

THE DEADLY STINGAREE

JONATHON CONG WITH A FOREWORD BY

COREY LYNN FAYMAN

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

FOREWORD

Dear reader,

The story you are about to read is the remarkable account of a week in the life of a Chinese orphan living in San Diego, California in 1891. Or it isn't. It is skillfully told to be sure, but I am not sure it is truthfully told. It may be complete fiction. Many of the historical characters described in these pages did pass through San Diego at that time and several of the key events described here took place, but I have found no specific evidence to support this story's claims or its authenticity. See my addendum for more details on the documented history.

The provenance of the original manuscript is also unknown. It arrived at my front door several years ago with an audible thump. I assumed there had been a delivery from UPS or FedEx but when I opened the door, I discovered an oversized manila envelope lying on the mat. There was no return address, only my name printed in large block letters—COREY LYNN FAYMAN and, as I had not immediately answered the door, I missed the opportunity to see who had put it there. I brought in the envelope, placed it on the kitchen table and opened it carefully. Inside were dozens of folded, broadsheet pages of

what looked like an old newspaper. I unfolded the first sheet and began to read. The contents left me both amazed and dumbfounded.

As to how and why the manuscript was given to me, that is still a mystery. I was living in San Diego's Chinatown district at the time and had recently published my third crime novel to some small acclaim. The confluence of those events may have brought the bearer of the package to my door. I can think of no other reason other than drunkenness or a mistaken address. The publication of this book may bring some new information to light. My editors and I have made some small adjustments for clarity, grammar and spelling, but the narrative presented here is essentially the same as the one delivered to me in the original broadsheets.

Is this remarkable tale fact, fiction, or some devious combination of both? I suspect the latter, but some part of me wishes for it all to be true. I think you will too.

Sincerely,

Corey Lynn Fayman
San Diego, California
November 2025

THE NORWEGIAN GUEST

Thursday, April 16, 1891, San Diego, California, USA

I did not feel comfortable speaking with the Norwegian, not at first. It was not common practice at that time for guests of Horton House to engage menials in conversation, especially one as lowborn and alien as me. None of the hotel's wealthy clients had ever spoken to me, let alone solicited me for information on the charlatans, thieves, drunkards, pickpockets, whores and murderers who made up the great majority of our city's population at that time. The mere appearance of a well-appointed guest in the loading area of Horton House set all the workers on edge. Red Mick, the day manager, attempted to escort the man back into the hotel, thinking he might be looking to hire a carriage to tour the surrounding country or ride out to the old lighthouse. The Norwegian would have none of it. When Mick informed him that hotel guests were not allowed in the loading area, the man glared at him with an intimidating intensity that would wither the brightest of the new gaslights in the hotel's lobby.

"I have paid good money for my room and board at this establishment," said the Norwegian. "I am in poor health. Your handbill

promised me tranquility and liberation from the everyday irritations of society so that I might recuperate from my diseased condition. I do not see how the hotel can fulfill its promises if you continue to disrupt my conversation with this young enterpriser.”

Red Mick was, at best, a smudged lamp of a man and he dwindled away to the dark confines of his office without another word. There were more important things for him to do than shepherd wayward hotel guests. President Harrison would arrive in five days and the exterior of the Horton House was to be covered in flags and other patriotic finery before he arrived.

The laborers on the dock bowed their heads and set to work with renewed commitment, afraid to look at the Norwegian and me. As their manager, Red Mick had a habit of transmuting his own mortifications and humiliations into angry chastisements of the those under his purview and the poor drudges now feared his wrath. I felt some sympathy for their situation and hoped that none of them would blame me. I could not have avoided the Norwegian in any case. I was secretly thrilled, of course, to engage in conversation with someone of his cultivation and sophistication. No one else had ever referred to me as an enterpriser before. Most white men called me something much worse. As Mick snuck away, the Norwegian turned to address me.

“I hope we shall have no more interruptions, Master ... what is your name?”

“I am Cong,” I said.

“And I am Sigerson,” he said offering his hand. “John Sigerson. I am Norwegian. From Norway.”

I hesitated to shake his hand. It was not a practice familiar to me.

“I have never met a Norwegian before,” I said, by way of explanation.

“You are concerned what others may think of your discoursing with me?”

“The hotel proprietors may register a complaint with my employer.”

“Who is your employer?”

“The laundryman. Mr. Lee of Chinatown. I have a contract with him to collect wash from several hotels, as well as the great houses on the hill.”

“I understand. You fear Mr. Lee will cancel your contract.”

I nodded. Mr. Sigerson cast his eyes on the pile of soiled bed sheets that had been loaded into the back of my wagon.

“What is your compensation for performing this service?”

“I am paid twenty-five cents for a fully loaded cart.”

“How often do you provide the laundryman with such bounty?”

“Twice a day, except on Sundays.”

“That is fifty cents a day, which comes to three dollars a week.”

“Yes.”

“And you are able to survive on such wages?”

“I have my donkey and my cart.”

Mr. Sigerson nodded.

“You are available for hire?”

I nodded. Mr. Sigerson turned his attention from me to my burro.

“Is your companion here a dependable stepper?” he asked.

“D’Artagnan is stubborn sometimes, but he is sure-footed.”

“Did you provide him with that French appellation?”

I nodded my head. Mr. Sigerson continued to question me.

“So, you have read the novels of Mr. Dumas? That is where you found the name?”

“Yes,” I said. “I enjoy reading books. It is one of my great pleasures in life.”

“And you prefer to read romances?”

“I enjoy stories of young men who overcome great difficulties. But I will read almost anything.”

“Bravo, Master Cong. You are the most interesting and unusual person I have yet encountered in this sun-bleached and dusty corner of the earth.”

I looked down at my feet, overcome with a gnawing befuddlement. I did not know how to respond to the Norwegian’s encouraging words, having heard so few directed at me before.

“Why are you speaking to me?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” he said.

“I rarely dialogue with a man of your standing.”

Mr. Sigerson chuckled. He was tall and lean, almost underfed, with a long, hooked nose that reminded me of a hawk’s beak. His skin was white to the point of translucence and a score of blue veins showed through it. I assumed this was due to his ailment or the cold blood of his Norwegian heritage.

“Well, Master Cong,” he said. “I am a curious man by disposition. The true nature of a community cannot be gleaned by conversation with its most fortunate citizens and tourists are shielded from the social complexities of the places they visit. The most illuminating conversations take place in kitchens, laundries and workshops. That is where the authentic voices of citizens can be heard, where the joys and sorrows of their situation are most clearly aired. The workmen’s dock is my first stop whenever I visit a new locality. If I had not done so today, I would not have discovered this remarkable Chinese scholar and businessman who has named his donkey after the youngest of the noble musketeers. You are an admirable and intriguing young man, Master Cong.”

I was dumbstruck at his words of praise for me. I could say nothing.

“And D’Artagnan is an admirable beast,” Sigerson said, sensing my discomfiture. He patted my burro’s right flank. “A noble specimen of *Equus asinus*, working companion to mankind since at least the time of the Egyptian kings.”

“He is only five years old,” I said. “I purchased him from a Mexican.”

“I did not mean to imply that D’Artagnan himself was as ancient as the pharaohs.” Sigerson chuckled. “Indeed, your donkey seems of good health, in the prime of life. I may wish to employ you both at some time.”

“For what purpose?” I said.

“I am an explorer by profession,” he said, turning to me with steady gray eyes. “I have come here to recuperate from weakness brought on by my recent travels in India. I contracted a lethargy there

that doctors have been unable to cure. They have prescribed rest, proper nutrition, and the healing effects of your temperate climate as a last resort.”

“The Horton House is well known for its health regimens,” I said.

“Yes, indeed. It is also quite dull, with a convocation of equally tedious guests. I will need to get out, at least for a few hours each day, or I shall go mad. I would like to explore your city and the surrounding country.”

The thought of carrying Mr. Sigerson on my cart made me uncomfortable. He was intelligent and engaging, but we would be noticed. I did not like to be noticed.

“You should engage my friend Reuben the Mexican,” I said. “He gives regular tours to the old lighthouse and Tijuana.”

“I have seen Mr. Reuben’s advertisement. His tours are not the kind of excursion I find enlightening, a wagon full of the same drunken and vacuous tourists I am trying to escape. I prefer a more spontaneous journey, one that allows for extemporaneous choices that lead where they may. I would pay you well for your time.”

“How much would you pay?”

“I will pay you two bits per hour or portion thereof.”

I was astonished again. Still I resisted.

“I could not give up my laundry route,” I said. In truth I would’ve happily thrown off the laundryman’s yoke for Mr. Sigerson’s company, but the laundry was my one steady employer. It would remain so long after Mr. Sigerson checked out of the hotel and returned to his ice-covered home.

“You are the man for me. I am sure of it,” said Mr. Sigerson. “At what hour do you conclude your regular business?”

“Mid-afternoon.”

“Very well. I will try to arrange my journeys around your schedule.”

The directness of Mr. Sigerson’s proposal was intoxicating. D’Artagnan’s reins grew slippery with the sweat from my hands. I cannot explain it, but I felt like a drunken man on the verge of a great precipice. No white man had negotiated with me so earnestly before.

"I will do it," I said.

"Excellent!" he said. He offered his hand to me again. This time I shook it.

"How shall we meet?" I said.

"Do not worry about that," he said. "I will find you when you are needed."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a silver dollar.

"This is an advance," he said, handing me the coin. "A deposit on our contract."

"Thank you," I said. I was dumbfounded. I had never received any sort of payment in advance. I often had difficulty collecting on my bill even after a job was completed. Mr. Sigerson turned to leave, then turned back.

"Master Cong?" he said.

"Yes?"

"There is one other thing I would like you to do for me, if at all possible. It does not require any extra time or effort on your part, only that you keep your ears attuned to any word you may hear of another visitor. He is an acquaintance of mine, a military man of British nationality, older than I am, and thicker of frame with more robust coloring. His hair has retreated from the top of his head. The face below it is haggard and deeply scarred from his adventuring."

"What is the man's name?"

"He will not be using his Christian name, I suspect, but an alias. The Colonel is a veteran of the Afghan campaign, and the author of several books on the Indian region."

"Did you know him in India?"

"I have crossed paths with The Colonel on more than one continent. If you should hear anything about The Colonel or a ship arriving from South America, let me know immediately."

I frowned at the puzzle of Mr. Sigerson's request and wondered if I'd been recruited into some sort of smuggling conspiracy. The brightness of the silver dollar in my pocket overwhelmed any misgivings.

"I will report any news that I hear of this man," I said.

“Thank you, Master Cong. I must warn you that under no condition should you approach The Colonel yourself. Be my ears only. Do not make yourself conspicuous in any way.”

“That will not be difficult,” I said. “I am invisible to everyone.”

“Indeed,” Mr. Sigerson said. “I am counting on it.”

THANK YOU

I hope you enjoyed this sample from *The Deadly Stingaree*.

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