Introduction

A Tale of Two Cities

THERE ARE TWO VERSIONS of the events of 1887. One is very well known; the other is not.

The first version is the one printed in most history books. It is the one that those who lived through the age wished to recall, the version they recounted to their grandchildren with a wistful smile. It is the story of Queen Victoria and a summer of celebrations for her Golden Jubilee. She had been no more than a teenage girl when the nation's weighty crown had been placed upon her head. A half-century later she had become the embodiment of empire, and a suitably grand series of events had been planned to commemorate this. On 20 June, the precise day she had first mounted the throne, the royal heads of Europe, Indian princes, dignitaries and representatives from all corners of the empire – even the Hawaiian queen, Liliuokalani – converged upon London. West End shopkeepers adorned their windows in red, white and blue; royal standards and Union Jacks, festoons of flowers and coloured garlands could be seen hanging from every sombre stony edifice. At night, the embassies and clubs, hotels and institutions throughout St James's and Piccadilly threw the switches on the electric lights and turned on the gas jets illuminating the giant crowns and the letters V and R affixed to their buildings. Her Majesty's

loyal subjects came to the centre of town from the suburbs and tenements; they punched their rail tickets from Kent and Surrey and pushed their way into the crowded streets, hoping to catch a glimpse of a royal coach or a princess in diamonds. They placed candles in the windows of their homes when the long summer twilight faded away, and toasted their monarch's health with beer and champagne and claret.

There was a service of thanksgiving at Westminster Abbey, a state banquet, a military review at Windsor and even a children's fete in Hyde Park for 2,500 boys and girls who were entertained by 20 Punch and Judy puppets, 8 marionette theatres, 86 peep shows, 9 troops of performing dogs, monkeys and ponies, as well as bands, toys and 'gas-inflated balloons', before being treated to a lunch of lemonade, cake, meat pies, buns and oranges. Throughout the summer there were Jubilee commemorative concerts, lectures, performances, regattas, picnics, dinners and even a yacht race. As the Jubilee corresponded with the traditional London 'season' there were also garden parties and balls. Ladies dressed themselves in the summer's fashion: lace-trimmed bustled gowns in black and white silk, and hues of apricot yellow, heliotrope and Gobelin blue. A magnificent ball was held at the Guildhall, where the Prince and Princess of Wales entertained their visiting regal relations, as well as the Prince of Persia, the Papal Envoy, the Prince of Siam and the Maharajah Holkar of Indore. All of high society danced beneath the banners and cascading arrangements of perfumed flowers. Tiaras and tie pins sparkled in the mirrors. Young debutantes were introduced to suitable sons. The whirl of Victorian life spun round and round to the dreamy melody of a sweeping waltz.

Then there is the other version.

This is the tale of 1887 which most choose to forget. To this

day, only a scant number of history books recount it, surprisingly few people even know that it occurred, yet in that year this story filled more column inches than the descriptions of royal parades, banquets and fetes put together.

That Jubilee summer had been an exceptionally warm and rainless one. The clear blue skies that presided over the season's carefree picnics and al fresco parties had shrivelled the fruit harvest and dried out the fields. Water shortages and an absence of seasonal agricultural labouring jobs only served to exacerbate an already growing employment crisis. While the wealthy enjoyed the fine weather from beneath their parasols and from under the trees of their suburban villas, the homeless and poor made use of it by creating an open-air encampment in Trafalgar Square. Many had come into the centre of town looking for work at Covent Garden Market where Londoners bought their produce, but a drought meant fewer boxes of plums and pears to lift and haul. With no money for lodgings, they slept rough in the nearby square, where they were joined by an increasing population of unemployed and homeless workers who would rather turn to the street than face the deplorable and demeaning conditions in the workhouse. Much to the horror of observers, these campers could be seen making their morning ablutions and scrubbing their 'vermin infested' clothing in the fountains, directly beneath the nose of Lord Nelson, who peered down from high atop his column. When the autumn began to move in, so too did the socialists, the Salvation Army and various charitable organizations, handing out Bibles, admission tickets to lodging houses, coffee, tea, bread and soup. Tarpaulins were raised in makeshift bivouacs; impassioned daily speeches were made between the paws of the giant bronze lions. The excitement, sense of community and free refreshments swelled

the number of outcast Londoners, which brought the police, which in turn brought the journalists, who roamed among the square's bedraggled population collecting the names and stories of these otherwise anonymous squatters.

'Mr Ashville' called himself 'a painter and glazier by trade'. He had been out of work for twelve months, thirty-three nights of which had been spent sleeping on the Embankment until the weather grew too cold and he moved to Trafalgar Square in the hope it might prove a bit warmer. Dejected and visibly worn by his experience, he attempted to remain positive about his prospects of one day finding employment.

A soldier's widow circled Trafalgar Square selling matches to support her young son, but she hadn't always lived like this. After failing to pay the final instalment on her hire-purchase sewing machine, she had lost her livelihood and then the single room she had called home. As she knew that going into the workhouse would mean that her child would be separated from her, roughing it in the square each night with him curled up under her shawl seemed a better option.[1]

An 'elderly couple' who had never before faced adversity found themselves sleeping together on one of the square's stone benches.[2] The husband of the pair had been employed as a musical director at a theatre but suffered an accident that rendered him unfit to work. With no savings, they soon fell behind on their rent and eventually were forced to make their bed under the stars. The thought of throwing themselves upon the mercy of their local workhouse was too shameful and frightening even to consider.

Hundreds came to Trafalgar Square to lay their heads against the paving stones, each with a similar tale to tell. It did not take long for political agitators to recognize that this congregation of the downtrodden was a ready-made army of the

angry with nothing to lose. Londoners had long realized that Trafalgar Square sat on an axis between the east and west of the city, the dividing line between rich and poor: an artificial boundary which, like the invisible restraints that kept the disenfranchised voiceless, could be easily breeched. In 1887, the possibility of social revolution felt terrifyingly near for some, and yet not close enough for others. At Trafalgar Square, the daily speeches given by socialists and reformers such as William Morris, Annie Besant, Eleanor Marx and George Bernard Shaw led to mobilization as chanting, banner-waving processions of thousands spilled onto the streets and inevitably into violence. The Metropolitan Police and the Magistrates' Court at Bow Street worked overtime in an attempt to contain the protesters and clear the square of those they considered to be indigents and rabble-rousers, but, like the irrepressible tide, no sooner were they pushed out than they returned once more.

The fatal error came when, on 8 November, Sir Charles Warren, the Commissioner of Police, banned all meetings in Trafalgar Square. Those who had come to see this location in the heart of London as a rallying place for the common man and forum for political action took this as a deliberate act of war. A demonstration was planned for the 13th of the month. Its pretext was to demand the release of Irish MP William O'Brien from prison, but the grievances expressed by the protestors extended far beyond this particular cause célèbre. Over forty thousand men and women gathered to make their point. They were greeted by two thousand police, as well as the Queen's Life Guard and the Grenadier Guards. The clashes began almost immediately and the police fell on the protestors with their truncheons. Despite pleas for a peaceful demonstration, many of the participants had come equipped with lead pipes, knives, hammers and brick bats; forty of the protestors were

arrested, more than two hundred were injured in the riot and at least two were killed. Unfortunately, Bloody Sunday, as it came to be known, did not signal the end of the conflicts. The tinkle of smashing glass and outbursts of public rage continued well into the start of the following year.

Through these two scenes moved two women whose lives and deaths would come to define the nineteenth century; one was Victoria, who gave her name to the era: 1837–1901. The other was a homeless woman called Mary Ann or 'Polly' Nichols, who was among those encamped at Trafalgar Square that year. Unlike the monarch, her identity would be largely forgotten, though the world would remember with great fascination and even relish the name of her killer: Jack the Ripper.