The Shaman

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

We were known as “The Royal Americans” which is why I joined. We were rifle regiment, so we wore the green rather than the red of the wider British Army. Formally we were “The Kings Royal Rifle Corps” but still referred to as “the Americans” right through the Second Anglo-Afghan War.

I had been a boy soldier during the Civil War and I found that I had a taste for soldiering so I stayed in the army and wore the blue for another 5 years. But I had no interest in fighting the American Indian tribes in those years. I learned to respect those people and I disliked the clear plan to slowly drive them from their lands, and then from life itself.

The Royal Americans were in Canada in the year 1870, and word got to me that this was the most travelled unit of any army any where in the world – that tempted me. Before “The Wolseley Expedition” “the Americans” had been in China and were said to be heading to North Africa after the rebellion in Canada was put down (which it was – bloodlessly). It seemed to me that a professional soldier with a thirst for adventure will fight under any flag, and by chance the flag of our regiment was a cross between the British and American flags. I resigned from the Union Army of the United States (where I had never felt at home) and joined the Kings Royal Rifles.

Sure enough, we were shipped across to Britain and then to South Africa. Both places took my fancy. I felt sure that I had made the right choice. Then after service in South and Eastern Africa we were shipped back north to the Mediterranean to see proper action in the Anglo-Egyptian War. After that we were sent to India, and went into battle in the second Anglo-Afghan War from 1878 to 1880 under the indomitable General Sir Frederick Roberts VC and the explorer General Sir Charles McGregor, both Indian born.

My pension was available after 10 years in that army, the last nine of them as a commissioned officer, and after 20 years all told of soldiering and fighting I was ready to take it. I was even ready to stay in India, where there were opportunities for the resourceful, if I could find the right woman.

And that gives rise to my story.

In my company there were two soldiers who were particularly difficult – Privates Mondale and Landiss. Every unit in every army has one, but we had two. They were aways fighting with one another, even in the presence of the real enemy. Sergeant Brown had a constant battle keeping them on task and off one another. He called them “incorrigible” and suggested that steps be taken to put them right.

I have never been one for the harsh discipline that is available in armies, or certainly in armies of that time, now another century. I prefer to lead by example and encouragement, and only to deal with cowards harshly, and neither Mondale or Landiss were that.

But this was India, and as Sergeant Brown said, in that place there are other ways of doing things. In truth there are mysteries in India beyond all understanding.

Sergeant Brown introduced me to the shaman, if that is the appropriate title to give her, or perhaps him. I say that because this shaman, “mganga” as they call them in Africa, a witch doctor I suppose, could have been of either sex. She carried herself as a woman, with long jet black hair, smooth skin and wearing a saree, but she was large enough of stature and bone, and deep enough of voice, to be a man.

She spoke English, and engaged me in some conversation. All I said was that I would be bringing Privates Mondale and Landiss up on charges unless she and Sergeant Brown could find an alternative means or altering their behavior, and she assured me that she had the answer. I left it to my sergeant – he is the one tasked with discipline.

I learned later that between them they had persuaded Mondale or Landiss to drink her concoction daily for the better part of three weeks. By all accounts it was a foul-smelling liquid, I was told extracted from the urine of a pregnant mare drained by hand several times a day. I was told that it would have the effect of reducing aggression in these two recalcitrant riflemen.

We were in barracks and between military drills the men were carrying out maintenance. I would have expected Sergeant Brown to keep Mondale or Landiss separate but to my surprise I happened on them and saw them working together, sewing curtains for the mess hall. They seemed to be in a very friendly disposition towards one another, and I commended them upon it.

“We find ourselves suddenly unable to engage in heavy lifting of any kind,” Rifleman Mondale explained. “But we have found ourselves well -suited to needlework.” There was something in the tone of his voice that sounded different from the man I knew – a higher tone perhaps, but definitely softer, reflecting this new, less violent personality. Then I saw something very odd. Rifleman Mondale looked across at Landiss and giggled (there is no other word for it) shielded slightly with the back of a limp hand delicately holding a needle.

When we had left the room, I asked Sergeant Brown what exactly was going on.

“As near as I can guess, Sir,” he said, “by some unworldly witchcraft these two soldiers are slowly becoming women.”

Being a man of some given education and to a greater extent self-educated, for the large part in the advances of science and technology that had seen only in the last few years the invention of the image projector, the phonograph and the telephone, I was not a believer in witches. But there was no doubt something strange going on. It was not just that the personalities of these two men had changed, but that their bodies were changing too.

The most unsettling things for me personally, was that I realized that I was looking at Rifleman Mondale in a different way, in a licentious way. I had never been that way inclined, having had sexual relations only with women up until then, which seemed to confirm that whatever changes the shaman had effected, they were at a very deep level.

It seemed incumbent upon me as the commanding officer to understand what was happening, so I had Sergeant Brown arrange for his “witch” to come to the barracks to meet me.

“Yes indeed,” she told me. “Trances and the like can alter the personality for only a very short period. If you wish to effect a change of a permanent or long-term nature then you need to change to physical nature of a person. We have people in India who have made the choice to abandon the male sex and live instead as women. We call these people *hijra*. Over the centuries we have learned many things about how we can assist these people in their aims.”

“I have heard of these eunuchs,” I said. “But they will never be women like you.”

“That is where you are wrong,” says she. “In fact, I was one. And before that I was a man. But now I am a woman.”

I was disbelieving. I did not ask for her to show me what was between her legs, but she showed me anyway, without any compunction. I could see that she was indeed oddly configured – perhaps a castrated man with an appendage so small that it might even be consider as feminine.

“You could undo this process?” I asked.

“The ball is rolling,” she said. “It may be able to be stopped, but I am not sure whether either of the subjects are seeking that.”

The fact is that there was no room for women in Kings Royal Rifles, and it was now clear that even with a rifle in their soft hands neither Mondale or Landiss would ever be a rifleman again. I discussed the matter with Sergeant Brown and we agreed that the proper course was to discharge them both from the service, but ensure that they remained in the care of the Corps.

We both made application for permission to take married quarters. I took Mondale into my bungalow and Brown took Landiss. Certainly on my part I preferred to think of this arrangement as being one of expedience and humanity, but I have the say that my earlier feelings soon reared up and I found myself engaged in relations with Mondale, who had assume the name “Molly”.

Like many soldiers who spend a good deal of the time in the sub-continent I decided to remain there when my pension became available. There are business opportunities there and Brown and I were keen to explore trade having left The Royal Americans.

It is my intention to return to the country of my birth in due course, even if only to build custom for my spice trading business, but I suppose that I am little concerned that the person that I call my wife might be in a difficult position, even though if you met her you would consider her as I do – an attractive and attentive woman.

There is also the fact that we have a growing family, comprised of half caste children fathered by British soldiers and rejected by Indian families, taken in by Molly and Mrs. Brown both.

As for the Shaman, our ladies both attend on her regularly, so that she can keep them both young and female.

The End

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