

THE BANNER SERIES OF SHORT STORIES

THE ONE WHO THOUGHT

By JAMES BARNES
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HE was the junior subaltern and he could boast of a month's service almost to a day. He possessed a tendency to bluish and a slight impediment in his speech that was half stammer, half lisp. His curly hair was cut short, and his helmet, which was a trifle large, came down over his ears. There was no danger of its falling off, however, for he always wore the strap under his chin, and it had stenciled a little white line in the suburned red of his face.

His regiment was on there where they preserve old-time traditions. They rose and saluted the colonel upon every possible occasion, they "str"ed each other left and right, and the junior subaltern was never expected to express an opinion upon any question whatever. The regiment was a fighting force behind it, and was as good as any of the other shire regiments; and that means that it was as good as any that ever wore red or khaki.

Now, on the day it had marched some 12 South African miles (which means a good 20 this side of the water), and incidentally it had climbed one or two rocky kopjes, and struggled through a half score of dry, sandy ridges down one bank and up the other. It had waded three drifts deep in clinging, black mud; and when it had settled down for the evening, the bulk of the transport was a muddle of blankets and gear behind. Most of the blankets and great-coats were on the wagons, and it was going to be cold. Twilight had merged into moonlight, and overhead in the clear African sky very early the great stars were blazing and twinkling, and somehow (it may have been the march or the moon), no one seemed much inclined to talk. The mess was not very large. To look at it, no one would have recognized in the thin-faced, tired-looking men in the smudged yellow uniforms the officers of one of the smartest of the line; nor would any one have known, after a glance at a bivouac, that it was a regiment at all.

When the troopship left England it had numbered 1,250 stalwart young fellows, keen on life and eager for fighting. Most of them had been in the front of their own shire twist in their speech that betrayed them as much as the little printed name—white on red—on the left side of their helmets. But now the quartermaster sergeant had told you that they numbered exactly 552, and that included the colonel and the bugler boy.

The rest—Lord knows where they were—had gone back to England to be repaired (perhaps damaged beyond all hope); others were still in the hospital, scattered as far back as the long trail extended; a few were on detached duty; and the rest, who were not present to answer to their names, lay beneath little unmarked rocky heaps, lost and forgotten, somewhere out in the wide stretch of an expedition. They came one place, however, where 20 lie together; and they can show you a hill that is remembered because they had something to do with making it different from other hills.

But to come back to this night. The colonel was grumpy because the little cart that was his own and carried his particular brand of whiskey and cigars had broken down along with the lift, and the wagon to which his belongings had been transferred had not yet arrived. The rest of the mess were grumpy at having to go out on the wild goose chase of an expedition when they had rather have stopped in the town back there, which was a conquered one, with a conquered club and conquered privileges.

"I think," began the junior sub, suddenly breaking the silence, and then he faltered. The looked round at him, and the colonel, from his seat on the biscuit box, stopped spreading some caviar on a big piece of soggy Boer bread and glared at him.

"I—I think," began the boy again, this time stammering slightly.

"Well," remarked the senior captain, "what do you think of that?"

"I think that the cavalry has gone through the neck, sir."

"And what the devil makes you think that?" put in the colonel, taking his hat from the senior captain.

"I don't know, sir," said the boy, "I was just thinking, and we don't see their fires."

The fact was that he had first spoken aloud without meaning to.

"Well, what if they have?" pursued the colonel, addressing the adjutant this time. "It's their business to keep in touch with us, anyhow, eh?"

"I should suppose so," returned the adjutant, innocently.

"I do think they kept a bit ahead, sir," put in the lieutenant of G company.

"Old Spuff told me he expected to bivouac on the other side, near the pan. He was out there last week, you know, and knows the ground."

"Confound him," said the colonel; "he can't expect my men to keep up with even his boy old hattracks when a third of them haven't any soles to their boots. What the devil are you sent out here for beats me, anyway. I'll wager there isn't a Boer within 14 miles."

"I heard today that the Boers were on their way to this very place," put in the boy.

"And how did you hear that?" asked the senior captain. "By gad, we are becoming very knowl'."

"There was a Kaffir by the road spoke to one of our Kaffir boys, and I asked him, and he said—"

"Humph, Kaffirs!" snorted the major, who hitherto had not spoken a word.

"It was reported to me at the time, colonel," spoke up a broad-shouldered young fellow, who was sent out here, "I didn't think it worth noticing." He closed his silver cigarette case with a snap.

The rest of the mess, who had paid just enough attention to the conversation to be worse than old wives. It was conceded that a black would tell another anything that came into his head, and fell while men only the things he thought they would like to hear.

"He was very intelligent-looking Kaffir," stammered the boy. "I think—"

"You better get turn into your blankets, youngster," said the major. "He's put in the thick-set, gray-templed young captain. "He's on guard with Mallon."

"Have you stationed the outposts?" asked the colonel in an undertone. He generally left everything to his adjutant,



"Fix Bayonets" Put in the Sub Suddenly.

had the strange sense of unreality that one feels upon suddenly coming out into the vantage spot of a panorama. It looked quite artificial, and yet it made him dizzy. In his imagination he could see just where the foreground ended and the canvas began. The view seemed to stretch up and down, painted so skillfully that he would like to go up closer to see how it was done. And the reason for this was the stillness—nothing moved, nothing sounded. He walked over to the edge, where he could look down on the sleeping regiment.

He could make out the wagons; everything else faded into the color of the earth and rocks; but as he looked he saw a spot of flame, and then another. He could see some dim figures moving, and he knew that the fires were being lighted. At the same time there came from ever so far (from the Kaffir kraals, more than likely) the sharp, clear crow of a cock.

It was wonderful how all these things brought the sense of reality to him. The moon was sinking behind the distant line of hills, but there was a glare in the sky that had been there before he was dozing off. He started up the hill. He had meant to have seen where the farthest sentry was posted—that was all he climbed over rocks and bowlders; his feet were fairly chattering at first, but the exercise made him warmer, and he was glad to be moving. Suddenly he found himself close against what appeared to be the sheer side of a cliff. But no entry. He turned and looked back to the valley again.

The fire embers were out; there was a chilly mist spread along the stream bed, and the voices of the Kaffir drivers, and the creak of the transport's iron on the gravel, were heard. The boy knew what it was, for he had seen hundreds of them—the little boxes in which the Mauser cartridges in clips of five were packed. So the Boers had been there! He remembered—of course—it was here that they had the skirmish 10 days ago when poor old Jack Leonard, of the lumbering well-intentioned "M. L.," was pippered into both lungs. The sub bent over, and then straightened himself and bent over again.

There, in a little patch of sand, between two big rocks, were the marks of horse hoofs. Small, unshod hoofs! He was not enough of a scout to know if they were fresh or not—but how had they got there? Nothing but a goat could have climbed the hill the way that was. Then suddenly he saw he was in a path, a tortuous, narrow path that twisted in and out among the bowlders, but kept close to the base of the sheer stone wall that rose in that direction. He had seen it before, a foolish path lead to "Must go some where," he thought. "I see; it's a short cut into the neck."

"Doused odd," said the sub aloud. So he followed it for perhaps 200 yards.

Now he remembered having noticed, ever since he had seen the kopje from afar, a jagged, brown line, like a split or cleft that ran down its side from the crest halfway to the middle.

The path led to the bottom of the jagged brown line. "Well, I never," thought the sub as he stumbled along, but when he came to the black shadow, the trail, after a double round, a big rock, turned sharp to the left, he stood and whistled. The brown line was not what he had seen. It was the opening into a crack. It was the opening into a narrow passage, and the path led, steep and straight, to the very top. It was very dark, but he could see a path of white light rising like a cloud way up on the rim.

"Here's a go," he thought. "What if?" He turned and looked over his shoulder at the valley—"Gad, I'll risk it. I can get up and back before relief. So he went up the steep incline, sometimes on his hands and knees, but most of the time he was on his feet. In less than five minutes he clambered out into the center of the patch of light and he saw how things were. The narrow pass was only a dent in the kopje side that led down to the lower opening. The top of the kopje was quite flat, and the bowlders were not so big as down below. But he soon forgot nasty things in looking far away all around him. He

there," he said to the nearest man, nodding into the valley.

The sub looked and fairly groaned. Men were running this way and that—some on the flanks were lying flat behind stones and firing up at the kopje—some were getting into their slings, with a sergeant hustling them as if they were a trifle tardy for roll call. In one case a company was standing at attention as if for inspection. The Kaffirs were doing their best to get the mules into the harness, but some were down already, and others were clearing. A few men were hit, for he could see the stretcher-bearers come running from left to right. The scene had all the confusion of complete surprise. It would soon be worse! What if the Boers should reach the spur? But here came the sergeant, and with him five penting men.

"All I could get, sir—Mr. Mallon, here—'We'll catch it 'ot if we stay here, sir.'"

"Fall in. Follow me at a double. Are magazines charged?"

"Yes, sir."

With 16 men behind him the sub scrambled up to the little path and started up along it shot foot. He did some thinking, too, as he ran. It would be a bit uncomfortable, if he should get into the middle of them when he reached the top, and it would be equally uncomfortable if caught halfway.

"There goes the guns, sir," panted the sergeant, who had kept pace with him.

"Sure enough, as they entered the kloof the reports of artillery and bursting shells sounded over the line of kopjes on the farther side.

"The cavalry's getting it now," grunted the lance-corporal.

"O' and 'eavy—there goes the 'ten-a-penny," gasped a short-winded little private.

"The 'chung-chung-chung' of the Vickers Maxim joined in the row.

The sub's heart beat almost as loudly.

"O' my word!" panted the sergeant.

"Must be attack' in force, sir!"

"This was just it. The party he had seen climbing the long great coat, and as he did so the sub felt a quick tap on his helmet and sudden swift breath along his hair. He crouched down, still giving orders—quiet and cool now—through a glorious excitement was humming through him. Here they come close to the Boers discovered that they were headed, and now the reason for the delay in reaching the spot was clear. They were pushing—and dragging—a seven-pounder Crupp up the path. At the first shot they vanished among the rocks on either hand like gophers.

"Ave a care, sir," implored the sergeant. "For Gawd's sake, get down yourself, sir!" He put up his hand and gently grasped the long great coat, and as he did so the sub felt a quick tap on his helmet and sudden swift breath along his hair. He crouched down, still giving orders—quiet and cool now—through a glorious excitement was humming through him. Here they come close to the Boers discovered that they were headed, and now the reason for the delay in reaching the spot was clear. They were pushing—and dragging—a seven-pounder Crupp up the path. At the first shot they vanished among the rocks on either hand like gophers.

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into the slanting wall. He rose to his feet, and then, as if thrown by an invisible wrestler, down he went with a clang on the water-bottle, and lay there. As if encouraged by this, the Mausers started furiously.

The red-headed soldier, in the act of firing, lost the thumb of his left hand, the thumb of his right, and the bullet, glancing from the stock of his rifle, traversed his cheek. In a minute he lay on his back, his eyes closed. But not a word did he utter. He twisted his hands into his tunic and lay back, the picture of despair.

"An hour went by. There were 10 cartridges left. The shot beyond the hill had not fired a shot for 15 minutes, but there was an intermittent snapping round the edge of the kopje, and one or two flashes were some painstaking marksmen lying well hid. The rocks on the crest were spotted with bullet marks, crashed and curled-up bits of nickel and lead lay all about. But if cartridges Three belonged to him. The two men on the flanks had thrown down their useless rifles—one lit his pipe.

"Wonder wonder where they'll take us to," he half-asked the man beside him.

"Fix bayonets!" put in the sub suddenly.

The sergeant, at him as if they thought he had gone mad. But they obeyed, snapping the ugly knives to their rifle barrels, and then they lay there waiting. If he had told them to charge, they would have obeyed—it was none of their responsibility.

"Just poke those bayonets over the rocks, you men," ordered the sub. "We'll show 'em what they'll get if they come on."

The strange signal of defiance flashed as the bright blades caught the sun. It brought a drove of bullets, and the men lay close.

"Let 'em all come!" whorted the lance-corporal.

Hardly had he spoken, when from 500 yards a volley of plunging fire came down. The Boers had gained the higher crest across the neck! There was no shelter now for the obstinate little band. They could be picked off—almost at will. Almost a dozen men were hit. The red-headed man was struck in the head and never stirred—killed outright. The little private next to him, the lance-corporal, was hit in his rifle, and ran for the path, bounding over the rocks like a rubber ball.

"For Gawd's sake, sir, let's out of this," groaned the corporal. "Run for it; there's no time to lose. Almost a dozen men were hit. The red-headed man was struck in the head and never stirred—killed outright. The little private next to him, the lance-corporal, was hit in his rifle, and ran for the path, bounding over the rocks like a rubber ball.

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