

Love Amidst The Mutiny

Alison tapped her foot in irritation. Her husband had not heard a word of what she had said in the last fifteen minutes.

'Percy, I have thought of something,' she said brightly. 'Let's not go to the theatre tonight. They are boring anyway. Let's ride down to the river, just you and me, I'll pack sandwiches, a flask of lime juice, and your favourite ale as well. It'll be wonderful, just you and me by the river!'

Lieutenant Currie continued to look at his papers.

'Nonsense, my dear,' he said distantly, 'it's twenty-five miles away, and stifling hot, and there's nothing to see, just the Ganges. And there are bound to be snakes. You hate snakes.'

'They won't put in a special appearance just to tease me,' said Alison despairingly. 'Percy! I want to be with you, just you - and make a go of things.'

Her husband did not look up. 'You are making a go of things,' he said letting annoyance creep into his voice.

'Dearest, can't you see, I have to get these accounts in order before tomorrow for the Brigadier to inspect? There's a deal of work to be done – the sepoy's apart from being insolent have been thieving as well. There's a clear four *annas* difference between the price we have paid and market rates. The Brigadier wanted me to check, and he was right!'

'Old Wilson should have been in a counting house in the City,' said Alison caustically, 'and not tried to command a regiment.'

Lieutenant Currie looked up in mild surprise at this, pushing back his glasses over his balding head. 'My dear, a large cantonment like Meerut's, the best in India as we all know under the East India Company, requires careful management, if we are to keep several British and Native regiments properly provided. What did Napoleon say? An army marches on its stomach!'

'Napoleon fought battles, your Wilson only keeps accounts!' shot back Alison hotly.

'Nonsense!' said her husband shortly. 'You know nothing of the matter. He is a fine soldier. And you saw yesterday how he treated those eighty-five rascally sepoy who had refused to accept cartridges for the new Enfield rifles. What nonsense to say the Muslim would not touch pig fat, nor the Hindu cow lard! If they can eat mutton, they better learn to eat every other animal! This is 1857 in the age of science and reason! Besides, it's our Christian duty to rid the natives of their evil superstitions! I was so glad that they were stripped in front of their own regiment and marched off to jail. Wilson is a fine disciplinarian, remember that, and I'm proud to serve under him!'

Her husband had never spoken to her before with such vehemence, as if he were lecturing a child.

Alison broke into tears. 'You should all be ashamed of dishonoring such fine soldiers,' she said hoarsely. 'Sepoy who have fought for you, and given you an Empire!'

Lieutenant Currie laid down his papers with confused weariness, and mopped his brow with a handkerchief limp with sweat. 'My dear, you are overwrought, this damned heat!' He came round the table heavily, and clumsily patted the coiled red braids of her hair. 'And - and the struggles you've had with these damned black servants, why it'd try the patience of a saint!'

Alison looked up through her tears. 'Percy, I am not a saint. I am a woman, and I want my husband!'

'Well, you have me,' said Percy Currie composedly, turning to go back to his papers. 'Once you get the hang of being a memsahib, you'll get along famously with the way things are here in India. Most English girls learn all the tricks within six months of marriage. You will learn faster, I'll be bound. In fact, I repose full confidence in you!' he added in his best regimental manner.

'I don't want you to repose confidence in me, Percy,' said Alison drying her tears. 'I want, I want...' Her voice trailed away.

Her husband was once again deep in his papers. 'Eh? What do you want?' he asked distantly.

'I want to be a wife, a real wife,' she started in a small voice.

He waved a hand in dismissal. 'You are all that, so don't fret. Why, why don't you go and get that lazy *khansamah* of ours to bake us a nice pudding for dinner? You could teach him some English dishes! You will like that, won't you?'

Alison nodded dispiritedly and left their living room.

The heat of an Indian summer was beginning to mount rapidly, now that it was past twelve. They had lunched early, for it was almost impossible to eat after noon in the heat of the day. She drew down the blinds to darken the bedroom, and then on impulse, pushed open the door to the rear veranda, and narrowing her eyes against the blinding

glare, plumped down into a rattan chair. Everything seemed hot, and quiet, in the European lines. The horses had all been taken into their stables. Even stray dogs were curling up under the shade of trees. No one was stirring, except a few servant women who were taking in washing. It was Sunday afternoon, a typical Sunday summer afternoon, in an Indian cantonment. Everyone, every living thing, rested.

But not Alison. She was a seething cauldron of pent-up emotions, let loose by the terrible happenings of the pervious day. The horror of what she had witnessed had flooded into her own private anguish, making a mockery of all her young hopes, and a sham of her life even before it had started.

Nothing in her life had prepared her for it. In England, which she had left barely ten months ago, she had known of India only through the romantic books she had read, and the coaxing letters she received from her elder sister, Gwen. She had finally come out to get married, in a world of beauty,

romance, and honour. She had been accounted very good looking at home, with fetching manners, and older women friends had observed with much regret that had she been born in a wealthy family she would certainly have caught a rich husband, if not a lord, with her big blue eyes and her fine figure, her Irish-red tresses being the only part of her not a la mode. But as the genteelly brought up daughter of a penniless curate, she had had no real prospects. She had been obliged to accept the first offer she received, and had been comforted by the wise Gwen's observation that Percy, though a lot older than her, was someone she could depend upon, someone who would help her get established in society.

She had been unhappy ever since she had said yes, in ways she had been unable to express even to herself, though everyone seemed busy congratulating her on her happiness. Percy's clumsy embraces had awakened desires she had semiconsciously suppressed till her wedding night. Without saying so, he seemed as little satisfied with her companionship as she was with him. She had hastily told herself a million times she was being uncharitable towards

her husband – he never hurt her in any way, only – only he was so cold – cold as an English night! Why did he marry her if he did not want her? Perhaps it helped his career to have a wife – perhaps he needed a dependable housekeeper. She had felt crushed at the thought. He was away a lot on regimental duties, and she had almost come to feel relief, ungenerously, when she saw him ride away.

She had tried to share with Gwen what she could not voice clearly to herself, but her sister had quickly brushed her aside every time, reminding her forcefully of her luck in securing a husband in an English regiment, that too in the Horse Artillery. She must be patient, she must remember she was a married lady with a position in society and put aside all her missish ways.

Alison had tried valiantly to accept her sister's advice, though every fibre in her body screamed with frustration. She understood much must be sacrificed for a place in society, but – with a flood of revulsion, she got up from her chair and went into the bathroom to bathe her head with cold water. She would now never want to belong to a society

that was so cruel, so hypocritical, so – so dishonorable! Yes, that was the word! Yesterday, that horrible Saturday, May the ninth, she had witnessed a most dishonorable act, which everyone else had accepted as just and necessary! Everyone around her on that parade ground had sat under the hot sun like cold stone figures! She could have killed herself with shame!

Eighty-five soldiers had been dishonored in front of their regiment, their beautiful French grey uniforms had been stripped away in public, and fetters placed on hands accustomed to carry sabres, and all for no fault of theirs! Their bare bodies showed to all the battle scars they carried, received unflinchingly in the service of the English, and yet they were treated worse than wild beasts with English gunners standing ready by their cannons with lighted tapers. Old heroes had wept like children and raised manacled hands to heaven seeking divine justice! Coldly, brutally, they had been raped of their honour, in broad daylight, in front of family, friends, and strangers. Her father had taught her to venerate Protestant martyrs who had given up their lives for their faith – how could any guilt

attach to sepoys who held steadfastly to their own religions?
They would not be such famous warriors were they less as
men of faith!

She had ridden home yesterday in the greatest distress
though Mrs. Rotton, the chaplain's wife, who sat next to her
had tried to explain that the sepoys' religion was mere idol
worship and could not be counted as faith. She had replied
acidly that the Mussalman was not an idol worshipper, and
all conversation had thankfully ceased.

She had run blindly into her darkened home, away from the
glare, the sun and the dishonour, and seeing Amjad in her
living room, had fallen on his breast, unthinkingly, her body
racked with sobs she could not hold back. Amjad was
Jamedar in the Third Native Cavalry, the regiment that had
been torn apart savagely on the parade ground a bare hour
ago.

He had been the first person to welcome her, when she had
arrived at her sister's house as a girl sent out to find a
husband in this new and savage land. He was tall, with deep

kind eyes, and a flowing black moustache - a tanned handsome version of dear Prince Albert himself, as she had thought to herself timidly. He had given her a slow reassuring smile as he had handed her down from her carriage, and she had come to depend on that smile in the days that followed her induction into society at the cantonment. He had watched over her when she had inexpertly ridden to hounds, he had been there to drive her home early from regimental balls. He had led her shopping in the *Sadar Bazaar* for Indian trinkets, he had explained Indian ways to her in his deeply accented English, and even introduced her to the *zenana* of a friendly Rajah. That night when she had to say 'yes' to Percy, who had shored up his courage with a couple of stiff pegs to offer for her, she had decorously asked to be allowed first to go to the ladies' room to compose herself and her thoughts, but seeing Amjad out in the dark she had run out instinctively as if to seek his approval. In a strange way, he seemed to know, he gave her that slow smile she had come to depend upon, and then unusually for him, he had pressed her hand reassuringly. He was her special friend, a man her brother-in-law, the captain of the regiment, had declared 'you can trust with your life.'

And now back home from that harsh dishonourable deed on the parade ground, she had clutched onto him, sobbing, sobbing on his breast. 'Amjad! Amjad! It was so – so horrible! How you must hate us – hate me!' Her body trembled with the violence of her feeling.

Suddenly his arms were around her, holding her comfortingly against the firmness of his body. 'Alison! Listen to me, Alison, I will always be your friend, and a friend of your family, of Gwen Memsahib, and the Captain Sahib and their children, never doubt me.'

She had listened slightly reassured. She had thrilled to hear him call her by her name for the first time, and not as '*Chotte* or Little Memsahib.' She had put her hands on his broad shoulders and looked up pleadingly.

'But they did such horrible things today to your comrades, to your regiment, Amjad, it – it is unpardonable'

'Your brother-in-law, the Captain Sahib, followed orders like a good soldier, even as I did. It is the fault of Colonel Smyth, who brought dishonour on all of us and also on himself, and it is Colonel Smyth who will repay!'

She had looked up at his stern face, chiseled as out of granite, and she had clung to him even as his arms tightened around her. Then, tremulously, as if seeking to bind herself within the safety of his arms, she had drawn down his head to make him look into her eyes.

Suddenly, uncontrollably, he had crushed her body against his and showered kisses on her face. Her lips sought his, softly at first, and then with the ardour of all her passion. She tore away, gasping for breath, but he caught her face in his hands and kissed her with a vehemence she could only surrender to. Her risen nipples were thrusting through the soft cotton of her dress and hurting against the hard fabric of his uniform. As he tightened his grip her right breast pulled hard against his leather cross-belt and she gasped with pleasure. She was nestled close to him, her thighs pressed

against his, his hands gripping her hips hard against his body. She felt his mounting passion.

'Amjad! Amjad! Take me, take me away to your village, far away! Make me yours forever!' she had pleaded.

He had pulled back from her to look searchingly into her face. Then, he kissed her bruised lips very softly a couple of times. His hands fondled her eager breasts softly through her lace chemise, and then his right hand wandered down slowly over her body to hold it tight between the cleft of her thighs.

'You are mine, from the dawn of time, Alison Begum,' he had said in his deep voice. 'Even Allah cannot change that. But whether the time is now, I cannot tell. Think! Our ways are not yours. While all my love will be at your service forever, you will bear the cost of exile from your own people. Think well, Alison Begum! If the decision is the same as what you feel now against my body, sit in your rear veranda tomorrow afternoon and drop your handkerchief, I shall come for you. If you decide to stay with your people,

you will still have me as your friend as before, and my sword will stand between you and harm forever.'

She had wanted to beseech him with all the passion she felt burning in her from the tips of her red hair down to the pit of her stomach, to beseech him to take her then and there, to sweep her to the bedroom, and body against heaving body make her his own. Even as she pleaded, he had turned away and she saw him go through a haze of tears. She had kept to her darkened room all that day, Percy thankfully putting it down to a mild attack of sunstroke, and leaving her to go back to his office. The heat had been intolerable. She had followed her ayah's advice and taken a cold bath, and feeling slightly refreshed drunk some sweet tea to think things over.

Everyone would say she was mad, mad like that distant Irish forbear of hers. If she ran away, she would destroy herself, and destroy Amjad as well. There would be pursuit, not that anyone really cared about her, but they would all be jealous for the reputation of the regiment. These men were merciless, she had seen how merciless they were on the

parade ground that day, they would shoot Amjad like a dog, the man she loved, the only man who had shown her any love, apart from her poor dear father, who had died so long ago, leaving wispy memories of a kindly face and warm comforting arms.

She would not let anything happen to Amjad. She would renounce her love for him. Wild despair filled her heart as she thought of the cold years that would follow. She must give up her one chance of happiness even before her life had begun! She had flung herself on her bed, and buried her head in her pillows. In the depth of her black mood a guarded remark of Gwen's swam into her head. What was it that Gwen had said one day in vague response to her own stuttered despair about Percy's coldness? That India was not a Christian country, it was heathen with wild pagan ways. And one had to adapt or perish. And she had added almost as a non sequitur something about Major Kildare being such a flirt, always willing to carry things just a little too far. She herself had been too deep in misery to take Gwen's meaning at that moment, and later on reflection had shaken off as unworthy the thought that Gwen had hinted at an improper

liaison. But lying on her bed in the darkened bedroom, with her breast racked by her unleashed passions, she began to see how other English women survived under this hot dusty climate with husbands more in love with their drink and their horses than with their wives. She began to see why Kildare was so popular with the ladies, who clustered around him in drawing rooms as he thumped away on the piano, while the rest of the men lingered over their port and cigars. Kildare was always the one man willing to escort a bevy of women to the cool hills around Simla. Yes, she saw it all!

‘My dear Gwen,’ Kildare had said one evening at the club, ‘you must bring your charming sister along to the hills next time. They say sisters like the same things, and I am sure I can show her what she wouldn’t have dreamt of in England!’

Gwen had been flushed with drinking too much wine and her eyes were brilliant. She had tapped Kildare’s arm with her fan, and said ‘Don’t you dare! I am not always so charitable!’

An exchange Alison had made nothing of then, but she had been new to India, and Meerut, and the ways of officers in cantonments. It was part of the many things she had not understood about the new life she was starting. But now, several months later, she began to understand. But she would be different. She would not flirt openly like the others, with men like Kildare, or that young Irish boy who always wanted to dance with her. No, she would not renounce Amjad! She would build a love life with Amjad that no one would ever get a whisper about, or even dare to imagine! It would be a secret world just for the two of them, a real world they would escape to on occasion, and then re-emerge into this make-believe sham world of brutal hard-drinking officers living amongst a vastly different people they did not understand or care about. Her mind made up, her despair courageously dispelled, she had fallen into a deep sleep, only to be woken up hours later by her ayah announcing that dinner was served.

Alison sat in her rear veranda on that hot Sunday afternoon, the tenth of May, squinting her eyes to look at the lifeless barracks behind her house, drenched by the blinding sun. Twenty-four hours had passed since that incident on the parade ground. In that short space of time, she had found herself, and found her love. Spontaneously stirred by some Christian conscience, she had made one last appeal to her husband that morning, to ride with her to the river in the evening, to be with her, to help her make one last desperate attempt at repairing a marriage that had never been. She had reached out into thin air. He had brushed her aside without an iota of recognition of her need. He just did not care enough for her to sense the turmoil she was going through. Perhaps, he did not care for any woman. She would vacillate no longer. She dropped her handkerchief as Amjad had told her to, though she saw no sign of life anywhere in that heat. But somehow, Amjad would know and he would come. But she would not run away. She would take him into her own bedroom and make love to him there. No one would know, there was no one to see. Her husband would be riding out any minute to his dusty office and its accounts. With quickening heart beat she waited for her love. From the

corner of her eye she saw Percy canter away. She got up impatiently, she would not sit in the veranda, she would wait for Amjad in her bedroom.

After pacing the room for a few minutes, she decided she would lie down to calm her nerves. On no account should Amjad judge her to be like the rest of the white memsahibs. She was not a loose woman, she was in love with him, only him, and she would be faithful to him all her life. Though it could never be an open marriage, in the cathedral of her heart, she would be married to him. There was Percy of course, but he did not care, he would not touch her most days, perhaps, only at Christmas or on birthdays, for form sake, perhaps she could push him away on those rare occasions. She could not think it all out now, she needed to wait for Amjad, and tell him all that was in her heart when he came. He would understand, she knew he would, for he cared for her.

Waiting for the delicious moment of his arrival, calming her beating heart, Alison fell into a waking dreamlike state from which she came out all of a sudden on seeing Amjad

standing still by her bedside. She jumped out of bed flustered, forgetting all the lines she had rehearsed. He held her by her shoulders and gave her a slow loving smile. She noticed he was not dressed in his cavalry uniform but wore flowing Pathan robes with a tall silk turban above his noble head.

'Amjad, Amjad! I am so happy you have come. I - I have something to tell you - I have thought it out - it -it would be dangerous to run away, Amjad, but I love you so - desperately, dear heart - I...'

He hushed her babbling with strong fingers held lightly against her mouth, and they both sank down side by side on the bed. She was panting with desire, and her eyes softened as she gazed on his magnificent presence. He kissed her softly at first, and then hard and deep. Her lips opened like a full blown rose and his tongue ravaged hers with sweeping passion. For several precious moments he held her in that close embrace, and then released her gently and leaned back to look at her.

'Make love to me now, here in my bed,' she asked longingly.

'Not here, but in my place, as it should be, Begum,' he said gently but firmly, getting up.

She was alarmed.

'We cannot run away, Amjad, I am sorry I ever suggested that,' she said her breasts heaving. 'They will come after us, the sahibs, I know, for the *izzat* of the regiment, they will kill you, my precious! We must be secret lovers!'

He held out his hand, and she rose obediently.

'I am taking you now to my house,' he said evenly in his deep voice. 'After we have become one, there will be time to talk of what we may do next. Come!'

She shrank back in confusion. 'What? No! I cannot come to the native regimental lines, you must realize that's impossible! Everyone will see! Amjad! I would be lost forever!'

'Begum, trust me, I would never permit even the shadow of rumour to darken your fame! I take you to my private home in the *bastee*. My servant, an old woman, owes her life to me and she will be discreet. Come, I have brought your sister's carriage, all will look normal. Come!'

She would not doubt her lover any longer. Her fate was in his safe hands. She would follow him where he led. She knew he came from a well-to-do class, serving in the Third Cavalry not for pay but to uphold the warrior traditions of his family. Gwen had told her as much, and of course he would have his own establishment in the *bastee*, the crowded native township that had sprung up between the European area and the sepoy lines, serving both with its shops and *bazaars*. She had been there several times to shop for household necessities or to buy the occasional trinket, and once even in Amjad's company. But she had never thought he would have a place there.

The hood of the carriage was pulled well forward to offer some shade against the glaring sun, and she hid in its

shadowed depths as Amjad whipped the horses forward towards the town. They left the neat European lines behind, every bungalow with windows shuttered against the heat and hardly a soul stirring abroad except for the stray messenger boy. They drove down the broad Mall, with its lovely row of spreading trees on either side, and soon entered the native quarters. Its narrow twisting lanes would normally have been full of jostling crowds but were bare in the heat of that Sunday afternoon, most shops having pulled down their shutters to permit their owners a short siesta before opening again in the evening. Alison had come that way before since her brother-in-law, a captain of the Third Native Cavalry, had his bungalow near the lines of his regiment well to the south of the Mall which divided the European from the sepoy areas. Gwen had said it was so convenient being near the *Sadar Bazaar* and anyway her bungalow was more spacious than those in the European lines, and nearer those of other officers, so she could always pop round for a chat over tea with a lady friend.

Alison was jolted out of her reverie when the carriage pulled up suddenly close to a low mud wall. Amjad handed her out

of the carriage and straight through a small wicket gate into a spacious yard shaded by a large mango tree. He nodded silently to a middle-aged woman in a black *burqa* who stood there, and then went out again through the gate. With a fast beating heart, Alison followed the woman into a low tiled house. A narrow veranda led into several small dark rooms, surprisingly cool despite the heat outside. The woman led her to a back room, *salaamed* respectfully, and left without saying a word. Alison was nonplussed for a moment. Then she noticed that a lovely lace *kameez* had been laid out on the bed, and an equally diaphanous pair of muslin pajamas. A ewer with cold water stood beside an enameled basin and several bottles of attar. She was hot and uncomfortable in her European clothes. She decided she would take them all off, put them away in a cupboard, wash her face and neck, and after applying some attar of roses to her ears, she would wear the clothes laid out on the bed. Her lover was an Indian, and she would dress for him in Indian clothes.

As she looked at herself in the long mirror set in a wall, she felt pride and passion mounting inside her. Her full figure looked far more enticing through the loose tracery of her

kameez than any girdle or low-cut bodice had ever displayed.

Little red-gold roses had been embroidered in her dress, matching the glinting red-gold of her thick tresses. She shook them loose in abandon. She was ready for her lover, but where was he?

Then she saw him through the mirror, coming smiling into the room till he stood close behind her, his strong hands rising gently to cup her full breasts through the silk. She laid her head back against his chest with a soft moan and closed her eyes. She was his, for him to do as he willed. She felt his thumbs rub her rosebud nipples till they thrust through the lace, felt him turn her round to crush her lips with his, and then he had lifted her body as if she were a child and laid her softly on his bed. She moaned with pleasure as his eager fingers undid the tape of her pajamas and drew them away.

Her lace *kameez* was rucked up above her hips, his hands firmly pushed her long thighs open and then she was arching her body towards his as he took her fast and furiously as if he were galloping over the grounds on his favourite mare. She had never known till that moment that a man could possibly make a woman so fully his own.

Suddenly, in rising waves her pent up passion burst out, and she wept with fulfillment. He lay lightly over her like a dark cloud, firmly controlling her body as she feverishly clutched his long form to herself, ran her hands down over his thighs to hungrily hold him deep inside her. As the intensity of her passion quietened into little whimpers of happiness, he started again, slowly, rhythmically teaching her with every nuance of movement the arts of lovemaking she had never realized existed till that precious hour. Finally, after time had ceased to exist, they lay side by side, their arms embracing their intertwined bodies drenched in the heat of their passion, and they slept.

Alison stretched out languorously and then sat up with a start. She was alone in the room. Someone had covered her naked body with a cotton sheet. A small lamp had been placed by the bedside. God! It must be hours late. The narrow barred window with its coloured panes looked

black. It was night. She got up in a hurry, twisting her thick tresses into a knot. She must hurry. There should be no scandal. She would have liked to take a long hot bath, but there was no time, she would bathe back in her own home. She dressed in her European clothes with feverish energy, and looked at herself in the mirror, smoothing her clothes. She needed a comb, she looked quickly round the room for one, and yes, there was one. She undid her hair, combed her hair quickly and then coiled it as neatly as she could into a chignon. Her face was still swollen with sleep and hours of love-making. She splashed water on it and dried herself with a towel. Where was Amjad? She must get home quickly! Would Percy have sent out a search party? Not likely. The *chowkidar* at the gate would have told him, if he was at all curious enough to ask, that she had driven out in her sister's carriage. He would have got busy with his accounts, but she must be back for dinner, if it still was not later than that. She must find Amjad

But he was already there beside her, fully dressed in the French grey uniform of his regiment, his shako under his arm. She went to him quickly and put her arms around him.

She felt the hard metal of the sabre he had buckled on, and his side arms.

She looked up into his face with instinctive alarm. 'What is it, dearest? What has happened?' she whispered.

His stern face showed no emotion.

'Come! I must take you to safety! Now!' he said, with just a hint of urgency.

Her face looked a question, and she hung back.

He looked at her steadily for a moment and then said evenly, 'The Regiments have mutinied. We have no time to lose.'

She was totally bewildered. 'Mutiny? Mutiny! Who - when - why?'

Even as she spoke he had led her by the hand out into the courtyard. The black night was lit garishly by fires, leaping

high in the air all round. She heard the hoarse yells of sepoy and the screams of women, and shuddering, sought the shelter of Amjad's arm.

He looked down on her gravely. 'The Colonel Sahib was a bigger fool than I imagined. That insult offered to us yesterday could not be forgiven! The Third Cavalry has mutinied and the Sepoy infantry regiments have joined us! I sent a warning through that young Gough Sahib, but either he was too late or the fools did not listen to him. Now, we will all have to bear the consequences. Any minute the English Artillery could bombard us, and there will be a massacre! Come, Alison Begum, come! I must get you to the English lines and safety, *inshallah!* Come!'

He pulled her impatiently towards the wicket gate in the mud wall, but she stood firm, lifting her red head proudly.

'If you are in danger, my place is by your side,' she said without a tremor in her voice. 'Understand, Amjad, I am yours, in life and in death!'

He looked at her uncertainly, as she stood her ground with quiet defiance.

‘Begum, there is a fight coming,’ he said at last in his deep voice. ‘My place is with my men. A battle is no place for a woman.’

‘Then leave me in your house,’ she countered.

He shook his head. ‘This place will be in the middle of the battle. It will be destroyed. None will survive! We must leave now, if we are to live!’

A troop of horse went thundering past, lifted sabres visible over the top of the mud wall, while sepoy yells, ‘*Maro! Maro! Angrez kafir ko maro!*’ Amjad’s woman servant had come out of the house, timorously. Without a word, Amjad whipped away her *burqa* even as she let out a thin scream, and then draping it full over Alison, lifted her into his arms and ran out of the courtyard. His tethered charger was pulling nervously away, scared by the yells and the fires.

With a word he quietened the horse, and swung lightly into

the saddle, Alison cuddled in his arms. In a moment they were pushing their way past the frightened milling crowds on the streets. The flames rising from the bungalows of English officers cast ghastly flickering light on all around, and combined with the hoarse yells of the enraged sepoy, drove terrified people out of their houses into the streets where there was no safety for anyone. Alison saw women and children stumble and fall screaming as men ran over them pushed by the mobs behind.

Somehow, guiding his horse more by instinct than design, Amjad rode out of the crowded streets, and they leapt over a *nullah* into a darkened field. A line of bungalows were blazing away to the right. Turning, Amjad galloped towards them, forcing the horse to take high garden fences in the dark, and then unerringly seeking shelter among the trees that bordered the large compounds, he made their way rapidly to the south, and away from the screams and shouts in the *bastee*.

His horse was blowing with the exertion, and Amjad pulled up briefly under a large banyan tree. 'We will go to the

Captain Sahib's bungalow,' he said, patting the horse's neck soothingly. 'You should be safe for the moment with your sister. The mob would not have reached this far south from the *bastee*. Perhaps, they never will, we do not know.'

She was happy to be in his arms. She was too scared, too confused to think of what was in store for them in the next few hours or minutes. Enough, that she was with him. Enough, to know that she was his, had been his for a short wonderful moment, if their end was near.

They galloped down a narrow dusty lane, turned into a road, and soon were in sight of Gwen's bungalow, normally a blaze of light in the evenings, but now only a single hurricane lantern glimmered in the veranda.

As they cantered in through the gate, she dimly spied Gwen's figure standing at the edge of the veranda, her two small children clustered round her knees. She called out to her excitedly.

Gwen ran out with a child in each hand. 'Thank God it's you, Amjad!' she said with relief. 'And you, Alison? What brought you here – and why are you wearing – what's happening, Amjad? All the servants have run away!'

They had dismounted, and Alison ran to embrace her sister, who held onto her distractedly. Amjad explained the situation in a few short sentences. Gwen continued to be bewildered.

'That's not possible!' she exclaimed. 'Our regiment? But they are the best – the loyalest! The Captain Sahib would never let them mutiny!' Then an alarming thought struck her. She went up to Amjad impulsively. 'Where is he, Amjad? Where is my husband?'

Amjad looked at her gravely. 'Memsahib, God is Great! The Captain Sahib is a very good man, surely God will protect him!'

Gwen trembled with fear, and a sob caught in her throat.

Alison put an arm round her and held her tightly. 'And Percy?' she asked of Amjad.

'Currie Sahib is very safe in the English lines,' said Amjad slowly. 'They have cannon and they have cavalry. It would be suicide for the sepoy to attack the English lines, so you can rest assured.'

Gwen looked up with renewed hope. 'Perhaps the Captain Sahib is also there,' she began, and then shook her head dejectedly. 'No, impossible, he will be with his regiment, and they - and they...'

Amjad held up a hand. 'You know he is liked by all the men. It is the Colonel Sahib who brought shame on us, and it is he who will pay.'

Gwen tried to say something, but fell silent. The children, sensing danger, started to cry, and Gwen bent down to kiss and comfort them.

'*Chotte Memsahib,*' said Amjad with emphasis looking straight at Alison, 'take Gwen Memsahib and the children inside, light lamps, and close all doors and windows. I stand guard outside. Now go!'

Even as the women turned to enter the darkened house, they heard a horse at fast gallop coming towards the house.

Amjad drew his sabre, and undid the flap of his pistol holster. A cavalry trooper rode in carelessly, drew his sabre in a flash, and then pulled up on recognizing Amjad in the flickering light of the hurricane lantern.

'God is Great, *Jamedar Sahib!*' he cried, sliding down from his horse. 'It is me, *Havildar Ram Singh!*'

Amjad relaxed visibly, but still stood cautiously alert. 'What news, *Havildar Sahib?*' he asked quietly.

Havildar Ram Singh came forward excitedly. They caught a glimpse of blood on his sabre as he sheathed it quickly.

'The Company Raj is over, over forever!' he shouted, his eyes dancing preternaturally. 'All our imprisoned comrades have been released from jail! They are free, and now they are armed and on horseback! The infantry is with us! We seek the cowardly Colonel who has much to pay!'

'You have not found him yet?' asked Amjad in a low voice.

'No! He has run away and is hiding!' yelled Ram Singh, almost dancing with impatience.

'And the General Hewitt Sahib?'

The *Havildar* laughed wildly. 'That old woman? He is drunk, and he is lying down! He is nothing! Nothing, I tell you! And the Brigadier Wilson - he is still doing his accounts! The Company Raj is finished, finished for good!' He danced in glee, drew his sabre, waved it about and then sheathed it panting.

'*Havildar* Ram Singh! Come to attention! You are an officer of the regiment, not a *bastee badmash!*' ordered Amjad sternly.

When he heard the order the *Havildar* drew himself up stiffly, and stood at attention before his superior.

'Are the English preparing to attack the Sepoy lines?' asked Amjad in slow measured tones.

Havildar Ram Singh shook his head, and in a few terse sentences informed Amjad that the English had taken up defensive positions around their own lines.

Amjad nodded thoughtfully. 'So, we will see what happens in the morning. And our English officers - what of them?'

His subaltern was silent for a moment. Then he said expressionlessly, 'It is decided they are to be killed, all of them, men, women, and children!'

'And you agreed? You, Ram Singh, you agreed?' queried Amjad, his voice tinged with growing horror.

‘The Regiment now serves the Moghul Emperor!’ said Ram Singh unflinchingly. ‘We must return Hindoostan to the Emperor, from out of the hands of these kafirs. They cannot live in our land!’

He turned without another word to mount his horse.

‘Your comrades look to you to lead them, *Jamedar* Sahib!’ he shouted from the saddle. ‘This is the moment of loyal duty to our Emperor! If you wish to save your friend’s family, do it now! You do not have much time – look! They are coming!’ With a wave of his sabre, he galloped away.

They stood, a small group, in the darkness of the garden.

Then, they heard the sound of the approaching mob, the distant death rattle of some victim, and baying clamour for blood.

Amjad came to a quick decision. ‘We cannot stay here any more. We must seek shelter in the civil lines, perhaps with the Commissioner, *Greathed* Sahib. This madness will end in the morning, but now we are in danger. Come, we have to

run! One horse cannot carry us all!' With that he looped the reins of his horse round its neck and gave it a smart whack to send it galloping away. 'Someone will find Toofan, or he may find me later, that horse can smell me out,' he added with a rueful smile.

Amjad carried the children, one on each arm, and they set off south once more, as fast as they could. They avoided roads and lanes, and took to ditches, crouching low. On many occasions before, Gwen had warned Alison to avoid going near ditches even in daytime, for she had said with a shiver, they most likely harboured cobras, but now they were fleeing for their lives, and had to follow Amjad whichever way he led them. Once on a darkened bund he pointed back silently, and turning they saw that Gwen's house was burning briskly as a mob shouted and screamed round it. They ran on, and crossing a road leapt into a ditch, only to have Gwen scream in horror. Alison quickly clapped a hand round her mouth, but gasped in fear herself as she saw that they were standing on the body of an English woman, stabbed and mutilated.

They had to run on. 'That was - that was - I think, the Chambers girl,' gasped Gwen as they rushed on, now quite heedlessly to escape that helpless body in the ditch. 'That girl had just come out, you know.' No one said anything, the horror was too great for words. Even the children uttered not a sound, frozen into silence by fear. At last, panting and disheveled, they saw lights ahead, and people speaking normally - it was the Commissioner's house, a haven of peace, and far different from the scenes they had left behind.

Mr. and Mrs. Greathed welcomed them most cordially, and then seeing their condition, quickly took them inside to the drawing room, after ordering the servants to fetch some lemonade and sandwiches. The women seated themselves on deep sofas, with the children burying their heads in Gwen's lap. Mr. Greathed sat on a chair, looking with growing concern at their gathering tears. Amjad stood by the door on watch.

'There, there, my dears,' said Greathed consolingly. 'Do compose yourselves. It is all over now. It will all be over soon - ended by the morning, I dare say. Yes, I hear there

has been a revolt of sorts in the military lines, but that happens on occasion, doesn't it? We have all gone this sort of thing before. You are safe here in any case, and your husbands, I will be bound, will send a relief column as soon as maybe. So, rest, that's the main thing to do.'

The man did not know the half of it, they could tell, but the women were too overwrought to say anything. Amjad just stood by grimly and said not a word as the Commissioner rambled on.

The women slowly gathered their nerves as Greathed continued in his soothing voice. The sandwiches remained untouched, but they found the lemonade somewhat refreshing. The children however refused to take even a sip, and started to whimper. Gwen asked for some milk, and Mrs. Greathed tinkled a small brass bell to summon her *khansamah*. After she had jangled it a few times in rising irritation, an ayah poked her head through an inner door.

'Tell the *khansamah* to bring some milk for the children,' said Mrs. Greathed slowly, in a loud irritated voice to the ayah.

'It should be warm enough to drink, mind you tell him that –
jaldi!

The ayah hung around uncertainly.

'Go! Go now and call the *khansamah*, you fool,' commanded
her mistress.

'They are gone, memsahib,' stammered the woman.

'Who's gone? Where? Don't gape at me, you idiot!' said Mrs.
Greathed, really annoyed.

'How many servants are left?' broke in Amjad coolly.

The ayah looked at him with relief. 'Just me and the other
ayah, *Jamedar Sahib*' she said.

Amjad nodded. 'Go and warm up some milk for the
children' he told the ayah kindly. 'I will go and inspect the
bungalow.'

When he returned a few minutes later, the Commissioner was still exclaiming about the cowardice and lack of loyalty of his servants, while his wife was repeating herself that she would get rid of the lot and employ better ones in the morning.

‘Luckily, a few of your servants are still quite loyal and on guard round the compound,’ said Amjad quietly, ‘but how long their courage will last I do not know. After all, they are just servants not soldiers. Commissioner Sahib, I must request you to gather your guests and bring them to the roof! Ayah! You and the other woman, bring as much food, water, lemonade, as you can up the stairs to the roof. *Jaldi karo!* There is no time to lose!’

‘What the devil, Sir? What’s the meaning of this?’ spluttered the Commissioner, refusing to budge from his chair.

‘Sir, there has been a Mutiny,’ said Amjad speaking slowly and clearly. ‘A big one. All the Native regiments are in revolt. The English troops have received no orders to march and have been told to take up defensive positions to guard

their own lines. You are in mortal danger! From your roof I can see crowds of rioters advancing. As a single soldier, I cannot hold them back for long. If you delay, you sacrifice your wife and your women guests!

There was a deathly silence. Alison ended it by getting up and asking the way to the roof. Then, there was a rush to go upstairs, everyone gathering shawls, blankets, and cushions, while the ayahs lugged up hampers of food and drink.

Amjad arranged their disposition on the floor of the flat roof, ordering everyone on no account to try and peep over the parapet. There were enough chinks between the balusters to keep watch on all that occurred down below.

'I shall nail the door shut,' he said going down, 'and pile up enough rubbish on the other side to make the roof look disused.'

'Just a minute, *Jamedar*,' said the Commissioner a little put out. 'I think we have left my brandy downstairs. If you will be a good fellow and get it up?'

Amjad gave him a long look. 'You do not need brandy tonight, just keep a clear head,' he said, as he disappeared downstairs, and soon they heard the door being nailed up. The Commissioner muttered something about damned impudence, but kept it to himself.

The minutes passed by slowly. The ayahs ranged themselves flat on their bellies with their eyes peeking between the balusters to keep watch. Gwen and Alison sat close together, patting the children till they slept from exhaustion. Mrs. Greathed was in a corner by herself wrapped up in a shawl with eyes closed, but they could see she was too tense to be really asleep.

The sisters started to whisper to each other. Among a great many things, they talked about the past, about the horror they were going through, about what the morrow might possibly hold for all of them. Gwen asked Alison how she came to hear of the mutiny and why she had left the safety of the European lines. When Alison said something about being caught unawares in the *bustee*, Gwen said it was just like her to be thoughtless and try and shop there without an

escort in the evening. Then, she stopped with a frown and looked closely at her younger sister.

'You were there in the *bustee*, Alison, you and Amjad in the evening...' She did not need to voice her suspicions, her sister's frank face told her everything. A look of revulsion swept over Gwen.

'How could you, Alison, how could you stoop so low!' she hissed in mortification.

Alison looked back with such a cool expression, that Gwen dropped her eyes. 'I know, he can't sing music-hall ditties in a light baritone,' said Alison evenly, 'but he is a far better soldier than Kildare.'

Gwen was about to retort, when Greathed dragged himself over the floor with a warning finger to his lips. 'No sound, anyone,' he hissed. 'We are surrounded!'

Alison wriggled her way to where the ayahs lay petrified, and cautiously peeped down. She could see silent masses of

men gathering in the dark outside the compound wall, waiting for a signal to attack. Then, it came. With one shout over a hundred men sprang to their feet with wild shouts, pelting stones at the house, smashing the glass of windows to smithereens. Someone threw a firebrand in through a broken window and a room caught fire. Then the mob was rushing in, breaking the furniture and looting whatever caught their fancy, even grabbing knickknacks of no earthly use to anyone. A few had cornered a terrified gardener and were demanding to know where the Commissioner Sahib was, they would not leave till they had killed him and his pig of a wife.

The people on the roof were petrified to say the least, fortunately the noise below drowned out the whimpering of the children. Suddenly, there was a loud shout, a pistol was fired in the air, and they saw Amjad ride in through the gate on his horse, Toofan.

The mob quietened a little on seeing a *Jamedar* of the Third Cavalry in full uniform, on his horse and waving a sabre.

'I will tell you where the Commissioner and his family are!' yelled Amjad in a booming voice.

'The bugger has betrayed us,' said Greathed, shivering beside Alison. 'He deliberately trapped us here!'

Many of the rioters had formed an admiring circle round Amjad and danced round him, while he laughed, and curveted his horse within their circle.

'Tell us, tell us, *Jamedar Sahib*,' the mob chanted. 'Tell us and we will kill them.'

'Yes, kill them!' said Amjad laughing indulgently. 'Kill them! They have run off to Suraj Kund - where the fakir baba preached, you remember - the infidels are there hiding in the temple! Go, drag them out and kill them! Bring me their heads! Go!'

The whole house was on fire by then. There was nothing much left to loot, so the mob, drunk with the lust of looting and killing roared off into the darkness in the direction

pointed to them by Amjad. But the Commissioner and his little group were trapped on the roof which might cave in at any moment, plunging them into the inferno below. As it is the heat was getting intolerable even on the roof. Just as they were beginning to think they had better jump and take their chances, Amjad's head appeared over the back parapet.

'Quick, the children first. Hand them to me, then follow, quickly!'

As Greathed, the last on the ladder, was halfway down, the roof caved in with a resounding crash, sending up a tall plume of fire and cinders, to be greeted within seconds by a far-off shout of joy.

Their ordeal was by no means over. Crowds of rioters all seemed to be dangerously close. Amjad led them quickly to the shelter of a mango grove just outside the compound wall, and telling them to huddle down behind the trunk of a great tree, he turned and hurried back again. They sat in silence and waited nervously for his return, as shouts and yells rang all round their hiding place. Then, after what

seemed an eternity, he emerged silently out of the shadows, and with a finger on his lips led them silently out through the grove to a narrow lane at the back. His horse was tethered to a tree, and beside it was a large coach with two horses within their traces, ready to start.

‘Commissioner Sahib, I saved your coach and horses.

Luckily the stables did not catch fire. You will have to drive it yourself today.’

Greathed merely nodded. As Amjad helped Gwen and the children to get into the coach, Greathed sprang up and reached for the reins.

‘There are still great many crowds of murderers about,’ said Amjad to Greathed. ‘Only God can tell what may happen next. But you must drive as fast as you can to the European lines. Avoid the *bastee*, all the *badmash log* are scattered there. Take the long route round to the west, past the civil courts. Few will be there, if any, they will be intent on looting the treasury, so they will not pay any attention to you. Drive at breakneck speed, stop for no one on any account and do not

draw rein till you have crossed the Mall and reached the English. Now go!

Greathed looked down at the soldier from his perch. 'Come with us, Sir,' he said civilly.

Amjad shook his head. 'I have neglected my duty too long. My place is with my regiment. Now, Go!' With those words, he leapt into his saddle and galloped out of sight.

Even as Greathed was whipping up the horses, Alison opened the door of the coach and jumped down. 'You go, Gwen, I am staying with Amjad,' she said shortly.

'Don't be a fool,' cried Gwen in despair. 'You don't know what you are doing, you silly fool. Get in! We will all die if we stay here a minute longer!'

Alison shook her head decisively. 'I am not coming. I am never coming back to the European lines! Go! Look after your own, for God's sake!'

Greathed was on the point of stepping down from the coach to add his pleas to Gwen's, when his wife raised a restraining hand.

'For God's sake, drive, Mr. Greathed, drive!' commanded his wife. 'Her blood be on her own depraved head!'

'Yes, we must think of the children!' wailed Gwen.

With a last unhappy look at Alison standing alone in the lane, Greathed whipped up the horses, and drove them at a rattling pace round the corner.

Alison breathed noisily through her nostrils. At last there was no one left to push her around and make her do things she hated. At last she was by herself. Alone. Quite alone. Slowly it began to sink into her mind that she was indeed totally alone, without any friend at hand. Amjad did not know she had got down from the coach on impulse. And she did not know where he was, might never know. Dangerous crowds milled all round the place, she could hear them yelling. Yes, she wore a *burqa*, but anyone who came within

a few paces of her would know she was a white woman. She was alone and in a very dangerous spot.

Alison sat down on a tree stump, tired, and confused. She needed to think. How was she to let Amjad know where she was? She realized with fright that there was no way she could do so. She must get to some place safe and wait, for him to search and find her. But where was safety? Desperately, she tried to remember Amjad's instructions to Greathed. He had told him to drive west past the civil courts, none of the rioters were likely to be there. Perhaps she could hide somewhere there till day came. But what surety was there that daylight would bring safety to a lonely woman, moreover a woman anyone could spot as a hated white woman? Her eyes smarted with tears. She must gather her wits and not lose her nerve. Where could she go? Perhaps there would be safety in a place of religious worship. She knew the natives were very respectful of the gods. She would be safe in St. John's Church if she could get there somehow. But the church was north of the Mall within

the European lines and even if she survived crossing the *bastee* she would never see Amjad again. She wept in frustration. She should hide in a temple, or in mosque, no one would molest a woman there. She had visited a few along with Amjad and she knew she would be safe in one of them. But those she had seen were near that Suraj Kund where Amjad had just sent the rioters to look for Greathed. She must avoid going there at all cost. In any case how could she find her way to the south-east? Which was the east? She had never learnt to find her direction by looking at the stars, though Gwen had tried to teach her. One thing she knew, she could not stay where she was, even for a minute. Wild men were all around, yelling for white people's blood. She must hide. She ran back into the grove. Then she shrank behind a tree. There were men about, sitting under the trees, drinking and laughing. She should never have got off Greathed's coach! Amjad - Amjad would have found her later - he was clever - he had even found the Commissioner's coach and horses - Yes! That was it, the stables were still standing, she would hide there and wait for light.

Cautiously, like a frightened mouse she made her way back to the Greathed's burnt down place, past knots of men drunk or asleep in the dark. There was eerie silence amidst the embers. Some of the posts and beams still continued to burn dully, sending up sparks into the night and lighting the place with an unearthly glow. She would circle round to find the stables.

'Arre bai! Arre bai! Kuon ho tum? Eh bai!'

A few men had come into the circle of light and were accosting her in Hindoostani. She knew native women would never speak to strange men, so shrinking into her *burqa*, she turned and hurried away from them.

'Eh, let the old woman go,' said someone in Hindoostani, and someone else laughed. Relieved, she tried to run, stepped on a smouldering piece of wood and shrieked, the hood of her *burqa* slipping from her head to reveal her red hair in the dull light.

A loud shout went up from the men. *'Gori hai! Angrez mem! Pakdo! Pakdo!'*

She had no chance against them. They had caught her before she had run a dozen steps on sore feet, and twisting her round, thrown her violently on the ground. They stood in a jeering circle round her, and she could smell the raw arrack on their breaths. One of them reached down and pulled her up by her hair as she struggled. Other hands tore at her clothes, shredding them into strips, till she stood naked and wild-eyed among them. A big unshaven man punched her in the stomach, and as she doubled up in pain, he knocked her down, and kicked aside her thighs. They all laughed hoarsely, more from sadistic pleasure. The big man who had hit her lewdly undid his pajamas, and Alison closed her eyes in fright and disgust. She heard a wild shout and an unearthly scream, and opened her terrified eyes to see the headless body of the man topple beside her while his head bounced off like a ball. A man stumbled and fell across her body, only to writhe screaming as a sabre sliced him from shoulder to kidney. Men were trying to run everywhere, but Amjad was standing there like an avenging angel, terrible in

anger, swinging his sabre and bringing down a man at every stroke. The few who could escaped screaming into the night. Dazed, she sat in the midst of bodies and blood, till Amjad very carefully wrapped her in a large grey blanket, and lifting her like a child carried her away from that awful scene.

She was crying and shuddering in his arms as they rode through the dark night on Toofan, away from Meerut and all its horrors. He crooned to her as they galloped, and slowly in stages, her whimpering stopped, and she fell asleep, exhausted, against his breast, even as they rode on tirelessly through the night. She woke up again during the ride to ask him whether she was still alive or dead, whether he was man or angel, and how he had found her. He stopped near a pond to let his horse drink, and offered her his water bottle. She drank as noisily as their mount, and gasped.

'There is no mystery, Begum Sahiba,' said Amjad in his calming deep voice. 'I found a picket of troopers approaching from the treasury, so I stopped to warn Greathed and turn him towards a safer path. He told me he

had left you behind. I went back to the lane but you were gone. I was searching for you in despair till I heard your cry.'

'I am so lucky you came,' she said cuddling back into his arms. She peeped up and saw his mouth set in a long hard line. 'Those men - those men...' she could say no more.

He held her close to his breast as they rode on once more.

'Forget, my Begum,' he said softly. '*Bastee badmash log* who would dishonour their mothers.'

She closed her eyes as ordered but the terrible images of her ordeal remained with her behind her shut eyelids.

Finally she must have fallen asleep rocked by the rhythm of their ride, for how long, she did not know. Then, the horse was clattering over some stone steps, and woke her up. They were passing through the arched gateway of a mansion and then through a large garden laid out in formal moghul style.

She saw servants and a few women running out from the mansion carrying lights. Amjad shouted something to them,

and then without stopping rode on round the building till they were at the back, facing a great river, glimmering in the light of a false dawn. Toofan carefully carried them down some steps to the edge of the river. Amjad throwing off the reins, slid down, still cuddling her in his arms. After carefully unwrapping her from the blanket, as if she were a precious piece of porcelain, he led her to the river.

'This is the sacred Ganges,' he whispered softly in her ear.

'This is my house, and I have bathed in her since I was a child, and every time I have come out renewed, all sins washed away, all hurt healed, all made whole again!'

A long time ago, she had asked someone to bring her to the Ganges - when was that, she could not remember - and Amjad her true love had at last brought her there. He led her into the water. It was cool, pleasantly so in the summer. They walked into the river, hand in hand, he fully dressed in his uniform, she as naked as the day she was born. They lay in the great river with just their eyes and noses above the lapping water till life and strength surged back into her

body, and she could smile with love at this man God had given her.

Hand in hand they rose from the river, she as proud and beautiful as if she were a Greek naiad formed for the gods. A woman stood on the bank with towels, giggling shyly. He shooed her away, she said something, he laughed, and then ordered her to get them some clothes.

'What did she say?' asked Alison curiously.

He looked at her for a moment with dancing eyes, and then said lightly, 'She said the white *mem* is far more beautiful than any of the whores I have brought to the house.'

Laughter gurgled in Alison's throat. Instead of taking offense, she took it as an accolade for the power she had over him.

She lay back on the shore and stretched out her arms to him invitingly. They made love half on land and half in water, and when they rose from their delightful embrace they

found not one but three giggling women hiding their faces behind their kerchiefs.

‘Go! Take the memsahib with you and dress her with care,’ commanded Amjad in lordly fashion. ‘And then bring her to the *dastarkhana*. We are both very hungry. Now, *jaldi karo!*’

The women took her away, wrapping her in a large cotton bath robe. It was a leisurely toilet, with the curious women asking her many questions in a mixture of pidgin English and Hindoostani. They seemed to know far more about what was happening than she did. They commiserated with her in genuine sympathy, weeping at the horrors of the mutiny, calling on Allah to protect all believers, and memsahib and her family in particular, and to punish the wrongdoers whoever they were. The women were convinced the mutiny would spread into a great war, and while the Padshah would reign once again in Delhi with all the glory of Akbar the Great, Allah be praised, the Angrez should be spared, especially their memsahib’s family, especially beloved of Allah, and so on and so forth. By some miracle, they all seemed to know telepathically what was happening exactly

in every corner of their mysterious country. Alison only half believed them as they dressed her with great care in the gorgeous robes of the East, and slipped golden sandals on her feet. The applying of unguents and the combing of her lustrous hair was a slow ceremony in itself. Finally, she was ready to join her beloved for breakfast, and when she surveyed herself in the mirrors held up for her inspection, she knew she had never been so beautiful, and her maids smiling happily all round knew that too.

Breakfast was a slow leisurely affair, with many dishes presented for her delectation, and quickly whisked away at any slight sign of disapprobation. Amjad encouraged her to try a variety of kebabs with a semicircle of chutney dishes to dip them in, and carefully listened to her comments after each trial. *Biriyanis*, tandoori chicken, *pattar-ke-gosht*, and a multitude of dals and vegetables to add complexity to the repast were presented, enjoyed, and replaced with newer variants. Sherbets were also served, and she injudiciously drank a few glasses till she realized that more than fruit spiced her drinks.

'It will not do you any harm,' said Amjad pleasantly. 'It is bhang, it will relax you and you will not feel tired when you travel.'

'I have to travel?' she asked, leaning back happily. 'No, dearest, I shall never leave your house.'

He looked at her gravely. 'You are not safe in this house. None of us are safe anymore. The mutiny has spread, my regiment is even now approaching the gates of Delhi to release the Emperor from the custody of the English. It is a war, Begum Sahiba, all over this gracious region, between the Ganges and the Jumuna. You must leave today. My people will take you far away to safety.'

She sat up in alarm at this news.

'And you, my beloved?' she asked, but she already knew the answer.

'My place is with my men,' he said gravely, 'in front of the gates of Delhi. We win or lose it all there, country, Emperor, freedom.'

She was his Begum, she was an Indian, she was English no more.

'And if we lose?' she asked, summoning up courage.

He sighed. 'It will be the Will of Allah,' he said. 'Then I too shall leave everything here, but I shall come to you, wherever you are, wherever my people have hidden you.'

'You will come?' she asked looking deep into his eyes.

'Yes, as Allah wills,' he said and kissed her full in the mouth, though a ring of loyal servants stood all around. 'We part this morning, according to Allah's wish, but He is always merciful, and surely He shall bring us together again, never doubt, my love.'

And thus the lovers parted, an Englishwoman and her
Hindoostani warrior, confident of meeting again through
Allah's mercy, but neither knew when, or where.

This is the first translation of an Urdu manuscript fragment found among several others in a sealed box, which was opened last year during restoration work on a ruined palace in Hyderabad. The rest of the narrative is lost. It is unclear whether it is a work of fiction or a recording of historical events. In the opinion of experts who examined the fragment, it is part of a diary or memoir written in fictional style in the manner of the times to conceal discreetly the identities of the people involved. This conclusion was forced upon them by the close relation the narrative bears to the real happenings on that fateful Sunday of May 10, 1857, in Meerut. It was the Third Native Cavalry that revolted first after 85 of its troopers were stripped of their uniforms the previous day and

jailed. Colonel Smyth was indeed the colonel of the regiment, and above him in charge in Meerut were Brigadier Wilson and General Hewitt. Commissioner Greathed indeed sought refuge on his roof along with several white women and children, who were rescued by loyal Indians. So much is common history, but the narrative also mentions a little known fact, that Lieutenant (later General Sir Hugh) Gough was warned of the impending mutiny by a friendly native officer and that he tried in vain to convince his superiors. The narrative's accuracy in recording small details further strengthens the conclusion that it is no idle story.

However, its main characters cannot be identified today with any certainty by examining the mutiny records of Meerut. Several people were killed in the uprising and many unidentified bodies were buried later. Perhaps, both Alison and Amjad Khan met a tragic fate, if indeed they were historical characters. It is also a mystery how the manuscript, the better part of which is lost, while some of the remaining pages have been rendered illegible, found its way to far-off Hyderabad. Did our hero and heroine escape the fury of the sepoy mutiny and somehow travel south to the shelter of a distant princely state? There is no evidence to support this assumption. However there does exist an intriguing military dispatch from the Third Anglo-Burmese War, which took place

twenty-eight years after the tragic events of the sepoy mutiny, which records the distinguished gallantry of two native officers. Their enthusiastic colonel wrote: 'Both the officers acted coolly and with conspicuous courage under fire, though clearly offering a target to the enemy because of their flaming red hair, and indeed both of them are brothers, Ashraf Khan and Asif Khan being sons of Amjad Khan, himself the Commander of the Deccan Light Horse of the Nizam's army of Hyderabad.'

Perhaps, the story did have a happy ending after all.