

The First Class Adventures Of Emerald and Jade
by Mr. Francis Zuccarello

Jade remains enough of a little girl to be captivated and inspired by the beautiful and exotic postage stamps in the many volumes of her grandfather's collection. Emerald, her sister, is thirteen and only a year older, but behaves as if she has put away childish things. These two girls spend a Saturday with their grandparents, Dr. Eben and Esmée Douglass, when a large, manila envelope slips through the mail slot of the front door. The envelope contains a photo of Eben with President Bill Clinton from an event at which Eben was honored for his wartime service. But it is the two cancelled twenty-nine cent stamps, "The Buffalo Soldiers" and "The Ledo Road Commemorative", that launch this African-American family on a courageous quest.

By the spring of 1995, the nation of Tompoc, on the Asian plateau between the Kashmir and East Turkestan, enjoys true independence after decades as a satellite state of the Soviet Union. Esmée and Eben, each with one eye, watch the live broadcast of a dazzling ceremony as the elderly Vincenzo Huan is reinstalled as ruler of Tompoc. The announcer remarks, "To the defiance of people who assign Roman Numerals everywhere, the once king is once again king." Otherwise, the grandparents are each preoccupied - he with his stamps, she with the hem of a fancy gown for Emerald.

Fifty years before, whilst on assignment as a medic along the Ledo Road in the China-Burma-India theatre of World War II, Eben saves the life of Huan, who they call The Cromurrah, or The Eternal One. The Army Air Corps dirigible aboard which Eben is a passenger, goes off course and they touch down in the capital of Tompoc. The royal steward, Lo Polo, discovers a Western doctor is amongst them, which he takes as the work of the divine, and he hurries the young Eben through the long corridors of the palace. He operates on Huan and even gives him a transfusion of his own blood. At no time are their different races an issue.

Eben remains in Tompoc with Huan whilst the king recovers. Huan learns of Eben's philosophy, that a good man has a good hobby, and that his good hobby is stamp collecting. When Huan is well enough for Eben to return to his duties on the Ledo Road in Burma, the King shows his gratitude and gives Eben the most appropriate gift. Imprinted on a sheet of pressed bamboo is the Grand Royal Seal of His Most Serene Highness - elegant, sapphire blue calligraphy in an oval about six inches long.

Eben still possesses the Grand Royal and would never part with it, although it is rare and highly valuable, because Tompoc has been a submerged nation since the end of World War II. Even after independence, outsiders continue to despoil the nation's economic and cultural wealth. Jade has seen the Grand Royal many times, but on this occasion, she asks Eben to show it to her again. He hands her the thick book of stamps from Asia. She opens to it and traces her finger around the calligraphy.

Jade turns the page and see the "Tompoc Telephony" issue that shows a stand-up telephone under a pagoda with pictograms all around. Suddenly, the desk phone in Eben's study rings and President Clinton informs him that he is the new ambassador to Tompoc. Immediately, the Doctor, his wife and two granddaughters are on a flight to Asia.

Back at Eben's desk, Jade looks at a book that features international cars. She see the "Zhil" issue, CCCP: 6 rubles.

When they arrive in the capital city of Tompoc, the current royal steward Hu Polo greets them and escorts them back to the palace. From the window of the royal limousine - a black, boxy, Soviet-era Zhil - Eben and his family see workmen raise a new sign, "Eben Douglass Medical Center" over a stone inscription, "Joseph V. Stalin People's Hospital."

Lo Polo presents Eben and his family at the court of Huan, who sits upon the throne of Yeti fur. The ladies, young and not so young, curtsy to the king, who takes Eben by surprise and shakes his hand. Huan reminds him that his people call him the Eternal One, and that his friendship with Eben is eternal as well.

In private, that night, at the request of Huan, Eben returns the Grand Royal to the King. The freedom of Tompoc remains at the mercy of their former occupiers and he must hand the priceless Grand Royal over to them as well as sign certain covenants that formalize his people's vassalage. Eben, once trusted to save Huan's life, is now called upon to save the life of Huan's nation.

Jade takes the Soviet Union volume from Eben's bookshelf. The pages flutter by until she stops at "Espionage Commemoratives." She sees the portrait of a dark haired, bright eyed beauty: Nikolasa Ulyanova Khodzhayev, 1958-1990, 90 rubles.

She also grabs an album of United States stamps and opens it to a commemorative issue, "Two Decades Of The Twin Festival, Twinsburgh, Nebraska": 22 cents.

After a day of touring the capital, Emerald, Jade, Esmée and Eben return to the palace. They walk the long, dark, unadorned halls, which Eben remembers were once decorated with precious metals and stones and fabrics, bright with torches. Huan informs him that every heirloom or legacy was looted from the palace after the war. He will show him the only royal treasure that remains: his twin teenage grandsons, Heelun and Heejun, each a crown prince. They also meet Nikolasa, the boys' tutor.

Jade flips open a collection book to original World War II era issues. She sees the stamp, "The Army Medical Corps" 3 cents: an army medic holds a bottle of blood over the body of a wounded soldier.

At dinner, which Esmée is pleased to see does not feature monkey's brains, Eben tells the tale of his first trip to Tompoc. Together he, Emerald and Jade teach Heelun and Heejun the history of the Ledo Road. Although without its construction, the United States would not defeat Japan, it is an example of terrible racism. African-Americans did not serve as soldiers but as the workers to build the road, with such a high cost in lives that its nickname is "a man a mile."

The dinner conversation does not remain completely serious, as the girls teach the boys the trick to remember how to spell dessert. There are two S's because you always want two desserts.

Afterwards, Nikolasa orders the treacherous guards to take everyone prisoner. She will keep the grandsons hostage until after Huan addresses his congress and instructs them to approve all the treaties.

Jade spots a stamp in one of the collections, "President Wilson Announces The Fourteen Points" in an address to a joint session of the U. S. Congress.

The next day, Eben and his family accompany Huan to the congressional hall. The Doctor advises the King to give a very, very long speech. Huan's speech is broadcast over the radio to the nation, and Nikolasa tunes in. Unknown to her, the family speeds back to the palace in the Zhil limousine.

The car smashes through the gates and up the steps and through the doors into the palace. The car speeds through the wide, dark halls, spins around the throne room and bursts into the quarters where Nikolasa holds the two princes.

The guards run off in panic and after some offensive driving, Eben disarms Nikolasa. Heelun and Heejun leap into the limousine which barrels back through the halls and out of the palace. Huan continues his lengthy speech.

They arrive in the hall of congress, whereupon the King knows that his grandsons are safe. He urges his people to reject the treaties, to preserve their freedom and their heritage.

Back in the Douglass home, Esmée hems another gown, this time for Jade. It turns out that both girls will attend the same formal dance, and each will have a crown prince escort.

Tompoc issues a new stamp, which features Emerald and Jade, Heelun and Heejun: 4 cents, Postage Due.