

FINN'S CLOCK

By Dean Whitlock

Chapter 7

So far . . .

Finn's father, Mike O'Neill, is a boatman on Boston Harbor, rowing out to meet incoming ships and offer them the services of Peter Jenkins, a clockmaker, to repair and adjust the marine chronometers they use for navigation. Finn, now 14 and done with school, has spent several months rowing second oar for Da. They're Irish immigrants, lucky to have such a good job when so many others struggle to earn as much as a dollar a day.

One morning, a Chinese junk appears in the fog, bearing Matthew Lawson, an expatriate Bostonian, and his daughter An-Ming. Mr. Lawson has a remarkable Chinese clock that he wants to have duplicated. He hires Peter to do it, and he hires Finn and his da to be boatman for him and An-Ming. Da rows for Mr. Lawson, and Finn discovers that navigating the channels of Boston Harbor is a simple chore compared to keeping watch over An-Ming.

The teamster was a thick-necked thug. He was aching for a fight, and he deserved one for the insults. But I had An-Ming to worry about. I glanced down the wharf to make sure she was all right.

The thug grabbed my shoulder and swung me face-to. "Don't turn your back on me, Mick, not when I'm talking to you!"

"I'm just try—" I started to say, but he shook me.

"Are you talking back to me?"

I clenched my fists, trying to keep my temper down. "I said I'm just trying to catch up to my friend. I'll be happy to get out of your way, as soon as you let go of me."

He tightened his grip, shouting all the while. "Oh, it's my fault now, eh? I've a good mind to—"

Suddenly Da was there, one big hand wrapped around the teamster's wrist. "You've got no mind at all, near as I can see," he said. His voice was low, almost quiet, which wasn't a good thing. Now I had to worry about calming him down, too.

I pulled out of the thug's grip. "It's all right, Da," I said. "I just bumped into him is all, and now I'll be getting along, no harm done."

"That's not what I saw," Da said, still clamped hard on the fellow's wrist. "It seems to me this clumsy loud-mouth owes you an apology." The thug glared and tried to jerk his hand free. He might as well have been yanking at an anchor.

“There’s no need for one,” I said, “and no time. I need to row An-Ming back to the junk.”

I looked for her again, and realized we were closed in by a ring of men. More like two half rings. The half behind Da was all Irish stevedores. The other half was teamsters, lined up behind the thug. Everyone of them, on both sides, had an ugly frown pasted on his mug.

“Let him go, Da, please. These men don’t need to be losing their jobs over one bump.” I turned to the teamster. “I didn’t mean to bother you,” I said. “I’m sor—”

“No!” Da growled. “Get along! I won’t have you apologizing to one like this.” He threw the fellow’s wrist free and stood facing him, ready for any false move. I could see the man swallow, but he stood his ground.

At that moment, An-Ming pushed her way through the gap in the two lines. “What is this?” she asked. “A problem?”

Da and I both looked her way, and the thug struck.

It was a hard right, but Da seemed to sense it coming. Maybe he knew the man would try it, maybe he wanted him to. Either way he was ready for it. A dip to the left, a slight turn. The thug’s swing missed Da’s jaw and just barely clipped his ear. Da was back at him in a flash, with a jab to the face that rocked the man back on his heels.

Then all Hell broke loose. The teamsters and the stevedores went at each other yelling like a flock of furies. I almost got knocked down in the rush. I ducked a fist thrown by one of the teamsters, and a stevedore went at him before I could even think to try it myself. It was An-Ming I was worried about.

“Anie!” I cried, but I doubt anyone heard it over the hubbub. Someone stumbled against me. Another man went sprawling and almost tripped me. Fists were flying right, left, and sideways. The poor carthorse shrieked with fear and reared, dumping crates into the melee. More men went flat, then grabbed the broken staves and leaped up, flailing at any head in sight.

I stumbled out of the press, almost to the edge of the wharf before I got clear.

“Anie!” I yelled again. And I saw her, farther down the wharf. Someone tumbled out of the mob and made a grab at her, but she dodged him easily, slipping sideways slick as an eel, and catching his foot with hers as she did it. He went flat on his face. She’d lost her hat, and her long braid had sprung free, whipping round her every time she moved.

I ran to her, reached for her arm. She twirled, braid and arms flying. Her fingernails stopped a hair from my eyes.

“*Wa!*” she cried. “Do not sneak up!”

“I think I’ll remember that,” I gasped.

A shrill whistle cut through the clamor of the brawl. I grabbed An-Ming’s arm and pulled her down the wharf toward the ladder. “Police! Let’s get out of here!”

She set her heels. “Wait! Your father, he is still in the fight!”

“Right where he wants to be,” I muttered, “and there’s no way we’re going to get to him.”

She came. Didn’t like it, but she came.

More whistles shrilled, coming closer. A glance back showed me dark blue uniforms and polished top hats pushing through the spectators massed at the street. The fight began to break up, the brawlers fleeing up and down the wharf and into the stalls. But storekeepers barred their doors, and the ships’ crews blocked their gangways. The police came on, laying about with their sticks, collaring as many as they could.

We reached the ladder just as a press of fleeing men caught up. Most ran by, aiming to get around the end of the granite warehouse to the lane on the other side of the wharf. One man came right at us.

“There you are,” he growled. He shoved me aside and grabbed An-Ming just as she started down the ladder. He was a tall man, brawny, his face half hidden by a broad flop-brimmed hat. He plucked An-Ming off the top rung like she weighed no more than a kitten. She yowled like a grown cat, twisting about, kicking and clawing, trying to break free. He clamped her arms tight with one long arm and fought to subdue her legs with the other.

I went at him with both fists. I was too short to get at his face, so I aimed for the kidneys. I hardly dented him; he was built like a brick privy. He caught me on the side of the head with his free arm and sent me sprawling again. But it loosened his hold on An-Ming. She prized an arm free and raked her hand across his cheek, leaving a trail of bloody streaks. He yelled.

“Rake him again, Anie!” I cried, scrambling to my feet. I climbed his back like a ladder and pummeled his ears. “Put her down!” I yelled.

He did, but not like I meant. He took one step to the edge of the wharf and threw her out over the ten-foot drop to the water. Down she went, arms and legs flailing.

I didn’t see her hit, because he went after me then, reaching back with his long arms to peel me off his shoulders. And he would have thrown me in, too, or worse, if Da hadn’t showed up. He gave the thug a roundhouse right that snapped his head sidewise and made him stagger. I dropped to the cobbles with a thud that rattled my teeth. By the time I was back on my pins, the thug had disappeared around the end of the warehouse, Da was rubbing his sore knuckles, and An-Ming was in the water, blowing out a stream of Chinese curses.

“Can you swim?” I cried.

“Get into the boat, you lump,” Da growled, “and be quick about it! The watch is almost on us.” He shoved me toward the ladder, and I half fell into the boat. He came down after me in a rush, jerked the painter free, and shoved us off. I already had my oars set and pulled out toward An-Ming.

“Can you swim?” I yelled again, craning around for a look-see.

She gave me a disgusted glare. “Yes!”

“Do you need a hand?” someone called. Billy Adams was sitting in his canoe just outside the Liverpool packet.

“Not from you,” Da replied.

“Why, it’s Mickey O’Neill,” Adams drawled. “Been fighting again? Or just drinking?”

“That’s no business of yours, Adams,” Da replied. “Get on with you.”

“Suit yourself, Mick. You enjoy your swim, miss.”

Adams rowed away, leaving An-Ming to tread water. We reached her in just a couple of strokes, and I pulled her over the side, streaming seawater.

“Now what was that all about?” Da demanded when she was safe on the stern thwart.

“That thug tried to kidnap her,” I told him.

“What are you talking about?” he growled. “In broad daylight? More likely he was fooled by her clothes and just wanted to rough her up for being foreign. He looked dumb enough.”

“He came at her on purpose! All the others were running away already, from the police!”

“Then he’s even dumber than he looked. Now let’s row her back where she belongs before you come to any more trouble. She’ll catch her death in those wet clothes.”

“I will survive, Mr. O’Neill,” An-Ming said. “Thank you for helping.”

Da rubbed his right fist. “It was my pleasure, miss. I apologize for the boy, though. He needs more time to grow up. Then he might make a better bodyguard.”

The words burned.

Da jumped off at Long Wharf, leaving me to ferry An-Ming the rest of the way. I set out for the *Hang-Jinhe* with quick, angry jabs on the oars. She shivered on the thwart, dripping pints of dirty water between the ribs. Her hair was starting to come undone and hung about her face in soggy hanks.

Halfway there, she said, “Finn, do not tell Father, please.”

“Mum’s the word,” I muttered.

Then she added, “We would have bested him in another minute.”

It helped a bit. She’d bloodied the bastard at least, and I could hope he’d gone deaf.

Back at the junk, she hurried to her cabin before anyone noticed. I swabbed out the boat as best I could, then pulled myself up the ladder to wait for Peter in the sun on deck. The cook offered me some of their Chinese tea and a sweet cake made with nuts and seeds. I have to admit, what they ate was strange but mostly good.

The steeple clocks were arguing over how close it was to six before Peter and Mr. Lawson came out of the clock room. They’d been hunched over their clocks and plans the whole time and were muzzy as old men. Then An-Ming came out, and Peter perked right

up. She had on another silk dress, this one printed with dragonflies and flowers, but she wasn't any happier about it than she had been the day before. She was carrying her bonnet, demanding to know who had designed such a useless piece of headgear. I noticed her hair was still damp, but there was no other sign of her dunking. Hu-Lan argued with her, and she finally jammed the bonnet over the thick coil on the crown of her head. She outright refused to tie it. Mr. Lawson sighed but kept silent.

There were five of us going ashore in the boat: me, Peter, Mr. Lawson, An-Ming, and Wang. Hu-Lan was staying on the junk in case Captain Li needed more translating. I rowed us in to Central Wharf, with An-Ming at the tiller again. Peter offered her the place, and even wiped off the thwart before she sat. She gave him a smile so big he was dazzled, and stayed with us as far as Congress Street. He had a room there in the top floor above Mr. Bonds's shop and usually had his supper at a boarding house up the street. An-Ming invited him to join us, but he gallantly bowed out, saying it was a family reunion and all. Just as he was tipping his hat to her, a woman stuck her head out of a second-floor window half a block down Congress Street, calling for help. Peter, true to form, clapped on his topper and loped down the street to see what the matter was. An-Ming didn't hesitate either. She said something Chinese to Wang and ran after as fast as she could. In that long, wide dress, it looked like she was gliding on ice.

"Go, Wang," Mr. Lawson said. "I'll follow." So we all went.

It turned out there were two women up there, milliners. They had been working past closing time in the room above the store to make a few more hats and a little more money, but the last person out had accidentally locked them in. Some other fellows gathered to answer the call, and they began debating with Peter what to do. I spotted a ladder in the alley beside the store. A great cheer went up from the men, but the women didn't look so happy. The ladder didn't reach high enough anyway, falling just about four feet shy of the window ledge. That led to some more discussion among the growing crowd of on-lookers. Finally An-Ming broke in.

"You," she called, pointing to a teamster at the edge of the crowd. "Bring wagon here, under window. You, Finn, put ladder on wagon." She said "laddah" and her grammar got lost in the excitement, but I could understand her well enough. The men just stood there, regarding the novelty of being ordered about by a Chinese girl.

Peter stepped in. "Good idea! Thank you, An-Ming. Let's go there, my good fellow, lead your horse right in here. Make room everyone, the women on high are waiting."

It was like herding geese, but soon enough Peter and An-Ming had the wagon under the window and the ladder stepped in its bed, and now the top rung was right where it needed to be. The women, however, would have none of it.

"We can't climb down that," the first one said.

"It's quite sturdy," said Peter, who was in the wagon, bracing the ladder.

"You're all under us!" the other woman exclaimed, as if to an idiot. "You'll see everything!"

Peter's whole face went red.

"It's all right, missy," the teamster shouted. "We won't look, will we lads?"

Of course all the men shouted no.

"A likely story!" the first woman yelled, grinning in spite of it.

"It wouldn't be proper," the other one added. "We wouldn't be able to show our faces on the street again." She was the older of the two.

"*Hao ben!*" An-Ming muttered. "They are silly as Hu-Lan! Peter, go help them climb out. Hold their skirts so sinful petticoats and ankles do not show."

Peter stared at her. "Ah . . . Their skirts?"

"Of course. We must get them out."

Peter smiled through his blush. "If you say so."

So Peter went up the ladder, but even that wasn't enough for the women. The first one did try to climb out, but when Peter made a grab at her skirts, he almost tipped her backward into the room.

"*Wa!*" An-Ming exclaimed, stifling a laugh. "Go in and wrap skirts tight. Lift women out window. Finn, hold ladder." Peter saluted and obeyed, and An-Ming fired off a round of Chinese at Wang. He nodded and made his way through the men to clamber onto the wagon and start up the ladder after Peter. Peter figured out how to clinch his arms around the bottom of the skirts and hand the younger woman out to Wang. She shrieked when she saw who it was, then giggled as he carried her down all rolled up in a neat bundle. There was still a bit of ankle and lace peaking out, just enough to brighten up the men, but not enough to soil the lady's honor. There was another great cheer when Wang set her down, and a third when the second was safely on her pins.

Then the teamster cried, "Three cheers for our Chinese boss lady!" and they gave An-Ming a rousing hurrah. She nodded to them, all serious, then slipped a smile at Peter. He grinned back like an idiot.

Mr. Lawson smiled. "In some ways she is just like her mother," he said. "Let's hope she doesn't try to run tonight's meal." His eyes were a bit damp I believe. Then he took another look at An-Ming and frowned. "Where is your bonnet, my dear?" he demanded.

She put on a look of surprise and felt all over the top of her head. "Must have blown off by wind." Her voice was so innocent that none of us were fooled.

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