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The Lazarus Gate

Written by Mark A. Latham

Published by Titan Books

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The LAZARUS GATE

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TITAN BOOKS

The Lazarus Gate
Print edition ISBN: 9781783296804
E-book ISBN: 9781783296811

Published by Titan Books
A division of Titan Publishing Group Ltd
144 Southwark Street, London SE1 0UP

First edition: September 2015
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Printed in the USA.

To Alison, for ensuring every day that I never grow up.

PROLOGUE



13th January 1890, 6.00 a.m.

LONDON, ENGLAND

The sound of the explosion had barely stopped ringing in the sergeant's ears when he snatched a glimpse of the thin man once again, vanishing around the corner. Somewhere nearby, three harsh trills of a police whistle sounded and, shaking his head to clear his senses, Sergeant Clegg snatched up his hat and steeled himself to join the pursuit.

Moments ago, Clegg had been in a daze, dabbing at his bleeding forehead whilst slumped against the portico of a coffee house. Now he was able to take stock of the situation, and was relieved that few people had been injured in the blast. It was early morning, and but for a few street traders laying out their stalls, street sweepers, and some eager clerks trying to get ahead of the day's work, it seemed that casualties would be limited. The same could not be said of his detail; he had counted three officers unconscious, and a further two groaning in agony by the side of the road. Smoke drifted across the street, and charred debris was spilled over the cobbles like coal from a scuttle. Shopfronts were splintered and smashed.

Clegg's shift had been long and wearying, and by rights it should have come to an end over an hour ago. But police work had a way of pressing a man beyond his limits, and Clegg now found himself pursuing these so-called anarchists through the streets of the West End. He was only dimly aware of the chaos unfurling around him, and of his colleagues dashing after him along Bond Street.

Threep-threep-threep! Constable Harris's whistle snapped Clegg from his reverie, and he squinted to clear his vision, in time to see the stocky policeman charging along the road, waving and whistling as he went, heading towards the junction of Oxford Street. Clegg shouted to any officers who were uninjured to follow him, and staggered off in pursuit. Had Harris seen the anarchists? If he had, there'd be hell to pay.

There were four of them now, with Harris in the lead. Constables Gleghorn and Regis seemed only lightly injured, and had picked themselves up after hearing the commotion. The sergeant's mind raced. Why would dynamiters target a near-empty street? What could be the point?

The sky overhead was a deep indigo, and the gaslights still burned, though they struggled to penetrate the remnants of last night's particular and the palls of grey smoke from the explosion. This didn't make any sense. Clegg pushed these thoughts aside, and reached deep inside himself for reserves of energy, redoubling his efforts to catch up with Constable Harris and whomever he was chasing. The policemen had no sooner reached the end of the road when the sound of clattering hooves filled the air, and a Black Maria approached them at speed from the right, skittering out of a side-street that led to Hanover Square. The two horses pulling it sweated and snorted, their exertions clear to see. The police coach slowed to turn onto New Bond Street and join the chase, and the man seated next to the driver shouted instructions to Clegg. It was the detective from Special Branch, the man in black who had sent them on this assignment just hours ago. Clegg had no idea how the man had requisitioned a police coach

so quickly, but he was glad to see reinforcements regardless.

'That's it man, keep going!' shouted the detective, in his Irish lilt. 'We almost have them.'

Clegg urged his legs to keep pace with the Maria, but the events of the day were starting to take their toll on the stout sergeant. His lungs felt raw and his chest pounded. The heavy uniform, cape and helmet felt more and more like a suit of armour.

When Clegg rounded the bend at the end of New Bond Street, the rising sun glared at him along the wide open thoroughfare of Oxford Street. His vision blurred, and his fatigue got the better of him. He pulled up sharply and squinted at the road ahead. Gleghorn and Regis overtook him, their youthful enthusiasm and desire for justice outweighing their bodies' requirements for rest. Sergeant Clegg took a deep breath, and pushed onwards, albeit at a slow jog. He could hear one of his men calling back to him, 'Come on, Sarge. There's three of 'em. We've got the bastards!'

The Black Maria was up ahead, stationary now, and there were more policemen at the scene. He could hear shouts and cries, and then a gunshot rang out into the early morning air. The few people who had seen fit to walk along Oxford Street at this hour scattered away from the commotion, and Clegg forgot about his tired legs and dry throat and raced towards the fight. Another gunshot rang out. Clegg reached the Maria, and was just about to rush into the fray when a dazzling flash of light saturated the area, accompanied by a high-pitched humming noise. No sooner had Clegg checked his run than Harris flew past him, like a rag doll, landing in a heap ten feet away on the cobbled stones. The horses at the front of the Black Maria whinnied and reared, and broke free of their driver's control. They bolted, taking the police coach with them, and headed back along Oxford Street as fast as they could go. Clegg was scared now. He took one look at the burly lad on the ground, clenched his teeth, and turned to face the danger. The coach was gone and with it his only cover, but he was still aware of the constables around him, and of the Special Branch man. Ahead of him was the Marble Arch, and

the remaining policemen were fanning out, brandishing their truncheons menacingly, whilst the detective pointed a stubby pistol towards the archway. Clegg took his place in the line, in time to see the thin man—the man they'd pursued all over the West End this morning—waving a gun in the direction of his colleagues with menace. The leg of a second fugitive disappeared through the arch, and Sergeant Clegg squinted in puzzlement for an instant. Hadn't the leg of the running anarchist been rather slender? Had he really seen the flash of lace at the stockinged ankle? A woman! Clegg pushed such thoughts aside, for surely his mind was playing tricks on him. In any case there was no way out for them now. The sadistic buggers would take cover in the archway, behind those walls of thick white marble, but they'd have to give it up eventually. They were in the middle of an exposed stone square—a courtyard surrounded by wide roads—and the archway was gated secure. This was their last stand.

There was another flash of light, although not as bright as before, and definitely coming from the arch this time. The thin man winked at them, turned his back and darted into the archway. But the detective had other ideas, and fired his gun again, this time finding his mark. The thin man dropped to the ground, the back of his skull a bloody mess.

'Come on!' shouted the detective, and darted towards the arch. The other officers had surrounded the edifice, but Clegg was afraid—the fugitives were surely armed.

'Hold on, sir!' Clegg cried, and dashed forwards, hoping to reach his superior before he got himself killed. But he need not have worried. When Clegg and the detective reached the archway, there was but one anarchist, the thin man, and he was dead where he'd been shot. Clegg looked around in every direction, and then stared through the archway. On the other side was Regis, looking dumbfounded. There had been three anarchists, he was sure. So where were they?

'Don't just stand there gawping, Sergeant,' the Irish detective snapped. 'Search the body.'

Clegg stepped forward to do as he had been instructed. The thin man was sprawled out on the ground in the shadow of the arch, his brains splattered on the cobbles. The sergeant was about to turn the body over, when he noticed something that made him pause. The anarchist had fallen inside the arch, his right hand outstretched towards the bronze gates of the monument. But there was no sign of the gun that he had been wielding just moments ago. In fact, his right hand was mutilated—the fingers seemingly sliced off cleanly, with no trace of blood. Clegg looked around, confused, and saw the detective looming over him. Clegg didn't need to see his shadowed expression to know that it was as grim as always.

'Search his body,' the man in black repeated.

'But, sir…' Clegg tailed off. He couldn't understand what had just happened; any of it.

Then he noticed that high-pitched humming noise was starting again, only this time it came from the corpse, and was getting louder. The Special Branch man was looking at his pocketwatch.

'Do it now, man!' he hissed at Clegg. 'We don't have much time.'

13th January 1890, 3.00 a.m.

YAMETHIN DISTRICT, BURMA

The manacles around his wrists and ankles curbed his progress, but nothing could stop John Hardwick from walking out of this hellhole. His matted hair was dirty and lice-ridden, and his beard scratched his chest as his head hung low from fatigue, yet his eyes were cold, determined. He felt the rifle butt push against his back once more, a sign that his captor was tired of his woefully slow shuffling.

'Myan myan lou!' one of the Burmese guards barked.

John picked up the pace as best he could. His feet were bare, filthy and bleeding. His prison garb was stained and tattered,

and he felt so weak it was painful to walk. When he had first emerged from his confinement, he had felt like Jeremiah released, and probably looked not unlike the prophet either. The warm air felt sweeter than anything he had ever known, though he had to squint even at the moonlight, as his eyes were so unaccustomed to light. How long had he been kept in that squalid cell? He wagered months, but it was hard to tell. This was the first time for as long as he could remember he had seen a guard and not been either beaten or force-fed opium, and his thoughts were confused. He tried to clear his head and take stock of his situation, his military training and experience coming back to him now that he was out of that pit of a cell.

He was being marched towards the perimeter wall of the tiny prison complex, along a dry dirt path that sloped down a steep hill. Tall, spindly palm trees lined the track on either side, black against the night sky like spectators on a gallows-walk, perhaps. John could just make out the silhouetted huts and rickety tower that passed for a guardhouse here, and by the moon and starlight he could see that there were half a dozen armed guards beside the tall bamboo gates, and some activity outside them. That such small numbers of rebels had proved sufficient to hold this position in a country that was mostly British-ruled was unnerving. This region had been claimed in the name of Her Majesty almost five years hence, and although the local government paid its taxes to the British governor at Rangoon, the hills were still wild and full of bandits and freedom fighters.

John was flanked by two guards. One set the pace, yanking his chains to hurry him along, the other strolled more nonchalantly. John knew the little bastard only too well, though only as 'Maung'—an honorific name of sorts, which the sadistic and diminutive rebel was entirely undeserving of. A few hours ago, John had been dragged from his cell for more midnight interrogations. Why they persisted in the charade God only knew—if John had known anything of interest, he'd have told

them long ago. In fact, after all the drugs and the beatings, he'd probably have told them many times. He couldn't be sure. By now his intelligence must be woefully out of date, and yet the Burmese rebels continued to torture and interrogate him, and the other prisoners, on an almost daily basis. John believed truly that they were merely going through the motions to sate their sadistic desires, and that they hadn't killed him because one day they'd need a British officer to trade. Was this that day? Perhaps, but he was unsure. All he knew was that his torture had ended, for now at least, and he had been brought outside. Outside! This was the first time that he'd breathed the open air for what seemed like an eternity. He refused to let the fact that it was the air of this God-forsaken country sully his pleasure.

Before he knew it, John was bundled into an ox-cart beside a muscular guard, who grunted at him contemptuously. The cart rumbled away from the prison, flanked by two mounted rebels. John looked back to see Maung spit at the ground in his direction, watching his prisoner's departure with enmity in his eyes.

By the time the trade was made, the sun was already high in the sky and the day was hot. They were no longer in the foothills of the Yamethin District. The Burmese guards who accompanied him now were not rebels, but liveried servants of the Crown. His manacles were gone, and he was being half-carried by disciplined soldiers into the shade of a small courtyard. John's head swam. He had passed in and out of consciousness for the whole journey, oblivious to the fact that he must have travelled nearly three hundred miles.

'Welcome back to civilisation, Captain Hardwick. Welcome to Rangoon.' The Englishman who greeted John smiled broadly. That smile was the last thing John saw before he passed out and was caught by the colonial guards.

13th January 1890, 12 noon

LONDON, ENGLAND

The Artist daubed the last stroke of oil paint onto his canvas and set down his brush. Smiling to himself, he stepped back to admire his handiwork. Any other man would have struggled to see the painting in the wan light of the apartment, but the Artist appeared pleased.

'Another triumph, my sweet pets. But what does it all mean? Shall we meditate upon it, hmm?' The Artist spoke as if to no one, but turned his head at the sound of movement in the corner of the room, from where his pets looked on.

The Artist pulled a loose robe of Chinese silk over his tattooed nakedness, tying the cord at the waist before tossing his long black hair free of the garment. He strode across the wood-floored room, his slippered feet making barely a sound. The midday sun struggled to find its way into the austere room through two small, grimy windows that overlooked a half-derelict warren of slums and gambling houses in the dark bosom of the Isle of Dogs. The few rays that pushed through were diffused by the constant swirl of opium smoke from the den below. The Artist walked to his bed and sat down upon it, savouring the feel of the thick mattress and satin bedclothes. Reaching to his nightstand he picked up a large glass pipe, lit it and took a draw, sighing as the opiates entered his system. He closed his eyes momentarily, savouring the sensation, before setting down the pipe and taking up instead a silver-tipped cane. Grasping the head of the cane, he rapped its tip hard against the wooden floor. Almost immediately, he could hear footsteps on the stairs below, racing to his door, followed mere moments later by a quiet knocking.

'Come!'

A burly Chinese servant entered the room, bringing with him a billow of smoke from the corridor beyond. He bowed low, his

black braided hair almost touching the floor as he did so.

'Master,' he said. 'I am at your service.'

The Artist rose from the bed and stepped forward. Tall and lithe, he towered over the servant who himself was not a small man.

'Hu, I have several errands for you.' The Artist gestured towards a far corner, where six canvases lay wrapped in brown paper beside a lacquered cabinet. 'Deliver those today, and be sure to insist upon the usual price. I am in no mood for bartering.'

Hu bowed again in acknowledgement and waited for further instructions, absent-mindedly fingering the wicked hook that passed for his left hand.

'I would also ask of you to call on Mr. Ruskin again. Tell him that his canvas is ready, but it is too large to move with any degree of secrecy. He must come here—it is in his best interests to view the painting before month's end. And it will be double the usual price. Remember, Hu, that Mr. Ruskin requests the utmost discretion in our dealings. You will be invisible on this errand, understood?'

Hu nodded.

'That is all for now,' the Artist concluded.

Hu moved for the parcels, but hesitated when his eye caught the fresh canvas in the centre of the room.

'What is it, Hu?' asked the Artist, impatience creeping into his tone.

'Will you require a… buyer for your latest work today, master?' Hu asked.

'Ah… no. Not today. This is something altogether more interesting than a mere commission.'

Hu gathered the parcels and bowed again. A bumping and scratching from the closet in the corner caught his attention, and he bowed once more before hurrying backwards in the direction of the door, casting a nervous glance at the corner before heading down the stairs whence he had come. The Artist strode across the room towards the closet, pausing only to take down a jar from a shelf on the wall. When he reached the closet,

he reached inside the jar for some strips of dried pork, which he threw down to his pets.

'Yes, yes. You see it too, don't you, my pets; my muses? This is most unexpected. The picture shows us what will come to pass, but how should one interpret such an image? If I am right, then it is all happening rather sooner than expected.' He paused to throw more meat into the closet. Chains rattled as his pets scrabbled for the titbits.

'What am I to do with this information, do you think? Who can I trust?' His ears pricked up as a low murmuring began. He smiled as one of his pets struggled to make a noise—first a gurgling, then a mumble.

'L… L… Lazarussss,' came the weak reply. The Artist's smile broadened with pleasure.

'Yes, my sweet. I rather thought you'd say that. Who's a clever girl?'

PART 1



The world was never made;
It will change, but it will not fade.
So let the wind range;
For even and morn
Ever will be
Through eternity.
Nothing was born;
Nothing will die;
All things will change.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

ONE



FROM THE JOURNAL OF JOHN HARDWICK

3rd January 1891

As I sit here at my desk to write this narrative, outside my window the night draws in all too quickly, and the orange-hued London fog that so characterises winter in this great city has dropped. It is at once enveloping, smothering and yet oddly comforting; comforting because it means that I am home at last. Little less than a year ago I never would have dreamt that it could be so.

The events I am about to record are true insofar as my memory allows. When reading the memoirs and monographs of others, it has often occurred to me that the recorded facts contained within cannot be wholly accurate. The human brain, after all, can only store so much information before it becomes fragmented or distorted. Therefore I have set down in writing every relevant detail as faithfully as I am humanly able, such as my skill with words will allow. I testify to you that this tale is true and in earnest. Though you might well think this story odd, or impolitic, or even unbelievable, it must be told—for who could believe that this document is anything but a work

of fiction after reading it? I can scarcely believe it myself, and I wish it were not the truth. For what this 'adventure' has taught me is that there truly are more things in heaven and earth—to misquote the Bard—than one can dream of. And precious few of them are wholesome. I am changed, quite irrevocably, by my experiences. I have learned, this past year, what fear truly is, and I doubt if I shall ever sleep well again knowing it.

This then, is my story; the true and honest testimony of John Hardwick.

28th March 1890

My arrival in London had been unceremonious, but nonetheless long awaited. I had spent forty days at sea with but two brief stops, and no hardship that may have lain in store for me could have dampened my enthusiasm for dry land. Of course, the English weather and the grimy London docks conspired to do just that, but it seemed like paradise to me. I disembarked the Navy steam cutter, HMS *Gannet*, for what I hoped was the final time, finding myself peering through thick swirls of mist on a drear and chilly morning. I closed my eyes to drink in the sounds and smells of London—labourers and ships' captains calling out and barking orders; bells tolling from departing ships across the mist-wreathed Thames; the creaking of ropes and timbers; the clanking of chains, winches and pulleys; the smell of tobacco, coffee, rum and sugar drifting from containers, and mingling with the salty air and smoky London particular. This, then, was home. A home that I had not seen in some six years, yet which still burned brightly in my memories.

My escort awaited me at the gates, and he was not quite what I had been expecting. Not that I'd really known what to expect. Captain James Denny of the Royal Horse Guards was a young, thin-faced man with a surprisingly garrulous nature and easy sense of humour. He and the two soldiers he had brought

with him were not in uniform, but presented me with salutes regardless. When I returned the honour, Denny winked and said, 'Oh no, sir. You're a civilian now.' I cracked a smile, albeit a humourless one.

Captain Denny, who insisted I call him Jim, was under instruction to meet me and help me get my bearings. He was at my disposal for a day or two, and whilst I initially felt irked that Horse Guards had sent a nursemaid for a man of my experience, I quickly became at ease in Jim's company and was glad of the companionship. No sooner had we stepped outside the main gateway to the docklands than my head swam. Any sense of relief I felt at the British weather, the cobbled streets and plain architecture was immediately countered by my confusion. I had hoped for a swift return to a more familiar district of the city and, as if reading my mind, Jim showed me to a waiting cab. The soldiers took my few bags—a great relief, for I was still gaunt and weak from my long convalescence—and secured them on the cab's stowage, and in a trice we were away.

My first task, and one of no small importance, was to find somewhere to live. My father had spent so much of his later life on the move that anything resembling a family home had long since been lost to me. After Mother had died my father had grudgingly supported me, but even then I had been unable to lay down roots whilst my studies took up most of my time. What had become of our old properties after Father's death remained a mystery to me.

When I remarked that I had no idea where I would room, Captain Denny became quite animated.

'My dear fellow,' he exclaimed, 'it seems the world is your oyster! You must ride with us to Westminster and seek suitable accommodation.'

I baulked at the idea, and he realised almost before he had finished speaking that lodging in Westminster was beyond my means. Not that I truly understood what my means were, but the bookkeeping would also have to wait for now.

'Of course, if you desire something more, ah, "homely" while you become acclimatised to the city,' he continued, correcting himself as he went along, 'then I can show you some marvellous guesthouses. Let's get you some rooms, courtesy of Her Majesty's armed forces, eh? I know a good place in Bloomsbury if it suits.'

He smiled warmly, and I could detect no real snobbishness. The army looks after its own, and until I had seen the state of my accounts I was rather glad of someone to pick up the bills and organise things for me. I accepted his offer, and he instructed the driver to take us to the north end of Gower Street. I knew the area of Bloomsbury to be an unassuming district, with a reputation for being frequented by intellectuals, artists and dreamy dilettantes, and I was sure it was a place in which I could be anonymous. I craved peace and quiet, at least for a while, without the pressure of keeping up appearances. I felt agoraphobic, like an animal too long in captivity, uncertain of the conditions of its release. I tried to put aside such foolishness but, as we rode, I confided in Denny that there was more to my choice of lodgings than just assets.

'In truth,' I explained, 'I do want somewhere homely, as you put it. I've been away for too long, Jim; experienced more than anyone's fair share out East. I don't mind telling you that I was already feeling stifled when I reached the embassy in Hong Kong—every dinner a formal one, every conversation stuffy and centred on politics. I just want to lay my head on a soft pillow and eat some hearty food that hasn't been prepared by the finest chefs money can buy. A comfortable boarding house sounds far more appealing to me right now than a stuffy hotel or large, empty townhouse. Does that make any kind of sense?'

Jim tipped his head back and laughed. 'Not really, old boy, I'd live in first-rate hotels all my life given half a chance—but I think if I were in your shoes I wouldn't make much sense either.' I couldn't help but laugh with him, and yet I wondered what would happen to him if he were sent out to the front line, far

away from the finer things in life to which he was so obviously accustomed. Would he be so ready with a jest if he'd seen all that I had?

The growler rattled its way along cobbled streets, the sound of the horses' hooves almost drowned out by the rhythmic clattering caused by the steel-rimmed wheels of the carriage. I gazed out of the small window as Jim prattled on about all that was current in London; the latest stage shows, museum exhibitions, fashionable writers and society scandals. He was rarely serious, and I wondered how on earth he could command the respect of his men. One soldier rode with us, whilst the other accompanied the driver. The man in our cab was a youthful private, not a day over eighteen I guessed, conspicuous by his silence.

'You know,' said Jim, 'our fathers knew each other. Colonel Denny often talked about Brigadier Hardwick. He was a good soldier, by all accounts.'

'Yes, he was. It was all he knew. And Colonel Denny? Is he…?'

'Oh, he's very much alive, the old goat,' Jim laughed. 'Terrorising the servants, running the old house like a military academy.'

'I know that part,' I said, staring out of the window. 'I often think I should have just given in, and joined up sooner.'

'But you had other dreams. Fathers always want their sons to follow in their footsteps, whether they want to or not. I've seen it before—luckily, when I was a boy, I just wanted to be a cavalryman; and here I am.'

'I wish you more luck than I've had,' I said, earnestly. 'Following in my father's footsteps hasn't been quite what I'd expected.'

'Ah, yes. I heard you had a rough time of it. Wounded? Or captured?' He looked as though he regretted the question as soon as it escaped his lips.

'Captured. Six months, near as damn it.' Jim looked at me,

partly pityingly, partly in wonder.

'I hear conditions out there…' Jim stopped short.

'The Burmese rebels have methods of torture that are alien to an Englishman. Even now the memories are… well, let's just say I don't like to dwell on it. It was only after my release that I discovered how long I had been imprisoned.'

'I don't mean to pry, old boy…' Jim said.

'No, it's fine,' I said, somewhat disingenuously. I wondered if Jim had been ordered to coax answers from me. I had experienced plenty of that recently, but I had no desire to hide anything from the army, no matter how painful the memories.

'Why did the rebels release you? Did you ever find out?' Jim asked.

'No one knows. It was sudden and unexpected—maybe they realised I wasn't going to talk, and decided that they should get some value from me rather than kill me. The rebels contacted the Burmese police only on the morning of my release, and arranged an exchange—six captured rebel fighters for me. Thankfully, a British corporal had been stationed nearby with local forces, and had sanctioned the deal—otherwise I would probably still be languishing in a cell, or dead of malnutrition, or worse. I don't even remember being transferred to their care. In fact, I barely remember anything before I reached Rangoon almost two weeks afterwards. My old commanding officer, Colonel Swinburne, was waiting for me. It took three weeks before I was able to walk without a cane. I remember strolling with him in the grounds of the barracks, smoking cigars and taking a glass of brandy, when he told me that my tour of duty was over; that I was going home. Despite ten years' service, six of those spent overseas, I put up no resistance. Once the colonel decided I was well enough to travel, I donned my uniform for the last time and headed overland to our territory in China.'

'And then in Hong Kong… you were discharged with full honours? Must have been a relief, after everything.'

'I suppose so,' I smiled unconvincingly. 'At Hong Kong I spent a single day and night in the company of a group of British officers at the embassy, and that was the end of my service to the Crown. I took ship the next day as a civilian. I cannot feign disappointment—after everything I had been through I must confess that I'd found it difficult to look to my future career in the army. But now here I am at home, and I have no idea what to do with myself.'

Jim looked at me sympathetically. I avoided his gaze. My honourable discharge from the army had left me reeling. I knew that I would receive a fair pension, and that I had at least a small income from my father's old holdings, though I expected no inheritance from him. But I had known little except a military life, and with no family or property to speak of, I knew it would be hard work to carve a niche for myself back in England. I suppose the prospect was daunting, for I had spent months outside anything resembling normality, and the last few weeks in a sort of dream-like state where my convalescence could happily have taken for ever.

'After all that—you miss it, don't you?' Jim asked.

'It made me sad in a way that I can't really explain. Yes—I miss it. Out there a soldier can make a difference, if only he does his duty. Here… I don't know what a soldier can do here. And I'm not even a soldier any more, am I?'

Jim patted me on the arm. 'This is London, dear boy, seat of the Empire; greatest city in the world. You can do anything you put your mind to. Write your memoirs, make your fortune. You'll soon find your feet, you'll see. And besides, the army looks out for its own. We'll help you find your feet.'

From that point on, Jim seemed determined to talk about other things, and to take my mind off the past. Jim was a bit of a dilettante, perhaps, but he was a cheerful sort, and he helped the journey pass quickly. We followed the great curve of the Thames from the docks at Wapping to the City proper. We passed the yawning, open mouth of London Bridge, which

was already busy with traffic even before seven in the morning. Great overladen carts rumbled towards the many docks with their goods, while omnibuses trundled behind, early morning workers stuck behind the trade traffic in their bid to get to their shops and offices on the opposite side of the river.

We entered the quieter streets of Blackfriars and the tree-lined Victoria Embankment, before sweeping northwards past Whitehall and up Tottenham Court Road. The great thoroughfare was like an avenue passing through several towns—so many high streets, each with their own character. On some, the fishmongers were gathered outside with their stalls of fresh fish from the early deliveries. On others, tailors, cobblers and haberdashers were setting up shop, and on others still were costermongers selling fruit, vegetables, salted pork and more. Young boys in flat caps ran back and forth with messages, parcels and bundles of newspapers. It seemed the further up the road we travelled, the livelier and busier London became, as the morning broke.

Just as I thought the traffic up ahead would delay us, the driver veered along a side street and finally out onto our destination, which was not Gower Street as I'd expected, but George Street to the north. I shot a quizzical look at Jim.

'Oh, yes. It's not quite as run-down as you expected, eh? I wouldn't do that to you. It's a top-drawer lodging, but the proximity to Euston makes the rent a snip.' He grinned.

I laughed, and made work of climbing down from the growler. I was about to get my bags, but the two soldiers were there before me.

'Now,' said Jim, 'I must introduce you to your landlady, Mrs. Whitinger. Let me do the talking; if she sees you with that beard at this hour I'm sure she'll think you've come to rob her. You must shave it off at your earliest convenience, by the way—it's simply not the fashion for the younger man.'

I started to understand Jim's character. I imagined that, in his dress uniform, medals, sabre and hat he cut a fine figure at society balls. I didn't fancy his chances in battle, but I also did

not hold that against him. Let him make japes and dance, and woo the eligible young ladies while he could, as perhaps I should have done a decade ago.

'Are you sure Mrs. Whitinger will have rooms?' I asked uncertainly.

'Oh, quite sure. She keeps the middle apartment free for officers in need. The last tenant was my friend Daniel, but he got a promotion last month and moved out. Been vacant ever since.' That wink again. 'The flat, that is, not Dan.'

We stepped onto the broad stone steps to the entrance of 11 George Street. It was an unassuming terraced house of dark brick, with large sash windows on each of its three floors. The front door was clean and looked as new, and the window boxes outside the ground-floor windows were tidy, and full of daffodils in bloom, betokening a house-proud occupant. The frosted glass rose above the door glowed with the light from within. Thus seeing that at least one resident was indeed up and about, Jim rapped firmly at the door. We waited less than half a minute before hearing the sound of the bolt being drawn back, and the door opened. Before us stood a small yet stern-looking lady of advancing years, wearing a cornflower-blue dress and a white linen apron. Her silver hair was scraped back into a bun, and her grey eyes looked us over keenly.

'My dear Mrs. Whitinger,' said Jim, 'I hope you are well on this fine morning.'

'Oh, it's you Master James. I wasn't sure you'd be coming, least not yet. Have you brought me a new lodger?'

'I have indeed my good lady. This is Captain John Hardwick, retired.' He announced me with exaggerated grandeur, and as he had intimated to me earlier she eyed me with suspicion.

'Do not worry, Mrs. Whitinger, I can assure you Captain Hardwick is a gentleman born. He has just returned from a tediously long sea voyage after many years abroad, and is in need of comfortable rooms, a good breakfast, and a long-awaited brush and shave.' Jim turned and gave a wink, and looking past

him I saw that Mrs. Whitinger's demeanour had softened.

She invited us inside, and bade the two privates take my few bags up to the first-floor landing. She clearly had an affection for Jim, who chastised her with a laugh for calling him Master James. 'I'm a grown man now, Mrs. Whitinger, and a captain of Horse Guards. Really, John,' he said, turning to me, 'I despair. I believe I will always be a fresh-faced ensign to Mrs. Whitinger.'

Mrs. Whitinger showed me up the stairs to my rooms, and Jim followed along. It was almost as I had pictured. There were three rooms—a large lounge ran the length of the house, with a window overlooking the street and a good-sized fireplace in the far wall flanked by two comfortable-looking armchairs. A small Chesterfield sofa, breakfast table and chairs, mahogany sideboard and a tall, half-empty bookcase completed the furnishings. Two rooms led off from that one, a bedroom at the rear of the house away from the hustle and bustle of the main street, and a small study at the front. The apartment overall was of a modest size, light and airy, but with a fussy décor, all flowers, figurines and soft furnishings. It looked homely. I guessed that Mrs. Whitinger had been expecting a new lodger—the bed was freshly made and a small posy of daffodils filled a vase on the windowsill of the lounge. It turned out that she had received a message the previous evening from an administrator at Horse Guards, informing her that an officer might be coming to stay the following day, and to have the apartment ready just in case.

Seeing that I was pleased with my lodgings, Jim began to take his leave.

'The first month's rent shall be paid on the morrow,' he said, and Mrs. Whitinger thanked him. 'I leave you in the good hands of Mrs. Whitinger, John, and shall call on you this evening. I trust you will dine with me?' he asked, although he gave me no time to refuse. 'And don't be too frightened by Mrs. Whitinger; she may look formidable but she's a dear thing really.' Before the old landlady could reply, he was taking off down the stairs, chuckling as he went, leaving Mrs. Whitinger exasperated.

'Really, Captain Hardwick, I don't know what I'm to do with him.'

'I know what you mean,' I replied, with a smile. 'Did you mention breakfast just now?'

'Oh, yes, yes, of course. Please do follow me to the dining room,' she said apologetically, and led the way downstairs again. 'So that you know, sir, I live in the rooms just to the right there, should you need anything.'

Mrs. Whitinger showed me into a small dining room from which the smell of bacon emanated, setting off my rumbling stomach. An English breakfast after months of ship's rations seemed suddenly to be the most important mission of my day. There were two other guests from the upper rooms already tucking into the spread. I introduced myself to my fellow guests, who seemed uninterested in all but the most cursory chit-chat, which was how I liked it.

At last, the others took their leave, and I was able to steal a moment with the newspaper that one of them left behind. One story in particular piqued my interest, and I read it with an inexplicable sense of anxiety.

POLICE DUMBFOUNDED OVER DYNAMITE ATTACKS

LONDON—Scotland Yard has been forced to admit that it is no closer to solving the heinous bomb attacks that have shaken the City in recent months. Speaking at Whitehall yesterday, the Assistant Commissioner, Sir Alexander Carmichael Bruce, admitted that despite hundreds of police hours being spent on the case, the attackers remain at large.

Sir Alexander refused to comment on rumours that one of the perpetrators had been shot at the scene of January's Bond Street bomb last month, on the day when London was rocked by three such explosions. He also could not rule out the possibility that the attacks mark the return of the Irish-American Dynamiters,

who have not conducted such activity on a large scale since the Gower Street explosion of ’85.

Sir Alexander stressed that London was not under attack and that people should not panic. Anyone who sees suspicious activity that may be linked to Dynamiters should report directly to New Scotland Yard.

It was hard to believe that trouble of this nature could be just around the corner. Having travelled clean across the world from one conflict to another, I had pictured my eventual return to London as utterly serene, as if Britain had never been touched by violence. But of course, there had always been anarchists opposing the status quo, and I presumed that these particular agents of chaos were affiliated with one of the many nations with an axe to grind against England—a list that seemed to be growing rather than shortening during this so-called ‘long peace’.

I finished my breakfast and thanked Mrs. Whitinger as she came to clear away the dishes. I took the newspaper up to my room to peruse it more thoroughly, although I fancied a stroll around the locality once I had freshened up somewhat.

There was a large bathroom opposite my apartment, well-appointed with large enamelled tub, washbasin and the first indoor flushing toilet I had ever seen—a luxury that somehow made me feel outside my own time. I unpacked my rather meagre-looking travelling bag and washed, before taking a straight-razor to my matted seaman’s beard. The small mirror in the bathroom confirmed my fears—I looked terrible; tired, haggard and unkempt. I had always been tall and somewhat thin, but now I was a shadow of my former self, with barely an ounce of fat on my body and with wiry muscles that resembled taut, knotted cords. My body was a catalogue of pain and suffering, every mark on my flesh providing a reminder of a darker time. I winced as I looked at the scars on my bared torso—burns, cuts, tears, bullet wounds and the tiny round blotches left by

hypodermic syringes and vicious torturers' barbs. That was one part of my tale that I had not related to Jim. The countless nights spent wailing at the dark, fighting off night terrors as the opium had left my system. Colonel Swinburne, to his great credit, had never spoken of those episodes, and there was no record of them on my papers. The colonel had seen me cured of my addiction, or so he had thought. Some urges had never left me after I had escaped the rebels' clutches. even as I dwelt on it now, I could smell the mouldy, dirty prison; could hear the screams of the inmates and the sadistic laughter of the guards, until the noise began to deafen me and my head swam. I gripped the sides of the porcelain sink tight, and closed my eyes, willing the nightmare to be gone. As the sounds faded and I regained control of my senses, something darker still stirred within me. I became nauseous and dizzy, and a gnawing hunger tore at my insides until it became a stabbing pain in the pit of my stomach.

I threw my shirt on once more and flung open the bathroom door, heading back to my room in a wild mood. As I did so I crossed paths with Mrs. Whitinger and almost barrelled her over. I think I mumbled something by way of an apology, but did not otherwise look up to meet her eyes. As I closed the door of my rooms behind me, I could hear her calling to me in concern, but I did not answer and she did not press the matter. I was rummaging through my bags with increasing panic, before I laid my hands upon the object of my obsession.

I laid out the small, battered wooden box on the breakfast table. My hands shook as I opened it to reveal the syringe and phial of opium solution within. I stared at it, disgusted by my weakness. In truth, after leaving Rangoon I had indulged my craving only twice, and it was with the weak solution that the phial now contained, given to me by a sympathetic Chinese doctor in Hong Kong. The dose was barely strong enough to quell the symptoms, but I had almost beaten my addiction completely, and the drugs were now there for those times when I could cope no longer. This, I decided, reluctantly, was not such

a time. I clenched my fists and squeezed my eyes tight shut until the shaking stopped and the pounding in my head ceased. Until the screams of the prisoners and the shouts of the torturers faded away. Taking several deep breaths to compose myself, I snapped the case lid shut and repaired to my bedroom to dress.

My destination was Covent Garden, although I had not realised that Friday was one of the busy market days in that part of London. I'd hopped onto an omnibus to save my sea-legs from walking, but soon regretted the decision when it slowed to a crawl as we neared the congested streets. The roads were clogged with traffic, largely caused by lumbering ox carts resupplying the market stalls and local traders, and the advertising carts pulling their large billboards slowly around London with scant regard for the inconvenience caused to other drivers. As soon as I spied the towers of St. Paul's looming majestically over the buildings to the south, I hopped down from the back of the 'bus and continued on foot.

After a short walk through the bustling crowds, I turned onto Henrietta Street, counting down the numbers of the shop fronts until I found what I was looking for. An anonymous-looking black door lay just beyond an iron railing, with a small brass plaque next to the doorknocker its only identifying feature.

NAPLEY, FAIRCLOUGH & ASSOC.
SOLICITORS AT LAW

I was admitted to the lawyers' office by an ageing, spindle-fingered clerk with wispy grey hair and a serious face. He extended me every professional courtesy, and I was acutely aware that the clerk was better dressed than me.

It was almost three-quarters of an hour before I was called to see the solicitor, Mr. Fairclough. He was a small, rotund fellow with a serious face that would have looked intimidating were it

not for his bulbous nose with small round spectacles balanced precariously on the end.

'Mr *ehm*, Hardwick, is it?' he asked, offering me a seat in a chair facing his overlarge desk.

'That is correct, Mr. Fairclough.' I replied. 'I have not had cause to do business with your firm for many years, as I have been abroad, serving in Her Majesty's Army. But you represented my late father, Brigadier Sir Marcus Hardwick, and now that I have returned I have come to examine the state of the family assets, whatever that may be.'

'Ah, of course. I did not recognise you, sir, but then I believe we met only once or twice and, as you say, it was long ago. I—*ehm*—do remember your father, however, and I'm sure I can be of service. Now, let me see…'

He got up from his tall leather chair and waddled over to a large bookcase, from which he pulled a large ledger. Placing it on his desk, he turned to a filing cabinet by the window and after some searching retrieved several sheaves of paper.

I had not known what to expect. I had fair resigned myself to the fact that most of my father's assets would have long been dissolved or sold off to pay debtors—whether there would be anything left for me to take charge of was questionable. However, I found myself pleasantly surprised. As Mr. Fairclough droned on, I realised that my father had been as shrewd a businessman as I could have imagined. He seemed to have had shares in firms all over London, from haulage and shipping to factories and liveries. Some had gone bankrupt or ceased trading over the years, but many were still solvent, and the dividends had been steadily accumulating during my time abroad. I had inherited a goodly percentage of all my father's assets, and so much of the money, and the shares themselves, were now mine. I was even more surprised to learn that my father had owned properties in various parts of the country—a cottage in Keswick, Cumberland; a small townhouse in York; a flat in Nottingham; an isolated farmstead in Kent; and others too. Whilst inspecting these

papers, Mr. Fairclough remarked upon a peculiar irregularity. It appeared some of the properties were still leased or rented, while others had long-standing tenants for whom my father had made provision, and who provided further income. There was more than one estate manager on the books, who dutifully deducted expenses, paid rents into the proper accounts, and looked after the properties and the tenants. My eyes were drawn to one particular paper, listing the deeds to that address near Faversham in Kent, the closest we had come to having a family home. It was there that we had lost my sister, Lily, to pneumonia, an event which had brought to a close perhaps the happiest days of my childhood, and changed the course of my life. I was surprised that it was still 'in the family', and the discovery filled me with a deep longing to return there. Along with all of my father's sundry business dealings that were still active, there was almost too much to take in. The late Brigadier Sir Marcus Hardwick seemed to be running a shrewd and profitable business some ten years after his death.

Mr. Fairclough could see that I was perhaps not best suited to take immediate control of such a web of legality and business endeavour, and so he helped me through the tangle of papers, showing me clearly what was mine and what I was responsible for. There were a few plots of land, derelict properties and even unprofitable agencies that I asked Mr. Fairclough to close down there and then, as with no one to manage them they were leeching off the income; but otherwise I was left with a pile of documents that made me not rich, but certainly comfortable. I arranged for any money that I was owed to be paid into my own bank account, which had lain dormant for some time, and procured what papers I required to prove my identity to the bank manager.

'Congratulations, Mr. Hardwick—or is it still Captain?—it seems you have had a most profitable day. It is always a pleasure to be the bearer of good news; in my line of work it is seldom the case, I am afraid to say.'

* * *

By the time I had reached the bank on The Strand, it was past midday, and I was already starting to feel tired from the morning's activity. I was far from my old self even now. Yet I pressed onwards, meeting with the bank manager and arranging the transfer of funds, bonds and promissory notes. I watched as he jotted down all manner of notes and calculations in his ledger, and breathed a sigh of relief when he presented me with my final account documents. When I had arrived I had feared my father's holdings would be in a terrible state, and that I would have to rely on an army pension to survive until I found gainful employment. As it stood, I need not have worried—I decided to tell Jim that I would pay Mrs. Whitinger's rent on my own after all.

Part of me worried that I might succumb to darker temptations now that I had money in my pocket, but I pushed such thoughts aside. Today, at least, I would enjoy those comforts of home that had so long been denied me. I took my leave of the bank and refreshed myself at a coffee house, before visiting a tailor and ordering four new suits, a new hat, shoes, sturdy walking boots, two neckties, a cravat, half a dozen silk handkerchiefs, a pair of leather gloves and a plain ebony walking cane. I bought a suit off the peg that fitted well enough, and changed into it immediately. The tailor promised to have my new clothes delivered to my lodgings on Monday morning, and even took my old suit away for mending and cleaning. Feeling twice the man I had done earlier that day even in an untailored suit, I headed back towards The Strand. The teeming mass of people on the broad street seemed to part for me, and I filled my lungs with air as if for the first time. Now it felt like home. Now I was truly in London.

That night I dined with Jim at a modest restaurant in Bloomsbury. We talked for some time, naturally, of army life; of promotions and retirements, of battles won and campaigns fought, of the colonies struggling abroad. Jim was good company, and I finally began

to feel at ease. I was certainly forced to re-evaluate my earlier opinion of him, for he was not as shallow as he appeared. We talked of my future plans—I knew I had to look into my father's business concerns, I told him, at least to ensure that everything was well; but after that I confessed I had no idea what to do with my time. Jim questioned me on my past, and his face lit up when I explained I had once harboured literary ambitions.

'What I said earlier about writing your memoir—now I'm certain you should!' he exclaimed. 'You have travelled so much, seen so many places and met so many interesting people. It would fly of the shelves, especially if you write it with a little… panache. You have a—how can I put it?—rather unique experience to share with the world.'

I tried not to let thoughts of my imprisonment sour the mood, for I knew Jim meant well.

'I'm afraid the pain of that "unique experience" is still too real in my mind for me to fictionalise it,' I said, somewhat gloomily.

'Who said anything about fiction? Listen old boy, you've been through a lot, probably through more than you've told me, but you've come out of it all right, haven't you? Still got the old moral fibre, faculties all intact? That's a bloody marvel, a triumph! If you wrote up all of your adventures abroad, you could fill a bookshelf with stirring tales, or high-brow memoirs, or penny dreadfuls—your choice, really. But people would lap it up, and it would get your name out there into the literary world. The world is your oyster!'

I smiled. It was the second time he had told me that already, and his enthusiasm was so infectious that I actually considered his plan. He had implanted a thought so deep in my imagination that it threatened to take root—could a long-dreamt ambition be realised? I had the means, and the time, to write my memoirs, and why shouldn't I? However, before the conversation became uncomfortable, and Jim felt compelled to talk more of Burma, I changed the subject, and we resumed a pleasant evening of good wine, rich food and cheerful banter.

* * *

When I returned to my lodgings that night I was in good spirits. As I closed the door of my apartment and lit a paraffin lamp, I noticed a letter pushed under my door. I turned up the lamp and sat at the small table to read it. The envelope was of thick, creamy parchment, and there was no address written on it, just the words 'Cpt. John Hardwick' in an elegant, yet masculine hand. It had been hand-delivered; I made a mental note to ask Mrs. Whitinger about the delivery boy in the morning. Inside the envelope was a short, handwritten missive on crisp white paper:

Captain Hardwick,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you back to England. However, there is a matter of business that we must discuss urgently.

Meet me at my club next Wednesday evening, 2nd April, at six o'clock. The Apollonian, Pall Mall. Show this letter at the door.

Yours, &c.,
Sir Toby Fitzwilliam, Bart.

I was puzzled. I had heard of the Apollonian Club, but could think of no reason why I would have any call to conduct business there. It was renowned as a club for the rich and powerful—anyone who was anyone in London sought membership to the Apollonian. I had even heard of Sir Toby Fitzwilliam, whom I seemed to recall was a judge of some repute, though I was certain we had never met.

With a head full of questions, I retired for the night, knowing that I would not sleep. I slept little at that time—without the comfort of knowing that there was a battalion of soldiers outside my door, or that I was safely on board ship in the middle of the ocean, my mind refused to switch off, instead remaining alert to

every possible danger, real or imagined. I dozed once, I think, but awoke in a fright, in a cold sweat—a result of fitful dreams in which I relived my worst sessions of cruel torture, and all of my guards and tormentors wore monstrous masks that twisted and writhed as if they were made of melting flesh, and inflicted their brutalities upon me with wicked blades that seemed to grow from their very arms. And then the dragon came, as it always did in the nightmare, and as everyone in the dream was consumed by fire, I woke.

In the small hours, I got out of bed more than once, and more than once passed by the small wooden box that still sat on the breakfast table. Though I was a bag of nerves, and dared not sleep, I would not—could not—allow myself to succumb to those urges; to undo all of my hard work on the road to recovery. I asked myself, as I so often had on such nights of late: What would my father have done?

'Not this time,' I whispered in the darkness, tapping the lid of the box softly. 'Not yet.'