

THE SATAPUR MOONSTONE

A MYSTERY OF
1920s BOMBAY

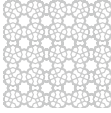
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THE RIDING RING

Perveen Mistry sighed, adjusting her hat on her sweating brow. It was six-thirty in the morning and already eighty-two degrees. Cantering around the riding ring at the Royal Western India Turf Club, never quite keeping up with her friend Alice, who was a much better rider, was vigorous exercise.

Alice Hobson-Jones was cantering on a large bay, Kumar, who had been born from racing stock. He'd wound up as an exercise horse because his stature was a few hands too short for the racetrack. Still, Kumar was a prince of a horse, and since Alice was almost six feet tall, their union dominated the ring.

Perveen, five feet three inches, had been delighted to be assigned a female pony, which she had assumed would be gentler. Dolly was so short Perveen had been able to swing herself over the saddle without being propped up by the grooms, an awkward ritual she'd had to repeat most of the times she'd ridden. However, the little horse was hardly amenable to the directions Perveen tapped out with her feet. She was no horsewoman, and it seemed that Dolly sensed it.

Still, this horseback ride was less frightening than the times Perveen had ridden huge animals during the house-party weekends Alice had brought her to in England. Now the shoe was on the other foot. Perveen had come home to practice law in Bombay, and Alice was on an extended visit trying to find a teaching position. In a city where the Mistris had resided for almost 350 years, Perveen's family connections opened doors, and it looked likely that Alice would be hired as a lecturer in mathematics at Wilson College.

Alice had campaigned hard to get Perveen to come out and ride at six o'clock three times that week. At the outset, it had seemed like

a healthy idea. The rains had stopped, making the city navigable, although as the sun rose, it became a hot and windy place again.

As Perveen came around the ring, she noticed Alice's father, Sir David Hobson-Jones, standing at the edge. He was a Western India Turf Club trustee, despite the fact he'd been in Bombay for only two years. That was the kind of thing that happened when one was part of the governor's ring of top three councillors.

Sir David smiled, making a sweeping gesture with his hand. Perveen trotted back around the ring, concentrating on keeping her back straight. As she passed Sir David, he made the same gesture, only more vigorously.

He was calling her over.

She felt her stomach sink. Perhaps he'd come to say someone in the club had complained about an Indian rider; she was the only one she'd seen.

Perveen pulled gently on Dolly's reins. The small whip provided to her was supposed to make the horse go faster—but she refused to use it as a matter of principle.

With an urgent hammering of her feet, Perveen managed to persuade Dolly to defect from the ring to the area where grooms waited to assist. A scrawny boy in the club's red uniform held the horse while she half-fell off. She was brushing her dusty hands on the sides of her split skirt when Sir David strolled up. He wore a sharp white suit that was free of wrinkles and dust and that looked utterly unsuitable for riding.

"Good morning, Sir David. Did you ride earlier?" She tried to sound less shaken than she felt. If Perveen was going to be thrown out of the European-established club because of her race, she could not let the matter pass without protest. But Sir David didn't know she was a member of the Indian National Congress. He understood only that she was his daughter Alice's former classmate at Oxford, and a young woman who was rising in Bombay's legal scene.

He shook his head. "I came for a quick breakfast before going over to the Secretariat. The eggs are very good here. Would you care to join me?"

So she wasn't being thrown out, which was good news. Still, she disliked the idea of going off without telling Alice.

"But I'm . . ." Perveen gestured at her riding clothing, which was not a sporty tweed habit like Alice wore but a light cotton jacket and a voluminous split skirt, the slightly outmoded garment her mother had presented her with as being suitable for an Indian woman doing something as outré as horseback riding.

"Don't give it another thought. People wear riding clothes on the veranda. I'll be the odd one out."

She still felt uneasy. "But Alice—"

"She'll know where to find us." Lowering his voice, the governor's special councillor said, "I've business to discuss with you anyway, before she arrives."

Business was a welcome prospect for a Bombay lawyer who was well-known but not as busy as she'd like. In the ladies' lounge, Perveen scrubbed the track's dust from her face and hands and brushed out her hair before fixing it up again in a coronet. She left off the pith helmet she'd been wearing, although its absence revealed a bright red line running straight across her forehead. Walking out to the veranda, she felt multiple pairs of English eyes on her. Was it because she'd been seen with Sir David, or was it the silly split skirt?

Sir David waved encouragingly at her, and this set off a chorus of whispers.

"I've taken the liberty of ordering you breakfast," he said. "You go straight to work after this, don't you?"

"I try to open up the office before eight," she said, putting on her best business voice. "It's the only time one can attack one's papers without interruption."

"Yes. As I mentioned, I may have a good prospect for Mistry Law."

She leaned forward so eagerly she almost knocked her empty teacup out of its saucer. "Does someone you know need a lawyer?"

A slender waiter in a crisp, high-necked jacket too large for him

righted her cup and poured a golden stream of Darjeeling into it. Sir David smiled benevolently. "Yes. I do."

She looked at him hard. Was he in trouble at work? "Remember that I'm a solicitor. The Bombay court does not yet allow women advocates to speak in court, but my father can—"

"That is irrelevant," he said, cutting off the rest of her explanation. "Have you heard of the Poona Agency?"

She was surprised by the simple question. Spooning sugar into her cup, she said, "Certainly. It's the branch of the civil service that oversees five hundred miles of British India north and west of the Bombay Presidency."

"The agency employs civil service officers known as political agents or residents. These men maintain relationships with princely kingdoms close to Poona."

The young waiter came back with a plate of scrambled eggs, toast, and kippers for each of them. The eggs looked fluffy, the toast appropriately buttered, but Perveen did not like kippers. She would eat just one, out of courtesy to her host.

It was like that with the British. An Indian could not prosper without contact with them, but one did not have to become a Britisher in habits. As she shook green chilies over her eggs, she considered the picture that Sir David was painting. Although the British government had authority over 50 percent of the subcontinent, the other half of India was a patchwork of large and small kingdoms ruled by Hindus, Muslims, and a few Sikhs. In exchange for being exempted from British rule, the royals paid hefty taxes to the British in the form of cash and crops. And as Sir David indicated, the kingdoms still had to cooperate with the desires of the political agents.

Sir David slid one of the kippers into his mouth, chewed with relish, and continued the conversation. "The Poona Agency is challenged. They've sent out a request for help finding a legal investigator to step in and assist with business in one of their neighbor kingdoms."

"How interesting," said Perveen, the wheels already turning as

she thought about the suitable lawyers she might refer. “Tell me more. How long has the position been open? And how much time will the job take?”

“The matter came up at a meeting last week, and the others agreed with me that you are probably the only person in India who could do it.”

Perveen almost lost grip on her teacup but steadied it. The hell if she'd be the one to work for Britain, which had kept India under its elephant feet since the 1600s. But she had to be diplomatic. Carefully, she said, “I'm honored that you'd consider me for a government position, but I'd never leave my father's practice. He just promoted me to his partner last month.”

“Congratulations! But you do serve clients who are willing to pay a fair rate—isn't that the reason to have a firm?”

Perveen nodded warily.

“Rest assured this is a one-off job—it will probably take a week, with a little more billing time afterward when you're back in Bombay writing the report.” He paused. “Have you tried a kipper yet? They're made from a local fish, not the usual Scottish herring.”

A tiny, bony local fish that she considered bait, not good eating. Reluctantly, she put it in her mouth. As she chewed the unpleasant fish, she thought.

Things weren't especially busy at the office; she had a few contracts to finish, but the prospect of more than a week's work for a prestigious employer would please her father, Jamshedji Mistry, who saw the British as allies, not adversaries. Still, it was out of town, and he wouldn't like that. Working some eggs over the top of the rest of kippers, which she was determined to avoid, Perveen said, “Poona's a hundred miles away. Is that where I'd have to go?”

“Not quite that far. Have you heard of Satapur?”

“It's a minuscule kingdom somewhere in the Sahyadri mountains.” Perveen remembered its shape, rather like a rabbit posed on hind legs, from her school geography book. “I don't know that I could point to it on a map or name its ruler.”

“It's just forty square miles,” he said. “And there isn't a royal

sitting on the gaddi at the moment. His Majesty Mahendra Rao died two years ago from the cholera. His son, the maharaja Jiva Rao, is just ten years old.”

Perveen tried to imagine the situation at hand. “So although Jiva Rao is already the maharaja in name, it will be at least eight years till he takes power. Does his mother rule until, then?”

Sir David shook his head. “Women don’t hold power in most princely kingdoms. For Satapur, in the case of a ruler’s being underage, the kingdom’s decisions are made by its prime minister and the political agent, who happens to reside at the circuit house near the hill station of Matheran.”

“Running a kingdom must be a challenge for a British political agent,” Perveen said skeptically, “especially if he’s not even living in the palace.”

Sir David waved a dismissive hand. “There’s a palace minister who does the day-to-day—sending reports to Mr. Sandringham on all that transpires. And the prime minister, Prince Swaroop of Satapur, is the maharaja’s uncle, so that’s cozy.”

Perveen took a bite of toast. Buttered toast was one thing the British did very well. “What can you tell me about the political agent?”

“Colin Wythe Sandringham has been at the post for about ten months. He is responsible for the well-being of the royal children and the late maharaja’s widow.”

“What children? You only mentioned Prince Jiva Rao.”

“He has a little sister, but I don’t know her name.”

Perveen didn’t like the way he had almost forgotten about the princess, or the way he had labeled the young maharaja’s mother, who should have been called a queen. Pointedly, she asked, “What is the maharani’s given name?”

“Mirabai.” He pronounced the Hindi name slowly, in his Oxbridge accent. “At least she’s not alone—the late Maharaja Mahendra Rao’s mother, the dowager maharani, is still ruling the zenana. I don’t recall her name.”

Of course, she thought. Sir David was better than most English

administrators—and he certainly had been respectful of her own professional accomplishment—but he seemed to share the common belief that the vast majority of Indian women were faceless, nameless, and passive.

He sipped his tea. “I think it’s splendid the mother and daughter-in-law have each other for company. But according to Mr. Sandringham, a bitter dispute has arisen between the two maharanis about the prince’s education.”

This was a common enough problem, regardless of whether one had royal blood. In Perveen’s own family, there had been disagreements about whether she should study law, as her father wished, or literature, which was her own choice. It hadn’t been until she’d been out of school for years that she had realized practicing law could bring her a lot more excitement in life than analyzing novels.

Unaware of her thoughts, Sir David continued. “Maharaja Jiva Rao’s mother wishes him to attend Ludgrove, where several other Indian princes are currently studying. But the grandmother, who still sees herself as superior to her daughter-in-law, doesn’t want him to go.”

Perveen had finished everything except the kippers. She wanted something sweet to take the edge off. She signaled the waiter. “Have you any mangoes?”

“No good ones today, memsahib,” he said mournfully. “The weather isn’t right.”

“Very well. I’ll take another piece of toast.” She turned back to Sir David. “Where in India is Prince Jiva Rao studying?”

“In the palace. He receives lessons from the Indian tutor that the grandmother hired thirty-five years ago to instruct her own children.”

“I suppose he could be a good teacher. Certainly an experienced one,” Perveen said, imagining this man would be over sixty.

“These are answers you could find out for us when you visit the palace. Mr. Sandringham paid a call earlier this month, but he was disallowed from getting any farther in than the durbar hall. And he wasn’t allowed to meet either of the maharanis due to customs of seclusion.”

“Hindu maharanis often observe purdah,” Perveen said. “If the agent is determined, he should return and ask to speak to each lady through a screen. That is common when purdah ladies are needed to testify to a court of law.”

“Going back to try again has its problems. You see, Mr. Sandringham is a cripple,” Sir David said bluntly.

“A cripple!” Perveen’s eyes widened. She was quite surprised the British had put someone with a disability in a position of such great responsibility and dispatched him far into the countryside. Probably he had a gigantic staff to assist him. How else could one manage?

“Others in the Poona Agency suggested sending him again; however, I don’t wish to compromise his health when the interview with purdah ladies could be accomplished with more ease by a woman lawyer.”

Sir David remembered what she’d done in Malabar Hill at the beginning of the year. She felt a rush of gratitude, knowing how easily things could have gone another way. Few lawyers could help women in seclusion, and she’d been involved in just such a case. Women who observed purdah could not meet with men outside of their immediate families. Nodding, she said, “You wish me to get behind the curtain, interview both plaintiffs, and report my opinion on what the Satapur agent should tell the appeals court about the maharaja’s schooling.”

“There’s another aspect to the interview,” Sir David said. “There are ongoing concerns about land improvement, such as bringing in railway lines, building dams, and so forth. What the maharanis and any other nobles in the palace think about these possibilities is valuable knowledge.”

“It truly is an investigator’s job.” Perveen took a bite of toast and chewed slowly, allowing herself time to think. This sounded like a straightforward consulting assignment. And the fact was, the Bombay Presidency bordered eighteen princely states, which likely housed dozens, if not hundreds, of royal women. If word got behind enough purdah screens that a lady lawyer could assist with

their concerns, Mistry Law might receive a tremendous number of new clients.

But what was the financial value of the endeavor being proposed? Sir David might hope she would do the job at a discounted rate due to their connection. But the British government wouldn't get away with underpaying her the way they did Indians in general. They wanted her. She had power.

Pursing her lips, she said, "I'm trying to fathom how this job could be billed."

He answered promptly. "Twenty rupees a day—the salary of a district sub-inspector."

Not terrible, but nothing to boast to her father about. She shrugged.

"However, your traveling expenses would be on par with a commissioner's. All rail travel will be first class, and you'll be able to stay in rest bungalows for ICS officers as needed. There will either be some riding or palanquin travel."

"A palanquin is one of those awful boxes on poles, isn't it?" She had a dislike of closed-in spaces.

"Sandringham goes that way. He says that part of the route is too narrow and difficult to be negotiated by horses. Local men handle it better. And you'll enjoy the scenery as you travel."

She raised a cynical eyebrow.

"The Sahyadri mountains are beautiful beyond compare. This month, they've already got their own minor post-rainy season. It is at least fifteen degrees cooler than Bombay." He finished with a flourish, reminding her of the hawkers near the Royal Bombay Yacht Club who proclaimed the splendor of the tourist boat ride out to Elephanta Island.

Mango showers sounded charming, but she didn't want to seem too excited. "Even though I've no court dates, there's always a load of contract work at our office. Making twenty rupees sitting at my desk isn't hard to do in a day's time."

He was silent for a minute. "Yes, I have seen how busy the office is. I'm fairly sure I can persuade them to commit twenty-five rupees per day."

This was phenomenal. Keeping a poker face, she said, “Duly noted.”

Her happy reverie was interrupted when Alice strode onto the veranda, showing no signs of having washed hands or face. “Hallo, Perveen! Here you are!”

“Sorry. Your father invited me to sit for a bit with him. I hope you weren’t worried.”

“Not at all. Has he convinced you to take the job yet?”

“What? You knew about it?” Perveen’s gaze went from her friend to the smug-looking Sir David.

“Why else do you think we’ve been riding around the ring all week?” Alice yawned. “I’ve been refreshing your skills.”

“How dare you trick me?” Perveen hooted with laughter. She was relieved and excited, but she didn’t want Alice to keep secrets from her. “You’re a dreadful excuse for a friend.”

Alice grinned and said, “Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.”

A VISITOR TO MATHERAN

Aditya, the official jester attached to Satapur Palace, was feeling sore from a long morning's ride. Satapur Palace was exactly four hills away from Matheran Station. Because of the thick fog and broken, muddy paths, the journey had taken five hours instead of three. The sun had just risen when he'd had set off on a short, sturdy gray mare. People had traveled the narrow path for centuries, so it was easy to see where to go; but the long summer's rains had left it treacherously slippery. He had been in a constant battle to keep the nervous horse moving forward to reach Matheran Station.

Now he sat half-hidden in the shadow of the station's roof. He liked traveling a good deal better than sitting in the palace trying to tell jokes and stories to people who had given up laughing years before. He'd had a cup of tea and was smoking his third cheroot. There were no travelers waiting to board, but sticking to the schedule, the train would still stop. The people on board would step out and exclaim at the beauty of the tall, silent green hills, the streams of water running down them like silver tears. All this nonsense he'd heard before.

The horn sounded well before the small black tram chugged up to the platform. A young conductor opened the door and jumped out, and a small flood of local boys appeared from out of the trees, quickly tying red scarves around their heads to signify their status as coolies approved by the stationmaster.

Due to the long rainy season, few people came to Matheran before late October.

Aditya watched an elderly man totter out of the train's general section, followed by two more men and a family.

The conductor was poised at the steps of the first-class carriage,

looking impatient. A boy sprang down, easily balancing a small trunk on his head. From the warm brown leather and geometric golden pattern, Aditya recognized it as Louis Vuitton, a brand favored by both Europeans and wealthy Indians.

Aditya moved out of the shadows to get a closer look. A dainty foot in a beige leather boot emerged before its owner: an Indian woman swathed in a butter-yellow sari embroidered in blue and gray paisley designs. She wore a white Chantilly lace blouse underneath her silk sari, which made her look like some of the wealthy Parsi women he'd seen at the races and society parties in Poona. Yet instead of a delicate parasol, she carried a brown bridle-leather briefcase.

He gaped at it, not quite believing his eyes. It must have belonged to her husband, who was surely coming off the train, too. Her husband surely was the P. J. Mistry, Esquire, mentioned in the letters the maharanis had received.

But nobody else stepped off the train.

As if feeling his gaze, the woman turned. Impertinent greenish-brown eyes regarded him from above a hooked nose—a Parsi nose; of that he was certain.

Aditya felt deflated. His body was sore from the long journey, and now the lawyer everyone was worried about hadn't come.

The lady turned from him to speak to the coolie who'd unloaded her suitcase. She gave him a coin; although Aditya could not see what it was, he guessed it was more than the usual paisa, because the boy had pressed it to his forehead and was beaming like a fool.

Idly, he wondered why she was going on holiday by herself. Perhaps she was meeting someone; Matheran was a hill station popular not just with the English but also with wealthy Indians.

A man dressed in shabby brown clothing came out of the train's third-class compartment, carrying a sack marked with the symbol of the Imperial Mail. He dropped it on the platform.

As if on cue, the region's only postal cart, a small wooden stage-coach driven by two locals, Pratik and his teenaged son, Charan,



came up the rough path. Aditya was friendly with them, but he drew back because he didn't want them to call out to him.

"You're late!" the stationmaster rebuked them loudly enough for Aditya to hear. "It's not just letters that are waiting. There is a mem-sahib."

"What is late, and what is early?" was the amiable response of Pratik. Pratik lumbered down from the driver's seat and took a long stretch before accepting the bundle of mail.

Aditya was startled to see Charan approach the woman. Aditya could not make out her reply, but Charan began gesturing as if she should follow him. When she reached the postal cart, the boy pulled down the back gate. From his watching place, Aditya could see the woman's shoulders curling downward as she looked inside. Perhaps she was afraid.

But Aditya realized the woman traveler had stooped for reasons of practicality. She placed her right foot on Charan's hands, which he had clasped together, making a step for her. And in the next instant, she'd tumbled into the back of the postal cart, clutching the briefcase to her chest. As she fell, the yellow silk sari flared out, and he got a glimpse of cinnamon-colored skin over the top of her kidskin boots. This was a titillating sight, something that he could exaggerate into an unseemly joke for the palace.

Charan latched the back of the wagon and went swiftly to the bench seat at the front. Aditya watched as Charan seated himself next to his father and took the sack of mail between his ankles.

Pratik rapped the horses with one stroke of his whip, and they were off.