THE TONTINE OF THE LOYAL UPSHIRES

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PRIVATE Billy Harkness passed half the night before the battle in collecting subscriptions for what he called a "tontine" for those who were to take part in the frontal portion of the attack. There were to be about 100 men engaged in that dangerous enterprise, about half a company of Billy's own regiment, the Loyal Upshires; and the same number of the Brocklehurst Rifles.

Billy's scheme caught on well enough, though many of those asked—and willing—to enter the tontine did not possess either the sovereign which he required of them or even half that sum. From these Billy accepted an order for the money against the next installment of pay due them. In this way, and with the help of donations from officers and others, Billy collected for his tontine over £100 in cash and promises. This he deposited in the hands of the regimental doctor, with explanations.

"But how am I to know who has won it?" asked the medico.

And Billy explained that since it would be the doctor's duty after the fight to find and fetch in, with his bearers and ambulance, the wounded, and bury the dead, it would be easy for him to judge who was the man entitled to sweep the pool.

"It's him that gets farthest, alive but wounded," Billy said; "the unwounded is disqualified, sir."

"What if two are together?" asked the doctor.

"You'll have to judge, sir, if you'll be good enough," Billy explained; "and if you was to see fit to divide the pool among two or three, there'd be no one would dispute your decision."

The doctor accepted his appointment, laughingly congratulating Billy upon his tontine. "It's a grand plan, Harkness," he said, "and no mistake! But it's hard on the chaps that get in unwounded, if any do!"

"You're right, sir, it does seem so," Billy replied. "But if they do get in, why, lord, they'll be glad enough to have got off with whole skins and to let some one else take the pool!"

There was a kopje that stood in the way of the British advance, like a lion in the path. The great rocky hill was firmly held by a strong commando of Boers, who had intrenched themselves after their fashion, and had mounted several guns to command the approaches.

The position was practically impregnable to frontal attack, for from the foot of the kopje there ran out in this direction a level plain, without cover or with only an occasional thornbush or isolated stone or rock. Troops attacking from the front would be exposed to a withering fire from every gun and rifle that the Boers should choose to bring to bear upon them, and must advance half way to the foot of the hill.

For this reason the position was to be attacked from both flanks, only the two half companies already mentioned being detailed to draw the fire of the enemy and keep his attention as far as possible from the main attack by attempting, or pretending to attempt, to rush the position from the front. The task entrusted to the hundred brave fellows seleced for this enterprise was dangerous enough. It was likely to prove fatal to most or all of those concerned, and that was why Bill Harkness thought of his tontine, and why his ingenious idea "caught on" among those about to take part in the affair.

The four young officers engaged commenced operations overnight by placing their handful of men in skirmishing order under what little cover each man could find for himself at three-quarters of a mile from the kopje.

At dawn the guns from the British position shelled the Boer camp with vigor, as though preparing for a frontal attack in force, the little body of scattered men of the Upshires and Rifles supporting the illusion by peppering the hill with immense energy from a hundred points in such a manner as to lead the enemy to suppose they were being attacked by a very much larger force, while the troops engaged in the main movement made wide sweeps to right and left under good cover. So much for the battle, which went ultimately in favor of the British. It is with the movements of the hundred or so of men engaged in the frontal attack that we are concerned at present.

The enemy replied to their fire with a furious fusillade of shrapnel, which searched the hiding places of our handful of subscribers to Billy's tontine and killed or wounded a score of them before the men had advanced one inch from the positions each had taken up under cover of darkness.

At length the signal was given for the advance, and each man left his shelter to creep or rush over as many yards of open as lay between him and the next spot, nearer the kopje, where he could lie concealed while he put in a few shots from his own rifle and drew fifty from those of unseen Boer marksmen.

It was a lamentable task that was set the poor fellows, and they were not long in learning this. In the first rush forward some twenty or thirty fell dead or wounded and were left lying in the open, to wriggle, if alive, toward some tuft of grass or any kind of shelter from the hail of bullets which swept over every moving thing visible to the Boers. Many found it better to lie still, rather than attract the enemy's fire by making any movement, and so they lay and suffered throughout the scorching day, without water and without shade, dead and dying together.

For many hours the skirmishing attack continued. The men knew well enough that they could not take the position and were not expected to do so; that they were there to draw the enemy's fire and hold his attention by constantly creeping closer and by pouring in bullets enough to delude him, if possible, into supposing that he was being attacked by a large force.

By 4 in the afternoon there may have been a score of men left unwounded, or so slightly wounded as to be able to continue the advance, which was, of course, by this time perfectly useless and aimless; but the men remaining in the running remembered the tontine, and though they would have served the military purpose for which they had been set that fatal task quite as well by lying, each in the safest spot he could find, until night, or until the kopje should have been taken by the main attack, each man now thought of his chance for the hundred pounds pool and pushed on, watching his rivals and trying to gain a foot or two of space for the tontine's sake, but thinking little of the enemy, who sat and picked him off whenever he moved, as a man may sit and shoot the rabbits that dart from hole to hole.

By 6 in the evening there were five men still in the running; by 7 there were three. Two of them were close together, running—as it were—neck and neck, so close to one another that they made when they moved for the same rock or thorn bush. The third man was fifty yards away on their left and perhaps a yard or two ahead. The two watched the one with anxiety, realizing that he was slightly in front. The single man was an Upshire private, while of the other pair one was a sergeant in the same regiment and the other a fine young private in the Rifles. These two conversed in a friendly manner in spite of their grim rivalry. Each was slightly wounded. The older man was shot through the left arm; the younger dragged his right foot. Both were glad of their wounds, for by virtue of them they were qualified to win Billy Harkness' tontine. As for Billy himself, he had fallen long since and lay groaning a quarter of a mile away with a shot through his body. The third man still in the running appeared to be pretty badly wounded; he moved slowly and lay down constantly, though he seemed determined to continue.

Gordon, the sergeant, knew him.

"It is Hughes," he said; "poor devil, he seems pretty badly hit. Hughes, lad," he continued shouting, "what d'you feel, where have they got you?"

"Through the shoulder, — them," the man shouted back. "I can't go on much longer—I'm dead faint—I'm bleedin' to death!"

"I don't think we've got to fear him much," said the younger man, Evans of the Rifles. "It'll be between you and me, sergeant."

Gordon lay staring at Hughes.

"I tell you what, youngster," he said presently, "I'm off to have a look at the poor chap; it's getting dusk, there's not so much risk. I might as well be there as here; better, for he's further on than we."

"Come on then, mate. I'll lend a hand with him, too," said Evans. "Lord, night's coming on, we may as well hang together and talk, while we're alive!"

The two men crept across toward the third man. Many shots were aimed at them, but it was growing dark and they were not hit.

Gordon had a little water in his bottle, and this he gave to the dying man. Between them they bound up his shoulder and stopped the bleeding.

"God reward you—that's better!" said Hughes; "but I tell you square I must shove on for to win this 'ere pool, though you've done Christian work for me."

"We're all for that," laughed Evans, and the three wounded men dragged themselves toward a group of stones twenty yards further on. A shower of bullets whistled about them. Hughes cried "Oh!" and turned over, dead. The other two reached cover unhurt.

"Well, I don't know, but I almost think I shall stop here a bit, maybe for the night," laughed Evans; "it's a nice bedroom, ain't it? You'll be going on, I dare say?"

Gordon looked out. There was not another inch of cover within fifty yards. He might travel the distance in safety, thanks to the dusk; but it would be a great risk.

"I think I'll stop," he said.

"Thank the Lord," laughed Evans, "for I expect I should have followed if you'd gone on."

Then the two men lay down and tried to sleep. There had been tremendous fighting for the whole of the day on both sides of the kopjes, but the din of war had now died down and apparently the enemy still held his position.

Gordon's wound was painful and he could not sleep; his companion was restless also.

"Let's both swear we won't move on if the other sleeps," he suggested suddenly; and Gordon laughed and agreed.

"You'll think me darned anxious to win that pool, and so I am," continued Evans, "and as you seem the right kind of good chap, mate, and may be my last friend on this earth, I don't know but what I'll tell you the reason. There's a woman in it."

"No doubt," said Gordon; "there generally is." Evans grunted, and the conversation languished for a few minutes.

"I don't know why you should be so keen on winning this yer tontine," said Evans presently. "I seem to have particular reasons; they say one's own always look the biggest. I suppose you're a married man?"

"No, nor likely to be," Gordon growled, "women ain't in my line."

As a matter of fact, and as Evans would have known, had he belonged to the Upshires, Gordon was popularly supposed in the regiment to have been badly jilted; his remarks upon the subject of the sex were invariably sour, and he had been heard to announce that any man who trusted a woman must be the kind of darned fool that is past praying for. In fastening this theory upon Gordon the regiment had, for once, made an accurate guess. He had been abominably treated but a year or two since while stationed at Aldershot, his girl having suddenly and utterly deserted him, presumably in favor of a younger man, and this within hail of the wedding day. Gordon never spoke of the matter, but the catastrophe had left him a silent, soured man, and the regiment—basing the hypothesis upon part knowledge—had accurately gauged the reason for his sternness and silence and for his soured view of womankind.

Evans spoke again presently.

"I suppose I've behaved — badly to her," he said suddenly; "for it's two years now and we ain't married yet, though she knows, and, so 'elp me God, I swear it's true, my one and chief desire is to do rightly by her. It was that or nothing at the time. Chaps like me can't marry when we like, as you know, and we fell in love with one another."

Gordon laughed, and the laugh apparently jarred upon the other, for he lay still for some little while and said no more.

"You needn't suppose," he resumed, after a pause of a quarter of an hour, during which there was silence broken only by the sound of an occasional sniping shot or the cry of some wounded man behind them asking for water or praying aloud that for God's sake he might die. "You mustn't suppose I regret it or ever did regret it, or shall. I'm only sorry it's so long before I've been able to do right by her." Another pause, and again the startling single shots and the appalling prayers from the rear.

"I've sent her what I can," Evans resumed; "but Lord knows whether she gets it now during this blamed war. She doesn't come under any kind of list, d'you see, of those to get helped, and who knows what becomes of letters posted in this darned country? Three pound I've sent her since the war began, an' my chocolate box that she'll have sold for ten thick 'uns if it ever reached her, but who's to know?"

"Any kids?" said Gordon.

"One, Lord! You never did see such a wonder! Crawled at six months and walked at twelve; the image of her mother, God bless her. Lord, what wouldn't I give to see the pair again before I die!"

"Maybe you will," said Gordon, sympathetically, "maybe you will. Our chaps'll fetch us in the morning under the red flag or they'll take the kopje."

"That'd be all right," said Evans, "but come morning light, I'm bound to shove on and so are you, and those blamed chaps up there will shoot straighter than they did last evening, you may bet!"

Gordon said nothing.

"You see," Evans resumed, presently, "it was like this: Mildred—"

Gordon gave a great start, almost rising to his feet.

"What's up, mate?" said Evans, "gave your arm a twinge? Stop a bit, let's see if I can get the bandage more comfortable like."

"Yes, that's better," said Gordon. "Lord, how it hurt, suddenly; for all the world as though I'd been shot over again."

Evans arranged the bandage and lay down again, looking up at the stars.

"Where was I?"

"You were saying something about the woman—Martha, or Maud—what was the name?"

"No, Mildred; well it was like this: Mildred she'd have been married in a month to another bloke; she liked him well enough, but for some reason she took a fancy for me, and felt she couldn't marry him. Her folks, they were all for forcing her, and she left them. They haven't took any notice of her since, and I don't know that she'd ask them now, not if she was starving, she and the kid."

"What's the kid called?" asked Gordon presently.

"They're both Mildreds," said Evans. "If you was to survive this yer job and I didn't," he resumed after another pause, "p'raps you'd look up the poor girl and tell her what happened, and why I hadn't sent any more cash after this date; you can tell her about this tontine, and how near I was to earning a hundred pounds! Lord, how near one can be to 'eaven and yet just miss it; this 'ere pool would make all the difference if one had got it!"

"What would you do with the money if you was to win it after all?" asked Gordon.

Evans' eyes looked wistfully into the distance. He did not answer for a moment or two.

"A hundred pounds!" he said dreamily at last. "I'd set her right, firstly; then I don't know but what I'd rent a cottage and grow poultry; anyhow, I shouldn't leave her much again, and Lord! we'd be happy. You don't like women, I can see, so you don't understand; but me and Mildred found our fate when we met and no mistake about it."

"Ah!" said Gordon.

"Where was all this?" he asked presently.

"At Aldershot—she's at Dover now, but her folks are at Aldershot still—Macdonalds, he's a saddle maker in King street, doing well. You might tell him about all this and say I meant well by her. Tell him us Tommies can't get married just when we please. He might forgive her, if he saw the kid. We'd have been married if I'd lived, you can tell him, so help me we should."

Gordon said no more. Presently Evans fell asleep. Gordon lay looking up at the sky, tossing restlessly, but after a while he too calmed down, and lay fairly still, but he did not sleep.

He only spoke once, however: "And at any rate it's better than I expected," he muttered.

Toward morning he crawled back a couple of yards and lay well behind Evans. Presently he fell asleep.

Evans woke him when it was nearly light.

"I thought I'd tell you mate, I'd be up and off when you're fair awake. I wouldn't steal a march on you."

"Stay where you are behind the rock, and don't be a — fool; can't you see you're in front of me?" said Gordon. "I'm going no further, not a blamed yard."

"I must," said Evans. "You was as far as me last night, up at the stones; I must go on to the next cover to win."

"You have won," said Gordon, "see where you are and where I am."

"I'd rather fight square for the tontine; you're dealing generous because of my story—"

"Get out," said Gordon. "I'm not such a fool; I'm not fit to move; I tried to crawl home while you were asleep, feelin' bad; but I couldn't travel more'n a yard or two."

"Come along and I'll help you—we'll lie abreast and win it together, why shouldn't we divide the stakes?"

"Let me be," said Gordon, "I'm too bad to move."

"Well, you are a good 'un, one of the best," said Evans. "Look 'ere, now, I won't going on; if you're bad, I'm bad too. Now, then, let me help you back behind these yere stones; they'll get you out here in the grass."

As though to prove the truth of this statement a volley of rifle shots rang out from the top of the kopje, and Evans fell over across Gordon's body.

Gordon dragged him behind the stones and examined him carefully. "Where've they hit you, lad?" he said.

"Through the body," said Evans, faintly. "I think this'll do me. See my girl if you can, mate, and tell her—goes by the name of Mrs. Evans—14 Duke street, Dover. Lord! I m faint!"

"Keep alive till doctor comes and you've won the tontine," said Gordon. "Buck up, old man!"

"Can't—can't," murmured Evans. "Oh, dear me! Oh, dear!"

An hour later Gordon saw to his joy that the ambulance men were out on the hill bringing in the wounded and burying the dead. Evans was still alive but unconscious. Gordon moistened his lips and temples with the few remaining drops of water. He waved a handkerchief persistently, and at length a couple of men, having buried Hughes, who lay close at hand, reached his sanctuary. The doctor and the chaplain were with them.

"Are you the last?" asked the doctor. "If so, I congratulate you, for you've won the tontine."

"This is the winner," said Gordon; "he's a yard higher than me—he's alive, isn't he?"

"Yes, he's alive," said the doctor; "just alive; couldn't you have got in front of him? You seem fairly well, barring that arm."

"Faint, doctor; couldn't drag myself another inch, not for a hundred pounds, and that's the truth!"

It was not the truth, but perhaps the recording angel dealt leniently with the lie. The doctor believed it.

"Well, you've had the most infernal luck," he said. "If the man had twopennorth of grit," he added afterward to the chaplain, "he'd have dragged himself ahead of the other fellow; his wound isn't as bad as all that.

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Gordon was still in the hospital when he read among the items of war news in a Cape paper the following:

"Sailed for England, invalided home, No. 439, Thomas Evans, Brockelhurst Rifles."

Evans' was the fourth name in the list; against it were placed the words, "doing well."

Gordon has received a scrawl from the young Rifleman before this. It contained the following passage after the expression of gratitude: "I found out your name, and Mildred shall know it, and the kid too, and she youngster shall be taught to mention it in her prayers. * * *"

"I think I need all they can do for me in that line," said Gordon, when he read this, "and perhaps a little more." He sighed and sat for an hour staring out of the window. Then he tried to read the paper, but the attempt was a failure.

He kicked it away and laughed.

"What a — old fool I am!" he said.