

## Fitcher Penrose (Ghosh's novel *River of Smoke*) Predatory

**Character** Frederick Fitcher Penrose is as eccentric as his name. He is an intriguing mirror-image of Bahram Modi, the opium trader who is the novel's main character. Like Modi, Penrose is a Victorian adventurer whose ambition is to plunder the riches of Asia for his own gain. The only difference is that Penrose is a botanist. He is attracted, in particular, by the legend of a certain golden camellia, which he pursues on land with the determination of a mercantile entrepreneur on the seas. While Penrose appears to be harmless and eccentric, he harbours a deep-seated desire to acquire. Indeed, he looks upon the natural world as 'an assortment of puzzles' which when a proper solution is found 'could provide rich sources of profit.' He alienates his sons who regard plants as 'no different from doorknobs, or sausages, or any other object that could be sold for a price on the market.' As a botanist, he is observant, though not always of people. He has a high opinion of himself and takes pleasure in correcting others, especially in botanical matters.

**Activities** Penrose spends most of his time rambling about the countryside in Cornwall and China, hunting for plants. We also find him, in Cornwall, on the *Redruth*, a boat that he has bought and refitted for his long sea voyages. In addition, he likes to browse in libraries, searching for old botanical books, and especially those with illustrations.

### Illustrative moments

*Predatory* A good example of Penrose's predatory nature occurs while he is sailing on the Cornish coast with Paulette. As usual, they have set out several nets to catch fish, but when Penrose hauls his in, he finds only a sea-porpoise. Paulette would like to set it free, but Penrose won't hear of it. 'He was delighted to see the plump creature floundering around on the deck', and then he 'swiftly slaughtered it and stripped it of its fat.' The only part of the porpoise that he did not utilise was its 'excrements,' paralleling the rapacious exploitation in the opium trade and colonial trade more generally. Like Bahram Modi, Penrose's quest remains inconclusive. 'Not for nothing was it said in Cornwall that he was so near with his pennies that he would skin a turd for its tallow.'

*Puritan* Another unsympathetic element in Penrose's character, one in contrast to Modi, is his puritanism. As the author puts it, 'he had no use for luxuries, and his wealth was a source not of comfort, but of anxiety—it was a burden, like a sack of cabbages that had to be hoarded in the cellar for seasons of scarcity.' This spartan approach to life is displayed while he is a gardener in his native Cornwall and his employed, a wealthy landowner asks him how much water his roses require. 'As much as the Lord gives, sir.' And how much is that, his boss persists. 'A cup a day, sir, and not one drop more,' Penrose replies. 'Not one single drop more, for that would be a sinful waste.'

*Ambitious* Perhaps the least undesirable of his qualities is ambition. We get a good example of this midway through the novel, when he is offered a chance to return to China, in order to hunt for the elusive camellia. This time, he would go not as the representative of Kew Gardens (in public hands) but employed by a private group of investors (led by Sir Joseph Banks, the real-life head of Kew Gardens), who are keen to find the magical plant. The voyage would disrupt his life—his young wife was pregnant, and he would lose his permanent job at Kew Gardens—but he knew that he would seize this opportunity with both hands. When Sir Joseph handed him a picture of the camellia, Penrose says, 'Yes, sir. Yes, I will go. I will start tomorrow.'