

THE TOWER OF SILENCE

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

GYAN PRAKASH



**PHIROSHAW JAMSETJEE CHEVALIER
'CHAIWALA'**

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The publication of *The Tower of Silence*, more than eighty-five years after it was penned by Mr Chaiwala, is a happy moment. Certainly, the author would have been pleased to see his rollicking novel in print.

I first encountered Phirozeshah Jamsetjee Chaiwala in the British Library, London in 2001. I was in the initial stages of research for my book, *Mumbai Fables*, wading through some documents from the 1920s. Reading the dry, official correspondence, I silently cursed the British Raj. As if ruling India was not bad enough, it had also condemned historians to struggle through the records of its tedious routines of government. Trawling through reams of documents to pick up bits of information about the past is a historian's occupational hazard, but did the material have to be so dreary? I needed a break. Setting aside the stack of files on my desk, I began looking through the catalogue of the Oriental and India Office Collection's European manuscripts for some light entertainment. My eyes glazed over as they moved from listing to listing, from the letters and diaries of this Governor-General to the private correspondence and papers of that Viceroy. Suddenly, an entry for the *Tower of Silence* caught my eye. The catalogue described it as the typescript of a novel written in 1927. I immediately requisitioned it.

To my delight, when the typescript arrived, I discovered it was a detective novel. I put aside everything else and delved into it. Though I was not sure how it contributed to my research on Bombay, I was hooked. Here was something that matched the enchantment that the city held for me. The action was non-stop, full of twists and turns and, although it moved from place to place, Bombay was at its centre. For two straight days, I read nothing but *Tower of Silence*. But disappointment awaited me. The typescript ended abruptly on page 169. It was clearly incomplete. Where was the rest?

In my pursuit of the concluding pages, I faced mystery after mystery. First, there was the author's name in the typescript: Phiroshaw Jamsetjee Chevalier (Chaiwala). It was clear enough that he was a Parsi. But Chevalier was not a Parsi last name. Chaiwala had obviously adopted it. But why? I consulted a Parsi friend who offered one possible explanation. He suggested that the author might have adopted the last name of Maurice Chevalier. Apparently the gramophone records of the French actor and singer were popular among the Parsis in the 1920s. This was plausible, though Chaiwala deepened the mystery of his adopted name by

rubber-stamping the pages with the name of the publisher – P.J. Chavalier and Co. – spelling the name with an ‘a’ rather than an ‘e’.

But whether spelt with an ‘a’ or an ‘e’, there was no record of this company as a publisher. In fact, in *Thacker’s India Directory* of 1927, it was listed as an export, import, and general commissioning agency with an office in Commissariat Building, Hornby Road, Bombay. Perhaps Chavalier & Co. decided to diversify its operations by entering publishing. But if it did, *Tower of Silence* authored by the company’s sole proprietor, was one of its two publications – the other being ‘Sixty-Seven Poems’, a hundred-page typescript also authored by Chaiwala.

Perhaps the sight of the publisher’s stamp caused the India Office in London to deposit it in the printed books collection on 5 June 1930. The *Catalogue of Books Printed in the Bombay Presidency during the Quarter ending 30 September 1928* listed it as published on 15 May 1928, with a first edition consisting of 100 copies. It was transferred to the European manuscripts collection on 21 March 1976. Apparently the rubber stamp on the typescript no longer persuaded the library staff that the novel had been published. For Chaiwala, who must have believed the contrary, this would have been a terrible blow.

Who was Chaiwala? Or was it Chevalier or Chavalier? I gathered from reading his novel that he was a well-educated Parsi businessman from Bombay, fluent in English and with literary ambitions. He took the trouble not only to self-publish his novel with a hundred typescript copies but also mailed one copy all the way to the India Office Library, London. But apparently only an incomplete version had reached its destination.

A further search in the British Library did not yield the missing pages, but I was convinced they existed. The methodical unfolding of the narrative, and the way the typescript was numbered and divided into chapters convinced me that Chaiwala was a careful man. It seemed unlikely that he had written and put into circulation an incomplete novel. Perhaps the missing pages of the India Office copy had gotten lost in the binding process, or come loose somewhere between the original filing in the printed books catalogue and later transfer to the manuscript collection. Where was it, then? I became obsessed with this question, and decided to locate the text.

THE HUNT

Both the man and the text posed mysteries. I did the only thing a historian could do, and made inquiries.

But first I asked a very efficient computer operator in Chennai to enter the typescript into digital form. Latha did the job with amazing accuracy and promptness and mailed it to me with a comment: ‘But sir, it appears the document is incomplete. What happens in the end?’ Which

entering the typescript into the computer, the action-packed suspense drama had evidently captivated Latha. I promised that she would be the first to know when I found out and then continued on to Mumbai.

I reasoned that since Chaiwala had taken the trouble to send his novel to the India Office in London, he must in all likelihood have also sent it to libraries in Mumbai. I scoured library after library, checking their catalogues and talking to the librarians. The search was time-consuming but full of unexpected delights. I gained a good knowledge of the collections in the city libraries and how they were used and abused by their patrons. The conversation with librarians often moved from my particular query to general discourses on the city and the state of the Parsis.

One such conversation with Mr M, the librarian of one noted library named after a prominent Parsi philanthropist, was particularly memorable. After calling my search for Chaiwala's book noble, he began lamenting the state of his library. He alleged that patrons, particularly students, came to the library not to read books but for respite from the heat and to sleep under the fan in the reading room. He complained about the students but also expressed his sympathies. After all, most of the students came from modest backgrounds and lived in cramped spaces. He was happy to provide the library's cavernous and cool reading room as a place where they could relax and perhaps even do homework, but drew the line on eating lunch in the reading room, a rule, he said, that was frequently violated.

The violation of the reading room's rules became a prelude to a general discourse on the decline of order in the city. Mr M was an engineer by training and had agreed to become the librarian only because of a sense of duty to his community. But he said that even the Parsis were becoming lax. No one cared about rules and duties anymore in Mumbai. To prove his point, he proceeded to tell me about an incident at Cusrow Baug, a Parsi residential colony in Colaba. A resident in the colony refused to pay the common charges for trash collection because he claimed that his family generated no trash. Mr M was incredulous and told him that this was impossible in modern society. But the resident stuck to his claim. Suspecting that something was amiss, Mr M stood sentinel overnight. Sure enough, he spotted the suspected resident emerging under cover of darkness carrying a bagful of garbage. As he tried to hide his bag among those of other residents, Mr M caught his arm and said: 'Remember, I told you that you can not live in modern society and produce no trash.'

Mr M was not alone in lamenting the Parsis losing their way. As I searched the libraries and looked for Chaiwala's antecedents, I drew a blank but encountered a rich and contradictory discourse on the Parsi community. A well-dressed Parsi gentleman in Tardeo sat me down and launched into an extended speech on the past and present of the community. I had gone to Tardeo because an entry in the *Times of India Directory and Calendar* for 1927 listed Chaiwala as

resident of Bhiwandiwalla House. When I asked someone on the street about the location of the building, he asked me who I was looking for. When I told him, he said: 'Oh, a Parsi from way back then? Yes, they were very important then. Look at them, now.' He pointed to an ill-kept building on Tardeo Road where lower middle-class Parsi women wearing faded dresses sat on the steps. When I approached the women with my questions about Chaiwala, none of them had heard of him and they assured me that no family with that name lived there. But they referred me to an elderly gentleman who stepped out of the building, telling me that he 'knew a lot about the past'.

The gentleman, dressed in a three-piece suit that had seen better days, was sweating in the October heat of Mumbai. But there was a dignity about him as he considered my question about Chaiwala. His family had lived in the building since the 1940s but he had never heard the name. 'A writer, you say. No, no such person could exist in this building today. If he ever did, he obviously had the good sense to leave.' With that, he proceeded to tell me about the glorious history of the Parsis. They had built the city. Look around, he said, and everywhere you will see buildings named after them and hospitals and colleges established by them. But now, it is all gone. The community had shrunk, slowly swallowed by everything around them.

I encountered similar elegiac sentiments in literature. There was an overwhelming sense of besiegement and disarray of the community in Rohinton Mistry's *Tales from Firozsha Baag* (1987) in Thrity Umrigar's *Bombay Time* (2002) and in many others. Tanya Luhrman's ethnographic study, *The Good Parsi* (1996) also finds conflicted feelings among the Parsis about the fate of the community in postcolonial India. On the one hand, there is a strong awareness of the fading memory of the community's distinct identity, history, and contributions to the city. On the other hand, there are contradictory sentiments about this loss. Some mourn that India has eaten into their once exalted position, forcing many to migrate to Australia, Canada, the UK, and the United States, rendering them a threatened minority in the very city that they built. Others regret that the community never assimilated, missing out on having a place at the table in postcolonial India.

Chaiwala could never have foreseen this future. His strong pride in the Parsis' distinct identity and destiny as a select elite is evident in his writing. Insofar as his novel's narrative was anchored in the desire to staunchly defend the Parsis' cultural heritage and Zoroastrian religion, he would not be an unusual figure in the city today.

I gained an understanding of Chaiwala's cultural world from my conversations, but I still had to find the missing text. Every time I was in Mumbai for research, I continued my hunt. The breakthrough came at the end of 2003, nearly three years after I had first found the novel in London.

In my search for Chaiwala's novel in Mumbai's libraries, I had neglected the Secretariat

Library, which is housed in the same building as the Asiatic Society. Walking through it on the way to the Asiatic Society, I had scarcely given a second glance to its reading room crowded with government servants and students reading newspapers and popular magazines. When I drew blank in the Asiatic Society's vaunted collection, I resumed my search in other libraries. With those yielding nothing, I wondered if Chaiwala had sent his novel only to London. Even if he had deigned to send it to the city's libraries, the typescript might have been subject to the mercies of the notoriously cavalier Indian librarians.

It was then that I remembered the row of dusty card catalogues in the Secretariat's reading room. Without much hope, I decided to try my luck. It was the day before I was to leave Mumbai and there was little else to do. Billowing dust rose when I forced open the rickety drawers of the jammed card catalogue, searching the entries on authors. Imagine my amazement when I found not one, but two entries for P.J. Chevalier! The first was for *Sixty-Seven Poems*, the second for *Tower of Silence*. I filled out two slips immediately, requisitioning both. Heart pounding and fingers nervously drumming on the desk, I waited. Thirty minutes later, the library peon walked into the reading room and summoned me to the librarian's desk. He handed me a bound volume of 'Sixty-Seven Poems'. The other book, he informed me, was untraceable. Then he left.

Crestfallen, I returned to my desk and desultorily read Chaiwala's poems. 'Amy' was a long poem about the poet's passion for another man's wife. Yet another, 'The Same Old Cry' railed against the conventional morality that forbade this love. Yet another was a diatribe against usurers of all faiths. The passion was palpable but the quality was uniformly mediocre. I had hit a low point, the dejection of not finding *Tower of Silence* compounded by reading Chaiwala's depressing poetry. Nonetheless, I decided to make one more try.

I walked up to the librarian and struck up a conversation about the library. She asked me about my research and my teaching position at Princeton University. She told me about herself and her visit to Cleveland where her son worked. I told her about finding Chaiwala's incomplete novel at the British Library and my fruitless search for copies in Mumbai's libraries. It was quite possible, I told her, that her library was the only one with the complete typescript of an important novel. As I spoke, the peon who had been listening to our conversation, the same one who had told me that *Tower of Silence* was untraceable, perked up. He asked me to write down the name once again on a slip of paper. Five minutes later, he returned with a bound copy of the complete novel. I had not been wrong about the Secretariat Library possibly being the only one in the world with a complete typescript. There was joy all around.

THE TEXT

At the center of *Tower of Silence* is an actual incident. In 1923, *The Graphic*, a London weekly

published an article on the Tower of Silence, or *dokhma*, in PunePune.¹ It described, without negative judgment, the Parsi practice of leaving their dead in the tower's well to be devoured by vultures. Accompanying the article were two illustrations. One was a photograph of the *dokhma*, a circular stone structure rising about 25 feet in height, with a flock of vultures sitting on top. The centrepiece, however, was a large aerial photograph of the Parsi dead in the well of the Tower.

The photograph created a stir in Mumbai. Sir Jamsetji Jejeebhoy, the chairman of the Parsi Panchayet, conveyed the outrage of the community to the Governor of Bombay, Lord George Lloyd. The Governor sent a telegram to the Secretary of State for India in London communicating the sense of indignation among the Parsis and requesting that the magazine editor be persuaded to destroy the photographic plate and the negative.² The Secretary of State promptly wrote to *The Graphic's* editor, who promised to destroy the plate and to ask the photographer to destroy the negative. The editor assured the Secretary of State that the photographer, although a European, was not an official, enabling the colonial government to plead non-complicity in the offending act. He also apologized for having violated Parsi religious sentiments, though of course that was not the intention. Like any editor, he was simply struck by the photograph's novelty.

In fact, the West was morbidly fascinated with the Parsi practice of disposing of their dead. In 1912, a British soldier was accused of entering the Tower of Silence in Pune, whereupon he was seized and bound by several men.³ The *Times of India* published a review of a Mills and Boon book of short stories by Maude Annesley titled *Nights and Days*.⁴ Among the stories was one called 'The Tower of Silence', detailing the experiences of an English lady married to an Oxford-educated Parsi millionaire in Bombay. Apparently, the story ended with the lady's suicidal and melodramatic entry into the well of a Tower of Silence where a Parsi priest pointed a chilling and calamitous finger to her doom. The reviewer ended by advising the Bombay Police to read the story to learn unknown details about Parsi customs.

More literary help awaited the Bombay Police. In 1920, the *Boston Globe* published a detective story by R.T.M. Scott, 'Smith of the C.I.D.: The Towers of Silence.'⁵ The story was about a US senator who has gone missing in Bombay. Smith, a Bombay Police detective, cracks the mystery as he, along with his Indian helpers, the senator's secretary and the American counsel climb under the cover of darkness into the Tower of Silence on Malabar Hill. They find the senator in the well of the tower into which he had been lured and abandoned to the vultures by his scheming secretary. The secretary meets his just desserts by being abandoned to a similar fate. To great Parsi outrage, his flesh-stripped skeleton is discovered in the well a few days later.

Meanwhile, aircraft were reported flying over dokhmas in spite of the indignation of the Parsis. A Texan reported in 1920 that a British pilot might have finally revealed the long-cherished secrets of the Towers by flying over them.⁶ The newspaper noted that the aviator

flight had provoked furious protests, but it went on to feed the readers' ghoulish appetite for details about vultures lying in wait for the dead bodies. Not to be outdone, the *New York Times* published a long story on the Parsis; it described their history, religion and prominent place in business, but the main focus was on the Tower of Silence.⁷

Chaiwala's novel was composed in the context of this perverse obsession with Parsi mortuary practices, the most egregious example of it being the publication of the aerial photograph in *The Graphic*. But while others clamoured for legal action against the magazine, the editor and the photographer, Chaiwala exacted retribution in fiction.

FINDING CHAIWALA

What was in his biography that explained his literary ambition? Who was this Parsi with the nom de plume of Chevalier?

I now had the complete novel but had made little progress in finding details about Chaiwala. Further consultation of *Thacker's India Directory* and *Times of India Directory and Calendar* revealed that his address had changed in 1931 from Tardeo to Dadar. He was listed as a resident of Imperial Mahal, Vincent Road (presently, Ambedkar Road on Khodadad Circle). This entry was repeated for the next two years, after which his name disappears from the directories. A visit to the building proved fruitless. No one had heard of Chaiwala, let alone remembered him. He did not appear in Pune directories either, casting doubt on my speculation that he had moved back there.

The next stop was the Parsi Panchayet, the apex administrative body of the Parsi community. I was received cordially at the Panchayet's office on Dadabhai Naoroji Road, but the officials threw up their hands when I asked to see their death records. 'If you don't know when he died then it is like looking for a needle in a haystack!' I was referred to another official who was reputed to know all about the days of yore. I walked over to the desk of a genial looking elderly gentleman. When I explained my purpose, he sighed and said: 'That's like looking for a needle in a haystack'. Over the next hour or so, he treated me to a barrage of aphorisms as he swiftly moved away from my inquiry to the subject of the state of the Parsis and the city. The substance of what he said was familiar. By now I had heard several variations of his discourse on the unique history of the Parsis, how their heyday coincided with the best times of the city, and how their marginalization was followed by Mumbai's decline and disarray. But the aphorisms that punctuated his speech and his archaic, Victorian English immediately reminded me of Chaiwala's novel. The visit, after all, had not been pointless. I had caught a glimpse of my author and his milieu in this Panchayet official's language.

In 2003, I placed an advertisement in *Parsiana*, the Parsi journal circulated worldwide

requesting information on Chaiwala. I received no helpful response. In 2013, I published another advertisement in *Jam-e-Jamshed*. But again, no response was forthcoming.

Meanwhile, I was beginning to build Chaiwala's portrait. A search in the *Bombay University Calendar* revealed that he matriculated from Tutorial High School, Bombay, in 1914. This was my cue to visit the school, now called Master Tutorial High School. Located near Kennedy Bridge, the school is housed in an old building that has seen better days. The principal, Peter D'Costa, was seated behind a desk in a small room, surrounded by a clutter of files and deep into office work with his associate. My presence was obviously inconvenient, but he very kindly and promptly requisitioned a thick, bound volume called the General Register. I carefully turned its yellowed, crumbling pages, running my finger over each numbered entry. My heart stopped when I spotted the entry – Peroshaw Jamshedji Chaewala. The register recorded that he was admitted to the school on 14 January 1913, and that his previous school was the Pune Native Institution. I also discovered that his younger brother Behram, born in 1898 and previously at St. Vincent's in Pune, was admitted at the same time. So were his sisters – Falak, born in 1900 previously at Sir C J Readymoney Girl's School, Pune, and the 1906-born Shirin. Evidently, the family had moved from Pune to Bombay, where the children were enrolled at the same co-educational school that, Mr D'Costa explained, was preponderantly Parsi at that time.

Having matriculated from high school, Mr Chaiwala joined Wilson College. According to the *Bombay University Calendar*, he passed the first year certificate examination in 1916 and Intermediate in Arts in 1917, studying Logic and French (perhaps explaining his adoption of the moniker Chevalier). He earned a BA in Philosophy in 1922. A visit to Wilson College proved rewarding. I was lucky once again to run into a very cooperative and forthcoming Vice Principal, Professor Shehernaz Nalwalla. A Parsi herself, she got caught up in my enthusiasm requisitioning old college registers and calling acquaintances for information. The records indicated that Chaiwala, or Chaewala, as his name was spelt in the register, was active in the college literary society, giving lectures on such diverse subjects as 'English humourists of the 18th century', 'The Gods of India' and 'Love.'⁸ He did not win any prizes or scholarships, and never passed his examinations in the first or second divisions but always in the lowest category – the pass class.

However, lack of academic excellence did not imply an absence of intellectual ambition. He was reported to have opened a debate on 'It is the Man that makes the Woman' organized by the Zoroastrian Brotherhood in October 1918.⁹ A decade later, when he was already PJ Chevalier, he wrote a Gujarati play, 'Pussyfoot' (Char Angelio in Gujarati, meaning four-toed ones), which was staged by the Empire Poetry League at Excelsior Theatre.¹⁰ Miss Falakbanu Jamsetji Chaiwala, a student of Elphinstone College, and the secretary of the Empire Poetry League, had initiated this event to support the Sir Leslie Wilson Hospital Fund. Her brother, the playwright

PJ Chevalier, was the Vice-President of the League. Including both male and female actors in defiance of tradition, the 'serio-comic' play, as it was described, was about two brokers who set out to loot people in a scientific manner while forming a pact to test each other's wives.

PJ Chevalier was not done yet. Having already written a novel and staged his play, he threw his hat in the ring for the 1929 elections to the Bombay Municipal Council. Addressing a 'sparsely attended gathering of voters' at Sir Cowasji Jehangir Hall organized by Ratheshta Mandal, a Parsi organization for the 'moral upliftment' of the community, he asked that a chance be given to 'young blood'. He promised to work for better relations between communities, promote education and improve the conditions of poor municipal employees. This is where things get mysterious again. The *Times of India* lists him as one of the candidates for the D ward (Girgaum), but his name does not appear in the list of winners and losers.¹² Perhaps he failed to actually file his election papers even as he campaigned as a candidate. Whatever the case, he had managed, once again, to throw mystery over himself.

But as I read and re-read the now complete text of *Tower of Silence*, the mystery began to clear. I began to understand that he was both Chaiwala and Chevalier. Like many Parsis I have encountered during my search, he took deep pride in his Parsi identity. This is evident in *Tower of Silence*. The text offers a primer on Parsi manners, customs, and clothing – all related to purification rituals that Zoroastrians had practiced for millennia. These practices, he wrote, were not based on blind faith but scientific facts, now proven by Western science. This was a common belief among the intelligentsia in the colonies. Hindu intellectuals also, for instance, claimed that modern Western science affirmed the scientific validity of the principles and practices advocated by the ancient Vedas. Beram, the Parsi protagonist possibly named after Chaiwala's younger brother, embodies the cultural qualities widely claimed by indigenous intellectuals in the colonies.

But Beram is not just another indigenous figure. As a Parsi, he is special. Chaiwala is angered by the ignorance of Englishmen who mistake a Parsi for just another Indian. Beram is from the East, but his person combines the vast and time-tested ancient wisdom of the Parsis with the modern scientific and technological arts of the West. He is a Chaiwala who can also pass off as Chevalier.

Although Beram's adversaries in the novel are British, he is not a nationalist. He duels with the British to avenge Parsi honour, but it is an engagement of equals, not between the colonizer and the colonized. Chaiwala wrote at a time when Gandhian mass nationalism was already in full flow, including in his native Bombay, but there is scant reflection of anti-colonial politics in the novel. Indeed, the text frequently expresses an admiration for British customs and manners.

Chaiwala treats the Western landscape as if it were his own. His characters navigate the

London streets and go in and out of hotels and inns with ease. He uses the details of the 1920s Lymington air show to great narrative effect. His choice of Sexton Blake, the popular fictional detective, as Beram's adversary reveals his knowledge of the popular English cultural milieu of the period. As Beram plays a cat-and-mouse game with Sexton Blake and his assistant Tinker, the action does not appear as a clash of cultures but as a contest of wits between individuals who share a vocabulary but pursue different goals. He uses English details with authority, as if he grew up with them. The novel even shares the contemporary British attitude towards the Nagas, regarding them as savages.

The prose style wavers between the Victorian language of Charles Dickens and the more fast-paced popular style of Edgar Rice Burroughs and other fiction writers of the period. The characters speak in the diction appropriate to their class and station in life. At times there are long sentences, strung out with semicolons, in hyperbolic language. But the tale itself is very much like the fiction of Edgar Rice Burroughs, with travels to exotic lands and a transcontinental chase. Poisons, magical drugs and a fight unto death between a cobra and a mongoose amplify the suspense and adventure. Secret cellars and disguises add mystery and provide twists to the narrative.

Even as occult powers and sorcery punctuate the story, the setting is thoroughly modern. Industrial modernity in the form of planes, trains and automobiles figure prominently. Chaiwala shows off his knowledge of firearms and explosives, investigative techniques and deductive reasoning as his characters race around London in expensive Rolls Royce and Mercedes automobiles.

Modern imperial geography also underpins the novel as the story moves between Britain, India and Burma. Easing the movement of the narrative across imperial territories is a cultural circuit, a cosmopolitan milieu that Chaiwala regards as wholly natural. Beram dwells in this milieu while proudly wearing his Parsi identity.

In this sense, the novel bears the mark of its time, expressing the fable of Bombay as a cosmopolitan city. Even as the narrative action brings the city, high and low, into view, what makes it a Bombay novel is its imaginative texture. *Tower of Silence* shows an intimate knowledge of Bombay as the story unfolds in places like the Taj Mahal Hotel, bars, the Parsi colonies in Colaba, Nepean Sea Road, Crawford Market and the Esplanade police station. But underlying this is the city's mythic image. A Bombay man, Chaiwala affirms this image as he calls the city 'gay and cosmopolitan', a heady mix of polyglot culture and fast life. It is this urban sensibility of Bombay that underwrites the novel. Even when the action takes place elsewhere, what guides it is a cosmopolitan worldview characteristic of the colonial city. To be sure, this cosmopolitanism was blind to its imperial and class underpinnings. But as a product of this world, Beram comfortably inhabits its cultural milieu so long as his Parsi identity and heritage are not

threatened.

I had not found all of Chaiwala's biographical details. A second visit to the Parsi Punchayet eased by weighty recommendations, did not yield fresh information. I was given access to the death registers, but unfortunately, only those dating from 1961 have been preserved. In any case, neither Chaiwala nor Chevalier showed up in the records. 'He could have died in 1933 or migrated', a friendly Punchayet official told me. 'Not to be a wet blanket, but without more details, it is like...' he hesitated for a moment as he searched for the right words. '...It is like what do they say – looking for a needle in a haystack!' There was that phrase again, but it no longer amused me. Seeing my dejected face, he tried to cheer me up. 'It is for a novel, right? This makes for an even better story! Chaiwala disappears into thin air!' He was right. Like the characters in his novel, Chaiwala had done a masterful disappearing act. He was gone. Without a trace.

But I had found him: in the *Tower of Silence* and the Parsi discourse in Bombay. From the page of the text, he emerged as someone completely at home in the Anglophone cultural world so long as it did not imperil his identity as a Parsi. . He was obviously well-travelled and well-read. One of his characters could shoot with 'the eye of Locksley' (Robin Hood) and could tell you how to journey from Rangoon to Putao. Chaiwala had disarming ambition and drive. Though he had no poetic talents, he self-published both a collection of his verse and a rollicking detective novel. He was very cosmopolitan. And, of course, very Bombay.

CHAPTER I

India is a great peninsula located in the south of Asia. The whole of its western coast is called Bombay Presidency where Bombay is the chief town and principal seaport. Poona, about four hour's journey from Bombay by the Great Indian Peninsula Railway, is a military station of no mean importance. It is also the summer seat of the government, when the heat in Bombay is more than conveniently bearable. The Poona racecourse, under the control of the Western Indian Turf Club, is the envy of the whole of Bombay Presidency.

The town is divided into two sections. The most densely populated area is called the 'City' while the extensive area of neat streets with pleasant little bungalows on either side surrounded by well-cared for gardens, is termed the 'Camp'. It is in the Camp that the well-to-do live, particularly those who have resigned from daily activities, either after a long meritorious government service or from their own businesses.

To the north of the Camp, except for a few bungalows with vast grounds, the whole of the surrounding country is an open plain, unkempt but picturesque, stretching for miles around. It is also where the solitary structure of the Tower of Silence stands, on one of the highest hills that rings the town on three sides.

At 2 p.m. one cloudless day in April, the hottest month of the year, through the heat wave that one could clearly see and feel, a tiny speck appeared in the sky moving from the racecourse side in the direction of the Tower of Silence.

At first, it could perhaps be taken for a solitary eagle basking in the penetrating rays of the sun. But on second thoughts, a keen observer would not fail to note that this species usually goes up in groups and that an eagle would scarcely fly as a crow does in a straight line, but in gentle curves, floating up and down and forward as eagles alone can do. Nor could it be a crow, for that black gentleman could never dream of reaching such an immense height. The next explanation was simple, but it seemed impossible for a full-sized aeroplane to be seen in this part of India. As the speck drew nearer and nearer, it seemed to grow larger at every moment, till it was overhead at an angle of forty-five degrees. It was so high that its presence would never have been detected unless someone had noticed it flying above. Over the next few minutes, it flew once overhead and then moved away into the void. Gleaming white in the glaring light and the almost unbearable heat of the sun, it went in the opposite direction from whence it came, growing smaller and smaller as it flew away from the Tower of Silence.

The speck then disappeared over the horizon. If an observer had by some chance seen the aeroplane's approach during the terrible heat of the noonday sun, he would soon have lost

interest. Whether it was a dodge, or it had reached the point from which it was to double back to its goal, subsequent events were to prove. But return it did.

Once again, it approached at an angle of about forty-five degrees, but this time it seemed to fly closer to the ground. For the first time, the outlines of the machine were visible. It appeared to be a powerfully built light craft, with engines that were quiet, yet sure, strong and smoothly rhythmic. It hovered for a few moments, until it attained an angle of sixty to seventy degrees.

All of a sudden, it swooped down recklessly in a neat dive towards the ground. It continued its crazy course till it seemed that it would, without the least doubt, crash to the ground and lie there in a mangled, burning heap. It was as if the man in control had lost his nerve. But its mad career was suddenly checked. Then, as it appeared to right itself, the plane began to play somersaults like a big fluttering kite shot in one wing that is struggling to stay in the air to stop itself from falling in a plumb line to the ground.

Just when the case seemed hopeless, the plane stopped its fatal descent with a loud roar and began to move forward in large circles, now flying upside down. If the airman and the solitary passenger had not been securely strapped onto their seats, they would without a doubt have dropped onto the hard ground beneath and been transformed in a trice into an unnerving mass of shapeless pulp. The semi-unruffled 'phuts! phuts!' of the engine created no stir in the neighbourhood, for it appeared like the familiar sound of the military having their target practice beyond the neighbouring hills. If the noise seemed at all out of the ordinary, it was perhaps explained away as something more than usual having transpired at the shooting range.

The plane had now righted itself but nevertheless flew aimlessly in a zig-zag path, the airman shaping its course in huge downward curves. It was indeed most curious! Was there some unforeseen magnetic influence that was holding the plane about the place?

Whether it would dive or volplane or move around in huge meaningless circles, it seemed unable to tear itself away from the sombre grey-white presence of the Tower of Silence. Was it the idle curiosity of an unbeliever to gaze upon the scene and profane the place or was there some other deliberate mathematical calculation with a grim purpose behind it?

Once more, the machine tilted dangerously to one side, but to one who understood aircraft, it appeared more of a device than an outcome of accident. It was again on the point of turning upside down when it righted itself in the nick of time. At that precise moment, a bright star-like object fell with a heavy dull speed in a straight line into the structure of the Tower of Silence and disappeared into its deep and awesome depth.

But for the intense light of the pitiless sun, the bright object that fell from the plane would have appeared as fleeting as a rocket, lost to sight in a few moments once it dropped into the hollow space underneath. Immediately the object penetrated the dark well-like interior of the grim structure, a brightness never seen there before brought into glaring relief the nerve

wracking objects reposing in its bosom.

One whole mound of skeletons, in all manner of poses, lay in a mouldering heap. The arms and legs of some were entwined around their own frames or that of their neighbours. Along the border of the twenty-foot thick wall of the well too, could be seen some half-a-dozen skeletons in different postures. One was lying flat on its back with its face upturned, the eyeless sockets gazing defiantly up in silent mockery at the blazing sun's burning rays. Another lay face down as if in utter sorrow and lamentation for forsaking the alluring rich world at so unseemly a moment.

Of the couple of freshly brought in bodies, one was turned sideways in a pose of peace and quietude. Its upper portion was quite devoid of flesh while the side in contact with the marble stones beneath was intact. So it was with the other corpse but for one difference. Whereas the former was allowed to maintain its pose of sleep, the latter was being turned over by some three or four huge dark forms, working in unison. The side facing the sun almost immediately suffered from the ruthless, cruel beaks of the vultures. For a brief moment, they crouched down in a highly tense and aggravated attitude at being thus unceremoniously disturbed by the object that fell in a sparkling glare into the dark abysslike pit.

It was very queer, but no sooner had the gruesome objects in the well of the Tower of Silence come out in clear relief, than the aeroplane recovered from its dangerous plight. It quivered a little, stood still for one long moment and then rose up in a graceful curve, as if sighing in relief for avoiding meeting a revolting death in the pit beneath.

In that brief moment as the clock struck 2 p.m., as the plane appeared to be stock-still, there was a sharp, low, metallic, shutter-like click. A trained ear could scarcely have failed to explain the brazen drama enacted in that tragic moment.

'Click'. So the chapter ended, bringing in its trail intense mental suffering to many an heralding several breath-stealing events that were to follow in quick succession.

CHAPTER II

Sirdar Kaidokad Aspandad, head priest of the Deccan, was taking his afternoon nap. He was peacefully sleeping on his bed in a beautifully furnished room of an imposing bungalow that was his ancestral property. The adjoining historical building was chiefly used for keeping the sacred fire, whose rightful guardian he was. This was the Atasberam, the father of all the temples in the Deccan.

One could reasonably think that the virtue of one fire is the same as any other. It gives the same majestic glow with which no one can take liberty with impunity. It appears to have the same one quality of inner pervading virtue, whether in a solitary log of wood or in a molten furnace. On the surface, this may all appear very true. But it must not be forgotten that the civilization of Persia and the ascendancy of the Parsees in Irania, the faithful followers of the Prophet Zoroaster, dates from 5000 BC. So Zoroastrianism has flourished for nearly 7000 years and it is the flame from the sacred ball of fire handed down to his followers by Zoroaster that is still preserved in a secret place in India. The betrayal of this place would be a death sentence for us, an automatic opening of the golden gate into the kingdom of heaven.

To the ordinary layman, it might appear as a truism that the inner virtue of a glowing coal is the same as that of any other burning ember. But there is a fundamental difference according to Zoroastrian philosophy. It rightly teaches its followers that even as the degree of fire varies according to the fuel supplied to it, or to be exact, an intermixture of air and fuel, so does its virtue differ comparatively.

For instance, the fire originating from an impure heap of faggots, leaves and other rubbish saturated in kerosene oil is undoubtedly inferior in quality and health-giving benefits to one emanating from a heap of sandalwood chips burnt in a pure atmosphere on a block of marble and accompanied by the determined chantings of reverent priests, trained over thousands of years in the art of evoking a flame second only in virtue to the life-giving glow of the sun. It cannot be denied that the Zoroastrians are past masters in this art of purifying and enhancing the virtue of fire. Their chants and the powerful electrically magnetic vibrating effects that their voices produce in unison are strong enough to literally snap the fetters of the most finely tempered steel. Even an ordinary semi-serious priest or zealous layman can break a glass tumbler to splinters by no other outward agency than the force of the magical vibrations of his sweet chants.

The fire temple in the keeping of Sirdar Kaidokad Aspandad contains the purest of pure fire, burning in a huge silver receptacle and ignited directly from the original ball of fire

handed down by Zoroaster. Its sacredness to the Zoroastrians can be seen from the intrinsic benefits that it confers on those who pray before it with faith. Hence the epithet fire worshippers, though in reality there is no actual fire worshipping but only the sober acknowledgement of the majestic glow of the fire as the best emblem of the creator, the one and only omnipotent god, the source of purity and righteousness, the beginning and end of the universe.

The keeper of the flame, the head priest of Atasberam, was sixty years old. In spite of his age he seemed to be in excellent health due to a religiously led life. He took up the complete length of the bed, for he was not of insignificant stature. He was also of ample proportions with bones covered by a shapely white mass of flesh and muscles. He had well-cropped hair and his face was covered with a huge but carefully combed silvery-gray beard. His face had a benevolent expression with the exception of the eyes that seemed to contain something deep and unfathomable.

As a rule, he did not suffer from the disturbing dreams that trouble others in their sleep. His sleep was almost childlike and peaceful. But on this particular afternoon, when the hidden shutter three miles away registered that fatal 'Click', his peaceful slumber was most dreadfully disturbed. On that sultry afternoon of the unbearable Indian summer, when men, beasts and birds seemed glad to escape from its tormenting influence, there was that sound.

'Click'.

At that very moment, the whole atmosphere around the sleeping head priest became disturbed. The 'click' let loose, as it were, some hidden magnetic button, sending in all directions some hidden and mysterious influences miles away, greatly disturbing the mental plane of interested and advanced personages like the old priest.

All of a sudden, he was conscious of a sudden burden settling on the seat of his peaceful soul. It was no dream or cruel trick of the mind. It was a sort of message, a mute realization, the passing of spirit into spirit, mysterious and inexplicable. It was not an ordinary telepathic message. There was no agent at the other extremity sending the message. Rather, it was the finely developed something in the man that made him instantly aware of impending danger, the realization of the information not vouchsafed by any sentient being.

A secret was out. Some foreign eyes had defiled the tranquil atmosphere either of a place of worship there in Poona or elsewhere. It was a vague premonition and realization that he was wanting in the task he had been set to safeguard by heaven. The magnetic well had been disturbed by a foreign and invisible element entering into it, its unwarrantable impurity causing ripples large and small.

He lay on his back in an almost cataleptic condition. Though his eyes were shut, his sense of hearing grew intensely acute. His mind, or his very soul as it were, appeared to come out of his

body, hovering in close proximity to it, or around the temple he was guarding, or miles away where some zealously guarded secret shrines reposed in complete security.

Lying thus in a tense attitude of grim expectation, outwardly calm yet inwardly raging, he failed to gauge the cause of his agitation. Nevertheless he felt certain that others who were as inwardly powerful as himself must also have received this message of inexplicable foreboding. So he tried to enter into mental communication with the guardians of four other smaller temples situated in the town. But news that he could easily have received during normal times through his great powers accumulated over half a century failed him at that moment, and his soul grieved at the prospect of losing these powers in so unaccountable a manner.

Something was terribly wrong somewhere and he could not put his finger on the spot. What could it be?

CHAPTER III

At the Batliwala Agiary, one of the four smaller temples, a ceremony of unique importance was being performed.

Faresta, invoking the thirty-three ministers (angels) of god, lacks even the slightest personal factor, as it is a thanksgiving for benefits already received rather than a request for fresh favours from god. On such occasions an offering is made of sweet-scented flowers of the most delicate Indian perfume, such as red and creamy white roses, lilywhite chambalis and fragrant mogras. A variety of the most delicious fruits are also offered in pretty silver dishes and utensils, along with the most agreeable and highly palatable sweet dishes.

There is of course a constant burning of costly incense and pure chips of sandalwood, agar, loban, etc. on glowing coals in a beautifully designed small silver receptacle. Eight priests, all dressed in white with snow-white pieces of rich muslin tied about their noses and hanging before their lips, were deeply engrossed in the rhythmical songs of Zoroaster in praise of God and his ministering angels that were the most authentic and brought the most positive results.

Then, at 2 p.m. there was that sound.

‘Click’

The atmosphere in the temple, surcharged as it was by the holy vibrations, raged into unimagined violence. For a second or two, the jaws of the officiating priests remained gaping wide open. Their voices seemed to die away at the very threshold of their throats. A horrified look crept into their eyes as if they suffered from a sudden shock of high electric voltage. Unconscious of their surroundings, the people sitting around them were ignorant of what was passing through their minds.

It was as if an aperture in their vision shot open and they just managed to catch sight of sa receding forms of the heavenly invoked beings before they vanished into obscurity. They were aware that it was no mere illusion. They knew that what was taking place was certainly not the product of imagination but a matter of fact. To all outward appearances the eight priests appeared calm but a silent mental message passed through their minds and each one of them knew for certain that all the other seven had experienced what he had but a moment ago. In unison, their thoughts were that something was terribly wrong.



At around 1 p.m., in a middle class quarter of a street in Poona, long rows of chairs were placed on the side facing a line of a half-a-dozen neighbouring houses. On the verandah of the cent

house, a huge copper vessel filled with well water stood on an iron stand, with a small German silver lota, or cup, placed beside it.

People dressed in white, with long coats and their national head gear, either a pheta or pagre arrived one by one. Also seen arriving in batches of two, or three or four, were ladies young and old, dressed in sable-black sarees with sapat on their feet. The men settled themselves on the rows of chairs, after washing their faces with the water from the copper utensil prior to performing a short thread prayer. The womenfolk proceeded straight away into the inner room. Immediately on entry, each woman would stoop low before the cold body and bow to it. After making a reverential obeisance, they took their seats, squatting cross-legged on the ground that was covered with white sheets.

They sat in a semi curve, in the hollow of which was a figure wrapped in white muslin. A silver utensil containing glowing coals and burning incense lay between the corpse and the two officiating priests who were mumbling prayers in a slow rhythmical intonation. The prone figure was lying on slabs of stone carved especially for the grim purpose. Its legs were crossed as were its arms. Securely wrapped from the neck downward in white muslin, only the face was visible.

And what a face it was. Alabaster white, the lips slightly parted, revealing an exquisite double row of pearly white teeth with an inexplicable smile, seeming joyous at leaving behind the heavy cares and worries of this world. The serene smile indicated the heavenly bliss in crossing over the very threshold of paradise with but a slight tinge of sadness for having left behind his dear ones. The forehead was high without a single wrinkle upon it. One or two stray locks of hair that peeped out gave an indication of the wealth of gold on the scalp while the nose was the delicate replica of a Grecian pattern.

The hall was now full of women; there were rich and poor, young and old, pensive and thoughtless, mothers and daughters, all of them on one common platform performing their bounden homage to the grim penalty that sooner or later they would all have to pay when life's reel of golden thread either fairly spun out or snapped in twain at an untimely moment.

When more priests arrived, the final ceremony began, prior to the body being taken to the Tower of Silence a mile or two away. The room was full of the pleasant smell of rich sandalwood burning. The mood was sombre as befitted the occasion. The mother, wife and the three very beautiful young daughters of the dead man were lamenting their insufferable loss. The heartbreaking sobs of the mother and wife and other close relatives, and the loud lamentations of the three innocent girls, brought forth an abundance of sympathetic tears from the whole congregation. The only son of the dead man, standing on the threshold of the doorway from where the body of his beloved father would be taken away, was crying his heart out in silent suppressed sobs.

The clock, hanging high on the wall appeared no less sombre. An observer would have noticed the due significance of the larger hand approaching its zenith, while the smaller hand pointed at the figure two.

‘Click’.

Two miles away from the origin of the terrible sound, the chanting of the five priests, two near the doorstep, two near the body and one keeping alive the flame with rich incense, died away. A lightning intercommunicative shock passed through their minds. Something had happened.

As the hour for parting drew nigh, the wife was frantic with grief. The mother looked with devotion at her dead son’s face, quite oblivious of the world around her, when, horror of horrors, she gave out one loud piercing shriek. Pointing her right-hand finger towards the face of her dead son, she stared at it with horror-stricken eyes mixed with unbelieving unadulterated joy for a moment and then fell face forward in a dead faint.

Her scream attracted the attention of others who turned their eyes towards the point she had indicated. What they saw sent shivers down their spines, though it was a sight that ought to have made them happy.

Gradually, very gradually, almost with measured methodical precision, the smiling parting lips of the stone-cold form closed over the shining rows of pearl-white teeth. The air of sublimity imperceptibly disappeared, and was replaced by a mournful frown.

Something was terribly wrong somewhere. What could it be?



Another scene played out in a vault of huge proportions in an excellently preserved place in a certain town, the most secretive place of fire worship in India. The exact location of the place would serve us no good purpose here.

It was here that the fire, handed down to his followers by Zoroaster and that has been constantly kept burning, was seen in all its glory, glowing on a unique receptacle of precious elements. A very important ceremony was taking place before the *Kabla*, the sacred fire. It was Nowjot, the thread ceremony. A child of nine years was being inducted into the religion of his forefathers. The priests were just nearing the end of their sacred recital of the lengthy ceremony when, miles away, there was that sound.

‘Click’.

The officiating priests and the boy undergoing the ceremony got shocks through their very beings as if some unseen force had knocked against them. One of the priests, whose exclusive duty was to continually feed the fire, was in the act of putting a fragrant piece of agar on the

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