

HOPE
Between the
PAGES

PEPPER BASHAM



Hope Between the Pages

©2021 by Pepper Basham

Print ISBN 978-1-64352-826-7

eBook Editions:

Adobe Digital Edition (.epub) 978-1-64352-828-1

Kindle and MobiPocket Edition (.prc) 978-1-64352-827-4

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission of the publisher.

All scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any similarity to actual people, organizations, and/or events is purely coincidental.

See the series lineup and get bonus content at DoorsToThePastSeries.com

Cover Photograph: Mark Owen/Trevillion Images

Published by Barbour Publishing, Inc., 1810 Barbour Drive, Uhrichsville, Ohio 44683,
www.barbourbooks.com

Our mission is to inspire the world with the life-changing message of the Bible.



Printed in the United States of America.

Chapter 1

August, 1915

Biltmore Estate, Asheville, North Carolina

Any story that begins with a library is bound to be an excellent tale. I smiled as I weaved my way down the narrow corridors of Biltmore's servants' halls, careful to keep myself hidden from the newly arrived guests. My mother's quote ushered my feet into a faster pace. There were many pleasures in working in the illustrious estate house, but none rivaled seeing the expressions of guests as they stepped over the threshold into Biltmore's library for the first time.

Into *my* territory.

The main second-floor sitting room stood vacant as I peered around the doorway from the servants' corridor. Early morning stillness blanketed the room like the sunlight through the tall eastern-facing windows of the grand stairwell, giving the dim passageway a sleepy golden hue. Nothing stirred. Not one movement.

Gripping my skirt, I dashed down the hallway and around the corner, finally disappearing into the darkness of the secret staircase.

I could have used myriad other entrances to the library, of course, but this one was my favorite. More intimate and special. Every morning I would find my way to the secret staircase behind the massive marble fireplace and begin taking care of the library. It was mine, so to speak. Mine to dust and organize and present with as much pride as each of the ten thousand book spines commanded from the two-story shelves surrounding the room.

It was due to Mother that I obtained such a coveted position as the "book maid." Mr. and Mrs. Vanderbilt had been kind enough to allow me to assume her position when she grew too ill to manage it,

and I would not take the opportunity for granted. How could I? I was entrusted with a page-ridden wonderland. Few people appreciated such an appointment as I did. Books breathed to me.

I emerged from the shadowed staircase into the massive room that woke with morning light like something from a fairy story. My gaze immediately moved to a shelf to my left that held some Brothers Grimm, Andersen, and even MacDonald, though most of the fairy-tale stories were scattered throughout the rest of the house. Also under my care.

The host of characters from Pellegrini's enormous painting stared down from their clouded perch on the ceiling as if watching the movements of the room from heaven itself. Sometimes, I felt like them, wondering how the stories on the shelves might match or impact the stories of the lives stepping into the room. It was a fascinating study—a beloved pastime—and welcome entertainment for a servant who loved books and lived to be invisible.

Stories held power and everyone told one, whether the characters within the story knew it or not.

I'd only served in my position for nine months, gratefully pulled from the kitchens, so I hadn't carved out the time to read every volume; but one day, I'd know each one on these shelves. My gaze took inventory of the enormous space, viewing the rows and rows of wonderfully symmetrical adventures, romances, histories, and dozens of other genres waiting for a new reader's perusal.

Duster in hand, I started for the shelf I'd ended on the day before when footsteps from below paused my feet. There was nowhere to hide except the cornered shadow between the bookshelf and upper part of the two-story window curtain draping with heavy red cloth to the story below. I dashed for the spot and slipped down behind the balcony railing, hoping the shadows and my black dress kept my presence concealed. Of course, the wealthy were raised to ignore servants, which should only help my cause, though the Vanderbilts broke such aristocratic expectations on a regular basis. Mr. Vanderbilt had even stooped to help me retrieve a stack of books I dropped when he accidentally opened a door in my way once.

Luckily, my place in the corner gave me a perfect view of the guests' entrance into the library, and the newest arrivals did not

disappoint. With due admiration, the two men grew wide-eyed and open-mouthed, displaying acceptable wonder at the grandness of the two-story library and overarching ceiling painting. They must have been father and son, or some close relation, from the familial resemblance of light hair and facial features. Their impeccable dress highlighted their class, from the starch of their white shirts to the glisten of their shiny shoes.

“Where does one possibly begin?” the younger of the two breathed, his voice echoing through the room, the glint in his eyes a fascinating reward.

“Wherever one wishes, I suppose,” responded the elder.

Ah, even better. English aristocracy, I wagered. Mr. and Mrs. Vanderbilt had mentioned the arrival of some of their English friends aboard one of the few passenger liners braving the Atlantic waters during a war. If I didn’t know better, I’d guess this particular party was one of Mrs. Vanderbilt’s subtle attempts at matchmaking people she held in high esteem. My shoulders relaxed. I would certainly remain invisible from *them*. The English were excellent at not seeing the servants.

“Well.” The elder man took a step deeper into the room. “You were interested in locating something a bit lighter in tone than Machiavelli, as I recall?”

“Anything not related to estate business or the current war in Europe would suit me fine,” the younger replied. “The latter I read about in spades much too regularly, and the former—” He sent a ruthless grin towards the older man. “You’ve nearly worked me to the bone.”

“Don’t you mean bored you to tears, Son?” The older man chuckled. “The hard work commences when we return home, as a matter of fact.” His voice lit with untamed merriment. “This may be an opportune moment to begin studying on the very subject. I imagine Mr. Vanderbilt should have a wealth of books on landscape architecture or accounting.”

“Now, Father,” came the younger’s quick reply, his palm rising in ready defense. “You promised a holiday, and that includes a respite from subjects related to our upcoming employment back home. Besides, I shall have plenty to do once the final school term begins in October

if I'm not whisked away to the battlefield to join Robert before then."

Their pleasant banter inspired my grin.

The elder released a sigh, meant for nothing more than show from the twitch of his lips. "Ah, well, I did promise that, didn't I? Besides, I should relish your company while I have it. Very well, what will you choose during this. . .respite?"

His son stepped forward, sending another appreciative glance around the room. "I must admit, this room makes me feel nostalgic. Maybe an adventure or childhood favorite? You know, I've never read any of the Tarzan books. Do you think Biltmore would have them?"

Before his father answered, Mr. Noble, the butler, entered the room. "Pardon me, sirs, but breakfast is ready. May I escort you to the Breakfast Room?"

The elder man turned without hesitation, but the younger paused and glanced up in my direction, almost as if he saw my hiding place. His pale eyes sparkled in the morning light and an expression I could only interpret as spellbound gave his soft smile an almost boyish look.

I covered my grin, unable to dampen the connection. . .the awareness.

I stared into the face of a kindred spirit. Another soul who understood the power of story and imagination and of worlds beyond the borders of a binding, and for some reason I couldn't explain, I felt as though I'd uncovered an impossible friendship.



I had just finished setting up the library as I thought best for the guests, when the expected murmur of voices approaching from the Long Hall broke into my humming of some classical piece Mrs. Vanderbilt had been playing on her phonograph. With a grasp for my dust brush and a quick tidying of the sofa-side table, I dashed for the spiral staircase and barely made it behind the secret stairway entrance before the small group entered.

I should have left, I suppose. Disappeared until the guests dispersed for their afternoon activities, but curiosity always overcame my nudge toward invisibility. After all, I'd been the conduit of world introductions, if one wanted to think about it poetically. When I spoke in such bookish fashion aloud, my fellow servants stared at me as if I'd

spoken Swahili, so I usually kept those ideas to myself. Mother would have understood. She's the one who taught me how to speak above my station. In private, of course.

I slid my hand into my apron pocket and drew out a small mirror, raising it around the mantel's side enough to catch the light. Then, with a tilt in the right direction, the room below came into view, just as the party entered. Would the guests enjoy my hand-picked selections, now on ready display throughout the room? Would they even notice?

"I shall keep my appreciation of the landscape to my view from the loggia." A woman's bell-like voice bounced off the white-framed ceiling. "I am a fine horsewoman, as you well know, but I have no desire to engage in miles of riding when I can see the display as well from here as there."

"Oh Lorraine, you really are missing out on closer inspection." This in Mrs. Vanderbilt's familiar voice. "And there are so many natural waterfalls and waterways. George simply adored the views."

Her voice trailed into an uncharacteristic quiet at the mention of her dear husband, gone over a year now. Could it be so long? The memory came with a strange mixture of long ago and immediate all at once.

When Mr. Vanderbilt died everything at the house changed, Mother had said. The number of parties and the number of servants decreased. A light, which once glowed from the very core of the house he built, somehow faded with his absence, though Mrs. Vanderbilt and her daughter, Cornelia, endeavored to keep it alight. Remembered.

And it was, in every limestone brick of the grand estate. In every beloved book.

"A capital prospect, Edith," an Englishman responded. Perhaps the same older gentleman I had heard earlier? "I only wish I'd come early enough to tell George what I thought of his magnificent estate. But I shall tell you, for you are part of him."

"Yes, and I feel certain he would smile gently at your compliment and then turn the conversation away from himself," Mrs. Vanderbilt responded, her voice brightening. "Anyone for tea?"

"Mrs. Vanderbilt, I must say I'm a bit perplexed." This from the younger of the two Englishmen. I noticed through my reflected spying that he had picked up a book from the side table.

My heart erupted into a pitter-patter. Had I chosen well?

“What do you mean, Oliver?” his father questioned.

Oliver. Ah, they must be the Camdens. The housekeeper had spoken of their arrival. Oliver Camden. A very pleasant name to the mind.

“Only this.” He raised the book for their inspection. “Before breakfast I was speaking to Father about wanting to read an adventure or childhood classic, and here I find on the table one of the very books I mentioned.”

I couldn’t tame my smile. The beautiful evergreen color marked the cover of *Tarzan*.

“And here, look.” He returned to the table and brought another book from its place, one of my particular favorites as far as adventures were concerned. “*King Solomon’s Mines*? And. . .” He laughed, a sound so warm and alive it made me think of an azalea-scented breeze in late spring. “*Dracula*?”

“I’ve never seen anyone become so excited over books.” The lady, Lorraine, sat shaking her golden head, her expression disclosing her distaste of Mr. Oliver’s passionate reaction.

I actually appreciated his response. Some of the upstairs group, excepting the Vanderbilts, kept their opinions and emotions so dulled, one would wonder if the house wasn’t filled with magnificently costumed mannequins.

“Then I’ve not surrounded you with the right people, Lorraine.” Mrs. Vanderbilt had regained her humor, a smile in her words, though the direction of my mirror did not afford me a view of her face. “A happy remedy with Oliver around, I’d say.”

“If that isn’t the understatement of the week,” came the elder Mr. Camden’s response. “I think without books the poor boy would shrivel up and die under constant estate work and gardening.”

“Though, Father, I do enjoy gardening.”

How could I ever fail to appreciate a mutual book lover? Even if I’d never speak to him.

“Sadie Blackwell, what on earth are you doing?” A forced whisper erupted from behind me.

My smile fell from my face and heat shot up my neck. I turned to meet the pinched face of the new housekeeper, Mrs. Potter, her beady

eyes taking in my position, my undeniably red face, and my extended mirror.

“Spying? You are spying on the guests?” Her harsh tones lifted into a squeak before she released a very unBritish-like groan. “This shall not be borne. Just you wait until Mrs. Vanderbilt hears of it.”