

FIGHTERS FOR THE FLAG

IV.—THE SOUTH WALES BORDERERS

YOU have seen them marching in many a state procession. A fine regiment in their scarlet uniforms with facings of grass green, their band swelling in their regimental march, "Men of Harlech," one of the greatest national songs ever written. And you must have noticed the silver wreath which is borne upon the staff of the king's colours. That wreath is a signal honour signally deserved, for it is carried in memory of one of the most splendid of the many splendid deeds which made glorious the history of the British Army.

In South Africa the seventies of the last century drew to a close amid war and rumours of war, and those who were best able to judge whether events were tending looked with anxiety to Zululand, then ruled by Cetewayo, a savage and powerful potentate. Again and again he harried the white settlers in his districts. All around the borders of Natal and Zululand lie spots still looked on as haunted ground, for there solitary farms were burnt, there lonely travellers were murdered by the men of Cetewayo. The British Government protested, of course; the British Government demanded indemnity and apology, but the black king was shifty as well as cruel. He would not give satisfactory replies, and finally an ultimatum was despatched to him early in January, 1879.

The time limit having expired, a force was despatched under Lord Chelmsford, the commander-in-chief. It was decided to divide the army into five separate columns, each to enter Zululand at a different point and to march to Ulundi, the capital, as the general goal. Of the five columns the third was the most important, consisting as it did of the first and second battalions of the 24th Regiment, as the South Wales Borderers were called then; a squadron of mounted infantry, two hundred Natal Volunteers, one hundred and fifty of the Natal Mounted Police, six guns, and three battalions of the Native Contingent. With this column rode Chelmsford himself.

Full of confidence and high spirits, the force reached the banks of the Buffalo River, the boundary between Natal and Zululand, and every man in it was eager to come to grips. Already on their march they had passed scenes of massacre; they had heard stories which had made them set their teeth and long for vengeance on the savage foe.

The crossing of the Buffalo was full of difficulty. The rainy season was not yet over; the river foamed in full flood, and the broken country on either bank was a mass of jagged rock and boulders jutting from wastes of morass and bog almost impossible for the transit of the artillery. In the face of enormous difficulties the river was crossed at Rorke's Drift—"drift" being the local equivalent to "ford." Here upon the Zululand bank a trader named Rorke had founded a trading station, which had developed into the headquarters of a little band of missionaries. A mission church had been built. The clergyman's house was near it—a long, low building with a verandah looking towards the river and a cluster of huts and other buildings around.

The village was deserted—all the non-combatants had had to fly at the approach of war—so the Army decided to form a base here, making the church into a store and the clergyman's house the hospital. Arrangements were hastily made, then the main body started for the interior, leaving Rorke's Drift in

charge of a handful of men under a couple of lieutenants. So bad was the going that they had to make the road as they went, shots being constantly exchanged, with small bodies of the enemy who tried to harass the advance. But no great damage was done and there was nothing to show that the Zulus were in any great force in the neighbourhood.

As they struggled onward through the swamps one hill was ever a landmark to the eyes of the army, a solitary rock rising sheer as a wall from the plain and isolated from, though backed by, the chain of mountains which cut off the interior.

"Rummy shaped hill that, mate," said one British Tommy to another. "If you look at it from here it is just like a man's hand."

"That's why it was given its name," broke in an old-timer. "The Zulus call it Isandhlwana, which means the Hill of the Little Hand."

So persistently did that solitary rock rise before them that it came to be looked upon as a goal to be desired, and when upon January 20th the tired force encamped under the shadow of its eastern face they felt the first step of importance had been won.

The British officers in command ordered a camp to be formed, the seven hundred wagons of ammunition and stores to be placed at the back, close under the cliff, the tents in front, chief among them a large marquee for the commander-in-chief, from which the British flag flew proudly. But while the men worked, the old-timers, who knew the country, grumbled.

"A laager should be made," they said. "The seven hundred odd wagons should be put end to end to make a barrier round the camp, they should not be placed uselessly behind. With them in front we shall have shelter if the enemy try to rush us."

Whether their protests reached the officers does not seem certain; at any rate, no notice was taken of them. British text-books, written long before with view to different warfare, were thought of more importance than practical experience, and having confidence in their officers the men were also inclined to laugh at the forebodings of the colonials. It was all very well for a little company of traders or missionaries to go into laager and seek shelter behind their wagons, but the British Army had no need of such precautions, especially when fighting a purely savage foe.

That night all went well, and the next morning two separate parties of mounted infantry and natives were sent out to reconnoitre while the main body remained in camp. Later, messengers returned with disquieting news. Almost as soon as they had left the camp the officers in charge of the detachments had discovered great activity among small bodies of the enemy moving on the distant hills; then had come certain information that the Zulus were in great force among the Inhazaty Mountains, some twelve miles away. The first idea was to storm the position, but the unpleasant discovery that the Native Contingent could not be relied upon. They bolted like rabbits at sight of the foe, and this had led to a modification of the plan, and finally the officers decided to remain where they were and send back for reinforcements before starting the offensive.

Lord Chelmsford decided to reply in person; and in the grey dawn of the next morning he rode out of the camp to join the advanced party, taking with him the Second Battalion of the South Wales Borderers (to give the regiment its present name) the mounted infantry and four of the guns. Thus the camp under the shadow of the Hill of the Little Hand was left in charge of the First Battalion of the Borderers and the Natal Volunteers and Police, with two guns and most of the Native Contingent who had been sent back by the advance party.

It was close on eight o'clock in the morning, and Chelmsford and

his men had been gone for some hours, when scouts reported that a body of the enemy was approaching from the north-east. That was hardly said ere another scout rushed up. The enemy were coming from the south-west, he said, and before the words were well spoken came yet another and another, all with the same tale of the approaching foe. In overwhelming numbers the Zulus were swooping from every quarter upon the unprotected camp.

All was excitement, and preparations for defence were hurriedly made, though no one seems to have thought of making use of the wagons in the old-timers' way. They were left under the shadow of the hill, but their oxen, which had been grazing on the plain, were brought in and tied to the poles, the horses were secured, the guns placed in position, and the Native Contingent was pushed forward among the hills on the left.

Throughout the day the place was a chaos of conflicting rumour. "The enemy is approaching in three columns"—"The enemy is in force behind the hills"—"The enemy is in full retreat," were but some of the reports which passed from mouth to mouth, and just as varied were the conjectures as to the Zulus strength.

On the 24th the storm broke. Two troops had been sent out to reconnoitre, and when about five miles from the camp they met the enemy in overpowering force. An officer rode along back to the camp to carry the warning—a deed of great heroism—while the rest deserted by their native donga, or steep ravine, and there fought to the finish. They were annihilated to the last man. Great was their heroism, splendid the face they showed the foe, though their fate has been somewhat overshadowed by the greatness of the catastrophe which followed close upon it.

Flushed with victory, drunk with slaughter, the Zulu impi rushed for the camp, attacking in a semi-circle, their favourite formation, while another huge detachment marched to the British left to hold the pathway to the river and so cut off means of escape.

"If I go back I am killed—if I go forward I am killed—it is better to go forward," is the chorus of a Zulu war-song, voicing the spirit which sent them into battle giants, all, seeming taller still because of the plume of feathers, of ten two feet high, which crowned each dusky head. Naked they were, these chanting warriors save for kilts of dangling ox tails.

For arms, each man carried a shield of hide on his left arm, its colour varying according to his regiment, while his right hand flourished a broad-bladed spear—his bangwan or stabbing-assegai. As further arms they all had smaller assegais or javelins for throwing and a great many had rifles, though all were indifferent shots and none seem to have made much use of the weapon.

At first the defence seemed successful. To quote an historian: "The 24th, one of the smartest battalions in the service, was dealing withering volleys, and Basutos and volunteers fought stubbornly for the homesteads of Natal. The enemy fell in hundreds yet kept advancing with undiminished resolution. Rank after rank of the foremost were swept away but still others pressed forward. The air was rent with the noise of battle."

So gallantly the South Wales Borderers stood their ground, so fierce was the hail of shell and bullet pouring from cannon's mouth and rifle muzzle, that even the fatalism of Cetewayo's warriors was not proof against it. Under that rain of death the dusky ranks wavered; here and there they broke, and the chanting savages broke for cover. It seemed as if the British had won the day. Hope thrilled high, when the Zulus rallied to fling themselves against both flanks, and under the onslaught the Native Contingent gave way, fleeing in wild disorder, and thus leaving the Borderers un-

protected in the rear.

But the panic which had sent the Basutos mad had left the British untouched. Hastily, a sort of square was formed, and again the square was driven back from every side. Had there been ample ammunition the flank attack would have failed as the one in front had done, but in the midst of the struggle the supply ran short. The British had to cease firing; they must depend on bayonets alone.

The Zulus were quick to take advantage of the lull. In a mighty wave of black glistening bodies, of tossing plumes, of blood-drinking, bloodthirsty weapons, the hordes rushed the camp. So sudden was the attack that but few of our men had time to fix their bayonets. Then came fighting hand-to-hand, fighting to the death, as the white men were engulfed by the black. High above the riot rose a shrill chorus in the Zulus tongue: "Kill, kill," they chanted. "Kill the white men, kill."

The British tried to rally even when rally was vain. The South Wales Borderers still formed their square; where they had taken their stand there they remained; but of the rest, some tried to retreat along the ten-mile way which led back to Rorke's Drift. And there the second army of the foe waited. To quote the historian again:

"Horse and foot, British and Zulus, friend and foe, in one writhing, slaughtering mass slowly pushed through the camp towards the road to Rorke's Drift. But of the 24th few if any left the ground where they had fought so well. The battalion fell and lay by companies, surrounded by slain enemies."

"When the battlefield was revisited the remains of officers and men were found in the line of their last parade. No man had limped; all had died, as they had lived, shoulder to shoulder."

In these words an epic is told.

The First Battalion of the South Wales Borderers was blotted out, though still along the ten-mile road the hopeless fight continued, and deeds of heroism were done on every hand. Gunners went back to certain death to spike their guns; an officer, Captain Shepstone—who had earlier brought the warning from the donga—reached comparative safety, looked back and found his colonel missing. "I must go and look for the chief," he said, and so rode back into the surging foe. His search was successful. He found his chief, and they died side by side.

None but mounted men reached the valley road to the river, and even they were at a disadvantage, for so rough was the country that the active Zulus could outstrip most horses. The black foe swarmed everywhere; fleeing men were dragged from their saddles, assegai and trampled under the hoofs of the horses dashing behind. "The Fugitives' Path" the road is called to this day, and those who saw its horror told how for all its miles it was one great scene of ghastly murder. Some few reached the river, but of these the majority died in the floods, so that but a handful struggled to the further bank. When the roll was called our losses were set down at 837 officers and men (including two colonels) and a very large number of natives. Of Zulus more than two thousand dead were counted.

How Lieutenants Coghill and Melville saved the flag is a well-known story, but its greatness justifies its repetition.

Both the young officers belonged to the South Wales Borderers, and when they saw that all was lost they resolved to save the colours. They were mounted and their horses were good. They drew their swords and, riding shoulder to shoulder, charged the foe.

So splendid was their rush that they literally carved their way through the mass, though the stabbing assegais lurged at them from every side, and giant blacks

sought to snatch the reins and drag the horses down. In spite of everything, through everything they forced their way, with pursuers yelling close behind. They reached the river's bank some distance from Rorke's Drift and plunged into the current.

Coghill alone scrambled up the further bank. There he drew rein to breathe his horse and looked behind, and Melville himself, exhausted and wounded, was struggling feebly in mid-stream.

In that one glance Coghill must have seen all the peril which lay behind, must have looked ahead where lay the open road to safety. Then he turned his horse's head and, plunging into the river, struggled back to his drowning comrade.

He reached him in time to save him, together they turned towards the Natal shore when another bullet did its work and their only horse died. Bleeding from a dozen wounds, exhausted by their superhuman efforts, the two young men gained the bank. There they died together, in their last sleep still guarding the flag they had given all to save.

The joint monument to their memory is one of the few things of beauty to be found in St. Paul's Cathedral.

One of the most thrilling adventures of the great fight was that of Colonel Lonsdale. He had been with the Second Battalion of the South Wales Borderers, who had ridden from the camp with Lord Chelmsford in the dawn, and with the rising of the sun he had developed fever. As day went on his symptoms became more serious, so that at last he determined to ride back to the camp to seek medical aid. Quite alone he went, and by the time its fires came in sight, night was at hand and he was half delirious, reeling in his saddle, his senses dazed.

As he approached the camp it did not occur to him that anything was wrong, many of the men seemed lying on the ground asleep, but others in red coats were sitting about the camp fires. He was close to where the sentries should have been when a shot rang out, whizzing near his face, and at the same moment he saw a gigantic Zulus, his assegai dripping blood, stride from the tent which had been the commander-in-chief's. In a flash he realized what had happened, he knew that the red-coated men sitting about the fires had black faces, and as the alarm was given he turned his horse and rode for dear life from the place.

Fortunately he outdistanced his pursuers, and returning to Lord Chelmsford, was able to save the other battalion from the trap. They were actually returning to the camp when he met them, and but for his warning must have walked blindly into the arms of the foe.

Later on, scouts reported that the camp had been abandoned by the enemy, and Chelmsford with his Second Battalion of the Borderers returned to find it a place of three thousand corpses. In that dreadful company the men kept watch all through the night, and in the morning continued their retreat to Rorke's Drift, where the Second Battalion was to do deeds rivalling the heroism of the First.

Space does not allow the story of Rorke's Drift to be told in full, for pages would be needed to do justice to the tale how one company of the South Wales Borderers held the little mission station against thirty thousand foes, losing in killed alone the appalling number of twenty-one officers and five hundred and ninety men. But the end was victory, for they kept the flag flying, until reinforcements came, and the world, rejoiced with their heroism, rejoiced when Queen Victoria commanded that henceforward of all British

regiments the South Wales Borderers alone should bear that silver wreath upon their flagstaff in honour of Isandhlwana and of Rorke's Drift, and in memory of how young Coghill and Melville died to save the colours.

Great as these deeds were, they have been almost equalled many times in the long history of the South Wales Borderers or "Howard's Greens," as they are nicknamed from their green facings and the name of a colonel who commanded them early in the eighteenth century. They were founded in 1689 and their records tell brilliant stories of Blenheim, of Ramillies, of Malplaquet, of the storming of the Cape in 1806, of Talavera, Salamanca, Vittoria and the Punjab.

In 1849, at Chillianwallah, they made another splendid stand, hardly less heroically disastrous than that in the shadow of the Hill of the Little Hand, for then, as later, the regiment faced appalling odds, standing its ground until practically annihilated. It is small wonder that up to the outbreak of the present war, of the entire British Army, the South Wales Borderers had won more Victoria Crosses than any other regiment.

Next—
THE 3RD DRAGON GUARDS.

Notes From Change Islands

The weather is very blustery and cold. Poor chance for seals this spring here owing to so much western winds. Also will have to go sea for them this spring unless conditions alter quickly.

Mosdell must be out of his mind to think that Kean is well qualified for a seat in the Upper House. It will be considered the biggest insult ever hurled at the Colony. If Sir Edward can twist the constitution enough to put Abe Kean in the Upper House surely he will have to twist it off in two, won't he?

The Council turned out on the 23rd February. It was a grand time and all enjoyed themselves well. It was the best turn-out yet. A nice tea was served by the ladies, after our walk around, and followed by a dance. All are more solid than ever or Coaker and the Union.

Mosdell might just as well try to level down the South Side Hills of St. John's as to try to put down Coaker and the Union.

All are very busy repairing cod traps and building motor boats.

There will be some "flash" boats in Change Islands after this winter's work. Most of them are getting built by model and some of them are dainties. Building by model is very near done away with and the model and draft are taking its place.

Mr. Halfyard's return at the next election is sure. He will poll all the votes he got at the last election and two-thirds of what Fitzgerald got as well.

The Society of United Fishermen paraded on the second of February and had a grand time. A grand tea was served and followed by a dance. It was job to tell who was Bell of the Ball.

CORRESPONDENT:
Change Islands, Mar. 4, 1916.

A QUESTION.

HOW are these rubbers of yours wearing? What! You've worn out two pairs and the third are fast going? I'm no clairvoyant, but I can tell one thing without even glancing at your feet: You have NOT been wearing BEAR BRAND. Well, it's no use crying over broken rubbers, but take my advice and buy a pair of BEAR BRAND immediately. How will you know them? You will find the "Bear" stamped on the shank, and the lining is purple—a royal color because the rubbers are fit for a king. You should get the rest of the winter out of one pair.

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