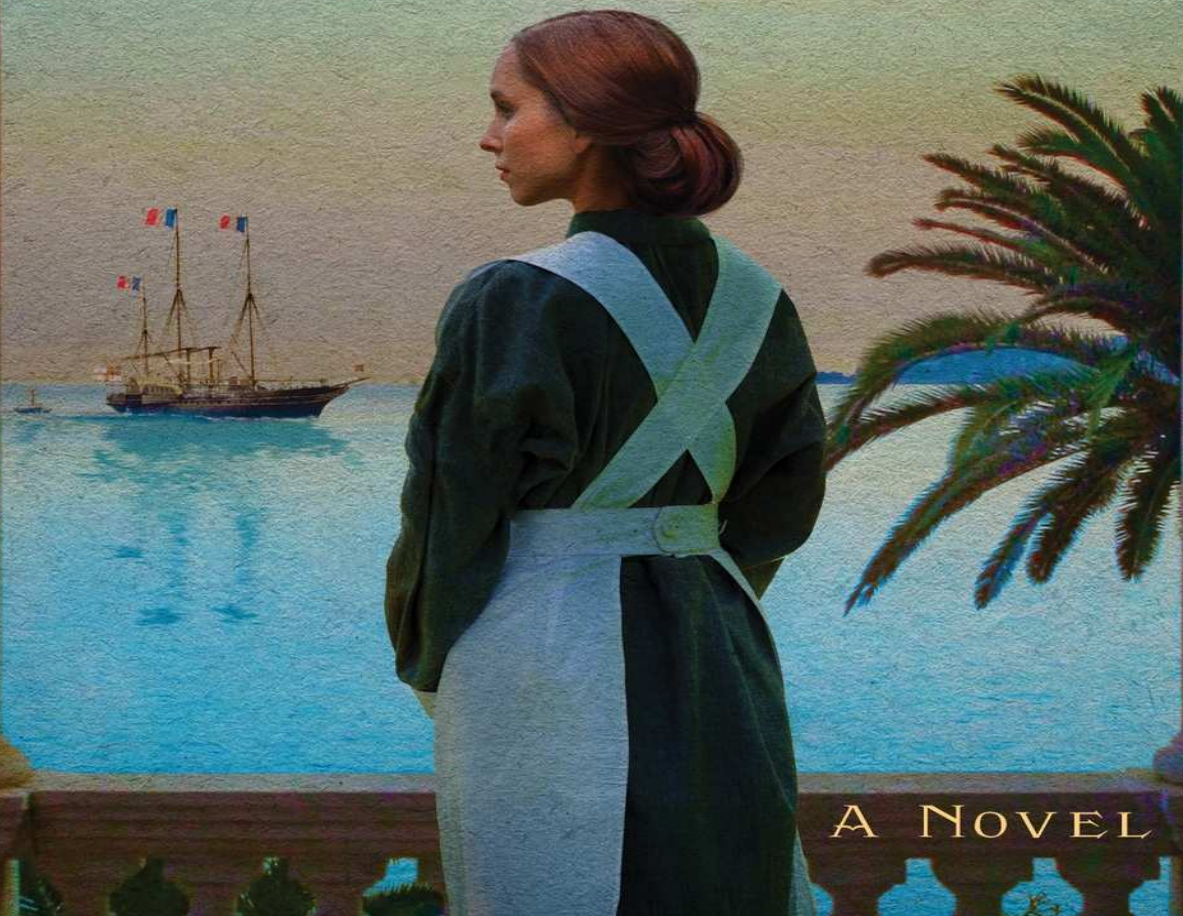


RHYS BOWEN

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ABOVE
THE BAY
of ANGELS

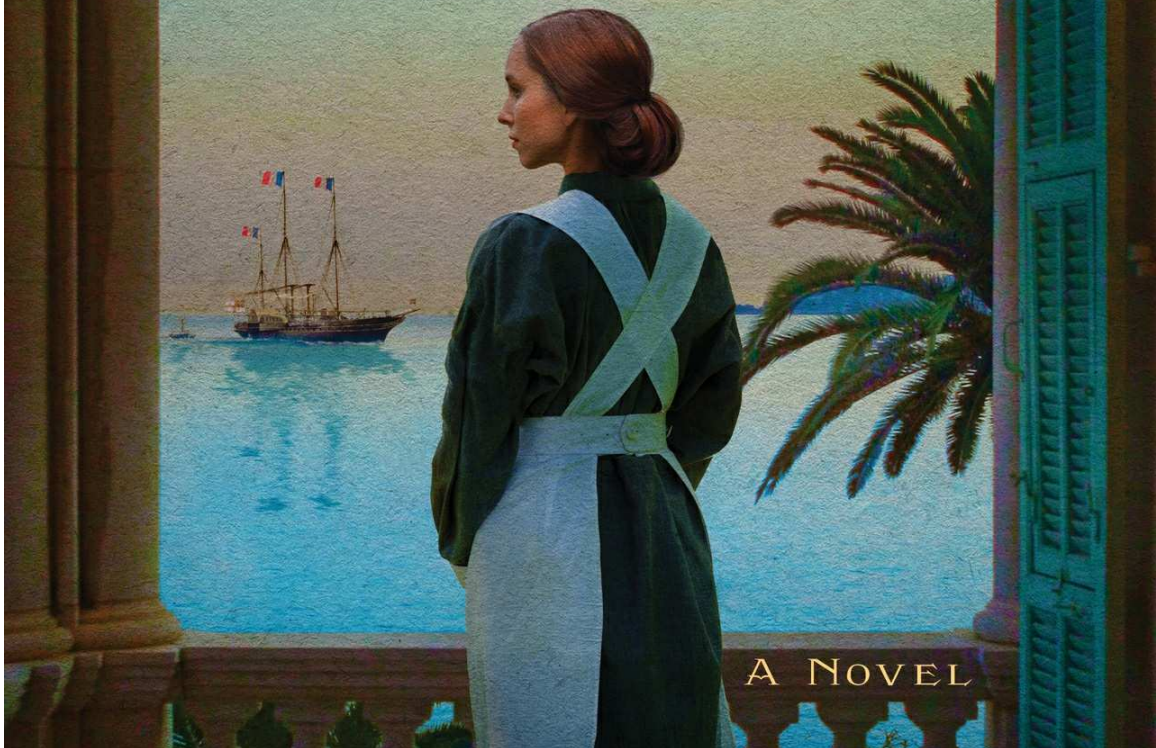


A NOVEL

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ABOVE
THE BAY
of ANGELS



A NOVEL

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Love and Death Among the Cheetahs

ABOVE
THE BAY
of ANGELS

A NOVEL

RHYS BOWEN

LAKE UNION
PUBLISHING

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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First edition

This book is dedicated to the real Mary Crozier. While not a marquise, she has a house almost as lovely as the villa in Nice, and she gives the most amazing tea parties.

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CHAPTER 1

London, September 1896

If Helen Barton hadn't stepped out in front of an omnibus, I might still be sweeping floors and lighting fires at an ostentatious house in St John's Wood. But for once I had followed my father's advice.

"Carpe diem" was one of my father's favourite sayings. Seize the day. Take your chances. He usually added "because that might be the only chance you get." He spoke from experience. He was an educated man from a good family, and had known better times. As the son of a second son, he could expect to inherit neither a title nor the property that would have come with it, and was sent out to India to make something of himself, becoming an officer in the Bengal Lancers. He had married my mother, a sweet and delicate creature he met on one of his visits home. It was soon clear that she couldn't endure the harsh conditions of Bengal, so Daddy had been forced to resign his commission and return to live in England.

From what Daddy told us, it had been made evident to him as a young man that he could expect no financial help from his uncle, the earl. He never told us why, or what rift had occurred within his family, but he was clearly bitter about it. However, he had finally fallen on his feet in a way and had acquired what was considered a prestigious position: he was in charge of guest relations at the Savoy, London's new luxury hotel. His ability to speak good French and mingle with crowned heads had made him popular at the hotel. He had patted the hands of elderly Russian countesses and arranged roulette parties for dashing European princes, for which he received generous tips. We had lived quite happily in the small town of Hampstead, on the northern fringes of London. My younger sister Louisa and I attended a private school. We had a woman who came to clean and cook for us. It was not an extravagant life, but a pleasant one.

Until it all came crashing down when the demon drink overcame my father. He worked at an establishment where the alcohol flowed freely amongst the guests. When invited, he took a glass, as it would have been rude to refuse. So who would notice if he later finished off a bottle?

I remember the first time he came home drunk.

"Roddy, where have you been?" my mother asked him when he arrived home at ten o'clock. "We waited dinner for you. I was worried."

"None of your business, woman." He spat out the words.

My mother winced as if he had struck her. My little sister grabbed my hand. We had never seen our father like this. He was normally so amiable and adored my mother.

"Roddy, have you been drinking?" Mummy said coldly.

“Just being sociable with the clients. Part of the job, don’t you know,” he said. Then he added, his voice rising aggressively, “I have to work for my living, or have you forgotten that? After all, it was because of you that I had to give up my commission in India and take a menial job bowing and scraping to those who should be my equals. Now where’s my dinner?”

I saw my mother’s horrified stare as she blinked back tears. After that day nothing was the same. It felt as if we were walking on eggshells. We never knew when he’d come home or what kind of mood he’d be in. Sometimes he was as jovial and affectionate as ever, but other times it was as if he’d turned into a monster I didn’t recognize. Louisa and I spent a lot of time hiding away in our bedroom. Mummy tried hard at first, begging him to stop drinking and think of his family, but nothing she said reached him, and in the end she just seemed to give up and fade like a wilting flower. She had never been strong to begin with.

I suppose we had all been dreading what happened next. My father arrived home in the middle of the afternoon announcing that he had been dismissed from his job. “All because of some stupid Russian woman who said she’d seen my helping myself to a little sip from a bottle of Scotch. They took her word against mine. Can you believe it? Who’d want to work at a place like that? I’m well rid of it.”

“But Roddy, what will we do?” my mother asked. “How will we pay the rent?”

“I’ll find something else, don’t you worry,” he said breezily. “A chap like me—I’ll be snapped up in no time at all.”

But he wasn’t. He tried in vain to find another position, but without a reference no respectable establishment wanted him. We watched him sink lower and lower into depression and drunkenness. We gave up our servant. I tried to be grown-up and take over the housework as Mummy seemed to have no energy for even the most basic of tasks. Daddy seemed genuinely concerned for her, but it didn’t stop his visits to the public house.

It was a bitter winter that year, and the price of coal had gone up. We spent our evenings around the kitchen table where the stove provided warmth. Mummy developed a nasty cough. I thought she should see a doctor, but Daddy dismissed the idea. “It’s just a bad cold, Bella. Your mother always likes to dramatize things, you know that.”

It might have started as a cold, but it turned into pneumonia, and three days later she was dead. I couldn’t believe she was gone. Neither could my father. “My precious darling Winnie,” he said. “It’s all my fault. It’s all my fault.” And he actually wept. He and Louisa and I hugged each other while the tears flowed. My mother was a genteel and sweet person who adored my father. They said she died of pneumonia, but I think it was of a broken heart.

We moved to a squalid two-room flat above a butcher’s shop, with only cold water and an outside lavatory. Father occasionally picked up work writing letters for the illiterate, tutoring in French, but nothing kept the wolf far from the door. I suppose I had no idea how bad our situation really was until one day, just before my fifteenth birthday, he announced he had found a position for me. I was to leave the school that I adored and become a servant in a big house, so that I’d earn money to feed father and Louisa and someone else would have to feed and clothe me. I was more than shocked. I was mortified. We might not have been rich, but I was from a good family.

“A servant? You want me to be a servant?” I could hardly stammer the words.

“I feel as terrible about it as you do, my darling child,” he said, “but the truth is that I can’t afford to feed you. We’ll be out on the street if someone doesn’t pay the rent, and I

can't seem to find a position. So your sister and I are relying on you at this moment."

I wanted to shout at him, to tell him that we might have enough money to scrape by if he didn't visit the public house so frequently, but I'd been brought up to be the good child, to obey my parents. I was doubly shocked when I found out that the house where I would be sent to work belonged to a nouveau riche man who had made money in the garment business. His factories turned out cheap blouses for working girls. He and his wife were loudmouthed and commonly ostentatious.

I stood outside, staring up at the gables and turrets of an incredibly ugly house. "Daddy, please don't make me do this," I pleaded. "Not a servant to these people. I realize I must leave school, but there must be something else I can do."

"It's only for a short while, Bella," he said, patting my hand. "I promise you as soon as I'm on my feet again I'll bring you home. Until then you are helping to make sure that your little sister does not starve."

What could I say to that? I realized then that he had always been a great manipulator, using his charm to get my mother to agree with whatever scheme he had in mind at that moment.

So I went to work for Mr and Mrs Tilley at the ugly house in St John's Wood. They kept a butler, a parlour maid, a footman, two housemaids, a cook and a scullery maid. As the lowest housemaid, I was responsible for rising at five in the morning, lighting the copper and the stove, then carrying heavy scuttles of coal to the bedrooms to make sure that the family awoke to warmth. It was backbreaking, soul-destroying work. I had to share a bed with Poppy, the scullery maid, in a freezing attic room. Mercifully I was so tired that I fell asleep instantly every night. It felt like a nightmare from which I couldn't wake up.

Then one day Mrs Tilley was entertaining. She liked to entertain frequently: coffee mornings and tea parties and extravagant dinners. All of these events meant extra work for us servants. We went through a frenzy of polishing silverware, making sure there wasn't a speck of dust on the mahogany table that seated thirty and, in my case, ensuring that the fires were supplied with enough coal to keep them burning brightly. On this occasion it was a tea party. Cook had been baking all morning: scones and sponge cakes and shortbreads so that the kitchen was full of wonderful aromas. And all afternoon she had been making little tea sandwiches—cucumber, egg and cress, smoked salmon. After Elsie, the parlour maid, had gone up to the drawing room with the tea things, Cook noticed that she had forgotten to put the macaroons on to the tray. She thrust them into my hands. "Quick. Take them up before Mrs T notices, or there will be hell to pay," she said.

I ran out of the kitchen with the dish, up the stone steps and through the green baize door that separated the servants from the real world. Female voices were coming from the drawing room. I crept in. Elsie had already put the tray on the trolley and was pouring tea. I hesitated, unsure what to do next, when Mrs Tilley spotted me.

"What do you want, girl?" she asked.

"I've brought the macaroons, ma'am," I said. "They weren't quite ready when Elsie carried up the tray."

She heard my refined accent and frowned. "Are you trying to ape your betters, girl?" Her own accent still carried an undercurrent of her East End upbringing.

“No, ma’am. I’ve always spoken this way. My father was a gentleman.”

“Then what in God’s name are you doing here?” one of the other ladies asked.

“My mother died. My father became too ill to work, and I need to support my little sister,” I replied. “There are not many jobs available to a fifteen-year-old.”

“You poor child,” the woman said. “Life can be cruel.”

Then she took a cream puff from the plate and bit into it. “You’ll never believe what I heard about Sylvia,” she said, her upper lip now lined with a delicate moustache of cream.

“Do tell.” The ladies leaned forward. And I was instantly forgotten.

You might have thought that my lot would have improved after that moment. It did, but only slightly. I still had to get up early to light the fires, but when Mrs Tilley was entertaining, she’d make sure I served them in the drawing room. “Her father was an aristocrat,” she’d say in a stage whisper. “Her parents died. I took her in, poor little thing.”

I’d stand there like a statue, determined to keep my face a mask of stone to show them I didn’t care. I wanted these self-satisfied, patronizing ladies to know that whatever they said they could never break me. “One day,” I would whisper to myself. I wasn’t sure what I meant by it. Only that if I could just hang on long enough, then I’d find a way to escape. And I’d make something of my life.

The only good thing about the Tilley household was that Mr and Mrs Tilley loved to eat. They ate very well. So well that I was able to take home leftovers to Daddy and Louisa on my afternoon off every week. My father loved his food. He would have been a gourmet if we could have afforded it and spoke fondly about banquets he had attended, as well as Indian feasts, country picnics, Christmas at the family seat. His eyes would light up when he saw my weekly offerings, wrapped in a clean napkin.

“My, my,” Daddy would say. “Roast pheasant. That takes me back to my childhood. I remember a banquet with the old earl once. We’d been out shooting. I’d bagged a couple of pheasants. My God, they were good. And smoked salmon. My dear, you are a miracle worker, a lifesaver.”

He’d take my hands and gaze up at me adoringly, the way he used to look at my mother. I’d try to smile back at him, although I wanted to scream. I wanted to shout at him, “Your childhood was full of banquets. Do you know what mine is like? Have you ever scrubbed floors so that your hands are raw? Or lugged coal up four flights of stairs? You have no idea what you are putting me through.” But he had become so thin and pale that I couldn’t say anything to hurt him. He had called me a miracle worker, a lifesaver, and I think I really believed to begin with that I could make him well again if I brought home enough good food to fatten him up. I tried to find bottles hidden around the flat and dispose of them. After a while, however, I realized it was hopeless. He was going to drink himself into the grave. I knew I had to stay where I was, enduring Mrs Tilley, until Louisa could be somehow taken care of.

Mrs Tilley boasted about having the best cook in London. “I lured her away from titled people,” she used to say. “It’s true what they say, you know. Money talks. I pay her much more than she was getting. And I’m told we have the best table for miles around.”

We also ate well in the kitchen, and I found that I had inherited my father’s palate and appreciation of good food. Our cuisine at home had always been rather basic, even in the days when we had a cook, and I became fascinated with the process of creating such wonderful flavours. “Show me how you made that parsley sauce, those meringues, that oyster stew,” I’d

say to Mrs Robbins, the cook. And if she had a minute to spare, she would show me. After a while, seeing my willingness as well as my obvious aptitude for cooking, she suggested to Mrs Tilley that her old legs were not up to standing for hours any more and that she needed an assistant cook. And she requested me. Mrs Tilley agreed, but only if she didn't have to pay me more money and I should still be available to do my party piece whenever she entertained.

And so I went to work in the kitchen. Mrs Robbins found me a willing pupil. After lugging coal scuttles up all those stairs, it felt like heaven to be standing at a table preparing food. We had a scullery maid who did all the most menial of jobs, like chopping the onions and peeling the potatoes, but I had to do the most basic of tasks—mashing the potatoes with lots of butter and cream until there wasn't a single lump, basting the roast so that the fat was evenly crisp. I didn't mind. I loved being amongst the rich aromas. I loved the look of a well-baked pie. The satisfaction when Mrs Robbins nodded with approval at something I had prepared. And of course I loved the taste of what I had created.

Now when I went home to Daddy and Louisa, I could say, "I roasted that pheasant. I made that apple tart." And it gave me a great rush of satisfaction to say the words.

"You've a good feel for it, I'll say that for you," Mrs Robbins told me, and after a while she even sought my opinion. "Does this casserole need a touch more salt, do you think? Or maybe some thyme?"

The part I loved the best was the baking. She showed me how to make pastry, meringues that were light as air, all sorts of delicate biscuits and rich cakes. After a year under Mrs Robbins's tutelage, I realized that I could now start to spread my wings. I could get a job as a cook, with the money and respect that went with it. I made the mistake of telling Mrs Robbins of my ambition, and she told madam. And madam didn't want to lose me. She loved the status that her aristocratic servant gave her. "Go on, tell them about your dad in India," she'd say when the ladies came to call. "Tell them about your great-uncle the earl and that blooming great palace of a house he lives in."

When she heard that I might be thinking of leaving, she called me into the drawing room and told me that if I was ungrateful enough to want to leave, she wouldn't give me a reference. She smiled as she said it. Smirked, actually, knowing that nobody would hire me without a reference. I was stuck whether I liked it or not. I tried to think of ways to escape. I could go to America maybe. They'd be impressed by my upper-class English accent and noble background, wouldn't they? I could become a cook there, or work in a high-class shop, or become a lady's companion. The only fly in that ointment was that every penny I earned went to Daddy and Louisa. I had no way to save up for my fare. And of course I couldn't leave them.

My father died the autumn I turned twenty. This did not come as a great shock to me, and I have to admit I did not feel the grief a daughter should feel. I had learned to shut off all feeling the moment I became a servant. Mrs Tilley gave me a day off to arrange for his funeral, and Louisa and I stood together at his grave.

"Well, that's that, I suppose," Louisa said. "I'm rather glad it's over, aren't you?"

"Glad our father died?" I asked.

She gave an awkward smile. "I don't mean it like that. After all, he was our father and I suppose we loved him once, but it was like holding our breath, waiting for the end to come."

“Yes, it was,” I agreed. “But I’m worried about you. What will happen to you now?”

She was almost seventeen, had shown little interest in her schooling and was recently apprenticed to a milliner. It suited her well as she had always been the sort of girl who admired herself in the mirror and longed to be fashionable one day, while I was interested more in my books and less in a way of life I could never have.

“You like your job?” I enquired. “And your employers?”

She nodded, tentatively. “They are very kind.”

I enquired whether she could live in with the family who owned the shop. She actually blushed and said that wouldn’t be necessary. She had been holding off until Daddy died, but she had had a proposal and was going to marry.

“Marry?” I stared at her in disbelief. “But you’re only a child.”

“Nonsense. Many girls marry at seventeen,” she said. “And Billy will take good care of me. I won’t have to work.”

I was more than shocked when I found out that the boy she wanted to marry was Billy Harrison, the son of the butcher above whose shop we lived. “A butcher boy? Louisa, you can’t marry trade. Daddy would turn in his grave.”

She regarded me haughtily. “As if our father did anything for us, Bella.”

“He did his best,” I said, not believing those words. His best hadn’t been good enough.

She put her hand over mine. “Billy is a good catch, Bella. His father owns three shops, plus a pig farm out in Essex. He plans to hand one of the shops over to Billy. We’ll live with his parents in a nice house on Highgate Hill until Billy can find us a house of our own. You can stop being a servant and come and live with us. I’m sure Billy won’t mind.”

I can’t tell you what anguish I went through that night. Of course I wished my sister well and wanted her to be happy. But here I was, stuck in domestic drudgery, having toiled for five years to support her, when she had no idea of the life I lived. I had wanted her to be educated, to have more chances than I. And now she was going to marry, and I . . . I was still a prisoner at the house of Tilley. Life seemed bitterly unfair.

Then it struck me that I’d no longer be responsible for her. My wages were now my own. I’d save up and be able to buy my ticket to America. This cheered me so much that I decided to treat myself on my next day off. No more coming home with leftovers from the Tilleys. I’d go up to the West End and look in the shop windows, maybe buy myself a new comb or even some rouge for my too-pale cheeks and maybe take tea in a tearoom. So I caught the Metropolitan Underground railway to Baker Street, then the Bakerloo Underground to Oxford Circus. It was horribly hot and smoky, and I was so relieved to come up into the fresh air again.

I felt a flutter of excitement when I emerged to a different world. Smartly dressed women, big beautiful shops. I walked along Oxford Street until I came to John Lewis’s wonderful department store. I gazed at all the windows, with their smartly dressed mannequins and realistic country scenes. In one window there was even a motor car. “A jaunt in the country” was written across the backdrop. Then I reached the front entrance and took a deep breath before I went in. It looked so beautiful it was almost like stepping into a palace. I approached the cosmetics counter and let the lady apply a little rouge to my cheeks before buying a small tin. Feeling very daring I came out again and turned down Bond Street.

I paused at Fenwick’s department store, then gazed in the windows of the jewellers, hatmakers, leather goods merchants and china shops until I emerged on to Piccadilly. Then a

really extravagant thought struck me. I remembered my father relating how he had been taken to tea at Fortnum and Mason when he was a child. I spotted the name across the street and decided that I, too, would have tea there, just this once. I stood at the edge of the curb, waiting for a break in the seemingly incessant stream of hansom cabs, omnibuses, delivery carts, and even occasional motor cars. Then right behind me I heard a scream, shouts and a police whistle, and my life changed in that instant.

CHAPTER 2

I spun around to witness a horrible scene. An omnibus stood beside the curb, its horses dancing nervously. Beneath its wheels lay the body of a young woman.

“She stepped out right in front of me,” the driver shouted as he climbed down to calm the horses. “We were going too fast. I had no chance to stop.”

“Is there a doctor in the crowd?” Two police constables had arrived at the scene.

“Too late for that, mate,” a male voice said. “I reckon she’s a goner all right.”

“Poor thing,” a woman beside me muttered. “I’m not surprised. Many’s the time I’ve had to sprint for my life as one of them omnibuses comes charging at me. The traffic is getting awful these days. You’re not safe to cross the road.”

The omnibus driver was backing up his horses cautiously as the constables tried to move the girl. I couldn’t take my eyes off her broken body. She was not much older than I. She reminded me of a rag doll I had had as a child. My sister had stuck scissors into it in a fit of temper, and let the sawdust run out so that the doll lay in a crumpled heap. As I looked on with pity and horror, I saw the girl’s eyes flutter open, looking around her with surprise as if she couldn’t believe what had just happened to her. Without hesitation, I stepped forward and knelt beside her, putting a gentle hand on her shoulder. “It’s all right. You’re going to be all right,” I said, gently, although I didn’t think this was true. “I’ll stay here with you until a doctor comes.”

She tried to focus on my face. “Palace.” The word came out as a whisper I could barely detect. “Palace. Tell . . .”

She tried to move her hand, and I saw that she had been holding an envelope in it. I took it from her. “Don’t worry. I’ll tell them,” I said, although I had no idea what she meant. Clearly it had been troubling her because the worried expression left her face. She gave a little smile and a small sigh, and her eyes closed. It almost seemed that she had fallen asleep, but a big hand touched my shoulder.

“There’s nothing you can do for her now, miss.” I looked up to see a constable standing behind me. “Were you a friend?” He helped me to my feet.

“No. I didn’t know her. I just didn’t want her to think she was alone. It was so awful.”

“You’re a kind girl. I expect she appreciated that,” he said.

Several men were lifting the girl’s body on to the pavement. Someone was covering her with a rug. I had no reason to stay any longer. I pushed through the crowd that had gathered, blinking back the tears that were welling in my eyes. I was still so much in a state of shock that I had crossed the street towards the park before I realized that I was holding the girl’s envelope. Something in it was so important to her that it was her one concern as she lay dying. I stepped into a shop doorway, out of the stream of passers-by, and looked down at the