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1933



PRITHVIRAJ CARRIED OFF SANJOGITA

YOUNG INDIA READERS : GRADE V

HEROINES OF INDIAN HISTORY

The stories of
SANJOGITA, RAZIA BEGUM,
PADMINI, DURGAVATI
AND NURJAHAN

BY

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PREFACE

This little book is intended as a companion to my earlier book ' Heroines of Indian Literature ' published several years ago by the Oxford University Press. The women whose characters I have tried to sketch in the following pages are all well-known personages that have played an important part each in her own time. The period covered by these heroines is the period commencing from the establishment of Muslim power in northern India and ending with the reign of Akbar which marks the highest ascendancy of the Mogul Empire. The treatment of the subject matter is biographical and personal and not historical.

A. C. M.

SANJOGITA

Indian history has many heroes but few heroines. But the few we do meet with are women whose names shed a light on periods made dark by jealousy, intrigue and treachery, or by the slaughter of war, the overthrow of kingdoms and the fall of dynasties. Each one is unique not only among Indian women but among womankind. Indian boys and girls are familiar with the story of Helen of Troy, who brought about the Trojan War in the old, old days ; of Joan of Arc, the maid of Orleans, who raised the siege of Orleans during the early days of the Hundred Years War between England and France ; of Queen Elizabeth, the virgin queen of England who raised her country to a high pitch of fame and glory ; of Queen Victoria who by her personal character did more to weld together the different parts of the British Empire than any other sovereign before or since ; and of other famous women of the West ; but they know little of the famous women of Indian history, although the work of

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these latter is more remarkable than that of the women of the West, because from times immemorial Indian women, including even queens, have played little or no part in public affairs, their proper sphere being the home.

Leaving aside characters like Sita, Damayanti, Draupadi, Sakuntala as belonging more to legend and literature than to history, we do not meet with any heroine until we come to the twelfth century of the Christian era—at any rate none of whom anything is known beyond the mere name. Our first heroine is Sanjogita, the only daughter of Jai Chandra, king of Kanauj. Being the only child of her parents she was brought up with tender care amid the pomp and luxuries of an eastern court. As a girl Sanjogita was fond of listening to the songs sung by the native bards of the country, who were and still are known as Bhats. These songs treated chiefly of love and war. There was a whole cycle of such songs current in northern India about this time, and they all centred round a living king named Prithviraj who ruled at Delhi at the same time as Jai Chandra ruled at Kanauj. Prithviraj was a Rajput of the Chauhan clan, the son of the Chauhan prince of Ajmer, to whom Anangpal,

the last Tuar king of Delhi, had given a daughter in marriage. It seems that in his earlier career he was a warrior of great courage and strength who left Rajputana in quest of adventure and waged war successfully upon neighbouring princes, annexing their territories to his own and making his capital Delhi once more the capital of a great Hindu kingdom like one of those that had flourished and fallen there from the days of the *Mahahharata* and the Empire of Hastinapur.

Sanjogita used to hear these epic songs about Prithviraj with great interest. Her imagination was excited by stirring descriptions

' Of moving" accidents by flood and iield,

Or hair-breadth scape i' the imminent deadly breach, '

and similar other events common in ancient warfare. The more she heard these songs the keener grew her passion to hear still more, until it reached a point when from a desire to hear the songs she rose to a desire to see the hero of these songs. She pictured this hero in her mind in all the colours of romance; she dwelt on that picture with love and longing; she idealized the hero and made him her own. She resolved to marry the brave Prithviraj if ever it might be her lot to choose a husband

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after her own heart. From the bards who sang her songs about Prithviraj she learnt all that she desired to know about her hero. But she also learnt that her marriage with Prithviraj was impossible because there was a family feud between her father, who was a Rathor Rajput, and Prithviraj who was a Chauhan—a feud that was due to rival claims to the Delhi kingdom based on similar ties of marriage. But she determined that no idle feud should prove a bar to her union with Prithviraj.

She kept her love and her resolve concealed from her parents, however. Her father did not seem to be *in* any hurry to look out for a suitable match for her. Her mother was, however, anxious that Sanjogita should be married as early as possible as she had already attained what in those times was considered the marriageable age. Not only that, but she wished that her daughter should herself choose a husband instead of being forced to accept one chosen by her parents. It was accordingly arranged that a *swayamvara* ceremony should be held to which brave princes should be invited from all parts of India. Prithviraj was purposefully left out of the invitation on account of the feud, but in order to add to the insult an image

of him was cast in brass and placed at the door of the pavilion where the *swayamvara* was to be held. Prithviraj was thus to act in the menial capacity of a door-keeper. On the appointed day princes flocked to Kanauj from all parts of India to try for the hand of the beautiful Sanjogita. At the auspicious moment the princess was ushered into the pavilion. Down the bright rows of princes she passed, bearing in her hand the bridal garland. Looking neither to right nor to left but with her head bowed as though in token of a mind already made up, she passed along the central passage from the head of the pavilion to the door. Coming to the door she stopped. She looked neither to right nor to left nor behind but only at the image standing at the door. She knew that the image was a likeness of Prithviraj whose name had long rung sweetly in her ears and whose image delighted her heart in the same way as a stone idol satisfies the heart of a humble worshipper. Round the neck of this image she hung the garland as a sign of her choice of Prithviraj as her husband.

There was a murmur of disappointment throughout the hall at this strange conduct of the princess. Jai Chandra ran down from his

throne to the door and chided his daughter bitterly, saying, 'What! darest thou choose my mortal foe and cast everlasting disgrace on my family?' 'But,' replied Sanjogita coolly, 'he who has won my heart can be no foe of my father's family. You bade me choose a lord from among the princes assembled here, and I have made my choice according to my own free will.' Jai Chandra was speechless with rage. He sent the princess away from the hall into the queen's rooms, swearing that he would give up his own life ere his daughter should marry an enemy of the house.

Just at this moment Prithviraj, who was hiding in the neighbourhood of Kanauj in disguise, carried off Sanjogita on the back of his horse from her father's palace to his own at Delhi. He loved Sanjogita as strongly as she loved him. He had exchanged love-messages with her through the medium of his court bards. He knew that he had been insulted by Jai Chandra by being represented in the bridal hall as a porter, but for the sake of Sanjogita he did not mind the insult. He knew that in the *swayamvara* ceremony Sanjogita would put the bridal garland round his image. He also knew that she was ready to fly with him if only

he could arrange for a flight. He had therefore made complete plans to seize the princess and run away with her. By a well-timed raid on Jai Chandra's palace he was able to seize Sanjogita and carry her off before Jai Chandra had time to prevent the elopement. The flight of the lovers from Kanauj to Delhi was made safe by Prithviraj's having stationed troops at various points of the road.

The running away of Sanjogita was a signal for war between the kingdoms of Kanauj and Delhi. Great preparations were made by Jai Chandra to crush Prithviraj in revenge for the wrong inflicted by the crafty Chauhan upon his family. Prithviraj was in happy ignorance of the gathering war-clouds. He found in Sanjogita all that satisfied his heart's strongest craving for love and beauty, and Sanjogita found in him the realization of her dearest dreams. The two were so fond of each other that neither could bear to keep aloof from the other for a moment.

After his marriage with Sanjogita Prithviraj began to spend more and more time in the company of his new queen and less and less on state business. The work of the government was left to his officials. The result was that the

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government became weak, the army inefficient and the treasury empty.

Jai Chandra, knowing that singly he was too weak to make war upon Delhi, sent an embassy to Muhammad Ghori, Sultan of Ghazni, the old enemy of Prithviraj, soliciting his help against Prithviraj. Muhammad Ghori gladly consented to help him, and he personally came down upon the plains of India with a force of 12,000 men. The news of another Muslim invasion made the subordinate chiefs of the Delhi king flock to Delhi to aid their sovereign lord Prithviraj. Prithviraj himself was, however, plunged in pleasure, unaware that Muhammad Ghori was thundering at his gate. At last he awoke to the situation and girded on his sword. He took leave of Sanjogita and marched out to the battlefield. 'Farewell, my lord,' said Sanjogita, 'fare you well! I pray we shall meet again, if not in this, then certainly in a better world.'

These last words proved strangely prophetic, but they were inspired by her belief in a prediction that had been made by an astrologer who had said that her married life would be very happy but at the same time very brief. Her married life had indeed been happy beyond all expectation, and now it seemed to her that it

might come to an end this very day. She had a secret fear that her husband would die on the battlefield and she had made up her mind that if her fear should unhappily prove true she would join her husband in heaven by burning herself on his funeral pyre.

Prithviraj marched northward to meet Muhammad Ghori. He was in command of a large army protected by a vanguard of hundreds of elephants and horses. Encamping at Tarain, the very field where he had defeated Muhammad Ghori not long ago, he met the enemy who were awaiting his approach. A fierce battle was fought. The elephants of Prithviraj, on whom so much of the hope of victory rested, were put to flight by a cavalry charge from the army of Muhammad Ghori. The trustiest tuskers turned tail and ran back in terror, trampling upon the Rajput soldiers posted behind. The friendly elephants thus completed the work of defeat and slaughter begun by the foe. Prithviraj fought bravely to the last. Riding a richly clad elephant he directed the movements of his army, risking his own safety in the thick of the fight. At last he was wounded and taken prisoner and put to death in Muhammad Ghori's camp. For some minutes the fatal news was

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kept back from the soldiers in the field. But word was secretly sent to the palace that the king was wounded and captured by the enemy.

When this news reached the palace Sanjogita came out with the object of taking command of the army herself. This was no time to give way to grief: the fate of a kingdom hung in the balance. Mounting her husband's elephant she ordered the trumpets to sound a note of victory in order to rally her scattered forces and to delude them into the belief that Prithviraj was still alive. For a moment the wavering soldiers did rally, but the news of the capture and death of the king could not be long concealed from them. The remnant of the Delhi forces fled in disorder, leaving Muhammad Ghori master of the field and conqueror of Delhi.

And now Sanjogita's task was done, and she must hurry away and join her lord as she had vowed to herself. She had done her last service to her husband and to his kingdom. Woman as she was, she had taken up arms and put herself in command of the army in his place; and all that remained now was for her to rejoin him by becoming a *Sati*. Before laying herself down on the funeral pyre she bade farewell to her attendants, rejoicing in the hope of

meeting her husband before the flames died down.

Sanjogita died ; Prithviraj had died before her ; and with them died the Hindu empire of Delhi. But though the Hindu empire of Delhi is dead, Prithviraj and Sanjogita still live in the memory of the Indian people, knit together by the bond of love and occupying a bright page in the annals of Indian heroism.

II

RAZIA BEGUM

India had many queen consorts but only one queen regnant in the middle ages. The reason for this is that Indian women have, more by choice than from necessity, played a silent and subordinate part in all affairs. Their devotion to their husbands is so perfect that they have cheerfully made over to the male sex the highest of worldly honours, sovereignty, when they could, by virtue of their character and ability, share that sovereignty, with grace and glory, and indeed shed lustre on it in some cases.

Razia Begum was the only reigning queen that ever sat on the throne of Delhi. She was the eldest child of Shamsuddin Altamash, the second king of what is known in Indian history as the Slave Dynasty. She was a wonderful woman in that wonderful age, born far in advance of her times. The empire of Delhi was **then** neither an empire nor ruled from Delhi. **Muslim** power in India had just been established, or rather simply asserted, by the overthrow

by Muhammad Ghori of the last Hindu king of Delhi, Prithviraj. Kutubuddin, the first king of the Slave Dynasty who succeeded to the throne just after Muhammad Ghori's conquest, was not a strong king nor did he rule long enough to become one. Razia Begum was thus born in times still echoing with the din of war, and amidst a people who loved the noise and tumult of fighting.

Being the favourite child of her father, Razia was educated in all branches of learning and in all the manly arts which were taught to princes in that age, such as riding, fencing, playing with the sword, etc. The Sultan's sons were lazy and licentious and cared for nothing but pleasure. But Razia took interest in all her father's affairs, including his military campaigns. Sometimes when her father had to leave Delhi to put down some revolt or to conquer some little territory on the borders of his kingdom, Razia Begum ruled the kingdom with care and ability. The ministers, however, did not like the Sultan's daughter being placed in charge of the government over the head of the heir-apparent. So they remonstrated with Altamash who answered them : ' Ah, my friends, do you not see that my sons are fond of ple5 ;re

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and that they take no interest in the affairs of the country? My daughter has always taken a keen interest in all my concerns since she came to years of discretion. She carries an old head on young shoulders.'

The ministers were obliged to accept the king's decision. Each time the king had occasion to leave Delhi Razia was placed at the head of affairs. But some of the nobles objected to being ruled by a woman on religious grounds, since the Quran says, ⁴ 'the people that make a woman their ruler shall be damned'. During a temporary absence of the Sultan from Delhi, they rose in revolt, imprisoned Razia Begum and enthroned her brother Ruknuddin. Ruknuddin soon found the crown a heavy load. So flinging the burdens of the kingdom on the shoulders of his mother, Shah Turkan, he returned to his life of pleasure. The queen-mother was a very cruel lady and so she became very unpopular. A rebellion soon broke out in the neighbourhood of Delhi, and Ruknuddin was forced against his will to go out and meet the rebels. In the confusion that arose in Delhi at the news of this revolt Razia Begum managed to escape from prison and with the aid of her friends and partisans set herself up against her

mother as a rival claimant to the throne. The queen-mother thereupon made a plot to put Razia to death. Her friends got news of this plot in time to nip it in the bud. They flocked round their favourite princess and put their armies under her command. With their help Razia Begum won back the fort of Delhi, imprisoned the queen-mother and secured her father's throne for herself by right of might.

Meanwhile Ruknuddin was returning to Delhi after abandoning the suppression of the rebellion which he had been sent to crush. But before he could reach Delhi his own bodyguard rose against him and went over to the side of Razia Begum who, backed now by practically the whole weight of the empire, became in fact though not in law empress of Delhi in succession to her father Altamash, who had now died.

Razia Begum's rule was one constant fight against lawlessness and prejudice. Many of the nobles who were opposed to the rule of a woman joined their forces together at Lahore and marched upon Delhi in a body. Razia Begum boldly determined to meet the combined attack, but she soon found out her own weakness as against the fearful strength of the rebels. So she turned to trickery in order to avert the

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danger. She managed to sow dissension among the rebel nobles, who began to fight against one another, leaving Razia Begum in peaceful possession of the throne.—

Having secured her throne against internal rebellion she turned her attention to improving the civil government of the country. She revised the laws so as to make them more humane: her womanly heart could not bear the cruel penal law of those times. She reformed many abuses that had crept into the government. She personally superintended the work of every department of the state. She cast off the veil and appeared not only before her courtiers and officers but also in public. She sometimes put on a turban like a man and presided at darbars like a king. This immodesty shocked the Ulamas or divines, who were really offended, however, not at her masculine bearing, but at her keeping all power in her own hands instead of giving most of it to court officials. Others were offended at being deprived of the powers and privileges which they had enjoyed during the reign of Altamash. Evil stories were therefore invented to blacken her character. A woman who appeared in public with her face open and who rode a horse in a dress was a shameless woman who must

be of bad character. She must be in unlawful love with somebody. Who could this somebody be but Jamalud-din Yakut, master of the horse, an officer who had to wait every day in front of the palace door with the queen's horse so that the queen might go wherever state business required her presence. Yakut used to help the queen in mounting and dismounting and sometimes used to ride behind her as an attendant. He had also received from the queen some marks of favour which envious tongues said were unusual.

Now Yakut was a negro slave, holding the not very high position of master of the horse. There was nothing attractive or interesting about this man, who was to all intents and purposes only a royal *syce*. And the great queen, the beautiful queen Razia, was supposed to be in love with him! The feeling against the queen ran high. The first to raise the banner of revolt was Altunia, governor of Sarhind. Razia Begum at once set her army in motion to punish this rebel. She herself commanded the troops and marched in the direction of the rebel noble's fort.

The royal army halted in front of the fort. But just before the attack was about to cc -

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mence Razia Begun saw that there was discontent in her army. Some of the Turkish nobles who were in command of regiments were going over to the side of the rebel chief. The queen was deserted by her ablest commanders ; Yakut was slain ; the few captains that remained loyal to Razia were soon put to flight; the queen herself was caught and imprisoned in Altunia's fort. After doing all this the Turkish nobles returned to Delhi to share the spoils of victory.

Even in this fallen state Razia retained her manliness of character to the full. From her prison she kept a watch on events in Delhi. She heard that the rebels had entered the capital, crowned her younger brother Bairam Shah, seized the highest posts in the State and plundered the treasury. Bairam Shah was a mere puppet in their hands in his sober moments, while in his drunken state he was a pitiable creature.

Razia Begum thought of a clever trick to free herself from imprisonment and make one more bid for the throne. She begged for permission to see Altunia, in whose fort she was a prisoner, but the interview was at first used. The queen was in despair and had

almost made up her mind to pass the rest of her life in prison when suddenly Altunia appeared before her in her cell. She rose up from her seat and spoke to him in a tone of reproach as well as entreaty. She blamed him for all the disorders that had taken place in Delhi during her absence; she recounted all the favours he had enjoyed under her father; she reminded him that the governorship he now held was her own gift. She taxed him with ingratitude and treachery and showed to him how meanly he had been treated by his own friends, who were in the enjoyment of power and wealth at Delhi while he himself was left behind to do the ignoble work of guarding his own sovereign in prison.

Altunia's heart was touched by the queen's appeal. He determined to take revenge upon his friends for having thus deceived him. He knew that there was in Delhi a strong party that was still loyal to Razia Begum. He knew also that Razia Begum could without help do nothing against the powerful nobles that had placed Bairam Shah on the throne. He knew also that without help he too was powerless against those nobles. Something might be done by a feir^ly combination of the two. But how was a

real combination possible except by marriage? It was a bold thought, but Altunia was a bold man. He boldly asked for the hand of Razia Begum, knowing well that it was not in the power of the queen to refuse, as she was a prisoner in his own fort.

Razia at once consented, as this was the very purpose for which she had wished to see Altunia. It was not a marriage of love but a political marriage, and it was performed immediately, and then Altunia collected his forces and marched towards Delhi. The Turkish nobles prepared to oppose him. The two armies met near Delhi on October 13, 1239. A fierce battle followed, lasting a whole day. Altunia was defeated and had to fly with the queen to Kaithal where he was able to obtain fresh troops. With their help he attacked the Turkish amirs, but was again defeated. Altunia and Razia Begum both fled a second time, but were soon caught and slain.

Thus ended the brief but brilliant reign of an able queen who rose to the throne by defying her sex, who ennobled that throne by acts of justice and benevolence, and who lost that throne only because she was too good for her age. Unfortunate was it for India that

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Razia Begum was not allowed to reign long enough to enable her to exercise her sweet womanly influence so as to calm down the stormy atmosphere of those turbulent times.

PADMINI

The name of Padmini, the peerless beauty of Mewar, is closely associated with the story of an unprovoked war and conquest, and with deeds of deceit and treachery, of greed and lust, from which the mind would have recoiled with disgust but for the fact that the same name is now more closely associated with an act of heroism unparalleled in its cool courage, its proud defiance, and its stern resolve to die rather than fall into the hands of a foreign conqueror.

Not long after the close of the reign of Razia Begum the throne of Delhi was occupied by the Khilji kings. Of these kings the most noted was Ala-ud-din. He conquered neighbouring territories and extended the power of Delhi far round.

One of Ala-ud-din's ambitions was to conquer Chitor. Whether it was his lust for conquest or his passion for beauty that filled him with this desire it is difficult to say. But it is certain that he had heard praises of Padmini's

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beauty so often that he strongly coveted her hand.

Padmini was the wife of Rana Ratan Singh, king of Mewar, a descendant of the famous Sesodia clan who boast of a purer descent than any other Rajputs. The story is that she was the daughter of a Rajput king of Ceylon whose name is now forgotten. Ratan Singh had heard stories of her great beauty from travellers or traders who came from that country to Mewar, and he longed incessantly to gain the hand of this princess. It is said that he went upon the quest of this beauty in the garb of a fakir and that he won her after many trials and hardships. At last he married her and brought her to Chitor as his bride.

With the object of conquering Chitor as a means of taking possession of Padmini Ala-ud-din marched a strong army to Mewar, a country which no enemy had yet entered. The news of the invasion flashed to the Rana's palace soon after the army started from Delhi. The whole of Mewar was astir. Vassals of the kingdom flocked to Chitor to defend the capital. The Rana was busy putting his army in battle order. The city was built on a natural rock 500 feet above the ground, and its fortress was

one of the strongest in the India of those days. The solid walls were protected by armed soldiers and gunners, the huge gates were guarded by watchmen day and night, and arms and weapons of all kinds were stored in the courtyard, and on the top of towers so that they could be hurled upon the enemy whenever they might come near the fortress.

Ala-ud-din's army came upon Chitor and encamped in front of the town. Chitor was besieged. No attempt was made to storm the fort: only a close siege was kept up from day to day for several weeks. There were sometimes petty fights between the enemies outside the walls of the fort, yielding no clear results. Stray attempts were made to force the gates or to scale the walls of the fort, but all to no purpose. Both parties were after a time reduced to a condition of helplessness. The Rana's supply of food had run short and starvation stared him and his soldiers in the face. Ala-ud-din had received news of a rising near the capital and he was anxious to go back to Delhi with his troops in order to save his throne. He had also heard that a large Mogul army was marching through the Punjab with a view to seizing the throne of Delhi. No

time was to be lost. Ala-ud-din must make haste to go back to Delhi. He must at the same time not let the enemy know that he was in trouble. He sent an envoy to the Rana with a friendly message saying that he was ready to raise the siege if only the Rajputs agreed to give him their queen Padmini. The offers of peace were scornfully rejected, as they were bound to be, seeing that a Rajput princess of the noblest blood was asked to leave her husband and become the mistress of a Muslim conqueror. So Ala-ud-din changed his demand to a demand for the jewellery that Padmini had brought from her father's house as her marriage dowry. The Rana quickly agreed to give this to Ala-ud-din. With his usual generosity he invited Ala-ud-din to his palace in order to present to him the jewellery he had asked for. Relying on the good faith of the Rajput, Ala-ud-din entered Chitor unguarded, and having received the ornaments took his departure. The Rana accompanied him to the outer gate of the palace as a mark of courtesy. This was the opportunity which Ala-ud-din had looked for. Just as the Rana was going back to his palace, a band of Ala-ud-din's soldiers fell upon him, bound him hand and foot and carried him to



ALA-UD-DIN'S SOLDIERS FELL UPON THE
RANA OF MEWAR

Ala-ud-din's tent. All this was arranged beforehand and was therefore done in the twinkling of an eye.

And now the Rana was a prisoner in Ala-ud-din's camp, and a prisoner would he remain until ransomed on such terms as Ala-ud-din might dictate. These terms were the same as had been first offered and rejected, that the Rajputs should give to Ala-ud-din their beautiful queen Padmini.

Padmini was as great an adept at tricks as Ala-ud-din. She advised her ministers to accept the proposed terms and to send word to Ala-ud-din that Padmini was prepared to go over to his camp if she was allowed to be accompanied by her usual train of attendants. A queen could not go upon a visit except as a queen. From having been the queen of Chitor she was going to become the empress of Delhi. Her train of attendants should therefore be in keeping with her new dignity.

When her ministers murmured at this, Padmini said, 'Never fear: a Rajput woman knows well how to guard her honour in the face of danger. Yes, tell the Sultan that Padmini will go to his camp at sunrise tomorrow attended by her handmaids who

will all travel in closed palanquins like herself.'

Ala-ud-din was very glad to think that the fulfilment of his hopes was near at hand. Early next morning the gates of Chitor were flung open and a long line of hooded palanquins swept over the plain to where Ala-ud-din and his army were encamped. When the palanquins entered the camping ground they were set down within an enclosure fixed for the purpose by the officers of Ala-ud-din. Half an hour was granted for a last meeting between Ratan Singh and Padmini. The half-hour was nearly over and Ala-ud-din was about to give orders that the meeting should come to an end when forth sprang from the palanquins an armed band of Rajputs who fell upon Ala-ud-din's troops unawares. Slaughtering the military guard round the Rana's tent, they cut the Rana's chains, ran back with him to Chitor and set him up on his throne before the surprised Tartar troops had time to recover from the surprise attack of the Rajputs. But when the Khilji army did recover from their shock of surprise they fell like fiends upon the Rana's soldiery, mercilessly slaughtering them to a man. Then began a fierce attack upon the fort of Chitor, an attack made

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still more fierce by the spirit of burning revenge.

And now Chitor was tottering to its fall. The Rana clearly perceived that defence was no longer possible. Still he and his chiefs did all they could to repel the attacks of the invaders. The flower of the Rana's soldiery had perished, and further fighting could only lead to further loss. One night the Rana heard a voice saying, 'I am hungry,' and raising his eyes he saw the majestic form of the guardian goddess of Chitor. 'Art thou not satiated,' asked the Rana, 'with the eight thousand Rajputs that were lately an offering to thee?' 'I must have royal victims,' was the reply, 'and if twelve princes of the blood royal are not offered as victims to me, the crown shall pass from thy line.'

Next morning the Rana called a council of war which his twelve sons also attended. When the demand of the Goddess was made known to them, a fight arose amongst the brave brothers as to who should be the first victim. The eldest, Arsi, urged his priority of birth and on the fourth day he gave up his life. Ajaisi the second prince asked for leave to follow; but he was the favourite son of his father, and at the latter's request he consented to let his brothers

precede him. Eleven princes died one after another and for the twelfth and last place there was a competition between the Rana and his surviving son, Ajaisi. But the father prevailed, and Ajaisi, with a small band of followers, was persuaded to take refuge in Kailwara.

The queen and the wives of the chiefs of Chitor heard that the town was unable to resist further and that the Rana had made up his mind to die sword in hand rather than fall a prisoner in the grip of the enemy. So the queen and the ladies prepared to burn themselves on the funeral pyre. A number of funeral pyres had been built in the vaults under the palace, and thither the Rana and the other brave heroes of Chitor watched their wives and daughters pass in a long procession numbering several thousand. Padmini was the last in the long line. When all the women had entered the vault, the doors were shut upon them, and they were left to burn themselves in the same manner as the devoted women of the old days. Then the Rana dressed in saffron robes rushed through the gates of the city, following the bright red banner of Mewar, and fell upon his Muslim foes. There was a terrible fight and a terrible slaughter, and at last all the

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Rajputs were killed, the Rana fighting to the end.

Thus perished Rana Ratan Singh of Chitor, a heroic name on which the lustre of Padmini's beauty and devotion has shed an added lustre. But though Ratan Singh has perished, Padmini's name will ever remain imperishable, as she is treated as a goddess by every Rajput lady in Rajputana and her name is cherished with reverence by thousands of other Indian women whose creed of creeds is lifelong devotion to their husbands and whose highest ambition is to die in the lap of their husband or to lay down their life for the sake of re-union with their deceased husband.

IV DURGAVATI

Durgavati played her part amid scenes quite different from those in which the heroines of earlier centuries appeared on the stage and yet in the essential marks of heroism she resembled the preceding three—Sanjogita, Razia Begum and Padmini. Like Sanjogita and Razia Begum she had to put on the role of a warrior-queen to defend her throne from a foreign foe. Like Padmini she had to sacrifice her own life for the sake of preserving her womanly honour. Like Sanjogita again her marriage was a romantic one of brief duration. She shared with Padmini the pride of birth that marked the ancient Rajput; and like Padmini she would not stain the honour of her family by falling into the hands of a Muslim conqueror.

Durgavati was the daughter of a king of Mahoba who belonged to what was known as the Chandel dynasty. Her father's kingdom was situated somewhere near the modern town of Banda in Bundelkhand. Her father was a poor king but full of family pride such as often

goes with fallen dignity. As Durgavati approached the marriageable age her father cast his eyes round for a suitable match for her among the princes of the chief Rajput houses that ruled in different parts of India. He could not brook the idea that a daughter of the Chandel house should be married to the heir of a petty state or to the scion of even a great king if he did not trace his descent from the founder of the famous Sesodia clan. At last, however, Durgavati was betrothed to the heir of a neighbouring state, the ruler of which was of undoubted Rajput descent. Durgavati was still very young and so the marriage was postponed until the princess had gained a good knowledge of the sciences and arts that were likely to be useful to her in the part she was destined to play in later life. Gifted with uncommon intelligence she quickly gained all the accomplishments which were considered graceful in daughters of royal or noble houses.

Before her marriage was actually celebrated a proposal came from Sangram Shah, king of Garha-Mandla or Gondwana, for the marriage of Durgavati with his son Dalpat Shah. Durgavati's father was perplexed. He had already pledged the marriage of his daughter with



DAPAT SHAH MEETS DURGAVATI

another prince. The present proposal was unsuitable as the rulers of Garha-Mandla were descended from some unknown chief. There were other reasons too why the proposal could not be accepted. He himself was poor and his territories were small while Sangram Shah was a powerful king ruling a large kingdom. A reply was sent to Sangram Shah to the effect that the Chandel family was highly flattered by the proposal of a marriage alliance between it and the royal house of Garha-Mandla but that it regretted that the proposal could not be accepted as Durgavati had already been betrothed to another prince and as the priests had declared that a marriage between her and the prince of Garha-Mandla was likely to prove unlucky.

Before Sangram Shah's envoy had left Mahoba a new turn of events took place. Durgavati had seen Dalpat Shah some time ago. The two had met in the glades of a forest in the course of their hunting trip, each a stranger to the other. Durgavati was hunting in one of the forests covering the slopes of the Vindhya hills where Dalpat Shah also happened to be wandering in search of game at the same time. Both happened to rest a while at the same spot. They met by accident but this

accidental meeting led to grave results on a later date. They met and fell in love with each other. The prince silently admired the slim figure of Durgavati riding her pony with graceful mien and shooting arrows with a sharpness of aim which a practised archer might envy. She on her part admired the handsome young man whose bearing proved him to be a born leader of men and a true prince. Strangers as they were, they spoke little, but as they parted each felt for the other a vague longing which neither knew at the time to be love. Now when an actual proposal of marriage had come from the father of this very prince whom she loved, she made up her mind that the proposal should not be rejected. She knew that her father had already handed a letter of courteous refusal to the messenger—a letter that she had no power to cancel or withdraw. So she gave the messenger a letter of her own to be handed to the prince, and in this letter she confessed her love for the prince and offered him her hand in defiance of her father's unwillingness. She then took the bold step of inviting the prince to come and take her away with him by any means he could.

Dalpat Shah was thrilled with joy on receipt

of this letter. He told the purport of it to his father who agreed to make war upon the Chandel king in order to bring about a union between his son and the princess of Mahoba. So a large army was sent to Mahoba under prince Dalpat Shah himself. The town was besieged. A proposal was again sent to Durgavati's father for her marriage with Dalpat Shah, but the proposal was again rejected. The result was an open attack on Mahoba, an attack which Durgavati watched from the roof of the palace with alternate feelings of joy and sorrow as she struggled between love for Dalpat Shah and love for her father. The Chandel king was defeated and Dalpat Shah carried away his bride to Garha-Mandla where their marriage was celebrated soon afterwards.

Four years after this marriage Sangram Shah died and was succeeded by his son Dalpat Shah. Dalpat Shah proved to be a good ruler. His practice was to make a tour through his kingdom in order to watch the condition of his subjects and study their needs. From one of these tours he was once brought home seriously wounded. He was riding a horse that had shied at something and run away in a fright flinging him down a rough gorge. Dalpat Shah died

soon after his return home, and Durgavati became a widow only four years after her marriage. So the priests had forecasted her future destiny correctly enough: Durgavati's marriage with Dalpat Shah did prove unlucky in that it led to her widowhood only four years later.

Durgavati's first wish was to burn herself on the funeral pyre of her husband and to earn for herself the honoured name of *Sati*. But she was persuaded by her people not to do so, as if she did she would only pave the way for the conquest of her kingdom by some neighbouring foe. So for the sake of her kingdom and her people and her infant son Vira Narain she consented to lead the life of a widow. But she decided not to live a life of retirement or seclusion but of busy activity in discharging the duties that had fallen upon her as guardian of her minor son.

Vira Narain became the nominal king of Garha-Mandla after the death of Dalpat Shah. But as he was a mere child his mother Durgavati ruled the kingdom as regent. Durgavati proved a most able regent in spite of her being a woman. She reorganized the revenue of the kingdom so as not only to make payments more

prompt and more assured but also to add to the income of the State. She improved the feudal system, and by this means improved the military system of her kingdom, making the State army not only larger but also more efficient and better disciplined. Nor were works of public utility passed over. In order to avert famines she dug large reservoirs of water, the most important of which was a tank near Jubbulpore which still exists and is known by its old name of Rani Tal (the Queen's tank). She cleared the forests of wild beasts, making life more safe in the distant parts of the kingdom. The result of these reforms was that the kingdom of Garha-Mandla became stronger and more wealthy than it had been in the days of Sangram Shah.

Durgavati's work was unfortunately not confined to internal reforms : threats of external invasion disturbed her mind constantly. Reports of the growing wealth and prosperity of Garha-Mandla had spread beyond the limits of the kingdom, and many an Indian and foreign king cast greedy looks on Gondwana.

The first invasion came in 1557 when Baz Bahadur king of Malwa attacked Garha-Mandla with a large force. Durgavati herself

went out to meet the enemy on the plains of the Narbada. Baz Bahadur was driven back with much loss.

The next invasion took place in 1564 when a Mogul army under the command of Asaf Khan invaded Gondwana. Durgavati again went forth to meet this attack. She commanded an army of 20,000 men defended by an array of one thousand elephants. The two armies met near the fort of Singorgarh. The battle was fierce and bloody. Durgavati's generals had made the mistake of posting the elephants in the van of the battle, whereas the Moguls had placed their guns in the front row face to face with the elephants of the opposite side. The booming of the Mogul guns created a panic among the elephants who trumpeting with uplifted trunk and tail ran back and trampled to death the masses of troops stationed behind. The Gondwana army thus thinned by running elephants were soon seized with panic. Durgavati was unable to prevent a retreat. But she managed to make the retreat as orderly as was possible in the circumstances. Retiring to one of the eastern hills she took up a strong position in a narrow mountain pass and there awaited another attack by the Mogul army. The Mogul

army discovered her position and came up to her the very next day, and the guns were again brought to bear upon her line of battle. The queen herself seated on her elephant tried to defend the pass with the help of a small band of faithful followers, but the Mogul guns proved too strong for her. Her son Vira Narain was wounded and was taken away to a place across the river Narbada. Soon after Durgavati too was wounded in the eye and though she suffered much pain she refused to leave her post even though at the same time rumours of the death of her son were started to draw her out of the pass.

Her heroic defence, however, proved in vain. Her army began to grow thinner and thinner; it was impossible for her to go back to her capital to bring reinforcement; even a retreat across the river was now impossible as the Narbada was in flood. Still many of her faithful followers begged her to go across the Narbada to a place of safety, urging that as long as she was safe the kingdom was safe. Just then a second arrow struck her, this time in the neck. She fell back, but immediately sat up again. Her elephant driver again begged her to let him take her across the Narbada. She

again refused saying, ' No, I will not turn back as long as aught remains to be done. I will either drive the enemy back or die here in the attempt.¹ These were words spoken in a moment of the gravest crisis in the life of a kingdom—words of heroic resolve that might do credit to the greatest hero. And yet they were the words of a woman, fighting against odds, bleeding and in pain, knowing that her only son had been carried away wounded from the battlefield and might be dead or dying.

The Mogul guns still made havoc among her little band of followers, who fell one after another by her side and before her very eyes. It was now quite clear to her that the pass could not be defended and her army could not be saved from the consequences of a severe defeat. There was nothing for her to do but to yield or die. Durgavati resolved upon the latter course. Bending forward from the howdah of her elephant she snatched the dagger from the girdle of the mahout and plunged it into her bosom, preferring death to dishonour.

A large platform has long stood to mark the spot where the warrior-queen Durgavati fought and fell. There are two round blocks of stone at each end of this platform, and

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tradition says that these are the war-drums of Durgavati which kept beating with the beating of her heart, and which were silenced only when that heroic heart was stilled in death. The village people still tell stories of how bravely Rani Durgavati fought and fell and how at night her war drums still thrill through the mountain air and how the spirits of hundreds of her soldiers who had fought and died by her side hover upon the battlefield as though still longing to fight the enemy and win the victory which they could not win in actual life.

V

NURJAHAN

Nurjahan is a heroine of Indian history who well deserves to be a heroine of Indian romance. She combined in herself all the special marks of a typical Indian princess, a peerless Indian beauty, a perfect player in the game of Indian politics. No woman ever combined these qualities in such a degree of perfection as Nurjahan. Her name has become proverbial in India for noted beauty. Nature gave her not only a rich share of beauty but also an extraordinary degree of intelligence, and both these gifts preserved their high quality till the end.

Nurjahan was the youngest child of Mirza Ghyas Beg, a native of Khurasan, who came over to India as a fortune-hunter at the court of Jahangir. She was born in 1577. Her father, after serving the emperor at Delhi for fifteen years, rose at last to the position of a Mansabdar and was appointed Dewan of Kabul.

In 1599 she was married to Ali Quli Khan, an army officer who had won the favour of

Prince Salim, the eldest son of Akbar, by giving him valuable help in the war against Mewar on which the prince had been sent by Akbar. In reward for this service Ali Quli Khan had obtained from the emperor the title of Sher Afgan or 'the knocker-down of tigers'. Later on he lost the prince's favour by refusing to help him in his rebellion against his father. He was soon afterwards forgiven. When Prince Salim ascended the throne as Jahangir, Ali Quli Khan was appointed governor of Bengal with his seat at Burdwan. The governorship of a rich province seems to have spoilt the rough soldier. Probably the charming beauty of his wife Nurjahan, then bearing the name of Mehr-un-nissa, kept him within the harem instead of sending him forth to manage the affairs of the province of which he was in charge. The result was that Bengal fell into a state of great disturbance. Reports of this soon reached the ears of Jahangir who was also informed that Sher Afgan was himself disloyal and on the point of breaking out into rebellion. Kutubuddin Khan was therefore appointed governor of Bengal *in* his place in 1606. Sher Afgan refused to make over charge to the new governor, and there

was a scuffle in which Sher Afgan lost his life.

After the death of Sher Afgan Mehr-un-nissa went to Delhi where her father Ghyas Beg was an important officer. There she led a life of privacy and retirement for four years at her father's house. In 1611 she attracted the notice of Jahangir. He chanced to see her at one of the ⁴ 'Mina Bazars' or fancy fairs held annually at the palace during the spring season. Jahangir fell in love with her and asked her father to give her to him in marriage. Her father was willing, but Mehr-un-nissa, out of devotion to the memory of her late husband, refused to marry a second time. Not all the wealth and splendour of the Mogul court would turn her heart away from the memories of her first love. She loved Sher Afgan; she had a daughter by him whom she loved dearly; and the widowed mother's dislike for giving her only child a step-father might have been an added reason for her refusal to marry again. All her relatives at the court pressed her to accept the royal suit, and she at last consented to marry Jahangir in May 1611. The marriage was celebrated in the quietest manner possible, so quietly that the event does

not find mention even in the emperor's private diary.

Jahangir was at the time of his marriage 42 years of age and Nurjahan, 34. But she was still in the bloom of youth and beauty, a beauty that age could not wither.

Jahangir in middle age was still the untamed and untameable spirit that he was in his younger days: the cares of the kingly office sat lightly on him. Even the charms of Nurjahan could not check him from his wild acts. He was wilful, fickle, impatient and proud. The crown prince of the Great Mogul Akbar, who remained the crown prince up to the age of 37; born under the blessing of a holy saint and piously named after that saint; petted and spoiled by his father—what else could he be but rash, lazy and fond of pleasure? It required all the tact and all the ability that Nurjahan could command to keep this restless spirit within bounds. It did not take her long to make a thorough study of the temper of Jahangir. In a few months¹ time she won complete influence over him. She used to be near him at all times; she used to accompany him in his travels; and even in his hunting expeditions she would join him like one of the court

shikaries. In course of time Jahangir became a slave of hers and began to dote on her charms. He changed her name, Mehr-un-nissa (' the moon among women ') to Nur Mahal (' Lustre of the Palace '), and again to Nur Jahan (' Lustre of the World '). She was made the first lady of the kingdom and loaded with presents of jewellery and grants of land.

Nur jahan soon began to take part in the political affairs of the empire. As a historian who lived in those times puts it, ' by degrees she became, in all but name, undisputed sovereign of the empire, and the king himself a tool in her hands \ She appeared in public to review troops, to grant interviews to officials, to hear appeals, and to do all such other business of the state as had to be disposed of by the emperor personally. Her advice was taken at meetings of the Privy Council; her signature was put down by the side of the imperial sign manual in all important papers; her name was stamped on coins along with that of Jahangir—¹a conjunction¹, says Lane-Poole, 'unparalleled in the history of Mohamedan money . '

For the first few years Nur jahan joined the party of prince Khurram, the ablest of Jahangir's sons, who afterwards succeeded him as Shah

Jahan. But she soon found that 'two stars keep not motion in one sphere,' that Khurram was as ambitious and intolerant of opposition as herself; and she therefore deserted him and joined the party of Shahryar, the youngest son of Jahangir. He was a quiet, weak and stupid lad, exactly the kind of person best suited to the purpose that she had in view, namely, of asserting her rule and her will in all matters throughout the empire. Shahryar was moreover the son-in-law of Nurjahan, who had given her daughter (by Sher Afgan) in marriage to him and who therefore wanted the emperor to name him as his successor. Jahangir however favoured his third son Parviz who was a great lover of wine like himself. The eldest prince, Khusro, had died in the Deccan amid suspicious circumstances, and the second, Khurram, was not only a brave general but also an able administrator and a first-rate statesman. A civil war was unavoidable.

It would be a weary task to thread one's way through all the intrigues and counter-intrigues at the court in which Nurjahan played her skilful part and by means of which she gained and lost and regained her political ends. These form no real part of Nurjahan as the



NURJAHAN NURSED JAHANGIR AND WATCHED

present sketch aims at drawing her. Suffice it to say that in the end the different political parties resolved themselves into two powerful leaders—Mahabat Khan and Nurjahan. Mahabat Khan was commander-in-chief of the army, and he took the bold step of seizing Jahangir and keeping him in his own custody. Nurjahan was not in the least daunted by this bold stroke of policy. She raised an army against Mahabat Khan amongst the nobles and commanded it herself. The battle between the two armies is vividly described by Elphinstone in his 'History of India,' but we are concerned only with the fortune of Nurjahan. Nurjahan was defeated. But though the battle was lost, all was not lost: Nurjahan now changed her tactics and adopted the policy of 'wait and see,' and she waited and watched so long that Mahabat Khan fell off his guard. Then by a sudden coup she released the emperor from captivity, brought the army under her full control, and forced Mahabat Khan to fly for protection to Prince Khurram. But the victory came too late: Jahangir's health began rapidly to fail; symptoms of his old disease, asthma, reappeared, and these forced him to go up to Kashmir for a change in the spring of 1627.

Nurjahan accompanied him thither, and nursed him and watched him with all the loving care of a devoted wife. Jahangir recovered for a time. When autumn came he left Kashmir for Lahore, but he died on the way. His remains were carried to Lahore and buried there.

Nurjahan was mad with grief. Her spirit was crushed ; her ambitions were dead ; she had no interest in life left. When Khurram succeeded Jahangir she did not mind it in the least. She was contented with her life of peace and retirement.

She survived Jahangir for eighteen years, living in a garden house at Lahore on the banks of the Ravi. A large pension was settled on her by Shah Jahan, but she led a simple, private life, wearing the white garb of a widow to the day of her death. She died in 1646 at the age of 68 and was buried at Lahore in a tomb near that of Jahangir.

Looking back at Nurjahan the reader will perhaps notice a general resemblance between her and Razia Begum in so far as both were involved in political intrigues for the sake of real or apparent sovereignty; but while Razia was a reigning queen, Nurjahan was only a queen consort, though in the matter of real

power and influence in the state Nurjahan held more of both than Razia at the height of her fortune—indeed, than even Jahangir himself did. But in one other respect, more important than power, she excelled Razia, and many other queens, and this was her love for her husband and her husband's love for her. Love was the main source of Nurjahan's activity. It was love that guided her heart as well as her head. Love led to ambition, ambition bred intrigue, intrigue gave her absolute sovereignty. And just when her hopes had borne fruit, love suffered a loss: Jahangir died. The lofty edifice of her ambition, reared brick by brick with her own hands, suddenly crumbled. Widowed and loveless, Nurjahan in retirement is a tragic figure, but the tragedy of her life was neither frustrated ambition nor disappointed love, but love cut off in mid career.

