

Satyajit Ray

The Chess Players and
other screenplays

Andrew Robinson, ed.

London

Faber and Faber

1989

PREFACE

Of the three screenplays in this book, two – *The Chess Players* and *Deliverance* – are based on short stories by the famous Urdu and Hindi writer Prem Chand. The third, *The Alien*, is an original screenplay by me. The three subjects could hardly be more disparate in style and content. *Deliverance*, which was made for television, deals with Untouchability and is distinctly angry in tone. *The Chess Players*, which is about the annexation of an Indian native state by the British Raj, is quite often funny in spite of its weighty theme. It is also my most expensive film, whereas *Deliverance* cost very little money. *The Alien*, which was never filmed, is best described as a whimsy.

Three primary reasons drew me to *The Chess Players*: my interest in chess, in the Raj period, and in the city of Lucknow where I spent many delightful holidays in my childhood and youth. It is the capital of Oudh, which was annexed by the then Governor-General of India, Lord Dalhousie. This was done through the agency of General Outram, who was the British political agent in Lucknow. Research revealed that the deposed King Wajid Ali Shah was an extraordinary character. Outram describes him as a worthless king, which he probably was, but this was compensated for by a genuine gift for music. He was a composer, singer, poet and dancer. He also wrote and produced plays on Hindu themes (he was a Muslim himself) in which he acted the main part. All this made the King a figure worthy of film treatment. As for the character of Outram, I was struck by the fact that he had qualms about the task he had been assigned to perform. This was revealed in a couple of Dalhousie's letters. Thus both the King and Outram were complex, three-dimensional characters. Chess is used as a metaphor for the political manoeuvrings of the Raj as well as an actual ingredient of a subplot involving two noblemen addicts of the game. The two friends, fearing trouble, retire into a village and play right through the Annexation and the arrival of the British army in Lucknow. Their story is treated in a light vein, although there is a note of pathos at the end.

I made *Deliverance* because I had been wanting to make a film

PREFACE

about the poorest of the poor, something I had never done before. The dramatic aspect of the Brahmin–Untouchable confrontation is vividly conveyed by Prem Chand in his story. I found it replete with cinematic possibilities.

The Alien germinated from a short story I wrote for the magazine for young people which I have been editing for the last twenty-five years. It concerned a meek village schoolmaster whose life is changed by an extraordinarily lucky encounter with an extraterrestrial. The idea of a supremely intelligent alien landing in a village where most of the inhabitants are unlettered lodged in my mind for a long time as a possible film subject. In 1966, I met Arthur Clarke on a visit to London. Kubrick had then been filming *2001* from Clarke's story, and Clarke had actually come to meet Kubrick. Clarke took me to the studio where I met the director and watched some of the shooting. On the way back from the studio, in the car, I gave Clarke a brief idea of the kind of sci-fi film I had in mind. Clarke encouraged me, and later, after his return to Sri Lanka where he lived, told his partner Mike Wilson about *The Alien*, which is the title I had in mind for my film. Wilson was enthused enough to fly down to Calcutta and make me write the screenplay virtually at the point of a gun. The work was completed in a fortnight. Wilson immediately started to work on setting up the production. Soon I found myself in Hollywood where Columbia had read the screenplay and had provisionally agreed to finance it. But, like many a cherished project, *The Alien* never really got off the ground.

The Alien was meant to be a bilingual film where the Indian characters would speak in Bengali among themselves, and all scenes involving the American engineer would be spoken in English. The screenplay, however, was written entirely in English. What is printed here is the first draft that Columbia found acceptable.

Satyajit Ray

THE CHESS PLAYERS

INTRODUCTION

The Chess Players, completed in 1977, was the first adult film about the British Raj in India. Today, after *Gandhi*, *Heat and Dust*, *The Jewel in the Crown*, *A Passage to India* and many other films, Ray's film remains by far the most sophisticated portrayal of this particular clash of cultures. No other director – British, Indian or otherwise – is likely to better it. As V. S. Naipaul remarked of it, 'It is like a Shakespeare scene. Only 300 words are spoken but goodness – terrific things happen.'

Satyajit Ray had known Prem Chand's short story *Shatranj ke Khilari* for more than thirty years before he attempted to make a screenplay out of it. Although it had first appeared in print in Hindi in the mid-1920s, Ray read it in English translation in the early 1940s as an art student at Rabindranath Tagore's university in Bengal and was immediately drawn to it for several reasons.

Lucknow, the setting of the story, is one of the most resonant cities of India. Satyajit took holidays there in the late 1920s and 1930s from the age of about eight, staying at first in the house of an uncle, later with other relatives. The uncle, a barrister called Atulprasad Sen, was the most famous Bengali composer of songs after Tagore. His house hummed with music of every kind, and his guests displayed polished manners to match; they included the greatest north Indian classical musician of modern times, Ustad Allauddin Khan (the father of Ali Akbar Khan and the guru of Ravi Shankar). The young Ray listened to him playing the piano and violin, and took in the atmosphere of courtly refinement which was so characteristic of Lucknow. He was also taken to see all the sights that had made Lucknow known as the 'Paris of the East' and the 'Babylon of India' a century before: the great mosque Bara Imambara with its notorious Bhulbhuliya Maze, the Dilkusha Garden, and the remains of the palaces of the Kings of Oudh. Nearby he saw the shell of the British Residency with the marks of Mutiny cannonballs still visible on its walls and a marble plaque commemorating the spot where Sir Henry Lawrence had fallen in 1857. Even today these places have a peculiar elegiac aura. The brief allusions to the city and that period in its history found in Prem Chand's story

conjured up a host of images and sensations in the twenty-year-old Ray's mind.

By then he was also keenly interested in chess. Over the next ten years or so this became an addiction – the main bond (along with western classical music) between him and his first English friend, an RAF serviceman with time on his hands in Calcutta in 1944–6, whose father happened to be a championship player. After this friend was demobbed, Ray found himself without a partner and took to playing solitaire chess. Over the next few years he became engrossed in it and bought books on the subject, which he would soon decide to sell to raise money to shoot pilot footage for his first film *Pather Panchali*. His passion for chess disappeared only with the onset of a greater passion: film-making.

That came around 1951, after his return to Calcutta from his first visit to Britain. Nearly a quarter of a century passed before Ray tackled the story he had admired as a student. His reluctance was principally due to his doubts about writing a screenplay and working with actors in a language – Urdu, the court language of Lucknow (which is very similar to Hindi, the language of Prem Chand's story) – not his own. So rich, subtle and life-like is Ray's usual film dialogue – as Naipaul has appreciated from just the portions of *The Chess Players* in English – so nuanced his direction of actors that he feared to work in a language other than Bengali or perhaps English. It was his affection for the story, his discovery of able Urdu collaborators, and his awareness of a pool of Urdu-speaking talent among actors in Bombay (rather than in his usual Calcutta), that eventually gave him confidence. For the first time, (barring *The Alien* and his documentaries), Ray wrote a screenplay in English, which was subsequently translated into Urdu. During production he spoke English to the actors and to his Urdu collaborators. Though his Hindi – which is technically India's national language – is serviceable, Ray characteristically avoids speaking it. 'He doesn't like to do anything unless he's really good at it,' Shama Zaidi, his chief collaborator in the writing of the screenplay has remarked.

Her role in the film began early on, about two years before Ray completed the first draft of the screenplay in June 1976. Ray's Art Director Bansi Chandragupta introduced her to Ray in 1974. He was just beginning to get to grips with his research for the film then – which makes it one of the longest pre-

production periods of any Ray film (during which he made another film, *The Middle Man*). It is not hard to see why: not only had Ray taken on the re-creation of an entire culture not his own, he was also having to confront his own ambivalence towards the British Raj and, in particular, the contradictions of King Wajid Ali Shah, one of the most bizarre monarchs in a land of eccentric rulers.

Since Ray has regularly been condemned for failing to make his own attitude to the Indian or British side clear in *The Chess Players* – notably in a long attack on the film for accepting the British view of Wajid Ali Shah as being 'effete and effeminate', published in the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, to which Ray replied at length – it is worth detailing the principal sources he consulted in his research in India and, later, in the India Office Library in London. He listed them in his reply, adding his own comments on their significance, which are reproduced here along with my own remarks in square brackets:

1. *Blue Book on Oude*. This is the official British dossier on the Annexation. It contains, among other things, a verbatim account of Outram's last interview with Wajid, and describes Wajid's taking off his turban and handing it to Outram as a parting gesture.
2. Abdul Halim Sharar's *Guzeshta Lucknow* (translated into English by E. S. Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain as *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*). Sharar was born three years after Wajid's deposition [in 1856]. His father had worked in the Secretariat of Wajid's Court and joined Wajid [in exile in Calcutta] in 1862. Sharar went and joined his father seven years later. Introducing the book, the translators say: 'The work has long been recognized by Indo-Islamic scholars as a primary source of great value, a unique document both alive and authentic in every detail.' Sharar provided most of the socio-cultural details, as well as a fairly extended portrait of Wajid both in his Lucknow and his Calcutta periods. [Luckily for Ray this wonderful book appeared in English just in time to be of use to him.]
3. The Indian histories of Mill and Beveridge, both critical of the Annexation.

THE CHESS PLAYERS

4. Two histories of the Mutiny (by Ball and by Kaye).
5. *The Letters of Lord Dalhousie*. One of these letters provided the information that Outram grumbled about the new treaty and apprehended that Wajid would refuse to sign it. Dalhousie ascribes this attitude to indigestion [an idea that Ray has Outram specifically reject when talking to Dr Fayrer – see p. 44].
6. *The Reminiscences of Sir Alexander Fayrer*. Fayrer was the Resident Surgeon, Honorary Assistant Resident and Post-master of Lucknow at the time of the takeover.
7. Two biographies of Outram (by Trotter and by Goldschmid).
8. The diaries and letters of Emily Eden, Fanny Eden, Bishop Heber and Fanny Parkes.
9. *The Indian Mutiny Diary* by Howard Russell. Russell came to India as the correspondent of *The Times*. He was on the spot when the British troops ransacked the Kaiserbagh Palace. He gives the only detailed description of the interior of the palace that I have come across.
10. The young Wajid's personal diary *Mahal Khana Shahi*. This turned out to be unending account of his amours. [Some think it spurious but Shama Zaidi does not.]
11. The text of Wajid Ali Shah's *Rahas* [the play he wrote about the god Krishna that is briefly performed by him at the beginning of the film].
12. Mrs Meer Hasan Ali's *On the Mussulmans of India* (1832). This was found useful for its details of life in the zenana.
13. *Umrao Jan Ada* (translated into English as *A Courtesan of Lucknow*). This gives a fascinating and authentic picture of Lucknow in Wajid's time.
14. All English and Bengali newspapers and journals of the period preserved in the National Library [at Calcutta].
15. I was also in close touch throughout with Professor Kaukabh of Aligarh University. Professor Kaukabh happens to be a great-grandson of Wajid Ali Shah and is considered to be one of the best authorities in India on Wajid.

In trying to assimilate this array of historical and cultural information along with Prem Chand's story to make a coherent whole with the potentiality of a screenplay, Ray faced certain

THE CHESS PLAYERS

formidable difficulties. First came the audience's widespread ignorance of the facts of the relationship between Britain and Oudh in the century leading up to the Annexation – in India as much as elsewhere: to which the film's ten-minute prologue seemed the only solution. Secondly, there was the fact that chess is not inherently dramatic on screen. Thirdly came the need to make the King sympathetic. Finally, an overall tone of voice had to be found that was in harmony with the pleasure-loving decadence of Lucknow, without seeming to condone it.

The third of these difficulties almost persuaded Ray to abandon the film. He felt a strong Outram-like aversion for Wajid Ali Shah, the more he discovered about his debauches. Both Saeed Jaffrey and Shama Zaidi at one time received letters from him declaring his doubts about whether he could portray the King successfully. When Zaidi wrote to Ray offering to translate Wajid's diary (in which he very explicitly describes his sex life from the age of eight) and his letters from Calcutta to his wife in Lucknow, Ray replied, 'Don't tell me all this because then I'll dislike him even more,' Shama recalls with amusement.

As Ray observes in his Preface to this collection, it was the King's musical talents that reconciled him to the rest of his character; a ruler who is capable of admonishing his tearful Prime Minister (whom he had first come to know at the house of a courtesan) with the remark, 'Nothing but poetry and music should bring tears to a man's eyes.' One is reminded perhaps of another Ray protagonist – the fossilized nobleman-aesthete in *The Music Room* (*Jalsaghar*), who lives only for music. As Ray said: 'The fact that the King was a great patron of music was one redeeming feature about him. But that came after long months of study, of the nawabs, of Lucknow and everything.'

This became the key that unlocked the character of Outram too. Among the copious extracts from the sources Ray consulted that are carefully noted down in his bulky shooting notebooks on *The Chess Players*, one comes across this character sketch of Outram taken from Goldschmid's biography of him:

1. Refused to benefit from conquest of Sind [in which campaign Outram had been in command in 1843].
2. Hated pettifogging ceremony.
3. 'His manner natural and gracious; his speech is marked by

THE CHESS PLAYERS

a slight hesitation when choosing a word, but it is singularly correct and forcible; and his smile is very genial and sympathetic.'

4. 'Quaint sense of humour', a good anecdotist.
5. 'He greatly appreciated music of a touching character. Sacred music always his preference.'

From this description, and knowing the universal dislike of Indian music by the British of the Raj, one can easily imagine Outram failing signally to comprehend Wajid Ali Shah's - 'our fat King's' - gifts as a composer, while seeing only too plainly his faults as a ruler. Indian 'impracticality' and Indian love of the inessential - as Outram sees it - baffle and irritate him as they have baffled and irritated the West from the beginning of its encounter with India. But Outram also finds Wajid Ali Shah intriguing. The scene in which he interrogates his Urdu-speaking ADC Captain Weston about the King's doings demonstrates Ray's insight into the nature of such cultural friction with exquisite skill, suggesting clearly (but never explicitly) the intimate links between nationalism, racialism and lack of imagination.

In Outram's utilitarian superior Lord Dalhousie, the Governor-General in Calcutta, the hauteur is palpable. The confident, mocking tone of his letters suggested to Ray not only the ironic tone of the film but also, quite directly, the sequence of cartoons in the prologue of the film explaining how the British steadily deprived the rulers of Lucknow of money, land and power while preserving their formal status. Dalhousie was responsible for the annexation of several Indian states before Oudh. In one of his letters - quoted in the film - he refers to Wajid Ali Shah sardonically as 'the wretch at Lucknow' and to Oudh as 'a cherry which will drop into our mouths one day'. Ray immediately decided to depict this literally in the film by showing a cartoon Englishman knocking the crowns off cherries and popping them into his mouth. Although the cartoons are brasher than one would like - one of the few slightly false notes in the film - they are an imaginative and amusing expression of the lack of imagination with which the East India Company generally treated the Indians it ruled: like pawns to be manipulated in a game of chess.

Ray counterpoints this lack with the very different failings of the two chess players, so wrapped up in their games that they

THE CHESS PLAYERS

barely understand the political game being played with their futures. It took him months of pondering to satisfy himself that such a counterpoint would work on the screen. The obstacle, as he put it to Jaffrey in a letter in May 1976, was

to establish the idea of obsession - which is basic to the development of the story - with a game which is basically abstract and intellectual. If it had been *gambling*, there'd be no problem. But the beauty of the story lies in the parallel that Prem Chand draws between the game and the moves of the crafty Raj leading to the 'capture' of the King.

His solution calls to mind two of his earlier films about obsessions: *The Music Room* and *The Goddess (Devi)*. In each case he stresses the human element without ever losing sight of the object of obsession. Just as it is not essential when watching these films to be familiar with Indian classical singing or Kali worship (though it is a big advantage with *The Goddess*), one need have no knowledge of chess to appreciate *The Chess Players*.

However, Ray was no doubt greatly assisted by his former passion for the game in building on Prem Chand's basic conceit. Deftly, he finds a hundred ways on screen to express Meer's and Mirza's utter absorption in their private world, enriching his theme so naturally and imperceptibly that its final impact defies analysis. All his best films have been like this - *Pather Panchali*, *The Postmaster*, *Charulata*, *Days and Nights in the Forest*, *Distant Thunder*, to name some of them. He had grasped the importance of this way of constructing a film as far back as 1950 after watching *Bicycle Thieves* and a hundred other films in London, when he wrote to his friend Chandragupta in Calcutta (then assisting Eugene Lourie in Jean Renoir's *The River*), as follows:

The entire conventional approach (as exemplified by even the best American and British films) is wrong. Because the conventional approach tells you that the best way to tell a story is to leave out all except those elements which are directly related to the story, while the master's work clearly indicates that if your theme is strong and simple, then you can include a hundred little apparently irrelevant details which, instead of obscuring the theme, only help to intensify it by contrast, and in addition create the illusion of actuality better.

THE CHESS PLAYERS

Ray's theme in *The Chess Players* is strong and simple – that the non-involvement of India's ruling classes assisted a small number of British in their takeover of India – but the way he expresses it is oblique and complex. It is not at first apparent, for example, what Mirza's ignorance of his wife's dissatisfaction with him may have to do with Outram's intention to annex Oudh; but by the end the link is clear, when Mirza's cuckolded friend Meer remarks to him with comic pathos in their village hideaway, 'We can't even cope with our wives, so how can we cope with the Company's army?' This is the moment in the film where Ray intends the two interwoven stories to become one, the moment of truth where all the pieces in the puzzle fall magically into place. Rather than the shattering revelation of the ending of *Charulata* – where Bhupati suddenly perceives his complete failure to understand his wife – the ending of *The Chess Players* recalls Ashim's deflation by Aparna at the end of *Days and Nights*. Though painful, it is also funny, made bearable for Meer and Mirza by their continuing affection for each other.

Neither film has much story as such, but – to quote Naipaul again – 'terrific things happen' in the compass of few words. The entire Indo-Muslim culture of Lucknow is suggested in *The Chess Players*, rather as Renoir suggests French society between the wars in *La Règle du Jeu*. Music and dance figure prominently, as it is important for us to grasp their highly regarded position in Wajid Ali Shah's world. His decision finally to renounce his throne without a fight is communicated to his courtiers not through mere words but through a musical couplet, a *thumri* of the kind made famous by Wajid – in fact his most famous *thumri* in India today (of which Ray knew a variation as a boy in Calcutta):

*Jab chhorh chaley Lakhnau nagari
Kaho haal adam par kya guzeri . . .*

which may be roughly translated as:

When we left Lucknow,
See what befell us . . .

On the printed page in English it may lack impact, but when sung by Amjad Khan in a hesitant voice husky with emotion, it is moving.

THE CHESS PLAYERS

In the later stages of making and releasing *The Chess Players* Ray must sometimes have felt the *thumri* could apply to him too:

When I left Bengal,
See what befell me . . .

After Herculean efforts to film the Company troops arriving in Lucknow – in the midsummer heat of Jaipur, since only there could the necessary elephants be made available – Ray managed to get the film finished by September 1977. But when it was shown to its prospective all-India distributors they withdrew their support, apparently dissatisfied with the classical nature of the film's songs and dances and its use of high-flown Urdu: they had obviously been anticipating more razzamatazz. 'Mr Ray has made the film for a foreign audience' was the comment Ray passed on to Jaffrey rather gloomily in a letter at the end of October. But he knew it had also received an excellent response at a screening in Bombay: so good, rumour has it, that it made some of the big guns in the Bombay industry conspire to prevent the film getting a proper release in India. The language of the film being Hindi/Urdu rather than Ray's usual Bengali, and the presence of Bombay stars (Amjad Khan and Sanjeev Kumar in particular), may have provoked industry fears of their own product being undermined.

Judging from the reactions to the film in the Indian press such fears were groundless: though the film had many admirers, most Indians misjudged it. They probably expected a more full-blooded treatment in the manner of Attenborough's (later) *Gandhi*; Ray's restraint and irony towards both sides did not please them. The hostile critic already mentioned (to whom Ray replied) complained that Ray gave no sense of the way that discontent over the Annexation helped to bring about the Mutiny. He wrote:

Study the records of this period and you realise how glaring is Satyajit's failure in giving us a picture of a placid and uneventful Lucknow in which his characters move about like lifeless dummies in an empty shadowplay.

Abroad the film had a warm reception, though not by any means as warm as that for much of Ray's earlier work, including *Days and Nights in the Forest*. Probably the most perceptive

THE CHESS PLAYERS

comment came from Tim Radford in the *Guardian*: 'Satyajit Ray seems to be able to achieve more and more with less and less.' Most critics, however, found the film slow and many also found it mannered and, like most Indians, too bloodless for their taste. The *New York Times* was probably typical in saying that 'Ray's not outraged. Sometimes he's amused; most often he's meditative, and unless you respond to this mood, the movie is so overly polite that you may want to shout a rude word.'

Neither East nor West seemed quite satisfied with *The Chess Players*. Both wanted Ray to have painted his canvas in bolder colours. But, as he pointed out at the time,

the condemnation is there, ultimately, but the process of arriving at it is different. I was portraying two negative forces, feudalism and colonialism. You had to condemn both Wajid and Dalhousie. This was the challenge. I wanted to make this condemnation interesting by bringing in certain plus points of both the sides. You have to read this film between the lines.

Most of Ray's films, as he has quietly but frankly observed on a number of occasions, can be fully appreciated only by someone with insight into both cultures. *The Chess Players* undoubtedly gains in meaning if one studies the history and forms of artistic expression of the Mughals and their successors, as well as the attitude to those successors epitomized by General Outram when he describes Wajid as 'a frivolous, effeminate, irresponsible, worthless king'. If V. S. Naipaul, himself one of the great writers of the century, is right in comparing Ray with Shakespeare, one may safely predict that people will still be watching *The Chess Players* and discovering new things in it for very many years to come.

A.R.

The Chess Players (Shatranj Ke Khilari) was first shown at the National Film Theatre as part of the London Film Festival on 3 December 1977. The cast included:

MIRZA SAJJAD ALI	Sanjeev Kumar
MEER ROSHAN ALI	Saeed Jaffrey
WAJID ALI SHAH	Amjad Khan
GENERAL OUTRAM	Richard Attenborough
KHURSHID	Shabana Azmi
NAFEESA	Farida Jalal
AULEA BEGUM, QUEEN	Veena
MOTHER	
ALI NAQI KHAN, PRIME	Victor Banerjee
MINISTER	
CAPTAIN WESTON	Tom Alter
DR JOSEPH FAYRER	Barry John
<i>Producer</i>	Suresh Jindal
<i>Screenplay</i>	Satyajit Ray, from a short story by Prem Chand
<i>Lighting Cameraman</i>	Soumendu Roy
<i>Animation</i>	Ram Mohan
<i>Editor</i>	Dulal Dutta
<i>Art Director</i>	Bansi Chandragupta
<i>Wardrobe</i>	Shama Zaidi
<i>Musical score</i>	Satyajit Ray
<i>Dance Director</i>	Birju Maharaj

THE CHESS PLAYERS

CHARACTERS

MIRZA SAJJAD ALI, a *jagirdar* of Oudh
MEER ROSHAN ALI, a *jagirdar* of Oudh
WAJID ALI SHAH, King of Oudh
AULEA BEGUM, WAJID's mother
ALI NAQI KHAN, Prime Minister of Oudh
KHURSHID, wife of MIRZA SAJJAD ALI
NAFEESA, wife of MEER ROSHAN ALI
AQIL, NAFEESA's lover
HIRIA, KHURSHID's maid servant
MUNSHI NANDLAL, a Persian tutor
GENERAL OUTRAM, Resident of Lucknow
CAPT. WESTON, OUTRAM's ADC
DR JOSEPH FAYRER, Residency doctor
KALLOO, a boy

Locale: Lucknow, 1856

SCENE I

Close-up of a chessboard (cloth). A game is in progress. A hand enters from the right, hovers over the pieces, and moves a White Bishop. Another hand enters from the left, moves a Black Knight and captures a White Pawn. The game continues.

NARRATOR: Look at the hands of the mighty generals deploying their forces on the battlefield. We do not know if these hands have ever held real weapons. But this is not a real battle where blood is shed and the fate of empires is decided –
(Now we see the two players – MEER ROSHAN ALI and MIRZA SAJJAD ALI.)
Mirza Sajjad Ali and Meer Roshan Ali are only playing at warfare. Their armies are pieces of ivory, their battlefield is a piece of cloth.
(Titles.)

MIRZA: Check.

NARRATOR: Mirza Sajjad Ali has given check, which means Meer Roshan Ali must now protect his King.

(Close-up of MEER's White King.)

This is the White King, which is open to attack from the Red Minister.

(Close-up of MIRZA's Red Minister. Close-up of MEER ROSHAN ALI.)

Meer Sahib, save your King, for if the King is lost, the battle is lost.

(Close-up of MIRZA. He takes a pull at the hookah, finds it's gone out.)

MIRZA: Maqbool!

(Long shot. A servant runs up, takes the hookah and hurries out to replenish it. The camera stays on the two friends playing with great concentration.)

NARRATOR: Poor Maqbool! How often will he have to attend to these hookahs. For there will be many more battles fought on that piece of cloth today.

(The camera begins to move very slowly to MS of the two friends.)

It has been like this ever since the day the two friends

THE CHESS PLAYERS

discovered this noble game. You may ask: have they no work to do? Of course not! Whoever heard of the landed gentry working? These are noblemen of the capital of Oudh: Lucknow.

(Close-up of an arch in the Mughal style: the camera pulls back. Followed by domes and minarets.)

After the passing of the Mughals in Delhi, Lucknow became India's bastion of Muslim culture.

(A flock of pigeons in the sky. A group of noblemen watch from a roof-top while the pigeons perform their feats.)

Not all their games had the elegance of pigeons . . . or kite-flying.

(An open field with hundreds of men flying kites. Gaily coloured kites fight and cavort in the sky.)

That notable culture had its cruel side too.

(A cock-fight is in progress. It is brutal and the crowd is intensely excited by it.)

Close-up of throne: the camera pulls back. The throne is empty.)

This is the throne of King Wajid, who ruled over Oudh. But the King had other interests too.

(WAJID's Rahas, with WAJID himself playing Krishna. He is surrounded by a bevy of pretty girls, playing gopinis. The accompanying music is a beautiful song composed by WAJID:)

Subha lagana subha sagana chhatra dharo mayee

Sakala pandita mila lagana kundali banayee

Nanda-nandanaki juga juga jeeyo

Ayeseey mohana rupa chanda sama jhalkayee.

(WAJID ALI SHAH, surrounded by a crowd, plays the tasha (drum) at the great festival of Mohurram.)

WAJID ALI SHAH at night reclining among his harem, being gently fanned with whisks.

Close-up of WAJID: the camera pulls back to show WAJID sitting on throne.)

Nevertheless, there were times when King Wajid sat on the throne.

(WAJID sitting at a durbar. The camera moves in slowly to a close-up of the crown.)

If he was not overfond of ruling, he was certainly proud of his crown. Only five years ago, in 1851, he had sent it to London to be displayed at the Great Exhibition.

THE CHESS PLAYERS

(Contemporary views of the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851.)
But listen to what an Englishman in India had to say about it.

(Close-up of Lord Dalhousie's letter. An English voice reads it out:)

'The wretch at Lucknow who has sent his crown to the Exhibition would have done his people and us a great service if he had sent his head in it – and he would never have missed it. That is a cherry which will drop into our mouths one day.'

NARRATOR: The head of the Kingdom of Oudh to be eaten like a cherry? Alas, words penned by the Governor-General of India . . .

(Portrait of Dalhousie.)

But perhaps Lord Dalhousie was inordinately fond of cherries. How many he had eaten in the last ten years:

(Animation showing crowned cherries with their crowns being knocked off by Dalhousie and the cherry being swallowed in one gulp.)

Punjab, Burma, Nagpur, Satara, Jhansi. The only one left is the cherry of Oudh, whose friendship with Britain goes back a century to the reign of Nawab Shuja-ud-Daula.

(Portraits of Shuja. Engraving of the Battle of Buxar, treaty document and details showing clasped hands.)

Nawab Shuja had been unwise enough to pit his forces against the British: no wonder he was defeated. But the British did not dethrone him. All they did was to make him sign a treaty pledging eternal friendship and five million rupees compensation. Ever since, the Nawabs of Oudh have maintained this friendship.

(Paintings of British fighting in Afghanistan, Nepal and Burma.)

When British campaigns needed money, the Nawabs opened their coffers.

(Same detail of clasped hands as before.)

And whenever British wrath had been aroused by evidence of Nawabi misrule –

(Animation: the Nawab asleep on the throne, a cake with the word 'Oudh' on it beside him. Governor-General struts in from the right, looking daggers, taps sleeping Nawab on shoulder.)

THE CHESS PLAYERS

Nawab wakes up with a start, hangs head in shame. Governor-General points peremptorily at 'Oudh'. Nawab takes out dagger, slices off a piece of 'Oudh', hands it to Governor-General. Governor-General gulps piece, lifts top-hat to Nawab and struts away.

Portrait of Ghaziuddin.)

Nawab Ghaziuddin's generosity so gratified the British that they gave him the title of King. It was Ghaziuddin who fashioned the crown . . .

(Move in to close-up of Ghaziuddin's crown. Cut to crown on WAJID's head (live).)

. . . which Wajid Ali sent to London. Poor Wajid! If only you knew what was in the mind of the Resident of Lucknow whose name was General Outram.

SCENE 2

Interior Lucknow Residency. OUTRAM's study. Afternoon.

The back of OUTRAM's head. He is smoking. There is a knock at the door. CAPTAIN WESTON, one of OUTRAM's assistants, enters and hands OUTRAM a telegram.

WESTON: From Cawnpore, sir. General Wheeler.

(WESTON hands OUTRAM the telegram and turns to go. OUTRAM calls him back.)

OUTRAM: Weston –

WESTON: Sir.

OUTRAM: Have you ever seen a pigeon that has one black and one white wing?

WESTON: Ah, no sir.

OUTRAM: Well now – *(Reading from a document)* 'Jewan Khan, the keeper of the royal pigeons, received a *khilat*' – that's a reward, I suppose, eh?

WESTON: Yes sir.

OUTRAM: – 'of Rs. 2000 for producing a pigeon with one black and one white wing.' I find this a very revealing document, Weston. It's an hour-by-hour account of the King's activities dated the 24th of January. That's yesterday. Did you know that the King prayed five times a day?

WESTON: Five is the number prescribed by the Koran, sir.

THE CHESS PLAYERS

OUTRAM: Surely all Muslims don't pray five times a day?

WESTON: Well, not all, sir, but some do.

OUTRAM: The King being one of them?

WESTON: The King is known to be a very devout man, sir.

OUTRAM: Is he? H'm . . . 'His Majesty listened to a new singer, Mushtari Bai, and afterwards amused himself by flying kites on the palace roof.' That's at 4 p.m. Then the King goes to sleep for an hour but he's up in time for the third prayer at 5 p.m. And then in the evening – now where is it? – 'His Majesty recited a new poem on the loves of the *bulbul*' –

WESTON: A bird, sir. The Persian nightingale.

OUTRAM: Ah-ha – at a *mushaira*. What's a *mushaira*?

WESTON: A *mushaira* is a gathering of poets. They recite the new poems.

OUTRAM: I see.

(OUTRAM puts down the court diary.)

Tell me, Weston, you know the language, you know the people here – I mean, what kind of poet is the King? Is he any good, or is it simply because he's the King they say he's good?

WESTON: I think he's rather good, sir.

OUTRAM: You do, eh?

WESTON: Yes sir.

OUTRAM: D'you know any of his stuff?

WESTON: I know some, sir.

OUTRAM: Well, can you recite it? Do you know it by heart?

WESTON: *(Taken aback)* Recite it, sir?

OUTRAM: Yes, I'm not a poetry man. Many soldiers are. But I'm curious to know what it sounds like. I rather like the sound of Hindustani.

(WESTON remains silent, slightly ill-at-ease.)

Are they long, these poems?

WESTON: Not the ones I know, sir.

OUTRAM: Well, go on man, out with it!

(WESTON recites a four-line poem.)

Is that all?

WESTON: That's all, sir.

OUTRAM: Well, it certainly has the virtue of brevity. What the hell does it mean, if anything?

WESTON: He's speaking about himself, sir.

THE CHESS PLAYERS

OUTRAM: Well what's he saying? It's nothing obscene, I hope?
WESTON: No sir.
OUTRAM: Well, what's he saying?
WESTON: (*Coughing lightly*)
Wound not my bleeding body.
Throw flowers gently on my grave.
Though mingled with the earth, I rose up to the skies.
People mistook my rising dust for the heavens.
That's all, sir.
OUTRAM: H'm. Doesn't strike me as a great flight of fancy, I'm afraid.
(*OUTRAM rises from his chair slowly.*)
WESTON: It doesn't translate very well, sir.
OUTRAM: And what about his songs? He's something of a composer, I understand? Are they any good, these songs?
WESTON: They keep running in your head, sir. I find them quite attractive. Some of them.
OUTRAM: I see.
WESTON: He's really quite gifted, sir.
(*OUTRAM glances briefly at WESTON and begins to pace the room thoughtfully.*)
He's also fond of dancing, sir.
OUTRAM: Yes, so I understand. With bells on his feet, like nautch-girls. Also dresses up as a Hindu god, I am told.
WESTON: You're right, sir. He also composes his own operas.
OUTRAM: Doesn't leave him much time for his concubines, not to speak of the affairs of the state. Does he really have 400 concubines?
WESTON: I believe that's the count, sir.
OUTRAM: And twenty-nine 'muta' wives. What the hell are 'muta' wives?
WESTON: (*Fastidiously*) 'Muta' wives, sir? They're temporary wives.
OUTRAM: *Temporary* wives?
WESTON: Yes, sir. A 'muta' marriage can last for three days, or three months or three years. 'Muta' is an Arabic word.
OUTRAM: And it means temporary?
WESTON: No, sir.
(*OUTRAM raises his eyebrows.*)
OUTRAM: No?

THE CHESS PLAYERS

WESTON: It means – er, enjoyment.
OUTRAM: Oh. Oh, yes, I see. Most instructive. And what kind of a king do you think all this makes him, Weston? All these various accomplishments?
WESTON: (*Smiling*) Rather a special kind, sir, I should think.
(*OUTRAM stops pacing, stiffens, turns sharply to WESTON.*)
OUTRAM: *Special?* I would've used a much stronger word than that, Weston. I'd have said a *bad* king. A frivolous, effeminate, irresponsible, worthless king.
WESTON: He's not the first eccentric in the line –
OUTRAM: (*Interrupting*) Oh – I know he's not the first, but he certainly deserves to be the last. We've put up with this nonsense long enough. Eunuchs, fiddlers, nautch-girls and 'muta' wives and God knows what else. He can't rule, he has no wish to rule, and therefore he has no business to rule.
WESTON: There I would agree with you, sir.
OUTRAM: Good. I am glad to hear that. I have it in mind to recommend you for a higher position when we take over –
WESTON: Take over, sir?
OUTRAM: Take over, Weston. And any suspicion that you hold a brief for the King would ruin your chances. You remember that.



THE CHESS PLAYERS

(Evening. The Muezzin's call can be heard. On the banks of the Gomti some Muslim boatmen are praying. More Muslims are praying in an open field. KING WAJID prays in his private mosque.)

(MIRZA SAJJAD ALI's drawing-room. MIRZA SAJJAD ALI and MEER ROSHAN ALI are praying. The chesscloth is in its place with only a few pieces standing. A game had just been finished before prayer time.)

Prayer over, MIRZA and MEER rise and prepare for another game. A servant brings a lamp.)

MIRZA: Maqbool! Bring the hookahs.

MEER: Mirza Sahib, where did you find this piece of calligraphy?

MIRZA: You won't believe me. I found it in a junk shop, for fifty rupees. Do you like it?

MEER: It's very good.

(The two have started to arrange the pieces.)

MIRZA: No wonder: it's the work of Shamsuddin.

MEER: When you come to my house next, I'll show you an even better one. My wife likes it so much, she's hung it in the bedroom.

(MIRZA is humming a ghazal. The pieces are arranged. It is MEER's turn to play.)

MIRZA: Meer Sahib. I must remind you of an unbreakable rule of chess.

MEER: What rule?

MIRZA: If you touch a piece, you must move it.

MEER: But I always -

MIRZA: You don't. Last time you touched a Knight, hesitated, then moved a Pawn. And on another occasion . . .

MEER: I'm sorry, Mirza Sahib. I'll be more careful from now on.

MIRZA: Well, make your move.

(Carriage bells are heard outside. MEER has just made his first move when a servant calls and announces that MUNSHI NANDLAL SINGH would like to see MIRZA Sahib. MIRZA is irritated by this interruption.)

Show him in.

(They put on their caps. NANDLAL comes in. Middle-aged, jolly, obviously a man of some standing and culture. MIRZA and

THE CHESS PLAYERS

MEER greet him with a totally convincing display of warm welcome.)

We haven't seen you for ages.

MEER: We were just talking about you.

NANDLAL: I hope I'm not disturbing you.

MIRZA: Not at all: we're honoured.

(NANDLAL catches sight of the chesscloth.)

NANDLAL: I see you're about to start a game.

MIRZA: Well, as a matter of fact -

NANDLAL: Then I'd better go.

MIRZA: No, no -

MEER: This is our fourth game of the day.

MIRZA: Do sit down, please.

NANDLAL: The game of kings, the king of games. I'm proud it was invented by an Indian.

MIRZA: I thought it came from Persia.

NANDLAL: No, it originated in India. Then it travelled to Europe.

(MIRZA and MEER are intrigued.)

I see you're playing the Indian way.

MEER: What other way?

NANDLAL: The British way.

MIRZA: Don't say the Company's taken over chess, too.

(They all laugh.)

NANDLAL: I learnt British chess from Mr Collins when I taught him Persian.

MIRZA: How does their game differ from ours?

NANDLAL: There's little difference. The piece we call the Minister is called the Queen in the British game. And the Queens are placed facing each other.

(NANDLAL makes the necessary changes to demonstrate.)

And the Pawn can move two squares in its first move. When a Pawn reaches the eighth rank it can be exchanged for a Queen.

(MIRZA and MEER shake their heads.)

MEER: I must say the British are clever.

MIRZA: But why change the rules?

NANDLAL: It's a faster game.

MIRZA: So they find our game too slow?

MEER: Like our transport: now we're to have railway trains, and the telegraph.

THE CHESS PLAYERS



NANDLAL: The telegraph is here already – and I don't like it.
 MEER: Why not?
 NANDLAL: Bad news travels faster.
 MEER: Bad news?
 NANDLAL: Haven't you heard?
 MEER: We hear nothing when we play.
 NANDLAL: Meer Sahib, you can't laugh it off. I hear the East India Company plans to take over Oudh.
 MEER: What!
 NANDLAL: I came here to tell you.
 (MIRZA chuckles.)
 MIRZA: You may have learnt British chess, but you seem not to follow their moves. All these campaigns in Nepal, the Punjab, Afghanistan, where do you think the Company gets the money to fight them? From the King of Oudh, of course. How? It's very simple. Just tell the King he's ruling badly, and unless he pays up, the Company will take over. The King pays up. The Company hears the jingle of gold, and everything returns to normal once again.
 NANDLAL: So you think the Company needs money again?
 MEER: Of course. Do you think the railway and the telegraph cost nothing?

THE CHESS PLAYERS

NANDLAL: You may be right. But I don't trust Lord Dalhousie. I hear that British troops have reached Cawnpore. What if war should break out?
 MIRZA: Meer Sahib, just take down that sword, will you?
 (MEER does not understand MIRZA at first. Then, nervously he gets up and lifts a large sword from a display on MIRZA's wall.)
 Take it out of its scabbard!
 (MEER obeys and shows the curved blade to NANDLAL.)
 Do you know whose sword that was? You tell him, Meer Sahib.
 (MEER is not very good at rhetoric, but has a go at it nevertheless.)
 MEER: This sword belonged to Mirza's great-grandfather. Both our great-grandfathers were officers in King Burhan-ul-Mulk's army.
 MIRZA: They were so formidable they struck terror into the enemy. In recognition of their valour, the King granted them estates . . . which we are living off to this day. So you see whose blood flows in our veins.
 (MEER gives a nervous giggle.)
 MEER: Whatever happens, the British can't stop us playing chess.
 MIRZA: We're talking of war, and he thinks only of chess!
 (NANDLAL laughs.)
 NANDLAL: Don't worry, Meer Sahib. We may have invented the game, but it's the British who have taken it up.
 MIRZA: And made the Pawn move two squares.
 (They all laugh.)
 NANDLAL: Well, I must take my leave.
 MEER: So soon?
 NANDLAL: I feel like an intruder. Mr Collins wouldn't answer the door to any callers when we played.
 MIRZA: Then Mr Collins should not only have studied our languages . . . but our manners too.
 (NANDLAL exits.)
 NARRATOR: While the great-grandsons of Burhan-ul-Mulk's officers fought bloodlessly, another game was being played elsewhere.
 (Close-up of LORD DALHOUSIE's hand signing a despatch.)

THE CHESS PLAYERS

In Calcutta, Lord Dalhousie was preparing an important despatch.

(Galloping despatch riders are seen against the sky.)

It was sent by special courier. Calcutta is 600 miles from Lucknow. The horseman covered the distance in seven days.

(The horsemen are seen against various landscapes.)

In the evening of January 31, 1856, the despatch reached General Outram.

(The riders against the skyline of Lucknow.)

SCENE 3

MIRZA's house. Night. The clock shows just after 10.30.

KHURSHID, MIRZA's wife, sits alone, in the zenana. A plangent song is heard in the background. In the drawing-room, another game is in progress. A full dinner is arranged on plates and dishes within easy reach of the players. It is clear that the meal has been going on for some time, and it is also clear that both are used to eating and playing at the same time. MEER has finished eating. Three servants come. MEER washes his hands and mouth in water poured into a basin from a jug, and then dries himself with a towel.

MIRZA: Finished already?

MEER: You know I'm a small eater.

(The zenana. KHURSHID, MIRZA's wife, stands at a door with a scowl on her face, watching the servants return to the kitchen.

RAHIM, carrying plates and dishes, gives the dozing MAQBOOL a nudge.)

RAHIM: The master wants you.

(MAQBOOL wakes up with a start, springs up and trips. He runs off towards the drawing-room. KHURSHID calls out to her maid servant.)

KHURSHID: Hiria!

(HIRIA has been dozing too. She comes to with a start and lumbers to her feet.)

(Drawing-room. MIRZA puts a paan in his mouth and makes a move. MEER touches a Knight, then quickly withdraws his hand. There is an exchange of looks - MIRZA's being admonitory.)

THE CHESS PLAYERS

MEER: Sorry, Mirza Sahib. It'll never happen again. *(He moves a Bishop.)* Check.

(MIRZA hadn't expected this move. It has put him in a tight corner. Just then HIRIA the maid servant comes and addresses her master from behind the door.)

HIRIA: Begum Sahiba wishes to see you, sir.

(MIRZA makes a face. He hates such summons from the zenana in the middle of a game. He deliberately keeps HIRIA waiting.)

Begum Sahiba wishes to see you, sir.

MIRZA: What for?

HIRIA: She didn't say, sir.

(MIRZA keeps looking at the game. HIRIA persists.)

MIRZA: Tell her I'm coming.

(HIRIA goes away.)

(Imitating his wife) 'Did you enjoy the pulao, dear?'

MEER: Is that what she wants to know?

(Zenana. HIRIA comes back to report.)

HIRIA: Master says he is coming.

KHURSHID: When?

HIRIA: He didn't say.

(HIRIA turns to go, yawning with great deliberation. KHURSHID calls her back.)

KHURSHID: Hiria, tell him I have a headache: he must come at once.

HIRIA: Why didn't you tell me? I could have rubbed sandalwood paste on your brow.

KHURSHID: Just do as you're told.

(HIRIA lumbers off.)

(Drawing-room. MIRZA now makes a move. A good, clever move. MEER is starting to ponder his response when HIRIA reappears.)

HIRIA: Begum Sahiba has a headache. She wants to see you at once.

MEER: You'd better look in.

MIRZA: Say I'm coming.

(HIRIA goes away, looking stern.)

They don't say a word when you spend the night with a

THE CHESS PLAYERS

whore . . . but when you stay at home and play a clean game, they pester you.

MEER: Why not go? It will take me some time to get out of this trap anyway.

MIRZA: Headache, my foot.
(MIRZA gets up.)

MEER: Tell her I thought the food was delicious.

MIRZA: Don't play around with the pieces.

MEER: You know I'd never do such a thing.

(Zenana, Bedroom. KHURSHID is sitting on the charpoy with her back to the door. MIRZA comes in.)

MIRZA: (Oozing compassion) Hiriya says you have a headache . . .

KHURSHID: (Laying it on thick) As if you cared.

MIRZA: What do you mean?

KHURSHID: As if you had the least bit of sympathy.

MIRZA: But -

KHURSHID: Even if I were dying, you wouldn't give me a drop of water.

MIRZA: How can you say that? I left the game because you called.

KHURSHID: That stupid game.
(MIRZA sits beside his wife.)

MIRZA: Stupid game? Why, it's the king of games. It was invented in India and now the world plays it.

KHURSHID: Then the world is stupid.

MIRZA: Ever since I started to play chess . . . my power of thinking has grown a hundredfold.

KHURSHID: But you never think of me.

MIRZA: Of course I do: I came rushing as soon as Hiriya told me.

KHURSHID: It was far better when you spent your nights with that singing woman. Now you sit hunched over that stupid bit of cloth and jiggle around those stupid ivory pieces. And I sit praying to God so you will finish early and come to bed. But the wretched game goes on and on and I go crazy sitting and waiting. I order Hiriya to tell me stories to keep me awake . . . and she keeps repeating the same stories over and over and over again. And you sit there with your stupid game and your stupid friend -

MIRZA: Begum, don't run down my friend because you're angry with me.

THE CHESS PLAYERS

KHURSHID: He sits there and doesn't know what game his wife is playing at home.

MIRZA: (Getting angry) Now don't gossip.

KHURSHID: Gossip? All Lucknow knows that his wife is carrying on with another man. Only you and your friend don't know.
(The conversation has gone on far too long for MIRZA. He comes to the point.)

MIRZA: Begum, if you have a headache -

KHURSHID: Who says I have?

MIRZA: What?

KHURSHID: I don't.

MIRZA: Then why did you send for me?
(KHURSHID says nothing.)

Well, I'll go then.
(KHURSHID grabs hold of her husband who has just got up. There is a tussle which wakes up the dozing HIRIYA. She overhears KHURSHID.)

KHURSHID: Please don't go just yet.
(With a knowing smile HIRIYA dozes off again.)

(In the drawing-room MEER outlines possible moves to himself.)

(In the zenana KHURSHID has forced her husband to lie down with her above him.)

MIRZA: What are you looking at?

KHURSHID: (Cooing) Your eyes.

MIRZA: My eyes?

KHURSHID: They're red from staring at those stupid pieces. I won't let you go back tonight.

MIRZA: But . . . Meer Sahib is waiting -
(KHURSHID playfully gags his mouth.)

KHURSHID: Please forget that game tonight.
(KHURSHID is trying to work MIRZA up, using all her wiles, caressing him with all the tenderness she is capable of. She begins to unbutton his clothes. MIRZA mumbles from behind her gag.)

MIRZA: What are you doing? It's so chilly.
(KHURSHID pulls a coverlet over them both.)

(Drawing-room. MEER wonders about his friend. Why is he taking so long? He looks around then gets up. He tiptoes to the

THE CHESS PLAYERS



door, cocks his ears and tiptoes back. With a deft but casual movement, he shifts one of his Pawns to a more favourable adjacent square.)

(Bedroom. MIRZA is lying on his back on the charpoy, KHURSHID above him. Both of them are silent. KHURSHID now releases him, her efforts having failed. MIRZA begins to button up his clothes. Horses pass in the night outside. A dog barks. KHURSHID sits on the edge of the bed, looking away. MIRZA stands up.)

MIRZA: Don't be angry, darling. Don't be so glum.
(KHURSHID says nothing.)

The thing is -

KHURSHID: You don't love me.

MIRZA: I do love you, believe me. I'll prove it . . . tomorrow.
My mind was elsewhere, with Meer waiting and the game half finished.

KHURSHID: You only care for that game.

(MIRZA laughs with some embarrassment.)

THE CHESS PLAYERS

MIRZA: Tomorrow I'll finish early . . . and dine with you. I'll show you how much I love you. All right?

KHURSHID: You love that game more than you love me.

(MIRZA laughs again and gets up to go, humming a song to cover his awkwardness. MIRZA exits. KHURSHID waits for some seconds, breathing hard. Then -)

KHURSHID: Hiria!

(HIRIA appears.)

Come and tell me a story: I want to stay awake all night.

(Drawing-room. MIRZA comes in. He has assumed a studiously solemn air. MEER looks up. He is bright enough to notice the ruffled hair and other tell-tale details such as a loose flap on MIRZA's jama.)

MEER: A bad headache?

MIRZA: Very bad.

MEER: Tch tch.

MIRZA: She was flailing her arms about. I feared she would have a fit.

MEER: Tch tch. (He sighs ostentatiously and then moves a piece.)
Check.

SCENE 4

The Residency Union Jack flutters in the morning breeze.

NARRATOR: Next morning, General Outram had a meeting with the Prime Minister of Oudh.

(OUTRAM sits at his desk. WESTON is by his side to interpret. The Prime Minister ALI NAQI KHAN's face registers the utmost consternation.)

ALI: (In Urdu) Resident Sahib, this will come to His Majesty as a bolt from the blue. In his worst nightmares he could not have dreamt of this from the Company Bahadur. I cannot think what agonies he will suffer when he hears of this.

WESTON: (Begins to translate.)

OUTRAM: Just sum it up, Weston, will you.

WESTON: Sir, His Majesty will be shocked to hear this.

OUTRAM: Well, will you tell the Prime Minister that I'd like His

THE CHESS PLAYERS

Majesty to go through the treaty and let me have his views as soon as possible. It's a matter of the utmost urgency.

WESTON: (*Translating ALI's reply*) The Prime Minister wishes to know, why the new treaty? What happened to the old one?

OUTRAM: Please tell the Prime Minister that despite repeated warnings from our Government His Majesty has made no efforts whatsoever during the last ten years to improve the administration here. And since this has caused considerable distress among the common people of the province our Government has no alternative but to take matters into their own hands.

WESTON: (*Translating ALI's reply*) The Prime Minister wishes to know how there can be talk of misrule when the people are so happy?

OUTRAM: Just ask the Prime Minister if he knows about Colonel Sleeman's report.

WESTON: (*Translates.*)

ALI: (*In Urdu*) Yes, I know about the report. Colonel Sleeman went on his inspection against His Majesty's wishes. Yet we bore the expenses for his tour, for all his eleven hundred people. Tents, elephants, provisions, everything . . . If he gave a bad report, that is our misfortune. If he had inspected the Company's Bengal –

(*OUTRAM interrupts impatiently.*)

OUTRAM: Mr Khan, there is no use wasting words. The Governor-General's decision is irrevocable.

(*MIRZA's house. Exterior. Afternoon. MEER walks up to the main door, and is immediately assailed by MIRZA's voice, raised in anger, coming from the direction of the drawing-room.*)

MIRZA: Ungrateful knaves! This house is burgled, yet none of you stirs out of bed. I'll have you all sent to prison. I treat you well and this is how you show your gratitude. Don't make excuses.

(*Drawing-room. All the servants in the household – five or six of them – are being ticked off en masse by MIRZA. The reason for this outburst is not clear from what we hear. MEER now enters and greets MIRZA who returns his greeting in a perfunctory*

THE CHESS PLAYERS

way. He dismisses the servants with harsh words, and looks at MEER with a scowl.)

MEER: Why all the excitement?

MIRZA: Some rascal made off with my chessmen.

MEER: What!

MIRZA: It's my fault: I should have kept them in the safe. They steal the clothes off your back these days.

(*MEER realizes the gravity of the situation.*)

MEER: What do we do now? I haven't a set of my own.

(*MIRZA paces about impatiently.*)

Why not let's go and buy a new set?

MIRZA: Meer Sahib, don't you know that shops are closed on Fridays?

MEER: And to think that I'd worked out such a beautiful new strategy . . . The entire day is ruined. However, as the poet says . . . (*He quotes some lines in Urdu.*)

(*MIRZA suddenly stops pacing. His eyes light up.*)

MIRZA: Meer Sahib, that old lawyer of ours . . .

MEER: Imtiaz Hussein Sahib?

MIRZA: Remember the south-east corner of his drawing-room?

(*MEER throws his mind back, then gives a beatific smile.*)

MEER: Indeed I do!

(*Imtiaz Hussein Sahib's drawing-room. In a corner of the drawing-room, on a table, is an elegant set of chessmen on a chessboard inlaid with ivory. MIRZA and MEER come into the room, accompanied by a SERVANT.*)

SERVANT: Please be seated, sirs. I shall inform the Vakil Sahib right away.

(*The SERVANT goes away. MIRZA and MEER slowly advance towards the table with the chessboard. Two chairs are placed invitingly on two sides of the table, though not facing it. MEER and MIRZA are left with no choice but to occupy them. They talk in whispers.*)

MIRZA: Considering all he's chiselled out of me in legal fees . . .

MEER: What about me, too?

MIRZA: He shouldn't refuse to lend it to us for a day.

(*A man in his early forties enters. This is CHUTTAN MIA, the Vakil's younger son. MEER and MIRZA rise and the usual greetings are exchanged.*)

Is Vakil Sahib in?

THE CHESS PLAYERS

CHUTTAN MIA: Yes, he is. He's resting. He's in bed. Unconscious.

(MIRZA and MEER exchange glances.)

We've sent for the doctor. Please make yourself comfortable. He was all right in the morning. Allah willing, he'll recover soon.

MIRZA and MEER: Let us pray for his speedy recovery.

CHUTTAN MIA: If you will excuse me.

MEER and MIRZA: Certainly, certainly: don't let us detain you.

(CHUTTAN MIA leaves. The two friends are alone again. MEER hums. Their eyes meet, then turn towards the chessboard. Silence reigns. The white pieces are on MEER's side, poised for battle. A tempting sight. MEER's fingers now approach a Pawn, slowly, tentatively. The fingers now touch the piece.)

MEER: (Very softly) Sipahi, advance!

(MIRZA replies by advancing a Knight. MEER is about to move his second piece when a SERVANT enters the room. MIRZA smartly withdraws his hand. The two friends are a picture of innocence. The SERVANT has brought sherbet on a tray. He puts it down on a table in the middle of the room, walks over to the chess table, removes the chessboard and places it on the table in the middle of the room. In its place, to the consternation of MIRZA and MEER, he puts the sherbet. The SERVANT leaves. MIRZA taps his stick on the floor. MEER toys with the glass of sherbet. Then, with studied nonchalance, he gets up, walks over to the other table and moves a chess piece. He invites MIRZA to follow him. MIRZA gets up and is about to move a piece when CHUTTAN MIA returns.)

CHUTTAN MIA: Father has regained consciousness. Come, he'll be happy to see you.

(MEER and MIRZA hesitate, but are left with no choice.)

(Vakil Sahib's bedroom. Vakil Sahib lies covered in a blanket. Apart from his face, only his right hand is exposed, holding a string of beads. He looks close to death. There are others in the room, in various states of despondency. Prayers are in progress.

MEER and MIRZA enter, led by CHUTTAN MIA.)

MEER: Are you sure he's conscious?

THE CHESS PLAYERS

CHUTTAN MIA: Yes, he was just talking to me. (He bends over the prostrate figure and raises his voice.) Father, Meer Sahib and Mirza Sahib have come to pay their respects.

(In response, Vakil Sahib parts his lips, rolls his eyeballs, and tries desperately to speak. Clear symptoms of the nearness of death. MEER and MIRZA back away towards the door. As they are about to cross the threshold, loud wailing goes up inside the house. MIRZA and MEER stand listening for a few seconds, then make suitable gestures of respect towards the dead, and exit to freedom and fresh air.)

SCENE 5

A room in one of the many palaces in the Kaiserbagh complex. Day.

A Kathak dancer, Bismillah Jan, is giving a recital for King WAJID, who is surrounded by his usual cohorts. There are appreciative wah-wahs at suitable gestures and WAJID seems to have not a care in the world. The dance goes on for a couple of minutes when the Prime Minister, ALI NAQI KHAN enters. He takes his seat beside WAJID. When the dance finishes, WAJID dismisses the entire congregation, so that now only WAJID and ALI are left. WAJID gazes at his Prime Minister, waiting for him to speak.

ALI bursts into tears.

WAJID: Come now, that is enough.

(ALI can only shake his head and sob.)

The Resident Sahib must have been singing ghazals to you. Nothing but poetry and music should bring tears to a man's eyes.

(WAJID becomes irritated.)

ALI at last controls himself. For the first time ALI looks WAJID straight in the eyes. He makes a great effort and says -

ALI: Your Majesty, you shall no longer wear the crown.

(An open space on the roadside where a ram fight is taking place. Day.

Close-up. A resounding crash as the heads of the two fighting rams collide. A large motley crowd surrounds the arena. Betting is going on, and there are shouts of 'Sohrab' and 'Rustum', the names of the two rams.)

THE CHESS PLAYERS



BOOKIE: Double or quits?

(Behind the BOOKIE appear MEER and MIRZA, who crane their necks to get a glimpse of the fight.)

Bet on Sohrab! Bet on Rustum!

(MEER addresses the BOOKIE.)

MEER: Tell me which is which?

(The BOOKIE points them out.)

BOOKIE: Sohrab has the black face.

(The fight goes on, the excitement of the crowd rising to a pitch. MEER brings out some money and places his bet on Rustum.)

MEER: One rupee on Rustum.

MIRZA: Why waste good money, Meer Sahib? Betting is not for us.

(It does appear for a moment that Rustum might win, and MEER gets involved in the general excitement.)

MEER: Rustum! Rustum!

(But suddenly the tide turns in Sohrab's favour. Rustum averts a butt, sidestepping. MEER's face falls. The backers of Sohrab go wild with excitement. MIRZA pulls MEER away.)

(A park in Lucknow. Day. A drumbeat followed by a proclamation: 'By order of His Majesty the King of Oudh the

THE CHESS PLAYERS

public is warned that there will be severe punishment for anyone spreading rumours that the Company is taking over our realm. The Company forces are not marching on Lucknow. They are passing en route to Nepal.'

MIRZA is sitting disconsolately on a park bench, eating nuts. MEER has been wandering near by. Everything is peaceful.

MEER comes up.)

MEER: Mirza Sahib -

MIRZA: Yes?

MEER: What is it that makes people spread rumours?

(MIRZA doesn't answer. He is drawing an outline of a chessboard in the dust with the tip of his cane.)

If anyone even mentions a takeover, I shall pull his tongue out.

(MIRZA still makes no comment.)

What a glorious day, yet we have to spend it in idleness.

MIRZA: Meer Sahib, for every problem there is a solution. One must know where to seek it. Let's go home.

(MIRZA's house. Zenana. Late afternoon. KHURSHID sucks contentedly on her hookah.)

(MIRZA's drawing-room. The chesscloth is spread in the usual place. MIRZA and MEER are arranging pieces in the squares. They are very unorthodox pieces indeed. The Pawns are cashew nuts - eight with their skins and eight without; the Knights are limes, green and yellow; Bishops are tomatoes; Rooks are chillies; the Kings and Ministers are phials of attar, dark and light. The King-phials have their stoppers on, while the Ministers are without them.)

MIRZA: Maqbool! Bring the hookahs.

MEER: I take my hat off to you, Mirza.

(MIRZA rubs his hands. He obviously relishes his own inventiveness.)

MIRZA: The Pawns are no problem. Neither are the King and the Minister. But you have to be very careful with the Bishops, the Knights and the Rooks.

MEER: Let me see . . . tomato is Bishop, lime is Knight, chilli is Rook.

MIRZA: Correct.

THE CHESS PLAYERS



(Zenana. KHURSHID, standing behind a screen, sees MAQBOOL preparing the hookahs.)

KHURSHID: Is the master back?

MAQBOOL: Yes, Begum Sahiba.

KHURSHID: Is he alone?

MAQBOOL: No, Begum Sahiba. Meer Sahib is with him.

KHURSHID: *(Suspicion growing)* They're not playing chess, are they?

MAQBOOL: They are, Begum Sahiba: with nuts, spices and vegetables. Who knows what magic there is in that game?

(MAQBOOL moves away with the hookah. KHURSHID realizes her strategy has failed. For a moment it appears she might break down. But she manages to pull herself together and exits.)

(Drawing-room. MEER moves a lime diagonally across the board with a view to capturing one of MIRZA's Bishops. MIRZA stops him in mid-course with an amused reprimand.)

MIRZA: Hold on, Meer Sahib. That's a Knight. Lime is Knight. Tomato is Bishop.

(MAQBOOL meanwhile brings the hookahs. At the door leading to the zenana appears KHURSHID. She doesn't cross the thres-

THE CHESS PLAYERS

hold, but extends only her hands which hold the chessmen in a silver bowl. She flings the pieces towards the chess players, and departs. The pieces descend in a cascade over the two men and scatter all over the floor. Both MEER and MIRZA are speechless for a few seconds.)

MEER: Who fired that salvo?

(He calls out to MAQBOOL. Sense has dawned on MIRZA at last. And he had thought it was the work of a thief! MIRZA turns grim. Meanwhile MEER and MAQBOOL pick up the pieces. Pawns and Knights and Rooks and Bishops are retrieved from unlikely places and placed in a heap on the chesscloth. MIRZA at last opens his mouth.)

MIRZA: Meer Sahib, if you don't mind, from tomorrow we'll play in your house.

MEER: You know you are always welcome.

(MIRZA now lifts the chesscloth by the corner and lets the improvised pieces roll out.)

MIRZA: Maqbool, give these vegetables to the Begum Sahiba with my compliments.

SCENE 6

WAJID's durbar room. Afternoon.

The throne is empty. The camera pulls back from it and cuts to the KING and the backs of his courtiers in a line. He is upbraiding them.

WAJID: You have deceived me. All of you.

(The courtiers have no answer to this accusation. WAJID starts pacing up and down in front of them.)

I loved you more than my own kin. I put my trust in you. I gave you all powers. What have you done except line your own pockets? Nothing. Colonel Sleeman had warned me against you. I paid no heed to him. Now I know he was right. *(He now turns to ALI.)* And he was right about you too, Prime Minister.

(ALI raises his eyebrows.)

ALI: About me, Your Majesty?

WAJID: Yes, about you.

ALI: What sin have I committed, Sire?

(WAJID now strides up to ALI and holds up DALHOUSIE's letter.)

WAJID: You dare to ask me that? Why did you not throw this paper in the Resident's face? Should you not have asked what right the Company had to break the treaty? The Company may assume administration, but it has no right to depose the King. *(He now turns away from ALI towards the empty throne.)* It is all my fault. I should never have sat on the throne. *(He walks up to the throne, runs his fingers lovingly over the jewels that stud it.)* But I was young, and I loved the crown, the robe, the jewels . . . I loved the pomp and the glitter . . . *(He moves away from the throne.)* In the beginning I behaved like a true King. For a time, at least. Did I not, Prime Minister?

ALI: You did, Your Majesty. Of course you did.
(WAJID walks over to the Dewan BALKISHEN.)

WAJID: Remember my army, Dewan Sahib?

BALKISHEN: How can I forget, Your Majesty?

WAJID: The daily parades? And the names I gave my cavalry regiments? Banka, Tirchha, Ghunghru . . . And my army of women? Pretty girls in pretty uniforms on pretty horses? What a picture they made when they trotted by . . . *(For a moment he is carried away by the memories of this regiment, and almost acts out the jaunty movements of the girls on the horses. But the memory passes, and seriousness returns. He shakes his head.)* But the Resident Sahib would have none of it! Richmond Sahib it was. He said, 'Why bother with an army? Our British forces are guarding your borders. You yourself are paying for them. So why bother?' 'Very well, Richmond Sahib. Your word is law. I shall not bother.' But what will I do? I ask you. If a King stops bothering about his realm, what is left for him to do?

(There is silence all around, heads bowed, everybody averting the King's eyes, everybody trying to hold down their sorrow.

WAJID continues after a pause and a slight smile.)

I found the answer. Resident Sahib never told me. No one told me. I found it myself. *(He turns to ALI.)* Do you remember that song of mine?

ALI: Which one, Your Majesty?

(WAJID recites the first line of a thumri.)

WAJID: Tarap tarap sagari raen gujari . . .
Kaun desa gayo, sanwariya!

ALI: I remember, Sire.

WAJID: Do you know when I composed it, and where?

(ALI does not know the answer. WAJID points to the throne.) It was here – on this very throne – in full court. *(Reminisces)* I shall never forget the moment. A man stood while his petition was read out.

(Cut to a flashback. WAJID is on the throne in full regalia, the petitioner before him.)

WAJID'S VOICE: Suddenly the clerk's voice seemed to fade away. *(Here the camera slowly moves to a close-up of WAJID. His whole being expresses his emotion at the new composition. As the song continues we cut to the present. The courtiers murmur their appreciation. WAJID turns away.)*

WAJID: That was the answer I found. No, Prime Minister, I was never meant to rule. If my people had come to me and said, 'We do not want you, you are making us suffer', I would have cast away my crown then and there. But they did not say so. Do you know why? *(He turns round to face the courtiers again.)* Because I have never hidden my true self from them. I was not afraid to show how I was. And they loved me, in spite of that. *(With great fervour)* Even after ten years I can see the love in their eyes. They love my songs. They sing them. *(WAJID looks at ALI.)* Go and ask the Resident Sahib: how many Kings of England have written songs? Ask if Queen Victoria has composed songs which her people sing. *(He turns round and starts pacing again.)* The Company is sending troops. Why? Because the Company fears my people may rise against it. It knows my people are strong. Some of the Company's best soldiers are from Oudh. Is it not strange, Prime Minister . . . that my 'poor, oppressed people' . . . should make the best soldiers in the Company's army? *(He turns round slowly and walks back.)* Half of Oudh has already gone to you, Company. Now you want the other half and the throne too. You are breaking one more treaty in asking for it. If my people are badly ruled, why have they not fled to a realm you own? Why do they not cross the frontier and ask you to save them from my misrule?

(He is silent for a few seconds. Then he walks up to the throne, ascends the steps and turns round. He addresses the PRIME MINISTER.) Prime Minister, please go and tell the Honour-

THE CHESS PLAYERS

able Resident my throne is not theirs for the asking. (*He sits down on the throne and grasps it in each hand.*) If they want it, they will have to fight for it.

(*OUTRAM's study. Late afternoon. OUTRAM is sitting smoking. Dr Joseph FAYRER, the young Residency doctor, is seated not far away. A bearer comes in with a lighted lamp and places it on the table.*)

OUTRAM: I don't like this damned business at all, Fayrer. Not one bit. And it certainly won't redound to the credit of John Company. You know my views on Sind?

FAYRER: I do, sir.

OUTRAM: We have even less justification for confiscation here than we had in Sind. Mind you, I meant every word I wrote in my report, and I fully endorse everything that Sleeman said. The administration here is execrable. And I don't like our fat King either. But a treaty is a treaty. I don't know whether you fully realize, but the King would be perfectly justified in insisting on the validity of the earlier treaty and refusing to sign the new one?

FAYRER: But wasn't the treaty of '37 abrogated by the Court of Directors?

OUTRAM: So it was, but by an inexcusable omission on the part of our Government, the King of Oudh was never informed.

FAYRER: Oh dear.

OUTRAM: Therefore – although we are fully entitled to take over the administration – we cannot dispense with the King, and we cannot appropriate the revenue. Nevertheless, I'm called upon to do my damndest to get him to sign and abdicate, so that we don't lose face while we gain a kingdom. The King moves out, we move in – or rather, march in – Wheeler's troops are straining at the leash at Cawnpore – and we take over.

FAYRER: But what if he should refuse to abdicate?

OUTRAM: We still take over, Fayrer. The Annexation of Oudh is a *fait accompli*. (*He gets up, walks over to the window and looks out. The window overlooks the River Gumti and a part of Lucknow in the west.*)

To all intents and purposes, we're already standing on British territory, and our gracious Queen already has five million

THE CHESS PLAYERS

more subjects, and over a million pounds more in revenue. No, no – the question is not whether he will abdicate, but whether we can ensure a peaceful takeover. I'm afraid the answer is: no, we cannot. You know Oudh doesn't lack fighting men. Some of the pluckiest lads in our own troops are from here. Well, the King has his own troops, and so do a number of the feudal barons who stand to lose by our action. If these people rise in defence of the province, Wheeler will have no choice but to order his sepoys to fire on their own brothers. You see the dilemma?

FAYRER: I do indeed.

OUTRAM: I mean if – ha, *if* he decides to abdicate, he loses his throne, of course, but there are compensations. He gets a hundred thousand rupees a month as an allowance, and he's free to give up all pretence of having to rule. But who knows what he's going to do? Does anyone ever know? Does he know himself? He's certainly the biggest bundle of contradictions I've ever come across. I mean, a devout man who prays five times a day, never drinks and keeps a harem the size of a regiment! A king who sings, dances, versifies, plays the tom-tom, flies kites from the palace roof and struts around the stage surrounded by frolicking nautch-girls. My God, Fayrer, I've had dealings with Oriental monarchs before, but none to hold a candle to this laddie! I can't make him out. Can you?

FAYRER: Well, I know he can be obstinate. He's the only King in the entire Oudh dynasty who has refused to be treated by an English doctor.

OUTRAM: Who does he consult then?

FAYRER: Quacks, from what I can gather.

OUTRAM: Stubborn fool. I rather fear he's decided to be obstinate with us too. I sent him the draft treaty two days ago. I asked for a quick reply and none has yet come. Five days to go and still no word from the King. You know what that means? It means I shall have to ask for an interview. I get the wind up just to think of it.

FAYRER: I know you don't like them –

OUTRAM: Like them! The very thought unmans me, Fayrer. Can you think of anything more preposterous than the Royal

THE CHESS PLAYERS

embrace? And, upon my soul, Fayrer, what is that extraordinary perfume he uses?

(FAYRER brings out his own handkerchief.)

FAYRER: You mean this?

(OUTRAM reacts strongly.)

OUTRAM: My God, man, that's it.

FAYRER: It's attar, sir. Everyone uses it here.

OUTRAM: Attar?

FAYRER: An extract of rose. The damask rose, I think.

OUTRAM: Damask rose - d'you know that my uniform still reeks of it three months after my last interview. It would be a damned sight more convenient if he were in purdah too, like his womenfolk. At least one would be spared the extreme proximity.

FAYRER: Have you considered speaking to the Queen Mother?

OUTRAM: I have, I have. In fact I'm going to see her tomorrow morning. I'm told she's a very sensible woman.

FAYRER: Well, she's known to have given him good advice in the past.

OUTRAM: So I'm told. But I'm damned if I know what defines good advice in the present instance, Fayrer. Good for whom? Good for him? Good for us? Good for the Company? Good for the people? And why should she intercede on our behalf? Why shouldn't she take the King's side? After all, he is her own son, and we're throwing him out, are we not? . . . I don't like it, Fayrer. I don't like it at all, and yet I have to go through with it. That's the problem. And that's my complaint, Doctor, and there's nothing you can prescribe for it. Nothing.

SCENE 7

MEER's house. Veranda in the zenana. Early afternoon.

NAFEESA, Meer's wife, hums and makes paan. She is about to put one in her mouth when she hears MEER shouting for his servant.

MEER: Rafiq Mia!

(NAFEESA's face darkens.)

THE CHESS PLAYERS

(Drawing-room. MEER and MIRZA. Both are standing. MIRZA looks around admiringly.)

MIRZA: Meer Sahib, this is an even better place than mine. So quiet: just right for chess.

(RAFIQ, the servant, appears.)

MEER: Bring the hookahs. And tell Begum Sahiba there are two for dinner.

MIRZA: You must show me the calligraphy your wife likes so much.

MEER: All in good time.

(Zenana. NAFEESA is sitting behind a screen. RAFIQ speaks to her through it.)

RAFIQ: The master's home, Begum Sahiba. Mirza Sahib is with him; he will dine with the master.

(NAFEESA reacts strongly; there is barely concealed panic in her eyes.)

NAFEESA: Very well.

(She gets up.)

(A lane near by. AQUIL, NAFEESA's lover, is shown making his way through a narrow lane. He has to step aside to make way for a passing palanquin.)

(Drawing-room. The pieces are arranged. The paan-box is now opened preparatory to the game, and the two friends help themselves. The servants bring two hookahs.)

MEER: Have you made up with your wife? She seemed rather agitated yesterday.

(MIRZA shakes his head.)

What a problem!

MIRZA: (Quoting a proverb) Wives are always a problem.

(MEER only chuckles. MIRZA gives him a glance.)

Don't you agree?

(MEER is anxious to start the game. He has White. He moves the first Pawn.)

MEER: Some wives are a problem. No problem here, though.

(Lane. AQIL enters MEER's house through the back door.)

THE CHESS PLAYERS



(Zenana. Veranda. AQIL enters and is grabbed by an excited NAFEESA.)

NAFEESA: Disaster! He's at home.

AQIL: What do you mean?

NAFEESA: He's in the drawing-room, playing chess. He's with his friend: he's never played here before. I'm so worried.

AQIL: So Uncle Meer's playing chess!

NAFEESA: Suppose something should happen?

AQIL: Don't worry: a man with his eyes on the chessboard is lost to the world.

NAFEESA: *(Hope rising)* That's just what he always says.

(Drawing-room.)

MEER: I don't wish to boast . . . but I'm the luckiest man in the

THE CHESS PLAYERS



world. Look where you will, you won't find as sweet and reasonable a wife as mine. I haven't a single complaint to make.

(MIRZA looks at him without saying a word.)

(Bedroom. NAFEESA and AQIL are on the bed. AQIL is demonstrating how well he can crack his fingers. NAFEESA is full of admiration for her lover's cleverness.)

(Drawing-room.)

MEER: She even takes an interest in chess.

MIRZA: No! Really?

MEER: Yes. One day I explained the game to her and she appreciated its fascination. Now she even insists on my leaving early . . . so as not to keep you waiting.

MIRZA: Extraordinary!

MEER: And when I return home in the small hours, she rubs balm on my forehead and I am soon asleep.

MIRZA: *(Chokes)* That is luck indeed!

(MEER suddenly remembers something and gets up.)

Where are you going?

MEER: I'll fetch that calligraphy.

THE CHESS PLAYERS

MIRZA: My respects to your wife.

MEER: Don't play about with those pieces while I'm away.

(MEER laughs at his own joke, and goes out. MIRZA takes no notice of it.)

(Zenana. Bedroom. AQIL continues with his demonstration. Suddenly MEER's voice is heard, humming. The voice approaches. The lovers spring apart, AQIL rolling off the fourposter and landing on the floor. This is convenient, because he would in any case like to crawl out of sight under the bed. But before he can do so, MEER is in the room. AQIL is MEER's nephew, which explains why MEER is not shocked in the way one would expect him to be. He merely expresses extreme surprise, looking from his nephew to his wife and back. At this point, NAFEESA is more the resourceful of the two. She puts her finger to her lips.)

NAFEESA: Sh-sh. (She pushes AQIL down with her hand.)

Don't come out. It's not safe yet.

MEER: (Finding his voice at last) What's going on?

NAFEESA: He's hiding.

MEER: That I can see. But why?

NAFEESA: They're after him.

MEER: Who? What have you done, Aqil? Was there a fight?

(MEER spots AQIL's cane hanging over the door and feels even more disconcerted. But NAFEESA has run out of invention. MEER turns to AQIL on the floor.) Say something! What happened?

AQIL: N-nothing.

(AQIL, too, is desperately trying to make up a story that will fit the situation.)

MEER: Who's after - ?

NAFEESA: Sh-sh.

MEER: (Lowering voice) Who's after him?

(AQIL has found his story at last. He gets unsteadily to his feet.)

AQIL: The army. The army is after me.

(AQIL is up on his feet now.)

MEER: But what army?

AQIL: Ours. The King's army.

NAFEESA: The King's army.

(AQIL's story is now ready.)

AQIL: They're rounding up people to fight the British, uncle. Just grabbing them off the street.

THE CHESS PLAYERS

(NAFEESA enthusiastically agrees.)

MEER: You know too?

NAFEESA: Aqil just told me.

AQIL: Officers came to our house.

NAFEESA: He sneaked out of the back door.

NAFEESA: Exactly.

MEER: I hope they didn't see you sneak out?

AQIL: I'm not sure, uncle.

NAFEESA: I heard them too. Just before you came. Clip-clop, clip-clop!

(MEER is thoughtful. He turns to AQIL.)

MEER: But . . . why hide under the bed? You can't be seen from the street.

AQIL: Er -

NAFEESA: He lost his head: he's like a child.

AQIL: I lost my head.

NAFEESA: Feel how his heart is racing.

(NAFEESA takes MEER's hand and places it on AQIL's chest. MEER shakes his head. He is obviously worried for the boy.)

MEER: (To NAFEESA) You'd better give him some hot milk.

(He now turns to AQIL.) Don't worry, my dear fellow: you're perfectly safe here.

(Exit MEER. AQIL and NAFEESA sigh in relief and embrace each other.)

(Drawing-room.)

MEER: They're calling at houses rounding up people to fight for the King.

MIRZA: Meer Sahib, you can be arrested for spreading such rumours.

MEER: Rumours? Aqil saw it with his own eyes.

MIRZA: Aqil?

MEER: He's my nephew, he's just told me what's going on.

MIRZA: When?

MEER: Just now. He was hiding under the bed. Poor boy, he's quite shaken: his heart is racing.

(MIRZA has now sized up the situation.)

The King's soldiers haven't been paid for months. They must have refused to fight. We must do something about it.

MIRZA: You mean you want to fight?

THE CHESS PLAYERS

MEER: Me? What a notion!
(MIRZA keeps looking at this gullible friend of his. He shakes his head and smiles.)
 MIRZA: Let's get back to our game.
 MEER: How can I play when I know we're not safe here?
(MIRZA loses patience.)
 MIRZA: Should we go back to my house?
 MEER: Out of the question.
 MIRZA: Well, we -
(The sound of horse's hooves is heard. MEER turns pale.)
 MEER: *(Whispering)* It's them.
(MIRZA gets up and goes to the window.)
 For God's sake, don't go out on the balcony! *(But MIRZA goes out to look. Two cavalrymen of Oudh are seen passing.)*
 MIRZA: They don't seem to be looking for anybody. I tell you, there's nothing to worry about.
(MIRZA sits down again but now MEER is on his feet. Behind him on the wall is a display of ferocious weaponry, similar to that in MIRZA's house. The juxtaposition is so ridiculous that MIRZA begins to laugh.)
 MEER: Why are you looking at me like that?
(But MIRZA is shaking with helpless laughter.)
 What are you laughing at?
 MIRZA: I'm laughing at my friend . . . descendant of Burhan-ul-Mulk's brave cavalry officer.
(He roars with laughter again.)
 MEER: *(Shaking him)* Pull yourself together and listen to me. We'll run away from here.
(MIRZA dissolves into laughter again.)
 MIRZA: *(Pointing at the chessboard)* And leave that behind?
 MEER: No, we take it. We'll play, but not here and not in your house either.
 MIRZA: Where then?
 MEER: In a village across the river there's a ruined old mosque. A quiet place, with not a soul around. The quietest, safest place imaginable.
 MIRZA: You've seen the place?
 MEER: With my own eyes. We'll leave at the crack of dawn and get back when it's dark.
(MIRZA ponders the idea.)

THE CHESS PLAYERS

Nobody will recognize us. We'll take a mat and a couple of hookahs. We can buy our lunch from a shop - kebabs and chapatis.
 MIRZA: What about weapons?
 MEER: What?
 MIRZA: We must carry weapons. A man who goes out unarmed in these troubled times never returns home.
 MEER: All right, we'll carry pistols.

SCENE 8

The Queen Mother AULEA BEGUM's chamber. Day.

AULEA is seated with her back to a Kashmiri shawl which is held up by two eunuchs to serve as a curtain. On the other side of the curtain are OUTRAM and his two ADCs: WESTON and HAYES. The interview has already started.
 WESTON: Begum Sahiba, the Governor has seen the treaty.
 OUTRAM: I have come to you, Begum Sahiba, because I know I can trust you to give your son good counsel, as you have done in the past.
 WESTON: *(Translates.)*
 AULEA: What if Begum Sahiba were to advise her son to order his troops to take up arms against the British forces?
 WESTON: *(Translates.)*
 OUTRAM: That, if I may say so, would be most imprudent.
 WESTON: *(Translates.)*
 OUTRAM: I have come here with only one purpose: to ensure that His Majesty signs the new treaty. And I would be greatly beholden to the Begum Sahiba if she would request His Majesty to do so.
 AULEA: Resident Sahib, how can I ask someone to sign a treaty which I myself do not understand? Wajid Ali Shah was enthroned with the full consent of the Company Bahadur. If he proved to be a bad ruler, why did the Company not do something about it? Why did it not guide him to correct the administration? Why this sudden drastic step after ten years? Has my son ever defied the Company or made trouble for it? Resident Sahib, have you forgotten how you were

THE CHESS PLAYERS

received by our people when you first came here a year ago?
Have you ever known such warmth and hospitality?

(WESTON is about to translate, but OUTRAM stops him with an impatient gesture.)

OUTRAM: Does the Begum Sahiba appreciate that His Majesty is being offered most generous compensation for the action that our Government is forced to take against him?

WESTON: (Translates.)

(There is a perceptible pause before AULEA answers.)

AULEA: Is not the Governor-General a servant of the Company?

WESTON: (Translates.)

OUTRAM: Yes, he is.

WESTON: (Translates.)

AULEA: Is he also not a servant of the Queen of England?

WESTON: (Translates.)

OUTRAM: Yes.

WESTON: (Translates.)

AULEA: Does the Queen of England realize how her servant is treating His Majesty who is servant of Almighty God and nobody else?

WESTON: (Translates.)

(OUTRAM appears ill-at-ease. AULEA continues without waiting for an answer.)

AULEA: Resident Sahib, tell the Governor-General that we do not want money. We want justice. If the Queen's servant cannot give us justice, we shall go to the Queen herself and ask for it.

(The balcony of a room in the Kaiserbagh. Evening.)

WAJID is sitting in the balcony, with his cat on his lap. There is a hushed group around WAJID: ALI, BALKISHEN and others, but WAJID seems oblivious of their presence. ALI reports an important event of the day in a muffled voice.)

ALI: The Resident Sahib had an audience with the Queen Mother today. The Queen Mother has told him that she herself will go to England to seek justice from Queen Victoria.

(There is no reaction from WAJID to all this. The Finance Minister, BALKISHEN, now speaks.)

BALKISHEN: Our barons have also sent word. They await your

THE CHESS PLAYERS

Majesty's order to raise an army of 100,000 men and 1,000 pieces of artillery to oppose the Company's forces.

(There is a pause. Through the window the sun is setting over the domes and minarets of Lucknow. At last, WAJID opens his mouth. But he doesn't speak: he sings. Very softly, he sings the first line of a new song.)

WAJID: Jab chhorh chaley Lakhnau nagari . . .

(The courtiers bow down their heads, touched.)

Jab chhorh chaley Lakhnau nagari

Kaho haal adam par kya guzeri . . .

(He repeats the first line and stops.) Company Bahadur! – You can take away my crown, but you cannot take away my dignity. (He turns to his Minister.) The Company has offered me a handsome allowance. As a citizen of Oudh, if not as its King, I must show my gratitude. Inform the Resident Sahib that I shall be pleased to receive him tomorrow at eight in the morning. But before he comes, dismount all guns and disarm all the soldiers, and instruct my people to offer no resistance when Lucknow is entered by the Company's troops.

SCENE 9

The Bara Imambara Gate. Dawn.

Shehnai plays raga Bhairon in the nahabatkhana. Looking down a slope into the city with the Bara Imambara in the background. MIRZA and MEER, well wrapped up against the cold, carrying bundles, make their way up the slope towards a bridge. As they cross the bridge, the placid river is seen behind them. The King's soldiers throw down their weapons. The discarded muskets form a heap on the ground.

The other side of the River Gumti.

MEER and MIRZA are standing in the middle of a road, looking around. There are a few huts, but they seem to be uninhabited. To the south the Lucknow skyline can be seen shrouded in mist across the river.

MIRZA: Well, Meer Sahib, where is your mosque?

MEER: I can see it clearly in my mind's eye. Even the tamarind tree right beside it.

THE CHESS PLAYERS

MIRZA: Perhaps the British troops have razed it to the ground?

MEER: God forbid! God forbid!

(There is a boy of about thirteen, KALLOO, standing a short distance away with a pellet-gun in his hand. He has been observing MEER and MIRZA with a great deal of curiosity.)

Shall we ask that boy?

(MIRZA calls him over.)

MIRZA: There used to be a mosque here, a ruined mosque.

KALLOO: *(Shakes head)* There's one about two miles from here.

MIRZA: An old mosque?

KALLOO: No, built only the other day.

MIRZA: *(Turns to MEER)* Well, Meer Sahib?

(MEER looks positively guilty now.)

Perhaps you saw the mosque in a dream? Well?

MEER: I'm terribly sorry, Mirza Sahib. That mosque was in Cawnpore. I saw it as a child; one can't always be right, you know.

(MIRZA glowers at his friend, speechless with anger.)

As the couplet goes: 'I have spent all this time in awareness, and now . . .'

MIRZA: To hell with your couplet. Where do we play now? In that field of mustard?

KALLOO: You can come to my house, sir.

MIRZA: Who else is there?

KALLOO: Nobody – they've all run away.

MIRZA: Run away?

KALLOO: To Sitapur.

MIRZA: Why?

KALLOO: The British are coming, sir. What if they shoot people down?

MIRZA: Yet you've stayed?

KALLOO: I want to see them come, sir.

MIRZA: Aren't you afraid?

KALLOO: I like their red coats. They're coming today, sir, down that road over there.

MEER: What if war should break out? How do we get back?

MIRZA: Do you want to go back now?

MEER: Not at all.

MIRZA: Then you'll stay and play?

MEER: Certainly.

THE CHESS PLAYERS

MIRZA: Definitely?

MEER: Definitely.

MIRZA: *(To the boy)* Very well, let's go to your house then.

What's your name?

KALLOO: Kalloo, sir.

MIRZA: Achcha, Kalloo.

(Outside KALLOO's cottage. KALLOO comes out of the door carrying a charpoy.)

MIRZA: Leave it, Kalloo. We have a mat with us.

(MEER and MIRZA have dropped their bundles on the ground and spread the mat. The chesscloth and the pieces, the hookahs, the paan boxes, everything is taken out of the bundles and put on the mat.)

KALLOO: You're playing, sir?

MIRZA: Yes, chess.

MEER: Can you prepare a hookah, Kalloo?

KALLOO: Yes, sir.

MEER: Go on then: everything's here.

(KALLOO's eyes light up.)

KALLOO: You'll give me baksheesh?

MEER and MIRZA: Of course.

MIRZA: Can you get us something to eat?

KALLOO: Now, sir?

MIRZA: No, when we're hungry.

KALLOO: I'll run to town and get anything you want.

MIRZA: Excellent.

(KALLOO notices the pistols, just coming out of the bundle. His eyes pop out.)

KALLOO: Are you going to fight the British, sir?

MIRZA: Why not? We're not afraid of them. Are we?

(MEER gives a nervous laugh, stressing the fact that MIRZA is only joking.)

(Palace interior in the Kaiserbagh. A clock on a mantelpiece shows half a minute to eight. WAJID is seated in a gilt chair, waiting for OUTRAM. Sound of marching boots is heard. OUTRAM and his two ADCs arrive at the door of the palace room and stop, clicking their heels. WAJID gets up and starts walking towards the door, followed by ALI, BALKISHEN, a

THE CHESS PLAYERS

young boy who is obviously WAJID's son, and four other courtiers.

OUTRAM and the ADCs step over the threshold, walk across a few steps and stop. The two groups now stand facing each other.

OUTRAM gives a stiff nod. WAJID walks over and embraces him. The group now walks across the room.

WAJID resumes his position on the gilt chair, while OUTRAM occupies the only other chair in the room, facing WAJID.

OUTRAM beckons to WESTON, who steps over and stands behind him.)

OUTRAM: We are most grateful to His Majesty for granting us this interview.

WESTON: *(Translates.)*

OUTRAM: We also appreciate his gesture in disarming his soldiers. We regard it, we hope rightly, as evidence of his concern to negotiate a peaceful conclusion to the treaty.

WESTON: *(Translates.)*

(WAJID has been looking at OUTRAM. He now turns his eyes away from him.)

OUTRAM: I would like if I may to make a personal request to His Majesty that he please sign this treaty and formalize his abdication.

WESTON: *(Translates.)*

(Still no response from WAJID.)

OUTRAM: I hope the King has understood what I've said.

WESTON: *(Translates.)*

(WAJID now turns his gaze slowly in the direction of OUTRAM and keeps it fixed on him long enough to make OUTRAM feel uncomfortable. Now WAJID turns his gaze towards WESTON. WESTON is unable to meet it, and drops his gaze. WAJID rises from his chair and slowly approaches OUTRAM. OUTRAM has also risen. Standing before OUTRAM, WAJID takes off his turban and offers it to him. OUTRAM is bewildered.)

OUTRAM: What is this?

(WAJID keeps his hand stretched out with the turban held lightly between his fingers.)

Would you please tell His Majesty that I have no use for that.

WESTON: *(Translates.)*

THE CHESS PLAYERS



WAJID: *(With great feeling)* I can bare my head for you, Resident Sahib, but I cannot sign that treaty.

SCENE 10

KALLOO's house. Courtyard. Early afternoon.

MIRZA and MEER are playing. There are hardly a dozen pieces left on the board. There are more Black casualties than White. MEER has White. MIRZA touches a piece then withdraws. He exchanges glances with MEER. He then makes a move.

MEER: You're sure? *(He indicates what he will do next.)* You can take it back.

MIRZA: It's all right.

(He slaps a mosquito which has landed on his neck.)

MEER: As you wish.

(MEER captures MIRZA's Minister. MIRZA swats another mosquito. We can see his irritation growing.)

I'm afraid you'll lose this time.

MIRZA: No wonder. These mosquitoes are draining my blood.

MEER: They don't seem to bite me.

MIRZA: They're choosy: they only go for pure blood.

THE CHESS PLAYERS

(MEER gives a short laugh.)

MEER: Check.

(MIRZA, his eyes on the board, takes at pull at the hookah. It's gone out. His temper rises.)

MIRZA: Where the hell is that boy? Kalloo!

MEER: You sent him to fetch the food.

(On a sudden impulse, MIRZA takes the hookah and gets up. He'll have a go at preparing it himself.)

Can you manage that yourself?

(MIRZA looks around in the house but can't find the tobacco. He emerges again.)

MIRZA: It's well past noon and still no sign of food.

MEER: How helpless we are without servants. As the verse goes . . . (He quotes it.)

MIRZA: You're in high spirits today.

MEER: I feel wonderful. The General is about to win the battle: my strategy has paid off.

(MIRZA makes a move. MEER crows with pleasure.)

What an ideal spot this is. No officers to harass us . . . and the British can come and go for all we care.

MIRZA: (With eyes on board) You must have slept well, thanks to the balm your wife rubs on your brow.

MEER: (Still sensing no threat) That's true of every night.

(MIRZA still has his eyes on the pieces, but one can see irritation getting the better of discretion.)

MIRZA: I wonder where Aqil places himself while your wife does her massage?

(MEER stiffens. MIRZA looks up at him and then back to the board.)

Under the bed, I suppose.

MEER: What do you imply?

(MIRZA glances up.)

MIRZA: Your move.

(MEER's look is a mixture of pain, disbelief and admonition.)

MEER: It's a dirty trick to put me off my game, just because you're losing.

MIRZA: Who's losing? I've moved; now it's your turn.

MEER: You've beaten me so often, and I've never lost my temper.

MIRZA: Your move, Meer Sahib.

MEER: One doesn't expect it from a gentleman.

THE CHESS PLAYERS

(MIRZA throws discretion to the winds.)

MIRZA: Does a gentleman let his wife carry on with any man that comes her way?

(This is too much for MEER. He brings all the venom he can into his words.)

MEER: You've no right to talk like that. You forget that your ancestors were nothing but grass-cutters.

(MIRZA suddenly grabs hold of MEER's shawl.)

MIRZA: And what about your ancestors, slaving away in the kitchens of -

(But MIRZA freezes in mid-speech. MEER has picked up a pistol and is pointing it straight at him. MIRZA is forced to let go of MEER. He draws back, reaches for the other pistol, but MEER kicks it out of his reach. MEER now rises to his feet, steps back, gun aimed at MIRZA. MIRZA, too, rises, shaken, incredulous, panicky. MIRZA suddenly feels desperate.)

Have you lost your senses? You must be insane. Throw away that stupid gun.

MEER: When I'm really angry, I can kill.

MIRZA: All right, kill me. Pull the trigger then. But what I've told you is the truth.

MEER: A lie!

MIRZA: I swear it's true. I can vouch for it.

MEER: I don't believe you.

MIRZA: You'll find out for yourself one day: then you'll regret it.

(By now MIRZA has almost got used to the gun. Perhaps at heart he doesn't believe that his friend can use it on him.)

MEER: You're saying this to upset me, so I lose the game.

MIRZA: That's a vile thing to say, Meer Sahib. Do you think I could ever be so mean? It's you who cheated in the past, but I never said a word.

(Suddenly we hear KALLOO's voice, screaming.)

KALLOO: (Off-screen) The British are coming! The British are coming!

(MEER, startled by the unexpected shout, accidentally presses the trigger, and the pistol goes off. MIRZA grips his arm. MEER looks stunned.)

In the distance is the army, marching up, the red coats blazing

THE CHESS PLAYERS

in the afternoon sun. A long column of animals, men and guns, flying a Union Jack. KALLOO watches spellbound.

MEER is looking with deep apprehension at MIRZA. MIRZA slowly removes his hand from the shawl which covers his arm. There is no blood on the shawl, but a small portion of the delicate embroidery has been holed and frayed by a brush from the bullet. MIRZA is relieved, but unnerved by the narrowness of his escape. MEER subsides with relief.

The troops pass in front of the camera filling the air with a great sound of clattering hooves, marching feet and rolling artillery.

MEER now realizes that there is no need for commiseration, since MIRZA is unhurt. He walks away. The wall between the two remains.

MIRZA is seated on the charpoy, profoundly shaken. MEER is disappearing in the distance.

The sound of the marching troops dies away.

KALLOO appears, panting. He addresses MIRZA.)

KALLOO: The food, sir.

(MIRZA doesn't reply.)

The food, sir.

(Still no reply.)

There was such a crowd in the market. Everybody shouting and running one way and another. That's why it took me so long, sir.

MIRZA: Put it on the mat.

(KALLOO walks over, puts the package down on the mat, and brings out some money from his pocket.)

KALLOO: Here's the change, sir.

MIRZA: Keep it.

KALLOO: Our King has given up, sir. The British have become our rulers.

(MIRZA reacts, looking at KALLOO for the first time.)

There was no fighting, sir. No guns went off.

(As the NARRATOR's voice takes over, the camera shows a series of skylines of Lucknow in the pale light of dusk.)

NARRATOR: You're right, Kalloo. No fighting, no bloodshed. Wajid Ali Shah has made sure of that. Three days from today, on February 5th 1856, the Kingdom of Oudh will be in British hands, Wajid Ali Shah will leave his beloved city, for all time, and Lord Dalhousie will have eaten his cherry.

THE CHESS PLAYERS

(Now we are back with MEER and MIRZA. The sound of azaan comes floating over the Gumti from the mosque. MIRZA is now seated on the mat, eating a belated lunch. He sees MEER approaching.)

MIRZA: (Affectionately) Meer Sahib, the food is getting cold.

(MEER advances with heavy steps. As he comes nearer, we notice a white smear on his shawl. Bird-dropping. MIRZA notices it.)

I see you've been standing under a tree?

(MEER looks gloomy. He still doesn't bring himself to look at MIRZA.)

MEER: Even the crows despise me. The British take over Oudh, while we hide in a village and fight over petty things.

MIRZA: We couldn't have done much even if we'd stayed in town.

MEER: If we can't cope with our wives, how can we cope with the British army?

MIRZA: Yes, you're right. So why worry?

MEER: I'm not worrying about that.

MIRZA: What are you worrying about, Meer Sahib?

(MEER looks at MIRZA for the first time: a brief, timid, tentative glance. MEER suddenly looks very lonely, very vulnerable.)

MEER: About who to play chess with.

(MIRZA is truly touched. He looks at MEER with warm sympathy.)

MIRZA: Here is one person, Meer Sahib. And there is some food; we can eat and play at the same time. When it's dark, we can go home. We need darkness to hide our faces.

(MEER nods, recognizing the truth of this.)

Come, let's have a fast game.

(MEER walks over to where MIRZA is sitting.)

MEER: A fast game?

(MEER slowly sits down.)

MIRZA: Yes, a fast game. Fast, like a railway train.

(MIRZA picks up the Minister.)

Move over, Minister. Make way for Queen Victoria!

(The camera freezes on a close-up of the Queen in MIRZA's hand. This dissolves into a view of the two friends playing their first game of British chess in the wan light of a late winter afternoon, as the sound of azaan mixes with that of a bugle, sounding the retreat.)

A GAME OF CHESS

by Prem Chand

Translated by Saeed Jaffrey

It was the age of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, and his capital, Lucknow, was steeped in subtle shades of decadence and bliss. Affluent and poor, young and old, everyone was in the mood to celebrate and enjoy themselves. Some held delightful parties, while others sought ecstasy in the opium pipe. All of life was charged with a kind of inebriated madness. Politics, poetry and literature, craft and industry, trade and exchange, all were tinged with an unabashed self-indulgence. State officials drank wine. Poets were lost in the carnal world of kisses and embraces. Artisans experimented with lace and embroidery designs. Swordsmen used their energies in partridge and quail fights, while ordinary people indulged in the new fashion for rouge and mascara, and bought fresh concoctions of perfume and pomade. In fact, the whole kingdom was shackled to sensuality, and in everyone's eyes there was the glow of intoxication caused by the goblet and the wine flask. About the rest of the world, the advances and inventions which knowledge and learning were making, how western powers were capturing areas of land and sea, no one had the slightest idea. They cared only for the quail fights and the bets being laid while partridges parried and thrust in the ring. *Chausar*, a kind of Monopoly, was played with great zest – people endlessly discussed manoeuvres and counter-manoevres, and great games of chess. Whole armies were lost and won – but only on the chessboard!

The Nawab was in even worse condition. In his quarters, new musical techniques and melodies were being devised, new recipes and forms of enjoyment were carefully pondered. If you gave alms to a beggar, he would not buy bread with it but would spend it on opium or hashish. The heirs of the rich sharpened their tongues with repartee, and gained other kinds of wisdom in the houses of pleasure.

The game of chess was considered ideal for self-advancement, for the maturing of wisdom and sharpening of the intellect. Even today there are descendants of those people who advocate it enthusiastically.

So if Mirza Sajjad Ali and Meer Roshan Ali spent most of their lives in 'sharpening their intellect' in this way, no one could point an accusatory finger at them. Whatever else the uninitiated might have thought of them, these two were gentlemen of leisure and owned inherited property. How else could they spend their time but by playing chess? Soon after sunrise, having breakfasted, they would open their chessboard and arrange the pieces with elaborate ceremony. And then the process of sharpening the intellect would begin. They were so engrossed in the game that it didn't matter when noon came, or the afternoon, or when dusk descended. A servant would come and announce that lunch or dinner was ready, and was always told, 'Set the places, we'll come.' But compared to chess, the best *korma* curry and the finest of *pulaos* seemed insipid. In desperation the poor cook would often just leave the food in the drawing-room, and then the two friends would satisfy two appetites simultaneously, proving their dexterity at both eating and playing chess; but sometimes the food would remain untouched.

There were no elderly relatives living with Mirza Sajjad Ali, so most of the chess bouts took place in the drawing-room of his house. This did not mean that the members of his household were happy with his pastime; on the contrary the household servants, and even other servants from the locality, from maids to housekeepers, gossiped enviously: 'What a wretched terribly unlucky game; it's ruined many a home. God forbid that anyone should acquire a craving for it – he will be able to serve neither God nor man! He will become like the proverbial dhobi's dog, welcome neither at home nor at the riverbank. It's an incurable malady!' Even the lady of the house, the Begum, raised her voice every so often in protest against this pastime. But the opportunities to do so were rare, as she would still be asleep in the mornings when her husband stole away towards the chessboard, and he would return at night long after she had fallen asleep again. She would vent her anger on the wrong people, mainly the hapless servants who were at hand. 'So, he wants *paan*, does he? Ask him to come and fetch them himself. It's not as though his feet are smeared with henna paste and he can't walk!' Then: 'What did you say? He has no time to eat? Go and smash the plate over his head! I don't care if he feeds the dogs with it or eats it himself – we can't wait for him any longer!' But

the irony of it was that the Begum found her husband less at fault than his partner, Meer Sahib. She referred to Meer Sahib scathingly as a fool, an evil influence and a sponger. It is quite possible, too, that Mirza, defending his own absence, put the entire blame on Meer.

One day the Begum had a headache, so she said to her maid, 'Go and fetch Mirza, and ask him to get a doctor. Go on now, run. My head is going to explode!' When the maid conveyed this message to Mirza, he merely said, 'You go back, I'm on my way.' The Begum was furious. She could not stand the idea of having a headache while her husband played chess regardless. 'Go and tell him that if he doesn't come, I'll go to the doctor myself - I don't need him to show me the way!' By now Mirza was in the middle of a most interesting game; in just two moves he could beat Meer Sahib. 'It's not as though she was dying,' he couldn't help saying. 'Can't she wait? The doctor's not some magician who will abracadabra the headache away!' Meer Sahib replied, however, 'I say, do go and listen to her - women have a very delicate temperament.' Mirza answered sarcastically, 'Yes, why don't I go now? Only two more moves and I've finished!' 'I too have thought of a move to *stun* you into defeat,' said Meer, 'but please go and listen to her. Why break her heart over such a small thing?'

Mirza grumbled, 'But I feel like defeating you *now*.'

Meer replied, 'I refuse to play now - please, go and speak to her.'

'But my dear fellow,' answered Mirza, 'I'll have to go all the way to the doctor's for nothing; she hasn't got a headache - it's just an excuse to annoy me.'

'Whatever it is, you can't just ignore her.'

'Oh, all right, then - just let me make one more move.'

Meer was firm: 'Absolutely not. I shan't touch a piece until you've been to see her.'

When Mirza Sahib finally entered the Begum's chamber, she complained bitterly. 'You love that wretched chess so much, you don't even care if someone's dying. You just can't tear yourself away from it. It's not chess at all - it's your mistress and my rival! You really behave dreadfully to me!'

'But what could I do?' Mirza replied. 'Meer Sahib simply

wouldn't let me leave; it's only with great difficulty that I've managed to extricate myself from his clutches.'

'Does he think everyone is as big a fool as he is?' said the Begum. 'He's got a wife and children too - or has he got rid of them?' Mirza stayed calm. 'The fellow's a complete addict. Whenever he comes and bullies me, I am forced, out of sheer politeness, to play with him.' But the Begum snapped back: 'Then why don't you shoo him away, like you would a dog?'

'Praise Allah!' said Mirza. 'He's my equal! In age and rank even more than an equal. I can't just dismiss him!'

'So let *me* shoo him away!' the Begum retorted. 'If he gets angry, let him. We're not dependent on him!'

As they say, if the Queen sulks, she merely shortens her own happiness. Nevertheless, the Begum called out for her maid. 'Go and fetch the chessboard, and tell Meer Sahib that my husband will not play now. Please tell him to leave and never to show his face here again.'

Mirza stepped in. 'Please - don't do such a terrible thing! Do you want to drag me down? Wait, Abbasi, where are you running to, you wretched woman?' The Begum called the maid back.

'Why don't you let her go? Anyone who stops her drinks my blood! All right, you've stopped her, have you? Let's see how you stop *me* now!'

Having said this, the Begum stormed out towards the drawing-room. Mirza's face was ashen. He commanded his wife, 'For God's sake, I swear on the Martyr of Karbala, Imam Hussain, that if you step out, you will see my own corpse leave this house!'

The Begum was adamant, and kept on moving, but suddenly at the door to the drawing-room the thought of being seen without a veil in front of a strange man stopped her. She leaned through the doorway, only to find (by a happy accident) the room completely empty! Meer Sahib had changed one or two pieces to suit him, and, as though to protest his innocence, had left the room and was walking nonchalantly on the veranda outside.

This was an opportunity not to be missed. The Begum's prayers had been answered. She marched into the room and began to disrupt the chess game totally, hurling some pieces under the divan and flinging others outside before bolting the door from the inside. Meer Sahib, who was close to the door, saw the chess pieces being flung out and from the feverish jingle

of bangles deduced that the Begum was furious. Quietly he went home.

Mirza scolded the Begum, saying that she'd done a terrible thing. The Begum merely replied, 'If that fool ever sets foot here again, I'll turn him out immediately! He thinks this is a whore-house, not our home! If you'd shown as much devotion to God as to chess, you two would've become prophets by now! Is it fair that you should keep playing chess, while I fret over what goes into the oven and the spice-grinder! Am I a slave? Please go to the doctor this minute! What are you waiting for?'

When Mirza left the house, mortified, instead of going to the doctor he went to Meer's house and, in deeply apologetic tones, told the whole story.

Meer Sahib laughed and said, 'I realized as much when the maid brought the message about the headache. I knew that the omens weren't good today. But she does seem extremely hot-tempered. Phew! What a cheek! You've pampered her too much. It's not right! What business of hers is it what you do outside? It's her duty to look after the household. It doesn't become her to interfere in men's affairs. Just look at my house; no one dares say boo!'

'Well, anyway, just tell me where we play now,' Mirza interrupted.

'Don't worry; I've a large enough house - we shall play here,' replied Meer cheerfully.

'But how can I calm down my Begum?' Mirza said. 'When I stayed at home to play she was angry enough, but if I leave the house, she'll kill me.'

'Oh, let her rant and rave, dear fellow - in two or three days she'll come round; but be a little stiff with her, too.'

For whatever reason, Meer Sahib's Begum actually preferred him to be absent from the house. She had never complained about his pastime. Indeed, if he was late in getting away, or felt lazy, she would lecture him on the virtues of punctuality and urge him to go. For this reason, Meer Sahib had come to think of his wife as having the most amiable disposition, and was convinced that she was the personification of female virtue. But now, when her own drawing-room had become the chess rendezvous, and Meer's constant presence began to interfere with her

freedom, she became irritable. 'How can I get rid of this curse?' she asked herself.

The situation was becoming rather difficult for the servants of the house too. They began to whisper and grumble among themselves. Until now, they had been able to slouch around and snore all day, not caring who came to and from the house. Their sole duty was going to the bazaar twice a day; that was all. But now they were on duty night and day. Sometimes they were ordered to fetch *paan*, at other times, water; sometimes ice would be demanded and sometimes a refill of tobacco. As for the hookah pipe, it was constantly kept smouldering away, like a broken-hearted lover! All of them would go to the Begum and moan: 'His lordship's addiction to chess has become a nightmare. We run errands all day; what kind of a game is this which takes from dawn until dusk to finish! Why can't they play for just an hour or two, and that's it - the end? And also, as your ladyship knows, it is bad luck to play it; whoever becomes addicted can't survive. In one form or another disaster befalls his house. Whole districts have been ruined. People point at us, making us die of shame.'

'I can't stand the sight of the game, either,' the Begum would reply; 'but what can I do? What power do I have?'

There were a few wise old men in the district who also started to predict disaster. 'There is no escape now. When our nobility has become so effete, only God can save the country! This kingdom will be ruined by chess! The omens are bad indeed.'

In fact, the whole realm of Oudh seemed to be in trouble. People were being burgled daily, and there was no one to listen to their complaints. It was as though the entire wealth of the villages was sucked into Lucknow, where it was spent on providing all manner of articles of pleasure. Jesters and mimics, *Kathak* dancers and providers of bliss held sway.

Gold pieces rained down on the shops where drink or opium were sold; the sons of the rich would throw a sovereign for a single puff. While this lavish spending was going on, the debt to the English Company kept increasing day by day. No one cared a jot how it was to be repaid. Even the yearly revenue could not be paid. The Representative of the Company kept on writing letters of warning and even made threats. But the people here

were driven by the intoxication of self-indulgence, and no one gave a damn.

Many months passed with the games of chess being played in the drawing-room of Meer Sahib. New moves were constantly invented, new strategies devised and destroyed. Sometimes they would quarrel while playing and even become abusive; but these small grievances would soon disappear. Sometimes Mirza would go home in a huff and Meer Sahib would pick up the chessboard, go inside, and swear never to go anywhere near a game of chess again. But by daybreak the two friends would be together again, sleep having evaporated all the unpleasantness of the previous day.

One day, while the two gentlemen were sitting there, diving in and out of the labyrinth of chess, an armed cavalryman from the Royal Regiment arrived, asking for Meer Sahib. Meer was terrified. 'God knows who the devil this is,' he said. He ordered all the doors of his house shut and told the servants to say he wasn't in.

'If he's not at home, where can he be? He must be hiding somewhere!' the cavalryman responded.

The servant said, 'I don't know about that. This is the reply I've got from the house. What is your business?'

'How can I tell you what my mission is!' retorted the cavalryman; 'He has been summoned by His Majesty. Perhaps they need more men for the army. Is he a landlord, or some sort of fraud?' The servant replied, 'Please take your leave; we shall inform his lordship.'

'It's not a matter of informing,' the cavalryman said; 'I shall come back early tomorrow, search the house and take him with me. My orders are to present him myself.'

With that, the cavalryman left, and Meer Sahib felt as though his own soul had gone too. Trembling with fear, he went to Mirza, saying, 'What can we do now?'

Mirza only answered, 'What a terrible calamity! Perhaps they will summon me too!'

'But the wretched fellow has threatened to come again tomorrow!' Meer insisted.

'If this isn't the wrath of heaven, then what is?' cried Mirza.

'If they really want to enlist more soldiers, then we're as good as dead! The mere mention of battle gives me the shivers.'

'Even now I've lost my appetite for food and drink,' mourned Meer.

'The only way out is not to confront him at all,' proposed Mirza.

'Let's just disappear – then let the whole city come and look for us, they won't find us. We'll play chess in some wilderness across the River Gomti; our friend will come here for us, and leave empty handed!'

Meer was thrilled, 'Bravo! What a brilliant idea! By God, from tomorrow morning, across the Gomti it shall be!'

Meanwhile, the Begum Sahiba was busy laughing with the cavalryman. 'You disguised yourself superbly,' she said. He laughed, 'I can snap my fingers at those idiots and they'll dance! My husband's brain and guts have been devoured by chess! See if he spends any time at home after this. Once he leaves in the morning, he won't dare to come back till late at night!'

From that day on, the two friends would leave the house in the darkness before sunrise, a small folded carpet under their arm and a packet of *paan* in their hand. They would go across the River Gomti and set up camp in an old ruined mosque, which was probably left over from the age of the Mughals. On their way, they would pick up a *chillum* holder, some tobacco and pieces of coal. On reaching the mosque, they would lay down the carpet and the chessboard, fill the *chillum*, light it, and start to play. Then they would be completely oblivious to all matters of this world and the next. 'Move, check, checkmate': apart from these cries, no other words passed their lips. Their absorption in the game was more intense than that of the most self-hypnotized mendicant. In the afternoons, whenever they felt hungry, the two gentlemen would walk through the narrower lanes of the town, find a working-men's café, and eat there. After a smoke of their *chillum* they would once again sink into their game of chess. So deeply, in fact, that on the odd occasion they didn't even bother about eating.

But meanwhile, the labyrinths of the political chess game being played in the country were becoming more and more elaborate. The forces of 'John Company' were steadily advancing towards Lucknow. There was panic in the city, people gathering up their wives and children and fleeing to the countryside. Such disturbances were of no concern to our two chess-playing friends,

however. On leaving the house, they would seek out the narrower lanes to avoid being seen, and the local people seldom saw their faces.

By now the English forces had almost reached Lucknow.

One day when the two gentlemen were engrossed in their game – Meer Sahib was losing and Mirza Sahib was outmanoeuvring him with every move – suddenly, what should they see but the English Army marching along the road right in front of them! The Company had decided to invade Lucknow; it wanted to devour the whole kingdom as a form of repayment of its debt. It was the age-old ruse of the money-lender; the same old trick that has enfeebled so many nations that, today, they find themselves in shackles.

Meer Sahib said, 'The English forces are coming.'

'Let them come,' said Mirza. 'Save your hand. Check.'

'But we must have a look,' Meer answered. 'Let's take cover and peep. What powerfully built youths they are! It terrifies me just to look at them.'

'You can see them later,' said Mirza. 'What's the hurry? Yet again, check.'

But Meer was excited. 'The artillery is here too. There must be about five thousand men – scarlet faces like red monkeys.'

'My dear sir, don't make excuses. Here. Check,' Mirza said.

'You really are an incredible man,' replied Meer. 'Please think about this – if the city's occupied, how are we going to get home?'

'When it's time to go home we'll think about it – here, check and checkmate.'

The army moved on. The two friends started a fresh game. Mirza asked, 'What about eating today?'

'I'm fasting today – why, are you hungry?' asked Meer.

'Not really,' replied Mirza. 'Who knows what might be happening in the city?'

'Nothing might be happening in the city,' snapped Meer impatiently. 'People will be resting after dinner. His Majesty, the Life of the World, will also be resting – or perhaps he's enjoying a round of drinks.'

This time, when the friends sat down to play, they continued until three o'clock. Then they heard the sound of the army coming back. Nawab Wajid Ali Shah had been dethroned. He

was under arrest, and the army was taking him away. There had been no trouble in the city at all – no warrior had shed a single drop of blood! The Nawab took leave of his kingdom in exactly the kind of weeping way that a young bride leaves home for her in-laws' house. The Begums, his wives, wept also. The maids and the housekeeper wept: a great kingdom had come to an end. From the beginning of time no king had ever been dethroned in such a peaceful and non-violent fashion, or at least history has recorded no such example. But this was not that *ahimsa*, that non-violence which pleases the gods. It was gutless impotence which made them weep. The ruler of Lucknow was made to march as an ordinary prisoner, while his own city of Lucknow slept on unconcerned in the sleep of decadent bliss! This indeed was the nadir of political decay.

Mirza looked up from his game. 'Those brutes have imprisoned our noble King!' 'Really?' responded Meer. 'Are you a judge suddenly? Here, check.'

But Mirza was anxious. 'Pause a while, dear sir. I'm in no mood to concentrate on the game just now. Our highest lord the Nawab must be shedding tears of blood. This day, the Light of Lucknow has gone.'

'Yes, of course he'll be crying,' said Meer. 'He won't get the luxuries he's used to in a foreign prison, I assure you. Check.'

'No one's life continues unchanged for ever. These really are hard times, a curse of the Heavens,' replied Mirza thoughtfully.

'Indeed, indeed,' replied Meer, vaguely, 'again, check. It'll be checkmate next; you can't escape, you know.'

'Oh my God, how unfeeling you are!' cried Mirza. 'You are witness to such a terrible event and yet you feel no sorrow? After the departure of our king, Light of the World, there's no connoisseur of the arts left! Lucknow has become desolate!'

'Please save the life of your *own* King first!' Meer replied; 'Then mourn the demise of "our Glorious Lord". Here. Check and checkmate. How about that?'

The English Army was taking the Nawab away in front of their very eyes, but as soon as it had disappeared over the horizon, Mirza set up a new game. 'The sense of hurt that accompanies defeat is terrible,' said Meer Sahib. 'Come, let us write an elegy on the miserable plight of the Nawab.' However,

Mirza's sense of loyalty and feeling for poetry had vanished with his defeat at chess and he was itching to take his revenge.

It was evening. In the ruins of the mosque the bats seemed to be calling the faithful to prayer. Swallows settled in their nests and prayed the *Maghrib* prayer of dusk. Our two players, on the other hand, were still embroiled in their game, like two blood-thirsty warriors fighting for their lives. Mirza had lost three consecutive games, and nor did the fate of the fourth one look at all promising. Over and over again he was willing himself to win, playing with great caution, keeping perfect control on his wits, but sometimes he was making such a bad move that he ruined the entire game for himself. Meer Sahib, on the other hand, was in high spirits, reciting *ghazal* poems, singing *thumri* melodies and snapping his fingers in glee. He would cry out, calling upon not only the district, but the world, to recognize his genius. He was as pleased with himself as if he'd unearthed some buried treasure. Mirza Sahib found this good humour extremely irritating. Raising an eyebrow, he would reproach his friend: 'Please don't change your moves. What are you doing? You make a move and then immediately change it! Whatever you have to do, think hard before doing it. And, sir, why do you always keep your finger on the piece? Please leave the pieces alone. Until you're convinced in your heart what move to make, don't even touch the piece! And why are you taking half an hour to make a move? This is most irregular. From now on, whoever takes more than five minutes over a single move will be considered to have lost the game. Look! You altered your move again! Please put that piece back where it was.'

Meer Sahib's Bishop was vulnerable, so he said: 'When did I move?'

Mirza was getting cross. 'You've already moved! You're advised to put the piece back where it was!'

Meer said, 'Why should I put it back? When did I even touch the piece?'

'You may talk of not touching it, but it's still considered a move,' snapped Mirza. 'You saw that your Bishop was vulnerable, so now you're trying to cause confusion.'

'You're the one who causes confusion,' Meer retorted. 'Victory and defeat are in the hands of fate. No one can succeed just by causing confusion.'

'But you've lost this game.'

'How have I lost the game?'

'Put the piece back where you first had it.'

'Why should I put it there? I will not.'

'You'll have to.'

'I certainly will not.'

'Even your guardian angel would say put the piece back!' shouted the exasperated Mirza. 'Just who do you think you are?'

The argument got worse. Both defended their positions and neither would concede a point. The argument became a real quarrel, as other, more personal criticisms, intended to embarrass and humiliate, were dragged in.

'How can you be expected to be familiar with the rules and laws of chess, when all your ancestors did was cut grass!' sneered Mirza. 'Aristocracy is something else altogether; you don't become an aristocrat merely by being left some property!'

'Your own dear father must have been a grass-cutter then,' said Meer. 'Our family has been playing chess for generations.'

'Rubbish!' shouted Mirza. 'Your people spent a lifetime slaving as cooks to the Nawab Ghaziuddin, and as a reward for that you were granted some property. And today you call yourselves aristocrats! Being a true aristocrat is not a game!'

'Why are you ruining the reputation of your own ancestors?' Meer retorted. 'They might have been cooks. Our elders sat at the same table as the Nawab, eating the same food as him and sharing his goblet.'

'Some people are entirely shameless!'

'Hold your tongue or you'll regret it! I'm not used to forgiving such insults! If someone so much as casts the slightest aspersion at my family, he gets his brains scrambled!'

Mirza was calmer: 'Kindly desist. You have no idea of my family's courage. Come, let us test our fates, and see where we are to go.'

'Yes, certainly. Who's afraid of you!' Meer declared coolly.

The two friends drew swords from their waists. In those days rich and poor alike carried at their waist a poniard or dagger, a sword or a large knife. Though our two heroes were indolent men, they were not without honour. National valour was at its lowest ebb with them, but personal pride they possessed in plentiful quantity. While any passion for politics had died within

THE CHESS PLAYERS

them – ‘Why should we die for the King or his kingdom or for the country?’ they felt. ‘Why disturb our sweet sleep of apathy?’ – when it came to personal matters they showed absolutely no fear. If anything, they’d show complete ruthlessness.

Being familiar with bamboo fights and the judo-like *garka*, they moved into position. Swords flashed. Sounds of combat filled the air; both were wounded and, writhing in agony, they both gave up the ghost there and then. Men whose eyes would not shed a tear for their King, cut their own throats over a chess Bishop!

It was dark now. The chessboard was spread out. Both Kings were seated gloriously on their royal thrones, but there seemed sadness in their faces, as though they were mourning the death of our heroes.

Silence reigned all around. The falling walls of the ruin, its crumbling arches and dust-laden minarets peered down at the corpses and grieved at the frailty of human life compared to any stone or brick.

DELIVERANCE