



## **Excerpt: The Sun Sets in the East**

by **L M Dillsworth**

shortlisted for the 2020 SI Leeds Literary Prize

### Chapter I – Beyond the Pale

At sundown we ride to the bazaar in a bullock cart. The Calcutta roads are full of potholes and we lurch from side to side with every jolt and jar. Half-digested haddock laps at the back of my throat. A poor choice of dinner, eaten in haste. It must be that which makes my stomach churn, not fear of what's ahead.

Baron lounges on the narrow bench opposite, his body angled so he can stretch out his legs. Like me he wears indigo jamas and a matching choga, the better to go unnoticed. The borrowed skin suits him, but I chafe at the ill-fitting sleeves that end an inch above my wrist bones.

'I've got just the thing for you, Wharton,' he says.

Gratefully I accept the proffered hip flask and take one long swig and then another.

'I do not underestimate the risk you take tonight,' I say, but Baron shrugs it off.

'I know just the chap to help you. If anyone can give a clue to your friend's whereabouts it's him. Besides, no soldier worth his salt can resist an adventure. Especially if it's top secret, eh, Marshall?'

The younger man sitting alongside him smirks in response. He has ignored Baron's advice to dispense with his uniform and wears the familiar red coat and cream jodhpurs of the East India Company's army. With his white blonde hair, he will stand out like a beacon.

'We'll get the savages talking for you Reverend,' he says and I feel a sharp stab of dislike for him.

The heavy beast is surprisingly swift and as we move further from the city I mark the changing scenery. In and around the centre of Calcutta and out towards Fort William the roads are wide and clean. Ladies and gentlemen, pastel-painted shops, barouche boxes and smart curricles. You could think yourself in York or Brighton but for the chattering natives and the smell of spices. Beyond Chowringee there can be no such mistake. There is a wildness unfamiliar and untameable. Waist-high grasses encroach on the roads; strange birds caw from the trees overhead and a jackal screams in the near-distance. The further we go the fewer white faces we see and for the first time in my life I feel conspicuous.