

The curse of the 'Choti Memsahibs'

IN OUR youth, we five brothers roamed the entire area of Bhati Gate, the Data Darbar-Mohni Road tract right up to the river. On the eastern side we touched the Anarkali Bazaar-Government College area. After dark the District Courts was our playing field. We roamed fearlessly, but never once did we dare cross the path where exists the 'Curse of the Choti Memsahibs'.

Last week, I decided to revisit the place at the edge of Mohni Road, just next to the akharra of the famous Gama Pehalwan, where sometimes we sneaked and posted ourselves near the eating area. It was always a rewarding experience. They respected us because of our father, for in those days people did respect the off-springs of the old families of Lahore. Just at the edge of the Old Christian graveyard on Circular Road-Mohni Road, is a dilapidated old dwelling whose roof has been broken ever since I remember. No one dares, even today, enter the room, where once someone tried to build a shop and the very next day was found with his throat slit. His son, so

the story goes, tried to complete the shop and the very next day his throat was also slit. Since then no one has dared to enter the place. Even the drug addicts who frequent the graveyard stay away.

On talking to a few old inhabitants of the area. I learnt that they had heard from their elders that the two 'choti memsahibs' were buried here even before the British took over Lahore in 1849, and that they were murdered by a Sikh chief, who had slit the throats of one of the girls in a fit of rage on hearing the news that the Sikh rulers had signed away the sovereign rights of the State of the Punjab. The other child had died in an accident, though one person claimed that even she was murdered, but a month or two later. One version claimed that they were the children of illegitimate parents. The stories seem endless. So an investigation was needed.

I contacted the person who looks after the graveyard, and he thought I wanted to buy a marble statue or an old tombstone. When he heard of the curse of the 'choti memsahibs' he went

pale in the face and refused to co-operate. I managed to calm him down and he took me to his room and showed me two broken tombstones. The first one read: "Edith Mary Welsford Carter, died 26 April, 1849, Lahore." The second one read: "Louisa Adams Carter, died 29 May, 1849, Lahore." So these were the two 'choti memsahibs' of Lahore. Just who were they and how did they end up in a Lahore graveyard even before the British officially took over Lahore.

It must be remembered that though the British took over in 1849, they had a small garrison inside the Lahore Fort much before the take-over. So British soldiers did live in Lahore, though they seldom ventured out lest they were murdered by Khalsa Sikhs. So the presence of the girls should not come as a surprise. But who was their father. This is where the colourful bit starts, and there is some substance to the rumours of the girls being murdered and the claim that the parents had some 'illegitimate' connection.

The father of the two girls was Lt. John Chilton Lambton Carter III. He

was born in Cornwall in 1817 and joined the East India Company. He belonged to the 53rd Regiment of Foot and had fought in India before being sent to Lahore. His family was from Cornwall and had always served in the various armies of and from Britain. One of the girls died of a sever fever, so claims one record, and one was murdered by a *Khalsa* Sikh priest who cursed the family. Scared of the consequence, John Carter III fled Lahore and took his entire family to far away New Zealand, where even today his ancestors live.

The father of John Carter III was John Chilton Lambton Carter II. He was a Lt. Colonel in the 44th Regiment and was killed fighting against Tipu Sultan. He lies buried in a military graveyard near the famous battlefield at Sriangapatam. The father of Lt. Col. John Carter II was John Chilton Lambton Carter I. He was an officer in the 32 Duke of Cornwall Regiment of Foot, and Lt. Carter died in the West Indies. One account says he was killed in battle, the other says he died in a shipwreck. This brings us to the point

where we trace the original Carter.

The Chilton-Lambton family is even today a leading aristocratic family of Cornwall. In October 1750 was born a beautiful daughter to the head of this family, and she was named Harraton Chilton-Lambton. She was by all accounts a beautiful woman and just when her marriage was being arranged, she eloped with her servant, John Carter, the footman of the family 'post chaise'. The Duke then, one account says, arranged for the local priest to set a curse on them, that whenever a girl is born in Harraton family, she meets a dreadful end. That end was to take place almost a hundred years later. But then the fact is that John Carter was murdered a week after marrying Harraton in a London church. She promptly married a friend of her legally-wedded husband by the name of Robert Young. It was this 'illegitimate' man who acquired the name of John Carter, who with the Cornish aristocratic connections of Harraton, managed to get a commission in the Company army, and to leave England and Cornwall to safe faraway lands.

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But the murder of the original John Carter in London also had to resurface. It so happened that the 'Carter' family did not have any girls till they came to Lahore, and it was here that Edith and Louisa were born, and it was here that they met their death. But just how does one end a curse, if there is such a thing in the first place.

Our research led us to New Zealand where John Chilton-Lambton Carter III had fled from the 'Curse of the Choti Memsahibs' of Lahore. He died in 1872. His grandson lost his small daughter in 1923 in what seemed like an accident. But then a Maori 'medicine man' approached the family and informed them that there was a curse on them. They allowed him to drive the "evil spirits" away as one account informs us. Since then the family has managed well. But in Lahore the "Choti Memsahibs" lie. I have no idea whether the curse still holds. But the fact remains that the people living near their graves on Mohni Road still maintain a healthy respect for the little girls. May they rest in peace.—

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