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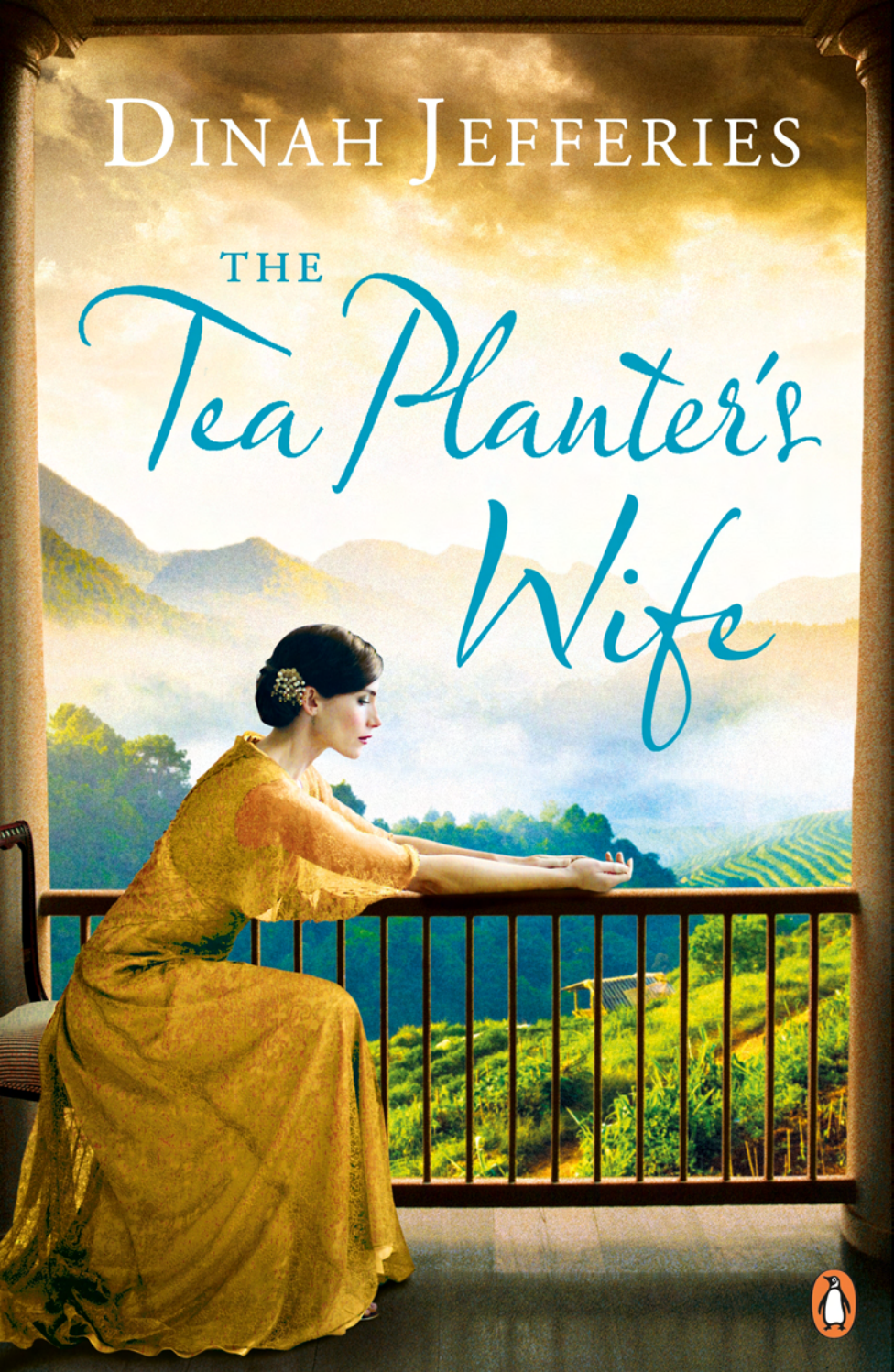
The Tea Planter's Wife

Written by Dinah Jefferies

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DINAH JEFFERIES
THE
Tea Planter's
Wife

The Tea Planter's Wife

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In memory of my son Jamie

Prologue

Ceylon, 1913

The woman held a slim white envelope to her lips. She hesitated for a moment longer, pausing to listen to the achingly sweet notes of a distant Sinhalese flute. She considered her resolve, turning it over as she would a pebble in her palm, then sealed the envelope and propped it against a vase of wilting red roses.

The antique ottoman stood at the end of the four-poster bed. Made from dark wood, its sides were covered in satin moiré with a padded leather lid. She lifted the lid, took out her ivory wedding dress and draped it over the back of a chair, wrinkling her nose at the sickly scent of mothballs.

She selected a rose, broke off the bloom and glanced at the baby, glad that he still slept. At her dressing table she raised the flower and held it against her fair hair; such fine threads of silk *he* had always said. She shook her head and let the flower go. Not today.

On the bed the baby's clothes were already placed in random piles. With the tips of her fingers she touched a freshly laundered matinee jacket, remembering the hours she'd spent knitting until her eyes had stung. Lying beside the clothing were sheets of white tissue paper. Without further delay she folded the little blue jacket, placed it between two sheets of the paper and carried it to the zinc-lined ottoman where she laid it at the bottom.

Each item was folded, placed between tissue and then added to the other layers of woolly hats, bootees, nightgowns and romper suits. Blue. White. Blue. White. Last of all were the muslin squares and terry napkins. These she folded edge to edge, and then, when it was done, she surveyed her morning's work. Despite what it meant, she did not blanch at the sight.

Another glance at the baby's fluttering lashes signalled that he

would be waking soon. She'd need to be quick. The dress she had chosen for herself was made from oriental silk in vivid sea green, slightly raised above the ankles and with a high-waisted sash. This had been her favourite dress sent over from Paris. She'd worn it the night of the party, the night she was certain the child had been conceived. She paused again. Might wearing it be viewed as a bitter attempt to wound? She couldn't be sure. She loved the colour. That's what she told herself. Above all, it was the colour.

The baby whimpered and began to fret. She glanced at the clock, lifted the child from his crib and sat in the nursing chair by the window, feeling a light breeze cooling her skin. Outside the sun was high in the sky and the heat would be building; somewhere in the house a dog barked and from the kitchens came the heady scents of cooking.

She opened her nightgown to reveal a pale marbled breast. The baby nuzzled and then latched on. A fine strong jaw he had, so much so that her nipples were cracked and raw and, in order to bear the pain, she was forced to bite her lip. To distract herself she glanced around her room. In each of its four corners, memories had attached themselves in the form of objects: the carved footstool that had come from the north; the bedside lampshade she had sewn herself; the rug from Indo-China.

As she stroked the baby's cheek, he stopped feeding, lifted his free hand and, in one heartbreakingly beautiful moment, his delicate fingers reached for her face. That would have been the moment for tears.

When she had winded him, she laid him on the bed wrapped in a soft crocheted shawl and, once dressed, she cradled him with one arm and took a last look round. With her free hand she closed the lid of the ottoman, threw the abandoned rose in a lacquered wastepaper basket, and then ran her palm over the remaining flowers in the vase, loosening the bruised petals. They floated past the white envelope to fall like splashes of blood on the polished mahogany floor.

She opened the French windows and, glancing around the garden, took three deep breaths of jasmine-scented air. The breeze had dropped; the flute silenced. She had expected to feel afraid, but instead was filled with a welcome sense of relief. That was all, and it was enough. Then, with firm footsteps, she began to walk, one inevitable step after another, and as she left the house behind, she pictured the palest shade of the colour lilac: the colour of tranquillity.

I

The New Life

I

Twelve Years Later, Ceylon 1925

With her straw sun hat in one hand, Gwen leant against the salty railings and glanced down again. She'd been watching the shifting colour of the sea for an hour, tracing the shreds of paper, the curls of orange peel and the leaves drifting by. Now that the water had changed from deepest turquoise to dingy grey, she knew it couldn't be long. She leant a little further over the rail to watch a piece of silver fabric float out of sight.

When the ship's horn sounded – loud, prolonged and very close – she jumped, lifting her hand from the rail in surprise. The little satin purse, a farewell present from her mother, with its delicate beaded drawstring, slid over her hand. She gasped and reached out, but saw it was too late as the purse dropped into the ocean, swirled in the dirty water and then sank. And with it her money, and Laurence's letter with his instructions folded neatly inside.

She looked about her and felt another stirring of the unease she hadn't been able to shake off since leaving England. You can't get much further from Gloucestershire than Ceylon, her father had said. As his voice echoed in her head, she was startled when she heard another voice, distinctly male but with an unusually honeyed tone.

'New to the East?'

Accustomed to the fact that her violet eyes and pale complexion always attracted attention, she turned to look, and was forced to squint into bright sunlight.

'I . . . Yes. I'm joining my husband. We're only recently married.' She took a breath, just stopping herself from blurting out the whole story.

A broad-shouldered man of medium height, with a strong nose and glittering caramel eyes, gazed back at her. His black brows, curling hair and dark polished skin stopped her in her tracks. She stared, feeling a little unnerved, until he smiled in an open sort of way.

'You're lucky. By May the sea would normally be a great deal wilder. A tea planter, I'm guessing,' he said. 'Your husband.'

'How did you know?'

He spread his hands. 'There is a type.'

She glanced down at her beige-coloured dress: drop-waisted, but with a high collar and long sleeves. She didn't want to be a 'type', but realized that if it wasn't for the chiffon scarf knotted at her neck, she might appear drab.

'I saw what happened. I'm sorry about your purse.'

'It was stupid of me,' she said, and hoped she wasn't blushing.

Had she been a little more like her cousin, Fran, she might have engaged him in conversation, but instead, imagining the short exchange to be over, she turned back to watch as the ship slipped closer to Colombo.

Above the shimmering city, a cobalt sky stretched into distant purple hills, trees gave shade and the air was filled with the cries of gulls as they swooped over the small boats massing on the water. The thrill of doing something so different bubbled through her. She had missed Laurence and, for a moment, allowed herself to dream of him. Dreaming was effortless, but the reality was so exciting it set butterflies alight in her stomach. She took a deep breath of what she'd expected would be salty air, and marvelled at the scent of something stronger than salt.

'What is that?' she said as she turned to look at the man, who, she rightly sensed, had not shifted from the spot.

He paused and sniffed deeply. 'Cinnamon and probably sandalwood.'

'There's something sweet.'

'Jasmine flowers. There are many flowers in Ceylon.'

'How lovely,' she said. But even then, she knew it was more

than that. Beneath the seductive scent there was an undercurrent of something sour.

'Bad drains too, I'm afraid.'

She nodded. Perhaps that was it.

'I haven't introduced myself. My name is Savi Ravasinghe.'

'Oh.' She paused. 'You're . . . I mean, I haven't seen you at dinner.'

He pulled a face. 'Not a first-class passenger is what you mean, I think. I'm Sinhalese.'

She hadn't noticed until now that the man stood on the other side of the rope that separated the classes. 'Well, it's very nice to meet you,' she said, pulling off one of her white gloves. 'I'm Gwendolyn Hooper.'

'Then you must be Laurence Hooper's new wife.'

She fingered the large Ceylon sapphire of her ring and nodded in surprise. 'You know my husband?'

He inclined his head. 'I have met your husband, yes, but now I'm afraid I must take my leave.'

She held out her hand, pleased to have met him.

'I hope you'll be very happy in Ceylon, Mrs Hooper.'

When he ignored her hand, she let it fall. He pressed his palms together in front of his chest, fingers pointing upwards, and bowed very slightly.

'May your dreams be fulfilled . . .' With closed eyes, he paused for a moment, then walked off.

Gwen felt a little disconcerted by his words, and the odd departing gesture, but with more pressing matters on her mind, she shrugged. She really must try to remember Laurence's lost instructions.

Luckily, first class disembarked first, and that meant her. She thought of the man again and couldn't help but feel fascinated. She'd never met anyone so exotic and it would have been much more fun if he'd stayed to keep her company – though, of course, he could not.

*

Nothing had prepared her for the shock of Ceylon's scorching heat, nor its clashing colours, nor the contrast between the bright white light and the depth of the shade. Noise bombarded her: bells, horns, people and buzzing insects surrounding her, swirling and eddying, until she felt as if she were being tipped about, like one of the pieces of flotsam she'd been watching earlier. When the background noise was eclipsed by loud trumpeting, she spun round to stare at the timber wharf, mesmerized by the sight of an elephant raising its trunk in the air and bellowing.

When watching an elephant had become quite normal, she braved the Port Authority building, made arrangements for her trunk, then sat on a wooden bench in the hot steamy air with nothing but her hat to shade her, and with which, from time to time, she swatted the clusters of flies that crawled along her hairline. Laurence had promised to be at the dockside but, so far, there was no sign of him. She tried to recall what he'd said to do in the event of an emergency, and spotted Mr Ravasinghe again, making his way out of the second-class hatch in the side of the ship. By avoiding looking at the man, she hoped to hide her flush of embarrassment at her predicament, and turned the other way to watch the haphazard loading of tea chests on to a barge at the other end of the docks.

The smell of drains had long since overpowered the spicy fragrance of cinnamon, and now mingled with other rank odours: grease, bullock dung, rotting fish. And as the dockside filled with more disgruntled passengers being besieged by traders and hawkers peddling gemstones and silk, she felt sick with nerves. What would she do if Laurence didn't come? He had promised. She was only nineteen, and he knew she'd never been further from Owl Tree Manor than a trip or two to London with Fran. Feeling very alone, her spirits sank. It was too bad her cousin hadn't been able to travel out with her, but straight after the wedding Fran had been called away by her solicitor, and though Gwen would have entrusted Laurence with her life, all things considered, she couldn't help feeling a bit upset.

A swarm of semi-naked brown-skinned children flitted among the crowd, offering bundles of cinnamon sticks, and with enormous, imploring eyes, begged for rupees. A child who couldn't have been more than five pulled out a bundle for Gwen. She held it to her nose and sniffed. The child spoke, but it was gobbledegook to Gwen, and sadly she had no rupees to give the urchin, nor any English money either, now.

She stood and walked about. There was a brief gust of wind, and, from somewhere in the distance, came a troubling sound – *boom*, *boom*, *boom*. Drums, she thought. Loud, but not quite loud enough to identify a regular beat. She didn't wander far from the small case she'd left by the bench, and when she heard Mr Ravasinghe call out, she felt her forehead bead with perspiration.

'Mrs Hooper. You cannot leave your case unguarded.'

She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. 'I was keeping my eye on it.'

'People are poor and opportunistic. Come, I'll carry your case and find you somewhere cooler to wait.'

'You're very kind.'

'Not at all.' He held her by the elbow with just his fingertips, and forged a path through the Port Authority building. 'This is Church Street. Now look over there – just at the edge of Gordon Gardens is the Suriya, or tulip tree as it is known.'

She glanced at the tree. Its fat trunk folded deeply like a woman's skirt, and a canopy studded with bright orange bell-shaped flowers offered an oddly flaming kind of shade.

'It will provide a degree of cool, though with the afternoon heat coming on so strong, and the monsoon not yet arrived, you will find little relief.'

'Really,' she said. 'There's no need for you to stay with me.'

He smiled and his eyes narrowed. 'I cannot leave you here alone, a penniless stranger in our city.'

Glad of his company, she smiled back.

They walked across to the spot he'd indicated, and she spent another hour leaning against the tree, perspiring and dripping

beneath her clothes, and wondering what she'd let herself in for by agreeing to live in Ceylon. The noise had amplified, and though he stood close, hemmed in by the crowds, he still had to shout to be heard.

'If your husband has not arrived by three, I hope you won't mind my suggesting you retire to the Galle Face Hotel to wait. It is airy, there are fans and soft drinks and you will be infinitely cooler.'

She hesitated, reluctant to leave the spot. 'But how will Laurence know I'm there?'

'He'll know. Anyone British of any standing goes to the Galle Face.'

She glanced at the imposing façade of the Grand Oriental. 'Not there?'

'Definitely not there. Trust me.'

In the fierce brightness of the afternoon, the wind blew a cloud of grit into her face, sending tears streaming down her cheeks. She blinked rapidly, then rubbed her eyes, hoping she really could trust him. Perhaps he was right. A person could die in this heat.

A short distance from where she stood, a tight bundle had formed beneath rows and rows of fluttering white ribbons strung across the street, and a man in brown robes, making a repetitive high-pitched sound, stood in the centre of a group of colourful women. Mr Ravasinghe saw Gwen watching.

'The monk is *pirith* chanting,' he said. 'It is often required at the deathbed to ensure a good passing. Here I think it is because great evil may have transpired at that spot, or at the very least a death. The monk is attempting to purify the place of any remaining malignancy by calling for the blessings of the gods. We believe in ghosts in Ceylon.'

'You are all Buddhists?'

'I myself am, but there are Hindus and Muslims too.'

'And Christians?'

He inclined his head.

When by three there was still no sign of Laurence, the man held out a hand and took a step away. 'Well?'

She nodded, and he called out to one of the rickshaw men, who wore very little more than a turban and a greasy-looking loincloth.

She shuddered at how thin the man's brown naked back was. 'I'm surely not going in that?'

'Would you prefer a bullock cart?'

She felt herself redden as she glanced at the heap of oval orange fruits piled up in a cart that had huge wooden wheels and a matted canopy.

'I do beg your pardon, Mrs Hooper. I shouldn't tease. Your husband uses carts to transport the tea chests. We would actually ride in a small buggy. Just the one bullock and with a shady palm-leaf hood.'

She pointed at the orange fruits. 'What are those?'

'King coconut. Only for the juice. Are you thirsty?'

Even though she was, she shook her head. On the wall just behind Mr Ravasinghe, a large poster showed a dark-skinned woman balancing a wicker basket on her head and wearing a yellow and red sari. She had bare feet and gold bangles on her ankles and she wore a yellow headscarf. MAZZAWATTEE TEA the poster proclaimed. Gwen's hands grew clammy and a flood of sickening panic swept through her. She was very far from home.

'As you can see,' Mr Ravasinghe was saying, 'cars are few and far between, and a rickshaw is certainly faster. If you are unhappy, we can wait, and I'll try to obtain a horse and carriage. Or, if it helps, I can accompany you in the rickshaw.'

At that moment, a large black car came hooting its way through the crowd of pedestrians, bicyclists, carts and carriages, only narrowly missing numerous sleeping dogs. Laurence, she thought with a surge of relief, but when she looked in through the window of the passing vehicle, she saw it contained only two large middle-aged European women. One turned to look at Gwen, her face a picture of disapproval.

Right, Gwen thought, galvanized into action, a rickshaw it is.

*

A cluster of thin palms stood waving in the breeze outside the Galle Face Hotel, and the building itself sided the ocean in a very British way. When Mr Ravasinghe had given her the oriental manner of salutation, and a very warm smile, she was sorry to see him go, but walked past the two curved staircases and settled herself to wait in the relative cool of the Palm Lounge. She instantly felt at home and closed her eyes, pleased to have a small respite from the almost total invasion of her senses. Her rest didn't last long. If Laurence were to arrive now, she was only too aware of the sorry state she was in, and that was not the impression she wanted to create. She sipped her cup of Ceylon tea, and then looked across the tables and chairs dotted about the polished teak floor. In one corner a discreet sign pinpointed the location of the ladies' powder room.

In the sweet-smelling, multiple-mirrored room, she splashed the repeated image of her face, and applied a dab of Après L'Ondée, which luckily had been safely stowed in her small case, and not in her drowned purse. She felt sticky, with sweat running down under her arms, but pinned up her hair again so that it coiled neatly at the nape of her neck. Her hair was her crowning glory, Laurence said. It was dark, long and ringleted when unpinned. When she'd mentioned she was considering having it cut short like Fran's, flapper style, he'd looked horrified, and tugged loose a curl at the back of her neck, then leant down and rubbed his chin on top of her head. After that, with his palms placed on either side of her jaw, his fingers gathering up her hair, he'd stared at her.

'Never cut your hair. Promise me.'

She'd nodded, unable to speak, the tingle from his hands so delicious that all manner of hitherto unfelt sensations arose in her.

Their wedding night had been perfect and so had the following week. On their final night neither of them had slept, and he'd had to rise before dawn in order to reach Southampton in time to board the ship for Ceylon. Though he was disappointed she

wasn't coming with him, he had business in Ceylon and they agreed the time would soon pass. He hadn't minded her staying on to wait for Fran, but she had regretted the decision the moment he was gone and hardly knew how she would bear to be apart from him. Then, when Fran had been delayed still further in London over a property she was letting out, Gwen decided to travel alone.

With her captivating looks, Gwen had never been short of beaux, but she'd fallen for Laurence from the moment she spotted him at a musical evening Fran had taken her to in London, and when he had grinned at her and charged over determined to introduce himself, she was lost. They'd seen each other every day after that, and when he proposed, she'd raised a burning face and, with no hesitation, said yes. Her parents had been none too pleased that a thirty-seven-year-old widower wanted to marry her, and her father had taken a little persuading, but was impressed when Laurence offered to leave a manager in charge of the plantation and return to live in England. Gwen would not hear of it. If Ceylon was where his heart belonged, it was where her heart would belong too.

As she closed the powder-room door behind her, she saw him standing with his back to her in the large entrance hall and her breath caught in her throat. She touched the beads at her neck, adjusting the blue droplet so that it sat in the centre, and, awed by the intensity of her feelings, stood still to drink in the sight of him. He was tall, with a good broad back and short light-brown hair, flecked with early grey at the temples. A product of Winchester school, he looked as if confidence ran in his veins: a man who women adored and men respected. Yet he read Robert Frost and William Butler Yeats. She loved him for it, and for the fact that he already knew she was far from the demure girl people expected her to be.

As if he had felt her eyes on him, he spun round. She took in the relief in his fierce brown eyes, and the wide spreading smile as he came striding towards her. He had a square jaw and a cleft

chin, which, along with the way his hair waved at the front and went crazy at the double crown, she found utterly irresistible. Because he was wearing shorts, she could see his legs were tanned, and he looked so much more dusty and rugged here than he had done in the chilly English countryside.

Full of energy, she ran across to meet him. He held her at arm's length for just a moment, then wrapped her in a bear hug so tight she could hardly breathe. Her heart was still racing when he'd finished swinging her round and finally let her go.

'You have no idea how much I've missed you,' he said, his voice deep and a little gruff.

'How did you know I was here?'

'I asked the harbour master where the most beautiful woman in Ceylon had gone.'

She smiled. 'That's very nice, but of course I am not.'

'One of the most adorable things about you is that you have no idea how lovely you are.' He held both her hands in his. 'I'm so sorry I was late.'

'It doesn't matter. Someone looked after me. He said he knew you. Mr Ravasinghe, I think that was his name.'

'Savi Ravasinghe?'

'Yes.' She felt the skin at the back of her neck prickle. He frowned and narrowed his eyes, increasing the fan of fine lines that were prematurely etched into his skin. She longed to touch them. He was a man who had lived and, to her, that made him even more attractive.

'Never mind,' he said, quickly recovering his good humour. 'I'm here now. The darned car had a problem. Luckily, Nick McGregor managed to sort it out. It's too late to drive back, so I'm just booking us rooms.'

They walked back to the desk, then, finished with the clerk, he reached for her, and as his lips brushed her cheek her breath escaped in a little puff.

'Your trunk will go up by train,' he said. 'At least as far as Hatton.'

'I know, I talked to the man in the Port Authority building.'

'Right. McGregor will arrange for one of the coolies to fetch it from the station in a bullock cart. Will you have enough in that case until tomorrow?'

'Just about.'

'Do you want some tea?' he said.

'Do you?'

'What do you think?'

She grinned and suppressed the urge to laugh out loud as he asked the clerk to send the bags up double quick.

They walked to the stairs arm in arm, but once round the bend in the stairwell she felt unexpectedly shy. He let go of her and went on ahead to unlock and then throw open the door.

She took the last few steps and gazed in at the room.

Late afternoon sunlight spilt through tall windows, tinting the walls a delicate shade of pink; the painted lamps either side of the bed were already lit and the room smelt of oranges. Looking at a scene so clearly set for intimacy, she felt a burst of heat at the back of her neck and scratched the skin there. The moment she had imagined over and over was finally here, and yet she stood hesitating in the doorway.

'Don't you like it?' he said, his eyes bright and shiny.

She felt her pulse jump in her throat.

'Darling?'

'I love it,' she managed to say.

He came across to her and let loose the hair that was pinned up. 'There. That's better.'

She nodded. 'They'll be bringing the bags.'

'I think we have a few moments,' he said, and touched her bottom lip with his fingertip. But then, as if on cue, there was a knock at the door.

'I'll just open the window,' she said, stepping back, glad of an excuse not to let the porter witness her stupid anxiety.

Their room faced the ocean and as she pushed the window ajar she looked out at ripples of silvery gold where the sun caught

the tips of the waves. This was what she wanted, and it wasn't as if they hadn't spent a week together in England, but home felt very distant and that thought brought her close to tears. She closed her eyes and listened as the porter carried in their bags, then, once the man had gone, she twisted back to look at Laurence.

He gave her a crooked smile. 'Is something wrong?'

She bowed her head and stared at the floor.

'Gwen, look at me.'

She blinked rapidly and the room seemed to hush. Thoughts raced through her mind as she wondered how to explain the sensation of being catapulted into a world she didn't understand, though it wasn't just that – the feeling of being naked under his gaze had unnerved her too. Not wanting the embarrassment to ambush her, she looked up and, moving very slowly, took a few steps towards him.

He looked relieved. 'I was worried for a moment there.'

Her legs began to shake. 'I'm being silly. Everything is so new . . . You're so new.'

He smiled and came to her. 'Well, if that's all, it's easily remedied.'

She leant in towards him, feeling light-headed as he fumbled with the button at the back of her dress.

'Here, let me,' she said and, reaching behind, slipped the button through the loop. 'It's a knack.'

He laughed. 'One I shall have to learn.'

An hour later and Laurence was asleep. Fuelled by the long wait, their love-making had been intense, even more so than on their wedding night. She thought back to the moments when she first arrived in the country; it was as if the hot Colombo sun had sucked the energy from her body. She'd been wrong. There was abundant energy lying in reserve, although now as she lay listening to the threads of sound drifting in from the outside world, her arms and legs felt heavy and she wasn't far from sleep. She realized how perfectly natural lying beside Laurence was

beginning to feel and, smiling at her earlier nervousness, shifted a little so that she could look at him while still feeling the strength of his body in the places where he seemed to be glued to her. Blanched of all emotion but one, her love had somehow distilled into this perfect moment. It was going to be all right. For another minute or two she breathed in the muskiness of him while watching the shadows of the room lengthen and then rapidly darken. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

2

Two days later Gwen woke early to sunlight streaming through her muslin curtains. She was looking forward to breakfasting with Laurence, and then being taken on the grand tour. She sat on the side of the bed and undid the plaits in her hair, then swivelled round to sink her feet into a sleek fur rug. She glanced down and wriggled her toes in its whiteness, wondering what animal it had belonged to. Out of bed, she slipped on a pale silk gown someone had draped over a nearby chair.

They'd arrived at the plantation in the hill country the night before, just as the sun went down. With a head aching from exhaustion, and dazzled by the violent reds and purples of the evening sky, Gwen had fallen into bed.

Now she marched across the wooden floorboards and went to the window to pull the curtains apart. She took a deep breath when she looked out on the first morning of her new world and, blinking in the brightness, reeled at the barrage of buzzing, whistling and chirping that filled the air.

Below her, gentle flower-filled gardens sloped down to the lake in three terraces, with paths, steps and benches strategically placed between the three. The lake itself was the most gloriously shining silver she'd ever seen. All memory of the previous day's car journey, with its terrifying hairpin bends, deep ravines and nauseating bumps, was instantly washed away. Rising up behind the lake, and surrounding it, was a tapestry of green velvet, the tea bushes as symmetrical as if they'd been stitched in rows, where women tea pickers wore eye-catching brightly coloured saris, and looked like tiny embroidered birds who had stopped to peck.

Just outside her bedroom window, there was a grapefruit tree

beside another tree she didn't recognize, but that looked as if it was laden with cherries. She would actually pick some for breakfast, she decided. On the table out there, a small creature stared back at her with round saucer-like eyes, looking half monkey and half owl. She glanced back at the enormous four-poster bed, surrounded by a mosquito net. The satin spread was barely crumpled and she thought it odd that Laurence hadn't joined her. Perhaps, wanting her to have an uninterrupted sleep after the journey, he had gone to his own room. She looked round, hearing the door creak as it opened. 'Oh, Laurence I –'

'Lady. You must be knowing, I am Naveena. Here to wait on you.'

Gwen stared at the small, square-shaped woman. She wore a long blue and yellow wraparound skirt with a white blouse, and had a long greying plait that hung all the way down her back. Her round face was a mass of wrinkles and her dark-ringed eyes gave nothing away.

'Where's Laurence?'

'Master is at work. Since two hours going now.'

Deflated, Gwen took a step back and sat on the bed.

'You wishing breakfast here?' The woman indicated a small table in the window. There was a pause as they stared at each other. 'Or verandah?'

'I'd like to wash first. Where is the bathroom?'

The woman walked across to the other side of the room, and as she moved, Gwen noticed her hair and clothes were infused with an unusual spicy fragrance.

'Here, Lady,' the woman said. 'Behind screen is your bathing room, but latrine coolie not coming yet.'

'Latrine coolie?'

'Yes, Lady. Coming soon.'

'Is the water hot?'

The woman waggled her head. Gwen was unsure whether she had meant yes it was or no it wasn't, and realized she must have shown her uncertainty.

'There is wood-burn boiler, Lady. Albizia wood. Hot water coming in, morning and evening, one hour.'

Gwen held her head high and attempted to sound more self-assured than she felt. 'Very well. I shall wash first and then take breakfast outside.'

'Very good, Lady.'

The woman pointed at the French windows. 'They open to verandah. I will go and come. Bring tea for you there.'

'What is the creature out there?'

The woman turned to look, but the creature had gone.

In complete contrast to the sweltering humidity of Colombo, it was a bright but slightly chilly morning. After breakfasting she picked a cherry; the fruit was a lovely dark red, but when she bit, it tasted sour, and she spat it out. She wrapped her shawl round her shoulders and set off to investigate the house.

First she explored a wide, high-ceilinged corridor that ran the length of the house. The dark wooden floor gleamed and the walls were punctuated by oil lamps along its length. She sniffed the air. She'd expected the place to smell of cigar smoke, which it did, but it also smelt strongly of coconut oil and aromatic polish. Laurence called it a bungalow, but Gwen noticed a sweeping teak staircase that led off from an airy hall to another floor. On the other side of the stairs, a beautiful chiffonier inlaid with mother of pearl leant against the wall, and next to that was a door. She pushed open the door and walked into a spacious drawing room.

Surprised by its size, she took a deep breath, opened one of the brown shuttered windows from a bank of windows running across the entire wall, and saw this room also fronted the lake. As light filled the room she glanced around. The walls were painted the softest blue-green you could imagine and the general effect of the place was refreshingly cool, with comfy-looking armchairs and two pale sofas piled high with embroidered cushions depicting birds, elephants and exotic flowers. A leopard skin hung across the back of one of the sofas.

Gwen stood on one of two navy-blue and cream Persian rugs, and twirled round with her arms held out. This would do nicely. Very nicely indeed.

A deep growl startled her. She glanced down to see that she'd trodden on the paw of a sleeping short-haired dog. A glossy black Labrador she thought it might be, though not quite the usual kind. She took a step back, wondering if it might bite. At that moment a middle-aged foreign man almost soundlessly entered the room. A narrow-shouldered man, with small features and a saffron-brown face, he wore a white sarong, white jacket and a white turban.

'The old dog's name is Tapper, Lady. Master's favourite dog. I am butler, and here is tiffin.' He held out the tray he was carrying then deposited it on a small nest of tables. 'Our own Broken Orange Pekoe.'

'Really? I've only just had breakfast.'

'Master will return after twelve. You will hear the workers' horn, Lady, and then he will be here.' He indicated a wooden rack beside the fireplace. 'There are magazines for you to read.'

'Thank you.'

It was a large stone-surround fireplace, with brass tongs, shovel and a poker, the usual trappings of a fire, and beside them an enormous basket piled high with logs. She smiled. A cosy evening lay ahead, with just the two of them curled up beside the fire.

She had just an hour before Laurence returned so, ignoring the tea, she decided to explore the outside of the house. It had been dusk when they'd arrived in Laurence's new Daimler, and she hadn't been able to see what the front of the house really looked like. She found her way back along the corridor and into the main hall, then pushed open one of the dark double doors, with a pretty decorative fanlight above it, and found herself on the front step, under a shady porch. A gravel drive, lined with flowering tulip trees, and interspersed with palms, led away from the house, and then twisted upwards into the hills. A few of the blooms lay scattered like large orange tulips, bright against the grassy verge.

She longed to walk up into the hills, but first went round to the side of the house, where a covered, but wall-less room fronted the lake, though at a slightly different angle from her own room. This outdoor room or portico had eight dark wooden pillars, a marble floor and rattan furniture, and the table was already set for lunch. When a small striped squirrel raced up one of the pillars and disappeared behind a beam, she grinned.

Retracing her steps to the front of the house, she began to climb the gravel drive, counting the trees. The further she climbed, the stickier she felt, but she didn't want to look back until she reached twenty. As she counted, and smelt the scent of Persian roses, the heat was building up, though thankfully still nothing like the blistering hub of Colombo. Either side of her, lush verges were carpeted with bushes crammed with large heart-shaped leaves and peachy white flowers.

At the twentieth tree she threw off her wrap, closed her eyes and spun round. Everything glittered. The lake, the red roof of the house, even the air. She took a deep breath as if by doing so she might absorb every particle of the beauty before her: the scented flowers, the thrill of the view, the luminous green of the plantation hills, the sound of the birds. It was heady stuff. Nothing kept still, and the air, filled with vivid bustling life, buzzed in continuous motion.

From her vantage point the shape of the house was clear. The back elevation was parallel with the lake, with the outdoor room on the right, and at one side of the house it looked like an extension had been added, thus forming an 'L'. Beside it was a courtyard and a path that disappeared through a wall of tall trees. She took several more deep breaths of clean air.

The ugly loud hooting of the midday horn shattered the tranquillity. She had lost track of time, but her heart skipped a beat when she picked out Laurence with another man as they strode from the tall trees towards the house. He looked in his element, strong and in charge. She threw her shawl over her shoulder and made a dash for it. But running down the steep slope was more

awkward than climbing up, and after a few minutes she slid on the gravel, caught her toe in a root, lost her footing and fell forward so hard it forced the air from her lungs.

When she was able to breathe and attempted to stand, her left ankle gave way. She rubbed her grazed forehead and felt so dizzy she sat back on her behind, already feeling the start of another headache, set off by the sun's heat. It had been so cool earlier, she hadn't thought to wear a sun hat. From beyond the tall trees she heard a frightful shriek, like a cat or a child in pain, or perhaps a jackal. She didn't want to wait to find out, so she forced herself to stand again, this time managing not to yield to the pain, and began to hop back down to the house.

Just as she was in clear sight of the front door, Laurence came back out and hurried towards her.

'I'm so pleased to see you,' she called out as her breath quickened. 'I went up to see the view but I fell.'

'Sweetheart, it isn't safe. There are snakes. Grass snakes, tree snakes. Snakes that rid the gardens of rats. All kinds of biting ants and beetles. Better not go off on your own. Not yet.'

She pointed at where the women had been picking tea. 'I'm not as delicate as I look, and those women were in the countryside.'

'The Tamils know the land,' he said as he came across to her. 'Never mind, hold on to my arm and we'll get you inside, and I'll ask Naveena to strap that ankle up. I can get the local doctor down from Hatton if you like.'

'Naveena?'

'The ayah.'

'Oh yes.'

'She looked after me as a child and I'm fond of her. When we have children –'

Gwen raised her brows and gave him a slow smile. He grinned, then finished his sentence: 'She'll look after them.'

She stroked his arm. 'What will I have to do?'

'There's plenty to do. You'll soon find out.'

On the way back down to the house, she felt the warmth of his body against hers. Despite the pain in her ankle, she experienced the familiar tingle, and lifted a hand to touch the deep cleft in his chin.

Once her ankle had been bandaged, they both sat down together in the outdoor room.

'Well,' he said, with a sparkle in his eyes. 'Do you like what you see?'

'It's perfect, Laurence. I'm going to be very happy here with you.'

'I blame myself for your fall. I'd intended to talk to you last night, but your headache was so bad, I decided to wait. There are a few little things I need to mention.'

She glanced up. 'Oh?'

The furrows on his forehead deepened, and when he narrowed his eyes, it was clear how the sun had enhanced the wrinkles there.

'For your own safety, steer clear of workforce matters. You don't need to bother yourself with the labour lines.'

'What on earth are they?'

'They're where the plantation workers and their families live.'

'But that sounds interesting.'

'To be honest, there's nothing much to see.'

She shrugged. 'Anything else?'

'Best not to wander about unaccompanied.'

She snorted.

'Just until you're more familiar with things.'

'Very well.'

'Only allow Naveena to see you in your nightgown. She'll bring your morning tea at eight. Bed tea, they call it.'

She smiled. 'And do you stay with me for bed tea?'

'Every chance I get.'

She blew him a kiss across the table. 'I can't wait.'

'Me neither. Now don't worry about a thing. You'll soon pick up on how things are done. You'll meet some of the other

planters' wives tomorrow. She's a funny old bird, but Florence Shoebotham may be a great help to you.'

'I haven't got anything left to wear.'

He grinned. 'That's my girl. McGregor has already sent someone in a bullock cart to pick up your trunk from Hatton station. Later, I'll introduce you to the staff, but apparently there's a crate waiting for you from Selfridges too. Things you ordered before you came out I'm guessing?'

She stretched out her arms, feeling suddenly brighter at the thought of the Waterford crystal and a wonderful new evening dress. The dress was just the thing, short with several layers of fringes in silver and pink. She remembered the day in London when Fran had insisted she have it made. Only ten days and Fran would be here too. A large jackdaw swept across the table and, quick as a wink, snatched a bread roll from the basket. She laughed and Laurence did too.

'There's a lot of wildlife. I saw a striped squirrel run into the verandah roof.'

'There are two. They have a nest up there. They do no harm.'

'I like that.' She touched his hand and he lifted it to kiss her palm.

'One last thing. I'd almost forgotten, but it's probably the most essential point. Household matters are entirely your affair. I won't interfere. The household staff answer to you and only to you.'

He paused.

'You may find things have gone a little awry. The staff have had their own way for far too long. It might be a struggle, but I'm sure you'll pull them back into shape.'

'Laurence, it'll be fun. But you haven't really told me much about the estate itself.'

'Well, it's a large Tamil workforce. The Tamil are excellent workers, unlike most of the Sinhalese. We house at least fifteen hundred. Provide a school of sorts, a dispensary and basic medical aid. They have various benefits, a shop, subsidized rice.'

'And the actual tea making?'

'That's all done in our tea factory. It's a long process but I'll show you one day, if you like.'

'I'd love it.'

'Good. So now that's settled, I suggest an afternoon rest,' he said, standing up.

She looked down at the remains of their luncheon and hugged herself. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Now was the time. When Laurence bent down to kiss her forehead, she closed her eyes and couldn't stifle the grin of pleasure, but as she opened her eyes, she saw he had already moved off.

'I'll see you this evening,' he was saying. 'I'm so sorry, darling, but I have to see McGregor now. The tea factory horn will sound at four, and I'll be away from the house then, but do sleep on.'

She felt tears warm the back of her lids but wiped her eyes with her table napkin. She knew how busy Laurence was and, of course, the plantation had to come first, but was she only imagining that her lovely, sensitive husband was being just a teeny bit distant?