

# THE HOURS BEFORE



*A Story of Mystery and Suspense  
from the Belle Époque*

ROBERT STEPHEN PARRY

## *To Ruby*

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*Also by the same author:*

‘The Testament of Sophie Dawes’ 2016

‘Elizabeth’ 2014

‘Wildish’ 2013

‘The Arrow Chest’ 2011

‘Virgin and the Crab’ 2009

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# THE HOURS BEFORE

This being of the 1st Hour  
and entitled  
'In Night's Reflection'



## Prologue

Entering the room, the English Lady regards the young maid with a look of surprise. She does not like surprises - not at this time of the night. This has always been a place one could depend on, secure and discreet. Affluently appointed with its fashionable Biedermeier bed and lavish draperies of silk and velvet, it is also a place of the highest standards, her little pied-a-terre with always someone reliable on hand - someone to run her bath or to brush her hair, someone to help her out of her clothes, or into them. But what's this? A stranger - someone completely ignorant of her personal requirements and preferences. With all she has to contend with in just a few hours time, it really is the last thing she would have wanted.

'I have not seen you before,' she says, addressing the girl in German as she walks to the dressing table, trying to sound civil, though weariness means her voice must trail away in a sigh as she throws off her shawl to reveal the radiant skin of her shoulders - a triumph for one of her years, she knows, that flawless skin. Her gloves and earrings come next, those sapphire and diamond treasures once given her by a Russian Count, hurled with abandon into a tray as she takes her seat on the special low-backed chair.

'If it please you, ma'am, my name is Kristina,' the girl states, introducing herself with a modest curtsy and in a voice that is amiable, well spoken and unexpectedly refined. 'Your usual helper, Sarah, is indisposed,' she adds, referring to the young woman who usually serves her here. 'And may I speak English with you, ma'am? It would aid me very much in my language studies.'

The English Lady feels her shoulders stiffen with indignation, not at all pleased with having the maid's wishes conveyed to her in this way. What are the impertinent girl's wretched language studies to her! And her name - Kristina - that would not be her real name. No one ever uses their real name here - not within the circumspect environs of Frau Fisher's very special *hotel privée*. By the light of the dimmed gas and solitary candle, she is aware of her approaching across the room and can see her far better now in the mirrors of her dressing table. The young hands with their lace sleeves reach forward to unpin and remove her hat with its plumes of ostrich and swan

feathers - the valuable Parisian creation to be placed into a box secured with ribbons - most carefully, most dexterously done, she thinks as she observes her movements still in reflection. The girl is confident, to be sure - knows her craft - rare in one so young. And unusual to look at, too. She does not wear a cap of any kind; and her face, framed by its short black hair, even has the appearance of being quite masculine.

Whether it is the late hour, a time when one usually wanders through the landscape of dreams, or whether it is the excess of champagne and absinthe conspiring to make her question reality, she does not know, but for one awful heart-stopping moment, she wonders if she might have walked into the middle of some bizarre crime scene - yes, that this might be some awful impostor or anarchist of some kind who has gained entrance and, having dressed himself in the clothes of one of the maids, would be intent on robbery or murder. The very idea makes her shudder. But no ... it cannot be. The pretty young face that looks back at her from the mirror is so kindly, with nothing other than charm and innocence upon it, that it banishes all her fears.

But really, what a peculiar creature.

‘Does it go well with you tonight, ma’am?’ the young woman inquires - again most irregular, for it is certainly not a maid’s place to engage in conversation. This kind of thing would never happen in Paris or London.

‘No. I am exhausted, if you must know, and I have a terrible headache,’ the English Lady snaps back - still finding it impossible to accept the young woman’s sincerity, and resolving instead to challenge her claims to competence in the language by speaking rapidly. ‘I have been stuck in the theatre all evening - an indifferent performance - and then for far too long with a gentleman afterwards. He was disposed to spending a good deal of money, however, which always interests me, but the silly old fool couldn’t even do the work of a proper man. He had to be aided, so the affair was discharged in a complete mess. Disgusting. I don’t know why I am telling you all this. It is, after all, none of your business.’

‘Indeed, no m'lady,’ the girl murmurs, though without any trace of contrition to her voice - and not at all shocked.

‘Anyway, there is certainly something that you do need to know,’ the English Lady continues, this time in more measured tones, ‘and that is I simply cannot go to bed, not even for what remains of the night.’



‘Really, ma'am - not at all?’

‘No. I must find some occupation to encourage me to stay awake because one of the most important assignments in my entire life is waiting for me in just a few hours from now. Hardly a convenient time, but the gentleman in question, an elderly widower of immense wealth and with already one foot in the grave, is just too good a prospect to pass up. He is a German baron, you see, and being here in Vienna, he naturally wishes to meet *The English Lady* - for that is what they call me in - er - certain circles. For this, our first meeting at the Imperial he can spare me only a brief hour before his departure - a short introduction, to be sure, but one which I must seize on for the purposes of utter conquest, for I might never be as fortunate to have such an opportunity again, not at my time of life. How old do you think I am, Kristina?’

‘Ma'am, I should not be offering an opinion on such ...’

‘How old - come on!’ the English Lady insists as she busies herself removing the powder and rouge from her face. ‘You seem excessively forward in all else. I shall not berate you if you are forthright and honest.’

‘I am always forthright and honest, ma'am,’ Kristina replies with immense seriousness while leaning forward to unfasten the rear buttons of her mistress’s gown, which she does without haste and with perfect confidence. ‘And I know that the most famed and sought-after courtesans are often far from youthful, is that not so?’ she adds calmly. ‘I would say you are ... um, forty-five years, having reached that age just a few days ago, because you have the look of determination of one born under the sign of the Bull.’

‘Good god! How on earth did you know that?’ the English lady demands. ‘You saucy minx. Who here has told you my details?’

‘No one, ma'am. It is my first evening of working here,’ the young woman replies as, quite spontaneously, she reaches a hand around and places it gently upon her mistress’s forehead, and the other upon the nape of her neck.

‘Oh, then you are a sorceress, is that it?’ the English Lady interrupts, almost speechless at such an audacious gesture of familiarity - but astonished that her headache has miraculously disappeared within seconds of the girl having laid her hands upon her forehead. ‘A sorceress, as well as the most handsome hermaphrodite in all of Vienna?’

‘Yes, ma'am. That is correct. I am all of these,’ the young woman answers - again with unusual gravity and in a voice so placid

and self-possessed as to again inspire a certain sense of unreality in her listener.

This is really too absurd. So, no sooner has the young woman taken away her hands, when she is presented with a theatrical scowl of disapproval for her trouble - though one which by its excess clearly indicates the very opposite in sentiment. 'What do you think of that face, Kristina, that scowl of mine?' the English Lady inquires, looking over her shoulder for a moment to behold her maid properly before turning back to the reflection. 'That is my actress's face - my profession, prior to my marriage, and one that has proved extremely useful ever since - even if for a somewhat different purpose. These days, my performances are normally for just one person at a time, when I must give the impression of being transported in the throes of ecstasy whenever a gentleman takes me to his bed or fumbles with me in a box at the opera. I can be very convincing, apparently. In any event, I suspect I shall need to draw upon all my skills later with the baron. That is why I must remain alert, you see - for even if I do go to bed now, I will look like death by the time you wake me and probably be so incoherent that the poor fellow will believe he has invited a madwoman to share his Champagne over breakfast. No - there is no alternative. In the hours before, I really must stay awake. And you will be well rewarded, my young enigma, if you should remain with me and assist me in this task.'

'It would be my pleasure, ma'am,' the maid answers, 'if m'lady does not object to the presence of dreams even when she does not sleep?'

'What?' The English Lady demands. 'Really, my dear, the way you talk - the way you say things - it's so peculiar!' she adds with a nervous chuckle and applying herself to the unwinding of her pearls once her helper has unfastened them from behind. 'I am not afraid of dreams, Kristina. Awake or asleep, if one does not embrace one's dreams, one will only ever spend a lifetime working for those who do,' she adds, beginning to take a curious pleasure in the exchange of ideas with her new companion, and upon which, placing the pearls aside she rises and removes the sash from around her waist, allowing her gown to slip to the floor. 'In any event, I cannot go to such a vital appointment in this filth,' she asserts stepping out of the spoilt dress. 'Look at it! The garment will certainly have to be cleaned professionally.'

At which Kristina stoops to take up the dark velvet folds from the floor, and with an almost imperceptible crinkling of the nose in

aversion to the various unfortunate stains upon its surface, swiftly disposes of the item into a nearby linen basket - while the English Lady, resuming her seat at the dressing table, signals with an imperious wave of the hand that the young woman might draw up a stool behind her in readiness for whatever work might be necessary - typically the brushing of hair or releasing of a corset. She always insists on this arrangement of the stool. She does not like anyone to be behind her unless they are seated.

‘You may unlace me now,’ she states. ‘My hair, however, I shall brush myself.’

‘Oh, do you always attend to your own hair, ma'am?’ Kristina inquires as, gradually, her fingers set about untying the laces.

In stony silence, for again the young woman’s curiosity seems to her the height of impudence, the English lady merely responds by seizing the hairbrush from the table, her favourite with its pearl inlay and ivory handle that is always left out for her and, keeping a most obviously firm hold on it, replies: ‘Always. Ever since the dreadful night here when some foolish child actually drew blood from my scalp with her brutality and lack of self-control. Don’t worry - I made sure it was the last time she worked here. Your mistress, Frau Fischer, was mortified, of course, and overflowing with apologies. But since then, I trust no one. I have a particularly sensitive scalp.’

And still with custody of the brush, she waits as the tightness around her spine and ribcage continues to slacken, so that inevitably she must sigh at the blissful release of it, of all those constricting ties and strips of unyielding whalebone giving way at last to a new and altogether softer presence that is her own body. There is no hurry. In keeping with her instructions at the start, Kristina allows her mistress to savour the pleasure of being released with kindness, comfortably, perfectly gently. Yes, there is time.

‘You can trust me with your hair, m'lady,’ the young woman murmurs from behind as her mistress unfastens the front busk herself and the garment is finally drawn away, leaving merely the welcoming cool of the chemise. ‘I would apply myself to your needs most diligently if you will give me leave - a task that will also help pass the time and which you might otherwise complete too quickly yourself.’

Once again, the English Lady can only stare back in stunned silence at the reflection in the glass, not sure of how to respond to such a mixture of eloquence and insubordination - whether she should laugh out loud or simply order the young woman to leave the room. In fact, she does neither. Instead, as the pins and combs of the

elaborate chignon of bright auburn hair are removed - and this, again, most delicately accomplished - she finds herself merely surrendering the brush, after all, passing it over her shoulder to the waiting hand behind.

The young woman does not get to work straight away, however. Instead, and with a touch that is not coarse or clumsy or feeble with impatience, she takes the hair in her hands and with alternate strokes pulls it from her mistress's shoulders several times in preparation. 'Did you always have such beautiful red hair?' she asks.

'No,' the English Lady replies with a disparaging gasp. 'The colour comes from a bottle, my dear - like so much of my courage these days. My natural shade has always been light brown. But that does not exactly get one noticed, not unless one is exceptionally beautiful, which I have never been. And I do like to be noticed, Kristina. I have made a vocation of it, so that these days my magnificent tresses of Titian red are famed through all of Europe - especially pleasing against my unfreckled skin, they say - a rare combination. Why, I'll have you know, a Prussian nobleman once wagered a lock of this very hair at cards when he no longer had the fortune required for the stakes. And when he lost even that treasure, which he had sought so hard to gain through so many lavish gifts and favours, he despaired of living and put a pistol to his head. All terribly tragic, of course. But it did little to diminish my reputation. And thereafter only the proximity of a modest fortune, or of royalty itself, will ever do for anyone who wishes to enjoy my society.'

'Then I am honoured, ma'am,' the maid responds, almost in a voice of surprise, 'that the task of entertaining you for so many hours this night should have fallen to me.'

'Enough of your cheek!' the English lady responds brandishing the handle of a closed fan towards the face in the mirror, for she was certain she had detected a smile there.

'My apologies, ma'am. It was not my intention to be sounding ungrateful,' the maid responds as, clearly indifferent and unmoved by the reprimand, she returns to her occupation with the brush - and still always with the utmost care, her eyes intent on every lengthy stroke as if there were no other task in all the world more important or worthy of greater consideration.

'Where do you come from?' the English Lady asks, after studying the young woman's face in the mirror again with renewed curiosity - for although there is a certain Slavic angularity to the cheekbones, the face itself is distinctly oval, almost oriental in form,

and there is a delicacy to the eyes, which are soft and sensuous. She also has a high forehead, though much of this is obscured by her fringe. 'What is your nationality?'

'I have none, ma'am,' the young woman answers crisply, almost with a lilt of amusement to her voice.

'Oh, I see. I presume that means you're Jewish? Well, don't worry, my dear. I don't happen to share in this noble city's preoccupation with anti-Semitism. I shan't ...'

'No, that neither, ma'am. As with gender, a person's race or nationality is illusory.'

'Oh, really? Well, perhaps you should try telling that to our generals and politicians who seem so intent on plunging us all into war. See if they agree that race and nationality are illusory.'

'The generals and politicians?' Kristina echoes, speaking slowly, as if thinking aloud. 'I suspect they might not listen to me,' she adds with her usual intensity.

'You may well be right, my dear,' the English Lady concurs. 'Oh, don't worry; I've known my fair share of generals in my time. Generals and field marshals and admirals and whatnot, and all the powerful men who make their weapons and ships for them. They are like schoolboys, most of them, playing at soldiers. And as for the politicians that serve them ... well, I won't even begin to tell you what I think of *them*. Um ... Anyway, Kristina, on a more practical note, I shall need a bath to be drawn much earlier than usual. The day staff will arrive below stairs well before dawn. Go to them later, as soon as you hear them and make sure there is sufficient hot water. I shall require this before seven. Then, after dressing, I must ride out immediately - a carriage must be ready at 8.30 precisely to take me to the Imperial. I will need the services of a companion, of course. Let us hope someone is available at such an unseemly hour.'

'Is m'lady referring to a footman or a maid?' Kristina inquires.

But to this, the English lady recoils in shock. '*A footman!* Don't be absurd. I have enough men in my life already, thank you, without adding another useless piece of baggage. No, wherever I go, I do so only with a female companion.'

'Then I shall ride out with you, ma'am, yes?'

'*You?*' the English lady exclaims with a blend of surprise and embarrassment. 'No, no sorry. I don't mean to sound unkind, my dear, but I must have someone dressed appropriately.'

'I have fine clothes, m'lady - far finer than those in which you see me. I am also competent in serving a lady in the capacity of

chaperone or companion, and you will not feel ashamed that I should be accompanying you. Fair maid or handsome footman, or anything else in-between, I can meet all your requirements. It is merely a matter of costume for one such as myself, would you not agree?’

To which the English lady finds herself giggling - for the first time with genuine mirth, deciding that it really would not be at all disagreeable to spend even the coming morning in the company of this amusing young lady, if that is indeed what she is. ‘Oh yes,’ she chuckles, ‘you could certainly pass for either, or anything in-between - of which, I should tell you, we have a good few notable examples in this City at present. Well then, so be it. It is a gamble for me, consenting to this. But if all else fails, there will certainly be some decent clothes we can fetch from the wardrobes.’

‘If it please you, ma'am I would be grateful if you would have faith in my promise,’ the young woman responds, her voice remaining gentle but also becoming distracted and even strangely exultant as she continues: ‘I shall make provision in good time,’ she declares, her eyes unfocussed, as if perceiving some remote and future time and place deep within her imagination, ‘I shall be beautiful for you, and worthy of your enterprise. I will be at your side or seated behind you as you ride to your conquest. I shall take your parasol or watch over your portmanteau. I shall support you at every turn and bring you good fortune and victory.’

‘Victory? Good God - you make it sound like a ruddy battle I'm going into!’ the English Lady exclaims, hoping that she does not appear unduly anxious. For the maid's words are not far off the mark. A few moments later, however, and with the continued ministrations of the slow, rhythmic brushing, a sense of tranquillity overtakes the English Lady once again, a calmness mingled with the focussed pleasure that only complete attention to the senses can bring.

‘You touch me with one hand and comb my hair with the other,’ the English Lady observes in a voice that sounds surprised, aware now for some time that a soothing palm has been resting upon her shoulder. ‘You possess the secrets of a courtesan - the use of two hands even when only one is required. You make the circle.’

‘I do, ma'am. I have the understanding, but I am not a courtesan.’

‘What are you, then, my lovely *Geisha*? What else do you know at your tender age?’

‘I know everything.’

‘Everything?’

‘Yes. I know, for example, that it is not a journey of romance

and intrigue you go to later today, but to one of vengeance and death. And that within the portmanteau that you carry there is not only the accessories of a silken fan or perfumed gloves but also a weapon of execution.'

Once again, the English lady is snapped out of her reverie.

'What! How do you know that?' she demands in a harsh whisper, feeling most disturbed again, more so than ever - and her heart beats fast, almost audibly in the silent room.

'Because of your daughter, ma'am,' the young woman answers with calm, 'because of her.'

'What he did to her ... you know?'

'Oh yes. And it is time, therefore, with your permission, m'lady, that I should reveal to you more of the circumstances that have brought you to this place.'

'I'm sorry - what do you mean, my dear? I don't understand,' the English lady murmurs, her voice faltering in confusion as the young woman places the brush down and reaches slowly to one side to retrieve the newspaper that is invariably placed in readiness upon the sideboard - though it would be far too early to be anything other than yesterday's edition.

'Look, m'lady ... you may read this and learn everything here,' she murmurs, raising the broadsheet as if obliging her mistress to survey its full extent in the central glass of the mirror.

'What kind of infernal paper is this?' the English lady gasps - her voice imprisoned in her chest, so astonished is she as she gazes ahead to all the grey halftone pictures and column inches of inky text. 'Since when could anyone read newsprint in reflection - or any kind of print, for that matter? Even in this light I can read every word. And this is not news, anyway. That is *my* picture there. And this article - all the articles: they are all about people I once knew.'

'Yes, that is correct, m'lady. It is your history, and yet so much more. Look carefully. Here, also, are those parts unseen by you, all those moments you were unaware of at the time. Do not be anxious. All is well. Allow me to turn the pages and to guide you.'

# Chapter 1



End of Sample