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CHAPTER XXIX.—RORKE'S DRIFT.



WHILE these terrible events were transpiring at Isandhlwana, the little company left in charge of the camp at Rorke's Drift were inapprehensive of any danger. They had charge of the commissariat stores, and had also 35 sick in hospital. The camp was situated in the vicinity of a tract of bush which, unfortunately, had not been cut down, and favoured the approach of the enemy, as it almost completely hid them from sight. Shortly after dinner on that eventful day two men were seen galloping furiously from Zululand, and at the river bank made frantic signs to be taken over. The ferryman hastened to the Zulu side, and was immediately horrified by the news of the disaster at Isandhlwana.

"The camp must be held," said Clement Ayre, with that decision which showed the intrepid soldier and the self-reliant man.

"Ride on to Helpmakaar," he added to the private who had accompanied him, "and hurry up reinforcements."

"Will you stay here?" asked the ferryman, looking with admiration at the stalwart young figure, and the square, resolute face.

"Yes, of course. Hurry up, man. Ah, there's Bromhead! Frightful news, old chap. We're totally defeated. Only about a score of us left to tell the tale, and they're marching on to Rorke's Drift. What's to be done? Can we keep them out till help comes?"

"It must be done," Bromhead answered quietly, and Clement saw his right hand involuntarily clench.

"How many men have you?" Clement asked, as he leaped from the boat to the lieutenant's side.

"There's about two hundred of us, if they stay," said Bromhead significantly.

"Well, Daniells, what is it?" he added, seeing the ferryman wanted to speak.

"Couldn't we moore the pont in the river and fight a few of us from the deck? We might send some of the black fiends to the bottom, and anyway keep them back for a while."

The lieutenant shook his head.

"You are a brave fellow, Daniells, but it can't be done. Haul up the pont, and come up to the

entrenchment. How far distant are they, do you suppose," he added to Clement.

"I may have an hour's advance of them, no more."

"An hour?" Bromhead's head went down on his breast as he took long strides towards the camp. By the time they reached it his plan of action was laid. He suggested that a detachment of horsemen should go out to meet the enemy, in order to delay their advance, and so give time for further strengthening the camp; but his suggestion was declined—the men refused to obey orders, and a hundred of them rode off to Helpmakaar.

A peculiar smile crossed the face of the brave lieutenant, thus left with a very handful to protect the camp.

"We're a hundred and four all told, now, not including thirty-five in hospital," he said, grimly. "Let's to work."

The intrepid soldier did not lose a moment, but gave his orders with surprising speed and precision. The store building and the hospital were barricaded, and loopholes left for shooting on the enemy. When the other contingent deserted the camp, Lieutenant Chard at once saw that the line of defence they had planned and begun was too elaborate and scattered for the few who could defend it; but he was ready with another suggestion.

"We must make a wall of the biscuit-tins, and strengthen it with mealie bags," he said, with a cool smile, and all hands set to work to carry out his suggestion. There was something intensely pathetic in these slight and feeble preparations, made with such cool determination; but when the first shot was heard in the distance, a strange thrill ran through every heart. The two officers in charge exchanged glances full of significance. Clement Ayre, impulsive and outspoken, as usual, put his thoughts into words—

"Do you think it'll stand?" he asked, gravely.

"No, but it'll give us a chance to sell our lives dearly," Bromhead announced, quietly. "And if we can but keep the attention of the enemy until the General comes up, we may save Natal."

"He must have heard by this time of Isandhlwana," said Clement, and then they said no more, for when men are face to face with death, though their minds are busier and fuller perhaps than in any previous part of their existence, they do not

care to express what they think and feel in words.

"You've jumped out of the frying-pan into the fire, Ayre," said Bromhead, with a faint smile. "On a horse in open ground you had a chance, here you have none; but we'll do our duty."

"Ay, ay, look yonder; are we ready to meet them?"

It was now half-past four, and the wall had only been built two boxes high, forming but a sorry sort of redoubt at best, when a band of Zulus were seen advancing at a run upon the camp. Nothing more perfect than the coolness, more heroic than the instant action of these intrepid men, who held the fate of Natal by a slender thread, was ever known in history. Every man was at his post—every hand steady at the guns; not a moment, not a chance of advantage, was lost, and the first fire made havoc in the ranks. But they rushed on, maddened by their success, over the fallen bodies of their comrades, and dashed round the hospital to the other side where the redoubt was weakest. There they were met by a handful of the brave garrison, who gave them a taste of the British bayonet, which put their assegais to shame. It was a desperate struggle, in which several were wounded, but each place was filled as it became empty by men who were assisting to defend the hospital in front. For at least eight hours this terrible siege continued, the hospital was burned down, and somewhat disheartened, the gallant little company retired into the centre of their entrenchments, feeling that unless the besiegers should desist or help arrive they must either surrender or allow themselves to be cut down at their posts.

Early in the siege Clement Ayre received a flesh wound in the left arm, which, though very painful, did not keep him from fighting. He fought, indeed, like a lion. More than once Bromhead looked at him in wonder, admiring his coolness and intrepid daring, which made him expose himself in the very hottest forefront of the battle, and seemed to nerve his arm with extraordinary strength. Towards midnight the firing from without became less frequent and less sustained, and a feeble hope began to flicker in the breasts of those who had held that forlorn hope. Not a word was spoken, but each ear strained for the next volley; each heart was secretly conscious of relief as the intervals became more and more prolonged. They felt certain that daybreak, at least, would bring them the longed for aid.

Meanwhile the General and his forces were about ten miles in advance of Isandhlwana, believing that they were marching upon the great body of the enemy, who were supposed to be