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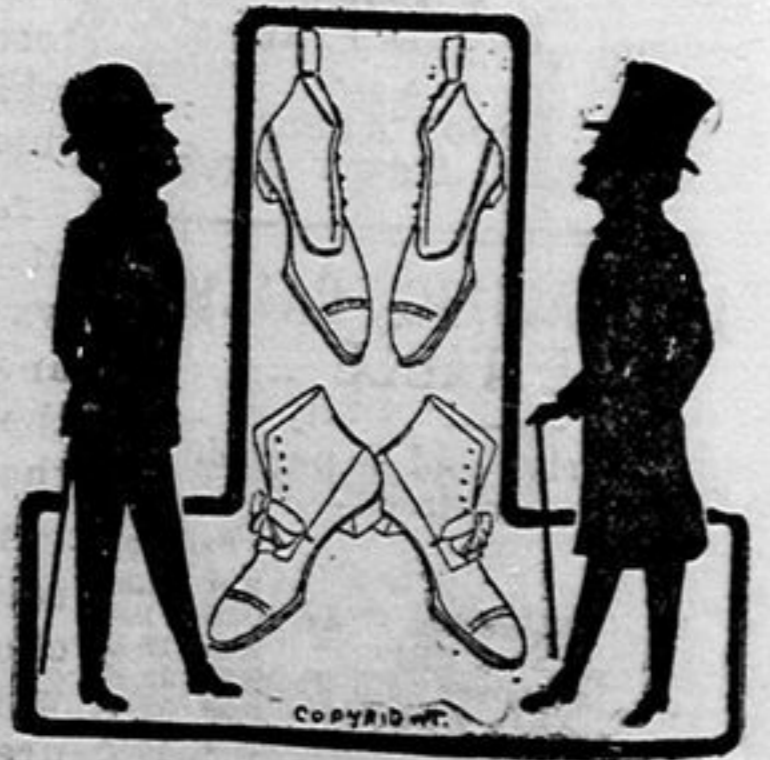
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THE RED YEAR

A Story of the Indian Mutiny

—By— LOUIS TRACY

Copyright by McLeod & Allen CHAPTER XII.

The Swing of the Pendulum

Malcolm's first measured thought was an unpleasant one. It was his intent to land one of the budgerow's crew at the earliest opportunity with a written message, which the bearer would probably be unable to read, addressed to Mohammed Rasul, bidding him go to the assistance of the unlucky Hossein Beg. That plan was now impracticable. The crew had bolted. He could not send the ryo shore nor trust to the help of any neighboring village, since men were already galloping along the left bank with obviously hostile designs.

As there was a favorable breeze and the current was swift and strong, he wondered why these pursuers strove to keep the boat in sight. Then it was borne in on him that they had a definite object. Could it be possible that they knew of the presence of other craft, lower down the river?—that he might be called on within the hour to make a last stand against irresistible odds on the deck of the budgerow? Rather than meet certain death in that way he would head boldly for the opposite shore, and trust again to his tired horses for escape to the jungle and the night. Yet, some plan must be devised to keep faith with that wretched zemindar. The man would not die if left where he was for another forty-eight hours, or even longer. But the word of a sahib was a sacred thing. Whatever the difficulty of communicating with Mohammed Rasul, he must overcome it somehow.

In his perplexity, his eyes fell on the two girls. Being ladies from Fyzabad, they might be able to help him with some knowledge of the locality. Summoning Chumru to take the helm he went forward and spoke to them. Now it is an enduring fact that a woman's regard for her personal appearance will engross her mind when graver topics might well be to the fore. No sooner did these sorrow-laden daughters of Eve realize that they were in a position of comparative safety, and in the company of a good-looking young man of their own race, than they attempted to effect some change in their toilette. A handkerchief dipped in the river, a few twists and coils of refractory hair, a slight readjustment of disordered bodices and crumpled skirts—above all, the gleam of the magic lamp of hope that illumined an abyss of despair—and the amazing result was that Malcolm found two pretty, shy, tremulous maidens awaiting him, instead of the disheveled, woe-begone women he had seen pushed down the steps of the ghat.

He introduced himself with the well-mannered courtesy of the period, and in response the elder of the pair raised her blue eyes to his and told him that since the 16th of June until the previous day they had been hiding in the hut of a native woman, mother of their ayah. "My dear father was killed by Mr. Tucker's side," said she. "He was the deputy commissioner of Fattehpore. Keene is our name—I am Harriet, this is my sister Grace. We only came out from England last cold weather." A sudden recollection brought a cry of surprise from Frank. "Why," he said, "you were fellow-passengers on the Assaye with Miss Winifred Mayne?" "Yes, do you know her? What has become of her? We were told that everyone at Meerut was killed." "Thank Heaven, she was alive and well when I last saw her three days ago." "And her uncle? Is he living? She was very much attached to him. How did she escape from Meerut?" broke in Grace, eagerly. "I wish they had never left Meerut. The Mutiny at that station collapsed in a couple of hours. Unfortunately, they are now both penned up in the Residency at Lucknow, which is surrounded by goodness only knows how many thousands of rebels. But I must give you Winifred's recent history at another time. I want you to tell me something about this neighborhood. What is the nearest town on the river, and which bank is it on?" "Unfortunately, our acquaintance with this part of India is very slight," said Miss Harriet Keene, sadly. "We remained at Calcutta four months with our mother, who died there, without having seen our dear father after a separation of five years. We came up country in March, and were going to Naini Tal when the Mutiny broke out. We only saw the Ganges three or four times before our ayah brought us across on that terrible night when father was murdered."

Malcolm had heard many such tensely dramatic stories from fugitives who had reached Lucknow during July. Phrases of pity or consolation were powerless in face of these tragedies. But he could not forbear asking one question: "How did you come to fall into the hands of Hossein Beg?" "We were betrayed by some children," was the simple answer. "They saw our ayah's mother baking chupatties, day after day, sufficient for four people. My sister and I lived nearly three weeks in a cow-byre, never daring, of course, to approach even the door. The children made some talk about the lavish food supply in the old woman's hut, and the story reached the ears of their father. He, like all the other natives here, seems to hate Europeans as though they were his deadliest enemies. He spied on us, discovered our whereabouts, and yesterday morning we were dragged forth, while the poor creatures to whom we owed our lives were beaten to death before our very eyes."

The speaker was a fair English girl of twenty. Her sister was eighteen, and their previous experience of the storm and fret of existence was drawn from an uneventful childhood in India, four years in a Brighton school, and a twelvemonth in a Brussels convent! Malcolm choked back the hard words that rose to his lips, and sought such local information as the ryo could give. It was little. The tiller of the Indian fields lives and dies in his village and has no interests beyond the horizon. This man visited the Ganges once a year on a religious feast, and perhaps twice in the same period in connection with the shipping of grain on his brother's boat. To that extent, but no further, did his store of general knowledge pass beyond the narrow limits of those who dwell far from a river highway.

Yet it was he who first espied a new and most active peril. "Look, huzoor!" he cried suddenly. "They have made signs to the Fattehpore ghat. Two boats are following us." And then Malcolm found that the real danger came from the opposite shore. It was a case of falling on Scylla when trying to avoid Charybdis. He learnt afterwards that the rebels had organized a code of signals from bank to bank, owing to the number of the craft with Europeans on board that sought safety in flight down the river. That some device must have drawn pursuit from the right bank was obvious. A couple of roomy budgerows with sails set were racing after him, and the long sweeps on board each boat were being propelled by willing arms.

It must be confessed that a feeling of bitter resentment against this last stroke of ill-luck rose in Malcolm's breast for an instant. He conquered it. He recalled Lawrence's bold advice, "Never Surrender," and that inspiring memory brought strength. At that point the Ganges was about a mile and a quarter in width. The budgerow was some six hundred yards distant from the left bank. Three miles ahead the river curved to the left round a steep promontory. The farther shore was marsh-land, so it might be assumed that a hidden barrier of rock flung off the deep current there, while the one chance of escape presented itself was to steer for that. He called for effect, and the budgerow and force it under the fire of the horsemen. The Fattehpore boats were a mile in the rear, but that advantage would be greatly lessened if Malcolm crossed the stream, and perhaps altogether effaced by the powerful sweeps at their command.

However, to cross was the only way, and the only way is ever the best way. Having once made up his mind Frank coolly reviewed the situation. Food had been eaten and effect, and the budgerow and force it under the fire of the horsemen. The Fattehpore boats were a mile in the rear, but that advantage would be greatly lessened if Malcolm crossed the stream, and perhaps altogether effaced by the powerful sweeps at their command. However, to cross was the only way, and the only way is ever the best way. Having once made up his mind Frank coolly reviewed the situation. Food had been eaten and effect, and the budgerow and force it under the fire of the horsemen. The Fattehpore boats were a mile in the rear, but that advantage would be greatly lessened if Malcolm crossed the stream, and perhaps altogether effaced by the powerful sweeps at their command.

He kept on grimly, however, never deviating from his perspective, which was the swampy ground on the outer curve of the bend. It was not until another mile was covered and the mutineers were almost abreast in the true line of the river, that he knew why they were making such heart-breaking progress as compared with his own craft. The Ganges, after the vagrom fashion of all giant rivers, was cutting a new bed through the sunken reefs towards the loy-laying marsh. At the wide elbow there were really two channels and he was now sailing along the comparatively motionless water between them!

By side with this terrifying discovery came the certain fact that his awkwardly built craft would gain little by manoeuvring. The new channel was dangerous, too. At any instant she might run ashore on the shoal that was surely forming in the centre of the river. At all costs that must be avoided. With a smile and a few confident words to the girls, he went aft, took the helm from Chumru and bade him help the ryo in putting out the port sweep. The effect was quickly apparent. The budgerow ran into the second channel, but she allowed her dangerous rivals to approach so close that the natives opened fire with long-range dropping shots.

It was now a matter of minutes ere the rebel marksmen would render the deck uninhabitable. To beach the boat, land the horses, and get the young ladies ashore in safety, had become an absolute impossibility. Then it occurred to Frank that the Fattehpore men could not know for certain that there were Englishwomen on board. They could see Chumru, the ryo, the horses, and of course, the steersman, but the girls were seated in the well amidships, these river-craft being only partly decked fore and aft. A modification of his scheme flashed through his brain, and he decided to adapt it forthwith. First asking Miss Keene and her sister not to reveal their presence, no matter what happened, he told Chumru to stand by the horses and help him to make their leap into the water when he gave the order. With difficulty he induced the scared ryo to take the rudder while he explained the new project. It had that element of daring in it that is worthy of success. Being nothing less

than an attempt to draw the rebel's attention entirely to himself and Chumru by making a dash for the shore, while the ryo was to allow the boat to continue her course down stream with, apparently, no other tenant than himself. Malcolm's theory was that, if he and Chumru made good their landing, they would hug the river until the budgerow was sufficiently ahead of pursuit to permit of her being run ashore. Though the plan involved deserting the helpless girls, yet was he strong-minded enough to adopt it. He substituted a forlorn hope for imminent and unavoidable death or capture, and it gave on last avenue of achievement to the mission on which he had come from Lucknow.

At the final moment he communicated it to the two sisters. They agreed to abide by his decision, and the elder one said with a calm serenity that lent to her words the symbolism of a prayer: "We are all in God's hands, Mr. Malcolm. Whether we live or die we are assured that you have done and will do all that lies in the power of a Christian gentleman to save us."

"I don't like leaving you," he murmured, "but our only weapons are a sword and a brace of empty pistols. If we run on another half mile we shall be shot down where we stand without any means of defending ourselves. On the other hand—" Then the budgerow struck a submerged rock with a violence that must have pitched him overboard were he not holding Nejd's headstall at the moment. She careened so badly that the girls shrieked and Malcolm himself thought she would turn turtle. But she swung clear, righted herself, and lay broadside on to the current. Another crash, less violent but more disastrous, tore away the rudder and wrenched the spar pulley out of the top of the mast. The heavy sail fell of course, but by some miracle left the occupants of the boat uninjured.

And now the maimed craft was carried along sluggishly, drifting back towards the centre of the river, while the men in the other boats set up a flendish yell of delight at the catastrophe that had overtaken the doomed Feringhis. Their skilled boatmen evidently knew of this reef. They stood away towards the shore, but the triumphant jeering that came from the crowded decks showed that they meant to pass their dismantled quarry and wait in safer waters until it lumbered down upon them. Malcolm suddenly became aware of his wounded arm. With a curious fatalism he began to dissect his emotions. He arrived at the conclusion that the drop from the nervous tension of hope to the relaxation of sheer despair had dulled his brain and weakened his physical powers. This, then, was the end. There could be no doubt about it. He quieted the startled horses with a word or two and spoke to the girls again. "You may as well come on deck now," he said. "It is all up with us. If a friendly bullet puts us out of our misery, so much the better. Other men's advice to you both is to leap into the river rather than be recaptured."

Grace was sobbing hysterically, but Harriet, clasping her fondly in her arms, looked up at him. "No," she said, "we must not do that. Our lives are not our own. The Lord gave and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord!" Frank winced in his anguish. To a pious man there is nothing so galling as helplessness; what a game of battledore and shuttlecock had been played with him and those bound up with his fortunes since the moulie's man-trap brought him headlong to the earth in the main street of Rai Bareilly! "Huzoor!" yelled Chumru, excitedly. "Look! There below! A smoke ship! And see! Those sons of pigs are making for the bank!" Malcolm could scarce believe his eyes when they rested on a small steamer with the British flag flying from the masthead, coming round the bend. Yet there could be no mistake about it. British officers in white uniforms were standing on her bridge, the muzzles of a couple of guns showed black and business-like over her bows, while her forward deck was packed with men in the uniform of the Madras Fusiliers. Her commander seemed to take in the exact position of affairs at a glance, and, indeed, the half-wrecked and almost empty boat in mid-stream, so eagerly followed by two thickly crowded craft now close hauled and putting forth desperate efforts to reach the bank, presented a riddle easy to read.

That twinge of pain quitted Frank's arm as speedily as it had made its presence felt. He helped the girls to the raised deck, so that the people on the steamer could see them. It was not necessary. An officer waved a hand to them as the sturdy little vessel dashed past, raising a mighty spume of white froth with her paddles, and soon her guns were busy. There was no question of quarter. Captain Spurgin had been with Neill at Allahabad. He knew the story of Massacre Ghat, of Delhi, of Sitapur, Maradad, Bareilly, and a score of other stations in Oudh and the Northwest. His gunners pelted the unwieldy budgerows with round shot until they began to sink. Then he used grape and rifle fire, until five minutes after the Warren Hastings came on the scene, there was nought left of the Fattehpore navy save some shattered wreckage and a few wretches who strove to swim amidst a hail of lead and in a river infested with crocodiles.

When the steamer dropped down stream Malcolm picked up the fugitives, Malcolm learnt that Spurgin was co-operating with Renaud. The one cleared the river, the other was hanging men on nearly every tree that lined the Grand Trunk Road. And Havelock, nobly aided by Neill, was moving heaven and earth to equip a strong force at Allahabad to avenge Cawnpore and raise the expected siege of Lucknow.

As Malcolm himself brought the earliest news of the investment, he and Chumru were put ashore with a small escort, in order that they might join Major Renaud's column, and hurry to Havelock with his thrilling tidings. Spurgin promised to visit the village on the east bank, release Hossein Beg.

Continued on page 7

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