

A Liberty Lane Mystery

"Rich period atmosphere and fast-moving action"
PUBLISHERS WEEKLY Starred Review of
When the Devil Drives

KEEPING BAD COMPANY

GILLIAN LINSCOTT writing as

CARO PEACOCK

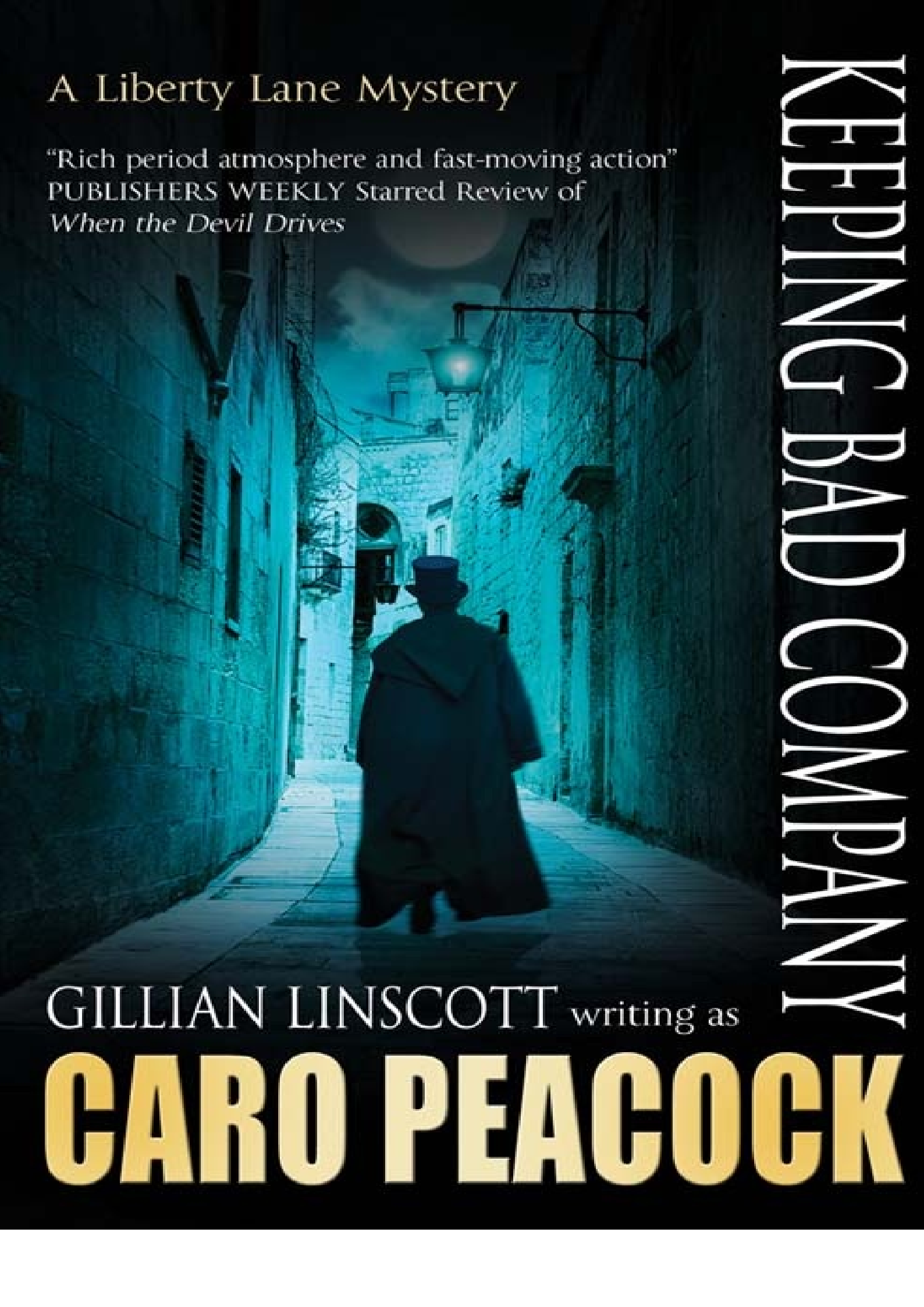


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DEATH AT DAWN
(USA: *A FOREIGN AFFAIR*)

DEATH OF A DANCER
(USA: *A DANGEROUS AFFAIR*)

A CORPSE IN SHINING ARMOUR
(USA: *A FAMILY AFFAIR*)

WHEN THE DEVIL DRIVES *

KEEPING BAD COMPANY *

** available from Severn House*

KEEPING BAD COMPANY

A Liberty Lane Mystery

Gillian Linscott

Writing as

Caro Peacock



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A footman refilled our champagne glasses so smoothly that the gentleman talking to me didn't pause in the story he was telling about a certain minister on a recent visit to Paris. The gentleman was keeping his voice low because the minister in question was at the other end of the room, in a group around a minor royal. Half the cabinet were present, in court dress of tailcoats, breeches, silk stockings and buckled shoes. It was very much a 'decorations will be worn' occasion, so the men's chests blazed with orders from all over the globe, gilded, jewelled and enamelled. It struck me as a pity that by the time a man had earned the right to wear silk stockings and jewels, he was usually well past the age when he might look dashing in them. There were exceptions, of course, like that rising politician, Mr Benjamin Disraeli. He was in the group with the minor royal, doing most of the talking as usual. His calves were svelte in silk, his black curls flowing, waistcoat ornamented with some multicoloured honour he must have managed to acquire on his honeymoon European travels. On the edge of the group his wife, Mary Anne, in ill-advised frills of purple silk, watched him adoringly.

Mr Disraeli had greeted me soon after I arrived, in company with a young gentleman from the Foreign Office.

'What a pleasant surprise to see you, Miss Lane. May I say that you're looking particularly well this evening?'

The second part of his remarks might have been true. I'd taken trouble for the occasion and was wearing my new amethyst-coloured silk with the low neckline and puffed sleeves, my favourite dragonfly ornament in my hair. The first part was untrue. It wasn't a surprise to see me because he had been partly responsible for my attendance at this diplomatic gathering. I sometimes carried out work of a confidential nature for the Foreign Office. Although Mr Disraeli was too ambitious and mercurial to be much trusted by the authorities, he was known to be an acquaintance of mine so was occasionally used to see whether I'd undertake particular assignments.

On this occasion, the task was straightforward and I'd accepted. The gentleman to whom I was listening was, to put things bluntly, a spy in the pay of a foreign embassy. He'd been involved in a nasty piece of work that had caused the suicide of a British diplomat. All I had to do was to slip a particular fact into our conversation that would make clear I was aware of it and see how he reacted. In return for my report, I could expect ten guineas, the knowledge that I'd helped expose a traitor and the possible gratitude of the Foreign Office. My target was near the climax of his grubby story. He leaned towards me confidentially, giving himself the chance to look straight down my bodice. I resisted the temptation to swing my elbow into his ribs. The question I was going to ask him as soon as his story finished would be a much more effective weapon. Only, I never managed to ask it.

I glanced over his shoulder across the room and saw a young gentleman break away from a group of people and come striding towards us, frowning. The sense of urgency about him made me wonder what my employers had, for some reason, changed their minds at the last minute. Nothing distinguished him from all the other young diplomats, except possibly that his face was redder than most. He was in his mid twenties, slightly plump and wore a decoration with crossed swords that looked as if it might be Indian. Something about him seemed familiar. I searched my memory, wondering where I'd met him before and what in the world I might have done to annoy him so much. As he came nearer it was worse than a frown, positively a glare, and directed straight at me. My target must have sensed he was losing my attention because he raised his voice.

‘. . . then, would you believe, the chambermaid said to him . . .’

~~Then he gasped and pitched forward, nearly knocking me over. That was because the glaring man had cannoned straight into him, catching him with all his weight on the shoulder. My target was gulping indignant noises. Apologies were in order, but the glaring man didn't make them. He disregarded his victim entirely, looking me full in the face, his eyebrows a black bar.~~

‘Liberty, what do you think you're doing here?’

His voice carried. People were staring. I returned his glare with one of my own.

‘I believe you have the advantage of me, sir.’

Meaning that he was a boor twice over, first for barging then for addressing me by my first name. By now the other gentleman had recovered enough to ask him what the devil he thought he was doing. Again he was ignored.

‘I'm taking you home this instant, young lady.’

I thought the red-faced young man had taken leave of his senses. So did some other gentlemen including my escort for the evening, who were rushing over to protect me. They closed round the young man and tried to hustle him away. He resisted and stood his ground.

‘Kindly don't interfere. This is a private matter.’

‘Insulting a lady isn't a private matter,’ one of the gentlemen said.

‘I'm not insulting her. I'm simply removing her from bad company.’

‘Why should you suppose you can dictate my company?’ I said, furious.

And yet, even as I said it, an impossible thought was taking shape in my mind. It came from his voice and the defiant way he was standing. So perhaps, deep down, I wasn't as surprised by his new words as the gentlemen to whom he spoke them.

‘So if you'll all excuse me, I am taking my sister home.’

My brother, Thomas Fraternity Lane, should have been four and a half thousand miles away and on that first evening I heartily wished that he still were. Which was sad, because for the past seven years the dearest wish of my heart had been to see him again. Seven years ago I'd stood with my father, now dead, on the shore at Gravesend and watched the waving white glint of Tom's handkerchief from the rail of the ship that was carrying him away to India. Tom was fifteen then, I eighteen. Letters from India every six months or so recorded Tom's career as a rising young administrator with the East India Company. Letters from me, slightly more frequently, recorded all the things about my life that I dared tell him without driving him into a frenzy of worry or disapproval. He wasn't due for home leave for several years. By that time, I might even have found a way to tell my only brother that his only sister was earning a living as a private inquiry agent. Or perhaps my life would have changed in such a way that I could tell it glancingly, as something that belonged in the past. His sudden and unexplained presence in London had ended that hope. Within seconds of being reunited, we were fighting as if we were back in the nursery.

Given our surroundings, the fight had to be more decorous than when the weapons were shuttlecocks and toy soldiers. Tom, myself and my escort for the evening, Mr Calloway, took ourselves into the lobby where a few footmen were leaning against the wall, waiting for their masters to come out to their coaches.

'What are you doing here? Why didn't you tell me you were coming home?' I said to Tom.

'I didn't have a chance. In any case, I didn't expect to find my sister practically in the arms of that man with one of the worst reputations in London.'

'I was *not* practically in his arms. Anyway, how do you know?'

'Because one of the men I was with was looking at you both and sniggering about old so and so making another conquest. Conquest! My sister!'

'I can assure you I'm nobody's conquest. If you want to know, it was quite the reverse.'

'I don't want to know. Don't move from here. I'm going to find a hansom.'

'And carry me into it with a sack over my head?'

'If necessary, yes.'

Mr Calloway gave a diplomatic cough. He'd collected my cloak and had it over his arm.

'Mr Lane, may I suggest that we both escort your sister home.'

He had such a reasonable air about him that my angry brother unbarred his eyebrows and lowered his voice.

'May I ask who you are, sir?'

'Malcolm Calloway, of the Foreign Office, at your service. I had the honour to be introduced to Miss Lane by our mutual friends, Sir George and Lady Talbot. She very kindly consented to accompany me to the reception this evening.'

It was the first I knew of George's knighthood. Trust Mr Calloway to be ahead of the Gazette. His explanation left out a lot of things, but it calmed Tom a little.

'But that appalling fellow . . .' Tom said.

'I entirely agree with you, Mr Lane. Unfortunately, my attention was diverted. If I'd known he was inflicting his presence on Miss Lane, I should certainly have taken the action which you so promptly did.'

I tried not to catch Mr Calloway's eye. He knew very well why I was there that evening. Part of my anger with my brother was that he'd made me fail in a professional obligation and, probably, cost me a much-needed ten guineas. My cloak wafted itself round my shoulders without visible assistance from Mr Calloway. His glance to the footman by the door produced a carriage as soon as we stepped out on to the pavement, not a hansom but a hireling two-horse landau with room for the three of us. Mr Calloway handed me in and stood back so that Tom could sit beside me.

'Where shall I tell the driver, Miss Lane?'

More diplomacy. From a past perilous occasion, Mr Calloway was well aware of my address, but wouldn't have improved Tom's mood to know that.

'Abel Yard, off Adam's Mews, Mayfair.'

The landau creaked and rattled over the cobbles. It was mercifully too noisy for conversation but I was aware of Tom beside me, tense as a gun dog. At Abel Yard they both got down to help me out. In the light of the carriage lamps, I could see Tom wrinkling his nose at smells of cows and chickens wafting from the far end of the yard. At the bottom of my stairs I thanked them both, wished them goodnight and closed the door before Tom knew what was happening. I needed time. Now I was recovering from the surprise, my heart was singing out that my brother was back. But there'd be explanations and quarrelling to come, I knew that as surely as I knew the sun would rise. For my part I wanted to know what he'd been doing at a reception in Whitehall when he should have been in Bombay. All next morning I waited in, sure that every carriage going along the mews, every footstep coming into the yard, was my brother's. By then, the desire for explanations had become a simple wish to see him again. When a knock came at the door in the yard, around noon, I practically threw myself down the stairs and flung back the door, ready to fall on his neck. This impetuosity must have surprised the footman who was standing there in a livery jacket of a strange bright brown colour, but he managed to keep his face a professional blank. I composed mine and accepted the card he was holding out to me. It had a gilded deckle edge and informed me in engraved copperplate that Mr Benjamin Disraeli would be 'At Home', at Grosvenor Gate, that afternoon, from half past two until half past four.

I carried it upstairs, puzzling it out. If Mary Anne Disraeli knew of my existence at all, it would be for reasons that would not have made me particularly welcome at her 'At Homes'. So the invitation clearly came from her husband, who must want to speak to me. All too likely, it would be to pass on a message from my employers about my failure the previous evening. Not a pleasant prospect, but I'd have to help for it. The afternoon was mild and sunny so I put on my green-and-blue printed cotton dress and walked the short distance from Abel Yard to Grosvenor Gate. Mary Anne was receiving her guests in the huge upstairs drawing room. The place was a skirmish of colours, gold silk curtains, crimson carpet, chairs and sofas upholstered in yellow damask, the whole riot reflected in tall mirrors with ornate gilt frames. My hostess, in sage-green satin, welcomed me with a vagueness that confirmed my guess about the invitation. I kept apart from the groups of chatterers and waited, sipping tea and turning over the pages of a book of engravings of Italian ruins that had been left open on a piecrust table and, sure enough, Mr Disraeli appeared at my side within minutes. This afternoon he was relatively soberly dressed in blacks and greys, but his waistcoat was figured gold silk.

'I trust you enjoyed the reception last night, Miss Lane.'

His voice and a lift of his eyebrow showed he knew very well that I had not, so I kept quiet and waited.

'It must have been a great pleasure to see your brother again. I'm sure you had a lot to talk about.'

Was he being sarcastic? I glanced at him and realized that for once Mr Disraeli was not thorough.

well informed.

‘There’s always a lot to talk about,’ I said.

‘Quite so. I hope he’s not feeling too nervous about giving evidence to the committee.’

I took a sip of tea, hoping to hide my surprise and probably not succeeding. It was becoming clear that whatever he wanted to talk about, it wasn’t my failure of the evening before.

‘I don’t think Tom’s a nervous man,’ I said.

‘Just as well. It can be an ordeal being questioned by a parliamentary committee, especially in the circumstances.’

I wanted to yelp out: *What committee? What circumstances?* It sounded terribly as if my brother had been recalled from India in disgrace, but surely, at his comparatively junior level, whatever he had done shouldn’t be serious enough to concern a committee of MPs. I hid my anxiety, knowing that you always got more out of Mr Disraeli if you knew a lot already.

‘I hadn’t realized Parliament was so directly concerned with East India Company internal affairs,’ I said.

In fact, it was a strange relationship. The vast concern that some people called John Company had grown, in around two hundred years, from a group of merchant adventurers to an organization with its own army that ran the whole subcontinent of India and much else besides. After a series of scandals, parliament had taken away some of its powers. Not enough of them, according to a lot of people.

‘The McDruggies have had some of their opium shipments confiscated by the Chinese,’ Disraeli said. ‘They’re yelling for compensation and war. When trade’s going well, the last thing they want is Government interference. As soon as they take losses, we’re supposed to sail in and save them.’

McDruggies? I tried not to let him see that I didn’t know what he was talking about.

‘I don’t suppose my brother’s to blame for any of that.’

‘No. He’s had the bad luck to be caught up in this affair on the fringes of it. Strictly speaking, it shouldn’t concern the parliamentary committee. Still, when it comes to one of the Company men probably committing murder, I suppose we have to take a decent interest.’

At this point I might have given in and asked him who’d been murdered and what it had to do with Tom, but Mary Anne had spotted us and come rustling across the room, ringlets bouncing, obviously concerned that her husband had been speaking for too long to one woman.

‘Dearest, the Claverleys want to know about Vienna. Do come and talk to them.’

‘Of course, dearest. You’ll excuse me, Miss Lane. We shall talk further.’

He let himself be rustled away, leaving me with half a cup of cold tea and a head spinning with questions.

I knew Tom must come that evening. I’d made everything in our parlour as ready as I could. A fire of best coal burned in the grate with the kettle on the hob and the teapot standing beside it. A bottle of the dozen of good claret a grateful client had sent me was decanted, the finest cold pie that money could buy standing on the table in case he was hungry. The cat was dozing on our new hearth rug. Mrs Martley, the very picture of respectability, knitted in her chair by the fire. My ex-streets urchin apprentice, Tabby, was on duty in the yard, ready to whistle up as soon as a gentleman appeared. The whistle came at around eight o’clock, just after we’d lit the lamps. I flew downstairs and this time it really was Tom. Before he could say anything I threw my arms round him and hugged him tightly, trying to make up for those seven years of missing him. For all I knew, he was intending to carry on our quarrel from where he’d left off, but for a while at least I wanted to enjoy the sheer wonder of his being back. He hugged me in return, but with some reserve, then followed me upstairs and stood in our parlour like a stranger, holding his hat and gloves in his hand. When I introduced Mr

Martley as my housekeeper he gave her a polite nod of the head and she bobbed a curtsey. I felt like crying for the time lost but took his hat and gloves from him, made him sit in the other chair by the fire, wildly offered tea, claret, pie.

‘I’ll take a glass of claret,’ he said. ‘Our tea tastes fresher because we’re closer to China. When you’re accustomed to tea in the East, you have no taste for what they do with it in England.’

I made a clumsy business of pouring, hiding my dismay. I’d parted from a brave boy who’d been my follower and companion in adventures. I thought of us racing our ponies over logs in the woods, diving from rocks into the sea, daring each other to climb out of our bedroom windows at night and gazing at foxes and badgers under the light of the moon. This young man’s face and figure were rounded, his dark hair sleeked down. He seemed at least five years older than I was, rather than two years younger. When we’d parted, his voice had only just broken and his laugh was still a boy’s. Now he spoke as if tea were a matter of grave policy. I couldn’t tell what to do with this stranger who had returned in my brother’s place. Then, as I handed him his glass, I looked into his eyes and saw Tom hadn’t gone away after all. They were still the fine dark eyes he’d had at fifteen. And, as so many times on our adventures together, the look in them told me that Tom was very worried or scared and was doing all he could to hide it.

I touched my glass to his.

‘To your return.’

‘I’m not sure that it’s worth toasting,’ he said.

Discouraging. I poured a glass for Mrs Martley and handed it to her with a nod and an upward glance that told her to keep her promise: go upstairs and leave me and my brother alone. She went. Tom emptied his glass at two gulps.

‘Liberty, I was very surprised to find you—’

‘Never mind that,’ I said. ‘What’s all this about you and a parliamentary committee and a murder?’ That stopped him in his tracks. He almost dropped the glass.

‘How do you know about that?’

‘It seems to be pretty well common knowledge.’

That was hardly fair to Mr Disraeli, whose knowledge was anything but common but I wasn’t ready to tell Tom about that particular friendship.

‘It was supposed to be a deadly secret,’ Tom said. ‘That was why I couldn’t write and tell you I was coming.’

‘So secret that you attend a Foreign Office reception with half the world there, but can’t tell your sister?’

‘We were ordered to go to the reception. I suppose they wanted to see me and size me up before the formal proceedings.’

‘They being the MPs on this committee?’

A nod.

‘But why do they want to speak to you?’

‘Because I’m a witness. Except I’m not really a witness. There were no witnesses. That’s the confounded thing about it.’

Those dark eyes were full of misery. I refilled our glasses.

‘You’d better tell me about it,’ I said.

THREE

The story Tom told me took us into the early hours of the morning. It ranged the entire distance across India, from Calcutta in the east to Bombay in the west, and then a death just before dawn by some red rocks on a hill. Here it is as he told it.

‘The man who died was named Burton. He was the assistant of a merchant, Alexander McPherson. McPherson runs a company that exports opium from India to China and imports tea from China to Britain. They say he’s well in with the Governor and a lot of the senior men in Calcutta. He used to work for the Company, but then branched out on his own. He’s away trading in Canton half the time. He’s supposed to be as rich as Croesus, built himself a house that’s practically a palace, stuffed with silver plate and jewels. But like the rest of the opium men, he took a bad knock recently when the Chinese confiscated whole shiploads of the stuff. I’ve never worked in Calcutta so all I knew about him was from gossip, until he arrived in Bombay about eight months ago. It still wouldn’t have been a matter of concern of mine, except for the effect it had on the deputy head of my department, a man named Edmund Griffiths.’

Tom’s voice was warm as he said the name, unlike his tone when talking about McPherson.

‘Although he’s senior to me and a lot older, Griffiths and I hit it off as soon as he was transferred from Calcutta to Bombay. You’d like him, Liberty. He reminds me of father. He’s spent most of his life with the Company, mostly as a local magistrate. He never cared much about money or promotion and as far as I can tell he lives on his pay. What he loves is India. He speaks dozens of the languages and dialects and even writes poetry in some of them. I’ve seen him joking on equal terms with a prince and hunkering down in the dust to talk to some old holy man. Of course, a lot of people in the Company don’t care for that sort of thing. They call him “The Mad Griff”. Even before he joined us in Bombay, some of the older men were laughing and gossiping about him. They were wondering why he was being transferred all the way there from Calcutta. Then the story got out: he was being sent pretty well in disgrace because he’d made public threats against McPherson. And I have to tell you, Liberty, if I’d been in Griffiths’s place, I hope I’d have been making threats against the man as well.’

Tom’s eyes blazed and he ran a hand through his carefully combed hair, disordering it. He was beginning to look and sound more like the brother I knew.

‘Why?’ I said.

‘Because the man was little better than a bandit. A long way back, in his magistrate days, Griffiths kept coming across natives who’d been deprived of their little bits of land by McPherson. The method was that he’d advance the farmers small loans, get them into debt then take over their land to grow opium. All legal, so there was nothing Griffiths could do about it, but he says it drove him nearly mad. He’s never been a man to keep his views to himself, so he started trying to kick up a fuss about it, appealing to the Governor and so on. Eventually he realized it was a waste of breath. After all, who was going to worry about the opinions of some obscure employee against a man with McPherson’s money and influence? So for years he kept on with his work and his language studies and tried to forget that the likes of McPherson existed.’

‘So what happened?’

‘The latest trouble in China. You know the Chinese authorities don’t want our opium? They keep trying to ban it, but McPherson and his like bribe the officials and get it in anyway, then just put the price up to cover the bribes. Quite recently, the Chinese have been taking a stronger line. The

confiscated thousands of chests of opium, including a lot of McPherson's, and burned them. McPherson comes rushing back to Calcutta, expecting the Governor to pay compensation and send warships. Well, the Governor's pretty powerful, but he can't do that without the say-so from Westminster.'

'Hence this committee?'

'Yes. Luckily the government won't be rushed into anything, though McPherson and his gang are doing their best. Anyway, to get back to Calcutta. With McPherson rampaging round making so much noise, it stirred up all the old feelings in poor Griffiths. He stood up in public, at some dinner another, and told McPherson to his face that he was no better than a pirate and the government shouldn't pay him one single rupee of compensation.'

'Brave.'

'I agree. If I'd been in Calcutta, I hope I'd have said so. Griffiths added for good measure that McPherson was a disgrace to his country and men like him, if they weren't checked, would get the British thrown out of India.'

Tom thumped his fist into his palm, caught up in Griffiths's oratory.

'And the threats?' I said.

'He told McPherson that if he went on cheating Indian farmers out of their land, one of these fine days he'd be found on a lonely road with his throat cut, and serve him damned-well right.'

'You heard all this from gossip?'

'No, I heard it from Griffiths himself. He said the only thing he regretted was that they'd hustled him out of Calcutta before he could say worse.'

'I can see why the Company wanted to put the whole breadth of India between them,' I said. 'But has Mr McPherson been found on a lonely road with his throat cut?'

'No. He's here in London, bursting to give his views to the committee. He and his gang came over on the same ship as I did. But the point is, that's exactly what happened to his assistant, Burton. He was supposed to be meeting McPherson one morning. McPherson found him dead, and his luggage looted.'

'But how does that concern you as a witness, since you were in Bombay all the time? Or Mr Griffiths, come to that?'

'Because Burton wasn't killed in Calcutta. He was killed just outside Bombay. McPherson and his people were honouring us with a visit.'

'Why?'

'McPherson was making his way back to London, to pull strings here. He was travelling by way of Bombay because he wanted to realize some of his assets there, he made no secret of that.'

'Assets?'

'Calling in loans, mainly. Even a fellow as rich as McPherson can't stand the loss of five thousand chests of opium without taking some harm. Then there were jewels. Everybody knew he was bringing some of his collection back to London with him to sell. While he was waiting, he used his spare time in Bombay trying to make things as difficult as he could for poor Griffiths.'

'Did he succeed?'

Tom looked into the fire and sighed.

'Yes. Griffiths is a stoic. He tried not to let it show. But the sight of McPherson parading around as if he owned Bombay made him furious. His health's not good either. He's had warnings from the doctor about his heart and should be leading a quiet life, but with this business going on, he can't rest. I'm sure McPherson knows that.'

‘But would it matter to him what Mr Griffiths thought, if he was so lacking in influence?’

‘You’d have thought not, but there’s something between them that goes a long way back. I don’t think Griffiths has told me the half of it.’

‘What about this Burton who was killed?’

‘I don’t know much about him, except that he was about my age and supposed to be McPherson’s right-hand man. McPherson must have trusted him to have him carry the jewels.’

‘The ones from Calcutta?’

‘No. They came by ship, as you’d expect. These were another collection, from somewhere inland. Nobody seems to know quite where. McPherson’s interests stretch all over the place. Anyway, Burton was bringing them from wherever it was and McPherson rode out on his own in the early morning to meet him. There are some big red rocks by the road that make a good place for an ambush. He found Burton and a native servant dead by the side of the road, with their throats cut. Their luggage had been looted. The other servants had run off.’

‘The jewels were gone?’

‘Some of them. But the most valuable, Burton had carried in a belt under his clothes. They were still there.’

‘Were you or Mr Griffiths present when any of this happened?’

‘No, of course we weren’t.’

‘Then I don’t understand how you’re involved.’

‘Because of a diamond hawk,’ Tom said.

I stared at him.

‘Hawk?’

‘Swooping on its prey, head and body set with diamonds, ruby claws, eyes and beak. It’s a brood the size of your hand. I thought it a vulgar thing, but it was supposed to be worth a fortune.’

‘How does that come into it?’

‘It was part of McPherson’s hoard. I found it on Griffiths’s desk.’

The fire shifted in the grate and coals fell on the hearth. I scooped them up without taking my eyes off Tom’s face.

‘It happened two days after Burton was killed,’ he said. ‘Griffiths had asked me to fetch some report from his desk. I moved the papers, looking for the report, and there was the hawk.’

‘What did you do?’

‘Picked it up and took it to Griffiths. Of course, I had no idea that it belonged to McPherson. But Griffiths recognized it. He told me I was to go straight away with him to the Governor and explain exactly what had happened. So that’s what we did.’

‘Did Griffiths have any explanation?’

‘None at all.’

‘How had he recognized it as McPherson’s?’

‘He said it had belonged to a lady he knew.’

‘So what was it doing on his desk?’

‘He said he had no idea.’

‘Did the Governor believe him?’

‘I don’t know. I think he’d have liked to believe him. I don’t think he cared much for McPherson either.’

‘So was there a trial?’

‘No. Officially Burton was murdered and robbed by bandits. But of course the Governor had to see

a report to London. Months later, word comes back that there's going to be a parliamentary committee looking into the affairs of the Company. It's mostly about the opium compensation business, but because of McPherson it's all connected. Griffiths and I were ordered to London.'

A lot of questions were in my head, but Tom looked mortally tired and the loud clock in the nearby workhouse was striking two. Tom told me that he was lodging in a house in the City which the Company owned, but I persuaded him that it would be madness to walk across London at this time in the morning. He consented to eat a slice of the pie and drink a cup of despised English tea, then I lit a candle and showed him through the little doorway into the room that I keep as my own study. It looked cosy by candlelight, with its bookshelves and daybed piled with shawls and cushions. Tom could sleep there. I could see his eyes going round the room, looking for things that would help him understand what sort of person his sister had become. If I'd found him changed in seven years, what might be going through his head about me?

In the morning, I was up before Tom and going quietly downstairs in my riding clothes. As usual my great friend the groom Amos Legge, was waiting for me on horseback at the gate into Abel Yard, holding the reins of my mare Rancie. We had our morning canter in Hyde Park, before the fashionable world was up and about. I told him that my brother was back, but no more than that because I supposed Tom had been talking in confidence. As he helped me down from Rancie, an idea came to me.

'Tom needs exercise. Would you take him riding in the park one day? Not on Rancie, more of a weight-carrier.'

Upstairs, Tom was sitting at breakfast in the parlour, being waited on by an obviously enchanted Mrs Martley. The remains of bacon and eggs on a plate suggested she'd used up most of our weekly supply on him and a smell of toast hung on the warm air. I sat down by the fire in my riding costume and made some for myself from what was left of the loaf.

'There are things we must discuss, Liberty,' Tom said.

My heart sank. That pompous tone was back. I buttered my toast, poured tea and ate and drank with deliberate slowness. Tom passed an impatient hand over his chin.

'I need a shave.'

'You've got too accustomed to having servants,' I said. 'A man won't suddenly appear and do it for you.'

We went upstairs to my study, leaving Mrs Martley clearing up. I sat on the daybed, leaving Tom in the armchair.

'Who's paying for all this?' Tom said.

'My palace here, you mean? I am.'

'From giving music lessons?'

'Only a few, these days. Chiefly, I'm an investigator.'

'Of what?'

'Of anything. I try to solve problems for people. When they can afford it, they pay me.'

'It must stop,' Tom said.

I managed not to say anything, biting my tongue.

'I didn't sleep much,' Tom said. 'I've come to a decision on what to do about you.'

I released my tongue. It was probably bleeding.

'Oh yes?'

'When all this is over, you're coming back to India with me.'

'I am, am I?'

Tom wasn't even looking at me.

~~'I can borrow your fare against my future salary and rent a small bungalow for the two of us. I don't suppose it will be for long because I dare say you'll be married within a year.'~~

'Oh really. Have you anybody particular in mind for me?'

'Nobody in particular, but there are a lot of Company men in their thirties and forties who don't want to go all the way back to England to find a wife. Good, intelligent men, some of them. You'd like them.'

'Should I indeed? Just as well.'

He'd failed entirely to notice my sarcasm and grinned with relief at having got a difficult scene over. The grin faded when I stood up.

'Did it occur to you at any point to consult me about this great plan?'

'You love travelling. You'd like India.'

'I'm sure I should, under other circumstances, but I'm not going to be shipped out with a labret round my neck: "Surplus to requirements. Please marry."'

'Libby, you know very well it's not like that. My responsibility to our parents . . .'

'Your responsibility to our parents is to remember what they taught us about the rights of men and women. That doesn't include trying to tyrannize a sister who is doing perfectly well leading her own life – and is two years older than you.'

I went on in this vein for some time, quite possibly sounding pompous myself. Tom kept trying to interrupt. The noise we made probably carried to Mrs Martley downstairs. Eventually we exhausted ourselves and just stood glaring at each other. The sight of us back in nursery mode again left me quivering between laughter and tears. I sat down on the daybed and held my right hand towards his palm flat, our childhood sign of truce.

'Pax.'

'What you won't see, Liberty—'

'Pax.'

He saw he'd get nothing out of me until he did it, so reluctantly held out his own palm and said the word. I made myself speak in a calm voice.

'Tom, the trouble is that you know very little about the life I lead. It's mostly my fault. I should have told you more, but it's not easy in letters. In any case, it means you're assuming things about me that simply aren't true. I promise you that in the seven years you've been away, I've done nothing that I couldn't have told our mother and father about if they were alive.'

'It's not a matter of what you've done or not done. It's your reputation that's—'

I held my palm out again and went on talking.

'You don't have to take my word for that. There are two people I'd like you to speak to. One of them's our father's old friend, Daniel Suter.'

'I want to call on Suter in any case. I hoped you were going to marry him.'

'We thought we might, for a while. Only he married Jenny and they're two of the happiest people I know. Tell Daniel that he's to answer any questions you care to put to him about me.'

Daniel could tell Tom a lot, including the events that had led me to my unusual trade. A lot, but not everything.

'Then there's another friend. You haven't met him, but he helped our father in the last few days of his life, and he brought Rancie to me. His name's Amos Legge. He's head groom at a livery stables in the Bayswater Road . . .'

Tom seemed about to protest again.

‘. . . and he’s been the best of friends to me. I shall see him tomorrow and tell him that he’s
answer all your questions, only you’d better be prepared for that to take a long time, because he won’t
be hurried. I’ve already told him that you’ll go riding in the park with him.’

That seemed, at last, to silence Tom. I wrote down the addresses of Daniel Suter and Amos
stables, then we went downstairs where Mrs Martley was making an ostentatious noise washing up. So
our voices had carried. She brought Tom his hat and coat and said she was sure we’d be seeing a lot of
him. I went to see Tom to the gates of the yard and told him that he’d find a barber to shave him
somewhere around the Burlington Arcade. As I watched him walk away down the mews, I thought that
he hadn’t replied to Mrs Martley’s remark about seeing a lot of him. We shouldn’t see him again until
he’d spoken to Daniel and Amos. When he’d heard all there was to hear from them, should we see him
at all? I only hoped I hadn’t lost my brother all over again.

The next few days brought no more visits from Tom. The only news of him came from Amos, who had twice taken him riding. I gathered that both rides had been long ones, but it would have been unfair to Amos to press for more details. I tried to distract myself with a case that Tabby and I had been working on for a while, involving a silver coffee pot and a remarkable amount of silliness from a family that should have known better. We concluded it to everybody's reasonable satisfaction and so were five guineas richer. Still no sign of Tom, and I began to wonder if he'd washed his hands of me altogether. Then one evening he appeared as Mrs Martley and I were clearing up the supper things. He looked tired and thinner in the face.

'Griffiths wants me to bring you to see him.'

Here was a surprise. Then I thought I could guess the reason.

'You've been discussing me with him?'

'Yes.'

'And all the things you found out from Daniel Suter and Amos Legge?'

'Yes.'

This time I managed to stop myself flying into a rage. Tom had no business to discuss my affairs with anybody else, but he had no friends or relatives around him to share his problems, so perhaps it was natural to confide in an older man whom he admired. I was sure that I knew the purpose of the proposed visit. Mr Griffiths would support Tom's plan for taking me to India on a husband hunt. Well, I could listen and say a polite no. Also, if I'm honest, I was curious to meet this combative Mr Griffiths.

'When?' I said.

'I'll call for you tomorrow morning at eight o'clock.'

'Isn't that a little early for visiting?'

'He's living out at Richmond. We'll take the stage from St Paul's.'

He drank tea with us, but wouldn't stay the night. He had things to discuss with men from the Company about his appearance before the parliamentary committee. He seemed sad and preoccupied and it went to my heart to know that I could do nothing to help him.

Next morning Tom brought a cab to collect me. The journey to St Paul's was too noisy and the stagecoach too crowded to have any chance for conversation, which was something of a relief. When Tom took off one of his gloves I noticed that the nails were bitten down to the quick, an old habit. When we came to Richmond he handed me down from the coach and gave me an assessing look. There was nothing for him to criticize. I was wearing my grey-and-blue wool dress and a bonnet so sober it was practically Quakerish.

'Well, am I respectable enough to meet your Mr Griffiths?'

He hesitated.

'Liberty, I don't want you to have the wrong impression of him. He may seem eccentric, but I promise you he's as good a hearted man as you could wish to meet.'

'Well then, I shall be respectful of him. More than that I won't promise.'

He looked as if he wanted to say more, but led the way across the green towards a neat brick-burnt cottage with a front garden that was a froth of wallflowers and forget-me-nots.

'Is it his?' I said.

‘I believe he’s rented it.’

~~In living so far out of town, Mr Griffiths must be taking great pains to distance himself from his Company colleagues.~~

We walked up the red brick path and Tom knocked on the door. It was opened at once by an Indian lad wearing a turban, tunic and white trousers. He was clearly expecting us and showed us into a sunlit room overlooking the garden. The man standing to meet us there reminded me of a heron. He was thin and angular, shoulders a little bowed. His face was clean-shaven and as brown as oak bark, with a bony wedge of nose and eyes that were probably grey, but had a bright and lively look that made them seem blue. His hair was bright silver, worn almost collar-length, but neat. He was simply dressed in a grey cutaway coat over a shirt and neckcloth of dazzling whiteness and a plain grey waistcoat.

‘Tom, my boy, it’s good to see you.’

He looked at me and smiled, but waited correctly for Tom to introduce us.

‘Miss Lane, it’s a pleasure to meet you. If you take that chair there, the sun won’t be in your eyes. You’ll join me in a cup of tea?’

His voice was pleasant and cultivated, rather old-fashioned. The tea was brought in by the lad soon as he’d finished speaking. It was served in small cups without milk and had a startlingly fresh taste. As we sipped and made polite conversation – the company on our stagecoach journey, the pleasantness of an English April – I looked round his room and liked it. The architecture was as rustic as you’d expect in a cottage, with great ceiling beams that threatened the head of anyone more than five and a half feet tall, with mostly plain wooden furniture. Books and maps were everywhere and the open desk crowded with papers and pens. I noticed that the inside of our host’s index finger was deeply ink stained and there was an ink spot on his otherwise immaculate shirt cuff.

We finished our tea. Mr Griffiths turned to my brother.

‘Tom, since it is such a very fine day, I’m sure you won’t object to taking yourself off for a walk for half an hour or so, while your sister and I enjoy a *gup*.’

‘Gup?’ I said.

He smiled.

‘It’s what Indians say for gossip. *Gup*, or even *gupgup*. Expressive, don’t you think?’

I glanced at Tom and saw from his face that Mr Griffiths’s more-or-less order to absent himself had come as a surprise to him. Still, since Mr Griffiths’s silver hairs made our being alone together respectable, he could hardly object. Tom gave me a look that told me, as plain as speaking, to behave and allowed himself to be shown out.

‘May I?’

Mr Griffiths was politely waiting for my permission to sit down. When I nodded he sat at the chair by his desk. His long-fingered hand wandered towards one of the pens as if it didn’t like being parted from it. I steeled myself for the likely lecture about what a fine young man my brother was and how it was my duty to go with him to India.

‘You’re fortunate in your brother, Miss Lane. He’s as fine a young man as I’ve ever encountered.’

I sighed mentally, staring down at my gloves. Just as I’d expected.

‘And I hope you won’t resent the fact that he’s told me something about the remarkable life you’ve been leading.’

No use saying that, yes, I did resent it. One of my gloves was developing a split in the seam.

‘I’m afraid he’s worrying a lot about his evidence to the committee. He feels he’s being used as what one might call a witness against me,’ Mr Griffiths said. ‘I’ve told him that all he can do is speak the truth and trust me to deal with the consequences.’

‘Tom will always speak the truth,’ I said, looking him in the face now.

‘Yes. To quote our Bard, he is “as true as truth’s simplicity”. But then, is truth always simple, do you think?’

He was looking at me as if he really wanted an answer. This interview was not going quite the way I’d expected.

‘Yes, I think truth is simple,’ I said. ‘It’s what we do to hide it that makes things complicated.’

He nodded, as if that had confirmed something.

‘You see, Miss Lane, there are things I can’t talk about to Tom.’

‘What kind of things?’

‘Who killed Burton and how that jewel came to be on my desk. Any talk we had about that would be only speculation, and unfair to Tom. His best way out of this is by telling the truth of what he heard and saw, pure and simple. He’s all too ready to do battle on my behalf, and wreck his own future. I don’t want that. But you’re in no danger of having to give evidence to that committee, so I can talk to you.’

He saw the look of surprise on my face and added courteously, ‘If you’ll permit it.’

‘But what can I do?’

I was mainly bowled over with relief that we weren’t talking about Tom’s plans for me.

‘Share some thoughts with me. It’s clear from what your brother says that you have an original way of looking at things.’

‘I’d like to help you if I could, but . . .’

‘I’m not asking you to help clear my name. I don’t care one iota whether my name is cleared or not in the eyes of those rogues and fools who make up public opinion. It’s not a murder trial and the committee can’t hang me. But I do want to understand what happened.’

He waited, looking at me in a deliberately droll way, like a spaniel waiting to be thrown a biscuit. He might have been trying to hide the seriousness of his request so it would be easier for me to refuse.

‘But this all happened with people I don’t know, in a country I don’t know and, I suppose, months ago.’

‘Yes, it’s more than six months since Burton died. Things move slowly between England and India. And yet your brain doesn’t move slowly, does it, Miss Lane? I have a distinct impression that there are things you’d like to ask me.’

‘You told Tom that the diamond hawk belonged to a lady. How did you know that?’

He’d invited questions but this one surprised him. His eyebrows went up.

‘I’d seen a lady wearing it a long time ago.’

‘How long ago?’

‘Twenty years.’

‘May I ask who the lady was?’

‘Her identity is irrelevant to any of this. Twenty years is a long time ago to most people.’

The barrier was polite, but firm. No progress down that path.

‘So how did it come into Mr McPherson’s possession?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Was it one of the jewels his assistant was bringing him?’

‘So we’re led to believe. I believe your brother has told you the sequence of events. He discovered the hawk on my desk. We took it to the Governor. McPherson later identified it as one of the jewels in the collection that Burton would have been carrying.’

His eyes were on me, waiting for the next question. For all his courtly politeness, I had an idea that

he was testing me.

‘Is there any reason to doubt that it was?’ I said.

‘I know of none.’

‘Does it strike you as strange that Mr McPherson should have left his assistant to carry a valuable consignment of jewels by road?’

An emphatic nod.

‘Very strange. Most people thought so.’

‘Shouldn’t they have expected an attack by bandits?’

‘Possibly, yes. Though the roads of India are safer on the whole than you might imagine. That’s one of the achievements of the Company. Still, in a country where wealth is so unequal, men will try to cure their poverty by violent means.’

‘Did Mr Burton have an armed guard?’

‘No. Only half a dozen servants. There was some sense in that. If you were moving something valuable by road, it might be safest not to draw attention to it. Safety in few, rather than safety in numbers.’

‘Only they weren’t safe. Somebody knew about the jewels,’ I said.

From where I was sitting I could see Tom on the garden path. He stood, trying to see into the room to find out if we were still in conversation. Griffiths didn’t notice him. After a while he walked away, presumably to make a few more circuits of the Green.

‘Somebody would have known,’ Griffiths said. ‘I want to explain something about India, if I may, without trespassing on your patience. Every European there, even the most humble, is surrounded by an army of servants. Even his servants have servants. Your *mali*, your gardener, will have a boy to carry the watering cans and that boy will give another boy a few mouthfuls of chapatti to fill the cans for him. Your syce will have three or four boys at least to do the hard work around the horses that is beneath his dignity. The kitchen of even a single man will employ enough people to staff a fair-sized inn in England. Mostly, they’re invisible to Europeans.’

‘Not noticed because there are so many?’

‘Exactly. Fine people in England make an affectation of not noticing their servants but in India it is truly the case. If we even began to think about all those people we depend on for our daily lives we might lose our confidence altogether, and that wouldn’t do, would it.’

‘So you think McPherson’s or Burton’s servants would know about the jewels being transported?’

‘That’s what most people thought, yes. Apart from the poor man killed, the other servants with Burton ran away and were never found. A lot of people concluded they were in league with the robbers.’

‘And yet you’ve come under suspicion for having something to do with it.’

He might well have taken offence, but his openness made me risk it. To my relief he beamed at me like a tutor encouraging a pupil.

‘Is it so surprising? Tom will have told you I threatened McPherson?’

‘Yes. But surely nobody suggests you rode out at the head of a robber band.’

He laughed.

‘Ah, but you see, Miss Lane, I didn’t need to. My influence among the natives is so strong that I only have to crook my finger and they’ll go out and kill whoever I please. It’s all part of the annoyance with me for actually liking the company of the Indians and learning their customs. As far as some people in the Company are concerned, it’s like being in league with the devil.’

‘As bad as that?’

‘Very nearly. There’s fear at the bottom of it, of course. If the Indians realized their power, they could sweep our military bands and our magistrates and our bridge parties off the face of the country more easily than a dog shaking off fleas. In their hearts, the Europeans know that and if they think about it, it scares them.’ Then he seemed to check himself for being too serious and smiled again. ‘Miss Lane, forgive me for being heated. I must keep my rhetoric for this.’ He gestured with his penholder towards a considerable pile of paper on his desk.

‘My pamphlet.’

It looked like a fair-sized book.

‘On McPherson?’

‘On the opium trade. It’s already wrecked the Indian farmers, stupefied tens of thousands of poor addicts and if it goes on like this, it will have us at war with China. All it needs is the order from the government and hundreds of men will die to protect the fortunes of McPherson and his like. I’m hurrying to finish my pamphlet, so that I can publish while the committee’s still sitting. If I do nothing else in my life, I want to wake the country up to what’s being done in our name.’

‘What about your position with the Company?’

‘This is a higher duty than to the Company. As soon as this inquiry’s over and my pamphlet out, I intend to resign my post and go back to India as a private person. I’ll have done what I can and shall spend the rest of the days that are left to me studying.’

Tom was walking down the path now, with a determined air.

‘So you had nothing whatsoever to do with the death of McPherson’s assistant?’ I said.

‘Do you know, you’re the first person in all this who’s actually asked me that outright. The answer’s no. I did not.’

The Indian lad showed Tom into the room.

‘I hope you’ll excuse us, sir,’ he said to Griffiths. ‘The next stage for town leaves in ten minutes and there’s a long wait if we miss it.’

‘Then you must go, with my thanks for allowing me to meet your sister. Miss Lane and I have had the most interesting conversation. You must bring her to see me again very soon.’

There were other passengers in the stage back, so Tom had no chance to ask the question that was obviously burning in his mind: had Mr Griffiths managed to convince me? I avoided his eye and mostly looked out of the window, wondering how much to tell him. Lying to Tom was clearly impossible, but Mr Griffiths had decided not to burden Tom with more speculation about Burton’s death and that seemed a wise course. When we got down at St Paul’s, we walked for a while, looking for a cab.

‘So what did you make of him?’ Tom said.

‘An honest and interesting man.’

He beamed.

‘I’m glad you thought so. What did you talk about?’

‘Life in India.’ And death rather more, but no need to say that.

‘So has he convinced you?’

‘I’m not sure he was trying to convince me.’

‘That’s Griffiths’s way. He doesn’t push you to a conclusion, just gives you some gentle guidance.’

‘And we talked about his pamphlet.’

Tom’s face clouded.

‘You disagree with him?’ I asked.

‘No. I agree with him entirely. Only it’s going to make a lot of trouble.’

‘I think that’s what he wants.’

~~A cab came. When we got down in Adam’s Mews, Tom escorted me to the foot of my staircase but wouldn’t come up.~~

‘I’m supposed to be back at East India House. They get worried if I’m out of their sight for long. They haven’t told me not to talk to Griffiths, but they’d like to.’

‘As bad as that?’

‘They’re all worrying about what I’m going to say to this confounded committee. They know how I hate giving evidence against Griffiths.’

As he turned to go, I said: ‘Do you think Mr Griffiths meant it, about wanting to see me again?’

‘If he says it, he means it.’

‘So we’ll be going again?’

‘If this committee business allows, yes.’

I was surprised how eager I was to see Mr Griffiths again. I’d liked him, but it was more than that. He’d piqued my professional curiosity with a puzzle I couldn’t see how to solve and I knew I couldn’t let it rest.

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