

Opening extract from  
**Blue Lantern**

Written by  
**Gill Hogg**

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# 1

At nearly nine pm Brodie took a last look at his uniform in the mirror: freshly ironed khaki shirt and trousers, Sam Browne belt polished and sitting comfortably, holstered Smith & Wesson 38 on his right hip; on his shoulder-taps the silver, oak-leaved pips of a commissioned officer. He adjusted his black peaked cap squarely.

Brodie left his quarters in the station, a small bed-sitting room, and hurried downstairs, patting his pockets as he went, making sure he had everything: notebook, pencil, keys, wallet with ID. When he came out of the building into the station yard, the Land Rover of his patrol was parked under the lights at the gate, the engine running. The sergeant standing by the vehicle saluted.

“All ready, sir.”

The men were fitted snugly inside the cab. Brodie looked at his watch.

“Time for an inspection, Sergeant.”

Sergeant Lam shouted. The Cantonese phrase was incomprehensible to Brodie. The men tumbled out of the vehicle agilely, ran inside the station, and lined up in a bare room by the stairs, mute. Brodie drew his gaze across faces cast in bronze. He examined the revolver of one of the constables; like all their weapons and uniforms it was spotless. The only purpose of the inspection was to satisfy these serious men that he was aware of their excellence.

“Very good, Sergeant. Let’s go.”

Brodie walked outside, while the rest ran silently for their places. He climbed into the front seat. A nod to the driver and

they began to move. The driver would follow a set route unless ordered otherwise. Brodie tuned the radio, called control, and heard an all-clear report from the returning patrol. Then he gave his attention to the sprawling street stalls and markets which rippled with life in the cool darkness; excited tourists and rowdy servicemen. His patrol would penetrate the night-town where the servicemen drank and womanised around Hankow and Haiphong Roads; and the Chinese markets, and resettlement areas south of Boundary Street in Shek Kip Mei. Brodie's brief was to keep order in the streets. If necessary the patrol would attend car accidents, stop violent arguments, move harassing beggars, and arrest thieves, street gamblers and con-men. He had found that the squad managed their duties almost without reference to him. The average age of the constables was in the late thirties, and their length of service around a dozen to twenty years; they knew the streets, while Brodie felt that he was at the mercy of the vagaries of that unpredictable monster, the crowd. Before every duty he asked himself, *What's going to happen tonight?*

Brodie's formal duties as a leader were light. Sergeant Lam looked after the men and the vehicle. Brodie had to attend on patrol, write a report, and if there were arrests, and charges to be brought, prepare the charges, and later give evidence in court. At times, he had asked Sergeant Lam about the health and happiness of the men. In his early enthusiasm of nine months ago, he had recorded their names, and details of their careers in a notebook. But the sergeant had never revealed that any of the constables had a problem which might require the interest of Inspector Brodie. The men were as distant and self-contained as they were immaculately presented. Brodie couldn't have more than the most elementary conversation with them in Cantonese. If he ever knew all their names, he had now forgotten most of them. To gesticulate, with a mixture of Cantonese and English jargon was sufficient communication for working purposes.

Brodie expected to be with the squad for probably another six months before he was posted elsewhere; and his reputation as an effective inspector rested, he had come to realise, on being courteous to Sergeant Lam, and accepting the Sergeant's guidance. Lam, wiry, ageless, with a smooth face eroded in fissures like a river stone, had created Bravo Two, and he alone could ensure that Brodie's orders were interpreted in a way best fitted to make them work. Brodie was aware that he did not control Sergeant Lam or his men; they largely controlled him.

Nathan Road was a very long road; it ran for miles in a passably straight line from the hills fringing the New Territories, to the golden mile of tourism near the docks on the tip of the Kowloon Peninsula. Brodie's Land Rover jerked forward fitfully in heavy traffic, heading toward that bright glow. They moved slowly into the Tsim Sha Tsui district where the hotels, restaurants, massage parlours and dance halls were soaked in throbbing light. Yanks on rest and recreation from the US Seventh Fleet roamed with British squaddies on leave from Chinese border posts. Crowds swelled on the footpaths, taxis honked impatiently, and rickshaws swerved alarmingly near to Brodie's vehicle. Streamers fluttered weakly in the heavy air, and the muffled thump of rock music inside the clubs and bars, lodged in the head like blows.

The call came in a few grated words on the radio, "Bravo Two, incident, Taksin Lane."

Sergeant Lam gave the driver directions, and they drove a block before scrambling out of the Land Rover; they plunged down an alley, shoving people aside. Brodie broke through a wall of onlookers into a space where a US Marine was fighting a British soldier.

"Police, break it up!" he yelled, trying to pull them apart.

Both fighters were running with blood and sweat, slavering and groaning; they were big men, heavier than Brodie, menacing

in the haze of shadows and flashing signs. The servicemen in the crowd, American and British, were enjoying the entertainment. The arm of one fighter swung at Brodie, who struck back with his stick. The man hesitated, wincing at a blow on his forearm. Brodie grabbed a handful of uniform on the shoulder of each contestant, and held them apart for a moment.

“You’re under arrest!”

The squaddie wrenched away, “Fuckin’ copper!”

Brodie heard a mechanical snick, a slight sound but audible against the background noise, and as ominous as the crack of a rifle. The soldier had a switchblade in his hand. He crouched, swaying drunkenly. The blade circled, sparkling.

“Come an’ get it, pig!”

Brodie closed quickly, swiping his stick toward the knife. He had no time for fear, only the awareness of his own vulnerability. The soldier grasped Brodie’s free arm, clamped it. Brodie dropped his stick, and thrust away the face which loomed before him, reeking of beer and digestion. The knife swung in a wide arc, and the point slashed across Brodie’s shirt-front at chest level.

A constable, a slight figure, disregarded the blade, and with a howl, hurled himself on the squaddie, ramming the barrel of his revolver up the squaddie’s nose. The three of them were stilled for a second in a tableau of violence. The squaddie’s clouded brain must have interpreted the constable’s move as a certain intention to fire, and he dropped the knife.

Brodie disengaged himself, and rubbed his forearm across his wet forehead. He drew his own revolver. “Bloody hell! Cuff them and get them out!”

His men secured the fighters. The engagement had lasted perhaps a minute, and he had visited the edge of being. The constable who saved Brodie had been cut deeply in the belly, and was on his knees. Brodie noticed for the first time that his own chest was wet with blood. The captives were herded down the

alley, and two constables carried their wounded comrade. The watching servicemen snarled abuse. Hoarse with outrage, Brodie turned on the nearest of them. The squaddie's shaven head rose neck-less from his shoulders.

"I'll blow the shit out of you!" he shouted, jabbing the 38 against the soldier's gut.

The soldier's reckless grin froze, and he shied away.

At the roadside, Sergeant Lam radioed for an ambulance, and a van for the prisoners. The squad could soon hear the approaching siren.

Brodie shook the limp hand of the wounded constable. "Thanks for what you did. It was very brave."

Even with the benefit of a Cantonese translation from Sergeant Lam, the man, in pain, received the words without a sign; but his friends had toothy grins of appreciation.

Stripped to the waist, Brodie lay on his back on a bed in the casualty ward at Queen Elizabeth Hospital. Beside the bed, on a chair, was his bloodstained khaki shirt, Sam Browne belt, and holstered 38, surmounted by his peaked cap. A shy Cantonese nurse worked over him, her eyes reduced to concentrated lines in her shining, oval face. The nurse injected anti-tetanus serum and cleaned the shallow six inch long knife-wound which crossed his chest.

As the nurse worked another person came into his view against the background of the screen curtains; a white-coated Chinese woman or girl with a tag on her lapel which read *Dr Helen Lau* under a line of Chinese characters.

"You've been in the wars, Inspector," she said, holding up his record card.

Brodie was conscious that the cut was not much more than a nasty scratch. He looked down at the raw valley of flesh trailing from one pectoral to the other.

“I’m sorry to trouble you with this.”

Dr Lau examined the wound and became more serious. She moved her lips tentatively before speaking, measuring out the words. “You have a dangerous job. Another fraction of an inch and you could have been killed. Your constable is in the emergency ward, seriously ill.”

She placed a hand against his forehead. “I’m going to give you a local anaesthetic and put some stitches in. You don’t want an ugly scar on your chest.”

While Dr Lau was preparing her instruments – he didn’t actually look at this; it was thankfully below the horizon of his vision – she began to question him quietly in slightly American-accented English.

“Where do you come from, Inspector?”

“Scotland, Glasgow.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Nearly two years.”

“Where do you live?”

“At the Mongkok station.”

These were the doctor-patient questions which must have occupied only a fragment of her mind.

“Yes, it’s on your card. You live in, like a doctor. What made you join the police?”

He was resting on the pillow looking at the ceiling, and gave his standard answer, designed to block further enquiry. “I was persuaded it was a worthwhile job.”

“A worthwhile job, huh?” she commented absently, touching on the one judgemental piece of information without pausing her stitching.

Brodie didn’t really mean *worthwhile*, but it was too complicated to explain. He couldn’t tell whether she was being ironical or agreeing. At that moment, he didn’t care much, because the wild voices from the alley were still shouting inside his head.

She was bending over him now, quite close. He could feel the tug of the threads as she worked, but no pain. He watched her absorbed stare. Her eyes were peat-brown with a golden fleck. The thought that she was attractive was submerged by the shock of the fracas; the brightness of the knife, the passionate courage of the constable.

When she had finished, Dr Lau checked his pulse, examined his eyes for a second time with a needle light, and stepped back to watch the nurse apply the dressing. “You can get dressed and go now. Take it easy for a day or so.”

He could feel the warmth of her hand on his bare shoulder, like a small animal crouching there. He sat up. Her eyes measured his shoulders and chest; it was perhaps the clinical assessment of an expert in anatomy. He had a long body with clearly sculptured muscles; the surface glowed gold-coloured from a light beneath the skin, a contrast to her opaque oriental pallor.

She smiled before she disappeared behind the curtain but did not speak.

Brodie visited the emergency ward when he was dressed. Constable Tan was unconscious. When Brodie got back to the station he changed his shirt, drank half a tumbler of neat Scotch in his room, and spent an hour in the duty office writing notes and filling in forms, reconstructing the ordeal of the brawl. As he completed the papers, he weighed the point of struggling with a drunken soldier in a back-alley thousands of miles from the place they both called home. In the Hong Kong streets, outcomes weren't dependent on common sense or the law, but on the uncertain chemistry of eyeball to eyeball confrontation; a danger point for him and his men. Yet the brawling soldiers would be handed over to the military police, and dealt with by their regiment – a few weeks of detention, or fatigue duty and

cancelled leave, and they would come back to brawl again. Constable Tan would probably still be recovering from his injuries.

His head was beginning to ache when the operator rang and said there was a call for him from the hospital.

“Hullo, is that Inspector Brodie?”

Brodie recognised the voice, and then thought he must be mistaken.

“It’s Dr Lau speaking. Your doctor. From Queen Elizabeth. Checking up to make sure you get an early night.”

Her tone was confident; slightly frivolous. Brodie, astonished, pushed away the pile of papers in front of him, and lay back in the chair, closing his eyes, and focussing on the smooth pronunciation of her precisely chosen English. He hadn’t expected to hear from her again. He hadn’t even thought of the possibility. Before this moment she had been no more than a ripple in the wake of his progress, but he hastened to make it seem that he had taken special notice of her.

“Hey, it’s great of you to call...” was all he could think of to say, but his inflection left no doubt about his pleasure.

“How are you feeling?”

“Suddenly, much better.”

“What are you doing?”

“Finishing my report.”

“Are you sitting in a chilly air-conditioned room?”

“Yes.”

“You should put something warm on.”

“OK.”

“How’s your breathing. No difficulty?”

“None.”

His replies were startled.

“You have mild shock. Get a good night’s sleep. Goodbye.”

The call lasted a few seconds. It was nearly two am! He tried

to remember more about her, the flecked eyes, the distant smile. Now that he thought about it, her smile seemed to him to imply slightly more than a good bedside manner.

Mike Brodie had chosen his seat in the Cantonese class for the view. The class was on the second floor of the Central Government offices on Victoria Island. He could look across the verandah to the HMS Tamar naval base, and the harbour beyond. He ignored the lesson. He was thinking of Helen Lau, whom he had managed to locate on the telephone at the hospital that morning, one of two brief conversational exchanges during the week. She had received his calls as though she expected them, and greeted him like a friend.

“It’s your cop here. Just checking that you’re properly protected,” he had said that morning.

“I’m lucky to have my own protector.”

“I’m lucky to have my own doctor.”

“Are you eating three meals a day?”

“Sure.”

“What do you have for breakfast?”

“Fruit, cereal, bacon and eggs. What about you?”

“I have a Chinese breakfast.”

“What’s that?”

“Some time I’ll show you. How much do you weigh?”

“Thirteen stone seven pounds.”

“You’re a big man,” she laughed.

She said she had to go on a ward round, and cut him off abruptly. He was surely going to meet this Chinese girl or woman again. She had an authoritative air that made him think woman rather than girl. She must have been in her late twenties like himself. He was struck by her poise. He couldn’t imagine a western woman acting on such a thin strand of connection. She

clearly had no thought that she was being presumptuous, or that she might be rebuffed. The idea that he might get to know a Chinese doctor seemed impossible. If she had been a bar-girl or a waitress, he might himself have pursued a meeting.

He rocked on the two back legs of his chair, hands in the pockets of his shorts, a corn-coloured wave of hair hanging over his forehead; his face not yet imprinted with much experience, but slightly hollow around the eyes, uncertain, cautious. His eyes were the colour of mercury.

The other ten members of the class were mimicking their teacher, Benny Wong, mumbling strange additions to their vocabulary. The sea beyond the Tamar base was powdered in the heat; the sails of ocean-going yachts crossed Brodie's line of sight occasionally. He could be barefoot on a deck now, feeling the craft flex and surge.

"Inviting, eh?" Paul Sherwin, sitting next to Brodie in the back row, whispered.

"I'm going to join the yacht club," Brodie replied, more an instant fantasy than a firm intention.

"The Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club? They won't have you. They don't want cops," Sherwin replied from behind his hand.

Don Parker in the front row turned round and frowned at them. Parker was serious about his lessons, and the best Cantonese speaker amongst them.

"Perhaps Mr Brodie can tell us? Faangaau? Benny Wong asked.

In the moment of hesitation, Parker turned round again: "What you were doing, twit!"

"Sleep," Sherwin said out of the corner of his mouth.

"Sleep," Brodie echoed.

To prompt was a convention not an offence. Benny Wong revealed his rabbit teeth good-naturedly, and treated the answer as original. The class sniggered, and settled to consider the

different meanings of strangely similar sounds. Brodie was partly deaf to the finer tonal subtlety of the language, liable to swear when he intended a compliment.

Only one of the class was a female, a government physiotherapist from England. Brodie wondered why the chill-faced young woman had ventured to Hong Kong to practice, and then accepted that her motives could have been as misty as his. The rest of the class were police inspectors, not long out of probation, all of them from Britain. Brodie at twenty-seven, and Parker, were a few years older than the rest. Parker had been an officer in the British army with a short term commission. One of their number had an arts degree from Leeds. Brodie thought the class, Miss Latimer the physiotherapist apart, were fairly representative of the larger class at the Police Training School; physically fit, moderately educated, and not obviously working class or middle class. The kind of people, their selection board had decided who had a *future*, a word used by the selectors, in Brodie's understanding, as though it implied a precise, attainable position.

To Brodie, the interview board in Edinburgh had painted the future as becoming something between an army officer on the frontier of the Empire, and a district officer in the Indian civil service. He would have the status of a commissioned officer, with the opportunity to be a wise authority from the west. He would immediately outrank the legions of Chinese constables who might have served for twenty years. But, as Brodie was now learning, this predicted role was an outdated prospect, made to seem attractive in Edinburgh by the history lessons he had absorbed at school.

He was less clear on the larger question of how he, an orphan brought up by a maiden aunt in Glasgow, came to be sitting in a Cantonese class, thinking about Helen Lau, and about joining the Royal Hong Kong Yacht Club. It may have come down to a simple practical point. Over two years ago, during lunchtime

at his job in a bookshop, in Fraser Place, he had crossed the road to the public library, as he did rather irregularly. He had gone into the newspaper room, and found the *Glasgow Herald* available on the table, open at the public appointments page. The bold advertisement called out to him. The Crown Agents were inviting applications for the Hong Kong Police Force. He soon made the application which started the process, but thinking back to that lunch hour, the fact that he ever saw the advertisement was fraught with chances. The situation had presented itself as the opportunity he was waiting for, the opportunity to 'get away'.

Brodie's Police Training School class was now dispersed, but those members who were on the Cantonese course had greeted each other warmly at being reunited, talked with affection of their brief common past, and chuckled over anecdotes from their schooling. Brodie noticed a certain guardedness. After intense competition at the School, there was a reluctance to show any disenchantment; being able to cope with the life had become an important competitive mark. The first postings of the graduate inspectors were to such diverse jobs that they had led very different lives. Some had gone to border posts; some started with clerical duties at HQ; Sherwin was in charge of an isolated station on Lantau Island; Parker had been selected for Special Branch, rumoured to take only the cream, and especially the budding linguists. Others were in the criminal investigation or narcotics divisions. Brodie's assignment to street patrols in Kowloon was the nearest equivalent to being on the beat.

During the breaks between lessons they leaned over the verandah, screwed up their eyes at the glint of the sea, boasted about the girls that they knew, and drank the vile coffee produced by the floor-boy. Today, one point of agreement emerged between them; the prospects of rapid promotion were limited.

"I can't see any of us getting up the tree very fast," Brodie said.

“They’ve overdone the recruiting in recent years,” Sherwin said.

“At sixteen hundred bucks a month, girlfriends and new suits will be difficult,” Parker said.

“No change left for girls,” somebody added.

“You can hardly pay your bar bills on what we get.”

“Let alone get a car.”

At a point in the conversation when they were all irritated by what could be purchased with their pay, Parker said, “I suppose those who want to, can pick up something on the side.”

Parker might have been more curious about the effect of his remark than its accuracy. Brodie thought that nobody amongst them doubted what *something on the side* meant. The subject of corruption, squeeze as it was called, was one that had crept up on them after graduation. Squeeze might be a mess-room joke in their new posting, or an occasional throwaway comment in a bar; it was like sex to a child approaching puberty – somewhat unbelievable and cloaked in mystery.

“You’re talking balls,” Sherwin said dismissively.

“You’re an idealist, Paul, if you believe it doesn’t happen,” Parker sighed, his thin ginger moustache twitching at the sensitivity he had uncovered.

“Some of the more senior cops seem to have plenty of money,” Brodie said.

“Sure, haven’t you noticed the Lancias and Alfas and Rolexes,” another put in.

“And the open-handed spending in restaurants,” Parker added.

“But it doesn’t necessarily follow that they’re signs of corruption,” Sherwin said.

“It happens,” a voice prophesied.

“I don’t believe it,” Sherwin said, putting his mug on the floor-boy’s tray.

He faced the group with his hands in his pockets, a pale triangular face, a slick of ginger hair; more a sixth-former than a cop with his skinny legs in baggy shorts.

“What do you know?” he challenged. “What do you really *know*? You’ve heard rumours. They come from ignorant cynics who want to think the worst.”

“Proof’s impossible, but everybody knows,” Parker said, circling a hand to include all of them.

Brodie said, “The rumours are always generous, aren’t they? Double my salary. Not an unpleasant thought.”

“Oh, Mike,” Sherwin said with disgust.

Brodie earned enough for his needs, but a girl like Helen Lau would be beyond him. She wasn’t the kind of woman you could dine at a street stall. “I’ve never thought about the implications of accepting a bribe,” he added hastily.

“Well, do you have a price?” Parker asked.

Brodie found the subject intriguing rather than offensive. “I have no idea.”

“I think it’s all a myth and a load of nonsense,” Sherwin persisted. “Sure, there’s always some corruption where there’s police work anywhere. But the kind of institutionalised and systematic extortion that you’re talking about doesn’t happen here.”

“How can you be so positive?” Parker asked.

“Because there’s no evidence, and I have faith in the integrity of the organisation I work for.”

Parker frowned comically. “Integrity?”

The rest of them were silent. They didn’t know what to believe. Always, when the subject was discussed it ended in perplexity and uneasiness; feeling foolish for not knowing; not wanting to admit how attractive the money was; not wanting to moralise. To Brodie, the young inspectors each seemed to be divided in their minds between the attraction of money, and the repulsion of corruption, except Sherwin.

“Let me ask you, Don. Would you take the money?” Sherwin asked.

“Well, I don’t know,” Parker laughed, turning toward the lecture room as the bell sounded. “I haven’t had an offer – yet.”