

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Day of the Scorpion

Paul Scott

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About the Book

India, August 9th 1942. The morning brings raids and the arrest by British police of Congress Party members. Amongst the prisoners is the distinguished ex-Chief Minister Mohammed Ali Kasim. Loyalty to the party's central vision of a unified free India, his incarceration is a symptom of the growing deterioration of Anglo-Indian relations.

For the long-serving British family, the Laytons, the political and social ramifications are immediately disturbing and tragic. Some, like Ronald Merrick, believe that true intimacy between the races is impossible; others, such as Sarah Layton, struggle to come to terms with their Anglo-Indian past. With growing confusion and bewilderment, the British are forced to confront the violent and often brutal years that lie ahead of them.

About the Author

Paul Scott was born in north London in 1920. During the Second World War he held a commission in the Indian army, after which he worked for several years in publishing, and for a literary agency. His first novel, *Johnnie Sahib*, was published in 1952, followed by twelve others, of which the best known are the 'Raj Quartet': *The Jewel in the Crown* (1966), *The Day of the Scorpion* (1968), *The Towers of Silence* (1971) and *A Division of the Spoils* (1975). His last novel, *Staying On* (1977), won the Booker Prize. He died in 1978.

Johnnie Sahib
The Alien Sky
A Male Child
The Mark of the Warrior
The Chinese Love Pavilion
The Birds of Paradise
The Bender
The Corrida at San Feliu
The Jewel in the Crown*
The Towers of Silence*
A Division of the Spoils*
Staying On*

**available from Arrow*

The Day of the Scorpion

Paul Scott



arrow books

To
Fern and John

with deep affection and regard

PROLOGUE

THE WRITER ENCOUNTERED a Muslim woman once in a narrow street of a predominantly Hindu town, the quarter inhabited by money-lenders. The feeling he had was that she was coming in search of a loan. She wore the *burkha*, that unhygienic head-to-toe covering that turns a woman into a walking symbol of inefficient civic refuse collection and leaves you without even an impression of her eyes behind the slits she watches the gay world through, tempted but not tempting; a garment in all probability inflaming to her passions but chilling to her expectations of having them satisfied. Pity for the titillation she must suffer.

After she had passed there was a smell of Chanel No. 5, which suggested that she needed money because she liked expensive things. Perhaps she had a rebellious spirit, or laboured under a confusion of ideas and intentions. On the other hand she may merely have been submissive to her husband, drenching herself for his private delight with a scent she did not realize was also one of public invitation – and passed that day through the street of the moneylenders only because it was a short cut to the mosque. It was a Friday, and it is written in the Koran: ‘Believers, when the call is made for prayer on Friday, hasten to the remembrance of Allah and leave off all business. That would be better for you, if you but knew it. Then, when the prayers are ended, disperse and go in quest of Allah’s bounty.’ Perhaps, when the service was over, it was her intention to return by the way she had come.

If she was going to divine service then she was bound for the Great Mosque, which lies in the heart of the city. Its minaret is not the only minaret in Ranpur, but it is the tallest and the only one from which the call to prayer is made nowadays; the other mosques of Ranpur are no longer in use as houses of worship. Some of them have decayed, others less ruinous are used as storerooms by the municipality. There are still Muslims in Ranpur but the days are gone when the great festivals of the *îd al-fitir* and the *îd al-Adzha* could fill the mosques with thousands of the faithful from the city and the surrounding villages of the plain. The days are gone because thousands of the faithful are gone. Some of those that remain still mourn friends and relatives who chose Islam but never reached the land of promise, having died on the way, some of illness, many by violence. Sometimes a train that travelled on would pass one coming out of Islam, laden with passengers who had neither chosen Islam nor been content to stay when they found themselves living there, in the houses they were born in. These people mourned too for what they had left behind and for friends and relatives who started on the journey with them but did not live to finish it. Some of the survivors settled in Ranpur which was still is, a sprawling city, seat of the provincial government. There are temples and bathing places on the banks of the sacred river, with steps and burning ghats. Bridges connect the north to the south bank which is less densely populated than the north where lateral and tangential industrial development has broken the landscape with chimneys taller than any minaret. From the air this expansion outward from the ancient nucleus falls into something like a pattern. From the ground no pattern can be seen (except to the east in the military precision with which the roads and installations of the cantonment were built by a people who are also gone) and the nucleus itself is a warren of narrow streets and chowks in which one may too easily get lost and, being lost, marvel that anyone could know of a short cut to the mosque or to anywhere, let alone find it. Here, you might think no experience would be long enough to acquire such knowledge, in fact that confusion seems to be almost deliberate, the result of a recognition of a need to huddle together in order not to be destroyed by a land that seems at best indifferent, at worst malignly opposed, to human occupation.

To leave the narrow streets and crowded chowks behind and enter the area once distinguished by the title Civil Lines, an area of broad avenues and spacious bungalows in walled compounds which culminates in the palladian grandeur of Government House, the Secretariat and the Legislative Assembly; to continue, still in an easterly direction, past the maidan, the government college, the hospital and the film studios and enter the cantonment, which someone once described as Aldershot with trees planted to provide shade instead of cut down to make room, is to pass from one period of history to another and to feel that the people from the small and distant island of Britain who built and settled here were attempting to express in the architectural terms that struck them as suitable the sense of freedom at having space around them at last, a land with length and breadth to it the promised ideal conditions for concrete and abstract proof of their extraordinary talent for running things and making them work. And yet here too there is an atmosphere of circumspection, of unexpected limits having been reached and recognized, and quietly, sensibly settled for. Too late to reduce the scale and crowd everything together, each road and building has an air of being turned inwards on itself to withstand a siege.

If you look in places like Ranpur for evidence of things these island people left behind which were of value, you might choose any one or several of the public works and installations as visible proof of them: the roads and railways and telegraph for a modern system of communication, the High Court for a sophisticated code of civil and criminal law, the college for education to university standard, the State Legislature for democratic government, the Secretariat for a civil service made in the complete image of that in Whitehall; the clubs for a pattern of urbane and civilized behaviour, the messes and barracks for an ideal of military service to the mother country. These were bequeathed, undoubtedly, these and the language and the humpy graves in the English cemetery of St Luke's in the oldest part of the cantonment, many of whose headstones record an early death, a cutting-off before the prime or the prime, with all that this suggests in the way of unfinished business.

But it is not these things which most impress the stranger on his journey into the civil lines, into the old city itself (where he becomes lost and notes the passage of a woman dressed in the *burkha* in the street of the moneylenders) and then back past the secretariat, the Legislative Assembly and Government House, and on into the old cantonment in a search for points of present contact with the reality of twenty years ago, the repercussions, for example, of the affair in the Bibighar Gardens. What impresses him is something for which there is no memorial but which all these things collectively bear witness to: the fact that here in Ranpur, and in places like Ranpur, the British came to the end of themselves as they were.

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More than two hundred miles south-west of Ranpur but still inside the boundary of the province which Ranpur is the principal city lies the town of Premanagar, and – some five miles farther, marking the site of an earlier town of that name – the Premanagar Fort.

Premanagar is most easily pronounced Premman'ugger. Old-style British used to call it Premah'n'gh, strongly accenting the second syllable and all but swallowing the third and fourth, which gave the Fort status of the kind enjoyed by a tent when it is called a marquee. Originally built by the Rajputs, the Fort was partially destroyed and patched up by the Moghuls who held it against the Mahrattas but lost it to the British. In the mid-nineteenth century it was for a time the seat of an English freebooting gentleman of doubtful origin called Turner who raised a company of mercenaries which he styled Turner's Horse. His men terrorized the countryside and were said to be devoted

their leader. Apart from his Horse Turner had six wives, and a modest fortune which he lost gambling in Calcutta trying to buy a seventh. He died in a skirmish which most historians of the Mutiny of 1857 overlook, probably because so far as one can see nothing led up to it and it led nowhere itself. And one daguerreotype reveals Turner as a man with side whiskers and fixed, pale-looking eyes that were probably blue. One suspects that he was murdered. His irregular cavalry either died with him or disappeared in search of further adventure, so no Turner's Horse lived on to perpetuate his memory. He was, it is said, a press-ganged sailor who deserted in Madras and sought his fortune up-country. But no matter. He is a body buried as it were in the foundations of that other ruined stronghold, the British Empire.

Real bodies were in fact buried in the foundations of the Premanagar Fort. It was a fashion of the times, but the parents of young men (and sometimes the young men's wives) who were bricked up alive to give a fort an auspicious start in life were handsomely rewarded. It is said, though, that the misfortunes of this particular fort were once traced to the fact that the treasurer at the court of the Rajput prince who built it – and bricked up a promising young man and his child wife – pocketed the bereaved family's pension for the five years it took the boy's father to pluck up the courage to go over the treasurer's head and hint at injustice. It is not known what then happened to the treasurer, or the complainant. And anyway it is all conjecture. It has the sound of a myth devised later to explain or anyway celebrate misadventure. The British – as usual – had the best of it. They inherited a partial ruin and preserved it with reverent determination as if awestruck at the thought of changing anything that might then be turned to their disadvantage. Until 1939 the Fort was a detention barracks, and a magnet for military schemes run by grey colonels who had forgotten that as rosy subalterns they had always found such exercises distracting to their sense of what one was in the world to do.

After 1939, the Fort became a prison – a place of civil instead of military detention. It comprised the foundations of the old outer wall, a broken-down despoiled Hindu temple in what had once been the precincts of the South Gate, a still stout inner wall, a pretty mosque, two wells, a flagpole, and a walled courtyard of red earth. Here, in the courtyard, between August 1942 and the date of his release, the Fort's most distinguished prisoner created a garden to pass the time. Traces of it still remain. Given better luck than Turner his memory might have been perpetuated by the habit, dear to Indians, of naming a place after its founder or its most illustrious inhabitant. But it is not known now. Kasim's Garden. Besides, it was only a patch.

Below the hill on which the redstone Fort rests in the massive immobility of its functional decline are other ruins, the site of excavations in 1926 by a team of Frenchmen whose leader became *persona non grata* with the Deputy Commissioner and the Provincial Governor when a complaint was lodged by an English lady, a Miss Frayle, that Professor Lebrun had made an improper suggestion to her while pointing out a recently uncovered frieze of Hindu erotica. The expedition departed from Pondicherry in amused, Gallic disgrace, collectively shrugging its shoulders; and the inquisitive English who subsequently took an archaeological interest in the diggings at Premanagar found the erotica disappointingly mild, so mild in fact that Miss Frayle's reputation suffered and she packed her bags and left for Persia.

Beyond the ruins is the plain, eroded by time, low rainfall, occasional floods and poor husbandry: a complex of old dry river-beds (nullahs) and scantily grassed hummocks over which herds of goats tinkled and still do, seeking the shade of infrequent trees and of bushes whose exhausted-looking leaves become yellowed by the dust blown up from the unmetalled strips on either side of the trunk road. This road stands out in the arid landscape, a hardened artery. The lifeblood of the country, traffic, flows along it thinly and irregularly. Even today you can stand on the roadside and hear

nothing for an hour on end except sometimes the goatbells and the wind in the telegraph wires. The wind is hot. At midday the Fort's outline is distorted by the shifting, shimmering air. At a suitable distance it takes on the look of a mirage and at certain times of the year, when climatic conditions are right, actually produces one – a replica of itself, hovering above ground, sometimes upside down. English people, observing the apparition, used to find themselves thinking of Kipling or A. E. W. Mason, and looking forward to sundown, at which hour it was customary to refresh the body and relieve the spirit of the otherwise oppressive burdens of their duty.

Ranpur and the Fort at Premanagar are the first two images in the story to be told.

The Prisoners in the Fort

AN ARREST, 1942

I

EX-CHIEF MINISTER MOHAMMED Ali Kasim was arrested at his home in Ranpur at 5 a.m. on August 9, 1942 by a senior English police officer who arrived in a car, with a motor-cycle escort, two armed guards and a warrant for his detention under the Defence of India Rules. The officer waited for ten minutes on the wrong side of the locked iron gates while the chaukidar went off to rouse one of the servants who in turn roused another who roused Mr Kasim. By the time the officer gained the entrance hall Mr Kasim was standing there in his pyjamas.

‘Good morning,’ the ex-Chief Minister said. ‘I’m sorry they’ve dragged you out of bed. Is that for me?’

‘I’m afraid it is,’ the officer replied. Mr Kasim glanced briefly at the warrant, asked the Englishman to step inside and promised not to be long. Mrs Kasim came out and offered him an early morning cup of tea which he felt he had to decline in the circumstances. She nodded, as if she quite understood, and then returned to help her husband get ready.

Ten minutes later Mr and Mrs Kasim came into the vestibule together.

‘Where are you actually taking me?’ Mr Kasim asked.

The officer hesitated. ‘My orders are to drive to Government House. Beyond that I can’t say.’

‘Oh, well, that’s just an initial formality. They’ll hardly put me up there for the duration. I hope it’s not going to be the Kandipat jail, though. It’s so damp and depressing.’ He turned to his wife, kissed and embraced her, and the officer moved away and looked at one of the many portraits on the wall, a head and shoulders study of an elderly Indian wearing a number of rather splendid-looking decorations: the ex-Chief Minister’s father, probably. He noted a likeness. The Kasims had always been rich and influential. The house was large and richly furnished, but had the spicy smell of Indian cooking and Indian perfumes which the Englishman always found disturbing, not quite civilized, or civilized in a way that suggested there was no distinction to be made between ancient and modern societies.

‘I’m ready,’ Mr Kasim said.

‘Haven’t you a bag?’

‘Oh, that’s here.’ He pointed to a suitcase and a bedroll standing against the wall. ‘I packed last night when I had news of the Congress Committee vote in Bombay. I thought it would save us time.’

The officer looked at the luggage and disguised his reaction – one of surprise and slight annoyance – by pursing his lips. Lists and arrangements for the detentions had been made secretly for some time but the arrests, if they had to be made at all, were supposed to come as a surprise.

Saying nothing the officer stooped, picked up the suitcase and bedroll and carried them out to the waiting car where they were taken from him by one of the servants who had now all been alerted and stood around in the forecourt to see their master off to jail.

It was still dark. Mrs Kasim did not come out of the house. The Englishman waited until Mr Kasim

was settled in the back seat of the car, gave a nod to the motor-cyclists and as they kicked the machines into life entered the car himself and closed the door. Now that the most embarrassing part of his job was done he would have liked a cigarette. He put his hand in his pocket. He would offer one to Mr Kasim to show him that he appreciated his co-operation. The last time he had arrested a member of Congress there had been a most objectionable scene: sarcasm, abuse and a lecture all the way to the jail about the iniquities of the *raj*. Mr Kasim was a model of restraint and good behaviour. But then he was a Muslim, and the Muslims were men of action, not words. You knew better where you stood with them and they knew when to bow with dignity to the inevitable. Remembering Mr Kasim was a Muslim, though, the officer realized he probably didn't smoke, and realizing that, he thought it would be better manners to deny himself as well.

*

'I'm sorry, Mr Kasim,' Sir George Malcolm said.

They were in the large lofty-ceilinged room where in 1937 Mr Kasim had presented himself to the preceding Governor and listened to formal and rather grudging words of invitation to form a ministry and in the October of 1939 presented himself again to hand in his written resignation and the resignations of his colleagues. He had been in the room on many other occasions, but these were the two that came most significantly to mind.

'Please don't apologize,' he said. 'Are they arresting Gandhiji too?'

'Yes, so I understand.'

'And the Committee in Bombay?'

The Governor nodded, then said, 'Rather a broad sweep this time, as a matter of fact. Even chaps in your district sub-committees are going into the bag.'

Through one of the tall windows light was now showing. Kasim could just make out the distant building of the Secretariat. During his own ministry the lights had often burned there all night. A tale was told that on the occasion of his resignation the preceding Governor had waited until he was alone with his ADC and then said, 'Thank God, now for a bit of peace.' An English wit in the Secretariat had commented, 'Well, why not? The war is nearly two months old,' and like the rest reverted to the habit of leaving the office at 4 p.m. to get in a game of tennis and a drink at the club before going home to dress for dinner.

The Governor said, 'I gather you packed last night. Did your colleagues do the same, d'you think?'

'Perhaps. I don't know. Should they have?'

'Most of them.'

'Are they in the building?'

'No. They're elsewhere.'

'In Kandipat?'

The Governor did not answer. Kasim did not expect him to. In a case of mass arrests like this the British would be absurdly secretive about the places where leading Congressmen were to be kept under lock and key.

'If they are in Kandipat or elsewhere, why have I been brought here?'

The Governor took off his spectacles, dangled them, then placed them on the blotter. His desk was untidy. In his predecessor's day it had always been unpleasantly immaculate.

'I wanted to have a talk,' he said.

'Before sending me to Kandipat?'

‘I think not Kandipat. Don’t you agree?’

Kasim smiled. ‘Do I have a choice, then?’

‘Possibly.’ The Governor leaned back in his chair and put one arm over it. With his other hand he played with the spectacles. ‘What a damn’ silly thing, isn’t it? What did your people expect us to do? Sit back and let you bring the country to a standstill? Did anyone in his right mind really expect us to be blackmailed into granting independence just like that in the middle of a world war, with the Japanese preening themselves on the Chindwin?’

‘Does anyone in his right mind think that arresting us all from Gandhi down will help?’

‘If it stops you from inciting the factory workers to strike, the railways to stop, the ports to close, the soldiers to lay down their arms. That’s what you voted for in Bombay yesterday.’

‘I did not vote, Governor-ji.’

‘No, you did not vote because you resigned from the Congress Committee last year. On the other hand you haven’t resigned from the Congress Party. There have been rumours that you were considering it.’

‘They are unfounded.’

‘Are they? Are they, truly?’

Kasim folded his hands.

‘They are mostly the result of one-time wishful thinking on the part – for instance – of Mr Jinnah.’

The Governor laughed. ‘Yes, I heard about that. Is *that* true? That Jinnah promised you a portfolio in Bengal or Sind if you’d go over to the League?’

‘Let us just say that his interest was aroused by my resignation from the All India Congress Committee. A certain gentleman was commissioned to ask what my further intentions might be. It is true that there were hints about a rosy ministerial future in one of the Muslim majority provinces, but nothing specific was promised.’

‘And your reply?’

‘Merely the truth. That I resigned from the committee in order to devote more time to my legal work and that in any case I was not an opportunist. Perhaps I should emphasize that I am not before you we go further. You are thinking of offering me a loophole through which I could escape going to prison, I believe.’

‘Not a loophole. But it would be an awful waste of your time and talent if you went to jail just when you were seriously considering resigning from Congress, wouldn’t it?’

‘I am not seriously considering it, Governor-ji. I am not considering it at all and have never considered it.’

‘Will you consider it now?’

‘Will you give me reasons why I should?’

The Governor sat forward, replaced his spectacles and picked up a pencil. ‘Yes, Mr Kasim. I’ll give you reasons, although as I see it they all point to one reason only – that you are no longer in sympathy with Congress policy. You haven’t been in sympathy for a long time and grow intellectually and emotionally further and further away from Congress with every week that goes by. You were impatient with Congress when they won the provincial elections in 1937 but dithered about taking office. You were impatient with the face-saving formula which allowed them to pretend to take office just to show that the scheme for a federal central government wouldn’t work. You were alarmed when you found yourself unable to form a provincial ministry which would have more accurately reflected the wishes of the electorate. The Congress majority in the province was slim enough to warrant a coalition. You wanted Nawaz Shah in your cabinet but none of your Congress colleagues would agree

because he was a Muslim Leaguist. You were enough of a realist to bow to the inevitable, and a good enough party disciplinarian to make sure that on any major point of legislation in the Assembly your compromises were with the Muslim League and not the Hindu Mahasabah. You were criticized for that. People said scratch Kasim and you'll find one of Jinnah's men underneath. But you preferred to run the risk of that sort of criticism and to invite defeat in the Assembly than adjust your programme to ensure a comfortable majority of Congressites and Hindu right wingers.' The Governor smiled. 'You see, I've done my homework. So let me continue. You knew what was going on in the districts, and knew that most of what the Muslims said was going on was gross exaggeration, but you recognized the dangers and were appalled at the evidence you had of what actual communal intimidation did exist. You saw that whatever the Congress professed to be, a national party, a secular party, a party dedicated to the ideal of independence and national unity, there were people in it who could never see it as anything but a Hindu dominated organization whose real motive was power for the Hindus and who were coming into the open now that they'd got power. That alarmed you too. Every instance that came to your notice of a Muslim being discriminated against, of an injustice done against a Muslim, of violence done to a Muslim, of Muslim children being forced to salute the Congress flag or sing a Congress hymn in school, you saw not only as reprehensible in itself, whatever the provocation might have been, but as another nail in the coffin, another wedge driven between the two major communities. And something else alarmed you, the realization that you were a man not only with one master but two, the electorate to whom you were responsible, and the Congress High Command. It alarmed you because the High Command itself wasn't administratively committed. It wasn't answerable to an electorate, but it controlled and directed you who were. So when Britain declared war on Germany and the Viceroy declared war on Germany and the Congress High Command objected to having war declared over its head and called on all Congress ministries to resign, you resigned. You resigned at the dictate of a political organization that had no electoral responsibility to the country, except in the provinces through men like yourself. You saw the constitutional absurdity of this, but you handed your resignation in, handed it in here in this room to my predecessor, and he was a man who welcomed it because he was a man of the old school who thought India ungovernable except by decree, a man who'd sat back and laughed up his sleeve for two and a half years as he watched the farce of a ministry trying to serve both its electorate and its political bosses, and who sat back now, breathed a sigh of relief and assumed Governor's control which I've inherited. And it wasn't just the constitutional absurdity that struck you, it was the political folly of resigning, of having to resign. Without power, politics are so much hot air, and power is what your party got rid of. You knew what would happen and have seen it happen. How many seats in the Legislative Assembly reserved for Muslims were won in 1937 by non-League Muslims? A tidy few including your own. How many would be won now if we had an election tomorrow? Any? Where would your slim Congress Party majority be with most of your non-aligned Muslims and even some of your Congress Muslims gone over to the League? Repeat that picture all over India and where is your party's proof of speaking for all India? Where is it, Mr Kasim? Where has it gone? You know the answer as well as I do. Up the spout. Down the creek. Sunk. Why? Because your party overlooked the fact that on the first assumption of political power the old battle was won and the new one begun. The old battle was for Indian independence and although you may not think so now, Indian independence became a foregone conclusion in 1937 when men like you became provincial ministers. Getting rid of us was still part of your programme but getting rid of us was no longer the battle. The real battle was to maintain and extend the area of your party's power. I've no patience with people, and they're chiefly my fellow countrymen, who profess horror at what they call the sorry spectacle of the Indians squabbling among

themselves because they're unable to agree about how the power they're going to inherit should be divided. Of course you must disagree. Of course you must squabble. It's a sign that you know you're no longer fighting for a principle because you know the principle has been conceded. You're fighting for political power over what has been conceded. It's logical. It's essential. It's an inescapable human condition. When you all resigned the power you'd got, in the belief that you were striking another blow for India's independence, you weren't striking a blow for that at all. You were striking a blow at your own existing and potential political power. You were narrowing the area you could hope to exercise it in. It isn't so much what you all did between 1937 and 1939 to make a lot of Muslims believe the League had been right and that a Congress ruled India would mean a Hindu India that made eventual partition of this country almost certainly inevitable, it's the fact that you relinquished power, and you relinquished it because you didn't understand the importance of keeping it. I say you but I don't mean you, Mr Kasim. You well knew its importance and the folly of giving it up, just as you well know the latest folly your party has committed, the folly of not admitting the consequences of the first idiocy, of thinking you can put the clock back to 1939, ignore Jinnah and pretend the quarrel is still with Britain and that the British are just playing that old game of dividing and ruling and hanging on like grim death. You well know that when Cripps came out in April your party had its last chance to retrieve its position. You well know that for the first time in all the long melancholy history of conferences, working parties and round table negotiations the Cripps Mission wasn't just going through the old motions of palming you off with as little as possible. It was us again, but under pressure from outside, from our allies, from America in particular, and I think you understood the peculiar advantages of negotiating with people under that sort of pressure. I think you understood too that the Cripps proposals were the best you are going to get while the war is on and that this was the last chance you had to contain Jinnah. But what happens? Your party shies like a frightened horse from the mere idea that any province or group of provinces should have the power to secede from the post-war Indian constitution and set up a constitution of its own. What does it mean, they ask? What about Pakistan? But who even a few years ago had ever heard of Pakistan let alone thought of it as practicable? Well, it's more than practicable now. It's damn' well certain. It needn't have been if you'd agreed to the Cripps proposals, come back into office, got on with the war and at the end of the war gone to a country you'd helped lead to victory and independence and trusted in the good sense of those people not to let their country be split down the middle. Instead of which you walk out of Cripps, spend the whole summer in cloud cuckoo land working up some absurd theory that if you make India untenable for the British they'll leave and the Japanese won't walk in. And while you're producing this ludicrous scheme you allow Jinnah to continue to extend the area of his power because in the Muslim majority provinces Jinnah's men have remained in office. And now comes the crowning folly, a resolution that's as good as a call to nation-wide insurrection. And you don't agree with that either, do you, Mr Kasim? You know the British simply aren't going to forgive all this Quit India nonsense going on while they're trying to concentrate on turning the tables on the Japanese, not to mark you – just to save themselves and their country but you and your country. You know all this, Mr Kasim, but you're still a pillar of the Congress Party, one of its most famous favoured Muslims, good propaganda and apparently living proof of the truth of their claim that they're an all India party, the sort of man who's influential enough in this province for me not to think twice about locking you up as a potential inciter of riots and strikes, because your party, your party, Mr Kasim, yesterday committed high treason by conspiring to take steps calculated to aid and comfort the King-Emperor's enemies. And the one big question in my mind is why is it still your party, Mr Kasim? What official policy or policies has it adopted and pursued in the last three years that you have honestly felt to be

either wise or expedient?’

‘Perhaps none,’ Kasim said.

‘Exactly. And so, my dear Kasim, don’t go into the wilderness with the rest of them this morning. However long it is, and my guess is it’s for the duration, what a waste of your talent, what misplaced loyalty. Get out now. Write to Maulana Azad. Write this morning, write here and now. Send in your resignation. What more suitable moment? And the moment you write your resignation I tear up the stupid document authorizing your arrest. There’s not a single act committed by you since you resigned office in 1939, not a speech, not a letter, not a pamphlet, not a thing said in public or overheard in private that warrants your being locked up. All that warrants it now is your continued allegiance to the Congress, your continued standing as a leading member of an organization we’re outlawing.’

‘I quite understand, Sir George.’

The Governor studied the expression on Kasim’s face. Then he got up, walked to one of the long windows, looked out, and came back again, pacing slowly. Kasim waited, his hands still folded on his lap.

‘I want you on my executive council,’ the Governor said. ‘If it were constitutionally possible for me to re-establish autonomy in this province I know whom I’d invite to head the administration. Short of that I want you *in*, I want to use your talents, Mr Kasim.’

‘It is very kind of you, Sir George. I am immensely flattered.’

‘But you refuse, don’t you? You refuse to resign. You insist on going to jail. Forgive me, then. I hope you don’t feel insulted. That wasn’t my intention.’

Kasim made a gesture of dismissal. ‘Please. I know this.’

The Governor sat down, took off his spectacles and played with them as before, but with both hands leaning forward, with his elbows on the desk. ‘Waste!’ he exclaimed suddenly. ‘Waste! Why, Mr Kasim? You agree with everything I’ve said, but you don’t even ask for time to consider my suggestion. You reject it out of hand. Why?’

‘Because you only offer me a job. I am looking for a country and I am not looking for it alone.’

‘A country?’

‘To disagree about the ways of looking for it is as natural as you say it is to squabble about how power will be divided when it is found. And as you say, I have disagreed many times about these ways, and people have many times expected me to resign and change my political allegiance. And in all these ways and means were all that mattered I expect Congress would have seen the back of me long ago. But these are not what matter, I believe. What matters is the idea to which the ways and means are directed. I have pursued this idea for a quarter of a century, and it is an idea which for all my party’s faults I still find embodied in that party and only in that party, Governor-ji, nowhere else. Incidentally I do not agree with you when you speak of Indian independence having become a foregone conclusion. Independence is not something you can divide into phases. It exists or does not exist. Certain steps might be taken to help bring it into existence, others can be taken that will hinder it doing so. But independence alone is not the idea I pursue, nor the idea which the party I belong to tries to pursue, nor do I doubt making many errors and misjudgements in the process. The idea, you know, isn’t simply to get rid of the British. It is to create a nation capable of getting rid of them and capable simultaneously of taking its place in the world as a nation, and we know that every internal division of our interests hinders the creation of such a nation. That is why we go on insisting that the Congress is an All India Congress. It is an All India Congress first, because you cannot detach from it the idea that it is right that it should be. Only second is it a political party, although one day that is what it must become. Meanwhile, Governor-ji, we try to do the job that your Government has always found it beneficial

leave undone, the job of unifying India, of making all Indians feel that they are, above all else, Indians. You think perhaps we do this to put up a strong front against the British. Partly only you would be right. Principally we do it for the sake of India when you are gone. And we are working mostly in the dark with only a small glimmer of light ahead, because we have never had that kind of India, we do not know what kind of India that will be. This is why I say we are looking for a country. I can look for it better in prison, I'm afraid, than from a seat on your Excellency's executive council.'

While Kasim was talking the Governor had searched for and found a folder from which he now took a paper. He handed it across the desk. Kasim unfolded his hands, took the paper, felt in his pocket for his spectacles.

'As you will see, Mr Kasim, that is a very short note which, if signed, will be your undertaking not to commit or cause to be committed any act whose effect is to disturb the peace or to hinder the defence of the realm. The undertaking would be valid for a period of six months from the date of your signature. As you'll also see there's a rider to the effect that the signatory would, if called upon, use his best endeavours to inhibit the effects of any such acts committed within the province by other persons. You'll notice the paper says nothing about resigning from Congress. But sign the paper and I'll still tear this other paper up.'

'Yes, I see,' Mr Kasim said. He put the note back on the Governor's desk and replaced his spectacles in their case. 'You are expecting trouble, then. You have realized the disadvantages of having to lock us up to stop us rousing what you call the mob. But the mob perhaps rouses itself. And it is uncontrolled. It wants to know what you've done with us. All kinds of undesirable elements will emerge. You want me therefore to become a sort of *ex-officio* peacemaker, armed with soothing words and no integrity. As you say, the paper says nothing about resigning from Congress, but it need not do so, of course. If I signed it I would be expelled. To sign it is tantamount to resignation. I could not sign it. You didn't expect me to, but I suppose you thought it was worth a try. I'm afraid you must cope with the mob without me.'

'Well we can do that and will.' For a while the Governor was silent, watching Kasim. Then he said, 'You are in a curious position.'

'I do not see it as curious.'

'I was thinking of your private position. Of your elder son, for instance, who holds the King of the Emperor's commission. He fought in Malaya, and now he's a prisoner of war of the Japanese. It has always puzzled me why you allowed him to join the army.'

'Allow? He was under no obligation to seek my approval. It was his wish. India must have an army as well as a government. He became an officer. I became a minister.'

'And you both served under the crown. Quite. But you no longer do. He does. No doubt you have heard rumours of the pressures being put on Indian prisoners, officers and men, to secure their release from prison camp by joining units that will fight side by side with the Japanese. News of your imprisonment might well be used by the enemy to add to those pressures in your son's case. He was an excellent officer, I believe. He would be useful to them. His loyalty as an officer might be subjected to severe strain if he hears that we have put his father in jail. In his present circumstances he cannot simply resign his commission as you resigned your ministerial appointment. That is the difference, isn't it?'

'I think it is a difference he will appreciate. Just as he will appreciate that I cannot let personal considerations affect my political judgement.'

'Yes,' the Governor said, 'I expect it is,' and stood up in a way that conveyed to Kasim that the interview was at an end. He stood up too. In the pit of his stomach he felt the old familiar hollowness

He did not want to go to prison.

The Governor held out his hand. Kasim took it.

'I'm afraid that for the time being at any rate your whereabouts aren't to be made known, and the restriction must unfortunately apply in the case of your family. They will write to you care of Government House, and your own letters will automatically come here. I hope, Mr Kasim, that occasionally you will think of writing personally to me.'

'Thank you. Am I to be allowed newspapers?'

'I shall give the necessary instructions.'

'Then I'll say goodbye.'

'Goodbye, Mr Kasim.'

Kasim bowed his head, hesitated, and then walked towards the double doors behind which, he knew, the young police officer to whom the senior man had handed him over, and two British military policemen, would be waiting. But just before he reached the doors he heard the Governor call his name, and turned. The Governor was still standing behind the desk. He made a gesture with both hands, indicating the desk, the papers on it.

'May I send you away with an interesting thought that has suddenly struck me?'

'What is that, your Excellency?'

'That one day this desk will probably be yours.'

Kasim smiled, looked round the room. The thought, just at that moment, was almost sickening. He said, 'Yes. You are probably right,' and, still smiling, turned and took the last few paces to his morning immediate prison.

*

At dusk Mr Kasim was taken from the upstairs room where he had been kept all day and driven to the sidings of the railway station at Ranpur cantonment. Here he was transferred to a carriage of the kind used to transport troops, most of whose windows had been blocked by steel shutters. The young officer in charge of him was joined by another. An armed sentry stood guard at the only door of the carriage that was still in use. When approaching the carriage Kasim saw that it was uncoupled. There were no other soldiers and police in the vicinity. When he entered the carriage he expected to find other occupants, friends, ex-colleagues; but he was alone. The two young officers talked to each other in low voices and mostly in monosyllables. He made up his bed on one of the wooden benches. A tray was brought in with his dinner: soup, chicken and vegetables, and rice pudding with jam – obviously chosen from the European style menu at the station restaurant. While he ate it one of the officers went for his own dinner. Half an hour later he returned and his companion went for his. Kasim's tray was taken by a British MP. Another armed sentry joined the first. At about nine o'clock the carriage was coupled to others, and the other officer returned from the restaurant. The two officers settled in the middle of the carriage leaving the guards at one end and Mr Kasim at the other. The train started. Kasim read. The officers continued to talk in low voices. They smoked cigarettes. Occasionally they shared a joke. At ten o'clock while the train was still moving slowly, uncertainly, picking its way across points and iron bridges, Mr Kasim gave the officers a start by rising suddenly and opening his suitcase. He sensed that they touched their holsters to make sure their revolvers were still there. From the suitcase he took out his prayer mat, then turned to them.

'I suppose neither of you can tell me which direction west is?' He smiled, was rewarded with vaguely uncomprehending but not totally unfriendly negative replies, and then unrolled the mat on the floor.

stood for a moment and composed himself in order to begin saying his Isha prayers in a peaceable frame of mind. He then performed in full the four Rak'ahs prescribed.

During the night he woke several times. The officers and the guards were taking it in turns to doze. He observed their faces: slack, remote in the dim pools of light from the overhead bulbs that had been left on. The light scarcely reached the end of the carriage where he lay and once, because he had moved and attracted the attention of the officer whose turn it was to keep watch, he returned the man's incurious, dispassionate, half-dreaming gaze for what seemed like an age before the man suddenly realized that Kasim's eyes were also open and looked away, stared down at his folded arms. When Kasim next awoke this man was asleep, his companion sitting forward, elbows resting on his knees, contemplating his clasped hands in one of which a cigarette was burning. Kasim raised his arm and looked at the luminous dial of his wrist-watch. Nearly five o'clock. The train was not moving but presumably wasn't at its destination. Distantly, through the silence, he heard the cry of jackals. He rose, aware of the sharp movement of the wakeful officer keeping a check on him. From his suitcase he took the waterproof bag, leather case, soap-box, towel and shaving kit that he had packed the night before last, and went into the cubicle. There was no lock on the door. A single bulb illuminated dirty green tiles and old, cracked porcelain. Iron bars were set in the window. Behind them was a pane of frosted glass. He showered and shaved, put back on the clothes he had travelled in. The train had begun to move again. The motion set the door swinging open and shut. When he came out both officers were awake. He nodded good-morning to them, returned his things to the suitcase, got out his prayer mat and performed the two Rak'ahs of the Fajr prayers. Making the last prostration he repeated to himself a passage from the Koran. Oh God, glory be to You who made Your servant go by night from the Sacred Mosque to the farther Mosque. Praise be to Allah who has never begotten a son, who has no partner in his Kingdom, who needs none to defend him from humiliation.

Kneeling he rolled the mat up again, returned it to the case and snapped the locks shut. He made up his bedroll and secured the straps. Then he sat on the hard slatted bench. The officers went in turn to the cubicle at the other end of the carriage. The sentry who squatted at the door rose and woke the sleeping sentry, and then lowered the window and looked out. The train came to a halt. Rain was drumming on the roof. Kasim wondered whether his wife was yet awake. He thought of his married daughter in the Punjab, of his son Ahmed in Mirat, and of his elder son Sayed who was God knew what hell-hole of a prison camp.

The train was, almost imperceptibly, once more in motion. Both officers had completed their ablutions. Now the sentries took it in turns to go into the farther cubicle. The officers mumbled at each other. One of them looked at his watch and stretched, went to the open window. The first light must be beginning to show, Kasim thought. The officer stayed at the window for some time. The overhead bulbs went out. The carriage was permeated with a grey mistiness that brought with it the notion of an early morning chill, and the faces of his guards were suddenly like those of strangers. The officer left the window and joined his companion. He must have made some sign. They began to adjust their belts. One reached for his cap. Kasim looked away, feeling the hollowness again. A few minutes later the train came to a halt. For a moment, because of the quietness, Kasim imagined they were held up by signals, but the silence was then broken by a voice speaking outside. Turning to look Kasim saw one of the officers at the window. He spoke to someone well below the level of the carriage. A moment later he opened the door and got down. His companion stayed in the carriage but stood at the open door. He lit a cigarette. One of the soldiers slung his rifle over his shoulder and studied the palm of his left hand as if he'd got a cut or a splinter. The carriage echoed metallically. It was being uncoupled. The rain had stopped falling. There was a whistle from up ahead. Kasim stood. The sentry stopped

looking at his hand and the officer in the doorway glanced round, then back through the doorway again. He answered a voice from below and came away from the door. An officer with an armband round his sleeve hauled himself up into the carriage.

‘Mr Mohammed Ali Kasim?’ he inquired, as if making a formal identification.

‘Yes.’

‘This way, please.’

Kasim picked up his suitcase and bedroll. The others stood aside for him. At the doorway he looked down into the face of the officer whose eye he had held during the night. He said, ‘I’d be grateful if you’d help me with my baggage.’

Standing below, near by, were two military policemen. The carriage was in a goods yard. A 15-cv truck was parked at the shuttered entrance to a warehouse. Kasim smelt coal dust. The officer reached up and Kasim nudged the suitcase forward until he felt its weight taken. The bedroll followed. The officer set both down on the cinders. Kasim turned round to face inwards as he climbed down the narrow, perpendicular steps; then stood waiting. The officer with the armband came down. He indicated the luggage.

‘This is all your luggage?’

‘Yes.’

‘Very well. My men will take you to the truck. Go with them, please.’

‘May I be told where you are taking me?’

The officer with the armband hesitated.

‘To the Fort,’ he said abruptly.

‘The Fort?’

Again the officer hesitated. Kasim thought he was surprised. ‘You’re in Premanagar,’ he explained.

‘Thank you. I didn’t know.’

He glanced round. One railway siding looked like any other. He had not been in Premanagar since his tour of the province in 1938. He had never visited the Fort, but he had seen it from a distance. He had no clear visual recollection of it. Premanagar, he remembered, was not far from Mirat where his son Ahmed was. If they ever told his family where he was, and allowed him visitors, perhaps he would see Ahmed.

II

MAJOR TIPPIT WAS a small man with very little hair. What was left of it was yellowy white. His face was lined and wrinkled. He had a high complexion. 'I'm a historian really,' he explained. 'I retired from the army in 1938, but they dug me out. It was decent of them to give me the Fort, wasn't it?'

Kasim agreed that it was.

'There's a lot of history in the Fort. I'm writing a monograph. Perhaps you'd like to read some of it and give me an opinion, one day when you have a moment.'

'I have a great number of moments.'

'I'm sorry I wasn't here when you arrived. Let us see, now, how long has it been?'

Major Tippit glanced at the papers on his desk but did not make any effort to find one in particular.

Kasim said, 'Nine days.'

'And you are comfortable?'

'I am comfortable.'

'Have you any complaints?'

'Several.'

'Oh yes. Lieutenant Moran Singh told me he'd made a note of them. It's here somewhere I expect. I'll look into them.'

'Can't you look into them now?'

Major Tippit had very pale blue eyes. He gazed out of them at Kasim as if he had reasons for not dealing with complaints but couldn't remember what they were. He clasped his bony little hands together on the desk – the kind of man, Kasim guessed, who, lacking skill, energy or resolution, would make up for them with a mindless, vegetable implacability. The unpleasant young Sikh, nominal commander under Major Tippit's command, would know exactly how far he could go, what would be allowed of him by way of license, and what disallowed.

'First of all,' Kasim said, 'is it really Government's intention to keep me in solitary confinement? I understand the Fort has a number of civil prisoners like myself. We are not criminals. We shall probably be here for some time. The others seem to mix quite freely. I can see them in the outer courtyard from the window of my room. But since coming here I've been kept isolated and have spoken to no one except my guards and Lieutenant Moran Singh. Is this state of affairs merely temporary or is it to continue?'

'Yes, I see.'

Kasim waited.

'I am sorry you feel like that. The old zenana house is extremely interesting. I must come over one day and point out some of its more remarkable features.'

'Some of my fellow-prisoners would be interested in it too.'

'Oh, I don't think so. If I may make bold, they are not of similar intellectual calibre. The other prisoners here are very much from the rank and file of your movement.' A look of almost intense disappointment came on to Major Tippit's face, as if he had only just realized what they were talking about. 'We were told several weeks ago that we might have to provide accommodation for a Viceroy's detenu. Of course we immediately thought of Mr Gandhi or Mr Nehru. At first I believed we had nothing suitable. Amazing how you can overlook something that's right under your nose. I have become so used to sitting here and looking through the window and seeing the zenana house, so used

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