

*The Badshah's beloved daughter showed an uncanny determination to garland Latu Bhai's neck with roses from Bassora whereas the Nawab was keen to despatch the damsel to the Caliph's harem*

# LATU BHAI

MANOJ DAS

**T**he news reached our village at sunset. Someone carried it to us as we were playing *ha-tutu* on the meadow, and a pall of gloom descended on us.

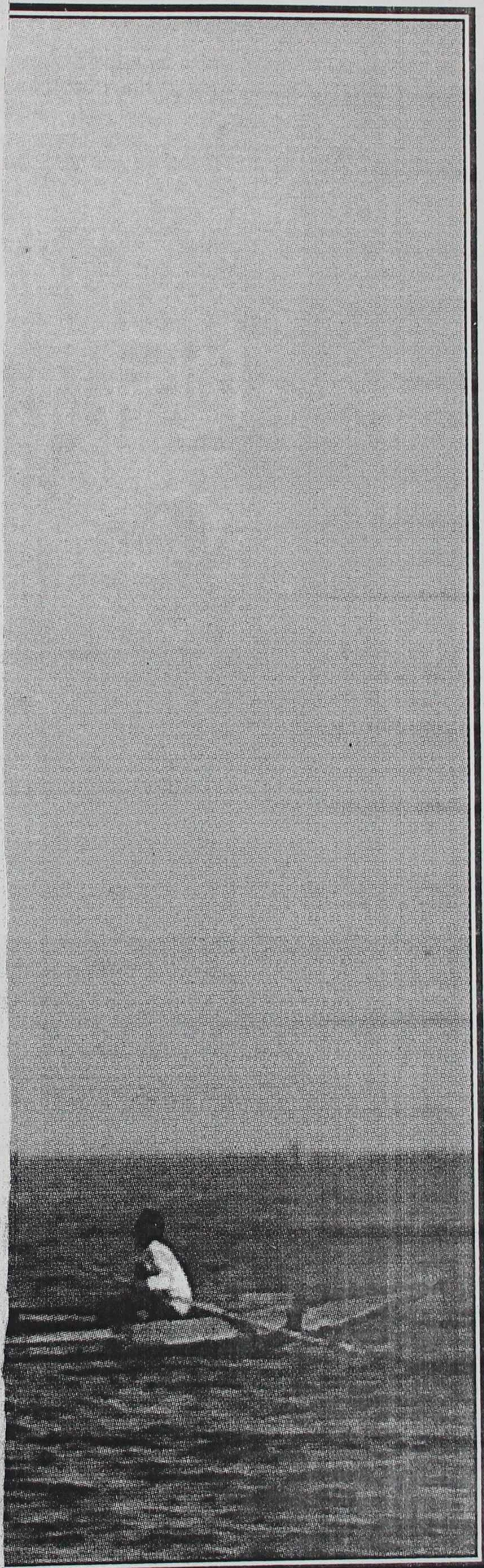
But I managed to laugh as soon as possible and laughed louder than warranted. Little wonder that my pals, the other boys, were surprised.

"But who can hang our Latu Bhai and how?" I questioned derisively.

The boys, intrigued for a few seconds, understood and cheered up. All of them recollected how even the Nawab's commander-in-chief had failed to behead him despite swirling an especially huge and heavy sword as many as seven times.

The reason why the commander had vainly targeted Latu Bhai's neck, both having taken position on a platform at the centre of the city, was, the Badshah's beloved daughter showed an uncanny determination to garland that very neck with roses from Bassora whereas the Nawab was keen to despatch the damsel to the Caliph's harem. Slicing Latu Bhai's neck was judged the easiest way to straighten the knotty situation.

While just one thwack from the commander's sword could divide a rhino, how could





## Flashes of lightning showed Latu Bhai pushing the bamboo vehemently in a

Latu Bhai survive seven such strokes? Of course it was a very special abracadabra that did it! He could telescope his head and neck into his trunk, like a tortoise, in the twinkle of an eye. The Nawab was rather impressed. Even though he did not reward him with the princess, he set a diamond-studded turban on his head which could have lighted our small village on a moon-less night, had Latu Bhai not secretly sent it to the princess as a parting gift before saying goodbye to Calcutta. Latu Bhai was not inclined to demonstrate his miracles merely for satisfying our idle curiosity, and we appreciated it.

We were yet to realise that neither did Calcutta have a Nawab nor Baghdad have a Caliph any longer and, in the life of the mighty great city, Latu Bhai was of no greater consequence than that of his own shadow. We were thrilled at the mere thought of our Latu Bhai's neck, familiar to us because he often carried us on his shoulders for fun, having come so close to that wonderful garland.

Be as that may, but everybody in our locality knew how close Latu Bhai's neck had once been to receiving the nuptial garland from the most distinguished bride of our region. In fact, a budding author had made a one-act comedy out of the event, but had prudently refrained from staging it.

The motherless Latu Bhai had lived in the city where his father was a small employee.

He had returned to the village after his father died, quitting his job which was plying a motor-boat on the Hooghly. The Zamindar of our area was in need of a driver for his motorboat and Latu Bhai was summoned to appear for an interview. It so happened that the Zamindar's proposed son-in-law was scheduled to arrive on the same day by car — a transport which was till then as



unfamiliar to most of our people as a dodo or a dinosaur.

Latu Bhai was in an impressive suit, a gift from his former master. In that attire he looked more like a Bar-at-law fresh from London than one who had hardly completed his primary education. Hence, there was nothing surprising in the Zamindar's men mistaking him to be the would-be-bridegroom when, out of sheer courtesy, he held open the car-door for the guests to alight. A few of those present on the spot confided to me later that the prospective son-in-law, when compared to Latu Bhai, looked like a cat before a tiger.

Latu Bhai was led upstairs. It was only when he was confronted by an unending arrival of delicious items on the table before him, after he had been treated to a tumblerful of sherbet, that he wondered if something had not gone wrong, because a candidate for the post of motor-boat driver was not expected to be treated in that way. But his bid to introduce himself repeatedly remained incomplete, first because the bride's cousins interpreted his half-articulated words as figurative phrases indicating modesty, and secondly because the items prepared with pure *ghee* were too

tempting to be ignored.

But he had to make a confession in decisive terms when Vasanti herself was ushered into his presence by her aunts. By then the real guest had been subjected to a lot of humiliation in the hands of the Zamindar's officials downstairs.

If Latu Bhai was immediately appointed to his post, and that too at a salary slightly higher than he expected, obviously it was to keep his mouth sealed about the embarrassing incident. He never spoke about it, but it was too amusing to be kept a secret.

By then Latu Bhai had been in the village only for a few months. If he had made numerous friends, he had made a couple of enemies too and the latter were the ones who mattered. Among them was Sundar Chowdhury, the only son of the soil to have become a deputy collector. Once retired, he applied his vast wit and experience to expanding his property. In the process he usurped a valuable piece of Latu Bhai's ancestral land. Latu Bhai challenged him and consequently was brutally beaten up by Chowdhury's rowdies. Wiping a stream of blood from his mouth, Latu Bhai had announced, in the presence of a dozen men, his intention of murdering the former deputy collector.

But once he became an employee of the Zamindar, Latu Bhai had no interest in quarrelling with his powerful neighbour. He went out in the morning and was back at night.

We were deprived of his company, but that only increased our attraction for him. He never went back on his word. If he promised a kite to one of us or a bunch of berries, he would by all means produce it. If an ailing villager needed medicine, he would brave a hostile weather and fetch the same on time from the bazaar miles away.

To experience a ride by his motor-boat was my dream. The



time and again in a subdued tone, "What can I say to Mother? How will Father take it? O God!"

"You're worrying too much. Don't such things happen?" Latu Bhai took her to task.

"No, Latu Bhai, such things are not expected to happen!" Vasanti Apa broke into tears.

We were approaching the village.

"Latu Bhai!"

Latu Bhai pricked his ears and looked at Vasanti Apa. But she said nothing.

"Latu Bhai!" she called out again after a minute or two. And she did so even for a third time, but



*'So many times I thought of ending my own life, holding myself responsible for his death'*

without following it up with anything.

"Listen, Vasanti, rest assured that none on this earth, we three excepting, will ever know anything. But, of course, you should tell all to your parents and tell them further that I swear by my soul, I will not speak a word of it to anybody. Your reputation will never be at stake." After a pause, Latu Bhai added, "And, Vasanti, you and I too should try to forget it."

If the first part of Latu Bhai's speech, for its sheer strength, reminded me of the thunder above, his last statement, inexplicably, created a patch of sadness in my heart.

Latu Bhai turned to me. "Do you understand? If you have any love for me —"

"I swear, Latu Bhai, I will not speak a word about it," I declared even before he had completed his exhortation.

I too was worried. My people must have looked for me everywhere throughout the night. The only place that was above the laws governing me in our family was my maternal uncle's house. I headed for it. It was summer vacation and nobody would demand a separate account for a particular night if I stayed with my grandmother for two or three days.

While in my uncle's village, I heard of Sundar Chowdhury's murder. The important man had a violent quarrel with Latu Bhai the day before. Latu Bhai's tattered sandals were found on the spot of the crime. He was arrested. It was not often that retired collectors were killed. The police became extremely active, which resulted in even eye-witnesses turning up in the court to vouch for Latu Bhai's crime.

**W**e, the village boys, were stunned to learn that Latu Bhai, indeed, had been hanged.

I took to practising law in the

tanned with the vicissitudes of the life of an early widow leading a decadent feudal family. Vasanti Apa was smiling. Her manager was talking to my junior outside my cabin.

"But there was only one person who could have saved him and that was I, had I declared that your Latu Bhai was with us the night Sundar Chowdhury was murdered. I need not tell you about the value of alibi. But I could not do that," she said and sighed.

I stood dumbfounded.

"But, had your Latu Bhai summoned me to the court, I would have braved every danger and come to his rescue, even if that were to

wreck my marriage!"

She paused and said, this time more to her-

self than to me. "But Latu Bhai could not have done that, for that would have meant the death of the true Latu Bhai. The one saved from the gallows would have been his ghost. He could not have remained deathless in my esteem, although I mean nothing to anybody else."

Again she focused on me her look surprisingly bright for her age. "So many times I thought of ending my own life, holding myself responsible for his death. But on second thoughts, I realised that such a deed would be like insulting him. Who am I to feel guilty for one who was as noble as the sun? Can anyone feel responsible for the setting sun? Who am I to question his wisdom?"

Vasanti Apa broke down.

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