NEVER FORGET YOU



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NEVER FORGET YOU

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *CORAM BOY*

JAMILA GAVIN





I dedicate this book in honour and in memory of
Miriam Hodgson, who had hoped that, one day,
I would write about this period.

A la claire fontaine
M'en allant promener
J'ai trouvé l'eau si belle
Que je m'y suis baigné
Il y a longtemps que je t'aime
Jamais je ne t'oublierai
Il y a longtemps que je t'aime
Jamais je ne t'oublierai

Part 1

WAR OR PEACE?



PROLOGUE
Flight

RUSSIA 1918

There were demonstrations and riots in the town the day they left. The gates of the city were closed by a barricade. An angry crowd surged round the strange foreigners: a pale woman who clutched a baby to her breast, and a very tall, very dark-skinned man who held her close. As the crowd threatened to overwhelm them, the man tenderly extracted the baby from its mother's arms, stripped it from its swaddling, and held its naked body above his head for all to see: a gently writhing, gleaming baby. Its cry rang out like a lost bird. The crowd gave a hushed moan. Every eye travelled from the pale mother to the dark-skinned man, so tall that it was as if he levitated above their heads, and so shining it was as if he were a living icon in his golden priest-like robe.

Suddenly silent, the crowd fell away respectfully, and the little family was allowed to leave.

ENGLAND 1937

You would have had to tip your head skywards to see the buzzard. It was so high, circling slowly over a golden, summer countryside with unblinking eye, scouring the woods and hedgerows, looking for a kill.

Its prey, those little voles, field mice, and rabbits, wouldn't have seen the killer – not until it dropped lower, its devouring shadow sliding silently over the land. Who knows what terror drummed in their tiny bodies as they made a run for it?

The buzzard was not interested in the limousine which, from that height, may have looked like a dark, burrowing creature, winding its way along the narrow country lanes. After a while, it swung away to scour another field. The passengers inside the car never saw the predator above, nor the life-or-death panic of the little creatures. They gazed silently at the unbelievably green hills and fields of wheat and barley, burnished by the July sunlight as if touched by Midas.

It was an English countryside.

But the family in the car were not English.



CHAPTER 1

The Princess

I will never forget the day my class was introduced to Noor. We had been told a new girl was joining us, and that she was an Indian princess. The excitement was palpable; none of the girls had only seen ever seen a real, live princess before – apart from photographs of the princesses Elizabeth and Margaret, or fairy-tale princesses in books. Most of them had never seen any kind of real Indian girl, except for a few who, like me, had been born abroad because their fathers were running the empire in various parts of the world. The words they liked to use were 'far-flung corners', which somehow always made me think of some vast tablecloth which someone had thrown out over half the world, as if it were their own great dinner table.

Chairs screeched back from desks as the class rose respectfully on the entry of the headmistress, Miss Heywood, accompanied by two distinctly Indian visitors. I felt my heart lurch with homesickness to see them. I had been born in India and lived there until they sent me and my

older brother, Eric, home, *home to England,* to go to school. For Eric, it was a boys' boarding school in Hertfordshire and for me, Barrowfield, a boarding school for girls in darkest Sussex, but I felt I was being sent *away* from home. India was my home, and my parents seemed so far away.

"Girls," proclaimed Miss Heywood, "I want you to meet His Highness the Sultan of Karanji and his daughter, Noor. Noor will be joining us next term, so they have come to Barrowfield today to finalise arrangements. We thought it was a good opportunity for you to meet your new classmate."

A polite greeting murmured round the classroom. They probably thought the girl was a disappointment. This was no glittering Indian princess, not like the ones they had read about in their colourful silken saris and sparkling adornments. She was small and bendy like a reed, as if she would blow about in a wind; she seemed shy and inscrutable, standing there with a bowed head from which hung two shining black plaits right down to her waist. She was wearing very unprincess-like clothes: a long tweed skirt, woollen stockings, sensible brown lace-up shoes, a dark blue hip-length cardigan beneath which was glimpsed a white blouse, lace-embroidered, and clipped at the throat with a silver brooch. Even our school uniform of light grey trimmed with red was far better. She stood there, leaning into her father as if she might hide behind him and, with a blank expression on her face, she seemed not at all as exotic as a princess ought to be.

But it was her father that we couldn't take our eyes off, and who caused everyone to gasp and stare most rudely. He was wearing a long peat-coloured woollen coat, mixed with raw linen and spun with gold silk. And at that moment, standing in a pool of sunlight which poured in through the windows, he gleamed. It felt as if everything in that dreary classroom had turned to gold.

He was tall, looming, gaunt, and very dark-skinned, like the trunk of an ancient tree, bringing a kind of wild nature among us. He had a long black beard which reached down to his chest, his cheekbones stuck out like rocky crags, and his nose curved like the beak of an eagle, between narrowed, searching eyes; eyes which hovered over us as if surveying us from a great height. Although it was late September, it had become suddenly cold outside, yet his feet were bare in open leather sandals.

But there was something about his face which was not just bird-like or king-like, but god-like. It was ethereal, spiritual; as if he was only partly of this earth, and that another part of him inhabited some outer, extra-terrestrial regions. Perhaps he had come from another time altogether: his golden coat made me think of medieval bishops, Byzantine icons, or the pharaohs of ancient Egypt.

"Our girls have been inculcated with the highest standards of duty, service and kindness, so I'm sure they will give Noor every consideration, and will ensure that she settles in quickly and smoothly," Miss Heywood said with a slightly obsequious flutter in her voice.

The Sultan spoke in reply, and we were spellbound by the depths of his rich bass voice: "My daughter and I thank you from the bottom of our hearts, don't we Noor?"

Noor looked up at him as if she looked up at the sun. She smiled, her face suddenly shining with such love and affection that she seemed transfigured from being boring and shy to beautiful and confident. "Yes, Papa," she replied, in a peculiarly accented voice, which rang out like a temple bell. "I'm sure I'll be very happy."

Then they were gone. The chairs scraped once more as we all sat down. There was an explosion of voices.

"Fancy having a real live princess in our class," hissed my friend, Dorothy – who we all called Dodo. "Do we have to call her 'Your Highness'?"

"That's enough girls!" exclaimed the History teacher, restoring order. "Let's carry on."

"She seems all right," Dodo whispered and I agreed, quite looking forward to next term when Noor would join us.



The buzzard was still circling when the limousine returned along the lanes buried among hedgerows. The relentlessly sinking sun heralded evening, creating dark reflections of cows which stood as if spellbound, their heads turned into the rays. The shadows of trees strode like giants across the landscape and, by the time they could see the lights of the city ahead, daylight had almost gone.

Flights of starlings soared and swooped in miraculous, ever-changing formations over the rich golden fields before settling for the night with babbling shrieks. Then silence.

"Our daughter will be in a place of safety," the Sufi prince reassured his wife when they finally reached their lodgings in London.

The newspaper boy was shouting at the top of his lungs:

"Germany re-arms!"