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R. G. ASH & CO., St. John's, Wholesale Distributors

Beautiful Cynthia;

OR

Victory After Many Defeats.

CHAPTER XXI. A LITTLE WAR.

Death, when it is visible and comes out to meet you in the open, can be very often is, faced with a cheerful countenance and a resolute heart; but the death that lurks behind a rock, that darts out suddenly with a little puff of smoke, one sharp ping of a Mauser bullet, threatens to become a hideous, nerve-destroying terror.

Every possible precaution was taken; the scouting was excellent; but they were fighting in a land where every man is a born scout, where such a war as this is regarded as a glorious and amusing game, where your foe would rather fight than eat or make love, and where men snipe at an enemy as nonchalantly as a Swiss shoots at a target in a rifle gallery for nuts or brass brooches.

All day, and not seldom at night, men dropped before their officers' eyes under the deadly firing of the hillmen. And not the men only. Promotion among the officers had been rapid, though the horrible little game had been running so short a time; Darrel was captain now, but the joy

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that should have been his at getting his company was marred and embittered by the thought of the dear, good gallant friend into whose place he had stepped, and who had died in Darrel's arms, gasping with a smile: "Jolly good aim, Frayne! The beggars can shoot! You've got your company!"

Every now and then the colonel, who loved his men, and who suffered almost the agonies of a parent as they dropped, sometimes under his very eyes, ordered a charge in the attempt to avenge them; but long before the men, eager as hounds unleashed, could reach the rocks from whence the shots had come, their hidden, sister foes had stolen away, and, gaining some higher and still less accessible spots, had got in a last shot or two before disappearing altogether.

Sometimes a solitary Afridi was run down, and would pay over the stakes quite cheerfully, but there could be no doubt that at present the Afridis were getting all the innings.

The expedition was making for a fort which had been seized and held by the Afridis, and, as a man dying of thirst in a desert longs for water, as the arctic explorer longs for the warmth of a London pavement in August, so the Rextords longed for a sight of that rough and rude fort, stuck up on the hillside, and the foe that held it.

"We ought to make it in a couple of days," said Dunton wistfully, and more to himself than to Darrel. "It's the only one thing I'm on the stretch for. Give me an hour or two's hand-to-hand scuffle with these gentry, no questions asked and no quarter given, and I shall feel that I have not lived in vain, as the old goody-book prefaces used to say. All I'm dreading, Frayne, is that they'll clear out of it and bolt like rabbits, as they've been doing all along, before we get to them."

Darrel shook his head. "They won't do that," he said quietly. "They'll give us a fair fight there. They're looking forward to it as much as we are."

"That's so," assented Dunton, with a grin. "This is their regular prelude, I know; a kind of pleasant little overture before the opera begins; but it's been a pretty long one, and the men, to say nothing of ourselves, are getting a bit sick of it. If we'd only foreseen, been prepared, and got a bigger force in hand."

"It is difficult to foresee this kind of trouble," Darrel broke in quietly but quickly. There was no reproach or rebuke in his tone. But Dunton took the hint, and, coloring, said, as quietly as Darrel had spoken:

"Of course. I wasn't complaining. The fewer the merrier, so far as I'm concerned, and the men think the same. I'll bet."

As he spoke his hand went up to the salute; the colonel had ridden up, his small, wiry figure erect, his mouth hid by the grizzled moustache, grave, yet with a cheerful expression which shone in his cool, gray eyes. He glanced at the two young fellows, reined in his horse and beckoned Darrel. Darrel, attempting to hide a limp, went forward all alert and eager.

"Not at all, sir!" replied Darrel, promptly, and with an admirable air of respectful surprise.

A shadow of a smile crossed the thin, bony face, yellow save for a red scar down one cheek.

"Sorry, thought I saw you limp. My mistake. We shall camp on the next long stretch. The hills are pretty clear; the hillmen are making for the fort, where they'll join the others and show fight, I hope. Tell the men to get all the rest they can; you'll have to call on them to-morrow for a long march. I want to attack at dawn the next day, if possible. Get the doctor to look at your feet, Frayne."

"There's really no need to trouble him, sir," rose to Darrel's lips, but he checked himself and saluted, for it was an order, and obedience is the first and last virtue in a soldier; but as he saluted he wondered whether, if he got his shrunken boots off, he would ever get them on again.

Darkness falls rapidly in such a defile through which the expedition were marching, but before it had closed down upon the valley the camp was made—there were no tents to offer a mark to the wily foe. And an hour or two later the doctor was examining Darrel's feet.

"Pretty bad," he said. "Let your man wash them and rub on this stuff. When we reach the point of fighting with automatic figures of metal and whalebone and the rest of it, instead of men, they'll make the feet of the machine of the very best steel. It's the part of your blessed bodies that gives me more trouble than any other. Some one, Wellington—or was it Napoleon?—said that an army marches on its stomach. That's just one of those smart sayings that makes me mad. You might fill a man up to his back teeth with beef and beer, but if he's got sore feet he's done for. Epigrams are all very well for literary chaps who get their living by firing them off, but they're out of place in a general. Rub it in well and use plenty of it; first-rate stuff."

"It smells bad enough," remarked Darrel, with a smile.

"It's the smell that half does it," retorted the doctor, with a grin. "Hello, how's your poor feet?" he demanded of Dunton, who entered the tent at that moment.

"Oh, first-rate!" replied that youth, with prompt and cheerful mendacity. "Humph! you'll follow the same prescription, my gentle youth. There's enough of the stuff for both of you. What's that?" he asked sharply, as his eye caught a red mark just below the calf which Darrel's native servant, Lal Sef, had exposed. "Shot? Cut? Let me see."

"Oh, go away!" exclaimed Darrel, with nearly real impatience. "It's been there since I was a kid. Got it fooling with an axe."

Dunton grinned. "Had you there, doc?" he remarked gloatingly.

The doctor grinned good-humoredly, and Darrel pulled down his trousers over the scar; for the sight

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of it awoke too many memories. It was in Cynthia's company that he had stolen the axe the woodmen had left while they went to dinner, and it was to show off before her that he had attempted to fell a small tree and had gone near to felling himself. How long ago it seemed, and yet how plainly he saw the boy and girl—the girl who had first watched him with scoffs and jeers which had given place to grief and self-reproach, to something like mortal terror, when the axe had slipped and the blood had run!

"It must have been a pretty bad cut," remarked Dunton casually. "Wonderful how long a scar lasts, and how plainly it shows. You'll carry that as long as you carry anything, Frayne, you bet. It will stick closer than a brother and prove more faithful than a woman."

Darrel's brows knit, and his lips drew straight.

"That will do," he said to Lal Sef curtly. "Take the rest of it to Mr. Dunton's man, and for Heaven's sake get me some water—not much of it." He added quickly, for water was not too plentiful, and he thought of the men who needed it more than he did.

An hour later he was going the rounds. Cheerfulness reigned over all the camp, notwithstanding the occasional ping of a Mauser on the hills. Mr. Thomas Atkins was reclining in various easy positions, with the song and the story which are as necessary as bread and meat, beer and tobacco, to your soldier, and Darrel rolled himself in his blanket to seek the repose which a day's march over a rocky pass under a molten copper sun and the sniping of the crafty Pathans had earned for him.

But, dog-tired as he was, he found it difficult to sleep. The memories started into life by the reference to the scar haunted him, and when he closed his eyes it was to see a mental vision of the girl kneeling beside him, the tears half blinding her as she made a childish and ineffectual attempt to staunch the wound.

They dropped on his foot and felt hot, he remembered. He could feel again the touch of her quivering little hands on his bare leg, could hear her sobbing breath.

He lay and cursed the precious gift of memory, and prayed for forgetfulness, as he had prayed—how often? Not one word of Cynthia had he heard since the night—his last night in England—he had dined with the Northams. And that was months ago. He counted them up, and they seemed ages.

(To be continued.)

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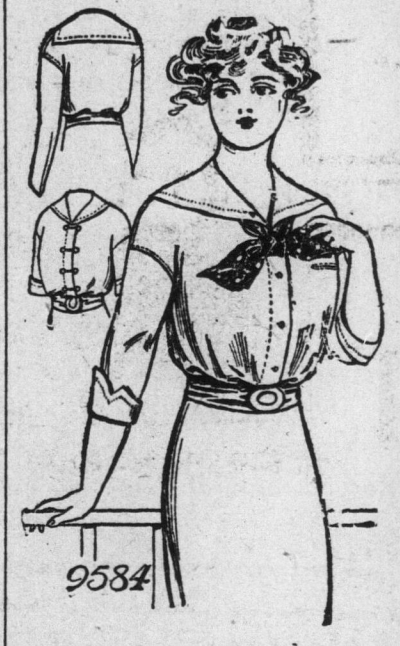
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