

PROFILE of The Week

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Queen Victoria and Abdul Karim:

Love Knows no Barriers!

He was 24, she was 68 and it was love at first sight! There was another crucial difference: she was the Queen of England and he was her loyal servant. He waited on her, taught her Urdu and Hindi and she saw much of the world through his eyes. Their affair lasted ten years and on her death vigorous attempts were made to expunge the records and to confine him to the dustbin of history.

The story of Queen Victoria and Abdul Karim is one of love against all the odds. The genesis of this relationship began with the death of Prince Albert, the devoted husband of Queen Victoria. His passing in 1861 left a void. Queen Victoria sought male company in John Brown but when he too passed she was extremely lonely.

Abdul Karim was born in 1863 in Agra, India. His family were Muslims and he was taught the languages of Urdu and Persian privately. In 1886 Queen Victoria visited a colonial exhibition in London and was impressed with the weavers and carpets of India. She requested that two persons be sent from India to London. Abdul Karim was chosen and he arrived at Windsor Castle in June 1887 for the Jubilee celebrations.

Karim immediately made a favorable impression with the Queen. She wrote that Karim's respect was in the extreme: he had kissed her feet! Karim was a handsome, six foot tall young man that wore a red tunic, and colorful turbans and waist bands. He

was her gift from India. Karim grew to become one of the most influential persons in Britain and indeed the Empire. How did this happen?

Queen Victoria was fascinated with India and she wanted to learn Hindi and Urdu. Karim taught her these languages and in return he became versed in the niceties of the court. The Queen was a good student and she was able to converse in Urdu and to compose entries in her Hindustani Journal.

Karim was her 'Munshi' or teacher and he was held in high esteem. Then one day the unthinkable happened. Karim entered the kitchen with some Indian spices. It created a mini-revolution in the gastronomy of the Palace.

Karim prepared Indian dishes and presented them to the Queen. She took a particular liking to curry and soon she was having curries for lunch while Karim conversed with her about international affairs. This unlikely relationship set

the tongues wagging and caused a friction in the palace.

There were those that resented the presence of Karim as they thought that he had an undue influence over the Queen. There was also racism. How could someone from another country who spoke and dressed differently get

shoulders with royalty there.

The Queen gave him lands in Agra and arranged for him to bring his family to England where they were comfortably housed. On a visit to India in 1890 Karim was able to use his status and get access to the Viceroy Lord Lansdowne.

lims in India. But such a high standing drew resentment. In 1897, Fritz Ponsonby, the Queen's Private Secretary, was on a mission to discredit Karim.

The Queen wanted to confer a knighthood on Karim but her advisors would have none of it. Her physician threatened to declare her insane if she went ahead with the knighthood. But Victoria and her Munshi would set rumors ablaze and jangle the nerves of the Empire with a daring act.

The Queen and Abdul Karim spent a night together at Glassat Shiel in Scotland. This was the first time that she had returned to the Loch since she and her ghillie John Brown had visited the cottage. Did Victoria and Karim have a physical relationship at the Loch cottage? Although one can't be certain the possibility seems remote. The Queen treated Karim as a son and would write to him as 'your loving mother.'

Queen Victoria was a great letter-writer. She wrote about every topic imaginable and with a good deal of caustic wit. Many of her letters reveal her love for Karim and his family. The reports from her staff show that racism was alive at the Palace. For example, Ponsonby stated that, "The Queen insists on bringing the Munshi forward, and if it were not for our

protest, I don't know where she would stop. But it is no use, for the Queen says that it is 'race prejudice' and that we are jealous of the poor Munshi."

Queen Victoria died in 1901 and Karim was one of the last persons allowed to see her. Her demise led to a new order at the Palace and a change in the fortunes of Karim. The new King was Edward VII and he wanted Karim out of the Palace in a hurry. He ordered that all of the Queen's papers addressed to Karim, and other records, should be burnt; the King himself supervised a bonfire.

Karim returned to India and lived on his estate Karim Lodge. He died at the age of 46. But the story took another twist as King Edward sent his agents to India to demand all records related to Queen Victoria. What they did not know was that Karim had kept a secret diary. The diary was recently given to Shrabani Basu who has written a book about Victoria and Karim.

The movie industry has become interested in the story and in September 2017 'Victoria and Abdul' was released with Judi Dench playing Victoria and Ali Fazal as Abdul Karim. Queen Victoria had nine children. She was distant from them. But there was once a Muslim commoner from India. He loved the Queen of England and she loved him in return. Their love story was unusual and will never grow old. It might even win a few Oscars!



Abdul Karim helps Queen Victoria with her State Papers in 1885. They were inseparable in the Palace.

so close to the Queen? But Karim was un-daunted and so was the Queen. She appointed him 'Munshi and Indian Clerk to the Queen Empress at a salary of 12 pounds per month.'

Karim accompanied the Queen on tours to Europe and rubbed

in 1891 the picture became rosier for Karim. He had his own quarters with servants and even a horse-drawn carriage and driver. His influence in domestic and international affairs grew as he gave advice on matters relating to the treatment of Mus-

lims in India. But such a high standing drew resentment. In 1897, Fritz Ponsonby, the Queen's Private Secretary, was on a mission to discredit Karim.