HISTORY SHAPERS

THE STORY OF LORD ROBERTS

EDMUND F. SELLAR

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The Story of Lord Roberts

by

Edmund F. Sellar

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PLEASE NOTE

In this series, you will read about historical figures who displayed courage, bravery, self-sacrifice, and many other admirable traits. Their stories remind us that many people in history took bold actions and made tough choices. Yet, even those who achieved great things sometimes held ideas or pursued goals that were not beneficial to everyone. History is full of complex individuals—parts of their lives inspire us to be brave and stand up for what is right, while other parts remind us to consider the unintended consequences of our actions.

As you explore these biographies, we invite you to reflect on the qualities that enabled these figures to achieve greatness and the lessons we can learn from their mistakes. Maybe you too can become a History Shaper—someone who learns from the past and helps to make our world a better place for everyone.

Contents

Early Days—Arrival in India

On the 30th September 1832, Frederick Sleigh Roberts was born at Cawnpore, in India.

Like so many of our great soldiers, Lord Roberts is an Irishman, and he is proud of the fact. His father, General Sir Abraham Roberts, was a distinguished soldier, and like his son spent the greater part of his life in India. While still a child of two years old, Sir Abraham and Lady Roberts brought their boy home to England.

Here they remained together for two years, after which the parents had to return to the East, and their child was left in the care of relatives at Clifton.

In common with so many children born in India, he was at first somewhat small and delicate.

His schooldays began early, as at the age of six he started doing lessons at a dame's school. In his eighth year he went to a school at Clifton kept by a Frenchman, Monsieur Desprez.

Here, though he was really eight years old, his small size and delicate appearance led him to be mistaken for a child of five.

This false idea of the boy's age and strength led to the downfall of one of his classmates. This latter was a

French boy about twice the size of Roberts, but a hulking, stupid fellow, who looked with jealousy on the little chap's cleverness and greater success at lessons. Unable to get above him in class, the Frenchman determined to take it out of his school-fellow by bullying.

One day a great outcry arose in the playground, and on a master hurrying up to see what the fuss was about, little Roberts was found lying on the ground, while the French bully was dancing about in a wild state of joy, and shouting out, "Me I have knock Freddy down! Me I have jump on him! Me I have dance on him!" All of a sudden his capers and song of victory ceased. Little Freddy recovered; quickly jumping to his feet, he landed his tormentor a good smack on the nose, straight from the shoulder, with his fist. The shouts of triumph changed to tears; the Frenchman was no boxer, and from that time he took care to leave the little English boy, who could use his fists in self-defence, severely alone.

At the age of ten young Roberts went to a preparatory school, and after remaining there for three years, he went to Eton, where he stayed a year, during which he gained a prize for mathematics; and this fact was recalled forty years later, when Etonians presented a sword of honour to their distinguished school-fellow on his return from victory in Afghanistan.

In January 1847 young Roberts, who had made up his mind to follow in his father's footsteps and become a soldier, entered Sandhurst.

Here he worked hard, and among other honours took a prize in German. His stay was not, however, to be a long one, as his father wished him to follow a career in India, rather than in the English army at home. So, after going to a military academy at Wimbledon, he at length secured a vacancy at the famous military college of the East India Company at Addiscombe.

Here the young man of eighteen began his military studies in real earnest, and he gave himself up to the study of "Fortification"; for already at this age he determined to get on in his profession, and we may be sure he was no idler.

His life at Addiscombe was a most happy one: he was popular with everybody, and had in especial five friends, who all chummed together, clubbing their pocket-money and having all things in common. Out of this common fund the fortunate member who got leave to spend a weekend in London was able to pay his expenses when his turn came.

Roberts rose to be corporal in the seminary, a position somewhat like a prefect at a public school, and we can well believe that his reign of authority was a mild and popular one, and that the junior cadets regarded him with the same feelings of affection as the soldiers in after years came to feel towards "Bobs," their popular and trusted Commander-in-Chief.

During his stay at Addiscombe, Roberts was by no

means strong. But as with Nelson, our greatest sailor, his good spirits and pluck more than made up for any delicacy.

His figure, though small and slight, was well-built. He was wiry and active, and always, we are told, very neat and careful about his dress.

At the end of the year 1851 Frederick Sleigh Roberts was gazetted a second lieutenant in the Bengal Artillery, and two months after the young cadet set sail for the land of his birth, where he was to become so famous. The departure of a cadet for India was in those days a much more serious affair than it is now. Leave could only be obtained—except in case of ill health—once, and that only after ten years in India, during an officer's whole service.

"Small wonder, then," Lord Roberts himself says, "that I felt as if I were bidding England farewell for ever when, on 20th February 1852, I set sail from Southampton with Calcutta for my destination."

The vast floating hotels which now cross the ocean were in those days undreamt of. Steamships were still in their infancy, the boats small and slow. The Suez Canal did not exist. People either had to go round the Cape to reach India, or else take the P. & O. to Alexandria; from thence the journey was made by river and canal to Cairo, from Cairo a diligence ran to Suez, and there the weary traveller had again to embark on a P. & O. which took him to Calcutta.

The steamer Roberts sailed in to Alexandria was the *Ripon*, commanded by Captain Moreby, a distinguished

officer and a kind, fatherly man, especially attentive to the home-sick young "griffins"—as new arrivals in India are called.

The freshness and novelty of life at sea is a great cure for home-sickness. A passing ship, a school of porpoises, the sight of land—all become objects of excitement and interest. Then games of many and various kinds fill the time, and the passenger at his voyage's end usually steps on shore with a feeling of regret, and kindly feelings towards the trusty vessel which has reached port in safety, and which has, for the time being, been his home.

After Alexandria the journey across the desert was made in a vehicle like a bathing-machine, drawn by four mules, and in this Roberts and five other young cadets bumped and jolted from Cairo to Suez.

The sight of Cairo made a great impression on young Roberts. It was his first real view of the "gorgeous East," and he eagerly took in every detail of the sort of scenery which was to become in India so familiar to him.

At Suez the "griffins" embarked on the *Oriental*, and the terrific heat of that region was soon met with. Only those who have made the voyage know how great that heat may be. Should there be a following wind the stanchions and even the deck seem to be red-hot; and it is only by stopping and sailing full-speed astern that the ship can be cooled down and become a bearable habitation.

"I don't know how we shall fight in India if it is as hot as this," Roberts is said to have remarked.

At last, on the 1st of April, Calcutta was reached, and the young cadet stepped on shore in the land of his birth.

After a dreary dinner with an invalid officer of his own regiment (surely no cheerful omen!) young Roberts went to bed, regretting his many comrades of the ship, and feeling lonely and home-sick. Next morning at an early hour he was astir, and made the best of his way to Dum-Dum, where he lost no time in reporting himself and joining his regiment.

Here the same cheerless welcome waited him; there were scarcely any soldiers in the fort, and his second dinner in India, instead of consisting of a cheery mess-party, as he may have pictured, was a lonely meal with another subaltern.

The outlook was most depressing for a young man just arrived in the country.

"I became terribly home-sick, and convinced that I should never be happy in India," he afterwards used to relate.

One night, on the rare occasion of his dining out, he encountered on his way home a furious cyclone. His native servant was walking ahead of him with a lantern, but the light was soon blown out, and his guide continued on his way, thinking his master was following him. The latter shouted to his servant to stop, but the roar of the tempest drowned his cries. The night was pitch dark, several trees had been blown down, and huge branches were being driven through the air like thistle-down. Nearly blown

off his feet, and in no little danger from the falling trees, it was only after weary hours wandering up and down and groping in the darkness that Roberts at length reached the safety of his own bungalow.

Next morning he sat down and wrote to his father, begging that if possible he might be sent to Burma. The old general replied with the glad news that he hoped shortly to be given the command of the large Peshawur division, when his son could then come and serve under him.

The young man hailed the news with delight; his dislike to India and his discontent vanished as if by magic; and when in August the wished-for order from his father came, he set forth with boyish eagerness for the frontier.

His journey thither took up nearly as much time as his whole stay at Dum-Dum. The macadamised road went no farther than Meerut; from there the remaining six hundred miles had to be made in a doolie or palanquin—a sort of sedan chair carried on men's shoulders. The heat was so great that travelling by day was impossible, and the stages had to be made by night. However, everything has an end, and at last, after being nearly three months on his journey, he reached Peshawur, where he found his father; and we can well imagine with what feelings of joy the pair greeted one another. They met "almost as strangers." "We did not, however," Lord Roberts himself tells us, "long remain so. His affectionate greeting soon put an end to any feeling of shyness on my part, and the genial and kindly spirit which enabled him to enter into

and to sympathise with the feelings and aspirations of men younger than himself rendered the year I spent with him at Peshawur one of the brightest and happiest of my early life."

At Peshawur—Meeting with Nicholson

During his journey up to Peshawur Roberts had rested at Cawnpore, which was his birthplace. At Meerut he saw for the first time a body of the famous Bengal Horse Artillery, a force which has been described as "unsurpassed and unsurpassable." All the young soldier's ambition was fired to become one day a member of this grand corps, and he had already formed "a fixed resolve to leave no stone unturned in the endeavour to become a horse-gunner."

In the meanwhile, however, Roberts lived with his father, and had a tremendous amount of work to do. His duties were twofold, for he not only acted as his father's aide-de-camp, but also continued to do his duty as officer with the 2nd Company 2nd Battalion of the Bengal Artillery (known locally as "The Devil's Own ").

On the 1st of January 1853, Lord Roberts relates that he was at a dinner-party when the unlucky number thirteen sat down. It would be in accordance with the superstition could we relate the after-fate of the party by death and misadventure. Strange to say, the very opposite has to be chronicled. No less than eleven years after all the thirteen

were alive, having passed through the terrible times of the Mutiny, during which five or six had been wounded.

In the autumn of the same year the health of old General Roberts began to fail, and he was, under advice from the doctors, obliged to leave India for good. So weak and ill was he that his son thought it his duty to accompany him part of the way down to Calcutta.

While travelling with his father Roberts missed his first chance of seeing active service and "smelling powder." There was trouble on the frontier; a number of the Bari villages were in revolt, and an expedition had to be sent to punish them. Although the young lieutenant galloped back as fast as relays of ponies could carry him, it was no good. He heard, indeed, the guns of "The Devil's Own " booming in the distance, but by the time he came up, to his grief and disappointment he found the fighting was over, and his baptism of fire was not yet to take place.

He was, however, to encounter another enemy of the British soldier in India, and during the winter he became very ill with fever. So serious was his illness that he was granted six months' leave of absence. This time he spent in a most delightful trip to Kashmir, on which he was accompanied by another lieutenant of artillery. The two young men had a splendid holiday; the country is one of the most beautiful and fertile in the world. The climate is good, and especially refreshing are the cool nights and fine early mornings, after the continual heat of the plains.

Thoroughly set up by the change, our hero returned

to Peshawur, and here he reached the height of his boyish ambition in receiving shortly afterwards the coveted "jacket" of a lieutenant in the Bengal Horse Artillery—the force he had set his heart on joining.

They were, indeed, a splendid body of men, mostly Irishmen, and great, strapping fellows, "almost all big enough to have lifted him from the ground with one hand." In such a crack corps good horsemanship was a point of honour with all, and Roberts soon set himself to become a good rider. So successful was he that he was chosen to ride in the regimental brake, which was drawn by six horses, ridden postillion fashion by three officers.

Again the old enemy, fever, laid him low, and once more the doctors sent him to Kashmir to get better. From Kashmir he set out on a four hundred miles' march to the famous hill station, Simla, and here came the "turning-point" in his career.

He was asked to lunch one day with Colonel Becher, the Quartermaster-General. After some talk, Colonel Becher, struck by the young man's soldierly qualities, told him he wished he could have him attached to his department. An appointment of this sort was sure to bring with it a rapid rise in his profession, and Lieutenant Roberts jumped at the idea. From that time it was the goal before him, till in the spring of 1856, far sooner than he had dreamt of, the Deputy-Assistant-Quartermaster-General was required for special service, and Roberts was offered the post.

His delight, however, soon received a check; his

appointment could not be sanctioned because he had not passed the necessary examination in Hindustani. This was to be held shortly. Nothing daunted, the young lieutenant engaged a native teacher, and set to work with all his might to learn the language. The time was short, but he made the most of it, and when July and the examination came, he passed the test with flying colours.

Shortly after he got what he had wished for: the vacancy was given him, and he was now a staff-officer, with every prospect of speedy success.

While on tour in his new capacity he received an offer which, had he accepted it, would have changed his whole life, and one of her greatest soldiers would have been lost to the country. This was none other than the chance of a post in the Public Works Department. The salary would, of course, have been far larger than that of an officer in the army, but Roberts was a soldier and the son of a soldier, and he determined to stick to his profession, so the offer was gratefully declined.

In order to join General Reed on a tour of inspection, Roberts accomplished a wonderful ride of a hundred miles in eleven hours, with but one short rest for refreshment. During this tour of inspection Roberts met for the first time a young subaltern in the Inniskilling Fusiliers, who will always be associated with the heroic exploits of the British army, and who many years after, as Sir George White, engraved his name on the annals of our race by

the heroic manner in which he "kept the flag flying" at Ladysmith during the dark days of the Boer War.

An incident worth telling, as showing how unprepared everybody was for the outbreak of the Great Mutiny, came under the young staff-officer's notice at Nowshera.

The 55th Native Infantry were stationed there, and their colonel, who had been hitherto used to clean-shaven Hindu Sepoys, was loud in his complaints of the big-bearded Sikhs who had lately been enlisted in his regiment, and who he declared quite spoilt the smart, trim appearance of the ranks on parade.

Two months later the Hindus had broken out into mutiny: of all the regiment only the despised Sikhs remained loyal, and the colonel, who had declared he would stake his life on his trusty Hindustanis, mad with grief and disappointment, blew out his brains.

While in these parts Roberts met for the first time that modern hero of romance, the great John Nicholson. Perhaps no man ever impressed him more, either before or since, and Nicholson was a fit hero for a young soldier's worship and respect.

Like Roberts, he came of Irish stock, though his ancestors had, in the reign of Elizabeth, been sturdy Cumberland dalesmen who had emigrated to Ireland. He had come out to India as a boy of sixteen, and nearly all his time had been spent keeping order among the unruly tribes of the frontier.

The natives literally worshipped him as a god: he had

been known to flog the men who knelt before him in prayer as to a god-like saint. The tribesmen looked on him as no mere mortal man. "You could hear the ring of his horse's hoofs from Attock to the Khyber," ran the saying on the frontier.

John Nicholson was a man of splendid size and strength, six foot two in height, and of commanding aspect. "He was a man cast in a giant mould, with massive chest and powerful limbs, and an expression ardent and commanding, with a dash of roughness: features of stern beauty, a long black beard, and a sonorous voice. His imperial air never left him." No wonder this modern crusader fired the imagination of the keen young soldier.

"Nicholson," says Lord Roberts, "impressed me more profoundly than any man I had ever met before, or have ever met since. I have never seen any one like him. He was the beau-ideal of a soldier and a gentleman...." The great man soon showed a regard and affection for the ardent young officer, and the two were together almost from that hour until Nicholson's heroic death in the streets of Delhi.

The Mutiny

On his return to Peshawur Roberts had looked forward to hard work and a long spell of routine, but the outbreak of the great Indian Mutiny was to provide him with a more exciting field of activity.

The year 1857 broke with the threatenings of coming trouble. The Sepoys were restless, and seemed to obey their orders sulkily. During the months of February, March, and April, mysterious "chupatties," or cakes, were sent about the country, passed from hand to hand, and this was thought to be a means of telling the natives to rise, and a secret signal for them to get ready.

We must remember that, for the first few years of British rule in India, Hindus and Mohammedans had been happy to dwell peacefully side by side. They were thankful for the change from bloodshed and strife to law and order, under just rulers. They could no longer be tortured and robbed by their native kings, for the country was quiet and prosperous, and the poor man could live and labour without fearing the tyranny of the rich.

By-and-by, however, the people began to forget how poor and ill-treated they had been in the past. The Mohammedans looked back with regret on their days of

power and splendour, when they had ruled India; while the Hindus thought of how they had got rid of the Mohammedan yoke.

Neither people liked to be ruled and to be under the power of a strange white people, who had come from across "the great water," and conquered their country with a mere handful of men. At this stage, the enemies of our rule spread a report that the English had made up their minds to destroy the religions of the two great races in India, and force them all to become Christians.

To a Hindu a cow is a sacred animal; on the other hand, the pig the Mohammedan holds in abomination, and he will sooner starve than even touch the flesh of what to him is an unclean beast. A report arose, and was busily spread about the country, that the new cartridges issued to the Sepoys, or native soldiers, had been greased with a mixture of cows' fat and lard. To touch one of these cartridges was to a native of either race a sin, and a great and unpardonable sin, against his religion. As explaining this feeling, Lord Roberts tells a story of a Sepoy, on his way to cook his food, with his "Iota," or tin drinking-vessel, full of water. He was met by a low-caste man employed in the Enfield Cartridge Factory, who begged him for a drink from his Iota. This Sepoy, a Brahmin—one of the highest caste—refused, saying, "I have scoured my Iota; you will defile it by your touch."

"Oh," sneered the low-caste native, "you think much of your caste, but wait a little; the Sahib-log "(that is,

European officers) "will make you bite cartridges soaked in cows' fat, and then where will your caste be?"

The Sepoy, no doubt, believed the man, and told his comrades what was going to happen. No wonder, then, that the soldiers believed the reports, and feared that by means of the new cartridges they were to be forced to change their religion.

At the time we speak of the British force in India numbered only 36,000 men, while there were some 257,000 native soldiers. The old belief that the British soldier was invincible, a belief which arose from the way in which mere handfuls of our men had broken and beaten large armies, met with a rude shock during the Afghan War, 1841—42. What the Afghans had shown to be possible the Sepoys might also accomplish. At all events, they had made up their minds to try.

Over the whole land there blew "a devil's wind," as the Hindus called it. The aged King of Delhi, when asked afterwards to explain the cause of the outbreak, answered, "I do not know. I suppose my people gave themselves up to the devil."

A mysterious prophecy was revived, and was repeated all over the country, from mouth to mouth.

In 1757, the Battle of Massy, Clive's victory which gave us India, had been fought and won. The English "raj," or rule, would run exactly one hundred years—so ran the prophecy; and lo! here was 1857—the hundred years had run their course.

The British forces were scattered in small detachments over Bengal, and most of the artillery was in native hands. Indeed, perhaps among the various causes of the Mutiny, it was the natives' sense of power—they had fought our battles and conquered for us, they argued—which urged them to rebel.

On the 11th of May, while Roberts and the other officers were sitting at mess in Peshawur, the bolt fell from the blue. In breathless haste a telegraphic signaler rushed in, and gasped out the startling news that an outbreak had occurred at Meerut, that Delhi had joined the rebels, and that many residents and officers at both stations had been murdered.

To fully understand the situation we must leave Lord Roberts for a little, and go back to relate the events which gave rise to the outbreak of the Mutiny, during which the whole power of British rule seemed at one moment to be tottering on its throne: a power which was only afterwards to be more firmly established, thanks to the heroic devotion and bravery of our men and their dusky allies who remained steadfast and true to their salt, while their comrades-in-arms on all sides rose in revolt.

As early as the 6th of February, an officer of the 34th Native Regiment had been warned by a Sepoy that his men, fearing that they were going to be forced to become Christians, meant to rise in revolt. We have already told the story of the Brahmin and the low-caste man at Dum-Dum.

The air was full of warnings had the authorities but

been alive to the fact. Already General Hearsay had written to the Government, "We are on a mine ready for explosion," and his words and warning were but too true. At Barrackpore, March 29th, on a Sunday afternoon, the match that was to explode the whole mine may be said to have been lighted.

The 34th were drawn up on parade, or rather the quarter-guard of the regiment—tall, fine, soldierly men—were drawn up in regular order. The rest of the regiment were in a wild state of excitement and disorder, chattering and gesticulating as only natives can.

In front of them a drug-maddened, excited Sepoy, named Mungal Pandy, stalked up and down. He shouted to his comrades to leave their ranks.

"Through biting these cartridges we shall all be made infidels! Be true to your faith, if you are not dogs! Show yourselves men; come out, and let the cursed Sahibs see that we are not afraid!"

Thus he marched to and fro, taunting the men with their cowardice; they were giving up their religion; they were accursed in this world, and with no hope of being saved in the next.

His words acted like magic, and struck home to his eager listeners; murmurs were heard, and the ranks swayed backwards and forwards. At this moment Lieutenant Baugh, the adjutant, roused from his afternoon's sleep by the news of a revolt, galloped upon the scene. Straight at Mungal Pandy he rode; there was a flash from