

BATTLE AT CHARASIA

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Camp Beni Hissar, 7 October 1879

We are now encamped within a few miles of the Bala Hissar and the city of Cabul, the mutinous troops having yesterday been defeated and driven from the heights above Charasia, which they had occupied with the idea of barring our further advance. The details of the action are as follows:—At daybreak yesterday morning a strong working party was sent out to improve the road through the Sang-i-Nawishta defile, but before they had gone two miles from camp the cavalry patrol in advance reported that the enemy were in great strength on the hills, and had guns in position commanding the road. The working party consisted of the 23rd Pioneers, under escort of a wing of the 92nd Highlanders and two guns of No. 2 (Swinley's) Mountain Battery; and upon the cavalry patrols being fired at and falling back, this party received orders to halt and act on the defensive. As the morning advanced it was seen that not only was the Sang-I-Nawishta held in force, but the hills beyond Charasia, from the Chardeh Valley to the Logar River, were crowned with armed men. It was plain that our further progress towards Cabul was barred, and as there was only one brigade available for the attack the position was not an encouraging one. Fortunately the 92nd Highlanders had been detached from General Macpherson's brigade for the time being, and this gave us another British regiment to fall back upon. Sir Frederick Roberts deemed it wise to attack without delay, as to remain inactive before the mutinous regiments now facing him would probably encourage a general tribal rising, and instead of 10,000 we should have 50,000 men to deal with. Already the hills to right and left of the camp had a few white-clad men upon them, plainly sentinels sent from the near village to watch the progress of the fight and aid in the pursuit if our army were driven back. General Macpherson had to make his way from Sufed Sang to Charasia, and as his baggage train was seen stretching along the valley, the tribesmen grew bolder and opened a desultory fire upon the escort. This was the signal for many men to join the sentinels I have spoken of, on the hills, and so numerous did the gathering become that a squadron of cavalry was sent back to reinforce General Macpherson, who was further ordered to make all possible haste to Charasia.

In the meantime the camp was astir with preparations for the attack upon the enemy in front, and the men were full of enthusiasm at the prospect of meeting face to face the regiments which had brought about Cavagnari's murder. The following troops, under the command of Brigadier-General Baker, marched out of camp towards the village of Charasia about eleven o'clock:—

- Four guns of No. 2 Mountain Battery, under Captain G. Swinley, R.A.
- Two Gatling guns, under Captain A. Broadfoot.
- 7th Company of Sappers and Miners, under Lieutenant C. Nugent, R.A.
- 72nd Highlanders, under Lieutenant-Colonel W. H. J. Clarke.
- Six companies of the 5th Ghoorkas, under Major A. FitzHugh.
- 200 of the 5th Punjab Infantry, under Captain C. McK. Hall.

This force was strengthened by 450 of the 23rd Pioneers, withdrawn from the road leading to the Sang-i-Nawishta defile; while at the same time our right attack was also modified. Major White, of the 92nd Highlanders, assumed command in this direction, the troops entrusted to his charge being:—

- Three guns, G-3, R.A., under Major S. Parry, R.A.
- Two squadrons of cavalry, made up of detachments of the 9th Lancers, 5th Punjab Cavalry, and 12th Bengal Cavalry, commanded by Major Hammond, 5th P.C.
- A wing of the 92nd Highlanders, under Major Hay.
- 100 men of the 23rd Pioneers, under Captain H. Paterson.

This force was to keep the enemy in play at the Sang-i-Nawishta by rapid artillery fire, and so to distract their attention that they would give time for our main attack to be delivered on their right, where they had no guns in position, and had not a narrow gorge to defend. The old tactics of turning their flank and taking their main line in reverse were to be followed; and knowing the Afghan inability, as a rule, to make a counter-attack, General Roberts weakened his right, so as to concentrate a strong infantry force for the outflanking movement over the hills overlooking the Chardeh Valley. Sirdar Nek Mahomed Khan (son of Dost Mahomed), who was in command of the Afghan troops, seemed to think we should make a determined effort to force the Sang-i-Nawishta Pass, and he had accordingly posted on the heights overlooking the road twelve guns, while three or four Armstrong-pattern breech-loaders were on the plain below. The enemy's disposition seemed to indicate that if we tried to force the Pass their guns would have held us in check, while their right was swung round to take us in flank, the series of ridges which

they covered offering a good maneuvering ground for such a movement, while the undulating plain below, with its belt of trees round about Charasia, would have given excellent cover. The accompanying map will show the relative positions, and also make clear the strength of the defending force which was able to cover so much ground.

After leaving the camp, General Baker made for the village of Charasia, which consisted of a number of detached walled enclosures such as are common all over the country. There were numerous orchards and gardens adjoining these, so that his first movements were well concealed from the enemy, whose attention up to this point was directed chiefly to Major White's movements on the Cabul Road. Seeing how greatly he was outnumbered, General Baker took the precaution of occupying a strong walled enclosure on the outskirts of Charasia, and here he placed his reserve ammunition and his field hospital. The temper of the villagers was so uncertain that he telegraphed to General Roberts for another regiment of infantry to strengthen his reserves, and 100 men of the 5th Punjab Infantry hurried out at once and joined the hospital and reserve ammunition guard. The remainder of the regiment were sent out soon after, although this left the camp very weakly guarded, only 1,000 cavalry and infantry with six 9-pounder guns being left at head-quarters. However, as General Macpherson was coming up with his brigade, the risk was well worth running, as failure on General Baker's part might have meant disaster to the whole army. The 72nd Highlanders led the way out of Charasia, and bullets soon began to drop among their ranks while the enemy's pickets were seen to be retiring up the ridges. As the brigade pushed forward with the intention of outflanking the main line of hills lying between Chardeh and the Sang-i-Nawishta, their progress was checked by a strong position on their left front on which the Afghans had raised sungars, and from which they began to open a heavy musketry fire. Two mountain guns replied to this, and the 72nd extended in skirmishing order, one company under Captain Brooke-Hunt turning off to the left, while the main body of the regiment worked away to the front, the ground affording but slight cover. Captain Hunt's company scaled a hill 500 or 600 feet high, climbing over difficult rocks, which hindered their rapid advance. The enemy were exceedingly numerous on their extreme right, another and steeper hill enabling them to pour a heavy fire upon the company. Two more mountain guns and the Gatlings were ordered to open fire upon this hill, and upon such bodies of men as were visible on the near ridges; but the Gatlings were in such bad order, owing to their defective make, that after a few rounds the drum "jammed" and they had to be taken out of action. Our true attack had now been recognized by Nek Mahomed and he hastened to reinforce his right; a stream of men was seen pouring along the rearmost ridges from the direction of the Sang-i-Nawishta, and standards borne by ghazis began to thicken on our left. General Baker lost no time in pushing forward part of his reserves, in order to force their first position before it could be strongly reinforced. The 5th Ghoorkas, and 200 men of the 5th Punjab Infantry, doubled forward, while the enemy's fire increased in intensity. Captain Hunt's company was strengthened by two companies of the 5th Ghoorkas, under Captain John Cook, VC; while two more companies of Ghoorkas and 200 of the 5th P.I. joined the advanced skirmishers of the 72nd in the main attack. The skirmishing line was thus extended so as to outflank the left of the ridge, which the Afghans still clung to with great obstinacy, as it was the key of the position on their right flank. This was at 1.30 PM, when our troops had been engaged for an hour and a half without having made much impression upon the enemy. With the strengthening of our advance success was soon declared: the hill on the extreme left, from which a flanking fire had been directed on our skirmishers, was carried in splendid style by the company of the 72nd and the two companies of the 5th Ghoorkas, while the other companies of the two regiments, by a series of gallant rushes, turned the enemy's left. At two o'clock our advanced line was enabled to direct a cross fire upon the 2,000 men who held the ridge, and who now showed symptoms of wavering. A general advance was ordered, and the 72nd, 5th Ghoorkas, and 5th P.I. were in a few minutes in possession of the Afghans' first line. But not without loss, for the enemy were chiefly armed with Snider and Enfield rifles, and their fire was rapid and continuous. Fortunately they had so little knowledge of the principles of musketry that their bullets mostly passed over our men's heads as the rush uphill was made. The 72nd Highlanders bore the brunt of the fighting, and their casualties amounted to thirty-six. They had on several occasions to cross open ground, and in spite of the exposure they rushed forward with an élan that could not have been surpassed. Private MacMahon, one of their number, particularly distinguished himself on the left. Almost single-handed he scaled a hill on the crest of which was a sungar filled with men: loading and firing as he went, his coolness incited four or five Ghoorkas to follow him; and when he finally leaped into the sungar its defenders took to flight and were shot down as they ran. MacMahon is to be recommended by General Baker for the Victoria Cross, his gallantry having been observed by the General and his Staff as well as by the officers engaged in the attack. It was such incidents as these which caused General Baker to express his great satisfaction with the behavior of the troops under his command.

After their first position had fallen into our hands, the enemy rallied on some low hills 600 yards in rear and reopened fire, to which our mountain guns replied, while our men were resting on their arms. A company of the 23rd

Pioneers, under Lieutenant Chesney, was thrown forward on the right, while two companies of the 92nd, under Captain Oxley, which Major White had detached to hold in check any flanking movement the enemy might attempt on General Baker's right, also came into action. The enemy's second position was attacked by the 72nd Highlanders and the 5th Ghorkas, aided by the three companies just mentioned, and at three o'clock the Afghan right had been broken up, and their regiments were flying towards the village of Indikee. The mountain guns fired shrapnel into their midst, and the Gatling guns, for the few moments they were able to work, also did some execution, while volleys from the 72nd at long ranges caused the fugitives to hasten their flight. Major Stockwell, with a wing of the 72nd, followed them rapidly until he reached the open ground leading down into the Chardeh Valley, when his further advance was stopped by General Baker, as the turning movement along the ridge towards the Sang-i-Nawishta had to be made. The want of cavalry was here painfully apparent, as the retreating masses of the Afghans could easily have been overtaken, the sloping ground between Indikee and the hills being admirably suited for a pursuit. While Major Stockwell had thus been completing the defeat of the enemy's right, two companies of the 23rd Pioneers had gained a footing on the main ridge itself, whence the enemy were rapidly retiring as they recognized that their line would in a few minutes be taken in reverse. General Baker swung round his left, ordered a general advance, and at 3.45 PM the ridge was in our hands without any serious opposition having been met with. Not that they had not shown great determination before, for bands of ghazis had made good their footing behind the sungars until our bayonets had forced them down. The 5th Ghorkas were charged by a number of these madmen, but they met the rush by a counter bayonet charge and cleared all before them.

Leaving General Baker with the main body of his force sweeping over the high ridge in the direction of the Sang-i-Nawishta Gorge, I must turn now to Major White's movements on our right, where had been done one of the most gallant feats of the day. The feint in this direction had been turned into a successful attack, resulting in the capture of twenty guns, although our infantry numbered only a few hundreds, and our cavalry were unable to act. Skirting the east of Charasia, Major White found the enemy scattered about among the trees, and also holding the hills to right and left of the defile. The three guns of G-3 were soon in action, and a few shells well placed, with the fire of skirmishers thrown out among the trees and gardens, drove back the more venturesome of the enemy to the shelter of the sungars in the hills, and behind some boulders in the bed of the Pass. Our guns were then moved forward and made beautiful practice, the answering fire from the enemy's artillery being quite harmless. One of our shells struck an Afghan field-piece, dismounted it, and killed two of the horses standing near, while another struck a standard in a cluster of men. In fact, the 103 rounds fired by G-3 were of the greatest value in preparing the way for the infantry attack. This attack was led personally by Major White, who at the head of only fifty Highlanders charged the first hill on the right, where several hundred Afghans were posted. Our men went up with a rush under a severe musketry fire, and the enemy waited as if to receive them at the point of the bayonet. With such odds in their favor, and a sungar to aid them, European troops would have swept back the handful of men attacking with scarcely an effort; but Afghan courage and steadiness are very limited. When the Highlanders were within five or six yards of the sungar the enemy turned and fled, and were shot in the back as they made for the next hill. The success thus gained was mainly due to Major White's personal gallantry, one striking instance of which may be quoted. Not caring to expose his men in a particularly steep bit of ground, which was enfiladed by a few Afghans well placed in rear of some rocks, he took a loaded rifle from one of the Highlanders and "stalked" the enemy single-handed. By cautious climbing he reached the rocks behind which they were concealed, and as he showed himself they jumped up and ran, no doubt in the full belief that the single figure they saw was only the leader of a number of others. One man stayed to fire, but missed his aim, and as he turned Major White shot him through the head. Unfortunately, he had no more cartridges with him, or some of the others would have fallen. This hill is to be called "White's Hill" in memory of his gallantry. The capture of this point enabled the guns to be advanced still further towards the entrance of the Pass, but Major White was not content. Having given his men breathing time, and being reinforced by another fifty men from below, he again went forward and captured two lower hills on the right, in the same grand style, and with only trifling loss. It was by these movements that he was able to send Captain Oxley with two companies well to the left, to co-operate with General Baker's Brigade. Six Armstrong guns fell into Major White's hands on the open ground below the hills; and when our turning movement in the Chardeh direction had been completed, and the enemy began to evacuate the main ridge, the cavalry were sent forward, and the infantry occupied the hills commanding the Sang-i-Nawishta Pass on the left. Here twelve more guns were captured in position, while the cavalry found two more abandoned on the road. The twenty guns brought out from Sherpur, therefore, to fortify the Pass have all fallen into our hands. Upon Major White gaining the ridge to the left he could see no further sign of the enemy, who had stampeded to the Bala Hissar. The cavalry could not follow as the Pass narrows, and the narrow paths beyond are not adapted for a body of horse charging. Our information was to the contrary, it being stated that the road opened into a plain, and our cavalry being accordingly sent to the right to cut off the retreat of the enemy when driven

towards Cabul by General Baker. As events occurred, the two squadrons would have been invaluable if they had accompanied the General. The progress of the brigade along the main ridge was very slow, as the ground was rugged and difficult; and it was not until nightfall that a junction was effected with Major White. The 23rd Pioneers and the 5th P.I. moved down into an open bit of ground beyond the Pass, while the 72nd Highlanders, the Ghoorkas, and mountain guns remained above, throwing out strong pickets over the range of hills. Major White's force bivouacked on the ground they had occupied when their last movement was made.

It is worth mentioning that two elephants, three camels, and 200 mules carrying stores, &c., were safely piloted over the precipitous hills which were taken, and the men were thus able to bivouac in comfort. Not the least important arrangement of the day was that of signaling. Captain Straton had parties of men with General Baker and Major White, and a third batch of signalers was sent to a high hill to watch the Chardeh Valley, and the movements of large bodies of tribesmen, who lined the crests of the range overlooking the camp from the west. Heliograms were exchanged between these points and the head-quarters camp, and General Roberts was kept fully informed of all that was happening in these directions. This focussing of all information upon a common center enabled the General to make his dispositions with accuracy and effect: without the signalers dangerous delays might have occurred. The heliographing was so thoroughly well done that Sir F. Roberts complimented Captain Straton personally on the success of his arrangements. The only drawback was a succession of small sand storms, which swept across the camp and blotted out everything for the time being.

The attitude of the tribesmen in our immediate neighborhood, i.e., on the ranges of hills east and west of the camp, was one of expectancy modified by an earnest desire to harass our pickets by spasmodic firing. Their ill-will was first shown by firing upon the signalers on the hill, and the party had eventually to be withdrawn. Two guns were sent down and a few shells pitched upwards, which caused these guerillas to withdraw to a safe distance. The convoy from our last camp at Sufed Sang, Zahidabad, was also fired upon, and General Macpherson had to throw out skirmishers to protect his baggage animals. At least some hundred men appeared on a high peak to the east of the camp, and fired upon a picket of the 92nd who were on a lower level. A brisk fire was kept up for some time, and the enemy driven off to higher ground. As they re-opened fire the R.H.A. were ordered to try a shot at the peak. The first shell dropped a little short, but the second burst on the point occupied, and the next instant it was quite clear, its late occupants running in disorder into the valley beyond. There were several of the Amir's soldiers among them, still wearing his uniform. The camp after this was left undisturbed: tents were struck at sunset in readiness for the early morning march which it had been decided to make to Beni-Hissar, just beyond the Sang-i-Nawishta Pass.

The enemy are believed, in this action, to have had 9,000 or 10,000 men on the ridges, including thirteen regiments of regulars. They left 300 dead on the field, but their total loss in killed and wounded must have been much greater. Our loss was twenty killed and sixty-seven wounded, among the latter being Lieutenant Fergusson, 72nd Highlanders, bullet contusion, left leg, slight; Dr. Duncan, 23rd Pioneers, bullet wound in the chest, severe; and Captain Young, 5th Punjab Infantry, bullet wound in left thigh, severe. Of the British Infantry regiments the 72nd lost three killed and thirty-four wounded; and the 92nd three killed and six wounded. Among our camp followers five dhoolie-bearers were killed and four wounded, returns which show that the kahars were well under fire in carrying off the injured.