






MRS D'SILVA'S  
**DETECTIVE  
INSTINCTS**

AND THE  
**SHAITAN  
OF CALCUTTA**



GLEN PETERS





Glen Peters was born in Allahabad to a family originally from Lucknow in India. His early childhood was spent living in a railway colony near Calcutta (now Kolkata). After his family emigrated to London in the 1960s he attended university in London and was president of his students' union. He pursued a career in engineering management and is now a partner in an international accounting firm. The idea of fictionalising some of the stories of his youth came to him during a sailing holiday when the starlit skies triggered childhood memories of the night skies over Calcutta. He is founder of Project Rhosygilwen, a Pembrokeshire-based rural arts regeneration venture.



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# CONTENTS

The Picnic	– 1
Identification	– 15
The Coroner	– 22
The Newcomer	– 35
The Coffee House	– 42
<i>Hartal</i>	– 48
Trains	– 60
Forbidden Affair	– 72
Fallout	– 82
Lindsay Street	– 90
Young Blades	– 99
Accused	– 108
The Doon Express	– 122
The Residency	– 140
Back to School	– 149
Revelation	– 156
Journalistic Endeavours	– 168
<i>Tamasha</i>	– 182
The Saviour	– 203
Wasted Life	– 214
Farewells	– 230
Missing	– 241
President's Rule	– 253
Ransom	– 265
Assassin	– 275
Cornered	– 286
Reunited	– 298
Loose Ends	– 313





# THE PICNIC

*Calcutta had seen better days. Once the capital of the Raj, with magnificent Victorian architecture, large green spaces and a thriving commercial hub, it was now sliding slowly into decay: a metropolis of open drains, overpopulation and political mayhem.*

‘It’s that bloody *shaitan* devil again,’ swore Mr De Lange as he read the front page of the *Sunday Statesman*, which was reporting another series of general strikes called by the Workers’ Revolutionary Movement. ‘I’d get that blighter Dutta up against the wall and put a bullet in his head if I had my way.’ But Mrs De Lange, who had heard her husband’s rants many times before, drew his attention to the approaching railway station.

The rickshaw wallahs at Bandle station always rejoiced on the day the sahibs arrived for their picnic at the shrine of Our

Lady by the Hooghly, a tributary of the great Ganges. Anglo-Indians were charged the sahibs' rate and were considered a soft touch when it came to fare haggling. The fact that this community of mixed European and Indian descent were still considered 'sahibs' a decade after the British had departed India showed how they were regarded by their fellow citizens.

On this particular day the group was made up of four families drawn from an assortment of households at the railway colony in Liluah, which was about ten minutes by the slow, ponderous electric train from Howrah, Calcutta's main station. They'd boarded this Sunday with their free family passes and were loaded with numerous shiny aluminium tiffin boxes. These were stuffed with *roti*, many different aromatic vegetables, the fluffiest yellow Basmati rice and, as a special treat, Joan D'Silva's fish curry *molu*. Joan's ten-year-old son Errol had been looking forward to the trip for days, thanks to the promise of a ride on the new electric train.

Mr De Lange was the assumed spokesman of the group; he was the senior foreman at the railway workshops and commanded the greatest respect in his community. Once, during the religious riots of '47, he had sheltered a dozen Muslims in his house, armed only with one cartridge in his double-barrelled shotgun.

Top of the social pile of course were the Shroves, who considered themselves superior Anglo-Indians because they were by far the whitest of the four families. If it hadn't been for Mrs Shrove's passion for fish curry *molu* she would not have joined this group as she and her husband Bernard preferred mixing with the officers at the Railway Club, which was closed to lower-ranking employees.

To cries of 'Mum, the rickshaw's spilling the gravy over

my Sunday dress' and 'Uncle, did you remember to bring the rounders bat', they bounced along the pothole-riddled, dusty road to the shrine, propelled by a dozen or so sinewy, loincloth-clad cyclists, each one intent on reaching his destination first. The twenty-minute journey drew longing looks from shopkeepers and pavement dwellers, as if they knew of the culinary celebration in store.

The shrine was a peaceful place, set in about fifty acres of palm trees and a grassy *maidan* overlooking the silted waters of the Ganges as it neared the end of its long, life-giving journey from the Himalayas. The *maidan's* surface was of the finest-blade grass, kept in peak condition by the ceaseless efforts of local devotees, who worshipped daily at the feet of the Lady. It was said that she had once appeared to fisherfolk out of the early morning mist, clad in a white sari.

They were far from real pilgrims. For them this was a day out to enjoy each other's company, for the adults to gossip and yearn for the good old days and for the teenagers to tease, flirt and play games. But above all else it was a chance to indulge shamelessly in the culinary specialities of their best cooks.

They were soon setting out sheets of matting under a large shady palm tree. The Primus stove that had been carried by one of the boys was pumped up, and its deep-blue coral flame produced enough heat to bring the food to the right temperature with a profusion of smell and taste. The bubbling fish *molu* gravy gave out a powerful aroma of the freshest spices, which Joan's cook had spent hours cutting and grinding the day before, and all was ready for the performance to begin.

This was no ordinary picnic; it was theatre. As recipients of these delicacies, the picnickers were both audience and actors.