

VICTORIAN ROGUES
COMPILATION



VANESSA BROOKS



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Vanessa Brooks
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ELSPETH



VICTORIAN ROGUES, BOOK ONE

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Elspeth

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CHAPTER 1



She stood on the second-class deck of the steamer ship leaning upon a side rail as she waved her white lace handkerchief to her husband Henry. He lifted his hat to her, gave a mocking bow, inclined his head, spun on his heel and stalked away without giving her or the ship, a backward glance. Elspeth watched until she lost sight of him amongst the press of people milling about the dockside. Her face had healed quickly after that terrible night. Thankfully, her cheekbone remained intact. Henry had been conciliatory on their final night together. He had begged to be allowed into her bed one last time, explaining that he wished to try and get her with child, giving her something positive to take home to England, a gift to his parents.

Since he'd been sober and had asked so politely, she'd reluctantly acquiesced. He tried at first to arouse her but eventually seemed to realise that her cringing form would never trust him again, and he'd taken her perfunctorily.

They'd barely spoken above the necessary that morning, and now he was gone. She knew it was probable that she would never see her husband again. A dart of intense hurt and loneliness lanced her. It hadn't taken Elspeth long to realize that Henry never really

wanted a wife. He'd taken her virginity without a moment's pause as to her naivety about the act, much less considering her comfort or desire. Once he was bored with her... he'd found others to warm his bed. A niggling doubt that she was somehow at fault for their failed marriage continued to plague her. If only she had been more worldly. She closed her eyes, struggling against her painful memories. Squaring her shoulders and straightening her back, she took a restorative breath, stepped bravely away from the ship's side, her place immediately filled by another waving passenger as she pushed through the crowds of spectators to make her way inside second class.

Her cabin was small but adequate, having everything she required, including a porthole window. She shared a water closet down the corridor with four other cabins. Her fare had cost Henry a substantial thirty-five pounds for a single second-class passage. Elspeth noticed her small trunk had been brought up by a steward and sat at the foot of her bed. She set about unpacking. Emptying everything she owned, she tidied away her clothing into the single wardrobe and chest of drawers, which doubled as her bedside cupboard. Once the task was completed, Elspeth acknowledged her rumbling tummy and headed out to find somewhere she could get a restorative cup of tea and perhaps something to eat.

Henry had explained the voyage to England would be easier now that the Suez Canal had opened up the previous year. The White Star RMS *Oceanic* would be able to cut their voyage by weeks now that the need to travel so far out of the way had been eradicated. Elspeth was excited about travelling through Egypt. She hoped that she would be able to spot a pyramid or two. She was managing to keep her painful memories at bay by dealing with practical concerns. She was leaving the land of her birth where her parents were buried, possibly forever. Everything she knew about living thus far had been gleaned here on the sub-continent. India was her home. She was leaving Bombay probably forever since she'd no plans to return. The act of saying farewell to this conti-

ment was profoundly wretched for her, and she knew that she needed to keep focused upon the here and now if she were to remain stalwart.

As she made her way along the outside deck, she passed a metal staircase leading directly to first class. Elspeth glanced right and left but there was no member of the crew about, the linked chain that held the sign, "private," hung upside down, leaving the ascending stairs invitingly open. She looked about her, and since she saw nobody in the vicinity, hurried up the steps. Most passengers were either on the shore side of the ship waving goodbye to family and friends, or in their cabin waiting to set sail. The crew were busily engaged, preparing the ship for cast-off.

Curious, but meaning no harm, Elspeth wandered the first class deck, peering in through open doors, admiring the salubrious surroundings given to the more affluent passengers. She came to a large salon with double doors opening outward onto the deck. Peeking inside, she looked about the sumptuously appointed room, which was set out with circular tables surrounded by comfortable looking tub chairs. The nearest table was set for tea, fully laid out with a silver tiered tea canopy and laid upon each tier were sandwiches and cakes of all varieties. On the highest section sat three small crystal dishes, each filled with exotic fruit salad and topped with whipped cream.

Elspeth edged forward, hungrily tempted by the delicious looking food. A man's voice startled her. "Good afternoon," he called. She turned and fled but forgot that the ship's doorway had a raised doorframe. She tripped and sprawled headlong to the floor. Her bag contents flew everywhere; she hurriedly crawled after them, chasing her personal belongings.

"I'm so sorry; I had no intention of startling you. Here, let me help you up. Steward! Steward, some help over here, if you please?" Strong arms lifted her, setting her back onto her feet. A steward arrived; he ran hither and thither collecting the spilled detritus from her bag. Elspeth apologised and protested it was her own

fault as she frantically collected up the final items from the deck before thanking the steward profusely for his help.

She walked over to her rescuer and thanked him shyly. He was a youngish man, perhaps in his early thirties. Warm brown eyes regarded her kindly from below a curling mop of light brown hair that had a tendency to flop forward over onto his forehead. His friendly face was singularly attractive, although his even features were at first glance nothing special. He looked... nice.

"Sit, join me, how'd you like your tea?" he asked jovially.

"Um, I really shouldn't be here. I'm trespassing from second class," Elspeth confessed quietly.

He regarded her with amusement. "Naughty girl, who is your travelling companion, your husband?" His gaze fell to her ring hand; he noted her gold wedding band.

She shook her head blushing. "No, I travel alone. My husband is a captain in the Queen's Lancashire Regiment. I am travelling back to England to live with his parents."

"You are travelling alone, without even a maid for company?" he queried with a frown.

"Yes," she replied. He so obviously disapproved. She tried to appear nonchalant. What else could she do? Elspeth lowered her eyes as she felt her cheeks heat crimson with embarrassment.

"Hm, well I think it might be prudent that you and I join forces as I too am travelling alone. Professor Adam Beresford, at your service, Mrs.?"

She lifted her head and gaped at him, he had more than surprised her by his kind offer. Giving herself a mental shake, she stretched out her hand.

"Wooten, Elspeth Wooten," she said as he took her hand. His grip was firm. He grinned affably at her.

"Right, well now that we are properly introduced, please take a seat. Do you take both milk and sugar in your tea?" She nodded and sat, unable to repress the smile that tugged at her lips. His eager warmth was reassuring, his nature seemed boyish; he was so

friendly and amenable. He handed her a china cup and saucer then passed her the sandwich plate. She selected the nearest sandwich, which turned out to be filled with cucumber. She nibbled delicately at the crust free bread and studied him. Meanwhile, the young professor gulped down at least two cheese sandwiches. He happily expounded upon his work for the London Antiquities Museum, enthusiastically describing some of the artefacts that he'd found on his recent travels.

"I have to say that I am surprised at your husband allowing his beautiful wife to travel so far away and all alone. If you were mine, I'd not let you out of my sight! I am excessively possessive about my treasures."

Elspeth had no idea how to respond to his double entendre, so she remained silent. It seemed to dawn upon the professor that he had completely monopolised the entire conversation. He glanced at the sandwich platter and saw too that it was empty. "I say, Mrs. Wooten, please forgive me. I appear to have devoured all the sandwiches! Here, have some cake instead." He thrust the cake plate under her nose and she chose a small chocolate éclair.

"Your turn. I fear that I have bored you enough with my obsessions. Tell me where are you heading once we arrive in England? I think you mentioned having a home in Lancashire?" He leaned forward in his chair, showing genuine interest. Elspeth set down her plate.

"In actual fact, I am not returning home. My home is, was, India, I was born there. My in-laws live in Lancashire; my husband wishes me to live with his parents from now onward. I shall possibly never return to India again." Her green eyes sheened over with unexpected tears, and she fell silent, unable to continue as a wave of homesickness swept over her, leaving her feeling shaken and extremely emotional. A white handkerchief appeared in her line of vision, and a large hand squeezed her shoulder.

"I did not mean to upset you, Mrs. Wooten. Come, chin up, deep

breaths in and out, that's the way of it, good girl!" She did as he suggested, breathing deeply.

"Your husband's a damn fool. If you were mine, I'd not let you out of my sight for a single moment!" Elspeth gave him a watery smile.

"Yes, so you said earlier on."

He grinned. "I did, didn't I? And I am sure I shall say it again."

She giggled.

"Now that's better. You should laugh like that more often. You have a beautiful smile and a very fetching laugh."

"Thank you, as do you, kind sir," she teased gently back, and he winked.

"Is your cabin adequate; is there anything I can get for you or do for you?" he asked her seriously.

Elspeth shook her head. "You have already done so much, thank you, Professor."

"Please, do call me Adam when we are in private conversation." He glanced about him, noticing the stewards clearing away the tea accoutrements. "I think tea time is finished, but I beg that you will join me for tea again tomorrow. Same time, same place, so that I may bore you again with my interest in ancient civilisations." He stood up and held out his palm in order to help her rise. Once she was standing, he held onto her hand longer than necessary, gazing into her eyes. "Your eyes are uncannily like the *Netra-Baagh*," he muttered to himself.

"What is the Tiger's Eye?" she asked. He was startled.

"You speak Hindi... Obviously. I will show you one day, perhaps. Join me for tea tomorrow, and I shall tell you the tale of the *Netra-Baagh*, *Shiromani*, in its entirety. Come, I shall walk you back down to your deck and see you into your cabin." Despite her protests, he insisted. They chatted easily together as they sauntered down to second class, where he turned away and left her outside her door, with a touch to the brim of his hat.

Those early days at sea passed pleasantly for Elspeth. Every day

she waited in her cabin, and at precisely three o'clock, the steward would knock at her door to collect her and escort her up the forbidden stairs into the first class salon. There a sumptuous tea awaited her, along with the charming professor. Adam regaled her with tales of his wild, exciting adventures, most of which she was certain were wholly embellished for her entertainment. Adam insisted every word was true, but Elspeth took everything he told her with a pinch of salt.

With charming self-deprecation, Adam Beresford told her the tale of the *Netra-Baagh*, the Tiger's Eye, *Shiromani*, "the elevated jewel." A glittering emerald that he claimed was handed to him by the maharaja himself, a gift for saving the life of his precious son, who, he told her, was drowning in the lake that surrounded the palace where he lived. The children that the prince was playing with had underestimated the depths of the crystal clear waters of the massive lake and the danger that depth represented to the small prince. After diving in one day, the child had struggled to stay afloat. Although the bottom of the lake looked close, it was deceptively deep. The prince was out of his depth. Adam, who had been walking nearby admiring the amazing structure of the sumptuous palace, responded immediately to the youngster's cries for help. Quickly stripping his outer clothing, he dived into the waters of the Man Sagae Lake, having no idea that the boy he was rescuing was, in fact, the prince. The following day, servants from the beautiful Jal Mahal Palace sought him out at his lodgings. They invited him to return with them to visit their illustrious master; their polite request was obviously more of a summons. Adam allowed them to escort him to an audience with one of the most powerful maharajas in India. He was also one of the richest. In gratitude for his son's life, Maharaja Sawi Singh II, presented Adam with a gift, a fabulous jewel, the *Shiromani*, the elevated jewel, the *Baagh-Netra*—Tiger's Eye. The egg-sized emerald was cut and polished so that it captured the light, turning it into a flashing iridescent green, just like the glinting eye of a tiger glimpsed within the depths of a dark jungle.

It was said to bring great fortune and good luck to its owner but only so long as the stone was given as a gift for valour. If it were sold or stolen, then the opposite effect would take place, and the jewel would become a curse, heaping disaster upon the new owner.

"Perhaps one day I shall show it to you," he said, finishing his tale. Picking up his teacup, he drained the dregs.

"Do you have many weird or wonderful artefacts to take back to London from your present trip?" Elspeth asked, intrigued.

"I suppose you might think so. I have an embalmed mummy, still packed into its sarcophagus," he sounded smug.

"A mummy?" she queried, never having heard the expression before.

"Yes, a body nearly a thousand years old. One that has had all the soft innards removed to be stored in jars in preparation for the pharaoh to use once he has arrived in the spirit world and can rebuild his body."

"But how did they remove the organs without destroying the body?"

Adam gave her an assessing look. "That is very gruesome information. Are you quite sure you wish me to impart the gory details?" Elspeth nodded enthusiastically.

"Well, at first they used hollow reeds as tubes to suck out the brain through the nose cavity but later on..." He halted as Elspeth clapped her hands over her mouth, her eyes wide with horror.

"They did not!" she exclaimed in horror. He nodded solemnly, his brown eyes twinkling.

"That is utterly disgusting!" she spluttered.

"Isn't it just? I did warn you," he chuckled delightedly.

"Please, no more organ removals, I beg of you!" She wagged her finger at him, and he laughed again. "What of their customs and beliefs?" She was genuinely interested.

"The Egyptians believed the pharaoh would need sustenance on his journey and supplied him with jars of grains, fruits, dried fish and meat, in fact, all manner of foods to sustain him on his celestial

way. His favourite pet would be slaughtered or entombed along with him. Often, servants and even his wife or concubines were entombed. They were there to attend to his needs when he reached the other world." Adam caught sight of Elspeth's face as she sucked in a breath with shock.

"That is despicable! What of those poor people's right to life?" She had no idea how adorable she looked in her righteousness.

"That was their ideology. I find historical cultures and customs utterly fascinating; however, they are not always palatable. I want to share the many customs and historical practices I have learned with as many people as possible. We are so inclined in England to think that our way is the only way. Many people close their minds against different principles and to other cultures. I want to open people's minds and show them the fascinating wonders of the ancient world!" Elspeth listened and found his enthusiasm endearing.

"Just don't tell them about the brain and organ removal, etcetera!" She chortled.

Adam watched her as she chuckled with merriment and it occurred to him that he might be falling in love. It had never been a state he had given much thought to before, and he certainly never supposed such a thing would catch him quite so unawares. Yet all at once, without a shadow of a doubt, he knew that he could love this beautiful woman. His heart twisted painfully with the realisation that she was already married to another man.