

Under the Jewelled Sky



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First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Orion Books,
an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Orion House, 5 Upper Saint Martin's Lane
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN (Trade Paperback) 978 1 4091 3118 2

ISBN (Ebook) 978 1 4091 3119 9

Typeset by Deltatype Ltd, Birkenhead, Merseyside

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon CR0 4YY

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The Maharaja's Palace

There are those who like to think that the British once ruled India, but this is not so. Truth be known, they barely commanded half of it, the rest belonging to the princes and nizams, the maharajas and maharanas. Over six hundred princely states of varying sizes remained regally detached, behaving as independent, autonomous kingdoms. Some flourished under great rulers who spread peace and prosperity, dispensing protection and justice to their subjects in unequal measure. Others struggled along under tinpot rajas who adopted hedonistic lifestyles and cared nothing much for their people. Renowned for trying to outdo each other with legendary acts of excess, many drank themselves to death in the process, purchasing Rolls-Royce motorised elephants a dozen at a time while their people starved. Some rulers were tyrannical, others saintly, but most fell somewhere between the two extremes.

Within these princely states, great palaces were built. Among them were those that rose from the plains, carved from gigantic stone slabs and constructed with such precision that they had no need for mortar. Others were set within enormous fortresses, perched on mountainous terrain, their ramparts stretching to the horizon and back with towering minarets crested with golden turrets. A palace might even be seen to float upon water, casting its reflection amid a lake of lotus flowers, appearing as a shimmering mirage through the morning mists. Each palace was the statement of its ruler, an embodiment of their wealth and godliness. The greater the riches and power, the more impressive the construction. Some royal households required five thousand staff to run them, others as few as seven hundred. Astonishing grandeur could be taken as a given. It was merely a matter of scale.

Born into a life of luxury, many maharajas had been reared to

believe themselves demigods. Whether old or young when they assumed authority, they often did so whimsically. Self-indulgent, idle lives brought on old age quickly, a trait often passed down the bloodline, with certain dynasties famed for their early deaths and epicurean misrule. This maharaja was not quite so self-obsessed, but even here, in a lesser-known principality overlooking the dry plains that stretched down to the delta, his kingdom shall remain anonymous, for the family survive to this day, and no passage of time could be long enough to intrude upon the privacy of a royal dynasty. No records were permitted, not even an image of the palace itself, photographed only as a reflection in a mirror, lest any part of the Maharaja's greatness be captured and carried away by the camera.

His Highness was renowned for his penchant for pomp and ceremony, with a great deal of inconvenience thrown to his staff for good measure. His entourage was rarely fewer than thirty in number: ministers of the state government, sometimes the dewan himself, a handful of nobles of varying importance, perhaps a guest or two who might happen to be visiting the Maharaja at the time. They would travel like the great nomadic caravans of the Arabian deserts, under the watchful eye of the head of the household, who would orchestrate the ADCs and chefs and valets, the guardsmen and bearers, the maids and sweepers.

Reputations were lavishly displayed, and it was not unusual for the Maharaja to change his mind over the most complex of arrangements, sometimes several times in one day, throwing the palace into skittering uproar, instigating packing and unpacking, keeping everyone waiting for days on end. Trains were summonsed and left idling at the Maharaja's private halt for weeks, guards assembled, the engine keeping up steam and His Highness nowhere to be seen. When he did eventually appear, everyone in his presence would stoop down and touch the ground three or four times and then salute with both hands to their foreheads. But the Maharaja was far too exalted to notice their greetings, such was the insignia of his greatness.

The British among the Maharaja's staff did not stoop to the ground, of course. They would bow, or curtsy, just low enough to exhibit their respect without kowtowing to the point of humiliation. The Maharaja preferred that certain positions be held by Britishers, and

insisted upon an English comptroller, responsible for ordering and maintaining stores and overseeing the general running of the palace, a fleet of lesser staff beneath him. The Maharaja's military secretary was British too, charged with keeping the buildings in pristine condition, supervising the running of the grounds, and acting as an hotelier in seeing to the accommodations of the constant flow of guests, their daily banqueting arrangements and entertainments. Below the military secretary were the aides-de-camp, the ADCs, who would be assigned to attend to distinguished guests, meeting and greeting, acting as envoys for the Maharaja, who had not yet perfected the art of being in two places at once, despite his godliness. The Maharaja also required the services of three doctors: two Western, and one Indian Ayurvedic for those of his household who remained mistrustful of the modern ways, himself included. Only the Ayurvedic appreciated that the Maharaja's bodily apparatus and digestion was not the same as ordinary people's because he was an aristocrat.

Dr Schofield had arrived to replace the outgoing Dr Castle, whose services had been dispensed with after an unfortunate business with the Second Maharani. Bill Castle had served as a field medic in the Japanese theatre of war, and had met George Schofield in Kohima, in the far north-east of India, in 1944, shortly after being shot. Schofield had pulled the bullet out of his shoulder and patched him up just nicely, and the two doctors had become firm friends. After the rumpus with the Maharani, the palace's senior physician, Dr Reeves, had scratched his head and wondered aloud where on earth they were going to find a replacement, given the short notice and the nature of India's current situation. Bill had immediately suggested the position be offered to his friend Schofield. Judging by the most recent letter Bill had received, enclosed with a Christmas card that December, things hadn't worked out too well for George since he'd demobbed and gone back to Blighty. A stint in India might be exactly what the man needed, and there was a very comfortable living to be had out here, if one could put up with the Second Maharani's endless dramatics and imaginary ailments. A telegram was dispatched at once.

Things had been pretty grim after the war for Dr Schofield. While his wife and daughter sat out the Blitz in Granny Gasson's cottage

in Wiltshire, their street in London had been bombed. Nobody was killed in the raid, but a few days later, the Luftwaffe managed to wipe out four of their neighbours in one fell swoop. At the first groaning wail of the klaxon over the borough, Mrs Leonard had taken shelter in her coal cellar, despite the constant warnings that it was no substitute for the depths of the tube station. She would not leave her home, she had declared, for it had been built by the Victorians and was therefore as solid as the empire itself. Mrs Banks, the local midwife, had been in the throes of delivering a difficult birth five doors down. There was no way to move the mother, the child moments away, and Mrs Banks had refused to leave as the bombs rained down. Nobody knew whether the child had lived to take its first breath. Everyone in the house had perished.

Their street half obliterated, there was nothing much for the Schofield family to stay for, so when the telegraph came early one morning, George Schofield had made the decision before he had tapped the top of his soft boiled egg. Sophie had finished with school. There was no point in her staying on for further exams. With all the upheavals of the last few years, it was unsurprising that her results had been so disastrous, adding to the general air of gloom that had settled upon the family once the war had blown over and he had returned from overseas. So India it was for the three of them, in the grandest possible style, and Dr Schofield was determined to make a success of it, despite his wife's protestations. Veronica would come round soon enough. It was only natural that she had become so very out of sorts, particularly after his long absences while serving abroad, but he had hoped that things might have improved between them by now. Sophie had been badly affected by it all too. They would be able to make a fresh start here, to leave the past behind and to become a family again, and that was all that mattered to him.

Sophie crossed the blue courtyard, the high yellow sun bouncing shining rays through the water dancing in its fountain. She found the heat exhilarating, adoring the way it seeped right through her, warming her bones. Her mother had told her to stay out of the sun, and to cover her skin and wear a hat whenever she went outside. Sophie's head was bare. If questioned about it when she returned,

she would say that she had forgotten her hat, or pretend that she had remained indoors.

Through the courtyard, past the first row of pillars, Sophie turned left, determined to find the ADC's room. She was not entirely clear on the directions, the palace being a very confusing place, but she had needed to get out of their apartments. Her mother had been tetchy with her all morning, and Mrs Ripperton, wife to the first ADC, had told Sophie that she was welcome to stop by there any time for a cup of tea and a chat. Sophie had tried to find it yesterday, but had become completely discombobulated and had ended up in a huge billiard room hung with dozens of hunting trophies and carved, silver-mounted elephant tusks. Not that she minded her accidental detours in the least. The palace was like a vast wonderland of exotic treasures, and she thought that even if she died and went to heaven, it could never be a paradise such as this. She had even had a maid for a short while before her mother had dismissed her, insisting that her presence was an unnecessary and vulgar indulgence that would give Sophie ideas above her station and turn her into a sloth. But Veronica Schofield had retained her own maid, a young woman she kept at arm's length and made no attempt to communicate with other than to point and bark single words of instruction that the poor girl had no hope of comprehending.

As a child, Sophie had marvelled at the sight of fairy-tale castles of the sort illustrated in books like *Sleeping Beauty*, with forest-bound high white walls and round turrets topped with soaring Bavarian cones, but they were nothing in comparison to this. She could scarcely conceive of the imagination that could have built such a wonderful sight. It seemed to her as though it had risen miraculously out of the vast landscape, bringing with it all the gold and silver and precious stones that the earth could yield, setting them into the very walls. And the size of it! Although she had been assured by their bearer that it was quite modest in comparison to the great palaces of the more famous princely states. When they had first arrived, she had asked him how many rooms there were and had been told, quite simply, hundreds. Whether or not this was true, she could not say, as she had quickly discovered that there was a great tradition for exaggeration here.

Sophie was glad to be away from England, away from the malaise of a life that had felt like darkness closing in around her. The move had come just in time. She could not have gone on like that indefinitely, treading water day by day, watching the clock, longing for the year to turn when she could finally leave home and make her own way in the world. Each year had felt like an aeon, as though she were treading the boards in the same old theatre night after night, going through the motions of an endless dress rehearsal that might never see its opening night. On the morning of her eighteenth birthday, the milestone she had been waiting for, her mother had refused to acknowledge it, insisting that her coming-of-age was still a full three years away. Sophie would not step out of their sight until she was twenty-one, for that was the way it had been for Veronica, and she saw no reason why it should be any different for her daughter. Sophie's heart had sunk, but then they had come here, on a first-class ticket, and the dark clouds that held over her had lifted.

Sophie followed the bleached stone pathway, retracing her steps from yesterday, thinking that she should turn right at the second fountain, not left. If she went straight on, the path would eventually split and lead on to the formal Moghul gardens that stretched out before the palace, and she had already been that way. She made a mental note of her position and wondered just how long it would take before a person learned their way around the place properly. Months, she expected. Rounding a corner, a sweeper jumped to attention, startled by her sudden appearance, and stepped off the path, making way for her.

'Namaste!' she said. The sweeper mumbled beneath his hat and bowed to her as she passed. Sophie bit the inside of her lip and tried not to smile. That was about the hundredth time someone had bowed to her since they had been here, and she would never get over the thrill of it. It made her feel like royalty.

Turning right at the next fountain, she followed a cloistered walkway, decorated with gods and goddesses hewn into the walls. She passed them without stopping, feeling relatively confident that she would be successful in finding her way today if only she could keep her wits about her and concentrate on where she was going rather than being distracted every few yards by some new curiosity.

The palace was filled with them at every turn, from the translucent carnelian flowers inlaid into the stone paths, to the endless corridors lined with miles of fine rugs and chandeliers and treasures of every description.

Without realising, Sophie wandered deep into the palace's maze, staring up at the paintings, marvelling at the ornate carvings, barely noticing how far she had ambled. Before she knew it, she was hopelessly lost. The unmistakable sound of voices came towards her; women, their tuneful language scattering through the echoing corridor, gay laughter, a delicate tinkling of tiny bells. Sophie stood rigid, not daring to breathe.

She looked around, panicked, fearful of what would happen should she be caught. Nobody was allowed to see the palace women. *Nobody*. It was one of the rules that had been emphasised before they had even set one foot across the threshold. The women belonged to the Maharaja, and once they became his possessions, they were locked away for life, never to be seen again by anyone outside, shielded behind the fretworked portals of their private inner sanctum, the *zenana*. Men had been killed for attempting to set eyes on a maharani, and there were stories of how their male slaves were blinded and castrated so that they might serve the women without seeing or feeling. Thinking quickly, Sophie threw herself into the shadow of an alcove, flattening herself against the cool stone wall, praying that they would either overlook her or pass the other way. The voices neared, the agony of every long second stretching out like an eternity as she waited there, heart leaping about in her chest. She looked around in desperation, wishing that the wall would just open up and swallow her.

There are a thousand places to hide in a palace, if you know where to look. Jag knew every stone of it like the back of his hand, having been born within its confines and raised there since infancy, being mothered by all the womenfolk of its servants' quarters, who greeted him tenderly and spoiled him with sweets. He had never known his mother, never seen her likeness, although his father would sometimes compare her to a figure in a painting, or tell the stories of when they were young and happy in their faraway land, before he was born. Jag imagined it all, until every moment of it became as embedded in

him as a true memory, gathered by his own *jiva*, from the days it had spent walking on this earthly plain.

Jag had been permitted to wander wherever he wanted as a boy, and had even been encouraged to play with the Maharaja's children on occasion. But to play with them had proved impossible, as there was nothing even remotely normal about them. Of course, they had thought of themselves as perfectly normal in their fine clothes and gilded cockades, which made matters even worse. There was nothing normal about a child being saluted at every turn and having their every whim fulfilled since the moment of first breath, or stepping in and out of the palace gates just for fun, forcing the royal buglers to trumpet their arrival again and again. There was nothing normal about being given a pet leopard cub for your seventh birthday, or shooting your first tiger at twelve. There was nothing normal about any of it, unless you were a prince or a princess, and Jag was neither of these things. He was the son of a servant, an important servant he liked to think, but a servant nevertheless.

As Jag grew up and the Maharaja's children were sent off to study in the great schools and universities of Europe, he had missed them not one little bit, keeping to his own studies, diligently following his father's advice that he should take whatever education he could from this brief part of his life and grow up to be a good man, to honour the memory of his mother. When he was not studying he would work, in some part of the palace, its outbuildings or its sprawling grounds, doing whatever his father required of him. His was a busy life, his father cautious of the risks of idleness, allowing little time for his son to wander from the righteous road of useful purpose. It would be his passport to a good life, his father frequently reminded him, for he was soon to take his place in this world as every young man should.

Pinned against the wall, Sophie became aware of a small movement. A door she had not noticed, set into the marble behind her, opened the tiniest crack. She braced herself for her imminent discovery, her heart flying into her mouth. The door opened an inch further, so slowly that she could hardly bear it, and from the darkness a pair of green eyes appeared, set into the smiling face of an Indian youth of about her own age. She looked at him in desperation. He lifted a finger and

pressed it to his lips. Opening the door a little further, he stole a brief glance into the corridor, jerked back quickly and beckoned Sophie inside. Silently, gratefully, she slipped into the gap. He pulled the slab of marble closed and slid open a hatch, revealing a delicately worked panel, a shaft of light flooding into their hidden chamber, patterning the wall behind them in a bright lattice of lace-thin lines. He stood back and gestured Sophie towards the small window, inviting her to enjoy the view. The voices grew louder as the women approached, the music of heavy jewellery jangling with each step, and then, like a painting floating into view, Sophie caught a glimpse of the first Her Highness and her entourage.

She had never seen such finery in all her life. Not even in books and picture magazines. Not even in the museums and galleries her father had taken her to as a child. They moved as one, like a bird of paradise, aflame with colour, their movements as graceful as a company of dancers, wrists laden with thick golden bangles, fingers and toes adorned with jewelled rings. Their saris shimmered in the softened light, drifting cloud-like around painted faces, and through the ancient fretwork panel crept invisible tendrils of exotic perfume, rich and heavy. On they glided, this glorious sight, along the corridor of treasures and the miles of cashmere rugs, past the sculptures and the paintings, the music of their voices fading with their disappearing figures. Sophie stared out through the panel, mesmerised, and felt as though she had just witnessed a spectacle that no eyes before hers had ever seen. Soon the corridor became quiet again. She turned to the youth, who was now little more than a dark shadow behind her.

‘*Aap ki merbani,*’ she said awkwardly, tripping over the impossible words she had tried so hard to embed.

‘You are welcome,’ he replied.

‘You speak English?’ After struggling along with the servants for the last fortnight with nothing but a hopelessly inadequate phrase book to help her, a tiny and rather useless volume entitled *Hindustani Without A Master*, giving instruction on phrases such as *the boat is sinking* and *do you sell socks*, Sophie didn’t even attempt to mask her surprised delight at finding somebody she could actually talk to. She stared at him, astonished.

‘Wait for a little while,’ he said to her, his face opening into a big

smile filled with fun and mischief. 'Your eyes will soon get used to the darkness.'

Sophie did as he suggested, the dimness around them slowly revealing itself as a series of uniform shadows along a walkway that ran as far as her eyes could make out.

'Come,' he said. 'We go along here.' He led the way carefully along the narrow passageway, checking for her constantly behind him.

'Where does it lead to?'

'Anywhere you want to go. The palace is full of hidden passages and secret chambers.'

'Who uses them?'

'No one. Not anymore. They used to be used by the servants, who were supposed to remain invisible, but that was in the old days, maybe hundreds of years ago. Most of them have been forgotten now.'

Sophie followed tentatively behind him, barely able to see her feet, one hand trailing along the wall to orientate herself. His footsteps slowed and halted.

'Stop here for a moment,' he said. 'I want to show you something.' There came the sound of a match striking, bursting a sudden flare of yellow light into the darkness, illuminating his face. 'Look.' He held the flame near the wall, revealing ancient marks scratched into it. 'These are hundreds of years old.'

'Who made them?'

'I don't know.'

Sophie stared in wonder, reaching out a finger to trace over a faint line of script. 'What does it say?'

'I don't know. It is written in dialect.'

The match burned down and went out, plunging them into darkness again.

'This way,' he said, making off once more. Sophie followed gingerly, her eyes readjusting to the gloom, through which she could just about decipher the vague shape of him before her. They came to a junction, two doors set into the walls, demarcated by the slender white outline of light that seeped through the tiny gaps. 'We go this way,' he said.

By the time they reached their destination, a door at the end of another long passageway, Sophie was thoroughly muddled. The youth

turned to her in the shadows, sliding back the panel behind another fretwork hatch. He peered through, listening intently for a while.

‘There’s no one here,’ he said, and pushed the door open.

Together they emerged into a tranquil courtyard of black and white marble, where, in a flood of blinding sunshine, steps led down into a classic Italianate water garden, an oasis, lush with fragrant flowers, heavy blooms laden with perfumed petals, timid orchids clinging to the trunks of nimbu trees, peeping through. In the centre of it all sat a lotus pond, the gentle sound of water trickling from pool to pool, surrounded by rising columns replicated from a leather-bound architectural volume in the Maharaja’s library, garnished with Rajput designs. A heavenly scent hung on the still air, unwavering. Sophie’s mouth opened, speechless. She saw that he was looking at her. He seemed pleased.

‘I’m Sophie,’ she said, putting out her hand. He looked at it, but did not take it.

‘My name is Jagaan Ramakrishnan.’ He introduced himself with an unintelligible tangle of words and a small bow. ‘But you can call me Jag.’

‘How do you do?’ Sophie attempted a short curtsy, unsure of the correct mode of salutation for someone who refused to shake hands. ‘You live here in the palace?’

‘Yes.’ He hesitated. ‘Well, not quite *in* the palace as such. We live in one of the staff quarters, behind the *pilkhana*, the elephant house. My father is one of the Maharaja’s bearers.’

‘Really? Have you ever met the Maharaja?’

‘Oh yes. Many times.’

‘What is he like?’

‘Fat.’ Jag ballooned his arms. ‘And very wealthy.’

‘I can see that.’ Sophie gazed around the water garden, the walls ornamented with pretty alcoves decorated with arabesques of different-coloured stones. ‘I never quite believed that places like this really existed.’

‘We have lots of palaces in India. This one is not so grand. There are many others that are far bigger.’

‘Are we allowed to be in here?’

‘No,’ he said, laughing quietly. The water garden was not a place

that one could enjoy often, being a favourite spot of the Second Maharani. Any area that she wished to visit would be evacuated well in advance and attended only by her ladies-in-waiting so that she should not be observed by anyone unauthorised or unworthy of her presence. 'But I thought you might like to see it. It's very pretty, isn't it?' He detected a glimmer of concern in Sophie's expression, and felt a pang of worry. 'You won't tell anyone, will you?'

'No!' Sophie said. 'Of course not.' She thought for a moment, unsure of what she should do, given these unexpected circumstances. 'I hate to think what might have happened if you hadn't come along and rescued me like that. It's just that I...' She broke off. Her mother had been quite clear that she was to stay away from the Indians and she was not to speak to the servants unless she was asking for something. It was too ridiculous for words, yet Sophie did not disobey her mother lightly. She looked at Jag. 'My father is the new doctor. Dr Schofield. I was trying to find my way to the ADC's room and the next thing I knew I was lost again. We've been here for a fortnight, but still I keep taking wrong turns or going round in circles.'

'It's not so complicated,' Jag said. 'All you have to remember is that it is like a big square, with lots of other squares inside it and around it.'

'Right.' Sophie nodded as though she understood, because she didn't wish to appear stupid.

'It has been added to quite a lot over the years, with extensions being built and alterations being made by the various maharajas, but it all links up. You just have to keep your direction in mind and you will not get lost.'

'Thank you. I will try to remember that.'

'So, you are doing something important in the ADC's room?'

'Oh no, no, not really. Mr Ripperton's wife, Mrs Ripperton, she said I could pop in there whenever I wanted to, and I didn't really have anything else to do today, and I was ...' She trailed off again, not wanting to say that she was feeling bored and lonely, or that her mother was not speaking to her, and that she didn't know what to do with herself. 'I was hoping that there might be some other young people here that I might make friends with, but it seems that I'm the only one. My mother thinks I should be volunteering at the Baptist

mission every day.’ She frowned a little and chewed the corner of her lip. ‘It’s been a little bit difficult, getting used to somewhere new, especially when there’s no one to talk to.’

‘You can talk to me if you want to,’ Jag said with a half-hearted shrug. ‘I don’t mind. I like speaking English.’

Sophie looked at him again. He had the most extraordinary eyes she had ever seen: deep green, like jewels. It was the first time she had ever really looked into an Indian face, seeing the sculpt of high cheekbones, the richness of the colour of his skin, the whiteness of his teeth, the jet black of his shining hair. Tall and slender, with an easy, fluid grace to his movements and a gentle manner, this was not what she had expected at all, not after everything her mother had said about savagery and ignorance.

She wondered if she should say anything, if she should mention what her mother had told her, but it seemed so wrong. Anyway, why shouldn’t she talk to him? He was nice, and he had saved her skin, and so what if he was Indian? They were in India, after all, so who else was she supposed to make friends with? Her mother would be furious, but that would be nothing new. Everything Sophie did was wrong anyway, and she had grown tired of the constant criticism of her endless misdeeds in her mother’s eyes. Before she could stop herself, the words tumbled out.

‘My mother said that I’m not supposed to make friends with the servants.’

Sophie hoped that her term, *to make friends*, would sound less offensive than the outright declaration that she wasn’t allowed to even speak to them unless she had to. Jag stepped back from her and looked at the ground. Sophie sensed immediately that her words had been hurtful, and she wished that she could snatch them back, saying quickly, ‘But she’s been in a bad mood ever since we got here and we’ve never been to India before, or rather, my father has, but we haven’t. She didn’t even want to come, but my father said we had to.’

‘It’s all right,’ Jag said quietly. ‘I do not want you to get into any trouble.’

‘Don’t be silly.’ Sophie decided to brush her concerns aside. ‘Just this morning I was wondering how I was going to manage being stuck here for six whole months when there was nothing to do and no one

to talk to, and now look. Here I am, in this lovely garden, standing here and talking to you. I have even seen one of the maharanis today!

'You must do as your parents tell you,' Jag said.

'Do you always do as your mother says, even if she is wrong?'

'I do not have a mother. She died when I was born.'

'Oh!' A blush came violently to her cheeks. 'I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to ...'

'Please, do not apologise. You didn't know, and I am not sad about it. I never knew her, so I never missed her.'

A pause hung over them, Sophie suddenly feeling as uncomfortable as he looked.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'About what I said about not making friends with the Indians.'

'Servants,' Jag said. She looked at him. 'You said servants, not Indians.'

'Oh.' She squirmed under her embarrassment. 'Sorry. Now I've offended you even more.'

'It's OK,' he said. 'My father wouldn't want me to make friends with you either.'

'Why?' Sophie said, feeling suddenly indignant. 'Because I'm English?'

'Yes. And because you're a girl. It is indecent.'

'Indecent?'

'Of course! Everybody knows how you English girls all have hundreds of boyfriends and go out dancing and drinking and seeing the pictures in the dark without a chaperone. An Indian girl would not even be permitted to speak to a boy, let alone to make friends with them.'

'Well that's just ridiculous.'

'Ridiculous or not, it is the way of our traditions.'

'And do you agree with it?'

'It doesn't matter if I agree with it. It is the way it is.'

'Hmph.' Sophie perched herself on the edge of a balustrade, thinking. 'You know, what you said is not true. My mother would go mad if I had ever had a boyfriend, so don't you go thinking that all English girls are like that. We are mostly very prim and proper.' She found herself straightening her back, sitting more upright as though

with a book on her head, and smiled at him. 'She can be a bit difficult about things.' She reached a hand to one of the plants, touching the leaves. 'My father said we needed a change. That's why we came out here. We were all miserable back in England, what with the shortages and bombed-out streets. This was supposed to be a fresh start, but I think my mother had decided not to like it before we had even left London.'

'Your father is right,' Jag said. 'Change is definitely a good thing. Take my country, for example. India has been waiting for change for generations, and now it is finally coming. The date of independence will be declared very soon, and India shall have her freedom once more. My father is very excited about it. There will be many celebrations, and many changes.'

'So I've heard,' Sophie said. 'But aren't you worried about all that?'
'Worried? Why should I be?'

'They say there is going to be lots of trouble and that the politicians are still arguing about who will be in charge.'

'There won't be any trouble. Believe me. And what do politicians know? They are just puffing hot air and trying to make themselves look important in the newspapers because they all want to be the first president of the new independent India. Why should there be any trouble when we are finally getting what we wanted and everyone wants the same thing?' Jag stopped, holding out a silencing hand, listening intently. 'Quickly,' he said. 'I think someone is coming.'

Sophie stood up and followed him to the doorway, the hinged slab of white marble sinking invisibly back into the wall as he closed it behind them.

'What now?' she whispered, waiting for her eyes to adjust.

'Do you want to see some more of the palace?'

'Yes please.' She nodded, her heart beating a little faster.

'We'll go this way,' he said. 'It becomes steep and narrow a little way ahead, so be careful.'

'Wait! I can't see a thing!' Sophie reached out into the darkness, found the looseness of his cotton sleeve, and hung on tightly.

The First Maharani slept badly that night, unable to escape the uncomfortable feeling that a pair of eyes had been watching her today.