CHAPTER XXIV.

WAR.

It was past midnight. Sleep had driven most of the excited multitude to bed. Cula came to me, and said,—

"Frank, I want an extra doctor at once, to go to the fort at the summit of Mount Boro. They are ready for a siege. I send at ten o'clock ten nurses and an extra doctor. Nominate a man."

"I will have a doctor ready," I replied, "and with your permission will go with him to see that all is in order in my department."

"Go," he replied, "but if possible, return with the boat, though it will only allow you six hours to superintend."

And so it was arranged.

At two o'clock the doctor and I were in the launch with the grey-clad soldier nurses. Carefully they had stacked their rifles and baggage, and, after a short chat, went to bed, for they recognized the wisdom of taking care of themselves, so that they might the better perform their duties. At nine we all met at breakfast. The soldier nurses were merry, as if they were going to attend a marriage feast, instead of journeying to prepare for the dead and the dying. Youth and health cannot long be sad, even when approaching a chamber of horrors.

In the distance we saw three captive balloons, and on approaching Pentona, found that they were attached to stations that formed a triangle round the city, which was crowded with soldiers.

On the wharf we found Darcy Brenda, in the grey-green uniform of a general, waiting to receive us.

"All our prisoners are soldiers on parole," he told me, "and regard the coming campaign as an excellent holiday."

Martial law, we found, had been proclaimed, and every prisoner who desired—which included them all—was allowed to come out as a soldier, knowing that any disobedience of orders or breaches of discipline would be met by death.

Going to the central station, I found that a report was received from each of the balloons of all that took place within view of their powerful telescopes.
"They can see," said Brenda, "the enemy when they are over a day's march away."

After a brief stay at Pentona, we re-embarked and proceeded on our way. At fourteen o'clock we came to the end of the waterway, and were met by a troop of soldiers on double electric tricycles. These machines had sufficient power to progress slowly, so that it required but little exertion to travel on them at a speed of about fifteen miles an hour.

Mount Boro rose gently from the plain for some twelve hundred feet, when the ascent began to be both steep and rugged. Dismounting from our cycles, we guided them in front of us, and so commenced our ascent to the fort, through the cool shade of the great pines. Presently, on stopping to rest, we looked downwards and saw the road we had come pass beneath us several times, as corkscrew-like it wound its way to the lower part of the mountain. Nearing the summit, on which the fort was established, we entered the open mouth of a tunnel through which we could pass upright, two abreast. Hardly had we proceeded a few yards by the dim light of a few torches, when the tunnel became brilliantly illuminated, and we found that we were confronted by a series of cross bars, which were in the form of an isosceles triangle, three inches at the base, six on the longer sides, and a similar distance apart. On approaching them, we found they were slid down from the roof into a solid base, and were firm as the Rock of Cashel. They rose automatically as we approached, and we saw, some thirty yards behind them, an array of quick-firing machine guns, which sank into a pit, from which they rose when required to send their deadly contents through the network of bars, and again sink to be reloaded.

Our journey had been performed with a stern, silent speed that was rather depressing, and which seemed to us to be quite unnecessary. Coming towards us, we now perceived a dark, grey-bearded man, rather above the middle height. Like every one else, since the declaration of war, he was dressed in the grey uniform of the soldiers. His eyes were almost black, and very piercing. His features were broad and swarthy, and wholly characteristic of the unmixed blood of the Rodas. Saluting me in military style, he held out his hand,—

"Your visit, Dr. Fairleigh, is very welcome, though unexpected. I have heard of you from General Cula Dero. I am Ket Troca, the Governor of the Fortress Borna. And your arrival is opportune. We will be attacked by the Rodas, probably at dawn."

On expressing my admiration for the defence of the tunnel, he replied,—

"You have not seen our best defence."

We passed on as we talked.

"Yonder fans," he said, pointing to some machinery, "will fill
BEYOND THE ICE.

the tunnel with a gas that will kill every man or animal in it; and as they are round a turn, no weapon of the invading force can reach them."

"Would it not," I asked, "take a very considerable time to fill the tunnel with sufficient gas to be effective?"

"No," he replied, stolidly. "Even supposing it were full of men as it could hold, in less than a minute after the fans were set going every man would be insensible, and most of them would be dead." At the end of the tunnel we came to a perpendicular flight of ladder steps and a double lift, on the latter of which we sent up the cycles and our party, after which Troca and I ascended, leaving the garrison below. The lift was hydraulic, and brought us up a distance of over 800 feet. On reaching the top we found that the fortress consisted of a large observatory, and sufficient accommodation for a considerable number of soldiers. A spring of water and a large stock of provisions made it able to stand a protracted siege, even if all communication with the outer world were cut off, which was very unlikely to happen.

The chief importance of the place was as an observatory and vantage ground, from which the movements of approaching troops could be seen. Communication was held with Pentona by means of a secret buried cable. In case, however, this should be discovered by the enemy, a number of carrier gulls were kept caged and sent to Pentona, when a number were received in exchange; and so communication could always be kept up.

Kit Troca took me to the telescopes, which were very powerful, and enabled any body of men to be seen from an immense distance.

"The Rodas," he said, "have scattered, and so approached in small parties of two or three, each carrying a young pine. There are now about 2000 of them encamped in the thick pine-grove on the mountain slope to the right."

"If they attack you bravely," I queried, in consternation, "surely they will carry the fort by sheer force of numbers? How many fighters have you?"

"Every member of the garrison," said Troca, "over ten years of age is a fighter. I have ninety-seven soldiers. The ten soldier nurses that came with you, twenty-one women and children, and ourselves. If, as I think, the Rodas attack us just before daybreak, over 2000 strong, and fight as they usually do, with fearless enthusiasm, we will slay at least four out of every five of them in a few hours."

The man smiled calmly, amused at my evident surprise.

"It seems an awful slaughter."

"What matter?" he asked with scorn. "They are murderous savages, who are too lazy and selfish to accept civilization. Your wife and General Dero have always advocated their subjugation,
and, had their wishes been carried out, the Gurlas would never have been able to attack us as they soon will."

As I looked at the high walls surrounding the fort, I shuddered at the thought of the awful slaughter that must take place, if it were attacked by a brave foe. On three sides the walls were almost perpendicular, on the fourth they were approached by a very steep slope. The Rodas were expected to try and rush this slope and the tunnel; all the other approaches being impassable. No column of smoke, or other sign, indicated the encampment of the Rodas in the pines.

As we scanned the country far and wide, through the powerful telescopes, we could see in the distance the towns seemingly asleep, and the war balloons motionless, high up above them. The quiet, to my mind, seemed like that which in tropical regions comes before great storms, on a sudden to change, as the air becomes filled with the rumble and roar of the thunder, the vivid flashes of the lightning, and the down-pouring rain torrents. I felt horror-stricken as I thought of the hissing shower of death-dealing bullets from the compressed air guns; the even more deadly current of poisonous gas in the tunnels, and the wounded falling back to be crushed as they rolled, or fell, down the steep approaches to the fort.

A carrier-gull was released, with a full report of the situation, written on two thin sheets of vellum paper, and wrapped round two stripped feathers, in the underpart of its tail.

With a shrill cry, it rose in the air, and rapidly winged its way to Pentona.

"The gull seemed certain of its direction," I said to Troca.

"Yes," he replied, "it has been the journey many times before, and the rapid and direct start it makes, relieves it of nearly all danger from the enemy's bullets."

"Have you sent for assistance?"

"No. I have only given the full details of the situation, and suggested that, if possible, a force be sent to attack the Rodas when they retreat from the fort. This they will do, tired and utterly disheartened, shortly after daybreak, when, if they are assailed by a surprise force, who occupy their camp in the pines, they will be killed almost to a man."

Early in the evening, half the garrison were sent to lie down in their clothes.

I reclined in an easy chair in an unavailing effort to slumber. My thoughts kept me awake. Sentries were stationed, and everything was in readiness, I knew, but the thought of the coming slaughter drove away sleep.

At the first hour of the morning, the sentries and watchers were relieved, and lay down to rest. Everything was dark. I must have gone to sleep. Suddenly I was awoke by a roar of voices, and instantly started up alert.
The fort was bright as day with the electric light. Silently and quickly, without any sign of hurry, the freshly woke garrison took their places. Going to the edge of the battlements, I saw a crowd, a swarm of men, rushing into the tunnel. Another lot were rushing up the slope to the fort, firing the obsolete powder rifles, and shouting as they came.

All in the fort was silent, motionless. Just as the foremost of the storming party had almost reached the turret walls, the gas guns opened fire, and the crowd were swept back to block the way of their still advancing comrades, or fall down the steep mountain sides and disappear amongst the gloomy pines in the dark depths beneath. Suddenly a flame shot out of the tunnel, and with it a crowd of human bodies that appeared like dead flies. The gas in the tunnel had been ignited by the powder guns and an explosion had been caused. The savages, ignorant of the armaments of Undara, were amazed, but undaunted.

With a fearless bravery again they swarmed into the tunnel. The slope was again and again covered, only to be swept of its human freight by the silent hail of bullets. Suddenly an arm caught me by the shoulder and pulled me back."

"Come quickly, Doctor Frank."

It was one of the nurses who spoke.

"The Rodas are scaling the further wall."

Without a word I followed the nurse. Up the seemingly inaccessible wall, a Roda had climbed with a silked cord in his teeth. Reaching the top, he leaped over, crouched under its shade, and hauled up the cord, to the free end of which, his comrade had tied a wire ladder. One of the nurses happened to see the man, and called the attention of the others.

By this time the ladder was put up, and fixed on the wall top. A nurse challenged the man, who replied, "All right!" Being still suspicious, she approached him, and he drove his sword through her heart. In an instant another nurse had shot the man dead, and the Rodas coming up the ladder one after the other, leaped the battlements, to be received by the bullets of the soldier nurses. At the moment I arrived, a Roda, missed by the bullets, fired his revolver and shot a nurse, and in less time than I take to write this sentence, three Rodas were over the battlements. We, with our backs to the walls, were in the shade. The Rodas stood head and shoulders in bold relief against the sky. Faster than we could shoot them they appeared over the battlements, and the fort seemed lost. We had retired into the hospital building, and seven Rodas were over the battlements. Their powder guns had attracted the attention of the men. The next Roda, as he put his hands on the top of the wall to leap over, sank on his face, and lay still and quiet. Two of the seven who had scaled the walls, grasped their comrade, and quietly sank in
a heap on his body. Several men appeared. I went to the
motionless Rodas.
“Be careful, Frank,” said Kit, “if you touch those corpses
you will be killed. A current of electricity runs all round the
bar on the top of the wall.”
He placed a board on the battlement and said, “Now lean on
that, and look over.”
I did so. All along the wire ladder hung dead Rodas, grasping
a rung with their dead hands. The metal had acted as a con­
ductor, and killed every man on the ladder, their muscles being
forced by the electricity to close their hands with a grasp im­
possible to free.
“Shut off the current,” called Kit.
In an instant the dead men loosed their holds, and the corpses
fell back into the black depths beneath.
We took in the dead soldier nurse, and the two who had been
wounded.
The Rodas fought and were fighting like fiends.
The rosy dawn commenced to melt the darkness, and the Rodas
gathered near the tunnel which was choked with their dead, and
were evidently in conference. The base of the fort was bare of
all covering. On a sudden, from the pines below, came a leaden
shower, killing and scattering the Rodas. For a moment they
hesitated panic-stricken under the fatal shower of lead. Then,
with a shout, they rushed and rolled pell-mell fiercely down on
the soldiers of Undara, who slaughtered them from their hiding­
places in the pines beneath. Spellbound I gazed, and in a few
minutes, which passed as a dream, realized that but a handful
of our assailants remained alive, and that even they were
prisoners. The carrier gull had duly reached Pentona, and a
force been despatched to steal on the Rodas, while they were
busy with the assault, and attack them at break of day.
A party were told off to dig a great trench, into which the
dead savages were put. Another gang rolled the dead men down
the side of the mountain and brought in the wounded. At the
end of the day all that remained of our brave assailants, who
were estimated at about 2500, was 27 prisoners, 193 wounded, a
pile of arms and clothing, and 25 great mounds where the dead
Rodas were taking their long last rest.
In all my hospital and dissecting experience, I had seen
nothing so dreadful as this awful carnage, and the stripping of
the mangled and dead corpses, and huddling them on the top of
each other in the one grave.
When evening came, the three fort doctors, the seven soldier
nurses and myself, were still busy setting limbs and dressing
wounds. Next morning, at daybreak, the soldiers with the
prisoners, and such of the wounded who could travel, returned
to Pentona, leaving only such of their number as were necessary
to enable us to care for the wounded. When we were left alone, arrangements were made to construct temporary shelter in the forest beneath the fort for the use of the wounded, so that in case of another attack, we would be free from possible traitors in our midst.

The second morning after the soldiers had left, as a soldier nurse and I went our rounds, in the bed of a wounded Gurla who was feigning sleep, we found a tiny six months old baby. The nurse stopped, and waringly held up one hand, as with the other she slightly lifted the bed clothes and showed the tiny mite of humanity, happily sleeping in the man's arms. Something—a movement of the man's arm, a dream fancy, or what not—woke the infant, who commenced to cry. From the shelter of a neighbouring bed, glided a woman, her long black hair streaming down her back, her big dark eyes wide open with terror. Crouching by the bed, she put one arm round the man's neck, the other round the crying babe, and turned a frightened imploring face to the nurse and me. The man, too weak to move, glared at us agonized, fierce, but without a trace of fear. Putting my hand on the poor woman's head I strove with voice and gesture to reassure her. For a moment she looked at me, and then, going on her knees, sobbingly placed my hand on her forehead. A voice from a neighbouring bed spoke, "She and her husband can only speak Roda." We turned and saw that we were observed by every man who was strong enough to lift his head.

"She has brought their baby and come to die with him," continued the man who had before spoken, and with whose aid we now satisfied the poor creature of our good intentions, and left her happy by the bedside of those she loved.

On returning to the fort, Kit Troca told us that many Rodas were concealed in the pines, but even if their fighting men were amongst them, which he doubted, they would abstain from making any attack on the nurses, or the fort, for fear we might retaliate on the wounded. Presently a messenger came from the hospital camp, and told us that Winda Garr, the woman who had come with her babe, had gone out to the pines, and reported to other women like herself who had come to search for their husbands or lovers, the kind treatment she had received, which had caused many of them to come timorously among the wounded.

On receipt of this news, I returned to the hospital, and found a scene even more heartrending than the profusion of open-eyed corpses that strewed the mountain side after the fight. In front of the hospital sheds were a group of women kneeling in a circle, their heads pointing centrewards. Sobbing and moaning, they leant forward on their hands, placing their foreheads on the ground, the while with their right hand from time to time putting earth on their heads. Their long black hair was loose, and at the mercy of a gentle wind that swayed it here and there,
till the heads seemed to be joined, and they appeared like a fantastic representation of grief. As we passed, the women moaned and sobbed, unheeding our presence. Just inside the shed door, two babies of some two or three years of age played in the corner with the ribbon streamers of the spear ends, while in the shed itself, several infants, their hunger satisfied, slept content and happy. Beside several of the beds knelt women, their long black hair hanging down their backs, indicating grief and death, according to the custom of the Rodas. As we passed along, they came out to me, and kneeling, took my hand, and placed it on their foreheads, uttering the while a long moaning groan. Oh, the pity of it! The husband and father dead or wounded; the mother stricken with grief to the full, and—oh, wise and merciful nature!—the little children playing or asleep. The troubles of the men would end with death or recovery, the women’s tears be dried, and their sorrows, diluted with the waters of Lethe, become memories to make the eye humid and the heart soft; while the little children, grown to maturity, would, in the future, regard the incidents that agonized their parents, as only facts for a story.

Winda Garr’s tears had been dried, her hair combed, and she now sat by her husband’s bedside. Him we might have tortured and killed, but fierce to the last, he would have struggled and defied us. No force could subdue him. His wounds had been dressed, his wife received with kindness, and their helpless babe put to sleep on his arm. As I passed his bed, he held out his hand, and, with his dark eyes now beaming with gentleness, signified his desire for my approach. On giving him my hand, he placed it on his forehead as the women had done, and murmured words of submission. The mighty power of kindness had subdued him, and on his recovery he would assist us to civilize his countrymen. Of the other women, those whose husbands were alive, did up their hair and were comforted. Those whose husbands had disappeared, grouped together in witch-like circles, weeping and sorrowing with dishevelled locks.

In the evening, the women still continued with their sorrowing. For five days they gathered at dawn, and, as the sun rose, commenced their wailing, which, fasting, they continued till it sank, when they rose, took food, and, wearied out, lay down to sleep. Exhaustion hushed their woe, and in the stillness of the forest, the music moved the feelings of the wounded and their watchers.

With hardly an exception, the men, though sorrowing for defeat, were reconciled, or anxious to join the people who comforted them in their weakness. Of the exceptions, all but one restrained their rage till future wars gave them a chance to slay their enemies or die for their country. This one man brooded on his fate, till his violent treachery brought on him retaliation and
death. Towards the end of the first row of beds, on the right hand side of the entry, lay a restless Roda chief. His wiry, muscular form indicated physical strength, far superior of its kind to the mental ability shown in the sloping forehead, thick lips, and massive chin and neck. All his life, his brutal strength had enabled him to gratify his greed and lust, and remorselessly crush those who opposed him. Slave of his desires, he now lay fevered and savage, regarding every fresh kindness as an additional reason for revenge. Unhappy man. Strong against outside enemies, he was a victim to his own selfish, uncontrolled passions. As the music, softly rising and falling, soothed the feelings of the conquered Rodas, this human brute lay nursing feelings of revenge, and glaring on his more happy countrymen who surrounded him.

The Roda women had saved the fort nurses so much work, that they had time to soothe and comfort those sufferers who were fevered and restless. In her womanly ministrations, one fair-haired soldier nurse, going from bed to bed, came to the side of this foolish Roda. When she had beaten up his pillow, and smoothed his bed, she sprayed his forehead with scent and water preparatory to cooling it with a fan. Gently he took her hand, and placing it on his forehead, drew her down, muttering feebly some words of thanks. His other hand had gently slid into the bed, then suddenly—as a flash of lightning shows in an instant the nature of the dark surrounding—his face changed, his hand appeared grasping a dinner knife, which, momentarily uplifted, descended with all his strength on the nurse’s shoulder. Horror stricken, patients and attendants watched the knife descend on its mission of death. With a shriek, the nurse recognized the situation. The descending blade, glancing from a knapsack strap she wore, pierced the bed clothes, and the nurse escaped. With a blow from a stick the Roda was disarmed, and as he cringed down, expecting death, his bed was smoothed, and he was left and forgiven—that is, by all those who lived under the wise laws of Undara. In the morning he was found cold and dead, with a Roda spear through his heart. Thus the savages, tamed by kindness, had avenged the treachery of their countryman in the way they thought just. They knew no better.