

CHAPTER 1

“I REMOVE MY OWN BOOTS”

CALCUTTA

January 1879

The Reverend William Hastie

Incoming Principal, Scottish College

I adjust my sun hat. *Topi* they call it. Got it at Aden. Most of the passengers went to the nearest shop, but I found mine in a gentleman’s store. The clerk said it was the highest quality. I’m not sure I believe him, but it’s certainly better than what my fellow passengers procured.

It’s been a wonderful passage. The Suez Canal is a marvel of engineering, even if it was built by the French. And nearby is the route Pharaoh took when he pursued the Children of Israel. It’s sand and arid desert on either side of the sea, and I’ve seen the mountains that forced the Hebrews to turn south. No wonder they wandered for forty years. It would take that long to get around the mountains.

That’s not the point, of course. The point is no one thwarts God’s plan. Pharaoh thought he had the Hebrews until God parted the Red Sea. And now we cross it in ease and comfort. I look forward to my posting in Calcutta. I’m sure the experience will prove invaluable when I return home and take a university position.

A few weeks later, I have my first view of British India. We travel to Calcutta along the coast of the Hugli River. I’ve read that the people think the river holy, because it’s part of the Ganges. Ridiculous to think the British have been in India a hundred years and still haven’t taught the people that goddesses don’t live in rivers.

The city of Calcutta emerges out of the verdant countryside like a precious jewel unwrapping itself from the green foliage. Looking through crowded shipping lanes, I spy proper buildings peeking out over the water, and a city square. When we arrive at the quay, the illusion is spoilt. There's a line of ox carts with semi-dressed men sitting on the drivers' benches. Cattle and dogs wander everywhere. When the gangway is secured, I see a welcoming committee from Scottish College. I gaze at the motley assembly of shabby missionary teachers and scruffy students. The College has been without leadership for over a year. Now God has sent me to restore order and lead the entire Scottish missionary enterprise into a new day. I adjust my *topi* and stride down the gangplank.

Mary Pigot

Lady Superintendent

Ladies' Association Female Mission

Mr. Wilson, Acting Superintendent of Scottish College, paces near my desk in the anteroom of the Female Mission. He wanted to speak with me alone, to tell me that he'll lead the delegation to greet The Reverend Hastie on the pier. How he can do that—greet the man—I don't know. I would have fought Mr. Hastie's appointment, demanded that the Foreign Mission Committee recognize everything I'd accomplished. But that's not Mr. Wilson's way. He's always in the background serving others. I know he must leave for the pier, but I keep remonstrating with him.

“Miss Pigot, you must accept Mr. Hastie,” he says to me. “I don't have the educational qualifications for the position. Please, for my sake, welcome Mr. Hastie.”

Mr. Wilson takes off his spectacles and rubs the space on his nose. He wipes the lenses with his handkerchief and puts them back on, his pale blue eyes suddenly larger.

I pout. “You’re the one who raised standards after you took on the job. Your students are the best in Calcutta. Your education has nothing to do with your ability. Besides, everyone is equal before God.”

Mr. Wilson shakes his head sadly. “That may be, Miss Pigot, but they aren’t equal in the Church of Scotland. I’m an ordinary person. I do a good job, but I’m not fit to be Head of the College. Besides, once the new man arrives I can go home on furlough and see my family.”

I stop myself from reaching for his hand. “But you’ll come back?” I blink back a tear. I can’t bear to think of life without his friendship.

“I hope to, if my health holds out and if the Church sends me. The new man may not want me,” Mr. Wilson responds.

“I hate him already,” I say, which is hardly fair since I’ve yet to meet Mr. Hastie. But I don’t know how I’ll cope without Mr. Wilson’s support and advice. Mr. Wilson squeezes my hand.

“You must accept the situation. Mr. Hastie is now God’s man in Calcutta.” Mr. Wilson moves his head to the side and shrugs. “I understand Mr. Hastie is a great speaker and well-trained. He’ll be an asset to the Scottish Mission.”

“But he isn’t you,” I sigh and pick at a piece of lint on my sensible gray dress.

“I think that’s the point,” Mr. Wilson says. “I’m a simple man from a small town in Scotland. I can’t engage in philosophy. I’m not the man for the job. I never was.”

“But you’re my friend.”

“You must make him your friend as well, Miss Pigot. Why don’t you invite him to view the Mohurrum Procession? The Female Mission’s on the route. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get to the pier so I can make a good first impression.”

I escort Mr. Wilson to his *gharry*, our local horse-drawn carriage, in the courtyard. As I watch the vehicle drive onto the road, I wonder what the illustrious Mr. Hastie is like.

James Wilson

Senior Lay Missionary, Scottish College

Miss Pigot is correct. I should have been named Principal of Scottish College. I've lived in Calcutta for sixteen years. I know the local culture. I know students, and I know the curriculum. I've served as Acting Principal for two years. Two years! And all for nothing. The Foreign Missionary Committee wants a university man and an ordained minister. And I shall soon lead the delegation to greet him.

When I arrive at the pier, students and teaching staff stand away from the bullock carts and drivers waiting to pick up cargo. I greet Mr. Edwards, another missionary from Scottish College, and turn to the senior students who came to welcome the new principal. All are dressed in dark European suits and some have their hair clipped close to their heads. I'm proud of them. Mr. Hastie won't find any fault with their preparation or manners.

The steamship's horn sounds. We turn to see the gangplank is down. A man of medium height strides down the gangplank with aplomb. I presume this is Mr. Hastie. He wears a brown three-piece suit and an extravagant *topi* that he'll have to trade for one in the missionary style. In Calcutta, the *topi* indicates one's social standing, and his is more suitable for a successful merchant.

"Come, gentlemen. It's time to greet our new principal." Staff and students fan out behind me. I swallow hard. We proceed around the bullock carts and walk towards my replacement.

Mary Pigot

Today I will meet Mr. Hastie for the first time. He's been in Calcutta a week but hasn't called at the Female Mission. This surprises me, since the Scottish mission community is a small one. However, Scottish College and the Female Mission are two separate institutions. The Church of Scotland Foreign Mission Committee supervises Scottish College. My Female Mission is supervised by the Ladies' Association in Edinburgh.

I sent Mr. Hastie and Mr. Wilson invitations to the Female Mission to observe the Mohurrum procession. Mohurrum commemorates the death of Mohamed's grandson. The procession begins at dawn at the nearby Tipu Sultan Mosque in North Calcutta. The route goes past our orphanage and school at 125 Bow Bazar. In preparation for the new principal, I have the groom and groundskeeper sweep the school courtyard at first light and put three cane chairs and a small table under the tamarind tree. No sooner do we finish, then the *gharry* arrives.

"Mr. Wilson, you've brought our new principal." I smile broadly and extend my hands.

"Allow me to introduce The Reverend Mr. William Hastie." Mr. Wilson gestures toward a man of medium height wearing a full suit, including a waistcoat.

He's a handsome man with a medium brown beard and mustache and brown eyes. His *topi* looks painfully new. He must have bought it at Aden; most new arrivals do. Mr. Hastie looks around our courtyard, smiles, and extends his hand. I grab it in both of mine, remembering Mr. Wilson's advice.

"We're so excited to have you with us," I say. "Come, I've arranged some refreshments until the procession comes by."

Mr. Hastie steps back and breaks contact with my hands. *Am I too familiar?* He looks around before selecting the chair with full arms.

I pick up a tasseled blue silk pillow. “Mr. Hastie? Do you require a cushion?”

“Not at the moment.” I put the pillow on my own chair.

“A wise choice, sir,” Mr. Wilson comments. “Although the morning fog is chilly, the air becomes close when the sun rises. Oh, I almost forgot. Miss Pigot, Mr. Steele sent along this packet of coffee.”

“That’s so thoughtful. Sajiva,” I call.

Sajiva emerges from the veranda without making a sound. He’s my most valued servant, always watching for what’s needed. “Yes, Mem.” His voice is both soft and musical. Sajiva stands with a questioning look.

“Take this coffee and be careful with it. Tell the *khansama* to prepare it with the refreshments. Be sure nothing is taken or wasted,” I order. The cook is a good man, but he doesn’t always pay attention to what he’s doing. Coffee is too precious to waste.

“Yes, Mem,” Sajiva replies. He takes the coffee and proceeds into the house.

Mr. Hastie raises his left eyebrow. “I’m surprised to see servants at a mission. I thought you trained your students in housewifery.”

I ignore Mr. Hastie’s presumption about our curriculum. “A house in India can’t be run without servants. We don’t have many. No gatekeeper, as you notice. Sajiva is the *durwan*. He organizes everything. Without him, I couldn’t do my job. Isn’t that true, Mr. Wilson?”

“I would have thought . . .” Mr. Hastie begins.

Is he criticizing me? “Every house has servants,” I interrupt him. “Even the College, doesn’t it, Mr. Wilson?”

Mr. Wilson spreads his hands in a calming motion. "Living in Calcutta is . . . challenging. Take a few weeks to get your bearings and see how things are done here. You're staying with Mr. Steele. I'm sure you'll notice his servants."

"More than seems strictly necessary. They forever sneak up on one," Mr. Hastie replies.

"I assure you, Mr. Steele is careful with money. He doesn't engage extra servants. By Calcutta standards, he lives simply," Mr. Wilson says.

"Well, it's hardly my place to comment." I catch a look of slight disgust cross Mr. Hastie's face and flinch at the implied criticism. Mr. Wilson's lips twitch. He nods at me to change the subject.

"So, Mr. Hastie, did Mr. Wilson tell you anything about this morning's procession?" I ask hastily. "The Hindus have countless gods and festivals to take their attention from other things. The Mohammedans don't do as many public events."

"Why invite me to view a heathen festival?" Mr. Hastie asks. "How could—"

"It's unique," Mr. Wilson comes to my aid. "Mohurrum is the second most important festival on the Mohammedan calendar."

"It's a lunar calendar, you know," I interject.

"I'm not ignorant of world religions." Mr. Hastie clears his throat as he speaks.

Sajiva comes out with a tray and offers each of us a cup of fruit juice. I savor the pungent guava flavor as I gather my thoughts. Mr. Hastie doesn't converse so much as judge.

"I thought you'd find the procession interesting," I offer. "It passes our compound."

Mr. Hastie sips his juice. He glances up as the children begin to chatter from the school veranda above us.

"I allow the children to watch. They can't do anything else with all the noise."

Mr. Hastie's eyes narrow as the sun's rays reach our seats. "Miss Pigot, allowing the children to watch is the same as letting them participate."

"I'm not sure what you mean. We're surrounded by festivals of every kind. It's impossible to ignore them." I can't understand why Mr. Hastie is being so rude, as if he thinks I'm beneath him.

"You must insist they keep their minds on their studies," Mr. Hastie continues.

As if on cue, the sound of drumming fills the air.

"Mr. Hastie, will you stand at the gateway or do you prefer to go upstairs to the veranda?"

"I'm certainly not standing in the street." As the dust kicks up, he holds a handkerchief over his mouth.

"Then follow me up the outside stairway."

Mr. Hastie watches the marchers from the veranda rail with a sour look on his face. I forget about him as men dressed in black march, blow horns, and beat drums. Some hoist black or red flags. It takes them about half an hour to pass our house.

"Such a somber festival. Just drums and horns," I comment. "I prefer happy events. It's over now. Let's go inside to the drawing room and have our coffee."

"Miss Pigot, why did you invite me here?" Mr. Hastie asks again.

"To see the procession. There's a festival somewhere almost every day. Since this one comes by our house, I thought you'd like to see it. That's all. Come, or the coffee will be spoilt."

I lead everyone into the house. The drawing room is dim compared to the bright morning sun, but not dim enough to disguise the dust motes. Ahead of us, Sajiva quickly wipes the lounge and chair cushions. As soon as everyone is seated, Sajiva serves the coffee with the small

biscuits I keep for special guests. The biscuits are a bit stale. Mr. Wilson winks at me and talks to Mr. Hastie about students at the College. I catch his eye as I drink, and nod. The sooner we have coffee, the sooner Mr. Hastie will leave.

The following Sunday I drive my *gharry* from Bow Bazaar to the European sector with its open spaces and gardens, an artificial world plopped into the middle of Calcutta. I make this journey at least once a week, passing the English church at St. John's Cathedral where I was baptized. I haven't attended since I started working for the Church of Scotland. The Scots have their own church, St. Andrew's Kirk. It's like their churches at home. In Scotland the churches don't have heat, and here St. Andrew's doesn't catch a breeze. The furnishings are plain, the walls whitewashed, and the organ in questionable tune. In our climate, it's impossible to keep any instrument in tune very long.

St. Andrew's Kirk held its first service sixty years ago. Like all structures in the European sector, the church has no connection to local culture. The nave is an oval shape with a gallery above for extra seating. The roof supports are fat Doric columns. The chairs are mahogany with cane seats for ventilation.

I don't usually attend St. Andrew's. The Scottish merchants and professionals are too busy congratulating themselves to worry much about the rest of us. But today is different. The Reverend Mr. Hastie will preach his first sermon. The gallery and main floor will be full of people ready to be impressed by this paragon from Scotland. After spending time with him yesterday, I'm less enchanted, but still curious.

I nod to the usher and take a place at the back underneath the gallery. All the wood gleams with polish, and the floor must have been scrubbed just before people began arriving. By

the time we leave, the dust will be back. I see The Reverend Mr. Gillan at the front, deep in conversation with Mr. Hastie. Mr. Gillan is my sworn enemy. He opposed my appointment as Lady Superintendent because I didn't come out directly from Scotland. Everyone from the home country calls people born and raised in Calcutta, like me, Eurasians. It's not a nice term.

Mr. Gillan seats Mr. Hastie in the center of the formal desk, then takes his seat to Mr. Hastie's right. The Reverend Mr. Thomson, who recommended my appointment, sits at the other end.

Sounds emanate from the organ in its place at the end of the gallery above the lectern. It's out of tune, and some of the keys don't sound. I open my Psalter to today's Psalm and join in singing the first few verses from Psalm 116. I don't see why we can't have something more cheerful. It's only January, and Lent doesn't start until March. This psalm is all supplications and sacrifices of thanksgiving.

Mr. Gillan rises to read the Scripture, John 13: 1-17. He has a flat-sounding voice, but it carries to the back. Mr. Thomson's voice is too soft now.

"He riseth from supper and laid aside his garments; and took a towel and girded himself. After that he poureth water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet."

When Mr. Gillan finishes reading, even I feel a thrill of anticipation. Everyone says Mr. Hastie is a great orator. I settle back to listen.

Mr. Hastie climbs the steps with their plain wooden bannister. From the lectern, he looks over the room silently for what seems a long time but is probably only a minute or so. From my seat at the back, it feels like he's looking down upon the congregation. It must be strange to look down on the lectern from the gallery. I see Mr. Wilson and Mr. Edwards keep the younger boys in the first row quiet.

Finally, Mr. Hastie begins speaking. A hush falls over the room. I sense everyone leaning forward. Mr. Hastie doesn't refer to notes or raise his voice, yet I hear every word. When he speaks of Jesus knowing his hour had come, I shiver despite the heat.

“When you come in after a long, hot day, do you remove your boots or does someone assist you?” Mr. Hastie asks the congregation. “And if so, is it a family member or a servant? And if there's no servant, would you want a family member to pull off your dirty boot? I think not.”

My mind wanders. My father told me that when he supervised indigo plantations he had a servant who took off his boots for him and cleaned them for the next day. I didn't see the point since the boots would only get dirty again. But my father said it was important to start each day fresh, which is what I always try to do.

“In this example,” Mr. Hastie expounds, “Jesus washes the disciples' feet. In essence he pulls off our boots. No wonder Peter protests. I would do the same. But Jesus tells us to serve one another.

“I'm here as your servant, because Jesus came to me as a servant and washed my sins away forever. Mine and yours, so we may do that for others.”

Humpf. Mr. Hastie didn't act like a servant yesterday.

“The Scots came to Calcutta to serve home and country. To uplift, educate and civilize the people around us.”

Mr. Hastie continues for about an hour. It was foolish for me to think a man like Mr. Hastie would be interested in a local festival—that it would be fun to talk about how the Mohammedans celebrate Mohurrum. I now realize he sees us as beneath him. Less educated. Less cultured. I understand now why Mr. Wilson said he wasn't qualified to lead the College.

The Church leaders don't want someone who cares about the students. They appointed an intellectual man who expects others to remove his boots.

Finally, Mr. Hastie finishes his speech and returns to his seat. Mr. Thomson gives the benediction from Corinthians.

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost be with you all. Amen.”

Usually these words give me a sense of peace. Today they feel like dust in my throat because I make my own way without assistance, remove my own boots, and never turn my back on people in need.

Life at the Female Mission is hectic. We have forty-six girls of all ages in the orphanage. Then there are the two high schools, the day schools, and of course the *zenana* students, those women and girls confined to their homes. And I built all of it. Well, not entirely. But I'm the one who expanded the mission's presence.

The following Tuesday, I'm reviewing our orphans' financial support. An individual or Sunday School class sponsors each child, and I send reports on their progress. As I write about the student we call Louisa, Sajiva enters the room and hands me a note from Mr. Steele. Sajiva waits as I open the stiff paper and read Mr. Steele's dramatic handwriting, which covers the page. Sajiva stands with a questioning look, far too discreet to ask about the note's contents.

“It appears Mr. Hastie has cholera.”

“Yes, Mem.” Sajiva cocks his head.

“Call for the *gharry*.”

It's very bad luck for Mr. Hastie to contract the disease so soon after his arrival. He seemed perfectly fine on Sunday, but disease strikes people down quickly here. We don't keep a long mourning period in Calcutta as they do in Scotland.

Sajiva helps me into the *gharry* and hands me my *topi*. The man is a treasure.

When I arrive at Mr. Steele's house, he isn't home. Mr. Steele has a substantial house with four stories and two courtyards. I climb the steps to the porch. The *durwan* meets me at the door, escorts me to Mr. Steele's nicely appointed drawing room, and tells me to wait for the doctor. When I ask after Mr. Hastie, the *durwan* moves his head to the side and departs. One of the *ayahs*, a maidservant, brings a silver tea service into the room.

"How is the *sahib*?" I ask. "Is he very ill?"

The girl looks at me, her dark eyes concerned. "They say his flux smells like fish, Mem. I hope we don't get sick, Mem."

"No one else will get sick." I assure her. "We'll do what the doctor tells us."

"Yes, Mem." The girl closes the door softly as she leaves the room. I don't think she believes me.

I gaze out the window at the grass Mr. Steele's gardener manages to grow during the Cold Weather. It's easy to grow grass this time of year, but once the Hot Weather arrives in March, the grass withers and blows away. I don't bother with it, but Mr. Steele upholds Scottish standards. If Mr. Hastie recovers, I wonder if he'll try to grow grass at the College.

About twenty minutes after I arrive, Mr. Wilson comes into the room looking more disheveled than usual. Mr. Wilson and his wife are my dearest friends, always ready to listen and offer sound advice. Katy Wilson ran the Female Mission before me and left for home shortly after I took up my position. Since then Mr. Wilson, with his thinning fair hair and cheerful smile,

has been my strongest support, willing to help me in any task. I take advantage of his good nature to keep my correspondence and accounts current. I don't know which of us is more surprised to see the other. Obviously, Mr. Steele sent notes to both of us.

"Miss Pigot, I didn't expect to see you. Where's Mr. Steele?" Mr. Wilson asks. "And what's Mr. Hastie's condition?"

"The *ayah* says his flux smells like fish, so it must be cholera. Dr. Charles is with him."

"My God." Mr. Wilson begins pacing while he rubs the back of his neck.

Why all this fuss? Mr. Hastie will either recover or die. I don't like to think of him dead. But if he goes home, Mr. Wilson will stay. Naturally, I'll pray for Mr. Hastie's recovery. It's my duty as a Christian. But surely God will send him home to recover fully. Then Mr. Wilson can take over the College.

Dr. Charles comes in with his stethoscope still around his neck, his round face grave and dripping sweat.

"Ah, Miss Pigot. Mr. Wilson. I'm glad you're both here. I won't have to repeat myself. Mr. Hastie is gravely ill."

"Cholera?" I ask.

"All the symptoms are there. The important thing is to keep him cool and get him to take as much fluid as possible. Allow me to introduce Nurse Briggs. She will remain until the matter is settled." Dr. Charles pulls out a handkerchief and wipes his face.

What kind of nurse will she be? She doesn't know the patient. I don't either, but at least I'm part of the community. If anyone should have charge of Mr. Hastie, it should be me. It's my duty, however inconvenient, not some outsider's.

"Dr. Charles, I thought Mr. Steele summoned me to nurse Mr. Hastie."

“Miss Pigot, I want you to relieve Nurse Briggs during the night. A tired nurse is of little use, after all.”

You could have given me the day shift and had an ayah sit with Mr. Hastie at night. Perhaps Mr. Steele wants the community to think he spares no expense. Only qualified nurses for Mr. Hastie. Never mind, this way Mr. Hastie will see a familiar face if he wakes during the night.

I pick up my things. “What time shall I take over?”

“Have your evening meal first, Miss Pigot. Good luck,” Dr. Charles says.

I wonder if Mr. Steele’s paying Mr. Hastie’s expenses. Probably. So, of course, he doesn’t want to pay for two nurses when he can get my services without cost. That must be the reason I’m on night duty. The important thing is for Mr. Hastie to recover as quickly as possible.

“Mr. Wilson, can I give you a lift?” I ask. “I’m going back to the orphanage.”

“Mr. Steele told me to stay until the crisis passes.”

“To what purpose?” I ask.

“I suppose so I can make any necessary arrangements.”

When I ask if he expects to be called upon, Mr. Wilson shakes his head.

When I arrive at Mr. Steele’s house after dinner, I find there isn’t much for me to do in the sickroom. I make sure the mosquito netting stays in place. Watch for restlessness. Call Nurse if matters deteriorate. Mainly, I am here so Mr. Hastie won’t be alone in a strange place. When I open the door to the sickroom, I see Nurse Briggs standing at the dresser, measuring something.

“Have you eaten?” I ask.

“Not yet. I’m preparing the patient’s medicine,” Nurse Briggs says.

“Where shall I put my things?”

Nurse Briggs shrugs, so I hang my hat and shawl on a hook near the door. The bed stands in the room's center, each leg in a saucer of water to keep white ants from creeping up. The cane lounge near the end of the bed also has saucer feet. There's a small table by the lounge with a kerosene lamp. A soft light flickers off the walls.

I watch Nurse Briggs. "What are you giving him?"

"Cholera pills," Nurse Briggs says.

"Do you know what's in them? I've always wondered."

Nurse Briggs shrugs again. She's a substantial woman. I step back from her gaze.

"Doesn't make a lot of difference what's in 'em," Nurse Briggs says. "Sometimes they work. Sometimes they don't. Probably opium. Patients always calm down after a dose. I'm giving him a bit extra. He's been restless. You shouldn't have to do anything much. Just call me if you need me. I'm a light sleeper."

Nurse Briggs walks over to the bed.

"Help raise him up a bit," she directs.

I put my arm under Mr. Hastie's back to lift him. Nurse holds his head. Mr. Hastie's bedclothes are damp; his skin clammy.

"Mr. Hastie," Nurse Briggs whispers. "Swallow these pills I'm putting in your mouth and take some juice."

The patient opens his eyes slightly. I smell his sour breath. Nurse closes his lips over the pills.

"Swallow. Swallow again," she orders, holding the cup to his lips, forcing them open.

"Drink. You must drink the entire cup."

"Noooo," the patient moans.

“Yes, sir. You must. I won’t leave you be ’til you do,” Nurse Briggs says.

Nurse Briggs keeps the glass at his lips. She’s oddly patient in her annoyance. Glub. Glub. Glub. The cup slowly empties.

“Very good, sir. Lay him back. That’s alright, then.”

I dampen a cloth and wipe Mr. Hastie’s brow. He’s a handsome man, more so when he isn’t talking. His beard is neatly trimmed and he seems younger than one would expect for such a senior position. But then, he’s only just arrived.

“Call if you need me,” Nurse Briggs reminds me.

Sitting up with a sick person isn’t very interesting. I thumb through the prayer book I brought with me, looking for the section with prayers for the sick. I hear a light tap on the open door.

“Mr. Wilson, how lovely to see you.” I smile. “Please, come sit on the lounge.”

“How’s the patient?” he asks.

“Resting. Nurse gave him cholera pills. I didn’t see you when I arrived earlier.”

“I dined with Mr. Steele and then took a walk to clear my head. In future, Mr. Steele invites you to join us for dinner at eight o’clock before you take up your duties.”

“I’d like that,” I say. “I’m trying to find an appropriate prayer. But they all seem to expect the patient to expire. I can’t pray for that.”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” Mr. Wilson says.

“Well, for one thing, this prayer takes up almost five pages. The patient could pass over from boredom.”

Mr. Wilson’s face has a funny expression before he bursts into a coughing fit. I pound his back.

“Please excuse me,” he gasps, and leaves the room.

What was that about? I thought Mr. Wilson was about to say something before he choked. I decide to make up my own prayer for the patient’s speedy and comfortable recovery. As the night deepens and the room grows cooler, I wrap up in my silk shawl. But I don’t put my feet up for fear I’ll fall asleep. As the hours pass, I listen to Nurse Briggs snore from her small room on the veranda and think the night will never end. Early morning fog is just seeping into the room when there’s another tap at the door.

“Good morning, Mr. Wilson.”

“I came to see how you’re getting on. How’s the patient?” Mr. Wilson asks.

We stand by the bed and I move the net. “He seems peaceful,” I say. “Do you think his fever has broken? I prayed for him. I’m sure he’s better.”

Nurse Briggs comes in from the veranda wearing a white gown with a wrapper. Her steel grey hair falls at the side of her head in a braid.

“What’s this? Why’re you here, Mr. Wilson?” Nurse Briggs asks, sharply, her eyebrows drawn together.

“I came to check on the patient,” Mr. Wilson explains.

“Let me see.” Nurse Briggs marches toward the bed. We step back and watch her feel Mr. Hastie’s forehead and smooth the sheets. Then, she abruptly turns to face us.

“Mr. Wilson, there’s no need for you to be here at this hour. And you, Miss Pigot, shouldn’t have admitted him.”

“That’s ridiculous,” I snap. “He’s here at Mr. Steele’s request.”

“Not at this hour,” Nurse Briggs scolds as she begins to leave the room. “Miss Pigot, you may go as soon as I change.”

In a few short minutes, Nurse reappears wearing a plain grey dress and an apron that might have been white once. "I'll see you this evening," she grunts, dismissing me as if I work for her. I raise my eyebrows and look for Mr. Wilson, but he's gone. I gather my things and go downstairs.

I arrive home about eight o'clock in the morning, so tired I don't know what to do with myself. Mrs. Tremearne meets me at the door and helps me into bed. Instead of closing my eyes, I count the plaster cracks in the wall. I have a large room with a canopied bed in the center. Sleep eludes me. The room is hot. I inhale dust coming in with the slight breeze. When my yellow song birds start dancing in their cage near my bedroom window, I get up.

"Poor little birds. I'll feed you. Mrs. Tremearne should've thought of that, but it's my fault. I told her never to touch you. There, there, I'm here now." I dip some seed into the cage and sit by the window. Dear Mrs. Tremearne. She'll do anything for me, but she overfed my last birds. I scolded her when they died and told her never to touch my birds again. She hasn't, which leaves me to clean out the cage.

I dress in loose clothing and move to the veranda where I doze all day, trying to avoid one of my frequent headaches. At dusk, I go inside to wash and put on suitable clothing. I look forward to dining at Mr. Steele's. He keeps a fine table. Far better than the poor missionary fare I usually eat. When I arrive at seven o'clock, Mr. Wilson and Mr. Steele are in the drawing room. Unfortunately, one can't just knock on the door and immediately proceed to the dining table. Instead, one has to arrive early for drinks and conversation. More's the pity.

"Miss Pigot, so good of you to join us," Mr. Steele says in his thick Glasgow accent. "We need a pretty face to break the gloom."

Mr. Steele looks surprisingly complacent considering he's host to someone at death's door. Still, he's a great supporter of the Female Mission, often taking my side against Mr. Gillan. The *durwan* comes into the room and begins preparing pegs of brandy and soda water.

Mr. Steele winks at me as if I'm a favorite daughter. "Would you prefer whiskey?"

"I've no preference," I say.

"And you, Mr. Wilson?"

"You're generous to ask, sir. Brandy is fine."

"We'll have whiskey after dinner then," Mr. Steele says. "Miss Pigot, you'll be about your duties, I'm sorry to say."

"The pleasure of joining you for dinner is more than sufficient." I smile and feel my stomach grumble in anticipation.

"It's a simple meal in view of the circumstances. Soup, vegetables, a bit of tinned beef. Shall we go through?" Mr. Steele asks.

Beef? I can't remember the last time I had beef.

The dining room is immaculate with a mahogany table and side boards, though I'm not sure insect saucers are good for mahogany. Mr. Steele's tablecloths are always snowy and soft. I don't know how he makes that happen. Maybe he purchases new ones every week. I'm not being unkind. He can well afford it.

After dinner the *ayah* gives me a lamp to take upstairs. I tap at the door and enter the sick room. Nurse Briggs turns away from Mr. Hastie's bed.

"How's Mr. Hastie?" I ask.

“Dr. Charles is pleased. Not out of danger though. You’ll have to keep a close eye on him.”

“Have you finished for the day?” I pointedly glance at the watch on my bodice.

“Just have to settle Mr. Hastie. Then I’m off to my little room on the veranda.” Nurse Briggs gives me a tight smile and turns to smooth the sheets and pillows. They look softer than the tablecloth downstairs. I settle myself on the lounge and begin leafing through my prayer book.

After about ten minutes, Nurse Briggs and I look up to see Mr. Wilson standing in the doorway.

“Miss Pigot, I thought I’d keep you company for a bit.”

“Wonderful.” I pat the seat beside me on the lounge.

“Have you found any new prayers for the patient?” he asks.

I nod “I think simple is best. Shall we?”

We sit close together, heads bowed and hands folded. I find the page and start: “*Good God, Lord and Father; Creator and Conserver, we pray unto Thee that it would please Thine infinite goodness to have a blessing upon this Thy poor creature, whom Thou hast bound and tied to the bed by most grievous sickness. Receive him into Thy protection.*”

Nurse Briggs looks toward the lounge with a disapproving expression. *Has she never heard a prayer before?*

“Amen,” I pronounce for her benefit.

“I’m leaving now,” Nurse Briggs says as she rubs her hands on her apron, removes it and hangs it on a peg. “Call me if anything’s amiss.” She looks over her shoulder and shakes her head as she leaves the room.

In the silence, Mr. Wilson and I sit for a moment. Then, suddenly, Mr. Wilson jumps up and rushes out of the room.

James Wilson

I stand on the downstairs veranda taking deep breaths. I should never have gone into the sickroom. Under normal circumstances I'm at the Female Mission two or three times a week to assist Miss Pigot. With my wife in Scotland, I look forward to visiting a sympathetic friend. But I have no reason to be in the sickroom and put myself and Miss Pigot in a compromising position.

Miss Pigot is so artless. She has no comprehension of how someone like Nurse Briggs views a married man and an unmarried woman in close proximity, even if Miss Pigot is in her forties. But I know how quickly tongues can wag. I should never have gone to the sickroom, let alone accepted Miss Pigot's invitation to sit beside her. I can hear my wife Katy admonishing me. "Ye be a foolish man," she would say. "Have a care what you're about."