

EAST MEETS WEST

"To work, Mary, to work," cried the Collector, touching his wife on the shoulder with a switch. Mrs Turton got up awkwardly. "What do you want me to do? Oh, those purdah women! I never thought any would come. Oh dear! "

5 A little group of Indian ladies had been gathering in a third quarter of the grounds, near a rustic summer-house in which the more timid of them had already taken refuge. [...]

"I consider they ought to come over to me."

"Come along, Mary, get it over."

"I refuse to shake hands with any of the men, unless it has to be the Nawab Bahadur.

10 [...]

They ought never to have been allowed to drive in; it's so bad for them," said Mrs Turton, who had at last begun her progress to the summer-house, accompanied by Mrs Moore, Miss Quested, and a terrier. "Why they come at all I don't know. They hate it as much as we do. Talk to Mrs Mc Bryde. Her husband made her give purdah parties until she struck."

"This isn't a purdah party", corrected Miss Quested.

"Oh, really," was the haughty rejoinder.

"Do kindly tell us who these ladies are", asked Mrs Moore.

20 "You're superior to them, anyway. Don't forget that. You're superior to everyone in India except one or two of the Ranis, and they're on an equality."

Advancing, she shook hands with the group and said a few words of welcome in Urdu. She had learnt the lingo, but only to speak to her servants, so she knew none of the politer forms and of the verbs only the imperative mood. As soon as her speech was over, she enquired of her companions, "Is that what you wanted?"

25 "Please tell these ladies that I wish we could speak their language, but we have only just come to their country." [Mrs Moore said]

"Perhaps we speak yours a little," one of the ladies said.

"Why, fancy, she understands!" said Mrs Turton.

"Eastbourne, Piccadilly, High Park corner," said another of the ladies.

30 "Oh yes, they're English-speaking."

"But now we can talk: how delightful!" cried Adela, her face lighting up.

"She knows Paris also," called one of the onlookers.

35 "They pass Paris on the way, no doubt," said Mrs Turton, as if she was describing the movements of migratory birds. Her manner had grown more distant since she had discovered that some of the group was Westernized, and might apply her own standards to her.

"The shorter lady, she is my wife, she is Mrs Bhattacharya," the onlooker explained.

"The taller lady, she is my sister, she is Mrs Das."

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40 The shorter and the taller ladies both adjusted their saris, and smiled. There was a curious uncertainty about their gestures, as if they sought for a new formula which neither East nor West could provide. When Mrs batthacharya's husband spoke, she turned away from him, but she did not mind seeing the other men. Indeed, all the ladies were uncertain, cowering, recovering, giggling, making tiny gestures of atonement or despair at all that was said, and alternately fondling the terrier or

45 shrinking from him. Miss Quested now had her desired opportunity; friendly Indians were before her, and she tried to make them talk, but she failed, she strove in vain against the echoing walls of their civility. Whatever she said produced a murmur of deprecation, varying into a murmur of concern when she dropped her pocket-handkerchief.

50 She tried doing nothing, to see what that produced, and they too did nothing. Mrs Moore was equally unsuccessful. Mrs Turton waited for them with a detached expression; she had known what nonsense it all was from the first.

When they took their leave, Mrs Moore had an impulse and said to Mrs Bhattacharya, whose face she liked, "I wonder whether you would allow us to call on

55 you some day."

"When?" she replied, inclining charmingly.

"Whenever is convenient."

"All days are convenient."

"Thursday..."

60 "Most certainly."

"We shall enjoy it greatly, it would be a real pleasure. What about the time?"

"All hours."

"tell us which you would prefer. We're quite strangers to your country; we don't know when you have visitors," said Miss Quested.

65 Mrs Batthacharya seemed not to know either. Her gesture implied that she had known, since Thursdays began, that English ladies would come to see her on one of them, and so always stayed in.

Adapted from *A Passage to India* by E.M Forster (1924)