

For five-and-twenty years he had watched British justice work, and British justice gives both sides a hearing; he had not told his own version yet.

"I know that you have had word in another part of this house with a German, who pretends to be a merchant but who is really a spy."

Ranjoor Singh looked even more suspicious. The charge was true, though, so he did not answer.

"Your being brought to this house was part of a plan—part of the same plan that leaves the German still at liberty. You are wanted to take further part in it."

"General sahib, am I an officer of the Raj or am I dreaming?"

Ranjoor Singh had found his tongue at last, and the general noted with keen pleasure that eye, voice and manner were angry and unafraid.

"I command a squadron, sahib, unless I have been stricken mad! Since when is a squadron commander brought face-downward in a carriage out of rat-traps by a woman to do a general's bidding? That has been my fate to-night. Now I am wanted to take further part! Is my honor not yet dirtied enough, General sahib? I will take no further part. I refuse to obey! I order this trooper not to obey. I demand court martial!"

"I see I'd better begin with an apology. It must first be proved to me that he, who tells me I am wanted to take further part in this rat-hole treachery, is not a traitor to the Raj! I have read of generals turning traitors! I have read about Napoleon; I know how his generals behaved when the sand in his glass seemed run. I am for the Raj in this and in any other hour! I refuse to obey or to accept apology! Let the explanation be made me at court martial, with Colonel Kirby sahib present to bear witness to my character!"

"As you were!"

THE general's eyes met those of the Sikh officer, and neither could have told then, or at any other time, what exactly it was that each man recognized.

"Ranjoor Singh, when I entered this house ten minutes ago I had no notion I should find you here. I have served the same 'Salt' with you, on the same campaigns. I even wear the same medals. In the same house I am entitled to the same credit."

"I am here on urgent business for the Raj, and you are here owing to a grave mistake, which I admit and for which I tender you the most sincere apology on behalf of the government, but which I cannot alter. I expected to find a trooper here, not necessarily of your regiment, who should have been waylaid and tempted beyond any doubt as to his trustworthiness."

"I received a message that Yasmini had two absolutely honest men ready, and I came at once to give them their instructions. I ask you to sacrifice your pride, as we all of us must on occasion, and your rights, as is a soldier's privilege, and see this business through to a finish. It is too late to make other arrangements, Ranjoor Singh."

"Sahib, squadron-leading is my trade! I am not cut out for rat-run soldiering! I am willing to leave this house and hold my tongue, and to take this trooper with me and see that he holds his tongue. By nine to-morrow morning I will have satisfied myself that you are for and not against the Raj. And having satisfied myself, I

and this trooper here will hold our tongues for ever. Bass!"

The general stood as still on his square foot of floor as did Ranjoor Singh on his. It was the fact that he did not flinch and did not strut about, but stood in one spot with his arms behind him that confirmed Ranjoor Singh in his reading of the general's eye.

"You may leave the house, then, and take your trooper. I accept your promise. Before you go, though, I'll tell you something. The ordering of troops for the front—for France—is in my hands. Your regiment is slated for to-morrow. But it can't go unless you'll see this through. The whole regiment will be needed, instead, to mount guard over Delhi."

"The regiment is to go, sahib, and my squadron, and—and I not? I am not to go?"

"That is the sacrifice you are asked to make!"

"Have I made no sacrifices for the Raj? How has my life been spent? Sahib—"

The Sikh's voice broke and he ceased speaking, but the general, too, seemed at a loss for words.

"Sahib—do I understand? If I do this—this rat-business, whatever it is—Colonel Kirby and the regiment go, and another leads my squadron? And unless I do this, whatever it is, the regiment will not go?"

The general nodded. He felt and looked ashamed.

"Has war been declared, sahib?"

"Yes. Germany has invaded Belgium."

For a second the Sikh's eyes blazed, but the fire died down again. He clasped his hands in front of him and hung his head. "I will do this thing that I am asked to do," he said; but his words were scarcely audible. His trooper came a step closer, to be nearer to him in his minute of acute agony.

"Thou and I, Jagut Singh! We both stay behind!"

"Now, Risaldar-Major, I want you to listen! You've promised like a man," said the general. "I'll make you the best promise I can in return. Mine's conditional, but it's none the less emphatic. If possible, you shall catch your regiment before it puts to sea. If that's impossible, you shall take passage on another ship and try to overtake it. If that again is impossible, you shall follow your regiment and be in France in time to lead your squadron. I think I may say you are sure to be there before the regiment goes into action. But, understand—I said, 'if possible!'"

RANJOOR SINGH'S eye brightened and he straightened perceptibly.

"This trooper, sahib—"

"My promise is for him as well."

"We accept, sahib! What is the duty?"

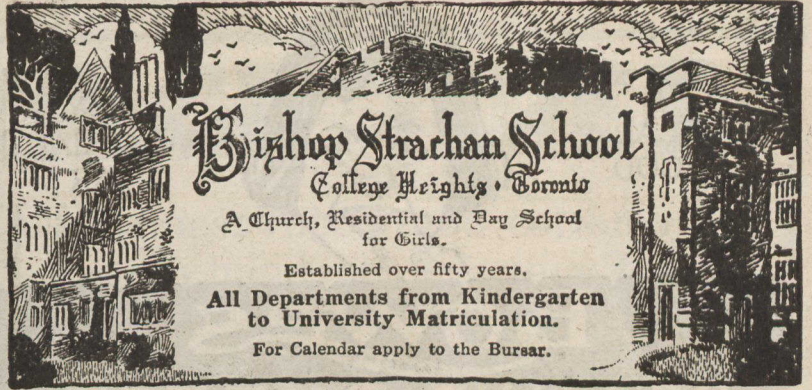
"First, write a note to Colonel Kirby—I'll see that it's delivered—asking him to put your name in Orders as assigned to special duty. Here's paper and a fountain pen."

"Why should all this be secret from Colonel Kirby?" asked Ranjoor Singh.

"There is no wiser and no more loyal officer!"

"Nor any officer more pugnacious on his juniors' account, I assure you! I can't imagine his agreeing to the use I'm making of you. I've no time to listen to his protests. Write, man, write!"

"Give me the paper and the pen, sahib!"



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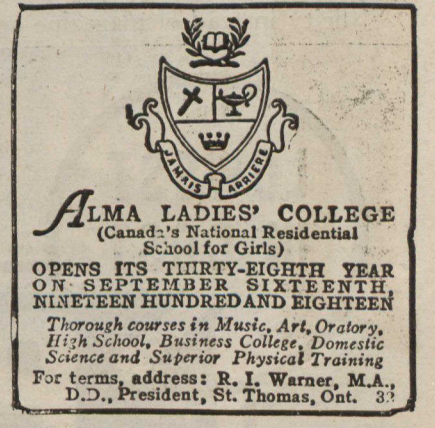
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