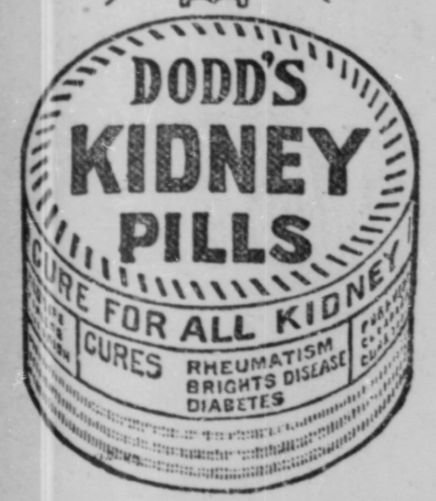


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THE DRUMS OF THE FORE AND AFT

(Continued)

They marched to the railway station, 900 strong, and every soul in campments turned out to see them go.

"A nice level lot," said the colonel to the second in command as they watched the first four companies en training.

"Fit to do anything," said the second in command enthusiastically. "But it seems to me they're a throng too young and tender for the work in hand."

"They're sound enough," said the colonel. "We must take our chance of sick casualties."

So they went northward, ever northward, past droves and droves of camels, armies of camp followers and legions of laden mules, the throng thickening day by day, till with a shriek the train pulled up at a hopelessly congested junction where six lines of temporary track accommodated six 40 wagon trains.

"Hurry up! You're badly wanted at the front," was the message that greeted the Fore and Aft, and the occupants of the Red Cross carriages told the same tale.

"Tisn't so much the bloomin' fightin'," gasped a head bound trooper of hussars to a knot of admiring Fore and Afts. "Tisn't so much the bloomin' fightin', though there's enough o' that. It's the bloomin' food an' the bloomin' climate. Frost all night 'cept when it hails an' b'illin' sun all day, an' the water stinks fit to knock you down. I got my 'ead chipped like an egg. I've got pneumonia, too, an' my guts is all out o' order. 'Tain't no bloomin' picnic in those parts, I can tell you."

"Wot are the niggers like?" demanded a private.

"There's some prisoners in that train yonder. Go an' look at 'em. They're the aristocracy o' the country. The common folk are a dashed sight uglier. If you want to know what they fight with, reach under my seat an' pull out the long knife that's there."

They dragged out and beheld for the first time the grim, bone handled, triangular Afghan knife. It was almost as long as a leg.

"That's the thing to j'int you," said the trooper feebly.

"It can take off a man's arm at the shoulder as easy as slicing butter. I halved the beggar that used that un, but there's more o' his likes up above. They don't understand thrustin', but they're devils to slice."

The men strolled across the tracks to inspect the Afghan prisoners. They were unlike any "niggers" that the Fore and Aft had ever met—these huge, black haired, scowling sons of the Bnei-Israel. As the men stared the Afghans spat freely and muttered one to another with lowered eyes.

"My eyes! Wot awful swine!" said Jakin, who was in the rear of the procession. "Say, old man, how you got pucked, eh? Kiswasti, you wasn't banged for your ugly face, hev'?"



Every woman who hopes and expects to be a mother should know that if she is in a state of unnatural weakness or disease at the time the baby is born, this unhealthy condition will be transmitted to the baby and will just as surely and remorselessly destroy its future health and happiness as if it were crushed out its birth.

a locomotive engine would be playing on the tender little life if it were playing on the track. This is the great law of heredity which never gets off the track for anybody.

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The tallest of the company turned, his leg irons clanking at the movement, and stared at the boy. "See!" he cried to his fellows in Pushto. "They send children against us. What a people and what fools!"

"Hyal!" said Jakin, nodding his head cheerily. "You go down country. Khana get, peenikapanee get—live like a bloomin' raja ke marfik. That's a better bandobust than baynit get it in your innards. Goodby, ole man. Take care o' your beautiful figure'd an' try to look kushy."

The men laughed and fell in for their first march, when they began to realize that a soldier's life was not all beer and skittles. They were much impressed with the size and bestial ferocity of the niggers whom they had now learned to call "Paythans," and more with the exceeding discomfort of their own surroundings. Twenty old soldiers in the corps would have taught them how to make themselves moderately snug at night, but they had no old soldiers, and, as the troops on the line of march said, "they lived like pigs." They learned the heartbreaking cussedness of camp kitchens and camels and the depravity of an E. P. tent and a wither wrong mule. They studied animalcule in water and developed a few cases of dysentery in their study.

At the end of their third march they were disagreeably surprised by the arrival in their camp of a hammered iron slug which, fired from a steady rest at 700 yards, flicked out the brains of a private seated by the fire. This robbed them of their peace for a night and was the beginning of a long range fire carefully calculated to that end. In the daytime they saw nothing except an occasional puff of smoke from a crag above the line of march. At night there were distant spurts of flame and occasional casualties, which set the whole camp blazing into the gloom, and occasionally into opposite tents. Then they swore vehemently and vowed that this was magnificent, but not war.

Indeed it was not. The regiment could not halt for reprisals against the franc-tireurs of the countryside. Its duty was to go forward and make connection with the Scotch and Gurkha troops with which it was brigaded. The Afghans knew this and knew, too, after their first tentative shots, that they were dealing with a raw regiment. Thereafter they devoted themselves to the task of keeping the Fore and Aft on the strain. Not for anything would they have taken equal liberties with a seasoned corps—with the wicked little Gurkhas, whose delight it was to lie out in the open on a dark night and stalk their stalkers—with the terrible, big men dressed in women's clothes who could be heard praying to their God in the night watches, and whose peace of mind no amount of "sniping" could shake—or with those vile Sikhs, who marched so ostentatiously unprepared and who dealt out such grim reward to those who tried to profit by that unpreparedness. This white regiment was different—quite different. It slept like a hog, and, like a hog, charged in every direction when it was roused. Its sentries walked with a footfall that could be heard for a quarter of a mile; would fire at anything that moved—even a driven donkey—and, when they had once fired, could be scientifically "rushed" and laid out a horror and an offense against the morning sun. Then there were camp followers who straggled and could be cut up without fear. Their shrieks would disturb the white boys, and the loss of their services would inconvenience them sorely.

Thus at every march the hidden enemy became bolder, and the regiment writhed and twisted under attacks it could not avenge. The crowning triumph was a sudden night rush ending in the cutting of many tent ropes, the collapse of the sodden canvas and a glorious knifing of the men who struggled and kicked below. It was a great deed, neatly carried out, and it shook the already shaken nerves of the Fore and Aft. All the courage that they had been required to exercise up to this point was the "2 o'clock in the morning courage," and they so far had only succeeded in shooting their comrades and losing their sleep.

Sullen, discontented, cold, savage, sick, with their uniforms dulled and unclean, the Fore and Aft joined their brigade. "I hear you had a tough time of it coming up," said the brigadier. But when he saw the hospital sheets his face fell. "This is bad," said he to himself. "They're as rotten as sheep." And aloud to the colonel "I'm afraid we can't spare you just yet. We want all we have, else I should have given you ten days to recruit in."

The colonel winced. "On my honor, sir," he returned, "there is not the least necessity to think of sparing us. My men have been rather mauled and upset without a fair return. They only want to go in somewhere where they can see what's before them." "Can't say I think much of the Fore and Aft," said the brigadier in confidence to his brigade major. "They've lost all their soldiering, and by the trim of them might have marched through the country from the other side. A more fagged out set of men I never put eyes on."

"Oh, they'll improve as the work goes on. The parade gloss has been rubbed off a little, but they'll put on field polish before long," said the brigade major. "They've been mauled, and they

They did not. All the hitting was on one side, and it was cruelly hard hitting, with accessories that made them sick. There was also the real sickness that laid hold of a strong man and dragged him howling to the grave. Worst of all, their officers knew just as little of the country as the men themselves and looked as if they did. The Fore and Aft were in a thoroughly unsatisfactory condition, but they believed that all would be well if they could once get a fair go in at the enemy. Pot shots up and down the valleys were unsatisfactory, and the bayonet never seemed to get a chance. Perhaps it was as well, for a long limbed Afghan with a knife had a reach of eight feet and could carry away enough lead to disable three Englishmen. The Fore and Aft would have some rifle practice at the enemy—all 700 rifles blazing together. That wish showed the mood of the men.

The Gurkhas walked into their camp, and in broken, barrack room English strove to fraternize with them; offered them pipes of tobacco and stood them treat at the canteen. But the Fore and Aft, not knowing much of the nature of the Gurkhas, treated them as they would treat any other "niggers," and the little men in green trotted back to their firm friends, the highlanders, and, with many grins, confided to them "That dam white regiment no damn use. Sulky—ugh! Dirty—ugh! Hya, any tot for Johnny?" Whereat the highlanders smote the Gurkhas as to the head and told them not to vilify a British regiment, and the Gurkhas grinned cavernously, for the highlanders were their elder brothers and entitled to the privileges of kinship. The common soldier who touches a Gurkha is more than likely to have his head sliced open.

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