

### CHAPTER THREE

Westenra House was some three miles east of Wolfsbridge, so it would be a bit of a ride. Fortunately, the Sun was out, the air was fresh, and the scenery was most pleasant I have always loved the English countryside. It is, in part, one of the reasons I never returned to live in my home country. Yes, America has its places of beauty, great beauty; but I have always found something soothing about the ancient green fields of England, its hedges and wildflower-ringed walking paths. Traveling along them gives me a refreshing of the spirit very few other places can offer. I felt myself relaxing for the first time in two days and mused that perhaps serving as a mere security agent wouldn't be such a bad thing after all. Not if the weather kept up like this.

Of course, it would have helped if the driver of the small pony-driven trap I was seated upon enjoyed a decent conversation along with the scenery. Instead, I had a taciturn Scot whose main capacity for dialogue seemed to be the word "Urrmmm."

"Lovely day, isn't it?"

"Urrmmm."

"Is it very far to Westenra House?"

"Urrmmm."

"Did you know I am secretly the Tsar of the Russians come to steal all your English women?"

"Urrmmm."

A most scintillating conversationalist, he.

Resigning myself to a silent ride, I leaned back in the seat and resolved to simply enjoy the scenery. Here and there were fresh, grassy pastures dotted with sheep or cows, there, a farmer out in his fields plowing behind an old horse. Pleasant sights. As the cart rounded around a long corner in the road, to my right I glimpsed a small gravel driveway with an ancient gate leading into the fields; a faded wood sign entitling it. *Rutherford Grange* scrawled the dim letters.

"Ah," I said aloud without realizing it, "So that's where Miss Christina lives."

My statement seemed to shake my companion out of his dour silence for the first time. The old Scot turned his head, looked at me, and asked: "Aye? So ye've met the Rutherfords, then?"

"I had the pleasure, yes. At the station."

He blinked. "Aye? Did she howl, then?"

"Howl?" This was the second time I had heard that word used in conjunction with the Rutherfords. "No! Whatever do you mean by that?"

"Nothin', lad," the Scot replied, turning eyes back to the road. "Nothin' at all. Be comin' up on the House in a minute."

And indeed very shortly the cart reached the border of a long, high brick wall, stretching out alongside the road. We traveled beside this for several hundred yards until we reached an open, wrought-iron gate, and the driver guided the pony through it. We entered into a thick clump of trees, which quickly thinned out into a spacious, well-kept garden, and I received my first look at Westenra House.

It was, without doubt, the most pompously dull edifice I have ever seen.

Even after all these years I find it difficult to find the words to describe just how the appearance of Westenra House put me off. The problem did not lie anywhere in its actual physical structure: it was a large, three-story mansion of the most modern design with two extensive wings jutting off from the main hall. If anyone else had been living there it would have been quite attractive. But with the Westenras owning it... well.

Perhaps this will help me explain. I have been in many manor houses over the years, from the richly opulent to the genteelly decrepit. Yet from palatial to worn out, magnificent to falling to shambles, in each there was always an air of individuality, of actually being *lived in*; a sense of familiar comfort. Even with the most conceited, socially-climbing matron you can name, in a house filled with the most expensive furniture and priceless bric-a-brac you can think of, there was always a sense of a place where memories were made and kept precious, where hearts were found and broken and mended again. A sense of home.

Westenra House had none of that.

As said before, it was physically attractive enough, but it had no comfort. It was too cold, too austere. If the young Westenras had been raised there, there would have been no laughter in the halls, no toys on the floor. It was a building meant only to show how rich and important the owners were, how far above they were over all others, a museum to the Westenras' greatness and nothing more. A mausoleum trying to be the Coliseum.

I could tell my silent driver felt it, too, for a veiled look of disgust passed over his face as he gazed at the place. But he said nothing and guided the trap around to the back, then pointed me roughly to a small door. Obviously one of the servants' entrances. I certainly stood highly in Sir Henry's esteem.

"Knock loud," the driver advised me in a mutter. "Someone'll hear ye eventually. Prob'bly Colleen." He gave me a sidelong look. "Ye'll find she's a pretty lass," he added, a brief half-smile twisting his face. Then he was nicking the reins, and I barely had time to grab my bag and leap out before the trap started moving back toward the stables.

"Thank you!" I called, but the driver only replied back with an extra-loud "Urrm." I took that as an "You're welcome." Then I turned towards the door. No sense turning back now. I walked up and rapped the knocker loudly. There was no answer. I knocked again.

*Hmmm*, I thought, *a maid named Colleen*. Suggestive of an Irish lass, young, red-haired and pretty. I had already had the great fortune to meet two extraordinarily beautiful women today and it had put my youthful imagination in a mood for feminine company. Almost unconsciously I was already slicking my hair back, envisioning golden-red hair and eyes as emerald as the fabled Isle. I knocked once more, waiting for the gorgeous creature that would undoubtedly answer.

The door flew open, a cat dashed out and entangled itself between my legs. So surprised was I that I involuntarily stepped back, right on the creature's tail; it yowled and swiped my calf with an extended claw. Now I yowled, made an odd sort of jiggy dance with my feet, slipped on the cat again and fell right down. With an indignant "Mrrrowrr!" the cat dashed off and left me sitting upon my dignity.

A howl of merriment met me. I looked up, reproachfully, to see, not an Irish beauty, but a dark-skinned, square-jawed and unquestionably masculine figure leaning against the doorpost, laughing uproariously.

My greeter was a young East Indian youth about my own age, with quick, intelligent eyes shining with mirth at my predicament. I had to admit he was quite handsome. The unfortunate stereotype of the Indian is that of a wasted, stick-thin figure with ribs showing, dressed in a dirty loincloth and turban. But this man was tall and strapping, broad in shoulder and thick in arm. His rough hands and hard build showed many years of hard labor, but his dark, smooth skin was unblemished by weather, acne or disease. His head was bare, but a neat pointed beard bristled on the tip of his chin. Even his teeth were excellent, better than many Europeans I knew. An air of pride and confidence hung about him, and, if it were not for the uniform that marked him as some sort of servant, one might almost have taken him for the master of the house.

He laughed immoderately at me for quite a while. I could only sit and look at him. It, the laughter that is, seemed to be something he hadn't done in a long time "A—are you all right?" he finally managed to get out at last, between guffaws. "Did you hurt anything?"

"Only my pride," I grumbled, feeling my backside. Grinning, the young Indian reached down and helped me up.

"I'd advise you to stay out of Colleen's way from now on if I were you," he told me. "She has a long memory and doesn't take kindly to people who stumble over her."

"Colleen's the cat?"

"Of course. This is her favorite door. Open it once and, swoosh, she's gone. What were you expecting?" He read the look on my face and laughed again. "Ah, I see. Old Jack's been having one of his little jokes again. No, Colleen's just the kitchen cat—not some Irish lovely."

"Wonderful," I muttered, dusting myself off

"Seriously, may I help you?"

"Harry Dickson. Here to help with security for the conference."

"Oh. So you're one of the detectives, eh?" The young Indian rolled his eyes. "Gods, that conference. For the past two months, Sir Henry's been on nothing but 'conference, conference, conference' and he blows up at the slightest delay. Everyone in the House will get on their knees and

give thanks when that thing's over. I was under the impression it supposed to be some sort of secret, but by now everyone in the whole bloody county knows about it. Anyway, come in. Mr. Appleby's in the kitchen—he'll probably be the one to talk to."

I entered a long, narrow servant's corridor, whitewashed and bare. It ran the entire width of the house, terminating at one end and turning a corner towards the rear. That, I surmised, lead toward the kitchen. "This way," the youth said, and guided me in that direction.

As we strolled, I commented, "Would it be too much to ask whose hospitality it is I'm currently enjoying?"

"My apologies. My name is Kritchna. Darshan Kritchna."

"Harry Dickson," I said again, and we shook hands. "If I may ask, what do you do here?"

Kritchna paused for a moment, then said: "Whatever Sir Henry thinks is beneath the white servants."

"Ah. Well." There seemed to be nothing to add to that, so I changed the subject. "So, how long have you been with Sir Henry? Did you come with him from India?"

"No!" Kritchna burst out so suddenly and sharply it was nearly a shout. For a split-second his dark eyes flashed fire. But just as quickly it was gone. "I mean, no," he said, in a much quieter, calmer voice. "I... came over on a ship about a year and a half ago. Working my way over. I've only been at the House about six months now."

"I see." I frowned. The answer had been a simple enough one, but—perhaps it was merely my overactive detective instincts. Yet for some peculiar reason, I had the unaccountable feeling my companion was holding something back. Why should Kritchna have such a strong reaction to such a simple question? It wasn't anything unusual for officials to bring home particularly favored native servants from India.

I mused, but put the questions to the back of my mind. No use looking for mysteries when there were none. "You speak English very well," I said.

Kritchna nodded absently. "Self-taught, mostly. A little missionary schooling," he muttered, but distantly, as if thinking about something else. But by now we had entered the kitchen, and put any more conversation aside.

The kitchen was, to all appearances, the antithesis of the cold, too-showy exterior of the House. It was smaller than most from similar-sized homes, but was comfortable and warm, like a well-loved family dining area. Utensils and other kitchen paraphernalia hung in a cozily haphazard fashion everywhere—those with a beloved, absent-minded aunt or uncle will know what I mean—and the air was thick with the friendly, clean scents of soap, onions, linen and fresh-baked bread. A flour-haired old woman was bending over a huge pot of spicy-smelling soup. "Where's Mr. Appleby, Mrs. Mulligan?" Kritchna asked her.

The old woman looked up from her stirring and smiled kindly. "Out," she said with a thick Irish accent. "Th' Master called for him. He should be back any moment. Who's this?"

"Fellow named Dickson. Here to help with the conference."

"Oh." She nodded pleasantly at me. "Nice t'meet you, Mr. Dickson. Darshan, Colleen didn't get out when you opened the door, did she?"

Kritchna shrugged, smiling. "Have you ever known her not to?"

"Oh, Darshan!" She tossed the spoon aside with a clatter. "Now I'll have t'go find her. You know how the Master hates to see her wanderin' around the yard. Here, you get over here and stir this soup. I'll be right back." Removing her apron, she toddled out of the kitchen. Unruffledly, Kritchna picked up the spoon and took her place. "Want some soup?" he asked casually.

I was about to decline but a growl from my stomach overruled me. "Yes, please. Thank you."

Kritchna poured a thick, steaming goulash of vegetables and meat into a bowl and shoved it over toward me. "Tea's in the kettle over there," he offered, and I was quick to help myself. The soup was excellent, and my stomach thanked me again and again.

But I also wished to know more about my curious companion. So I attempted to steer him into conversation again: "Are you the only Indian on the staff?" He nodded briefly, his attention on the soup. "Do you like working for Sir Henry?"

He looked up at me wryly. "Would you?" he demanded.

I had to admit he had me there. "No," I admitted.. "To be perfectly frank, I'm only here because my employer wishes it. But if he's that bad, why do you stay?"

"I have my reasons," Kritchna said gruffly. "And, 'to be perfectly frank,' they're not any of your business."

I was properly abashed. "You're right. I apologize. It was rude of me to inquire."

Kritchna sighed deeply and gave me a sheepish smile. "No. Forgive me. Sir Henry doesn't have a monopoly on boorish behavior. Seriously, working around here is fine—as long as you stick with the rest of the servants. They're all right. Mind you, Mr. Appleby can come on a bit strong at times—but you'll see that for yourself. Otherwise, he's quite a decent bloke—a bit too dignified, but fair." He sighed again. "But, as for the Westenras... they're... they're..." He paused, taking a deep breath as if searching for the words. Or trying to erase a bad memory. "I get along well enough with Peter," he said at last. "He's not a bad sort. Weak as anything, and, well, you know, being that he's—"

"What?"

Kritchna seemed to realize he has said too much. "Nothing."

"No, what? If I'm to work here I'd better know something about who I'm working for."

"Well..." Kritchna mused a moment. "All right," he said, "But if you ever tell anyone I told you this, I'll deny it. Understand?" I nodded. "All right. Peter Westenra is... well, he's—" The young servant sighed. "Well, perhaps you've heard he doesn't pay much attention to the women in the village?"

"Not exactly," I admitted, thinking of Christina Rutherford. "But I've heard of something along those lines."

"Ah. Well, let's just say...there are certain *reasons* for his lack of interest. Do you think you understand?"

"Oh," I replied, realizing.

Here was something not in the files, and little wonder. If Peter Westenra was what I was grasping, that revelation would mean scandal and social ruin to a man like Sir Henry. An ordinary family would not be able to live with such a reputation, let alone an arrogant, grasping ass such as Sir Henry. The only counter would be to arrange some sort of a legitimate marriage as a cover—which explained that whole affair Christina Rutherford had mentioned earlier. To hide the embarrassment of his son, Sir Henry had obviously tried to force the boy to 'court' Christina. For whatever reason, it had fallen flat.

I had to admit I wondered why. From all reports, Peter was a smart man, certainly more intelligent than his sire. He would have known the dangers of *not* appearing absolutely normal in Society. If he found himself unable to curb his desires within the bonds of an ordinary, if unwanted marriage, there were ways around such vows. Men and women of "normal" appetites did so all the time. Surely he would have seen the benefits a marriage, even a fake one, would have given him career-wise and socially.

But Kritchna was continuing.

"Obviously, you might think that Sir Henry doesn't get on too well with his younger son. But he also can't just deny him because of the effects it'll have on his position. So they keep him quiet and under wraps, like a sheep." He smiled. "Ironically, everyone in town already knows. About Peter, I mean. But they keep it quiet...not for Sir Henry's sake, but for his. I know it's strange, but the fact is, everybody rather likes him. Far more than they do his father or brother. He's... well, he's *good*. Not at all like the rest of his family. They..."

The young Indian's voice trailed off. Then his jaw clamped smartly shut, as if he had definitely decided not to say something. "Peter'll be at the conference, but he'll be expected to do little but sit and nod and agree with whatever his father or brother says. I have to say I feel a bit sorry for him."

Silently I agreed. I could imagine it—a pale, sickly child, probably quite sensitive, born into a domineering family like the Westenras. And then discovering just why he preferred the company of boys. It must have made for many painful experiences as he was growing up.

Kritchna was looking away, seemingly lost in thought. Then he said: "Look, let's just forget the whole thing. Would you care for more soup?"

"Please," I replied, and about that time Mrs. Mulligan returned, carting a small black-and-white tabby: "There's my Colleen. There's my pretty lass." I swore the feline gave me the most miffed look. I made a mental note to keep away from her in future. Just in case.

We had just finished eating when the door opened and a pudgy, middle-aged man strode in. He was small and balding, with grey hair on the sides, but comported himself with the regality and dignity

of all butlers (which oftentimes was far more than that which their masters possessed). He was holding a thick, black book beneath his arm that I recognized as *The Book of Common Prayer*. “Ah, Darshan, there you are,” he said. “I need to speak with you. It just so happens that late yesterday afternoon, I—oh, hello, young man. And whom might you be?”

I stood. “Harry Dickson, here for the conference.”

“Ah, yes, one of the security men. A moment, young man, and I’ll escort you to the library. Sir Henry will give you your instructions from there. Now, then, Mr. Kritchna—early last night I called you and couldn’t find you for about an hour. Where were you?”

“Oh,” Kritchna squirmed in his chair, “I was doing something for Sir Henry, Mr. Appleby.”

Appleby drew himself up. “I doubt that, for I asked the Master if he had called for you, and he said no. Now, really—where were you? And don’t tell me you were out helping at the stables. I checked there, as well.”

“All right, all right.” Kritchna threw up his hands. “I confess. I snuck into town for an hour and went to the cinema.”

“Darshan!”

“It was a *Little Neddy* picture!”

Appleby groaned and put his hand to his forehead. “Darshan, Darshan, what am I going to do with you? Sneaking off from your duties! And you know how I feel about cinemas! If the Master found out, you would be dismissed at once.”

“Well, if it’s any consolation, the picture wasn’t that good.”

The butler sighed. “It most certainly is not. But I shall deal with you later. Come along, young man, and I’ll take you to the library. But you remain right where you are, Mr. Kritchna—we have a few matters to discuss.”

With a sympathetic glance at Kritchna, I rose from the table. Appleby escorted me out from the servants’ quarters into the House proper.

Now I knew why the kitchen had seemed so homey and comfortable in stark contrast to the cold and ostentatious outside of the House—obviously none of the Westenras ever choose to set foot there. It would be beneath them to enter any room where mere servants dwelt. But out here, where the masters of the house lived, things were different. Everything had been carefully and selectively chosen for the glory of Sir Henry Westenra.

There was not a room I passed that did not have at least one portrait of Sir Henry, or Alexander, looming in majestic bombastity over the rich carpet and mahogany walls. Sneering down upon the peons with stiff-upper-lip superiority. No expense had been spared to give that impression. The furnishings themselves were, naturally, of the most elegant and expensive sort—very beautiful, but bought to show off Sir Henry’s wealth and taste rather than to be actually *used*. The whole interior of Westenra House, outside the kitchen, reeked of the same dead, loveless elegance its exterior did. I

I could not imagine the conference being a success in a place like this. Everyone would be too afraid they’d track mud upon the carpets.

“The library,” Appleby’s said, and opened the door for me.

It was much as I had expected. Filled wall-to-wall with rare and expensive books, not one of which had ever been cracked open. I hated to see such a thing. A library should smell pleasantly of wood pulp, with the pages of each volume yellowing and well-thumbed, used and loved. Not treated as some sort of untouchable museum piece.

Did I say that the books were all uncracked? I stand corrected—for as I watched Appleby crossed the room to a small, obscure shelf where there was a gap between volumes. Carefully and reverently, he replaced his copy of *The Book of Common Prayer*.

“Your employer allows you to use the library?” I asked, rather astounded.

The butler harrumphed at the unexpected question, coughed, turned slightly red. “This small shelf is permitted for the servants’ use, young man. I keep my own books here. If I’m not overstepping my bounds, sir, may I ask—are you a believer?”

“Hm?” I looked at him in puzzlement. Thinking back to my train ride, I inwardly groaned. God, not another Spiritualist, please! “A believer in what?”

The butler held up his book—which I now saw was the Bible. “A believer in the Word, sir; in the Holy Bible and the death and resurrection of Our Lord, the Holy Son of God.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, that! Thank goodness—I thought you were going to say Spiritualism.”

“Spiritualism? Oh, heavens, no, no, no. Total rubbish, and Satanic rubbish at that! I’ll have none of that!”

I smiled. “Well, then, we have something we can agree on—at least in regards to Spiritualism being ‘rubbish. I don’t believe in the Devil, though. I’m not a Christian.’”

“I see, sir.”

“Does that offend you?”

“No, sir; that’s your concern. But I must admit it disappoints me to find so few Christians these days. The Spiritualist obsession in this country...” he shook his head. “The Bible explains the existence of life after death perfectly well! Where is people’s faith?”

I shrugged “Faith is fine, until you actually reach a point where all you’ve heard about faces you. Then you want facts. You want to know your loved one is all right; you don’t want pats on the head and comforting murmurings of ‘have faith.’ Ergo, the popularity of Spiritualism Why do you need faith when you can simply ‘talk’ to your loved one and find out the truth?”

“I suppose,” the butler said. “But I still think it’s evil. The Enemy will use all at his disposal to lure men from the Truth. Spiritualism is just another tool in his arsenal.”

“Perhaps,” I said, not wanting to get into it. I thought of Sir John. “Then again, perhaps if it makes some people happy, then there’s a reason for it.”

“You’re speaking of the Rutherford séance?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“It’s common knowledge, I’m afraid. I must admit, it truly upsets me to see Mrs. Rutherford so wounded. She and her daughter are fine Christian people. Even if Miss Rutherford, if you’ll excuse me for saying so, can be a bit too exuberant at times. But their faith should have been strong enough to see them through this. I’m sorry to see that it is not.” He paused before a door. “But enough of that. Gossiping is a sin, and one I must overcome. Please pardon me. If you’ll wait in here, I’ll fetch Sir Henry.”

“Thank you,” I said and the butler left, leaving me alone with books never read. I glanced around, looking at the titles. As I suspected, no real attempt at ordering had been done; they were simply shoved inside according to size and color of cover. Here was a first edition of *Pickwick Papers*, there a history of South America, there a old, rare of volume of Arronax’s sea life encyclopedias, there *Hamlet*. I found myself reaching up and plucking the books off the shelf at random. If the Westenras would not use their own library, I thought, I would. Glancing up, I saw a large, black, folio-sized volume. There was no title upon the spine. Idly I reached for it, then paused. There was something within the volume I had honestly not expected to see.

A bookmark.

A simple paper bookmark, tucked low down among the pages so you would not have noticed it unless you were right before the volume. Curious, I carefully opened the cover to the title page to read:

*JOURNAL OF CHRISTOPHER WESTENRA*  
(1663-1664)

A journal! I never would have thought a Westenra would have kept one. Then again, I would never have thought a Westenra having the intelligence to be able to write. But I was being cruel. Gently fingering the bookmark, I flicked it open to the pages it marked, somewhere in the middle of the book. It read:

*“I have buried the body under the bridge where no one will think to look for it. As soon as we have a good flood, the grave will be smoothed out. I dare not let anyone know what I have discovered. If it should be learned, I would be the one hanging off the edge of the bridge, not the Rutherford—”*

Voices behind me caused me to slam the book shut and quickly replace it back on the shelf. The door opened and Appleby came in, followed by a very red-faced, very indignant Sir Henry.

“Sir Henry, this is Mr. Dick—” the butler began but Westenra cut him off.

“So, you finally decided to come, eh?” he snorted, glaring at me. “I’m surprised you even had sense to get on the right train. Very well, now that you’re here, you may as well be useful. The rest of the security staff won’t be arriving until tomorrow, so there’s nothing for you to do—so go out to the stables and see if you can lend a hand out there. They always need someone to clean up after the horses. Not what you signed up for, I’m sure, but I never waste men or time. I won’t have any layabouts here. Later, you can get the feel of the place. But whatever you don’t, don’t mess up! This conference is too damned important. I spent months trying to get the wretched French over here, and I won’t have anything spoil it now! Damn them anyway, miserable Frogs and their concerns about what we’re doing to the natives in India. They’re our wogs, not theirs. We’ll do what we like with them. Frogs and Wogs, what a combination, eh?” He glowered at me, as if expecting me to answer. I could swear his mustache actually flapped.

I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of answering. Appleby just looked embarrassed. Instead, I said: “Whatever you like, Sir Henry. And may I ask about my sleeping quarters?”

“Oh,” Westenra shrugged dismissively. “Yes. Well, space is at a premium here with the conference, so most of the arrivals’ aides will be rooming with the servants. I planned to have the security staff sleep out in the stables with the men out there. Since you’re here, I guess we can put you up with our house Indian, what’s his name, Appleby?”

“Kritchna sir, Darshan Kri—”

“Yes, Kratchna. You can sleep with him tonight. Ordinarily, I wouldn’t think of putting any white man with a wog, but you have to make do when you have to. What do you think of that, Mr. Dickson?” He looked at me smugly.

“That would be excellent.” I replied coolly. “I’ve already had the opportunity to meet Mr. Kritchna and would be glad to have him as a roommate.”

Sir Henry looked at me bemusedly. Clearly he had been expecting another answer. Then he shrugged: “Suit yourself. Appleby, show Mr. Dickson to the stables for now. I’m sure they can find something useful for him to do.” He turned to leave.

“Oh, Sir Henry,” I called, “one more thing.”

“What?”

“I look forward to meeting your son Peter. Is he here?”

“Peter?” Sir Henry wheeled about. “Why would anyone want to meet him? Yes, yes, he’ll be here, if he’s not too drunk to walk. But I wouldn’t get too friendly with him.” He gave a wicked smirk. “He might take it the wrong way.” He turned on his heel and stalked out.

I glanced over at Appleby. Once he had been certain his master was no longer in sight, he had leaned against the wall and gave a groan. “Sir, I apologize... it’s just Sir Henry’s way...”

“Never mind, Mr. Appleby,” I said. “Just take me to the stables. After the air in here, horse dung would smell far sweeter.”

After a rather filthy rest of the afternoon, I ate dinner with the rest of the staff in the kitchen. I sat next to Kritchna, and Appleby led the table with great dignity and good manners. To his credit, he forced neither of us to join him and the rest in prayer before and after the meal. Afterwards, most of the staff left for bed or their other duties, while Appleby sat reading his Bible, waiting for any call. Tomorrow, I would learn my exact duties and master the grounds of the House, and so wished to retire early. Kritchna had no other duties, so we both said goodnight and trooped upstairs.

Kritchna’s room was at the very top of the House, just off the attic. At the door, he paused. “Welcome to the Wolfsbridge Savoy,” he said, “Please, make yourself comfortable.” And he opened to the smallest, most wretched garret I had ever been inside.

It was barely bigger than a closet. There were no furnishings for there was no room for them, just a small, rickety bed with a pillow shoved inside. There was barely enough room for one man to walk beside it. One lone window, a porthole really, let in what light there was. And there was precious little of that even in the daytime, for the roof above slanted down, neatly blocking the majority of the view. There weren’t even actual walls, for the builders had simply left the bare wooden skeleton of the timbers showing. Kritchna slipped in, bent under the bed and pulled out a candle. With a match from his pocket, he lit it and then grandly gestured me inside. “The Royal Suite.”

“Good Lord, this is ridiculous,” I exclaimed. “In a house this large, the other servants should get regular rooms, even the tweenies. Why do you get this?”

In reply Kritchna simply ran his hand down the brown pallor of his skin. I bit off an obscenity.

"I'm used to it by now," Kritchna said, starting to pull off his clothes. "Just something else my people have to put up with."

"Oh, for—but, look, Kritchna... Darshan. I don't know you very well, but you're obviously an intelligent, gifted man. Why are you in Service? Surely there's something else better you can be doing rather than this. Working for the Foreign Office as a translator, perhaps, or..."

"As I said, I have my reasons for being here," Kritchna answered, just a little too sharply for me not to take note. "Now, move over, I've got to put this blanket out in the hall."

"Whyever for?"

"Where do you think I'm going to sleep? You get the bed."

"You mean Sir Henry expects you to give up your own bed for me?"

"For a white man, yes."

"Nonsense." I was appalled. "I'm not about to kick you out of your bed just so I can have one. I'll sleep in the hall."

"No, you shan't. If Sir Henry catches you, he'll have both our heads. He may not like you, but you're still white. He expects you to behave as one."

"I'd be ashamed to call myself a white man if I kicked another man out of bed just so I could have it. Look. There's just enough room for the two of us. Why don't we share?"

Kritchna looked skeptical. "Share the bed?"

"Why not? At least that way we both get a bit of mattress."

"If you can call this piece of petrified timber a mattress. I've slept on iron bunks that were softer. But—all right. But you get the side by the wall. If someone comes up here, I have to hit the floor fast."

"Fine," I replied, and quickly changed to my own nightshirt. I crawled in next to Kritchna (the mattress groaning as I did) and he blew out the candle.

"Just like Ishmael and Queequeg, eh?" Kritchna chuckled.

"You've read that?"

"Oh, yes. My grandfather was well-versed in literature, both Eastern and Western. I've read lots of things. Just remember to keep your great white whale to yourself, sahib."

"Ha. No problem there." We turned our backs to each other and closed our eyes.

I couldn't sleep. Which was unusual: for most my life I've been able to sleep anywhere, unfamiliar surroundings or no. Irritably I drew the lone blanket up closer. I felt cold. But no matter how tight I pulled, no matter how I curled up my body to conserve heat, I could not get warm. And this on a summer night that would ordinarily make me perspire. Further, I was starting at every sound: the gentle whisper of bat wings over the roof, the creaking of settling floorboards, the hoot of an owl. Finally, I jerked up as the sound of tiny, regular pattering sounded on the tiles above us. *Pat-pat-pat-pat-pat-pat-pat*. It traveled quickly down the slope of the roof, then up, then back down again. A rat? I wondered. Then I heard a piping little mew.

"It's Colleen," Kritchna murmured sleepily next to me. "She climbs upon the roof at nights. You get used to it."

"Mmm," I mumbled, slipping back down. Mentally I admonished myself. It must have been all the talk of Spiritualism earlier, I thought. Playing games with my subconscious, making me jump at every little sound as if afraid a Spirit might jump out and seize me. Foolish. You know better than that, Dickson.

Above, Colleen continued with her contented mewling. *Enjoy yourself, my girl*, I thought and started drifting to sleep again.

That was when I heard the other noise.

I say without exaggeration that it was the strangest sound I have ever heard. Heavy, and regular, spaced precisely like footsteps. *Thump. Thump. Thump*. But there was something odd, something wrong about each noise. Something incomplete I should say, as if whatever was causing it was something very big and very heavy and yet—somehow not fully solid. Like something only partly filled, something not quite fully *complete*. The best way I can describe it is as if someone had a great rubber bag half-filled with water and was steadily dropping it upon the roof, so its echo sounded more like "*Schtwhump*." And it was continuing—*Schtwhump, schtwhump, schtwhump*....

"What the hell is that?" Kritchna grunted, rising up in the bed.

“Dunno,” I replied. “Could someone have gotten on the roof?”

Whatever it was, it was moving steadily, if wetly, down toward the edge. Directly above us, Colleen the cat was still meowing, but suddenly fell silent just as the *schtwhumping* stopped. We could hear her hiss violently. Then there was a great, frightened “MRRROOWWWWWW!!!” and suddenly the little porthole that served as our window shattered into pieces! Kritchna and I both clambered up clumsily, knocking into each other and trying to avoid falling glass, as we stumbled to the edge of the bed and over.

“Damnation!” roared Kritchna. “What the bloody hell is going on? Where’s that damn candle?” There was the scratch of a match and the tiny pinprick of flame shone dimly. Kritchna raised the candle up. “What happened?”

“Something came through the window,” I snapped obviously, climbing back upon the bed. My hands pressed against several pieces of glass, cutting myself, but I ignored it. “But God knows—oh my!” I drew back. Kritchna leaned forward, holding the candle out. He swallowed.

There on the bed, lying in a bloody heap, was the tiny, twisted body of Colleen. Her head had been completely severed from her neck.