

THE  
STRANGE  
AFFAIR

*of*

SPRING  
HEELED  
JACK



MARK HODDER

\*PRESENTS\*

BURTON &  
SWINBURNE

THE  
STRANGE  
AFFAIR

of

SPRING  
HEELED  
JACK



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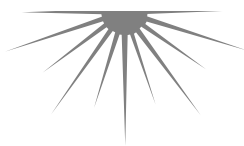
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Dedicated to my father

**MICHAEL JOHN HODDER**







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*A Rage to Live* by Mary S. Lovell was at my side throughout this project. There are a great many biographies of Sir Richard Francis Burton, but this, in my opinion, is by far the best.

To Yolanda Lerma: thank you for being so patient, so supportive, and for feeding me!

Finally, the “famous names” who feature herein are national heroes who loom large in the British consciousness. In this novel I have, with my tongue in my cheek, mercilessly trampled on their reputations and turned them into something they most definitely were not. I did so secure in the knowledge that my tampering will damage their stature not one little bit.





THE FIRST PART

IN WHICH AN AGENT  
IS APPOINTED AND  
MYSTERIES ARE INVESTIGATED

A known mistake is better than an unknown truth.  
—ARABIC PROVERB



## THE AFTERMATH OF AFRICA

Everything Life places in your path is an opportunity.  
No matter how difficult.  
No matter how upsetting.  
No matter how impenetrable.  
No matter how you judge it.  
An opportunity.

—LIBERTINE PROPAGANDA

“By God! He’s killed himself!”

Sir Richard Francis Burton staggered back and collapsed into his chair. The note Arthur Findlay had passed to him fluttered to the floor. The other men turned away, took their seats, examined their fingernails, and fiddled with their shirt collars; anything to avoid looking at their stricken colleague.

From where she stood on the threshold of the “robing room,” hidden by its partially closed door, Isabel Arundell could see that her lover’s normally dark and intense eyes were wide with shock, filled with a sudden vulnerability. His mouth moved spasmodically, as if he were struggling to chew and swallow something indigestible. She longed to rush to his side to comfort him and to ask what tidings had wounded him; to snatch up that note and read it; to find out who had killed himself; but such a display would be unseemly in front of the small gathering, not to mention embarrassing for Richard. He, among all men, stood on his own two feet, no matter how dire the situation. Isabel alone was aware of his sensitivity; and she would never cause it to be exposed to others.

Many people—mostly those who referred to him as “Ruffian Dick”—considered Burton’s brutal good looks to be a manifestation of his inner

nature. They could never imagine that he doubted himself; though if they were to see him now, so shaken, perhaps it might strike them that he wasn't quite the devil he appeared, despite the fierce moustache and forked beard.

It was difficult to see past such a powerful façade.

The Committee had only just gathered at the table, but after glancing at Burton's anguished expression, Sir Roderick Murchison, the president of the Royal Geographical Society, came to a decision.

"Let us take a moment," he muttered.

Burton stood and held up a hand in protest. "Pray, gentlemen," he whispered hoarsely, "continue with your meeting. The scheduled debate will, of course, have to be cancelled, but if you'll allow me half an hour, perhaps I can organise my notes and make a small presentation concerning the valley of the Indus, so as not to disappoint the crowd."

"That's very good of you, Sir Richard," said one of the Committee members, Sir James Alexander. "But, really, this must have come as a terrible blow. If you would rather—"

"Just grant me thirty minutes to prepare. They have, after all, paid for their tickets."

"Very well. Thank you."

Burton turned and walked unsteadily to the door, passed through, closed it behind him, and stood facing Isabel, swaying slightly.

At five eleven, he personally bemoaned the lost inch that would have made him a six-footer, though, to others, the breadth of his shoulders, depth of his chest, slim but muscular build, and overwhelming charisma made him seem a giant, even compared with much taller men.

He had short black hair, which he wore swept backward. His skin was swarthy and weather-beaten, giving his straight features rather an Arabic cast, further accentuated by his prominent cheekbones, both disfigured by scars—a smallish one on the right, but a long, deep, and jagged one on the left, which tugged slightly at his bottom eyelid. They were the entry and exit wounds caused by a Somali spear that had been thrust through his face during an ill-fated expedition to Berbera, on the Horn of Africa.

To Isabel, those scars were the mark of an adventurous and fearless soul. Burton was in every respect her "ideal man." He was a wild, passionate, and romantic figure, quite unlike the staid and emotionally cold men who moved in London's social circles. Her parents thought him unsuitable but Isabel knew there could be no other for her.

He stumbled forward into her arms.

"What ails you so, Dick?" she gasped, holding him by the shoulders. "What has happened?"

“John has shot himself!”

“No!” she exclaimed. “He’s dead?”

Burton stepped back and wiped a sleeve across his eyes. “Not yet. But he took a bullet to the head. Isabel, I have to work up a presentation. Can I rely on you to find out where he’s been taken? I must see him. I have to make my peace with him before—”

“Of course, dear. Of course! I shall make enquiries at once. Must you speak, though? No one would fault you if you were to withdraw.”

“I’ll speak. We’ll meet later, at the hotel.”

“Very well.”

She kissed his cheek and left him; walked a short way along the elegant marble-floored corridor and, with a glance back, disappeared through the door to the auditorium. As it swung open and closed, Burton heard the crowd beyond grumbling with impatience. There were even some boos. They had waited long enough; they wanted blood; wanted to see him, Burton, shame and humiliate the man he’d once considered a brother: John Hanning Speke.

“I’ll make an announcement,” muttered a voice behind him. He turned to find that Murchison had left the Committee and was standing at his shoulder. Beads of sweat glistened on the president’s bald head. His narrow face was haggard and pale.

“Is it—is it my fault, Sir Roderick?” rasped Burton.

Murchison frowned. “Is it your fault that you possess exacting standards while, according to the calculations John Speke presented to the Society, the Nile runs uphill for ninety miles? Is it your fault that you are an erudite and confident debater while Speke can barely string two words together? Is it your fault that mischief-makers manipulated him and turned him against you? No, Richard, it is not.”

Burton considered this for a moment, then said, “You speak of him so and yet you supported him. You financed his second expedition and refused me mine.”

“Because he was right. Despite his slapdash measurements and his presumptions and guesswork, the Committee feels it likely that the lake he discovered is, indeed, the source of the Nile. The simple truth of the matter, Richard, is that he found it while you, I’m sorry to say, did not. I never much liked the man, may God have mercy on his soul, but fortune favoured him, and not you.”

Murchison moved aside as the Committee members filed out of the robing room, heading for the presentation hall.

“I’m sorry, Richard. I have to go.”

Murchison joined his fellows.

“Wait!” called Burton, pacing after him. “I should be there too.”

“It’s not necessary.”

“It is.”

“Very well. Come.”

They entered the packed auditorium and stepped onto the stage amid sarcastic cheers from the crowd. Colonel William Sykes, who was hosting the debate, was already at the podium, unhappily attempting to quell the more disruptive members of the restless throng; namely, the many journalists—including the mysterious young American Henry Morton Stanley—who seemed intent on making the occasion as newsworthy as possible. Doctor Livingstone sat behind Sykes, looking furious. Clement Markham, also seated on the stage, was chewing his nails nervously. Burton slumped into the chair beside him, drew a small notebook and a pencil from his pocket, and began to write.

Sir James Alexander, Arthur Findlay, and the other geographers took their seats on the stage.

The crowd hooted and jeered.

“About time! Did you get lost?” someone shouted waggishly. A roar of approval greeted the gibe.

Murchison muttered something into the colonel’s ear. Sykes nodded and retreated to join the others.

The president stepped forward, tapped his knuckles against the podium, and looked stonily at the expectant faces. The audience quieted until, aside from occasional coughs, it became silent.

Sir Roderick Murchison spoke: “Proceedings have been delayed and for that I have to apologise—but when I explain to you the cause, you will pardon me. We have been in our Committee so profoundly affected by a dreadful calamity that has—”

He paused; cleared his throat; gathered himself.

“—that has befallen Lieutenant Speke. A calamity by which, it pains me to report, he must surely lose his life.”

Shouts of dismay and consternation erupted.

Murchison held out his hands and called, “Please! Please!”

Slowly, the noise subsided.

“We do not at present have a great deal of information,” he continued, “but for a letter from Lieutenant Speke’s brother, which was delivered by a runner a short while ago. It tells that yesterday afternoon the lieutenant joined a hunting party on the Fuller Estate near Neston Park. At four o’clock, while he was negotiating a wall, his gun went off and severely wounded him about the head.”

“Did he shoot himself, sir?” cried a voice from the back of the hall.

“Purposefully, you mean? There is nothing to suggest such a thing!”

“Captain Burton!” yelled another. “Did you pull the trigger?”

“How dare you, sir!” thundered Murchison. “That is entirely unwarranted! I will not have it!”

A barrage of questions flew from the audience, a great many of them directed at Burton.

The famous explorer tore a page from his notebook, handed it to Clement Markham, and, leaning close, muttered into his ear. Markham glanced at the paper, stood, stepped to Murchison’s side, and said something in a low voice.

Murchison gave a nod.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he announced, “you came to the Bath Assembly Rooms to hear a debate between Captain Sir Richard Burton and Lieutenant John Speke on the matter of the source of the Nile. I, of course, understand you wish to hear from Sir Richard concerning this terrible accident that has befallen his colleague, but, as you might suppose, he has been greatly affected and feels unable to speak at this present time. He has, however, written a short statement which will now be read by Mr. Clement Markham.”

Murchison moved away from the podium and Markham took his place.

In a quiet and steady tone, he read from Burton’s note: “The man I once called brother today lies gravely wounded. The differences of opinion that are known to have lain between us since his return from Africa make it more incumbent on me to publicly express my sincere feeling of admiration for his character and enterprise, and my deep sense of shock that this fate has befallen him. Whatever faith you may adhere to, I beg of you to pray for him.”

Markham returned to his chair.

There was not a sound in the auditorium.

“There will be a thirty-minute recess,” declared Murchison, “then Sir Richard will present a paper concerning the valley of the Indus. In the meantime, may I respectfully request your continued patience whilst we rearrange this afternoon’s schedule? Thank you.”

He led the small group of explorers and geographers out of the auditorium and, after brief and subdued words with Burton, they headed back to the robing room.

Sir Richard Francis Burton, his mind paralysed, his heart brimming, walked in the opposite direction until he came to one of the reading rooms. Mercifully, it was unoccupied. He entered, closed the door, and leaned against it.

He wept.



“I’m sorry. I can’t continue.”

It was the faintest of whispers.

He’d spoken for twenty minutes, hardly knowing what he was saying, reading mechanically from his journals, his voice faint and quavering. His words had slowed then trailed off altogether.

When he looked up, he saw hundreds of pairs of eyes locked on to him; and in them there was pity.

He drew in a deep breath.

“I’m sorry,” he said more loudly. “There will be no debate today.”

He turned away from the crowd and, closing his ears to the shouted questions and polite applause, left the stage, pushed past Findlay and Livingstone, and practically ran to the lobby. He asked the cloakroom attendant for his overcoat, top hat, and cane, and, upon receiving them, hurried out through the main doors and descended the steps to the street.

It was just past midday. Dark clouds drifted across the sky; the recent spell of fine weather was dissipating, the temperature falling.

He waved down a hansom.

“Where to, sir?” asked the driver.

“The Royal Hotel.”

“Right you are. Jump aboard.”

Burton clambered into the cabin and sat on the wooden seat. There were cigar butts all over the floor. He felt numb and registered nothing of his surroundings as the vehicle began to rumble over the cobbles.

He tried to summon up visions of Speke; the Speke of the past, when the young lieutenant had been a valued companion rather than a bitter enemy. His memory refused to cooperate and instead took him back to the event that lay at the root of their feud: the attack in Berbera, six years ago.



Berbera, the easternmost tip of Africa, April 19, 1855. Thunderstorms had been flickering on the horizon for the past few days. The air was heavy and damp.

Lieutenant Burton’s party had set up camp on a rocky ridge, about three-quarters of a mile outside the town, near to the beach. Lieutenant Stroyan’s tent was twelve yards off to the right of the “Rowtie” that Burton shared with Lieutenant Herne. Lieutenant Speke’s was a similar distance to the left, separated from the others by the expedition’s supplies and equipment, which had been secured beneath a tarpaulin.

Not far away, fifty-six camels, five horses, and two mules were tethered.



In addition to the four Englishmen, there were thirty-eight other men—abbans, guards, servants, and camel-drivers, all armed.

With the monsoon season imminent, Berbera had been virtually abandoned during the course of the past week. An Arab caravan had lingered, but after Burton refused to offer it an escort out of the town—preferring to wait instead for a supply ship that was due any time from Aden—it had finally departed.

Now, Berbera was silent.

The expedition had retired for the night. Burton had posted three extra guards, for Somali tribes from up and down the coast had been threatening an attack for some days. They believed the British were here either to stop the lucrative slave trade or to lay claim to the small trading post.

At two thirty in the morning, Burton was jolted from his sleep by shouts and gunfire.

He opened his eyes and stared at the roof of his tent. Orange light quivered on the canvas.

He sat up.

El Balyuz, the chief abban, burst in.

“They are attacking!” the man yelled, and a look of confusion passed over his dark face, as if he couldn’t believe his own words. “Your gun, Effendi!” He handed Burton a revolver.

The explorer pushed back his bedsheets and stood; laid the pistol on the map table and pulled on his trousers; snapped his braces over his shoulders; picked up the gun.

“More bloody posturing!” He grinned across to Herne, who’d also awoken, hastily dressed, and snatched up his Colt. “It’s all for show, but we shouldn’t let them get too cocky. Go out the back of the tent, away from the campfire, and ascertain their strength. Let off a few rounds over their heads, if necessary. They’ll soon bugger off.”

“Right you are,” said Herne, and pushed through the canvas at the rear of the Rowtie.

Burton checked his gun.

“For Pete’s sake, Balyuz, why have you handed me an unloaded pistol? Get me my sabre!”

He shoved the Colt into the waistband of his trousers and snatched his sword from the Arab.

“Speke!” he bellowed. “Stroyan!”

Almost immediately, the tent flap was pushed aside and Speke stumbled in. He was a tall, thin, pale man, with watery eyes, light brown hair, and a long bushy beard. He usually wore a mild and slightly self-conscious expression, but now his eyes were wild.

“They knocked my tent down around my ears! I almost took a beating! Is there shooting to be done?”

“I rather suppose there is,” said Burton, finally realising that the situation might be more serious than he’d initially thought. “Be sharp, and arm to defend the camp!”

They waited a few moments, checking their gear and listening to the rush of men outside.

A voice came from behind them: “There’s a lot of the blighters and our confounded guards have taken to their heels!” It was Herne, returning from his recce. “I took a couple of potshots at the mob but then got tangled in the tent ropes. A big Somali took a swipe at me with a bloody great club. I put a bullet into the bastard. Stroyan’s either out cold or done for; I couldn’t get near him.”

Something thumped against the side of the tent. Then again. Suddenly a veritable barrage of blows pounded the canvas while war cries were raised all around. The attackers were swarming like hornets. Javelins were thrust through the opening. Daggers ripped at the material.

“Bismillah!” cursed Burton. “We’re going to have to fight our way to the supplies and get ourselves more guns! Herne, there are spears tied to the tent pole at the back—get ’em!”

“Yes, sir!” responded Herne, returning to the rear of the Rowtie. Almost immediately, he ran back, crying, “They’re breaking through the canvas!”

Burton swore vociferously. “If this blasted thing comes down on us we’ll be caught up good and proper. Get out! Come on! Now!”

He plunged through the tent flaps and into the night, where he found himself facing twenty or so Somali natives. Others were running around the camp, driving away the camels and pillaging the supplies. With a shout, he leaped forward and began to set about the attackers with his sabre.

Was that Lieutenant Stroyan lying over in the shadows? It was hard to tell. Burton slashed his way toward the prone figure, grimacing as clubs and spear shafts thudded against his flesh, bruising and cutting him, drawing blood.

He momentarily glanced back to see how the others were doing and saw Speke stepping backward into the tent entrance, his mouth hanging open, eyes panicked.

“Don’t step back!” he roared. “They’ll think that we’re retiring!”

Speke looked at him with an expression of utter dismay and, right there, in the midst of battle, their friendship ended, for John Hanning Speke knew that his cowardice had been recognised.

A club struck Burton on the shoulder and, tearing his eyes away from the other Englishman, he spun and swiped his blade at its owner. He was jostled

back and forth. One set of hands kept pushing at his back, and he wheeled impatiently, raising his sword, only recognising El Balyuz at the very last moment.

His arm froze in midswing.

His head exploded with pain.

A weight pulled him sideways and he collapsed onto the stony earth.

Dazed, he reached up. A barbed javelin had transfixed his face, entering the left cheek and exiting the right, knocking out some back teeth, cutting his tongue, and cracking his palate.

He fought to stay conscious.

Someone started dragging him away from the conflict.

He passed out.



In front of the Rowtie, Speke, driven to a fury by the exposure of the shameful flaw in his character, strode into the melee, raised his Dean and Adams revolver, pressed its muzzle against the chest of the man who'd downed Burton, and pulled the trigger.

The gun jammed.

"Blast it!" said Speke.

The tribesman, a massive warrior, looked down at him, smiled, and punched him over the heart.

Speke fell to his knees, gasping for air.

The Somali bent, took him by the hair, pulled him backward, and, with his other hand, groped between Speke's legs. For an instant, the Englishman had the terrifying conviction that he was going to be unmanned. The tribesman, though, was simply checking for daggers, hidden in the Arabic fashion.

Speke was thrust onto his back and his hands were quickly tied together, the cords pulled cruelly tight. Yanked upright, he was marched away from the camp, which was now being looted and destroyed.



Lieutenant Burton regained his wits and found that he was being pulled toward the beach by El Balyuz. He recovered himself sufficiently to stop his rescuer and to order the man, via sign language and writing in a patch of sand, to go and fetch the small boat that the expedition party had moored in the harbour, and to bring it to the mouth of a nearby creek.

El Balyuz nodded and ran off.

Burton lay on his back and gazed at the Milky Way.

*I want to live!* he thought.

A minute or so passed. He raised a hand to his face and felt the barbed point of the javelin. The only way to remove it was by sliding the complete length of the shaft through his mouth and cheeks. He took a firm grip on it, pushed, and fainted.



As the night wore on, John Speke was taunted and spat upon by his captors. With their sabres, they sliced the air inches from his face. He stood and endured it, his eyes hooded, his jaw set, expecting to die, and he wondered what Richard Burton would say about him when reporting this incident.

*Don't step back! They'll think that we're retiring!*

The rebuke had stung, and if Burton put it on record, Speke would be forever branded as less than a man. Damn the arrogant blackguard!

One of his captors casually thrust his spear through Speke's side. The lieutenant cried out in pain, then fell backward as the point pierced him again, this time in the shoulder.

*This is the end,* he told himself.

He struggled back to his feet and, as the spear was stabbed at his heart, deflected it with his bound hands. The point tore the flesh behind his knuckles to the bone.

The Somali stepped back.

Speke straightened and looked at him.

"To hell with you," he said. "I won't die yellow."

The tribesman leaped in and prodded the spear into Speke's left thigh. The explorer felt the blade scrape against bone.

"Shit!" he coughed in shock, and grabbed reflexively at the shaft. He and the African fought over it—one trying to gain possession, the other struggling to retain it. The Somali let go with his left hand and used it to pull a shillelagh from his belt. He swiped at Speke's right arm and the cudgel connected with a horrible crack. Speke dropped the spear shaft and crumpled to his knees, gasping with agony.

His attacker walked away, turned back, and ran at him, plunging the spear completely through the Englishman's right thigh and into the ground beyond.

Speke screamed.

Instinct took over.

With his awareness strangely separated from his body, he watched as his hands gripped the weapon, pulled it free of the ground, out through his thigh, and threw it aside. Then he stumbled into his attacker and his bound fists swept up, smashing into the man's face.

The warrior rocked back, raising a hand to his face as blood spurted from his nose.

Speke half walked, half hopped away, his disengaged mind wondering how he was staying upright with such terrible injuries.

*Where's the pain?* he mused, entirely unaware that he was afire with it.

He hobbled, barefoot, across jagged rock, down a slope, and onto the shingle of the beach. Somehow, he started to run. What tatters of clothing remained on him streamed behind.

The Somali snatched up the spear and gave chase, threw the weapon, missed, and gave up.

Other tribesmen lunged for the Englishman but Speke dodged them and kept going. He outdistanced his pursuers and, when he saw that they'd given up the chase, he collapsed onto a rock and chewed through the cord that bound his wrists.

He was faint with shock and loss of blood but knew that he had to find his companions, so, as dawn broke, he pushed on until he reached Berbera. Here he was discovered by a search party led by Lieutenant Herne and was carried to the boat at the mouth of the creek. He'd run for three miles and had eleven wounds, including the two that had pierced the large muscles of his thighs.

They placed him onto a seat and he raised his head and looked at the man sitting opposite. It was Burton, his face bandaged, blood staining the linen over his cheeks.

Their eyes met.

"I'm no damned coward," whispered Speke.



The battle should have made them brothers. They both acted as if it had—and less than two years later they embarked together on one of the greatest expeditions in British history: a perilous trek into central Africa to search for the source of the Nile.

Side by side, they endured extreme conditions, penetrating into lands unseen by white men and skirting dangerously close to Death's realm. An infection temporarily blinded and immobilised Burton. Speke became permanently deaf in one ear after attempting to remove an insect from it with a

penknife. They were both stricken with malaria, dysentery, and crippling ulcers.

They pressed on.

Speke's resentment simmered.

He constructed his own history of the Berbera incident, excising from it the most essential element: the fact that a thrown stone had cracked against his kneecap, causing him to step back into the Rowtie's entrance. Burton had looked around at that very instant and had plainly seen the stone bounce off Speke's knee and understood the back-step for the reaction it was. He'd never for one moment doubted his companion's courage.

Speke knew the stone had been seen but chose to forget it. History, he discovered, is what you make it.

They reached the central lakes.

Burton explored a large body of water called by the local tribes "Tanganyika," which lay to the south of the Mountains of the Moon. His geographical readings suggested that it could be the Nile's source, though he was too ill to visit its northernmost shore from whence the great river should flow.

Speke, leaving his "brother" in a fevered delirium, trekked northeastward and found himself at the shore of a vast lake, which he imperiously named after the British monarch, though the tribes that lived on its shores already had a name for it: "Nyanza."

He tried to circle it, lost sight of it, found it again farther to the north—or was it the shore of a second lake?—took incomplete, incompetent measurements, and returned to Burton, the leader of the expedition, claiming to have found, on his own and without a shadow of a doubt, the true source of the great river.

They recovered a modicum of health and undertook the long march back to Zanzibar where Burton fell into a fit of despondency, blaming himself for what, by his demanding standards, was inconclusive evidence.

John Speke, less scientific, less scrupulous, less disciplined, sailed back to England ahead of Burton and en route fell under the influence of a man named Laurence Oliphant, an arch-meddler and poseur who kept a white panther as a pet. Oliphant nurtured Speke's pique, turned it into malice, and seduced him into claiming victory. No matter that it was the other man's expedition; Speke had solved the biggest geographical riddle of the age!

John Speke's last words to Burton had been "Good-bye, old fellow; you may be quite sure I shall not go up to the Royal Geographical Society until you have come to the fore and we appear together. Make your mind quite easy about that."

The day he landed in England, Speke went straight up to the Royal Geo-

graphical Society and told Sir Roderick Murchison that the Nile question was settled.

The Society divided. Some of its members supported Burton, others supported Speke. Mischief makers stepped in to ensure that what should have been a scientific debate rapidly degenerated into a personal feud, though Burton, now recovering his health in Aden, was barely aware of this.

Easily swayed, Speke became overconfident. He began to criticise Burton's character, a dangerous move for a man who believed that his cowardice had been witnessed by his opponent.

Word reached Burton that he was to be awarded a knighthood and should return to England at once. He did so, and stepped ashore to find himself at the centre of a maelstrom.

Even as the reclusive monarch's representative touched the sword to his shoulders and dubbed him *Sir* Richard Francis Burton, the famous explorer's thoughts were on John Speke, wondering why he was taking the offensive in such a manner.

Over the following weeks, Burton defended himself but resisted the temptation to retaliate.

Life is fickle; the fair man doesn't invariably win.

Lieutenant Speke, it gradually became apparent, had made a lucky guess: the Nyanza probably *was* the source of the Nile.

Murchison knew, as Burton had been quick to point out, that Speke's readings and calculations were badly faulted. In fact, they were downright amateurish and not at all admissible as scientific evidence. Nevertheless, there was in them the suggestion of a potential truth. This was enough; the Society funded a second expedition.

John Speke went back to Africa, this time with a young, loyal, and opinion-free soldier named James Grant. He explored the Nyanza, failed to circumnavigate it, didn't find the Nile's exit point, didn't take accurate measurements, and returned to England with another catalogue of assumptions which Burton, with icy efficiency, proceeded to pick to pieces.

A face-to-face confrontation between the two men seemed inevitable.

It was gleefully engineered by Oliphant, who had, by this time, mysteriously vanished from the public eye—into an opium den, according to rumour—to pull strings like an invisible puppeteer.

He arranged for the Bath Assembly Rooms to be the venue and September 16, 1861, the date. To encourage Burton's participation, he made it publicly known that Speke had said: "If Burton dares to appear on the platform at Bath, I will kick him!"

Burton had fallen for it: "That settles it! By God, he *shall* kick me!"



The hansom drew up outside the Royal Hotel, and Burton's mind reengaged with the present. He emerged from the cab with one idea uppermost: someday, Laurence Oliphant would pay.

He entered the hotel. The receptionist signalled to him; a message from Isabel was waiting.

He took the note and read it:

*John was taken to London. On my way to Fullers' to find out exactly where.*

Burton gritted his teeth. Stupid woman! Did she think she'd be welcomed by Speke's family? Did she honestly believe they'd tell her anything about his condition or whereabouts? As much as he loved her, Isabel's impatience and lack of subtlety never failed to rile him. She was the proverbial bull in a china shop, always charging at her target without considering anything that might lie in her path, always utterly confident that what she wanted to do was right, whatever anyone else might think.

He wrote a terse reply:

*Left for London. Pay, pack, and follow.*

He looked up at the hotel receptionist. "Please give this to Miss Arundell when she returns. Do you have a Bradshaw?"

"Traditional or atmospheric railway, sir?"

"Atmospheric."

"Yes, sir."

He was handed the train timetable. The next atmospheric train was leaving in fifty minutes. Time enough to throw a few odds and ends into a suitcase and get to the station.