

MY LORD THE TIGER

Judgment for the Marwari

By JOHN LE BRETON

THE air was hot and dense in the lime-washed Cutcherry at Hajipur. The window-mats of scented grass were drenched with water, and hung idly between the fierce sunlight and the inner gloom. High above the crowded common people, at the eastern end of the building, was the vacant seat of judgment, presently to be occupied by him who represented the might and majesty of the British Raj in this district of Central India—Syed Mehta, the Deputy-Collector.

In waiting was the plaintiff, Narain Ganesh, the fat Marwari money-lender, shining of countenance, and arrayed in spotless white. In waiting also was the defendant, Mirza Mahomed, one time a gallant soldier of the King, now old and grey, and very sorely troubled. The court-house was full and overflowing with lean, brown villagers of Hajipur, and they were all in the grip of the Marwari, every poor struggling soul of them. If the Deputy-Collector gave judgment against Mirza Mahomed, they were doomed even as he was doomed. Their fields would be taken from them! The hated Marwari would yoke them to his service, and mint their lives day by day, into the thick white rupees that made him like a god above them—needing naught, and fearing naught.

They knew the law of the British Raj, knew well that the Marwari had good cause to show a face that had no crease of care; but to-day, a little flicker of hope was arising from the ashes of their despair. There was no Englishman in the Court to deal out legal justice untempered by mercy. This Syed Mehta, whose father had been one of themselves, might stand between the rich man who wanted all and the poor man who asked but the right to live.

There was a stir in the Court, and a whisper that was like the fluttering of rapid wings. The Deputy-Collector Sahib had entered, and was taking his seat. Little did he seem like the brother of his piteous brethren, and their hearts grew leaden as they looked upon him. This was a Sahib, from the crown of his neatly cropped head to his well-shod feet. Clothed as a Sahib he was, in smooth, tailored linen, and there was the gleam of a plain gold signet upon his shapely hand. The thin, handsome face was cold and indifferent. The eyes had the Sahib's look that seems to see nothing though it sees all.

NOW, the Court was open. First to be tried was the case of Narain Ganesh, the Marwari, who claimed from Mirza Mahomed, a ryot, the return of moneys lent and payment of agreed interest. The papers were laid upon the table, and the Deputy-Collector, turning them over with the handle of his pen, satisfied himself that they were in order. He inclined his head toward the Marwari, who thereupon began to plead his cause.

"It is an obstinate debtor, Protector of the Poor, one who hath no gratitude for favours bestowed upon him. When he would not pay me that which he owed, I waited. I left my money in his care, though it might have grown better in mine own. Still, he would not pay me. Long-suffering is thy servant, and again I waited, until at length that which he owed me exceeded the value of all his miserable land! Then said I, 'The fields are mine. Give them unto me, or else pay me the sum which thou owest.' Neither of these things would he do, and so, diffuser of justice, thy servant seeks a remedy at thy righteous hands."

The Deputy-Collector turned slightly toward Mirza Mahomed. Idly he was twisting his signet ring round and round his finger and looking down upon it, so that his face was not to be seen. "What sayest thou to this, Mirza Mahomed?" he asked.

The old soldier, lean from hunger, weighted by misfortune, yet still full of pride because of a glorious past, came forward, and saluted.

"Sahib, the Marwari has spoken truth."

The wedged mass of humanity in the body of the court tried to move, and breathed hard. This was the answer of a man coming unarmed to meet a thrice-armed enemy. The Marwari threw out his hands widely, as though to grasp and hold all that he claimed.

"Behold! the debtor acknowledges the justice of my demand," he exclaimed. "Then who shall deny it? Now, thou watcher over the distressed, make over his lands to me. Sahib, I have waited."

The Deputy-Collector was looking at Mirza Mahomed, as though inviting him to speak. In the cold indifference of his face, his eyes suddenly lived

and glowed. They seemed to be the eyes of a friend and Mirza Mahomed opened his sad heart to the light of them.

"Sahib Sahib, if I lose my land, I, who was a soldier, will become a slave, to toil for this sucker of men's blood! My cattle are lost because the white Sahibs drove them from the grazing grounds that had fed our beasts since the Prophet walked the earth. Even then did I toil on, and starve so that I might repay this man his rupees—and then came the white Sahibs again, and took all, all for the tax! It is known that the Government will not by any means be denied, but surely this man may wait! Another year the crops will be better. Had he kept his rupees in hiding they would not have borne such harvest as that which he now demands from me. Let there be a new pledge, so that I may fight on yet a little! If in two years I do not restore to him the rupees which he lent, together with the interest which we first agreed upon, then let him take the land. Sahib, I pray you hold back his hand until two years!"

The Deputy-Collector glanced at the Marwari, who stood listening, a very image of contemptuous silence.

"Thou hearest, Narain Ganesh?" he said. "The security is good. The interest," he paused significantly, "is good. Thou art a rich man, and it is easy for the rich to be generous. The opportunity is given thee."

The Marwari's heavy-jowled face was convulsed with surprise and displeasure. Then he grew furious. Scores of similar cases had left him the undisputed victor. What had British justice ever demanded before but signed documents, and properly executed legal formalities? He scented an unholy attempt to tamper with the highest privileges which the Empire bestows upon her sons. Yet—yet—it might be wise to please a Deputy-Collector. The fate of Mirza Mahomed dangled in the balance for one moment. Then, aghast, the Marwari looked at the sea of eager, hollow-cheeked faces that stared up at him from the well of the Court. Not a man of them but would ask for generosity also. It was unthinkable! Favour may be bought at too high a price. He held up suppliant hands, and whined like a beaten cur.

"Light of the Universe, it cannot be! If this man enjoy my rupees, and my land for two long years, how shall I live? The justice of the law is all that I ask. Thy servant implores only that which is his right, and to so much even the humblest is entitled."

FOR one long breathless moment there was silence. Then, leaning his elbow upon the table, and shading his eyes with his hand, the Deputy-Collector spoke very slowly, and in such low tones that few of those who strained to listen caught his words.

"Then the law must take its course. The British Raj grinds the faces of the poor, and being blind, knoweth it not; but it is strange to see a brother eat up a brother. The Marwari seeth that which he has wrought. He hath eyes to see when he snatcheth food from the hands of the children."

The Marwari waited, a sour grin upon his insolent mouth.

"Judgment is for the plaintiff, Narain Ganesh, the Marwari."

Mirza Mahomed's head was bowed as he listened. Now he must starve, or till the land as the hireling of his new owner, and be only half-starved. Better had he fallen when death was seeding the battlefield and raining blood upon its shallow soil. Then would he have been honoured by all, and remembered by perhaps a few. Yet there was still patience in his heart.

"God is good," he said, and went his way.

That day the Marwari's victories were many. Famine had brought the people low. Their land had yielded nothing, and dust lay upon it. Afterwards came cholera that took away two lives out of every three, and kept the workers from the fields, so that again there was barrenness. Then it was that the Marwari found rupees to buy seed with, and rupees to buy food with, while the seed was growing. He required much for a little because there was only himself between the villager and death. When the Government had taken the tax, there was

nothing left for the Marwari, and so the debts grew and grew until they spread over all the land and made it forfeit. It was always the same accursed story—even to the end of it, which was:

"Judgment is for the plaintiff, Narain Ganesh, the Marwari."

When it was all over Syed Mehta, the Deputy-Collector, went back to his encampment, and sat alone in his tent a very long while. Then, of a sudden, he leaped to his feet, like one pierced by a cunning sword-thrust, and flung up his arms, his fingers clenched upon the palms as if in agony. He was the servant of the King and Emperor; it was his privilege and his duty to expedite the law that sold his struggling brethren to the bondage of Hell. Yet who should aid them, if not himself?

He cast the flap of the tent aside, and as he gazed out upon the darkening skies deep peace fell upon him. As in a vision he saw many things.

"Yea; God is good!" he said.

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THE stars were golden sparks against the velvety blackness of the Indian night, and gave no light upon the slumberous earth. Like gold-dust, far-away worlds were sprinkled on the vast arch of Heaven: a sight to make a man marvel at unending glory and know himself as he is. A man, fiercely painted, came stealthily from the Deputy-Collector's encampment, and, looking upward, smiled. He plucked a leaf from a towering tree—one single leaf from all the myriad leaves—and crushed it in his hand.

"Even as I," he thought, "it is gone, and none knoweth where it has been."

Once he had dreamed that he would be a giant tree, a landmark even in a mighty forest. Now, he knew that he was but as a leaf, a thing to fall unobserved, and drift before the faintest breeze.

Down through the jungle he plunged, his bare feet deep in the dust of the narrow path that other naked feet had made. In the valley lay the homesteads of the village, all dark now, and silent. Upon his left wrist was a heavy chain, and with the broken, dangling end of it he smote upon the door of Mirza Mahomed's hut, and commanded him to come forth.

All the village might be asleep, but forgetfulness had not yet come to ease Mirza Mahomed. His deep voice sounded in instant response.

"Who calls?"

"Open thou, my brother, and see!"

The door was thrown open, and with a newly-kindled torch in his hand, Mirza Mahomed stood upon the threshold peering into the darkness. Beyond the circle of the brightest radiance stood the traditional man-tiger of the Mohurram. A limp, cloth mask of a scowling tiger-head concealed the face and head; the broad breast was barred with black and yellow; the splendid body was naked save for a loin-cloth. From the left wrist, the broken chain swung to and fro, and the voice of one used to obedience rang out upon the night.

"Come, brother, and rouse our brothers. There is hunting to-night! We hunt the Marwari, and the Tiger Sahib hath need of thee!"

"My Lord the Tiger!" shouted Mirza Mahomed, and straightway dashed out into the darkness to rouse his fellows, and drag them forth to glorious doings. All through the village he ran, crying the news, his twirling torch leaving trails of fiery sparks in its wake.

"My Lord the Tiger! My Lord the Tiger!" he shouted, and battered upon the doors until the people streamed out, and followed him in ever-increasing numbers. Magically, the darkness and silence changed to uproar, and flaming torches. Then, dangerously murmuring, and clustering like a swarm of hiving bees, suddenly they were all gathered together about the Marwari's hut. He was awake, and heard the soft trampling of many feet, and low cries that seemed to threaten. His door was very strongly barred.

THERE was a hush, and people drew closer to each other to make way. The Tiger-Sahib was coming. Twice before he had been heard of in the district, and once he had been in Burrapore, not thirty miles away, where the villagers affirmed that he had risen from the earth and vanished in a cloud. Always he had righted great wrongs, and the heart of the people lay at the feet of his deliverer who came to them in terrible, yet familiar, guise. Swiftly and silently from the darkness he came, up