



fiction

The Marble Rose

by Shakib Ahsan

WITH ITS CHIPPED-OFF CORINTHIAN arches, its creaky old spiraling stairways, its run-down teak panelling and with whatever remains of this once plush English country-side garden house — it now rarely draws in a curious stare or two. Nobody even remembers that this place was used to be known as 'Guard kila'. Harder even to believe is that — facing up to the river were shady arbours for any body who had nothing better to do in the evening than counting the ships coming from Zafarabad. Bands of squirrels up and down the trees like they had done the winters before. The house had many windows, may be the mason who had built it got a bit carried away but they all opened up to the beautifully kept garden. At the centre was a Woodrose bush ringed by a marble seat with intricate motifs of roses. Sue Alan, one of its inhabitants loved to bury her head — a pretty one though, into the works of Marlowe over there. Her slanting eyes caught in the arrays of glowing sunset were the very ones that went wild in awe over moon light. She loved to look at it from her huge bay window. Back in those days this homestead had a name — 'Villa Riverview'. Where the monsoon once blossomed Woodroses now floods the slums.

It has been a good seven years since the battle of the Plassey. Bill Cooper, erstwhile Purchase Officer in Charge of Hoogli of the East India Company has been asked to resume his duties from Islampur (now Dhaka). The only reason he did not question his superior's decision was his apprehension about the cover-up he was involved in sometime ago which got a little nasty. Begrudgingly his 'Missus' moved in shortly afterwards with their two daughters; Sue, aged 17 and Rozy, 6. Without a good church, school or neighbourhood around, this was the last place on earth she had a reason to like. And if they were not reason enough, her fright for malaria was. Sue, on the contrary, had taken things in much better strides. A long month of Sundays was not exactly what she was preparing for but somebody had to keep her head on when the woman of the house was acting like a school girl. Tagging along with her father to places in and around the city, she discovered that their new found home was not that drab. Especially a trip to a place called Cammerbari (now Farmgate) took them through a woodland, massive, exhilarating but very spooky. When in some summer nights she is at her tethers end she stands over the balcony quietly playing her violin, letting flurries from the river gently play with her chestnut frizzles. Every body would gather around, listening to tunes from far away home while the river lites up with drowsy glows of floating lanterns and the stars overhead go astir all night long. On the Sunday Mass among the regular retinues is one poor soul from the Cavalry who never misses throwing at least a few discursive glances at Sue. She tries her best not to be impolite and would often manage a smile, which is the best she can do, without laughing her wits out everytime he reminds her of a lizard.

In the Fort overlooking the river Burigunga (Lalbag Fort), Meer Dean shared a quarter with a small of over-dressed men donned with demented red turbans, who still thought they were in the Nayeb's Royal Guard Regiment. There was nothing wrong in it except that the Nayeb was no longer paying them. The new masters from England were still tolerating the Nayeb Jassarot Khan's carnival moods — gradiose parades on Elephants through the streets. For Meer Dean, it was a job he was born into, although the pay was hardly enough to scrape off a dog's life.

It has been almost three years of Nabobship for Meer Cassem but he was still far from any where near paying his way out to freedom and getting the English off his face. He learnt in the hard way that collecting taxes from the subjects no matter how insignificant, was no picnic. Every where the tax people went, a small army soon ensued. He fully understood, the longer he took in paying up his dues the sooner will his royal days be over. Hard-pressed, he sacked the fun-loving Nayeb and gave the job to Mohammed Ali-Beg, making him clear that nothing short than a fully treasury would satisfy him.

Bill Cooper did not hide his contempt at the new Nayeb's free hand over their affairs as he went over to meet the company's Resident Agent. The Agent calmed Bill, saying Meer Cassem's days were numbered. Soon it was the Muslim month of Fasting. The evening air began to fill, much to the delight of the two girls, with long-winded chants and swirling fireworks coming from the Hussein Dullan, a Shitte holy shrine. They would race up to the roof to catch a breath-taking view of the mayhem. One Sunday, on way back from the morning mass, Mrs. Cooper's carriage was slowed down by a rowdy procession of marchers, robed in green with pitchers in their hands. Sue had not seen a procession such colourful has this one before. Later that day after much coaxing, Mrs. Cooper agreed to take her two persistent daughters to the Dullan on the day of the festival which comes once in a year. They arrived at the fair by phalanx, an equally memorable experience for the two. The mausoleum was housed inside of a structure which was draped with long, flowing curtains and lit up with myriad candles. Secretive ladies sung songs which sounded like Jeremiahs. A few lunatics were having the fun of their life, scaring the little ones including Rozy. But the fire-eating magician took all her cares away. The smell of exotic incenses mixed with the whole atmosphere made the place look like straight out of the fantasy books, without the lunatics part of course. Sue wanted to be herself, do something silly like everybody around when suddenly her eyes fell on a funny looking red turban. She almost giggled at the man who was wearing that. Before she could point him out to Rozy, she lost him. Coming out, Sue caught a glimpse of the man again on the stairs. Meer Dean had not seen such beautiful European ladies from this close before. Their four eyes met for a brief moment but the memory for no reason at all were tucked away in some far corner of their minds.

The red Peacock flowers were in blossom the town over. Spring blusters were carrying them far and wide. Sue spends her days in the tropics like any other European girl of her age without any sort of life at all. One day a small crowd gathered at the English Resident's lodge. Meer Cassem after failing repeatedly to persuade the company in paying their tariff has freed all others from theirs as well — a deliberate venture to bring in the English wrath. The Resident got assurances from the Governor of Patna that Cassem would soon wish he had not played with their patience. Within days Bill Cooper had bad news — the attack on Mogul garrison in Patna had gone awry and worse still the resident was killed. Although 'Dhaka' was days journey from Patna, it worried Mrs. Cooper. Bill tried to calm her down by saying that reinforcements from Calcutta was probably on their way to quell the disturbance up there. As soon as they have arrested Cassem things are bound to be normal, he assured. Back in Calcutta, a scuffle broke out in a meeting over the Council's way of handling things,

Somebody wanted to see Meer Zafar, the lesser evil of the two, back on throne. Major Adams was to put the carrot before the mule. Zafar was offered the throne of Moorshidabad in exchange of joining hands against Cassem. Just as it was imagined, he jumped at it, forgetting how he had been thrown out the milk like a fly only shortly before. Some greeds are so insidious that it cannot be uprooted by mere destruction of the flesh. When this fiery greed contracts most of the people of a particular nation, an invisible fetter clasps around their fate. Major Adams forced marched victorious through the streets of the renegade Nabob's city with a timely help from an old friend. The news was greeted with cheers among the Europeans in 'Dhaka' and some were in the opinion that Cassem should be hunted down, punished and made a good example for whoever messed with them. Having turned down his prayer for leave for the third time by his Commandant, Dean was already piqued enough to take any interest at whatever happened out of his camp. He has been away for years since he joined in and just got news from his ailing father. Moreover with the re-

and got worse no matter how hard Sue and her mother tried to rub her back to life. Sensing the inevitable, Mrs Cooper cried out for help. A shadow moved from behind and lifted the poor child near the fire. Minutes later she showed signs of life. Sue did not speak the language of the native but did not even have to look deep for what she was looking for in his eyes. Suddenly this tall and dark stranger looked strangely similar to man she had seen in a fair.

Next day they were brought back to the city and kept inside the walls of the fort. Some officers had their eyes on some of the women, Dean heard. He knew that the south-west wall of the fort was undergoing repair. He decided to take a chance if it was worth the life of four, including himself. When his turn came for the watch he slipped away from his post, woke Sue up and got them slip through the crack. He had a dingy anchored outside. He pulled hard over, as harder he knew, holding on for luck to get him past the bridge near Pagla before the moon was out. The watch there is usually tight. But as bad luck would have it, the moon came up too soon, round and bright, bathing the horizon from end to end. This he could

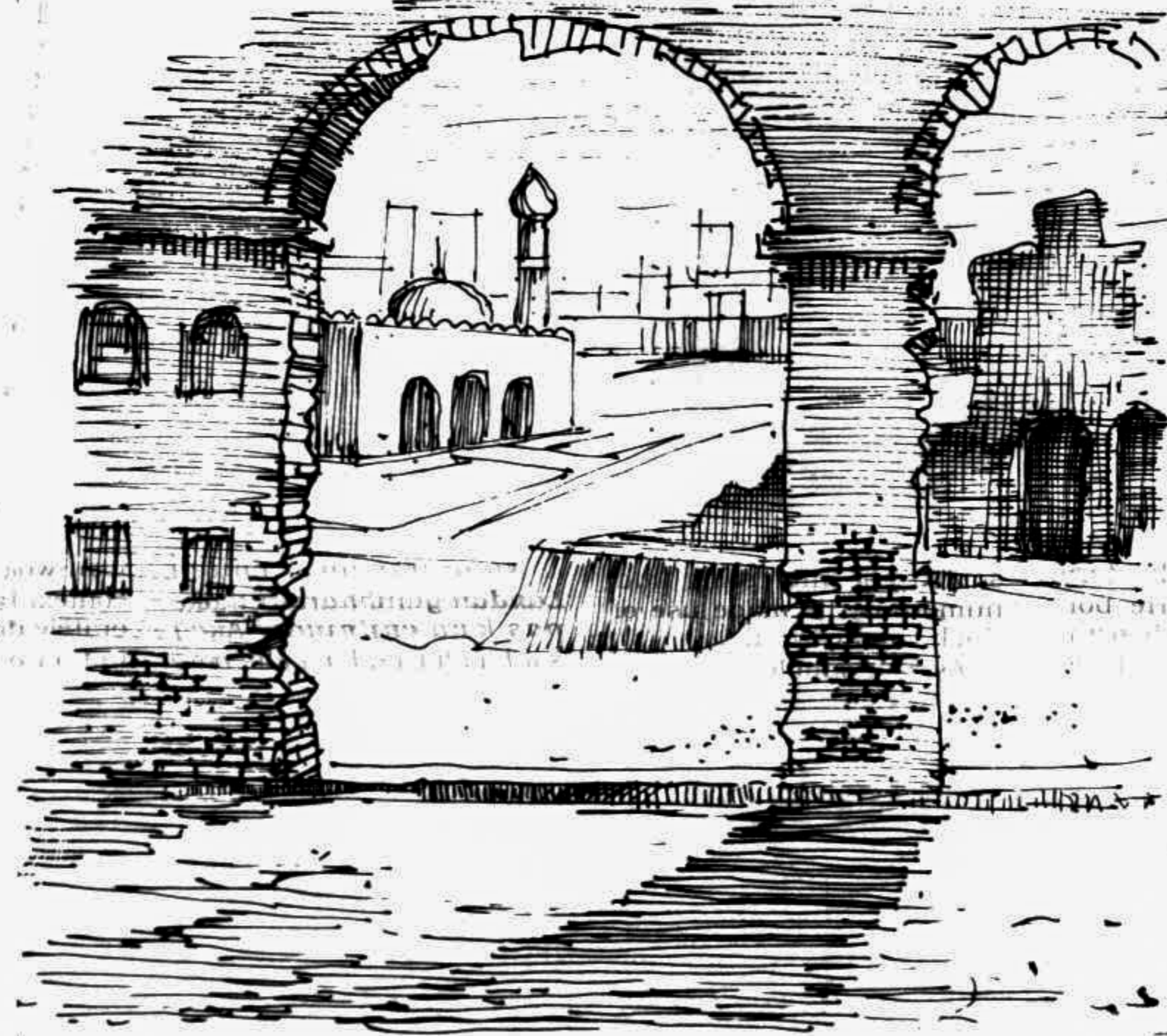
find of an old well in the bush. They pulled up enough water for them. Sitting on the threshold Dean was figuring his next move when Sue came up with a piece of a Marshmellow for him. She stood there for a moment, her eyes down casted as if she wanted to tell him, 'Thank you, you've been kind, I don't know how to thank you enough'.

It was almost mid-day, the forest had quietened down. He got up to make a visit to the village he had earlier seen, this time with a little plan. Nobody had a reason to question a soldier looking for good, healthy horses to requisite for the army. Fatehpore Cidi was the place called. Before dark he returned with two geldings and enough barely for all. Mrs Cooper cooked a brew on a mud stove made by Dean while Sue brimmed her eyes with tears trying to keep the fire burning. She served him the piping hot soup in a cup of coconut shell. She seemed to be less worried. Rozy was playing with his beautiful knife. Sue sat next to him, although it was not the perfect time but she seemed to be humming some kind of a song, while doing her hair. He by this time has known their name to be Sue and Rozy, for him he was simply 'Soldier' to them. Sue asked him his name and wrote something on the floor with charcoal, spelling 'Meer Dean' in a way he has never heard before. Then she smiled shyly, Dean saw Sue smile for the first time. That night they set out criss-crossing the tall and dark trees. Scary big bats were flying past a ghostly red moon. Thanks for the stomping horses they could not hear the otherwise frightening nocturnal sounds of the forest. They entered Dahpa Footala by morning. Two wise old men greeted them right when they were hopelessly looking for traces of human life. They were hungry and thirsty. Ashamed of having nothing much to treat them with the men took them to their huts. The women of the house had never seen white women before. Rozy was running a fever so they started by fixing her a herbal tea. Mrs. Cooper called Dean and handed him her jeweleries thinking he could find a better use of them. Back from the market he found Sue in a Sari wrapped just like they wear them here. The unsuspecting way she was drying up her wet tresses of hair and the timid way she shied away from his unassuming stares whisked him away to a quieter corner of his own world for a brief moment. After dinner, Sue came out of the stuffy hut for some air. Someone was playing on the flute faraway. She remembered the nights she spent creating her own world of music, surrounded by her loved ones. She struggled to keep her eyes dry. That night it rained like mad with accompanying bursts of thunder. Next morning the world was quiet, ready for another day of uncertainty. It was time to say good-bye. The native women would not have them leave without a gift. Two hand made cloths were especially weaved for them over night. Mrs. Cooper was moved beyond words. Ahead lay the mightiest, widest and bluest watery stretch in this part of the world. At high noon they could see parts of the magnificent river Meghna. What they heard there was equally unbelievable. An English army had crossed the river the night before, under cover of the rain storm. If there was a shred of truth in it then the river would soon be a dangerous place to be. A dash for Tripura (now Comilla) was the safest bet they had. The river was heaving like a mad bull. Rozy pressed her against Dean, staring out tensely at the huge black clouds. As the sun was preparing a descent beyond the foothills of Arakan they reached their port of call. The shawls came in handy. Mrs Cooper and Sue draped themselves with

that to hide their foreign identity. They got them meal and board in a caravansary — at least they had something to sleep on. Dean could not close his eyes for a moment in the last three nights. Suddenly nothing felt like hitting his bug-infested bed at the old fort. He dozed off thinking about a hot Tanduri just out of the oven, dipped in a gravy of mutton with his back against the door. He woke up to find Sue's shawl underneath his head. He went over to check whether Rozy was sleeping tight. All the sun and rain went hard with the poor child. Snuggly back to his place, as silently as possible, he started picking up his thoughts from where he had left. He soon found himself thinking of Sue again. She had not spoken to him in her own silent but expressive way since morning. Something is bugging her, he thought. To his surprise he felt someone else was also keeping awake. Sue crept up to him, took his hands in hers and leaned her head on him. Dean could not see her face and she, his but these two persons were closer than they ever had been with anybody. Sue went away as surreptitiously she came, leaving her locket in his hands. Probably in her own way, she said sorry for being rude all day. Dean waited for the breath of the morning, holding on to his treasured moments. Now he was left with his only possession, his sword. He used to take pride in its designs on the ivory knob. But this had to go. On his way back he overheard some men talking about the fall of 'Dhaka'. He could not believe his ears. He looked at the locket — a tiny black bead in the shape of a tear drop, not knowing what to do with it anymore.

Two days later Bill Cooper met this wife and daughters. He had been taken captive by the mutineers and later freed by Lieutenant Sweeton's lads from Noakhali — those who had crossed the river in torrents. The renegade Mogul troops fled to monghyr and their indisputable leader Meer Cassem somewhere farther than that, probably for a next time. Sue saw the last of Meer Dean at the caravansary. Due to Bill Cooper's personal request he got away with a life sentence. He was believed to have moved to Delhi, started his own business and made a fortune. Sue Alan married a Cavalry officer of the Dragoon Regiment, divorced him and earned fame as a violinist in her short life. She died after an attack of typhoid four days before her 22nd birthday. She lies in eternal sleep right at the spot where every body had left her long before the Woodrose bush shed her last flower. Leaving behind a tomb stone inscribed with the words '... here lies amongst her beautiful possessions, young Miss Sue Alan. Died on the 1769th year of the Good Lord.' Meer Dean of course had no way of knowing what ever happened to her but one can always say, he thought of Sue till the day he died, if he had not shied her locket to the Bay of Bengal.

Bill Cooper returned to Hoogli after Sue had died. Business was booming and never better. Sue Alan or Meer Dean are not the beginning, neither the end of the numerous stories only this city has in store. Nobody remembers them now or how they felt in a moment of lapse which had changed their life completely. But that lambent sky, that beautiful gloaming, that bright visper saw and still remembers it all, along with other tales as well, lost for ever on us. Some people never loose their faith on the magical power of the skewed rays of the dying sun and what it can do to men and women of all time. One of these days 'Villa Riverview' will go under heaps of metropolitan debris. One day we all will be gone but those people of the coming days would still not grow tired of our stories which we are continuously making every day.



placement of the jolly-good old Nayeb, life at the camp was never the same. Gruelling Parades, Mounting horses, Lamponing were getting too much to put up with. Bill had just popped his first bottle of champagne open when Paul Radcliff, one of his men from work rushed in. They are planning to get up tonight', he blurted out. A small crowd was already at the Resident's quarter with disbelief. The Agent could not confirm the rumour but said it was wise for the women and children to be taken out to safety at the English barrack at Begunbari (now Tejgaon). Bill asked his wife to get packed fast. Sue quietly woke and got Rozy dressed up. Looking at the Woodrose she dared not to think what future might hold for them. She remembered the young officer from the church and felt a bit assured, she did not know why. What she had no way of knowing was that the English cantonment was among the first casualty. Later that night a group of women and children were rounded off from the road in torrents, the group the Coopers were in. They were carted off in a decrepit old Jesuit church. The damp air inside became heavy with the cries of cold and hungry children. Rozy started to shiver

definitely do without. He could see the three, cuddling each other as if they knew, they have run out of luck. Now he was getting worried. He prayed for a miracle. Suddenly he saw the out-flow of the river Pundur, which he had totally forgotten about. He quickly turned his boat towards it. The runlet, guarded by thick foliage on both the sides gave the much needed cover. They boarded off where the canal lost itself deep into a virgin forest. All he needed to find out was how close were they from the city's peripheral settlements (now Dhanmond). From now on he needed luck more than anything, pure and simple and a lot of it. They walked on for hours on end. Dean took Rozy on his shoulders. Only piles of moon beam piercing through the forest canopy knew their whereabouts. Dean looked at Sue, helping her mother to walk, her hair glued to that resplendent, once-seen-never-forgotten face. He paused, sensing the edge of a clearing ahead. Espying an out-post to their right he decided to get a closer look. Surprisingly the coast was clear. He returned with them. He wanted to fetch something to eat from the nearby fields before it got too bright. He came back with two Marsh mallows in

review

From Dal-Bhat to Machh-Bhat

by Helal Uddin Ahmed

'Matsya — Pukure Machh Chash Manual'
(A Manual on Pond Pisciculture)
Edited by Dr Kamal Siddiqui and Samarendra Nath Choudhury
Published by the National Institute of Local Government (NILG), Dhaka, October, 1996.
Price: Taka 400, US\$ 13.

THERE IS A WELL-KNOWN CHINESE proverb: "If you give somebody a fish, he will savour it for a day. If you teach him pisciculture, he will be happy all his life." Driven by this vision and believing in the concept of 'Mache-Bhate Bangalee' (fish and rice eating Bangalee) as in medieval Bengal, Dr Kamal Siddiqui and his team of experts have produced an extensive and elaborate manual in Bangla on pond-

based pisciculture. This massive volume appears to be the second in the series brought out by NILG under the stewardship of Dr Siddiqui, the first one being the manual on Brikhha (Trees) having similar size, shape and style. Samarendra Nath Choudhury is the co-editor of this manual. Apart from the co-editors, other contributors include Abid Hossain, Jamshed Ahmed, Abdul Auwal Khan, Md Abdur Rahman, Anowara Begum Shelley and Shaikh Siraj.

The manual contains nineteen chapters and twenty four annexures. Chapter 1 dwells on the definition, genesis and benefits of pisciculture as well as its historical, cultural and socio-economic impact. Chapters 2 to 8 cover different ingredients of pisciculture in ponds such as

motivation and training, use and ownership of ponds, natural of pisciculture in ponds such as motivation and training, use and ownership of ponds, natural environment of fish fry, etc. Chapters 9-11 contain practical information and experiences on techniques of digging and preparing ponds and management of pisciculture. Chapter 12 furnishes information on common diseases of fish — their prevention and remedies. Chapters 13-14 discuss separate and mixed cultivation of fish. Chapter 15 focuses on different aspects of integrated fish farming. Chapter 16 deals with various miscellaneous topics such as pisciculture in ponds, mini-ponds, pen and cages, cultivating small-sized fish and pisciculture in dirty water. Chapter 17 dwells on topics ranging from catching fish to its

marketing. Chapter 18 discusses strategies for large-scale involvement of Bangladesh women in pisciculture. Chapter 19 presents successful experiences in pisciculture from all over Bangladesh.

While presenting an overview on pisciculture in Bangladesh, the authors write in the introductory chapter: "Since time immemorial, fish has been an essential ingredient of our diet. Presently, 80 per cent of animal protein that the Bangladeshi people consume come from fish. Besides, fisheries resources contribute 4 per cent of our national income and 11 per cent of our export earnings. Over 10 million people of the country are directly or indirectly engaged in production, extraction or marketing of fish. This all-pervasive

influence of the fisheries sector is quite natural because our soil is fertile, the climate is favourable and closed or open water-bodies such as rivers, canals, ponds, lakes, swamps and marshes are innumerable in number.

There are many reasons why pond-based pisciculture has not been given due importance in the past. One of the reasons was much smaller population size and ready availability of fish in open water bodies. As a result people did not feel the urge in the past to cultivate fish in ponds.

The situation is different now. Population has greatly increased. Due to natural and man-made causes such as sedimentation in water-bodies, construction of flood-control embankments, unplanned irrigation,

uncontrolled use of pesticides in farmlands and massive extraction of fish fries, production of fish in our open water-bodies has greatly diminished.

Although the manual has been written for Local Government and NGO leaders, officials and field workers, it will be useful to any institution or individual engaged or interested in pisciculture.

It can also be used in training courses on the subject.

The language of the manual is simple, clear and lucid. Technical jargons have been avoided and needs of the clientele groups appear to have been catered to. The realities of Bangladesh and the need for conservation of the environment have been given due importance.