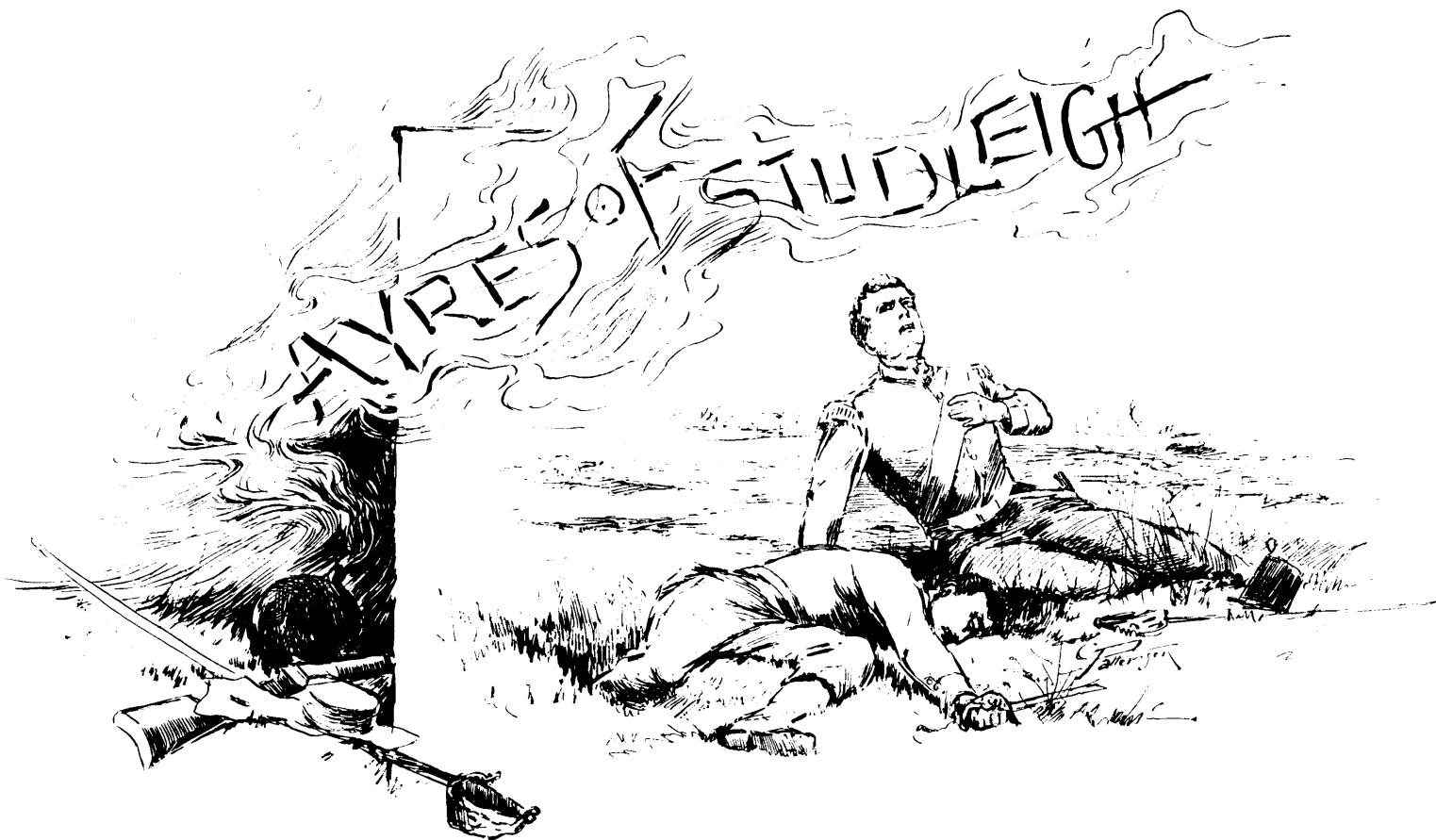




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CHAPTER VII.—THE BURSTING OF THE STORM.

Sunday, the 10th of May, passed over peacefully in Delhi. The usual services were held in the churches, and there were no alarming signs of any disposition to rebellion among the natives. But anxiety still possessed the Europeans, and they rose on Monday morning apprehensive of some great crisis. The uncertainty regarding the nature of this crisis was the hardest trial these brave hearts had to bear. On Sunday morning, Captain Ayre had made every arrangement with his friends, the Eltons, to take the boy, with his native nurse, in their carriage to Calcutta, and thence home to England. Rachel was up before dawn on Monday morning gathering together her baby's wardrobe, thankful for anything that would divert her mind from the parting, and the anxieties which encompassed them. Although she was in weak health, her wonderful power of endurance and quiet resolution never deserted her for a moment. Her husband watched her in amazement and admiration, knowing that her passionate love for the child must make the sacrifice one of no ordinary kind. Once, when he tried to express something of his feeling, she lifted her face to his, and her mouth trembled.

"Don't, Geoffrey!" she said, almost sharply, and he saw that it would be wise to leave her alone. So with a kiss, he left her, and went to meet his brother officers.

Rachel continued her preparations, breathing many a passionate prayer into the folds of the little garments. With her, however, mother love had not eclipsed wifely love. Her husband was still first and dearest, and she had chosen as her heart dictated. While the child slept through the cool hours of the early morning the faithful Azim watched by him, dividing his attention between his idolised charge and the mistress he loved with scarcely less devotion.

"Come here, Azim," she said at length, when her task was almost done, and motioning him to follow her to the verandah, where they could talk without fear of disturbing the child. With a low salaam Azim obeyed, and stood before her with his arms meekly folded, his large expressive eyes fixed intently on her face. For a moment Rachel Ayre met that look with one of the keenest questioning, which the native felt to indicate that his beloved Mem Sahib was debating within herself how far he was to be trusted. In spite of his silent and voiceless ways, Azim had a quick understanding and an acute perception. But, though the slight suspicion visible in the expression of his mistress's face hurt him, he made no sign.

"Azim," she said, quickly, "the Sahib and I are about to give you the greatest proof of our confidence that we have in our power. We entrust the life of our child in your hands."

The Oriental bowed, and laying his hand upon his heart, uplifted his eyes to heaven. He knew enough of the English to understand what his mistress was saying to him, but his own tongue had only mastered a few simple words, and he could not answer her except by signs.

"Major and Mrs. Elton have kindly undertaken to convey our precious baba home to England, but it is on you we depend to care for him and to shield him with your life. For such a service gold cannot pay, though it will not be lacking. The fervent gratitude of a lifetime will be yours, Azim. Is your love for the baba strong enough to undertake this charge?"

Again Azim bowed himself to the ground so low that his lips touched the feet of his mistress; then he raised himself, laid his hand on his heart, and pointed to the inner room of the bungalow where lay the unconscious child. "Azim die, baba live," he said, with eagerness, and his lustrous eyes shone. "Sahib and Mem Sahib, trust Azim. He not forget. Azim die, baba live!"

Rachel's eyes filled with tears, and extending her hand she grasped that of her dusky servant in a fervent grasp.

"May God reward you, Azim, and deal with you as you deal with him," she said, quickly. "Now, you must awaken baba, for the carriage is to pass at eleven and we must not keep it waiting."

"Let the poor child sleep while he may, Rachel," said the voice of Lady Vane, and she came hurriedly up the verandah steps, her face paler than her wont. "We are too late. Sir Randal has just sent a servant to tell us that the rebels have arrived from Meerut, and entered the city by the Bridge of Boats; and we are to make ready at once to withdraw to the Flagstaff Tower."

Rachel scarcely grew a shade paler, and betrayed no sign of fear.

"But will that prevent the Eltons from leaving?" she asked, quickly.

"I should imagine so. Yes, certainly."

"And where is Geoffrey?"

Lady Vane hesitated a moment; but the steady look of the younger woman demanded that there should be no concealment.

"The 54th have gone out to meet the rebels."

Rachel turned her face away, and after an instant of silence passed into an inner room, while Azim was busily engaged dressing his charge.

"Azim die; baba live," he reiterated, and a faint, wan smile touched Rachel's lips.

"The 54th have gone out to meet the rebels." She realized in that awful moment what it was to be a soldier's wife. Lady Vane followed her into the room, and sat down calmly on a rocking chair.

"If this is to be our last day of life, Rachel, so be it, and our blood be upon the head of the English Government. No, I will not hush—I am not so good as you. I have always told you so; and I must relieve my mind. We'll be obliged to die, and every soldier in the city will fight to-day against fearful odds. A hundred to one, Randal said. I hope if both our husbands, my dear, must die, it will be at their post, and not before they have sent half-a-dozen each of these vermin into eternity. Do you hear that firing? Isn't it amazing how quietly we can take it when it comes? But God only knows what is before us."

"God will take care of us," murmured Rachel, as she threw on her child's dress, and held him while the nurse's skilful fingers fastened it.

"Perhaps He will; but unless the age of miracles should be renewed, there is not an atom of hope," said the elder woman, with the philosophy of despair. "It depends, of course, on how many faithful souls are left among the Sepoys. I believe myself that Azim there may be the only one. I have a revolver, Rachel, which I learned to use when I came to India first. I will keep it for you and for myself, should the worst emergency come. Here is a carriage, and poor Mrs. Elton looking like a corpse in it. Ah, the Major, too. It revives one to see an English soldier. Well, what has happened?"

Major Elton, a tall, stout, military man, cleared the verandah steps at a bound.

"Come, both of you! The streets are comparatively quiet. We will reach the Flagstaff Tower in safety, perhaps, if we take the byways."

"You cannot leave the city, then?" said Rachel, as she hastily threw on a wrap.

"The city is in the hands of the rebels. There's a hand-to-hand combat going on at this minute at the Cashmere Gate. Resistance is absurd and simply means butchery of our poor fellows: God help us all!"

Rachel folded the child in her arms. The Major gave his arm to Lady Vane.

"There is no room for the bearer. Let him be. If he is faithful, he'll find you out again," he said, waving Azim to keep back. A low, guttural cry escaped the servant's lips, and he stood on the verandah step the picture of un-