

VINEET BAJPAI

1857

The Sword of Mastaan



TreeShade Books

Part 3

*Dillī meñ aaj bheekh bhī
miltī nahīñ unheñ;
thā kal talak dimāgh jinheñ
tāj-o-takht kā*

- MEER TAQI MEER

I, Theophilus Metcalfe

**Jhajjar Province (modern-day Haryana),
15th May 1857**

All I could see for miles was a barren, dusty expanse, with small twirling clouds of dry earth blowing over the scorched landscape.

This Indian summer was particularly blazing – as if the entire country was being baked under the breath of a fire-spewing dragon from the oriental legends.

Blood and fire, I thought to myself.

Isn't that what this mystical land of Hindustan has become?

Blood and fire.

Only a day ago, I, Theophilus Metcalfe, son of the illustrious late Sir Thomas Metcalfe, was no less than a prince. The mansion built by my father, the Metcalfe House, was the real seat of power in Delhi, where kings and Nawabs routinely called on to bend their backs.

Yet somehow, within just two strikes of the clock tower, I was in the heart of a ruinous graveyard that the Mughal capital was fast turning into – surrounded on all sides by the horrifying screams of my dying countrymen.

The stiff protruding tongue of the assailant I had stabbed in the chest with my heavy talwaar only a few hours back, is still haunting me.

Stench of limestone powder mixed with native blood is still reeking fresh in my head.

I have a strong feeling that I, Theo Metcalfe, am slowly going mad.



As the burning 'loo' of the great northern Indian plains fills my eyes and teeth with fiery dirt, I know there can be only two outcomes of this wretched journey.

Either these menacing fighters of the Nawab of Jhajjar will kill me upon nightfall, on our way back to Delhi (the rascals won't dare attack me face to face, I know), or they would hand me over to the rebel army at the Walled City – only for me to be butchered in the worst possible manner.

Death is certain either way.

I giggle to myself nervily, as I try to calm my shivering chin and wrists. Something is happening to me. The thick vein on my temple is throbbing, ready to burst open.

Death is certain. So much of it.

But not mine.

Mmmmm... urmmmmppphh... heehee...

I am unable to hold back my wicked laugh again.

They can't hear me. They are riding a few paces behind.

Is my mouth frothing?



'But I will not be able to take them all by myself, Bhura...' I had pleaded. 'They are attacking by the hundreds.'

I am not a coward by any measure. But the bloodbath in Delhi was terrifying, enough to turn even the bravest warrior into a bundle of splintered nerves.

'Put the sword and the pistol to good use, Theo saahab,' Bhura Khan had replied gruffly, slinking away into the darkness of the night, leaving me behind in a narrow limestone quarry. By now even his loyalty was feeling the fear of rebel bayonets. Bhura could no longer linger around with me, the poor ill-fated Englishman, who was as good as a dead man walking.

Loyalty lasts only till the master wields the power to reward handsomely and to punish horribly. Not a moment longer. In these burning days of May 1857, Delhi had become a cruel spectacle of human depravity, and it had snatched away everything from me – the unfortunate scion of the Metcalfe family.

Everything. Every loyal servant... every last friend.

It had all started on that black day of 11th of May, when I had managed to escape on horseback from a frenzied mob of the native army. My eye was all but lost and, desperate as I was to get out of

my Company uniform, I was clad only in my underclothes. My fortunes had turned for the worse when an unidentifiable masked man had struck me with a brick thrown with the blazing speed of a cannonball, sending me crashing into a gutter. I do not recollect what happened immediately after. I must have lost consciousness. Thereafter, with the help of an old ally and the newly appointed kotwal of Delhi, Muin-ud-din, I had managed to stay hidden from the marauding mobs for a couple of days.

But soon my luck ran out again. Muin-ud-din informed me that my whereabouts had been discovered and that the mutineers would attack any time. Arming me with some money, a horse, a sword and a handheld musket, Muin-ud-din had sent me away with Bhura Khan. The supposed hideout was an abandoned limestone pit outside the walls of the city.

It was in this burning hellhole, covered with white dust, hungry and thirsty, that I, Theo Metcalfe, awaited my pursuers.



It was a hideous sight, even for a seasoned soldier like me.

As a murderous shadow made its way into the narrow cave, I had struck with blind rage. My primal instinct for survival had reached its zenith.

The strike was so powerful that it tore into the man across the entire girth of his chest – through skin, through muscle and even through bone. The haemorrhage of the man's internal organs was so sudden that his blood-soaked tongue had shot out of his mouth. It sprang out in the manner of an English jack-in-the-box, acting like a spout for oozing blood.

Delirious with this crimson splattering in the suffocating limestone tunnel, I had immediately decided to ride out to the palace of an old and trusted friend – the powerful Nawab of Jhajjar.

Little did I know then... when life chooses to engulf a man in the perfect storm of misfortune, even one's own shadow begins to claw up slowly... to tear out the remaining flesh from bones.

It was in the heart of the Nawab's stronghold this morning that I realized how very alone in all of Hindustan I really was. This man, who had ascended to the throne of Jhajjar with the help of my late father, had refused to even see my British face. Instead, I was given a dying pony, and am being saddled back to Delhi under the guard of two select fighters.

The Nawab has betrayed me ruthlessly and sentenced me to the rebel army's gallows.

And this is where I, Theophilus Metcalfe, am beginning to sense the deadly metamorphosis I am going through... in body, mind and soul.

From the promising young officer of the East India Company that I was till two days ago...

...to a grotesque monster readying to shock even the Devil with his brutal vengeance.

From the sophisticated Theo... to the one-eyed Metcalfe!

The Djinn's Blood-Magic

Laal Qila, Delhi, 16th May 1857

Taking a morning tour of the royal palace was his daily routine. It offered him a make-believe sense of authority.

As he waited for his paalki or palanquin bearers, Zafar sat in a trance. The morose and brutal events of the last few days had left him numb in body and nerve. Despite his old age, up until a few days back the king had succeeded in maintaining a reasonably healthy constitution. However, even that seemed to be crumbling now. Unbeknownst to the senile Emperor that all of it was probably just the turmoil of his own internal demons, he had come to believe that the repeated possession of his mortal body by an angry, cursed and tortured djinn or pishaacha had been taking its toll. His hands trembled as he blankly mulled over the ghastly episodes that had unfolded one after the other since the fateful morning of 11th May.

His euphoria at seeing a massive army swearing allegiance to his regal person had come and gone at a cruel speed. The rebel commanders who had approached him with their backs bent had soon discovered how toothless he truly was. In less than seventy-two hours, the company commanders who had been showering him with exalted titles like Jahanpanaah and Aalijaah had begun to address him, humiliatingly as '*buddhab*' and '*ae badshah*'. Sparkling floors of the forever elegant Diwan-e-Khaas had been trampled under the muddy boots of uncouth mutineers and, on more than one occasion, an excited rebel had even pulled at the royal beard to wake up a seemingly sleepy supreme commander of the great uprising.

'The regal palanquin is ready, your highness,' announced the head servant of the royal palace.

Zafar nodded and lifted himself up from his silken seat with the help of his glittering walking stick. He trudged slowly towards his daily ride and permitted himself to be deposited into the high perch that was lifted on the shoulders of four men. He was lost in thought.



Vacillating as always, Zafar had lost his intrepidity shortly after his unsure and uncharacteristic blessings to the commanders of the native armies. The triumphant Emperor that Hakim Ahsanullah had witnessed at the tasbihkhaana on the morning of the outbreak had not lasted more than half a day. Whether it was indeed an otherworldly force summoned by the vile dervish that was controlling the old king, or simply his own internal conflict between a burning desire to revive his dynasty and a prudent assessment of brute British military might that was now surfacing, no one could tell.

When out in the Diwan-e-Khaas, the Emperor had busied himself in mindlessly showering praise and titles upon the rebel commanders. Spending these hours like a cornered lamb against the impassioned primal aggression of the freedom army leaders, Zafar was simply playing along. Once he was back in the much-welcomed privacy of his palace chambers, true to the merciless character of the decaying Red Fort, intrigue became the order of the day.

Untimely death, poisoning, seduction, adultery, intoxication, murder, deceit, conspiracies... these creepers of malice had never left the door of this colossal palace. The latter had lived up to its ominous name with the colour of blood routinely staining its floors, walls and haunted crypts. Betrayal was in the very air of this hissing castle. Sure enough, the old Badshah was working industriously towards selling out the very same countrymen he had promised to lead.

At the behest of his favourite queen Zeenat Mahal and Mirza Ilahi Bakhsh, the forever scheming father-in-law of his late son Mirza Fakhru, Bahadur Shah was planning to expeditiously dispatch a secret letter to the British commanders. Besides submitting explanations of his own helplessness, he was prepared to assure them of all his support for when their mammoth army marched down to sack Delhi.

In a further attempt to distance himself from the uprising, and also because deep down he was still just a gentle artist and a poet, Zafar took it upon himself to protect whatever few Christians were left in the city. Quickly running out of obedient sons and servants to carry out his feeble orders, he entrusted Muin-ud-din, an old loyalist, to lead an armed rescue party backed up by royal decree. The task given to Muin was to bring every living white soul to the safety of the fort.

What the Mughal did not suspect was that even this simple act of kindness was in fact part of a larger, cruel scheme of cause and effect, with the half-faced dervish as the ghastly puppeteer.

The second wish that the poor Zafar had asked for in the horrifying cavern below his palace...

...was about to come true.



They were offered shelter in the basement or tehkhaana close to the royal kitchens.

By the morning of the 16th of May, over fifty European men, women and children had been rescued by Muin and his soldiers. The refugees were offered hot meals and fresh clothes by the Badshah's servants. Relieved beyond words at this timeliest intervention from the Mughal monarch, these grateful families thanked their stars and their guardian angels.

But what the Gods had scripted for the dwellers of Delhi was evidently clear from the heartless and inhuman massacres that had been unleashed across the city over the last seventy-two hours.

It was not long before a dozen Indian soldiers came galloping into the delicate Diwaan-e-Khaas and gruffly demanded that the royal physician, Ahsanullah be brought to them. A damning letter to the British had been caught by the sepoy at the Delhi Gate that morning, and it bore the seal of the old Hakim. Tempers were soaring quickly, exacerbated by the fact that the native army was fast running out of food grain. Hearing the loud commotion, the king arrived himself, in

order to try and douse the tension between the hungry soldiers and his own impecunious servants and guards. The palace really had nothing to give to the rebels.

When Hakim Ahsanullah insisted that the letter was a downright forgery, swore in the name of Allah a hundred times and pleaded that he had nothing to do with it, the irate soldiers changed their menacing request.

They now demanded that the king should immediately hand the white-skinned prisoners over to the rebel army, so the bunch could be put to the sword without further delay.



The incessant and brutish pounding of massive horses trampling over his favourite gardens and assembly hall was driving the Badshah mad.

Within a matter of one hour, several more rebel fighters had made their way into the royal gardens and the Diwaan-e-Khaas, the House of Nobles. From their outwardly appearance, the soldiers of the freedom army looked somewhat unkempt, impulsive and prudish. In reality, these sepoy were far more astute in their politics than the Badshah had given them credit for. The objective of the rebel fighters was not really the murder of the sheltered British. Their target was the Timurid king himself. His wavering behaviour, bits of vital information coming in from their own ragtag intelligence, and now the insistence of Zafar to protect a few European families – were all clear giveaways.

The mostly illiterate yet deeply perceptive Indian fighters' strategic understanding of the situation was second to none.

By now they had figured that Zafar was not the most reliable of allies under these trying circumstances, let alone being their true leader. They could sense that his loyalties lay with no one but his own survival and his more than suppressible desire to place his chosen son on the throne of Delhi. They could also tell that the white women and children lodged in his basement cellars did not represent solely an act of compassion or magnanimity. They were his insurance ticket against the impending British onslaught.

And the rebel fighters were determined to tear that ticket in his face.

If they won, he would be the king – nominal or real, they did not really care as long as Hindustan won its independence from the foreigners.

But if they were to be defeated, they would not let Zafar go scot free.

The poor white women and children in the Naqqaar Khaana (drum-house) cellars had to be sacrificed – as yet another offering at the altar of a horrible, bleeding chapter of politics.



Much against his powerless pleas, the soldiers dragged out the refugee European families to the open water tank of the Naqqaar Khaana in front of the Badshah's eyes.

The air of the palace gardens was rendered thick and hoarse with the cries and wails of the hapless prisoners.

'*Khuda ke liye...* leave them alone!' said the old king, with all the strength in his paper-thin lungs. He was audible to no one

but himself. And to the Hakim standing next to him, frozen with fear.

As the white prisoners were made to line up on their knees, they thrashed around in futile attempts to free their bound limbs. They wept incessantly, begging the Emperor of Hindustan for mercy at least on their innocent children.

Seeing the evident pointlessness of their desperate pleas, this time it was Ahsanullah who broke into a terrifying laughter. He could now clearly remember the second wish his fool of a monarch had asked the half-faced dervish for!

Those bloodcurdling words rang in the Hakim's mind -

'Grant me this wish, O conjurer of the hidden spells... that the British... the heathen that have sucked the blood of all of Hindustan, are forced to fall to their knees and beg for mercy... in my very palace, before my very eyes!'

It was all happening!

Zafar was now distraught, as his blurry eyes saw British blood turning the grass and stone of the Naqqaar Khaana crimson, and the screams of the dying women and children echo across the arched halls and passages of his palace.

'Please spare them...' he insisted one more time, as sweaty spears and scimitars punctured their way into the shivering bodies of the wretched victims.

'Please spare them... in the name of your khalifa... in the name of the merciful Allah...' the Emperor squeaked again, his own body now almost as lifeless as those that lay hacked in front of him.

‘Shhhhhh...’ whispered a lunatic-looking Ahsanullah, suddenly into his king’s ears. ‘This is the djinn’s blood-magic, O Badshah. Do not interfere now, lest the next to get slaughtered should be us. You see, jahanpanaah, the dervish’s djinn is supremely just. He only grants you your second wish, and nothing more. He gives you *precisely* what you had asked him for!’

Dizzy with the violence unfolding in front of his eyes, the Emperor was dumbfounded upon hearing the Hakim’s macabre words. There could not have been a more gnarled or crueller interpretation of Zafar’s second wish - than what the merciless evil spirit summoned by the dark dervish had distortedly conjured in this bloodied hour.

Unable to believe the vicious monstrosity of the rebel sipahis, the king of Delhi now clung to what was only a fleeting measure of solace. He convinced himself that the native soldiers too were possessed by some malicious ethereal power this morning. That had to be the explanation! The inhuman massacre he had just witnessed was not the Hindustani way. Murdering of women and children was NOT the Hindustani way!

The old Badshah could not withstand the pressure anymore, and finally caved. His protests puffed to a stop as he once again gave preference to his own preservation.

But the die of destiny had long been cast.

What the senile Emperor did not know was that his undoing was already in the making. Before escaping from Delhi, two British telegraph operators had swiftly punched out morse code messages to several British chhaavanis.

One of those SOS messages had reached Peshawar, to the dreaded Nikhaal-bhagwaan.

A second telegraph had found its way to the hands of another war beast. One that was coming to devour Zafar's whole world.

A man called William Hodson.

He was being guided by the invisible hand of fate... to fulfil Bahadur Shah Zafar's third and last wish.