

THE MYSTERIOUS LADY HESCOMBE



G. P. McCANN

RED LEAD PRESS
PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA 15222

The contents of this work including, but not limited to, the accuracy of events, people, and places depicted; opinions expressed; permission to use previously published materials included; and any advice given or actions advocated are solely the responsibility of the author, who assumes all liability for said work and indemnifies the publisher against any claims stemming from publication of the work.

This book is a work of fiction. Though it contains references to historical events, peoples and locations, these are used solely to lend the fiction an historical context. All other names, characters and incidents as well as the dialogue and the stories are fictitious and are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead is purely coincidental.

All Rights Reserved

Copyright © 2009 by G. P. McCann

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without permission in writing from the publisher.

ISBN: 978-0-8059-6224-9

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing

For more information or to order additional books, please contact:

Red Lead Press

701 Smithfield Street

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15222

U.S.A.

1-800-834-1803

www.redleadbooks.com

For Hilary

CONTENTS



THE POISON WITHIN	1
THE SHADOW MAN	14
A FATAL BLOW	42

THE POISON WITHIN



❖ The lamp outside 17 Meard Street burnt with a warm glow in the fog of a cold January evening. Inside, by the fire sat Lady Lyriah Hescombe, young, beautiful and intelligent. Her family lived out in the country to the east of London but Lyriah loved the city and had opted for a modest apartment in the Soho district. Her family hardly thought it was the area for a Lady to reside; the rich had moved out of some years before, opting for the more refined areas of Park Lane and Mayfair. Lyriah knew the dangers of living where she did. There was a steady influx of immigrants, Jews, Greeks, French and others from equally far flung places, but these interesting people made life more exciting.

Lyriah hated the injustices of the world and tried to help those in need whenever she could. Her clients often employed her to look into private matters, she had helped return goods to their rightful owners, reunited separated families and also saved the life of a young man who had sought to meet his maker. She did not like the label of detective or sleuth, she considered herself to be just a simple woman who righted the wrongs of the world wherever she could.

She read the day's newspaper scouring its pages for another lost soul for whom she could be of help. Like most other days the news was not cheerful. A Hansom Cab driver, Arthur Macclestone, had been found murdered in the gardens near Westminster Abbey apparently having been clubbed about the head. There was an update of the story regarding the London Zoological Gardens in Regents Park who had suffered a break-in the previous week in which a rare snake had been stolen. The public had been assured that it was not poisonous but Lyriah was sure that had it been they certainly would not

have said so. The story that Lady Hescombe was presently reading gave little more information than last week's report; the snake had not yet been found. Her eyes fell on the story of a mind-reading dog when she heard a great commotion outside. She rushed to window and drew back the curtain. Below her on the front step, the lodger from the apartment above, Millie Jenkins, a young woman whose work could only be described as colourful, was being beaten by one of the many men who frequently came to sample her wares. Lyriah, seeing that she was in need, grabbed her umbrella and rushed downstairs.

As she threw open the front door she heard the man screaming,

'I wouldn't pay for anything from you, you dirty whore!' And with that Lady Hescombe cracked the handle of her umbrella sharply upon the man's head. He looked at her dazed for a few moments before attempting to speak, but Lyriah beat him to it,

'If you so wish, I can do it again.' The man turned on his heels and ran away into the fog of the night.

'Thank you most kindly Miss, I thought I was done for then. He ain't paid you see Miss and I said to him I would tell his wife that he visits me if he didn't pay right away.'

'You should be careful Millie; someone might not always be here to help you out.'

'I will Miss, I promise.' The young girl went inside and ran up the stairs, Lyriah could hear her sobbing.

As Lyriah gathered herself together to go back in, a small wiry man approached her from Wardour Street.

'I do hope you would be so kind as to tell me the whereabouts of a Lady who goes by the name of Hescombe.'

Upstairs Lyriah showed the man into the living room and placed her umbrella back inside the tall basket that stood by the door. The gentleman's nerves seem to steady a little once the umbrella was put away, and had you just seen Lady Hescombe's agility with the accessory you would understand his apprehension. The gentleman introduced himself as Oberon Wilting and Lyriah offered him a seat opposite her.

'I am most humbly grateful to you for giving so easily to me the time of which I am quite aware is most precious to you.'

Lady Hescombe was not one to suffer fools gladly and was far from taken in by the gentleman exuberant manners.

'You are quite right sir, my time is exceedingly precious, so I would be very much obliged if you would proceed to enlighten me with the purpose of your visit in the clearest and most concise manner you can!'

'Oh Lady Hescombe you honour me with your sheer kindness in merely agreeing to listen to my troubles and if with time you are in anyway able to assist me then I should...'

‘Mr Wilting!’ Lyriah exclaimed exasperated and shot him the most disapproving of looks, ‘Will you please just explain to me the predicament in which you find yourself.’

‘Oh Lady Hescombe I will hastily lay before you my problem.’ He gave her a solemn bow of the head before continuing. ‘My dear brother, Meredith Wilting has disappeared; I saw him last around a week ago but have heard not a whisker from him since. Each night I wait for his return but,’ he pulled a dirty handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose very hard and then licked his lips rather vigorously in a way that greatly disturbed Lady Hescombe ‘it seems that I may be waiting in vain.’

‘Could he not just be away travelling? It has as you say only been a week since you last saw him; I suspect that he will return when he is ready. I will though, if you give me a description keep an eye out for him when I am about town.’

‘I do not wish to insult your intelligence my good Lady and I am greatly comforted by your words but I fear you do not understand. He left in a great rush and he took something of mine with him. I do not understand it; he was always the good child when we were growing up, always doing things for others, always returning things that I had stolen and yet the world has never looked kindly upon him; a great injustice you might say. He would never run away, he would have nowhere to go and he would most definitely not take something of mine unless something was wrong. I have a great loyalty to my brother and if he is in need then I must help him.’

Lyriah sat silently for a few moments and considered what he had just told her.

‘Alright Mr. Wilting, I will do my best to assist you and find your brother and your property, will you please describe him for me?’ She took a small pad from the table by the side of her chair and prepared her pencil for the dictation.

‘Well, let me see how best to go about this.’ He stopped for a moment, closed his eyes and stroked his chin. ‘Well Lady Hescombe, he looks greatly like myself. That is apart from the fact that he is better looking, with long brown hair opposed to my blond, is slightly taller and slightly broader, is without a right leg and is also dumb, that is to say he cannot speak.’

Lyriah fought her instinct to laugh and spoke whilst struggling to keep her composure ‘A most striking resemblance by the sound of it.’

‘I forgot the most remarkable similarity, our teeth.’ He smiled and revealed the most terrifying set of dentistry Lyriah had ever seen. His canine teeth were very long and sharp and his tongue danced around them in an equally terrifying manner.

‘Our teeth are quite amazing do you not think?’ Lyriah was too disturbed to even reply ‘Just like a snake they are, I do love snakes Lady Hescombe, do you?’

Lyriah was rescued by a knock at the door; it was a young constable who required to speak with her. Lyriah was most unsure of her guest and so stepped out onto the landing to speak with the policeman.

'I'm sorry to bother you your Ladyship but Inspector Bridlington has asked if you will accompany me. There's been another murder you see and the Inspector is most perplexed and thought your expertise may help us out.'

She stepped back into the living room and began to put on her bonnet and her travelling cloak.

'I am most sorry Mr. Wilting' she lied 'but I have been called away to some most urgent business, I have listened to what you have said and I will do my best to help you. What out of interest did your brother take from you?'

'A long handled mace Lady Hescombe. It has an oak shaft studded with metal and upon the end moulded also in metal is the shape of a human skull.'

'Thank-you Mr. Wilting I will be in touch if I have anything to report.' she said trying to sound as undisturbed as she could. She descended the stairs with Mr. Wilting and saw that he was on his way before climbing into the Hansom cab that was waiting for her. She set off with the Constable into the fog of the night.

The cab trundled gently through the night toward The National Gallery and Trafalgar Square before turning off to go down the north side of St. James' Park where the Queen's Palace lay before them. Lyriah had been made aware that the victim of this last attack was a woman who was of very high birth, and as they rattled toward the great palace she became exceedingly nervous.

Thankfully her fears were not to be confirmed and as the cab turned left in front of the palace and began its journey along the south side of St. James' Park she breathed a great sigh of relief. The cab stopped about a third of the way up the south side of the park roughly opposite the lake's western edge. Lyriah looked to her right and saw that they were outside the barracks. As she stepped down from the cab she was met by Inspector Bridlington of the Metropolitan Police.

'I am very glad that you came Lady Hescombe, this is a most dreadful incident and I am at a loss. The only witnesses, the victim's son and the coachman are in a state of most awful shock and can hardly speak; we have just the barest facts from them. I must also warn you that it is a most shocking sight, that even I was ill prepared for, but if you will oblige me in taking a look I would be most grateful.'

Lyriah said nothing but nodded her head gently; she followed the Inspector into a courtyard, always remaining two steps behind. The courtyard was playing host to the most beautiful of carriages in front of which two graceful black horses stood restlessly. There were a great many uniformed men from both the police force and the Horse Guards, they stood in a strange circle with their backs facing inwards. It was dark and the only light came from two gas lamps that hung from the east wall of the barracks building.