

From Fraser's Magazine.  
*Murder of Commissioner Fraser—Delhi, 1835*  
A TALE OF CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE.

IN the grounds of Easter Moniack, the seat of the ancient family of Fraser of Reelig, near Inverness, there stands, under the shade of a wide-spreading cedar of Lebanon, a small cenotaph, sacred to the memory of four sons of the family, three of whom were in the service of the Honorable East India Company, and died in India.

The circumstances attending the death of one of the sons—William Fraser—are so curious, that a narrative of them may not be without interest to your readers.

William Fraser was a distinguished member of the Bengal civil service, and held, in 1835, the important office of commissioner of Delhi, under which denomination was included an area of some twenty thousand square miles, and a population of probably not less than three millions of people, besides several small *quasi* independent chiefships. He was a man deservedly popular with the natives of all ranks, and was beloved by them, more particularly by the lower classes, with whom, on many occasions, he showed strong sympathy; but being a man of considerable force of character and decision of purpose, he sometimes made enemies.

Upon the 22d March, 1835, between six and seven o'clock in the evening, Mr. Fraser was returning on horseback, attended only by an unarmed servant mounted on one of his spare horses, from an official visit to the rajah of Kishengurh, and was just entering his own grounds, when a native trooper rode up, and, as he passed, discharged his carbine into Mr. Fraser's back. So close was the assassin when he fired, that Mr. Fraser's coat was singed with the powder. The balls passed through his body, he sprang up in his saddle, and then fell dead on the ground. The trooper was seen by the terror-stricken servant to ride off at speed in the direction of the city of Delhi, situated about a mile distant. The servant rode to Mr. Fraser's house, gave the alarm, and his people hastening to the spot found their master dead, but his body still warm. All that the servant, a lad of about sixteen years of age, could say was, that the assassin was a horseman armed with a sword and carbine.

Mr. (now Lord) Lawrence happened to be at the time magistrate of the adjoining district of Paneeput. Early on the morning of the 23d March he received a brief note in Persian from one of his police officers, stating that news had just arrived to the effect that on the previous evening a trooper had ridden up to the commissioner as he was returning from his ride, and fired his carbine into his "sacred body," killing him on the spot.

Mr. Lawrence was much shocked at this tragic intelligence; and thinking that, as he was intimately acquainted with Delhi, he might be of use to Mr. T. Metcalfe, the senior civil officer, and to the magistrate, Mr. Simon Fraser, in tracing the murderer, he instantly ordered his horse, and rode off to Mr. Metcalfe's house, a distance of forty miles. In reply to his inquiries, Mr. Metcalfe told him that no satisfactory traces of the murderer had been found; that no one was suspected; and that, further, some men of the Goojur caste, well known for their skill in tracking, had been sent to the scene of the murder, to follow up, if possible, the tracks of the assassin's horse. They had succeeded in doing so to a spot where the road divided into three branches, two

leading into the country, and the third to the Cabul gate of the city of Delhi.

The Goojurs apparently considered it very improbable that any man in his senses, after the commission of such a crime, would venture himself into Dehli, full as it was of government police, and where he could scarcely hope to escape observation and arrest; they therefore did not think it worth while to examine the road leading to the city, but tried, without success, to follow up the tracks along the two roads branching into the country. It was too dark when they abandoned their ineffectual search for further examination towards the city. Recommencing the search the next morning, they found that all marks of the previous night had been obliterated by the footsteps of early travellers passing to and from the town. The Goojurs were therefore completely at fault, and could give no further assistance. Mr. Metcalfe, however, informed Mr. Lawrence that an old chief—Futteh Khan, a resident of Delhi (who was in receipt of a pension for good service under the Duke of Wellington in the pursuit of the celebrated outlaw Doondiah Waugh in 1804)—had just been calling on him, and, after expressing his deep sorrow for the sad fate of Mr. Fraser, observed that it might possibly turn out that his own nephew, Shumshoodeen Khan, the nawab of Ferozepore, had been implicated in the murder. Mr. Metcalfe, however, expressed his doubts of the nawab's having any share in the affair, and said that he thought very likely the old pensioner's accusing his nephew arose from some motives of private enmity. Mr. Lawrence remarked that it might be so; but as in hunting, when the scent is lost, one casts about at a venture to recover it, so in this case they must take up any chance clue which might present itself, in the hope of its leading to the object sought for. Therefore he would advise that in the absence of anything more tangible, it would be well to follow the clue suggested by Nawab Futteh Khan.

Accordingly, Mr. Lawrence left Mr. Metcalfe's house, and went to that of the magistrate, Mr. Simon Fraser, to whom he told the conversation that had passed between Mr. Metcalfe and the old pensioner. The magistrate stated that he was aware that the nawab of Ferozepore was at enmity with the late commissioner, in consequence of some proceedings of that officer in connection with the Ferozepore State. The late nawab had left two sons: the elder illegitimate, who had succeeded his father; and the younger, the son of his married wife, for whom no provision had been made. The late commissioner, thinking the case a very hard one, had been endeavoring to force the ruling nawab, Shumshoodeen, to assign a portion of his territory for the support of his younger brother, which the nawab bitterly resented, and hence his enmity to Mr. William Fraser.

Thinking that these facts, added to the suspicions expressed by the old pensioner, gave them a clue which they should at once follow up, Mr. Lawrence and Mr. Simon Fraser proceeded together to visit the house in the city of Delhi belonging to the nawab Shumshoodeen, in the hope of obtaining information which might lead to the detection of the murderer. On arriving at the house, and entering the courtyard in which it stood, they found no one, nor did any person respond to their repeated calls. Mr. Fraser then proposed to Mr. Lawrence that they should enter the house; that Mr. Lawrence should remain and watch below, while he went upstairs and looked about him. This they did. Mr. Lawrence, to occupy the time, sauntered about the court-yard, and came upon a very good-looking chestnut horse standing at his picket.

Being fond of horses Mr. Lawrence went up and began to examine the animal, and had reason to

admire some of his points. While so doing, a man of the Goojur caste, whom until then he had not observed, joined Mr. Lawrence, who praised the animal to him. The Goojur, while admitting the merits of the horse, somewhat abruptly remarked, "Yes, sir; but do you not perceive that the hind hoofs are wider than the front ones?" And then, taking up a straw, he measured a hoof before and behind with it; and holding it up to view, said, "There is just one straw's difference between the one and the other; and the same difference was seen in the tracks of the horse which the murderer of Mr. Fraser rode. I am certain that this is the animal that was ridden by the murderer." As the Goojur was saying this, a native trooper, in undress, lounged up. On Mr. Lawrence beginning to question him, he said that the horse belonged to him; that he was an orderly of Shumshoodeen Khan, the nawab of Ferozepore—a district some ninety miles south of Delhi; and that he had been sent on a special duty to the city.

Mr. Lawrence said, "This is a nice horse."

"Yes," said the man, "he is a fine horse; but he is very sick, and has not been able to eat much for a week, nor to do his work."

Upon this Mr. Lawrence, feeling strong doubts as to the truth of the statement, and espying the saddle and other furniture of the horse at a little distance on the ground, walked up to them, and moving them with his foot, observed the *tobrāh*, or nose-bag, full of grain, ready for the animal. He picked it up, and slung it on the horse's head, who commenced at once feeding greedily, proving that the trooper's statement was evidently not very correct. As Mr. Lawrence stood watching the animal, he was joined by the magistrate, who said he could find no one in the house, but that, as he came down the staircase, his eye lighted on some fragments of paper floating on the top of a large bucket of water. These fragments, on taking them up, bore all the appearance, to him, of a Persian letter, which had been read, torn up, squeezed together, and then thrown away. Even in their then condition, the magistrate, who was a man of quick apprehension and a good Persian scholar, could discern words in that language indicating instructions as to some transaction. He therefore put the papers into his pocket, with a view to further examination. Mr. Lawrence then told Mr. Fraser of the peculiarity in the horse's feet pointed out by the Goojur, and his own suspicion that the trooper was probably connected with the murder. Mr. Lawrence got into a conversation with the trooper about the late murder, as to who might have been connected with it, without making any special allusion to the nawab, his master; and without arousing his suspicions he induced the man to accompany him out of the nawab's premises, down the Chandeny Chowk (or great market-place) of Delhi, past the Begum Sumroo's garden, until they reached the magistrate's *kutcherry* and treasury, where there was a guard of sepoy posted under a native officer.

Mr. Lawrence then suggested to Mr. Fraser that it would be expedient to arrest the trooper, to which the latter consenting, they summoned the subhadar, who came up with two or three sepoy. Mr. Lawrence then turning to the trooper said to him: "This is an awkward business, this murder of the commissioner; and as it strikes me you must know something of the matter, you shall remain here under restraint until our doubts regarding you are cleared up." They then

handed over the trooper, whose name was Wassil Khan<sup>\*</sup>, to the subhadar, with directions to keep him in confinement until further orders. Subsequently, the nawab's house being searched, Wassil Khan's sword, which had been recently sharpened, was found among his clothes; but no trace of the carbine with which the murder had apparently been committed was forthcoming.

They then proceeded to Mr. Metcalfe's house, and reported to him all that had occurred, pointing out how, to their minds, it corroborated the old pensioner Futteh Khan's suspicions. It struck them both that in all probability the trooper had perpetrated the deed; that he, as a trusty follower of the nawab, had been instigated to it by his master, he himself having no motive of his own to engage in such an affair. At nightfall Mr. Lawrence again met the magistrate at his house, who informed him that, on coming home, he had tried to put the pieces of the Persian letter together, and to fix them with gum, but that they so stuck together, and the ink was so faded by the action of the water, that he was inclined to give up as useless any attempt to decipher the writing, and was about to do so, when Dr. Graham, civil surgeon of Delhi, called upon him, and, seeing how he was engaged, proposed to go for some chemicals which would restore the color of the ink. This was done; the letters became clear, and the writing proved to be a note from the nawab Shumshooden Khan to his servant Wassil Khan, to the following purport: "You know the object for which I sent you into Delhi; and I have repeatedly told you since, how important it is for me that you should buy 'the dogs.' If you have not yet done so, you must do it without delay; it is most *urgent* and necessary." It was then repeated, "It is necessary, it is very necessary, to buy the dogs."

The magistrate read the letter to Mr. Lawrence, and asked his opinion about it. He immediately replied: "I am certain 'the dogs' mean the commissioner, William Fraser, whom the trooper was sent by his master, the nawab, to waylay and murder; and as there was some delay on the trooper's part, the nawab wrote this letter to him, enjoining him to do the work speedily." The magistrate concurred in this view, and Mr. Lawrence then left, and with this fresh evidence of the nawab's complicity, returned to the commissioner, telling him what had transpired, and urging him to send for the nawab at once, on the plea of wishing to consult him, as suspicions had arisen against one of his servants, the trooper Wassil Khan, in connection with the murder. The commissioner demurred, on account of the nawab's position and influence in the country, thinking it possible also that he would not obey the summons; but Mr. Lawrence continued to urge the measure, saying, "The nawab would either come or not come: if he did *not*, his refusal would give reasonable ground for believing that he was implicated—a result which he would probably be careful to avoid; and if *he came*, there would be this great advantage, that being out of his own territory, the nawab could not use his influence, as he otherwise certainly would do, to stifle the inquiries which out at once to be instituted in the Ferozepore state by a special officer deputed for that purpose." Mr. Metcalfe then agreed to send for the nawab, and to depute Mr. C. Gubbins, magistrate of the adjoining district of Goorgaon, to prosecute inquiries. The nawab

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<sup>\*</sup> Wassil Khan was a Mogul, tall and well-made: he was known as an expert horseman and an excellent shot; just such a fellow as was *capable* of making a desperate resistance had time and opportunity availed; but taken at disadvantage, he probably thought it was his best chance to succumb to circumstances, and trust that no evidence of any importance would be found against him. He proved to be a desperate villain; but, nevertheless, undeniably possessed great courage, fortitude, and devotion to the cause of his master.

obeyed the commissioner's summons; and the coast being thus clear, Mr. Gubbins was able to pick up gradually, in conversation with the people, bits of intelligence throwing light on the case. He thus ascertained that it was the general impression there was a man on foot with the trooper on the fatal night, which had not hitherto been supposed. Mr. Gubbins learnt his name and abode, but could not get hold of him; as, for some reason or other not then clear, he had taken to the adjacent hills, and would not come in. This man was said to be Unyah Meo, a noted freebooter, well known for his power of enduring great fatigue, and for his swiftness of foot. Every endeavor was made by the government officers, but in vain, to arrest Unyah, or to induce him to surrender himself; and it was supposed that, fearing the vengeance of the nawab on himself and family if he gave evidence against him, and also the punishment which would be inflicted by the government if he admitted his complicity in the murder, Unyah continued to elude pursuit.

Colonel Skinner, the well-known commander of the corps of irregular cavalry called "Skinner's Horse," and a most intimate friend of William Fraser, had from the first exerted himself to help the magistrate in this difficult matter. With that view, Skinner had used every means in his power to induce Unyah to come in, but for a long time without success. At last Skinner received an anonymous Persian letter stating that the writer was well acquainted with the man whom he was in search of; and as he (the writer) was also desirous of bringing the murderer to justice, he would aid Mr. Skinner in his endeavors to secure the man. If, therefore, Skinner would send a party of horse under a native officer to a certain village in Bulundshuhur district, some twelve miles from Delhi, on a certain night, he would find the man he wanted. Whether this letter was written at Unyah's suggestion or otherwise, never transpired. Skinner acted on the information of the anonymous writer, and sent the party, which duly arrived in the village, but could find no one answering to the description of Unyah Meo. The party was just about quitting the village on their return to Delhi when suddenly a man appeared, and walking up to the native officer said, "I know whom you are seeking; I am Unyah Meo. I will go with you."

On being made over to the magistrate, Unyah agreed to tell all he knew of the murder. He stated that the nawab Shumshoodeen Khan, being at enmity with the late commissioner, had instructed his servant Wassil Khan to go into Delhi, to watch his opportunity, and to kill Mr. Fraser some night as he was returning in the dusk from his customary evening ride. As William Fraser was well known to the natives for his great strength and remarkable courage, the nawab did not consider it prudent to devolve the task of murdering him on one single man, as in that case there would be a great chance of failure. The nawab had therefore sent Unyah Meo to remain in Delhi with the trooper, and to accompany him on all occasions when he went out with the intention of waylaying the commissioner. Unyah's instructions were to remain close by, so that when the carbine was fired, in the event of the shot not proving fatal, he could run up and help dispatch the commissioner: however, as the shot killed the commissioner on the spot, there was no occasion for Unyah to interfere. At the suggestion of the assassin he at once started off to convey the intelligence to the nawab. Unyah ran all that night and the next day, arriving on the following evening at Ferozepore, a distance of ninety miles. He entered the fort, and going straight to the door of the nawab's room, which was only closed by a thick curtain, told the orderly on duty to go in and inform the nawab that Unyah Meo had arrived and wanted to see him immediately, as he had very important news for him. The man went in and Unyah, with the natural caution and suspicion of his profession, crouching down lifted the corner of the curtain which closed the door to see what would follow, and hear what the nawab might say. The servant woke the nawab,

who, on hearing of Unyah's arrival, ordered him to be admitted at once, but at the same time warned the servant in a low voice to take especial care, that when the nawab dismissed Unyah he should on no pretext be allowed to leave the fort. Unyah went in and told the nawab of the successful murder of the commissioner, at which he expressed great delight, and promised Unyah a handsome reward. He was then dismissed, and told to wait in the fort until the next morning, when he should receive the promised present, and he might then be allowed to go to his home.

But Unyah, remembering the orders he had overheard not to allow him to leave the fort, and sumising that they boded no good to him, slipped down to the gateway, and making some excuse to the sentry on duty there to allow him to pass through, sped away as fast as he could to his own house, situated in the jungle at a distance of seven miles from the fort, which he very soon reached. Unyah had two wives; he explained his situation to them, and said he must hide himself as best he could, for he was too tired to go further; it was pretty certain the nawab's horsemen would be sent to seize him. He then made a hasty meal, and going up to the flat roof of the house, his wives covered him up with some sheaves of straw placed there to dry.

Unyah's surmises were correct, for shortly after the nawab's horsemen arrived, as he had expected, and questioned the women as to whether they had seen Unyah. They, of course, denied all knowledge of him; and the horsemen, having searched the house in vain, returned to the fort, having made the women promise that should Unyah return he was to go at once to the nawab, who was anxious to reward him for his good services. Next morning Unyah, refreshed by his night's rest, fled to the hills, and defied every effort to find him, until he surrendered himself, as already related, to Skinner's troopers.

Ever since the murder of Mr. Fraser search had been made by the police, but in vain, to find the carbine used by Wassil Khan. It happened, however, that one evening, some time after the murder, a woman was drawing water from a deep well close to the Cabul gate of Delhi. While so employed, the rope broke, and the vessel attached to it sank into the water. She called her husband to her assistance; and he, letting a hook down fastened to a rope, pulled up not the lost vessel but a carbine, scarcely at all rusted, and bearing the appearance of having been recently discharged. On its being shown to Unyah, he at once recognized it as the weapon used by Wassil Khan.

Other evidence, tending to establish the guilt of the nawab and the trooper, was procured by degrees. Thus the grain-merchant who had supplied forage for the horse deposed that he had done so at the trooper's request for several days preceding the murder; then people of the bazaar adjacent to the nawab's house at Delhi, gave evidence that Wassil Khan had been in the habit of riding the animal out every afternoon, and that on the night of the murder he had returned with his horse in a tather, showing he had ridden hard. There happened to be a mosque near the scene of the murder, in which it was proved Wassil Khan had been seen on the very evening in question saying his prayers for an unusually long time, and that on their completion he had ridden his horse sharply off, as if intent on business of importance. It further appeared, that on the fatal night the commissioner had been detained later than usual, owing to the visit he had paid to the rajah of Kishengurh.

Both the nawab and the trooper were tried by a special commissioner, deputed by the government for the purpose, and their guilt being clearly proved, they were condemned to death. They were hanged close to the Cashmere gate of the city, and both retained their resolution to the last, and denied all knowledge of the murder.

Thus perished Nawab Shumshoodeen Khan, a chief of considerable position and wealth, all of which he owed to the British government, who had raised his father from comparatively humble circumstances for his services during the wars with the Mahrattas in the years 1802-3. The father was a man of ability, and was bred up in a school which demanded the exercise of the virtues of moderation, vigilance, and industry. In his old age he was highly respected and even honored; whilst the son, having no such inducements to self-restraint, passed a life of self-indulgence and recklessness, and came to an untimely and disgraceful death.

Some of the Mohammedans of Delhi regarded the nawab as a martyr, and erected a tomb to his memory, which was in due time regarded as a sacred shrine, to which numbers resorted to worship.

Of all the government officers employed in the investigation of this case, Lord Lawrence is now the sole survivor. Of those who have died, Mr. S. Fraser the magistrate, and Dr. Graham, met with violent deaths. Mr. S. Fraser, then holding the office of commissioner of Delhi, was killed in the king's palace by the mutineers on the morning of 11<sup>th</sup> May, 1857; and Dr. Graham was shot dead about the same time by the rebels at Sealkote in the Punjab, both falling in the execution of their duty.

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