

An Eastern Promise Romance

ZULEMA AND THE KALENDER PRINCE

ORWENA KAWELSTE





The Eastern Promise Romances

Yet More Praise for *The Eastern Promise Romances*

"I love a good burka banger and this one is up there in the top 150. The scene with the snake and the olive oil is simply breathtaking"

Stringbonefellow's Members' Mag

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'Eat Me Dates' Promotion



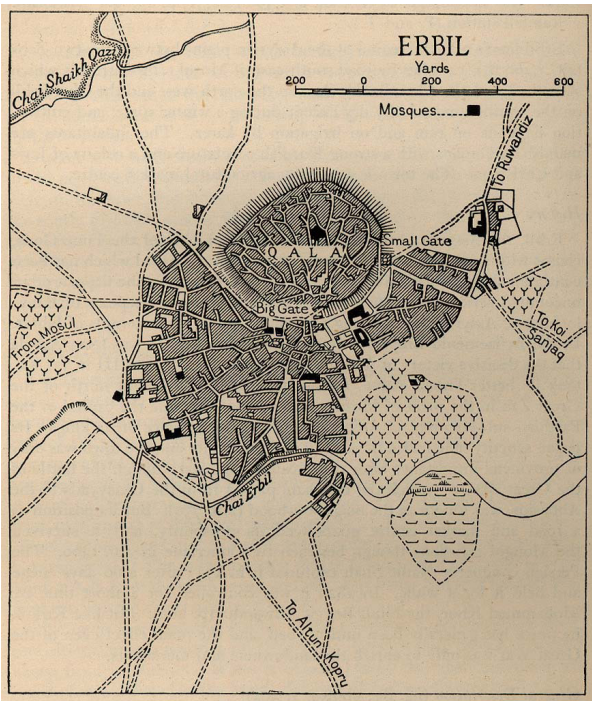
Orwena Kawelste is the nom de plume of award winning authoress Wonera Alkestew (former PA and founding member of the DHRA). Unemployed for more than 30 years due to a serious mood swing in 1986, she has long harboured ambitions to break the conventions of the western "bodice ripper" for which, as a highly decorated (usually evening teale with aubergine accessories) author she is singularly famous. In 2016 she decided to strike out in a new direction and found herself inventing a brand new genre: "the burka banger" or "hijab hijacker".

Having studied Sheherazade in her youth and The 1001 Arabian Nights in her maturity, she accidentally tuned into Rimsky-Korsakov's The Tale of Tasr Sultan as a 46 year old and now considers herself something of an expert on the region known in happier times as "Arabia". Orwena lives in Buckland Rippers with her sister Elspeth and two cars (Fiat Panda III and Mr Throaty (Porsche Carrera 911)).

ORWENA KAWELSTE



Zulema and the Kalendar
Prince



CHAPTER ONE

I first set eyes on Zulema when I passed by the city's Big Gate on my way to meet Colonel Anstruther who had been assigned the task of smoothing my passage into Arabian society.

Newly graduated from the University of Alton St Pancras with a first class degree in Civil Engineering with Practical Household Management, I has been invited to join Howard Threadboneham-Carter's soon to be famous excavations hoping to discover the tomb of Tukankh'piece (*aka* Tutankh'brian) in the Valley of the Kings. It was July 1922.

Strong winds and an incident with a primus stove had disrupted Dr Threadboneham-Carter's work and I had received news at the Thomas Cook Bureau in Tyre that I should delay my arrival and perhaps take the opportunity to familiarise myself with embalming rituals north of the Euphrates in the hope that these might prove useful in later life. I had little hope of this at the time, restless as I was to be at work with brush and trowel, but as fate would have it what I learned on that short and unexpected diversion would help my sister and I enormously a decade or so later when faced with agonising *post mortem* choices for my Great Aunt Eugenie.

So Ephasus it would be, but to secure the necessary permissions and passes I must first speak with the British Consul in Baghdad and it was there I was bound on that fateful day in 1922 with - I hoped - the help of Colonel Anstruther.

The Colonel - a portly but kindly man long since retired from active military service - was generally to be found '*holed up*' in a small cafe run by Ahmed. Ahmed's Cafe was known to one and all

for the thick, dark, sweet and gritty coffee which was the single item on his bill of fare, so it had taken no time at all to ascertain from the small blind beggar boy at the railways station platform the direction in which I should travel. Throwing a few coins to the floor to recompense the unfortunate child, I watched others scramble to pick them up and then set forth with steady step despite the heat and the smallest suggestion of apprehension rising in my chest.

The sun was remorseless and, though I sought the deep shadows of the narrow streets, I was uncomfortable in the full evening dress my mother had assured me was the proper attire for a travelling English gentleman. "*What distinguishes us from all other races*", she had intoned over supper in the magnificent dining room of our beautiful Crendell home, "*is our fortitude and above all our ability to sweat discreetly into our heirloom clothes whilst others flap and fan their way into unbecoming gyrations*". She was of the old school and I, a mere 32 years old, was in no position to gainsay her.

I tugged guiltily at my white tie and tight-fitting collar hoping to loose it just a little and allow the tiniest draft of air to penetrate. Honesty compels me to record that the efficacy of my efforts was a singular disappointment to me. At least, I reflected, I had had the good sense to leave my luggage at the station in the care of a kindly man who had hurled it onto a cart and immediately taken it away for safe keeping until my intended return. He had not asked my name, neither had he taken any money from me; proof if it were needed of his honesty and that I had chosen well.

A little way beyond the souk, where I resisted the temptation to buy silks and spices for my onward journey, I spotted the sign for Ahmed's Cafe and there plain as day was the rubicund figure of Colonel Anstruther seated at a table in nonechalant repose. He quickly brushed aside a dusky maiden who had been helping him align the unruly buttons on his flies and rose to greet me: "*Mr*

Standish, I presume", he intoned in a deep rich baritone used in times gone by, I imagined, to bark orders at an unfortunate subordinate. "No", I responded quickly, "*Maltravers .. Peter Maltravers ... from England?*" The quizical expression on his face suggested that mine was not the visage he had been expecting. "*Maltravers, you say?*" "*From England?*" I nodded confirming his understanding of who I was and from whence I came.

"*But ... what of Standish?*" I was clueless as to his inquiry and shrugged my shoulders, wincing at the pain in my chest where damp raw skin now rubbed against my overtightened trouser braces. "*And you have no package for me?*". "None", I confessed.

Whether through tiredness or the unfamiliarity of my surroundings I could not say, but I sensed an immediate ebbing of the Colonel's interest; a suspicion confirmed by his gesture to the dusky maid who returned to his side and once again began the futile task of rubbing away invisible stains from his lap.

"*Might I buy you a drink?*", I asked hoping to revive his curiosity before the vigorous de-greasing occupied his mind entirely. Without warning, his head jerked violently and his lower limbs seemed momentarily to take on a life of their own. "*Don't stop now*", he urged though whether to me or the girl I did not know. I assumed the former and, sensing the Colonel's urgency, summoned a man of ugly visage - perchance the eponymous Ahmed - urging him to bring two coffees without delay. I ordered nothing for the lady: occupied as she was with the Colonel's business, it seemed unlikely she would have the capacity to cope with crockery as well.

I sat down and surveyed my surroundings. Several locals were in animated conversation and to the side of the room near to a small curtained kitchen entrance two young men played arab darts: a game of skill wherein a 12 foot circular board is peppered from a distance of four yards with the blades of sharpened scimitars. I

had played much the same game at my public school and thought perhaps to challenge them but wiser council prevailed and I stayed my hand.

At last the coffees arrived and with them a cooling glass of the sweetest water together with a small bowl of nuts the like of which I had never before encountered. "*It's a test*", Colonel Anstruther offered, sensing my uncertainty. "*They are testing your metal old bean*", he continued, "*seeing if you're up to snuff*". Not for the first time I reflected on the queerness of the Arabian character, the absurdly insistent sense of manhood, the need always to prove something without knowing quite what was to be proven. Hoping to make a good impression, to appear as manly as they and afraid of nothing, I took a handful of the nuts and crunched upon them with feigned enthusiasm. Words are inadequate to describe the horror of the situation in which I now found myself: unable to swallow and yet unwilling to spit, I was frozen in an oral limbo the like of which I had never encountered in my 32 years upon this earth.

The Colonel smiled: a smile of such satisfied contempt that I quite forgot his innate kindness (to which I referred on page 1) and thought in that terrible moment to strike him hard. But manners and the words of my old schoolmaster Mr Trenche-Foote reverberating in my ears ("*You're a stupid boy but not irredeemable*") I determined instead to show good grace and to swallow the disgusting mash which was even now searing itself into the delicate linings of my inner cheeks.

I swallowed hard and drained the water glass in blessed relief. "*Congratulations old fruit. You've passed*", the Colonel beamed, his face quite transformed back into the rubicund squire of first acquaintance. "*Here. Take the girl as your reward, but have her back by Tuesday, I will have need of her by then.*" I demurred at his kindness and explained that I was bound for Jerusalem early on

the morrow.

"Hold fast young man", the Colonel patiently advised, "Nothing hereabouts is blessed with speed and the Number 16 only goes as far as Jerusalem on Fridays now it's on the reduced summer schedule". I struggled to hide my disappointment. I had an appointment with a chiropodist near the Wailing Wall on Wednesday and it looked as though it must now be delayed. I hoped mother would understand.

"Colonel", I offered hesitantly, "your name was given to me as one well-versed in the affairs of Araby and best capable of assisting me in my quest to travel first to Baghdad and thence north of the Euphrates. Might I prevail upon you to do so?"

His manner suggested that requests such as this were commonplace but that mine in particular might be more than tiresome to him, so I was surprised when he spoke immediately and to positive effect. *"Young man", he said, rearranging himself more comfortably in his dampened trousers, "I cannot deny that I would rather you were Standish and that you had brought with you from England a package vital to my plans. But as it is, you are not and this I must accept as the camel accepts its hump: reluctantly but with fortitude. I will assist you but first you must do something for me: something that young woman you recently saw in my company cannot do."* Having witnessed first hand precisely what the young lady in question *could* do for him I was loath to imagine what she could *not*.

"If it is within my powers", I offered cautiously "then of course I will do whatever I can". He seemed pleased at this response and our business was swiftly concluded. *"Splendid", he intoned, rising from his seat and grasping my hand, "Now we must be formally introduced: I am Anstruther, formerly Colonel of the Dorset Light Infantry, wounded in Khartoum and resident in these parts this past forty years. You I know are Standish and you have a package for me".*

Once again I was forced to correct his misapprehension, assuring him that I was, on the contrary, still Maltravers and that I bore no *there*." package. His disappointment seemed doubled. "*Very well, meet me at Mohammed's at 7.30 sharp and we shall conclude our business*". And with neither further formality nor ceremony he was off.

The Colonel's departure left me momentarily at a loss and I might have tarried at Ahmed's - for want of alternative adventure - for a good while longer, but a tugging at my coat tails alerted me to the presence of a small moon-faced child whose navish manner at once commanded my full attention.

The child said nothing, but a series of increasingly animated gestures indicated that I should follow him with all possible speed. Having no better plan I did as I was bidden and found myself walking, at far greater pace than the heat made sensible, through the back streets of the city heading in the direction from which I had come. There rose before me once again the Big Gate; ceremonial entrance to the city in olden times.

If truth be told it had seen better days. Once covered in turquoise and capped with gold, its ornamentation had long since been plundered and its turrets were deeply pocked by the random rifle fire of many decades of idle sport. Thus defiled it now presented but a sorry version of itself to the casual eye. Indeed so pronounced was its decline that sight of it might have detained me no longer, had I not once again recognised the figure of a young woman, surrounded by a body of uniformed men; waiting apparently for some adventure - or perhaps some misadventure - to befall her. She sat expressionless atop a howdah as though halted in mid journey by some imaginary traffic light. About her, her guards - for this is what I took them to be - looked anxiously around as though in fear of hidden threat which might at any moment assail the small party and put the young girl's life at risk. Was it only I who noticed a

sadness in her eye; a resignation to a fate as yet unclear?

Only later - with Tutankh's piece safely dispatched to the Cairo Museum and my work in Egypt done - would I discover her identity and come to know that this was Zulema betrothed of the Kalender Prince and destined for his court where, in time, she would become his 18th wife and mother of his 88th, 89th and 96th children.

Had I known then what I would come to know, might everything have fallen out differently? Had Anstruther not proven as good as his word and smoothed my passage (as his had once been smoothed) to Baghdad in time for the Annual Date and Hazelnut Festival? Had mother not insisted on forwarding my spats? Had the 4.15 from Damascus not been delayed by a points failure at Aleppo? Everything might have been different. Utterly, wretchedly, devilishly different.

But these things did come to pass. And so, fates were sealed and ... whilst I still have the strength to recount it, the tale of Zulema and the Kalender Prince must be told.

Now read on

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Watch out for **ZULEMA AND THE DAMASCUS DANDY**
coming next year

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Praise for *The Eastern Promise Romances*

"Good news at last for the Middle East. Forget war, terrorism and IS and wallow in a romance that ripens in these novels like a soft warm fig."

Mrs Amanda J Threadbone

"I loved Zulema and the Kalendar Prince: the vigour of the souk, the mystery of the veil, the romance of the desert wind: it was all my hanging baskets rolled into one"

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