

# I

I WAS A YOUNGER MAN when I first met her. I should tell you this in fairness, not because the years have dulled my recollection of that moment, for in truth I could still lead you to the spot where I was standing when she looked in my direction. I've forgotten many things. That is not one of them. I'm telling you because even the wisest man, when young, is ruled by other things than wisdom when he meets with such a woman. And when I met Lily Aitcheson, I knew I was in trouble.

There are many who believe they know what happened, but they do not know the whole of it. The rumours spread, and grow, and take their hold, and so to end them I have been persuaded now to take my pen in hand and tell the story as it should be told – both in the parts that are my own and in those pieces that were hers, as they were told to me by others and as I came to discover them.

You may ask how closely you can trust my narrative, when I have waited until now to set it down, and when those days must surely seem so distant to me, like a magic lantern show

of memories played against the coming darkness. I can only reassure you we kept notes from our enquiries – Gilroy’s and my own – and I have those beside me here now in my study, for my reference.

As to memory, you may understand this better for yourself, when you are old, but there are some corners of the mind imprinted so indelibly with what we have experienced that, long after the less important things have slipped away and we have lost the simple function of recalling where we last set down our spectacles, those deeper memories yet remain. The slightest thing may make them stir – a wafting scent, a few notes of a song half-sung, the darkness of a passing cloud.

Most evenings in my armchair by the fireside I drift now to those memories and assure you they are every bit as clear as when I lived them.

Me at fourteen in the scorching bright sunlight, the day I was taught how to fire a musket.

A turn, and I’m deep in the jungles of Darien, fighting the Spaniards, and Lieutenant Turnbull, my friend and commander, is urging me onwards in spite of the shot to his shoulder that’s just made him fall. ‘Go,’ he says. ‘Do not stop. Go!’

Turn again, and it’s several years on and I’m once again following Turnbull’s directions, his letter inviting me to come and visit him tucked in my pocket as I climb the worn stones of Edinburgh’s High Street in search of his door.

He lived, that year, in Caldow’s Land – the term *land* being commonly applied in that town to those great, high tenements in which each floor was, of itself, a separate dwelling, serviced by a common stair. It was a narrow building, and an

old one, and the evening I arrived in mid-September under skies that threatened rain it looked unwelcoming. The hollow shadows lying deeply in the arched shop booths at street level, the several looming storeys of dark windows, and the jagged roofline cutting at the sky all seemed to warn me not to stay.

But I was stubborn, I was weary, and I did not heed the warning.

So, for what came next, I've no one but myself to blame.