

GEORGE HENTY

A SOLDIER'S DAUGHTER,
AND OTHER STORIES

George Henty

**A Soldier's Daughter,
and Other Stories**

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G. A. Henty

A Soldier's Daughter and Other Stories

A SOLDIER'S DAUGHTER

CHAPTER I

A PUNITIVE EXPEDITION

On the North-West frontier of India stood the little fort of Darlinger. It had been erected two years previous to the opening of this story, and was occupied by three companies of a Punjabi regiment under the command of Major Ackworth. It was intended to act as a check to the incursions of the fierce tribes across the frontier. One of these raids had recently been made, and the major was about to start with two and a half companies and two field-guns to punish the invaders. He was a strict officer but not unpopular, being very particular about the comfort and well-being of those under his command; in other respects, however, he was a silent and reserved man. He had lost his wife a year before, and this had completely broken him down; the only being he seemed now to care for was his daughter Nita. Nita's mother had intended to return to England with her daughter just before death put an end to the plan.

The major talked often of the necessity of sending Nita home, but so far it had only been talk. "I have quite made up my mind at last, Nita, when I return from this expedition, to pack you off to your uncle in England; you are getting a great deal too old to be knocking about in a barrack-yard, and there are no ladies here who would keep you up to the mark. I know that you are a favourite with all the officers, but that only makes matters worse. You have been a regular tomboy for the last five years, and it is quite time that you were taught to behave as a young lady."

"I can behave like that now when I like, father, and I am sure I don't want to grow up a young lady like the colonel's two daughters, who used to walk about as if their feet were pinched up in wooden shoes, and simper and smirk whenever anyone spoke to them. Then there was Captain Mann's wife, who seemed to think of nothing but dress, and expected to be waited on by all the officers."

"That is all very well," the major said. "I admit that they were not favourable specimens of their sex, and I by no means advise you to take them as models; you know well enough that I should not be sending you home to England unless I was absolutely convinced of the necessity for so doing. I shall miss you very sorely, and shall count the days till, in three years' time, I shall take my leave and come home to you, to bring you out again when I return. You must admit yourself that your accomplishments are not strictly feminine in their character. You are as good a shot as there is in the regiment both with rifle and revolver, you can fence very fairly, you have a very good idea of cricket, but you know nothing of music."

"Well, father, you know you have said many times that you don't like musical women."

"No, I am not fond of them, though I like a woman who can play an accompaniment to a good old English, Scotch, or Irish song; but as for a woman who is always strumming on a piano, I think that she is a bore of the worst kind, so we won't say much about the music. Then you could not make a garment for yourself to save your life, and there is no more necessary accomplishment on the frontier than for a woman to be able to make her own clothes. You can cook very decently, I admit; but as for anything else you know no more than a child of ten. I am afraid that your uncle will be sadly shocked at your ignorance of everything except barrack life."

"I wish I had been a boy instead of a girl," Nita said.

"I rather wish so too, Nita; but as a boy, you would have been obliged to go home and work desperately hard to get a commission. No, I think you had better be contented with matters as they are, and if we can't turn you out a soldier we can, at least, make a lady of you."

Nita made a little grimace which showed that the prospect did not delight her. "What is the use," she said, "of my being able to hit the ace of diamonds ten times following at twelve paces?"

"It is not impossible that it may be of use if you come out here again. It is more than probable that you will be a soldier's wife, and in a country such as this, it is by no means unlikely that your skill with a pistol may be of use to you. You remember in the mutiny how women fought at the side of their husbands. There has been more than one massacre since we have been here, and such an event might occur again. At the present moment the tribes are restless, and may break out in a general insurrection at any time. However, that is as it may be. Young Carter will take his leave and go down country in a month's time, and I shall place you under his care."

Nita laughed. "I should rather say, father, that you would place him under my care, for he is the most stupid man in the regiment."

The major smiled. "He is not popular, Nita, but he is a good honest young fellow; he doesn't say much, certainly, but as you talk enough for two I have no doubt that you will get on very well when you are once in a railway-carriage on your way down South, and he will be able to look after you when you get to Bombay, and see all about your passage, and make general arrangements for your comfort. I do not know any one in the regiment to whom I would rather trust you."

"Well, father, as you say so, of course I must go. If it were only for six months I should not mind, for I want to see the sea, and the shipping, and of course it will be all new to me in England. I have no doubt that my aunt will be very kind and make allowances for my deficiencies, but it will be terrible work saying good-bye to you when we have never been separated even for a day. I will promise you that I will do my best to be trained up to be a lady. Shall I have to go to school?"

"Certainly, dear; I shall ask your aunt to find a first-rate finishing school to which you can be sent for the three years that you are in England, except for your holidays."

"The girls will all think that I am a little savage. I have heard you say that they go out for walks two by two, like an awkward squad being drilled, and they never run races, but have to walk along with their arms down by their sides, and their feet turned out. Oh dear, it will be dreadful!"

"Not so bad as that; I believe there are schools now where girls play games – hockey, football, and cricket, and have gymnastics; and I shall ask your aunt to choose one of that sort."

"That will be better," Nita said more cheerfully; "at any rate, I think that I shall be able to hold my own."

"I dare say you will feel very happy when you have been settled there for a time. The great point is to make the best of things. You are a big girl for your age. You are as tall as many village girls at sixteen, and if you are bright and cheerful you will soon make yourself liked. Naturally in every school there are one or two disagreeable girls, but there will be no reason why you should quarrel with them."

Nita threw back her head. "They had better not quarrel with me," she said; "you know that I have had lessons in boxing."

"Why, you little savage," he said, "you don't suppose in a finishing school for girls they use their fists against each other! I gave you permission to learn to box, for I think it well that every man or woman should be able to protect themselves if necessary. Moreover, boxing gives quickness of thought, and doubtless improves the pose and figure. If you were to hit a girl at school, it would lead to your instant expulsion. Women fight with words, not with fists. I think after your constant verbal skirmishes with the officers that you will be able to hold your own."

"I think so, father," Nita said; "oh, yes! I think I shall get on very well at school."

On the following day the major marched away, and he told his daughter that he should probably be back in a fortnight. "Take care of yourself," he shouted as he waved his hand before giving the

order to start; "I expect to hear, when I come back, that you have been doing junior subaltern's work to Lieutenant Carter."

As soon as the force were beyond the gate she went up to the lieutenant. "You heard, sir," she said, saluting in military fashion, "that my father has deputed me to act as your sub?"

The young man looked at her in surprise. "I understood that the major was joking, Miss Ackworth."

"Partly in jest, partly in earnest, sir," she said calmly; "one white officer to fifty men is quite enough under ordinary circumstances, but it might not be enough here if we were attacked in force by the Pathans. I might not be of any use in directing the men's movements, they have their own native officers for that, but in case of trouble I could keep watch and carry orders for you and act as hospital nurse, and do no end of things."

"I trust that there will be no necessity at all for your efforts in any direction."

"Look here, Charlie," she said; "if that is the way you take my well-meant offers, I shall withdraw them." This she said in a tone of contempt.

"I think you are quite right to do so, Miss Ackworth. I do not think there is the most remote chance of your services being called into requisition."

"I don't know," she said; "somehow or other I have a sort of uneasy conviction that there is trouble brewing."

The lieutenant's face changed its expression instantly. "Have you any reason whatever for such an idea?" he asked, with a sharpness and directness differing widely from his usual manner.

"No, I cannot quite say that I have; still, there are sundry little things which might afford some foundation for it. To begin with, you know that thirty of the camp-followers went off a week ago. Why should they have done that? They are always well treated. There has been no grumbling among them, and yet, without a moment's notice they stole away, just before the gates were closed at night."

"Yes, Miss Ackworth, we discussed that matter among ourselves, and came to the conclusion that the men thought they wanted a change and had gone off to their villages."

"Yes, of course, it might have meant that. I heard you talking it over when you were sitting in the veranda outside our bungalow. I thought you were all very stupid, because you only seemed to have one idea between you. Why, I could have given you several reasons at least.

"The men all belong to the hill tribes, and, I have no doubt, had an inkling that an expedition was going to start, and so went to join their friends. They took, I heard, half a dozen rifles with them, which would certainly seem to show that they had no intention of returning here.

"Well, that is one solution. The other is that the raid that my father has gone out to punish is really a feint to get him to take the greater part of the garrison away, and during his absence to fall upon us tooth and nail."

The young lieutenant looked at Nita gravely. "What you suggest is quite possible; I never thought of it before, and I don't think the major can have done so, or he would have left some more of his force here. I beg your pardon, Miss Ackworth. I see that in case this supposition turns out to be correct you will make a very useful subaltern, and I at once accept your offers in that direction. I trust sincerely that your fears will not come to anything, but at any rate I will at once take every precaution in my power – forewarned is forearmed, you know."

"That is right, sir," she said, saluting again; "I hope that when you are assigning a place in the defence to everyone else you will not forget me. I am as good with the rifle as anybody, and, as you know, I am a pretty certain shot with my revolver, and if it came to close fighting should not waste much ammunition."

"I will remember," he said, with a slight smile; "but I should say that, to begin with, your place would be in one of the officer's bungalows, which we will turn into a hospital. There will be plenty of work for you there if we are attacked. I again apologize for having treated your first proposal so lightly."

"Oh, never mind about that, Charlie! I am glad that it is you that they left behind, for most of the other officers would only have chaffed me, and then I should have got into a rage."

Greatly satisfied, she returned to her father's bungalow, and set herself to going through his belongings, and putting aside all old garments she could find that could be torn up and used for dressings.

Charlie Carter at once called up the two native officers and told them that he did not consider the fort safe from attack while the troops were away. The soldiers were formed up, and with these they made a tour of the walls, telling off a man to every twenty yards, and additional men to the points that were weakest and most open to attack. "You will let half the men off duty every day, but see that all are ready for work at night; there will be no occasion for them all to remain on guard, but you will station a third of them at their posts, and change these three times during the night. Those not on sentry will sleep with their rifles beside them, magazines charged, so as to be ready at once if the alarm is given. One of you by turns will be on night duty, to see that the sentries are vigilant, and that all is going on quietly. The troops who are off duty will, of course, hurry to take their respective posts on the wall should the alarm be given by day."

The officers appeared in no way surprised at the orders. There had been some discussion among them on the previous evening about the fort being left so slenderly guarded, and they were pleased to see that their officer was determined not to be caught napping. A tour of inspection was made, and each man was instructed in the position that he was to occupy in the case of assault. The weakest spot was the gateway, which was commanded by a native mosque a hundred yards away, several low buildings surrounding it.

"I wish I could pull that place down," he said to Nita; "but it is more than I can venture to do when we have really nothing to go upon. The major has always said that if we were going to be attacked he should not hesitate to level it to the ground, but he could not venture to do so unless the danger were imminent, as its destruction would be bitterly resented by all the people round."

"Don't you think, Charlie, that if we were to plant a couple of barrels of powder under it, and lay a train by which it could be fired, that it would smash it up pretty completely? We have a large store of powder, and can spare two or three barrels for the purpose."

"It is a capital idea, Miss Ackworth, and I will carry it out to-night when the people in the village are all asleep. Upon my word, if it were in accordance with military discipline, I should feel disposed to hand over my command to you, for your brain works quicker than mine does, by a long way."

"I am quite content to serve under you," she said. "I dare say I shall have other suggestions to make later on; some, no doubt, will be possible, others the contrary, but I shall submit them for your approval or rejection, knowing very well that some of them would be impracticable. Now look here: I shall find it frightfully dull taking my meals by myself, and I don't suppose you will find it lively, so I wish you would join me on the veranda of our bungalow."

"I don't know, Miss Ackworth, whether your father would quite approve of that."

"Nonsense!" the girl laughed; "you know I am not in any way to be regarded as a young lady yet. Besides, my father was going to send me very soon down to Bombay, and from there to England, under your escort, which shows that he considers you a prudent and trustworthy guardian for me. If I were at home all day by myself I am sure that I should get the jumps. My brain is always busy, and, as father's representative here, I think I ought to be able constantly to confer with you; and I am sure it will be more pleasant for you to sit in our veranda and smoke your pipe and put up with my chatter, than it would be for you to be moping by yourself in the ante-room. If you like I will promise to talk as childish as I can, and with all due respect to you as commander of the garrison."

Carter laughed. "Very well, Miss Ackworth; it would certainly be a great deal more pleasant for me, and you must take the responsibility when the major returns."

"I will do that," she said; "my father must see that it would be ridiculous for us each to be taking our meals alone all the time that he was away."

"Do you know, Charlie," Nita said on the second evening, "I have always thought you rather slow, and now I see that you are really nothing of the sort."

Carter laughed. "I am quite conscious that I am slow, Miss Ackworth. I am not quick in taking in ideas, or in expressing my own. I often wish that it wasn't so, but I have lately been getting better. I can't chaff as most of them can, but I find myself able to join in general conversation more easily. Some day, I dare say, I shall become quite a conversationalist."

"How very serious you are!" she said; "you talk with me as if I were a woman, and not, as most of the others do, as a little girl to be chaffed."

CHAPTER II

ATTACKED

"Have you got another uniform, Charlie?" the girl asked on the following evening.

"Certainly I have," Carter answered in some surprise.

"Well, I wish you would send it over here."

"Send it over here, Miss Ackworth! What on earth do you want it for?"

"Well, it is this. It is as well to be prepared for all contingencies. I certainly do not mean to be carried away, if the fort should be captured, and made the slave of some Afridi chief. If I find things going badly I shall run back here and put on the uniform, cut my hair off short, and then go out and fight till the last. It would be a thousand times better to be killed fighting than to be captured."

"Certainly it would," the young officer said gravely; "it would be a hard lot for a woman to be carried off a captive by these Afridis."

"Very well, then, you will lend me a uniform?"

"Yes I will, Miss Ackworth, but I should advise you to keep the last bullet in your revolver for yourself."

"I mean to," she said, "but something might happen; I might fall seriously wounded and be unable to use it, and then, if they found me lying wounded, they would fire a bullet into me and so finish me."

"God forbid that it should come to that!" he said, "though it is as well to make provision against it. I am now quite of your opinion that there is a possibility of our being attacked. For the last two days many of the villagers have abandoned their homes and cleared off. There must be some reason for this, and the only one that I can see is that the men are aware that we are going to be attacked. They have no ground for complaint against us, we have always paid for everything that we have had of them. There has been no enforced labour, and we have every reason for supposing that they are well content to have us established here, as the fort would be a protection in case of an Afridi raid. This move on their part certainly is ominous. Should we be driven from our walls, which, I hope, will not take place, I suppose that we must rally in the mess-house and make our last stand there. The walls are solid, and I have this morning set some of the men, who know something of carpentering, to work at once to make thick shutters for all the windows and to store the house with provisions. I think we could make a stout defence there."

"I think it is a very good plan, Charlie; a bugle call would bring all the men down from the walls in no time. There are no buildings round, and the enemy would have to attack us across the open; I believe if only twenty men get there in safety we ought to be able to drive them off."

"We will have a good try for it, anyhow," the young lieutenant said; "they will know that the major will not be many days before he is back, and after one or two sharp repulses they may deem it expedient to move off, lest they should find the tables turned upon them. You are rather a bloodthirsty little person, Miss Ackworth!"

"Do you think so? I hope not. I know very well that if we are attacked it will be a very serious matter, and I fear there will be great loss of life. But I do think that if they made a trifling attack, and drew off, I should enjoy the excitement. I most certainly hope that there will not be any regular attacks. Still, if there are, I fancy that I should, in a sort of way, enjoy them. It would be very wrong, I have no doubt, but I don't think that I could help it."

"I think that is the way with all soldiers, Miss Ackworth. They may feel nervous before action, but when they are once engaged they lose all sense of fear, and their great anxiety is to get hand to hand with the enemy. If it were not for that feeling, I fancy that very few attacks would ever succeed. The man who deliberately said to himself, 'No one could live under such a storm of bullets as this', would not be likely to march steadily through it."

"It is a funny thing, isn't it, that men should be so fond of fighting?"

"It is; I have wondered over it many a time. All savage races love fighting, and certainly our own people do. If there were a great war, hundreds and thousands of men would volunteer at once. I am afraid this instinct brings us very near the savage. I think no other nation possesses it to anything like the same extent as the British race. The Germans are fine soldiers and fight well, but they do it purely because they are commanded and have to obey. The Frenchmen are nearly the same, and I think it is something like this with the Russians. The Turk, now, is a thorough good fighter, and with him it is a matter of religious fanaticism. It is curious that our Indian subjects, for the most part, go into battle with the same feelings as do our own people. There are no finer fighters in the world than the Sikhs, the Punjaubis, and the Ghoorkhas. They are all magnificent, but are equalled in Africa by the Hausas and other tribes from whom we draw our soldiers. All these people go into a fray as if they were going to a feast."

"I expect," Nita said, "it is because we have that feeling that we always win our battles."

"No doubt that is so, and I only hope that the feeling will not be knocked out of us by school-boards and other contrivances of that sort."

Nita shook her head. This was beyond her. "Why should it do so?" she asked.

"The school-board trains up the boys to despise their fathers' callings. I am afraid they all want to go into shops, or to get some small clerkship, and to struggle, in fact, for anything where they can wear black clothes instead of fustian. Still, I hope they won't lose the courage that our race has always possessed. At any rate a very large number of young fellows who have been to board schools become Volunteers afterwards, and I thoroughly believe that the Volunteers would turn out as one man if we had a very serious war, say, with France or Germany."

"That would be a serious war," Nita said. "Those nations have tremendous armies, so I have heard my father say."

"They have; but they are, in my opinion, *too* tremendous. If they were to fight in solid masses they would be literally swept away. If they fought in the open order, which is now the rule with us, the battle would extend over such an area that no general in the world could handle an army covering such an enormous space. I should say that from a hundred to a hundred and fifty thousand is the greatest body that could be efficiently worked under one command. I don't think the French are ever likely to fight us. The way the Fashoda affair was settled seems to show that their rulers are very adverse to plunging into war with us. When we fought them at the beginning of the century we had a population of five or six million, while the French had six times that number. Now our British Islands have something like forty million, and are every day increasing, while the French are stationary, if not going back. Besides, if there were a big war, I believe that the colonists would, if we were hardly pushed, send us half a million fighting-men. Between us and Germany the matter is different. They are entering the field as our commercial rivals, and they fret that we should hold almost all the land in the world where a white man can work. I except, of course, North America. The Germans are uneasy in themselves. Democracy is making great strides, and the time may well come when a German Emperor may be driven to quarrel with us in order to prevent civil war at home. At present, however, the power of the emperor is supreme. Germany is adding to her navy, for without a powerful navy they could not hope to get into contact with us; but while they build one war-ship we can build three, so that we need not fear our supremacy at sea being threatened save by an alliance between France and Germany and Russia, an alliance which there is little fear of coming about, for the Germans hate the Russians and the Russians hate the Germans. You might as well think of an alliance between a dog, a cat, and a rat, as that those three Powers should pull together. No, the next war, when it comes, may be between us and Russia; and as it is certain that the little Japs would join us, I think that between us we should make things pretty hot for her. There, Miss Ackworth, I have been giving you a sort of lecture on the politics of the world. I hope that you did not find it dull."

"Certainly not," Nita said. "I am very much obliged to you. Of course, I have heard these things talked over before, but never in such a way that I could exactly understand them. It seems funny to be discussing such matters up here on the frontier with the chance of being attacked every hour."

"Well, I must go my rounds. Good-night, Miss Ackworth! I hope your sleep will not be disturbed."

"I hope not, indeed," the girl said; "I have slept soundly every night so far. There has been so much to arrange and work out that I go off as soon as I lay my head upon the pillow."

Four hours later she sat suddenly up in bed. It was certainly a rifle-shot that she heard. This was followed almost instantaneously by a heavy roar of musketry. "It has come!" she exclaimed as she leapt out of bed and hurriedly dressed herself. She paused a moment as she looked at the suit of uniform, and then muttering "There will be time enough for that later on", she proceeded to put on her own clothes. She slipped a handful of cartridges into her pocket, and with her revolver in her hand sallied out. It seemed to her that the place was attacked on all sides at once, for flashes of fire spat out round the whole circle of the walls; but this was as nothing to the roar outside. By the sound, she assured herself that the main attack was directed on the gate, and here the fire of the defenders was also exceptionally heavy. She made her way up to the top of the wall. Here she found the greater part of the men who had been in reserve, although some of them had, as arranged, hurried to other threatened points.

"Take steady aim, men, take steady aim!" Lieutenant Carter shouted. This told her where he was stationed, and she made her way to him. When his eye fell on her he said, "You ought not to be here, Miss Ackworth. If things were going badly with us I should say nothing against it; but at present, at any rate, you have no business here, and I must ask you to retire at once. What do you suppose the major would say if, on his return, he found that you had been killed by a chance shot on the walls? I must really beg of you to descend at once."

Never before had Nita heard the young lieutenant speak in such a tone of command and determination. "All right!" she said meekly; "just let me have one peep over the wall and then I will go down."

"You may take just one peep, but there is nothing to see. They have failed in the expectation that they would take us by surprise. At present they are lying down and using up their ammunition."

Nita took a hasty glance over the parapet, and then, descending the steps, made her way to the bungalow, which it had been decided had better be used for the wounded, as it was a bullet-proof building, although less well ventilated and comfortable than the hospital would have been. She set to work to light the lanterns ranged along the wall, to get out bandages, and to prepare for the reception of the wounded. Two of the men had been told off to assist her, and these were already there when she arrived. It was not long before the first patient was brought in. He had been severely wounded in the head while firing over the parapet. Nita shuddered, but, putting on a thick white canvas apron which she had made on the previous day, began her work. The surgeon had unfortunately gone with the expedition, and she felt that the responsibility was a heavy one. She knew a little of bandaging, having been present when the doctor had given some lectures to the officers on the subject, but this was a case altogether beyond her. She could only bathe the man's head and then put a loose bandage round it. She gave him a drink of water and then sat suddenly down on the next bed, faint and sick. She held out her hand to one of the men for a glass of water, drank it up, and then with a great effort got on to her feet again, and waited for the next patient.

Five or six more men were brought in during the night. All had been hit either in the head or shoulder; some of them, however, were only gashed in the cheek, and these, as soon as their wounds were bandaged, took up their rifles and went off again to the wall. So the night passed; the fire had slackened a good deal, and it was evident that the Afridis had abandoned the idea of taking the fort by assault. Although it was two o'clock when the attack had begun, the night seemed endless to Nita, and she was grateful indeed when the first tinge of daylight appeared in the east. Presently Carter

arrived. "You have done well indeed, Miss Ackworth," he said, "and have been far more useful than you could have been on the wall. It required a deal of nerve to carry out your work, and your looks show what a strain it has been. I beg that you will go and lie down for a time. Half the men have come down from the wall, and a good many of them are adepts in the art of bandaging wounds, having been enlisted among fighting tribes. Your bandaging has been really effective, but these men will make a neater job of it."

"How are things going on?" she asked.

"Very well. They have fallen back now to the mosque and village, and no doubt will spend the morning in consultation."

"You have not fired off the barrels, then?"

"Oh no! I shall keep that as a pill for them when matters become more serious. Now please go and lie down. Of course if there is a fresh attack you will get up and come out again."

Nita walked slowly across the yard to her room. "Why are my legs so ridiculously weak?" she said to herself; "I am sure that I have not been afraid, and as to the work of bandaging those poor fellows, it was nothing. I suppose it was the sight of blood, and having to wait so long for something to do. I am sure that I should have borne it ten times better if Mr. Carter had allowed me to remain on the wall. I should not have thought that I could have been overruled by what he said, but he spoke so sternly and sharply that I felt that I must obey him. I would not have believed that Charlie could have spoken so. I shall not be so quick in forming my opinion about people again. I think I spoke of him as 'stupid' when father said he was to take me down country, but I see that there is nothing stupid about him. He is very quiet, certainly, but he takes the command as if he had been accustomed to it all his life. I am quite certain that if anyone can defend this place he can. How silly of me! I forgot to ask him what was the strength of the force attacking us. However, that will keep till I get up."

So saying, she lay down on the bed, dressed as she was, and in two minutes was fast asleep. It was eleven o'clock when she woke. "I did not think that I should have slept five minutes," she said indignantly to herself; "here I have had nearly six hours." She dipped her face in water, brushed her hair, and made herself as tidy as possible. When she went out Lieutenant Carter was talking to the two native officers; she waited till they both saluted and retired, then she went up to him. "Please tell me a little more about it, Mr. Carter. How many are there of the attackers? What do you think they are going to do? Did you kill many of them?"

"Three questions at once," he said with a smile, "and to none of them can I give you a satisfactory answer. In the first place, they are very strong; we have put them down as having fifteen hundred men. As to their intention, I can tell you nothing yet, for there has been no development. Thirdly, I think that we must have killed fifty at their first rush at the gate; but that is pure surmise, for they carried off the bodies as fast as they fell. I am waiting somewhat eagerly to see what their next move will be. We have heard outbursts of yells twice in the last hour, and I expect that we shall soon see the result."

"It is long odds," the girl said.

"Very long," answered the lieutenant; "for there is no doubt that it is a preconcerted thing. An attack was made on that outlying post, a considerable distance from the fort, and probably only with the intention of getting our garrison to march away, while all the assembled tribes came down upon us, feeling, no doubt, that with the benefit of a surprise, and knowing how small our garrison must be, it would be carried at the first rush. Now that that has failed they will, no doubt, adopt some quite different tactics. I have had the men at work ever since daybreak, piling up sacks full of earth against the gate to within two or three feet of the top, where I have made some loopholes, so that our men can lie down on the sacks and keep up a heavy fire. That is all that I can do at present, until we see what game they mean to play."

"That is capital," the girl said; "if they make a real attack, that is the position where I shall place myself. There will be no chance of my being hit there, and at that distance I could calculate on bringing down an enemy at every shot."

"I am afraid that you are a very wilful young person," he said with a smile; "but as I know how good a shot you are, I shall not refuse your aid in case of extremity."

CHAPTER III

HARD PRESSED

Towards daylight next morning a tremendous fire opened suddenly, and Nita dressed hastily and ran out. Running up to the walls, she saw that a large number of men were approaching the gate, covered by a rain of bullets from the mosque and village, and that, as it seemed to her, an equally strong attack was being made from the other side. The Punjaubis were hard at work, and from the number of dead that covered the ground behind the enemy, she felt how accurate their fire had been. This time the Afridis seemed to have worked themselves up to a pitch of fanatical bravery. Two or three times they halted for a minute, but their leaders came to the front, and, waving their flags, led them forward again. At last, in spite of the fire of the twenty-five men on that side, they reached the gate, at which they began to hack with their heavy knives.

Half a dozen men now ran down from the wall, and, climbing up the barricade, opened fire through the loopholes on the mass below, causing terrible destruction among them. The men who could not get at the gate opened fire at these loopholes, and it was not long before two of the defenders fell, shot through the head. Nita at once went up and took the place of one of them. The two men who had been killed were lying next to each other. Taking a careful aim from one loophole she fired – a man dropped; then she shifted her place to the next vacant loophole, and fired from that. Sometimes she lay still for two or three minutes, and then fired several shots in rapid succession from the loopholes; sometimes using one and sometimes the other, and thus avoiding the storm of bullets that followed each shot. She had no sense of fear now. She was proud of doing her share of the work. That she was doing a share she knew, for scarcely one of her shots missed the mark.

Presently the men before the gate began to sneak off, and in five minutes more all was over, the Afridis suffering heavily as they retreated across the open. Then Nita went down into the courtyard. As she did so, she saw Carter run across the court to the other side, where the combat was still raging. She mounted the wall a short distance away. The enemy had each brought up a great faggot, and thrown it down against the foot of the wall, giving a slope almost to the top. Up this they had again and again rushed, only to be beaten back each time by the Punjaubis. Fortunately the faggots were insufficient to reach quite to the top of the wall, and the Afridis had to help their comrades up the eight feet between the crest and the top of the parapet, only to see them fall back shot or bayoneted. The arrival of ten men from the gate turned the tables. With thirty rifles playing upon them the Afridis felt that no more could be done, and retired sullenly, taking advantage of every bit of rising ground or bush to lie down and fire.

"Well, Miss Ackworth, *that* affair is over. I saw you standing at a distance, and was thankful that you did not come up to join us."

"I did my fighting on the other side," she said with a smile. "You know you said that –"

"You did!" he said angrily. "I shall have to put you under arrest, Miss Ackworth, for disobeying orders."

"Thank you! but it happens that I did not disobey orders. You particularly said that I might fire through the loopholes of the gate when it was seriously attacked, and I took advantage of the permission to get possession of two holes where the defenders had been killed, and I flatter myself I did some good. I fired thirty shots, and know enough of my shooting to be sure that there were not many of them thrown away. The circumstances were exactly what you pointed out. The gate was very seriously attacked, and it was therefore open to me to do a little shooting on my own account."

"It was really wrong of you, Miss Ackworth. The attack was serious, but I never thought for a moment that they would take the gate, and it certainly never entered my mind that you would expose yourself to being killed in this way."

"I took every precaution, Charlie, and fired sometimes from one loophole and sometimes from another; and as I must have accounted for quite twenty-five men, I honestly believe that I, at least, did as much as any of your soldiers, and probably a good deal more."

"That is all very well," he said; "I don't say that you did not do good service, and I admit that my orders did give you some sort of license; however, this must not occur again, or I shall consider it my duty to order you to keep your place in the hospital, and shall have to put a sentry at the door to prevent you from coming out under any pretence while fighting is going on. You must remember that I shall have to account for your safety to the major when he returns, and that were anything to happen to you the blame would fall upon my shoulders, and would not be put down to your wilfulness. However, should the time ever come when we are driven to our last corner, I shall then authorize you to use your pistol."

Glad to have got off so easily, Nita went down to the hospital. There were but few wounded, and these, as before, had been hit principally on the head and shoulder. Lieutenant Carter came in shortly afterwards: "Let me have a look at your patients, Miss Ackworth; I have gone through the St. John's ambulance course and am pretty good at bandaging. I see that you have taken great pains with the men, but I think that I can possibly make a little improvement here and there. Besides, in some cases, I may be able to get the balls out. It will be more than a week before the surgeon is back with your father, and extracting a bullet might make all the difference between life and death. I have brought in a case of instruments the doctor left behind him. Do you think that you could help me?"

"Certainly I could," she said; "I think my first attack of weakness will be my last."

"Well, then, let us set to work."

With two or three of the patients the ball had penetrated too deeply, but where it had lodged comparatively close to the surface, Carter managed to find its position with a probe, and in four cases he succeeded in getting it out. The patients behaved with heroic fortitude, and although the operation was necessarily painful, bore it without a murmur. When the work was done and the wounds bandaged again, he said: "Now, Nita, a little fresh air would do you good; come with me up to the ramparts. I am going to try the effects of an explosion. It is certain that the enemy are all gathered now in the mosque and village, and possibly after their defeat of this morning such a blow will disconcert them altogether, and send them to the right-about."

"I should think it would," Nita agreed. "What loss did they suffer this morning, do you think?"

"I should say at least a hundred and fifty of their bravest men."

They went together to the spot where the train of gunpowder ended. "You go on to the walls," he said, "and watch. I will run up as soon as I have lighted the fuse. We calculated that it would last five minutes before it fires the train of gunpowder."

Nita ran up to the wall and a minute later was joined by the officer. He took out his watch and counted the minutes as they went past. "Now, Miss Ackworth," he said, putting his watch into his pocket again, "the fuse ought to be done in forty seconds, but we must allow a minute or two for miscalculation in its length."

Two minutes passed, then there was a deep roar; the mosque came down like a house of cards, and many of the dwellings collapsed from the shock of the explosion. Timbers and stones flew up high into the air. There was a moment's pause, and then an outburst of wild yells and screams. "I think that ought to frighten them a bit," the lieutenant said; "unless their leader has great power over them, and is a man of iron nerves, they will be off. The worst of it is, they won't like to return home to face their women after the disasters that they have suffered, and without having obtained some great success. The men scarcely know what nerves mean, and they may very well make up their minds to try one last attempt. You may be sure it will be a formidable one if they do, and they will probably adopt some entirely new scheme. We shall have to be doubly cautious for the next two nights."

Although a sharp look-out was kept, there was no sign of the enemy retreating. Towards evening a scattered fire was opened from the village against the gate, but otherwise the night passed quietly.

"I don't like it," Carter said the next morning; "the enemy have not gone yet, and they have not renewed the attack. I have no doubt that the beggars are up to something. I wish I knew what it was. It worries me."

"It does seem strange," Nita said; "but perhaps they have been burying their dead, which would keep them pretty well occupied all day. However, as we have beaten them off twice with the loss to ourselves of only six killed and eight wounded, I suppose that we shall be able to resist them again."

"I am sure we shall if they attack us openly. It is only the unknown that I am afraid of. I was on the walls the whole night, but except for a continued random fire from the village they were quiet. I wish we had a moon. In that case we could make them out comfortably at a hundred yards, whereas on these dark nights one can't see twenty."

The officer's prevision of danger told upon Nita, and when she reached the bungalow that night she dressed herself in Carter's uniform, cut her hair carefully close to her head, and lay down in readiness to leap up at the first alarm.

Had anyone been keeping special watch in the courtyard, they would have seen a number of dark figures clustering between the wall and the hospital. During that and the preceding night a party of Afridis had gathered at the foot of the wall, crawling forward, one by one, on their stomachs. They were armed only with spear and knife, and with these had attacked the wall noiselessly, working the stones out one by one, unobserved and undreamt of by the watch on the wall above. The first night they had almost completed their work, and by three in the morning on the second had made an opening through which two men could pass abreast; then one had gone back to the village, and presently a stream of men were passing through the wall.

When all was ready they burst out with triumphant yells. They were, however, ignorant of the position of the various houses, and scattered miscellaneously. A moment later the bugle sounded, and twenty men in reserve at once made a rush to the mess-house. The defenders of the wall came running down the various steps leading from the battlements. Many of these were cut down on the way, but twelve of them managed to join their comrades at the mess-house.

Nita sprang up when the first yell broke out, seized her revolver and a box of cartridges, and had reached the mess-house just as the party in the yard came in. The door was kept open until the last fugitive entered, desperately wounded, and followed by a mob of the exulting Afridis, who, however, were prevented from entering the building.

Each man had been instructed as to the place he should occupy in case they were driven from the wall, and the Punjaubis took up their positions in stern silence.

"Where is Lieutenant Carter?" Nita asked. "Has anyone seen him?"

"I am here, Miss Ackworth, and, thank God, you are here too. I was one of the last to come in, for I hung round your bungalow to help you if necessary."

Candles and lanterns had been placed on the table, and Nita took a match-box from her pocket and lit several of them.

"Hullo, Miss Ackworth, is that really you?" said the astonished lieutenant as soon as a light was struck.

"Really and truly," she said; "you rather scared me yesterday by your talk, so I got into your uniform before I lay down."

"You did well," he said; "and I should certainly take you for a lad who had just joined the regiment. Well, I must not stay here. The first thing is to go round and rearrange the posts, for we have little more than half our original number now. I shall only leave three or four men on this floor at present, and shall at once open fire from the upper windows. I shall be much obliged if you will stay down here."

"Certainly I will do so. I will place myself near the main door, and will let you know if the enemy seem to be collecting for an attack upon it."

"You are a brave girl," he said, "and I wish I had two or three dozen like you."

The Afridis at once pulled down the barricade from the front gate, and the tribesmen swarmed in. Very soon, however, they were obliged to take shelter in the various buildings, for the galling fire from the windows of the mess-house rendered it impossible for them to stay in the open.

At daylight firing ceased altogether and refreshments were served out to the troops, and the lieutenant and Nita sat quietly down to breakfast.

"There is no disguising it," he said, "our position is a very critical one. In the first place, have you any idea how these rascals got into the fort?"

"I have no certain idea at all, Charlie, but I think that in the dark they must have somehow cut a hole through the wall.

"I should think that it was something of that sort; they certainly did not get over it, they could not have done so without being seen by the sentries. That they should have got in has certainly changed our position greatly for the worse. They have shown themselves amazingly determined and enterprising. I have no doubt they will fill every house whose windows bear on ours, and keep up such a fire that we shall not be able to show ourselves. Under cover of that fire they will attack us. We may kill a great many of them, but I fear that in the long run it will come to the same thing. Our only hope, I think, lies in the chance that the major has received news of the attack upon us, and has abandoned all idea of the expedition and is hurrying back to our relief. God grant that he may arrive to-day, or at latest, to-morrow. It is no use our shutting our eyes to the fact that our position is a very grave one."

Nita herself had already seen this, and yet she turned a little pale at her companion's words. "Well," she said, "I am glad indeed that I put on your uniform. One can but be killed once, and if they fail to kill me I shall do it myself. The only thing that troubles me is the thought of father returning and finding me dead;" and her eyes filled with tears.

"It is awful; I can say nothing to comfort you," he said sadly, "but we must keep up each other's courage till the last. There will be no great occasion to keep up yours, though, for you are the pluckiest girl that I ever saw. As for my own courage, I am in command here, and must keep up a brave face, no matter what I may think."

"I am afraid that I am not so brave as I seem to be. It is as much as I can do really to keep myself from breaking down and crying."

"That is only natural, Nita, and if you would like to have a good cry I will leave you to yourself for half an hour."

"Oh no, I don't mean that I am going to, for if I began to cry I don't know when I should stop; and," she added, with an attempt at a smile, "that would shake my hand, and I shall want it to be as steady as I can. I think that I can promise that every shot shall tell this time. I dare say it seems horrid to you that I should be so bloodthirsty, but I hate them all so for coming down and attacking us like this that I would kill them all with one blow if I could."

"I wish you could, very heartily," he said with a smile. "You have been a great friend to me," he went on, taking her hand; "your high spirits have kept me up, and I don't know what I should have done without you. It was you that thought of blowing up the mosque, which I should say must have accounted for a great number of them, not to mention those you brought down with your pistol. You have forgiven my speaking so sharply to you, I hope?"

"I have never thought of it since; you were quite right to blow me up, and I felt that at the time. Yes, we have been great friends, and I have told myself scores and scores of times what a little fool I was to have thought that you were rather stupid because you talked so little and didn't seem to care much for entering into the amusements of the others."

"No, I know that I was not what you call a good comrade, but I could not help it. I fancy I was shy, and I did not care much for any of their sports; besides, I knew that they regarded me rather as a killjoy, and that kept me from mixing with them much."

"Well, you have had your turn now, Charlie, and no one could have come out of it more splendidly. You will be a great soldier some day, if – " and she stopped.

"If I live, yes. I hoped some day to have got a chance of distinguishing myself. And the chance has come, but, as you say, it is unlikely that it will ever come again. But, as you also said, one can but die once, and at least I hope that I shall die with credit, and a soldier can wish no more. But I would give all the few hours I may have left to me to know that you would escape."

"That is all nonsense, Charlie; I am only a girl, and a girl's life is not worth anything. If it wasn't for my father I should be fairly content."

"Well," he said, "it is no use talking. We shall have to do the best we can when the time comes. I must go round and see after the men."

CHAPTER IV PRISONERS

There was but a short cessation of hostilities, and then from every building round a blaze of musketry burst out. The men were at once called down from the upper rooms, where there were no shutters, and planted at the loopholes of those on the ground floor. "Don't throw away a shot," was the order given to them; "keep well in shelter, and when you do fire take care that you bring down your man."

So the fight went on all day. The losses of the enemy were far greater than those of the garrison, but the men lost to the latter could be ill spared.

"It is awful to think of the fate of those in the hospital," Nita said, when she took a hasty meal in the middle of the day with Lieutenant Carter. "Four or five of them managed to get in here alive, the rest must have been massacred in cold blood."

"Do not fret over that, Nita; it may be the fate of all of us in a few hours. We shall sell our lives dearly, but I cannot shut my eyes to the fact that the enemy are not far off a big rush. Then the doors will give way, for we have no means of strengthening them; and as there are two entrances at the back as well as those in front, nothing but the return of the major can save us. There is no doubt that in spite of their losses the enemy are determined to capture the place. We have now only eighteen men left capable of firing a rifle, and they are fifty to one against us. It is of no use disguising it from ourselves. To-night will see the end of the fight."

"If it must be so, it must," Nita said quietly. "You don't think that anyone is likely to see that I am a girl?"

"Certainly not; your disguise in that way is complete. Perhaps you had better allow me to trim your hair as closely as I can to the masculine style. There is more chance for you and me than for the men, for it is just possible that they may take us and carry us off as hostages. That means that they will keep us as slaves till they are attacked in such force that they may think it prudent to make terms. The chances are against it, but there is a possibility that it is the course they will take."

"I would rather die than that," Nita said. "I might keep up my disguise for a time, but they would be sure to detect it sooner or later. I dare not think of this."

"I don't believe that you would be detected, Nita. I should not penetrate your disguise myself, and if I who know you cannot do so you may well pass with these ruffians. You have plenty of spirit and may very well sustain your character."

"I shall blow my brains out before I am taken," she said passionately, "I have quite made up my mind to that."

"That must be your own choice," he said gravely. "While there is life there is hope, and sooner or later you may be restored to your friends. Sooner than later, I should guess, for you may be sure that when the news of this massacre reaches the authorities they will lose no time in getting together a strong punitive expedition against the tribes, and as soon as they find that resistance is hopeless they will try to make terms on the strength of any hostages that they may have in their hands."

Nita shook her head. "It is all very well for you to give me hope, Charlie, but you know as well as I do that the chances are hundreds to one against us."

At night, as soon as it became dark, there was a tremendous rush against all four doors. "It is of no use, men," Carter said, in firm tones which rose above the din, "the doors will not hold out five minutes. We will assemble here and fight till the last. We have done all that men can do, and I thank you for the way that you have stood by me; but the odds are too great for us, and we have nothing to do now except die like men. They will find that, handful as we are, we can account for a good many of them yet."

The men gathered in a ring, with Carter and Nita in the centre. Three minutes later two crashes were heard, and the Afridis burst in. They paused a moment on seeing the compact little body waiting their attack, then with yells of triumph rushed at them. They were met with a stream of musketry, every shot of which took effect, and the crack of the revolvers of Carter and Nita added to the din. In vain the enemy endeavoured to break the circle. Then they betook themselves to their muskets. The ground was speedily piled with dead, but numbers gradually prevailed. The little ring of defenders grew smaller and smaller, and at last, when but six men were standing, the enemy burst into the circle. There was wild fighting for a minute, bayonets against sword and spear, but gradually the din ceased.

Carter was one of the last to fall. Nita had one shot left in her revolver and directed this against her forehead. But at the moment when she was about to draw the trigger she was felled to the ground by a blow from the butt-end of a musket. Then the Afridis, seeing that all was over, scattered for plunder, leaving the bodies of the slain where they lay.

Daybreak dawned, and Nita opened her eyes. She saw that Carter, herself, and two others had been removed from the heap of slain and placed by themselves. She closed her eyes again with a shudder, and yet with a feeling of relief. The removal of the three men as well as herself must have been the result of an examination of the slain, and, like herself, the other three must have been found breathing. Her head ached as if it would split, and she lay for a long time without moving. Then two men, who were evidently chiefs, came up and examined them.

There was some discussion between them, and then Carter and another were taken away, and she and the remaining man, who was one of the native officers, were also carried out. The wounds of the four were all roughly bandaged, and then Carter and his companion were taken up by four natives and borne away. Nita remained for another hour. By this time the fort had been completely ransacked. Then she and her companion were also placed on stretchers and carried out of the fort, which was at once set on fire in a dozen places. Some water was given them, and the tribe then started off. Nita lay with her eyes closed all day, scarcely able even to think, for her head throbbed as if it would split. They travelled fast and did not halt till nightfall. Then she was given a piece of dry bread and a little water. She made an effort to eat, but it was useless; she drank most of the water, however, and soaked her handkerchief in the rest, and placed it on her head, and managed at last to doze off to sleep. In the morning she felt better. The chief then came up and spoke to her. She shook her head, and he went away, and presently returned with one of the tribesmen who had served in a Punjabi regiment.

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