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THE STORY OF
RANI OF JHANSI



written by SANDHYA RAO
illustrated by REGINALD GOVEAS

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The Story of Rani of Jhansi (English)

ISBN 81-86895-02-7

© Tulika Publishers

First printed in India, 1997

Reprinted in 1998, 1999, 2002

This edition 2004

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Printed and bound at

APR Brothers, 159 St Mary's Road, Abhiramapuram, Chennai 600 018, India

Published by

Tulika Publishers, 13 Prithvi Avenue, Abhiramapuram, Chennai 600 018, India

email tulikabooks@vsnl.com

website www.tulikabooks.com

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THE STORY OF
RANI OF JHANSI



written by SANDHYA RAO
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Think of 1857 and you think of the Rani of Jhansi, one of India's bravest women. This is her story. Read and colour.

What is so special about 1857? That was the year Indian soldiers openly turned against their masters, the British. It was the first organised fightback and Indians called this their first war of independence. In British eyes, it was a revolt — the sepoy mutiny. 'Sepoy' is what they called Indian soldiers serving in their armies. The word came from the Hindi 'sipahi'.

Using force and cunning, the British had managed to take control of the whole of India and Indians had been slaves in their own country for about 200 years now. The time had come to change all that.

When Lakshmibai was born in Benaras, in 1827 — some say she was born in 1835 — the wise ones said she would become queen. Her parents, Moropant Tambe and Bhagirathibai, named her Manukarnika after the river Ganga. Her mother told her many stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha and Manu, as she was called, was very happy.

All of a sudden, Bhagirathibai died. Manu was only 4. Moropant then moved to a place called Bithur where he worked for Baji Rao II, who had once been the Peshwa. 'Peshwa' was the title given to the Maratha ruler.

Manu was not sad for long. She quickly made friends with two boys, Nana Sahib and Tantia Tope. Nana Sahib was Baji Rao's adopted son. With them, she learned to ride and shoot. She also went to school, although in those days girls were not taught to read and write.

Everyone, including Baji Rao, called her Chhabili, the sweet one. Certainly there was something special about her.



Manu and friends

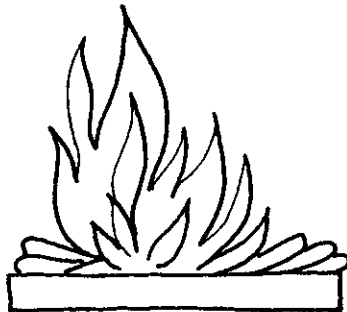
Maybe that's why Gangadhar Rao, the raja of Jhansi, married her. Especially since he had decided not to marry again after his first wife, Ramabai, died. They had no children. When Gangadhar Rao married Manu, she was a child herself, only 15. But she was bold and intelligent. The bride was given a new name, Lakshmibai, Rani of Jhansi.

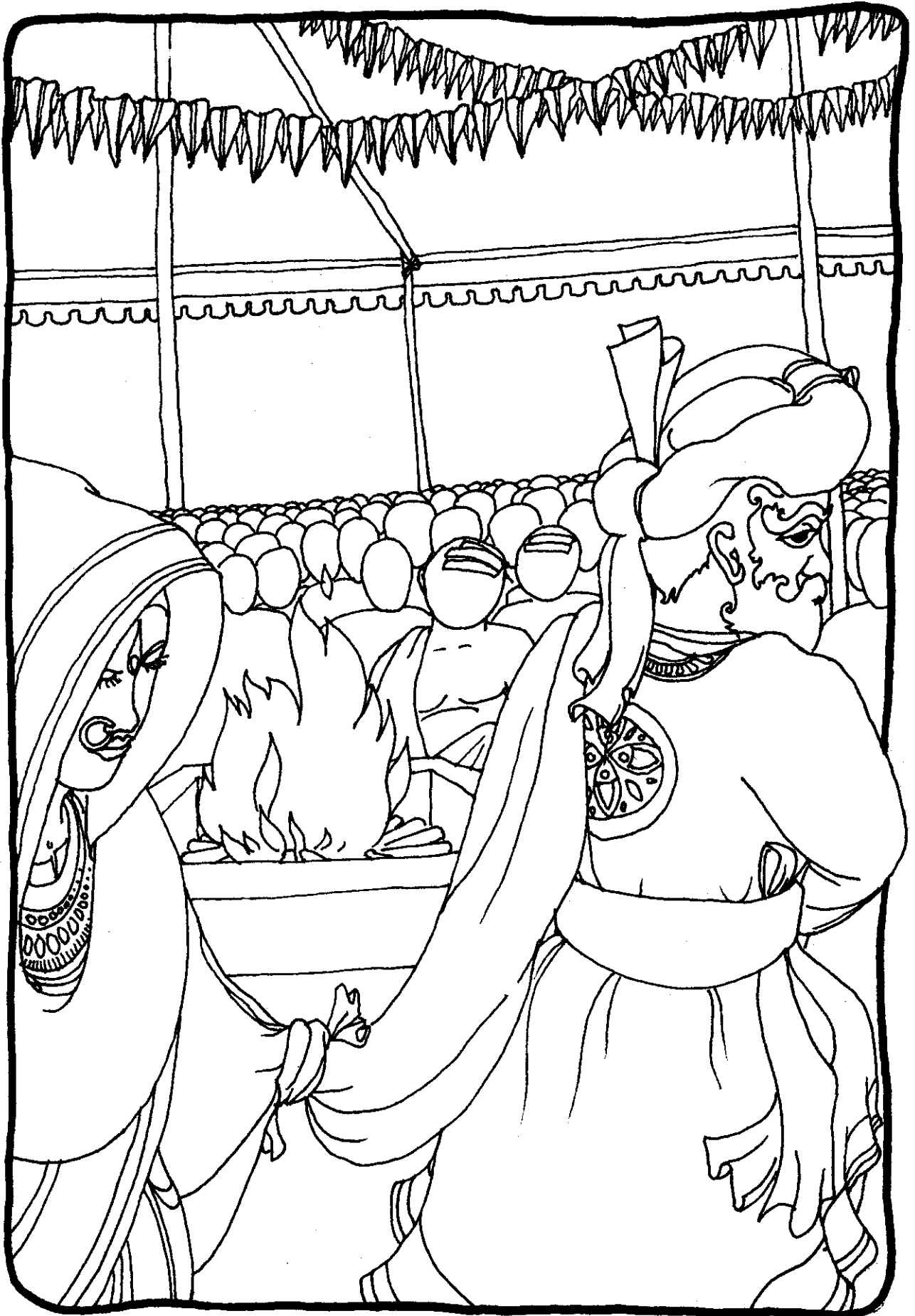
The kingdom of Jhansi was in central India, in the region now known as Madhya Pradesh. The people of Jhansi welcomed Lakshmibai into their hearts and she loved them too.

In 1851, Lakshmibai had a baby boy. The people were thrilled. At last their raja had an heir. Sadly, the baby died after three months. The people were heartbroken.

In those days, it was common for rulers to adopt if they did not have children. Gangadhar Rao chose five year-old Anand Rao, his cousin's child, to be his adopted son. A colourful ceremony was held on November 19, 1853 and Anand was renamed Damodar Rao Gangadhar. The raja informed the British about the adoption and told them that his queen, Lakshmibai, would rule Jhansi until the boy grew up.

With that, Jhansi's troubles began. It seemed as though the raja had been waiting for this moment because two days later, Gangadhar Rao died. Immediately, Governor General Lord Dalhousie announced that he was taking over Jhansi.





The marriage of Manu and Gangadhar Rao

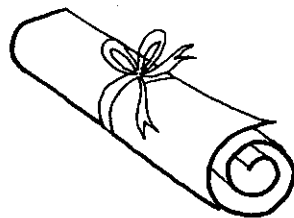
The British had a clever way of acquiring new territories for their empire called the Doctrine of Lapse. That's what they used now. If an Indian ruler died without a natural heir, the British simply took over his or her kingdom. The kingdom or state "lapsed" to the British.

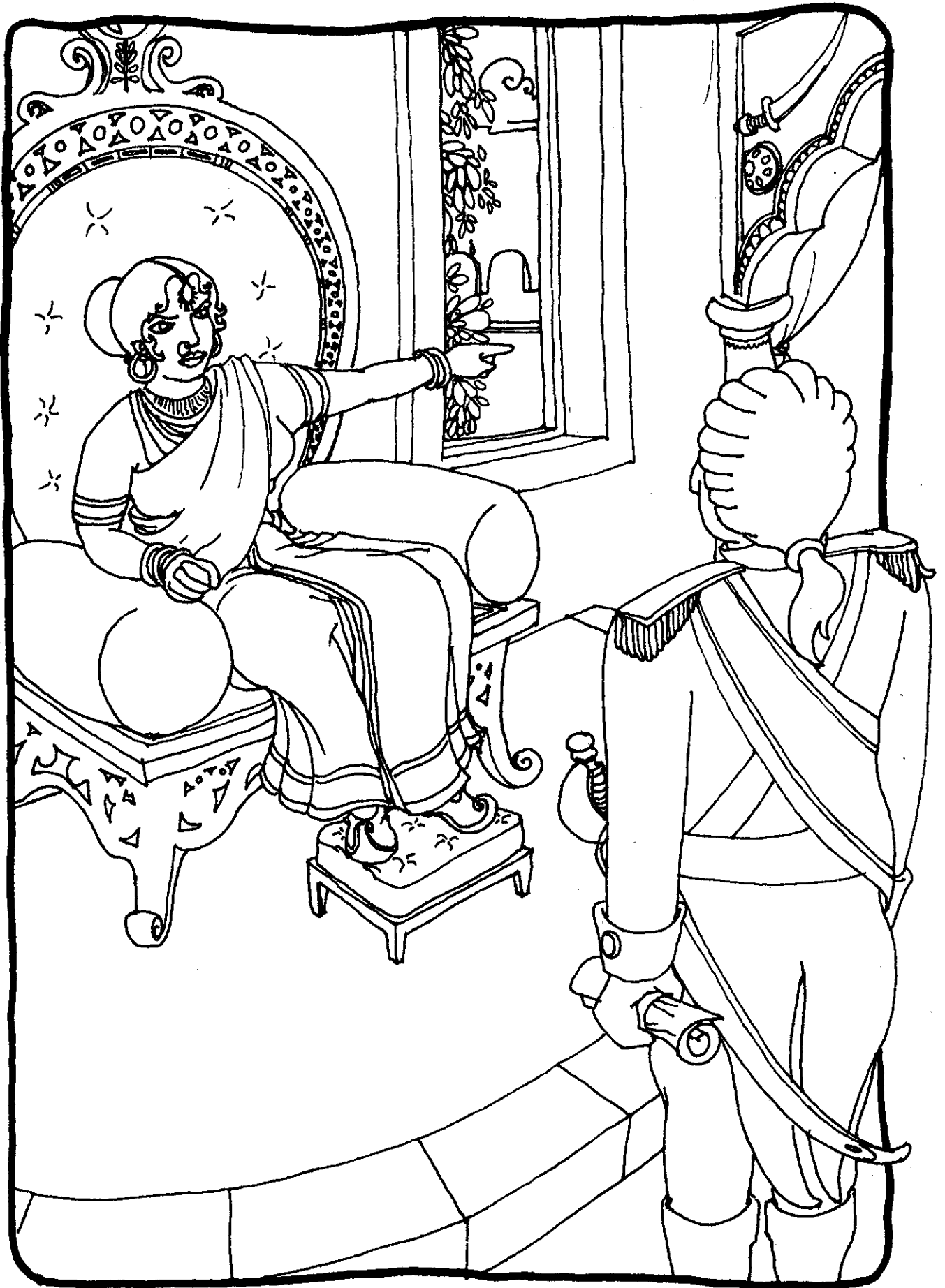
Lakshmibai wrote many letters to the British authorities asking to be recognised as the malika of Jhansi until Damodar was old enough to rule. The British pretended they couldn't hear.

"Main Jhansi nahin doongi," Lakshmibai said to the officer who came with Dalhousie's orders. "I will not give up Jhansi." But in her heart she knew it was no use. That night, alone in her room, Lakshmibai wept and wept. In the morning, she and Damodar left the fort and went to live in a palace in the town. The British began to govern Jhansi.

In the palace, Lakshmibai led a quiet life. She visited the temple regularly. She taught Damodar to fence and ride, read and write. And she did not stop writing to the British for justice.

Three years passed. The year 1857 arrived.





"Main Jhansi nahin doongi!"

The British occupied all of India and their armies were full of Indian soldiers. Not everybody was happy, though. The sepoys, for instance. They were very hurt because their officers had given them new cartridges to use in their rifles. These were greased with fat from pigs and beef to help the bullet fire more smoothly from the rifle.

But the soldiers felt the cartridges were dirty because their religion did not allow them to touch pork or beef. By using these cartridges, they were going against their religious beliefs. This upset them greatly. There were a lot of other problems too, but this was the worst.

One hot summer's day, on May 10, sepoys of the Bengal army in Meerut attacked their British officers. They even killed some of them. The sepoy mutiny had begun! As the news spread across central and northern India, hundreds and thousands of soldiers turned against their officers. Some of them rushed to Delhi and crowned Bahadur Shah Zafar II their leader. He was the last of the Mughal emperors, very old and held virtual prisoner by the British.

Very soon, the mutiny spread to Jhansi. The British did not know what to do or how to control the mutineers. They appealed to Lakshmibai to talk to her people and tell the soldiers to return quietly to their camps.

Lakshmibai said she would do her best. She was caught in a very strange situation. She couldn't say no to the British because Jhansi had always been loyal to them. She couldn't say no to the rebels because she believed in freedom.



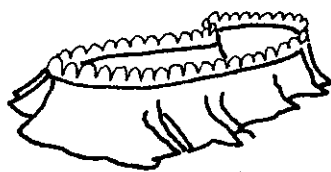
1857: where the sipahis mutinied

While she was trying to sort out these questions, the rulers of neighbouring Orchha, Pihari and Dalia decided to attack Jhansi. But Lakshmibai rose to the occasion. She gathered her army together and led them well. None of the attackers could come anywhere near Jhansi.

Seeing this, the British accused Lakshmibai of preparing to fight against them! This was the last straw. Lakshmibai decided to join the rebellion — her war for independence had begun.

First of all, she dug up all the piles of ammunition that had been hidden secretly under the fort when the British took over Jhansi. Then she set up two new factories to manufacture hundreds of rifles and swords. Thousands of men — and some women — were trained to fight. Very soon, the Jhansi army was 15,000 strong.

Lakshmibai supervised all the activities, galloping from one place to another on horseback. Often, two bright eyes peered over her shoulder. It was little Damodar riding pillion, two small arms holding his mother tight! Their Rani was always on horseback so much so the people believed she jumped out of bed right on to her horse!





Lakshmibai talking to her soldiers

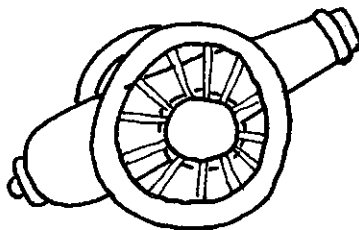
Meanwhile, the British were gradually regaining control over India. Bahadur Shah was captured and sent to exile in Rangoon. By March 1858, they were ready to take on Lakshmibai. The job was given to their best general, Sir Hugh Rose.

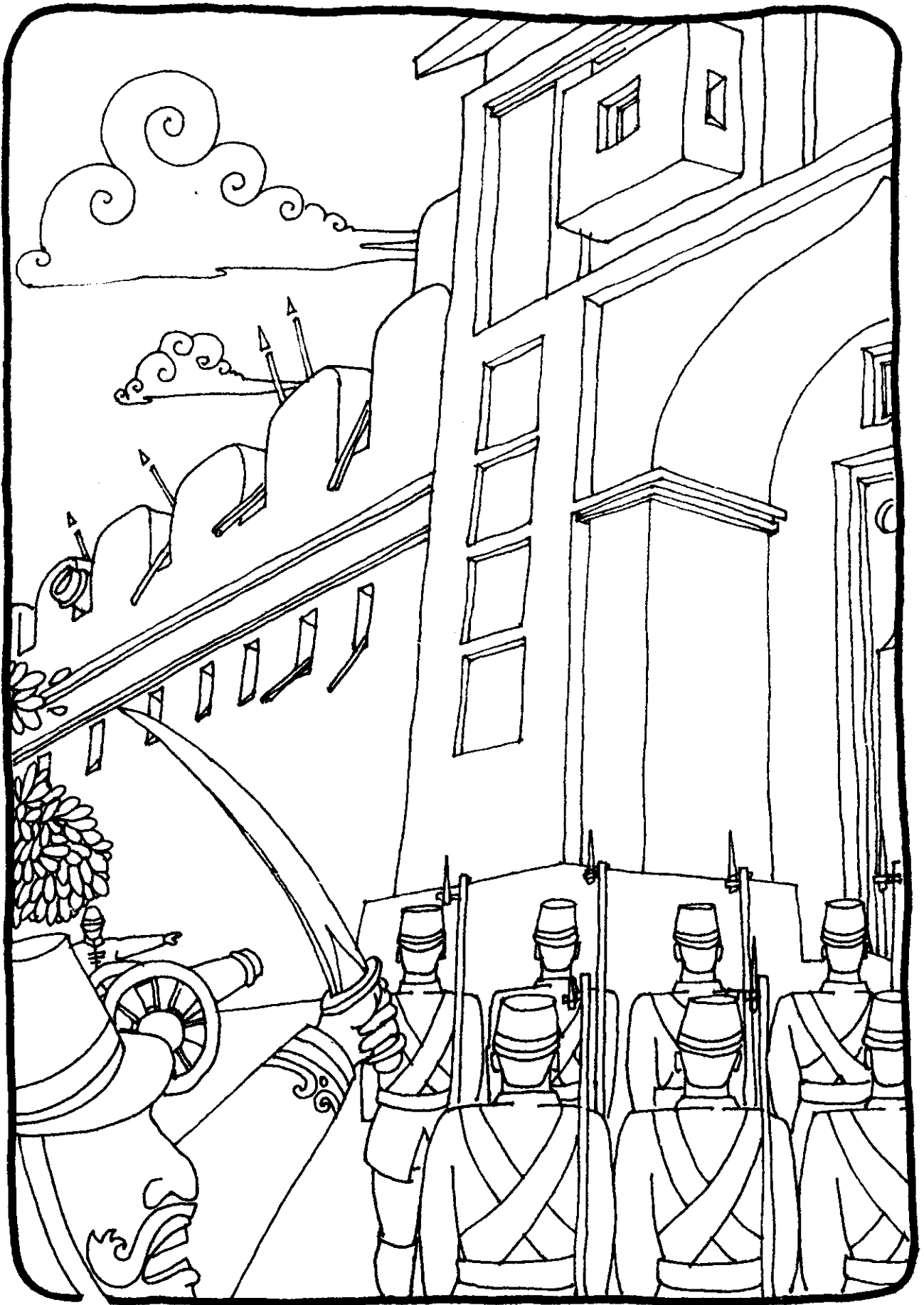
Rose's men reached Jhansi on March 23. Lakshmibai's two best gunners, Ghulam Gaus Khan and Khuda Baksh, fired furiously at the attackers. Lakshmibai raced up and down the ramparts of the fort, shouting encouragement to her men. The firing on both sides continued.

Late in the evening on March 31, the people noticed a huge fire near the Betwa river. This was a signal from Tantia Tope, Lakshmibai's childhood friend, that he had arrived with Peshwa Nana Sahib's army to help Lakshmibai. The people inside the fort cheered with relief.

But Rose's army was very disciplined and it fought off the attack. Tantia Tope was forced to push back to a place called Kalpi, 170 km away. After this, Rose continued the siege of Jhansi. Suddenly, the English cannons blasted a huge hole in the wall. Through this opening, three days later, the British forces ran into the fort.

In the terrible fighting, 5,000 of Lakshmibai's soldiers were killed; 60 of Rose's men died. But where was she, the Rani?



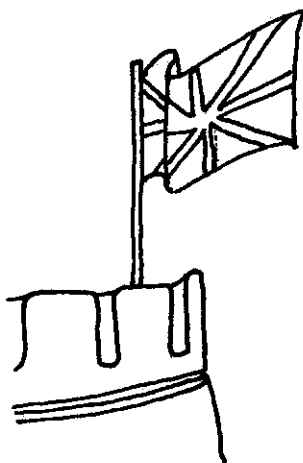


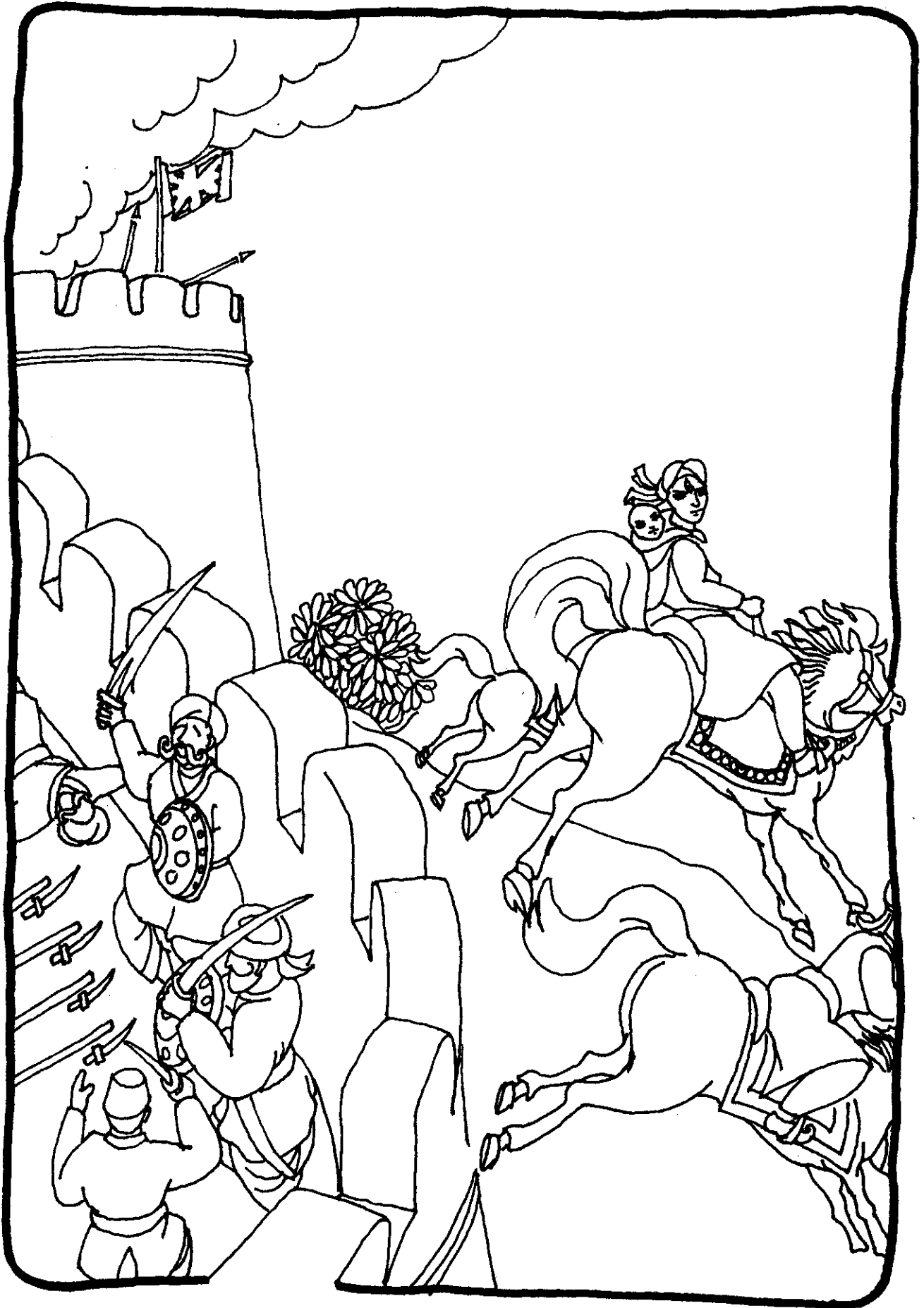
Sir Hugh Rose attacks the fort of Jhansi

She had escaped. Lakshmibai tied Damodar to her back with a shawl and jumped her horse down the steep slope of the fort. Accompanied by about 350 people, she rode for 24 hours continuously until she caught up with Tantia Tope in Kalpi. Rose gave them hot chase and scored one more point for his side.

Meanwhile, Rao Sahib, Baji Rao's nephew, joined Tantia Tope and Lakshmibai. All three went on to Gwalior. They hoped the Scindia of Gwalior would support them. He didn't because he was on the British side. But his soldiers did. Lakshmibai's fame had spread so far and wide that the moment they heard she was one of the leaders of the Peshwa army, they deserted their own army in large numbers.

The Scindia was forced to take shelter with the British and Rao Sahib occupied the vacant throne. But Lakshmibai was restless. "We must prepare ourselves for another onslaught," she said to Tantia Tope and Rao Sahib. Sure enough, by June 16, the bugle sounded outside Gwalior fort. Rose was back with more men and more arms.





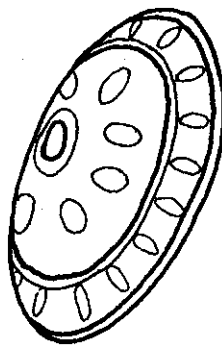
Lakshmi Bai escapes from the fort at night

Once again there was a terrible battle. Lakshmibai sat on her horse, holding the reins between her teeth and a sword in each hand. Her eyes glittered with fire as she fought off one attacker after another. Her jewels flashed, her swords caught the sunlight. She fought more bravely than any man. But on the third day of fighting, she was hit by a shot from an unknown soldier who did not even know she was the Rani of Jhansi. She fell at Kotah ki Sarai near Gwalior.

Her soldiers huddled together, shocked. It could not be true. Their beloved Rani could not be dying. "Give my jewels to my soldiers and look after little Damodar," she whispered with her last breath.

The moment Lakshmibai died, the Peshwa army lost heart. The Scindia returned to Gwalior. Tantia Tope was caught and hanged a year later; Rao Sahib four years later. The sepoy mutiny came to an end.

The history of India is full of stories of the brave. Indeed, Lakshmibai was not the first Indian woman to defy the British, even though she is probably the most famous. There was once another, Rani Chennamma of Kittur. But that's another story.



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