

## BULLET MARKS.

## A WIMBLEDON STORY.

We were sitting round our tent one evening last year, at Wimbledon—the “wo” being our major, the captain and sub of our company, his covering sergeant, corporal Williams, and a certain sapper, to wit, myself. We were drinking pale ale and smoking, as was every one else in the hundred tents around us.

“Here’s my last bull’s eye,” and the sergeant produced from his cap-pouch a flattened bullet, turned inside out as neatly as possible.

“What’s the cause of that I wonder?” said the corporal.

“You see,” said the captain,—being an engineer he was bound to know—“when the point of the bullet strikes the target, part of the lead is melted by the development of heat caused by the sudden arrest of the bullet’s motion, and goes off in the splash; the rest of the bullet is softened by the heat; and inasmuch as the parts must stop in their order of succession, the edge of the cup of the bullet is driven in level with the base of the cup. Is that so, Major?”

“Yes, quite right; but, if you like, I can spin you a yarn about these said bullets, that may just last out these weeks.”

“Well, let’s have it.

I had a sort of second cousin, Gerald Ashton, who had been brought up with myself and my sister, my father being his guardian. We had all been like brothers and sister, when one day he woke up to find he could not live without a nearer relationship to her. He spoke to the old gentleman, and there was a little family fracas.

He had only a hundred a year, and father did not think that was enough, though Gerald did; there was no objection at all in other respects—let him earn some more and they would see—wait a little—you know the kind of thing an old gentleman would say. Well, it was of no use. He said he felt himself a burden; there was no scope for his energies, and he would go—and go he did.

I urged upon him that he should get something to do. He had been well educated, and a clerkship, or something of the kind, could he got for him if he still resolved not to go on at the hospital.

No—he would go. There was only one thing he did do well, that was shoot, and he would carry his abilities to a market where they would be appreciated. And so, at the mature age of twenty-two, he left us, his profession, his home, and his prospects.

He disappeared, and six months after we heard he was with the 40th Dragoons, in India.

We wrote, and offered to buy his discharge, but he would “have none of us.” He liked it very well; was already corporal; expected the three stripes soon; and was “Gentleman Jack” with his comrades.

Some six months after this I was sent out to India, with a company; and as my sister was getting thin, and showing other signs of the desirability of a sea-voyage, and of a warm climate, it was agreed I should take her over.

We reached Calcutta, and in a few weeks settled down.

There was war going on, and I was placed in charge of one of the chief depots for small arms and ammunition, besides having my regular duties with the company.

One day I was down at the store, when my sister arrived, pale and breathless.

“Look, Charles, poor Gerald’s in dreadful trouble.”

I put her into an office chair, took the newspaper, and read—

“Yesterday evening as an officer of the 40th Dragoon Guards was returning to camp he was shot at from behind a clump of bushes. The bullet struck him in the thigh and lodged in the saddle. Although wounded so severely he had sufficient presence of mind to ride straight to the bushes, and there found one of his own men, a corporal of the troop, nicknamed “Gentleman Jack” by his comrades, whose rifle was still smoking from the discharge. Fortunately at this moment the guard arrived, and the man was at once arrested. A court martial will, of course, be held at once, and although the man has previously borne a good character and is reported to be respectably connected, it is to be hoped he will receive the reward for so abominable a crime.”

“Oh,” I said, “this is all nonsense. Gerald’s no murderer, or else he’s very much changed. I’ll see what they say at headquarters.”

“Do, for God’s sake, go. If anything happened to Gerald I should never forgive myself, for if I had run away with him when papa was so cruel, he never would have enlisted at all.”

“Don’t talk nonsense, Meggie, but go home, and I’ll come to you with the telegram.”

I went to headquarters. They gave me permission to use the telegraph for a question or two. The report was not encouraging.

It was our Gerald. The officer had seen the flash and heard the report—an extremely loud report, as if there had been two charges of powder in the carbine.

The bullet was found in the saddle, and one cartridge was missing from his twenty rounds. Court martial had declared him guilty, and the general’s confirmation of the sentence had just arrived. Fifty lashes in the camp square, and four years’ imprisonment in the civil jail. Sentence to be carried out on the 12th. Everybody was very sorry, but quite convinced he had tried to murder his superior officer. No one could understand with what motive.

I did not know what to think. There was more evidence forthcoming in a day or two when we had the papers.

His statement in defence was, that he had just been returning from guard, when he remembered that he had forgotten to get a book one of the officers had asked him to bring in from the town, some three miles distant. Without stopping to think, he walked off at once, got the book, and was within half a mile of the camp, when he fancied he saw a tiger. He got behind the bushes to watch, and saw one making for the distant camp. Anxious to secure the prize, he incautiously broke open one of the packages and loaded, to have a shot at it. He had covered the beast, and was firing at the tiger, when he heard another report simultaneously with that of his own carbine. He saw the tiger roll over as if shot, and then bound away. In another instant the officer came around the tope bleeding, and ordered him into arrest. He was quite sure that he had hit the tiger, and equally sure that another rifle was fired at the same moment that he pulled the trigger.

Of course such a lame statement had no effect, and he was sentenced.

I could not help thinking that there was a flaw in the evidence. How was it if there

was, as agreed, a loud report—which meant a full charge of powder—that the bullet stopped at the saddle instead of going through both saddle and horse. That was a great discrepancy—a full charge would have made a loud report, and sent it right through anything at a distance of 300 yards. I felt that there was something wrong, and six days to go it, but much might be done. Margaret insisted on going with me in spite of all I could do to keep her away.

“Have I not done all you wished me to do since we have been out here? Do, for heaven’s sake, let me have my way in this.”

So we went up the country in post haste. I was, of course, as one of the staff, admitted to see poor Gerald, whom I found terribly cut up.

“I don’t mind the imprisonment; it’s the disgrace!—the lashes! I shall kill myself directly I get loose after it, I know I shall.”

“No, no,” said Meggie; “don’t, for my sake. Oh Gerald! if you know how I have suffered for weeks past, you would live for my sake. I do not care about the brand or the lashes. I know you are innocent, and that there has been some horrible blunder committed in this matter. Oh, Willie, dear, do think of something to save him.”

“Oh, do, there’s a good fellow! get me some stuff that would make an end of me.”

“Don’t talk like that, Gerald; there’s some infernal mistake in it. Don’t despair yet. Let’s go over the ground again step by step,” and I made him tell me the whole story over again.

“It seems to me, Gerald, we want not a few things to show you are not guilty. We want the tiger you shot at, and that we shan’t get; and we want the clue to the mystery of the other rifle.”

“Oh, I’ve thought of all till I am sick. I don’t care what happens now. I’ll wait till the day before it’s to come off and then break my head against the walls.”

“Don’t be a fool, Gerald! I’m sure you are innocent. So is Margaret.”

“Yes; so are a hundred others; but it’s all no use. In three days I am disgraced for life, if I live.”

“Well I must leave you now, and see what I can do.”

“Let me have five minutes with Meggie, will you?”

I left them alone for some ten minutes, and then told Meggie she must go home with me.

I was beaten; I could not see how I could get any fresh evidence, and without that a reprieve—a postponement—was impossible.

I went to the wounded officer, the captain of his own company, and got him to tell his own story, it was just the same thing over again—always the exceedingly loud report, and the fouled and still smoking carbine.

“I would,” said the captain, “have given the price of my commission rather than have had it happen. He’s as fine a fellow as ever sat a horse, brave, kind, and as thorough a gentleman as the colonel himself. I always made him my orderly when I could, so as to have company. I declare to you that I did my best at the court martial for him, and got into disgrace with the general presiding for ‘coloring my statements’—that was his expression—so as to favour the prisoner. I almost snivelled when I heard the sentence, as if he had been my own brother. The men are mad about it, there has not been a lash or public punishment of any kind in the regiment for the last twenty-five years.”

I hardly know how to pass the time; I tried to think, but my ideas only travelled in the same old groves again.