



Translated extract from

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Ilija Trojanow
The World Collector

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To

Nuruddin

&

Ranjit

Who truly cared

*

This novel is inspired by the life and work of Sir Richard Francis Burton (1821-1890). The treatment follows the biographical contours of his younger years sometimes, in matters of detail; sometimes, it distances itself from what has been handed down as record. Although I have woven a few of Burton's expressions and turns of phrase into the text, his character is above all a product of the author's fantasy, and makes no claim to be measured by biographical realities. Every person is a mystery; this holds even more true for a person one has never met. This novel is a personal approach to a mystery, which does not aim to expose it.

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Do what thy manhood bids thee to,
From none but self expect applause:
He noblest lives and noblest dies
Who makes and keeps his self-made laws.
(Richard Francis Burton, Kasidah VIII, 9)

The Last Transformation

He died early in the morning, before anyone could tell a black thread from a white one. The priest's prayers ebbed away; he moistened his lips and gulped back his spit. The doctor at his side had not moved since the pulse beneath his fingertips had subsided. Stubbornness alone had kept his patient alive; in the end his will had succumbed to a blood clot. A mottled hand lay on the dead man's crossed arms. It drew back so that a crucifix could be placed on the naked breast. Much too large, thought the doctor, decidedly Catholic, baroque as the deceased's scarred torso. The widow stood across from the doctor, on the other side of the bed. He did not dare to look her in the eye. She turned away, made her way calmly to the writing table, sat down and began to write something. The doctor noticed the priest putting the crucifix away and understood this as a sign to pack away his syringes and electric battery. It had been a long night; he would have to look for a new position. It was such a shame; he had liked the patient and had enjoyed living in this villa, high above the city with a view over the bay and, wide beyond it, the Mediterranean. He felt he was blushing and this made him blush even more. He turned away from the dead man. The priest, a few years younger than the doctor, stole a glance around the room. A map of the African continent on a wall, besieged on either side by bookshelves. The open window unsettled him, as everything unsettled him at that moment. The flitting noises reminded him of other sleepless nights. The drawing to his left, an arm's-length away, beautiful and incomprehensible, had rattled him at the very first glance. It reminded him that this Englishman had gone gallivanting around the most god-forsaken corners of the world, where only the naïve or foolhardy would dare to venture. His obstinacy was notorious. #That was as much as the priest knew about him. Yet again, the Bishop had managed to extricate himself from an unpleasant duty. It hadn't been the first time he had forced him to administer absolution to someone he did not know. Trust your common sense: this was all the Bishop offered him, as he set off. Strange advice. He had been caught off-guard by the wife, who forced him to do it, demanding the last sacrament as if the priest owed it to her. He had bowed to her will and was regretting it already. She stood in the open door, and handed the doctor an envelope, talking at him all the while. Should he say something? The priest accepted her quiet but firm thanks -- what should he say? -- and with her thanks

the unspoken request to leave. He smelled her sweat and remained silent. In the vestibule, she handed him his coat, her hand. He turned away, but did not leave; he could not go out so burdened into the night. He turned around with a jolt to face her.

– Signora ...

- You'll forgive me if I don't show you to the door?

- It was wrong. It was a mistake.

- No!

- I will have to report this to the Bishop.

- It was his final wish. You had to honour it. You'll have to excuse me, Father. I have so much to do. Your anxieties are unfounded. The Bishop knows all about it.

- You may be certain, Signora, but I do not share your conviction.

- Please pray for the salvation of his soul, that would be best for us all.

Good-bye, Father.

She spent two days at his deathbed, her prayers and internal dialogues# occasionally disturbed by visitors wishing to pay their last respects. On the third day, she woke the maid earlier than usual. The maid threw a shawl over her nightgown. She tapped her way through the woolly night to the shed where the gardener slept. He responded to her calls only when she banged against his door with a shovel. Anna, he called, has something terrible happened again? The lady needs you, she replied, and then added: Right away.

- Have you gathered firewood, Massimo?

- Yes, signora, last week, when it got cold. We've got enough ...

- I wish you to make a fire.

- Yes, signora.

- In the garden, not too close to the house, but not too far down either.

He raised a small pyre, like they did in the village at the solstice. The physical exertion warmed him slightly. His toes were wet from the dew; there was a reason to look forward to the fire. Anna came outside carrying a cup in her hand, her hair tousled as twigs of brushwood. He breathed in the coffee as he took the cup from her.

- Will it burn?

- So long as it doesn't rain.

He bent over the cup as though trying to decipher something in the liquid. He slurped.

- Should I light it?

- No. Who knows what she wants. Better wait.

The bay lightened up, a three-master dropped its sails. Trieste woke up to carriages and load-carriers. The lady of the house stepped across the lawn wearing one of her heavy, wide dresses.

- Light it.

He obeyed. *Burn burn sun bride, shine shine moon groom*, he whispered to the first flames. His father's song to the solstice. The mistress stepped closer to him; it was hard for him not to shrink away from her. She held out a book.

- Toss it in!

She had nearly touched him. Something helpless was concealed in her command. She would never be able to throw the book into the fire herself. He fingered the cover, the spots, the seam, he shrank a little from the flames, stroked the leather, searching for a memory, until it occurred to him, what it felt like -- the scar on his first-born's back.

- No.

The flames strained at the leash in every direction.

- Get somebody else. I can't do it.

- You will do it. Now.

The fire had risen to his feet. He didn't know what to say to her. Anna's voice was a tongue flickering at his ear.

- It's none of our business. If she leaves now ... the letters of recommendation, the farewell gifts. What's this book to you? Give it to me, what's so great about it?

He did not see it flying past, he only heard a crackle, a blaze, flames that winced, and as he made out the book in the fire, the cover curled up like an ingrown toenail. The maid squatted; he saw a sooty birthmark on her naked knee. The camel leather burns, a grimace cracks, page numbers burn, baboon sounds glow, Marathi, Gujarati, Sindhi evaporate, leaving behind scrawled characters that flutter in sparks before they sink as cinders. He, Massimo Gotti, a gardener from the Karst near Trieste, recognises the deceased Signore Burton in the fire: in his younger years, in old-fashioned gear. Massimo stretches out his arm, the hairs on the back of his hand are singed, the pages burn, the notes,

the threads, the bookmarks and the hair, her silky black hair, long black hair, hanging down from one end of a bier, drifting in a wind of wails. A dead woman lies just a flame-wall away, her skin tears off, her skull bursts, she begins to shrivel, until all that is left of her weighs less than her beautiful long black hair. The young officer does not know what she is called, or who she is. He cannot bear the stench much longer.

Richard Francis Burton strides hurriedly away. Picture this – he shapes his first letter home from the New World in his mind – after four months on the high seas, you arrive at last, and on the beach, they heap up pieces of wood and burn their corpses. Bang in the middle of this stinking, filthy hole called Bombay.

BRITISH INDIA

The stories of the soldier's servant's scribe

0.

First steps

After months on the high seas, marooned with chance acquaintances, talking without proportion, rationing your reading in time with the rolling waves, bartering with the servants from Hindustan: port wine for a word or two, *aste aste* in the doldrums, damn what a hangover!, *khatarnak* and *khabardar* in a storm near the Cape, the waves attacking in steep formations, no passenger could hold his dinner down in such slanting positions, some things were too hard to pronounce, the days grew stranger and stranger, everyone talking to himself, and so they drifted over the Indian Pond.

Then came the bay. Billowing sails scooped air like hands do water. They saw what they had already smelt, at first sight through a telescope rubbed with clove oil. It was impossible to tell when the land boarded the ship. The deck was an observation platform, a stage for all commentary.

– It is a tabla!

The British passengers standing at the rail were disturbed in their conversation. They turned around. An old man, an Indian, simply clad in cotton-white stood before them. He was somewhat smaller than the force of his voice. A white beard reached

down to his belly, but his forehead was smooth. He smiled in a friendly manner, but he was standing too close to them, much too close.

– A double drum. A bol of bom and bay.

The man brought out two arms and two hands and set them in motion, to accompany his deep voice.

– On the left hand the blessed bay, Bom Bahia, and on the right hand Mumba Aai, the goddess of the fisherfolk. A teental of four syllables. If you like, I will show it to you.

He had already pushed his way through them, and his two index fingers began drumming on the rail, his head shaking its mane

Bom-Bom-Bay-Bay

Bom-Bom-Bai-Bai

Mum-Mum-Bai-Bai

Bom-Bom-Bay-Bay.

– Rough and shrill, as befits a rhythm that has been beating for centuries: Europe on the other hand, India on one hand. It is simple enough, actually, for anyone who wishes to listen.

The man's eyes laughed with pleasure. The more privileged passengers were called upon to disembark; the sloop was waiting, India was just a few oar-strokes away. Burton helped one of the ladies over the rungs. When she was safely seated, her hands in her lap, he turned around. He saw the white-haired, white-bearded drummer standing on the deck, stiff, legs far apart, arms crossed behind his back. His eyes rolling around behind thick glasses. Off you go, off you go! But watch your luggage. This place isn't Britain. You are entering enemy territory! And his laughter flew away as the groaning ropes lowered the sloop down to the sea.

Upon disembarking, it became apparent the binoculars had deceived. The dock was built on spoiled fish, covered in dried urine and acrid water. Sleeves were rapidly pulled over noses. A man in uniform stood sweating and shouting atop centuries of rot firmly stomped to the ground by bare feet. The newcomers looked around cautiously. Curiosity was postponed until further notice. Leave everything to us; we'll take care of all the work! Anticipating the exchange, Richard Burton parried the annoying solicitor's sticky English with some flowery phrases of Hindustani as if he was proudly handing out samples of perfume. He called a coolie who stood off to the side, ignoring the tumult. He asked, listened, negotiated, he supervised how his

trunks were loaded onto backs and carried to one of the available *droskies*. It's not far from here, said the carriage driver, and the price is right. The carriage glided through the crowd like a towed boat. Caps and bald heads, turbans and *Topis* drifted in its wake. The ship, his home for the last four months, sunk out of sight in the growing chaos. He didn't recognize any faces in the commotion, and it took a while before he saw an image that made sense: A merchant's paws resting atop some sacks of rice in front of a store. Burton leaned back as the carriage escaped the harbor and curved into a wide street. A boy evaded the horse's hooves as late as possible, and rewarded himself with a grin for passing the test of courage. A man was getting shaved next to spinning wheels. A child without skin was held in front of him. He was horrified for a moment and then forgot it again. The driver seemed to be naming the buildings on both sides: Apollo Gate, behind it the Fort, Secretariat, Forbes House. *Sepoy!* The driver pointed to a cap with greasy hair underneath, and further down a pair of scrawny, hairy legs sticking out of dungarees that were too short. Hideous, thought Burton, those are the native soldiers I'll be commanding, my God, these clothes, sheer decoration; even their facial expression seems fake. The carriage trotted past a cluster of women with tattoos on their hands and feet. Wedding, said the driver, happily. And the smell? Henna! The decorated women disappeared around the corner. The houses, usually three stories high, seemed stricken with gangrene. A man on one of the wooden balconies coughed and spat his age onto the street. The few buildings with a bit of stature seemed like overseers in a leper colony. Burton kept catching glimpses of grey headed crows between the palm crowns. They circled over a veiled woman kissing the feet of a marble angel. Shortly before arriving at the hotel, he saw crows land on a cadaver. The driver turned around to him while going full speed, sometimes they don't wait for death to come.

The British Hotel in Bombay did not resemble the Hotel Britain in Brighton by any means. In Bombay you paid more money for less comfort; you had to find your own bed, table and chair. But, at least they told you where to find them. In Brighton, you wouldn't find a drunken cadet with heathen hair and swampy breath climbing a chair at night to peer over a muslin curtain and ogle his roommate. Burton, who hadn't gotten closer to sleep for hours, snatched up the mosquito net and threw the next best object he found under his bed at the cadet. The shot flew smack in the middle of the cadet's face. He toppled from his chair; he mumbled and swore, then lit a candle. A scream was heard: The cadet recognized what hit him; it was a rat that

Burton had just struck dead with his boot. Only the wall of material protected the lanky cadet from his own threats. Burton reached another time under the bed and grabbed a bottle of brandy. Lizards were good luck, rats were despised. The lizards hung on the wall like colorful miniatures. The rats hid. Sometimes in vain.

His neighbor on the other side was a medic on his first post. He sat on the windowsill looking out to the sea. Until the wind changed course. Watch out! he shouted through the sleeping quarters, *Hindu roast is blowing!* and his shouts fell through the narrow stairwell, onto the forehead of the slumbering Parsee, who got rid of the guests with exaggerated servility. *Close eyes and hatches.* The Parsee opened his eyes and shook his head annoyed. These damned *Ghoras* could only bear the sight with tail wind.

The medic refused to accompany Burton to the burning site. One should be on guard against false curiosity, he declared, the progeny of his father's sermons, just emerging from his mother's protection. But he allowed himself to be talked into trespassing the Carnac Road; the border between the brain of the empire and its bowels. At his first society dinner with the gentlemen, Burton discovered they wholeheartedly governed all the districts, these shopkeeper's sons, descendants of bailiffs, carried atop heathen hands from the shade into the cool, richer and more powerful than they'd have ever imagined in their wildest dreams. Their wives precisely navigated the map of the ruling prejudices. Each of their sentences set in a warning: Listen here young man! They had considerably measured and were now certain which words did justice to India. The climate: 'fatal', the attendants: 'limited', the streets: 'septic', and the Indian women: all of those things combined, which is why these, listen carefully young man! Which is why they are absolutely to be avoided, even if certain bad habits have taken hold in the meantime, as if one couldn't demand morals and self control from our men. These customs have lent a fatal facade of normality to the intolerable. But disgrace remains disgrace, even if it has come to seem normal. Best would be- you won't receive a more honest piece of advice--, best would be for you to keep away from anything foreign! You will never understand the abstruse thinking of the natives. North of the Carnac Road is where you will find everything the Indian's hide behind their backs, warned a lady with a carpet tongue warned.

Alley gout. Every step a touch. Burton had to keep jumping to the side, his attention focused on the carriers, haulers, movers. The only thing visible in the sea of humans were the heavy loads, oversized blocks hovering and swaying over the swell

of rocking heads. Rag shops. Workshops among lots of the same workshops. Pot-bellied dealers on mats hand-fanned themselves with air, behind them narrow entries lead to fly contaminated caves, bulbous like an old habit. Burton had to beg the merchants to offer him something for sale, and when they finally consented, they gave him the worst quality they had in stock, they gave their word of honor the goods were the best available, they assured him the next time and the time after that, that what they were passing off was satisfactory, until it actually was, only the tug of war, accompanied by sighs and grimaces, had to be continuously repeated to negotiate a better price.

You speak the dialect of these chaps well enough, said the medic, somewhat reproachfully. Burton laughed: The ladies from yesterday would be horrified. They most certainly think sharing a language is the same as sharing a bed. When the natives speak, the medic thought a while, it sounds strange, not really cultivated, right? It's as if, as if pebbles were rattling in a cast-iron pot. Black City. Out of the blue, a temple, a mosque, colorful speckles adorned in monochrome. The medic was disgusted by the deformed goddess, whose grimacing head was much larger than her body. Enjoy the surprise; in a city where so many tongues are at home, the mute goddess is its patron saint. They walked past a tomb. Clubs hung on the wall next to a corpse covered in green embroidered material. The magical tools of the holy Baba, a guard explained to them, gourds from Africa. Outcasts and untouchable dogs. The wilted limbs of the beggars were smeared with holy color, a deformed cow swishes her tail back and forth against the flies, her short fifth leg painted orange; further along, a person without any limbs was lying on a blanket in the middle of the alley that lead to the back entrance of the large mosque; there were coins scattered around him like drops of smallpox. A naked dark-skinned man stopped traffic. He was smeared from head to foot with fat and wore a red handkerchief around his forehead. In his hand a sword. A huge crowd collected around his unstable screams. Show me the right path, shouted the man, and held his sword in the air. An older man next to Burton murmured something in the toneless monotony of a prayer, while the naked man swung the sword like a whip and the crowd gradually turned into his enemy. What's happening here? I don't understand, what's happening here? The medic cowered behind Burton's back. The naked man spun around in a whizzing circle with the sword stretched out, until he stumbled; the sword slipped from him, some of the men from the crowd jumped him and began to punch and kick him. Don't get involved, the medic begged him, you're a grown man, maybe you're strong, but you're

no competition for these wild men. And what if they kill him? That's none of our business!

You know Dick, said the medic on the way home, they told me two monsoons would be the average life expectancy of a newcomer. Not to worry, Burton consoled him. That surely applies only to those who live too cautiously and die of constipation. Constipation? Murmured the medic. I'm not prepared for that.

1.

The Servant

Nobody would come to him at this hour. Not this scorching month. They'll be begging the Gods in the temple for rain again, but him, what should he promise Ganesh? Actually, he could break camp, close his office, ha, flee the dust, but it is too far from his sleeping quarters. Too far. So endure! In this damned heat. Paper and quill lie ready. Even though nobody would come to him. Not at this time of day, not in this scorching month. He isn't calm enough to take a nap. He got used to keeping an eye on the jackals. The way they fight over every customer, barely does he turn the corner of the *Lahiyas* then they scan him for his insecurities, until he squats down and states his order as a plea. He'd never realize he'd been cheated. By these dishonorable wretches. Jackal scribes. They still hold him in esteem, are still a bit afraid. He doesn't know what they have to be afraid of, but his voice, firmer than his body, keeps them at a distance. He can rely on his strength, on his dignified appearance, his good name, his respectable age. This time of day, this time of year, is for despairing. The earth heats up and nothing moves. No thought, no property. He stretches out his legs. The heat melts on the road. It glues to the hooves of an ox that refuses to keep going. The driver beats him, tired, whip for step, to the end of the road.

That man there, in the middle of the street. The way he looks around, the *Lahiya* knows he has a customer. The others know it to. He's immediately ambushed; he's a tall man, standing stooped; he sinks his head and raises it again; his body offers no resistance to the many hands pulling at him. Even if he escaped the first jackal, the second would grab him; the gang would rip him apart. The man keeps standing there, as if rooted, taking no step towards the tree, where the scribes blow dust from the streets off their white sheets. He raises his head again; one of the jackals separates from the group, followed by the others. They release this man who towers over them. The *Lahiya* sees the other scribes pointing at him with their know-

it-all fingers; he sees the man's eyes, and his glance falls on him like the shadow from a cloud. The tall man walks towards him, his face marked by rebellious pride and a bland grey moustache. The Lahiya knows that this time the others have been left behind; they casually bind their loincloths and gesticulate as if the world held no secrets from them. This man certainly has a wish that only the old Lahiya can fulfill.

--Writing letters to the government officials of the British Empire are my specialty.

--It isn't a typical letter...

--Also letters to the East Indian Company.

--To officers as well?

--Of course.

--It shouldn't be a formal letter.

--We write what you desire. But certain formalities must be upheld. The authorities insist on form. The smallest error in structure, the smallest omission in the formal address, and the letter isn't worth an *Anna*.

--Much has to be explained. I've taken on duties, as nobody else would...

--We'll be as detailed as the situation requires.

--I stood by him for many years. Not only here in Baroda, I moved with him when he was transferred...

--I understand, I understand

--I served him faithfully.

--Doubtless.

--He would have been lost without me.

--Of course.

--And how did he repay me for it?

--Ingratitude is the noble reward.

--I saved his life!

--May I find out to whom this letter is being addressed?

--To nobody.

--To nobody? That is most unusual.

--To no particular person.

--I understand. You wish to re-use the letter?

--No. Or yes, yes. I don't know who I should give the letter to. All of the *Angrezi* in the city knew him; it has been a long time since then, maybe too long, I don't know, some of them are certainly still in Baroda. Just this morning I saw

Lieutenant Whistler. He drove by in the carriage, one of these new carriages with half the roof made of leather, a beautiful coach. He nearly ran me over. I recognized Lieutenant Whistler immediately. He visited us several times. I ran behind the coach, he'd have to stop soon. I asked the coachman.

--and?

--No, he said, this is Colonel Whistler's coach. I was not mistaken. My master made fun of his name.

--So we'll write to Colonel Whistler!

In order to demonstrate his readiness, his ability finally to bait the customer, the *Lahiya* opens the inkwell, takes the quill in hand, dabs, scratches a sample, bends forward to make some lines and freezes. The whirling dust from the newcomer has settled. The timid voice starts telling the story from out of the tormenting light that the *Lahiya* doesn't want to squint into anymore. Speculations turn into suggestions, suggestions turn into schemes, schemes become people, unknown people turn into people with names, characteristics and faces. The *Lahiya* held the quill firmly between his fingers, but he understands neither the conclusion nor reason for the life story that this man spreads out in front of him. It doesn't make sense to write down these confused outlines.

--Listen. It doesn't work this way. Some thoughts, some notes, some sketches first, then I'll make some suggestions how we can organize the letter.

--But...I have to know, what will it cost?

--Pay two Rupies, *Naukaram-bhai*. Then we'll see how much work it requires.