

an excerpt from

THE GREAT EASTERN

by

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Chapter Twenty-Two

The proposition seemed simple to him. Wherever the spider of empire sought to weave her web Nemo would snap it. Wherever news was conveyed more quickly than a man could carry it, Nemo would slow it down. He knew from the battles in own land, he knew from efforts of the Candiotes against Ottoman rule, that rapid communication could only aid the overlord. If you kill an Englishman, another grows in his place. But if you keep the Englishman here from making known his wish to the Englishman there, you've won a battle without shot being fired.

In Nemo's mind there was even more to it. What made Bundelkhand its own world was its distance from other realms. His palace was not just nine miles from Jhansi, it was three hours. Jhansi was not just 650 miles from Bombay, it was nine days if you did not for a moment cease your walking, two or three times that if you paused for rest and sustenance. Imagine, Nemo thought, if the news (good for the Habsburg Netherlands, bad for Spain) appeared at Aix the very moment it

transpired in Ghent— The rebellion would have been over before it had scarce begun.

And if the Atlantic were no longer barrier between there and here? If the Pacific could be spanned in moments? If each toll of the Lutine Bell were heard not only in the Underwriting Room of Lloyd's, but all over London, and the continent, and down to Bombay, and across to Boston, and in Peking and Djakarta, and Osaka and Auckland, the second toll rung before the first had ceased to echo?

That would be a world in which empire would ne'er again be defeated. Worse: a world in which all habit, custom, distinction, cuisine, language, visage, sport, pleasure, devotion— Musical scales, decorative jars, the clouds that scud, the clouds that linger, the specific stink of shit in the cesspool— The feel of sisal fibres on the rug that leads to the bedroom— The sound the Betwa river makes when its banks o'erflow, and the sound the Betwa river makes in drought, when it is all but dry— The high musk that seeps from beneath various bedchamber doors, only years later associated with sex— The dull clang of large pots as they are being washed just outside the Palace walls— The hot and foetid breath of the cow when it yawns— The melting sand of ground grain 'neath the tongue— The Jermyn Street cologne worn by officers of the Company, designed to convince them they'd not left

home, when every sight and smell and sound that hypothesis would contradict—
The place visited with a trusted childhood friend, small and dark and damp, that
was known to no one else, and never would be, under oath and on pain of death—
The aroma of your Amah's kitchen, which is all we know of home— Could ne'er
again be sacred. These were Dakkar's memories but surely each of us holds on to a
thought, a notion, a thing - a badge of time and place - whose meaning would be
lost were it to be worldly shared. Whatever, for you, be the flower that only in the
Andes blooms, and even there but once in each fifteen years— In this world we have
tiger here, and lion there; the elephant here, and rhinoceros there; the narwhal
here, and great white there— But in the telegrapher's kingdom all beasts would be
Company beasts; all places would be Company places; and all time, too— Until
noon in San Francisco were as midnight in Bombay. And soon all of it, rolled up in
one large tarpaulin, as big as a map of the world, as big as the world itself; and all
people places things bound up in it, here as much as there, there as much as here.
And the whole thing tied together - tight, knotted, inescapable - with thick winds of
copper cable. No. That was not the world Dakkar grew up in and not, were he to
have a say in it, the world that would inherit this one. The depredations of his own
time were bad enough. He'd make it his ambition - his life, really - that when the
sun set upon this century and rose upon the next, there would be as much spirit,
variety and distance as there were in it this very evening, here, beneath the waves of

the unanimous sea: the sea that separates, better than all else, that land from this one. He knew, our Prince and Captain did, and knew deep: that where missionaries landed, soon would come rum merchants, and soonafter the slave traders. Let them ply their evil, if they might. But let them do it in person, where they'd not be immune to slaughter or revolt. They should not have the ability to enslave by wire.

And so when Nemo's time on this planet came to end, when he was laid down in his watery grave - for there was nowhere, not e'en the Betwa River where it flows beneath the Orchha Palace in Bundelkhand, that he could now call home - he wanted to descend in peace, knowing that what was cooked by Amahs in the palace of his childhood gave out tastes and smells that were, in their precise mix and pungency, elsewhere unknown. That to eat the food of Devi's kitchen one would have to journey by sea and rail and horse and foot. And that once eaten, the tastes and smells, they would be transported, if at all, by memory alone. The trceries of mind within the cerebella of those who'd had the good fortune that unique ambrosia to eat. And if you had not been there, all you would know would be the fine and distant song, passed from mouth to ear to mouth to ear, o'er space and yes, over time— The way it should be. And the way it would remain, as long as *Nautilus* sailed, as long as Nemo were alive.