

A BRIDGE TOO FAR

Rupert knew that politeness was the key to a correct society, one in which everyone respected each other, and behaved in a way which recognised a natural hierarchy. These elements were essential, as was expected by the monarch, Queen Victoria.

Rupert sat at the dining table, as Lord George said grace. 'For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful.'

'Amen' echoed the gathering, most of whom understood that it was their position in society which meant it was right and proper that they had been invited to share dinner with Lord Berkhamsted.

'And how is Rupert spending his time at the moment?' came the question from the beautiful young woman sitting to his left, the sparkling diamonds of her necklace not able to match the light which emanated from her glistening eyes.

'One is developing one's connections with India.' Rupert's hypnotic gaze created a bridge of connection between the two. At that moment, a voice came from the other side of the table.

'The name is Samuel. Would you care to indulge in some caviar?' The bridge that Rupert was building was broken, as Alice turned her gaze towards a very handsome young man, whose beautifully manicured moustache made mockery of Rupert's barely controlled stubble. Samuel and Alice continued to talk, their eyes creating their own bridge, as Rupert was compelled to focus on his food. Was this really what he was supposed to do at meal time? The irony implicit in Rupert's reflection was lost on him. All he knew was that another man, one beneath him in society's natural hierarchy and therefore righteousness, had stolen a gaze which belonged to him.

'Battenberg cake, sir?' asked the waiter as he leaned over Samuel's shoulder.

'Not just yet, thank you. I feel that I need to take a short rest.' Samuel smiled at Alice. 'Could you possibly return in... let's say... seven minutes.'

'Of course, sir.' The bridge remained unbroken, as Samuel waved his hand towards Rupert.

'Would the good gentleman here, er...'

'Rupert,' came the reluctant self-identification.

'Would you like some cake, while the good lady and I are still talking?' asked Samuel, addressing his potential rival, apparently indicating politeness, but in fact signalling victory. Samuel locked eyes again with Alice, their bridge remaining unbroken.

That night, Rupert could not sleep, caught in the turmoil created by a bridge that had been broken, as another was built. At that moment, Rupert heard the sound of footsteps across the landing, as a figure made its way from the guest bedrooms, across the bridge that was the landing, to the lavatory. Rupert threw the bed sheets to one side.

‘After you,’ he announced, as his arm propelled Samuel down the wooden staircase. ‘All gentlemen allow others, even those beneath them, to go first.’ As Samuel lay motionless, not breathing, on the hall floor, Rupert knew that justice had been done and that one bridge, a bridge too far, had been forever broken.