ABIR MUKHERJEE

Death in the East

VINTAGE

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Vintage
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

Vintage is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Copyright © Abir Mukherjee 2019

Abir Mukherjee has asserted his right to be identified
as the author of this Work in accordance with the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act 1988

This novel is a work of fiction. In some cases true life figures appear
but their actions and conversations are entirely fictitious. All other
characters, and all names of places and descriptions of events, are the
products of the author's imagination and any resemblance to actual
persons or places is entirely coincidental.

First published by Vintage in 2020
First published in the UK by Harvill Secker in 2019

penguin.co.uk/vintage

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

ISBN 9781784708535 (B format)

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our
business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest
Stewardship Council® certified paper.

PROLOGUE

February 1922

Jatinga, Assam

The birds were killing themselves.

Not a few, but thousands.

'They're starlings,' said the woman. 'Suicide birds.'

A long-dead schoolmaster's question echoed inside my skull.

'You, Wyndham. The collective noun for a flock of starlings is . . .?'

My ignorance, met by the crack of ruler upon desk.

'*Murmuration*, boy! A flock of starlings is called a murmuration! Now don't forget.'

Murmuration.

It suggested the clandestine. Something whispered. Something hidden.

Maybe it had to do with the way they flew, vast flocks pirouetting through the clouds as though of one mind, receiving instructions from one voice.

And tonight, in the void of a new moon, did that voice tell them to plummet earthward through mountain mists and to break themselves on the floor of this valley in the middle of nowhere? I leaned on the veranda's wooden balustrade and watched.

In the valley below, the flames from a hundred torches illuminated a scene from Dante as half-naked tribesmen shrieked and ran and set about the fallen creatures with clubs and sticks.

'Why do they do it?' I asked.

The woman turned to me, her expression suddenly sombre.

'Fear,' she said. 'The same reason men the world over attack anything they don't understand.'

'I meant the birds. Why do they come here to die?'

She smiled. 'Everyone has to die somewhere. And personally, Captain, I can't think of a better place. Can you?' She looked down at the tribesmen. 'Of course the locals say the valley is cursed. That the birds become possessed by evil spirits.'

'And you?' I asked. 'What do you believe?'

'Me?'

She feigned surprise, a pretence for my benefit, then moved closer. When she spoke, her voice was a whisper. 'If you decide to stay in our little outpost for any length of time, Captain, you may find a fair few of our number who are possessed of a certain malevolence. Who's to say there isn't evil at work here?'

The cries from the valley floor started to ebb and the air began to still, no longer roiled by the constant swoop and smack of birds crashing to their deaths.

Behind us a door opened. Yellow light spilled onto the velvet blackness of the veranda. A starched servant in white tunic and stiff-fanned turban made the call to dinner, then stood aside as the sahibs and mems of the Jatinga Club downed drinks and processed inside.

Emily Carter took a final sip from her flute. 'Brace yourself, Captain,' she said. 'This is where the fun starts.'

She handed the empty glass to the servant and disappeared inside, though not before kicking a bloodstained bird off the balcony and away into the darkness below.

ONE

Two weeks earlier

I'd left Calcutta with a grim resolve, a suitcase-full of *kerdū* gourd, and, in case of emergencies, a bullet-sized ball of opium resin hidden between the folds of my clothes. My destination was an ashram in the Cachar hills, a forgotten backwater in a far-flung corner of the distant province of Assam, three days' travel and a million miles from the sophistication, such as it was, of Calcutta. It had come, if not highly recommended, then at least loudly lauded, by my physician, Dr Chatterjee, a quack who specialised in Ayurvedic potions and whom I'd have dismissed as a charlatan had it not been for the fact that his remedies seemed to work. In hallowed tones, he'd explained that the place was run by a holy man called Devraha Swami, a 250-year-old sage who could cure most anything from acid reflux to yellow fever with nothing but a few herbs and a lot of prayer. It wasn't much to pin one's hopes on, but in my present situation I had little option. And as they say, a drowning man will clutch at a straw … or a herb.

The *kerdū* gourd had been Chatterjee's suggestion too: smashed, mashed and mixed with a few other elements, it formed a pulp that when imbibed tasted like boot polish, but offered temporary respite from the opium pangs. I'd packed enough to last me the three-day journey – with some to spare, because when it came to rail

transport, or anything else for that matter in India, nothing ever ran to schedule.

I'd arrived in the country almost four years earlier, sauntered off the boat at Kidderpore docks and straight into the first of a thousand opium dens. If that's an exaggeration, it's only slight, and I'd certainly found my first fix within a week of arrival.

I hadn't come here an addict – an *opium fiend* – as the priests and the pedants called it. My use had been medicinal: a means of staunching nightmares and stimulating sleep. Addiction had come later, gradually, *perniciously*, and my realisation of the fact more slowly still.

I'd tried to wean myself off it. Who wouldn't? After all, a policeman with an opium habit is like a long-distance runner with his laces tied together. You might manage to stay on your feet for a while, but sooner or later, you're going to end up falling on your face.

And people notice when you fall.

Unfortunately for me, the people who'd noticed first had been the all-seeing men and women of Section H, the intelligence arm of the military, responsible for the political stability of the Raj. They tended to interpret their brief in the widest possible terms, which meant they spied on anyone and everyone, and that included me and my nocturnal pilgrimages to the wrong sort of temples.

For now they'd kept the information to themselves, less as a kindness and more as leverage to force me to dance to their tune. Either way, there was no guarantee they wouldn't change their minds and report it to my superiors, and the threat was there like a knife to my throat.

Not being overly keen on such blades, I'd decided to do something about it, hence my sojourn, first by rail and then road to the ashram of Devraha Swami.

*

The journey had started smoothly enough. I'd caught the Darjeeling Mail from Sealdah station to Santahar Junction in the north of Bengal, hoping to make the connection to Guwahati, the capital of Assam. But the connection failed to turn up, due, apparently, to a flash strike by the 'no-good-bloody-awful' native railway workers further up the line.

Faced with such adversity, I did what any self-respecting Englishman would do. I paid a railway urchin a few annas to direct me to the nearest alcoholic drink and climbed inside.

I spent the best part of a day cooling my heels and propping up the bar in a flyblown joint called Duncan's Hotel where the beer was wet but the company sadly lacking. It's no fun drinking alone, not much anyway, and when it came to comrades in ale, or comrades of any sort for that matter, I really only had one: my friend and junior officer, Sergeant Surrender-not Banerjee. He'd saved my life once but I didn't hold that against him. Of course Surrender-not wasn't his real name. Indians didn't go in for stiff-upper-lip Victorian nomenclature, not when it came to naming their children at least. His real name was Surendranath, which was difficult to pronounce, and so everyone called him Surrender-not. Everyone British at any rate.

Surrender-not, however, was on his way to Dacca, Bengal's second city, situated in the arse end of the province and separated from Calcutta by two hundred miles and half the Ganges delta. He was off to his aunt's house, to seek refuge from the torrid independence fever that had infected Calcutta's native populace and divided families down the middle, setting brother against brother, father against son.

Half a day in and I was already missing him, mainly, I realised, because over the last six months we'd spent hardly any time just sitting and having a drink like we used to do in the days when I'd first arrived, when Calcutta was new and shining and the opium

was my servant and not my master. I sat at the bar in Duncan's Hotel and raised a glass to him in tribute, which was ironic, given his tolerance for alcohol was on a par with that of the average English schoolgirl.

At dusk, the urchin returned with news of the arrival of the Assam Mail and I followed him back out the door, still none the wiser as to who Duncan was, or had been, or what terrible madness had possessed him to put up his hotel here in the middle of nowhere.

Any relief I derived from finally being aboard the Assam Mail evaporated upon the realisation that I could probably have walked to Guwahati faster than the little narrow-gauge train was trundling. Nevertheless, as the geriatric locomotive groped its way ponderously through the darkness, I attempted the impossible and tried to make myself comfortable on the stiff wooden benches of the second-class carriage that would be my home for the night.

A red sun was rising by the time the train pulled into its platform in the Assamese capital, light enough for me to watch my connecting train to Lumding puff merrily out of the station. Another man might have waited for the next train, but that man probably didn't have a couple of *kerdū* gourds rotting in his suitcase. Instead I waylaid a lorry driver and paid him to ferry me hell for leather to the next station up the line, arriving there just as the platform guard was about to blow his whistle.

Lumding arrived nine hours later, by which time I and my stock of *kerdū* gourd were close to exhaustion. I fell off the train and into the fragrant, multicoloured mayhem of Indian provincial life, with its traders and travellers, its station hawkers, crying out their wares with the urgency of Seventh-Day Adventists proclaiming the second coming, and its market-bound smallholders doubled over like beasts of burden with their produce, their livelihoods, weighing on their narrow backs. There were even a few red-cheeked, baby-faced

colonial officials, each freshly minted and making his solitary way upcountry, to some remote outpost to take up his station as the only white authority within a fifty-mile radius.

And it was on the platform that it happened. That thunderclap of shock. The electric bolt of fear. For a heartbeat, no more than an instant, I saw a ghost: a dead man; a man I'd last seen almost twenty years before. His eyes bored into me from across the concourse, older, time-ravaged, but with the same cold, unwavering stare. Time plays tricks on the memory, but it's hard to forget the face of a man who's tried to kill you.

Cold sweat trickled down my collar. I told myself I was mistaken: deceived by the light, a casualty of exhaustion, a victim of the O – willing to accept anything except the evidence before me. Maybe that's why I just stood there dumbstruck.

A second later he was gone, just one more eddy in a sea of bodies. I came to my senses in a panic and, head pounding, grabbed my suitcase and gave chase, shoving my way through the crowd and still not fully trusting of either eyes or memory. I pushed aside protesting bodies and caught a glimpse of a linen-suited back making for the exit before losing him once more in the throng.

I ran on, now breathless and sweat-soaked, and emerged onto the station steps just in time to see him disappear into a large, black motor car that had been waiting with its engine idling. I watched as a porter loaded his valise and a white-clad chauffeur revved the engine. As it moved off, I caught one last silhouetted glimpse of the man in the back. I told myself it was impossible. Here, now, in this remotest of corners, could it really be that I was staring at a man who'd got away with murder, a man who'd also tried to kill me? He'd come pretty close too.

I shivered and looked on helplessly as the car sped off. The aching in my head and bones grew stronger and I doubled over in pain. I told myself it was nonsense: an aberration, a paranoid delusion, a

hallucination – call it what you will – and that the figure had been someone else, just another trader or tax inspector or tea planter going about his business. After all, I'd had opium-induced hallucinations before, though nothing like this. Never anything so tangible. So vivid. What's more, they'd always occurred when I'd been under the influence and in the seclusion of some opium den; never as now, knee-deep in a sea of people. And while the thought that after all these years I should suddenly hallucinate about a long-dead murderer was perplexing, what really terrified me was the fear that I might be descending into madness.

TWO

February 1905

Whitechapel, east London

It was her screams that first drew our attention. Piercing cries that sliced through the pelting rain and echoed off the weeping, crumbling walls.

'Come on, Wyndham. Keep up!'

The voice was deep and harsh as a strop, and I did my best to comply. The narrow lanes of Whitechapel, never pleasant, were now a slick, sodden maze of backstreets and blind alleys. Ahead of me, Sergeant Whitelaw raised his whistle to his lips and blew.

We sprinted along Black Eagle Street, past the towering, razor-tipped wall of the Truman brewery, through a mud bog of a tenement yard, and on to Grey Eagle Street.

Two figures stood out, silhouetted in the arc of a distant street lamp and locked in combat. Beside them, a woman, judging by the length of her hair and her screams, seemed to have been knocked to the ground.

Candlelight blossomed in upstairs windows. Whitelaw blew his whistle again – a mistake, as all it did was alert the two combatants to our presence at a distance still too far to intervene. Sure enough, the men stopped, stared, and after a moment's pause, high-tailed it up the street.

We gave chase, at least we did until we reached the woman, who paid us little heed and kept on screaming. Her left cheek was

starting to swell and blood mingled with the rivulets of rainwater trickling down the side of her face. Suddenly, my stomach churned. I knew her.

'Bessie?' I whispered.

'Get after them, Wyndham!' shouted Whitelaw. 'I'll see to the girl.'

I did as ordered. Without a second thought. Even though I knew her better than I knew almost any other woman in London. She was twenty years old, not yet six months married, and her name was Bessie Drummond.

To me though, she'd always be Bessie May.

Looking back, things might have been different if I'd stayed with her, but Whitelaw was a sergeant and I was a constable, on the force a mere nine months, and orders were orders.

I left him there, kneeling beside Bessie, while I chased after the two figures, already little more than shadows in the dark. A hundred yards on, they split, one cutting left into Pearl Street, the other sprinting straight ahead. I followed the latter. He seemed closer and, more importantly, weaker, possibly injured, running with one hand clasping the other.

Behind me Whitelaw blew his whistle again, summoning more officers to the scene. I just hoped it was to help catch the two fugitives rather than because Bessie's injuries required serious attention.

The man ahead disappeared into the gloom, then reappeared in the halo of a street lamp, darting across the junction with Quaker Street. I afforded myself a smile. Another hundred yards on, I knew, came a dead end, a wall, and a forty-foot drop onto railway sidings.

I slowed down. A cornered man is a dangerous man, and I wanted to be ready, should he try to double back or fancy his chances with his fists. The street descended once more into darkness but I could still hear him running. Thin soles slapping on wet cobblestones. Then, suddenly, he stopped.

'Give it up!' I called. 'There's nowhere to go.'

I walked forward, senses heightened, until finally I saw him. A thin man in a cloth cap, holding his right arm with his left. God knows how he'd managed, but he'd heaved himself up and onto the wall separating the street from the drop to the railway tracks.

He turned round and peered down into the void. I cursed, and once more broke into a run, hoping to stop him before he did something foolish.

'Don't try it! You'll break your neck!'

He hesitated. I was only yards away now. He glanced over his shoulder, smiled at me, then swivelled round once more and in an almost balletic movement, jumped.

I heard the thump of him hitting the ground and for a moment I stood there, frozen. Then gathering my wits, I sprinted over to the wall and pulled myself up. Peering down, I steeled myself against the sight of his broken body on the tracks. Instead, I saw half a dozen freight bogies parked directly below, and the man clambering down the side of one and running off up the tracks to Shoreditch.

I jumped down, landing heavily on the curved roof of the freight car. The rain had left it slick and the soles of my boots offered as much grip as a greased pig on a frozen lake. Before I knew it, I was on my arse, scrabbling for a handhold and hurtling off the top of the wagon. As I reached the edge, I grabbed at the metal guttering that ran along the car's length. Momentum carried me over and I cursed as a streak of pain speared up my right arm. But my grip held. I cursed again, this time in relief, then let go and dropped onto the wet earth. Stumbling backwards, I tripped on a rail, then fell onto the tracks behind.

A whistle screamed, far louder than Whitelaw's. I looked up, and in a matter of seconds, aged ten years as a juggernaut of a locomotive rumbled angrily towards me.

With the fear of God suddenly and violently instilled into every fibre of my being, I pulled myself up and rolled off the tracks with an alacrity that would have impressed the wing-heeled god, Mercury. The thing hurtled past moments later, and I lay there, face down, my heart hammering against my ribs.

I turned and sat up. A wave of nausea swelled in my stomach. I scanned the vista, searching frantically for sight of my quarry. Then in the distance came the crunch of footsteps sprinting on gravel. I struggled to my feet and ran after them: along the track towards Shoreditch station, past the rain-lashed hulks of freight trains idling in their sidings. The station stood out in the darkness, lit up like a Christmas tree. A few late-night travellers stood sheltering under a rusting Victorian awning, looking out onto the tracks in hope of a train which, like the man I was chasing, was nowhere to be seen. I ran on, further down the tracks, before turning the corner into the Shoreditch goods depot and straight into a chapter from the book of Exodus. A gang of men, their heads bowed, were busy unloading hessian sacks from a goods wagon. A line of them, like Israelites in bondage in the land of Egypt, stood soaking silently in the rain, each man awaiting his turn for two others to hoist a pregnant sack onto his shoulders. Then, swaying under his burden, he walked slowly off towards a nearby warehouse, making way for the next in line.

I ran up to the foreman.

'Did you see anyone pass here?'

He struggled to hear me over the noise of the yard.

Up close, he looked older than I'd expected, grizzled, in his fifties. But work like this aged a man, and it was possible he was a decade or more younger.

I repeated the question.

He shook his head. 'Who'd be mad enough to be out on a night like this?'

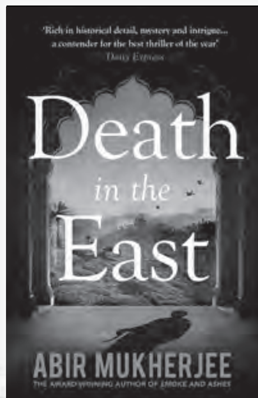
I scoured the compound but there was no sign of the fugitive. Desperately I sprinted back out to the tracks and peered into the black. In the distance a figure was climbing onto the platform at Shoreditch.

I started running, but it was already too late. The distance was too great, and once out of the station, he would disappear into the warren of streets and I would never see him again. Nevertheless I ran, reaching the platform just as the Liverpool Street train pulled up. I scanned the tired faces of the few passengers, but there was no sign of him.

Forlornly, I walked out of the station, stood under the awning as the rain pelted down. Bruised and sodden, I contemplated what I'd have to say to Sergeant Whitelaw. Across the road, the lights burned in a public house and served only to compound my misery. I began the long walk back towards Grey Eagle Street, past a group of destitute wretches taking shelter under the railway arches.

AWARD-WINNING HISTORICAL MYSTERIES FROM

ABIR MUKHERJEE



'A JOURNEY INTO THE DARK UNDERBELLY OF THE BRITISH RAJ'

DAILY EXPRESS