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THE RED YEAR
A Story of the Indian Mutiny

—By—
LOUIS TRACY

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CHAPTER XIII.
The Men Who Wore Skirts

That was what the rebels called the 78th—"the men who wore skirts." Now, Highland regiments had fought in India for many a year before the Mutiny, and the kilt was no new thing to their native eyes. The phrase, therefore, is significant. It crystallizes the legend that went round—that an army of savage English was marching from Allahabad, and that its most ferocious corps was dressed in skirts, the men having sworn never to assume male clothing until they had avenged their murdered women-folk.

These could be no better proof that the sepoy and his helpers were well aware that they had outraged all the laws of war and humanity by their excesses, and there was a further reason why the garb of old Gaul was more dreaded throughout India than other British uniform during the autumn and cold weather of 1857. Not many Europeans knew it until long afterwards, but the natives knew, and told the story with bated breath, and one British officer knew, for he was with the Seaforth Highlanders in Cawnpore when they took dire vengeance for the Well.

It is a matter of history how Havelock marched his little army of twelve hundred men along the Grand Trunk Road from Allahabad. He led a thousand British soldiers, drawn from the 64th, 84th, and 78th Foot, and the 1st Madras Fusiliers. Captain Brassey brought 130 loyal Sikhs to the column: there were six small guns, and eighteen volunteer cavalry.

These details should be appreciated before it is possible to understand the supra-miraculous campaign Havelock conducted. For five days the expedition tramped north in the rain and heat, through a land given over to dead men, vultures and carnivorous animals. Renaud and Spurgin had made no prisoners. They did not slay wantonly, but the slightest shadow of suspicion falling on any man meant the short shrift of a rope and the nearest tree.

At last, on the 12th of August, the main body overtook Renaud, whose patrols were stopped by a large force of rebels entrenched in a village four miles south of Fattehpore. The junction took place at one o'clock in the morning. At daybreak, Havelock sent Colonel Tytler, with the eighteen volunteer horse, to reconnoitre. The enemy's cavalry, thinking they had only Renaud's tiny detachment to deal with, charged across the plain, to find the whole twelve hundred drawn up to receive them. Struck with a sudden fear, the white-coated troopers reined in their horses. This was the first real check Nana Sahib had received. It was typical of the new order. The flood-tide of mutiny had met its barrier rock. Thenceforth, it ebbed though it raged madly for a while in the effort to sweep away the obstruction.

Without giving the enemy's cavalry time to recover from their surprise, Havelock threw forward his infantry, Captain Maude, of the Royal Artillery, rushed his six guns to a point-blank range, there was a short and sharp fight, and the rebels broke. They were chased through and out of the town of Fattehpore. All their

guns and some valuable stores were captured, and, greatest marvel in a day of marvels, not one British soldier had fallen!

No wonder Havelock wrote to his wife: "One of the prayers oft repeated since my school-days has been answered, and I have lived to command in a successful action. . . . But away with vain glory! Thanks be to God who gave me the victory."

That evening Malcolm witnessed the plundering of Fattehpore, which was permitted in retribution for its recent rebellion. The town lay on the main road, which, at this point, was removed from the river by many miles, else he would have ridden to the ghat and sent a message to Hossein Beg in order to make sure of the safety of the friendly ryot.

Owing to his knowledge of the vernacular, he managed to pick up a bit of useful information while questioning a native on this matter. On the battle-field he came across a state elephant which had been shot through the body by one of Maude's nine-pounders. The manner of the beast's death was remarkable—it is not often that an elephant is bowled over by a cannon ball like a rabbit by a bullet from a small calibre rifle—and its trappings betokened that it had carried a person of importance.

Now he learned that Tania Topi was the rider, and it was thus he discovered that Nana Sahib was directing the operations from Cawnpore, as Tania Topi was his favorite lieutenant, whereas it was believed previously that the Brahmin usurper would lead his hosts to take part in the siege of Lucknow.

On the 15th a sharp fight gave the British possession of the village of Aong. The position was dearly won, for the gallant Renaud fell there, mortally wounded. The men were about to prepare their breakfast after the battle when news came that the enemy, strongly reinforced from Cawnpore, were preparing to blow up a bridge over the Pandoo Nuddee, an unfordable tributary of the Ganges, six miles ahead. Havelock called for a special effort, the troops responded without a murmur, and advanced through dense groves of mango trees until they came under fire. For the second time that day they hurled themselves on the rebels, drove them headlong out of a well-chosen position, and saved the bridge.

Cawnpore was now only twenty-three miles distant. With the fickleness of the rainy season the sky had cleared, and the sun beat down on the British force with a fury that had not been experienced before that year, though the hot weather of 1857 was noted for its exceedingly high temperatures. The elements seemed to have joined with man to try and stop the advance, but neither Indian sun nor Indian sepoy could restrain that terrible host. Dogged and uncompromising, animated rather by the feelings of the infuriated tigress seeking reprisals for her slain cubs than by the sentiments of soldiers engaged in an ordinary campaign, they pressed on, until sixteen miles of that sun-scorched road were covered.

Then Havelock commanded a halt in a grove of trees, and two level-headed sepoys, deserters from Nana Sahib's army, came and told the British General that the Nana had brought five thousand men out of Cawnpore to do battle for his tottering dynasty. It was in vain. Though he displayed some tactical skill, placed his men well, and did not hesitate to come under fire in person, he was out-generalled by a flank march and sent flying to Bithoor, there to curse his fate, befuddle his wits with brandy, and threaten to drown himself in the Ganges.

But the battle was not won until one of those strange incidents happened that distinguish the Mutiny from all other wars. It must never be forgotten that the sepoys had received their training from British officers. Their words of command, methods of fighting, even their uniforms, were based on European models.

They had regimental bands, too, and the tunes in their repertoire were those in vogue in Britain, for native music does not lend itself to military purposes. The musicians, of course, were profoundly ignorant of the names or significance of the melodies they had been taught to play.

Hence, when Nana Sahib rallied his men in a village, Havelock called on the Highlanders and 64th to take it, and the two regiments entered into a gallant race for the position, while the Highland pipers struck up an inspiring pibroch. Not to be outdone, a sepoy band responded with "The Campbells are Coming!"

And this, of all airs, to the Mackenzies! It was chance, of course, but it added gall to the venom of the 78th. This fourth and greatest victory was a costly one to the British, but it left their ardor undiminished, their reckless courage intensified. On the next day they flung themselves against the remnant of the Nana's army that still tried to bar the way into the city. Vague rumors had reached the men of the dreadful tragedy enacted on the 15th. They refused to credit them. None but maniacs would murder helpless women and children in the belief that the crime would hinder the advance of their rescuers. So they crushed, tore, beat a path through the suburbs, until the leading company of Highlanders reached the Bibigarh, the House of the Woman.

Malcolm was with them, and he saw a sergeant enter the blood-stained dwelling, while the men lined up in front of the Well in an awed silence. The sergeant returned. His brick-red face had paled to an ashen tint. In his hand he carried the long, thin strands of a woman's hair, strands that had been hacked off some unhappy Englishwoman's head by Nana Sahib's butchers.

He removed his bonnet with the solemnity of a man who is in the presence of God and death. Passing down the ranks he gave a lock of the hair to each soldier.

Some life for every hair before the sun sets," he said quietly. And that was all, but there are old men yet alive in Cawnpore who remember how the Highlanders raged through the streets that evening like the wrath of Heaven.

General Neill, who came later and assumed the role of magistrate, showed neither pity nor mercy. Every man who fell into his hands, and who was connected in the slightest degree

with the infamy of the Well, was hanged on a gallows erected in the compound, but not until he had cleaned with his tongue the allotted square of blood-stained cement that formed the floor of the house.

Cawnpore, on the 17th, was indeed a city of dreadful night. The fierce exultation of successful warfare was gone. The streets were empty save for prowling dogs, pigs, and vultures, some wild beasts. No sound was heard in the British encampment except the melancholy plaint of the pipes mourning for the dead, during the interment of those who had fallen. Even the unconquerable Havelock said to his son, as they and the officers of the staff sat at dinner:

"If the worst comes to the worst we can't but die with our swords in our hands."

Next morning his splendid vitality reasserted itself. He advanced towards Bithoor and took up a strong position in case Nana Sahib might attempt to recover the city. But that arch-fiend had been deserted by the majority of his followers, and he was babbling of suicide to his fellow Brahmins.

Meanwhile Neill brought a few more troops from Allahabad, and Havelock threw the greater portion of his army across the Ganges. Owing to the difficulty of obtaining boats and skilled boatmen, this was a slow and dangerous undertaking. It took five days to ferry nine hundred men to the Oudh side, but Lawrence had said that the Residency could only hold out fourteen days, and come what might, the effort must be made to relieve him.

On the 20th while Malcolm was occupied with some details of transport, Chumru came on him. The swarthy was no longer "Ali Khan," the beaver-hunter, but a white-robed domestic, though no change of attire could rob him of the truculent aspect that was the gift of nature.

Beside Chumru stood another Mohammedan, an elderly man, who straightened himself under the sahib's eye and brought up his right hand in a smart military salute.

"Huzoor," said Chumru, "this is Ungud, Kumpani pisin (a pensioner of the Company), and he would have speech with the Presence."

"Speak, then, and quickly, for I have occupation," said Malcolm. But he listened carefully enough to Ungud's words, for the man coolly proposed to

work his way to Lucknow and carry an message to Lawrence that the General-sahib entrusted to him.

It was a desperate thing to suggest. The absence of native spies from either Cawnpore or Lucknow proved that the rebels killed, and probably tortured all who attempted to run the gauntlet of their investing lines. Yet Ungud was firm in his offer, so Malcolm brought him to Havelock and the general at once wrote and gave him a letter to Lawrence, the news of the great Commissioner's death not having reached the relieving force.

He seized the opportunity to write a few lines to Winifred. He was charged with the care of Ungud as far as the nearest river ghat, and he scribbled the following as he rode thither:

British Field Force,
Cawnpore, July 20th, 1857.
My Dearest Winifred:

If this note is safely delivered, you will know that Sir Henry Havelock, at the head of a strong force, is on his way to relieve Lucknow. I am with him, as major on the staff.

I reached Allahabad on the 4th, thank you wholly to your loving thought in sending Chumru after me, for I was a prisoner in the hands of a fanatical mouvie when Chumru came to my assistance. He saved my life there, and his quick-witted devotion was shown in many other instances during a most exciting journey. My thoughts are always with you, dear one, and I offer many a prayer to the Most High that you may retain your health and spirits amid the horrors that surround you. Be confident, dear heart, and bid your uncle tell his comrades of the garrison that we mean to cut our way to your rescue through all opposition.

The bearer will endeavor to return with a reply to the general. Perhaps you may be able to send a line with him. In any event, I trust he will see you, and that will bring joy to my soul when I hear of it.

Ever your devoted,
Frank.

By Havelock's order, a light, swift boat was placed at Ungud's disposal, and Malcolm supplied him with plenty of money for horses and bribes on the road, while, in the event of success, he would be liberally rewarded afterwards.

Now it chanced that on the 20th, about the very hour Ungud set out on his daring mission, the Mouvie of Fyzabad managed to goad his co-religionists into a determined assault on the Residency.

At ten o'clock in the morning the bombardment suddenly ceased. The garrison sentries noted an unusual gathering of the enemy's forces in the streets and open spaces that confronted the Bailey Guard and the other main posts on the city side.

They gave the alarm and every man rushed to the walls. Even the sick and wounded left their beds. Men with the fire of fever in their eyes, men with bandaged limbs and scarce able to crawl, asked for muskets and lined up alongside their yet unscathed comrades.

They waited in grim silence, those war-worn soldiers of the Queen. The signal for a furious struggle was given in dramatic fashion. A mine exploded, a large section of the defending wall crumbled into ruins, a hundred guns belched forth a perfect hail of round shot, sharpshooters stationed in the neighboring houses fired their muskets as rapidly as they could lift them from piles of loaded weapons at their command, and, under cover of this fusillade, some three thousand rebels advanced to the attack.

They came on with magnificent courage. They actually succeeded in planting scaling-ladders across the breach, and their leader, a fierce-looking cavalry rissaldar, leaped into the ditch and stood the right in front of the Cawnpore batteries, waving a green standard to encourage his followers.

He was shot by a man of the 32nd, and his body formed the lowermost layer of a causeway of corpses that soon choked the ditch. But the concentrated fire of the denizens checked this most audacious of the many assaults delivered during those four days of fighting. At two o'clock the attack slackened and died away. The rebels had lost some hundreds, while the British had only four men killed and twelve wounded.

There was much jubilation among the garrison at this outcome of the long-expected and dreaded attack. It added to their spirit of self-reliance, and it cast down the hopes of the mutineers to a corresponding degree, because their moral inferiority was proved beyond dispute. Like all Asiatics, they had not dared to press on in the face of death. With one whole-hearted rush those three thousand fighters could have swarmed into the Residency against all the efforts of the few Europeans and natives who resisted them. But that rush was never made by the assailants as a mass. Not once in the history of the Mutiny did the sepoys adopt the "do or die" method that characterized the British troops in nearly every action of the campaign.

When the moon rose on the night of the 21st a sharp-eyed sentry saw a man creeping across the broken ground in front of the Bailey Guard. He raised his rifle, but his orders were to challenge anyone who approached thus secretly, and, perchance, a messenger from some relieving force might be slain by error.

"Who goes there?" he cried.

"A friend," was the answer, but the rest of the stranger's words showed that he was a native.

"The sentry was no linguist.

"You stop where you are," he commanded, bidding a comrade summon an officer, "for someone who can talk the lingo."

Within a minute the newcomer was admitted. It was Ungud, who had run the gauntlet of the enemy's pickets and who now triumphantly produced Havelock's letter to "Lawrence-sahib Bahadur." Alas, Henry Lawrence was dead, but Brigadier Inglis, who succeeded him in the command, now learnt that Havelock had defeated Nana Sahib, occupied Cawnpore, and was advancing to the relief of Lucknow.

How the great news buzzed through the Residency! How men grasped each other's hands in glee and exultation and sought leave to take the joyful tidings to the hospital and the women's quarters!

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