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THE DRUMS OF THE FORE AND AFT

(Continued.)

Three days later the brigadier arranged a battle according to the rules of war and the peculiarity of the Afghan temperament. The enemy were massing in inconvenient strength among the hills, and the moving of many green standards warned him that the tribes were "up" in aid of the Afghan regular troops. A squadron and a half of Bengal lancers represented the available cavalry, and two screw guns, borrowed from a column 30 miles away the artillery at the general's disposal.

"If they stand, as I've a very strong notion that they will, I fancy we shall see an infantry fight that will be worth watching," said the brigadier. "We'll do it in style. Each regiment shall be played into action by its band, and we'll hold the cavalry in reserve."

"For all the reserve?" somebody asked.

"For all the reserve, because we're going to crumple them up," said the brigadier, who was an extraordinary brigadier and did not believe in the value of a reserve when dealing with Asiatics. And indeed, when you come to think of it, had the British army consistently waited for reserves in all its little affairs, the boundaries of our empire would have stopped at Brighton beach.

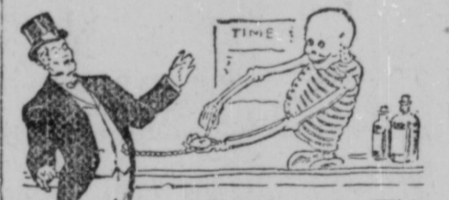
That battle was to be a glorious battle.

The three regiments, debouching from three separate gorges, after duly crowning the heights above, were to converge from the center, left and right upon what we will call the Afghan army, then stationed toward the lower extremity of a flat bottomed valley. Thus it will be seen that three sides of the valley practically belonged to the English, while the fourth was strictly Afghan property. In the event of defeat the Afghans had the rocky hills to fly to, where the fire from the guerrilla tribes in aid would cover their retreat. In the event of victory these same tribes would rush down and lend their weight to the rout of the British.

The screw guns were to shell the head of each Afghan rush that was made in close formation, and the cavalry, held in reserve in the right valley, were to gently stimulate the break up which would follow on the combined attack. The brigadier, sitting upon a rock overlooking the valley, would watch the battle unrolled at his feet. The Fore and Aft would be drawn from the central gorge, the Gurkhas from the left and the highlanders from the right, for the reason that the left flank of the enemy seemed as though it required the most hammering. It was not every day that an Afghan force would take ground in the open, and the brigadier was resolved to make the most of it.

"If we only had a few more men," he said plaintively, "we could surround the creatures and crumple 'em up thoroughly. As it is, I'm afraid we can only cut them up as they run. It's a great pity."

The Fore and Aft had enjoyed unbroken peace for five days and were beginning, in spite of dysentery, to recover their nerve. But they were not happy, for they did not know the work in hand and had they known, would not have known how to do it. Throughout those five days in which old soldiers might have taught them the craft of the game they discussed together, their mis-



"Time is up." Without their realizing it, death stands beside many a man, waiting while the man's watch briskly ticks away the few remaining hours of his life. When a man feels run down and out of sorts and knows that he is overworking himself, he should call "Time" himself.

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adventures in the past—how when a one was alive at dawn and dead ere the dusk, and with what shrieks and struggles such another had given up his soul under the Afghan knife. Death was a new and horrible thing to the sons of mechanics who were used to die decently of zymotic disease, and their careful conservation in barracks had done nothing to make them look upon it with less dread.

Very early in the dawn the bugles began to blow, and the Fore and Aft, filled with a misguided enthusiasm, turned out without waiting for a cup of coffee and a biscuit and were rewarded by being kept under arms in the cold while the other regiments leisurely prepared for the fray.

The Fore and Aft waited, leaning upon their rifles and listening to the protests of their empty stomachs. The colonel did his best to remedy the default of lining as soon as it was borne in upon him that the affair would not begin at once, and so well did he succeed that the coffee was just ready when—the men moved off, their band leading. Even then there had been a mistake in time, and the Fore and Aft came out into the valley ten minutes before the proper hour. Their band wheeled to the right after reaching the open and retired behind a little rocky knoll, still playing, while the regiment went past.

It was not a pleasant sight that opened on the unobstructed view, for the lower end of the valley appeared to be filled by an army in position—real and actual regiments attired in red coats and—of this there was no doubt—firing Martini-Henry bullets, which cut up the ground 100 yards in front of the leading company. Over that pockmarked ground the regiment had to pass, and it opened the ball with a general and profound courtesy to the piping pickets, ducking in perfect time, as though it had been brazed on a rod. Being half capable of thinking for itself, it fired a volley by the simple process of pitching its rifle into its shoulder and pulling the trigger. The bullets may have accounted for some of the watchers on the hillside, but they certainly did not affect the mass of enemy in front, while the noise of the rifles drowned any orders that might have been given.

"Good God!" said the brigadier, sitting on the rock high above all. "That regiment has spoiled the whole show. Hurry up the others, and let the screw guns get off."

But the screw guns, in working round the heights, had stumbled upon a wasp's nest of a small mud fort, which they incidentally shelled at 800 yards, to the huge discomfort of the occupants, who were unaccustomed to weapons of such devilish precision.

The Fore and Aft continued to go forward, but with shortened stride. Where were the other regiments, and why did these niggers use Martinis? They took open order instinctively, lying down and firing at random, rushing a few paces forward and lying down again, according to the regulations. Once in this formation each man felt himself desperately alone and edged in toward his fellow for comfort's sake.

Then the crack of his neighbor's rifle at his ear led him to fire as rapidly as he could—again for the sake of the comfort of the noise. The reward was not long delayed. Five volleys plunged the files in banked smoke impenetrable to the eye, and the bullets began to take ground 20 or 30 yards in front of the firers, as the weight of the bayonet dragged down and to the right arms wearied with holding the kick of the leaping Martini. The company commanders peered helplessly through the smoke, the more nervous mechanically trying to fan it away with their helmets.

"High and to the left!" bawled a captain till he was hoarse. "No good! Cease firing, and let it drift away a bit."

Three and four times the bugles shrieked the order, and when it was obeyed the Fore and Aft looked that their foe should be lying before them in mown swaths of men. A light wind drove the smoke to leeward and showed the enemy still in position and apparently unaffected. A quarter of a ton of lead had been buried a furlong in front of them, as the ragged earth attested.

A private of the Fore and Aft spun up his company shrieking with agony, another was kicking the earth and gasping, and a third, ripped through the lower intestines by a jagged bullet, was calling aloud on his comrades to put him out of his pain. These were the casualties, and they were not soothing to hear or see. The smoke cleared to a dull haze.

Then the foe began to shout with a great shouting, and a mass—a black mass—detached itself from the main body and rolled over the ground at horrid speed. It was composed of perhaps 300 men, who would shout and fire and slash if the rush of their 50 comrades who were determined to die carried home. The 50 were Ghazis, half maddened with drugs and wholly mad with religious fanaticism. When they rushed the British fire ceased, and in the lull the order was given to close ranks and meet them with the bayonet.

Any one who knew the business could have told the Fore and Aft that the only way of dealing with a Ghazi rush is by volleys at long ranges, because a man who means to die, who desires to die, who will gain heaven by dying, must, in nine cases out of ten, kill a man who has a lingering prejudice in favor of life if he can close with the latter. Where

they should have closed and gone forward, the Fore and Aft opened out and skirmished, and where they should have opened out and fired, they closed and waited.

A man dragged from his blankets half awake and unfed is never in a pleasant frame of mind. Nor does his happiness increase when he watches the whites of the eyes of 300 six foot fiends upon whose beards the foam is lying, upon whose tongues is a roar of wrath, and in whose hands are three foot knives.

The Fore and Aft heard the Gurkha bugles bringing that regiment forward at the double, while the neighing of the highland pipes came from the left. They strove to stay where they were, though the bayonets wavered down the line like the cars of a ragged boat. Then they felt body to body the amazing physical strength of their foes. A shriek of pain ended the rush, and the knives fell amid scenes not to be told. The men clutched together and smote blindly—as often as not at their own fellows. Their front crumpled like paper, and the 50 Ghazis passed on, their backers, now drunk with success, fighting as madly as they.

Then the rear ranks were bidden to close up, and the subalterns dashed into the stew—alone, for the rear rank had heard the clamor in front, the yells and the howls of pain, and had seen the dark, stale blood that makes afraid. They were not going to stay. It was the rushing of the camps over again. Let their officers go to hell if they chose. They would get away from the knives.

"Come on!" shrieked the subalterns, and their men, cursing them, drew back, each closing into his neighbor and wheeling round.

(To be Continued.)

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