll be six months in this godforsaken pit waitin' for a ship."

American, then. Chi-Yen recognized the accent—or rather, she recognized it as not being among the often incomprehensible dialects spoken by crews of the English-flagged vessels.

From a young age, first with her own mother and then while moving from one to another of Old Mother's various houses, Chi-Yen had been surrounded as often by foreign speakers as by those of her own native Cantonese. But unlike the women and girls around her, she seemed to have a remarkable ease with languages. While she never had cause to speak them herself—in fact she kept the breadth of her knowledge a secret—she knew enough to understand most English, a good deal of Portuguese, a smattering of Russian, and of course the simplified pidgin used by the Chinese servant class to communicate with their foreign masters.

The Americans bent to take their sick companion by the arms and raise him to his feet, but this inspired a burst of violence from the unsteady man. He swung a fist at his helpers, boxing one hard in the ear, and for his trouble received a knee to the face. He dropped back to the ground, a gush of blood from his now broken nose spilling into the slick of his vomit in the street. He mumbled something through thick lips dangling a web of pink saliva.

"You reap what you sow, Mick," said the one who had spoken first, the seeming leader of the trio.

The man with the cuffed ear spat into the gutter near his friend—now his enemy—and added: "These heathen bastards'll slit his throat for a penny soon as the sun hits the horizon. I vote we let 'em."

Chi-Yen found nothing unusual in this scene. She had

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witnessed it countless times before, with different men each time. Sometimes they were angry, sometimes somber, sometimes laughing. Sometimes they helped one another and others they stumbled fighting from Old Mother's doors and didn't stop, for all she knew, until long after they had returned to their ships and set sail on a course that, with any luck, would send them straight to the bottom of the ocean.

It wasn't the men who gave her pause, though, but her knowledge of what was happening now behind closed doors—the women, the girls, her friends who would be taking this brief moment between customers to relax, to breathe sighs of relief, to wash the stains from their robes and their bodies. They would be shaking out the bedding to remove all traces of the dirty, hairy barbarians. The younger girls, the newer girls, might sometimes cry, but that never lasted long. If any were injured they would treat the wounds, washing cuts and applying poultices to bruised flesh. And all the while Mei-Xing, Old Mother's assistant and manager of this brothel for barbarians—a woman half Old Mother's age and yet half as forgiving—would be counting the profits and measuring the remaining stocks of wine, demanding efficiency from the kitchen staff and beating them with a switch if her mood were foul, as was often the case.

Chi-Yen stepped into the street and kept her gaze down, avoiding any chance of eye contact as she rounded the men and made her way into a narrow side alley and toward a servants' entrance. She refused to look at them, but she felt their eyes on her as she heard the words that chilled her very bones, that stood the downy hairs on her neck and almost caused her to drop her roosters into the alley muck.

"Next time," the man on his knees managed to choke through the bile in his throat, "I'm comin' back for that one."

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The second ugliest. The strategy had worked so far in Old Mother's primary house. Chi-Yen had so far managed to keep herself in that ignored zone between pretty and ugly—between the girls who had been promoted to the service of wealthy Chinese men, and those so useless that they had been cast off as playthings for the less discriminating—and more violently vulgar—foreign boatmen. But now she had been noticed.

Chi-Yen hurried into the house and shut the door, leaning against it both to separate herself from the street and to rest and regain the breath that had vanished from her lungs. The short, dark hallway stood empty. No one inside had noticed her arrival. She heard chopping from the back porch kitchen and movement overhead from the girls upstairs. There was none of the telltale laughter and moaning to indicate customers on the premises, which was not surprising given the early hour.

Straight ahead, the door to Mei-Xing's small room under the stairs stood closed. With luck Chi-Yen could complete her duties and return to the Old City without having to face the mistress of the house.

She delivered the birds to the kitchen, where the old cook hung them to age from a hook near the open window. Chi-Yen could have left then through the same side door she entered without repercussions. There would be no harm in avoiding Mei-Xing and returning home immediately to her true mistress, Old Mother. But she knew she would not be missed right away if she tarried a while longer, and there were reasons to stay—reasons that made the risk worthwhile. Many of the girls upstairs, after all, were friends. They had lived with Chi-Yen before being moved to this steaming riverside slum.

She crept past Mei-Xing's closed door and stepped as

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quietly as possible up the wooden stairs, avoiding the steps that had been loosened to squeak out warnings to residents of the house. Still they heard her, and by the time she reached the landing they had all gathered together, soft as mice, to usher her into a private room where they spoke in delighted whispers, peppering her with questions about news from within the city walls. How was Old Mother? Any new slaves in the house? Were the soldiers prepared for the coming war?

Chi-Yen answered all their questions until it was time for one of her own: "Xiao-Niao?"

The girls grew silent and cast down their eyes. Xiao-Niao was the most recent to join their staff. Three months earlier she had been sent straight from Old Mother's first house, where she had long been a mentor and guardian to the younger Chi-Yen. But her stay in this new place had not gone well. An Englishman with the unlikely name of Basil Malvenue—unpronounceable to the Chinese tongue—had taken a liking to Xiao-Niao and become a repeat customer. He was a bitter, cruel man who bragged of a dispensation from the Queen herself. But because he paid well, greedy Mei-Xing had turned a blind eye to his cruel appetites and quick temper.

During the man's third visit to her room, Xiao-Niao had made her first and only attempt to escape. So he beat her and kicked her as she lay on the floor begging for mercy, her screams and cries echoing throughout the house. When Mei-Xing could ignore it no longer, she approached the room and the man threw three times his usual fee at her. He called for dinner and ate while sitting on Xiao-Niao's bed, watching the flies as they crawled across her broken face. It wasn't until he left the next morning that Mei-Xing

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allowed the girls to lift Xiao-Niao and clean her wounds, to dress her and brew a tea that would help her sleep.

Now three weeks into her convalescence, Xiao-Niao smiled when her young friend Chi-Yen entered the room. Although it seemed like a painful effort, the smile went a long way toward lessening the horror of the scars she would always bear. In fact it was Chi-Yen who had the harder time speaking, who seemed to be in the most pain. Tears welled in her eyes as she studied the yellow and purple bruises on Xiao-Niao's face and arms and the bandages wrapped around her chest to hold cracked ribs in place.

"Chi-Yen, Chi-Yen," said Xiao-Niao. "Do not cry for me."

"How can I not cry? Look what they have done to you."

"Yes, look. What dirty barbarian will want me now?" And Xiao-Niao smiled again, knowing that Chi-Yen of all people would understand. "What do you think? Will I be the second ugliest girl? Perhaps Old Mother will take me back and let me work in her kitchen."

Chi-Yen removed the dumplings from her pocket, unwrapped them, and fed them to her friend. She had planned to save one for herself, but with the truth of these circumstances—and the implications for her own future—Chi-Yen had lost her appetite. Old Fong's warning, the drunken sailor, the increasing hostility of the soldiers and the city's beggars—it all added up to one bad future. Chi-Yen's world was closing in around her, herding her, pushing her toward a miserable destiny. She had been a fool to think she could escape it.

And then there was Mei-Xing, watching her from the doorway, appraising her worth as if seeing her for the first time. In her hands she held the two feeble excuses for roosters that Chi-Yen had delivered to the kitchen.

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As her fierce mistress looked from the dumplings to the birds, Chi-Yen's unhappy fate revealed itself at last.

The man from the street stepped forward from the hallway behind Mei-Xing, leering, a crust of blood in his mustache, the reek of fresh vomit rising from his damp shirt. He wavered unsteadily and leaned a hand against the wall to keep himself from keeling over. He pointed a scabby finger at Chi-Yen.

"She be the one what I want," he said.

A NOTE ON THIS PREVIEW

This is an advance preview of
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Official publication is scheduled for October 2013.

For additional information, including
cover art, author bios, interview availability, etc.,
please visit the Baaa! Press web site at:

<http://www.baaapress.com>