

A mysterious figure called the Jaguar threatens a Mesoamerican empire of the 15th century. Can an unlikely duo stop him?

THE CASEBOOK OF QING AND XMUCANE:

Being the accounts of the collaboration of a young Chinese naval officer and an elderly, very perceptive Meso-American woman, as they encounter mysteries and adventures.

By B.E.L. Coulson

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BEL COULSON

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The Chinese sailors struggled to keep from sinking. The storm was truly upon them and while they could see the shore and a beach where they could moor their boats, they were not there yet, and the furious wind and waves were making it difficult to make any progress.

Eventually, though, they caught the tide and were able to ride it to the beach. The men, who were exhausted from the exertions that got them there, nevertheless jumped to their tasks of dragging the boats to safe ground, getting the horse off the boat (Qing at this point wondering whether the horse was worth the trouble), and unloading the gear, goods and provisions, all in the rain and wind that had not yet let up.

Bao was in no state to be managing any of this, so it fell to Qing to give the orders. One by one he assigned the sailors their tasks: seeing to the shelter of the officers, starting a fire, finding places to keep the goods dry, feeding the horse (again with the horse, thought Qing) and so on. The weather was preventing much of this from actually happening, and starting a fire seemed out of the question. It was growing dark and without the light, not much could be accomplished. Fortunately, all of the men seemed no worse for the voyage, except Bao. Qing went to the Captain, who was sitting under a copious tree with the Lieutenant.

“Captain, with your permission I would like to cease our preparations for the evening. I will provide the men some rations to get them through till tomorrow, but no more work can be done tonight. Let us see how we stand at the first light. I would like to move the foodstuffs to this location and a rotating guard can be set to watch over both the provisions and the officers. Who knows what creatures lurk in this forest that would desire both of these things?”

“Make it so, Qing. We will have to postpone our shark’s fin soup, then? So be it. Also, if you can get this rain to stop that would be helpful.”

Qing grinned at this unexpected bit of dark humor from the Captain. “I will ask Master Sailor” replied Qing, “he seems capable of just about anything.”

Qing set the watch, observed the men finding sleeping arrangements in the trees, and then finally sat himself down. He did not think he would sleep that well, given the situation they were in, but before he knew it the sun was once again blazing in his eyes, and the new day arose.

Qing went down to the beach, where Master Sailor stood with a few of the men. They were staring out to the ocean’s horizon. Qing was still a little groggy, but he noted a look of concern on the chief’s face.

“Is there a problem, Master Sailor?” said Qing.

“Well, Ensign, I have good news and I have bad news. Which will you be wantin’ first?”

“I suppose the good news. It will make the bad news seem less bad when I hear it”.

“The good news is actually right in front of you, that the Whinnying Ship has survived the storm quite intact, from the look of it. Take a gander.” and he pointed to it off the shore. Indeed, the rigging seemed quite whole, though there was some damage to the hull. Qing was very glad to see this.

“What’s the bad news, then?”

“It appears” said Master Sailor “that the rest of the fleet has disappeared.”

“The gods save us,” said Qing. “We are stranded in this new world”. He pointed to one of the seamen. “Go up to the camp and tell the Captain and the other officers of this news.” The sailor ran off.

“What happened to them, Chief, do you think?”

Master Sailor stroked his chin. “Maybe they all sunk, though that is unlikely for all of them to have had such a dramatic fate. More likely,

it is, that they tried to escape the storm by going out to sea, though it was passing rude of them not to tell us.”

Qing mused. “No time. Or no one to receive any signal. It might have been a mistake to take so many officers on this excursion.”

The chief nodded. “Specially as some did not want to come. But we are here now, and time to make the best of it.”

“I see something.” Ensign Bao pointed at a tree. Behind it a figure with long grey hair appeared to be hiding.

“Crossbowmen at the ready,” The Captain ordered. Though fatigued, six bowmen took their positions on the beach, aiming at the strange figure. Cautiously, the person, or thing, slunk deeper into the trees, staying behind the thick trunk.

“That was clearly a person, likely a woman, we should go after her before she warns other barbarians of our presence,” Lin spouted.

“May I remind you, Lin, that our mission is to persuade foreigners to peacefully acknowledge the authority and benevolence of the Emperor. We are only to seek combat if met with hostility and defiance. Besides, without the fleet, I doubt we would survive a fight with locals,” the Captain replied. “Bin how long do you estimate it would take to repair the vessel?”

“Weeks, sir, maybe months. We survived the storm, but the hull hit some sandbars.” The Captain bit his lip.

“Well, then it looks like we must do the best we can to ensure that we survive here that long. We will await whatever response we get from these locals. Bring out some of the customary gifts.”

In the village the mood was similarly tense. “Are they men or demons?” asked Xmucane’s nephew Dacey, a curious young man and one of the best hunters in the village.

“As you know well, nephew, I don’t believe in demons, so I think that they are men, yet they certainly look different from us. Their skin is paler, and their eyes are small compared to ours. But their vessel is huge and has pieces of white cloth on top, I never imagined that boats could be built to such a size. They also have bows which they turn over on the side to fire, these are made of some kind of metal that is very hard. It looks like the silvery metal that won’t melt in our fires.

“But auntie, the smiths say that that such metal cannot be worked like copper or gold, and so is for Gods and Demons alone,”. In reality, Xmucane felt these same fears. She had always paid as little mind to the gods and demons as she could get away with. What if this was the end of the world and these newcomers were demons heralding it. Was she about to face judgement, she who had harbored thoughts about the limitations of the gods? But demons were supposed to be ferocious and unmerciful, and she had evaded them, had she not?

She shook herself. Demons or no, it was time to act. “Dacey, take as many of the village men as you can, go greet these visitors, I will personally go to the Cacique and tell him the news.” Dacey obeyed, using his fine words to encourage many of the strong men in the gathering crowd to follow after him. None disobeyed, for in the absence of the elders, nobody questioned Xmucane’s authority.

Within twenty minutes of watching the old lady disappear into the woods, the Chinese sailors saw a large body of men coming out of the trees, one hundred or more. Their skin was brown (“like the people of the southern islands” thought Qing). They were dressed in sleeveless shirts of alternating blue, white, yellow, and red threads. Below, they wore loincloths. Both garments were made from a coarse fabric that resembled hemp. Unlike the Chinese, they wore their hair short or

shaved it off completely. All possessed bows with arrows pointed at various targets among the Chinese on the beach. The Chinese bowmen in turn pointed their weapons at the newcomers. The other sailors held onto whatever they could, having no weapons of their own.

The Captain decided to take the initiative. Taking a blue and red silk shirt with dragons attached to it from the gift pile, he slowly walked forward towards the leader of the natives, who was shocked at his boldness. The warrior lowered his weapon as the Captain came closer. Chen held out the shirt, with a long-extended arm. The warrior waited and looked for a moment, then slowly took the textile. The Captain motioned for him to put it on. Cautiously, the warrior did so. Seeing the strange shirt on their leader amused his comrades, who laughed and pointed. One of them tried to address the Captain in his own tongue. Chen merely looked at him, confused. The local looked away in embarrassment. The leader turned to one of the other warriors and spoke to him. This warrior took a pack from his back off and took out a plain clay jug with an inverted rim, and an equally plain wooden cup. He poured some thick white liquid from the jug into the cup. Putting down all his other things, the leader took the drink and approached the Captain holding it out to him.

“Don’t drink it Sir, barbarians are not harmonious, they are treacherous,” warned Lin. The Captain ignored him and took the cup, sipping the concoction inside. He turned back to the crew.

“It tastes like nothing I have ever had before. It is definitely intoxicating, though not nearly as much as Baijiu, more like millet wine, but far tastier.” He gave the cup back. The lead warrior pointed at it and said “pulque.” The Captain understood and pointed at the garment he had given the leader before saying “silk.” The natives and Chinese muttered curiously.

Out of the trees emerged a woman in a triangular skirt, made of the same cloth as the men’s garments. Qing guessed it was the same woman who had first seen them. She looked a little surprised at her nephew’s new shirt, but not nearly as shocked as the others. She spoke to the leader. He smiled and turned back to the Chinese. Pointing at the

sun, which was in the Western part of the sky he moved his hand up and down and then held up seven fingers. Then he pointed to the Chinese ship.

“I think he wants us to wait on our ship seven days.” Ensign Qing said.

“I am sure of it, young Qing,” said Master Sailor.

“I don’t like this. Why do they want this?” said Bao.

“I don’t know, but I intend that we will comply. Master sailor, how long will our provisions last?”

“We will be fine with food sir, the fruit trees onboard survived the storm and are ready to yield, but we could use more fresh water.”

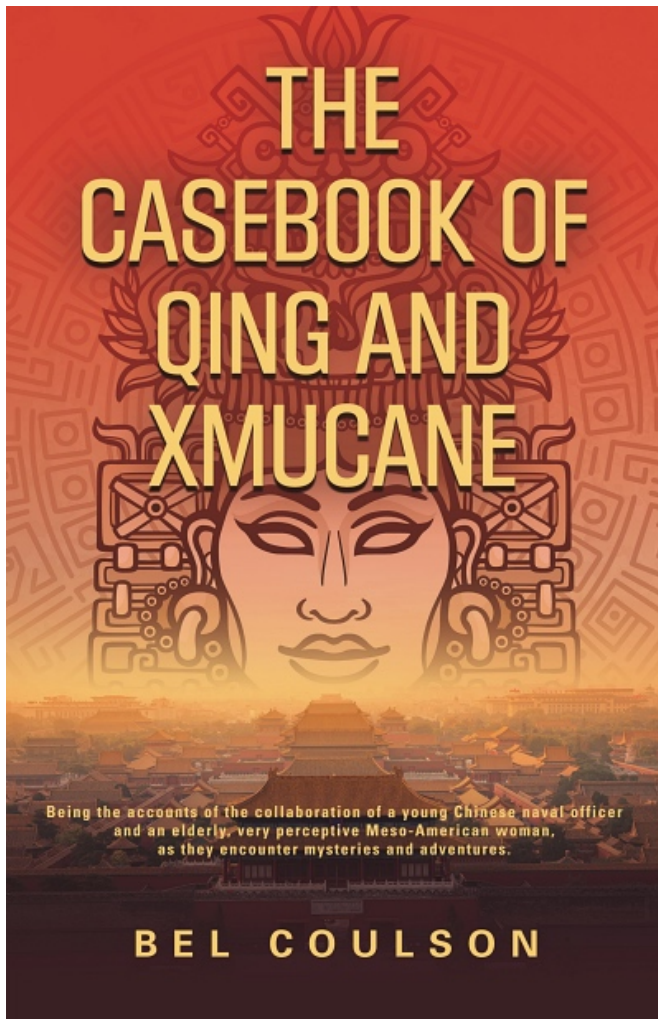
The Captain made a drinking motion with his hand. The native tried to give him another cup of pulque, but he motioned his hand in front of him. Walking back quickly, he went to the shore and scooped some sea water with his hand. The native leader smiled and pointed off down the beach a little distance.

“Master sailor, take two men and scout out in that direction.” The old sea salt immediately complied with the Captain’s orders. The villagers watched the Chinese men leave, but did not try to stop them. For about ten minutes, the standoff continued with nobody saying anything except to their own people. Xmucane hoped the newcomers had understood that her nephew was trying to point them towards a stream. Both the villagers and the newcomers seemed slightly more at ease now that their leaders were getting along, but the air was still filled with danger. What the visitors could not possibly know was that she had gone to the Cacique who had in turn ordered a messenger sent to the imperial capital to inform the Emperor of the new arrivals.

The villagers had heard that in the capital, Tzintzuntzan, there was a foreign courtier who the Emperor used as a translator, because he could speak every known language. It was likely the ruler would dispatch him once the Cacique informed him of the new arrivals. The

villagers could only hope that the Emperor could send him in the seven days Xmucane's nephew asked the Chinese to wait. Official channels took time, but surely the ruler would not delay in handling such a strange turn of events. Master Sailor and his two companions returned smiling.

“Sir, there is a stream in the direction they pointed too. The water is clean and will easily nourish all our men.” The Captain turned back to the natives and smiled. The native leader smiled back. He spoke to his followers, who slowly and tensely made their way back into the forest from which they had come.



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