

'Used to drive a truck for the Sheffield people,' he went on. 'Drove that truck every day for five years. Yes, sir, never missed a day in five years! Them Sheffield people is a great bunch; always give us Saturday afternoon off! An' you've never been there?'

Just the shadow of a smile crept around the trooper's mouth, and he answered, imitating Butters's sober tone: 'No, sir, I never have!'

Well, well,' commented Ezra, and then he launched with his full powers upon a description of his native heath and of the thirty odd years of his colorless life. The trooper lay stretched out at full length under the rain of trivialities and tried to sleep, but Butters's nasal tones were not soothing. Now and then he drowsed away, but Ezra's voice would rise and the unhappy trooper would awake into the glare of the sand and the sky with a start. Finally he sat bolt upright and faced his tormentor.

'For heaven's sake!' he ejaculated, 'sing "Beulah Land" or anything else! There may be two people in that world that care about hearing that but who cares about whether your boss gave you five or six dollars a week? I don't.'

The trooper slid abruptly over the tailpiece, and Butters saw him climb into the next waggon.

'Now I wonder,' he mused, 'what's the matter with him. Heat, I guess. I was just tryin' to amuse him.'

He relapsed again into uncomfortable silence, and abuse of his horses. The line of wagons crawled on across the plain, following only the shifting, shallow ruts which had been cut by other trains before them. Butters drooped his head and silently regretted the moment in which he had thrown away a job and the proximity of Dolan's free lunches because the government offered him more than he had been getting.

At the head of the column Lieutenants Cadman and Stevens began consulting their watches and assuming expressions of care and thoughtfulness. It happened that it was Cadman's first independent command, and his responsibilities rested heavily upon him.

'It's time we came in sight of timber,' said Stevens.

In reply Cadman held up a hand for silence, and both checked their horses and listened. The creaking of axles sounded loud behind them in the hot silence, but far in front there throbbed another sound—a sound they both knew.

'They're at it!' shouted Cadman. 'And the Lord knows how long they've been at it!'

Stevens scratched his head in perplexity. 'Now I wonder what we ought to do,' he mused. 'Run our waggons right smack into the fighting and risk getting in the way or even losing them? Or just sit tight here and wait for something to happen?'

In the inmost recesses of his being First Lieutenant Cadman was perplexed by the same question; but he had no intention that Second Lieutenant Stevens should guess it. Indeed, he welcomed the manifest perplexity of his subordinate.

'My orders,' he said, with a certain amount of stiffness, 'are perfectly explicit. I am to bring up this ammunition with all possible speed—and that's what I shall do. Lieutenant Stevens, will you order the rear guard to close in, and decrease the intervals between your flankers?'

Stevens saluted and rode away, while the waggon-train, men and beasts pricking up their ears at the sound of the distant firing, ploughed steadily on through the sand. As Stevens passed the first waggon, Butters shouted at him:

'Say, we ain't goin' up where all that racket is, are we?'

At the moment Stevens' contempt for teamsters was intensified by a certain irritation at the sudden stiffening of his superior's discipline. Butters' question hit him across the grain.

'You'll go where you are ordered,' he snapped.

The waggon train assumed a more compact form. The members of the escort closed up on the flanks and at the rear, while a few troopers scouted still further out on the plain. Stevens and Cadman endeavored to be everywhere at once, searching zealously for some danger to be met and avoided, but they encountered nothing save the increasing sounds of firing ahead. To increase the compactness of his column, Cadman threw his waggons into two lines, and Butters found himself driving beside the deaf teamster. This was an added grievance, but he remembered the trooper in the back of the waggon.

'They won't make us get into this, will they?' he called across anxiously.

The trooper stuck his head above the side of the waggon and glowered at him. 'This battle,' he growled, 'was designed and is being carried out solely for the torture and destruction of teamsters.'

Butters stared at him vacantly and shook his head. 'I hired out to drive my team,' he objected. 'I ain't no soldier.'

The sandy nature of the ground changed somewhat, and a thin growth of bushes and stunted trees appeared. The ground commenced to slope and the surface grew rockier. Gradually the glare of the sun decreased, and men and horses gasped their relief.

Butters took the empty pipe from his mouth and gazed into the empty bowl despairingly. 'Ain't got any 'baccy, have ye?' he called across to the cavalryman.

The other shook his head. 'There's plenty of it up there where they're fighting, though,' he added with a grin.

Butters seemed to consider the matter deeply. 'I guess they can keep it,' he said finally.

Mingled with the distant roar and cackle of the firing came a new sound—a deeper, steadier roar. Cadman heard it and scowled.

'The river's higher!' he muttered.

The column hurried forward, spurred on by Cadman's nervous orders. A trooper from the advance party came riding back to where the two lieutenants were holding a hurried consultation.

'The bridge is gone, sir,' he announced.

Cadman stared at him incredulously. 'Gone?' he demanded. The trooper nodded. Cadman and Stevens looked at each other and then at the trooper, as though he were the cause of the disaster.

'We'll have to wait, that's all,' Stevens said.

'There's a signal corps man on the other side of the river,' the trooper went on, 'but there's none of us up there can read the wig-wag.'

With a muttered exclamation Cadman spurred forward his horse and rode toward the point where the little knot of horsemen had gathered on the edge of the river. He took a private's carbine, tied a handkerchief to it, and held mute converse with the figure on the other side of the stream. The cavalryman and the distant waggon-train watched them in uncomprehending interest. Cadman's face grew more and more serious as the signals fluttered back and forth. Finally he lowered his improvised flag and turned to Stevens with a helpless expression.

'We're licked if we can't get these waggons across the river,' he announced in a dull voice. 'They've been fighting here for fourteen hours, and the ammunition's nearly gone. They can't hold out more than an hour longer. This freshet came along two days ago and washed out the old bridge and the pontoons.'

The men looked at the river. It roared past them brimming from bank to bank—a hundred and fifty yards wide. The signal man on the other bank leaned on his flag and watched them curiously. Through the rush of the waters they heard the rattle of firing that would die out in defeat unless they could get the blue boxes across.

'How about fords?' Cadman asked.

The troopers shook their heads.

'We've been five miles up and down stream,' explained one of them whose trousers were wet to the waist and whose bay horse was black with the water, 'and there ain't a place better than this!'

Cadman pushed his horse to the bank, but the beast refused to enter the water. He used his spur and the flat of his sabre—and was nearly unsaddled for his pains.

'Did you try the depth here?' he demanded of the drenched soldier.

'I couldn't get ten feet from the shore,' answered the man.

The two officers and the little group of soldiers continued to stare helplessly at the rushing water, seemingly obsessed by the consciousness of their own powerlessness. The signal-man on the opposite bank shouted something unintelligible, waved his arms, and sat down. Presently they saw the clouds of smoke arising from his pipe.

'Gee!' exclaimed a voice in Cadman's ear. 'That fellow over there's got some smokin'.'

Cadman whirled to see Butters—his long figure leaning eagerly against a tree, his hands in his trousers' pockets, his pipe, bowl downward, hanging from his lips—contemplating the distant smoker with an expression of the keenest envy.

Cadman's helpless indignation found a vent. 'Why did you leave your team?' he stormed.

Ezra turned upon him a glance of mild astonishment. 'Well, they'll stand all right,' he explained. 'Can't go very far,' he added, with a cheerful grin at the river.

'You get back to them!' shouted Cadman.

'All right, all right!' murmured Butters, with the air of a man quieting a weeping child, as he went back to his horses.

The column commenced to lose all semblance of military order and straggled to the edge of the river to watch the thing that had stopped it. Cadman recovered from the first shock, which had reduced him to blind inactivity, and became feverishly busy. Men galloped up and down the bank looking for boats. He himself tried to find fords in a dozen places; he sent the best swimmers of his half-company into the water with their horses. In the meantime the teamsters stood about in knots and watched the fruitless effort of the cavalry without attempting to hide their scorn. Occasionally men appeared on the other shore. The sound of firing continued without slackening; it was evident that the engagement was still too hot for men to be spared.

After a while Cadman sat down on the ground in a dejected heap, and watched his distant horsemen scurrying along the distant banks of the stream. Stevens, whose supply of wild schemes for forcing a passage was not exhausted, stood at his side and offered further suggestions, to all of which Cadman shook his head despondently.

'And now,' he groaned, 'that we are hung up on the edge of this silly brook, they'll probably get into our rear,