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THE COLUMBIAN, VOL. XXI. NO 32
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THE WITCH'S HEAD.

By H. RIDER HAGGARD.

This company, running swiftly, took possession of the ridge, down which the troop had charged, and by which alone it would be possible for Ernest to retreat, and, taking shelter behind stones, began to pour in an inaccurate but galling fire on the little party of whites. Ernest charged up through them, losing two more men and several horses in the process; but what was his horror, on reaching the crest of the ridge, to see about 1,000 Zulus, drawn up, apparently in reserve, in the neck of the pass leading to the plain beyond! To escape through them would be almost impossible, for he was crippled with wounded and dismounted men, and the pace of a force is the pace of the slowest. Their position was desperate, and, looking round at his men, he could see that they thought so too.

His resolution was soon taken. A few paces from where he had for a moment halted the remainder of the corps was a little eminence, something like an early Saxon tumulus. To this he rode, and, dismounting, turned his horse loose, ordering his men to do the same. So good was the discipline, and so great his control over them, that there were no wild rushes to escape; they obeyed, realizing their desperate case, and formed a ring round the rise.

"Now, men of Alston's Horse," said Ernest, "we have done our best; let us die our hardest."

The men set up a cheer, and next minute the Zulus, creeping up under shelter of the rocks, which were strewed around, attacked them with fury.

In five minutes, in spite of the withering fire which they poured in upon the surrounding Zulus, six more of the little band were dead. Four were shot, two were killed in a rush made by about a dozen men, who, reckless of their own life, determined to break through the white man's ring. They perished in the attempt, but not before they had stabbed two of Alston's Horse. The remainder, but little more than thirty men, retired a few paces further up the little rise, so as to contract their circle, and kept up a ceaseless fire upon the enemy. The Zulus, thanks to the accurate shooting of the white men, had by this time lost more than fifty of their number, and, annoyed at being put to such loss by a foe numerically so insignificant, they determined to end the matter with a rush. Ernest saw their leader, a great, almost naked fellow, with a small shield and a necklace of lion's claws, walking, utterly regardless of the pitiless rifle fire, from group to group, and exhorting them. Taking up a rifle which had just fallen from the hand of a dead trooper—for up to the present Ernest had not joined in the firing—he took a fine sight at about eighty yards at the Zulu chief's broad chest, and pulled. The shot was a good one; the great fellow sprung into the air and dropped. Instantly another commander took his place, and the final advance began.

But the Zulus had to come up hill, with but little cover, and scores were mown down by the scorching and continuous fire from the breech loaders. Twice when within twenty yards were they driven back; twice did they come on again. Now they were but twelve paces or so away, and a murderous fire was kept up upon them. For a moment they wavered, then pushed forward up the slope.

"Close up!" shouted Ernest, "and use your swords and pistols." His voice was heard above the din; some of the men dropped the now useless rifles, and the revolvers began to crack.

Then the Zulus closed in upon the doomed band, with a shout of "Bulala Umlungo" (kill the white man)!

Out rang the pistol shots, and the fire flew from the clash of swords and assegais, and still the little band, momentarily growing fewer, fought on with laboring breath. Never did hope forsaken men make a more gallant stand. Still they fought, and still they fell, one by one, and as they fell were stabbed to death; but scarcely one of them was there whose death wound was in his back.

At last the remaining Zulus drew back; they thought that it was done.

But no; three men yet stood together upon the very summit of the mound, holding six foes at bay. The Zulu captain laughed aloud when he saw it, and gave a rapid order. Thereupon the remaining Zulus formed up, and, stabbing the wounded as they went, departed swiftly over the dead, after the main body of the corps, which had now vanished round the mountain.

They left the six to finish the three.

Three hundred had come to attack Alston's Horse; not more than 100 departed from that attack. The overpowered white men had rendered a good account of their foes.

The three left alive on the summit of the little hill were, as fate would have it, Ernest, Jeremy and an ex-sailor.

Their revolvers were empty; Ernest's sword had broken off short in the body of a Zulu; Jeremy still had his sword and the sailor a clubbed carbine.

Presently one of the six Zulus dodged in under the carbine and ran the sailor through. Glancing round, Ernest saw his face turn gray. The honest fellow died as he had lived, swearing hard.

"Ah, you —— black mate," he sung out, "take that, and be d——d to you!" The clubbed rifle came down upon the Zulu's skull and cracked it to bits, and both fell dead together.

Now there were five Zulus left, and only Ernest and Jeremy to meet them. But stay; suddenly from under a corpse uprises another foe. No, it is not a foe—it is Mazooku, who has been shamming dead, but suddenly and most opportunely shows himself to be very much alive. Advancing from behind he stabs one of the attacking party and kills him. That leaves four. Then he engages another, and after a long struggle kills him, too, which leaves three. And still the two white men stand back to back, with flashing eyes and gasping breath, and hold their own. Soaked with blood, desperate and expecting death, they were yet a gallant sight to see. Two of the remaining Zulus rush at the giant Jeremy, one at Ernest. Ernest, having no effective weapon left, dodges the assegai thrust and then closes with his antagonist, and they roll over and over, down the hill together, struggling for the assegai the Zulu holds. It snaps in two, but the blade and about eight inches of the shaft remain with Ernest. He drives it through his enemy's throat, and he dies. Then he struggles up to see the closing scene of the drama, but not in time to help in it. Mazooku has wounded his man badly, and is following to kill him. And Jeremy? He has struck at one of the Kaffers with his sword. The blow is received on the edge of the cowhide shield and sinks half way through it, so that the hide holds the steel fast. With a sharp twist of the shield the weapon is jerked out of his hand, and he is left defenseless, with nothing to trust to except his native strength. Surely he is lost! But no—with a sudden rush he seizes both Zulus by the throat, one in each hand, and, strong men as they are, swings them wide apart. Then with a tremendous effort he jerks their heads together with such awful force that they fall senseless, and Mazooku comes up and spears them.

Thus was the fight ended.

Ernest and Jeremy sunk upon the bloody grass, gasping for breath. The firing from the direction of the camp had now died away, and after the tumult the shouts, and the shrieks of the dying, the silence seemed deep. It was the silence of the dead.

There they lay, white man and Zulu, side by side in the penceable sunlight; and in a vague, bewildered way Ernest noticed that the faces, which a few minutes before had looked so grim, were mostly smiling now. They had passed through the ivory gates and reached the land of smiles. How still they all were! A little black and white bird, such as fly from ant hill to ant hill, came and settled upon the forehead of a young fellow scarcely more than a boy, and the only son of his mother, who lay quiet across two Zulus. The bird knew why he was so still. Ernest had liked the boy, and knew his mother, and began to wonder as he lay panting on the grass what she would feel when she heard of her son's fate. But just then Mazooku's voice broke the silence. He had been standing staring at the body of one of the men he had killed, and was now apostrophizing it in Zulu.

"Ah, my brother," he said, "son of my own father, with whom I used to play when I was little; I always told you that you were a perfect fool with an assegai, but I little thought that I should ever have such an opportunity of proving it to you. Well, it can't be helped; duty is duty, and family ties must give way to it. Sleep well, my brother; it was painful to have to kill you—very."

Ernest lifted himself from the ground and laughed the hysterical laugh of shattered nerves at this naive and thoroughly Zulu moralizing. Just then Jeremy rose and came up to him. He was a fearful sight to see—his hands, his face, his clothes were all red, and he was bleeding from a cut on the face and another on the hand.

"Come, Ernest," he said, in a hollow voice, "we must clear out of this."

"I suppose so," said Ernest.

On the plain at the foot of the hill several of the horses were quietly cropping the grass, till such time as the superior animal, man, had settled his differences. Among them was Ernest's black stallion, the Devil, which had been wounded, though slightly, on the flank. They walked toward the horses, stopping on their way to arm themselves from the weapons which lay about. As they passed the body of the man Ernest had killed in his last struggle for life, he stopped and drew the broken assegai from his throat. "A memento," said he. The horses were caught without difficulty, and the Devil and the two next best animals selected. Then they mounted, and rode toward the top of the ridge over which Ernest had seen the body of Zulus lying in reserve. When they were near it Mazooku got down and crept to the crest on his stomach. Presently, to their great relief, he signaled to them to advance; the Zulus had moved on, and the valley was deserted. And so the three passed back over the neck, that an hour and a half before they had crossed with sixty-one companions, who were now all dead.

"I think we have charmed lives," said Jeremy, presently. "All gone except us two. It can't be chance."

"It is fate," said Ernest, briefly.

From the top of the neck they got a view of the camp, which now looked quiet and peaceful, with its white tents and its Union Jack fluttering as usual in the breeze.

"They must be all dead, too," said Ernest; "which way shall we go?"

Then it was that Mazooku's knowledge of the country proved of the utmost service to them. He had been brought up at a kraal in the immediate neighborhood, and knew every inch of the land. Avoiding the camp altogether, he led them to the left of the battlefield, and after two hours' ride over rough country, brought them to a ford of the Buffalo which he was acquainted with, some miles below where the few survivors of the massacer struggled across the river, or were drowned in attempting to do so. Following this route they never saw a single Zulu, for these had all departed in the other direction, and were spared the horrors of the stampede and of "Fugitive's Drift."

At last they gained the further side of the river, and were, comparatively speaking, safe on Natal ground.

They determined, after much anxious consultation, to make for the little fort at Helpmakaar, and had ridden about a mile or so toward it, when suddenly the Zulu's quick ear caught the sound of distant firing to their right. It was their enemy, the Undi corps, attacking Rorke's Drift. Leaving Mazooku to hold the horses, Ernest and Jeremy dismounted and climbed a solitary koppie or hill which just there cropped out from the surface of the plain. It was of an ironstone formation, and on the summit lay a huge flat slab of almost pure ore. On to this they climbed, and looked along the course of the river, but could see nothing. Rorke's Drift was hidden by a rise in the ground. All this time a dense thunder cloud had been gathering in the direction of Helpmakaar, and was now, as is common before sunset in the south African summer season, traveling rapidly up against the wind, set in a faint rainbow as in a frame. The sun, on the other hand, was sinking toward the horizon, so that his golden beams, flying across a space of blue sky, impigned upon the black bosom of the cloud, and were reflected thence in sharp lights and broad shadows, flung like celestial spears and shields across the plains of Zululand. Isandhlwana's mountain was touched by one great ray which broke in glory upon his savage crest, and crowned him that day's king of death, but the battlefield o'er which he towered was draped in gloom. It was a glorious scene. Above, the wild expanse of sky broken up by flaming clouds and tinted with hues such as might be reflected from the jeweled walls of heaven. Behind, the angry storm, set in its rainbow frame like ebony in a ring of gold. In front, the rolling plain where the tall grasses waved, the broad Buffalo flashing through it like a silver snake, the sun kissed mountains and the shadowed slopes.

It was a glorious scene. Nature in her most splendid mood flung all her color streamers loose across the earth and sky, and waved them wildly ere they vanished into night's abyss. Life, in his most radiant ecstasy, blazed up in varied glory before he sunk, like a lover, to sleep awhile in the arms of his eternal mistress—Death.

Ernest gazed upon it and drank it in with his heart, which, set to nature's tune, responded ever when her hands swept the chords of earth or heaven. It lifted him above the world and thrilled him with indescribable emotion. His eyes wandered over the infinite space above, searching for the presence of a God; then they fell upon Isandhlwana and marked the spot where the shadows were deepest; where his comrades lay and gazed upon the glorious sky with eyes that could not see, and at last his spirit gave way, and, weakened with emotion and long toil and abstinence, he burst into a paroxysm of grief.

"Oh, Jeremy," he sobbed, "they are all dead, except you and me, and I feel a coward that I should still live to weep over them. When it was over, I should have let that Zulu kill me, but I was a coward and I fought for my life. Had I but held my hand for a second I should have gone with Alston and the others, Jeremy."

"Come, come, old fellow, you did your best and fought for your corps like a brick. No man could have done more."

"Yes, Jeremy, but I should have died with them; it was my duty to die. And I do not care about living, find they did. I have been an unfortunate dog all my life. I shot my cousin, I lost Eva and now I have seen all my comrades killed, and I, who was their leader, alone escaped. And perhaps I have not done with my misfortunes yet. What next, I wonder; what next?"

Ernest's distress was so acute that Jeremy, looking at him and seeing that all he had gone through had been too much for him, tried to soothe him, lest he should go into hysterics, by putting his arm round his waist and giving him a good hug.

"Look here, old chap," he said; "it is no use bothering one's head about these things. We are just so many feathers blown about by the wind, and must float where the wind blows us. Sometimes it is a good wind, and some times a bad one, but on the whole it is bad, and we must just make the best of it, and wait till it doesn't think it worth while to blow our particular feathers about any more, and then we shall come to the ground, and not till then. And now we have been up here for more than five minutes, and given the horses a bit of a rest. We must be pushing on if we want to get to Helpmakaar before dark, and I only hope we shall get there before the Zulus, that's all. By Jove, here comes the storm—come on!"—and Jeremy jumped off the lump of iron ore and began to descend the koppie.

Ernest, who had been listening with his face in his hands, rose and followed him in silence. As he did so, a breath of ice cold air from the storm cloud, which was now right overhead, fanned his hot brow, and when he had gone a few yards he turned to meet it, and to cast one more look at the scene.

It was the last earthly landscape he ever saw. For at that instant there leaped from the cloud overhead a fierce stream of jagged light, which struck the mass of iron ore on which they had been seated, shivered and fused it, and then ran down the side of the hill to the plain. Together with the lightning there came an ear splitting crack of thunder.

Jeremy, who was now nearly at the bottom of the little hill, staggered at the shock. When he recovered, he looked up where Ernest had been standing, and could not see him. He rushed up the hill again, calling him in accents of frantic grief. There was no answer. Presently he found him lying on the ground, white and still.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE CLIFFS OF OLD ENGLAND.

It was an April evening off the south coast of England. The sun had just made up its mind to struggle out from behind a particularly black shower cloud, and give that part of the world a look before he bade it good night.

"That is lucky," said a little man, who was with difficulty hanging on to the bulwark netting of the R. M. S. Conway Castle; "now, Mr. Jones, look if you can't see them in the sunlight."

Mr Jones accordingly looked through his glasses again.

"Yes," he said, "I can see them distinctly."

"See what?" asked another passenger, coming up.

"The cliffs of old England," answered the little man, joyously.

"Oh, is that all?" said the other; "curse the cliffs of old England!"

"Nice remark that for a man who is going home to be married, eh?" said the little man, turning to where his companion had stood.

But Mr. Jones had shut up his glasses, and vanished aft.

Presently he reached a deck cabin, and entered without knocking.

"England is in sight, old fellow," he said, addressing somebody who lay back smoking in a cane chair.

The person addressed made a movement as though to rise, then put up his hands to a shade that covered his eyes.

"I forgot," he answered with a smile; "it will have to be very much in sight before I can see it. By the way, Jeremy," he went on, nervously, "I want to ask you something. These doctors tell such lies." And he removed the shade. "Now, look at my eyes, and tell me honestly, am I disfigured? Are they shrunk, I mean, or got a squint, or anything of that sort?"—and Ernest turned up his dark orbs, which, except that they had acquired that painful, expectant look peculiar to the blind, were just as they always had been.

Jeremy looked at them, first in one light, then in another.

"Well," said Ernest, impatiently, "I can feel that you are staring me out of countenance."

"Hamba gachle," replied the imperturbable one. "I am di—di—diagnosing the case. There, that will do. To all appearance, your optics are as sound as mine. You get a girl to look at them and see what she says."

"Ah, well; that is something to be thankful for."

Just then somebody knocked at the cabin door. It was a steward.

"You sent for me, Sir Ernest?"

"Oh, yes, I remember. Will you be so good as to find my servant? I want him."

"Yes, Sir Ernest."

Ernest moved impatiently. "Confound that fellow, with his everlasting 'Sir Ernest!'"

"What, haven't you got used to your handle yet?"

"No, I haven't, and I wish it were at Jericho, and that is a fact. It is all your fault, Jeremy. If you had not told that confoundedly garrulous little doctor, who went and had the information printed in The Natal Mercury, it would never have come out at all. I could have dropped the title in England; but now all these people know that I am Sir Ernest, and Sir Ernest I shall remain for the rest of my days."

"Well, most people would not think that such a dreadful misfortune."

"Yes, they would if they had happened to shoot the real heir. By the way, what did the lawyer say in his letter? As we are so near home, I suppose I had better post myself up. You will find it in the dispatch box. Read it, there's a good fellow."

Jeremy opened the box, battered with many years of travel, and searched about for the letter. It contained a curious collection of articles, prominent among which was a handkerchief which had once belonged to Eva Caswick; a long tress of chestnut hair tied up with a blue ribbon; ditto of golden, which had come—well, not from Eva's tresses; a whole botanical collection of dead flowers, tender souvenirs of goodness knows who, for, after awhile, these accumulated dried specimens are difficult to identify; and many letters and other curiosities.

At last he came to the desired document, written in a fair clerk's hand; and having shoveled back the locks of hair, etc., began to read it aloud:

"St. Ethelred's Court, Poultry, Jan. 22, 1879.

Sir"——

"You see," broke in Ernest, "while we were fighting over there at Isandhlwana, those beggars were writing to tell me that I was a baronet. Case of the 'bloody hand' with a vengeance, eh?"

"Sir" (began Jeremy again), "it is our duty to inform you of the death, on the 16th of the present month, of our esteemed client, Sir Hugh Kershaw, Bart., of Archdale Hall, Devonshire, and of the consequent devolution of the baronetcy to yourself, as only son of the late Sir Hugh's only brother, Ernest Kershaw, Esq.

"Into the question of the unhappy manner in which you came to be placed in the immediate succession, it does not become us to enter. We have before us at this moment a copy of her majesty's pardon, granted under the Transvaal amnesty act, and forwarded to us by Reginald Cardus, Esq., of Dum's Ness, Suffolk, which we have neither the wish nor the will to dispute. It is clear to us that, under this pardon, you are totally free from any responsibility for the breach of the law which you perpetrated some years since; and of this it is our duty to advise you. Your title to succeed is a clear one.

"As was only to be expected under the circumstances, the late Sir Hugh did not bear any feeling of good will toward you. Indeed, we do not think that we shall be exaggerating if we say that the news of your free pardon materially hastened his end. On the attainment of full age by the late Hugh Kershaw, Esq., who fell by your hand, the entail of the family estates was cut, and only the mansion house of Archdale hall, the heir looms, which are numerous and valuable, therein contained, and the deer park, consisting of 185 acres of land, were resettled. These consequently pass to you, and we shall be glad to receive your instructions concerning them, should you elect to honor us with your confidence. The estates pass, under the will of the late baronet, to a distant cousin of his late wife's, James Smith, Esq., of 52 Camperdown road, Upper Clapham. We now think that we have put you in possession of all the facts connected with your accession to the baronetcy, and, awaiting your instructions, we have the honor to remain your obedient servants,

(Signed) "PAISLEY & PAISLEY."

"Ah, so much for that!" was Ernest's comment. "What am I to do with Archdale hall, its heir looms and its deer park of 185 acres, I wonder? I shall sell them, if I can. Mine is a pretty position; a baronet with about sixpence halfpenny per annum to support my rank on; a very pretty position!"

"Hamba gachle," replied Jeremy, "time enough to consider all that. But now, as we are on the reading lay, I may as well give you the benefit of my correspondence with the officer commanding her majesty's forces in Natal and Zululand."

"Fire away," remarked Ernest, wearily.

"First letter, dated Newcastle, Natal, Jan. 27, from your humble servant to officer commanding, etc."

"'Sir—I have the honor to report, by order of Lieut. and Adjt. Kershaw, of Alston's Horse, at present incapacitated by lightning from doing so himself'"——

"Very neatly put, that," interpolated Jeremy.

"Very. Go on."

—"'that on the 22d inst. Alston's Horse, having received orders to check the flanking movement of the Undi corps, proceeded to try and do so. Coming to a ridge commanding the advance of the Undi, the corps, by order of their late commander, Capt. Alston, dismounted and opened fire on them at a distance of about 500 yards, with considerable effect. This did not, however, check the Undi, who appeared to number between 3,000 and 4,000 men, so Capt. Alston issued an order to charge the enemy. This was done with some success. The Zulus lost a number of men; the corps, which passed right through the enemy, about twenty troopers, Capt. Alston, and his son Roger Alston, who acted as his aide-de-camp. Several horses and one or two men were also severely wounded, which crippled the further movements of the corps.

"'Lieut. and Adjt. Kershaw, on taking command of the corps, determined to attempt to retreat. In this attempt, however, he failed, owing to the presence of dismounted and wounded men; to the detachment of a body of about three hundred Zulus to intercept any such retreat; and to the presence of a large body of Zulus on the further side of the pass leading to the valley through which such retreat must be conducted.

"'Under these circumstances he determined to fight the remains of the corps to the last, and dismounting them, took possession of a fairly advantageous position. A desperate hand to hand encounter ensued. It ended in the almost total extermination of Alston's Horse, and in that of the greater part of the attacking Zulus. The names of the surviving members of Alston's Horse are—Lieut. and Adjt. Kershaw, Sergt. Maj. Jeremy Jones, and Trooper Mazooku, the only native in the corps.

"'Those ultimately effected their escape, the enemy having been either all destroyed or having followed the track of the Undi. Lieut. and Adjt. Kershaw regrets to have to state that in process of effecting his escape he was struck by lightning and blinded.

"'He estimates the total loss inflicted on the enemy by Alston's Horse at from four hundred to four hundred and fifty men. In face of such determined bravery as was evinced by every one of his late gallant comrades, Lieut. Kershaw feels that it would be invidious for him to mention any particular names. Every man fought desperately, and died with his face to the enemy. He begs to inclose a return of the names of those lost, the accuracy of which he cannot, however, guarantee, as it is compiled from memory, the papers of the corps having all been lost. Trusting that the maneuvers attempted by Lieut. Kershaw under somewhat difficult circumstances will meet with your approval, I have, etc.

"'By order of Lieut. Kershaw.

"'JEREMY JONES, Sergeant Major.

"Then follows the reply, dated Maritzburg, Feb. 2:"

"'SIR—1. I have to direct you to convey to Lieut. and Adjt. Kershaw, and the surviving members of the corps known as Alston's Horse, the high sense entertained by the officer, etc., of the gallant conduct of that corps in the face of overwhelming odds at Isandhlwana on Jan. 22.

"'2. It is with deep regret that the officer, etc., learns