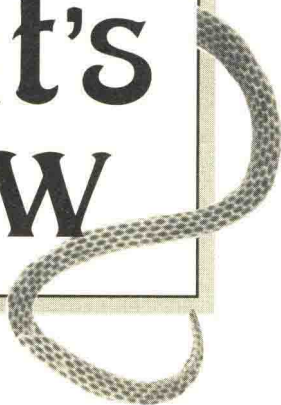


MERCEDES LACKEY



The Serpent's Shadow



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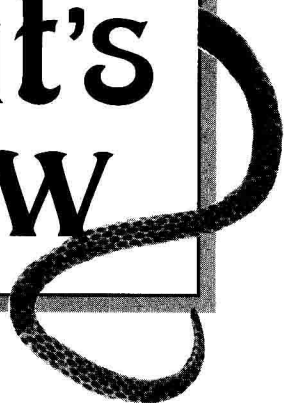
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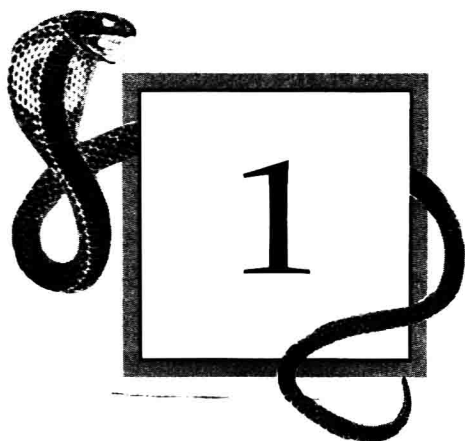


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for Mike Gilbert

we'll miss you



LEADEN, self-important silence isolated the chief surgeon's office from the clamor of the hospital and the clangor of the street outside. A rain-dark day, a dim, chill room filled with cold, heavy, imposing mahogany office furniture and lined with ebony bookshelves containing dreary brown leather-bound volumes so perfectly arranged that it was not possible that any of them had ever been taken down and used—the room in which Maya found herself was designed to cow, confine, and intimidate. But Maya Wither-
spoon, though depressed by an atmosphere so alien to her native India, had spent most of her life perfecting the art of keeping a serene and unreadable expression on her face. All that practice stood her in good stead now.

Across from her, enthroned behind his mahogany desk of continental proportions, sat Doctor Octavian Clayton-Smythe, Chief Medical Officer of St. Mary's Hospital, Paddington, in the rattling heart of London. *One of Kipling's "little tin gods,"* she thought irreverently, clasping her ice-cold, black-gloved hands tightly on top of the handbag in her lap. *He would fit in quite perfectly in the Colonial Service. Stiffly propped up in his armor of utter respectability . . . so sure of his importance, so intent on forcing others to acknowledge it.*

Cocooned in the somber black woolen suit of the medical pro-

fession, as if he sat in mourning for all the patients he had managed to kill, he frowned down at the results of her various academic examinations—results that should leave no doubt in the mind of any sensible person that she was fitter to be granted the sacred title of “Doctor of Medicine and Surgery” than a good many of the young *men* who would have that very accolade bestowed on them in the course of this year of Our Lord, 1909. In point of fact, she already *had* that title—in her homeland of India. This, however, was not India; it was London, England, the heart of the British Empire and of civilization as the English knew it. And as such, there were two distinct handicaps to her ambition that Maya labored beneath at this moment. The first was her sex. Although female doctors were not unknown here, there were no more than three hundred in the British Isles, and most probably the actual number was less than that.

The second was that although Maya’s father had been a perfectly respectable British doctor serving in the Army, stationed at Delhi, and although Maya herself had obtained her degree as a physician in the University of Delhi, her mother had *not* been a fellow exile. She had been a native, a Brahmin of high caste. And although in India it had been Surya who had wedded far beneath her state, the reverse was true here, and Maya, as a (to put it crudely) half-breed, bore the sign of her mother’s non-English blood in her dusky complexion. All else could be disguised with education, clothing, careful diction, but not that. Maya’s knee-length black hair had been knotted into a pompadour and covered with a proper hat and veil, her body wrapped in good British wool of proper tailoring, her accent trained away with years of careful, self-imposed lessons in speech. Yet none of that mattered very much to someone who was so fiercely determined to consider Maya as one of the barbaric and alien “They.”

It was raining again outside the hospital; it seemed to Maya that it was *always* raining here. Cold wind blew the raindrops against the glass of the office windows, and Maya was glad of the warmth of her woolen suit coat—for she, too, was encased in the feminine version of the uniform of the office she aspired to, plus

the added burden of corset, petticoats, and all the other wrappings deemed necessary to "decent" dressing. Doctor Clayton-Smythe had a gas fire laid on in his office, but he had not bothered to have it lit. Perhaps *he* didn't feel the cold; after all, it was spring by the British calendar, and the good doctor had plenty of good English fat to insulate him, seallike, from the cold.

He looks more like a walrus, though. I believe he probably bellows at his wife, and means as much by it as a walrus bellowing at his little cow.

Doctor Clayton-Smythe cleared his throat, immediately capturing her attention. "Your results are . . . remarkable," he said cautiously.

She nodded, part modest acknowledgment, part caution on her own part. In a way, she felt strangely calm; she had been nervous before this battle, but now that the enemy was engaged, her mind was cool, weighing every least inflection. *Not yet time to say anything, I think.*

Now the doctor looked up, at long last, meeting her eyes for the first time. He was a heavy man; the English staple diet of cream, cheese, beef and bread, vegetables boiled to tastelessness, heavy pastry, and more beef, had given him a florid complexion and jowls that were only imperfectly hidden behind old-fashioned gray mut-ton-chop whiskers and a heavy mustache, a salt-and-pepper color that matched his hair. *If he doesn't yet suffer from gout, he will,* she thought dispassionately, *and his heart will not long be able to maintain his increasing bulk.* Gray hair, neatly trimmed, and rather washed-out blue eyes behind gold-rimmed glasses completed the portrait of a highly successful physician and surgeon; the head of his hospital, and a man who could deny her, not only the right to practice here in his hospital but certification to practice medicine in the British Isles if he chose to exert his influence. However, Maya had chosen her adversary with care; if this man certified her, no one in the United Kingdom would ever deny her expertise.

"How old are you, if I may ask?" he continued.

"Five and twenty," she replied crisply. "And that may seem a trifle young to you to have become a physician and surgeon. But I

had been studying medicine under the tutelage of my father since I was old enough to read, and achieved Doctor of Medicine at the University of Delhi at the age of twenty-two."

He nodded slowly. "And you were practicing alongside your father as well?"

"I was certified in India as a practicing physician," she reminded him, taking pains to keep her impatience and growing frustration out of her voice. "I was my father's partner in his practice. Wives and daughters of military personnel felt more comfortable consulting a female physician in matters of a personal and delicate nature. I aided him as a physician in my own right for a period of nearly four years."

"That was in India; you might find ladies feel differently about you here," he replied, the expected hint that her mixed blood would prove a handicap, and a more tactful hint than she had expected.

She smiled a small, cold smile, as cold as her feet in those wretched, tight little leather "walking" shoes she'd laced onto her feet. "The women of the poor take what they are offered; and for that matter, so do the men," she told him. "They can hardly afford to take their patronage elsewhere, since there is no alternative. I will—if certified—be undertaking work for certain Christian charities. The Fleet Charity Clinic, to be precise." There were also certain suffragist charities she would be working for as well, but it wasn't wise to mention those.

Charity work would scarcely allow her to earn much of a living, which was why most male physicians wouldn't even consider it. She would not tell him what else she had in mind to augment her income.

He brightened a little at that. *Probably because I won't be a threat to the practices of any of the young male physicians, who have wives with the proper attitudes to support*, she thought, amused in spite of her resentment. She suppressed the desire to sniff, as her nose tickled a little.

"Far be it from me to become an impediment to someone who wishes to devote herself to the welfare of the poor," he replied

with ponderous piety, and removed a document from beneath the results of her examinations, signing it quickly. He passed it to her over the desk; she received it in those black-gloved hands—black, for she was still in mourning for her father, and though Society might forgive the occasional breach of strict mourning in a young *white* woman, it would never do so for her. The year of formal mourning was not yet up, and in the interest of economy, she had already decided to prolong it as long as she could. Mourning colors gave her a certain safety. Even a brute would not offer too much insult to a woman in mourning, even if she was a half-breed.

That paper was her medical certification, giving her the authority to practice medicine, and the right to practice surgery here in this hospital, admit patients, and treat them here.

"Congratulations, Doctor Witherspoon," he continued. "And may I repeat that the results of your examinations are remarkable, including those in surgery. I dare say your skills are equally outstanding."

"Thank you very much, Doctor," she replied with feigned meekness and gratitude; he swelled with self-importance, mistaking it for the genuine emotion. "I hope I will succeed in surpassing your expectations."

She rose. He did the same. She extended her right hand; he pressed it once in token of farewell, released it quickly, then immediately seated himself as she turned to leave. She was not important enough for him to remain standing until after she was gone, nor worthy of his time to be given a heartier handshake or more of his attention.

She closed the door of the office behind her, carefully and quietly, then smiled—this time with real warmth—at the doctor's receptionist and secretary, a young man with thin, blond hair, who had sincerely wished her good luck on her way in. She met his questioning blue eyes, and held up her signed certification in a gesture of triumph. The young man nodded vigorously, clasped both hands above his head in an athlete's gesture of victory, and gave a silent cheer. Maya's companion, a plump, animated woman three years her junior, who was seated in one of two chairs for

visitors placed in this stuffy little reception room, was a trifle less circumspect.

"Oh, Maya! Well done!" Amelia Drew said aloud, leaping up from her chair to embrace her friend. Maya kissed her proffered cheek, waved cheerfully at the secretary, and guided Amelia out the door and into the hospital corridor before Amelia said anything that Doctor Clayton-Smythe might overhear and interpret as unflattering.

Nurses in nunlike uniforms hurried past, carrying trays and basins. Young men, medical students all, arrayed in their medical black, strode through the corridor like the would-be kings they all were.

Maya closed the reception-chamber door behind Amelia, and Amelia cast off any pretense of restraint, skipping like a schoolgirl. "You did it! You got the old crustacean to bend and give you your certification!"

"Not a crustacean, my dear. That was a fat, grumpy walrus on his very own sacred spot of beach." Maya's grimace betrayed her distaste. "It was a narrower thing than I care to think about." She stepped around an elderly charwoman scrubbing the floor on her hands and knees, bundled in so many layers of clothing her true shape could not be determined.

Amelia dodged a medical student on the run—probably late for a surgery. "But your marks were so good. And the letters from the other doctors at Royal Free Hospital—"

"I wasn't entirely certain of success, even with the highest of examination results," she replied, as they traversed the polished oak of the corridor, the starched frills of their petticoats rustling around their booted ankles. Amelia's costume, severe, and plain, was identical to Maya's but of dove-gray rather than stark black. Amelia was in the midst of her own medical education. Fortunately, both her parents were as supportive of her ambition as Maya's had been. Unfortunately, this gave young Amelia a distorted view of the prejudices of the majority of the male population of her land.

"I don't think I convinced him until I told him that I intended to

practice among the poor." Maya smiled again, then laughed, thinking what shock the poor mummified man would have felt had she told him the entire truth.

"There's no harm in *intentions*, is there?" Amelia giggled. "And if there are those besides the poor who decide to ask for your services, well, that has nothing to do with your *intentions*."

"True enough," Maya laughed. "But can you imagine what he would have said if he had known what I really planned to do?" Now that she was up and moving, warmth and life had returned to her feet, at least. And now that the ordeal was over and her victory laurels were firmly in her hands, she was feeling celebratory and just a little reckless.

Amelia was the only person outside Maya's household who knew what Maya intended, and even she blushed a brilliant scarlet as they moved side by side across the echoing foyer, heels clicking smartly on the tiles. "I daren't even guess," Amelia murmured, fanning her scarlet cheeks to cool them.

Just before they reached the doors giving out onto the street, Maya's fingers moved surreptitiously, and she murmured a few words that Amelia did not hear. She sensed a thin breath of energy wafting upward from the well of strength within her, and as they stepped out into the weather, the rain ceased for a moment.

"Well! There's more luck!" Amelia exclaimed as the clouds parted a little, letting a glimpse of blue peek through. She raised her hand imperiously, signaling their need for transportation. There was always a great coming and going of cabs here, both horse-drawn and motorized, and they procured a hansom without any difficulty whatsoever. Maya climbed in and gave her address to the driver through the little hatch above. It shut with a snap, and Amelia joined her.

It was, as she had specified with her tiny exercise of magic, a *clean* cab: no mud or worse on the floor, no cigar ash anywhere. And just as they settled themselves within the shelter of their conveyance and pulled their skirts well in, away from possible mud splashes, the rain began again. The cab moved off into a thin curtain of gray, the poor horse's ears signaling his dislike of the wet.

This was just as Maya had intended. It didn't do to *change* anything with magic, not if one wanted to remain undetected; one could only *arrange*. In this case, the break in the clouds that would have occurred a little later, and a few blocks away, happened above them and at the time they left the building, and closed again as soon as they were in shelter. And the cab was in good repair, the driver neither drunk nor mean spirited.

The precious certificate, now folded and safely inside Maya's handbag, rested beneath her hands on her lap. Amelia made small talk to which Maya responded with half of her attention. London, from within the partial enclosure of the hansom, was an assault on the senses of a very different sort than the heart of Delhi. In place of the scent—no, call it what it was, the *stench*—of hot, baked earth, dust, sweat, and dung, the smell of London enveloped them in damp, mold and mildew, wet wool, wet horse, smoke, stagnant water, the acrid tang of motor exhaust, a hint of sewage and horse droppings, and the river smell of the Thames. Harsher, deeper voices than the rapid twitter of her peoples' myriad tongues fell upon the ear. There was no bawl of livestock, only the clatter of wheels and hooves on cobblestones, neighing, the jingle of harness, and the alien noise of a motorcar or 'bus. And, of course, the atmosphere, so cheerless, so cold. . . .

But she had no other choice now; *this* was her home, and this strange island her refuge. If she was ever to find protection, it would be here. Her enemy was even more alien to this environment than she was.

She shook off her dark mood with an effort, turning all of her attention to her companion. Amelia was the most sensible, practical, and dauntless young woman that Maya had ever met. From the moment that they encountered each other at the London School of Medicine for Women, Maya had felt they had been friends or even sisters before, in some other lifetime. Naturally, she had not said anything of the sort to Amelia, who would only have been confused. The Church of England did not admit to the reincarnation of souls.

"Well, it will be your turn to beard the dragon in his den in another year or so," she told Amelia, who laughed.

"I am going to practice at the Royal Free Hospital," she replied. "They, at least, are open to women physicians. I'm not so ambitious as you."

"It wasn't ambition, it was necessity," Maya told her soberly. "What if Royal Free had balked? I would have nowhere to turn—"

"But why should they balk?" Amelia interrupted.

Maya gestured wordlessly to her own face, and Amelia flushed. "If I tried and failed to obtain certification at St. Mary's, then Royal Free would likely *have* certified me just out of spite," she continued cheerfully. "My father always taught me to try the hardest path first, you know, although if I had seen that man before I made that plan, I would have thought twice about the wisdom of it."

"I hadn't thought of that." Amelia pursed her lips. "Still, that won't do for me. St. Mary's might accept a woman physician, but they'll never accept a woman as a student. Not now, anyway. Perhaps in a few years."

"There is nothing wrong with Royal Free," Maya said firmly, "And a good many things that are right." She might have elaborated on the subject, but the cab had just turned down the shabby-genteel street that housed her home and surgery and was pulling up at the front door. Gupta, a shapeless bundle of waxed mackintosh and identifiable only by the white chalwars stuffed into his Wellingtons that peeked from under the hem of the mac, was setting the last screw into the inscribed brass plate beside her door—a plate that proclaimed this to be the surgery of Dr. M. Witherspoon.

"I suppose we won't see much of you anymore," Amelia said wistfully, as Maya dismounted from the hansom.

"Nonsense! You'll see me on Thursday at the latest, or have you forgotten our luncheon date?" Maya replied instantly. "Not to mention that you are welcome *here* at any hour of the day or night. Now, *you* go back to your studies, while I see what Gupta has found for me."

She circled around to the driver, perched up above the passenger compartment in the weather, and handed him a guinea—more

than enough for her fare and Amelia's with a generous tip. "London School of Medicine for Women, please," she told him briskly. "My companion has a class at two."

"I'll 'ave 'er there well afore, ma'am," the cabby said, impressed by the guinea, if by nothing else. He chirruped to his horse, who trotted off without needing a slap of the reins or a touch of the whip. Amelia's gray-gloved hand waved farewell from the side of the cab, and Maya turned to Gupta.

"Was this bravado or anticipation, my friend?" she asked in Hindustani, touching the plaque.

"Neither, mem sahib," Gupta replied. "We knew, we all knew, you could not fail." His round, brown face held an expression of such earnest certainty that she wanted to laugh and cry at the same time.

"Well, let us go in out of this miserable weather. Come to me in the conservatory, and tell me what has happened to make you so sure of me." She waited while he put a last polish to the plate with a rag he stuffed back in his pocket, then moved past him into the little house she had bought to shelter her odd little "family."

It had taken most of her inheritance to buy it and fit it up, and had it been in better repair, or a better neighborhood, she could not have managed it. But *because* it was so shabby and had required the tearing out of walls, she had been able to install a great many comforts that better dwellings could not boast. The house was lit by electric light, which was much safer than gas. Hot water from a coal-fired boiler in the cellar circulated through the house via pipes and radiators, a luxury often used to keep conservatories and hothouses warm in winter on the Great Estates. More hot water was available for cleaning and bathing at all times, laid on in the bathrooms, without the need to heat water on the stove and carry it up in cans. At last she was warm enough so that she was able to throw off her coat as soon as she entered the front hall.

She had arranged for the hallway to be painted, rather than papered, in white. Furnished with pegs for coats, a bench for waiting patients, and a small table holding a brass dish from India for calling cards, she had hung prints of some of her father's favorite

paintings on the walls. The impression was warmer than that of a hospital, but not "homelike"—wise, since this was the entrance to her surgery as well as to her home.

It was scarcely possible that she would have any patients calling yet, and she longed to shed her woolen suit with the coat and revert to more comfortable garb.

Not yet. Not yet. But I shall be rid of these confounded shoes! Why is it that attractive shoes are a torture to wear?

Hanging her coat on its peg in the hall, she passed the door to her examining room and surgery (formerly the parlor and smoking room) and climbed the stairs to the next floor. Here were the bedrooms, all alike, and the bathroom fitted up with the most modern of appointments. Her room was at the back of the house, away from street noise. The second bedroom, connected to hers, served as her parlor and sitting room.

Gupta had the third bedroom, and his son Gopal and his son's wife Sumi the fourth. Gopal and Sumi's four children shared the nursery on the floor above, where the servants' quarters had once been. Gupta had been her father's friend as well as his servant—but more importantly, he had been Surya's devoted guardian. There had been no question of whether or not the family would emigrate when Maya fled to England; she would have had to lock them all in prison to prevent them from coming with her.

Gupta had seen a great deal in his fifty-odd years, and she rather thought he was unshockable, which was just as well, considering what she was planning. She needed the help of a male to carry it out, and Gupta was the ideal man for the job.

The door to her bedroom stood invitingly open, and she hurried through it. With a sigh of relief, she sank down into a chair and unlaced her shoes. Exchanging them for soft leather slippers, she hesitated a moment, then shrugged.

Ridiculous. There is no reason to go out, and unlikely that anyone but a friend will call. I am getting out of this rig!

The rooms of this house were so tiny, compared with those in the bungalow in India. She had enough room to pass between the pieces of furniture, chair, bed, trunk, wardrobe, and table, but no

more. Never, ever would she have needed the featherbed at home! Here, it, and the down-filled duvet and woolen blankets were absolute necessities, for not even the hot-water pipes could prevent the house from cooling at night.

In a trice, she slipped off the coat and skirt of her suit and hung them up on the outside of the mahogany wardrobe to be brushed later. The shirtwaist followed, then the corset cover, which she laid on the lace coverlet of the bed, and at last she could unhook the front busk of the corset and rid herself of the unwelcome constriction. At last she could *move*! She never laced her corsets anywhere near as tight as fashion dictated; she flattered herself to think that she didn't need to. Nevertheless, the garment restricted movement, if only because it was designed around what a lady would consider appropriate movement. Maya had chafed against those restrictions as a girl, and her feelings hadn't changed in the least now that she was an adult.

Fashion be hanged.

The corset joined the rest of her undergarments on the bed. Donning a far more comfortable flannel wrapper dress of a chocolate brown over her uncorseted petticoat, she went back out into the hall, then descended the stair at her end of the upstairs hall, passing the kitchen on her way to the conservatory. Gopal was in the throes of creativity in there, and she paused a moment to sniff the heavenly, familiar aromas appreciatively. Gopal had reacted to the presence of the modern iron stove set into the arch of the fireplace with tears of joy—though many of his countrymen preferred to cook over a tiny charcoal fire, Gopal was an artist and appreciated good tools. With so many thousands of British soldiers and civilians going out to Colonial Service and returning with a hunger for the foods they had grown accustomed to, it was a simple matter for Gopal to procure virtually any spice or foodstuff he required for them all to eat the way they had at home.

Home. Odd how the other Eurasians she had met would speak of Britain as Home—a “home” they had never seen—with as much longing as the expatriates. Home for Maya was and always would be India, the place where she had been born and where she had

spent most of her life. How could you long for a place you had never even seen?

She stepped through the French doors into the warmth of her conservatory—which had required the lion's share of her inheritance to build—and was *almost* Home.

A little judicious use of magic had caused the flowering vines planted around the walls of the conservatory to grow at an accelerated pace, hiding the brickwork and the view of the houses on all sides. Passion flowers flung their great starburst blooms against the green of the vines. In bloom at all times and seasons, they filled the air with perfume, as did the jasmine, both day- and night-blooming. A fountain and generous pool added warm humidity and the music of falling water, the hot-water pipes around the perimeter a tropical heat. Here were the flowers she loved, and here, too, were her pets—

Not pets. Friends.

They rushed to greet her as soon as she set food on the gravel of her path—first the pair of mongooses, Sia and Singhe, romping toward her with their peculiar humpbacked gait. Rhadi, the ring-necked parrot, dove for her right shoulder, long tail trailing out behind him like a streamer, while the saker falcon Mala dropped down onto her left. Neither so much as scratched her skin, so soft footed were they, and though Mala was death incarnate to the sparrows, starlings, and pigeons, he would sooner starve than touch a feather of Rhadi's head. The peacock Rajah strode toward her with more dignity, his tail spread for her admiration. And last of all, Charan, her little monkey, sprang into her arms as soon as she held them out for him. Only the owl, named Nisha, whose round eyes seemed to stare straight into one's heart, did not stir from her slumber in the hollow of a dead oak tree that showed what a fine garden had once stood here. Maya had left it there for the benefit of her birds, who all found it a fine place to perch, and the vines twined around it just as happily as they climbed the brick of the walls, giving it a kind of new life.

"And have you been good?" she asked them all, as the mongooses romped around her ankles and the monkey put his arms