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The Siege of Krishnapur

Written by J. G. Farrell

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*The Siege
of Krishnapur*

J. G. Farrell

Weidenfeld & Nicolson

LONDON

I

Anyone who has never before visited Krishnapur, and who approaches from the east, is likely to think he has reached the end of his journey a few miles sooner than he expected. While still some distance from Krishnapur he begins to ascend a shallow ridge. From here he will see what appears to be a town in the heat distorted distance. He will see the white glitter of walls and roofs and a handsome grove of trees, perhaps even the dome of what might be a temple. Round about there will be the unending plain still, exactly as it has been for many miles back, a dreary ocean of bald earth, in the immensity of which an occasional field of sugar cane or mustard is utterly lost.

The surprising thing is that this plain is not quite deserted, as one might expect. As he crosses it towards the white walls in the distance the traveller may notice an occasional figure way out somewhere between the road and the horizon, a man walking with a burden on his head in one direction or another ... even though, at least to the eye of a stranger, within the limit of the horizon there does not appear to be anywhere worth walking to, unless perhaps to that distant town he has spotted; one part looks quite as good as another. But if you look closely and shield your eyes from the glare you will make out tiny villages here and there, difficult to see because they are made of the same mud as the plain they came from; and no doubt they melt back into it again during the rainy season,

for there is no lime in these parts, no clay or shale that you can burn into bricks, no substance hard enough to resist the seasons over the years.

Sometimes the village crouches in a grove of bamboo and possesses a frightful pond with a water buffalo or two; more often there is just a well to be worked from dawn till dusk by the same two men and two bullocks every single day in their lives. But whether there is a pond or not hardly matters to a traveller; in either case there is no comfort here, nothing that a European might recognize as civilization. All the more reason for him to press on, therefore, towards those distant white walls which are clearly made of bricks. Bricks are undoubtedly an essential ingredient of civilization; one gets nowhere at all without them.

But as he approaches he will see that this supposed town is utterly deserted; it is merely a melancholy cluster of white domes and planes surrounded by a few trees. There are no people to be seen. Everything lies perfectly still. Nearer again, of course, he will see that it is not a town at all, but one of those ancient cemeteries that are called 'Cities of the Silent', which one occasionally comes across in northern India. Perhaps a rare traveller will turn off the road to rest in the shade of a mango grove which separates the white tombs from a dilapidated mosque; sometimes one may find incense left smouldering in an earthenware saucer by an unseen hand. But otherwise there is no life here; even the rustling leaves have a dead sound.

Krishnapur itself had once been the centre of civil administration for a large district. At that time European bungalows had been built there on a lavish scale, even small palaces standing in grounds of several acres to house the Company representatives of the day who lived in magnificent style and sometimes even, in imitation of the native princes, kept tigers and mistresses and heaven knows what else. But then the importance of Krishnapur declined and these magnificent

officials moved elsewhere. Their splendid bungalows were left shuttered and empty; their gardens ran wild during the rainy season and for the rest of the year dried up into deserts, over whose baked earth whirlwinds of dust glided back and forth like ghostly dancers.

Now with the creaking of loose shutters and the sighing of the wind in the tall grass, the cantonment has the air of a place you might see in a melancholy dream; a visitor might well find himself reminded of the 'City of the Silent' he had passed on his way to Krishnapur.

The first sign of trouble at Krishnapur came with a mysterious distribution of chapatis, made of coarse flour and about the size and thickness of a biscuit; towards the end of February 1857, they swept the countryside like an epidemic.

One evening, in the room he used as a study the Collector, Mr Hopkins, opened a dispatch box and, instead of the documents he had expected, found four chapatis. After a moment's surprise and annoyance he called the *khansamah*, an elderly man who had been in his service for several years and whom he trusted. He showed him the open dispatch box and the chapatis inside. The *khansamah*'s normally impassive face displayed shock. He was clearly no less taken aback than the Collector himself. He stared at the purple dispatch box for some moments before picking the chapatis out of it respectfully, as if the box had a personal dignity of its own that might have been offended. The Collector with a frown gestured to him to remove the wretched things. A little later he overheard the *khansamah* shouting at the bearers, evidently convinced that they were responsible for a reckless practical joke.

The Collector was busy at that time. In addition to his official duties, which had been swollen and complicated by the illness of the Joint Magistrate, he had a number of domestic matters on his mind; his wife, too, had been in poor health

for the past few months and must now be sent home before the hot weather.

It is unlikely, given his other preoccupations, that the Collector would even have noticed the second pile of chapatis had his eye not been led towards them by a column of ants; the ants were issuing from a crevice between two flagstones and their thin column passed within a few inches of his shoes on its way to the chapatis. The chapatis had a grimy and scorched appearance; again there were four of them and they had been left on the top step of the brick portico which provided the main entrance to the Residency. The Collector had stepped out on to the portico for a breath of air. He hesitated for a moment, on the point of calling the *khansamah* again, but then he noticed the sweeper working not far away; he watched for a while as the man progressed, sitting on his heels and sweeping rather indiscriminately, with a bundle of twigs as a broom. No doubt the chapatis on the portico were the property of the sweeper. The Collector went inside again, dismissing the matter from his mind.

The following afternoon, however, he found four more chapatis. This time they were not in his study but on the desk in his office, neatly arranged beside some papers. Though there was still nothing very menacing about them, as soon as he saw them he knew beyond doubt that there was going to be trouble. He examined them carefully but this told him nothing, except that they were rather dirty.

The Collector was a large and handsome man. He wore low side-whiskers which he kept carefully trimmed but which nevertheless sprouted out stiffly like the ruff of a cat. He dressed fastidiously: the high collars which he habitually wore were sufficiently unusual in a country station like Krishnapur to make a deep impression on all who saw him. He was a man of considerable dignity, too, with a keen, but erratic, sense of social proprieties. Not surprisingly, he was held in awe by the European community; no doubt this was partly

because they could not see his faults very clearly. In private he was inclined to be moody and overbearing with his family, and sometimes careless over matters which others might regard as of great importance ... for example although he had seven children, and was living in a country of high mortality for Europeans, he had not yet brought himself to make a will; an unfortunate lapse of his usually powerful sense of duty.

At that moment he happened to be alone in the office, one of a number of rooms in a part of the Residency set aside for Government business. He was not fond of this room; its bleak official aspect displeased him and usually he preferred to work in his study, situated in a more domestic part of the building. The office contained only a few overloaded shelves, a couple of wooden chairs for those rare visitors whose rank entitled them to be seated in his presence, and his own desk, untidily strewn with papers and dispatch boxes; the person who had placed the offending chapatis on it had had to clear a space for them. On one of the lateral walls was a portrait of the young Queen with rather bulging blue eyes and a vigorous appearance.

Disturbed, and having now forgotten the reason he had gone to his office in the first place, he made his way slowly back towards the hall of the Residency, wondering whether certain measures might be taken to palliate the effects of this approaching, but still hypothetical, trouble, or even to avoid it altogether. 'Just supposing that serious trouble should break out in Krishnapur ... an insurrection, for instance ... where could we find shelter? Could the Residency, merely as a matter of interest, of course, be defended?'

As he stood in the hall pondering this question the Collector experienced a sensation of coolness and great tranquillity. During the daytime the light here came from a great distance; it came between the low arches of the verandah, across cool flagstones, through the green louvred windows known as 'jilmils' let into the immensely thick walls, and, at last, in the

form of a pleasant, reflected twilight, to where he was standing. One felt very safe here. The walls, which were built of enormous numbers of the pink, wafer-like bricks of British India, were so very thick . . . you could see yourself how thick they were.

The Residency was more or less in the shape of a church, that is, if you can imagine a church which one entered by stepping over the altar. The transept, as you stand on the altar looking in, was formed by, on the left, a library well furnished with everything but books, of which there was only a meagre supply, some having been borrowed and not returned, some eaten by the ubiquitous ants, and some having simply vanished nobody knew where; yet others, imprisoned, glumly pressed their spines against the glass of cabinets whose keys had been lost . . . and on the right, a drawing-room, lofty, spacious and gracious. Immediately facing you in the nave was a magnificent marble staircase, a relic of the important days of Krishnapur when things were still done properly. Behind the staircase the dining-room, together with a number of other rooms having to do in some way with eating or with European servants or with children, ran along the rest of the nave which was flanked on each side by deep verandahs. The building was of two storeys, if you discount the twin towers which rose somewhat higher. From one of these towers the Union Jack fluttered from dawn till dusk; on the other the Collector sometimes set up a telescope when the mood took him to scrutinize the heavens.

The Collector, whose mind had returned to browse on chapatis, gave a start as a man's voice issued loudly from the open door of the drawing-room nearby. 'The mind is furnished,' declared the voice in a tone which did not invite debate, 'with a vast apparatus of mental organs for enabling it to manifest its energies. Thus, when aided by optical and auditory nerves, the mind sees and hears; when assisted by an organ of cautiousness it feels fear, by an organ of causality it reasons.'

‘What nonsense!’ muttered the Collector, who had recognized the voice as belonging to the Magistrate and had now remembered that he himself should be sitting in the drawing-room at this moment for the fortnightly meeting of the Krishnapur Poetry Society was due to begin ... indeed, had already begun, since the Magistrate was holding forth, though not apparently about poetry.

‘Dr Gall of Vienna, who discovered this remarkable science, happened to notice while still at school that those of his fellow students who were good at learning by heart tended to have bulging eyes. By degrees he also found external characteristics which indicated a disposition for painting, music, and the mechanical arts ...’

‘I really must go in,’ thought the Collector, and reflecting that, after all, as President of the Society it was his duty, he took a few firm steps towards the door, but again he hesitated, this time standing in the open doorway itself. From here he could see a dozen ladies of the cantonment sitting apprehensively on chairs facing the Magistrate. Many of these ladies held sheaves of paper densely covered with verse of their own devising, and it was the sight of all this verse which had caused the Collector to hesitate involuntarily at the very last moment. Behind the ladies his four older children, aged from four to sixteen, all girls (the two boys were at school in England), sat in a despairing row. They took no part in these proceedings but he considered it healthy to expose them to artistic endeavour. Only the youngest, still a baby, was excused attendance.

Unaware that the President of their Society was lingering at the door, the ladies stared at the Magistrate as if hypnotized, but very likely they did not hear a single word he said; they would be in far too great anxiety as to the fate of their verses to listen to him discoursing on phrenology, a subject in which only he found any interest. Soon the moment would come when they would read their works and the Magistrate would pronounce sentence on them, a moment which they both

desired and dreaded. The Collector, however, only dreaded it. This was not because of the low standard of the verse, but because the Magistrate's judgements were invariably pitiless, and even, at times when he became excited, verged on the insulting. Why the ladies put up with it and still returned week after week for their poems to be subjected to such indignities was more than the Collector could fathom.

Yet it was the Collector himself who was responsible for this fortnightly torment since it was he who had founded the Society. He had done so partly because he was a believer in the ennobling powers of literature, and partly because he was sorry for the ladies of the cantonment who had, particularly during the hot season, so little to occupy them. At first he had been pleased with the ladies' enthusiasm and had considered the plan a success ... but then he had made the mistake of inviting Tom Willoughby, the Magistrate. The Magistrate suffered from the disability of a free-thinking turn of mind and from a life that was barren and dreary to match. To make things worse, he was married, but in the celibate manner of so many English 'civilians'. The Collector had eyed the Magistrate's marriage with complacent pity: his wife, imported from England, had stayed two or three years in India until driven home by the heat, the boredom and a fortuitous pregnancy. Ah, the Collector had witnessed this sad story so often during his time in India! And now, though later than most, it seemed that his own marriage, which had survived so long in this arduous climate, must suffer a similar fate, for his wife, Caroline, sitting nervously in the front row with her own sheaf of poems, would soon be sailing from Calcutta. Such was the reward for complacency, he reflected, not without a certain stern satisfaction at the justice of this retribution.

'Oh, there's Mr Hopkins,' said the Magistrate, ending his discourse abruptly as he caught sight of the Collector lurking in the doorway. And the Collector was obliged to step forward

smiling, as if in anticipation of the poetry that would soon be gratifying his ears.

An empty chair had been placed beside the Magistrate, who was somewhat younger than the Collector and had the red hair and ginger whiskers of the born atheist; his face wore a constant expression of cynical surprise, one eyebrow raised and the corner of his mouth compressed, as far as one could make out beneath the growth of whiskers which here varied from ginger to cinnamon. It was said in the cantonment that he even slept with one eyebrow raised; the Collector did not know if there was any truth in this.

At one time everyone had sat in a circle and every member of the Society had been willing to voice an opinion on the poem which had just been read. Those were the days when every single poem had bristled with good qualities like a hedgehog and had glutted itself with praise like a jackal, the happy days before the Magistrate had been invited. Soon after his arrival the circle had begun to disintegrate, the ladies had progressively dropped away from each side of him until, soon, they faced him in a semi-circle, and now, at last, directly, as if in the dock. The Collector had bravely installed himself at the Magistrate's side in order to plead mitigating circumstances.

By this time the poetry reading had begun and Mrs Worseley, wife of one of the railway engineers, had faltered to the end of a sonnet about an erl-king. Everyone, including the Collector, was now watching the Magistrate in dismay, waiting for his verdict; although sure about most things, the Collector lacked confidence in his own judgement when it came to poetry and was obliged to defer to the Magistrate, but not without the private suspicion that his own judgement might be superior after all.

'Mrs Worseley, I found your poem defective in metre, rhyme, and invention. And to be quite honest I consider that we've had far too many erl-kings in recent weeks, though

I can assure you that even one erl-king would be more than enough for me.' Mrs Worseley hung her head, but looked quite relieved, thinking that she had got off lightly.

Mrs Adams, a senior lady, the wife of a recently retired judge, now read in a commanding voice a long poem of which the Collector could make neither head nor tail, though it seemed to have something to do with Nature, serpents, and the fall of Troy. He allowed his mind to wander and, as his eyes came to rest on his wife, he thought that if there should indeed be trouble at Krishnapur it was just as well that she would not be there to see it; perhaps he should have insisted that the children go home with her; he would have done so but he had feared that the fuss, even if the *ayah* went too, would be too much for her nerves ... Never mind, he had almost decided to retire in a year's time, at the end of the next cold season. He did not have to worry, as did the poor Magistrate, about securing a pension. He had a glorious and interesting life awaiting him in England whenever he considered that his duty in India was done.

But still those chapatis lodged in his mind, undissolved. In this room it was even harder to believe in trouble than it had been in the hall, indeed, it was hard to believe that one was in India at *all*, except for the punkahs. His eyes roamed with satisfaction over the walls, thickly armoured with paintings in oil and water-colour, with mirrors and glass cases containing stuffed birds and other wonders, over chairs and sofas upholstered in plum cretonne, over showcases of minerals and a cobra floating in a bottle of bluish alcohol, over occasional tables draped to the floor with heavy tablecloths on which stood statuettes in electro-metal of great men of literature, of Dr Johnson, of Molière, Keats, Voltaire and, of course, Shakespeare ... but now he was obliged to return his attention to the proceedings.

Miss Carpenter had begun to read a poem in praise of the Great Exhibition; the Collector groaned inwardly, not because

he found the subject unsuitable, but because it had so evidently been chosen as homage to himself; poems about the Exhibition recurred every few weeks and seldom failed to excite the Magistrate's most cutting remarks. This was undoubtedly because his own interest in the Exhibition was as well-known to the Magistrate as to the ladies; indeed, it was more than an interest for he had been a prominent member of the selection committee for the Bengal Presidency and, having taken his furlough in 1851, had attended the Exhibition in an official capacity. It was generally held in the cantonment that the Magistrate resented the fact that the Collector should be in with all the 'big dogs' in the Company simply because he was in the habit of collecting artistic and scientific bric à brac.

*'Power, like the trunk of Afric's wondrous brute,
Had, on that stage, its double triumph found,
To lift the forest monarch by the root,
Or pick a quivering needle from the ground.'*

Although it was usually considered unwise to offer explanations to the Magistrate as you went along, Miss Carpenter was unable to prevent herself explaining that this image of the Exhibition was a reference to the versatile talent of Edmund Burke. But as the air of interrogation among her fellow poetesses only deepened as a result of this explanation she was obliged to add an explanation to her explanation, to the effect that this talent of Burke's had been compared to an elephant's trunk, which could uproot an oak or pick up a needle. The ladies shifted their terrified eyes to the Magistrate to see how he was responding; his face remained ominously impassive, however, beneath its ginger growth. Miss Carpenter bravely proceeded:

*'Whilst they, the Royal Founders of the scene,
Through ranks of gazing myriads calmly move,
And Britons throng to proffer to their Queen
The willing dues of loyalty and love.'*

‘Really, this is not at all bad,’ thought the Collector in spite of his alarm on her behalf; he was fond of Miss Carpenter, who was serious and pretty, and anxious to please.

*‘Pebbles and shells which little children find
Of rainbow-tinted hues, on ocean’s shore;
Though full of learning to the thoughtful mind,
Themselves how vain, how shortly seen no more!’*

‘How excellent, how serious! The girl has a remarkable gift.’ The Collector was surprised to find himself responding to a poem composed by one of the ladies; hitherto he had considered the poems of value only for their therapeutic properties. Alas, Miss Carpenter had been unable to resist appending yet another explanation: that this last verse was a reference to Newton’s description of himself as ‘only a child picking up pebbles on the shore of the great ocean of truth’. This was altogether too much for the Magistrate. ‘Half of this poem appears to have been copied from books, Miss Carpenter, and the other half is plainly rubbish. It’s entirely beyond my understanding why you should feel you have to say “Afric’s wondrous brute” instead of “elephant” like everyone else, and “forest monarch” instead of “tree”. Nobody in his right mind goes about calling trees “forest monarchs” ... I’ve really never heard such nonsense!’

The ladies gasped at this frontal attack, not just on poor Miss Carpenter, but on poetry itself. If you can’t call an elephant ‘Afric’s wondrous brute’ what *can* you call it? Why write poetry at all? Miss Carpenter’s eyes filled with tears.

‘Look here, Tom, that’s very extreme,’ grumbled the Collector, displeased. ‘I found it a very fine poem indeed. One of the best we’ve heard, I should think. Mind you,’ he added as his confidence once more deserted him, ‘the subject of the Exhibition, as you know, is one that holds a particular interest for me.’

Miss Carpenter coloured prettily at this speech and

appeared not to hear the Magistrate's derisive: 'Ha!' 'The fellow is quite impossible!' mused the Collector crossly.

Not everyone, the Collector was aware, is improved by the job he does in life; some people are visibly disimproved. The Magistrate had performed his duties for the Company conscientiously but they had not had a good effect on him: they had made him cynical, fatalistic, and too enamoured of the rational. His interest in phrenology, too, had had a bad effect; it had reinforced the determinism which had sapped his ideas, for he evidently believed that all one's arts were limited by the shape of one's skull. Given the swelling above and behind the ear on each side of his skull (he had once insinuated) there was not very much the Collector could do to remedy his inability to make rapid decisions ... Though, of course, one could not be 'absolutely sure' without making exact measurements. He had also begun to say something about a bump on each side of the Collector's crown which signified 'love of approbation', but noticing, at last, how badly the Collector was responding to this opportunity for self-knowledge he had desisted with a sigh.

'By the way, Tom,' said the Collector as the meeting broke up, 'I found something odd on my desk in the office just now. Four chapatis, to be exact. And yesterday I found some in a dispatch box. What d'you make of it?'

'That's strange. I found some too.' The two men looked at each other, surprised.

Presently they heard that chapatis were turning up all over Krishnapur. The Padre had found some on the steps of the Church and had assumed that they were some sort of superstitious offering. Mr Barlow, who worked in the Salt Agency, had been brought some by his watchman. Mr Rayne who, in addition to his official duties at the opium factory, was the Honorary Secretary of the Krishnapur Mutton Club and of the Ice Club, was shown chapatis by the watchmen employed in the protection of both these institutions. It soon became

clear that it was chiefly among the watchmen that the chapatis were circulating; they had been given them by watchmen from other districts, without apparently knowing for what purpose, and told to bake more and then pass them on again to watchmen of yet other districts. The Collector discovered by questioning his own watchman that it was he who had left the chapatis on the desk in his office. Although he had baked twelve more chapatis and passed them on, as he had been instructed, he had felt it his duty to inform the Collector Sahib and so had left them on his desk. He denied any knowledge of those in the dispatch box and on the portico. Where these came from the Collector never discovered.

In due course an even more curious fact emerged. The chapatis were appearing not just in Krishnapur but in stations all over northern India. Not only the Collector found this disturbing; for a while no one in Krishnapur could talk of anything else. Again and again the watchmen were interrogated, but they seemed genuinely to have no idea what the purpose of it had been. Some said they had passed on the chapatis because they believed it to be the order of the Government, that the purpose had been to see how quickly messages could be passed on.

In Calcutta the Government held an inquiry, but no reason for the phenomenon came to light and the excitement it caused died down within a few days. It was suggested that it might be a superstitious attempt to avert an epidemic of cholera. Only the Collector remained convinced that trouble was coming. He half remembered having heard of a similar distribution of chapatis on some other occasion. Surely there had been something of the kind before the mutiny at Vellore? He asked everyone he met whether they had heard of it, but no one had.

Before leaving Krishnapur to escort his wife to Calcutta, where she was to embark for England, the Collector took a strange decision. He ordered the digging of a deep trench

combined with a thick wall of earth 'for drainage during the monsoon' all the way round the perimeter of the Residency compound.

'The Collector's weakness appears to have found him,' observed the Magistrate lightly to Mr Ford, one of the railway engineers, as they smilingly surveyed the progress of this work.

2

It was during this winter that George Fleury arrived in Calcutta with his sister and first set eyes on Louise Dunstaple. It was hoped that something might come of this meeting for Fleury was not married and Louise, though not quite his social equal, was considered to be at the very height of her beauty . . . indeed, she was being talked of everywhere in Calcutta as the beauty of the cold season. She was very fair and pale and a little remote; one or two people thought her 'insipid', which is a danger blonde people sometimes run. She was remote, at least, in Fleury's presence, but once he glimpsed her at the racecourse, flirting chastely with some young officers.

Dr Dunstaple in those days was the civil surgeon at Krishnapur. But somehow he had managed to get himself and his family to Calcutta for the cold season, leaving the Krishnapur civilians to the tender mercies of Dr McNab, who had taken over as regimental surgeon and who was known to be in favour of some of the most alarmingly direct methods known to civilized medicine.

The Doctor had left his son Harry behind in Krishnapur, however. Thanks to the help of a friend in Fort William young Harry had been posted as an ensign to one of the native infantry regiments stationed at Krishnapur (or rather at Captainganj, five miles away) where his parents could keep an eye on him and see that he did not get into debt. Harry, who by now was a lieutenant, was quite content to be left behind

when his family, which included little Fanny, aged twelve, went away to enjoy themselves in Calcutta; being 'military' he tended these days to look with condescension upon civilians and Calcutta was undoubtedly riddled with the fellows.

Nor was Mrs Dunstaple displeased that her son should stay in Krishnapur, though this meant that he would be away from her side. Harry was at a vulnerable age and Calcutta swarmed with ambitious mammas anxious to expose young officers like Harry to the charms of their daughters. Alas, Mrs Dunstaple well knew that India was full of young lieutenants who had ruined their careers at the outset by disastrous marriages. All the same, this consideration, as applied to Harry, did not prevent her from hoping to be able to show off the charms of Louise before suitable young men. In the East the roses in a girl's cheeks fly away so quickly, so very quickly (though, strictly speaking, this did not apply to Louise whose beauty was of the pale sort).

The Season had been unusually successful, and not only for Louise (who had shown herself hard to please, however, in the matter of proposals). There had been many splendid balls and an unusual number of weddings and other entertainments. Moreover, the Turf, which had fallen into a decline in recent years, had revived wonderfully. Of course, you would be likely to see the same mounts in the Planters' Handicap as in the Merchants' Plate or the Bengal Club Cup but it was a season of remarkable horses, for this was the era of Legerdemain, Mercury, and of the great mare, Beeswing. But the cold season was nearing its end by the time Fleury and his sister, Miriam, arrived and new faces like theirs were longed for in Calcutta drawing-rooms (by this time all the old faces were so familiar that they could hardly be looked at any more). Besides, it was known that their father was a Director, with all the social standing which that implied in the Company's India. It was also rumoured that young Fleury had scarcely been half an hour in India before Lord Canning had offered him a cigar.