

Good-Bye

by **Edgar Wallace, 1875-1932**

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„IN view of the evident unrest among the hill tribes, the Officer Commanding the 90th Sikhs will detail an officer and sixty men to proceed by march-route to Mangoon. They will take with them preserved rations sufficient to last 20 days, and 200 rounds of ammunition a man.“

As he finished reading, Colonel Burton, of the 90th Sikhs, laid down the document he had been reading aloud with a gesture of impatience.

„Sixty men!“ he said, looking across the flower-laden vases, that gave his writing-table the appearance of a small garden, to his daughter, who, seated in a comfortable basket-chair, was busily engaged in her lace work. „Sixty fiddlesticks! Why don't they put, ‚Will proceed to Mangoon for the purpose of affording the hillsmen target practice?‘“

„Is it really so bad, father?“ asked Gladys, looking up from her work.

„Bad?“ answered the Colonel. „It's worse. It's murder pure and simple—that is as far as murder can be pure and simple, but there are the orders,“ picking the paper up again and running his eye over it. „What chance, I should like to know, will sixty have against a possible six thousand? If they escape the fever—

and you know, dear, the country between here and Mangoon is one long swamp, they can never hope to hold their own against these men. Don't I know; haven't I had a substantial token of their fighting quality?" And the long scar that extended from his temple to his jaw grew an angry red as the blood of the choleric old Colonel began to warm at the recollection of his fighting days.

"No, Gladys, my girl," he said, "to send sixty men against a hundred times their number may be a great compliment to the 90th, but it's hard lines on the men who are sent."

Gladys was silent, for awhile, and then she asked, "Did you say Captain Henniker is going?"

"Yes," was the reply; "I must send a captain. Boyd's on leave, so is Grier. Hayton's down, with fever. I can't send Hinge, the poor fellow is only just married. I confess that I was in a dilemma when Henniker, who is awaiting leave, helped me out by volunteering."

"Poor fellow," said Gladys softly.

"A brave man," replied the Colonel, in that snappy fashion he adopted when he wanted to be unusually impressive. "I wonder," he went on, gazing meditatively at the Burmese idol that served as a paper-weight, "I wonder if the people at Home ever realise the number of men who die here in India, unrewarded, unrecognised, and unknown, for their country's cause. I'm afraid that they are apt to look upon a brilliant cavalry charge as the highest type of valour, and fail to remember that the officer and man who fight one long, running, tiring fight, harassed by bush skirmishing, overcome by heat and thirst, and weakened by fever, are entitled to just a little hero worship. I speak feelingly, dear, for I've had as much of that kind of thing as will last me a lifetime."

The girl rose from her seat as the Colonel was speaking, and crossing the room, leant lovingly over her father's shoulder. They made a pretty picture, and the half-darkened bungalow, with its skins and screens, its bamboo walls covered by trophies of many a frontier fight, made a splendid setting for the tough old soldier and his fair young daughter, and as he ran his fingers through the gold-brown tresses that hung over her shoulder, and saw the sympathetic tears that glistened in her sweet grey eyes at the recital of her father's past troubles, the old man said, "You have a kind heart, darling, you are a true soldier's daughter. It is the dearest wish of my heart to see you a soldier's wife."

"A soldier's wife, dad?" she repeated.

"Yes, clear," said the Colonel kindly, "a soldier's wife. You know that I have no desire to pry into your love affairs, but I am rather curious to know how matters stand with Boyd and yourself."

For a time she did not answer, but walked to her table, and commenced to tidy her work.

"Captain Boyd," she said after awhile, a faint flush rising to her cheek, "is a—friend."

The Colonel, who was fitting on his helmet and trying to make her believe that he did not notice her very evident confusion, stopped short as the last word fell in incisive tone from her lips.

"A friend? Why, Gladys, I thought—"

„Yes, yes, I know,” the girl said hastily, almost tearfully. „I don't want you to think any more about it. Captain Boyd and I are friends, very good friends, but nothing more.”

This was, indeed, news for the Colonel. Everybody who was anybody from Tugabad to Simla knew, or thought that they knew, that the affair of Boyd and „Burton's little girl” was as good as settled.

Probably had Colonel Burton been anybody else but Colonel Burton he would have seen the change; as it was, he had thought it strange that Boyd, who had applied for leave for sporting purposes, should prefer the solitude of the tiger-run jungle to the company of Gladys; but this he had put down to the fact that all men require a little change. He was just a trifle angry that he had not been made acquainted with the change of affairs, for although there had been no engagement, things drifting along in a free-and-easy style characteristic to Anglo-Indian society, yet like everybody else, he had thought that it was merely a matter of time for Boyd to speak. Boyd was a great favourite of his, and had been ever since he had come to the regiment a white-faced boy, straight from his mother's apron strings.

The Colonel had been struck by the youngster's grit, and when in an affair on the Afghan border, „Burton's Boy,” as he had been nicknamed, saved his commanding officer's life by the simple expedient of jumping in front of him, and receiving a half-arm jab from an Afridi's knife, the friendship was cemented more firmly than ever.

When he had seen the evident pleasure the society of his daughter had given his protégé, the old man had felt that his cup of happiness was full. There was no one to whom he would have sooner given her, and now to hear that all his cherished plans were tumbling to the ground like a card-house, was, to say the least, annoying. „What has Boyd said or done?” he asked as mildly as was possible—for him. „Some silly lovers' quarrel, I'll be bound. Now look here, Gladys, my girl, I've set my heart on you're marrying Boyd, and—”

He got no further, for with an air of queenly dignity she had risen.

„And I, dad,” she said, „have set my heart on marrying whom I please.”

Further altercation was prevented by the arrival of a native orderly, who saluted his chief.

„The Doctor sahib wishes to see you at the Hospital,” he said.

„What's wrong?” asked the Colonel, tartly; the little encounter had not improved his temper.

„And the Boyd sahib wishes to see you at the orderly room,” went on the impassive Oriental, quietly ignoring the question.

„Boyd?” said the Colonel, quickly. „Boyd? Why his leave doesn't expire for another week. I wonder why he's back.” Then turning to follow the soldier, he said half abashed, „I'm sorry I got so peppery, dear, but you know how I feel, and how much I have this at heart.”

„I know, dad, dear,” said Gladys, putting her arms round the old man's neck, and kissing him. „I know, it will be hard for you; but—”

„Well, well,” he answered with a sigh. „I suppose you will have to decide for yourself; after all you are entitled to choose the man who is to make life all or nothing to you.”

„Arthur back,” mused the girl, watching her father's figure disappearing across the palm-bordered square, „His leave doesn't expire for an awful long time yet. I wonder what has brought him back. Poor dad! how I wish—” with a

long-drawn sigh, as she seated herself and resumed her work, „but there, it's all over now, and wishes are vain and useless.”

The Colonel had unconsciously described the estrangement very accurately when he called it „a silly lovers' quarrel.”

It had been such a quarrel as none but lovers would have indulged in, and as such was, of course, absurdly childish.

How well she remembered that night when in the cool of sun-down they had sat together in one big chair and watched the young moon rise over the rice plantations, making in the black waters of the lagoon a glittering silvery background for the motionless giant rushes and jungle grass that fringed the waters.

How happy they were then, and how beautiful the world had seemed.

It all came back to her as she worked, the sweet scent of the jessamine, the strange weird calls from the distant jungle, the sing-song drawl with its tom-tom accompaniment that came from the road-side temple where the devotees of Shiva were holding „high-jinks,” as Arthur had irreverently put it.

How handsome he had looked as he sat there with a cigarette between his lips. As a matter of fact he wasn't—few men are—but the light favoured him, and in its mysterious fashion adjusted the shape of his features to something like proportion, and converted the sun-tan and freckles into a complexion.

Gladys had said something trivial, it might have been anything from an opinion of a book or a description of a dinner, with which he did not agree, a little innocent bantering evolved into rather plain-speaking personalities: „Don't be a fool, Gladys!” and thus the quarrel. Had it ended by her leaving him in tears, it would have been the usual comedy of a lovers' tiff, but unfortunately she did not; choosing to remain and say all the nasty things that occurred to her—and they were not a few.

In return he had driven her almost to desperation by telling her with a laugh that she would be only too pleased to ask his forgiveness in the morning.

He had a powerful imagination, and he sketched out the form the reconciliation would take, even going as far into details as to describe how they would gaze into one another's eyes, and such little things as lovers do, and the un-loved world know nothing about.

This wounded her pride more deeply than he could ever have known. Even love cannot stand against ridicule; he thought that he was being unusually smart, but he was a man—and a fool; He had sent imploring letters since, asking, nay imploring forgiveness, but had received no answer. Once she had felt inclined to forgive him, but there rose before her the scene he had sketched so graphically, and he had lost his chance. A shadow fell across the doorstep, and there stood the object of her thoughts.

The colour left her cheeks; it was the first time they had met since that night.

He was in uniform; she did not stop to wonder why, she remembered he looked his best in khaki.

„Won't you come in?” she faltered.

„Thanks,” he answered rather huskily (he had not noticed any particular hoarseness until that moment). „I shan't keep you long, but I—I—” He looked helplessly round for something inspiring. Gladys with downcast eyes had resumed her work. For a time neither spoke, he was thinking of something to say that would give him an opening, some trivial remark that would lead up to the point in view.

„I've come," he said, nervously twisting his sword-knot into a spiral, „to ask you—whether you—that is—whether you will be as we were before. I know," he added hastily, seeing she had risen with a heightened colour. „I know I have no right to ask, particularly as you have as good—or as bad—as refused; but now that I—"

„Exactly," put in Gladys with a scornful smile. „Now that you have returned, after so long an absence, I, having fretted myself into a state of lachrymose collapse, will instantly fall into your arms, and confess my faults. That is as you have already pictured, is it not? Unfortunately, Captain Boyd, that melodramatic situation does not appeal to me. I'm afraid I have no histrionic soul!"

He was not an emotional man, and as deeply as he felt her stinging words, not a muscle of his bronzed face moved. They stood facing one another in the dim light of the bungalow.

„You did not give me time," he said quietly. She had never heard that tone before, and the anger died within her, and the intuitive knowledge of some approaching calamity came upon her.

„You did not give me a chance to finish the sentence, but perhaps it doesn't matter."

A bugle sounded the „Fall in," and they could see a crowd of men leaving the shade of bungalows, and form into an orderly line.

„The men for the front," said the girl, temporarily forgetting the quarrel. „Henniker's men, poor fellow!"

„Poor fellow," repeated Boyd absently; then changing his tone he pointed with a reckless laugh to the distant horizon, where, shimmering in the heat, the first of the Mangoon heights frowned down upon the purple swamp that stretched as far as eye could see.

„Do you see that?" he asked, almost rudely. „Do you see those hills? Do you know that Khas Khan is waiting with a thousand men to cut up this little force, not one of which will probably return? The Government knows, the General knows, but as in theory Khas Khan is a loyal and faithful servant to the Queen, and has made no declaration of war, they dare not send more for fear of exciting the country, and bringing down upon the head of the British Government, the abuse of every fire-side critic from John O'Groat's to Hong Kong."

„And do you mean," said Gladys in horror, as the awfulness of the thing dawned upon her, „Do you mean that these men are to be used as a bait, a human, living bait, to be sacrificed so that a secret enemy may be made an open foe? Oh, surely not!"

„That's about the size of it," said Boyd, with a mirthless laugh. „See! your father is addressing the men."

„I can't see Captain Henniker anywhere," said the girl. In the last few minutes they had unconsciously returned to old familiarity of manner.

„It isn't likely you will," said Boyd grimly, „considering that at present he is lying in a very hopeless condition in the hospital."

„In hospital?" repeated Gladys, in bewilderment. „In hospital? How? When?"

„About an hour ago, poor old chap, he took a touch of sun, and went down in the middle of the parade ground."

This was why her father had been sent for, and then a thought striking her, she asked,

„But who is going with the men? Not—not—” The colour died from her cheeks as she began to realise the truth.

„Yes,” he said quietly, „you have guessed rightly. I am. I heard that a detachment was going up, and returned to volunteer my services. As it happened, I returned at the very moment I was required.”

For a moment she stood as if dazed, then catching both his hands in hers, and looking beseechingly in his face she said, almost in a whisper, „No, no, not you, Arthur! Say you are joking. You must be, you cannot mean that. Why, you yourself have said it is certain death!”

Even as she spoke she knew that it was the truth he had told her.

She noticed for the first time he was dressed in Field Service order.

A bugle drawled from the parade ground.

„Officers come and be damned,” said Boyd bitterly. He was repeating the words that soldiers have put to the „officers’ call.”

They seemed just then so very à propos.

He slipped his arm round the girl’s waist, and drawing down the brown head to his breast, tried to soothe her, for she was weeping softly.

„Don’t cry, darling,” he said, with a quaver in his voice. „It’s all my fault, all mine. I was a fool, don’t make it harder for me than it already is.”

She did not answer, but raised her tear-stained face to his, and their lips met.

„Good-bye,” she whispered between her sobs. „Good-bye,” he muttered, and putting her gently from him, he left her.

A little aloof from the other officers, the Colonel was waiting his arrival.

„Here’s your instructions,” he said roughly. He was trying to hide the man under the martinet. „And you’re a young fool, and—God bless you—a brave man; and now don’t forget if you have the slightest excuse for returning do so. If Khas shows any signs of armed resistance—I know the devil won’t till you’re hemmed in on all sides—but if, by God’s mercy, he does, you are to retire at once, do you understand? And now good-bye!”

Boyd wrung the extended hands, and turned to his company who were standing at ease.

„Slope arms!” he called.

Sixty butts crashed to „Attention,” and then with a rattle came up together.

An orderly had left the telegraph office and was running towards the Colonel, who, surrounded by his officers, was waiting to see the company march off.

„Fours—right!” said Boyd, casting one look towards the white figure that stood in the doorway of the Colonel’s quarters. „By the left—quick march.”

With a quick step the little body of men wheeled round the group of officers, towards the gate that led to the Mangoon road. „Goodbye,” he said between his set teeth; „Good-bye to all that makes life worth living.”

They had crossed the square and were nearing the main guard-room.

The guard composed of men of a British Infantry regiment had turned out with shouldered arms, ready to salute their dusky comrades. The regular footfalls of the little party reverberated through the stone archway that formed the entrance to the cantonments and the straggling street that led to the bazaars, beyond which the torturous swamp road lay before them.

„Halt!”

Mechanically the troop came to a standstill, and Boyd looked round in astonishment, for he had recognised the Colonel’s voice.

„What is it, sir?“ he asked wearily, he was not in the humour for further instructions or fresh farewells.

Colonel Burton did not answer, but handed the telegram he had just received to him. Like a man in a dream, Boyd read:

„FROM GENERAL OFFICER COMMANDING THE FORCES IN TUGABAD TO THE O.C. 90TH SIKHS. STOP OR RECALL DETACHMENT PROCEEDING TO MANGOON. TRIBE HAS RISEN. A BRIGADE IS BEING ORGANISED FOR DESPATCH TO THE AFFECTED DISTRICT.“

He handed the orange-coloured form back, and for a moment could not believe his senses; at last he found his voice:

„Fall out, men,“ he said. „Go back to your quarters.“ Then turning to the Colonel, who was watching him rather closely, he said, „If you don't mind, sir, I should like to see Gladys?“

The elder man laughed and rubbed his hands.

„I haven't the slightest objection to offer,“ he said.
