

Bullet Marks

A Story of Love and Circumstantial Evidence.

I had a sort of second cousin, Gerald Ashton, who had been brought up with myself and my sister, my father being his guardian.

We had all been like brothers and sisters, when one day he woke up to find he could not live without a nearer relationship to her. He spoke to the old gentleman, and there was a little family fracas.

He had only a hundred a year, and my father did not think that was enough, though Gerald did; there was no objection at all in other respects—let him earn some more and they would see—wait a little—you know the kind of thing an old gentleman would say. Well, it was of no use. He said he felt himself a burden; there was no scope for his energies, and he would go—and go he did.

I urged upon him that he should get something to do. He had been well educated, and a clerkship, or something of the kind, could be got for him if he still resolved not to go on at the hospital.

No—he would go. There was only one thing he did do well, that was to shoot; and he would carry his abilities to a market where they would be appreciated. And so, at the mature age of twenty-two, he left us his profession, his home, and his prospects.

He disappeared, and six months after we heard he was with, say the 40th dragoons in India.

We wrote, and offered to buy his discharge, but he would “have none of us.” He liked it very well; was already corporal; expected the three stripes soon; and was “Gentleman Jack” with his comrades.

Some six months after this I was sent out to India with a company; and as my sister was getting thin, and showing other signs of the desirability of a sea-voyage, and of a warm climate, it was agreed I should take her over.

We reached Calcutta, and in a few weeks settled down.

There was war going on, and I was placed in charge of one of the chief depots of small arms and ammunition, besides having my regular duties with the company.

One day I was down at the store, when my sister arrived, pale and breathless.

“Look, Charles, poor Gerald’s in dreadful trouble.”

I put her into an office chair, and took the newspaper, and read—

“Yesterday evening as an officer of the 40th dragoon guard was returning to camp he was shot at from behind a clump of bushes; the bullet struck him in the thigh and lodged in the saddle. Although wounded so severely he had sufficient presence of mind to ride straight to the bushes, and there found one of his own men, a corporal of the troop, nicknamed “Gentleman Jack” by his comrades, whose rifle was still smoking from the discharge. Fortunately, at this moment, the guard arrived, and the man was at once arrested. A court martial will, of course, be held at once, and, although the man has previously borne a good character and is reported to be respectably connected, it is to be hoped he will receive the proper reward for so abominable a crime.”

“Oh,” I said, “this is all nonsense. Gerald’s no murderer, or else he’s very much changed. I’ll see what they say at headquarters.”

“Do for God’s sake, go. If anything has happened to Gerald I should never forgive myself, for if I had run away with him then papa was so cruel, he never would have enlisted at all.”

“Don’t talk nonsense, Maggie, but go home, and I’ll come with the telegraph there.”

I went to headquarters; they gave me permission to use the telegraph for a question or two. The report was not encouraging.

It was our Gerald—the officer had seen the flash and heard the report—an extremely loud report, as if there had been two charges of powder in the carbine.

The bullet was found in the saddle, and one cartridge was missing from his twenty rounds. Court-martial had declared him guilty, and the general’s confirmation of the sentence had just arrived. Fifty lashes in the camp square and four years’ imprisonment in the civil jail. Sentence to be carried out on the 12th. Everybody was sorry, but quite convinced he had tried to murder his superior officer. No one could understand with what motive.

I did not know what to think; there was more evidence forthcoming in a day or two, when we had the papers.

His statement in defense was, that he had just been returning from guard, when he remembered that he had forgotten to bring a book one of the officers had asked him to bring in from the town, some three miles distant. Without stopping to think he walked off at once; got the book, and was within a half a mile of the camp, when he fancied he saw a tiger. He got behind the bushes to watch, and saw one making for the distant camp. Anxious to secure the place, he incautiously broke open one of his packages and loaded, to have a shot at it. He had covered the beast, and was firing at the tiger, when he heard another report simultaneously with that of his own carbine. He saw the tiger roll right over as if shot, and then bound away. In another instant the officer came round the bush bleeding, and ordered him into arrest.

He was quite sure that he hit the tiger, and equally sure that another rifle was fired at the same moment that he pulled the trigger.

Of course such a lame statement had no effect, and he was sentenced.

I could not help thinking that there was a flaw in the evidence. How was it if there was as agreed, a loud report—which means a full charge of powder—that the bullet stopped at the saddle instead of going through both saddle and horse. That was a great discrepancy—a full charge would have made a loud report, and sent it right through anything at a distance of 200 yards. I felt that there was something wrong, and made up my mind to go on to the spot. I had but six days to go in, but much might be done. Margaret insisted on going with me in spite of all I could do to keep her away.

“Have I not done all you wished me to do since we have been out here? Do, for heaven’s sake let me have my way in this.”

So we went up country in post haste.

I was, of course, as one of the staff, admitted to see poor Gerald, whom I found terribly cut up.

“I don’t mind the imprisonment; it’s the disgrace! The lashes; By God! I shall kill myself directly I get loose after it, I know I shall.”

“No, no,” said Maggie; “don’t, for my sake. Oh, Gerald! if you knew how I have suffered for weeks past, you would live for my sake. I do not care about the brand or the lashes. I know you are innocent, and that there has been some horrible blunder committed in this matter. Oh, Willie, dear, do think of something to save him.”

“Oh, do, there’s a good fellow! get me some stuff that will make an end of me.”

“Don’t talk like that, Gerald, there’s some infernal mistake in it. Don’t despair yet. Let’s go over the ground again, step by step,” and I made him tell me the whole story over again.

“It seems to me, Gerald, we want but a few things to show you are not guilty. We want the tiger you shot at, and that we shan’t get; and we want the clue to the mystery of the other rifle.”

“Oh, I’ve thought of it all till I’m sick. I don’t care what happens now. I’ll wait till the day before it’s to come off, and then break my head against the walls.”

“Don’t be a fool, Gerald! I’m sure you are innocent. So is Margaret.”

“Yes; so are a hundred others; but it’s all no use. In three days I am disgraced for life, if I live.”

“Well, I must leave you now, and see what I can do.”

“Let me have five minutes with Maggie, will you?”

I left them alone for some ten minutes, and then told Maggie she must go home with me.

I was beaten; I could not see how I could get any fresh evidence, and without that a reprieve, a

postponement, was impossible.

I went to the wounded officer, the captain of his own company, and got him to tell his own story; it was just the same thing over again—always the exceedingly loud report, and the fouled and still smoking carbine.

“I would,” said the captain, “have given the price of my commission rather than have had it happen. He’s as fine a fellow as ever sat a horse, brave, kind, and as thorough a gentleman as the colonel himself; I always made him my orderly when I could, s as to have company. I declare to you that I did my best at the court-martial for him, and got into disgrace with the general presiding for ‘coloring my statements’—that was his expression—so as to favor the prisoner. I almost sniveled when I heard the sentence, as if he had been my own brother. The men are mad about it; there has not been a lash or public punishment of any kind in the regiment for the last twenty-five years.”

I hardly knew how to pass the time; I tried to think, but my ideas only traveled in the same old grooves again.

I invited the assistant surgeon to come up to my quarters, and introduced him to my sister. He was quite a young fellow, and seemed quite flattered by my simple attention, for in the army they have not quite made up their minds whether a medical officer should be treated as a gentleman; but the strangest thing I ever saw in my life was my sister’s conduct. Of course, speaking to you fellows I shan’t be misunderstood, and some of you have seen her. She laid herself out to please him to an extent I never should have thought my dear, grave Maggie capable of; sang to him, played to him, and made eyes at him till I thought her brain was turned. She said she should like to see his quarters, asked him to ask us to lunch, and shut me up like a rat-trap when I ventured to hint that it might not be convenient.

“Well, he went away at last as mad as she. I spoke to her after he was gone, and she fell into my arms, sobbing as if her heart was breaking, and then, without a word of explanation, ran out of the room.

Next day we went to his quarters, and nothing would satisfy her but that he should mix up some medicine for her out of the bottles of his little traveling case. There she was, handling, and sniffing, and tasting everything, like a child of ten rather than a girl of eighteen. She sent him about the room; made him bring books from the opposite side of it so that she might read about the properties of drugs; and, in short, behaved so like a lunatic that I thought the trouble about Gerald must have affected her mind. I got her away at last, and intended to insist on her remaining in the house and putting some ice to her head. It was quite unnecessary; the moment we left the surgery she was calm and silent as a nun.

Well, the days passed in some sort of dreary fashion till the evening of the 11th. I had been asked during the day to go down with the officers to see some rifle practice, as some temporary marks, and I went down.

It was rather late when I rode up to the firing point, and they were just leaving off; and one of

them came up and said,

“I say, captain, tell us the cause of these new bullets turning inside out?” and he handed me a bullet reversed; just such another as Williams has in his hand.

I took it, just to explain the matter to him, when a thought struck through my mind like a flash of lightning.

“Saved, by God!” I exclaimed. “Who’s got that bullet out of the saddle?”

“What bullet?”

“Gerald’s—my cousin’s.”

“Oh! ‘Gentleman Jack’s’ affair. The doctor’s got it.”

“Where is he?”

“Don’t know—quarters, I think.”

“No, he’s come into town; I saw him on the road as we came by.”

I sped on into town, leaving them to think what they pleased; and spent more than two hours finding the doctor. At last I caught him.

In another minute we were riding full gallop to his quarters.

He had the bullet—a little bruised and singularly flattened, and blunted at the point—it must have been just spent when it struck.

I then went to the sergeant who had charge of the nineteen rounds of ammunition that were found in Gerald’s pouch. About midnight I contrived to find him, and after some little delay I got possession of them.

I then returned to the doctor, and we compared the nineteen bullets with the one found in the saddle. I then ran to the telegraph clerk, roused him out of bed and told him to telegraph to the headquarters in Calcutta, to my lieutenant in charge of the magazines.

After an hour’s waiting, ringing at the bell, an answer came that the night watchman would fetch the lieutenant. I then sent message No. 1:—

“Examine the books and see the date on which the last ammunition was sent for the use of the 40th dragoons; find the same parcel, and carefully remove one cartridge from each of twenty packets, selected at random; take out bullets, and remove plugs; and send No. in base of cup of bullets.”

The answer came that he understood, and would rouse up the people to do it.

After an hour and a half, the answer came back:—

“All the bullets are numbered 5, with a dot on the right.”

I then sent message No. 2:—

“Examine what cartridges bear that No. 2 with a dot on the left, and report to whom issued, and when—report quickly—a man’s life depends on speed.”

Again I waited another hour. No answer came.

It was getting late—half-past two; at four the parade would take place. I urged more speed.

The reply came:—

“We have ten men at work breaking open barrels, and searching. No No.2 yet found.”

At last it came:—

“One barrel No.2 in store; the rest of the same shipment was damaged and useless, and sold in bulk to native dealers for value as old metal at one of the clearance sales some time ago.”

I had learnt all I could. I spurred back to camp with the bullets, from which I had never parted, in my pouch. I shall never forget the scene.

In the middle of the camp the men were drawn up in three sides of a square; in the center of the square were the triangles, with Gerald lashed to them. I saw them as I came down the hill take off his jacket and lash his wrists. I sped on. I could see the old colonel, with the paper in his hand, standing alone, and then I saw nothing more, for a dip in the road concealed them; as I rose again to the crest at less than a quarter of a mile. I saw a woman rush in from between the ranks towards the triangles, holding something in her hand. I darted on, and rushed into the square, but just in time to seize the farrier’s arm, as the lash was descending, and to see that the woman was my sister, and that she was being led away between two sergeants.

“Stop colonel, for the love of God!” I cried, with my hand still grasping the farrier’s arm; “I have evidence to prove the man not guilty.”

I then showed the colonel the bullet that had come from the saddle and the others from the pouch, and pointed out to him that while one was marked No. 2, the others were all marked No. 5 with a dot. I assured him, on my honor as an officer and a gentleman, that it was almost impossible that a No. 2 bullet could by any chance get into a packet of No. 5 bullets. He was only too glad to hear me, and agreed to postpone the execution of the sentence till further orders from the general of his division.

I've heard some shouts, and I've seen some displays of enthusiasm in my time, but I never shall forget the shout that rose the minute that the colonel had pronounced that the execution of the sentence on corporal Ashton would be postponed until further orders.

The men had been standing at "attention," many of them with tears rolling down their cheeks, but when they heard "postponed," they broke ranks, rushed up to the triangles, cut the lashings, broke the cat, screamed, shouted, and danced like madmen.

"Three cheers for 'Gentleman Jack' and his wife! Again! again, boys!"

Officers and all joined in for a few minutes. There stood the old grey headed colonel in the midst of the scene that outbedlamed Bedlam.

As for me, I was like a man in a dream; I felt a hundred hands grasping mine. I had my sister sobbing in my arms, and then I heard the colonel say to the bugler, "sound the assembly."

What a change! In less than a minute I stood by the fallen triangles in the centre of three lines of living statues. Not a sound; not a movement.

"Major Jackson, reform your column and break off the men," said the colonel; and then walked away with myself and sister.

"But what did your sister do there?"

"Well, she had promised Gerald that he should not suffer the dangers of the lash; and had, during the hour I thought she was fooling with the doctor, managed to get hold of his bottle of prussic acid, and had rushed out with half of it to him and half to herself; and her appearance had so thoroughly surprised every one that she had reached the triangles, and almost raised it to her lips, when the doctor, recognizing his own blue bottle, struck her hand a violent blow, and dashed it on the ground, beside disabling her from getting her own share.

"And how did the affair end? was the general of the division satisfied?"

"I don't think he would have been with that evidence alone, and so we went about to hunt for more. I begged that as we had found so much, Gerald might be permitted to accompany a party of search, under a guard, to find the missing tiger.

We went there, Maggie insisting on joining us. All the officers off duty went, and about half the men.

Gerald then pointed out the spot where he had stood, and where he shot the tiger; and from that point we started, crossing and re-crossing, till there could not have been anything as large as a half-crown that could be hidden.

Maggie and I were riding in front of the line, when Maggie exclaimed:

“What a horrible smell comes from that copse.”

“Don’t smell anything, Mag.”

“You’ve lived here so long, that you’ve no sense of smell left.”

Of course as Maggie was with us, Blinkers was there too. Blinkers advanced to the copse—paused—and rushed underneath the grass, barking as if infuriated.

“There’s something in there, Willie.”

Some of the others coming up, we pushed our way into the depths, guided by the frantic bark of Blinkers, and, after being much scratched and torn, found ourselves in the centre of a trampled circle of jungled grass, with the half-devoured remains of a large tiger.

The doctor was sent for, and the wound discovered; the beast had evidently been lamed, the bullet breaking the fore leg. It was also evident that, wounded as it was, it had lingered on till it was nothing but skin and bone, and had died only within the last few days. Assisted by some natives, the good-natured doctor commenced the horrible task of searching for the bullet, and, after half an hour’s labor, the most disgusting he had undergone, it was found flattened against the large bone of the hind leg, and handed to me.

Never shall I forget the pleasure I felt when I saw on the rescued bullet, the No. 5, with a dot as fresh and clear as if it had just come from the pressing machine.

Great was the rejoicing that night in the camp of the 40th. Blue fires were burnt, the band came and serenaded Maggie. The whole of the officers, including the old colonel, came to a levee; but still I felt there was one thing more to be found out. How did the No. 2 bullet get into the saddle?

At length I inquired whether any of the officers missed any of their arms. Curiously enough, the only missing arms was a gun belonging to the wounded captain. I asked, did he remember the size. He did. It was just a shade smaller than the bore of the regimental carbines. You could get a government bullet down by a good deal of hammering.

I now propounded my theory, that the bullet No. 2, had been fired from the captain’s missing rifle, for the point of the bullet was marked with rings, and considerably flattened. Now there was nothing in the flesh, and nothing in the saddle to produce these marks, and they must therefore have been made before firing.

I then proposed that a full search should be made with dogs, for at least two miles round, from where the shot was fired, to see if any traces could be found of either the man or the gun.

We made the most careful search; presently I came to a stone on the road itself, marked in a most peculiar manner.

“What’s the cause of these marks?” said I to the farrier of the troops, who had volunteered to

help, and who said he never felt more grateful to any one in all his life, than he did to me for squeezing his wrist so hard that day.

“What’s the cause? It’s been used as a hammer for something—a nail in a shoe.”

“Nail-heads are square.”

“True for you—these are round.”

“Do you think a ramrod would make these marks?”

“It just would. Somebody’s been driving down a hard bullet with it.”

“So I think. Now take this stone and throw it straight over the gap into the middle of the copse, and I’ll mark where it seems to fall.”

He threw it, and marked the spot, we found our way into the jungles; and there, within a few years of the stone, under the long leaves, we found what we sought—the remains of a native, stripped entirely of flesh and skin except on the hands and feet, and with a great gaping wound in the skull; and in the inside, which the ants had perfectly cleaned out, was a large piece of the breach of the burst gun that he had by his side.

The whole evidence was there: two empty cartridge cases; another No. 2 bullet; eight untouched cartridges. It was clear enough that the man, whoever he was, had taken the captain’s gun and in putting in two charges of powder, rammed down the too large bullet with the blows of the stone on the now bruised end of the ramrod; and the loud report that all the witnesses spoke of was as loud as the simultaneous report of the discharge of three charges of powder could make it. While the want of force in the bullet was accounted for by the bursting of the gun.

We took home the skull and the burst rifle, and the cartridge cases, together with some remnants of clothing; and we there found out the intended murderer to have been one of the cyces, or grooms of the captain, that he had horse-whipped a month before for ill-using a horse of which he had charge.

Of course there was a new trial ordered; and, and as the evidence was unquestionable, Gerald was discharged.

“Did he leave the regiment?”

“Not a bit—Why should he? The men worshipped him, and the officer who was wounded was invalided; and he and his comrades managed matters amount them so well that at the first parade of the regiment, in Calcutta, some six months afterwards, the old colonel presented to the men a new officer, Captain Ashton, adding, ‘If he makes half as good an officer as he did a soldier there will not be a better in her majesty’s service.’ ”

“And your sister Margaret?”

“Oh, I’ve just sent a little case lined with velvet, and something inside engraved “William Gerald Ashton, from his affectionate uncle.”—*Once A Week*.

Green-Mountain Freeman [Mt. Plier, Vermont], August 21, 1867