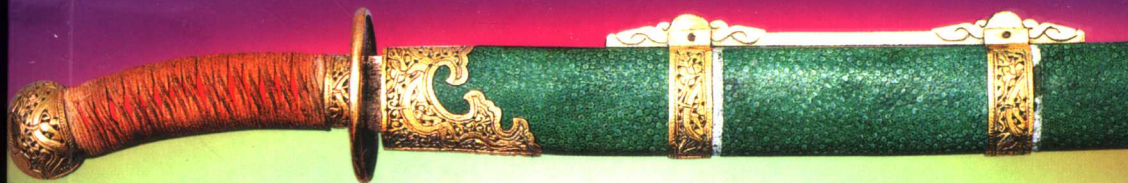


# The Emperor's Bones

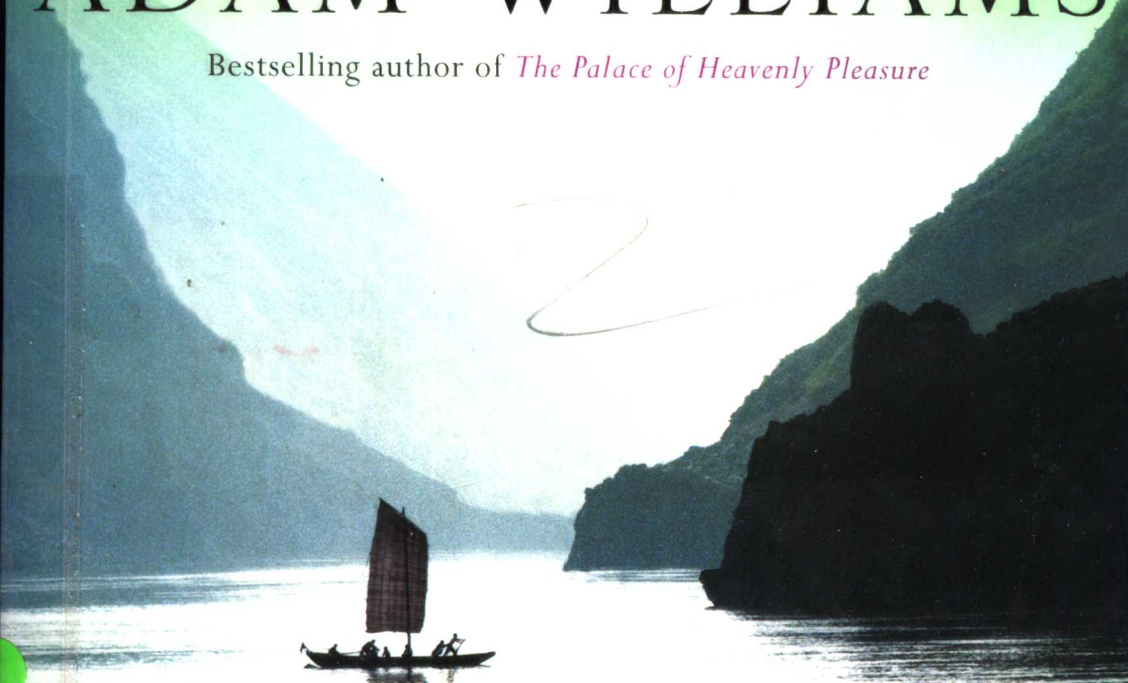
'Full of love and loss  
and guts and gore and  
derring-do . . . this is as good  
as the adventure story gets'

*The Times on The Palace  
of Heavenly Pleasure*



## ADAM WILLIAMS

Bestselling author of *The Palace of Heavenly Pleasure*



ADAM WILLIAMS

*The*  
*Emperor's*  
*Bones*

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I

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*In memory*

*of the Muirs and Newmarches, missionaries and  
railwaymen, who lived through the turbulent early years  
of the last century in North China;*

*of my grandmother, Catherine, who once, like her  
red-headed namesake, browbeat a warlord who had the  
temerity to camp troops on her lawn;*

*of my mother, Anne, and my godmother, Jilly, who  
brightened my childhood with stories of their own  
adventures as they grew up in Tientsin and Chinwangtao  
before the Second World War;*

*of my father, Peter Gordon Williams, a taipan of a Hong  
Kong trading house who wanted to be a writer;*

*And to my wife, Fumei, and children, Alexander and  
Clio, the fifth generation of my family to be living in  
China.*

# The Characters

\* Denotes non-fictional characters

## *Tientsin*

Lei Chuang-hsi ('Old Man Lei') – a Tientsin banker, an old Confucianist

Grandmother Lei – his mother

Lei Tang – his elder son

Yu Fu-hong – daughter of Old Man Yu of Shishan, married to Lei Tang

Lei Ming – his younger son, a returned overseas student, teacher and nationalist

Lei Lan-hua – his daughter

Dr Edward Airton – chief medical officer at the Kailan Mining Administration, a former missionary

Nellie Airton – his wife

Catherine Cabot – her goddaughter

Dr Edmund Airton – Airton's son, a doctor working for the Kailan Mining Administration

George Airton – Airton's younger son, working for the China Railways, champion jockey

Lionel Charters – a commissioner of the China Maritime Customs Service

Jenny Charters – his wife, daughter of Dr and Mrs Airton

Willie Lampsett – Reuters correspondent in Tientsin

Robby Berry – his friend

Andreas von Henning – employee of Wilson & Co. a trading house

Martha Cohen – an American teacher

Douglas Pritchett – a British intelligence agent

## *Shanghai*

'Big Ears Tu'\* and 'Pock-marked Huang'\* – leaders of Green and Red

Gangs respectively

Tommy Hsu – a rich young cotton-mill tycoon and owner of a cinema chain; head of a playboys' militia

Wang Yi – a student activist, Yu Fu-kuei's first husband

### *'North of the Wall'*

#### *MUKDEN AND DAIREN*

Dr and Mrs Gillespie – missionaries in Mukden

Henry Manners – former British intelligence agent, now working for the Japanese

'One-armed Sutton' – English mercenary in charge of Chang Tso-lin's Arsenal

#### *SHISHAN*

Yu Hsin-fu ('Old Man Yu') – a soy-bean tycoon

Dr Richard Brown – missionary

Professor Ralph Niedemeyer – an American paleontologist

### *Tsinan*

Bishop Huber – Catholic missionary

Hsiung – his Taoist friend

### *The Russians*

#### *REDS*

Mikhail Borodin\* – Comintern agent, Lenin's and Stalin's emissary and adviser to Sun Yat-sen

Fanya Borodin\* – his wife

General Galen\* – military adviser to Kuomintang

'Mr Behrens' – a Russian spymaster

Mr Barkowitz – a go-between for the Comintern in Shanghai

#### *WHITES*

Baron Ungern von Sternberg\* – leader of a Cossack army in Mongolia

Colonel Sergei Ilyanovich Kovalevsky (Serge) – Russian soldier down on his luck in Mukden

Oleg Priapin, Samsonov, Ordovitch – officers on the armoured train 'Shantung'

*The Japanese in Manchuria*

General Taro Hideyoshi – head of the Kempeitai, the secret police in the Kwantung army

Colonel Doihara\* – intelligence officer in the Kwantung army

Colonel Machino Takema\* – Chang Tso-lin's military adviser

Tadeki Honjo – manager of the Southern Manchurian Railway (SMR) in Shishan

Captain Fuzumi – commander of the SMR garrison in Shishan

*The Nationalists (Kuomintang) in Canton*

Dr Sun Yat-sen\* – leader of the Nationalists, founder of the Kuomintang Party

Madame Sun Ching-ling\* – his wife

Sun Fo\* – his son, communications minister in KMT government

Liao Chung-kai\* – Dr Sun's vice-president, assassinated 1925

Wang Ching-wei\* – sometime prime minister

Eugene Chen\* – foreign minister

General Chiang Kai-shek\* – director of KMT's Whampoa arsenal, later generalissimo and leader of the Northern Expedition

General Tang Sheng-chi\* – commanding KMT 8th Corps attack on Wuhan

General Chien Chung\* – commanding 6th Corps attack on Nanking

General Pai Chung-hsi\* – commander of army investing Shanghai

General T. K. Wang\* – commander of Nationalist troops attacking Hsuehchow

Colonel Loong – head of 6th Corps logistics department

John Soo – Oxford graduate and engineer attached to Whampoa arsenal

*The Chinese Communist Party (CCP)*

Li Ta-chao\* – founder of CCP

Chen Tu-hsiu\* – formal leader of CCP

Chou En-lai\* – deputy commander of Whampoa arsenal under United Front with KMT

Li Li-san,\* Mao Tse-tung\* – young CCP leaders

Comrade Li – Labour leader and CCP activist in Shanghai

Chin Hong-chi – young CCP activist in Shanghai

*The Warlords*

*FENGtian CLIQUE (MANCHURIA)*

Marshal Chang Tso-lin\* – warlord of Manchuria, ‘The Tiger of the North’

General Chang Hsueh-liang\* – ‘The Young Marshal’, his son and heir

General Chang Tsung-chang\* – ‘The Dog General’, Chang’s subordinate, later notorious warlord of Shantung

Wang Yung-chiang\* – Chang Tso-lin’s prime minister

General Kuo Sung-lien\* – one of Chang’s senior generals, who betrayed him in 1925

General Lin Fu-po – a minor Manchurian warlord, ruling in Shishan

Yu Fu-cheng – Lin Fu-po’s chief minister in Shishan, son of Yu Hsin-fu, brother of Yu Fu-kuei

Colonel Yen – commander of General Lin’s regiment

*CHIHLI CLIQUE (CENTRAL AND NORTHERN CHINA)*

Marshal Wu Pei-fu\* – warlord, head of Chihli clique

Lieutenant Ti Jen-hsing – an officer in Wu’s army, who later changes sides and joins Shishan forces

*ANLI CLIQUE (EASTERN CHINA PROVINCES)*

General Sun Chuang-fang\* – warlord of Kiangsu, Chekiang, Kiangsi and Shanghai

Major Yang Yi-liang – officer in Sun’s counter-intelligence arm in Shanghai

Yu Fu-kuei – his mistress, daughter of Yu Hsin-fu of Shishan

*NORTHWESTERN WARLORDS*

General Feng Yu-hsiang\* – ‘The Christian general’, warlord of Shensi

General Yan Hsi-shan\* – warlord of Shansi

*SOUTHERN WARLORDS*

General Chen Chiung-ming\* – southern warlord threatening Canton



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PROLOGUE  
*Green Thoughts in  
Green Shade*

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## *Catherine, 1917*

An English nurse was napping in the sunshine, her head resting on the root of a silver birch tree. Her wide skirt and apron, emblazoned with the red cross, billowed over the bed of bluebells and foxgloves like Ophelia's kirtle in the Millais painting. The tresses of auburn hair slipping from her scarf added a touch of untidy colour, which would have been attractive to a knight of the Pre-Raphaelite school, had one happened to stumble on the scene. As it was she was unobserved. She had come here to escape the bickering of nurses and orderlies with little work to do. The glade hummed with the natural sounds of a continental European summer.

On her lap were letters from her mother – old letters, since the postal service, like the railways, had been in paralysis since the February Revolution that had toppled the Tsar and brought the fighting on the Galician front to a standstill. In the distance a solitary gun was firing (even now some soldiers heeded Kerensky's call to arms) and once or twice in the last hour the whine and crump of enemy projectiles had exploded in the trench lines, but these tired sounds of half-hearted human hostility seemed inconsequential in the timeless music of the forest. It was as if Nature was mocking man and his wars, mimicking the staccato of machine-gun fire with the elegant tap-tap-tapping of a tiny woodpecker, parodying the wail of shells with the fluting of birds, and substituting for the silent death of the gas clouds the buzzing insect life hazing the surface of the pond.

Catherine let herself relax in the embracing heat and the warm breeze that brushed her cheeks. Above her head the dark leaves rustled against a clear blue sky. Her limbs were heavy with languor. For a while the words she had been reading hovered in her mind:

Darling, *please* forgive me. I really can't BEAR to stay in this city any longer. Life under the so-called 'Provisional Government' is just TOO boring. With my Pyotr away, and the rationing, and the meanness – the VULGARITY of it all – St Petersburg is really no place to be. I will be quite safe with the Dashkovs, who have organised a special train to take us over the border to Sweden. I am *not* abandoning you, my darling, headstrong girl. I really am not. I know that you will look after yourself, my brave Florence Nightingale, and join me in Paris when you can. How long, after all, can this war last? General Romalov says that the front is collapsing, and despite the boastings of that *awful* Kerensky and his VAIN military posturings, I am sure that must be the case. So you WILL certainly be coming home soon, and *as an Englishwoman* I am sure that you will have no problem with travel passes or whatever bit of paper it is that these revolutionists demand nowadays. I know I will see you soon, my darling, and in the meanwhile, can you forgive your foolish mother for her weakness and selfishness? Can you?

'*Sestritsa! Sestritsa!* Sister! Sister! Please don't leave us!'

She heard the agonised voices as if from far away, and even in her sleep she shivered as the familiar nightmare welled from the depths of her unconsciousness. She could not block out the images of white faces and flailing, stretching arms. She felt again the weak fingers pulling at her skirt, and Pavel Alexandrovich behind her, with his spade beard and world-weary frown, standing impatiently by the door of the convent cell that had become a makeshift surgery, beckoning her outside to where ambulance carts loaded with patients were waiting in the snow-speckled courtyard.

She knew she was dreaming. She could feel the sun on her limbs and face, the rough wood of the birch tree under her head. If she could only open her eyes . . .

'Water,' whispered Feodor, the golden-haired boy, the young officer from the 62nd Division, whose stomach had been torn open by shrapnel, and whose intestines two nights before she had held in her hands while Pavel Alexandrovich, exhausted after three days without sleep, had performed another of his surgical miracles. Must she just abandon him? When and where would this retreat end?

'Nurse Cabot, it is time to go,' the doctor was saying.

'Water,' moaned Feodor.

'*Sestritsa, sestritsa,*' pleaded the other patients.

'I'm coming,' she had told Pavel, and a German shell had burst close to the convent walls. The paraffin lamp swung on its hook casting shadows while plaster fell from the ceiling.

'You must come now, Katusha,' said the doctor. 'There is no time to make farewells.' He left the room. She felt the blazing eyes of the patients as she lifted her leather satchel on to her shoulders.

'Water,' pleaded Feodor. His voice was hardly a whisper.

'I can't give you water,' she said. 'You have a stomach wound. Water will kill you.'

'Water. Please.' His blue eyes widened. She saw the dimming pupils, the sign that death was near. 'I'm so – thirsty.'

She heard the ambulance wheels on the cobbles, the screams of whipped horses, the patients' howls of anguish. She felt the scrabbling hands. She made her decision and filled a cup from the pail. 'I shouldn't be doing this,' she said.

'Thank you,' sighed Feodor, as she put the water to his parched lips. She had only intended to wet his mouth but, with surprising strength, he clenched her hands and the contents poured down his throat. There was a beatific smile on his face. 'Oh, Lisabetta,' he whispered. It had not been the first time she had been called by the name of a dying man's sweetheart, and in these last moments she gazed into his blue eyes willing him to live, although she knew it was impossible. For a moment Catherine was indeed Lisabetta, and Feodor became her own lost Nicky. Then, suddenly, his body began to shake, and green bile gushed from his mouth and nose, as she had known it would. She closed the staring eyes. It was as if she had surfaced out of a deep pool. She heard again the moans and cries of the others. '*Sestritsa*, don't leave us.'

'Nurse Cabot, you must come. Now.' Pavel Alexandrovich was back and shouting at her. She knew he had seen what she had done. At this moment she did not care. With an effort she shook away the hands clutching her skirt and ran out of the door into the courtyard.

Into pandemonium. Walking wounded who had not found places in the carts were struggling with the orderlies. Her colleague, Marya, hunched among bags and blankets, was screaming at her to hurry. Leonid, the Tatar driver, hauled her up onto the seat, then cracked

his whip at the horses and the desperate humanity crowding round them. Somehow they made it out of the yard and through the muddy streets to the road where a mixed procession of soldiers, vehicles and refugees was slowly winding its way from the fighting. Catherine leaned over the side of the shaking cart to look behind her. A soldier with a crutch was trying to keep up with their ambulance. His bandage, unrolling behind him, made a white trail on the churned yellow snow. Other men, crawling, were left behind. She heard the fading, pleading cries: '*Sestritsa . . . sestritsa . . .*'

Smoke was rising into the pale blue sky from the burning cottages. Catherine could see Cossacks throwing torches at the thatched roofs. Peasant women ran out of the blazing buildings clutching bundles, babies, chickens.

It was in this confusion that Pavel Alexandrovich had ridden up beside them. 'Nurse Cabot!' His face was angrier than she had ever seen it. 'It won't do. We are healers not murderers.'

She stared in astonishment at his wild, accusing eyes. Marya, frightened, clutched her arm, and Leonid turned his dark face to look at her. What was he talking about? Murderers? Murder was in the air, in the ground, all around them. It was a world of death and destruction. Pavel Alexandrovich was having difficulty controlling his horse, but even as it reared he was shouting: 'You know the regulations. You received training at Princess Golitsin's hospital. How could you give water to a stomach patient? You killed that boy.'

'He was dying, Doctor.'

'Without your assistance he might have lived. This will go in my report.'

'He was already dying!' she screamed. Marya clutched her hand.

'You're no nurse. You're a murderer,' spat Pavel, and Catherine knew that something in him had snapped. She and the other nurses had relied on the austere calm of this magisterial surgeon, the father figure in their little world. No matter the chaos, the horror and confusion, Pavel Alexandrovich had provided a point of order. Now the world was cracking around her.

A shell burst in the field beside them, and for a moment all was fire, flying mud and snow. The cart rocked in the blast, and Leonid had to use all his skill to hold the horses. Around them soldiers were running and leaping for cover. Marya was screaming – but Catherine had eyes only for Pavel Alexandrovich. His mount had

sunk to the ground, yet somehow his body remained in the saddle, but where there had been a contorted, accusing face, now gouts of blood fountained from the stump of his neck. And ringing in her ears was the sound of the last word he had spoken: 'Murderer.'

She woke with a start, and heard the chatter of the forest. She shivered, and wondered why this dream always returned to haunt her. She had seen much, much worse in the months that had followed. That retreat of 1915 had lasted for more than forty days, all the way to Minsk. A whole countryside had been uprooted and many of the fleeing peasants had died of hunger and cold. Why did she not dream of the burn victims, whose skin had hung from their raw bodies like discarded clothes? Or the cholera epidemic, when they had piled bodies like logs because the ground was too frozen to dig a pit? Or the woodshed in Chertoviche where they had stacked the amputated limbs? Or the surreal drive through the cleared-out trenches during the advance of 1916, when she had stumbled on soldiers in all the contortions of death, the corpse of an officer kneeling against the barbed wire in an attitude of prayer, Russians and Austrians killed in the hand-to-hand fighting, embracing in the mud of the trenches where they had fallen? Why did she not dream of all the other boys who had held her hand and called her by the name of their mother or lover or sister before they died?

Because she had not been accused of murdering them. Oh, it was unfair. If only Pavel Alexandrovich had not been killed she might have been able to explain to him. His death had exonerated her in the eyes of officialdom: Marya and Leonid had not reported what they heard; but Pavel *had* died, and sometimes she thought she would never be free of his accusing stare. His ghost returned to haunt her nightmares.

Especially now. She had had no difficulty sleeping when the war had been fought in earnest. When every hour brought new patients from the front line, there had been no time to think of horror or hardship or anything but the task at hand. When the guns had thundered their loudest, shaking whatever accommodation they had been allotted, be it the straw-covered floor of a rat-infested stable, or a four-poster bed in a commandeered mansion (she had experienced both in her time and everything in between), then she had slipped into dreamless oblivion, waking refreshed to take on another day.

The revolution had changed all that. Now that the front was



quiet, it was impossible to sleep at all – even in a beautiful glade like this, which recalled the world before the war, the dream *dacha* she and Marya had fantasized about so many times, while shells whined and men slaughtered each other less than a quarter of a verst away. This unnatural peace had released every nightmare she had bottled up for two years.

It was not only that. The war had given meaning to her life. For the first time in her peripatetic existence she had found a home, a sense of belonging – but now she did not know this army any more. Only yesterday she and Marya had passed a group of soldiers on the road. They had been drunk, and when they saw the two nurses they had stopped, and one had made an obscene gesture. The others had laughed, and Marya whipped the horses on. Mercifully the men had not followed, although a tall, bearded brute, had staggered after them for a few paces, yelling, ‘Aren’t we good enough for you aristocrat bitches? You can’t put on airs with us any more, you know. We’re free men now.’

The abdication of the Tsar had shocked them all, but she attributed the beginning of the rot to the ridiculous instruction, which had come down from St Petersburg, that officers should no longer use the familiar ‘thou’ when ordering their men. Then rabble-rousers had arrived from the cities – the Bolsheviki – who made speeches telling the men not to fight any more, not an aristocrat’s war, they declared, and the officers had done nothing.

Two years before, when Catherine had arrived at the front, there had been camaraderie and a cause. She had believed there was nobody nobler or more magnificent than the peasant soldiers with their simple faith in the Tsar and Mother Russia, no hardship they would not undertake. They could be defeated, as in 1915, but not broken. She had tended several of these heroes, and been amazed by their uncomplaining fortitude. One bayoneted man had walked two versts holding his guts in his hands, then waited his turn in the queue until an orderly had noticed the seriousness of his hurt.

In the old days it had been an honour to serve them. A privilege. She was an Englishwoman, a foreigner, but they had treated her as one of their own, calling her *Rizhi Angelochek*, the Little Red Angel, because of the colour of her hair and – they added – the warmth of her heart. She in turn would have done anything for them. They had been her people.