

The Children of Kali by Peter Marshall

In 1918 Caroline Gorst on her first visit to India is visiting the Red Fort in Delhi.

The day was warming up but a breeze blew through from the Yamuna River. She dabbed her brow with her handkerchief and noticed a grey haired old man in a neat pin stripe suit. He was seated holding a fan with which he idly cooled himself. He caught Caroline's eye and smiled.

'Please.' He offered her the fan.

'Oh no I couldn't. Thank you.'

'Please. I am used to the heat. I even wear a waistcoat.' He brandished the fan. 'I don't know why I brought it.' He pressed the fan into her hand.

'Thank you. You are very kind.'

He dismissed his generosity with a wave of his hand.

'You are new to India.'

Caroline nodded. Not certain whether she should encourage him.

The pavilion overlooked some gardens. Caroline gazed on them glad of the cooling draught of the fan.

'These are called The Hayat Baksh Bagh. The Life Bestowing Gardens though they do not look like that now.'

Caroline smiled. The gardens consisted of trees and a lawn worn thin by the sun.

'In the time of the Great Moghuls these gardens would have been magnificent. You have to imagine fountains, myrtle bushes lining the paths and banks of carefully tended flowers.'

His voice was gentle and cultured in that special Indian way that suggested a native refinement merely gilded by impeccable English. She wondered if he was a retired university professor.

'It was here that Aurangzebe recreated the cool mountain gardens of Kashmir and Afghanistan to help him forget the remorseless heat of this conquered land of theirs. To no avail, in the end India weakened their blood and sapped their will to rule.'

Caroline smiled at the old man. He had a round face and wore thick gold rimmed spectacles. His hands, she noticed, were carefully manicured and his tie neatly knotted. She was glad that she was not expected to contribute and wondered if he regaled everyone in this way.

'You see the people who built these palaces and gardens with their cool terraces and "streams of paradise" wished to stop time. To make it irrelevant amidst beauty and leisure. To banish it with culture and refinement, as if to defy their mortality by constructing such a heaven on earth that God would be ashamed to claim them. They were trying to cheat death you see. By playing God.'

He smiled at Caroline.

'On the Emperor Babur's tomb in Kabul it is written. "This theatre of heaven, this light garden of the Godforgiven Angel King."'

He shrugged at such human vanity.

"If there be paradise on earth, it is here, it is here, it is here." That is written in the stones of this palace. You see you all come to India to play God only to find you are all too human. It is India's lesson to the world.'

They sat in silence for a few minutes and then he stood up slowly.

'Please excuse me I must go and find my grandchildren. It is time I took them home.'

Caroline offered him the fan.

'No no no. I want you to have it.' He put his hands together and bowed his head.

'Goodbye.'

She watched him slowly make his way and her gaze continued over the vast architecture of the Fort. He was right. There was a sense of power and order here unlike the teeming chaos that lay outside its walls, a chaos and anonymity of which she was more than a little afraid.