

CASTE

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Cast by W. A. Fraser

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W. A. FRASER

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BY

W. A. FRASER

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"THE LONE FURROW," "THOROUGHBREDS," ETC.

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CHAPTER I

The three Mahrattas, Sindhia, Holkar, and Bhonsla, were plotting the overthrow of the British, and the Peshwa was looking out of brooding eyes upon Hodson, the Resident at Poona.

Up on the hill, in the temple of Parvati, the priests repeated prayers to the black goddess calling for the destruction of the hated whites.

Each one of the twenty-four priests as he came with a handful of marigolds laid them one by one at the feet of the four-armed hideous idol, repeating: "*Om, Parvati! Om, Parvati!*" the comprehensive, all-embracing "*Om*" that meant adoration and a clamour for favour. Even to Nandi, the brass bull that carried Shiva, he appealed, "*Om Shiva!*"

But down on the rock-plateau, where gleamed in the hot sun marble palaces, a more malign influence was at work. Dandhu Panth, the adopted son of the Peshwa, had come back from Oxford, and the English believed he had been changed into an Englishman, Nana Sahib.

Outwardly he was a sporting, well-dressed gentle-

man, such as Oxford turns out; but in his heart was lust of power, and hatred of the white race that he felt would make his inheritance, the Peshwaship, but a vassalage. His dreams of ruling India would fade, and he would sit a pensioner of the British. The Mahrattas had been stigmatised by a captious Mogul ruler, "mountain rats." As Hindus there was a sharp cleavage of character; the Brahmins, fanatical, high up in the caste scale, and all the rest of the breed inferior, vicious, blood-thirsty, a horde of pirates. Even the man who first made them a power, Sivaji, had been of questionable lineage, a plebeian; and so the body corporate was of inflammable material—little restraint of breeding.

And for all Nana Sahib's veneer of English class, mental development, beneath the English shirt he wore the *junwa*, the three-strand sacred thread, insignia of the twice-born,—the Brahmin.

From Governor General to the British officers who played polo with the Peshwa's son, they all accepted him as one of themselves; considered it good diplomacy that he had been sent to Oxford and made over.

There was just one man who had misgivings, the Resident at Poona. He was a small, tired, worn-out official—an executive, a perpetual wheel in the works, always close to the red-tape-tied papers, always. Strange that one not a dreamer, no sixth-sense, should have attained to an intuition—which it was, his distrust of the cheery, sporty Nana Sahib. That Hodson's superiors intimated that India was getting to his liver

when he wrote, very cautiously, of this obsession, made no difference; and clinging to his distrust, he achieved something.

After all it was rather strange that the matter had not been taken out of his hands, but it wasn't. A sort of departmental formula running: "Commissioner So-and-So has the matter in hand—refer to him." And so, when a new danger appeared on the distressed horizon, Amir Khan and a hundred thousand massed horsemen, Captain Barlow was sent to consult with the Resident. That was the way; a secretive, trusty, brave man, for in India the written page is never inviolate.

Captain Barlow was sent—ostensibly as an assistant to the Resident, in reality to acquire full knowledge of the situation, and then go to the camp of Amir Khan with the delicate mission of persuading him not to join his riding spear-men to the Mahratta force, but to form an alliance with the British.

The Resident had asked for Barlow. He had explained that any show of interest, two men, or five, or twenty, an envoy, even men of pronounced position, would defeat their object; in fact, believing Nana Sahib to be what he was, he conceived the very simple idea of playing the Oriental's Orientalism against him.

Barlow would be the last man in India to whom one as suspicious as the Peshwa's son would attribute a subtlety deep enough for a serious mission. He was a great handsome boy; in his physical excellence he was beautiful; courage was manifest in the strong content of his deep brown eyes. Incidentally that was one of

the reasons the Resident had asked for him, though he would have denied it, even to his daughter, Elizabeth, though it was for her sake—that part of it.

The affair with Elizabeth had been going on for two or three years; never quite settled—always hovering.

Indeed the Resident's daughter was not constituted to raise a cyclone of passion, a tempest of feeling that brings an impetuous declaration of love from any man. She was altogether proper; well-bred; admirable; perhaps somewhat of the type so opposite to Barlow's impressionable nature that ultimately, all in good time, they would realise that the scheme of creation had marked them for each other. And Colonel Hodson almost prayed for this. It was desirable in every way. Barlow was of a splendid family; some day he might become Lord Barradean.

Anyway Captain Barlow was there playing polo with Nana Sahib—one of the Prince's favourites; and waiting for a certain paper that would be sent to the Resident that would contain offers of an alliance with the Pindari Chief.

And this same hovering menace of the Pindari force was causing Nana Sahib unrest. Perhaps there had been a leak, as cautiously as the Resident had made every move. If the Pindari army were to join the British, ready at a moment's notice to fall on the flank of the Mahrattas, harass them with guerilla warfare, it would be serious; they were as elusive as a huge pack of wolves; unencumbered by camp followers, artillery, foraging as they went, swooping like birds of prey, they were a terrible enemy. Even as the tiger