

## From *The Beast of Mysore*

No time for reloading; time only for the bayonet, backed up with solid British guts behind it. The men of the 33<sup>rd</sup> bellowed as one voice, screaming out a war cry in challenge to their approaching enemy. Their blood was up; Arthur could hear the collective pounding of over six hundred hearts, charged with fear and hatred of the foe, six hundred pairs of boots thudding rhythmically into the hillside. The Sultan's men had not had time to reload their own muskets either. Those who had them had already fixed bayonets. Others simply slung their firearm over the shoulder by its leather strap and drew the curved swords which were popular among the men of Mysore.

In absolute silence, Arthur kept pace with his men. Sweeping the fast-approaching enemy line with the eye of a professional soldier, he focused upon what appeared to be an officer, if his bearing and demeanor was any true indicator. The man was in the front rank, and wore a scarlet turban which was fronted by a large ruby. His scimitar was crusted with precious stones of all varieties. This was not Tipu himself, he knew, for the Sultan had a reputation as being something of a short, fat man, whereas this fellow was tall and lean of stature; but his posture and garb told Arthur that he was a leader of some import nonetheless. *That sword certainly did not come cheap, and neither did that ruby.*

Putting on a burst of speed, Wellesley angled towards his right. The enemy officer saw him coming out of the corner of his eye, turned quickly to face his new opponent. It was only then that Arthur realized that he had missed something; the man held a sword in his right hand, but the left came up first as his adversary pivoted towards him. It was clutching a pistol. A scant ten feet separated the two men now, and Arthur could make out the tiger-themed design worked into the wood and metal of the pistol. The yawning black muzzle swung to face him, pointing directly at his face, and the Indian officer snatched the trigger triumphantly.

It was only Arthur's vampire reflexes that saved him. The powder sparked and flashed, thrusting the mini-ball out of the barrel at lightning speed. Arthur was already beginning to swerve, tilting his upper body farther to the right in a desperate effort to avoid it. Even so, it was damned close. The ball fensed his left cheek open to the bone.

It is a strange truth that vampires do not bleed, no matter how grievous the physical trauma which they may sustain. They could be injured and killed (although *killed* is not strictly the right word) most certainly; direct sunlight, intense heat and flame, water that had been blessed by a priest or some other holy man, and most particularly the bite of silver could all inflict varying degrees of damage upon even the strongest supernatural frame. For all that Wellesley knew, the Sultan might have issued silver ammunition to his officers and perhaps even his fighting men. He could most certainly afford to, if that was his wish.

The wound burned for a moment, causing Arthur to wince. But within seconds he could feel the flesh and musculature of his face beginning to knit itself back together. Just an ordinary ball, he realized, hearing it sink into the chest of a Redcoat running behind him, could hear the crack of a rib breaking and the soft slurp of the now-deformed missile embedding itself into one of his

lungs. The man collapsed with a hiss of expelled air. Arthur refused to turn his head to look, needed to stay focused on his opponent; the enemy officer's expression had changed from one of triumph to one of disbelief, but he recovered well, slashing his scimitar at the British colonel in a vicious shoulder-level cut. Arthur ducked smoothly under the wild swing, and rather than stab the man, he thrust his left hand forcefully outwards, striking him squarely in the chest.

Coming from an ordinary human being, the blow would most likely have fractured the officer's breastbone; but with all the supernatural strength of a vampire behind it, the open-palmed strike not only shattered the man's being heart right there within his chest, but also propelled his body sixty feet backwards through the air, cutting a swathe of devastation through the rear ranks like a cannon ball and bowling over all those that it touched. One ranker went down with blood gushing from his nose, clipped in the face by the officer's boot as it flew past. A second was knocked unconscious by a headbutt, and a third dislocated the fingers of one hand, bent backwards by the officer's hurtling body. The corpse ploughed a furrow in the earth some ten feet long when it landed at the rear of the column, where it lay unmoving – the officer had died as soon as Wellesley's hand had struck him.

With a sickening crunch, the two sides came together. Bayonets and swords rose and fell, blade clashing with blade. Some fought dirty, having learned to fight in the gutter. They were not averse to gouging out an eye with hooked fingers or planting a knee firmly in their opponent's crotch before cutting his throat. Wellesley caught a glimpse of Shee, anchoring the far left end of the 33<sup>rd</sup>'s line. The man was little more than a red-jacketed blur, cutting, thrusting, and hacking at the tiger soldiers, only to dance lightly out of range when the return strokes came.

The 33<sup>rd</sup> had a well-deserved reputation for hard fighting. They wasted no time in getting stuck into the Sultan's men with boots, blades, and musket butts. The junior officers, all mortal humans to a man, did not shirk from their bloody duty, but the true force multipliers were the handful of vampire officers. In terms of pure shock factor, each one was worth a company of trained troops. These vampires had trained hard, some of them for years and even decades, in order to master the twin arts of maneuvering a company of infantry soldiers on the battlefield and of close-order combat with edged weapons.

Through his peripheral vision, Arthur saw a slew of tiger soldiers fell dead in the wake of three red whirlwinds. One could track the path of his captains and Major Shee simply by focusing upon the gouges which they tore through the enemy ranks. Here a decapitated head flew high into the air; there an arm, still clutching a sword in its death grip, was tossed carelessly aside, having been ripped bodily from its socket.

The two units of fighting men had been engaged for less than a minute, and yet already the body count numbered in the hundreds. In the euphoric realization that the very Devil himself was on *their* side, the 33<sup>rd</sup> were spurred on to fight even harder.

*They're breaking, Arthur realized as he quickly glanced to his left and then to his right. I'll be damned if they aren't breaking!* He disemboweled a charging tiger soldier with the edge of his blade, and then decapitated a second on the backswing. Blood gouted angrily from the stump of

the corpse's neck. As it took six more shambling steps, the spurting of the arterial fountain grew lower with each passing heartbeat, until finally the headless body toppled sideways into the dust.

"Push harder my lads!" he cried, laying about him with the sword on all sides. Never once did Wellesley stand still for more than a heartbeat, staying one step ahead of the vicious enemy counterstrokes that tried to put him down. "They're ready for cracking, I tell you!"

No sooner were the words out of his mouth than the Sultan's men proved him right. The troops that Tipu had sent to save the right flank of his army suddenly broke and ran. Most had the presence of mind to at least hold on to their weapons, but not all. The vampire captains stabbed several of them in their backs as they passed, but were disciplined enough not to pursue the fleeing enemy without first obtaining permission from their colonel.

Wellesley took to the sky, and circled his sword three times clockwise around his head in the approved British Army hand-signal for "officers shall repair to my location." Major Shee and the cadre of regimental captains and lieutenants streaked to his position, and an impromptu conference was held two hundred feet in the air above the Mallavelly plain. Baird and Harris rushed to join them.

"My men are holding in square," Baird offered without preamble. "Tipu's cavalry may have caught us by surprise, but we gave them a proper bloody nose to be going along with."

"Will they stand?" Arthur asked, instantly concerned for the security of his right flank.

"Of course they'll bloody well stand, Wellesley," Baird snapped. "The men of the 12<sup>th</sup> would rather die to the last man than give up to this mob of bloody heathens."

"Easy now, Baird." Harris laid a gentle hand upon the general's shoulder. "Colonel Wellesley makes a valid point. He was casting no aspersions upon the quality of your men. Is that no so, Wellesley?"

"Indeed it is, sir. No offence was intended."

Mollified, Baird flashed his fangs in a conciliatory smile. "None taken, Wellesley. The blood's up, you understand."

Arthur nodded. He did indeed understand, could feel the lust for it burning in every corner of his body. Baird was prone to rash words and sometimes rasher deeds on any given day, but how much more so when the plain about him ran red with the blood of friend and enemy alike?

"The bastards are breaking," Harris stated matter-of-factly. "Their cavalry won't be back in a hurry." He looked meaningfully towards the village, where the Sultan's much-reduced band of horsemen was listlessly attempting to reform. They appeared to have no real leader, and were doing little more than milling around in small groups. Some were applying dressings to their own wounds or to those of their comrades.

Out beyond the village to the south, a growing haze signaled the approach of the British artillery, accompanied by several battalions of native infantry to act as an escort. These men, supplied by the Nizam of Hyderabad, were British-trained and therefore more than capable of forming square against the cavalry if they decided to chance an attack.

“General Floyd, if I may ask – just *where* are your cavalry?” Arthur attempted to keep the peevishness out of his tone, but didn’t entirely succeed.

Baird, on the other hand, didn’t even make the attempt. “Aye, Floyd. You were supposed to be screening our flanks from those bastards. I’ve seen neither hide nor hair of your bloody dragoons *or* the native cavalry all morning. It’s a damned disgrace!”

The usually affable Floyd visibly stiffened. “You must understand, *General Baird*, that I am in the habit of entrusting those officers under my command with a certain degree of autonomy. That is the cavalryman’s *way*. I have issued orders to the effect that—“

“Yes, yes, *yes*,” Baird interrupted, balling up a fist in frustration. “There is no *time* for that now! We may have broken their line, but those war elephants are a different story altogether.”

“I’m confident that we can still stand fast against them, sir,” Arthur interjected earnestly. “By my count, there are only six. There’s no beast yet born that can stand against the massed volley fire of a British regiment. So long as the men hold their nerve, that is.”

“They are British Redcoats,” Baird growled, pointing at the line of battle formed by the 33<sup>rd</sup> below them. “*Of course* they’ll hold their nerve.”

“Quite. And look there, it isn’t as if they will have to do it unsupported, what?” Harris’s officers all turned to regard the top of the ridgeline, where the companies of sepoy troops were cresting the apex and marching down the back side of the hill to take their place on either side of their British allies.