

Reza Haque

My Last Sahib

That's my last Sahib hanging from the wall,
looking as if he were Lord Clive. I call
that piece *The Thunderer*; Chinnery's hands
worked leisurely a month, and there he stands.
Would you like to have a look at him? I said
"Chinnery" by design, for never read
memsaabs like you that pictured confidence,
the depth and passion of its earnest glance,
but to myself they turned (who else puts by
the curtain I have drawn for you, but I?)
and asked how such a glance came there. It's not,
madam, just his servant's presence that wrought
that poise into the Sahib's cheek: perhaps
Chinnery chanced to say, "Milord, the straps
of the whiplash so become you, no paint
can ever hope to capture the faint
semblance between you two." Bugger! He had
a heart – how shall I say? – too soon made sad,
too easily distressed: he loathed whate'er
he looked on, and his gaze went everywhere.
Ma'am, all was one! My service at its best,
the dropping of the revenue in the West,
the bow of courtesy some Bengali Babu
made in the office for him, the brown taboo
he rose with zeal to efface – all and each
would draw from him alike the reproving speech,
or sneer, at least. He ranked men,—good! but ranked
in terms of the colour of skin, and thanked
God for having created him white. Who'd bear
this sort of cruel insult year after year?
This grew; from *Kali* I received commands;
then all sneers stopped together. There he stands
as if Lord Clive. Will you please rise and go
upstairs, madam? Notice Tipu, though,
taming a tiger: he was a real hero,
whom the French treachery brought to sorrow!
That's another story; I will save it
for the day when we – strange lovers – next meet.