

Fenn George Manville

Fix Bay'nets: The Regiment in the Hills



George Fenn

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Regiment in the Hills**

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Chapter One

On the March

Trt – trt – trt. Just that little sound, as the sticks flirted with the drumheads to keep the men in step; for Her Majesty's 404th Fusiliers were marching "easy." So it was called; and it meant with the men smoking, and carrying their rifles as they pleased – shouldered, at the trail, slung muzzle up or muzzle down. But, all the same, it was a miserable fiction to call it marching easy, for it was impossible to make that march anything but hard. Why? Because of the road.

No; that is a fiction, too. It is absurd to call that stony shelf of rock, encumbered with stones of all sizes, full of cracks and holes, a road. It was almost in its natural state, with a smooth place here and there where it had been polished in bygone ages by avalanches of ice or stones.

But the sun shone brightly; the scenery was glorious, and grew in places awe-inspiring, as the regiment wound up and up the pass, and glimpses of snow-capped mountain and glowing valley were obtained.

To any one perched on high, as were a few scattered goats, the regiment, with its two mounted officers, its long train of mules, ambulance, and baggage-guard, and the native attendants, must have looked like a colony of marauding ants on their march, so wonderfully was everything dwarfed; even the grand deodar cedars growing far down the precipitous slopes below the track, which were stately trees, springing up to a hundred and a hundred and fifty feet, looking like groups of shrubs in the clear, pure air.

It was as much climbing as marching, and, as Bill Gedge said, "all agin the collar;" but the men did not seem to mind, as they mounted higher and higher in the expectation of finding that the next turn of the zigzag was the top of the pass.

"Here, I say," cried the owner of the just-mentioned name, a thin, wiry-looking fellow, whom so far drill and six months in the North-west Territory of Her Majesty's Indian dominions had not made muscular-looking; though, for the matter of that, he did not differ much from his companions, who in appearance were of the thorough East-end Cockney type – that rather degenerate class of lads who look fifteen or sixteen at most when twenty. Stamina seemed to be wanting, chests looked narrow, and their tunics covered gaunt and angular bodies, while their spiked white helmets, though they fitted their heads, had rather an extinguisher-like effect over the thin, hollow-cheeked, beardless faces.

Defects, all these, that would naturally die out; but at the time now under consideration any newspaper writer would have been justified in calling them a regiment of boys.

But, boy-like, it did not trouble them, for, apparently as fresh as when they had started hours before, they seemed to be revelling in the wonderful air of the mountain region, and to be as full of antics as a party of schoolfellows out for a day. Songs had been sung, each with a roaring chorus; tricks had been surreptitiously played on the "pass it on" principle – a lad in the rear tilting the helmet of the file in front over his eyes, or giving him a sounding spank on the shoulder with the above admonition, when it was taken with a grin and passed on right away to the foremost rank; while the commissioned officers seemed to be peculiarly blind and deaf so long as their lads marched well, and there was no falling-out of done-up fellows waiting for the ambulance to overtake them for the rest of the march.

"Here, I say," cried Private Gedge, "I ain't a-going to drop no coppers in no blessed hats when that there band comes round. They don't 'arf play."

"Don't keep *on*," said the file on his left.

"Play? Yah! Why, we might jest as well have a dozen of them tom-tomming niggers in front saying 'Shallabala' as they taps the skins with their brown fingers."

"You are a chap, Bill," said another. "Talk about yer Syety for Cruelty to Hanimals! Why, yer orter be fined. It's all I can do to keep wind enough to climb up here, let alone having to blow a brass traction-engine, or even a fife."

"Gahn! They're used to it. They don't half play. Pass the word on for 'Brish Grannydiers.'"

Bang – bang – bang – bang! Four distinct beats of the big drum, which were taken up by the echoes and repeated till they died away in the distance, in company with volleys of notes in a spirited crash from the brass instruments far in front, as the band struck up a rattling march, whose effect was to make breasts swell, heads perk up, and the lads pull themselves together and march on, many of them beginning to hum the familiar melody which had brightened many a long, up-country tramp.

"Talk about telly-phoning, Billy; they heered you without."

"Yes, that's your style," cried the first speaker, bursting out with a very good imitation of Punch in one of his vocal efforts, and supplementing it with a touch of the terpsichorean, tripping along in step with a suggestion of a nigger minstrel's jig.

Marching easy does not mean free and easy: and this was too much for one of the sergeants of the company, a tall, gaunt, particularly bony-faced fellow, frowning and full of importance, but almost as boyish of aspect as those who bore no chevrons on their sleeves.

He came up at the double, unnoticed by the dancer, and tried to range up alongside; but the rocky shelf was for some minutes not wide enough. Consequently he had time to grow redder in the face and more angry.

At last, though, he was in a position to speak.

"Here, you, sir," he shouted; "drop that. You're not on a cellar flap now. Recollect where you are."

Private Gedge gave a start, and squinted horribly for the benefit of his comrades right and left, as he pulled himself together, jerked his rifle over from one shoulder to the other, and marched on with his body stiff as a rifle-barrel.

"You're too full of these monkey-tricks, sir; and if there's any more of them I shall report you."

Private Gedge squinted more horribly than ever, as he marched on now as stiffly as if being drilled – too stiffly to satisfy the sergeant, who kept close behind.

"March easy, sir! march easy!" he cried importantly, and the offender dropped his rigidity, the result being that the sergeant returned to his place in the rear of the company, while Private Gedge relieved his feelings in a whisper.

"Yah! Gee up! Gee! Who wouldn't be a sergeant? Bless his heart! I love him 'most as much as my mother dear – my mother dear – my gee-yentle mother dear."

He sang the last words, but in a suppressed voice, to the great amusement of his fellows.

"Oh, I say, I wish I warn't a swaddy," he whispered.

"Why?" asked the lad on his left.

"So as to give old Gee one on the nose, and then have it out with him. I'd make him warm. It's this sort o' thing as makes me hate it all. The ofricers don't mind us having a bit of a lark to make the march go light. They takes no notice so long as we're ready for 'tention and 'll fight. It's on'y chaps like Tommy Gee as has got his stripes that comes down upon you. Why, I was singing and doing that plantation song on'y yesterday, and Mr Bracy and Cap'en Roberts come along, and

they both laughed. Bet sixpence the Colonel would have looked t'other way. – Oh, I say, ain't I hungry! Is it much farther?"

"I dunno," said another; "but ain't the wind cold up here?"

"Band's done again," said Gedge. "That was a short un. I s'pose if I was to cry 'Hongcore' old Gee 'd be down upon me again."

Ten minutes later the men had something more substantial to think about than music, for the shelf-like track came to an end in a great natural amphitheatre, whose walls were dwarfed mountains streaked with rifts and ravines which glistened white and sparkling as they scored the green grassy slopes, while the floor of the great hollow was a beautiful mead through which a fairly rapid torrent ran.

The halt was called upon a tolerably smooth level, arms were piled, and with the celerity displayed in a regiment on the march, the camp kitchens were formed, the smoke of fires rose, and videttes being thrown out after the fashion observed in an enemy's country, the men were free for a couple of hours' halt for rest and refreshment, to their great delight.

Pending the efforts of the regimental and camp follower cooks, some of the men began to roam about within bounds; and the group to which Private Gedge was joined made for one of the little ravines which glistened white in the sunshine, and the joker of the company soon made his voice heard.

"Oh, I say," he cried. "Only look! Here yer are, then. Here's yer hoky-poky. Here's yer real 'apenny ices laid on free gratis for nothing. Here yer are, sir; which 'll yer 'ave, storrbry or rarsbry? The real oridgenal 'stablishment, kep' by Billi Sneakino Pianni Organni. Who says hoky-poky?"

"Why, 'tis real ice, Bill," said one of the men.

"Snow," said another.

"Gahn!" cried Private Gedge, scooping up a couple of handfuls. "It's hailstones, that's what it is. You on'y get snow atop o' the high mountains."

"But it is snow, my lad," said a voice from behind, and the party started round, to see that a couple of their officers had followed to look at the glittering rift which ran right up hundreds of feet. "We're pretty high now."

"How high, sir?" said Gedge, saluting.

"We're at the top of the pass now," said the young officer who had spoken; "ten thousand feet above the sea."

"Why, that's higher than the top of Saint Paul's, sir," said one of the men.

"Top o' Saint Paul's," cried Gedge scornfully. "Why, it's higher than the Monniment atop o' that. Higher than 'Amstead, ain't it, sir?"

"Yes," said the young officer, smiling. – "Don't straggle away, my lads. Keep close in."

The speaker strolled away back with his companion towards where the native servants were busily preparing the mess meal, and their men looked after them.

"Ain't them two chummy?" said one.

"They jest are," said Gedge. "That Captain Roberts aren't a bad sort; but Mr Bracy's the chap for my money. He looks as if he could fight, too, if we had a row with the niggers."

"Oh, I don't know," said another superciliously; "you can't never tell. Some o' them nice-looking dossy chaps ain't up to much. They can talk, but they talk too fast. How could he know we were ten thousand foot high? Why, that must be miles, and that's all stuff."

"What do you know about it, stoopid?" cried Gedge fiercely. "Miles. Why, of course it is. Ain't we come miles this morning?"

"Longwise, but not uppards."

"Not uppards? Why, it's been sich a gettin' upstairs ever since we started this morning. Don't you be so jolly ready to kick again' your ofricers. Mr Bracy's a reg'lar good sort; and if we comes to a set-to with the niggers he'll let some of yer see. I say, though, think we shall have a row?"

“You bet! I heered Sergeant Gee say we should be at it ’fore long, and that these here – what do they call ’em?”

“Dwats,” said one of the men.

“Yes, that’s it,” cried Gedge. “That’s right. I remember, because I said to myself if we did we’d jolly soon give ’em Dwat for.”

Just then a bugle rang out, and the men doubled back for the lines, where, thanks to the clever native cooks, a hastily prepared meal was ready and made short work of, the keen mountain air and the long march having given the men a ravenous appetite.

Chapter Two

The Colonel

"Well, Colonel," said Dr Morton as the officers sat enjoying their lunch, breathing in the crisp mountain air and feasting their eyes at the same time upon the grand mountain scenery, "I must confess to being a bit lazy. You may be all athirst for glory, but after our ride this morning pale ale's good enough for me. I'm not a fighting man, and I hope when we get to the station we shall find that the what you may call 'em – Dwats – have dissolved into thin air like the cloud yonder fading away on that snow-peak. If, however, it does come to a set-to, here I am, my dear boys, at your service, and I'll do the best I can."

"Thank ye, Doctor," came in chorus from the officers; "but the less the better."

"We shall have something to do, for certain," said the Colonel, a keen-looking, deeply bronzed man of fifty, "for these hill-tribes will never believe in England's strength till they have been well thrashed; but a fight does not mean for certain that we shall want the doctor's help afterwards."

"So much the better," said that gentleman, laughing. "But, as I said, here I am if you want me, and I've got as well-arranged an ambulance as –"

"Oh, I say, Doctor, don't talk shop," cried the young officer spoken of as Captain Roberts, a handsome, carefully dressed young fellow of seven or eight and twenty. "They're regular curs, are they not, sir – these Dwats?" he added, turning to the Colonel.

"Certainly not," replied the latter gravely. "They are decidedly a brave, bold, fighting race. Tall, dark, big-bearded, just such fellows as hill-tribes are; restless, pugnacious fighting-men, always engaged in petty warfare with the neighbouring chiefs, and making plundering expeditions."

"I see, sir," said the Captain; "like our old Border chieftains used to be at home."

"Exactly," said the Colonel; "and each chief thinks he is one of the greatest monarchs under the sun. England is to them, in their ignorance, only a similar nation to their own, and the Empress a lady-chief."

"We shall have to teach them better," said the Major, a gentleman with an eyeglass and a disposition to become stout. "We shall soon do it. A good sharp lesson is all that's wanted. The only difficulty is that, though they are as a rule always busy cutting one another's throats, as soon as one of the tribes is attacked they all become friends and help one another."

"Save us trouble."

"What's that, Bracy?" said the Colonel.

"Save us trouble, sir," said the young man, laughing; "we can thrash half-a-dozen of the tribes together."

"With a regiment of raw boys?" said the Major, frowning so fiercely that he shot his glass out of his eye and replaced it angrily.

"Look here, Graham, you and I are going to quarrel."

"What about, sir?"

"Your bad habit of depreciating our lads."

"Yes," said the Doctor, nodding his head sharply. "You do, Major, and it isn't good form to cry bad fish."

"But it's true," said the Major sharply. "The War Office ought to be ashamed of itself for sending such a regiment of boys upon so arduous a task."

"The boys are right enough," said the Colonel. "What do you say, Bracy?"

"I say of course they are, sir."

"Yes, because you're a boy yourself," said the Major in a tone which made the young man flush.

"I wish I had some more boys like you, Bracy, my lad," said the Colonel warmly. "Graham's a bit touched in the liver with the change from warm weather to cold. He doesn't mean what he says – eh, Morton?"

"That's right, Colonel," said the Doctor. "I have my eye upon him. He'll be asking for an interview with me to-morrow, *re*, as the lawyers say, B.P. and B.D."

"Hang your B.P.s and B.D.s!" said the Major hotly. "I mean what I say, Colonel. These boys ought to have had three or four years in England before they were sent out here."

"But they are sent up into the hills here where the climate is glorious, sir," cried the Doctor, "and I'll answer for it that in a year's time they will have put on muscle in a wonderful way, while in a couple of years you'll be proud of them."

"I'm proud of the lads now," said the Colonel quietly.

"I'm not," said the Major. "I feel like old Jack Falstaff sometimes, ready to say, 'If I be not ashamed of my soldiers, I'm a soused gurnet.' They're boys, and nothing else."

"Nonsense," said the Colonel good-humouredly. "I've seen some service, and I never had men under me who marched better or more cheerfully than these lads have to-day."

"And not one fell out or came to me with sore feet," said the Doctor stoutly. "Boys? Well, hang it all! they're not such boys as there were in the old 34th."

"What do you mean?" said the Major, shooting his eyeglass again.

"In the Peninsular War, sir," said the Doctor; "a regiment of boys, whose ages were from fourteen to sixteen, and they behaved splendidly."

"That's right," said the Colonel, nodding his head.

"Oh yes," cried the Major superciliously; "but they had only the French to fight against. Any English boy could thrash a Frenchman."

"Don't despise the French, Graham," said the Colonel quietly. "They are a very brave and gallant nation; and as to our lads, I certainly agree that they are very young; but when, as the Doctor says, they have been out here a bit, and put on more muscle –"

"But, hang it all, sir!" cried the Major, "they didn't come out here to put on muscle, but to fight. And as to your 34th, our fellows haven't got to fight Frenchmen, but these big hill-tribes. The boys are right enough in their place, and we shall make soldiers of them in time; but suppose to-morrow or next day we come plump upon the enemy – what then?"

"Our boys will make them run, sir," cried Bracy, flushing up.

"You mean they'll make our lads run," growled the Major.

"No, I don't, sir. I'll answer for our company. What do you say, Roberts?"

"Same as you do, old man. Go on; you can put it stronger than I can."

"No," said Bracy: "perhaps I've said too much, as the youngest officer in the regiment."

"Not a bit, my lad," cried the Colonel warmly. "I endorse all you say. They are terribly young-looking, but, take them all together, as bright and plucky a set of fellows as any officer could wish to command."

"Yes," said the Major through his teeth; "but look at them to-day. Hang me if they didn't at times seem like a pack of schoolboys out for a holiday – larking and shouting at one another, so that I got out of patience with them."

"Better like that than limping along, discontented and footsore," said the Colonel gravely. "The boys are as smart over their drill as they can be, and a note on the bugle would have brought every one into his place. I don't want to see the life and buoyancy crushed out of lads by discipline and the reins held too tightly at the wrong time. By the way, Graham, you dropped the curb-rein on your horse's neck coming up the rough pass, and thoroughly gave him his head."

"Yes," said the Major; "but we were talking about men, not horses."

“Bah! Don’t listen to him,” cried the Doctor, laughing. “He’s a bit yellow in the eyes, and he’ll be singing quite a different song soon. The boys are right enough, Colonel, and all the better for being young – they’ll mould more easily into your ways.”

“Humph!” growled the Major, frowning at the Doctor, who responded by raising his glass, nodding, and drinking to him.

It did not seem long before the bugle sounded, and the men fell in, every lad drawing himself well up, trying to look his best and as proud as a peacock, when the Colonel rode along the ranks, noting everything and ready to give boy after boy a look of recognition and a word of praise about something which had been improved; for Colonel Graves had one of those memories which seem never to forget, and it had long been borne in upon the lads in the ranks that their leader noted and remembered everything, ready for blame or praise.

In this case he drew rein opposite one very thin-looking fellow, making his sallow face turn red.

“Felt any more of that sprain, Smith?”

“No, sir; right as can be now. Ain’t felt it a bit.”

“That’s right. Fall out, my lad, if it turns weak in the least, and get a ride.”

“Yes, sir; thanky, sir. I will, sir.”

A little farther on there was another halt.

“Those boots right, Judkins?”

“Yes, sir; fit splendid, sir.”

“Good. Take care for the future; you and all of you. A man can’t march well unless he has a comfortable boot, and a chafe once begun and neglected has sent many a good soldier into hospital.”

“These are fust-rate, sir,” said the man quickly. “Easy as a glove.”

And so on as the Colonel rode along the ranks, making every man feel that his officer had a real interest in his welfare.

The inspection over, the advance-guard set off, then the order, “Band to the front,” was given, and the regiment filed off past the Colonel’s horse, making for a narrow opening between two hills which seemed to overlap, and sent back the strains of the musical instruments in a wonderful series of echoes which went rolling among the mountains, to die away in the distance.

Half-an-hour later the only signs left of the occupation of the pass were a few birds hovering about and stooping from time to time after some fragment of food. But all at once the birds took flight, as if in alarm, and the cause was not far to seek; for there was a flash in the afternoon sunshine among the rugged masses of half-frozen rocks on one side of the amphitheatre; then another flash, and a looker-on would have seen that it came from the long barrel of a gun.

Directly after appeared a tall, swarthy man in white which looked dingy by comparison with the beds of snow lying on the northern side of the mountains.

The man stole cautiously from stone to stone, and after making sure that the last soldier forming the baggage and rear-guard had disappeared, he ran quickly back to one of the snow-filled ravines and made a signal by holding his gun on high.

This he did three times, and then turned and ran steadily across the meadow-like bottom of the halting-ground, till he was near the narrow gap through which the regiment had passed, to recommence his furtive movements, seeking the shelter of stone after stone till he disappeared between the folding rocks, while in his track came in a straggling body quite a hundred active-looking men of the same type – strongly built, fierce-looking, bearded fellows, each carrying a long jezail, powder-horn, and bullet-bag, while a particularly ugly curved knife was thrust through the band which held his cotton robe tightly about his waist.

By this time the last of the rear-guard was well on its way, and the hill-men followed like so many shadows of evil that had been waiting till the little English force had passed, and were now about to seek an opportunity for mischief, whether to fall upon the rear or cut up stragglers remained

to be seen. Possibly they were but one of many similar parties which would drop down from the rugged eminences and valleys which overlooked the track, completely cutting off the retreat of Colonel Graves's regiment of boys, of whose coming the tribes had evidently been warned, and so were gathering to give them a warm reception when the right time came.

Chapter Three

First Troubles

“Steady, my lads! steady!” said Lieutenant Bracy. “Not too fast, or we shall leave the baggage behind.”

Warnings like this had to be given again and again; for, though the track was as bad as ever, it was for the most part downhill, and the patches of snow lying in the jagged hollows on either side of the pass were less frequent, while the sheltered slopes and hollows were greener with groves of stunted fir and grass, and, far below, glimpses were obtained of deep valleys branching off from the lower part of the pass, whose sides were glorious in the sunshine with what seemed to be tiny shrubs.

For the men required checking. They were growing weary, in spite of their midday halt, and longing to get to the ground below the snow-line, where they were to camp for the night.

Colonel Graves was no less eager; for, though his little force was safe enough on the right, where the side of the pass sloped precipitately down, the track lay along a continuation of the shelf which ran upon the steep mountain-side, the slope being impossible of ascent, save here and there where a stream tumbled foaming down a crack-like gully and the rocks above them rose like battlements continued with wonderful regularity, forming a dangerous set of strongholds ready to conceal an enemy who could destroy them by setting loose stones in motion, or, perfectly safe themselves, pick the men off at their leisure.

“I shall be heartily glad to get on to open ground again, Graham,” said the Colonel.

“My heart has been in my mouth for the last two hours,” was the reply. “We can do nothing but press on.”

“And trust to the rocks up there being impassable to the enemy, if there is one on the stir.”

“Yes; I don’t think he could get up there,” replied the Major; “but there is an enemy astir, you may be sure.”

“I suppose so. The fact of a force like ours being at their mercy would set all the marauding scoundrels longing. Well, we have done everything possible. We’re safe front and rear, and we can laugh up here at any attack from below on the right.”

Just about the same time Bracy and his friend Roberts were tripping and stumbling along with their company, the slowness of the baggage giving them time to halt now and then to gaze in awe and wonder at the stupendous precipices around and the towering snow-mountains which came more and more into sight at every turn of the zigzag track.

“I suppose the Colonel knows what he’s about,” said Bracy during one of these halts.

“I suppose so,” replied Roberts. “Why?”

“Because we seem to me to be getting more and more into difficulties, and where we must be polished off if the enemy lies in wait for us in force. Why in the world doesn’t he try another way to Ghittah?”

“For the simple reason, my boy, that there is no other way from the south. There’s one from the north, and one from the east.”

“That settles the question, then, as to route; but oughtn’t we to have flankers out?”

“Light cavalry?” said the Captain grimly.

“Bosh! Don’t talk to me as if I were a fool. I mean skirmishers out right and left.”

“Look here, young fellow, we have all we can do to get along by the regular track.”

“Irregular track,” said Bracy, laughing.

“Right. How, then, do you think our lads could get along below there?”

"Yes; impossible," said Bracy, with a sigh; and then glancing upward at the towering perpendicular rocks, he added, "and no one could get along there even with ropes and scaling-ladders. Well, I shall be precious glad to be out of it."

"There, don't fret. I expect we shall find any amount of this sort of country."

"Then I don't see how any manoeuvring's to be done. We shall be quite at the mercy of the enemy."

"Oh! one never knows."

"Well, I know this," said Bracy; "if I were in command I should devote my attention to avoiding traps. Hallo! what's amiss?"

The conversation had been cut short by the sharp crack of a rifle, which set the echoes rolling, and the two young officers hurried forward past their halted men, who, according to instructions, had dropped down, seeking every scrap of shelter afforded by the rocks.

"What is it?" asked Bracy as he reached the men who were in front, the advance-guard being well ahead and a couple of hundred feet below.

Half-a-dozen voices replied, loud above all being that of Private Gedge:

"Some one up there, sir, chucking stones down at us."

"No," replied Bracy confidently as he shaded his eyes and gazed up; "a stone or two set rolling by a mountain sheep or two. No one could be up there."

"What!" cried the lad excitedly. "Why, I see a chap in a white nightgown, sir, right up there, shove a stone over the edge of the parrypit, and it come down with a roosh."

"Was it you who fired?"

"Yes, sir; I loosed off at him at once, but I 'spect it was a rickershay."

"Keep down in front there, my lads," said Captain Roberts. "Did any one else see the enemy?"

A little chorus of "No" arose.

"Well, I dunno where yer eyes must ha' been, pardners," cried Gedge in a tone full of disgust; and then, before a word of reproof or order for silence could be uttered, he was standing right up, shaking his fist fiercely and shouting, "Hi, there! you shy that, and I'll come up and smash yer."

The words were still leaving his lips when Bracy had a glimpse of a man's head, then of his arms and chest, as he seemed to grasp a great stone, out of a crack five hundred feet above them, and as it fell he disappeared, the sharp cracks of half-a-dozen rifles ringing out almost together, and the stone striking a sharp edge of the precipitous face, shivering into a dozen fragments, which came roaring down, striking and splintering again and again, and glancing off to pass the shelf with a whirring, rushing sound, and strike again in a scattering volley far below.

"Any one touched?" cried the Captain.

"No, sir; no, sir."

"I think that chap were, sir," whispered Gedge, who was reloading close to Bracy's side. "I didn't have much time to aim, sir, and the smoke got a bit before my eyes, but he dropped back precious sudden. But oh, dear me, no!" he went on muttering, and grinning the while at his comrades, "I didn't see no one up there. I'd got gooseb'ries in my head 'stead of eyes. Now then, look out, lads; it's shooting for nuts, and forty in the bull's-eye."

"Hold yer row; here's the Colonel coming," whispered the man next him.

"Keep well under cover, my lads," said Bracy as the clattering of hoofs was heard.

"Right, sir," said one of the men.

"Why don't you, then?" muttered Gedge.

"Silence, sir!" snarled Sergeant Gee, who was close behind.

"All right," said Gedge softly; "but I don't want to see my orficer go down."

For, regardless of danger, while his men were pretty well in shelter, Bracy was standing right out, using a field-glass.

"Cover, cover, Mr Bracy," cried the Colonel sharply, and as he reined up he was put quickly in possession of the facts.

"Shall we have to go back, Sergeant?" whispered Gedge.

"You will – under arrest, sir, if you don't keep that tongue between your teeth."

"All right, Sergeant," muttered Gedge. "I only wanted to know."

He knew directly after, for the Colonel cried sharply:

"That's right, my lads; keep close, and fire the moment you see a movement. You six men go over the side there, and fire from the edge of the road."

The section spoken to rose and changed their positions rapidly, and as they did so a couple more blocks of stone were set in motion from above, and struck as the others had done, but did not break, glancing off, and passing over the men's heads with a fierce *whir*.

"Cover the advance with your company, and change places with the rear-guard when they have passed. Steady, there, my lads," continued the Colonel to the next company of the halted regiment; "forward!"

He took his place at their head, and advanced at a walk as coolly as if on parade; and the first movement seemed like a signal for stone after stone to be sent bounding down, and to be passed on their way by the long, thin, bolt-like bullets from the covering company's rifles, which spattered on the rocks above and kept the enemy from showing themselves, till, finding that every stone touched in the same place and glanced off the projecting shoulder half-way up, they became more bold, irritated without doubt by seeing the soldiers continue their course steadily along the track in spite of their efforts to stop their progress.

"That's got him," cried Bracy excitedly as he watched a man, who at the great height looked a mere dwarf, step into full view, carrying a block upon his shoulder.

This he heaved up with both hands above his head, and was in the act of casting it down when three rifles cracked, and he sprang out into space, diving down head first and still grasping the stone, to pass close over the marching men, strike the stony edge of the shelf, and shoot off into the deep valley below.

The horrible fall seemed to impress the covering party strangely, and for a brief space nothing was heard but the irregular tramp of the passing men.

"That's put a stop to their little game," whispered Gedge.

"Look out! fire!" growled the Sergeant; and a couple more of the enemy fell back, after exposing themselves for a few seconds to hurl down stones.

"Serve 'em right, the cowards," said Gedge, reloading. "If they want to fight, why don't they come down and have it out like men?"

"I say," whispered his neighbour on the left, "you hit one of them."

"Nay, not me," replied Gedge.

"You did."

"Don't think so. Fancy I hit that beggar who pitched down, stone and all. I felt like hitting him. But don't talk about it, pardner. One's got to do it, but I don't want to know."

"No," said Bracy, who overheard the words and turned to the lad, "it's not pleasant to think about, but it's to save your comrades' lives."

"Yes, sir, that's it, ain't it?" said the lad eagerly.

"Of course," replied Bracy.

"And I ought to shoot as straight as I can, oughtn't I?"

"Certainly."

"Hah!" ejaculated Gedge, and then to his nearest comrade, "I feel a deal better after that."

The stony bombardment continued, and Bracy watched every dislodged block as it fell, feeling a strange contraction about the heart, as it seemed certain that either it or the fragments into

which it splintered must sweep some of the brave lads steadily marching along the shelf, horribly mutilated, into the gulf below.

But it was not so; either the stones were a little too soon or too late, or they struck the side and glanced off to fly whirring over the line of men and raise echoes from far below. For, after certainly losing four, the enemy grew more cautious about exposing themselves; and as the minutes glided by it began to appear as if the regiment would get past the dangerous spot without loss, for the baggage mules and heavily-laden camels were now creeping along, and the covering party at a word from Captain Roberts became, if possible, more watchful.

It was about this time that Bill Gedge, who tired seldom, but with the effect of keeping the stones from one special gap from doing mischief, drew the Sergeant's attention to that particular spot, and, hearing his remarks, Bracy lay back and brought his field-glass to bear upon it.

"It ain't no good firing at a pair o' hands coming and going," said Gedge. "I want to ketch the chap as is doing that there bit o' brick laying."

"Bit of what!" cried Bracy.

"Well, I calls it bricklaying, sir. You see, I've watched him ever so long, sticking stones one above another, ready to shove down all together. I think he means to send 'em down on the squelchy-welchies."

"The what?" cried Bracy, laughing.

"He means the camels, sir."

"Oh. Yes, I can see," continued Bracy. "Looks more like a breastwork."

Even as he spoke there was a puff of smoke, a dull report, and a sharp spat on the rock close to the young officer's hand, and he started up, looking a little white, while Sergeant Gee picked up a flattened-out piece of lead.

"Right, sir," he said; "it is a breastwork, and there's a couple o' long barrels sticking out."

"Let them have it there," cried Captain Roberts. "They're opening fire with their jezails."

"Yes, sir," said Gedge in a whisper; "we've just found that out for ourselves."

He drew trigger as he spoke, and as the smoke rose and he looked up, loading mechanically the while, he caught sight of a long gun dropping swiftly down, barrel first, to fall close by one of the camels, grunting and moaning as it bore its balanced load along the shelf.

"Mine," cried Gedge. "I hit the chap as he was looking down. I wants that there long gas-pipe to take home."

"Thank you, Gedge," said Bracy in a low voice. "I believe you've saved my life."

"Not me, sir; he shot first, but it did look near."

"Horribly, my lad, and he'd have had me next time."

"Think so, sir?" said the lad, taking aim again. "Well, there's another on 'em shooting, and I want to get him if I can. Stop him from committing murder, too."

Gedge took a long aim, and his finger trembled about the trigger for nearly a minute, but he did not fire; and all the while, evidently set in motion by a good strong party of the enemy, the stones came crashing and thundering down, in spite of the firing kept up by the covering sections, whose rifle-bullets spattered and splashed upon the rocks, and often started tiny avalanches of weathered débris.

Then all at once Gedge fired, and the long barrel, which had been thrust out from the little breastwork and sent down dangerous shots time after time, was suddenly snatched back, and the lad reloaded, looking smilingly at the lieutenant the while.

"Good shot," said Sergeant Gee importantly. "You didn't do your firing-practice for nothing, my man."

"Did you hit him, Gedge?" cried Bracy eagerly.

"Yes, sir; he had it that time. I could ha' done it afore if he'd ha' showed hisself."

"But he did at last."

“That he didn’t, sir, on’y his shadder on the stone, and I aimed at that.”

“Nonsense!” cried the Sergeant.

“Ah, well, you’ll see,” said Gedge, and he turned with a grin to his officer. “I foun’ as I should never hit him strite forrard, sir, so I thinked it out a bit, and then aimed at his shadder, and it was like taking him off the cushion – fired at the stone where I could see the shadder of his head.”

“Ah! a ricochet,” cried Bracy.

“That’s it, sir; a rickyshay.”

The stones continued to fall without effect; but no one above attempted to expose himself again to the deadly fire from below.

Suddenly Bracy started from his place.

“Up with you, my lads; forward!”

Waving his sword, he made a rush, leading his men along the deadly-looking piece of road swept by the stones from above, for the rear-guard had passed in safety; and, with his breath coming thick and fast, he dashed forward, knowing full well that their first movement would be the signal for the stones to come down thick and fast. He was quite right; for, as the men cheered and dashed after their two officers, block after block came whirring down, crashing, bounding, shivering, and seeming to fill the air with fragments so thickly that it was quite impossible to believe the passage of that hundred exposed yards could be accomplished in safety. But they got across untouched, and the men cheered again as they clustered about their officers, the precipitous spot where they now stood being sheltered from the danger, apparently inaccessible even to the enemy.

“Bravo, my lads!” cried the Captain.

“Splendidly done,” said Bracy, breathless, “and not a man hurt.”

“All here?” said Captain Roberts.

“Yes, sir,” “Yes, sir,” came in a scattered volley of words.

“No – stop!” said Bracy excitedly. “Where’s Gedge?”

There was a dead silence, the men looking at one another and then back along the stone-strewed track, only a third of which was visible. But there was no sign of the missing man, and after a word or two with his brother officer Bracy doubled back, followed by Sergeant Gee, till they had rounded a bend of the track and could command the whole distance. As they halted to examine the road, another stone fell from above, struck the road, and then bounded off into the valley.

“There he is,” cried Bracy excitedly, thrusting his sword back in its scabbard. “Just beyond where that stone fell.”

“Yes, sir; I see him now. It’s all over with the poor lad. Here, sir; don’t, sir. What are you going to do?”

“Do? Fetch him in,” said Bracy sharply.

“No, sir; don’t, sir. It’s like going to a ’orrid death,” faltered the Sergeant, whose face was of a clayey hue. “You mustn’t go, sir. You ought to order me to fetch him in, and I will if you tell me.”

“I’m not going to tell our lads to do what I daren’t do myself,” said Bracy coldly. “They can’t see us here – can they?”

The Sergeant glanced upward, but the view in that direction was cut off by projecting masses of stone.

“No, sir; they can’t see us here.”

“Then here goes,” cried the young officer, drawing a deep breath and pressing his helmet down upon his head.

“No, sir; don’t – ” began the Sergeant in tones of expostulation; but he did not finish, for before the second word had left his lips Bracy was bounding along as if running in an impediment race, leaping masses of stone, avoiding others, and making for where he could see the motionless figure; of Gedge still grasping his rifle and lying face downward among the stones.

A yell arose from above as Bracy bounded into view, and stones began to fall again; while, upon reaching the fallen man, the young officer, completely ignoring the terrible peril in which he stood, bent down, passed his arms about the waist, raised him, and with a big effort threw him over his shoulder; and then turned and started back, carrying the poor fellow's rifle in his right hand.

The yells from above increased, and before Bracy had gone half-a-dozen yards of the return journey there was a loud *whish*, and he stopped short, for a block of stone struck the path not a yard before him, and then bounded off. For a moment or two Bracy felt mentally stunned by the close approach of a horrible death; then, recovering himself, he strode on again, feeling strongly that it was more perilous to stand still than to go on, with every step taking him nearer to safety.

There was an intense desire burning within him to try and run, but the rugged path forbade that, and he tramped slowly on with his load, with the air seeming to his heated imagination to be thick with the falling missiles which came hurtling around.

"The next must do it," he found himself muttering, as he went on with what, though only a matter of minutes, seemed to be a long journey, before, coming confusedly as it were out of a dream, he heard the cheering of his men, and Sergeant Gee and three more relieved him of his load, while the crash and rattle of the falling stones seemed to be far behind.

"Hooray!" A tremendously hearty British cheer – only that of a company, but as loud it seemed as if given by the whole regiment; and the next thing out of the confused dream was the feeling of his hand being grasped, and the hearing of his brother officer's voice.

"Splendid, old man!" he whispered. "Talk about pluck! But what's the matter? Don't say you're hurt?"

"No – no, I think not. Only feel a bit stunned."

"Then you're hit by a stone?"

"No, no. There, I'm better now. Here! That poor fellow Gedge! I hope he isn't killed."

They turned to the little group of men who surrounded poor Gedge, now lying on his back, with Gee upon one knee bending over him, and trying to give him some water from his canteen.

"Dead?" cried Bracy excitedly.

"Fraid so, sir," replied the Sergeant. "Stone hit him on the 'elmet, and I expect his head's caved in."

"Bathe his face with a handful of the water," said Bracy sadly. "Poor lad! this was horribly sudden."

Both he and Roberts looked down sadly at the stony face so lately full of mischievous animation, and in view of the perilous position in which they stood and the duty he had to do, the Captain was about to order the men to make an extempore stretcher of their rifles and the Sergeant's strong netted sash, so that the retreat could be continued, when Gee dashed some water in the prostrate lad's face.

The effect was marvellous. In an instant a spasm ran through the stony features. There was a fit of coughing and choking, and as the men around, always ready for a laugh, broke out, the supposed dead opened his eyes, stared blankly, and gasped out:

"Stow that! Here, who did it? Here, I'll just wipe some one's eye for that, here, I know – I – here – I s'y – I – er – Mr Bracy, sir! You wouldn't play tricks with a fellow like that? Ah, I recklect now!"

The poor fellow's hand went to his bare head, and he winced at the acute pain the touch gave him.

"I say, sir," he said, "ketched me a spank right there. – Is my 'elmet spoiled?"

"Never mind your helmet, Gedge, my lad," cried Bracy, who was bending over him. "There, you must lie still till we get something ready to carry you to the ambulance."

"Kerry me, sir! What for? Ain't going to croak, am I? Not me. Here, I'm all right, sir. Give's a drink outer my bottle. – Hah! that's good. – Drop more, please, Sergeant, – Thanky. – Hah! that is good. Feel as if I could drink like a squelchy-welchy. – Here, I s'y, where's my rifle?"

"I've got it, pardner," said one of the lads.

"Oh, that's right. Ain't got the stock skretched, hev it?"

"No, no; that's all right, Bill."

"Glad o' that. Here, I s'y; I went down, didn't I?"

"Yes, my lad; just in the middle of the worst bit where the stones were falling."

"That was it – was it? Well, I did wonder they never hit nobody, sir, but I didn't expect they'd hit me."

"What are you going to do, my lad?" said the Captain sharply.

"Get up, sir. – Can't lie here. 'Tain't soft enough. I'm all right. Only feel silly, as if I'd been heving my fust pipe. – Thanky, Sergeant. – Here, it's all right; I can stand. Who's got my 'elmet?"

The poor fellow tottered a little, but the British pluck of his nature made him master the dizzy feeling, and the old familiar boyish grin broke out over his twitching white face as he took hold of the helmet handed to him and tried to put it on.

"Here, I s'y," he cried, "no larks now; this ain't in me."

"Yes, that's yours, Gedge," said the Sergeant.

"Got such a dint in it, then, that it won't go on."

"No, my lad," said Bracy. "Here, Sergeant, tie my handkerchief round his head."

"Yes, sir; thank ye, sir. Here, hold still, Gedge," cried the Sergeant.

"Well, I'm blest!" muttered the poor fellow; "there's all one side puffed out like arf a bushel basket. Here, I've often heard of chaps having the swelled head when they've got on a bit; but I won't show it, mateys. I won't cut your company. – Thank ye, Sergeant."

"Fall in," cried the Captain. "Gedge, you'll have to be carried. Two men. Sergeant, and change often."

"I can walk, sir, please," cried Gedge. "Let me try. If I can't some un can carry me then."

"Very well, try. – Forward."

The march was resumed, but after a few steps the injured lad was glad to grasp the arm offered him by Gee.

"Thanky, Sergeant," he said. "Just a bit dizzy now, and I don't want to go over the side. Better soon; but, I say, did you fetch me in?"

"No: it was Mr Bracy," said Gee gruffly.

"Oh, him!" said the lad quietly, and with a curious look in his eyes as he gazed in the young lieutenant's direction. "Well, thank ye, sir; much obliged," he said in an undertone. "I'll say so to you some time. But I say, Sergeant, talk about having a head on; I've got it now."

"Yes; but don't talk. Hullo! they're up above us again yonder."

"What, the Dwat you may call 'ems?"

"I s'pose so," said the Sergeant gruffly, as a stone crashed down close to the foremost man.

"And me not able to shoot!" muttered Gedge. "Well, of all the hard luck! But I owe some on 'em something for that shy at my coco-nut; and oh! I s'y, Sergeant, it's just as if some one was at work at it with a pick."

Chapter Four

Wounded Men

The Sergeant was right, for, after turning a rib-like mass of stone forming an angle in the path, it was to find that either a fresh party of the enemy were waiting for them, or the others had by taking a short cut reached an eminence commanding the path; and as soon as the company came in sight they were saluted with an avalanche of stones, on a spot where they were terribly exposed, there being no shelter that could be seized upon by a few picked marksmen to hold the stone-throwers in check while the rest got by.

Matters looked bad, for the whole; of the baggage with the guard had disappeared, and, to make matters worse, shot after shot came whistling by from behind, indicating that the hill-men had come down to the track, and were closely following them in the rear.

“We must make a rush for it, Bracy,” said Captain Roberts, as he gazed up at the heights from which the invisible enemy were bombarding the path. “We’ll hold them back for a few minutes, and then you take half the company and dash across to yonder rocks. As soon as you are in shelter open fire and cover, as I fancy you can get a sight of them from there. It’s waste of ammunition to fire from here, and – Who’s that down?”

For there was a sharp cry from one of the men, who staggered forward a few yards, fell, and sprang up again minus his helmet, which had been struck by a bullet from behind.

“All right; not much hurt, sir,” cried the sufferer, rejoining his companions, after picking up his helmet, the back of which had been scored by a nearly spent rugged missile, whose track was marked in a long jagged cut across the man’s right cheek-bone, from which the blood was trickling down.

The rear men were on the alert, watching for a chance to retaliate upon their troublesome enemy, but holding their fire, for not a man was visible, and it seemed useless to fire at the rocks they had just left.

“The sooner we are out of this the better,” said the Captain quietly. “You know your work. – Wait a minute, and then at the word rush across to the rocks.”

The minute had nearly passed, the time filled up by the rattle and roar of falling stones, and Bracy’s half-company, though at rest, were panting hard with excitement like greyhounds held by a leash. Then, just as the falling stones were beginning to slacken as if the throwers grasped the fact that they were wasting their strength, and were reserving their discharge till the half-company made its rush, there was a sudden quick movement among the rocks they were to try and reach, and Bracy’s blood ran cold as, puff, puff, puff, and then crack, crack, fire was opened.

“Hah!” ejaculated Roberts excitedly; “they’ve got down somehow to cut us off. We’re between two fires, Bracy, man. There’s nothing for it now but to dash forward. You must clear them out of that. Don’t stop to pick up your men who go down. We shall be close behind, and will see to them. Get across, and then turn and cover us if you can.”

Bracy nodded, and drew his revolver, just giving one glance upward at the heights from whence the stones came, and then fixing his eyes upon the rocks on the other side of the curve of the track, from which fresh puffs of smoke arose, making their position look desperate with the enemy in front and rear, supplemented by those hidden among the rugged natural battlements of their stronghold.

“How many men shall I lose?” thought the young officer; and then, “Shall I get across alive?”

The next moment all was changed.

“Why, Roberts,” he cried, “it’s our own men yonder, firing up instead of at us, to cover our advance.”

“Forward, then,” cried Roberts. “We shall be close behind.”

Bracy dashed ahead, waving his sword, and his half-company of boys cheered as they followed him; while as soon as they started there was a tremendous crashing of dislodged masses of rock, which came thundering down, fortunately sent too soon to injure the charging soldiery, who were saved from a second discharge by a sharp crackling fire from the rocks which they were to have occupied, the rapid repetitions telling that a strong company of their friends were at work, and the bullets spattering and flicking among the enemy, driving them at once into cover.

There was a hearty cheer to greet Bracy and his half-company as they successfully crossed the stone-swept track and reached the shelter of the rocks, ready to turn on the instant and help to keep down the stone-throwing as Roberts and his men came along at the double.

But Bracy's lads did not fire a shot aloft, for a glance at the second half of the company revealed a new danger, and his men dropped into position, ready to repel that with a volley. For no sooner had the second half started than the track, a quarter of a mile in their rear, suddenly seemed to become alive with white-garbed hill-men, who came bounding along in a little crowd.

“Steady, steady! make every shot tell, boys,” cried Bracy. “Fire!”

A ragged volley was the result; the hill-men stopped suddenly as if petrified, and were hesitating still as to what they should do, when a second volley sent them to the right-about, leaving several of their number on the track, while half-a-dozen more were seen to drop before their comrades were out of sight.

There was another burst of cheering as the second half-company pressed on without the loss of a man, Gedge having so far recovered that he was able to double with one of his comrades, who came steadily on with him, arm-in-arm. As the young officers stood breathless and panting with their exertions, the stern, keen face of Colonel Graves suddenly loomed above the smoke, and his horse bore him into their midst.

“How many men down?” was his first eager question.

“Two slightly wounded; that's all, sir,” was the reply.

“Forward, then,” he said, and he signed to Roberts and Bracy to come to his side.

“You've done well,” he said. “Retain your places as rear-guard. I'll keep in touch with you. — Hark!”

“Firing, sir,” said Captain Roberts.

“Yes; the Major must be clearing the way for us. We must get off this shelf and on to open ground before dark.”

He turned his horse's head and made his way towards the front as rapidly as the nature of the wretched rock-strewn shelf would allow; and the two young officers tramped on at a fair distance from the rear of the baggage-guard, keeping a sharp lookout for enemies in pursuit, feeling little anxiety about the rugged eminences up to their left, knowing as they did that they would have ample warning of danger by an attack being made somewhere along the line whose extreme rear they were protecting.

Their task was comparatively easy now, for their two wounded men had been passed on to the baggage-train, so that they could be in charge of the ambulance men and have the benefit of the Doctor's help. A shot came now and then from behind, showing that the enemy were in pursuit; but no mischief was done, a return shot or two from the rear files, who retired in skirmishing order, silencing the firing at every outbreak. Every step taken, too, now was more and more downward, and the keen winds, sharpened by the ice and snow, which had cut down the ravines at the higher part of the pass, were now tempered by the warm afternoon sunshine, which bathed the tops of the shrubs they had looked down upon from above, the said shrubs having developed into magnificent groves of cedars, grand in form and towering in height.

These last were for the most part on the farther side of the now verdant valley — verdant, for its rocky harshness was rapidly becoming softened; even the shelf along which they tramped

began to be dotted with alpine flowers, which gave the march the appearance of having lasted for months, for the morning; had been in part among mountains whose atmosphere was that of a sunny day in February. Now they were in May, and according to appearances they were descending into an evening that would be like June.

Matters were going on so quietly now that the two officers found time for a chat at intervals, one of which was as they passed a formidable-looking spot where the thickly scattered stones and marks of lead upon the rocks showed that it must have been the scene of one of the attacks made by the enemy from the rocks above. But there was no sign of them now, the only suggestion of danger being the presence of a score of their men left to keep any fresh attack in check, and who retired as soon as the rear-guard came in sight.

"This must be where the Major had to clear the way," said Roberts as he scanned the heights with his glass.

"Yes," replied Bracy; "and I hope he was as well satisfied with the boys as we were."

"Shame if he wasn't," cried Roberts. "Pooh! don't take any notice of what he said. You know his way."

"Yes; he must have something to grumble at," replied Bracy. "If he were with a regiment of veterans –"

"Yes, of course; he'd be snarling because they were what he'd call worn-out, useless cripples, only fit for Chelsea Hospital. The Doctor was right: it's his liver."

"Yes," said Bracy; "and when we are in camp to-night and at dinner he'll be in the highest of glee, and do nothing but brag about how he made the enemy run."

"Well, yes; a bit of work always does him good. It isn't brag, though, for I believe the Major to be a splendid officer, and if we have much to do he'll begin showing us greenhorns what a soldier ought to be. But, I say, don't talk about dinner. I didn't think of it before; now I feel famished. My word! I shall punish it to-night."

"If we get safely into camp," cried Bracy excitedly. "Down with you, my lads, and look out. It came from across the valley there, from among those trees."

Even as he spoke, pat, pat, pat came as many bullets, to strike against the bare face of the rock over their heads and fall among the stones at their feet, while the reports of the pieces fired were multiplied by the echoes till they died away.

"Nothing to mind," said Roberts coolly. "They're trying to pick us off! We can laugh at any attack if they try to cross the depths below there."

"Nothing to mind so long as we are not hit," replied Bracy; "but I object to being made a mark for their practice. What have you got there, Jones?"

"One of their bullets, sir," said the man, who had picked up a messenger which had come whizzing across the valley.

"Bullet – eh? Look here, Roberts," and Bracy handed his brother officer a ragged piece of iron which looked as if it had been cut off the end of a red-hot iron rod.

"Humph! Nice tackle to fire at us. Lead must be scarce. Now, that's the sort of thing that would make a wound that wouldn't heal, and delight old Morton."

Pat, pat, again overhead, and the missiles fell among the stones.

"We must stop this," said Roberts. – "Hold your fire, my lads, till you have a good chance. One telling shot is worth a hundred bad ones."

"Ah! Look out," cried Bracy, who was scanning the distant grove of large trees across the valley a quarter of a mile away. "There they go, breaking cover to take up ground more forward, to have at us again."

For, all at once, some fifty white-coats became visible, as their owners dashed out of one of the patches of cedars and ran for another a furlong ahead. The lads were looking out, and rifle after rifle cracked. Then there was quite a volley to teach the enemy that a quarter of a mile was

a dangerous distance to stand at when British soldiers were kneeling behind rocks which formed steady rests for the rifles they had carefully sighted.

Five or six men, whose white-coats stood out plainly in the clear mountain air against the green, were seen to drop and not rise again; while the rest, instead of racing on to the cover in front, turned off at right-angles and made for a woody ravine higher up the right face of the valley; but they did not all reach it in safety.

The firing brought back the Colonel, who nodded thoughtfully on hearing Roberts's report.

"Hurry on," he said; "the shelf descends to quite an opening of the valley a quarter of a mile farther on, and there is a patch of wood well out of reach of the hills, where I shall camp to-night. The advance-guard have cleared it of a similar party to that you describe."

"It was getting time," said Bracy to Roberts as the Colonel rode on. "I shouldn't have liked for us to pass the night on this shelf. Think they'll attack us after dark?"

"Can't say, my son. If they do – "

"Well, what?" asked Bracy.

"We shall have to fight; but not, I hope, till we have had a comfortable meal."

"I hope the same; but I suppose there'll be no rest till we've had a good set-to and thrashed the ruffians. Why, the country seems to be up in arms against us."

"Yes," said Roberts; "it's a way these genial hill-men have."

"Fortunately for us it is very thinly peopled," observed Bracy as they tramped along, seemingly as fresh as when they started.

"Don't be too sure. We've been up among the mountains. Wait till we see the vales."

But the troubles of the day ceased at sunset, one which was made wonderful with the hues which dyed the mountains of the vast Karakoram range; and when the cooking-fires were out in the cedar grove and the watches were set, officers and men slept well in the aromatic air; even the mules did not squeal and kick so very much in their lines, while the weary camels groaned and sighed and sobbed in half-tones, as if bemoaning their fate as being rather better than usual, for none had been riddled by bullets, fallen, or been beaten overmuch, and their leaders had taken care that they were not overloaded, and that they had plenty to eat and drink. The only men who slept badly were Gedge and Symons, the man whose cheek-bone had been furrowed by a bullet. But even they were cheerful as they talked together in the shelter of a canvas tent, and passed the time comparing notes about their ill-luck in being the first down, and calculating how long it would be before they were back in the ranks.

"Hurt much, matey?" said Gedge.

"Pretty tidy, pardner. How's your nut?"

"Been easier since the Doctor put the wet rag on it soaked with some stuff or another. Oh, I shouldn't care a bit, only it keeps on swelling up like a balloon, and it'll make a fellow look such a guy."

"Hist!" said the other; "some one coming. The Doctor."

"Are you asleep in there?" said a low voice.

"Mr Bracy, sir," cried Gedge eagerly. "No, sir; we're wido."

"How are you, my lads – in much pain?"

"Oh no, sir; we're all right."

"I came just to see how you are. Good-night. Try and get to sleep."

"Yes, sir; thank ye, sir. Good-night, sir."

"Good-night."

There was a faint rustle as of feet passing over cedar needle, and then a faint choky sound as if some one in the dark were trying to swallow something.

"I like that," said Symons at last in a whisper; "makes yer feel as if yer orficers do think o' something else besides making yer be smart."

“Like it?” said Gedge huskily. “I should just think you do. Oh, I say, though, what a guy I shall look in the morning! Wish we’d got a box o’ dominoes and a bit o’ candle.”

Chapter Five

Boys in Action

"Look at those boys," said Bracy the next morning on meeting his brother officers at their attractive-looking mess breakfast, spread by the native servants beneath a magnificent cedar. "Yes, they look cheery and larky enough, in spite of yesterday's experience."

"As full of fun as if this were a holiday," said another.

"Ah," said Roberts, "no one would think that we were surrounded by the enemy."

"Are we?" asked Bracy.

"Are we? – Just, hark at him. – Where have you been?"

"Having a glorious bath in that torrent. The water was as clear as crystal."

"And cold as ice," said the Major, with a shudder. "I tried it in my gutta-percha wash-basin."

"Oh yes, it was cold," said Bracy; "but it was like a shower-bath squared and cubed. It came down on my head in tubfuls, sent an electric thrill through one's muscles, and a good rub sent every trace of stiffness out of my legs. Feel as if I could walk any distance to-day."

"Well, be patient, old man," said Roberts, laughing. "I dare say you'll have a chance."

"But what's that you were saying about the enemy?"

"Why, every hill's covered with them, and they evidently mean to attack."

"Oh, very well," said Bracy, beginning upon his breakfast; "then I suppose we must fight."

There was a laugh behind him, a hand was laid upon his shoulder, and the young man looked up sharply, to see that the Colonel had come up silently over the thick carpet of cedar needles.

"Good-morning, sir."

"Good-morning – all," said the Colonel quietly. "All well?"

A chorus of assent ran round the group, and the Colonel continued:

"That's the spirit to take it in, Bracy. Of course we must fight; and the sooner the scoundrels give us the chance the better – eh, Graham?"

"Yes; we've come to give them a lesson, and they'll get it. We ought to reach the station by evening. The poor fellows there must be anxiously looking out for us."

"Yes; I've sent three different messengers to say that we shall be there by night, and I hope one out of the three will get there with the news."

"Then you mean to go on at once?"

"Of course. Did you think I meant to stay here?"

"I only thought it possible that, as this was a strong place, and we have plenty of provisions and good water, you might hold on and let them attack us."

"Oh no," replied the Colonel, taking his seat on the ground with the rest. "If we do that the enemy will take it for granted that we fear him. It must be forward, and plenty of dash."

"Yes; but while our lads are raw they would be more steady behind such a breastwork, or zareba, as we could soon make round us."

"I thought the boys were steady enough yesterday," said the Colonel quietly; "and we shall be far better off in the open than drawn out in a line on that narrow shelf."

"Oh, then we shall have a better road to-day?"

"Yes," said the Colonel, going on calmly enough with his meal. "As far as I can gather from our guides, who all agree as to the character of the road, we have wide, open valleys, with forest till within a couple of miles of Ghittah; then the mountains close in again, and we have a narrow shelf to traverse high above the bottom of a gorge."

"With plenty of places for stone-throwers?" said the Major.

"Plenty," replied the Colonel; "so you know what you have to expect, gentlemen. But I hope and believe that unless they are too closely beleaguered the little garrison at the station will make a sally to meet us, and help to clear the way."

"What a jolly old humbug Graham is!" whispered Roberts. "It's all to belittle our lads. He knew that as well as the Colonel."

"I suppose so," replied Bracy. "Ah, here's the Doctor."

For that gentleman came bustling up, smiling and nodding to all in turn.

"Morning, Doctor," said the Colonel. "What do you think of your patients this morning?"

"My patients? Seen them?"

"Yes," said the Colonel quietly. "Bracy and I had a look at them as soon as it was light."

"Getting on splendidly," said the Doctor, rubbing his hands. "Narrow escape for that boy whose cheek is scratched; an inch or two more to the left, and –"

"Ah! Bah! The old story, Doctor," said the Major contemptuously.

"Yes, sir," replied the Doctor tartly, as he fixed his eyes on the portly, middle-aged officer on the opposite side of the cloth. "You didn't take those pills, then?"

"How do you know?"

"By the way you talk," said the Doctor, chuckling, and screwing up one eye and glancing round at the rest.

"No, sir, I did not take the rubbish," said the Major angrily, as he saw every one smiling. "Was it likely that I should take them at a time like this?"

"No, I suppose not," said the Doctor coolly; "but I should. But, as I was going to say, Colonel, it's wonderful what a deal the human skull can bear. Now, for instance, that boy Gedge: a great stone comes down many hundred feet, increasing in velocity with the earth's attraction, strikes him on the head, and down he goes, insensible, with his skull crushed in, you would expect; but no: it is the old story of the strength of the arch and the difficulty in cracking an egg-shell from outside, though the beak of a tiny chicken can do it from within."

"Then there's no fracture?" said Bracy eagerly.

"Not so much as a faint crack, sir. Fellow was too thick-headed."

The Colonel sprang to his feet the next minute, for one of the officers appeared to announce the appearance of three several bodies of men descending from the distant heights.

"How near?" asked the Colonel.

"The nearest about a mile and a half, sir."

"Another live minutes for you to finish your breakfast, gentlemen, and then we march."

The bugles were sounding directly after, and in less time than their leader had given out, the officers were with their companies, the native servants had replaced the camp equipage, and at the end of the quarter of an hour the march was resumed in the most orderly way, the baggage-train being strongly guarded, and the men well rested, flushed, and eager for the coming fray.

It was like a glorious late spring morning in England, and the wide valley the regiment was traversing presented a lovely series of landscapes, backed up in front and to right and left with mighty snow-capped mountains, whose peaks looked dazzling in the early morning sun. But though every breast breathed in the crisp air with a strange sense of exhilaration, no one had eyes for anything but the two bodies of white-robed men approaching them from right and left, the third being hidden by the forest patch where the troops had bivouacked, and for which the enemy had made as soon as it was evacuated, evidently to cover their movements prior to a rush upon the rear.

The Colonel, upon seeing this, made a slight alteration in his plans, halting Captain Roberts's company with orders to close in and follow the rear of the column, thus bringing the impedimenta and servants more into the centre, the movement being performed without the slightest check to the advance, though the appearance of the bodies several hundred strong, to right and left, was very suggestive of an immediate attack.

This was delivered, evidently by an agreed-upon signal; for suddenly a tremendous burst of yelling arose, and the two unorganised crowds came rushing down upon the column, which halted, faced outward, and the next moment, while the enemy on either hand was about a couple of hundred yards off, there was a rolling volley nearly all along the line, and the white smoke began to rise, showing the two bodies of the enemy scattering and every man running for his life back towards the hills, but leaving the flowery grass dotted with patches of white, others dropping fast as they grew more distant and the wounds received began to take effect.

There was a little disorder in the centre among the servants, and mules and camels were restive as the shouting hill-men came rushing on, with their swords flashing in the sunshine, and the rattle of the musketry threatened to produce a panic; but the native servants behaved well, and were quieting their animals, when there was another suggestion of panic, as Captain Roberts suddenly exclaimed:

“Here they come, Bracy!”

For the sergeants and men thrown out in the rear a couple of hundred yards suddenly turned and fired and came running in to take their places, as the two rear companies were halted, swung out right and left in line, fixed bayonets, with the peculiar ringing, tinkling sound of metal against metal, and waited the coming of the third body of the enemy, as strong as the two which had attacked in front.

They came out from the shelter of the cedar forest with a rush, yelling furiously, each man waving his long jezail in his left hand, while a long curved tulwar, keen as a razor, flashed in his right – big, stalwart, long-bearded, dark-eyed men, with gleaming teeth and a fierce look of determination to slay painted in every feature.

It was enough to cow the stoutest-hearted, for in numbers they were enough to envelop and wipe out of existence the handful of slight-looking lads ranged shoulder to shoulder across their way.

But not a boy amongst them flinched; he only drew his breath hard as if trying to inflate his chest to the utmost with courage, and then at the word every other lad fired low, sending a hail of bullets to meet the rushing force when it was about a couple of hundred yards distant.

The men were staggered for the moment, but for the moment only, and they dashed on again, leaping over or darting aside to avoid those of their companions who staggered and fell. Then, as they reduced the distance by about one-half, the yelling grew fiercer, and the enemy came running and leaping on with increased speed.

“Fire!”

Some fifty rifles delivered their deadly contents with a roar as if only one had been discharged.

The effect was magical.

The yelling ceased, and as the cloud of soft grey smoke arose it was to show the crowded-together enemy halted in front, while those behind were pushing and struggling to get within reach to strike at the hedge of glittering bayonets, from which a third volley flashed out.

That was enough. As the smoke rose and the lads stood in double line now, ready to receive the charge upon their glittering points, the enemy was seen to be in full flight.

“Stand fast!” roared Roberts.

“Back, back!” shouted Bracy; and, sword in hand, the officers rushed along in front of their men, literally driving some of the most eager back, to re-form the line; for the sight of the flying enemy was too much for some of the younger, least-trained lads, who were in the very act of dashing forward with levelled bayonet in pursuit.

“Well done; very well done, my lads!” cried a familiar voice as the Colonel galloped back to them. “Steady, there; steady!” he shouted as he rode right along the little line and reined up his horse, to sit gazing after the flying enemy, frowning the while as he saw how many white cotton

robes dotted the soil before the uninjured disappeared again in the cedar grove, from which they had delivered their attack.

“Capital, gentlemen!” he said a minute or so later; “but I did not like that unsteadiness. You must keep your men well in hand.”

The next minute the orders were given, and the column resumed its march, for it was no time to think of prisoners or attending to the enemy’s wounded. In fact, before the regiment was half a mile away their friends were back from the hills seeing to their dead and wounded, and gathering up their arms, greatly to the annoyance of the rear-guard lads, who one and all were troubled with longings for some of the keen tulwars to take back to England as trophies of their fight.

But the stern order “Forward!” rang in the lads’ ears, and the expectation of being attacked at any time by one or other of the bodies of the enemy hovering on the hill-slopes on either side, or of a fresh dash being made upon the rear in the hope of cutting off the baggage, kept every one on the alert.

Chapter Six

Up the Gorge

“Yes,” said Colonel Graves, as the morning glided by without incident and midday approached, with the men beginning to show traces of their hot, rapid march. “Pass the word on, for we cannot halt yet. It will cheer the lads, and have a good effect upon the enemy.”

The next minute, just as many of the lads were straining their eyes forward in search of the place likely to be chosen for their midday halt, and making frequent use of their water-bottles, there were the preliminary taps on the big bass, a few vigorous rolls on the kettledrums, and the fifes began to shrill out their sharp notes in a merry air, which brightened every face at once. Some of the lads began to whistle the tune as they stepped out more briskly, and Judkins, of Captain Roberts’s rear company, burst out with:

“Poor old Bill; that ’ll do him good. Pity he ain’t with us. Wonder how he is.”

“Getting on, my lad,” said Bracy, who overheard the remark; “and I don’t think he’ll be many days before he’s back in the ranks.”

Just then a cheer was given right in front, to be taken up and run right along the column, sounding as if it had been started by the men in thankfulness for Bracy’s good news about Gedge, though it was only the effect produced by the band; while as soon as the air came to an end, and there was silence for a minute, another hearty cheer was given for that which was to come, the men knowing well the meaning of the silence, which was broken directly after by half-a-dozen beats of the drum, and then with a sonorous clash the brass instruments of the excellent band burst forth in a grand march, the clarion-like triumphant notes echoing softly from the hills on their right, where clusters of the enemy could be seen staring at them as if in wonder.

“Hear that, you black-muzzled old women? You in white night-gowns?” shouted Judkins. “That’s better than your wheezy old squealing pipes, made to imitate our Highlanders’. I say, lads, how come they to have pipes like our fellows? Wish some one would ask Mr Bracy. I dessay he knows.”

“Why don’t you ask me yourself, Judkins?” said Bracy, who was close; at hand.

“Oh! Beg pardon, sir. I didn’t know you could hear me.”

“Don’t be a sham, Judkins. You know I was just behind you.”

The lad coloured like a girl, and his comrades laughed; but Bracy took no notice, and said quietly:

“I don’t profess to understand these things; but the use of bagpipes for music seems to be a custom with the ancient tribes that migrated from the north of Asia and spread right away through Europe till they were stopped by the sea.”

“Hullo, Bracy!” said Roberts, coming up. “Giving the men a lecture? You don’t mean that the Scotch and Irish pipes had their origin out here?”

“I have read so. These hill-men have theirs right away east, and you pick up tribes of people with them at intervals till you get to Italy, where the mountaineers play them. Then it is not a very long jump to the Highlands and Ireland, where they use bellows instead of blowing into the bag.”

“A discourse on wind,” said Roberts quietly. “I want something more solid. How soon are we going to halt for a feed and rest?”

The bugle rang out soon after, for they readied a broad stream of bright clear water, and in a loop of this, which offered itself as a capital protection for two-thirds of the distance round their temporary camp, the regiment was halted, and with strong videttes thrown out along the unprotected portion, the men fell out, when a hasty meal was eaten, and the men ordered to lie down for half-an-hour, with their arms ready, so that they could spring to their places at the first alarm.

When the bugle rang out it was at the end of the hour's rest, and, thoroughly refreshed, the march was recommenced, the men stepping out to the merry strains of a favourite song, which was repeated in chorus as the band ceased playing; and the birds that had been hovering near were the only objects visible when the halting-place was vacated, though the thick woods on the hill-slopes on either side were felt to be lull of the enemy.

"Haven't given them all they wanted, have we?" said Roberts as they tramped towards where through the clear air the sides of the valley could be seen closing in and growing higher and more jagged of outline.

"No," said Bracy thoughtfully. "It will take something more than a brush like that to beat them off. We shall have our work ready for us yonder where the Colonel said the track rose again to continue like a shelf right away to Ghittah."

"I suppose so. Well, good luck to us, and may we have no more casualties."

"Amen," said Bracy. "I wish, though, if we are to have a sharp encounter, we could have it now we're fresh, instead of just at the end of a heavy day's march."

"Soldiers have to fight when the time comes, and they can't pick and choose, I suppose. But never mind; the lads won't be done up, for this is easy marching. It is not too hot, and we have plenty of good water. I say, I suppose we shall follow this stream right away now?"

"No doubt. It must come down from the snow-mountains, and through that gorge yonder."

"Yes, the one that seems so near, and does not get a bit nearer. It's capital, our having this river on our right flank, for it would be a nice job for the enemy if they tried to ford it."

Roberts was right, for every mile of their forward journey made the river a greater protection, the torrent growing fiercer and the banks rocky in the extreme, and for the most part nearly perpendicular, till at last it was a good fifty feet down to the water's level, so that it ceased to be of use for refreshment to the men.

At last the sides of the valley began to close in more rapidly, and their track became steeper, till all at once they were brought up short by what seemed to be the mighty gates of the gorge, up which they could see but a short distance, for it turned off to the right. But there, plainly enough in the western sunshine, crossing the end in a steep slope, was a part of the terrace-like path they were to follow, while on their left was its commencement, one heavy stone-strewn track, which in places rose like a series of gigantic steps.

Here a halt was called, and the men lay down for a brief rest, while the perilous-looking path in front was reconnoitred first by the officers with their glasses, the eminence above the track being carefully searched for hidden bodies of the enemy ready to commence their attack as before by thrusting off the stones which hung aloft ready to fall, almost at a touch.

But there was no sign of danger apparent. A great eagle was gliding here and there in the mouth of the wild ravine, out of which came the deep roar of the river in a series of foaming cascades; while no sign was visible of the enemy in the rear, and the officers soon came to the conclusion that there was nothing to fear from their left unless there was some pass known to their foes by which the mountains high above the shelf-like track could be reached.

"We're to form the rear-guard again, lads," said Roberts, who had just received his orders. "Did it so well before, the Colonel says," he added a little bitterly.

"Well, if we want more fighting we ought to have been sent in advance," replied Bracy, "for I feel convinced that there's something unpleasant waiting for us as soon as we enter that black rift."

"Most likely," said Roberts. "The Major leads again, but they're going to send half a company on first scouting. Yes," he said impatiently, "there must be something bad ready for us. The enemy would never be such fools as to let us go through there. Why, Bracy, give us our company, and twenty-four hours to prepare, and we could hold that place against a thousand."

"Yes, I suppose we could."

“Well, what are we waiting for?” cried Roberts impatiently. “It doesn’t want above two hours to sunset, and to be caught there with the night coming on – Ugh!”

“There they go!” cried Bracy excitedly, as the active lads selected as scouts began to ascend the track in the lightest order; and their progress was watched with the keenest anxiety as they rose more and more into the full view of the regiment, apparently meeting with no obstacles to their progress, and showing the track to be followed by the waiting party below.

Just then the Colonel rode back to where the young officers were standing.

“This track is so narrow, Roberts,” he said, “that your company will be ample to protect the rear; so I shall trust entirely to you. If we are to be attacked it will be in front; of that I am convinced, though probably the attacking will be on our part, for sooner or later we shall find a rough hill-fort, strongly held.”

“Hope we shan’t fall into some trap, sir,” said Roberts earnestly.

“I hope not,” said the Colonel, turning his horse and moving forward, but only to turn his head again.

“It will be stiff work for the train,” he said; “but they must do it. You will help to keep the baggage-men well up to their work, for I mean to get through this pass to-night.”

“Nice job,” said Roberts bitterly. “We shall have the enemy behind us, stirring us up, and we shan’t be able to get on without pricking up the mules and camels.”

“No firing yet,” said Bracy, without heeding the foreboding remarks of his companion. “They’re getting well on. Ah! there goes the advance.”

For a bugle rang out, its notes being repeated again and again with wondrous clearness from the faces of the black-looking barren rocks on high, and the scene became an animated picture to the men of the rear-guard, who lay on their arms, resting, while the regiment filed up the track, two abreast, giving life to the gloomy gorge, which grew and grew till the baggage animals added their quota to the scene.

“At last!” cried Roberts, as their own turn came, and after a long and careful search backward from a point of vantage with his glass, he gave the word, and his rested lads began to mount eagerly, but with every one keeping an eye aloft for the blocks of stone they expected to come crashing down, but which never came any more than did the sharp echoing rifle-fire announcing the attack upon some rough breastwork across the shelf.

It was a toilsome, incessant climb for an hour, and then the highest point was gained, the men cheering loudly as they clustered on the shelf, nowhere more than a dozen feet wide, while the rock fell perpendicularly below them for over a thousand feet to where the river foamed and roared, one terrible race of leaping cascades.

There had not been a single casualty with the mules, and the track, in spite of its roughness, was better for the camels in its freedom from loose stones than the former one they had traversed.

And now their way was fairly level for a time, and the descent of the path gentle when it did begin going down towards the river, which from the slope seemed to rise. But they could see only a little way forward, from the winding nature of the gorge, which now grew more and more narrow.

“Not so far to fall,” said Bracy coolly, “if we do come to a fight.”

“Deep enough to break our necks,” grumbled Roberts. “Here, I say, it will be dark soon; look how black it looks below. I wish those fellows had not cheered; it was like telling the enemy we were coming on, for they must be round the corner yonder. There – look!”

As he spoke one of the men in front suddenly turned and pointed to where the gorge was at its narrowest.

“Yes, we can see them, my lad. Keep a sharp lookout to the rear,” he shouted to the men behind. “We shall be hearing from them now, Bracy, for, take my word for it, they’re flocking along the path. Well, we shall have to fight in the dark, old man, like rats, in this confounded trap.”

“Very well,” said Bracy between his teeth, as he took out and examined the chambers of his revolver, before he replaced it in its leather holster; “if the dogs do come on I mean to bite.”

Chapter Seven

Boots for Booty

“Well, you needn’t bite this time, old fellow,” cried Roberts, with a sigh of relief, as a burst of cheers arose faintly from the front once more, to be taken up and run down the column, even the native mule and camel drivers joining in, till it reached the company which formed the rear-guard. “What does this mean?” cried Bracy excitedly. “That we’re too far back to know what is going on in the front. Those are not enemies, but friends.”

“What! people from the station come to meet us?”

“That’s the right nail, struck well on the head, old chap; and I’m jolly glad of it, for I feel more like feeding than fighting, I can tell you.”

“Roberts, old fellow, this seems too good to be true,” cried Bracy joyfully.

“But for once in a way it is true. Push on, my lads; there’ll be something better than bullets for a welcome to-night.”

Roberts was right, for upon the last of the weary beasts bearing the baggage reaching the end of the defile, the young officers found themselves face to face with a couple of companies of their fellow-countrymen, bronzed, toil-worn looking men, many of them bearing the marks of hardly-healed sword-cuts, and looking overstrained and thin as if from anxiety and overwork, but one and all with their faces lit up by the warmth of the welcome they were ready to give the regiment which had come to their help.

The bandsmen played their best as they led the way across the lovely amphitheatre into which the gorge had opened out, towards where, high up along the northern side, and upon the rocky bank, stood the station and town of Ghittah. The river, which here flowed smooth and deep, seemed as if of ruddy golden metal, as it glistened in the rays of the sun dipping down behind the snow-mountains which shut them in. And every now and then the cheery echoing strains of the band were pretty well drowned by the cheers and counter-cheers of the relievers and the relieved.

Bracy felt his breast swell with pleasure at the warmth of the welcome, for the fraternisation was complete, the war-worn veterans seeming as if they could not make enough of the raw striplings marching by their sides towards where the British colours could be seen floating over the grim castle-like place that had been the home of one of the old hill-chiefs till the district was added to the British dominions. But look which way he would, the young officer could see no trace of the enemy.

Birds of a feather flock together naturally, and before half a mile had been covered a tall, thin, boyish-looking officer, with a star of merit in the shape of a series of strips of diachylon upon his brow, gravitated towards the rear-guard and suddenly joined their ranks, holding out and shaking hands with the new-comers.

“How are you?” he cried. “How are you? I say, don’t look at a fellow like that. I’m an awful scarecrow, I know; but I’m Drummond – Tom Drummond of ours.”

“Oh, you look right enough,” cried Bracy merrily. “Only a bit of the polish rubbed off.”

“And a bit chipped,” said Roberts, laughing.

“Eh? Oh, this!” cried their new friend. “Getting better, though, now. Doesn’t improve a fellow.”

“Doesn’t it?” cried Bracy. “I should be proud of such an order.”

“It’s very good of you to say so,” said the young subaltern, with his eyes glistening.

“How did you get it?” asked Roberts.

“Oh, in a scrimmage with those treacherous beasts. They’d got me and about a dozen of the lads in a corner among the rocks, and it was either stand still and be cut up or make a dash with the bayonet. There were about fifty of ’em.”

“So you made a dash?”

“Yes, but only six of us got through, and all damaged. One big fellow was nourishing a sharp tulwar, and he was in the act of cutting down one of my fellows, and I went at him to try and save the poor lad, but I was too late. The great brute cut him down and rushed at me.”

“Well?” said Bracy, for the thin, boyish-looking officer stopped, and looked red.

“Oh, I gave point, and got well home. I put all my strength into it, and it brought me so close that instead of having my head split by his blade I had the hilt on my forehead here. It struck in a nasty place, but being, as my old Latin coach said, awfully thick-skulled, the pommel of the tulwar didn't break through. I say, though – never mind that – have either of you fellows a spare pair of boots? I can swap a lot of loot with you – fancy swords and guns and a chief's helmet – for them. Look; I've come down to this.”

He laughed and held up one leg, the lower part of which was bound in puttees, while the foot was covered with a bandaged raw-hide sandal.

“Not smart on parade,” said Bracy, laughing, “but good to keep off corns.”

“Yes,” said the subaltern; “but I'm blest if they keep out chilblains. Oh, crumpets, how my feet do itch of a night by the fire.”

“Well, I should say my boots are about your size. Roberts's wouldn't lit. He has such big, ugly feet.”

“Come, I like that, Bracy. Hang it all! my trotters look liliputian beside his.”

“Now,” said Bracy mockingly; “but wait till you can see Drummond's feet. Look here,” he added, turning to the subaltern; “you have a pair of Roberts's too; they'll do for goloshes.”

“I don't care how old they are, so long as they are boots.”

“All right, old fellow; we'll set you up with anything we've got,” said Bracy.

“Bless you, my children!” cried the young officer. “Bless you! Never mind the dramatic business. Oh, I say, we are all glad you've come.”

“You've been in a tight corner, then?”

“Tight? We've lost a third of our number, and were beginning to think the Government was going to let us be quite wiped off the slate. Here, I feel like a schoolboy again, and want to cheer.”

“All right; cheer, then,” cried Bracy, smiling, and clapping the speaker on the shoulder as if he had known him for years.

“No; hoarse as a crow now, and I want my breath to talk. I say, we have been sharp set. We began to feel like the talking parrot who was plucked by the monkey, ready to say, ‘Oh, we have been having such a time!’ Those Dwats are beggars to fight.”

“We've found that out – that is, when they can take you at a disadvantage,” said Roberts.

“Ah, that's their idea of manoeuvring,” said Drummond. “They can tight, though. We must have killed hundreds, but they come on all the same. There were thousands of them all about the hills here yesterday.”

“But where are they now?” asked Bracy.

“They melted away like snow last night and this morning, just when we were expecting an assault on the old fort yonder, which we thought would be final.”

“Final?”

“Yes; we were getting dead beat. That's what makes us all so fond of you.”

“I see,” said Bracy, who noticed a hysterical vibration in the youth's voice.

“That was the first inkling we got of your coming.”

“What! Didn't you hear from our messengers?” said Roberts.

“Didn't they get through?” cried Bracy.

“Get through? No. They wouldn't let any messengers get through. Never mind. You've all come, and if we don't have a jollification to-night my name's something else.”

“Then you're all right for provisions?”

“Oh yes, for some time to come. Ammunition was his weak point. We’ve blazed away till the men’s barrels have been hot.”

“It seems as if the men of your regiment are beggars to fight too,” said Bracy dryly, “judging by the appearance of some of you.”

“Fight? Obligated to,” said the subaltern, laughing. “Talk about practising the art of war; we ought to pass any examination. But, joking apart, it has been an awful time for the poor women and children.”

“Ah!” cried Bracy. “You have women and children yonder?”

“Yes, any number, bless ’em! The ladies and the men’s wives have worked like slaves – hospital work, you know. As to our doctor, he’ll be mad with joy to meet yours to share the work with him. Ah! there they go.”

For just then a burst of cheering came from the grim walls of the old fort, which were lined by its occupants; and mingled with the enthusiastic cries came the strains of music.

“You have your band, then?” said Roberts.

“Bits of it,” said the subaltern dryly. “The brass instruments are battered horribly; and as for the wood, they are all cracked and bandaged like wounded men; while the drums are nearly all as tubby as tom-toms, through the men having mended them with badly-cured goat-skins. I say, though, talk about goat-skins, I ought to have added sheep.”

“Why?” said Bracy.

“Are you fellows fond of shooting?”

“Yes,” said Bracy eagerly. “Is it good up here?”

“Grand, when there’s a chance of the shooting being all on your side.”

“The beggars try to stalk you, then, sometimes?” said Roberts.

“Sometimes? Nearly always.”

“But what have you got here – tiger?”

“Never saw one. Plenty of bear.”

“All! that will do.”

“Chamois-like deer, goats, and splendid mountain sheep. Pheasants too. Ah! I can give you some glorious pheasant shooting. Here they come. Oh, I say, what a pity for the old man to march our poor ragged Jacks out to see you! They’ll look – ”

“Glorious,” cried Bracy. “I should be proud of being one of your regiment. By George; what shrimps our lads seem beside them!”

“Your lads look perfection,” cried the subaltern enthusiastically. “Don’t you run them down. If you’d been looking despairingly for help for a whole month you’d feel as I do. Here, I must trot back to my chiefs. Just fancy; my captain and lieutenant are both down, *non com*, and I’m in command of my company. Isn’t it disgusting for the poor fellows? But they behave very well. So glad to have met you, dear boys. Ta-ta for the present. We’ve got a splendid feed ready for you all, and we shall meet then. – Don’t forget about the boots, old chap. You shall have these to present to the British Museum. Label ’em ‘Officer’s Foot-gear. End of Nineteenth Century. Rare.’”

The subaltern trotted off, and with the regiment going half-mad and cheering wildly in response to the cries of welcome which greeted them, the boyish ranks marched on, solid and stiff, for a time, their rifles sloped regularly, and step kept in a way which made even Sergeant Gee smile with satisfaction. But directly after, as caps and helmets, mingled with women’s handkerchiefs, began to wave from the walls, the strong discipline of the corps was quite forgotten, helmets came out of their proper places and were mounted on the ends of rifles, to be carried steadily at the slope, to be held up on high at arm’s-length, and even danced up and down, in the wild joy felt by the whole body, from the Colonel down to the meanest bugle-boy, that they had arrived in time to succour the brave and devoted men, marched out of the dark gateway and formed up in two lines for their friends to pass in between them. Hardly a dark face, lined, stern, and careworn, was

without something to show in the shape of injury; while nearer the gate there was a body of about two-score badly wounded and bandaged men who had hobbled or been carried out, ready to add their faint share of cheering to that of their comrades.

As Roberts and Bracy led their company towards the gate, and the young officers caught sight of the ladies standing in a group ready to greet them with outstretched hands, one of them – never mind which – perhaps it was Bracy – felt half-suffocated, while the thin, careworn faces, many of them wet with the coursing tears, looked dim and distorted as if seen through bad spectacles on a wet day; and when, after having his hand shaken a score of times and listening to fervent greetings and blessings, he got through the gateway to the great inner court, where the baggage and pack-mules, camels, and the rest were packed together in company with the native servants, the said one – as aforesaid, never mind which – said to himself:

“Thank goodness that’s over! If it had lasted much longer I should have made a fool of myself. I never felt anything like it in my life.”

“Bracy, old chap,” said Roberts just then, “we mustn’t forget about that fellow’s boots. I’ve a pair, too, as soon as I can get at my traps. I say, I know you’ve got a mother, but have you any sisters?”

“Yes; two.”

“I’ve three. Now, can you explain to me why it was that as soon as I was marching by those poor women yonder I could think of nothing but my people at home?”

“For the same reason that I did,” replied Bracy rather huskily. “Human nature; but thank Heaven, old man, that they’re not here.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Roberts thoughtfully. “It would be very nice to see them, and I know my dear old mother would have been very proud to see us march in. My word, this has been a day!”

“Yes, and here we are. Shall we ever get away?”

“Of course we shall. But, hullo! what does that mean?”

Bracy turned at the same moment, for rather faintly, but in a pleasant tenor voice, there came out of a long box-like ambulance gharry, borne on two mules in long shafts at either end:

“When Johnny comes marching home again – Hurrah!”

And from another voice a repetition of the cheer:

“Hurrah! Hurrah! When Johnny comes marching home again, Hurrah! Hurrah!”

“Ah, Mr Bracy, sir, just having a bit of a sing-song together.”

“Why, Gedge, my lad, how are you – how are you getting on?”

“I don’t look in, sir, and I’ll tell yer. Doctor says it’s all right, but my blessed head keeps on swelling still. I don’t believe I shall ever get my ’elmet on agen. My mate here, though, is getting on swimming.”

“That’s right. You’ll lie up in hospital for a hit and soon be well.”

“Orspital, sir? Yes; but it’s longing to be back in barracks, tents, or the ranks as worries me. But never say die, sir. We’ve got here. – How do, Captain? Thank ye for asking. Yes, sir; getting on, sir. We’ve got here with on’y us two knocked over. Now then, sir, what next?”

“Yes, Gedge,” said the young officer thoughtfully; “what next?”

“I’ll tell you,” said Roberts cheerily; “find our traps and that fellow’s hoots.”

Chapter Eight In Quarters

There was rest and refreshment in the old fort of Ghittah that night such as the regiment had not enjoyed since their march up-country; and to have seen the occupants of the stronghold, no one could have imagined that a few hours before the beleaguered were in a state of despair.

But they had cause for rejoicing, since, after a month's brave resistance, with heavy losses, they were now strengthened by the presence of nearly a thousand light, active young fellows, perfectly new to warfare, but well officered, in a high state of discipline, and eager to prove themselves against the enemy, whatever the odds.

There was plenty of room for the new-comers, for the stronghold was a little town in itself, and the regiment shook itself down into its new quarters as quickly as it would have formed camp out in the open, so that the men paraded the next morning fresh and ready for anything; the senior Colonel inspecting the grand addition to his force, while his own men, after busy efforts, showed up in very different guise to that of the previous day, the thin and gaunt seeming to have plumped out during the night, while the officers' ladies showed that they had not quite forgotten how to dress.

Over the mess breakfast, which was had in common with the officers of the garrison, the new-comers had been made well acquainted with the enemy's tactics, and warned of the suddenness of the attacks made and attempts at surprise, so that they might be well prepared. They had already heard the result of the council of war held by the seniors of the two regiments, and were prepared to take over nearly all the duty, so as to give the harassed, worn-out regiment a rest.

Then the parade was held in due form, the lads of the new regiment mounted guard, and their officers made a tour of inspection afterwards with their new friends, who pointed out the strength and feebleness of the old fort.

The latter predominated, especially on the side of the river, and there were plenty of weak spots where Colonel Graves saw at a glance how easily an active body of mountaineers might scale the lower rocks of the mighty clump upon which the fort was built and mount to the ramparts, and unless the defence was strong there the place must fall.

"It tells well for the brave efforts you have made," said Colonel Graves to his brother in rank. "I should propose throwing up an additional wall at two of these spots – walls well loopholed for musketry."

"I have proposed it, and intended to do it," said Colonel Wrayford; "but it has been impossible. The enemy has kept us too thoroughly upon the *qui vive*."

"Well, there will be an opportunity now," said Colonel Graves as he stepped up on to an open place on the wall and began to sweep the mountain-slopes with his glass.

"See anything of them?" asked Colonel Wrayford.

"Nothing. Are they well in hiding?"

"Possibly. I do not understand our not having had a visit from them before now. We generally have their white-coats streaming down those ravines in two parties. It looks as if your coming had scared them away."

"That's too good to expect," said Colonel Graves, laughing. "They'll come, sure enough, and when least expected, no doubt. So much the better, so that we can give them a good lesson to teach them to behave with respect towards Her Majesty's forces, for this place is to be held at all hazard."

"Yes; of course," said Colonel Wrayford rather bitterly. "Well, it has been held."

"And bravely," said Colonel Graves, bowing, with a show of deference, towards his senior.

"Thank you," said the latter simply. "We have done our best."

He turned away, to begin using his glass, sweeping the different ravines – dark, savage-looking gorges which disembody upon the smiling, garden-like expanse on both sides of the river, and seeming strangely in contrast, with their stony sides, to the tree-besprinkled verdure and lovely groves of the little plain not more than a mile long by half that space wide.

“Hah! I thought the visit would not be long deferred,” said Colonel Wrayford, lowering the glass and pointing to a thin line of white figures slowly coming into sight and winding down a zigzag path on one side of the gorge, through which the river came down from the mountains beyond.

“I see,” said Colonel Graves; “but I was watching those ravines to right and left.”

“Yes; the enemy is changing his tactics to-day. You see, he does not mean us to have much rest.”

The bugles rang out at the first appearance of the enemy, and the walls were manned with a strength to which they had been foreign; and as the two Colonels walked round and supervised the arrangements, the senior asked whether the new-comers could shoot.

“Admirably,” said Colonel Graves, and then, with a smile – “at the target; they have to prove what they can really do now.”

“They will have every opportunity, and from behind strong walls.”

Meanwhile the white-robed enemy came streaming down to the plain in the most fearless manner, till they were well within shot, and still they came on.

“This seems strange,” said Colonel Wrayford; “they have generally begun firing before this.”

“They look more like friends than enemies,” observed Colonel Graves.

“They may look so,” replied the other as he scanned the advancing force, “but we have no friends among these tribes. They are all deeply imbued with the Mussulman’s deadly hatred of the Christian, and only when firmly held down by force do they submit to the stronger power. Unfortunately they have broken out, and we have had enough to do to hold our own, while the very fact of one tribe boldly shutting us in has made half-a-dozen others forget their own enmity among themselves and come to their aid.”

Meanwhile Captain Roberts’s company occupied a strong position along a curtain defending the great gate, and the lads were all in a state of eager expectation of the order to fire.

“It’s our turn now, Sergeant,” said one of the youngest-looking. “I could pick off that chap in front before he knew where he was.”

“Silence, sir!” said the Sergeant shortly; and then looking to right and left, he gave a general admonition:

“Less talking in the ranks.”

“Yah!” whispered the lad who had been snubbed. “Why don’t they make him curnel?”

“See Drummond just now?” said Bracy, where he and his companion stood together.

“Just a glance,” replied Roberts.

“Why, he came close by you.”

“Yes; but my attention was taken up by his boots – yours, I mean. I never saw a fellow look so conscious and proud of being well shod before.”

“Hullo! What does this mean?” said Bracy. “Not an attack, surely? My word! that’s brave; one, three – six of them. Why, Roberts, the cheek of it! They’re coming to order us to surrender.”

“Well, it will be exercise for them, for we shan’t. We’ll let them give up if they like.”

“I say, look!” continued Bracy, as half-a-dozen of the well-built fellows came on alone, making for the gates. The officers scanned them with their glasses, and noted that their thickly-quilted cotton robes were of the whitest, and of line texture, while each wore about his waist a fine cashmere shawl stuck full of knives and supporting a curved tulwar in a handsome scabbard. “I say,” cried Bracy, “what dandies! These must be chiefs.”

Whatever they were, they made straight for the gates, and the two Colonels walked down to meet them.

"Keep a sharp lookout up there, Captain Roberts. You command the approach. Are these men quite alone?"

"Quite, sir, as far as I can see."

"Can you make out any strong body stealthily approaching, Mr Bracy?"

"No, sir; they seem to be quite alone."

"Be on the alert for a rush, and fire at once if you see anything. – You will have the gates opened, I presume?" continued Colonel Graves.

"Oh yes; it is an embassy, and they will expect to enter the place. Send for the two interpreters."

A couple of lithe-looking, dark-eyed hill-men came forward at once, the gates were thrown open, and the party of six stepped in, looking smiling and proud, ready to salute the two officers, who stood forward a little in advance of half a company of men with fixed bayonets.

Salutes were exchanged, and in a brief colloquy the eldest of the party, a smiling fellow with an enormous black beard, announced through one of the interpreters that he was the chief of the Red Dwats, come with his men to meet the English Captain and tell him that he and his people wore the most staunch friends the famous white Queen had, from there to the sources of the great river, the Indus.

Colonel Wrayford replied that he was glad to hear it, and if the chief and his people were faithful to Her Majesty's sway they would always be protected.

The chief said that he was and always would be faithful, and that he hoped the great white Queen would remember that and send them plenty of the guns which loaded at the bottoms instead of the tops, and boxes of powder and bullets to load them with. Then he would be able to fight for Her Majesty against the other chiefs who hated her, because they were all dogs and sons of Shaitan.

"Roberts, old fellow," whispered Bracy, high up on the wall, "I could swear I saw one of those fellows leading the attack made upon us from the cedar grove."

"Shouldn't be a bit surprised, dear boy. Perhaps he has repented and has come to say he is good now and will never do so any more. Can you understand any of his lingo?"

"Not a word. It doesn't seem a bit like Hindustani. What's that?"

"The Colonel asked what was the meaning of the attack made upon us yesterday."

"Ah, then he knows that fellow?" whispered Bracy.

"No doubt. The old man's pretty keen, and if that chap means treachery, I'm afraid he didn't get up early enough this morning if he has come to take in old Graves."

"I'm sure that's one of them. I had him at the end of my binocular, and I know him by that scar on his cheek."

"They all seem to have a good deal of cheek," said Roberts coolly.

"Look here; I'd better warn the Colonel."

"No need, old fellow. He knows what he's about. These niggers are precious cunning, but it's generally little child's deceit, and that's as transparent as a bit of glass. Don't be alarmed. Old Graves can see through any tricks of that kind, and Wrayford hasn't been on this station a twelvemonth without picking up a few native wrinkles."

"Pst! Listen to what they're saying."

"Can't: it's rude," said Roberts.

"Not at a time like this, when perhaps men's and women's lives are at stake."

"All right; let's listen, then. What's the boss saying?"

"I don't like it, Wrayford. These are part of the tribe that tried to destroy us as we came up yesterday, and now they find we have escaped them they want to make friends."

"Well, we want the tribes to be friendly."

“Yes, but not with sham friendliness, to lull us into security, and then, after waiting their time, to join their fellows in a general massacre.”

“I am afraid you are misjudging our visitors here,” said Colonel Wrayford quietly.

“I am sure I am not. I swear I saw that dark fellow with the cut on his cheek leading a charge.”

“There; what did I tell you?” whispered Bracy.

“And what did I tell you about the old man seeing as far into a millstone as is necessary for being on the safe side?”

“Yes; and I am glad his observation was so keen.”

“He’s all right, old fellow; but hist! what is it? Ah, that’s right. Wrayford is glad to hear that the chief of the Red Dwats is so friendly to the Queen, and his request for arms and ammunition shall be sent to the proper quarter. Now, then, what does he say to that?”

One of the interpreters spoke to say that the great chief of the Red Dwats would camp in the valley above, so as to be close at hand if any of the sons of Shaitan who had been molesting the fort before should dare to approach again. They were all gone back now to their own valleys in fear, through his approach, and now the two great English Generals and their men might sleep in peace.

“Thank you. Bravo! Encore, Sambo!” said Roberts softly. “Going? Pray remember me to all at home.”

“Ugh!” raged out Bracy below his breath; “if ever treachery was plainly marked upon a smiling, handsome face, it is there in that scoundrel’s. Roberts, we must never trust these men within our guard.”

“Most certainly not, old fellow; but I suppose we must let them go back in safety, like the noble ambassadors they are.”

“What is going on now?” said Bracy. “Why, they’re shaking hands with Colonel Wrayford, English fashion. Surely he is not going to trust them?”

“Seems as if he is,” replied Roberts softly as the young men stood gazing down at the party below. “Perhaps he knows the native character better than we do, and thinks it’s all right.”

“Well, I don’t,” said Bracy shortly, “young as I am. Those fellows have come as spies, and I’m more and more convinced that they are the set who harassed us as we came.”

“I begin to think you are right, old man,” said Roberts.

“Well, of all – That scoundrel is going to offer to shake hands with Graves!”

“No, he isn’t,” replied Roberts softly. “Doesn’t like the look of the old man’s eyes. Made a sort of shy at him. Now they’re off, after picking up all that they could about our strength and position. Well, it isn’t right, perhaps, for us to pull our superior’s actions to pieces; but I don’t think Wrayford is right.”

“And Graves seems to think as you do,” said Bracy thoughtfully as he watched the departure of the chiefs. “Look! those fellows are not missing much with their rolling eyes. I wonder what they think of our lads. The poor fellows don’t show up very well against these stout hill-men.”

“They showed up well enough yesterday,” said Roberts tartly. “Pooh! What has size got to do with it? Well, I’m glad they’ve gone; but I should like to know what they are saying to one another.”

“Talking about the strength of the gates, you may depend, and whether this would be a good place to make their first attack when they come to put the garrison to the sword,” said Bracy slowly.

“Well, you are a cheerful sort of a fellow for a companion,” said Roberts, laughing.

“That’s what they came for, cheerful or not.”

“Perhaps so; but coming to do a thing and doing it are two different matters. Well, the show is over, and we may come down. Let’s go and see about getting our new quarters a little more ship-shape. I want to see what the men are doing.”

“Not yet,” said Bracy. “I want to watch these fellows back to their own men, to see what they are about.”

“You can’t tell from this distance.”

“Not much; but my glass is very powerful, and I want to try and judge from their actions what is going on yonder.”

“All right; I’ll stop with you.”

Two-thirds of the guards mounted were dismissed, and soon after, the walls and towers were pretty well deserted. The two young officers remained, however, Captain Roberts dreamily watching the wondrous panorama of snowy mountains spreading out to the north as far as the eye could reach, while Bracy sat with his double glass carefully focussed and resting upon the stone parapet, watching the departing chiefs, who strode away looking proud and haughty, and apparently without holding any communication with one another till they were well on their way, when Bracy noted that they suddenly began to talk with a good deal of animation.

Bracy kept up his watch till they reached their followers, who closed round them in a very excited way.

It was just then that Roberts roused himself from his reverie.

“Hullo, there!” he cried; “most done? Can’t make out anything, can you?”

“Yes; there’s a regular mob of fighting-men crowding round those fellows, and they’re holding a regular meeting.”

“Good little glass. I say, old man, I’ll swop with you. Mine’s a bigger and better-looking binoc. than yours. Anything else?”

“One of the party – I think it’s the one with the scar on his face, but I can’t be sure – ”

“Can’t you tell him?”

“Not at this distance.”

“Then I won’t swop. It’s not such a good glass as I thought. Well, what next?”

“He’s telling his experiences, and the beggars are lancing about, roaring with laughter.”

“Can you see that?”

“Yes, quite plainly.”

“Then I think I will swop, after all. Can’t hear what they say, I suppose?”

“Hardly.”

“Humph! Not so good a glass, then, as Pat’s, that brought the church so near that he could hear the singing. Go on.”

“He’s gesticulating. Now he’s marching up and down stiffly like Graves did while the conference was going on.”

“Well, of all the impudence! But no flam: can you really make out all that?”

“Perfectly. Now he is taking off his puggree and pretending to take a handkerchief out and mopping his bald head.”

“Like Wrayford does. Why, the scoundrel stood as stiff as a poker when he was here and let the others do the talking.”

“Yes, while he was studying his part. Now they’re laughing again and stamping about and holding their sides. He is going through everything he noted for their amusement, and telling them what absurd-looking people the English are.”

“Oh yes,” said Roberts; “we’re a very humorous lot, we British – very amusing indeed, but best at a distance, for we’re rather prickly, and easily induced to make use of our knives. What next?”

“The show’s over; and look – you can see that?”

“What! that flashing in the sunshine?”

“Yes; every man has drawn his sword and is waving it in the air. He must have said something which excited them.”

“Made ’em all draw and swear that they’d cut us to pieces and fling us in the river, I dare say.”

"Oh, there you are!" cried a familiar voice, and the tall, thin subaltern hurried to their side. "I say, what do you think of that for a fit?" he cried, stopping, and then holding out one foot. "Just as if they had been made for me."

"If you say any more about them I'll take them away again," said Bracy, smiling.

"Then mum it is, for I wouldn't be so cruel to my poor plantigrades. They haven't been so happy and comfortable for months. Watching those Dwats?"

"I've been doing so," said Bracy, closing his glass and returning it to its case. "What do you think of them?"

"Think they're a set of humbugs. They've come here hunting for information and pretending to be friends; and the worst of it is, old Wrayford believes in them."

"Nonsense! He couldn't be so weak," cried Roberts.

"Oh, couldn't he? But he could. He hasn't been the same man since he was cut down about a month ago. Poor old man! he's as brave as a lion still, but he has done several weak things lately which none of us like. What do you think that thick-lipped, black-bearded ruffian proposed?"

"I don't know," said Bracy eagerly.

"To send on a couple of hundred of his cut-throats to help to defend the fort against the enemy."

"He proposed that?" cried Roberts.

"To be sure he did."

"But Colonel Wrayford," said Bracy, "he declined, of course – at once?"

"No, he didn't. He hesitated, and told your old man that an ally would be so valuable, and that it would not do, hemmed in as we are, to offend a powerful chief who desired to be friendly."

"But that's absurd," cried Roberts.

"Of course it is," replied Drummond. "The only way to deal with these fellows is to make 'em afraid of you, for they're as treacherous as they are proud. But there, it's all right."

"All right, when the senior Colonel here temporises with the enemy!"

"It was only one of his weak moments. He won't do anything of that kind. He'll talk it over with your old man and think better of it. Besides, we shouldn't let him."

"Oh, come, that's a comfort," said Roberts, glancing at Bracy, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Yes, I see," said Drummond, "you're chaffing because I bounced a bit; but I'm blessed if you don't have to bounce up here in the mountains if you want to hold your own. I should be nowhere amongst these hill-niggers if I didn't act as if I thought I was the biggest pot under the sun. That's one reason why I was so anxious about my boots. Why, if it hadn't been for you two I couldn't have shown my face before that party this morning. I wouldn't have had them see me with my feet bandaged up like they were for anything. It would have been lowering the dignity of Her Majesty's service in the eyes of the heathen."

"Of course," said Bracy, smiling; "but never mind that. You don't believe in these fellows, then?"

"Oh yes, I do."

"But just now you said –"

"What I say now, that they're a set of impostors, pretending to be friendly so as to see what your regiment was like and how the defences looked."

"There, Roberts!"

"All right, dear boy. Well, when they come again we must show them our boy-regiment, and how they've improved with the excellent practice we can make in firing."

"That's the way," said Drummond cheerily. "They'll soon come again with two or three other tribes, for they've all made up their minds to have us out of this old fort, palace, or whatever they call it."

"And we shan't go – eh?" said Bracy, with a quaint look in his eyes.

"Most decidedly not," replied Drummond. "Now then, you're not on duty. Come and have a look round. Hullo! this is your doctor, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Bracy.

"Don't like the cut of him," said Drummond. "He's doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Same as he did first time we met – last night at the mess – looking me up and down as if thinking about the time when he'll have me to cut up and mend."

"Well, my dear boys," said the Doctor, coming up, rubbing his hands. "Ah! Mr Drummond, I think? Met you last night. Glad to know you. Come, all of you, and have a look at my hospital quarters. Splendid place for the lads. Light, airy, and cool. They can't help getting well."

"But I thought you had no patients, sir," said Drummond.

"Oh yes, two that we brought with us; and if Colonel Wrayford is willing, I propose that your wounded should be brought across, for it's a far better place than where they are. Come on, and I'll show you."

"Thanks, Doctor; I'm just going to see the Colonel," said Roberts.

"That's a pity. You must come without him, then, Bracy."

"I really can't, Doctor; not now. I am going with Roberts."

"Humph! that's unfortunate. Mr Drummond would like to see, perhaps, how we arrange for our men who are down?"

"Most happy, Doctor – "

"Hah!"

"But I am going with my friends here."

"Standing on ceremony – eh, gentlemen?" said the Doctor, smiling quickly and taking a pinch of snuff. "Well, we'll wait a bit. I dare say you will neither of you be so much occupied when you are once brought in to me. I thought perhaps you would like to go over the place first."

Bracy turned and took hold of the Doctor's arm.

"All right, Doctor," he said, laughing. "You had us there on the hip. I'll come."

"What, and keep the Colonel waiting?"

"We can go there afterwards," said Bracy quietly. "Come, Roberts, you can't hold back now."

"Not going to, old fellow. There, Doctor, I beg your pardon. I'll come."

"Granted, my dear boy," said the Doctor quietly. "There, Mr Drummond, you'll have to go alone."

"Not I," said the subaltern, smiling. "I'll come and take my dose with them."

"Good boy!" said the Doctor, smiling.

"I suppose you have not had your two patients taken to the hospital yet?" said Bracy.

"Then you supposed wrongly, sir. There they are, and as comfortable as can be."

"That's capital," cried Bracy, "for I wanted to come and see that poor fellow Gedge."

"That fits," said the Doctor, "for he was asking if you were likely to come to the hospital; but I told him no, for you would be on duty. This way, gentlemen, to my drawing-room, where I am at home night and day, ready to receive my visitors. Now, which of you, I wonder, will be the first to give me a call?"

"Look here, Doctor," said Roberts, "if you're going to keep on in this strain I'm off."

"No, no; don't go. You must see the place. I've a long room, with a small one close by, which I mean to reserve for my better-class patients. – Here, you two," he said to the injured privates lying upon a couple of charpoys, "I've brought you some visitors."

Sergeant Gee's wife, whose services had been enlisted as first nurse, rose from her chair, where she was busy with her needle, to curtsy to the visitors; and Gedge uttered a low groan as he caught up the light cotton coverlet and threw it over his head.

“Look at him,” said the Doctor merrily, and he snatched the coverlet back. “Why, you vain peacock of a fellow, who do you think is going to notice the size of your head?”

“I, for one,” said Bracy, smiling. “Why, Gedge, it is nothing like so big as it was.”

The lad looked at him as if he doubted his words.

“Ain’t it, sir? Ain’t it really?”

“Certainly not.”

“Hoo-roar, then! who cares? If it isn’t so big now it’s getting better, ’cos it was getting bigger and bigger last night – warn’t it, sir?”

“Yes,” said the Doctor; “but the night’s rest and the long sleep gave the swelling time to subside.”

“The which, please, sir.”

“The long sleep,” said the Doctor tartly.

“Please, sir, I didn’t get no long sleep.”

“Nonsense, man!”

“Well, you ask him, sir. I never went to sleep – did I, pardner?”

“No,” said his wounded companion. “We was talking all night when we wasn’t saying *Hff!* or *Oh!* or *Oh dear!* or *That’s a stinger!* – wasn’t we, Gedge, mate?”

“That’s right, pardner. But it don’t matter, sir – do it? – not a bit, as the swelling’s going down?”

“Not a bit,” said Bracy, to whom this question was addressed. “There, we are not going to stay. Make haste, my lad, and get well. I’m glad you are in such good quarters.”

“Thank ye, sir, thank ye. Quarters is all right, sir; but I’d rather be in the ranks. So would he – wouldn’t you, pardner?”

His fellow-sufferer, who looked doubtful at Gedge’s free-and-easy way of talking, glancing the while at the Doctor to see how he would take it, nodded his head and delivered himself of a grunt, as the little party filed out of the long, whitewashed, barn-like room.

“A couple of wonderful escapes,” said the Doctor, “and quite a treat. I’ve had nothing to see to but cases of fever, and lads sick through eating or drinking what they ought not to. But I dare say I shall be busy now.”

“Thanks, Doctor,” said Roberts as they returned to the great court of the large building. “Glad you’ve got such good quarters for your patients.”

“Thanks to you for coming,” replied the Doctor; and the parties separated, Drummond leading his new friends off to introduce them to some of the anxious, careworn ladies who had accompanied their husbands in the regiment, and of the Civil Service, who had come up to Ghittah at a time when a rising of the hill-tribes was not for a moment expected. On his way he turned with a look of disgust to Bracy.

“I say,” he said, “does your Doctor always talk shop like that?”

“Well, not quite, but pretty frequently – eh, Roberts?”

The latter smiled grimly.

“He’s a bit of an enthusiast in his profession, Drummond,” he said. “Very clever man.”

“Oh, is he? Well, I should like him better if he wasn’t quite so much so. Did you see how he looked at me?”

“No.”

“I did. Just as if he was turning me inside out, and I felt as if he were going all over me with one of those penny trumpet things doctors use to listen to you with. I know he came to the conclusion that I was too thin, and that he ought to put me through a course of medicine.”

“Nonsense.”

“Oh, but he did. Thank goodness, though, I don’t belong to your regiment.”

The young men were very warmly welcomed in the officers' quarters; and it seemed that morning as if their coming had brought sunshine into the dreary place, every worn face beginning to take a more hopeful look.

Drummond took this view at once, as he led the way back into the great court.

"Glad I took you in there," he said; "they don't look the same as they did yesterday. Just fancy, you know, the poor things sitting in there all day so as to be out of the reach of flying shots, and wondering whether their husbands will escape unhurt for another day, and whether that will be the last they'll ever see."

"Terrible!" said Bracy.

"Yes, isn't it? Don't think I shall ever get married, as I'm a soldier; for it doesn't seem right to bring a poor, tender lady out to such places as this. It gives me the shivers sometimes; but these poor things, they don't know what it will all be when they marry and come out."

"And if they did they would come all the same," said Roberts bluffly.

"Well, it's quite right," said Bracy thoughtfully. "It's splendidly English and plucky for a girl to be willing to share all the troubles her husband goes through."

"So it is," said Drummond. "I've always admired it when I've read of such things; and it makes you feel that heroines are much greater than heroes."

"It doesn't seem as if heroes were made nowadays," said Bracy, laughing. "Hullo! where are you taking us?"

"Right up to the top of the highest tower to pay your respects to the British Raj. I helped the colour-sergeant to fix it up there. We put up a new pole twice as high as the old one, so as to make the enemy waxy, and show him that we meant to stay."

"All right; we may as well see every place while we're about it."

"You can get a splendid lookout over the enemy's camping-ground, too, from up here."

"Then you still think that these are enemies?"

"Certain," said Drummond; and words were spared for breathing purposes till the flag-pole was reached, and the young subaltern passed his arm round it and stood waiting while his companions took a good long panoramic look.

"There you are," he then said. "See that green patch with the snow-pyramid rising out of it?"

"Yes; not big, is it?"

"Awful, and steep. That mountain's as big as Mont Blanc; and from that deodar forest right up the slope is the place to go for bear."

"Where are the pheasants?" asked Roberts, taking out his glass.

"Oh, in the woods down behind the hills there," said Drummond, pointing. "Splendid fellows; some of reddish-brown with white spots, and bare heads all blue and with sort of horns. Then you come upon some great fellows, the young ones and the hens about coloured like ours, but with short, broad tails. But you should see the cock-birds. Splendid. They have grand, greeny-gold crests, ruby-and-purple necks, a white patch on their back and the feathers all about it steely-blue and green, while their broad, short tails are cinnamon-colour."

"You seem to know all about them," said Bracy, laughing.

"Shot lots. They're thumpers, and a treat for the poor ladies, when I get any; but it has been getting worse and worse lately. Couldn't have a day's shooting without the beggars taking pop-shots at you from the hills. I don't know where we should have been if their guns shot straight."

"Well, we shall have to drive the scoundrels farther off," said Roberts, "for I want some shooting."

"Bring your gun?" cried Drummond, eagerly.

"Regular battery. So did he; didn't you, Bracy?"

There was no reply.

"Bracy, are you deaf?"

"No, no," said the young man hurriedly, as he stood in one corner of the square tower, resting his binocular upon the parapet, and gazing through it intently.

"See a bear on one of the hills?" said Drummond sharply.

"No; I was watching that fir-wood right away there in the hollow. Are they patches of snow I can see in there among the trees?"

"Where – where?" cried Drummond excitedly.

"Come and look. The glass is set right, and you can see the exact spot without touching it."

Bracy made way, and Roberts stepped to the other side of the tower and looked over the wide interval to where their visitors of the morning were forming a kind of camp, as if they meant to stay.

"Phee-ew!"

Drummond gave a long, low whistle.

"Snow?" said Bracy.

"No snow there; at this time of year. That's where some of the enemy are, then – some of those who disappeared so suddenly yesterday. Those are their white gowns you can see, and there's a tremendous nest of them."

"Enemies of our visitors this morning?"

"They said so," replied Drummond, with a mocking laugh; "but it seems rather rum for them to come and camp so near one another, and neither party to know. Doesn't it to you?"

"Exactly," cried Bracy. "They would be sure to be aware, of course."

"Yes, of course. What idiots they must think us! I'd bet a penny that if we sent out scouts they'd find some more of the beauties creeping down the valleys. Well, it's a great comfort to know that this lot on the slope here are friends."

"Which you mean to be sarcastic?" said Bracy.

"Which I just do. I say, I'm glad I brought you up here, and that you spied out that party yonder. Come away down, and let's tell the Colonel. He'll alter his opinion then."

"And send out a few scouts?" said Bracy.

Drummond shook his head.

"Doesn't do to send out scouts here."

"Why?"

"They don't come back again."

"Get picked off?"

"Yes – by the beggars who lie about among the stones. We have to make sallies in force when we go from behind these walls. But, I say, you two haven't had much fighting, I suppose?"

"None, till the bit of a brush as we came here."

"Like it?"

"Don't know," said Bracy. "It's very exciting."

"Oh, yes, it's exciting enough. We've had it pretty warm here, I can tell you. I begin to like it now."

"You do?"

"Yes; when I get warm. Not at first, because one's always thinking about whether the next bullet will hit you – 'specially when the poor fellows get dropping about you; but you soon get warm. It makes you savage to see men you know going down without being able to get a shot in return. Then you're all right. You like it then."

"Humph!" ejaculated Bracy, and his brow wrinkled. "But had we not better go down and give the alarm?"

"Plenty of time. No need to hurry. They're not going to attack; only lying up waiting to see if those beggars who came this morning can do anything by scheming. I fancy they're getting a bit short of lead, for we've had all kinds of rubbish shot into the fort here – bits of iron, nails, stones, and broken bits of pot. We've seen them, too, hunting about among the rocks for our spent

bullets. You'll find them very nice sort of fellows, ready to shoot at you with something from a distance to give you a wound that won't heal, and cut at you when they can come to close quarters with tulwars and knives that are sharp as razors. They will heal, for, as our doctor says, they are beautiful clean cuts that close well. Never saw the beauty of them, though. He's almost as bad as your old chap for that."

"But we had better go down and give the alarm," said Bracy anxiously.

"None to give," said Drummond coolly. "It's only a bit of news, and that's how it will be taken. Nothing to be done, but perhaps double the sentries in the weak places. Not that they're very weak, or we shouldn't have been hen; when you came."

"Well, I shall feel more comfortable when my Colonel knows – eh, Roberts?"

"Yes," said the latter, who had stood frowning and listening; "and I don't think he will be for sitting down so quietly as your old man."

"Not yet. Be for turning some of them out."

"Of course."

"Very spirited and nice; but it means losing men, and the beggars come back again. We used to do a lot of that sort of thing, but of late the policy has been to do nothing unless they attacked, and then to give them all we knew. Pays best."

"I don't know," said Roberts as they were descending fast; "it can't make any impression upon the enemy."

"Shows them that the English have come to stay," interposed Bracy.

"Yes, perhaps; but they may read it that we are afraid of them on seeing us keep behind walls."

A minute or two later the news was borne to headquarters, where the two Colonels were in eager conference, and upon hearing it Colonel Graves leaped up and turned to his senior as if expecting immediate orders for action; but his colleague's face wrinkled a little more, and he said quietly:

"Then that visit was a mere *ruse* to put us off our guard and give them an opportunity for meeting the fresh odds with which they have to contend."

"Of course it was," said Colonel Graves firmly.

"Well, there is nothing to be alarmed about; they will do nothing till they have waited to see whether we accept the offer of admitting as friends a couple of hundred Ghazees within the gates. – Thank you, gentlemen, for your information. There is no cause for alarm."

The young officers left their two seniors together, and as soon as they were alone Drummond frowned.

"Poor old Colonel!" he said sadly; "he has been getting weaker for days past, and your coming has finished him up. Don't you see?"

"No," said Bracy sharply. "What do you mean?"

"He has Colonel Graves to lean on now, and trust to save the ladies and the place. I shouldn't be surprised to see him give up altogether and put himself in the doctor's hands. Well, you fellows will help us to do the work?"

"Yes," said Bracy quickly, "come what may."

"We're going to learn the art of war in earnest now, old chap," said Roberts as soon as they were alone again.

"Seems like it."

"Yes. I wonder whether we shall take it as coolly as this young Drummond."

"I wonder," said Bracy; "he's an odd fish."

"But I think I like him," said Roberts.

"Like him?" replied Bracy. "I'm sure I do."

Chapter Nine

Warm Corners and Cold

It was a glorious day, with the air so bright, elastic, and inspiring that the young officers of the garrison felt their position irksome in the extreme. For the Colonel's orders were stringent. The limits allowed to officer or man outside the walls were very narrow, and all the time hill, mountain, forest, and valley were wooing them to come and investigate their depths.

It was afternoon when Roberts, Bracy, and Drummond, being off duty, had strolled for a short distance along the farther side of the main stream, and paused at last in a lovely spot where a side gorge came down from the hills, to end suddenly some hundred feet above their heads; and from the scarped rock the stream it brought down made a sudden leap, spread out at first into drops, which broke again into fine ruin, and reached the bottom like a thick veil of mist spanned by a lovely rainbow. The walls of rock, bedewed by the ever-falling water, were a series of the most brilliant greens supplied by the luxuriant ferns and mosses, while here and there, where their seeds had found nourishment in cleft and chasm, huge cedars, perfect in their pyramidal symmetry, rose spiring up to arrow-like points a hundred, two hundred feet in the pure air. Flowers dotted the grassy bottom; birds flitted here and there, and sang. There was the delicious lemony odour emitted by the deodars, and a dreamy feeling of its being good to live there always amidst so much beauty; for other music beside that of birds added to the enhancement – music supplied by the falling waters, sweet, silvery, tinkling, rising and falling, mingling with the deep bass of a low, humming roar.

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