

A stylized, hand-drawn letter 'D' in black ink, positioned to the left of the main title. It has a thick, irregular outline with a small tail at the bottom.

DEATH
AT DEEPWATER POINT

DR HAMISH HART MYSTERIES
BOOK FOUR

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CHAPTER ONE

A Marine Board enquiry into the circumstances attending the collision between the Southport Steam Shipping Company's steamer Natone, and the Moreton Bay Oyster Company's steamer The President, which occurred off the jetty at Southport on the 5th instant, concluded yesterday. The first witness examined gave evidence to the effect that the Natone had been at the Labrador Jetty at about the same time as The President and was following in the wake of the vessel. After leaving the Labrador Jetty the Natone came out into mid-channel, being then about two lengths astern of The President. When abreast of the crossing mark on Stradbroke Island, the Natone's bow was just a little behind the port quarter of The President. There was a strong ebb tide and in crossing toward the Southport Jetty, the Natone did not follow its proper course but took a sweep towards the mainland. The next moment, the Natone struck The President a little above the midship section nearly at right angles.

The Brisbane Courier. Wednesday 26 May, 1886

“Good Lord! Why is there such a crowd at the wharf?” Dr Hamish Hart struggled to tuck his own case under his arm while simultaneously juggling Rita’s luggage from one hand to the other.

Rita ignored the question.

“Which way do we go?” he said.

Hamish stood alongside his friend Rita to consider the options while their fellow travellers pushed past, impatient to join the throng. The humidity in the air tugged at his skin, exaggerated by the stifling

proximity of the crowd. Brightly coloured hats fluttered like strange birds against the dull sky. Tugging at his collar, he felt the sweat drip down his neck.

“I don’t understand why I’m wearing a woollen coat on a trip to the seaside,” he said.

Rita feigned a look of shock. “Dr Hamish Hart,” she said, “did you really expect to travel on the steamer in your bathing suit?” She stifled a laugh. Hamish was used to her teasing. They had been friends a long time. That they sounded to others like a married couple was a source of amusement to them. Hamish knew Rita would never marry him. Nonetheless, he found it difficult to love any other woman.

He was looking forward to the weekend at The Deepwater Point Hotel, as it would be a pleasant break from his general practice. While he loved his work, the monotony of the chronic illnesses of the middle-classes sometimes bored him. When Rita suggested they catch the steamer to Southport to see an exhibition by the famous balloonist, Celestine Dupont, he agreed enthusiastically. Now that they were on the wharf, hemmed in by a crowd of fellow travellers, he wondered if he’d made the right decision. He disliked crowds. And he was hot in his coat.

As they finally inched their way to the front of the mob, Hamish was able to gain a decent view of the two grand steamers that waited at the wharf. The President was berthed to the left, and the Natone, a much larger and more impressive vessel, to the right. The promenade deck appeared to lean towards the crowd, perched as it was above the roof of the saloon.

“Six hundred passengers can fit on the main deck and another two hundred on the promenade,” said Hamish, unable to suppress his admiration.

“And here they all are,” Rita said, looking around at the crowd.

Hamish’s eye was drawn to the wheel reaching from the river to the full height of the main deck. “She should be quick with that double wheel,” he murmured. He was startled by a man in a starched uniform who silently took his and Rita’s bags and created a path to the back of the Natone where a ramp led into the steamer’s lower section.

"I see we're booked on the Natone," said Rita. "I like the little steamer, The President."

Hamish noted the crowd thinning in the direction of The President. Passengers were already boarding the smaller steamer. "The Natone is said to be faster," he pointed out.

"They're not faster at boarding," said Rita.

"We'll get to Southport more quickly on the larger vessel," said Hamish. "I'm certain of it."

"I've heard The President provides the faster trip," said Rita, not looking at him.

Hamish stopped. "Really?" he said. "Would you care to make a wager?"

Rita looked up at him, a small tuck upward at the corner of her lips. "Certainly," she said. "What can you afford to lose?" Hamish immediately regretted his challenge. His friend was tiny, but relentless. Whatever wager he made now, he would be held to, should he lose.

He decided to make the stakes high. "If The President reaches Southport before the Natone, I get your Harriet Martineau translation of Comte. To keep," he added.

Rita's eyes grew large. She hesitated. Hamish knew well enough that was her favourite book. "Fine," she said at last. "If the Natone reaches Southport first, I get your first edition Darwin."

"What?" cried Hamish. "That book is worth a fortune."

"So, you are not so sure the Natone is the faster vessel, after all?"

"I agree to the wager," said Hamish. "I will not need to give up my Darwin."

They shook hands vigorously.

By the time the wager had been set, they had inched their way onto the gangway.

The substantial iron saloon steamer bustled with life as they and the other passengers filed on board and made their way onto the promenade deck. Rita slipped her arm behind Hamish's elbow and held tight. The agitation of the wait in the crowd fell away when Hamish felt her closeness. They climbed a narrow staircase to the upper deck and manoeuvred their way to the edge, where they gripped the rail, passengers pressing against

them from behind. All the seats on the upper deck were occupied, but many of the passengers were crushed against the rails, gazing back at the wharf. The last passengers were still making their way onto The President when Hamish felt the Natone paddle turn in the river.

“We’ll see who gets there faster,” said Hamish over the noise. The Natone edged out into the river and passed the other steamer.

“Early days yet,” said Rita. “Come downstairs with me. I need tea.”

There were two saloons below. Hamish and Rita entered the one reserved for first-class passengers. They admired the maple lined walls and the tiny landscapes of Tasmanian scenery in the panels between the windows. As they took seats by one of the windows, they looked out at a view of bustles and waistcoats.

“You’d think we’d have a clear view in first class,” said Rita.

Hamish was looking around for a waiter. “I believe the only difference between first and second class is the washbasin in the ladies retiring room.” He waved towards a man in a white uniform.

Rita laughed. “Useful,” she said.

The man in white placed tea and cake on their table and Rita tucked in.

“You’re beaming,” said Hamish.

“I love an adventure,” said Rita over a creamed scone.

“I’m not sure how much adventure there’ll be,” said Hamish. “Southport is a sleepy place by all accounts. Unless you are excited by fishing.”

Rita put down the scone almost knocking her tea over. Hamish reached over and put it right just in time.

“Of course, there’ll be excitement,” cried Rita. “There’s the ballooning exhibition tomorrow. A lady balloonist! Who would have thought Celestine Dupont would come here to Queensland. It must feel like the end of the world to her.”

“The owners of the Grand would have paid a fortune to get her here. Imagine the cost involved in securing someone of her celebrity and bringing her all the way from Paris to Southport.”

Rita smiled. “Perhaps she was up for an adventure as well. People say she is tremendously attractive.”

Hamish's eyebrows arched. "Do they now?"

By the time they had finished their second cup of tea, the crowd outside the window let out a collective gasp, and Hamish and Rita saw the tall chimney of *The President* steaming past. The passengers on deck waved enthusiastically at an equally excited crowd waving back at them from the deck opposite.

Rita thrust her slim arm in the air. "Yes!" she cried.

"That behaviour is un-lady-like," said Hamish.

"When have you known me to be lady-like? Besides, you're being sullen."

A gap appeared in the onlookers outside as *The President* disappeared and Hamish was able to see the bank of the river, the width of which had broadened significantly as they neared the mouth. A jolt made Hamish grab both cups of tea to steady them as the steamer made its way across the tidal currents into Moreton Bay. They turned the corner and were on their way through the Bay and along the coast toward Deepwater Point. There was a distinctly different smell in the air, the smell of the sea, and the air was cooler. Rita adjusted her shawl.

The steamers passed one another twice on the long trip south. Each time, Rita stood up to cheer on the object of her wager. *The President* was in the lead for two hours in the last half of the journey but in the end the *Natone* picked up speed in the final leg and came in view of the dock almost an hour ahead of *The President*. Hamish chose not to cheer out loud, though he was quietly relieved he could keep possession of his Darwin. He didn't really want Rita's translation of *Comte*. He decided not to mention the wager unless she did.

A rush of passengers pushed against one another to ascend the stairs and gain their first view of the seaside town. Hamish and Rita joined them and found themselves a spot three rows back from the rail where they balanced on their toes peering outward. Rita was too low to see anything, but Hamish realised the passengers at the front were pointing to something out to sea. He followed their outstretched arms upward to the object of their collective gaze. His eyes opened wide, and his lips parted.

"What is it?" shouted Rita. She was on the tips of her toes, but Hamish

knew she wouldn't be able to see over the fluff, fur and flowers in front of her.

"She's majestic," cried Hamish.

"Who is?" screamed Rita.

"Look higher instead of trying to see ahead. Can't you see the top of the masts?"

Hamish joined the others and pointed toward a large schooner with a gleaming hull and tall masts. He was breathless. He'd always loved ships. At one stage, he had dreamt of work as a ship's surgeon. But when faced with the opportunity of such a position, the reality appeared to fall short of his imaginings and he decided to remain land based. Rita managed to wriggle her way into a front row position against the rail and cried out in delight at the sight of the massive ship aground on the bar. Everyone was awed by the sight of such a large ship trapped in the sand.

The Scottish Prince looked comfortable on her sandy perch, but the waves were beginning to rise and lick at her lower deck. "How did a ship that size come to be stuck on a sandbank?" Rita called back over her shoulder. "I'm sure the owners are asking the same question," laughed Hamish.

It was half-past six and a strong south-easterly wind had blown up during the trip. The passengers of the Natone made their way in single file toward the gangway and landed on dry ground in a single writhing mass. Rita struggled to hold on to her hat in the wind while Hamish placed his hand on her head. "It's an amazing hat," he commented. "I've never seen you wear anything like it." The hat had a low flat crown and a straight brim that increased in width at the front where the straw was turned up flat against the crown. "I'm not convinced it was a sound choice for a steamer ride, though," he added.

"It wasn't windy when we left Brisbane," quipped Rita.

A parade of men in the same starched uniforms were bringing the bags from the back of the steamer onto the jetty. They placed them unceremoniously on the promenade and a circle of people amassed around them. Passengers pushed past one another to identify and retrieve their bags.

Hamish was contemplating entering the fray when he heard a voice.

“Welcome Miss.” The voice came from shoulder height. “I’ll get yer bags fer yer Miss.”

Both Hamish and Rita glanced down at the freckled face of a boy about twelve or thirteen.

“It’s perfectly fine,” said Rita, “the doctor can collect our bags.” The boy lowered his head. Rita smiled. “Stay with us and I’ll pay you anyway,” she said.

“As soon as we clear ourselves from this mob,” added Hamish, not sure why he had to navigate his way through the throng to collect the bags if they were paying the boy to do it.

By the time Hamish returned with their luggage, the crowd had dispersed into waiting carriages, or further along the promenade. Rita offered the boy a coin in her small, gloved hand. He took it gratefully and scampered away. Hamish looked to the left and right. “Up there,” he said, pointing north along the road, “the Grand Hotel at Deepwater Point.”

“It’s certainly grand,” said Rita, picking up the one bag she had packed for the weekend. They proceeded along the esplanade toward the hotel, the sound of the waves lapping against the seaway in their ears and the smell of salt in the air. Rita shifted her bag from one hand to the other and shook her wrist.

“Let me take it,” said Hamish, wrenching the bag from her fingers.

“I don’t understand why you didn’t allow the boy to carry it,” said Hamish. “I can’t fathom your periodic bouts of fierce independence in relation to small matters.”

“He’s a child,” said Rita.

“Yes, but now I’m carrying all the bags.”

Rita smiled and her eyes danced. “Give mine back then,” she said. “I didn’t ask you to take it.”

Hamish walked on. He and Rita had been friends since Hamish was fresh out of medical school. He knew her as well as anyone could, but she was still a mystery to him in many ways.

Ahead of them, the Grand Hotel towered over the esplanade.

“According to the Courier, it is the most glorious hotel in the colony,” said Rita.

Hamish tilted his head to the side. "It looks like a miniature version of Parliament House. It has the same roof and gables."

"It's prettier than Parliament House," said Rita.

The pale green building stretched along the esplanade for one hundred and fifty feet, as if draped in brown lace as two balconies with ornate railings ran the entire length of the structure.

At the door, Hamish noticed a tall, slim man with impeccable style speaking with a shorter, somewhat gaunt Chinese man. They seemed to be in an earnest conversation when the tall man saw Hamish and Rita approaching. He immediately turned away from the Chinese man in a gesture of dismissal and looked Hamish and Rita up and down. The Chinese fellow scarpered away as though he was guilty of something.

"Why on earth are you carrying your own luggage?" said the tall man.

Hamish and Rita stopped in their tracks and Hamish dropped the bags. The man looked around for the bag boy, who was cowering behind him.

"I dismissed him," stated Rita. "I prefer to carry my own luggage."

The man looked at Hamish who had both his and Rita's luggage at his feet.

"Hmm," he said.

"I'll take them to your rooms, Sir," said the freckled boy, ducking around his boss to pick up the bags.

Hamish handed him another coin.

They followed the manager indoors and gazed around the interior of the entrance hall where a luxurious space unfolded and offered to hug them. It didn't seem possible to enter a space, the dimensions of which were difficult to comprehend, while at the same time feel the welcoming warmth of a beautiful home. Nonetheless, the sense of grandeur seemed incongruent with their expectations of a seaside village in this frontier colony. Hamish noticed an odour that filled him with warmth.

"What is that aroma?" he asked quietly. Rita was still taking in the scene with a sense of awe.

"Linseed oil and mahogany," she said.

Rita stared up at a glittering crystal chandelier that descended from the

ceiling at the centre of the hall, overhanging an enormous staircase that swept elegantly up to the second floor.

A voice interrupted their thoughts.

“Campbell Charles,” said the man, “hotel manager.”

Hamish took his outstretched hand. “Doctor Hamish Hart and Doctor Rita Cartwright,” he said.

Campbell Charles bowed slightly toward Rita. “A lady doctor. How very unusual.”

“Isn’t it?” said Rita. “And yet here we are.”

“Dr Cartwright graduated from the London School of Medicine for Women,” said Hamish. “She is very accomplished.”

“Indeed,” said Campbell Charles, still sounding doubtful.

“I work at the Lady Bowen Lying-In Hospital for Women,” said Rita. “I am unable to register as a practicing physician in the colony at present, so I am employed as a pharmacist. I’m confident it will not be long before the restrictions are lifted.”

The manager’s lips curled upward only slightly as he handed them each a set of keys.

“Your rooms are upstairs and to the left,” he said. “Dinner is at seven in the dining hall. It is said to be one of the finest examples in the colony.”

He pointed to a large room to their left. Before the entrance to the larger room there was a small room with a bay window, two cosy armchairs and an occasional table.

“We call this the Reading Room,” said Campbell proudly.

Hamish and Rita looked past the reading room into an expansive space set with large round tables and chairs. They were still trying to take in the enormity of the dining hall when Campbell Charles directed their attention to the right of the entrance hall.

“There are also some suites on this floor,” he said. “Colonel Otis Winter and his nurse are permanent residents in one of them. In the others we accommodate families. As you can imagine, we are very busy over the Christmas season.”

“I find myself grateful we have come in February,” said Hamish. “I prefer

a more relaxing atmosphere. Dr Cartwright, on the other hand, is seeking excitement.”

Campbell Charles smiled condescendingly at Rita. “There’ll be enough of that this weekend, my dear,” he promised. “Celestine Dupont and her exhibition will satisfy your desires in that regard.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” said Rita.

Hamish was proud of her. She had shown uncharacteristic restraint in not bristling at the hotel manager’s condescension. He held her arm lightly. “Shall we?” he said, gently guiding her toward the stairs before she had time to change her mind about letting the hotel manager off.

Rita followed him graciously. “I’ll bring the book to you as soon as I have washed and changed,” she said. Hamish smiled. “No need,” he said.

They went into their adjoining rooms and Hamish stretched his aching arms.

“Come and look,” Rita cried from the next room. “I have my own balcony.”

Hamish joined her.

“I know,” he said. “Every room has one.”

Looking out over the sea wall, in one direction they could see a long stretch of ocean reaching to Burleigh Heads. In front of them, they could see across the passage to Stradbroke Island. They enjoyed the scene for a few moments before noticing the force of the wind on their skin.

Hamish brushed curly sand-coloured hair back from his face. His fringe was kept long to mask a scar down one side of his cheek, but at this moment it had been blown across his eyes and was caught in his mouth. “There is quite a blow,” he said. Rita helped him push back his hair. The proximity of her hands to his face made him want to hold her, but he pulled away instead. “Leave it,” he said, “I need to get inside out of the wind.”

While Hamish secured the shutters, Rita discarded her shoes and tested the plush carpet with her stockinged toes.

Hamish dodged past her to the door. “I’ll call for you in half an hour for dinner,” he said. Within seconds, Rita was standing before him, her hands held out with the Comte translation as if it were a sacrificial offering. Hamish scanned the cover and looked into her eyes. “I don’t want it,” he said.

She pushed it further toward him. "You won the bet. You must take it."

Hamish took the book from her hands and turned toward the door. Then he turned back again and held out the book.

"I have this translation of Comte, you might like to read while we are on holiday," he said, "if you are interested."

Rita smiled and took the book back.

"It's only a loan," he said.

"Of course," grinned Rita.