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CHAPTER XXVII.—ON ACTIVE SERVICE.

Next morning there were sad hearts left at Winterdyne and Stonecroft when the young soldiers went away. Lord Winterdyne and Norman accompanied them to Portsmouth, and watched the transport ship leave. It carried a regiment of five hundred men, with officers and servants, and was the first instalment of the reinforcements for which the Commissioner of Natal had asked. The parting, though sorrowful, was not haunted by much serious misgiving, the outbreak at the Cape not being considered in the light of a serious war. It is difficult for those at home to realize that when we have carried civilization and peaceful pursuits into our colonies, we have also not failed to teach the natives of each new country the art of war. Clement Ayre was in wild, exultant spirits, as well he might be with such prospects as he had in view. The love of a high-born, well-dowered, and gentle girl, and an opportunity almost within his reach of proving himself worthy of her, were calculated to rouse his highest enthusiasm. As Raybourne and he paced the deck of the troopship day after day, as she sped towards the haven where her arrival was so ardently looked for, Clement's talk was more of the dangers and battles he hoped to share with his comrades than of the dear ones he had left behind. Harry, on the contrary, seldom spoke of them, but showed in his absent, preoccupied demeanour that his thoughts were more of home.

"I don't understand you, Harry," Clem said to him one day, as they lounged together with their pipes under the awning on the deck. "If I didn't know what stuff you were made of, I should say you were inclined to show the white feather. Do you regret having volunteered to go where glory waits you?"

Raybourne laughed.

"It isn't that, but I tell you what it is, Clem, I feel a trifle queer about the whole business. I believe it's going to be a serious affair for me. I can't tell why."

Clement laughed loud and long.

"You've got the blues, Hal, and are home-sick. I confess I feel a bit that way myself, only I don't give way to it. Cheer up, man—ten to one we are back in England for Easter."

"I hope so. This voyaging is a confoundedly slow business, anyhow," said Raybourne, raising himself and looking somewhat wearily across the

wide expanse of the ocean shimmering in the hot glare of the sun. "Do you know what I wish? That I had married before we left."

Clem looked at him in open-eyed wonder.

"You want to knock things off without delay, and no mistake," he said, comically. "It's a pity you didn't think of it—who knows but that Evy might have consented? You never know what girls *will* do. But, why do you wish that, old fellow? Don't you see we can both do the deed together in old Peplow's Church. We mustn't part company on such an eventful occasion."

"No, certainly not, Old Peplow," said Raybourne abstractedly. "Oh, no, certainly not."

Clement took his pipe from his mouth, and reaching out his long right arm gave his friend a vigorous shake.

"I sav, Harry, are you well enough? What do you mean? Shall I get Hetheridge to prescribe a dose of paregoric?"

"I was just thinking that it would have made it all right for Evelyn, supposing Peplow had only read the service over us that morning we left for Plymouth," Raybourne went on. "You see she would be Lady Raybourne, with her own jointure, which nobody could touch."

Clement put out his pipe, and laid it down on the deck. There was a queer lump in his throat and a sort of sickness in his heart, which prevented him speaking for a moment.

"I'll punch your head, Harry, upon my word I will," he said, at length. "It is paregoric you want, and castor-oil, and—and the whole medicine chest poured into you. I'm positive it's your liver; but I'll go and ask Hetheridge this minute."

"You needn't bother; you know as well as I do that I'm all right," said Harry, lazily, as he folded his hands above his head. "There's nothing out of the way in what I am saying. It may be a very remote contingency, but still it *might* happen, Clem, that one, perhaps both of us, might leave our bones to whiten in Zululand. Yes, I wish I had done it. I suppose a fellow couldn't be married by proxy."

Clem never spoke, but got up and walked away. He felt genuinely uncomfortable, miserable even; there was something in all this which sounded too real and serious; he had not a fear for himself; but as he pictured what it would be if he returned home alone, he felt as if a cold stream were pouring over him.

"If you feel like that, Harry, I wish you'd go back in this old tub on her return voyage," he said, when he sauntered back again. "I really wish you would, old fellow. You've made me awfully uncomfortable."

"I'm sorry for that, though I don't see I said anything out of the way. Come back alone in this thing, did you say? Not if I know it. You needn't think that it's the assegais I'm afraid of. It isn't that. But I wish I had thought of Evelyn sooner. You see we were both just letting things drift along, weren't we, until this marching order brought us all to our senses?"

"I wish you wouldn't bother about Evelyn, Harry," said Clem, speaking in earnest too. "In that way, I mean. Even supposing, even supposing—no, hang it, I won't suppose anything, except that we shall go home triumphantly with medals on our breasts. But what I meant to say was that Evelyn will be very well off suppose she never married anybody. My mother is not exactly a poor woman; and, of course, if I fall the place goes to Evy."

"Perhaps there would have been a selfishness; yes, it would have been selfish to ask her to take my name. You see, after a while she might want to marry someone else, and that would be awkward, wouldn't it? Yes, it was better to leave her free."

It was a long time before Clement Ayre got rid of the uncomfortable feeling these words produced in his mind. Even after the excitement of the march to the seat of war they often recurred to him, with the same vague feeling of dread.

In twenty-one days the Tamar was touched at the Cape of Good Hope, and three days later sailed for Durban Harbour, amid the enthusiastic acclamations of the people, to whom the arrival of substantial aid from England, earnest of more to come, was like the very shining of the sun. They lived in a state of fearful dread and uncertainty, knowing against what fearful odds the brave little British army had to fight, and fearful lest the dawn of any new day might witness the triumphal descent of a horde of victorious savages upon the hated and helpless Europeans.

The march to the Zulu border was begun at once. It was beset with difficulties, for heavy rains had set in, resulting in the flooding of the rivers and swamps, which rendered progress, especially of the wagons, very slow and tedious. That march was a strange revelation, not only to our two young soldiers, but to all who had hitherto regarded the war in Zululand as mere child's play. It was a wild and difficult country to traverse, devoid of roads, except the occasional deep tracks made by the traders' wagons. High mountains, inter-