

Fenn George Manville

Midnight Webs



George Fenn
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Story One: Smith's Ditty

Introduction

First Words

I've waited these many years, expecting some one or another would give a full and true account of it all, but little thinking it would ever come to be my task; for it's not in my way. But seeing how much has been said about other parts and other people's sufferings, while ours never so much as came in for a line of newspaper, I can't think it's fair; and as fairness is what I always did like, I set to, very much against my will; while, on account of my empty sleeve, the paper keeps slipping and sliding about, so that I can only hold it quiet by putting the lead inkstand on one corner, and my tobacco-jar on the other. You see, I'm not much at home at this sort of thing; and though, if you put a pipe and a glass of something before me, I could tell you all about it, taking my time like, it seems that won't do. I said: "Why don't you write it down as I tell it, so as other people could read all about it?" But "No," he says; "I could do it in my fashion; but I want it to be in your simple unadorned style; so set to and do it."

I daresay a good many of you know me – seen me often in Bond-street, at Facet's door – Facet's, you know, the great jeweller's, where I stand and open carriages, or take messages, or small parcels with no end of valuables in them; for I'm trusted. Smith, my name is – Isaac Smith; and I'm that tallish grisly fellow with the seam down one side of his face, his left sleeve looped up to the button, and not a speck to be seen on that "commissionnaire's" uniform, upon whose breast there are three medals.

I was standing one day, waiting patiently for something to do, when a tallish gentleman came up, nodded as if he knew me well; and I saluted.

"Lose that limb in the Crimea, my man?"

"No, sir; Mutiny," I said, standing as stiff as use had made nature with me.

And then he asked me a heap more questions; and I answered him; and the end of it was, that one evening I went to his house, and he had me in, and did what was wanted to set me off. I'd had a little bit of an itching to try something of the kind, I must own, for long enough; but his words started me; and in consequence I got a quire of the best foolscap paper, and a pen'orth of pens; and here's my story.

Story 1-Chapter I

Dub-dub-dub-dub-dub-dub. Just one soft beat given by the boys in front – the light sharp tap upon their drums, to mark the time for the march – and in heavy order there we were, Her Majesty's 156th regiment of Light Infantry, making our way over the dusty roads with the hot morning sun beating down upon our heads. We were marching very loosely, though; for the men were tired, and we were longing for the halt to be called, so that we might rest during the heat of the day, and then go on again. Tents, baggage-wagons, women, children, elephants – all were there; and we were getting over the ground at the rate of about twenty miles a day, on our way up to the station, where we were to relieve a regiment going home.

I don't know what we should have done if it hadn't been for Harry Lant, the weather being very trying – almost as trying as our hot red coats and heavy knapsacks and flower-pot busbies, with a round white ball like a child's plaything on the top; but no matter how tired he was, Harry Lant had always something to say or do; and even if the colonel was close by, he'd say or do it. Now, there happened to be an elephant walking along by our side, with the captain of our company, one of the lieutenants, and a couple of women in the howdah; while a black nigger fellow, in clean white calico clothes, and not much of 'em, and a muslin turban, and a good deal of it, was stridling on the creature's neck, rolling his eyes about, and flourishing an iron toasting-fork sort of thing, with which he drove the great flap-eared patient beast. The men were beginning to grumble gently, and shifting their guns from side to side, and sneezing, and coughing, and choking in the kicked-up dust, like a flock of sheep, when Captain Dyer scrambles down off the elephant, and takes his place alongside us, crying out cheerily: "Only another mile, my lads, and then breakfast."

We gave him a cheer, and another half-mile was got over; when once more the boys began to flag terribly, and even Harry Lant was silent, which, seeing what Harry Lant was, means a wonderful deal more respecting the weather than any number of degrees on a thermometer, I can tell you. But I looked round at him, and he knew what I meant; and, slipping out, he goes up to the elephant. "Carry your trunk, sir," he says; and taking gently hold of the great beast's soft nose, he laid it upon his shoulder, and marched on like that, with the men roaring with laughter.

"Pulla-wulla. Ma-pa-na," shouted the nigger who was driving, or something that sounded like it; for of all the rum lingoever spoke, theirs is about the rummest, and always put me in mind of the fal-lal-la or tol-de-rol chorus of a song.

"All right. I'll take care!" sings out Harry; and on he marched, with the great soft-footed beast lifting its round pats and putting them down gently, so as not to hurt Harry; and, trifling as that act was, it meant a great deal, as you'll see if you read on, while just then it got our poor fellows over the last half-mile without one falling out. And then the halt was called; men wheeled into line; we were dismissed; and soon after we were lounging about, under such shade as we could manage to get in the thin topes of trees.

Story 1-Chapter II

That's a pretty busy time, that first half-hour after a halt: what with setting loosely up a few tents, and getting a fire lighted, and fetching water; but in spite of our being tired, we soon had things right. There was the colonel's tent, Colonel Maine – a little stout man, that we all used to laugh at, because he was such a pudgy, round, good-tempered chap, who never troubled about anything; for we hadn't learned then what was lying asleep in his brave little body, waiting to be brought out. Then there was the mess-tent for the officers, and the hospital-tent for those on the sick-list, beside our bell-tents, that we shouldn't have set up at all, only to act as sunshades. But, of course, the principal tent was the colonel's.

Well, there they were, the colonel and his lady, Mrs Maine – a nice, kindly-spoken, youngish woman: twenty years younger than he, she was; but for all that, a happier couple never breathed; and they two used to seem as if the regiment, and India, and all the natives were made on purpose to fall down and worship the two little golden idols they'd set up – a little girl and a little boy, you know. Cock Robin and Jenny Wren, we chaps used to call them, though Jenny Wren was about a year and a half the oldest. And I believe it was from living in France a bit that the colonel's wife had got the notion of dressing them so; but it would have done your heart good to see those two children – the boy with his little red tunic and his sword, and the girl with her red jacket and belt, and a little canteen of wine and water, and a tiny tin mug; and them little things driving the old black ayah half wild with the way they used to dodge away from her to get amongst the men, who took no end of delight in bamboozling the fat old woman when she was hunting for them, sending her here and there and everywhere, till she'd turn round and make signs with her hands, and spit on the ground, which was her way of cursing us. For I must say that we English were very, very careless about what we did or said to the natives. Officers and men, all alike, seemed to look upon them as something very little better than beasts, and talked to them as if they had no feelings at all, little thinking what fierce masters the trampled slaves could turn out, if ever they had their day – the day that the old proverb says is sure to come for every dog; and there was not a soul among us then that had the least bit of suspicion that the dog – by which, you know, I mean the Indian generally – was going mad, and sharpening those teeth of his ready to bite.

Well, as a matter of course, there were other people in our regiment that I ought to mention: Captain Dyer I did name; but there was a lieutenant, a very good-looking young fellow, who was a great favourite with the Colonel and Mrs Maine; and he dined a deal with them at times, besides being a great chum of Captain Dyer's – they two shooting together, and being like brothers, though there was a something in Lieutenant Leigh that I never seemed to take to. Then there was the doctor – a Welshman he was, and he used to make it his boast that our regiment was about the healthiest anywhere; and I tell you what it is, if you were ill once, and in hospital, as we call it – though, you know, with a marching regiment that only means anywhere till you get well – I say, if you were ill once, and under his hands, you'd think twice before you made up your mind to be ill again, and be very bad too before you went to him. Pestle, we used to call him, though his name was Hughes; and how we men did hate him, mortally, till we found out his real character, when we were lying cut to pieces almost, and him ready to cry over us at times as he tried to bring us round. "Hold up, my lads," he'd say, "only another hour, and you'll be round the corner!" when what there was left of us did him justice. Then, of course, there were other officers, and some away with the major, and another battalion of our regiment at Wallahbad; but they've nothing to do with my story.

I don't think I can do better now than introduce you to our mess on the very morning of this halt, when, after cooling myself with a pipe, just the same as I should have warmed myself with a pipe if it had been in Canady or Nova Scotia, I walked up to find all ready for breakfast, and Mrs Bantem making the tea.

Some of the men didn't fail to laugh at us who took our tea for breakfast; but all the same I liked it, for it always took me home, tea did – and to the days when my poor old mother used to say that there never was such a boy for bread-and-butter as I was; not as there was ever so much butter that she need have grumbled, whatever I cost for bread; and though Mrs Bantem wasn't a bit like my mother, she brought up the homely thoughts. Mrs Bantem was, I should say, about the biggest and ugliest woman I ever saw in my life. She stood five feet eleven and a half in her stockings, for Joe Bantem got Sergeant Buller to take her under the standard one day. She'd got a face nearly as dark as a black's; she'd got a moustache, and a good one too; and a great coarse look about her altogether. Measles – I'll tell you who he was directly – Measles used to say she was a horse godmother; and they didn't seem to like one another; but Joe Bantem was as proud of that woman as she was of him; and if any one hinted about her looks, he used to laugh, and say that was only the outside rind, and talk about the juice. But all the same, though, no one couldn't be long with that woman without knowing her flavour. It was a sight to see her and Joe together, for he was just a nice middle size – five feet seven and a half – and as pretty a pink-and-white, brown-whiskered, open-faced man as ever you saw. We all got tanned and coppered over and over again, but Joe kept as nice and fresh and fair as on the day we embarked from Gosport years before; and the standing joke was that Mrs Bantem had a preparation for keeping his complexion all square.

Joe Bantem knew what he was about, though, for one day when a nasty remark had been made by the men of another regiment, he got talking to me in confidence over our pipes, and he swore that there wasn't a better woman living; and he was right, for I'm ready now at this present moment to take the Book in my hand, and swear the same thing before all the judges in Old England. For you see, we're such duffers, we men: show us a pretty bit of pink-and-white, and we run mad after it; while all the time we're running away from no end of what's solid and good and true, and such as'll wear well, and show fast colours, long after your pink-and-white's got faded and grimy. Not as I've much room to talk. But present company you know, and setra. What, though, as a rule, does your pretty pink-and-white know about buttons, or darning, or cooking? Why, we had the very best of cooking; not boiled tag and rag, but nice stews and roasts and hashes, when other men were growling over a dog's-meat dinner. We had the sweetest of clean shirts, and never a button off; our stockings were darned; and only let one of us – Measles, say – take a drop more than he ought, just see how Mrs Bantem would drop on to him, that's all. If his head didn't ache before, it would ache then; and I can see as plain now as if it was only this minute, instead of years ago, her boxing Measles' ears, and threatening to turn him out to another mess if he didn't keep sober. And she would have turned him over too, only, as she said to Joe, and Joe told me, it might have been the poor fellow's ruin, seeing how weak he was, and easily led away. The long and short of it is, Mrs Bantem was a good motherly woman of forty; and those who had anything to say against her, said it out of jealousy, and all I have to say now is what I've said before: she only had one fault, and that is, she never had any little Bantems to make wives for honest soldiers to come; and wherever she is, my wish is that she may live happy and venerable to a hundred.

That brings me to Measles. Bigley his name was; but he'd had the small-pox very bad when a child, through not being vaccinated; and his face was all picked out in holes, so round and smooth that you might have stood peas in them all over his cheeks and forehead, and they wouldn't have fallen off; so we called him Measles. If any of you pay "Why?" I don't know no more than I have said.

He was a sour-tempered sort of fellow was Measles, who 'listed because his sweetheart laughed at him; not that he cared for her, but he didn't like to be laughed at, so he 'listed out of spite, as he said, and that made him spiteful. He was always grumbling about not getting his promotion, and sneering at everything and everybody, and quarrelling with Harry Lant, him, you know, as carried the elephant's trunk; while Harry was never happy without he was teasing him, so that sometimes there was a deal of hot water spilled in our mess.

And now I think I've only got to name three of the drum-boys, that Mrs Bantem ruled like a rod of iron, though all for their good, and then I've done.

Well, we had our breakfast, and thoroughly enjoyed it, sitting out there in the shade. Measles grumbled about the water, just because it happened to be better than usual; for sometimes we soldiers out there in India used to drink water that was terrible lively before it had been cooked in the kettle; for though water-insects out there can stand a deal of heat, they couldn't stand a fire. Mrs Bantem was washing up the things afterwards, and talking about dinner; Harry Lant was picking up all the odds and ends to carry off to the great elephant, standing just then in the best bit of shade he could find, flapping his great ears about, blinking his little pig's eyes, and turning his trunk and his tail into two pendulums, swinging them backwards and forwards as regular as clockwork, and all the time watching Harry, when Measles says all at once: "Here come some lunatics!"

Story 1-Chapter III

Now, after what I've told you about Measles 'listing for spite, you will easily understand that the fact of his calling any one a lunatic did not prove a want of common reason in the person spoken about; but what he meant was, that the people coming up were half mad for travelling when the sun was so high, and had got so much power.

I looked up and saw, about a mile off, coming over the long straight level plain, what seemed to be an elephant, and a man or two on horseback; and before I had been looking above a minute, I saw Captain Dyer cross over to the colonel's tent, and then point in the direction of the coming elephant. The next minute, he crossed over to where we were. "Seen Lieutenant Leigh?" he says in his quick way.

"No, sir; not since breakfast."

"Send him after me if he comes in sight. Tell him Miss Ross and party are yonder, and I've ridden on to meet them."

The next minute he had gone, taken a horse from a sycee, and in spite of the heat, cantered off to meet the party with the elephant, the air being that clear that I could see him go right up, turn his horse round, and ride gently back by the elephant's side.

I did not see anything of the lieutenant, and, to tell the truth, I forgot all about him, as I was thinking about the party coming, for I had somehow heard a little about Mrs Maine's sister coming out from the old country to stay with her. If I recollect right, the black nurse told Mrs Bantem, and she mentioned it. This party, then, I supposed, contained the lady herself; and it was as I thought. We had had to leave Patna unexpectedly to relieve the regiment ordered home; and the lady, according to orders, had followed us, for this was only our second day's march.

I suppose it was my pipe made me settle down to watch the coming party, and wonder what sort of a body Miss Ross would be, and whether anything like her sister. Then I wondered who would marry her, for, as you know, ladies are not very long out in India without picking up a husband. "Perhaps," I said to myself, "it will be the lieutenant;" but ten minutes after, as the elephant shambled up, I altered my mind, for Captain Dyer was ambling along beside the great beast, and his was the hand that helped the lady down – a tall, handsome, self-possessed girl, who seemed quite to take the lead, and kiss and soothe the sister, when she ran out of the tent to throw her arms round the new-comer's neck.

"At last, then, Elsie," Mrs Colonel said out aloud. "You've had a long dreary ride."

"Not during the last ten minutes," Miss Ross said, laughing in a bright, merry, free-hearted way. "Lieutenant Leigh has been welcoming me most cordially."

"Who?" exclaimed Mrs Colonel, staring from one to the other.

"Lieutenant Leigh," said Miss Ross.

"I'm afraid I am to blame for not announcing myself," said Captain Dyer, lifting his muslin-covered cap. "Your sister, Miss Ross, asked me to ride to meet you, in Lieutenant Leigh's absence."

"You, then –"

"I am only Lawrence Dyer, his friend," said the captain smiling.

It's a singular thing that just then, as I saw the young lady blush deeply, and Mrs Colonel look annoyed, I muttered to myself, "Something will come of this," because, if there's anything I hate, it's for a man to set himself up for a prophet. But it looked to me as if the captain had been taking Lieutenant Leigh's place, and that Miss Ross, as was really the case, though she had never seen him, had heard him so much talked of by her sister, that she had welcomed him, as she thought, quite as an old friend, when all the time she had been talking to Captain Dyer.

And I was not the only one who thought about it; else why did Mrs Colonel look annoyed, and the colonel, who came paddling out, exclaim loudly: “Why, Leigh, look alive, man! here’s Dyer been stealing a march upon you. Why, where have you been?”

I did not hear what the lieutenant said, for my attention was just then taken up by something else, but I saw him go up to Miss Ross, holding out his hand, and the meeting was very formal; but, as I told you, my attention was taken up by something else, and that something was a little dark, bright, eager, earnest face, with a pair of sharp eyes, and a little mocking-looking mouth; and as Captain Dyer had helped Miss Ross down with the steps from the howdah, so did I help down Lizzy Green, her maid; to get, by way of thanks, a half-saucy look, a nod of the head, and the sight of a pretty little tripping pair of ankles going over the hot sandy dust towards the tent.

But the next minute she was back, to ask about some luggage – a bullock-trunk or two – and she was coming up to me, as I eagerly stepped forward to meet her, when she seemed, as it were, to take it into her head to shy at me, going instead to Harry Lant, who had just come up, and who, on hearing what she wanted, placed his hands, with a grave swoop, upon his head, and made her a regular eastern salaam, ending by telling her that her slave would obey her commands. All of which seemed to grit upon me terribly; I didn’t know why, then, but I found out afterwards, though not for many days to come.

We had the route given us for Begumbagh, a town that, in the old days, had been rather famous for its grandeur; but, from what I had heard, it was likely to turn out a very hot, dry, dusty, miserable spot; and I used to get reckoning up how long we should be frizzling out there in India before we got the orders for home; and put it at the lowest calculation, I could not make less of it than five years. At all events, we who were soldiers had made our own beds, and had to lie upon them, whether it was at home or abroad; and, as Mrs Bantem used to say to us, “Where was the use of grumbling?” There were troubles in every life, even if it was a civilian’s – as we soldiers always called those who didn’t wear the Queen’s uniform – and it was very doubtful whether we should have been a bit happier, if we had been in any other line. But all the same, Government might have made things a little better for us in the way of suitable clothes, and things proper for the climate.

And so on we went: marching mornings and nights; camping all through the hot day; and it was not long before we found that, in Miss Ross, we men had got something else beside the children to worship.

But I may as well say now, and have it off my mind, that it has always struck me that, during those peaceful days, when our greatest worry was a hot march, we didn’t know when we were well off, and that it wanted the troubles to come before we could see what good qualities there were in other people. Little trifling things used to make us sore – things such as we didn’t notice afterwards, when great sorrows came. I know I was queer, and spiteful, and jealous; and no great wonder that, for I always was a man with a nastyish temper, and soon put out; but even Mrs Bantem used to show that she wasn’t quite perfect, for she quite upset me one day, when Measles got talking at dinner about Lizzy Green, Miss Ross’s maid, and, what was a wonderful thing for him, not finding fault. He got saying that she was a nice girl, and would make a soldier as wanted one a good wife; when Mrs Bantem fires up as spiteful as could be – I think, mind you, there’d been something wrong with the cooking that day, which had turned her a little – and she says that Lizzy was very well, but looks weren’t everything, and that she was raw as raw, and would want no end of dressing before she would be good for anything; while as to making a soldier’s wife, soldiers had no business to have wives till they could buy themselves off and turn civilians. Then, again, she seemed to have taken a sudden spite against Mrs Maine, saying that she was a poor little stuck-up fine lady, and she could never have forgiven her if it had not been for those two beautiful children; though what Mrs Bantem had got to forgive the colonel’s wife, I don’t believe she even knew herself.

The old black ayah, too, got very much put out about this time, and all on account of the two new comers; for when Miss Ross hadn’t the children with her, they were along with Lizzy, who, like

her mistress, was new to the climate, and hadn't got into that doll listless way that comes to people who have been some time up the country. They were all life and fun and energy, and the children were never happy when they were away; and of a morning, more to please Lizzy, I used to think, than the children, Harry Lant used to pick out a shady place, and then drive Chunder Chow, who was the mahout of Nabob, the principal elephant, half wild, by calling out his beast, and playing with him all sorts of antics.

Chunder tried all he could to stop it; but it was of no use, for Harry had got such influence over that animal, that when one day he was coaxing him out to lead him under some trees, and the mahout tried to stop him, Nabob makes no more ado, but lifts his great soft trunk, and rolls Mr Chunder Chow over into the grass, where he lay screeching like a parrot, and chattering like a monkey, rolling his opal eyeballs, and showing his white teeth with fear; for he expected that Nabob was going to put his foot on him and crush him to death, as is the nature of those great beasts. But not he; he only lays his trunk gently on Harry's shoulder, and follows him across the open like a great flesh-mountain, winking his little pig's eyes, whisking his tiny tail, and flapping his great ears; while the children clapped their hands as they stood in the shade with Miss Ross and Lizzy, and Captain Dyer and Lieutenant Leigh close behind.

"There's no call to be afraid, miss," says Harry, saluting as he saw Miss Ross shrink back; and seeing how, when he said a few words in Hindustani, the great animal minded him, they stopped being afraid, and gave Harry fruit and cakes with which to feed the great beast.

You see, out there in that great dull place, people are very glad to have any little trifle to amuse them; so you mustn't be surprised to hear that there used to be quite a crowd to see Harry Lant's performances, as he called them. But all the same, I didn't like his upsetting old Chunder Chow; and it seemed to me, even then, that we'd managed to make another black enemy – the black ayah being the first.

However, Harry used to go on making old Nabob kneel down, or shake hands, or curl up his trunk, or lift him up, finishing off by going up to his head, lifting one great ear, saying they understood one another, whispering a few words, and then shutting the ear up again, so as the words shouldn't be lost before they got into the elephant's brain, as Harry explained, because they'd got a long way to go. Then Harry would lie down, and let the great beast walk backwards and forwards all over him, lifting his great feet so carefully, and setting them down close to Harry, but never touching him, except one day when, just as the great beast was passing his foot over Harry's breast, a voice called out something in Hindustani – and I knew who it was, though I didn't see – when Nabob puts his foot down on Harry's chest, and Lizzy gave a loud scream, and we all thought the poor chap would be crushed; but not he: the great beast was took by surprise, but only for an instant; and in his slow quiet way he steps aside, and then touches Harry all over with his trunk; and there was no more performance that day.

"I've got my knife into Master Chunder for that," says Harry to me; "for I'll swear that was his voice." And I started to find he had known it.

"I wouldn't quarrel with him," I says quietly; "for it strikes me he's got his knife into you."

"You've no idea," says Harry, "what a nip it was. I thought it was all over; but all the same, the poor brute didn't mean it, I'd swear."

Story 1-Chapter IV

Who could have thought just then that all that nonsense of Harry Lant's with the elephant was shaping itself for our good? But so it was, as you shall by and by hear. The march continued, matters seeming to go on very smoothly; but only seeming, mind you; for let alone that we were all walking upon a volcano, there was ever so much unpleasantry brewing. Let alone my feeling that, somehow or another, Harry Lant was not so good a mate to me as he used to be, there was a good deal wrong between Captain Dyer and Lieutenant Leigh, and it soon seemed plain that there was much more peace and comfort in our camp a week earlier than there was at the time of which I am now writing.

I used to have my turns as sentry here and there; and it was when standing stock-still with my piece, that I used to see and hear so much; for in a camp it seems to be a custom for people to look upon a sentry as a something that can neither see nor hear anything but what might come in the shape of an enemy. They know he must not move from his post, which is to say that he's tied hand and foot; and perhaps from that they think that he's tied as to his senses. At all events, I got to see that when Miss Ross, was seated in the colonel's tent, and Captain Dyer was near her, she seemed to grow gentle and quiet, and her eyes would light up, and her rich red lips part, as she listened to what he was saying; while, when it came to Lieutenant Leigh's turn, and he was beside her talking, she would be merry and chatty, and would laugh and talk as lively as could be. Harry Lant said it was because they were making up matters, and that some day she would be Mrs Leigh; but I didn't look at it in that light, though I said nothing.

I used to like to be sentry at the colonel's tent, on our halting for the night, when the canvas would be looped up, to let in the air, and they'd got their great globe-lamps lit, with the tops to them, to keep out the flies, and the draughts made by the punkahs swinging backwards and forwards. I used to think it quite a pretty sight, with the ladies and the three or four officers, perhaps chatting, perhaps having a little music, for Miss Ross could sing like – like a nightingale, I was going to say; but no nightingale that I ever heard could seem to lay hold of your heart, and almost bring tears into your eyes, as she did. Then she used to sing duets with Captain Dyer, because the colonel wished it, though it was plain to see Mrs Maine didn't like it, any more than did Lieutenant Leigh, who more than once, as I've seen, walked out, looking fierce and angry, to strike off right away from the camp, perhaps not to come back for a couple of hours.

It was one night when we'd been about a fortnight on the way, for during the past week the colonel had been letting us go on very easily, I was sentry at the tent. There had been some singing, and Lieutenant Leigh had gone off in the middle of a duet. Then the doctor, the colonel, and a couple of subs were busy over a game at whist, and the black nurse had beckoned Mrs Maine out, I suppose to see something about the two children; when Captain Dyer and Miss Ross walked together just outside the tent, she holding by one of the cords, and he standing close beside her.

They did not say much, but stood looking up at the bright silver moon and the twinkling stars; while he said a word now and then about the beauty of the scene, the white tents, the twinkling lights here and there, and the soft peaceful aspect of all around; and then his voice seemed to grow lower and deeper as he spoke from time to time, though I could hardly hear a word, as I stood there like a statue watching Miss Ross's beautiful face, with the great clusters of hair knotted back from her broad white forehead, the moon shining full on it, and seeming to make her eyes flash as they were turned to him.

They must have stood there full half an hour, when she turned as if to go back; but he laid his hand upon hers as it held the tent-cord, and said something very earnestly, when she turned to him again to look him full in the face, and I saw that her hand was not moved.

Then they were silent for a few seconds before he spoke again, loud enough for me to hear.

"I must ask you," he said huskily; "my peace depends upon it. I know that it has always been understood that you were to be introduced to Lieutenant Leigh. I can see now plainly enough what

are your sister's wishes; but hearts are ungovernable, Miss Ross; and I tell you earnestly, as a simple truth-speaking man, that you have roused feelings that until now slept quietly in my breast. If I am presumptuous, forgive me – love is bold as well as timid – but at least set me at rest: tell me, is there any engagement between you and Lieutenant Leigh?”

She did not speak for a few moments, but met his gaze, so it seemed to me, without shrinking, before saying a word, so softly, that it was like one of the whispers of the breeze crossing the plain; and that word was “No!”

“God bless you for that answer, Miss Ross – Elsie!” he said deeply; and then his head was bent down for an instant over the hand that rested on the cord, before Miss Ross glided away from him into the tent, and went and stood resting with her hand upon the colonel's shoulder, when he, evidently in high glee, began to show her his cards, laughing and pointing to first one, and then another; for he seemed to be having luck on his side.

But I had no more eyes then for the inside of the tent; for Captain Dyer just seemed to awaken to the fact that I was standing close by him as sentry, and he gave quite a start as he looked at me for a few moments without speaking. Then he took a step forward.

“Who is this? O, thank goodness!” (he said those few words in an undertone, but I happened to hear them). “Smith,” he said, “I forgot there was a sentry there. You saw me talking to that lady?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“You saw everything?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you heard all?”

“No, sir, not all; only what you said last.”

Then he was silent again for a few moments, but only to lay his hand directly after on my chest.

“Smith,” he said, “I would rather you had not seen this; and if it had been any other man in my company, I should perhaps have offered him money, to ensure that there was no idle chattering at the mess-tables; but you I ask, as a man I can trust, to give me your word of honour as a soldier to let what you have seen and heard be sacred.”

“Thank you, captain,” I said, speaking thick, for somehow his words seemed to touch me. “You sha'n't repent trusting me.”

“I have no fear, Smith,” he said, speaking lightly, and as if he felt joyful and proud and happy. “What a glorious night for a cigar!” And he took one out of his case, when we both started; for, as if he had that moment risen out of the ground, Lieutenant Leigh stood there close to us; and even to this day I can't make out how he managed it, but all the same he must have seen and heard as much as I had.

“And pray, is my word of honour as a soldier to be taken, Captain Dyer? or is my silence to be bought with money? – Curse you! come this way, will you!” he hissed; for Captain Dyer had half turned, as if to avoid him, but he stepped back directly, and I saw them walk off together amongst the trees, till they were quite out of sight; and if ever I felt what it was to be tied down to one spot, I felt it then, as I walked sentry up and down by that tent, watching for those two to return.

Story 1-Chapter V

Now, after giving my word of honour to hold all that sacred, some people may think I'm breaking faith in telling what I saw; but I made that right by asking the colonel's leave – he is a colonel now – and he smiled, and said that I ought to change the names, and then it would not matter.

I left off my last chapter saying how I felt being tied down to one spot, as I kept guard there; and perhaps everybody don't know that a sentry's duty is to stay in the spot where he has been posted, and that leaving it lightly might, in time of war, mean death.

I should think I watched quite an hour, wondering whether I ought to give any alarm; but I was afraid it might look foolish, for perhaps after all it might only mean a bit of a quarrel, and I could not call to mind any quarrel between officers ending in a duel.

I was glad, too, that I did not say anything, for at last I saw them coming back in the clear moonlight – clear-like as day; and then in the distance they stopped, and in a moment one figure seemed to strike the other a sharp blow, which sent him staggering back, and I could not then see who it was that was hit, till they came nearer, and I made out that it was Captain Dyer; while, if I had any doubts at first, I could have none as they came nearer and nearer, with Lieutenant Leigh talking in a big insolent way at Captain Dyer, who was very quiet, holding his handkerchief to his cheek.

So as to be as near as possible to where they were going to pass, I walked to the end of my tether, and, as they came up, Lieutenant Leigh says, in a nasty spiteful whisper: "I should have thought you would have come into the tent to display the wound received in the lady's cause."

"Leigh," said Captain Dyer, taking down his white handkerchief – and in the bright moonlight I could see that his cheek was cut, and the handkerchief all bloody – "Leigh, that was an unmanly blow. You called me a coward; you struck me; and now you try to poison the wound with your bitter words. I never lift hand against the man who has taken that hand in his as my friend, but the day may come when I can prove to you that you are a liar."

Lieutenant Leigh turned upon him fiercely, as though he would have struck him again; but Captain Dyer paid no heed to him, only walked quietly off to his quarters; while, with a sneering, scornful sort of laugh, the lieutenant went into the colonel's tent; though, if he expected to see Miss Ross, he was disappointed, for so long as I was on guard, she did not show that night.

Off again the next morning, and over a hotter and dustier road than ever; and I must say that I began to wish we were settled down in barracks once more, for everything seemed to grow more and more crooked, and people more and more unpleasant. Why, even Mrs Bantem that morning before starting must show her teeth, and snub Bantem, and then begin going on about the colonel's wife, and the fine madam, her sister, having all sorts of luxuries, while poor hardworking soldiers' wives had to bear all the burden and heat of the day. Then, by way of winding up, she goes to Harry Lant and Measles, who were, as usual, squabbling about something, and boxes both their ears, as if they had been bad boys. I saw them both colour up fierce; but the next minute Harry Lant burst out laughing, and Measles does the same, and then they two did what I should think they never did before – they shook hands; but Mrs Bantem had no sooner turned away with tears in her eyes, because she felt so cross, than the two chaps fell out again about some stupid thing or another, and kept on snarling and snapping at each other all along the march.

But there, bless you! that wasn't all: I saw Mrs Maine talking to her sister in a quick earnest sort of way, and they both seemed out of sorts; and the colonel swore at the tent-men, and bullied the adjutant, and he came round and dropped on to us, finding fault with the men's belts, and that upset the sergeants. Then some of the baggage didn't start right, and Lieutenant Leigh had to be taken to task by Captain Dyer, as in duty bound; while, when at last we were starting, if there wasn't a tremendous outcry, and the young colonel – little Cock Robin, you know – kicking and screaming, and fighting the old black nurse, because he mightn't draw his little sword, and march alongside of Harry Lant!

Now, I'm very particular about putting all this down, because I want you to see how we all were one with the other, and how right through the battalion little things made us out of sorts with one another, and hardly friendly enough to speak, so that the difference may strike you, and you may see in a stronger light the alteration and the behaviour of people when trouble came.

All the same, though, I don't think it's possible for anybody to make a long march in India without getting out of temper. It's my belief that the grit does it, for you do have that terribly, and what with the heat, the dust, the thirst, the government boots, that always seem as if made not to fit anybody, and the grit, I believe even a regiment all chaplains would forget their trade.

Tramp, tramp, tramp, day after day, and nearly always over wide, dreary, dusty plains. Now we'd pass a few muddy paddy-fields, or come upon a river, but not often; and I many a time used to laugh grimly to myself, as I thought what a very different place hot, dusty, dreary India was, to the glorious country I used to picture, all beautiful trees and flowers, and birds with dazzling plumage. There are bright places there, no doubt, but I never came across one, and my recollections of India are none of the most cheery.

But at last came the day when we were crossing a great widespread plain, in the middle of which seemed to be a few houses, with something bright here and there shining in the sun; and as we marched on, the cluster of houses appeared to grow and grow, till we halted at last in a market-square of a good-sized town; and that night we were once more in barracks. But, for my part, I was more gritty than ever; for now we did not see the colonel's lady or her sister, though I may as well own that there was some one with them I wanted to see more than either.

They were all, of course, at the colonel's quarters, a fine old palace of a place, with a courtyard, and a tank in the centre, and trees, and a flat roof, by the side of the great square; while on one side was another great rambling place, separated by a narrowish sort of alley, used for stores and hospital purposes; and on the other side, still going along by the side of the great market-square, was another building, the very fellow to the colonel's quarters, but separated by a narrow footway, some ten feet wide, and this place was occupied by the officers.

Our barracks took up another side of the square; and on the others were mosques and flat-roofed buildings, and a sort of bazaar; while all round stretched away, in narrow streets, were the houses of what we men used to call the niggers. Though, speaking for myself, I used to find them, when well treated, a nice, clean, gentle sort of people. I used to look upon them as a big sort of children, in their white muslin and calico, and their simple ways of playing-like at living; and even now I haven't altered my opinion of them in general, for the great burst of frenzied passion that ran through so many of them was just like a child's uncontrolled rage.

Things were not long in settling down to the regular life: there was a little drill of a morning, and then, the rest of the day, the heat to fight with, which seemed to take all the moisture out of our bodies, and make us long for night.

I did not get put on as sentry once at the colonel's quarters, but I heard a little now and then from Mrs Bantem, who used to wash some of Mrs Maine's fine things, the black women doing everything else; and she'd often have a good grumble about "her fine ladyship," as she called her, and she'd pity her children. She used to pick up a good deal of information, though; and, taking a deal of interest as I did in Miss Ross, I got to know that it seemed to be quite a settled thing between her and Captain Dyer; and Bantem, who got took on now as Lieutenant Leigh's servant, used to tell his wife about how black those two seemed one towards the other.

And so the time went on in a quiet sleepy way, the men getting lazier every day. There was nothing to stir us, only now and then we'd have a good laugh at Measles, who'd get one of his nasty fits on, and swear at all the officers round, saying he was as good as any of them, and that if he had his rights he would have been made an officer before them. Harry Lant, too, used to do his bit to make time pass away a little less dull, singing, telling stories, or getting up to some of his pranks with old Nabob, the elephant, making Chunder, the mahout, more mad than ever; for, no matter what he

did or said, only let Harry make a sort of queer noise of his, and, just like a great flesh-mountain, that elephant would come. It didn't matter who was in the way: regiment at drill, officer, rajah, anybody, old Nabob would come straight away to Harry, holding out his trunk for fruit, or putting it in Harry's breast, where he'd find some bread or biscuit; and then the great brute would smooth him all over with his trunk, in a way that used to make Mrs Bantem say, that perhaps, after all, the natives weren't such fools as they looked, and that what they said about dead people going into animal's bodies might be true; for, if that great overgrown beast hadn't a soul of its own, and couldn't think, she didn't know nothing, so now then!

Story 1-Chapter VI

But it was always the same; and though time was when I could have laughed as merrily as did that little Jenny Wren of the colonel's at Harry's antics, I couldn't laugh now, because it always seemed as if they were made an excuse to get Miss Ross and her maid out with the children.

A party of jugglers, or dancing-girls, or a man or two with pipes and snakes, were all very well; but I've known clever parties come round, and those I've named would hardly come out to look; and my heart, I suppose it was, if it wasn't my mind, got very sore about that time, and I used to get looking as evil at Harry Lant as Lieutenant Leigh did at the captain.

But it was a dreary time that, after all; one from which we were awakened in a sudden way, that startled us to a man.

First of all there came a sort of shadowy rumour that something was wrong with the men of a native regiment, something to do with their caste; and before we had well realised that it was likely to be anything serious, sharp and swift came one bit of news after another, that the British officers in one native regiment had been shot down – here, there, in all directions; and then we understood that what we had taken for the flash of a solitary fire, was the firing of a big train, and that there was a great mutiny in the land. And not, mind, the mutiny or riot of a mob of roughs, but of men drilled and disciplined by British officers, with leaders of their own caste, all well armed and provided with ammunition; and the talk round our mess when we heard all this was, How will it end?

I don't think there were many who did not realise the fact that something awful was coming to pass. Measles grinned, he did, and said that there was going to be an end of British tyranny in India, and that the natives were only going to seize their own again; but the next minute, although it was quite clean, he takes his piece out of the rack, cleans it thoroughly all over again, fixes the bayonet, feels the point, and then stands at the "present!"

"I think we can let 'em know what's what, though, my lads, if they come here," he says, with a grim smile; when Mrs Bantem, whose breath seemed quite taken away before by the way he talked, jumped up quite happy-like, laid her great hand upon his left side, and then, turning to us, she says:

"It's beating strong."

"What is?" says Bantem, looking puzzled.

"Measles' heart," says Mrs Bantem; "and I always knew it was in the right place."

The next minute she gave Measles a slap on the back as echoed through the place, sending him staggering forward; but he only laughed and said:

"Praise the saints, I ain't Bantem."

There was a fine deal of excitement, though, now. The colonel seemed to wake up, and with him every officer, for we expected not only news but orders every moment. Discipline, if I may say so, was buckled up tight with the tongue in the last hole; provisions and water were got in; sentries doubled, and a strange feeling of distrust and fear came upon all, for we soon saw that the people of the place hung away from us, and though, from such an inoffensive-looking lot as we had about us, there didn't seem much to fear, yet there was no knowing what treachery we might have to encounter, and as he had to think and act for others beside himself, Colonel Maine – God bless him – took every possible precaution against danger, then hidden, but which was likely to spring into sight at any moment.

There were not many English residents at Begumbagh, but what there were came into quarters directly; and the very next morning we learned plainly enough that there was danger threatening our place by the behaviour of the natives, who packed up their few things and filed out of the town as fast as they could, so that at noonday the market-place was deserted, and, save the few we had in quarters, there was not a black face to be seen.

The next morning came without news; and I was orderly, and standing waiting in the outer court close behind the colonel, who was holding a sort of council of war with the officers, when a sentry up

in the broiling sun, on the roof, calls out that a horseman was coming; and before very long, covered with sweat and dust, an orderly dragoon dashes up, his horse all panting and blown; and then coming jingling and clanking in with those spurs and that sabre of his, he hands despatches to the colonel.

I hope I may be forgiven for what I thought then; for, as I watched his ruddy face, while he read those despatches, and saw it turn all of a sickly, greeny white, I gave him the credit of being a coward; and I was not the only one who did so. We all knew that, like us, he had never seen a shot fired in anger; and something like an angry feeling of vexation came over me, I know, as I thought of what a fellow he would be to handle and risk the lives of the four hundred men under his charge there at Begumbagh.

“D’yer think I’d look like that?” says a voice close to my ear just then. “D’yer think if I’d been made an officer, I’d ha’ showed the white feather like that?” – And turning round sharp, I saw it was Measles, who was standing sentry by the gateway; and he was so disgusted, that he spat about in all directions, for he was a man who didn’t smoke, like any other Christian, but chewed his tobacco like a sailor.

“Dyer,” says the colonel, the next moment, and they closed up together, but close to where we two stood – “Dyer,” he says, “I never felt before that it would be hard to do my duty as a soldier; but, God help me, I shall have to leave Annie and the children.” There were a couple of tears rolling down the poor fellow’s cheeks as he spoke, and he took Captain Dyer’s hand.

“Look at him! Cuss him!” whispers Measles again; and I kicked out sharp behind, and hit him in the shin. “He’s a pretty sort of a – ”

He didn’t say any more just then, for, like me, he was staggered by the change that took place.

I think I’ve said Colonel Maine was a little, easy-going, pudgy man, with a red face; but just then, as he stood holding Captain Dyer’s hand, a change seemed to come over him; he dropped the hand he had held, tightened his sword-belt, and then took a step forward, to stand thoughtful, with despatches in his left hand. It was then that I saw in a moment that I had wronged him, and I felt as if I could have gone down on the ground for him to have walked over me, for whatever he might have been in peace, easy-going, careless, and fond of idleness and good-living – come time for action, there he was with the true British officer flashing out of his face, his lips pinched, his eyes shining, and a stern look upon his countenance that I had never seen before.

“Now then!” I says in a whisper to Measles. I didn’t say anything else, for he knew what I meant. “Now then – now then!”

“Well,” says Measles, then in a whisper, “I s’pose women and children will bring the soft out of a man at a time like this; but, cuss him! what did he mean by humbugging us like that!”

I should think Colonel Maine stood alone thoughtful and still in that courtyard, with the sun beating down upon his muslin-covered forage-cap, while you could slowly, and like a pendulum-beat, count thirty. It was a tremendously hot morning, with the sky a bright clear blue, and the shadows of a deep purple black cast down and cut as sharp as sharp. It was so still, too, that you could hear the whirring, whizzy noise of the cricket things, and now and then the champ, champ of the horse rattling his bit as he stood outside the gateway. It was a strange silence, that seemed to make itself felt; and then the colonel woke into life, stuck those despatches into his sword-belt, gave an order here, an order there, and the next minute – Tantaran – tantaran, *Tantaran – tantaran*, Tantaran-tantaran, *Tantaran-tay*– the bugle was ringing out the assemblée, men were hurrying here and there, there was the trampling of feet, the courtyard was full of busy figures, shadows were passing backwards and forwards, and the news was abroad that our regiment was to form a flying column with another, and that we were off directly.

Ay, but it was exciting, that getting ready, and the time went like magic before we formed a hollow square, and the colonel said a few words to us, mounted as he was now, his voice firm as firm, except once, when I saw him glance at an upper window, and then it trembled, but only for an instant. His words were not many; and to this day, when I think of the scene under that hot blue sky,

they come ringing back; for it did not seem to us that our old colonel was speaking, but a new man of a different mettle, though it was only that the right stuff had been sleeping in his breast, ready to be wakened by the bugle.

“My lads,” he said, and to a man we all burst out into a ringing cheer, when he took off his cap, and waved it round – “My lads, this is a sharp call, but I’ve been expecting it, and it has not found us asleep. I thank you for the smart way in which you have answered it, for it shows me that a little easy-going on my part in the piping times of peace has not been taken advantage of. My lads, these are stern times; and this despatch tells me of what will bring the honest British blood into every face, and make every strong hand take a firm gripe of its piece as he longs for the order to charge the mutinous traitors to their Queen, who, taking her pay, sworn to serve her, have turned, and in cold blood butchered their officers, slain women, and hacked to pieces innocent babes. My lads, we are going against a horde of monsters; but I have bad news – you cannot all go – ”

There was a murmur here.

“That murmur is not meant,” he continued; “and I know it will be regretted when I explain myself. We have women here and children: mine – yours – and they must be protected,” (it was here that his voice shook). “Captain Dyer’s company will garrison the place till our return, and to those men many of us leave all that is dear to us on earth. I have spoken. God save the Queen!”

How that place echoed with the hearty “Hurray!” that rung out; and then it was, “Fours right, march!” and only our company held firm, while I don’t know whether I felt disappointed or pleased, till I happened to look up at one of the windows, to see Mrs Maine and Miss Ross, with those two poor little innocent children clapping their hands with delight at seeing the soldiers march away; one of them, the little girl, with her white muslin and scarlet sash over her shoulder, being held up by Lizzy Green; and then I did know that I was not disappointed, but glad I was to stay.

But to show you how a man’s heart changes about when it is blown by the hot breath of what you may call love, let me tell you that only half a minute later, I was disappointed again at not going; and dared I have left the ranks, I’d have run after the departing column, for I caught Harry Lant looking up at that window, and I thought a handkerchief was waved to him.

Next minute, Captain Dyer calls out, “Form four – deep. Right face. March!” and he led us to the gateway, but only to halt us there, for Measles, who was sentry, calls out something to him in a wild excited way.

“What do you want, man?” says Captain Dyer.

“O, sir, if you’ll only let me exchange. ’Taint too late. Let me go, captain.”

“How dare you, sir!” says Captain Dyer sternly, though I could see plainly enough it was only for discipline, for he was, I thought, pleased at Measles wanting to be in the thick of it. Then he shouts again to Measles: “’Tention – present arms!” and Measles falls into his right position for a sentry when troops are marching past. “March!” says the captain again; and we marched into the market-place, and – all but those told off for sentries – we were dismissed; and Captain Dyer then stood talking earnestly to Lieutenant Leigh, for it had fallen out that they two, with a short company of eight-and-thirty rank and file, were to have the guarding of the women and children left in quarters at Begumbagh.

Story 1-Chapter VII

It seemed to me that, for the time being, Lieutenant Leigh was too much of a soldier to let private matters and personal feelings of enmity interfere with duty; and those two stood talking together for a good half-hour, when, having apparently made their plans, fatigue-parties were ordered out; and what I remember then thinking was a wise move, the soldiers' wives and children in quarters were brought into the old palace, since it was the only likely spot for putting into something like a state of defence.

I have called it a palace, and I suppose that a rajah did once live in it, but, mind you, it was neither a very large nor a very grand place, being only a square of buildings, facing inward to a little courtyard, entered by a gateway, after the fashion of no end of buildings in the east.

Water we had in the tank, but provisions were brought in, and what sheep there were. Fortunately, there was a good supply of hay, and that we got in; but one thing we did not bargain for, and that was the company of the great elephant, Nabob, he having been left behind. And what does he do but come slowly up on those india-rubber cushion feet of his, and walk through the gateway, his back actually brushing against the top; and then, once in, he goes quietly over to where the hay was stacked, and coolly enough begins eating!

The men laughed, and some jokes were made about his taking up a deal of room, and I suppose, really, it was through Harry Lant that the great beast came in; but no more was said then, we all being so busy, and not one of us had the sense to see what a fearful strait that great inoffensive animal might bring us to.

I believe we all forgot about the heat that day as we worked on, slaving away at things that, in an ordinary way, we should have expected to be done by the niggers. Food, ammunition, wood, particularly planks, everything Captain Dyer thought likely to be of use; and soon a breastwork was made inside the gateway; such lower windows as looked outwards carefully nailed up, and loopholed for a shot at the enemy, should any appear; and when night did come at last, peaceful and still, the old palace was turned into a regular little fort.

We all knew that all this might be labour in vain, but all the same it seemed to be our duty to get the place into as good a state of defence as we could, and under orders we did it. But, after all, we knew well enough that if the mutineers should bring up a small field-piece, they could knock the place about our ears in no time. Our hope, though, was that, at all events while our regiment was away, we might be unmolested, for, if the enemy came in any number, what could eight-and-thirty men do, hampered as they were with half-a-dozen children, and twice as many women? Not that all the women were likely to hamper us, for there was Mrs Bantem, busy as a bee, working here, comforting there, helping women to make themselves snug in different rooms; and once, as she came near me, she gave me one of her tremendous slaps on the back, her eyes twinkling with pleasure, and the perspiration streaming down her face the while. "Ike Smith," she says, "this is something like, isn't it? But ask Captain Dyer to have that breastwork strengthened – there isn't half enough of it. Glad Bantem hasn't gone. But, I say, only think of that poor woman! I saw her just now crying, fit to break her poor heart."

"What poor woman?" I said, staring hard.

"Why, the colonel's wife. Poor soul, it's pitiful to see her; it went through me like a knife. – What! are you there, my pretties?" she cried, flumping down on the stones as the colonel's two little ones came running out. "Bless your pretty hearts, you'll come and say a word to old Mother Bantem, won't you?"

"What's everybody tying about?" says the little girl, in her prattling way. "I don't like people to ty. Has my ma been whipped, and Aunt Elsie been naughty?"

“Look, look!” cries the boy excitedly; “dere’s old Nabob!” And toddling off, the next minute he was close to the great beast, his little sister running after him, to catch hold of his hand; and there the little mites stood close to, and staring up at the great elephant, as he kept on amusing himself by twisting up a little hay in his trunk, and then lightly scattering it over his back, to get rid of the flies – for what nature could have been about to give him such a scrap of a tail, I can’t understand. He’d work it, and flip it about hard enough; but as to getting rid of a fly, it’s my belief that if insects can laugh, they laughed at it, as they watched him from where they were buzzing about the stone walls and windows in the hot sunshine.

The next minute, like a chorus, there came a scream from one of the upper windows, one from another, and a sort of howl from Mrs Bantem, and we all stood startled and staring, for what does Jenny Wren do, but, in a staggering way, lift up her little brother for him to touch the elephant’s trunk, and then she stood laughing and clapping her hands with delight, seeing no fear, bless her! as that long, soft trunk was gently curled round the boy’s waist, when he was drawn out of his sister’s arms; and then the great beast stood swinging the child to and fro, now up a little way, now down between his legs, and him crowing and laughing away all the while, as if it was the best fun that could be.

I believe we were all struck motionless; and it was like taking a hand away from my throat to let me breathe once more, when I saw the elephant gently drop the little fellow down on a heap of hay, but only for him to scramble up, and run forward shouting: “Now ’gain, now ’gain;” and, as if Nabob understood his little prattling, half-tied tongue, he takes him up again, and swings him, just as there was a regular rush made, and Mrs Colonel, Miss Ross, Lizzy, and the captain and lieutenant came up.

“For Heaven’s sake, save the child!” cries Mrs Maine. – “Mr Leigh, pray do something.”

Miss Ross did not speak, but she looked at Captain Dyer; and those two young men both went at the elephant directly, to get the child away; but, in an instant, Nabob wheeled round, just the same as a stubborn donkey would at home with a lot of boys teasing it; and then, as they dodged round his great carcass, he trumpeted fiercely, and began to shuffle off round the court.

I went up too, and so did Mrs Bantem, brave as a lion; but the great beast only kept on making his loud snorting noise, and shuffled along, with the boy in his trunk, swinging him backwards and forwards; and it was impossible to help thinking of what would be the consequence if the elephant should drop the little fellow, and then set on him one of his great feet.

It seemed as if nothing could be done, and once the idea – wild enough too – rushed into my head that it would be advisable to get a rifle put to the great beast’s ear, and fire, when Measles shouted out from where he was on guard: “Here’s Chunder coming!” and, directly after, with his opal eyeballs rolling, and his dark, treacherous-looking face seeming to me all wicked and pleased at what was going on, came the mahout, and said a few words to the elephant, which stopped directly, and went down upon its knees. Chunder then tried to take hold of the child, but somehow that seemed to make the great beast furious, and, getting up again, he began to grunt and make a noise after the fashion of a great pig, going on now faster round the court, and sending those who had come to look, and who stood in his way, fleeing in all directions.

Mrs Maine was half fainting, and, catching the little girl to her breast, I saw her go down upon her knees and hide her face, expecting, no doubt, every moment, that the next one would be her boy’s last; and, indeed, we were all alarmed now, for the more we tried to get the little chap away, the fiercer the elephant grew; the only one who did not seem to mind being the boy himself, though his sister now began to cry, and in her little artless way I heard her ask her mother if the naughty elephant would eat Clivey.

I’ve often thought since that if we’d been quiet, and left the beast alone, he would soon have set the child down; and I’ve often thought, too, that Mr Chunder could have got the boy away if he had liked, only he did nothing but tease and irritate the elephant, which was not the best of friends with him. But you will easily understand that there was not much time for thought then.

I had been doing my best along with the others, and then stood thinking what I could be at next, when I caught Lizzy Green's eye turned to me in an appealing, reproachful sort of way, that seemed to say as plainly as could be: "Can't you do anything?" when all at once Measles shouts out: "Arry, 'Arry!" and Harry Lant came up at the double, having been busy carrying arms out of the guardroom rack.

It was at one and the same moment that Harry Lant saw what was wrong, and that a cold dull chill ran through me, for I saw Lizzy clasp her hands together in a sort of thankful way, and it seemed to me then, as Harry ran up to the elephant, that he was always to be put before me, and that I was nobody, and the sooner I was out of the way the better.

All the same, though, I couldn't help admiring the way Harry ran up to the great brute, and did what none of us could manage. I quite hated him, I know, but yet I was proud of my mate, as he went up and says something to Nabob, and the elephant stands still. "Put him down," says Harry, pointing to the ground; and the great flesh-mountain puts the little fellow down. "Now then," says Harry, to the horror of the ladies, "pick him up again;" and in a twinkling the great thing whips the boy up once more. "Now, bring him up to the colonel's lady." Well, if you'll believe me, if the great thing didn't follow Harry like a lamb, and carry the child up to where, half fainting, knelt poor Mrs Maine. "Now, put him down," says Harry; and the next moment little Clive Maine – Cock Robin, as we called him – was being hugged to his mother's breast. "Now, go down on your knees, and beg the lady's pardon," says Harry laughing. Down goes the elephant, and stops there, making a queer chuntering noise the while. "Says he's very sorry, ma'am, and won't do so no more," says Harry, serious as a judge; and in a moment, half laughing, half crying, Mrs Maine caught hold of Harry's hand, and kissed it, and then held it for a moment to her breast, sobbing hysterically as she did so.

"God bless you! You're a good man," she cried; and then she broke down altogether; and Miss Ross, and Mrs Bantem, and Lizzy got round her, and helped her in.

I could see that Harry was touched, for one of his lips shook; but he tried to keep up the fun of the thing; and turning to the elephant, he says out loud: "Now, get up, and go back to the hay; and don't you come no more of those games, that's all."

The elephant got up directly, making a grunting noise as he did so.

"Why not?" says Harry, making-believe that that was what the great beast said. "Because, if you do, I'll smash you. There!"

Officers and men, they all burst out laughing to see little Harry Lant – a chap so little that he wouldn't have been in the regiment only that men were scarce, and the standard was very low when he listed – to see him standing shaking his fist at the great monster, one of whose legs was bigger than Harry altogether – stand shaking his fist in its face, and then take hold of the soft trunk and lead him away.

Perhaps I did, perhaps I didn't, but I thought I caught sight of a glance passing between Lizzy Green, now at one window, and Harry, leading off the elephant; but all the same I felt that jealous of him, and to hate him so, that I could have quarrelled with him about nothing. It seemed as if he was always to come before me in everything.

And I wasn't the only one jealous of Harry, for no sooner was the court pretty well empty, than he came slowly up towards me, in spite of my sour black looks, which he wouldn't notice: but before he could get to me, Chunder Chow, the mahout, goes up to the elephant, muttering and spiteful-like, with his hook-spear thing, that mahouts use to drive with; and being, I suppose, put out and jealous, and annoyed at his authority being taken away, and another man doing what he couldn't, he gives the elephant a kick in the leg, and then hits him viciously with his iron-hook thing.

Lord bless you! it didn't take an instant, and it seemed to me that the elephant only gave that trunk of his a gentle swing against Chunder's side, and he was a couple of yards off, rolling over and over in the scattered hay.

Up he jumps, wild as wild; and the first thing he catches sight of is Harry laughing fit to crack his sides, when Chunder rushes at him like a mad bull.

I suppose he expected to see Harry turn tail and ran; but that being one of those things not included in drill, and a British soldier having a good deal of the machine about him, Harry stands fast, and Chunder pulls up short, grinning, rolling his eyes, and twisting his hands about, just for all the world like as if he was robbing a hen-roost, and wringing all the chickens' necks.

“Didn't hurt much, did it, blacky?” says Harry coolly. But the mahout couldn't speak for rage; but he kept spitting on the ground, and making signs, till really his face was anything but pretty to look at. And there he kept on, till, from laughing, Harry turned a bit nasty, for there was some one looking out of a window; and from being half-amused at what was going on, I once more felt all cold and bitter. But Harry fires up now, and makes towards Mr Chunder, who begins to retreat; and says Harry: “Now I tell you what it is, young man; I never did you any ill turn; and if I choose to have a bit of fun with the elephant, it's government property, and as much mine as yours. But look ye here – if you come cussing, and spitting, and swearing at me again in your nasty heathen dialect, why, if I don't – No,” he says, stopping short, and half-turning to me, “I can't black his eyes, Isaac, for they're black enough already; but let him come any more of it, and, jiggermaree, if I don't bung 'em.”

Story 1-Chapter VIII

Chunder didn't like the looks of Harry, I suppose, so he walked off, turning once to spit and cruse, like that turn-coat chap, Shimei, that you read of in the Bible; and we two walked off together towards our quarters.

"I ain't going to stand any of his nonsense," says Harry.

"It's bad making enemies now, Harry," I said gruffly. And just then up comes Measles, who had been relieved, for his spell was up, and another party were on, else he would have had to be in the guardroom.

"There never was such an unlucky beggar as me," says Measles. "If a chance does turn up for earning a bit of promotion, it's always some one else gets it. Come on, lads, and let's see what Mother Bantem's got in the pot."

"You'll perhaps have a chance before long of earning your bit of promotion without going out," I says.

"Ike Smith's turned prophet and croaker in ornary," says Harry, laughing. "I believe he expects we're going to have a new siege of Seringapatam here, only back'ards way on."

"Only wish some of 'em would come this way," says Measles grimly; and he made a sort of offer, and a hit out at some imaginary enemy.

"Here they are," says Joe Bantem, as we walked in. "Curry for dinner, lads – look alive."

"What, my little hero!" says Mrs Bantem, fetching Harry one of her slaps on the back. "My word, you're in fine plume with the colonel's lady."

Slap came her hand down again on Harry's back; and as soon as he could get wind: "O, I say, don't," he says. "Thank goodness, I ain't a married man. Is she often as affectionate as this with you, Joe?"

Joe Bantem laughed; and soon after we were all making, in spite of threatened trouble and disappointment, an uncommonly hearty dinner, for, if there ever was a woman who could make a good curry, it was Mrs Bantem; and many's the cold winter's day I've stood at Facet's door there in Bond-street, and longed for a plateful. Pearls stewed in sunshine, Harry Lant used to call it; and really to see the beautiful, glistening, white rice, every grain tender as tender, and yet dry and ready to roll away from the others – none of your mosh-posh rice, if Mrs Bantem boiled it – and then the rich golden curry itself: there, I've known that woman turn one of the toughest old native cocks into what you'd have sworn was a delicate young Dorking chick – that is, so long as you didn't get hold of a drumstick, which perhaps would be a bit ropy. That woman was a regular blessing to our mess, and we fellows said so, many a time.

One, two, three days passed without any news, and we in our quarters were quiet as if thousands of miles from the rest of the world. The town kept as deserted as ever, and it seemed almost startling to me when I was posted sentry on the roof, after looking out over the wide, sandy, dusty plain, over which the sunshine was quivering and dancing, to peer down amongst the little ramshackle native huts without a sign of life amongst them, and it took but little thought for me to come to the conclusion that the natives knew of something terrible about to happen, and had made that their reason for going away. Though, all the same, it might have been from dread lest we should seek to visit upon them and theirs the horrors that had elsewhere befallen the British.

I used often to think, too, that Captain Dyer had some such feelings as mine, for he looked very, very serious and anxious, and he'd spend hours on the roof with his glass, Miss Ross often being by his side, while Lieutenant Leigh used to watch them in a strange way, when he thought no one was observing him.

I've often thought that when people get touched with that queer complaint folks call love, they get into a curious half-delirious way, that makes them fancy that people are nearly blind, and have

their eyes shut to what they do or say. I fancy there was something of this kind with Miss Ross, and I'm sure there was with me when I used to go hanging about, trying to get a word with Lizzy; and, of course, shut up as we all were then, often having the chance, but getting seldom anything but a few cold answers, and a sort of show of fear of me whenever I was near to her.

But what troubled me as much as anything was the behaviour of the four Indians we had shut up with us – Chunder Chow, the old black nurse, and two more – for they grew more uppish and bounceable every day, refusing to work, until Captain Dyer had one of the men tied up to the triangles and flogged, down in a great cellar or vault-place that there was under the north end of the palace, so that the ladies and women shouldn't hear his cries. He deserved all he got, as I can answer for, and that made the rest a little more civil, but not for long; and, just the day before something happened, I took the liberty of saluting Captain Dyer, after he had been giving me some orders, and seizing that chance of speaking my mind.

“Captain,” I says, “I don't think those black folks are to be trusted.”

“Neither do I, Smith,” he says. “But what have you to tell me?”

“Nothing at all, captain, only that I have my eye on them; and I've been thinking that they must somehow or another have held communication outside; and I don't like it, for those people don't get what we call 'cheeky' without cause.”

“Keep both eyes on them then, Smith,” says Captain Dyer, smiling; “and, no matter what it is – if it is the most trivial thing in any way connected with them, report it.”

“I will, sir,” I says; and the very next day, much against the grain, I did have something to report.

Story 1-Chapter IX

That next morning was hotter, I think, than ever, with no prospect either of rain or change; and, after doing what little work I had to get over, it struck me that I might as well attend to what Captain Dyer advised – give two eyes to Chunder and his friends. So I left Mrs Bantem busy over her cooking, and went down into the court.

All below was as still as death – sunshine here, shadow there; but through one of the windows, open to catch the least breeze that might be on the way, and taking in instead the hot sultry air, came now and then the silvery laughter of the children – that pleasant cheery sound that makes the most rugged old face grow a trifle smoother.

I looked here, and I looked there, but could only see old Nabob amusing himself with the hay, a sentry on the roof to the east, and another on the roof to the west, and one in the gateway, broiling almost, all of them, with the heat.

The ladies and the children were seldom seen now, for they were in trouble; and Mrs Maine was worn almost to skin and bone with anxiety, as she sat waiting for tidings of the expedition.

Not knowing what to do with myself, I sauntered along by where there was a slip of shade, and entered the south side of the palace – an old half-ruinous part; and after going first into one, and then into another of the bare empty rooms, I picked out what seemed to be the coolest corner I could find, sat down with my back propped against the wall, filled and lit my pipe, and then, putting things together in my mind, thoroughly enjoyed a good smoke.

There was something wonderfully soothing in that bit of tobacco, and it appeared to me cooling, comforting, and to make my bit of a love-affair seem not so bad as it was. So, on the strength of that, I refilled, and was about half-way through another pipe, when things began to grow very dim round about me, and I was wandering about in my dreams, and nodding that head of mine in the most curious and wild way you can think of. What I dreamed about most was of getting married to Lizzy Green; and in what must have been a very short space, that event was coming off at least half-a-dozen times over, only Nabob, the elephant, would come in at an awkward time and put a stop to it. But at last, in my dreamy fashion, it seemed to me that matters were smoothed over, and he consented to put down the child, and, flapping his ears, promised he'd say yes. But in my stupid, confused muddle, I thought that he'd no sooner put down the child with his trunk than he wheeled round and took him up with his tail; and so on, backwards and forwards, when, getting quite out of patience, I caught Lizzy's hand in mine, saying: "Never mind the elephant – let's have it over;" and she gave a sharp scream.

I jumped to my feet, biting off and nearly swallowing a bit of pipe-shank as I did so, and then stood drenched with perspiration, listening to a scuffling noise in the next room; when, shaking off the stupid confused feeling, I ran towards the door just as another scream – not a loud, but a faint excited scream – rang in my ears, and the next moment Lizzy Green was sobbing and crying in my arms, and that black thief Chunder was crawling on his hands and knees to the door, where he got up, holding his fist to his mouth, and then he turned upon me such a look as I have never forgotten.

I don't wonder at the people of old painting devils with black faces; for I don't know anything more devilish-looking than a black's phiz when it is drawn with rage, and the eyes are rolling about, now all black flash, now all white, while the grinning ivories below seem to be grinding and ready to tear you in pieces.

It was after that fashion that Chunder looked at me as he turned at the door; but I was then only thinking of the trembling frightened girl I held in my arms, trying at the same time to whisper a few gentle words, while I had hard work to keep from pressing my lips to her white forehead.

But the next minute she disengaged herself from my grasp, and held out her little white hand to me, thanking me as sweetly as thanks could be given.

“Perhaps you had better not say a word about it,” she whispered. “He’s come under pretence of seeing the nurse, and been rude to me once or twice before. I came here to sit at that window with my work, and did not see him come behind me.”

I started as she spoke about that open window, for it looked out upon the spot where I sometimes stood sentry; but then, Harry Lant sometimes stood just in the same place, and I don’t know whether it was a strange impression caused by his coming that made me think of him, but just then there were footsteps, and, with his pipe in his mouth, and fatigue-jacket all unbuttoned, Harry entered the room.

“Beg pardon; didn’t know it was engaged,” he says lightly, as he stepped back; and then he stopped, for Lizzy called to him by his name.

“Please walk back with me to Mrs Maine’s quarters,” she said softly; and once more holding her hand out to me, with her eyes cast down, she thanked me; and the question I had been asking myself – Did she love Harry Lant better than me? – was to my mind answered, and I gave a groan as I saw them walk off together, for it struck me then that they had engaged to meet in that room, only Harry Lant was late.

“Never mind,” I says to myself; “I’ve done a comrade a good turn.” And then I thought more and more of there being a feeling in the blacks’ minds that their day was coming, or that ill-looking scoundrel would never have dared to insult a white woman in open day.

Ten minutes after, I was on my way to Captain Dyer, for, in spite of what Lizzy had said, I felt that, being under orders, it was my duty to report all that occurred with the blacks; for we might at any time have been under siege, and to have had unknown and treacherous enemies in the camp would have been ruin indeed.

“Well, Smith,” he said, smiling as I entered and saluted, “what news of the enemy?”

“Not much, sir,” I said; what I had to tell going, as I have before hinted, very much against the grain. “I was in one of the empty rooms on the south side, when I heard a scream, and running up, I found it was Miss Ross – ”

“What!” he roared, in a voice that would have startled a stronger man than I.

“Miss Ross’s maid, sir, with that black fellow Chunder, the mahout, trying to kiss her.”

“Well?” he said, with a black angry look overspreading his face.

“Well, sir,” I said, feeling quite red as I spoke, “he kissed my fist instead – that’s all.”

Captain Dyer began to walk up and down, playing with one of the buttons on his breast, as was his way when eager and excited.

“Now, Smith,” he said at last, stopping short before me, “what does that mean?”

“Mean, sir?” I said, feeling quite as excited as himself. “Well, sir, if you ask me, I say that if it was in time of peace and quiet, it would only mean that it was a hit of his damned black – I beg your pardon, captain,” I says, stopping short, for, you see, it was quite time.

“Go on, Smith,” he said quietly.

“His black impudence, sir.”

“But, as it is not in time of peace and quiet, Smith?” he said, looking me through and through.

“Well, sir,” I said, “I don’t want to croak, nor for other people to believe what I say; but it seems to me that that black fellow’s kicking out of the ranks means a good deal; and I take it that he is excited with the news that he has somehow got hold of – news that is getting into his head like so much green ’rack. I’ve thought of it some little time now, sir; and it strikes me that if, instead of our short company being Englishmen, they were all Chunder Chows, before to-morrow morning, begging your pardon, Captain Dyer and Lieutenant Leigh would have said ‘Right wheel’ for the last time.”

“And the women and children!” he muttered softly; but I heard him.

He did not speak then for quite half a minute, when he turned to me with a pleasant smile.

“But you see, though, Smith,” he said, “our short company is made up of different stuff; and therefore there’s some hope for us yet; but – Ah, Leigh, did you hear what he said?”

“Yes,” said the lieutenant, who had been standing at the door for a few moments, scowling at as both.

“Well, what do you think?” said Captain Dyer.

“Think?” said Lieutenant Leigh contemptuously, as he turned away – “nothing!”

“But,” said Captain Dyer quietly, “really I think there is much truth in what he, an observant man, says.”

There was a challenge from the roof just then; and we all went out to find that a mounted man was in sight; and on the captain making use of his glass, I heard him tell Lieutenant Leigh that the man was an orderly dragoon.

A few minutes after, the new-comer was plain enough to everybody; and soon, man and horse dead beat, the orderly with a despatch trotted into the court.

It was a sight worth seeing, to look upon Mrs Maine clutching at the letter enclosed for her in Captain Dyer’s despatch. Poor woman! it was a treasure to her – one that made her pant as she hurriedly snatched it from the captain’s hand, for all formality was forgotten in those days; and then she hurried away to where her sister was waiting to hear the news.

Story 1-Chapter X

The orderly took back a despatch from Captain Dyer, starting at daybreak the next morning; but before then, we all knew that matters were getting to wear a terrible aspect. At first, I had been disposed to think that the orderly was romancing, and giving as a few travellers' tales; but I soon found out that he was in earnest; and more than once I felt a shiver as he sat with our mess, telling as of how regiment after regiment had mutinied and murdered their officers; how station after station had been plundered, collectors butchered, and their wives and daughters sometimes cut down, sometimes carried off by the wretches, who had made a sport of throwing infants from one to the other on their bayonets.

"I never had any children," sobbed Mrs Bantem then; "and I never wished to have any; for they're not right for soldiers' wives; but only to think – the poor sweet, suffering little things. O, if I'd only been a man, and been there!"

We none of us said anything; but I believe all thought as I did, that if Mrs Bantem had been there, she'd have done as much – ah, perhaps more – than some men would have done. Bless my soul! as I think of it, and recall it from the bygone, there I can see Mother Bantem – though why we called her mother, I don't know, unless it was because she was like a mother to us – with her great strapping form; and think of the way in which she —

Halt! Retire by fours from the left.

Just in time; for I find handling my pen's like handling a commander-in-chief's staff, and that I've got letters which make words, which make phrases, which make sentences, which make paragraphs, which make chapters, which make up the whole story; and that is for all the world like the army with its privates made into companies, and battalions, and regiments, and brigades. Well, there you are: if you don't have discipline, and every private in his right place, where are you? Just so with me; my words were coming out in the wrong places, and in another minute I should have spoiled my story, by letting you know what was coming at the wrong time.

Well, we all felt very deeply the news brought in by that orderly; for soldiers are not such harum-scarum roughs as some people seem to imagine. For the most part, they're men with the same feelings as civilians; and I don't think many of us slept very sound that night, feeling as we did what a charge we had, and that we might be attacked at any time; and a good deal of my anxiety was on account of Lizzy Green; for even if she wouldn't be my wife, but Harry Lant's, I could not help taking a wonderful deal of interest in her.

But all the same it was a terribly awkward time, as you must own, for falling in love; and I don't know hardly whom I pitied most, Captain Dyer or myself; but think I had more leanings towards number one, because Captain Dyer was happy; though, perhaps, I might have been; only like lots more hot sighing noodles, I never once thought of asking the girl if she'd have me. As for Lieutenant Leigh, I never even thought of giving him a bit of pity, for I did not think he deserved it.

Well, the trooper started off at daybreak, so as to get well on his journey in the early morning; and about an hour after he was gone, I had a fancy to go into the old ruined room again, where there was the bit of a scene I've told you of. My orders from Captain Dyer were, to watch Chunder strictly, both as to seeing that he did not again insult any of the women, and also to see if he had any little game of his own that he was playing on the sly; for though Lieutenant Leigh, on being told, pooh-poohed it all, and advised a flogging, Captain Dyer had his suspicions – stronger ones, it seemed, than mine; and hence my orders, and my being excused from mounting guard.

It was all very still and cool and quiet as I walked from room to room, slowly and thoughtfully, stopping to pick up my broken pipe, which lay where I had dropped it; and then going on into the next room, where, under the window, lay the bit of cotton cobweb and cat's-cradle work Lizzy had

been doing, and had left behind. I gave a bit of a gulp as I picked that up; and I was tucking it inside my jacket, when I stopped short, for I thought I heard a whisper.

I listened, and there it was again – a low, earnest whispering of first one and then another voice in the next room, whose wide broken doorway stood open, for there wasn't a bit of woodwork left.

I have heard about people saying, that in some great surprise or fright, their hearts stood still; but I don't believe it, because it always strikes me that, when a person's heart does stand still, it never goes on again. All the same, though, my heart felt then as if it did stand still with the dead, dull, miserable feeling that came upon me. Only to think that this was only the second time I had come through these ruined rooms, and they were here again! It was plain enough Harry Lant and Lizzy made this their meeting-place, and only they knew how many times they'd met before.

Time back, I could have laughed at the idea of me, a great strapping fellow, feeling as I did; but now I felt very wretched; and as I thought of Harry Lant kissing those bright red lips, and looking into those deep dark eyes, and being let pass his hand over the glossy hair, with the prospect of some day calling it all his own, I did not burn all over with a mad rage and passion, but it was like a great grief coming upon me, so that, if it hadn't been for being a man, I could have sat down and cried.

I should think ten minutes passed, and the whispering still went on, when I said to myself: "Be a man, Isaac: if she likes him better, hasn't she a right to her pick?" But still I felt very miserable as I turned to go away, when a something, said a little louder than the rest, stopped me.

"That ain't English," I says to myself. "What! surely she's not listening to that black scoundrel?"

I was red-hot then in a moment; and as to thinking whether this or that was straightforward, or whether I was playing the spy, or anything of that sort, such an idea never came into my head. Chunder was evidently talking to Lizzy Green in that room; and for a few seconds I felt blind with a sort of jealous savage rage – against her, mind, now; and going on tip-toe, I looked round the doorway, so as to see as well as hear.

I was back in an instant, with a fresh set of sensations busy in my breast. It was Chunder, but he was alone; there was no Lizzy there; and I don't know whether my heart beat then for joy at knowing it, or for shame at myself for having thought such a thing of her.

What did it mean, then?

I did not have to ask myself the question twice, for the answer came – Treachery! And stealing to the slit of window in the room I was in, I peeped cautiously out in time to see Chunder throwing out what looked like a white packet. I could see his arm move as he threw it down to a man in a turban – a dark wiry-looking rascal; and in those few seconds I seemed to read that packet word for word, though no doubt the writing was in one of the native dialects, and my reading of it was, that it was a correct list of the defenders of the place, the women and children, and what arms and ammunition there were stored up.

It was all plain enough, and the villain was sending it by a man who must have brought him tidings of some kind.

What was I to do? That man ought to be stopped at all hazards; and what I ought to have done was to steal back, give the alarm, and let a party go round to try and cut him off.

That's what I ought to have done; but I never did have much judgment.

Now for what I did do.

Slipping back from the window, I went cautiously to the doorway, and entered the old room where Chunder was standing at the window; and I went in so quietly, and he was so intent, that I had crept close, and was in the act of leaping on to him before he turned round and tried to avoid me.

He was too late, though, for with a bound I was on him, pinioning his hands, and holding him down on the window-sill, with his head half out, as, bearing down upon him, I leaned out as far as I could, yelling out, —

"Sentry on the west roof, mark man below. Stop him, or fire!"

The black fellow below drew a long awkward-looking pistol, and aimed at me, but only for a moment. Perhaps he was afraid of killing Chunder, for the next instant he had stuck the pistol back in his calico belt, and, with head stooped, was running as hard as he could run, when I could hardly contain myself for rage, knowing as I did how important it was for him to have been stopped.

“Bang!”

A sharp report from the roof, and the fellow made a bound.

Was he hit?

No: he only seemed to ran the faster.

“Bang!”

Another report as the runner came in sight of the second sentry.

But I saw no more, for all my time was taken up with Chunder; for as the second shot rang out, he gave a heave, and nearly sent me through the open window.

It was by a miracle almost that I saved myself from breaking my neck, for it was a good height from the ground; but I held on to him tightly with a clutch such as he never had on his arms and neck before; and then, with a strength for which I shouldn't have given him credit, he tussled with me, now tugging to get away, now to throw me from the window, his hot breath beating all the time upon my cheeks, and his teeth grinning, and eyes rolling savagely.

It was only a spurt, though, and I soon got the better of him.

I don't want to boast, but I suppose our cold northern bone and muscle are tougher and stronger than theirs; and at the end of five minutes, puffing and blown, I was sitting on his chest, taking a paper from inside his calico.

That laid me open; for, like a flash, I saw then that he had a knife in one hand, while before another thought could pass through my mind, it was sticking through my jacket and the skin of my ribs, and my fist was driven down against his mouth for him to kiss for the second time in his life.

Next minute, Captain Dyer and a dozen men were in the room, Chunder was handcuffed and marched off, and the captain was eagerly questioning me.

“But is that fellow shot down or taken – the one outside?” I asked.

“Neither,” said Captain Dyer; “and it is too late now: he has got far enough away.”

Then I told him what I had seen, and he looked at the packet, his brow knitting as he tried to make it out.

“I ought to have come round and given the alarm, captain,” I said bitterly.

“Yes, my good fellow, you ought,” he said; “and I ought to have had that black scoundrel under lock and key days ago. But it is too late now to talk of what ought to have been done; we must talk of what there is to do. – But are you hurt?”

“He sent his knife through my jacket, sir,” I said, “but it's only a scratch on the skin;” and fortunately that's what it proved to be, for we had no room for wounded men, since we should have them soon enough.

Story 1-Chapter XI

An hour of council, and then another – our two leaders not seeming to agree as to the extent of the coming danger. Challenge from the west roof:

“Orderly in sight.”

Sure enough, a man on horseback riding very slowly, and as if his horse was dead beat.

“Surely it isn’t that poor fellow come back, because his horse has failed? He ought to have walked on,” said Captain Dyer.

“Same man,” said Lieutenant Leigh, looking through his glass; and before very long, the poor fellow who had gone away at daybreak rode slowly up to the gate, was admitted, and then had to be helped from his horse, giving a great sobbing groan as it was done.

“In here, quick!” I said, for I thought I heard the ladies’ voices; and we carried him in to where Mrs Bantem was getting ready for dinner, and there we laid him on a mattress.

“Despatches, captain,” he says, holding up the captain’s letter to Colonel Maine. “They didn’t get that. They were too many for me. I dropped one, though, with my pistol, and cut my way through the others.”

As he spoke, I untwisted his leather sword-knot, which was cutting into his wrist, for his hacked and blood-stained sabre was hanging from his hand.

“Wouldn’t go back into the scabbard,” he said faintly; and then with a harsh gasp: “Water – water!”

He revived then a hit; and as Captain Dyer and Mrs Bantem between them were attending to, and binding up his wounds, he told us how he had been set upon some miles off, and had been obliged to fight his way back; and, poor chap, he had fought; for there were no less than ten lance-wounds in his arms, thighs, and chest, from a slight prick up to a horrible gash, deep and long enough, it seemed to me, to let out half-a-dozen poor fellows’ souls.

Just in the middle of it, I saw Captain Dyer start and look strange, for there was a shadow came across where we were kneeling; and the next instant he was standing between Miss Ross and the wounded man.

“Pray, go, dear Elsie; this is no place for you,” I heard him whisper to her.

“Indeed, Lawrence,” she said gently, “am I not a soldier’s daughter? I ought to say this is no place for you. Go, and make your arrangements for our defence.”

I don’t think any one but me saw the look of love she gave him as she took sponge and lint from his hand, pressing it as she did so, and then her pale face lit up with a smile as she met his eyes; the next moment she was kneeling by the wounded trooper, and in a quiet firm way helping Mrs Bantem, in a manner that made her, poor woman, stare with astonishment.

“God bless you, my darling,” she whispered to her as soon as they had done, and the poor fellow was lying still – a toss-up with him whether it should be death or life; and I saw Mrs Bantem take Miss Ross’s soft white hand between her two great rough hard palms, and kiss it just once.

“And I’d always been abusing and running her down for a fine madam, good for nothing but to squeal songs, and be looked at,” Mrs Bantem said to me a little while after. “Why, Isaac Smith, we shall be having that little maid showing next that there’s something in her.”

“And why not?” I said gruffly.

“Ah, to be sure,” says she, with a comical look out of one eye; “why not? But, Isaac, my lad,” she said sadly, and looking at me very earnestly, “I’m afraid there’s sore times coming, and if so, God in heaven help those poor bairns! O, if I’d been a man, and been there!” she cried, as she recollected what the trooper had told us; and she shook her fist fiercely in the air. “It’s what I always did say: soldiers’ wives have no business to have children; and it’s rank cruelty to the poor little things to bring them into the world.”

Mrs Bantem then went off to see to her patient, while I walked into the court, wondering what would come next, and whether, in spite of all the little bitternesses and grumbling, everybody, now that the stern realities of life were coming upon us, would show up the bright side of his or her nature; and somehow I got very hopeful about it.

I felt just then that I should have much liked to have a few words with Lizzy Green, but I had no chance, for it was a busy time with us. Captain Dyer felt strongly enough his responsibility, and not a minute did he lose in doing all he could for our defence; so that after an anxious day, with nothing more occurring, when I looked round at what had been done in barricading and so on, it seemed to me, speaking as a soldier, that, as far as I could judge, there was nothing more to be done, though still the feeling would come home to me that it was a great place for forty men to defend, if attacked by any number. Captain Dyer must have seen that, for he had arranged to have a sort of citadel at the north end by the gateway, and this was to be the last refuge, where all the ammunition and food and no end of chatties of water were stowed down in the great vault-place, which went under this part of the building and a good deal of the court. Then the watch was set, trebled this time, on roof and at window, and we waited impatiently for the morning.

Yes, we all of us, I believe, waited impatiently for the morning; when I think, if we had known all that was to come, we should have knelt down and prayed for the darkness to keep on hour after hour, for days, and weeks, and months, sooner than the morning should have broke as it did upon a rabble of black faces, some over white clothes, some over the British uniform that they had disgraced; and as I, who was on the west roof, heard the first hum of their coming, and caught the first glimpse of the ragged column, I gave the alarm, setting my teeth hard as I did so; for, after many years of soldiering, I was now for the first time to see a little war in earnest.

Captain Dyer's first act on the alarm being given was to double the guard over the three blacks, now secured in the strongest room he could find, the black nurse being well looked after by the women. Then, quick almost as thought, every man was at the post already assigned to him; the women and children were brought into the corner rooms by the gates, and then we waited excitedly for what should follow. The captain now ordered me out of the little party under a sergeant, and made me his orderly; and so it happened that always being with or about him, I knew how matters were going on, and was always carrying the orders, now to Lieutenant Leigh, now to this sergeant or that corporal. At the first offset of the defence of the old place, there was a dispute between captain and lieutenant; and I'm afraid it was maintained by the last out of obstinacy, and just at a time when there should have been nothing but pulling together for the sake of all concerned. I must say, though, that there was right on both sides.

Lieutenant Leigh put it forward as his opinion that, short of men as we were, it was folly to keep four enemies under the same roof, who were likely at any time to overpower the one or two sentries placed over them; while, if there was nothing to fear in that way, there was still the shortening of our defensive forces by a couple of valuable men.

“What would you do with them, then?” said Captain Dyer.

“Set them at liberty,” said Lieutenant Leigh.

“I grant all you say, in the first place,” said the captain; “but our retaining them is a sheer necessity.”

“Why?” said Lieutenant Leigh with a sneer. And I must say that at first I held with him.

“Because,” said the captain sternly, “if we set them at liberty, we increase our enemies' power, not merely with three men, but with scoundrels who can give them the fullest information of our defences, over and above that of which I am afraid they are already possessed. The matter will not bear farther discussion. – Lieutenant Leigh, go now to your post, and do your duty to the best of your power.”

Lieutenant Leigh did not like this, and he frowned; but Captain Dyer was his superior officer, and it was his duty to obey; so of course he did.

Now, our position was such, that, say, a hundred men with a field-piece could have knocked a wing in, and then carried us by assault with ease; but though our enemies were full two hundred and fifty, and many of them drilled soldiers – pieces, you may say, of a great machine – fortunately for us, there was no one to put that machine together and set it in motion. We soon found that out; for, instead of making the best of things, and taking possession of buildings – sheds and huts – here and there, from which to annoy us, they came up in a mob to the gate, and one fellow on a horse – a native chief, he seemed to be – gave his sword a wave, and half-a-dozen sowars round him did the same, and then they called to us to surrender.

Captain Dyer's orders were to act entirely on the defensive, and to fire no shot till we had orders, leaving them to commence hostilities.

“For,” said he, speaking to all the men, “it may be a cowardly policy with such a mutinous set in front of us; but we have the women and children to think of; therefore, our duty is to hold the foe at bay, and when we do fire, to make every shot tell. Beating them off is, I fear, impossible; but we may keep them out till help comes.”

“Wouldn't it be advisable, sir, to try and send off another despatch?” I said. “There's the trooper's horse.”

“Where?” said Captain Dyer with a smile. “That has already been thought of, Smith; and Sergeant Jones, the only good horseman we have, went off at two o'clock, and by this time is, I hope, out of danger. – Good heavens! what does that mean?” he said, using his glass.

It was curious that I should have thought of such a thing just then, at a time when four sowars led up Sergeant Jones tied by a piece of rope to one of their saddle-bows, while the trooper's horse was behind.

Captain Dyer would not show, though, that he was put out by the failure of that hope; he only passed the word for the men to stand firm, and then sent me with a message to Mrs Colonel Maine, requesting that every one might keep right away from the windows, as the enemy might open fire at any time.

He was quite right; for just as I knocked at Mrs Maine's door, a regular squandering scattering fire began, and you could hear the bullets striking the wall with a sharp pat, bringing down showers of white lime-dust and powdered stone.

I found Mrs Maine seated on the floor with her children, pale and trembling, the little things the while laughing and playing over some pictures. Miss Ross was leaning over her sister, and Lizzy Green was waiting to give the children something else when they were tired of the pictures.

As the rattle of the musketry began, it was soon plain enough to see who had the stoutest hearts; but I seemed to be noticing nothing, though I did a great deal, and listened to Mrs Bantem's voice in the next room, bullying and scolding a woman for crying out loud and upsetting everybody else.

I gave my message; and then Miss Ross asked me if any one was hurt, to which I answered as cheerfully as could be that we were all right as yet; and then, taking myself off, Lizzy Green came with me to the door, and I held out my hand to say good-bye; for I knew it was possible I might never see her again. She gave me her hand, and said “Good bye,” in a faltering sort of way, and it seemed to me that she shrank from me. The next instant, though, there was the rattling crash of the firing, and I knew now that our men were answering.

Story 1-Chapter XII

As I went down into the courtyard, I found the smoke rising in puffs as our men fired over the breastwork at the mob coming at the gate; Captain Dyer in the thick of it the while, going from man to man, warning them to keep themselves out of sight, and to aim low.

“Take care of yourselves, my lads. I value every one of you at a hundred of those black scoundrels. Tut, tut! whose that down?”

“Corporal Bray,” says some one.

“Here, Emson, Smith, both of you lend a hand here. We’ll make Bantem’s quarters hospital. – Now then, look alive, ambulance party!”

We were about lifting the poor fellow, who had sunk down behind the breastwork, all doubled up like, hands and knees, and head hanging; but as we touched him, he straightened himself out, and looked up at Captain Dyer.

“Don’t touch me yet,” he says in a whisper. “My stripes for some one, captain. Do for Isaac Smith there. Hooray!” he says faintly, and he took off his cap with one hand, gave it a bit of a wave, “God save the Quee – ”

“Bear him carefully to the empty ground-floor, south side,” says Captain Dyer sternly; “and make haste back, my lads: moments are precious.”

“I’ll do that with private Manning’s wife,” says a voice; and, turning as we were going to lift our dead comrade, there was big strapping Mrs Bantem, and another soldier’s wife; and she then said a few words to the captain.

“Gone?” says Captain Dyer.

“Quarter of an hour ago, sir,” says Mrs Bantem; and then to me: “Poor trooper, Isaac!”

“Another man here,” says Captain Dyer. – “No, not you, Smith. – Fill up here, Bantem.”

Joe Bantem waved his hand to his wife, and took the dead corporal’s place; but not easily, for Measles, who was next man, was stepping into it, when Captain Dyer ordered him back.

“But there’s such a much better chance of dropping one of them mounted chaps, sir,” says Measles grumbling.

“Hold your tongue, sir, and go back to your own loophole,” says Captain Dyer; and the way that Measles kept on loading and firing, ramming down his cartridges viciously, and then taking long and careful aim – ah, and with good effect, too! – was a sight to see.

All the while we were expecting an assault; but none came; for the mutineers fell fast, and did not seem to dare to make a rush while we kept up such practice.

Then I had to go round and ask Lieutenant Leigh to send six more men to the gate, and to bring news of what was going on round the other sides.

I found the lieutenant standing at the window where I caught Chunder; and there was a man each at all the other four little windows which looked down at the outside – all the others, as I have said, looking in upon the court.

The lieutenant’s men had a shot now and then at any one who approached; but the mutineers seemed to have determined upon forcing the gate, and, so far as I could see, there was very little danger to fear from any other quarter.

I knew Lieutenant Leigh was not a coward; but he seemed very half-hearted over the defence, doing his duty, but in a sullen sort of way; and, of course, that was because he wanted to take the lead now held by Captain Dyer; and perhaps it was misjudging him, but I’m afraid just at that time he’d have been very glad if a shot had dropped his rival, and he could have stepped into his place.

Captain Dyer’s plan to keep the rabble at bay till help could come, was, of course, quite right; and that night it was an understood thing that another attempt should be made to send a messenger to Wallahbad, another of our corporals being selected for the dangerous mission.

The fighting was kept on in an on-and-off way till evening, we losing several men, but a good many falling on the other side, which made them more cautious, and not once did we have a chance of touching a man with the bayonet. Some of our men grumbled a little at this, saying that it was very hard to stand there hour after hour to be shot down; and could they have done as they liked, they'd have made a sally.

Then came the night, and a short consultation between the captain and Lieutenant Leigh. The mutineers had ceased firing at sundown, and we were in hopes that there would be a rest till daylight; but all the same the strictest watch was kept, and only half the men lay down at a time.

Half the night, though, had not passed, when a hand was laid upon my shoulder; and in an instant I was up, piece in hand, to find that it was Captain Dyer.

"Come here," he said quietly; and following him into the room underneath where the women were placed, he told me to listen; and I did, to hear a low, grating, tearing noise, as of something scraping on stone. "That's been going on," he said, "for a good hour, and I can't make it out, Smith."

"Prisoners escaping," I said quietly.

"But they are not so near as that. They were confined in the next room but one," he said in a whisper.

"Broke through, then," I said.

Then we went – Captain Dyer and I – quietly up on to the roof, answered the challenge, and then walked to the edge, where, leaning over, we could hear the doll grating noise once more; then a stone seemed to fall out on to the sandy way by the palace walls.

It was all plain enough: they had broken through from one room to another, where there was a window no bigger than a loophole, and they were widening this.

"Quick here, sentry," says the captain.

The next minute the sentry hurried up, and we had a man posted as nearly over the window as we could guess; and then I had my orders in a minute:

"Take two men and the sentry at their door, rush in, and secure them at once. But if they have got out, join Sergeant Williams, and follow me to act as reserve; for I am going to make a sally by the gate to stop them from the outside."

I roused Harry Lant and Measles, and they were with me in an instant. We passed a couple of sentries, and gave the countersign, and then mounted to the long stone passage which led to where the prisoners had been placed.

As we three privates neared the door, the sentry there challenged; but when we came up to him and listened, there was not a sound to be heard; neither had he heard anything, he said. The next minute the door was thrown open, and we found an empty room; but a hole in the wall showed us which way the prisoners had gone.

We none of us much liked the idea of going through that hole to be taken at a disadvantage; but duty was duty, and, running forward, I made a bold thrust through with my piece in two or three directions; then I crept through; followed by Harry Lant, and found that room empty too; but they had not gone by the doorway which led into the women's part, but enlarged the window, and dropped down, leaving a large opening – one that, if we had not detected it then, would no doubt have done nicely for the entrance of a strong party of enemies.

"Sentry here," I said; and leaving the man at the window, followed by Harry Lant and Measles, I ran back, got down to the courtyard, crossed to where Sergeant Williams with half a dozen men waited our coming, and then we were passed through the gate, and went along at the double to where we could hear noise and shouting.

We had the narrow alley to go through – the one I have before mentioned as being between the place we had strengthened and the next building; and no sooner were we at the end, than we found we were none too soon; for there, in the dim starlight, we could see Captain Dyer and four

men surrounded by a good score, howling and cutting at them like so many demons, and plainly to be seen by their white calico things.

“By your left, my lads, shoulder to shoulder – double!” says the sergeant.

Then we gave a cheer, and with hearts bounding with excitement, down we rushed upon the scoundrels to give them their first taste of the bayonet, cutting Captain Dyer and two more men out, just as the other two went down.

It was as fierce a fight that, as it was short; for we soon found the alarm spread, and enemies running up on all sides. It was bayonet-drill then; and well we showed the practice, till we retired slowly to the entrance of the alley; but the pattering of feet and cries told that there were more coming to meet us that way; when, following Captain Dyer’s orders, we retreated in good form in the other direction, so as to get round to the gate by the alley, on the south side.

And now for the first time we gave them a volley, checking the advance for a few seconds, while we retreated loading, to turn again, and give them another volley, which checked them once more; but only for a few seconds, when they came down upon us like a swarm of bees, right upon our bayonets; and as fast as half-a-dozen fell, half-a-dozen more were leaping upon the steel.

We kept our line, though, one and all, retiring in good order to the mouth of the second court, which ran down by the south side of the palace; when, as if maddened at the idea of losing us, a whole host of them came at us with a rush, breaking our line, and driving us anyhow, mixed up together, down the alley, which was dark as pitch; but not so dark but that we could make out a turban or a calico cloth; and those bayonets of ours were used to some purpose.

Half-a-dozen times over I heard the captain’s voice cheering us on, and shouting, “Gate, gate!” Then I saw the flash of his sword once, and managed to pin a fellow who was making at him, just as we got out at the other end with a fierce rush. Directly after I heard the captain shout “Rally!” and saw him wave his sword; and then I don’t recollect any more; for it was one wild fierce scuffle – stab and thrust in the midst of a surging, howling, maddened mob, forcing us towards the gateway.

I thought it was all over with us, when there came a cheer, and the gate was thrown open, a dozen men formed, and charged down, driving the niggers back like sheep; and then, somehow or another, we were cut out, and, under cover of the new-comers, reached the gate.

A ringing volley was then given into the thick of the mutineers as they came pouring on again; but the next minute all were safely inside, and the gate was thrust to and barred; and, panting and bleeding, we stood, six of us, trying to get our breath.

“This wouldn’t have happened,” says a voice, “if my advice had been taken. I wish the black scoundrels had been shot. Where’s Captain Dyer?”

There was no answer, and a dead chill fell on me as I seemed to realise that things had come now to a bad pass.

“Where’s Sergeant Williams?” said Lieutenant Leigh again; and it seemed to me that he spoke in a husky voice.

“Here!” said some one faintly; and turning, there was the sergeant seated on the ground, and supporting himself against the breastwork.

“Any one know the other men who went out on this mad sally?” says the lieutenant. “Where’s Harry Lant?” I says. There was no answer here either; and this time it was my turn to speak in a queer husky voice, as I said again, —

“Where’s Measles? I mean Sam Bigley.”

“He’s gone too, poor chap,” says some one. “No, he ain’t gone neither,” says a voice behind me; and turning, there was Measles tying a handkerchief round his head, muttering the while about some black devil. “I ain’t gone, nor I ain’t much hurt,” he growled; “and if I don’t take it out of some on ’em for this chop o’ the head, it’s a rum ’un; and that’s all I’ve got to say.”

“Load,” says Lieutenant Leigh shortly; and we loaded again, and then fired two or three volleys at the niggers as they came up towards the gate once more; when some one calls out, —

“Ain’t none of us going to make a sally party, and bring in the captain?”

“Silence, there, in the ranks!” shouts Lieutenant Leigh; and though it had a bad sound coming from him as it did, and situated as he was, no one knew better than I did how that it would have been utter madness to have gone out again; for even if he were alive, instead of bringing in Captain Dyer, now that the whole mob was roused, we should have all been cut to pieces.

It was as if in answer to the lieutenant’s order that silence seemed to fall then, both inside and outside the palace – a silence that was only broken now and then by the half-smothered groan of some poor fellow who had been hurt in the sortie – though the way in which those men of ours did bear wounds, some of them even that were positively awful, was a something worth a line in history.

Yes, there was a silence fell upon the place for the rest of that night, and I remember thinking of the wounds that had been made in two poor hearts by that bad night’s work; and I can say now, faithful and true, that there was not a selfish thought in my heart as I remembered Lizzy Green, any more than there was when Miss Ross came uppermost in my mind; for I knew well enough that they must have soon known of the disaster that had befallen our little party.

Story 1-Chapter XIII

Whatever those poor women suffered, they took care it should not be seen by us men; and, indeed, we had little time to think of them the next day. We had given ourselves the task to protect them, and we were fighting hard to do it, and that was all we could do then; for the enemy gave us but little peace – not making any savage attack, but harassing us in a cruel way, every man acting like for himself, and all the discipline the sepoys had learned seeming to be forgotten.

As for Lieutenant Leigh, he looked cold and stern; but there was no flinching with him now: he was in command, and he showed it; and though I never liked the man, I must say that he showed himself a brave and clever officer; and but for his skilful arrangement of the few men under his charge, that place would have fallen half-a-dozen times over.

We had taken no prisoners, so that there was no chance of talking of exchange; though I believe to a man all thought that the captain and files missing from our company were dead.

The women now lent us their help, bringing down spare muskets and cartridges, loading too for us; so that when the mutineers made an attack, we were able to keep up a much sharper fire than we should have done under other circumstances.

It was about the middle of the afternoon when, hot and exhausted, we were firing away; for the bullets were coming thick and fast through the gateway, flying across the yard, and making a passage in that direction nearly certain death, when I felt a strange choking feeling, for Measles says to me all at once, —

“Look there, Ike.”

I looked, and I could hardly believe it, and rubbed my eyes; for just in the thickest of the firing there was the sound of merry laughter, and those two children of the colonel’s came toddling out, right across the line of fire, turned back to look up at some one calling to them from the window, and then stood still laughing and clapping their hands.

I don’t know how it was; I only know that it wasn’t to look brave; but, dropping my piece, I rushed to catch them, just at the same moment as did Miss Ross and Lizzy Green; while directly after Lieutenant Leigh rushed from where he was, caught Miss Ross round the waist, and dragged her away, as I did Lizzy and the children.

How it happened that we were none of us hit is strange to me, for all the time the bullets were pattering on the wall beyond us. I only know I turned sick and faint as I just said to Lizzy, “Thank God for that!” and she led off the children, Miss Ross shrinking from Lieutenant Leigh with a strange mistrustful look, as if she were afraid of him; and the next minute they were under cover, and we were back at our posts.

“Poor bairns!” says Measles to me; “I ain’t often glad of anything, Ike Smith; but I am glad they ain’t hurt. Now my soul seemed to run and help them myself, but my legs were just as if they couldn’t move. You need not believe it without you like,” he added in his sour way.

“But I do believe it, old fellow,” I said warmly, as I held out my hand. “Chaff’s chaff; but you never knew me make light of a good act done by a true-hearted comrade.”

“All right,” says Measles gruffly. “Now see me pot that sowar. Missed him, by Jove!” he exclaimed as soon as he had fired. “These pieces ain’t true. No – hit him – he’s down! That’s one bairn-killer the less.”

“Sam,” I said just then, “what’s that coming up between the huts yonder?”

“Looks like a wagin,” says Measles. “’Tis a wagin, ain’t it?”

“No,” I said, feeling that miserable I didn’t know what to do; “it isn’t a wagon, Sam; but – why, there’s another – a couple of field-pieces!”

“Nine-pounders, by all that’s unlucky!” said Measles, slapping his thigh. “Then I tell you what it is, Ike Smith – it’s about time we said our prayers.”

I didn't answer, for the words would not come but it was what had always been my dread, and it seemed now that the end was very near.

Troubles were coming upon us thick; for being relieved a short time after, to go and have some tea that Mrs Bantem had got ready, I saw something that made me stop short and think of where we should be if the water supply was run out; for though we had the chatties down below in the vault under the north end, we wanted what there was in the tank, while there was Nabob, the great elephant, drawing it up in his trunk, and cooling himself by squirting it all over his back.

I went to Lieutenant Leigh, and pointed it out to him; and the great beast was led away; when, there being nothing else for it, we opened a way through our breastwork, watched an opportunity, threw open the gate, and he marched out right straight in amongst the mutineers, who cheered loudly, after their fashion, as he came up to them.

There was no more firing in that night; and taking it in turns, we some of us had a sleep, I among the rest, all dressed as I was, and with my gun in my hand, ready for use at a moment's notice; and I remember thinking what a deal depended on the sentries, and how thoroughly our lives were in their hands; and then my next thought was of how was it possible for it to be morning, for I had only seemed to close my eyes, and then open them again on the light of day.

But morning it was; and with a dull dead feeling of misery upon me, I got up and gave myself a shake, ran the ramrod down my piece, to see that it was charged all right, looked to the cap, and then once more prepared for the continuation of the struggle, low-spirited and disheartened, but thankful for the bit of refreshing rest I had had.

A couple of hours passed, and there was no movement on the part of the enemy; the ladies never stirred, but we could hear the children laughing and playing about; and how one did seem to envy the little light-hearted thoughtless things! But my thoughts were soon turned into another direction; for Lieutenant Leigh ordered me up into one of the rooms commanding the gateway, and looking out on the square where the guns were standing, and came up with me himself.

"You'll have a good lookout from here, Smith," he said; "and being a good shot –"

He didn't say any more, for he was, like me, taken up with the movement in the square – a lot of the mutineers running the two guns forward in front of the gate, and then closing round them, so that we could not see what was going on; but we knew well enough that they were charging them, and there seemed nothing for it but to let them fire, unless by a bold sally we could get out and spike them.

Just then Lieutenant Leigh looked at me, and I at him; when, touching my cap in salute, I said, "Two good nails, sir, and a tap on each, would do it."

"Yes, Smith," he said grimly; "but who is to drive those two nails home?"

I didn't answer him for a minute, I should say, for I was thinking over matters about life, and about Lizzy; and now that Harry Lant was gone, it seemed to me that there might be a chance for me; but still duty was duty, and if men could not in such a desperate time as this risk something, what was the good of soldiers?

"I'll drive 'em home, sir," I says then quietly, "or they shall drive me home!"

He looked at me for an instant, and then nodded.

"I'll get the men ready," he says; "it's our only chance, and with a bold dash we may do it. I'll send to the armourer's chest for hammers and spikes. I'll spike one, Smith, and you the other; but mind, if I fail, help me, as I will you if you fail; and God help us! Keep a sharp look-out till I come back."

He left the room, and I heard a little movement below, as of the men getting ready for the sally; and all the while I stood watching the crowd in front, which now began hurraing and cheering; and there was a motion which showed that the guns were being run in nearer, till they stopped about fifty yards from the gate.

"What makes him so long?" I thought, trembling with excitement; "another minute, perhaps, and the gate will be battered down, and that mob rushing in."

Then I thought that we ought, all who escaped from the sortie, in case of failure, to be ready to take to the rooms adjoining where I was, which would be our last hope; and then I almost dropped my piece, my mouth grew dry, and I seemed choked; for with a loud howl the crowd opened out, and I saw a sight that made my blood run cold: those two nine-pounders standing with a man by each breech, smoking linstock in hand; while bound with their backs against the muzzles, and their white faces towards us, were Captain Dyer and Harry Lant!

One spark – one touch of the linstock on the breech – and those two brave fellows would be blown to atoms; and as I expected that every moment such would be the case, my knees knocked together; but the next moment I was down on those shaking knees, my piece made ready, and a good aim taken, so that I could have dropped one of the gunners before he was able to fire.

I hesitated for a moment before I made up my mind which to try and save; and the thought of Lizzy Green came in my mind, and I said to myself, “I love her too well to cause her pain,” when, giving up Captain Dyer, I aimed at the gunner by poor Harry Lant.

“Don’t fire!” said a voice just then; and turning, there was Lieutenant Leigh. “The black-hearted wretches!” he muttered. “But we are all ready; though now, if we start, it will be the signal for the death of those two. But what does this mean?”

What made him say that was a chief, all in shawls, who rode forward and shouted out in good English that they gave us one hour to surrender; but at the end of that time, if we had not marched out without arms, they would blow their prisoners away from the mouth of the guns.

Then, for fear we had not heard it, he spurred his horse up to within ten yards of the gate, and shouted it out again, so that every one could hear through the place; and though I could have sent a bullet through and through him, I could not help admiring the bold daring fellow, riding up right to the muzzles of our pieces.

But all the admiration I felt was gone the next moment, as I thought of the cruelties practised, and of those bound there to the gun-muzzles.

There was nothing said for a few minutes, for I expected the lieutenant to speak; but as he did not, I turned to him and said, —

“If all was ready, sir, I could drop one gunner; and I’d trust Measles – Sam Bigley – to drop the other, when a bold dash might do it. You see, they’ve retired a good thirty yards, and we should only have twenty more to run than they; while the surprise would give us that start. A good sharp jack-knife would set the prisoners free, and a covering-party would perhaps check the pursuit while we got in.”

“We shall have to try it, Smith,” he said, his breath coming thick and fast with excitement; and then he seemed to turn white, for Miss Ross and Lizzy came into the room.

Story 1-Chapter XIV

I should think it must have been the devil tempting Lieutenant Leigh, or he would never have done as he did; for, as he looked at Miss Ross, the change that came over him was quite startling. He could read all that was passing in her heart; there was no need for her to lay her hand upon his arm, and point with the other out of the window, as in a voice that I didn't know for hers she said, —

“Will you leave those two brave men there to die, Lieutenant Leigh?”

He didn't answer for a moment, but seemed to be straggling with himself; then, speaking as huskily as she did, he said, —

“Send away that girl!” And before I could go to her – for I should have done it then, I know – and whisper a few words of hope, poor Lizzy went out, mourning for Harry Lant, wringing her hands; and I stood at my post, a sentry by my commander's orders, so that it was no spying on my part if I heard what followed.

I believe Lieutenant Leigh fancied he was speaking in an undertone when he led Miss Ross away to a corner and spoke to her; but this was perhaps the most exciting moment in his life, and his voice rose in spite of himself, so that I heard all; while she, poor thing, I believe, forgot all about my presence; and, as a sentry – a machine almost – placed there, what right had I to speak?

“Will you leave him?” said Miss Ross again. “Will you not try to save him?”

Lieutenant Leigh did not answer for a bit; for he was making his plans; and I felt quite staggered as I saw through them.

“You see how he is placed. What can I do?” said Lieutenant Leigh. “If I go, it is the signal for firing. You see the gunners waiting. And why should I risk the lives of my men, and my own, to save him? He is a soldier, and it is the fortune of war; he must die.”

“Are you a man, or a cur?” said Miss Ross then, angrily.

“No coward,” he said fiercely; “but a poor slighted man, whom you have wronged, jilted, and ill-used; and now you come to me to save your lover's life – to give mine for it. You have robbed me of all that is pleasant between you; and now you ask more. Is it just?”

“Lieutenant Leigh, you are speaking madly. How can you be so unjust?” she cried, holding tightly by his arm; for he was turning away; while I felt mad with him for torturing the poor girl, when it was decided that the attempt was to be made.

“I am not unjust,” he said. “The hazard is too great. And what should I gain if I succeeded? Pshaw! Why, if he were saved, it would be at the expense of my own life.”

“I would die to save him!” she said hoarsely.

“I know it, Elsie; but you would not give a loving word to save me. You would send me out to my death without compunction – without a care; and yet you know how I have loved you.”

“You – you loved me, and yet stand and see my heart torn – see me suffer like, this!” cried Miss Ross, and there was something half wild in her looks as she spoke.

“Love you!” he cried; “yes, you know how I have loved you.”

His voice sank here; but he was talking in her ear excitedly, saying words that made her shrink from him up to the wall, and look at him as if he were some object of the greatest disgust.

“You can choose,” he said bitterly, as he saw her action; and he turned away from her.

The next moment she was on her knees before him, holding up her hands as if in prayer.

“Promise me,” he said, “and I will do it.”

“O, some other way – some other way!” she cried piteously, her face all drawn the while.

“As you will,” he said coldly.

“But think – O, think! You cannot expect it of me. Have mercy! O, what am I saying?”

“Saying!” he cried, catching her hands in his, and speaking excitedly and fast; “saying things that are sending him to his death. What do I offer you? Love, devotion, all that man can give. He

would, if asked now, give up all for his life; and yet you, who profess to love him so dearly, refuse to make that sacrifice for his sake! You cannot love him. If he could hear now, he would implore you to do it. Think. I risk all; most likely my life will be given for his; perhaps we shall both fall. But you refuse. Enough; I must go; I cannot stay. There are many lives here under my charge; they must not be neglected for the sake of one. As I said before, it is the fortune of war; and, poor fellow, he has but a quarter of an hour or so to live, unless help comes.”

“Unless help comes!” groaned Miss Ross frantically, when, as Lieutenant Leigh reached the door, watching me over his shoulder the while, Miss Ross went down on her knees, stretched out her hands towards where Captain Dyer was bound to the gun, and then she rose, cold and hard and stern, and turned to Lieutenant Leigh, holding out her hand. “I promise,” she said hoarsely.

“On your oath, before God?” he exclaimed joyfully, as he caught her in his arms.

“As God is my judge,” she faltered with her eyes upturned; and then, as he held her to his breast, kissing her passionately, she shivered and shuddered, and, as he released her, sank in a heap on the floor.

“Smith,” cried Lieutenant Leigh, “right face – forward!” And as I passed Miss Ross, I heard her sob, in a tone I shall never forget, “O, Lawrence, Lawrence!” and then a groan tore from her breast, and I heard no more.

Story 1-Chapter XV

“This is contrary to rule. As commandant, I ought to stay in the fort; but I’ve no one to give the leadership to; so I take it myself,” said Lieutenant Leigh. “And now, my lads, make ready – present! That’s well. Are all ready? At the word ‘Fire!’ privates Bigley and Smith fire at the two gunners. If they miss, I cry fire again, and privates Bantem and Grainger try their skill; then, at the double, down on the guns. Smith and I spike them, while Bantem and Grainger cut the cords. Mind this: those guns must be spiked, and those two prisoners brought in; and if the sortie is well managed, it is easy; for they will be taken by surprise. Hush! Confound it, men, no cheering!”

He only spoke in time; for in the excitement the men were about to hurray.

“Now, then, is that gate unbarred?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Is the covering-party ready?”

“Yes, sir.”

My hand trembled as he spoke; but the next instant it was of a piece with my gunstock. There was the hot square, with the sun shining on the two guns that must have been hot behind the poor prisoners; there, too, stood the two gunners in white, with their smoking linstocks, leaning against the wheels; for discipline was slack; and there, thirty or forty yards behind, were the mutineers, lounging about, and smoking many of them. For all firing had ceased; and judging that we should not risk having the prisoners blown away from the guns, the mutineers came boldly up within range, as if defying us; and it was pretty safe practice at some of them now.

I saw all this at a glance, and while it seemed as if the order would never come; but come it did at last.

“Fire!”

Bang! the two rifles going off like one; and the gunner behind Captain Dyer leaped into the air; while the one I aimed at seemed to sink down suddenly beside the wheel he had leaned upon. Then the gate flew open, and with a rush and a cheer we, ten of us, raced down for the guns.

Double-quick time? I tell you it was a hard race; and being without my gun now – only my bayonet stuck in my trousers waistband – I was there first, and had driven my spike into the touch-hole before Lieutenant Leigh reached his; but the next moment his was done, the cords were cut, and the prisoners loose from the guns. But now we had to get back.

The first inkling I had of the difficulty of this was seeing Captain Dyer and Harry Lant stagger and fall forward; but they were saved by the men, and we saw directly that they must be carried.

No sooner thought of than done.

“Hoist Harry on my back,” says Grainger; and he took him like a sack; Bantem acting the same part by Captain Dyer; and those two ran off, while we tried to cover them.

For don’t you imagine that the mutineers were idle all this while; not a bit of it. They were completely taken by surprise, though, at first, and gave us time nearly to get to the guns before they could understand what we meant; but the next moment some shouted and ran at us, and some began firing; while by the time the prisoners were cast loose, they were down upon us in a hand-to-hand fight.

You see in those fierce struggles there is such excitement, that, for my part, I’ve but a very misty recollection of what took place; but I do recollect seeing the prisoners well on the way back, hearing a cheer from our men, and then, hammer in one hand, bayonet in the other, fighting my way backward along with my comrades. Then all at once a glittering flash came in the air, and I felt a dull cut on the face, followed directly after by another strange numbing blow, which made me drop my bayonet, as my arm fell uselessly to my side; and then with a lurch and a stagger I fell, and was trampled upon twice, when, as I rallied once, a black savage-looking sepoy raised his clubbed musket

to knock out my brains; but a voice I well knew cried, "Not this time, my fine fellow. That's number three, that is, and well home;" and I saw Measles drive his bayonet with a crash through the fellow's breast-bone, so that he fell across my legs.

"Now, old chap, come along," he shouts, and an arm was passed under me.

"Run, Measles, run!" I said as well as I could. "It's all over with me."

"No, 'taint," he said; "and don't be a fool. Let me do as I like, for once in a way."

I don't know how he did it, nor how, feeling sick and faint as I did, I managed to get on my legs; but old Measles stuck to me like a true comrade, and brought me in. For one moment I was struggling to my feet; and the next, after what seemed a deal of firing going over my head, I was inside the breastwork, listening to our men cheering and firing away, as the mutineers came howling and raging up almost to the very gates.

"All in?" I heard Lieutenant Leigh ask.

"To a man, sir," says some one; "but private Bantem is hurt."

"Hold your tongue, will you!" says Joe Bantem. "I ain't killed, nor yet half. How would you like your wife frightened if you had one?"

"How's private Lant?"

"Cut to pieces, sir," says some one softly.

"I'm thankful that you are not wounded, Captain, Dyer," then says Lieutenant Leigh.

"God bless you, Leigh!" says the captain faintly. "It was a brave act. I've only a scratch or two when I can get over the numbness of my limbs."

I heard all this in a dim sort of fashion, just as if it was a dream in the early morning; for I was leaning up against the wall, with my face laid open and bleeding, and my left arm smashed by a bullet; and nobody just then took any notice of me, because they were carrying in Captain Dyer and Harry Lant; while the next minute the fire was going on hard and fast; for the mutineers were furious; and I suppose they danced round the guns in a way that showed how mad they were about the spiking.

As for me, I did not seem to be in a great deal of pain; but I got turning over in my mind how well we had done it that morning; and I felt proud of it all, and glad that Captain Dyer and Harry Lant were brought in; but all the same, what I had heard lay like a load upon me; and knowing, as I did, that poor Miss Ross had, as it were, sold herself to save the captain's life, and that she had, in a way of speaking, been cheated into doing so, I felt that, when the opportunity came, I must tell the captain all I knew. When I had got so far as that with my thoughts, the dull numbness began to leave me, and everything else was driven out of my mind by the thought of my wound; and I got asking myself whether it was going to be very bad; for I fancied it was; so getting up a little, I began to crawl along in the shade towards the ruined south end of the palace, nobody seeming to notice me.

Story 1-Chapter XVI

I dare say you who read this don't know what the sensation is of having one arm-bone shivered, and the dead limb swinging helplessly about in your sleeve, whilst a great miserable sensation comes over you that you are of no more use – that you are only a broken pitcher, fit to hold water no more, but only to be smashed up to mend the road with. There were all those women and children wanting my help, and the help of hundreds more such as me; and instead of being of use, I knew that I must be a miserable burden to everybody, and only in the way.

Now, whether man – as some of the great philosophers say – did gradually get developed from the beast of the field, I'm not going to pretend to know; but what I do know is this – that leave him in his natural state, and when he, for some reason or an other, forgets all that has been taught him, he seems very much like an animal, and acts as such.

It was something after this fashion with me then: for feeling like a poor brute out of a herd that has been shot by the hunters, I did just the same as it would – crawled away to find a place where I might hide myself, and lie down and die.

You'll laugh, I daresay, when I tell you my sensations just then; and I'm ready to laugh at them now myself; for, in the midst of my pain and suffering, it came to me that I felt precisely as I did when I was a young shaver of ten years old. One Sunday afternoon, when everybody but mother and me had gone to church, and she had fallen asleep, I got father's big clay-pipe, rammed it full of tobacco out of his great lead box, and then took it into the back kitchen, feeling as grand as a churchwarden, and set to and smoked it till I turned giddy and faint, and the place seemed swimming about me.

Now, that was just how I felt when I crawled about in that place, trying not to meet anybody, lest the women should see me all covered with blood; and at last I got, as I thought, into a room where I should be all alone.

I say I crawled; and that's what I did do, on one hand and my knees, the fingers of my broken arm trailing over the white marble floor, with each finger making a horrible red mark, when all at once I stopped, drew myself up stiffly, and leaned trembling and dizzy against the wall, trying hard not to faint; for I found that I wasn't alone, and that in place of getting away – crawling into some hole to lie down and die, I was that low-spirited and weak – I had come to a place where one of the women was, for there, upon her knees, was Lizzy Green, sobbing and crying, and tossing her hands about in the agony of her poor heart.

I was misty and faint and confused, you know; but perhaps it was something like instinct made me crawl to Lizzie's favourite place; for it was not intended. She did not see me, for her back was my way; and I did not mean her to know I was there; for in spite of my giddiness, I seemed to feel that she had learned all the news about our attempt, and that she was crying about poor Harry Lant.

“And he deserves to be cried for, poor chap,” I said to myself, for I forgot all about my own pains then; but all the same something very dark and bitter came over me, as I wished that she had been crying instead for poor me.

“But then he was always so bright, and merry, and clever,” I thought, “and just the man who would make his way with a woman; while I – Please God, let me die now!” I whispered very softly directly after, “for I'm only a poor, broken, helpless object, in everybody's way!”

It seemed just then as if the hot weak tears that came running out of my eyes made me clearer, and better able to hear all that the sobbing girl said, as I leaned closer and closer to the wall; while, as to the sharp pain every word she said gave me, the dull dead aching of my broken arm was nothing.

“Why – why did they let him go?” the poor girl sobbed; “as if there were not enough to be killed without him; and him so brave, and stout, and handsome, and true. My poor heart's broken! What shall I do?”

Then she sobbed again; and I remember thinking that unless some help came, if poor Harry Lant died of his wounds, she would soon go to join him in that land where there is to be no more suffering and pain.

Then I listened, for she was speaking again.

“If I could only have died for him, or been with, or – O, what have I done, that I should be made to suffer so?”

I remember wondering whether she was suffering more than I was; for, in spite of my jealous despairing feeling, there was something of sorrow mixed up with it for her.

For she had always seemed to like poor Harry’s merry ways, when I never could get a smile from her; and she’d go and sit with Mrs Bantem for long enough when Harry was there, while if by chance I went, it seemed like the signal for her to get up, and say her young lady wanted her, when most likely Harry would walk back with her; and I went and told it all to my pipe.

“If he’d only known how I’d loved him,” she sobbed again, “he’d have said one kind word to me before he went, have kissed me, perhaps, once; but no, not a look nor a sign! Oh! Isaac, Isaac! I shall never see you more!”

What – what? What was it choking me? What was it that sent what blood I had left gushing up in a dizzy cloud over my eyes, so that I could only gasp out once the one word “Lizzy!” as I started to my feet, and stood staring at her in a helpless, half-blind fashion; for it seemed as though I had been mistaken, and that it was possible after all that she had been crying for me, believing me to be dead; but the next moment I was shrinking away from her, hiding my wounded face with my hand for fear she should see it, for leaping up, hot and flush-cheeked, and with those eyes of hers flashing at me, she was at my side with a bound.

“You cowardly, cruel, bad fellow!” she half-shrieked; “how dare you stand in that mean deceitful way, listening to my words? O, that I should be such a weak fool, with a stupid, blabbing, chattering tongue, to keep on kneeling and crying there, telling lies, every one of them, and – Get away with you!”

I think it was a smile that was on my face then, as she gave me a fierce thrust on the wounded arm, when I staggered towards her. I know the pain was as if a red-hot hand had grasped me; but I smiled all the same, and then, as I fell, I heard her cry out two words, in a wild agonised way, that went right to my heart, making it leap before all was blank; for I knew that those words meant that, in spite of all my doubts, I was loved.

“O Isaac!” she cried, in a wild frightened way, and then, as I said, all was blank and dark for I don’t know how long; but I seemed to wake up to what was to me then like heaven, for my head was resting on Lizzy’s breast, and, half mad with fear and grief, she was kissing my pale face again and again.

“Try – try to forgive me for being so cruel, so unfeeling,” she sobbed; and then for a moment, as she saw me smile, she was about to fly out again, fierce-like, at having betrayed herself, and let me know how she loved me. Even in those few minutes I could read it all: how her passionate little heart was fighting against discipline, and how angry she was with herself; but I saw it all pass away directly, as she looked down at my bleeding face, and eagerly asked me if I was very much hurt.

I tried to answer, but I could not; for the same deathly feeling of sickness came on again, and I saw nothing.

I suppose, though, it only lasted a few minutes, for I woke like again to hear a panting hard breathing, as of some one using great exertion, and then I felt that I was being moved; but, for the life of me, for a few moments I could not make it out, till I heard the faint buzz of voices, when I found that Lizzy, the little fierce girl, who seemed to be as nothing beside me, was actually, in her excitement, carrying me to where she could get help, struggling along, panting, a few feet at a time, beneath my weight, and me too helpless and weak to say a word.

“Good heavens! look!” I heard some one say the next moment, and I think it was Miss Ross; but it was some hours before I came to myself again enough to find that I was lying with a rolled-up cloak under my head, and Lizzy bathing my lips from time to time, with what I afterwards learned was her share of the water.

But what struck me most now was the way in which she was altered; her sharp, angry way was gone, and she seemed to be changed into a soft gentle woman, without a single flirty way or thought, but always ready to flinch and shrink away until she saw how it troubled me, when she'd creep back to kneel down by my side, and put her little hand in mine; when, to make the same comparison again that I made before, I tell you that there, in that besieged and ruined place, half starved, choked with thirst, and surrounded by a set of demons thirsting for our blood – I tell you that it seemed to me like being in heaven.

Story 1-Chapter XVII

I don't know how time passed then; but the next thing I remember is listening to the firing for a while, and then, leaning on Lizzy, being helped to the women's quarters, where, in spite of all they could do, those children would keep escaping from their mother to get to Harry Lant, who lay close to me, poor fellow, smiling and looking happy whenever they came near him; and I smiled, too, and felt as happy, when Lizzy, after tending me with Mrs Bantem as long as was necessary, got bathing Harry's forehead with water and moistening his lips.

"Poor fellow," I thought, "it will do him good;" and I lay watching Lizzy moving about afterwards, and then I think I must have gone to sleep, or have fallen into a dull numb state, from which I was wakened by a voice I knew; and opening my eyes, I saw that Miss Ross, pale and scared-looking, was on her knees by the side of Harry Lant, and that Captain Dyer was there.

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