

THE LIGHT HORSE



J. D. Brayton

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The Light Horse is the story of two men who join forces to capture one of the most dreaded murderers in history; one man driven by sworn duty, and the other man by vengeance; a psychological thriller based on documented fact, written after years of research into this compelling and nearly unbelievable chapter of British/India history.

The Light Horse

by

J. D. Brayton

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J.D. Brayton



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Prologue

Suttee

Even the vultures had fallen into a silence in the tamarind trees by the river in the blazing midday heat. They perched in a slump and remained motionless under a blue sky drenched in a sun only Bengal can claim. They, the vultures, by nature and necessity, are patient creatures sacred to the God of mendicants – Lord Shiva. Instinct bound by life, death, and the certain dispersal of rot and carrion left by mortality and unnecessary flesh.

They are in Bengal the sacred *shokun*.

She sat on the river rocks, head bowed, cross-legged and covered by a pure white shawl. She was bare footed, and her hands rested on her thighs, open and offering her bronze palms to the sky – a Brahmin woman in her late forties – thin, well-proportioned and quite beautiful despite the suffering and deprivation. She had subjected herself to this willingly. Her nephews and sons had come and gone leaving small offerings of food and replenishing the water in a small earthen pot they had left by her side. They could be seen kneeling and begging her to stop her fasting and come back with them and abandon her slow starvation and death by exposure. It had been four days since she had spoken or even acknowledged their presence, or heard their entreaties to quit this slow starvation and certain death by the brutal Bengali sun in the day and the chill of the early autumnal night. She had only just begun to show the strain of her vigil by an occasional involuntary pitching forward or backwards when fatigue caused her body to lurch quickly in spasms she was less able to control with every passing hour.

He sat there also. For all four days and nights he sat under a mango tree fifty yards from her by the river Nerbudda and watched her while making entries into his journal or signing official papers brought by his personal courtier, a sepoy, Talu – holding the rank of a *naik*, or corporal in the native units – who approached with strict orders not to make any more noise than necessary. Conversation was to be kept to a minimum. Any mounts were to be left at fifty yards. Food or water was to be brought up on foot. He, the *burra* – a commanding colonel of the East India Company – slept there as well on a simple military issued bedroll used by Her Majesty's native field regiments. The *Burra sahib* ate sparingly, eschewing any form of meat or heavy European victuals that might make his body weak under the strain of the harsh climate of Bengal. He had learned to adapt from years in the country and by observing the habits and customs of the natives

in all the provinces he had been stationed in since his training and commission as a field officer in the East India Company back in 1824.

Now he waited. Not only out of respect, but out of duty. It was by the formal edict that the practice of *suttee* be stopped in any area under which control was exercised by the Marquis of Dalhousie and by command of Lord Bentinck in 1829. He knew there would be formidable opposition by all observant Hindus. The practice of *suttee* was sacred and ingrained within the Brahmin caste. Under the watchful eyes of the British the practice could be slowed, denied, and perhaps eventually stamped out. Neither he nor the empire could expect a mere edict to stop the practice overnight. He had witnessed a *suttee* firsthand a year earlier in Jubbulpore when he had been unable to enforce the edict as it was not his jurisdiction or prudent to interfere. He had watched fascinated and horrified as the widow sat motionless while her male relations prayed as they circled the pyre and lit the wood ablaze and burned the old woman alive. She died without uttering a sound. He had seen much in his service throughout India, from his present crusade to stamp out the gangs of dacoit and the cults of Thuggee to the horrors of death by torture, but this spectacle had broken his heart. He vowed to do all in his power to stop this practice wherever he could. Though *suttee* was voluntary, it was done with not only the approval of a widow who wished to follow her husband in death, but all her male relations, who purchased the wood necessary and paid for the services of a Brahman priest to pray as the widow died by immolation surrounded by family. He had been with dear Amalie, who at the time was eight months pregnant with their first child. She had covered her mouth in horror and wept when the fires were lit. They'd spoken in her native French, as Amalie had not yet mastered English enough to convey passion: "My God, William – can you not stop them?"

"No, my dearest – I cannot. We are outnumbered and would be the cause of an incident, or we might possibly be attacked were I to interfere with this abomination. I swear my love – when we reach my post and take up residence in Saugor, I will not allow such a thing to take place ever again if it be in my power to forbid it."

He could never forget the look on his dear wife's face as the flames leaped higher into the morning sky, their party stalled by the throng blocking the path of retreat. She had released her white veil to cover her face, wept quietly for a bit, and then steeled herself with a fortitude that made him realize how deeply he loved her. They had never spoke of it again until four days ago, when a group of Brahmin approached him at his official residence with a formal request to allow

a recently widowed woman, and mother of eight, to become *suttee* in two days' time. He had given his official disapproval and knew that without an official military interdiction, the ritual would go forward. The woman would be burned alive. He had decided that use of military force was both unwise and insensitive. He could not risk an insurrection. He was new to his post, and only the respect of the native peoples would avert an incident. And now he sat under the mango tree in a battle of wills with the Brahmin's wife and his dedication to duty. He had refused, despite written petitions by the woman's family, to allow the woman to voluntarily immolate herself and have her ashes mixed with those of her husband's. Her husband had been a village durbur and of the Brahmin caste and held political power. It was unthinkable for any to refuse this request, especially a pashu-an unbeliever, a foreigner – no matter that he was a Colonel in the British company and the newly installed resident commandant of the province. That this edict formally outlawing the ritual practice of *suttee* was handed down by the highest office of Her Majesty's governor-general of India, Lord Bentinck, was of little difference in the face of a millennia of religious ritual. He had personally spoken with reverence and empathy to the widow as they sat face to face on the banks of the river, alone and without a tone of officiousness. He spoke in fluent Bengali to her. He was gentle and respectful.

“Naw mo shkar, Mother... why must you do this thing? Is there not grief enough with the passing of this great man who was your husband?”

“Naw mo shkar, Colonel... simply because I am his, sir. And so shall we always be together.”

“I see no advantage to ending your life in this way, mother. Will not your children and grandchildren be in grief for the years you have yet to spend and enrich them? How could your death in so dramatic and painful a fashion be embraced by those whom you love and whom you bore in your womb and brought into this world? Would not your long life of wisdom and your ability to teach your children of the deeds of this great man, your honored husband, whom you deeply loved, be worth so much more than this senseless act?”

“I am in the act of love by so doing, my dear colonel. They embrace and understand my faith and need. My body is of no worth. My soul is his. I shall cease to feel pain. I will cease in want or desire.”

“Mother, I cannot allow *suttee*. It is banished and outlawed by official decree. It is a cruel and unnecessary fate for one so genuinely revered by so many. You are loved, mother. Not all

desire that you do this thing. Two of your nephews, your grandson, and your daughter have personally asked that I intercede. Have they not said so to you personally, mother? Have they not begged you to stay and live with them? You will not want for any sustenance. You may grow old and give wise counsel to the young who need it so.”

“I will be a burden, Burra sahib. My heart is no longer of this world. My husband awaits me. You are kind. You are strong but you know little of our Brahmin ways. Death is to you a pashu, a firenge, is such a finality. To us it is a door to all beginnings.”

“You are faithful, mother. You are beautiful in your loyalty. I will not allow suttee. I will not.”

“Then you and I, sir, will wait with the shokun. We shall all be in the circle. Speak with me no more. I am resolute.”

“I wish you peace, mother. I too am resolute that there shall be no suttee. I am thus constrained in heart and duty.”

He returned to the shade of the mango tree and drank the strong black Assam tea, read through his daily official papers, and made the occasional entry into his journal, whereupon he started a series of pencil sketches of the woman on her rock by the river’s edge. *Narrissa awaits* was the caption he gave it, and he slowly added detail as the days progressed. His sepoy came in the heat of the late afternoon with more dispatches from the Calcutta office.

“*Burra* sahib, there is a troupe of Bauls who beg permission to come and pick from the jackfruit trees. From this they make their instruments. They wait a half a kilometer away before they approach. They are aware of the Sut *Narrissa*.”

“She weakens. Unless there is another that may convince her, I am certain she shall expire very soon.”

“Indeed, Colonel Sleeman. She is Sut. If even her grandchildren cannot sway her, she shall surely die.”

They both looked at her sitting in the withering heat as the nilkontho birds chattered overhead, devouring bits of fruit and the insects about the mango tree. The sepoy watched the birds above him in the mango tree and soon allowed his gaze to fall upon the vultures who gathered in the distant tamarind grove near the river. They perched on the branches, hunched over, and moved little, only enough to fluff their feathers and dance for new footing, waiting for the inevitable.

“*Burra sahib*, these nilkontho birds in our tree are sacred to Durga. They know her time is near.”

“Talu, this is superstitious nonsense. This woman wills her own death. In her grief she has abandoned all hope. I shall not allow suttee... but other than my occasional words I can do little to prevent her death. Then they can bring wood to fire, when she dies, but not before.”

“Yes, *Burra sahib*. Many in the village do not deny you are a Britishman with strength and conviction to stay and keep so long a watch on this woman. Still more grumble – but none dare insult you because they see you as a man of honor. They also know of your suppression of the dreaded Thugee. They call you the fierce *Beelha* – the enemy of Thugs.”

“Talu, it is my duty. Nothing more, nothing less. It grieves me to watch this creature of God die a slow and miserable death by exposure. Still, she must not burn alive. Honor is important. But I feel little honor when I know I must see her die in this way. Please go and replenish the jug by her side with fresh, cool water.”

“*Han*. And the troupe of Bauls?”

“Talu – do you know that I have heard that some Bauls have been employed by the Thugee as inveiglers and *sothas*? “

“*Han* – I do, Colonel – but with respect, that number is few. Those are surely heretics. These Baul are of a sect worshipping of music and Krishna. The most of them embrace the beauty and song of the heart. Most do not go with the Thugee. They do no murder. They are considered purely mad with embrace of the songs of ancient ages. None carry weapons other than simple knives needed for gathering food. This is a very exalted troupe, sir. I speak as a Bengali, *Burra* Colonel. Their leader has a son who is a very great poet and mystic.” The colonel grunted in measured cynicism. He weighed the situation carefully for a few moments. He could read no guile in the face of the sepoy, his personal aid-de-camp.

“*Bhaa-lo*... after you bring this woman water go and give permission for the troupe to make their camp by the grove of jackfruit trees. Post two armed guards. Allow no one to approach the *Sut*. Bring their leader here to me, and this mystic son of his. Tell him to bring his instrument.”

“As you order, sir.” the sepoy saluted and began to refill the colonel’s canteen with fresh water.

“*Naa*, no... Talu... her first – I shall wait. Leave your weapon.” The sepoy nodded, took his rifle off his back, and leaned it in a crook of the mango tree. He walked slowly out of the shade

into the sun toward the woman who sat nearly doubled over and severely weakened by the heat. The colonel filled his ivory pipe with loose tobacco, lit it, and thought of Amelie. She was eight months pregnant and needed a proper residence. She had become used to rough travel, and had stood it with remarkable stoicism and none but the rarest of complaints. They were a solid week of travel away from his new official command in the provincial post beyond Calcutta in the highlands of Bengal. This delay vexed him, but it was her entreaties and his official duty to see this through. He had learned from his years in India that respect of the natives, his officers, and sepoy came not through the artifice and the officious conduct of so many British commanders, but through personal presence and hardship in dire circumstance in the field. Colonel William Sleeman never asked anyone in his command to do what he himself would not do ten times over. This is how he ruthlessly tracked down the bands of Thugee in Hyderabad, and built a system of approvers and informers that had begun to break the back of the cult of the Thugee in India. These bands of stranglers had preyed on uncounted thousands of innocent travelers on the roads and trade routes of North Central India since before recorded history, or the British incursion. It had taken solid evidence to convince the high command to allow him to make the destruction of the Thugee his official mission, but he had done so. Especially after several bodies of sepoy soldiers, who had been strangled and robbed of treasure and pay chests bound for the provincial capital had been found by information given by Thugee informers.

The sepoy returned and filled the Colonel's canteen.

"Talu; have you a sepoy available to retrieve an umbrella from my camp?"

"I shall send word immediately to bring it."

"Do so immediately, Talu. And your assessment?"

"Very dire, *Burra sahib*. She will die very soon if she does not drink water."

"*Han...* Yes. Go quickly. Bring the Baul leader and the umbrella."

The sepoy returned in an hour's time with a large umbrella. He was soaked in sweat and accompanied by two Bauls- one young and one old. Both wore the orange-saffron dyed robes and the younger of the two carried a one stringed *ektara* slung over his back. Colonel Sleeman looked straight ahead to the woman as they drew near. They stopped a respectful distance from the shade of the tree. The colonel relit his pipe, still averting his direct gaze. He got a good coal going and allowed the smoke to pass over and around the party before he bade them come into the shade and sit. The *naik* sepoy remained standing at attention.

“Talu, give me the umbrella and help me on with my colors.”

“*Han*, Colonel. Do you require assistance erecting the umbrella?”

“No. My jacket, please.” Talu helped the colonel on with his regimental jacket and handed him his hat.

“Talu, I’ll return presently. Please be at ease and start tea for our guests. Afterwards, when I return, I’ll have a word with them.”

Colonel Sleeman picked up the umbrella and balanced it on his shoulder. He walked out of the shade of the mango tree and walked with all the grace of a regimental commander in the field. He picked his way across the rocks until he stood beside her. She had become much, much worse since they had first spoken. Her frail figure stooped in the hellish afternoon sun. The heat had caused her lips to become chapped, cracked, and nearly black. There was dried blood upon her chin.

“Mother, I shan’t be but a moment or two.”

“You are such an odd Britishman. You come to shade me from fate?”

“I am a man of science, tactics, and the rule of logic, mother. If you are to die here, as is your wish, I cannot abide the torture. It is both unnecessary and illegal.”

“You are a very odd man.”

The colonel struggled to find three rocks into which he wedged the shaft of the large umbrella. He managed to open it and with some difficulty adjust it so that the emaciated woman was protected by the shade. “You could not send a sepoy for such degrading duty?”

“With your permission, mother – may I sit just a moment?”

“You must do as you wish.”

Sleeman removed his hat and sat cross-legged at her side. They allowed a few moments of silence to pass between them as the vultures squalled and fought for position in the trees fifty yards away.

“Mother – I do not send others to do anything that I would not do myself. I do not consider this act degrading in the least.”

“If I had the strength, I would remove your umbrella forthwith.”

“Madam. Please be advised that this umbrella is the property of Her Majesty’s 112 Regimental Dragoons and must not be tampered with or moved without my orders or consent. I shall so advise any members of your family, or any persons who approach this spot.

Accordingly, I shall also decree that any person or persons who are caught doing so will be arrested and brought to the stockade in manacles.”

“Ah. Will you hang them also?”

“Certainly not.”

“And if I find the strength to do so?”

“In your case, mother, I would most certainly sentence you to life.” The colonel allowed a hint of a smile to play on his lips.

“You are a very, very odd man.”

The colonel rose up and placed his cap on his head before bowing deferentially.

“Mother, due to the gravity of the situation I consider it an honor that you judge me so. Please, at least sip some water from time to time. There is no need to be in pain.”

“May the blessing of Lord Shiva be upon you, Colonel.”

“Thank you, madam. You shall have another visitor soon.”

“So, I am by your decree having a very busy day.”

“By your leave, madam.”

Colonel Sleeman bowed once more and slowly picked his way across the rocks and back to the mango grove where his guests sat drinking cups of tea and speaking quietly in Bengali. As he came closer, Talu began to rise in deference to the commandant.

“At ease, Corporal. Remain seated. And how do our guests like our finest black tea from our company plantations in Assam?”

“They are well pleased, Colonel, and send you their sincere compliments.”

The colonel bowed to the two seated musicians dressed in traditional saffron *alkhalla* robes. He took off his regimental cap and his uniform coat. He greeted them as Hindus.

“Naw mo shkar.”

“Naw mo shkar,” the two men answered.

Colonel Sleeman continued in English. Though he was quite fluent in Bengali, the dialect of the wandering Baul musicians was unknown to him. He allowed Corporal Talu to interpret the proceedings.

“Corporal, please convey my regret that I am so informal, but the afternoon heat is quite oppressive. Assure them that I have no wish to offend them by being too casual. Please assure them that I regret that I have made them wait.”

Corporal Talu did so, and both men bowed and made salaam. Talu reached for the colonel's camp stool, but Sleeman refused it, choosing instead to sit cross-legged on the ground carpet with the men. Talu poured his colonel a cup of tea and handed it steaming in a saucer over to him. Colonel looked at each man thoughtfully as he blew on the hot brew.

"May I ask to whom I have the pleasure of addressing, corporal?"

"The elder gentleman is the leader of the troupe, sir, he is called Infir das Fahakir. The younger is his son and the one about whom I have spoken. He is perhaps the most gifted Baul of our time, Colonel. He is one called Lalan. They say he is a mystic and touched by a talent only bestowed by Lord Krishna himself."

"I see. Does he purport to be these things? A mystic? A seer?"

"He does not, sir. He seems almost unaware of his fame."

"He seems to be as any other traveler to me. I am not one well known for being overly circumspect in these matters."

"As you wish, sahib Colonel."

"I am most impolite in speaking English, gentleman," said the colonel switching to Bengali, addressing first the elder and then the younger. "My mastery of Bengali is rudimentary at best. I shall try not to add to your discomfort. Hence, I shall rely on my trusted sergeant to make my requests more clear." Both men smiled and made salaam. They too switched from their native dialect to Bengali.

"We are most honored to be called into your presence, sahib Colonel. Your fame is great, your courage uncontained, and your success in stamping out the dreaded stranglers from our land can never be repaid. The name of Sleeman is honored," spoke the elder, again touching his forehead with great reverence.

"I must be blunt, sir. Her Majesty's service is the greatest honor in my life, and I shan't take credit for a job that is far from complete. You must also be aware that I know many rumors exist that some Bauls move with the Thugee Feringeea and are employed as inveiglers aiding him in his evil acts."

"This, sahib Colonel Sleeman, is a matter of great disgrace that but a very sordid few would bring upon we who serve Krishna in song and verse. We ask nothing. We own little. We have only our love of the great one and our song to sustain us. No such persons or acts would be tolerated amongst my people. You have my word."

“Your word, Infir das-Fahakir, is respected here. My aide Talu has told me of your loyalty. I ask you now if you have any rumor of Feringeea the Thugee or of the movements of other bands of dacoit in this province?”

“Only that they are hunted and remain active to the north with increased caution. You are known, sahib Colonel, to be a ruthless *beelha* in capture but fair in justice. Still, they are certain of their goddess Bhowanee’s protection.”

“No true goddess would sanction the brutality and murder committed by the Thugee in the auspice of religion. I have been present at the unearthing of the *bele*, the burial places of these most unholy, ghastly murders. I have seen horrors few would imagine, Infir das-Fahakir, and I have seen innocent women and children slain mercilessly and buried secretly where none could mourn them. This scourge will no longer be tolerated by Her Majesty’s East India regiments or by me or by the peoples of India. They will all be hunted, captured, and hung. Or some may be granted mercy. If they become approvers in my service, they will be spared and trained at my prison at Jubbalpore. As I breathe, none will escape.”

“May you be blessed and granted strength by Krishna and sustained by Vishnu and your purpose granted the swift surety of Lord Shiva.”

“I welcome your support, Infir das Fahakir. And you, sir,” said the colonel, nodding to the young man holding his *ektara*, the one stringed instrument favored by the Bauls, “may I compliment you on the fine workmanship and magnificent carving on your instrument. I am told by my *naik* that you are praised widely for your abilities.”

The young man smiled and gave salaam. “I do only as my soul dictates, great one. This is my honor. Nothing less.”

“You are Lalan das Fahakir?”

“I am at your service, sahib Colonel.”

“I wish to ask a great favor of you, for which you will be handsomely rewarded.”

“I ask nothing from one so blessed, sahib Colonel.”

“The woman by the river yonder begs to be made *Sut*, and this is no longer legal in His Majesty’s territories. Corporal Talu has told me of your genius in composing poetry and song.”

“He is indeed this, sahib Colonel,” interjected Infir das Fahakir, placing an affectionate hand on his son’s shoulder. “Lalan is blessed by Lord Krishna and a source of unending pride to we humble Bauls.”

“Your fame in so great a country is worthy of recognition, Lalan das Fahakir. I ask as an agent of Her Majesty that you find inspiration on this day to save this poor woman’s life.”

“That you entrust me with so noble a request, sahib Colonel Sleeman, is a great honor. I pray Lord Krishna will grant me the verse I shall need to be successful.”

“She has great nobility in her face and manner. She is an intelligent woman beset by grief and the sorrow of her husband’s passing. Many within her own family clearly wish her to live. I fear that she is quite close to death. She may have a day, or an hour yet to survive. I cannot say. Go to her, Lalan das Fahakir. She has five children and seventeen great grandchildren. I see great love and poetry in her eyes, if I may characterize it as such. You must summon all within you. Sing to this woman. Awaken her love of life. Do this, Lalan das Fahakir, and you shall be granted an official pass by my own decree that you and your band be fed and given Her Majesty’s protection wheresoever you wander within Bengal or India. You shall be given provisions and have access to my personal physician while you camp here.”

“Your generosity is beyond measure, sahib Colonel. I am humbled.”

“Do you require other musicians from your number?”

“No sahib.”

The colonel switched back to English. “Corporal Talu, please give Infir das Fahakir an escort back to his encampment. Provide him with an extra allotment of rice and lentils from our camp stores. Ask Doctor Smithington to go to the camp and administer to any who are in need.”

“Han, Burra sahib.”

Once the colonel and Lalan were alone, the Baul sipped the last of his tea, looking at the colonel in a curious, and almost familiar manner for a native to regard a British officer. This made Sleeman a bit uncomfortable, but he too finished his tea and began to make notes in his daily journal. The Baul began a quick test of the tuning of his instrument. He then simply sat, staring at Colonel Sleeman. The colonel addressed the Baul without looking up from his journal. “Sir, is there any more you require from me? Will you soon begin?”

“With great pleasure, Colonel, but I ask your permission to speak honestly now that it is just we two.”

“Proceed.”

“I mean no disrespect to you as a British officer in any way, but I must state plainly that I do not undertake this task simply because of my position as subservient to the power of the British forces, or your rank, your king, the *sut*, or any other reason – except one.”

The colonel raised his eyebrows. This was a rather blunt speech from an itinerant musician.

“And that is?”

“I dreamt of our meeting. I know this outcome. And please don’t think me overly familiar or odd, but I see who and what you truly are.”

“This borders on insolence, sir.”

“Please, Colonel... I mean no disrespect – simply hear me. You are more than what even you yourself know. You are blessed by the great God Vishnu – the protector. You are exalted above all beings in one task. You and only you will save countless thousands of beings from the evil that has beset this land since before time.”

“I am a man of duty and discipline, Lalan das Fahakir, nothing more and nothing less. I serve my Queen, my country, and all who rely upon me for sustenance and protection. I appreciate your gracious words, but I really must ask that you set to your task.”

“Immediately, sir. But I also feel more shall come to me from my dear Krishna in regards to your fate.”

Sleeman laid his pen down and met the musician’s eyes, his patience momentarily strained. “I do not believe in fate, sir. One makes his own fate through the superiority of manifest purpose, discipline, and practice.”

Lalan das Fahakir stood and bowed at the waist. “As you wish, Colonel. I hope to have occasion as to speak again.”

“Indeed, musician. Indeed. Proceed to your calling. The sun becomes hotter by the moment.”

Sleeman watched as the Baul walked toward the river and Narrissa the *sut*. He looked again to his journal and dated it. He made a simple entry:

Sept, 1839—Bengal,

Nerbudda River encampment.

Contracted Baul musician in last attempt to save a woman’s life.

His fame as a poet and lyricist are well known to all in my sepoy regiment.

May his effort prove successful for all involved.

Medical services have been approved for Bauls and Dr. Smithington dispatched to minister to needs of clan.

Have approved appropriation of extra rice and lentils to troupe of Bauls from whence Lalan das Fahakir came.

By the time the colonel had made his entry and dried the ink in a patch of sun, the Baul had moved to the rocks by the river, and the first notes of his *ektara* began a drone-like trill over the sound of the rushing water. The sepoy he had left in charge of the umbrella sat transfixed by the Baul's voice and song. The woman, ever so gradually over the course of the song, began to sit upright and listen also. Sleeman sat, peeling a mango and surveying the unlikely drama as it unfolded. The music was haunting and beautiful. His mastery of Bengali, though far from perfect, was fluent enough to catch the words of poetry from his shaded camp. The Baul's dialect and accent was different and, in song form, archaic. Sleeman found himself leaning ever so slightly forward so as to catch any bit of lyric he could discern. The Baul sang and played, his head moving slowly, trancelike, as he sang in a curious and melodious tone that even at a distance, captured and surpassed all sounds of the day around it. The vultures in the trees opposite the Sut opened their wings and sat utterly still on their perches, beaks held open in the heat of day. None made a sound. Not a bird sang or any animal moved. It was sublime and, even to a man of reason such as Colonel William Sleeman, almost certainly mystical and impossible to describe. Lalan das Fahakir's voice was one of a kind, a high tenor with contralto capabilities. He sang effortlessly, for hours, into the blue cloudless Bengal sky until nearly sunset, stopping for only the occasional sip of water, which he in turn directed the sepoy to offer the Sut. At first she refused, but by the end of the afternoon, to Sleeman's amazement, she began to drink from the jug of water beside her. By the time the sun had nearly set, the Baul and the sepoy guard had returned.

"I see, musician, that at least you have induced this poor woman to drink."

"I can take no credit, sahib. She was thirsty and drank. That is all."

"I shall expect your return at dawn. I will send an escort."

"You are kind, sahib Colonel."

"Good evening."

The musician bowed and made salaam and went away. Talu didn't move. He stood at attention. Colonel Sleeman looked at the sepoy with irritation.

"Private, I do not recall relieving you from your duty."

"Forgive me, *Burra sahib*." He saluted. "But the *Sut* bade me thank you personally and wished that I ask you to have a word."

"Call Talu and have him start the evening meal, Private. Go get your replacement. I shall go to her alone and wait for relief. Make haste!"

"Yes *sah!* Immediately, *sah!*" The sepoy snapped a salute and jogged toward the main encampment. Colonel Sleeman put on his regimental jacket and hat, placing a side arm discreetly in his holster at his side. Evening brought out predators of all kinds, animal and human. He picked up his pipe and tobacco, stowed it in his coat and lit a small torch for light. He walked to the river. Narrissa the *Sut* sat perfectly still. He noticed her posture had improved with her acceptance of water. She sat more erect. Sleeman wedged the torch into some rocks and sat a respectful distance from the woman.

"Naw mo shkar, Mother Narrissa."

"*Naw mo shkar*. Good evening, Colonel, you are very thoughtful to come."

"Madam, my sepoy says you wish a word with me."

"I do, sir. And I shall be brief. By this time tomorrow I shall die. I wanted to thank you for the kindness you have shown both to my family and to myself over these past days."

"My duty is to see you are not allowed to immolate yourself, madam. I hope your pronouncement of death, if it is to prove true, is a natural passing, devoid of undue suffering."

"I have called you an odd man. I know now this is true. What Britishman would expend so much energy on so common a creature as myself?"

"I remind you of the importance of law and duty, both in my demeanor and in my cause. Should this make you judge me odd then, yes, I must agree. Still, madam, the effect of the *Baul* is quite remarkable. I saw you drink water as he sang to you. I must impart that I am not easily impressed. May I ask your permission to smoke?"

The woman laughed aloud, the first time he had heard her do so in all these days of the somber death watch. "You are the colonel, *sahib*. You need not ask my permission."

"It is my way."

"Have your smoke, *sahib* Colonel. I only object that it is dangerous to your health."

This made the colonel return a laugh.

“Under the circumstances, both specific *and* general, I find a little tobacco the least of my worries.” There was a silence as he packed his pipe and lit it, and they both sat, watching the last light of day disappear over the mighty Nerbudda River. Dragonflies flit over the entire slow-moving silver surface before them. The night crickets began their song, and the sweetness of the night air began to blow away the harsh heat of another Bengal day.

“My life has been blessed and sweet. Except for my dear husband’s death, I have been mostly happy;” she said at last. “I accept this as my last night in this existence... but for you, my dear odd colonel, the struggle will continue.”

“I do not complain, madam. I accept my duties with no regret. I come from humble beginnings. I was born in Cornwall in the south of England. I have always known I should be a soldier. And so I go forward with this path with a sublime determination. So one might say that I too have been blessed.”

“This Baul you chose is a great and knowing soul. Did you know this?”

“I only heard from my sepoy aide-de-camp. His dialect is a bit strange in song, so I was unable to follow from so far a distance. I am gratified that he has eased your suffering.”

“He knows my fate. He knows yours also. I shall die tomorrow, but my death will help you, sahib Colonel, to save thousands of living souls. This comforts me beyond words.”

“I am not much for prophecies and mysticism, madam. Forgive my bluntness. But if this musician has helped you to find purpose in your passing then I am glad. He is purported to be great in the act of poetry and song.”

“Quite so, sahib Colonel. He knew details of my life only I knew. He sang of the first love I had as a young girl. He was a boy of fifteen, pressed into service by zamandirs and killed in yet another meaningless war. He sang of this and of my children and my dear grandchildren, one of whom will bear in future generations a great doctor who shall save many lives from disease. He sang of my dear husband, who even now sits here with us now, waiting for me to join him. And he sang of you.”

“An entire verse at least, one should hope.”

“I see you are comfortable enough with a dying old woman to make jokes.”

“I am not without a sense of humor, mother. I save it for those times where there are very few witnesses.”

They both found themselves giggling like children under the rising moon. They then sat in silence for a long time.

“Madam, is there any more I can do for you on this evening?”

“Yes, Colonel, I ask permission for my grandchild Nalan to bring paper and pen so that I may dictate some thoughts before my death. He is a clever child of eleven and the only one in the family who can read and write. May I see him in the mid-morning?”

“Of course. Anything else?”

Narrissa the Sut reached over to Colonel Sleeman and put her hand on his and held it. It was a gesture that was never done in public between a married Brahmin woman and a British officer.

“I ask you but one thing. That you believe what is given as prophecy and suspend your logic but long enough to find He whom you seek.”

Sleeman stopped puffing on his pipe. He felt confused and unsure of how to react to this overtly familiar gesture. He was almost embarrassed by his own rush of emotion at the old woman’s touch. He was transported back through time to the last moment he laid eyes on his beloved younger sister Mary in Cornwall. She had come to the docks to see him off, perhaps for the last time. He had been accepted for officer training by the East India Company cadet college at Fort William near Calcutta, and he was to report that spring. She whom he held dearest in his life, beyond even his own mother, his baby Sister Mary whom he called Teeny, was in tears, begging him to be safe and to return to her. The statistics were not good. More than a third of young Englishman died in service to the company in India. Disease, climate, and accident in the bush or jungle killed so many of Britain’s “second sons,” who had neither prospect under British law as heirs to their fathers’ monies or estates, or who simply came from humble means. She had laid her hand upon his, just as Narrissa was doing now. He could hear her voice from the past:

Willy, dear Willy. You who loathe all that is not logic and rote. Please hear our prayers in the wind. Believe that your ancestors watch over you and that you can only but open your heart and you shall hear our words and prayers. Believe, Willy. Simply allow your heart to believe.

“I am unsure how I should fulfill such a promise, madam. I am not a man for conjecture or prone to mysticism.”

“Time and circumstance makes even the wisest man circumspect, my kind colonel.”

Sleeman looked away from the woman's eyes and out across the river at the rising moon and silently puffed on his pipe.

"All may doubt, sir... few will open hearts to see a truth in evidence."

"I am a man who trusts facts and procedure and the power of acquired knowledge."

"Facts, indeed. I have a *fact*, kind Colonel, that only the winds know. I will die tomorrow, and you shall live to save a nation by *this fact*. And there is one thing more. I shall whisper it to you and then you shall know that the musician is truly a seer and a mystic."

Narrissa, the grandmother and honored woman, hours from her own death, leaned in toward the stalwart colonel and whispered, "*Your dear brother Lewis held the medal of St. Christopher you gave him as he boarded the ship that went down in the violent storm in the channel off Bristol. He prayed that your family would find strength.*"

Sleeman jumped to his feet and dropped his pipe, sending sparks of tobacco over the rocks before him. He felt his heart racing and his pulse pounding. For several moments he stood as if at attention during a drill, unmoving, waiting for orders to breathe, move, or react. He struggled to compose himself. "*Impossible*," he finally managed to sputter. "*Impossible!*"

No one but he and his older brother Lewis – who had stood so proudly in his new naval uniform upon the dock before boarding the sloop-of-war H.M.S. Weasal in 1798 – knew of the silver medal Sleeman had passed to his hand that gray morning. He had told no one, not his mother, his father, four other brothers, or his beloved Teeny, about the silver medal and chain he had purchased in Cornwall with money he had saved all that summer when Lewis announced that he had joined the Navy. It was a moment between brothers. Surely it could be discovered through means of a charlatan that his brother had been lost in a storm on his first voyage – this could be found somewhere in his personal records – but how? Still, it was possible for *someone* to know this personal fact. But pass this fact to a Baul in the bush on the road to Jubbalpore? Here? Now? The medal was a secret between brothers. A secret. One he had all but forgotten over the years. Sleeman was too evolved an intellect to suspect witchcraft – though it did cross his mind for a frightened moment.

"*Impossible*," he said again, but gently now as he looked upon the woman with the orange moon shining in her eyes who smiled peacefully with great empathy for him and his confusion.

"You must have loved him very much. I am sorry for your brother and the loss to your family."

“*Impossible.*” He repeated, looking about almost helplessly for his pipe amongst the rocks.

“You must leave room, Colonel sahib for that which cannot be explained. You must. If only but a little. The Baul is an avatar of Lord Krishna. He is the key to the capture of him whom you seek. No one need know but the three of us, and soon I shall be no more. This is no slight to your military ability and prowess. You must open your heart and allow yourself to believe. Accept this – your destiny.”

Mother Narrissa, the Sut, pointed at the pipe lodged in the rocks, and Colonel William Sleeman, humbly, as if he were a mere boy, bent before her and clutched his pipe as a child clutches a lost fetish. He allowed the slightest of tremors to course through him, and then he felt oddly at peace. He allowed this peace to silence his doubts and natural cynicism. He tapped the pipe on his boot and placed it inside his jacket.

“That pipe was given to me as a gift from old Colonel Gregory, my regimental commander at the cadet academy at Fort William upon the occasion of my first award of command. Perhaps your Baul told you that as well?”

“Honestly, Colonel, this tobacco smoking! It is a nasty and unhealthy habit. You really must consider stopping. And no, the Baul does not need to tell me about such things; this smoking is what took my dear husband from me. I am sure of it. His heart could not abide it. Soon I shall see him in paradise, and hopefully we will no longer quarrel about tobacco.”

“A paradise without marital bickering is a paradise well worth attending. I shall give your caution some thought.”

“You will not forget to send me my grandson at dawn?”

“I shall not.”

“Goodbye, Colonel.”

“Goodbye, Narrissa.”

§

The malaria returned in the night. William Sleeman was barely aware that it was happening again until he was awakened by the cool rag Talu was placing on his forehead. The shivering was intense, and Talu had put two wool blankets on the colonel and begun boiling water for herbal tea.

“*Burra sahib*, we must move you from here. Your wife has made me swear that I will immediately evacuate you to the main residence if the malaria returns.”

“N-no. I c-can’t go yet.”

“I must insist, Colonel. Your wife will have my head. You are very ill, sir. You have begun the fevers three hours ago. I must disregard you because the doctor and your wife have made me promise to evacuate you. You may court martial me, *Burra sahib*, once the fever has broken. I would gladly face imprisonment rather than your wife’s anger.”

“The woman... s-she m-must be...”

Sleeman fell into delirium before he could hear Talu tell him that he had posted two sentries on either side of the *Sut* and she was well guarded. A litter was brought forward, and four sepoy picked up Sleeman and placed him carefully on it as Talu covered the shivering sweating man with blankets. Talu spoke quickly in Bengali, ordering the soldiers to make haste to the main encampment where a wagon was made ready for the colonel’s immediate transport to the official residence under care of Doctor Smithington. He ordered two other sepoy privates to break camp immediately. Corporal Talu followed the colonel’s transport, carrying the satchel containing official documents and the colonel’s military jacket and hat. It was half-past four in the morning.

At dawn the Baul returned to the evacuated campsite and after some short consideration went forward and began the song that marked the *Sut* Narrissa’s last hours of life. The guards did not stop him. They sat transfixed by the musician’s voice and the drone of the *ektara*. This song was interrupted only once and for a short time as a little boy carrying a small notepad and pen approached, was waved through by the sentry, and sat on a rock next to his grandmother and wrote what she quietly dictated. Once the boy left, the musician, after bowing low to the woman and making salaam, took his instrument and also took his leave.

Well into the late afternoon the long shadows of the trees began to stretch across the river, and the birds went silent. One sepoy had fallen asleep in the oppressive heat and did not notice the tiger moving silently through the high grass past him at no more than ten yards. The other sepoy was near sleep, but his back was turned on the *Sut* as he lolled upon a rock under the scant shade of a small tree twenty-five yards from the woman he was assigned to guard. He was bored, unconcerned, and indolent, his only movement being the occasional swatting at mosquitoes or shooping flies with his kerchief. His eyes were narrowed into slits as he daydreamt about the

whores on *Tandoterra* Street in Calcutta and the cool glass of beer that awaited him once he was granted leave.

His rifle was unloaded.

When the tiger charged and attacked it was over quickly. The Sut saw the tiger before it attacked and simply closed her eyes and smiled. This magnificent avatar would carry her on its back to her beloved. And also, by her death, would come a precious gift to the odd man who would save the lives of uncounted thousands of innocent souls traveling on the roads of India.

§

After two days in a fever haze from the severe attack of malaria, and under the round-the-clock care of his beloved Amelie and Dr. Smithington, William Sleeman was finally told the news of the Sut Narrissa's death. Even in his weakened state, his rage, which was very out of character, nearly made the colonel apoplectic. He demanded to know who was responsible for guarding the woman and had them both demoted and brought back to the residence until he could debrief them personally. He honored his wife and doctor's request to calm himself and take two days to regain his strength and balance of temperament before continuing his official duties. This, as it turned out was fortuitous indeed.

In the afternoon of the second day, Colonel Sleeman was resting comfortably on the veranda in the shade sipping a mixture of herbal tea and swallowing small slivers of mango and orange – the first food he had been able to keep down since the attack of malaria. True to form, his measured temperament had returned, but he still seethed in anger that this poor woman whom he had befriended was so mercilessly killed by what he deemed utter incompetence by both guards. This made him sad and heartsick.

Amelie came to him and told him in French (she had never mastered the English language, but this mattered little to Sleeman, who spoke French fluently) that a small boy had been waiting outside in the courtyard since noon yesterday claiming to be Narrissa's grandson. He had a note that only the colonel must see. He utterly refused to give it to Talu, who in exasperation allowed the child to sleep with the horses in the barn and fed him decently.

“Narrissa's grandson? By God bring him in immediately! Why wasn't I told?”

He was a small, long-limbed, bony, underfed child with huge brown almost simian eyes. He was filthy but had a very proud bearing. He could read and write, after all – in both Bengali and English. His face bore an almost magnetic resemblance to his grandmother. He stood at attention holding a slip of paper.

“Colonel sahib, sir. I have English and wish to for present you with my here write and news of my beloved grand woman.”

“Come here sonny... let me thank you for coming so far. I had great respect for your grandmother. She and I had occasion to consider philosophy. Let me tell you that I wish you to convey my great remorse at the incompetence of the guards who allowed the beast to end her life.”

“No end, sahib great Colonel. Begin. Not end. She is happy and safe with my grand fatherman. She knew the tiger. Please.” The boy bowed and handed Sleeman the note. Amelie brought the child a cool glass of lemonade and bade him sit while the colonel carefully opened and read the childish script in Bengali.

Lord Krishna and the Baul give you a great gift with my death, dear Colonel.

Follow for twice a fortnight in the direction the tiger ran, and you shall find he whom you seek.

May the blessing of Lord Krishna and Lord Vishnu protect you and bless you.

A last request. Keep the Baul close, and if it please you, find a small job for my beloved Nalan, and a tutor to help him become educated. He is of exceptional intelligence and he will, I predict, be of great aid to you in the future.

I shall always be thankful for your stubbornness. You are and always shall be a very odd man.

This, dear Colonel, is a distinction, not an insolence.

“Dear God,” he muttered under his breath, “...we have lost so much time.”

The colonel stood immediately and called for his aide-de-camp. In his weakened state he tottered ever so slightly. Amelie steadied him and spoke in French for him to calm himself. He

ignored her, the blood coursing through his veins as his duty became apparent. There was no time to waste.

“Talu! Take this child to have him cleaned and properly shod. Bring the two guards to me *immediately*... and any other direct witnesses to the tiger attack! Double-quick, sir... and mount light provisions for a two-week hard run. I need no less than twelve armed rifles from my irregular light horse and four of our best sowar regulars. I want the Pindari scout. We’ll pick up the rest of our Hunter Company along the way once we cross into Madhya Pradesh. Alert Lieutenant Colbert, Captain Medwyn, and Sergeant O’Terrie. We ride by sunset.”

Talu snapped smartly and saluted. “Immediately, *sah!*”

He pulled the boy from his chair and hustled him from the veranda.

It was the 2nd of October, 1830, and the hunt for Feringeea was on.

The errant guards indicated a northwesterly direction that the tiger had run until the *shikaris* were dispatched to track and kill the man-eater – in one day, the native hunters had brought down the beast with their muskets.

The head of the tiger was stuffed and presented to the family of Narrissa. The Brahmins refused the gesture and returned it with a measure of gratitude and superstition. It hung in Colonel Sleeman’s office at his base at Saugor for ten years. Thereafter, the trophy was presented as a gift from the colonel himself (by that time a Major General with peerage) to *Havildar* Nalan Chatterjee, by then a respected soldier in the native sepoy regiments assigned to Lucknow in the year 1856. He would remain one of the few loyal native sepoys to escape death at the hands of the conspirators of the great Sepoy mutiny of 1857. He risked death to escape a traitorous unit and warn the British command of the mutiny. Havildar Nalan Chatterjee fought bravely against the native regiments who seized the fort at Lucknow, butchering the British soldiers and their wives. He escaped and made it back to British lines and helped supply vital intelligence for the final assault and recapture of the besieged city. He was gravely wounded in the leg during a brash sortie into Lucknow under fire to save four officers, kept alive for ransom, and received a commendation from the Lord General and a stipend for life.

But this was to be in the future (which does not exist).

Mother Narissa knew the truth of such things.

The Light Horse

And in the trees of Bengal, the shokun sat perched – as they had from the beginning of time – and waited for sustenance and sanction, hunched forward on bare branches, holding their wings aloft in the dry heat, always in preparation for another sacred cleansing feast of flesh.

The cries of the *shokun* call out, bathed under endless sun:

What fool invents history?

*Death is yet another beginning. Life is naught but illusion
carried on the wings of carrion birds.*

§

THE LIGHT HORSE



J. D. Brayton

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