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John Kaye and George Bruce Malleeson

Excerpt

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HISTORY OF THE INDIAN MUTINY.

BOOK VII.—FEEBLENESS IN BENGAL AND STRENGTH
IN BIHÁR.

[1857.]

CHAPTER I.

PANIC AND PANIC-MONGERS IN CALCUTTA.

It is time now to return to Calcutta. The measures taken and the views entertained by the Government on receiving intelligence of the Mirath outbreak have been already recorded. It is evident that up to the end of the month of May they had not fully apprehended the gravity of the situation. "Everything," wrote the Secretary in the Home Department, Mr. Cecil Beadon, on the 25th of May, to the French Consul and the other French residents at Calcutta, who, with rare self-sacrifice, had placed their services at the disposal of the Government, "everything is quiet within six hundred miles of the capital. The mischief caused by a passing and groundless panic, has already been arrested; and there is every reason to hope that in the course of a few days tranquillity and confidence will be restored throughout the Presidency." Certainly the disinclination of the Government to accept, to the extent to which they were proffered, the loyal and disinterested offers of the members of the Trades' Association, of the Masonic Fraternity, of the Armenians, and of the French residents, seemed to argue on their part a conviction that the resources at their disposal were equal to any emergency, and a belief that the measures already taken would suffice to put down the revolt. But, however that may have been,

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nothing could justify or even palliate the tone of the reply of the Home Secretary to the French residents. It seemed at the time difficult to affirm to whom Mr. Beadon, the mouth-piece of the Government, intended to impute "a passing and groundless panic." It could not apply to the citizens of Calcutta, for not only had they evinced no fear, but they had not caused the mischief. That mischief had been caused by the Sipáhis; but it was scarcely the result of panic. Nor, had it been so, was the panic, it would seem, altogether groundless, and certainly it was not passing.

It is clear, at any rate, that, on the 25th of May, the Government reckoned upon order being maintained throughout the country between Calcutta and Alláhábád, and upon the prompt repression of the rebellion.

They had, on the 20th of May, commenced, and they subsequently continued, the despatch by detachments of the 84th Regiment to the North-West Provinces. They had been cheered, on the 23rd of May, by the arrival from Madras of the 1st Madras Fusiliers, and with commendable promptitude they had, at once, sent off that regiment in the same direction. They were expecting regiments and batteries from Persia, from Ceylon, and from Rangún.

The Government, then, felt tolerably secure regarding Bengal ^{Views of the Government.} proper and the country south of Alláhábád. The news, however, from the districts north of the last-named city was calculated to alarm. Between the 25th and

^{May 25-30.} 30th of May, the native troops at Fírúzpúr, at Áli-garh, at Mainpúri, at Itáwah, and at Balandshahr, had mutinied. Great fears were entertained regarding Lakhnao, Kánhpúr, Ágra, and the surrounding districts. On the other hand they were confident that the fall of Dehli was imminent, and that the troops engaged in the capture of that place would be almost immediately available to secure the threatened districts north of Alláhábád. It is only fair to them to admit that this view was shared by the public, and, very generally, by soldiers. It was justified, moreover, by the records of the past. Neither to the invaders from the north, to the Maráthás, nor to the English under Lord Lake had the capital of the Mughuls ever offered more than an ephemeral resistance. It was hardly, then, to be supposed that, garrisoned by native soldiers without a chief, it could successfully resist the trained and disciplined warriors of England.

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VIEWS OF THE GOVERNMENT.

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Secure, then, of his base, of the ground lying six hundred miles in advance of it, confident that the troops in the North-West would very soon be available for the repression of rebellion in the central districts, and fearful only regarding the rising there of the native army before the Commander-in-Chief should detach a force to keep it under, the Governor-General, on the 31st of May, despatched the following telegram to General Anson :—" I have heard to-day that you do not expect to be before Dehli until the 9th. In the meantime Kánhpúr and Lakhnao are severely pressed, and the country between Dehli and Kánhpúr is passing into the hands of the rebels. It is of the utmost importance to prevent this, and to relieve Kánhpúr, but nothing but rapid action will do it. Your force of artillery will enable you to dispose of Dehli with certainty; I, therefore, beg that you will detach one European Infantry Regiment, and a small force of European Cavalry, to the south of Dehli, without keeping them for operations there, so that Áligarh may be recovered, and Kánhpúr relieved immediately. It is impossible to overrate the importance of showing European troops between Dehli and Kánhpúr. Lakhnao and Alláhábád depend upon it."

Lord Canning's anxiety about the weak point of his position.

May 31.

The instincts which dictated this telegram were undoubtedly sound. The country between Dehli and Alláhábád was the weakest and the most threatened part of the British position. The only error committed by the Governor-General was the error of believing that the force of artillery on the spot could dispose of the Mughul capital with certainty. But Lord Canning shared that belief with almost every other European, civilian and soldier, in British India.

His view justified.

On the 1st of June, then, all looked hopeful to the Government of India. Its members were so sanguine, that, having only two European regiments to guard Calcutta and the country between that city and Dánápúr, they dispensed with the aid which would have been afforded them by fifteen hundred armed European citizens; they allowed the three and a half native regiments at Barrackpúr and the regiments at Dánápúr, Banáras, and the intermediate stations, to remain armed; knowing that the districts lying between Dehli and Alláhábád were in imminent peril, they yet hoped—even confidently hoped—that the disaster there might be delayed until either General Anson should despatch a regiment from the

June 1.

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north-west, or until they should be strong enough to send up troops from Calcutta.

If the Government of India had had no other resources at their disposal, the course they actually pursued would have been amply justified. But writing, not, so to speak, after the event, but in the spirit of those who were present in Calcutta at the time, I am bound to affirm that they had other resources, and that they neglected them. When the lives of thousands, when the *prestige* of one's country, when the very safety of the national position are in danger, it is a crime to depend solely upon possibilities. If the Government of India did not know, every other man in India knew, that the mutiny of the 19th Native Infantry had been no isolated act. Conscious of this, as I must suppose they were, the Government of India most certainly knew that in the long direct line between Dánápúr and Míráth there was but one European regiment. Yet, even in the first half of the first week of May, when fully aware that the condition of the native army was, to say the least, excited, and that the European soldiers were to the natives in the proportion of one to twenty-four, the Government of Lord Canning had, even then, actually ordered the return of the 84th Regiment to Rangún, and had only been deterred from this step by the opportune outbreak of mutiny at Lakhnao on the 3rd of that month.

The 84th Regiment remained then at Barrackpúr to watch over, on the 6th of May, the disbandment of a mutinous portion of the 34th Native Infantry. That act accomplished, nothing further remained for it to do. Yet the first detachment of the 84th started for the north-west only fourteen days later (20th May). This delay not only remains unexplained, but it is inexplicable. So far as Bengal was concerned, the Government of India had been content to dispense with the 84th Regiment on the 3rd of May, and to send it out of India. Yet, though the occurrences at Lakhnao on that day disclosed the latent weakness in the centre of our line, the 84th was detained motionless near Calcutta! It is true it was used on the 6th, but subsequently to that date it wasted fourteen precious days—days which, if profitably employed, might almost certainly have secured Kánhpúr!

I cannot but think that a mistake, but little less important, was committed when the first offer of the Calcutta citizens, made on the 20th of May was refused. The acceptance of that offer

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1857.] THE REASON OF THEIR CONDUCT.

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would have disengaged for immediate action the wing of a regiment. As events happened, the first batch of the 84th Regiment, leaving Calcutta the 20th of May, succeeded in reaching Kánhpúr early in June. Now it cannot be questioned but that the entire 84th Regiment, if despatched on the 6th of May, might have reached Kánhpúr during that month. Its presence would probably have prevented the outbreak which occurred there; and, in that case, it might certainly have been strengthened by a wing of the 53rd, leaving Calcutta the 21st, and by the Madras Fusiliers, which actually left on the 23rd.

The reason why the Government did not act in the manner in which it might have acted is explained by Mr. Secretary Beadon in his letter, already quoted, to the French residents at Calcutta:—"Everything is quiet within six hundred miles of the capital. The mischief caused by a passing and groundless panic has fortunately been arrested, and there is every reason to hope that, in the course of a few days, tranquillity and confidence will be restored throughout the Presidency." This "reason to hope" had, I have shown, no solid foundation. The hope which existed was, in fact, without reason. It had sufficient vitality, however, to induce the Government to risk the weakest and most threatened point of their line in order that they might appear strong to the world.

The week that followed the 1st of June disclosed to the Government their error, to the world the short-sightedness of the Government.

During that week intelligence reached Calcutta of the mutiny at Lakhnao, of the defection of all the regiments occupying Oudh, of revolts at Ázamgarh, at Banáras, and at Alláhábád, of the massacre of the Europeans at Jhánsí. This news increased the anxiety of the Government regarding the safety of their weak centre line; for Oudh was separated from Kánhpúr but by the river, and even before the defection of that province, the position of Kánhpúr, garrisoned by native troops and in close proximity to the stronghold of the discontented heir of a prince whom we had dispossessed, had inspired alarm. As counterbalancing, in a measure, the effect of this evil news the Government saw with satisfaction the arrival, during that week, in Calcutta, of the 64th Foot and 78th Highlanders from Persia, of a wing of the 35th Foot from Moulmein, of a wing of the 37th Regiment, and of a company of

June 1-7.
Their first
awakening.

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Royal Artillery from Ceylon. Awake now to the danger before them they pushed on these regiments to the north with praiseworthy activity. The uncompleted state of the railway rendered the progress of the detachments slow. In default of this means of transit, single-horsed post-carriages—the quickest mode of travelling then available—bullock carriages, and steamers, were employed to the fullest possible extent. The Government, in fact, did then all that was possible to save the threatened line.

I have said that the Government were awake to the danger before them in the north. It is strange, however, that their eyes were not yet opened to the full magnitude of the crisis; that they neglected the danger at their very door. At the time that they were despatching every available European soldier to protect a station in their centre line from the possible mutiny of the armed Sipáhis who garrisoned it, they allowed the Sipáhis close to Calcutta to remain armed; the native garrison of Dánápúr to remain armed. What is more, in spite of so many examples of disaffection, they believed, or professed to believe, in the loyalty of these men. Their policy at this period was to trust, or to seem to trust, every native regiment until it should revolt. Such a policy naturally greatly hampered the movements of the European troops, for it was often necessary to keep these inactive at a station to guard against a possible outbreak.

Thus, with the news of the revolt of many regiments stationed within the limits of the six hundred miles indicated by Mr. Beadon in his famous letter of the 25th May ringing in their ears, the Government reported to the Court of Directors their belief that a public profession of loyalty made by the 70th Regiment of Native Infantry, then stationed at Barrackpúr, would "have the happiest influence on the minds of all well-disposed men in the Native Army." They, therefore, allowed three and a half native regiments at that station to retain their arms. To the 6th Native Infantry at Alláhábád, on the eve of a revolt accompanied by marked barbarity, the Government sent, at the same time, their acknowledgment of a similar profession. They would not believe the fact which was patent to all around them,—the fact that the entire native army was animated by but one feeling, and that the mutiny of a regiment was merely a question of time and of opportunity.

Their views regarding the possibility of an advance from

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1857.] GENERAL ANSON—HIS CHARACTER.

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Dehli in the direction of their weak central line were encouraged by the receipt, at this period, of information of a victory gained by the Mirath garrison over the rebels issuing from Dehli at the rivulet Hindan, near the town of Gházi-ud-dín Nagar. This victory, in which the rebels lost five guns, was gained on the 31st of May. It encouraged the hope that almost any post might bring the intelligence of the fall of the great fortress.

Another most important item of intelligence conveyed to the Government during this absorbing week was that of the death by cholera of the Commander-in-Chief, General Anson, at Karnál, on the 27th of May. This Death of General Anson. much to be lamented event did not occur until General Anson had prepared and set in action the measures which were to the end persistently carried out for the capture of Dehli. His death was a great—time proved it to be a most sensible His character. loss. A man of very remarkable natural talents, General Anson had, during a residence in India of more than five years, used those talents to master completely the necessities of Indian warfare. He was a perfect judge of character. No man ever more quickly detected the veneer of superficiality. He could not conceal his contempt for a man whom he discovered to be playing a part. Hence, probably, there swarmed up after his death enemies and detractors. They have not succeeded, however, in sullyng his fair fame. For to him, as truly now as when death snatched him from the triumph which he had prepared, may be applied the immortal epitaph which the great historian of the Peninsular War composed for one of the most illustrious of English Generals:—"The honest loved, the dishonest feared him. For, while he lived he did not shun, but scorned and spurned the base, and, with characteristic propriety, they spurned at him when he was dead."

It has already been shown, in the volume immediately preceding this, how, consequent upon the death of General Anson, the command of the force destined to besiege Dehli devolved upon Major-General Sir Henry Barnard, commanding the Sirhind Division.

I have now given a picture—a severe but accurate picture—of the information possessed by the Government of India up to the end of the first week of June, of the deductions they drew from that information, of their hopes, their fears, and beliefs. It will have been Summary of the mental range of the Government.

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observed that whilst, in the main, their view of the position was correct, they had not sounded the full depths of the disaster; and that as in May, so still, early in June, they preferred the assertion of a belief in the loyalty of the Sipáhis who had not revolted, to the taking of measures which, whilst rendering them harmless for mischief, should place at their disposal, for active employment, the British soldiers who were watching them; and the upholding of their infallibility as a Government to acting in generous concert with the only classes they could absolutely trust,—the Europeans and Eurasians living and settled in India.

The fortnight which followed was full of startling incidents, but incidents marked by the same general correctness of view regarding strategy, the same weakness of political vision, and the same distrust of their own countrymen.

We have seen how, on the night of the 6th of June, the native regiment at Alláhábád which, the previous day, had been thanked by the Government for its professions of unswerving loyalty, mutinied and murdered nearly all its officers, including some young boys just arrived from England: how the fortress of Alláhábád, occupying a most commanding position on the Jamnah, and considered the gateway to the North-West, escaped by a miracle. Simultaneously the telegraphic lines were cut or destroyed, and communication with the army before Dehli became impossible except by way of Láhor or Bombay. The troops in Rájputáná and in Central India were likewise reported to have risen. There had been a mutiny at Banáras, but thanks to the wise and statesmanlike conduct of Mr. Frederic Gubbins of the Civil Service, and the bold measures adopted by Colonel Neill and his Madras Fusiliers, the mutiny had been suppressed, and the disaffected of the great Hindu city had been overawed.

From the 7th of June, indeed, it may be truly affirmed that the outlook to the Government of India had become darkness intensified. Mr. Beadon's intact line of six hundred miles had been attempted in many places. Beyond it all was impenetrable.

In this extremity the Government still clung to the army before Dehli. On the 10th of June, Lord Canning drafted to the Major-General commanding that army a letter in which he urged him to send southwards, with the least possible delay, an Euro-

June 6.
The awaken-
almost com-
plete.
Lord Canning's
anxiety re-
garding his weak
central line.

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1857.]

MR. GRANT'S PRACTICAL ADVICE.

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pean force as large as he could spare.* He kept the letter by him for eleven days, and only despatched it when the chances of relieving the central line from Calcutta seemed almost desperate.

Two days after that letter had been penned Lord Canning, yielding to the solicitations of the ablest of his councillors, Mr. J. P. Grant, resolved to avail himself of the aid which had been proffered him, three weeks earlier, by the citizens of Calcutta. But in order to induce the Governor-General to agree to this tardy concession, it was necessary for Mr. Grant to lay aside all gloss, to sacrifice the false confidence on which Mr. Beadon had laid so much stress three weeks previously, and to describe facts as they really were. "In reality," wrote Mr. Grant early in June, "in reality

June 10.
Mr. Grant's
practical
advice.

as well as in appearance we are very weak here, where we ought to be—and if we can't be should at least appear to be—as strong as possible. We have as enemies three Native Infantry regiments and a half, of which one and a half are the very worst type we know; one, two, three (for no one knows) thousand armed men at Garden Reach, or available there at a moment; some hundred armed men of the Sindh Amírs at Damdamah; half the Mubammadan population; and all the blackguards of all sorts of a town of six hundred thousand people. Against these we have one and a half weak regiments, most of whom dare not leave the Fort. There is no reason to expect real help in real danger from the Native Police. The

June 12.

* The letter, in a more complete form, runs as follows:—"Banáras has been made safe. So has Alláhábád, I hope, but only just in time. Henceforward, the reinforcements will be pushed up still further—to Kánhpúr; but the disorganised state of the country between Alláhábád and Kánhpúr may interpose delay; and both telegraph and dawk from any place north of Alláhábád is now cut off from Calcutta. I cannot, therefore, speak so confidently of the time when help will reach Sir Hugh Wheeler. It may not be for four or five days, or even more. This makes it all the more urgently necessary that you should push down an European force immediately. When it reaches the Kánhpúr division, it will, according to the instructions which have been sent to you, pass under Sir Hugh Wheeler's command. And with him will rest the responsibility of relieving Lakhnao, and pacifying the country from Kánhpúr downwards. It will be for you to judge what your own movements should be. All that I require is, that an European force, as large an one as you can spare, should be sent southwards with the least possible delay, and that it should not be detained an hour for the purpose of finishing off affairs at Dehli after once the great blow has been struck."

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insurrection is regularly spreading down to us. Is this an emergency or not? My conviction is that even a street row at the capital would give us an awful shake—not only in Bengal, but in Bombay and Madras—at this moment.”

This remonstrance, vivid, true, and out-spoken, expressed in nervous, even in passionate language, the thoughts of the much maligned citizens of Calcutta. The daily newspapers had for a fortnight been pressing the same arguments on the Governor-General. These had failed to shake the reluctance of Lord Canning, to take his own countrymen into his confidence, to admit that he had some small occasion for their aid. But now one of his colleagues, and incomparably the ablest of his colleagues, pressed upon him, in language more clear and more forcible than any used by the Press, the dangers of persistence in the same policy of distrust. That even the weighty utterances of Mr. Grant would, in any case, have met the fate of the expressed opinions of the European community is scarcely probable. But he did not stand quite alone in his view. It happened that an examination of the records of the Home Office showed that the question of raising volunteers in India had been thoroughly discussed in the time of Lord Dalhousie; that a decision in favour of the measure had been recorded; and that that decision had received the endorsement of the Court of Directors. This discovery added force to Mr. Grant's argument. He clenched it further by recording his opinion that it was probable that, if a Volunteer Corps were not raised in the crisis then before them, the Home Government would ask the reason why. These arguments proved successful. Lord Canning, still retaining his opinion as to the practical uselessness of the measure, sanctioned, on the 12th of June, the enrolment of the citizens of Calcutta as volunteers.

Lord Canning sanctions the enrolment of volunteers.

The Calcutta citizens nobly responded to the call of the Government. In a very few days the three arms—Horse, Foot, and Artillery—sprang into vigorous life. Men of all classes and of all positions pressed forward to enrol themselves, and in less than three weeks a brigade was formed sufficiently strong to guard Calcutta, and to enable the Government, had they deemed it necessary, to send all the regular troops into the field.

The day following that on which the Government had thus announced their intention to solicit the aid which three weeks