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William Howard Russell

Excerpt

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MY DIARY IN INDIA.

CHAPTER I.

Battle of Bareilly.—A little piece of foresight.—The march to the Battle.—The enemy's artillery practice.—Fainting or dead soldiers.—Charge of sowars.—Helped into the saddle.—Death of a camel driver.—Vague recollections—Sun-stroke—A slight move forward.—Walpole and Cameron.—“Jones the Avenger.”—The Gazees and their champion.—Awful manifestation.

May 5th.—BATTLE OF BAREILLY.—Early this morning, the army, pushing on a strong advance guard of cavalry, guns, and infantry, proceeded to attack the enemy's position before the city of Bareilly. We had a long march before us ere we could get at them. In our little camp at Head-Quarters, there were great preparations last night. Norman was indefatigable; so were Macpherson and Allgood; and last, not least, the Chief and the Chief of the Staff. General Mansfield's small staff are well exercised. Hope Crealock has joined him as Assistant Adjutant-General, in lieu of Hope Johnstone, gone home sick, and Flood is Aide-de-Camp. An order of march and battle was specially ordered, and dispositions made to strengthen Tod Brown's ordnance guard on any demonstration on the part of the numerous cavalry of the enemy. Lieutenant Morland, the

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indefatigable baggage-master, had no ordinary task before him to keep those enormous masses of vehicles, and beasts, and men, which seem to be growing every day from the ground, in anything like order. In our camp special instructions were given for the restriction of the dooly-bearers to a certain part of the line of march. There were three of us—Sir David Baird, Alison, and myself—who were to be marched at the head of the infantry column, but on the right or off side, the enemy lying on our left front. There were other sick officers similarly placed. It was curious how little information we could get about Bareilly, even when we were so close to it. Natives do not understand topography well, and cannot give a good description of country, which demands intelligence and education to do well. This time we had spies, but they were not very useful in that respect. Indeed, our payment is too small to quicken zeal. George Allgood had an agent living among the rebels, and sending out information at the risk of his life for several months, whom he rewarded with only 300 rupees, or £30. A native prince would have paid him as many thousands. All the way from Furreedpore till within a mile of the ruined cantonments of Bareilly, the country is as level and smooth as a bowling-green. The road is consequently raised above the ground, in order that it may not be flooded in the rains. Outside the cantonments there is a small stream flowing deviously in a deep bed, and the ground is intersected by nullahs and is unfavourable for the movements of regular troops. Brigadier Jones is now supposed to be within a day's march on the other side of the town; but there are

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THE MARCH TO THE BATTLE.

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at least two sides open for the greater part of the rebels to get off, and they are far stronger in cavalry than we are.

Before we started this morning, I called the syce, and told him to keep my best horse close to the litter. It was quite enough to be disabled and lamed for life by the negligence of one of them, and so my injunctions were fervent and menacing. Alison and Baird gave the same directions to their servants. This little piece of foresight saved all our lives, although I had a hard struggle for my own. One of the most horrible deaths which a man can meet, to my mind, is to be cut to pieces as he lies helpless on a sick couch, and that fate happened but too often to our sick and disabled in their doolies during this campaign. Knowing that the enemy had thousands of sowars, whilst we had only a few hundreds of horse, that our line of march would necessarily be very long and imperfectly protected, and that natives are very prone to make flank and rear attacks, it struck me that our position and arrangements would be such as to afford them every inducement to try the effects of a charge; and the result proved I did not miscalculate. We marched at daybreak and moved slowly, with frequent halts to close up the column, and to permit the baggage and siege guns and ammunition to join. As the sun rose it gave promise, which was only too well kept, of a day of intense pitiless heat. By 9 o'clock in the morning we had not got much more than half way towards Bareilly.

Tortured by flies, smothered in an atmosphere of dust, prostrated by heat, my sufferings were augmented by loss of blood, by recent leech-bites, and

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by a fresh blister. Belladonna had lost its influence over the pain in my injured limb.

Looking out of my portable bedstead, I could see nothing but legs of men, horses, camels, and elephants moving past in the dust along the elevated causeway on my left.

The trees by the roadside were scanty. There was no friendly shade to afford the smallest shelter from the blazing sun. I had all the sensations of a man who is smothering in a mud-bath.

The constant halts of the column were most irritating and annoying; but, about noon, I heard some shots fired in front. The men moved forward at once, and, making my dooly-bearers avail themselves of an opening between two battalions on the line of march, I was carried over to the left side of the road, which was blocked up with a mass of men and baggage, of which language can give no description. By this movement I was enabled to see a little of what was going on, and got a little out of the dust clouds.

It appears that we had just come upon a picket or patrol of the enemy, who had abandoned a gun in a small work, which was intended to sweep the road. They "bolted" almost immediately, pursued by a few rounds from our guns, and were soon lost among the trees and buildings in front of Bareilly. The firing ceased, and the troops continued to advance. After a time I observed a squadron or two of the Carabineers moving along in the fields to my left, beyond and fringing which were the usual dense woods of mangoes, peepuls, and other trees common over all this part of Rohilcund. I could not quite see the

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THE HEAVY GUNS ARE WANTED.

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base of these groves where it was buried in the corn, but presently I beheld a puff of smoke rise from the midst of them, close to some cottages, and the round-shot, which seemed to pitch into the centre of a squadron of the Carabineers, ricocheted through the fields right towards my dooly, to the infinite discomfiture of numerous camp-followers who were engaged in plundering the vegetable gardens and corn-fields. The shot stopped within thirty yards of the road. It was followed quickly by another, directed at the Carabineers, which did not come so far. The Carabineers trotted slowly out of the line of fire; and just at that moment I saw Sir Colin and his small staff cantering over the ground, and then a troop, or part of a troop, of horse artillery under Tombs, on both of which the enemy seemed to recommence their practice. Suddenly their fire ceased, and, looking as far forward as I could in advance, I saw the infantry deploying on the ground in front of the road, and extending themselves towards the left. There were some white buildings to be seen here and there amid the trees before them. "Bareilly hai, sahib," said my bearers. Then a fresh outburst of musketry fire took place, which died out, and one or two heavy guns began to open from inside the city upon us. Another pause took place. I was consumed by desire to see and to know.

An officer—I forget his name now—came down the road, and, seeing me in the dooly, he asked, "Can you tell me, Russell, where Tod Brown is? The Chief wants up the heavy guns!"

I could only reply that I had seen him an hour before struggling to make his way through the

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baggage and infantry which blocked up the road towards the front. "And what are the heavy guns for? Are there works in front?"

"No; but the enemy seem strong, entrenched in old houses and enclosures, and Sir Colin wants to give them a pounding before he goes in at them. They have shown lots of cavalry on both our flanks."

The delay, or rather the halt of the part of the column where I was placed, lasted some time after this. Every moment the heat became more fearful. More than one European soldier was carried past me fainting, or dead. Major Metcalfe had kindly given me two bottles of French wine of the Chief's. I gave a cupful to one of those poor fellows who laid down by my dooly, getting it down his mouth with difficulty, for his teeth were partially set; his tongue sticking in his throat. He recovered a little—looked at me, and said, "God bless you!"—then tried to get to his feet, gave a sort of gasp, and fell down dead. The crush on the road had become tremendous. The guns were beginning to move towards the front of the line which was halting yet. Each instant rude shocks were given to the dooly, which threatened to hurl it down the bank; so I told the bearers to lift me, and carry me off from the road to a small tope in the field on my left, which seemed to be a quarter of a mile away, and looked as though it would certainly give us shade. The fields were covered with camp-followers, who were plucking the grain and salads, with which the country appeared to abound. But it turned out that the tope, which after all was a very small cluster of bamboos and

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A PAUSE IN THE ACTION.

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other trees, was much farther than I thought, and was by no means umbrageous. Here my dooly was placed close to Baird's; two or three sick or wounded officers followed our example, and Alison and some others were lying near us; the bearers went inside among the bamboos, and squatted down to smoke, or sleep. Have we not all in our small experience seen an army swallowed up by skilful leadership? Perhaps not often at Chobham or Aldershot, but still often enough at accidental reviews. Just now there was no sign of the British troops in front. They had dipped down into ravines, or were at the other side of the high road. Here and there were clouds of dust, which marked the course of cavalry on our flanks. Behind us were the columns of the rear-guard and of the baggage. But the camp-followers were scattered all over the plains, and the scene looked peaceful as a hop-gathering. There is a sun, indeed, which tells us we are not in Kent. In great pain from angry leech-bites and blisters, I was so irritated by the heat and the weight of my light coverings, that I had removed every particle of clothing, except my shirt, and lay panting in the dooly. Half-an-hour or so had passed away in a sort of dreamy, pea-soupy kind of existence. I had ceased to wonder why anything was not done. Suddenly once more there was a little explosion of musketry in our front, and then a long, steady, rolling fire. I leaned out of my dooly, and saw a long line of Highlanders, who seemed as if they were practising independent file-firing on a parade-ground, looking in the distance very cool, and quiet, and firm; but what they were firing at I in vain endeavoured to make out. A few native troops

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seemed to be moving about in front of them, and hiding among the buildings against which our line of fire was directed. As suddenly as it began the firing died out once more. "What can it be?" said I to Baird.

"I have not the least idea. It is firing of some sort or other. How deuced hot it is! Phew! I am going to die."

A long pause took place. I looked once or twice towards the road to see if there were any symptoms of our advance. Then I sank to sleep. I know not what my dreams were, but well I remember the waking.

* * * * *

There was a confused clamour of shrieks and shouting in my ear. My dooly was raised from the ground and then let fall violently. I heard my bearers shouting "Sowar! sowar!"—I saw them flying with terror in their faces. All the camp-followers, in wild confusion, were rushing for the road on which was massed our column. It was a veritable *stampede* of men and animals. Elephants were trumpeting shrilly as they thundered over the fields, camels slung along at the utmost of their jogging stride, horse and tats, women, and children, were all pouring in a stream, which converged and tossed in heaps of white and black as it neared the road—an awful panic! And, heavens above! within a few hundred yards of us, sweeping on like the wind, rushed a great billow of white sowars, their sabres flashing in the sun, the roar of their voices, the thunder of their horses, filling and shaking the air. As they came on, camp-followers fell with cleft skulls and bleeding wounds upon

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A RIDE FOR LIFE.

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the field. A few squadrons turned to the right, As to the rest, there could be no doubt about their destination ; the left wing of the wild cavalry was coming straight for the tope in which we lay. The eye takes in at a glance what tongue cannot tell or hand write in an hour. Here was, it appeared, an inglorious and miserable death swooping down on us in the heart of that yelling crowd. At that instant my faithful syce, with drops of sweat rolling down his black face, ran towards me, dragging my unwilling and plunging horse towards the litter, and shouting to me as if in the greatest affliction. I could scarcely move in the dooly. I don't know how I ever managed to do it, but by the help of poor Ramdeen I got into the saddle. It felt like a plate of red-hot iron ; all the flesh of the blistered thigh rolled off in a quid on the flap, the leech-bites burst out afresh ; the stirrup-irons seemed like blazing coals ; death itself could not be more full of pain. I had nothing on but my shirt. Feet and legs naked—head uncovered—with Ramdeen holding on by one stirrup-leather, whilst, with wild cries, he urged on the horse, and struck him over the flanks with a long strip of thorn—I flew across the plain under that awful sun. I was in a ruck of animals soon, and gave up all chance of life as a troop of sowars dashed in among them. Ramdeen gave a loud cry, with a look of terror over his shoulder, and, leaving the stirrup-leather, disappeared. I followed the direction of his glance, and saw a black-bearded scoundrel, ahead of three sowars, who was coming right at me. I had neither sword nor pistol. Just at that moment a poor wretch of a

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camel-driver, leading his beast by the nose-string, rushed right across, and, seeing the sowar so close on him, darted under his camel's belly. Quick as thought, the sowar reined his horse right round the other side of the camel, and as the man rose, I saw the flash of the tulwar falling on his head like a stroke of lightning. It cleft through both his hands, which he had crossed on his head, and with a feeble gurgle of "Ram ! Ram !" the camel-driver fell close beside me with his skull split to the nose. I felt my time was come. My naked heels could make no impression on the panting horse. I saw, indeed, a cloud of dust and a body of men advancing rapidly towards us from the road ; but just at that moment a pain so keen shot through my head that my eyes flashed fire. My senses did not leave me ; I thought that I knew quite well what it was—I felt certain that I was "cut down," and I put my hand up to my head, but there was no blood on it—still this faintness must be death. For a moment a pleasant dream of home came across me ; I thought I was in the hunting-field, that the heart of the pack was all around me ; but I could not hold on my horse ; my eyes swam, and I remember no more than that I had, as it were, a delicious plunge into a deep cool lake, in which I sank deep and deep, till the hissing waters rushed into my lungs and stifled me.

* * * * *

On recovering my senses I found myself in a dooly by the road-side ; I thought what had passed was a dream. Then I felt my head, and expected to find a gaping wound there where the dull pain beat fitfully into the brain. But there was no