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Queen Victoria's Last Love

By Rob Coldstream

In 1897, Britain celebrated
Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee -
60 years on the throne.
But the show of pomp and majesty
on London's streets
concealed a very different
royal story.
Behind palace gates,
a secret war was raging
over Queen Victoria's shocking
relationship with a servant.
Some said he was on the make.
Others that he was a spy.
But worst of all, he was an Indian.
It was a relationship that violated
Victorian taboos of race and class,
and set the Queen on a collision
course with her royal household,
who made their feelings plain.
"You are an impostor.
"You are from a very low class,
"and can never be called
a gentleman. "
This just enraged Victoria.
The worse the attacks got,
the more she defended him.
There was a place for everyone,
and everyone had place,
but Karim didn't have a place.
If one knew him today,
he would be a pain in the arse.
Abdul was not greedy.
Abdul was brown.
And therefore he was a threat.
And the Queen loved him
more than she loved them.
That, really, is what it was about.
This is a tale of love and loathing
at the heart of the British court
over the extraordinary relationship
between the most powerful
empress on earth
and her Indian servant,
Abdul Karim.

In June, 1887, in the 50th year of Queen Victoria's reign, a tall, handsome stranger walked into the Queen's life. And 10 years of trouble began. Abdul, when he was young, when he first appeared at court, looked wonderful. Queen Victoria always had a great appreciation of male beauty, and so when she saw these gorgeous clothes of sashes and turbans, um... kissing her feet, how could she resist them? Abdul Karim was one of two Indian servants who had arrived as gifts from Her Majesty's Indian empire. His role was to serve as the Queen's khitmagar, or table hand. But Victoria soon found Abdul was a man of many talents. We don't know exactly what Abdul said in that first year, when he starts to really come to her attention. All we know is that somehow he must have appealed to her romantic interest in the Orient. He started to tell her stories of India, and that hooked her. As the Empress of India, Victoria had long been fascinated by the most exotic and important jewel in her crown. The dangers of the long sea voyage made a visit to India impossible. But now, Abdul brought India to her. I think Victoria was just enchanted and enraptured with the idea of being Empress of India.

He told her stories about India.
Fables about India.
India for her was exotic,
it was a place of spices and saris,
and a place of peacocks.
It was the India of her imagination,
which was a colourful and gay
and exotic space.
And Abdul satisfied her
imaginative curiosity.
She really desperately wanted
to know about her empire.
He certainly would have given her
aspects of Muslim history,
and one of the great stories
of Indian Mogul history
is, of course, Shah Jahan,
the Emperor,
and that's how
the Taj Mahal was built.
She must have fallen for
those great romantic tales.
Young Abdul didn't just feed
the Queen's romantic imagination.
Within a few weeks of his arrival,
he was also adding some zing
to the royal taste buds.
Evidence of Karim's
kitchen revolution
is recorded in the archives
at Osborne House -
Her Majesty's favourite residence
on the Isle of Wight.
Well, this is a ledger,
and it gives a fantastic account
of the mountains of food
that were consumed here.
The influence of Abdul Karim
is very clear.
In the luncheon menu here,
for instance,
every Sunday at lunchtime,
there was always a curry dish
provided on the menu.

And here, on the 13th of February,
it was a chicken curry.

"20th of August, 1887.

"Had some excellent curry prepared
by one of my Indian servants. "

And we know that Abdul Karim
and some of the Indian attendants
cooked these curries,
they prepared the meat
and procured their own spices
and so on,
and were given a corner
of the main kitchen here at Osborne,
where they could prepare
these authentic curry dishes.

I suspect she rather enjoyed it.

With Karim in her kitchens,
the Queen's palaces were transformed
into some of Britain's first -
and finest - curry houses.

But Abdul had ambitions
to be more than just a novelty chef.
Given his class background,
which was fairly humble,
I think most people in that position
would have been fairly reticent.

Abdul Karim was not.

What he says to the Queen
is that he is a very educated man,
to the point of implying
that he can be a teacher.

Abdul was eyeing promotion.

And in Queen Victoria, the would-be
teacher found an eager pupil.

At the age of 68, the Queen
was a figure of great authority,
and much revered by her subjects.

But her private life
was marked by tragedy.

Victoria had never fully recovered
from the death of her beloved
German husband, Prince Albert.

For two decades, John Brown,
her Scottish servant,

had been the Queen's most intimate male companion.

But in 1883, Brown died.

And in Abdul Karim, the Queen found the ideal replacement.

He was a very warm man, he was very entertaining, he was jolly, he was a very human person, as such.

And maybe those were the traits that, er... attracted the Queen to him eventually, because he was a man who came across as a man of flesh and blood, and I don't think she was used to real people around her.

She wanted somebody with whom she could relate directly, um... and she craved this kind of intimacy.

You know, there's that famous quote, after Albert dies, she says, "There's nobody who can call me Victoria now. "

Certainly she was very needy, she was emotionally hungry, and she grew up without a father, and with a mother that she believed didn't love her.

She did not have an easy childhood at all.

So in later life, what she really, really needed was someone to give her unconditional attention.

In Abdul Karim, she found a man ready, willing, and able to provide it.

Just weeks after Abdul's arrival at court, the Queen made a startling announcement.

"I am learning a few words

of Hindustani.

"Young Abdul teaches me.

"He's a very strict master,
and a perfect gentleman. "

No more pots and pans for Abdul.

The 24-year-old kitchen boy
was now to be known as the Queen's
munshi, or teacher.

Entrusted with the honour
of instructing the monarch
in the official language
of her Indian subjects.

For the rest of her life, the Queen
kept a daily record of her studies
in a series of journals.

Well, here we have an example
from the Queen's Hindustani diary.

"Aaj ka din bohat atchaa rahaa.

"Shah Persia aaj hamaari mulakaatko
meh chandvasiroh keh aayi. "

"The day was very fine.

"The Shah of Persia
came to see me today

"with some of his ministers
at two o'clock'.

The script has been written
with a certain amount of fluency,
in a very enthusiastic way.

She's trying to come to grips
with something which is actually
very alien.

And the skill that is needed
for that to be done
at a competent level
is going to be very,
very significant.

So what I see is, actually,
I'm very impressed with
what she was able to achieve,
only, what, about a year after
she had started learning Hindustani.

Over the years, the Queen's
Hindustani journals
would become a secret

channel of communication
between the monarch
and her munshi.
Some of the vocabulary
seems quite suggestive.
There's things like, "The Queen
will miss Abdul. " Translate.
"Give me a hug. " Translate.
I don't think it is actually that,
but it's stuff that seems
quite personal and intimate
that they felt the need
to be able to say to each other.
With his daily doses of Hindustani,
his tales from the Taj,
and his mango chutney,
Abdul had become
the Queen's undisputed favourite.
And she didn't care who knew it.
Abdul was kind of like a pet,
really,
like a beautiful tiger or something,
walking along beside the Queen,
and sometimes,
when they were on the continent,
people were quite confused
about who he was,
because he would follow her carriage
in his own carriage.
And it was said, in France,
for example,
that he was a captured Indian prince
that she paraded around
just to show the might
of the British Empire.
But not everybody was so taken
with the Palace new boy.
On entering royal service,
Abdul had landed in a world
governed by strict codes
of class and protocol.
At the top of the court hierarchy
were the ladies and gentlemen
of the royal household.

When Abdul arrived
at the English court,
it was like entering a labyrinth,
with layers and layers of people
going out and out and out.
At the heart of it
are the lords and ladies in waiting.
These are aristocrats,
then you get the actual servants
who do the cooking and cleaning.
So the idea that somebody who's
a servant, who is an outsider,
who has none of this pedigree,
none of this background,
can suddenly leapfrog
into a position
of great closeness to the Queen
is something that they find,
well, not only threatening,
but wrong.
Abdul soon found himself at odds
with the royal household,
led by the Queen's Private
Secretary, Sir Henry Ponsonby,
and Her Majesty's doctor,
Sir James Reid.
The household had never been used
to Indian servants,
and, um,
they really didn't like it.
Sir James had to deal
with them medically,
but there was much more to it
than that,
because the Queen was obsessed
by their clothes and comfort.
She was always worrying,
and Sir James had to have special
tweeds made for them,
but they had to be in Indian styles,
because she wanted them
to look exotic.
She gave Henry Ponsonby
a dictionary,

which I can just see
his wry face, you know,
I can imagine him going back
to the family and saying,
"Oh, she's given me a...
"Imagine, she's given me
a Hindustani dictionary,
"and I've got to learn Urdu now. "
Had Abdul just been pleased,
or happy with his position
as a khitmagar,
which is a waiter at table,
and all that,
they mightn't have minded so much.
But it was that he was getting
special treatment.
The Palace simmered with quiet rage
over the servant
who didn't know his place.
But the discontent
was about to boil over
into an unprecedented civil war
between the Queen and her own court.
Christmas, 1887.
At Osborne House, the Queen's staff
and family were looking forward
to the traditional highlight
of the festive season.
There is this rather strange form of
Victorian house party entertainment.
I think it's a shame that it's
fallen by the wayside - the tableau.
What you do is that you get all your
unwilling family and friends,
you get them to dress up,
you build your own scenery.
But it doesn't really matter
if nobody can act or sing.
You just arrange yourselves
into a sort of staging
of an old master painting...
or a biblical scene.
And then all sorts
of people carry props

representing this,
that and the other,
and there's slightly wonky
palm trees in the background.
The royal am-drams had been
a fixture in the household
from the early years
of Victoria's marriage.
25 years on, the Queen's children
were still providing
the onstage talent...
as were the aristocrats
of the royal household.
Usually, the more important
positions in the theme
would be held by
the more important people
and the members of the royal family.
The arrival of Abdul Karim and the
Indian servants changed everything.
Once Victoria had
the Indians at Osborne,
this was a great boon
for the staging of tableaux,
because now they could do scenes
from the East and that sort of thing
with genuine-looking characters.
If you needed wise men
for a nativity scene,
here you had them.
Straight from the East,
the real thing.
It wasn't only the royal repertoire
that was transformed
by Karim's arrival.
With each performance, Abdul himself
inched closer to the limelight.
It's quite interesting
to chart his rise to power
from the early ones,
where he's kind of an extra.
Just a servant in the background.
But as time goes on,
he gets promoted, if you like.

This was something, I think,
he was known to be very fond of.
I understand he would be
the main star, the director,
the overall and be-all.
There's one called The King Of Egypt
where he's...
he's on a throne.
He has his own slaves fanning him.
He's clearly the top guy now.
This man was a waiter,
but here he is as the king of Egypt.
And although it was only
on the stage, you know,
it actually meant something
in real life too.
The costumed capers mirrored
a real-life palace promotion.
By 1894, Abdul was already
a regular presence
at royal receptions.
Now, he was to be officially
elevated by Queen Victoria
to the position of
Her Majesty's Indian Secretary.
'As for Abdul Karim, the Queen
can never praise him highly enough.
'He is zealous and attentive,
'a thorough gentleman
in feelings and manners. '
Karim had crossed a line.
No longer a mere servant,
he was now elevated into
the top rank of the palace hierarchy
as a member of
the royal household itself.
The Queen's gentlemen
were not amused.
In the household at the time,
status is terribly important,
and someone who came
from India who was Indian
probably wouldn't have held
positional rank below stairs

above the most junior parlour maids,
housemaids, and junior boot boys.
And so, suddenly, when the Queen
chooses this individual
and places him not just in a
position of special servant to her,
but ultimately as
her private secretary,
this really upset everyone.

Karim was not only overturning
the established order
inside the royal household,
he was also about to fall out with
the most powerful man in the empire,
the Viceroy of India himself.

It all started with
a Christmas card.

"Hearty greetings to
His Excellency, the Earl of Elgin.

"To wish you a happy Christmas. "

"From Mh. Abdul Karim

"at Windsor Castle. "

"Flow'rets fair as the morning light

"wake for you, the earth be white,

"With hearts of gold

and a breath of may,

"and a wish from my heart

to yours today. "

It's hardly likely that
the earth was going to be white
in India, but never mind.

At the Viceroy's Mansion
in Calcutta,

Abdul's attempt to ingratiate
himself cut no ice.

For somebody to start writing
in that very personal way
to the Viceroy of India,
an aristocrat of incredible
standing, was extraordinary.

Imagine it - you've been
made Viceroy of India,
you're dealing with the massive
problems of the subcontinent,

you're constantly
dealing with people
at the highest level
of that society,
and then suddenly, out of the blue,
a Christmas card arrives
from Abdul Karim.
What do you do with it?
Why's he written it?
Who is he?
Although Christmas was important,
it was very much a family thing,
and an intrusion from outside
was not, I think, really expected.
I just don't think that
anybody really felt
that you really
ought to use Christmas
for sending some sort of a greeting.
Well, why not just
send an ordinary letter?
But it was wrong,
and difficult, therefore,
to make a reply,
and it was better overlooked.
I don't think it was a question
of snobbery or anything like that.
It was just incomprehensible,
somehow.
Karim's card was returned
and quietly buried
in government files in Whitehall.
When Queen Victoria
learnt of the slight,
she leapt to Abdul's defence.
Victoria liked to
stir things up, you know?
We know this because
although she knew
that the Viceroy despised Abdul,
she insisted that
the Viceroy should reply.
You know, now
the Viceroy was perplexed.

He would not deign
to write to a lower,
a creature from the lower orders,
but he had to respond, you know.
There was a place for everyone
and everyone had a place.
But Karim didn't have a place.
And so it made life complicated,
An intruder, any dirt that
sort of got into the machinery,
it was difficult to know
how to remove it.
The Christmas card fiasco,
and Karim's promotion
as the Queen's Secretary,
stung the royal household
into attack.
They used as a weapon Lord Elgin's
former assistant Fritz Ponsonby -
the son of Victoria's
private secretary.
Fritz had been despatched
to Abdul's hometown of Agra.
His mission - to investigate
Karim's family credentials,
and he came up with
some powerful ammunition.
At court Abdul had given
the impression that his father
was a high-flying surgeon-general
in the Indian army.
The truth was rather less glamorous.
Abdul was, let's say,
slightly economical with the truth
about his family background,
and he pretended that his father had
had a position in the Indian Army,
been a glamorous surgeon.
Fritz Ponsonby discovers
that Abdul's father
was in fact a lowly apothecary
at the jail in Agra
and that Abdul's background
was not nearly

as exalted as Abdul pretended.

Ponsonby's enquiries revealed that Abdul was the second of six children from a family of decidedly modest means.

His father was a hakim, or native doctor, at Agra Jail.

A young man of limited education, Abdul had also been employed at the jail as a lowly clerk, but used his father's connections with the British authorities to push himself forward for royal duty.

When news reached the British court, the feathers began to fly.

Here was a man, who, in the view of the Victorian was of a very low class, and in the view of the Victorian was from a lesser race.

"By your presumption and arrogance, you've created for yourself a situation that can no longer be permitted to exist.

"You are an impostor.

"On the subject of your origin, we have a certificate from India about your father.

"You are from a very low class

"and can never be called a gentleman.

"To be called 'Secretary' is perfectly ridiculous. "

Abdul's embellishment of his past deepened the household's hostility.

But the Queen-Empress herself took a radically different view.

As the household began to make their attacks on Abdul, researching his family background, saying he made grandiose claims, saying he was dishonest and that sort of thing, this just enraged Victoria.

The worse the attacks got,
the more she defended him.
The Queen comes out with an
interesting statement for the time,
that it's "race prejudice" -
because there are a lot
of people at the time
who thought that, well,
the world is organised into races,
and some are better than others.
I mean, this was
an era of social Darwinism,
so she was definitely
taking a stand on that.
"To make out the Munshi is low
is really outrageous.
"Abdul feels cut to the heart
at being thus spoken of.
"The Queen is so sorry
"for the poor Munshi's
sensitive feelings. "
Under royal protection,
Abdul prospered.
The Queen gave him
not one but three houses -
at Balmoral, Windsor, and this one
in the grounds at Osborne.
She brought Karim's Indian wife
to live at court,
and even offered
intimate marital advice.
"My dear Abdul, I spoke
to Dr Reid about your dear wife.
"It may be she has
twisted something inside,
"which would account for
things not being 'regular'.
"I have had nine children myself,
"and there is nothing
I would not do to help you both. "
As the Queen's favourite,
and as an Indian,
Karim was almost
universally despised

by Victoria's staff and family.
And it wasn't only
the colour of his skin
that made Abdul the subject
of bitter resentment.
If one knew him today,
he would be a pain in the arse.
He was pompous, conceited -
you can see it in his face -
and absolutely did not think
of knowing his place.
He pushed for whatever he could get
and he was a bit of a rogue.
He was so pushy, and he was
always trying to get more and more.
You know, he got a huge amount
of money out of the Queen.
Obviously, you know, he got
a bit too big for his boots.
You know, he wanted
to be given his...
what he considered
his correct status.
And when he was on the train,
he wanted to have
a whole carriage for himself.
I mean, he always wanted
to be the top.
And then the other Indian servants
didn't like him either,
because he was domineering
and unkind to them.
He certainly doesn't
come out of it terribly well.
He was manipulative.
He simply abused the dignity
in a way that he shouldn't have had
as a personal servant to the Queen.
He abused it.
Karim was so confident
of his own importance
that by the year of Victoria's
Diamond Jubilee
he appeared to regard himself

not as Her Majesty's servant,
but as her master.
In October 1897,
a photograph is published
in The Graphic
of Queen Victoria sitting at a table
with Abdul standing right
in the centre of the photograph.
So the Queen in the photograph
is a little old lady
with a rather bent back.
Abdul is looking straight to camera,
a strong, big, solid figure,
and much more dominant
than the Queen,
and the whole iconography
of the photograph
suggests that the Queen
is basically subservient.
At every level, the photograph seems
to offend ideas about hierarchy.
This photograph produced
absolute horrified reaction,
and I think it's important
to make the point
that Abdul organises for
this photograph to be taken,
and also, I think,
sends it to the press.
In their efforts to rid themselves
of the upstart Indian,
Abdul's enemies had failed
to make his character,
his class or his race count
against him in the Queen's eyes.
As her Diamond Jubilee approached,
they hit upon
a powerful new weapon -
Abdul's religion.
In 1891, Abdul Karim set out
for the short drive from Windsor
to the sleepy village of Woking.
He was on a visit to
a controversial new building,

the first of its kind in Britain.
The Queen's Munshi, Abdul Karim,
went on Sunday to his devotions
at the Mohammedan mosque at Woking.
This custom he observes every year
and is met by Mohammedans
from all parts of England
who come to see the Munshi
and join him in prayers.
Britain's first purpose-built mosque
had opened its doors
for business in 1889.
But that didn't mean
Victorian Britain welcomed Muslims.
Across the globe,
Britain's imperial interests
were in conflict with Islam.
There were military adventures
in Egypt and the Sudan,
tensions in the Middle East
with the Ottoman sultan
and seemingly endless wars
in Afghanistan.
There'd been a certain amount of fear
of Islam for centuries.
It became much, much more explicit
in the late 19th century.
So we have people
like William Gladstone
talking about
the unspeakable and wicked Turk.
He referred to the Koran
as "that accursed book".
When congregations
actually took place,
there were indeed assaults,
physical assaults,
missiles, bricks -
people who were actually worshipping
got badly injured.
With Britain
in the grip of Islamophobia,
the presence of a Muslim within
the inner sanctum of the Empire

was potential dynamite.
Those responsible
for running the Empire
soon found cause to be worried.
The Queen thinks Mohammedans do
require more protection than Hindus.
They are decidedly
and by far the most loyal.
Abdul Karim was very influential
on Queen Victoria's view of India.
She seems to take
a decided pro-Muslim stance.
In particular,
there is a clash of festivals
and she actually
suggests to the Viceroy
that he should cancel
the Hindu festival.
And the Viceroy's reply is
to point out
this would be just as difficult to do
as cancelling Christmas in England.
Karim was not only feeding the Queen
with inflammatory advice
over religious tensions in India,
increasingly he was seen as
a security risk in his own right.
As the Queen's secretary,
Karim had access to secret documents
on vital matters of foreign policy
in Russia, Afghanistan
and the Middle East.
Government officials feared
he was feeding state secrets
to Britain's enemies
in the Islamic world.
One of his jobs
is to blot her signature
as she writes her endless letters,
but when people start saying,
"Abdul - Abdul - is allowed to read
the letters of Lord Elgin
"with important information about
the running of the great Empire,"

then this is new territory, I think.
For a personal servant to be close
to the monarchy is one thing -
for him to get involved
in politics is another.

The question was, of course,
is whether Karim in fact could read.
And nobody really ever resolved
that one.

But at the same time, of course,
Grandfather had to arrange
for a certain amount of surveillance
of a most careful nature.

In 1896, Abdul set sail for India
on his annual holiday.

But he was not alone.

"The Munshi is coming out.

"I'm not sure about the exact date
but about this time.

"But we should like to know

"if any of the intriguers
in native states and elsewhere
"make any attempt to approach him.

"Do what you can
with as little stir as possible. "

Tipped off by the Viceroy,
intelligent officers
were following Abdul's every move.
Karim's name even appeared
on a secret dossier
monitoring the political views
of every prominent Muslim in the UK.

But the Munshi was no militant.

British agents concluded
that on his holiday
Abdul was plotting nothing more
than his own enrichment.

Karim had travelled to India
to take ownership
of more than 140 acres
of prime government land in Agra,
a gift from the Queen
as a reward for his loyal service.
It was land that made Karim's family

one of the richest and most powerful
in the region.

This whole area was allotted to him.
He came with two ships loaned off,
or gifts, from England,
and very nice gifts from England.

The whole area
was known as Karim Lodge.

Now we enter his home.

This is the room...

where he used to
receive his guests.

He was a very important person.

I am told that even
the Governor-General also came here.

On his trips home, the man who had
left India as a humble waiter
now enjoyed the libertine lifestyle
of a Maharaja.

His life was very lively.

He loved music and dances, wines,
he was very fond of Indian festivals
and parties here.

He used to arrange dances
of beautiful women
and all the time
there was drinking going on.

And he loved music.

And then he used to take these
big people hunting.

But Victoria couldn't last
for long without her Abdul.

By 1897, the Queen had become
completely dependent upon him,
to the almost total exclusion
of her own staff and family.

As the Diamond Jubilee approached,
Karim took his place
at Her Majesty's side.

The household were beside themselves
over the pair's growing intimacy.

I think Queen Victoria
actually loved Abdul as a son.

We know from her letters...

They were deeply affectionate,
her letters to him, and they were
signed "your loving mother".
And so therefore Abdul was there
and he became like her son.
When Abdul became ill, Queen
Victoria insisted on visiting him.
And she would visit him
in his bedroom. This is the Queen,
going into the bedroom
of a servant twice a day.
She would sort of straighten
his pillows and stroke his hand
and make sure his fever was,
you know...
held his forehead, et cetera.
And this was breaking
all sorts of taboos.
But Abdul's life of luxury had left
him increasingly plagued by illness.
In 1897, at the start of Victoria's
Diamond Jubilee year,
the Queen's doctor, Sir James Reid,
seized his opportunity to strike.
Dr Reid, who was charged
with looking after Abdul,
told the household that Abdul
had what he called gleet,
which was his name for,
I think, gonorrhoea.
It's extraordinary
when you think about it, really,
that Dr Reid should have breached
his doctor's confidentiality
and broadcast this fact, but he did.
And when the household are told,
this is totally unacceptable,
this is really the last straw.
For the members
of the Royal household,
consorting with an Indian
was bad enough -
consorting with a diseased Indian
was beyond the pale.

Drastic measures were called for.
As the household prepared
for their traditional Easter break
in the South of France,
it fell to the Queen's Lady
of the Bedchamber, Harriet Phipps,
to deliver an ultimatum.
The household said,
"Look, if Abdul's coming to France
with us this year, then we resign.
"We don't want him. "
And the Queen flies
into a wonderfully...
a rage that only a monarch is
allowed to do.
She was in such a rage she swept all
the papers off her desk.
It would have made a wonderful bang,
all this stuff going on the floor.
It was a physical expression of fury.
In the face of the royal tantrum,
the household was forced
into a humiliating climb-down.
Desperate to bring an end
to the Munshi mania,
Victoria's own son, Bertie,
the Prince of Wales,
now stepped into the fray
with an unprecedented attack
on the monarch herself.
In 1897, the world came to London.
From across the Empire,
representatives of
Her Majesty's colonies
arrived for the Diamond Jubilee.
But as the Queen's family and staff
prepared for the ceremonies,
the Palace was mired in crisis
over the monarch and her Munshi.
So, it's 2012,
it's the Queen's Diamond Jubilee,
and the Olympic Games, and
all the world are coming to London.
You've got to think of 1897

and Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee
as the same kind of scale
of occasion.
All the eyes of the world
were going to be on London,
and most of the world
had come to London.
It was going to be the biggest thing
that had happened to the monarchy.
And yet, at the same time,
this was the year of Munshi mania.
With just weeks to go
until the celebrations
Victoria and Abdul dropped a
bombshell, over the Jubilee honours.
Karim was a go-getter,
and Queen Victoria was willing to...
facilitate this to a great extent.
Up to the point that eventually,
late in his career,
she is going along with
the suggestion
that he should be knighted.
After a decade at court,
Karim already boasted
a chestful of prestigious medals -
gifts from his ever-admiring
Queen Empress...
and one from the German Kaiser.
But for the Queen's ministers,
the prospect of Sir Abdul Karim
was one step too far.
She was in danger of
undermining the monarchy itself.
If somebody who was
the son of a hospital orderly
could be elevated
to the position of a knight,
then the message it's sending
to all the other Indian princes
is that all these different
gun salutes,
these orders of precedence -
they're meaningless.

Determined to put an end
to the crisis,
Abdul's old adversary,
the Viceroy of India,
joined forces with
the Prime Minister Lord Salisbury
to oppose Karim's knighthood.
Victoria refused to back down.
Queen Victoria was very lukewarm
about the Diamond Jubilee.
She was undergoing -
to borrow a phrase
from her descendant -
her "annus horribilis".
A terrible year.
She refused to wear a crown,
and she, at one point,
threatened to pull out
of the thing altogether.
With the success of the Jubilee
hanging in the balance,
in April 1897 Queen Victoria's son,
the Prince of Wales,
stepped into the fray.
After a fraught discussions with
her Majesty's doctor Sir James Reid,
the pair came up with a plan.
The following day, Reid visited
the Queen, and made his play.
"There are people in high places
who know Your Majesty well,
"who say to me that
the only charitable explanation
"that can be given
"is that Your Majesty is not sane.
"And that the time will come when,
"to save Your Majesty's
memory and reputation,
"it will be necessary for me
to come forward and say so. "
"I have seen the Prince of Wales
yesterday,
"and he says he's quite made up his
mind to come forward if necessary,

"because it affects the throne. "

I think for the household
actually to stand up in this way
is very remarkable.

And I think that perhaps,
at the back of their minds,
or maybe at the front of their minds,
is that the Queen is going to
appear in public very shortly,
the monarchy is going to be exposed
to public view with the Jubilee,
so it's important
that things should be in order.

The threat to have
the Queen declared insane
appeared to hit home.

For once in her life,
Victoria admitted defeat.

Abdul would remain plain "Mr Karim".

On the 22nd of June 1897,
the palace gates opened
and Britain celebrated
the Queen's 60 years on the throne.

But Victoria had the last laugh.

Throughout the celebrations
the man who had become her rock
remained at her side,
rubbing shoulders with Indian
princes and European royalty.

Ever the industrious student,
Victoria ended the day with
an entry in her Hindustani journal.

For the remaining four years
of the Queen's life
Victoria and Abdul were inseparable.

But in 1901 the Queen died
and Abdul's protection
came to an end.

Just days after the Queen's funeral,
Karim received a visit at his home
on the royal estate.

Abdul and my grandfather
were in Karim Lodge
and there was this group

that came out from the palace.
My grandfather was asked
to go into the cottage
and lay his hands on any documents
which had the royal crest on it.
And I think there was
a concerted effort to... erase him.
It was something that
he was extremely hurt about.
Karim's treasured collection
of letters and mementos
from the Queen was destroyed.
He was turned out of his houses
and banished to India.
The royal family's treatment
of Abdul Karim
after Queen Victoria's death
was far too heavy-handed,
and unjustified.
Er, the fact is that he had had
this friendship with the Queen.
To deny that friendship
was to deny, really,
the last 14 years
of the Queen's life.
With Karim's departure,
the traditional order
and its stuffy harmony
were restored
in the royal household.
And, as for Abdul,
he retired to his estates in Agra.
But the local boy-made-good
didn't live to enjoy his celebrity.
The high life had taken its toll
on Abdul's health.
He died in 1909, at the age of 46.
"This is the last resting place
of Hafiz Mohammed Abdul Karim.
"He is now alone in the world.
"His caste was
the highest in Hindustan.
"None can compare with him. "
I like his chutzpah.

Here was an Indian pushing himself,
and politically, I would say,
it's extremely good to cock a snook
at the royal household.

When you look at Abdul's sort of
meteoric ascent in the court,
I think he's a very clever operator.
He's incredibly impressive, actually.
You know, full marks to Abdul.