

SOMEBODY MUST HANG FOR THIS: THE MOPLAH DEATH TRAIN

“A great crime . . . a singular atrocity”—The Horror of the Black Hole—The worse horror of the Moplah Death Train—Eighty miles of Torment—Sixty-four prisoners stifled—The man responsible should be hung

WHEN was committed that great crime, memorable for its singular atrocity, memorable for the tremendous retribution by which it was followed. The English captives were left to the mercy of the guards, and the guards determined to secure them for the night in the prison of the garrison, a chamber known by the fearful name of the Black Hole. Even for a single European malefactor, that dungeon would, in such a climate, have been too close and narrow. The space was only twenty feet square. The air-holes were small and obstructed. It was the summer solstice, the season when the fierce heat of Bengal can scarcely be rendered tolerable to natives of England by lofty halls and by the constant waving of fans. The number of the prisoners was one hundred and forty-six. When they were ordered to enter the cell, they imagined that the soldiers were joking; and, being in high spirits on account of the promise of the Nabob to spare their lives, they laughed and jested at the absurdity of the notion. They soon discovered their mistake. They expostulated; they entreated; but in vain. The guards threatened to cut down all who hesitated. The captives were driven into the cell at the point of the sword, and the door was instantly shut and locked upon them.

“Nothing in history or fiction approaches the horrors which were recounted by the few survivors of that night. They cried for mercy. They strove to burst the door. Holwell, who, even in that extremity, retained some presence of mind, offered large bribes to the gaolers. But the answer was that nothing could be done without the Nabob's orders, that the Nabob was asleep, and that he would be angry if anybody woke him. Then the prisoners went mad with despair. They trampled each other down, fought for the places at the windows, fought for the pittance of water with which the cruel mercy of the murderers mocked their agonies, raved, prayed, blasphemed, implored the guards to fire among them. . . . At length the tumult died away in low gaspings and moanings. The day broke. The Nabob had slept off his debauch, and permitted the door to be opened. But it was some time before the soldiers could make a lane for the survivors, by piling up on each side the heaps of corpses on which the burning climate had already begun to do its loathsome work. When at length a passage was made, twenty-three ghastly figures, such as their own mothers would not have known, staggered one by one out of the charnel-house.”

Macaulay, Essay on “Lord Clive.”

WE were all, when young, made to shudder at the fate of those who suffered in the Black Hole of Calcutta. And truly, even now, after frequent re-readings, Macaulay's vivid narrative (given above) brings the inevitable nausea, The agony is so elemental, so easily visualised that the horror is stark and abiding.

The purpose of the narrative in Macaulay's hands, was to condone somewhat the “tremendous retribution which followed,” and he found justification in “these things which, after a lapse of more than eighty years, cannot be told or read without horror.”

More than eighty years have elapsed since Macaulay wrote: more than one hundred and sixty since the events he described. During the interval the power and might of the British Empire has grown to an extent which would have exhausted even Macaulay's power of rhetorical presentation. In India particularly the imperial power has extended and ramified until the widest reaches and the most intimate recesses of Indian life are affected by its sway.

Its apologists are in the habit of arguing in its defence that “we English” have such a “genius for government” that this Imperial rule, though it be alien to the three hundred and more millions of Indian people over whom it is extended, is so mild, wise, tolerant and efficient, that it comes as a boon and an ennobling influence to a conglomeration of peoples who, if left to themselves would suffer untold misery and privation. The British rule, we are told, may be alien to the whole body of Indian peoples; but so would be the rule of any one of those people over the rest, and the attainment of that alternative would involve all the horrors of chaos, carnage, famine and ferocity such as we associate with the names of Akbar Khan, Surajah Dowlah, or Nana Sahib. For proof we are

referred to the Black Hole of Calcutta and the massacre of Cawnpore. The Indians, runs the Imperialist legend, cannot rule themselves—therefore *we* must, in the interests of humanity, rule them.

The worth of this precious bit of special pleading was never more than infinitesimal. It becomes a maddening insult to the intelligence of every decent human being who reads such a news item as this from the *Manchester Guardian*:—

The following was issued by the India Office yesterday (22nd November, 1921):—

A message has reached the India Office of a deplorable occurrence in Madras Presidency in which 64 Moplah prisoners lost their lives. On November 19 100 convicted prisoners were entrained at Tirur, the British railway base for troops engaged in the Malabar fighting, for conveyance to Bellary Gaol.

When Podanur (about 80 miles from Tirur) was reached soon after midnight 56 were found to be dead. After receiving medical aid, the survivors were taken to Coimbatore. Eight more prisoners have since died there.

The prisoners were in a closed luggage van or vans (this is not yet clear), and apparently were suffocated. Points remaining to be explained are why the prisoners were not carried in ordinary compartments, and why signs of distress were not detected earlier.

The Government of Madras state that an investigation is being held, and a full report will be issued as soon as possible.

The Moplahs are known to us only from newspaper reports of their recent “insurrection.” How far their “revolt” exceeded a mere “riot” we are not allowed to know. Certainly they had raised no corps of volunteers, armed and equipped with magazine rifles and machine guns. None of their leaders were Privy Councillors; and none threatened to hand their territory over to any Kaiser (whether of Germany, the Sandwich Islands, or the Malabar Coast). They were an obscure and pastoral people who had grown angry at some real or fancied injustice. If they had firearms at all they were few in number and obsolete in pattern—old Tower muskets left over from the days of “John Company”; possibly even flint-locks.

At most their “insurrection” was a provoked outburst of feeling less dangerous to life and limb than many a jingo assault upon a Peace Meeting or the Armistice Celebration at Charing Cross. But even if it had been otherwise—if they had fought pitched battles and inflicted countless wounds and many deaths they would still (in the hands of men of dignity, decency and self-control) have been entitled to a treatment consistent with those qualities. Instead—!

A hundred men are to be conveyed by rail. They must travel for hours. Even in a climate such as this of Britain it would be torture to compel anyone to travel for such a distance, standing, with no possibility of rest, no provision for physical necessity, no water, and no food.

Even in this climate. In India, and *Southern India* at that, the bare thought becomes a degradation.

Read again Macaulay's description. Note the dimensions of the Black Hole—twenty feet by twenty. Note that he says that that space in that climate would have been “too close and narrow” even for “a single European malefactor.” Note that when the one hundred and forty-six English prisoners of Surajah Dowlah were ordered to enter this space they “laughed and jested at the absurdity of the notion.” Note all that and then note:—

“The van used to convey the Moplah convicts was a luggage van made of wood, divided into three partitions. The length of the van was 26 feet and its breadth 8 feet.”

Morning Post, 25/11/21

Reduce it to cold arithmetic. For 146 English there were provided 400 square feet—a little less than 2.74 square feet per person. This constituted a “singular atrocity”—a “great crime.” One hundred Moplahs—possibly more—were packed into a luggage van whose total floor space, making no allowance for partitions, was 208 square feet—less than 2.08 square feet per person. No figures are given of the height of the Black Hole—we do know that the Moplahs were crammed into a closed luggage van. The season of the year was different, but the Moplahs were nearer the Equator. Viewed as dispassionately as is humanly possible, cold arithmetic alone shows the modern atrocity to exceed the earlier.

There may be—one hopes not, but there may be—those who would find an excuse in the fact that the one set of victims were English, and the others just “niggers.” If such there be, let them learn from the results that the plea will serve them little.

We take this news telegram from the *Morning Post* of November 25th:—

MADRAS, Nov. 22.

The Special Correspondent of the *Madras Mail* telegraphs from Tirur that the official inquiry shows that the Moplah prisoner victims of the Podanur disaster, almost certainly died of suffocation. The van in which they were confined recently came up from Madras, and neither contained, nor had contained, any petrol or poisonous articles. On previous occasions a van of a different pattern had been used to convey prisoners. The vehicle used on the occasion of the accident had ventilating panels covered with perforated metal, but it was found that these had been recently painted, so causing obstructions to the air passages. A horrible struggle seems to have occurred in the van, many bodies being severely bitten, probably as the men fought for a place where the air came through the chinks of the doors.

Read in conjunction with Macaulay's classic outburst, this extract is only too illuminating. Every circumstance save one reappears. We have not yet heard that the poor Moplah victims offered bribes to their gaolers, nor that they were told that nothing could be done till a Nabob had finished his sleep.

Their gaolers would seem to have been out of sight and hearing—possibly sleeping in cars constructed with a careful consideration for the need, in that climate, for air and breathing space.

But what difference did this make to the tortured and maddened Moplahs? Not from fear of a brutal Nabob, from sheer indifference and callous stupidity, they were left to their fate by those who were appointed a guard over them.

There was to have been inquiry as to why their cries for aid were not heard sooner. We shall be told, probably, that the roar and rattle of the train rendered their guards as incapable of hearing their screams of agony, as Surajah Dowlah from drunkenness was oblivious to the agony of his victims.

We shall be told all sorts of things. An attempt—a poor, mean-spirited attempt—was made to attribute the deaths to some fumes from some commodity—petrol or chemicals—which had been carried in the van previous to its cargo of human beings.

The *Morning Post*, to its credit be it said, refuses to be a party to this outrageous evasion. It records the fact bluntly. It regrets it; but—then it leaves it. It is an accident, it seems to say, a regrettable accident; but, after all, the victims were only “niggers,” and rebel-convicts at that. And so the aristocratic old *Post* turns back to its normal work of *blethering* about the “betrayal of Ulster” and the abominations of Bolshevism.

This may be all right for the *Morning Post*, it may even be all right for the *Times*, the *Mail*, and the

rest of the bourgeois press who are a thousand times more concerned about keeping the proletariat in besotted adulation of things as they are than in clearing their own honour and conscience from the stain of complicity in an infamy. It is not and cannot be good enough for us.

It is not, and cannot be, good enough for any man of any class who has any remnant of common decency and common humanity.

The Empire is no thing of our creation. It exists neither by our leave nor for our advantage. Its rulers would, we know, have little compunction about suppressing us, if they found it convenient, as ruthlessly as they suppressed the Moplah rising. They do not rule by our choice, nor with our will. They rule, and know they rule, in flat defiance of both. It would be easy for us, and quite justifiable, were we to say that we have neither part, nor complicity, nor responsibility for acts such as this atrocious Black Hole of the Moplahs.

Easy, but in no way sufficient or manly.

By any and every one of the Moplah survivors, by any and every kinsman of the sixty-four victims of this abominable brutality, we (being English) will be confounded into one category with the active agents of British rule, whose immediate orders precipitated the crime. Everything and everybody answering to the name of English will be tainted with this murder until fitting penance and reparation shall have been performed. And if reparation comes not voluntarily, then we can be sure of an enforced retribution. The fact that we of the working-class have been too weak or too little united to displace these agents and the ruling system which they serve is a defence which acquits us of the crime only to convict us of a desolating incompetence.

We will, if we are men, submit in patience to neither alternative. We shall be satisfied neither with a white-washing report nor with elaborate official evasions uttered by bored under-secretaries in reply to languid queries in the House. Much as we detest the canons and standards of the established law, and much as we wish to replace them by others more to our liking, we shall be content in this instance if our rulers act strictly by the standards they themselves have set up for our observance. For them, and by those standards, the taking of life is a crime to be expiated—unless madness or extreme provocation can be pleaded—only by the death of the guilty party.

Here are sixty-four corpses.

Sixty-four men were as surely murdered, and murdered in cold blood, as any men that ever died by pistol, knife, bludgeon or poison.

Whoever it was that ordered those hundred Moplahs into that luggage van to go that journey was as surely guilty of murder—and more meanly and abominably guilty—than if he had stricken them down by his own hand. His agents were accessories before and after the fact, but he, whoever he may be, is the Murderer-in-Chief.

No matter who he is, this ghastly, this monstrous crime, should be expiated in the only way it can be. The man must be hanged.

The least we of the working-class can do is to see that somebody swings for it.

The most we can do is to make any repetition impossible. This is one of the fruits—the inevitable fruits—of Imperialism!