

shrunk into herself; but when she had risen to go away, Stephen thrust a little packet into her hand. "Read it when you go home," he said. It was his little dissenting magazine, the insignificant brochure which she would have scorned so in the old days. With

what tears, with what swelling of her heart, with what an agony of pride and love and sorrow she read it that night!

And so the old house was closed, and the old life ended. Henceforward, everything that awaited her was cold and sad and new.

HOW A FORT DITCH WAS PLUMBED.

An Episode in an Indian Campaign.

DURING an Indian campaign, about a quarter of a century ago, it was necessary to take a very strongly fortified city. The name need not be given. Some of the allusions in the following story will probably enable those conversant with recent Indian history to identify it.

The city held a commanding position; planted on the only knoll of high ground in the district, it was visible for miles around. The massive mud walls of the city,—and with the old-fashioned siege trains they were the hardest to batter down,—heavily mounted with guns, many of which bore the stamp of European manufacture, frowned defiance far and wide; while high above the rest, and most defiant of all, rose the *enceinte*, the fort itself. Many a siege had it withstood, and it still boasted of being one of the fast-decreasing number of "maiden forts of Hindostan." The surrounding country was very arid, bordering on desert, with scarcely a tree of any growth, beyond some conspicuous avenues of palms, exotics here, which a former chief had introduced. One of the old, broad, classic rivers of India flowed near, and supplied the water for the ditch or moat, with which the whole city was surrounded. The besieging camp was on the whole well placed, and had been favoured with more than an average of healthiness; for, as a rule, in India verdure and health are found in inverse proportions. Still so large a force as was now hurriedly gathered together here, though free from any strong local provocatives to disease, could not long show a clean bill of health. The hillmen of the frontier were beginning to droop, as they sighed for the more bracing air of their native heights. The Hindostanis, despite all the sanitary precautions of the quarter-master-general's department, showed signs of failing strength and heart; and the European part of the force were daily giving in increasing sick returns. Time pressed, for the sake of the troops—and for other reasons; the surround-

ing country was becoming disturbed, while the more remote districts, denuded of troops, who had been all wanted for the siege, were growing restless. The city *must fall*. England's honour must be vindicated speedily; the blood of the two brave young Englishmen, the representatives of their country, who had been cruelly done to death beside its walls, must be avenged without further delay.

Impatience had now begun to show itself in camp. Weary of the protracted siege, with its monotonous duties of systematic investment; the men were eager for the excitement of the crowning assault; and it was generally considered to be close at hand. Spies had reported that disease and famine were daily claiming their victims by hundreds in the city,—that desertions were of nightly occurrence. They could not hold out much longer; yet it would be no bloodless achievement. The enemy knew that they deserved no mercy, they expected no quarter, and they meant to sell their lives dearly. All this was generally known in camp; and it only made men the more eager for the end.

The city walls had been fast crumbling away under the pounding of our siege guns, and would offer no great difficulties. But then the real work of the day would begin. However easily they might be mounted, the fort, which stood out in an extreme corner, would still remain to be gained. It was the stronghold of the besieged; here they would make their last stand. To reach it would be a march of death to many. They would have to fight their way foot by foot; and of all fighting street-fighting in an old Indian city is the most deadly. Every roof, every window, every loop-hole in the walls has its matchlock-men, where, under cover, they can pick off their enemy calmly, and with unerring aim; while the fort guns, which always command the city itself, as a precaution against

an *emcute*, as well as the glacis against an attack from without, would sweep down the long narrow streets, and hundreds of brave fellows fall without being able to strike a blow in fair fight. This, too, was well known in camp, and the general hope was that, while feints might be made at different points on the city walls, the grand assault would be on the fort itself, on its water-face; for the main ditch ran under its very walls.

While the camp was in this state of excitement and impatience, and everything indicated that the assault would be made within a week at furthest, one evening there was the usual gathering of officers in the artillery mess-tent, which, as a rule, included those of the engineer corps, who were too few in number to establish a mess of their own. It happened that the old brigadier-general, and the chief engineer, were both present. Naturally, the coming assault was the topic of conversation. On the faces of the elder men the glow of hope for success and for honourable mention in General Orders, was perceptibly subdued by the thought of absent dear ones, whose future for weal or woe hung on the results of that assault; while among the youngsters light-hearted enthusiasm seemed to hold unbroken sway.

In the course of the conversation there passed some remarks, loud enough to reach the brigadier's ear, about the attack being made on the fort itself, as the more brilliant and the less bloody course; and all the youngsters were in favour of it. The brigadier, turning to the chief engineer, said, as though quite casually, "Well, colonel, I suppose you are prepared, whenever the order comes? All the ladders, and those sort of things, ready? By the way, do you know the exact depth of the ditch on the fort face?" "Not *exactly*," was the reply, "but, I fancy, near enough for our purpose." "I wish I knew to a foot," said the brigadier. "It might save many lives;" he added gravely. Then, looking at the young men who had been the loudest in their remarks about making the assault direct on the fort, he said, "Well, young gentlemen, I admire your zeal; but, considering that we know the ditch is much deeper opposite the fort than round the city, I can't say much for your united forethought, when not one of you has had—I will not say the pluck, for that I don't doubt—but the wit to go and plumb it."

The remark was like the bursting of a shell; nearly every man at the table felt himself hit, and hit hard.

Soon after, the party broke up and began

to disperse. A young subaltern of engineers—we will call him Norval—as he was passing a group of officers waiting at the door of the mess-tent for a few last words, was thus greeted by a young captain of artillery, named Wilson: "A pretty good wiggling all you young engineers got to-night, Norval; and I must say you deserved it." "Perhaps so," was Norval's quiet remark, as he walked away.

This was not the first sneer Captain Wilson had launched at Norval; for before coming into camp, they had been together in cantonments. A few words will explain the different characters of these two men, and their attitude towards each other. Norval was a man of mark, though he could hardly be said to be a popular man. Indeed, a natural reserve prevented this; but, his readiness to help (and his position as an engineer officer in cantonments, gave him many opportunities of helping), and his gentle, thoughtful bearing commanded regard and, young though he was, respect; while Wilson's more genial manner—for he was a first-rate companion, and the very life of a mess—made him a more general favourite among youngsters. But unhappily, Wilson's early training had been very different from Norval's. That of the latter had been precisely of the kind out of which the consistent practical Christian is the most likely to be developed; for in his early home religion had been a quiet, unpretending principle of daily life. Wilson, on the other hand, had been accustomed from childhood to the most rigid observance of religious forms, and had seen in the inner life of his home so much that was unreal and untrue, that his naturally quick, discriminating mind had grown to regard the profession of religion as an imposture. He remembered bitterly how many a hard ungrateful task had been imposed, and duty exacted, in the name of religion. He held in contempt—and he made no secret of it—all those who were supposed to be influenced by religious motives. He had the character among his acquaintances of being a scoffer, yet he was so clever, so able to hold his own in argument, and so amusing, that, in spite of what they disapproved, he was very popular among his brother officers, especially the younger ones; and to be popular was the great aim of his life. Norval recognised his abilities, but shrunk from the man who so perverted them. Wilson, again, was so utterly incapable of appreciating Norval, that he lost no opportunity of showing his dislike towards him. Norval was a first-rate cricketer, and ever ready to join in

a match, a more than average billiard player, and a keen sportsman; but, the very fact that a bet on any game, and still more an oath, was hateful to him; that he was always in his place at church, and known to take an interest in the spiritual needs of the men under him, was enough to brand him in Wilson's mind as a hypocrite, and to draw forth, whenever opportunity offered, the cutting sneer. He was Wilson's *bête noir*.

Hence arose that remark after mess on the evening already referred to. It so happened, that the rebuke of the old chief applied least of all to Norval, for he had only a few days before joined the camp, and had had plenty to do in learning the duties of his own post, and had never thought of inquiring what his seniors knew, or did not know, regarding the state of the siege.

Nevertheless, from the moment the brigadier's words were uttered, Norval made up his mind. He would wipe off the reproach. As he left the mess-tent, little heeding Wilson's words, or perhaps exulting in the thought that he would very soon give him cause to regret them, he crossed over to the lines of the European regiment which lay beyond the artillery, and, picking his way between tent-ropes or over insidious tent-pegs, to the tent on the extreme left, he there found the man he wanted, Captain Parker, who commanded the Light Company of the 10—th Regiment.

"Parker," he said, "I am bent on a little spree to-night, and I want you to join me."

"What's up now? You out on a spree! Well, yes, I'll join you; for I am very sure friend Norval will go in for no spree, as he calls it, in which I should be ashamed to join him."

"Well, look here, old fellow, just now at mess the old brigadier startled us all by asking us, as we were crying so loud for an assault on the fort, whether we knew the exact depth of the ditch on that side. And to our shame be it said, not a man had ever thought of it. I can't take much blame to myself, because I have so lately joined; but I should like, for the fun of the thing, to go and take soundings, as my old father the commodore would say, and present it to the old boy before he turns in for the night. Will you come and help me?"

"Will I not? When do you go?"

"Well, we ought to have some fellows with us in case of a scrimmage; for we may have to fight our way back. So, if you can bring half a dozen of your best "Lights," I should be glad. I needn't say, don't bring drunkards; but bring clear-headed fellows—

men who don't fancy they require a tot of grog to brace up their pluck, forgetting that it muddles their brains. We must have men who have brains and pluck at command."

"All right," said Parker; "you shall have the best I can give; men in whose hands I can trust my own life, and yours too, if need be."

"Then let us meet at the battery on the extreme left of our lines—that will bring us pretty straight in front of the fort. Now I'll go and arrange with old Jones, who is field officer, and get him to let us pass the sentries. It's past eight now; the moon won't be up till nearly one, and, luckily for us, it's the dark side of the moon, as a native would say, so it will be all the darker and better for us. If we start at ten, we shall be back—if we ever do get back—before the moon rises."

"So be it—ten, sharp."

They parted. Parker went to think over his company, and pick the men he thought would be the most reliable for such a venture. Success was of vital importance; for he knew that nothing but success would justify such a step without orders, and save him perhaps from a court-martial. Norval at once proceeded to find Major Jones, and talk him into letting them pass; which was no easy matter, for the old man, personally as brave as any of them, had a provokingly strong regard for "Rules and Regulations," and had no fancy for being privy to hair-brained adventures. He was, however, won over, and consented. "Remember, Norval, it may cost me my commission, if you chance to come to grief; yet for your sake I'll run the risk."

That settled, Norval had much to do, and not much over the hour to do it in. His habits of ready resource now stood him in good stead; he had at once grasped the idea, and soon formed his plans. He was an enthusiastic angler; and knowing that while the force had been lying so many weeks before the fort, they had had many a day's good fishing in the old classic river that skirted the camp, he had stowed away some tackle among his baggage in the hope of getting his share of the sport. This he now turned to good account. At the artillery canteen he got a large bung cork; this he cut into a float by tapering it upwards to a point, leaving the bottom flat; through the middle he slipped a quill, inside which he fixed a piece of mainspring, and ran through it a strong line he had—strong enough to land a *mahseer**

* A *mahseer* is a large fish met with in the rivers of Northern India, and highly prized by anglers as the Indian salmon.

of ten or a dozen pounds weight. Thus he contrived a first-rate float, through which the line would run freely one way, but would not slip one inch the other way. On one end of the line he fastened a large-sized plummet, and wound it all up on a short piece of bamboo. This was all his apparatus—simplicity itself, yet deserving a patent.

It was now nine o'clock. One hour more he could call his own. That hour—how it was spent was only known by the subsequent disclosures of his "bearer," who said that when he had gone into the tent to take his master a cup of tea, he found him very busy writing; that, when he afterwards lifted up the *pardah* (curtain) to take away the cup, his master was on his knees; and that, as he left the tent to go out, his master placed in his hand a thick packet, with orders that, if he did not return by morning, it was to be given to the Paymaster.

As the stillness of the night-air was broken by the several regimental *gongs* striking ten, Norval appeared at the rendezvous. Parker and his men were already there, and good Major Jones was there too, to protest once more, almost with tears—and to let them pass the sentries.

It was now quite dark. The sentries of the enemy formed a *cordon* about three hundred yards outside the city walls, and about twice as far in front of the advance line of the English pickets, and their presence was only to be detected by the sound of their voices, as they met at the end of each beat, and passed on the word "*Sub achcha!*" ("All's well!") from end to end of the line. The little party were now fairly on their way; treading softly and slowly they stole along till within about fifty yards of the enemy's sentries. Here they stopped. Two sentries were in the act of meeting straight in front of them; they passed the word to each other, and parted on their return way. Norval now counted how long it took them to reach the other end of their beats, and back again. They went, and came, and parted. Norval waited still,—with his little band, their hearts beating quick and loud, so as almost to be heard in the dead stillness of the night,—waited till he knew that the sentries must be close at the end of their beats with their backs still turned, and a clear two hundred yards between them. Then at a word from him all the party sprang forward as noiselessly as possible, were soon beyond the sentries, and up to the bank of the ditch itself.

There, a few yards in front of them, rose up, looming out against the dark sky, the

towers of the fort, and at their feet the ditch of unknown depth. A glance betrayed the real state of affairs. The flanking bastions had been sadly pounded by the heavy guns, and in some parts the curtains between had been entirely demolished, and crumbled down till the *débris* gave an easy ascent from the water's edge.

As the bank of the moat had been somewhat raised, it furnished cover and shelter on its outer side. Here Parker and his men lay down concealed. Norval arranged his apparatus for the cast. Unwinding his line from the stick and fastening the end round his body, he hung it in loose coils on his right arm, and took the plummet in his right hand. Then noiselessly crossing the pathway on the bank, he stole down to the water's edge, and threw the plummet sufficiently high to insure a good arc and straight fall. It carried with it, coil after coil, the line off his arm, and fell in the very middle of the ditch. It dropped with a sharp plash, a single sound; it made but a slight noise, not more than a fair-sized fish would make as he snapped at a fly,—yet that slight noise "sounded an alarm on the dull ear" of night. Instantly all was life. The sentries started out of their half-sleeping stroll, and fired off their matchlocks; the guards sprang to the battlements, and blazed away in the direction from which the sound had come. The sentries on the glacis followed suit without aim or object. Norval, the instant he had made his cast, had sprung back across the bank, and was lying concealed by the side of Parker. Slowly raising his head over the bank, he could see the guards hurrying to and fro along the ramparts, running down the sloping *débris* to the brink of the water, and there standing aghast. But there was nothing to be seen—nothing to account for the noise. The sound was not repeated. There was evidently nothing astir. So the firing gradually ceased; the men returned to their posts, or their slumbers; and Norval heard on the ramparts an occasional laugh, as the joke was passed along, "*Kali muchhli tha!*" ("It was only a fish!")

That danger passed, it now remained to draw out the line with its register float, and to make good the retreat. But Norval waited till all was perfectly quiet before he stirred from his lair. He waited—it seemed hours—when the gongs in camp began to sound eleven. "Now for it," he thought, "or I shan't be back by midnight." So he crept up the bank again, across the path, and down the other side, close to the water, where the grass was longer and helped to conceal him

as he lay full length on the very brink. Then began the work of drawing in the line: round and round he turned slowly, over and over, noiselessly winding the line round his chest, converting himself into a winch—until he had the cork in his hand. In the excitement he forgot himself for a moment; turning less cautiously than usual, his foot touched the water. The splash was heard. Again all were on the *qui vive* on the walls; but nothing seemed to come of it; so the sentries relapsed into quiescent confidence, and contented themselves with the thought, "There goes that fish again!" But it brought Norval back to his former prudence: more slowly and silently than ever he gathered round him the few feet of line that remained.

At last it was all done, and the plummet was in his hand! He now crawled back to Parker, touched him; the signal was passed on to the men, and the retreat began. This was a far more tedious and delicate affair; they now had the enemy, already startled, behind as well as in front. The slightest sound would have betrayed them, and all might have been undone. So one by one, in single file, at short intervals, on hands and knees, they crept along, until they were within some fifty yards of the enemy's sentries. Now Norval, who was in advance, pulled up; all closed in; not a word was uttered. With bated breath they waited till the sentries had met and parted, and were on the extreme end of their beat again; then they rose cautiously on their feet, and with a simultaneous spring made for the lantern, which, by agreement, had been placed to guide them back to the battery; and were again safe and sound within their own lines.

There was Major Jones only too ready to welcome them. Between night-rounds he had been constantly at the battery; for his anxiety was so intense that he could not rest in his tent. It is due to him to say that, during those two weary hours of agonizing suspense, the brave old man had thought more of the danger of that "young mad-cap Norval," than of his own imperilled commission. The trembling voice and the convulsive grip with which he greeted the young engineer told how much he had gone through.

With a very fervent "good night" and "God bless you" to him and to Parker, and with a kindly shake of the hand to each of the men, and the assurance that he should never forget how they had joined him in a venture of life or death, Norval made straight for the brigadier's tent. The old man was

asleep; so, seeing a light in the chief engineer's tent close by, he walked in and said, "Colonel, I find the brigadier has turned in, so I come to you. If you'll kindly *unwind me*, you'll know the depth of the ditch under the fort rampart. Please tell the brigadier I will vouch for its accuracy."

"Tell me how you did it," said he eagerly.

"Let me off for to-night, colonel. You shall hear all to-morrow, when in reporting it I may have to ask your forgiveness for unauthorised absence from camp after tattoo."

He had not left the tent many minutes when the general awoke, and was told by his bearer that "Norval sahib" had been to see him, and had gone to the chief engineer. A note at once brought the colonel, with the line in his hand. Nothing would now satisfy the brigadier but that Norval should be sent for, as he could not sleep again till he had heard how it had been done.

"Captain Wilson," he called out—for Wilson was his orderly officer, and was in attendance close at hand—"will you oblige me by telling Lieutenant Norval that I wish to see him at once. He has actually gone and plumbed the ditch!"

Captain Wilson, who was very comfortable, as he lay back in his easy-chair dozing over his *cheroot*, was not over well pleased to be thus disturbed, and still less for such an object. So he went on his errand in no very gracious mood. On reaching Norval's tent he made straight for the *pardah*, and was going to lift it, when the bearer stopped him, "*Hookum na*," he said (which means "the order is not to admit any one").

"I must see your master," Captain Wilson retorted haughtily, and was again moving to lift the *pardah*; but the bearer again interfered, and, joining his hands, deprecating Captain Wilson's entering the tent, said, "*Sahib girja parhta hai*" ("My master is saying his prayers").

Wilson turned contemptuously on his heel, saying, loud enough for Norval to hear, "Tell your master the brigadier sahib wants him immediately."

"Saying his prayers!" hum! more cant and humbug, eh? Yet did he expect I would come for him at this moment? No, it can't be!" (so Wilson thought within himself as he walked back). "There is no hypocrisy in this at any rate. That man must be sincere. 'Saying his prayers!'" The sound of his own voice this time in such very different tone from that in which the words were first uttered, set him musing; and his uncertain steps, now slow, now quick, betrayed that a

struggle was going on in his mind as he wended his way back to the brigadier's tent.

Norval the while had been, as his bearer had truly said, "saying his prayers!"—prayers overflowing with thankfulness that his life had been preserved. As he rose, he called to his servant and asked for the packet he had put into his care. He opened it with tearful eye and trembling hand, as he thought how

the contents might have told to his mother and to her whom he hoped in time to make the partner of his life, the tale of his soldier's death. Again ascended from his heart the prayer of gratitude to Him into whose hands he had committed himself, for that he had gained his object, and was safe.

He proceeded at once to the brigadier's tent. As he reached it he was accosted by



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Captain Wilson. "Norval, can you ever forgive me the wrongs I have done you in thought and act? I feel now how I have wronged you. Can you ever forgive me? May we not be friends? such a friend as you I need, or I am lost."

From that hour they were friends indeed.

The assault was made on the fort itself.

And in a few months—the Victoria Cross not having then been established—the *Gazette* which announced Lieutenant Norval's promotion to a regimental captaincy proclaimed him brevet-major.

Thus was the ditch plumbed, and many a life saved—and one heart was plumbed too, and set in the way of being saved.

J. CAVE BROWNE.

