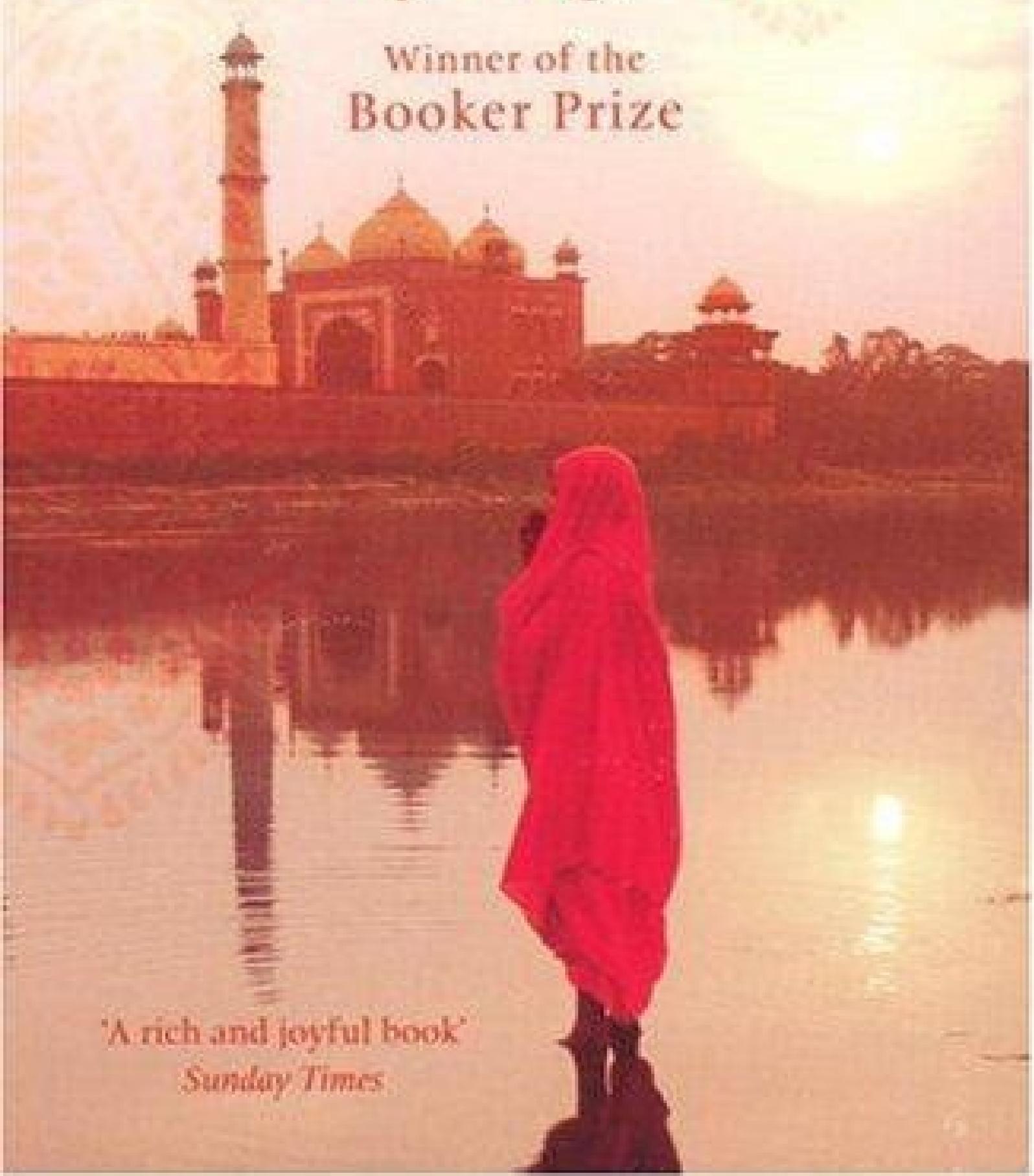


PAUL SCOTT

Staying On

Winner of the
Booker Prize



'A rich and joyful book'
Sunday Times

STAYING ON

Paul Scott

About the book

Instead of returning “home” when he retired, Tusker, once a Colonel in the British Army, and his wife Lily chose to remain in the small hill town of Pangkot with its eccentric inhabitants and archaic rituals left over from the days of the Empire.

To my old colleague and friend

Roland Gant

whom I regard and thank

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Chapter One

WHEN TUSKER SMALLEY died of a massive coronary at approximately 9.30 a.m. on the last Monday in April, 1972, his wife Lucy was out, having her white hair blue-rinsed and set in the Seraglio Room on the ground floor of Pankot's new five-storey glass and concrete hotel, The Shiraz.

The Shiraz was only a step or two away from the little hill station's older hotel, Smith's, whose annexe had been occupied by Tusker and Lucy for ten years. The annexe, known as The Lodge, was a small bungalow in what had once been an adjacent but separate compound, a section of whose dividing wall had been knocked down and a path trodden to create an illusion of connexion between hotel and annexe. The old gateway into The Lodge's compound, now known as the side-entrance, gave on to a lane. Immediately opposite was The Shiraz.

If Tusker had been found at once, then, and a message sent across, Lucy would have had the news at just the moment any woman would subsequently have to think of as the most inconvenient at which to hear she had become a widow. At 9.30 she was going under the dryer.

But Tusker lay dead for half-an-hour and might have lain longer if Mrs Bhoolabhoy, who owned Smith's and lived in one of its principal rooms, hadn't become unnerved by the howling of Colonel and Mrs Smalley's dog, Bloxsaw. The howling was not very loud because the dog was locked in Colonel Smalley's garage, but it was persistent so Mr Bhoolabhoy was ordered over to complain on Mrs Bhoolabhoy's behalf.

Mrs Bhoolabhoy, who had jowls and favoured sarees in pastel colours such as salmon pink which emphasized the fairness of her skin, was a martyr to several things, among them, migraine. On mornings when she kept to her room, work at Smith's Hotel came virtually to a standstill. The slightest percussive sound was more than she was prepared to bear. The hotel was hers, Mr Bhoolabhoy merely its manager, whom she had married. Mrs Bhoolabhoy weighed sixteen stone. Her husband was constructed on more meagre lines. Mr Bhoolabhoy had managed Smith's for years before the woman he married turned up as its new proprietor. He was her third and youngest husband; according to Tusker Smalley probably the lucky one because she was unlikely to enjoy a fourth, being now almost as richly endowed with killing flesh as with life-enhancing rupees. Tusker, who called Mr Bhoolabhoy Billy-Boy, except when they had quarrelled, which sometimes they had to, said Billy-Boy looked like a man who, inured to disappointment, had suddenly glimpsed an immense possibility and begun to organize himself so as not to make the mistake that would block his way to it. Mrs Bhoolabhoy had had no children by any of her husbands. "He stands to gain," Tusker had often pointed out to Lucy. "And he feeds her up a treat. One day she'll drop."

Actually, Mrs Bhoolabhoy fed herself without either Mr Bhoolabhoy's help or hindrance. His policy was to minimize every risk of incurring her displeasure. These

risks were many. On her good days when she waddled about looking into this and that and finding fault he followed in her galleon-wake in his neat well-pressed suit making sure her orders were carried out and the sources of her irritation at once put a stop to. On her bad days he walked on tiptoe and had the entire staff doing the same so that even the guests (when there were any) felt themselves under a cloud and got out of the place as soon as possible after breakfast.

The last Monday morning in this April (April 24) was such a morning; if anything heavier than usual with the pressure of Mrs Bhoolabhoy's martyrdom which throbbed like a silent fog-warning through the hotel from the shuttered bedroom (the old Number One) where she lay on a massive double bed which she took up most of. Occasionally Mr Bhoolabhoy was detailed to share this bed but had not been the previous night when he had slept in his own room (the old Number Two). The two rooms were en-suite with a communicating door which Mr Bhoolabhoy never bolted his side of but which frequently did not give to his gentle midnight nudge. He had not nudged it the night before. Sunday had been a shattering day.

At 7.30 a.m. he was summoned from No. 2 to No. 1 by his wife's personal maid, a local Pankot woman whom they called by the name she had been given long ago by the British military family who employed her as a little ayah until they went home in 1947: Minnie. Minnie was now plump, middle-aged and grumpy. Mr Bhoolabhoy got no change out of her. She took orders only from Mrs Bhoolabhoy, and not always from her. Mr Bhoolabhoy maintained a cautious attitude to Minnie. Sometimes Minnie complained about him to Mrs Bhoolabhoy, or about what she called Management which came to the same thing. This led to Mrs Bhoolabhoy shouting at him. At other times when Minnie was being uncooperative even with Mrs Bhoolabhoy he got shouted at again.

"You can't win, old man," Tusker had told him. "Not with women. Minnie probably fancies you. It gives her a kick to get you into trouble. Obviously you've never made a pass at her. Try it."

"No, no. It must be menopause."

"In that case she ought to go into the next Guinness Book of Records. You've been saying that for years. Have another peg."

So they had had another peg. That was a week ago. Monday evenings were evenings Mr Bhoolabhoy usually looked forward to. However badly Monday started, however badly indisposed Mrs Bhoolabhoy was at breakfast-time, by lunch she had usually recovered sufficiently to take some nourishment and so fortify herself to spend the rest of the gruelling day playing bridge at the Pankot Gymkhana Club. Mondays were not her only bridge days: there could be sessions on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday; but never Sunday because Sunday was Mr Bhoolabhoy's day off and her day for checking his records of the hotel's income and expenditure which often contributed to the fact that there could easily be a difference of opinion between them on Sunday evening, a celibate night for Mr Bhoolabhoy and a Monday morning

migraine for his wife.

What gave Monday evenings their attraction was not just that Mrs Bhoolabhoy could be counted on to stay late at the club but also that on these evenings Mrs Smalley took herself to the pictures at the New Electric. Once Mr Bhoolabhoy had seen the last evening guest out of Smith's dining-room and ensured that the servants were beginning to clear up and the kitchen-staff to wash up, that cook had remembered to prepare Mrs Bhoolabhoy's midnight snack, that Minnie had properly arranged her mistress's bed and was somewhere within her mistress's immediate call, then he and Tusker could meet over a bottle either at The Lodge or on the verandah of the hotel (where the sound of Mrs Bhoolabhoy returning could be better heard).

Neither man got drunk. Tusker drank more than Mr Bhoolabhoy, but then Tusker was a member—the last surviving member in Pankot, with his wife—of the old school of British and needed his liquor. Mr Bhoolabhoy drank less not only because he had principles (frail at times) but because he loved listening to Tusker who seemed to know so much about such a lot (old scandal, new scandal, local scandal, international scandal; the Profumo affair, the Kennedy assassination, why President Johnson pulled dogs by their ears, why Prime Minister Heath was married to a boat, why it was that the British were pro-Pakistan in the first IndoPak war and pro-India in the one just finished, and what Henry Kissinger had said to the dumbest blonde in Connecticut who only wanted to send a message to her momma in Warsaw).

Over the years of their convivial Mondays Mr Bhoolabhoy had gathered a great deal of esoteric information about Presidents, Palaces and Peoples' Democracies. The range of Tusker's knowledge of the world had astonished him, fascinated him. He often wished he could remember one-tenth of what he had learned, been told; and sometimes thought he might have done so if he had got as well-oiled as Tusker. But apart from his principles, his preference for hearing clearly what Tusker was saying, his relative abstemiousness was imposed upon him by awareness of the necessity to aim off for the wind of Mrs Bhoolabhoy's unpredictable Monday night desire.

This tended to depend on how much she had won. More often than not she came home up on the evening in which case Mr Bhoolabhoy had to be prepared to be up to things too. He had to be similarly prepared if she had lost so much in the day-long bridge session that she was feeling unloved and unwanted in an unkind and swindling world. He found this rather touching and on such occasions, after their combined and gigantic climax, they often had a little weep together and exchanged protestations of their beholdeness one to the other and of their resolve to be beholden forever. (Her break-even nights could be very dull.) Too often, though, the combination of money lost, midnight snack, violent intercourse and tears of relief and love, led next day to Mrs Bhoolabhoy's further prostration.

But this Monday was unlikely to draw to a close for Mr Bhoolabhoy with a convivial meeting with Colonel Smalley (Indian Army, Rtd). Today, unless he could wriggle out of it again he was going to have to write the Letter. Obeying the summons delivered

by Minnie he entered Room No. i and stood nervously at the foot of his wife's bed. The summons had not surprised him because a quarter of an hour before he had heard Mrs Bhoolabhoy moan. He had already warned the servants not to clatter.

“Shall I send for Dr Rajendra, Lila?” he asked in a whisper, and in the English they spoke to one another in because he could not understand her when she rattled away in her native Punjabi.

She mouthed the word no. Her mouth and her moustache were all he could see of her face. She was on her back, both hands pressed to her head.

“Dr Taporewala, perhaps?” Then he moistened his lips in anticipation. “What about Dr Battacharya?”

Dr Rajendra practised western medicine; Taporewala, the ayurvedic. Dr Battacharya went in for acupuncture, and had once cured Mrs Bhoolabhoy of migraine for a whole week by sticking her ample body all over with little pins; which had been a sight to see.

“No doctor,” she said. “Have you written the Letter?”

“I am about to.”

“Do it. Then bring it. I will sign it.”

“There is no need for you to be bothered with trivial matters of detail, dear Lila. What am I here for?”

“Sometimes this is a question I ask myself.”

Mr Bhoolabhoy tiptoed out then tiptoed in again.

“Lila, it will have to be typed.”

“Naturally.”

“The machine will make a noise.”

“One has one's crosses.”

Mr Bhoolabhoy nodded.

He went back to his own room and then out through the door that gave, as all the bedroom doors gave, on to the dim green windowless dining-room where ragged palms, potted in brass spittoons, stood sentinel among tables shrouded by stained napery. Daylight entered only from the threadbare lounge which had windows on to the verandah. Between dining-and sitting-room Mr Bhoolabhoy had his office, a glassed-in cubby-hole that gave a view of both rooms. This was Mr Bhoolabhoy's

sanctuary. A naked electric bulb provided illumination. The office doorway was narrow enough to make it difficult for Mrs Bhoolabhoy to enter, and inside he kept the office cluttered so that if she entered she could not advance far and, leaving, had to back out. He closed the door, closed the section of window that normally remained open for guests to communicate with him (demands, complaints, settlements), sat in his swivel chair, inserted in the elderly Remington a sheet of hotel notepaper plus carbon and flimsy and began, *April 24, 1972, My Dear Colonel Smalley*. Then stopped.

From Room 7, the closest to the office, was coming the sound of music. He ran softly out, tapped at the door, opened, and surprised Mr Pandey in the lotus position, eyes closed, transmitting or absorbing *prana* to the accompaniment of a morning raga by Ravi Shankar or someone on All-India Radio.

Mr Bhoolabhoy had little ear for any music except Christian hymns. He switched the raga off. Mr Pandey opened his eyes. Bhoolabhoy, by signs, alerted him to Mrs Bhoolabhoy's Monday morning condition. Mr Pandey sighed, nodded his head from side to side, shut his eyes again and resumed meditation, but this time with an expression of concentration instead of beatitude.

Mr Pandey was chief clerk to the lawyers in Ranpur who dealt with Mrs Bhoolabhoy's intricate business affairs. He came up once or twice a month with papers and documents, stayed a day or so and was boarded free so Mr Bhoolabhoy had no compunction about turning off his transistor. His presence this weekend was especially ominous. Among the papers he expected to take back to Ranpur today was a copy of the Letter. Mr Bhoolabhoy returned to his office, tore the paper out of the machine and set things up again but this time with the two carbons he had forgotten the first time ; and began again, "My Dear Colonel Smalley," and paused, seeking inspiration, reluctantly resumed without it and eventually finished. He ended, "Yours very Sincerely."

It was now nearly 8 a.m.

In the days before the Shiraz was built this had been the witching hour at Smith's because it was at 8 o'clock that the night train from Ranpur was scheduled to get in after its long haul up the single track into the Pankot Hills from the plains and, consequently, at that hour that staff and management had been ready for the arrival of guests who had booked and been hopeful of others who hadn't booked and all of whom began to turn up at about 8.30 in taxis, tongas, avid for breakfast during the serving of which the luggage of departing guests would be piled on the verandah so that it and they could go down to the station to catch the midday departure back to Ranpur. This had been the pattern since the days of the *raj*. After the *raj* went there had been bad times, good times, near-disastrous times, times of retrenchment, times of ebullient hope, as Pankot waxed, waned, waxed again in popularity. But for Smith's now it all seemed to be coming to an end.

The night train from Ranpur still reached Pankot at 8 a.m. From 8.30 or so onward,

then, from the front verandah of his hotel, Mr Bhoolabhoy could assess the Shiraz's morning intake of guests who had come up by rail by counting the number of passengers in the taxis that drove slowly past the entrance to Smith's compound before making the right-angled turn into the Shiraz's forecourt. There were seldom many. Most of the Shiraz's guests arrived later in the day by private car or by the Indian Airways 'bus that picked them up in mid-afternoon at the airfield down in Nansera.

The building of the Nansera airfield predated the building of the Shiraz by several years and for a while Smiths had prospered. Half-an-hour by air from Ranpur to Nansera and then an hour's chug in the airport 'bus from the Nansera valley up into the Pankot Hills had made the old hill station an attractive proposition for people who found an all night train journey and a six hour one back a high price to pay for a weekend in more invigorating air. The 'bus had used Smith's as its pick-up and put-down point and the airline had set its office up in Smith's compound—a useful concession which had now been transferred to the Shiraz; and unfairly, Mr Bhoolabhoy felt, the fact that the Shiraz now existed, all five storeys of it, attracted more people up than ever before: people in government, in commerce, the idle rich, the busy executives, and now even film stars and directors from the Ranpur Excelsior Talkie Company who had recently shot part of a movie in Pankot and booked the entire top floor of this modern monstrosity.

The presence of movie stars had caused excitement among simple people who hung round hoping for a sight of them and followed their vans and trucks to the location where they were shooting exteriors even though this was way over on the other side of East Hill. Often they had had their trek for nothing because the heroine was a girl given to temperaments and sometimes locked herself into her suite at the Shiraz for the whole day and admitted only her personal entourage, her publicity manager and the gossip column-ists. By the time she got over her temperament the hero was likely to be having one too. There was no shooting for days at a time. The owner of the film company then came up from Ranpur and threatened everyone with proceedings for breach of contract, upon which the director, a young man who was into realism, also had a temperament and declared the location useless. Everyone packed up and went home.

Tusker and Mr Bhoolabhoy had laughed about this only last Monday night, and he was smiling now, recalling it, when Minnie appeared at the office window, holding her hand out. She had come for the Letter. He indicated the paper still in the typewriter and held up four fingers to indicate four more minutes. It was now 8.30.

Five minutes later, unable to delay longer, he took the letter into Mrs Bhoolabhoy. Five minutes later still he was back in his office, inserting new sheets of paper to rewrite the letter to Lila's taste. It now began, "Dear Colonel Smalley," instead of "my Dear Colonel Smalley."

It was to end not "Yours very Sincerely, Lila Bhoolabhoy," but "Yours faithfully, L. Bhoolabhoy, Prop." In between, its three friendly and apologetic paragraphs had to be

cut to one curt one. Mr Bhoolabhoy had to type the new version several times before he was satisfied that she might approve it. By ten past nine the final curt version was finished. He took it to Mrs Bhoolabhoy. After she'd read it she held out her hand. He gave her his Parker 61, then helped to prop her up to sign.

"I will take it across now, Lila."

"Minnie will take it. Call her."

He did so. He put the letter in its envelope. When Minnie came in Mrs Bhoolabhoy grabbed the letter and gave it to Minnie herself. "To Colonel Smalley. Immediate."

Minnie said nothing but took the letter. Mr Bhoolabhoy made to follow her out but was commanded to stay. "You may massage the back of my neck," Mrs Bhoolabhoy said. For five minutes he performed this vaguely erotic task. Things were just getting interesting for him when she said, "Enough. Now go back to the office to be on hand to deal with Colonel Smalley if and when he comes."

As he left Lila's room Mr Pandey was coming out of No. 7 armed with his brief-case and his breakfast, a single glass of orange juice which he always drank over at the little hut where Indian Airways had once kept an office. Mr Bhoolabhoy followed him as far as the verandah, watched him cross the compound and settle himself, and kept alert for the sound of the transistor. He heard a crackle or two, but nothing more disturbing so remained where he was, his hand on the back of the chair Tusker usually sat in on Monday evenings.

"Always," he thought, "I have the mucky end of the stick. But then I am only part of the fixtures and fittings." These, undoubtedly, had all depreciated in value. The stucco on the walls of the hotel was peeling, the compound had been let go. Mrs Bhoolabhoy's priorities had never been those of her predecessor, old Mr Pillai, Mr Bhoolabhoy's first employer. Her business affairs remained a mystery to him. Mr Pandey knew far more about them than he did. He glared across the compound at the little babu and wondered not for the first time to what extent Mr Pandey enjoyed more than Mrs Bhoolabhoy's confidence.

"Management!"

"Yes, Minnie, what is it?"

Management, it seemed, had to go across at once to The Lodge to complain about the noise.

"What noise?"

"Smalley dog."

"I hear no dog." He bent his head. He heard it then.

According to her mistress, Minnie said, the dog had been locked in the garage again, either because Colonel and Mrs Smalley had disagreed once again about whose dog it was and which of them should take it for walkies or because Colonel Smalley was being spiteful as the result of the Letter.

“You personally gave him the Letter?”

Minnie said she had given it to their servant, Ibrahim.

“But Colonel Smalley was in?”

Yes. Minnie had seen him having breakfast on the front verandah of The Lodge.

“And Mrs Smalley?”

According to Ibrahim, the memsahib was at the hairdresser. Also according to Ibrahim there would be a row when memsahib got back because Tusker Sahib had just sacked him. He, Ibrahim, was once more no longer in the Smalleys’ employment. He had promised, though, to hand the Letter to Tusker Sahib before leaving, which meant right away because he had been told to get out at once and never come back. It was the fourth time in a year that he had been sacked by one or other of them; but this time Tusker Sahib had actually given him his month’s pay. Ibrahim was therefore packing his things so that he could station himself, bundle and all, outside the Shiraz, where Mrs Smalley would find him when she came out with her new blue hair and ask why he wasn’t at work. Colonel Memsahib (Minnie said) had gone to get new blue hair because she and Colonel Sahib were expecting a visitor any day.

“An Englishman,” Minnie said, holding her elbows.

Mr Bhoolabhoy stood up. “Then I must prepare a room.” The Smalleys had no spare bedroom at The Lodge. On the rare occasions they’d had a guest the guest stayed in the hotel.

“Dog first,” Minnie said. “Room later.”

“Damn the dog,” Mr Bhoolabhoy said but just then the distant howling took on a new and louder and despairing note. A shriek came from Mrs Bhoolabhoy’s room. Minnie hurried away. Mr Bhoolabhoy hesitated, then ran down the steps and made for The Lodge. Tusker’s wrath was more easily endured than Mrs Bhoolabhoy’s. And there was just the possibility that Ibrahim had not delivered the Letter into Tusker’s hands but left it in some perfectly rational but inconspicuous place where it would take time for Tusker to find it. But whether Ibrahim had handed it to Tusker personally or not before departing, sacked, it had certainly been found and opened. Mr Bhoolabhoy recognized it, without its envelope. Tusker lay in the middle of the bed of crimson canna lilies, the letter clutched in his right hand.

Chapter Two

TUSKER SMALLEY'S DEATH can be fixed as having occurred at approximately 9.30

a.m. rather than say twenty minutes later when the dog stopped whining and began to howl, causing Mrs Bhoolabhoy to shriek, because the dog, Bloxsaw (the Indian pronunciation of its real name, Blackshaw) was generally recognized as too stupid to be aware of the moment its master's soul departed; and Dr Mitra, Tusker's physician, pronounced the coronary as having been so massive as to have caused death at the moment of his fall. About twenty minutes before his fall, that is at about 9.10 a.m., Tusker had dragged Bloxsaw into the garage, locked him in, then told Ibrahim that he was dismissed and could clear out right away. He had paid him off. That was at 9.15.

Ibrahim knew it was 9.15. Having taken his money he glanced at his watch to work out how much longer Lucy-Mem would be at the hairdresser and so how long it would be before the business of negotiating his reinstatement could begin. If it ever did. The paying off had been an ominous variation on the theme of getting the push. For another few minutes Ibrahim hung around, out of sight, anticipating a yelled complaint that the breakfast egg was off, but the only sound was the racket made by the dog using the garage door as a punch-bag. Presently Ibrahim went out by the back to look for the young *mali* (his trump card on this occasion). The *mali* was nowhere to be seen. Instead there had been Mrs Bhoolabhoy's maid, Minnie, looking for him and now handing him a letter.

"Much trouble," she said, nodding at the envelope.

"Good," Ibrahim said. He told her he'd been sacked. She covered the lower part of her face, grinning with him, sharing the comedy of life. Then she went. He took the letter to Tusker Sahib at once, prepared for anything from a shied tea-cup to a friendly smile. The Sahib had always been unpredictable, more so since his illness, but it was always better to be sacked by him than by Memsahib. Once Memsahib had sacked him she had a way of not looking, not listening, not seeing him for days as though the mere fact of her having told him to go had caused him to disappear. All his longest periods of technical unemployment stemmed from notice given by Colonel Memsahib. The Sahib, although sometimes threatening violence, was a soft touch by comparison. With Memsahib the war tended to be one of attrition, not confrontation. Even when she was on his side against Tusker Sahib he dealt with her cautiously.

"A letter, Sahib," he announced. "Just now come."

"I told you to get out!" the Sahib shouted. "You've got your money, so go, now. *Ek dam.*"

"From Management," Ibrahim said, putting the letter on the breakfast table. "Shall not trouble household further. Only performing last duty. The world collapses around one's head. So it is written. Salaam Aleikum."

He retired into the bungalow and waited, listening for the sound of the envelope being

torn open out there on the verandah. He guessed what the letter was about. In the servants’

quarters both at Smith’s and the Shiraz the subject of the future of The Lodge and of Smith’s itself had been discussed for weeks; and news—from conversations overheard of plans made by the consortium of businessmen who owned the Shiraz to buy up Smith’s and

“redevelop”—swapped for news of what was known or guessed about Mrs Bhoolabhoy’s latest successes in playing one of these businessmen off against the other with a view it was supposed to being invited to join the consortium herself.

Apart from the Shiraz, the consortium owned a new hotel in Ranpur, one in Mayapore, and another down in Mirât (The Mirât Lake-Palace Hotel). They also owned a small chain of restaurants called the Go-Go-Inns which specialized in Punjabi food. All the businessmen concerned in these enterprises had come from the Western Punjab in 1947 when it became part of Pakistan at the time of Independence and Partition, and had arrived in India penniless, they said. Mrs Bhoolabhoy’s first husband was believed to have come from there, having “lost his all” in the riots between Muslims and Hindus. It was agreed by the servants both at Smith’s and the Shiraz that you could hardly find a Western Punjabi, once destitute, nowadays not making a packet. “Bloody immigrants,” Ibrahim sometimes called them. Ibrahim did not hear the sound of the envelope being opened. Bloxsaw was now yelping as well as punching the garage door. What he did hear was a shout, “The bitch! The bloody bitch!” and the scrape of Tusker’s wicker-chair as he rose, no doubt to go and sort Mrs Bhoolabhoy out.

Ibrahim smiled. Since he had been dismissed it was no concern of his that the Sahib leaving by the front and himself by the back meant the bungalow would now be unattended. He went to the servants’ quarters in the rear compound and found the young *mali* trying to repair the leak in the old water-can.

“Leave that,” he said. “We are dismissed. One out, all out.”

“When shall we be reinstated?”

The *mali* had been employed for only a few weeks. But he knew the score. Ibrahim had briefed him.

“This time perhaps never. Come. Help me pack a few things then pack a few things yourself to make it look good.”

“I also should pack?”

“Of course.”

“Where shall we go?”

“To the Shiraz.”

“We seek employment at the Shiraz?”

“No. We shall take up positions near main entrance to accost Memsahib when she comes out,”

Mali put the watering-can aside but remained squatting on his hunkers. His brown eyes darkened with the effort of concentrating.

“Ibrahim,” he said. “Why when you are pushed am I also pushed?”

“I have explained it before. There is no time to explain it again now.”

“What of pay?”

“What of it? Did I say *I* was sacking you? You are still in my employ, at least until end of the month. Speak of pay then, not before.”

“If we are pushed, what of shelter, what of food?”

“Given push, not pushed. If you hope to go foreign you must learn pukka English. Stop asking questions and get on with it. Allah will provide.”

The hut where Ibrahim slept lay behind the corrugated iron garage which was a comparatively new construction. As a bungalow The Lodge had always been diminutive, the servants’ quarters correspondingly so: six or seven men, women and boys had once had accommodation here, just sufficient for a modest bachelor establishment in the days of the *raj*. Then, there had been several huts and a cookhouse. Only the hut in which Ibrahim slept remained in good repair. The others had fallen into ruin and of the cookhouse there was nothing left except a few blackened bricks. No one had used it to cook for the occupants of The Lodge since the time Smith’s annexed it. A modern kitchen of sorts had subsequently been installed inside The Lodge but this was seldom put to major use because—breakfasts and buffet parties apart—the Smalleys usually ate in the main hotel dining-room or had Ibrahim bring trays over.

Tusker Sahib occasionally had crazes for going to the market and bringing back fresh food which he made a hash of, burning the potatoes, over-spicing the stew. Ibrahim was prepared to make tea, toast, cook eggs, squeeze fruit juice, pour from the packets of cornflakes, oversee the stocking of the refrigerator with butter and milk, and in winter have a go at making the morning porridge which kept his master’s and mistress’s old bones warm. If either was ill he could and did turn his hand to anything in the line of nursing and commissariat. Years younger than both he felt for them what an indulgent, often exasperated but affectionate parent might feel for demanding and unreasonable children whom it was more sensible to appease than cross.

He had spoiled them both three months before when Tusker Sahib had been taken seriously ill for the first time in his seventy-odd years, and Dr Mitra had ordered him to bed, either in the hospital or at home, preferably the hospital. “Bugger hospital,” Tusker had shouted. “Come to that, bugger bed. Ibrahim’ll look after me, so will Lucy if she can get her arse off the chair.”

One of the pleasures of working for Tusker Sahib was the further insight it gave him into the fascinating flexibility and poetry of the English language. Since his youth in Mirât, since his boyhood even, it had never failed to stun him with its elegance. Only those few months in Finsbury Park, London N, had caused him any disquiet. The language had sounded different, there. But the place was stiff with Greeks.

For days after Tusker’s confinement to bed he had gone round muttering, “Bugger bed, and get your arse off the chair.” For days, too, he and Lucy-Mem separately or together shopped for the ingredients of the good nourishing-broth which would keep Tusker’s strength up without overheating his blood. Separately or together they had slaved over the rarely used electric oven at The Lodge that was either not hot enough or too hot, somehow not in either their separate or combined competence, a regular djinn of a stove, one moment exhaling smoke and flames and at the next as cold as Akbar’s tomb; while in the bedroom or on the verandah Tusker Sahib lay either incomprehensibly docile—like a man (Ibrahim thought) who knew he’d left it too late to go to Mecca or, at other times, pronouncing anathema, against the broth, his wife, Ibrahim, Dr Mitra, and the Shiraz whose tall shadow darkened The Lodge’s garden in the mornings until the sun got high enough for the fivestoreys to emit heat rather than cast shadow, and cut The Lodge off from the cool breeze that sometimes came at midday in the warm weather. Chiefly, though, Tusker pronounced anathema against Mrs Bhoolabhoy whose chief *mali* was supposed to tend The Lodge’s garden as well as the kitchen-garden and the ragged flower pots in the hotel’s own compound. Ibrahim belonged to Tusker and Lucy; but the *mali* and the sweeper had always been Mrs Bhoolabhoy’s responsibility, their services paid for in the rent. Throughout Tusker’s illness the old *mali* hadn’t worked at The Lodge. The grass began to need cutting. The canna lilies began to wilt. The jungle was advancing.

“What does Mrs Bhoolabhoy think I am?” Tusker cried one day. “A sleeping beauty?

What’s she going to do? Wake me in a hundred years’ time after hacking her way through her own bloody thickets? Who does she think she is? Prince bloody Charming? Just wait till Billy-Boy gets back. I’ll have both their guts for garters.”

“What is Sahib saying?” Ibrahim asked Colonel Memsahib.

“Nothing. It is only his delirium,” Lucy replied. “But we must do something about the *mali*. The state of the garden is beginning to retard Colonel Sahib’s recovery.”

Ibrahim disagreed. He had worked for the Smalleys for several interesting tumultuous years and wasn’t ready yet to lose them. They were the last survivors of Pankot’s permanent retired British residents. This and the fact that he himself was England-

Returned gave him a certain cachet among the other servants. If Tusker died now Lucy-Mem might go Home. He judged that Tusker's anger about the state of the compound was the main thing that kept him on the boil, and so—alive. Tusker was a man who needed irritants. Often he invented them. Here was one ready-made. From a peaceful orderly scene of a *mali* cutting grass and watering canna lilies Tusker might have turned his face away, and to the wall. Sometimes, feeling himself both demeaned and exalted, Ibrahim threw a can of water on the lilies. He even picked a few marigolds for Tusker's bedside vase. Cut the grass he would not. He was a head-bearer, not a gardener; and in any case he agreed with Tusker that Mrs Bhoolabhoy's *mali* had always cut the grass, if only by steering the old machine while his tenpence-in-the-shilling assistant dragged it on ropes.

"It's in the lease!" Tusker shouted one day. Exasperated and ignoring Ibrahim's advice to do nothing until Mr Bhoolabhoy was back from his mysterious trip to Ranpur, Lucy-Mem went to confront Mrs Bhoolabhoy, something Ibrahim couldn't remember her ever doing before.

"I never interfere with business matters," she once said to him in her small light voice. "I have no business brain at all." Ibrahim took this with a pinch of salt. Memsahib was a devil when it came to checking change and prices on shopping lists. And most of the concessions Tusker Sahib wrung out of Mrs Bhoolabhoy, Ibrahim knew, originated in what Lucy described as her own "addled little brain". Without that addled little brain there would have been no new refrigerator two years ago, no repair to the garage door the same year, no new seats on the twin thunder-boxes which stood side by side on a dais in the bathroom like viceregal thrones and which the liar of a sweeper declared he had evidence of having been used at times simultaneously.

So when Lucy-Mem went to confront Mrs Bhoolabhoy about the case of the disappearing *mali* he almost expected her to return with a *mali* in tow.

"Old *mali* seems to have resigned," she told him, "and hired himself out to the Shiraz. Beyond that I simply don't know. I suppose we must wait and see."

He expected her to say, "Surely you could have told us old *mali* had gone?" But she didn't, and on second thoughts he realized he hadn't expected it. Sahib and Memsahib were extremely interesting examples to him of the almost total self-absorption that overtook old people such as them. Both lived, really, in worlds of their own. If either had bothered to ask him what had *happened* to old *mali* he might have told them. But all Sahib had done was grumble that the *mali* hadn't turned up, and all Memsahib had done was listen with half-an-ear until the moment when it struck her that it was bad for Sahib to grumble so much. It wasn't of course true that old *mali* had resigned. He had been sacked, unofficially as part of the process of what Mrs Bhoolabhoy called retrenchment, officially because she had decided that he was selling part of the produce of the kitchen garden to the bazaar from where at times of inexplicable shortage Mr Bhoolabhoy had been unwittingly buying it back. This was not proven against old *mali* but Mrs Bhoolabhoy was convinced of the fact and when Mrs

Bhoolabhoy was convinced of a fact one had to assume that a fact was what it was. There was no appeal against her judgment. All old *mali* had actually ever done, though, was appropriate his fair share of what he had hoed and sweated to grow. The kitchen garden had occupied most of his time, what was left over, Mrs Bhoolabhoy complained, had for years been lazily spent cutting the grass at The Lodge. The *mali*'s departure for the Shiraz left the Hotel with only the assistant *mali*, a youth with a lame left leg and a blind right eye who just about managed to cope with the weeds in the Smith's flower-beds of which, between stony paths, there were now but vestigial traces. It was believed that Mrs Bhoolabhoy was only awaiting an opportunity to sack this wretched fellow too. It was typical of her, Ibrahim thought, that she should have told Lucy-Mem that old *mali* had resigned.

Old *mali* was sacked on the day Tusker Sahib was taken ill, which was the day after his friend and drinking companion, Mr Bhoolabhoy, went down to Ranpur ostensibly to execute commissions for Mrs Bhoolabhoy : a rare enough event for the servants to wonder whether in fact he had been sacked too; or had left her at last for another woman. For instance, the nautch-girl, Hot Chichanya, who sang at the Go-Go-Inn in Ranpur and was said to be the daughter of a Russian mother and an Afghan father. The head bearer at Smith's had seen a clipping of a newspaper photograph of Hot Chichanya pinned to the inside of Mr Bhoolabhoy's almirah door and one by one all the male servants had entered the manager's room during his absence to get an eyeful.

Mr Bhoolabhoy's interest in Hot Chichanya dated from the time she came up to Pankot to sing in the first cabaret produced in the Shiraz's Mountain View Room (of which it was reported she complained that there was hardly any room, less view and no god-dammed mountain). The servants at the Shiraz said she had a voice like a frog but breasts like melons. In the clipping these showed to advantage in spite of the poor newsprint. The staff at the Shiraz had also reported to the staff at Smith's that Hot Chichanya was insatiable and kept by her bedside an illustrated edition of the Kama Sutra printed in Hong Kong, to inspire her lovers if they showed signs of flagging at 3 a.m. when the sound of her raucous voice and stamping bootshod feet and the cracking of the red leather whip she used in a number called Koshak-dance had more than once disturbed and brought complaints from other guests, particularly parents visiting the boys who were getting a sound Englishstyle public school education at the Chakravarti College which was housed in the old Summer Residence.

The complaints had no effect. Hot Chichanya was in the protection of two young men, both thin, who were nephews of a senior member of the consortium of owners. All her lovers, rumour had it, were thin. The scrawnier the better, and age no object. Mr Bhoolabhoy could not be ruled out as a candidate. He had attended the cabaret twice. Now he was in Ranpur, where Hot Chichanya performed nightly.

"Poor Bhoolabhoy Sahib," the Smith Hotel cook said when it dawned on them what the manager might be doing. "Has he the strength?"

When he got back from the plains three weeks later, although silent he looked content;

like a man, cook said, whose objective had been achieved. It was noted too that on the first Sunday following his return he did not go to St John's Church, of which he was a pillar. Francis (Frank) Bhoolabhoy was a cradle Christian. What Mrs Bhoolabhoy was no one knew. She had been married so many times that her original family name seemed lost in antiquity. She showed no interest in any religion, in any kind of hereafter, only in the here and now and in how this might be arranged to her advantage.

On the morning of his return Mr Bhoolabhoy spent two hours in Mrs Bhoolabhoy's room but the persistent sound of chat suggested conversation of a business not an amorous and certainly not a confessional nature. Emerging, he went about his normal routine with his usual air of muffled energy, the difference being that when he sat over his typewriter or whispered a rebuke to someone who had dropped a plate his eyes were on neither.

"He has been having his end away," the aged head bearer said, using one of Ibrahim's expressions. "God be thanked, there is hope for all of us."

Removing the soiled socks, shirts and underwear which Mr Bhoolabhoy had brought back from his trip, the dhobi's boy spent a moment or two on each garment, testing for new scent, conclusive evidence of a wild Khurdish night with the cabaret artist. He had learned from his father that dhobis were expected to maintain a tradition of being the first to detect the smell of adultery in any household. But only once did he discover an aroma not comprised of Mr Bhoolabhoy's natural body odour and the familiar smell of the Hamam soap Mr Bhoolabhoy favoured. He got, just, a whiff of something uncharacteristic when checking a pair of smart y-fronted underpants, but the smell was quickly traced to the fact that the pants were new, still full of dressing, obviously bought in Ranpur and not washed before use. Was the purchase of new underpants significant in itself?

It wasn't until the evening of this day that Mr Bhoolabhoy gave silent notice of the fact that his wife must have told him both about the *mali's* dismissal and Tusker Sahib's illness. No member of the staff had mentioned either to him. They preferred him to find things out for himself. At five o'clock he strolled into the rear compound, inspected the kitchen-garden, then as if going to visit the invalid went to the gap in the wall which gave access to and a view of the compound of The Lodge, and stood for a while, hands behind back, observing the uncut grass, like a man looking at the scene of a recent disaster which he'd heard tell of, was inquisitive about but not responsible for.

Ibrahim, stationed where he could see but not be seen watched Mr Bhoolabhoy. He had known from early morning that Mr Bhoolabhoy was back but had said nothing to the Smalleys because it was one of those days on which for no clear reason none of them was speaking to the others unless it couldn't be helped. Such days occurred less frequently than the days on which it was simply the sahib and memsahib not speaking to one another except through him or one of them not speaking to him except through the other; but there was no real accounting for these days of mutual tripartite silence.