



The Pavilion of the Mumbai race course.

## **HER MAJESTY: A TRUE RACE HORSE STORY**

By Dr. Adi D. Adins

Dedicated to my daughter, Marian

Author's Note: This is a true story. It happened in Bombay (now Mumbai), India, on February 2, 1947, when I was a teenager. The race is based on my eye witness account.

I have never forgotten that day.

I have grown tired of feeling emotional whenever I reflect on that day.

Now that I have written it, I will be able to retell it without feeling emotional. Even though the story is true, I have taken the liberty to improvise and embellish this piece with fictional events to enhance the story.

To familiarize you, the reader, with some history before the actual horse race, I had to alternate the story's narrative between the past and the present. *The past narrative is in italics.*

I hope you enjoy this historical fictional story.

YES! Today is the day!

THE BIG DAY!

The one day that all horse racing fans of India (and many around the world) have been waiting for.

HER MAJESTY'S DAY

*The Indian Derby Day!*

*This horse had won the heart of all, even the doubtful, from the time the vet tied those wooden sticks to prop her up, as she could not stand and had no balance, while her mother watched her with pity. In 1943, she had made her entrance into our world only to stay bundled up with her eyes closed on the straw without moving a muscle for hours. Her eyes winced and then opened for two minutes and then she looked like she was gone. The vet shook his head and A.C. Ardeshir, the owner, realized the inevitable. "Sorry son," he said.*

*"Daddy please let her live," his nine-year-old son Homi, pleaded with his father. "I will take care of her and exercise her and maybe someday she will be good for the Gymkhana races," Homi said - as his mind wandered. A.C.A. was adamant, "She is too weak. Her doctor says she will suffer and die before morning. It is not right to make a horse suffer." Homi was too busy rubbing the weak newborn filly with a sponge and a brush while his tears streaming down his face. "Please Daddy, just till morning." "I will prop her up," said the Vet. A.C.A stormed out telling the vet to do the unmentionable as soon as Homi fell asleep. Homi did not*

*sleep that night.*

*"See Daddy, her eyes are now open and she is trying to walk. Look how proud she is. She looks like a queen. I will name her 'HER MAJESTY'," Homi proclaimed.*

The Derby was named after the Earl of Derby who won a coin toss in 1779 between Sir Charles Bumbury to name a race after, either of them. It was the latter's horse "Diomed" that won the first ever English Derby.

The Royal Western India Turf Club (RWITC) was the brainchild of the British and their influence in Colonial India. It was well planned and methodically based on separating those who were white, and those with substantial means, from the "riff-raff."

The Member's Stand was for the Turf Club (TC) members only. Only the elite could be members. Each member had to be sponsored and voted in by another member. Members had to wear a suit and a tie. The women paraded in high fashionable clothes. Each member had to wear a "Turf Club" badge on race days. Guests were allowed with special badges accompanied by a member. The "Finish Post," which determined the winning horse, was at the center of the stand. The horses ran clockwise on the track. The paddock was equally shared with the "First Enclosure," to which only the TC members could enter and return. This is where the horses paraded first with their syces - handlers who held the horses near their mouths - and walked with them. Later the jockeys would mount them and take them through an equally shared path to the racing field.

The "First Enclosure" was for anyone who could pay a higher price. That is where private bookies could offer their own odds from their stands. People could view the paddock from their side and taunt the jockeys as they mounted and rode their horses to the race field. They could barely see the finish line, which was further away to the left of them. However, they could easily watch the last second moves of the horses and riders whipping

for the win.

The "Second Enclosure" was cheaper and further back. Farthest was the cheapest "Third Enclosure." All three enclosures allowed RWITC betting.

Last of all was the "Mahalaxmi Bridge" where one can stand and just watch for free the horses, as they were going around the last bend in the track.

Races in Bombay usually occurred once a week, only on Saturday or Sunday. But the race's presence was felt throughout the week. On Monday, "The Times of India" newspaper would print the previous day's race results with commentaries. The rest of the week, on each day, the next weekend's race would have a column with updated changes and commentaries. Finally, on the day of the race the paper had the final number of horses in each race along with the name of their jockeys.

There were also the racing printouts available from various private printing companies with past records of horses and full details about how they ran in previous races. These would come out four days earlier.

The "Mahalaxmi" (translated "Great Luck") Race Course is the foremost race track of India. The British brought their tradition as conquerors with them to India. They had their own private clubs for cricket, soccer, and horses with gymkhanas, polo, and thoroughbred horse racing. The last was their "Jewel in the Crown" of all sports.

The British also made sure that their interests remained in exclusive areas. They carved those out those areas methodically in Bombay. Think of it as a peninsula shaped like a right hand with the palm down, a pointed first finger jetting out south off the mainland, into the Arabian Sea. The thumb is where the Gateway of India (a welcoming edifice for the visiting King George V) was built many years ago. Next to it they built their own private club.

On the opposite side, the Parsee industrial leaders, the Tatas, built the world-famous Taj Mahal Hotel. Beyond the pointed first finger is where most of the upper class lived. That was also where their military units were stationed. The area was not as populated and there were many open spaces. The pinkie is further on the outskirts, to the right. That is where the "Mahalaxmi" Race Course was built in 1883.

The "Mahalaxmi" Race Course is beautiful and peaceful until the start of a race. Then the commentator's excited voice and the roar of the crowd would begin reaching their crescendo at the end of the race. After that, one can settle down and feel the cool ocean breezes from the left and enjoy the central green grass beauty of "Mahalaxmi" until the next race. The Arabian Sea is on the left with the Muslim mosque, often surrounded by water, and can be reached only at low tide.

In front of the "Turf Club" and "First Enclosure," one can see the wide one-and-a-half-mile race track with markers at each furlong. There are eight furlongs to a mile. The mile marker is on the opposite side. It is all green with well-manicured grass in the middle. The brown wide track on which the race is run is separated by a white railing. On the track, after each race, local women came and with bended backs and small utensils, routinely make the track smooth and even for the next race. Then, there are boards with the names of the jockeys for the next race, the odds, and the results of the previous race. The red ball is always ready to be hoisted up when an "objection" is declared. Behind the track are the homes of many well-to-do residents with spacious flats and houses.

On the right you can see through the smog, the tall chimneys of a hundred mills and factories constantly spouting and adding to the polluted, dull grey sky. This is where the multitudes of people live and work. This is where they live in old crumbling houses that are continuously being propped up with bamboo and new concrete. In these areas, most of the street dwellers, beggars and many well-educated but poor earners, live.

*Months earlier, Her Majesty had not shown much promise on her morning exercises, according to her trainer. However, she made her debut in a low prized race, "just to see what she can do."*

*That event was a surprise. Walking from the paddock to the field and to the starting gate seemed to help her realize who she was. She held her head high and started to prance as if she was walking with bearers holding her long cloak behind her. Her trot from the paddock to the race track seemed different than that of other horses. Her ears were propped back, her head was held high and her front two legs almost imitated old military goose steps. In short, she seemed to prance in a flirtatious manner. At the starting gate she was unusually calm, that some in the crowd thought she was not yet ready for the race.*

*The gates opened, and she was out first. Pandu Khade, her experienced jockey, could not hold her back. She was gone and won by several lengths. Khade was impressed. "We have a champion here," he beamed as he brought her back to the paddock. Her Majesty walked back without breaking a sweat and seemed to bow to the applause from a few of her interested viewers. A.C.A. was impressed. This was a good beginning. However, he had enough experience of failed expectations with other horses, in a sport with huge ups and downs. Her Majesty knew better.*

*After that first race, she won every race including several stake and classic races.*

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A.C.A. was a prominent Parsee in this sport of kings: thoroughbred horse racing.

*The Parsees are followers of the first monotheistic religion, Zoroastrianism, taught by their prophet Zoroaster or*

*Zarathustra. Their ancestors fled from Ancient Persia around 800 AD to escape religious persecutions from Muslim conquest. The Zoroastrian religion was a dominant religion besides Judaism and Christianity when Mohammad was born in 570 AD.*

*Those Zoroastrians who fled Persia found sanctuary in India, became known as Parsees, and excelled as traders. Because of their inherent beliefs of truth and honesty with good thoughts, good words, and good deeds, they were trustworthy and prosperous entrepreneurs. The British East India Company, and later, the merchants from Britain and other countries, felt more comfortable doing business with them. Parsees prospered and adopted western ways. They were welcomed in many important political and social gatherings and functions of the British.*

Today, in February 1947, there was magic in the air. Her Majesty, his filly, was to have her greatest moment of her life. She was gentle and continued to excel during her exercises. She was especially fond of her stable mate, Equity. They looked like they were siblings with the same dark brown, almost chocolate colored coats and an almost similar, narrow white peninsula running from their foreheads to their nostrils. They often did their morning exercises together.

This was the Indian Derby Day. The most prestigious of all Indian horse races. It is a one-and-a-half-mile race. The "Mahalaxmi" Race Course is one and a half miles around the track. The horses start in front of the Turf Club, run clockwise, and finish at almost the same spot. The last stretch to the finish line is almost three furlongs long. That is where the excitement begins with thousands of people exuberantly cheering until the finish line.

The Indian Derby is for four-year-old thoroughbred horses. It is considered the most prestigious of all racing events in

British India. It is the second leg of the Indian Triple Crown, preceded by several classic races including The Indian 2000 Guineas and followed by the St. Leger. Her Majesty had already won all the earlier ones easily.

A.C.A. was a thin, tall man. He was the head of a well-established Parsee family; he was a very private and proud person. He was a "His-Business-Was-His-Business" type of fellow. He only answered questions with short answers. However, at the RWITC, in the Member's Stand, he stood out in a crowd. People often flocked around him, which was normal for someone of his stature and fame. He enjoyed that feeling. He wore light colored suits, with a tie around a starched collar. He had a good-sized, well-established stable and been involved in thoroughbred racing for several years. He usually had at least two horses scheduled to run on each race day. Today he was very happy. His expectations, along with thousands of others, were high. This was to be his big day also.

A.C.A. could not have prepared better. He wanted to make certain that nothing was spared. He brought a champion jockey W.T. (Billy) Evans, all the way from Australia to ride her instead of Pandu Khade, her regular Indian jockey. Khade was to ride Equity, Her Majesty's stable mate. Khade's job was to just stay ahead of Her Majesty and be a pacesetter. This would strategically preserve Her Majesty's stamina, and allow her to bolt and win in the final stretch run. Both jockeys wore the same colored silk uniform of A.C.A. However, Evans wore a white cap and Khade wore a red one.

Her Majesty was now four years old and eligible for the Indian Derby. Everything had been planned for over two years for this race. She had won every race thus far, making her the favorite choice. Even "Bucephalus" (named after Alexander the Great's horse), compared to her, looked like a barn horse. She was unbeatable.



“Put everything you have on her!” was the cry. “An easy and certain ten percent in two minutes,” was on the mind of everyone. Besides, it was a bracket bet which meant that if either Equity or Her Majesty won, you got paid. Your money was safe. This was an unprecedented expectation and the money flowed.

The anticipation was at a high pitch. Her Majesty pranced elegantly in the paddock as usual. No one even bothered to look at the other horses. Everyone, who was any one, was there. People were already congratulating A.C.A. before the race even started.

A.C.A. stood proud, prematurely holding a heavy garland that he was sure it would be placed on his beloved filly when she would prove to be the champion.

The call for the jockeys was followed by the mounting of their horses. They paraded around the paddock once and then moved through the divider to the racing field. The jockeys ignored the predictable taunts and encouragements from those spectators who were lined up four to five rows deep. Finally, after some warm-ups on the field, they got ready for the starter to hoist the wires to start the race. Every horse looked fit and ready. They pranced like they were getting ready for a line dance. The jockeys, who usually acted nonchalant, had life in them and showed it. There was a hush among the crowd.

Yes, there was going to be magic. No one knew what. There is always magic in India. There were prominent forecasters saying things without knowing what. How can there be any other result? No one came forth with any worthwhile prediction this time. Usually they do so after the race. Her Majesty was a 10/1 odds-on favorite.

A.C.A. was poised with his garland and his eye on the race

track, surrounded by a host of people around him. He was ready. The horses were ready. All eyes were focused on the red and white caps of his jockeys on his favorite horses. In the distance, unless you had powerful binoculars, you could only see the color of the jockey's silks and if they were the same, the color of the cap becomes most important.

They were ready at the starting wires. The starter called on the jockeys to get ready. The jockeys directed their horses to move to the wire, and move slowly forward according to their starting draws. All was quiet.

ZOOOM went the wires straight up! The horses lunged for their first move, and the jockeys rose up on their horses. The crowd roared and then held their breath.

"THEY'RE OFF!" - screamed the commentator.

Just as expected, at the first bend, Equity with Khade's red cap galloped to the front, with Her Majesty half a length behind. It was planned, it was fixed, and everyone knew it. This would go on until the last stretch and then Equity would ease up and Her Majesty would take over and win. The other fourteen horses along with Bucephalus, which no one watched, would remain way behind. They went around the second bend in a similar fashion and now they were on the opposite side.

Ho-Hum, Ho-Hum, Ho-Hum..... "OH MY GOD!" the commentator exclaimed. "EQUITY HAS FALLEN AND HER MAJESTY IS ON THE GROUND WITH BOTH JOCKEYS OFF THEIR HORSES.... IT IS OVER.... Poor HER MAJESTY.... WHAT A SHAME! The other horses have all passed and Bucephalus is taking off." Everyone was quiet.

A ghostlike hush fell throughout the stands. ACA became rigid like stone.

"WAIT... one of the fallen horses has risen with his jockey and is galloping at full speed from far back. Is it Her Majesty??? NO.... IT IS EQUITY. LOOK AT HER JOCKEY'S RED CAP. ARE YOU SURE? I DON'T KNOW. I JUST DONT KNOW. TOO HARD TO TELL!

THEY ARE COMING IN THE FINAL STRETCH. I CAN SEE HER....

YES... YES... IT IS HER MAJESTY. EVANS had PICKED UP THE WRONG CAP.... WOW.... LOOK AT HER RUN... SHE WILL NEVER CATCH UP."

Bucephalus was too far ahead.

"SHE IS FURIOUS. SHE HAS PASSED ALL THE OTHERS. SHE IS GETTING CLOSER. SHE IS FLYING..... SHE IS A FLYING RANEE."

"SHE IS GOING TO GET HIM. SHE WILL BEAT HIM.

YES. YES... YES... YES... YESSSSSSSSSS.....

Oh no...oh no...lost by a nose. Only a nose.....WHAT A SHAME....."

There was utter silence except for a few wails. A hundred thousand voices stood stunned.

A.C.A. dropped the garland. His hands started to shake. They never stopped shaking.

Tragically, Equity had broken her fetlock and had to be destroyed.

Two weeks later Her Majesty beat Bucephalus in the classic Indian St. Leger by twenty lengths. She was never beaten again.

## The End

P.S. Today, Her Majesty is known as one of the most celebrated horses in British India's racing history. Her achievements during the mid-1940's surpassed all other race horse champions, for she was the winner of four Indian classic races, and placed second in the coveted Indian Derby. Her dramatic fall and recovery, only to come second in the Indian Derby, continue to excite race horse historians to this day. Being present among the thousands who witnessed this dramatic moment has continued to be one of my most cherished life-memories.