



# THE GREAT CURRY CONTEST

A Clockwork Imperium  
Short Story  
J.P. MEDVED

# **The Great Curry Contest**

## **Or, How Henry and James Became Friends with Raheem**

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# I

James Billingsworth was drunk. His companion, Henry Emerson, was cursing him with a loquacity that, had anybody nearby understood the Queen's English, would have left their ears burning and their cheeks red.

The two British airmen were both thoroughly enjoying Cairo.

"Come away from there you sodding tosspot!"

Henry steered his friend past the colorful bottles on display in the stall and out of reach of their more-than-questionable liquid contents.

James was momentarily nonplussed to have his plan for imbibing further exotic spirits so frustrated, "You know, for a naval man you're much too temperate, Henry."

"We sail the wind, not the waves. No need to seek oblivion like our soggy brothers in arms." Henry grunted as he deftly parried an attempt by his comrade to double back to the stall, "Besides, the army's shipping off to rescue Gordon any day now, as soon as the Voyageurs battalion arrives." He placed his body between the stall and his friend and matched the other's sidesteps and feints until James gave up with an exaggerated sigh and turned to go. "And I've no desire to pilot an airship with an aching head and a cotton filled mouth." At this last he plucked a little green bottle just visible in James's rear pocket and placed it, with an apologetic look towards the stall's vexed owner, back on the shelf where it had resided a moment earlier.

For reply James blew Henry a raspberry.

The market around them was a riot of colors, sounds and smells. Cairo in the spring of 1885 was awash with the new and the alien, and the nearly three thousand troops of Her Britannic Majesty, here to end the Mad Mahdi's ill conceived rebellion and rescue the famous Charles Gordon, only added to the din. The blood red uniforms of British soldiers on leave shared the narrow alleys and winding marketplaces with native merchants in white robes, foreign traders with their flamboyant silks, and the strange head coverings and poltroons of men from the colonial regiments of London's far flung Empire.

A group of this last, dark, be-turbaned Sikhs in the dusky blue of the 2nd Bengal Clockwork Artillery, were making their own way through the dozens of covered stalls in the market. They all laughed uproariously as one of their number, his arms gesticulating broadly, finished a joke for his companions.

James perked up his ears, "Those fellows seem less temperate than you." And he was off.

Henry, with an exasperated glance heavenward, chased after his impetuous comrade.

When he caught up to him, James was already in earnest conversation with the four other men. As he drew nearer Emerson could tell it was an argument; a good natured affair of the sort that soldiers in the same army, but different regiments, will use to settle or engender healthy rivalries.

"You British have no stomach for it. It is why it has taken you so long to commit to rescuing Gordon, after a year of public outcry, and it is why we poor colonials must now bear the burden of your inde-

cision." The speaker was a slight man, the same one who had told the joke earlier. He had a large mole just below his left eye. His trimmed beard bobbed as he spoke, "As soon as you encounter one setback your people lose all their will, and the ministers recall the soldiers and wash their hands of the whole distasteful business. It happened with Hicks and it would have happened with Gordon if he wasn't so popular."

Both young Britons rushed to their country's defense, Henry interjecting as James made to speak, "Poppycock! If it weren't for the British will to end the slave trade Gordon wouldn't be in the Sudan in the first place."

"No, Gordon is an exception, as a rule your people have no stomach for difficult things. It is why English food is so bland. Why, Englishmen do not even dare eat the traditional curry of my homeland of Jagaipuri."

James was growing indignant, "We English eat whatever food suits us and if we do not eat your spiced glop it is because we choose not to, not because we cannot." He swayed slightly on his feet.

The short Indian soldier looked around at his friends with a conspiratorial smile, which they all returned. "Do you care to place a wager on that?"

Before Henry could diffuse the trap, James walked right in to it, "We'll match you farthing for farthing. The strength of the English stomach is unimpeachable."

The jaws sprang shut, "The Indian soldiers' mess is hosting a spicy curry eating contest tonight. I'll bet you a guinea you two don't make it past the first bowl."

Henry tried to answer ahead of his friend but before his mouth was even halfway open James had sealed their doom, "It's a bet!" He shook the Indian artilleryman's hand.

"See you at eight o'clock then," and the group of colonial soldiers walked off, leaving James and Henry amid the bustling native traffic of the marketplace.

The two stood in silence for a moment, until Emerson finally found his voice, "You blithering sot!"

## II

The man in front of them was a mountain. The bearded giant must have stood six foot four, with brawny, thick shoulders and massive, trunk-like legs. The turban atop his dark skinned face only added to his imposing height, and the scowl above his crossed arms let Henry and James know just what he thought of the two trespassing Englishmen before him.

James spoke up, "We're ah, here for the curry eating contest."

The scowl deepened.

Henry stepped in front of James and tried, "We were invited to come by one of your mess mates. Short chap, beard like so," he pantomimed the length, "mole, on his left cheek."

Eyes narrowed. "Vaskar invited you?"

"Yes!" James cut in, enthusiastic, "Good ol' Vaskar. Told us to pop on by for a bite of curry, he did."

The scowl remained, but the mountain shifted his bulk just enough to allow the airmen past him and into the wide tent which served as the mess hall for the Indian soldiers of the Gordon Relief Expedition. It was well lit with oil lamps and a few galvanic lights strung in between the poles. Three long tables ran the length of the tent and men from the various Indian regiments--the Bengal Clockwork Artillery, Skinner's Horse, the Madras Pioneers, the Landhoor Rangers--occupied all but a few of the seats.

At the very center of the middle table a space had been cleared, and a small crowd stood at its fringes. There were ten open seats, and on the table steamed three massive pots. Henry almost gagged from the scent of unfamiliar spices.

"I *hate* curry."

James was more sanguine, "So you've told me old boy. For the last four hours. It's done nothing to aid my return to the world of the temperate."

"It was your prolonged *absence* from that world which caused this bloody mess in the first place!" Henry's whisper was almost a snarl. "And now we stand to lose a whole guinea because of your soggy impetuosity."

"Oh don't be such a wet blanket! We've only got to survive the first bowl."

Henry grunted and shook his head as they made their way to two of the seats in front of the large pots of curry. The little crowd parted reluctantly and sullen stares met the pair of white interlopers as they sat down at the long table. Henry looked about anxiously and James cracked a nervous smile.

There was a movement across the table, and Vaskar, a smirk below his single mole, took a seat directly opposite them. He was joined by one of his companions from the marketplace. "So you came. I was beginning to have doubts."

James rejoined, "Your slop doesn't scare us."

Henry added, "And when we say we will come, we do. The word of an Englishman is gold."

Vaskar chuckled, "Of course. Well, I hope you brought some *real* gold, because when it comes time to pay me for losing this bet, your word will not suffice."

Henry's hands clenched into fists under the table. James's nostrils flared.

There was a moment of tense silence as the four men eyed each other across the wooden no-man's land. This was eased only marginally when they were joined by the six other contestants; soldiers from various of the other Indian regiments, including one fat lancer who hardly was able to fit in his seat. Henry wondered idly how he managed to fit atop a horse.

He heard the sound of activity behind him, a rustling as the crowd parted. Henry turned in his seat. There stood the giant from before. He spoke and his voice was like boulders, "I am Raheem. I will be judging this contest." His arms were crossed over his chest. "There will be three stages. Yoghurt bowls are at the end of the table," he nodded his head in that direction, "for those who can no longer stand the spice and wish to concede."

His eyes settled on Henry and James. "Otherwise the rules are as usual. Does anyone need me to explain?"

"Well actually--"

James cut Henry off with a cheery smile, "Nope! Sounds bully." He ignored Henry's sour look and whispered out of the side of his mouth, "Don't want to appear as amateurs dear boy, ninety-nine percent of this is mental."

"How in bloody hells would *you* know?" Henry shot back.

His little speech over, the giant stepped forward to occupy the space between Henry and James and began dishing out curry to each of the contestants. He first served the five men across the table, most of whom were listening to Vaskar tell some story or another, his arms waving in that expansive way of his.

The curry spilled into the bowls, steam rising off the chunky concoction that was, Henry imagined, the color of the mud in a Bengali pigsty after a particularly virulent rain had mixed it together with all the *other* typical contents of a Bengali pigsty. He wrinkled his nose in disgust.

Raheem served the two men to Henry's left, including the fat lancer who leaned in as soon as his dish was full and inhaled the aroma greedily. The ladle went back for Henry's allotment next.

He almost missed it.

If he hadn't been deliberately ignoring James, who was trying to make cheerful remarks on the other side of Raheem, he wouldn't have caught the quick hand movement as the ladle passed in front of Vaskar. As it was he still couldn't be quite sure of what he had seen. He looked closer when the ladle dipped in for James's portion. There, again, Vaskar's hand flicked imperceptibly when the steaming

utensil passed in front of him. His broad arm movements as he spoke and Raheem's bulk as he dished out curry served to conceal the movement from just about everyone but Henry.

Henry leaned back in his chair and motioned to James behind Raheem's bulk, "I do think we're being had."

James raised an eyebrow. Henry, with a wayward glance up at the back of Raheem's turbaned head, quickly related what he had seen Vaskar do to the ladlefuls of curry destined for their bowls. "I think we ought to denounce them and then leave at once," he finished.

James shook his head, "We can't give up without even one bite! There's something more important at stake here than our tongues, Henry, the honor of the Sceptered Isle hangs in the balance. Would you have our actions impugn cowardice to the reputation of Mighty Britannia?"

Inwardly Emerson cursed. His friend knew just how to use Henry's sense of honor and patriotism against him.

Raheem, finished with dishing out curry, turned and bent over the two Englishmen, his voice low so that the rest of the table could not hear it, "I can remove him, if you wish. What he did is against the rules."

Henry's eyes widened. Apparently their whispers were not as confidential as they had thought.

"Actually," James Billingsworth's smile was alight with mischief, "I have a better idea."

There was a brief pause after James outlined his plan. He looked at Henry expectantly and, with a roll of his eyes, Emerson nodded.

"Very well," Raheem's voice was a deep, rumbling bass, "I will allow you to proceed as you wish." The big man didn't smile, but Henry thought he saw a hint of mirth at the corners of his eyes before he turned away.

James stood up, a queasy expression on his face. "Sorry to delay the proceedings, but can one of you chaps direct me to the nearest loo? Drank a bit too much *zibib* I'm afraid."

The fat lancer pointed with a stubby arm towards the tent entrance and, with a smile that showed he was no stranger to difficulties involving *zibib* and loos, gave directions to James on how to locate the closest one. With profuse thanks, James was off, his alacritous exit leaving the tent's entrance flapping in the air of his wake.

Henry smiled, the glares from across the table doing little to dampen his now rising spirits.

In no time at all James was back, announcing his return with an apparently less-than-sober rendition of "Rule, Britannia!" His caterwauling captured the attention of the whole tent for a brief moment.

It was just long enough.

With James finally seated again, Henry nodded to Raheem who announced, "We will now begin the first stage of the contest. You will have three minutes to finish your bowls. Begin."



Vaskar looked expectantly towards the two Britons, "Now we see just how cast-iron the English stomach is. I don't imagine I will be surprised."

"Oh, you may be." Henry smiled.

For a split second the four men eyed each other across the table again, each daring the others to take the first bite. Neither Englishman blinked. Vaskar, with one last glare between the two, finally raised his spoon to his lips. His companion did likewise, and Henry and James followed suit.

Almost in unison the four men swallowed. Vaskar's face was a picture of gloating triumph as he watched for Henry's reaction. Then his face changed. It was subtle at first, his eyes widening almost imperceptibly, but Henry was pleased to note its rapid progression across his features. The cheeks were reddening, the nostrils flaring, and Vaskar attempted to swallow again, working the muscles in his throat with no result.

As Vaskar and his companion stood up abruptly and lunged for the bowls of cooling yoghurt near the entrance, Raheem's impassive face broke into a broad, toothy smile. It shone on Henry and James, "I should think we ought to be friends."

Henry returned the smile and grasped Raheem's outstretched hand in his own, "I rather think we shall."

James nodded his agreement as he spoke around a mouthful of curry, "Quite. And Henry, this stuff is actually pretty good!"

**End.**

## Afterword

I hope you enjoyed this free short introduction to Henry, James and Raheem and their ahistorical world. Please share this with anyone and everyone, it's totally free and I don't mind you passing it on to a friend or two (in fact, I would love it).

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for news, links and updates about all the stories set in the Clockwork Imperium series (including *To Rescue General Gordon*, and *Queen Victoria's Ball*) or visit Amazon to purchase them.

Thanks for reading!

-J.P.