

The Scoring of the Raja

W.A. Fraser

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BURRAPARA was Raja of his own domain after a fashion. The domain of Burrapara was on the Madras side, two days steady steaming from Calcutta.

His father, the old Raja, aided by a bull-necked Dewan (Prime Minister) had ground down the ryots (farmers) for tax-money until the whole Raj had become practically bankrupt.

Then the British Sirdar (Government) stepped in and platonically arranged things. That's the Sirdar's prerogative in India.

Under the new régime thirty-six lakhs a year flowed into the coffers, and the burden on the shoulders of the ryots was lighter than it had been in the memory of ten generations. The Raja was allowed twelve lakhs a year for himself and court, while the Sirdar took the other twenty-four for managing the country, and incidentals.

The Double X Hussars were stationed at Burrapara as part of the governing faculty. It was like sending a public school to a watering place for duty. There were white palaces, and leisure Brahmins, and horses without stint; a big polo ground, a fine race course, and a proper oriental atmosphere as background.

The Double X contingent had everything in life to make them happy — except the Burrapara Cup. Each year, for three years, they had reached out with a "by-your-leave-gentlemen" for this bit of plate, but each year it had gone back to grace the sideboard of the Raja.

Burrapara himself was a sportsman from the first tinkle of the bell. He gathered leopards and kept them in a cage; and once a year turned them out on the plain for an improved pig-sticking bout. This was at Christmas time.

The Double X took themselves to horse and hunted "Spots" with their lances. In the three years only two fellows had been mauled with sufficient intentness to cause their death — that is, two European officers; perhaps a score of beaters and shikarries had also been mauled, but they were His Highness's subjects, and did not figure on the European side of the ledger; so it was good sport, and of a fair interest.

The polo was as fast as they played it in Tirhoot, which is like looking at polo from the topmost pinnacle; and not one of the Double X played a bit faster or closer on the ball than Burrapara himself.

From an earthly point of view it was almost a paradise for men whose lines were cast along that plane. As I have said, the only unreasoning thing was the Cup — they could not get that. Yearly it sat big in pride of place at the annual Race Meet. It was donated by the Raja for an open handicap steeplechase of three miles. It was a retroactive donation, for his own stable always won it. That was why the Double X were sad.

Captain Woolson started it. "If you fellows will back me up," he said, "we'll land that mug this try."

"Going to ham-string the Raja's horses?" Devlin asked. But Devlin had no head for deep plots, Woolson knew that; he was only a lieutenant who danced well.

"The Raja gets this crazy old plate back every time because he's got the best nags," Woolson observed with an air of conviction.

"There may be something in that," Devlin answered, setting his glass down with a sort of "hear! hear!" ring.

"Devlin, you're an imbecile. You make remarks that are not in the game. What I mean is that we haven't a gee-gee in the whole bally troop that Burrapara can't give pounds to, with, at least, a dozen Arabs."

"That's what's the matter, Woolson," one of the officers said; "we're beaten before the race starts — that's what's the matter with getting the Cup."

"It's a great discovery," said Devlin, sarcastically.

"Look here, youngster, shut up!" said Captain Lutyens, wearily; "it's too hot to blather. Woolson's got a scheme, or he wouldn't be talking — talking's all rot, anyway."

"Yes," continued Woolson, "the Raja is as slick as a Brahmin. He gets fifteen or twenty Arabs down from Abdul Rahman at Bombay, gallops them a bit — God knows where, we never see the trial — and the best of the lot is chucked into this handicap light, being a green one, and beats all our well-pounded nags out."

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"Oh, fiddlesticks!" exclaimed Devlin, impatiently; "all the fellows know that. Your discovery is like going to hear 'Pinafore' — it's antique. Besides, it's not the Raja at all; it's O'Neill that does the trick. You're an unsophisticated lot, and O'Neill knows just what your nags can do. What do you suppose the Raja keeps him for — his beauty? it's to play the English game against you Feringhis."

Lutyens threw a box of matches at Devlin's head by way of entreaty, and the latter went out on the veranda swearing there was a conspiracy to keep him out of the good thing.

"Go on, Woolson," said Lutyens; "tell us how to do up the Raja. That young ass is out of it now, so go on with the disclosure."

"Well, we'll have to get a horse down from up country on the quiet to do the trick. What do you think?"

"Where'll you get him?" asked Lutyens.

"Some of you fellows remember Captain Frank, don't you — Frank Jocelyn."

"I do," said Lutyens, decisively. "I've had to live in retirement, financially, since I joined him in a big thing we were to pull off at Lucknow once. But he's always got a fast horse; generally — yes."

"Well, he's got one called Saladin now, that you simply couldn't handicap down to the form of the Raja's lot."

The others waited, and Woolson continued unravelling his brilliant plot:

"I saw a note in one of the Calcutta papers about this Saladin brute, and wrote up to Doyne. Doyne says he's dicky on his legs, but he'd stand a prep. for one race, especially in the soft going here. He's never won yet, because his legs wouldn't stand training on the Calcutta course. It's as hot and hard as a lime-kiln, as you fellows know. If we could buy him from Captain Frank, and play him a bit in polo here, he'd be sure to get in the handicap with a light weight, and we'd even up things with His Highness."

"I'm if, it, if it's all on the square," said Lutyens. "The Raja's a good sort, and we must have it all straight."

"Gad I'll tell him we're going to win with Saladin, if we get him," exclaimed Woolson. "But we mustn't let Captain Frank know about it; he'd never let any sort of a game go through unless he was Viceroy of it himself. We'll get Doyne to buy the horse, and Jocelyn can discover accidentally that he's being sent up to Tirhoot among the indigo sahibs, or to Heaven, or to almost any place but here."

"I'll stand doing Captain Frank up," said Lutyens with candor. "His hand is against every man, and, pro tem., we'll send a punitive expedition against him. I don't mind that a bit."

The truth of the matter as concerning Woolson was, that there was a standing feud between him and Jocelyn over some brilliant coup at Lucknow, and he knew the Captain wouldn't sell him a horse at any price.

So that was the inception of the plot. Woolson was commissioned to acquire Saladin. He wrote his friend Captain Doyne to buy the horse as cheaply as he could — warned him against Captain Frank's rapacity, and explained that Saladin would be supposed to go to any part of the British Empire but Burrapara.

Doyne executed his commission with diplomatic enthusiasm. Jocelyn wanted three thousand rupees. Doyne offered two thousand, and half the first purse the horse won, plate not to count. Theoretically that should have represented a considerable sum — in point of fact, Doyne chuckled softly to himself over this commercial victory, for he knew that Saladin would only win the Cup at Burrapara and no prize money.

The horse was bought and shipped in a roundabout way to his new owners.

Woolson played him in polo just twice, then pretended to make a discovery. "I'm going to keep that chestnut brute for the races," he assured the Raja, "he can gallop a bit."

Burrapara smiled pensively, for he had Shahbaz in his stable, and it would take a rare good horse to beat him.

O'Neill was an ex-Hussar officer who had found the service too fast for his limited income. Influential friends had farmed him out to the Raja, and he was what might be called commander-in-chief of stables to His Highness. He also made a discovery; the Raja would never have found it out for himself.

"Look here, Your Highness," he said, "the Mess have got hold of a good thing at last. I don't know where they puckerowed that white-faced Arab, but he's a rare good one. He'll beat Shahbaz for the Cup."

"And ——?" said the Raja, with oriental control.

"We must play the game too, Your Highness."

"You know best, O'Neill Sahib. It's in your department." The Raja liked to play at officialdom.

"Shall I get a horse to beat them, Your Highness?"

"What appropriation do you require?" asked Burrapara.

"Perhaps three or four thousand, Your Highness."

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"I will command the treasurer," replied the Raja, laconically.

Now as it happened, O'Neill, before he left the service, had swung along in the racing game beside Captain Frank. "Frank knows every horse in India," he mused, "and if the rupees are forthcoming, he'll get just what I want." Though he had not the faintest idea that the Mess had got one from Frank.

So he wrote by the first mail steamer to Jocelyn:

"The fellows down here have picked up a horse somewhere, called Saladin. Do you know anything about him? I saw them try him out, and he galloped like a wild boar. If you've got something in your stable to beat him I'll buy it, or lease it. It's all about the Raja's Cup, three miles over timber, for Arabs and Countrybreds. Captain Woolson is at the bottom of it — I think you'll remember him."

Jocelyn puckered his thin lips and whistled long and softly to himself when he read the letter. "My aunt!" he ejaculated, "they played softly. Who the thunder told Woolson about Saladin?"

He shoved the letter into his pocket, lighted a cheroot, and played chess with this new thing for three days. Then he wrote to O'Neill:

"Woolson was born of commercial parents — he gets this thing from his father, who was a successful soap merchant. They bought Saladin from me to go up country. The Raja has my sympathy if he hopes to beat the chestnut with anything he's got there. I have nothing in my stable could look at him over three miles of country.

"But all the same, I think we can beat out this joint stock company. I've got May Queen, and Saladin has always been worked with her. He's a sluggish devil, and has notions. He won't try a yard so long as the mare is galloping beside him; that's because they've worked together so much. He'll just plug along about a neck in front of her, and the more you hammer him the sulkier he gets.

"If you've got something fairish good in your stable, and the Raja will pay well for the expedition, I'll send the Queen down, and go myself later on to ride her, for the edification of our friend, the soap merchant's offspring. I'll guarantee you'll beat Saladin, only you must have something good enough to do up the others. Don't let them know where you've got the mare."

These affairs of state were duly laid before the Raja by O'Neill in a general way without too much attention to detail. Kings as a rule don't care for detail, they like to win, that's all. Burrapara simply gleaned that by the aid of a mare, a certain Captain Frank, and his own Shahbaz, he was to win once more his favorite toy; also triumph over the united ingenuity of the Double X Mess. The executive duties he left to O'Neill; also spoke the necessary word to the treasurer.

In two weeks May Queen was in the Raja's stables, and the wise men who had gone out of the West knew not of this back-wash in the tide of their affairs.

Two weeks later Frank Jocelyn sauntered into the Mess of the Double X with his *débonnaire* military swing, as though he had just returned from a week's shikarri, and lived there always.

"Great gattlings!" exclaimed Lutyens; "where in the name of all the Brahmins did you come from? Jocelyn, by all that's holy."

"Where's the balloon?" asked Devlin.

"Nobody ever come here any more?" asked Captain Frank, pitching into a big chair after solemnly grabbing each paw that was extended to him.

"Heaps of ordinary chaps," answered Lutyens.

"But visits like mine are like the cherubs', eh?"

"He's tons like a cherub," muttered Devlin; then aloud, "Here, boy, bring a peg, Captain Sahib's dry."

"Came down to the fair to pick up some smart polo ponies," Jocelyn volunteered. "Any racing at the fair?"

"Heaps," said Lutyens; thinking dismally of the accursed fate that had steered Captain Frank their way when they had got it all cut and dried for Saladin. "Make yourself at home, Jocelyn," he said, "I've got to make a call."

Then he posted down to Woolson's bungalow. "Guess who's here?" he said.

"Anybody big?"

"Size of an elephant."

"The C.C.?"

"No — Jocelyn."

"Good God! Not Captain Frank?"

Lutyens nodded; Woolson turned pale. "Does he know!" he asked dismally.

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"Don't think it. It's a pure fluke, his coming; he's down after some polo tats."

Woolson's face showed that he was still mistrustful. "He'll stay for the races, sure."

"Uh-hu!" grunted Lutyens.

"And he'll spot Saladin; he's got devil-eyes, that chap."

"Uh-hu!" again assented Lutyens.

"We'll have to tell him, and beg him to keep quiet."

"I think so."

"You'll have to put him up, Lutyens, to keep him out of their hands."

"All right."

So that night Captain Frank learned to his great surprise that Saladin was in Burrupara. Gracious! but he was surprised. How had it happened — he had understood Doyne was sending him up country?

Woolson told the Captain a fairy tale about that part of it; but he had to be made free of the secret that they hoped to win the Cup with Saladin.

"Don't tell the Raja nor O'Neill," begged Lutyens. "The honor of the Double X demands that we win that Cup."

"I'll tell nobody," said Captain Frank. "Let everybody find out things for themselves — that's my way of working."

They cracked a bottle of champagne to this noble sentiment, and all that belonged to the Double X was placed at the disposal of Captain Frank during his sojourn amongst them. The Raja had a dozen bungalows splendidly furnished, always at the command of visitors; and Captain Frank assured Lutyens that one of these had already been placed at his disposal, so he declined the Double X Captain's hospitality. "Hang it!" he said to himself, "I can't eat his rations, and sleep in his bed, and play against him; that's too stiff an order."

As race day approached, events outlined themselves more clearly. The Raja had three horses entered for the Cup; Shahbaz, May Queen and Ishmael. Woolson had Saladin, and there were six other entries, not calculated to have much bearing on the history of the Cup.

"What's this May Queen thing?" asked Lutyens.

Nobody knew; not even where she had come from. She was a country-bred without a record, that's all that anybody could say. It didn't matter anyway, Shahbaz was what they had to beat, that was certain. O'Neill was riding this pick of the stable himself.

Two evenings before the race O'Neill came over to the Mess. He wanted somebody to take the mount on May Queen; the boy who was to have ridden her was ill, he explained.

"Jocelyn will ride for you," exclaimed Lutyens. "He'd get paralysis if he hadn't a mount at a meeting."

"Is she any good?" asked Captain Frank.

"We don't know much about her," answered O'Neill. "We'll declare to win with Shahbaz, but the mare may run well. The Raja'll be delighted if you'll pilot her."

"It'll be better," said Lutyens, "for an outsider to ride than one of our fellows."

"All right, I'll take the mount," exclaimed Captain Frank, "only I'd like to school her a bit to-morrow."

You will see that the tea set had been almost completed; because when Fate undertakes to arrange matters, there is seldom a hitch. Everybody works for Fate — everybody.

Of course there was a big lottery held at the officers' mess the night before the race; and the Burrupara Cup was the main medium for a plunge.

Woolson was suspicious. "I don't like it," he said to Lutyens. "Frank Jocelyn isn't down here for the benefit of his health; and I'll swear he hasn't bought a single gee-gee. We don't know anything about that mare; I've tried to find out where she comes from, but nobody knows."

"Do you suppose she's good enough to beat Saladin?" asked Lutyens, doubtfully.

"Well, Jocelyn rides her."

"I'm the cause of that," answered Lutyens.

"You may think so, but to me it looks like a job. O'Neill and Captain Frank knew each other in the old days. If they back the mare in the lotteries, I'm going to have a bit of it," asserted Woolson.

This little cloud of suspicion broadened out, until by the time the lotteries were on, there was a strong tip out that May Queen was a good thing for the Cup. The Mess ran Saladin up to a steep figure when his chances were

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sold in the lotteries.

Nobody but O'Neill wanted to back Shahbaz, and he went cheap. When May Queen was put up, Jocelyn laughingly made a bid, saying, "I'd back a mule if I rode him in a race."

"You're pretty slick, Mr. Frank," Woolson muttered; and he bid on the mare. This started it, and in the end May Queen fetched nearly as good a price as Saladin. It went that way all the evening; the Mess flattered themselves that they had stood by Saladin pretty well — and they had. Of course Captain Frank couldn't well bid on Saladin, he explained; it was their preserve.

When they were finished at last, Captain Frank said to Woolson: "I've got that brute Shahbaz in two lotteries. You'd better take half to hedge your money; you're loaded up with Saladin."

"No, thanks," the other man said, with a clever glint in the corner of his eye, "I've also got May Queen, your mount; I've got enough."

"Do you want to part with a bit of May Queen?" the Captain asked carelessly.

"Not an anna of it. I'll stick to the lot. The Saladin money belongs to the Mess; we bought him together, but the May Queen business is nearly all my own."

He looked sideways at Jocelyn while he said this, watching the blond-mustached face narrowly; then he spoke up with abrupt impetuosity, "Jocelyn, look here, you know all about that mare. Tell me whether it's all right or not."

"I think," answered Jocelyn, leisurely, pouring with judicious exactness half a bottle of soda into his peg glass, "that you fellows here are a bally lot of sharks. You've bought all of Saladin in the lotteries; the most of May Queen, and then want to know what's going to win. You'd better have half of Shahbaz now, and make a certainty."

"No thanks, I'm filled up."

"Do you want to part with a bit of Saladin?"

"Can't do it. All the fellows are in it — all the Mess."

"I think you're missing it over Shahbaz. O'Neill thinks he'll win," drawled the Captain, appearing terribly solicitous for his enemy's welfare.

A little later Captain Frank rehearsed this scene to O'Neill. "I pretended to want a bit of Saladin, or May Queen, but Woolson wouldn't part with any. Lord! but the father is big in the son. Stuck to his pound of flesh like a proper Ishmaelite. Then I offered him some of Shahbaz in the lottery, but he shut up like a knife; he was afraid I'd force it on him. To-morrow after Shahbaz wins, I'll say to him: 'I wanted you to take a bit of the good thing;' and he'll scowl, because he'll be sick at his stomach. I'll teach them to get a good horse out of me to do up a fine chap like the Raja, and then pay for him out of stakes that are not to be had."

Woolson's version of the same thing to Lutyens was slightly different, which only goes to show that human nature is a complex machine.

"Jocelyn's got stuck with Shahbaz in the lottery, and he's been trying to unload on me. He wanted a piece of Saladin. That's Captain Frank all over; pokes his nose in here on our good thing, roots around until he finds out something, then wants a share."

"I wish he hadn't come," said Lutyens, abstractedly. "Heaven knows what he'll do; he's like a Hindoo juggler."

"He can only win out on May Queen," retorted Woolson, crabbedly; "and I've got the biggest part of her in the lotteries myself."

"Yes, but the other fellows are all down on Saladin, and it's the Cup we're really after, not the rupees."

Woolson said nothing to this. The Cup was all right as a Cup, but it would suit him to land his big coup over May Queen.

The next day at the race-course Lieutenant Devlin sauntered up to Captain Frank, and said: "Little Erskine, who is in the Seventh, over in Collombo, is in a bit of a hole; and I'd like to help him out. What I've got's no good to him — 't isn't enough."

"Say, youngster," drawled Jocelyn, "are you one of the forty thieves that got Saladin down here to do up O'Neill and the Raja?"

"Oh, I think the fellows played fair enough," answered Devlin, "but whatever it was they didn't ask my advice; in fact they drummed me out."

"What are the bookies laying against Shahbaz?" queried Captain Frank.

"Five to one," answered Devlin.

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"What does Erskine need?"

"Couple of thou., I fancy."

"Have you got four hundred?"

"Yes; but can Shahbaz ——"

"Don't be a damn fool," interrupted Captain Frank, with profane brevity.

It was time to mount for the Burrapara Cup. As they jogged down to the post, Frank ranged alongside of Woolson, who was riding Saladin, and said, "You'd better take half of Shahbaz still"; but Woolson tickled Saladin with the spur, and swerved to one side, pretending not to have heard.

O'Neill was riding Shahbaz, and to him Jocelyn said: "When we've gone half the journey, you slip out in front before Saladin gets his dander up. I'll keep close beside him and he'll never try a yard. But keep on in front, so as not to draw him out."

For a mile and a half, half-a-dozen of the nine starters were pretty well up. As the pace increased, and Shahbaz drew away in the lead, all of the others but Saladin and May Queen commenced to drop out of it. At two miles Shahbaz was six lengths in front; Saladin and May Queen were swinging along under a steady pull, neck and neck.

"He means to stick to me, and beat me out," mused Woolson.

"The blasted idiot is kidding himself," thought Jocelyn. "He thinks he's got to hang to my coattails to win."

Saladin was keeping his eye on May Queen. He had been separated from his stable chum for weeks, and now he was galloping along beside her as in the old days. His soft Arab heart was glad. What a pity she couldn't gallop a bit faster though. The thrill of strength was in his muscles, and he would like to unstring his great tendons that soft warm day, and spurn the red, yielding earth. His leg wasn't a bit sore; ah, there was another horse on in front there. Why couldn't May Queen hurry up?

Soon his rider's legs commenced to hitch at his ribs, and Woolson was chirruping at him to move on. If they'd hurry his chum he would.

Woolson was getting anxious. There was only half a mile to go now, and Shahbaz was still well in the lead. He had ridden Saladin under a pull all the time, and fancied that his horse had a lot left in him; but now when he shook him up he didn't respond.

"Go on!" he shouted to Captain Frank. "We'll never catch Shahbaz."

"Go on yourself," answered the Captain, in schoolboy retort.

Woolson brought his whip down on Saladin's flank. Stung by it the Arab sprang forward, and for a second Woolson's heart jumped with joy. He felt the great muscles contract and spread under him, and fancied that he would soon overtake the dark bay in front. The mare struggled too; Saladin heard her laboring at his quarters, and waited patiently.

"Steady, you brute!" Captain Frank ejaculated to the mare, but Saladin knew the voice, and after that the man on his back amounted to very little in the forces governing the race.

With whip, and spur, and profane appeals Woolson labored at of his stride a dozen times. The mare struggled and strained every nerve to keep up with her stable companion. Saladin rebelled against the fool who was riding him, and sulked with Arab persistence; raced as he had always done at home with the mare, neck and neck.

Shahbaz was tiring badly. At the last fence he nearly fell, striking the top rail with his toes out of sheer weariness. There was only a short run in on the level now. Would he last out? If Saladin ever ranged alongside of him it would be all over, Jocelyn knew that. In the struggle he would forget about May Queen, and shoot by Shahbaz as though he were dead.

Woolson was in an agony of suspense. Shahbaz would certainly win, and he might have saved his mount, throwing Wim out his money by taking Frank's offer. A sudden resolve seized him. Saladin was sulking and he was worse beaten than the horse; he could not ride him out. He would take Frank's offer now.

Bending his face around toward Jocelyn he gasped "I'll — take — half — Shahbaz ——" then he disappeared. That final grab had effectually settled the race. They were rising at the last jump, and his movement caused Saladin to swerve. The horse struck the rail heavily, and Woolson was shot out of the saddle, and planted inches deep in the soft earth on the outside of the course.

It had looked a close thing from the stand. "Saladin'll win in a walk," the Mess fellows said just before the fall: "Woolson's been waiting on O'Neill, and now he'll come away and win as he likes."

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When Woolson vacated the saddle so energetically, a groan went up from them. When Shahbaz slipped by the judge's stand, three lengths in front of May Queen, they groaned again; but with official politeness cheered lustily for the Raja.

His Highness sat complacently eyeing the excited people. It was a very small thing to get agitated about, for he had won, you see.

Captain Frank bought Saladin back for a thousand rupees; beaten horses go cheap.