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978-1-108-04470-7 - The Personal Adventures and Experiences of a Magistrate During the Rise, Progress, and Suppression of the Indian Mutiny

Mark Thornhill

Excerpt

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# THE INDIAN MUTINY.



## CHAPTER I.

### INTRODUCTORY.

AFTER the suppression of the Indian Mutiny, I commenced to write an account of my adventures—illness and other causes delayed me ; by the time my narrative was completed, the then interest of the public in the subject was exhausted. Years have since passed, and an interest of another kind has arisen. The events of that time have become history, and to that history my story may prove a contribution, for I saw much that has not been recorded. I have therefore resolved to publish my narrative, which without further preface I commence.

In the beginning of the year 1857 I was magistrate of Muttra, a large city in Upper India. It is situated on the banks of the river Jumna, thirty-four miles from Agra, and on the high road, which runs from thence to Delhi. I had held the appointment about four years, and been married rather longer ; we had with us two children, a little girl and a baby. The position of magistrate, though much reduced from what it had been, was still a very fine one. I had a large income and great authority, and

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we lived in a degree of state which has long since been abandoned.

Our house was large and handsomely furnished, we had many horses and a great retinue of servants, besides a guard of soldiers and numerous attendants on horse and foot, who were provided for me at the expense of the Government. I had a chest full of silver plate, which stood in the hall, and a great store of Cashmere shawls, pearls, and diamonds.

Our life was secluded, and for the greater part of the year monotonous—travellers seldom passed, and there was little of incident; but among ourselves we were sociable, and in the extreme quiet there was something not unpleasant. In November, when the heat began to moderate, we went into tents and marched about the district. We passed the mornings in long rides and the day under groves of trees. Our life was then a perpetual picnic and very enjoyable.

It was at the end of January 1857, and we had just returned from our tour, when one day as I entered the office I found four little cakes laid on the table, dirty little cakes of the coarsest flour, about the size and thickness of a biscuit. A man had come to a village, and given a cake to the watchman, with injunctions to bake four like it, to distribute them to the watchmen of the adjacent villages, and to desire them to do the same. The watchman obeyed, but at the same time informed the police they had now reported the affair, sending in the cakes. The following day came similar reports from other parts of the district, and we next learnt from the newspapers that these cakes were being distributed in the same manner over all Upper India.

The occurrence was so singular that it attracted the attention of the Government, who directed inquiries; but

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notwithstanding all the efforts that were made, it could not be ascertained either by whom the distribution had been contrived, where it commenced, or what it signified. After being a nine days' wonder the matter ceased to be talked about, and was presently for the time forgotten, except by those few who remembered that a similar distribution of cakes had been made in Madras towards the end of the last century, and had been followed by the mutiny of Vellore. These cakes were the famous Chappatties.

After this I fell ill and went to Agra, where my brother was then Secretary to the Government. Early on the morning of the 12th of May a telegram was received by a lady from her niece at Meerut, informing her that one of the native regiments had mutinied, murdered several of the English, and were gone off to Delhi. The wire then ceased working, and no further information could be obtained.

In the course of the day several visitors called, and this telegram formed the chief subject of conversation. Most of the visitors disbelieved the story or considered it much exaggerated. It was thought that if a serious mutiny had occurred, the Government would have received the first information. My brother had gone after breakfast to Government House; he did not return till late in the afternoon, and he then appeared much discomposed, as if he had heard of or expected some calamity.

I had permission to remain two more days at Agra, but my brother's manner so impressed me that I resolved to return at once to Muttra. I thought it possible, if the news was true, that some of the mutineers might wander into my district and create a disturbance; anything more serious than this I did not contemplate. I

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desired my servant to pack up my clothes, I sent for a party of bearers, and entering my palanquin after dinner I travelled all night, and reached home the next morning a little before daybreak. The following day A—— arrived with the children.

It was our custom in the hot season to dine early, and when the sun had set to take a drive; that evening we drove round the old parade ground. At the further end was a slight rise, just sufficient to afford a view over the river Jumna. The water was then low, and the river rolled in several branches; a herd of cattle were lazily crossing the one nearest us. By the roadside was a grove of trees, a little temple, and a well. A party of travellers were resting by it, and their camels browsing. The scene was simple and full of the repose of Eastern life. In the times that followed it often recurred to my memory. Indian twilight is but of short duration; when we reached home it was dark.

Immediately on my return from Agra I had sent off messengers in all directions to obtain news of the mutineers; none had arrived, nor beyond vague rumours had any confirmation of the telegram been received. I was beginning half to doubt its truth; my doubts were now dispelled in a manner I little anticipated. As I stepped from the carriage a letter was handed me: it had been left by a servant with a message that it was important. A lamp was burning in the hall, I went towards it, and saw by its light that the letter had inscribed upon it, in large characters, the word 'Urgent.' I opened it in haste; it was from a gentleman, one of the engineers on the railway then constructing to Delhi, and who resided about forty miles down the line towards that city. It was to inform me that a party of mutineers had attacked and burnt his house. He had been absent and

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had escaped ; he had sent on this letter to inform me and to warn me that he had heard that the main body of the mutineers were advancing towards Muttra. So soon as I had read the letter I sent round and summoned the other English. We decided to send away the ladies and children to Agra.

Of the rest of that night I retain but a dreamy recollection. I remember that till near midnight the other families came hurrying in, that there was much confusion, some terror, and that till the palanquin bearers arrived from the city, we sat awaiting them in my drawing room. It was a beautiful room, brightly lighted, gay with flowers. It was the last time I thus saw it, and so it remains impressed on my memory.

It was near daybreak before the party started. I sent with them an escort of horsemen, and, as a further protection, all the Englishmen whose duties did not compel them to remain in the station. In the course of the day I got intelligence from the north of the district that no mutineers had as yet entered it, but from the direction of Delhi could be heard the sound of heavy cannonading. About midnight I was awoke by the arrival of a messenger from Agra ; he brought a letter from Mr. Colvin, who was then the Lieutenant-Governor. I went to my room to write an answer. As I was writing I heard through the open doors the tramp of horses ; in a minute or two a servant entered and announced that an English gentleman had arrived and was dismounting at the entrance. Almost immediately after the gentleman entered ; he was quite a young man, he was armed with sword and revolver, and wore twisted round his hat a large native turban—he looked very tired and exhausted. He informed me that he was the assistant to the magistrate of Goorgoan ; the district

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that lay between mine and Delhi. The mutineers, he added, had entered the district, and the country had risen in insurrection, and he was on his way to Agra to convey the information to the Government; his horse had knocked up, and he had ridden to my house to request the loan of another, as also one for his servant.

I sent for horses, and also for refreshment for my guest. While it was getting ready, he informed me of the particulars of the mutiny of the regiment at Meerut, and of the events that had followed their arrival at Delhi; how the native troops at Delhi had joined them, how they had marched down to the palace, placed the king on the throne, and massacred all the English and Christians they could lay hands on. While narrating the story, he had been much agitated. When I inquired the names of the victims he broke down altogether, for among them was his only sister, a young girl of eighteen, who had but a few months previously arrived in India.

When he had eaten and drank, I persuaded him to lie down and rest, for I thought him too tired to proceed, and I sent on his letters by a horseman of my own to Agra. A little after dawn he left me, and soon after came the magistrate of Goorgoan and his clerk; and succeeding them at short intervals came all the English and Christians residing along the road to Delhi. Some were accompanied by their wives, their sisters, and their children—these I sent on under escort to Agra—the remainder, some five-and-thirty, sat down with me to breakfast. When breakfast was over I left my guests and went to my own room, where my office people were assembled.

I had hitherto kept silence about the mutiny, so far at least as was possible, partly from fear of exciting alarm, partly lest if the news should prove false I might

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appear ridiculous. There was now no longer any object in concealment. I told them what I had heard; they expressed great astonishment; but ere long I perceived from the remarks they let fall that they had heard it all before, and, indeed, as regarded what had occurred at Delhi that they were much better informed than I was. All regular work was suspended; when a few papers had been signed and some orders issued there remained nothing more to do. However, to while away the time, I continued to chat with them about the events at Delhi. They soon got so interested in the subject as partly to forget my presence. Their talk was all about the ceremonial of the palace, and how it would be revived. They speculated as to who would be the Grand Chamberlain, which of the chiefs of Rajpootana would guard the different gates, and who were the fifty-two Rajahs who would assemble to place the Emperor on the throne.

As I listened I realised, as I had never done before, the deep impression that the splendour of the ancient court had made on the popular imagination, how dear to them were its traditions, and how faithfully all unknown to us they had preserved them. There was something weird in the Mogul Empire thus starting into a sort of phantom life after the slumber of a hundred years.

The rest of the day passed wearily away, the rooms were darkened to exclude the glare; there was nothing to do, my guests got tired of chatting, one by one they lapsed into silence or fell asleep; the water splashed on the frames of scented grass, the punkahs swung monotonously to and fro. At length the light softened, and began to stream in nearly level through the chinks of the Venetian blinds; then the servants threw open the doors, we dined, and strolled out into the garden. A

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messenger presently galloped in to inform me that Captain Nixon was approaching with the Bhurtpore army. About dusk the army arrived; Captain Nixon brought with him several officers whose presence still further swelled our party. But in India guests are easily accommodated—the heat made it pleasant to sleep out of doors. I had beds arranged in the verandah and on a terrace beyond; soon after nine all the party were slumbering on them, all but myself and a few others, who preferred to sit up till later, and watch the moonlight.



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## CHAPTER II.

## THE ASSEMBLING OF THE ARMY.

BHURTPORE is a small independent State, adjoining Muttra on the west. The Rajah had died some four years previously to the occurrence of the events I am relating, and the English Government had assumed charge of the territory till the infant son he had left should come of age. The administration of the State was conducted by an English officer, Major Morrison, who had the title of Agent, and several assistants, of whom the chief was Captain Nixon. Captain Nixon had received early intelligence of the disturbances at Delhi, and had immediately proposed to the Government to make use of the Bhurtpore troops to aid in suppressing them. The proposal had been approved of, and he had been authorised to march the army to Delhi, taking Muttra by the way. From some oversight these orders had not been communicated to me, and I was in consequence unaware of Captain Nixon's approach till about an hour before he entered the station.

As it was supposed that the mutineers were marching down on us, Captain Nixon decided to suspend his advance and await their arrival on the other side of the city, where he proposed to place his troops in position and throw up entrenchments. The city itself was very capable of defence, for it was full of narrow lanes and

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houses of solid stone. At Captain Nixon's suggestion I erected barricades at the principal entrances, I raised guards, and I adopted various other measures to enable the inhabitants to co-operate with the soldiers—measures to which I looked back with some amusement, when I became better acquainted with the feelings of the citizens and their fighting capabilities.

Soon after breakfast I received a visit from two brothers—the Seths ; they were wealthy bankers, and the persons of the greatest influence in the city. They came ostensibly to show me a letter they had received from their agent at Delhi, but the real object of their visit was to warn me against the Sepoy guard, whom they informed me intended to mutiny on the first opportunity, and carry off the treasure. They added that the guard would have mutinied the previous evening but for the unexpected arrival of Captain Nixon's troops.

We had then in the treasury over half a million of silver rupees, and about ten thousand pounds' worth of copper coins, and money no longer current. During the first two days after my return from Agra I had become doubtful of the fidelity of the guard, and I had in consequence requested permission to send the treasure in to Agra ; in anticipation of the permission I had caused the rupees to be packed in boxes, and had collected carts for their conveyance. On the departure of the Seths I sent off a mounted messenger to Agra, reiterating my suspicions of the guard, and renewing my request for permission to send in the treasure.

In the course of the day we received intelligence that our fears regarding the approach of the mutineers were groundless. They were fortifying themselves in Delhi, from whence, apparently, they had no intention of departing. On this Captain Nixon decided to continue