A PASSAGE TO INDIA

PART I: MOSQUE

CHAPTER I

Except for the Marabar Caves—and they are twenty miles off—the city of Chandrapore presents

nothing extraordinary. Edged rather than washed by the river Ganges, it trails for a couple

of miles along the bank, scarcely distinguishable from the rubbish it deposits so freely. There

are no bathing-steps on the river front, as the Ganges happens not to be holy here; indeed

there is no river front, and bazaars shut out the wide and shifting panorama of the stream. The

streets are mean, the temples ineffective, and though a few fine houses exist they are hidden

away in gardens or down alleys whose filth deters all but the invited guest. Chandrapore was

never large or beautiful, but two hundred years ago it lay on the road between Upper India,

then imperial, and the sea, and the fine houses date from that period. The zest for decoration

stopped in the eighteenth century, nor was it ever democratic. There is no painting and scarcely

any carving in the bazaars. The very wood seems made of mud, the inhabitants of mud moving.

So abased, so monotonous is everything that meets the eye, that when the Ganges comes

down it might be expected to wash the excrescence back into the soil. Houses do fall, people

are drowned and left rotting, but the general outline of the town persists, swelling here, shrinking

there, like some low but indestructible form of life.

Inland, the prospect alters. There is an oval Maidan, and a long sallow hospital. Houses belonging

to Furasians stand on the high ground by the railway station. Beyond the railway— which

runs parallel to the river— the land sinks, then rises again rather steeply. On the second rise is

laid out the little civil station, and viewed hence Chandrapore appears to be a totally different

place. It is a city of gardens. It is no city, but a forest sparsely scattered with huts. It is a tropical

pleasaunce washed by a noble river. The toddy palms and neem trees and mangoes and pepul

that were hidden behind the bazaars now become visible and in their turn hide the bazaars.

They rise from the gardens where ancient tanks nourish them, they burst out of stifling purlieus

and unconsidered temples. Seeking light and air, and endowed with more strength than man or

his works, they soar above the lower deposit to greet one another with branches and beckoning

leaves, and to build a city for the birds. Especially after the rains do they screen what passes

below, but at all times, even when scorched or leafless, they glorify the city to the English people

who inhabit the rise, so that new-corners cannot believe it to be as meagre as it is described,

and have to be driven down to acquire disillusionment. As for the civil station itself, it

provokes no emotion. It charms not; neither does it repel. It is sensibly planned, with a redbrick

club on its brow, and farther back a grocer's and a cemetery, and the bungalows are disposed

along roads that intersect at right angles. It has nothing hideous in it, and only the view

is beautiful; it shares nothing with the city except the overarching sky.

The sky too has its changes, but they are less marked than those of the vegetation and the

river. Clouds map it tip at times, but it is normally a dome of blending tints, and the main tint

blue. By day the blue will pale down into white where it touches the white of the land, after

sunset it has a new circumference— orange, melting upwards into tenderest purple. But the core

of blue persists, and so it is by night. Then the stars hang like lamps from the immense vault.

The distance between the vault and them is as nothing to the distance behind them, and that

farther distance, though beyond colour, last freed itself from blue.

The sky settles everything— not only climates and seasons but when the earth shall be beautiful.

By herself she can do little— only feeble outbursts of flowers. But when the sky chooses,

glory can rain into the Chandrapore bazaars or a benediction pass from horizon to horizon. The

sky can do this because it is so strong and so enormous. Strength comes from the sun, infused

in it daily; size from the prostrate earth. No mountains infringe on the curve. League after

league the earth lies flat, heaves a little, is flat again. Only in the south, where a group of fists

and fingers are thrust up through the soil, is the endless expanse interrupted. These fists and

fingers are the Marabar Hills, containing the extraordinary caves.

CHAPTER II

Abandoning his bicycle, which fell before a servant could catch it, the young man sprang up

on to the verandah. He was all animation. "Hamidullah, Hamidullah! am I late?" he cried.

"Do not apologize," said his host. "You are always late."

"Kindly answer my question. Am I late? Has Mahmoud Ali eaten all the food? If so I go

elsewhere. Mr. Mahmoud Ali, how are you?"

"Thank you, Dr. Aziz, I am dying."

"Dying before your dinner? Oh, poor Malimoud Ali!"

"Hamidullah here is actually dead. He passed away just as you rode up on your bike."

"Yes, that is so," said the other. "Imagine us both as addressing you from another and a

happier world."

"Does there happen to be such a thing as a hookah in that happier world of yours?"

"Aziz, don't chatter. We are having a very sad talk."

**The hookah had been packed too tight, as was usual in his friend's house, and bubbled**

**sulkily. He coaxed it. Yielding at last, the tobacco jetted up into his lungs and nostrils, driving**

**out the smoke of burning cow dung that had filled them as he rode through the bazaar. It was**

**delicious. He lay in a trance, sensuous but healthy, through which the talk of the two others did not seem particularly sad—they were discussing as to whether or no it is possible to be friends with an Englishman. Mahmoud Ali argued that it was not, Hamidullah disagreed, but with so many reservations that there was no friction between them. Delicious indeed to lie on the broad verandah with the moon rising in front and the servants preparing dinner behind, and no trouble happening.**

**"Well, look at my own experience this morning."**

**"I only contend that it is possible in England," replied Hamidullah, who had been to that**

**country long ago, before the big rush, and had received a cordial welcome at Cambridge.**

**"It is impossible here. Aziz! The red-nosed boy has again insulted me in Court. I do not**

**blame him. He was told that he ought to insult me. Until lately he was quite a nice boy, but the**

**others have got hold of him."**

**"Yes, they have no chance here, that is my point. They come out intending to be gentlemen,**

**and are told it will not do. Look at Lesley, look at Blakiston, now it is your red-nosed boy,**

**and Fielding will go next. Why, I remember when Turton came out first. It was in another part**

**of the Province. You fellows will not believe me, but I have driven with Turton in his carriage—**

**Turton! Oh yes, we were once quite intimate. He has shown me his stamp collection."**

**"He would expect you to steal it now. Turton! But red-nosed boy will be far worse than Turton!"**

**"I do not think so. They all become exactly the same, not worse, not better. I give any Englishman**

**two years, be he Turton or Burton. It is only the difference of a letter. And I give any**

**Englishwoman six months. All are exactly alike. Do you not agree with me?"**

**"I do not," replied Mahmoud Ali, entering into the bitter fun, and feeling both pain and**

**amusement at each word that was uttered. "For my own part I find such profound differences**

**among our rulers. Red-nose mumbles, Turton talks distinctly, Mrs. Turton takes bribes, Mrs.**

**Red-nose does not and cannot, because so far there is no Mrs. Red-nose."**

**"Bribes?"**

**"Did you not know that when they were lent to Central India over a Canal Scheme, some**

**Rajah or other gave her a sewing machine in solid gold so that the water should run through his state?"**

**"And does it?**

**"No, that is where Mrs. Turton is so skilful. When we poor blacks take bribes, we perform**

**what we are bribed to perform, and the law discovers us in consequence. The English take and do nothing. I admire them."**

**"We all admire them. Aziz, please pass me the hookah."**

**"Oh, not yet— hookah is so jolly now."**

**"You are a very selfish boy." He raised his voice suddenly, and shouted for dinner. Servants**

**shouted back that it was ready. They meant that they wished it was ready, and were so understood,**

**for nobody moved. Then Hamidullah continued, but with changed manner and evident**

**emotion.**

"But take my case—the case of young Hugh Bannister. Here is the son of my dear, my dead

friends, the Reverend and Mrs. Bannister, whose goodness to me in England I shall never forget or describe. They were father and mother to me, I talked to them as I do now. In the vacations their Rectory became my home. They entrusted all their children to me— I often carried little Hugh about— I took him up to the Funeral of Queen Victoria, and held him in my arms above the crowd."

"Queen Victoria was different," murmured Mahmoud Ali.

"I learn now that this boy is in business as a leather merchant at Cawnpore. Imagine how I

long to see him and to pay his fare that this house may be his home. But it is useless. The

other Anglo-Indians will have got hold of him long ago. He will probably think that I want

something, and I cannot face that from the son of my old friends. Oh, what in this country has gone wrong with everything, Vakil Sahib? I ask you."

**Aziz joined in. "Why talk about the English? Brrrr . . . ! Why be either friends with the fellows**

**or not friends? Let us shut them out and be jolly. Queen Victoria and Mrs. Bannister were**

**the only exceptions, and they're dead."**

**"No, no, I do not admit that, I have met others."**

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"I think you ought not to walk at night alone, Mrs. Moore. There are bad characters about

and leopards may come across from the Marabar Hills. Snakes also."

She exclaimed; she had forgotten the snakes.

"For example, a six-spot beetle," he continued. "You pick it up, it bites, you die."

"But you walk about yourself."

"Oh, I am used to it."

"Used to snakes?"

They both laughed. "I'm a doctor," he said. "Snakes don't dare bite me." They sat down side

by side in the entrance, and slipped on their evening shoes. "Please may I ask you a question

now? Why do you come to India at this time of year, just as the cold weather is ending?"

"I intended to start earlier, but there was an unavoidable delay."

"It will soon be so unhealthy for you! And why ever do you come to Chandrapore?"

"To visit my son. He is the City Magistrate here."

"Oh no, excuse me, that is quite impossible. Our City Magistrate's name is Mr. Heaslop. I

know him intimately."

"He's my son all the same," she said, smiling.

"But, Mrs. Moore, how can he be?"

"I was married twice."

"Yes, now I see, and your first husband died."

"He did, and so did my second husband."

"Then we are in the same box," he said cryptically. "Then is the City Magistrate the entire of

your family now?"

"No, there are the younger ones— Ralph and Stella in England."

"And the gentleman here, is he Ralph and Stella's half-brother?"

"Quite right."

"Mrs. Moore, this is all extremely strange, because like yourself I have also two sons and a

daughter. Is not this the same box with a vengeance?"

"What are their names? Not also Ronny, Ralph, and Stella, surely?"

The suggestion delighted him. "No, indeed. How funny it sounds! Their names are quite different

and will surprise you. Listen, please. I am about to tell you my children's names. The first

is called Ahmed, the second is called Karim, the third— she is the eldest— Jamila. Three children

are enough. Do not you agree with me?"

"I do."

They were both silent for a little, thinking of their respective families. She sighed and rose to

go-

"Would you care to see over the Minto Hospital one morning?" he enquired. "I have nothing

else to offer at Chandrapore."

"Thank you, I have seen it already, or I should have liked to come with you very much."

"I suppose the Civil Surgeon took you."

"Yes, and Mrs. Callendar."

His voice altered. "Ah! A very charming lady."

"Possibly, when one knows her better."

"What? What? You didn't like her?"

"She was certainly intending to be kind, but I did not find her exactly charming."

He burst out with: "She has just taken my tonga without my permission—do you call that

being charming?— and Major Callendar interrupts me night after night from where I am dining

with my friends and I go at once, breaking tip a most pleasant entertainment, and he is not

there and not even a message. Is this charming, pray? But what does it matter? I can do nothing

and he knows it. I am just a subordinate, my time is of no value, the verandah is good

enough for an Indian, yes, yes, let him stand, and Mrs. Callendar takes my carriage and cuts

me dead ..."

She listened.

He was excited partly by his wrongs, but much more by the knowledge that someone sympathized

with them. It was this that led him to repeat, exaggerate, contradict. She had proved

her sympathy by criticizing her fellowcountrywoman to him, but even earlier he had known. The

flame that not even beauty can nourish was springing up, and though his words were querulous

his heart began to glow secretly. Presently it burst into speech.

"You understand me, you know what others feel. Oh, if others resembled you!"

Rather surprised, she replied: "I don't think 1 understand people very well. I only know

whether I like or dislike them."

"Then you are an Oriental."

She accepted his escort back to the club, and said at the gate that she wished she was a

member, so that she could have asked him in.

"Indians are not allowed into the Chandrapore Club even as guests," he said simply. He did

not expatiate on his wrongs now, being happy. As he strolled downhill beneath the lovely moon,

and again saw the lovely mosque, he seemed to own the land as much as anyone owned it.

What did it matter if a few flabby Hindus had preceded him there, and a few chilly English

succeeded?