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Near the Garafraza St. Bridge

THE RED YEAR

A Story of the Indian Mutiny
—By—
LOUIS TRACY

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CHAPTER II.
A Night in May

Winifred, quite unconsciously, had stated the actual incident that led to the outbreak of the Mutiny. The hot weather was so trying for the white troops in Meerut, many of whom, under ordinary conditions, would have been in the hills, that the General had ordered a Church Parade in the evening, and at an unusual hour.

All day long the troopers of the 3rd Cavalry nursed their wrath at the fate of their comrades who had refused to handle the suspected cartridges. They had seen men whom they regarded as martyrs stripped of their uniforms and riveted in chains in front of the whole garrison on the morning of the 9th. Though fear of the British force in the cantonment kept them quiet Hindu vied with Mussalman in muttered execrations of the dominant race. The fact that the day following the punishment parade was a Sunday brought about a certain relaxation from discipline. The men loafed in the bazaars, were taunted by courtesans with lack of courage, and either drowned their troubles in strong drink or drew together in knots to talk treason.

Suddenly a sepoy raced up to the cavalry lines with thrilling news. "The Rifles and Artillery are coming to disarm all the native regiments!" he shouted.

He had watched the 60th falling in for Church Parade, and, in view of the action taken at Barrackpore and Lucknow—sepoy battalions having been disbanded in both stations for mutinous conduct—he instantly jumped to the conclusion that the military authorities at Meerut meant to steal a march on the disaffected troops. His warning cry was as a torch laid to a gunpowder train.

The 3rd Cavalry, Malcolm's own corps, swarmed out of bazaar and quarters like angry wasps. Nearly half the regiment ran to secure their picketed horses, armed themselves in hot haste, and galloped to the gaol. Smashing open the doors, they freed the imprisoned troopers, struck off their fetters, and took no measures to prevent the escape of the general horde of convicts. Yet, even in that moment of frenzy, some of the men remained true to their colors. Captain Craigie and Lieutenant Melville Clarke, hearing the uproar, mounted their chargers, rode to the lines, and actually brought their troops to the parade ground in perfect discipline. Meanwhile, the alarm had spread to the sepoys. No one knew exactly what caused all the commotion. Wild rumors spread, but no man could speak definitely. The British officers of the 11th and 20th regiments were getting their men into something like order when a sowar clattered up, and yelled to the infantry that the European troops were marching to disarm them.

At once, the 20th, broke in confusion, seized their muskets, and procured ammunition. The 11th wavered, and were listening to the appeal of their beloved commanding officer, Colonel Finnis, when some of the 20th came back and fired at him. He fell, pierced with many bullets, the first victim of India's Red Year. His men hesitated no longer. Afire with religious fanaticism, they, too, armed themselves, and dispersed in search of loot and human prey. They acted on no preconceived plan. The trained troops simply formed the nucleus of an armed mob, its numbers ever swelling as the convicts from the gaol, the bad characters from the city, and even the native police, joined in the work of murder and destruction. They had no leader. Each man emulated his neighbor in ferocity. Like a pack of wolves on the trail they followed the scent of blood.

The rapid spread of the revolt was not a whit less marvelous than its lack of method or cohesion. Many writers have put forward the theory that, by accident, the mutiny broke out half an hour too soon, and that the rebels meant to surprise the unarmed white garrison while in church. In reality, nothing was further from their thoughts. If, in a nebulous way, a date was fixed for a combined rising of the native army, it was Sunday, May 31, three weeks later than the day of the outbreak. The soldiers, helped by the scum of the bazaar, after indulging in an orgy of bloodshed and plunder, dispersed and ran for their lives, fearing that the avenging British were hot on their heels. And that was all. There was no plan, no settled purpose. Hate and greed nerved men's hands, but head there was none.

Malcolm's ride towards the centre of the station gave proof in plenty that the mutineers were a disorganized rabble, inspired only by unreasoning rancor against all Europeans, and, like every mob, eager for pillage. At first, he met but few native soldiers. The rioters were budmashes, the predatory class which any city in the world can produce in the twinkling of an eye when the strong arm of the law is paralyzed. Armed with swords and clubs, gangs of men rushed from house to house, murdering the helpless inmates, mostly women and children, seizing such valuables as they could find, and setting the buildings on fire. These ghoul practices the most unheard-of atrocities. They spared no one. Finding a woman lying ill in bed, they poured oil over the bed clothes, and thus started, with a human howl, the fire that destroyed the bungalow.

They were rank cowards, too. Another Englishwoman, also an invalid, was fortunate in possessing a devoted

servant. This faithful creature saved her mistress by her quick-witted shriek that the mem-sahib must be avoided at all costs, as she was suffering from smallpox! The destroyers fled in terror, not waiting even to fire the house.

It was not until days later that Malcolm knew the real nature of the scene through which he rode. He saw the flames he heard the Mohammedan yell of "Jai! Jai!" and the Hindu shriek of "Ahi! Ahi!" but the quick fall of night, its growing dusk deepened by the spreading clouds of smoke, and his own desperate haste to reach the cavalry lines, prevented him from appreciating the full extent of the horrors surrounding his path.

Arrived at the parade ground, he met Craigie and Melville Clarke, with the one troop that remained of the regiment of which he was so proud. There were no other officers to be seen, so these three held a consultation. They were sure that the white troops would soon put an end to the prevalent disorder, and they decided to do what they could, within a limiting area, to save life and property. Riding towards his own bungalow to obtain a sword and a couple of revolvers, Malcolm came upon a howling mob in the act of swarming into the compound of Craigie's house. Some score of troopers heard his fierce cry for help, and fell upon the would-be murderers, for Mrs. Craigie and her children were alone in the bungalow. The riff-raff were soon driven off, and Malcolm not yet realizing the gravity of the emeute told the men to safeguard the mem-sahib until they received further orders, while he went to join his senior officer.

Incredible as it may seem, the tiny detachment obeyed him to the letter. They held the compound against repeated assaults, and lost several men in hand-to-hand fighting.

The history of that terrible hour is brightened by many such instances of native fealty. The Treasury Guard, composed of men of the 8th Irregular Cavalry, not only refused to join the rebels, but defended their charge boldly. A week later, of their own free will, they escorted the treasure and records from Meerut to Agra, the transfer being made for greater safety, and beat off several attacks by insurgents on the way. They were well rewarded for their fidelity, yet, such was the power of fanaticism, within less than two months they deserted to a man!

The acting Commissioner of Meerut, Mr. Greathed, whose residence was in the centre of the sacked area, took his wife to the flat roof of his house when he found that escape was impossible. A gang of ruffians ransacked every room, and piling the furniture, set it alight, but a trust-worthy servant, named Golab Khan, told them that he would reveal the hiding-place of the sahib and mem-sahib if they followed quickly. He thus decoyed them away, and the fortunate couple were enabled to reach the British lines under cover of the darkness.

And, while the sky flamed red over a thousand fires, and the blood of unhappy Europeans, either civilian families or the wives and children of military officers, was being spilt like water, where were the two regiments of white troops who, by prompt action, could have saved Meerut and prevented the siege of Delhi? That obvious question must receive a strange answer. They were bivouacked on their parade-ground, doing nothing. The General in command of the station was a feeble old man, suffering from senile decay. His Brigadier, Archdale Wilson, issued orders that were foolish. He sent the Dragoons to guard the empty gaol! After a long delay in issuing ammunition to the Rifles, he marched them and the gunners to the deserted parade-ground of the native infantry. They found a few belated sowars of the 3rd Cavalry, who took refuge in a wood, and the artillery opened fire at the trees! News came that the rebels were plundering the British quarters, and the infantry went there in hot haste. And then they halted, though the mutineers were crying, "Quick, brother, quick! The white men are coming!" and the scared suggestion went round: "To Delhi! That is our only chance!"

The moon rose on a terrified mob, cringing or riding the forty miles of road between Meerut and the Mogul capital. All night long they expected to hear the roar of the pursuing guns, to find the sabers of the Dragons flashing over their heads. But they were quite safe. Archdale Wilson had ordered his men to bivouac, and they obeyed, though it is within the bounds of probability that had the rank and file known what the morrow's sun would reveal, there might have been another Mutiny in Meerut that night, a Mutiny of Revenge and Reprisal.

It was not that wise and courageous counsel was lacking. Captain Rosser offered to cut off the flight of the rebels to Delhi if one squadron of his dragoons and a few guns were given to him. Lieutenant Moller of the 11th Native Infantry, appealed to General Hewitt for permission to ride alone to Delhi, and warn the authorities there of the outbreak. Sanction was refused in both cases. The bivouac was evidently deemed a masterpiece of strategy.

That Moller would have saved Delhi cannot be doubted. Next day, finding that the wife of a brother officer had been killed, he sought and obtained evidence of the identity of the mem-sahib's murderer, traced the man, followed him, arrested him single-handed, and brought him before a drumhead court-martial, by whose orders he was hanged forthwith.

Craigie, Rosser, Moller, and a few other brave spirits showed what could have been done. But negligence and apathy were stronger that night than courage or self-reliance. For good or ill, the torrent of rebellion was suffered to break loose, and it soon engulfed a continent.

Malcolm failed to find Craigie, who had taken his troop in the direction of some heavy firing. Passing a bungalow that was blazing furiously, he saw in the compound the corpses of two women. A little farther on, he discovered the bodies of a man and four children in the centre of the road, and he recognized, in the man, a well-known Scotch trader whose shop was the largest and best in Meerut.

For the first time, he understood what this appalling thing meant. He thought of Winifred, and his blood went cold. She and her uncle were alone in that remote house, far away on the Aligarh Road, and completely cut off from the comparative safe northerly side of the station.

Living heed to nought save this new horror of his imagination, he wheeled Nejd and rode at top speed towards Mr. Mayne's bungalow. As he neared it his worst fears were confirmed. One wing was on fire, but the flames had almost burnt themselves out. Charred beams and blackened walls showed stark and gaunt in the glow of a smouldering mass of wreckage. Twice he rode round the ruined house calling he knew not what in his agony, and looking with the eyes of one on the verge of lunacy for some dread token of the fate that had overtaken the inmates.

He came across several bodies. They were all natives. One of two were servants, he fancied, but the rest were marauders from the city. Calming himself, with the coolness of utter despair, he dismounted, and examined the slain. Their injuries had been inflicted with some sharp, heavy instrument. None of them bore gunshot wounds. That was strange. If there was a fight, and Mayne, perhaps even Winifred, had taken part in the defense, they must have used the sporting rifles in the house. And that suggested an examination of the dark interior. He dreaded the task, but it must not be shirked.

The porch was intact, and he hung Nejd's bridle on the hook where he had placed it little more than an hour ago. The spacious drawing-room had been gutted. The doors (Indian bungalows have hardly any windows, each door being half glass) were open front and back. The room was empty, thank Heaven! He was about to enter and search the remaining apartments which had escaped the fire, when a curiously cracked voice halted him on the foot of the garden.

"Halt! Who go dare?" it cried, in the queer jargon of the native regiments.

Malcolm saw a man hurrying towards him. He recognized him as a pensioner named Syed Mir Khan, an Afghan. The old man a born fire-eater, insisted on speaking English to the sahib-log, unless, by rare chance, he encountered some person acquainted with Pushtu, his native language.

"I come quick, sahib," he shouted. "I know all things. I save sahib and miss-sahib. Yes, by dam, I slewed the cut-heads."

As he came nearer, he brandished a huge tulwar, and the split skulls and severed eyebrows of victims of his hand in the garden became explicable. Delighted in having a sahib to listen, he went on:

"The mob appearing, I attacked them with great ferocity—yes, like terrible lion, by George. My fighting was immense. I had my actions with the pigs."

At last he quieted down sufficiently to tell Malcolm what had happened. He, with others, thinking the miss-sahib had gone to church, was smoking the hookah of gossip in a neighboring compound. It was an instance of the amazing rapidity with which the rioters spread over the station that a number of them reached the Mayne's bungalow five minutes after the first alarm was given. It should be explained here that Mr. Mayne, being a Commissioner of Oudh, was only visiting Meerut in order to learn the details of a system of revenue collection which it was proposed to adopt on the sequestered estates of the Oudh taluqdars. He had rented one of the best houses in the place, the owner being in Simla, and Syed Mir Khan held a position akin to that of caretaker in a British household. The looters knew how valuable were the contents of such an important residence, and the earliest contingent thought they would have matters entirely their own way.

As soon as Malcolm left, however, Mr. Mayne loaded all his guns, while Winifred made more successful search for the servants. The Afghan was true to his salt, and their own retainers, who had come with them from Lucknow, remained steadfast at this crisis. Hence the mob received a warm reception, but the fighting had

taken place outside the bungalow, the defenders lining a wall at the edge of the compound. Indeed, a score of bodies lying there had not been seen by Malcolm during his first frenzied examination of the house.

Then an official of the Salt Department, driving past with his wife and child, shouted to Mr. Mayne that he must not lose an instant if he would save his niece and himself.

"The sepoys have risen," was the horrifying message he brought. "They have surprised and kicked all the white troops. They are asking the whole station. You see the fires there? That is their work. This road is clear, but the Delhi road is blocked."

Some distant yelling caused the man to flog his horse into a fast trot again; and he and his weeping companions vanished into the gloom.

Mayne could not choose but believe. Indeed, many days elapsed before a large part of India would credit the fact that the British regiments in Meerut had not been massacred. Several servants were mounted on all the available horses and ponies, and Mr. Mayne and Winifred had gone down the Grand Trunk Road towards Bulandshahr and Aligarh.

"Going half an hour," said Syed Mir Khan, volubly. "I stand fast, slaying budmashes. They make rush in thousands, and I retreat with great glory. Then they put blazes in bungalow."

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