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Opening Extract from...

Flood of Fire

Written by Amitav Ghosh

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To Debbie
for our 25th

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75°
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Shanghai
Chusan (Zhoushan)
Ningbo (Ningpo)
HIMALAYAS
NEPAL
INDIA
Delhi
Ganges River
Ghazipur
Nayanpur
Benares
BIHAR
Rangpur
ASSAM
Mekong River
Yangtze River
Amoy (Xiamen)
Canton (Guangzhou)
Whampoa (Huangpu)
Kowloon
Hong Kong
Macau
Pearl River
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PACIFIC OCEAN
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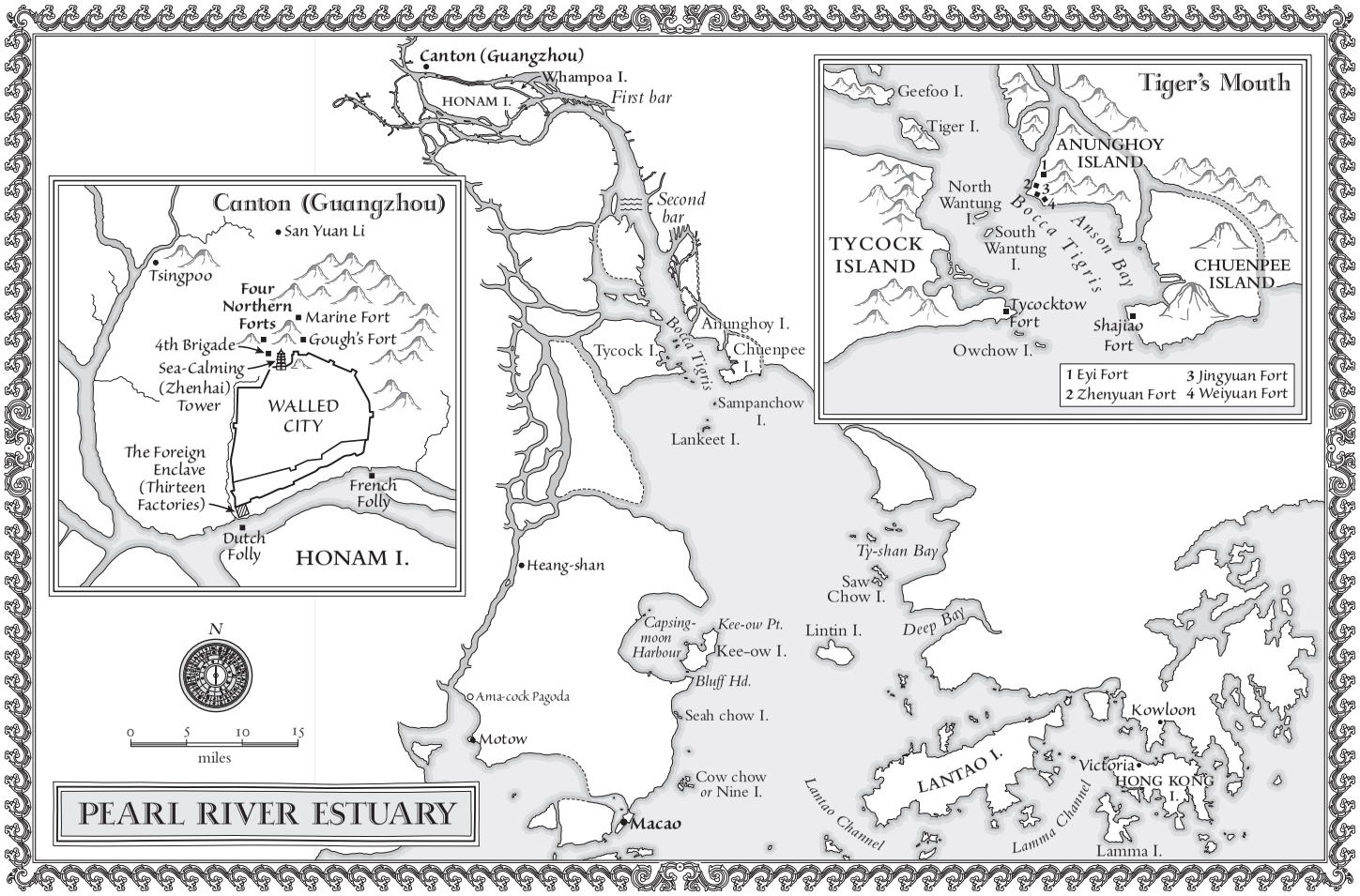
Canton (Guangzhou)
Whampoa I.
HONAM I.
First bar
Second bar
Anunghoy I.
Chuenpee I.
Tycock I.
Bocca Tigris
Sampanchow I.
Lankeet I.
Heang-shan
Ty-shan Bay
Saw Chow I.
Lintin I.
Deep Bay
Capsing-moon Harbour
Kee-ow Pt.
Kee-ow I.
Bluff Hd.
Ama-cock Pagoda
Seah chow I.
Motow
Cow chow or Nine I.
Macao
LANTAO I.
Lantao Channel
Lamma Channel
Victoria
HONG KONG I.
Kowloon
Lamma I.
Canton (Guangzhou)
San Yuan Li
Tsingpoo
Four Northern Forts
Marine Fort
4th Brigade
Gough's Fort
Sea-Calming (Zhenhai) Tower
WALLED CITY
The Foreign Enclave (Thirteen Factories)
French Folly
Dutch Folly
HONAM I.
Tiger's Mouth
Geefoo I.
Tiger I.
ANUNGHOY ISLAND
North Wantung I.
South Wantung I.
TYCOCK ISLAND
Bocca Tigris
Anson Bay
CHUENPEE ISLAND
Tycocktow Fort
Shajtao Fort
Owchow I.
1 Eyi Fort
2 Zhenyuan Fort
3 Jingyuan Fort
4 Weiyuan Fort
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miles
PEARL RIVER ESTUARY

One

Havildar Kesri Singh was the kind of soldier who liked to take the lead, particularly on days like this one, when his battalion was marching through a territory that had already been subdued and the advance-guard's job was only to fly the paltan's colours and put on their best parade-faces for the benefit of the crowds that had gathered by the roadside.

The villagers who lined the way were simple people and Kesri didn't need to look into their eyes to know that they were staring at him in wide-eyed wonder. East India Company sepoys were an unusual sight in this remote part of Assam: to have a full paltan of the Bengal Native Infantry's 25th Regiment – the famous 'Pacheesi' – marching through the rice-fields was probably as great a tamasha as most of them would witness in a year, or even a decade.

Kesri had only to look ahead to see dozens of people flocking to the roadside: farmers, old women, cowherds, children. They were racing up to watch, as if fearful of missing the show: little did they know that the spectacle would continue for hours yet.

Right behind Kesri's horse, following on foot, was the so-called Russud Guard – the 'foraging party'. Behind them were the camp-followers – inaccurately named, since they actually marched ahead of the troops and far exceeded them in number, there being more than two thousand of them to a mere six hundred sepoys. Their caravan was like a moving city, a long train of ox-drawn bylees carrying people of all sorts – pandits and milk-women, shopkeepers and banjara grain-sellers, even a troupe of bazar-girls. Animals too there were aplenty – noisy flocks of sheep, goats and bullocks, and a couple of elephants as well, carrying the officers' baggage and the furniture for their mess, the tables and chairs tied on with their legs

in the air, wriggling and shaking like upended beetles. There was even a travelling temple, trundling along atop a cart.

Only after all of this had passed would a rhythmic drumbeat make itself heard and a cloud of dust appear. The ground would reverberate, in time with the beat, as the first rank of sepoys came into view, ten abreast, at the head of a long, winding river of dark topees and flashing bayonets. The sight would send the villagers scurrying for cover; they would watch from the shelter of trees and bushes while the sepoys marched by, piped along by fifers and drummers.

Few were the tamashas that could compare with the spectacle of the Bengal Native Infantry on the march. Every member of the paltan was aware of this – dandia-wallahs, naach-girls, bangy-burdars, syces, mess-consummers, berry-wallahs, bhisties – but none more so than Havildar Kesri Singh, whose face served as the battalion's figurehead when he rode at the head of the column.

It was Kesri's belief that to put on a good show was a part of soldiering and it caused him no shame to admit that it was principally because of his looks that he was so often chosen to lead the march. He could hardly be held to blame if his years of campaigning had earned him a patchwork of scars to improve his appearance – it was not as if he had asked to be grazed by a sword in such a way as to add a pout to his lower lip; nor had he invited the cut that was etched upon the leather-dark skin of his cheek, like a finely drawn tattoo.

But it wasn't as if Kesri's was the most imposing face in the paltan. He could certainly look forbidding enough when he wanted to, with his scimitar-like moustaches and heavy brow, but there were others who far surpassed him in this regard. It was in his manner of wearing the regimental uniform that he yielded to none: the heft of his thighs was such that the black fabric of his trowsers hugged them like a second skin, outlining his musculature; his chest was wide enough that the 'wings' on his shoulders looked like weapons rather than ornaments; and there wasn't a man in the paltan on whom the scarlet coattee, with its bright yellow facings, showed to better advantage. As for the dark topee, tall as a beehive, he was not alone in thinking that it sat better on his head than on any other.

Kesri knew that it was a matter of some resentment among the battalion's other NCOs that he was picked to lead the column more often than any of his fellow sepoy-afsars. But their complaints caused him no undue concern: he was not a man to put much store by the opinions of his peers; they were dull stolid men for the most part, and it seemed only natural to him that they should be jealous of someone such as himself.

There was only one sepoy in the paltan whom Kesri held in high regard and he was Subedar Nirbhay Singh, the highest ranking Indian in the battalion. No matter that a subedar was outranked, on paper, by even the juniormost English subaltern – by virtue of the force of his personality, as well as his family connections, Subedar Nirbhay Singh's hold on the paltan was such that even Major Wilson, the battalion commander, hesitated to cross him.

In the eyes of the men Subedar Nirbhay Singh was not just their seniormost NCO but also their patriarch, for he was a scion of the Rajput family that had formed the paltan's core for three generations. His grandfather was the duffadar who had helped to raise the regiment when it was first formed, sixty years before: he had served as its first subedar and many of his descendants had held the post after him. The present subedar had himself inherited his rank from his older brother, who had retired a couple of years before – Subedar Bhyro Singh.

Theirs was a landowning family from the outskirts of the town of Ghazipur, near Benares. Since most of the battalion's sepoys hailed from the same area and were of the same caste, many were inevitably connected to the subedar's clan – indeed a number of them were the sons of men who had served under his father and grandfather.

Kesri was one of the few members of the paltan who lacked this advantage. The village of his birth, Nayanpur, was on the furthest periphery of the battalion's catchment area and his only connection to the subedar's family was through his youngest sister, Deeti, who was married to a nephew of his. Kesri had been instrumental in arranging this marriage, and the connection had played no small part in his rise to the rank of havildar.

Now, at the age of thirty-five, after nineteen years in the paltan, Kesri had a good ten or fifteen years of active service left and he

fully expected to rise soon to the rank of jamadar, with Subedar Nirbhay Singh's support. And after that, he could see no reason why he should not, in time, become the battalion's subedar himself: he did not know of a single sepoy-afsar who was his equal, in intelligence, vigour and breadth of experience. It was only his rightful due.

*

In the course of the last several months Zachary Reid had met with so many reverses that he did not allow himself to believe that his ordeal was almost over until he saw the *Calcutta Gazette*'s report on the inquiry that had cleared his name.

> 5th June, 1839
> . . . and this review of the week's notable events would not be complete without a mention of a recent Judicial Inquiry in which one Mr Zachary Reid, a twenty-one-year-old sailor from Baltimore, Maryland, was acquitted of all wrongdoing in the matter of the untoward incidents on the schooner *Ibis*, in the month of September last year.
>
> Regular readers of the *Calcutta Gazette* need scarcely be reminded that the *Ibis* was bound for Mauritius, with two Convicts and a contingent of Coolies on board, when Disturbances broke out leading to the murder of the chief Sirdar of the immigrants, one Bhyro Singh, a former subedar of the Bengal Native Infantry who had numerous Commendations for bravery to his credit.
>
> Subsequent to the murder, the *Ibis* was hit by a powerful Storm, at the end of which it was found that a gang of five men had also murdered the vessel's first mate, Mr John Crowle, and had thereafter effected an escape in a longboat. The ringleader was the Serang of the crew, a Mug from the Arakan, and his gang included the vessel's two convicts, one of whom was the former Raja of Raskhali, Neel Rattan Halder (the sensation that was caused in the city's Native Quarters last year, by the Raja's trial and conviction on charges of forgery, is no doubt

still fresh in the memory of most of Calcutta's European residents).

In the aftermath of the storm the stricken *Ibis* was fortunate to be intercepted by the brigantine *Amboyna* which escorted her to Port Louis without any further loss of life. On the schooner's arrival the guards who had accompanied the Coolies proceeded to lodge a complaint against Mr Reid, accusing him of conspiring in the flight of the five badmashes, one of whom, a coolie from the district of Ghazipore, was the subedar's murderer. These charges being of the utmost gravity, it was decided that the matter would be referred to the authorities in Calcutta, with Mr Reid being sent back to India in Judicial Custody.

Unfortunately for Mr Reid, he has had to endure a wait of several months after reaching Bengal, largely because of the ill-health of the principal witness, Mr Chillingworth, the captain of the *Ibis*. Mr Chillingworth's inability to travel was, we are told, the principal reason for the repeated postponements of the Inquiry . . .

After one of those postponements, Zachary had thought seriously about calling it quits and making a getaway. To leave Calcutta would not have been difficult: he was not under physical confinement and he could easily have found a berth, as a crewman, on one of the ships in the port. Many of these vessels were short-handed and he knew he would be taken on without too many questions being asked.

But Zachary had signed a bond, pledging to appear before the Committee of Inquiry, and to renege on that promise would have been to incriminate himself. Another, equally weighty consideration, was his hard-won mate's licence, which he had surrendered to the Harbourmaster's office in Calcutta. To abandon the licence would have meant forfeiting all that he had gained since leaving Baltimore, on the *Ibis* – gains that included a rise in rank from ship's carpenter to second mate. And were he indeed to return to

America to obtain new papers, it was perfectly possible that his old records would be dug up which would mean that he might once again have the word 'Black' stamped against his name, thereby forever barring his path to a berth as a ship's officer.

Zachary's was a nature in which ambition and resolve were leavened by a good measure of prudence: instead of recklessly yielding to his impatience, he had carried on as best he could, eking out a living by doing odd jobs in the Kidderpore shipyards; sleeping in a succession of flea-ridden flop-houses while he waited for the Inquiry to begin. A tireless self-improver, he had devoted his spare time to reading books on navigation and seamanship.

> The Inquiry into the *Ibis* incident commenced with a well-attended Public Hearing in the Town Hall. Presiding over it was the esteemed jurist, Mr Justice Kendalbushe of the Supreme Court. The first witness to be called was none other than Mr Chillingworth. He provided extensive testimony in Mr Reid's favour, holding him blameless for the troubles of the voyage which he ascribed entirely to the late Mr Crowle, the first mate. This individual, he said, was of a notoriously fractious and unruly disposition and had badly mishandled the vessel's affairs, creating disaffection among the Coolies and the Crew.
>
> Next to appear was Mr Doughty, formerly of the Bengal River Pilots Service. Mr Doughty bore eloquent witness to the sterling qualities of Mr Reid's character, declaring him to be exactly the kind of White youth most urgently needed in the East: honest and hard-working, cheerful in demeanour and modest in spirit.

Kind, crusty old Doughty! Through Zachary's long months of waiting in Calcutta, Mr Doughty was the only person he had been able to count on. Once every week, and sometimes twice, he had accompanied Zachary to the Harbourmaster's office, to make sure that the matter of the Inquiry was not filed away and forgotten.

The Committee was then presented with two affidavits, the first of which was from Mr Benjamin Burnham, the owner of the *Ibis*. Mr Burnham is of course well known to the readers of the *Gazette* as one of the foremost merchants of this city and a passionate advocate of Free Trade.

Before reading out the affidavit, Mr Justice Kendalbushe observed that Mr Burnham was currently away in China else he would certainly have been present at the Inquiry. It appears that he has been detained by the Crisis that was precipitated earlier this year by the intemperate actions of the newly appointed Governor of Canton, Commissioner Lin. Since the Crisis has yet to be resolved it seems likely that Mr Burnham will remain a while yet on the shores of the Celestial Empire so that Captain Charles Elliot, Her Majesty's Representative and Plenipotentiary, may avail of his sage counsel.

Mr Burnham's affidavit was found to be an eloquent attestation to Mr Reid's good character, describing him as an honest worker, clean and virile in body, wholesome in appearance and Christian in morals. After the affidavit had been read out to the Committee Mr Justice Kendalbushe was heard to remark that Mr Burnham's testimony must necessarily carry great weight with the Committee, since he has long been a leader of the community and a pillar of the Church, renowned as much for his philanthropy as for his passionate advocacy of Free Trade. Nor did he neglect to mention Mr Burnham's wife, Mrs Catherine Burnham, who is renowned in her own right as one of this city's leading hostesses as well as a prominent supporter of a number of Improving Causes.

The second affidavit was from Mr Burnham's gomusta, Baboo Nob Kissin Pander who was also on board the *Ibis* at the time of the Incident, in the capacity of Supercargo. He too is currently in China, with Mr Burnham.

The Baboo's testimony was found to corroborate Mr Chillingworth's account of the Incident in every respect. Its phrasing however was most singular being filled with outlandish expressions of the sort that are so beloved of the Baboos of this city. In one of his flights of fancy Mr Burnham's gomusta proved himself to be a veritable chukker-batty, describing Mr Reid as the 'effulgent emissary' of a Gentoo deity . . .

Zachary remembered how his face had burned as Mr Kendalbushe was reading out that sentence. It was almost as if the ever enigmatic Baboo Nob Kissin were standing there himself, in his saffron robe, clutching his matronly bosom and wagging his enormous head.

In the time that Zachary had known him, the Baboo had undergone a startling change, becoming steadily more womanly, especially in relation to Zachary whom he seemed to regard much as a doting mother might look upon a favourite son. Bewildering though this was to Zachary he had reason to be grateful for it too, for the Baboo, despite his oddities, was a person of many resources and had come to his aid on several occasions.

Such being the testimonials accorded to the young seafarer, the reader may well imagine the eagerness with which Mr Reid's appearance was awaited. And when at last he was summoned to the stand he did not disappoint in any respect: he was found to be more a Grecian than a Gentoo deity, ivory-complexioned and dark-haired, clean-limbed and sturdily built. Subjected to lengthy questioning, he answered steadily and without hesitation, producing a most favourable impression on the Committee.

Many of the questions that were directed at Mr Reid concerned the fate of the five fugitives who had escaped from the *Ibis* on the night of the storm, in one of the vessel's longboats. When asked whether there was any possibility of their having survived, Mr Reid replied that there was not the slightest doubt in

his mind that they had all perished. Moreover, he said, he had seen incontestable proof of their demise with his own eyes, in the form of their capsized boat, which was found far out to sea, with its bottom stove in.

These details were fully corroborated by Captain Chillingworth, who similarly affirmed that there was not the remotest possibility of any of the fugitives having survived. These tidings caused a considerable stir in the Native Section of the Hall, where a good number of the late Raja of Raskhali's relatives had foregathered, including his young son . . .

It was at this point in the proceedings that Zachary had understood why the courtroom was so crowded: many friends and relatives of the late Raja had flocked there, hoping, vainly, to hear something that might allow them to nurture the hope that he was still alive. But Zachary had no comfort to offer them: in his mind he was certain that the Raja and the other four fugitives had died during their attempted escape.

When questioned about the murder of Subedar Bhyro Singh Mr Reid confirmed that he had personally witnessed the killing, as had many others. It had occurred in the course of a flogging, when the subedar, on the Captain's orders, was administering sixty lashes to one of the coolies. Being a man of unusual strength the coolie had broken free of his bindings and had strangled the subedar with his own whip. It had happened in an instant, said Mr Reid, before hundreds of eyes; that was why Captain Chillingworth had been obliged to sentence him to death, by hanging. But ere the sentence could be carried out, a tempest had broken upon the *Ibis*.

Mr Reid's testimony on this matter caused another Commotion in the Native Section, for it appears that a good number of the subedar's kinsmen were also in attendance . . .

Bhyro Singh's relatives were so loud in their expressions of outrage that everyone, including Zachary, had glanced in their direction. They were about a dozen in number and from the look of them Zachary had guessed that many of them were former sepoys, like those who had travelled on the *Ibis* as the coolies' guards and supervisors.

Zachary had often wondered at the almost fanatical devotion that Bhyro Singh inspired in these men. They would have torn his killer limb from limb that day on the *Ibis*, if they hadn't been held back by the officers. It was clear from their faces now that they were still hungering for revenge.

At the conclusion of the Hearing the Committee retired to an antechamber. After a brief deliberation, Mr Justice Kendalbushe returned to announce that Mr Zachary Reid had been cleared of all wrong-doing. The verdict was greeted with applause by certain sections of the courtroom.

Later, when asked about his plans for the future, Mr Reid was heard to say that he intends soon to depart for the China coast . . .

And that should have been the end of it . . .

But just as he was about to go off to celebrate with Mr Doughty, Zachary was accosted by a clerk of the court who handed him a wad of bills for various expenses: the biggest was for his passage from Mauritius to India. Together the bills amounted to a sum of almost one hundred rupees.

'But I can't pay that!' cried Zachary. 'I don't even have five rupees in my pocket.'

'Well, I am sorry to inform you, sir,' said the clerk, in a tone that was anything but apologetic, 'that your mate's licence will not be restored until the bills are all cleared.'

So what should have been a celebration turned instead into a wake: ale had never tasted as bitter as it did to Zachary that night.

'What'm I going to do, Mr Doughty? Without my licence how am I to earn a hundred rupees? That's almost fifty silver dollars

– it'll take me more than a year to save that much from the jobs I've been doing here in Calcutta.'

Mr Doughty scratched his large, plum-like nose as he thought this over. After several sips of ale, he said: 'Now tell me, Reid – am I right to think that you were trained as a shipwright?'

'Yes, sir. I apprenticed at Gardiner's shipyard, in Baltimore. One of the world's best.'

'D'you think you're still up to snuff with your hammer and saw?'

'I certainly am.'

'Then I may know of some work for you.'

Zachary's ears perked up as Mr Doughty told him about the job: a shipwright was needed to refurbish a houseboat that had been awarded to Mr Burnham during the arbitration of the former Raja of Raskhali's estate. The vessel was now moored near Mr Burnham's Calcutta mansion. Having been long neglected the budgerow had fallen into a state of disrepair and was badly in need of refurbishment.

'Wait,' said Zachary, 'is that the houseboat on which we had dinner with the Raja last year?'

'Exactly,' said Mr Doughty. 'But the vessel's pretty much a dilly-wreck now. It'll take a lot of bunnowing to make her ship-shape again. Mrs Burnham bent my ear about it a couple of days ago. Said she was looking for a mystery.'

'A "mystery"?' said Zachary. 'What the devil do you mean, Mr Doughty?'

Mr Doughty chuckled. 'Still the greenest of griffins, aren't you, Reid? It's about time you learnt a bit of our Indian zubben. "Mystery" is the word we use here for carpenters, craftsmen and such like – men such as yourself. You think you're up for it? The tuncaw will be good of course – should be enough to clear your debts.'

A great wave of relief swept through Zachary. 'Why yes, Mr Doughty! Of course I am up for it: you can count on me!'

Zachary would willingly have started work the next morning, but it turned out that Mrs Burnham was preoccupied with the arrangements for a journey upcountry: her daughter had been advised to leave Calcutta for reasons of health, so she was taking her to a hill-station called Hazaribagh where her parents had an estate. Between this and her many social obligations and improving

causes, Mrs Burnham was so busy that it took Mr Doughty several days to get a word in with her. He finally managed to catch up with her at a lecture that she had arranged for a recently arrived English doctor.

'Oh, it was frightful, m'boy,' said Mr Doughty, mopping his brow. 'A satchel-arsed sawbones jawing on and on about some ghastly epidemic. Never heard anything like it: made you want to dismast yourself. But at least I did get to speak to Mrs Burnham – she says she'll see you tomorrow, at her house. You think you can be there, at ten in the morning?'

'Yes of course I can! Thank you, Mr Doughty!'

*

For Shireen Modi, in Bombay, the day started like any other: later, this would seem to her the strangest thing of all – that the news had arrived without presaging or portent. All her life she had placed great store by omens and auguries – to the point where her husband, Bahram, had often scoffed and called her 'superstitious' – but try as she might she could remember no sign that might have been interpreted as a warning of what that morning was to bring.

Later that day Shireen's two daughters, Shernaz and Behroze, were to bring their children over for dinner as they did once every week. These weekly dinners were Shireen's principal diversion when her husband was away in China. Other than that there was little to enliven her days except for an occasional visit to the Fire Temple at the end of the street.

Shireen's apartment was on the top floor of the Mistrie family mansion which was on Apollo Street, one of Bombay's busiest thoroughfares. The house had long been presided over by her father, Seth Rustomjee Mistrie, the eminent shipbuilder. After his death the family firm had been taken over by her brothers, who lived on the floors below, with their wives and children. Shireen was the only daughter of the family to remain in the house after her marriage; her sisters had all moved to their husbands' homes, as was the custom.

The Mistrie mansion was a lively, bustling house with the voices of khidmatgars, bais, khansamas, ayahs and chowkidars ringing through the stairwells all day long. The quietest part of the building

was the apartment that Seth Rustomjee had put aside for Shireen at the time of her betrothal to Bahram: he had insisted that the couple take up residence under his own roof after their wedding – Bahram was a penniless youth at the time and had no family connections in Bombay. Ever solicitous of his daughter, the Seth had wanted to make sure that she never suffered a day's discomfort after her marriage – and in this he had certainly succeeded, but at the cost of ensuring also that she and her husband became, in a way, dependants of the Mistrie family.

Bahram had often talked of moving out, but Shireen had always resisted, dreading the thought of managing a house on her own during her husband's long absences in China; and besides, while her parents were still alive, she had never wanted to be anywhere other than the house she had grown up in. It was only when it was too late, after her daughters had married and her parents had died, that she had begun to feel a little like an interloper. It wasn't that anyone was unkind to her; to the contrary they were almost excessively solicitous, as they might be with a guest. But it was clear to everyone – the servants most of all – that she was not a mistress of the Mistrie mansion in the same way that her brothers' wives were; when decisions had to be made about shared spaces, like the gardens or the roof, she was never consulted; her claims on the carriages were accorded a low priority or even overlooked; and when the khidmatgars quarrelled hers always seemed to get the worst of it.

There were times when Shireen felt herself to be drowning in the peculiar kind of loneliness that comes of living in a house where the servants far outnumber their employers. This was not the least of the reasons why she looked forward so eagerly to her weekly dinners with her daughters and grandchildren: she would spend days fussing over the food, going to great lengths to dig out old recipes, and making sure that the khansama tried them out in advance.

Today after several visits to the kitchen Shireen decided to add an extra item to the menu: *dar ni pori* – lentils, almonds and pistachios baked in pastry. Around mid-morning she dispatched a khidmatgar to the market to do some additional shopping. He was gone a long time and when he returned there was an odd look on his face. What's the matter? she asked and he responded evasively,

mumbling something about having seen her husband's purser, Vico, talking to her brothers, downstairs.

Shireen was taken aback. Vico was indispensable to Bahram: he had travelled to China with him, the year before, and had been with him ever since. If Vico was in Bombay then where was her husband? And why would Vico stop to talk to her brothers before coming to see her? Even if Vico had been sent ahead to Bombay on urgent business, Bahram would certainly have given him letters and presents to bring to her.

She frowned at the khidmatgar in puzzlement: he had been in her service for many years and knew Vico well. He wasn't likely to misrecognize him, she knew, but still, just to be sure she said: You are certain it was Vico? The man nodded, in a way that sent a tremor of apprehension through her. Brusquely she told him to go back downstairs.

Tell Vico to come up at once. I want to see him right now.

Glancing at her clothes she realized that she wasn't ready to receive visitors yet: she called for a maid and went quickly to her bedroom. On opening her almirah her eyes went directly to the sari she had worn on the day of Bahram's departure for China. With trembling hands she took it off the shelf and held it against her thin, angular frame. The sheen of the rich *gara* silk filled the room with a green glow, lighting up her long, pointed face, her large eyes and her greying temples.

She seated herself on the bed and recalled the day in September, the year before, when Bahram had left for Canton. She had been much troubled that morning by inauspicious signs – she had broken her red marriage bangle as she was dressing and Bahram's turban was found to have fallen to the floor during the night. These portents had worried her so much that she had begged him not to leave that day. But he had said that it was imperative for him to go – why exactly she could not recall.

Then the maid broke in – Bibiji? – and she recollected why she had come to the bedroom. She took out a sari and was draping it around herself when she caught the sound of raised voices in the courtyard below: there was nothing unusual in this but for some reason it worried her and she told the maid to go and see what was happening. After a few minutes the woman came back to

report that she had seen a number of peons and runners leaving the house, with chitties in their hands.

Chitties? For whom? Why?

The maid didn't know of course, so Shireen asked if Vico had come upstairs yet.

No, Bibiji, said the maid. He is still downstairs, talking to your brothers. They are in one of the daftars. The door is locked.

Oh?

Somehow Shireen forced herself to sit still while the maid combed and tied her lustrous, waist-length hair. No sooner had she finished than voices made themselves heard at the front door. Shireen went hurrying out of the bedroom, expecting to see Vico, but when she stepped into the living room she was amazed to find instead her two sons-in-law. They looked breathless and confused: she could tell that they had come hurrying over from their daftars.

Seized by misgiving, she forgot all the usual niceties: What are you two doing here in the middle of the morning?

For once they did not stand on ceremony: taking hold of her hands they led her to a divan.

What is the matter? she protested. What are you doing?

Sasu-mai, they said, you must be strong. There is something we must tell you.

Already then she knew, in her heart. But she said nothing, giving herself a minute or two to savour a few last moments of doubt. Then she took a deep breath. Tell me, she said. I want to know. Is it about your father-in-law?

They looked away, which was all the confirmation she needed. Her mind went blank, and then, remembering what widows had to do, she struck her wrists together, almost mechanically, breaking her glass bangles. They fell away, leaving tiny pinpricks of blood on her skin; absently she remembered that it was Bahram who had purchased these bangles for her, in Canton, many years ago. But the memory brought no tears to her eyes; for the moment her mind was empty of emotion. She looked up and saw that Vico was now hovering at the door. Suddenly she desperately wanted to be rid of her sons-in-law.

Have you told Behroze and Shernaz? she asked them.

They shook their heads: We came straight here, Sasu-mai. We

didn't know what had happened – the chits from your brothers said only to come right away. After we came they said it would be best if we broke the news to you, so we came straight up here.

Shireen nodded: You've done what was needed. Vico will tell me the rest. As for you, it's better that you go home to your wives. It'll be even harder for them than it is for me. You'll have to be strong for them.

Ha-ji, Sasu-mai.

They left and Vico stepped in. A big-bellied man with protuberant eyes, he was dressed, as always, in European clothes – pale duck trowsers and jacket, a high-collared shirt and cravat. His hat was in his hands and he began to mumble something but Shireen stopped him. Raising a hand, she waved her maids away: Leave us, she said, I want to talk to him alone.

Alone, Bibiji?

Yes, what did I say? Alone.

They withdrew and she gestured to Vico to sit but he shook his head.

How did it happen, Vico? she said. Tell me everything.

It was an accident, Bibiji, said Vico. Sadly, it happened on the Seth's ship, which he loved so much. The *Anahita* was anchored near an island called Hong Kong, not far from Macau. We had just boarded that day, having come down from Canton. The rest of us went to bed early but Sethji stayed up. He must have been walking on the deck. It was dark and he probably tripped and fell overboard.

She was listening carefully, watching him as he spoke. She knew, from previous bereavements, that she was presently in the grip of a kind of detachment that would not last long: soon she would be overwhelmed by emotion and her mind would be clouded for days. Now, while she was still able to think clearly, she wanted to understand exactly what had happened.

He was walking on the *Anahita*?

Yes, Bibiji.

Shireen frowned; she had known the *Anahita* intimately since the day the vessel's keel was laid, in her father's shipyard: it was she who had named her, after the Zoroastrian angel of the waters, and it was she too who had overseen the craftsmen who had

sculpted the figurehead and decorated the interior. If Sethji was walking, he must have been up on the quarter-deck, no?

Vico nodded. Yes, Bibiji. It must have been the quarter-deck. That's where he usually walked.

But if he fell from the quarter-deck, said Shireen, surely someone would have heard him? Wasn't there a lascar on watch? Were there no other ships nearby?

Yes, Bibiji, there were many ships nearby. But no one heard anything.

So where was he found?

On Hong Kong island, Bibiji. His body washed up on the beach.

Was there a ceremony? A funeral? What did you do?

Toying with his hat, Vico said: We held a funeral, Bibiji. Many other Parsis were in the area; one of them was a dastoor and he performed the last rites. Sethji's friend Mr Zadig Karabedian also happened to be around. He delivered the eulogy. We buried him in Hong Kong.

Why Hong Kong? said Shireen sharply. Isn't there a Parsi cemetery in Macau? Why didn't you bury him there?

Macau was impossible, Bibiji, said Vico. There was trouble on the mainland at the time. The British representative, Captain Elliot, had issued an order asking all British subjects to stay away from Macau. That was why the *Anahita* was anchored at Hong Kong Bay. When Seth Bahram died, we had no choice but to bury him in Hong Kong. You can ask Mr Karabedian – he is coming to Bombay soon and will come to see you.

Shireen could feel the grief beginning to well up inside her now. She sat down.

Where did you place the grave? she asked. Is it properly marked?

Yes, Bibiji. There aren't many people on Hong Kong island and the interior is very pretty. The grave is in a beautiful valley. The spot was found by Seth Bahram's new munshi.

Absently Shireen said: I didn't know my husband had hired a new munshi.

Yes, Bibiji. The old munshi died last year when we were on our way to Canton, so Seth Bahram hired a new secretary – a well-educated Bengali.

Did he come back to Bombay with you? said Shireen. Can you bring him to see me?

No, Bibiji; he didn't come back with us. He wanted to stay on in China and was offered a job in Canton, by an American merchant. So far as I know he's now living in Canton's foreign enclave.

*

June 10, 1839
Foreign enclave
Canton

My one regret in starting this journal is that I did not think of it earlier. If only I had embarked on it last year, when I first came to Canton with Seth Bahram! To have some notes to consult would have been helpful when I was trying to write about the events that led to the opium crisis in March this year.

Anyway, I have learnt my lesson and won't make that mistake again. Indeed so eager was I to start my journal-keeping that I pulled out my notebook as soon as I stepped on the junk that brought me from Macau to Canton. But it was a mistake: many people crowded around to see what I was doing, so I thought the better of it. I realized also that it would not be wise to write in English, as I had intended – better to do it in Bangla; it is less likely to be deciphered if the journal should fall into the wrong hands.

I am writing now in my new lodgings, in Canton's American Hong, which is where Mr Coolidge, my new employer, has taken an apartment. He does not live in the lavish style of Seth Bahram; his staff have been relegated to a servants' dormitory at the back of the Hong. But we manage well enough and even though the accommodation is rudimentary I must confess that I am overjoyed to be back in Canton's foreign enclave – that unique little outpost that we used to call Fanqui-town!

It is strange perhaps, to say this about a place where cries of *'Gwailo!'*, *'Haak-gwai!'* and *'Achha!'* are a constant reminder of one's alienness – but nonetheless, it is true that stepping ashore at Canton was like a homecoming

for me. Maybe it was only because I was so relieved to be gone from Hong Kong Bay, with its fleet of English merchant ships. Of late a forest of Union Jacks has sprouted there – and I must admit that a weight lifted from my shoulders when they disappeared from view: I can never be comfortable around the British flag. My breath seemed to flow more freely as the boat carried me deeper into China. Only when I stepped off the ferry, at the foreign enclave, did I feel that I was at last safe from Britannia's all-seeing eye and all-grasping hand.

Yesterday afternoon, I went to visit my old haunts in Fanqui-town. It was startling to see how much the atmosphere here has changed in the short time that I've been away. Of the foreigners, only the Americans remain, and the shuttered windows of the empty factories are a constant reminder that things are not as they were before the opium crisis.

The British Factory is particularly striking in its desolation. It is strange indeed to see this building, once the busiest and grandest establishment in Fanqui-town, all locked and shuttered, its verandas empty. Even the hands of the clock on the chapel tower have ceased to move. They are joined together at the twelve o'clock mark, as if in prayer.

Also empty are the two factories that were occupied by the Parsi seths of Bombay – the Chung-wa and the Fungtai. I lingered awhile near the Fungtai: how could I not, when it is so filled with memories? I had thought that by this time Seth Bahram's house would have been rented out to someone else – but no: the window of his daftar remains shuttered and a doorman stands guard at the Hong's entrance. At the cost of a couple of cash-coins I was allowed to slip in and wander around.

The rooms are much as they were when we left, except that a thin film of dust has collected on the floors and the furniture. It gave me an eerie feeling to hear my footsteps echoing through empty corridors – in my memories that house is always crowded with people, redolent of the

smell of masalas, wafting up from the kitchen. Most of all it is filled with the spirit of Seth Bahram – I felt his absence very keenly and could not resist going up to the second floor, to look into the daftar where I had spent so many long hours with him, transcribing letters and taking dictation. Here too things are as they were at the time of our departure: the large rock the Seth had been gifted by his compradore is still in its place, as is his ornately carved desk. Even his armchair has not moved: it remains beside the window, as it was during the Seth's last weeks in Canton. In that darkened, shadow-filled room, it was almost as if he were there himself, half-reclining, smoking opium and staring at the Maidan – as though he were looking for phantoms, as Vico once said.

This thought gave me a strange turn and I went quickly downstairs, back into the sunlight. I thought I'd visit Compton's print-shop, and turned into Old China Street. Once a bustling thoroughfare, this too has a sleepy and forlorn look. It was only when I came to Thirteen Hong Street, where the foreign enclave meets the city, that things looked normal again. Here the crowds were just as thick as ever: torrents of people were pouring through, moving in both directions. In a minute I was swept along to the door of Compton's print-shop.

My knock was answered by Compton himself: he was dressed in a dun-coloured gown and looked just the same – his head topped by a round, black cap and his queue clipped to the back of his neck, in a neat bun.

He greeted me in English with a wide smile: 'Ah Neel! How are you?'

I surprised him by responding in Cantonese, greeting him with his Chinese name: *Jou-sahn Liang sin-saang! Nei hou ma?*

'Hai-aa!' he cried. 'What's this I'm hearing?'

I told him that I'd been making good progress with my Cantonese and begged him not to speak to me in English. He was delighted and swept me into his shop, with loud cries of *Hou leng! Hou leng!*

The print-shop too has changed in these last few months. The shelves, once filled with reams of paper and tubs of ink, are empty; the air, once pungent with the odour of grease and metal, is now scented with incense; the tables, once piled with dirty proofs, are clean.

I looked around in astonishment: *Mat-yeh aa?*

Compton shrugged resignedly and explained that his press has been idle ever since the British were expelled from Canton. There was little work in the city for an English-language printing press: no journals, bulletins or notices.

And anyway, said Compton, I'm busy with some other work now.

What work? I asked, and he explained that he has found employment with his old teacher, Zhong Lou-si, who I had met several times during the opium crisis ('Teacher Chang' was what I used to call him then, knowing no better). Apparently he is now a *mihn-∂aaih* – a 'big-face-man', meaning that he is very important: Commissioner Lin, the Yum-chai, has put him in charge of gathering information about foreigners, their countries, their trading activities &c. &c.

In order to do this Zhong Lou-si has created a bureau of translation, Compton said: he employs many men who are knowledgeable about languages and about places overseas. Compton was one of the first to be hired. His job is mainly to monitor the English journals that are published in this region – the *Canton Press*, the *Chinese Repository*, the *Singapore Journal* and so on. Zhong Lou-si's agents bring copies of these journals to him and he goes through them to look for articles that might be of interest to the Yum-chai or Zhong Lou-si.

The subject that Compton follows most closely is of course the *∂aaih-yin* – 'the big smoke' – and it happened that he was going through an article in the *Chinese Repository*, on opium production in India. It was lucky for him that I came by for he was having trouble making sense of it. Many of the words in the article

were unfamiliar to him – 'arkati', 'maund', 'tola', 'seer', 'chittack', 'ryot', 'carcanna' and so on. Compton had not been able to find them in his English dictionary and was at his wit's end. Nor did he know of many of the places that were mentioned in the article – Chhapra, Patna, Ghazipur, Monghyr, Benares and so on. Calcutta was the one place he had heard of – it is known here as Galigada.

I spent a long time explaining everything and he thanked me profusely: *Mh-goi-saai, mh-goi-saai!* I told him that I was delighted to help; that it was but a small return for the many kindnesses that he and his family have shown me and for the long hours that I spent in his print-shop earlier in the year. It was wonderful to be back there again – Compton is perhaps the only person of my acquaintance who is as besotted with words as I am.

*

Before the start of the march, Kesri had been told that it would take the advance guard about five hours to get to the next camp-site. A scouting party had been sent ahead to choose a site on the shores of the Brahmaputra River. Kesri knew that by the time he arrived the camp's lines would already have been laid out, with sections demarcated for the officers' enclave, the sepoy lines, the latrines and the camp-bazar, for the followers.

Sure enough, around mid-morning, after five hours on the road, Kesri's horse began to flare its nostrils, as if at the scent of water. Then the road topped a ridge and the Brahmaputra appeared ahead, at the bottom of a gentle slope: it was so broad that its far bank was barely visible, a faint smudge of green. On the near shore, the water was fringed by a pale brown shelf of sand: it was there that the campsite's flags and markers had been planted.

A border of sand ran beside the river as far as the eye could see. Looking into the distance now, Kesri spotted a rapidly lengthening cloud of dust approaching the campsite from the other direction. At its head was a small troop of horsemen – their pennants showed them to be daak-sowars, or dispatch riders.

A long time had passed since the battalion's previous delivery

of letters; almost a year had passed since Kesri had last heard from his family. He had been awaiting the daak more eagerly than most and was glad to think that he would be the first to get to it.

But it was not to be: within minutes of spotting the battalion's colours, one of the dispatch riders broke away to head directly towards the column. As the only mounted man in the advance guard, it was Kesri's job to intercept the sowar. He handed his pennant to the man behind him and cantered ahead.

Seeing Kesri approach, the rider slowed his mount and removed the scarf from his face. Kesri saw now that he was an acquaintance, a risaldar attached to campaign headquarters. He wasted no time in getting to the matter that was uppermost in his mind.

Is there any mail for the paltan?

Yes, we've brought three bags of daak; they'll be waiting for you at the campsite.

The risaldar swung a dispatch bag off his shoulder and handed it to Kesri.

But this is urgent – it has to get to your com'dant-sahib at once.

Kesri nodded and turned his horse around.

Major Wilson, the battalion commander, usually rode halfway down the column, with the other English officers. This meant that he was probably a good mile or two to the rear, if not more – for it often happened that towards the end of a day's march the officers took a break to do some riding or hunting; sometimes they just sat chatting in the shade of a tree, while their servants brewed tea and coffee. That way they could be sure that their tents would be ready for them when they rode into camp.

To find the officers would take a while, Kesri knew, for he would have to run the gauntlet of the entire caravan of camp-followers, riding against the flow. And no sooner had he turned his horse around than he ran into a platoon of scythe-bearing ghaskatas – to them would fall the task of providing fodder for the hundreds of animals that marched with the column. Behind them came those who would prepare the campsite: tent-pitching khalasis, flag-bearing thudni-wallahs, coolies with cooking kits, dandia-porters with poles slung over their shoulders; and of course, cleaners and sweepers, mehturs and bangy-burdars. Next was the battalion's laundry contin-

gent, a large group of dhobis and dhobins, with a string of donkeys, laden with bundles of washing.

After leaving the dhobis behind Kesri slowed his pace a little as he drew abreast of the ox-carts that belonged to the bazar-girls. He had long been intimate with their matron, Gulabi, and he knew that she would be upset if he rode past without stopping for a word. But before he could rein in his horse a claw-like hand fastened on his boot.

Kesri! *Sunn!*

It was Pagla-baba, the paltan's mascot and mendicant: like others of his ilk, he had an uncanny knack for guessing what was on people's minds.

Ka bhaiyil? What is it, Pagla-baba?

Hamaar baat sun; listen to my words, Kesri – I predict that you will receive news of your relatives today.

Bhagwaan banwale rahas! cried Kesri gratefully. God bless you! Pagla-baba's prediction whetted Kesri's eagerness to be back at the camp and he forgot about Gulabi. Spurring his horse ahead, he trotted past the part of the caravan that was reserved for the camp-following gentry – the Brahmin pundits, the munshi, the bazar-chaudhuri with his account books, the Kayasth dubash, who interpreted for the officers, and the baniya-modi, who was the paltan's banker and money-monger, responsible for advancing loans to the sepoys and for arranging remittances to their families. These men were travelling in the same cart, chewing paan as they went.

It was the munshi who was in charge of letters: to him fell the task of distributing daak to the sepoys. As he was passing the cart, Kesri paused to tell the munshi that a delivery of post had arrived and he had reason to believe that he might at last have received a letter from his family.

Keep the chithi ready for me, munshiji, said Kesri. I'll meet you at the camp as soon as I can.

The throng on the road had thinned a little now and Kesri was able to canter past the bylees that were carrying the paltan's heavy weaponry – dismantled howitzers, mortars, field-pieces – and its squad of artillerymen, a detachment of golondauzes and gun-lascars. Next came the jail-party, with its contingent of captured Burmese soldiers, and then the mess-train, with its cartloads of supplies for

the officers' kitchen – crates of tinned and bottled food, barrels of beer, demijohns of wine and hogsheads of whisky. This was closely followed by the hospital establishment, with its long line of canvas-covered hackeries, carrying the sick and wounded.

After leaving these behind, Kesri ran straight into swarming herds of livestock – goats, sheep and bullocks for the officers' table. The bheri-wallahs who tended the animals tried to clear a path for him, but with little success. Rather than sit idly in the saddle, waiting for the herds to pass, Kesri swerved off the path and rode into a stretch of overgrown wasteland.

This was fortunate for he soon spotted the battalion's dozen or so English officers: they had broken away from the column and were riding towards the sandy ridge that separated the river from the road.

They too saw him coming and reined in their horses. One of them, the battalion's adjutant, Captain Neville Mee, rode towards Kesri while the others waited in the shade of a tree.

'Is that a dispatch bag, havildar?'

'Yes, Mee-sah'b.'

'You can hand it to me, havildar. Thank you.'

Taking possession of the dispatch bag, the adjutant said: 'You'd better wait here, havildar – you may be needed again.'

Kesri watched from a distance as Captain Mee trotted off to deliver the bag to the commandant. Major Wilson opened it, took out some papers and then slapped Captain Mee on the back, as if to congratulate him. Within minutes the officers were all pumping the captain's hand, crying out: 'You're a lucky dog, Mee . . .'

The sight piqued Kesri's curiosity: had Captain Mee received a promotion perhaps? He had certainly waited for one long enough – almost ten years had passed since the last.

It so happened that Mr Mee was Kesri's own 'butcha' – his child – at least in the sense in which the word was used in the Bengal Native Infantry, which was to say that Kesri had been Mr Mee's first orderly when he joined the battalion as an eighteen-year-old ensign, fresh from the Company's military academy at Addiscombe, in England. Kesri was not much older than him but he had been recruited three years earlier and had seen enough combat to consider himself a veteran. From that time on Kesri had 'raised' Mr Mee,

instructing him in the ways of the battalion, teaching him the tricks of Indian-style *kushti* wrestling, nursing him when he was ill, and cleaning him up after riotous nights of gambling and drinking at the officers' club.

Many sepoys did as much and more for their butchas yet their services were often forgotten when those officers rose in the ranks. But that was not the case with Kesri and Mr Mee: over the years their bond had grown closer and stronger.

Mr Mee was a tall, broad-shouldered man with a square-jawed, swarthy face and a receding hairline: his hearty manner belied an unusually sharp tongue and a quick temper. As a young officer his pugnacity had often got him into trouble, earning him a reputation as a regular 'Kaptán Marpeet' – 'Captain Brawler'. Nor had the passage of time smoothed his rough edges; from year to year his prickliness seemed only to grow more pronounced, his manner more abrasive.

Yet Captain Mee was in his way an excellent officer, fearless in battle and scrupulously fair in his dealings with the sepoys. Kesri in particular had good reason to be grateful to him: early in their association Captain Mee had discovered that Kesri secretly harboured the ambition of learning English and had encouraged and tutored him until Kesri surpassed every other member of the paltan in fluency, even the dubash. As a result Kesri and the captain had come to understand each other uncommonly well, developing a rapport that extended far beyond the battalion's business. When Mr Mee needed a girl for the night, he depended on Kesri to tell him which members of Gulabi's troupe were poxy and which were worth their daam; when he was short of money – which was often, because he was, by his own confession, always all aground, ever in need of the ready – it was Kesri he looked to for a loan, not the bankers of Palmer & Co. nor the baniya-modi.

It was not uncommon for officers to be in debt for many of them liked to gamble and drink. But Captain Mee's debts were larger than most: to Kesri alone he owed a hundred and fifty sicca rupees. In his place many other officers would have paid off their debts by dipping their hands into the regimental till, or by seeking a post in which there was money to be made – but Mr Mee was not that kind of man. Wild and intemperate though he might be, he was a man of unimpeachable integrity.

Even though Kesri and Captain Mee knew each other very well, they both understood that their relationship was undergirded by a scaffolding of lines that could not be crossed. Kesri would never of his own accord have ventured to ask the adjutant why his fellow officers had congratulated him. But as it happened, Captain Mee broached the subject himself as he rode up to dismiss Kesri.

'A word with you, havildar? It's something rather chup-chup, so you'll stow your clapper about it, won't you?'

'Yes, sir.'

'That dispatch you just brought? It was for me. I've been ordered to report to Fort William, in Calcutta. The high command's putting together an expeditionary force, for an overseas mission – I'd got wind of it and sent in my name. I'll be commanding a company of sepoy volunteers. They've asked me to bring an NCO of my choice which is why I'm telling you all this. The only man I can think of is you, havildar. What do you say? Do you think you might want to come along?'

Nothing could have been further from Kesri's mind that day than to volunteer for an overseas expedition: after eight months of garrison duty in a remote outpost on the border between Assam and Burma he was exhausted and looking forward to some rest. But out of curiosity he asked: 'To where will the force be going, sir?'

'Don't know yet,' said the adjutant. 'It's still in the planning stages, but I hear the prize money will be good.'

For a moment Kesri was tempted to sign on as a *balamteer*: 'Really, sir?'

'Ekdum!' said Mr Mee with a smile. 'I've outrun the constable long enough: this may be my last chance to pay off my debts. With battas and tentage I'll be earning four hundred and fifteen rupees! Between that and the prize money I should be able to square things with everyone, including you. So what do you say, havildar? You think you might want to cut a caper abroad?'

Suddenly Kesri came to a decision. 'No, sir, too tired now. Sorry.'

The captain pursed his lips in disappointment. 'That's too bad, havildar – I was counting on you. But think about it; there's time yet.'

*

Zachary was careful to make an early start for his appointment with Mrs Burnham.

Bethel, the Burnham residence, was in Garden Reach, a distant suburb of Calcutta where many of the city's wealthiest British merchants had built palatial homes. The area lay to the south of the dockyards of Kidderpore, on a stretch of shore that overlooked the Hooghly River.

The Burnham estate was one of the grandest in Garden Reach: the house was vast, surrounded by a compound that sprawled over two acres of riverfront. Zachary had been inside the mansion twice before, as a dinner guest. On both occasions, he had been ushered in through the front doorway, by a magnificently uniformed chobdar, and his name had been announced in ringing tones as he stepped into the Burnhams' glittering sheesh-mull.

But his fortunes had been on the rise at that time: he had just been appointed second mate of the *Ibis* and he had also been in possession of a trunkful of finery. Since then he had come a long way down in the world, and the change in his circumstances was made amply clear to him from the moment he presented himself at the estate's gate. He was taken around to a servants' entrance, where he was handed over to a couple of veiled maids who led him through a series of narrow corridors and staircases to Mrs Burnham's sewing room – a small sunlit parlour, with sewing boxes stacked on the tables and embroidery hanging on the walls.

Mrs Burnham was seated at one of the tables, dressed austerely in white calico, with a lace cap on her head. She had an embroidery frame in her hand, and did not look up from it when Zachary was shown to the door.

'Oh, is it the mystery? Send him in.'

Mrs Burnham was a tall, Junoesque woman, with reddish-brown hair and an air of placid indifference. At their previous meetings she had addressed hardly a word to Zachary which was just as well perhaps, for he had been so thoroughly cowed by her distant, languid manner that he might have found himself at a loss for an answer.

Now, without stirring from her seat or glancing at him, she said: 'Good morning, Mr . . .?'

'Reid, ma'am. Good morning.'

Zachary took a step towards her, with his hand half-extended,

but only to beat a hasty retreat when she failed to look up from her embroidery. He understood now why Mrs Burnham had elected to receive him in her sewing room rather than in one of the many reception rooms on the ground floor: she wanted to impress on him that his position in the house was that of a servant, not a guest, and that he was expected to behave accordingly.

'Mr Reid, I gather you are a trained mystery?'

'Yes, ma'am. I apprenticed at Gardiner's shipyard in Baltimore.'

Mrs Burnham's eye did not waver from her embroidery. 'Mr Doughty has no doubt explained the job to you. Do you feel that you will be able to refurbish the budgerow to our satisfaction?'

'Yes, ma'am. I'll certainly do my best.'

She raised her eyes now, and looked him over with a frown. 'You appear rather young to be an experienced mystery, Mr Reid. But Mr Doughty speaks highly of you and I am inclined to trust his word. He has also told me about your financial difficulties; he has led me to believe that you are deserving of our charity.'

'Mr Doughty is very kind, ma'am.'

Mrs Burnham carried on as if he had not spoken: 'My husband and I have always endeavoured to be sympathetic to the poor whites of this country. There are sadly too many such in India – they venture out from the Occident in the hope of making their fortunes but only to end up in difficulties. Mr Burnham feels that it is incumbent upon us to do what we can to prevent these unfortunate creatures from becoming a blight on the prestige of the ruling race. We have always made an effort to be generous to those who need it – I am inclined therefore to offer you the job.'

'Thank you, ma'am,' said Zachary. 'You will not regret it.'

Her frown deepened, as if to indicate that his thanks were premature.

'And may I ask, Mr Reid,' she said, 'where you intend to reside if I hire you for this job?'

This took Zachary by surprise and he began to stutter. 'Why, ma'am . . . I've been renting a room in Kidderpore—'

'I'm sorry,' she said sharply, cutting him off. 'That will not do. Those Kidderpore boarding houses are known to be dens of disease, iniquity and vice. I cannot allow it, in all conscience. Besides, the budgerow needs to be guarded at night and I have no chowkidar to spare.'

It occurred to Zachary now that she was hinting that he should live on the budgerow. He could hardly believe his luck: to be given a chance to escape the flea-bitten flop-houses he had been living in was as much as he could have hoped for.

'I'd be glad to move into the budgerow, ma'am,' he said, trying not to sound too eager. 'If you have no objection, that is.'

Now at last, she put her embroidery aside but only to subject him to a scrutiny that made his forehead pucker with perspiration.

'It must be clearly understood, Mr Reid,' she said, her voice growing sharper, 'that this is a reputable house where certain standards are upheld. While living on this estate you will be expected to comport yourself with the utmost propriety at all times. On no account will you be permitted any visitors, male or female. Is that understood?'

'Yes, ma'am. Clearly understood.'

Her frown deepened. 'This month I shall be away for a while,' she said, 'because I must take my daughter to my parents' country estate, at Hazaribagh. I trust there will be no laxity in my absence?'

'No, ma'am.'

'If there is, you may be sure that I shall learn of it. I know that you have been at sea and I confess that this is a cause of considerable concern to me. I am sure you are aware of the deplorable reputation that sailors have earned in the eyes of respectable people.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

'You should be warned, Mr Reid, that you shall be under observation at all times. Although the budgerow is moored at a good distance from this house, you should not imagine that the distance is enough to conceal unseemliness of any kind.'

'Yes, ma'am.'

Now falling silent, she transfixed him with a glare that was as sharp as the needle in her hand: it seemed to go right through his clothes and into his skin. 'Very well then,' she said, as he stood squirming in his shoes. 'Please start at your earliest convenience.'

*

Kesri's hopes of receiving a letter from home were so much buoyed by Pagla-baba's prediction that he spurred his horse into a full gallop as he rode to the camp.

He was only a few minutes away when he spotted his servant, Dhiru, running towards him.

Havildarji! Subedar Nirbhay Singh has asked you to go to his tent. At once.

Reining in his horse Kesri said: What does the subedar want? Do you know?

He's received a letter from his village, said Dhiru. I think it is bad news, havildarji. You'd better hurry.

Kesri gave him a nod and again nudged his horse into a gallop.

By the time Kesri entered the camp dozens of men were filing towards the subedar's tent. Most of them were close relatives of the subedar's, and Kesri could tell from their demeanour that there had been some kind of bereavement in the family. He was mildly flattered to be included in this gathering.

Dismounting near the tent, Kesri found himself face to face with the paltan's munshi.

What's happened, munshiji? What's going on?

Haven't you heard? said the munshi. The subedar's had very bad news from home. His brother, Bhyro Singhji, is dead.

Kesri started in shock: Bhyro Singh had always seemed to be destined to outlive his contemporaries.

Bhyro Singhji mar goel? He's dead? But how?

He was killed at sea, many months ago. He had taken a job on a ship, escorting girmitiya migrants. He was on his way to Mauritius when it happened. And there's some other news too – that's why the subedar has sent for you. You'd better go.

Kesri put a hand on the munshi's shoulder: Yes, munshiji, but first tell me – did a letter come for me in the daak?

The munshi shook his head: No, forgive me, havildarji, there was nothing for you.

Kesri bit his lip in disappointment. Are you sure? Nothing?

Nothing. You'd better go to the subedar now.

Kesri stepped into the tent to find the subedar seated on a mat: he was an imposing-looking man, with a broad, heavy face and a luxuriant, greying moustache.

Subedar-sah'b, said Kesri, you sent for me?

The subedar looked up at him with reddened eyes. Yes, havildar; there is bad news.

I heard about Bhyro Singhji, your brother. It is very sad—

The subedar cut him short. Yes but that's not all. The letter I

received had some other bad news too, concerning my nephew Hukam Singh, who is married to your sister.

Wohke kuchh bhael ba? Has something happened to him?

Hukam Singh mar goel. He too is dead.

This stunned Kesri. Dead? But how? What happened?

There is no explanation in the letter, said the subedar. But some relatives of mine are coming to Assam to meet me. They should reach our base at Rangpur soon – they will tell us everything. But what about you? Has your family sent any news of your sister?

No, subedar-sah'b. Nothing. I was hoping to get a letter in this daak, but the munshiji tells me there is nothing for me.

Kesri lowered his face. He could not believe that his family had not written to tell him that his sister Deeti had been widowed. The silence was bewildering: what could it possibly mean?

On the way to his tent Kesri stopped to vent his disappointment on Pagla-baba: Why did you say there was a letter for me? There was nothing – *kuchho nahin!*

Pagla-baba answered with a wide grin: I didn't say you would get a letter, havildarji. All I said was that you'd have news of your relatives. And you did, didn't you?