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# INDIGO

A NOVEL OF INDIA IN THE YEARS BEFORE ITS INDEPENDENCE

## Christine Weston

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*By Christine Weston*

CEYLON

BHIMSA,
THE DANCING BEAR

# INDIGO

*To my parents*

# *PART ONE*

# I

It was a February afternoon and they were watering the garden; the smell of water among the flowers reached young Jacques de St. Remy where he stood in his bedroom door, lazily allowing himself to be dressed. This was his fourteenth birthday and for fourteen years this fragrance had come up from the garden into his body, stirring a precious disquiet. Perhaps at the hour of his birth this same fragrance had touched his mother's face and his own.

"Lift thy foot," said Hanif sharply. He knelt before Jacques, tying the laces of his white buckskin shoes. "The other one—place it here, on my knee."

Jacques laid his hand on Hanif's head for support, but he did not take his gaze from the garden which lay in a haze of sunlit dust, twittering leaves and odors of moisture and flowers. Beyond the boundary of cactus and lantana bushes rose the dark mass of the mango grove whose limp russet leaves would soon turn a crisp green. Beyond that stretched the fields. The vats and huts and boiler-rooms of his mother's factory lay out of sight beyond the trees but as he listened Jacques could hear, above the creak of a well wheel and the voice of the gardener, a distant hum and stir of machinery.

"Must you pull all my hair out at once?" inquired Hanif plaintively.

Jacques' gaze drifted to the young man who knelt at his feet. Hanif was twenty, slender, beautiful in his own way. A velvet cap set off his curled and jet-black hair; he wore a velvet waistcoat over his white kurtha, and his long legs were hidden in immaculate pantaloons. Hanif was a dandy who spent all his wages on clothes when he did not squander them on luxuries less innocent. An orphan whose parents had died in the last great famine, he came from Monghyr where they speak a shriller tongue than up-country, but when he sang his voice dropped to a minor key, and he sang a good part of the time.

"This cap," murmured Jacques. "It makes seven at least. There is the red one and the purple one and the gray one and . . ."

Hanif replaced the boy's foot on the ground and rose, setting the cap at an angle above his black velvet eyes. "It was bought solely in honor of your birthday. Shall I proceed about my duties looking no better than a chamar, or am I to appear decently clad in your mother's sight?"

"Where is the butterfly you promised me?"

Hanif removed the cap and from its perfumed interior plucked a crumpled object which he laid on the dressing table.

"That!" exclaimed Jacques scornfully.

"I chased it until I was exhausted. I ran and I ran."

"The only time I saw you run was when the buck goat chased you."

Hanif retorted with an unquotable jest on the character of buck goats, then gravity descended on him once more. "Alas! Your hair, my child."

Jacques regarded himself in the glass. His own face always interested him, for it appeared always as the face of a stranger. He wondered sometimes what his soul looked like—his soul, that hidden, separate self. He had discussed this question with his friend Hardyal but they never arrived at any satisfactory explanation. "My father," said Hardyal, "is not orthodox. He does not believe in the persistence of the soul as Father Sebastien believes or as Madame de St. Remy believes. My father has made his ideas quite clear to me and he is happy that I share them."

"But your family!" Jacques had reminded him. "Your grandmother and your aunts! Aren't they always afraid that if they misbehave they might be born again as fleas, or turtles?"

Hardyal shrugged scornfully. "What can one expect from women?"

Hardyal's heresy did not trouble Jacques very much; nothing about his friend troubled Jacques, except perhaps an occasional twinge of fear lest something happen to separate them.

"Stand still," commanded Hanif. "You cannot appear thus before the photographer."

"I don't want to appear before him at all—in these disgusting clothes." His bottom itched in the new, tight drill.

Hanif dipped a comb in a bowl of water and drew it through the boy's light brown hair. Jacques knew that in her own room his sister Gisele was also being tricked out for the occasion. The ayah squatted on her haunches with Gisele crouched on a stool before her, and clawed the girl's golden fleece, eliciting screams of wrath.

The house was filled with the excitement of a party; bare feet pattered over the china-matting, bead curtains clashed and tinkled, there was a scurrying between the cookhouse and the back verandah. Jacques heard the familiar sound of Father Sebastien's arrival and saw the priest's fat pony led away to the stables. In a few hours, he thought, this day will have ended like all the days I can remember. When light fades, the crows will fly westward to roost and the flying foxes will flap across the garden to feed in the tamarinds. From all over the plain dust will rise into the air, stirred by homeward moving feet; there will be a smell of wood smoke and food cooking, and all the special evening voices. The Hour of Cowdust, Hardyal called it.

"There!" exclaimed Hanif. "Now you are beautiful!"

Jacques' hair stuck to his head as if it had been varnished. Singing under his breath Hanif began to set the room in order, shaking the mosquito curtains above the bed, picking up and smoothing the discarded clothes.

In an hour the guests would be here: Mr. Wall the Engineer, Doctor and Mrs. Brown, Hardyal, and the railway inspector's two dull little girls, invited because there were no other white children in Amritpore. The inspector's little girls were not wholly white, and neither Jacques nor Gisele liked them, but Madame de St. Remy insisted that their company was better than nothing. Perhaps they would all bring presents, thought Jacques, brightening. Except for Hardyal he didn't care whether they came or not. Hardyal and Mrs. Lyttleton . . . he wandered across the room to examine his collection of butterflies. In their cork-lined case under heavy glass they looked like a jeweller's window, and for some minutes he

stared at the great Cat's Eye moth which Mrs. Lyttleton had given him.

Hardyal and Mrs. Lyttleton! These were his friends. Why, why since he loved them equally had he not been allowed to invite Mrs. Lyttleton this afternoon? He knew that his mother disliked her, but his understanding stopped there. It confused him to feel that he must not love Mrs. Lyttleton, that he was not even supposed to be friends with her. She was old and kind and full of marvellous stories. She lived in a fascinating house from which he was allowed, at any time, to take anything he liked. She was the sort of friend one might dream about . . . and yet, and yet . . .

Wheels ground up the long avenue of shisham and he saw an ekka jerk to a stop, its dejected pony hanging its head. A shrill duet started up between the driver and his passenger, and Jacques began to laugh. Hanif joined him and they watched delightedly as Mr. Boodrie the amateur photographer dismounted from the ekka. In his anxiety to unload the camera and its apparatus safely he'd managed to entangle himself in the black cloth; blind and frustrated he groped about under it while the ekka-wallah sat callously grinning.

Jacques exclaimed: "I hope it all goes to smithereens!"

Hanif laid his hand on the boy's neck. "No running off. No climbing trees. Come!"

## 2

IN A CORNER of the verandah overlooking her rose garden Madame de St. Remy sat talking with her old friend and confessor, Father Sebastien, a tall, stout Franciscan with shrewd eyes and ruddy cheeks above his black beard. Ten years before, Father Sebastien had acquired Auguste de St. Remy's taste for Trichinopoly cigars and Madame obtained them for him regularly, long after her husband's death. Father Sebastien smoked one of these now while he listened to her clear, quick voice.

"I think Ganpat Rai is mistaken in putting so much faith in Aubrey Wall."

"Why?"

"Because Wall is an Englishman and the English have a quality of maggots. They devour everything they come in contact with."

If in 1757 the Frenchman Dupleix had triumphed over the Englishman Clive it is possible that an historic effulgence might have warmed and sweetened somewhat the character and destiny of Madame de St. Remy, one hundred and fifty years after the Battle of Plassey. But on this February afternoon she still cherished resentment against that ancient humiliation: whenever she was ill or angry her antipathies escaped into the open disguised as history.

The priest, who rather liked Aubrey Wall, said gently: "Your judgment is sometimes very sweeping, Madame."

"That is because I know them so well."

Madame could not afford to be wrong; mistakes and shortcomings were reserved for God, via the accommodating ears of Father Sebastien. God and His vicar knew her to be chaste, a devoted mother, loyal to her traditions and bedded in her faith. Believing in God, cynical of men, she managed to combine submission to the Church with a refined tyranny over human beings. But Father Sebastien knew that she was a lonely woman, capable of a mysterious increase of spirit to any degree which ambition might demand of her. When

Auguste de St. Remy died, leaving her his two children and his indigo, Madame's genius for enterprise had emerged to astonish all who knew her. The indigo industry was wavering under the threat of German coal tar inventions, but to Madame it seemed inconceivable that anything so ancient and so well established as indigo should lose its market. She had learned much from the misfortunes of other planters, many of whom were Indians, and she was convinced that the European's flexibility was what made for his success against the native. She had observed, also, the waste and tedium of old methods, and two years after Auguste's death she imported machinery from England and built a new factory with a steam plant for the tanks and power for stirring and pumping. She bought up the pulse and millet fields of her neighbors and put them to indigo; nor did she forget the old cry of the peasants: If you sign an indigo contract you won't be free again for seven generations! It was an echo from the days when men inherited their fathers' and their grandfathers' debts. So Madame wrote a new contract by which she bought, not their product, but their labor. Under her genius the factory prospered and five years after Auguste's death she was rich enough to build a chapel for Father Sebastien, and a year later, a school for his Indian converts.

In the big green-washed drawing room of Madame's house there hung a portrait of Auguste de St. Remy made ten years ago. Fish ants had channelled down one aquiline nostril, down the lips into his beard; but his eyes, which his son had inherited, gazed across the room to a pencil drawing of his birthplace above Nonancourt in Normandy. Madame de St. Remy, never in love with her own middle-class heritage, sometimes confused her children by references to Nonancourt as her own birthplace and to the stone house among the plane trees as her father's house. In France, measured by her own standards and mislaid among her own kind she might not have stood a fair chance, but in India it was different. Indians were impressed by greatness, nurtured on arrogance; India was a vast theatre for the struggle of the Church—and of Madame—against the usurping Bloomsbury British. And when she spoke of the British, Madame used the word *sinister*, and the word *formidable* with ominous French sibilance.

She returned to the subject of Hardyal. "They are determined, between them, to send him to England and turn him into a sahib." She laughed, but Father Sebastien frowned. After a slight hesitation he said: "We must not forget that there is a ruling power in this country. For better or for worse it is part of our own power. It is our protection, too. We must not forget that. Jacques must not be allowed to forget it."

"On the contrary nothing would please me better than that Jacques might one day become lieutenant governor of the Province!"

He gave her a quick glance, then laughed. "Ah, Madame!"

Madame stared into her garden where the most fragile of her roses had shed their petals under the day's heat. She said: "Talking of Aubrey Wall, you understand I am not inspired by rancor. It is just that I mistrust his intentions. One can never be sure what he is thinking. But you know as well as I that the most insignificant Englishman never loses sight of his object, which is the extension and preservation of the empire. They never submerge their identity, as we are always willing to submerge ours, in the soil and culture of a foreign land. The English will not even learn to speak another language with the proper accent. They actually pride themselves on their incapacities. Have you ever heard Wall trying to speak French? *Exécrable!*"

"Yet he has taught Hardyal to speak excellent English."

"Yes," she sneered. "And boxing—and cricket!"

Father Sebastien surveyed his sandalled feet. "This question of race . . . how then do you account for a woman like Laura Lyttleton?"

Madame's hands clenched in her lap. "I am not obliged to account for her. I am not obliged to invite her into my house. I am in no way responsible for her existence . . . nor am I constrained to admit, even, that she does exist!"

Her passion alarmed him. "But Madame, who ever suggested . . ."

"Jacques!"

He stared. "Jacques?"

Madame brought her feelings under control. "Yesterday there was a scene. I asked Jacques whom, besides Hardyal, he would like to invite here for tea. I realize how little Amritpore has to offer in the way of amusement and companionship for the children. And you

know . . . for his age . . . how serious he is, how discriminating. It is not natural in a child, this quality, this capacity for love. It has always troubled me, for my feelings are deeply maternal."

He nodded, and she continued rather breathlessly: "What was I to think when he looked into my eyes and asked for Mrs. Lyttleton?"

Father Sebastien was silent, frowning in his turn. He would have liked to say that he understood Jacques, that he knew the boy as intimately as she knew him, but the truth was he did not know Jacques. Gisele yes, he knew Gisele; knew her mind, her heart, even her fate. He was himself, in a sense, the instrument of that fate. But on Jacques' account he suffered strange forebodings.

Madame went on: "You know that I have scolded him for running over there as he does behind my back. I have warned Hanif to see to it, but Hanif is lazy. I have an idea that he might even connive."

"Then you should dismiss Hanif."

"It would accomplish nothing. Jacques can turn any servant round his little finger."

Father Sebastien chewed his cigar. He would not, if he could prevent it, lose the son as he had lost the father. "You believe, then, that Jacques really cares for Mrs. Lyttleton?"

She forced herself to say it: "Yes."

"It would be fatal for him to come under her influence!"

"As his father did," murmured Madame de St. Remy with stinging bitterness. Presently she said in a calmer voice: "In a little while Hardyal will be gone and Jacques will feel deserted. Though he does not confide in me, though he tries to exclude me from his thoughts, I can read them. But what is one to do? Children are so unpredictable."

The priest tossed his cigar into the garden. "Perhaps it would be better, then, if we were to do what I have often suggested—send him to France for his education."

She made a small, despairing gesture. "Ah, not yet! When he is older . . . when I have taught myself to bear the thought of parting from him!"

Father Sebastien started to say something, but he was interrupted

by the appearance of Boodrie. "Madame! Will you please come to assist me in taking Jacques' photo? I have tried and tried. He will not stand still. He will not do one single thing which I ask. He falls down. He crosses his eyes. He makes indecent motions. He laughs. Hanif laughs. Gisele laughs. Junab Ali comes all the way from the cookhouse to laugh. They all laugh. Ah, Madame! Father!"

Madame rose, and she and the priest followed the demoralized half-caste into the house.