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M. D. McGRATH Near the Garafraza St. Bridge

THE RED YEAR

A Story of the Indian Mutiny

-By-

LOUIS TRACY

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The Meshes of the Net

On a day in January, 1857, a sepoy was sitting by a well in the cantonment of Dum-Dum, near Calcutta. Though he wore the uniform of John Company, and his rank was the lowest in the native army, he carried on his forehead the caste-marks of the Brahmin.

"Brother," said the newcomer "lend me your brass pot, so that I may drink, for I have walked far in the sun." The sepoy started as though a snake had stung him.

"Do you know, swine-begotten, that your hog's lips would contaminate my lotah?" asked he, putting the scorn of centuries into the words.

"Contaminate!" grinned the Lascar, neither frightened nor angered. "By holy Ganga, it is your lips that are contaminated, not mine. Are not the Government greasing your cartridges with cow's fat? And can you load your rifle without biting the forbidden thing? Learn more about your own caste, brother, before you talk so proudly to others."

"I like Mr. Malcolm," she confided to herself with a little laugh, "but his manner with women is distinctly brusque! I wonder why!"

One evening in the month of April, a slim, straight-backed girl stood in the veranda of a bungalow at Meerut. Her slender figure, garbed in white muslin, was framed in a creeper-covered arch.

"There!" she said, tugging at a refractory glove. "Did you hear it? It actually shrieked as it split. And this is the second pair. I shall never again believe a word Behari Lal says. Wait till I see him. I'll give him such a talking to."

"I hardly know. When I buy gloves, I buy them of sufficient size. Of course you have small hands."

"Thank you. Please don't trouble to explain. And now, as you have been rude to me, I shall not take you to see Mrs. Meredith."

"For your sake, Miss Mayne, I would face Medusa, let alone the excellent wife of our Commissary-General, but fate, in the shape of an uncommonly headstrong Arab, forbids. I have just secured a new charger, and he and I have to decide this evening whether I go where he wants to go, or he goes where I want to go. I wheedled him into your compound by sheer trickery. The really def-

nite issue will be settled forthwith on the Grand Trunk Road."

"I hope you are not running any undue risk," said the girl, with a sudden note of anxiety in her voice that was sweetest music to Frank Malcolm's ears.

"Oh, go away, you and your Arab. You are both horrid. You dine here to-morrow night, my uncle said?"

"Yes, if I don't send you a telegram from Allahabad. I may be brought there, you know, against my will."

Lifting his hat, he walked towards a huge pipal tree in the compound. Beneath its far-flung branches a syce was sitting in front of a finely-proportioned and unusually big Arab horse.

"Ready for the fray," I said, murmured Malcolm with a smile. He wasted no time over preliminaries. Bidding the syce place his thumbs in the steel rings of the bridle, the young Englishman gathered the reins and a wisp of gray mane in his left hand.

"Perhaps you do not speak my language," she said in Urdu the tongue most frequently heard in Upper India.

"By that time, Malcolm had regained his wits. A verse of a poem by Hafiz occurred to him.

Leading the Arab, who, with the fatalism of his race, was quiet as a sheep now that he had found a master, the young officer took the direction pointed out by the lady.

"The number of armed retainers gathered there was unexpectedly large. He was well acquainted with the Meerut district, yet he had no notion that such a fortress existed within an hour's fast ride of the station.

But he saw no more of the Princess. He thought she would hardly dare to receive him openly, and her deputy gave no sign of admitting him to the interior of the palace, which

crowd ditch, and crashed into a field of millet. Another ditch, another field, breast high with tall castor-oil plants, a frantic race through a grove of mangoes—when Malcolm had to lie flat on Nejd's neck to avoid being swept off by the low branches—and horse and man dived headlong into deep water.

"The splash, for more than the ducking, frightened the horse. Malcolm, in that instant of prior warning which the possessor of steady nerves learns to use so well, disengaged his feet from the stirrups. He was thrown clear, and when he came to the surface, he saw that the Arab and himself were floundering in a pool.

"A bold leap, sahib! Did you mean to scale the fort on horseback? And why not have chosen a spot where the water was cleaner?"

To his exceeding wonder, his eyes met those of a young Mohammedan woman, richly garbed, and of remarkable appearance. She was unveiled, an amazing fact in itself, and her creamy skin, arched eyebrows, regular features, and raven-black hair proclaimed her aristocratic lineage.

"Perhaps you do not speak my language," she said in Urdu the tongue most frequently heard in Upper India.

"Princess," he said, "the radiance of your presence is as the full moon suddenly illumining the path of a weary traveler, who finds himself on the edge of a morass."

"This well said," she vowed, smiling with all the rare effect of full red lips and white even teeth. "Nevertheless, this is no time for compliments. You need our help, and it shall be given willingly. Make for the gate, I pray you."

She turned, and gave an order to one of the attendants. With another encouraging smile to Malcolm, she disappeared.

The mad pace set by the Arab when he heard the clatter of his feet on the hard road chimed in with the turbulent mood of his rider.

But money and rank are artificial, the mere varnish of life, and the hot breath of reality can soon scorch them out of existence. Events were then shaping themselves in India that were destined to sweep aside convention for many a day.

"I have it in my heart to envy Behari Lal," said her companion, glancing up at her from the carriage-way that ran by the side of the few steps leading down from the veranda.

"But that is a kindness," she murmured. "Then you shall come, and be miserable."

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