

Singapore Sapphire (A Harriet Gordon Mystery)

To Download this book in many format Visit :

<https://wocoentala.org/source1/bc09bff13ec400ffe8e8c94f1d45082f>

Early twentieth-century Singapore is a place where a person can disappear, and Harriet Gordon hopes to make a new life for herself there, leaving her tragic memories behind her--but murder gets in the way.

Singapore, 1910--Desperate for a fresh start, Harriet Gordon finds herself living with her brother, a reverend and headmaster of a school for boys, in Singapore at the height of colonial rule. Hoping to gain some financial independence, she advertises her services as a personal secretary. It is unfortunate that she should discover her first client, Sir Oswald Newbold--explorer, mine magnate and president of the exclusive Explorers and Geographers Club--dead with a knife in his throat.

When Inspector Robert Curran is put on the case, he realizes that he has an unusual witness in Harriet. Harriet's keen eye for detail and strong sense of duty interests him, as does her distrust of the police and her traumatic past, which she is at pains to keep secret from the gossips of Singapore society.

When another body is dragged from the canal, Harriet feels compelled to help with the case. She and Curran are soon drawn into a murderous web of treachery and deceit and find themselves face-to-face with a ruthless cabal that has no qualms about killing again to protect its secrets.

Born in Africa, author A. M. Stuart has traveled extensively and has lived in Kenya, Singapore and Australia. She is the author of the Guardians of the Crown historical romance series, published by Harlequin Australia, and her books have been nominated for multiple international awards.***This excerpt is from an advance uncorrected copy proof***

Copyright © 2019 A. M. Stuart

Prologue

Friday 4 March 1910

SINGAPORE

"Shorthand and Typewriting. An Englishwoman undertakes casual work as a stenographer and typist. She guarantees rapid and careful work together with ABSOLUTE SECRECY. Address Mrs. Gordon, Tanglin Post Office 35."

Sir Oswald Newbold picked up his pencil and circled the small advertisement on the second page of The Straits Times, folded the paper and set it down beside his place mat. He crossed one leg over the other and, picking up his tea cup, he surveyed his garden.

The early morning mist rose out of a jungle beyond the boundary of this barely tamed corner of Singapore. The very air seemed alive with the "boobook" call of the native birds and the screech of Macaque monkeys. The early morning humidity surrounded him like a blanket.

The smell of the hearty English breakfast of bacon and eggs that Nyan set before him seemed curiously at odds with the tropical surroundings.

As he ate, Sir Oswald's eyes strayed once more to The Straits Times. He set down his fork and dabbed the egg yolk from his moustache.

Folding his napkin, he pushed back his chair and stood up.

"Nyan, I have a letter to write. Be ready to take it into town for me later this morning."

CHAPTER ONE

Singapore

Monday 7 March 1910

The day had not begun well for Harriet Gordon. A domestic upset in the kitchen had to be smoothed over before she even arrived at the school to find the unreliable typewriter there refused to work. The decision to retrieve her own little typewriter from the home of Sir Oswald Newbold, had been where it all began.

As the pony trap turned off Bukit Timah Road into the long drive that wound its way through the abandoned rubber trees and thickets of jungle up to Sir Oswald Newbold's home, the hairs on the back of her neck began to prickle.

Not a monkey, a bird or an insect could be heard in the ulu that surrounded the house and a cloying hush settled around Harriet, as thick and impenetrable as the humidity of the late morning.

The pony flattened his ears and slowed his jaunty pace, as the low silhouette of the old plantation house came into view. Aziz clucked his tongue encouragingly but Mr. Carrots came to a standstill, his ears pressed against his lowered head. The boy shifted in his seat, his gaze darting around the overgrown garden.

"Sorry, Mem. We go no further and I think we should not stay. They call this place Bukit Hantu It is a bad place."

"Bukit Hantu? What does that mean?" Harriet asked.

Her client had told her that he had named the property Mandalay, in memory of his long connection with Burma.

Aziz shook his head. "There are evil spirits here."

Harriet smiled at the boy "There are no such thing as evil spirits, Aziz. You stay here with Carrots and I'll just pop in and collect the typewriter."

Aziz jumped from the trap and helped Harriet down.

She narrowly avoided a puddle, remnant of the morning rain storms. Lifting her skirts to avoid the cloying red mud, she strode the last fifty yards to the steps of the old house. On her first visit to Mandalay, it had not seemed quite so run down but now she could see the wood on the verandah supports were rotten and in need of painting, green mildew stained the stone steps and a single shutter somewhere around the side of the house flapped and banged, even though there seemed to be no wind.

And again, the silence... no sound of servants chattering, no clanging of pots from the kitchen. Nothing.

Her unease intensified as she set her foot on the lower step leading up the verandah.

Glancing back, she forced a smile and waved at Aziz. The boy stood in the shade of a massive Rain tree, holding Mr. Carrots bridle. As she watched the pony shook his head, almost sending the slender boy flying. The animal started to back away and it took all Aziz's strength to hold him. Neither boy nor animal wanted to be here and her unease began to grow.

Bukit Hantu? Harriet's knowledge of Malay was still rudimentary. She knew bukit meant hill, but hantu? She would ask Julian when she got home.

The wooden boards on the verandah creaked as she approached the door. Her client would not be expecting her until later in the day, but she needed the typewriter she had left with him. She knocked loudly on the frosted glass panel and stood back, expecting Sir Oswald's elderly Burmese servant to answer the door as he had done the previous day. The seconds ticked past without any movement from within the house.

She tried the door handle and found the door unlocked. Given the valuables she had seen in the house, she considered Sir Oswald's security a little lax.

'Hello,' she called, her voice vanishing into the dark bowels of the house. 'Sir Oswald? Are you at home?'

Damn it, she swore under her breath. She needed the typewriter.

If no one was at home perhaps she could retrieve her property and be gone, leaving a note of apology for her intrusion.

Remembering the name of Sir Oswald's servant, she called out again.

'Nyan? Sir Oswald?'

Only an echoing silence reverberated through the house to the open back door visible from where she stood.

Just collect the typewriter and go. You can leave a note...

She stepped over the threshold and as her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she caught her breath. The main living room bore no resemblance to the cluttered room she had admired the day before. Then every space had been filled with oriental rugs, antique furniture and Asian art. This morning nothing remained in place. Furniture had been overturned, cushions torn apart and valuable porcelain lay shattered on the rugs.

A sensible woman would have turned on her heel.

She glanced at the study door. It stood ajar and drawn by an invisible force, she approached it, her breath held tightly in her throat. Something under her foot crunched and she started, taking a step back. The splintered remains of two port glasses lay scattered across the floor, along with a small silver tray and a broken decanter. Her nose twitched as she caught the scent of the port and something else, sweet and sickly, at odds with the pervading odor of damp and dust.

She skirted the broken port glasses and put her hand out to push the door open, but drew it back as if she had been bitten at the sight of dark smears on the chipped white paint.

With a single extended finger, she pushed the study door. It opened on protesting hinges and she peered around it, her gaze seeking the familiar solidity of the sturdy black case of the Corona typewriter. It sat where she had left it, on the round table in the center of the room but as her peripheral vision widened she let out her breath in a gasp.

Every book had been swept from the shelves, papers scattered across the floor interspersed with copious amounts of broken china and in the middle of the carnage, between the table and the big desk, Sir Oswald Newbold lay spreadeagled.

Years of assisting her husband's medical practice and his work in the worst slums of India had enured her to death in its many forms but nothing could have prepared her for the sight of the bloodstained corpse lying on the expensive oriental carpet. He stared up at the ceiling with sightless eyes, his face fixed in a grimace of horror, echoed only by the hideous grin of the devilish imp carved on the handle of the antique knife, the dha Sir Oswald had called it when he had shown it to her the previous day, that had been thrust into his neck.

The scream stuck in Harriet's throat.

CHAPTER TWO

Runnels of sweat trickled down the back of Inspector Robert Curran's neck, softening the stiff, starched collar of his uniform. He took off his helmet and wiped his forehead with a

handkerchief, before turning his attention to the old colonial plantation house. Time and the elements had not been kind to the once proud structure that bore a crudely painted sign above the steps leading up to the veranda. 'Mandalay'. A name that conjured up the romance and mystique of Burma, not this neglected building.

Dark green moss stretched over the weathered timber like the grasping fingers of the jungle eager to reclaim the building back into the forest. Several windows were missing shutters and on others they swung crookedly on rusty hinges. Even from where he stood he could see the verandah floor had warped from the constant humidity.

A pony trap, guarded by a young Malay boy stood in the shade of a Rain tree some distance from the house. Avoiding a large puddle in the rutted driveway, remnant of the morning rain storms, Curran approached the boy. The lad bobbed his head, his hand stroking the nose of the skewbald pony, whose ears twitched unhappily as a large drop of moisture landed squarely on the white patch between his eyes.

In his fluent Malay, Curran asked the boy his name.

"Aziz, tuan," the boy replied. His gaze darted to the verandah. "I told the mem this was a bad place. Bukit Hantu is a place of bad spirits. Can I take the mem and go home?"

"Not just yet." Curran gave the boy a reassuring smile. "I need to speak to the mem. You just wait here."

He turned toward the house, pacing the distance in easy strides. What had the boy called the place? Bukit Hantu? The haunted hill.

He made a mental note to ask one of the Malay constables how the place had acquired that name. The name on his notes just said 'Newbold - Mandalay'.

He approached the steps leading up to the verandah. Beyond the wide expanse of warped and broken boards, the front door stood open but the bulk of his sergeant, Gursharan Singh, loomed out of the gloom obscuring any view into the house.

"Who found the body?" he asked Singh.

"She did, sir." His sergeant indicated a European woman who sat bolt upright in a rattan arm chair on the verandah, her hands clutching a leather handbag. A fall of pink Bougainvillea that climbed across the verandah and threatened to engulf the house had hidden her from sight.

The woman looked up at him from beneath a sensible pith helmet swathed in a net and he had an impression of a youngish woman, with brown hair, coiled, as was the fashion at the nape of her neck. She wore a plain white, high necked blouse fastened with a brooch at her throat and a skirt of an indeterminate dark color. A thoroughly respectable woman who seemed at odds with the decayed house.

Beneath a complexion far too unfashionably browned to have ever graced his aunt's drawing room, she looked grey, and drawn. Although he was yet to view the corpse, Curran knew it would be no sight for the faint hearted. It surprised him the woman had not succumbed to the vapors. Instead she sat waiting for him, pale but perfectly composed.

"What's her name?"

"Gordon. Mrs. Harriet Gordon," Singh said. He leaned toward his superior officer. Curran topped six feet, but Singh had several inches on him.

"You should know, sir. There's not just one body. We found a servant dead in the kitchen."

Curran's lips tightened and he issued curt orders to Singh before crossing the verandah to address Mrs. Gordon.

"Inspector Curran, Detective Branch," he said, holding out his hand. "You are Mrs. Gordon?"

The woman rose to her feet to shake his hand.

"Mrs. Gordon. I am the sister of the headmaster of St. Thomas School."

"What brought you out here today, Mrs. Gordon?"

She raised her chin, her shoulders straightening. "I did some secretarial work for Sir Oswald yesterday and I came to retrieve my typewriter." Beneath the tight white collar of her blouse, her throat worked as she swallowed, and she pushed a damp tendril of brown hair back behind her ear with a trembling hand. "You don't suppose I could have it back? I need it for work at the school."

"Perhaps later. Are you all right?"

Mrs. Gordon's face had taken on an unhealthy sheen and she swayed slightly. Curran wondered if shock had begun to set in. With two corpses on his hands, he did not need a fainting woman. He gestured at the chair.

"Please take a seat, Mrs. Gordon. Is there anything I can get you?"

A tremulous smile caught the corner of her lips. "A cup of tea would be nice, but failing that, a glass of water?"

"We'll see what we can do," Curran strode across to the verandah rail and gestured to his driver, Constable Tan.

"Tan, fetch some water for Mrs. Gordon."

Mrs. Gordon subsided on to the chair, running a hand over her eyes. He studied her anxiously for signs of imminent vapors, but whatever momentary weakness had afflicted her, had passed and she met his gaze with surprisingly cold, hard eyes.

"I would like to return home, Inspector."

His instincts prickled at the obvious animosity in that gaze.

"How well were you acquainted with Sir Oswald?"

"Not at all. I met him for the first time on Saturday and at his request came out here yesterday afternoon to do some work for him."

Curran leaned against the verandah rail, crossing his booted feet at the ankles. "He was not expecting you today?"

"No. We had agreed that I would return on Wednesday afternoon to continue my commission."

"Which was?"

"I was typing his memoirs, Inspector."

Curran cleared his throat. "I apologize for the questions, but can you tell me exactly what you did when you arrived at the house today?"

Her lips tightened and she looked down at her hands, her fingers teasing a leather tassel on her handbag. "The front door was ajar. I knocked and called out but nobody answered. I called out again and concluded that no was at home."

Curran gave her a skeptical glance. "So, you turned your hand to a little breaking and entering, Mrs. Gordon?"

Her head came up, her eyes blazing. "I... I didn't see it that way. I intended merely to retrieve my typewriter, leaving a note for Sir Oswald."

"Go on."

"You will see for yourself, the living room has been pulled apart. At the door to the study I trod on some broken glass and that was when I saw the marks on the closed door." She swallowed. "It is blood?"

Curran shook his head. "I haven't been inside yet."

Her shoulders lifted and she blew out a breath. "I thought... no... I knew something was terribly wrong. I pushed the door open and went in."

Curran wondered how many other women of his acquaintance would have had the courage to open that door.

"And what did you see?" he prompted.

"My typewriter was where I had left it but like the living room there was a terrible mess and of course, Sir Oswald..." she trailed off and took a shuddering breath before looking up at him. "I assure you, apart from the telephone, I have touched nothing in the roo..."

Other Books

Dragon Keeper (Dragon Keeper #1).

🔍 🔍 🔍 🔍 🔍 .