

CHAPTER 33

A few months later, the clatter of horse hooves on the cobbles outside the house, roused Jacob from writing up his accounts. He wiped the misted window and looked out to see a messenger on horseback, dismounting, coming to the front door and knocking loudly. Mistry went to the door, took an envelope with a large red seal on it, thanked the messenger and carried the envelope to Jacob.

“What is it?” he said, taking the envelope. He examined the seal, broke it and opened the envelope, “Hmm,” he said, “this is good news. I am summoned to Florence to visit a new customer who wants to talk about a contract to buy our best quality cloth. I have met him before but he doesn’t know what he wants yet so I will need to take some new samples with me. Let me see,” he said, turning the pages of a diary, “yes, I could go in about a month’s time.”

“I am pleased for you, sir,” Mistry said, lapsing back into calling him ‘sir’. Jacob thought he saw a cloud pass across her face as she spoke. “Will we be long without you?”

“I suspect it will be at least two months.”

“I will keep the house ready for you.” She turned and walked from the room.

Jacob sat in silence, re-reading the letter and thinking about Mistry. Abruptly, he got up and went to the kitchen where she was working. He turned her towards him and saw that she was tearful. When he asked her what was troubling her, she said. “I shall be sorrow that you will be away for so long.”

He wanted to reply but the words he had in his head took a long while forming. After a few moments, he blurted

out. "I should be glad if you would come with me. The journey can be lonely and tedious. I would enjoy your company."

"As you wish, sir," she said noncommittally but he could see her shoulders lift.

"No, Mistry, I am not commanding you to come, you must decide if you want to come."

She turned towards him and he could see that she could hardly contain her pleasure. "It'd be my pleasure, Jacob but never before have I travelled. I wouldn't know what to do."

"I will tell you everything you need to know; you have shown that you learn quickly - already you sound like an educated lady, so you will have no difficulties."

Jacob spent time preparing and organising travel arrangements and sorting out clothes for himself and Mistry.

When they started, Mistry's pleasure in everything she did and everything she saw was obvious to Jacob. He had given her several outfits which his wife had owned, many of which had come from Italy when he had travelled there. He saw with satisfaction the admiring eyes of the male passengers and quizzical glances between them as they obviously wondered about the relationship between the young woman and the older man. Before they had started the journey, Jacob had said that they should revert to formal titles and if he were asked he would introduce her as Mistress Darkall his servant. In consequence, she always had the smallest of rooms and the most uncomfortable of beds. She never even commented to Jacob about any discomfort. Her earlier life where she had slept on doorsteps, street corners or, if lucky in haystacks, meant that she found anything else blissfully comfortable.

The journey was, as he had told her, tedious and there were several occasions when the carriage broke down or the horses went lame and they had to wait endless hours while changes were made. There were arguments and fights amongst their fellow passengers who accused the groom of deliberately

going slow, suspecting that he had been bribed to deliver them to inns where the beds would be flea ridden and the food intolerable.

Jacob had a great interest in the way people naturally developed a structure, forming what he told Mistry were loosely knit 'tribes'. He found that, after a couple of days, those passengers who were going all the way to Florence developed an affinity with each other. Those who were only staying for short distances they instinctively excluded from conversation. Jacob, by travelling all the way to Florence was considered a superior person. Mistress Darkall, although covertly admired was, as a servant, never spoken to directly. This pleased her because she would have been too terrified to reply. For the first few days, only by holding her hands tightly beneath a muff could she stop them from shaking with fright and cold. She kept the muff to cover her hands even when, as they journeyed south, the weather became hot and the sun intense. Many times in those days, she despaired of ever feeling at ease. There were times when, if it had been possible she would have leapt from the coach and walked back to Firenze House no matter how much effort it took.

She noticed one of the younger men was often looking at her and when he did, she would quickly look out of the coach at the passing scenery which constantly astonished her with its variety. She was particularly amazed at the small towns they passed through where people were busying themselves with their work; carpenters sawing; farriers shoeing horses, houses being built, farmers gathering in crops and women washing and sewing at the doors of their houses. She always knew when they were approaching a town by the smell which wafted into the coach long before they arrived. Each town was different but when she had been there a short time, she ceased to notice. She wondered if, when she returned to Barnes, it would also have an odour which she would recognise after her nose had been cleansed by country air.

Whenever she turned her eyes back from looking outside, she became aware of the gaze of the young man again. He had a face that pleased her and when their eyes met, a smile flickered on his lips. At the next stop, night was falling and only a guttering taper lit the area so he stepped down first and turning, took her hand to guide her safely to the ground.

She waited to collect their bags and began struggling with it to the inn.

“Allow me,” the young man said in a friendly voice.

“Sir...” she stammered awkwardly, “I am Mr. D’Arcy’s servant. My job is to carry bags.”

“I insist,” he said, taking the bag from her and depositing it in the entrance to the inn. Jacob had taught her how to curtsy but not well, as she did so, she almost fell and he caught her arm to steady her. “You must be tired after your journey.”

She found she could not speak but managed to nod. At that moment, Jacob, carrying his own case, caught up with her.

“I fear your maid is fatigued, sir,” the young man said. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am George S’Aderson, I am travelling to Milan to join my regiment.” He rummaged in his bag, “here, I have a little brandy I think it might help revive your maid, sir.”

Mistry was sitting down, her face pale. She looked at Jacob, who nodded his encouragement and passed her the flask. Mistry drank a mouthful and grimaced. Captain S’Aderson leapt forward and caught her as she fainted. Together, he and Jacob carried her into the hostelry where a woman directed them to a cool, white painted room which being on the shade side of the inn was cooler than other parts of the building. The two men placed Mistry on the bed. Jacob quietly thanked the captain, saying that he would take care of her. The captain nodded his understanding and closed the door quietly. On the table was a jug of cool water which Jacob,

Shadows in the Wall

sitting on the bed beside her, poured onto a cloth and wiped her forehead, sprinkling some of the water on her lips. In a few moments she had revived and swung her legs off the bed and sat up shakily.

“What happened,” she asked, still confused. “The man gave me a drink and then...”

“It is the journey, you need to sleep. I will leave you to undress yourself and get into bed.”

Mistry held the dark green velvet drape of his sleeve. “Don’t ‘e leave me, Jacob, I am afeard here.” When she spoke, he saw that her anxiety had caused her speech to revert to that of the streets she had grown up in.

“I will not leave you,” he pointed to the other door in the room, “I am in the room there. I will leave the door open so that you can reach me whenever you want.”

Mistry, stood up but almost immediately fell back on the bed.

Jacob knelt down by the bed, held her hand and said, “My dear, you are unwell, you must sleep.”

Mistry, her face drained of colour, sat up slowly. “I am sick, Jacob, I fear I will spew.”

Jacob reached for the bowl on the wash stand and held it while Mistry emptied her stomach contents into the bowl. When she had stopped, he took the bowl to the girl in the hostel who grimaced but gave him another bowl. When he went back to Mistry, he wiped her mouth with his handkerchief and when she had lain back, stroked her damp forehead. She tried to undo her buttons but her hands were shaking so much that she could not control them.

“Allow me, Mistry,” Jacob said. She lay back and smiled her thanks. “I will take off your outer garments.

Shadows in the Wall

As he started to take her clothes off, he saw how hot and feverish she had become with beads of perspiration standing on her brow and her upper lip.

“I am so hot, Jacob,”

“You have so many clothes on; you are not in England now. You are probably suffering with the heat. I think you need to remove all your clothes, Do that and I’ll leave you now that I’ve taken off the bulky outer clothes?”

“Sir..., Jacob, I have no strength, can you do it for me?”

He started to do as she asked and noticed that his hands were also shaking with arousal as he took off her outer clothes and saw her pale, beautiful skin. He covered her with a sheet and sat down on the hard wooden chair beside the bed while she closed her eyes.

In a few moments, her body began to shake. Jacob put out his hand to restrain her and she opened her eyes and smiled weakly.

“Mayn’t I die, Jacob?”

For answer, he squeezed her hand to pass on some of his strength.

“If I die I would like to be with you Jacob.” She took his hand and pulled him towards her. He hesitated before taking off his shoes and his clothes and getting clumsily onto the small bed. He put his arms round her as she laid her head on his shoulder and he noticed that the body she pressed against him had stopped shaking.

“Jacob, if I am to die, I need to tell you of my love for you,” she said whispering to him.

“And I for you, Mistry but do not talk of dying. I have seen the sort of illness you have and it will pass.”

“If I had not come for to be your housekeeper, I would have died on the streets I was so often near to starving. So I am not afraid of death. Living only began when I came to you.”

She was near to sleeping and her voice was so quiet, he could hardly hear her. "You are the kindest man. I want to tell you that my love for you came from the first day and it has been with me every day. When I wake, I think of you, when I sleep I dream of you. To care for you gives me more pleasure than a woman like me deserves. You see, I have sinned many times and have given harm to my God. I could do nothing else; there was no way to live without sin."

"It matters not, Mistry, God will understand as do I." He said. "I too bless the day you came into my house. I knew loneliness which made me wonder if I wanted to continue to live but you have taken that all away and you are always in my thoughts and... in my heart."

For a moment their eyes met and he allowed himself to think that she was asking him to come to her. Even so he was unsure of what to do...this was a moment like nothing he had experienced before. He went to her carefully, afraid that she like a bird might descend into the sky if he approached too quickly. She was struggling with her buttons but her hands were shaking so much that she could not control them. Seeing that she was unable to remove her clothing, cautiously he went to help. She let her hands fall back and, as he began to pull at her buttons he found that he was also trembling. His hands began to perspire and a sensation of warmth spread through his body. He knelt down beside the bed and stroked her hair and a feeling of intense pleasure coursed through his body with the excitement of touching her.

Unable to contain himself, he said. "I've thought about you since almost the first day you came into Firenze House, Mistry."

She looked with longing at him and said slowly. "Jacob those thoughts filled my mind as well."

"I lived with my wife for many years and have never felt as I do now. There was a time when I came on you washing

yourself; you didn't know I was there. You stood unclothed before me and such a desire for you went through me that I could hardly stop myself. You weren't aware I was seeing you."

"No, I knew you were there," Mistry said, "and knowing that you saw me made me tremble inside. When you left and went upstairs I was disappointed."

"You were," he cried, "I had no idea; I thought that I, much older than you and in ill-health, would never interest you."

"Oh, dear man, you are the gentlest person I have met. I never thought I could meet someone so kind. My dreams are always of you and what we could do together."

While she spoke, he had undone all her buttons and pulled her naked body towards him. He saw that she was still cold and put his arms round her to warm her. As he did, the stirring in his body caused him to stiffen. Mistry sensed the change in him and reached down to caress him. He had tried to conceal his ardour by moving away but the bed was too small and he would have fallen out. She kissed his head, his lips, his neck and his hands. In a bliss which he had never experienced before, he cupped her breasts, allowed his hands to slide over her lissom body until he found the area of desire. "I have so little knowledge, Mistry, this is new to me," he whispered in her ear.

Their roles had changed, she the experienced teacher and he the neophyte. She guided his hand, showing him what she liked a man to do. As he entered the warmth of her body, he exploded with a violence which at first brought terror but when he saw the pleasure he was giving her he continued with even more force. The little wooden bed creaked beneath them as they moved to the heights of ecstasy. In her passion, she bit into his shoulder. The exquisite pain made him more violent. And then the peace when she held him tightly her legs and arms entwining his

Shadows in the Wall

After the passion, she looked up at him as he lay above her and said. "Now I can die happily."

"You will not die now that we have found each other."

They lay together for almost an hour; Mistry became still and silent and he constantly put his hand on her breast to make sure she was still breathing. Gradually she drifted into sleep and Jacob did also.

The next morning he woke as she got out of bed. He saw with pleasure the lines of her young body and marvelled at her beauty. Feigning sleep, through half lidded eyes, he watched her move around the room, pour the spring water in the bowl and sponge herself down and collect the clothes which Jacob had scattered on the floor. When she had put on her day clothes, she went to open the shutters, sat on the chair in front of the window and looked out over green hills and valleys. Quietly he got out of bed and went to stand behind her. He thought she had not heard but without saying anything, she raised her hand to catch his and pressed her head backwards to look up into his eyes. She did it so naturally that he wondered if she had known that he had been awake and admiring her. The thought of the closeness that had grown between them, elated him

"You were right, Jacob, I do feel better."

"The countryside around here would make anyone feel better but I am so glad you are well now," he smiled down at her upturned face. "Are you ready to eat, I imagine you are starving - you haven't eaten for almost a day." As Mistry nodded, he said, "I will go and get some bread and cheese which is all they serve here in the morning. I've stayed here many times before on my journey to Florence. The coach goes today but there is another tomorrow, I will go to the stage and ask if we can get on the coach tomorrow or another day. I think you need a rest. So, when we've eaten and if you feel well enough, we may walk along the river you see there, he pointed

through the open window. We can take food from this inn and have what the French call a *picnique*. The water here is sweet and cool it comes straight from the spring which wells up in the nearby hill. I think it will be less hot today because the sky is cloudy but we can anyhow sit beneath the shade of trees.

When he returned with a tray, he laid it on the small table. Mistry sat and ate while Jacob picked only at a few morsels.

“You may have eaten something which was not good,” he said, “I suspect it was the rabbit you had for dinner the night before last. I didn’t like the inn keeper, quite an evil looking man and he looked at you in a most objectionable way.”

Mistry smiled to herself. “I thought him to look comely,” she teased

Jacob looked at her anxiously through lidded eyes. Several men had passed admiring glances at her since they had started on the voyage, the latest being Captain S’Aderson, a much younger and nice looking man. Dressed in some of the finery which had been worn by his wife when she had been alive the beauty Jacob had seen in Mistry when she had first come to him was now even more apparent. He had caught her many times looking at herself in a mirror and he became so proud to be with her. Knowing that the journey would soil the clothes she wore, before they had set off he had ordered new clothes to be made for her return.

Whenever she was the subject of admiration a momentary sensation of pride tempered with slight jealousy filled his mind. He had so successfully taught Mistry to read and write and understand the complexities of language that when they were in hostels with other guests whom they had not met before, she was frequently taken for a lady from a good family. He wore only old clothes when he was travelling and had on one occasion been mistaken for her servant admittedly by a man with bad sight. This so shocked him that he gave his

travelling clothes away to a beggar and replaced them with garments more suitable to his station.

As she sat before him now in a thin silk gown which he had given her before they left, he looked with satisfaction at her slim figure and the elegant way she held herself as she sat in the chair in front of him.

He was about to express his admiration when there was a quiet knock on the door.

Jacob stood up and opened the door a few inches only, "Thank you, captain, she is still weak but recovering. She may be well enough to take the air later."

He stepped outside, closing the door behind him.

A murmured voice reached Mistry's ears and she was about to rise when Jacob quietly came back and closed the door.

"Who was that, Jacob?"

"The captain from yesterday, he was enquiring about your health."

"Did you not invite him to share the meal with us?"

"He told me last evening that he has hired a horse and is going to visit a friend."

"Oh," she said, "I hope we shall see more of him on the journey."

"We may but he suspects he may not be able to take the same coach that we travel on because the friend he is visiting is a long way away and he will probably not get back in time." Jacob knew this not to be true and had told S'Aderson they would travel by the same coach which would be leaving three hours later that same day.

"That will be sad; he seemed a nice man and good company for the long journey."

Shadows in the Wall

“For myself, I preferred the conversation of the older two men sitting beside me. They are also in business.”

“Yes, but they did not address one word to me,” she pouted, “and the older lady sitting beside me seemed to sleep and snore most of the time.”

“I’m sure she is a charming lady but not well. You will notice she keeps breathing from her nosegay. I spoke a little with her. She is returning to her family in Milan where she has a good doctor. No one, she says, can understand her ailment in London. I do fear for her well-being, I am suspicious that sometimes when we think she is sleeping, she may have fainted off.”

“But she does snore so loudly I am surprised she does not waken herself. Even above the noise of the horses and the wheels, I can still hear her,” she smiled. “You have taught me so much about your business, I would have liked to speak to the two old men about their work one of them with diamonds and the other with ladies clothes but I know they would not speak with a woman.”

“Shall I introduce you as my business partner which is anyhow what you are slowly becoming?”

“I should like that but I am not sure I can. I heard what they were saying and I would want to talk to them about many things, new things.”

“Do you indeed!” Jacob raised his eyebrows, “what things do you mean?” He was pleased to see that Mistry was eating well.

“When I was on the streets I used to watch people working. It seemed to me that there would be better ways they could do it.”

“Tell me, I’d be interested to know.” Jacob said.

“One of the things was using mare’s urine on cloth. I saw it once when my man took me to an old crone’s house in a

Shadows in the Wall

village near Barnes, she had horses running around and she had put a blanket over one which was ill, when it pissed, some of it splashed on the blanket and the dye changed its colour.”

“The smell must have been very unpleasant.”

“I can still remember it. Before you taught me how to speak I would have said ‘it did fair make I puke’,” she laughed, “but of course now I know better.”

“What did it do once you had stopped ‘puke’?” Jacob found himself laughing with her and realised that he had not laughed much since before he had married Isabel. She had been of a serious disposition and he had adopted her behaviour which had stayed with him even after her death.

“Where it had been splashed, red colours looked pink and had a shiny surface, I expect that with a brush you could do interesting designs.”

Jacob looked surprised and then said, “I don’t think you should tell our fellow travellers, we should keep that to ourselves, we will try it when we get back to Firenze House. If it works, it could give us a new trade. It is your idea, I won’t forget that.”