



RONALD BASSETT FORTUNE FAVOURS THE BRAVE

A NOVEL OF THE INDIAN MUTINY



Fortune Favours the Brave

Ronald Bassett

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SEPTEMBER FOURTEENTH

He lay waiting in the grey coolness of the early dawn, his hip pressed uncomfortably against the hard, red earth and his Enfield, with sword already fixed, in the crook of his left arm. In an hour, the eastward sky would streak with silver and yellow, and then with shattering swiftness, the sun would explode, turning the ridge into an anvil beneath the hammer blows of relentless, murderous heat. The sweat would burst from every pore, and the angry rash that swarmed his chest and armpits, thighs and genitals, unwashed for four months, would torture him with itching until his filthy nails drew blood. And with the dawn would come the stench of corpses, putrefying and maggot-writhing, the stench of a thousand human bowels wrung with dysentery, of the canal that was an open, fetid sewer, of vomit and urine steaming in the heat, and the stench of his own sour body.

And that was the least of it. Malaria, cholera and scurvy stalked the ridge, scarcely to be preferred to the mangling horror of red-hot grape or the scything round-shot that spilled a man's bowels over his knees. Add to these the black, bloated flies that crusted food and filth alike, crawled into the mouths and nostrils of sleeping men and filled the eye-pits of the dead, and the curled scorpions in the red dust, poised to strike at unwary, unshod feet, and the inexorable lice —

He ran his tongue over lips that were sore-covered and cracked. Fer Chris' sake! How had he become part of this endless nightmare? How had it all *started*? At Meerut? No. Meerut had been only a phase of the same nightmare, the stage at which stultifying monotony had suddenly erupted into blood-spattered carnage. It had begun long before Meerut. It had begun in

Croydon, with Mrs. Finnis and her Fallen Woman, in Merton with the Godfrey's Cordial, and with the Society for the Relief of Destitute Young Persons — and the taters.

He could hear the breathing of his fellows in the darkness, impatient, apprehensive, a whisper of steel, the muted screech of a scaling ladder against a stone, a low, nervous cough to clear the slime from a fear-knotted throat. Like him, they'd fight light today, carrying nothing more than rifle and sword, cartridge-pouch and canteen. That was enough for any man likely to be dead by midday, and if he survived, well, midday was a hundred years away.

Someone, behind him, was talking to another. An officer, sod him. Nicholson and young Lieutenant Lang. Sod'em both. He'd had a gutful of officers and their arrogant ladies. The Kashmir Gate, was he saying? Christ — ! Didn't the stupid bastard realise that behind that moat and wall were sixty thousand rebel sepoys, fanatic, well-armed, trained by British officers, and reckoned the finest non-white military force in the world? And these bleedin' army toffs meant to carry Delhi by storm with 3,660 infantry — a ragged mixture of British, Sikhs and Goorkhas — and a paltry 1,300 in reserve, fully half of whom should have been stretched on hospital cots a month ago, none of them capable of marching five miles with a regulation forty-pound pack on his back. It made a man want to puke.

The neck-cloth of his kepi and the rotted linen of his tunic — once dark green but now bleached to a dirty straw — were starch-stiff with months of accumulated sweat, but they'd be sodden enough, and clinging to his streaming flesh, with the first few minutes of exertion. He slid his hand to his cartridge-pouch, feeling for the hardness of the greased, black-papered cartridges that, as he tore them open with his teeth, would smear his lips and chin with powder and fill his mouth with the caustic taste of sulphur. They

were the same cartridges that, a few months earlier, had driven a hundred and fifty thousand hitherto loyal and docile native troops to berserk mutiny, to the barbaric butchery of countless defenceless whites, women and infants, to rape, torture, and pillage, to scorch the length of British India with the dragon's breath of revolution and anarchy.

He allowed his broken lips the luxury of an ill-tempered smile. Those rot-gutting black Pandies were going to have the bleedin' cartridges, one way or the other.

Brigadier-General John Nicholson drew a watch from his cummerbund and held it close to his eyes. 'A quarter before six,' he said. 'It's time, blast it. The Rifles can go forward.'

Rifleman Joseph Dando rose to his feet. 'Sod'em,' he grunted.

Chapter 1

On the lower slopes of the southern Himalayas, the Bhagirathi River is joined by the Alaknanda and becomes the sacred Ganges, flowing south-eastward through the foothills, parallel and eventually merging with its sister Jumna. Between these two great rivers is the Doab, the vast, unvaried plain on which stands Allahabad, Cawn-pore and Delhi, linked by the Grand Trunk Road to Lahore and Peshawur in the North. In the centre of the dun-coloured, arid Doab, forty miles from Delhi, are the town and cantonments of Meerut, a rivet in the gateway to central India.

There were warriors at Meerut two thousand years before Christ — Gond, and then Dravidian, the light-skinned horsemen of Chrandragupta, the invaders of Mahmud of Ghazni and Mahommed of Ghor, and then the Moguls. Then, as the new, white *gora-log* and their native mercenaries pushed outwards into Sind and the Punjab, Meerut gradually relinquished its role as a frontier stronghold but, with its excellent garrison facilities and its proximity to Delhi, retained its usefulness in the accommodation of both Queen's regiments and the sepoy of the Honourable East India Company.

In May of 1857, Meerut was the only station in India where European troops were not outnumbered five to one. 2,000 British military shared its cantonments with 2,350 Indian sepoy.

There were no longer fortifications or defensive works at Meerut; there was nothing to be defended against. The British cantonments lay on the northerly perimeter, facing the open plain that spread unbroken to the Himalayas, to Simla. Neat lines of whitewashed, thatched-roofed buildings lined roads with English names — Warwick Row and Bedford Row, Barrack Street, Brown

Street, and a wide, tree-shaded thoroughfare called the Mall. On the plain was St. John's Church and the cemetery, with its carefully tended graves of men, women, and infants who had journeyed from Taunton and Tunbridge Wells, Dumfries and Dorking, to die of cholera, or malaria, or in childbirth, in the service of a Queen or a Board of Governors who had never heard of them.

Adjacent to the artillery lines was the enclosed Dumdum — the stores and magazine. There was a hospital to the rear of the infantry, the cook-houses, gymnasias and canteens, and then the long rows of officers' bungalows, each with its compound, its clipped hedges, its fig tree, and pampered rose bushes. Southward still were the civil residences and public gardens, the Treasury, and Civil Court with their shaven lawns and the *bhangis* sprinkling water to keep the dust from the sahib-logs' shoes. Westward were the sepoys' lines, overlooking the sun-baked mile where the officers raced their ponies, the transport lines, and then the beginning of a different world, a different species — the teeming native quarters, the bazaars, and the Old City.

Except as servants, the natives did not intrude into the exclusive Europeans' area, but as servants they were numerous and indispensable. A gentleman would consider an establishment with fewer than eight servants a privation, and there was a degree of justification. The *khansamah* who cooked his food would not serve it at the table, the *bhistie* who brought his fresh water would not remove the soiled linens, the *mehtar* who swept his path would not clean his dog, and the *dhoby* would wash clothes but do nothing else. There must be a *syce* to groom the horses, an *ayah* to dress the children — but not to wash them — and a *chowkidah* to watch the house and drive off undesirables. This was caste — something the Englishman did not understand but usually treated with respect, and which was yet to bring him to the very cliff-edge of disaster.

It was a population divided roughly into four estates: the European civil and

military officers, the European military rank and file, the native military and, least considered, the multifarious mass of the Indian common people. There were seepages between the estates. A European might talk socially with Indians of high family and have a warm-skinned Punjabi girl that his wife knew of but pretended she did not. The soldiers, too, had their bazaar women and had learned to live with Johnnie Sepoy. The pale mem-sahibs and their equally pale children were the most insulated. The women's biggest enemy was the boredom that characterised cantonment life, a boredom exacerbated by the punishing, incessant heat that drained them of all humour and affection, by the rigid distinctions of rank, the endless round of meaningless social events, the tea and gossip, and the certain knowledge that absolutely nothing could change during the long, stultifying years that stretched ahead.

Their husbands dozed, sweating, under the creaking *punkahs*, drank too much, smoked cheroots, played billiards, and swore over their expenses. Prices didn't make sense. Eggs were sixty for a shilling, flour 3d per stone, a chicken 4d, beef 1½d a pound and fresh pork 3d. But a man had to entertain — continuously — and, in the Europe Shop, Cheshire cheese was 3/6d a pound and English ham 4/-. Brandy was a crushing 8/- a bottle, with whisky, port and sherry 6/-. English beer — Bass or Allsops — was a half-crown a bottle. The younger civilians and the junior army officers constantly lived beyond their means, striving to keep pace with their betters. But there were willing moneylenders in the bazaars, and there were cards and dice. In the end, there might be a pistol and yet another white stone in the little cemetery.

Three English regiments were represented in Meerut. The 60th Rifles, whose lines enclosed Warwick Row, Middle Row, and Bedford Row, were the most experienced, having been in India for almost twelve years. Most of the riflemen had seen hard service against the Sikhs. The 6th Dragoons — the Carabineers — were recent arrivals with a percentage of young recruits still

recovering from their first sunburn and horses from the Cape half-trained and unreliable, their quarters and stables occupying North Row and South Row. Close to the Dum-dum, and predictably housed in Cannon Row and Range Road, were the Bengal Artillery — Europeans in the service of John Company. All of them, from the tanned and leathery rifle veterans to the pink-faced, peeling cavalry cornets, were the *Ferin-ghees* — the white soldiers of the Great Queen across the black water.

The English common soldier suffered from fewer inhibitions than did his betters. He had financial problems, but they were usually minor and transitory. His daily routine was simple and clear-cut. He cleaned his arms and equipment, drilled, marched, stood guard, paraded in order to awe the populace, and occasionally gave aid to the magistrates in suppressing civil disturbances. Despite long years of service and battle experience, he did not have to make decisions; they were made for him, often by boys who had never used a razor. His recreations were confined to sleeping, petty gambling, drinking, and prostitutes. In his canteen, he could buy beer at 6d a quart or, in the bazaars, drink native *darro* or *bhang* for 2d a bottle — a concentration of which, aided by the sun, could send a man *ghazi*. In the bazaars, too, were the ‘angel houses’ — the brothels with their pimps and reeking perfumes, where he risked syphilis or a knife in the back for a sweating hour of carnal animalism. He could still be flogged for drunkenness, insubordination, or absence from duty, but the maximum was now only fifty lashes. For striking an officer, for cowardice, or for refusing an order in the face of an enemy, he could be shot.

Johnny Sepoy was something of an enigma. It had always been said that he would never behave well under fire unless he had the company of British troops to show him the way, but events would prove this a painful fallacy.

He served for an initial period of fifteen years for a pittance, chiefly for the

even smaller pension that would maintain him in his old age. His regiment was commanded by white officers. True, there were native officers, but always subordinate to their British counterparts and even to a British NCO. If a Hindu, he might come from any caste except the Untouchables who were not enlisted, which meant that, off duty, a native officer must abase himself before the newest Brahmin recruit. On the other hand, it had been agreed that the sepoy should not be sent abroad and, unlike the British soldier, he could not be flogged, nor be given beef or pork in his rations. He was intensely proud of his uniform and his regiment. There had been recent suggestions that the morale of John Company's Bengal Army was becoming strained, that mutiny was being whispered, and if this were true, the outcome could be very ugly. Exclusive of irregulars, there were two hundred thousand native troops in India. To hold them in check were less than forty thousand British.

But, of course, it could not be true. The rumour might have been inspired by the fact that, on 5 May, in Meerut, eighty-five men of the 3rd Native Cavalry had refused to handle the cartridges issued for the new Enfield rifle — intended to replace their own muskets as it had already replaced the Brunswicks of the 60th. The cartridges, the Indian troopers claimed, had been impregnated with pork or cow fat as part of a deliberate campaign to destroy the caste system. Still, the 1847 instructions for preparing cartridge grease were plain — three pints of country linseed oil to one-fourth of a pound of beeswax, mixed by melting the wax in a ladle, pouring the oil in and allowing it to remain on the fire until the composition is entirely melted. There had been no subsequent cancelling order.

Be that as it may, the eighty-five men were charged with mutiny, court-martialled, and sentenced to hard labour on the roads for periods varying from six to ten years. Pending disposal, they were now lodged in the Meerut civil gaol.

But these were only eighty-five men from three full-native regiments, their own — the 3rd Light Native Cavalry — and the 11th and 20th Native Infantry.

There was the fourth estate — the *ryots*, the common people south of Circular Road and the Aboo Nala Canal. The largest of the bazaars, the Sudder, was a mazy warren of narrow streets, alleys and courtyards, of ramshackle houses, hovels, and shops, with windows shuttered against the sunlight and that permeating, indefinable smell that only an Indian native quarter can generate — a musty-rich combination of drying hides, curry and boiling *ghee*, cheap perfume, cow dung, sweat and urine, rotting fruit. It was vibrant with noise, of tinkling bells, wailing music from cavernous doorways at which painted, bangled whores sat waiting, of shopkeepers shouting — tailors, leatherworkers, barbers, brass-smiths, the screeching wheels of cumbersome, bullock-drawn *tongas*. Underfoot there was stinking filth, the cobbles drenched with blood-red betel juice and prowled by skeletal dogs. Here could be bought anything — coco-palm arrack, chupatties, eggs or mutton, a nautch girl's erotic dance, a letter written or a pair of army boots, an astrologer's prophesy, a scented, red-lipped boy or a girl of ten, aphrodisiacs, silks and muslins, pornographic pictures, an assassin's knife.

The Sudder Bazaar had another commodity. It was *gup* — gossip, or more than gossip. The servants of the Sahibs brought their masters' secrets — the officers' debts, the mem-sahib's pregnancy, the departures for Simla, the contents of the latest telegram from Agra. In exchange, they brought back *gup* to their masters. Some of it was useful — the movement of goo jars and budmashes, the professional thieves and troublemakers that the natives resented as much as the Europeans, news of the continuous, rumbling complaints against the taxes of John Company, on land, salt, opium, saltpetre and fermented juices, of the toll on river ferries, of police corruption. *Gup*

was the finger on the pulse of India, and of recent weeks there had been puzzling talk of the chupatties — the thin cakes of unleavened bread — passed from village to village between Delhi and Lucknow. The men who passed them did not know why, except that they had been directed to continue 'from the North to the South, from the East to the West, take two and make ten more.' It was a message, a signal, but for whom and for what? Somebody recalled the old prophecy that the British Raj would be driven from India one hundred years after it had been established in 1757. Well, it was now 1857, but it was only bazaar *gup*.

The heat of daytime was almost intolerable. The sun, reflected by the lines of white-washed buildings, hurt the eyes, and the trees stood motionless, unstirred by the smallest breath of air. Drinking water was warm and flat-tasting, and paving stones burned through the soles of leather shoes. The shadows were hard but offered no coolness, and the flies hummed.

Nobody moved in the open after midday. Gentlemen drank whisky-sodas, thinking of the ice that could be had in Calcutta, or thumbed through a year-old copy of *Punch*, or, naked, soaked sweat into the crumpled sheets of their beds. Women, in the privacy of their rooms, shed corsets and stockings, wrote long letters to Cheltenham and Canterbury, and dreaded the approaching hour of ritual to be spent on tea, cakes and stereotyped small-talk. Outside, on the verandah, the watchman slept on his string *charpoy*.

Only in the evenings, when the sun was a dull orange ball over the race-course and a million invisible cicadas filled the air with harsh, monotonous chirping, did the cantonments come to life. Off-duty riflemen in starched white drill wended their way down Brook Street towards Begam's Bridge and the whore-shops, fingering their rupees. Officers in mess jackets and cummerbunds, ladies in heavy damask and with fans fluttering, took carriages to this function or another — Ladies' Night at the Officers' Club,

the regimental band at the Commissioner's house, the new troupe of dancers and jugglers in the Gardens.

It had always been this way, and always would. This was Meerut, in May 1857.

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But in London, outside of the Horse Guards and Leadenhall Street, few people would have heard of Meerut, and even in those places, most would have been ignorant. India was Queen's territory in name only. A governor of John Company could tell a new official: 'I expect my will to be your rule, and not the laws of England, which are a heap of nonsense. My orders from time to time must be obeyed, and received as statute law.' India was a market where corn could be purchased for a bushel and sold on a Liverpool dockside for 3/10d, and which annually shipped ninety million pounds of tea to England, with cotton, sugar, indigo, carpets, jute, leather. In London, *The Times* was pointing a righteously indignant finger at the laxity of divorce laws, and commenting on the feasibility of the Atlantic Telegraph Company's plan to lay an undersea cable from Ireland to Newfoundland. Publications were jostling to serialise new novels — Dickens' *Little Dorrit*, Thackeray's *The Virginians*, and Mrs. Gaskell's *Cranford*. In the ballrooms of the rich, two new dances, the polka and the waltz, were challenging the popularity of the Lancers and the cotillion while in the penny theatres the poor were hooting the villain of *The Murder in the Red Barn*. Now, the cheers that had greeted the homecoming heroes of the Crimean War were only a fading echo, the magazine *Bunch* was reassuming its traditional role of lampooner of the military man, with caricatures of improbable, bean-pole guardsmen escorting tipsy nursemaids, choleric colonels in mustard baths, and effeminate subalterns with tiny hats and oversized swords.

Few people had heard of Meerut. But they would, all of them, very soon.

Chapter 2

Rifleman Joseph Dando sat on the edge of his bed and chewed a straw, relishing the knowledge that nothing was required of him until late tomorrow. It was Saturday, and from noon, when he had completed guard duty, until the next day's Church Parade at 5.30 pm, he could do as he pleased. It was a beautiful thought.

It was too hot to do anything yet, but later he had the choice of a number of things. He could, for a start, drink beer with Tom Brownlow and Edwin Wilson, or he could stroll over to the sepoy lines to watch the *sowars* — the Indian cavalymen — sticking tent-pegs, or watch the wrestling matches on the artillery ground, or he could go to the Sudder Bazaar.

It wasn't really a problem. He'd known all the time that he would go to the Sudder Bazaar.

He wanted to see Padmini again, in the curtained, perfumed house off Aboo Lane — Padmini, with her tiny, perfect body that moved with delicate grace, her submissive, almond eyes, and the hands and feet of a child. She was not like the other ones who haggled for every anna, had a repertoire of soldiers' expressions, and hid the ravages of their years by lavish paint and the darkness of the room. Padmini was young. He didn't know how young. Fourteen, fifteen — ? These Indian girls matured early. He didn't even know if her name was really Padmini. The whores assumed exotic names, like Malayevati, or Bhargava, or Draupadi, and one woman might have several names to give the impression that the brothel-keeper had more women than he did. It didn't matter, Padmini was different.

Long before it was time, he washed the sweat from himself, kicked

movement into the barracks sweeper, and changed into clean whites — drill tunic and trousers, a white cover to his kepi with a square flap that fell over his neck to his shoulders, belt and sidearms. The barrack-room was rousing from sweltering slumber, all the men having stood picquet for twelve hours of the previous twenty-four. As Joseph emerged into the failing sunlight, the men under punishment were mustering for extra drill, and the duty bugler was sounding Officers' Mess.

He skirted the park with its bandstand reserved for officers and their ladies and conceded to other ranks and their women only on rare and special occasions. With evening approaching, the scent of carefully tended jasmine and amaranth was intense. He crossed the wide Mall, deserted, into Chapel Street, his steel-shod boots rapping on the stones. There was a group of four or five dismounted Indian cavalymen in their silver-grey patrols, standing at the northern end of Chapel Street, looking beyond the Mall towards the Rifles' guardroom. Joseph fixed them with a disapproving frown to indicate that their presence was observed, that they had no business there, and they looked away, their dark faces blank of expression. He walked on, and in seconds had forgotten.

Church Parade tomorrow. That meant more clean whites. Bugger it, the *dhoby*-wallahs must be making a bleedin' fortune. Still, if Captain Muter didn't keep them standing too long on the drill-ground, and get them all mucked with sweat, the whites might last until Monday, when he had to escort the Pandies from the gaol —

Pandies. It was becoming a habit to refer to mutinous sepoys as Pandies — since the first incident, when a sepoy named Mangal Pande had hacked down his adjutant and sergeant-major. It was odd, right enough. First Mangal Pande of the 34th and then the eighty-five troopers on the Rifles' own drill-ground, whom Joseph, with a loaded rifle in his hands, had watched stripped of their

regimentals and shackled. It was bleedin' odd.

No, Muter wouldn't keep them standing long. He was a good 'un. Quiet, but good. The battalion's commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Dennis, was absent in England, and the acting commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Jones, wasn't one for pomp and rattle. Johnnie Jones was short and paunchy, bald and near-sighted — hardly the image of an intrepid rifleman — but he was a gritty old bastard, even if he did insist on a full fifty lashes for any man drunk in the lines. The Reverend John Rotton, now — he'd drone his sermon on the weaknesses of man, undefined because of the ladies present, and the troops would fidget on the hard seats —

But he had reached the Sudder Bazaar. It was dusk, and there were oil lamps guttering, adding their reek to the existing interfusion of smells. The house was unobtrusive. Over the door was some Hindustani lettering with an English translation *Kamaledhiplava*. He pushed through a curtain of beads.

'The Sahib wishes?' The woman was bent, but it was difficult to see her clearly in the light of a single lamp, and her *saree* shrouded her features. Her voice was old. He caught the glitter of a jewel in a nostril, and there were rings on her fingers.

'Padmini,' he said.

'Ah — Padmini,' she nodded. 'The Sahib is a man of taste. Her face is pleasing as the new moon, her body soft as the mustard flower, as fair as the yellow lotus. Her eyes are bright and beautiful as the orbs of the faun, her breasts full and high, and her *yoti* resembles the opening lotus bud. Her love seed is perfumed like the lily that has newly burst — '

'How much?' Joseph asked.

She held out her hand. 'Three rupees for me, *gora-log* — and what you will for the woman.'

He paid her. Three rupees, sod it, was a lot. *And* something for the woman

— say another rupee. That was nearly six shillings. He'd swear that bleedin' officers didn't pay six shillings. The woman placed the palms of her hands together and inclined her head. 'Taste of the fruit, *gora-log*, for tomorrow there is only dust.'

Joseph groped his way past her. Tomorrow? Why tomorrow? There was dust every bleedin' day, wasn't there? But he was in the room. It was strange that whenever he reached it, the room was already occupied by the woman he'd asked for, and none other. Perhaps they all waited here, and then, hearing the chosen name through the *pardah*, the others fled.

She stood in mid-floor with palms joined. 'Dando-sahib?' She smiled. How did she know his name? He had been here only twice before and he'd not mentioned it. He went to the bed, unbuckling his belt, and she, in one graceful movement, sank to the floor, waiting. Someone had made a pathetic attempt to give the room an English flavour but had achieved only an incongruous mixture. There was a heavy European bedstead and mattress, a marble-topped washstand, and two basket chairs. Worse, a crudely coloured portrait of Queen Victoria looked down at Joseph as he drew off his breeches with regal disapproval. Everything else, however, was Indian — the shabby carpet, the drapes, the brassware, the stale, scented air. And Padmini. She raised her head. 'Now?'

She loosened the knot of her girdle and, as she rose, the *saree* floated to her feet in a blue, gauzy mist. She was small, her breasts high, firm, and geometrically circular, not like those of English women. She had a tiny waist, accentuated by generous, plump hips and belly. The space between the joints of her thighs was wide, shaven of hair and deeply cleft, her skin satin-bronze, dusted with saffron. There was a single, narrow bangle on each wrist and each ankle. He had seen her exact counterpart a hundred times, carved in red stone by the hands of Indian artisans a thousand years ago — the erotic

dancing courtesans of Krishna that postured and contorted on the walls of shrines and temples, the child-women symbols of fecundity, the licentious nymphs of Hindi mythology, the five hundred Apsaras of Heaven.

Padmini came to him, sinking again to the floor at his knees, then reached forward, her small hands cupping gently. ‘Strong he is, and proud,’ she whispered, ‘like a fire that is lighted, Dando-sahib. See, he fills my hands, hot with wanting — the impudent one. When he sees me in heat he comes quickly to me, and when I open my thighs, he kisses my belly, so that I cry with yearning.’ She lowered her head, her lips opening.

It was an ecstasy he could tolerate only for seconds. ‘No, not that. It ain’t proper.’

‘Proper?’ She laughed mischievously. ‘Of course, Dando-sahib — how would you know? You have only known your damp fish of white women, who lay on their backs like sacks of flour, staring at the ceiling.’ She rose to her feet and lifted her arms, showing him her body. ‘How will you have me, Dando-sahib? There are twenty-five ways. The ram, the he-goat, the turn-about, the rainbow arch, the somersault — ?’

He pulled her to the bed, and she came easily, laughing — a child with full, woman’s breasts. She arched under him, her knees splayed and her nails caressing, scratching. He entered her immediately, firmly, and she said, ‘Aye — ’ softly, apprehensively, and then met each of his thrusts with the strong cushion of her thighs. For several moments, her movements were predictable, mechanical, but suddenly she contorted, her eyes clenching and mouth dropping loosely open. Surprised, he hesitated, but Padmini was jolting savagely, boring, her legs rising to his waist and entwining about his middle, her nails clawing and her breath coming in short pants. He was no longer the master. There was the fleeting, choking incandescence of his own convulsion, and his strength drained. He lay still, his weight on her, and she

drew a deep breath. ‘Ayeee — !’

They remained, their bodies fused but unmoving. ‘There are occasions, Dando-sahib,’ she said presently, ‘when it is like the first time, when I was virgin and my breasts just round enough to be called a woman’s, and the first man lifted my clothes, in the shade of the scrub patch below the village. He was an old man, the uncle of my father, and with daughters with children of his own — but he was a lusty one, and we came to the scrub patch often, until someone told the headman, and I came to Meerut.’

‘Dirty ol’ bastard,’ Joseph commented. ‘That’s bleedin’ incest.’ It wasn’t. It was just India. His heat had died, and he did not want to remain lying here, unclothed, even with Padmini. He would want her again, he knew, but not tonight. Sensing the change in him, Padmini went to the washstand, poured water from a big brass *lotah*, then washed him and herself.

‘I’ll be back,’ he said. ‘Not tomorrow. There’s a Church Parade tomorrow.’ Besides, there’d be no bleedin’ six rupees tomorrow, either — or until next week.

She was folding the *saree* about herself and, her body obscured by its drapery, looked even more childlike than before. She suddenly stood still. ‘No, not tomorrow, Dando-sahib.’ Her voice was low, flat-toned. She paused. ‘It is necessary for you to go to your church?’

Joseph nodded, buttoning his tunic. He placed a silver rupee piece on the washstand, but Padmini did not glance at it. ‘Church tomorrow,’ he confirmed, ‘and escorting prisoners on Monday. Picquet on Tuesday.’

She watched him buckle his belt and then reach for his kepi. ‘Don’t go to your church, Dando-sahib,’ she said quickly.

He shrugged. ‘It’s standin’ orders.’ Besides, what did it matter? If he didn’t attend church, he still couldn’t come here.

‘Even now — ’ she was only just audible, ‘ — in the cavalry lines, *the*

sowars are sharpening their swords.'

Joseph stared at her with incomprehension in his face. 'The *sowars*,' he echoed. 'The 3rd Natives?' What b'Christ was she talking about? There were eighty-five mutinous troopers in the civil gaol. Well, if eighty-five could be mutinous, so could the bleedin' rest. He sucked in his breath. It might be bazaar drivell, or it might not. 'What d'yer mean?'

Padmini shook her head wearily. 'It doesn't matter, Dando-sahib. The church doesn't matter. What can the few do against the many? Can the mango plant fight the monsoon? Or even escape from its path? It has been written, and the time has come — when the sun is setting on the horizon, darkness is coming on, but it is not yet night and not altogether day. Then shall ye drive away the evil and ravening wolf that seeks for us, and set your foot on the burning weapons of the exploiter, whoever he may be!' She placed the palms of her hands together.

'What the 'ell are yer talking about? It don't make sense.' Or perhaps it did. She'd said the few and the many. The 'few' were the eighty-five troopers in the civil gaol, and the 'many' must be their gaolers, the 60th Rifles. She was right. The mango plant didn't fight the monsoons. 'Are the *sowars* looking for trouble? Are they thinking of breaking out the prisoners?' His eyes narrowed. 'While we're in church?'

She did not speak.

Joseph shouted. 'Yer said the *sowars* are sharpening their swords! What for?' A few dozen rioting *sowars*, or a few hundred, wouldn't amount to a row of rotten beans once the Rifles got among them, but there were civilian residences near the gaol, with women and children —

He took her by a shoulder. 'The *sowars* — what about them?' She shook her head, and he gave an impatient snort. Well, he likely knew enough, and he could guess the rest. He flung himself from the room, past the salaaming

huddle of the old woman, and into the street. He'd report it to the guardroom, and the subaltern officer could decide.

In the yellow glimmer of the bazaar lamps he could see other white-clad figures — two of them drunkenly reeling, arms linked and Irish voices carolling. They'd need more than blarney to get them past the sharp eyes of the guard-sergeant. But he saw no sepoy. It might be just a coincidence; he'd never previously noticed whether they visited the bazaar after dark. He turned into moonlit Chapel Street, his footsteps echoing.

There was one thing. If the sepoy were looking for trouble, they'd find their smooth-bore Brown Bess muskets opposed by the new Enfield-Pritchett rifles, with which the 60th had been equipped for four months — and that would give the bastards reason for howling to their pot-bellied elephant god. The Enfield, weighing less than nine pounds, was precisely accurate up to two hundred yards. Beyond that distance, a rifleman was expected to hit a target of six feet at five hundred yards, and of eight feet at one thousand yards. At this latter distance, the .577 calibre minie ball, driven by sixty grains of black powder, would penetrate four inches of pine. There was, of course, a minor shortcoming. The riflemen of the 60th had been issued with only ten rounds of ammunition per man.

*

Joseph Dando had never recalled his mother and retained only fragmented, ill-defined memories of his father. Katie Dando's thin fingers had sewn men's shirts in an Aldgate sweatshop, being paid four shillings per dozen shirts and having to provide her own thread, until consumption laid her in Whitechapel Burial Ground at the age of twenty-two.

His father, Matt Dando, he remembered, was small, neat, and dark, with black, glossy ringlets and gypsy-like features that suggested an ancestry other than Anglo-Saxon. Whatever his antecedents, however, Matt Dando was as

tough and resilient as whipcord. A costermonger, trading fruit and nuts in season and a variety of fish in winter — plaice, cockles, oysters and sprats — he would defend his few feet of market curb with boots and beltbuckle. Joseph had been four or five years old then, and a great deal had happened since to blur memory-pictures of infancy.

The room in Kennington, with its peeling, leprous walls, its splintered floor, its rats, and the single water pump shared by forty other families, belonged — his father claimed with mock piety — to the Church. By this, he meant that his landlords were the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. Matt Dando spat each time he saw a clergyman, an act of ingratitude that doubtless weighed heavily in his disfavour following his death from typhoid in the epidemic of 1841. The date had been 9 November, a cold, fog-choked day on which, on the other side of London, a son was born to the young Queen and her husband, Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg.

It was just possible, however, that the death of Matt Dando contributed towards the continued survival of young Joseph. The mortality level among the children of London's poor was murderously high; in a bad year, three-quarters died before the age of five. Left to his own resources, the shabby little six-year-old waif would have followed his father within weeks, consigned to an unmarked grave in a cheap wooden box provided by a resentful parish. But it was not to be so. There were stirrings of conscience among a well-fed middle class that for hundreds of years had considered the poor an unfortunate but necessary evil, a source of cheap labour that required to be kept in its rightful place — at a distance. A rising young writer, signing himself 'Boz,' had already, with his brilliant pen, nakedly revealed the hypocrisy and humbug, the pathos and despair, that existed among the meaner subjects of Queen Victoria. More realistically, the young Lord Ashley, in the House of Commons, was vociferously harassing Authority

towards reform. Already, he had achieved improvements in the treatment of lunatics, a ten-hour working day for mill-workers, and a degree of protection for working children. Slowly, very slowly, Authority was beginning to take notice of the poor, and Authority took notice of Joseph Dando.

Authority, on this occasion, was represented by two large gentlemen in stovepipe hats and frock coats, lavish side-whiskers, and breath laden with the smell of porter. Their arrival was fortunately timed. Little Joseph had no rent for his late father's dingy lodging room, and the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, it seemed, did not consider charity essential to property management. If Christ had been a landlord, he would never have lent his support to the Sermon on the Mount. Others could pay their fourteen pence. If Joseph couldn't —

The alternative was a chilling one, although at six years the implications were perhaps not fully apparent to Joseph.

A small army of vagrants lived and slept in alleyways and doorways, under arches or bushes, or crawled into warehouses and boat-sheds, and each frosty dawn delivered its harvest of stiffened corpses, unknown, unwanted. The indomitable Ashley was to tell a somnolent House of a boy who had spent an entire winter inside an iron roller in Regent's Park, and miraculously lived to tell of it. For Joseph Dando, the arrival of Authority meant salvation. Six years is an age of credulity. In later life, young Joseph would learn to question the motives behind any apparent act of kindness, but today, the paternal interest of the Society for the Relief of Destitute Young Persons was heaven-sent. His trust in the integrity of adults was infinite — particularly adults in stovepipe hats and side-whiskers.

From their superior height, they talked across his head.

'Did they say six years?'

The other nodded doubtfully. 'Six years.'

‘He seems small for his age, wouldn’t you think?’ A puny charity waif would be viewed with indifference by prospective employers, who expected a good day’s work in payment for board and blanket, and the boy could remain a Society incumbent for several years — an unsatisfactory situation.

Joseph was completely ignorant that his fate, for a few moments, hung precariously in the balance and, being ignorant, was equally blissful. Authority would not abandon him. In the event, Authority did not, but it was a near thing. Joseph gathered his few personal belongings — his father’s brightly polished Sunday boots and spotted kerchief, a spoon, and a small, cheap brooch, once his mother’s — and accompanied benevolent Authority into the street.

It was his first journey in a hackney, and he had not the slightest knowledge of where it might be taking him. His large companions had not deigned to enlighten him and he did not wish to ask. He sat with his grubby hands clasped about his father’s boots, listening to the clip-clop of the cab-horse’s feet on the greasy cobbles and watching, through the small, steamed window, the vague shapes of shop fronts and houses sliding past in the November gloom. He could not know that his few brief years of independence were finished, and he would never know it again. Authority seldom saw eye to eye with independence.

Dusk had fallen when the four-wheeled growler reached Borough Road, and the lamplighters were abroad with their poles, the softly hissing lamps smearing the wet pavements with yellow, but insufficient to show the seedy buildings, livery stables, low-fronted shops and occasional beer-houses. There were curbside stalls with guttering candles, laden with fruit and fish, the wheedling voices of hawkers. Joseph swallowed at the nostalgia that filled his throat, but it was beginning to drizzle with rain. He pushed the boots under his thin coat and broke into a trot to match the hurried pace of his

escort.

Had he been able to read, and had it not been too dark to do so, a small, painted board fixed to a high wall would have been his first introduction to the Society for the Relief of Destitute Young Persons. The top of the wall was thickly embedded with broken glass, but he did not see that either. There was a brief, paved courtyard, a door that opened after a bell jangled faintly in some distant cavern, and then he was in.

For any person of six years, an initiation into a completely new environment is a confusing experience. Joseph, however, had no desire to be anything but compliant. The house, he noted, was bitterly cold. A large hand placed between his shoulder-blades propelled him firmly along a paved, echoing passageway, up an ill-lit, stone staircase with iron railings, and into a long, bare room — bare, that is, save for the floor, which was occupied by a confusion of small, huddled shapes, each tightly swathed in a blanket — four or five dozen. It was damply chill. A smoking dip was balanced in a bottle in the centre of the floor, flanked by two buckets, and on the far wall was a framed religious text, but to Joseph it was incomprehensible.

He had parted company with the two gentlemen in stovepipe hats, and he was never to see them again. His new guardian was a thin, pale youth of possibly sixteen years who relieved him of his father's boots, his spoon, and his brooch. Like the gentlemen in the stovepipe hats, Joseph never saw them again. The youth thrust a flimsy blanket into his arms and indicated a small area of empty floor space. 'There y'ar. No talking, cussin' or blubbin'. No baccy. If yer wants ter piss, there's the buckets. The pit's in the yard, but I ain't showing yer tonight. Yer'll 'ave ter keep till mornin'.' He departed, leaving Joseph to his own thoughts.

That, then, was that. Authority was apparently unaware that he had not eaten for ten hours, but there were doubtless minor imperfections in even the

best-planned organisations. He was cold, and he felt very lonely. He thought of Matt Dando, dead now for a week. His father had not been an affectionate man. He had been free enough with oaths and blows and had been hog-drunk every Saturday night, but there had existed between them a rough camaraderie that provided Joseph with a sense of belonging to somebody. Now, he supposed, he belonged to Authority, which was a cold, intangible thing.

*

Ensign Napier eyed the short, dark rifleman who stood at attention before him. The man wasn't drunk. He'd been to some bazaar brothel and come back with some *gup* about the *sowars* sharpening their swords. It was likely that the woman had imparted more than just information, and he — Napier — might make a note to ensure that the man saw the surgeon within the next few days. Still, that could wait. The man's story could mean something — the gaol, the Church Parade, the disgruntled native cavalrymen. After the events of the last few days, the pieces fitted very nicely. Too nicely? Napier could make a fool of himself. The bazaars were probably teeming with rumours of every kind. It only needed a single, resentful sepoy to mutter some vague, empty threat, and in hours his words, passed from mouth to mouth, distorted and embellished, had exploded into a portent of mayhem involving thousands.

William Napier was very young — the youngest ensign of the 60th. It was a juniority of which he was acutely sensitive. He was already the butt of good-natured but sometimes irritating banter from the older officers, even his brother ensigns, and he had no desire to bring down a storm of ridicule on his own head with some hysterical story of blood-hungry sepoys. He had been in India only five months while most of the men had served there for twelve years — since he was a small boy in a velvet suit — and it might not be

beyond some of them to organise a little light relief in the shape of a rip-roaring invasion of the sepoys' lines — at the ensign's expense.

He glanced at Colour Sergeant Garvin — solid, imperturbable old Garvin — with an unspoken question. The sergeant nodded. 'Dando's a good man, sir. I've known 'im since he 'listed, and he ain't given to tellin' fairy stories.'

Ensign Napier frowned. He needed more advice than from a sergeant. Surely, blast it, there'd be English officers of the 3rd Cavalry who would have a better knowledge of their own troopers than a bazaar prostitute? He drew a deep breath. 'All right, Dando, you've done the right thing. I'll see to it. Dismiss.' He didn't quite know what he'd see to. Ideally, he should report to Colonel Jones — but Jones was a peppery old devil —

Joseph Dando saluted, turned about, and marched for the door, past the long rack of Enfield rifles with a padlocked chain passed through their trigger-guards. From behind him, he heard the ensign's voice. 'I don't like it, Sergeant, damme — '

'With permission, sir,' the sergeant suggested, 'we might send a corporal and a couple o' men to the sowars' lines — just to nosey around. A reconnaissance, yer might say — ' He recognised the youngster's predicament, and he didn't envy him the prospect of pulling the colonel out of his bed at near midnight with a half-cock story —

At the door, Joseph halted to allow a newcomer to enter — a man in a scarlet, gold-braided frock-coat and white pantaloons. A colonel, Joseph realised, of native infantry. His hand snapped to his kepi, and then he felt his belly writhe. He recognised the man. He was Colonel John Finnis, of Croydon.

No, not Croydon, b'Christ — but of John Company's bleedin' 11th Native Infantry! He'd been in Meerut — a mile away — and Joseph had never known. They'd probably been within yards of each other on dozens of

occasions, and neither had been aware —

Jesus bleedin' Christ! Joseph lowered his head and ran. The Colonel whirled, his jaw dropping. 'What — ?' he gulped. 'That man — !'

'One of ours, sir,' Ensign Napier said.

'I can see that, you bloody fool!' Finnis roared. 'What's his name?'

'Dando, sir. Rifleman Dando,' Napier winced. The Colonel had been drinking, and the Ensign had enough worries without this.

'Of "A" Company, sir,' Sergeant Garvin contributed.

'Dando — that's it!' The Colonel's face was turkey-red. 'So the damn blackguard ran to the Army, did he — ?'

It just wasn't justice, Napier decided. When other ensigns did their subaltern officer duty, nothing happened except an occasional staggering drunk that the sergeant handled, or a complaint from the chaplain's lady about obscene singing. He — Napier — had a threatened sepoy mutiny and a colonel who had gone *ghazi*.

'There's a possibility, sir,' he said hurriedly, 'that there's trouble brewing among the Pandies — the sepoys — '

The Colonel glared at the Ensign's immaculate green mess-jacket. '*Trouble*? What d'ye mean by *trouble*? Ye're the second damn idiot tonight that's been bleating about *trouble*! There's young Gough of the 3rd Cavalry with some poppycock drivel about Indian troops attacking the gaol — and he's even gone to Brigadier Wilson with it —'

Ensign Napier breathed with relief. Someone else knew, then, and had gone to the top — to the station commander. 'You think, sir,' he enquired, 'that there's nothing behind it?'

Colonel Finnis exploded. '*Godammit*! Of course there's nothing behind it! Every festerin' young whipper-snapper who arrives from England thinks there's murdering black *budmashes* behind every damn' tree! We've had

native troops in India for a hundred years, boy — longer than half o' your English regiments with their blasted airs and graces.' He flung a scarlet arm towards the door. 'A lady could walk through my lines a damn sight safer than among the thievin' scum ye've got in the Rifles.'

This was too much. Ensign Napier drew himself up. 'I resent those remarks, sir — ' but Colonel Finnis was stamping angrily away. At the door he paused.

'Rifleman Dando, eh?' he boiled. 'I'll teach Mister Rifleman Dando what it's like to build roads across the Doab for five bloody years!'

Three hundred yards away, in barrack-room number 8, Joseph was tugging off his boots. It was soddin' stupid worrying himself about the gaol. Tomorrow — or Monday for certain — he'd be in there himself.

*

The affair of the Fallen Woman had happened at Croydon when he had joined the downstairs staff of Colonel Finnis' household. That had been after the Society for the Relief of Destitute Young Persons, and after his employment by Dr. Whistler of Merton.

John Finnis, of the 11th Native Infantry of the East India Company Bengal Army, was in England on a year's furlough from Delhi. He was a large, imposing man, running to stoutness, with a brick-red face, carefully groomed moustache, and a powerful voice. His vocabulary was liberally salted with Hindustani and Goorkhali, and consequently sometimes incomprehensible to those lesser mortals who lacked the benefit of half a lifetime in India. The Colonel was short-tempered, impatient, and drank heavily. At least, he poured his first three fingers of whisky at 11 a.m. precisely, after which time he seldom seemed to be without a glass in his hand, and both temper and patience became progressively shorter. He was never positively drunk; he held his liquor like an officer and a gentleman, but his face would flush to a

deeper shade of red, his speech become mildly slurred and even more heavily weighted with Hindustani. Everything for the Colonel, Joseph soon learned, had to be done at once. *Ek dum!*

Mrs. Esther Finnis, the Colonel's Lady, could scarcely have been less like her spouse. A ladies' journal might have politely referred to her as slim, rather than spare, and Joseph did not understand how, after so many years under an Indian sun, she had managed to retain her pale complexion. She had reddish hair and a manner that defined her as infinitely superior to the ordinary folk of Croydon, to tradesmen and, of course, the below-stairs domestics. Mrs. Finnis was a gentlewoman and was anxious that everyone should know so. Her few excursions into the realm of social drinking were confined to *mitha pani* — lemonade — and a very occasional glass of sherry.

The house had two acres of lawns and flowerbeds, stables and outhouses. There was a cook, an upstairs maid, and an Indian manservant named Gupta Sen who lived over the stables, prepared his own food, and whose ablutionary habits, Joseph discovered, were peculiarly un-European. The Indian rarely entered the house and was referred to by the Colonel as the *syce*. The chaise was a *gharri*, the horses damn *tats*. A bed was a *dhoolie* and the bathroom the *ghuslkhana* — and the Colonel did not take kindly to a stare of bewilderment. He swore loudly, grossly, and repeatedly — in English.

In the world of the Colonel and Mrs. Finnis there were only two kinds of humanity — masters and servants, the rulers and the ruled. Among the first were numbered persons of title, officers, bishops, magistrates, masters of foxhounds, physicians of eminence but not surgeons or bank managers. The second included all people who worked for wages, military rank and file, most foreigners, and all persons of brown or yellow skin. The Colonel and his Lady, of course, were British, and in 1850 that meant the wealthiest, most powerful, most arrogant nation in the world.

Even in Croydon, no more than ten miles from London, the increasing drift of country workers into the towns was becoming apparent. The desolation of rural areas by the abandonment of roads in favour of the railways had already started. There was more and better-paying work in London, and employers preferred the ruddy-faced, thickset men from the country to the pale, shifty natives of the town slums. They were good with horses and harness, stronger and more willing, and seldom had ideas above their station. From the workers' viewpoint, a guinea a week in London was considerably better than a precarious eight shillings in Midhurst or Maidstone. So the drift was beginning.

To the Colonel and his Lady, the situation was merely one of annoyance. The working classes were becoming impertinent with their picking and choosing, but in England, one couldn't hang a man by his thumbs and flog him to insensibility. That was the advantage of India; the *ryots* knew their place, b'God — and India was going to be kept that way.

There was another, more local, source of annoyance. Colonel Finnis had chosen Croydon for his furlough because of its proximity to the East India Company's Military College at Addiscombe, and the Colonel, furlough or not, preferred the company of brother officers to that of anaemic, simpering women. Fortuitously, the 5th Dragoon Guards were billeted in neighbouring Hayes, and Gupta Sen drove the Colonel to Hayes often. Joseph was glad to see him go, although aware that when the Colonel returned, he would stamp into the house snarling curses on the heads of the languid, popinjay subalterns of the Queen's service — who had never heard a shot fired in anger and considered the army to consist of tea parties, *chemin de fer*, and the regimental band. Colonel Finnis was an 'Indian,' and there was a social distinction between an officer of John Company's native sepoys — irrespective of rank and experience — and a gazetted Queen's soldier. The

distinction rankled. At such times, Joseph made himself scarce, listening from afar to the Colonel's imprecations and Mrs. Finnis' wheedling sympathies. It was only for a year, she soothed, and then they could return to Meerut, to the Battalion, where the Colonel was lord of all he surveyed and his lady only slightly less esteemed than the *Buna Ranee* herself. It was only for a year.

In his calf-length nightshirt, relieved of his whale-boned stomacher, and with a little net bracing his handsome moustache, the Colonel's military bearing was somewhat diminished, and it was then, immediately before retiring, that Mrs. Finnis chose to raise domestic issues. It would never do to discuss them in the possible hearing of the menials and, more important, by bedtime the Colonel had achieved a state of alcoholic torpor in which, from sheer lack of interest, he was unlikely to seriously debate any new project his wife was considering. And Mrs. Finnis had a new project.

'Lady Weeton gave a lecture today,' she began, 'at the Ladies' Domestic Mission.'

The Colonel grunted.

'About fallen women,' she added.

He drew a deep breath and closed his eyes.

'There are many women,' she said, 'who have become victims of sensual vice and, as a result, are compelled into a life of sinful depravity — '

The Colonel grunted again. 'They're called whores.'

' — and, as Lady Weeton said, tempting vain and budding youth to his doom — *'

He choked. 'Vain and budding — ? Dammit, woman, whores are necessary. Without 'em, no decent woman could walk safe. Vain and budding youth?' He snorted. 'B'God, there's not much o' that in the ranks — and precious little among the officers either — ' The Colonel was not in the best of

humours. That evening a drawling captain of the fashionable 5th Dragoon Guards had enquired whether ‘those black fellahs’ were really worth their fodder. Weren’t they likely to run amok at the drop of a hat? Or should it be a turban? There had been guffaws, and the Colonel had boiled with fury. Whatever his faults, he had a considerable regard for his sepoy, and no lick-spit tailor’s dummy of a dragoon was going to question their discipline and loyalty.

‘And Lady Weeton suggested we might give sanctuary to a fallen woman. She said — ’

‘Sanctuary?’ It was sufficient to compel him to open his eyes. ‘*Sanctuary?* You mean have a damn whore *here?*’

‘A fallen woman.’ She nodded. ‘Lady Weeton is a most sincere person — ’

‘Bugger Lady Weeton — !’

‘ — and Sir Simon Weeton is Deputy Lord-lieutenant — ’

‘I don’t care a damn if he’s the festerin’ Prince Consort!’ The idea was preposterous. In thirty years of soldiering he’d seen plenty of the women who ‘followed the drum’ from Plymouth to Peshawur — unkempt, shameless, determined to extract every possible penny from a soldier’s pocket before surrendering an indifferent body, and only anxious to be finished so that another client could be sought before the barracks’ drums beat retreat. They swore like veterans, drank as much as any man, brawled, and fought with their fists. The Colonel bore them no ill will; they were as much a part of garrison life as pipe-clay and pack-drill — but to have such a woman in his own house, perhaps even in the same room, was inconceivable. He raised himself on an elbow. ‘Goddam — ! If you think — !’

Mrs. Finnis did think. To comply with the suggestions of Lady Weeton was a very desirable thing in Croydon. ‘My *dear* Mrs. Finnis! How *brave* of you! You simply *must* take tea with Sir Simon. Shall we say Thursday, at four?’

The possibilities were scintillating. She was unaware that, by next week, Lady Weeton would have forgotten the fallen women and would be advocating prayer books for sailors or trousers for the Bantu.

So Mrs. Finnis had her fallen woman. Hannah Minting was diminutive, yellow-haired, and impenitent. She was surprised at her good fortune but did not question it. Anything was worth trying after the nightly prowling of streets and taverns in search of drunken dragoons, evading the Peelers, sick from too much gin and too little food, bruised, insulted, jeered. Mrs. Finnis, Hannah knew, was one of those haughty town ladies who had the ability to look at a street woman as if she simply wasn't there. Still, it wouldn't be the first time Hannah had sung hymns for a bowl of soup. There couldn't be many things worse than whoring.

When she arrived, she carried her entire belongings lumpily bundled in a large kerchief and a linnet in a tiny cage named Fred. In her straw bonnet tied with crumpled ribbons, frayed shawl and thin shoes, she stood in the hall and eyed her surroundings defiantly. 'If yer wants ter know,' she said, 'I'm *Methodiss*. When do we eat? Before or after?'

Mrs. Finnis' own feelings were rather confused. In her enthusiasm, Lady Weeton had omitted to explain what to *do* with a fallen woman when one was acquired, and Hannah Minting was not the chastened, apologetic, and grateful female that Mrs. Finnis had vaguely expected. Hannah Minting wasn't going to apologise to anyone. The Colonel's Lady decided that, for the present, Hannah should be sent downstairs, but the cook and maid immediately threatened to terminate their services. They were honest, church-going bodies and weren't going to share the kitchen with one of *them*.

Ushered into the drawing room, Hannah lowered her bundle and linnet-cage to the carpet, untied her bonnet, and said, 'Christ, my feet are like murder.' Colonel Finnis gulped at his whisky, purpling, then marched from the room,

roaring for Gupta Sen. Hannah glanced at Mrs. Finnis knowingly. ‘The ol’ man like ‘is booze, does ’ee? They’re all the bleedin’ same.’

This, Mrs. Finnis decided, wasn’t at all her interpretation of Lady Weeton’s fallen woman. Mrs. Finnis, however, was a Colonel’s Lady — and Colonels’ Ladies didn’t concede an inch to women of lower orders. Captains’ wives, majors’ wives — all maintained a respectful, acquiescent silence when the Colonel’s Lady voiced an opinion. They nodded, smiled, and agreed. It was the natural order of things. One day, some of them would be Colonels’ Ladies and they, too, would be accorded the deference that was their right. A shabby little prostitute could soon be awed into compliance.

The gentleman,’ announced Mrs. Finnis icily, ‘is Lieutenant-Colonel John Finnis, Commanding Officer of the 11th Native Infantry, Honourable East India Company —’

‘Native?’ Hannah’s eyes widened. Her voice sunk to a shocked whisper. ‘Yer mean — he’s a blackie?’ She shook her head. ‘Christ, I’d never ’ave guessed!’

‘Colonel Finnis is *not* a — ’ Mrs. Finnis fought for composure. She drew a deep breath. ‘Colonel Finnis is English. All officers of native regiments are English — or, at least, British. Do you understand?’

Hannah nodded thoughtfully. ‘I’ve ’eard about them blacks, but I ain’t never ’ad one.’ She frowned. ‘Are they any *different*?’

The Colonel’s Lady was shaken. In the narrow world of gentlewomen, there were formidable sanctions upon what might, or might not, be discussed, even between mother and daughter. The subject of sexual experience, above all others, was, by common consent, invested with a cloak of secrecy and sinfulness. It did not exist. Mrs. Finnis shuddered. ‘I think,’ she said, ‘that for the time being, it might be better if you took your meals in your room.’ She needed a little time. ‘Later, perhaps, we can have a long talk.’ She eyed the

caged linnet doubtfully. 'The Colonel doesn't care for — er — animals — in the house. Perhaps the conservatory — ?'

Hannah tossed her head. 'I should bleedin' think so! It ain't a animal — it's Fred.' She leaned forward confidently. 'There was this sailor, see — from Portsmouth — '

'Yes — ?' enquired Mrs. Finnis weakly. She led the way to the stairs.

'Well, yer 'ave to be soddin' careful with sailors. Take Maudie Spencer — never even saw 'im proper, she didn't — and he left 'er with a dose like you never saw — '

'Dose — ?'

'Clap.' Hannah sniffed. 'So when this sailor starts coming the ol' finger lark, I sez — '

Mrs. Finnis opened the bedroom door, propelled Hannah through, then drew it firmly shut. This couldn't really be happening. It just couldn't. Lady Weeton's lecture on fallen women had mentioned nothing like this, and Mrs. Finnis had the sickening feeling of having made a ghastly mistake. She decided that, for once, she needed a sherry, and her hand shook as she poured it. How could a woman be so uncouth, so shameless? How could any woman entertain such thoughts?

Besides — what did happen with that sailor?

*

Joseph did not meet Hannah Minting for several days, a period during which she was maintained in rigid *purdah* and, presumably, had a number of long talks with Mrs. Finnis. The Colonel had retired behind mutterings of 'damn *nautch*-girl' and spent more time than ever in the armchairs of the Military College. Lady Weeton, frustratingly, had gone to Scotland, but there were a number of other ladies of Croydon with a spiteful interest in Mrs. Finnis' experiment who were fluttering to see its outcome. It wasn't every

day that a real, live prostitute could be seen, and *spoken* to, over tea and cakes in a Croydon drawing room. The anticipation alone was breathlessly exciting.

Mrs. Finnis was perturbed. Eager to display her trophy, she had, even before Hannah's arrival, sent notes of invitation to the Croydon ladies and, predictably, all had accepted. Afternoon tea, during which subjects of conversation would range from the vicar's new croquet green to fashions in crinolines or the Literary Society's last meeting, was hardly an occasion upon which to launch Hannah Minting. Unfortunately, there seemed no alternative. The ladies were coming to see Mrs. Finnis' Fallen Woman. Nothing would have kept them away.

There was a tingling hush of expectation when Mrs. Finnis, her heart in her mouth, announced that she would now introduce Miss Hannah Minting. What followed was as incredible as anything the Colonel's Lady had remotely imagined.

When Hannah made her appearance, she was demure and timorous, her eyes to the carpet and raising them modestly to whisper an occasional monosyllable in answer to the cautious dissection of her benefactor's guests. If the ladies had expected a Scarlet Jezebel, complete with feathers and sequins, they were disappointed. Denuded of cheap cosmetics, Hannah had a good skin, and with her yellow hair tied back on her neck, a plain black dress and buttoned boots, she presented a rather colourless portrayal of her profession — and a reticent one — refusing to rise to the bait of her inquisitors' innuendos and leaving most of the talking to the Colonel's Lady, who was an expert. It was a pity that Lady Weeton couldn't have seen.

In response to a guarded question about Croydon, Hannah smiled primly and declared that it was nice enough, 'but inclined to be *raffish* of a Saturday night, as yer know — 'specially when the provost's out o' sight.'

Cheltenham, she added, was preferable. There was a better class of people in Cheltenham. Did Mrs. Bradshaw know Cheltenham?

The bank manager's wife did not. But did Miss Minting have many military friends in Croydon? Hannah smiled again. 'The 5th Dragoons, mostly — and the 28th Old Braggs. Cavalry's always more likely to be gentlemen, I always say — though their spurs can cause yer a damage, as all the ladies'll vouch fer.' She paused. 'Colonel Finnis, now, is a military man but, o' course, being in India, we hain't earlier been acquainted.'

The vicar's wife mustered sufficient courage to enquire which church Miss Minting attended. 'It all depends,' Hannah explained, 'which one is givin' the buns an' tea. Sometimes — ' she nodded artlessly, ' — I've been twice in one day, if there's two givin' buns an' tea.'

Miss Minting's choice of churches, however, was not what most of the ladies wanted to hear about. They wanted a fleeting but deliciously shocking brush with Carnal Pleasures and the Ways of Men, but dared not specifically ask, or indicate that they had the slightest interest in such horrific matters. It was maddening. Here, in this very room, was a woman who knew *everything*, and who, with a few words, could set them all swooning with exquisite consternation — but she refused to be drawn. Hannah Minting sat with her hands in her lap, smiling, and mutely taunting, daring them. Ask me, her eyes said. Ask me, ladies, and I'll tell you. I'll tell you everything — but ask me first.

Mrs. Scammell, the headmaster's wife, made a desperate effort. 'Do you have any pastimes, Miss Minting? Walking? Riding?'

It was too good to miss. Hannah nodded again. 'Walking — and ridin'. Every day.' She brushed a crumb from her skirt, then, 'My gentlemen friends enjoy ridin'.' Her face was a portrait of innocence as she raised it to her questioner. 'And your 'usband, Mrs. Scammell? Does 'ee ride often?' Mrs.

Scammell was suddenly scarlet. She swallowed. 'No — that is — '

'There's a shortage of good mounts in Croydon,' Mrs. Finnis interceded hurriedly, foolishly. 'The Colonel has said so.' She beamed.

'Reely?' Hannah was mildly surprised. 'Is that why 'ee prefers Hayes better?'

It was enough. The ladies of Croydon might be fair game, but the Colonel's Lady was not. Afternoon tea was brought to a close, rather prematurely. None of the ladies seemed anxious to delay departure. There was a flurry of bonnets, gloves and reticules, the grating of wheels in the drive, with the upstairs maid curtseying and Joseph opening carriage doors. In five minutes, they were gone. Watching the last of them disappear, Joseph wondered why they'd bothered to come, but these female gentry had peculiar habits. Behind him, in the house, Mrs. Finnis had dismissed the maid and returned to the drawing room, where Hannah was still seated and eating the last of the caraway cake.

'There are certain matters,' Mrs. Finnis said, 'of which ladies choose to remain ignorant.'

Hannah gazed at her silently.

'They include politics, the law, wars, commerce, gambling — with many other things that concern only men. And one thing above all.' She paused. 'Only men — '

'Yer mean yer *pretend* it don't concern yer,' Hannah mocked. 'Like them ol' bitches 'ere — all of 'em with minds like the arse-end of a sewer. Only concerns men?' she laughed. 'What d'yer do when yer ol' man gits 'is leg over? Just pretend it ain't 'appening?'

Mrs. Finnis decided she would have a headache and retire. She was beginning to wonder if Lady Weeton was really worth it.

Chapter 3

On the morning of Sunday, 10 May, Colonel John Jones looked through his pince-nez at the sky and frowned thoughtfully. It was going to be hot today, he decided — damn' hot. A day for sunstroke. After breakfast, he sent his *chaprasi* to the guardroom with an order to change the time of the Church of England Parade to 6 p.m., for a service at 6.30. It would be a little cooler for the men on the drill-ground.

The Chaplain, the Reverend John Rotton, with his lady, their two children and their *ayah*, left for the church at 6.15. The old *ayah* had been restless all day, with a confused story of sepoys threatening to fight. It was probably nothing, but the Chaplain took his walking cane — the one he'd had since Cambridge. The old phaeton never reached the church.

Mrs. Muter — Captain Dunbar Muter's lady — did reach the church, and waited until the clock struck seven, wondering why her husband's company and the other people hadn't arrived. She was very lucky.

Pretty little Mrs. Charlotte Chambers, recently out from England, was pregnant and near her time. Captain Chambers had decided that the church service would be fatiguing for her, so she remained in the bungalow with the curtains drawn. She was unlucky.

Mrs. Ann Battersby was recovering from smallpox. She was half sleeping, hearing distantly the noises of the *masalchi's* dish-washing in the kitchen. Presently the noises ceased. She listened, mildly puzzled, and then realised that she was alone in the house.

Mrs. Julia Warren's *gharri* had just reached the junction of Brook Street and Bank Street when her red-sashed *syce* hauled in his reins, dropped to the

ground, and ran. Mrs. Warren stared about her, uncomprehending.

Michael and Mary Freer, aged seven and six respectively, were hotly disputing a game of 'Happy Families' under the shade tree in the compound. Mary needed only Master Bunn the baker's son, but she never achieved him.

Hill Street, Round Road, and Boundary Road, flanked by the gardens of officers' bungalows, were strangely deserted of natives, hushed, with only the dusty trees beginning to whisper in the first puny breeze of the day. The heartbeat of Meerut had suddenly paused.

At three minutes before six o'clock, on the Rifles' drill-ground, the white-coated riflemen clustered about the perimeter, waiting for the bugle. They wore sidearms only. Their Enfields were in the barrack-rooms, chained in racks. Lieutenant Cromer Ashburnham, the Acting Adjutant, had already inspected the sergeants and dismissed them, to shorten still further the period to be spent in the sun. He stood talking to Captain Muter, drawing out his watch. Then he turned and nodded at the waiting bugler.

Bill Sutton's bugle never reached his lips. A man, hatless, and in soiled whites, was running across the drill-ground from the direction of the Mall. He was sobbing, his mouth sagging loosely and his eyes wide. Captain Muter halted in mid-sentence, and Ashburnham, with his watch still in his hand, turned.

The man, his attention captured by the officers' green regimentals, changed direction, and then shouted incoherently. There was mud on the knees of his breeches, and sweat streaked his face. He tried again to shout, throwing a glance over his shoulder, and Captain Muter stepped forward.

'The Pandies — !' The dishevelled rifleman heaved air into tortured lungs. The Pandies are out — killin'. The bastard sowars — cuttin' down women — ' Vomit overtook his words, and he slabbered, convulsing. 'Fer Chris' sake — !'

Muter swore, but Ashburnham had already whirled. Behind them, the men of 'A' Company, only seconds earlier thronging the fringe of the drill-ground, were streaming pell-mell into Middle Row. Amazed, Ashburnham stared. 'What the — ?' Above the men's white-capped heads he could see another Rifles officer, astride a pony, thrashing his lathered mount towards the guardroom. A sergeant, ripping off his tunic as he ran, was shouting. 'Greens! D'yer hear? Change to greens! Whites ain't no good fer the dark.'

Joseph Dando, Tom Brownlow, and Edwin Wilson wrenched off their white drills. The *sowars* were loose, the galloping officer had screamed at them — loose, and scything down every white person in sight. That was all they'd heard, and they'd seen the running man. There was no key to the rifle rack, but a steel-tipped boot driven against the padlock hasp tore it from its rivets. 'Ten shittin' rounds!' Tom Brownlow snarled.

From the guardroom, distant by four hundred yards, a bugle was sounding Alarm-to-Arms repeatedly. There was more news now, thrown from the mouths of gasping men who had reeled from the Sudder Bazaar. The 3rd Native Cavalry had mutinied, fired their lines and, accompanied by loot-seeking *goojars*, were running amok in Meerut, seeking Europeans. They were better men, they were shouting, than the *Feringhee* pigs. The greencoat soldiers — the *Ruffel ka-Pultan* — were in their church without guns, helpless and trapped. *Maro Feringhee!* Kill the English! Kill their haughty, chalk-faced women and their whining whelps! *Maro Feringhee!*

It was impossible. It just couldn't be happening. But Captain Muter could see the smoke rising to the south-westward, towards the race-course. Confound that bugle. It didn't help a man to *think*. The 3rd Cavalry had mutinied, but nothing had been said about the 11th and 20th Native Infantry, in adjacent cantonments. The bastards. The filthy, rot-gutting bastards. They'd thought the Rifles would be in church, but they hadn't known about

the change of orders. By now, Muter realised, his wife would be in the church — if she'd got there. There were ashes in his mouth. The bastards.

The riflemen were deluging back to the drill-ground, the sergeants shouting them into line, and a dozen officers had come running, buckling on sword-belts and their Adams' pistols. As the men jostled into order, Muter could hear the rifle cartridges rattling loosely in their pouches. Ten rounds, b'God! He glanced about him. He was still the senior officer here, and he had to do something — fast. And his wife was in the church.

Goddam — perhaps things weren't so bad. A few brawling sepoys, a barrack-room fired, and a hysterical bazaar had distorted the incident into a mutiny. He was only a captain, wasn't he? There was a colonel, a major, and three captains senior to himself. Where the hell were they? He, Muter, couldn't march off half a battalion to the bloody sepoy lines with fixed swords, could he?

The other officers were looking at him expectantly. Why *him*? There must be four hundred men already on the drill-ground, with others continually arriving — from the off-duty companies and the other church parties — still ignorant of the cause of the excitement. The smoke to the south-westward was thickening.

'Lieutenant Austin.' Muter had reached a decision. 'March off the first fifty men — in quarter-column if you please — to the Treasury.' There was £170,000 in the Treasury, a mile and a half away, and he could hardly be criticised for ensuring its safety. As for the sepoy lines, well, he'd wait. Colonel Jones must know by now, b'God.

He had a sudden thought. 'You're not to open fire!' he roared at the departing Austin. 'You're not to open fire on any account, d'you understand?'

*

The Reverend Rotton's old phaeton had just turned into the Mall when the sultry evening peace was shattered by a distant, ragged volley of musket fire. On a Sunday? The *ayah* had crouched low in her seat, rocking back and forth, her face terrified. John Rotton grasped his cane grimly. To his left, beyond the canal, the sky was black with drifting smoke, and he could hear confused shouting. Something very unusual was happening — and on a Sunday, too. He had spent the entire afternoon in an airless study, preparing his sermon. It was too much. Annoyed, he ordered the phaeton to be driven to the Rifles' guardroom. He would complain.

When the clock struck seven, Mrs. Dunbar Muter rose from her pew in the empty, silent church. This was quite ridiculous. Where was everyone? She climbed back into her pony-carriage, feeling foolish. The ponies clattered along deserted Barrack Street and around the long bend of Circular Road — and then Mrs. Muter stared, unbelieving. Beyond the brown, dusty race-course the thatched roofs of the native lines were ablaze from end to end, vomiting sparks and smoke into the sky. More startling, two Englishmen in the uniforms of the Bengal Artillery were running desperately towards her, pursued by a shouting, missile-throwing mob of natives. It was incredible. Probably the men were drunk. She ordered the carriage to be turned back towards the Mall, to reach the bungalow by an alternative route. When she arrived, the servants were assembled excitedly in the compound, about to depart — the cook with the silver.

Pretty little Mrs. Chambers ran, ungainly in her pregnancy, for the compound wall, but they overtook her easily and threw her to the ground. Then, laughing, they stripped her of her clothes, and she lay sobbing, more aware of her swollen belly than of her nakedness. For a few moments, it seemed that they were content to stare, jeering, at a grovelling, humiliated mem-sahib, until a man with a long butcher's knife pushed his way through

the throng. He placed the point of the knife just below her navel, thrust viciously and ripped upwards.

Mrs. Battersby delayed them for several minutes. She stood by her couch defiantly and, because of her smallpox, none was willing to approach her. Then they tossed burning, oil-soaked rags into the room until her flimsy nightdress flared like a torch, and she fell, writhing, cursing them. Her sixteen-year-old daughter, Phillipa, compensated for the inconvenience of her mother. They dragged her to the canal bank, flayed her with iron-shod *lathis* until she was crimson-raw and semi-conscious, then prised open her legs and forced burning brands into her body with the pole of a broom.

The terrified, reinless ponies of Mrs. Warren's *gharri* clattered into Bank Street. Alongside the vehicle a native trooper rode, lunging with his sabre at the crumple of clothing between the cushions. The trooper was a little unfortunate, for the lady had been dead for several minutes before he had spurred towards her, and he did not see the two officers of his own regiment, enraged, thundering down on him with swords raised. He was the first *sowar* to die, his head almost severed from his shoulders.

Michael and Mary, under the shade tree, might have survived unnoticed had their game not been interrupted by unusual noises from the bungalow. The *ayah* was on the verandah, staring woodenly at the door. Suddenly aware of their approach, she turned with a jerk. 'Run, little puppy-tails! Run quickly to the *lal koortie*. Run quickly, quickly — !' But they could see. On the floor, their mother was being raped by a soldier who had been their father's orderly while three others watched, waiting their turn. Mrs. Freer churned, frenzied, as the children's throats were cut, then lay numbly until the men had finished and died uncaring.

*

The sepoy infantry of the 11th and 20th milled chaotically about the wide

maidan that spread the length of the burning cantonments. It was dusk. They were uncertain, leaderless, and nervously excited, loading and firing their muskets aimlessly at the sky and at the flaming thatch on the opposite side of Race Road. The *sowars* and the *goojar* jackels were loose in Meerut, killing, looting, but the infantrymen weren't sure. The men in the gaol were not theirs. The *sowars* were big-mouths. The English soldiers might not be so easily beaten — and there was the *top-khana*, the artillery, to contend with yet. Wait a little, wait a little. There was time yet.

Colonel Finnis, astride a white horse, rode directly into the *maidan*. He did not lack courage — a bull-like, stubborn courage that knew no method of dealing with controversy except unflinching confrontation — and tonight he was very sober. His own 11th Infantry, he had sworn, would never mutiny. There were fools among them, b'God, but no murderers, and there wasn't a sepoy alive whose knees didn't turn to water when the Colonel-sahib roared his displeasure.

And he was almost right. As he reined, a *havildar* saluted and took the head of his horse, and around him the noise died. He'd known it all the time, b'God. A short, blistering speech, and he'd have them in column and marching to tear the guts out of the bloody *sowars*. The men of the 11th, like truant schoolboys apprehended by a master, were buttoning their tunics and edging into ragged lines, eyes lowered from the tall Colonel-sahib silhouetted against the red sky. He'd known it all along, b'God — and tomorrow he'd have the ringleaders stripped and manacled in front of the entire regiment —

Nobody knew who fired the first shot. It might have been a sepoy of the 20th, less awed by, and resentful of, the threatening appearance of another regiment's commander. The heavy, .75 calibre ball, fired from only yards away, smashed into the Colonel's chest, jolting him backwards in the saddle. There was amazement in his face but only for a moment. The second ball

struck him between the eyes and blew the back off his head. The *havildar* whirled, shocked. 'You fools! You pigs — !'

But it was too late.

*

Lieutenant Austin was worried. He had brought his fifty men up to the Treasury at the double, with swords fixed. There had been a moment of uncertainty when the sepoy guard, of twice his strength, had tumbled into the walled courtyard, but the riflemen's Enfields came up to their shoulders, with Austin's voice ringing with an authority he did not feel. The sepoys had grounded their muskets and disappeared into the deepening gloom. He could not have stopped them, even had he wished.

They were isolated now — a mile and a half from the Rifles' cantonments where he had received his orders from Muter, and he had no further information on the alleged *sowars'* mutiny than he'd had then, and that was damn flimsy. He had posted his men on the flat roof of the Treasury building and behind the *sangar* — the low wall surrounding it — and he had ten rounds to a man, with instructions not to fire anyway. Was the mutiny real, or wasn't it? He'd remain here until ordered otherwise, but what did he do if he were attacked?

There was trouble, all right — bleedin', 'orrible trouble. From the roof, the riflemen could see the Commissioner's and the Judge's houses burning, and there were distant, scattered musket-shots, the occasional chatter of hooves, shouts and gleeful whoops. In the light of the flames, crouching figures darted, and the surface of the canal gleamed ruddily. They could see the glitter of knives and the *sowars'* curved *talwars*. Several times, a group of horsemen burst out of the blackness of the public gardens, screeched at the waiting riflemen, wheeled, and disappeared, laughing.

Tom Brownlow squinted along the barrel of his rifle. 'I could knock that

laughing bastard out of 'is saddle,' he offered, 'as easy as kiss yer arse.'

'Yer 'eard what the Lieutenant said,' Joseph reminded him. No shootin'. We ain't sure it's a proper disturbance. It might be Ramadam.'

'Ramadam's Muslim,' Edwin Wilson said. 'The Shiites, not the 'Indoos.'

'Shites?' Brownlow grunted. 'I'd give 'em bleedin' shites, alright — wi' twenty inches o' cold bleedin' steel.' He peered towards the Gardens. 'What's that — ?'

Out of the far shadows two men and a woman stumbled — the men in shirt-sleeves and the woman with shawl trailing and near to collapse. Twenty yards behind them, a cavalryman cantered, his sabre drawn. Following him, and baying him on, swarmed a rabble of natives — servants, loin-clothed coolies, and bazaar riff-raff. The *sowar* was riding easily, confidently, his white teeth gleaming as he grinned. He rose in his stirrups, his sabre raised.

Tom Brownlow's rifle was already at his shoulder. He took aim and fired quickly. The cavalryman jerked, then fell from his saddle with arms outflung and sabre spinning. Behind him the throng came to a jostling halt, then turned and scattered. Tom Brownlow reached into his pouch for a fresh cartridge. 'And then there was nine,' he muttered.

Lieutenant Austin's enraged voice came from the courtyard. 'Who the hell was that? Who fired?'

'Brownlow, sir,' Tom answered. He was reloading. 'There's three civilians — a lady an' two — '

'Did you hear my order? That nobody was to fire?'

'Aye, sir, but — '

'You're under arrest, Brownlow. Sergeant Waller! I'll have that man disarmed and under close arrest.'

'Well, sir — if yer think so — ' It was the Sergeant's voice in the darkness, measured, conciliatory.

‘I do think so, damn you — and the same applies to any other insubordinate devil who can’t keep his finger off his trigger.’

There was another voice, panting. ‘Then your guard-room won’t be nearly big enough, Lieutenant. There’s going to be a lot of firing tonight if we’re to stay alive.’

Austin swivelled. ‘Who are you, sir?’

‘Roberts, Assistant Commissioner. This is Mr. Bradley, the Accountant, and Mrs. Bradley.’ He paused. ‘That was a near thing. If it hadn’t been for your man’s shot, we’d have been cut down.’ He laughed shakily. ‘And did I hear you say you’re arresting him for it?’

‘My orders are that we shall not open fire on any account, sir,’ Austin said. ‘The man deliberately disobeyed.’

‘Then I thank God he did, Lieutenant, and his disobedience will earn him a hundred rupees as soon as I can get within hand-shake reach of him. But your own philosophy is, to say the least, remarkable — in common with the remainder of your regiment. May I enquire when you received your orders, and from whom?’

‘Shortly after six o’clock, from my company commander. But why?’

‘A great deal has happened in two hours, Lieutenant. I don’t know the half of them, but I can tell you a few. All three sepoy regiments have mutinied, and Colonel Finnis of the 11th is dead. There are a lot of others dead as well — women and children, mostly caught in their quarters. Dozens of houses have been burned to the ground, scores looted, and if there are any white people in Meerut who haven’t managed to reach the European cantonments, they’re not likely to be alive at dawn. There are two and a half thousand sepoys and twice that number of *budmashes* hunting them down like animals. And what — ’ Mr. Roberts’ finger stabbed at Austin’s chest — have our gallant Rifles done, eh? Or the Dragoons? Or those twelve shining field guns

of the Bengal Artillery?’ He glanced about him musingly. ‘Well, they’ve sent a half company to secure the Treasury, with orders not to shoot.’

Austin did not care for this kind of exchange in front of his own men, but an army captain couldn’t call an assistant commissioner a quibbling fool, particularly with a lady present. These damn pompous civilians seemed to think that the army was in India just for the benefit of the East India Company’s shareholders. Every time they blundered their way into a disaster, they expected soldiers to risk life and limb to get them out of it — and, of course, these pretentious clerks were all military experts.

‘It’s possible you’ve had exaggerated reports, sir,’ the Lieutenant said. ‘If the situation is as bad as you say, the Rifles would have had the native lines surrounded.’

‘Exaggerated?’ Roberts curbed his exasperation with difficulty. ‘Damn, I can believe my own eyes if nothing else — ’

Mrs. Bradley spoke for the first time. ‘Lieutenant — it’s true. There are horrible things happening — natives burning, looting, murdering. My own *khansamah* is out there with a knife in his hand. We waited and waited to hear the rifles from the 60th or the Artillery guns until it was too dangerous to wait any longer. They chased us across the Gardens — and my *khansamah* was one of them, screaming filth about — ’ She paused. ‘There’s a small child transfixed on the iron railings of the bridge, and pieces of a woman lying on the canal path. And you think we’re exaggerating?’

‘My apologies, ma’am. No offence was intended, I assure you.’ There was a fresh fusillade of musket-shots from the flame-pitted gloom beyond the red ribbon of the canal. What in damnation was wrong? When he had left the drill-ground with his fifty men, there had been four or five hundred others, accoutred and ready to march. The suggestion that they had not moved was simply unbelievable — and yet he had heard no sustained, regular volleys to

indicate troops under command moving through the streets and bazaars — and there had certainly been no artillery fire. A few rounds of canister might have cleared the sepoy lines in seconds. Blast it, something was wrong.

‘My orders were to secure the Treasury,’ Austin said. ‘Well, we’ve secured the Treasury. Fifty men aren’t enough, and ten rounds each will last about four minutes — according to the musketry manual. But we’ll stay.’ He shrugged. ‘I don’t really see that there’s much choice.’

Joseph Dando sat on the roof, thinking. This was a bleedin’ fine mess, and no mistake. He’d told Ensign Napier, hadn’t he? All right, Dando, he said. You’ve done the right thing. I’ll see to it, he says. Like buggery he had. Joseph might just as well have kept his mouth shut. He might have known that no officer attached importance to anything a man said. And if Joseph hadn’t gone to the guard-room he wouldn’t have walked into Colonel Finnis. Still, he’d just heard the civilian say that Colonel Finnis was dead. He wouldn’t wish that on anyone, but it did remove a few problems. This morning, he had been contemplating the next few years breaking stones on the Grand Trunk Road, chained to a line of coolies. Now, look what had bleedin’ happened.

Come to think of it, if it wasn’t for Colonel Finnis and his soddin’ fourteen sovereigns, he — Joseph — would never have left Croydon and never have enlisted in the 60th. Well — that wasn’t altogether right. There’d been Hannah Minting.

*

The Croydon ladies had departed, twittering, and the Colonel, who vehemently avoided afternoon tea, was still absent with Gupta Sen. Mrs. Finnis had a headache, and the cook and maid were downstairs. Joseph, with suddenly no task to occupy him, wandered aimlessly into the house and found himself confronted by Hannah Minting.

'Gawd,' she said. 'Oo are you?'

'Joseph. Joseph Dando.' He had heard the cook and the maid discussing her in the kitchen, but she hardly coincided with the mental vision that the conversation had generated. She wasn't 'flaunting her nakedness' — or, so far as he could see, flaunting anything except a small raisin cake that she immediately dispatched and then licked her fingers.

'Ah, yes,' she chuckled. 'Second footman, ostler, or gardener — depending on 'oo they're trying to himpress.' She glanced at the cold teapot and sighed. 'Where does the ol' man keep 'is booze?'

He hesitated. 'In the sideboard.'

Hannah cocked her head for a moment, listening, then went to the sideboard and opened it. 'Brandy, whisky, port, sherry.' She sniffed. 'No gin. Still — ' She poured herself a brandy and drank it as easily as water. 'Gawd — that's better.' Next, she took a similar measure from the whisky bottle, glancing up at him impishly. 'Port or sherry, Joey? Better not make too big an 'ole in the brandy an' whisky. Never be greedy, I always say — an' you don't git rumbled.'

Joseph shook his head. He still retained distinct memories of Godfrey's Cordial. Hannah shrugged, pouring a generous port. 'I knew a butler once,' she confided, 'that'ad a taste for 'is ol' man's wines. Every time he went

into the cellar, he'd 'ave a bottle o' vintage — then open 'is trousers, fill the bottle, an' put it back on the bottom rack.' She laughed. 'Gawd — ! I'd like to see their bleedin' faces when m'Lord poured the '27 Moselle!'

Joseph grinned, and she wagged a finger. 'Ah, so yer can smile, eh? That's more than them vinegar-guts downstairs can do.' She wrinkled her nose at the dryness of the sherry. 'How old are yer, Joey?'

'Nearly sixteen.'

'Nearly sixteen?' She closed her eyes. 'When I was nearly sixteen — ' The

mixture of alcohol was beginning to have some effect, and she swayed slightly. Joseph listened for the sound of Gupta Sen's chaise. It had turned five o'clock, and the Colonel must soon be returning to change clothes for his evening with the 5th Dragoons. 'I think — ' he remonstrated.

'You think I'm gettin' oiled. Well, I ain't. It's just that I ain't 'ad a drop past my lips for a week. I ain't even talked to nobody for a week — nobody *worth* talkin' to, that is. This 'ouse is like a bleedin' convent.' She drained the last dregs of sherry from her glass. 'I'll tell yer what, Joey. You come upstairs, an' we'll talk.'

Joseph flushed. 'If the Colonel — '

It was the Colonel. Joseph heard the noise of iron-bound wheels on gravel, the chop of hooves. He pushed the bottles into the sideboard and closed it hurriedly. 'Yer 'll 'ave to go, quick,' he urged. 'If the Colonel finds you 'ere, there'll be all 'ell let loose.' He, at least, had no business in the drawing room.

'Never mind about 'im. You come upstairs, Joey boy, an' we'll talk.'

He could hear the Colonel's irate voice. There was no time. He nodded.

Since leaving the custody of the Society for the Relief of Destitute Young Persons, Joseph had achieved a vague understanding of the unmentionable business of lying on a bed with a woman, but the few women with whom he had been acquainted — Mrs. Luker, Mrs. Turpin, Mrs. Finnis, the cook, and even the upstairs maid — had not inspired in him an enthusiasm for a more intimate relationship with any member of the sex they represented. He had, of course, seen other women — younger women who were more interestingly curved, more graceful of movement, and thus, he conceded, of greater desirability — but he could only guess what secrets were hidden under the voluminous draperies of women's clothing, and he had never envisaged being invited upstairs. Hannah Minting, he observed as she preceded him, was one

of the more interestingly curved ones, but he was not persuaded that this was the occasion, or she the instrument, for enlarging his education.

The bedroom was pleasantly furnished but untidy. The bed was dishevelled, there were several items of clothing strewn on the floor, and on the dressing table was a jumble of toiletry articles, spilt powder, ribbons, and hairpins. Hannah waved an apologetic hand. 'The maid don't do fer me — thinks she might catch somethin'.' She surveyed herself in the mirror, frowning, and kneading her corseted waistline. 'Christ, if I don't git these stays orf, they'll cut me in 'arf.' She began loosening her bodice.

Joseph was alarmed. More than anything else, he wanted to go, but he could hear threatening rumbles from below, and if he left the bedroom now, he might meet the Colonel on the stairs. Hannah had pushed her bodice over her hips and was plucking at the fastenings of her corsets.

'I ain't done it much before,' he confessed. He'd never done it at all, but he did not wish to appear completely uninitiated.

'Ain't done what?' She was still absorbed in her fastenings. Then she looked up, meeting his gaze through the mirror. 'Ain't done what?'

Joseph shrugged.

Hannah remained silent for several seconds, then, 'Gawd Almighty,' she said, very softly. She drew a deep breath, and, ruefully amused, shook her head. 'I 'adn't thought of it — not fer a second.' She paused again. 'When I said to talk, I meant *talk*. Do yer think — ' Resentment had crept into her voice. 'Do yer think I do nothin' but whorin' *all day long*?'

He was confused. 'No — '

'No, I don't,' she retorted. 'And you ain't done it? I should bleedin' think not! At sixteen? Yer'd drain yer strength. What bloody next? Women is fer *men*, not boys o' sixteen — !'

Her derision stung him. 'I ain't a boy,' he gritted, 'and if I'd wanted to, I

could've — ' he shrugged, ' — 'undreds of times. It's just that I ain't wanted to, much.'

She laughed, then sat on the edge of the bed. For a long time she gazed at the floor in silence, seemingly depressed, while Joseph stood awkwardly. Finally, she looked up with a wan smile. 'It's a bloody queer ol' world, ain't it, Joey?'

Joseph didn't know quite what she meant, but she was probably right. He agreed.

'You ain't done it,' she mused, 'but yer will, sooner or later — and after this, yer'll not be satisfied till yer do. It's the first time that matters most.' She was merely thinking aloud. 'It's the first time that yer'll remember, more'n all the others. That's why it's important — not with some dirty tart in a shillin' whore-shop.' But her expression was strangely maternal as she rose to her feet. 'Would yer like to, Joey? Now, I mean.'

Joseph struggled for nonchalance. 'If yer like.'

Hannah raised her eyebrows but said nothing. She pushed her skirt over her knees, discarded her stays, and then, in her shift, began to peel off her black worsted stockings. Joseph, his eyes fastened on her, swallowed at a drying throat. Slowly, she drew the pins from her hair, and it fell in a tumbled cascade to her waist. Then she looked at him, frowning. 'Gentlemen,' she suggested, 'at least take orf their boots.'

Chapter 4

Nobody knew quite what had happened, and many simply did not believe the wild, nonsensical news that was coming in with every few minutes. These sort of things just didn't happen in sun-baked, somnolent Meerut, b'God. Captain Muter sent a man for his sword-belt and pistol and boiled with uncertainty. It was only fortuitous that he had been on the drill-ground in the first place, and he wished fervently that he had gone straight to the church to join his wife. Was the church safe? Where, blast it, was the Colonel?

Portly little Colonel Jones arrived on the drill-ground at last, his pince-nez hung from his neck on a black cord. He walked with short, impatient steps, his head thrust forward and peering shortsightedly at the clustered officers who turned to face him. His cap hid his baldness, but not the white beard that fell to his chest. 'Adjutant? Ashburn-ham?' He blinked. 'You'll make your report, if you please.'

'It's mostly only hearsay, sir,' Ashburnham apologised, 'and in my opinion —'

'Godammit, man — !' Jones roared. 'Everything starts as hearsay, and I don't want *opinion*. I want a *report*.'

Lieutenant Ashburnham choked, and began again, with the little Colonel darting a quick glance at Captain Muter, then at the four lines of green-clad, sweating soldiers. Satisfied, he nodded.

'First — ammunition. No man will move a step until he has a hundred rounds in his pouch. Detach another fifty men to the magazine, at the double. If the guards object, shoot 'em. If the doors are barred, smash 'em in.' He paused for a second, then glared at Ashburnham. 'And I said *at the double*, man.'

He turned to Captain Muter. 'Immediately, the men have their cartridges, the remainder of "A" Company will form skirmishing line in advance of the main column, with rifles loaded and swords fixed. The column will advance on the native lines via Chapel Street and Circular Road, and form extended order on the race-course. All native troops bearing arms, or not under command, will be shot down.' He toyed with his pince-nez. 'My compliments to the senior officer available of the Carabineers and the Bengal Artillery. Inform them of my intentions and emphasise that I shall expect them to move in my support immediately with all possible strength.'

He wheeled again, on the first officer within his limited vision. 'The guardroom is to be maintained by the duty picquet, reinforced by all men in the hospital who can stand on their feet. If they can stand, they can shoot. The European lines are to be kept secure, and ready to receive civilians. The Surgeon is to accompany the column and report to the drill-ground fully prepared for field duty within five minutes, on pain of court-martial. The Assistant Surgeon will remain at the hospital.' The officer flung up a hand in salute and ran. Colonel Jones had the appearance of an elderly solicitor dressed in someone else's regimentals for a party joke, but few appearances were more deceptive. Strangers raised eyebrows on first seeing him, but not for long — and never when he began issuing orders.

Ashburnham's men were back as the Surgeon, with his weighty haversack and still fumbling with his buttons, arrived panting. The wooden ammunition boxes, with the new Enfield cartridges tied in bundles of five, were smashed open in seconds. The officers checked their six-shot Adams pistols, never before fired at human targets. It was claimed that, at short range, the .50 calibre bullet would stop a running man in his tracks or knock a standing one flat on his back. It was going to be interesting to verify the claim.

Another, red-coated officer was swinging heavily from his horse, and Jones

swore softly under his breath. The new arrival was Brigadier Archdale Wilson, commanding the Bengal Artillery — a John Company man, the station commander, and the Colonel's superior. Jones, at that moment, didn't want the complication of a superior officer. In particular, he didn't want Archdale Wilson.

'I was fired on,' Wilson gritted, 'by my own blasted lascars. It's a damn mutiny, Jones. As soon as General Hewitt gets here — '

'General Hewitt?' The Divisional Commander was a military absurdity, another John Company officer with fifty years of service. He was too fat and infirm to sit a horse and, outdoors, never descended from his carriage. The idea of allowing the old dotard to supervise any military operation more complex than passing the port at dinner might be laughable under different circumstances. Wilson was bad enough. Hewitt, b'God, was a disaster.

'With respect, sir,' Colonel Jones said evenly, 'there's been a deal of time wasted already. The Treasury has been secured, and I've taken the magazine. My battalion is ready to march. If we move quickly, we can confine the majority of the mutineers to the vicinity of their lines — before they get too scattered — '

'Aha!' Wilson wagged a finger. 'I admire your enthusiasm, Colonel, but there are such things as regulations.' It was an opportunity to put a Queen's officer firmly in his place. If Jones thought he was going to be the hero of the day, to create another opportunity for the critics to jeer at the ineptitude of East India Company administration, then he was mistaken.

'Regulations? Dammit, Sir — if our information is correct, there are women and children being murdered out there.'

There was a mad clatter of hooves as a horse halted, rearing, and a young Carabineer cornet vaulted dramatically from his saddle, his face tense with youthful determination. He glanced uncertainly at Wilson, then at Jones.

‘Colonel Custance’s compliments, sir. The Carabineers are mounted and ready, and he would be honoured to place himself under your orders.’ He waited expectantly.

‘Very dashing, young man,’ Brigadier Wilson said dryly, ‘I’m sure you were a great success with the ladies in Hyde Park. However, in your haste you seem to have forgotten that you are addressing two officers of field rank who are entitled to a salute. In due course, I shall take up the matter of the Carabineers’ discipline with Colonel Custance. In the meantime, you may inform him that he is to remain where he is until orders are received from General Hewitt.’ He paused. ‘And there is no need to ride back like a mad moujik.’

‘Sir,’ Colonel Jones protested. ‘The Carabineers are a mile distant. If you would at least order them to join us, it would save time later — ’

‘Regulations, Colonel. You know as well as I do that I am not permitted to issue orders if the Divisional Commander is present.’

‘If he’s *present*! He’s not present. God knows where he is. Trying to get his fat arse into a pair of pantaloons — ’

‘That will do, Colonel,’ Wilson snapped. ‘General Hewitt is in Meerut, and that means he’s present.’ He glanced over his shoulder. ‘And if that doesn’t satisfy you, you’ll observe that he is entering your drill-ground at this moment.’

‘In a bloody carriage,’ Jones spat.

*

For an hour, the mob had been gathering about the Treasury building and was becoming increasingly bolder as the riflemen, crouched on the roof and behind the *sangar*, made no reply to the ragged deluge of musket shots that kicked up the dust and tore splinters from the stonework. It was night, but there was enough light from the burning buildings beyond the canal to glitter

on fifty sword-bayonets — more than sufficient to discourage even the most belligerent among the prowling sepoy. Still, the greencoat soldiers weren't firing back, and what were fifty against so many? There were silver rupees in the Treasury, piled from floor to ceiling, lakhs and lakhs of rupees, enough to make every sepoy a rich man for life. The sepoy and the jackal-like *budmashes* crept closer.

They were committed now; there could be no turning back the clock. Many of the sepoy had been taken by surprise by the sudden turn of events. There had been mutiny whispered, but not planned for today. There had been talk for weeks, with small conspiring groups meeting in odd places and weaving schemes that others did not believe would ever materialise. The white soldiers in India, it was said, were the only ones the British had left. All the others had been killed in the great Crimean War. Kill these, too, and there would be nothing. It would be easy. On 24 May, all over India, there would be parades to mark the *Buna Ranee's* birthday, during which both British and Indian troops would fire a musketry salute with blank cartridges. At least, the British would fire blanks and, having emptied their rifles, would receive a close-range volley of ball from the sepoy. But that was two weeks hence — if it ever happened at all. Today, the *sowars* of the 3rd had taken matters into their own hands, pouncing on the fact that the greencoats would be in their church, unarmed. They hadn't been. They were still very much alive.

But there could be no turning back now. It was done. Colonel Finnis and seven other English officers were already dead — and countless women and children. It was done. There was nothing now but to finish it.

There was good reason for finishing it. The Honourable East India Company had been in India too long, squeezing every anna from a population living under conditions of incredible poverty. Everything was taxed — the food a man ate, the salt he seasoned it with, the land he tilled, the crops he

raised, the road he walked on. The *goojars* extorted money, the police had to be bribed — and a complaint to a contemptuous officialdom necessitated a tax duty of one shilling, when a man's entire income was only seven or eight a year.

The Bengal Army, too, had cause for complaint. There had been a number of petty economies by the Company, depriving the sepoy of many of his hitherto advantages over the ordinary *ryot*. Further, the sepoys had always been content in the knowledge that he would never be taken overseas, which would result in an injury to his caste. But were not there already three regiments serving in Burma? Where would they be sent next? And the cartridges — greased with pork and cow fat. All these things were planned to pollute the religious purity of Hindus and Muslims alike so that all would be compelled to become Christians. It was enough. True, there were trouble-makers in the native lines, ready to exploit the most trivial discomfort, magnify the smallest slight, but it was time to cry enough. In any case, it was too late now. It was done.

The English soldiers were not invincible. They had been completely destroyed in Crimea, humiliated in Afghanistan, and had made hard work of the campaign against the Sikhs — and needed Indian troops to help them. They did not have the proud fighting history of the men of India — of the Rajputs, the Mahrattas and Punjabis. The English could be beaten. *Feringhee! Ko! Maro, maro!*

*

‘They're getting soddin' close,’ Edwin Wilson observed. Tom Brownlow, unarmed, sat with his back to the low parapet. ‘Dando,’ he enquired, ‘if yer all gits killed, an’ I don’t, can I ‘ave yer new razor?’

Joseph snorted. ‘Git fester’d. If we all gits killed, what makes you think you won’t be?’

‘I’m under arrest. Yer supposed ter *prertect* me to the last man, so’s I can be delivered ter justice. It’s my right as a loyal subject of ‘er Majesty Queen Victoria. It’s orl written down somewhere — ’

‘Balls,’ Joseph said.

Sergeant Waller shouted from below. ‘Stow yer gab up there, or there’ll be a few more o’ the Queen’s loyal subjects on a bleedin’ charge tomorrer.’

Lieutenant Austin drew his pistol. ‘You can give Brownlow back his rifle, Sergeant. The Pandies have decided to come.’

The sepoys had discarded their shiny black *shakos* in favour of white cloth wrapped turban-like around their heads. These, with their white cross-belts and trousers, made their owners excellent targets. ‘Pick yer man careful,’ Sergeant Waller ordered. ‘Aim low, an’ take yer time.’ The advice was unnecessary for most of the riflemen had fought at Mooltan and Goojerat; but there were some who had not. Joseph brought his foresight to bear on a man running wide on the flank to avoid notice. No yer don’t, yer bastard, Joseph decided. In five seconds from now yer’ll be lying flat as a board wi’ a gutful o’ lead, cow fat an’ all.

‘Ready,’ Austin cautioned, then, ‘Fire!’

There was a thundering crash that left every man’s ears singing and deafened. A blanket of powder smoke rolled over the riflemen, and they scrambled to their feet. There was no time to reload. It was cold steel now, and nothing else. There were no rules in bayonet fighting, no manual as there was with musketry. There was nothing, it was considered, to teach. A man just slashed and thrust, and devil take the hindmost.

The smoke thinned, and they could see the canal again, and the burning bungalows on its far side, but the charging sepoys had gone. They had simply disappeared — except that the road that fronted the Treasury and the rising slope of the Public Gardens were strewn with oddly distorted mounds of

tangled scarlet and white, some which crawled, moaning, and others that remained motionless. Beyond the crumpled shapes, hundreds of men were flying, scattering, and vanishing into the shadows. In seconds, there were none in sight.

‘Reload,’ Lieutenant Austin shouted. ‘They’ll be back.’

*

General Hewitt was doubtful about the use of artillery. The guns, he suggested, might start fires among the bungalows, which were the property of the East India Company. Even Brigadier Wilson supported Colonel Jones’ vehement protest that since half of Meerut was in flames already, the fate of a few more bungalows was hardly a matter for concern. With the old soldier sitting in his carriage trying hopelessly to cope with a situation that he was incapable of even interpreting, Archdale Wilson was becoming uncomfortably aware that his earlier desire to embarrass a Queen’s officer had misfired. Priceless time was being wasted. Wilson knew it, Jones knew it, and a lot of other officers knew it. When the affair was over there were going to be some awkward questions to find answers for. Worse, he — Wilson — had been given a warning last night by a young officer of the 3rd Native Cavalry, and he had ridiculed it. That might come out too. Jones, blast it, had been right. They ought to have moved immediately on the sepoy lines, surrounded them, and torn them to shreds with grape. Now it could be too late, and this drivelling old fool in the carriage would still be debating possibilities at dawn if his decisions weren’t made for him.

Colonel Jones needed no urging to order an advance. General Hewitt’s carriage was left to follow at leisure as the Rifles, with skirmishers trotting ahead, tramped into Chapel Street. Emerging on to the *maidan*, the riflemen wheeled, flanked on their left by the Carabineers, and on their right by a battery of horse artillery. Only now, with the full western perimeter of Meerut

exposed to them, did they know how far the situation had deteriorated, and Archdale Wilson's throat was dry. This, for certain, meant a court-martial. For more than a mile the entire length of Meerut was afire, pouring sparks into the black sky and with the crackle and roar of the flames drowning all other noises. There were figures moving in the red glare — sepoys, mounted sowars with frantic horses, and the inevitable *budmashes*, loot-seeking, crouching from shadow to shadow, but their numbers did not add up to three regiments.

Captain Muter turned to the Brigadier. 'Are we to shoot to kill, sir?'

Archdale Wilson nodded, pale. It was too late — too blasted late. Three mutinous regiments had gone, spreading like poison throughout Meerut, across the Doab, up the Grand Trunk Road. Tonight three battalions, tomorrow six, and in a week the entire Bengal Army.

'Shoot them like dogs,' he gritted.

*

She held his hot face against her breast until his racing heart quietened. 'Yer ain't a boy, did yer say, Joey?' She laughed softly. 'Christ, yer not. I've known Irish hussars who couldn't do better. There's only one thing, Joey — ' She eased herself to a sitting position and massaged an arm. 'Women ain't bleedin' plough 'orses. It's all right wi' women like me. 'Arf the time we 'ave to wrestle wi' bears, but if yer ever 'ave a woman of yer own — ' She shrugged.

'My own?' It was a possibility he had never remotely considered. Then he realised, guiltily, that he shouldn't be here. He raised himself. 'Yer'd best get dressed. Yer'll get cold.'

'Gawd, no.' She laughed again. 'When some hulkin' Blue Marine's got yer agin a wall in the sheetin' rain in November, yer feet in water, yer shift sodden wet an' pulled to yer waist — that's when yer feel bleedin' cold. And

when yer tramps from Plymouth to Aldershot, follerin' the drum, wi' no coat, an' the wind cuttin' like a knife, and nothin' in yer belly since yesterday — that's cold, Joey.'

'There's no need for it,' Joseph suggested. 'Not now.'

From the window the linnet emitted a dismal chirp, and Hannah rose to push a fragment of bread through the wicker bars of the cage. The linnet ignored it. 'E's gettin' choosy,' Hannah observed, then added, 'A sailor gave 'im to me, instead o' money — the cheatin' bastard.' She returned to Joseph. 'No need, did yer say? I've 'eard that before, Joey. There ain't no need fer a woman to debase 'erself, to indulge in the sinful lusts o' the flesh. Put yer trust in the infinite mercy o' Lord Jesus.' She snorted. 'If yer trust in Lord Jesus to pay the rent, an' buy shoes to yer feet, or provide yer wi' stew an' dumplin's — then yer'll wait a bleedin' long time.'

Joseph was not qualified to comment on the inadequacy of Lord Jesus. 'But yer all right now,' he insisted. 'It's all right 'ere.'

'It's the soddin' Garden of Eden,' she retorted, 'if yer *likes* the Garden of Eden, but I don't. As soon as I feel like it, I'm orf.'

Joseph made a decision. 'If yer go, I'll come with yer.'

Hannah paused in the pinning of her hair and stared at him. 'Come with me?' She spluttered. 'Five minutes o' friggin' and yer think yer 've got sole rights! Gawd — the last thing I want is a boy lover follerin' me around.'

'I can work.'

She shook her head. 'Not the way I shift about, Joey. Aldershot, Portsmouth, Plymouth, Bristol — ' She sniffed. 'If yer 'ad plenty o' money — '

Joseph's wages were four pounds a year, paid in weekly installments of eighteen pence. Hannah, with several hairpins between her teeth, studied him thoughtfully. 'If there was a bit o' money,' she repeated, musingly, 'the

Colonel's money — ?'

He gazed back at her. 'Christ,' he said, 'I don't know.'

Hannah explained. 'There was a sergeant once, who told me that a Colonel's commission costs thousands o' pounds, an' most of 'em have money besides their pay. Now, if yer 'appened to come across a few dozen sovereigns, Joey — ' She winked.

'He gets 'is money from Gurney's Bank,' Joseph nodded doubtfully. 'Gupta Sen drives 'im there every month. Then he puts it in the bureau in the library, locks it, an' keeps the key 'imself.'

'Well, then,' Hannah resumed, 'yer don't need a key to open a piddlin' little bureau, do yer?'

It was a disturbing thought. 'I don't know,' he repeated. Each week he waited for his eighteen pence while the Colonel unlocked the bureau, then opened the little black cash box that jingled interestingly. Joseph had no particular qualms about stealing, but sovereigns were different. He'd never even held a sovereign in his hand.

'The Colonel would 'ave the Peelers after us,' he said.

'In Croydon,' she nodded. 'The Colonel an' his kind don't credit people like us wi' intelligence. He'll expect us to go on a boozin' spree, an' by the time he finds we've got more bleedin' sense, we'll be in Chatham.'

'Chatham?'

'There's naval *and* military at Chatham — same as Portsmouth. Double prospects, see? An' it's nicely out o' the way. They'll never chase as far as Chatham.' She laughed.

'If I did — ' he said slowly, ' — if I did, I wouldn't want yer to go back to whorin'.'

She shot him a quick sideways glance. 'Ah — course not, Joey, but it's best to be prepared, I always say. It all depends on 'ow much yer gets, see. With

an ‘undred pounds, say — ’

*

In Meerut, there had been a night of indecision, frustration, suspense and repeated alarms. The horse artillery had fired three rounds of canister at the fleeing remnants of the mutineers, and then the Rifles, with swords fixed, had swept through the Sudder Bazaar, retrieving the bodies of murdered Europeans from the filth-choked gutters. Brigadier Wilson was uneasy at the possibility of the mutineers swarming around his flank to attack the Rifles’ lines, the sanctuary of hundreds of white civilians and defended only by the duty picquet and a few invalids. He ordered a cessation of action and an immediate return to the cantonments, dreading the thought of another disaster to add to the first.

The force bivouacked in the Mall with rifles at hand, the artillery horses in their traces, and a chain of sentries flung around the lines. The flames of Meerut reddened the sky for the remainder of the night, dying to smoking embers just before first light, but long before dawn, it had become plain that the bulk of the three regiments of mutinous sepoys had left the town. There was only one direction for them to go — southwestward, forty miles, to Delhi. And Delhi posed other problems, too numerous and complex to contemplate for the moment. Captain Charles Rosser of the Carabineers pleaded for two squadrons and a few guns with which to dash ahead of the sepoys and bar their road, but Wilson declined the offer, apprehensive of making a false move. He did not wish to split his force without further intelligence. The Carabineers, moreover, were too inexperienced and ill-mounted to be thrown against hardened native troops. The ride alone, across a simmering Doab, would empty half the Carabineers’ saddles before Delhi was even sighted. No, let dawn come first, and they would take stock.

The fifty weary, powder-blackened men at the Treasury watched the dawn

rise on a scene of utter desolation, of scorched, gutted buildings and charred rafters, smashed furniture, a dead bullock in the shafts of a *tonga*, a carriage with a broken wheel and the ponies gone, trailing telegraph wires and, for a hundred yards around the Treasury, the scattered, contorted corpses already attracting flies. Joseph Dando probed cracked lips with the tip of his tongue. ‘Christ,’ he muttered, ‘I ‘ope they don’t take it out o’ the bleedin’ stoppages.’

They’d had a harrowing night, and, now that it was past, they were feeling pleased with life, nervously joking and threatening blood-curdling retribution to any further sepoy attacks. In truth, it was unlikely that they could have sustained another attack. A few of them had a single cartridge remaining, most of them none. They had fought off assault after assault, their ammunition dwindling, round by precious round. Then, during a lull, a sortie party of ten men and a sergeant had rushed a nearby bungalow, trapping a dozen looters and killing them all with berserk relish. They had returned with grim faces. There were, they said, other bodies in the bungalow — two white women, a child, and a pet dog. Dawn had brought silence, and the desolation.

When Captain Muter relieved them, they drank their first water since the previous day, crammed bread into their mouths, and filled their cartridge pouches. They were exhausted, but none of them thought of sleep. Meerut had to be made safe, and there were scores to settle.

The Sudder Bazaar and the surrounding streets were weirdly deserted and hushed. Joseph and Tom Brownlow moved cautiously, eyes wary, with rifles loaded and ready.

Their iron-shod feet crunched among shattered pottery and glassware flung from every house, and they whirled, tense, at the creak of a swinging door, a flapping curtain, the trickle of water from a smashed cistern. The first bodies they stumbled upon were those of two riflemen of their own company, so viciously mutilated that they could be recognised only with difficulty. Tom

Brownlow knelt.

‘Soddin’ ‘ell. It’s Johnnie Kinnear an’ Bill Husband. The poor bastards.’ The previous afternoon the two men had left the cantonments on a week’s furlough, with an advance of pay and a bullock cart. They had covered less than a thousand yards, and then this. Tom Brownlow rose to his feet. ‘The poor bastards. I’ll bet they wished they ‘adn’t joined.’

Only yards away, in a ditch lay the corpse of Mrs. Chambers — or, more accurately, the fragments of her corpse. Her pregnant torso had been slashed open from her groin to her breasts, her unborn infant torn from her and stamped into the ground. Dismembered limbs were strewn in the blood-drenched dust, blackening in the sun, and swarming with white ants. There was a stench of putrefying flesh.

‘Bleedin’ Christ alive! D’ yer see — ?’ Joseph snarled. ‘What did she ever do ter anyone — *anyone* — ter ‘ave this done to ‘er?’ Mrs. Chambers was an officer’s lady, and she might have considered men like Joseph Dando to be less than dirt, but she had never harmed him. She’d been a pretty, vivacious lady, with a soft, English complexion and frothy lace petticoats — and now she was in the ditch, her face bloated and blood-smeared, her teeth-clawed lips drawn back in a silent scream. ‘What did she bleedin’ do?’

They found another woman in the same ditch — naked but teeming with flies fastened to legs and buttocks that had been flayed to raw meat by a savage flogging. The pit of her belly was a charred, lacerated horror. In a nearby bungalow, the blackened shapes of two children and yet another woman lay among the burned wreckage of a bedroom. An elderly Indian woman crouched on the verandah, on all fours, her skull split.

‘I don’t know — ’ Tom Brownlow whispered. ‘I don’t know, Dando boy. I don’t know — ’

Neither Dando nor Brownlow were squeamish men, and sympathy was not

an emotion that came easily to them. A man wasn't a soldier until he had achieved his first fifty lashes over a gun-wheel, which reduced his back to a crimson jelly, and bone-crushing battles with boot and belt-buckle did not prevent him from mustering next morning. A man mangled by a runaway gun-limber, or blinded by an exploding gun-breech, elicited little sympathy. He was merely a fool for being careless. Women and children, however, were different. They hadn't been paid to march, fight and kill — or be killed. They were harmless people. For the first time in their lives, Dando and Brownlow discovered that, with throats choked with horror, they could no longer trust themselves to speak. What inhuman, sadistic bastards had done this?

There was more. Close to the gaol, now empty of prisoners, an unsuccessful attempt had been made to burn a brick-built bungalow. Inside, there was evidence that an evening gathering of a dozen men and women had been surrounded, unsuspecting, but the men of the house had fought savagely, retreating, as their number diminished, from room to room, until the last fell in the bathroom seconds before the women were hacked down with sabres. Doors and window-frames were torn from their fittings, furniture smashed to matchwood, carpets shredded, and among the debris the bodies lay, mouths twisted, hands clawing to find a mutineer's throat before a final sword-thrust.

Similar scenes were being uncovered in a dozen different localities, the bodies of men mutilated beyond recognition, women stripped, bestially defiled, often half burned, the children with smashed limbs, hung from spikes or flung into ditches like broken blood-smirched dolls. Most were the families of officers and Company officials whose residences had been, fashionably, outside the European lines, south of the Mall. Flowering shrubs were trampled, lawns torn and scattered with pitiful oddments — women's clothing, children's toys, books and papers — with here and there a swarming cloud of black flies to indicate another corpse, human or animal.

All day, in furnace heat, the artillery limbers jolted along Hill Street and Road Hill, hauling their grisly loads to the cemetery, where the Reverend Rotton waited. They had to be buried quickly, these corpses, before they swelled with putrescence, stinking.

At the junction of Brook Street and Bank Street, Joseph Dando and Tom Brownlow were building a gallows. It was a handsome construction, to which they had given considerable thought, and it could, if necessary, hang four men simultaneously. They intended that it should, repeatedly. A long platform swivelled between two upright posts and was maintained in a horizontal position by loose stakes. It was simple and very quick. One just kicked the stakes away, and that was that. Nobody had told them to build the gallows. On the other hand, nobody had the slightest wish to discourage them. They were going to hang every brown-skinned bastard in Meerut.

‘I went to London in ‘forty-nine,’ Tom Brownlow said, ‘an’ saw Mrs. Manning ‘anged in Horsemonger Lane for murderin’ ‘er husband — so I know orl about it.’ He eyed the waiting nooses. ‘Except the prayers. I don’t know the proper prayers fer ‘anging. Yer don’t suppose the Reverend Rotton’ll oblige once we git started, do yer?’

‘We don’t want no bleedin’ prayers,’ decided Joseph. ‘They ain’t Christians. We’ll just need plenty o’ soddin’ rope.’

*

It would be several weeks before the first news of the mutiny could reach London by the quickest route — ship to Suez, overland to Alexandria, ship again to Marseilles, and thence through Calais and Dover. India was remote, in terms other than just distance. It was difficult to envisage a land mass of more than a million square miles or to appreciate that Karachi was as far from Calcutta as London was from Athens. India was big, but far, far away, and few English people would ever see it. In May of 1857, these English people

were more concerned with affairs nearer home.

It was pleasant in London in May. The evenings were lighter, with Hyde Park and St. James's newly green, grazed by sheep and horses, and the ladies were emerging in daring spring bonnets. The Queen and the Prince Consort were at Windsor while elsewhere the gentry were planning their departures to country residences, or for deerstalking in Scotland, the waters of Bath, Harrogate, or the headier delights of Paris and Rome. It was fashionable to stroll the river bank to the Cremorne Gardens in Chelsea, or northward to Lord's cricket ground in St. John's Wood, where the Gentlemen of Surrey were playing an eleven from Essex. In the Athenaeum and the Garrick, gentlemen talked of Palmerston's foreign policy, or of the gathering storm clouds about the head of James Buchanan, the new President of the United States. In the beer-houses there was speculation on the possibility of Tom Sayers fighting John C. Heenan for the championship of the world.

*

By evening, a number of apprehensive natives had trickled back to Meerut — *buniahs*, *nautch*-girls, and house-servants who had fled their posts at the first threat of marauding *budmashes*. If they had expected amiability from the waiting British, or even civility, they were disappointed. The riflemen were seeking weapons, bloodstained clothing, or marks of struggle. They intended to find them, and they did. It was futile to protest that an ox-goad was not a weapon, that a smear of blood came from a slaughtered sheep, or that scratches were innocently sustained. There was a gallows waiting, and it could hang men in fours — Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Sudras, Vaisayas and Untouchables, side by side. A handful of sepoy who claimed no part in the mutiny and had, they swore, escaped the company of their fellows at the first opportunity, were under armed guard, awaiting a decision on their fate. They were unlikely to be kept in suspense very long. There was no time for the

niceties of a trial. In hours, for certain, the British must march, but, before they did, Meerut was going to know the meaning of reprisal.

There were informers. The Sudder butchers had been the ferocious ones, they whispered, then the masons, the carpenters, and the bakers. There was a certain butcher in Cattle Row —

A Carabineer officer emerged from the Sudder Bazaar, in one hand a pistol and in the other a trailing rope that unceremoniously hauled a reeling native. ‘This one,’ he said quietly, ‘I wanted to tear to pieces personally, with just my hands, but I’ll forego that luxury, b’God, if you’ll leave his carcass hanging until his flesh rots from his bones.’ He gave the rope a vicious wrench to fling his prisoner headlong to the dust. ‘This is the animal who used a knife on Mrs. Chambers.’

A rifle butt between the shoulders brought the butcher to his knees, and a dozen hands reached for him. He jerked, spitting, heaving, but in seconds he was on the platform with a noose around his neck. He glared at his executioners with red eyes. ‘*Feringhee* pigs! The white whore died, like all the white pigs will die — in Delhi, Lucknow and Cawn-pore and Feroz-pore — ’ There was saliva on his beard. ‘The knives are sharp, *Feringhees*, and your time is finished.’

‘That’s enough o’ that bleedin’ cock,’ Joseph said. He lifted his foot to kick away the stake supporting the gallows platform, but a loud voice froze him. ‘Halt, there! Rifleman! Halt — or there’s fifty lashes to ye’ back before ye’re an hour older.’

It was Colonel John Jones, in full green regimentals despite the searing heat, crossbelt, sword-belt and sword. He stood with his pince-nez raised as he peered first at the gallows and then at the file of natives crouched under the rifles of their unsympathetic captors. ‘I gave no orders for a gallows. It’s a damn pretty pass when English soldiers take the law into their own hands

— and I'll not have it in my battalion, d'ye hear? I'll give the orders in the 60th. You there — ' he pointed to Joseph. 'Ye're "A" Company men, aren't ye? Captain Muter's? Did he order this?'

'Nobody ordered it, sir,' Joseph said. 'It was our own idea — me an' my rear-rank man — '

The Colonel nodded. 'And, b'God, if ye'd hanged a single native without permission — ' he wagged his pince-nez at them, ' — just one native — I'd have ye shot.'

'This bastard, sir,' Joseph indicated the man on the gallows. 'This was the bastard what carved up Mrs. Chambers.'

Colonel Jones puffed out his cheeks. 'Dammit, ye're not only hanging people without trial, ye're blasted impertinent.' His eyes rose to the Indian and then back to Joseph. 'For the impertinence, ye can have two days C.B.' He paused. 'Now get on with the damn hanging.'

Joseph kicked. There was a crash and, above them, the Indian fell into space, choking and contorting against the hot sky. Joseph eyed him dispassionately for several seconds, then spat. 'If I was you, mate, I'd complain ter Vishnu about it.' He turned. 'Oo's next fer bleedin' transmigrashun?'

*

A messenger had reached Delhi. A loyal *sowar* had lashed his horse across the arid, shimmering Doab and, near to exhaustion, clattered over the bridge of boats that spanned the Jumna. It was late night, and he rode for Ludlow Castle, the house of the Commissioner, Mr. Simon Fraser — the representative of British civil authority. When the soft-footed bearer brought the letter to his master, the Commissioner was asleep in a chair following a heavy dinner. The bearer hesitated, but the dusty *sowar* had been insistent. Awakened and petulant, the Commissioner threw the letter aside, unopened.

It was a damned impertinence, whoever it was, to expect him to read correspondence after dinner.

The next morning, a flustered magistrate pushed his way past the *chowkidar* to Fraser's breakfast table. The road from Meerut, he panted, was swarming with armed sepoy. The 3rd Native Cavalry were already crossing the bridge, and the small garrison of the Delhi magazine had barricaded itself for defence. Aghast, Fraser searched frantically for the letter he had received the previous night, tore it open, and then choked. He shouted for his carriage. For God's sake, there might just be time. He reached the Calcutta Gate at full gallop, swearing at his syce, but he was too late. The mutinous *sowars* were already in the city, and Europeans were being hewn down in a mad bloodhunt.

Mr. Fraser was never able to make his excuses before a court of enquiry. He was dead within the hour.

*

The causes of the mutiny had been many and complex, accumulating slowly for a century. The powder keg and fuse were already waiting when the incident involving the greased cartridges provided the spark. If it had not been the cartridges, it would almost certainly have been something else.

At least two men had an opportunity, however fleeting, to tear out the burning fuse before the powder keg burst irrevocably. One was the vacillating Station Commander at Meerut, the other the complacent Commissioner in Delhi. With immediate, firm action, each might have localised the revolt and considerably reduced the horror that was to follow. But now, it was too late, and within days the Ganges Valley would be aflame with murder, arson, and pillage — Ferozepore, Lucknow, Cawnpore, Ali-gargh, Itawali, Bulandshahr, Mainpuri, Muttra, Shahjahan-pur, Bareilly, Jhansi — one by one, with sickening rapidity, the native regiments were

turning on their officers, massacring all Europeans until in the entire north-west provinces only two islands of British survival remained — Meerut and Agra — and neither knew for how long their lines of communication with Calcutta would remain unsevered.

And in Calcutta, there was the stench of disaster. Each agonising hour brought further news of the all-devouring mutiny, from Budaon, Moradabad, Nasirabad, Nimach, and even Allahabad. A decision could scarcely be taken before a new event made nonsense of it. There was no time now for *chota hazri*, for *tiffin*, or afternoon sleep beneath the *punkah* until four. Something was happening, something of which they had seen warnings for years, and those warnings, during the past few weeks, had been shouted at them. The sun was setting on the Honourable East India Company, not with the peace of evening but with a catastrophic explosion.

The weakness of the British in India was now being ludicrously revealed. In the entire sub-continent, there were stationed, on paper, twenty-nine battalions, but of these, three were in Persia, three in Burma, twelve in the Punjab, and one with a wing absent in Aden. Within the great sweep of northern India between Calcutta and Peshawur — a distance of thirteen hundred miles — there was only a single battalion of British troops at Dinapore, none at Benares, none at Mirzapore or Allahabad. There was an infantry depot and some artillery reserves at Cawnpore and a weak battalion at Agra. Delhi was bereft of troops except for a handful of artillerymen to guard the arsenal. Neither Fyzabad nor Bareilly had British garrisons, and Lucknow had one under-strength battalion. Only at Meerut, north-east of Delhi, was there a sizeable concentration — the 60th Rifles, the raw Carabineers, and two batteries and a company of artillery. If the Meerut troops were overwhelmed, the whole of northern India was lost.

Something must be done, and done quickly — but what? Months would

pass before reinforcements could be expected from England, even by the shorter overland route. Hasty telegrams were despatched to Persia and Burma, recalling the forces retained there and — a welcome piece of luck — some troops on voyage for China were intercepted. Still, many officers of native regiments that, as yet, had not mutinied were scornful of any suggestion that *their* men were unreliable. Other regiments *might* rebel, but not *their* regiments. It was to prove a fatally misplaced confidence.

Even for the British troops, means of mobilisation were completely lacking. There was no transport service, and commissariat and medical facilities were rudimentary and inadequate. There were no stretchers for the sick and wounded, and the *gomashtras* — the native contractors normally utilised for vehicles and supplies — had either disappeared or were plainly reluctant to cooperate. Through the chaos, incompetence, and helplessness, however, one fact had emerged and remained undisputed. Delhi was the linchpin, materially and psychologically. Delhi was the rallying point, the bastion of northern India. Delhi before anything else must be retaken.

The Doab — the wide, dusty plain between the Ganges and the Jumna, where temperatures rose to 130°, where white battalions were drained of all vigour, decimated by sunstroke and crazed by thirst — would be the battleground. It had been a battleground before, between the warrior princes of India since the dawn of history. This time there was a difference. This time the conflict was the legacy of a vast commercial venture that had grown obese, arrogant, and stultified by its own power, and by a Westminster to which anything beyond sight remained out of mind, provided it cost as little as possible. As with every other conflict, however — in every age and in every theatre — it was the ordinary men, the peasants and the privates, who owned nothing, knew nothing, and could gain nothing, who were to die there.

Chapter 5

There weren't a hundred pounds in the black cash box. There were fourteen sovereigns and a little silver. It might have been better, Joseph considered, if he had waited until after the Colonel's next visit to Gurney's Bank, but it was too late now. Choosing the afternoon that the Ladies' Domestic Mission ensured Mrs. Finnis' absence, with the house quiet, he had forced open the desktop with his clasp-knife. Once he had done that, there was no turning back.

Their flight, with their bundles and the linnet cage, was hurried. Joseph had heard of thieves being apprehended by means of the electric telegraph, and at each pause of the train, he eyed the platforms for a sight of the brass buttons and shining stovepipe hats of searching constables. In London, teeming with people, noisy and clogged with smoke, he was convinced that the police would be waiting, but Colonel Finnis, it seemed, had not utilised the electric telegraph. Once in the street, he felt safer. It was surely unlikely that anyone would recognise them in this swarming anthill of a city. Hannah, who held the sovereigns, declared that they would not waste money on a hansom or an omnibus, so they walked to London Bridge, to the South-Eastern & Chatham Railway's station, but she relented sufficiently to buy them each a hot mutton pie. She also pointed out the dome of St. Paul's, the Monument, and Tower Hill, but Joseph was unable to feel impressed. He was beginning to regret the adventure and, had it been possible, would have wished himself back in Croydon with his eighteen pence each week. He brightened a little when the train pushed its rattling, steam-shrouded length into the flat green fields beyond Erith. Perhaps Chatham would be like Croydon or even Merton.

Chatham, however, was completely unlike either. First, there was a *smell* at Chatham — faint but distinctive, a mixture of hemp, salt, black shag, tar, ale, and yellow soap — which was apparent as soon as they alighted from the train. There were ships anchored in the Medway River — not the work-stained ships he'd once seen at Woolwich, but warships with gleaming paintwork and brass, snowy decks and immaculate canvas. Joseph could see the gun-brigs *Hecate* and *Helios*, the full-rigged frigate *Imperieuse*, and the massive old three-decker, *Royal George*. In the streets, there were bluejackets — square, stocky little men in straw hats with brown faces wrinkled from years of peering at empty horizons and hands like pieces of gnarled oak. There were also Marines and redcoats, and something Joseph had not seen before — infantrymen in dark green regimentals with red facings. He'd never seen a soldier in anything but scarlet.

‘Them's the 60th Rifles.’ Hannah told him. ‘Chatham's their depot, but there's not much 'ere now except recruits, invalids an' a few drill sergeants. The regiment's in India, and by the time they come back, I'll be a bleedin' old woman.’ She pointed. ‘Still, there's Fusiliers, an' some 3rd Buffs. So, what wi' Marines an' sailors, we won't do too bad.’

Joseph bridled. ‘I didn't steal fourteen pounds,’ he retorted, ‘for yer to chase after boot-necked bloody soldiers. There's other places besides Chatham — ’

‘Not on fourteen pounds, Joey, an' there's twelve shillin's o' that gawn already. It 'ad to be a garrison town or a dockyard. The demand's not the same in other places. There's keep ter be earned, and lodging 'ouses want 'igh rents from professional ladies what might want their room, private like, any time o' day or night, see?’

‘That's finished wi'. That's why I left Croydon with yer.’

She shook her head. ‘I didn't say anythin' about finishin', Joey — an' I ain't going to. I can't sew shirts or make bonnets, an' nobody'll employ me

fer a domestic wi' out references. I ain't goin' to sweat in a factory fer six bleedin' shilling a week or scrub floors. There's only one thing I know, Joey — an' that's follerin' the drum.'

Joseph had increasing cause for annoyance as the day passed. If he had anticipated a new era of domestic bliss in Hannah's company, he was disillusioned when, at a dingy tenement house off the High Street, she introduced him as her young brother. The proprietress, a slatternly, shuffling woman of sixty, displayed complete indifference towards the claim, then led them up ramshackle stairs trailed by a throng of curious, ragged children. The house reeked of staleness, damp plaster and soiled bedding. Through a broken window, Joseph could see a muddy yard choked with indescribable debris and occupied by two pigs and a scattering of chickens. Somewhere in the lower depths of the house a female voice was screeching obscenities.

Hannah was indignant for a different reason. 'Did yer hear that? Four-and-six! The cheatin' old bitch! Four-and-six for one soddin' room! Yer'd think it was Kensington bleedin' Palace, wouldn't yer?'

*

'And I don't festerin' see,' Joseph Dando expostulated, 'why we 'ave to stay in this bleedin' pig — 'ole. Why don't we git at the bastards?'

'Becorse,' explained Sergeant Garvin, drawing on his superior military knowledge, 'there ain't enough of us, see?'

'There was enough of us for Sirdhana, wasn't there?' Joseph snorted. 'We bleedin' showed 'em at Sirdhana, didn't we?'

They had. They had showed them at Sirdhana. Brutally. Ten miles from Meerut, the village *ryots*, encouraged by straggling mutineers, had murdered their postal officials and laid siege to the European Convent of Sirdhana, the Sisters of which had retreated to the roof, trusting in Providence for salvation. Providence, so often unsympathetic, had on this occasion seen fit to dispatch

a company of the 60th, which promptly massacred every native in sight, innocent or guilty, and then escorted the shocked Sisters of Mercy back to the Meerut hospital. To be sure, they had shown them at Sirdhana.

For the first time, Joseph had killed a man with cold steel. With a sword-bayonet, he later concluded, you really knew you were killing a man. Shooting was an impersonal, detached business. You took aim, squeezed a trigger, and watched a distant figure spin to the ground. It was satisfying but scarcely more so than hitting a wooden target at a thousand yards. At Sirdhana, he had pursued the sepoy into a walled yard from which there had been no escape. A bullock lay dead, still roped to a *chirsa* well, and the ground was littered with smashed furnishings from the convent chapel. The sepoy had turned, panting, his eyes showing white. ‘Dohai! Dohai!’ — but Joseph had thrust at a point just below the junction of the cross-belts, and the man gave a single, despairing shout as he sagged, his weight almost tearing the rifle from Joseph’s grasp. Then he sat in the dust, his hands to his belly and his loosened turban-cloth trailed over his face. Joseph had walked away, the hate of a few seconds earlier suddenly drained.

‘Sirdhana ain’t Delhi,’ the sergeant insisted. ‘We know for certain there’s six regiments o’ Pandies in Delhi — the 3rd Cavalry, 11th, an’ 20th, what all marched from ‘ere — and the 38th, 54th and 74th, what made the Delhi garrison, apart from the King o’ Delhi’s own troops. Next, there’ll be reinforcements from every other soddin’ regiment that’s mutinied, from Benares to Ferozepore. Lastly, Delhi’s a bleedin’ fortress, designed by an English general to be defended. All that adds up to a sight too much for eight ‘undred riflemen and a few sore-arsed dragoons. And what will ‘appen if we leave Meerut unguarded, eh?’

There were other factors beyond the sergeant's ken, but his interpretation was broadly correct. Meerut was an armed camp, but nothing more. Delhi,

forty miles away, was a fortified city, and any chance there might ever have been of surprising its defenders had long since passed. Indeed, Meerut, isolated and far from help even if any were available, was itself in danger of being submerged. The town's civil European population was swollen by refugees occupying the hospital and barrack-rooms, and with hundreds under canvas, all with their own stories of horrifying escape from massacre and rapine. The heat of daytime was searing, intolerable, and already there had been deaths from the dysentery that inevitably followed the unsanitary conditions prevailing. The officer's lady and the rifleman's woman bivouacked within feet of each other and discovered that, surprisingly, they were both of a similar species, that whether one sweated or merely perspired, the smell and discomfort were much the same, that lice did not respect social rank, that airs and graces couldn't be maintained when dysentery turned a lady's bowels to water, and a coarse camel-blanket was a luxury when there wasn't another stitch of bed-covering to be had.

The previously immaculate lines, the Mall and the Gardens, were scored by entrenchments, walls and compounds were torn down to provide fields of fire for artillery pieces, and cavalry patrols scoured the plain. *Ryots* unable to explain their presence quickly and convincingly were cut down or hanged, and there were daily parades of protesting bazaar natives for the benefit of the refugees. It required only a nod for a man to be bundled away to the gallows.

At night, the tents glowed with candles and oil lamps, the long lines of tethered horses were silent, and the sentries peered into the dark void of the Doab, trying to identify the distant specks of glowing red that meant burning thatch and marauding *budmashes*. Nobody walked at night, and there were few sounds other than the sentries' pacing feet and their continuous cries.

'Number one post — all's well.'

'Number two post — all's well.'

'Number three post — all's well.'

There was hatred in Meerut — a hatred directed towards the hot, south-westward horizon, towards the Hindun and Jumna rivers, and Delhi, where the Pandies were.

'Our numbers ain't goin' to grow,' Joseph suggested. 'All the time we stay 'ere we'll be gettin' fewer wi' sickness an' wounded until there ain't enough to muster a bleedin' quarter guard. We might as well git at 'em now.'

*

Fourteen cities had stood on or near the site now occupied by Delhi on the western bank of the Jumna river — the old capital of the Mogul emperors and the largest and richest centre in Hindustan. Seven miles in circumference, all sides of the city were strongly walled and bastioned, with the addition of a wide, dry ditch pierced by seven gates. The Jumna, a thousand yards wide and fordable only in winter, was crossed by a single bridge of boats.

Fourteen cities here had seen the mastership of Mogul, Tartar, Turk, Afghan, Persian, Mahratta, and Rajput. Delhi had been the prey of countless invaders from the northwest. Nadir Shah, the King of Persia, had massacred one hundred thousand people here in 1747 and carried away the fabulous Peacock Throne, but since the Regulating Act of 1773, there had been a more demanding master — the Board of Governors of the Honourable East India Company.

Inside the city and overlooking the Jumna stood the King of Delhi's palace, itself a citadel and covering an area of a quarter square mile, a complexity of red sandstone and white marble, partnered by the ancient fortress of Selimgarh, which dominated the Jumna boat-bridge. The surrounding city was a confusion of densely packed houses, of graceful minarets, temples, and mosques, their domes and spires flashing white and gold in the hot sunshine, and above all towered the Jama Masjid, the Great Mosque built by Shah

Jehan two hundred years earlier. Delhi had been the seat of an empire before Alexander invaded India, and here, now, was the last of the emperors — Mohammed Suraj-oo-Deen Bahadur.

Bahadur Shah, King of Delhi, Ruler of the Universe, Protector of the Poor, showed little evidence of his illustrious ancestry except perhaps his aquiline, dissipated features and a passion for Persian poetry. He was eighty-two years old, white-bearded, an infirm, thin-framed little man dependent now on a pension of £120,000 annually from John Company. He had a favourite Queen, the doll-like Zenat Mahal-Begum, who seldom left her apartments, an uncounted number of concubines, and seven sons, of whom the older had for many years usurped the remnants of authority that their father's title still retained.

When the dusty rebel *sowars* from Meerut had drummed across the bridge of boats and through the Calcutta Gate on the morning of 11 May, the old king was embarrassed and frightened. If he had ever entertained ambitions of regaining the glory of his forefathers, they had faded years before. The English were too powerful, and he was too old. Life was pleasant, effortless. He had his wives and his women, the soft, young ones whose names he could never remember, trained in the sixty-four arts of Kama, who excited his flagging desires with practised hands and with recipes of uchchata plant, liquorice, long pepper, and rams' testicles boiled in milk — or, when these failed, tied to his lean shanks an artificial lingam of wood-apple or buffalo-horn so that they could cry ecstasies to his sexual vigour. There was everything that he wanted, now, in the dusty rooms of the palace. Life, indeed, was pleasant, effortless. Why did these fools want to involve him in rebellion, to make him a Mogul emperor? What place had he, an old man of eighty-two, in the ranks of a war against the British Raj?

But the *sowars* were adamant, and his sons shouted for a holy war. On the

Meerut road, only hours away, were the marching mutineers of the 11th and 20th Native Infantry, and already the English in Delhi were being hunted down and killed. Lead us, *Gharib parwar*, and all India will rise to the banner of Tamarlane, of Akhbar and Shah Jehan, and all will flock to Delhi. Now, O King, it is time for the English to be driven from Hindustan. Their armies have all been killed before Sebastopol, and we shall have allies from Russia and Persia. Now is the time, O King.

*

Meg Garvin, the Sergeant's wife, as brown as a *karanie*-woman, threw water over the grass tattie mats that hung over the door of No. 8 barrack-room to cool the suffocating heat of the Doab summer. She put down her bucket.

‘What are yer? Bleedin’ Brook Green Militia? There’s wimmin an’ mites, just in from Delhi — what’s left of ‘em. And they ain’t come fer tiffin an’ cakes, I tell yer. There’s babies bein’ speared on bayonets, an’ young girls bein’ butchered — an’ yer all sittin’ on yer arses, waitin’ fer that fat ol’ sod Hewitt to git orf ‘is *charpoy*. “We’re defendin’ Meerut successfully” ‘e sez. Against what, I might arsk? Against a few bleedin’ *ryots* wi’ sticks? Why don’t yer git after that bastard King o’ Delhi — what’s doin’ all the murderin’?’

*

Bahadur Shah, in Delhi, wasn’t murdering anyone. Bahadur Shah was playing for time. From the wall of the Selim-garh he could see the Meerut road, and he watched for the distant pall of dust that would tell him of the approach of General Hewitt’s white soldiers. He had thought of telegraphing Hewitt, but the wires had been cut. Still, Hewitt must come. Hewitt, with infantry, cavalry, and artillery, would be only hours behind the sepoy of the 11th and 20th, who were streaming through the Calcutta Gate shouting for

the lives of the English pigs and their lick-spittle *baboo* native clerks.

There was horror in the streets, in the Chadni Chauk, on the steps of the Delhi Bank, in Canal Street and Custom House Road, but there was little that Bahadur Shah could do to prevent it. Besides, he was very tired, and the noise irritated him. He was hardly responsible for the mutinous behaviour of the East India Company's own troops, was he? That was Hewitt's concern, and Hewitt wasn't here. He, the King, couldn't involve himself tonight. His physician had recommended a new aphrodisiac of rice with the eggs of sparrows boiled in milk and then mixed with sugar and clarified butter — and he had a new woman from Koshola, who had brazenly lifted her eyes from the floor to return his gaze, promising much. Was she not a Lotus woman? Her body was well clothed with flesh, as soft as the Shiras flower. She walked like a swan, her voice was low and musical as the note of the Kolila bird, and when she had kissed his thigh he had felt her bosom against him, hard, full, and high. Alas! He was eighty-two, and there was much he could not do.

Most of the European civilians in the streets had been killed within minutes of the *sowars* bursting through the Calcutta Gate. Lieutenant Willoughby, of the Commissariat Ordnance Department, with eight artillerymen, defended the magazine for three hours before blowing it up and, with it, themselves and four hundred sepoy who were swarming over the walls.

Mr. Heatly, the editor of the *Delhi Gazette*, was determinedly penning a report on the Meerut sepoy's outrageous arrival in Delhi when those same sepoy smashed their way into his office, wrecked his presses, and then slashed out the throats of the editor, his wife, his mother, and his child with broken glass bottles.

The Reverend Midgley Jennings was scythed down in his quarters. His daughter Annie and eighteen-year-old Mary Clifford, who had arrived in

Delhi from Ireland only the previous day, were dragged into the street to join Mrs. Berresford, the wife of the secretary of the Delhi Bank and her five children, the Eurasian wife of Major Skinner, Mrs. Colonel Forster, and a score of other women — the families of government and bank clerks, sergeants and ordnance conductors. In the street, the children were killed, hacked to pieces, and fragments of their flesh crammed into their parents' throats. The women, stripped of every vestige of clothing, were paraded through the streets and then dragged triumphantly to the palace. The Queen of Delhi did not care for English ladies. She surveyed them silently. They weren't so haughty after a dozen rapes, a thrashing with *lathis*, and the taste of their own infants' blood in their mouths. Zenat Mahal-Begum ordered them to the garden to be beheaded and then burned.

Mr. Berresford raced to his house, to find his children dead and his wife gone. Frantic, he loaded a shotgun and a pistol. In the next house, a woman was shrieking, and Berresford hurled himself through a crowd of jeering natives to see his neighbour's wife contorting on the floor under the weight of several men, above her a child crucified to the wall. Berresford shot four men before he was overpowered, stabbed to death, and left lying with the naked torso of the woman.

Torn and insulted, corpses floated in the Jumna and lay in every street and alley, in smashed offices and looted houses, among the babul trees and shrubs, until darkness descended to hide their ignominy. It was Ramadam, the month for fasting. Now, with night, the *sowars* could eat. They were hungry after a tiring day.

Bahadur Shah's apartments in the Dewan-Kass overlooked the river and a secluded garden, furnished with a marble summer-house, several fountains, and an artificial cataract that splashed gently among scented amaranth, jasmine, and jalasuka. There was moonlight on the surface of the river, and

the crickets whispered. The night was warm, and from a distance there came the noise of gunshots and shouts.

The Koshola woman lowered her soft body over the old King, simulating the trembling desire of the practised concubine, kissing his forehead, eyes, throat, chest, then her tongue seeking the inside of his mouth. He reached for her breasts, and she murmured ‘Sut, sut!’ deliciously, then raised her honey-coloured legs to entwine about him gently urging. The whitebeard’s too old, she thought. He’s an empty old husk. When he tires of squeezing my breasts, he’ll scrabble at my belly with his thin fingers, but it’ll not help him. He’ll demand *auparishtaka*, and I’ll take my mouth to the limp old rag between his thighs, feigning ecstasy.

It was a pity, Bahadur Shah considered. The woman was interesting. The aphrodisiac hadn’t worked. They never did. It was a pity, too, about the Europeans. There had been hundreds of them in Delhi, and now, it seemed, they were all dead. When the English soldiers did come, they were likely to be very angry.

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From Ambala to the north, where the Commander-in-Chief, General George Anson, was desperately mustering all the white regiments within reach, came the orders for the Meerut garrison. There was to be a march on Delhi — six companies of the 60th Rifles, two squadrons of the Carabineers, a battery of Horse Artillery, one of Bengal Artillery, and two eighteen-pounders manned by European civilians. The column mustered in the early evening on the Doab, northward of the cantonments, ready for a night dash towards the Hindun River.

There were to be no non-effectives in the Delhi Field Force. On previous occasions, an army in India had always marched with five camp-followers to every fighting man — servants, *dhoolie*-bearers, *nautch*-girls, grasscutters

and camel doctors, grooms and drivers, cobblers and tailors. Officers' baggage had included tents and carpets, glassware and silver plate, wines and liqueurs, heavy mahogany furniture, and wagon-loads of foodstuffs. Now, it was to be different. Save for a handful of *bhisties* and *dhoolie*-bearers for the wounded, no man would march unless he was to fight. The column's baggage-carts, hauled by bullocks, were stripped of nonessentials, and the riflemen, in shirtsleeves and kepis, carried only weapons and ammunition. To move otherwise on the Doab was to ask to be felled by the pounding heat that blinded the eyes and shimmered the horizon. Clustered in the shade of the church were the women and children, watching. Two companies of Rifles remained with them, to scan the empty, brown plains for signs of approaching dust — a messenger to tell them of their men reaching Delhi or a vengeful horde of *sowars* to massacre the last of the *Feringhees* in Meerut.

‘*Chalo bhai*’ The drivers of the lumbering *tongas* cracked their whips and the bullocks lowered their heads, straining. On the flank, the horse artillery wheeled into column to free the infantrymen of their dust, and the loin-clothed *bhisties* shouldered their goatskin waterbags. The white *gora* were mad.

The gun caissons jolted, jingling over the iron-hard ground, with helmeted artillerymen clinging to their narrow seats. Behind them, the Carabineers kicked their unruly Cape horses into lines of threes. ‘Bleedin’ griffs,’ Rifleman Brownlow muttered. A griffin was a newcomer to India, inexperienced and likely to be a burden to his fellows, and Brownlow referred to both the half-trained cavalry horses and their riders. ‘Still, sod it, they all ‘ave ter learn.’

Colonel Jones, ruddy faced and dumpish, waited for his company officers to report the infantry column ready. Beside him was his galloper, Ensign Alfred Heathcote, a man old for his rank, who had gone to the Californian

goldfields, to Australia and China, and had served in Her Majesty's Navy before coming to the 60th Rifles. He was a better soldier than most of his superiors, a horseman who could ride rings around the best in the 6th Dragoon Guards, and the Colonel's immediate choice for a task that, paradoxically, was usually delegated to a junior officer yet demanded military acumen and mature judgement.

Also waiting to march, unhappily, was Ensign William Napier, for weeks plagued by the knowledge that, on the evening of 9 May, he had held in his hand the key that might have slammed a vicious door on the mutiny. Because of his timidity, his trepidation at the prospect of waking his Colonel from his sleep, hundreds of men, women, and children had already been brutally butchered, and perhaps thousands more were likely to be. There were two others, he knew, who shared the knowledge of his incompetence — a sergeant and a rifleman. Had they talked? In the Officers' Mess, at morning *durbar*, during the constant discussions of that day's events, he had tensed, mentally cringing, but nothing had been said. To young Napier, the 60th was the finest regiment in the British Army, and the British Army the finest in the world. He had listened enviously to older men's stories of the Sikh campaign, and one day, he had promised himself, he'd lead a company of cheering riflemen against an enemy position. Captain Napier, the gazetteer would say, for conspicuous gallantry in the face of overwhelming odds — . But now he would carry the memory of Meerut with him to the moment of his death.

'Poor ol' Muter,' Joseph Dando conceded. 'He's a decent sod, but 'ee does *fart about*, don't 'ee?' Captain Muter remained in Meerut with 'B' and 'C' Companies. Muter was a good officer, if a little unimaginative. He was a drill-book soldier, and he'd know exactly how to defend Meerut in the prescribed, safe fashion, without rash heroics. The march to Delhi, on the other hand, might necessitate a few rash heroics.

It would be dusk in an hour, but during that time, they would march almost directly into the setting sun. The Doab stretched ahead, flat, featureless, and already the dust was rising, clawing at the throat. The men, with rifles slung, lowered their heads. They knew the Doab. It was an old enemy. Presently, there would be the cries of '*Bhistiel*' for the few seconds of luxury that a mouthful of water afforded. The ungreased wheels of the *tongas* screeched painfully, the bullocks plodding. The cavalry vedettes were ahead and to flank, hardly visible now through the dust.

Joseph had once heard that soldiers sang as they marched, but whoever invented the fallacy had never marched in column across an Indian plain. There was no desire to add to the existing torture of cracked lips, the sting of dust in the nostrils, sore, red-shot eyes, and heat that seared through cap covers and shirts until the men's senses were numbed, lungs aching. Gun barrels and belt-buckles burned the fingers, cap-visors blistered, and unceasing sweat rotted clothing at armpits and groin, smearing the body with a scalding rash. Soldiers might give voice to stirring marching songs in novelettes or stage operettas, but they didn't sing on the Doab. A few words were a croaking effort, a grunt or a nod the usual reply. Any attempt to sing 'Cheer, Boys, Cheer' would have been considered madness.

Could the little column really reach Delhi? It mustered 450 riflemen and 16 officers, 250 unpredictable Carabineers, and a small assortment of artillery pieces. Three nights' march across the Doab lay the first obstacle — the Hindun River — and it could prove to be insurmountable. Only nine miles beyond the river was Delhi, and it was certain that any crossing would be overwhelmingly opposed by the Pandies. Christ, Joseph mused, Sergeant Gavin was right. It wouldn't be like shooting down a few soddin' *ryots* in Sirdhana. And if they crossed the river, and if they reached Delhi, what the bleedin' 'ell would they do then?

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Joseph had to do something. The tenement room was banned to him during all the hours that soldiers or sailors were likely to be on short furlough, and that meant any time between noon and midnight, or even all night if Hannah entertained a sailor on a seven-bells shore leave. During the mornings, she was often sleeping off the effects of the night's exertions, and she would rise with swollen eyes, bad-tempered, to scratch her head and yawn, pull her grubby shift over her shoulders and reach for the gin bottle. Then she'd swear at him, toss him a shilling and tell him to get out. Joseph, stiff from a night crouched on the stairs, would seek the comparative freshness of the street, to walk himself weary, and hoping that, tonight at least, there'd be no reeling bluejacket to deny him the bed.

There was a choice of a number of occupations with which to pass the day. He could walk down to the foreshore of the Medway in time for the eight o'clock gun and watch a dozen ensigns climb to their mastheads as if pulled by a single hand. There would be an hour of mast-drill, with the barefoot sailors swarming the yards, followed by an hour of gun-drill. The port lids would open simultaneously with a distant crash, like red mouths, revealing the black muzzles of the 32-pounders. Faintly, he'd hear the gun-captains' shouts, and finally, the shrill of pipes that signalled secure and stand-easy. He knew, now, who Nelson was — and, watching the machine-like precision of the ships of the Medway estuary, he wasn't surprised that a single British gunboat could settle an international dispute by simply dropping anchor off a foreign port. At least, so it was claimed.

Alternatively, he could watch the soldiers drilling at Fort Pitt, marching, forming a square, and repeating endlessly the motions of loading, kneeling, and firing. He had met the recruiting sergeants in the streets of Chatham — ramrod men with short-cropped hair, barrel chests, and voices like gun-

wheels on gravel. There was the sergeant of the 60th Rifles in his curious green shell-jacket, kepi, and tight overalls, offering a choice of two battalions — the 1st in Peshawur and the 2nd in Ireland preparing to sail for the Cape Colony. Less appealing were the 7th Fusiliers, who could only offer a barracks in Manchester — to the green-clad man's silent disdain. The 64th Foot, in scarlet, blue, and polished shako, promised a voyage to Bombay and the tropical delights of Poona, and the Marines a golden opportunity to see the world in one of Her Britannic Majesty's ocean bulldogs, with the added incentive of a daily tot of rum. It was all very tempting.

Recruiting wasn't easy. In peacetime, common soldiers were regarded with contempt and abuse, and enlistment was the ultimate in degradation. Theatres, music halls, and many taverns refused admission to soldiers, and none but the lowest of women consorted with them. Many a housemaid had been discharged by a disgusted mistress for speaking to a redcoat, and few fathers would contemplate without horror the possibility of a daughter marrying one. Soldiers were gutter-scum, drunken, foul-mouthed, criminal, rapacious, wasters of public money, and outcasts from decent society — except, of course, when the country's safety was threatened, when magically they were transformed into heroes, cheered on their departure for the war, their backs slapped, and treated to free beer. Their existence, for a while, had become justified.

And in the East End of London, in Dublin and Cork, Edinburgh and Manchester, among the green shires, the factory towns, the Highlands, the seaports — anywhere that young and unemployed men might be found — the recruiting sergeants were abroad, cajoling, boasting, buying ale, and with pockets filled with Queen's shillings. Westminster and Whitehall had decided to set the country's military house in order, and time — as it had been before, and would be again — was running short. There was only a single battalion

in Canada, with increasing friction over the frontier with the USA. Relationships with France had reached a level of almost open hostility, and Prussia was beating a drum. Russia was looking for an excuse to subjugate Sweden and showing an unsavoury interest in the Dardanelles and the border with Afghanistan, both gateways to India. Britain had become uncomfortably aware that her military establishment was ridiculously small. There were fewer than 60,000 troops at home — 12,000 of which were needed to bridle Ireland. India swallowed up 30,000, and a further 40,000 were scattered in small packets throughout the biggest empire the world had known. There were no reserves and not more than forty artillery pieces in the whole of Britain. Worse, there were only five fully-manned ships of the line available for home waters, and these obsolete. It was high time to raise recruits.

It was on a Sunday that Joseph Dando enlisted. On Sunday mornings, divine service was held in the ships of the Fleet, and at Fort Pitt the troops mustered for church parade and were subsequently marched to the garrison church of St. Mary's. Until midday, when the Navy accorded its crews a make-and-mend period of leisure and the barracks canteen opened its doors until 3 p.m., the pavements of Chatham and Rochester would see no uniforms. The streets were quiet, the taverns deserted until the first cutters emptied a thirsty watch-ashore onto the jetties and the Buffs' church parties were dismissed. It was a morning for Sunday clothes and bonnets, prayer books and chapel, for carriages drawn by clip-clopping horses, for tolling bells and chanted psalms. Alternatively, for the less righteous, it was a morning for lying idly abed, content in the warm and drowsy knowledge that, in this benevolent England, men did not work today.

Joseph had left the tenement early, leaving Hannah sleeping in a room that was untidy, airless, and tainted with the odours of cheap perfume, gin, and bodies. With an aching head and a queasy stomach, she'd not rise until noon,

breakfast on porter, and then venture to the Fortune of War, where she'd drink more porter and survey opportunities for the afternoon's revenues. He had no desire to be present when she climbed groggily from the bed.

He crossed the bridge into Rochester, then turned northward to stroll the fringe of the bleak saltings, shivering in the wind. He was absent longer than he had intended, and when he regained Chatham's High Street, he knew it had gone midday. From the bar of The Trafalgar, a mechanical piano was grinding out 'Unbroken Stands that Line of Red, Majestically Firm — ' mingled with the clatter of ale mugs and the murmur of masculine voices, and small boys were scuttling homeward with jugs of old brew to augment their fathers' Sunday dinners. It was just as well, he decided. Hannah would have risen by now. She might even have departed and, with luck, could even be absent until nightfall.

He sensed as soon as he lifted the latch that he'd made a mistake, that he should not have returned. Almost simultaneously, he experienced a flare of resentment. He, after all, had stolen the money that paid the rent, hadn't he? If he'd been caught, he, and not Hannah, would have gone to prison. He pushed the door wide.

There was a red tunic flung over the back of a chair and a white, pipe-clayed belt on the floor amid Hannah's tumbled clothes. Joseph almost laughed. He had a talent, it seemed, for interrupting other men's ecstatic moments. Hannah reared nakedly from the bed. 'Fer Chris' sake! Yer bleedin', stupid clod! Can't yer bleedin' see — ?'

Joseph didn't wait to see. He wasn't even interested in ascertaining whether the gentleman was a Fusilier or a Buff. He closed the door on Hannah's raging abuse and walked slowly down the stairs and into the street.

The mechanical piano in The Trafalgar was galloping through 'What does a Ribbon mean to a Soldier?' when he entered the bar. Any recruiting sergeant

would do — Fusiliers, Buffs, the 64th, even Marines — anything except the Navy. He had no stomach for the Navy.

Recruiting sergeants wore rosettes pinned to their hats. Joseph searched the assortment of shakos, kepis, and forage caps through the haze of tobacco smoke, but there were no sergeants with rosettes. There were no sergeants at all.

A potman eyed him questioningly. ‘I’m looking,’ Joseph said, ‘for a sergeant.’

‘Wot sergeant?’

‘Any sergeant,’ Joseph shrugged. The mechanical piano shuddered to a halt, drew breath, then lurched into ‘My Love Lies Across the Sea.’ The potman jerked a thumb at a far door. ‘Sergeants don’t usually drink in the taproom. Yer might try the Private.’

In the Private, there was a lone sergeant in dark green regimentals trimmed with red. His cap, with its black leather visor, pommel, and cruciform badge, was removed, revealing shorn, greying hair. He was a stocky man, broad-shouldered and, to Joseph, distinctly forbidding as he lifted his eyes over his ale mug. Joseph had seen riflemen of the 60th before, several times, although they seemed to spend more time clambering among the gorse beyond Rochester Castle than behaving like real soldiers — who wore scarlet and polished brass, and marched behind a band and colours with bayonets glistening. He felt vaguely disappointed. A soldier had a right to a fine red coat, not a sombre green one. In the next bar the mechanical piano was still chinking merrily. He hesitated.

The green sergeant placed down his mug and nodded. Joseph drew a deep breath. ‘I want to enlist,’ he stated.

The sergeant raised his eyebrows. ‘I’d be pleased to accommodate yer, lad — but not on a Sunday. There’s no recruitin’ on a Sunday. If yer meet me

tomorrow, say, I'll sign yer quick enough.'

Joseph shook his head. 'Today.'

The sergeant chuckled. 'What's the 'urry? Yer've got ten years, lad. What's one day matter? Yer ain't goin' to miss any promotion.' He frowned. 'Is it the Peelers?'

'Today,' Joseph repeated firmly. 'If it's tomorrow, I'll likely 'list in something else — the Fusiliers or the 64th. I ain't choosy.'

The sergeant gazed at the frothed surface of his beer. It had been a poor season for recruits — and for good reason. Wages in industry were rising steadily; even an illiterate labourer could earn twenty-five shillings on the railway diggings. The army, with its brutalising discipline, its lash, and its years of foreign service, paid 7/6d per week, but deducted 1/10d for barrack damages, washing, and the renewal of necessities — forage cap, shell jacket, shirts, razor, brushes, mits, soap, towel, and haversack — and 3/6d for food. That left 1/8d in the soldier's hand, an amount incremented by a grant of a penny a day for every five years of service. Only the Marines were paid an additional allowance when married. In the army, wives and children shared the barrack-room with the men, and barracks were unsanitary, sordid, vermin-ridden. A man who volunteered for the army became worse than a convict. Convicts had rights; soldiers had none. The green sergeant raised his head and looked at Joseph. If he were this slight, dark-haired boy, he'd rot in Hell before he took a Queen's shilling.

'How old are yer, lad?'

'Eighteen.'

'Can yer prove it?'

Joseph shook his head. 'I was a charity waif. I weren't registered.'

The sergeant took a mouthful of beer. For a sovereign the boy was a liar. He didn't look eighteen, and he had a puny frame for the rigours of the

barrack square. Still, that wasn't his concern. The surgeon would have the last say. Recruits were hard to come by.

Beyond Joseph's shoulder, through the open door of the Private, the sergeant saw a familiar figure approaching, a figure in a scarlet coat and chin-strapped forage cap. The sergeant decided quickly. 'All right, lad. Yer can consider yerself enlisted.' He didn't even know the young bugger's name. 'I'll walk yer back to barracks, get yer vittled, and see yer've got a bed.' He drained his ale just as the Fusilier sergeant entered. 'We're gitting so many bleedin' recruits for the 60th,' he said loudly as he ushered Joseph away, 'that we'll've to start a third soddin' battalion.' Joseph would have liked to tarry for a few moments, just to see what the Fusilier might have to offer, but the green sergeant was propelling him into the street. It was always the festerin' same, Joseph mused. He didn't plan things properly. In another five minutes, he might have got himself a red coat and brass buttons. Now it was too stinkin' late.

Chapter 6

The village of Ghazi-ud-din Nagar lay a mile from the river Hindun, a clutter of thatch-roofed native houses between crudely ploughed, stony fields, a few dusty trees, a walled well around which some fowls scratched hopelessly. The heat rose from the bleached, sand-coloured earth as from the floor of an oven, visually, so that the trees and houses seemed to dance before the eyes. Beyond the river, the plain continued, scattered with tired scrub, and the officers thought of pig-sticking. There might be a few duck, also, if one searched far enough, but in late May, the Hindun was a mere rivulet twisting between dun, stratified banks, spanned by six hundred yards of causeway constructed by some long-forgotten engineer of John Company. The causeway was the road to Delhi, and a single, well-served battery could hold it against an army.

The village headman — the *lumbardar* — had already told them that the women washing clothes in the river had returned with frightening news of many sepoys on the opposing, dried river bed, of big guns on wheels, and they had heard the name of Mirza Abu Bakr, a son of the King of Delhi. The vedettes had gone forward on the road and in twenty minutes had returned. The women had been right. The Pandies were in copybook formation on the far bank, between five and six thousand strong, with heavy guns enfilading the length of the causeway. There could be no flanking movement, only a frontal assault, and the Pandies knew it. They had learned well from the *Feringhees*.

Brigadier Wilson took off his hat to mop his face with a bandana. 'I'm sorry, Colonel.' He glanced at Jones. 'It's a job for infantry, and I'm afraid

your greenflies are going to be mauled if those damn' gunners have remembered their training.' He gave a tight smile. 'I seem to recall there was a similar situation three years ago, at Balaclava — only on that occasion the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army was watching. Today, he doesn't even know we're here. You may not achieve the front page of *The Times*.

Colonel Jones frowned. 'I'd be obliged if ye'd draw their sting with a salvo, sir. If we can provoke them into firing just before my men begin to cross the causeway, we'll have just that much time to get halfway across before they've reloaded.' He turned. 'Company officers! Captain Williams! Captain Andrews! "A" and "D" Companies will advance across the causeway in column sections with fixed swords and at the double. The remaining four companies will follow in support as soon as the enemy's guns have been taken.' He seemed oblivious to the possibility of every man of his command being torn to crimson shreds. He removed his pince-nez and placed them carefully into a pocket. 'I shall lead,' he declared.

'Soddin' Christ,' Joseph said. He snap-locked his sword to the barrel of his rifle. A half dozen women ran, stooped and wailing, with their *chudders* over their heads, as 'A' Company doubled forward, and the bullocks at the well scrambled to their feet, startled. The causeway was ahead of them, sickeningly empty. From behind, Major Tombs' troop of horse artillery overtook them at a gallop, slewed into its own pall of dust, and unlimbered, with the artillerymen spilling from their seats and flinging themselves at their guns with hand-spikes, rammers and sponges.

'Load! — and Ram! Ready — ? FIRE!'

The ground shuddered under the riflemen's trotting feet. There was a thunderous clap, and the near side of the causeway was obscured by smoke. The native women shrieked. Ahead of 'A' Company, moving at an almost comical prance, was the portly little figure of Colonel John Jones, his arms

swinging across his chest like pistons. Whatever else, Joseph considered, he's a plucky old sod. He could have waited behind the battery in comparative safety, but he didn't. The smoke rolled over the riflemen in a sulphurous cloud, and then they were free of it, into the hot glare of the sun, and the causeway was still there.

‘Stop your vents! Sponge! Load — and Ram! Cock your locks! Ready — ?’

Almost simultaneously with the crash of the second salvo, the far bank of the river twinkled prettily with a pattern of tiny flames. Instinctively, the jostling files hunched their shoulders, tensing, but the sepoy's aim was high. Joseph had a fleeting glimpse of two *dhoohlie*-bearers smashed, sprawling, to the dust, each with a leg torn off by a single eighteen-pound shot that spun on into a flurry of crazed chickens before vanishing from sight. They were on the hard surface of the causeway now, and they could see clearly the lines of waiting sepoy in scarlet and white, their heads swathed in the white turbans that most had adopted in preference to the regimental shakos. Two heavy guns were directly enfilading the causeway, and the gun teams were working feverishly to reload, reducing elevation to fire point-blank at the approaching British. It must be any second now —

By Christ, it was hot. Joseph could see the snaking course of the Hindun below him to his right, jolting — a mud-coloured ribbon with its edges churned and pocketed by the feet-marks of cattle, tufted with dried sedge and trampled rushes. His own feet scalded in his heavy boots, and he bared his teeth to suck air into lungs that threatened to burst. The sepoy artillerymen had scattered from their gun-muzzles. A *jemadar* flung up an arm. ‘Numbers one and two — FIRE!’

No man yet born has been within eighty yards of heavy guns aimed directly at him, heard the shouted order to fire, seen the matches flare at the breeches, and not felt his belly twist into knots of nauseating fear. The files of riflemen

convulsed into disorder. Men crouched with eyes clenched. Several dropped to their knees, choking obscenities. Colonel Jones, ten paces in the lead, swerved, lifting his arms to his face.

Nothing happened. Incredibly, impossibly, nothing happened.

Eighty yards away, the *jemadar* was screaming vituperation at his nonplussed gun-crews. There was bile in Joseph's throat. He was trembling, and he felt the muscles of his face twitching uncontrollably. At his side, a man was vomiting, still stumbling forward with his rifle grasped across his chest, and Colonel Jones, his hat gone from his bald head, was shouting. 'Rifles! Charge! Charge!'

It was deliriously theatrical, but nobody cared. The riflemen avalanched forward, suddenly filled with a savage bravado that nothing, now, would quell. Free of the narrow causeway they deployed, scattering — stabbing, slashing, clubbing. 'D' Company, behind Captain Andrews, swarmed over the guns, and behind them, the causeway clear, the four supporting companies were racing. Tombs' guns, from the departed bank, were hammering rapid-fire at the sepoy positions, and for a few glorious moments, it seemed that five thousand men would be flying in disorder from seven hundred. The mutineers, however, recovering from the discomfiture of seeing their enemies streaming across the causeway unscathed and bullied by their *subadars*, were reforming, retreating sullenly before the Rifles' skirmishers. The Bengal Artillery's heavy guns had been brought up to the causeway, jolting across the ploughed *khets* as if they were light field pieces, and the Carabineers were beginning to cross in support of the thinly spread 60th. Brigadier Wilson had been reluctant to commit the cavalry during the heat of day. Their horses, brought from the Cape in the supposition that they would adapt more readily to the climate, had already shown, on the march across the Doab, that they could not. Many of them showed signs of collapse after an

hour's exertion. Still, two squadrons of dragoons couldn't be allowed the luxury of idleness while a mere six companies of infantry fought like mad dervishes on the western bank.

And on the western bank, Captain Andrews was roaring on his company beyond the captured guns — 'Come on "D!" Come on, "D!" — when a shattering, scorching explosion lifted an ammunition *tonga* and its bullocks into the air, throwing a hundred men headlong and spewing smoking debris in every direction. When the black, acrid smoke cleared, Captain Andrews was no longer shouting. His body, completely naked and blackened, in company with ten others, lay broken and scattered among the guns they had taken. Ensign Heathcote, the Colonel's galloper, was hurled into the air like a rag doll, his boots torn from his feet by his stirrups, his horse killed instantly. With nose bloodied, concussed, and bruised, he demanded another mount immediately.

The fighting, Joseph Dando decided, was the lesser problem. It was the heat — the pounding, merciless heat — which would decide for how long a man could coordinate his thoughts, his movements. Lips were cracked and bleeding, smeared with stinging cartridge powder, eyes agonised by sweat and dust, and every desperate, panting breath singed the lungs. None of the older soldiers, now, would talk of the Sikh campaign, only of the Hindun crossing. Christ — how long could it last?

It could not last for long. The Carabineers had taken the flank, and Tombs' crazed artillerymen were across, unlimbering again to pour canister into the sepoys — already under a punishing fire from the 60th's Enfields, which had never permitted them within effective musket range. In tens and dozens they were filtering away from their lines, grouping again among another scattering of native houses, distant by a mile. The riflemen edged forward, crouching, firing, reloading, and firing again. A ditch defended by fifty sepoys was

cleared in seconds at sword-point, with a savagery born of desperation. Sobbing, blaspheming, the riflemen swept on, and then the sepoys broke.

'The bastards 'ave got their bellies full, Tom,' Joseph croaked.

Tom Brownlow, the stocky miner who had skirmished with Joseph over the chalk cliffs beyond Rochester Castle, among the clogging leaves of autumn, lifted his gnarled, brown face. 'Not yet they ain't, Dando Boy. They're too bleedin' many, and they can go on failin' back until they reach Delhi, draggin' us behind 'em and sweatin' our guts out until there's so few of us left that they c'n spit on us. They don't 'ave to stand up an' fight.'

'Then they'd better git out o' that soddin' village, smartlike,' Joseph said, 'or they're goin' to roast.'

Major Tombs' gunners had relimbered yet again, careering off the road almost at the feet of the retreating sepoys, with horses, caissons and guns hidden by a blanket of yellow dust as they whirled about, smashed charges and canvas-packed grapeshot into the muzzles, and fired, tearing down the sepoys in swathes as they scattered for the shelter of the houses. There were roofs afire, spewing sparks and smoke into the sun, with the noise of the blazing straw scarcely different from the continuous crack-crack of the 60th's Enfields. The shirtsleeved lines came on, ramrods thrusting, caplocks snapping home under sweating palms, eyes searching for the scarlet and cross-belted mutineers swarming ahead.

And it could not last for long. It was more than flesh and blood, English or Indian, could tolerate. Darkness ended it — a darkness that forbade any thought of house-to-house fighting. The 60th and the Carabineers shortened their line, with men reeling drunkenly in their exhaustion. The sepoys' sheer weight of numbers could not be overcome, but five thousand had been pushed back by seven hundred, the causeway stormed, and five guns taken. Two of them — the eighteen-pounders that, miraculously, had failed to fire

on the advancing 60th — had already been examined. Their crews, in their frantic haste to reload after their first salvo, had loaded shot before powder-charge. It was a mistake that had cost the causeway, but there still remained nine more miles to Delhi.

Night brought coolness. The western bank of the river was peppered with cooking fires, the picquets prone on their bellies, sucking on pipes hidden within their hands or gulping scalding, bitter-sweet tea brought up by the ‘bobbers’ from the rear. To fall asleep over a rifle meant a certain fifty lashes, but there was little chance of even the weariest sentry sleeping. The night was continuously interrupted by the musket-shots of invisible, ill-humoured sepoys, beyond accurate range but a constant, nagging annoyance on an open plain where any wild bullet might find an unsuspecting victim. When the shots of one marksman had kicked up the dust four times only feet from Joseph Dando he spat deliberately and reached for his rifle. That bastard’s a bit too close,’ he decided, ‘so I reckon I’ll git ‘im.’

‘Naw,’ said Brownlow. ‘Likely ‘ee’s a picquet, be’ind cover. Yer’ve got to make ‘im show ‘imself, Dando Boy. Softlee, softlee, catchee monkey.’ He groped in his haversack for his towel and swathed it around his head in place of his kepi. ‘A rupee agin’ your new razor that I’ll *walk* up an’ do fer ‘im before ‘ee fires.’

‘Two rupees,’ Joseph nodded, ‘an’ leave ‘em ‘ere before yer go.’

Tom Brownlow chuckled. ‘Yer’ a distrustin’ sod, ain’t yer?’ He tested the caplock of his rifle with his thumb, rose to his feet, and walked off into the gloom with no more concern than if he were going for a quart of ale. Within yards, he knew, he would be silhouetted against the flicker of the Rifles’ own fires and the red glow of the burning village to his right, but Brownlow made no attempt to conceal himself, or even to quieten his footsteps on the hard *kunkur* of the road. He had covered less than forty yards when a voice

shouted.

‘Halt! *Khon hy?* Who goes there?’

Without slackening pace, the rifleman gave a nonchalant wave of his arm. ‘Ridgement.’

There was a pause, then ‘What ridgement?’

Brownlow halted at last. ‘What ridgement are *yew?*’ The sepoy climbed from behind a tangle of scrub. ‘38th Infantry, Bengal — ’ They were the last words he spoke. Brownlow’s rifle came up to his shoulder as he fell to one knee, and his shot smashed the sepoy backwards into the scrub with legs flung to the dark sky. Brownlow sniffed contemptuously. ‘Bleedin’ griffin!’

*

Most of all, Joseph remembered the Chatham barrack room. It accommodated twelve men, and each man possessed a low bedstead, a palliasse and bolster, two blankets, and a canvas sheet. The corners of the room, segregated by hung blankets, were reserved for the wives and families of married riflemen, although small boys often took advantage of the beds vacated by men on duty or absent for other reasons. Other furnishings were minimal — a battered deal table and the communal utensils of the room; two large bowls, one beer can, and two mugs. There was one all-purpose roller towel, which was washed weekly, while each man had his own towel, a coarse, oblong cloth measuring sixteen inches by twelve that he could wash as frequently or infrequently as he chose. Sheets were washed once a month, usually by the women, who also undertook other cleaning and mending tasks in exchange for a small allowance from the men’s stoppages.

The barrack room was dirty, tumultuous, thick with tobacco smoke and noisy with imprecations. In terms of blasphemous vocabulary, the women and children competed favourably with even the most hardened soldiers. Children of both sexes swilled ale, sucked on clay pipes, mimed their elders,

and fought viciously at the slightest provocation. For a recruit, even one conditioned by a charity school, the first few days in a barrack-room was a shuddering experience.

Single men, Joseph was to learn, did not approach the ‘married corners.’ The regulations fixed the number of wives permitted in barracks at six per company — or one to each room. It was, however, a ruling often flouted, and in Joseph’s room there were two wives, both of corporals. One was Katie Lawrence, a robust, slovenly but merry Irishwoman with a quip for every occasion and three children hanging to her skirts. The other was Meg Garvin, childless, and lacking Katie’s years and wit, but equally truculent and fond of a ‘drop’ at another’s expense. It was the women, their maternal instincts aroused by Joseph’s youthfulness, who initiated him into the ways of the barrack room, overcame his early reserve, and dispelled any impression he might have had of being an intruder. Katie had pushed a mug of hot tea into his hand while Meg, not to be outdone, offered him a pinch of shag. The three children had studied him gravely with grubby fingers in mouths.

‘So it’s a rifleman ye’re goin’ to be, eh, me bhoyo?’ enquired Katie. ‘Ye don’t look auld enough to hev lost the crib-marks arf ye’ arse.’

‘Don’t take any notice of ‘er,’ Meg advised. ‘She’s been on the strength fer eleven bleedin’ years, an’ thinks she knows it orl.’

Katie said, ‘Balls,’ but grinned. She winked at Joseph. ‘An’ don’t ye let that auld bastard Sergeant Flynn run ye ragged, me laddo — or I’ll kick him in the crotch, so I will. It’s a black-hearted Donegal Protestant he is, an’ not fit to mix wi’ dacent Christians.’

It was all very strange — an atmosphere he had never known before — but oddly reassuring. He had never been a member of a family, but if his new fellows were coarse-mannered and profane, they provided for him his nearest appreciation of family loyalty. The two corporals, George Lawrence and

Steve Garvin, were older men with twenty years of service between them — solid men whose rank was the reward for long service and good behaviour rather than military acumen. They were a steadying influence on the younger men, none of whom had worn regimentals for longer than two or three months and, with the swagger of veterans that comes with three months soldiering, needed to be curbed. Of mixed origins, they included Tom Brownlow, a Kentish miner, Edwin Wilson, a baker's lad who played a flute, Jim Bathurst, Bill Rose, and Sam Turner — all farm labourers — Bill Sutton the bugler, and two Irishmen, Patrick Lyons, and Patrick Holloran. With the exception of Tom Brownlow, who might have been any age, they were all less than twenty years old.

Quartermaster's victuals, the provisions supplied by the army, allowed two meals a day, at noon and six o'clock — usually stringy beef or old mutton, with bread or biscuit, prepared by the women and 'bobbed out' by the carver. Any extras had to be purchased from the Sutler, or 'won' by some other means. The riflemen turned into their beds by nine o'clock or remained in the dark. Each barrack-room was entitled to a ration of only one and a quarter pounds of candles per week.

The next morning, Joseph shivered in his nakedness as a surgeon thumbed his muscles, examined his teeth and genitals, and then pronounced him fit for the Queen's service. He signed his attestation of loyalty to Her Majesty and then drew his regimentals. Henceforth, whenever on duty, he would wear a coatee of heavy green serge, with a stiff black leather stock around his neck to keep his head erect. His kepi, also green, with a black visor and badge, would be retained by a tight chin strap. A wide black shoulder belt was decorated with a regimental plaque, and from a waist belt hung bayonet frog and scabbard — only henceforth he would always refer to a bayonet as a sword — balanced, on his right hip, by an ammunition pouch to

accommodate sixty one-and-a-half-ounce cartridges.

For the march, a haversack held a towel, soap, razor, spare boots, two spare neck stocks, two shirts, two pairs of socks, boot blacking and brushes, cooking utensils, and two days' ration of bread. On field service, he would additionally carry a greatcoat and blanket, and his ammunition might be increased to a hundred rounds.

It was Katie who boned his heavy boots with the handle of a spoon and Meg who took his stiff new kepi and, for an hour, manipulated its headband until it was soft and pliable. 'We'll not see yer wi' raw feet an' a splittin' 'ead,' Meg explained, and Katie added. 'It'll cost ye a drap on payday, me darlin'.'

Accompanied by Corporal Garvin — as a recruit Joseph was not permitted to move a yard without an accompanying NCO — he drew his Brunswick percussion rifle from the armoury. It was thickly coated with glutinous, brown grease and had to be washed in coal oil, dried, then lightly reoiled before it was fit to handle. The 60th, Garvin told him, had been equipped with rifles instead of the Brown Bess musket of the line regiments for fifty years, but this — the Brunswick — was 'a soddin' awful beast, an' if we ever 'ave to use it in real fightin,' we'll do bleedin' better wi' cold steel.' Corporal Garvin was not alone in his opinion; twelve months later a Select Committee on Small Arms would condemn the Brunswick as the poorest military rifle in Europe — but a further five years would elapse before it was replaced by a better.

Despite Katie's precautions, and despite Meg soaping his socks, Joseph's feet became raw. The Rifles marched with a rapidity of pace that, initially, caused his calf muscles to flare with agony and the sweat to soak his shirt until it was sodden. Every jarring step on the iron-hard drill-ground thrust knife-blades of pain into his abdomen. He marched, doubled, marched again,

his mouth dry and his breath coming in short gasps until he was certain he must collapse. Incredibly, he did not. His fingers were torn to bleeding from hours of exercising with the heavy Brunswick until the very mention of rifle drill filled him with the nausea of fear. His right kneecap was a hideous black puffball following days of crunching contact with the ground as he flung himself to kneeling fire. Endlessly he fixed and unfixed his sword, endlessly he loaded, rammed, snapped home his caplock, and presented, his shoulder bruised and his arms aching. His neck stock, designed specifically for the torture of recruits, clawed at his throat until his tongue swelled in his mouth and he thought his eyes would burst from their sockets. When the beautiful music of Bill Sutton's bugle released him and sent him limping back to the barrack room he stretched himself on his bed, throbbing with weariness, and never caring that the candle was pinched out at nine. Wincing, he drew off his boots to the grins of the other riflemen. 'Christ,' he gasped, 'Jesus Christ — it's a bleedin' miracle I've got any feet left at all.'

Patrick Holloran laughed. 'Shure, an' it's allus the same wid these youngsters, I kin tell ye.' He winked. 'They hevna got the moral fibre of us aulder men.'

He received a buffet from Katie that spreadeagled him on his palliasse. 'And how wid ye be knowin', ye bluidy Kilkenny bog-peasant?' she roared. 'Ye hevna sorved long enough yersel' ter take the shine off ye' hobnails!'

In later years, Joseph would realise that there were hundreds of Katies and Megs in hundreds of similar barrack rooms — hard, ungainly women who mothered the recruits, washed and sewed, bloodied the noses of the insolent, wrote letters for the illiterate, reared children, nursed the sick, got drunk, swore, laughed and cried and followed their men faithfully through long years of constant hardship and foreign stations, sharing the vicissitudes of frostbite, tropic heat, dysentery, malaria, and cholera without complaint. For

the love of a man they had ostracized themselves from their families and from polite society. They were profane but seldom promiscuous, unfeminine and dissolute but with a strange pureness of heart. Joseph, like many others, would owe much to Katie and Meg.

The weeks had passed. He learned to pitch a tent, build a field kitchen, and almost developed an affection for his Brunswick, which he could load and fire three times in one minute. He got drunk in Chatham with Tom Brownlow and Edwin Wilson, vomited in the bushes outside the officers' mess, and was threatened with field punishment by Sergeant Flynn. He had also received the initiation of a punched ear from Katie Lawrence.

By November, he was able to sniff condescendingly at the sight of stiff-marching Buffs and Fusiliers in their scarlet and pipe-clay and, out of sight of the guardhouse, wear his kepi rakishly over his eyes, with his left arm swinging and his right clamped firmly to his side — the characteristic of a rifleman who marched with weapon trailed and never sloped like the riff-raff of the line. It was fashionable to cultivate an air of aggressiveness, to emphasise that a green coatee equalled toughness and devil-may-care, to react to insult with fist, boot and belt-buckle. It had become incredible that, for even a moment, he had ever considered wearing scarlet and brass.

And with November came the order for India.

'Two sergeants, eight corporals, forty rank,' Captain Mosley read, 'will embark on Her Majesty's Transport *Simoom* for the port of Bombay.' He raised his head slowly. 'The draft will be permitted to take five wives, to be chosen by lot.'

*

The dawn of Whit Sunday rose with a viciousness that boded another day of excruciating heat. To the westward, the sepoy were already active, and the riflemen had scarcely boiled tea before puffballs of smoke through the far

dust told of the remaining rebel guns opening fire. This morning, nobody considered Colonel Jones comical when the fat little man stumped from his tent, buckling his sword-belt. If white-bearded little Jonesy could do it, then so could the hard-bitten battalion, and today a lot of bleedin' Pandies were going to eat dirt.

The dead of the previous day were buried under a solitary babul tree at the nine-mile stone of the Delhi road — Captain Andrews and ten others — there being no time for anything more than the few words of the burial service. With the causeway open, the Carabineers advanced as far as an abandoned toll-bar where an East India Company sign, listing dues for carriages, bullock-*tongas*, *dak-gharries* and livestock, had been torn down. The sepoys' guns in the charred village were beginning to find their range on the road, and the Cape horses were becoming unmanageable. Captain Rosser reported apologetically to Colonel Jones that he was unable to progress further and must even withdraw his tugging, terrified horses if the village guns were not silenced. He was damn sorry, and if he ever got his hands on the imbecile who suggested these blasted Cape mules —

It was the battle of yesterday again, and later Joseph would find difficulty in separating the events of the different days. Two companies of the 60th in column, with rifles trailed, trotted past the chagrined Carabineers and the wide-flung toll-bar. A quarter-mile further, halting, they turned into extended line.

'Load balls! Fix swords!'

They were anxious to have done before the sun reached its shattering worst. Already, the glare was hurting half-closed eyes, with the men's shirts sodden with sweat. The sword-bayonets glittered, clattering, then rose.

“A” and “D” Companies — Foooor-WARD!'

The long, irregular line lurched forward, walking. They would cover as

much ground as possible at an easy pace, and the sepoy gunners would need a little time to re-lay their guns. There was a familiar, jingling rumble, and Tombs' incredible battery came bucketing around the far flank with gun-wheels bouncing madly and the full-stretched horses lathered. Thank Christ for Tombs! The artillery received the compliment of a gravel-throated cheer as they crashed to a halt. Thank Christ for Tombs — and thank Christ for English horses — and the crazy bastards had opened fire before the Pandies —

But only just. There was a chatter of musket shots from the shabby tangle of buildings, and then the crump-crump-crump of field pieces, well hidden. 'Double march — !' The riflemen broke into a slouching trot, and the dust swirled. On the left an artillery lieutenant, crouched over his sights, jerked and slumped, coughing blood, and ahead of Joseph Dando the youthful figure of Ensign Napier suddenly sprawled as if cut down by a scythe.

There was no time to pause, and better not to look. Other men were down, and someone was shouting for *dhoolie*-bearers. Ahead was a swarming anthill of red coats, white-trousered legs running among loop-holed walls, jeering voices shouting '*Maro Feringhee!*' There's too bleedin' many of 'em, Joseph seethed. There's bleedin' thousands of 'em. How could a thin line of riflemen fight soddin' thousands? It jest weren't right.

'Halt and take cover!'

It was none too soon. To even survive, the riflemen must keep the sepoy at a distance from which their Brown Bess muskets were almost useless. The Enfield rifle, with its long-range precision, was the only trump card the 60th had — but where did anyone take cover on a table-top, sun-hardened plain with scarcely an undulation for miles? The riflemen went to earth, legs splayed and cursing, the sun clawing at their backs and the dust broiling under them.

‘Don’t waste a ball. Don’t snatch. Pick yer man, an’ aim fer the gut. Fire when yer ready.’ They knew the drill — firing, then twisting onto their backs, biting away the endpaper of a fresh cartridge, emptying its powder into the rifle barrel and hammering the butt between the feet, reversing the cartridge to ram home the ball, and finally twisting back on elbows with one hand groping in a pocket for a copper percussion cap. It was a drill used by the 60th since its raising in 1755 from among the backwoodsmen of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia, as the Royal American Regiment — to the annoyance of the ‘brass and pipeclay,’ who preferred to stand in drilled lines, firing like machines in the time-honoured manner of Waterloo, Vimiero, and Salamanca.

In the hospital tent on the eastern bank of the Hindun, Ensign Everard Lisle Phillips, late of the 11th Native Infantry, wished fervently that he could be anywhere else in the world. Well, he had volunteered to accompany the Delhi Field Force in any capacity rather than remain with the women in Meerut, but he had never envisaged that, when the fighting began, he would find himself a surgeon's assistant.

The tent was hot, chokingly airless, and stinking of chloroform anaesthetic. A low trestle table was draped by a stained tarpaulin, and on a canvas stool was a clutter of instruments — an amputating knife, saw, two or three tenacula, artery forceps, needles and waxed hemp ligatures. At the surgeon's feet was a bucket of blood-coloured water.

Both Phillips and Surgeon Innes streamed with sweat. ‘Put the tube into his mouth,’ Innes instructed. ‘Hold his nostrils, keep the sponge wet, and squeeze gently.’ From a distance, across the river, they could hear the rumble of gunfire, faint shouting, but none of it was their business. On the table was stretched Ensign Napier, his breeches cut away to reveal a left leg which was a shredded horror from the thigh downwards. Innes was testing a knife-edge

with his thumb. 'A few drops more, Mr. Phillips, then I think he will do.'

Innes' hands were large, like a boilermaker's, but deft and amazingly delicate. He grasped the thigh, thrust with the knife and, with two or three rapid sawing movements, fashioned a flap of flesh below the amputation point, holding it back with the fingers of his left hand. Several more lightning movements of the knife shaped the second flap, and under went the big thumb. 'Saw, Mr. Phillips, if you please. I shall require you to take this artery. I need both hands.'

Phillips drew a deep breath. B'God, why couldn't he be out there on the Doab, in the dust and heat and gunfire? He knew himself to be as white-faced as the unconscious Napier on the table. He counted the saw strokes — five, six, seven — and then, chillingly, the surgeon took the severed, mangled lower leg from the table and dropped it into a box of sand. Phillips hardly saw the rest — the femoral artery taken up on a tenaculum and tied with two stout ligatures, other vessels with bow forceps and single thread, a strip of lint wetted in the bucket and put between the flaps, and the stump raised. Was it really finished? B'God, was it over?

Innes was wiping his hands with a blood-soaked towel. He grinned. 'With a bit more practice, Mr. Phillips, ye'll make a useful assistant. The first fifty or so are always the worst.' He handed Phillips the towel.

'Will he be all right now?' Phillips' voice was hoarse.

Innes shrugged. 'The amputation's the easiest part — 'specially with anaesthetic, as ye see. There's other complications — gangrene, septicaemia, and God knows what — and India's not the best place.' He looked down at Napier. 'Still, he's young and strong.'

Napier opened his eyes, stared at the roof of the tent, and then began to vomit. Phillips threw down the towel and pulled a grubby handkerchief from a pocket. Napier grimaced, weakly nodding his thanks. 'It's finished?' He

turned his head to the surgeon. 'And I've lost a leg?'

Innes snorted. 'What's a leg, lad? Ye had two of 'em, anyway. Legs are as common as muck. When I was at Guy's, there were damn great heaps o' legs that nobody wanted.'

Napier shivered. 'I'll never lead the 60th again.'

'Rubbish. Lord Raglan was Commander-in-Chief of the British Army with one arm, wasn't he? And how about Nelson?' He chuckled. 'We'll send ye back to Meerut by *tonga*, and ye'll likely be home in England by Christmas, the hero of the Hindun, and all the ladies fluttering around ye like berserk butterflies.'

An orderly sergeant pushed through the tent-flap. 'Mr. Innes, sir. The Brigadier has ordered the 60th to clear the village an' hold it. I thought yer'd like ter know. Yer'll likely want ter be ready.'

Surgeon Innes nodded. 'If ye'll shout for a *dhoolle*, Sergeant, we'll convey Mr. Napier to the mess tent, where the others are. At dusk, they'll be leaving for Meerut — and England.' He winked. 'Don't it make ye wish ye could lose a flaming leg, Sergeant?'

There were nine other wounded in the officers' mess tent, most of them lying naked except for their dressings, sweating, in an oven-like heat and the flies swarming. One was a rifleman, a survivor of yesterday's explosion, with a torso as blackened as a cinder and his face stripped of flesh. Every movement was agony, every breath an excruciating ordeal, but he held a stunted clay pipe between his teeth and made no sound. A *bhistie* sprinkled water to lay the dust, and then sat on his haunches to eat his midmorning *chupatties*. Ensign Napier listened for the gunfire. The 60th were going to clear the village, and he wouldn't be with them. He wouldn't be leading. He didn't want to go to Meerut or England. He wanted his leg back. B'God, wasn't it possible to put back the clock, just a paltry few hours? Wasn't it

possible? Dear God, put back the clock.

He'd barter twenty years for two short hours. He didn't want to go to Meerut.

Ensign Napier did go to Meerut, but no further. They buried him in the little cemetery of St. John's, in the shade, north of the 60th's old cantonments, where the cooling wind of the Himalayas comes unhindered clear from Kashmir, where, in the evening, could be heard the distant bugle and the tramp of feet, the faint music of the band and the sergeants shouting. And he lies there still.

Chapter 7

For a few brief weeks, the eyes of the western world had been on London where, in Hyde Park, a glass palace housed a vast exhibition to unite — so Her Majesty said — the industry of all the nations of the earth. Among palm trees and flowers, statues and fountains, jostling thousands could see giant steam engines, printing presses, cotton from Lancashire, Oriental silk, and the Koh-i-Noor Diamond. The Russian Ambassador presented his imperial master's felicitations while his military attache showed a keen interest in Mr. Colt's new multi-shot pistols. The French delegation was similarly intrigued by Colonel Thornton's seven-barrelled volley gun while a Prussian gentleman with a distinctly military bearing admired the Wedgwood pottery before making lengthy notes on Norton's exploding bullet.

Thirty miles from Hyde Park, in the pay-sergeant's office at Fort Pitt in Chatham, twelve women were assembled to decide by lot which five of them were to accompany their husbands to India. The Battalion in Peshawur had already been absent from England for six years and was unlikely to return for a further ten or twelve; any woman left behind would not see her man again until he had completed his term of service — or even longer. Any commanding officer was entitled to add two years to a man's service if it expired on a foreign station. The woman, perhaps with children, would be abandoned, penniless, and homeless. It was not surprising that Captain Mosley had delegated responsibility for the ballot to Lieutenant Freer, and that young man had passed the sickening task to the pay-sergeant.

The twelve women crowded into the tiny room, silently, with the torment showing only in their eyes. Behind his table, the pay-sergeant held a cigar

box, inside of which, he explained, were twelve folded papers — five marked ‘To go’ and seven ‘Not to go.’ He was unable to meet their gaze. Fifteen years earlier, in Corfu, he had received fifty lashes for a few moments of insubordination, and he had never forgotten that crushing humiliation, but he’d choose the gun-wheel again — aye, b’God, right now — to be relieved of this filthy task.

The husbands waited outside. They did not converse. There was nothing to say. A man’s eyes would clash with those of another and move quickly away or fall to the child that clutched his hand. The children were mute. They did not know what the occasion could mean, but *something* was happening — something that their parents had discussed last night behind the blanket, long after the candle had been snuffed. It was important. It was also sufficiently important for a throng of single men to gather, not mingling with the husbands but grouped apart, staring at the roof, at their boots, whistling softly through their teeth and not knowing what to do with their hands.

There was a murmur of voices from within the office, and the watchers stiffened, turning. A woman emerged, her face ashen, her eyes wide and searching frantically among the frozen riflemen. Her man stepped forward, swallowing at a choked throat, but he could not reach her before her despair exploded. Her mouth twisted. ‘Christ — Geordie — ! I ain’t goin’! Bloody, soddin’ Christ — I ain’t goin’!’ Yards away, Joseph Dando felt his belly heave.

The pay-sergeant was wasting no time. This was a brutality he wanted finished with quickly. There were women sobbing, women flushed and jerkily laughing on their husbands’ arms, children bewildered and, infected by their elders’ moods, jumping excitedly or bursting into tears without knowing why. Meg Garvin, with skirts whirling, flung herself on Steve. ‘Ter ain’t got rid o’ me yet, yer ol’ devil!’ She waved her precious scrap of paper.

‘Ye’ll be buyin’ the beer ternight, Steve — an’ we’ll all be drunker than bleedin’ fiddlers’ bitches.’

Steve Garvin grinned, swallowing uncomfortably and knowing that, if he spoke, he might lose control of his manhood. Then his eyes moved beyond Meg, and a moment later he knew he must run for a latrine. He wanted to retch. Katie Lawrence stood facing her husband, motionless. She seemed, oddly, to have shrunk, and her eyes, in a grey face, were those of a whipped animal. ‘Shure,’ she whispered, ‘I’m tould India kin be a terrible wet place — an’ yer kin niver remember to change ye’ socks — ’

Steve Garvin glanced down at Meg. ‘There’ll be no beer ternight, lass. Not ternight.’ He ran, choking.

*

Her Majesty’s Transport *Simoom* was a new vessel, a steam screw-ship of 2,042 tons and the first to be built specifically for the carrying of troops. A thousand soldiers could be crammed into her — 560 on the long maindeck, 156 on the middle troopdeck, and 250 on the fore troop-deck. There were cabin berths for one field officer and twenty other officers, cots for a further twenty, and, if necessary, space for eight hammocks in the officers’ mess hall. A cramped after compartment provided accommodation for forty-five women and eighty children.

They had marched from Chatham to board her at Gravesend — the forty riflemen in field order, and the five women, with four children riding on the two limbers that hauled the baggage and the officers’ trunks. It was an eight-mile march, and George Lawrence tramped mechanically, his face wooden. Only once, during a brief halt, did he turn to gaze back along the road where, far behind, a woman followed with an infant in her arms and two others stumbling at her side. She did not approach but kept her distance, and she stood on the rain-swept Gravesend jetty long after the *Simoom* had churned

into mid-river and vanished from sight.

In the grey estuary, the transport dug her bows into the long rollers of the North Sea, heeling as she turned towards the Channel and pouring black coal smoke into the sky. Between her decks, her human cargo was busily being sick — women, children, men of the 60th, of the Artillery, the 9th Lancers, the 32nd, 52nd and 98th Foot. There was a four-month voyage ahead of them. They would cross the equator twice, and there would be burials at sea before they reached Bombay. There was one latrine shared by the officers, four shared by seven hundred men. Water would be strictly rationed, with an armed sentry placed at the water tank. For all purposes — cooking, washing, and drinking — officers would be allowed eight imperial quarts per day, the men only four. There would be a further twice-weekly issue of half a gallon for washing clothes, if supplies permitted. In the Bay of Biscay, the deck-spaces would be awash and every stitch of clothing and bedding would be sodden, but south of the Gambia the upper decks would be enclosed by netting to prevent the heat-crazed stokers from throwing themselves over the side and the tar would be bubbling between the planking, the children gasping for air. Within days of departing Gravesend, every person would be lice-ridden and a harassed surgeon would fight a losing battle against dysentery, typhoid, scurvy, and scabies. Closely confined, tempers would fray and women would fight like animals over trivialities. Thirty-three men would be flogged.

North Foreland was to starboard. The gong for officers' mess was sounding — for kidney soup, roast pork and apple sauce, fruit, and Stilton. On the troopdecks, there was salt beef with boiled peas and biscuit.

Four months before they saw the hazy hills of Malabar. Perhaps five.

*

Colonel Jones had no desire to send his six companies against the village.

The sepoys had good cover, and once the riflemen advanced within musket-range on that open plain, they could be torn to pieces. There were five or six thousand mutineers, but they weren't going to stand up and fight.

They didn't need to. They just had to fall back slowly, mile by mile, provoking the *Feringhees* into hopeless attacks, paring down their numbers by tens and dozens until the little force was so reduced that it would be useless. Jones didn't like set-piece, orthodox actions anyway. They were for the brass and pipeclay of the line, not for riflemen. There was a less expensive way — exacting, but less expensive — to keep their distance, intact, snapping at the heels of the sepoy horde, sniping, ambushing, but never being involved toe to toe with the enemy's superior numbers. Harried and frustrated, the sepoys could become a rabble, and then perhaps Delhi might not have the lunar remoteness it did at present.

But Brigadier Archdale Wilson wanted the village taken. The village was of no particular value except that the sepoys occupied it in force, but that was sufficient reason for Wilson to want it. It was the logic of Waterloo, the way of tradition, and the British taxpayer was entitled to good traditional value for his money. Besides, it was time these damn 60th Rifles learned how to stand in line and fight like soldiers.

'Bugler,' Colonel Jones ordered. 'Sound off "Left shoulders forward" and "Advance".' There was a chance that, if he could quickly change his line of approach, he might momentarily confuse the sepoys. The riflemen scrambled to their feet, turned to their right, and ran — a long, double file snaking across the plain towards the flank. The village flamed from end to end, crackling with musket-shots behind a ragged blanket of smoke. Tombs' guns were crashing again, the artillerymen loading and firing with berserk speed.

'Change front left!' The files whirled into line, stumbling, panting, and surged forward again. The sepoy gunners would be clawing their pieces

around, cursing, hampered by their own breast-works. There was thatch burning again, spitting, raining sparks, and whirling soot. The heat embraced them, choking, crushing, tautening the face-flesh and corroding the lungs.

A single sepoy field-piece opened fire with a roar of grape-shot, and there were men down, on their knees, on all fours, sprawling. The advancing riflemen were committed now; they could only go forward. It was too late to turn back, too near to stand still. The officers had their swords out — blunt, ineffectual weapons that many of the cavalry had already abandoned in favour of pig-spears. Officers who had equipped themselves with Colt revolving pistols had also discovered that the .36 picket bullet had little stopping power, and at least one Englishman had been cloven to the teeth by a sepoy's *talwar* after emptying four or five shots into him. The .50 calibre Beau-mont-Adams was less accurate at longer ranges, but it would stop anything on legs with the force of a steam hammer.

‘Watch out fer them festerin’ ammunition *tongas*,’ Joseph shouted. One of the heavy, solid-wheeled waggons stood only yards away, with a company of mutineers falling back around it. One shot striking the *tonga*, accidentally or intentionally, could send its lethal burden exploding into the sky — and a hundred men with it. But the ‘A’ Company men were among the sepoys now — Dando, Brownlow, Tug Wilson and Bill Sutton the bugler, stolid Sergeant Garvin and Irish Holloran, Jamie Bathurst and Moss Rose — iron-tough, slum-reared men, driven to animal savagery by heat and dust, by the casualties of yesterday, the memory of Meerut and the stories of Delhi. They wanted to kill bleedin’ Pandies, to smash them into the ground with bullet, sword, butt and steel-tipped boot, to stab and slash, snarling incomprehensible obscenities, and to teach these shit-faced sods that they couldn’t play old bucko with the *Ruffel ka-Pultan*, the Rifles —

‘Drive ‘em clear of that blasted waggon!’ Captain Williams swept them

forward. The ground was thick with powder from broken gun-charges and the air swirled with sparks and burning wisps of straw. It was a perilous position, but there was no choosing. The sepoy, scrambling to change front, to form new ranks in the choking smoke from which to receive the advancing 60th, were milling in confusion. The shouting *jemadars*, slashing with their canes, were losing control, and red coats were breaking away. 'Keep'em moving! Don't give'em time to reload!' Wilson snap-fired twice at the nearest group of mutineers, then ran at them. They scattered. Joseph Dando aimed at the white belt of a bearded, cavern-mouthed *havildar*-major. 'Pick the bones out o' that,' he spat, 'yer louse-arsed bastard!'

Major Tombs' guns had fallen silent, but the rebel nine-pounder that had fired a round of grapeshot had hastily limbered and was withdrawing. With it, more sepoy were disappearing into the smoke. A bugle was braying 'Retire,' followed by a discordant second and then a third. For a few seconds, the sepoy's massed centre wavered. A determined rush could still have deluged over the thinly-spread riflemen who crouched and ran among the scorched and shell-broken walls of the village. Then, lacking concerted command, the last shreds of discipline melted. A few groups of the more determined — *subadars*, *jemadars*, *havildars* and *naiks*, older men, some white-bearded and with John Company medals on their chests — remained firm, fighting doggedly until shot or cut down, but the rest were streaming away behind their guns, their heads lowered against the great pall of yellow dust that was enveloping them, lashing at their bullocks and shouting insults at the *Feringhees* behind them.

Joseph Dando and Tom Brownlow, filthy from dust and smoke, lips powder-blackened and bleeding, prodded the bullocks of the ammunition *tonga* into motion with their swords, driving them towards the river and away from the cascading sparks. The bullocks, free of the smoke, could smell water

and, crazed with thirst after hours in the open sun, thrust into their yokes with tongues out-thrust and eyes swelling. Iron-rimmed wheels screamed, pulverising the stones beneath as the cumbrous vehicle lurched and swayed threateningly, but, if its parched woodwork held together, the bullocks would not halt until they were belly-deep in the Hindun.

An hour later, when the sepoys were beyond gun-range across the plain and still withdrawing, Colonel Jones picked his way among his new positions. 'Who were the two men who drove off the bullock cart?'

Joseph climbed to his feet. 'Me an' my rear-rank man, sir — Brownlow.'

The Colonel raised his pince-nez. 'Ah — the two hangmen, eh? Didn't I give ye both two days confined to barracks?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And did ye ever do it?'

'No, sir. Yer see, there ain't no barracks — '

Jones nodded. 'Well, ye deserve a flogging for the deliberate loss of government property — four bullocks, a waggon, and a hundred nine-pound gun-charges, but I'll suspend punishment. Ye probably saved the lives of ye' entire Company.'

There was no possibility of advancing beyond the village. The men had reached a condition of extreme exhaustion and were incapable of moving a step further. Two had been killed and six wounded, but twelve had collapsed from sunstroke, of whom four would be dead before the following dawn. Others, gulping down water left by the sepoys, were rocked by stomach cramps and vomiting. The riflemen sank to the ground where they halted, crawled into shaded corners, and lay prostrate, gasping for breath from open, slimed mouths, heedless of falling soot, crawling flies, of anything.

Water came up at last — warm, muddy water in the goatskin *massaks* of the trotting *bhisties*, taken from a Hindun river fouled by cattle, village refuse,

and the native *dhobie*-women, but at that moment more welcome than heaven-sent nectar. The chastened Carabineers had flung a dozen vedettes to the westward; the troopers kicking their horses into some semblance of discipline before the midday ration carts arrived. There was stringy salt beef — more usually referred to as ‘red mutton’ in case it had to be issued to Hindu troops — and choke-dog biscuits that the men preferred to soften by frying if possible. In cantonments there might have been the additional luxury of hard peas — still hard after six hours boiling — and a measure of belly-gripping lime-juice, but there was no time for pampering in the field. British soldiers had fought on salt beef and biscuits for two hundred years, from the frozen wastes of Canada to the furnace climate of Afghanistan. Besides, the rank and file simply didn’t want different food, claimed the pundits. Improve rations, and spoil the soldier.

*

There were more important things than rations that the fatigued soldiers knew nothing of. A galloper from Meerut had brought Chief Commissioner Greathed’s plea that the force retrace its steps immediately. The telegraph wires to Agra had been cut, Meerut was entirely isolated, and two companies of the 60th were just not enough for defence. Delhi could wait. The safety of Meerut, with its hundreds of refugees, its strategic value to the Company, its stores, offices, and properties, was more important.

Brigadier Wilson was uncertain. The loss of Meerut in his rear would be a disaster, but his orders from the Commander-in-Chief had been to march for Delhi, to join the larger force descending from Ambala — the 9th Lancers, the 75th and 101st Infantry, six companies of the 104th, and two troops of Horse Artillery. Failure to comply with those orders could also be disastrous for the Europeans, yet Wilson could not be sure that his own six companies of the 60th and the Carabineers could even achieve the arranged rendezvous

at Baghpat, north of Delhi. They had taken the crossing at Ghazi-ud-din Nagar, pushed back an enemy seven times their number from the river, but there were limits to what could be done by eight hundred men. Still — no, they couldn't return to Meerut. That was unthinkable after all this. Meerut, dammit, must fend for itself.

And he couldn't afford to send back even a half company. God alive — ! If Meerut did fall, followed by the massacre of its Europeans, the blame would be centred on him — Wilson. He would be castigated for abandoning hundreds of people to butchery in defiance of an appeal from the civil authority. Worse could follow. If Meerut did fall behind him, and the 60th were unable to fight their way to the Jumna River at Baghpat, they would be in limbo, cut off from any help, with sick and wounded increasing, food and ammunition dwindling daily — a hopeless, nomadic band for which there could be only one ultimate end. Brigadier Wilson entertained no illusions about his force's chances. They were slim. By tonight, the sepoys' leaders in Delhi would know exactly how few in number the advancing Europeans were and might decide that it was no longer necessary to progressively fall back on the city, that one determined action would finish the whole business. Caught on the open Doab by the rebels' full weight of horse, foot, and artillery, the Rifles and Carabineers could scarcely avoid being overrun.

When the men had been fed and rested, Colonel Jones ordered the collection of rubble and timber for the building of a breast-high *sangar* around the position, and sentries detailed for the evening. There was little fear of sepoys approaching without warning from the cavalry vedettes, but there was another danger — the *goojars*, the professional thieves who could move through the darkness with snake-like silence, often naked with bodies greased, stealing weapons, equipment, ammunition, and even tethered horses. It was customary to shoot them on sight; a moment's hesitation could be

rewarded by a lightning knife-thrust in the chest.

The *goojars* had their female counterparts, and when, with the cool of dusk, natives from Ghazi-ud-din Nagar roamed the lines with goats' milk, juices, *chupatties*, sweetmeats, and pulla — the muddy-tasting river fish — they had to be carefully watched for the sleight of hand that could remove a watch from a cummerbund or rupees from a pocket. Some of the natives, it was certain, would be spying for the Delhi sepoys, counting men, guns, ammunition waggons, and listening for snatches of conversation. What they saw were tramping sentries, with the off-duty men sleeping on their rifles, all artillery pieces loaded, positioned, and manned by helmeted gunners and, distant, the vedettes at their horses' heads, scanning a horizon into which the great orange ball of the sun was splintering.

The conversation might have baffled an Indian *ryot*.

'Did we bring any rum?' the Colonel inquired.

Ensign Heathcote nodded. 'Fifty gallons, sir,'

'Then ye can issue a gill to every man.'

Patrick Holloran gave a whoop. 'God bless ye, Colonel, sorr. May ye honour's cow niver run dry.'

The Colonel's eyes twinkled. 'I trust it will not, Rifleman.' He glanced about him. 'Where are the two hangmen?'

Dando and Brownlow stepped forward.

'There's a small task,' Jones said, 'that with ye' professional leanings, ye shouldn't find difficult. I want another gallows built — a portable one that can be dismantled and carried in one of the carts. Let the natives see ye building and testing it. At every halt, I shall want it assembled in a prominent position.' He paused. 'We are going to show that the Queen's justice is still being exercised in India. The gallows will be for civil criminals — *goojars*, *bud-mashes*, men or women. Military prisoners — sepoys — will be blown

from the muzzles of guns.'

*

For the second time in less than a month, Bahadur Shah watched the dusty sepoy streaming across the bridge of boats into the city. There was, however, a difference. On the first occasion, they had stamped through the Calcutta Gate, drunk with bravado and shouting that the *Feringhee* soldiers were worthless pigs, cowards, and imposters, ready for slaughter. The warrior Hindu and the valiant Mussulman were both worth ten of these unclean English, smelling of beer and tobacco, sweating and blistering in the sun, and striding about as if they were god-kings.

This time there was no shouting. The sepoy slouched sullenly, their pipe-clayed trousers filthy, tunics torn. Many were wounded — shattered faces swathed in blood-soaked turban cloths, white facings slimed with crimson, men limping, reeling, clutching a smashed shoulder, an arm that hung uselessly, dripping. The road behind them, for ten miles, was littered with abandoned dead and the thirst-crazed maimed, who cursed with their last, choking breath the arrogant Mirza Abu Bakr, the handsome one, who had led them out to drive the English into the Hindun River.

Old Bahadur Shah was spitefully amused. This fine son of his, who thought himself another conquering Mogul, had reached the river with six thousand troops, British-trained, disciplined, and equipped, with their own native officers. First, he had claimed, they would sweep away the contemptible little force of Wilson Sahib, then swoop on Meerut. But in two days, he had been soundly thrashed by a few hundred of the *Ruffel ka-pultan* (the greencoat Rifles), losing his guns, his supplies, hundreds of infantry, and most of his reputation. Bahadur Shah was amused. The fighting cocks had discovered they were only dirt-scratching fowls, and they had been torn by hawks.

There were others in Delhi not displeased at the sepoy's discomfiture.

Hundreds of merchants, artisans, and servants were rueing their exchange of masters. Trade had shrunk. There was little paid employment. The streets and ditches were becoming choked with filth, the lawns overgrown, the police had vanished, and footpads, many in uniform, prowled the city. *Gharri-tats* drooped in their shafts; there were no Company Sahibs to take to the Chadni Chauk, no mem-sahibs for tea. The Amm-Kan — the Hall of Justice — stabled the *sowars'* horses, its floors fouled by dung and straw. St. James's Church, the native college, the Delhi Bank, all with smashed windows and broken doors, were stripped of furnishings, desolate, shelters for vagrants. Delhi, without Europeans, was a city of dirt and growing dilapidation.

In the garden below the old King's window in the Dewan-Kass, the cataract had ceased to splash and the jasmine had died and shrivelled for lack of watering. What was to happen to the Ruler of the Universe? Had not he been securely seated on a goodly bough of a flourishing tree? And had not his own act sawn asunder the branch on which he rested? Why hadn't General Hewitt and his white soldiers marched to Delhi on the first day of the mutiny? Every day new bodies of sepoys swarmed into the city, and every day they demanded their pay from the Palace. But the old King's finances were draining; there was no longer his pension from John Company, no obliging Mr. Berresford at the Delhi Bank. There was no Delhi Bank.

He had his women still, of course — the soft, young ones whose names he could never remember — but his privacy had gone. The palace echoed with the clashing feet of strangers, men with loud voices and bad manners who had no patience for the customs and protocol of a thousand years and laughed at him behind his back. Even his women, he suspected, were listless and impatient for him to finish with them. There were lustier lovers waiting below.

One development, however, afforded him a warped satisfaction, and he was

going to enjoy telling the shaken Mirza Abu Bakr. Wilson Sahib's little force of Europeans was not the only one approaching Delhi. The old King still retained the remnants of an intelligence service, and it had told him of a *Feringhee* army under the Commander-in-Chief General George Anson — three regiments of infantry, one of cavalry, and horse artillery — marching steadily down the Grand Trunk Road from Ambala towards the Jumna at Baghpat. And there was yet a third force, small but significant — six hundred Goorkhas, following the course of the Hindun, southward from Deyhra Dhoon, who would, within hours, reinforce the *Ruffel ka-Pultan* of Brigadier Wilson and Colonel Jones. It was going to be amusing to see his son's face. The English were not all running in terror for their ships. A lot of them were marching on Delhi. Even worse, not all native soldiers had mutinied. Some of them were marching on Delhi also.

*

The vedettes had come clattering into the village soon after dawn, all dust, sweat, and determination, to report the approach of a column of troops from the northward, with baggage carts and, it seemed, women. The 60th stood to arms, the few local natives scattering and the artillerymen wrenching their guns around with hand-spikes to bear on the river. Brigadier Wilson stood with a glass to his eye, searching for the telltale yellow haze without which nothing could move on the Doab. Surgeon Innes laid out his instruments on his canvas stool.

Three officers, thirty-eight men, and two native auxiliaries were already dead, wounded, or prostrate with sunstroke — an uncomfortably high percentage of the force's total, and presenting an even more serious problem. The seriously wounded and sick could not be adequately cared for under the crude conditions of a punitive expedition. They could only be sent back to the hospital at Meerut. That meant bullock-*tongas*, or at least *dhoolie*-bearers,

and a small escort on every occasion — a constant drain of effective strength. If the Rifles' losses continued at the rate of the last two days, they would cease to exist in just over a fortnight.

The riflemen were refilling their canteens from the *bhisties'* goatskin bags — water that was already clouded and sour-smelling. There was a new notion that boiling somehow reduced the hazards of dysentery and cholera, but it was all bleedin' nonsense. How could boiling do anything to water except make it soddin' 'ot?

Surgeon Innes' hospital supplies were totally inadequate for the needs of even the briefest action. Restricted to two small panniers carried by a pony, he had his surgical instruments — which the army required him to provide at his own expense — a few rolls of dressings, sutures, a bottle of chloroform, a little brandy, some quinine, liquorice powder, sulphur ointment, castor oil, soap, and six small tins of beef extract. The "hospital" was a bell tent, lit at night by a single, smoking oil lamp, and Innes was compelled to utilise the slightly larger officers' mess tent for post-surgical cases. He had no trained assistance, no utensils except a copper kettle and a bucket. A single day of heavy fighting could empty every item from his panniers and leave him almost helpless.

It was beginning to get hot. Neither Wilson nor Jones wanted to keep the men standing to arms for no purpose, and there was no sign of an approaching enemy. The sun could scythe down the riflemen more viciously than rebel muskets. Brigadier Wilson snapped his glass shut with an impatient snort. 'Rosser! Where's that damn officer who reported enemy infantry?'

A cavalry subaltern stepped forward. 'Sir?'

Wilson glared at him. 'Are you sure you saw infantry, man, and not a crowd of blasted *ryots*?'

The subaltern coloured. 'I'm quite sure, sir.'

'Native Infantry, in column, eh?'

'Yes, sir.'

'How many did you calculate?'

The subaltern hesitated. 'Six or seven hundred — a battalion. It was a little difficult, sir. There was a lot of dust, and they were some miles distant.'

'Some *miles*! You're saying that you didn't approach nearer than *some miles*? What the hell do you think you're on vedette duty for? And do you even know what a damn battalion looks like?' Wilson was sweating. 'Six or seven hundred infantry in column, with carts and women, eh? Blast you, man, I'll tell you what you saw. A dozen village peasants and a bullock plough. Are you suggesting that six hundred sepoys are marching on this position when six thousand couldn't do it yesterday?'

The subaltern choked back his own annoyance. This was the second time that the loud voice of Brigadier Wilson had ridiculed him in the presence of others. Dammit, he knew what a column of native troops looked like, didn't he? He'd seen them all right, and so had his troopers. This was what happened when Queen's soldiers were commanded by a querulous fool of a John Company officer. 'I'm sure I was not mistaken, sir. If you'll allow me to take out another patrol — '

'Good God! And have you discover a brigade of Russian Cossacks — ?'

From a short distance away there came a rifle shot, and then a shout of '*Dhoolie!*' A rifleman had fallen on his face, his weapon exploding as he crashed. He was the first, and there could be a dozen more within the hour. In Madras or Bombay, a sunstroke victim could be packed in ice, but there was nothing on the Doab except warm, polluted water from the Hindun. Ice! Christ, Joseph Dando mused — what couldn't we do with some bleedin' ice? He recalled the winter-frozen pump at the Society for the Relief of Destitute

Young Persons and the Wandle River at Merton, when the whole world was white crystal and the horses' breath feathered in the cold air. It was bleedin' queer how nobody thought ice was anything special until he came to somewhere like the Doab.

In the Mian Mir cantonments, near Lahore — where they had night frosts in winter — the Europeans made their own ice. Two or three deep pits, with well-rammed sides, were dug and covered with thatched roofs. When the winter frosts began, in mid-December, small earthenware saucers were laid in rows in the surrounding field and filled with water daily, which froze during the night. At dawn, the saucers of ice were emptied into the pits, rammed hard and covered. When the frosts stopped, in February, the pits were closed and remained undisturbed until the hot weather began in April. In a good year the store of ice, with care, might last until the following September. Mind — it weren't barrack-room riflemen what got ice, bugger it. Ice was for officers' whisky-sodas and mem-sahibs' *mitlia pani*. Nobody dug ice-pits for the benefit of soddin' riflemen.

Captain Charles Rosser was also feeling concern for the two squadrons of Carabineers drawn up on the plain towards the road. They were clad in red and blue serge tunics and breeches, Hessian boots, tall, peaked leather hats — the same serge in which they had embarked at Southampton eight months before and in which their sister dragoon regiments had fought through the vicious Crimean winter. They had their cloaks rolled on the front of their saddles, and their horses were burdened with sheepskins and throat plumes. Tombs of the Artillery had already ordered his gunners to cut the collars from their coats, and Rosser was tempted to do the same for his own men, but dress correctness was the first discipline of a recruit, and a large percentage of the Carabineers were scarcely more than recruits who should still be trotting the tan of the riding school.

*

Rosser could well recall the riding school.

‘Ride! March! Trot! Trot out! Quit your stirrups! Canter! Trot! Walk! Ride! Halt!’ There would be early morning squadron drill on Hounslow Heath or Wormwood Scrubs, with the mist reaching up to the horses’ bellies and soaking the leathers. Breakfast in the mess, an hour or two asleep in an armchair, then perhaps an hour with the sabre in the gymnasium. With half the officers always absent on leave, the afternoons were periods of boredom, and young Charles Rosser, with only his army pay, had nothing to spare for the small luxuries that made an officer’s life tolerable — membership of Pratt’s or White’s, Turkish baths, whist at a pound a point, racing at Sandown, a small house in Chiswick. Charlie Rosser’s pay as a subaltern had been four-and-sixpence a day, from which dinner in the mess cost two shillings, wine one shilling, servant sixpence, breakfast sixpence, and washing, mending, and cleaning sixpence — total four-and-sixpence. Nor did Her Majesty pay for his uniform — tunic, helmet, breeches, jack-boots, overalls, frock-coat, patrol jacket, and stable jacket — and he was perpetually in debt to his tailor. An officer with private means could maintain two chargers and a civilian groom, late-night champagne and chicken, the opera, partridge shooting, and good cigars. Charlie Rosser had shared a groom with two others and occasionally shot a few snipe and hares on Wimbledon Common with a borrowed gun. Promoted to lieutenant, with an increase of pay to five-and-threepence, he could enjoy a supper of eggs, bacon, and beer, and watch, in mufti, a melodrama at the Coburg Theatre — ‘With one hand I tore the faithless woman from his damned embrace, and with the other stabbed my brother to the heart!’ In funds, he might visit the Cremorne Gardens — ‘Open at three. Dinner at four. Teas at six. The Cremorne Supper at nine. The Dogs and Monkeys. Loisset’s Grand Circus. The Ballet at ten.

The Grand Display of Fireworks at eleven. Only one shilling admittance.' He walked. The price of a hansom meant no breakfast on the morrow.

He was a captain now, and could expect to remain so until retirement, he would never afford another step. He'd heard of one infantry officer who was a serving captain of forty-seven years' service who had fought at Waterloo, whose Lieutenant-Colonel was the only other officer in the regiment who had been alive in 1815 — two years old. There was, of course, the slight chance of brevet promotion in the field as a result of the deaths of officers above him, and India had seemed more promising than home service after the 6th Dragoons had missed the Crimea. There was usually fighting of some kind in India with, in addition, the hazards of cholera, smallpox, bubonic plague, dysentery, typhoid, malaria, rabies, and pneumonia. For a hundred years, junior officers had toasted, after mess dinner, 'Here's to a bloody war!'

*

Brigadier Wilson dismounted and gave the reins of his horse to an orderly. 'We'll stand the men down, Colonel Jones, if you please. There'll be *darbar* at my tent at ten for all field ranks. In the meantime — '

'Dust! There's dust, sir — by the river — '

Archdale Wilson whirled, tearing open his glass. There was dust, sure enough, and alarmingly close. It had remained unseen until now because whoever caused it was clinging to the depression of the Hindun River — and whoever caused it was less than a mile away.

'Load balls! Fix swords!'

'Load! — and Ram! Cock your locks!'

Minutes later, the column broke into view, a battalion in threes, climbing from the river's edge. In its rear followed laden carts, a straggle of women, and even a few children. They were brown-skinned soldiers, in good order, with picquets leading and to flank, and the men in the village could hear the

inevitable, distant screech-screech of *tonga* wheels and the occasional shouts of the drivers as they urged their beasts up the slope of the river bank. The village was silent, watching. There was no sign that the approaching natives were about to deploy into line or were even aware of an enemy's proximity. Certainly it was unlikely that six hundred mutineers would deliberately advance on a superior number of Europeans behind barricades, yet surely they could, by now, see the village with its tents, waggons, horse-lines, guns and, beyond it, the pawing ranks of the Carabineers?

'This,' said Joseph Dando gleefully, 'is goin' ter be easy.' The effect of a volley of the Enfields' minie bullets and Tombs' grapeshot on the closely-formed, marching column would be devastating. The natives would be torn down in their scores, swept away as if by a giant broom. Joseph, kneeling, drew a sight on the leading trio. It was impossible to miss.

'Don't fire! Fer Chris' sake! Them's white officers!'

'Hold ye' fire! Uncock ye' locks and stand clear o' the guns!'

Four hundred yards away, the approaching column was wheeling, marching to attention. The officers turned — European officers in flat, broadcloth caps, dark tunics and white pantaloons — and behind them the column halted, turned into line. A bugle teetered 'Still,' and the officers' swords rose in salute and fell.

'B'God, they're Goorkhas.' Wilson groped for his bandana. 'It was a damn close thing.'

Goorkhas? The tensed, suspicious riflemen stared across the Doab. They were black bastards, weren't they? They were soddin' Pandies. Dogras, Bengalis, Punjabis, Mahrattas, Goorkhas — what difference did it make? There was only one medicine for bleedin' Pandies.

'Major Reid, Sirmoor Battalion, 2nd Goorkhas Regiment.' A tanned officer stood before Archdale Wilson. 'From Deyhra Dhoon, sir. My orders are to

accompany your line of route for Baghpat.'

Wilson nodded, but uncertain. A reinforcement of six hundred infantrymen could make a considerable difference to his command, make it a force to be reckoned with. But sepoys — ?

'I'm delighted to see you, Major. Your men are looking well.' His eyes flickered over the motionless ranks of Goorkhas. 'They're armed, with ammunition?'

'Yes, sir.' Reid was mildly surprised. 'A hundred rounds per man. We've had *sowars* on our flanks for the past eighty miles or so, not near enough to teach 'em a lesson, but we had the pleasure of joining some of your 6th Dragoons in cutting up some sepoy sappers, near Meerut, after they'd killed their officers.'

Wilson plucked at his lip. 'Excellent.' He hesitated. 'You're completely confident of your battalion's loyalty, Major?' A score of other commanders had sworn confidence in their men and had been murdered for it. If there existed the slightest doubt about the Goorkhas, now was the time to settle with them. The 60th were behind cover, rifles held ready. The artillery pieces were loaded and aimed. It could be all over in a few seconds.

'*Confident*, sir?' Reid frowned, his voice pained. He looked over his shoulder at his waiting men. 'These aren't Indian sepoys, sir. They're Goorkhas. Nepalese. They've given their oath.'

Archdale Wilson knew all about Nepal and the Goorkhas. Since the Anglo-Nepalese War in 1814, the East India Company had been permitted to maintain three regiments of infantry recruited from the hill tribes of Nepal, an independent kingdom. They had always been good soldiers, courageous, honest, humorous — but so had been the Bengal Light Cavalry, the Punjab Infantry, and the highly-trained Bengal Engineers. They had still mutinied. The Goorkhas were also Hindu, if only loosely, and must nurse some

sympathy for the disgruntled sepoy. And what if Nepal espoused the mutineers' cause? The King of Nepal was a mere figurehead; the real power in Katmandu was the chief minister, Jung Bahadur Rana, friendly so far, but few independent native princes could, at this moment, be believing in a reconquest of India by the few, scattered British. Jung Bahadur might decide that it was time for a change. If he did, what price Reid's Goorkhas then?

Archdale Wilson sighed. 'Reid, you'd better be right. There are some damn ugly precedents — Finnis at Meerut, Smith at Fatehgarh, Simpson at Allahabad, Spottiswoode at Benares. Dammit, we'd *both* better be right.' He paused. 'You'll perhaps be a little tolerant if the European troops are distrustful of your own. They've good cause. All the same, I'll order fifty lashes for any Queen's soldier who picks trouble with a Nepalese. The regulations don't allow me to do the same with a Goorkha, but if there's the slightest suggestion of unrest, I shall have no hesitation in disarming your battalion at gunpoint, and, if necessary — ' he drew a deep breath, ' — shooting them down. I'm sorry, Major.'

There was a white ring around Reid's mouth, beneath his tan. He inclined his head. 'I understand, sir.'

*

'They're queer-looking buggers, ain't they?' Tom Brownlow said. They look more like bleedin' Chinamen than Indoos. I wonder wot their wimmin is like?'

The Goorkhas were certainly queer-looking buggers — short-statured, sturdy, Mongolian, and varying in complexion from honey to dark brown. A few had long, trailing moustaches, most had shaven heads and, when they removed their small, band-box hats, all revealed a long, black tuft of hair growing from the crown. In the blinding heat of the Doab they were raising their tents, swarming little brown men, chattering and shouting '*Jai-lo*' and

‘*Jhunto*’. One of them waved a cheery hand at the distant, watching riflemen and laughed. ‘*Taggra raho.*’

‘Cheeky bastard,’ Joseph spat.

Brownlow cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, ‘When did yer larst see ‘Ong Kong, yer slant-eyed sods?’

The delighted subject of his enquiry waved his hand again. ‘You kiss my arse, hey? You got any rum?’

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At the *darbar* table, Major Charles Reid sat sullenly, speaking as briefly as possible only when addressed. He was an outsider, an interloper among these Queen’s officers who planned to kill sepoy and glanced at him apologetically when they spoke of ‘Pandies’ and ‘the blacks.’ They were clearly uncomfortable about the Goorkhas, and he was unable to even attempt explaining that Queen’s officers just didn’t understand. They were incapable of understanding their own men. At best they were only condescending, at worst viciously unfeeling. How, then, could they understand Goorkhas?

In the mess at Deyhra Dhoon, there had been an old Gurung who, it was claimed, had fought against John Company in 1814 and had been among the first to enlist in its service. It was not unlikely. Frail and bent, he did little now but gentle dusting and painstaking silver-polishing, and it was a milestone in a subaltern’s regimental career when the old patriarch acknowledged him by name. The ranks saluted him with a respectful ‘Salaam’ — a courtesy he accepted as if it were his natural right, but nobody laughed. When the battalion marched, he bowed before Reid and made his longest speech for many years. ‘I am an old man, Sahib, and I think I shall not see you again. May your Lord God Almighty, which gentleman your Honour greatly resembles, grant you safety and the best of luck.’ That was something, Reid considered, which couldn’t be told to Queen’s officers.

At eighteen, Reid had achieved his cadetship of the Military College of the Honourable East India Company at Addiscombe, and he remembered well how, on his first day, the long list of regimental titles had read like some great thunder of drums — the Bengal Artillery, the Madras European Infantry, the Bombay Engineers, the Madras Native Infantry, the Bengal Light Cavalry, the Sikh Infantry. He remembered the distinctive smell of the trophy room, particularly when the sun was hot through the windows, of wax and dusty uniforms, the Afghan *talwars*, the brass *jezails* of long dead Pathans, camel saddles, daggers, shredded flags, drums, the sad, horse-tail plumes of helmets, a stuffed tiger shot by some forgotten Company Sahib, stained letters and spider-written diaries. The trophy room was a place that belonged to the dead, and young Reid had always experienced an odd aversion to remaining in it alone. It wasn't that he believed in ghosts. It just seemed that all these faded remnants shouldn't be here. They were vaguely repulsive, and had no place in the young, sunlit world of the living.

Although in later years he did not know why, he had initially harboured a desire to be an artilleryman, but his examination results were inadequate. Cadetships in military engineering and gunnery were offered only to the higher-qualified candidates who, after two years at Addiscombe, were sent to either the School of Military Engineering at Chatham or the Artillery Depot at Woolwich. For no logical reason an infantry appointment required higher marks than one in the cavalry, and young Charles Reid found himself destined for the Company's 2nd Regiment of Goorkha Infantry.

Not all of his fellows considered that their vocation lay in the military field. There was no money in soldiering, and many had every intention, after a few years, of transferring to the civil arm of the Company. That was the way to live in India. In any case, all military operations were subordinate to civil jurisdiction. Why sweat in some Godforsaken outpost for ninety-five pounds

per year, at the beck and call of every snotty-nosed clerk, when you might be a Commissioner with fifteen servants? Everyone knew that a civilian's salary was a negligible fraction of his income by other channels.

England and Addiscombe were beautiful. He remembered that. He remembered the great, green elm trees that rustled against skies blue and cool, the rooks of summer, and the Sunday church bells on the still air of an English evening, and lilac, boating parties, and the giant snowball, seven feet in diameter, that he and the other cadets had rolled down the hill into the High Street. He remembered those things in the scrub-hills of the Punjab, pinned down by the sniper-fire of invisible Pathans, short of ammunition and water, and with seven hours of white-hot sun before darkness curtained a safe withdrawal. He remembered those things, too, when he found the corpse of one of his men, captured and then abandoned, pegged out on the ground, castrated, blinded, and flayed.

Charles Reid did not expect to see England and Addiscombe again. 'No officer,' protested a member of Parliament, 'who goes to India can say when he will return. He must either leave his bones or his regiment in India — a species of cruelty practised by no other Government in the world.'

And Charles Reid would leave his bones in India; he could never abandon his Goorkhas. But to see them disarmed? He had heard of the bitter scenes at Amritsar and Mooltan, where English troops and artillery had ordered the native infantry to pile their arms. They had obeyed, humiliated, and their own white officers, in tears, had broken their swords over their knees. That was another thing that Queen's officers wouldn't understand.

Chapter 8

They'd seen plenty of floggings before. There had been none during their brief Chatham days among recruits still awed by a sergeant's rhetoric, but there had been thirty-three aboard the *Simoom* — for theft of water or kit, for fighting — and probably a flogging a month in the 60th, mostly for drunkenness. Old soldiers sneered at it and flaunted backs criss-crossed with scars. The whip, they said, was better than prolonged confinement in a stinking cell with an iron weight chained to a leg. And it saved guards. Anyway, what were fifty lashes? Time was when a man had four or five hundred just for silent contempt. Fifty was for boys. B'Christ, there's been commanding officers who flogged six times a week, regular nigh clockwork, saving Sundays.

The trouble had been the Goorkha women. Brownlow, Dando, and several others had been speculating on the possibilities offered by the several dozen Nepalese females — and the riflemen had been a long time without females. Nobody seemed to know about Goorkhas. After a few years in India, any soldier knew that Rohilkund women were hot and easy, that Madras women grunted and scratched, Bengalis were barrels of nails, Punjabis churned like gun-mules, and show a Patna woman a rupee and she'd be on her back quicker than a whip. But who knew about Goorkhas?

'Just because they're *small*,' Joseph informed his fellows, 'it don't mean they're *no good*.'

'They ain't so small,' claimed Brownlow. 'I've 'ad smaller.'

'Not smaller *wimmin*,' Joseph objected. 'If they was smaller, they couldn't be *wimmin*.'

‘‘Corse they soddin’ could. Size don’t mean anythin.’ I’ll tell yer somethin,’ Dando Boy. Some of the randiest ma-dames I’ve known ‘ave been small.’

‘Ter spake the truth,’ offered Patrick Holloran, ‘I prefer me divershuns wi’ a foin big woman — somethin’ ye kin get hold ev — but I’d not be tornin’ me nose up at one ev them wee jewels, if she wor to axe.’

Tom Brownlow laughed. ‘This ain’t the land o’ bleedin’ praties an’ buttermilk, Irish. Them Goorkhas ‘ave got soddin’ great knives.’

‘Shure, an’ I’ve got a bloody great fist,’ Holloran nodded. ‘But I’ll tell ye, bucko, I intind ter hev a bit o’ fun wid one of thim little darlints as soon as it’s dark. There’s no woman as’ll resist a bloody Dublin Jackeen, me bhoyo.’

The tiny Nepalese women, with brown, Oriental faces and dark, almond eyes, chattered and laughed around the Goorkhas’ campfires during the day, throwing coy glances at the distant, watching riflemen. They had never seen so many white men before — or any white men who showed such constant interest in them. They were flattered, and they giggled. A few naked infants tumbled in the dust, squabbling, urinating, sucking on a marrow bone or sleeping soundly, untroubled by crawling flies or barking dogs. At night, the Goorkha men sat at the fire, singing hymn-like songs, and the goats for tomorrow’s meat would be led forward, their heads sliced off with a single slash of a razor-sharp *kukri* as the Goorkhas cheered. Then men would climb to their feet to dance, whirling in the fire-glow, leaping and gyrating to the drumming of *madals*. There was a pervading reek of rancid *ghee*, of bullocks’ dung, goats’ blood and musty bodies. In the blackness of the Doab, the sentries stood with their eyes turned away from the fires so that their vision was not impaired. There might be cavalry picquets further afield, but they’d offer little inconvenience to a crawling *goojar*, and more than one sentry had been found with a knife in his back, his weapons gone, while his

face still smiled at the ribald songs around the fires.

The women did not join the men at the fires. They sat in the shadows, singly or in small groups, a few crooning softly as they suckled children — some as old as four or five — at their breasts or showed white teeth as their menfolk's laughter reached them. A crying infant was hushed, and the mongrel dogs, who seemed to have no specific masters, prowled and sniffed among the tent-ropes or lay silently with muzzles on paws, meditatively.

Patrick Holloran found his woman easily enough — too easily. He whistled softly and she came, showing no surprise or embarrassment, and had loosened the knot of her girdle before he even decided how best to persuade her towards it. Tom Brownlow had been right; she was a randy little darlint' b'Jasus. He'd not have done better in the ol' Phaynix on St. Patrick's night. It was a rare bit o' fun — until the sentry shouted.

'Khon hy? Who go da? Yih Angrezi hy?'

Holloran swore, then ran for the darkness of the Doab, head lowered and clawing at his breeches. The woman ran, too, hoping to reach the Goorkha tent-lines before being recognised. Twenty yards away the startled sentry fell to one knee, cocked and fired. He could see only a running figure, and his orders were clear — challenge once and then shoot. The ball whirred within inches of Holloran's head. He swerved, plunging towards the 60th's fires, but there were whistles blowing, and, seconds later, the blare of a bugle. Then there was a second shot, and a third. Holloran cursed again.

Ahead of him, the Rifles were scrambling from their blankets, tearing at their shot-pouches as they flung themselves behind cover and, behind, the Goorkhas' officers were shouting for their battalion to form square around the tents and waggons. It was inconceivable that a sepoy force could have approached so close. What were those blasted Carabineer picquets up to? Were they blind and deaf? Or was it just nervous sentries blazing away at a

jackal drawn by the smell of the camp? Or a skulking *goo jar*?

Brigadier Wilson emerged from his tent, struggling into his tunic. ‘Colonel Jones? What in blazes — ?’

‘There’s no report yet, sir, but I’ll hazard it’s nothing of importance.’

Joseph Dando and Tom Brownlow knew, and at any moment Captain Williams would know. Irish Holloran was missing. His rifle, ammunition pouch, canteen, and haversack lay neatly on his folded blanket, screaming to be noticed, and Jim Bathurst had no rear-rank man at his back. Sergeant Gavin’s eyes roved, calculating. ‘Holloran! Where’s bloody Holloran?’

‘Jesus Christ,’ Joseph moaned. ‘That’s bugged it.’

‘I ‘ope,’ added Brownlow, ‘it was worth it becorse ‘ee’s going to git a floggin’.’

*

The first flogging that Joseph had ever seen had been on his first morning in the care of the Society for the Relief of Destitute Young Persons, when he was six. On their teeth-chattering return from the pump, the charity waifs assembled until Mr. Luker emerged from his breakfast of fried bacon — and he was usually champing thoughtfully on his last mouthful. Unfailingly, he slowly flexed the heavy cane that never left his hand and then barked, ‘We shall now give thanks to the Lord for this new day.’

The waifs gave thanks, or rather Mr. Luker did. The waifs’ accompanying mumble was incoherent. Mr. Luker was a short, square man with a heavily freckled bald head and a pugnacious white goatee. His thick, stubby fingers were constantly curling and recurling about the cane whilst he considered his next words.

Joseph soon discovered that the period immediately following Thanksgiving was that for punishment, an ordeal to await with bated breath. The offenders, in turn, stood before the assembly while the misdemeanour

was outlined in contemptuous detail — a small boy who had soiled his blanket, another who had been heard to utter an obscenity, and a girl of eight years who had surreptitiously torn a spoiled page from a lesson book. Each culprit lowered a head to be clamped firmly between the knees of Mr. Luker's assistant, and Mr. Luker's arm rose and fell with stunning force. The trapped child heaved, baying and retching, until released, to fall on all fours, eyes glazed and mouth sagging. The girl crouched, shocked and sobbing. Joseph looked away.

It was fortuitous that on Joseph's first morning Mr. Luker had information of some importance to impart. His face twisted into one of his rare smiles. 'Today,' he pronounced, 'is 'Prenticeship Day.'

The few words meant nothing to Joseph, but they obviously did to his fellows, and he sensed the expectation with which they had suddenly become charged. Mr. Luker drew a deep breath. 'Today,' he resumed, 'those of you who are nine years old, or more, will be examined by the Churchwardens, who have made a treaty with the owner of a great Nottingham factory to provide eighty apprentices — from this Society and elsewhere.' He paused, and, inevitably, flexed his cane. 'Each boy and girl accepted for indenture will be given a new suit of clothes and a pocket handkerchief — and a whole shilling for the journey. *They will travel by steam railway train from St. Tancras Station to Nottingham!*'

The waifs swayed, with eyes wide. Mr. Luker, however, had not finished. 'The laws of Parliament have made apprentices into ladies and gentlemen —' he sniffed, '— fed on roast beef and plum pudding, allowed to ride their masters' horses, with silver watches and pockets filled with money. There is nothing too good, it seems, for paupers and vagrants.'

He halted, regained his composure, then smiled again. 'There is no compulsion. Those who are chosen may volunteer, and will sign their names

to a paper — which is an agreement that they will be bound to the mill-owners until the age of twenty-one. Boys will be instructed in the trade of stocking-weaving and the girls in lace-making.’

Joseph was spell-bound. The munificence of Authority was overwhelming. A new suit of clothes, the ownership of a shilling, and a journey on a steam railway train were achievements that, only yesterday, had been beyond his wildest dreams. His arithmetical ability was severely limited, but he recognised that eighty was a large number. What kind of industrial emporium could absorb eighty apprentices at one time? Was Nottingham as far as Woolwich? He had been to Woolwich, and could vouchsafe that it was a very long distance indeed. The tragedy of the whole business, he realised with sickening disappointment, was that he did not qualify. He was only six.

A brief few years earlier, Joseph Dando’s lack of years would not have saved him from the smoking jaws of Moloch — the mines and factories of northern England. He had never heard, and probably never would hear, of names like Peel, Sadler, Ashley, Cobbett, and Chadwick — the indomitable few who had condemned, condemned again, and finally outlawed the employment of four-year-olds for twelve- or fourteen- hour days, flogged and their heads thrust into butts of cold water when they fell asleep from sheer exhaustion at their labours, their limbs warped from long periods of unnatural posture and, with senses numbed by weariness and despair, frequently killed or maimed by unguarded machines. Even as Joseph lamented his immaturity, waist-stripped girls of eleven, in the pits, crawled with burdens of one hundred and fifty pounds from coal-face to pit-bottom, a journey exceeding the height of St. Paul’s, for twelve hours a day for threepence or fourpence. Much had been improved, but the waifs who laboriously but delightedly penned their acceptance of a twelve-year indenture would discover that Jerusalem was not yet come, that the Act to abolish slavery applied to

negroes, not to native-born British subjects. Like thousands before them, the excited little band, clutching their shillings, would vanish into the smoke, dirt, and noise of the northern towns and would never return. Nor would any mourn them.

Joseph's disappointment faded quickly in the presence of more immediate perplexities. The first was Scripture, suitably flavoured with fire and brimstone, and during which the waifs intoned a biblical text, chalked on a board and to be learned by rote. It read: 'And let none of you imagine evil in your hearts against your neighbour; and love no false oath: for all these are things I hate, saith the Lord.' It meant very little to Joseph — but who was Lord? Something to do with Authority? The identity of the Lord would mystify him for many months, and the texts were equally ambiguous, but he memorised them.

There was a strange apathy among his fellows that he found disconcerting. Unlike the grimy street denizens who screeched oaths, brawled, begged, or pilfered, whose every day was a new battle for survival, the charity waifs stood or moved with an air of resignation, their eyes dull, dutifully sing-songing their lessons and seemingly incapable of any childish enterprise. It was a sexless community, with the girls allowed no more consideration than the boys, nor apparently expecting any. Not that Joseph possessed any previous experience of girls, and his mild curiosity towards their physical difference was quickly satisfied and not sustained. They were different, but not much. It would be a long time before he realised that there was rather more about girls than met the eye.

Scripture was followed remorselessly by arithmetic, for which the waifs were segregated into two groups of differing ability, and necessitating the participation of Mrs. Luker. The lady resembled in many respects her husband — short and rotund, with bird-like eyes that missed nothing and

revealed no emotion. Her speech matched her eyes — terse, dogmatic, humourless. Buttoned to the throat, her black dress was as tightly laced as her corpulence allowed, so that the bulk of her seemed to be pushed into the majestic bosom laying solidly above her corsets.

Arithmetic was a monstrous thing that would remain repugnant to Joseph for the rest of his life. It was inconceivable that so much importance should be attached to the notion that when one oddly shaped symbol was added to a second, the result was a different symbol entirely. He secretly knew this to be nonsense. On his father's cart, he had seen oranges added to oranges, and they had remained oranges. Still, if Mrs. Luker insisted, and she did, he would pretend to agree. Mrs. Luker did not resort to a cane. She used the flat of her pudgy hand. Often.

Joseph needed more than arithmetic to distract him from the pains of hunger. He concentrated on Mrs. Luker. When her black dress was removed, he wondered, did she instantly expand like a squeezed sponge suddenly released? Alternatively, was she capable of transplanting her abundant contours downwards instead of upwards? That might be interesting.

With the makebelieve of arithmetic concluded, it must surely be time to eat. The distant noises of the Borough Road told him that the outside world was about its business, and the morning was advancing. There was a shop he remembered — a workmen's ordinary — where for three-ha'pence one could buy pie, 'taters, and gravy, read the day's newspaper, and depart with a free clay pipe. For another ha'penny there was a generous slab of brown pudding, sprinkled with sugar and comfortingly solid. On Saturdays, when his father had been in funds, Joseph could reasonably anticipate the indulgence of an ordinary dinner before Matt Dando repaired to a beer-house to drink himself into stupefaction. But that had been before.

No, it was not time to eat. It was time for reading. Under different

circumstances, Joseph might have given the subject his undivided attention. There was an advantage in learning reading. There were all sorts of things just waiting to be read — posters on walls, playbills outside music-halls, labels on bottles, and omnibus route boards. Joseph decided that he would learn to read immediately, then perhaps eat afterwards. The trouble was that it was more difficult than he'd thought, and three times within the next hour he felt the stinging force of Mrs. Luker's hand. There must be easier ways of learning reading, he considered, without this complicated alphabet.

Food came at last, in the form of boiled potatoes, bread, and weak tea. He would have fallen to immediately, but first, Mr. Luker led the saying of grace, and nobody reached for a spoon until it was finished. Joseph disposed of his potatoes and bread quickly and then looked about him, but there was nothing more. The portions of potatoes, he noted, varied considerably. The thin youth who ladled them from a large iron pot must have his favourites, Joseph calculated — or his enemies. It was a useful thing to know.

*

It was a pity, pronounced Archdale Wilson, that the maximum penalty permitted was fifty lashes. The regulations did not provide for blackguards like Holloran, who were a disgrace to the Queen's uniform. Surgeon Innes was required to examine the culprit and declare him fit for punishment — a duty he did without enthusiasm. Even fifty lashes could put a man into hospital for a week, and the surgeon had neither medicaments nor space to spare for self-imposed injuries. Innes was also required to attend the flogging with a bucket of water and a towel, to revive Holloran if he fainted and, if deemed necessary, postpone the balance of punishment to a later date. It was another task he did not relish.

Least concerned was Major Reid. The woman with whom Holloran had consorted remained unidentified; probably some of the wives knew, but they

weren't going to tell. The Goorkhas, he confessed, were inclined towards promiscuity and did not regard it in quite the same light as Europeans. Under normal circumstances, the offending male would pay damages of a hundred rupees to the aggrieved husband and the wayward wife would be sent back to her village. That ended the matter with everyone satisfied, but since nobody knew who the woman was, nobody felt aggrieved.

The cat-o'-nine-tails had a deceptively flimsy appearance. It weighed only 3 1/8 ounces, with a stock of 19 1/4 inches and nine lashes — each knotted nine times — 24 1/2 inches, but there was no deception about its effect. It tore the flesh from a man's back in ribbons. Irish Holloran, strapped to a make-shift triangle, was a tough man, but the first blow drew an involuntary shout from his lips. The drummer stepped back. 'One lash delivered, sir.'

Colonel Jones nodded. 'Carry on with the punishment.'

Holloran did not cry out again, except that during the brief pause after the twenty-fifth, when a second drummer relieved the first, the Irishman gasped, 'B'Jasus — this is a bloody poor day's work, an' no mistakin'.' The watching ranks of riflemen laughed, not at Holloran's plight, but with relief. Holloran's eyes remained clenched, his teeth bared, as blow after blow smashed into his flesh. ' — forty-eight — forty-nine — fifty.' The drummer turned, sweating. 'Fifty lashes completed, sir.'

When they cut him down, Holloran dropped to his knees. 'Holy Mary — ' he breathed. The surgeon soaked his towel and laid it over the Irishman's shoulders to keep the flies from the lacerations, and Holloran winced, his face twisting. Two men lifted him upright and carried him, feet trailing, towards the hospital tent, and the two drummers washed the spattered blood from their hands and forearms.

With the parade dismissed, the riflemen trickled away in silence. A flogging wasn't an entertaining thing to watch. It was degrading, a

humiliation that all of them experienced just by watching, and it brought a man down to the level of an animal. Worse, b'Christ. Horses and cattle weren't given fifty bleedin' lashes, were they?

Brigadier Wilson drew out his watch. 'We shall march at four,' he ordered, 'for Baghpat.'

There was salt beef for dinner again, with a biscuit — no different from a thousand times before — but today, many of the men pushed their rations aside. Somehow they just weren't hungry.

'Red mutton an' bleedin' choke-dog,' Brownlow gritted. 'Don't they ever think of anything different? Yer'd suppose that cows run around wi'out livers, or tripe, or kidneys, wouldn't yer? And taters? Don't they grow soddin' taters any more?'

Taters, Joseph mused. Christ, he didn't care if he never saw another tater — not after the Society for the Relief of Destitute Young Persons, and Mary Parfitt, and the thin youth ...

*

The thin youth, Mr. Luker's assistant — was an enigma. He seemed to have no name, no established place in the charity school except vaguely between the waifs and the custodians. He woke them rudely from their blankets, supervised them at the pump, herded them from place to place, and restrained them whilst Mr. Luker thrashed them. He never smiled, nor showed sympathy, and his only words were commands, frequently supported by fist or boot. He possessed, however, a far more potent means of extending favour or censure. The difference between one potato and two was the difference between a day of hunger and one of relative satiety — and the thin youth ladled the potatoes.

But his seemingly invulnerable position had a weakness, and Joseph stumbled on it.

Mary Parfitt was eleven, one of several new arrivals who followed the 'Prentice Day exodus. Her clothes, although shabby, had shown evidence of a more prosperous background than that from which most of the waifs had come, and she could already read and write with moderate skill. She was a tall girl, slim of body and with the thin cotton of her bodice just beginning to tauten over the swelling of young breasts. Shy and nervous, the immodesties of the urine bucket, the shite-pit and the pump were clearly ordeals for her. Joseph was amused. On Mary Parfitt's arrival he had been a charity waif for all of sixteen days and felt decidedly superior. She'd learn, and the sooner the better.

Because of her scholastic abilities, Joseph did not think it odd that the thin youth should allot Mary Parfitt to the Lukers' house-chores rather than to arithmetic and reading, nor was it worthy of note that, after her first day, the girl had a bruised cheek and only a single potato on her plate. It was none of Joseph's business. The bruise might have been the result of Mrs. Luker's displeasure and, anyway, he had worries of his own. The next day, Mary Parfitt displayed a swollen lip and again, he observed, attained a single potato. Then, returning that evening to his blanket, Joseph discovered that Mary's sleeping space, next to his own, was vacant.

This, he conceded, was a strange thing. No waif abandoned his blanket except for a few seconds at the bucket. Could the timorous, bewildered Mary Parfitt have absconded? It was hardly likely, or possible. He was very tired. Only the tallow dip guttered in its bottle, and the big room was silent. There were a few indefinable noises from the distant Borough Road, but nothing else save the steady breathing of the slumbering waifs around him. Joseph compelled himself to wakefulness and waited, listening.

He waited a long time, an age, and his weariness had almost defeated him when Mary Parfitt returned, creeping on bare feet among the tumble of

huddled sleepers. She lowered herself to her blanket, sobbing.

For Joseph, it was something of an anticlimax, and he was only regretful that he had sacrificed valuable sleep to no purpose but to hear the blubbing of another waif. Within seconds he was asleep.

He would have forgotten the incident entirely had he not, on the morrow, followed behind Mary Parfitt as she proffered her plate to the iron pot. To Joseph's surprise, three large potatoes tumbled into the plate, and Mary Parfitt flushed before hurrying away with her eyes on the floor.

That afternoon, Joseph turned the matter over in his mind. There seemed no sense in it, but it was odd. Mary Parfitt, it was true, had seemed too inoffensive to justify only one potato, but what had she done to earn three? Was it something to do with her absence last night — which might be considered punishable rather than reward-able? Where had she gone? Not to the Lukers' rooms, that was certain. There was only one alternative, and there, to be sure, was the link with the potatoes. But why?

It could mean anything or simply nothing, but tonight and tomorrow would decide it. And tonight and tomorrow did; when he sought his blanket, Mary Parfitt was absent. He didn't remain awake until her return. She was there next morning, and at midday she had three potatoes.

He'd been right, then. Joseph felt mildly smug. He had observed something that apparently nobody else had — not even the bird-eyed Mrs. Luker. When he thought about it again, however, he wasn't exactly sure *what* he had observed, or at least what it meant. Was it of sufficient importance to investigate further?

It was a question he was unable to immediately answer. In less than three weeks he had not yet fallen to that level of subordination at which most of the other waifs were void of all wit and initiative, but he also had no desire to be thrashed by Mr. Luker. There were some things best left alone. Joseph was

still undecided when he had finished his turnip soup supper. He was hoping that Mary Parfitt would be wrapped in her blanket tonight, but she wasn't.

Joseph lay for several minutes, gazing through the gloom above his head. Something, for certain, was going on, and whatever it was added up to the difference between one potato and three. The knowledge of how could be valuable. It might even be worth the risk of a thrashing.

Cautiously he climbed to his feet and picked his way towards the buckets. Nobody stirred. He lifted the lighted dip from its bottle and, cupping the flame with his hand, crept into the passageway. He knew the location of the thin youth's closet. He had seen into it, but had never entered. Six feet from its doorless entrance he paused, suddenly unnerved. The stone floor was cold to the soles of his feet, and he could feel his heart pounding under his shirt.

There was a frightening combination of sounds coming from the closet. Someone was weeping jerkily, then released a sharp cry of anguish. The cry was abruptly muffled, followed by the impatient mutter of a male voice. The sobbing began again, hopelessly. Joseph drew a shivering breath, tiptoed forward, and held up the flame in his hand.

He did not understand what he saw. It was incomprehensible and ugly. In the puny, flickering flare of the tallow dip, the gaunt, white buttocks of the thin youth convulsed excitedly, while beneath him, with legs splayed and head thrown back with eyes closed, was Mary Parfitt. It was she who was sobbing. Joseph stared, aghast but fascinated — but only for a moment. The youth choked, scrabbling to his knees and turning, his face twisted with fear. Mary Parfitt sat up, pulling her shift between her thighs.

'Chris' sake!' The thin youth's jaw sagged. 'Yer bleedin' little sod.' He groped for his breeches. 'I'll thrash yer.' Several things had become suddenly, if only vaguely, apparent to Joseph. He had still not fully grasped the significance of the scene of a few seconds earlier — he'd consider that

later — but the thin youth's anger was artificial. He'd been frightened — and it was unlikely that he'd be frightened of Joseph Dando.

'I heard a noise,' he lied, 'and I thought I'd tell Mr. Luker.' The thin youth, struggling to pull the twisted legs of his breeches over his knees, sucked in his breath. 'Yer little bastard.'

Joseph backed away. 'Mr. Luker — '

'Shut yer mouth!' the youth hissed. He shot a quick glance into the darkened passageway and then down at Mary Parfitt. 'Git back to yer bleedin' place — an' quick!' Mary Parfitt nodded miserably, pulled herself to her feet, and, bending double, scuffled away. The thin youth breathed a little easier. Both he and Joseph stood, listening. The house was silent.

With a measure of composure regained, the youth leaned forward. 'Yer didn't see nothin,' alright?'

Joseph considered. 'Not much,' he agreed. 'Only you rubbin' bellies wi' Mary Parfitt. That ain't much.' It wasn't much, was it? It seemed a tedious thing to want to do.

'That's right,' the youth grinned. 'It ain't nothin'. And it ain't worth talkin' about, 'specially — ' he paused and winked, ' — 'specially if yer likes plenty o' taters?'

'Ah.' Joseph nodded gravely. 'I like plenty o' taters. Three taters.'

'Well, then,' the youth confided, 'if yer keeps yer mouth shut, yer might git three taters. Alright?'

Joseph nodded again. He had still to assess why Mary Parfitt's belly was worth three taters, but there was no accounting for adult values. He knew which he would prefer, any time.

'You want ter rub 'er again?' he offered generously. 'If yer want to, I'll tell her to come back.'

'Gawd, not ternight,' the other breathed. 'Termorrow — yer can tell her

that. And tell her if she don't be'ave a bit more willin', none of yer gets three taters.' He sniffed. 'Now bugger orf.'

When Joseph regained the sleeping room he saw the gleam of Mary Parfitt's eyes over the top of her blanket. 'Yer've got to be'ave more willin' tomorrow,' he whispered, 'or we don't get three taters.'

'Why don't you mind your own business?' she gasped. 'It ain't your business.'

'I ain't tellin' nobody,' Joseph assured her. 'Besides, it ain't much, is it?' He would like to know more.

He heard her breathing shiver. 'It's dirty, and it 'urts awful.'

Joseph snorted. 'Garn — it don't. It ain't nothin'. Rubbin' don't 'urt.'

'It does. Anyway, how would you know? You ain't had it.'

The following day, Joseph waited impatiently for Scripture, arithmetic and reading to be finished with, tingling with anticipation, but he was not disappointed. At midday, for the first time, there were three potatoes on his plate — large, starchy and handsome — and he would have three taters a day thereafter.

Six months later, the Society for the Relief of Destitute Young Persons pushed Mary Parfitt into the world — a world confined to the basement of a house in Bloomsbury where, for seven days a week, the friendless little slavey would begin her scrubbing at six in the morning and seldom see her bed before midnight, for fifty shillings a year and her keep. Like his father's boots and the gentlemen in the stovepipe hats, Joseph never saw her again.

He was still baffled. Many weeks before, choosing his opportunity very carefully, he had made a resolute effort to determine more precisely the motives behind the thin youth's eccentricity. Mary Parfitt, of course, was beyond the scope of his research — she was, after all, his senior by five years, head and shoulders taller and with her bumps beginning to show — but

the uncomprehending small girl who allowed him to lift her skirt in a quiet corner of the passageway exhibited nothing he had not previously expected. She had, indeed, rather less than himself, and that wasn't much. Mary Parfitt, however, had claimed that rubbing hurt. He experimented tentatively, but in response to his enquiry the small girl denied any discomfort. On the contrary, it was rather pleasant. It was inexplicable, and Joseph abandoned the exploration. In any case, his three potatoes were safe.

Chapter 9

Still three weeks must pass before the first news of the sepoy revolt reached England — news that would interrupt Her Majesty's first awarding of her new military decoration that bore her name — a simple bronze cross bearing the inscription 'Tor Valour.' Brunei was about to launch the biggest ship in the world — the *Great Eastern*, of nearly nineteen thousand tons — and the chemist Faraday had predicted that streets would be lit and machines driven by electricity. But who needed electricity when London's coal-gas lighting already provided twelve times the illumination of the old oil street lamps? And wasn't steam already driving machines that did the work of twenty men and providing penny-a-mile travel on the railways? A new and permanent army camp had been constructed at Aldershot, a criminal waste of public money, while London was busily tearing down hundreds of acres of worker tenements to allow space for railways and factories and simultaneously building equally gimcrack worker tenements elsewhere — in Stepney, Bermondsey and Hackney.

Nobody knew yet that the few hundred sweat-streaked men of the Delhi Field Force had crossed the Hindun River and were marching across a furnace Doab for the Jumna at Baghpat. Delhi Field Force? Baghpat? Where was Baghpat — ?

*

At Baghpat there was nothing except another scattering of shabby native houses, little different to Ghazi-ud-din Nagar, and a bridge of boats across the Jumna abandoned by its Company toll-collector. There were the usual acres of ploughed, parched *khets*, a few children splashing nakedly in the river,

scratching, scrawny fowls, and the headman obeising as the tired column swung into the village and halted. They had marched since six that morning and it was now well into the afternoon. Water was scarce; the *bhisties'* goatskins were empty and none of the men had more than a mouth-swill left in his canteen. The horses and bullocks had not had a drink all day and were led directly to the river. There were more men in the *tongas*, collapsed from heatstroke — and one of the Goorkha women, who had borne a child on the march. Many of the young cavalrymen were suffering badly from sun-scorch and insect bites, with lips broken and sore-covered, skins blistered and beginning to fester. The 60th and the Sirmoor Goorkhas were in better condition, but these, too, were developing skin ailments from an unbalanced diet, aggravated by dust, sun, and lack of washing.

All these things, however, were of minor importance. They had marched to Baghpat to rendezvous with General Anson's 9th Lancers and 75th Foot — and in Baghpat there was nothing.

'It ain't justice,' Dando croaked. 'It ain't bleedin' right.' For two whole days of torturous marching they'd thought of Baghpat, of the four squadrons of seasoned Lancers, veterans of Goojerat, who could ride the arses off any native cavalry. They'd thought of commissariat *tongas*, lines of them, and fresh-killed meat, coffee, flour for breadmaking, preserved potatoes, rice, lime juice — and a rum issue. There'd be no beer, except perhaps a barrel or two of porter for the officers, but the larger column from Ambala might well have a following, with women, and native sutlers selling *bhang* — reputed to be made from boiled hemp, but giving a man a few hours of solace even if it did mean a reeking head next morning. But there was nothing in Baghpat except the wide, grey river in which the horses and bullocks now stood, knee-deep, a lime-stone *ghat* descending to the bridge, scattered with dung and, beyond, the same, brown Doab stretching to the horizon. They had cursed the

Doab a thousand times, cursed the thorn scrub that ripped clothing and clawed at bared flesh, festering in hours, the ants, scorpions and snakes, and the lone kite that hung, motionless above the column, taunting them. Only the thought of Baghpat had lent strength to their stumbling, dragged them to their feet after each halt, and prevented many from throwing themselves to the dust in final exhaustion.

Joseph had once haltingly read about India in a cheap little book at the Society for the Relief of Destitute Young Persons. 'In India,' the smudged print said blandly, 'the towns are filled with merchants and artificers of all kinds; gold, precious stones, and jewels are found in abundance. The people, who once had scarcely a rag to cover their nakedness, now flaunt gay attire and have learned the use of many comforts and luxuries that were before unknown to them.' Whoever had written that had never seen Baghpat.

India, someone else had said, was the brightest jewel in Her Majesty's crown. Joseph Dando thought it was a soddin' awful place. Why didn't they give it back to the blacks? He'd served five years in India — five years of heat, dirt, and flies, of bazaar whores and contemptuous white officials, bad food and adulterated drink, of being cheated of his pay, and officered by men of whom few had even bothered to learn his name. Not that England was much to be preferred to India. A new model prison had been built at Pentonville, and its cleanliness, wash basins and hammocks had impressed the visiting Duke of Saxony. The Duke, however, had not visited the barracks, which were still indescribable slums, and the soldier death rate from consumption, due to overcrowding, was eighteen in a thousand whilst that of the remainder of the population was only three and a half. Why, b'Christ, were soldiers treated worse than convicts and infinitely worse than animals? Hadn't the Queen burst into tears when she had awarded the Crimea Medal to maimed veterans and thanked them movingly for doing their duty?

‘This,’ Joseph said morosely, ‘is the larst place on Gawd’s earth.’

Brownlow hawked, tried to spit, but failed. ‘There’s people,’ he pointed out, ‘what pays ‘undreds of pounds ter see foreign parts — and ‘ow many do yer suppose ‘ave seen Baghpat, eh? They never git beyond Paris or Naples — an’ Paris ain’t no different ter London, only they talk different an’ eat bleedin’ snails.’

One thing was certain: they’d not march further than Baghpat today. The tents were going up and tea was brewing, boiled to black bitterness, and many of the men had their boots off, puncturing blisters with a needle threaded with worsted. The bullocks, anyway, would need a full eight hours of rest and grazing — if grazing could be found — to compensate for eight hours of hauling, and a similar period to digest and remasticate. As tired as the infantrymen were, they always knew that they could outmarch either bullocks or horses, and it was regard for the animals’ welfare that compelled a halt and rest. The cavalrymen were less fortunate. Lacking native grass-cutters in attendance, they had to seek their own fodder to supplement the oats carried in the waggons, and suitable vegetation was not easy to find on the Doab. Well, the riflemen grinned smugly, that was the price to pay for sitting on a bleedin’ ‘orse all day.

Brigadier Wilson’s disappointment at finding nothing at Baghpat was as intense as his men’s, but for more serious reasons than a weariness for salt beef and biscuit. Under normal circumstances a European battalion, given water and what the men carried in their haversacks, was expected to survive in the field for two or three days and fight one battle. Any further existence had to be supported by supply waggons — the longer the period, the more waggons and the slower the progress. Every waggon needed six bullocks and a driver, all to be fed from the food they carried — and Wilson had cut his baggage to the bone, calculated to reach Baghpat quickly, but no further. His

column had been on the march for eleven days, and had fought its battle. Reserves of ammunition had been seriously depleted, and rations had almost all gone. Thank God their progress from the Hindun had been uneventful — but what now? Where was Anson and his horse, foot, and artillery?

Wilson convened a meeting of his field officers. ‘If General Anson is marching from Ambala to Delhi, he must come down the Grand Trunk Road, through Kurnal — and it's clear he's been delayed. That, gentlemen, leaves us with a problem. We can't halt here with scarcely a day's rations and fodder remaining, and we're too far from Meerut to fall back. My intention is to go on, to lessen the distance between ourselves and the General. We can reach Alipore in seven or eight hours, starting after dark.’

Colonel Jones agreed. ‘And we'd reach Alipore in considerably less if we abandoned the waggons. They hold us back to three miles an hour, and we can't feed the bullocks after today, anyway. My Riflemen will manage on what remains of the field rations, and so, I suppose, will the Carabineers and Goorkhas. But the horses?’

‘The artillery horses will fare well enough on straw *bhoosa*,’ Tombs volunteered. ‘There's enough oats for one feed for the Carabineers' horses before we march. After that — ’ he shrugged, ‘the Lancers' commissariat had better not be too far away, or we'll be burying a lot of dead horses.’

It was difficult to admit, in this age of steam railways and screw-driven ships, that once beyond sight of a railhead or seaport, man was as dependent upon horses and bullocks as he had been for hundreds of years. He could travel no faster or further, and a team of bullocks consumed in ten days all it could haul in a waggon if it did not have additional grass supplies.

‘It's agreed, then, gentlemen,’ Wilson nodded. ‘I think we should cross the river before midnight, which will allow us an easy march and an opportunity for a halt before approaching in full light. The Carabineers will carry out a

reconnaissance in advance of the main column; we don't want to blunder into Alipore if it's bristling with enemy guns.'

The Carabineers' trumpeter was sounding off 'Boots and Saddle' as Dando eased his throbbing feet into his boots. 'Christ,' he gritted, 'it just ain't believable, is it? The bullocks can't march, but the soddin' foot-sloggers can. It's a wonder we ain't been shod by the bleedin' farrier.'

There was no road, but the night was clear, and it seemed strangely quiet without the incessant screeching of the *tonga* wheels. They could hear the rumble and jingle of the gun caissons on the flank, but little else except the tramp of their own feet. All of them were weary, and still dulled by the sleep that had been curtailed before midnight. They marched mechanically, unspeaking and withdrawn into themselves, their shoulders hunched and eyes half closed. Few of them had any tobacco left. Dando and Brownlow shared their last few shreds, passing the pipe between them until it sucked dry. The cavalymen slumped in their saddles, dozed for brief seconds, and waking with a jerk as they swayed.

They halted each hour, on the hour, but only for a few minutes, sufficient for a mouthful of water and to sponge the horses' tongues before tramping on. Although they were free, at least, from the scorching heat of day, the exertion of the previous eleven days had taken its toll on even these leather-tough men. But they were a strange breed. Desperately tired, only a sullen, ill-humoured pride kept many of them on their feet. They might curse their officers, condemn their regiment as the worst in the army — but let a man of another corps say so and he would have a fist in his face. They might drink themselves to collapse, roar their drunken way to the guardhouse, but they would also march their feet bloody and not display the weakness of complaining. Baghpat had been a disappointment, but they'd forgotten Baghpat. Tomorrow was another day, and tomorrow there'd be Alipore.

Irish Holloran marched. He might have stayed with Surgeon Innes and his hospital tent in Baghpat, to follow more leisurely in a few days' time, but Irish Holloran asked no favours of anyone. He marched — an' to hell wi' the bloody doctor. In an hour the back of his shirt was saturated, but not with sweat, and Dando, Brownlow, and Edwin Wilson took his rifle, haversack and bed-roll.

Long before dawn had begun to streak the sky with dirty yellow they had reached to within a mile of Alipore, and they sank gratefully to the earth. Several troops of the Carabineers had gone ahead into the gloom, and the 60th's officers stood in small groups, talking in low voices. The artillery had halted, the horses champing softly. The cavalry mounts were clearly approaching complete exhaustion. With a dragoon weighing one hundred and sixty pounds, dress and accoutrements weighing forty, and saddlery, wallets, and equipment adding another sixty, the animals were having to contend with a total load of two hundred and sixty pounds — far too much for prolonged marching in the conditions of the Doab. As Tombs had said — if there was no commissariat in Alipore, a lot of dead horses would have to be buried.

The cavalry patrols were a long time returning — longer than might be expected to be necessary to ascertain the occupancy of a native village. But they were less than a mile distant, and there had been no sound of shots — and even shouts would have been carried in the silence of the dawn. The riflemen crouched, stiff-muscled, to be suddenly startled by a buff-coloured pea-fowl that strutted from a tangle of bamboo, emitted a loud 'kok-kok-kok-kok', and disappeared. 'I ain't never cared for game before midday,' Dando said. 'Anyway, it's out o' season.'

Seconds later they jerked again as, from the northward, came the clear note of a bugle. Hundreds of hands reached for rifles. 'Ain't that Reveille?' Brownlow asked.

‘It’s “Reveille” alright,’ Edwin Wilson agreed, ‘but I ain’t guessin’ oo’s blowin’ it.’

Brigadier Wilson’s orders came immediately. The 60th and the Sirmoor Goorkhas tumbled into line of column with sword-bayonets clattering from scabbards, and the field pieces jolted to the flanks. ‘Load ball!’

“‘Ere we go agin.’ Brownlow spat black powder. But Captain Rosser was swinging from his saddle, smiling, and the officers clustered around Wilson had relaxed. The artillerymen were mounting their caissons and the Carabineers uncasing their squadron guidons, swallow-tailed, purple and gold in the sunshine that flooded warmly across the Doab as the sun exploded. There was Colonel Jones’s voice: ‘Drums to the front! The 60th will lead into Alipore, at the trail and marching to attention.’

They saw the long lines of tents before they saw Alipore, the quarter-guard in scarlet and blue jostling into position below a flagstaff, presenting arms as the riflemen swung past. Beyond were serried ranks of infantry — the 75th Foot, the European Fusiliers, the pawing horses of the Lancers and the polished brass of guns. Hats were off and waving as a thousand men cheered, and a band was playing. Colonel Jones raised his sword-hilt to his chin, and the cheers redoubled. ‘Christ — are they cheerin’ *us*?’ asked Dando — but he was marching proudly with head high, his aching muscles and his hungry belly forgotten. O’ course they were cheerin’ the bleedin’ 60th. Who else? The 60th was the finest regiment in the soddin’ army, wasn’t it — ?

‘There’s a canteen tent, Dando, Boy,’ Brownlow said from the corner of his mouth. ‘An’ we’ve got a few rupees owin’, ain’t we?’

*

Joseph Dando’s first encounter with the Demon of the Bottle had occurred during his period of employment with Dr Charlton Whistler, who maintained a rural practice at Merton.

In the village there was a post office, at the door of which one must knock for several minutes before an impatient old man opened a hatch and affixed one of the curious new penny stamps to a letter for despatch. There was a mill with a weir, a small ale-house that brewed its own ale, and a store where could be purchased anything from lamp-oil to stick-jaw toffee and Ceylon tea to stove blacking. More relevant to Joseph, there was the Doctor's Shop.

It was, strangely, hardly a shop at all, but a house with a large bay window in which was displayed two handsome carboys, each filled with gleaming liquid of red and green. There was a brass plate by the door engraved with the legend 'Charlton Whistler MD, MRCS, Physician & Surgeon', which after dark was illuminated by a self-generating gas lamp. There was also Mrs. Turpin — a lady as ample as Mrs. Luker of the Society for the Relief of Destitute Young Persons — with cheeks like polished apples, grey hair under a crisp mob cap, and a starched pinafore. He quickly learned that Mrs. Turpin was Housekeeper and Cook General, that even Dr. Whistler did not enter her kitchen without permission, that she viewed all small boys with frowning suspicion, and considered that Satan found work for idle hands.

The practice was a poor one, and dispersed, with remuneration usually long overdue and not rarely in the form of a sack of potatoes or 'a rabbit from the meddur'. The Shop became Joseph's new kingdom. Its stock included soaps and scents, snuff, toothbrushes, hair dyes and jujubes in addition to a wide range of patent medicines of uncertain formulation and even less certain efficacy. Joseph even became the master of the leeches, housed in a large glass jar and periodically removed to be rolled between the palms to remove an accumulation of slime. Bleeding was becoming unfashionable but still had its few faithful adherents, and an avid leech was expected to gorge a half ounce of blood if briskly towelled before application. Joseph's leeches became progressively fewer as, desperate from months of hunger, they turned

to cannibalism.

Increasingly he assumed responsibility for the Doctor's more rudimentary dispensing from the raw botanicals supplied by a London wholesaler. Preparation was easy enough — powders, spirits, ointments, tinctures, and even pill masses — and errors of composition were likely to be less hazardous than the garish-labelled bottles of proprietary elixirs that lined the shelves. There were, however, no laws against the sale of poisons and opiates, and on Saturday evenings Joseph would supply laudanum to two dozen nursing maids. A night of pleasure with a visiting swain must not be disturbed by a wailing infant. He also polished the brass plate at the door until it gleamed like a mirror in time for the arrival of the milkman with his yodel and his iron churns carried by a pony. There was the shop to be swept and, once a week, the bay window and the tall carboys wiped clean. The Doctor's own pony had to be fed and watered, then harnessed to the gig for a daily round that might last beyond midday and cover twenty miles. The privy pail had to be emptied, rinsed, and sprinkled with sand.

Doctor Charlton Whistler, who had taken him from the Society, was a middle-aged bachelor, uncommunicative but not unkind. He always seemed too deeply involved in more important matters to be easily approached — even had Joseph desired to approach him, which he did not. He had no desire to provoke attention. Things were going too nicely.

These, however, were Joseph's halcyon days, the like of which he would never know again. It did not appear unjust to him that he was employed for twelve or more hours a day, received not a penny in payment, was permitted to leave the house during the week only if on errand, and on Sunday for a brief few hours leisure in daylight. There was little to do in the vicinity of Merton. He would occasionally filch a few pieces of cough candy from the Shop and walk the lanes or the banks of the Wandle to the watercress beds,

but Mrs. Turpin was provoked to displeasure by muddy boots, and he would be banished to his tiny room with nothing but the company of a dull, old copy of *The Lancet* until dusk forbade all attempts at reading. He was never permitted a candle. One Sunday, he tramped six miles to see a rat-killing contest in a barn at Banstead, but the adventure resulted in filthy boots, a torn coat-pocket, and a breathless return to Merton several minutes after dark — a luxury for which he was deprived of further excursions for a month. Still, only Merton would remain nostalgically fixed in his mind as the place he least wished to leave and to which, some day, he would return. But he never did.

Throughout his entire period of employment with Doctor Whistler, Joseph never suspected that the prim and matronly Mrs. Turpin had a vice. It was difficult to imagine that Mrs. Turpin had any faults at all. From her immaculate white cap to the burnished toes that occasionally peeped from beneath her voluminous skirts, she was a paragon of female correctness. But she did have a vice. It was gin — a discreetly wrapped bottle of which was delivered to her care by the twice-weekly carrier from Putney. Joseph's eyes would have boggled could they have penetrated the wall of his room to behold a sprawled and fuddled Mrs. Turpin, with grey hair dishevelled and her corsets unlaced, emptying the final dregs of a bottle into her eager mouth. It would have been incredible, because the following morning Mrs. Turpin was unfailingly as meticulous and austere as ever, not a whit the worse for a quart of gin consumed during the previous evening.

Mrs. Turpin's vice was accompanied by a problem. There were seven evenings in each week, and two bottles of gin were invariably inadequate. Fortunately, there was a substitute. It was sold in the Shop, and it was called Godfrey's Cordial. Sooner or later, Mrs. Turpin knew, Doctor Whistler would undertake one of his periodical stock-takings, and then he would

discover that a large quantity of Godfrey's Cordial was unaccounted for. It was, however, impossible that Mrs. Turpin could be responsible, and there was now a far more likely culprit.

For several weeks following his Banstead misdemeanour, Joseph spent his Sunday afternoons closer to Merton, often sitting, a lonely little figure with a sticky handful of cough candy, on the wall that flanked the railway. He could see the steam trains, black and brassy, threshing past with their following broods of cramped carriages, vomiting steam and sparks, northward to London and southward to the sea. He had never seen the sea. The trains from London, he knew, went to Nottingham, and he often wondered if the clanking carriages carried any of his erstwhile companions with their new suits and shillings. He stared after each train until its trail of steam had diffused and disappeared, a feeling in his belly that was not hunger but felt very similar.

Joseph had a problem rather similar to that of Mrs. Turpin — but it involved the cough candy. There was very little demand for it in mid-summer, and he was beginning to worry that Doctor Whistler would soon discover that the level of candy in the big glass jar had fallen rather lower than the incidence of summer coughs might justify. Joseph had, on several occasions, shaken the jar vigorously to encourage an appearance of greater volume, but to no appreciable improvement. There was only one real solution. He must abandon cough candy.

He scanned the shelves of the Shop for something else that might make his weekly vigil on the wall more agreeable. There was worm syrup, toothache reliever, diarrhoea mixture, liniment, acorn salve, croup medicine, chafing powder, nursery pomade, macassar oil, skin balm. None of them suggested the delectability of cough candy. He had sampled Mother Faithful's Physic — reputedly an extract of rare American roots — and decided that the muddy Wandle tasted better, even if it did nothing for imperfect digestion, liver

complaints, constipation, poor appetite, and impurities of the blood.

He had not, however, tasted Godfrey's Cordial, a recent innovation of a Camberwell manufacturing apothecary. A heavy, dark liquid, each bottle was accompanied by a printed leaflet which introduced '*A palatable, discreet and effective Calmative for Feverish or Sleepless Infants, scientifically compounded, and regularly used by several Royal Families of Europe, which, from deference, may not be named, and by Aristocracy, from whom Testimonials are Constantly Received.*' There followed a selection of such testimonials, from 'His Highness the Duke of —', 'His Grace the Marquis of —', and 'Doctor —, MD, FRCP.' All glowingly endorsed the efficacy of Godfrey's Cordial. It must, Joseph considered, be at least worth tasting.

It was delicious. It was nectar. By comparison, cough candy was insipid dross. He'd not the slightest notion that anything — anything at all — could taste so exquisite as Godfrey's Cordial. There was every justification for the patronage of Royal Families of Europe and the Duke of —. Joseph was strongly tempted to take a full mouthful, to flood his cheeks before allowing the ecstatic liquor to seep into his throat, but he re-corked the bottle and hid it behind the Squires' Tooth Powder. He could wait until Sunday, by the railway.

On Sunday afternoon, Doctor Whistler was conveniently absent. Joseph concealed the bottle of Godfrey's Cordial beneath his coat and slipped from the house. It was a dull day, overcast with heavy clouds that threatened rain, but he had no intention of going far. If it did rain, he could run from the railway to the Shop in a few minutes. He pulled himself to the top of the wall and sat with his shoulders hunched and his heels drumming idly against the old brickwork.

The thick, cloying liquid filled his mouth, luxuriantly. This, then, was what the Royal Families of Europe drank. He wasn't surprised. If he were a Royal

Family, or a Duke, he'd drink a bottle every day. Probably two bottles. He licked the stickiness from his lips and drank again. The next moment, seeing the white plume of an approaching train, he thrust the bottle guiltily under his coat — then realised the futility of it, and laughed. The train, he knew, had come from St. Pancras and was going to Nottingham, which was by the sea. He drank again, watching the tail of the train shrinking into the distance, half concealed behind the steam that flattened across the meadows.

He felt beautifully at peace with everything. Being a doctor's boy had its advantages. Godfrey's Cordial for one. He'd be willing to wager that the apprentices who had gone to Nottingham had drunk nothing like it —

It was becoming difficult to string his thoughts together coherently, but it didn't matter. One day he might go to Nottingham, by steam railway, of course, and he'd take a bottle with him, under his coat, just to let them taste.

He felt a warm splash of water on his cheek. It was beginning to rain. That was a festerin' nuisance — he'd have to return to the Shop and Mrs. Turpin, and he didn't relish spending the rest of the day in his cramped bedroom with an old copy of *The Lancet*, which had no pictures and only a lot of print he didn't understand. The spots of rain were large — as large as pennies. He lifted the bottle to his mouth, drained the last of its contents, then dropped it into the tall grass below his feet. He couldn't quite see where it had fallen, so he leaned forward. He felt strangely weightless, insubstantial — and, oddly, his eyes were refusing to focus. The ground seemed to float up gently to meet him. He fell on his face.

*

‘Two pice for a large measure, or two annas for a bottle, *gora-log*.’ The Bengali placed his dirty hands together and bowed. The darkened interior of the tent reeked of alcohol. ‘See — your comrades already dance among the fig trees of the Apsaras with the daughters of Heaven.’ In one corner several

red-coated infantrymen were snoring. 'And I have a woman with delicious limbs, *gora-log*.'

The woman interrupted brazenly. 'For half a rupee only, *gora-log*, I will give you something you have never had before.'

'What 'ave yer got?' Dando glanced at her. 'Bleedin' leprosy?'

Tom Brownlow was sniffing at a bottle. 'Fer Chris' sake — ! What's this? Coach varnish? I ain't surprised they're dancin' among the soddin' fig trees. A bottle o' this would snuff out a team o' gun-mules.'

The Bengali shrugged and smiled resignedly. 'Ah — Sahibs — if you had the money — ' his voice was doubtful, '— I have whisky.'

Both Dando and Brownlow looked at him. 'Whisky?'

He nodded. 'Very good whisky, *gora-log*. Real English whisky. In the Europe Shop in Delhi it would cost five rupees a bottle. For you, Sahibs, only four — or a half rupee for a large measure.' He lifted another bottle from a basket. English common soldiers seldom had half-rupees to spend, and certainly not four, but it was worth trying. 'See, the label says "Highland Monarch" — which is in England, *gora-log*.'

Dando and Brownlow were suddenly silent, and then Brownlow asked, 'Ow many bottles 'ave yer got?'

The Bengali brightened. 'Three bottles, Sahib. For you, the *Ruffel ka-Pultan*, four rupees a bottle, or a half-rupee — .'

'Ter bastard,' Dando said quietly. 'Where did yer get three bottles o' whisky in Delhi? They don't serve bleedin' blacks or rankers in the Europe Shop. So yer must 'ave stole 'em — and that means yer probably murdered.'

The man's ingratiating smile fled. 'Murder? Sahib — ' He laughed shakily. 'I am a respected *buniah*. My uncle is *chowkidar* to the Reverend Farrer Sahib in Meean Meer, and many famous English gentlemen have drunk from my bottles. See, you can ask anyone. You can ask this woman.' He was

suddenly aware that Dando's sword-bayonet was at his throat, and his eyes widened. 'I am an honest man, Sahib — a pious *Ramaswami*.' He swallowed. 'See, to prove it, I shall sell you a bottle of English whisky for only two rupees and he glanced at the woman, '— you can have the woman, in the corner — '

Dando snorted. 'She's a bleedin' sand-whore, poxed to the eyebrows,' His sword-bayonet prodded. 'Who did yer soddin' murder ter get the whisky?'

'Murder? Sahib — '

'An do yer know what we're doin' with murderers from Delhi? We're 'anging some, and we're blowin' others from the muzzles o' guns. It's a bleedin' 'orrible sight. There's guts an' blood fer two 'undred yards.'

The Bengali drew a deep breath. 'Sahib, I shall *give* you a bottle of whisky. A whole bottle.'

Joseph Dando studied him thoughtfully, then looked across at his companion. Brownlow sniffed. 'Three bottles,' he said.

The Bengali threw up his hands. 'It is impossible, *gora-log*! I shall be a ruined man. For many months I have saved my money to buy the whisky.'

'Orl we 'ave ter do is march yer to the guard-tent. They do say as 'ow yer don't feel a thing. One minute yer tied to a gun-muzzle, an' the next minute yer flyin' in bleedin' bits — arms, legs, brains.'

The Bengali reached down into his basket. 'Three bottles, Sahib?'

They left the tent with the bottles beneath their shirts. 'We'll find a place in the shade, Dando Boy,' Brownlow suggested. 'Then I'll meet yer among the fig trees.'

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When he awoke, his head blazed with pain, and for several minutes, he lay with his eyes clenched, frightened and unable to define where he was, or why. There was a foul taste in his mouth, and he was very cold. When at last

he stirred, he was rocked by nausea and began to vomit, gasping and crying on his knees. Finished, he clung to the roughness of the wall, sucking air into his lungs and groping desperately for intelligence. It was dark, and his clothes were as sodden as if he had been plunged bodily into a butt of water; his breeches clung to his legs like cold, wet skin. His jacket was crumpled and dank.

It had stopped raining and the night was clear. Above him the stars showed well, and he could hear the elms rustling, jeering. Joseph drew himself shakily to his feet, shivering with the cold, and immediately began retching again. This time, when he had done, he felt mildly better — sufficiently so to discipline his chaotic wits and to take stock of his predicament. There was a congealing stickiness on his lips, and his nose felt twice its normal size. He reached up a hand tentatively and then winced.

Bleedin' hell — what had happened? One moment he'd been sitting on the wall, as happy as a pig in a swill, and the next moment he was puking and spewing with a searing headache and a bloody nose. And it was dark. Not just dusk, but dark.

He clambered over the wall and stumbled, reeling towards the shadowy jumble of Merton. There was neither a sound to be heard nor a light to be seen until he reached the Shop. The self-generating gas lamp was still burning, and he could see the red and green carboys in the window, gleaming like baleful eyes. He shivered again and then fumbled for the latch. It made a noise like a pistol shot.

Inside, the Shop was in darkness, but he had barely entered before the door of Doctor Whistler's inner room opened. Joseph saw the Doctor's tall figure against a frame of yellow lamplight and then heard his measured voice. 'Come here, Boy.'

It was a room that served as both a consulting room and parlour. A fire

burned in a small grate under a mantelpiece with a tasselled fringe and supporting a glass-imprisoned clock, two rearing brass horses, a jar of tobacco and another of paper spills, and a tumbled miscellany of medical instruments. The furnishings included a mahogany desk, two shiny leather chairs crowned with antimacassars, and a couch partially hidden by a folding screen. Mrs. Turpin was seated, straight-backed, in one of the chairs, her eyes sternly on the floor. Doctor Whistler walked slowly to the fireplace and turned, his hands behind his back. Then he stared.

‘Great Christopher, Boy — ! What — ?’ Startled, Mrs. Turpin glanced up, then rose to her feet. Joseph drew a shuddering breath. Doctor Whistler walked forward, frowning. ‘What’s happened, Boy?’

Joseph could feel his nausea returning, inexorably, and his nose throbbed. He swallowed. ‘I fell orf a wall,’ he jerked, ‘sir.’

‘Fell off a wall? At three hours past midnight?’ The Doctor was incredulous.

Joseph wanted to vomit again. ‘I was sittin’ on the wall,’ he choked, ‘watching the steam railway, an’ I fell orf.’ Then he vomited.

He had a momentary vision of Mrs. Turpin’s whirling skirts as she ran for a basin and towel, and then the Doctor had lifted him bodily in his strong arms. His belly was twisting, contorting, and there was a spitting, yellow haze before his eyes. He heard Mrs. Turpin say, ‘He looks like death.’ He was on the couch, his face pressed into the basin, and he agreed with Mrs. Turpin. If he looked like death, he also felt like it. Doctor Whistler, however, was leaning over him, sniffing doubtfully.

‘Ah, yes,’ he said. ‘Ah, yes. I begin to see.’ He raised himself, then thrust out a lower lip. ‘You didn’t just “fall orf”, did you, Boy? Hey?’ Under different circumstances Joseph might have detected a note of relief in his employer’s voice, but for the moment he was too concerned with death. The

Doctor persisted. 'What did you drink, Boy?'

Joseph lay back on the couch weakly. He may as well confess before he died. 'Godfrey's Cordial,' he gasped.

The Doctor grunted. 'How much?'

'A bottle.'

'A *bottle*?' The Doctor drew in his breath, frowning. 'Do you know what it's made of, Boy? Opium and treacle. And do you know what the dose is? One level teaspoon with water. There's enough opium in a bottle of Godfrey's to stupefy a herd of buffalo.' He reached for Joseph's pulse. 'Stick to cough candy, Boy. It's safer.'

Mrs. Turpin raised her head primly. 'You mean he's been stealing cough candy as well?'

'Every Sunday for months past.' He was wiping his hands on the towel.

'He needs a leathering,' Mrs. Turpin retorted. 'He's a thief.'

The Doctor yawned. 'All boys are thieves. The condition is endemic, Mrs. Turpin. He was certain to steal something, and as it was only a pinch of cough candy I was not too concerned. But he'll not filch anything else in a hurry.'

'He's still a thief, and not to be trusted. How much else has he taken?'

Doctor Whistler looked down at the boy's white face. Joseph's eyes were closed, his brow glazed with perspiration. 'He's paying for it now. He'll have a sorry stomach for a couple of days. Meanwhile, he'll do better without those wet clothes and wrapped in a blanket.' He glanced up at the clock under its glass cupola. 'It's gone three and we should all be abed.'

Mrs. Turpin, however, was not to abandon so easily the opportunity that had presented itself. 'How many bottles has he taken?' she insisted. 'He might have been drinking it for weeks.'

The Doctor shook his head, mildly amused. 'If he has, I'll write to *The*

Lancet. It would be a medical phenomenon. No, I'll wager this was his first — and he'll not want to repeat the experiment.'

'I would sleep easier,' Mrs. Turpin said, 'if you made sure.'

He gazed at her silently for several moments, then shrugged. 'Very well, if you think it's important.' He lit a paper spill from the fire and carried it carefully to the lamp in the outer room. Mrs. Turpin sat with her eyes on the grate, her feet neatly together and her hands folded in her lap. On the couch, Joseph lay in a drugged sleep, his mouth open.

When Doctor Whistler reappeared, his face was twisted with incredulity. 'Thirty-six bottles!' he breathed. 'He's drunk thirty-six bottles!'

Mrs. Turpin nodded sadly. 'I'm not surprised. I've had my suspicions for a long time, but it was not for me to make accusations.' She rose to her feet, smoothing her pinafore. 'After all, he came from a pauper school, and there's no knowing what his origins are. We can only guess.'

Doctor Whistler stared at the recumbent Joseph. 'Thirty-six bottles!' he repeated. 'And I never realised there was anything more involved than a few ounces of cough candy.' He paused, perplexed. 'By Christopher — how could a boy of fifteen consume thirty-six bottles — alkaloid morphine — without any effects until now? It's beyond belief!'

'Ah, he's a sly one, and no mistake,' Mrs. Turpin agreed, 'but in the end he over-reached himself. They always do.' She patted her grey hair righteously. 'He'll have to go, of course.'

Chapter 10

The goldsmiths and silversmiths of the Chadni Chauk had closed and barred their shops, and much treasure was being buried by night. The tapping hammers of the brass and copper workers were silent, and the potters' wheels no longer whirled under skilled brown fingers. The looms and frames of the weavers and embroiderers were empty and gathering dust. Nobody wanted to buy, only to loot — and what fool worked only for another to steal from him? There was no shortage of food, although prices were rising. A far greater force than the British had would be required to completely blockade the city. It was estimated that there was sufficient ammunition already within the walls to maintain the entire Bengal Army for a year. Mirza Abu Bakr was going to need all of it. The *Feringhees* were astride Delhi Ridge, and, as Bahadur Shah had anticipated, they were very angry.

For a second time, Prince Mirza Mogul swore that he would stop the British in the open, on the Doab — long before they came within artillery range of Delhi. He had entrenched at Budlee-ke-Serai, seven miles away, and when the first white soldiers were in sight, he had opened fire with his largest guns, but his sepoy had still been crouched around their cooking fires when the red-coated infantrymen of the 75th Foot swept over his gun positions with fixed bayonets. Worse, three squadrons of Lancers had deluged out of the white-hot sky like savage centaurs, their bamboo lances transfixing running men in their frenzied scores, and finally, when his lines were breaking into confusion, the detested *Ruffel ka-Pultan*, who had already once humiliated him, had waded, waist-deep across the Nujufgurb Canal and flung themselves up the slopes of the ridge. Shattered, the sepoy had run for the walls of

Delhi, leaving behind four hundred dead, twelve guns, all their ammunition, tents and stores. Had the *Feringhees* only known, they could have poured into the city on the heels of the unnerved sepoy rabble. But the *Feringhees*, hardly believing in the magnitude of their success, had halted — and in a week, the twenty thousand defenders of Delhi would be trebled, with the opportunity of a quick, cheap victory gone.

Still, Bahadur Shah could see the Union Jack now, floating over the ridge to the north-westward. There weren't many *Feringhees* yet — three thousand, perhaps four — but he knew better than his son that they'd not relinquish their grip easily. The English were like locusts. They couldn't be driven away, only killed, and the English on the ridge would have to be killed more quickly than they could be replaced. If they were not, then with absolute certainty Delhi would fall. Whatever happened, many men were going to die — perhaps his son, perhaps himself. But was it not written that none was born of woman save to die?

There was, however, a little time remaining, and he still had yet a few women. His physician, Ahsanullah Khan, had prescribed sesamum seeds mixed with the juice of the fennel plant, flower of barley, and long pepper. It wouldn't make any difference. It never did. But he liked the soft, young ones — the ones who came to his couch for the first time, too inexperienced to hide the disgust that leapt to their eyes as he motioned them to him. It was their loathing — the sole emotion he could still inspire — that he relished, as another might the treading of petals into the mud. There would be a few more opportunities yet.

From his window, he could see in one direction clear across the Jumna, across the mid-stream eyots, stippled with weeds, to the brassy glitter of a distant gun battery on the eastern bank. Below, in the other direction, the Fatehpuri Mosque had been piled with sandbags, and the Kala and Sunahri

temples marred by ugly mud walls, their white marble smirched with filth, betel juice, and horse droppings. Behadur Shah could also see the big 24-pounder guns by the Kashmir Gate that could easily reach Ludlow Castle — the late Commissioner's house that the English picquets had already reoccupied. Mirza Abu Bakr had already said that he would attack tomorrow, and the next day, and the next — until every *Feringhee* had been cut to pieces. It was really very tiresome, but there were other things that the English would find just as devastating as bullets. They were called cholera, and dysentery, and typhoid. It was high summer, and soon the Nujufguhr Jheel Canal would become an open, fetid sewer, and men would die by the hundreds daily, helplessly, until the dead outnumbered the living, and those that remained would be weak from vomiting, their bowels bleeding and their teeth turning to chalk. It did not matter that soldiers were coming from England. They could not reach Delhi in time, and only those already in India would have the full brunt of the revolt to contend with, but they would have to be killed quickly. For a beginning, he, the king, would offer a bounty of a hundred rupees for every green tunic of the *Ruffel ka-Pultan* brought to the palace. Money was always a better incentive than promises of glory hereafter.

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The three miles of the ridge — a geographical oddity in a terrain otherwise as flat as a table — ran roughly north-south and parallel to the river, its nearest point 1,200 yards from the city and averaging about forty feet above its interior level. The long sweep of land between the ridge and the walls was wooded — more thickly towards the Jumna — and intersected by numerous *sangars* and gardens, *nullahs*, dry creeks, houses, and mosques, an untidy labyrinth where crawling picquets watched for movement, hidden guns waited, and the sniper's bullet rewarded the unwary with sudden death.

From Flagstaff Tower, a 150-foot white-washed column on the spine of the

ridge, could be seen every building of prominence within Delhi — the King's Palace, the fort of Selimgarh, the soaring Jama Masjid, the Water Bastion over the Jumna, the Shah Bastion and the great Kabul Gate through which the Grand Trunk Road ran from Peshawar to Calcutta. Of greater relevance were the defences' guns — 18- and 24-pounder siege batteries, 8-inch and 10-inch mortars, howitzers and Coehorns — the heaviest metal of the Bengal Army, nicely placed and with ample ammunition. The wall-tops were packed with infantry, the scarlet and cross-belts of Company sepoy, the soiled yellow of the King's Guards, the grey of dismounted sowars, pyramids of roundshot and piled gun-charges, regimental standards, bandsmen. Beyond Selimgarh the bridge of boats swayed continuously as more and more mutineers poured across the river into the city, from Bareilly, Fategarh, and Mainpuri, and nothing could be done to stop them. On the causeway outside the Calcutta Gate the band of the 54th Native Infantry played light airs — 'The Lincolnshire Poacher,' 'Royal Windsor,' and 'A Southerly Wind and a Cloudy Sky' — as if it were the Commissioner's garden party thronged with officers and ladies, frothy crinolines, and parasols. *Havildars* inspected muskets, shouted drill orders, and threatened the Colonel-Sahib's wrath. The sun climbed higher and the flies thickened. On the hidden side of the ridge, the British were laying tent lines and had already dug the first dozen graves of a burial ground on the bank of the Nujufgurrh Canal, opposite the old race course.

The British line consisted of a series of strongpoints, of light batteries supported by infantry — Flagstaff Tower, the Mosque, the Observatory, Crow's Nest, Hindoo Rao's House — an abandoned residence — the Mound, and the stables of the house of Sir Theophilus Metcalfe, a Delhi magistrate. Of these, Hindoo Rao's House was the key to the entire defence line — a three-floored house with a flat roof, its walls loop-holed and upper windows

bricked in, and manned by a combined force of Sirmoor Goorkhas and 60th Rifles. The loss of the House could mean the outflanking of the chain of positions, and Mirza Abu Bakr knew it. He also knew of the *Feringhees'* aversion to prolonged fighting during the heat of the day, and he intended to wear down their resistance with continuous assaults and incessant bombardment, depriving them of rest, reinforcements or relief, supplies, and water. Besides, his spies had reported that Hindoo Rao's House was partly defended by native infantry — Nepalese — who might well be waiting for an opportunity to come over to the Delhi mutineers, and if that happened there might follow a victory so complete and shattering that the English in India would be finished forever. And all for one little house on the slope of Delhi Ridge.

They came through the gardens and broken houses of the village of Subjee-Mundee in excellent order, five thousand sepoy led by the 60th Native Infantry, fresh from the Ambala District and filled with boasting courage, surging like a vast, scarlet flood across the grassland of the hill. Hidden by low trees, perhaps in a *nullah* beyond the canal, a gun battery opened fire with a rumbling crash, and the walls of Hindoo Rao's House shuddered, spilling plaster. The twenty riflemen of the southerly picquet were running for cover, stooping as they scrambled across the entrenched vegetable garden. It was surely impossible that three hundred Goorkhas and three hundred Rifles could hold back this advancing mass long enough for sufficient reserves to be hurried from the mile-distant camp. Behind the sepoy van a band was lustily playing 'Cheer, Boys, Cheer!' and Major Reid laid down his glass. 'There's only room for one damn 60th Regiment on Delhi Ridge,' he said. 'Let's see which — '

Less than a minute later, he knew. He waited until the stolidly advancing enemy was within twenty yards of his trenches, tramping through a cluttered

melon grove, then released a hurricane of double-loaded canister that tore the leading companies of the 60th Native Infantry to red-pulped ruin. The following ranks hesitated, then came on determinedly into a second blizzard of six hundred minie bullets at point-blank range. The band had wailed to a shocked silence, and a proud battalion of marching sepoy was suddenly only a dozen reeling men, glassy-eyed and stunned. Reid drew his pistol. 'Fix swords! Out and at 'em!'

Goorkhas and riflemen tumbled into the sunlight of the garden. There were sepoy corpses strewn among smashed melons and trampled hibiscus, and the little Nepalese were slashing madly with their *kukris*. In front of 'A' Company, fifty or sixty mutineers poured over the edge of a *nullah* and turned desperately to defend, but the green tide of riflemen was only seconds behind them, hurtling into the *nullah*, stabbing, blaspheming. The bandsmen of the 60th Natives had died here, and still lay among their torn brass instruments. Across the flowered shrubs, thorn tangles, and crumbling walls of Subjee-Mundee, men fired doggedly, or thrust and clubbed, panting. The Goorkhas were fighting with berserk fury, their whirling *kukris* inflicting ghastly wounds, but Mirza Mogul was herding more and more infantry across the four narrow bridges that spanned the canal to the southward, and from Hindoo Rao's House the 'Retire' was teetering.

Tom Brownlow found himself a loophole. These bleedin' Chinamen,' he spat, 'ain't arf bad, are they?'

'They're Goorkhas,* Dando said.

'Goorkha Chinamen,' Brownlow nodded. 'Regular little slant-eyed bantam cocks.' Through the trees they could see the thronging sepoy reloading, their ramrods stabbing. There would be a few minutes' breathing space. Brownlow took a handful of minie bullets from a pocket and, with a clasp-knife, began to shave off the soft leaden nose of each. The cylindrical Enfield bullet

passed cleanly through a man, and could fail to halt a sepoy crazed with hashish, but when blunted it expanded in flight to make a wound as big as a fist. It was impossible to guess how the mutineers' wounded fared. They no longer had regimental surgeons, and the few native doctors would hardly cope with hundreds of gun-shot wounds and smashed limbs. The English dispassionately shot all wounded they found, but many stumbled back to their bivouac or crawled into a corner to die slowly from bloodloss, thirst, gangrene, and fever. Still, there was no pity to spare for Pandies. They ain't 'oomans,' Tom Brownlow had always affirmed. 'They're only animals wot soddin' *look* like 'oomans. There's arf of 'em can't even speak English!' And that proved it.

'It's the truth,' Joseph Dando agreed. He took careful aim and fired. 'An' there's another dead bleedin' animal.'

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Two hours later they were still firing. It was debatable who were the more uncomfortable — the men exposed to the sun in the entrenchments and on the roof, or those in the stifling rooms of the house, choked with powder smoke and falling debris. Their weapons had become almost too hot to grasp and in constant hazard of exploding during the process of loading. Men swathed their rifle-barrels in rags, and threw them to the floor and urinated on them. The dead were dragged from the loopholes to the cellar, the wounded to Surgeon Innes' trestle table, where he probed and cut, blood-drenched to his elbows, his shirt and breeches sodden with sweat.

Below and surrounding the house, several thousand sepoy swarmed, crawling, crouching among walls and shrubbery. They had learned the bitter lesson that to advance in drilled lines was to be scythed down by the raking volleys of the *Ruffel ka-Pultan*, and now they were more wary. Many had deliberately muddled their regimentals, inching their way forward, firing and

flattening to earth. Every ditch, every tree, every clutter of rubble gave cover to a sepoy determined to kill his *Feringhee*. Most of them never did; the accursed Enfield rifles picked them off with remorseless regularity. The dead were piling and the wounded coughed and retched, grey-faced, among the wild mangoes and bananas and the dense bamboo thickets from which they would never emerge, but some were within range and their shots were telling. Their regimental standards were in Subjee-Mundee — John Company flags additionally embroidered with moons and stars — and the native officers, promoted to colonels and brigadiers by Mirza Abu Bakr, were screaming for their men to make a final charge to sweep the English to ruin. What was death? Did not the warrior dwell in bliss everlasting, with ever-young and beautiful *houris* ministering to his wants and pleasures? *Maro Feringhee! Ko! Maro, maro!*

Joseph Dando sucked the ball of a thumb that was raw and bleeding from repeatedly snapping home his cap-lock. ‘If yer was to arsk me,’ he said reflectively, ‘them soddin’ Pandies mean business this time, Brownlow. I reckon they’re goin’ ter do fer us. This time — ’ he groped for another cartridge, ‘ — this time we’re goin’ ter get bleedin’ knackered.’

‘Yer might be right,’ Brownlow sniffed. ‘On the other ‘and, yer might not. We could get reinforcements yet, Dando boy. The General won’t want ter throw away six ‘undred soddin’ rifles.’

‘More like five ‘undred now,’ Dando said. ‘And the General ‘ad better stir ‘is bleedin’ stumps, becorse the next time them Pandies come, they’re goin’ ter keep on bleedin’ coming — an’ we ain’t goin’ to stop ‘em.’

‘An’ we’ll be cut orf in the flower of our bleedin’ youth,’ Brownlow nodded, then frowned. ‘That reminds me. Yer owes me a pinch o’ shag. I’ll ‘ave it now — before it gits all mucked wi’ blood.’

*

When Tom Brownlow stripped his shirt he revealed a white, lean torso pitted with blue scars as if tattooed by a drunken hand, but his blood had flowed red enough, mingled with black dust on a hundred occasions as he lay on his belly at the coal-face, stabbing with a pick in the fetid darkness. He measured time only by the number of tubs filled, by the increasing cold that numbed his legs, the shrinking candle pinned to a timber, and at midday he'd take his piece — likely bread and a cold potato, a brief pipe of baccy — before rejoining the gang for another six hours. In winter he'd only see the day's light on Sunday.

Not that he cared overmuch. He was one of a good working gang — three men and a boy — and each did what he was best at. One man cut, another hauled clear, the third filled the tubs, and the boy carried to pit-bottom. They were paid by weight, and there was no place for a weak 'un. In a good week, unhindered by flooding or falls, they'd take home fifteen shillings and the boy six. There'd be a few quarts of porter and meat in the pot.

He didn't even care that the wage-tokens with which he was paid could only be spent in the shop and ale-house of the mine-owner, who was also the owner of his father's single-room cottage, or that injury meant instant dismissal without compensation, sickness meant no wages save the charity of his fellows, and that every child was expected to follow his father into the mine at the age of seven or eight. How could he care? It had always been so, and these were things that would never change. He — Tom Brownlow — had followed his father, and had seen him buried under a hundred tons of fallen rock. The gang had passed around the cap, and the mine-owner had paid his father's wages for the full day although he had died well before noon. But Tom was twenty years old and earning a man's money. His mother died within the year, not wanting to continue without the man who had given her little during his lifetime and left her nothing at his death.

Tom hadn't wanted to marry, but a single man had no claim to a cottage, and he needed a woman to wash the coal from him, to prepare his piece, to rub his chest with meat-fat when the damp was bad in his muscles. Katie Prettyman had been willing, and he had taken her for better or worse.

And Katie Prettyman had been willing only because of her apprehension for a pregnant belly. Everyone in Minster knew she was a man-teaser, that sooner or later she'd lead a man on too far.

On Sunday, Tom had walked her on the empty, rutted road that led to the Minster Marshes. It was summer, and across the vast expanse of mud flats they could see the glitter of sunlight on open water. Despite the sun, however, the wind sweeping unhindered across the saltings was cold, and he'd found the derelict fowler's hut. Katie had been coquettish, clinging to his arm with feigned nervousness and complaining that her shoes would be soiled, and then realised, too late, that she was about to rue more than her shoes.

He had never disrobed a woman before. He had never even seen a woman unclothed except a marble statue in Canterbury, and Katie did not possess the perfection of an Aphrodite. Her shoulders were too thin, and below her breasts were the red pinch-marks left by her corsets. Oddly, it had been a disappointing experience. She had lain stiffly, unyielding and tensed with fright. He was glad to have it finished with, and he walked back along the road with Katie trailing several yards behind, brushing the mud from her skirts and crying. She wouldn't tell. Her father would thrash her with his belt for far less than whoring, but there was only one consequence of lying naked with a man — a swollen belly and a brat.

Katie did not achieve her swollen belly, but she did achieve Tom Brownlow in wedlock. For his part, it might as well be Katie Prettyman as anyone else. She washed the coal from him on Saturday nights, made up a good piece, and never failed to give him a washed shirt and spit-clean boots on Sundays, but

she was an unresponsive, resentful woman, and the occasions when he fumbled for her beneath the blanket became progressively rarer. Katie felt cheated. True enough, Tom Brownlow was no worse than any other man she might have wed, and likely better than most. He brought home his wages untouched, and he had never struck her, whilst many of the other miners went straight to the ale-house, drank their way through their week's pay, and thrashed their women for protesting that there was no food in the house and no money for buying any. But Katie Prettyman had been given no choice, had she? She remembered that chill afternoon with the seabirds screeching, of the sickness in her throat as he unbuttoned his trousers, and she wondering if she would manage to wipe the mud from her shoes before she reached home.

She hadn't bargained for that. She'd tempted men before a score of times, with her twisting hips or a lifted skirt, and she knew how to touch a man seemingly by accident, so that he flushed. She enjoyed tempting men.

Well, there were other men, and, if her own husband was indifferent towards her, it probably meant there were other women. There were women in the mine, and she'd heard gossip. In the darkness they worked stripped to the waist, and it was said that the overseers would tally up extra weight for a wench who was accommodating. If that's what Tom Brownlow was doing, well, it was a game two could play.

And the game had ended on that June morning when the Stour River flooded the new cut. The steam pump had clanked and panted, but it would take all of ten hours, the engineer had said, and the men might as well go home. It meant a day's weight lost, and the men were sullen. They might work to exhaustion tomorrow, but they'd not make up a whole day. Tom Brownlow walked slowly down the hill to his blackened, flintstone cottage, to find a man on the bed with Katie.

Tom Brownlow had hit the man with the flat of his shovel, shattering jaw

and nose, and obliterating an eye. The man had fallen, vomiting crimson slime, before Katie screeched that he was the mine-owner's son, whereupon Tom smashed her mouth with a blow of his fist that left four of her teeth embedded in his knuckles. That done, he picked up his piece, closed the door of the cottage carefully behind him, and tramped unhurriedly towards the Canterbury road.

*

'Ere they come,' Joseph Dando said. He laid his powder-blackened cheek against the stock of his rifle. The trenches in the garden would be overrun first, and that might give the men in the house sufficient time to reload after their first volley. Then it would be cold steel — but not for long. Two or three hundred men couldn't live against bleedin' thousands.

Joseph had seldom contemplated the business of death, and had never thought beyond a mental picture of little St. Mary's Church on the Mitcham road, with the parson's white surplice curling in the breeze as he droned at the graveside, the rooks circling the tower and the old bell tolling. He had never visualised a brutal, painful death under a hot Indian sun. That might happen to other men, but not to Joseph Dando. Christ, everyone had to die at some soddin' time, and he'd have company — Tom Brown-low, Edwin Wilson, Irish Holloran, Sergeant Garvin, and Mr. Heathcote. How exactly would it happen? He hoped it would be bleedin' quick, b'Christ, and he hoped he went well. He must think of a final quip to shout across at ol' Tom Brownlow.

From among the tangle of banana fronds and the dense pink-flowered mango trees, the sepoy battalions emerged like a tidal wave. The six-pounders in the garden flashed, rearing back on their trails with the canister-shot slashing through the spiky grass like murderous hornets. 'Sponge! Load — and Ram! Ready — ?' Scores of sepoys were down, shrieking and jerking,

but the tidal wave had not paused. Major Reid waited again — until he could see the approaching brown faces distorted with hate, many with the fixed, wide-eyed stare of men drugged into recklessness, and then he shouted: ‘Fire at will — !’

Joseph squeezed his trigger, felt his rifle kick hard into his shoulder and his ears ringing. Cartridge. Tear with the teeth, with the black powder stinging on the tongue. Christ, it was hot. Ram tight. Ball. Ram again. Fumble with sore fingers in cap-pocket. Thumb home. Ready —

He thought, oddly, of his Chatham days, when he’d drilled with the heavy Brunswick until he’d almost sobbed with weariness, of the sharp flints that bloodied his knees, of the barrack-room wives with their brine and bread poultices. In his new green regimentals and with his kepi aslant he had strutted the High Street, fancying himself a soldier and no end of a fine bucko.

But the sepoys had reached the trenches, and dozens were across. It could be only seconds now before they reached the artillerymen, and then the house —

And then there was that time he’d come face to face with Hannah Minting —

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‘My arse!’ Hannah had stared across the smoke-wreathed taproom of the Fortune of War. ‘It’s Joey! And a bleedin’ rifleman! Christ — the Russians ain’t arf going to shit their breeches!’ She threw back her head and laughed, then sobered. ‘Are yer goin’ ter buy me a quart o’ porter?’

‘No, I ain’t,’ Joseph said. ‘Bugger orf.’ He had achieved a new status, and knew just how to deal with whores.

Hannah pulled a wry face. ‘Christ — we’re a bit snotty, ain’t we? It weren’t long ago when yer kettle started boilin’ every bleedin’ time yer saw my tits.’

She winked. 'I'll tell yer what, Joey. Yer' been paid? Fer a shilling, I'll give yer a soldier's farewell yer'll not ferget till the day yer' pensioned.'

Joseph sniffed. 'Bugger orf. I'm bleedin' particular where I stick it.'

*

'Fix swords!' Ensign Heathcote barked, and Joseph clambered to his feet. But something was happening. The road on the crest of the Ridge, above them, was vomiting horsemen — neither Lancers nor Carabineers, nor rebel *sowars*, but men in sand-coloured clothes and red *puggarees* — hundreds of men throwing themselves from their saddles, sending away their mounts with a stinging slap on the rump before deploying across the slope, firing their carbines, crouching, running, indistinct among the dried scrub and dusty rocks. For a few fleeting seconds, the gunfire around Hindoo Rao's House ceased, and sepoy, riflemen, and Goorkhas stared upwards. Who were these? Mutineers or Queen's? If they were mutineers, then the riflemen and Goorkhas would simply die a little sooner — but if they were Queens —

Major Reid was shading his eyes with a hand. 'They're Guides!' he shouted, his voice laughing. 'They're Daly's damn' Corps of Guides, from Hoti Murdan! B'God — !' He turned. 'Careful with your aim. They're our own. They're the Guides, o' the Punjab Frontier Force.'

Joseph Dando wiped his mouth with a filthy palm. 'Guides? *Guides*? 'Oo the bleedin' 'ell are Guides? They're Sikhs, ain't they? First it's Goorkhas, then it's Sikhs. It's the first time I've been glad ter see soddin' blacks. Brownlow — ' He glanced over his shoulder. 'Brownlow — ?'

Tom Brownlow sat with his head resting against the wall, very still, gazing at the melee in the garden. There was a trickle of blood from his mouth, and his smoking pipe had fallen to the floor, its stem broken. Joseph sucked in his breath. 'Brownlow — ?'

Outside, the Sikhs came down the slope of the Ridge like wolves, using

every conceivable fragment of cover. It was impossible to estimate their numbers; they might have been five hundred or five thousand, and their guns seemed to be flashing from every direction, from every gully, every boulder, every tangle of shrub. Bewildered, and caught in a vicious cross-fire, the sepoy halted. With their officers lashing with *rattans*, a few ran on blindly, to meet the riflemen's swords or the Goorkhas' *kukris*. Others knelt, firing aimlessly at the Ridge above them. Then the six-pounders belched again, and the drenching canister was enough. The sepoy turned their backs on Hindoo Rao's House, jostling aside the swearing *subadars* and seeking the shelter of Subjee-Mundee, where the Prince's aides spat and shouted insults at them. Did they call themselves men? Where were the Hindu warriors who were each worth ten Englishmen? Where was the promised slaughter of the worthless *Feringhee* pigs? The whores of Delhi would jeer at them — the milk-sops who had fled from a little house manned by a handful of white men and a few renegade Goorkhas. The stumbling sepoy snarled their replies. If the great Mirza Mogul and his curled and perfumed aides were so brave, they could show the way. Here was a musket. Here was a pouchful of cartridges. And there was Hindoo Rao's House — just through the mango trees.

In the House, Tom Brownlow was dead, and when the dhooiie-bearers came to take his corpse, Joseph motioned them away. 'Git yer dirty bleedin' 'ands orf,' he retorted. 'There ain't nobody touching Brownlow 'cept me, see?' No rot-guttin' black was going to maul Brownlow around like a sack of flour. Alone, he dug a grave in the stone-hard earth of the high plateau, among scattered hog-plum and kusha grass, from where could be seen the far bank of the Jumna and the road to Meerut. 'Yer weren't a bad ol' sod,' Dando addressed the blanket-wrapped Brownlow. 'I wouldn't 'ave told yer to yer face, but yer weren't a bad ol' sod.' He sat by the side of the grave, sucking thoughtfully on his pipe, until dark, then sighed, rose to his feet, and

walked slowly back to the house.

The mutineers' assault on Hindoo Rao's House had been too close to success for comfort. The position needed strengthening, and the following day its force was increased to four companies of the 60th, 350 Goorkhas and 300 Guides, supported by ten heavy and two light guns in battery. The riflemen's suspicion towards their Indian allies was diminishing. The Goorkhas had already demonstrated their loyalty in no mean fashion. They were vicious hand-to-hand fighters from whose unbridled ferocity the sepoy recoiled, and during the night following the attack several of the little Nepalese had slithered silently through the mango grove into Subjee-Mundee to return with dripping *kukris* and the severed heads of a dozen mutineers, including that of a *risaldar*-major of the 3rd Native Cavalry. Yet at leisure they were friendly, good-humoured and garrulous, like noisy puppy dogs, jostling around their acrid-smoking fires for their goat-meat and rice, and greeting the arrival of their rum issue with loud shouting.

The Guides were very different. They were lean, whipcord men, hawk-featured and bearded. Their ability to make use of cover in the barest of terrain was almost incredible, and they were superb marksmen. The Sikhs would lie motionless for hours on the sun-baked Ridge, waiting and watching for the tiniest movement below. Then there would be a single shot, and in Subjee-Mundee another sepoy would sprawl in the dust. Enemy snipers, mud-smeared, who inched their way through the scrub, were mercilessly stalked, and seldom escaped to boast of their killing. The taciturn Sikhs neither shaved nor cut their hair, always carried something blue and something of steel, abstained from tobacco, and maintained the five *Kakkas*: the *Kangi* — the comb, the *Kachh* — breeches to the knee only, the *Kard* — the knife, the *Kes* — long hair, and the *Kirpan* — sword. The riflemen of the 60th never reached an intimate relationship with the Sikhs, as they did with

the amiable Goorkhas — but there was no denying that the grim-eyed men from the Punjab were ‘useful buggers to ‘ave on the right bleedin’ side’. Within days their dun-coloured clothes — known as ‘karky’ — were being copied by units throughout the length of the Ridge, with white drills dyed with tea or curry powder to present a range of shades varying from near-orange to dark brown.

And within days, in the British Camp that lay on the low land between the Ridge and the Nujufgurh Canal, cholera struck.

Chapter 11

There was the stink of death on the Ridge, and vultures floated over the broken walls, their soulless eyes on the scores of decomposing corpses that lay scattered among the weed-choked gardens, the dead horses bloated and stifflegged, crawling with ants and already half devoured. There were corpses, too, in the canals, clogging the sluice gates, sprawled in the debris of the *nullahs* and dry creeks. The jackals came by night, their keen noses leading them through the ruins of ancient Delhi, and they left before dawn, glutted. By day there was the constant crack-crack of bullets, the whine of ricochets, sometimes a startled hare darting for a bamboo patch, or fowls running wild from the abandoned native villages. But always there was the stink of death, and the mounds in the burial ground increased in number daily.

Temperatures rose to 120°, and the men of the newly arrived 8th and 61st Foot were dying in their dozens. Surgeon Innes had ordered that the Rifles should continue to wear their green serge tunics instead of the flimsy linen that had become fashionable among the other regiments, and there was a sentry at every well. Men rose in the morning debating whether they would be on their feet at sunset — and it was not yet July, when the rains would come, and the incidence of cholera could be expected to multiply twenty-fold. The Commander-in-Chief, His Excellency the Honourable George Anson, had died even before reaching the Ridge, and his successor, Major-General Sir Harry Barnard, was experiencing a nightmare. Take Delhi? It would be a miracle to even cling to the Ridge, and he had written, ‘The thing is too gigantic for the force brought against it.’ The 60th Rifles, the backbone

of his motley army, had suffered casualties of forty per cent in four weeks, but casualties he expected. It was the insidious cholera that caused him the greatest concern. His concern, however, would be short-lived. He would be dead himself within a week — from cholera.

*

Joseph Dando had once known a stench almost as bad. The Society for the Relief of Destitute Young Persons expected a measure of compensation for the charity it extended. Factory and mill-owners, and other prospective employers, paid a modest fee for the acquisition of children who had been disciplined and been given at least a fleeting knowledge of letters and figures. The shorter the Society's period of custodianship, the better; a lengthy stay could prove uneconomical. Ashley's Factory Act had been a savage blow at the Society, but there were loopholes still. Factory inspectors were few in number, and on the occasions of their predictable visits an unscrupulous employer could hide from sight the children obviously under-age. In any case, there had been no official registration of births until 1837, and who could dispute whether an undocumented waif was seven, eight, or nine?

In the meantime, there was no reason why the Society's charges should not contribute something in return for their bed, board, and education, and there were eight good hours after midday. The children went to the dust-collector.

Beyond the wall of the charity school were the premises of 'Geo. Bell, Dust Collector & Dredger. Firewood.' Mr. Bell contracted to dispose of other people's garbage and, until he did dispose of it, the garbage lay in vast, odious heaps, waiting to be sorted into the marketable and the unmarketable. It was the waifs' labour that Mr. Bell employed for this purpose. Rags, cinders, and bones had to be separated — the rags for further examination, cinders searched for coal fragments. Wood was chopped and bundled for sale as kindling, paper and unusable rags stacked for conveyance, in due course,

to a pulp mill. The endless, jumbled remainder had to be sieved, with pure dust collected for brick-making and manure.

It was foul, nauseating work, with the big, laded sieves heavy for the children to handle. The obnoxious dust choked their throats and stung their eyes, and the stink of corruption was everywhere. Much of the refuse was unsuitable for shovelling, and the waifs were compelled to gather it in their hands, spattering themselves to the armpits with filth. There was putrescence in the heaps — blood-soaked dressings and other indescribable matter from the wards of Guy's Hospital, rotting butchers' offal, dead dogs and, occasionally, the corpse of an infant parcelled in rags or paper.

There was little respite from the sorting. Every hour brought another dust-cart with its fetid load, and the great, tangled mounds never seemed to diminish. They worked with cold, chilblained fingers, soaked by drizzling rain, until it was too dark to see, then filed wearily back to a supper of watery turnip soup, and so to their blankets. The Society appropriated the few ha'pennies that each had earned from Mr. Bell.

Only on Sundays were they released from the great stink. On Sunday boiled potatoes might be substituted by pea pudding with a shred of meat. It was the day, too, for visiting members of the Society, sometimes bringing their families, following church, to view with righteous condescension the waifs and foundlings that their charity had rescued from starvation and despair. Joseph grew to loathe these well-fed, arrogant benefactors, and in particular the sleek, plump children in their velvet suits or hooped skirts, giggling and whispering, and eyeing him as if he were an animal from Africa — to be discussed, shrugged at, and sometimes even allowed the privilege of a few words, but not touched or even approached too closely. There was a limit to charity.

*

There was continuous fighting around the outposts of the Ridge — the Mirza Mogul's campaign of attrition — and the hospital tents were filled to suffocating capacity with wounded and sick. The army doctors worked without pause throughout the daylight hours and far into the night. Both the surgeon and the assistant surgeon of the 75th, exhausted, had succumbed to cholera, and several others were in danger of collapse. To aggravate the situation, accommodation and medical attention had to be provided for the increasing trickle of civilian refugees from every corner of the North-Western Provinces, many of whom had travelled for hundreds of miles in bullock *tongas*, or afoot, hiding by day, and suffering privations that none had previously thought possible. Malnutrition, fatigue, the horror of witnessing loved ones butchered, all had reduced their resistance to infection, and there were as many sick among the civilians as among the soldiers. They were an embarrassment — utilising tents and blankets, rations, water, and military protection that could be ill-afforded — but there was little choice.

Not all of the refugees were grateful for the sanctuary afforded by the Ridge. Not all thought that they should receive no greater consideration, no better food and shelter, than the common soldiers who went to man the defence lines at weekly intervals and returned to the camp fewer in number, spent and haggard or, swathed in camel blankets, swelled the population of the burial ground by the Nujufgurh Canal. These were the wives of Company officials who had been accustomed to service at table by a soft-footed *khitmatgar*, with fresh sheets daily on the bed, a carriage, and pair for the shortest journey, and no task more strenuous than the signing of chits or the lifting of a porcelain teacup. It was monstrous that they should be expected to occupy a tent in company with a dozen others, to sleep on the hard ground in a coarse *jhool*, to queue for beef stew and bread. They complained, continuously and bitterly. Was there no such thing as rank any more? Why

didn't the soldiers take Delhi and have done with this humiliating state of affairs?

And the Company Ladies on Delhi Ridge, as they ate their beef stew, mused thoughtfully on the story of the English girl taken prisoner at Cawnpore by a mutinous *sowar* and lodged in the custody of his family. When her captor lay in a drunken sleep, the girl had taken his sword and cut off his head, and for good measure, the heads of his mother, wife, and two children. She then walked out of the house and, meeting other mutineers, had said, 'Go inside and see how nicely I have rubbed the *Risaldar's* feet,' — knowing her own death to be only seconds away. That, agreed the Ladies of Delhi, was how an English girl could behave. Why didn't these men show a little of the same spirit?

*

With Tom Brownlow dead, Joseph Dando experienced the return of an old, familiar feeling — loneliness. Tom Brownlow had been his constant companion, his rear-rank man, for almost six years. They had sweated together in the airless 'tweendecks of the *Simoom*, had drunk and whored in Jullundur, Ambala, and Meerut, fought together at Sirdhana, Chazi-ud-din Nagar, Budlee-ka-Serai, and finally in Hindoo Rao's House on the Ridge, and despite a constant exchange of oaths had been inseparable cronies. There were other men with whom Dando had served equally long — Edwin Wilson, Bill Sutton, Jim Bathurst, Bill Rose — but they didn't mean the same thing as Tom Brownlow and, anyway, Joseph had no desire for a substitute. There was a smouldering anger in his belly. He had detested the Pandies before, but now the very thought of them brought the blood to his eyes and choked his throat with rage. For the first time since the near-forgotten death of his father he had lost someone he had cared for — and those murderin' black bastards were going to pay.

His companions began to eye him warily. He had grown morose, and his temper flared easily. Behind his back they shrugged, silently mouthed the word '*ghazi*,' and tapped their foreheads with a finger. Well, the Ridge was enough to send any man *ghazi*, with its heat and stench and its daily, multiplying death-roll — but, Christ, a man didn't have to snarl at his bleedin' mates, did he? And there were letters and newspapers from England, demanding answers to dozens of stupid questions. Why hadn't the mutineers been massacred at Meerut, and Fategarh, and Cawnpore? What was the delay in recapturing Delhi? How could a few thousand ignorant black natives be allowed to defy the British Raj? Something was wrong. If the mutineers couldn't be subdued by bullet and bayonet, couldn't they be starved into submission? Anyway, what was the damn' British Army doing? What did it suppose the tax-payer was paying for? B'Christ, it was enough to send any man *ghazi*.

On the 20th of June, the sepoy again flung themselves through Subjee-Mundee, and on that day the Monsoon burst, with torrential rain turning the Ridge into a glutinous morass. The creeks and *nullahs* cascaded with tawny water, swirling rotting corpses and other debris towards the swollen Jumna. Brown men and white fought savagely in the mud, but the Enfield rifles were less affected by the teeming rain than the sepoy's powder-primed muskets, and the frustrated mutineers were once more pushed back down the slope of the Ridge, leaving behind hundreds of sodden dead. The British could not follow. They had sixty-two casualties of their own, they were exhausted, and many were weakening from fevers and dysentery. Only Dando, ignoring the 'Recall,' had continued reloading and firing on the outskirts of Subjee-Mundee until Ensign Heathcote and two riflemen dragged him back to Hindoo Rao's House, cursing.

'Godammit, man — !' Heathcote panted. 'D'you suppose you can fight a

thousand blasted Pandies on your own?’

Dando grunted. 'I jes' finished wi' running away, that's all. I ain't running away from them bleedin' animals. They ain't never goin' to be beat if we keep running away.'

Ensign Heathcote groped in a damp pocket for a cheroot and then lit it slowly. 'Damn you, Dando. There's a difference between retiring after hammering seven bells out of five thousand sepoy — and running away. And who the hell d'you suppose you are? A brass-bound British hero? Well, I'll tell you, Dando. You're a damn' fool. Three men had to return to Subjee-Mundee to bring you back, and they might have been killed. You — ' his finger stabbed. ' — I don't care about. You have my permission to march down to the Kabul Gate, in full field order and with a hundred rounds — and you can fight the whole blasted Pandy army by yourself. Likely you'll get a Victoria Cross. But you'll never again endanger the lives of any of the men in my Company, d'you understand?'

Behind the walls of Delhi, Mirza Abu Bakr was preparing for his most spectacular assault of the siege — on 23 June. The Brahmins and the astrologers were adamant in agreement. The old prophecy said that the rule of the British would last but a hundred years, and 23 June was the centenary of the Battle of Plassey. It was clearly written in the stars, the astrologers affirmed, that the war with the *Feringhees* would continue for one year, but that from 19th Sambat there would be peace, and Hindustan would be free. Spies from the British lines had kept the Prince well informed of his enemies' situation. Their casualties were increasing more rapidly than replacements could arrive. There was cholera and dysentery sweeping through the camp, and they who had come as besiegers were now the besieged. His agents on the Ridge had already attempted to coerce the loyal native contingents into joining the mutineers' cause, promising that the King of Delhi would give

high rank to the officers, and there were rupees in plenty for sepoy. The agents had achieved little. The perfidious Sikh running-dogs of the English had denounced them, and they had been hanged before nightfall. But the seeds had been sown. Conditions on the Ridge could only worsen. There would be more dead, more privation, and many would count the cost too high.

And conditions on the Ridge were already worsening. The stench of unburied corpses and the churned filth of the canal filled everyone's nostrils, sickeningly. Drinking water was a slimed, obnoxious fluid that had to be gulped down with eyes closed and stomach contorting. Men and women could not hold their bowels, and the swarming black flies were everywhere, smothering food and putrescence alike. When the rains ceased, and the Ridge steamed under the broiling sun, men dropped like ninepins, vomiting and with eyes glazed, to die within hours. Those that lived dragged their weary, weakening frames to the trenches and gun-batteries, tortured by itching skins and sore-broken lips. There were scorpions in shadowed corners, and jackals were bold enough to infiltrate the lines at night to bite men as they slept. Rations were skimpy and monotonous, and the smallest luxury — a tin of meat, a handful of fruit, a few fish — commanded incredible prices in the camp bazaar.

At dawn on the 23rd of June, the dispirited picquets at Hindoo Rao's House and the Observatory watched twenty thousand sepoy pouring from the Moree and Kashmir Gates. The vast horde never seemed to stop emerging from the city, until the entire plain to the north of the walls was crammed with jostling red and white companies, the sun glittering on bayonets and the ripple of muskets as they rose to thousands of shoulders. What possible hope was there? Didn't the soddin' generals *know* that the time had come when flesh and blood could do no more? The odds were just too great. Didn't they

bleedin' know?

Joseph Dando lay on his belly in the vegetable garden. He could see over the torn thatched roofs of Subjee-Mundee and the line of the Kurnal Trunk Road. When the first sepoy companies reached the road, they'd be within effective rifle range — six hundred yards. Then it would be just a matter of time.

*

When Doctor Charlton Whistler had come to the Society, requiring an assistant, it had been Joseph's turn for disposal. Joseph was disappointed. What was an *assistant*? He had always hoped for a fine northern factory, a suit of clothes, a shilling, and a journey on a steam railway train. Still, he followed the tall doctor, a pace behind, into the Borough Road, where his new employer turned to survey him. 'Are you hungry, boy?'

Hungry? Was that the same thing as wanting food? Hunger was ever constant. It was no more apparent to him than the outline of the nose between his eyes. But he *always* wanted food. Joseph nodded.

'Yes, sir,' the doctor prompted.

'Yes, sir,' Joseph repeated hurriedly.

Together they walked a few yards to enter — to Joseph's agonised rapture — a workmen's ordinary. Doctor Whistler eyed the greasy table-tops and the chalked bill of fare doubtfully. 'And which of these gastronomical phenomena is to your pleasure, boy?'

Joseph had not read the bill. 'Pie, taters and gravy,' he breathed, then added, 'sir.' The doctor stabbed a gloved finger at the waiting proprietor. 'Pie, taters and gravy, my good fellow — for one, you understand, but a substantial portion, followed by — ' he scanned the bill, ' — fig pudding with custard. Figs are capital things for the bowels.' He sat watching silently, with eyes mildly amused, as Joseph applied himself urgently to his plate.

When the last morsel of fig pudding had disappeared, the doctor drew a watch from his waistcoat pocket. ‘That must satisfy you, boy, until we reach Merton.’

*

Merton. He’d go back to Merton one day. Despite the circumstances of his departure, he recalled his days there with a degree of nostalgia. He remembered his very first night when, following a glorious supper of beef broth laced with onions and barley, boiled ham, and milk, he had gone to the tiny bedroom with its own door and smelling faintly of lye. His bed had sheets. Left to himself, he had considered his dirty feet dubiously and then, with care, removed the sheets, folded them, and laid them aside. The blankets had a more familiar feel, and the thin mattress had been something from heaven. He recalled the church, from which he had retreated hurriedly after reading a notice exhorting a meeting of the Young People’s Society of Christian Endeavour. He’d had a gutful of societies claiming an interest in young people. And there was Charlie Judd’s big horses, with their sweet, hay-scented breath, and the wonderful green of the fields, fresh and cool with morning wetness —

Line after line of tramping sepoy came across the Kurnal Trunk Road and engulfed the village of Subjee-Mundee, scattering jungle fowl and long-tailed pheasants, followed by bullock-drawn light guns, ammunition *tongas*, several bands, stooped water-carriers in grimy *dhotis*, horses and elephants, cautious *budmashes* and trotting, grey-coated cavalry. On the Ridge, the big 18-pounders flared and crashed, deluging canister, but artillerymen were throwing down their rammers and sponges and running back, cursing that they’d had enough, and many of the guns were being worked by officers and sergeants. Riflemen, Goorkhas and Sikhs crouched behind their earthworks or rubble *sangars* with parched mouths and deafened ears, loading and firing

desperately. The sepoy ranks, smashing through the drooping banana fronds, melted away, but more came, and more. *Jemadars*, with slashing *rattans*, urged them on. It was written that today the *Feringhees* would be crushed, and their power ended forever. Vishnu had entered the weapons of the warrior Hindu, and Indra from his sun-chariot would hurl his thunderbolts at the English. There was nothing to fear. All was fore-ordained.

The English infantry, however, had not been informed about Vishnu and Indra, nor did they believe overmuch in prophecies written in the stars. They held their ground, and every pace of the sepoys' advance was paid for by a life. The mutineers, congesting among the bananas and the mango trees, could hardly be missed. They surged forward a dozen times, bravely enough, scrambling and crawling up the difficult slope of the Ridge, but few reached the first *sangars* of the riflemen's positions. The twisted bodies covered the ground like a scarlet carpet — Bengali and Punjabi men, veteran *havildars* and *jemadars* who had served no other master but John Company's flag since their loin-clothed boyhood, who had taken the oath, and then broken it because the *Feringhees* had broken theirs. Many had no choice. The regiment had marched, and they had marched. They had fought, and now they were dead without ever knowing the real reason why, or what their deaths had achieved.

Eleven hours later — eleven hours of torturous sun, of no food and only a few snatched mouthfuls of water, of men collapsing from heat-stroke, of sobbing oaths, stifling dust and powder-smoke, the brown earth soaking up the blood of the killed and choking maimed — Hindoo Rao's House still stood, untaken. It was unbelievable, but it was true. It was 4 p.m. by the officers' watches, and the mutineers had not mounted the Ridge. The sepoys were muttering. Why was this so? Had they not been promised an easy victory? A victory that was pre-ordained? Why, then, after eleven hours, did

fully a quarter of their regiments lie dead? And why did the Union Jack still fly over the Ridge? They were hungry, thirsty, and faint with weariness. There had been a mistake. It was the wrong day, and the stars had been misread. The *Feringhees* were not going to be beaten today.

And when, with evening, the sepoy saw long lines of the enemy, with bayonets fixed and apparently unruffled by the day's ordeal, advancing out of the setting sun, they broke, retreating, as they had before, through Subjee-Mundee towards the safety of Delhi. The *Feringhees* were far from unruffled. They had simply reached the end of their powers of resistance, and there was nothing else to do but stand up, advance, and make an end of it, one way or the other. They trod towards the mango grove like sleepwalkers, ramming and firing without knowing that they did, and when the leading riflemen reached the farthest hovels of the deserted village, they fell on their faces.

*

Joseph Dando had intended to get drunk, but somehow the prospect lacked flavour without the company of Tom Brownlow. The bazaar, an inevitable development among any concentration of soldiers, was situated at the northerly extremity of the Ridge — logically the area most remote from Delhi and the daily fighting. Several dozen traders had set up ramshackle stalls and offered a wide range of wares, undoubtedly most of which had come — and would continue to come — out of Delhi. Fruit, fish, various unidentifiable meats, rice and flour, liquor, and even European preserves — probably looted — could be purchased, but at extortionate prices. Officers, and even ladies who had never previously soiled their feet in the dust of a native market, haggled unashamedly for a few potatoes, bartered trinkets or clothing or, unable to afford the prices demanded, gazed wistfully at humble foodstuffs that, only weeks earlier, they would have scorned to have in their kitchens.

The stalls were not for the common soldiers. They came for a bottle of

bhang or an hour with a painted whore. What did syphilis matter when cholera, malaria, and typhoid were already decimating the population of the Ridge, and a man could be mangled by grapeshot tomorrow?

Joseph shouldered a passage through the throng of shouting vendors, tethered camels, officers with rakish beards and a wide variety of unmilitary clothing, tall Sikhs, artillerymen, women in creased dresses and broken shoes, bleating goats and leg-tied, fluttering chickens. He needed alcohol in his throat — a lot of alcohol — and he didn't care what kind. Twenty yards away was a ragged tent, and he'd seen it before, at Alipore, but he was unlikely to achieve whisky today, sod it. He fumbled for his money, but a woman, her eyes on a nearby stall, had stumbled into him. She turned, and they stared at each other. She was Mrs. Esther Finnis, the Colonel's Lady.

*

She had once been Miss Esther Millard, the daughter of the Reverend Charles Freeman Millard, of the Parish of St. Giles-on-the-Hill, in Norwich. The Minister had one son and five daughters. Miss Esther had been the fifth and, at her birth, somewhat unwelcome. Five daughters could be difficult to dispose of, and the matrimonial prospects of the youngest were uncertain. Nor were her chances enhanced by her physical qualities. She had reddish hair, pale skin much given to freckles in the summer, and she was thin while her sisters had sleek black hair and the hourglass figures befitting young ladies of their station. Miss Esther resembled her father, an angular man with wispy mutton-chops, buttoned gaiters, and tending towards periods of abstraction as he grew older, but indulgent towards his family when not immersed in the affairs of a parish he was to serve for thirty-eight devoted years.

Apart from the minister, it had been a wholly female household. Young Richard Millard, adored by his sisters, had been faced with the traditional

choice of Church or Army — and had chosen a red coat and India. The girls had wept, but it had been Richard, a cadet at Addiscombe, who had brought the handsome, sun-bronzed Captain Finnis to Norwich. Elizabeth, Rosamund, May, and Dorothy had fluttered their eyelashes, pointedly demonstrated their abilities in sewing and cooking, and vied with each other to achieve moments with him alone. Astonishingly, it was to colourless Esther that he gave his attention, and then, even more incredibly, asked permission of the Reverend Millard to propose marriage to her.

To Esther, nothing could have been more unexpected than a proposal of marriage. She had always assumed that her turn would only follow those of her four sisters, if at all. It was an opportunity, however, not to be declined. Captain Finnis was a wonderful catch — dashing, masterful, and with his foot on the ladder of a promising career. They were married within three months. Her sisters wept again — although whether from happiness or frustration it was difficult to gauge — and Esther became the Captain's Lady.

She had been entirely ignorant of the role expected of her. Married women, she knew, shared a bed with a husband and, if God willed, bore a child at approximately yearly intervals, but by what process she had only vague notions that, in the event, proved entirely erroneous. The truth came as a brutal shock. Could this really be right? Was this shameful embarrassment, this flagrant invasion of her body, an experience shared by all other married women? All those demure, church-going matrons, paragons of virtue, did they really undergo this nightly, panting exchange between the sheets? It was possible, of course, that other husbands did not climb into bed drunk — as Captain Finnis did on his wedding night, and on almost every night thereafter — but she had not expected anything so bestial.

Esther adapted — as she did to so many other things — to the heat and dust of India, to the complex protocol of army life, and to the fact that her husband

had a number of faults, including a bad temper, a fondness for alcohol, and an eye for other women, brown or white. True, standards were different in India, but there had hardly been a time when the Finnis household did not include one female domestic who had been engaged primarily for the purpose of satisfying the Captain's carnal desires. In time the arrangement became almost a boon, and gossip told her that most other wives — including the chaplain's — had accepted the need for the *khansamah's* daughter.

And Esther Finnis had enjoyed, with trepidation, a few amorous skirmishes of her own. During the hot season she had gone to Simla while her husband sweated in Agra — and in Simla it was impossible to avoid the attentions of prowling bachelors to whom all lonely wives were fair game. The lonely wives, recalling the *khansamah's* daughter, blushed but did not object when their hands were squeezed, or their knees touched under the table. A squeezed hand, however, inevitably led to more serious things — a stroll in the moonlight that somehow managed to terminate in the lady's bungalow and with the gentleman remaining until dawn. The servants knew. All Simla knew, but Simla had hundreds of such explosive secrets, and they remained secrets by mutual, unspoken consent. Esther, at least, discovered that to share a bed with a man could be breathlessly enjoyable, but she was terrified of the possible consequences, and her few swains soon abandoned her in favour of less apprehensive conquests.

With the years came her husband's promotion and her own advancement of seniority among the ladies. In 1850, they had returned to England for a year's furlough, but her father had died during the previous year, her sisters were scattered, and Richard Millard had left his bones in Afghanistan. The furlough was hardly a success. There had been the unfortunate incident of the Fallen Woman, who had repaid charity by absconding with one of the domestics, Joseph Dando, and fourteen sovereigns of the Colonel's.

In many ways, England wasn't the same as India, and she had been glad when they sailed again for Bombay.

Six years later, there had been Meerut. Colonel Finnis had come from the mess, furious of temper, breathing brandy fumes, and claiming that he'd apprehended the thief, that he'd have Joseph Dando breaking stones on the Grand Trunk Road if it was the last thing he did. But on the evening of the following day, Colonel Finnis was dead, shot by a sepoy, and the world of Esther Finnis had suddenly disintegrated.

Nothing remained of the Regiment. Her house had been burned to its foundations, the servants flown, and nobody had time to spare for a Colonel's widow. She was the Senior Lady, it seemed, only whilst her husband lived. Thereafter she was just one of scores of bereaved mem-sahibs whose soft hands were untrained for anything except a little dainty embroidery, and of far less value than the common soldiers' women who scrubbed floors, tended the vomiting sick, filled sandbags and drove bullock-carts without qualms. The Meerut bereaved mem-sahibs did their best. They sewed bandages, read poetry to the wounded, and tried to invent new ways of serving horse-flesh — although few of them had ever cooked anything before in their lives.

Meerut had nothing to offer Esther Finnis, and all eyes were turning towards Delhi, under siege by the Delhi Field Force, and to where reinforcements and supplies were constantly travelling. Many women with husbands in the Field Force had, by bribery or cajolery, managed to join their menfolk on the Ridge, and Esther Finnis, convinced that a Colonel's widow would inspire more sympathy among the larger concentration of officers, packed her valise and travelled to Delhi.

It had been a mistake. Delhi Ridge was incalculably worse than Meerut. There was continuous fighting, cholera, dysentery, and typhoid. Rations for non-combatants were meagre, nobody wished to talk about Colonel Finnis,

and Esther did not have the youth or physical attributes to barter for the patronage of an unattached officer — the resort of many distressed widows — or the money for the few extras that would make life remotely tolerable. She walked the muddy bazaar slowly, debating whether to spend her last few annas on lentils and onions today or save them until tomorrow. And after tomorrow?

After tomorrow there would be nothing. It seemed grossly unfair that she, Mrs. Esther Finnis, who only weeks ago had been the First Lady of the 11th Native Infantry, should now be facing slow starvation while younger chits of girls could enjoy extras such as porridge, fish, and mangoes. She was desperately envious. But Esther was forty-three, and no beauty, and what officer would mortgage his pay for a faded woman of forty-three?

She drew a deep breath. But she was a Lady, and white. She refused to starve. There were common soldiers, and there were natives. What did sepoys earn? She ought to know, but she didn't. Would an Indian pay five rupees to lust with a mem-sahib? For five rupees she could buy camel meat, rice — perhaps even some soap — and what did it matter if a man was brown-skinned? For five rupees —

Then she had come face to face with Joseph Dando.

Chapter 12

Back in London, the public was demanding crushing retribution for the mutineers in India, and dozens of bloodthirsty and equally impracticable schemes were being offered for the Government's consideration. However, the first reinforcements — a hundred and twenty-five men of the Rifle Brigade — were marching for embarkation at Portsmouth, and Emperor Napoleon III had offered the overland route to Marseilles, whereby troops could travel via Cairo and Suez. The Maharajah of Bithur — the Butcher of Cawnpore — had already proclaimed that the King of Egypt, embracing the mutineers' cause, had killed every soldier of a relieving British army on its arrival at Alexandria.

*

Joseph touched the battered peak of his kepi. 'Ma'am.' He would have pushed on immediately, but she had not moved.

'Dando,' she recalled. 'You're Dando.'

He nodded.

Her thoughts were racing. 'The Colonel was going to have you arrested in Meerut. If it hadn't been for — ' She paused. 'You're a thief.'

Dando shrugged. In Meerut, with Colonel Finnis, he might have had reason for apprehension, but on the Ridge, nobody worried about tomorrow. In any case, imprisonment — or even road-building, if there was any being done — would be considered a happy escape from the hazards of Delhi. Joseph glanced again at the liquor tent.

'You're a thief,' she repeated, almost desperately. 'You stole fourteen sovereigns. That's — ' she calculated, ' — that's two hundred and ten

rupees.’ It was hot, and she could feel her petticoat sticking clammily to her legs. Two hundred and ten rupees. What couldn’t she do — ?

Joseph snorted. ‘Christ! I ain’t got two ‘undred bleedin’ pice, nor likely to ‘ave. Anyway, I didn’t ‘ave yer fourteen sovereigns. Hannah Minting did.’

Esther Finnis shook her head. ‘It doesn’t make any difference. It was the Colonel’s money, and I want it back.’ It was hopeless, and she knew it — but any money would help. There were rumours among the women that the magistrates were going to distribute ‘succour money’ among distressed widows and orphans, but weeks might pass before this happened, and she had to survive. ‘If I don’t get it back — ’

‘Yer’ll ‘ave me arrested, is that it?’ He shrugged again. ‘Yer’ll be lucky if anyone listens to yer. It was seven years ago, and yer ain’t got much proof, ‘ave yer? Anybody can walk up an’ say, “There’s a man what stole fourteen sovereigns, seven years ago — an’ I want them back.” Even if they did believe yer, I can’t pay what I ain’t got, can I?’

He was right, and Esther Finnis knew it. The harassed military would have no time for a woman bleating about something that might, or might not, have happened seven years ago in England. Despair flooded into her throat. She was near to tears, but there were still straws to clutch at, and she couldn’t afford the luxury of pride. ‘If you haven’t got two hundred and ten rupees,’ she said as firmly as possible, ‘you must have *some* money. You get paid.’

Dando gazed back at her, frowning. There were dozens of ladies like Mrs. Finnis on the Ridge, desperately trying to maintain an outward appearance of gentility, of their former exalted station. Few had yet abandoned their superior mannerisms, or their disdain for the lower orders, and he had not heard of any asking money from a common soldier. It was disconcerting. Mrs. Finnis, whatever her present circumstances, was a Colonel’s Lady. The demands of barrack-room women and bazaar whores he could demolish with

a few obscenities, but a Colonel's Lady was something different. Sod it, he'd taken the fourteen sovereigns all right, and he'd not dispute that, logically, he owed that sum to Mrs. Finnis — but what bleedin' interest could she have in the paltry few annas that remained of his pay? It was not only disconcerting, it didn't make bleedin' sense.

Esther Finnis was fighting back a feeling of faintness. She hadn't eaten today, and she shouldn't be standing in this sun — but she mustn't faint. It was hopeless. She just couldn't insist on money from Dando, and she wished she hadn't asked. No, that wasn't right. She was allowing her pride to assert itself, and she couldn't eat pride. Nobody was going to give her money for nothing, and she had only one thing to sell. It was that — or starvation. Other women had been doing it, and several she knew made no effort to pretend otherwise. It wasn't forever, nor need it be too often — just enough to earn a few rupees. Nobody had showed surprise in Simla. It was happening in Simla all the time. She couldn't, of course, expect quite the revenue of a big-bosomed young thing that all the unmarried subalterns jostled for — but, after all, she *had* been a Colonel's Lady.

How did one *begin*? She brushed some dust from her bodice. 'I know that many of the men have been parted from their wives for a long time — ' She halted, then, 'You must all miss your wives.'

Joseph Dando was perplexed. 'Most of 'em ain't married.' What was she bleedin' talking about now?

She lowered her eyes. All men wanted a woman sometimes, didn't they? There were places on the Ridge, she knew, where women could be had, but they were only native women, sweaty, with betel-stained teeth, no better than animals. Suppose — just suppose — there was a white lady available. Just suppose —

She glanced up quickly, but his face was blank with incomprehension. 'I

mean,’ she said, ‘if there were any of the men — ’ She smiled. ‘It could be arranged —’ Joseph lifted his kepi to wipe sweat from his eyes with the back of his hand. ‘Yes, ma’am —?’

Esther Finnis just couldn’t. Not, at least, with this dirty little soldier who had once been the meanest of her domestic servants. That would be whoring — and she was the widow of the late Colonel of the 11th Native Infantry of the Honourable East India Company. Her husband’s officers had saluted her. On Ladies’ Night she had sat at the President’s right hand, and it was she who led the ladies out when the gentlemen reached for their cigars. She took newly-arrived brides under her wing, and a slight frown was sufficient to silence the subaltern who was talking too loudly, or dissuade the flushed young woman from accepting a third cup of punch. It had been she who insisted that any European officer or lady guilty of certain behaviour should be transferred quietly from the station.

Mind you — if there was a clean young officer — that wouldn’t be whoring. Just an indiscretion.

‘I had supposed,’ she compromised, ‘that some of the men might want letters written, and I still have a few books — Shelley, Coleridge — ’

He stared. ‘Ah, yes, ma’am — Coleridge.’ He nodded gravely. ‘That’d be nice.’ Who the bleedin’ ‘ell was Coleridge? Did she mean Bert Coleridge in ‘C’ Company?

Esther Finnis felt very sick. The confused noises of the bazaar seemed distant and unreal, and her vision had hazed. She mustn’t faint. If she fainted, she’d fall — and she had only a single petticoat and there were holes in her stockings. She drew a shuddering breath, but knew herself swaying. The perspiration on her face was suddenly cold.

“‘Ere — ’ It was Dando’s voice. ‘Yer’ lookin’ bleedin’ seedy, ma’am — ’ She felt his hand on her arm. ‘Yer’d better git in the shade an’ sit down

awhile.’ Unprotesting, she allowed him to steer her towards a mound of bundled brushwood, where she lowered herself gratefully. ‘If yer can put yer ‘ead between yer legs,’ Dando suggested, but perhaps that wasn’t quite the right thing for a lady. He gazed at her curiously as she sat with eyes closed. She weren’t exactly a bleedin’ oil painting. She looked as if a few square meals wouldn’t do her any ‘arm.

He pushed his canteen into her hands. ‘You wait ‘ere, ma’am — an’ don’t move.’ Then he was gone, and she sat limply, incapable of effort, and ashamed.

When Joseph returned he held in his cupped hands a segment of banana leaf on which lay cooked eggs, rice, and chupatties. ‘It ain’t much,’ he apologised, then added, ‘Yer ‘ave ter eat it with yer fingers.’

Esther Finnis sobbed. ‘I’m sorry. It must be the sun. It seems unusually warm today. You’re very kind. I’m sorry to be a nuisance. I had no breakfast — but I’m sure it’s the sun — ’ The words stumbled stupidly, and Dando gave a sheepish chuckle. ‘It ain’t much,’ he repeated, ‘but it’ll fill yer up. There ain’t nothin’ like a bit o’ belly timber fer puttin’ the spunk back into yer.’ He watched as she ate every scrap from the banana leaf, then said, ‘Things ain’t goin’ too good, are they, ma’am?’

She shook her head, dabbing at her lips with a handkerchief. ‘No.’

‘What yer said,’ he went on, ‘about Bert Coleridge. Well — he ain’t exactly reliable. Now, if I’d ad my rear-rank man, Tom Brownlow — ’

She opened her reticule and drew out her purse. ‘I have one and a half rupees. Do you know how little that will buy?’ She smiled ruefully. ‘If I were a native, I could chase 24-pound round-shot.’ The British had two 24-pounder guns on the Ridge, captured from the mutineers, but no shot — and were reduced to firing back the spent missiles of that calibre hurled against them. Natives were paid a half rupee for every round-shot retrieved.

Joseph eyed the hot, disordered bazaar. What did he do now, b'Christ? He'd done his bleedin' Samaritan act. Well, he still had enough in his pocket for a bottle of *bhang*, and if the Colonel's Lady wanted to talk about Shelley and Bert Coleridge, that was her business. All he had to do was touch his cap and walk away.

He jingled the remaining coins in his pocket, uncertain.

If Tom Brownlow had been here, he'd know what to do. He stole another quick glance at Mrs. Finnis. The only remaining asset she possessed was her body — and, sod it, a man would need to want a woman desperate 'ard to be stimulated by a woman like this. A native might — for the simple novelty of an hour of titillation with a mem-sahib, that he could boast of to his comrades, or in his village — and Joseph's resentment of the slightest familiarity between natives and European women was as intense as any Englishman's. The mere thought of a brown-skinned Hindu exercising his lust on the shrinking body of a chaste white maiden was enough to make a Britisher's blood boil.

'I git vittles,' he said slowly. 'Beef an' choke-dog, sometimes pork, oatmeal, peas — an' a double issue o' rum when we're on picquet. We git fed like bleedin' fighting cocks.' It was only partially true. By Army Field standards, the men were not ill-fed, but quantities were not generous, and an active man needed all his rations if he hoped to meet the exhausting demands that the daily fighting imposed. 'It ain't the same as cook-shop food, but it'll be better than goin' 'ungry — '

Esther Finnis smiled gratefully and neatly folded her handkerchief. She did not pause to consider by what means Dando's food would be procured. Despite twenty years of marriage to an army officer, she had never concerned herself with the functions of the commissariat, which, anyway, was a civil department. Meat, potatoes, and sacks of flour came in waggons, the

quartermaster made entries in a ledger, and the men were fed. There must, she supposed, be superfluous food. Certainly there had always been in her own kitchen, and her late husband had always sworn that her *khansamah* maintained a small regiment of dependents on the surplus provisions from the Finnis house. The bills he received left no other conclusion.

Dando's offer was most acceptable — until some better arrangement presented itself, or until the magistrates decided to act — and, after all, Dando did owe her fourteen sovereigns. It was only right that he should make some small reparation. She rose to her feet, smoothing the creases from her skirt. 'I don't want to be a burden, and you must let me know if you have difficulties. My tent is between the 61st's lines and the canal. You'll not mistake it. It has white walls and a green roof.' Her humiliation of a few moments earlier was forgotten. 'And if you can manage a little soap, and needles and thread — and possibly some cologne — ?' She smiled again, the expression in her eyes becoming distant, and then glided away.

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Reinforcements were steadily arriving on the Ridge — the Kumaon Battalion of Goorkhas, Her Majesty's 8th Foot, Sikh and Punjab Infantry, almost all with their scarlet serge replaced by the new *khaki rang*. Pioneers, sappers and miners were trickling in, and a hundred Afghans had come from Kabul. Superbly mounted, in chain mail, and armed with long-barrelled *jezails*, curved *talwars* and daggers, they made a brave show as they swaggered the camp lines, but appeared to have no inclination to involve themselves in the fighting. Heavy guns, hauled by elephants or twenty-yoke bullock teams, were being inched laboriously over the spine of the Ridge with lashing whips and stabbing goads to form new batteries — Johnson's Battery, War-rand's, Maunsell's, and Wilson's — and the Carabineers' horses tugged at their head-ropes at the smell of passing camels with their panniers

of round-shot. The air was thick with dust and noisy with oaths, the chinking of pad-chains, screeching wheels, and groaning animals.

Daytime temperatures seldom dropped below 120°. At sunset it cooled slightly, but the dry atmosphere was stifling, and men sought sleep in the open, sweating and gasping, or watched the meteor-like approach of enemy projectiles from the Delhi walls, pin-pricked with lights. There were frustrations. An attempt with barrels of gunpowder on rafts to blow up the bridge of boats across the Jumna — across which mutinous reinforcements were still streaming — failed, and a flock of sheep brought by the 61st Foot from Ferozepore were driven off by raiders. A troop of elephants, about to load sick and wounded, were stampeded by the noise of gunfire and plunged, trumpeting, across the canal, with their *mahouts* helpless. Worse, a force of *sowars* had over-ridden a gun battery manned by natives, sabred the crews, and driven off in panic the picquet of Carabineers and irregulars. Only desperate fighting by the few men who remained at their posts eventually rescued the situation. There had been a number of cases of treachery, with gun lascars tampering with ordnance charges so that the guns' ranges were erratic, or filling the vents with powdered glass. Artillery pieces often flashed six or seven times before discharging, allowing the enemy ample time to take cover. There was a growing air of depression on the Ridge, a knowledge that despite the arrival of fresh men, the mutineers' numbers were increasing even faster, that the sick-roll was multiplying with horrific speed, and the possibility of taking Delhi was becoming ludicrously forlorn.

In Delhi, however, there was no corresponding rise in confidence. The mutineers were having troubles of their own. There were too many leaders, too many conflicting views, and the old discipline of John Company's sepoys was shaken. Shops were ransacked, houses openly broken into, and bands of soldiers were scouring the surrounding countryside, terrorising the *ryots* and

carrying off corn supplies and fodder. Delhi, in the grip of lawlessness, had all the appearance of a pillaged city.

There was bravery in the fighting against the British, but the casualties sustained against the enemy's superior small arms were ghastly. Experiments had been made in the firing of 32-pounder rockets found in the Delhi Magazine, but they had inflicted more damage on the mutineers than in the British positions, and finally one had landed in a nearby powder factory, causing a devastating explosion and killing a dozen coolies.

Subadar Shah's authority had disappeared completely, and he was now only a target for ridicule and complaint. Thousands of mutineers demanded pay, and he had none to give. He had put his name to decrees that exhorted heavy taxes from the city's merchants, but most of the merchants had fled or were in hiding, and the few thousand rupees that were collected somehow disappeared into other pockets. The flowers and lawns of the Palace gardens were trampled and bare, the trees shrivelled, the fountain basins filled with refuse. There was nobody to bath him daily, to rub his skin with ointments and perfume, colour his lips with *alackta*, and shave his body every fifth day. Worse, the women who now came to his chamber were no longer Brahmins, trained in the arts of the courtesan — the sixty-four accomplishments of the Kama Shastra — but clumsy women of lower caste, enticed from the street, with no knowledge of subtle preliminaries, and smelling of the sheep and goats they had just left.

Ah, why had Hewitt Sahib not come on the first day? There was nothing in the future for him — Mahomed Surajoo-Deen Bahadur, descendant of Akbar and Shah Jehan. Whether the mutineers or the English prevailed, he could expect only humiliation from one and a hempen noose from the other.

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Back on the Ridge, Joseph Dando was faced with a number of problems. To

provide for Mrs. Finnis from his own rations meant an empty belly for himself. Well, he was no stranger to the gnawing of an empty belly — but there were ways and means. The Society for the Relief of Destitute Young Persons had taught him how to pilfer. He knew the price of being caught — fifty lashes and a bloody back — but only fools were caught. He stole carefully, never in superfluous quantities, and from different sources — a pocketful of rice from an open sack in the bazaar, mutton pieces from an unattended field kitchen in the ‘griffin’ 8th’s lines, a treasured tin of sausages from beneath the brailing of an officer’s tent. Mrs. Finnis, however, was becoming fastidious. She was grateful, but did bread always have to be three days old? Were there no eggs or poultry? Perhaps sardines? And was there no better than this hard yellow soap with such poor lather?

Most of all she complained of the water, the nauseating fluid taken in water-carts from the nearest point of the Nujufgurth Canal. There was fresher water, but it was remote. After dark, carrying several canteens, Dando made his way warily through the burial ground, then dropped to his knees, following the bank of the canal southward. This was a dangerous place. There were creatures worse than a rabid, startled jackal, or a cobra with death in his fangs. This far from the lines there could be prowling natives, and if Dando stumbled into any he could pray for a quick knife-thrust. He had no desire to be dragged alive into Delhi, where he might have a red-hot ramrod forced up his rectum or, depending upon his captors’ mood, suffer castration, blinding, facial mutilation, or drowning after having his jaws compelled open with a stick and a hundred women urinating in his mouth. Not that the English did not reciprocate. Muslim prisoners were sewn into pig-skins and pork offal crammed into their throats. Hindus choked with cow-fat, before being lashed to a gun-muzzle and blown to crimson slubber, or slow-hanged from a gallows.

He reached the sluice gate, then froze as his hob-nailed boots sent a small cascade of stones into the dark water below. Christ —

Six feet away from him a man sat motionless, surveying him, but his eyes were empty pits, and the moonlight was white on the bones of his skull, stripped of flesh. Dando drew a deep breath. Why didn't this bleedin' country have black nights, an' fog — like the Borough Road? He crawled across the sluice gate rather than attempt the Trunk Road bridge, which was more likely to have its hidden watchers, then ran, making for the old escape channel that had carried water long before the canal had been engineered. Reaching the shallow incline of its bank, he flung himself down, panting, straining his ears. He'd be likely to have every soddin' Pandy within a mile chasing his guts. He was a bleedin' fool, doing all this for a selfish bitch who meant to squeeze him for every ha' penny's value of her husband's fourteen sovereigns.

Joseph lowered his lips to the cool water of the escape channel. There were too many soddin' people like Mrs. Finnis — and too many fools like Joseph Dando. There'd been Doctor Whistler, f' instance, and his Scarlet Runners.

*

Joseph had always assumed that a silk hat and gloves were the hallmarks of prosperity, and it was a long time before he recognised that Doctor Whistler was far from wealthy and, indeed, his total fortune was often reduced to the few coppers he carried in his pocket. Jars of pickles and bottles of parsnip wine did not pay bills, and to supplement the meagre income from his private patients Doctor Whistler had achieved the appointments of Medical Officer of the Workhouse and Dispensary Doctor to the local Board of Guardians, with the dual posts yielding an annual stipend of one hundred and fifty pounds. In return, the Guardians demanded a full pound of flesh.

It was the doctor's duty to attend to all patients who proffered a charity ticket by a Guardian, and the tickets were of two kinds. The first, printed in

black, entitled the holder to free out-patient treatment, medicines, or dressings. The second, printed in red, ordered the doctor to attend the patient, similarly with free treatment, in his or her home — often involving a lengthy journey in rain, snow, or darkness. Joseph learned to know the red tickets as Scarlet Runners, and to dread them as much as his employer. Under the Poor Law appointment, the doctor might treat pauper patients for many months for the equivalent of two or three shillings each, make hundreds of visits to the workhouse only to have his prescriptions refuted by the Guardians and cheaper substitutes insisted upon — accused of debauching able-bodied shirkers at public expense. Worse were the gentry, each eager to outspend his neighbour on sport, entertainment, horseflesh, and a good cellar, but reluctant to spend a farthing on the services of a country doctor, and if the gentry were too proud to pay their bills, Doctor Charlton Whistler was too proud to plead. They will give a porter a shilling to carry a bag twenty yards, if they can be *seen* to do it,' he mused, 'but nobody can see them paying their doctor, tailor, or grocer, so there is no advantage gained by doing so.'

The signs came gradually. The doctor's black suit grew shabbier, and there was a darn in the finger of a glove. He avoided showing the cuffs of his shirt, and his fine silver watch was suddenly replaced by a cheap German one. It was becoming difficult to replenish the stock of proprietary goods in the shop, and a visiting manufacturer's traveller, from London, eyed the emptying shelves and sniffed.

'Poor Law doctor, hain't he?'

Joseph nodded.

'I see'd it before. A "splendid hopening for a young medical man," eh? And now sez the Guardians, 'aving haccep'ted the position, he must abide by the consequences, or there's plenty of hambitious young doctors oo'd be 'appy to take the post for less.' He sniffed again. 'Doctor Whistler, my young fellow,

must *heconomise*. Prescribe raisin wine instead o' port, say — an' fob off the paupers with pump water, Epsom salts and gentian, see? Otherwise — ' he shrugged, leaving the sentence ominously unfinished. 'You mark my words.'

Joseph marked his words, but Doctor Whistler did not economise. Nor, however, did he make the Guardians blush with shame by brandishing bills for port and porter purchased from his own pocket for the under-nourished of the parish. There were, as the traveller had said, many newly-qualified doctors eager to become parish medical officers in the sublime expectation that valuable experience and introductions would follow. It was hardly Joseph's business — he was only the doctor's boy — but he was beginning to perceive that the world was divided into two kinds of people: them what gave, and them what took.

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There was another problem. A picquet duty at Hindoo Rao's House lasted for two weeks, during which time no man left the defences, nor even strayed more than a few yards from his allotted place. As Mrs. Finnis pointed out, she could hardly maintain herself during Joseph's two-weeks' absence. A lady couldn't steal food. If she were caught, the embarrassment would be too much. 'Of course,' she said wanly. 'I'm grateful for everything you've done. I'm sure I must be a nuisance.' She had seldom given their relationship a thought, and she would rather not know of his difficulties. 'The food you've brought has been so welcome, but if only there was *money*.' Mrs. Finnis was tiring of mutton and rice. There were women, she knew — mere captains' wives — who had Mocha coffee, omelettes, ham, and cheese. It was infuriating. 'If there was money,' she repeated wistfully, 'it would be so much easier.' Dando, after all, still owed her two hundred and ten rupees.

Tom Brownlow would have known what to do. He would probably have told her to shut her arse — or, more likely, have never involved himself at all.

It did not occur to Joseph that he might describe his predicament to one of his own officers, unburden his responsibility, and let the Army take care of its own. Officers tended to listen to rankers' stories with suspicion, and he would have to explain how he had maintained Mrs. Finnis so far. That might have uncomfortable consequences.

Where, b'Christ, could he get money from? His pay was hopelessly inadequate. Well, there was a source, dangerous and unpleasant, but a few of the less scrupulous men had resorted to it — the bodies of dead mutineers.

Many of the sepoys, it was reputed, carried money and looted jewels in their linen cummerbunds, and there was a story of a man of the 61st who had found twenty gold mohurs — worth thirty-two pounds in English money — on one corpse. The native troops on the Ridge — Sikhs, Punjabis, and particularly the irregulars — considered corpserobbing a prerogative of the victorious. On the instant that a mutineer fell, there would be a frantic scramble to reach the body and the coveted cummerbund, sometimes even resulting in fighting among the claimants. The British troops, if equally rapacious, had fewer opportunities. They were forbidden to break ranks or desert a position, and the penalties for disobedience were too severe when, in all certainty, most sepoys carried even less of value than their British counterparts. Still, it was the only thing Dando could do.

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It seemed to be hotter than ever before. The grass yellowed, the mangoes turned brown and dry, and the tangled footmarks of bullocks and horses on the canal bank were rock-hard. A burning wind raised storms of dust that rustled among the withering bamboo thickets and drifted into the tents. When there was no dust, the world shimmered under an incandescent sky in which only vultures hovered. Men collapsed, to die of apoplexy or sunstroke, their faces turning black within minutes, and the doctors were helpless against the

hurricane of disease that struck the Ridge — cholera, malaria, dysentery, and vicious fevers they had neither the time nor knowledge to diagnose. The suitability of drinking water could only be gauged by smell, which was seldom less than foul, and the fat, black flies swarmed everywhere. In the humid caverns of the tents men lay in baths of sweat, children struggled for breath and fainted as their mothers sought lice in waist-length hair.

No amount of cologne or perfume could smother the constant, acrid smell of bodies. In the night, when the ground released its heat, sleep was impossible with the sweat that streamed between breasts and thighs, angering the prickly heat from which everyone suffered. A lighted lamp was a magnet for myriads of mosquitos and giant moths, throwing fluttering shadows as big as birds on the tent walls.

From Delhi the mutineers' guns maintained unceasing fire, and the *dhoolie*-bearers struggled across the Ridge with their burden of wounded to the hospital tents, where the bloodied surgeons probed and swabbed. For a mangled limb there was no remedy but amputation, and so far every amputation had proved fatal. Gangrene was inevitable. Blood loss, shock, and fevers scythed down others. The newly-arriving troops in particular were being decimated by cholera even before they fired a shot. In three weeks the 52nd Foot were reduced from six hundred to one hundred and forty-five fit men.

Joseph Dando had brought Mrs. Finnis nineteen rupees — to Dando a minor fortune. He did not describe how he had acquired the money, and she was not curious, but wrinkled her nose because the coins were sticky with blood. Was this all? Would there be any more?

'Nineteen rupees ain't bleedin' bad,' Joseph protested. Indeed, he thought it was soddin' good. His head flared with pain from his hours of crawling on the sun-scorched lower slopes of the Ridge, and corpse after corpse had yielded

nothing until several vultures had scrambled sky ward from a hummock of scrub, and he had found the faceless *suba-dar*. 'It ain't so easy as yer might think.'

When he had gone, she debated how she would spend her nineteen rupees. She could, of course, draw a ration of stringy beef or camel-meat from the commissariat, but she would have to take her turn in a shuffling line of other women and whining children, in the heat and smells, and proffer her plate like a pauper. In the bazaar there was poultry, vegetables, tea and sugar — and she'd seen some English toilet soap.

She had little experience of money handling. As the youngest of five sisters in Norwich she had seldom concerned herself with the intricacies of house-keeping. In Meerut, on the occasions that she was driven to the Europe Shop, she was only vaguely aware of prices, and did not handle money. She signed chits, and her husband had received monthly invoices, at which he swore. Hats and clothing were selected from catalogues sent from Calcutta, as were curtains and linens, wines and potted foods, the Colonel's cheroots, and her own toiletries.

*

It had been Ladies' Night in the officers' mess of the 6th Dragoon Guards in Meerut, and Colonel Finnis had sweated, his face lobster red above his dress regimentals, under a *punkah* that seemed scarcely to stir the air. The table had groaned under the weight of the Carabineers' silver — candelabra, salvers and bowls, ornate salt-cellars, and tankards. Beneath the listed battle honours — Blenheim, Ramillies, Oudenarde, Malplaquet — the band played discreet music, sometimes hardly audible above the murmur of conversation, the sudden laughter, of the guests. Ladies' fans fluttered, officers smoothed their sleek moustaches, and red-sashed native orderlies moved swiftly among the multi-coloured throng. There had been claret cup, sherry, and madeira,

preserved oysters, pheasant and roast beef, devilled eggs, and a variety of cheeses. The women's shoulders gleamed whitely in the lamplight as they complimented each other sweetly, their participation in the flow of conversation regulated in accordance with their social rank.

When Colonel Finnis left, he had been bad-tempered. He usually was following an evening with Queen's officers, and his wife had learned that it was better not to provoke him. But he needed something on which to vent his spleen. He slumped into the seat of the carriage and swore at the syce, then, 'Where the blazes did you get that damn' bonnet? It looks like an explosion in a blasted hen-coop.'

*

It was hardly surprising that Esther Finnis spent her nineteen rupees quickly and with doubtful wisdom. She could not resist the English toilet soap and a small jar of Rumbelow's Skin Balm. There was mutton, camel, and goat-meat, but she preferred a small fowl, its neck wrung as she waited. Then, when she had bought a few handfuls of tired-looking vegetables, and failed to ignore the temptation of a tiny box of crystallised ginger, it seemed impossible that her nineteen rupees had melted away.

The fowl was nothing more than skin and bone. She could have wept with disappointment, but she made it last two days. The crystallised ginger had congealed into sticky sugar, and the skin balm melted to a yellow oil with an odour that seemed irresistible to flies. Dando would not be back for eleven more days, and she was hungry. She took her place in the line for a fragment of sinewy beef and a cupful of watery rice, praying that she would not be recognised.

She had watched the Sikh approaching along the canal bank. Beyond him a party of English officers was fishing, but they were absorbed in their recreation, laughing. The Sikh came nearer, gazing indifferently at the tent.

Esther Finnis could not believe that she was really doing it, but she was. She beckoned.

He neither increased nor slackened his pace, but merely changed direction towards her. Terror flooded into her throat and her heart pounded. Was this really *happening*?

It was madness, but it was too late. The man's form filled the tent opening, masking the sunshine so that everything within was tinted green by the light that penetrated the dyed canvas. His dark face was pock-marked over a black beard, and he grinned. An empty pit yawned in Mrs. Finnis' stomach, and she seemed to have hardly the strength to speak. 'Five rupees.' She held up a hand with fingers splayed. 'Five rupees.' He nodded, still grinning, and let the tent-flap fall behind him.

There began for Mrs. Finnis an hour of horror that a daughter of a minister could not have been warned of in her wildest nightmare. The lustful desires of Englishmen she knew of, or at least could guess, but the Sikh's appetite was overpowering and bruising, his weight crushing the breath from her until she sobbed with humiliation, pleading with him to stop. His face glistened with sweat, and his grin hardened. He was far from finished with Mrs. Finnis. Did she but know, he had hardly begun and, when he had, she wanted to scream. There were English officers only a hundred yards along the canal bank, and she no longer cared that they might find her in the degrading position she now was. But she was unable to scream and, when he was finally satisfied, she crouched on all fours, vomiting. It was a long time before she rose, to grope for a water bottle, and the Sikh had gone, leaving her nothing.

Chapter 13

Major-General Archdale Wilson, who had succeeded to the unenviable command of the Delhi Field Force, was faced with a dilemma. Trickling reinforcements had increased his force on the Ridge to eight and a half thousand men, both British and Indian. It was unlikely, however, that more than five thousand of these were fit for combat. Disease and the continuous, daily fighting and artillery fire would only further whittle away his numbers. He knew, now, that not another man would be sent in reinforcement. Delhi had drained every available loyal unit from the Punjab, and the future of that province hung in precarious balance as a result. Wilson's superiors were demanding action — an easy thing to do from the armchairs of Calcutta, and easier still from the remoteness of Whitehall. But one thing was certain. Wilson could no longer remain on the Ridge. He must either attack in force now — or withdraw from Delhi.

In his heart, Archdale Wilson inclined towards the second course, although aware that this would ruin him militarily and socially, provide the mutineers with their biggest encouragement since the beginning of the revolt, and strongly influence the opinions of a number of wavering, but yet uncommitted, native rulers. To retreat from Delhi could mean the beginning of the end for British India.

But he shrank from the thought of assault. Behind the fortifications of Delhi were possibly sixty thousand sepoy, supported by an unknown number of irregulars, marauders, and religious fanatics. And it wasn't just the numbers of the enemy that worried Wilson. True, to even take the walls would be a brilliant achievement, but it would be after that stage that the real difficulties

would begin.

Much of Delhi was a maze of twisted, narrow streets — a dark labyrinth of which the defending natives knew every inch, but where the British might find themselves trapped like blind rats. Furthermore, Wilson could not trust his men to resist the temptations of pillage and liquor, which could reduce them to a rabble in minutes, insubordinate, drunken, and uncontrollable. It had happened at Badajoz, and it could happen in Delhi to men who had been confined to the arid, stinking Ridge for months. He would have to throw every fit man, and many who were not, into an assault — and a defeat, with its casualties, the women and children exposed to massacre, the guns and stores lost, would be even more disastrous than a retreat, however inglorious.

If Wilson was hesitant, however, his colleagues were not. The risk, they insisted, must be taken — and taken now. They could wait no longer, watching their regiments' manpower dwindling. If the General delayed further, a council of war would consider presenting demands for his replacement. During late August, a siege train had fought its way from the arsenal at Ferozepore, arriving on the Ridge on the 4th September — thirty-two pieces to make up the heavy artillery to fifteen 24-pounders, twenty 18-pounders, and twenty-five mortars and howitzers. Archdale Wilson could hold back no longer. He agreed to an assault, issuing an order to the troops in which he emphasised his confidence that 'British pluck and determination will carry everything before them, and that the bloodthirsty and murderous mutineers against whom they are fighting will be driven headlong out of their stronghold, or be exterminated.' Wilson's own feelings were somewhat less trenchant than the words he wrote.

There was much to be done in preparation, and it was impossible to hide from the enemy that something big was afoot. As many sick and wounded as possible were despatched by caravan towards Ambala, in litters swaying on

the flanks of camels or in crawling *tongas*, an ordeal that would accelerate the deaths of many and sow a fresh crop of white crosses in the English cemetery. For those remaining on the Ridge there began a daunting labour — to push four siege batteries towards the walls of Delhi, one suicidally only eighty yards from the vast Water Bastion that dominated the approaches to the main gate. Working parties, totalling twelve hundred men, hewed and dug, cursed and sweated, flung down a spade to snatch up a rifle, or threw themselves headlong as the point-blank enemy fire tore down their hours of agonising work. In one battery position, fifty men were cut down during the first day, including Lieutenant Eaton of the 60th, who suffered a fractured skull with the brain laid bare — but confuted the surgeons by surviving.

Only elephants could haul and push the big 24-pounder guns needed to smash breaches in the formidable red walls, and elephants did not care for gunfire. They trumpeted, trunks writhing, as their *mahouts* stabbed frantically with their goads and shouted, ‘*Mail! Mail! Somalo!*’ and the rope-tugging men scattered from the path of the massive, stamping feet. Joseph Dando had never seen an elephant before coming to India, and he didn’t bleedin’ trust ‘em. Horses, mules, bullocks, and even camels he didn’t mind — but soddin’ elephants! He didn’t care to be within yards of one unless it was securely in leg-chains, but there was no doubt that they were useful, and would handle with ridiculous ease a foundered gun that a dozen yoke of bullocks had baulked at.

*

He could just remember the donkey, purchased for three pounds, and the tiny cart — his father’s most valuable possessions. He remembered the weary tramp from the gloomy little room in Kennington to Covent Garden or Billingsgate, and blowing on his blued fingers as Matt Dando shouted, ‘Three a penny Yarmouth bloaters!’ at a wind-swept kerbside. There were bad days

when takings were only sufficient to feed and stable the donkey — and the donkey came first. Without it, Matt Dando would have no means of livelihood. On good days his father would get drunk or gamble at cards, shove-ha'penny, or pitch-and-toss. Some of the men maintained dogs, reared specifically for fighting, and matched them in bloody battles against those of others. In summer, there had been cherries, oranges, roses, lavender, wallflowers, and mignonette — perishable commodities that wilted progressively when kept under the bed in Kennington, and the cause of oath-provoking anxiety as the days passed.

On Sundays, when Matt Dando was sleeping off the effects of his Saturday intemperance, Joseph could walk to Battersea Fields, where the clerks and shopkeepers strolled with their families and solemn gentlemen sailed model boats on the lake. There had been the old lady with spectacles on a stick, who had given him a whole penny for retrieving a wind-snatched bonnet. He'd held the coin tightly in a hot hand for a long time, suffering ecstatic agonies of indecision. There were so many things that might be achieved with a whole penny — a paperful of toffee, a sparrow in a straw cage, a hot pie, a ride on one of Mr. Shillibeer's omnibuses, or even — dare he? — the gallery of a theatre. He decided on the toffee — the hard, brittle toffee which, if only sucked, could be made to last for hours. On reaching the stall he had opened his clenched fingers to stare at an empty palm, the penny unbelievably gone, and he had burst into disappointed tears. It was totally unjust. It was beyond toleration. He snatched desperately at a tray of barley-sugar, but only succeeded in dashing it to the ground — and ran, with the stall-keeper's oaths following him. He ran until exhaustion drove the angry frustration from him. It was dusking, and he turned back towards Kennington.

*

The assault was to be made by four columns, with a fifth in reserve — each

column mustering approximately a thousand men and including many who were clearly unfit to fight. The 9th Lancers and the Carabineers had already been ordered to provide crews for the gun batteries, and the force to remain in defence of the Ridge was pathetically small. The hospital tents were scoured for men who could stand, or even sit, propped up, with a gun. There could be only one assault, and if it failed, nothing else mattered. The Punjab, only tenuously held, would inevitably be overrun, thousands more would die, and the whole of northern India from the Afghan frontier to Bengal would be in the hands of the mutineers. The hesitating native princes might then throw in their lot. Persia — still rankling from the humiliation she had suffered from the British only months earlier — might send troops, and Russia's intentions were always suspect. It was Delhi, then, or nothing.

The bombardment opened with an ear-splitting roar, the bearded, scarecrow gunners swarming around the iron monsters of the sand-bagged batteries — waist-stripped Bengal Artillerymen, dismounted cavalymen, native lascars — cheering as their hurtling shot smashed into the Delhi walls, spattering masonry skywards and filling the air with a pall of red dust. The mutineers' reply came immediately, and men were sprawling, flung like bloodied toys to the ground, blaspheming and sobbing. The guns lurched, vomiting sulphurous smoke through which the terrified dhoolie-bearers darted, searching for wounded, and ragged officers with blackened faces crouched over sights, flinging up a hand as the breeches flared again.

Far behind the siege batteries, in the teeming camp, around Hindoo Rao's House, Flagstaff Tower, and among the rubble of Subjee-Mundee, the assault infantry were cleaning and oiling their weapons for the last time. Men sat in the shade, refilling their ammunition pouches carefully with the pouch-buckle on one notch, and examined their percussion caps for possible misfires. Their lives might depend on a minute fragment of fulminate of mercury sealed with

a touch of shellac. Officers honed swords, reloaded their Adams' pistols, and broached their last tins of sardines or treasured bottles of warm Moselle. There was a flurry of last-minute letter-writing to catch the final mail for Meerut — which might or might not ever reach England.

Dando had no letters to write. He had never written one in his life. But he was as ready as he could ever be. It was a soddin' pity that ol' Tom Brownlow had missed the assault after all the weeks of bleedin' sweat and stink of the Ridge, and Dando would feel uncomfortably naked without the rear-rank man who had tumbled after him, swearing, for six years. He knew what was planned. Two hundred of the 60th Rifles, in skirmish order, were to lead the assault on the Kashmir Gate — which hopefully would be breached. How many of that two hundred would reach the walls was anybody's guess, and Dando didn't speculate on it. He, like his fellows, did not always find the decisions of higher command intelligible, but he supposed *somebody* knew what they were doing, sod it. From the limited viewpoint of the rank and file, the whole scheme seemed bleedin' crack-brained.

If he survived this campaign, he had only four more years of service. He'd always vaguely visualised a return to Merton but, come to think of it, there wasn't much at Merton. A donkey and cart was the thing — and pineapples. There was money to be made with pineapples, bought in Covent Garden for fourpence and sold from a stall for tenpence or a shilling — or penny a slice. And song-sheets and literature, which kept longer than roses and violets. He might even think about getting married, if he happened upon a decent young body who was quick with her fingers and could earn a few shillings with sewing or bottle-washing. He'd be only twenty-six or twenty-seven. It'd be bleedin' queer having a woman in the bed *every* night and knowing she could be had just for the reaching out. But likely it took the guilt off the gingerbread.

*

Below Ludlow Castle, the gutted house of dead Commissioner Fraser, they waited for the dawn to rise. During the night, four officers of the Bengal Engineers had crawled through the darkness to ascertain the effects of the bombardment on the Delhi walls and had returned to report practicable breaches in the vicinity of the Kashmir and Water Bastions. It was all settled. The siege batteries would cease fire at the first gleam of sunlight, whereupon the 60th's skirmishers would go forward, followed by the column — a mixture of Her Majesty's 75th, the 1st Bengal Fusiliers and the 2nd Punjab Infantry. Other columns would be simultaneously attacking the walls elsewhere — but no man had the inclination to think about other columns.

There was nothing else to be said or done. In three days more than three hundred casualties had been suffered in the siege gun emplacements — losses that had to be justified. A surprising number of men had attended the Reverend Rotton's last field service, and there was nothing more to be said.

When the guns ceased firing there remained an awful, frightening silence. In Delhi men stirred in their sleep, not because of noise but for the sudden lack of it, and women hushed infants wailing for their milk, but none would guess that, northward on the bank of the Jumna, thousands of men waited in the gloom for the order to pour towards the walls. A few beggars in the streets rose, rubbing their cramped limbs and wondering at the quietness. Dogs yawned, scratched their sores, then sniffed the air, and on the walls the puzzled sepoy's tiptoed to rouse their *havildars*.

From Ludlow Castle the eastward sky was paling, and the first weak fingers of the sun were silvering the surface of the river. Brigadier Nicholson, commanding the first column, drew out his watch, then nodded. 'A quarter before six. It's time, blast it.' He drew a deep breath. 'The Rifles can go forward.'

Dando climbed to his feet. 'Sod 'em,' he said. 'Sod 'em all.' 'A' Company

moved off in untidy column of threes. They had to pass through the guns of No. 2 Battery and then filter across a narrow bridge that spanned a creek before they could deploy — and if they were only a few minutes late, and the daylight caught them as they converged on the bridge, then the 60th advance could be stopped there and then in a blizzard of canister.

The silent guns of the battery loomed ahead in the dawn murk — seven 8-inch howitzers and two 18-pounders — their empty muzzles still smoking gently and the huddled forms of exhausted artillerymen among the broken sandbags and gabions. There were muttered good wishes, and then they were past, with five hundred yards to the Delhi Gate and only the bridge to negotiate.

No enemy fire yet — but there wouldn't be if the Pandies knew their business. They'd be waiting, straining their eyes and keeping the glow of their port-fires hidden — and they'd have the range of the bridge to an inch. The riflemen were sweating, and Sergeant Garvin's low, urgent voice was telling them to move their arses a bit faster. Dando spat. A mile back, at Flagstaff Tower, General bleedin' Wilson would be drinking coffee and complaining that his shaving water wasn't hot. Bugger the officers. They thought a battle was a bleedin' game, like duck-shooting or pigsticking.

Their feet were on the hard *kunkur* of the Alipore Road, and here was the bridge, with the shadowy creek below twisting to left and right. There was a noisy rattle of wings as several mallard burst from the reeds, but the leading riflemen were across the bridge, crouching as they trotted. Eastward, beyond the Jumna, the dawn erupted, flooding the landscape with treacherous sunlight. Two hundred yards ahead the battered walls of Delhi were crawling anthills, with bugles shrilling and, within seconds, the crackle of musketry and the crunching explosions of heavy guns. But it was too late. The 60th's skirmishers were deploying into line of divisions, cheering as they surged

forward with swords fixed.

The *maidan* that stretched ahead of them was as flat and smooth as a drill-ground, trodden to rock hardness for a thousand years by the countless feet of men, elephants and laden camels. Dando could see the twin arches of the Kashmir Gate and the flanking, red-brown walls, gouged and pitted by the earlier British bombardment, and then the broken ditch, strewn with rubble and refuse. The top of the wall was shrouded with smoke torn by gun-flashes, and there was the familiar chirrup of bullets as they ripped into the earth around their feet. There were men down, he was certain, but he didn't know who. Irish Holloran was still there — Garvin, Rose, Wilson, Turner, and Mr. Heathcote with pistol drawn and shouting for the ladders, hardly audible above the shattering noise. Men were descending into the ditch, seeking easy places, and then from somewhere to their right came the sound of an explosion that shuddered the ground under them. 'The Gate's blown!' Heathcote yelled, his voice breaking to falsetto.

Dando had just reached the brink of the ditch when a massive, invisible hammer-blow spun him backwards. He sprawled wildly, with arms outflung. What, fer Chris' sake, was this? Everything before his eyes was blood-red, as if he were looking through a red-stained window. He felt nothing except a ringing ache in his head, and there was something wrong with his ears. The uproar of moments earlier was distant, miles away, as through a long, echoing cavern.

*

Surgeon Innes mopped his sweating face with a towel. 'Punctured fracture o' the skull — and damn' near the artery, I'd say.' He lifted a limp eyelid with the ball of a thumb. 'He ought to be dead.' Dando, unconscious and breathing stertorously, lay on the red-slimed table with his head supported by a sand-bag. Innes spoke over his shoulder. 'I'll have his head shaved, if you

please, Mr. Phillips — and quickly. If there's haemorrhage, there's not much hope. I'll need bone forceps, trephine, chisel and gouge, scalpel and wax — and I believe there's some silkworm gut left.' He rolled his sleeves to the elbow, slowly. 'Have ye ever seen an exposed brain, Mr. Phillips? No? Well, I've only seen it once. When I was a student at Guy's, I watched Astley Cooper — that was in 'twenty-four or 'twenty-five. O' course, they worked a lot faster in those days, without anti-aesthetic. I don't recall if the patient lived.' He gazed at Dando thoughtfully, then sighed. 'Dammit, looking at it won't mend it.' He picked up a scalpel. 'We'll excise the wound first, and then we'll see — '

Chapter 14

Delhi had fallen. Delhi, after seven days of savagery, was once more in British hands, and the surviving, broken-spirited sepoy were streaming southward in disorder with a pursuit column on their heels. At sunrise on the 21st of September a royal salute had been fired, and Colonel John Jones, who had led the 60th into Bahadur Shah's palace, had sat on the throne and toasted the health of Her Most Gracious Majesty, to whom the city had been restored.

It had been a week of incredible bravery and often recklessness inspired by desperation, of success and failure, blind determination betrayed by cowardice, persistence, and moments when defeat seemed inevitable. The men from the Ridge had clawed their way into the city with a barbarity that the sepoy had not anticipated. For hour after hour, into the night and the following day, fighting raged from house to house and street to street, with no quarter, no pity. Abandoned wounded were shot or bayoneted and, when there were no bullets, men clubbed and clawed. These were different men, the sepoy realised, to those starched and polished *gorahs* who drawled, yawned over tiffin, rode carriages in the Mall, and smeared perfumed oil on their whiskers.

Not all was heroism. Retreating sepoy had deliberately abandoned houses littered with bottles of liquor to delay the advance, and many of the English troops fell victim to the stratagem. General Wilson had specifically warned against this danger, and prowling officers smashed hundreds of bottles of beer, wines and spirits, but often too late. Soldiers reeled in drunkenness, heedless of orders or flying bullets, and in one house ten stupefied men were

surprised by mutineers and cut to pieces. On the third day, however, the Magazine was captured, and with it two hundred and thirty-two artillery pieces of all calibres. Until that moment, Archdale Wilson had remained unconvinced that the Delhi Field Force could succeed, and on several occasions had been on the brink of ordering a withdrawal to the Ridge. Now, unbelievably, there was a glimmer of hope. His outnumbered troops were not only holding their own, they were beginning to win. Could it really be possible?

It could — not because the mutineers' courage was failing. They fought bitterly, sullenly, but their native officers had never experienced command responsibility. Their tactical appreciation seldom extended beyond visual range, and strategy was a closed book. They fought hard, often at the wrong time and in the wrong place, unable to exploit their superior numbers and sometimes even hampered by them. Withdrawals to less exposed positions were disputed by the holy men — the *ghazis* — who claimed they were immune to English bullets, then flung themselves, screeching, to their deaths. The sepoys' courage remained firm, but their confidence in their leaders, their own abilities, and even the validity of their cause, was draining fast. The Lahore Gate had fallen, the Canal Street, the College, the Delhi Bank, the whole length of the Chadni Chauk and the holy of holies, the Jama Masjid itself. The holy men and the astrologers had lied, lied, lied.

Now, with the mutineers fled, and hundreds of suspected collaborators herded from the gates at bayonet-point, the streets were safe. It was time for the serious business of looting. 'Indiscriminate plunder,' General Wilson had ordered hopefully, 'will not be allowed. Prize agents have been appointed, by whom all captured property will be collected and sold, to be divided, according to the rules and regulations on this head, fairly among all men engaged, and any man found guilty of having concealed captured property

will be made to restore it, and will forfeit all claims to the general prize; he will also be likely to be made over to the Provost-Marshal to be summarily dealt with.'

It was unlikely that the order influenced many. The agents had been appointed — Captain Wriford of the 1st Bengal Fusiliers, Sir Edward Campbell, and Surgeon Innes of the 60th Rifles — and a tent for the reception of treasure erected on the roof of a house overlooking the Dewan-Kass, but for several days little of real value was surrendered. Neither officers nor men had much faith in promises of shares for all, which gave a few paltry rupees to a soldier and immense fortunes to men who had never lifted their arses out of bleedin' armchairs. Bugger the agents. Let 'em find their own soddin' treasure.

And the agents had to. Treasure was not always easy to find. Months earlier it had been buried in cellars, under paving stones, bricked into walls, and the agents with their working parties began a desperate race with the equally determined soldiers, whose distrust of promises was to be justified when the Governor-General in Calcutta later objected to a share-out and offered in lieu a bounty of six months' pay to every man of the Delhi Field Force — thirty-six rupees and ten annas.

Gradually, however, the treasure in the prize tent accumulated — gold mohurs, jewellery, gold chains, bangles and rings, diamonds, emeralds and rubies, pearls, silver plate, miniatures, and costly brocades. Assessed at far below their real value, the items were offered for sale, and the tent was crowded with speculating officers, civilians, and their ladies, particularly those who had dashed frantically from Meerut at the first news of Delhi's fall, too late to join the free-for-all. Many who purchased even more cheaply from whispering natives discovered that pearls could be copied in glazed wax, silver by dipped lead, and not all that glittered was gold.

Some of the regiments had suffered severely. A few days before the assault, the 60th Rifles had been reinforced from Meerut and, of the 640 who had stormed the walls, 389 were killed or wounded, and several other corps had casualties amounting to more than half their complements. The main hospital was now centred in an ochre-painted house a half mile from the walls, where the moans of the maimed and the stink of gangrene would not spoil the coffee and Curacao of the increasing numbers of civilians and ladies touring the battered city. Haggard surgeons and apothecaries still fought their battles with scalpels, probes, and chloroform-soaked sponges, but daily the mud building in the compound — the Dead House — was filled with corpses awaiting burial by the Nujufgurrh Canal. And the fall of Delhi had not halted cholera, typhoid, or dysentery, nor discouraged the black, hungry flies that swarmed over open wounds even as the surgeons operated and plagued the helpless men as they sweated, pain-racked, on their blankets. There were still wounded in Delhi — those who could not be moved, and would not be until their stiff bodies were despatched to the cemetery by *tonga*. Few would cling to life for more than a few days. But the Queen would be grateful to her gallant soldiers. Four years later she would award a medal to the survivors — not, of course, with her own hands, or even those of high-ranking officers, but distributed among the men by their sergeants.

*

He was the Doctor's Boy, and sometimes, semi-humorously, the Young Doctor. He had seen measles and smallpox, carbuncles and boils, gout, indigestion, and then, Doctor Whistler said, he'd lifted four bone fragments and would write to the Lancet about it, adding, in almost the same breath, that it was the hardest day's work he'd ever done, and it was probably all for nothing. Mrs. Luker was removing her black dress, and he waited for her magnificent bosom to explode, but it wasn't Mrs. Luker — it was Hannah

Minting, unrobing with the adroitness of long practice, and her breasts were white and full, with nipples like large bronze coins. She sank to her knees. 'How will it be, Dando-sahib? The yawn? The crab? The wife of Indra?' He stooped to unfasten his boots, but they were muddy, and Meg Garvin would curse him for a filthy bog-peasant if he dirtied her floor, so he sat on the grass that sloped towards the grey Medway, with Tom Brownlow and his bread and cheese, below them the anchored ships of the Nore swinging gently with the tide, the gulls wheeling and screaming, whilst twenty yards away Ensign Heathcote and Colonel Finnis shared a bottle of claret and sandwiches from a spread napkin. But it wasn't claret. It was Godfrey's Cordial, and Tom Brownlow was shooting at a steam railway train taking Goorkhas to Nottingham...

Mr. Luker flexed his cane and sniffed. 'Septic for a sovereign. We'll try brine poultices, but it's too late, I fear.' There was a smell of cough candy, and Colonel Jones put three taters on his plate and ordered Gupta Sen to be hanged from the water-tank of the *Simoon*, but Mary Parfitt wouldn't lift her shift, protesting that it was dirty, and it hurt. The rot-guttin' Pandies came through Subjee-Mundee like a scarlet tidal wave, and he had only one cartridge left. His throat burned with thirst.

*

All was well with the little world of Mrs. Esther Finnis. From Meerut had come a draft on the Delhi Bank, letters from her worried sisters in England, and Mrs. Custance, Mrs. Palmer, and Mrs. Muter. The newly-arrived ladies were anxious to see the sights of Delhi — the harem in the Palace, for instance, the Begum's quarters, and the Jama Masjid, which had been forbidden to Europeans. And there was the prize tent, they'd heard, where gems and fine tapestries could be purchased at a twentieth of their real values and sold in England for a handsome profit. Not, they hastened to add, that

they were interested in making a profit, but Mrs. Muter, the wife of Captain Dunbar Muter of the 60th, did know Surgeon Innes, one of the prize agents, and it was useful if one *knew* somebody.

Delhi was recovering quickly, with the *buniah*s anxious to please and even more anxious to recoup their losses of the past few months. European goods were still in short supply and expensive, but native produce was pouring in from the surrounding country — poultry, mutton and beef, fish, eggs, flour, and vegetables. Wildfowl, hares, and snipe were plentiful, with prices little higher than before the mutiny. Damaged buildings were being repaired, *gharris* were emerging to ply for hire, and thousands of natives were jostling for reemployment by the Sahibs, all stoutly affirming that their loyalty had never wavered and that they had never doubted for a moment that the filthy Pandies would be defeated.

Mrs. Finnis was delighted to be guide to the ladies from Meerut. Here was the place where poor, dear General Nicholson — the leader of the first column — fell, and there was the notorious Kashmir Gate. From the wall they could see the Ridge where, Mrs. Finnis related, she had shared the soldiers' hardships for two months. She wouldn't tell everyone, but there had been ladies — women — whose behaviour was no better than it should be. If she mentioned what some of them did for a few ounces of rice and some old mutton —

The ladies nodded primly. They could guess. But the heat was increasing and they were getting uncomfortably damp under their several petticoats. Could they go to the prize tent now? They would like to meet Surgeon Innes, and perhaps he would advise them on some pearls — some very modest pearls, of course. Large pearls tended to be pretentious, wasn't that so?

On the ladies' arrival, Surgeon Innes was absent from the noisy prize tent. He was in the nearby Selimgarh, the old fortress, where a thousand wounded

were quartered, and he had no intention of being elsewhere. When an orderly brought him word that four ladies requested his presence he lifted exhausted eyes from the coma of a dying patient and snarled. 'Ladies? Tell 'em to go to hell.' He paused. 'No — wait. Give the ladies my apologies. My medical duties unfortunately prevent me from giving them the attention I would wish, and my appearance — he glanced down at his blood-smeared shirt, '— is not fit for their eyes. If they could arrange another hour, I should be indebted.'

The Meerut ladies would have departed, but Mrs. Finnis bridled. This was a discourtesy. Mr. Innes might be a prize agent, but he was still only a surgeon — an occupation to which the Army did not even attach a rank. Surgeons simply did not send messages of rebuff to Colonels' Ladies. Medical duties could wait. If the uncivil Surgeon Innes refused to come to the ladies, then they would go to Surgeon Innes.

The stench of the hospital met them like a blow of a fist. In hot, semi-darkness, hundreds of men lay on trampled straw, indescribably filthy, among blood, vomit, and excreta, attended by a few indifferent natives. There was a strange noise — a continuous murmur — of groaning and the humming of a million flies, an occasional curse, and sometimes weeping. Many of the men were naked, uncaring in their pain, or unconscious, and a solitary voice was croaking repeatedly, '*Bhistie!* Fer Chris' sake! *Bhistie!*' The ladies, shocked, lifted the hems of their skirts from the debris at their feet, and Surgeon Innes, his shirt-sleeves rolled to his elbows, rose from his knees angrily. 'This is no place for ladies!'

'Surgeon Innes, I believe?' Esther Finnis fumbled for her cologne-scented handkerchief. 'I am Mrs. Finnis, wife of the late Colonel John Finnis, of the 11th Native Infantry.'

On the straw, Joseph Dando opened his eyes. For an immeasurable time he had been in shattering pain. How long? Days? Weeks? There had been

grotesque nightmares, from which he had awakened gratefully, only to lie sweating as the pain came again. He didn't know why. He didn't know where he was, nor cared. Suddenly, however, the pain had gone — completely. There were some people standing over him, and he recognised Surgeon Innes and — soddin' 'ell — Mrs. Finnis. Christ, he hadn't done much for her on the Ridge — near bugger-all — but she'd come to see him. A Colonel's Lady had come to see him. It made a man feel bleedin' humble.

'He's a Rifleman,' Mrs. Muter observed, surprised. 'One of my husband's regiment.' Mrs. Finnis' belligerence had oddly disappeared and her eyes sought the door. 'Surgeon Innes is right,' she said. 'Perhaps another time — ?'

Dando smiled weakly. 'It's bleedin' decent of yer, ma'am,' He struggled to raise himself on his elbows. 'If yer'd just give me a mouthful o' water — '

Mrs. Finnis lost her head. 'I didn't come here to fetch water.' She saw the startled eyes of her companions on her, but it was too late. She temporized. 'It is rather an impertinence, isn't it? After all, there are coolies for water.'

But Joseph was no longer listening. He could hear the far distant voice of Brownlow, his rear rank man, shouting that he'd saved Dando a bottle, and was he coming to the bleedin' fig trees or wasn't he? Dando grinned.

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The 60th Rifles, The King's Royal Rifle Corps

First raised in 1755, under the Duke of Cumberland, commanding the British forces in America, the regiment was recruited from the States of Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia, titled the Royal American Regiment, 60th Foot. Mustering 4,400 men armed with rifles instead of the standard Brown Bess musket, the 1st Battalion was initially stationed on Governors Island with, later, another battalion at Albany. The Royal Americans fought with distinction in the French and Indian Wars, but prior to the outburst of the Revolution had been ordered to the West Indies, and subsequently to England, where the regimental title was changed.

Clad in green, instead of the more usual scarlet, the 60th Rifles developed a reputation for alertness, swift movement, and adaptability, unusual during a period when military manoeuvring tended to be formal and ponderous. Skilled in skirmishing and similar activities demanding flexibility and initiative, the regiment became an elite, and in two hundred years achieved a list of battle honours that stood amongst the proudest in the British Army. Twenty-six battalions were raised during the First World War, and ten during the Second.

The re-organisation of the Army in 1881, which compelled the marriages of numerous unrelated regiments and threw all old distinctions and traditions into the melting pot, left the King's Royal Rifle Corps untouched, but in the 1960s, the regiment was amalgamated with the Rifle Brigade and the Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry to form the Royal Green Jackets.

The capture of Delhi in September 1857 was by no means the end of the

Indian Mutiny. Lucknow was still under siege, and fighting would continue for another year — but Delhi, as had been predicted, was the linchpin, and its loss to the mutineers broke their determination. The old King of Delhi was condemned to life exile in the Andaman Islands, but died in Burma before he could be transported. His two eldest sons and a grandson were also captured — and shot immediately. There were many horrors to follow, but the British campaign now assumed the shape of a vast mopping-up operation, costly, arduous, and often frustrating — and ultimately successful.

Following the Mutiny, the charter of the Honourable East India Company was revoked and India, and the sepoy regiments, came directly under the jurisdiction of the British Crown, and remained so until dominion status was granted in 1947.

Glossary

alacktake a colouring made from lac iamaranth purple or crimson flower

anna one sixteenth of a rupee

apsaras beautiful handmaidens of Hindu mythology

atta flour

auparishtaka fellatio

ayah children's nurse

baboo native clerks in European service

babul acacia tree

bhang native alcoholic liquor

bhangi sweeper

bhistie water carrier

bhoosa chopped straw, cattle fodder

bibikhana women's quarters

Brahmin Hindu religious caste

budmashes thieves, undesirables

Buna Ranee Great Queen

buniah shopkeeper

Chadni Chauk Street of Jewellers, Delhi

'Chalo Bhai' 'Come along, Brother'

chaprasi messenger

charpoy string bed

chirsa well, with bucket raised by bullock

chota hazri 'little breakfast'
chowkidar watchman
chudder sheet
chupatti thin cake of unleavened bread
cummerbund tightly-wound waist sash

darro native alcoholic liquor
darzi tailor dhoby: dhoby-wallah washerman dhoti loincloth
dhoolie canvas bed, sometimes used as a stretcher
Doab flat plain between rivers Ganges and Jumna
dum-dum magazine
durbar conference, discussion

'*Ek dum!*' 'At once!'

Feringhee English, Englishman

ghat causeway
Gharib parwar Defender of the Poor
gharri four-wheeled cart
ghazi literally, holy. Colloquially, mad *ghee* clarified butter
ghuslkhana bathroom, wash-place
gomashtas native transport contractors
goojars professional thieves
gora-log lord
gup gossip

havildar sergeant

jemadar native officer, second in seniority in a company
jezail long-barrelled native musket
'*Jhanto!*' jovial term of abuse, literally 'One pubic hair'
jhool coarse blanket
John Company originally 'Jan Kompanie' (Dutch East India Company)
later applied to the Hon. East India Company

Kamaledhiplava 'A boat in the ocean of love'

karanie Anglo-Indian, half-caste

karky (khaki) dust-coloured

khaki rang khaki-dyed linen

Khansamah cook

khet tilled field

khitmatgar servant waiting at table

'*Khon hy?*' 'Who's there?'

Kshatriya Hindu religious caste

kukri broad-bladed Goorkha knife

kunkur limestone used in road-making

lal koortie redcoat infantry

lathi iron-shod stick

lotah water vessel

lumbardar village headman

madal small drum *mahout* elephant keeper and driver

'*Maill Maill Somalo!*' 'Go on! Careful!'

maidan plain

Maro Feringheel 'Kill the English!'
masalchi dishwasher, second cook
massak goatskin waterbag
mehtar sweeper mitha-pani lemonade
mochis leatherworkers
mohur gold coin, worth 15 rupees

naik corporal
nais barbers
nautch dance
nullah ravine

pardah curtain
pice copper coin, % *anna*
puggaree strip of cloth binding hat or turban and falling over neck as
protection against sun
pulla river fish
pundit learned man, authority

Ramadan Muslim religious festival
risaldar native cavalry officer
ryot peasant
rattan slender cane
ridgement regiment
RuSel ka-Pultan The Rifle Regiment (60th Rifles)
rupee silver coin

salaam respectful greeting

sangar low wall
saree loose female gown
sepoy Indian native soldier
Shiites Moslem religious order
sowars native cavalrymen
subadar native officer, senior in a company
Sudra Hindu religious caste
syce groom

'Taggra raho!' 'Good health!'
talwar curved native sword
tats, tattoos native ponies
tatties grass screens or mats
tiffin luncheon
tonga bullock cart
topkhana artillery

Vaisaya Hindu religious caste

yoti female sex organ
'Yih Angrezi hy' 'Are you English?'

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