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THE RED YEAR
A Story of the Indian Mutiny
— By —
LOUIS TRACY

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CHAPTER IV.
On the Way to Cawnpore

That was William Hodson's way. Men who met him began by disliking his hectoring, supercilious bearing. They soon learnt to forget his gruffness and think only of his gallantry and good-comradeship.

At any rate his stirring advice and the dispatches he brought roused the military authorities at Meerut into activity. Carrying with him a letter from the Commander-in-Chief he quitted Meerut again that night, and dismounted outside Anson's tent at Kurul at dawn on the second day!

On the 27th, Archdale Wilson led the arison towards the rendezvous fixed by the force hurriedly collected in the Punjab for the relief of Delhi. On the afternoon of the 30th, cavalry veterans reported the presence of a strong body of mutineers on the right bank of the river Hindun, near the village of Gaur-din Nagar and a place where a battle had been fought. The iron-sheathed rebels meant to fight the two British forces in detail before they could effect a junction. The generalship of the idea was good, but the sepoys did not count on the pent-up wrath of the British soldiers, who were burning to avenge their murdered countrymen and dishonored countrywomen, for it was now becoming known that many a fair English lady had met a fate worse than death ere sword or bullet stilled her anguish.

A company of the 60th Rifles dashed forward to seize the bridge. Lieutenant Light and his men took up the enemy's challenge with their heavy eighteen-pounders, and Colonel Mackenzie and Major Tombs, at the head of two batteries of horse artillery, crossed the river and turned the left flank of the sepoy force. Then the Rifles extended and charged, the mutineers yielded, and Colonel Custance with his dragoons sabred them mercilessly for some miles.

Next morning, Whit-Sunday, while the chaplains were conducting the burial service over those who had fallen, the mutineers came out of Delhi again. A severe action began instantly. Tombs had two horses shot under him, and thirteen out of fifty men in his battery were killed or wounded. But the issue was never in doubt. After three hours' hard fighting the rebels broke and fled. So those men in Meerut could give a good account of themselves when permitted! Actually, they won the first two battles of the campaign.

Exhausted by two days' strenuous warfare in the burning sun, they could not take up the pursuit. The men were resting on the field when a battalion of Ghoorkahs, the little fighting men of Nepal, arrived under the command of Colonel Reid. They had marched by way of Bulandshahr, and Malcolm heard to his dismay that the native infantry detachment stationed there aided by the whole population of the district, had committed the wildest excesses.

Yet Winifred and her uncle had passed through that town on the road to Cawnpore. Aligarh, too, was in flames, said Reid, and there was no communication open with Agra, the seat of Government for the North-West Provinces. There was a bare possibility that the Maynes might have reached Agra, or that Nana Sahib had protected them for his own sake. Such slender hopes brought no comfort. Black despair sat in Malcolm's heart until the Brigadier sent for him and ordered him to take charge of the great treasure from Meerut to Agra. He hailed this dangerous mission with gloomy joy. Love had no place in a soldier's life, he told himself. Henceforth he must remember Winifred only when his sword was at the throat of some wretched mutineer appealing for mercy.

He went to his tent to supervise the packing of his few belongings. His bearer, a Punjabi Mohammedan, who cursed the sepoys fluently for disturbing the country during the hot weather, handed him a note which had been brought by a camp follower. It was written in Persi-Arabic script, a sort of Arabic shorthand that demands the exercise of time and patience ere it can be deciphered by one not thoroughly acquainted with it. Thinking it was a request for employment which he could not offer, Malcolm stuffed it carelessly into a pocket. He rode to Meerut placed himself at the head of the 8th Irregular Cavalry, a detachment whose extraordinary fidelity has already been narrated, and set forth next morning with his train of bullock carts and their escorts.

He called the first halt in the village where he had parted from Winifred. The headman professed himself unable to give any information, but the application of a stirrup leather to his bare back while his wrists were tied to a cart wheel soon loosened his tongue.

The king's hunting lodge was empty, he whined; and the Roshinara Begum had gone to Delhi. Nana Sahib's cavalcade went south soon after the Begum's departure, and a moulah had told him, the headman, that the Nana had hastened through Aligarh on his way to Cawnpore, not turning aside to visit Agra, which was fifty miles down the Bombay branch of the Grand Trunk Road.

Malcolm drew a negative comfort from the moulah's tale. That night he encamped near a fair-sized village which was ominously denuded of men. Approaching a native hut to ask for a piece of charcoal wherewith to light a cigar, he happened to look inside. To his very great surprise he saw, standing in a corner, a complete suit of European armor, made of tin, it is true, but a sufficiently bewildering "find" in Goojer hovel.

A woman came running from a neighbor's house. While riving him the charcoal she hastily closed the rude door. She pretended not to understand him when he sought an explanation of the armor, whereupon he seized her, and led her, shrieking, among his own men. The commotion brought other villagers on the scene, as he guessed it would. A few fierce threats, backed by a liberal display of naked steel, quickly evoked the curious fact that nearly all the die-bodied inhabitants "had gone to see the sahib-log dance."

Even Malcolm's native troops were puzzled by this story, but a further string of terrifying words and more

saber flourishing led to a direct statement that the white people who were to "dance" had been captured near the village quite a week earlier and imprisoned in a ruined tomb about a mile from the road. It was risky work to leave the valuable convoy for an instant, but Malcolm felt that he must probe this mystery. Taking half a dozen men with him, and compelling the woman to act as guide, he went to the tomb in the dark.

The building a mosque-like structure of considerable size, was situated in the midst of a grove of mango trees. A clear space in front of the tomb was lighted with oil-lamps and braziers. It was packed with uproarious natives, and Malcolm's a torrid gaze rested on some upon an acrobats doing some feat of balancing. A clown was making jokes in Hindoostanee, some nuns, wearing the conventional gauze and spangles of circus riders, were standing near a couple of piebald ponies.

He and his men dashed in among the audience and the Goojars ran for dear life when they caught sight of a sahib at the head of an armed party. The performers and the nuns nearly died of fright, believing that their last hour had surely come. But they soon recovered from their fear only to collapse more completely from joy. A French circus, it appeared, had camped near a party of nuns in the village on the main road, and were captured there when the news came that the English were swept out of existence. Most fortunately for themselves the nuns were regarded as a part of the show, and the villagers, after robbing all of them, penned them in the mosque and made them give a nightly performance. There were five men and three women in the circus troupe, and among the four nuns was the grave reverend mother of a convent. Malcolm brought them to the village and caused it to be made known that unless every article of value and every rupee in money stolen from these unfortunate people, together with a heavy fine, were brought to him by day break, he would not only fire each but also destroy the standing crops, but he would also hang every adult male belonging to the place he could lay hands on.

These hereditary thieves could appreciate a man who spoke like that. They met him fairly and paid in full. When the convoy moved off, even that amazing suit of armor, which was used for the state entry of the circus into a town, was strapped on to the back of a trick pony.

The nuns, he ascertained, were coming from Fategarh to Umbala and they had met the great retinue of Nana Sahib below Aligarh. With him were two Europeans, a young lady and an elderly gentleman, but they were travelling so rapidly that it was impossible to learn who they were or whither they were going.

Here then, was really good news. Like every other Englishman in India Malcolm believed that the Mutiny was confined to a very small area of which his own station was the center. He thought that if Winifred and her uncle reached Cawnpore they would be quite safe.

He brightened up so thoroughly that he quite enjoyed a sharp fight next day when the budmashes of Bulandshahr regarded the straggling convoy as an easy prey.

There were three or four such affairs ere they reached Agra, and his Frenchmen proved themselves to be soldiers as well as acrobats. On the evening of the 2nd of June he marched his troops, and receiving equal reassurance ones from a fatuous Viceroy. It was with the utmost difficulty that his wiser subordinates got him to disarm the sepoy regiments in Afra itself. He vehemently assured the Viceroy that the worst days of the outbreak were over and issued a proclamation offering forgiveness to all mutineers who gave up their arms, "except those who had instigated others to revolt, or had taken part in the murder of Europeans."

Such a man was sure to regard Malcolm's bold journey from the wrong point of view. So delighted was he that he gave the sowers two months' pay, lauded Malcolm in the Gazette, and forthwith despatched him on a special mission to General Sir Hugh Wheeler at Cawnpore, to whom he recommended Frank for promotion and appointment as aide-de-camp.

This curious sequence of events led to Malcolm's following Winifred Maeyne along the road she had taken exactly three weeks earlier. The route to Cawnpore lay through Etawah, a place where revolt had already broken out, but which had been evacuated by the mutineers, who, like those at Aligarh, Bulandshahr, Mainpuri, Meerut, and a score of other towns, ran off to Delhi after butchering all the Europeans within range.

With a small escort of six troopers, his servant, and two pack-horses, he travelled fast. As night was falling on June 4th, he re-entered the Grand Trunk Road, some three miles north of Bithoor, where all unknown to him, Nana Sahib's splendid palace stood on the banks of the Ganges.

It was his prudent habit to halt in small villages only. Towns might be traversed quickly without much risk, as even the tiniest display of force insured safety, but it was wise not to permit the size of his escort to be noted at leisure, when a surprise attack might be made in the darkness.

Therefore, expecting to arrive at Cawnpore early next day, he elected not to push on to Bithoor, and proposed to pass the night under the branches of a great pipal tree. Chumru, his Mohammedan bearer, was a good cook, in addition to his many other acquirements. Having purchased or made his master's pay for, which is not always the same thing in India, a small kid (by which please understand a young goat) in the village.

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In each case the tiny detachment discovered blackened walls and unburied corpses. The Meerut district abounded with Goojars, the hereditary thieves of India, and these untamed savages had lost none of their wild-beast ferocity under fifty years of British rule. They killed and robbed with an impartiality that was worthy of a better cause. When Europeans, native travelers and mails were swept out of existence they fought each other. Village boundaries which had been determined under Wellesley's strong government at the beginning of the century were re-arranged now with matchlock, spear and tulwar. Old feuds were settled in the old way and six inches of steel were more potent than the longest Order in Council. Yet these ghoulis fled at the sight of the smallest white force, and Malcolm and his irregulars rode unopposed through a blood-stained and deserted land.

On the 21st of May, eleven days after the outbreak of the Mutiny, though never a dragoon or horse gunner had left Meerut cantonment since they marched back to their quarters from the ever-memorable bivouac, Malcolm led his light horsemen north, along the Grand Trunk Road in the direction of Mazaffernugger.

A native brought news that a collector and his wife were hiding in a swamp near the road. Happily, in this instance, the two were rescued, more dead than alive. The man, ruler of a territory as big as the North Riding of Yorkshire, his wife, a young and well-born Englishwoman, were in the last stage of misery. The unhappy lady, half demented, was nursing a dead baby. When the child was taken from her she fell unconscious and had to be carried to Meerut on a rough litter.

The little cavalcade was returning slowly to the station when one of the troopers caught the hoof beats of a galloping horse behind them. Malcolm reined up, and soon a British officer appeared round a bend in the road. Mounted on a hardy country-bred, and wearing the semi-native uniform of the Company's regiments, the aspect of the stranger was sufficiently remarkable to attract attention apart from the fact that he came absolutely alone from a quarter where it was courting death to travel without an escort. He was tall and spare of build, with reddish brown hair and beard, blue eyes that gleamed with the cold fire of steel, close-set lips, firm chin, and the slightly-hooked nose with thin nostrils that seems to be one of nature's tokens of the man born to command his fellows when the strong arm and clear brain are needed in the battle-field.

He rode easily, with a loose rein, and he waved his disengaged hand the instant he caught sight of the white faces.

"Are you from Meerut?" he asked, his voice and manner conveying a curious blend of brusqueness and gentility, as his tired horse willingly pulled up alongside Nejdji.

"Yes. And you?" said Malcolm, trying to conceal his amazement at this apparition.

"I am Lieutenant Hodson of the 1st Bengal Fusiliers. I have ridden from Kurnaul, where the Commander-in-Chief is waiting until communication is opened with Meerut. Where is General Hewitt?"

"I will take you to him? From Kurnaul, did you say? When did you start?"

"About this hour yesterday."

Malcolm knew then that this curt-spoken cavalier had ridden nearly a hundred miles through an enemy's country in twenty-four hours.

"Is your horse equal to another hour's canter?" he inquired.

"He ought to be. I took him from a bunniah when my own fell dead in a village about ten miles in the rear."

Bidding a young bank manager take charge of the detachment, Frank led the newcomer rapidly to headquarters. Hodson asked a few questions and made his companion's blood boil by the unveiled contempt he displayed on hearing of the inaction at Meerut.

"You want Nicholson here," said he, laughing with grim mirth. "By all the gods, he would horsewhip your general into the saddle."

"Hewitt is an old man, and cautious, therefore," explained Frank, in loyal defense of his chief. "Perhaps he deems it right to await the orders you are now bringing."

"An old man! You mean an old woman, perhaps? I come from one. I had to go on my knees almost before I could persuade Anson to let me start."

"Nonsense! Why is one a soldier! I would cross the infernal regions if the need arose. If I had been in Meerut on that Sunday evening, no general that ever lived could have kept me out of Delhi before daybreak. The way to stop this mutiny was to capture that doddering old king and hold him as a hostage, and twenty determined men could have done it easily in the confusion."

Continued on page 7

Continued on page 7

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Continued on page 7

Continued on page 7

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Continued on page 7

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Continued on page 7

Continued on page 7

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