

BAMBA

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It was the spring of 1864, and a twenty-four year old King stepped off a ship *en route* to Bombay *via* the Suez, docked in the choppy waters of Port Alexandria. The ship was carrying an important package, a lead-lined casket with the six-month-dead body of his mother, the Queen Regent. No longer the royal family of an existing monarchy, but one fourteen years previously had been seized by the East India Company, property and possessions handed over by the then ten-year-old king. Brought into the Durbar, staring up at men in finely feathered hats and red coats, the child signed over everything to which his family could lay claim, including the Ko-hi-Noor. A *gift* the English call it, to Queen Victoria herself, from the child King. He strode off the ship as the water licked its sides, headed for the American Mission orphanage in Cairo. The King was on a special mission, to find a bride, and one who was as exotic as he.

This is how Bamba's story always begins, with this King, who whisks her off to a life of riches and wealth, her *destiny*. Bamba was the daughter of an Ethiopian slave girl and a German merchant. An illegitimate child, she was adopted in her teens by her father, and placed in the American Mission School in Cairo. Barbara Müller she was christened, and baptised, same as her mother, by the Coptic Church.

To piece together Bamba's story is to sift through what little we have: photographs, stories, and we can speculate, place ourselves inside the frame, somehow. Big eyes under faint eyebrows, a severe stare, no smile creeping slowly across from the corner of her lips.

The King, before arriving in Cairo that breezy evening, had written to the American Mission School, a letter addressed to Reverend Hogg:

*My Dear Mr Hogg,
What I wished to have spoken to you about was whether there
was in either of your schools a truly Christian girl who has joined*

the Church, and whom you and Miss Dales could recommend me for a wife, it is very desirable that I should find a wife from the same quarter of the globe. Rank and position in life are of no consequence to me. What I want is a truly Christian girl who loves the Lord Jesus in sincerity and truth.

I am, Yours Faithfully; Duleep Singh.

Bamba, they had renamed her, and what is described is her extraordinary beauty. She spoke not a word of English, and as a reply to his request for marriage, she gave him a small handkerchief embroidered with flowers and kissed his hands.

She wore a dress of rippling white silk, hanging in layers over her body, rising up to the neck in a piece of dramatic French lace, *fichu point d'Alençon*. Orange flowers were braided into her hair, covered by a veil of soft slippery gauze. Only a necklace of tiny pearls hung around her neck, and a slim bracelet set with small diamonds. The wedding was held in the British Consulate in Alexandria, an impressive building, white and formidably enclosed by high walls. That he was Indian, or a king, Singh did not betray with his attire, apart from a large red tarboosh, black tassel hanging to one side. He was in European costume for the wedding, a handmade suit, as he had grown up seeing British men wear around him.

Singh fussed over his bride, maintaining every detail of her attire, her hair; the way she powdered her skin. A seamstress was hired and kept on call, while *Bamba* was pushed into the stylish crinolines of the time. She tottered around in high boots, the metal skirt bouncing around her; throwing off her balance. Singh instructed that she 'look like other people', but that as a signature style, her dresses were to be cut short. The seamstress despaired. A compromise was reached: that she would dress in a faux-Egyptian style. In the few pictures there are of *Bamba*, she is striking: in a Turkish jacket with long and wide sleeves, on her head a fez strung with large pearls, worn with a tassel that hangs down to her shoulders. Her hair underneath plaited into several very long, thin braids, either arranged neatly to frame her face, or coiled gently over her head.

Bamba was a tremendous hit in the court of Queen Victoria, who wrote in a journal, 'I never beheld a lovelier child, a plump little darling

with the most splendid dark eyes, but not very dark skin'. She would make Bamba sit next to her, and question her thoroughly about her life and past. *Not very dark skin*. A clue to Bamba's position and reception. Bamba's true heritage was kept a secret, mere whispers among the officials at the India Office, although the Queen herself was told in a handwritten letter from Duleep Singh, followed by an apology for her low social ranking.

Bamba was only sixteen when she was moved to England and made mistress of Elveden, Singh's estate in Surrey. At the time he was living off a pension provided by the India Office, but as the couple embarked on a mission to rebuild the entire estate in the fashion of Sikh palaces back home in India the costs soared, and receipts were sent to the India Office (and largely left unpaid). It became a very serious project as the old estate was torn down, piece by piece, and rebuilt with enormous splendour. A drawing room of carved wood, by craftsmen bought in from India, painted with gold leaf, and encrusted with precious stones. Chairs made of sandalwood littered the halls, covered in fine needlework. A suite of ebony was mounted, inlaid, and brushed over with powdered gold. And enormous mirrors filled the rooms, refracting light from heavy chandeliers, a dizzying spectacle of shining, bright surfaces and leathered furnishings. Bamba gave birth to six children, and threw herself into household work. A devout Christian, she kept to her prayers daily, building little shrines around the estate, as she had done at the orphanage as a child.

There is not very much known about Bamba's life at this time; her story is almost entirely written as a footnote to that of her husband's, and very little has been recorded to give hint of Bamba's nature or interests. Apart from, of course, her *beauty*. Perhaps she spent her time pacing the large grounds, constantly adapting to her new life, holding onto things that she could call entirely her own. In an account of her disposition the Maharaja proclaims that she was entirely submissive, and if asked what she would like to do, simply stated, 'Maharajah wish I wish.'