

**THE MAD RANI: AND
OTHER
SKETCHES OF INDIAN LIFE
AND THOUGHT**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649094172

The mad Rani: and other sketches of Indian life and thought by Philip Ashby

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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LONDON
GEORGE ROUTLEDGE & SONS, LTD.
BROADWAY HOUSE, 68-74 CARTER LANE, E.C.

Printed in Great Britain by
F. Robinson & Co. Lowestoft

DS
421
A7
1922

MY DEAR WILLIAM,

The memorable journey which you and I made together last year round half the globe was a varied and delightful experience which neither of us will readily forget ; and I think it will interest you to know that there is a real, though not an obvious, connection between that journey (or rather series of journeys) and the production of these sketches. This connection is not obvious ; for, though we saw and heard many surprising things in the ports and cities of the Far East—from Burmah to China, from Manchuria and Japan to Honolulu—, these stories are in no way derived from those adventures ; but are, as you know, based entirely upon my own experiences in India during the quarter of a century preceding our travel. The connection however is none the less real : for, if it had not been for your industry, example and encouragement, I doubt if I should ever have troubled, or ventured, to set pen to paper at all. When we started down the Hoogly and sailed for many days eastward—ever eastward, my jaded condition might have been summed up in one comprehensive, contented sigh of relief : I wanted nothing but to sit on deck with the lightest of fiction, to gaze idly at sapphire seas, to chuckle over the dialects and manners of our cosmopolitan fellow-passengers, to loaf without official responsibility through the kaleidoscope of oriental bazars, and to contemplate with wonder (now happily divested of authority) the gorgeous shrines of Eastern religions, with the mysterious observances of their devotees : (you know—to your cost—my passion for temples ; often enough it has tried your

patience !) But *you* were not content with lotus-eating. I daresay you were really just as jaded as myself, after your several years of journalism in India with scarcely a holiday and never a hot weather in the Hills ; but you would not admit fatigue, or give way to indolence. Your Muse was quickened by the mud flats of the Hoogly, stimulated by the under-life of Rangoon, nourished in Malay by the very decay of the rubber industry, and brought to prolific maturity by sights and stories of opium-smuggling, of political intrigue and of famine administration in the ports and big cities of China. These activities of yours I watched unmoved : I wanted to see things, not to write about them. To make " copy " out of those priceless experiences of ours was perhaps beyond me ; at any rate to attempt it was too much like those interminable blue books and reports, of which I had had more than enough in twenty-five years of official life. So when we were aboard ship, I would doze over a novel, listening to the rattle of your type-writer, and murmuring

" Video meliora proboque,

" Deteriora sequor."

And when we were ashore, I would sometimes tramp alone round supererogatory temples, while you would be writing articles in the hotel about scenes we had already witnessed together. But when I came Home and the sense of leisure began to grow on me, when I found you in this country writing, still writing, I began to ask myself—" If *he* can make readable copy after a few hours' impression of a foreign scene or adventure, cannot *I* make interesting to the British public some of those Indian experiences which have taken me weeks, months, even years to live through ? " And so I began to write a little, and the *cacoethes scribendi* grew as I wrote ; and when I showed you the sketches as I finished them, you encouraged me with advice and criticism based upon your inside knowledge of the literary

world. So that is the reason why I am taking the liberty of dedicating these sketches to you and writing you this letter as a preface.

Some of your friendly criticisms are before me at this moment. While you envy my "wide knowledge of native life" and my first-hand material, you are inclined to deprecate my "direct unvarnished manner" and "close adherence to the truth." You exhort me to be more imaginative and dramatic, and to work up deliberately to "a tremendous climax—the unexpected if possible." You like the treatment of the later sketches in the series better than that of the earlier, because you think they show "a much surer touch." You are probably right; but from my own point of view the reason for this preference of yours is simply this: the first nine or so are facts, plain and almost unadorned, and I have drawn on practically nothing but my memory; while the later stories, though based on experiences equally true and almost as vivid, are woven together with some imagination, the coherence and development of the plot being in some cases invented. To illustrate your criticism of my "discursive" treatment, you even took the trouble to re-write one of my stories, "The Mad Rani," in the accepted sensational manner, with due regard to atmosphere, impressionism and dramatic climax. The story itself is, as you know, true; I have more than once told it to select hearers in India, and I have tried to relate it here almost exactly as it occurred. Your rendering of the same story is a most exciting piece of sensationalism, and I enjoyed it immensely; but I scarcely recognised my own experience: and indeed, to confess the truth, I do not think I am capable of treating any of my facts in that arresting manner, though I am quite sure that you are.

But apart from your example and encouragement, I have another and more serious motive in publishing these sketches. The constitutional reforms in India are now well advanced in the experimental stage: you and I saw more than a little

of their inception before we left India last year. The ultimate responsibility for confirming or abolishing, enlarging or restricting, this devolution of powers to the children of the soil, lies with the British Parliament. It is therefore of great importance that the British public should see something more than the troubled surface of Indian political life, should dive into the quieter and less advertised depths below, should appreciate, with some understanding and sympathy, the unfamiliar mentality of the great Indian population, should in a word do what is so often impressed upon the patient bureaucrat, that is, 'get under their skin.' In these stories I am trying to show to anyone who will read them, how the Indian mind actually and habitually works. Their religious, philosophical and moral conceptions are different from ours: you may say, if you like, (Indians often say it themselves with pride), that their ideals are spiritual, whereas ours are material: at any rate they are different. Their standards of thoroughness in industry, of accuracy in the spoken word, of courtesy, honour, and sincerity in social behaviour, are difficult for us to understand. I do not say they are inferior. Anyone who reads "The Honour of Caste," "The Gate of Bathing," or "Satti," will I think acquit me of any want of sympathy with Indian ethical feelings; indeed one friendly critic, to whom I have shown these sketches, has rather reproached me because in depicting oriental ideals I have omitted to exhibit a better way, a higher light—the way and the light of Christianity. But my object is not to apportion praise or blame, still less is it to proselytize: it is simply to understand, and help the reader to understand, how India actually thinks, feels, speaks and acts; and I hope and believe that these stories, if recognised as substantially facts and not as sensational fiction, will show, in a sufficiently interesting manner, how profoundly different the mind of the East still is from the mind of the West.

This difference is illustrated every day in the use of