

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Singing Sands

Josephine Tey

About the Author

Josephine Tey is one of the best known and best loved of all crime writers. She began to write full-time after the successful publication of her first novel, *The Man in the Queue* (1929), which introduced Inspector Grant of Scotland Yard. In 1937 she returned to crime writing with *A Shilling for Candles*, but it wasn't until after the Second World War that the majority of her crime novels were published. Josephine Tey died in 1952, leaving her entire estate to the National Trust.

Praise for Josephine Tey

‘A detective story with a very considerable difference.
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‘As interesting and enjoyable a book as they will meet in a
month of Sundays’ *Observer*

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‘Suspense is achieved by unexpected twists and extremely
competent storytelling . . . credible and convincing’
Spectator

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‘Josephine Tey enjoys a category to herself, as a virtuoso in
the spurious . . . the nature of the deception on this
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among the best in the field’ *New Yorker*

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The Daughter of Time

THE SINGING SANDS

Josephine Tey



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The beasts that talk,
The streams that stand,
The stones that walk,
The singing sand . . .

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1

It was six o'clock of a March morning, and still dark. The long train came sidling through the scattered lights of the yard, clicking gently over the points. Into the glow of the signal cabin and out again. Under the solitary emerald among the rubies on the signal bridge. On towards the empty grey waste of platform that waited under the arcs.

The London mail at the end of its journey.

Five hundred miles of track lay behind it in the darkness all the way to Euston and last night. Five hundred miles of moonlit fields and sleeping villages; of black towns and unsleeping furnaces; rain, fog, and frost; snow flurry and flood; tunnel and viaduct. Now, in the six o'clock bleakness of a March morning the hills had risen round it and it was coming, casual-seeming and quiet, to rest after its long urgency. And only one person in all its crowded length did not sigh with relief at the realisation.

Of those who sighed two at least sighed with a gladness that bordered on passion. One of these was a passenger, and the other was a railway employee. The passenger was Alan Grant; and the railway employee was Murdo Gallacher.

Murdo Gallacher was a sleeping-car attendant, and the best-hated living creature between Thurso and Torquay. For twenty years Murdo had browbeaten the travelling public into acquiescence and blackmailed them into tribute. Monetary tribute, that is. Their vocal tribute was voluntary. To first-class passengers far and wide he was known as Yughourt. (Oh God, it's Old Yughourt! they would say as his sour face became visible through the steamy gloom of Euston.) The third-class passengers called him a variety of things, both frank and descriptive. What his colleagues called him is nobody's business. Only three people had ever got the better of Murdo: a cowhand from Texas, a lance-corporal of the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders, and an

unknown little Cockney woman in the third-class who had threatened to beat him over his bald head with a lemonade bottle. Neither rank nor achievement impressed Murdo: he hated one and resented the other; but he was greatly afraid of physical pain.

For twenty years Murdo Gallacher had done the absolute minimum. He had been bored by the job before he had been a week at it, but he had found it a rich lode and he had stayed to mine it. If you got morning tea from Murdo the tea would be weak, the biscuit soft, the sugar dirty, the tray slopped, and the spoon missing; but when Murdo came to collect the tray the protests which you had been rehearsing died on your lips. Now and then an Admiral of the Fleet or something like that would venture an opinion that it was damned awful tea, but the ruck smiled and paid up. For twenty years they had paid up, weary and browbeaten and blackmailed. And Murdo had collected. He was now the owner of a villa at Dunoon, a string of fried-fish shops in Glasgow, and a very nice bank balance. He might have retired years ago but he could not bear the thought of losing his full pension; so he endured the boredom a little longer and evened things up by not bothering with early morning teas unless passengers suggested the thing themselves; and sometimes, if he was very sleepy, forgetting about the order anyway. He hailed the end of each journey with the relief of a man who is working out his sentence and has only a short time left.

Alan Grant, watching the lights of the yard float past beyond the steamed-up window and listening to that gentle sound of the wheels clicking over the points, was glad because the end of the journey was the end of a night's suffering. Grant had spent the night trying not to open the door into the corridor. Wide awake, he had lain on his expensive pallet and sweated by the hour. He had sweated not because the compartment was too hot—the air-conditioning worked to a marvel—but because (O Misery! O

Shame! O Mortification!) the compartment represented A Small Enclosed Space. To the normal eye the compartment was just a neat little room with a bunk, a wash-basin, a mirror, luggage racks in assorted sizes, shelves that appeared or disappeared as bidden, a fine little drawer for one's hypothetical valuables, and a hook for one's presumably unhocked watch. But to the initiate, the sad and haunted initiate, it was A Small Enclosed Space.

Overwork, the doctor called it.

'Sit back and browse for a little,' the doctor had said, crossing one elegant Wimpole Street leg over the other and admiring the hang of it.

Grant could not imagine himself sitting back, and he considered browsing a loathsome word and a contemptible occupation. Browsing. A fattening-up for the table. A mindless satisfaction of animal desires. Browse, indeed! The very sound of the word was an offence. A snore.

'Have you any hobbies?' the doctor had asked, his admiring glance going on to his shoes.

'No,' Grant had said shortly.

'What do you do when you go on holiday?'

'I fish.'

'You fish?' said the psychologist, seduced from his Narcissian gazing. 'And you don't consider that a hobby?'

'Certainly not.'

'What is it, then, would you say?'

'Something between a sport and a religion.'

And at that Wimpole Street had smiled and had looked quite human; and assured him that his cure was only a matter of time. Time and relaxation.

Well, at least he had managed not to open that door last night. But the triumph had been dearly bought. He was drained and empty; a walking nothingness. 'Don't fight it,' the doctor had said. 'If you want to be in the open, go into the open.' But to have opened that door last night would have meant a defeat so mortal that he felt there would be

no recovery. It would have been an unconditional surrender to the forces of Unreason. So he had lain and sweated. And the door had stayed closed.

But now, in the unrewarding dark of early morning, in the bleak anonymous dark, he was as without virtue as if he had lost. 'I suppose this is how women feel after long labour,' he thought, with that fundamental detachment which Wimpole Street had noted and approved. 'But at least they have a brat to show for it. What have I got?'

His pride, he supposed. Pride that he had not opened a door that there was no reason to open. Oh God!

He opened the door now. Reluctantly; and appreciating the irony of that reluctance. Loath to face the morning and life. Wishing that he could throw himself back on that rumpled couch and sleep and sleep and sleep.

He picked up the two suitcases which Yughourt had not offered to do anything about, tucked the bundle of unread periodicals under his arm, and went out into the corridor. The little vestibule at the end of it was blocked almost to the roof with the luggage of the more lavish tippers, so that the door was nearly invisible; and Grant moved on into the second of the first-class coaches. The forward end of that too was stacked waist-deep with privileged obstacles, and he began to walk down the corridor towards the door at the rear end. As he did so Yughourt himself came from his cubby-hole at the far end to make sure that Number B Seven was aware that they were nearly at the terminus. It was the acknowledged right of Number B Seven, or of any Number whatever, to leave the train at his leisure after arrival; but Yughourt had of course no intention of hanging round while someone had his sleep out. So he knocked loudly on the door of B Seven and went in.

As Grant came level with the open door Yughourt was shaking B Seven, who was lying fully dressed on the bunk, by the cloth of his sleeve and saying in choked exasperation: 'Come on, sir, come on! We're practically in.'

He looked up as Grant's shadow darkened the door and said disgustedly: 'Tight as an owl!'

The compartment was so solid with the reek of whisky that you could stand a walking-stick in it, Grant noticed. Automatically he picked up the newspaper that Yughourt's shaking had dislodged on to the compartment floor, and straightened the man's jacket.

'Can't you recognise a dead man when you see one?' he said. Through the haze of his tiredness he heard his own voice say it: Can't you recognise a dead man when you see one? As if it were a thing of no moment. Can't you recognise a primrose when you see one? Can't you recognise a Rubens when you see one? Can't you recognise the Albert Memorial when——

'Dead!' said Yughourt in a kind of howl. 'He can't be! I'm due to go off.'

That, Grant noted from his far-away stance, was all that it meant to Mr Blast His Soul Gallacher. Someone had taken leave of life, had gone out from warmth and feeling and perception to nothingness, and all it meant to Damn His Eyes Gallacher was that he would be late in getting off duty.

'What'll I do?' said Yughourt. 'How was I to know anyone was drinking themselves to death in my coach! What'll I do?'

'Report to the police, of course,' Grant said, and for the first time was conscious of life again as a place where one might have pleasure. It gave him a twisted macabre pleasure that Yughourt had at last met his match: the man who would get out of tipping him; and that that man should be the one to put him to more inconvenience than anyone had succeeded in doing in all his twenty years in the railway service.

He looked again at the young face under the rumpled dark hair, and went away down the corridor. Dead men were not his responsibility. He had had his fill of dead men in his time,

and although he had never quite lost a heart-contraction at its irrevocability, death had no longer power to shock him.

The wheels ceased their clicking and instead came the long low hollow sound that a train makes coming into a railway station. Grant lowered the window and watched the grey ribbon of the platform run past. The cold struck him like a blow in the face and he began to shiver uncontrollably.

He dropped the two suitcases on the platform and stood there (chattering like a blasted monkey, he thought resentfully) and wished that it were possible to die temporarily. In some last dim recess of his mind he knew that to dither with cold and nerves on a station platform at six of a winter morning was in the final resort a privilege; a corollary to being alive; but oh, how wonderful it would be to achieve temporary death and pick up life again at some happier moment.

‘To the hotel, sir?’ the porter said. ‘Yes, I’ll take them over when I’ve seen to this barrow-load.’

He stumbled up the steps and across the bridge. The wood sounded drumlike and hollow under his tread, great bursts of steam billowed up round him from below, noises clanged and echoed from the dark vault about him. They were all wrong about hell, he thought. Hell wasn’t a nice cosy place where you fried. Hell was a great cold echoing cave where there was neither past nor future; a black, echoing desolation. Hell was concentrated essence of a winter morning after a sleepless night of self-distaste.

He stepped out into the empty courtyard, and the sudden quiet soothed him. The darkness was cold but clean. A hint of greyness in its quality spoke of morning, and a breath of snow in its cleanness spoke of the ‘high tops’. Presently, when it was daylight, Tommy would come to the hotel and pick him up and they would drive away into the great clean Highland country; away into the wide, unchanging, undemanding Highland world where people died only in

their beds and no one bothered to shut a door anyhow because it was too much trouble.

In the hotel dining-room the lights were on only at one end, and into the gloom of the unlit spaces marched ranks of naked baize-topped tables. He had never before, now he came to think of it, seen restaurant tables undressed. They were really very humble shabby things stripped of their white armour. Like waiters without their shirt-fronts.

A child in a black uniform dress and a green jersey coat embroidered with flowers poked her head round a screen and seemed startled to see him. He asked what he might have for breakfast. She took a cruet from the sideboard and set it on the cloth in front of him with an air of ringing the curtain up.

‘I’ll send Mary to you,’ she said kindly, and went away behind the screen.

Service, he thought, had lost its starch and its high glaze. It had become what housewives call rough-dried. But now and then a promise to send Mary to one made up for embroidered jerseys and similar infelicities.

Mary was a plump calm creature who would inevitably have been a Nannie if Nannies were not out of fashion, and under her ministrations Grant felt himself relaxing as a child does in the presence of a benevolent authority. It was a fine state of affairs, he thought bitterly, when he needed reassurance so badly that a fat hotel waitress could provide it.

But he ate what she put in front of him and began to feel better. Presently she came back, removed the slices of cut bread, and put in their place a plate of morning rolls.

‘Here’s the baps to you,’ she said. ‘They’ve just this minute come. They’re poor things nowadays. No chew in them at all. But they’re better than that bread.’

She pushed the marmalade nearer to his hand, looked to see if he needed more milk, and went away again. Grant, who had had no intention of eating any more, buttered a

bap and reached for one of the unread papers from last night's store. What came to his hand was a London evening paper, and he looked at it with a puzzled lack of recognition. Had he bought an evening paper? Surely he had read the evening paper at the normal hour of four o'clock in the afternoon. Why buy another at seven o'clock in the evening? Had buying an evening paper become a reflex action; as automatic as brushing one's teeth? Lighted bookstall: evening paper. Was that the way it worked?

The paper was a *Signal*; the afternoon voice of the morning *Clarion*. Grant looked again at the headlines which he had absorbed yesterday afternoon and thought how constant in kind they were. It was yesterday's paper, but it might equally be last year's or next month's. The headlines would for ever be the ones that he was looking at now: the Cabinet row, the dead body of the blonde in Maida Vale, the Customs prosecution, the hold-up, the arrival of an American actor, the street accident. He pushed the thing away from him, but as he reached out a hand for the next in the pile he noticed that the blank space for the Stop Press news bore scribblings in pencil. He turned the paper round so that he could see what someone had been calculating. But it seemed that the scribble was not after all some newsboy's hasty reckoning of the odds. It was someone's attempt at verse. That it was an original work and not an attempt to remember some verse already known was apparent in the desultory writing and in the fact that the writer had filled the two missing lines by ticking in the required number of feet; a trick that Grant himself had used in the days when he had been the best sonnet-writer in the sixth form.

But this time the poem was none of his.

And suddenly he knew where the paper had come from. He had acquired it by an action much more automatic than buying an evening paper. He had put it under his arm with the others when he picked it up as it slipped to the floor of

compartment B Seven. His conscious mind—or as much of it as was conscious after last night—was concerned with the disarray that Yughourt was making of a helpless man. His only deliberate action had been his reproof to Yughourt in his straightening of the man's jacket, and for that he had needed a hand, and so the paper had gone under his arm with the rest.

So the young man with the tumbled black hair and the reckless eyebrows had been a poet, had he?

Grant looked with interest at the pencilled words. The writer had designed his effort in eight lines, it seemed, but had not been able to think of the fifth and sixth. So that the scribble read:

*The beasts that talk,
The streams that stand,
The stones that walk,
The singing sand,
:
:
:
:
That guard the way
To Paradise.*

Well, it was odd enough, in all conscience. The beginnings of delirium tremens?

It was understandable that the owner of that very individual face would see nothing so ordinary in his alcoholic dreams as pink rats. Nature itself would turn cartwheels for the young man with the reckless eyebrows. What was the Paradise that was guarded by so terrifying a strangeness? Oblivion? Why had he needed oblivion so badly that it represented Paradise to him? That he had been prepared to run the known horror of the approaches to it?

Grant ate the fine fresh bap that there was 'no chew in' and considered the matter. The writing was unformed but not at all shaky; it looked the writing of an adult who wrote

an unformed hand not because his co-ordination was bad but because he had never quite grown up. Because in essentials he was still the schoolboy who had originally written that way. This theory was confirmed by the shape of the capital letters, which were made in pure copy-book form. Odd, that so individual a creature had had no desire to impress his individuality on the form of his letters. Very few people indeed did not adapt the copy-book form to their own liking; to their own unconscious need.

One of Grant's milder interests had for years been this business of handwriting; and in his work he had found the results of his long observation greatly useful. Now and then, of course, he was shaken out of any complacency about his deductions—a multiple murderer who dissolved his victims in acid turned out to have handwriting remarkable only for its extreme logic; which after all was perhaps appropriate enough—but in general, handwriting provided a very good index to a man. And in general a man who continued to use the schoolboy form for his letters did so for one of two reasons: either he was unintelligent, or he wrote so little that the writing had had no chance of absorbing his personality.

Considering the high degree of intelligence that had put into words that nightmare hazard at the gates of Paradise, it was obvious that it was not lack of personality that had kept the young man's writing adolescent. His personality—his vitality and interest—had gone into something else.

Into what?

Something active, something extrovert. Something in which writing was used for messages like: 'Meet me Cumberland bar, 6.45, Tony', or for filling up a log.

But he was introvert enough to have analysed and put into words that country-of-the-moon on the way to his Paradise. Introvert enough to have stood apart and looked at it; to have wanted to record it.

Grant sat in a pleasant warm daze, chewing and considering. He noted the tightly-joined tops of the n's and m's. A liar? Or just secretive? A curiously cautious trait to appear in the writing of a man with those eyebrows. It was a strange thing how much the meaning of a countenance depended on eyebrows. One change of degree in the angle this way or that and the whole effect was different. Film magnates took nice little girls from Balham and Muswell Hill and rubbed out their eyebrows and painted in other ones and they became straightway mysterious creatures from Omsk and Tomsk. He had once been told by Trabb, the cartoonist, that it was his eyebrows that had lost Ernie Price his chance of being Prime Minister. 'They didn't like his eyebrows,' Trabb had said, blinking owlishly over his beer. 'Why? Don't ask me. I just draw. Because they looked bad-tempered, perhaps. They don't like a bad-tempered man. Don't trust him. But that's what lost him his chance, take it from me. His eyebrows. They didn't like 'em.' Bad-tempered eyebrows, supercilious eyebrows, calm eyebrows, worried eyebrows—it was the eyebrows that gave a face its keynote. And it was the slant of the black eyebrows that had given that thin white face on the pillow its reckless look even in death.

Well, the man had been sober when he wrote those words, that at least was clear. That toper's oblivion in compartment B Seven—the fugged air, the rucked blankets, the empty bottle rolling about on the floor, the overturned glass on the shelf—may have been the Paradise he sought, but he was sober when he blue-printed the way to it.

The singing sand.

Uncanny but somehow attractive.

Singing sand. Surely there actually were singing sands somewhere? It had a vaguely familiar sound. Singing sands. They cried out under your feet as you walked. Or the wind did it, or something. A man's forearm in a checked tweed

sleeve reached in front of him and took a bap from the plate.

'You seem to be doing yourself very well,' Tommy said, pulling out a chair and sitting down. He split the bap and buttered it. 'There's no chew in these things at all nowadays. When I was a boy you sank your teeth in them and pulled. It was evens which came away first: your teeth or the bit of bap. But if your teeth won you really had something worth having. A nice floury, yeasty mouthful that would last you for a couple of minutes. They don't taste of anything nowadays, and you could fold them in two and put the whole thing in your mouth without any danger of choking yourself.'

Grant looked at him in silence and with affection. There was no intimacy so close, he thought, as the intimacy that bound you to a man with whom you'd shared a Prep. school dorm. They had shared their public school days too, but it was Prep. school that he remembered each time he encountered Tommy anew. Perhaps because in all essentials that fresh pinky-brown face with the round ingenuous blue eyes was the same face that used to appear above a crookedly-buttoned maroon blazer. Tommy had always buttoned his blazer with a fine insouciance.

It was so like Tommy not to waste time or vitality on conventional inquiries as to his journey and his health. Neither would Laura, of course. They would accept him as he stood; as if he had been there for some time. As if he had never gone away at all but was still on his previous visit. It was an extraordinarily restful atmosphere to sink back into.

'How is Laura?'

'Never better. Putting on a bit of weight. At least that's what she says. Don't see it myself. I never liked skinny women.'

There had been a time, when they were both about twenty, when Grant had thought of marrying his cousin Laura; and she, he had been sure, had had thoughts of

marrying him. But before any word had been said the magic had faded and they were back on the old friendly footing. The magic had been part of the long intoxication of a Highland summer. Part of hill mornings smelling of pine needles, and of endless twilights sweet with the scent of clover. For Grant his cousin Laura had always been part of the happiness of summer holidays; they had graduated together from burn-paddling to their first fishing-rods, and together they had first walked the Larig and together had stood for the first time on the top of Braeriach. But it was not until that summer at the end of their adolescence that the happiness had crystallised into Laura herself; that the whole of summer was focused into the person of Laura Grant. He still had a slight lifting of the heart when he thought of that summer. It had the light perfection, the iridescence, of a bubble. And because no word had been said the bubble would never now be broken. It stayed light and perfect and iridescent and poised, where they had left it. They had both gone on to other things; to other people. Laura indeed had skipped from one person to the next one with the bright indifference of a child playing hop-scotch. And then he had taken her to that Old Boys' dance. And she had met Tommy Rankin. And that had been that.

'What's the fuss at the station?' Tommy asked. 'Ambulances and things.'

'A man died on the train. I expect it is that.'

'Oh,' said Tommy, dismissing it. 'Not your funeral this time,' he added in a congratulatory way.

'No. Not my funeral, thank Heaven.'

'They'll miss you on the Embankment.'

'I doubt it.'

'Mary,' said Tommy, 'I could do with a pot of good strong tea.' He flicked the plate that held the baps with a contemptuous forefinger. 'And another couple of these poor bargains.' He turned his serious childlike gaze on Grant and