

# THE TREACHEROUS ROAD

The lives of thousands hang on a girl's courage and determination — in the powder-barrel that is modern India. Part One of a new serial by a master story teller

**TALBOT MUNDY**

*Author of "King of the Khyber Rifles," "Tos of Samothrace," and other best sellers*

**M**ARQUISE O'RELL'S roadster speeded from Dilwara, where the sacred monkeys scamper on the hill beside the road. She put the brakes on suddenly, just within sight of the Club and the polo grounds. The servant jumped out and stood bowing with both hands to his forehead. Guru Govind approached from the direction of a wayside shrine. Gray silk turban, alpaca suit, silver-rimmed spectacles.

"Do you know," he asked, "how wonderful you look against that mountain, in a blue frock beneath that blue sky —"

"I know how blue I feel," Marquise interrupted. "I was just now envying those monkeys. They never have to decide anything. They just live and let things happen."

"May I get into your car?"

"Please."

"No, don't drive forward. Wait here. You and I are not sacred monkeys; and there is something which must not happen."

Marquise glanced in the direction of the Club.

The Guru nodded. "Yes. I understand the predicament."

"It's personal," Marquise retorted. She respected him, liked him, trusted him. But there were limits. And besides, she felt an intuition of danger.

He nodded again. "Nevertheless," he remarked, "I have a duty. I must persuade you. Let us talk of the predicament. Do not my years, austerities, follies, defeats, and persistent laughter, entitle me to leave off pretending?"

"You mean pretending you don't know what I'm up against?"

"Shall I describe the up-against-ness? Well, let us see: you are a General's daughter. He is Irish, and has a sense of humor."

"Father is more than a hundred miles away, at Palanpur."

"And at Palanpur he sits on powder barrels," said the Guru. "But you have personal responsibilities. Abundant health, popularity, privilege, means — and an embarrassment of choice."

"I don't believe you have the slightest idea why I'm worried," she answered.

"I intend to worry you more."

"You couldn't."

"I must. May I raise my umbrella?"

Marquise stared at him. "You're trying to break bad news," she said at last. "What is it?"

"*Sahiba* it can become good news. But it concerns those officers."

Marquise froze. "Captain Goddard and Captain Haigh? What do you know about them?"

"They are men who would prevent what I am going to ask you to do."

"Neither of them has the right to interfere with me," she answered.

"No. No right. But they would interfere."

"They might try to," she answered. "They don't like you."

"Why should they? They know some of the answers to life's riddles. I know others. Before they were born I abandoned wealth, position, privilege. I did what countless men of my race have done. I took the begging bowl, and wandered, and learned — a little. In the course of years, as always happens to all of us, I was sent to give my little knowledge to those who know less. I became known as a *guru* — a teacher — a healer of states of consciousness."

"But that doesn't explain why you should hide behind an umbrella. Tell me your bad news."

"Give me your thought, *Sahiba*. You are distracted. Undecided. Angry with yourself, and cross with me because two officers of opposite characteristics and equal merit throw their hearts at your feet."

"They don't," she retorted. "They're not that kind of weakling. They're men."

"Let us say then that these two officers believe you are the only woman whose love is worthy of their manhood. Am I right about that?"

"Well, if you are right, they're wrong," Marquise retorted. "But I don't know that you're right."

The Guru laughed. "I have been young. I

loved. Do you wish to pretend that those officers are not challenging you — the one, as wind blows on a cornfield —"

"Do you think I'd surrender to that kind of thing?"

"The other, as a stream that seeks another stream, that they may join and —"

She laughed. "Some streams approach slowly, and then turn away."

The Guru's eyes twinkled behind the thick lenses. "Ireland," he remarked, "is a place on a map, but the Irish escape the limits of a definition. We were talking about the umbrella. Neither of those officers is conditioned by the slightest confidence in me."

"They scarcely know you."

"Consequently, one of them believes I am an agitator of sedition and the enemy of law. The other one thinks me a subtly subversive, incompetent fool."

"What has that to do with the umbrella? Guru *Sahib*, if it's bad news, tell me."

"I am going to ask you to risk misunderstandings, and perhaps more."

"I wish you wouldn't treat me like a weakling. Tell me!"

"In confidence? If you should say no, nevertheless, will you keep the request secret?"

MARQUISE NOW SPOKE AS CALMLY AS HER THROBBING HEART WOULD LET HER: "PLEASE! YOU MUST GET AWAY BEFORE THEY KILL YOU! QUICK! QUICK!"

"Yes. Honor bright. That I promise."

"Drive me to Palanpur!"

She stared. "Why? What has happened?"

"It is something that must not happen."

"To my father? General O'Rell? Is he in danger?"

"Yes. All Rajputana is in danger — chiefly, at the moment, from such incorruptible Domsday Bookers as are waiting for you on the Club verandah."

"But can we reach Palanpur in time? It's a long way. Can't you 'phone to my father?"

"*Sahiba*, telephones are spillers of secrets! India is on the verge of madness worse than that of '57! I must talk to your father."

"Can't you tell your information to someone here, who would —"

"*Sahiba*, it is secret! It must be kept secret

from such young hotheads as those captains — and —"

"One of them isn't a hothead."

"But he would forbid your driving me to Palanpur, if he should know the tenth of what I know. And the other is an overwhelming man who thinks in terms of guns. He is vigorous, vital, knows his own mind, acts! Captain Goddard would arrest me if he even guessed my secret."

"How shall he guess it if I don't tell it to him?"

"He may ask questions. He is an irresistible man."

Marquise smiled. She had resisted Goddard — so far. The Guru nodded, reading her eyes. "And Captain Haigh?" he asked. "How well do you know him?"

"I met him three weeks ago. We've danced, played tennis, gone riding. He has told me about his people, and his ideas. We think the same way about lots of things. But I haven't the slightest idea what he thinks about me."

"No?" The Guru wiped his spectacles. Then he raised the umbrella again. "I could tell you. But no matter. Those are dangerous men. Between them they might cost a thousand lives and endless ill-will. Can't you go without seeing them first?"

"No. One of them might think I was running away, and the other —"

Illustrated by Marshall Frantz

