

HENTY GEORGE
ALFRED

THE QUEEN'S CUP

George Henty
The Queen's Cup

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G. A. Henty

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Chapter 1

A large party were assembled in the drawing room of Greendale, Sir John Greendale's picturesque old mansion house. It was early in September. The men had returned from shooting, and the guests were gathered in the drawing room; in the pleasant half hour of dusk when the lamps have not yet been lighted, though it is already too dark to read. The conversation was general, and from the latest news from India had drifted into the subject of the Italian belief in the Mal Occhio.

"Do you believe in it, Captain Mallett?" asked Bertha, Sir John's only child, a girl of sixteen; who was nestled in an easy chair next to that in which the man she addressed was sitting.

"I don't know, Bertha."

He had known her from childhood, and she had not yet reached an age when the formal "Miss Greendale" was incumbent upon her acquaintances.

"I do not believe in the Italian superstition to anything like the extent they carry it. I don't think I should believe it at all if it were not that one man has always been unlucky to me."

"How unlucky, Captain Mallett?"

"Well, I don't know that unlucky is the proper word, but he has always stood between me and success; at least, he always did, for it is some years since our paths have crossed."

"Tell me about it."

"Well, I have no objection, but there is not a great deal to tell.

"I was at school with—I won't mention his name. We were about the same age. He was a bully. I interfered with him, we had a fight, and I scored my first and only success over him. It was a very tough fight—by far the toughest I ever had. I was stronger than he, but he was the more active. I fancied that it would not be very difficult to thrash him, but found that I had made a great mistake. It was a long fight, and it was only because I was in better condition that I won at last.

"Well, you know when boys fight at school, in most cases they become better friends afterwards; but it was not so here. He refused to shake hands with me, and muttered something about its being his turn next time. Till then he had not been considered a first-rate hand at anything; he was one of those fellows who saunter through school, get up just enough lessons to rub along comfortably, never take any prominent part in games, but have a little set of their own, and hold themselves aloof from school in general.

"Once or twice when we had played cricket he had done so excellently that it was a grievance that he would not play regularly, and there was a sort of general idea that if he chose he could do most things well. After that fight he changed altogether. He took to cricket in downright earnest, and was soon acknowledged to be the best bat and best bowler in the school. Before that it had been regarded as certain that when the captain left I should be elected, but when the time came he got a majority of votes. I should not have minded that, for I recognised that he was a better player than I, but I fancied that he had not done it fairly, for many fellows whom I regarded as certain to support me turned round at the last moment.

"We were in the same form at school. He had been always near the bottom; I stood fairly up in it, and was generally second or third. He took to reading, and in six weeks after the fight won his way to the top of the class and remained there; and not only so, but he soon showed himself so far superior to the rest of us that he got his remove to the form above.

"Then there was a competition in Latin verses open to both forms. Latin verse was the one thing in which I was strong. There is a sort of knack, you know, in stringing them together. A fellow

may be a duffer generally and yet turn out Latin verse better than fellows who are vastly superior to him on other points. It was regarded as certain that I should gain that. No one had intended to go in against me, but at the last moment he put his name down, and, to the astonishment of everyone, won in a canter.

"We left about the same time, and went up to Oxford together, but to different Colleges. I rowed in my College Eight, he in his. We were above them on the river, but they made a bump every night until they got behind us, and then bumped us. He was stroke of his boat, and everyone said that success was due to his rowing, and I believe it was. I did not so much mind that, for my line was chiefly sculling. I had won in my own College, and entered for Henley, where it was generally thought that I had a fair chance of winning the Diamonds. However, I heard a fortnight before the entries closed that he was out on the river every morning sculling. I knew what it was going to be, and was not surprised when his name appeared next to mine in the entries.

"We were drawn together, and he romped in six lengths ahead of me, though curiously enough he was badly beaten in the final heat. He stroked the University afterwards. Though I was tried I did not even get a seat in the eight, contrary to general expectation, but I know that it was his influence that kept me out of it.

"We had only one more tussle, and again I was worsted. I went in for the Newdigate—that is the English poetry prize, you know. I had always been fond of stringing verses together, and the friends to whom I showed my poem before sending it in all thought that I had a very good chance. I felt hopeful myself, for I had not heard that he was thinking of competing, and, indeed, did not remember that he had ever written a line of verse when at school. However, when the winner was declared, there was his name again.

"I believe that it was the disgust I felt at his superiority to me in everything that led me to ask my father to get me a commission at once, for it seemed to me that I should never succeed in anything if he were my rival. Since then our lives have been altogether apart, although I have met him occasionally. Of course we speak, for there has never been any quarrel between us since that fight, but I know that he has never forgiven me, and I have a sort of uneasy conviction that some day or other we shall come into contact again.

"I am sure that if we meet again he will do me a bad turn if possible. I regard him as being in some sort of way my evil genius. I own that it is foolish and absurd, but I cannot get over the feeling."

"Oh, it is absurd, Captain Mallett," the girl said. "He may have beaten you in little things, but you won the Victoria Cross in the Crimea, and everyone knows that you are one of the best shots in the country, and that before you went away you were always in the first flight with the hounds."

"Ah, you are an enthusiast, Bertha. I don't say that I cannot hold my own with most men at a good many things where not brains, but brute strength and a quick eye are the only requisites, but I am quite convinced that if that fellow had been in the Redan that day, he would have got the Victoria Cross, and I should not. There is no doubt about his pluck, and if it had only been to put me in the shade he would have performed some brilliant action or other that would have got it for him. He is a better rider than I am, at any rate a more reckless one, and he is a better shot, too. He is incomparably more clever."

"I cannot believe it, Captain Mallett."

"It is quite true, Bertha, and to add to it all, he is a remarkably handsome fellow, a first-rate talker, and when he pleases can make himself wonderfully popular."

"He must be a perfect Crichton, Captain Mallett."

"The worst of it is, Bertha, although I am ashamed of myself for thinking so, I have never been able to divest myself of the idea that he did not play fair. There were two or three queer things that happened at school in which he was always suspected of having had a hand, though it was never proved. I was always convinced that he used cribs, and partly owed his place to them. I was jealous enough to believe that the Latin verses he sent in were written for him by Rigby, who was one of the

monitors, and a great dab at verses. Rigby was a great chum of his, for he was a mean fellow, and my rival was always well supplied with money, and to do him justice, liberal with it.

"Then, just before we left school, he carried off the prize in swimming. He was a good swimmer, but I was a better. I thought myself for once certain to beat him, but an hour before the race I got frightful cramps, a thing that I never had before or since, and I could hardly make a fight at all. I thought at the time, and I have thought since, that I must have taken something at breakfast that disagreed with me horribly, and that he somehow put it in my tea.

"Then again in that matter of the Sculls at Henley. I never felt my boat row so heavily as it did then. When it was taken out of the water it was found that a piece of curved iron hoop was fixed to the bottom by a nail that had been pushed through the thin skin. It certainly was not there when it was on the rack, but it was there when I rowed back to the boathouse, and it could only have got there by being put on as the boat was being lowered into the water. There were three or four men helping to lower her down—two of them friends of mine, two of them fellows employed at the boathouse. While it lay in the water, before I got in and took my place, anyone stooping over it might unobserved have passed his hand under it and have pushed the nail through.

"I never said anything about it. I had been beaten; there was no use making a row and a scandal over it, especially as I had not a shadow of proof against anyone; but I was certain that he was not so fast as I was, for during practice my time had been as nearly as possible the same as that of the man who beat him with the greatest ease, and I am convinced that for once I should have got the better of him had it not been for foul play."

"That was shameful, Captain Mallett," Bertha said, indignantly. "I wonder you did not take some steps to expose him."

"I had nothing to go upon, Bertha. It was a case of suspicion only, and you have no idea what a horrible row there would have been if I had said anything about it. Committees would have sat upon it, and the thing would have got into the papers. Fellows would have taken sides, and I should have been blackguarded by one party for hinting that a well-known University man had been guilty of foul practices.

"Altogether it would have been a horrible nuisance; it was much better to keep quiet and say nothing about it."

"I am sure I could not have done that, Captain."

"No, but then you see women are much more impetuous than men. I am certain that after you had once set the ball rolling, you would have been sorry that you had not bided your time and waited for another contest in which you might have turned the tables fairly and squarely."

"He must be hateful," the girl said.

"He is not considered hateful, I can assure you. He conceived a grudge against me, and has taken immense pains to pay me out, and I only trust that our paths will never cross again. If so, I have no doubt that I shall again get the worst of it. At any rate, you see I was not without justification when I said that though I did not believe in the Mal Occhio, I had reason for having some little superstition about it."

"I prophesy, Captain Mallett, that if ever you meet him in the future you will turn the tables on him. Such a man as that can never win in the long run."

"Well, I hope that your prophecy will come true. At any rate I shall try, and I hope that your good wishes will counterbalance his power, and that you will be a sort of Mascotte."

"How tiresome!" the girl broke off, as there was a movement among the ladies. "It is time for us to go up to dress for dinner, and though I shan't take half the time that some of them will do, I suppose I must go."

Captain Mallett had six months previously succeeded, at the death of his father, to an estate five miles from that of Sir John Greendale. His elder brother had been killed in the hunting field

a few months before, and Frank Mallett, who was fond of his profession, and had never looked for anything beyond it save a younger son's portion, had thus come in for a very fine estate.

Two months after his father's death he most reluctantly sent in his papers, considering it his duty to settle down on the estate; but ten days later came the news of the outbreak of the Sepoys of Barrackpore, and he at once telegraphed to the War Office, asking to be allowed to cancel his application for leave to sell out.

So far the cloud was a very small one, but rumours of trouble had been current for some little time, and the affair at least gave him an excuse for delaying his retirement.

Very rapidly the little cloud spread until it overshadowed India from Calcutta to the Afghan frontier. His regiment stood some distance down on the rota for Indian service, but as the news grew worse regiment after regiment was hurried off, and it now stood very near the head of the list. All leave had not yet been stopped, but officers away were ordered to leave addresses, so that they could be summoned to join at an hour's notice.

When he had left home that morning for a day's shooting with Sir John, he had ordered a horse to be kept saddled, so that if a telegram came it could be brought to him without a moment's delay. He was burning to be off. There had at first been keen disappointment in the regiment that they were not likely to take part in the fierce struggle; but the feeling had changed into one of eager expectation, when, as the contest widened and it was evident that it would be necessary to make the greatest efforts to save India, the prospect of their employment in the work grew.

For the last fortnight expectation had been at its height. Orders had been received for the regiment to hold itself in readiness for embarkation, men had been called back from furlough, the heavy baggage had been packed; and all was ready for a start at twenty-four hours' notice. Many of the officers obtained a few days' leave to say goodbye to their friends or settle business matters, and Frank Mallett was among them.

"So I suppose you may go at any moment, Mallett?" said the host at the dinner table that evening.

"Yes, Sir John, my shooting today has been execrable; for I have known that at any moment my fellow might ride up with the order for me to return at once, and we are all in such a fever of impatience, that I am surprised I brought down a bird at all."

"You can hardly hope to be in time either for the siege of Delhi or for the relief of Lucknow, Mallett."

"One would think not, but there is no saying. You see, our news is a month old; Havelock had been obliged to fall back on Cawnpore, and a perfect army of rebels were in Delhi. Of course, the reinforcements will soon be arriving, and I don't think it likely that we shall get up there in time to share in those affairs; but even if we are late both for Lucknow and Delhi, there will be plenty for us to do. What with the Sepoy army and with the native chiefs that have joined them, and the fighting men of Oude and one thing and another, there cannot be less than 200,000 men in arms against us; and even if we do take Delhi and relieve Lucknow, that is only the beginning of the work. The scoundrels are fighting with halters round their necks, and I have no fear of our missing our share of the work of winning back India and punishing these bloodthirsty scoundrels."

"It is a terrible time," Sir John said; "and old as I am, I should like to be out there to lend a hand in avenging this awful business at Cawnpore, and the cold-blooded massacres at other places."

"I think that there will be no lack of volunteers, Sir John. If Government were to call for them I believe that 100,000 men could be raised in a week."

"Ay, in twenty-four hours; there is scarce a man in England but would give five years of his life to take a share in the punishment of the faithless monsters. There was no lack of national feeling in the Crimean War; but it was as nothing to that which has been excited by these massacres. Had it been a simple mutiny among the troops we should all be well content to leave the matter in the hands of our soldiers; but it is a personal matter to everyone; rich and poor are alike moved by a burning

desire to take part in the work of vengeance. I should doubt if the country has ever been so stirred from its earliest history."

"Yes, I fancy we are all envying you, Mallett," one of the other gentlemen said. "Partridge shooting is tame work in comparison with that which is going on in India. It was lucky for you that that first mutiny took place when it did, for had it been a week later you would probably have been gazetted out before the news came."

"Yes, that was a piece of luck, certainly, Ashurst. I don't know how I should be feeling if I had been out of it and the regiment on the point of starting for India."

"I suppose you are likely to embark from Plymouth," said Sir John.

"I should think so, but there is no saying. I hardly fancy that we should go through France, as some of the regiments have done; there would be no very great gain of time, especially if we start as far west as Plymouth. Besides, I have not heard of any transports being sent round to Marseilles lately. Of course, in any case we shall have to land at Alexandria and cross the desert to Suez. I should fancy, now that the advantages of that route have been shown, that troops in future will always be taken that way. You see, it is only five weeks to India instead of five months. The situation is bad enough as it is, but it would have been infinitely worse if no reinforcements could have got out from England in less than five months."

"Is there anything that I can do for you while you are away, Mallett?" Sir John Greendale asked, as they lingered for a moment after the other gentlemen had gone off to join the ladies.

"Nothing that I know of, thank you. Norton will see that everything goes on as usual. My father never interfered with him in the general management of the estate, and had the greatest confidence in him. I have known him since I was a child, and have always liked him, so I can go away assured that things will go on as usual. If I go down, the estate goes, as you know, to a distant cousin whom I have never seen.

"As to other matters, I have but little to arrange. I have made a will, so that I shall have nothing to trouble me on that score. Tranton came over with it this morning from Stroud, and I signed it."

"That is right, lad; we all hope most sincerely that there will be no occasion for its provisions to be carried out, but it is always best that a man should get these things off his mind. Are you going to say goodbye to us tonight?"

"I shall do it as a precautionary measure, Sir John, but I expect that when I get the summons I shall have time to drive over here. My horse will do the distance in five and twenty minutes, and unless a telegram comes within an hour of the night mail passing through Stroud, I shall be able to manage it. I saw everything packed up before I left, and my man will see that everything, except the portmanteau with the things I shall want on the voyage, goes on with the regimental baggage."

A quarter of an hour later Captain Mallett mounted his dog cart and drove home. The next morning he received a letter from the Adjutant, saying that he expected the order some time during the next day.

"We are to embark at Plymouth, and I had a telegram this morning saying that the transport had arrived and had taken her coal on board. Of course they will get the news at the War Office today, and will probably wire at once. I think we shall most likely leave here by a train early the next morning. I shall, of course, telegraph as soon as the order comes, but as I know that you have everything ready, you will be in plenty of time if you come on by the night mail."

At eleven o'clock a mounted messenger from Stroud brought on the telegram:

"We entrain at six tomorrow morning. Join immediately."

This was but a formal notification, and he resolved to go on by the night mail. He spent the day in driving round the estate and saying goodbye to his tenants. He lunched at the house of one of the leading farmers, where as a boy he had been always made heartily welcome. Before mounting his dog cart, he stood for a few minutes chatting with Martha, his host's pretty daughter.

"You are not looking yourself, Martha," he said. "You must pick up your roses again before I come back. I shall leave the army then, and give a big dinner to my tenants, with a dance afterwards, and I shall open the ball with you, and expect you to look your best.

"Who is this?" he asked, as a young fellow came round the corner of the house, and on seeing them, turned abruptly, and walked off.

"It is George Lechmere, is it not?"

A flash of colour came into the girl's face.

"Ah, I see," he laughed; "he thought I was flirting with you, and has gone off jealous. Well, you will have no difficulty in making your peace with him tomorrow.

"Goodbye, child, I must be going. I have a long round to make."

He jumped into the dog cart and drove away, while the girl went quietly back into the house. Her father looked up at the clock.

"Two o'clock," he said; "I must be going. I expected George Lechmere over here. He was coming to talk with me about his father's twelve-acre meadow. I want it badly this winter, for I have had more land under the plough than usual this year. I must either get some pasture or sell off some of my stock."

"George Lechmere came, father," Martha said, with an angry toss of her head, "but when he saw me talking to Captain Mallett he turned and went off; just as if I was not to open my lips to any man but himself."

The farmer would have spoken, but his wife shook her head at him. George Lechmere had been at one time engaged to Martha, but his jealousy had caused so many quarrels that the engagement had been broken off. He still came often to the house, however, and her parents hoped that it would be renewed; for the young fellow's character stood high. He was his father's right hand, and would naturally succeed him to the farm. His parents, too, had heartily approved of the match. So far, however, the prospect of the young people coming together was not encouraging. Martha was somewhat given to flirtation. George was as jealous as ever, and was unable to conceal his feelings, which, as he had now no right to criticise her conduct, so angered the girl that she not unfrequently gave encouragement to others solely to show her indifference to his opinions.

George Lechmere had indeed gone away with anger in his heart. He knew that Captain Mallett was on the point of leaving with his regiment for India, and yet to see him chatting familiarly with Martha excited in him a passionate feeling of grievance against her.

"It matters nought who it is," he muttered to himself. "She is ever ready to carry on with anyone, while she can hardly give me a civil word when I call. I know that if we were to marry it would be just the same thing, and that I am a fool to stop here and let it vex me. It would be better for me to get right out of it. John is old enough to take my place on the farm. Some of these days I will take the Queen's shilling. If I were once away I should not be always thinking of her. I know I am a fool to let a girl trouble me so, but I can't help it. If I stay here I know that I shall do mischief either to her or to someone else. I felt like doing it last month when she was over at that business at Squire Carthew's—he is just such another one as Captain Mallett, only he is a bad landlord, while ours is a good one. What made him think of asking all his own tenantry, and a good many of us round, and getting up a cricket match and a dance on the grass is more than I can say. He never did such a thing before in all the ten years since he became master there. They all noticed how he carried on with Martha, and how she seemed to like it. It was the talk of everyone there. If I had not gone away I should have made a fool of myself, though I have no right to interfere with her, and her father and mother were there and seemed in no way put out.

"I will go away and have a look at that lot of young cattle I bought the other day. I don't know that I ever saw a more likely lot."

It was dark when George returned. On his way home he took a path that passed near the house whence he had turned away so angrily a few hours before. It was not the nearest way, but somehow he always took it, even at hours when there was no chance of his getting the most distant sight of Martha.

Presently he stopped suddenly, for from behind the wall that bounded the kitchen garden of the farm he heard voices. A man was speaking.

"You must make your choice at once, darling, for as I have told you I am off tomorrow. We will be married as soon as we get there, and you know you cannot stop here."

"I know I can't," Martha's voice replied, "but how can I leave?"

"They will forgive you when you come back a lady," he said. "It will be a year at least before I return, and—"

George could restrain himself no longer. A furious exclamation broke from his lips, and he made a desperate attempt to climb the wall, which was, however, too high. When, after two or three unsuccessful attempts, he paused for a moment, all was silent in the garden.

"I will tackle her tomorrow," he said grimly, "and him, too. But I dare not go in now. Bennett has always been a good friend to me, and so has his wife, and it would half kill them were they to know what I have heard; but as for her and that villain—"

George's mouth closed in grim determination, and he strolled on home through the darkness. Whatever his resolutions may have been, he found no opportunity of carrying them out, for the next morning he heard that Martha Bennett had disappeared. How or why, no one knew. She had been missing since tea time on the previous afternoon. She had taken nothing with her, and the farmer and his two sons were searching all the neighbourhood for some sign of her.

The police of Stroud came over in the afternoon, and took up the investigation. The general opinion was that she must have been murdered, and every pond was dragged, every ditch examined, for a distance round the farm. In the meantime George Lechmere held his tongue.

"It is better," he said to himself, "that her parents and friends should think her dead than know the truth."

He seldom spoke to anyone, but went doggedly about his work. His father and mother, knowing how passionately he had been attached to Martha, were not surprised at his strange demeanour, though they wondered that he took no part in the search for her.

They had their trouble, too, for although they never breathed a word of their thoughts even to each other, there was, deep down in their hearts, a fear that George knew something of the girl's disappearance. His intense jealousy had been a source of grief and trouble to them. Previous to his engagement to Martha he had been everything they could have wished him. He had been the best of sons, the steadiest of workers, and a general favourite from his willingness to oblige, his cheerfulness and good temper.

His jealousy, as a child, had been a source of trouble. Any gift, any little treat, for his younger brothers, in which he had not fully shared, had been the occasion for a violent outburst of temper, never exhibited by him at any other time, and this feeling had again shown itself as soon as he had singled out Martha as the object of his attentions.

They had remarked a strangeness in his manner when he had returned home that night, and, remembering the past, each entertained a secret dread that there had been some more violent quarrel than usual between him and Martha, and that in his mad passion he had killed her.

It was, then, with a feeling almost of relief that a month after her disappearance he briefly announced his intention of leaving the farm and enlisting in the army. His mother looked in dumb misery at her husband, who only said gravely:

"Well, lad, you are old enough to make your own choice. Things have changed for you of late, and maybe it is as well that you should make a change, too. You have been a good son, and I shall miss you sorely; but John is taking after you, and presently he will make up for your loss."

"I am sorry to go, father, but I feel that I cannot stay here."

"If you feel that it is best that you should go, George, I shall say no word to hinder you," and then his wife was sure that the fear she felt was shared by her husband.

The next morning George came down in his Sunday clothes, carrying a bundle. Few words were spoken at breakfast; when it was over he got up and said:

"Well, goodbye, father and mother, and you boys. I never thought to leave you like this, but things have gone against me, and I feel I shall be best away.

"John, I look to you to fill my place.

"Good-bye all," and with a silent shake of the hand he took up his bundle and stick and went out, leaving his brothers, who had not been told of his intentions, speechless with astonishment.

Chapter 2

Frank Mallet, after he had visited all his tenants, drove to Sir John Greendale's.

"We have got the route," he said, as he entered; "and I leave this evening. I had a note from the Adjutant this morning saying that will be soon enough, so you see I have time to come over and say goodbye comfortably."

"I do not think goodbyes are ever comfortable," Lady Greendale said. "One may get through some more comfortably than others, but that is all that can be said for the best of them."

"I call them hateful," Bertha put in. "Downright hateful, Captain Mallett—especially when anyone is going away to fight."

"They are not pleasant, I admit," Frank Mallett agreed; "and I ought to have said as comfortably as may be. I think perhaps those who go feel it less than those who stay. They are excited about their going; they have lots to think about and to do; and the idea that they may not come back again scarcely occurs to them at the time, although they would admit its possibility or even its probability if questioned."

"However, I fancy the worst of the fighting will be over by the time we get there. It seems almost certain that it will be so, if Delhi is captured and Lucknow relieved. The Sepoys thought that they had the game entirely in their hands, and that they would sweep us right out of India almost without resistance. They have failed, and when they see that every day their chances of success diminish, their resistance will grow fainter."

"I expect that we shall have many long marches, a great many skirmishes, and perhaps two or three hard fights; but I have not a shadow of fear of a single reverse. We are going out at the best time of year, and with cool weather and hard exercise there will be little danger of fevers; therefore the chances are very strongly in favour of my returning safe and sound. It may take a couple of years to stamp it all out, but at the end of that time I hope to return here for good."

"I shall find you a good deal more altered, Miss Greendale, than you will find me. You will have become a dignified young lady. I shall be only a little older and a little browner. You see, I have never been stationed in India since I joined, for the regiment had only just come home, and I am looking forward with pleasurable anticipation to seeing it. Ordinary life there in a hot cantonment must be pretty dull, though, from what I hear, people enjoy it much more than you would think possible. But at a time like the present it will be full of interest and excitement."

"You will write to us sometimes, I hope," Sir John said, when Mallett rose to leave.

"I won't promise to write often, Sir John. I expect that we shall be generally on the move, perhaps without tents of any kind, and to write on one's knee, seated round a bivouac fire, with a dozen fellows all laughing and talking round, would be a hopeless task; but if at any time we are halted at a place where writing is possible, I will certainly do so. I have but few friends in England—at any rate, only men, who never think of expecting a letter. And as you are among my very oldest and dearest friends, it will be a pleasure for me to let you know how I am getting on, and to be sure that you will feel an interest in my doings."

There was a warm goodbye, and all went to the door for a few last words. Frank's portmanteau was already in the dog cart, for he had arranged to drive straight from Greendale to Chippenham, where he would dine at an hotel and then go on by the mail to Exeter.

It was three o'clock when he drove into the barracks there. Early as the hour was, the troops were already up and busy. Wagons were being loaded, the long lines of windows were all lighted up, and in every room men could be seen moving about. He drove across the barrack yard to his own quarters, left his portmanteau there, and then walked to the mess room. As he had expected, he found several officers there.

"Ah, Mallett, there you are. You are the last in; the others all turned up by the evening train, but we thought that as you were comparatively near you would come on by the mail."

"I thought I should find some of you fellows keeping it up."

"Well, there was nothing else to do. There won't be much chance of going to sleep. We all dined in the town, for of course the mess plate and kit have been packed up. We are not taking much with us now, just enough to make shift with. The rest will be sent round to Calcutta, to be stored there till we settle down. The men had a dinner given to them by the town, and as they all got leave out till twelve o'clock, and the loading of the wagons began at two, there has been a row going on all night. Most of us played pool till an hour ago, then we gradually dropped off for an hour's snooze."

"There will be a chance of getting breakfast, I hope?"

"Yes, there is to be a rough and tumble breakfast at a quarter to five. We fall in at a quarter past. We got through the inspection of kits yesterday. The mess sergeant and a party will pack up the breakfast things, and the pots and pans will come on by the next train. There is one at eight. It will be in plenty of time, as I don't suppose the transport will be off until the afternoon, perhaps not till night. There are always delays at the last moment."

"However, it will be something to be on board ship. That is the first step towards getting at those black scoundrels. We are all afraid that we shall be late for Delhi; still there is plenty of other work to be done."

"Any ladies with us?"

"No, there was a general agreement among the married officers that they had best be left behind. So for once the regiment goes without women."

"There is a levity about your tone that I do not approve of, Armstrong," Frank Mallett said, reprovingly. "There were no women when we went out to the Crimea, at the time when you were a good little boy doing Latin exercises."

"Well, altogether it is a good thing, Mallett, and we shall be much more comfortable without them."

"Speak for yourself, Armstrong. Lads of your age who can talk nothing but barrack slang, and are eminently uncomfortable when they have to chat for five minutes to a lady, are naturally glad when they are free from the restraint of having to talk like reasonable beings; but it is not so with older and wiser men. How about Marshall?"

"He has been away on leave for the last ten days. He has not come back here. There have been two fellows inquiring after him diligently for the last week. There was no mistaking their errand, even if we did not know how he stood. I expect he is on board the transport. I fancy the Colonel gave him a hint to join there. No doubt the Jews will be on the lookout for him at Plymouth, as well as here; but he will manage to smuggle himself on board somehow, even if he has to wrap up as an old woman."

"He deserves all the trouble that has fallen upon him," Frank Mallett said, angrily. "I have no patience with a young fool who bets on race horses when he knows very well that if they lose there is nothing for him to do but to go to the Jews for money. However, he has had a sharp lesson, and as it is likely enough that the regiment won't be back in England for years, he will have a chance of getting straight again. This affair has been a godsend for him, for had he remained in England there would have been nothing for him to do but to sell out."

So they chatted until the mess waiters laid the table for breakfast, when the other officers came pouring in. The meal was eaten hastily, for the assembly was sounding in the barrack yard. As soon as breakfast was finished, the officers went out and took their places with their companies.

There was a brief inspection, then the drums and fifes set up "The Girl I Left Behind Me," and the regiment marched off to the station, the streets being already full of people who had got up to see the last of them, and to wish them Godspeed in the work of death they were going to perform.

The baggage was already in the train that was waiting for them in the station, and in a few minutes it steamed away; the soldiers hanging far out of every window to wave a last goodbye to

the weeping women who thronged the platform. Two hours later they reached Plymouth, marched through the town to the dockyard, and went straight on board the transport.

There was the usual confusion until the cabins had been allotted, portmanteaus stowed away, and the general baggage lowered into the hold. A tedious wait of three or four hours followed, no one exactly knew why, and then the paddle wheels began to revolve. The men burst into a loud cheer, and a few minutes later they passed Drake's Island and headed down the sound.

They had, as expected, found young Marshall on board. He kept below until they started, although told that there was little chance of the bailiffs being permitted to enter the dockyard. As he had the grace to feel thoroughly ashamed of his position, little was said to him; but the manner of the senior officers was sufficient to make him feel their strong disapproval of the position in which he had placed himself by his folly.

"I have taken a solemn oath never to bet again," he said that evening to Captain Mallett, who was a general favourite with the younger officers; "and I mean to keep it."

"How much do you owe, young 'un?"

"Four hundred and fifty. What with allowances and so on, I ought to be able to pay it off in three or four years."

"Yes, and if you keep your word, Marshall, some of us may be inclined to help you. I will for one. I would have done so before, but to give money to a fool is worse than throwing it into the sea. As soon as you show us by deeds, not words, that you really mean to keep straight, you will find that you are not without friends."

"Thank you awfully, Mallett, but I don't want to be helped. I will clear it off myself if I live."

"You will find it hard work to do that, Marshall, even in India. Of course, the pay and allowances make it easy for even a subaltern to live on his income there, but when it comes to laying by much, that is a difficult matter. However, so long as the actual campaign lasts, the necessary expenses will be very small. We shall live principally on our rations, and you can put by a good bit. There may be a certain amount of prize money, for, although there is nothing to be got from the mutineers themselves, some of the native princes who have joined them will no doubt have to pay heavily for their share in the business."

"Well, you won't give me up, will you, Mallett?"

"Certainly not. I was as hard as anyone on you before, for I have no patience with such insane folly, but if you keep straight no one will be more inclined to make things easy for you."

The voyage to Alexandria was unmarked by any incident. Drill went on regularly, and life differed to no great extent from that in barracks. All were glad when the halfway stage of the journey was reached, but still more so when they embarked in another transport at Suez.

Here they learned, according to news that had arrived on the previous day, that at the end of August Delhi was still holding out; and that, although reinforcements had reached the British, vastly greater numbers of men had entered the city, and that constant sorties were made against the British position on the Ridge.

Excitement therefore was at its highest, when on the 20th of October a pilot came on board at the mouth of the Hooghly, and they learned that the assault had been made on the 14th of September; and that, after desperate fighting extending over a week, the city had been captured, the puppet Emperor made prisoner, and the rebels driven with tremendous loss across the bridge of boats over the Jumma.

The satisfaction with which the news was received, in spite of the disappointment that they had arrived too late to share in the victory, was damped by the news of the heavy losses sustained in the assault; and especially that of that most gallant soldier, General Nicholson.

Nor were their hopes that they might take part in the relief of Lucknow realised, for they learned that on the 25th of September the place had been relieved by Havelock and Outram. Here, however, there was still a prospect that they might take a share in the serious fighting; as the losses of

the relieving column had been so heavy, and the force of mutineers so large, that it had been found impracticable to carry off the garrison as intended, and the relieving forces were now themselves besieged. There was, however, no fear felt for their safety. If the scanty original garrison had defied all the efforts of the mutineers, no one doubted that, now that their force was trebled, they would succeed in defending themselves until an army sufficiently strong to bring them off could be assembled.

Not a day was lost at Calcutta. General Sir Colin Campbell, who was now in supreme command, was collecting a force at Cawnpore. There he had already been joined by a column which had been despatched from Delhi as soon as the capital fell, and by a strong naval brigade with heavy guns from the ships of war.

All arrangements had been made for pushing up reinforcements as fast as they arrived, and the troops were marched from the side of the ship to a spot where a flotilla of boats was in readiness. The men only took what they could carry; all other baggage was to be sent after them by water, and to lie, until further instructions, at Allahabad. As soon, therefore, as the troops had been packed away in the boats, they were taken in tow by two steamers, and at once taken up the river. Officers and men were alike in the highest spirits at finding themselves in so short a time after their arrival already on the way to the front, and their excitement was added to by the fact that it was still doubtful whether they would arrive in time to join the column. Cramped as the men were in the crowded boats, there was no murmuring as day after day, and night after night, they continued their course up the river.

At Patna they learned that the Commander in Chief was still at Cawnpore, and the same welcome news was obtained at Allahabad; but at the latter place they learned that the news of his having gone forward was hourly expected.

They reached Cawnpore on the morning of the 11th, and learned that the column had left on the 9th, but was halting at Buntara. Not a moment was lost. Each man received six days' provisions from the commissariat stores, and two hours after landing the regiment was on the march and arrived late at night at Buntara, being received with hearty cheers by the troops assembled there.

They learned that they were to go forward on the following morning. Weary, but in high spirits at finding that they had arrived in time, the regiment lighted its fires and bivouacked.

"This has been a close shave indeed, Mallett," one of the other captains said, as a party of them sat round a fire. "We won by a short head."

"Short indeed, Ackers. It has been a race all the way from England, and it is marvellous indeed that we should arrive just in time to take part in the relief of Lucknow. A day later and we should have missed it."

"We should not have done that, Mallett, for the men would have marched all night, and, if necessary, all day tomorrow, to catch up. Still, it is a wonderful fluke that after all we should be in time."

"There is no doubt that it will be a tough business," one of the majors said. "Havelock found it so, and I expect that the lesson he taught them hasn't been lost, and that we shall have to meet greater difficulties than even he had."

"Yes, but look at our force. Sixteen guns of Horse Artillery, a heavy field battery, and the Naval Brigade with eight guns; the 9th Lancers, the Punjaub Cavalry, and Hodson's Horse; four British regiments of infantry and two of Punjaubies, besides a column 1,500 strong which is expected to join us tomorrow or next day.

"I hope in any case, Major, that we shan't follow the line Havelock took through the narrow streets, for there we cannot use our strength; but will manage to approach the Residency from some other direction. We know that it stands near the river, and at the very edge of the town, so there ought to be some other way of getting at it. I consider that we are a match for any number of these scoundrels if we do but get a fair ground for fighting, which we certainly should not do in the streets of the town."

"I don't care how it is, so that we do get at them," another officer said. "We have heard such frightful details of their atrocities as we came up that one is burning to get at close quarters with them."

I suppose we shall go to the Alumbagh first, and relieve the force that has so long been shut up there. I only hope that we shan't be chosen to take their place."

There was a general exclamation of disgust at the suggestion.

"Well, someone must stay, you know," he went on in deprecation of the epithets hurled at him; "and why not our regiment as well as any other?"

"Because I cannot believe that after luck has favoured us so long she will play us such a trick now," Frank Mallett said. "Besides, the other regiments have done something in the way of fighting already while we have not fired a shot; and I think that Sir Colin would be more likely to choose the 75th, or, in fact, any of the other regiments than us. Still if the worst comes to the worst we must not grumble. Other regiments have had weary times of waiting, and it may be our turn now. Your suggestion has come as a damper to our spirits, and, as I don't mind acknowledging that I am dog tired with the march, after not having used my legs for the last seven or eight weeks, I shall try to forget it by going off to sleep."

Making a pillow of his cloak, he lay down on the spot where he was sitting, his example being speedily followed by the rest of the officers.

The next morning the troops were on the march early, but they were not to reach the Alumbagh without opposition, for on passing a little fort to the right they were suddenly attacked by a small body of rebels posted round it.

But little time was lost. Hodson's Horse, who were nearest to them, at once made a brilliant charge, scattering them in all directions. A short pause was made while the fort was dismantled, and then the column proceeded without further interruption to the Alumbagh.

There was some disappointment at its appearance. Instead of finding, as they had expected, a palace, there was nothing but a large garden enclosed by a lofty wall, and having a small mosque at one end. It had evidently been a place of retirement when the Kings of Oude desired to get away from the bustle and ceremony of the great town.

The Commander in Chief was thoroughly acquainted with the situation in the city, by information that he had received from a civilian named Kavanagh; who had at immense risk made his way out from the Residency, and was able to furnish plans of all the principal buildings and the route which, in the opinion of Brigadier General Inglis, was the most favourable for the attack.

In the evening the reinforcements arrived, bringing up the total force to 5,000. When the orders were issued, the officers of the –th found to their intense satisfaction that, as Captain Mallett had thought likely, the 75th was selected to remain in charge of the baggage at the Alumbagh.

The force moved off, early on the morning of the 14th, but, after marching a short distance along the direct road followed by Havelock, struck off to the right, and, keeping well away from the city, came down upon the summer palace of the Kings of Oude, called the Dilkoosha. It stood on an eminence commanding a view of the whole of the eastern suburbs of the town, and was surrounded by a large park.

As soon as the head of the column approached this, a heavy musketry fire broke out, and it was at once evident that their movements had been watched and the object of their march divined. The head of the column was halted for a few minutes until reinforcements came up. Then they formed into line, the artillery opened on their flanks, and with a cheer the troops advanced to the attack.

"The beggars cannot shoot a bit," Frank Mallett said to his subaltern, Armstrong. "I expect they are Sepoys, for the Oude tribesmen are said to be good marksmen."

Keeping up a rolling fire at the loopholes in the walls, the infantry pressed forward. The fire of the enemy slackened as they approached, and they soon forced their way in, some helping their comrades over the wall, others breaking down a gate and so pouring in. A halt was made until the greater portion of the troops came up, and then the advance was continued.

The defenders of the wall had been considerably reinforced by troops stationed round the Palace itself, but they were unable to withstand the British advance, and soon began to retreat towards the

city; stopping occasionally where a wall or building offered facilities for defence, but never waiting long enough for the British to get at them. In two hours all had been driven down the hill to the Martiniere College. Here again they made a stand, but were speedily driven out, and chased through the garden and park of the college, and thence across the canal into the streets of the town. Here the pursuit ceased, the –th being told off to hold the Martiniere as an advanced position. Sir Colin established his headquarters at the Dilkoosha, the rest of the troops bivouacking around it or on the slope of the hill between it and the college.

After seeing that the men were comfortable, and getting some food, most of the officers gathered on the flat roof of the college, whence a fine view was obtainable over the town. The Residency had been already pointed out to them, and the British flag could be seen floating above it. Several very large buildings, surrounded for the most part with walled gardens, rose above the low roofs of the native houses in the intervening space.

"The way is pretty open. A good deal of the ground seems to be occupied with gardens, and most of the houses are so small that they could not hold many men."

"I agree with you, Mallett. It is evident that we shall be passing through an open suburb rather than the town itself. Those big buildings, if held in force, will give us a good deal of trouble. They are regular fortresses."

"I don't think that any of them are built of stone. They all seem to be whitewashed."

"That is so," the Major agreed, as he examined them through his field glass. "I suppose stone is scarce in this neighbourhood, but it is probable that the walls are of brickwork, and very thick. They will have to be regularly breached before we can carry them."

"It makes one sad to think that that flag, which has waved over the Residency for the last five months, defying all the efforts of enormously superior numbers, is to come down, and that these scoundrels will be able to exult in the possession of the place that has defied all their efforts to take it. Still one feels that Sir Cohn's decision is a necessary one. It would never do to have six or seven thousand men shut up there, when there is urgent work to be done in a score of other places. Besides, it would need a vast magazine of provisions to maintain them. Our force, even when joined by the garrison, would be wholly inadequate for so tremendous a task as reducing to submission a city containing at least half-a-million inhabitants, together with thirty or forty thousand mutineers and a host of Oude's best men, with the advantage of the possession of a score or two of buildings, all of which are positive fortresses."

"No, there is nothing for it but to fall back again till we have a force sufficient to capture the whole city, and utterly defeat its defenders. With us away, this place will become the focus of the mutiny. Half the fugitives from Delhi will find their way here, and at least we shall be able to crush them at one blow, instead of having to scour the country for them for months. The more of them gather here the better; and then, when we do capture the place, there will be an end of the mutiny, though, of course, there will still be the work of hunting down scattered bands."

"We may look forward to very much harder work tomorrow than we have had today," Captain Johnson said. "With these glasses I can make out that the place is crowded with men. Of course, today we took them somewhat by surprise, as they would naturally expect us to follow Havelock's line. But now that they know what our real intentions are, they will be able to mass their whole force to oppose us."

"So much the better," Frank Mallett said. "There is no mistaking the feeling of the troops. They are burning to avenge Cawnpore, and little mercy will be shown the rebels who fall into their hands."

"I should advise any of you gentlemen who want to write home," the Colonel said, gravely, "to do so this evening. There is no doubt that we shall take those places, but I think that there is also no doubt that our death roll will be heavy. You must not judge by their fighting today of the stand that they are likely to make tomorrow. They know well enough that they will get no quarter after what has taken place, and will fight desperately to the end."

Most of the officers took his advice. Captain Mallett sat down on the parapet, took out a notebook, and wrote in pencil:

"Dear Sir John:

"Although it is but four days since I posted you a long letter from Cawnpore that I had written on our way up the river, I think it as well to write a few lines in pencil. You will not get them unless I go down tomorrow, as I shall of course tear them up if I get through all right. I am writing now within sight of the Residency. We had a bit of a fight today, but the rebels did not make any serious stand. Tomorrow it will be different, for we shall have to fight our way through the town, and there is no doubt that the resistance will be very obstinate. I have nothing to add to what I wrote to you last. What I should like you to know is that I thought of you all this evening, and that I send you and Lady Greendale and Bertha my best wishes for your long life and happiness.

"Yours most sincerely,

"Frank Mallett."

He tore the page from his notebook, put it in an envelope and directed it, then placed it in an inner pocket of his uniform.

"So you are not writing, Marshall," he said, as he went across to the young ensign who was sitting on the angle of the parapet.

"I have no one particular to write to, Captain Mallett, and the only persons who will feel any severe sorrow if I fall tomorrow are my creditors."

"We should all be sorry, Marshall, very sorry. Ever since we sailed from Plymouth your conduct has shown that you have determined to retrieve your previous folly. The Colonel himself spoke to me about it the other day, and remarked that he had every hope that you would turn out a steady and useful officer. We have all noticed that beyond the regular allowance of wine you have drunk nothing, and that you did not touch a card throughout the voyage."

"I have not spent a penny since I went on board at Plymouth," the lad said. "I got the paymaster to give me an order on London for the amount of pay due to me the day we got to Cawnpore, and posted it to Morrison; so he has got some fifteen pounds out of the fire. Of course it is not much, but at any rate it will show him I mean to pay up honestly."

"Well done, lad. You are quite right to give up cards, and to cut yourself off liquors beyond the Queen's allowance; but don't stint yourself in necessaries. For instance, fruit is necessary here, and of course when we once get into settled quarters, you must keep a horse of some sort, as everyone else will do so. How much did you really have from Morrison in cash?"

"Three hundred; for which I gave him bills for four fifty and a lien on my commission."

"All right, lad, I will write to my solicitor in London, and get him to see Morrison, and ask him to meet you fairly in the matter. He will know that it will be years before you are likely to be in England again, and that if you are killed he will lose altogether; so under these circumstances I have no doubt that he will be glad enough to make a considerable abatement, perhaps to content himself with the sum that you really had from him."

"I am afraid that my letter, with the enclosure, assuring him that I will in time pay the amount due, will harden his heart," Marshall laughed. "I am much obliged all the same, but I don't think that it will be of any use."

However, on leaving him, Mallett went downstairs, borrowed some ink from the quartermaster, and wrote to his solicitor, enclosing a cheque for 300 pounds, with instructions to see the money lender.

"You will find that he will be glad enough to hand over young Marshall's bills for four fifty for that amount," he said. "He has already had fifteen pounds, which is a fair interest for the three hundred for the time the lad has had it. He will know well enough that if Marshall dies he will lose every penny, and that at any rate he will have to wait many years before he can get it. I have no doubt that he would jump at an offer of a couple of hundred, but it is just as well that the young fellow

should feel the obligation for some time, and as the man did lend him the money it would be unfair that he should be an absolute loser."

Chapter 3

The next morning three days' rations were served out to the troops, and the advance begun; the movement being directed against the Secunderbagh, a large garden surrounded by a very high and strong wall loopholed for musketry. To reach it a village, fortified and strongly held, had first to be carried. The attack was led by Brigadier Hope's brigade, of which the regiment formed part. As they approached the village, so heavy a musketry fire was opened upon them that the order to advance was changed and the leading regiment moved forward in skirmishing order. The horse artillery and heavy field guns were brought up, and poured a tremendous fire into the village, driving the defenders from their post on the walls.

As soon as this was accomplished, the infantry rushed forward and stormed the village, the enemy opposing a stout resistance, occupying the houses and fighting to the last. The main body of them, however, fled to the Secunderbagh. The 4th Sikhs had been ordered to lead the attack, while the British infantry of the brigade were to cover the operation. The men were, however, too excited and too eager to get at the enemy to remain inactive, and on leaving the village dashed forward side by side with the Sikhs and attacked the wall. There was a small breach in this, and many of the men rushed through it before the enemy, taken by surprise, could offer a serious resistance. The entrance was, however, so narrow that very few men could pass in, and while a furious fight was raging inside, the rest of the troops tried in vain to find some means of entering.

There were two barred windows, one on each side of the gate, and some of the troopers creeping under these raised their shakos on their bayonets. The defenders fired a heavy volley into them, and the soldiers, leaping to their feet, sprang at the bars and pulled them down by main force, before the defenders had time to reload. Then they leaped down inside, others followed them, the gates were opened, and the main body of troops poured in.

The garden was held by 2,000 mutineers. With shouts of "Remember Cawnpore," the troops flung themselves upon them; and although the mutineers fought desperately, and the struggle was continued for a considerable time, every man was at last shot or bayoneted.

In the meantime a serious struggle was going on close by. Nearly facing the Secunderbagh stood the large Mosque of Shah Nujeeff. It had a domed roof, with a loopholed parapet and four minarets, which were filled with riflemen. It stood in a large garden surrounded by a high wall, also loopholed, the entrance being blocked up with solid masonry. The fire from this building had seriously galled Hope's division, while engaged in forcing its way into the Secunderbagh, and Captain Peel, with the Naval Brigade, brought up the heavy guns against it. He took up his position within a few yards of the wall and opened a heavy fire, assisted by that of a mortar battery and a field battery of Bengal Artillery; the Highlanders covering the sailors and artillerymen as they worked their guns, by a tremendous fire upon the enemy's loopholes. So massive were the walls that it was several hours before even the sixty-eight pounders of the Naval Brigade succeeded in effecting a breach.

As soon as this was done the impatient infantry were ordered to the assault, and rushing in, overpowered all resistance, and slew all within the enclosure, save a few who effected their escape by leaping from the wall at the rear.

It was now late in the afternoon, and operations ceased for the day. The buildings on which the enemy had chiefly relied for their defence had been captured, and the difficulties still to be encountered were comparatively small. The next day an attack was made upon a strong building known as the Mess House. This was first breached by the artillery, and then carried by assault by the 53rd and 90th regiments, and a detachment of Sikhs; the latter, single handed, storming another building called the Observatory, in the rear of the Mess House.

At the same time the garrison of the Residency had, in accordance with the plan brought out by Kavanagh, begun operations on their side. The capture of the Secunderbagh and Mosque had been

signalled to them, and while the attack on the Mess House was being carried out they had blown down the outer wall of their defences, shelled the ground beyond, and then advanced, carrying two large buildings facing them at the point of the bayonet.

All day the fighting continued, the British gaining ground on either side. The next day the houses still intervening between them were captured, and in the afternoon the defenders of the Residency and the relieving force joined hands. The total loss of the latter was 122 officers and men killed and 345 wounded.

Frank Mallett's letter to Sir John Greendale was not sent off. He received a bullet through the left arm as the troops advanced against the Secunderbagh, but, using his sash as a sling, led on his company against the defenders crowded in the garden, and took part in the desperate fighting. Three of his brother officers were killed during the three days' fighting, and five others wounded.

"Well, Marshall," he said on the evening of the day when the way was open to the Residency; "you have not cheated your creditor, I see."

"No, Captain Mallett. I thought of him when those fellows in the mosque were keeping such a heavy fire upon us as we were waiting to get into the Secunderbagh. It seemed to me that his chance of ever getting his money was not worth much. How the bullets did whizz about! I felt sure that we should be all mown down before we could get under the shelter of the wall.

"I don't think I shall ever feel afraid in battle again. One gets to see that musketry fire is not so very dangerous after all. If it were, very few of us would have got through the three days' fighting alive, whereas the casualties only amount to one-tenth of the force engaged. I am very sorry you are wounded."

"Oh, my wound is a mere trifle. I scarcely felt it until the sergeant next to me said, 'You are wounded in the arm, Captain Mallett.' The doctor says that it narrowly missed the bone, but in this case a miss is as good as a mile. I am very sorry about Hatchard and Rivers and Miles. They were all good fellows, and when this excitement is over we shall miss them sadly. It will give you your step."

"Yes, I won't say that it is lucky, for one cannot forget how it has been gained. Still it is a good lift for me, for there are two or three down for purchase below me, and otherwise I should have had to wait a long time. It puts you one higher on the list, Captain Mallett."

"I am going to clear out altogether as soon as the fighting is all over, so whether I am fourth or fifth on the list makes no difference whatever to me."

"Still it is a great satisfaction to have been through this and to have taken one's share in the work of revenge. It was a horrible business in the Secunderbagh, though one did not think of it at the time. The villains richly deserved what they got, but I own that I should not care to go into the place again. They must have suffered tremendously altogether. The Colonel said this afternoon that he found their loss had been put down as at least six or seven thousand."

The regiment took its full share in the work that followed the relief of Lucknow, portions being attached to each of the flying columns which scoured Oude, defeated Kunwer Singh, and drove the rebels before them wherever they encountered them.

In the beginning of February the vacancies in the ranks were filled up by a draft from England. The work had been fatiguing in the extreme, but the men were as a rule in splendid health, the constant excitement preventing their suffering from the effect of heat or attacks of fever.

Two companies which had been away from the headquarters of the regiment for six weeks, found on their return a number of letters awaiting them, the first they had received since leaving England. Captain Mallett, who commanded this detachment, found one from Sir John Greendale, written after the receipt of his letter from Cawnpore.

"My Dear Mallett:

"We were all delighted to get your letter. Long before we received it we had the news of the desperate fighting at Lucknow, which was, of course, telegraphed down to the coast and got here

before your letter. You may imagine that we looked anxiously through the list of killed and wounded, and were glad indeed that your name in the latter had the word 'slightly' after it.

"Things are going on here much as usual. There was a terrible sensation on the very morning after you left, at the disappearance of Martha Bennett, the daughter of one of your tenants. She left the house just at dusk the evening before, and has not been heard of since. As she took nothing with her, it is improbable in the extreme that she can have fled, and there can be little doubt that the poor girl was murdered, possibly by some passing tramps. However, though the strictest search was made throughout the neighbourhood, her body has never been discovered.

"We lost another neighbour just about the time you left—Percy Carthew. He went for a year's big game shooting in North America. We don't miss him much, as he lived in London, and was not often down at his place. I don't remember his being there since you came back from the Crimea. Anyhow, I do not think that I ever saw you and him together, either in a hunting field or at a dinner party; which, of course, you would have been had you both been down here at the same time. If I remember right, you were at the same school."

And then followed some gossip about mutual friends, and the letter concluded:

"The general excitement is calming down a little now that Delhi is taken and the garrison of Lucknow brought off. Of course there will be a great deal more fighting before the whole thing is over, but there is no longer any fear for the safety of India. The Sikhs have come out splendidly. Who would have thought it after the tremendous thrashing we gave them a few years back?"

"Take care of yourself, lad. You have the Victoria Cross and can do very well without a bar, so give someone else the chance. My wife and Bertha send their love."

Two or three of his other letters were from friends in regiments at home bewailing their hard fortune at being out of the fighting. The last he opened bore the latest postmark. It was from his solicitor, and enclosed Marshall's cancelled bill.

"Of course, as you requested me to give 300 pounds for the enclosed, I did so, but by the way in which Morrison jumped at the offer I believe that he would have been glad to have taken half that sum."

Mallett had gone into his tent to open his letters in quiet. He presently went to the entrance, and catching sight of Marshall called him up.

"I have managed that affair for you, Marshall," he said; "and have arranged it in a way that I am sure will be satisfactory to us both. You must look upon me now as your creditor instead of Morrison, and you won't find me a hard one. Here is your cancelled bill for four hundred and fifty. I got it for three hundred, so that a third of your debt is wiped off at once. As to the rest, you can pay me as you intended to pay him, but I don't want you to stint yourself unnecessarily. Pay me ten or fifteen pounds at a time at your convenience, and don't let us say anything more about it."

"But I may be killed," Marshall said, in a voice struggling with emotion.

"If you are, lad, there is an end of the business. As you know, I am very well off, and the loss would not affect me in any way. Very likely you will light upon some rich booty in one of these affairs with a rebel Rajah, and will be able to pay it all off at once."

"I will if I can, Mallett, though I think that it will be much more satisfactory to do it out of my savings, except that I shall have the pleasure of knowing that if I were wiped out afterwards you would not be a loser."

A few days later Frank Mallett was sent with his company to rout out a party of rebels reported to be in possession of a large village twenty miles away. Armstrong was laid up by a slight attack of fever, and he asked that Marshall should be appointed in his place on this occasion.

"One wants two subalterns, Colonel," he said, "for a business like this. I may have to detach a party to the back of the village to cut off the rebels' retreat, and it may be necessary to assault in two places."

"Certainly. Take Marshall if you wish it, Captain Mallett. The young fellow has been behaving excellently, and has gone far to retrieve his character. Captain Johnson has reported to me that he is exemplary in his duties, and has shown much gallantry under fire, especially in that affair near Neemuch, in which he rushed forward and carried off a wounded man who would otherwise have certainly been killed. I reported the case to the Brigadier, who said that at any other time the young fellow would probably have been recommended for a V.C., but that there were so many cases of individual gallantry that there was no chance of his getting that; but Marshall was specially mentioned in orders four days ago, and this will, of course, count in his favour.

"Take him with you by all means; your ensign only joined with the last draft, and you will certainly want someone with you of greater experience than he has."

Marshall was delighted when he heard that he was to accompany Captain Mallett. In addition to his own company, a hundred men of the Punjaub infantry and fifty Sikh horse were under Captain Mallett's command, the native troops being added at the last moment, as a report of another body of mutineers marching in the same direction had just come in.

Frank spent a quarter of an hour in inspecting some maps of the country, and had a talk with the native who was to act as guide. When the little force was drawn up, he marched off in quite another direction from that in which the village lay. Being in command, he was mounted for the first time during the campaign. The lieutenant in command of the Sikhs presently rode up to him.

"I beg your pardon, Captain Mallett, but I cannot but think that your guide is taking you in the wrong direction. I looked at the map before starting, and find that Dousi lies almost due north. We are marching west."

"You are quite right, Mr. Hammond, but, you see, I don't want any of the natives about the camp to guess where we are going. None of these Oude fellows bears us any goodwill, and one of them might hurry off, and carry information as to the line we were following.

"We will march four miles along this road, and then strike off by another leading north. We must surprise them if we can. We don't really know much about their force, and even if we did, they may be joined by some other body before we get there—there are numerous bands of them all over the country. And in the next place, if they knew that we were coming, they might bolt before we got there.

"Besides, some of these villages are very strong, and we might suffer a good deal before we could carry it if they had notice of our coming. However, you were quite right to point out to me that we were not going in what seemed the right direction."

The column started at four o'clock in the afternoon. It had been intended that it should move off at daybreak on the following morning, but Frank had suggested to the Colonel that it would be advantageous to march half the distance that night.

"Of course, we could do the twenty miles tomorrow, Colonel," he said, "but the men would hardly be in the best fighting trim when they got there. Moreover, by starting in the afternoon, the natives here would imagine that we were going to pounce upon some fugitives at a village not far away."

The permission was readily granted, and accordingly, after marching until nine o'clock in the evening, the column halted in a grove of trees to which their guide led them, half a mile from the road. Each man carried four days' cooked provisions in his haversack. There was therefore no occasion for fires to be lighted, and after seeing that sentries were placed round the edge of the grove, Frank Mallett joined the officers who were gathered in the centre.

"What time shall we march tomorrow?" the officer in command of the native infantry asked.

"Not until the heat of the day is over. We have come about twelve miles, and have as much more to do; and if we start at the same hour as we did today we shall get there about nine. I shall halt half a mile away, reconnoitre the place at night, and if the ground is open enough to move without making a noise, we will post the troops in the positions they are to occupy, and attack as soon as day breaks.

"In that way we shall get the benefit of surprise, and at the same time have daylight to prevent their escaping. Besides, if we attacked at night a good many of the villagers, and perhaps women, might be killed in the confusion.

"Tomorrow morning we will cut down some young saplings and make a dozen scaling ladders. We have brought a bag of gunpowder to blow open the gate, and if the main body enter there while two parties scale the walls at other points we shall get them in a trap."

At about nine o'clock the next evening the guide said that they were now within half a mile of the village, and they accordingly halted. The men were ordered to keep silence, and to lie down and sleep as soon as they had eaten their supper; while Mallett, accompanied by the two officers of the native troops and the guide, made his way towards the village.

It was found to be larger than had been anticipated. On three sides cultivated fields extended to the foot of the strong wall that surrounded it, while on the fourth there was rough broken ground covered with scrub and brushes.

"How far does this extend?" Captain Mallett asked the guide.

"About half a mile, and then joins a big jungle, sahib."

"This is the side they will try to escape by; therefore, Mr. Herbert, you will lead your men round here with four scaling ladders. You will post them along at the foot of the wall, and when you hear the explosion of the powder bag or an outburst of musketry firing, you will scale the wall and advance to meet me, keeping as wide a front as possible, so as to prevent fugitives from passing you and getting out here. The cavalry will cut off those who make across the open country. I would give a good deal to know how many of these fellows are inside. Four hundred was the number first reported. They may, of course, have already moved away, and on the other hand they may have been joined by others. They were said to have some guns with them, but these will be of little use in the streets of the village, and we shall probably capture them before they have time to fire a single round."

At three o'clock the troops stood to their arms, and moved noiselessly off towards the positions assigned to them. Captain Mallett led his own company to within four hundred yards of the wall, and then sent Marshall forward with two men to fix the powder bag and fuse to the gate. When they had done this they were to remain quietly there until warned that the company was about to advance; then they were to light the fuse, which was cut to burn two minutes, to retire round the angle of the wall, and join the company as it came up. The troops lay down, for the ground was level, and there was no spot behind which they could conceal themselves, and impatiently watched the sky until the first gleam of light appeared. Another ten minutes elapsed. The dawn was spreading fast, and a man was sent forward to Lieutenant Marshall to say that the company was getting in motion.

As soon as the messenger was seen to reach the gates, Mallett gave the word. The men sprang to their feet.

"Don't double, men. We shall be there in time, and it is no use getting out of breath and spoiling your shooting."

They were within a hundred yards of the gate, when they heard a shout from the village, and as they pressed on, shot after shot rang out from the wall. A moment later there was a heavy explosion, and as the smoke cleared off, the gate was seen to be destroyed.

A few seconds later, the troops burst through the opening. Infantry bugles were sounding in the village, and there was a loud din of shouting, cries of alarm and orders. From every house the mutineers rushed, musket in hand, but were shot down or bayoneted by the troops. As the latter approached a large open space in the middle of the village a strong body of Sepoys advanced in good order to meet them, led by their native officers.

"Steady, men, steady," Captain Mallett shouted. "Form across the street."

Quickly the men fell in, though several dropped as a volley flashed out from the Sepoy line.

"One volley and then charge," Mallett shouted. Some of the guns were already empty, but the rest poured in their fire, when the word was given, as regularly as if on parade.

"Level bayonets—charge!" And with a loud cheer the soldiers sprang forward. The Sepoys, well commanded though they were, wavered and broke; but the British were upon them before they could fly, and with shouts of "Cawnpore," used their bayonets with deadly effect, driving the enemy before them.

As they came into the open, and the fugitives cleared away on either side, they saw a long line of men drawn up. A moment later a flash of fire ran along it.

"Shoulder to shoulder, men," Captain Mallett shouted. "Give them the bayonet."

With a hoarse roar of rage, for many of their comrades had fallen, the company rushed forward and burst through the line of mutineers as if it had been a sheet of paper. Then they divided, and Captain Mallett with half the company turned to the right. Marshall took the other wing to the left.

Encouraged by the smallness of the number of their assailants, the mutineers, cheered on by their officers, resisted stoutly. A scattering fire opened upon the British from the houses round, and the shouts of the mutineers rose louder and louder, when a heavy volley was suddenly poured into them, and the Punjaubies rushed out from the street facing that by which the British had entered. They bore to the right, and fell upon the body with which Marshall was engaged.

The Sepoys, taken wholly by surprise, at once lost heart. Cheering loudly, the British attacked them with increased ardour, while the Punjaubies flung themselves into their midst. In an instant, that flank of the Sepoys was scattered in headlong flight, hotly pursued by their foes. There was no firing, for the muskets were all empty; but the bayonet did its work, and the open space and the streets leading from it were thickly strewn with dead.

The Sepoys attacked by Captain Mallett's party, on the other hand, though shaken for a moment, stood firm; led by two or three native officers, who, fighting with the greatest bravery, exhorted their men to continue their resistance.

"Would you rather be hung than fight?" they shouted. "They are but a handful; we are five to one against them. Forward, men, and exterminate these Feringhees before the others can come back to their assistance."

The Sepoys were now the assailants, and with furious shouts pressed round the little body of British troops.

"Steady, men, steady," Captain Mallett shouted, as he drove his sword through the body of one of the rebel leaders who rushed at him. "Keep together, back to back. We shall have help here in a minute."

It was longer than that, however, before relief came. For three or four minutes a desperate struggle went on, then Marshall's voice was heard shouting:

"This way, men, this way!"

A moment later there was a surging movement in the ranks of the insurgents, and with a dozen men Marshall burst through them, and joined the party. These at once fell furiously upon the mutineers, and the latter were already giving way when some fifty of the Punjaubies, led by their officers, fell upon them.

The effect was decisive. The Sepoys scattered at once, and fled in all directions, pursued by the furious soldiers and the Punjaubies. Reaching the walls, the fugitives leapt recklessly down. Forty or fifty of them were cut down by the cavalry, but the greater portion reached the broken ground in safety. Here the cavalry could not follow them, for the ground was covered with rocks and boulders concealed by the bushes. In the village itself three hundred and fifty lay dead.

"Thanks, Marshall," Frank Mallett said, when the fight in the village was over. "You arrived just in time, for it was going very hard with us. Altogether it was more than we bargained for, for they were certainly over a thousand strong. They must have been joined by a very strong party yesterday."

"I ought not to have gone so far," Marshall replied, "but I had no idea that all the Punjaubies had come to our side of the fight. The men were so eager that I had the greatest difficulty in getting them off the pursuit. Fortunately I met Herbert, and learned that all his men were with us. Then I

gathered a dozen of our fellows, and rushed off, telling him to follow as soon as he could get some of his men together.

"You can imagine what agony I felt when, as I entered the open space, I saw a surging mass of Sepoys, and no sign of any of you; and how I cursed my own folly, and what delight I felt, as on cutting our way through we found that you were still on your feet."

"Yes, it was a close shave, Marshall; another two or three minutes and it would have been all over. The men fought like lions, as you can see by the piled-up dead there. Half of them were down, and twenty men cannot hold out long against four or five hundred.

"We owe our lives to you beyond all question. I don't see that you were in the least to blame in the matter, for naturally you would suppose that some of the Punjaubies would have joined us. Besides, it was of course essential that you should not give the Sepoys time to rally, but should follow them up hotly.

"Where is Anstruther?"

"I don't know. I have not seen him since we entered the square."

"Have any of you seen Mr. Anstruther?" Captain Mallett asked, turning to some soldiers standing near.

"He is lying over there, sir," one of the men said. "He was just in front of me when the Pandies fired that volley at us as we came out of the streets, and he pitched forward and fell like a stone. I think that he was shot through the head, sir."

They went across to the spot. The ensign lay there shot through the brain. Four or five soldiers lay round him; one of them was dead, the others more or less seriously wounded.

"Sound the assembly," Captain Mallett said, as he turned away sadly, to a bugler. "Let us see what our losses are."

Chapter 4

The bugle sounded, and in a short time the infantry fell in. They had been engaged in searching the houses for mutineers. The Punjaubies had lost but five killed and thirteen wounded, while of the whites an officer and eighteen men were killed and sixteen wounded; nine of the former having fallen in the bayonet struggle with the Sepoys. Nine guns were captured, none of which had been fired, the attack having been so sudden that the Sepoys had only had time to fall in before their assailants were upon them.

"It is a creditable victory," Mallett said, "considering that we had to face more than double the number that we expected. Our casualties are heavy, but they are nothing to those of the mutineers.

"Sergeant, take a file of men and go round and count the number of the enemy who have fallen.

"Ah, here comes a Sowar, and we shall hear what the cavalry have been doing outside."

The trooper handed him a paper: "Fifty-three of the enemy killed, the rest escaped into the jungle. On our side two wounded; one seriously, one slightly."

"That is as well as we could expect, Marshall. Of course, most of them got over the wall at the back. You see, all our plans were disarranged by finding them in such unexpected strength. Had we been able to thrash them by ourselves, the Punjaubies would have cut off the retreat in that direction. As it was, that part of the business is a failure."

The Sergeant presently returned.

"There are 340 in the streets, sir," he reported; "and I reckon there are another 20 or 30 killed in the houses, but I have not searched them yet."

"That is sufficiently close; upwards of 400 is good enough.

"Now, Mr. Marshall, set the men to work making stretchers to carry the wounded.

"Mr. Herbert, will you tell off a party of your men to dig a large grave outside the village for the killed, and a small one apart for Mr. Anstruther? Poor fellow, I am sorry indeed at his loss; he would have made a fine officer.

"Sergeant Hugging, take a party and search the village for provisions. We have got bread, but lay hands on any fowls or goats that you can find, and there may be some sheep."

While this party was away, another tore down the woodwork of an empty house, and fires were soon burning, an abundance of fowl and goats having been obtained. The cavalry had by this time come in.

While the meal was being cooked the British and Punjaub dead were carried out to the spot where the grave had been dug. The troops had a hearty meal, and then marched out from the village. They were drawn up round the graves, and the bodies were laid reverently in them. Captain Mallett said a few words over them; the earth was then shovelled in and levelled, and the troops marched to a wood a mile distant, where they halted until the heat of the day was over. They returned by the direct road to the camp, which they reached at midnight.

All concerned gained great credit for the heavy blow that had been inflicted on the mutineers, and the affair was highly spoken of in the Brigadier's report to the Commander in Chief. Shortly afterwards Mallett's name appeared in general orders as promoted to a brevet Majority, pending a confirmation by the home authorities.

Two days after the return of the little column, the brigade marched and joined the force collected at Cawnpore for the final operation against Lucknow, and on the 3rd of March reached the Commander in Chief at the Dil Koosha, which had been captured with the same ease as on the occasion of the former advance.

They found that while the main body had gathered there, 6,000 men under Sir James Outram had crossed the Goomtee from the Alum Bagh, and, after defeating two serious attacks by the enemy, had taken up a position at Chinhut. On the 9th, Sir Colin Campbell captured the Martiniere with

trifling loss. On the 11th General Outram pushed his advance as far as the iron bridge, and established batteries commanding the passage of the stone bridge also. On the 12th the Imambarra was breached and stormed, and the troops pressed so hotly on the flying enemy that they entered the Kaiser Bagh, the strongest fortified palace in the city, and drove the enemy from it.

The –th was engaged in this action, and Major Mallett was leading his company to the assault on the Imambarra when a shot brought him to the ground. When he recovered his senses he found himself in a chamber that had been hastily converted into a hospital, with the regimental doctor leaning over him.

"What has happened?" he asked.

"You have been hit, Mallett, and have had a very close shave of it, indeed; but as it is, you will soon be about again."

"Where was I hit? I don't feel any pain."

"You were hit in the neck, about half an inch above the collarbone, and the ball has gone through the muscles of the neck; and beyond the fact that you won't be able to turn your head for some time, you will be none the worse for it. An inch further to the right, or an inch lower or higher, and it would have been fatal. It was not one of the enemy who did you this service, for the ball went up from behind, and came out in front; it is evidently a random shot from one of our own fellows."

"I am always more afraid of a shot from behind than I am of one in front when I am leading the company, doctor. The men get so excited that they blaze away anyhow, and in the smoke are just as likely to hit an officer two or three paces ahead of them as an enemy. How long have I been insensible?"

"You were brought in here half an hour ago, and I don't suppose that you had lain many minutes on the ground before you were picked up."

"Have we taken the Imambarra?"

"Yes, and what is better still, our fellows rushed into the Kaiser Bagh at the heels of the enemy. We got the news ten minutes ago."

"That is good indeed. We anticipated desperate fighting before we took that."

"Yes, it was an unlucky shot, Mallett, that knocked you out of your share in the loot. We have always heard that the place was full of treasure and jewels."

"If there is no one else who wants your attention, doctor, I advise you to join the regiment there for an hour or two. As for me, I care nothing about the loot. There are plenty of fellows who will benefit by it more than I should, and I give up my share willingly."

The doctor shook his head.

"I am afraid I cannot do that; but, between ourselves, I have let Ferguson slip away, and he is to divide what he gets with me."

"Have we any wounded?"

"I don't know yet. The whole thing was done so suddenly that the loss cannot have been heavy. I was in the rear of the brigade when you were brought in, and as the case at first looked bad, I got some of the stretcher men with me to burst open the door of this house and established a dozen temporary beds here. As you see, there are only four others tenanted, and they are all hopeless cases. No doubt the rest have all been carried off to the rear, as only the men who helped me would have known of this place.

"Now that you have come round, I will send a couple of hospital orderlies in here and be off myself to the hospital in the rear. I will look in again this evening."

In a short time the doctor returned with an orderly.

"I cannot find another now," he said, "but one will be enough. Here is a flask of brandy, and he will find you water somewhere. There is nothing to be done for any of you at present, except to give you drink when you want it."

Two hours later Marshall came in.

"Thank God you are not dangerously hurt, Mallett," he said. "I only heard that you were down three-quarters of an hour ago, when I ran against Armstrong in the Kaiser Bagh. He told me that he had seen you fall at the beginning of the fight, and I got leave from the Colonel to look for you. At the hospital, no one seemed to know anything about you, but I luckily came across Jefferies, who told me where to find you, and that your wound was not serious, so I hurried back here. He said that you would be taken to the hospital this evening."

"Yes, I am in luck again. Like the last it is only a flesh wound, though it is rather worse, for I expect that I shall have to go about with a stiff neck for some weeks to come, and it is disgusting being laid up in the middle of an affair like this. Have we lost many fellows?"

"No. Scobell is the only officer killed. Hunter, Groves and Parkinson are wounded—Parkinson, they say, seriously. We have twenty-two rank and file killed, and twenty or thirty wounded. I have not seen the returns."

"And how about the loot, Marshall?" Mallett said, with a smile. "Was that all humbug?"

"It is stupendous. We were among the first at the Kaiser Bagh, and I don't believe that there is a man who has not got his pockets stuffed with gold coins. There were chests and chests full. They did not bother about the jewels—I think they took them for coloured glass. I kept my eyes open, and picked up enough to pay my debt to you five times over."

"I am heartily glad of that, Marshall. Don't let it slip through your fingers again."

"That you may be sure I won't. I shall send them all home to our agent to sell, and have the money put by for purchasing my next step. I have had my lesson, and it will last me for life."

"Well, I must be going now, old man. The Colonel did not like letting me go, as of course the men want looking after, and the Pandies may make an effort to drive us out of the Kaiser Bagh again; so goodbye. If I can get away this evening I will come to see you at the hospital."

A week later Frank Mallett was sitting in a chair by his bedside. The fighting was all over, and a strange quiet had succeeded the long roar of battle. His neck was strapped up with bandages, and save that he was unable to move his head in the slightest degree, he felt well enough to take his place with the regiment again. Many of his fellow officers dropped in from time to time for a short chat, but the duty was heavy. All open resistance had ceased, but the troops were engaged in searching the houses, and turning out all rough characters who had made Lucknow their centre, and had no visible means of subsistence. Large gangs of the lower class population were set to work to bury the dead, which would otherwise have rendered the city uninhabitable. Strong guards were posted at night, alike to prevent soldiers from wandering in search of loot and to prevent fanatics from making sudden attacks.

"There is a wounded man in the hospital across the road who wants to see you, Mallett," the surgeon said one morning. "He belongs to your company, but as he only came out with the last draft, and was transferred only on the day that the fighting began, I don't suppose you know him. He said I was to tell you his name was George Lechmere, though he enlisted as John Hilton."

"I seem to know the name, doctor, though I don't remember at present where I came across him. I suppose I can go in to see him?"

"Oh, yes, there is no objection whatever. Your wound is doing as well as can be; though, of course, you are still weak from loss of blood. I shall send you up this afternoon to the hospital just established in the park of the Dil Koosha. We shall get you all out as soon as we can, for the stench of this town at present is dreadful, and wounds cannot be expected to do well in such a poisoned atmosphere."

"Is this man badly hit, doctor?"

"Very dangerously. I have scarcely a hope of saving him, and think it probable that he may not live another twenty-four hours. Of course, he may take a change for the better. I will take you to him. I have finished here now."

"It must have been a bad time for you, doctor," Mallett said, as they went across.

"Tremendously hard, but most interesting. I had not had more than two hours' sleep at a time since the fighting began, till last night, and then I could not keep up any longer. Of course, it has been the same with us all, and the heat has made it very trying. I am particularly anxious to get the wounded well out of the place, for now that the excitement is over I expect an outbreak of fever or dysentery.

"There, that is your man in the corner bed over there."

Mallett went over to the bedside, and looked at the wounded man. His face was drawn and pinched, his eyes sunken in his head, his face deadly pale, and his hair matted with perspiration.

"Do you know me, Captain Mallett?"

"No, lad, I cannot say that I do, though when the doctor told me your name it seemed familiar to me. Very likely I should have recognised you if I had met you a week since, but, you see, we are both altered a good deal from the effect of our wounds."

"I am the son of Farmer Lechmere, your tenant."

"Good heavens! man. You don't mean to say you are Lechmere's eldest son, George! What in the world brought you to this?"

"You did," the man said, sternly. "Your villainy brought me here."

Frank Mallett gave a start of astonishment that cost him so violent a twinge in his wound that he almost cried out with sudden pain.

"What wild idea have you got into your head, my poor fellow?" he said soothingly. "I am conscious of having done no wrong to you or yours. I saw your father and mother on the afternoon before I came away. They made no complaint of anything."

"No, they were contented enough. Do you know, Captain Mallett, that I loved Martha Bennett?"

"No. I have been so little at home of recent years that I know very little of the private affairs of my tenants, but I remember her, of course, and I was grieved to learn by a letter from Sir John Greendale the other day that in some strange way she was missing."

"Who knew that better than yourself?" the man said, raising himself on his elbow, and fixing a look of such deadly hatred upon Mallett, that the latter involuntarily drew back a step.

"I saw you laughing and talking to her in front of her father's house. I heard you with her in their garden the evening before you left and she disappeared, and it was my voice you heard in the lane. Had I known that you were going that night, I would have followed you and killed you, and saved her. The next morning you were both gone. I waited a time and then went to the depot of your regiment and enlisted. I had failed to save her, but at least I could avenge her. That bullet was mine, and had you not stumbled over a Pandy's body, I suppose, just as I pulled my trigger, you would have been a dead man.

"I did not know that I had failed, and, rushing forward with my company, was in the thickest of the fight. I wanted to be killed, but no shot struck me, and at last, when chasing a Pandy along a passage in the Kaiser Bagh, he turned and levelled his piece at me. Mine was loaded, and I could have shot him down as he turned, but I stood and let him have his shot. When I found myself here I was sorry that he had not finished me at once, but when I heard that you were alive, and likely to recover, I thanked him in my heart that he had left me a few more days of life, that I could let you know that it was I who had fired, and that Martha's wrong had not been wholly unavenged."

He sank back exhausted on to the pillow. Frank Mallett had made no attempt to interrupt him: the sudden agony of his wound and his astonishment at this strange accusation had given him so grave a shock that he leaned against the wall behind him in silent wonder.

"Hello! Mallett, what the deuce is the matter with you?" the surgeon exclaimed, as, looking up from a patient over whom he was bending a short distance away, his eyes fell on the officer's face. "You look as if you were going to faint, man."

"Here, orderly, some brandy and water, quickly!"

Frank drank some of the brandy and water and sat down for a few minutes. Then, when he saw the surgeon at the other end of the room, he got up and went across to Lechmere's bed.

"There is some terrible mistake, Lechmere," he said, quietly. "I swear to you on my honour as a gentleman that you are altogether wrong. From the moment that I got into my dog cart at Bennett's I never saw Martha again. I know nothing whatever of this talk in the garden. Did you think you saw me as well as heard me?"

"No, you were on one side of that high wall and I on the other, but I heard enough to know who it was. You told her that you had to go abroad at once, but that if she would come out there you would put her in charge of someone until you could marry her. You told her that she could not stay where she was long, and I knew what that meant. I suppose she is at Calcutta still waiting, for of course she could not have come out with you. I suppose that she is breaking her heart there now—if she is not dead, as I hope she is."

"Did you hear the word Calcutta or India mentioned, Lechmere?"

"No, I did not, but I heard quite enough. Everyone knew that you were going in a day or two, and that was enough for me after what I had seen in the afternoon."

"You saw nothing in the afternoon," Captain Mallett said, angrily. "The girl's father and mother were at home. We were all chatting together until we came out. She came to the trap with me while they stood at the open window. It was not more than a minute before I drove off. I have not spoken to the girl half a dozen times since she was a little child."

"Why, man, if everyone took such insane fancies in his head as you do, no man would dare to speak to a woman at all."

"However," he went on in an altered voice, "this is not a time for anger. You are very ill, Lechmere, but the doctor has not given you up, and I trust that you will yet get round and will be able to prove to your own satisfaction that, whatever has happened to this poor girl, I, at least, am wholly innocent of it. But should you not get over this hurt, I should not like you to go to your grave believing that I had done you this great wrong. I speak to you as to a dying man, and having no interest in deceiving you, and I swear to you before Heaven that I know absolutely nothing of this. I, too, may fall from a rebel shot before long, and I thank God that I can meet you before Him as an innocent man in this matter."

"I must be going, for I see the doctor coming to fetch me. Goodbye, lad, we may not meet again, though I trust we shall; but if not, I give you my full forgiveness for that shot you fired at me. It was the result of a strange mistake, but had I acted as you believed, I should have well deserved the death you intended for me."

"Confound it, Mallett, there seems no end of mischief from your visit here. In the first place, you were nearly knocked over yourself, and now there is this man lying insensible. So for goodness' sake get off to your room again, and lie down and keep yourself quiet for the rest of the day. I shall have you demoralising the whole ward if you stay here."

Captain Mallett walked back with a much feebler and less steady step than that with which he had entered the hospital. He had some doubts whether the man who had made this strange accusation and had so nearly taken his life was really sane, and whether he had not altogether imagined the conversation which he declared he had heard in the garden. He remembered now the sudden way in which George Lechmere had turned round and gone away when he saw him saying goodbye to Martha, and how she had shrugged her shoulders in contempt.

The man must either be mad, or of a frightfully jealous disposition, to conjure up harm out of such an incident: and one who would do so might well, when his brain was on fire, conjure up this imaginary conversation. Still, he might have heard some man talking to her. From what Sir John had said, she did leave the house and go into the garden about that hour, and she certainly never returned.

He remembered all about George Lechmere now. He had the reputation of being the best judge of cattle in the neighbourhood, and a thoroughly steady fellow, but he could see no resemblance in the shrunk and wasted face to that he remembered.

That evening both the officers and men in the hospital were carried away to the new one outside the town. When the doctor came in before they were moved, he told Mallett that the man he had seen had recovered from his swoon.

"He was very nearly gone," he said, "but we managed to get him round, and it seems to me that he has been better since. I don't know what he said to you or you to him, and I don't want to know; but he seems to have got something off his mind. He is less feverish than he was, and I have really some faint hopes of pulling him through, especially as he will now be in a more healthful atmosphere."

It was a comfort indeed to all the wounded when late that evening they lay on beds in the hospital marquees. The air seemed deliciously cool and fresh, and there was a feeling of quiet and restfulness that was impossible in the town, with the constant movement of troops, the sound of falling masonry, the dust and fetid odour of decay.

A week later the surgeon told Mallett that he had now hopes that the soldier he was interested in would recover.

"The chances were a hundred to one against him," he said, "but the one chance has come off."

"Will he be fit for service again, doctor?"

"Yes, I don't see why he should not be, though it will be a long time before he can carry his kit and arms on a long day's march. It is hot enough now, but we have not got to the worst by a long way, and as there is still a vast amount of work to be done, I expect that the regiment will be off again before long."

"Well, at any rate, I shall be able to go with you, doctor."

"I don't quite say that, Mallett," the doctor said, doubtfully. "In another fortnight your wound will be healed so that you will be capable of ordinary duty, but certainly not long marches. If you do go you will have to ride. There must be no more marching with your company for some time."

A week later orders were issued, under which the regiment was appointed to form part of the force which, under the command of General Walpole, was to undertake a campaign against Rohilcund, a district in which the great majority of the rebels who had escaped from Lucknow had now established themselves. Unfortunately, the extent of the city and the necessity for the employment of a large proportion of the British force in the actual assault, had prevented anything like a complete investment of the town, and the consequence had been that after the fall of the Kaiser Bagh, by far the greater portion of the rebel force in the city had been able to march away without molestation.

Before leaving, Mallett had an interview with George Lechmere, who was now out of danger.

"I should have known you now, Lechmere," he said, as he came to his bedside. "Of course you are still greatly changed, but you are getting back your old expression, and I hope that in the course of two or three months you will be able to take your place in the ranks again."

"I don't know, sir. I ain't fit to stay with the regiment, and have thought of being invalided home and then buying my discharge. I know you have said nothing as to how you got that wound, not even to the doctor; for if you had done so there is not a man in hospital who would have spoken to me. But how could I join the regiment again? knowing that if there was any suspicion of what I had done, every man would draw away from me, and that there would be nothing for me to do but to put a bullet in my head."

"But no one ever will know it. It was a mad act, and I believe you were partly mad at the time."

"I think so myself now that I look back. I think now that I must have been mad all along. It never once entered my mind to doubt that it was you, and now I see plainly enough that except what the man said about going away—and anyone might have said that—there was not a shadow of ground or suspicion against you. But even if I had never had that suspicion I should have left home."

"Why, sir, I know that my own father and mother suspected that I killed her. I resented it at the time. I felt hard and bitter against it, but as I have been lying here I have come to see that I brought their suspicions upon myself by my own conduct, and that they had a thousand times better ground for suspecting me than I had for suspecting you."

"All that happened was my fault. Martha cared for me once, but it was my cursed jealousy that drove her from me. She was gay and light hearted, and it was natural for her to take her pleasure, which was harmless enough if I had not made a grievance of it. If I had not driven her from me she would have been my wife long before harm came to her; but it was as well that it was not so, for as I was then I know I should have made her life a hell.

"I did it all and I have been punished for it. Even at the end she might never have gone off if I had not shouted out and tried to climb the wall. She must have recognised my voice, and, knowing that I had her secret, feared that I might kill her and him too, and so she went. She would not have gone as she did, without even a bonnet or a shawl, if it had not been for that."

"Then you don't think, as most people there do, that she was murdered?"

"Not a bit, sir. I never thought so for a moment. She went straight away with that man. I think now I know who it was."

"Never mind about that, Lechmere. You know what the Bible says, 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord,' and whoever it may be, leave him safely in God's hands."

"Yes, sir, I shall try to act up to that. I was fool enough to think that I could avenge her, and a nice business I made of it."

"Well, I think it is nonsense of you to think of leaving the regiment. There is work to be done here. There is the work of punishing men who have committed the most atrocious crimes. There is the work of winning back India for England. Every Englishman out here, who can carry a weapon, ought to remain at his post until the work is done.

"As to this wound of mine, that is a matter between us only. As I have told you, I have altogether forgiven you, and am not even disposed greatly to blame you, thinking, as you did, that I was responsible for that poor girl's flight. I shall never mention it to a soul. I have already put it out of my mind, therefore it is as if it had never been done, and there is no reason whatever why you should shrink from companionship with your comrades. I shall think much better of you for doing your duty like a man, than if you went home again and shrank from it."

"You are too good, sir, altogether too good."

"Nonsense, man. Besides, you have to remember that you have not gone unpunished. Had it not been for your feeling, after you had, as you believed, killed me, you never would have stood and let that Sepoy shoot you; so that all the pain that you have been going through, and may still have to go through before you are quite cured, is a punishment that you have yourself accepted. After a man has once been punished for a crime there is an end of it, and you need grieve no further over it; but it will be a lesson that I hope and believe you will never forget.

"Hackett, who has been my soldier servant for the last five years, was killed in the fight in the Kaiser Bagh. If you like, when you rejoin, I shall apply for you in his stead. It will make your work a good deal easier for you, and I should like to have the son of one of my old tenants about me."

The man burst into tears.

"There, don't let's say anything more about it," Mallett went on, taking the thin hand of the soldier in his. "We will consider it settled, and I shall look out for you in a couple of months, so get well as quick as you can, and don't worry yourself by thinking of the past. I must be off now, for I have to take down a party of convalescents to rejoin this evening.

"Goodbye, lad," and without waiting for any reply, he turned and left the marquee.

Chapter 5

"It is little more than two years and a half since I left, Lechmere, but it seems almost a lifetime."

"It does seem a time, Major. We must have marched thousands of miles, and I could not say how many times we have been engaged. There has not been a week that we have not had a fight, and sometimes two or three of them."

"Well, thank God, we are back again. Still I am glad to have been through it."

"So am I, sir. It will be something to look back on, and it is curious to think that while we have been seeing and doing so much, father and my brother Bob have just been going about over the farm, and seeing to the cattle, and looking after the animals day in and day out, without ever going away save to market two or three times a month at Chippenham."

"And you have quite made up your mind to stay with me, Lechmere?"

"Quite, sir. Short of your turning me out, there is nothing that would get me away from you. No one could be happier than I have been, ever since I rejoined after that wound. It has not been like master and servant, sir. You have just treated me as if you had been the squire and I had been your tenant's son, and that nothing had ever come between us. You have made a man of me again, and I only wish that I had more opportunities of showing you how I feel it."

"You have had opportunities enough, and you have made the most of them. You were by my side when I entered that house where there were a score of desperate rebels, and it would have gone hard with us if aid had not come up. You stood over me when I was knocked down by that charge of rebel cavalry, and got half a dozen wounds before the Hussars swept down and drove them back."

"I was well paid for that, sir," the man said with a smile.

"Yes, you got the Victoria Cross, and no man ever won it more fairly. But, after all, it was not so much by such things as these that you showed your feelings, Lechmere, as by your constant and faithful service, and by the care with which you looked after me. Still, as I told you before, I don't like standing in your way. In the natural course of things you would have had your father's farm, and there is now no reason why you should not go back there."

"No, sir. Since we heard that that poor girl came back home and died, there is no reason why I should not go back to the old place, but I don't like to. Two years of such a life as we have been leading does not fit one for farm work. Brother Bob stopped and took my place while I went soldiering, and even if I were willing to go back to it, which I am not, it would not be fair to him for me to step in just as if nothing had happened. But, anyhow, I shall be glad to be back again at the old place and see them all. Father and mother will know now that they suspected me wrongly. But they were not to blame. Mad as I was then, I might have done it if I had had the chance."

"Well, Lechmere, you know well that I shall be always glad to have you with me as long as you are willing to stay. Perhaps the time will come when you may wish to make a home for yourself, and you may be sure that the first farm on the estate that falls vacant shall be yours, or, as that does not very often happen, I will see that you get a good one somewhere in the neighbourhood."

The man shook his head, and without answering went on unpacking his master's portmanteau. They were at the Hummums Hotel, in Covent Garden, and had arrived half an hour before by the evening train, having come overland from Marseilles.

Two years' soldiering had greatly altered George Lechmere. He had lost the heavy step caused by tramping over ploughed fields, and was a well set-up, alert and smart-looking soldier; and although now in civilian clothes—for his master had bought him out of the service when he sent in his own papers—no one could avoid seeing that he had served, for in addition to the military carriage there was the evidence of two deep scars on his face, the handiwork of the mutineers' sabres on the day when he had stood over his master surrounded by rebel horse. His complexion was deeply bronzed

by the sun, and there was that steady but watchful expression in his eyes that is characteristic of men who have gone through long and dangerous service.

"I shall stay two or three days in town," Major Mallett said. "I must get an entire refit before I go down. You had better come round with me to the tailor's tomorrow, the first thing after breakfast. You will want three or four suits, too."

"Yes, sir. And besides, they would like to know down there when you are coming home. They are sure to want to give you a welcome."

"And you, too, Lechmere. I am sure that all your old friends will give you as hearty a welcome as they will give me. Indeed, it ought to be a good deal heartier, for you have been living among them all your life, while I have been away for the most part ever since I was a boy."

Four days later they went down to Chippenham. Mr. Norton, the steward, was on the platform when the train came in.

"Welcome home again, sir," he said warmly, as Frank stepped from the carriage. "We were all glad, indeed, when we heard that you were back safe, and were coming down among us."

"I am glad enough to be back again, Norton," Frank Mallett said; as he shook the man's hand. "We had warm work of it for a bit, but at the end, when the excitement was over, one got pretty tired of it."

"This is George Lechmere, Norton," the Major said, as he went along with the agent to where George was standing with the pile of luggage. "You have heard how gallantly he behaved, and how he saved my life at the risk of his own."

"How are you, George?" the agent said, as he shook hands with him. "I should hardly have known you. Indeed, I am sure I should not have done so if I had met you in the street. You seem to have grown taller and altogether different."

"I have lost flesh a bit, Mr. Norton, and I have learnt to stand upright, and I shall be some time before I get rid of this paint the sun has given me."

"Yes, you are as brown as a berry, George. We saw in the gazette about your getting the Victoria Cross in saving the squire's life. I can tell you every man on the estate felt proud of you."

"Are you ready to be off, sir?"

"Yes. I suppose you have got the dog cart outside, as I asked you?"

"Well, no, sir," the agent said, in a tone of some embarrassment. "You see the tenants had made up their minds that you ought to come in a different sort of style, and so without asking me about it they ordered an open carriage to be here to meet you. I knew nothing about it until last night. The dog cart is here and will take up your luggage."

"Well, I suppose it cannot be helped," Mallett laughed. "Of course, they meant it kindly."

"I will see the luggage got in the dog cart, and come over with it," Lechmere said.

"You can see it into the dog cart, George, but you must come with me. I have got to put up with it, and you must, too."

He stood chatting with Mr. Norton on the platform till George returned, and said that the luggage was all packed, and that the dog cart had gone on ahead. There was an amused look on his face, which was explained when, on going out, Mallett found an open carriage with four horses, with postilions in new purple silk jackets and orange caps, and large rosettes of the same colour at the horses' heads.

"Bless me," said the Major, in a tone of dismay. "I shall feel as if I were a candidate for the county."

"They are the family colours, you see, sir."

"Yes, I know, Norton, and the Conservative colours, too. Well, it cannot be helped, and it does not make much difference after all."

"There will be no fuss when I get there I hope, Norton," he went on, as he took his place, and Lechmere climbed up into the seat behind.

"Well, sir," the agent said, apologetically, "there is an arch or two. You see, the tenants wanted to do the thing properly, and the school children will be on the lawn, and there are going to be some bonfires in the evening, and they have got a big box of fireworks down from London. Why, sir, it would be strange if they did not give you a welcome after going through all that, and being wounded three times and getting so much credit. Why, it wouldn't be English, sir."

"I suppose it's all right," Mallett said, resignedly; "and, indeed, Norton, one cannot help being pleased at seeing one's tenants glad to have one home again."

In half-an-hour's drive they arrived at the boundary of the estate. Here an arch had been erected, and a score of the tenants and tenants' sons, assembled on horseback, gave a loud cheer as the carriage drove up, and as it died away one shouted:

"Why, that is George Lechmere behind. Give him a cheer, too!" and again a hearty shout went up.

The carriage stopped, and Major Mallett said a few words, thanking them heartily for the welcome they had given him, and assuring them what pleasure it was to him to be back again.

"I thank you, also," he concluded, "for the cheer that you have given to my faithful comrade and friend, George Lechmere. As you all know, he saved my life at the risk of his own, and has received the greatest honour a soldier can gain—the Victoria Cross. You have a good right to be proud of him, as one of yourselves, and to give him a hearty welcome."

The carriage then drove on again, the farmers riding close behind as an escort. At the entrance of the drive up to the house another and larger arch had been erected. Here the rest of the tenants and the women were collected, and there was another hearty greeting, and another speech from Mallett.

Then they drove up to the house, where a number of the gentry had assembled to welcome him. After shaking hands and chatting with these for a short time, Frank went round among the tenants, saying a few words to each. When he had done this he invited them all to a dinner on the lawn that day week, and then went into the house, where the steward had prepared a meal.

Among the familiar faces, Frank missed those he would most gladly have seen. He had a year before received a letter from Lady Greendale, telling him of Sir John's sudden death, and had learned from the steward during the drive that she and her daughter were in London.

"They went there a month ago," he said. "A year had passed after Sir John's death, and people say that it is not likely that they will be much at home again for some time. Lady Greendale has high connections in London, as you know, sir."

"Yes, she was a daughter of Lord Huntinglen, Norton."

"Yes, sir. They always went up to town for the season; and they say Lady Greendale liked London better than the country; and now that Miss Bertha is out—for she was presented at Court a fortnight ago—people think they won't be much down at Greendale for the present."

"Has Miss Greendale grown up pretty? I thought she would, but, of course, when I went away she was only a girl, not fully developed."

"She is a beautiful young lady, sir. Everyone says she is quite the belle of the county. Folks reckon she will make a great match. She is very well liked, too; pleasant and nice without a bit of pride about her, and very high spirited; and, I should say, full of fun, though of course the place has been pretty well shut up for the last year. For four months after Sir John's death they went away travelling, and were only at home for a few weeks before they went up to London the other day, in time for the first Drawing Room."

"I suppose we shall not see much of you for a time, Mallett?" one of his friends said, as they sat at luncheon.

"No, I don't suppose I shall be able to settle down for a bit. After the life I have led, I am afraid that I shall find the time hang heavily on my hands, alone here."

"You must bring home a wife, Major Mallett," one of the ladies said.

"That is looking quite into the dim future, Mrs. Herbert," he laughed. "You see, since I first went on active service I have been removed altogether from feminine attractions. Of course I have been thinking it over, but for the present my inclination turns towards yachting. I have always been fond of the water, and had a strong wish to go to sea when I was a boy, but that aspiration was not encouraged. However, I can follow my bent now. Norton has been piling up money for me in my absence, and I can afford myself the luxury of a big yacht. Of course I shall be in no hurry about it. I shall either build or buy a biggish craft, for racing in summer, and cruising in winter."

"That means that you won't be here at all, Major Mallett."

"Oh, no, it does not mean that, I can assure you. I shall run down for a month three or four times a year; say for shooting in September or October, and for hunting a month or two later on; besides, I have to renew my acquaintance with my tenants and see that everything is going on comfortably. I expect that I shall spend four or five months every year on the estate."

"Till you settle down for good?"

"Yes, till I settle down for good," he laughed. "I suppose it will have to be someday."

"Then you don't think of passing much time in London, Mallett?"

"No, indeed. Fortunately my father sold his town house three years ago. He did not care about going up, and of course it was of no use to me. I have never had any opportunities for society, and my present idea is that it would bore me horribly. But I'll dare say that I shall be there for a month or so in the season."

"Of course, there is my club to go to, and plenty of men one knows; but even if I had a longing for society, I know no one in what are termed fashionable circles, and so should be outside what is called the world."

"Oh, you would soon get over that, Major Mallett. Why, Lady Greendale would introduce you everywhere."

"It is not likely I shall trouble her to do that," Mallett answered.

Frank had told George Lechmere that, as soon as they arrived, he would be at liberty to go off at once to his father and mother.

"Stay as long as you like," he said. "I shall get on very well without you for a few days."

"I shall come up again tonight, sir, and get your things brushed and your bath ready in the morning. I should not be comfortable if I did not do that. Then after breakfast, if you do not want me, I can go to the farm for a few hours. Of course I shall have lots to tell the old people about India. But for that I don't know what I should do to pass the time away, with no work on hand."

"Oh, you will have your old friends to look up, George. After being over two years on service, you have a right to a month's leave. As you have got your six months' batta in hand, besides your savings, you have enough cash to go on with; but when you want money, you know that you have only to speak to me."

"I have a good bit, sir. I have scarcely spent a penny since I joined, and in the two years have laid by a nice little sum. Besides, we all picked up a bit. Most of those native chiefs and their followers had money or jewels about them, and all of us got something; some good prizes. So one way or another I have made as much or more in the two years' soldiering as I should have done in two years' farming; but if I had not above a few shillings in my pocket, I should do well here, for I have no occasion to spend any money with all my friends wanting me to go round to see them and tell them of our doings."

"Found everything going on satisfactorily at home, George?"

"Yes, sir, all well. Bob has turned out a great help to my father. I was sure he would do well when he got the chance. Of course, so long as I was there he had not much responsibility, but I could see then that he would make a good farmer. Things have been going on just as well as when I was at home."

"Are you going over there now?"

"Not until after breakfast, sir, anyhow. I told them that I might look in some time in the morning, but that I could not say whether you might want me for anything."

"No, I shan't want you at all, George. I told you so yesterday. However, after breakfast I will walk over to the farm with you. I only had time for a word with your father yesterday, but I told him that I would come over to see them sometime today."

Accordingly, after an hour's talk with his agent, Frank Mallett walked over to the farm with George. The latter's father and mother were both in the house, an unusual thing at that time of day with the former, but he had said at breakfast to his son:

"You must look after things by yourself today, lad. The Squire said yesterday that he would come over sometime, and I would not be out when he came, not for a twenty pound note."

He and his wife came to the door when they saw Frank coming across the field towards the house.

"Well, Lechmere," the latter said, when he came up. "I am glad to see you and your dame looking so well and hearty. I had not time to say more than a word to you yesterday, and I wanted to have a comfortable talk with you both. I wrote you a line telling you how gallantly George had behaved, and how he had saved my life; but I had to write the day afterwards, and my head was still ringing from the sabre cut that had for a time knocked all the sense out of me, and therefore I had to cut it very short. How gallantly he defended my life against a dozen of the enemy's cavalry was shown by the fact that he received the Victoria Cross, and I can tell you that such an immense number of brave deeds were performed during the Mutiny that George's must be considered an extraordinary act of bravery to have obtained for him that honour."

By this time they had entered the farmhouse parlour. George had not followed them in, but on inquiring where he was likely to find Bob, had gone off to join him.

"I was proud to hear it at the time, Squire; and when it was in the papers that our George had got the Victoria Cross, and all our neighbours came in to congratulate us, we felt prouder still. Up to the time when we got your letter, we did not know for sure where he was. He had said he meant to enlist, and from the humour that he was in when he went away we guessed it to be in some regiment where he could get to the wars. We felt the more glad, as you may guess, from the fact that both the Missus and I had wronged him in our thoughts. We learnt that before we got the news, and it was not until we knew that we had been wrong that either of us opened our lips about it, though each of us knew what the other thought."

"I know what you mean, Lechmere. He told me all about it."

"Well, Squire, you may be sure, when we knew that we had wronged him, how the wife and I fretted that we did not know where to write to, nor how to set about finding out where he was, and so you can guess how pleased we were when we heard from you that he was with your regiment, and that he had saved your life at the risk of his own.

"We did not know then, Squire, that if he had had twenty lives he would have done right to have risked them all for you. He told us the whole story yesterday—just to mother, me and Bob. I can't tell you yet, Squire, what we thought of it. I do not know that I shall ever be able to tell you, and we shall never cease to thank the good Lord for saving George from being a murderer in his madness—a murderer of our own Squire—and to bless you, Major, that you should not only have forgiven him and kept his crime from everyone, but should have taken him in hand, as he says, as if it had never happened."

"There was no occasion for him to have said anything about it, Lechmere. He was undoubtedly more or less mad at the time. Upon the whole, I think that the affair has made him a better man. Up to the time when he saved my life, he did his duty as a soldier well, and was a most devoted servant to me, but the weight of this business pressed heavily upon him, and in spite of all I could say he held himself aloof as much as possible from his comrades; but after that he changed altogether. He felt, as he told me, that God would not have given him this opportunity of saving the life that he had

so nearly taken had He not forgiven him, and his spirits rose, and while before he certainly was not popular among his comrades—a reserved man never is—he became a general favourite.

"The officers, of course, showed a good deal of interest in him after what he had done. He could have been a sergeant in the course of a month, but he refused corporal's stripes when they were offered to him on the day after the battle, saying that he preferred remaining with me, though the Colonel told him that, after what he had done, he would stand a good chance of promotion, after two or three years' service, as a sergeant. He told me that he knew his jealous disposition had been a sort of trouble to you; but I am sure that he will never worry you in that way again. I believe that he is now thoroughly master of himself, and that even the man who wrought that foul wrong need not fear him."

"You heard, sir, that the poor girl came home and died?"

"Yes. He told me when he heard the news from you."

"She never said who did it, sir, but from other things that came out there is no doubt who it was."

"He told me, Lechmere, but I stopped him short. I did not wish to know. I had my suspicions, but I did not want to have them confirmed. The fellow I suspect is no friend of mine, and I don't want to know anything about him. If I were certain of it, I could not meet him without telling him my opinion of him."

"You are not likely to meet him here, Squire. A year ago he happened to be over at Chippenham one market day. There were a dozen of us there, and I can tell you we gave him such a reception that he mounted his horse and rode straight on again. If he hadn't, I believe that we should have horsewhipped him through the town. Three months afterwards his estate was put up for sale, and he has never been down in this part of the country since; not that he was ever here much before. London suited him better. You see, his mother was, as I have heard, the daughter of a banker, and an only child; and even if he hadn't had the estate he would have been a rich man. Anyhow, I am heartily glad that he has left the county."

"I, too, am glad that he has gone, Lechmere. I have not met him for years, but if we had both been down here we must have run against each other sometimes, and after some matters that had passed between us years ago we could scarcely have met on friendly terms. However, as there is nothing beyond mere suspicion against him, he may in this case be innocent. You see, I was suspected unjustly myself, and the same thing may be the case with him."

"That is so, Squire; though I don't think that there is any mistake this time. In fact, I believe she told her mother, though she kept it from her father for fear he would break the law. At any rate, it is a good thing he has gone; for he was a hard landlord, and there was not a good word for him among his tenants."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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