

WILBUR SMITH

WITH
TOM HARPER

GHOST FIRE

ZAFFRE

FORT ST. GEORGE, MADRAS, INDIA
1754

The two children climbed the wall and dropped into the garden. The evening air was ripe with the midsummer scent of jasmine flowers and coconut oil burning in the lamps that had been lit. Long shadows hid them from view as they crept toward the big house.

They were brother and sister. The girl, the older of the two, had long fair hair that hung loose down her back, though she was of an age when more modesty would soon be required. The Indian sun had tanned her skin golden. She had a woman's curves, but a soft, girlish face that brimmed with mischief.

"Why have we come here, Connie?" asked the boy. He was taller than her, of which he was proud, though a year younger. He was sturdily built, already taking the shape of the man he would become, with a mop of tousled red hair and intelligent brown eyes. His skin was darker than hers, a bronze that could pass for Indian as easily as European.

Constance crouched behind a terracotta urn. "Mr. Meridew is hosting an assembly this evening. Gentlemen only."

"But that will be the most boring party in the world," Theo complained. "Old men talking about the price of cotton all night."

"They have not come to talk business, Theo. I had it from my

hairdresser, who had it from her sister, whose cousin is a cook in the house, that Mr. Meridew has hired a troupe of nautch-girls to dance. I am told it will be so scandalous that the men have been talking of little else all week.”

“You want to break in and see what they do?”

“Don’t you?”

“Of course. But . . .” Theo was not a coward, but he had a practical streak. Painful experience had taught him that if they were caught it was he who would feel the strength of their father’s anger.

Constance’s green eyes sparkled. “I dare you,” she said. “They say the nautch-dancers are the most beautiful women in the world. You will be of age soon. Are you not curious to see the mysteries of the feminine form?”

Theo swallowed. Constance was dressed in Indian style, with a bright sari wrapped around her and draped over her shoulders. She had mastered the intricacies of the garment so that it clung to the contours of her body, shifting easily as she moved. She wore nothing underneath, yet she had a slimmer waist than many a woman who trussed herself up with iron stays and whale-bone busks. Her young breasts swelled under the fabric.

To Theo, the complexities of women’s undergarments were a mystery more profound than the algebraic equations his despairing tutor tried to make him work out. But he could not fail to notice the changes in his sister over the last two years—and it made him uncomfortable when she spoke so frankly. He knew women should not say such things.

“Or are you frightened?”

Her eyes met his, flashing with the challenge. Theo swallowed his doubts. He could never resist his sister—however many times it ended with him bending over in their father’s study.

“I’ll go first,” he said defiantly.

Keeping low, he ran to the house and flattened himself against the wall. It was a grand building, as befitted the richest merchant in Madras, designed in the fantastical style that was unique to the British in India. A broad veranda was supported by Grecian columns; onion domes flanked classical pediments. It stood about half a mile from Fort St. George and Madras, though near enough for its occupants to hear the surf crashing on the beach that fronted the city walls.

From the sounds within, Theo guessed the party was taking place on the first floor. He recalled a grand ballroom there from his only visit to the house, trailing along behind his father.

A shadow flitted past one of the ground-floor windows. Theo ducked. He could see the carriages and palanquins lined up on the driveway. With so many of Madras's finest citizens assembled, the house would be full of servants. He could not hope to get up the stairs unseen.

A carved stone elephant stood on the terrace. It was almost as tall as Theo. He climbed onto a flowerpot, scrambled onto its back, then hoisted himself to the roof of the veranda. Just in time. As his legs disappeared over the edge, a light swept the terrace. A Sikh watchman was making his rounds with a lantern. Theo flattened himself against the roof and waited until the danger had passed. He edged to the nearest window and peered inside.

There was no glass—in India, it was an unimaginable luxury. Wooden blinds hung in the opening, protecting the room from the dust and heat of the day. Theo heard the soft pulse of a drum, and the sinuous playing of breathy flutes. He pushed his fingers between the slats and pried them apart.

The smell of sweet tobacco billowed into the night, so suddenly that Theo nearly choked. He covered his mouth to stifle a cough. He saw the merchant princes of Madras lounging on cushions, sucking lustily on their hookah pipes. Most had

removed their coats and wigs, but even from behind Theo recognized nearly all of them. They passed through his father's office, or the family godown, almost every day.

None of them noticed Theo. Their gazes were fixed on a troupe of dancing girls swaying and spinning in time with the music. They wore saris, like Constance, yet theirs were made of a cloth so fine it was almost transparent. Theo stared at the dancers, hypnotized by their movements. Their hips writhed; their breasts undulated under the gauzy fabric. One, in particular, fascinated him: a slim young woman with almond eyes, her oiled skin gleaming in the lamplight.

The dancers unwound their turbans. Long black hair spilled over shoulders, falling over breasts.

The men clapped appreciatively and shouted encouragement.

The throb of the music seemed to grow faster, more urgent. All the dancers moved as one, but Theo's eyes were fixed on the girl with the almond eyes. She tied her turban cloth around her hips, then wriggled out of her sari, pulling it from under the makeshift belt. The flimsy cloth unraveled from her body and trailed away, like a veil.

All that covered her was the band of cloth around her loins, and her black hair brushing her breasts. She pressed her palms together, swiveling her hips, and Theo's chest tightened. Her hair swayed from side to side, caressing her breasts and offering tantalizing glimpses of the dark brown nipples beneath.

Theo was so entranced he didn't hear the sound behind him.

"She's beautiful," whispered Constance.

Theo whipped around. "What are you doing?" he hissed. "You should not be seeing such things."

Constance pouted. "I know what a woman's body looks like."

Theo could feel he was losing control. He knew they should go, but he could not bear to look away. In the room, the girl had untied the knot in the cloth around her waist. She held it

against her skin, spinning behind it, offering snatches of bare flesh. Theo glimpsed the curve of her buttocks, the smooth arc of her belly tapering away between her thighs.

Suddenly she let the cloth fall to the floor. At the same time, she flicked back her hair, and her nakedness was revealed.

Theo was open-mouthed. Her breasts were firm, gleaming with the oil she had rubbed on her skin. Between her legs, the girl's sex was smooth and exposed, a plump, mounded cleft meticulously plucked free of any hair. He had never seen such a thing before. Warmth spread through Theo's loins. His manhood strained against his breeches, so hard he thought it might burst.

The men inside had risen to their feet, whistling and cheering. One stood in front of the window, rubbing the crotch of his breeches and blocking Theo's view. The girl disappeared from sight.

The pang of loss was too much to bear. Theo scrambled to his feet, careless of anything except one more glimpse of that beautiful naked body, still gyrating in time with the music as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Get down," hissed Constance.

She tugged on his belt. Theo resisted, but Constance was stubborn. She grabbed his ankle and pulled it from under him.

The roof tiles were slippery with the evening dew. Theo lost his balance and fell, sliding down the slick pitched roof on his stomach. He flailed for a handhold, but there was nothing to grip. He felt his legs go over the edge. He hung there for a moment, dangling in space. Then he dropped.

He landed hard, knocking over a flowerpot. A stabbing pain shot through his ankle, and he cried out despite himself. The flowerpot rolled away, bounced down the steps and shattered.

Constance jumped down after him, landing softly as a cat. "Oh, Theo," she said, "are you hurt?"

Shouts came from the front door, and lantern beams swept across the lawns. Theo tried to rise, grimacing with pain. Rapid footsteps approached the corner of the house.

“You must go,” said Constance. Her eyes were wide, alive with excitement. “If they catch us, we will be in such trouble.”

“What about you?”

“I can take care of myself.”

With a flick of her wrist, she flipped a fold of her sari over her head, covering her face. In an instant, she was unrecognizable.

Theo ran. Each step was agony, but he forced himself to go on, spurred by the fear of what his father would do to him if he was caught.

The terrace was now awash with light. The music had stopped. Merchants were hanging out of the upper windows to see what was happening. Below, the terrace, which had been empty a few moments ago, was crowded with onlookers. Every servant had come to witness the commotion.

The master of the house pushed through the throng in a fury. He had spent months planning the evening. He had promised his guests that they would enjoy private sessions with the dancers afterward, in consideration of favors they had done him, and now everything was ruined. Someone would pay.

As he looked around the assembled crowd, his gaze paused on Constance. He saw only another veiled servant—and he had so many servants, he could not be expected to recognize all of them. It would never have occurred to him that an Englishwoman would disgrace herself by donning native dress. He turned his attention elsewhere.

At the far end of the garden, a shadow disappeared into the rose beds.

“After him!”

Theo blundered through the bushes. Thorns drew beads of blood on his arms, the hard earth jarring his swollen ankle. He could hear the men pursuing him, and he redoubled his efforts to escape. He came to the wall and reached up to haul himself over.

It was too high. He stretched on tiptoe, gritting his teeth as a flash of pain shot through his ankle. The guards were closing on him, their lamps casting dappled shadows through the rose bushes.

Theo's fingers scrabbled for the top of the wall. He couldn't find a purchase. He tried to jump, but his foot would not take the pressure. The bushes rustled as the guards charged through. Forcing himself to breach the pain barrier, Theo jumped again. His ankle felt as if it had snapped—but he made it. He hauled himself up the wall, flailing and kicking.

Firm hands grabbed his legs and tried to pull him away. He fought, lashing out with his feet. His shoe connected with something soft, and he heard a grunt of pain. His fingers could not keep their grip. He came away from the wall, landing in a heap on top of the guards. Before he could run, they held him in a tight grip.

They dragged him onto the lawn and shone a lamp in his face. One was bleeding from his mouth where Theo had kicked him.

"Theodore Courtney," said Meridew, in a voice that carried the full weight and dignity of the United Company of Merchants Trading to the East Indies. "Wait until your father hears of this."

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Mansur and Verity Courtney were sitting in their parlor, playing chess, when Meridew arrived at the door. Their house was

a short distance from his. They had an uneasy relationship with the East India Company, and Mansur did not want to be too close to the walls of Fort St. George.

Mansur raised his eyebrows when he heard the angry knocking on the door. "Are we expecting callers?"

"I thought all of society had been invited to Mr. Meridew's gathering." Verity moved her knight, taking her husband's bishop.

A large Sikh in a bright red turban entered the room. His name was Harjinder, Mansur's guard and stoutest servant. He had served the family since before Constance was born.

"Theo-sahib has returned," he announced.

Mansur rose. "I wasn't aware he had gone out."

Theo stood on the doorstep between two sepoys. Meridew waited beside them, red-faced with fury. A large gathering of Indians and Englishmen crowded behind them.

"I was not expecting so many callers at this hour," Mansur said calmly.

"He broke into my garden, clambered onto my roof and interrupted a private entertainment I was hosting for the most eminent citizens of Madras," said Meridew.

Mansur considered this. "I wish I could say that does not sound like my son."

"And what was the nature of this entertainment?" asked Verity, innocently. She was behind her husband, peering over his shoulder.

Meridew blanched. "I would rather not say in front of a lady."

"But if I am to punish my son, I must know the nature of the offense."

Meridew tried to catch Mansur's eye. "If you and I could discuss this in private—between gentlemen, as it were . . ."

"My husband and I have no secrets from each other," said Verity.

She fixed Meridew with a stare that brooked no argument. Meridew flushed and looked away.

“I am sure the entertainment must have cost a great deal of money,” added Mansur. “If you send your man to my office in the morning, I will see you are properly compensated.”

Meridew took the offer for what it was—a bribe. “I dare say you know best how to discipline your own children,” he muttered.

“I promise you it will not happen again,” said Verity. She shot Theo a dark look. “Will it?”

“No, Mother.”

“What were you thinking?” Mansur exclaimed, as soon as the door had closed on Meridew. “Where did you get such a ridiculous idea?”

The truth was, it had been Constance who first heard about the dancers, and Constance whose curiosity had insisted they try to peek in. But Theo would not betray her. There was still a chance she might have escaped unseen.

“I heard some of the boys talking about it,” he lied. “I . . . I wanted to see the nautch-girls.”

Mansur and Verity shared a parental look.

“I understand a boy your age will have certain . . . interests,” Mansur said awkwardly, “but you cannot embarrass us like this. Our family is not so secure here that we can afford to antagonize the Company.”

Theo stuck out his chin. “I don’t give a fig for the East India Company.”

“Go to your room.”

Theo made to argue—but one look at his father’s face convinced him to think better of it. He stomped up the stairs.

Mansur turned to Verity and sighed. “He is a growing young man, with a young man’s desires,” he reflected. “It is natural he should want to see such things.”

“But not in such a manner,” Verity responded tartly. “Soon Constance will need a husband, and if it is said that her brother goes around ogling native women from rooftops, there is not a

reputable family in the whole Presidency who would countenance such a match.”

Mansur grinned. “Of course, my love, you would never have dreamed of marrying a disreputable young man. You would not have *countenanced* it, Cousin.”

Verity glared at him. She and Mansur were cousins, though they had grown up unaware of each other’s existence. Their fathers, the brothers Dorian and Guy Courtney, had been mortal enemies. But from the first moment Mansur spied Verity through a telescope, on the deck of her father’s ship, he had fallen absolutely in love with her.

“I conducted myself with the utmost decorum,” said Verity.

“You leaped onto my ship during a sea battle, and left your father clutching a fistful of your blouse, so keen was he to keep you from me,” Mansur answered.

Guy Courtney, Verity’s father, had been a monster, who beat his daughter savagely and abused her for his own purposes. Later, he had tried to kill the whole Courtney family. When he had held a knife to Mansur’s baby cousin Jim’s throat, Mansur’s aunt Sarah had shot him dead.

“I wonder how Sarah and Tom are faring,” Verity mused.

Mansur sucked on his hookah pipe and didn’t reply. Thinking about Tom and Sarah, their son Jim and grandson George, reopened old wounds he preferred not to dwell upon.

Verity read the expression on his face. She rose. “I should see that Constance is all right. I hope she has not been disturbed by all the commotion and Theo’s foolishness this evening.”

But when she put her head around Constance’s door, everything was as it should be. Her daughter lay in her bed, her golden hair spread across the pillow, breathing softly in her deep, untroubled sleep.

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