

# Salt of the Sarkar

## Across the Black Waters

by

## Mulk Raj Anand

Excerpt from Chapter I  
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### I

'MARSELS!'

'We have reached Marsels!'

'Hip, hip, hurrah!'

The sepoys were shouting excitedly on deck.

Lalu got up from where he sat watching a game of cards and went to see Marseilles.

The sun was on its downward stride on the western horizon as the convoy ships went steaming up towards the coast of France, with their cargo of the first Divisions of Indian troops who had been brought to fight in Europe, a cargo stranger than any they had carried before. The hot, red afternoon, stirred by a chill breeze from the stormy gulf, lay quivering on the town, which sheltered beneath a few steep rocks.

'Is the war taking place there then?' a sepoy asked.

No one answered him, as most of the sepoys did not know where the war was. In fact they had not known where they were going until it was announced in the orders of the day that a message had been intercepted through the 'telephone without wires' on the ship, that the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, Lord Kitchener, who had once been Commander-in-Chief in Hindustan, had told the House of Lords that two Divisions of the Indian Army were on their way to France. The Lords had clapped their hands, it was said, and

had sent their greetings to all brave ranks of the Indian Army. The King-Emperor, too, had sent them a message, reminding them of the personal ties which bound him and his consort, Mary, with the Indians since he had visited India for the Delhi Durbar, congratulating them on their personal devotion to his throne, and assuring them how their one-voiced demand to be foremost in the conflict had touched his heart ... The sepoys had been excited by these messages, the edge of their curiosity sharpened by the first authentic news which they had received of their destination. And the lives of the N.C.O.s had become unbearable answering questions, 'Where is France?' 'Is that England?' 'Where is the enemy?' 'How many miles is it from here?' ... Now one of them was asking 'Is the war there?'

Lalu felt, however, as if the naive questioner had taken the words out of his own mouth. For the rim of the sky was full of bloody contours, as if the souls of the war dead were going through the agony of being burned in their journey from hell to heaven. The battle might be raging there, though it was foolish to think so, because surely there would have been a sound of guns if the front was so near.

Lest someone should be looking at him and prying into his thoughts he began to walk away towards the prow of the ship.

'So we have come across the black waters safely,' he said to himself apprehensively, as if he really expected some calamity, the legendary fate of all those who went beyond the seas, to befall him at any moment. Truly, the black, or rather blue, water seemed uncanny, spreading for thousands of miles. It seemed as if God had spat upon the universe and the spittle had become the sea. The white flecks of the foam on the swell, where wave met wave, seemed like the froth churned out of God's angry mouth. The swish of the air as the ships tore their way across the rough sea seemed like the fury of the Almighty at the sin which the white men had committed in building up their powerful engines of the Iron Age, which transported huge cities of wood and steel across vast spaces, where it was difficult to tell in which direction lay the north, the south, the east or the west.

If his father had been alive and present, he would certainly have prophesied disaster for all those who had crossed the black waters, and he would have regarded this war to which they were going as a

curse laid upon the sahibs for trying to defy nature.

‘But why am I turning superstitious and thinking such thoughts?’ he rebuked himself. He had always defied his father and preened himself on his schooling, and he did not realize that he had inherited many of his father’s qualities, not only the enduring ones such as his short, lithe wiry frame, his love of the land, his generosity, his stubborn pride and his humour, but also his faith and his naivete.

A few sea-gulls were coming out to meet them, and more seemed to be seated on the hills above the bay, but on closer view the latter proved to be houses.

It was thrilling to be going out on this adventure, he felt, ‘like the pride of the beggar who suddenly finds wealth’. The smoke from the funnels of the convoy ships before, behind, and on both sides, was talking to the sky. The sea spoke the language of his soul, restless and storm-tossed, while the wind went bursting with joy in the sun. And the ship was urging him forward into the unknown. He was going to Vilayat after all, England, the glamorous land of his dreams, where the sahibs came from, where people wore coats and pantaloons and led active, fashionable lives – even, so it was said, the peasants and the poor sahibs. He wondered what was his destiny.