

A bold journalist indeed

HAFIZUR RAHMAN narrates a story of Maulana Muhammad Ali Jauhar's courage and journalistic commitment as the Editor of *Comrade*

How the 70-year old chief of Hoti-Mardan was unjustly arrested in 1912 for alleged "attempt at familiarity" with two young Englishwomen, and honourably acquitted by the Bombay High Court "without a stain on his character", is one of the interesting episodes I came across while browsing through the pages of *Comrade* of February 24 that year. *Comrade*, as readers may recall, was edited and published by the great freedom-fighter, Maulana Muhammad Ali Jauhar.

Maulana was so incensed with the incident that he strongly condemned the attitude of the Frontier bureaucracy regarding the issue, and expressed his opinion saying, "it was the independence and manliness of this important and extremely rich chief which actuated the local authorities to humble his pride and shower great indignities on him."

Along with the Khan (who is not named, but would probably be the father of the famous Nawab Sir Muhammad Akbar Khan), his English chauffeur named King and his wife were also arrested for alleged abduction of two British girls

ably discharged by the court.

The story, as culled from two editorials of *Comrade*, goes like this. The Khan had commissioned King and Mrs King to go to Bombay and secure the services of a governess and a teacher to coach the children and to apprise the ladies of the English culture and way of living.

From among a number of persons recommended to them for the task, the Kings selected two English girls, Elsie Swennel and Daisy Coutts. Miss Swennel had been a salesgirl at Whiteway Laidlaw's, a well-known fashionable establishment of general merchandise in Bombay, while Miss Coutts had served as a hospital nurse. These young women reached Hoti on September 25, 1911.

The evidence presented in the court showed that the Khan, who had himself gone to the railway station to receive the girls, protested to King and his wife that they were both young and unmarried. Five days later, the girls were informed that they should get ready to proceed to Rawalpindi since the Khan had decided to send them back to Bombay.

For eleven days, Elsie Swennel and Daisy Coutts were housed in

probably with undecided future plans. Then as a consequence of a message received from the Bombay police, the District Magistrate of Pindi recovered the girls and sent them to Bombay under police custody.

On their arrival in Bombay, the statements of the two girls were

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taken down. On the basis of those statements, the District Magistrate, Peshawar, issued a warrant of arrest for the chief of

action was taken on the basis of three remarks made by Elsie Swennel in letters to the Sister Superior of the Foundlings Home in Bombay, where she had worked for some time.

The first one was, "The chief came yesterday. He brought a lot of fruits and sweets. He seems a

very kind man but..." The second comment was that she would have stayed on "had the Khan had a begum or a rani." Of course, he had one. The third remark was that the Khan was very kind but, on two occasions, "he was rather familiar with his hands."

The girls had also complained in their letters about the bungalow which was in the

single bedroom that they were supposed to share, about the opening of the room into the verandah and about the embar-

when they were gazed at whenever they used to come to the verandah.

On such flimsy and inconsequential evidences were the old and respected chief arrested and humiliated. The presiding judge at the Bombay High Court, Mr Justice Daver, in his judgement, also made a "judicial aside" which amounted to a severe condemnation of the methods adopted by the Northern India Police and the other administrators concerned.

His observed, "When the two girls were at Hoti, the accused could have taken advantage of them, but he did not interfere with their liberty." Justice Daver also observed that during their eleven-day stay in Rawalpindi, the girls made no complaints against the conduct of their host and in the cross examination, which went on for three days, the only impression that could be produced was that there were certain acts of the accused which were of very trifling nature, but Miss Swennel apprehended them to be the acts of familiarity.

The Judge, therefore, discharged and acquitted the Khan, his chauffeur and Mrs King, stating that "they will leave the court without a stain on their character." The charge of

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Jauhar: founder of the Mulsim press in the subcontinent

King had earlier been withdrawn by the prosecution.

In an earlier part of the judgement, Justice Daver took note of the fact that the Khan had been testified to be a cripple of 70 years of age by three eminent army doctors, all Englishmen, and that "he has been subjected to a great many indignities, and the procedure followed seems to me to be un-understandable."

The case created a stir and prompted Maulana Muhammad Ali to take editorial notice of the "cruel arrest" of the chief in the most critical words. In his second editorial on the subject, Maulana disclosed that the Chief Commissioner of the NWFP, Sir George Roos-Keppel, was so displeased with the editorial censure of his administration that he cancelled the annual subscription to *Comrade*, which still had

eight months to go and decided to forgo the arrears. Maulana had quite a bit to say about the issue. His remarks can be termed as a minor masterpiece of sarcasm in those days. I would like to quote some excerpts from the editorial:

"We have hitherto had on our subscribers' list practically every member of the Government of India and head of a local government. We would be less than human if we did not feel gratified at this token of appreciation of a journal yet in its infancy. Sir George Roos-Keppel has been a subscriber of *Comrade* since the paper was started in January 1911, and we have been grateful to him for having given us the opportunity of reaching him in this manner.

"Had Sir George decided to forgo any sum paid out of his private purse, we should only have laughed at his tactics. He would have benefitted us when he wanted to hurt us. But it is the Chief Commissioner that does so, and we should like to know who authorised him to play ducks and drakes even with eight rupees, one anna and two pies.

"The paper was ordered by the administration and was paid for out of the taxes which we and our clients pay. It is not for Sir George Roos-Keppel to show his pique at our and their expense. We hope Finance would take note and ask Sir George to refund the money out of his private purse."

Such was the power of the pen wielded by Maulana Muhammad Ali Jauhar. Truly, he was a fearless journalist, and could take on the British Government without a thought for his own safety.