



THE FIFTH MILE-POST

AN INDIAN
GHOST STORY.

By C. E. JEFFERY.

Illustrated by Ernest Prater.

the other side of the river, while nearer at hand a herd of huge black buffaloes were wending their way homewards across the shining sands, driven by a speck of a boy.

There was the familiar and pungent scent of burning cow-dung in the air, and distant voices sounded near. The peace of evening had fallen over everything, and Staples was glad to be still and enjoy it.

Presently a rather dirty-looking native, with a blue *pagri* and brass badge, approached and presented a note to the District Superintendent with a low salaam. Staples took it and read it.

ONE evening, after a hard day's work, Staples, the young District Superintendent of Police of Chota Jahannampur, was sitting before the door of his tent, enjoying his pipe and the cool air blowing across the water; for his Penang lounging chair had been placed on the bank of the *khal* or creek.

His lengthy limbs were outstretched, his peg glass stood at his elbow, and his grimy fox terrier, Cinders (so called because she used to spend most of her time in the stoke-hole of the steam launch), was sitting beside him intently regarding the culinary operations of some boatmen who were cutting up fish and rolling curry *masala* for their evening meal.

The sun was setting in unspeakable glory behind a low bank of violet-tinted clouds, and for a moment the great orb seemed poised on the horizon, ere it descended into the bosom of the mighty Ganges, which was just visible beyond a low desert of sandy *char*.

A long flight of flamingoes or other water birds traced a dark zig-zag line against his flaming disc as they winged their flight to still wilder haunts, and the distant palms, like needle points, stood out in black relief against the sunset glow on



"A NATIVE APPROACHED AND PRESENTED A NOTE TO THE DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENT WITH A LOW SALAAM."

"Hajjunge Factory,

"Tuesday.

"DEAR STAPLES,—If you have a grain of Christian charity in your composition, dine with me this evening. I can put you up for the night. I have not seen a white face since I left Calcutta a month ago, and I have almost forgotten my mother tongue. This accursed place is the abomination of desolation, but I am doing what I can to save something from the wreck. Since that fool E—— set himself to ruin the indigo trade everything has gone to the dogs, and we are beggared.

"Yours sincerely,

"ANTHONY REILLY."

Staples gave the man a verbal message to the effect that he would be at the factory by eight (the usual Indian dinner hour), and then called his bearer, whom he instructed to order round the cart at seven sharp, for Hajjunge was a good four miles off, and he did not know what the road might be like.

Punctually to the time the bamboo cart came round with a game little country-bred pony named Skittles between the shafts, and the District Superintendent mounted and drove off, the *sais* hanging on precariously at the back, apparently by one toe.

It was a glorious night. The moon was full, and the whole country, flat as a pancake for hundreds of miles, lay bathed in her ghostly radiance. You could have seen to pick up a pin, or to read the smallest print; and the heavy dew glistened like hoar frost on the short turf, for it was December and the cold weather had set in.

The road was utterly lonely and deserted, and not a single human being did they meet, though they could hear the distant sound of tom-toming in the villages, and see faint lights gleaming amongst the trees.

The night wind rustled mournfully amongst the dead branches of the palms, and far away across the waste sounded the melancholy cry of the jackals, rising and falling on the still air; otherwise all was silent as the grave.

They were nearing the fifth mile post from Sultangunge, when suddenly a figure appeared on the *bund* ahead—so suddenly, indeed, that it seemed to have sprung out of the ground, for Staples, who had his eyes fixed on the road in front of him, had noticed nothing the moment before. It was the figure of a female, and her white

garments seemed to concentrate the light of the moon, as white objects do. Nineteenths of the Bengalis, male or female, wear white, so there was nothing peculiar in that; but what did strike Staples as singular was that a woman should be there alone at that hour, and in such a deserted spot, for native women are timid and gregarious.

Now, Bengalis have a particularly annoying habit of never turning out of the way of vehicles. You may shout, swear, and all but drive over them, and they will not take the least notice. I myself have often seen them walk slap into a carriage driven rapidly through the streets of Calcutta, just as if they were bent on committing suicide; and in the crowded thoroughfares of the native bazaars the *sais* has always to jump down and clear a passage.

The female in question appeared in no way different from her species. As she drew near Staples shouted at her, but with no effect.

Then the *sais* turned his head, and shouted too, using some of those vigorous epithets in which the vernacular of India is so rich. But still the woman came on, as if she had had the whole *bund* to herself, swerving neither to the right nor the left, just like a blind person.

She was close upon them, when something in her appearance caused the District Superintendent to rise in his seat, and utter a sudden exclamation. But it was too late. The woman went down under the horse's hoofs.

"My God, she's killed!" cried Staples, dragging back the frightened animal with all the power of his sinewy arms, while the *sais* sprang down and rushed round to the horse's head.

But Skittles did not wait for him. He reared straight on end, and then dashed madly down the *bund* into the paddy field, dragging the bamboo cart behind him.

Staples had thrown himself out, and now the Police Sahib and the *sais* stood and stared at one another blankly. Instead of the bleeding body of the woman they had expected to find, there was—nothing. Not a vestige of anything or anybody. It was as if the earth had opened and swallowed her up.

The long straight *bund*, with its dewy turf, lay glistening in the moonlight, looking like frosted silver; the paddy fields were deserted; not a trace of a human being was to be seen far or near.

"What on earth was the thing?" exclaimed Staples, speaking English in his bewilderment, and staring all around him. "And where can it have vanished to?"

"Sahib," replied the *sais*, who was shaking all over, and whose black face was blanched to an unearthly grey, "it was not a Bengali woman; it was a mem sahib. I saw her."

"'Mem sahib' or no 'mem sahib,'

thereabouts, in a coat of Berhampore silk, who would have looked all the better for the ministrations of the village barber. Still, he had the air of a gentleman.

The two men went into the house together, and dinner was served shortly after in a room giving on to the veranda.

Staples was rather silent during the meal; but Reilly, who was full of satisfaction at having someone to talk to, did not appear to

notice the young official's abstraction. When dinner was over the two men adjourned to the veranda over-

looking the gardens. There

were plenty

of bamboo

chairs of all

sorts and

sizes, and

the Urya

bearer, an

imposing-

looking

gentleman,

in a stupen-

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which is

the staff



"THE HORSE REARED STRAIGHT ON
END AND DASHED MADLY INTO
THE PADDY FIELD."

where the dickens is she gone?" said Staples.

"*Khudda janta!*" (God knows) answered the *sais*, shrugging his shoulders, and glancing round with a shudder.

However, there was nothing to be gained by staying there, and Skittles having been recaptured, they mounted the considerably damaged cart once more, and drove on to their destination without further accident. Another mile brought them within sight of Hajigunge factory.

Reilly came out to meet his guest, and gave him a hearty welcome. He was a tall, gaunt, loose-limbed man of forty or

of life to thirsty Anglo-Indians.

The night air was fragrant with the scent of the jasmine and roses, and more especially with the heavy perfume of the flowers on a big chumpa tree close at hand. At a little distance was a thick hedge of the "moonlight cactus," a species with waxy white flowers which blooms only at night, and which looked quite ghostly in the moonbeams. At dawn the blossoms shrivel up and die, and by sunrise nothing is left of them.

All was marvellously still. Sometimes a flying fox lumbered by on heavy flapping wings, or an owl hooted in the adjacent

thicket, where the fireflies were holding high carnival; but for the most part nothing was to be heard but the ceaseless whirr of myriads of grass insects.

Up to this time Staples had said nothing about his adventure on the *bund*; but as he and his host sat there in the semi-darkness, he cleared his throat, and commenced his story, though not without hesitation, for he had an idea that Reilly would ridicule the whole thing.

However, Reilly did nothing of the sort. He sat and listened attentively, puffing away at his cigar, and throwing in an occasional interjection or question.

Staples related what had occurred clearly and graphically, and when he had finished his story, he said, "I daresay you will laugh at me for an ass, but the whole thing has made me feel jolly queer. For the life of me I can't account for how she disappeared. If she had been a ghost she could not have vanished more completely. There was not cover enough to have hidden a mongoose, nor anything that she could possibly have got behind, barring that D. P. W. mile post, and that would not have sheltered her long."

Still Reilly was silent as he watched the smoke from his cheroot curl upwards. "It is odd, certainly," he said, at last. Then, after a moment's pause, "You don't happen to believe in ghosts, I suppose?"

"By Jingo, no; not at the end of the nineteenth century," exclaimed Staples.

"Well, I don't know why we should not believe in them as much at the end of the nineteenth century as at the beginning," said Reilly, slowly. "Besides, ghosts are coming into fashion again since Stead took to poking them up."

"You don't believe in them, I imagine?"

"I don't know," replied Reilly, slowly and thoughtfully. "The longer I live the more inclined I am to believe that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy. Something strange happened to me not long ago."

"What was it?" asked Staples, eagerly.

"Well," said Reilly, knocking off the ashes of his cheroot against the arm of his Penang chair, "it was in this way: One night I had to send a messenger down to Sultangunge dispensary, sharp, to get a bottle of cholera mixture for one of the coolies who was taken ill. The man was pretty bad, and the messenger had orders to put his best leg foremost. Well, he started off, but he had not been gone half

an hour when he came flying back as if Old Nick himself was behind him. I never saw a man so convulsed with terror; his eyes seemed starting from his head, and he fell at my feet in a sort of fit, foaming at the mouth. He was speechless; and, as nothing we could do could get him round, I finally sent for a *duli* and had him trotted off to the dispensary. Next day by chance Woodward, the Civil Surgeon, turned up on inspection duty, and I told him all about it. He saw the man Buddu, and examined him carefully; and finally gave it as his opinion that the whole thing was a fraud. The man was shamming, he thought; anyhow, he could not find out anything wrong with him. But in three days Buddu died.

"Just before he went under he opened his eyes full on my face with the first gleam of intelligence he had shown since the fatal night, and said, in a sort of hoarse whisper, 'I saw the mem sahib.' Then he gave up the ghost, and I—well, I have to support his widow."

"Strange indeed! But have you no clue to the mystery?" asked Staples, with much interest. "What do the natives say?"

Reilly shrugged his shoulders. "What's the use of listening to bazaar *gup*?" he said. "However, there is not a servant in this house who would go along that *bund* at night for all you could offer him. If I have occasion to send to Sultangunge they always make a wide detour. It is rather inconvenient sometimes, and I have tried physical persuasion more than once; but it's of no use. They swear the *bund* is haunted, and that they prefer a thrashing to the chance of encountering the *bhut*."

"But whose is the ghost supposed to be?" demanded Staples. "The woman I saw to-night was no native. I saw her face for an instant. I shall not forget it in a hurry," and the District Superintendent shuddered.

"We had better turn the subject," said his host, cheerfully. "It does not do to talk of ghosts by moonlight, and in a haunted-looking old barracks like this. Let's go inside to the lamplight; we may as well sit there as here. By the way, did you ever meet Trefusis?"

"Do you mean Trefusis of the Civil Service?" asked Staples.

"Yes, F. W. Trefusis. He's at home on furlough now."

"I know he is," answered the District

Superintendent. "He found it convenient to take leave when his wife died. There were awfully queer things said. No, I don't know him, and don't want to. He is a bad lot from all I've heard, and I sincerely hope my luck will never send me to a district of which he is collector. I knew a fellow who was with him once, and he said the way he treated Mrs. Trefusis was the scandal of the station; used to have all sorts of shady characters in the house with her; and half her time she could not wear a low-necked dress at dances, because of her delicate chest, she said, but people knew better. The men could hardly keep their hands off him."

Reilly nodded. "It's all true, and worse, too," he said, thoughtfully, and looking at the red tip of his cigar. "I knew her well. She was a gentle, quiet little woman, with soft, clinging ways, and big grey eyes. Not pretty, you know, but with something very taking about her. He was tired of her, so he deliberately set to work to kill her with ill-usage. She died in this house."

"Died in this house!" repeated Staples. "What brought her here?"

"Well, you see—take another peg," and Reilly passed the bottle of Exshaw No. 1, with a hand that was hardly as steady as usual—"Trefusis was at that time acting as collector of Chota Jahannampur for Chichele, who was at home on sick leave; and he was out here in camp, or at least he was at Sultangunge."

"Mrs. Trefusis was in very ill-health (she was always delicate), and had entreated to be allowed to stay behind in the *sudder* (this is the ayah's story), but Trefusis would not hear of it—sick as she was, he dragged her out into these swamps."

"She grew worse, and finally was brought here in a *palki*, for the weather was hot and muggy, and the tents were insufferable. This house was empty then; merely in charge of a *chaukidar*, and—well, here she died."

Reilly paused for a moment, and his

voice was husky with emotion. Staples said nothing. At last Reilly continued—

"The news of her death was kept quiet. I suppose the dispensary baboo gave a certificate of some sort. A *mistri* from the bazaar knocked together a few brandy-boxes, and made a coffin. The tent *kulassis* dug a hole in the *bund*, and she was buried—just beyond the fifth mile post, you know."

"And were there no inquiries made?" asked Staples. "Was there no investigation into the cause of her death?"

"Inquiries? No. Who was there to inquire?" answered Reilly, in a dreamy tone. "She died of



"STAPLES RELATED TO REILLY WHAT HAD OCCURRED. 'I CAN'T ACCOUNT FOR HOW SHE DISAPPEARED,' HE SAID."

fever—so Trefusis said; and the Civil Surgeon of Chota Jahannampur was a native. You know how likely a Bengali baboo is to interrogate the Collector Sahib. Mrs. Trefusis had been dead a week before the news reached the *sudder*."

"And the ayah: had she nothing to say?"

"Plenty, no doubt; but who listens to an ayah's *bah-bah*? Besides, she returned to her home and relations somewhere beyond—the desert of Sind, I expect, and it is said she took a good deal of jewellery with her. But now don't you think we had better be going to roost? It is the witching hour of midnight, when churchyards yawn and graves give up their dead. Hi, bearer! *butti la 'o*."