

PALANQUIN

A Tale of India and Beyond

a novel

By Lance Mason

Preface

On 6 November 1892, a tea-chest of documents, diaries, and other historical material was found in Bombay, in the dusty corner of a warehouse belonging to Marlowe & Sons, a prominent Liverpool shipping firm engaged in the India trade. It was eventually established that this misplaced item was the property of my father, Brig. Gen. Jonathan “Jock” Alexander Gough-Martin, IOM, DSO, and had been lost during his return to Britain with his regiment nearly four years previous. Once Father was identified as the rightful owner of the large, tin-lined box, we were traced through military records and our Lancashire relations, and the chest was delivered to us in mid-March 1893 via Suez, Gibraltar, and Southampton. Sadly, Jock died shortly thereafter, aged sixty-eight years.

It has taken the better part of three years to organize and read Father's papers, then interpret and research them. Meanwhile, I have been communicating with well-informed persons, verifying claims, and transcribing what follows. I caution that not all of the following was chronicled in the chest's papers. Of that which Father did not have first-hand knowledge, I am most grateful for the access provided me to the private diaries, journals, and records of other persons, some of renown and featured here, and others who laboured in obscurity. These more contemporary sources were most valuable for detailing events after 1862.

I have put this account in the form of a story, in order that the reader might be entertained as well as informed. As poetic license has bridged minor gaps in the record, some readers may cite errors or disputes in these pages, and raise debate where they find it lacking. It is not my place to contest these assertions, but to put forth the reality of what I have before me and let history judge its merits.

14 January 1896
Hugh Christopher Gough-Martin, FRCS (Edin), MB ChB
Field Cottage
Godalming, Surrey

Introduction

In describing the era in question, one might choose the term *byzantine*. Yet even that adjective fails to fully capture the military, political, bureaucratic, and economic chaos the East India Company brought to bear in its rule over India. During that rule ended three decades ago, with Father still in harness, disorder was too often the order of the day, and the crude use of force its first path to profit.

In an attempt to bring some storytelling logic to such processes and events, parts of this narrative will focus on the life of Jehangir Arjani, a Parsi from the city of Poona, who studied and worked as a battlefield surgeon under demanding conditions at a time when Britain was almost constantly engaged in war. He pursued and practiced his skills alongside Jock and others, and exemplified the best of the Parsis, a group integral to Britain's history in India. Happily, this use of a medical viewpoint was much aided by the help of my friend and colleague Peter Turnbull, appointed Surgeon-General, Government of Bombay in 1893. In addition, as a schoolboy, I knew J. Arjani, and a more upright and ethical person I couldn't expect to meet. It was he who inspired me to take up medicine, much to the pleasure of my father.

Despite the perceived benefits of hindsight, there is no ideal place to begin this account since British motives, politics, and conduct in India were often that ill-informed and ill-conceived as to produce neither consistent justice nor unsullied ethics to underpin such a story. Even the good British plans and the good British men and women who emerged during Father's time commonly served only as stop-gaps in the often sordid history that unfolded.

Yet all stories must start somewhere, and this one shall begin with two vital pieces of history, the first voyage of the *Hector* to Gujarat, and the First Afghan War, both of which had profound effects on our nation's role in India and, ultimately, on the fate of her Empire.

2 March 1896
H.C. Gough-Martin

Publishers Note

The reader will note many years' span between the author's dates above and publication of this volume. Due to potentially upsetting passages contained herein in regard to the life of Florence Nightingale, OM RRC LGStJ, and not heretofore revealed, the publishers felt it necessary to defer the book's release until after her death. This is meant to honour her venerable and respected reputation as one of the Empire's leading lights, and in consideration of her family and the causes for which Miss Nightingale dedicated her life.

Gareth Morgan, Editor
Greenwich Meridian Books
Greenwich, London

CHAPTER 1

The Opening of India – A Blood-Streaked Dawn

It is 1608, November, in Gujarat, north of Bombay, and the acrid stink of burning wood stabs through Captain William Hawkins's dreams, prying open his eyes to see that the veranda of his cottage is alight. Gold and black shapes dance across the windows, and the flames chew through the flanks of the house that looks out to the hills east of Jamnagar. ¹

Hawkins jolts upright, and the heat rolls over him like the breath of Lucifer. For months the Viceroy has conspired with the Portuguese Jesuits to drive him out—or kill him. His wife Miriam and Finch, his lieutenant, have raised warnings of stratagems on his life, and Hawkins has prepared his escape, caching valuables far from the house, and storing spare clothes with Finch's concubine, gold and silver coins sewn into the hems. Yet India's betrayals and intrigues are not to be pondered as one's house burns down around one's corpse-to-be.

Hawkins peers under his bed, finding no spikes, broken glass, or serpents. He thus swings down into the semi-darkness, searching out his escape in the floor planking. He loops his fingers through a copper rung and heaves up a fitted panel, sliding it toward the wall as a thick stream of chill air rises up from the tunnel below. Smelling the swirling odor of raw meat, Hawkins reaches down and grasps the horn of a large, butchered goat, working the carcass out of the hole and onto the floor. The rising heat in the room sucks a draft up from the tunnel, spreading a lake of cooling air around him.

Hawkins drags the gutted beast up and onto the bed, then scrambles down the hole, sliding the panel closed above him. The draft ceases, but his dread of death by fire is quelled. The tunnel feels as fresh and humid to Hawkins as Devon in spring. Crouched among aromas of salted meat and roots crushed from digging, he only now realizes his beloved copper bracelet is gone, lost from his wrist in manhandling the goat. Too late now. Reaching up, he swings two iron toggles, locking the panel, and makes good his escape.

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The following day, with six of his men and two Portuguese Jesuits, Viceroy Sayad Mutaza presents himself to court. The Mughal Emperor Jahangir has traveled from Agra to Gujarat to investigate the intrusion by the British ship *Hector*, the first to fly the Union Jack in Indian waters. But a Mutaza minion bears an ornate wooden tray under a yard of tan calico covering the purported remains of the *Hector's* captain. The Viceroy and his allies, having stolen and divided the ship's cargo, now quickly repeat their appeals to the Ruler that

“... the English be barred from the region.”

“The Englishman is now gone from God's good earth....”

“... and cannot enslave India to unfair trade...”

Thus Portugal, the envoys hope, will again be affirmed as the Mughal Empire's only partner in foreign commerce, for which the priests have prayed to their own lord.

Meanwhile, the odors of burnt flesh are clashing with the warm scents of sandalwood and camphor. Indicating the tray, Mutaza says, “We respectfully apologize to His Majesty for the foul smell. Perhaps all English smell so when burned.” Mutaza wears a silk turban and gold-

threaded robes, his hair and beard oiled and wound into place. On his feet are white horsehide slippers with turned-baksheesh toes.

Jahangir's eye roams over the faces of Mutaza and his toadies, but shows no emotion. He reflects on His ancestors Babur, Humayun, and Akbar, on the crimes and betrayals punished by His family's four generations of rule, and on the horrors wreaked by the Portuguese on their religious opponents far to the south. Finally, He speaks.

"Commissioner."

As Royal Commissioner, Mutaza assigns all Court contracts—for cavalry horses, the new bridge over the Kali Kolak, the royal pantry, even for the Emperor's silken hose. Assured a commission from each, he has an outsized interest in the Empire's trade, and knows the English as obstinate negotiators, not as free with *baksheesh* and corruption as the Portuguese.

"Commissioner, you have brought before me the remains of Hawkins, master of the British vessel in our harbour?"

"Indeed, Excellency." Mutaza slides the calico back to reveal charred skin, a leg-bone, muscle, and ribs. "The pirate is dead, burned in a fire at the small country house. My men are abroad in the hills hunting for his widow who was absent when the fire began. She may have hired agents to kill him."

The stare with which the Emperor fixes Mutaza is one he cannot decipher. Curiosity for the macabre? Suspicion? Or praise for this official the Ruler had underestimated. "You have not mistaken this meat and bone for ... another subject of the court. . . another stranger or wayfarer?"

"Indeed not, Highness, for we also recovered—*this*." Mutaza lays a heavy bangle onto the strip of calico. "It is of the red metal the Portuguese call *cobre*. Hawkins never was without it, said to be his grandfather's."

The Emperor's gaze wanders from Mutaza's face to the tray's grisly cargo, then rises again. "Was this Hawkins an honourable man, dealing honestly with the court and our subjects?"

"Alas, no, Excellency."

"He was a pirate?"

"All English are, Highness, infamous throughout the world for plundering ships of other nations."²

"He would have betrayed us?"

"Without question."

"And the correct punishment for such treachery, for this greed and self-interest that insult the Emperor?"

Sayad Mutaza feels a tremor crawl up his back and over his shoulder, creeping now toward his heart like a handful of spiders. His blind confidence dims slightly, though he can't say why. "Punishment, Highness?"

Jahangir's eyes now seem washed free of feeling. "Death by means most certain for he who betrays the Emperor?"

Only one answer can meet that question, though it strains the Viceroy's voice. "Indeed, Highness, death to the disloyal."

Again Jahangir shows nothing, but Mutaza feels a cold stab in the meat of his groin. His soldiers sense his unease, but the Emperor feels only contempt for a sacrilege against His rule, for those who would attempt to feed Him lies—as if He could not tell goat parts from those of a man.

His Highness lifts His left hand, twitching two fingers. From behind an emerald-green curtain beside the throne, William Hawkins steps out, bedecked in the cobalt-and-crimson, gold-braided uniform of an Ambassador of His Britannic Majesty James I.

The faces of the Jesuits freeze, and they hunch down in their black cassocks, like ravens under threat, calculating some evasion.³ But not Mutaza, nor his soldiers. They know what awaits. Thoughts of any skirmish toward freedom vanish when the emperor's 60-strong guard appear from behind pillars and archways. Scabbards tinkle against chain mail, the only sound in the air.

Below hard green eyes, Hawkins wears a serene smile, striding up to the wooden tray. His right hand lifts the bangle, fits it back on his left wrist, then raises a shank of meat to his even, English teeth. To the horror of all but the Emperor, he bites into the blackened flesh. Chewing, his smile unchanged, Hawkins circles the priests and Mutaza—all taller than he—and proffers the dripping meat, gristle, and bone to each of their mouths in turn. As each turns away in revulsion and fear. Hawkins ambles across the green marble floor, bows deeply to Jahangir, then rises again and speaks.

“My lord, here under Allah's hand, I embrace the wise and ancient Urdu proverb.” He eyes the piece of goat with some affection, and then glances with false regret toward his enemies. “Vengeance is, indeed, a meal best eaten cold.”⁴

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At dawn the two Jesuits are tied to wooden posts to serve, alas briefly, as living targets for the palace's mounted lancers. Once dead, they are then beheaded in local fashion, a noose tightened around each of their necks. The ropes are tied to saddle horns, and the horses spurred away until the heads spring free, tumbling through the ochre dust. Mutaza and his guards are shaved, drawn and quartered, and then ripped apart by four of the black chargers that served in the lancers' practice. Later, as the deceased's heads rot away on hooks above the city gates, peasants will collect the falling teeth, talismans against disease.

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William Hawkins had descended from John Hawkins, or *Hawkyms*, naval architect to Elizabeth I and vice-admiral against the Spanish Armada under his cousin Sir Francis Drake, founder of Her Majesty's Royal Navy base in Plymouth. Our William was named for John's father, and the *Hector's* voyage to Gujarat was the third by the East India Company, under the Crown's charter for:

"Good sayfe Harbors for a maintenance of a trade [and] in sayfetic from the daunger of the Portingalls, or other enymies."⁵

Having foiled his enemies in India, Hawkins will, in 1612, die of a disease unknown to his physicians. He is aboard the *Thomas* off the shores of Ireland, returning from Malaya, in the early flush of Britain's Far East trade.

Pregnant, his widow Miriam marries again, to Gabriel Towerson, captain of the *Thomas*, who returns to India, plying the trade of a Spice Islands merchant and freebooter, putting commerce before the Crown, and profit before duty. This runs him afoul of envious British authorities and of Dutch officials in the Maluccas, where he is tortured and executed, his head put on public display, as with the Jesuits of Gujarat, an operatic irony no doubt lost on Captain Towerson.

1. Though presented here in modern English, this chronicle from Hawkins's life is taken almost *verbatim* from the memoirs of a 17th-cent. East India Company clerk, one of dozens who served, if not always honourably, during that era. The assistance of Christopher Randall, Balliol College, Oxford, was instrumental in my revision of the original text.
2. On this, Mutaza was correct—Sir Francis Drake, Sir Walter Raleigh, and John Hawkins, giver of the bracelet, raided ships from Plymouth to the Tropics to the Spanish waters of the Old and New Worlds, profiteering from such vessels for themselves and the Crown.
3. The clerk's derisive "ravens" metaphor was not entirely inapt; the black-robed Jesuits missionaries were then ubiquitous, as are the raven family.
- 4.. Hawkins's "vengeance" quote here questions the claim that its Eng. origins are from the Fr. circa 1846. He perhaps acquired it from Kurrachee's Pathan (Pashtun) traders, revenge being a firm principle of their tribe's code (as shown in Chapter 2).
5. In time, "John Company," as it came to be known, would make the Indian subcontinent the "jewel in the Crown" of British dominion in the known world—to many, a shameful enterprise.