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

Without guns to breach the walls, even the heroic Nicholson was powerless against a strongly fortified city. The siege train was toiling slowly across the Punjab, but the setting in of the monsoon rendered the transit of heavy cannon a laborious task...

"What sort of escort accompanies it?" asked Nicholson, when the news reached him. "Almost exclusively natives and few in number at that," he was told. An hour later a native spy from Delhi came to the camp...

The place named was a large village, ten miles northwest of the ridge, and Nicholson guessed instantly that the sepoys had planned the daring coup of cutting off the siege train. With him, to hear was to act. He formed a column of two thousand men and a battery of field artillery and left the camp at dawn on the 25th...

Officers and men ate a slight meal, growled a bit, and swung off in the new direction. At four o'clock in the afternoon they found the sepoy army drawn up behind a canal, with its right protected by another canal, and the centre and left posted in fortified villages...

"Now, first," he said, "I want you to take that seral and the guns. You all know what Sir Colin Campbell told you at Chillianwallah, and you have heard that he said the same thing at the battle of the Alma..."

Utterly exhausted, the soldiers slept on the sodden ground. That night, smoking a cigar with his staff, Nicholson commented on the skill shown in the enemy's disposition. "I asked a wounded havildar who it was that led the column, and he told me the commander was a new arrival, a subadar of the 8th Irregular Cavalry, named Akhab Khan..."

Malcolm started. Akhab Khan was the young sowar whose life he had spared at Cawnpore when Winitred and her uncle and himself were escaping from Bithoor. "I knew him well, sir," he could not help saying. "He was not a subadar, but a lance-corporal..."

"You will be rendering a national service by your deed," said Nicholson, gazing into Frank's troubled eyes with that magnetic power that bent all men to his will. "I know it is a distasteful business, but you are able to carry it through, and five hours of your observation will be worth five weeks of native reports..."

"Yes, sir," said Malcolm, choking back the protest on his lips. He could not trust himself to say more. He refused even to allow his thoughts to dwell on such a repellent subject. A spy? What soldier likes the office? It stifles ambition. It robs war of its glamour...

"What is toward, sahib?" asked the Mohammedan. "Have we not seen enough of India that we must set forth once more?" "This time I go alone," said Frank, sadly. "Perchance I shall not be long absent. You will remain here in charge of my baggage and of certain letters which I shall give you..."

Malcolm went with him and never had he taken part in a harder day's work. The road was a bullock track, a swamp of mud amid the larger swamp of the ploughed land and jungle. Horses and men floundered through it as best they might. The guns often sank almost to the trunnions; many a time the infantry had to help elephants and bullocks to haul them out...

Provided they met some stragglers on the road they meant to enter the city. But the dawn, by skillful expenditure of money on Malcolm's part and the exercise of Chumru's peculiar inventiveness in maintaining a flow of lurid language, they counted on keeping their new-found comrades in tow while they made the tour of the city. The curiosity of strangers would be quite natural, and Malcolm hoped they might be able to slip out again with some expedition planned for the night or the next morning...

In this half-fellow-well-met manner the party crossed the bridge, were interrogated by a guard at the Water Gate and admitted to the fortress. It did not dismount within the precincts of the sacred Hall of Audience itself. He began by explaining timorously that while affairs remained in the present unsettled condition he could not arrange matters as he would have wished. He knew that there were arrears of pay and that the food supply was irregular...

"But you do not help me," he said, with some display of spirit. "Respectable citizens tell me that you plunder their houses and debauch their wives and daughters. I have issued repeated injunctions prohibiting robbery and oppression in the city, but to no avail." He was interrupted with loud murmurs. "What matters it about the bazaar folk, O King," yelled a sepoy. "We want food, not a sermon..."

"To be sure. Is there not the Council of the Barah Topi? (Twelve Hats.) Are not Bakht Khan and Akhab Khan in charge of brigades? Where hast thou been, brother, that these things are not known to thee?" "Be patient with me, I pray thee, friend. I and twenty more, whom thou seest here, have ridden in within the hour. We come to join the Jihad, and we are grieved to find a dispute toward when we expected to be led against the infidels..."

"The sepoy laughed scornfully. "You will see as many fights here as outside the walls," he muttered, and moved off for men were beginning to guard their tongues in Imperial Delhi. A rowdy gang of full five hundred armed mutineers marched up and hustled the mob right and left as they forced a way to the gate. Their words and attitude betokened trouble. The opportunity was too good to be lost. Malcolm dismounted, gave the reins to Chumru, and told him to wait his return under some trees somewhat removed from the road, for Akhab Khan had sharp eyes, and the Mohammedan's grotesque face was well known to him. Chumru made a fearsome grimace, but Malcolm's order was peremptory. Summoning a fruit-seller, the bearer led the Gwalior men to the rendezvous named and distributed mangoes amongst them...

Frank joined the ruck of the demostroated and passed through the portals of the magnificent gate. A long, high-roofed arcade, spacious as the nave of a cathedral, with raised marble platforms for merchants on each side, gave access to a quadrangle. In the centre stood a fountain, and round about were grassy lawns and beds of flowers. The sepoys tramped on, heedless of the destruction they caused in the garden. They passed through the noble Nakar Khana, or music-room, and entered another and larger square, at the further end of which stood the Divan-Ah, or Hall of Public Audience. Not even in Agra, and certainly not in gaudy Lucknow, had Malcolm seen any structure of such striking architectural effect. The elegant roof was supported on three rows of red sandstone pillars, adorned with chaste gilding and stucco-work. Open on three sides, the audience chamber was backed by a wall of white marble, from which a staircase led to a throne raised about ten feet from the ground and covered with a rarely beautiful marble canopy borne on four small pillars...

The throne was empty, but an attendant appeared through the door at the foot of the stairs, and announced that the Light of the World would receive his faithful soldiers in a few minutes. The impatient warriors snorted their disapproval. They did not like to be kept waiting, but carried their resentment no further, and Malcolm, with alert eyes and ears, moved about among them, as by that means he hoped to avoid attracting attention. Even in that moment of deadly peril he could not help admiring the exquisite skill with which the great marble wall was decorated with mosaics and paintings of the fauna and flora of India. The mosaics were wholly composed of precious stones, and the paintings were executed in rich tints that told of a master hand. There was nothing bizarre or crude in their conception. They might have adorned some Athenian temple in the heyday of Greece, and were wholly free from the stiff drawing and illogical coloring usually seen in the hand of a Venetian artist. Auguste de Bordeaux, had carried out this work for Shah Jehan, that great patron of the arts, and in any event, his appreciation of their excellence was spasmodic, for the broken words he heard from the excited soldiery warned him that a crisis was imminent in the fortunes of Delhi. "Who is he, then, this havildar you gunners from Bareilly?" said one. "And the other, Akhab Khan. They say he fought for the Nazarenes at Meerut. Mohammed Latif swears he definded the treasury there," chimed in another...

"As for me, I care not who leads. I want my pay." "I, too, I have not eaten since sunrise yesterday." "We shall get neither food nor money till some one clears those accursed Feringhis off the hill," growled a deep voice close behind Malcolm. There was something familiar in the tone. Frank edged away and glanced at the speaker, whom he recognized instantly as a subadar in his old regiment. But now a craning of necks and a sudden hush of the animated talk showed that some development was toward. Servants entered with cushions, which they disposed around the foot of the throne and at the base of its canopy. A few nobles and court functionaries lounged in, two gorgeously appaieled guards came through the doorway, and behind them tottered a feeble old man, robed in white, and wearing on his head an egret's tail of Paradise plumes, fastened with a gold clasp in which sparkled an immense emerald. Malcolm had seen Bahadur Shah only once before. He remembered how decorous and dignified was the Mogul court when Britain paid honor to an ancient dynasty. And now, what a change! The aged emperor had to lift a trembling hand to obtain a hearing, while, ever and anon, even during his short address, belated officers and troops clattered in on horseback, and did not dismount within the precincts of the sacred Hall of Audience itself. He began by explaining timorously that while affairs remained in the present unsettled condition he could not arrange matters as he would have wished. He knew that there were arrears of pay and that the food supply was irregular. "But you do not help me," he said, with some display of spirit. "Respectable citizens tell me that you plunder their houses and debauch their wives and daughters. I have issued repeated injunctions prohibiting robbery and oppression in the city, but to no avail."

"What matters it about the bazaar folk, O King," yelled a sepoy. "We want food, not a sermon." The Emperor seemed to fire up with indignation at the taunt, but he sank into the chair on the throne. He To be continued



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