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FIGHTERS —FOR THE FLAG

(Continued from page 6)

Then came other rumours, how upon Christmas Day just after the snow had left on his mission Sir William Macnaghten had been shot down in Cabul by a pistol he had presented to his murderer only the day before. Tiding of other murders followed, then news that General Elphinstone and two other officers were held as hostages in the hands of Akbar Khan, the Afghan leader, and that all the rest of the Army with the women and children, were setting out from that bungalow town on the plain, to begin a march of incredible hardship over the mountains in the face of the wintery storms.

The retiring force consisted of six hundred British soldiers, a thousand native cavalrymen, nearly three thousand native infantry, and a very large number of British ladies with their children, nurses and women servants; roughly speaking, five thousand

soldiers and twice that number of non-combatants. Rumour—always so eloquent in the East—had told how Cabul had been evacuated by the British on January 6th. The distance was eighty miles and the road appalling bad, but by the end of three or four days it was felt that the advance guard ought to be in sight.

No one came, the mountain passes seemed deserted save for the few bands of loemen ever in the vicinity, but some noticed that the sky was flecked with black dots ever moving forward to descend beyond the mountains.

They were vultures eager to reach their goal. A week elapsed. It was late in the afternoon of January 12th that the sentry on the gate called out that he saw a moving figure at the mouth of the pass.

All crowded the battlements and watched with breathless eagerness and it was seen that the newcomer was a European, mounted on an exhausted pony. Nearer he came. They saw that he reeled in the saddle and that behind him an Afghan horde appeared in fierce pursuit.

That was enough for the Somersets. The gates were opened and out a little body of volunteers went at the double to surround the solitary man and bring him to the safety of the city.

He was bleeding from a dozen wounds, he was exhausted by hunger and cold and horror, but before he would sit or rest he faltered the outline of his ghastly story, and the garrison knew that he—Doctor Brydon—was the sole survivor of that army of fifteen thousand souls who had set out from Cabul three dreadful days before.

Of the rest a handful of ladies and wounded officers were in the hands of the Afghan leader, Akbar Khan, who had secured them as hostages before the march had well begun, but all the rest had struggled to that Juddulluk crest where the Somersets had made their stand a couple of months before. Arriving there the fugitives had found their way blocked by a quickset hedge, a rampart of furze and while they waited, wondering what to do, the attack had come.

What ensued was not a fight, the odds were too great for that, it was a massacre, one of the most brutal that history has to record.

With the dawn a little body of forty-five European soldiers broke through the barrier and gained the further side. There they made their last stand.

Twenty officers and twenty-five of the rank and file, almost all wounded, they stood together to the end, outnumbered by a hundred to one, but with never a thought of surrender.

When the massacre was over one officer (Captain Souter of the 44th, i.e. The Essex Regiment) was alive with two or three privates, and these were taken prisoners. They were wounded to the verge of death but were afterwards rescued, and it was found that Captain Souter had saved the flag. He had wound it about his body in that last, great stand.

A little handful of the advance guard had crossed the Juddulluk summit before the raising of that barricade, but for them also the enemy were in wait, though fighting step by step, their numbers ever decreasing, they struggled on. A forlorn band of six, three captains, a lieutenant and two regimental surgeons came within sixteen miles of Jellalabad, but one by one the other five were slain in that last lap, and thus Brydon alone rode to the city gates.

The whole eighty miles of mountain pass back to Cabul was one long

horror where men and women and children lay heaped in death, their bodies desecrated with unspeakable mutilations.

Hot with blood-lust quickened by that massacre, the Afghans came swooping on Jellalabad where the Somersets waited. The foe in front, the fear of famine in their midst.

A letter came from Shah Shuja whether really written by him—at the sword's point—or not is doubtful and in it he demanded the surrender of the garrison.

The demand for capitulation was ignored and the garrison determined to hold out to the end.

So February found the Somersets still holding out, after two months' strain, and then it seemed heaven itself had taken sides with their foes, for a great earthquake added to the horror of the siege and the walls which had been rebuilt with such infinite pain and difficulty, crumbled to ruin, their yawning gaps leaving open pathways for the foe.

But the men were undaunted, they set to work to repair the breaches and as they worked another earthquake came to mock them. Yet another shock did untold damage but still they worked on, so that by the close of March the parapets were restored, the breaches built up and every battery re-established.

Then came fresh hope in the news that a British force under General Pollock—quite the right man in the right place—was marching to their relief. But by now hunger was upon them and within those ancient walls the Somersets were desperate.

In the last week of March a gallant sortie was made which was successful, and back to the city came a cheering force, driving five hundred sheep and goats before them.

The sortie put fresh heart into them in many ways, and a week later, April 7th, they sallied forth again in three columns to attack the Afghans who, six thousand strong, were posted on which seemed invincible forts all round the plain.

But so well was the attack planned, so brilliantly did the Somersets carry out their orders, that each of the three companies won a decided victory and then united swept down upon the Afghan headquarters.

In a few hours the battle was over, Akbar Khan was in retreat and the beleaguered garrison were the mas-

ters of the situation. Two days later the relieving force appeared before the city and the friends—having a sense of humour—went out to meet them, playing the old Scots air: "Oh, but you've been lang a-comin'."

The two little forces united to form what was called the Army of Retribution, and the latter part of the campaign brilliantly atoned for the mistakes of the past.

The handful of British ladies and officers who were in the hands of the enemy were rescued and on October 1st there was an official proclamation to the effect that as the disasters in Afghanistan had been avenged upon every scene of past misfortune, the British Army would withdraw.

Which they did, brilliantly, splendidly, having added to their laurels and shown the stuff of which our men are made. But it is an unfortunate coincidence to have to add that Shah Shuja had been assassinated by the subjects who did not want him, and that before they left Afghanistan the British took care Dost Muhammed was safely back on his throne.

Now, of course, the Somersets are at the front again, fighting and dying in a cause infinitely more important than that which led them among the rocks and deserts of Afghanistan, and in that barrier which the Allies have thrown across Northern France is material which knows no defeat. When our battle-line is being tested by German shot and shell and the sulphurous clouds of war hang over us, let us think of the gallant Somersets and remember Jellalabad.

—Next—
Loyal North Lancashire Regiment.

A dispatch from Paris says that Mgr. Ginistry, Bishop of Verdun, was the last civilian to leave that shell-swept city. The Bishop left town on the footboard of a locomotive, the only means of conveyance available at the time.

—Safety First.

In a certain borough in the north of London one man who had been invited to enlist wrote as follows to the local recruiting committee: "Do not feel I ought to leave my wife while there are any single men left at home in this district."



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