The Tainted

Cauvery Madhavan

HOPEROAD

PART ONE

1920–45

Mutiny

CHAPTER ONE

Nandagiri, January 1920

'I know you're anxious to meet the fine Eastern beauties of Raja Bazaar, Flaherty, but the first thing we've to do is pay our respects to the dead. I tell you, lad, this is where your lessons about life in India should begin – right here.' Sergeant Tom Nolan of the Kildare Rangers crossed himself before lifting the latch at the entrance to the military cemetery.

Private Michael Flaherty crunched down the broad gravel path, thankful for the shade provided by the majestic tamarind trees that dotted the acre and a half of the graveyard. He was startled when two natives rose suddenly from behind a large marble headstone – short, curved scythes in one hand, salaaming obsequiously with the other.

'Don't you go encouraging them, Flaherty. They're waiting for baksheesh, that's what they're always after.' Tom led him across to the left-hand side of the graveyard. 'Look: "Here lies Pat Walsh". Young Pat came out to India in 1913 with the Kildare Rangers, before the war. You knew him, didn't you? His ma worked for the Aylmers up at the Big House in Straffan. In fact, Colonel Aylmer paid for this headstone and

us lads in C Company, we had this angel especially ordered all the way from the monument-wallahs in Madras. Fine-looking thing, isn't it?' The big man sighed. 'Three weeks was all that lad knew of India,' he said sombrely.

'It was the dysentery that took him, wasn't it?'

'Aye. Shat himself to death, he did.'

Sergeant Nolan was running his fingers along the inscription on an elaborate stone cross. 'Did you know we lost twenty-seven men to cholera when the Regiment was first posted here back in 1913? Good men all and lucky, too, I'd say.'

'Lucky?' Michael followed the Sergeant along a row of older tombs, watching him flicking out fallen leaves from the crevices in the sculpted headstones with the tip of his cane.

'Jaysus, lad, I'll tell you why they were lucky – because they died in hospital, dosed with opium and Father Jerome by their bedside. Think about it – a year or two later and they could have been rotting in the sludge of some rat-infested trench in France, gassed and dead with no absolution. Which would you prefer, eh?'

'I don't plan to die anywhere but at home, Tom.'

'Ah, cocky as always! Look around, Flaherty – there are many ways to die in India. If the heat doesn't kill you, it could be cholera or consumption, and if you keep those at bay you could go to your Maker from the bite of a mosquito, a dog or, quicker still, a snake. And then there's the worst of all – the venereal. Jaysus, I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy.'

When Tom began to go into details of soldiers slowly going mad in the sanatorium in Deolally, the younger man wished they could just leave and head for the bazaar, as promised. The orderly rows of headstones and the Sergeant's commentary had brought back the misery of the three-week voyage from Plymouth in England to Bombay when, in the few respites from severe

seasickness, Michael had had to endure stories of death and dying from seasoned India hands with a relish for morbid details.

'All right, Flaherty, stop your moping.' Sergeant Nolan slapped him on the shoulder. 'The bazaar it is. We'll head on to Mumtaz Bibi's in Black Town. Her girls are clean and I swear none of them smell of Condy's fluid like the girls from the Rag.' He lowered his voice. 'Truth be told, lad, I can never bloody get it up in the Rag. Jaysus, could anyone blame me? There are thirty whores working there and six hundred of us, including the Fusiliers and the two companies of the Welsh lads up from the plains. The girls do a brisk trade, so you can't take your time when there are others outside getting impatient.'

Michael wondered what his mother would have thought, should she have overheard this conversation.

But the Sergeant was continuing: 'God-awful place it is, for sure. I've seen the Welsh and the Fusiliers get into fights while waiting their turn. The Military Police don't like to see any trouble in the Rag. They'd double march you to the Guard Room in no time at all – no ifs and buts. There are plenty of do-gooders that want the place closed, but where the hell would that leave the likes of us poor soldiers? Sure, it's a well-known fact that abstinence in the tropics can do you terrible harm.'

By now Michael was thoroughly put off. 'I haven't too much money, Tom,' he tried.

'Go on with you, you miser! You've a week's pay in your pocket – sure that's enough to keep you shagged up till Kingdom Come.'

Half an hour later they were in Black Town, Nandagiri's native quarter, making their way through the filthy laneways. In Raja

Bazaar, the main market, Michael lingered in front of a stall selling birds of all kinds and was captivated by a large green parrot. Within minutes he had parted with one rupee, having been repeatedly assured by the fast-talking proprietor of the stall, a giant of a Pathan, that he had secured a bargain.

For a while after, Michael had been followed by a ragged crowd of children, who shrieked with laughter as the bird squawked abuse from its cage. They grew bolder by the minute, taunting the parrot with whistles and loud screeches until Tom Nolan turned on them suddenly and let out an almighty roar, clipping a few ears into the bargain.

'Flaherty, you've bought yourself trouble,' he said sternly. 'Dogs and monkeys are a nuisance but at least they can't speak.'

'I'll put manners on him, Tom. You can see he's intelligent.'

The older man responded with a loud snort just as they halted in front of a two-storey house.

Through a tiny iron grille set high in the wall, a child's eyes regarded them for a moment and then they could hear her call out, her voice shrill and excited. Seconds later, a heavy latch was pulled back and the child, no more than six or seven, opened the door, her mouth agape. Behind her, an elderly woman bustled down the corridor towards them and the little girl, still open-mouthed, clambered back onto her place on the small ledge beside the door.

As she came closer, the old woman threw her hands up in delight.

'Eye-rish sahibs! Tom sahib! Oh, so happy Regiment is come back! I having plenty new girls, clean girls. Doctor sahib give clean chit. Always, my girls very clean.'

Michael flinched as she stepped closer, leering at him, her teeth stained an alarming red and her spicy breath overwhelming.

She clutched him by the forearm, saying, 'Come, come, sahib, very good time here.'

'Jaysus, Tom, would you tell her to stay away from me?'

Tom laughed. 'Lighten up there, lad. Wait till the Colonel gets wind of this: Nandagiri's finest ladies are happy to have the Regiment back!'

They followed the woman down the cool dark corridor, and as they emerged into the inner courtyard, Tom turned to him and winked. 'Mumtaz Bibi will sort you out with whatever you fancy. Mind yourself now – make sure you see the girl washes herself before, and you've heard the good Surgeon-Major say it often enough – wash yourself after.'

Michael nodded wordlessly. This was nothing like the exotic experience he had been anticipating: rose petals and peacock feathers, fragrant dusky skin and bejewelled fingers that could work all sorts of magic . . .

Mumtaz Bibi made Michael sit on one of the dilapidated chairs in the shade of the narrow verandah while she fussed over Tom Nolan, pulling aside one of the grubby curtains and ushering him dramatically into the last of the dozen or so rooms that flanked the courtyard. Michael placed the parrot's cage on the floor beside him and looked around.

A low brick wall surrounded a well that dominated the centre of the courtyard; beside it, a brass bucket caught the late-afternoon sun and shone blindingly, its handle tied to a very long coir rope. A young woman stepped out from the room that Tom Nolan had been taken into, a large earthen pot held casually to her hip, and headed for the well where she threw the brass bucket in. Michael heard a dull splash and the woman shook the rope vigorously from side to side, her big breasts swaying with the motion until, satisfied that the bucket

was full, she steadied the rope and began to pull it up. She filled the earthen pot then set off back to the room.

The parrot must have spotted the woman for he stopped his preening and, cocking his head this way and that, he began to rock gently on his perch, chanting, 'Nice girlies! Girlies! Girlies! Plenty good jig-jig!' Every minute or so, as if clearing his throat, he paused before giving an ear-splitting squawk. Michael could hear muffled giggles and plenty of cursing from the occupants of the hidden rooms.

The young punkah-wallahs who sat beside each of the doors with their backs to the rooms, stopped their work and grinned at each other, glad for the break from the monotony of their work. Their sole function was to keep a steady rhythm as they pulled the ropes that were attached to enormous cloth fans which hung from the ceilings inside the rooms. Nodding off to sleep was a hazard of the job, one they paid for with a kick in their shins and the loss of the tip that might have been thrown to them by departing customers.

Michael had already tried in vain to distract the bird, but the parrot carried on undeterred: 'Quickie jig-jig! Good jig-jig!'

There was a growl of frustration from one of the rooms across the courtyard. 'Abdul, you *sowar ka baccha! Punkah chalao*, you bloody fool!' The punkah-wallahs immediately stopped smiling and set upon the ropes vigorously as if possessed. The boy Abdul pulled as hard as he could, but he had begun crying in anticipation of the hiding that he might get, and with every sob his rhythm got more and more erratic.

In his cage, the parrot heard the abuse hurled at Abdul and within a few seconds he countered enthusiastically, his raucous voice ringing loud and clear all around the courtyard: *'Sowar ka*

baccha! Son of a pig! Your sister is a whore! She do plenty good jig-jig!'

'Flaherty! Would you keep that bleedin' bird quiet?' bawled the Sergeant. 'You're never coming anywhere with me again.'

There was a quick flurry of movement in the dark corridor and Mumtaz Bibi hurried into the courtyard carrying a large black shawl which she flung over the cage with an apologetic smile at Michael. The parrot went quiet immediately.

'Sahib, come,' she said, and led Michael to another enclosed courtyard, much smaller than the first, with just two rooms at one end. A huge peepal tree grew in the middle, but there was no shade, for the sun streamed in regardless, finding its way through the canopy of leaves. In a natural hollow, low down in the trunk of the tree, sat a roughly-hewn stone idol, its menacing black eyes rimmed heavily with grey ash and its body smeared all over with a thick yellow paste.

'Sahib picking girl?' Mumtaz Bibi gestured towards the door of the first room. Inside, four young women sat together on a low sagging charpoy bed in a companionable tangle of arms and legs, combing and plaiting each other's hair. They looked up at him unhesitatingly and waited. Michael was taken aback by their bold demeanour and the frank curiosity on their faces. Mumtaz Bibi gave Michael a quick glance and snapped her fingers at one of the girls, who got up immediately and jumped off the bed.

Once in the adjoining room, the girl unhooked a rag that hung from a nail and dusted the thin mattress on the charpoy. The punkah on the ceiling slowly came to life, pulled by a wretched little creature with a cleft lip who had been asleep on his haunches outside the room. Mumtaz Bibi had given his ear

a sharp twist and the boy had sprung up, gathering the ropes that lay limp beside him. Michael sat down on the charpoy, the coir ropes squeaking with his weight. The girl headed to the corner of the room where the floor dipped towards a rudimentary drain; a cockroach that had been lurking under a large earthenware water-pot scurried away through it, heading outside.

Lifting her skirt up around her hips without any ceremony, the girl picked up a bar of Lifebuoy soap from its place on a wooden ledge, squatted in front of the drain and began washing herself.

She was very dark but not a smooth inky black like the Negro lascars on the troopship that had brought the Regiment out to India from Plymouth. Instead, her skin was coarse and she was heavily built; her feet were badly cracked at the heels, he noticed. Her eyes were lined with kohl, and her palms and the tips of her fingers were decorated with a red stain. Her hair, very long and loosely plaited, glistened with coconut oil, the rank smell of which Michael found most disagreeable. Sitting uncomfortably on the charpoy, he wondered how he had let Tom Nolan convince him that this was the best way to spend his first weekend furlough in India.

When she was finished, the girl loosened her skirt, wiping the inside of her thighs dry with the garment as it slipped off her hips. Michael stood up and fished in his pocket for a few pice and held them out to her. With one eye on the doorway, she slipped the coins into the water pot and then salaamed gratefully before continuing to undress. She had lifted her cotton shift over her head, exposing her large breasts, when she realised that Michael was leaving. She gave a small cry of dismay, and as he strode across the courtyard, nearly tripping

on a knot of the peepal tree roots, he heard her call out for Mumtaz Bibi. The wide-eyed stone idol glared at him from its nook in the tree and he shuddered.

Mumtaz Bibi followed him quietly to the bigger courtyard. The parrot was silent in his hooded cage and Michael, a little unsure of what he should do next, looked towards the room that Tom had gone into.

'Tom Sahib having two girls.' Mumtaz Bibi came closer, smiling at him. 'Girl not good? Sahib better liking white girl?'

Michael picked the shawl off the cage, handed it to her and headed for the front door. 'Tell Tom Sahib I go. To barracks.' He spoke slowly, wondering how much English the woman really understood.

Mumtaz Bibi accompanied him all the way to the front door, where the little child had nodded off to sleep, her cheek pressed against the grille. The old woman drew the latch open and Michael stepped past her out on to the narrow street. As he walked back towards the bazaar, he heard the parrot squawk softly in his cage, dipping his head from left to right, and Michael walked briskly, hoping the beggar children wouldn't latch on to him once again. The bazaar meandered in haphazard fashion. Shopkeepers called out to him as he walked by, some sending their lackeys to follow him, which they did for a distance, the more persistent ones running alongside, imploring him to stop. They only gave up and slunk away when he turned around with a raised fist and let out a roar as he had seen Tom do.

He was sweating profusely by the time he reached the dusty road beyond which lay a large reservoir, the rather grandly named Lake Victoria, which separated the native Black Town from the rest of Nandagiri. On the far side of the water, to the north, was the lower end of Kildare Avenue with its fine

hotels, elegant tearooms, tailoring establishments, bookshops, taxidermists and hardware emporiums.

Michael walked up and onto the bund – an earthen dam that enclosed the lake from east to west. The bund, which was about twenty feet high, had been built eighty years earlier to blot out any views of Black Town from Kildare Avenue and its pretty lakeside bandstand. The bund was out of bounds to all natives and animals from Black Town; their only access to Nandagiri was a circuitous route around the western shore that brought them into the town via the civil lines. The semicircular bund came to an abrupt end on either side of the gardens that surrounded the bandstand, with steep steps leading down to the large expanse of manicured lawns and flower beds.

Michael jogged down the steps, hoping that he hadn't been spotted coming from Black Town, since soldiers were not permitted to go there. Tom Nolan had a well-founded theory that neither the Military Police nor the officers would be out and about on Kildare Avenue much before four-thirty in the afternoon: 'No better time to head to Mumtaz Bibi's so we can get shagged and be back in time for tea.'

Michael followed a gravel footpath through pergolas weighed down with rambling roses and jasmine, and past neat borders of dahlias, cannas and carnations. He couldn't take a shortcut over the grass, for the lawns themselves were out of bounds to soldiers in the ranks. Passing through the ornate gates of the park, he stood for a moment in the shadow of a bronze enthroned Queen Victoria and, resting the parrot's cage on the stone plinth at the base of the statue, he surveyed the length of Kildare Avenue before him.

The wide cobbled street ran in a straight line all the way up to St Andrew's Church, where it branched out in three directions,

one of which he knew led to the military cantonment a mile away. It was only three weeks ago, on their arrival via train from Madras, that the Regiment had paraded smartly up Kildare Avenue to cheers and cries of welcome from British civilians, who had paused along both sides of the street, ordering their tongas to stop, coming out of shops, clapping as the soldiers had marched past, heading towards the regimental barracks.

Now, as Michael set off up the street, he could see the bhistis, weighed down with their goat's bladder water-carriers slung on their backs, watering the cobbles around the church before working their way down to the gardens at Lake Victoria. The sweet scent of fresh wet earth filled the air, and Michael breathed it in deeply, knowing that it would last but a minute or two. Coolies and jampan-bearers called out to him as he walked by, offering to carry the parrot or take him back to the barracks in the comfort of a jampan – a type of sedan chair.

Michael lingered at the elaborate window display of the Empire Medical Hall. He knew that Tom had intended to stop by at this well-known establishment to stock up on remedies, which he claimed were far superior to those supplied by the regimental doctor. Bottles of pink calamine lotion and Milk of Magnesia were arranged in precarious pyramids, ringed by a fine selection of eau de colognes and talcum powders. Rows of tinctures, syrups and balms occupied the remaining space. As he marvelled at the variety, Michael spotted the stylish façade of the Emerald Tearoom across the street and crossed over, confident that if he entered and sat at a table overlooking Kildare Avenue, he could wait in cool comfort for Tom to show up.

A haughty head waiter walked up to Michael just as he put the parrot down by the windowsill, under the fronds of a giant potted palm.

'These tables are reserved, sir – for officers and their wives,' he said stiffly. 'Please follow me: we've another section.'

'It's fine, Victor. This gentleman is with me and there's no one else here yet. Michael, come along here, lad.'

'Father Jerome! I never saw you when I walked in – fancy meeting you here.'

'This is one temptation I can't resist,' the priest informed him. 'They've the best fruit cake in India, I reckon, and their jam sponge is as good as you'd get in Dublin. Sit down, sit down.'

Michael ordered tea, and the waiter, his lips compressed in defeat, agreed to return with the cake trolley.

Father Jerome leant over the table and lowered his voice. 'Pay no attention to his manner, Michael. These Anglo-Indians all have a chip on their shoulder. They've mixed blood, you see, and are highly complexed as a result. Ah, I see you've bought yourself a parrot. Native birds are fierce rude, don't you know? Here, take a napkin and throw it over the cage. It won't look good if the regimental chaplain is caught fraternizing with a foul-mouthed creature, will it? Now tell me, lad, how are you settling in?'

'I've my name down for the Signallers course, Father, but it'll be many weeks before we know who's been selected to go to Madras. As for everything else – the rations aren't too bad and a man can afford to buy a roast chicken if he wants to, and bread and butter are cheap. I thought the bacon was grand till that route march to Ooty. Did you hear about it, Father? Young Captain Milne turned green. Lord, he was sick as a dog! We were crossing the river at the ford at Pykara and saw a herd of filthy pigs on the bank, their snouts buried in whatever they were eating. It was only when we got closer that we realised it was a body, a human one! Sergeant Nolan said the natives let their dead off in rivers.

Apparently, river waters are considered holy or something. I tell you, Father, I haven't touched bacon since.'

'Indeed, it's a strange religion, Michael. It has the natives in a vice-like grip that even dying cannot release, for they believe in reincarnation.' Father Jerome slurped his tea before adding casually, 'I could do with a little help on Sundays – you know, in the half-hour before I serve Mass. It would get you off duty for an hour or so if you volunteered. You'd do a fine job, Michael, and your mother, God bless her, would be proud of you.'

Michael was grateful that the waiter timed his return at that precise moment, followed by a flamboyantly turbaned Indian bearer pushing the three-tiered cake trolley. Although he liked the regimental chaplain, he was a bit taken aback by the suggestion and wasn't quite sure how to respond. There were many others in the Regiment who could be described as God-fearing Catholics, far more committed than him. And the slagging he would get – it would be painful. Why, he would be crucified in the barracks every Sunday.

Then he had a desperate thought. *I could get out of it by telling Father Jerome where I was barely an hour ago. Let's see if he still wants a sinner like me ironing the vestments and polishing the silver for Mass.*

Father Jerome was looking at him genially. 'Try the sponge or even one of those cream buns. The jam in them is particularly delicious.'

'I'll have that slice of custard pie.' Michael pointed out the confection to the waiter.

No sooner had he ignored Father Jerome's recommendation and declared his choice than Michael felt churlish. Cream buns were actually his favourite, and the last time he had eaten one was when the troopship had docked in Aden on the voyage

out to India. But he felt a sudden resentment at having been put under unfair pressure, for he couldn't possibly refuse the priest's request to volunteer, could he? And anyway, why did Father Jerome have to mention his mother?

'Good choice, Michael lad. The pie is in fact excellent.'

Michael cut into the edge of the pie and it crumbled softly. Perhaps it was a good thing, he thought, as he savoured the taste of the smooth vanilla custard, that he had shown a degree of contrariness. Maybe it would dissuade Father Jerome from pursuing the matter of Sunday Mass.

'So, what did you think of Black Town then?' the priest asked unexpectedly. 'Did you buy the parrot there? Raja Bazaar holds enticements of all sorts, eh, Michael?'

The young man wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. So, this was what the more experienced soldiers had implied when they said that this priest always managed to wheedle things out of people. Father Jerome was going to get him to admit to being at the brothel, in the bazaar and out of bounds all in the one go, without so much as making an accusation.

'Yes, I bought the parrot for one rupee, Father. Sergeant Nolan thinks I bought myself trouble.'

'Ah . . . so Tom gave you the tour, did he? I should have known. You both go back a long way, I believe. Your fathers were both ghillies up at the Aylmer house in Straffan.'

'Yes, and my sister – my eldest sister, Bridget – was to marry Tom, but she drowned the year I turned ten. It was a dreadful thing altogether. My Da reckoned it was one of the biggest funerals Ardclough had ever seen. The Aylmers even came down from the Big House – although not into the church, of course. You see, Father, she was the nursery maid and a big favourite with the children.'

Michael stirred his tea and tried hard to picture his sister's face, but all he could really remember was her cheery disposition. Her scapular lay rough against his chest, causing him a good deal of discomfort in the heat but he bore it stoically because, though he had hesitated at first when his mother had asked him to wear it, in the few short months since he had left home become convinced of its efficacy in keeping him safe from harm's way. Often he had wondered how the very same scapular that had left Bridget to struggle in vain to disentangle herself from the reeds at the bottom of the canal, had somehow managed to save him – the first time at Plymouth from being kicked in the head by Colonel Aylmer's charger when it broke loose below decks on the troopship – and the second time, barely a few days ago, when a sudden sharp sag in the mosquito net above his bed had alerted him to the fact that a snake had fallen from the rafters in the high ceiling and lay hissing barely a few feet away, directly above his face. The punkah-wallahs had managed to kill the young cobra, having cornered it in the latrines after a quarter of an hour of high drama, but Michael had no doubt that Bridget's scapular had saved him.

Michael sighed and looked out at Kildare Avenue. Surely Tom Nolan would have finished at Mumtaz Bibi's by now. If he turned up at the pharmacy across the road at this very moment, Michael could make his excuses and leave before Father Jerome steered the conversation back to helping at Mass.

The priest dabbed his lips and then brow with his napkin. 'A heavy cross to bear, it is – the death of a child. How difficult to believe that such a thing could be the will of God – and yet such a cross couldn't be borne without His help.'

Michael looked away quickly. Any talk of heavy crosses brought back the wretched sight of his mother, crippled by

the weight of her grief as it had slowly and surely crushed her spirit. He knew what Father Jerome was going to do next. It was what most people did when they were powerless – they prayed. For weeks after Bridget drowned, the whole family had prayed constantly for her, and through it all and ever since, Michael had often wondered why they had bothered petitioning for her soul when she was so obviously in heaven – for where else could his sweet and beautiful sister have gone?

To Michael's surprise, Father Jerome said nothing but scraped back his rattan chair and stood up instead. He smoothed down his hair, which sprang up as coarse and unruly as before.

'I must head into that fine establishment across the street, the Empire,' he said. 'They've something for everything, and as you can see, my hair needs subduing.' He turned towards the head waiter who was striding across the room, solar topee and cane in hand. 'Ah, Victor, you've everything ready. Now be sure you put Private Flaherty's tea on my chit, good man.'

Michael stood up. 'That's decent of you, Father Jerome, but I have money. We were paid yesterday.'

'No need for any of that, Michael. I'll be seeing you before Mass tomorrow; an hour ahead should do.'

The priest jammed the solar topee on his head and marched off briskly without waiting for a reply. Michael flopped back into his chair and groaned in disbelief. He had just sold himself for a custard pie! No jig-jig but plenty of pie – was this what the Mysterious East had in store for him? The turbaned bearer began to clear the table while the head waiter hovered impatiently.

I bet that bloody Anglo-Indian would like to clear me out of this room as well, thought Michael as he got up and headed for the

palm by the window. The parrot squawked as the napkin was lifted off and when Michael turned, cage in hand, the man was waiting, solar topee at the ready.

Out on Kildare Avenue, Michael scanned the now crowded street, wondering if he would be better off forgetting about Tom and making his way back to the barracks on his own. They would anyhow have had to present separately at the Guard Room, in the same fashion as they had left, for strictly speaking Tom Nolan, as a Non-Commissioned Officer, was forbidden from fraternising with a Private.

As he tried to make a decision, a tonga-wallah pulled up just outside the Emerald, where Michael was standing. The vehicle heaved as the passengers alighted and Michael found himself face to face with his Commanding Officer, Colonel Aylmer. Instinctively standing to attention, he saluted smartly.

'At ease, Private Flaherty.' The Colonel returned the salute and turned to help his wife down, his two children and their ayah following with small nervous squeals as the tonga rocked from back to front.

The children stared at the parrot and Michael froze, fearing what was to come.

'Mother, look – a parrot! You did promise we'd have one as soon as we got to India.' Colonel Aylmer's son was a delicate-looking boy and his eyes were wide with excitement.

'I'd prefer a monkey.' The little girl made a face at Michael.

The parrot shifted on his perch and squawked loudly, and the children were delighted.

'Oh, look! Does he talk? Oh, do make him talk!'

'Now in you go with Ayah and make sure Victor has the table under the punkah for us.' Colonel Aylmer waved the ayah on.

Mrs Aylmer, who was adjusting her hat, which had got dislodged as she stepped out of the tonga, smiled and shooed the children ahead of her into the Emerald Tearoom.

Colonel Aylmer watched them disappear into the building. 'I see you've applied for the Signallers course, Flaherty. Good, very good, but it could be a while before we know how many from the Regiment will go to Madras. I've been thinking – you might take on duties as my batman in the meanwhile.'

'Sir! Yes, sir!'

'Have you heard from the family? Your father, old Donnie – he's well, I hope? I believe it's been a bitterly cold spring at home. The lower lake in the East Woods was frozen over for days.'

'Sir! They're well, sir! I had a letter waiting when we docked in Madras, sir.'

'That's good. I'll speak to Captain Milne. You can start with me straight away.'

'Sir! Yes, sir!' Michael came to attention and saluted, and as if on cue the parrot fluttered around in the cage and squawked, *'Sowar ka baccha!'*

'Native birds have no manners, Flaherty. Mrs Aylmer will have none of that in our house.' With that, Colonel Aylmer strode into the Emerald Tearoom to join his family.

CHAPTER TWO

Nandagiri, March 1920
I swear I'll never touch another bottle of Lion Beer – and Jaysus, I won't ever sing myself hoarse again. Please God, I will remember these good intentions the next payday.

Michael fingered the scapular around his neck as he made these resolutions, his head throbbing like one of those small native drums beaten by the crazy old Pathan who came around the barracks with his troupe of dancing monkeys. The chai-wallahs claimed they had a cure for a hangover, but it was common knowledge that all they did was lace their syrupy-sweet tea with flecks of opium.

Wincing, Michael put the heavy iron, hot with glowing coals inside it, down on its brick stand and lifted the old cotton sheet off the priest's satin stole. He checked the stole for creases and any tiny burn-holes from the embers that sometimes spat unexpectedly out of the iron. Father Jerome had shown him the near-invisible darning in several places on the alb and stole that he had had to get repaired at his own expense, sending the garments all the way to Ooty to the French nuns who were the acknowledged experts at mending delicate fabrics.

Satisfied that there was no damage, he hung the garment carefully on the wooden clothes horse. Michael had fashioned the stand for Father Jerome just a few days earlier, using rough lengths of teak salvaged from the woodshed at one end of Colonel Aylmer's house. He had finished it off neatly, using brass thumbtacks to cover the wood with strips of green baize that he had managed to coax out of Captain Milne, who had ordered several yards of the fabric for repairs to the billiard tables in the Officer's Mess. Father Jerome had been delighted with Michael's handiwork.

'You're a good lad, so you are. I knew it straight away.'

Michael had taken more than two months to fall into a routine at Sunday Mass, for Father Jerome was far more particular than he could ever have imagined. The priest refused to accommodate any shortcuts or alterations when it came to the serving of Mass just because they were, as he put it 'in this heathen, idol-worshipping land'.

The Regimental Chapel stood at one corner of the north end of the parade grounds and was partially shaded by the overhanging branches of three large Flame of the Forest trees. Originally a barrack room, the Chapel's distinguishing feature was a slim wooden cross, painted white, that was fixed to one gable end. Screwed on the door was a smaller but heavier brass cross, and on either side of the steps leading up to the door were regulation whitewashed terracotta flowerpots, each overflowing with masses of marigolds and tumbling nasturtiums.

Michael's first job when he arrived at seven o'clock on a Sunday morning was to unlock the small anteroom that served as a vestry, and to open the wooden shutters that were meant to keep out the dust. The parched red earth yielded copious

quantities of fine dust that swept across the vast parade grounds, penetrating even the tiniest of cracks in windows and doors.

This morning, as always, the two sweepers squatting by the steps of the Chapel had jumped up to salaam Michael as he approached. He let them in to sweep and mop the Chapel while he began the task of preparing the anteroom for Father Jerome. A large wooden ammunition box, on which the faded remains of a stencilled cross were still visible, contained two brass candle-stands, several large candles, a pair of small silver dishes, an ornate chalice and an assortment of embroidered altar cloths, loosely wrapped in an envelope of soft muslin.

Michael dabbed polish sparingly on the silver and brass items and lined them up on the small desk by the window to dry before buffing them to a high shine. *If only my Ma could see me now,* he thought. He had brushed the maroon velvet altar cloths and was ironing out the kinks in the fraying silken tassels when the priest walked in, dabbing the beads of sweat off his forehead.

'Ah, Michael lad, good – good, you've made a start. This heat, it'll be the death of me and it's only March as yet. What will we do when it turns hot? We'll have to shift Mass times to earlier in the morning.' The priest examined the polished chalice as he spoke, holding it at arm's length, up towards the light streaming in from the open window. 'Are we down on the polish?'

'There's enough for another few weeks, Father. That bottle from Madras is much better than the foul stuff issued by the Quarter Master. The brass shines up as good as new.'

'You go easy with it now, lad. There's no more where that came from.'

'I'm watching every drop, Father.' Michael grinned secretly as he looped the altar cloths lightly over his arm and headed

into the Chapel. Everyone knew the priest had a knack for procuring things that even the Quarter Master could never lay his hands on. The list included a Dundee cake sitting snug in its shiny tin, untouched since it had left the famous London store that produced it, a dozen tins of condensed milk, two brand-new football bladders and a tropical field-set of first-class emollients for all manner of bites, stings, blisters, corns and calluses. 'The kindness of others knows no bounds,' he would say, but they all knew that it was never that simple.

Michael draped the three altar cloths one next to the other over the long wooden trestle table and then stepped back, to make sure that the three silken tassels were level with each other. Father Jerome was particular about the appearance of things.

'The tassels are level but the space between the altar cloths isn't equal.'

Michael swung around. A young woman was standing in the aisle about halfway up the Chapel. She caught his eye for a moment, before looking up at the ceiling, checking exactly where the punkahs were before picking the pew she wanted to sit on.

'The best spot is not necessarily directly under the punkah, but you must know that by now,' she said, glancing at him again as she smoothed down her pale-yellow voile dress and then placed her wide straw hat on her lap.

Michael nodded, not knowing what to say, convinced that he had seen the young woman before and yet not quite able to place her. She was slight, very pretty, and her light-brown hair, fashionably crimped, framed her face closely. It was the colour of her eyes that held his attention. From where he stood at the altar, they looked green but now, as she sat in the second pew looking directly back at him, so confident and unhesitant, he could see they were flecked brown and amber.

'I'm Sean Twomey's daughter. I look like my father, so people always think they know me from somewhere. You see, I have his colouring and eyes, all Irish.' She patted down her hair with deft little motions of her wrist. 'In fact, I had red hair when I was born.'

Just then, Father Jerome walked in from the anteroom bearing the silver chalice. 'We've an unexpected helper today,' he announced. 'You know Mr Twomey, I'm sure.'

A tall man with receding hair and a sheepish smile shuffled in behind the priest, carrying the cruet set and candlesticks.

'The Bacon-wallah?' Michael knew instantly it was the wrong thing to have blurted out.

'My father does have a name, you know!' the girl said, bridling.

'Now, Rosie pet, don't get in a huff. The lad meant no harm – sure, that's how they all know me, for don't I produce the best bacon and sausages east of the Suez. Aren't I right, Father Jerome?'

'Too right, Sean, too right you are. It can keep me going all day, the thought of two thick bacon chops on a plate, surrounded by a mound of buttered potatoes and some peas from the Convent of Mercy. Rose, hold your head high, child, for your father is a mighty fine Bacon-wallah.'

The priest signalled for Michael to ready his vestments, and as Michael made to leave, he glanced back at Rose Twomey, who looked far from mollified.

Father Jerome returned to the anteroom followed by the Bacon-wallah, who waited silently as the priest put on his alb and stole and finally the chasuble, saying the prayer for each as he did so. The heat in the room was stifling and as Michael fanned the priest with a hand-held punkah, he wondered why the Bacon-wallah was here in the Regimental Chapel when it was the

custom for most civilians to attend Sunday Mass at the larger and more comfortable St Andrew's Church on Kildare Avenue.

The priest adjusted the chasuble and then crossed himself before addressing Sean Twomey. 'I'll speak to the Colonel myself, Sean, but I wouldn't like to promise anything. Rose is only eighteen, and you know as well as I do that Mrs Aylmer's a very particular memsahib. Still, as I said, I'll do my best. And now I'll advise you to take your place in the pews; there's little enough sitting room once the lads file in.'

When the Bacon-wallah left, Father Jerome sat down on the only chair in the room and closed his eyes. Michael knew he had to keep quiet and continue with the punkah, for this was the five minutes before Mass that Father Jerome spent praying and thinking, his fingers drumming the arms of the old chair as he mentally ran through his sermon.

But today the priest was in a talkative mood. 'What do you make of it, eh, Michael? He wants me to put in a word with the Colonel. The Bacon-wallah has a notion that Mrs Aylmer might be persuaded to take on his Rose as a lady's maid or even a nanny for the two little ones. But the girl is Anglo-Indian. I know her mother was from a military orphanage so there is plenty of Indian blood running in her veins. No, I don't think Mrs Aylmer will care for an Anglo-Indian in her household. Like every self-respecting Mem in India, she would rather have a native ayah than take on a chee-chee girl, though I must admit young Rose doesn't look like one. Takes after her father, don't you think, and speaks like him as well.'

The priest dabbed his forehead with a large white handkerchief. 'Sean Twomey's a good man, but he should have gone home to Ireland when he finished up here. But so many of these time-expired soldiers tend to stay on and end up making

disadvantageous marriages with half-caste girls. What's the draw, eh Michael? What would make anyone want to stay on in India?'

Father Jerome still had his eyes closed and Michael wasn't sure if he was really expected to reply. He couldn't imagine what would make anyone want to linger on in India. Now if it was Canada or Australia, he might jump at the chance himself, and to America he'd go in a flash – but India, hell, you'd be lucky to leave with your life and limbs intact.

The priest sighed and stood up. 'The Missal please, Michael.'

The Mass book in his hand, Father Jerome moved to the door and waited for Michael to open it, stepping out after a considered pause and walking in a slow, ceremonious fashion to the altar. Michael had found it amusing at first: the priest's solemnity seemed out of place in this dilapidated old barrack with its terracotta roof and dusty punkahs that didn't so much stir the air as occasionally dislodge all manner of creatures from their dark sanctuaries in the tiled roof above. No falling scorpion or disorientated bat or even the odd snake was allowed to disrupt the Mass for any more time than it would take to have it caught and killed. Two Indian coolies sat waiting on their haunches right outside the Chapel door, their pronged sticks, nets and lathis at hand in case any such occasion should arise. It was Father Jerome's demeanour that lent gravity to the occasion. His unhurried preparations for each stage of the Mass, combined with his sonorous voice, transported the congregation to a place far removed from the modest building.

When he first started his Sunday Mass duty with Father Jerome, Michael had been taken aback at what he saw from his vantage point a few steps behind the altar. The sincerity of the devotion had really surprised him. These men who swore,

drank, gambled and visited the Rag as often as they could afford and with no compunction, sat Sunday after Sunday, making their weekly peace with their Maker and queueing patiently to receive Communion.

Michael wondered if Bridget ever featured in the prayers that Tom Nolan recited with his eyes closed and head bowed. Or was the man, like so many of the other soldiers in the Chapel, just praying for himself? Michael often watched Tadhgh Foley, who always sat up in the first pew, his hands clasped together so tightly that his knuckles turned white even before Mass began. The whole Regiment knew he had lost three of his children in quick succession – and as if that had not been cruel enough, the three separate letters from home telling him about their deaths from scarlet fever had arrived at the very same time. Father Jerome, who helped the men to read and write their letters, had had the dreadful task of relating the tragic news to Tadhgh. The man had borne his grief wordlessly, which the others had put down to shock, and even now, he spent most of his time in silence, obsessively carving a set of wooden animals for his remaining child, a baby boy not yet a year old.

As casually as he could, Michael glanced over to where Rose Twomey sat. She was looking directly at him and her frank gaze didn't waver a bit. He had seen that kind of look before and it had always led him into trouble. Mary Cullen had given him that look and so had her sister. And there was Nuala. Everyone in Ardclough had thought her a bit slow – except they hadn't seen the speed with which she could undo her buttons.

Michael looked away, staring instead at the embroidered cross on Father Jerome's stole, trying hard to pick up the thread of his sermon . . . but memories of those dangerous afternoons back home in the ruined keep of Reeves Castle interrupted his

thoughts. Nuala had shown him a huge breast that had left him so speechless that she stuffed it back tearfully, rebuffing all his subsequent overtures with vicious name-calling. Mary Cullen had pulled her drawers down for him but would only let him look, and her sister, who had asked him to go first, had at the sight of him, fallen to her knees sobbing that she had gone too far. Weeks later, he had been waylaid near the stone bridge at the canal and given a good thrashing by the girls' brothers. 'That'll teach ye!' they shouted as they flung him into a bank of nettles.

Rose was still looking at him. This time he didn't look away but held her gaze, even as Father Jerome asked the congregation to stand for the Creed. She closed her eyes and began to recite, her lips barely moving, her hands smoothing down the white satin sash on her dress. The Chapel filled with that strange hissing that always came when the Mass-goers collectively chanted the Lord's Prayer.

After the Mass, when the soldiers had regrouped and marched smartly away back to their barracks, Father Jerome walked down to the door of the Chapel, where he stood majestically beside the pots of marigold, like a king outside his castle, acknowledging individually the few officers and civilians as they slowly made their way out. Michael began clearing the altar, carefully putting things away in the anteroom. He could see Surgeon-Major McArdle and his wife in animated conversation with Father Jerome before they finally said their goodbyes. Sean Twomey and his daughter were next, and Michael lingered at the altar to see if Rose might turn around to look at him again, but she stood dutifully by her father till the Bacon-wallah shook hands with Father Jerome and then, unfurling her umbrella, she stepped out of the shade and walked away without turning back.

Michael waited in the anteroom for the priest in order to help him disrobe and lock up. Often Father Jerome would just sit back for a few minutes and ramble on about the sermon, usually being very self-critical about the content of his homily. He would then repeat some of the conversations he had had after Mass. Today, as usual, he was dabbing beads of sweat from his forehead when he walked in and sat down heavily.

'Lord help us, Michael, the letters from home in the next dak will bring nothing but the worst news. I've been hearing about it from Surgeon-Major McArdle, and I tell you he was very good to have given me notice of what's to come.'

'What is it, Father? Will there be another war?' Michael was putting the silver candlesticks away as he turned to look at the priest.

'No, Michael, the trouble's at home. Killings, beatings – all indiscriminate and cruel. There's bound to be repercussions. Have any of the men said anything? Have you heard any talk? Come, lad, you must know what I'm talking about. Weren't you home on furlough before Christmas when those devils tried to shoot the station-master and his son in Sallins? They burnt the cottage down as well. There was no compensation and never will be.'

'Aye. My Ma was so afraid – she put her foot down and wouldn't let me out of her sight, but there was no stopping my Da and some of the neighbours. That whole week they kept vigil at the station in Ardclough where my cousin is the linesman. So, the news is about the Black and Tans?'

'Yes, although I'm not sure what to make of it, lad, as it seems our own newspapers have been censored. The good doctor was quoting the American papers, which he laid hands

on yesterday. Apparently, the violence has spread the length and breadth of the country. People are fearful.'

The priest disrobed in silence, passing the vestments to Michael, who shook them out, folded and hung them on the wooden stand, before draping a sheet of muslin over the whole arrangement to keep it dust-free till the following Sunday.

'But right now, I must put aside Surgeon-Major McArdle's news, for duty calls – the men will be waiting,' said Father Jerome, looking at his watch. 'You be a good fellow, lock up and drop by my office with the keys. I've a nice little packet of coffee to give you. Did I ever tell you that my brother's a shipping agent in Singapore? He knows all about the small comforts in life, and this coffee from Java is one of them.'

Michael thanked him. He often wondered if the generous 'shipping-agent brother' in Singapore was just a good cover for Father Jerome's natural penchant for those 'small comforts in life'. However, the priest was just as generous as the brother he claimed to have and Michael was grateful for whatever came his way, whether it was coffee or shaving balm or even the occasional book.

Father Jerome headed off briskly to his small office on the far side of the parade grounds, next to the NCOs' Mess; it was here, every Sunday after Mass, that he spent two hours or so reading out letters and writing replies for the soldiers in the Regiment. A good many were illiterate, barely able to sign their own names. Michael felt desperately sorry for the men who were dependent on the priest to relay news from home. Reports of births and deaths, intimate declarations of love and longing, litanies of complaint, requests for more money, news of illnesses and tragedy filled the letters that arrived from Ireland, and the priest was privy to them all. The men had no

choice but to share their most personal details with Father Jerome as he read letters from their wives and sweethearts, their parents and children, and then patiently wrote out the replies back.

There had been chatter all right, about the Black and Tans, but much of it was futile 'wet canteen' talk, fuelled by the beer sold there, only to be put aside the next morning, when all that mattered was surviving another viciously hot day. The bugles sounded at five o'clock in the morning, an hour before dawn, but most mornings Michael found the heat had roused him earlier, and if it wasn't the heat it was the foul breath of the wizened old native barber as he leant over Michael's sleeping body to shave his face. The Regiment paraded while it was still cool, just as dawn broke, the early-morning marches taking the same old routes with hardly a variation, in order to avoid the local sholahs – the patches of mountainous forest surrounded by grassland. These areas were considered a malaria risk; also, they were frequented by wild boar that invariably caused the officers' horses to bolt.

The hill stations in the Nilgiri Range could not compare in altitude with North Indian Himalayan towns like Darjeeling or Simla, which Michael had heard were very cool even in the summer. With spring at its end in South India, the temperature in Nandagiri had been rising steadily, along with everyone's irritability. Morning parade was the only major exertion of the day and it was followed by breakfast at nine o'clock, after which the men headed back to their barracks with nothing to do except lie on their beds and threaten the punkah-wallahs with fates worse than death if they should dare slacken their efforts.

Camp followers arrived in a steady stream all through the morning until lunch, squatting outside the barrack verandahs

and setting up impromptu stalls on the bare ground. They cried their wares unceasingly: tea, tailoring services, mynah birds and tame mongooses, coffee, postcards of naked women, cigarettes, fruit, buns and cakes, nasty-looking herbs and potions to keep your dick from shrivelling up while you queued impatiently at the Rag, and medicines to cure you if you got anything more from the native whores than you paid for. If you were awake, too hot to read, and if you hadn't the money for a game of cards or the energy to listen to another man's woes, you could spend your time in a hammock under the punkahs on the verandah, watching the whole *tamasha* – the great Indian circus of chancers, swindlers and crooks – unfold before your very eyes. And even if the scene was no longer as novel a spectacle as when the Regiment had first arrived in Nandagiri a few months ago, without this daily performance, life in the barracks would be unbearably dull.

In the afternoon everything came to a standstill. The fragrant khus-khus tatties were lowered over every window and door, and the bhistis drenched them with water. The barracks became cool, dark havens as the punkah-wallahs got a steady rhythm going on the ropes. As the water evaporated from the sweet-smelling grass blinds and the punkahs circulated the cool air around the darkened rooms, it was possible in those couple of hours to drift off into a hypnotic sleep of the sort that only a tropical afternoon could induce. The only soldiers not supine were the ones on Guard-Room duty.

Not too far from the barracks – for Nandagiri was but a small cantonment – in the officers' bungalows, a siege mentality struck entire households every afternoon, and memsahibs and their male housekeepers, the khitmatgars, prided themselves on the degree with which they could seal the whole house from

the debilitating heat. Nothing stirred but the fine red dust that swirled across the parched parade grounds as if possessed.

Evening did not always bring relief. If the air was still, the insects would be out in greater force, and sweat seemed to attract them in droves. But at least there was more to do than during the day. Colonel Aylmer was keen on the Regiment playing sport, and there was always a game of football or hockey to be had. The swimming pool was only two years old and had been constructed by the Madras Sapper Regiment, who were based in Wellington thirty miles away. B Company took their turn in the pool on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday evenings, and Michael, along with some of the other younger lads, always went to the wet canteen afterwards.

The wet canteen was the highlight of most days in the barracks. There was drink to be had and it was served cold. Here a man could buy a beer, on credit if needed, play cards, take a gamble on a game of dice or place a bet on a boxing match. If you hadn't any money and had accumulated too many unpaid chits, the talk, some of it loose and careless, was always free. And talk there was, of the trouble in Ireland. A couple of the Fusiliers – Shinners no doubt – had started the rumours going while queueing up at the Rag, but Tom Nolan, who had overheard Captain Milne discuss it with Major Symes, was able to tell everyone at the wet canteen on Thursday that the rumours were, in fact, true because the dispatches from Army Headquarters had expressed concern about the possible effect on morale amongst Irish regiments.

The men had listened quietly but some muttered that they wished they were back home to be able to give the Tans a swift kick in the bollocks and a slow bullet to their heads. The canteen had drunk a round to that idea. Fighting talk

always got their blood up, and many a fist was slammed into a palm as one by one the men raised their bottles and vowed to string up the Tans and bugger them with rifle butts. 'Tie them down to railway tracks at night,' suggested the lad whose father was a linesman. 'Weigh them with stones and drown them alive in sacks,' said the lad who had worked in the flour mill at Naas. By closing time, they found it hard to decide between nailing the fuckers to a cross, leaving them swinging by their scalps at the crossroads or setting them alight, crotches first.

But the next morning was just another day in India, where the only constant was the company of other men suffering equally from sunburn and featureless routine. It was little wonder, thought Michael, that all mention of the Tans was left for the wet canteen.

Though Father Jerome had, after Mass today and in a deliberately casual fashion, slipped in his questions about how much the men in the barracks knew about the events in Ireland, Michael had held his tongue as he always did. Much as he liked Father Jerome, he had decided that he wasn't going to be the priest's inside source on the thoughts and activities of the men in the Regiment.

As he locked up the anteroom of the Chapel, it struck Michael that if Surgeon-Major McArdle was right and the newspapers at home were indeed being censored, things must really be as bad as the priest feared. Tom Nolan would want to know about that, he thought. Much like Father Jerome himself, the Sergeant wished to be in the picture about everything and anything – but he garnered his information very overtly. It was hard not to be truthful, when Tom looked you in the eye and asked what he wanted to know directly to your face.

The keys to the Chapel in his hand, Michael headed to Father Jerome's office. To the east of the parade grounds he could see the weekend bazaar in full swing beneath the intertwined canopy of three majestic peepul trees. All manner of things could be purchased, all sorts of services were available, but it was the Bacon-wallah who was the king of this Sunday market. Seated on a folding canvas chair, set on a high wooden platform, between puffs on his pipe, he barked commands to his three Indian servants, who scurried around, weighing and packing as per his orders. Two urchins kept the dogs and monkeys away with sling shots, which they used with great precision, and painful yelps punctuated the air now and again, but the smell of the dried and cured sausages, the smoked bacon and the aroma of chickens being grilled over red-hot coals kept the creatures coming back.

Michael had seen the Bacon-wallah at the Colonel's bungalow a couple of times while there himself on his daily orderly duties. Sean Twomey home-delivered the Aylmers' requirements four times a week, like he did to the rest of the officers' bungalows. Mrs Aylmer normally left such routine kitchen matters to her very able khitmatgar, but when the old soldier called once a month to settle the chit, she received him on the verandah, paying him quickly and with the minimum of small talk.

Regimental memsahibs were notorious for not paying their chits on time. The proper stabling of polo ponies and the upkeep of children in boarding school back home was a drain on a military salary, and Indian tradesmen were always the last to have their chits settled. Perhaps that was why the Bacon-wallah transformed himself into Sergeant Sean Twomey for his chit-collecting trips. Bathed and shaved for the occasion and wearing his old Rangers uniform, all his service ribbons displayed proudly and a shamrock on his cap badge, he did his

monthly collection in the cantonment on a smart bay Arab that he had got from a retiring cavalry officer in exchange for settling his very large unpaid chit; he even employed a syce to accompany him for the occasion.

Two weeks ago, Michael had been polishing the brass on the Colonel's dress uniform when the Bacon-wallah arrived at the Aylmers' bungalow. Peering through the dressing-room window that overlooked the verandah, he watched the old man stand up, nearly to attention, as the Colonel's wife swept out of the house, her purse and her leather-bound account book in hand and the khitmatgar in attendance.

Mrs Aylmer believed that India was to be survived, not loved, and in order to do that she ran her household with clockwork precision; as for her chits, they were always paid on time. Her native servants respected and feared her both in good measure, for she expected them to take their duties just as seriously as she took hers. She spoke passable Tamil, first learnt nearly twelve years ago in Nandagiri when her husband, then a young Major, had insisted that his bride take lessons in conversation from the Regiment's own Brahmin tutor. She had quickly realised the wisdom of this; speaking Tamil allowed her the freedom to go riding out in the country every day as she had done all her life in Ireland, and, equally importantly, it meant she didn't have to rely on her khitmatgar to translate between her and the rest of the servants.

The Kildare Rangers had been posted to India, to the regimental centre in Nandagiri, twice in the last ten years, and though she did not much care for coming back to India, this time Mrs Aylmer was top of the pecking order in the cantonment. She came only after her husband in the moral and social authority she commanded amongst soldiers of every rank, their wives

and absolutely any civilian whom she came across. This time around she was the Burra Memsahib, with nearly the same set of household servants as during her previous tenure in Nandagiri. They had turned up, all unsummoned, at the Colonel's bungalow the night the Regiment arrived, the khitmatgar heading the line-up, greeting the family with folded palms and tears in his eyes.

The same khitmatgar, Gajjapati, stood right behind her chair this evening, looking at the Bacon-wallah with ill-concealed envy. Michael knew what was running through the khitmatgar's head. Here was a tradesman – a bazaar tradesman, even if it was the Gorah Bazaar – who was able to sit in the presence of the Memsahib.

Michael picked up the scabbard of the Colonel's ceremonial sword and as he dabbed on the polish, he listened to Mrs Aylmer questioning the items listed on the chit that Sean Twomey had just presented to her.

'The smoked bacon has become far too dear, Mr Twomey. Why, it's eight annas more than it was in January when we arrived, and there's another matter – it's far too salty. Cook has to soak it for a whole night and the next day as well, and that'll not be possible once the hot weather comes. Surgeon-Major McArdle has been talking to the Colonel about the dangers of eating too much salt.'

'Ah, the Surgeon. He's newly arrived in India, Mrs Aylmer. The body needs plenty of salt in the tropics, sure, we lets out more salt than we could ever eat. With sweating and such, you know.'

Leaning against the window with the polish-soaked rag in his hand, Michael had laughed quietly at the expression on Mrs Aylmer's face. She, like her husband, placed great store by loyalty. To gossip about the Regiment's new Surgeon would

be unthinkable, as would discussions of any bodily fluid. So, ignoring the Bacon-wallah's remarks, she ran her finger through the bill, comparing it now and again with her own account book, checking details with Gajjapati. When she was satisfied that the account was correct, she paid the chit in full and placed the order for the following week.

'I won't be ordering any more of the smoked bacon, Mr Twomey, unless you're willing to use less salt. I'll be forced to order it from the Jesuit Fathers in Ooty. The rest of the weekly order will be as usual, with a leg of lamb for this Sunday, plus an extra seer of lamb bones every second day from now on. The children are to have good bone soup daily.'

The old soldier stood up and bowed slightly. The Jesuits were the bane of his life. How could his pigs ever compete with those who were fed on the leftovers from the tables at an Irish seminary? 'Less salt if that's the way you want it, Mrs Aylmer. And you can be sure there'll be no charge for the bones if it's for the young ones.' He twirled his greying moustache and smiled. 'They're neat little riders, the pair of them. They looked very smart trotting down Kildare Avenue on their ponies.'

Michael had nearly finished, with just the puttees left to whiten up with Blanco, when he heard the children shout out to their mother that Father was home. The family gathered on the verandah and fell happily into their evening routine. The bearer kneeling at the Colonel's feet eased off the master's riding boots and proceeded to sponge his feet with icy cold towels. The small ivory-inlaid teapoys that the Memsahib had recently bought from the Kashmiri dealer in town were brought out from the drawing room and on to them the khitmatgar placed crocheted doilies before bringing out two tall glasses

of very cold homemade barley water and little rounds of puff pastry filled with minced chicken and peas. He waited quietly, smiling indulgently at the children, while the Colonel and the Memsahib decided what they would like to drink. Mrs Aylmer handed him the key to the drinks cupboard in the dining room and he duly returned with two glasses of gin, a bottle of cold tonic water, and slices of lime.

'Dinner will be a bit early, Gajjapati,' Michael heard Mrs Aylmer say. 'We'll be going to the Club immediately after. Ask Ayah to get ready. She'll come with the children and they can stay at the Club for an hour or so. Tell the syce to bring the carriage around in half an hour.'

Colonel Aylmer, an accomplished artist himself, was admiring his children's artwork. 'James, son, this is wonderful – our gulmohur tree with Tippu Sultan sleeping under it! How did you get that silly dog to keep still? I think you'll be coming with me next weekend, to Lansdowne Ridge. Would you like that?'

'I should like to paint the mountain, too, Father. Don't you like my drawing just as much?' Alice Aylmer had climbed onto the Colonel's lap. She was eight years old, with far more artistic ability than her older brother. Michael had seen her deft little water colours and well-proportioned sketches pinned on the cork board in her parents' bedroom and he waited to hear what the Colonel would say.

'Alice is too young, isn't she, Mother?' James objected before the Colonel could speak. 'She's too young to ride with Father and me all the way to the Ridge. Anyway, her pony has lost a shoe, and the farrier can't come for another few days because his baby turned blue and died.'

'Oh James! Wherever did you hear that?'

'But it's true, Mother. Ask Ayah or even Gajjapati. The baby died in the most horrible way – it was a cobra bite. I heard the syce tell Ayah this morning.'

'You mustn't listen to the servants' talk, James. I've told you that before.'

'I wasn't listening, Mother, I promise. I just heard them.'

Colonel Aylmer ran his fingers through his son's hair. 'The poor man must be in a bad way,' he said. 'That's not the first child they've lost, if I remember right.'

'I suppose I'd better make inquiries, though you know yourself, Charles, that these Eurasians can get too familiar, given half a chance. Do you think you might send him something towards the child's funeral? That should be enough, don't you think?'

'I'll send on an envelope to Father Jerome, or better still, I'll suggest a collection at the Club this evening. That'll help the poor chap.'

James put down his lemonade. 'Ayah said the farrier should be happy he has one less mouth to feed.'

'Like we'll be when you go home to Ireland.' Alice had her hands on her hips.

'Alice!' snapped her mother. 'You're being very unkind. And James, that's quite enough.'

Colonel Aylmer pulled his daughter close. 'Now, let's see your sketch, Alice. I see you've used your new pastels and very well too. It's a fine drawing, wouldn't you agree, James?'

'Oh, I know she's a better artist than me, Father, and she's made Ayah's face look just as ugly as it does in real life. But you've another two years in India before you're sent back, Alice, so I should like to have Father to myself at Lansdowne Ridge.'

'Really, Charles, do put them out of their misery,' his wife frowned. 'We can't have the children fighting over you like this.'

The Colonel laughed. 'Beatrice, my dear, they know I'll have a fair resolution. Now, let me see . . . how about if Alice gets a new paint box maybe?'

Alice cried, 'Oh, thank you, Father! That is very fair, perfectly fair!'

Michael watched the child skip around the verandah in excitement. The Aylmers were well off, unlike most of the Irish officers of the Kildare Rangers. Colonel Aylmer's father had commanded the Rangers in 1895 and had been decorated twice for his bravery during campaigns in the North-West Frontier. However, the family fortune had been made by Aylmer men a few generations earlier in the sugar plantations in the West Indies. Charles Aylmer was the eldest of three sons and his marriage to Beatrice had been considered very advantageous, for she was the only daughter of one of County Kildare's largest landowners, bringing with her an independent income of four thousand pounds a year.

As a child who had grown up in Ardclough, barely a mile away from the Aylmer estate, Michael was much more familiar with the family's personal life than most men in the Regiment. Other soldiers' families had traditionally found work on the estate, but none had the access to the daily goings-on that Michael and his family had had, for when his sister Bridget started at the Aylmers' as a nursery nurse, she regaled them at home every night with stories of the life at the Big House.

The two years between 1916 and 1918 had been a difficult time for all in Ardclough, and on the Aylmer estate it was no different. Charles was a career soldier and his two younger brothers, who had volunteered in the first few months of the war, had been sent into the thick of the action as soon as they were commissioned.

The Kildare Rangers were away fighting in France, and every week brought telegrams: casualties, deaths and men missing in action. In the autumn of 1917, when she was just thirty years old, Beatrice Aylmer took over the running of the estate completely when her frail in-laws died in quick succession, barely a week apart, unable to bear the news of the deaths of their two younger sons at Gallipoli. Colonel Aylmer came home on leave twice during the four years of the war and both times left secure in the knowledge that his wife, with the help of the Estate Manager and numerous staff, would not let the Aylmer estate fall apart.

Bridget had been very fond of little James, who was just two years old when she started work at the Big House in 1913. But it was Baby Alice who was her favourite. Bridget was there the morning the child was born, had cradled her nervously for a few minutes while the doctor and the nurse had attended to Mrs Aylmer, and had fallen in love with the sweet-natured infant, a love that was reciprocated by the little girl. The children's nanny was in her sixties and having looked after Beatrice Aylmer and her four brothers themselves when they were small, she was not jealous of the children's fondness for Bridget but encouraged it instead. The girl took them to the lake to feed the ducks, she walked and ran and played ball with them, read to them, made dresses for the dolls and costumes for all the pretend play that kept them busy for hours.

By the time Colonel Aylmer returned home from the war Bridget was indispensable.

Looking at the family gathered on the verandah in the fading light of an Indian dusk, Michael remembered how his sister used to pray for Colonel Aylmer's safe return from the war. 'My poor little mites must have their father back,' she would

say as she knelt, the rosary beads moving swiftly through her fingers. *If only Bridget could see the children now, together with both their parents,* he thought, then cleared his throat softly before stepping out on to the verandah. He came to attention and saluted smartly.

'Sir! Good evening, sir.'

'At ease, Flaherty. I take it you have me sorted for tomorrow morning?'

'Sir! Yes, sir. It's all cleaned and polished, done and ready, sir.'

'Good, good. How are they getting on in the Mess with the regimental silver?'

'Sir! Captain Milne stopped by at the Mess at four o'clock. The lads must be done by now, sir.'

'We must show the Fusiliers how we do things here in Nandagiri. It'll be a splendid St Patrick's Day dinner. The Band Master's assured me the music will be fit enough for a Coronation Ball.'

'Sir! The Band have been practising all month, sir.'

There was a small tug on his tunic, and a boy's eager voice. 'Will you bring me a bird's nest tomorrow, Michael? With eggs in it?'

'I'll do my best, Master James,' Michael promised. 'I've spotted one in the eaves of the Chapel roof. I'll see if I can tease it out.'

Mrs Aylmer was quick to intervene. 'James, you mustn't trouble Michael. He has a lot of duties and his own things to do in the barracks.'

'It's no trouble at all, Mrs Aylmer. I'd be happy to do it for the young lad.' If only she knew, thought Michael, that it was probably going to be the most interesting thing he'd do all week.

'Well, you'd better get going, Flaherty,' the Colonel put in. 'Take the khitmatgar's cycle if you wish. It is rather dark and we do have a big day tomorrow.'

Michael came to attention and saluted. 'As you say, sir. Good night, sir, Mrs Aylmer.'

'Will you wear the shamrock in your cap badge tomorrow, Michael?' asked Alice.

'Sure, Miss Alice. I'm an Irishman, aren't I?' said Michael, bending down and giving her a little salute.

CHAPTER THREE

20 March 1920

Dear Diary,
Aunty Mags says that's how real English and Irish girls keep diaries and this is how they start – 'Dear Diary' – and then they pour their hearts out, writing down everything that happens to them, good and bad, sad and happy.

Dear Diary, you were my eighteenth-birthday present from Aunty Mags, so here I am, and this is what happened to me today.

Mrs Aylmer said no followers, but Private Flaherty is *not* a follower. He is the Colonel's batman and works in the same house as I do: how could that be *my* fault? I think he's taken a fancy to me, but I can't help that.

I shall now confess what happened today. The family had gone to the Polo Grounds, to watch the Colonel and the Chokra Sahibs practise for their return match against the Fusiliers next week in Ooty. I was on the verandah sewing buttons on Mrs Aylmer's blue riding jacket, when out he walked with his mug of tea and a mouth full of Gajjapati's

coconut macaroons. The cook has been told to give the Private tea and something to eat before he goes back to the barracks. I know that because I heard the Colonel ask Mrs Aylmer whether the servants had remembered to feed his batman.

'Old Donnie's son', the Colonel called him. 'Did Gajjapati give Old Donnie's son his tea?' Mrs Aylmer said, 'Yes, of course, Charles, they do as they are told. Do you see how like Bridget he is? It unnerves me sometimes.'

So, there I was on the verandah and he sits down beside me without so much as a by-your-leave and begins to talk, mostly questions about me. Aunty Mags said that's what men do when they're really interested in you. Anyway, I said it was my turn and I asked him about Bridget. It was a sad story, and when he had finished, I asked him about the Aylmer estate. And wait till I tell you this, Dear Diary – the estate's nearly as big as the entire cantonment in Nandagiri! No wonder the family can afford the fancy new motor car that is being driven up from Madras. The Colonel bought it off a retiring Brigadier who's heading back home to England, the lucky man.

The motor car arrives next month, just in time for when Mrs Aylmer plans to stop going out on her horse. She's expecting, you know, and how lucky that turned out for me because the Colonel felt Mrs Aylmer would need some proper help for herself and someone far more superior to the native ayah for the children. So, Mrs Aylmer agreed and took me on, though Michael said that back home in Ireland, in the Big House, the Aylmers had no less than forty servants!

But when I asked him about my father's hometown, Michael wasn't very helpful. 'I've never heard of a Crossterra near Glengarriff,' he said, 'nor, in fact, of any Glengarriff.' Maybe he

hasn't travelled like I have. I've been to Madras and Bangalore, and me only eighteen. Aunty Mags said we'll be going to Calcutta next year. Uncle Dennis will be eligible for passes for us on the train. Imagine – Calcutta, the heart of the Empire! We might even see the Viceroy as he drives by in his carriage.

I told Michael this, but he laughed. 'I've crossed the Suez Canal and I'm only twenty-three,' he said, 'and I've seen the King and Queen at a hundred paces while parading at Windsor Castle.'

It made me a bit cross to think he was making himself out to be a man of the world so I told him that I'd probably be crossing the Suez myself before I was twenty. 'I'll be going home, you see, back to Ireland.'

'Back home? To Ireland?' he repeated and didn't even try to hide his surprise.

I told him what Father has promised me – that we'll be going home to Glengarriff soon, leaving this horrid hot country of dirty natives behind to be with our own people.

This put Michael in his place. He went quiet for a while and then he told me, 'I bet you'll get to see them too – Their Majesties,' he explained. 'If anyone does, Miss Rose Twomey, it will be you.'

I stood up then, to show him how I would curtsey, just for fun, and that's how it all happened. The button box on my lap fell to the floor, and we were both on our knees picking up the little brass ones and the big camel-bone ones and the special ones made from mother-of-pearl, when he leant forward and kissed me on my cheek.

I stood up, Dear Diary, I stood up straight away and I told him Mrs Aylmer had said no followers. But he squeezed my hand, gave me a wicked big wink and walked away, down the