

THE PAINTED BRIDGE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Daughter of Dust
Oranges and Lemons

THE
PAINTED
BRIDGE

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O N E

Lizzie Button was upside down. The crown of her head rested on the floor; her feet, in black laced boots, floated above her. Lucas St Clair leaned his eye closer to the ground glass and brought her face into sharper focus, moving the brass knob backwards and forwards to sharpen the grain of her skin, the strands of cropped hair that lay across her forehead. Her expression was wary. Lucas had trained himself to read eyes that signalled from below mouths, frowns that mimicked smiles. He ducked out from underneath the cloth, replaced the lens cap and looked at her in the flesh, right way up.

‘Are you comfortable, Mrs Button?’ he said, inserting the plate. ‘Warm enough? Will you be able to keep still?’

‘Yes, Doctor,’ she said, her lips barely moving. ‘Go on. Make my picture.’

‘Here we go.’

Tugging out the dark slide, he removed the lens cap with a flourish and began to count out the exposure.

'... two. Three. Four.'

He could feel the familiar excitement rising in him. The hope that the picture would succeed even beyond his expectations and reveal Mrs Button's mind. 'Eight, nine, ten.' That it would offer up the secrets of the world inside her head. 'Sixteen. Seventeen.' Illuminate the mental landscape, the population of unseen persecutors and innocents with whom Mrs Button conversed. 'Twenty-three. Twenty ...'

The fernery door flew open behind him and the patient swung round towards it with a look of alarm in her eyes. Her hands began to pluck at a piece of wood, wrapped in a ragged white shawl, on her lap. Lucas heard a pair of feet wipe themselves repeatedly on the sack thrown over the threshold behind him as a voice rang through the air.

'Stuck. Swollen from the rain, I suppose. Afternoon, St Clair.'

Lucas held up his hand for silence.

'Thirty-one. Thirty-two. One minute, please.' Querios Abse crossed the brick floor and stood beside him. Abse wore old-fashioned trousers strapped under the instep and shoes that had moulded themselves to the forward press of his big toes. His body was padded with an even layer of flesh, with his own mortal armour. He stood watching as Lucas continued. 'Forty-nine. Fifty.'

'That must be long enough,' he said. 'Surely to goodness.'

Lucas St Clair counted on. 'Seventy-one. Seventy-two.'

His eyes, steady and clear, held the whole picture before him: Lizzie Button – her shoulders hunched now, her gaze fastened upon him; the carved wooden chair on which she sat; the plain canvas strung from the wall behind her and the spider that clambered over it.

‘Ninety-nine. One hundred. You can relax now, Mrs Button. Thank you.’ He flung the square of black velvet over the front of the camera and turned to Abse. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘Just dropped in as I was passing. How are you getting on?’

‘I’m making progress, thank you.’

The cheer in Lucas’s voice belied his disappointment. The picture was spoilt, he knew already, the spell broken when Abse crossed the threshold. The patient had moved. On the plate, she would appear to have half a dozen heads and a score of ghostly hands fluttering over her lap. He wouldn’t develop the photograph. It would disturb Mrs Button further to see an image of herself that looked as if it came from a freak show. He’d finished the exposure only to make the point to Abse that he ought not to be disturbed.

‘And what’s your opinion of Button here?’ Abse jabbed a hand towards her. She was rocking back and forth on the chair, cradling the stick in her arms and humming. Abse lowered his voice a fraction. ‘Incurable, Higgins reckons.’

‘I can’t say yet, sir. I haven’t had a chance to make a print or to study her image.’

‘You’ve met the woman, haven’t you? You’ve read her notes. What difference does it make to see the wretched creature on glass?’

Lucas had explained to him in detail the difference he believed the new science might make. The opportunity it offered to see the face in a settled expression, reduced to two dimensions, with all the accompanying clarity and possibility for close reading. Was Abse baiting him? Or did he just not listen?

‘It’s a scientific way of looking,’ he said. ‘Free of the old prejudices and preconceptions. It can lead us into the minds of patients. Mind if I carry on, Abse? We can talk while I’m working.’

Lucas stepped inside the dark cupboard and closed the door behind him, glad of the flimsy removal from Abse. He wore a long apron over his trousers, the pale canvas stained with what looked like sepia. His sleeves were rolled to the elbows and the neck of his shirt unbuttoned behind a lopsided blue cravat. His brown hair reached to his shoulders and his whiskers – his only vanity – were razored in a sharp line that reached from his ears to his chin.

He inhaled the sweetish smell of ether as he lifted the plate out of the dark slide and slid it into a bath of water. He would clean it off, reuse it another time. By the orange gloom of the safe light he prepared a new plate, gripping it between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, using the other to pour the collodion, tilting the surface backwards and forwards, watching as the gummy tide rolled over the glass, then draining the surplus from one corner, drop by drop, back into the neck of the flask. Abse's face loomed towards him from the other side of the small window of amber glass, his flesh and silver hair turned a sulphurous yellow, his red waistcoat the same tone as his black jacket. He dangled his watch in the air and tapped the face of it.

'I haven't got all day, St Clair,' he called. 'I'm expecting a new patient.'

Lucas retrieved the fresh plate from the silver bath and secured it in the dark slide. He rinsed his long fingers with water from an old kettle that he kept on the shelf for the purpose and stepped out, blinking in the glare.

The fernery had been an enthusiasm of Abse's late mother but had long ago fallen into disuse. Empty of plants and with the stove in the middle lit only for his visits, the old glass house felt damp and chilly year round. The light was good though. It was

shadowless north light, as scientific as light could be. It poured through the cracked panes of the sloping glass roof in a pristine abundance that Lucas found – despite his atheism – miraculous. *Lux a eterna.*

‘Finished with the dark arts, have you?’

‘Not yet.’ He wished that Abse would take his leave. Mrs Button wouldn’t be able to settle until he did. Nor would he, come to think of it. ‘You expect a new patient, Mr Abse?’

‘Yes, she’s due any time.’ Abse cleared his throat and rocked on his heels. ‘There was something actually, St Clair. We’ve got the inspectors coming in again before long. Of course, they never say when. I want more of the pictures on display, in the day room. Gives the place an up-to-date look.’

Lucas hesitated.

‘Very well. I’ll hang them myself, on my next visit.’

Abse walked towards the door.

‘Good. Best be off,’ he said. ‘Oh, and St Clair!’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Don’t forget to tell me what ails Mrs Button. If your photograph speaks to you in the privacy of your darkened room. Tells you any more than doctors with a lifetime of experience have been able to see unaided.’

Lucas cleared his throat.

‘Shall do.’

‘Bloody old sod,’ Mrs Button said over the sound of Abse’s departing chuckle as the fernery door banged shut.

Lucas watched as Abse made his way along a path edged with box and out of the walled garden. He disliked the idea of his pictures being pressed into the service of a publicity campaign

– pasted up like advertisements for cocoa powder or soap flakes before their true utility in diagnosis had been properly established. There was something dishonest about it. He squashed the objection. He had to keep Abse in favour of the project, needed his agreement in order to continue visiting Lake House. It was a small price to pay for the opportunity to pursue his research.

He stooped under the cloth again and began to readjust the focus of the expensive French lens. Poised on her head, her old print dress sailing above her, Lizzie Button had grown still. Her expression had changed – her mouth curving downwards in a slight smile, her eyebrows lifted quizzically towards the ground. She looked almost hopeful. Lucas threw off the velvet and straightened up, inserting the dark slide into the camera back with one practised movement.

‘I’m so sorry for the interruption, Mrs Button. Shall we start again?’

The cab lurched through the gates and along a driveway edged with tall trees that still clung to the last of their foliage. Red and gold leaves fluttered on near-naked branches as if the stately oaks and beeches were down to their undergarments, to petticoats and one stocking. Anna glimpsed the house through the glass and got an impression of its great flat front, of ivy encroaching on the top windows. It had a half-blind look that reminded her of the flint house.

‘As you see,’ Vincent said, ‘it’s a fine place. Comfortable. Well situated.’

‘Very fine. Who are your friends?’

‘You’ll find out soon enough.’

He climbed out, his feet crunching on the scatter of gravel as he headed for the studded double door. Glad to escape the confines of the cab, Anna jumped down on to the mossy stones and followed Vincent to the porch. She hoped she looked sufficiently presentable. Her boots were still stained with salt from the trip to the coast; she had on her old blue velvet dress, with the lace collar. She disliked the two new dresses Vincent had bought her on their marriage. The wool irritated her skin and the dark hues drained her face of colour. She pushed a few escaped strands of hair back into her tortoiseshell combs, while Vincent heaved on the bell.

A maid led them through a hallway and on into a room lined from skirting board to ceiling with shelves crammed with books and ledgers, heaps of yellowing papers pushed in like thatch on their tops. The floor was as crowded as the walls: curios, chairs stacked with more files, a stuffed fox in a glass cabinet.

‘What a funny old place,’ she said, glancing around. ‘It doesn’t look as if anyone ever reads the books.’

‘Good afternoon, Reverend.’

She jumped. The voice came from a man halfway up a ladder propped against one of the bookshelves. He climbed down and hurried across the room towards her, brushing a hand on his red waistcoat, extending it. His hair was silver, brushed upwards on both sides of his head; he had a signet ring jammed on to his little finger.

‘Querios Abse. Welcome to Lake House.’ He shook Vincent’s hand then hers, holding it a moment too long as he regarded her. Anna disentangled her hand, turned away from his avid stare. ‘I take it this is she?’ the man said to Vincent. He pulled Vincent

towards the door and they began to talk in low voices, facing away from her.

The wind gusted again outside; threadbare curtains belled inward from the windows then subsided. Anna felt a rising sense of indignation. She'd missed her appointment with her sister, travelled all this way and wasn't even going to be invited to sit down. She pretended to examine a globe on a stand, spun it on its axis through China, Persia, Abyssinia until she found England, its dear, peculiar outline. Wheeling it more slowly, she trailed her fingers over the lumpy surface of the Atlantic. She would visit Louisa tomorrow. She'd go early.

She looked up to find both men regarding her.

'Oh, yes,' Vincent said. 'Excellent physical health.'

He came towards her with a look of regret, holding his hat against his chest.

'Anna, I believe it best if . . . *Thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.*'

'What do you mean, Vincent?'

Anna was perplexed but her voice was eager. She wanted to offer forgiveness, even before she knew for what. For what didn't matter. What mattered was that they pulled together, each played their part. That was what marriage was, as far as she could make out.

'Goodbye, Anna.'

He made a stiff little bow, walked backwards to the door and disappeared through it. He was there and then not there, like one of Louisa's phantoms. She began to follow but the man called Querios Abse stepped in front of her, holding out both arms as if he was herding an unwilling sheep.

'One minute, Mrs Palmer. I'd like to introduce you to someone.'

'Where's my husband gone?'

Another door opened at the far end of the room and a woman crossed the floor, the clip of her heels on the boards deadened as she reached the rug.

'This is Fanny Makepeace,' said Abse. 'Our matron.'

'Good afternoon, Mrs Makepeace. I'm leaving now, if you'll excuse me.'

'Your bonnet, Mrs Palmer,' the woman said, holding out a hand crowded with rings. 'Your cloak.'

Everything about Makepeace appeared ordinary. She was in middle age and of medium height, her brownish hair drawn tightly back to display a pair of deep-set eyes that looked at Anna without expression. Yet Anna's skin prickled with unease at the woman's proximity; she was unable to meet her cool stare.

'I'm going,' she repeated. 'I'm not staying.'