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The Snake Strikes

By LIEUTENANT EDGAR GARDINER

A red-blooded tale of outlawry and border raids in India, and the spectacular exploit of Mahbub Ali

TROWBRIDGE *sahib* stamped up and down the sultry *Thana* room and cursed, while the panting village *chowkidar* leaned against the doorway watching listlessly. Truly, these *sahibs* of the *Thana* [police station] were not as other men: why should the news of a *dacoity* [robbery] so enrage this one? True, in the village he had left at dawn were five newly dead, and the *dacoits* had retreated beyond the river with much gold and silver and jewels. What of that?

Old Aghad Khan had more than enough and to spare—that is, he did have before the *dacoits* had extracted from him the secret of the hiding-place of his wealth by the simple expedient of roasting the soles of his feet over a small fire. Those *bobs* had plucked him as clean as a crow. But Aghad Khan needed that wealth no more, for when the *chowkidar* had last glimpsed old Aghad he had been quite thoroughly dead if the hillman were any judge—the strangling silken cord of *Thugee* drawn tight about his skinny neck or the dagger protruding from between his lean ribs had either of them been quite enough to assure such a state. And now Aghad Khan's soul roasted in the fires of Jehanum quite as his feet had roasted in the *dacoit's* tongue-loosening flames. Again the *chowkidar* spat languidly into the dust without.

"*Babadur!*" the reader of the vernacular, crouched upon his mat with the litter of papers disorderly over its entire surface, dared to interrupt the mighty *sahib's* explosive wrath: "*Babadur* [son of a

king], a letter to the Inspector-General will bring a troop of *sowars*——"

"Curse the Inspector-General!" And again Trowbridge *sahib* was off in a more fiery display of verbal pyrotechnics than ever. Fresh fuel was added to that tirade because Trowbridge knew that such a letter should have been written days ago when the outrages first began, instead of trying to cope with the situation single-handed, aided only by the scant dozen of native policemen under him.

Each sultry day brought the news of a fresh outrage against the majesty of the British *Raj*; of new robberies in some lonely village far away from the one where his men had expected it and where they had lain in wait. Each day brought fresh tidings of violent death while the villages of the district seethed with mutinous unrest.

Trowbridge *sahib* looked past the listless *chowkidar*, and through the open doorway at the thread of shining river shimmering in the heat waves, a mere thread of a stream now, in wider wastes of shifting sand. A mere thread, that grew daily more shallow until it might now be forded in a dozen spots, while all up and down its length boats could be requisitioned on either bank to convey a party across—and his policemen be none the wiser.

He looked across at that native state lying on the other shore, where hillmen swarmed under a petty native's rule, where trouble and thieves bred like rabbits, keeping the British *Raj* awake of

nights and making his own life an intolerable burden.

It was Trowbridge *sahib's* first setback in all his brilliant administrative career and he was properly explosive. Curses on the *dacoits*! Curses on a native buffer state whose every inhabitant was a potential trouble-maker, a thief if but given a chance, who had only to recross the river borderline and secure complete immunity! It looked almost as though the robbers were watching the *Thana* with eagle eyes. It seemed they were quite able to anticipate his moves—or there was a traitor among his own small force who was aiding them!

At that paralyzing thought Inspector Trowbridge stopped short. In his mind he ran over the few natives under his orders. Not one but whom he would trust with life itself. Not one but had been with him for years, following him from one district to another as he was shifted from post to post, each more difficult and trying than the last, until his superiors had sent him to this lonely hill district where so many had failed. And now, was he, too, doomed to failure here? Must he now call for the assistance of a troop of *sowars*; he who always before had been so self-sufficient? He stopped short and his face grew haggard.

As he pondered over that arresting thought there was a stir in the sultry heat without. Trowbridge heard the sharp orders of dismissal, heard the men scattering to their quarters behind the *Thana*. It was Mahbub Ali and his four men just returning from their fruitless night watch at the ford by the village of Bakhadur, where they had lain all the night in the darkness because Mahbub had been certain that the *dacoits* would pass that way. Instead, they had made the night hideous in another village a dozen miles away.

And Mahbub had been so certain of

his information, gathered in the devious ways that only he could have told had he been willing to do so. He had promised the *Sikar Bahadur* that this time they would not fail; promised it with a flash of white teeth through black beard! And Mahbub above all his men was fitted to know. In that damnable, trouble-breeding state beyond the river he had been born and reared. There he numbered friends and relatives by the score—Trowbridge's mouth dropped open. Was Mahbub Ali the traitor? Impossible! And yet——

THE doorway darkened suddenly. Mahbub Ali strode in, shouldering the village watchman carelessly out of his way, saluting his superior smartly. Between these two lay long years of close association, of innumerable problems solved by the native's sharp wits and his superior's unquestioning faith and prompt, efficient backing. Between them lay the ceremony of blood brotherhood. No! By all the gods of Hind! It was not Mahbub Ali who was a traitorous dog! Trowbridge *sahib* returned the salute and smiled grimly.

"Again the trap failed, *Sikar Bahadur!*" Mahbub's voice was weary and disappointed.

"And again the wolves struck, and far away!" Trowbridge retorted. In swift words he told of this latest indignity. He watched Mahbub's rage rise in gathering blackness.

"We be watched! Day and night some one spies upon us, oh my friend!" Mahbub growled the words. He grew tense and grim with sudden resolve. "Have I the permission of the Presence to depart?" he asked softly.

Trowbridge considered.

"Surely, you would not leave me now, Mahbub!" he said at last.

"The Presence knows what is in my

mind," Mahbub went on simply. "Mahbub Ali will go, nor will any of the servants of the British *Raj* see him soon again. He would go to visit in the hills where he was born."

"But, damme, man! You can't leave me like this! We've got to stamp out these *dacoities*, and at once! Already they have gone on too long. Already the might of the *Raj* is a jest among these hill people. Soon they will rise against it—refuse to pay their taxes—the red flame of open rebellion will flare along the border—troops will pour in, leaving waste and ruin wherever they go! My service, all my work, will be undone! And what of your own long years under the *Raj*? What of the inspectorship that is almost within your hands? Mahbub, by God! You can't do it!"

Mahbub cast a single significant look at the open-mouthed reader of the vernacular crouched upon his mat, a glance that took in the languidly insolent hillman *chowkidar*, the village watchman, and abruptly Trowbridge *sahib* calmed.

"Very well, then! Come into my office!" he growled.

Mahbub closed the door softly behind him and waited a moment with his ear pressed closely against its panels.

"Nay! Oh, Trowbridge *sahib*, it is no jest! Mahbub Ali the sub-Inspector goes on leave and none knows whither!" He held up a hand, arresting his superior's wrathful utterance.

"There be spies!" he whispered. "I know not if they be among these dogs of the villages, or among our own men," he hurried on. "Therefore Mahbub Ali goes. But in his stead——"

"You are right, Mahbub." Trowbridge raised his head, his eyes hopeful again. "But something must happen very soon. If another outrage occurs I must call in other help. Perhaps it's too late already—

God! Man, we can't fail now! At all costs we must stamp this out. Revolt! And that's just what that damned snake across the border wants! Open revolt! Unlimited raids! Right now he is accepting foreign gold to start trouble along this border!"

At the words Mahbub Ali seemed to change.

"I go—and at once, Trowbridge *sahib*!" he said insolently. "It is not for you to ask the reason. I am a free man! I do not choose to stay! Pay me now and have done!" He leaned across the flat-topped desk, a boastful insolent Afghan in every line of him.

Trowbridge gasped at his sudden change—gasped, and cursed viciously.

"All right!" he gritted. Hastily he signed an order, filled it out with brief references to the *Thana* records, and thrust it into the outstretched hand that waited to receive it. "And don't ever let me see your filthy carcass around here again," he finished.

Without a word Mahbub took the order, but every line of his departing figure was eloquent of wordless insult as he shouldered past the reader and the village headman of Bakhadar who were entering, who must have heard every word that had just passed between them!

OPEN revolt was very near. The Inspector knew it from the almost contemptuous and unreasonable demands of the headman, no less than from the changed bearing of his reader. One more raid from across the border—his brow grew moist as he thought of such an end to all his hopes and plans. Ruin, complete and devastating! He damned the *bohs* of that buffer state; he damned Mahbub Ali, root and branch—Mahbub Ali, his trusted friend and subordinate, who had failed him now in his hour of

need. What had gotten into the man, anyhow? His action was quite likely to be the last straw — the spark that would start all that hill country to blazing with the horrors of a border war!

Mahbub Ali packed his few belongings swiftly and with care, mounted his horse and departed toward that ford from which he had so lately come. Behind him he heard the stifled whispers of his astounded fellows, knew that already the entire village had been apprised of what had taken place. He smiled grimly into his black beard as, head high, he rode swaggeringly away. Sudden as had been his plans, all had gone without a hitch. Yet Mahbub Ali, sub-Inspector, trusted right hand to Trowbridge *sahib*, never reached the ford.

Instead, there came a very holy man indeed, one almost naked and exceedingly filthy, one quite as insolent as any hillman, who squatted close beside the crossing and mutely held out his begging-bowl to every traveler. Even to the police who came at dusk to guard the crossing, he held out the bowl and took with wordless disdain the *pice* they carelessly condescended to drop therein before he hobbled toward the village.

Though he was not there, yet he knew when those troopers were withdrawn upon swift, sudden orders from Trowbridge *sahib*, knew by morning light how the whole *Tbana* force had prevented by the barest of margins a recurrence of the events of the night before at another village only a few miles away.

With unheeding ears he heard the buzz of gossip in the village over the event, saw the watchful wariness when one of the hated policemen strode arrogantly through the shops with a wave of swift silence preceding and following his passage.

At midday he begged his way across

the river to the other bank when Mahmoud Khan crossed it hurriedly. Though Mahmoud was a land-owner and quite the richest man of those parts, the bowl remained empty as the beggar held it out to him, nor would Mahmoud pay for the holy one's passage among his own few servants before he hurried away on his own affairs. And that unregenerate one grew loud and wrathful when the holy man would follow in the dust of the road asking shrilly for largess, until the land-owner ordered one of his shrinking servants to beat the holy man.

None among them dared so affront the Gods, however, and Mahmoud and his party disappeared in a cloud of dust toward the nearest village, leaving the beggar to pursue his aimless way in peace.

DUSK was falling swiftly when the holy one came to the village. Another such would have made haste to fill his bowl at the tables of the villagers who wished to acquire merit, for the evening meal was being eaten. Yet this *yogi* preferred to mortify his flesh, or perhaps he was doing penance for some sin and durst not eat. He carelessly passed the hovels, he skirted the inn, making his way through the blackness now as though he knew just what he was about.

Like a monstrous snake he crawled upon his belly to the flimsy wall of a hut set some distance beyond the others, before whose door horses stamped and snapped under the care of a single *syce*. Mahmoud's horse was there, and others; yet the holy one had no eyes for them.

In the black shadow of the wall he lay with his ear pressed against the frail barrier. He stiffened as he heard Mahmoud's voice.

"Mahbub Ali is gone and in disgrace. This very day he went toward the hills

where he was born and the white *sabib* spoke many bitter curses against him!"

Another voice broke in but the listener could not distinguish the words.

"That could not have been the work of Mahbub, may the Djinn fly away with him! I tell you Mahbub is gone and none knows where. But the Inspector-*sabib* was most bitter!" It was Mahmoud again.

The listener smiled fleetingly.

"Tomorrow, then? It is agreed?" Mahmoud speaking once more. "But who shall tell the Inspector-*sabib* at the *Thana*?"

"Who but thyself, Mahmoud?" The owner of that coarse voice must have moved closer, for the words came clearly to the listening ears.

And now Mahmoud was protesting; he seemed fearful lest his traitorous hand show too clearly when all was over.

"Who but thyself, indeed?" Again that unknown voice. "As you are to profit, why should you not also share in the danger? You say your note is due at the money-lender's and you beg of me to destroy it!" The holy man stiffened expectantly. "And therefore, you yourself shall send the Inspector-*sabib* the message that will hurry his men far away. Or go with it yourself, for all I care!"

Again Mahmoud protested vehemently.

"Enough!" the other rasped. "That you must do; but, stay—— Many years have I known you! Once you were wealthy. You owned much land. Bit by bit it has gone, swallowed up by your careless squanderings. Now nothing is left. In all your house is now not enough to tempt a *chupperbund* across the river. You shall do as I say or we come to the village not at all. Then how will you satisfy the money-lender when he seeks an accounting? But before we go on to the money-lender's house we will even stop with

you. We will batter down your door, and what tale you shall tell the Inspector-*sabib* afterward is no concern of mine. But how shall he suspect Mahmoud then, who also suffered the loss of all his valuables because the men of the *Raj* were far away?" The voice ended in a sneering chuckle.

The holy man waited to hear no more. Like a shadow he was gone, past the snorting horses, past the village settling down to rest. Unseen, he crossed the ford with strange agility and strength for such a holy one. And in the early watches of the morning the Inspector-*sabib* was awakened by a stone tossed within his sleeping-room.

IT WAS a sultry noontide when Mahmoud dismounted before the *Thana* door and tossed his reins carelessly to a waiting servant. Trowbridge *sabib*, pale and frowning, pacing restlessly to and fro, greeted him shortly, and listened to his story.

"That bears out what I heard this morning, Mahmoud," he said. "I shall send one of my men to the ford and order those six men to where you have told me they will prove more useful. But wait! You are returning now to Bakhadar? By your hand I shall send that message—will you do this thing for me, Mahmoud?"

The land-owner nodded slowly, veiling his eyes lest the Inspector-*sabib* see the eagerness reflected there. What fools were these white *sabibs* after all! Not at all shrewd as was——

He stopped. What if that other failed to keep his promise? But almost at once he reassured himself. After all, what did it matter? Mahmoud would send away all his servants for the night. There was a marriage feast in that village across the

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river, he recollected—it would afford a capital excuse.

If the *chupparbunds* passed him by, he could himself hack open his own door! Who would be there then to tell just what men had done the deed or what they had taken? And now this foolish white one was sending by Mahmoud's own hand the order that would profit Mahmoud so greatly! He *salaamed* low and hastened away on galloping hoofs, leaving Trowbridge to resume his restless pacing, and he quite failed to see that other messenger who followed Mahmoud's course shortly after him.

Dusk fell and deepened swiftly into night. The ford was deserted. The six policemen on guard there had left hurriedly shortly after Mahmoud had delivered Trowbridge's written message to them, making for the next ford six miles farther down the stream—six, no, seven mounted men. Another had joined them as they left the village of Bakhadar behind.

The last of Mahmoud's servants had gone away, rejoicing at such unexpected generosity; his big house was deserted and forlorn. Only Mahmoud sat alone in the great audience chamber amid the frayed and tarnished furniture. He smoked and brooded glumly as the hours dragged, from time to time glancing anxiously behind him as though he sensed another's presence.

But that could not be; the women's wing was deserted—none had lived there since his aged mother had sickened and died. Mahmoud had never taken to himself a wife, preferring to sip of the pleasures of many wells instead.

That stealthy rustle was only a mon-goose after a snake; those creaking noises

were only aged boards settling into new places as the old building shifted wearily into new disintegration.

What if, after all this careful planning, those *dacoits* did not come? Or, coming, what if they failed to gather up, among other things, his notes at the money-lender, now past due, and for which Mohammed Singh was even now pressing him? What if they took them and held them over his head to enforce ever-growing fresh demands?

Mahmoud tortured himself into a sweat of cold fear as he sat and waited. He lit the great round-wicked lamp, set so incongruously among all that Oriental setting under its ugly red shade.

He should have assured himself of the blessings of the Gods on these affairs! He should have given alms—a few—to that holy man the day before instead of ordering his servants to flog him!

A loud groan startled him—Mahmoud jumped. His eyes, wide with fear, looked everywhere about. He saw nothing unusual, nothing out of place. Again that groan, eerily dismal.

On the door without, a swift knocking, loud and imperious. It stilled suddenly as Mahmoud sat in frozen torpor. The sound of sharp blows—the flimsy boards were splintering under the onslaught of those keen blades—the bars gave way suddenly. Into the room poured a dozen fierce bearded forms—a hoarse voice shouted in Mahmoud's ear:

"Mahmoud! We have come even as I promised. The ford was unguarded. My men saw the *Tbana* servants leave before the dusk. We go now to the money-lender's——"

The speaker's eyes took one glance into Mahmoud's fear-convulsed features.

"Nay! We harm thee not! . . . What is it, then? Speak, dog!"

A single shot rang out and the great lamp shattered into nothingness, the flame flickered and expired in one last gasp.

"Police!" a strange voice cried. At once it was answered in chorus by the bearded ruffians crowding around Mahmoud. Like frightened rats they blundered about in the blackness of the room, their weapons drawn, stumbling against the crowded furniture. As flesh touched flesh they stabbed viciously, and now groans were added to their curses and the din they made amid the smashing furniture. They found the yawning blackness of the open door at last. Stabbing and slashing, they fought their way clear. In their fright they forgot their horses tethered a little space away in an alley. As fast as they could run they hurried for the ford.

"THE ford of Bakhadar at last," Trowbridge *sabib* muttered to his six followers . . . "And it lacks a few minutes of midnight," he added as he squinted at the illuminated dial of his watch. "We are just about on time as that note suggested. Now keep a close watch on both banks, my children. Fire at once on any men, mounted or on foot, who seek to cross—though I'm blessed if I know what it's all about," he muttered to himself. "Perhaps I'm a blasted fool to pay any attention at all to an unsigned note . . . But, damme! Mahmoud came to me as the note said he would—and he told me exactly what the note led me to expect. . . . I've a hunch that it is the read goods! But what the devil is in the wind, anyhow?"

From the silent village came a confused chorus of wild shouts, the sound of swiftly running feet, drawing momen-

tarily nearer. Among the troopers at his side sounded the click of weapons being cocked, as forms loomed through the thick dusk, their faces turned fearsomely behind them.

The orange flames of the rifles' discharge stabbed through the darkness; followed shrieks, groans; a body plumped to the ground almost at Trowbridge *sahib's* feet. The white glow of his flashlight burst full upon a bearded figure.

"By the Lord Harry! A hillman! A raider from across the border! God! It's the Snake himself!"

In the village a glow rose swiftly above the huddled huts; leaping flames roared skyward, bathing all the country in their ruddy glow. Showers of sparks swirled upward into the billowing smoke clouds.

"Hell!" Trowbridge's voice was violent. "That's Mahmoud's house!"

By the sinister glow of the flames his troopers were bending over four huddled forms that would never move again—hillmen all—raiders from that buffer state beyond the thread-like river. Among themselves they were calling off names as they recognized one after another of those dead—not one but was a desperate character—not one but was wanted by the British *Raj* for dark lawless deeds.

A naked man came slowly toward Trowbridge *sahib* from the direction of the fire that was now sinking again almost as fast as it had arisen, having thoroughly gutted that old ruin. The roof crashed in with another shower of dancing sparks and another glowing burst of dazzling golden flames. In the light of that glowing burst the naked man bent briefly over the dead bodies, and now Trowbridge *sahib* saw that it was a *yogi*, incredibly filthy, and therefore doubly holy.

"The Snake!" that holy one shouted. "And three others! Allah be praised! We have them all!" The holy one turned to

the astounded Inspector. Smartly he saluted.

"No more need Trowbridge *sahib* fear the coming of the night and the *dacoits* together! Here are the last of them—and their leader! A dozen there were. Now we have them all!"

"Mahbub!" Trowbridge shouted. "Mahbub Ali! . . . Twelve, you said? You killed eight of them? Alone and single-handed?" Awe was in his tones.

Mahbub Ali smiled, a curiously changed and altered Mahbub. Gone was the silky black beard of which he had always been so proud. Gone, too, was the spick and span uniform, the snowy turban. Here was only a filthy beggar whose wild locks straggled out from under a dirty rag.

"Aye, Trowbridge *sahib*, it is I. I, who left the Presence to seek my kindred of the hills!" He smiled briefly. "Nor were they so hard to find. But I slew none—not one of those eight who perished with Mahmoud in his blazing house! In Mahmoud's deserted, rat-infested *zenana* I lay hidden. And when the *chupperbunds* appeared before him as their leader had promised I shot out the light. I called 'Police!' in a loud voice."

He chuckled softly as he remembered that wild death scramble of the *dacoits*.

"Then Siva, the Destroyer, worked her bloody will! In the sudden blackness those *bobs* thought all the hosts of the *Raj* had appeared against them. They thought each whom they brushed against was an enemy and all their knives were turned against their fellows. But four reached the door alive, of whom their leader was one, while the lamp that I had broken was now roaring and crackling amid Mahmoud's things that they had broken in their wild scramble. A roaring, crackling hell yawned behind them as they ran into your ready rifles at the

ford and so to their death. No more shall these *chupperbunds* steal across the border in the black night, mocking the might of the *Raj* and the Presence. Soon all the border will be peaceful again. When the headmen of the villages shall learn of this feat of thine they shall fear the *Raj* and the Presence as never before!"

"Forgive me, Mahbub!" Trowbridge *sahib's* voice was husky, his outstretched hand shook. "I shall not forget. Forgive my hasty words——"

"They are already forgotten, oh my friend," Mahbub said softly. "What, then, is there to forgive?"

"I shall not forget," Trowbridge repeated softly. "In the morning I will write to the Inspector-General. Perhaps when I hear from him again you will no longer be sub-Inspector——"

Mahbub swung about to the gaping policemen——

"By the beard of my father!" he roared loudly. "By all the Blessed Imams! Is this the way you cows keep watch?" He rushed at the six burly forms before them. "But no, my children! The need for that is past! Go you quickly and help the villagers! And drag those dead crows from where they roast in the flames, that the Presence may learn who they be and what manner of men are foolish enough to stand against him and the mighty *Raj!*"
