THE ROMANCE OF INDIA

CHAPTER I

THE WONDERFUL EXPLOITS OF SIVAJI

Over two and a half centuries ago—in the year 1646 to be precise—a travel-stained band of men entered the courtyard of the royal palace of Bijapur, a city with which the fates have dealt hardly, and which to-day is little more than a ruin. But at the time of which we are writing Bijapur was the capital of a large and important kingdom in the southern portion of the peninsula, and was inhabited by a brave and warlike people.

The men dismounted from their shaggy mountain ponies and looked about them curiously. It was evident that they had come from afar, for their hair was long and matted, and their speech rough and uncouth; and the splendidly dressed officer of the guard, who had been eyeing them with suspicion, mentally decided that they were Maráthás, or tribesmen who lived in the wild hilly country in the far west.
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"Behold, we bear important tidings!" they cried.
"We must see His Majesty Muhammad Adil Shah."

When they were at length admitted, the monarch, in the presence of a brilliant court, asked them their business.

"We have come to tell Your Majesty that Sivaji, son of Shahji, has taken the fort of Torna."

A murmur of surprise and incredulity went the round of the assembled courtiers, but the king, raising his hand to command silence, bade the messengers continue their narrative.

"May it please Your Majesty," they resumed, "our lord Sivaji has been troubled in his mind since many days. Long has he considered with sorrow that the fort was not maintained in a manner befitting the safety of the country. But now, zealous of Your Majesty's glory, he has deposed the governor and vested himself with the authority of this miserable one."

"How say you?" interrupted the king. "This is Shahji's son?"

"Even so, Your Majesty. We humbly pray you to look with favour upon our master Sivaji, that by your royal approval of a patriotic deed you may strike terror into the hearts of those base ones who seek to stir up the kingdom into sedition and revolt."

The king plucked uneasily at his beard. "Shahji," he muttered to himself—"Shahji, the powerful noble and general in command of the Bijapur army! How came his son thus to take the law into his own hands?"
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"Tell me," he commanded sternly, "how old is this capturer of forts?"

"Your Majesty, he is but nineteen years."

The king's brow cleared, and a broad smile passed round the Court. What manner of youth was this who seemed so anxious for his country's welfare? Certainly it was not a matter to be taken seriously. So the messengers were dismissed with the promise that their petition should receive attention at a later date, while the courtiers smiled to themselves over what they considered a very excellent joke.

This is the first glimpse we have of the renowned Sivaji. A Hindú boy, of martial spirit and keen imagination, fed from his earliest years on the wonderful exploits achieved by the legendary heroes of India, burning to follow in their steps and to do noble deeds for his country and his religion, we see him in company with a few boyish friends and a ragged band of low-caste natives capture an important fort. The tried men of war surrender in astonishment to these inexperienced youths, while the aged Governor delivers up his sword in mute dismay. Sivaji has placed his foot on the first rung of the ladder of fame.

The youthful hero lived with his guardian at Poona. The old man was very much shocked by his ward's daring actions, but his lectures and entreaties made no impression; the spirit of adventure was in Sivaji and he would not be restrained. The aged tutor took to his bed in despair, and shortly afterwards died. On his deathbed his dying eyes seemed to see something of the future in store for the boy,
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for he called him, and bade him go on as he had begun.

"My son," he murmured with faltering accents, "I pray that you will continue your campaign for independence. Protect Brahmans, kine and cultivators; preserve the temples of the Hindus from violation; and follow the fortune which lies before you." And so saying, the old man expired.

Thus was Sivaji left his own master. His father was far away fighting in the wars. Poona, as the map will show, is some distance from Bijapur. It is situated in the Marathá country, a wild and mountainous region, very difficult of access. Sivaji crouched in his native hills like one of the cunning mountain tigers, and made himself stronger and stronger. By bribes and other means he got possession of several forts. Men occupying posts of honour and distinction were glad to enter his service. Little by little his power and possessions increased. Now here, now there, as the opportunity presented itself, forts were taken, districts seized, until at length Sivaji found himself ruler over a large province.

News travelled slowly in those days, and the Bijapur Court were little aware of what was really going on. They had other and more important affairs to attend to than the suppression of a mere mountain robber, and it was not until they received a taste of Sivaji's power that they condescended to notice his existence. A large treasure was being forwarded to court by the Governor of Kalian. A powerful escort was sent with it to ensure its safety, for the country abounded in thieves, and caravan robberies
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had become very numerous. The camels, bearing
the precious burden, picked their way gingerly
along the rocky pathways. Before and behind rode
mounted men, fingering naked swords and keeping
an anxious look-out for danger. Suddenly there
was a thunder of horses' feet, and Sivaji at the head
of three hundred men swept like a whirlwind upon
them. The escort fled in every direction, and the
booty was borne with all speed to the young bandit's
mountain fastness.

Bijapur, lacking its treasure, sat up in indignation
and alarm. "Treachery!" muttered the king.
"Shahji must be concerned in this. He is using his
son to plot against me!" And so the doughty
general, who was fighting his country's battles far
away, was treacherously seized and conveyed to the
capital. With tears in his eyes he protested his
innocence; but the king's heart was black with
suspicion. The veteran soldier was thrown into a
dungeon, and the door built up save for a tiny open-
ing. "If your son does not submit within a certain
period," he was told, "the aperture shall be for
ever closed." The unhappy parent, face to face with
death, sent an urgent appeal to his too-enterprising
offspring, and the growling of the mountain tiger
ceased for a time to trouble the ears of Bijapur.

A few lines are here necessary to explain the
general position of India at this period. In 1526
Bábar the Lion, a fierce and warlike prince, swept
down from Afghanistan to establish a throne in India.
This, known to history as the Great Moghul Empire,
flourished exceedingly, and was now at the zenith of
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its power. Seated on his world-famed “peacock” throne at Delhi, Shah Jehan, fifth and most splendid of his line, held supreme sway over the northern part of the peninsula. Never before, never since, was an Indian court so magnificent. The splendours of Delhi were the wonder and amazement of the few European travellers who found their way thither. The peacock throne alone, a mass of living light, with its tail blazing in the shifting colours of rubies, sapphires and emeralds, was a thing which, once seen, was stamped for ever on the memory. The French jeweller Tavernier turned faint and giddy when he beheld it, but his business instincts revived sufficiently to enable him to make a valuation. He estimated its worth at the enormous sum of six and a half millions sterling. The buildings of the city were lordly and magnificent. Every one has heard of the Taj Mahal, one of the glories of the world. Built by Shah Jehan to shelter the remains of his favourite wife, and later used as his own tomb, this still remains, a marvel of architecture, to bear witness to the sumptuous splendour of those times.

In the Deccan two kingdoms still held themselves free from the Moghul yoke. The word “Deccan” means “South,” and this territory comprised all that huge district south of the Narbadá River. These two kingdoms were Bījapur and Goleconda (otherwise called Hyderabad). The inhabitants of India consisted of a large number of martial races, differing from each other in language, in custom and in creed, and were perpetually engaged in warfare.