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THE RED YEAR
A Story of the Indian Mutiny

—By—
LOUIS TRACY

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CHAPTER I.
Wherein Fate Plays Tricks With Malcolm

If it is difficult for the present generation to understand the manners and ways of its immediate forbears, how much more difficult to ask it to appreciate the extraordinary features of the siege of Lucknow! Let the reader who knows London imagine some parish in the heart of the city barricading itself behind a mud wall against its neighbors: let him garrison this flimsy fortress with sixteen hundred and ninety-two combatants, of whom a large number were men of an inferior race and of doubtful loyalty to those for whom they were fighting, while scores of the Europeans were infirm pensioners: let him cram the rest of the available shelter with women and children: let him picture the network of narrow streets, tall houses and a few open spaces—often separated from the enemy only by the width of a lane—as being subjected to interminable bombardment at point-blank range, and he will have a clear notion of some, at least, of the conditions which obtained in Lucknow when that gloomy July 1st carried on the murderous work begun on the previous evening.

The Residency itself was the only strong building in an enclosure seven hundred yards long and four hundred yards wide, though by no means so large in area as these figures suggest. The whole position was surrounded by an adobe wall and ditch, strengthened at intervals by a gate or a stouter structure, such as the Banqueting Hall, which was converted into a hospital, the Treasury, the Brigade Mess, the Begum Kotee, the Barracks, and a few nondescript houses and offices, were utterly unsuited for defense against musketry alone. As to their capacity to resist artillery fire, that was a grim jest with the inmates, who dreaded the fallen masonry as much as the rebel shells.

Even the Residency was forced to use its underground rooms for the protection of the greater part of the women and children, while the remaining buildings, except the Begum Kotee, which was comparatively sheltered on all sides, were so exposed to the enemy's guns that when some sort of clearance was made in October, four hundred and thirty-five cannon balls were taken out of the Brigade Mess alone.

Before the siege commenced the British also occupied a strong palace called the Mueche Bhowan, standing outside the entrenchment and commanding the stone bridge across the river Goomtee. A few hours' experience revealed the deadly peril to which its small garrison was exposed, and Lawrence decided at all costs to abandon it. A rude semaphore was erected on the roof of the Residency, and on the first morning of the siege, three officers signaled to the commandant of the outlying fort, Colonel Palmer, that he was to spike his guns, blow up the building, and bring his men into the main position. The three did their signaling under a heavy fire, but they were understood. Happily, the prospect of loot in the city drew off thousands of the rebels after sunset, and Colonel Palmer marched out quietly at midnight. A few minutes later an appalling explosion shook every house in Lucknow. The Mueche Bhowan, with its immense stores, had been blown to the sky.

That same day Lawrence received what the Celtic soldiers among the garrison regarded as a warning of his approaching end. He was working in his room with his secretary when a shell crashed through the wall and burst at the feet of the two men. Neither was injured, but Captain Wilson, one of his staff-officers, begged the Chief to remove his office to a less exposed place.

"Nothing of the kind," said Sir Henry, cheerfully. "The sepoy does not possess an artilleryman good enough to throw a second shell into the same spot."

"It will please all of us if you give in on this point, sir," persisted Wilson.

"Oh, well, if you put it that way, I'll turn out to-morrow," was the smiling answer.

Next morning at eight o'clock, after a round of inspection, the general, worn out by anxiety and want of sleep, threw himself on a bed in a corner of the room.

Wilson came in.

"Don't forget your promise, sir," he said.

"I have not forgotten, but I am too tired to move now. Give me another hour or two."

Lawrence went on to explain some orders to his aide. While they were talking another shell entered the small apartment, exploded, and filled the air with dust and stifling fumes. Wilson's ears were stunned by the noise, but he cried out twice:

"Sir Henry, are you hurt?"

Lawrence murmured something, and Wilson rushed to his side. The coverlet of the bed was crimson with blood. Some men of the 32nd ran in and carried their beloved leader to another room. Then a surgeon came and pronounced the wound to be mortal. On the morning of the 4th Lawrence died. He was conscious to the last, and passed his final hours planning and contriving and making arrangements for the continuance of the defence.

"Never surrender!" was his dying injunction. Shot and shell battered unceasingly against the walls of Dr. Fayer's house in which he lay dying, but their terrors never shook that stout heart, and he died as he lived, a splendid example of an officer and a gentleman. A true of all that is best and

noblest in the British character. And death, who did not spare the Chief, sought lowlier victims. During the first week of the siege the average number killed daily was twenty. Even when the troops learnt to avoid the exposed places, and began to practise the little tricks and artifices that tempt an enemy to reveal his whereabouts to his own undoing, the daily death-roll was ten for more than a month.

There was no real safety anywhere. Even in the Begum Kotee, where Winifred and the other ladies of the garrison were lodged, some of them were hit. Twice ere the end of July Winifred awoke in the morning to find bullets on the floor and the mortar of her wall broken within a few inches of her head. That she slept soundly under such conditions is a remarkable tribute to human nature's knack of adapting itself to circumstances. After a few days of excessive nervousness the most timorous among the women were heard to complain of the monotony of existence!

And two amazing facts stand out from the record of guard-mounting, cartridge-making, cooking, cleaning, and the rest of the every-day doings inseparable from life even in a siege. Although the rebels now numbered at least twenty thousand men, including six thousand trained soldiers, they were long in hardening their hearts to attempt that escalade which, if undertaken on the last day of June, could scarcely have failed to be successful. They were not cowards. They gave proof in plenty of their courage and fighting stamina. Yet they cringed before men whom they had learnt to regard as the dominant race. The other equally surprising element in the situation was the readiness of the garrison, doomed by all the laws of war to early extinction, to extract humor out of its forlorn predicament.

The most dangerous post in the entrenchment was the Cawnpore Battery. It was commanded by a building known as Johannes' House, whence an African negro, christened "Bob the Nailer" by the wits of the 32nd, picked off dozens of the defenders during the long days of the siege. What quarrel this strange land had with the English no one knows, but the defenders were well aware of his identity, and annoyed him by exhibiting a most unflattering effigy. Needless to say, the whites of his eyes, and his woolly hair were reproduced with marked effect, and "Bob the Nailer" gave added testimony of his skill with a rifle by shooting out both eyes in the dummy figure.

Winifred had heard of this man. Once she actually saw him while she was peeping through a forbidden casement. Knowing the wholesale destruction of her fellow-countrymen with which he was credited, she had it in her heart to wish that she held a gun at that moment, and she would surely have done her best to kill him.

He disappeared and she turned away with a sigh, to meet her uncle hastening to yards her.

"Ah, Winifred," he cried, "what were you doing there? Looking out the punishment inflicted on Lot's wife when she would not obey orders?"

"I have just had a glimpse of that dreadful negro in Johannes' House," she said.

Mr. Mayne threw down a bundle of clothes he was carrying. He unslung his rifle. His face, tanned by exposure to sun and rain, lost some of its brick-red color.

"Are you sure?" he whispered, as if their voices might betray them. Like every other man in the garrison he longed to check the career of "Bob the Nailer."

"It is too late," said the girl. "I was visible only for an instant. Look! I saw him at that window."

She partly opened the wooden shutter again and pointed to an upper story of the opposite building. Almost instantly a bullet imbedded itself in the solid planks. Some watcher had noted the opportunity and taken it. Winifred coolly closed the shutter, and adjusted its cross-bar.

"Perhaps it is just as well you missed the chance," she said. "You might have been shot yourself while you were taking aim."

"And what about you, my lady?"

"I shan't offend again, uncle, dear. I really could not tell you why I looked out just now. Things were quiet, I suppose. And I forgot that the opening of a window would attract attention. But why in the world are you bringing me portions of Mr. Malcolm's uniform? That is what you have in the bundle, is it not?"

"Yes. The three men who shared his room are dead, and the place is wanted as an extra ward. I happened to hear of it, so I have rescued his belongings."

"Do you—do you think he will ever claim them, or that we shall live to safeguard them?"

"My dear one, that is as Providence directs. It is something to be thankful for that we are alive and unharmed. And that reminds me. They need a lot of bandages in the hospital. Will you tear Malcolm's linen into strips? I will come for them after the last post."

He hurried away, leaving the odd collection of garments with her. The clothes were her lover's parade uniform, which Malcolm had carried from Meerut in a valise strapped behind the saddle. The other articles were purchased in Lucknow and had never been worn. In comparison with the smart full-dress kit of a cavalry officer and the spotless linen, a soiled and mud-spattered turban looked singularly out of place. It was as though some tattered dandy had thrust himself into a gathering of dandies.

Being a woman, Winifred gave no heed to the fact that the metal badge on the crossed folds was not that worn by an officer, nor did she observe that it carried the crest of the 2nd Cavalry, whereas Malcolm's regimentary thirty 3rd. But, being also a very thrifty and industrious little person, she decided to untie the turban, wash it, and use its many yards of fine muslin for the manufacture of lint.

The folds of a turban are usually kept in position by pins, but when she came to examine this one she discovered that it was tied with whip-cord. Her knowledge of native headgear was not extensive, so this measure of extra security did not surprise her. A pair of scissors soon overcame the difficulty: she shook out the neat folds, and a pearl necklace and a piece of paper fell to the floor.

She was alone in her room at the moment. No one heard her cry of surprise, almost of terror. Her glance at the glistening pearls told her that they were of exceeding value. They ranged from the size of a small pea to that of a large marble; their white sheen and velvet purity bespoke rareness and skilled selection. The setting alone would vouch for their quality. Each pearl was secured to its neighbor by clasps and links of gold, which a brooch-like fastening in front was studded with fine diamonds. Winifred sank to her knees. She picked up this remarkable ornament as gingerly as if she were handling a dead snake. In the vivid light the pearls shimmered with wonderful and ever-changing tints. They seemed to whisper of love, and hate—of all the passions that stir heart and brain into frenzy—and through a mist of fear and awed questioning came a doubt, a suspicion, a searching of her soul as she recalled certain things which the thrilling events of her recent life had dulled almost to extinction.

Her uncle had told her of the Princess Roshnara's words to Malcolm on that memorable night of May 10, when he rode out from Meerut to help them. At the time, perhaps, a little pang of jealousy made its presence felt, for no woman can bear to hear of another woman's overtures to her lover. The meeting at Bithoor helped to dispel that half-formed illusion, and she had not troubled since to ask herself why the Princess Roshnara was so ready to help Malcolm to escape. She never dreamed that she herself was a pawn in the game that was intended to bring Nana Sahib to Delhi. But now, with this royal trinket glittering in her hands, she could hardly fail to connect it with the only Indian princess of whom she had any knowledge, and the torturing fact was seemingly undeniable that Malcolm had this priceless necklace in his possession without telling her of its existence. Certainly he had chosen a singular hiding-place, and never did man treat such a treasure with such apparent carelessness. But—there it was. The studied simplicity of its concealment had been effective. She had heard, long since, how he parted from Lawrence on the Chinbut road. Since that hour there was no possible means of communicating with Lucknow, even though he had reached Allahabad safely.

And he had never told her a word about it. It was that that rankled. Poor Winifred rose from her knees in a mood perilously akin to hatred of the negro who dealt death or disablement to her friends of the garrison, but, this time, it was a woman, not a man, who was regarded as the enemy.

Then in a bitter temper, she stooped again to rescue the bit of discolored paper that had fallen with the pearls. Her anger was not lessened by finding that it was covered with Hindu-stani characters. They, of course, offered her no clue to the solution of the mystery that was wringing her heartstrings. If anything, the illegible scrawl only added to her distress. The document was something unknown; therefore, it lent itself to distrust.

At any rate, the turban was destined not to be shredded into lint that day. She busied herself with tending up the rest of the linen. When night came, and Mr. Mayne could leave his post, she showed him the paper and asked him to translate it.

He was a good Eastern scholar, but the dull rays of a small oil lamp were not helpful in a task always difficult to English eyes. He bent his brows over the script and began to decipher some of the words.

"Malcolm-sahib . . . the Company's 3rd Regiment of Horse . . . heaven-born Princess Roshnara Begum . . . Where in the world did you get this, Winifred, and how did it come into your possession?" he said.

"It was in Mr. Malcolm's turban—the one you brought me to-day from his quarters."

"In his turban? Do you mean that it was hidden there?"

"Yes, something of the kind."

Mayne examined the paper again.

"That is odd," he muttered after a pause.

"But what does the writing mean? You say it mentions his name and that of the Princess Roshnara? Surely it has some definite significance?"

The Commissioner was so taken up with the effort to give each spidery curve and series of distinguishing dots and vowel marks their proper bearing, as the text that he did not catch the note of disdain in his niece's voice.

"I have it now," he said, peering at the document while he held it close to the lamp. "It is a sort of pass. It declares that Mr. Malcolm is a friend of the Begum and gives him safe conduct if he visits Delhi within three days of the date named here, but I cannot tell when that would be until I consult a native calendar. It is signed by Bahadur Shah and is altogether a somewhat curious thing to be in Malcolm's possession. Is that all you know of it—merely that it was stuck in a fold of his turban?"

"This accompanied it," said Winifred, with a restraint that might have warned her hearer of the passion it strove to conceal. But Mayne was deaf to Winifred's coolness. If he was startled before, he was positively amazed when she produced the necklace.

He took it, appraised its value silently, and scrutinized the workmanship in the gold links.

"Made in Delhi," he half whispered.

"A wonderful thing, probably worth two lakhs of rupees or even more. It is old, too. The craftsman who fashioned this clasp is not to be found nowadays. Why, it may have been worn by Nurmahal herself! Each of its fifty pearls could supply a chapter of a romance. And you found it, together with this safe-conduct, in Malcolm's turban?"

"Yes, uncle. Do you think I would speak carelessly of such a precious object? When one has discovered a treasure it is a trait of human nature to note pretty closely the place where it came to light."

Mayne was yet too much taken up with puzzling side-issues to pay heed to Winifred's demeanor. He remembered the extraordinary proposal made by Roshnara to Malcolm ere she drove away to Delhi from her father's hunt.

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