

The Project

Pritti Sumanaji was bored.

Life as the manager's wife on this remote tea estate offered few stimulations. The servants took care of all those chores which had occupied her whilst she had schemed her husband's way up to his present status. Her position then had meant that she was always busy. Plotting which of his superiors to invite and impress at dinner parties had filled many happy hours. Left to his own devices he would have been quite overlooked.

Combined with such careful planning (some had called it social climbing -- so unfair!) she had to maintain their city apartment in tip-top order. All, incredibly, with just one servant! She had to ensure that Ranjit was always impeccably turned out. Always with polished shoes, sharply creased trousers and a spotless white shirt. Pritti had spent hours supervising the servant.

Her efforts were rewarded. Ranjit was now a man of importance – and she a Mem sahib of considerable status. Yet, she was bored.

The servants who now surrounded her took care of everything, and were well versed in their routines. Too well versed. Her main challenge with the house staff was their almost total refusal to accept change. This plus an inability to break through the barrier of their dialect. Introducing them to some modern example of Western gadgetry offered occasional stimulation, but not regularly. One such change had been memorable, but served also to reinforce the servant's reluctance to 'modernise'.

Tired of seeing the dhobi-wallah wash everything laboriously by hand, Pritti had an automatic washine-machine brought up and fitted in the laundry room. The need for the machine to be properly levelled was overlooked, so that the first time it came to a

spin cycle the machine had chased the dhobi-wallah, herself and assembled house staff screaming from the room. For weeks afterward even with the machine properly tamed, Pritti had been obliged to stand by the dhobi-wallah at each wash..

Outside, the gardens had been redesigned (quite unnecessarily) and the malis took care of everything. Besides, involvement in gardening was not quite the thing for the Planter's Wife. It was all right for Ranjit: her husband had the estates to run. He loved his job and the up-country life. Pritti had settled in well enough but she missed the city social life.

"Chai, Memsahib?" she heard the khansama softly ask as she lay on a rattan planter's chair on the open verandah.

"No, Maneesh. A glass of fresh lime juice instead. Please."

"Acha, Mem'. Lime juice." she heard him grumble softly as he padded back into the bungalow.

Maneesh was a good enough house steward but both he and the maid, Sunitha, were stubbornly set in the ways her predecessors had trained them to. Tea was *always* offered at this hour, and it was a deliberate rebellion, born of her ennui, that made her demand a change of beverage. She could imagine the gossip now between Maneesh, Cook, and the other staff about her erratic behaviour. No matter, she would be obeyed.

However shallow the victory, Pritti was determined to put her stamp on things. It had become an obsession. She *would* bend the servants to her will! Even so, she needed a 'Project'. Something to get her teeth into --- and, her mind made one of its almost-connected leaps. It was time that Ranjit and she hosted a dinner party for those fellow professionals and friends as were their neighbours.

'Neighbour' was a rather loose term up here in the Hills. Other than the more senior staff of the Estate itself, their nearest neighbours were just about in sight across the tea covered hills. As the crow flies no distance, but by the unpaved lanes that climbed,

dipped and wound their serpentine way from estate to estate it was a drive to be reckoned with. The 'Main' road out of the Hills was even subject to a time-controlled one-way system. However, despite the difficulties of travel, anyone invited to a function would attend, such was the dearth of social life these days.

Even that dreadful Mrs. Kumar, the supercilious widow of a former local doctor. As Mrs. Doctor Kumar she still queened it locally. It was outrageous, Pritti thought (without the slightest sense of irony.)

Sipping the over-sweetened lime juice Maneesh had brought her, Pritti felt a hand placed gently on her shoulder. 'Hello darling,' her husband asked. 'Enjoying the cool of the morning?'

'Mmm,' she replied, 'but if I don't find something to do I shall go mad.'

'Things can't be that bad. We're living the good life up here.'

'Oh, we have all the creature comforts, Ranjit – but there's so little to actually *do*.'

Her husband muttered something about 'restless spirits', and then flopping into another verandah chair, he suggested that she just needed a hobby.

'A hobby? Shall I take up stamp-collecting? Or -- start Bridge mornings?'

Ranjit fidgetted, then his face brightened as he said, 'The Mission Sisters have sent over the biggest pile of magazines. They're in the sitting room.'

Oh God, Pritti thought. Any magazine which the Mission parted with would be *centuries* old. Her mood of self-pity lightened as the servants now lay out a light luncheon for Ranjit and herself. Food always lifted her spirits, even if it meant she was plumping up a bit. That was alright; it demonstrated her status. She did not want to look like a coolie woman after all.

Ranjit, sensing her contradictory moods, bolted his food and looked positively relieved as he made his excuses and hastened back to his duties. Pritti had the grace to smile up at him as he left and said, ‘ I’ll see you later, darling. Perhaps I’ll be in a better mood by then.’

He offered her a tentative smile in return and reminded her about the magazines. Shortly afterwards she heard his car leave. Sighing, she wandered into the cool of the house. Disinterestedly, she picked up a few of the magazines from the coffee table and carried them back out to the verandah. The scent of frangipani soothed her as she eased back into the comfort of her chair. Leafing idly through the first magazine confirmed her earlier thoughts; ages old and full of fashions long since passé.

Pritti dropped it and lifted another. In boredom she flicked through the interminable pages of advertising. Her attention was briefly caught by a series of brightly illustrated recipes, but she shuddered at the thought of the stodgy foods they depicted, and their effects on her waistline.

Suddenly it was there. Totally irrational! Utterly silly! Ranjit would think her mad – but she could not tear her eyes away from the magazine article now before her.

Crazy as it was, no matter how trite it might be considered at Home in the big city, here it would be the talking point and the envy of the other ladies in their little circle. Pritti had found her Project! No matter what Ranjit might think, or what resistance he might offer, she had to have the thing now shown in detailed drawings before her -- a Serving Hatch between kitchen and dining room!

The afternoon was a whirlwind of activity. The bewildered servants were dragooned into moving furniture to clear the wall between the dining room and kitchen. Finding chalk she marked out dimensions on the teak-paneled wall.

When Ranjit returned at the end of the day she pounced upon him, squealing, ‘I’ve got it! I’ve found my Project.’

‘What ?’ he exclaimed as she dragged him into the dining room.

‘There!’ she pointed dramatically.

‘What?’

‘There. Don’t you see?’

‘See what? Ah! Wait. Yes, I’ve got it. You’ve moved the furniture.’

‘God! You can be so irritatingly. Look at the wall.’

‘What the – ? Somebody’s been scribbling on it.’

‘Oh Ranjit! It’s a Serving Hatch. Don’t you see it?’

Ranjit pulled her towards the nearest chair, assuring her that everything would be alright. Pritti practically screamed at him not to be ridiculous. Couldn’t he see? - - They’d be the first in the Hills, in the State maybe, to have a serving hatch.

The servants stared, as puzzled as Ranjit. Spotting them he demanded a brandy for the Mem – and a double for himself. Pritti pirouhetted in excitement, ‘Can’t you see their faces? Their envy. Can’t you?’

He couldn’t, ‘What’s so special about a serving hatch? They’ve been around for ages. Lots of modern houses have them.’

‘Not up here in the back of beyond. Nobody has one up here. Think. No waiting while dinner cools as servants wander backwards and forwards from the kitchen.’

Ranjit began to explain that the servants had always served food in the traditional way, but his wife’s face darkened so he closed his mouth.

'I know!' Pritti cried with fresh excitement. 'We'll invite *everbody* for a special dinner party on Friday. Ranjit, you must get some little men – carpenters – to start immediately.'

Oh Lord, he thought. Pritti firmly believed in his ability to produce 'little men' to deal with her fads and fancies. Witness the disaster of the washing machine. Still, carpentry should not be difficult.. Despite himself, Ranjit began to share his wife's enthusiasm. Any excuse for a party, he thought. But, Friday? That was just three days away.

He phoned the Estate maintenance office, and was able to assure his impatient wife that 'the little men' would arrive in the next morning. Pritti delightedly began writing up lists of invitees, even telephoning those people she could immediately reach.

Between times she demanded that Cook prepare a 'Special Menu', ordering ingredients to be brought in from outside. Over his grumbles and Sunitha's flapping at the excitement, Pritti tried, again, to explain the principle of a serving hatch to Maneesh.

Her pleas still fell upon deaf ears. It would, he said, be most unseemly and embarrassing to serve food through this strange hole in the wall. As Pritti became more insistent, the old servant fell back on long-established routine -- He went into not-understand-mode.

Pritti appealed to Ranjit to sort things out, but listening to his gentle reasoning with the servant, she interrupted with a no-nonsense declaration that she *must* be obeyed. If the house servants could not accept her changes, well, she would change them, the servants. And that was that!

Sunitha, as usual spying from the doorway, promptly had hysterics. Her hair-tearing immediately affected the Cook, dhobi-wallah and even the sweeper, her fellow-spies. Maneesh looked stunned. His was a position of importance; nobody had spoken so bluntly to him before.

Ranjit looked on, mouth agape in astonishment. Then his natural instinct as conciliator clicked in and he ushered all of the servants away to their quarters, assuring a scowling Pritti that he would sort everything out.

When he returned, his now much calmer wife was seated with the wretched magazine article open before her. She looked at him with a trusting smile and said, "There, darling, I knew that you would sort everything out for me. Those silly servants are so used to having a man in charge that they can never accept a woman giving orders,"

Oh Lord, he thought, if only you knew. But of course Pritti never did. She would always be impulsive, determined to have her own way, yet reliant upon him to smooth her path. She was maddening, but he would always indulge her. Especially when she looked as plumply kittenish as now.

As a tribute to Ranjit's managerial skills the evening meal was served on time, and peacefully. Whilst Maneesh did not appear exactly subdued, he was more than usually punctilious and attentive, and firm in his direction of the still nervous Sumitha. Pritti contented herself with acting the gracious Memsahib.

Dinner over, Ranjit was surprised to be allowed to relax in his favourite armchair, where he soon nodded off, hands comfortably folded upon his small paunch. His wife quietly occupied herself writing more invitations to the impending dinner party.

When Ranjit awoke from his cat-nap, the couple took their usual leisurely stroll through the gardens, enjoying the cool evening air and the overall peacefulness of the hills. Eventually they retired to their bedroom wing, leaving the servants to secure the bungalow for the night. Whilst she made ready for bed Pritti briefly reminded Ranjit about the carpenters – and his assurance that Maneesh would fully obey her instructions in the future.

Dreading a night of such discussions Ranjit dragged out his shower. However, to his surprise he emerged from the bathroom to find his wife, giggling like a girl, snuggled

up in his bed. Gosh, he thought, perhaps there's something to this serving hatch nonsense after all.

Pritti's thoughts were quite similar when sometime later she retired to her own bed, chuckling at the smug expression on her husband's sleeping face,

The carpenters arrived early the next morning. Their foreman evinced no surprise at the job in hand (rather to Pritti's disappointment). After jabbering away at machine-gun speed in dialect, the crew set to, and in no time a large, precise hole appeared between dining room and kitchen, exposing the worried faces of the servants. Having achieved the hole the carpenters disappeared – No explanations; they just went.

When Ranjit returned for lunch Pritti was a nervous wreck. Why had the men left? Where were they? When were they coming back? The bemused Ranjit tried valiantly to appease her, saying that the carpenters were, temporarily, needed elsewhere on a very important and urgent job. This was not what Pritti wanted to hear. What was more urgent or important than her needs? She had a dinner party to host in two day's time!

Oh God, thought Ranjit, here we go again. Thinking this, he was sure that he saw a smirk on the hovering khansama's face. In annoyance he gave the servant a quite savage dressing down. This surprised Ranjit himself as much as it did the errant Maneesh, and predictably sent Sumitha wailing to the kitchen. Ranjit however continued his lecture to the khansama and laid especial emphasis on the fact that the Mem's every instruction was to be followed, absolutely, and in every degree.

Lunch was a subdued affair. Even Pritti was shocked at her normally gentle husband's outburst (although it was quite beyond her to realise that she was the cause.). Before returning to work, her husband assured her that the hatch would be completed in time, even if he had to finish it himself. He seemed so determined that even Pritti knew better than to question him, although inwardly she was screaming.

The next two days were agony. No sign of the carpenters. Would they actually return in time? Could the hatch be finished and working properly before her guests arrived?

She could not relax or sleep properly. Her only relief was to vent her worry on Ranjit, driving him to avoid her whenever possible, and to drill Maneesh harder than any sergeant-major. Repeatedly she impressed upon the still reluctant servant that when her guests were seated at table, he must use the new serving hatch to present the food. There was to be no further talk about precedent, dignity or any other avoidance of the issue. The Memsahib's orders would be obeyed. To the letter.

The carpenters arrived mid-afternoon Friday, just as Pritti was about to explode. To her credit she gave them only a short, if poisonous, diatribe and then stood in the background as they quickly and efficiently fitted the surrounding trim. Proudly the foreman demonstrated how easily the door on the dining room side glided open in its tracks, and how unobtrusive the whole thing was when the door was closed. Pritti had to agree; the men had done a marvellous job.

There was just a lingering worry as she dismissed the carpenters and began to give Cook and his helpers last-minute instructions for the evening ahead. Maneesh really should have had a 'dress rehearsal'. Hush, she told herself; there's nothing that can go wrong, and besides she had to get herself ready to receive. Lord, there were only a few hours left – and Ranjit wasn't even home yet.

Ranjit did of course appear in good time to make himself presentable, and further checks with the kitchen assured Pritti that all was well. The guests began arriving, and by design were congregated on the verandah or the lawn below. Everybody was expertly served drinks by Maneesh and a coyly demure Sunitha. Old friends met after perhaps several weeks absence and there was an atmosphere of happy relaxation.

Pritti slipped away, and after one last check with the kitchen and one final admonition to Maneesh to use the serving hatch, she rang the crystal bell to summon her guests to table.

She had stage managed things rather well. The more important guests, including Mrs Doctor Kumar, were seated facing the serving hatch. This, gleaming with fresh oil, was discreetly but obviously highlighted by carefully placed lamps.

Pritti immediately heard a buzz of conversation as people noticed it. A few slighting comments of, 'How quaint,' and a derisory sniff from Mrs Doctor Kumar were overwhelmed by exclamations of happy surprise – and she positively preened when she heard 'Good old Pritti, she's always a trend-setter.' Had she been common she would have punched the air and yelled, 'Yes!'

She now stood with her back to the hatch, the better to enjoy her guests' reactions. Then, in the certainty of everyone's attention, she rang the bell for service. Immediately she heard the hatch door slide open. There was a collective gasp of surprise – oh so satisfying to Pritti.

Followed by a stunned silence as first one white starched trouser leg appeared in the hatchway, slowly followed by the rest of a squirming, perspiring and hugely embarrassed Maneesh carefully balancing a soup tureen.

Obeying to the letter his Mem's instructions.