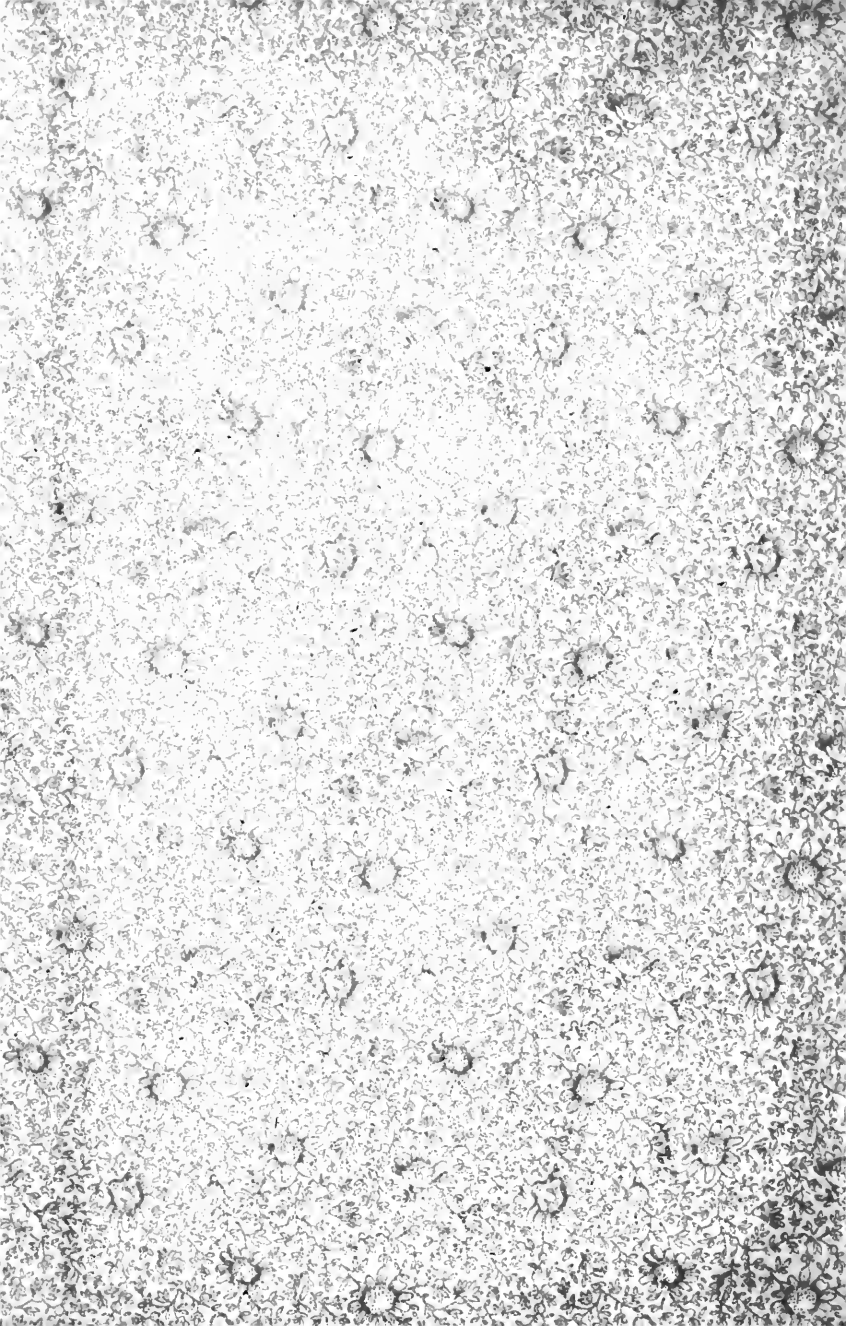


THE DACOIT'S TREASURE

BY EDITHA



A. C. Moore



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"JOHNSON LUNGED AT HIM WITH HIS BAYONET."

THE
DACOIT'S TREASURE

OR

IN THE DAYS OF PO THAW

A Story of Adventure in Burma

BY

HENRY CHARLES MOORE

ILLUSTRATED BY HAROLD PIFFARD

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THE DACOIT'S TREASURE



CHAPTER I

THE PHOONGYEE'S SECRET

GEORGE MURRAY was a fortunate man. At the age of twenty-eight he inherited from a distant relative a fortune sufficiently large to enable him to resign the post he held in a prominent business house, and to give himself up to any kind of pursuit that pleased him. It had always been his great desire to travel; and as soon, therefore, as he was in a position to do so, he bade goodbye to England, and set out on a voyage to Burma.

Arriving at Rangoon, he was heartily

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welcomed by an old schoolfellow, Sydney Cameron, who had emigrated to that part of the world years before, and had become a prosperous rice-merchant in the land of his adoption.

For a day or two after Murray's arrival, Cameron's thirst for tidings of his friends in the old country kept the new-comer at rather close quarters; and Murray, eager as he had been at first to impart what information he could, began at length to tire of the continued fire of questions with which Cameron assailed him. He longed for an opportunity of escaping for a while and exploring his strange surroundings.

Not until he had been Cameron's guest for some days, however, did Murray venture to hint that, being a stranger in a strange land, there were a good many things of interest in the country which he would like to see. When he did mention the matter—

“Why, my dear fellow, yes, of course!” exclaimed Cameron. “Upon my word,

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I have been strangely forgetful, not to say selfish. But you must make allowances. You must remember it is ten years since I have seen anyone from the old place ; and letters never tell everything. I'll do my best, though, to make up for having bored you !”

And he did ! The very next morning Murray was roused soon after six o'clock, and requested to be ready at seven for a visit to the Shway Dagon Pagoda, a famous temple, which attracts good Buddhists to Rangoon from all parts of Asia. He needed no second bidding. He had heard of this pagoda before he left home, and the glimpses he had caught of it since his arrival in Rangoon made him more anxious than ever to visit it. Seven o'clock accordingly found the two friends driving to the place ; and they spent an hour pleasantly enough in admiring the barbaric splendours of the ancient building.

It is strange how sometimes the most

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apparently trivial things will shape or alter a man's whole career. When Gilbert Murray wandered with his friend round the old Burmese pagoda that morning, he had no definite object in life. His intention was simply to rove aimlessly from place to place, "putting in time," as he confided to Cameron, "by travel and sight-seeing." Had anyone told him that a chance visit to a heathen temple would lead to an incident destined to affect his whole future, he would probably have laughed incredulously. Yet so it was. And it came about in this way.

The two friends, having seen everything of interest at the pagoda, were returning to the spot where they had left their conveyance, when they were startled by loud and angry shouts.

"What is the matter?" Murray asked.

"A riot," Cameron replied, somewhat shortly, with difficulty concealing his anxiety.

"A rising of the natives?"

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“Oh, no—a religious riot. The Moharram, the great annual Mohammedan festival, is being held, and this is one of the fights with which the two Mohammedan sects usually mark the occasion.”

Before Cameron had time to give his friend any further information a wild crowd of Mohammedans dashed round the corner, closely followed by another and larger mob, who, uttering horrible imprecations, hurled sticks and jagged stones at those in front as they ran. Presently the fugitives made a stand, and for a time the fanatics fought madly, taking no notice whatever of the two Englishmen and a feeble old *phoongyee*, or Burmese priest, who stood helplessly looking on. Blood flowed freely, staining the long white garments of the rioters, some of whom had their robes literally torn from their backs in the *mêlée*.

Again the smaller mob took to flight, and a wild yell burst from their opponents as they dashed after them. One fanatic, bleed-

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ing and tattered, stopped as he passed the venerable *phoongyee*, and deliberately hurled a stick at him. The missile was well aimed, and the unfortunate priest fell senseless to the ground as, with a fiendish scream of delight, the fanatic rushed madly after his fellow-rioters.

“You scoundrel!” Murray shouted, and would have avenged the priest; but Cameron caught hold of him.

“Let the fiend go,” Cameron said. “Your interference would only result in an attack upon you by the whole mob. Come and see what we can do for the *phoongyee*.”

The poor old priest had received an ugly cut on the forehead. Fortunately Murray knew enough of “first aid to the wounded” to be able to bandage the gash with his pocket-handkerchief, while Cameron enlisted the services of a little Burmese boy—who stood watching the operation with tears in his eyes—and sent him off at a run to the monastery for help.

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In a few minutes a number of yellow-robed *phoongyees* and novices came hurrying to the spot. The novices squatted down some yards away, as a sign of respect, but the *phoongyees* advanced to the wounded man, who had by this time regained consciousness. They spoke to him for some minutes with marked solicitude, and then assisted him to walk to the monastery.

Cameron and Murray drove home and sat down to breakfast on the verandah. They were lingering over their meal, when a sturdy young Burman walked boldly up the steps and said to Cameron—

“The *phoongyee* whose head the English gentleman opposite to you bound up so skilfully that he did not die, has commanded me to beg you and your kind friend to call and see him at the monastery before sunset.”

“Tell the good *phoongyee* that we will certainly do as he desires,” Cameron replied ; and the messenger departed.

“What does he want to see us about?”

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Murray asked, after Cameron had translated the message.

“He probably wants to thank you for your timely aid,” Cameron replied; “but I accepted the invitation because I know you will find a visit to the monastery exceedingly interesting. Of course I will go with you, to act as interpreter.”

It was late in the afternoon when they arrived at the monastery, an elaborately carved wooden building surrounded by tamarinds, areca, and palmira palms. A novice was standing at the gate, evidently on the look-out for them, and he at once escorted them to a large hall, where they found the old *phoongyee* sitting in solitary state on a raised seat. His head was still bandaged with Murray's handkerchief, but he did not appear to be suffering.

“Sit down, please,” he said feebly.

Cameron and Murray immediately sat, tailor fashion, on the floor—Murray, anxious not to commit any breach of Burmese

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etiquette, carefully copying all that Cameron did, though he found it somewhat difficult to keep his feet hidden from view.

“You English,” the *phoongyee* began, in a low, musical voice, “though you drink spirits, slay cattle, and eat flesh, and have, moreover, taken from us the land of our fathers, are yet kind to the feeble and distressed, be they rich or poor, white or brown. You speak also the words that are true; but nevertheless you hanker after riches, and will place your lives in danger for silver rupees. I perceive your companion does not understand my speech. Promise me that you will faithfully repeat to him in his language all my words.”

“I promise.”

“It is good. Your companion has been kind to me, even as a mother is kind to her child. With riches I will repay him. Now listen attentively. In the country that lies between the Irrawaddy and Chindwin rivers there is a temple called the Sunrise Pagoda.

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Tell your companion to go there, and, seventy yards from the centre of the altar, search the ground for a stone slab. When he has found it, let him raise the stone and descend into the earth. There he will find rubies and other precious stones—bracelets, anklets, ear-tubes and rings, all of gold, and piles of Indian and peacock rupees.¹ Let him take them all. Tell him now my words.”

Concealing his great excitement as well as he was able, Cameron repeated to Murray all that the *phoongyee* had said.

“Is he in earnest?” Murray asked. “Perhaps the blow he received has turned his brain.”

“I think not,” Cameron replied. “His conversation is perfectly rational.”

“But supposing the treasure is there, what right has the priest to say we may take it?”

“I’ll ask him.”

“I have told my friend all the words

¹ Burmese rupees.

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that you have spoken," Cameron said to the *phoongyee*, "and he bids me thank you for them. But as the eighth commandment of his religion is the same as the second commandment of yours, he wishes to know if the treasure belongs to any man. If it does he cannot take it."

The priest grew angry. "Thinkest thou," he said, "that I, a *phoongyee*, would tell any man, even though he be a *kala*,¹ to steal?"

"I do not think it; but still, my friend wishes to know how the treasure became hidden there."

The *phoongyee* glanced round the hall, as if anxious to assure himself that none of his brother *phoongyees* or the novices were near, and then replied cautiously, "Draw nearer, and I will tell you about the treasure."

Cameron and Murray moved close to the aged man, and then sat down again.

"The son of my brother," the *phoongyee* said, "forgot all the precepts taught him

¹ A foreigner.

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while a youth, and became a dacoit *bo*.¹ His hands were red with blood, and women and children feared him more than they did tigers or deadly snakes. He burned villages to the ground and crucified their headmen. But after the Owner of the White Elephant² had been captured and sent across the sea, the soldiers of the Great White Queen fell upon the dacoits and slew them, my brother's son alone remaining alive. He fled, wounded, to a hermit's cave, and hid there for many months. Then he came down to Rangoon in disguise. But the sons of the jungle droop in towns, and my brother's son soon died. Before the breath left him he sent for me—not that I might remain there to protect his body from evil spirits, or proclaim the wretchedness of life, but that he might tell me where his treasure—the plunder collected by his lawless band—was concealed. To me he made known the exact spot. To me he gave all the pre-

¹ Leader.

² King Theebaw.

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cious stones, money, and golden ornaments. But at my consecration I vowed that I would not take to myself even the value of a dram of silver ; so the treasure has remained untouched where the dacoits hid it. Let your friend take it and do with it what seemeth best to him."

Cameron rapidly explained to Murray what the *phoongyee* had said, and without waiting for him to recover from his surprise, declared to the venerable priest, "The gratitude of my friend is more than words can express."

"It is good. Now you must leave me ;" and as the *phoongyee* spoke he struck a small gong which stood beside him. A novice immediately entered and escorted the Englishmen to the monastery gate.

"Well, what do you think of your good fortune?" Cameron asked, as the gate clanged behind them.

"I really don't know what to think," Murray declared, starting off almost at a

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run in his excitement. "Do you believe his story?"

"Most certainly I do," panted Cameron, who found it difficult to keep pace with his friend.

"But, my dear fellow, doesn't it strike you as being somewhat extraordinary for him to bestow upon me, a total stranger, so large an amount of valuable treasure for such a trivial service as I rendered him?"

"Not at all—for the simple reason that the Buddhist religion strictly forbids its *phoongyees* to possess wealth."

"That is probably to prevent their becoming worldly. Our friend did not accumulate wealth, but merely accepted a valuable gift——"

"A most serious offence! A *phoongyee* must on no account accept more than is necessary for his immediate wants—enough food to last for the day, and some cloth when his garments are worn out. To

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accept money or jewels is a terrible sin in the eyes of these people."

"Why in the name of goodness, then, didn't the old fellow distribute his wealth in charity?"

"And thereby publish abroad his sin? That would have been very unwise."

"Then, as far as I can judge, our friend has been in a very unenviable position?"

"He has, undoubtedly. The hidden treasure must have been a source of great anxiety to him for many a long day. Your timely service afforded him an opportunity, such as he never had before, to dispose of his wealth. Under the cloak of gratitude—mind you, I don't say that he was not grateful—he was able to ease his conscience without exciting suspicion. I am confident that he became possessed of the wealth in the way he told us; and now that he has made over the treasure to you he will forget that he ever knew of its existence."

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It appeared on the following day that Cameron's idea of the *phoongyee's* intentions was remarkably accurate. Cameron and Murray called at the monastery to ascertain from the *phoongyee* the exact position of the Sunrise Pagoda, but the aged priest declined to receive them.

"Well," said Murray, as they turned away, somewhat crestfallen, "it is evidently a matter of conscience with the old man, so I suppose we ought not to complain; but his scruples are highly inconvenient, all the same. However, we shall have to manage without him.

"I say 'we,'" he went on, "because I shall not attempt to go in search of the place unless you can arrange to go with me. I know enough of the country already to be well aware that an expedition to the Sunrise Pagoda is likely to be a highly dangerous affair; and I will only take advantage of the *phoongyee's* information on condition that you will help me in the

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search, and share with me whatever spoil we may find. For you are the only man in the country whom I can call friend; and to go on such an errand with merely a few strange natives, of whose language even I know nothing, into a country swarming with dacoits, would be simple madness. I would not run the risk for ten times the value of the *phoongyee's* treasure."

"Well, well," said Cameron, "I'll join you. I fancy I shall rather enjoy the adventure, even if we get no treasure for our pains! And fortunately my Eurasian clerk can be relied upon to look after my business for me while we are away."

"Thanks!" said Murray gratefully, grasping his friend's hand.

So it was settled; and three days later the adventurers started on their expedition. They were accompanied by Murray's servant Johnson—a thick-set, jovial-looking Londoner. While travelling by train from

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Rangoon to Prome he was told of the object of their journey, and was even more pleased at the idea of some adventures than at the promise of a portion of the treasure.

From Prome the travellers journeyed by water to Mandalay; and Murray and Cameron enjoyed their up-river trip immensely. On board they made the acquaintance of an elderly man, connected with the Geological Survey of India, whose tales of adventure and discovery were wonderfully entertaining.

“Have you ever heard of the Sunrise Pagoda?” Cameron ventured to ask him, on the second day. “It’s somewhere in Upper Burma, I believe.”

“No, I can’t say that I have,” the geologist replied; “but, bless you, there might be a hundred pagodas with that name in this country without one hearing of them. What is this particular pagoda famous for?”

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"I don't know that it is famous," Cameron said cautiously, "but my friend and I are going to travel across country from the Irrawaddy to the Chindwin, and we heard that there was a pagoda of that name somewhere about there."

"That is highly probable. Whether it is worth seeing is another matter. Are you travelling for pleasure?"

"Yes, my friend is fresh from England, and anxious for sport and adventure."

"His desire will assuredly be gratified if you are going in the direction you have mentioned, for Po Thaw is usually to be met with thereabouts, and he is certain to cause you considerable trouble. He is the most notorious *bo* that this country has ever produced. He has defied the Government again and again, and, in spite of all the efforts of the military and police, he practically rules the land from the Irrawaddy to the Chindwin. His ferocious cruelty is something appalling, and his

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hatred of Europeans amounts almost to madness. I am too old a traveller to wish to dissuade you from continuing your expedition, but I must urge you to take a thoroughly trustworthy guide. Unless you do, you will probably very soon find yourselves in Po Thaw's clutches. I have on board the very man you need. He knows Upper Burma thoroughly, and is as true as steel. He hates dacoits like poison, and has very good reason for doing so, as they crucified his father and strangled his mother."

"Does he speak English?" Murray asked.

"Fluently," the geologist replied. "In fact, his knowledge is a little too good, for he has translated the Lawkanîdi, the Burmese book of proverbs, and studs his conversation with its wise sayings. Would you like to speak to him?"

"Yes, if he is open to an engagement."

"His service with me expires directly we reach Mandalay. I'll call him."

Tha Bu, the guide in question, quickly obeyed the geologist's call. Like most Burmans, he was short, thick-set, and attired in the brightest of skirts and turbans. He greeted the Englishmen with a kind of half-military salute, placed his huge cheroot in his mouth, and waited to hear what was required of him.

"These gentlemen," the geologist said to him, "require a Burman to guide them through the country which lies between the Irrawaddy and the Chindwin. I have recommended you."

Tha Bu smiled, and said pleasantly, "I shall consider it a great honour to serve the white masters."

"If you serve us faithfully, you shall be liberally rewarded," Cameron declared.

"Liberality begets love and attracts attendants," Tha Bu promptly replied, "but niggardliness arouses hatred and keeps a man solitary."

"Is that his usual style of conversation?" Murray inquired in an undertone.

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“Oh, no! He is only trying to impress you with his wisdom,” the geologist replied, laughingly. “He drops his fine talk in time of danger, or when matters of importance have to be attended to.”

“How many white masters are going?”
Tha Bu asked.

“Three,” Cameron replied.

“With new rifles from England?”

“Yes.”

A smile of intense satisfaction passed over the Burman's face, and he muttered, loudly enough for the Englishmen to hear, “Now thou dog, Po Thaw, beware!”

Terms were easily arranged, and Tha Bu was installed as guide forthwith. He proved his usefulness as soon as the adventurers stepped off the steamer at Mandalay by taking them straight to the most comfortable hotel in the city. He allowed his “white masters” barely half an hour to settle themselves, and then, entering their room, he saluted them and

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said abruptly, "A buffalo delights in mud, a duck in a pond, a priest in the Law; but a woman delights in her husband."

Cameron nodded his head approvingly.

"Such a woman is Mah Shway O, my wife," Tha Bu declared.

"I am exceedingly glad to hear it," Cameron assured him. "But now let us talk about our expedition."

"I was doing so: my wife says she will accompany us."

"Nonsense! We can't be hampered with a woman," said Cameron shortly.

"The dangers of the journey will be many," Murray joined in, "and your wife might fall into the hands of the dacoits."

"I have told her that," Tha Bu replied, "but nevertheless she declares that if I go with you, so will she."

"Very well, then, let her accompany us," Cameron said, guessing at once that Tha Bu, like most Burmans, had implicitly to

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obey his wife.¹ "We shall start early tomorrow morning. Have a boat ready for us. The coolies and bullock-carts we can hire when we have crossed the river."

¹ King Theebaw was a notable example of a hen-pecked husband. Queen Supayalat not only ruled him, but practically ruled the whole of Upper Burma, and the atrocities which marked his reign were, in the majority of cases, instigated by her.

CHAPTER II

PO THAW APPEARS

AT an early hour the following morning the three Englishmen and Tha Bu started for the river-side. Mah Shway O,¹ Tha Bu's wife, was awaiting them in the boat, smoking the inevitable cheroot. She greeted the travellers with a pleasant smile, and then set to work to stow away the baggage. The trip across the river was uneventful, and the landing was effected at a picturesque little village of bamboo-and-mat huts.

All the inhabitants turned out to watch the Englishmen land. "The white lords

¹ A Burmese woman retains her maiden name after marriage. Children are not named after either of their parents.

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want coolies and bullock-carts!" Tha Bu shouted ; and immediately some half-dozen men advanced, squatting down when they drew near to the Englishmen.

Cameron explained to them how far he wanted them to accompany him, and offered them good terms, which they promptly refused.

A Burman is passionately fond of driving a bargain—not so much for the sake of profit as for the pleasure of arguing. He is wonderfully proud of obtaining an anna more than is offered him.

Cameron, of course, knew the national failing, and had purposely offered the men a trifle less than he intended to pay them. The Burmans produced their most weighty arguments, and Cameron gravely answered them. After the discussion had lasted for ten minutes, Cameron offered to raise the pay one anna per man per week. The offer was immediately accepted, and everybody was perfectly satisfied.

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In less than an hour the expedition started from the village. At the head of it marched Tha Bu and Johnson. Then came two bullock-carts and four spare bullocks, followed by Cameron and Murray. Four Burmese coolies brought up the rear. The three Englishmen and Tha Bu carried both rifles and revolvers, but the coolies and cartmen were armed only with *dahs*,¹ which they carried slung over the left shoulder. Mah Shway O, too, who rode in the first bullock-cart and appeared to consider the expedition excellent fun, had a *dah* beside her, which she declared she would use if necessity required. The Burmans had discarded their brilliant turbans, and had tucked their skirts tightly between their legs, fastening them at the waist behind.

For an hour or so they journeyed through the dense jungle, Johnson and Tha Bu

¹ A *dah* is a formidable, long-handled weapon, slightly curved backwards in the blade and used, as occasion may require, as a sword or a knife.

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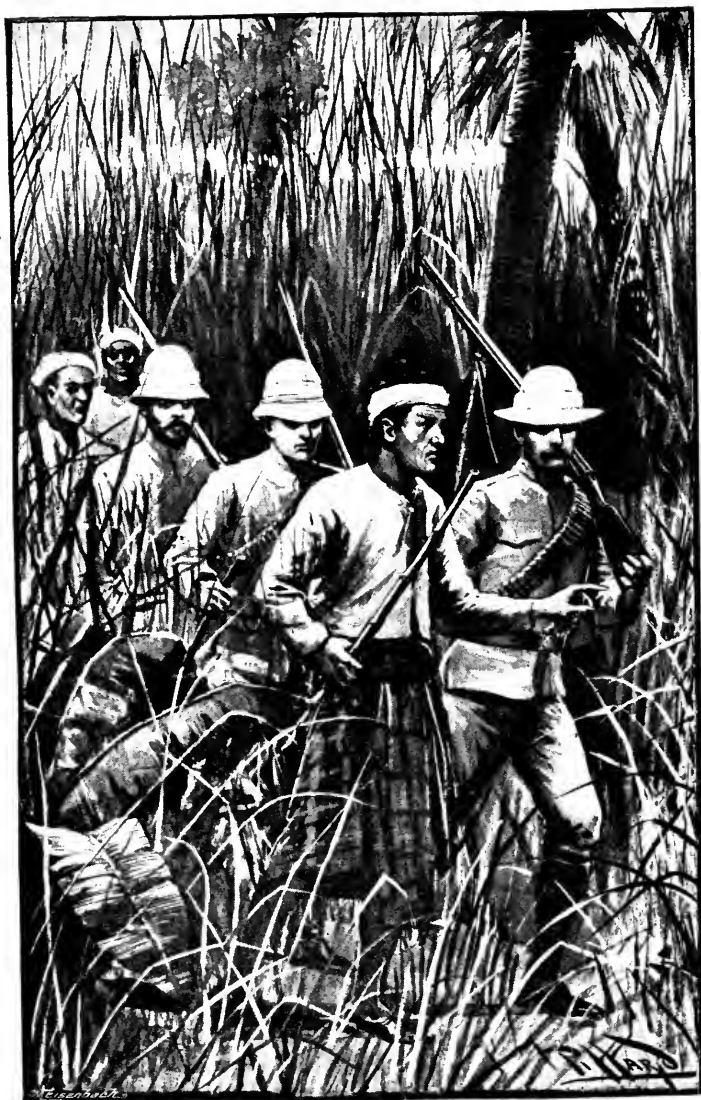
discussing the probability of a fight with the dacoits, as the party forced their way through the thick, tangled undergrowth. They were far more anxious to meet the fiendish robbers than were Cameron and Murray. The heat was intense, for the elephant-grass, which grew to a height of over twelve feet on either side of the narrow track, kept off any little breeze there might have been.

Late in the day they reached a monastery, and a few minutes later a village, where they halted. The villagers greeted them most hospitably, placing food and drink before them without any thought of payment.

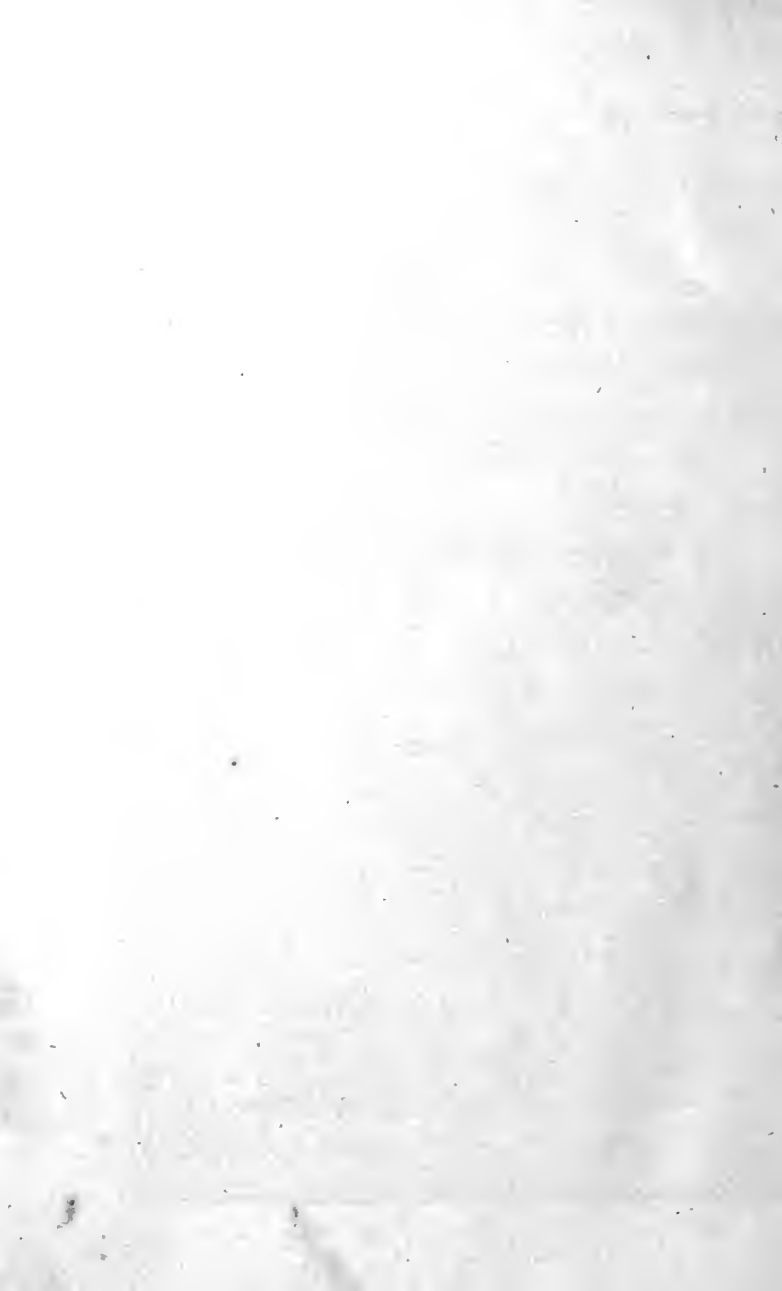
The travellers soon saw that an event of some importance was about to take place in the village. Tha. Bu made inquiries among the people, and obtained the information he required.

“To-morrow, sir,” he reported to Cameron, “the headman’s son is to be made a monk.”

“But this is not the usual time of year



"THEY FORCED THEIR WAY THROUGH THE THICK, TANGLED UNDERGROWTH."



for an ordination," Cameron replied suspiciously.

"It is not, sir, but the pious head of the monastery has permitted the present candidate to be ordained at this season, as illness prevented his presenting himself at the proper time. The headman will be pleased if you are present at the festivities."

"One word for the headman and two for yourself, Tha Bu," Cameron answered, smiling. "I suppose you enjoy a show as much as the majority of your countrymen?"

Tha Bu drew himself up. "I am what nature made me," he replied with dignity, "and the wisdom that I have acquired cannot stifle my national tastes."

"Is an ordination ceremony a showy affair, then?" asked Murray, who had been listening to the conversation.

"The ceremony itself is exceedingly solemn," Cameron replied, "but the events which precede it are decidedly frivolous and

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gay, as the last day of a Burman's life as a layman is spent in a manner which, from a Christian point of view, would be considered the reverse of a suitable preparation for a monastic life. The Burmese look at the matter in this light : If a man has never indulged in the pleasures and dissipations of the world, his retiring from it is no great work of merit ; but if, on the other hand, he spends the last day or two of his life as a layman in the full enjoyment of every pleasure dear to a Burman's heart, the austerity of a monastic life will be more keenly felt by him, and consequently his act of renunciation will be the more meritorious."

On the following day, at the hour appointed for the festivities to commence, the Englishmen made their way to the headman of the village, who provided seats for his visitors where they could watch the whole of the proceedings, which began with a procession, headed by a band consisting chiefly of drums and discordant reed instruments.

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Girls were to be seen attired in brilliant costume and loaded with jewellery ; women were there with fruit and flowers for the pagodas ; and men carried aloft an imitation tree made of bamboo, from the branches of which were suspended the future priest's collecting bowl, fan, water-bottle, etc. Then came the future priest himself. His clothes were gorgeous. He had several gold rings on each of his fingers, but instead of wearing a turban his head was covered with tinsel and gum-flowers. When the procession had passed round the village, the youth moved from the stage on which he had been carried to a beautifully decorated throne, erected outside his father's house. The crowd immediately sat down in the road, leaving a clear space in front of the throne for the performers. Dancing-girls, jugglers, football players, and boxing men in turn performed before the throne, and the proceedings were not nearly at an end when the Englishmen retired from the scene.

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“Well, what did you think of the performance?” Cameron asked, as he and Murray walked to the hut set apart for them.

“Oh, I wasn't particularly interested,” Murray replied, “but possibly that was because of a man in the crowd who was watching us keenly all the time. First he looked at us from one point and then from another, and his looks were by no means amiable. I am confident that he means to do us some mischief if he can. When he saw that I noticed him he walked away.”

“Could you recognise him if you were to see him again?”

“Easily, by a deep gash on the lower part of his left cheek.” A few minutes later Murray exclaimed, eagerly, “Look, Cameron, yonder is the very man I was telling you about! Just see the swagger he puts on! He is evidently somebody important, by the way people stare after him.”

As the Burman walked along, his country-

men greeted him with discordant cries of delight. One aged dame called his attention to the Englishmen. He glanced at them, and with a shrug of his shoulders made some remark which highly amused the people.

“Who is that man?” Cameron inquired of a woman standing near.

She made no reply. Other women came up and asked her what the white lords wanted, but none appeared inclined to answer Cameron’s question. They looked at the Englishmen’s revolvers and then at the Burman swaggering down the bullock-cart track, and, evidently fearing for his safety, shook their heads with a solemnity rarely seen in the merry little women of Burma.

“Come, come, tell me who is the brave man you all smile on?” Cameron said coaxingly; and a woman who had just joined the group replied, “He is Po Thaw, the brave *bo*.”

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“Po Thaw!” Cameron repeated in amazement.

“Yes, Po Thaw, the brave *bo*, the handsome *bo*!” the woman replied; and the others echoed her words.

“Murray,” Cameron said excitedly, as they walked on, “that fellow is the notorious Po Thaw—one of the greatest fiends that ever trod the earth. Many Englishmen have been tortured to death at his order. He it was, too, who stood by and jeered while Tha Bu’s mother and father suffered the horrible deaths to which he had condemned them.”

“Let us hurry on and shoot the scoundrel!” Murray exclaimed, grasping his revolver.

“No, no, my dear fellow—that would never do. His men are undoubtedly near at hand, and we should be overpowered in no time.”

“But surely the villagers would help us? ’

“ Help foreigners to fight their countrymen! Is it likely? ”

“ I understood you to say, some days ago, that these dacoits plundered and murdered their own countrymen. If that be the case the villagers would have cause to bless us were we to rid them of such vermin. ”

“ Listen! The villagers are greeting him with shouts of ‘ The brave *bo!* ’ ‘ The good *bo!* ’ ‘ The handsome *bo!* ’ and some are cursing the *kala* dogs—us. The fact is, we are in the midst of his friends. His followers were, no doubt, largely recruited from this village, which is, in all probability, his native place. He destroys other villages with fire and sword, but this one he protects, and is consequently regarded by its inhabitants with considerable affection. The brave *bo*, in the village he protects, is always the hero of song and story, and the favourite of the village belles. ”

“ Then I suppose our hours are numbered. ”

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“I don't think that ; for the headman of the village will take good care that we are neither killed nor robbed while we are in his district. Once we are out of it he won't care in the least what happens to us.”

When Cameron and Murray arrived at their quarters they found Tha Bu in a state of great excitement.

“I have been speaking to the vile dog Po Thaw,” he said.

“The murderer of your father and mother,” Johnson joined in. “And you didn't kill him?”

“Until a suitable opportunity for vengeance arrives, one should carry his enemy on his shoulders,” Tha Bu replied pompously. “The time having arrived, he should dash him to the ground and break him to pieces like a jar on a rock.”

“What did Po Thaw say to you?” Cameron asked, ignoring the guide's remark.

“He asked me many questions.”

“Did he recognise you?”

“ I do not think so.”

“ Or see that you recognised him? ”

“ He did not think that his face was as familiar to me as the mole upon my hand. I pretended that I thought he was one of the village men. He asked me in what direction we were travelling on leaving the village, but I told him the white lords did not tell their servants whither they were going.”

“ Do you think he will attack us in the jungle? ”

“ I do, sir, unless we push on to the English fort before he has time to collect his men.”

“ How far is the fort from here? ”

“ A day's march.”

“ Then we will start at once. Johnson, is everything ready? ”

“ Quite, sir.”

In a few minutes the travellers were on the march again. The Englishmen and Tha Bu were on the alert for an attack, but

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the coolies were purposely kept in ignorance of danger, to prevent their promptly bolting. Hour after hour passed, but nothing whatever was seen or heard of the dacoits.

Shortly after sunset the travellers encamped in an open space on which stood a number of dilapidated pagodas. Cameron took every precaution against a surprise, but, nevertheless, felt far from secure, and wished heartily that he had a stronger force.

Murray, who was comfortably seated on a reclining figure of Gautama, surveyed his friend. Presently he exclaimed, "You're looking precious serious, old fellow!"

"Well, the fact is," Cameron replied, "I think we have made a mistake in encamping here. It would have been better had we pushed on to the fort." Then, calling Tha Bu, he asked—

"How far are we from the fort?"

"About four hours' march, sir," the Burman replied.

"Can you lead us in the dark?"

Po Thaw Appears

“Most certainly, sir. I can guide you in the dark as easily as in the light.”

“Then we’ll start again in half an hour.”

The whole of that night the little band marched through the gloomy jungle. But Tha Bu had evidently miscalculated the distance. For six hours they had been on the march, and still they had not reached the fort. Yet, spent and exhausted though they were, they dared not rest. Cameron was convinced that the dacoits were dogging their steps through the jungle, and at any moment the insidious foe might be upon them. So they stumbled on through the darkness, praying for the dawn, starting almost at the sound of their own footsteps, and hardly daring to speak above a whisper. Had Tha Bu lost his way?



CHAPTER III

A FIGHT WITH THE DACOITS

THE terrible suspicion of Cameron and Murray that Tha Bu had lost his way grew stronger every moment. Soon the suspense became perfectly unendurable. "Tax him with it," Murray at last urged, "and let us know the worst without further delay."

"I will," Cameron answered shortly, and sent a cartman forward to tell the guide to come to him at once.

Tha Bu obeyed the command with his customary promptitude. "The English masters are anxious," he said, before Cameron had time to speak. "I can see it plainly in their faces. But what is the reason?"

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His composure at once restored the Englishmen's confidence in him. But to make assurance doubly sure, Cameron said, "I suppose you are quite certain that this track leads to the fort?"

"I am, sir," Tha Bu replied, with emphasis. "Do the English masters doubt it?" he continued. "Twice I have done this journey in the time I told you it would occupy; but nature has since raised obstacles. When I last travelled this way the vile dog Po Thaw was not known, and my countrymen were continually passing in safety along this track. But none travel this way now, for Po Thaw's cruel deeds are known to every Burman, and the vile *bo* is feared more than deadly cholera. So the jungle plants have sprung up again all along the track and made travelling difficult. Now the English masters know why our journey has taken longer than I said it would. The wisest men sometimes——"

"Yes, yes," said Cameron, cutting short

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the inevitable proverb, "your explanation is perfectly satisfactory. Hurry back to your post."

Considerably relieved in mind, the Englishmen stepped out with renewed vigour, and at five o'clock in the morning the travellers reached the fort.

Lieutenant Mills, the officer in command, welcomed them heartily. He was a smart, good-looking young fellow, with an air of determination about him which marked him as a man admirably suited for the dangerous and responsible position he occupied. Cameron had known him when he was stationed at Rangoon, and the meeting was a pleasant surprise for both.

"My quarters are not exactly palatial," he said with a smile, leading the way to a bamboo hut raised on piles some three or four feet from the ground, "but they are comfortable, and that's the great thing."

The travellers fully appreciated the comforts of the lieutenant's hut, when, having

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refreshed themselves, they lay at their ease in luxurious long chairs, and prepared to answer Mills' very natural inquiry—

“What in the name of everything that's extraordinary has brought you up here?”

“My friend Murray is yearning for adventure,” Cameron replied, as he leisurely lit a cheroot, “and I have caught the complaint from him.”

“Well, you have certainly come to the right quarter. Of course you have heard of Po Thaw; but do you know that on principle he tortures to death every Englishman he captures? With such a small party as you have, I do not see how you can possibly escape falling into his hands. At present he practically rules the whole of the country between the Irrawaddy and the Chindwin, and his spies are so numerous that he is kept thoroughly acquainted with the movements of every white man in the district. Your journey has no doubt been fully reported to him.”

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“Oh, yes, he knows all about it. We saw him two days ago, and he saw us,” Murray calmly remarked.

“You saw him? Where? Where?” Mills asked, rising excitedly from his chair

Murray told him all that had occurred at the village.

“Yes, you undoubtedly did see the scoundrel,” Mills said; “but why he did not seize and crucify or burn you is more than I can understand. Perhaps he had a bigger job on hand. I wish I could meet the fiend.”

“How is it that he manages to escape capture?” Murray asked. “And where does he obtain his arms?”

“The latter part of your question is easily answered. Po Thaw held some appointment at King Theebaw's blackguardly court, but when Mandalay fell into our hands he did not accompany the ministers of State who went out to meet our troops. The Burmese were supposed to have laid down their arms, but while the people were

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flocking to the gates to witness our soldiers entering the capital, a large mob of ruffians, headed by Po Thaw, collected all the arms that could be found and escaped with them. The result you and all the world know. Po Thaw, being a man of considerable ingenuity, and possessing an unrivalled knowledge of the country, has successfully defied us ever since. After he has made a raid on some village which is not under his protection, he disperses his large band, to meet again on an appointed day at some spot many miles away. He has several lieutenants as remorseless as himself, and sometimes as many as three villages are plundered in one day."

"Then we have precious little chance of ever——" Murray commenced, and then stopped short.

"Go on, old man. Tell Mills the object of our expedition," Cameron said quickly, as he viciously crushed a particularly persistent mosquito.

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Murray was considerably relieved. He was one of those who never can keep a secret for any length of time.

Without a moment's hesitation he briefly but lucidly told the young officer the story of the *phoongyee's* treasure.

"What a tremendous bit of luck!" Mills exclaimed. "But take my advice," he continued, "and wait until we have captured Po Thaw before proceeding in search of the treasure. While he is at large it is simply madness to think of attempting to reach the Sunrise Pagoda. If your party were more numerous, it would be different."

"But I can't leave my business for too long a period," Cameron objected, "and Murray and I have determined to push forward at all costs as quickly as possible."

At that moment a smart young sergeant entered the hut. Saluting his officer, he said briskly, "There's a Burman outside the fort, sir, who says he has a letter to deliver into your hands. Shall I admit him, sir?"

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“I’ll have a look at him first,” Mills replied, rising from his chair; and taking his field-glass, he at once proceeded to the edge of the fort, accompanied by Cameron and Murray, and surveyed the stranger.

Presently he called out, “Sergeant, let the man pass!”

The Burman soon advanced, casting nervous glances at the sentry’s bayonet. He produced from his mouth a quill about an inch in length, and delivered it to Mills, who quickly extracted from it a piece of paper about three inches square. There was writing on it. He read it eagerly. Then he turned to Cameron and Murray and said seriously, “I say! you fellows have had a wonderful escape. Listen!—

“*To the Officer in Command.*

“Be prepared, for to-morrow Po Thaw, with a strong force, will attack you. In a few hours he is going to kill three Englishmen, who are resting for the night some six hours’ march from your fort. I would save

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them if I could, but long before this reaches you they will have been crucified. Avenge their death. Let my messenger return at once. Give him no message and ask him no questions.'”

For a few moments Cameron and Murray were too horrified to speak. But Johnson, who had also heard the letter read, exclaimed gleefully, “What a sell for Po Thaw! He thought we were going to stay at the pagodas all night!”

Tha Bu was equally delighted at Po Thaw's disappointment. In fact, his joy was so great that he quite forgot to utter a suitable proverb.

“Po Thaw's loss will be your gain, I hope,” Murray said to Mills, later, “for I need scarcely say the knowledge of the *bo's* kind intentions with respect to us will make us willingly fight shoulder to shoulder with your men.”

“Your assistance will be very welcome,” Mills declared. “I have lost several

A Fight with the Dakoits

men recently through dysentery — poor fellows!”

“By the by, who is your correspondent?” Cameron asked casually.

“I haven’t the faintest idea who she can be,” said Mills.

“She?” Cameron and Murray exclaimed together, with increased interest.

“Yes, judging from the writing. Look at it.”

“Oh, yes, it’s a woman’s handwriting, undoubtedly,” Cameron declared, after glancing at the note. “But how in the name of goodness can an Englishwoman have obtained a knowledge of Po Thaw’s plans? Perhaps she’s a prisoner, though.”

“That is scarcely likely,” Mills said. “Had she been a prisoner, she would not have told us to ask her messenger no questions. I think it more likely that she is some foolish Eurasian girl who became Po Thaw’s wife, but has grown weary of his incessant brutality. At any rate, whoever

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she is, I am exceedingly obliged to her for her timely warning."

Mills saw that the anonymous lady's messenger was supplied with food and drink, and then dismissed him.

A few minutes later he announced his intentions respecting Po Thaw. "I'm going to try to deceive the mighty *bo*," he said. "The Burmese firmly believe that Englishmen celebrate every piece of good fortune by getting incapably drunk. I am going to make Po Thaw believe that the whole of my force is drunk, in celebration of your arrival. I have a Burmese prisoner, and when all my men have simulated drunkenness, I'll make it easy for him to escape. He'll hurry to Po Thaw and bring the dacoits down upon us at once, in expectation of an easy victory."

"But," Cameron ventured to remark, "although the Burmese never get drunk, I fancy they know pretty well how long

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it takes a European to recover from a drunken bout ; and I imagine your prisoner will know that by the time he finds his comrades, everybody in the fort will be sober again."

Mills laughed. "My dear fellow," he said, "that just shows how little you know of the ways of the wily Burmese. This prisoner of mine will simply use one of the peculiar, far-travelling cries common to his race, and by that means he will probably find his rascally friends in less than half an hour! Sergeant!" he then called to a man standing near ; and the soldier was instructed to tell the men quietly that they were to pretend to get drunk.

"I will have some harmless concoction served out to them," Mills explained, "and they must appear to drink about ten times as much as they really do. Every man in the fort is to pretend he is intoxicated."

"The sentries too, sir?" the sergeant

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asked, half convinced that his officer had taken leave of his senses.

“Yes. They must pretend to fall fast asleep, but at the same time they must keep a sharp look-out. And when you are drunk, sergeant—at least, when you are supposed to be—you must drop a knife near that Burmese fellow yonder, so that he can cut the ropes that bind him, and escape. I want him to have an opportunity of telling Po Thaw that we are all incapable of offering resistance, and urge the *bo* to attack us quickly. Do you thoroughly understand me?”

“Yes, sir—thoroughly,” the sergeant replied, with a feeling of intense relief.

“Very well. Go and tell the men—but remember, they are not to become uproarious. They may sing in moderation, but in less than an hour after the drink is served out I want all of them to pretend to be asleep.”

The sergeant saluted and retired.

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When the men heard what they were to do they entered into the spirit of the thing at once. A liberal measure of weak tea was served out to every man ; and they pretended to enjoy it greatly. Mills secretly filled a mug, similar to those from which his men were drinking, with the contents of a bottle of Bass, and then offered it to the Burmese prisoner, who declined it. He saw, however, that it was an intoxicant, and of course imagined that all the men were drinking the same beverage.

The soldiers acted their parts well. For half an hour or so they appeared to be drinking steadily. Then they commenced to sing and dance, these amusements giving way later to all manners of absurd acts. One man gravely saluted a monkey that was engaged in its usual occupation on the top of a hut ; another, who was staggering along, assumed the greatest terror on meeting a harmless little lizard about half an inch in length ; a third began to square

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up to an image of Buddha, whom he challenged to "come on"; a lance-corporal began to chalk *chevrons* on the legs of a bullock, while a private threw his arms around a pillar of one of the huts and affectionately kissed it.

While all this tomfoolery was going on, the sergeant who had received Mills' instructions staggered towards the prisoner, sat down near to him, and began to eat plantains, peeling them with a well-sharpened knife. After sitting there for about ten minutes he staggered away, leaving the knife lying on the ground. The Burman quietly snatched it up and hid it in his *lungyi*.¹

In a quarter of an hour every man whom the prisoner could see appeared to be fast asleep. He glanced at the officers' quarters, and saw the three Englishmen slumbering, as he thought, in their bamboo chairs. They were watching him, however, and saw him

¹ Skirt.

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cut the ropes which bound him. After that, he lay still for some moments. Then, suddenly springing up, he rushed quickly and noiselessly across the fort, clambered over the stockade, and was gone!

Four hours later Mills, anxiously surveying the jungle through his field-glass, saw several fierce faces peering out.

“Don’t show yourselves on any account,” he said to his men; and the dacoits, having come to the conclusion that their foe was unprepared, quitted the shelter of the jungle and advanced quickly towards the fort. It was quite certain that they fully expected to take the place by surprise, for they did not, as is usual with them, encourage each other with hideous war-cries, but advanced in silence. There were fully two hundred of them, some armed with rifles, others with *dahs* and long spears. Several bamboo ladders by which they hoped to mount the stockade were carried by the foremost men.

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Nearer and nearer they came, growing evidently more confident of success the closer they drew to the fort.

“Fire!” Mills shouted.

Bang! went the rifles, and many a dacoit's career of rapine and murder was ended.

For a moment the robbers seemed inclined to bolt back into the jungle; but their leaders, with cries that the *kala* dogs were few and they were many, succeeded in checking their fright. With fierce, loud cries they rushed madly forward. Again a terrible fire was poured into them, with deadly effect. Then came the order which the British soldiers had been anxiously awaiting—“Fix bayonets!” The gleaming steels clicked into their places.

“Follow me, men!” Mills shouted, a moment later.

The gate was opened quickly, and the young officer, waving aloft his sword, dashed out to meet the attackers. The dacoits were taken completely by surprise. It had never

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occurred to them that the Englishmen would be so rash as to quit the fort. Some of them promptly flung down their arms and ran towards the jungle ; but the majority stood their ground, and fought bravely.

In the excitement of the fight most of the Englishmen had forgotten all about Po Thaw ; but Mills, dashing from one spot to another, sought eagerly for the notorious *bo*. Suddenly he uttered a cry of delight. Near him was a dacoit leader with a deep scar on his left cheek. He rushed at him. The dacoit smiled, parried the sword-thrust with his *dah*, and lunged at his opponent, who also turned aside the blow. But Mills was an expert swordsman, and in less than a minute his opponent was lying dead at his feet.

“ Po Thaw is dead ! ” passed quickly from one man to another. A rousing cheer signalled the good news, and in a few minutes the enemy was in full flight. Then the British soldiers crowded round the dead *bo*, eager to see the man whose

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infamous cruelties had made the most callous among them shudder.

Tha Bu had been anxiously seeking for Po Thaw during the fight, and when he heard that he was killed, he exclaimed frantically, "Killed! Killed! And not by my hand! Let me go and spit on the dead dog."

He pushed his way unceremoniously through the crowd, gave one look at the dead man, and then shouted, "That's not Po Thaw!"

The soldiers were indignant at what they considered an unwarrantable attempt to rob their officer of his victory. "Look at the scar on his left cheek!" they exclaimed loudly and angrily.

"I see it," Tha Bu replied contemptuously. "But does a vain Baboo become an Englishman by putting on English clothes? Certainly not! Nor does a dacoit become Po Thaw by scarring his face. He has done that to deceive you all. Many

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months ago an English officer tried to kill Po Thaw. He did not succeed, but he wounded him badly on the left cheek. Po Thaw has more wisdom than bravery, and, fearing that he would be easily recognised by the scar on his face, he gave an order that every one of his chief lieutenants should be cut on the left cheek, so as to bear a scar similar to his. And now, when some of the Indian soldiers of the Great White Queen hear that the man with the scarred face has been fighting in three places at one time, they foolishly believe him to be an evil spirit, and fear him the more."

"I suppose you do really know Po Thaw when you see him?" said Mills, somewhat dejectedly.

"I do, sir," Tha Bu replied. "One may cherish the memory but forget the face of his parents' benefactors; the features of their murderer, once seen, can no more be effaced than the tattoo marks upon my thighs."¹

¹ Every Burman is tattooed from the waist to the knees.

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“ Did you see Po Thaw to-day ? ”

“ I did not, sir. I should know him in a moment amidst a thousand men with scarred faces.”

And then Cameron and Murray remembered that the dead man differed in many respects from the Burman whom they had seen and heard hailed as Po Thaw, the brave *bo*.

Mills was terribly disappointed. The fight had been a fierce one, and he had won a victory to be proud of ; but still, he knew only too well that the brave effort of that day had been vain. Had Po Thaw been present, and suffered defeat, it would have been a severe blow to dacoity in that part of Burma. But as things were at present the *bo* would declare in every village that, had he led the men against the *kala* dogs, he would have won a great victory ; and the credulous people would believe him and flock to his service.

CHAPTER IV

“WE HAVE COME TO BE YOUR WIVES”

AN hour or so after the fight, Murray and Cameron were busying themselves over one or two of the soldiers who had been rather severely wounded, when Mills came up. After warmly thanking them for their help, he inquired as to their plans for the immediate future. They understood his reason for asking when he explained later that if they were still determined to find the *phoongyee's* treasure, and would not take his advice and wait until Po Thaw was captured, it was necessary that they should hurry on to the next fort at once.

“As I told you before,” he said, “after a raid upon a village, or a fight with our

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troops, the *bo* almost invariably disperses his band, with instructions to meet again on a certain day at some distant spot ; and now is therefore the best chance you will have of performing the next stage of your journey in safety."

"Then we'll push on at once by all means," Cameron replied, and he gave Tha Bu instructions to put the little expedition in marching trim with all speed.

An hour later the guide announced that everything was ready. The adventurers were loth to leave their kind host, but there was very obvious danger in delay ; and so, with many expressions of mutual goodwill, the friends parted.

"I wish I could go with you," Mills said at the last moment, "but that, of course, is impossible. I won't disguise from you that you are going on a very dangerous journey, but I wish you every success, and shall be heartily pleased to hear, if ever you obtain the treasure, that it was worth risking your

“ We have come to be your Wives ’

lives for.” Then, turning to his soldiers, he said, “ Now, men, let us give them a parting salute ;” and as the plucky little party filed slowly through the gateway of the fort a hearty cheer rang out, which the travellers returned right lustily, while Mah Shway O, anxious to share in the demonstration, pulled her husband’s turban from his head and waved it wildly in the air.

An hour passed quickly by, and Cameron and Murray were just congratulating themselves on the rapid progress they were making, when they saw the man in charge of the first bullock-cart suddenly dash into the jungle, quickly followed by Mah Shway O, who seized him by the hair and promptly brought him tremblingly back.

Murray laughed. “ That was smart work,” he said. “ But what made the fellow——”

He stopped short, seized Cameron by the arm, and pointed along the jungle path. Some thirty well-armed dacoits were marching ahead of them. Discovery was certain,

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for the track, which, since they left the fort, had been of a zigzag description, was now straight for a considerable distance. With laudable presence of mind, Tha Bu ran to the right of the path and shouted in Hindustanee, "Charge!" then, rushing quickly to the left, exclaimed in the same language, but in a different tone of voice, "Forward! Quick!"

Hearing the two commands, the dacoits imagined that they were about to be attacked by two separate detachments, and, without looking round, fled into the jungle.

Cameron, Murray, and Johnson laughed heartily, and warmly congratulated Tha Bu on his presence of mind.

"Yes," Tha Bu replied gravely, "in battle a warrior is needed, in commotion a counsellor, at meals a loved one,¹ but in an emergency a wise man."

"Well, your trumpeter ain't dead, at any rate," Johnson observed.

¹Burmese women are supposed to wait on their husbands at meals, and eat their own food afterwards.

“ *We have come to be your Wives* ”

“ Dead? Nobody was killed ! ”

“ I mean it’s like your cheek to call yourself a wise man. It’s downright conceit. ”

“ A worthless man always notices the trivial faults of others, even though they be as small as a *sesamum*, ” Tha Bu replied airily, “ but his own fault, as large as a cocoanut, he does not see. ”

“ Well, what’s my cocoanut fault ? ” Johnson asked.

“ You talk too much. Flavourless is a betel-leaf without lime, tasteless a curry destitute of salt ; and senseless the utterances of one without knowledge. ”

Johnson laughed. “ If I talk too much, ” he said, “ I wonder what you do. Your tongue is wagging from morning till night. ”

Cameron and Murray, who had been listening with considerable amusement, now thought it time to interfere.

“ Come, come, ” Cameron said, “ we can’t afford to waste time like this. Tha Bu, tell

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the cartmen that the next man who tries to escape will be killed on the spot."

While Tha Bu was speaking to the cartmen, Cameron thanked Mah Shway O for her promptitude in arresting the runaway. The charming little woman beamed with delight, and accepted with undisguised pleasure a couple of cheroots from the Englishmen. As she was smoking at the time, she placed a cheroot in the pierced and distended lobe of each ear, so that they might not be stolen or mislaid.

Then Cameron turned to Tha Bu. "Do you think the men we saw just now are likely to waylay us?" he asked.

"I do not, sir," Tha Bu replied. "They were some of the dacoits who attacked the fort, for I saw five wounded men with them. They are evidently making their way to their meeting-place, which is, no doubt, many miles distant."

In spite of Tha Bu's reassuring explanation, the travellers proceeded very cautiously,

“ We have come to be your Wives

and it was late in the day when they arrived at their resting-place—a village of considerable size. The inhabitants were most hospitable, and food was quickly set before the wayfarers in the rest-house. A respectful crowd sat a few yards away, watching with interest every mouthful they took. Johnson suggested that probably they had heard that Englishmen eat with their ears.

When the meal was finished, the people crowded round Tha Bu and plied him with questions as to who the white lords were, and whither they were going. Tha Bu cleverly satisfied their curiosity without imparting any important information. Then he in turn asked questions. He inquired as to the whereabouts of the dacoits, and heard that they were in full flight in a northerly direction. He was also informed that on the following day a famous priest was to be cremated. Tha Bu was naturally most anxious to witness the ceremony, and

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suggested to Cameron that they should have a day's rest in the village.

"The dacoits are not likely to attack us here, sir," he said, "for the village is fairly well protected, and the people hate Po Thaw, who has frequently stolen their cattle."

"I'll hear what Mr. Murray says," Cameron answered.

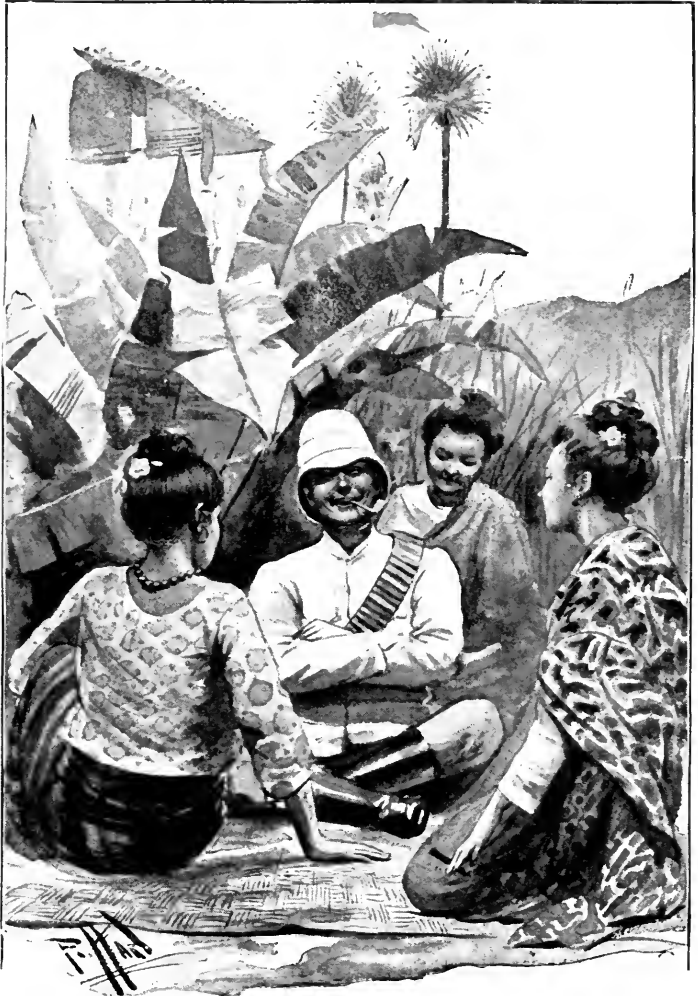
"When leaders are many," Tha Bu muttered, "all consider themselves very wise, and each desires his own way; consequently their undertaking ends in ruin."

Ignoring Tha Bu's uncomplimentary remark, Cameron went in search of Murray. He found him seated on a mat, smoking a pipe, and surrounded by an admiring crowd of smiling Burmese girls.

"Hallo, Murray!" he laughed, "you've made a wholesale conquest."

"It appears so," Murray replied, "and I'm exceedingly gratified to find that my type of beauty is so well appreciated."

"Don't flatter yourself, my boy. The



"SURROUNDED BY AN ADMIRING CROWD OF SMILING BURMESE GIRLS."



"We have come to be your Wives"

girls are not admiring your face, but your pipe."

Murray was considerably astonished. He removed the pipe from his mouth and critically examined it.

"Cameron," he said, with mock solemnity, "I sadly fear that you're horribly jealous of my popularity with these charming little ladies. It is most unlikely that a common meerschaum would be the object of so much feminine attention."

"An ordinary clay would have been equally as attractive," Cameron declared, "for evidently not one of them has ever seen a pipe before. Cheroots are too plentiful for pipes to be introduced among them. Ask one of them to have a draw."

Murray held the pipe towards the girls. After a considerable amount of giggling and pushing, a coquettish little woman advanced and took it. She placed it in her mouth and puffed vigorously. Her friends struggled

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to emulate her, and the pipe was not returned to Murray until fully twenty damsels had in turn placed it between their round, betel-stained lips.

“ Now, Murray,” Cameron said, “ perhaps you can spare me a few moments. Would you like to see a *phoongyee byan* ? ”

“ A what ? ” Murray asked.

“ A *phoongyee byan* . ”

“ Well, it doesn't sound as though it were the kind of thing I am pining to see. Perhaps you'll kindly tell me in respectable English what the object is. ”

“ A *phoongyee's* funeral. ”

“ Thanks. I'm ' off ' funerals. ”

“ But this is going to be a regular swell affair. The deceased *phoongyee* was very popular, and greatly beloved. ”

“ Well, I shouldn't have thought it. The people must be adepts in the art of concealing their feelings, for they are as jolly as possible. But perhaps they haven't heard yet of the *phoongyee's* death. ”

"We have come to be your Wives"

"Oh, yes, they have. He died two years ago."

"Two days ago you mean."

"No, I don't. I mean two years ago."

"Now look here, Cameron, there is a limit to my credulity. I had my doubts about your explanation of that pipe business, but I swallowed your tale. I flatly refuse, however, to believe that a dead body can be kept unburied for two years in this sweltering climate."

"This body was embalmed," Cameron explained, "and to-morrow it is to be burned with great pomp."

"Oh, if it's a case of cremation I'll certainly be present," Murray declared. "I'm very keen on cremation," he continued, "and have made my people promise to dispose of my body in that way. But I sincerely hope that Po Thaw won't forestall my relations. I shouldn't like to be cremated by him."

"Don't hint at such a thing, my dear

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fellow. Dead or alive I trust we shall never fall into that arch-fiend's hands. I'll tell Tha Bu that we have decided to stay and witness the ceremony."

Directly Tha Bu heard his master's decision he communicated it to the head-man of the village, who immediately hastened to the rest-house to see if he could contribute in any way to the comfort of the Englishmen. He was a pleasant, good-natured old fellow, and sat talking to Cameron and Tha Bu for some considerable time. But when they mentioned Po Thaw his face grew dark.

"Unless the soldiers of the Great White Queen capture that fiend before many months, this village will be burned to the ground and the bones of its people will fertilise the soil," he said sadly.

"We hate Po Thaw," he continued. "Our old men and matrons curse him; our maidens and children turn pale and tremble at his name. Our young men, one and all, have

“ We have come to be your Wives ”

refused to join his robber band, and for this he threatens us all with horrible deaths. But in spite of his threats we will not break the commandments of Buddha, nor the laws of the Great White Queen. Po Thaw may crucify us, but in our next existence we shall be better men, and he will be a dog or a vile insect.”

For a few moments there was silence. Then the headman exclaimed cheerfully, “ But why anticipate the day of evil things? I must amuse you, and not make your generous hearts sad.”

He shouted for the football players to come and perform before them. Eight young Burmans, with their skirts tucked up around their waists, advanced and stood in a ring at intervals of two or three yards from each other. The ball, about a third of the size of an Association ball, was made of polished bamboo wicker. A player punted it straight up in the air, and, as it descended, received it on his knee, sending it high into the air

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again. As it fell, another player gave it a fresh impetus with his elbow. In this way the ball was passed from one man to another, and with such accuracy that during the quarter of an hour they played it did not once fall to the ground. Nor was it kicked out of the reach of the players standing in the ring.

One young player gave a splendid exhibition of his skill. He punted the ball into the air with his bare foot and received it, as it fell, behind him, on his heel, sending it high up again, to descend on the shoulder, the knee, the calf, the heel, the neck, or the elbow. The player's graceful movements, as he twisted and turned about to receive the ball and skilfully launch it into mid-air, excited the admiration of the three Englishmen.

When the play was finished, the headman departed, and the travellers retired to rest.

It rained heavily throughout the night, but they slept on undisturbed until Tha Bu

"We have come to be your Wives"

brought their breakfast to them. The unbroken night's rest had given them excellent appetites, and it was not until they had satisfied their hunger that they noticed three exceedingly pretty Burmese girls sitting a few yards away, attentively watching them. Their hair was decorated with many flowers, and it was very evident that each had devoted more than ordinary attention to her toilet.

"What are those girls waiting for?" Cameron asked Tha Bu.

"To speak to you, sir," Tha Bu replied, with a merry twinkle in his eye.

"What about?"

"They have not told me, sir."

Cameron stepped out of the rest-house to speak to them. Murray, Johnson, and Tha Bu closely followed him.

"Do you wish to speak to us?" Cameron asked the girls.

"Yes, my lord, we do," one of them replied, taking the cheroot from her mouth,

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but remaining seated. "We have come to be your wives, for we see that you have none."

Cameron was so astounded at this declaration that he could not for the minute think what to say. The young woman calmly continued: "The village matrons speak no scandal of us, and our brothers are not ashamed to hear their friends talk of us in the bazaar. We can cook, we can wash clothes, and we have gone through the ear-boring ceremony."¹

"Your conduct, we are quite confident, is irreproachable," Cameron declared, "and you are as pleasing in our eyes as daybreak is to the man who has trudged all night through the jungle; but—but you cannot become our wives."

"Why not?" the maiden asked in surprise.

"Because some day we shall return to

¹ A ceremony marking the transition from girlhood to womanhood.

"We have come to be your Wives"

our own country, and if we were to take you there the cold would kill you."

"We would wrap blankets round ourselves."

"In our country no woman is allowed to smoke cheroots or chew betel."

This piece of information considerably astonished the Burmese girls. They discussed it among themselves for a few minutes. Then the one who had before spoken said, "Nevertheless, we will be your wives and live happily until we go to your country. Then we will cease to smoke and to chew betel, and before many months have passed we will die."

Cameron was at his wits' end.

"Where's Tha Bu?" he asked, turning to Johnson.

"I do not know where he has gone, sir," Johnson answered, "but he said he would be back in a moment."

"What's the conversation about?" Murray inquired.

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“Oh! I had quite forgotten that you don't understand Burmese,” Cameron replied. “These three girls have actually come to ask us to marry them.”

Murray smiled. Johnson squared his shoulders, gave his moustache an extra twist, looked pleasantly at the damsels, and then said to Cameron, “If you please, sir, which is the girl that wants to marry me?”

“I haven't the faintest idea,” Cameron declared. “They wish to be our wives, but I don't know at all how they intend to pair.”

“Shall we always have to live in Burma, sir, when we're married?”

Cameron laughed.

“I'm sorry to disappoint you, Johnson, he said, “but I've declined their offer. Unfortunately they don't appear at all disposed to accept the refusal.”

At that moment a curiously attired middle-aged Burman came striding towards them. He wore Chinese breeches, and in place of a jacket a tigerskin was thrown over his

“ *We have come to be your Wives* ”

shoulders. His beard was long and straggling, and his hair, instead of being tied up in a chignon, was hanging loosely down his back. In his left hand he grasped a thick bamboo. Directly the girls saw him they began to tremble violently.

“ Foolish maidens,” he shouted fiercely, “ I have come to save you from ruin. You asked the *kalas* to make you their wives. Do not deny it, for I know you did. Everything you say or do is known to me. Are there no young men in this village, that you wish to marry flesh-eaters? Are there no good Buddhists among the youths around you that you would mate with these strange men—these white fools, who, knowing not the true Law, laugh at transmigration? I tell you this, foolish maidens: If you take to your arms these slayers of cattle, and drinkers of intoxicants, you will have to suffer hereafter some of the horrible tortures which are painted on the roof of the monastery school. Go back to your huts and

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leave these *kalas* in peace. Go! go! and remember what I now say: If you speak to these men again, the *nats*¹ of the forest will seize you."

The strange man, whose speech and manner had impressed even Cameron, imperiously waved the girls away with his stick. Trembling in every limb, and not daring even to look at the Englishmen, they rose up and walked quickly away. The man followed, muttering fiercely, and shaking his fist at them.

The three Englishmen stood in silence, gazing after the retreating figures. Suddenly they heard behind them a half-stifled laugh. Looking quickly round, they beheld Tha Bu.

"Who is that extraordinary individual?" Cameron asked, pointing to the weird stranger.

"That man, sir——," Tha Bu commenced, and then burst into a fit of uncontrollable mirth.

¹ Evil spirits.

CHAPTER V

THE "SPOTTED FACE"

"WELL, who is that strange creature?" Cameron asked, when Tha Bu's fit of merriment had subsided.

"A wizard, sir," the guide replied, with a broad grin.

"A wizard! That accounts for his uncomplimentary remarks concerning us. All your wizards have, I notice, an extraordinary dislike for Englishmen."

"The wiser a man is, sir, the more they dislike him. They hate me."

Johnson uttered an ominous grunt, but Tha Bu continued, unabashed—

"Nevertheless, when I saw that the love-sick maidens would not leave you I hurried

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to the wizard's hut to tell him to drive them away. He asked for one rupee, but I gave him eight annas only. That was more than sufficient, for the girls will think he discovered by his own magical powers the object of their visit. It will be talked about in the bazaar, and the people will flock to him more than ever."

"For what?" Murray asked; but Tha Bu pretended not to hear the question. He had a very patriotic objection to exposing the failings of his countrymen.

"The Burmese are wonderfully superstitious," Cameron explained, "and their wizards are consulted on almost every subject. Isn't that so, Tha Bu?"

"It is, sir."

"But," Murray argued, "if you know they are frauds, why don't you denounce them?"

"Because, sir," answered the wily Tha Bu, "wizards are sometimes very useful to me during my travels. Those maidens

The "Spotted Face"

would not have left you had not the wizard frightened them away."

"Poor little things," Murray said tenderly, "I hope they will soon forget us."

"In two days you will be as forgotten as the beatings their mothers gave them in their childhood," Tha Bu declared.

"How do you know?" Johnson asked angrily, preferring to believe that one of the three girls was desperately in love with him.

But Tha Bu made no reply. Turning to his masters, the guide adroitly changed the conversation by reminding them that if they wished to see the *phoongyee's* funeral, it was time they were off.

"Come along, then, Cameron," said Murray. "I wouldn't miss that interesting ceremony for anything."

They hurried away at once, and reached the monastery just in time to see the coffin placed on the large four-wheel car in which it was to be drawn to the place of burning. On the car was a figure of a huge elephant,

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in a kneeling position, with a stage resting upon its back ; and on this stage the gorgeous coffin was laid. The crowd now became very excited, for a most important part of the ceremony was about to take place. Four strong ropes were fixed to the axle-tree of the car, two each way, and the men, dividing themselves into two parties, seized them, and commenced the most extraordinary tug-of-war that Europeans ever witnessed. With loud shouts the funeral car was pulled first one way and then the other, every man exerting himself to the utmost, being anxious to obtain some of the merit to be derived from drawing the coffin to the funeral pyre.

For nearly a quarter of an hour the tug-of-war was continued without either side gaining any permanent advantage. Then the men on the northern side of the car pulled it some ten yards, amidst the wildest shouts of the onlookers. But in this effort they exhausted themselves, and the men on the

The "Spotted Face

southern side managed to pull the car back more than thirty yards. In spite of all their efforts the northern men could not regain what they had lost. They grew desperate, and, with perspiration streaming down their faces and naked backs, tugged spasmodically at the ropes, contesting every inch of ground, but, nevertheless, slowly losing. The advantage which the southern men had already obtained, incited them to still greater efforts. In a short time they pulled the car to the left in a straight line for the pyre some hundred yards away. Occasionally the northern men made a frantic effort to arrest the progress of their opponents, and the car was drawn back a yard or two, only, however, to be pulled forward with less exertion immediately after.

Thirty-five minutes from the commencement of the tug-of-war the southern men, almost mad with joy, drew the car up to the pyre, which was erected in a large open space. It was built in the shape of a seven-

The Dacoit's Treasure

roofed monastery, and was elaborately decorated. The coffin was removed from the car to a platform, underneath which was a pile of highly inflammable material, and the large crowd awaited the final scene in breathless expectation. From the pyre several ropes were stretched to some elevated ground about fifty yards distant. Rockets were fixed to them with ratan rings, and at a given signal they were discharged, sliding quickly along the ropes to the pyre, and firing it. The flames spread rapidly, and in an incredibly short time all that remained of the pyre was a heap of ashes.

As soon as the ceremony was concluded, the travellers prepared to proceed on their journey. Their departure was witnessed by the headman—who presented them with a basket of particularly fine plantains—and nearly all the village folk. Johnson looked anxiously, but in vain, for the girls who had wished to marry Englishmen. They evidently dared not disobey the wizard.

The "Spotted Face"

After leaving the village, the little party covered many miles without adventure, until, on arriving at a rest-house about an hour before sunset, they found an elderly, long-bearded Mohammedan sitting there, evidently in great distress.

"Salaam, sahib," he exclaimed sorrowfully, bending low as Cameron advanced to him.

"Salaam," Cameron replied, and then asked, "Why are you alone in the jungle?"

"Alas! sahib," the follower of the Prophet replied, "my servants are all dead. A month ago I and my son quitted Mandalay with twelve servants and five bullock-carts piled with merchandise; but a week since, Po Thaw, the cruel *bo*, captured us. My servants he tied together and roasted alive. My son he crucified, and me he vowed to blow to pieces from his dragon-shaped cannon. But, Allah be praised, the vile dog's men were beaten in a fight with the English soldiers; and in the confusion which

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ensued when Po Thaw heard of his men's defeat, I escaped. For nearly a week I hid in a ruined pagoda, only daring to creep out at night in search of food. But when I became sure that Po Thaw had left the neighbourhood, I hurried here to wait until some travellers came by to whom I could offer my services in return for protection."

"Has Po Thaw quitted the neighbourhood, then?" Cameron asked.

"Yes, sahib. By now the dog is many miles away. I will swear it, for I heard him tell his men to disband and meet again in two weeks seven miles west of Malay. They obeyed him at once, and disappeared into the jungle in twos and threes."

"Are there any other dacoit bands about here?"

"No, sahib, none."

"And where are you bound for now?"

"I know not, sahib. I am ruined, ruined, and my son, my only son is dead. East or west, north or south, it mattereth not to me

The "Spotted Face"

at all, now, whither I go. Sahib, your party is not large ; may I not join it? I will work hard from morning till night, and try, in serving you faithfully, to forget my grief. I know this part of the country well, and can lead you through narrow jungle paths to any place to which you wish to go."

"But we have a guide already."

"Yes, sahib, I know ; but your guide might die, and if you had not another to lead you, your party would be in terrible danger."

"Quite true, quite true : I never thought of that. Well, you may come with us."

"Sahib, I thank you. May you live to a venerable age, and have an abundant family!"

"Do you know the Sunrise Pagoda?"

"I know it well, sahib, and can lead you to it in seven days."

"Tha Bu!" Cameron called out.

"Yes, sir!" the Burman replied, hurrying to him.

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“This Mohammedan knows the Sunrise Pagoda, and can lead us to it in seven days.”

Tha Bu was evidently rather annoyed at the prospect of having a rival, and said, as he eyed the stranger suspiciously, “A horse's worth is known by its speed; oxen by their carrying power; a cow by its milk; and a wise man by his speech. Let this stranger therefore speak with me, so that I may know what kind of man he is.”

For five minutes or more the Buddhist and the Mohammedan engaged in an excited conversation. Then Tha Bu reported to Cameron, “The words he speaks appear to be true and sensible; but surely, sir, you will not trust a man of whom you know absolutely nothing? Me you know well, for I have served many Englishmen; and it will be much wiser to trust me to lead you to the Sunrise Pagoda than to be guided to it by a man of whom you know nothing reliable, and whom therefore you cannot trust.”

“You misunderstand me, Tha Bu. I

The "Spotted Face"

have perfect confidence in you, and what I want you to do is to occasionally consult this man, and accept or reject his information as you think advisable."

"Very well, sir, I will do so."

The follower of the Prophet made himself useful in many ways during the next half-hour, and the Englishmen were just congratulating themselves on having secured a valuable addition to their party, when a shout from Tha Bu made them turn round in time to see the Mohammedan, with a rifle in his hand, disappear into the jungle.

"Shoot him ! shoot him !" Tha Bu shouted ; and then it dawned upon the Englishmen that the Mohammedan was decamping with the rifle. They fired, and then rushed after him ; but the man had vanished.

"Is it your rifle he has taken, Tha Bu?" Cameron asked, when at last they gave up the search.

"Yes, sir," the Burman replied. "I laid it down for a moment to attend to the kettle,

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and when I went to take it up I found it had gone. I looked round and saw the treacherous man running away with it."

"Well, I'm glad he appeared in his true colours so quickly."

"So am I, sir. I wonder where he would have led us if we had trusted him?"

"Ah, I wonder!"

"Not to the Sunrise Pagoda?"

"I'm afraid not. By the by, the cartmen have worked very well to-day. Give them that basket of plantains."

Tha Bu distributed the plantains among the cartmen, declaring to them at the same time that they ought to be very grateful indeed to the English lords for giving them what was at first intended for themselves.

Most of the men proceeded to make themselves comfortable before commencing to eat. But one man, evidently more hungry than his comrades, devoured a plantain at once. In less than a minute he uttered a shriek of pain, and fell forward to the ground in agony.

The "Spotted Face"

"He's poisoned!" Murray declared, as he knelt down beside the poor fellow.

"Don't eat the plantains! They're poisoned!" Mah Shway O shouted excitedly, in Burmese.

"Poisoned! What do you mean?" her husband asked.

"Attend to the man. I will tell you afterwards," she replied.

In less than ten minutes the cartman was dead.

"Now, Mah Shway O, tell me how you know the plantains are poisoned," Cameron said sternly.

"My lord, I saw the Mohammedan who stole my husband's rifle handling them. To me he said, 'These plantains are very fine; are they for the English masters to eat?' 'They are for the English masters,' I said; and soon after I saw him touching them again. When he saw I noticed him he moved away."

Cameron took up a bunch of the plantains

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and examined them closely. Then, turning to Murray, he said quietly, "Every one of these plantains is poisoned. They have been punctured with some poisoned instrument. Look at the small hole in the top of each one. We have had a narrow escape. That rascally Mohammedan thought the plantains were for our consumption, and poisoned them to kill us."

"But why should he want to poison us?" Murray asked. "We have done him no harm!"

"It may be that he or his religion has received some slight, doubtless unintentional, from a white man, and, meeting us, he made up his mind to avenge it. It is more probable, however, that his reason was one we shall never guess; for most of the actions of Asiatics are prompted by motives which to us are perfectly inscrutable."

"Do you think, then, that his story of his capture by Po Thaw, and subsequent escape, is true?"

The "Spotted Face"

"Well, really, I don't know what to think. But I know this, that if ever I come across the rascal I'll show him no mercy."

By Cameron's order the plantains were burned and the unfortunate cartman buried. But scarcely had the poor fellow been committed to the ground when Murray exclaimed—

"Look, Cameron! Here's another stranger; and, judging from his appearance, he is twenty times more villainous than the Mohammedan."

"Never judge from appearances in this part of the world," Cameron replied, in the tone of one who had done so and rued it.

The stranger, a Burman, approached them, timidly. His dress consisted chiefly of a *lungyi*. His face was covered with round marks, tattooed in the skin. When the cartmen saw him they exhibited great terror, and hid from his sight. Mah Shway O, with a shrill scream, ran to her husband

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and clung tightly to him. Tha Bu glared fiercely at the stranger.

“Who is this man, Tha Bu!” Cameron asked sharply.

“Sir, he is a vile creature,” the guide replied excitedly; “he is a spotted face—one of King Theebaw’s executioners. Those black circles on his cheeks proclaim his loathsome profession.”

Cameron well knew the intense hatred which the Burmese entertain for public executioners, and was disposed to order the stranger instantly to depart.

“He stole a *lungyi*,” Tha Bu continued, “and was therefore made a government slave to patrol the streets at night, put out fires, and act as public executioner.”

“But how do you know he stole a *lungyi*?” Cameron asked, growing interested.

“It is tattooed on his breast. I can see the words ‘*lungyi* thief’ from here.”

“Ah, yes, so can I!”

“Shall I drive the vile wretch away?”

The "Spotted Face"

"No, no. I want to speak to him."

The ex-executioner saw they were talking about him, and squatted down in an attitude of piteous supplication.

"What do you want?" Cameron asked him.

"My lord, in pity hearken to my words, though I am a vile creature and no better than a pariah dog. One night, many years ago, my house was burnt down and all my clothes destroyed. I had not even a *lungyi* to wear, nor money to buy one. My father, a Hindoo, had undergone *sumajh*¹ many years before, and my mother, too, was dead. I had no friends to give me a *lungyi*, so I stole one. Alas! I was caught and branded. For many years I was a public executioner ;

¹ *Sumajh*, or the burial alive of lepers, was, until the British Government suppressed it, a very common practice in India. A leper, growing weary of life, would ask his friends to perform *sumajh*, and they, finding him a burden, would readily consent. A grave would be dug, and the leper escorted to it with much pomp. The poor creature would then sit down in the grave, which was immediately filled in with earth by his friends.

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but when the soldiers of the Great White Queen captured Mandalay, and took away the Lord of the Celestial Elephant, I had to fly for my life. Since then I have lived in the jungle, hiding from those who sought to kill me. My lord, vile as I am, life is sweet to me, and I long to reach a country where the meaning of the spots on my face will be unknown. Let me be your slave, my lord, until we reach some place where the great fire-boats start for other lands. I will serve you faithfully, my lord; and if I break my word may all the curses of the book of curses have effect on me!"

Cameron repeated to Murray what the wretched man had said.

"Do you believe his story?" Murray asked.

"Well, I've been so often deceived by Asiatics that I very rarely believe anything they say."

"Perhaps this rascal will emulate the Mohammedan, and run away with a rifle?"

The "Spotted Face"

"He shall not have the opportunity. Tha Bu, you heard what that man said, did you not?"

"Yes, sir, I did hear," the guide replied.

"Do you think he is speaking the truth? Do you think that he has really been hiding in the jungle since the capture of Mandalay?"

"Yes, sir, I think the words he has spoken are probably true. While King Theebaw reigned, the 'spotted faces' were feared more than the cholera, for no one knew when he might be seized by them and killed without trial. When the English soldiers arrived at Mandalay the 'spotted faces' hid themselves, for they knew that the people longed to kill them. Some were dragged from their hiding-places and torn to pieces by the mob, but others escaped to the jungle. Possibly this man is one of them."

"Be sure that those circles are really tattooed on him. They might be painted, to deceive us."

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“Dog, come nearer!” Tha Bu shouted to the “spotted face,” who advanced in great terror.

“Yes, sir, they are really tattooed,” Tha Bu declared, after closely examining the marks on the man’s face and chest; “and, moreover, I recognise the vile fellow as one of the king’s executioners.”

“Very well, then, he may take the place of the cartman who has just died. Tell him so.”

Directly the “spotted face” heard that he was to become a cartman, he squatted down in front of the Englishmen and exclaimed earnestly, “My lords, I thank you. Many years have passed since I did meritorious work, but I will strive to do it now, by serving you faithfully.”

“Mind that you do,” Cameron replied, “for if you take anything that is not yours, be it but a handful of rice, you shall die.”

“My lord, if I deceive my benefactors I shall deserve to die the most painful death

The "Spotted Face"

you can inflict. And now, my lord, hearken to my words. You are in great danger, for the dacoit *bo* is close at hand."

"Po Thaw?"

"Yes, my lord, Po Thaw—the fierce *bo*, who fears neither man nor the *nats* of the hills and the forests. I have seen him but a few minutes ago. I was wandering through the jungle in search of food when I heard some one approaching. Hiding among the tall elephant-grass, I watched to see who the stranger was. He was an old, long-bearded Mohammedan, but nevertheless strong and agile. When he stopped near where I was hiding, I feared that he had discovered me, for he stood still and looked around. But he had not, and, thinking that no one was near, he plucked the long beard from his chin and the turban from his head. Then I saw that he was Po Thaw."

"Was he armed?" Cameron asked excitedly.

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“Yes, my lord, with a rifle such as you have beside you. After removing his beard and turban, he took off his long robes and tied them up in a bundle. Then he disappeared quickly from my sight, carrying the rifle in one hand and the bundle in the other.”

“Were any of his men with him?”

“No, my lord; he was quite alone.”

“That Mohammedan,” Cameron said, turning to Murray, “was Po Thaw in disguise.”

He then repeated to Murray and Johnson what the “spotted face” had told him, adding gloomily, “I’m afraid our hours are numbered, for Po Thaw knows our strength, or rather our weakness, and will swoop down upon us with a strong force.”

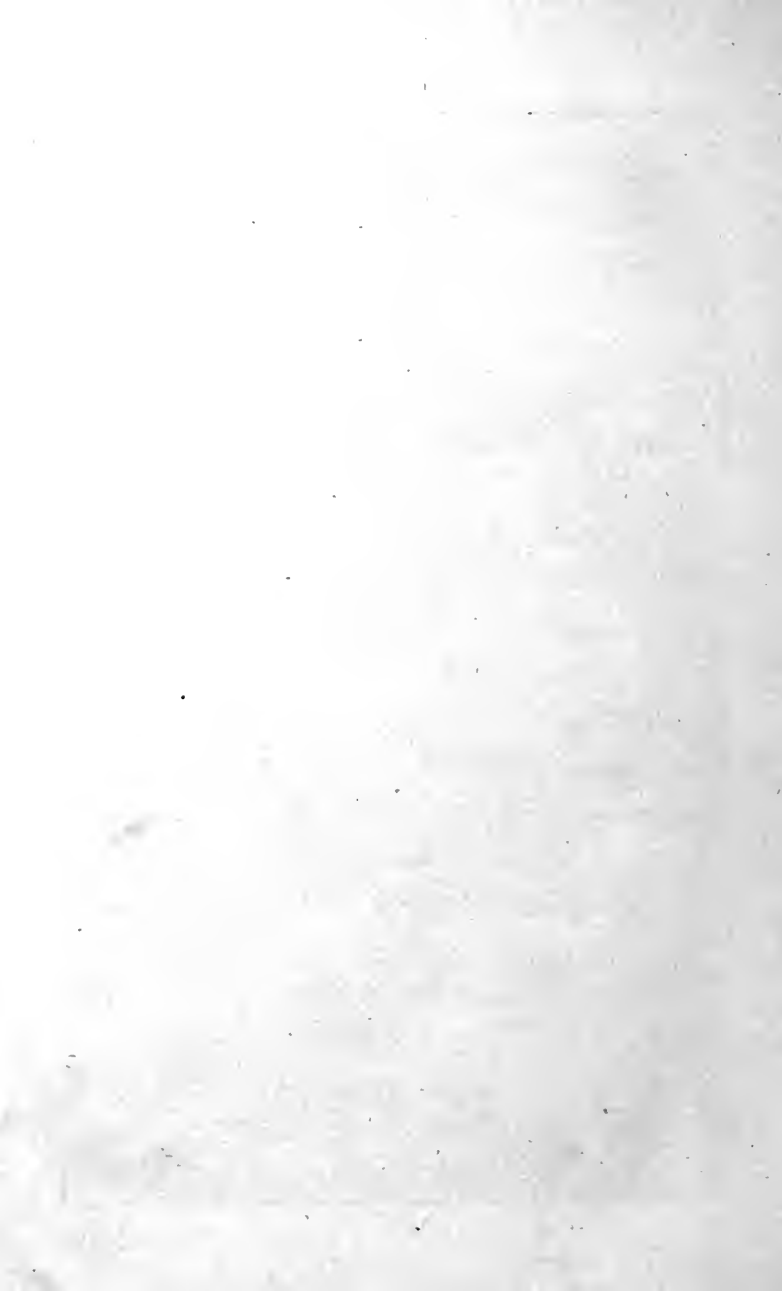
“But he believes us to be all dead by this time. He poisoned the plantains because he was told we were going to eat them, and he surely won’t bring a large force to seize our dead bodies!”

“Ah, I forgot that! By the merest



"THA BU! WHO KILLED THIS MAN?"

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chance his plans have been upset, and we may escape him after all."

"But—but our baggage. Po Thaw never misses an opportunity to plunder, and he'll send a party of men to remove our things to-night or to-morrow. Believing us to be dead he will, however, probably send but a small force, knowing that the cartmen would make no resistance. We must give them an unpleasant surprise."

"Hadn't we better push on to the next fort at once?"

"What do you think, Tha Bu?"

"Well, sir," Tha Bu replied, "the paths have been heavy to-day and the bullocks and the men are tired out; but in four hours they will be able to continue the journey."

"Very well, then, we will start in four hours. Keep a watch on the 'spotted face,' mind!"

"Yes, sir, I will."

But when the time for the start arrived, the "spotted face" was found by the

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Englishmen lying dead, with his head nearly severed from his body.

“Tha Bu!” Cameron shouted, “who killed this man?”

“He was a vile creature,” Tha Bu replied evasively, “and it is well that he is dead.”

Cameron and Murray looked at their guide suspiciously.

“Did you kill him, Tha Bu?” Cameron asked severely.

“The English masters should know by this time that I am a good Buddhist,” Tha Bu made answer with dignity, “and that I would kill no man—but a dacoit. It is because the ‘spotted face’ has so frequently broken the commandment ‘Thou shalt not destroy life’ that I said ‘It is well that he is dead.’”

Cameron then closely questioned, in turn, every one of his men, but could obtain no information as to who was the murderer. So the “spotted face” was buried and the travellers continued their journey.

CHAPTER VI

ANOTHER FIGHT WITH DACOITS

BUT slight progress was made by the little party during the two following days. It seemed as though everything conspired to bring their journey to a standstill. The rain fell incessantly; the track grew narrower and narrower, and frequently the jungle plants had to be cut away to make a passage for the bullock-carts. The Englishmen were compelled to work desperately hard the whole of the time, the cartmen and coolies having become so dispirited that they were scarcely of any use. Nothing, however, was seen or heard of the dacoits.

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Cameron and Murray were certainly rather glad of that, for they were far too tired to be able to offer much of a resistance if attacked.

On the third day the weather improved somewhat, and this seemed to put fresh heart into the coolies, who cheerfully resumed their share of the work. Cameron and Murray, thankful to be able to rest their aching shoulders, were walking along in the rear of the party. One or two of the cartmen had declared their conviction that dacoits were lurking about, waiting for a favourable opportunity to attack the expedition; and Cameron was calculating their slender chances of victory, should their terrible foes confront them, when Murray excitedly broke in upon his reverie.

“ I say, Cameron ! ” he exclaimed, “ didn't you tell that Mohammedan, or rather Po Thaw, that we were going to the Sunrise Pagoda ? ”

“ I did, ” Cameron replied.

Another Fight with Dacoits

“Well, he’ll guess that we have some particularly strong reason for going there, and will probably search about and discover the treasure before we are able to get it.”

“I don’t think so. He has heard of geologists and other scientific men travelling about the country, and will, no doubt, come to the conclusion that we are such.”

Whether Po Thaw arrived at that conclusion or not, the fact remains that the travellers continued their way through the jungle unmolested, and arrived without further adventure at the second fort, where they received a hearty welcome from the officers in charge.

“It is good to see some English faces again,” Lieutenant Brown declared to Gordon, his brother officer, as they all sat down to rest and talk.

“Yes,” Gordon agreed; “but what in the world brings them here?” And he turned inquiringly to the travellers as he spoke.

Cameron laughed. “Explain the object of our journey,” he said, turning to Murray,

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who once more obligingly related the story of the *phoongyee's* treasure, and also all that had happened to them since they quitted Mandalay.

“I wish we were going with you!” Gordon declared excitedly, when Murray had finished his tale. “It would be twenty times more interesting than staying here. We’ve hunted everywhere for this Po Thaw, but have never even caught sight of him. If we might have the satisfaction of an occasional fight with his men, I shouldn’t mind being where we are; but to be hidden away here, with positively nothing to do, is too bad.”

“It will all come in good time,” Brown replied, “and perhaps when it does come we shall have more of it than we care about. In the meanwhile, we must make the best of our lot. If we had had less leisure, Gordon, you would not have become so proficient with the banjo. Bring out the instrument and give us a song.”

Another Fight with Dacoits

“ Shall I ? ” Gordon said, looking towards Cameron and Murray.

“ Do, by all means. We should like it immensely,” Murray declared, speaking for both.

So Gordon took out his banjo, and, sitting down on a bamboo stool, gave a very fair rendering of a humorous song, to the unbounded delight of his hearers. Johnson and Tha Bu, seated on the steps of the hut, applauded loudly, and demanded an encore. Gordon acceded readily to their request ; and, indeed, for over an hour he amused them with his singing and strumming.

“ There’s just time for one more,” Brown said, looking at his watch, “ so give us the favourite.”

Without a moment’s hesitation the young officer commenced “ The Old Folks at Home,” a song which never fails to touch the hearts and dim the eyes of English exiles. He sang it very well, too, and when he finished there was perfect silence. Not one of his countrymen could trust himself to

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speak. His own eyes were filled with tears. He put away his banjo, and hurried from the hut to inspect his men.

“He’s a wonderfully smart soldier,” Brown said to Cameron and Murray, when Gordon had left them, “but terribly homesick. He is one of a large family, and had a very happy time at home. He’s engaged, too. That’s his girl’s photograph on the shelf. Pretty girl, isn’t she? But he hasn’t heard from her for months, although no doubt there is a whole pile of letters waiting for him at Rangoon or Mandalay. I know he has written a score or so to her, but hasn’t had an opportunity to send them off.”

At that moment Gordon ran up the steps and said gaily, “*Au revoir*, you fellows. I haven’t enjoyed myself so much for a long time as I did this afternoon. We’ll have a really jolly evening when I return.”

A minute or two later he rode away at the head of his mounted infantry, on his daily scouting expedition.

Another Fight with Dacoits

About an hour later one of the men galloped up to the fort, his pony covered with foam. Springing from his saddle, he hurried to the officers' quarters.

Directly Brown caught sight of the man, he could see by his face that some misfortune had befallen the scouting party. "What is it?" he asked anxiously.

"Sahib, I have bad news," the man replied sorrowfully. "The dacoits attacked us, and Gordon Sahib is dead. He was shot through the heart while trying to seize Po Thaw."

"Where is his body?"

"Alas! sahib, the dacoits have captured it."

"Captured it! And you alive to say so!" Brown thundered.

"Sahib," replied the man, with dignity, "I was commanded to ride back to you with all speed for reinforcements, but I would gladly have died in attempting to regain Gordon Sahib's body. I know that five of our men were killed before I left them; many more

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will be dead, I fear, before we can possibly reach them."

Brown immediately ordered twenty men to parade at once. Then, turning to the Englishmen, he asked, "Did you understand what the man said?"

"I did," Cameron replied, "and I have told the sad news to my friend. Of course you will allow us to accompany you?"

"Certainly. It is very good of you to offer so readily. Poor Gordon!"

In a few minutes the reinforcement started from the fort, and for nearly half a mile proceeded at a steady double along a jungle path. Johnson and Tha Bu were both present, and anxious for the fray.

Soon they met four of Gordon's men, retreating.

"Sahib," one exclaimed, pulling up his pony and saluting Brown, "we have tried hard to recover Gordon Sahib's body, but we are all that remain alive, and the dacoits are many."

Another Fight with Dacoits

“Are they pursuing you?” Brown asked eagerly.

“Yes, sahib.”

The soldiers were now at a comparatively open spot, and here Brown decided to meet the enemy. He extended his men in a long line, and made them lie down.

“Don’t fire until I give the word,” he told them; but they had not to wait long for it. The dacoits, flushed with victory, dashed wildly towards them. Brown allowed them to advance within fifty yards, and then his voice rang out: “Ready! Present! Fire!” The dacoits were taken completely by surprise, and hesitated, as if about to retire; but, urged on by Po Thaw himself, they rushed forward again, threatening the *kalas* with all sorts of horrors.

Some deadly independent firing followed. Soon came the order to fix bayonets. Brown glanced at his men. All were ready. “Charge!” he shouted, and dashed forward in advance. The dacoits fired one volley and

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then ran wildly back towards the thick jungle—but not before several of them were disabled by the brave Bengalees. Johnson dashed after the retreating dacoits, keeping his eye the whole of the time on Po Thaw, who tried in vain to induce his men to stand and fight. The *bo* was at the other end of the line, and by the time that Johnson, bleeding from a *dah*-wound on the shoulder, had reached him, he found Tha Bu engaged in a hand-to-hand fight with the notorious chief. But the plucky little guide, though brave as a lion, was no match for the infamous *bo*, who disarmed him just as Johnson was wondering whether it would be honourable to kill Po Thaw while he was fighting some one else.

Directly Johnson saw that his Burmese friend was wounded, he rushed at the *bo*, who was about to strike off Tha Bu's head. Fortunately for the guide, Po Thaw turned away to meet his fresh adversary. Johnson lunged at him with his bayonet, but the *bo*

Another Fight with Dacoits

turned it aside with his *dah*. Then, uttering a mocking laugh, he disappeared quickly into the jungle. Johnson followed, but could find no trace of him. He met, however, two dacoits carrying a dooly. At sight of the Englishman they dropped their burden and promptly bolted.

Curious to know what was in the dooly, Johnson raised a corner of the cloth placed over its contents. To his surprise and relief he saw the body of the young officer whose banjo-playing he had so enjoyed a few hours previously.

“I’ve found him!” he called out at the top of his voice, and in a few moments Brown, Cameron, and Murray joined him.

“Let me have a look at the poor boy,” said Brown. He pulled aside the covering, and a cry of horror escaped him, for the body was headless. A moment later he reverently replaced the cloth.

For a minute or so he stood with stern

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face, grasping his sword and gazing fiercely into the jungle. Then he formed up his men, and marched them back to the fort.

They buried their comrade just as darkness was coming on. It was a solemn scene. The Englishmen, standing at the hastily made grave, and the native soldiers looking sadly on from afar, vowed to avenge the young officer's death.

Tha Bu's wound was not thought to be a dangerous one, but severe enough to make it impossible for him to think of any exertion for several days. He sent his wife to fetch Johnson, whose wound had been skilfully attended to. When he arrived Tha Bu said, "You are indeed a good friend, Mr. Johnson ; you saved my life."

"Well, perhaps you'll have a chance of saving mine, some day," Johnson answered airily. "How's the wound? Does it pain?"

"Very little. My wife has attended to it carefully. She is a beautiful wife. The

Another Fight with Dacoits

beauty of a cuckoo is its voice ; the beauty of the unattractive in face and figure is wisdom ; that of a woman her devotion for her husband."

" Look here, Tha Bu, if you want to get well quickly you mustn't talk so much. Forget you're a wise man until you're quite well again. It's much better to be a fool in good health than a wise man in bad."

" Perhaps I deserve your admonition. A man who admonishes when admonition is required, and by his admonition prevents the commission of a crime or foolish act, is loved by the good ; but——"

Johnson snatched up his helmet and bolted from the hut. A little later, however, his conscience began to accuse him. He was exceedingly fond of the conceited little Burman, and it seemed to him that he had done a shabby thing in hurrying from his sick-bed. He returned to the hut ; but Tha Bu was delirious ! Full of remorse, he ran to the officers' quarters to tell Cameron and Murray

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the sad news. They visited the guide at once, and saw that everything possible was done for him.

“He’s terribly bad,” Cameron declared, when Brown, a few minutes later, inquired after the wounded man, “and if he dies we shall be compelled to give up all thoughts of finding the treasure until Po Thaw is captured. It would be madness at present for us to attempt to reach the Sunrise Pagoda without a guide. Brown,” he went on anxiously, “you know better than we do the Burmese constitution, and the effect of wounds upon it. What do you think? Is Tha Bu going to die?”

CHAPTER VII

A SPY.

THE following morning, at a very early hour, the four Englishmen hurried to the hut occupied by Tha Bu, and, to their intense relief, found that their guide had regained consciousness.

“Well, Tha Bu!” Cameron asked, “is the wound still very painful?”

“Not quite so painful as it was yesterday,” the guide replied feebly. “It will gradually heal sir,” he continued with conviction, after a pause, “for everything is done little by little. Learning comes gradually, mountain-climbing is a work of patience; wealth is accumulated slowly, and love comes and grows by degrees.”

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Unfortunately Tha Bu did not prove to be a true prophet, for soon after the Englishmen left him he grew rapidly worse, and in a short time he was again unconscious.

The Englishmen were much concerned when they heard of this relapse. They were discussing it in the officers' quarters, when a havildar walked up the steps, stood in the doorway, and saluted.

"Sahib," he said in a broken voice, addressing his officer, "will you look towards the jungle?"

There was something so very mysterious about the man's manner that Brown jumped up from his chair and ran to a point which commanded a view of the surrounding jungle. A horrible sight met his eyes. Stuck on a pole, about fifty yards from the fort, was the head of his late brother officer.

Turning quickly to the havildar, who had followed him, he said sternly, pointing to the lifeless head, "It must be brought in at once."

“Sahib, it shall be done immediately.”

Two minutes later a dozen native soldiers were advancing cautiously towards the grim object of their errand, every moment expecting the dacoits to open a murderous fire upon them. But to their great surprise not a shot was fired, and their sad duty was performed without any casualty.

When the havildar came to report that he had carried out his officer's order, he handed in a paper with Burmese writing on it. He had found it, he said, hanging from one of the lieutenant sahib's teeth.

“A message from the fiendish *bo*, I suppose,” Brown remarked to Murray and Cameron, as he unfolded the paper. “He evidently would not let his scoundrels fire on my men, for fear it might not reach me. I wish you would kindly translate the writing for me, Cameron. You are a better Burmese scholar than I.”

Cameron took the note and read out at once—

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“ ‘*To the white kala chief, from Po Thaw the famous and invincible warrior.*”

“ ‘White fool, you are in my power, and I will show you no mercy. I will never rest until I have killed every white *kala* in the land. You white dogs shall be taught before long that you cannot conquer the descendants of celestial beings. Your bodies——’ ”

Cameron stopped short and read the remainder to himself. Then he tore the paper into pieces and threw them over the stockade.

“What more did the scoundrel say?” Brown asked quietly.

“The latter part of the note,” Cameron replied, “contained a disgusting description of how he intends to mutilate our dead bodies.”

“If ever we have the misfortune to fall into his power, he will, no doubt, carry out his threats to the letter,” Brown remarked, as they walked away to reverently bury poor Gordon’s remains.

A few hours later Brown, who had been surveying the jungle through his field-glass, called to Cameron and Murray, who were revelling in a pot of refreshing tea.

“Just come and look at this strange object approaching the fort,” he said, “for I haven’t the faintest idea what he is.”

Cameron and Murray jumped up to look at the stranger.

“It’s the wizard!” they exclaimed together, for they recognised at once the odd attire of the man whose timely appearance had, a few days before, relieved them of the importunities of the husband-seeking young ladies.

“Do you know the old guy?” Brown asked in surprise.

“Tha Bu knows him intimately,” Murray declared with a smile, and then related the circumstances under which they had seen the wizard.

“Perhaps he has relented and is the bearer of a message from the damsels,” Brown sug-

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gested, as they walked down to the gate to hear what he wanted.

Directly the wizard saw Cameron and Murray, he exclaimed, "Alas! my lords, I have bad news from the village where you rested a few days ago. Admit me and I will relate everything to you."

Brown gave instructions for the man to be admitted. "Give me food and drink," he begged, directly he was in the fort, "for I have travelled far, and am faint."

Having consumed some rice and plantains, he settled himself and began his tale. "Now, my lords," he said, "hearken unto my words. On the day after the white lords left the village where I have dwelt for many years, that son of a dog, Po Thaw, came with many hundreds of men to punish us for entertaining you. The headman he crucified. He kindled a large fire and threw men alive into it. Molten lead he poured into the ears of the women, and the children he threw to the captive cobra. Blood flowed through the

village like water in the south-west monsoon, and of all who looked towards the pagoda that morning I alone am alive. Me, the dog Po Thaw dared not kill. He feared my magic. Had he raised his hand against me, I would have struck him dead."

"Why didn't you strike him dead as it was?" Cameron asked. "It would be no crime to kill that fiend in cold blood."

"My lord, my magical powers may only be used in defence, and not in offence. But hear my words, my lords. When the dacoits had burnt the village to the ground and departed, my heart was sad, and I said to myself, 'I will hurry on to the English fort and tell the valiant soldiers of the Great White Queen all that Po Thaw has done, so that they may punish him.' I passed quickly through the jungle, and from a distance saw the dacoits rejoicing at their bloody work."

"How many men had the *bo* with him?" Brown asked eagerly.

"I do not know, my lord. It is impossible"

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to tell. I saw about eight hundred, but he may have had many more."

"Eight hundred! Then his followers have increased?"

"They have, my lord, for he has had it proclaimed in every village that he is going to drive the English from the country, and he has promised to give to every one of his followers an Englishwoman for an inferior wife."

"In what direction were the dacoits moving?"

"They were travelling, my lord, towards this fort, which Po Thaw has made up his mind to destroy; but I well know that it is foolishness for Po Thaw to attempt to defeat the soldiers of the Great White Queen. Have you many men in this fort, my lord?"

"When the murdering, thieving *bo* attacks it, he will find I have more than enough to defeat him. Your face appears very familiar to me. Where have I seen you?"

“ I am a famous wizard, my lord ; perhaps you have been to me for advice.”

“ Oh, no, I haven't,” Brown laughingly answered.

“ Perhaps you have seen me walking through a village and have been told that I was the great and venerated wizard.”

“ Very likely. But what do you intend to do now ? In what village are you going to live ?”

“ I should like to remain in this fort, my lord, if I may, and help you to fight the dacoits. The jungle will soon grow over the ashes of the village where I have lived for many years, and my countrymen will forget that it ever existed ; but until I have avenged the murder of its inhabitants, until the cruel *bo* is killed or taken prisoner, I will not settle down in any village. May I stay here, my lord ?”

The wizard was allowed to remain. That night, as Brown lay awake, thinking of the news which the wizard had given him, he suddenly regretted that he had permitted the

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man to stay in the fort. He had a presentiment that the fellow would be the cause of some misfortune. So impressed was he with the idea that he hurriedly dressed himself and went out to give instructions that the wizard should be well watched. But the man with the tiger-skin was nowhere to be seen. He had mysteriously disappeared, leaving behind him nothing but his bamboo stick.

“Treachery is inborn in Asiatics,” Brown declared to Cameron and Murray, when he informed them next morning of the wizard’s desertion, “but a wizard develops that undesirable trait to a wonderful degree. The scamp who has just escaped had perhaps no intention of deceiving us when he first arrived, but, finding that we were not so numerically strong as he expected, he seized the first opportunity to desert.”

“How did he manage to escape?” Murray asked.

“He must have clambered over the stockade, for he has left behind him his

long bamboo stick, the only thing which could impede his flight.”

“I suppose he’ll make it his business to give Po Thaw full particulars of our strength?”

“Oh, yes, he is sure to do that. I only hope that the *bo* will kill him for his pains. He is quite likely to do so, to save the expense of paying for the information. At any rate, I don’t suppose we shall ever see the wizard again.”

But they did see him again, and that very speedily.

About eight o’clock in the morning a Burman, holding aloft a white cloth tied to a bamboo, issued from the jungle and walked calmly across the clearing towards the fort. The man was Po Thaw. He was unarmed, and evidently perfectly confident that the flag of truce would be respected. Halting some twenty yards from the fort, he called out in Hindustanee—

“Po Thaw has words to say to the white foreign chief.”

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“The white foreign chief, the servant of the Great White Queen, will listen unto your words,” Brown replied.

“It is good,” Po Thaw declared. “My warriors are many and brave, and their prowess is known to all throughout the land. You Englishmen say that you have taken this land from the *phoongyee* king,¹ and call yourselves its rulers. But we laugh at you, for *we* are the rulers. We traverse the jungle, fighting our enemies, protecting our friends, and enriching ourselves, but you are forced to live in little forts which you think we cannot capture. Hearken attentively now to my words. I have determined to take this fort, but, from motives of piety and regard to life, have come to offer to spare your lives if you will give up your fort at once.”

“The warriors of the Great White Queen,

¹ Theebaw was in a monastery previous to his ascending the throne. There is also another explanation of his being called the *phoongyee* king, which is far from creditable to his mother.

be they white or black, never surrender," Brown replied haughtily.

"But how can few fight against many? I know the number of your warriors, and for every one that you have I have a hundred. The wizard has told me all that I wish to know about your fort."

"The wizard is no better than a pariah dog, who sneaks about the village stealing the crows' food; but still, he is a braver man than you, Po Thaw. You call yourself a warrior chief, and all you are brave enough to do is to kill old women and cut off the heads of dead men whom you feared to touch when alive."

"White chief, last night I could have killed you as you lay asleep. I was the wizard you admitted to your fort. I was dressed up in the clothes of the old thief whom I slew a few days ago. If you wish it, I will call for the tiger-skin and beard, and show you how I made myself resemble the great wizard."

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The Englishmen and the native soldiers were all astounded when they heard that their visitor of the previous day was none other than the notorious *bo*, and many were the regrets that they had not seen through his disguise.

“Do you think what he says is true?” Cameron asked.

“I am certain of it,” Brown replied, “for when I saw the fellow I thought his face appeared familiar to me. What a fool I was not to remember where I had seen it before!”

“Does the English chief believe the words I have spoken?” Po Thaw called out.

“I do,” Brown replied.

“Then do not call me a coward, for I spared your life that we might meet face to face in battle.”

“That I do not believe; for the man who would poison the plantains which his enemies were to eat would not spare a sleeping foe.”

The *bo* gave a start of surprise when he heard the poisoned plantains mentioned; he had evidently never dreamed that his Mohammedan disguise had been penetrated.

“This is not the time to bandy words,” he declared angrily. “I have come here to offer to spare your lives. Refuse to give up the fort, and every one of you, white and black, shall be killed.”

“Po Thaw, we scorn both your mercy and your threats,” Brown replied, calmly and distinctly. “Do your worst, for we fear it not.”

“The white chief speaks boldly, as if his soldiers were white men instead of Indian dogs, whose hearts are like water with fear.”

The brave Indian warriors heard this attack upon their courage with the greatest indignation.

“Sahib,” begged a smart havildar, “let me speak for just one minute with this low-born wretch.”

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Brown gave his consent at once, and the gallant turbanned soldier, who had fought bravely for his Empress in Afghanistan, called out to the *bo*—

“Son of a dog! the words the English sahibs have hearkened unto, you would have feared to speak but for the flag of peace which you hold in your bloodstained hands. You are like the little child who, safe on its mother’s hip, shakes its tiny fist at the big elephants in the timber yard. You say that the hearts of the Indian soldiers of the Great and Good White Queen are like water with fear, but you know well enough that the words you speak are not true. Our fathers fought your fathers, and defeated them; and as they did, so will we do. Po Thaw, it is you who are the coward—you who are not feared by warriors, but by aged men and women and children. In years to come you will be remembered only as a coward, who killed the weak and defenceless, but fled to the jungle in terror when brave soldiers came

near him. No wandering poet shall sing your praises, but your countrymen will hang their heads with shame when they hear your name mentioned."

"Silence," roared the *bo*, half mad with rage. "I came not here to talk to Indian slaves, but to their master. White chief, will you give up your fort?"

"No! I will not," Brown replied loudly. "You may go back to your men and tell them that the white chief and his brave Indian soldiers laugh at your threats. Be-gone, I say!"

Po Thaw turned quickly on his heel and walked away a few yards. Then he stopped short and again turned to the fort. His face was distorted with passion.

"When you are in terrible agony," he shouted, "when my men pour molten lead into your ears and eyes, and your nose and hands have been thrown to the pariah dogs, you will regret that you did not surrender your fort when I commanded

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you to do so. White fool! prepare to die, for my followers are many, and not one of you in that fort, white or black, shall escape me!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE FORT SURROUNDED

PO THAW did not remain inactive for long. A quarter of an hour after his return to his followers, the siege commenced. Brown had hoped that the dacoits would at once attempt to carry the fort by assault, but he was disappointed. They did not even show themselves, but, from the shelter of the jungle, poured in a continual stream of bullets. The fire was not returned, for Brown had given instructions that no man was to shoot unless he could see one of the enemy. When it grew dark, the firing ceased. Shortly after midnight, however, a sharp-eyed sentry discovered the dacoits emerging from the jungle.

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The night was very black, and it was some moments before the Englishmen could distinguish the almost naked forms of the dacoits as they crept slowly and silently towards the fort. With scarcely a sound the defenders took up their positions to await the command to fire. Nearer and nearer the enemy came, evidently confident that they were unobserved.

“Fire!” shouted Brown, and a deadly volley was poured into the advancing force. In a moment all was uproar. Finding they were discovered, the dacoits broke out into a loud war-whoop and dashed towards the fort, planting their bamboo ladders against the stockade, and clambering quickly up them. But as fast as they ascended they were shot down by the Bengalees, every man of whom was determined to avenge the insult which Po Thaw had uttered that day. Tarred ropes were ignited by Brown's command, and fixed in such position as to throw a good light upon the attackers. The



A DESPERATE AFFRAY



The Fort Surrounded

English civilians loaded and fired as rapidly and efficiently as old soldiers, but to their great disappointment, Po Thaw was evidently not among the attackers. The leader had a scar on his face, in the same position as the notorious *bo*; but they knew Po Thaw too well by sight now to be misled by that disfigurement.

On every side of the fort the assailants fought bravely, but their valour was of no avail; for the defenders, calm and stern, never wasted a shot, and did terrible execution. In less than ten minutes from the firing of the first shot, the dacoits fled pell-mell into the jungle. Their loss was enormous; but of the defenders, two only were killed and three wounded. Johnson was delighted with the result, and showed his delight by smacking some of the Indian soldiers heartily on their backs, a proceeding which considerably surprised the turbanned warriors.

Po Thaw remained quiet for some time

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after this repulse. Three days passed without a single dacoit being seen by those in the fort, though their presence was made known by the bullets which they poured at intervals from their jungle shelter upon the stronghold.

On the third night, a daring fellow crawled up to the stockade and set light to it. He was shot, and the fire promptly extinguished. Nevertheless, his fate did not deter others from attempting the same thing. On the fourth day after the attack a private volunteered to carry a message to the next fort. Brown pointed out to the man the dangerous nature of the undertaking, but finding that only increased the brave fellow's eagerness, he accepted his services and gave him a cypher note for the officer in charge.

Attired as a Burman, the soldier crept out of the fort under cover of darkness, and all his comrades hoped that he had got clear away. But at daybreak, to their dismay

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and sorrow, they saw his dead, mutilated body lying about twenty yards from the fort. It was recovered, amidst a galling fire from the dacoits. Tha Bu, hearing the firing, came hurrying from his hut, apparently in perfect health.

“Hallo! how are you, my friend?” Johnson exclaimed as he grasped the guide’s hand, genuinely pleased to see him about again.

“As happy as a bird that has just escaped from its cage,” Tha Bu replied gaily.

“Well, you ought to be very thankful to your wife. She’s an excellent nurse.”

“I do not wish to detract from my wife’s merits,” said Tha Bu pompously, “but the state of my body makes me an excellent patient. I have never led a vicious life, and a healthy body is better than twenty doctors and a hundred nurses.”

“Wait till you break your leg; you won’t say so then.”

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Tha Bu hurried back to his hut, ostensibly to fetch something he had forgotten.

The garrison rejoiced greatly at having the assistance of another steady shot, but their joy was short-lived, for on the day succeeding Tha Bu's return to duty Cameron sickened with malarial fever. Everything that could be done for him was done, but with no very satisfactory results. On the fourth day of his illness he appeared a trifle better, but in the evening he was delirious. In his delirium he revealed what, for some unaccountable reason, he had never confided to anybody; and Murray, who nursed him devotedly, discovered to his amazement that his friend was in love! "Of all things!" he gasped, as he listened to Cameron's incoherent ramblings. "I always thought he was wedded to his work! I shall never feel astonished at anything after this!" And while Cameron raved about a certain Edith Clarence, a young lady who had recently come out to Burma to keep house

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for her father, Murray determined that, at the first opportunity, he would have it out with Cameron for keeping such an interesting matter so entirely to himself.

On the fifth day Mah Shway O persuaded Murray to let her administer a Burmese draught to the patient. It was wonderfully efficacious, for Cameron soon fell asleep, and slept soundly until about ten o'clock the following morning. When at last he opened his eyes, Murray saw at once, and with a feeling of indescribable relief, that the fever had left him.

“How do you feel?” he asked solicitously, bending over the bed.

“Rather weak, but otherwise pretty well,” Cameron responded faintly.

“Chicken broth and rice-pudding will soon set you up, then. Tha Bu has been convalescing on such dainties, and he is as strong as ever.”

“I'm very glad of that. Have the dacoits been driven off yet?”

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“Not yet. But you mustn't talk. Try and get another nap.”

Murray was afraid that a plain statement of fact might excite his friend, for affairs were growing more serious every day. Still hidden from sight, the dacoits kept up a worrying fire upon the fort, day and night. Frequently the besieged men could hear the enemy greeting with shouts of delight recruits who were joining them. Even Brown began to feel anxious about the result of the siege; but neither the Europeans nor the Asiatics guessed it, for he was always in high spirits, and declared that the dacoits would soon grow tired of remaining in ambush, and would attack the fort.

And as a matter of fact he did not fear the dacoits at all. The enemy he feared was fever. Already three men had died of it, and others had sickened. It was indeed an anxious time for the young officer, and occasionally he felt sorely tempted to end

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the weary siege by leading a sortie to dislodge the enemy. But his better judgment prevented him from taking a step which, under the circumstances, would have been disastrous to his force. So another weary fortnight passed away. Cameron recovered and was able to again take his part in the defence ; but eight privates died, and several others were dangerously ill. Throughout this terribly trying time the brave sons of India never uttered a word of complaint, but delighted in paying many kindly little attentions to the English sahibs.

And so the anxious days dragged on. The heat was intense, sickness increased, and at times the bravest hearts began to despair.

But better days were in store. One morning the dacoits were suspiciously silent. Twice during the previous night their war-howl had rent the air, but the expected attack had not taken place.

“I wonder what villainy they are planning

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now," Murray said, as the three Englishmen sat in the shade, smoking some of their few remaining cheroots. "I feel convinced some special mischief must be brewing. They haven't fired a shot for nearly eight hours."

"Probably they are making their final preparations to assault the place," said Brown. "I think we have pretty well tried their patience, and no doubt some of them begin to think that their time might have been more profitably employed in plundering undefended villages."

Scarcely were the words out of Brown's mouth when sharp firing was heard.

"That's strange!" Brown exclaimed, jumping up from his chair. "None of the bullets hit the fort!"

He surveyed the jungle through his field-glass, but not a man, or a sign of firing, could be seen. Nevertheless, the sounds that he heard proved unmistakably that a fierce fight was going on somewhere in

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the immediate neighbourhood. For two or three minutes the besieged believed that the dacoits had quarrelled among themselves, but that impression was speedily dispelled in a very agreeable way—by their hearing a hearty British cheer, which rang above the fusillade.

“Reinforcements!” Brown exclaimed excitedly; and the four Englishmen, beaming with delight, sent up a vigorous cheer. Tha Bu, in his intense excitement, forgot that he was civilised, and indulged in an energetic but particularly ungraceful dance of triumph. He brought it to an abrupt conclusion, however, when he noticed Johnson watching him with unconcealed amusement.

A minute or two later over a hundred dacoits rushed from the jungle, closely followed by a score or two of English soldiers, who were dealing death right and left. In their haste to escape, many of the dacoits dashed madly across the clearing in front of the fort, and were promptly dealt with by

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the garrison. At last the tired soldiers entered the fort. The rank and file shook hands with Johnson, and greeted Tha Bu with genial exclamations of "Hallo! school-master." Tha Bu greatly appreciated this recognition of his learning, and beamed extensively upon them.

"There'll be some brown widdies in the country to-day," Johnson remarked when the men had made themselves comfortable. "You fellows did a considerable deal of damage!"

"Yes," one of them replied: "we meant to! It was like this 'ere. When we got to a village the other day we found it was burnt to the ground, except a few huts. Well, we didn't growl at that, 'cause a Burmese village ain't exactly a Windsor Castle or a Margate; but when we found that the dirty, sneaking, thieving dacoits had done it, and saw how they'd treated the women and the little 'uns—well, I shouldn't like to repeat all we said. I tell

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you it would have made the chaplain swear to see what we saw—men and women lying about everywhere as dead as our old commissariat mule what the tiger chawed. If they'd only been dead we shouldn't have minded so much, but they was mutilated. And that wasn't the worst. The poor little kiddies, as had never done no one no harm, 'cept perhaps when they didn't know as they was a-doing of it, was lying about with their arms and legs cut off. Some of the dead mothers—pretty wenches, too—had their poor little butchered young 'uns clasped in their arms, trying to protect 'em like. 'Tain't usual for the Hunderd-an'-Sixtieth to blub, but I'm blowed if every blessed one of us wasn't blubbin' like spanked youngsters. Then we took our davy over Parson Jack's pocket-Bible never to show no dacoit no mercy; and we didn't to-day, did us, boys?"

A vigorous shout of "No!" was the emphatic reply.

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In the meantime, Mills was relating their adventures to Brown, Cameron, and Murray.

“But how did you hear we were in a fix?” Brown asked him, as soon as he had an opportunity.

“I received a letter to that effect from an anonymous friend,” Mills replied.

“The woman who wrote to you once before?” Murray asked.

“Yes. The handwriting is the same. I'll read the note:—

“*To the officer in charge.*

“The fort near the Moo River is besieged by a strong body of dacoits under Po Thaw, who intends to starve out the defenders. Hurry to the relief of your fellow-officer, for Po Thaw declares that in less than two weeks the fort will be a heap of ruins. He has planned a terrible death for the English officer. Be in time to prevent the fiendish act. Ask my messenger no questions, give

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him no message, and let him return at once.' ”

“ Haven't you the slightest idea who the writer is? ” Brown asked, as he carefully examined the letter.

“ Not the slightest, ” Mills replied ; “ but as her first note was exceedingly useful to me, I placed almost implicit confidence in her second. Luckily we had been reinforced a few days before this note arrived, so I left the other officer in charge and hurried on here. I had no idea, though, that the *bo* had such a large force with him. Had I known it, I would have brought more men. By the way, you might send out to discover in what direction the dacoits are retiring. ”

“ Certainly, ” Brown replied, and immediately gave the necessary instructions.

When the scouts returned they reported that the dacoits were flying north, evidently under the impression that Lieutenant Mills'

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party was but a portion of a large force sent against them.

Early the following morning the scouts were again sent out, but this time without seeing anything whatever of the dacoits.

“It seems to me that this is a good opportunity for us to push on,” Cameron suggested to Murray, soon after the return of the scouts.

“Well, I’m quite ready to start,” Murray replied. “Marching through the jungle suits me a great deal better than being confined to a fort.”

“Let us consult Tha Bu, then.”

They found the guide sitting in a shady corner, studying an English pocket dictionary, and committing to memory the longest words he could find in it.

“Tha Bu, we have come to speak with you about continuing our journey,” Cameron said to him.

The Burman closed his book, placed it in the pocket of his white jacket, and replied,

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“You have done well, sir, for one in search of knowledge should immediately repair to a man possessing it, so that advantage may be taken of his wisdom.”

“Have you yet discovered the exact position of the Sunrise Pagoda?” Cameron asked sharply.

“I have, sir. I discovered it some days before we entered this fort.”

“Do you think it would be advisable to start at once?”

“The sooner we start, the sooner we shall reach our destination. If we start speedily, we shall be able to cross the Moo River before dark.”

“Then get everything ready, and we’ll start in half an hour.”

Brown and Mills were rather sorry when the travellers told them of their intention to depart, for they had hoped to celebrate their victory by an entertainment of some kind.

“I really think you fellows had better give up all thoughts of reaching the Sunrise

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Pagoda," Mills said, "for you are bound to be killed, or captured, which means the same thing, before you can get there."

"We have been hitherto so fortunate in escaping from the dacoits' snares," Murray replied, "that we feel encouraged to prosecute our search with renewed vigour."

"Well, if you are determined to go on, I'll accompany you as far as the Moo," Mills said, a few minutes later. And when the travellers started off, they were attended by twenty soldiers, who were all wonderfully polite to Mah Shway O. They sang comic songs to her, and paid her outrageously flattering compliments; and she smiled and didn't understand one word of what they were saying. Then they amused her by performing various simple tricks with coins and pocket-handkerchiefs. She enjoyed that immensely.

"I say, schoolmaster, your wife's a deuced smart little woman," one soldier called out to Tha Bu.

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“A woman is what a husband makes her,” the Burman replied promptly: “without the moon the night is not pleasant, nor the ocean without waves; a pond without ducks is not pleasing to the eye, nor a maiden without a husband.”

“Bosh!” Johnson exclaimed; whereat the soldiers laughed, and Tha Bu was much annoyed.

“A swan is out of place among crows,” he declared, “a lion among bulls, a horse in the midst of asses, and a wise man among fools.” Then he left them.

At about half-past four the travellers arrived at a thinly-populated and poverty-stricken village on the bank of the Moo. Cameron had engaged the cartmen to accompany him as far as the Moo only, and relied upon obtaining coolies in this village. But he soon saw that he would have considerable difficulty in getting them. Accompanied by Tha Bu, Cameron, Murray and Mills strolled round the village in search of

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the required coolies. All they could recruit were two undersized and particularly miserable-looking specimens of humanity. On returning with these unsatisfactory objects, they found that every one of the cartmen had disappeared. The soldiers had been holding a "sing-song" in the rest-house, and had not troubled themselves about the cartmen.

"They can scarcely have deserted," Cameron said, "for they were to receive their wages in a few minutes."

Tha Bu spoke hurriedly to the two coolies. They replied briefly.

"There is an opium-den in this village;" Tha Bu said to Cameron: "we shall find the cartmen there."

Guided by the coolies, Tha Bu and the three Englishmen wended their way to the opium-den. Tha Bu pushed open the door, and the Englishmen entered. The proprietor, a Chinaman, exhibited signs of great terror on seeing the visitors, but finding they

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did not seize him, he soon regained his composure. The Englishmen gazed round the room in amazement; for it was indeed a strange place. Two of the cartmen were leaning back against big cushions, perfectly insensible; others were in a semi-dazed state. The only one who was quite in his right mind immediately bolted from the hut.

The visitors, piqued with curiosity, pursued their investigations. One odd-looking article, which they afterwards found to be an opium-pipe, specially attracted their attention. They noticed that the bowl of this pipe—there was only one in use—was made of a cocoanut-shell with a hollow wooden tube fitted tightly into a hole at the top, and a little bamboo tube, about eighteen inches in length, fixed into the side. The cocoanut was half filled with water, and on the top of the wooden tube was placed a small earthen bowl—perforated at the bottom—filled with opium and having a few pieces of fire upon it. The proprietor handed round the pipe

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to those who were seated with their backs to the cushions, anxiously awaiting their turn for a whiff of the much-loved narcotic. Holding the bottom of the cocoanut with one hand and the wooden tube with the other, he knelt down in front of the smoker, who placed the bamboo tube in his mouth, and gave three or four draws at it. The next moment the smoker sank gently back against the cushion and lay unconscious, with his mouth wide open, for a few minutes. Then he sighed heavily, opened his eyes, stretched himself three or four times, and finally rose.

When Tha Bu had sent the cartmen back to their work, Murray declared his intention of indulging in the Eastern luxury. His friends earnestly endeavoured to dissuade him, but in vain. He wiped the bamboo tube with his pocket-handkerchief, and then placed it in his mouth. In a few moments he was unconscious. When he awoke, he placed his hands to his forehead, as if in

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pain. But in a few moments he sprang smilingly to his feet.

“My dear fellows!” he exclaimed enthusiastically, “I have had a most delightful dream. Neither poet nor painter, were he gifted beyond any man who ever lived, could depict the glorious things I have seen and heard. Never, while I live, shall I forget them.”

Cameron shrugged his shoulders, and fearing that Murray might be tempted to again lose himself in the land of incomparable delight, he got him as quickly as possible out of the hut.

The cartmen were awaiting them. One of the men addressed Tha Bu, who listened in silence to all he had to say. Then Tha Bu said to the Englishmen, “These cartmen do not wish to leave your service. All the wages that you owe them they had foolishly gambled away or spent in the opium-hut before you arrived. Therefore, if you will have pity on them, and let them continue

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with you, their blessings will be upon you. And as it is evident you cannot obtain other coolies, you will be suiting your own convenience and earning a good name at the same time."

"Accept their services," Cameron replied bluntly.

Then he called the men together and paid them.

The wily opium-hut proprietor was standing a few yards away, and each cartman, as he received his money, handed it over to him.

When the last man had been paid, Mills commanded two of his own men to seize the Chinaman. They obeyed him with alacrity.

"Return a rupee to each of those men," Mills said to the Chinaman.

The Celestial sighed and protested, with many pious allusions to his ancestors, that he would be ruined. Finding, however, that Mills took no notice of his protestations, he fumbled about the pockets of his baggy

trousers, and produced exactly the required number of rupees. He gave one to each man. Mills saw one man looking somewhat doubtfully at his coin, so he examined every one of them himself. They were all counterfeit!

The Chinaman was hurrying quickly away.

“Fetch that man back!” Mills shouted.

Johnson dashed after him and unceremoniously seized him.

“Now give me two rupees for each of those men,” Mills demanded.

The Chinaman wept copiously, but showed no disposition to do as commanded.

“If you don’t give me the money at once, I shall increase the amount,” Mills declared.

The money was immediately forthcoming; but it was a terrible shock to the wily Chinaman when Mills absolutely declined to return to him the counterfeit coins.

Half an hour later the travellers parted from Mills and his men, and crossed the

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Moo. The soldiers gave them a hearty parting cheer.

Having reached the opposite bank in safety, they rested for a while before proceeding into the jungle.

The cartmen sat in a ring, telling fearful, blood-curdling tales of the horrors performed by the evil *nats* of the forest. Suddenly the Chinese opium-hut proprietor approached them quietly. He had followed them, unseen, across the river, determined, if possible, to get his money back. They made room for him. He squatted down, and in a few minutes produced three cards, on which were drawn respectively a peacock, a tiger, and an elephant. He then performed the three-card trick with the unsurpassed skill of a Chinaman, and in a very short time had won every anna that the cartmen possessed. Then he quickly decamped, for fear the Englishmen might see him.

CHAPTER IX

THE FIRE-WALKING ORDEAL

CHEATS and thieves do not always get their deserts in this world, and the crafty Chinaman, managing to escape unobserved, missed the trouncing he would inevitably have received had any one of the Englishmen caught him at his knavery.

Soon after sunrise the following morning Johnson detected a Burman peering at the little camp through the elephant grass. He rushed at him, and after a brief struggle captured him and took him to his masters. Cameron charged the man with being a dacoit; but he indignantly denied the accusation, declaring that he lived alone in the jungle to feed a captive cobra. And

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in support of his words he pointed to a net of eggs that he was taking to the creature. He even went so far as to invite the English lords to accompany him and see for themselves that what he had said was true. The invitation was accepted ; and Cameron, Murray, Johnson, and Tha Bu, all well armed, immediately started off to see the cobra.

“I suppose you have never seen a cobra in an ant-hill?” Tha Bu said to Johnson as they trudged along.

“No, nor an elephant in a swallow’s nest,” Johnson replied fiercely.

“Come, come, Johnson,” said Cameron soothingly, “don’t be so touchy, man. Tha Bu is not chaffing you. Cobras are caught in ant-hills. White ants travel about in this part of the world in large armies, and occasionally throw up, in an incredibly short time, a hill about two feet high and twelve feet in diameter in which to store provisions. But the cobra, being of a lazy disposition, and perhaps incapable of making a dwelling-

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place for his partner, enters the ant-hill, drives out its occupants, and makes it suitable for his expected family. Unfortunately for the cobra, a watch is frequently kept on these ant-hills, and as soon as he has been observed to enter one, the men of the village build around it, as quickly as possible, a strong fence bristling with spears and thorn bushes. If the cobra attempts to escape he gets impaled; if he reconciles himself to his captivity he lives in peace and luxury."

"Don't they kill the creature, then?" Johnson asked in surprise.

"No, because the Burmese believe that the souls of men and women who have not lived good lives enter into animals and reptiles, and consequently they are forbidden by their religion to kill anything."

This was Johnson's first introduction to the doctrine of transmigration, and he laughed heartily.

"Do *you* believe that nonsense, Tha Bu?" he asked a few minutes later.

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“Nonsense!” Tha Bu exclaimed angrily. “What right have you to call it nonsense? You are not a wise man. A fool does not gain wisdom by waiting on a wise man, any more than a spoon knows the taste of curry gravy. As for your religion, I have studied it and rejected it. You say that your God, who made everything, is just and impartial, but how can that be when some men are born great and others lowly; some are rich and others poor; some beautiful, others ugly; some live to a venerable age, others die young; some enjoy perfect health, others suffer hopelessly year after year? Would a just and impartial God make those who have done no wrong suffer? Certainly not, and the only explanation I can accept is that good and evil arise from ourselves, and that according to our merits or demerits in one life we are made better or worse in our next.”

“Suppose, then, that on the spur of the moment you gave way to temptation and committed some sin of which you repented

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immediately. Your religion would not take into consideration your repentance, but would punish you as severely as if you had deliberately sinned and gloried in it. Now, my religion teaches me that if I repent of my sins I shall be forgiven. Your God may be just and impartial, but mine is better still, for He is merciful."

Tha Bu was considerably surprised at Johnson's unusual seriousness and eloquence. He made no reply, however, but busied himself in examining his rifle.

In about a quarter of an hour the five men reached the cobra's enclosure. They mounted a high bamboo platform and gazed down on to the ant-hill. Soon they noticed the cobra peeping out of one of the holes. He had recognised the voice of the man who daily fed him. Directly the eggs and some milk were lowered, the huge reptile came out of his house, without exhibiting the slightest fear, and ate the good things provided for him.

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“There is one thing I don't understand about this matter,” Cameron said to the Burmese prisoner. “How is it that the cobra is a captive when there is no village near?”

“When he first came to this ant-hill,” the Burman replied, “a large village stood here. But one night Po Thaw and his vile men attacked the village and killed all who resisted them. At the *bo's* command thirteen small babies were thrown alive into the cobra's pit before their mother's eyes. May the white lords never see such an awful sight! When the dacoits had taken all the wealth they could find they burned the village to the ground, and now the jungle has grown over it. For many days I was lying between life and death, for I had seventeen *dah* wounds in my body. And when at last I recovered I found that of all the living creatures that once dwelt in the village the cobra and I alone remained. There was no *phoongyee* whom I could

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consult, but I knew my duty as a good Buddhist, and from that day I have dwelt alone in my hut in the jungle so that I might obtain merit by daily feeding the cobra."

"Do you not fear the dacoits' return?"

"I am a son of the jungle, my lord, and neither the dacoits nor you could discover my hut. I should know of a man's approach long before he reached me, and would, if necessary, take precautions for my safety."

"Do you know where Po Thaw and his men are now?"

"I know that they are not on this side of the river, but I expect they will be in a few days. Po Thaw likes this part of the land better than any other, for not very many miles away dwells the beautiful Mah Noo."

"His wife?"

The Burman laughed merrily. "Po Thaw would be happy if she were," he said, "but she hates him as if he were an evil *nat*. She speaks to him words

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which no man dare utter. She calls him a coward ; she laughs at his threats ; she tells his men not to do the vile things he orders ; and she vows that sooner than marry him she will die. Now I must leave the brave white lords, for my hidden hut is not far away."

Cameron offered the Burman a present of five rupees, which, however, he declined.

"A friendly action is best paid by thanks," he said courteously, and then quickly departed.

"So after all Po Thaw is sufficiently human to have an affection for a woman who defies him," Murray said a little later. "Well, that is one redeeming trait in his character, at any rate. I had an idea that his way with the ladies was 'love me or you die.'"

"Now, the curious thing is," said Cameron, "that I have heard of this woman Mah Noo, but quite forgot to mention her to you."

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“Tell me all about her, then, for I feel greatly interested. I should be interested in any woman who had the pluck to openly defy our enemy Po Thaw.”

“Well, do you remember Miss Clarence? I introduced you to her one night at the Gymkhana.”

For a few moments Murray appeared to be deep in thought. “Oh, yes, I remember her perfectly,” he said at last. “A fat little girl, with red hair.”

“No, no! Miss Clarence is a tall, graceful girl, with brown hair shot with gold, blue eyes——”

“In fact, wonderfully like a penny novelette heroine,” Murray interrupted. “Your description doesn’t help me in the least. Did I dance with her?”

“You did, twice.”

“Oh, I remember—the girl you slipped down with in the lancers?”

“Yes, that was Miss Clarence.”

“Then why didn’t you say so at once, my

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dear fellow? I should have known who you meant straight off. But what has she to do with the audacious Mah Noo?"

"She knows her. I was telling her that evening——"

"Which evening? At the dance when you fell——"

"Yes, yes. Well, when I mentioned that you and I were going into this part of the country she became deeply interested, and told me that a schoolfellow of hers, a Burmese girl named Mah Noo, lived somewhere in this direction. They had been at boarding-school together at Brighton, and Miss Clarence declares that Mah Noo is the sweetest, kindest, and cleverest girl she ever knew. They had parted in the usual way of school-girls, vowing eternal friendship, and solemnly promising to write to each other by every mail. Miss Clarence did write several letters to Mah Noo, but received no replies. I persuaded her, however, to write one more letter and to entrust

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it to me to deliver if ever we saw her. I have the letter in my pocket."

"Well, I sincerely hope that we shall meet the young lady, if it is only to see what effect a Brighton education has had upon her."

At that moment Tha Bu, who had been walking some distance ahead, came hurrying back to them, holding up his hands as a sign for them to halt.

"Between thirty and forty Mohammedans, all armed with revolvers, are near at hand," he reported to Cameron.

"Are they approaching us?" Cameron asked.

"No, sir, they have crossed our path and are now descending into a hollow some hundred yards on our right."

"Are you certain that they are Mohammedans, and not dacoits in disguise?"

"Quite, sir. I was near enough to hear them talk. They are expecting to meet some more of their co-religionists soon. I

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do not believe they would be hostile to us if they saw us, but nevertheless it would be well to watch them, hidden from their sight."

Cameron and Murray looked at each other in silence. The same thought had occurred to both of them. The Mohammedans had evidently, by some means or other, heard of the hidden treasure and were pushing forward to secure it.

"Tha Bu, are you confident that you are taking us the nearest way to the Sunrise Pagoda?" Cameron asked.

"Quite, sir. Why do you doubt it?"

"I was thinking that the path the Mohammedans had taken was perhaps nearer."

Tha Bu smiled. "If the Mohammedans are also travelling to the Sunrise Pagoda," he said, "they will be very many days before they reach it, if they continue in the direction they are going."

"But what can the Mohammedans be

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doing in this part? Had they any merchandise with them?"

"I saw none; but it would be well, perhaps, if we watched them. I know a spot from where we can gaze down into the hollow whither they have just gone. Shall I lead you to it?"

"Yes."

For nearly a quarter of a mile the three Englishmen silently followed Tha Bu, who always found a passage through what appeared at first to be impenetrable vegetation. At last he stopped, knelt down, and signalled to them to imitate him. They did so, and in a minute or two found themselves on the brink of a precipice. They gazed down, and beheld some sixty feet below them an open space about a hundred yards square. Whether it had been dug out by man, or was the work of nature, they were unable to determine. The jungle plants grew to the very brink, and the steep sides were brilliant with gorgeous flowers. But the travellers

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scarcely noticed the beauties of the scene, their attention being devoted to the movements of quite a hundred Mohammedans who were assembled in the hollow. Some were very old men with beards dyed red—a sign, as Cameron explained in a whisper, that they had made a pilgrimage to Mecca; while others were but youths. The old and elderly men were in a large majority. The young men looked restless and nervous. In the centre of the hollow was a ditch, fifteen feet long and three feet wide, full of red-hot charcoal. A number of men were engaged in adding fuel to it. After gazing at the scene in wonderment for some ten minutes, Tha Bu gave a sign, and the Englishmen, following him, crept slowly away.

When they had gone some distance Murray inquired, “Well, what in the name of goodness were they doing?”

“Preparing for a religious ceremony,” Cameron answered. “To-night those young Mohammedans we saw will walk barefooted

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along that fiery path. They think that if they are true believers the fire can do them no harm."

"Then I propose that we witness the ceremony," said Murray.

"Very well, we will."

About twelve o'clock that night Tha Bu, followed by Cameron and Murray, again crept to the edge of the precipice. It was a terribly weird scene that they gazed upon this time. In the centre, the fiery path threw a lurid glare upon the men, who moved quietly to and fro. The heat from the fire was intense, and made the perspiration pour from the two Englishmen, distant as they were from it. Some twenty yards away from the fire, a large number of worshippers sat cross-legged on mats and carpets, beating their breasts; the voices of men and boys mingling in a sad, wailing chant. For a few minutes there would be silence, broken only by the words of the priest. Then, suddenly, the worshippers

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would break out into a loud chant, beating their breasts as they did so.

This continued until about one o'clock, when torches were placed in the hands of the youths who were to walk through the fire. Waving aloft their lighted torches, they dashed madly round the valley, uttering loud cries. In the meantime, a number of men stood on either side of the fire, waving across it, backwards and forwards, pennants, attached to long sticks. A few minutes later, a wild shout announced that the youths were approaching the fire. The men with the pennants hastily drew back. The young fanatics, twenty in number, shouting loudly and beating their breasts wildly, walked barefooted round and round the fire. Some of them lost courage, and were supported on either side by friends, who, with words and wild gestures, strove to excite them to bravery. The excitement became intense when the leader of the procession halted at the end of the long fire, as if about to step



"SEVEN OR EIGHT TIMES THEY PASSED THROUGH THE FIRE."



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into it. But his courage failed him, and, with still louder cries of encouragement from their friends, the men walked round once more.

The next time, however, the leader did not hesitate for one moment, but stepped boldly into the red-hot fire, and ran the whole length of it. The others followed him: some running quickly, and others deliberately walking. Not one of the twenty youths shirked the ordeal. Seven or eight times they passed through the fire, and frequently the red-hot cinders stuck to their naked feet. No cry of pain escaped them, however. Soon they worked themselves into such a state of religious excitement that all semblance of order was lost. It became impossible to restrain the youths from rushing up and down the fiery path, instead of awaiting their turn.

Six of them were dancing like madmen in the fire, when all at once, as the Englishmen looked on, there was a flash, a report, and

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several of the poor wretches fell wounded on to the burning path. Instantly their friends rushed to rescue them from a horrible death but almost simultaneously a murderous fire was opened on them also, and many fell dead or wounded on the red-hot cinders.

For a few moments the surviving Mohammedans, who seemed completely powerless with surprise, huddled together like a flock of sheep, gazing hopelessly up at the place which concealed their unknown enemy.

Presently another volley was poured into them, with deadly effect. This aroused the fanatics to madness. They seized their revolvers and rushed furiously up the steep, hidden path, which led to the top of the cliff. But the mysterious enemy was awaiting them, and met the defenders with another destructive volley. In a few minutes there was a heap of dead and dying Mohammedans at the foot of the path.

The dacoits, for such were the aggressors

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now burst into loud shouts of triumph, and swarmed down the path to commence their work of plunder and mutilation.

But Cameron, Murray, and Tha Bu had meanwhile loaded their rifles, and directly the dacoits rushed into the arena, they fired. Three men instantly fell dead. At this, without a moment's hesitation, the remaining rascals ran pell-mell to the path to escape. Some of the dying Mohammedans, however, with a final effort, fired their revolvers as the dacoits passed them.

A regular panic now seized the miserable robbers, who fought madly among themselves to escape up the narrow path. Into this struggling crowd Cameron, Murray, and Tha Bu, burning with righteous indignation against the wanton aggressors, fired again and again. At last the surviving dacoits managed to escape, and all was silent.

The fiery path threw a lurid glare upon a horrible scene of slaughter, and already two or three jackals had appeared.

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“We must go down there, and see if any of the poor wretches are alive,” Murray said decisively, when the last shot was fired.

“Why deal unnecessary blows?” Tha Bu asked with surprise. “If the vile dogs are not dead, they will be before many hours.”

“If we leave them there, no doubt,” was the reply. “Possibly we shall be able to save the lives of some.”

“Why should you, sir? They are not your friends. The dacoits would kill you at any time, and the Mohammedans would most certainly have murdered you had they seen you when they were excited over the fire-walking ordeal.”

“Tha Bu,” said Cameron, “you have diligently acquired the habits of Englishmen, but I fear that you know little of their feelings. Lead us down into the hollow at once!”

Tha Bu silently did as he was commanded, but it took nearly half an hour to reach the scene of the fight. All three then searched

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among the fallen foes for a sign of life. At last they found a Burman who still breathed. They bandaged his wound, gave him water to drink, and, later, plantains to eat. At first the man was suspicious that they intended to torture him, but he soon became convinced that his fears were groundless. Then he expressed to Tha Bu his thanks for the Englishmen's kindness.

At Cameron's desire Tha Bu questioned him about the dacoit band to which he belonged. Gratitude unloosed the wretched man's tongue, and he readily told the guide that the raid upon the Mohammedans had been made without Po Thaw's sanction or knowledge. Po Thaw, and the majority of his men, had not yet crossed the Moo, and were not expected to do so for a day or two. The men who attacked the fire-walkers were proceeding quietly to the place appointed by the *bo*, when one of them by chance discovered the Mohammedans. They promptly decided to attack them and divide the

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plunder among themselves. But the most important piece of information Tha Bu obtained was that when Po Thaw crossed the river he would travel straight to the appointed meeting-place, which lay in a different direction from the Englishmen's planned journey. Cameron and Murray were somewhat relieved to hear that, but Johnson and Tha Bu were far from pleased at there being no immediate prospect of their making another effort to kill or capture the infamous *bo*.

CHAPTER X

MAH NOO

TWO days later the travellers became aware that they were approaching a village. They proceeded cautiously, for fear it might prove to be a stronghold of the dacoits.

Suddenly the three Englishmen halted and listened. A sweet girlish voice singing "Home, Sweet Home" filled them with astonishment and delight. Two verses were sung, but the Englishmen did not move a step. Each had a lump in his throat. Johnson had tears in his eyes; he brushed them hurriedly away and glared at Tha Bu.

"Let us see who she is!" Murray said, and proceeded in the direction of the voice. The others followed him.

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In a minute or two they discovered a graceful girl seated at an easel, painting.

At first they thought she was English, for she was attired in a charming European dress, but when she turned round to speak to one of the two Burmese women who were sitting smoking their cheroots near her, they saw at once that she was a Burmese girl. It was evident, too, that she was somebody of importance, for a number of men, armed with somewhat antiquated rifles, were seated at a respectful distance from her and apparently guarding her. A handsome dooly proclaimed her mode of travelling.

For some time the three Englishmen, half hidden behind some jungle plants, watched her in silence.

Then Murray whispered to Cameron, "She's out and out the prettiest Burmese girl I have ever seen. I must have a closer look at her. Come along, we'll go and speak to her."

Without waiting to see if Cameron and

the others were following, Murray stepped out into the open and walked quickly towards the young Burmese lady. Her guard raised their rifles menacingly directly they saw the intruder, but at a word from her they lowered them.

Her eyes brightened at the sight of the Englishmen, and they knew at once that their presence was not unwelcome. They raised their helmets, and Murray said—

“I must apologise for our rushing into your presence in this manner, but when we heard you singing ‘Home, Sweet Home’ we were so delighted that we hurried to you thinking—er——”

“Thinking that I was a countrywoman of yours, I suppose,” she suggested in a sweet voice and perfect English. “Well, it must be a great disappointment to you to find me——”

“I’m sure it is nothing of the kind,” Murray broke in gallantly; “for if you are not English by birth you have the tastes

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and accomplishments of an Englishwoman. That is very evident."

"Well, I must confess that I like England much better than I do Burma. I try to be patriotic, but I can't. My only excuse is that I was for eight years at a school at Brighton."

"At Brighton!" Cameron exclaimed. "Then you are Mah Noo?"

"Yes, that is my name," she replied with surprise. "But how—how did you know it?"

"That," said Cameron, "you will easily understand when I explain that we know your friend Miss Clarence. She it was who told us about you. And, now that I come to think of it, she has a grievance against you. She said you promised to write to her, but have not done so."

Mah Noo stared at her visitors in blank astonishment. "Well," she said at length, "to think that you should be friends of my old schoolfellow, Edith Clarence, and

that we should meet here in the wilds of Burma! She has not forgotten me, then? Ah, and neither have I forgotten her! I would have written to her frequently, but—but the fact is I am a prisoner.”

“A prisoner!” Cameron and Murray exclaimed, glancing at the easel and dooly.

“Yes, I am surrounded with nearly every comfort that can be obtained in this country, but nevertheless I am a prisoner. These servants who surround me are also my keepers; they both obey me and rule me.”

“I—I really don’t understand,” Murray declared.

“Well, I will tell you my history. But first tell me of my friend. When did you last see her? Where is she living now? When is she coming to Burma?”

“We last saw her in Rangoon about three weeks ago.”

“In Rangoon! Oh, how I wish I might see her!”

“I have a letter from her to you,”

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Cameron joined in. "She gave it to me a day or two before we left Rangoon, in case I should come across you."

Mah Noo took the letter eagerly, and asking the Englishmen to excuse her, read it again and again. And as she read it the travellers were able to have a good look at her. Cameron did not admire her very much, for his thoughts just then were full of Edith Clarence; but Murray's conviction that she was the prettiest girl he had seen since he left England became strengthened. Certainly she was prettier than the average Burmese girl, for her nose was not large and flat like most Burmese beauties, but was small and just a wee bit tip-tilted. Her eyes were dark and expressive, and shaded by long, dark lashes. Her hair, of course, was jet-black, but although done up in the style that was fashionable when she left England a year previously, it was adorned Burmese fashion with exquisite flowers. And certainly her complexion was

no darker than many a pure-bred English girl's.

“Then you are Mr. Cameron, I suppose?” she said to Cameron when she had finished reading the letter.

“Yes,” he replied, “and my companions are Mr. Murray and his confidential servant.”

“Well, I will tell you my history now. My father was a *woon-gyee*¹ in the time of King Mindoon. But when the king died he fled from Mandalay; for Theebaw, knowing that his father had not intended him to ascend the throne, had determined to kill all who were acquainted with the late king's wishes. We reached Lower Burma in safety and settled down in Moulmein, where my father, who always liked the English, made many friends. For six months I had an English governess, and finally, at the advice of his friends, my father sent me, when ten years old, to England. I remained at Brighton for eight years. Then my

¹ Secretary of State.

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father, who had returned to Mandalay after its capture by the British, sent for me. Greatly to my surprise he did not meet me at Rangoon, nor was he waiting for me at Mandalay. My uncle Bah Wah quieted my anxiety by telling me that my father was living on the banks of the Moo, and that as he was too unwell to travel he had sent him to meet me instead. We quitted Mandalay immediately, and reached our destination in three days ; only to find, however, that my dear father had been brutally murdered by that arch-fiend Po Thaw for refusing to assist him in his depredations. I begged to be allowed to return to Mandalay at once, and my uncle consented, but Po Thaw appeared on the scene and threatened to kill him if I were permitted to depart. Since then I have been a prisoner. My uncle is a vain man, and because we are descendants of the great Alompra¹ lives in almost regal style. So

¹ Aloung-payah, commonly called Alompra, was a man of humble birth who headed a rising against the

long as he prevents my escape Po Thaw has promised to uphold his dignity."

"But why does Po Thaw want to keep you a prisoner?" Murray asked, on the spur of the moment.

"Because — because he wants me to become his wife."

"The scoundrel!"

"After all, I may perhaps never see him again, for I hear that he was severely wounded two days ago and is not expected to be able to move for some time. It may sound unwomanly and heartless, but I hope sincerely that he will not recover from his illness."

"A hope which is shared without a doubt by hundreds of people. I am delighted to hear that he is wounded; but an honourable death is a thing I grudge him. Are you certain he is severely wounded?"

victorious King of Pegu. He defeated the Peguans, was proclaimed King of Burma, and founded the last Burmese dynasty.

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“Oh, yes. I have one servant who is faithful to me, and he keeps me informed of all the movements of the *bo*.”

“Then I suppose it was you who sent those timely letters of warning to the fort?”

“I did write to the officer; but how did you hear of it?”

“We were at the fort when the first letter arrived. By your friendly action you probably saved our lives, and I can assure you that we don't intend to forget the debt we owe you. We will arrange for your escape as speedily as possible. Will your uncle receive us in a peaceful manner?”

“Oh, yes, especially if he knows that you have no intention of interfering with his miniature kingdom. I am afraid that you will be sorely tempted to laugh outright when you see his pompous style of living, but don't do so if you can help it. And now I must return, or he will hear of my conversation with you before I tell him of your arrival.”

She said something to her attendants bowed smilingly to the Englishmen, then took her seat in the dooly, and in a few minutes was carried out of sight.

For some time the Englishmen stood where Mah Noo had left them, without uttering a word.

Then Murray said, in the tone of a man prepared to defend his words, "She's the sweetest girl I ever met."

Cameron made no reply.

"Don't you think so?" Murray asked sharply.

"I'm quite unable to form an opinion," Cameron declared. "How should I know what girls you have met?"

"Well, isn't she the sweetest girl *you* ever met?"

"No, she is not. At the same time I don't deny that she is a very nice girl."

"Nice is a paltry adjective to apply to such a sweet, kind, and clever girl."

"Good gracious, man, how do you know

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she is all that? We were only speaking to her for two minutes."

"I am repeating Miss Clarence's opinion of her. You told me that so she described her."

"Ah, yes, I had forgotten that. Miss Clarence, of course, had many opportunities to judge of her character, and I have no doubt that what she said aptly describes Mah Noo."

"Po Thaw shall not marry her if I can prevent him. It makes my blood boil to think of such a vile wretch marrying her. If we can't make her old uncle, who appears to be a champion fool, listen to reason, we must carry Mah Noo off and take her to Mandalay."

Cameron said nothing more, for he saw that Murray had taken a violent fancy to the Burmese girl.

They hurried back to their men, and drank the tea which Mah Shway O had prepared, in silence.

“ Here comes a messenger, sir,” Tha Bu exclaimed.

The Englishmen looked up from contemplating their cups and saw a Burman riding quickly towards them. His appearance was decidedly grotesque. His long black hair was streaming loosely from his head, mingling with the ends of his gorgeous turban. His white jacket was flying behind him, and his long scarlet tassel trappings were swinging about in a most perplexing fashion. His knees nearly touched his chin ; his feet were bare, and one toe only was placed in each stirrup. And to add to the extraordinary effect, he waved his arms wildly in the air and shouted excitedly. He pulled up suddenly on reaching the party, and addressed Tha Bu thus—

“ It has reached the Golden Ears that the white strangers from over the sea are drawing nigh to his kingdom. What is their business with the Lord of the Celestial Elephant? ”

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“Whom do you call the Lord of the Celestial Elephant?” Tha Bu asked haughtily. “I am a true-bred Burman and know that the one to whom that title belongs is no longer in Burma.”

“Bah Wah now bears that title. In his veins flows the blood of the mighty Alompra.”

“Tell him, then,” said Cameron, “that we come on a friendly visit. We are subjects of the mighty Queen of England, travelling on pleasure.”

“Then, my lord, I have authority to conduct you to the Golden Feet.”

The messenger dismounted, and in a few minutes the travellers followed him to the village. The first thing that attracted their attention was a man lying flat on his back in the main street, with a heavy stone on his chest, which effectually prevented his moving. Inquiry elicited the fact that he was one of Bah Wah's ministers ; he had displeased his master and was being punished accordingly.

The poor fellow was lying in the scorching sun, but bore the punishment with the stoicism characteristic of Burmans.

“It strikes me we had better mind our p’s and q’s,” Murray remarked; “for a man who can treat one of his courtiers in that fashion has probably a choice assortment of punishments reserved for outsiders.”

There were further signs, too, that this little village was ruled in very much the same fashion as Theebaw ruled his dominions. Several one-armed men were walking about; Tha Bu explained that they were convicted thieves. For the first offence, as already stated, a thief is branded on cheeks and chest; for the second he loses an arm; for the third the punishment is death.

Bah Wah’s palace was not a very magnificent place, being simply a disused *kyoung*, which he had appropriated. Into the assembly hall of this building the Englishmen and Tha Bu were conducted and requested to sit down. They did so, although etiquette

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made them very uncomfortable by compelling them to hide their feet. Several members of the nobility were present, conspicuous in the chains of their order, the number of chains they wore denoting their rank. Some wore three, some six, some nine, and others twelve. The rank of several others could be discovered by the shape of the betel-boxes and spittoons which their attendants carried. At last Bah Wah entered the hall, and immediately the courtiers fell flat upon their faces, and remained in that position until he had taken his seat. Then he said to Tha Bu—

“Can you speak the language of the white strangers?”

“I can, my lord,” Tha Bu replied.

“Then you shall be the ‘lord of my words.’”

“I will tell them the words of the Great Lord of Righteousness.”

At a sign from Tha Bu the Englishmen then advanced and placed before Bah, Wah

a few presents, consisting of three pieces of cloth, a bottle of pickles, a cake of soap—which the potentate's eldest son began to eat—a sixpenny telescope, and a handglass. Bah Wah expressed himself as being very pleased with the presents, but his pleasure did not beget generosity, for all he gave in return was a pineapple and two oranges. Then he began to question them. First, he inquired after the Great White Queen ; then he asked their names and ages ; then whether they could take their teeth out, and if they were married. Those questions being satisfactorily answered, he asked, through Tha Bu, "Is your country as powerful as Russia?"

"Yes, more powerful," Cameron replied ; "we have fought the Russians and beaten them."

"But you cannot always beat the dacoits."

"No, nor can the brave warrior always kill the mosquito which irritates him. England is the most powerful country in the world, and her enemies cannot stand against

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her for long. The days of the dacoits are numbered."

Bah Wah changed the subject of conversation with conspicuous abruptness.

"Can you play chess?" he asked.

"I can," Cameron replied.

"Then we will play a game together. Follow me."

They followed the descendant of the great warrior to his private apartments, which were by no means extravagantly furnished. On a little bamboo table a chess-board was open, with the men already arranged. An attendant placed the board on the ground, with a cushion for each of the players to squat down upon. But although the board contained sixty-four squares and the men numbered sixteen on each side, Cameron discovered at once that the Burmese game was different from the English one. Tha Bu went to his assistance and explained the power and disposal of the men. The king and the minister—there is no queen—are mounted

on two elephants and are defended by two castles, two knights on horseback, two officers on foot, and eight foot-soldiers. The men are arranged in three lines so as to leave eight squares unoccupied, and none of them possess the power of the English chess queen. Cameron soon grew interested in the game, for the Burmese style was exceedingly novel and complicated. For some time Murray watched the play patiently, hoping that Mah Noo would shortly enter the room. But as the time passed on without her appearing he grew restless, and quitting the players, who were engrossed in the game, strolled along the verandah of the palace, thinking that perhaps he might come across her there. And in a charming little nook, surrounded by graceful palms and brilliant flowers, he found her reading a popular English novel. At her feet sat a little girl smoking a huge cheroot. Mah Noo appeared a little surprised to see Murray ; but she was evidently not displeased.

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“Aren't you afraid to wander about the palace of the 'Lord of many White Elephants' in this manner?” she asked with a smile.

“Is it a dangerous thing to do, then?” he inquired, as he leant against the verandah and looked at her with scarcely disguised admiration.

“Well, I really can't say, for you are the first white man I have ever seen here. Where are your friends?”

“Cameron is playing chess with your uncle; the others are looking on, with a certain amount of fear that my friend may have the temerity to win and be promptly executed for so doing.”

“I don't think Bah Wah would do that. It is possible, though that if he finds your friend is a good chess-player he may refuse to let him depart.”

“Well, if Cameron has to remain, I shall certainly not depart without him. Do you not find life very dull here?”

“ Painfully dull. The things which might have amused me had I never been to England I find very distasteful indeed. Do you know, I was terribly disappointed when I returned to Burma. During my absence I thought of it as a perfect Elysium, for the impressions of my early childhood, completely happy as it was, were of the brightest ; but when I returned and saw things with European eyes the shock was awful. My dear father was actuated by the best motives when he sent me to England, but I fear that my European education and ideas will stand in the way of my happiness. If I were living in Rangoon it would be different, but here—oh, it is terrible ! ”

“ Miss Clarence is at Rangoon. We will conduct you safely to her with the greatest pleasure.”

“ It is very kind of you to offer, and I feel very much inclined to avail myself of your assistance.”

“ Why hesitate ? ”

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“ Because—because you are not travelling towards Rangoon.”

“ But we shall be before very long. We are going to the Sunrise Pagoda first. Do you know it ? ”

“ Oh, yes, very well.”

Then Murray told her of the *phoongyee's* treasure. She grew quite excited.

“ The *phoongyee's* story must be true,” she declared, “ for Po Thaw has been searching for a long time for the treasure of a notorious *bo* who was supposed to have been killed together with the whole of his band. Only last week he sent out several parties to thoroughly search the jungle in all directions. One party has gone to the neighbourhood of the Sunrise Pagoda, so I am afraid that before you reach your destination the treasure will be discovered and removed.”

CHAPTER XI

A TRIAL BY ORDEAL

THE game of chess resulted in a victory for Bah Wah, who was consequently jubilant. Not because it was a novelty to rise from the board a winner—as a matter of fact, no one had hitherto had the audacity to defeat him—but because he had had some very grave doubts as to the advisability of ordering the Englishman to be strangled if he had the temerity to win. Mah Noo had told her uncle many very wonderful things about the power of England, and it was beginning to dawn upon him that China, Burma, and Russia were not, after all, the three greatest nations in the world. Therefore, he by no means relished the necessity

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for killing the Englishman if he won. Had his courtiers not been near him he would have given Cameron a gentle hint that he was not expected to win. To have done so in their hearing would have been most unkindly, so for the first time in his life he strained every nerve and won on his merits.

Cameron suggested another game. Bah Wah discreetly replied that important State affairs demanded his immediate attention, and promptly departed.

Directly Cameron was disengaged, Murray repeated to him what Mah Noo had said about Po Thaw being in search of the hidden treasure.

“Then we must hurry off at once and remove it before he gets into the neighbourhood,” Cameron said decisively.

“But how about Mah Noo?” Murray asked quickly; “we can’t possibly leave her here.”

“Why not? She doesn’t appear to have been badly treated.”

“You know the reason—that scoundrel Po Thaw wishes to marry her. She may refuse to have anything to do with him, but it will certainly be at her peril.”

“You forget, my dear fellow, that she is a Burmese girl and that her marriage with Po Thaw would be considered by many of her countrywomen an honour for her.”

“Nonsense, Cameron! You’re letting your tongue run away with you. No one but a hopeless idiot would suggest that a girl of Mah Noo’s disposition and attainments could contemplate being Po Thaw’s wife with anything but loathing. She hates the fiend, and it is our duty to see that she is not persecuted by him. For myself, I absolutely decline to leave this village unless Mah Noo be with us.”

“And of course, sir, begging your pardon, I’ll do as you do,” Johnson joined in; “for I shouldn’t like any harm to come to the young lady. I’d rather kill Po Thaw in cold blood than let him marry her. If an Englishman,

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now, were to marry her, I think she would be happy."

Murray nodded his complete approval.

"So if we escort the lady back to Mandalay," Johnson continued, "she will be seen by lots of Englishmen, and one of them will possibly marry her."

Murray did not appear to consider that a very delightful prospect.

"Well, what are you going to do, Cameron?" he asked.

"Anything you like," Cameron replied; "but I warn you that by taking Mah Noo with us to the Sunrise Pagoda we shall be making her run many risks. If we are eventually captured by dacoits who do not happen to know her, the fact of her being with us will add to the cruelty of her captors."

"Then let us hurry back with her to the fort and leave her in Brown's charge."

"That means we shall have to give up all thoughts of finding the treasure, at any rate

for some time, because it would be sheer madness for us to attempt to pass through Bah Wah's territory after rewarding him for his hospitality by decamping with his niece."

"Then let us give up the treasure. What is it compared with the life of a young girl?"

"Really, Murray, you talk as if Po Thaw contemplated murdering Mah Noo, instead of marrying her."

"At present he possibly has no intention of murdering her, but when he finds that she loathes him and will on no account marry him, he'll have no scruples about murdering her."

"Perhaps you're right. At any rate, I repeat that I am quite ready to do whatever you like in the matter."

"Then I'll speak to Mah Noo and arrange for her abduction."

Tha Bu had been silently listening to the conversation. Now he rose and said thoughtfully: "He is a wise man who knows the

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use of opportune language and who can discern a maiden worthy of his love.'

Then he walked slowly away.

Cameron laughed heartily.

"What did he mean, Murray?" he asked.

"I'm bothered if I know," Murray answered testily. "Why don't you ask him?"

For the first time since they quitted Rangoon the friends were annoyed with each other. Cameron thought Murray absurdly unreasonable, and Murray was convinced that Cameron was abominably heartless. Fortunately, they were not long permitted to brood over their grievances. A large gong was sounded, and the villagers hurriedly assembled in front of Bah Wah's palace.

Tha Bu conveniently returned and explained that Bah Wah was about to sit in judgment. So the Englishmen squatted down in the front row to watch the proceedings. Bah Wah soon appeared. The moment the people saw him they fell flat on their faces and remained in that attitude

A Trial by Ordeal

until he had mounted a gorgeous carved seat placed under the palm-trees. Then a gong was sounded and his subjects sat up. Business commenced at once by several men crawling on all fours to the royal judge and handing up petitions, written on palm-leaves with an iron style. With their petitions the litigants also brought presents. If their petitions were granted, Bah Wah accepted the presents; if they were not, he refused them. The Englishmen soon noticed that the petition of a man with a valuable present was invariably granted. In disputed cases plaintiff and defendant always brought presents, and the man with the more valuable gift nearly always won the day. But on this occasion Bah Wah's judicial ability was put to a severe test, for in one case it was utterly impossible for him to decide which was the more valuable present, plaintiff's or defendant's. Pretending to be deep in thought, he gazed solemnly at the presents for some moments. With a deep-

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drawn sigh, he decided at last to judge the case on its merits. The "Keeper of the Book of the Oath" immediately approached the litigants, and placed on each man's head a palm-leaf on which the oath was inscribed. Then from a third leaf he read aloud, in a sing-song voice, the following tremendous oath, the men repeating it after him:—

"If I utter anything that is not true, may the all-knowing God, who has exercised all and every virtue throughout the duration of four hundred million one hundred thousand worlds, and the *nats* and giants who guard Him night and day, slay me. May the *nats* who guard the eighty-four thousand sacred writings slay me. May the *nats* who guard the relics of the supreme god, consisting of his forty teeth—four of them grinders—eight thousand of his hairs, his cranium, his brow, his cheek-bone, and his breast-bones, slay me. May the *nats* who guard the eighty-four thousand gilt pagodas slay me. May the *nats*, dragons, and giants who guard the

islands, the rivers, the mountains, the forests, the clouds, the winds, the sun and stars slay me. May the eighty-four thousand giants who guard the blessed seats kill and devour me piecemeal. May the ends of my fingers be cut off, may all my nerves be severed, may I suffer from boils, cancer, leprosy, ringworm, itch, scurvy, dysentery, cholera, small-pox, fever, asthma, deafness, blindness, lameness, and all kinds of shameful, putrid, dirty, abominable and inflammatory complaints and diseases. May I become a fool and an idiot. May fire and smoke come out of my mouth. May all sorts of elephants, male and female, kill me in an instant. May I be bitten and slain by tigers, snakes, and other ferocious inhabitants of the jungle. May I suddenly fall down dead. May the earth open beneath my feet and swallow me. May a thunderbolt from heaven kill me. If I travel by water may the ship sink and I be devoured by crocodiles and sharks. May I incur the hatred of the king and his minis-

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ters. May they, and everybody else, ill-treat me and raise law-suits against me. May I have calumniating enemies. May I be separated from my friends and relations, and be utterly miserable. May I be killed with every kind of weapon that exists, and as soon as I am dead may I be precipitated into the one hundred and twenty-eight large and small hells. May I fall feet upwards, head downwards, and be tormented for an immense time with fire and flame. And after I have suffered there every species of horrible torture, may I be changed into a pig, a dog, or some vile insect. And if I again become a man, may I be the slave of other men, a thousand and ten thousand times. And finally, may all my undertakings, thoughts and desires remain for ever as worthless as a heap of cotton destroyed by fire."

One would imagine that no man after taking such a stupendous oath would dare to speak anything but the truth. It soon

became evident, however, that one of the litigants was committing the grossest perjury. They were small farmers, and one declared that while he was praying at the pagoda the other had stolen his bullock. The accused indignantly denied the charge, and asserted that he had had the bullock from its birth. Witnesses were called by both sides, and, after being sworn, flatly contradicted each other without the slightest hesitation. Bah Wah had not the faintest idea how to act. His ministers dared not advise him without being asked to do so, and he was in no mood just then for consulting them. After a long and painful silence Bah Wah appealed to Cameron for advice. Cameron firmly but politely declined to assist, and so did Murray and Johnson. Tha Bu had plenty of advice ready, but he was not consulted. Consequently he muttered many uncomplimentary, but obviously true remarks, concerning his royal countryman's want of intelligence.

After making another endeavour to dis-

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cover which of the men was committing perjury, Bah Wah exclaimed loudly, "You shall undergo a trial by ordeal." This decision was received with pronounced satisfaction by the on-lookers. Without a moment's hesitation the litigants were marched to a pond near by and compelled to wade in until the water nearly reached their chins. Then they were placed side by side and a board put upon their heads. At a sign from Bah Wah, the board was pressed down by two officials, causing the litigants immediately to disappear beneath the water. The time they remained out of sight appeared very long to the excited crowd. No doubt it appeared still longer to the men themselves. At last the man who was accused of the theft came panting and spluttering to the surface. He dashed the water from his eyes and anxiously looked round for his opponent. When he found that he was still below water he uttered a shriek of terror, scrambled to the

bank and tried to escape. But the minions of the law rushed at him and promptly seized him. At that moment the other man rose to the surface, and, having remained under water longer than his rival, was hailed as the owner of the bullock. Consequently the first man was considered a thief, and as he already bore the words "cloth thief" tattooed upon his chest, his fate was clear. The spotted-face executioners seized him, and at a sign from Bah Wah hacked off his left arm.

Cameron, Murray, and Johnson did not attempt to conceal their intense horror and disgust at the barbarous act. Johnson sprang to his feet and relieved his feelings by shouting fiercely at Bah Wah, "You miserable scoundrel! For two pins I'd wring your wretched neck." Fortunately, Bah Wah did not understand a word of English, so no harm was done. But it was clear to him, nevertheless, that the Englishmen were far from pleased with what they

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had seen. So he avoided them and passed at once in state to his palace.

It was soon evident that Bah Wah was desirous of removing any bad impression he had created, for an hour later he sent his prime minister to invite them to visit his white elephants. They were three in number, but, as Johnson declared, they were no more white than Tha Bu was, their claim to that distinction resting solely upon a few greyish hairs which they possessed. As white elephants rank next to royalty, each animal was kept in an elaborately carved teak house covered with gold leaf, and was waited upon by several attendants—all men of high rank. When they entered an elephant's house they took off their shoes, and when the animals went down to the lakelet for their daily bath they held over them a canopy of gold. As each elephant came out of the water its feet were carefully washed in a silver basin. Their food was kept in gold and silver vessels.

When the Englishmen had politely admired the ponderous creatures, Bah Wah drew Cameron aside and said—

“Hearken unto my words, for, though I am the Lord of Many White Elephants and the Arbiter of Existence, I am in need of advice. My prime minister does not hasten to obey my orders, nor does he think the words I speak are always words of wisdom. For many years he has carried the flag of the God of Death,¹ but yet he does not die. He fears me no more than the little child who knows not my power, for although he may offend me, I dare not kill him. Ah, white stranger, you are surprised that the Lord of the Heavenly Weapon should be unable to kill any man he pleases. I will explain. My prime minister was formerly a servant of King Mindoon, whom he managed, no doubt by witchcraft, to please so well that the king gave him a

¹ Carrying the flag of the God of Death is the Burmese expression for having grey hair.

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patent, guaranteeing that he should not be put to death by certain methods which are mentioned therein. These methods are nearly two hundred in number, and there is no way of killing a man known to me that is not mentioned in that list. I have spent many days and nights trying to invent some new way of killing the old dog, but in vain. Now, I know that the white lords are acquainted with many things of which we are ignorant, and perhaps the Great White Queen has some method of killing her prime minister when he displeases her which is unknown to me, therefore I beg you to tell me how I may rid myself of the man I hate."

"Can you show me the list of deaths by which he may not die?" Cameron asked.

"Yes, I carry a copy of it about with me. Here it is."

Cameron perused the document. It was a lengthy one, and contained almost every kind of death imaginable—indeed, every kind of death known to the Burmese.

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Bah Wah watched Cameron eagerly while he read it. When he had finished he asked anxiously, "Do you know any method not mentioned there?"

"I do," Cameron declared, returning the document.

Bah Wah's face beamed with delight.

"Tell me quickly, then, what it is," he said, "so that the old dog may die before sunset."

"Englishmen do not kill men who have done them no harm. Your prime minister is no enemy of mine."

"But I do not ask you to kill him. Let me know how he can die, and I have but to speak and he dies."

"I must consult my countrymen first, for the taking of a life is a serious matter to us.

"Tell me in a few hours, then."

"In three days you shall know our answer."

"It is a very long time. The old dog may die before then."

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“In that case you will be spared the trouble and sin of killing him.”

“But I want to kill him. His death will be sweeter to me than the deaths of one hundred other men. I beseech you, therefore, to tell me your answer to-morrow.”

“I have already told you that you shall have it in three days,” Cameron said sternly; whereupon Bah Wah departed in a huff.

As the Englishmen returned to their quarters, Cameron told Murray of Bah Wah's great desire. They discussed it for some little time and finally came to the conclusion that with some judicious threats they might easily make the prime minister a very useful ally. So they sent Tha Bu to bring him to them with as much secrecy as possible. In a very short time the prime minister arrived. There was nothing at all imposing about him just then, for his *lungyi* and turban were not particularly brilliant, and he was not wearing the usual gorgeous waistcoat. His jacket

was open, showing his bare breast, which was covered with knobs of various sizes and shapes, caused by the rubies, sapphires, and pieces of ivory which were buried under the skin as charms against wounds.

“Your life is in danger,” Cameron said to him solemnly.

The prime minister smiled incredulously.

“But it is in our power to save you from those who would kill you.”

“The white lords are good to warn me,” the prime minister declared; “but who are the enemies that seek my life? Are they white men?”

“No. It is a Burman who is planning your death.”

“You speak of the ‘Lord of the Life and Property of his subjects,’ I suppose,” the minister said with a smile; “but I fear him not. I bear on my breast many charms against wounds, but the protection they afford is small compared with that which a patent of King Mindoon grants me. In the face of

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that, no member of the Royal House, were he even as powerful as the mighty Alompra, dare kill me."

"Bah Wah has shown me a copy of the patent," Cameron said, "and has asked me if there are any ways of taking life known to Englishmen not mentioned therein."

"And what did the white lord reply?" the prime minister asked curiously.

"I replied that there were."

The Burman puffed nervously at his cheroot for a few moments, and then said sadly—

"What harm have I done to the white lord that he should place my life in the hands of my enemy? I have always been a friend of the English, and it is because I hate their great enemy, the bloody Po Thaw, that Bah Wah, who fears the *bo*, seeks to kill me."

"At present," Cameron said, "I have not told Bah Wah how he may lawfully kill you, but unless you promise to help my friends

and me to escape with Mah Noo, I shall do so."

"I will promise that with pleasure, for Mah Noo is the child of one who in the good never-to-be-forgotten days of King Mindoon was my greatest friend. I said to Bah Wah that it was not a meritorious act to make the child of his noble brother marry such a pariah as Po Thaw, but he would not hearken to my words. When do the white lords think it will be well to leave this place?"

"The sooner the better."

"The day after to-morrow, then, will be a good day, for all the people in the village are going to the river to see a boat-race. I will make all preparations, and come again to-morrow after sunset to see the white lords."

"Very good, but remember that if I see the slightest sign of hesitation or treachery on your part I will tell Bah Wah at once how he may lawfully kill you."

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“My lord,” the prime minister said with dignity, “the name of Po Se has never been connected with treachery, and never shall be.”

“Sir,” said Tha Bu to Cameron, “the words my countryman speaks are pleasing to the ears, but still one should not trust implicitly even a friend, for when a friend is angry with you he becomes, being possessed of your secrets, the most dangerous of enemies. With your permission, sir, I will administer an oath of fealty to him.”

Cameron nodded assent, whereupon Tha Bu ostentatiously took a piece of paper from his jacket pocket and wrote in the vernacular the following oath :—

“I, Po Se, solemnly declare that I will faithfully serve and carry out the wishes of Sydney Cameron, Esquire, servant of Her Majesty Queen Victoria, Empress of India, ruler of many great lands, conqueror of mighty kings, owner of numberless elephants, ruler of the seas and possessor of thousands

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of fire-boats. If I break the oath which I now consummate by drinking water in which swords, spears, and guns, have been dipped, may I die by these weapons.”

Standing in front of an image of Gautama, Po Se read aloud what Tha Bu had written. Then he burned the paper, placed the ashes in a small mug of water, stirred them up with little wooden models of swords, spears, and guns, and finally drank the concoction.

CHAPTER XII

EDITH CLARENCE

EARLY the following morning Murray and Cameron obtained an interview with Mah Noo. She was delighted when told of their arrangement with Po Se, and eagerly discussed with them their chances of reaching the English fort in safety. Then she related many amusing incidents she had witnessed during her enforced residence in Bah Wah's little kingdom, and consequently the time passed quickly and pleasantly away. The two Englishmen were very comfortable, and had no desire to leave the cool, shady balcony for the scorching open. But suddenly all three were startled by the sound of a noisy mob

approaching. Mah Noo sprang to her feet in terror.

“It is Po Thaw returning,” she declared excitedly.

Cameron and Murray instinctively grasped their revolvers.

“Hurry down the steps, run across the compound, and hide in the jungle,” Mah Noo continued.

“Lead the way,” Murray said quietly; “for unless you accompany us, we will remain here.”

“It would be foolish for me to go,” Mah Noo declared, “for Po Thaw would be on our track immediately he discovered I was missing. I will remain, and will tell the people that no one is to mention your visit. And every day I will send food to you in the jungle.”

“I shall remain here,” Murray declared decisively.

“And I, too,” said Cameron.

“But Po Thaw will kill you if you do,”

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Mah Noo protested, with great agitation. "He has threatened you with fearful deaths. Oh, do please go and hide in the jungle!"

Murray did not move a step, but critically examined his revolver. Cameron surveyed the approaching crowd through his field-glass. Presently he exclaimed in a tone of relief, "Po Thaw is not with that party."

"Are you certain that he is not on that bullock-cart?" Murray asked anxiously. "The village people have evidently some reason for being deeply interested in it. Look how they are crowding round the lumbering thing."

Cameron again surveyed the advancing crowd, and a moment or two later hurriedly passed the field-glass to Murray, saying excitedly, "Look at the bullock-cart, quickly!"

Murray did so. "Good gracious!" he exclaimed, "there's a white woman in it."

Mah Noo, on hearing the surprising news, jumped up from her seat, picked up her

native parasol, and said eagerly, "Let us run to meet her then. Some misfortune must have befallen her, or she would not be in this part of the country."

Mah Noo and the two Englishmen hurried quickly towards the stranger. As they approached the bullock-cart the villagers made way for them, and as they did so, a cry of surprise escaped from Cameron and Mah Noo, for the new arrival was Edith Clarence.

"Edith! Edith! This is a pleasure," Mah Noo called out delightedly, forgetting that her friend was assuredly a prisoner.

Edith Clarence was the picture of dejection when her friends first caught sight of her, but when she heard Mah Noo's voice she brightened up at once, and, slipping out of the bullock-cart, ran to meet her old schoolfellow. The girls greeted each other warmly, but before they had time to ask any questions the men who had been Edith's escort—and a villainous-looking lot they

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were—roughly separated them. One man seized hold of Edith's arm, and commenced to pull her back to the cart, but Mah Noo picked up a small bamboo cane and struck him smartly across the face. With a howl of rage the man released his hold, and seizing his *dah* rushed savagely at Mah Noo, who would undoubtedly have been killed had not Murray sprang forward and dealt the fellow such a terrific blow that he staggered back, yelling with pain. Another rascal who drew his *dah* was struck to the ground by Cameron.

“You dogs!” Mah Noo exclaimed to the now thoroughly cowed men. “How dare you treat a friend of mine in that fashion?”

“Po Thaw said we were not to let anybody speak to her until we delivered her into Bah Wah's hands,” one of the men muttered surlily.

“Do not tell me what that base-born rascal Po Thaw said. I am a descendant

of the warrior Alompra, and the words of a thieving coward are beneath my notice.”

Bah Wah, hearing the excitement, came hurrying towards them in a very flurried and unkingly manner. When he saw Edith he looked very surprised, and, turning angrily to the chief man of the escort, asked, “From whence have you brought this white woman? Tell me quickly, for the white lords and their women are no enemies of mine.”

“My lord,” the man replied, “Po Thaw, who fears neither man nor demon, said unto me, ‘Take this white woman to Bah Wah, and tell him to guard her safely, for she will be a companion for Mah Noo, and both shall be my wives.’”

Cameron glanced at Edith, half fearing that she might have understood the rascal’s words. She had not, however, but the agony of mind she had undergone, and the joy of seeing friends again, proved too much for her, and she fainted. Cameron caught her

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as she fell, and carried her into the shade of some trees. Murray ran to the nearest hut for some water.

“Is the white woman dead?” the chief of the escort asked anxiously, knowing that his life would be the penalty if she were.

“No, dog, she is not,” Bah Wah replied sharply. “Go back to your master, and tell him that his words have reached the Golden Ears. The white woman shall be taken care of.”

The men needed no second bidding to depart, and disappeared quickly into the jungle.

Cameron soon managed to bring Edith round. She laughed at her weakness, and thanked Cameron warmly for his attention.

“If you feel quite better, dear, perhaps you will tell us how you fell into the dacoits' hands,” Mah Noo said to Edith a few minutes later, when Bah Wah had left them.

“Certainly,” Edith replied; “I'll tell you at once. About a fortnight ago I left

"CARRIED HER INTO THE SHADE OF SOME TREES."





Mandalay in a steamer to go up to my father at Bhamo, but unfortunately the steamer ran aground, and as there was no prospect of its being got off for some hours a few of the passengers went ashore to pick flowers. I caught two or three splendid butterflies, and in my anxiety to catch a beautiful specimen I got separated from the rest of the party. While putting the butterfly in my collecting box I was seized from behind, and a cloth stuffed into my mouth. I tried to scream, but could not utter a sound. I struggled wildly to free myself from the man's grasp, for the glimpse I caught of him proved to me that he was a dacoit. He uttered a cry resembling a jackal's, and in a few moments four or five of his comrades appeared. They bound one of their turbans over my eyes, and, lifting me in their arms, carried me quickly away. I swooned, and when I recovered consciousness I was lying on a bullock-cart and surrounded by the men you saw just now. They appeared delighted at

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my recovery, which made me think they had no intention of ill-treating me. The following day I was taken into the presence of Po Thaw. When he told me who he was—he spoke fairly good English—I, foolishly, perhaps, called him a cowardly murderer. He laughed, and then declared that when he had driven the English out of the country he would make me one of his wives. At the time that threat did not frighten me at all, but when, day after day, I was hurried through the jungle without seeing a soul but my guard, I began to fear that I was being taken to some spot where, even if Po Thaw were captured, I might remain for years unheard of by Europeans. And now, to my delight, I find myself among friends. I really can't understand it. Was the man I saw not Po Thaw after all, but some loyal Burman, playing a practical joke, or—but I can scarcely think that—are you on friendly terms with Po Thaw?"

"The man you saw was, undoubtedly, Po

Thaw," Mah Noo replied; "but instead of our being on friendly terms with him we all cordially detest him. I, too, am a prisoner, and destined, like you, to become one of his wives."

"That you shall never be," Murray declared emphatically. "Cameron and I intend to upset Po Thaw's arrangements, and, if all goes well, in a few days you and Miss Clarence will be safe in an English fort."

"If Bah Wah hears of your intention to set us free, he will certainly kill you," Mah Noo declared; "for Po Thaw only allows him to reign over his miniature kingdom on condition that I am not allowed to escape. Bah Wah is not a particularly hard-hearted man, and, in a way, is fond of me. But he loves to delude himself with the belief that he is a king, and, if necessary, would unhesitatingly sacrifice my happiness or life to retain his trifling power."

"We shall take very good care that he does not hear of our intention," Murray

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said, "and one fine day he will discover that you have flown. But we had better move away from you now, for I see that Bah Wah is watching us. It will never do to arouse his suspicions."

Murray and Cameron sauntered away to their quarters. After sunset Po Se paid a visit to them. He came secretly, and remained but a few minutes.

"I have arranged everything," he said. "Bah Wah will go to the boat-race on his state elephant, and the ladies will also have a royal animal. Another elephant has been set aside for the white lords. All the elephants are fleet of foot, and when the boat-race is finished the white lords or the ladies must suggest an elephant race. I will administer a sure and speedy poison to Bah Wah's elephant so that it will not run many yards. The white lords must urge on their elephant, and the ladies must strive to be the winners. In a short time the white lords and the two sweet flowers of this village

will be alone. The speed of the elephants must not be slackened until they have gone many miles. Ponies will be awaiting you at a certain place to be arranged to-morrow. Now I must depart, for the things that I do are watched and straightway discussed in the presence of Bah Wah."

But before Po Se departed he said apologetically, "The white lords will not, I trust, break the promise they made to me concerning the vile intentions of Bah Wah?"

"You should know, at your age, that an Englishman does not break his promise," Cameron replied sharply; "but for your satisfaction I tell you that for all the wealth in Burma we would not now instruct Bah Wah how he may kill you. Nor would all the tortures he can imagine be sufficient to wring the secret from us."

Po Se expressed his complete satisfaction, and departed hurriedly. The Englishmen made themselves comfortable for the night. But about half-past one they awoke with a

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start. The village was in a state of uproar. They seized their revolvers and dashed out of their hut, with the intention of running to the protection of the ladies. But they stopped short on the threshold to gaze at the novel scene. Every house was lighted up with lamps, and on the roof of each sat one or two men energetically beating drums, blowing trumpets, or thrashing the thatch with big sticks. On the ground, men, women, and children of all ages were making the night hideous with discordant musical instruments. Such as were not fortunate enough to possess a drum, a trumpet, a clapper, or other recognised musical instrument, banged gongs or tin pots to the accompaniment of blood-curdling screams. Every man, woman, and child appeared to have gone raving mad.

“Where’s Tha Bu?” Cameron asked Johnson.

Johnson pointed to a neighbouring hut. Tha Bu and Mah Shway O were on the

roof of it, vigorously beating the thatch, and yelling at the top of their voices.

Cameron shouted to Tha Bu, who left his occupation with great reluctance.

“What’s the matter?” Cameron asked.

“Cholera, sir. Two women have died,” Tha Bu answered.

“But what are you all making this vile noise for?”

“To frighten away the evil spirit who caused the cholera,” and, without waiting to be asked any more questions, Tha Bu scrambled on to the roof and continued his energetic contribution to the public discord.

The Englishmen hurried to Bah Wah’s palace. His Majesty was sitting on the roof, beating a drum and screaming hideously.

Mah Noo and Edith Clarence were on the verandah, watching the excitement with considerable amusement. Mah Noo had explained to Edith what the cause of it was.

“They’ll repeat this for the next three

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or four nights," Mah Noo said to Cameron and Murray, after a few moments' conversation.

"Thank goodness we sha'n't hear the noise," Cameron said, and immediately told the ladies of the arrangements for the morrow. They discussed the matter for some twenty minutes. Then Mah Noo declared that sleep would be the best preparation for the events of the following day, so they said good-night and parted in high spirits. In spite of the unearthly din, which continued until nearly daybreak, they managed to sleep soundly, and woke considerably refreshed. When they looked out they saw that the roof of nearly every hut was smashed in, the result of the previous night's excitement. But for once in a way the village folk worked hard, all being anxious to get their huts repaired before starting off to see the great inter-village boat-race.

CHAPTER XIII

FLIGHT AND CAPTURE

WHEN the necessary task of repairing the half-demolished huts was completed, the villagers hurried indoors to don their holiday attire. The men soon came out, resplendent in brilliant *lungyis* and gorgeous turbans. The women, a little later, appeared in tasteful flowered skirts, and bedecked with everything they possessed, or could borrow, in the way of bracelets, anklets and rings. Even the little children, who usually ran naked, wore, in honour of the occasion, at least one bracelet or anklet.

In a short time all the inhabitants were making their way to the river. Bah Wah

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Mah Noo, and Edith Clarence departed on royal elephants. Po Se followed them, riding on the shoulders of a sturdy slave—his favourite mode of travelling. An elephant was then placed at the Englishmen's disposal. The *mahout* salaamed, and, after an anxious glance around, said, in an undertone, to Cameron: "My lord, I am the trusted servant of the wise and all-powerful minister, Po Se. He has given me my instructions, which I will faithfully carry out."

Then Tha Bu, who was remaining behind on the plea that his wife was unwell, approached them, primed with some parting advice. "In the presence of pleasing women the tongue is unloosed," he said gravely. "Therefore, sirs, I advise you before speaking to see who is near you. Act like a hunter who, traversing the jungle and fearful of danger, looks first on one side and then on the other."

"We will remember your advice and be

very careful," Cameron replied; whereupon Tha Bu returned to his hut, swelling with importance.

Cameron, Murray, and Johnson, without any further delay, took their seats in the *howdah*, and joined the procession of elephants, bullock-carts, and pedestrians proceeding to the river. It was a very happy crowd. The dreaded cholera was for the time completely forgotten, and every man, woman, and child appeared determined to get all the enjoyment possible from the outing. Some had musical instruments, which they played energetically, and others sang. But the majority amused themselves by playfully chaffing each other, and laughing heartily at every untoward event. If a bullock suddenly stopped short, and, in spite of the prodding of the driver, refused to budge an inch, the occupants of the other carts considered it an excellent joke. If a cart-wheel went over anyone's foot they screamed with delight; and when

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a man accidentally cut himself with a *dah*, they roared with laughter.

“I can't see anything to laugh at in that,” observed Murray, in a tone of disgust.

“They are a very unsympathetic people,” Cameron replied. “A Burman rarely shows sympathy, and never expects any.”

“And yet,” said Murray, “they are most hospitable. How do you account for that?”

“I can't account for it, my dear fellow; but the fact remains that they *are* terribly callous.”

After a quarter of an hour's ride the Englishmen arrived at the river, the banks of which were crowded with sightseers. Murray was anxious to know where they all came from.

“Some of them have probably come fifty or a hundred miles solely to see the race,” Cameron declared. “The interest these up-country people take in boat-races is marvellous,” he continued, “and the competition among the youths anxious to row

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in the village boat is very great. The crew is chosen by veterans who have themselves rowed in inter-village races. Bah Wah's crew, I understand, is a very good one, and is expected to win easily. By the by, that boat moored in the middle of the river is the winning-post. You notice that bamboo placed across its bowsprit? Inside it, and projecting at each end, there is a thin ratan; and it is the duty of the foremost man in each boat to try to pull the ratan out before his opponent can do so. The crew which secures the ratan are the winners of the race. Sometimes this rule gives rise to comical scenes. A man in each boat will seize the ratan at the same moment, with the result that each is pulled overboard and the boats capsized."

At that moment Johnson, who had been anxiously gazing up the river, exclaimed excitedly, "They're off, sir!"

The boats were certainly approaching, but the race had not commenced. "They

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are having a preliminary row over the course," Cameron explained, "to appease the *nats* of the river. In the prows you will see offerings of rice, fruit, and flowers, with which they hope to propitiate the dreaded demons. The people firmly believe that if they neglected the preliminary row the *nats* would show their displeasure by upsetting the boats and drowning the rowers."

In a few moments the boats passed. Each crew consisted of twenty men, who, as they rowed, sang a by no means unmelodious patriotic song, which lauded Burma, and all appertaining to it, in most extravagant terms.

The preliminary row concluded, the race commenced. As the boats approached the end of the course the shouts of encouragement and yells of delight of the excited partisans were simply deafening. Every man, woman, and child shouted at the top of his or her voice. And there was certainly cause for excitement, for the boats

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were nearly level. Then, with a sudden spurt, the boat representing Bah Wah's village drew away from its rival, who tried to respond, but in vain. The crew rowed well to the last; but in spite of all their exertions Bah Wah's men won, amidst great excitement, by a little more than a boat's length. As the cane was drawn from the bowsprit and waved aloft in triumph, some of the winning crew jumped up and danced for joy in their boat. The next moment the victorious oarsmen were struggling for life in the water. The crowd laughed heartily; and, instead of going to their assistance, they—being, like all Burmans, incorrigible gamblers—began callously to make bets as to the number who would be drowned or seized by crocodiles. As it happened, only one poor fellow perished. The Englishmen were not aware of his death until some time after, and it never occurred to them at the time that, with so many people

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close at hand, the oarsmen could be in danger. The other members of the crew, swimming dog-fashion, safely reached the bank, where they were quickly surrounded, and congratulated warmly, by the very friends who had a minute previously watched their frantic struggles for life without moving a hand in their behalf. Even Bah Wah graciously smiled upon them, and, in an unprecedented fit of generosity, presented each with a new turban.

The Englishmen now approached Bah Wah and the ladies, and were welcomed cordially. Johnson, with considerable thoughtfulness, immediately engaged Bah Wah in conversation, leaving Cameron and Murray to devote themselves to Edith and Mah Noo. Bah Wah could not understand a word of Johnson's newly-acquired Burmese, but, being in a good humour, pretended that he did. Occasionally he made some remark, and Johnson in turn looked as if he quite

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agreed with what the great man said. But a conversation carried on under such circumstances must, after a time, begin to flag. Johnson was quite aware of that, and was considerably relieved when Po Se came towards them, bringing with him a young girl, half Burmese, half Hindoo.

"This girl," Po Se said to Bah Wah, "begs to be allowed to perform, before the Lord of Many White Elephants and the white strangers, her wondrous egg-dance."

Mah Noo heard what was said. "We should all very much like to witness it," she declared; and, without waiting for Bah Wah's consent, Po Se commanded the girl to commence her performance.

Bah Wah was terribly indignant, and drawing Cameron aside said to him eagerly, "Tell me now, I beseech you, how I may kill that presumptuous dog Po Se. My heart is very sick because he still lives. Have pity on me. Let me kill him at once and be happy."

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Cameron was very annoyed at his *tête-à-tête* with Edith Clarence being interrupted, and he replied angrily, "I shall do nothing of the kind. If you ask me in two days I will, as I promised, let you know whether or not we can assist you."

Bah Wah uttered a grunt of annoyance, savagely kicked a servile courtier who happened to be handy, and turned his attention to the dancing-girl. She advanced, and handed to Bah Wah the articles she would use in her dance. They consisted of a basket containing twenty fowls' eggs, and a brass head-band to which were fastened, at equal distances, twenty pieces of string. The strings were all of the same length, and each had a noose at the end.

After the articles had been examined by Bah Wah and the Englishmen, the girl fixed the brass band on her head and drew, on the ground, a ring about eighteen inches in diameter. Standing in this ring she began to turn round and round, increasing her

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speed every moment until it made the on-lookers dizzy, and the strings from the head-band formed a horizontal circle. Without slackening in the slightest degree her gyrations, she pulled down one of the strings, fixed an egg in the noose, and jerked it back again into position. Noose after noose she filled in this manner, until she had twenty eggs spinning in a circle round her head. For two or three minutes she spun round and round at a speed that was simply marvellous. Then she caught hold of the strings one by one, took the eggs from the nooses, and replaced them in the basket. A moment after replacing the last one she stopped suddenly and stood as motionless as a statue. So clever was the performance that the Englishmen could not restrain their applause, nor withhold a generous reward.

A few minutes later the journey home was commenced. For a short time Bah Wah and his English companions discussed the boat-race. Then Mah Noo began to talk

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about the elephant she was riding. She declared that she knew the good points of an elephant, and that hers was undoubtedly the fastest runner of the three. Murray did not agree with her. He expressed an opinion that the elephants on which he, Cameron, and Johnson were seated, were far superior animals in point of speed.

“There is only one way of deciding the question,” said Mah Noo. “We must have a race.”

“I should like it immensely,” Murray declared.

Bah Wah, once more in a good humour, readily gave his consent to the race being run there and then. They had arrived at a wide track which continued right into the village. The two huge animals were placed side by side. Bah Wah struck a gong, and the race commenced. The people dashed after the two elephants; but Po Se, again mounted on his slave, intercepted them.

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“ Back! back!” he shouted fiercely. “ Have you forgotten the respect due to the King of Umbrella-bearing Chiefs that you dare to rush before him? Back, this moment, or your flesh shall be food for the birds of the air.”

The crowd slunk back at once. Bah Wah heard his prime minister's words, but they did not please him; they clearly proved to him that although his people had dared to treat him with disrespect, they feared to disobey his prime minister. He was, however, too interested in the elephant-race to worry himself about that at present. But a great surprise was in store for him. His elephant, which was usually much more fleet of foot than either of the contending animals, appeared to be exceedingly lazy. The *mahout*, sorely puzzled, and dreading Bah Wah's displeasure, did his utmost to accelerate his speed, but without success. Finally, the elephant tried to leave the track and enter the jungle.

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“The noble elephant is ill, my lord,” one of Bah Wah’s favourites declared. “He wishes to go into the jungle to die in solitude.”

Other men confirmed this statement ; so Bah Wah dismounted, and as no other elephants were to be had, he took a seat in a fairly comfortable bullock-cart. But he saw no more of the race. The fugitives were out of sight.

“There is not a soul to be seen now,” Murray exclaimed, looking back along the track which they had just travelled. “Po Se has evidently done his work well.”

“What did he give the elephant?” Cameron asked.

“I saw him feeding it with some sugarcane while we were watching the egg-dance, but I haven’t the faintest idea of what was in it.”

Nothing more was said for some time. The elephants went lumbering along at a pace which certainly surprised the occupants

of the *howdahs*. The village was reached in wonderfully quick time, but the place was deserted, and there was nothing to impede the progress of the huge animals. Through the village they went, past the *kyoung* on its outskirts, and out into another track which they traversed until the jungle became too dense. Then the riders dismounted quickly, and, led by Cameron, hurried to an old pagoda. There they found an ancient Burman, toothless, wrinkled and bent, peacefully smoking his cheroot.

“Have you carried out the instructions of Po Se?” Cameron asked him sharply.

“My lord, I have,” he replied. “Follow me, and you will see that I have done all that was required of me.”

The old man led them to an open space near by, and pointed to five sturdy Burmese ponies tied to the trees. Native saddles were on all of them, but two had been adapted for ladies' use.

In a minute or so the fugitives were

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mounted, and riding quickly in single file along the narrow jungle path.

Just as the sun was setting they arrived at the rest-house where they had arranged to meet Tha Bu.

The worthy Burman was anxiously awaiting them. He led them at once to the ruins of a large pagoda, which he had hastily prepared for their accommodation, a small shrine having been set apart and arranged by Mah Shway O for the ladies.

Johnson saw to the ponies, and then helped Mah Shway O to prepare the tea. A huge fallen image of Gautama made an excellent table, and smaller ones were utilised as seats. The meal was by no means sumptuous, consisting only of tea, stale biscuits, and jam. Nevertheless, they enjoyed it, and for nearly two hours they sat there, after the sun had gone down, talking of their adventures in the past and their plans for the future. They might have talked the night through had not Cameron reminded them

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that they were still in danger, and that as they would have to make an early start in the morning, and be prepared for any emergency, they had better get a good rest while they had the chance.

Mah Noo rose at once, "Come along, Edith," she said, "Mr. Cameron is quite right. We ought to have been asleep an hour ago." And with a laughing "Good-night," the two friends made their way to the shrine which had been prepared for them.

They were both very tired, and Edith was soon asleep. But Mah Noo, weary though she was, had no notion of sleeping until she had satisfied her curiosity on a matter of absorbing interest, concerning which she had been all day longing for an opportunity to question her friend.

"Edith!" she whispered; and, receiving no answer from her sleepy companion, she repeated loudly, "Edith Clarence!"

Edith sat up startled, and only half awake.

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“What is it?” she cried, “Po Thaw! Oh!—where is he? Help! Mr. Cameron!”

Mah Noo laughed unfeelingly, and, putting her hand over her friend's mouth, made her lie down. “Don't be silly,” she said. “I am sorry I frightened you, but—you *are* in love with Mr. Cameron, then?”

“Why—how—why do you think so?” stammered Edith confusedly.

“Oh!” replied Mah Noo, “instinct, I suppose, my dear Edith—instinct; together, of course, with the fact that when you thought danger threatened, his name was first on your lips.”

“Go to sleep, Mah Noo,” said Edith, with mock severity, “and don't be impertinent.”

“But you *do* love him, Edith dear?” persisted Mah Noo persuasively. “Come now—confess!”

But Edith pretended to be asleep, and not another word could Mah Noo get from her.

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At an early hour the following morning, the fugitives mounted their ponies and continued their journey, Murray riding beside Mah Noo, while Cameron and Edith were in the rear.

“I’m glad we are alone, Mr. Murray,” Mah Noo declared, “because I have something very important to say to you.”

“What a coincidence!” Murray exclaimed. “I too have something very important to say to you.”

“But I am sure that what I have to say is by far the more important, so I’ll speak first.”

“Pardon my contradicting you, but I am quite certain that nothing can be more important than what I wish to say.”

“I want to speak of something that concerns the happiness of two people.”

“And so do I.”

“Then I believe we both want to talk about the same thing.”

“I hope sincerely that we do. Mah Noo, I love you, and——”

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“Oh, that’s not what I wanted to say,” she interrupted, with a nervous laugh.

“But still,” he continued eagerly, “there is no other subject so important to me. Mah Noo, I repeat that I love you, and that my greatest ambition is to make you my wife. If you can love me in return, and will promise to be my wife, I shall be the happiest man in the world. But if you cannot—if there is no hope for me—do not let your gratitude for anything I may have done to further your escape prevent your saying so. Whether you travel as my affianced bride or not, I will do my utmost to guard you from all danger. What is your answer?”

“What—what would your friends say to your marrying a black girl?” she asked quietly.

“Black!” he exclaimed indignantly. “Why, dearest, you know well enough that you are no darker than many English girls.”

“But I’m sure your friends and relations would object to your marrying me.”

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“They would do nothing of the kind. Nobody in his senses could do anything but congratulate and envy the man who married you. Come, dearest, say that you will be my wife.”

“I do not think I ought, but—but I do love you, and—and——”

“God bless you, my darling!” Murray said earnestly ; and, bending down, he kissed her.

Neither Cameron nor Edith noticed the action. But Johnson and Tha Bu did, and they grinned with delight.

“Seems to me, Tha Bu,” Johnson said, a few minutes later, “that I’m the only one of this party that can’t do any love-making. And it’s all through you too,” he continued. “If you hadn’t been so clever when that little Burmese girl wanted to marry me, I should have been a married man by this time.”

Tha Bu laughed scornfully. “The foolish girls did not love you,” he declared. “They

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were only anxious to obtain white husbands for a novelty, just as boys delight in capturing a white crow. You have too much affection in your constitution. I could judge that from your face directly I saw you."

"Oh, yes, you're deuced clever, no doubt. You'll tell me soon that you can judge a man's appetite by the size of his mouth." And Johnson strolled away.

After a few minutes' conversation of a particularly hopeful description, Murray, remembering his friends, said, "Now I must tell Cameron and Miss Clarence."

"Not yet," Mah Noo replied quickly. "I want to tell you first what I was about to say when—when you interrupted."

'Is it more important than what I had to say?' he asked with a smile.

"I'll leave that for you to decide. What I want to tell you is that I believe my friend Edith is in love with Mr. Cameron, and I should very much like to know whether you think he cares for her."

“ Well, he hasn’t told me so.”

“ Ah! but you nevertheless know that he does? ”

“ Well—I believe so. Anyhow, when he was down with fever, he was continually raving about her.”

“ That’s enough, then. But the poor girl herself foolishly imagines that he thinks no more of her than of any other woman.”

“ Oh, that’s absurd. Tell her I say so—no, no, don’t. I’ll tell Cameron of my good fortune, and then surely he’ll try at once to obtain similar happiness for himself.”

Scarcely had Murray spoken these words when a weird howl arose from the jungle near at hand.

“ What is that? ” he asked sharply, turning round in his saddle and addressing Tha Bu, who was calmly examining his revolver.

“ The dacoits’ signal for attack,” the guide replied, as firmly as he could.

Within a few moments a wild, evil-looking

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mob burst from the jungle, and, with shrill cries, instantly surrounded the fugitives.

Taken by surprise, in fierce desperation the Englishmen and Tha Bu emptied their revolvers into the merciless enemy. Every shot told, but the struggle was altogether hopeless. The dacoits were over a hundred strong, while the fugitives were but four men and three women. To their great surprise, the dacoits made no attempt to slay them, but contented themselves with shouting and brandishing their brightened *dahs*, which flashed in the sun quite dazzlingly.

Then Po Thaw appeared. He stood alone, firmly grasping his jewelled *dah*. Directly Mah Shway O saw him, she rushed at him with indescribable fury. But he was on the alert, and, warding off her blow, made a savage lunge at her with his *dah*, at which she fell severely wounded.

A cry of horror broke from the fugitives, and Tha Bu, mad with rage, dashed at the *bo*. His brave act was useless, however, for

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instantly he was struck to the ground by a dozen of the enemy. Seeing this, Johnson made a strenuous effort to get at Po Thaw; but before he had gone many yards he was borne to the ground and disarmed, though not without a fierce struggle with nearly a score of dacoits.

Cameron and Murray had reloaded their revolvers in the meantime, and were reserving their fire for the first person who dared to touch either Edith or Mah Noo.

Presently a loud voice was heard above the din.

“The white dogs are in my power,” exclaimed Po Thaw, “for they are but few, while my followers are many. If the vile strangers will surrender, no harm shall be done to the women; but if they dare to fight, the women shall be treated even as I have treated this woman”—pointing to the prostrate Mah Shway O as he spoke.

There was an ominous pause.

But if we promise to surrender,” Cameron

called out, after translating his words to Murray, "will you swear that you will not kill or torture these two ladies?"

"Yes, I will, for I am not likely to harm the women who are to be my wives. Ha! the white dog looks fierce! Did he want the women? Well, I will take the *kalas* back to the feeble Bah Wah, and see whose wives these women are to be."

"Don't surrender," Mah Noo whispered to Cameron. "Let us all die together."

"I cannot consent to that," Cameron replied. "We must cling to life as long as we possibly can with honour. Sooner or later this bloodthirsty robber is certain to be captured by our troops, and then we shall be set free."

"What is your answer?" Po Thaw asked impatiently. "Will you surrender and save the lives of yourselves and the women, or die here and let your bodies be eaten by the beasts of the jungle?"

Cameron again consulted Murray and

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Johnson. Murray agreed with Cameron that, under the circumstances, the best thing they could do would be to surrender. Johnson, however, was strongly in favour of fighting at all costs.

“We will surrender,” Cameron said to Po Thaw, “trusting to your promise not to kill us.”

“Throw down your arms, then,” the *bo* answered, with a smile of pleasure which he tried to conceal.

The Englishmen threw down their rifles and revolvers, which were seized at once by the enemy.

“Dismount!” Po Thaw commanded.

They hesitated and were unceremoniously pulled from their ponies. Johnson struggled violently, and, before his arms were tied behind him, managed to inflict a surprising amount of injury upon his persecutors. Cameron and Murray were also bound, and their ponies appropriated by some of the *bo*'s lieutenants.

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“ You are surely not going to leave those poor creatures behind,” Cameron exclaimed, as they moved off, leaving Tha Bu and Mah Shway O lying bleeding on the ground.

“ The dogs shall stay where they are,” Po Thaw declared. “ They should be thankful that their deaths are not full of agony.”

“ But that man is your countryman, and his religion is your religion.”

“ I have no religion, and fear the idle *phoongyees* no more than I fear you. Say no more about the half-dead dogs, for your words will only anger me and make me inflict further hurt upon them.”

When Johnson understood that Tha Bu and Mah Shway O were to be left alone to die, he became frantic. With a tremendous effort he expanded the huge muscles of his chest and arms, and snapped the turbans which bound him. Before the astounded dacoits could realise what had happened, he rushed at them. He was unarmed, but they fled in terror, convinced that he was a *nat*

in man's form. Po Thaw alone remained calm.

“Cowardly fools!” he shouted. “The *kala* dog is unarmed. Come back and seize him. Capture him alive; his death must be a lingering one.”

But the men heeded him not. Each was anxious to hide himself in the jungle.

Then Po Thaw commanded his scarred lieutenants, six in number, to seize Johnson. They were strong men, and each had won his rank by some act of personal bravery. Armed with heavy sticks, they made a combined rush on Johnson, who was running to and fro, searching for a *dah*.

The first blow aimed at him he skilfully avoided, and seized his assailant by the throat. With his disengaged hand he struck terrific blows at the others.

But the unequal struggle was soon over. A blow from behind sent Johnson senseless to the ground. In a moment the dacoit leaders pounced upon him, and shouted for

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ropes. They were soon forthcoming, and in a short time Johnson was securely bound, hand and foot.

Po Thaw was in a terrible rage, and, as soon as Johnson regained consciousness, abused him unmercifully. Johnson, however, ignored the *bo*. His thoughts were all of his friends lying wounded and uncared for. But Murray's blood boiled when he witnessed Po Thaw's cowardly conduct, and he denounced the *bo's* heartlessness in language which made the scoundrel wince. Po Thaw snatched up a stick and rushed at him. He dealt one blow, and then Mah Noo sprang forward and seized his uplifted arm.

"People have told me that you are a brave man," she said, looking him full in the face; "but now I know that you are nothing but a miserable coward, whose heart is like water with fear when he meets his foes. You boastfully say that you will be as mighty a warrior as Alompra; but Alompra was a brave man, and did not wait until his

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enemies were disarmed before he struck them. You would not have had the courage to strike the Englishman had he been able to defend himself."

"The words you have spoken are but words of foolishness," Po Thaw declared angrily. "I do not fear any man, be his skin white or brown. But why do you speak so well of the white *kala*? Do you love him? If so, your love must cease; for, as you know, I have decided to make you my wife. You think that because you have lived for a time in the Englishmen's little country across the sea, that you know all about the white *kalas*; but you do not. They are proud, cruel dogs, and only fit to be murdered and plundered."

"They are brave, noble men," Mah Noo declared stoutly, "and the sooner they have captured you and every other *bo*, the better it will be for our country."

CHAPTER XIV

THE END OF BAH WAH

WHEN Po Thaw arrived at Bah Wah's village, he shouted to Po Se, who came to meet him, "Dog, where is your master?"

"The Great Lord of Righteousness is in his palace," Po Se replied, with difficulty concealing his sorrow at seeing his English friends prisoners.

"Bring him to me at once, then."

"I will conduct you to the Golden Feet if you desire it. The Sovereign of the Whole World cannot come to his servant."

"You shall soon see that I am no servant of the feeble-minded Bah Wah. Bring him

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to me at once, or I'll strike your head from your shoulders with my *dah*."

Po Se smiled, and said—

"Supayalat wished to kill me ; Theebaw wished to kill me ; Bah Wah wished to kill me ; but they feared to raise their hands against me. The good king Mindoon hath said that I must never be killed. If kings dare not kill me I need not fear a base-born robber such as you."

"Seize the chattering dog," Po Thaw shouted to his men, "and punish him. Let his life be worse than death."

The prime minister was promptly seized and bound, and carried away for punishment. Then the *bo* proceeded to the palace where Bah Wah was seated on a throne, surrounded by his favourites. Evidently he had not heard of Po Thaw's arrival, for a look of terror came over him when he saw him.

"I am glad to see that the valiant Po Thaw has recovered so quickly from his

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wounds," he declared, with every semblance of earnestness. Instead of replying, Po Thaw roughly seized him by the hair and dragged him to the ground. The terrified Lord of the Celestial Elephant shouted loudly for help, but his courtiers, anxious for their safety, instantly bolted.

"Take him and guard him until I have decided how the miserable dog shall die," Po Thaw said to his men, who unceremoniously dragged Bah Wah away. Then the order to loot the village was given, and a scene of rapine and murder ensued too horrible to describe.

For more than an hour the terrible work continued; and finally, when the plunder had been removed to a place of safety, the village was set alight.

Mah Noo and the English prisoners had been forced to witness the carnage, and were now fully prepared to suffer a cruel death themselves. Bah Wah was terribly agitated, for he feared that Po Thaw would not let

The End of Bah Wah

him die the royal death of being sewn up in a red sack and thrown alive into the Irrawaddy.

“Po Thaw,” he exclaimed, “listen to my words. To ask you to spare my life would, I now know, be as useless as to expect a tiger to give up the child which he has seized near the village ; but I remind you that I am a descendant of the famous Alompra, and that it is not lawful to kill me except in the way which, by their deaths, so many Golden Footed princes have made glorious.”

“False dog!” Po Thaw answered, “were it not that the blood of the mighty warrior flows in your veins, I would cut you to pieces and throw you to the swine ; but out of respect for the Great King, whom I resemble more than you in bravery, you shall die the royal death. I cannot spare the time to take you to the river, but you shall return to the heavens in the lake close by.”

“Po Thaw, I thank you ; and when you fall into the hands of the servants of the

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Great White Queen, may they be as merciful to you as you have been to me."

"Hearken unto my words, Po Thaw," Cameron joined in, "and remember that the punishment of a judge who judges iniquitously, and decides falsely, shall be greater than though he had slain one thousand women, one hundred priests, or one thousand horses. Bah Wah is in no way to blame for the escape of our countrywoman and Mah Noo. I and my two friends are to blame, and if anyone is to be punished it should be we and not Bah Wah."

"Bah Wah shall be punished, and you also," the *bo* declared. "But as for the women, they shall be my wives, and I will do to them whatever seemeth best to me."

"If you force them to be your wives your punishment shall be very severe when our soldiers capture you. You have many men with you; but there are some among them who are sick of fighting against women and children, and would rejoice if you were cap-

The End of Bah Wah

tured ; for my countrymen would permit them to return to their paddy fields and live in peace. Perhaps some of them will tell the English chiefs how you deal with these two women. If you treat them well, some of your crimes may be forgiven ; but if you compel them to be your wives your punishment will be indeed heavy. Think of my words, Po Thaw, for you cannot fight the English much longer, and before many weeks have passed you will be a *bo* no more."

"The white *kala* talks as if he were a wizard ; but I laugh at his words, and spit at him."

"I am no wizard, but the words I speak are nevertheless true."

"Some day I shall know whether or not they were true, but long before that day arrives you and your companions will be dead and forgotten. Now you shall see the weak-minded Bah Wah die ; but do not imagine the death in store for you will be such an easy one."

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Bah Wah and the three Englishmen were then marched to the lake, surrounded by a large crowd. Bah Wah was in excellent spirits, smoking his cheroot and cracking jokes freely with his guard. To die the royal death was evidently the height of happiness to him. When they reached the water a large red sack was produced, and Bah Wah, the cheroot still in his mouth, entered it and squatted down without the slightest hesitation. The top of the sack was quickly sewn up, and without any delay it was lifted by a number of men and pitched into the lake. It sank at once, and was not seen again.

When Cameron and Murray were marched back to the ruined village, they were alarmed to find that Edith and Mah Noo were not where they had left them. Their fears were soon quieted, however, by hearing from a sympathetic Burmese woman that they had been removed to the palace, which had not been destroyed, where they were to occupy Mah Noo's apartments.

The End of Bah Wah

Shortly before sunset, Cameron, Murray, and Johnson were tied hand and foot, and compelled to pass the night in the open. Their custodians sat quietly in a circle around them, the red burning end of their large cheroots alone being visible to the prisoners. Occasionally the Englishmen would speak a few words, but it was an expensive luxury, for every time they spoke their guards struck them with their long canes.

To the prisoners the night appeared terribly long, and daybreak had never been so welcome, albeit they knew that in all probability it was the last morn they would ever see.

No breakfast was given them, and as they lay, hungry and dispirited, they heard the sound of many carpenters at work.

Cameron lifted his head, and glanced towards the workmen. The colour left his cheeks; his eyes filled with a glare of horror.

“Heaven help us!” he gasped. “The fiends are going to crucify us!”

CHAPTER XV

MAH NOO'S APPEAL

NEITHER Murray nor Johnson uttered a word, but their cheeks blanched and the perspiration poured from their faces when they saw the preparations for their crucifixion. The dacoits, seeing that they understood what was to be their fate, jeered at them and gave graphic illustrations of the tortures they were to endure. Unfortunately the scoundrels had plenty of time to devote to their fiendish amusements, as it was not until the sun was getting high in the heavens, and began to pour down mercilessly on the doomed men, that Po Thaw and his officers appeared on the scene.

Mah Noo's Appeal

"Have the *kalas* passed a peaceful night?" Po Thaw asked mockingly, and as no reply was forthcoming, added with a brutal laugh, "Well, to-night you shall sleep very soundly. Ten thousand mosquitos and a hundred jackals will be powerless to disturb you."

Cameron interpreted what Po Thaw said, but Murray and Johnson agreed with him that it was useless to reply. That maddened Po Thaw, and he ordered his men to sharpen their *dahs*. They obeyed him promptly, laughing the whole of the time.

"Do the white dogs know why my brave warriors are sharpening their weapons?" Po Thaw asked, later.

"To torture their defenceless prisoners," Cameron replied, without a moment's hesitation.

"The *kala* has spoken the words of truth. My warriors are sharpening their *dahs* so that they may be able to wound the white dogs as they hang helpless on the wooden

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crosses. The wounds my warriors will make will not be deep enough to kill, but they will be very painful. But if the *kalas* will do as I bid them they shall not die this awful death, but shall be set free. Let them advise Mah Noo and the white girl to be my wives, and if their advice be taken, I will swear to convey the Englishmen in safety to their nearest fort."

"We would rather die the most horrible death you could devise than urge either of the women to become the wife of such a brutal man as you," Cameron declared.

"The words you speak are but your own words," Po Thaw shouted fiercely. "Tell your companions what I have said to you and let me know their reply."

"Po Thaw promises to spare our lives and escort us in safety to the nearest fort if we can induce Miss Clarence and Mah Noo to consent to become his wives," Cameron said to Murray and Johnson. "But if we refuse to urge them to do so

he will add other tortures to our crucifixion. What do you say?"

"I for one will never think of accepting life on such conditions," Murray declared emphatically. "Mah Noo has promised to be my wife, and while there is life in my body I will never give her up."

"If the ladies marry Po Thaw," said Johnson, "they will be miserable for the whole of their lives. Our pain will soon be over."

"Quite true, Johnson," Cameron said, "our agony will be great, but it will be brief—to-day pain, to-morrow peace, while life for Miss Clarence and Mah Noo would be simply a living death with such a man as Po Thaw. He may compel them to become his wives, but do not let us be a party to their misery."

"White dogs," Po Thaw hissed, "I have understood most of your words, although spoken in your own tongue, and I know that you prefer to die. Therefore you shall

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die, and all the torments of the hot and cold hells shall not be more dreadful than those you are about to undergo."

"Crucify the dogs!" he shouted to his men, who eagerly rushed to obey his command. They seized the Englishmen and roughly dragged them towards the crosses, which were now ready for the victims. They were not of the same shape as the one on which our Saviour suffered, but were square frames with beams from the top corners to the opposite bottom ones. Johnson was selected as the first to suffer. Not a word of reproach or supplication escaped him. He was determined to let Po Thaw see how an Englishman could die. But just as he was being forced against the cross, Mah Noo and Edith Clarence excitedly pushed their way through the crowd and boldly faced Po Thaw.

"Wretched man!" Mah Noo exclaimed, "you are basely going to take the lives of men whom you induced to surrender under

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false pretences. You know, and so do your followers, that you promised to save the white men's lives if they surrendered. Now, Po Thaw! vile slayer of defenceless women and unarmed men, the words I am about to utter are no idle ones, such as vain boasters as yourself speak, but words which express the true and unalterable determination of the Englishwoman and myself. You say that we are to be your wives, but how would you like to wed dead women? If these white men die by your orders, then shall we die also. You may take away from us everything with which you imagine we can harm ourselves, but still we shall be able to put an end to our existence. A frog never having seen the sea deems it no larger than the water in the well where he dwells, and you, who have not seen England, think in your ignorance that it is but little mightier than Burma. But I assure you that the knowledge of the English is so great that if all the wisdom of our *phoongyees* and wizards

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was possessed by one Burman, he would still be an ignorant child compared with an English *phoongyee*. I learned many things during the years I was in England, and one was, how to kill myself without any weapon or drug. If you kill the Englishmen, then will the white woman and I kill ourselves. And remember this, Po Thaw; if I die you will have been the cause of my death—you will have slain a descendant of the immortal Alompra.”

Then she turned to the crowd, which had listened in amazement to her bold words.

“Hearken to me, my countrymen,” she said in a loud voice. “These white strangers have done you no harm. They are not soldiers, but simply travellers who have come to see the glorious land of our forefathers. Yet they are to die an infamous death by the order of Po Thaw—who thinks less of taking a human life than a good Buddhist does of killing a mosquito. I have travelled in the land of these white

men, and everywhere I went I was treated with great kindness. I have lived in their big cities and small villages; in their sea-ports and up-country towns, but never once have I been ill-treated. Countrymen, you know that I am a descendant of the mighty Alompra, who did more for our beloved country than any other man. There is no need for me to relate his noble deeds, for they were told to you when you were little children sitting astride on your mothers' hips; but I ask you now to show that you honour his memory by granting the wish of one in whose veins his blood flows. All I ask is that the lives of these Englishmen may be spared. Urge Po Thaw to grant my desire, and if he is at heart a true Burman he cannot refuse you. If these white men wanted to plunder our country, to destroy our pagodas or insult the Buddhist religion, I would not ask for their lives to be spared one moment; but they wish to do none of these things. They

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are simply travelling peacefully through our country, as I travelled through theirs. Their countrymen treated me kindly, and I will not believe that you will repay the hospitality shown to Alompra's descendant by killing men from the country that showed her that kindness. As I have told Po Thaw, if these men die, I die also, and he will be the cause of my death."

Mah Noo's speech created a profound sensation. The dacoits applauded her warmly, but none had the courage to imitate her boldness of speech and demand that her wish should be granted. Po Thaw, however, was quick to note the impression Mah Noo's speech had made upon his followers, and acted accordingly.

"For the sake of Mah Noo's famous ancestor," he said, "and because of the kindness shown to her in the *kala's* country, I will grant her request. The Englishmen shall not be killed."

The prisoners could scarcely believe that

Po Thaw meant what he said. Even Mah Noo was astonished, but she soon determined to strike the iron while it was hot.

“Po Thaw,” she said, “I thank you from my heart. Good deeds are always a source of great happiness to the performers, and you will derive far more satisfaction from the recollection of this one good act than from your many deeds of violence. Add therefore to your happiness, and to the merit of your act of mercy, by setting the Englishmen free and letting them depart uninjured.”

“I will consider your words,” Po Thaw replied, “and will tell you, later, my decision. Now go back to the palace and take the white woman with you, for the sight of your sweet faces makes my thoughts wander from my warlike plans.”

So Mah Noo and Edith Clarence, fearing to awaken Po Thaw's anger by disobeying him, immediately returned to the palace.

Po Thaw watched the two girls until they were lost to sight. Then he turned

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to the Englishmen, his face distorted with rage.

“Vile dogs,” he hissed, “I have spared your lives, but in the days to come you will curse me for having done so, for I have reserved you for a life that is a living death.”

A few moments later Po Thaw, at the head of some fifty dacoits, marched with his prisoners into the jungle. In about half an hour they arrived at a small village at the foot of a hill.

“This is to be your home, dogs,” Po Thaw declared to the Englishmen, who at first thought the place was deserted. But the noise made by the new arrivals aroused the inhabitants, who came crawling from their squalid huts in every stage of the most hideous disease that the world knows. It was a leper village!

The Englishmen understood Po Thaw's threat now. They were to be confined in this village of slow-coming death and see, day by day, the afflicted inhabitants dragging

through their weary lives. "But how will they keep us here?" was a question they asked themselves. It was answered in a way they little expected. Among the crowd of lepers who had come forth to see the strangers were three women, hideous objects, but yet in all probability with many years of life before them. Po Thaw commanded them to advance, and then turning to the English prisoners said, "I have taken from you the women you desired, to be my wives, but in their stead I give you these three women. When you marry a woman from your own country you are joined together by one ring, but to these women you shall be joined by many rings."

His followers immediately produced three stout chains and six padlocks.

Directly Cameron saw the chains he guessed the truth. "Struggle for your lives!" he shouted excitedly to Murray and Johnson. "The fiends are going to chain us to the lepers."

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They did struggle violently, but with their hands tied tightly to their sides they could not offer any effectual resistance. In a few minutes they were overcome, and the chains placed round their right wrists and padlocked. Then the other ends of the chains were attached in a similar manner to the left wrists of the lepers, leaving only about two feet of chain between the diseased and untainted. For a few moments the Englishmen strove frantically to tear the chains from their wrists, but their efforts were of course futile, and served only to amuse the dacoits.

“Now that I have given you each a wife,” said Po Thaw, “I will return to the white woman and her friend to make them my wives. When I have driven all the white *kalas* into the sea I will return and see how happy you are.”

Without another word Po Thaw walked quickly out of the village followed by his men, who considered the punishment

meted out to the Englishmen an excellent joke.

Po Thaw made his way at once to the palace, where he found Edith and Mah Noo sitting in the verandah, evidently very miserable.

“Maidens,” he said to them, “for you I did what I would not do for anyone else, no, not for King Theebaw if he came back to his country and commanded me to do it. I have spared the lives of the two Englishmen, and now I ask for my reward.”

“Where are the Englishmen?” Mah Noo asked anxiously.

“In safety. I escorted them some distance through the jungle and then set them free. They are going to hurry back to their own country.”

“They did not tell you so, Po Thaw.”

“If you were a man you would not have dared to say that.”

“I would have dared to say much more than that; I would have said, as I say now,

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that the words you have spoken about the Englishmen returning to their country are not true."

"Silence, Mah Noo! I do not wish to speak angry words to you now; the time for them will be after we are married. For a few days I can remain here in idleness, and no better time could be found for my marrying you and the white-skinned woman. To-day I will send out the packets of pickled tea¹ and to-morrow we shall be married. Tell your companion the words I have said."

"There is no need for me to tell her, for we have both decided that it would be far better to die than become your wives. If you call together the people to witness our marriage I will declare before them all that I and the Englishwoman loathe you and refuse to marry you."

"Foolish maiden, do you not yet know

¹ The invitation to a Burmese wedding consists of a packet of pickled tea.

the power of Po Thaw? Look from the verandah and see the ruins of the houses destroyed by fire. I commanded, and all that was done. My power is great, and I could compel you to be my wife."

"Yes, Po Thaw, I know that you could, but the news that you had compelled a defenceless woman who did not love you—a woman who was the promised wife of another man—to marry you, would spread throughout the length and breadth of the country. In every village that you appeared the *phoongyees* would invert their collecting-bowls,¹ and the people who are now your friends would fear your approach more than any village you had threatened."

"The *phoongyees*," Po Thaw answered

¹ When the inhabitants of a village repeatedly violate any of the commandments of Buddha or live unlawful lives, the *phoongyees* invert their collecting bowls and refuse to make their daily rounds. To the credit of the people it must be said that whenever this sign of monastic displeasure is displayed they strive their utmost to mend their ways.

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angrily, "are a pack of cowards, and I fear them no more than if they were a gang of thin-legged Hindoo coolies. If they loved idleness less and their country more they would stir the people up to revolt against the *kalas* and help me drive them into the sea. Mah Noo, you are as dear to me as unexpected sight to the eyes of a blind man, and it is because I love you far better than any other woman that I will tell you my hopes for the future. You believe me to be nothing but a robber whose bowels of compassion are dried up, and whose chief delight is to see his *dah* dripping with blood; but I declare—and if I am not speaking the truth may all the curses contained in the book of curses have effect upon me—that this dacoity is simply to disguise my real plans for driving the *kalas* out of the land. In every large town in Upper and Lower Burma there are several of my trusted men preparing for the great rebellion. I have many hundreds of supporters, and at a certain

Mah Noo's Appeal

date they will rise together and kill every European they can find. Then I will place myself at the head of my countrymen and drive every *kala* out of the country. Afterwards I will declare myself King of Burma, and with the riches taken from the white merchants of Rangoon I will build a palace more glorious than the one at Mandalay. And you, Mah Noo, shall be my superior wife. The white-skinned maiden shall wait on us at meals and be my inferior wife. For my brave deeds I shall be loved by the people, and for the blood of Alompra which flows in your veins you will be thought a queen worthy of me. We will rule wisely, and our land shall become as great and as famous as China."

"It is not by such means as you talk of that our country shall become famous," Mah Noo declared. "For long years blood has flown too freely in our land, and the rich soil in many parts is laying idle because there are none to cultivate it. Peace is what our

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country needs more than anything, so that the people may be encouraged to till the land, knowing that where they have sown they shall reap. If the hands that now wield the *dah* were to grasp the implements of agriculture instead, Burma might become famous. But to talk of driving the English from the country is simply foolishness, for you can no more do it than you can drive the sun from the heavens. From the mighty Irrawaddy to the Chindwin there are but a few English forts, and in each fort there are only forty or fifty men commanded by young officers; yet you cannot capture them, and with your hundreds of men fear to attack the white men except when they are marching through the jungle. You do not know what the English army is, but I do. You saw some of it when the victorious troops entered Mandalay and all our countrymen, sad-hearted and hating the conquerors, cried out with delight when they saw the Englishmen marching in short straight lines along

the dusty road, their feet touching the ground together. And, perhaps, if you had not already left the city, you heard their chief call out to them and the short lines became long lines almost before you knew it. Those brave soldiers could have destroyed the town and everybody in it, but as you know they did not harm any but those they caught fighting them. They could have taken away all the riches of the city, but they did not, and Mandalay has become, in the few months it has been under the British rule, a place of which every Burman may well be proud. But the men who captured Mandalay and took away the woman-ruled Theebaw were a very small portion of the English army. If the men of Lower Burma should foolishly revolt, which I do not believe at all likely, and were to join their forces with yours, Roberts, the great English war chief, would send thousands of his quick-marching soldiers from India. And if they were not enough

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he would send a message by the magic wires to Wolseley, the other great war chief—whose blood flowed when the English captured Rangoon many years ago. He would send out from England thousands more men in great fire-boats. Believe me, Po Thaw, to think of attempting to drive the English from the country is utter foolishness.”

“Your stay in the land of the English dogs has made you despise your countryman,” Po Thaw declared somewhat dejectedly.

“It has not, but I do not wish to see hundreds of my countrymen killed in the hopeless attempt to gratify your ambition.”

“In spite of your words I will free my country from the power of the *kalas*, and when you are the queen of a large and prosperous country you will thank me for my bravery.”

“I have already told you that I will never willingly become your wife.”

“Willingly or unwillingly it is all the same

to me so long as you do." Then he turned to Edith and told her in the best English he could muster that on the following day she was to become his wife. For a few moments she stood speechless with horror and indignation. Then she found relief in an outburst of tears. Po Thaw sat down opposite to her and laughed at her piteous weeping.

"Leave us this moment," Mah Noo exclaimed fiercely, her eyes ablaze with anger, "or you shall see that the spirit of Alompra lives within me."

And as she spoke she picked up his *dah* and waved it perilously near to his head. He rose quickly and departed unceremoniously without his weapon.

Then Mah Noo, herself in terribly low spirits, endeavoured to cheer up Edith, but with little success.

About half an hour later there was tremendous excitement among the dacoits. Po Thaw was shouting orders in an un-

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usually agitated manner, and roundly abusing his men for not executing them more expeditiously. Mah Noo soon discovered that the dacoits were immediately to quit the ruined village, but whether they were intent on another raid or feared an attack themselves, she knew not.

“Do not let ourselves be seen,” she said to Edith, “and perhaps we shall be forgotten in the excitement.”

But no such good fortune was in store for them. In a few minutes they were sought out, hurriedly placed in two doolies, and carried quickly away, Po Thaw and four of his men accompanying them.

“Where are you taking us?” Mah Noo asked imperiously.

“To a place of safety,” Po Thaw replied, “for I am determined that, even if I die in battle, neither of you shall become the wife of a white man.”

Mah Noo made no reply, but her heart sank within her.

CHAPTER XVI

THE GRATITUDE OF PO SE

FOR some time after Po Thaw had quitted the leper village, the Englishmen stood staring with horror at the poor afflicted women to whom they were chained. Around them too were gathered nearly all the inhabitants of the village. Old men and women with long, snowy-white hair, and merry little children already slightly disfigured, moved about among a crowd of more hideous objects, who either crawled on elbows and knees or walked on crutches. And many of these doomed, socially dead, beings, joked in husky voices about the Englishmen's plight.

‘Murray, old fellow, I shall go mad

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soon," Cameron declared excitedly, as he moved as far away as possible from the woman to whom he was chained.

"No, no, you won't," Murray replied; "keep as calm as you can and perhaps we shall be able to think of some means of escape. We are not in such a plight as we might have been."

"I can't imagine a more horrible one."

"We might have been put in a prison with these poor creatures. As it is we have only to remove these chains to be free."

"Only!"

"Ask the crowd if anyone in the place has a file to lend us."

Cameron did so. An old man promptly replied, "We have not what the white lord desires. Even if we had we should not dare to lend it. Po Thaw would burn us alive if we did. Four men who had lived here for many years displeased the great *bo*, so he tied them together, poured kerosene over them, and then set them alight. Our lives

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are not happy ones, but we would rather linger on, slowly dying, than be burned to death."

"There is no hope of our being set free by these poor creatures," Cameron declared to Murray.

"Then we must free ourselves without their assistance," Murray replied. But how to do this was a subject which the Englishmen discussed for an hour or two without coming to any satisfactory decision. The crowd, having gratified its curiosity, had left them. Only two or three children, who now and again stopped short in the middle of their play to stare at them, were near. An exclamation of terror from one of the children, and the immediate flight of all of them, aroused the Englishmen from their gloomy thoughts.

Looking round they beheld Po Se, mounted on his slave's shoulders, approaching. Two men followed him.

"My lords!" Po Se exclaimed, as he dis-

mounted. "I neither forget my friends nor my enemies. My life was in your hands and you were merciful; therefore will I repay your kindness and at the same time annoy the base-born dog Po Thaw."

At a sign from Po Se the two Burmans, who were sitting at a respectful distance, advanced. Each had a large file. Po Se took a third from his pocket, and seizing in the middle the chain which bound Cameron commenced to file through it. His men in a similar way worked at the chains on Murray and Johnson. It was slow work, but Po Se and his men stuck to it with determination, and at last the three Englishmen were free. The women unconcernedly hobbled away to their huts.

Cameron, Murray, and Johnson were overcome with gratitude to their deliverers and thanked them again and again.

"Your thanks are very pleasing to my ears," Po Se declared, "but, nevertheless, I must not listen to them any longer, for it

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is dangerous to linger here. We must hurry away at once."

Without another word he clambered on to his slave's shoulders and started off at a trot. The Englishmen followed, the chains dangling from their wrists. When they had proceeded some distance, Cameron asked Po Se a question which had been on the tip of his tongue from the moment his deliverer appeared: "How is it that you are uninjured? Did Po Thaw pardon you?" Po Se laughed merrily. "The dog, in spite of his brave words before the English lords, feared to punish me," he declared. "While the village was being looted, Po Thaw came to see me tortured. I said to him, 'Po Thaw, hearken to my words! I appear to be a healthy man, but I am not. Seven famous Burmese doctors and one English soldier-doctor told me so. Our doctors consulted my horoscope; the Englishman examined my skin. All of them said that if I ever received any bodily pain, I should drop

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down dead. Therefore, Po Thaw, I warn you to be very careful what you do to me. If you harm me, I shall die at once, and you will be for ever hated by our countrymen for daring to disregard what the good King Mindoon said concerning me. King Mindoon said that I was not to be killed in certain ways; and even you, Po Thaw, should respect his command.' Well, my lords, Po Thaw was not very angry at my words. 'You must have bewitched Mindoon for him to have given you that patent,' he said, 'and if I do not send you away, you will bewitch me. Leave this place at once and never let me see your face again.' My lords, I was well pleased, and hurried away as speedily as possible. But my quick-footed man had not carried me a mile when we met a messenger hurrying towards the village. He knew me and delivered into my hand a letter from my brother at Mandalay. My heart was glad when I read it, for my brother said that the Great White

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Queen was determined to put a stop to the horrible doings of the dacoits, and had commanded a large body of her white soldiers to kill or capture Po Thaw as speedily as possible. When my brother wrote, the white soldiers had just left Mandalay."

The three Englishmen grew quite excited over this splendid piece of good news.

"Where is the messenger?" Cameron asked eagerly. "I want to question him myself."

"By now, my lord," Po Se answered, "he is many miles away. I sent him back at once with a message to the English chief. I told him to say that Po Thaw was going to crucify three Englishmen and marry an English lady against her wish. I begged the English chief to hurry on quickly and prevent Po Thaw from doing these vile things."

"He will do his best, but he may be too late. Can't we do something, Po Se, to

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prevent Po Thaw from forcing the ladies to marry him? It is simply maddening to think that we are doing nothing to rescue Miss Clarence and Mah Noo from the scoundrel's clutches."

"Do not let that thought trouble you, my lord. The ladies are safe! Po Thaw has postponed his wedding. He has heard of the English soldiers' advance, and is now busy preparing to fight them. He declares that he will soon destroy them, and that his victory will be celebrated by his marrying the two ladies. But the vile dog is boastful. He may marry again, but not in his present existence. Before many weeks have passed he will be as helpless as a babe in the jaws of a tiger."

"But where are the ladies now?" Cameron persisted.

"That, my lord, I do not know. Po Thaw has removed them to some place where they will remain in safety until the fighting is finished. When the white soldiers

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have defeated the dacoits it will not be difficult to discover where the ladies are hidden. Many of Po Thaw's men will readily help the soldiers to find the ladies, in the hope that for so doing they will be forgiven their crimes."

The knowledge that Edith Clarence and Mah Noo were safe, for a time at any rate, cheered the Englishmen greatly. They marched on in high spirits. Presently Cameron said to Po Se, "How did you hear of our awful plight?"

"When I had dismissed my brother's messenger," Po Se replied, "I hurried back to Bah Wah's village in the hope that I might get your crucifixion postponed. Alas! I could think of no way of doing what I wished. Hidden in the jungle, I gazed sadly at you, my heart aching because I could not rescue you. Then I saw the beautiful Mah Noo push through the crowd, and heard with pride the noble words she said. But I knew well enough that Po Thaw only

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spared your lives for something worse than death. So when he marched you away, I followed cautiously and saw him take you to the leper village. When I saw how he intended to punish you, I rode back to the ruined village and told these two men, who have made and severed many chains for me, to come and set you free. They did, and Po Thaw's vile intentions have been completely upset."

"They have indeed," Cameron said, "and we shall remember you with gratitude as long as we live. You have nobly repaid the small service we rendered you."

Murray and Johnson heartily agreed with all that Cameron said.

Po Se was delighted at the Englishmen's praise, and made no attempt to conceal his pleasure. He became very talkative, and the time passed pleasantly away. At last they arrived at a spot where two jungle paths met. "My lord," said Po Se to Cameron, "whither do you wish to go? This path

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leads to the Moo, the one to the left to the Chindwin."

"We wish to go to the Chindwin," Cameron replied.

"Then, my lord, we must part here. Take these files, and when you are in a safe place remove the chains from your wrists. And do not forget as you travel along to proceed cautiously. Look to the right and to the left, in front of you and behind you. One should never believe there is no enemy about because he cannot easily see him."

Cameron thanked Po Se for his gift and advice. Then he said, "By the by, Po Se, sha'n't we pass somewhere near the Sunrise Pagoda?"

"Yes; the white lords will pass a few miles to the left of it."

"We should much like to see it. Can you direct us to it?"

"I can, my lord."

Po Se's directions were numerous and complicated, but the Englishmen thanked

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him and parted with the ex-prime minister in good spirits. The end of their long and dangerous journey seemed close at hand. This, however, was the first time that they had traversed the jungle without a guide. They missed Tha Bu terribly. In less than an hour after parting with Po Se they arrived at the uncomfortable conclusion that they had lost their way completely. They trudged on, however, hoping, sooner or later, to strike a path. It was a weary journey, and the travellers were just beginning to get somewhat dispirited when they heard the neighing of a horse. Immediately they hid themselves, and watched to see who would pass by, but no one came along. So they crept forward in the direction from which the sound came.

“Look!” Johnson exclaimed softly. Peeping through the undergrowth in the direction he pointed, they saw a Chinaman seated on the ground eating rice with great relish. Near to him was his pony, tethered to a tree.

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They watched him for some time with interest. When at last they felt assured that he was alone, they stepped forward and confronted him. But the Chinaman did not appear particularly surprised to see them. He pointed with his chopsticks to the chains, and smilingly asked, "What for got bracelets?"

"First tell me who you are, and where you are going," Cameron commanded sharply.

"Me am a merchant. Now me on my way to the Chindwin."

"How is it that you have not been robbed by Po Thaw?"

"Me have been robbed by him last year. This year me say, no be caught and robbed again, me will hide in the day and travel in the night."

Cameron looked close into his face, for he had a suspicion that the Chinaman was Po Thaw himself in disguise, but a close scrutiny of his features dispelled that idea, and he

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asked him, "Can you remove the chains from our arms?"

"If can do, may keep chains?"

"Certainly."

"And files?"

"Yes."

The Chinaman set to work at once. It was a long job and darkness enveloped them before it was finished.

"Do you know the Sunrise Pagoda?" Cameron asked the Chinaman, after they had partaken of some tea which he had brewed.

"Yes. What for ask?"

"Will you lead us to it?"

The Chinaman eyed them doubtfully for a few moments. Their clothes were almost in rags, and the travellers had not the appearance of prosperous Englishmen. Nevertheless, the Chinaman said, "If can pay, then can do."

"We have no money with us, but when we get back to Rangoon we will pay you

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handsomely. I am Mr. Cameron, the rice merchant."

"Can do," the Chinaman promptly declared, regarding Cameron with considerable awe. He untethered his pony and suggested an immediate advance.

"Before we start," said Cameron, "you must take an oath that you will lead us to where we wish to go, and not deliver us into the hands of Po Thaw or any other dacoit."

The Chinaman expressed his perfect willingness to take the oath at once. Cameron therefore gave him a small, square piece of paper to hold and lit it with a match. As it burned the Chinaman repeated, "I swear, before heaven and the spirits of the universe, that I will to the best of my ability lead you in safety to the Sunrise Pagoda. Should I not do so, may I disappear, as this paper disappears, by fire."

All night they trudged through the solitary jungle, but the time passed pleasantly, for the

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Chinaman, who was born in Rangoon, and had never seen the Flowery Land, was a very entertaining man. He related, in quaint language, gruesome tales of native superstition and charming little love stories which always ended happily. He declared, with pride, that his little Burmese wife was the sweetest woman in the world, and that his ten-year-old son was the best kite-flyer in Rangoon.

Soon after daylight they reached the Sunrise Pagoda, which stood almost on the brink of a precipice. It was a small and very insignificant copy of the great Shway Dagon, and although not in good repair it was not nearly such a ruin as many pagodas the travellers had seen. Weeds grew in profusion on the shrine and even on the spire, but the little bells tinkled pleasantly, and the faded flowers on the altar showed that it was still frequented by good Buddhists.

“How long English gentlemen stay

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here?" the Chinaman asked, soon after their arrival at their long-sought destination.

"Several days," Cameron replied.

"No can stay," the Chinaman said, alluding to himself, and immediately asked Cameron for a written promise to reward him on his return to Rangoon.

Cameron gave it at once, and a few minutes later the Chinaman departed.

The travellers were very pleased indeed to get rid of him, being eager to commence their search for the treasure. When they were satisfied that he had ridden away they set to work in earnest. The distance mentioned by the Rangoon *phoongyee*—seventy yards from the centre of the altar—was measured by strides, but although they searched diligently for nearly an hour they saw nothing of the slab. They were just beginning to wonder whether the *phoongyee* had been deceived by his nephew when Murray, raking about under a bush, struck something hard beneath the soil.

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“ Hurrah ! ” he shouted, “ I believe I ’ ve found it . ”

Cameron and Johnson ran to him at once, but before they had time to ascertain if they really had discovered the entrance to the treasure cave they heard a voice they knew only too well.

“ Make for the thicket , ” Murray whispered, and all three of them ran quickly across the open space which lay between them and cover. The branches they had hurriedly pushed aside had scarcely ceased to quiver when Po Thaw and four of his followers marched out of the jungle.

CHAPTER XVII

A RACE FOR LIFE

PO THAW was evidently not in an amiable mood. His men, some yards in rear of him, watched him anxiously, apparently fearing some outburst of temper which might prove fatal to them. Cameron, Murray, and Johnson, from their hiding-place, also watched him with considerable anxiety. They were convinced that he was, like them, in search of the hidden treasure, and fully expected him to make a thorough search for the entrance to the cave. But, to their great relief, they soon saw that he had no immediate intention of so doing. He sank wearily to the ground, commanding his men to keep watch while he slept. For fully a quarter of an hour not a word was spoken. Po Thaw's

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men smoked their cheroots with evident enjoyment, and seemed at peace with the whole world. But suddenly they crept silently away from their leader, and nearer to the Englishmen. Then they looked anxiously at Po Thaw to see if their movements had disturbed him. But the *bo* was still as before. After a few moments' complete silence one of the dacoits said to his companions: "He sleeps! Now let us speak the things we have in our minds. For many months we have followed Po Thaw from village to village, burning them to the ground and killing our countrymen. For these things, as the *phoongyees* told us when we were boys, we shall have to suffer dreadful torments in the hell to which we will be sent before we can live again. From that punishment we cannot escape, but why make the lives we now live miserable to please Po Thaw? When he urged us to leave our village and follow him he promised that we

should soon obtain so much wealth that each of us would be rich enough to build a pagoda. Where is that wealth now? It has not been in my hands. It has not been in yours. If we ask him where is the wealth he will kill us, and the share that is due to us will be his. Better for us if we had never seen his stern face, and had stayed at home to cultivate our fields. But words will not alter the things that are done. What shall we do in the future?"

"What can we do?" said another. "If we secretly leave him he will search for us, and when he has found us our deaths will be the most horrible he can invent. When he urged me to leave my wife and children he swore that we should drive the white *kalas* from the land, and bring back to Mandalay the Lord of Many White Elephants. But that we have not done. The white men we have fought have been very few, but few as they were we could not drive them away. They fear us no more than we fear the thin-legged Hindoos."

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“We have killed one hundred of our countrymen for every white man we have slain,” declared the third dacoit, “and I am weary of making our women widows, and their children fatherless. Po Thaw has not kept his promise to us, therefore why should we any longer obey him?”

“I will not obey him,” the fourth dacoit answered, “for after all he is not a mighty warrior. He declares that he is as mighty as Alompra, but a pariah dog might as truthfully claim to be as powerful as an elephant. And why does he persecute the sweet Mah Noo? She does not wish to be his wife, and her wish should be respected. We should be better men if we served Mah Noo instead of Po Thaw. The good deeds which Mah Noo did among Bah Wah’s people are well known to us, and will assuredly secure her a place in the highest heavens. Moreover, she spoke before us all words about Po Thaw which we had long thought but feared to utter. It was brave of her, but she will be made to

suffer for it, and so, too, the white woman. Cannot we rescue them?"

"I will willingly risk my life for them," said the third speaker. "Let us now leave Po Thaw and hurry towards the soldiers of the Great White Queen. If we appear near their terrible little fort with no weapons in our hands no harm will come to us, for the English lords never fight unarmed men. It is foolishness, but it is a very good thing for us. And when the white lords admit us to their presence we will tell them about the white woman that Po Thaw holds a prisoner. Then they will march forward to the white woman's rescue, and we will also guide them to Po Thaw. They will kill him, and we shall be able to return to our villages in peace, and in cultivating our land and in instructing our sons forget all the horrible things we have seen and done while we followed Po Thaw."

"The words you have uttered are not all words of wisdom," said the man who had

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first spoken. "I have one thing to say to you. The white lords have offered to give Rs5000 to any one who brings to them Po Thaw's head. Po Thaw owes us much money; why, therefore, should we not sever his head from his body and obtain the money the white lords offer? We should each become rich enough to build a pagoda, and be able to live happily, knowing that Po Thaw could no longer injure us."

For a minute or two there was complete silence. The dacoits evidently considered that the suggestion of their comrade would be a terribly risky one to carry out. They gazed at Po Thaw's muscular form and then looked uneasily away.

"Are not my words pleasing to you?" asked the man who suggested killing Po Thaw.

"They are pleasing," one of the others declared quickly, "but how shall we obtain his head? Po Thaw is very strong."

"He sleeps. We will draw lots, and one of us will have to creep quietly up to him

and strike off his head before he awakes. The other three will be ready to rush upon him in case the first blow does not prove fatal. Come, let us draw lots."

His companions raising no objection, the speaker produced from the folds of his tucked-up *lungyi* four big seeds commonly used for gambling purposes. Each conspirator took one, and after a few moments' conversation, pitched it carefully towards a small hole in the ground, a few yards distant. The man whose seed stopped farthest from the hole was to commit the assassination. With an unusual regard to the fitness of things it fell to the lot of the man who had suggested Po Thaw's murder to carry it out. The other dacoits were considerably relieved, but their comrade accepted his stroke of bad luck with philosophical resignation, and immediately prepared to do his duty. Firmly grasping his *dah* he advanced stealthily towards his leader.

The Englishmen, watching events from

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their hiding-place, felt strangely tempted to utter a cry of warning to their great enemy. But Po Thaw was in need of no such warning. When the would-be murderer was only two or three yards from his victim, Po Thaw suddenly sprang to his feet and faced him. All the man's courage deserted him in the presence of his dreaded chief. His knees shook, and his *dah* fell from his trembling hand. The next moment Po Thaw sprang upon him, lifted him at arm's length above his head, carried him to the edge of the precipice and hurled him into eternity. The other conspirators promptly sought safety in flight.

“Cowardly dogs!” Po Thaw shouted after them, “I heard all that you said, and shall remember your treacherous words as long as I live. Death shall not come to you suddenly, as it might have done, in battle. You shall die lingering deaths.”

Then he walked quickly away, passing close to the Englishmen. It never occurred

to them to rush out, seize the dead man's *dah* and attack Po Thaw. They were in fact too interested in watching his ungovernable rage and listening to his wild ravings to think of that.

“What was he saying?” Murray asked, when the *bo* was out of sight.

“These were his exact words,” Cameron replied: “‘The cowardly dogs have heard of the many soldiers which the *kalas* are sending against me, and foolishly imagine that I am unable to defeat them. They shall see the mistake they have made, for I have many brave warriors who will follow me as long as they have life. It is well, perhaps, that the snarling jackals have deserted me; nevertheless, when they fall into my hands their punishment shall be terrible.’”

“Then I sincerely hope the poor wretches won't fall into his hands,” Murray said, “although they certainly deserve some punishment for their villainous attempt on their leader's life.’”

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“ They’ll soon regret their conspiracy, and in their anxiety to save their own skins each man will, at the first opportunity, betray his comrades. It will be a case of the survival of the craftiest. Each will suspect the other and will seek safety in killing him. Before many days have elapsed only one of those three men will be alive, but which one I am, of course, unable to say.”

Cameron, Murray, and Johnson then made themselves as comfortable as possible, and proceeded to eat what remained of the food they had purchased from the Chinaman. They aided its digestion by discussing their plans. All three agreed that it would be advisable to wait some time before examining the entrance to the cave, for fear Po Thaw or any of his late followers should return and discover them.

“ If we make our examination after sunset,” said Murray, “ the air will be cooler, and we shall be able to work more energetically. The heat to-day is abominable.”

Cameron agreed with him. "I've been in Burma now for seven years," he said, "and don't remember ever having felt the heat so much. It's exceptionally hot. I can't account for it."

Johnson soon fell asleep, with his face hidden in his arms.

"Don't disturb him," Cameron said, "Then he'll be fresh to watch later, while we sleep."

It was almost too hot even to talk, and nearly half an hour passed in silence. The heat became yet more oppressive, and soon Cameron and Murray unconsciously fell asleep. An hour passed, and still they slept, all their hardships and troubles forgotten in delightful dreams of those they loved.

The sun had set and darkness was rapidly covering the land, when Johnson suddenly awoke. The perspiration was pouring from his body and the heat was stifling. He gasped for breath, and dashed the perspiration from his forehead. Several cheetahs and other animals unknown to him

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dashed madly by. With a foreboding of danger, he sat up and looked anxiously in the direction from which they came. A grand yet terrible sight met his eyes. The jungle was on fire!

Seizing each of the sleeping men by the shoulder, he shook them roughly, shouting, "Mr. Murray! Mr. Cameron! The jungle's on fire!"

The sleeping, perspiring men awoke, but for a few moments did not realise their danger.

"The jungle's on fire!" Johnson repeated. "We must run for our lives."

They were wide awake now, and, springing to their feet, looked quickly round for their best means of escape. The direction in which Po Thaw had gone was already closed to them, the fire having at that point reached to the very edge of the precipice. Every moment's delay lessened their chances of escape, so they dashed off in the other direction, keeping close to the precipice in the hope that they might find a path down

it, or at least a ledge on which they could rest in safety. But they saw nothing of the kind, and every minute the flames were cutting them off more and more. In the hope that they might even yet reach a place of safety they rushed on, tearing their clothes again and again as they pushed through the thick vegetation. Frequently the leaping flames stretched across their path, but they dared not hesitate, and, closing their eyes, plunged through them. The jungle animals, wild with fear and smarting with pain, rushed madly past them and fell headlong over the precipice. Dead and dying birds lay about in hundreds, their brilliant plumage ruffled and burnt.

“It’s all up with us,” Cameron gasped, as the flames across their path grew fiercer. “We shall have to die, so why struggle on?”

“Nonsense, man,” Murray answered quickly. “If we peg away we are certain to come to a place of shelter before long.”

Murray did not really feel that any hope

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was left, but he knew that it would be better for them to battle on until they fell exhausted than to quietly await their doom.

“The animals are wise,” Cameron said, as a mixed herd dashed by them and disappeared over the precipice.

“They are mad,” Murray answered sharply, and moved closer to his friend.

For another five minutes the terrible race for life continued.

Cameron grew exhausted and fell again and again. Seven years' residence in Burma had made him less hardy than his companions. Murray and Johnson each placed an arm round his waist, and bore him along for nearly a quarter of a mile. All three were badly burnt, and their fate appeared certain when suddenly Johnson pointed ahead through the bushes to an open space, and shouted excitedly, “We're saved!”

With renewed strength the two men dashed on, and in half a minute placed their now unconscious burden out of danger

of the flames at the foot of a pagoda. Thirty or forty men were busy enlarging the clearing in which the pagoda stood. They had effectually stopped the progress of the fire on the three sides of the pagoda; on the fourth side was the precipice. They were evidently all poor people. They wore skirts only, the upper part of their bodies being bare. Directly they saw the Englishmen several of them rushed to their assistance. Their doctor, a quaint and particularly dirty-looking individual, promptly administered to Cameron some liquid from a carved wooden bottle. The effect was eminently satisfactory, as Cameron not only speedily regained consciousness, but appeared none the worse for his terrible experience.

“It is good!” said the doctor proudly, as he returned his curious bottle to a capacious pocket.

Murray and Johnson nodded assent to the few Burmese words they knew.

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“What is it?” Cameron asked.

The doctor smiled pleasantly.

“That, my lord, is known only to me,” he replied, “and I shall tell it only to my son. If the white lords came more frequently to me I would make their lives in this land free from all diseases and pain. Now I will attend to your burns.” This time he produced from his pocket a box of ointment, and rubbed some of it on Cameron’s burnt hands. Not having a bandage handy, he called a little boy who was diligently obstructing the men in his well-meaning endeavour to assist them in clearing the jungle. The boy approached, shyly, towards the Englishmen. The doctor seized him, and adroitly deprived him of his only article of clothing—his pretty pink *lungyi*—which was quickly torn up for bandages. The little fellow wept bitterly, but soon forgot his loss in watching with tremendous interest every movement of the Englishmen.

Murray and Johnson had each several

burns to be attended to, and for some time the Burmese doctor was proudly busy. The Englishmen thanked him gratefully for his kindness, and those thanks were much more appreciated than payment would have been. Moreover, the Burman was well aware that his reputation would be considerably enhanced by having successfully doctored three white men.

“Where is your village?” Cameron asked a little later.

The doctor pointed over the precipice. Noticing the Englishmen’s look of surprise, he took them to the other side of the pagoda and directed their attention to some roughly cut steps leading to a ledge some distance down the precipice. From that ledge there were perilous-looking bamboo ladders leading to another. The ledges lower down were connected in the same way. The village at the foot of the precipice could not be seen.

“If they live down there, why did they

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build their pagoda up here?" Murray asked Cameron.

Cameron repeated the question to the Burman. "We are not rich men," the doctor explained, "and to build a pagoda requires much money. So I said to the men of my village: 'Let us collect our money and with it build a pagoda. We shall have to share the merit of the work; but if we erect it in a place which is very difficult of access there will be much merit to be divided among us, and we shall at any rate receive more than if we did nothing but feed the good *phoongyees*.' My words were said to be words of wisdom, and for three years we were busy making the steps up the side of the precipice. Then we brought up from the village every stone of which the pagoda is built. And now the *phoongyees* and all who hear of it say that although we are only poor men, our work was one of great merit, and that in our next existence our lot will be a happier one."

After the Englishmen had expressed their genuine astonishment at their wonderful piece of work, the doctor continued: "But the fierce fire would have destroyed our beloved pagoda had we not hurried up here and cut away all the jungle that grew around it. And it was the performing of another work of merit that enabled us to know quickly of the fire and guard against it. Not very far from this spot stands the Sunrise Pagoda. It is not a pagoda of much importance, and possibly the white lords have never heard of it, but near it, many yards down the side of the precipice, lives a holy hermit. How long he has lived there no one knows. Some say that he has lived there for hundreds of years. He was there when my father was a boy, and my father is the oldest man in the village. Only once have I seen the holy hermit. It was when I was a young man, and I lay peeping over the precipice for hours to catch a glimpse of him. I shall never forget that day. The holy man

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came at last on to the ledge in front of his cave and walked slowly to and fro. He was a thin old man with snowy white hair which reached almost to his waist. The great carrion birds flew to him and ate from his hand. One settled on his shoulder. Large birds and small birds all seemed to love him. Then he looked down towards our village, and, raising his hands on high, said loud enough for me to hear: 'Live on in poverty, my children, for riches bring strife and sickness and murder.' Then he returned to his cave. During all the long years that the holy man has lived there our villagers have supplied him with food and two tiger skins a year for clothing. Before the steps up the precipice were made we had to walk many miles to reach the Sunrise Pagoda and lower the food, but now the distance is not great, and we send our gifts to the holy hermit every day. It was from performing this meritorious action that two of our men were returning when they dis-

covered from the flight of the birds that the jungle was on fire, and that the flames were travelling towards the precipice. They hurried down to us and told us the sad news. And when we heard that our pagoda was in danger every young man in the village left his work to hasten to save it. As you see, we have saved it."

While the doctor had been talking to the Englishmen his countrymen had been working hard. To the right and to the left of the clearing the fire had reached the edge of the precipice. The crescent of flames having nothing more to consume, grew less fierce every minute. Assured now of the safety of the pagoda, the doctor invited the Englishmen to accompany them down to his village. But Cameron, Murray, and Johnson were most anxious to remain as near the Sunrise Pagoda as possible. Edith Clarence and Mah Noo were aware that that was their destination, and might, they thought, send a messenger to them there.

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Moreover, they feared that if the treasure were not speedily removed Po Thaw might discover it.

The doctor was quick to notice their reluctance to accept his invitation.

“It will be impossible,” he said, “for you to continue your journey for two days. Jungle fires distress the traveller long after the flames have ceased to make the night sky red. And your burns need attending to. When you have had two days’ rest in our village you will feel as refreshed as a wild animal who has drunk at a pure stream after being pursued for hours by the hunters.”

For a few minutes Cameron and Murray discussed the advisability of accepting the doctor’s invitation, with the result that Cameron said, on behalf of himself and companions, “We will gladly partake of your hospitality.”

“It is good,” said the doctor. “Now, my lords, follow me.”

To the Englishmen, unaccustomed as they were to mountain climbing, the descent appeared a particularly perilous one. For some distance they climbed down a number of roughly-hewn steps. Then they came to a ledge from which they descended, by means of a thin bamboo ladder, to another one thirty feet below. Having climbed down five similar ladders, they at last reached the bottom of the precipice. The village was close at hand, and the women and children soon appeared to gaze at the white strangers. They admired their fair complexion, but shook their heads solemnly at the texture, cut, and general unsuitableness of their clothes. Then the sympathetic women discovered that the strangers were thirsty. They hurried away, returning in a few minutes with a supply of milk and fruit. The Englishmen partook of it with great relish, to the intense delight of the kind-hearted little hostesses.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TREASURE

WHEN Cameron, Murray, and Johnson had finished their meal they proceeded to make themselves comfortable by lying at full length on the matting, which the thoughtful Burmese women had provided for their use. They lit their pipes and smoked in silence. It was one of those beautifully calm Eastern nights which fill the healthy-minded European with an exquisite, indescribable feeling—a sad heart-yearning for something unknown yet felt to be unattainable. The three Englishmen fully experienced this strange—and oft-times ennobling—influence as they gazed in silent admiration at the scene before them. Fire-

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flies innumerable glistened in every shrub, and seemed to stretch an ever-breaking web of golden thread from bush to bush. Great fox birds hovered lazily overhead, and far above them a graceful paddy bird flew quickly homewards. Soon the moon appeared, adding fresh charms to what was already beautiful, and clothing even the squalid and filthy with a weird picturesqueness. At the top of the great precipice the beloved pagoda stood like a sentinel keeping watch over those who had toiled and spent their all to make it what it was. The Englishmen were gazing at the pagoda when, to their surprise, they heard Po Se's voice. Looking quickly round they beheld the ex-prime minister dismounting from his slave's shoulders.

“My lords!” he exclaimed with evident concern, “it only reached my ears a few minutes ago that you had honoured this village with your presence. This is my native place. I returned to it to-day after

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many years absence. I was tired after my journey, and slept soundly. My friends had too much respect for me to risk my life by awaking me.¹ But when my eyes opened the friends who stood around me waiting for me to awake told me of the fierce jungle fire. Soon they spoke of three English lords who had suddenly rushed out of the flames and sought safety at the pagoda. My lords, I waited to hear no more. I mounted my bearer and came to you as quickly as I could, for I knew that the white strangers were the just lords who had refused to deliver my life into the hands of the vain Bah Wah. My lords, my heart is sad to see that you have been wounded by the cruel jungle fire. The burns, I fear, are very painful.”

“You will be pleased to hear,” said

¹ The Burmese believe that when a person sleeps his spirit leaves the body and flits about at will. When the spirit returns to the body the sleeper awakes. If any one be awakened before the return of his butterfly-spirit he will certainly die.

Cameron, "that we are suffering no pain whatever. Your doctor is a skilful man, and your neighbours have been very kind to us."

Po Se beamed with pleasure. "They are poor people," he said, "but they are good and keep the five commandments. The pagoda they have built above our heads will earn them much merit. The *phoongyees* have said it. And certainly it is a beautiful pagoda. It has more gold leaf, glass, and rubies than the Sunrise Pagoda, which the English lords were so anxious to see. My lord, were you pleased with it? Did you think it worth travelling so many miles to see?"

"The jungle fire," Cameron replied, "was upon us before we had time to examine it as closely as we should have liked, but in a day or two we shall return to it. That is very necessary, as Mah Noo and the English lady knew we were bound for the Sunrise Pagoda, and may send a messenger

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to us there. Do you still think that there is no danger of Po Thaw making the ladies marry him?"

"My lord, I do. I have consulted no wizard, but the words I said to you yesterday I am sure are words of wisdom. Nevertheless, the things that should occur do not always take place, and Po Thaw may escape from the white soldiers sent to punish him. If he does he may fear to approach Mah Noo, for she is a clever woman, and knows many things which we think a woman should not know. A woman with learning is to be avoided like deadly poison, and possibly Po Thaw, in spite of his threats, may fear her greatly. Moreover, women won by force are never really wives, and even Po Thaw may think that wives who love not their husbands are most undesirable. He might fear that if he married Mah Noo and the white lady they would betray him to the English soldiers."

Po Se's reply was not as reassuring as the

Englishmen had hoped it would be. Consequently the prospect of two days' idleness in the village, cut off entirely from any chance of seeing or hearing of Edith Clarence and Mah Noo, was by no means a delightful one. The villagers, however, did all they could to entertain them. The band played outside their hut for hours at a stretch, in the mistaken belief that they were affording the Englishmen great pleasure. The village girls danced before them, and the lads exhibited their proficiency with the football. Each day the actors gave a performance of four hours' duration, and expressed great regret that the white lords could not stay for five days more to witness the whole of the play. It usually took eight days to perform, but they would endeavour to get through it in seven. The married women of the village industriously mended the Englishmen's clothes, with comical results. The holes burnt in their brown coats were patched with brilliant red, pink, yellow,

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or blue cloth. A different colour was used for each hole. The women were immensely proud of their handiwork, and beamed with delight when Cameron, Johnson, and Murray appeared in their mended coats.

So much was done for the Englishmen's comfort that their stay in the village was not nearly so wearisome as they had expected it to be. Every inhabitant of the place turned out to see them depart. Johnson was quite sad at leaving them, for, in spite of his very limited knowledge of Burmese, he had made many friends during the two days.

The precipice was climbed in safety, and then the travellers saw the terrible effects of the fire. As far as they could see all was desolation. And as they journeyed on towards the Sunrise Pagoda they shuddered as they contemplated the thousands of dead or dying birds and beasts which lay around them. Many thousands more they knew must have been utterly consumed.

“Now,” said Cameron, “I can understand why the Buddhist Law threatens such terrible punishment hereafter to the person who sets light to the jungle. This scene is sad enough to us; what must it be to a good Buddhist with his firm belief in transmigration?”

When the travellers arrived at the Sunrise Pagoda they were surprised to find it had not suffered much damage. Its tinkling bells had disappeared, the gold leaf which covered the spire had perished, and many of the big images which had been kept in position by the sturdy creepers which grew around them had fallen to the ground. The bush which grew over the supposed entrance to the treasure cave had disappeared, but Johnson soon discovered the spot. Quickly scraping away the ashes and the earth beneath they found, to their great delight, part of a stone slab. After making this discovery they set to work with renewed vigour, and in a little more than half an

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hour had laid bare not one stone slab but four, side by side. Each was about six feet long and three feet wide. With difficulty they moved one and anxiously peered into the gloomy hole. But, to their great disappointment, they could distinguish nothing.

“It certainly does not look very inviting,” Murray said; “but perhaps we shall find it better than it looks when we descend. There’s a bamboo ladder all ready for use. Who’ll go first?”

“I will,” Johnson replied at once.

“Very well, then. Take these matches with you and strike a light as you go down.”

Johnson cautiously descended into the gloomy hole. Cameron and Murray anxiously waited for his opinion of the place. Several times they saw the flicker of a match as it was struck and immediately went out.

“Don’t waste the matches,” Murray called down; “we’ll come and assist you.”

Murray and Cameron descended by the ladder and looked around.

“ I think,” Cameron said, “ we had better go up and remove another slab. It is utterly impossible to see anything with only this bit of light, and we mustn't be extravagant with the matches. The village girl would only let me have one box. She had another, but appeared most anxious not to sell it.”

“ Light one more match before we go,” Murray suggested ; “ we may have better luck this time.”

Johnson did so. The match burned, and with the brief light it gave they discovered a large coil of tarred rope. They cut off a piece and lit it. The rope flared, and the Englishmen glanced round the cave with astonishment. It was about forty feet by thirty, and was lumbered up with all manner of curious and valuable articles. Johnson said it reminded him of an auction-room. Images of Buddha, huge bells, triangular gongs, horse-trappings, drinking-vessels, and

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doolies were plentiful, while in one corner were heaped some dozen matchlocks and several jewelled *dahs*. The Englishmen each took one of the latter, and then turned their attention to a handsome gilt and glass studded teak box, which had evidently been taken from some *phoongyee kyounng*, such boxes being made specially for the safe custody of the Buddhist manuscripts.

“Perhaps,” said Murray, “we shall find the rupees in this.”

But they were disappointed. All the box contained was a number of rare books written on sheets of stained black ivory, the characters being enamelled and the margins gilded.

“I shouldn’t have thought the dacoits would have troubled to steal this sort of thing,” Murray remarked as he threw a book down in disgust.

“My dear fellow, those books are very valuable,” Cameron declared, “and you may be sure that the dacoits were well aware of

that. We shall be able to sell them to European libraries and museums for a good large sum."

In another box they found a collection of small but valuable Hindoo idols, studded with precious stones; also several gold nose-rings, bracelets, anklets, and ear-rings. Many of the ear-rings and nose-rings had pieces of withered flesh attached to them, proving that the dacoits had shown no mercy to the people they had robbed. While examining the box Cameron discovered to his surprise that it was standing on a stone slab similar to those which covered the entrance to the cave.

"I believe," he declared, "that there is another cave beneath this." His companions being of the same opinion they speedily removed the box and discovered several long, thin slabs, which they at once lifted away, and exposed to view a cell about twelve feet in diameter. Johnson held the torch over it while Cameron and Murray

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peered down. It was some twenty feet in depth, and at the bottom they saw several boxes piled one upon another.

“That is where the money is,” Cameron declared with conviction.

“No doubt,” Murray replied; “but what in the name of goodness is that huge thing coiled up near the boxes?”

“By Jove!” Cameron exclaimed, “it’s a snake—a guardian snake.” And as he spoke the serpent reared its head and slowly uncoiled its immense length of body.

“Shall I throw my *dah* at it?” Johnson asked excitedly.

“No,” Cameron replied, “it’s climbing up the side. Wait until its head appears at the top and then attack it. It is a most venomous snake, but darkness, confinement, and hunger will have weakened it, and if we are sharp we can kill it before it fully regains its powers.”

They stood at intervals round the cell grasping their *dahs* ready for action. The

few moments they had to wait seemed terribly long. Suddenly they saw the serpent's head appear. Murray, to whom it was nearest, at once slashed at it from left to right, and with one stroke severed the head from the body. It fell with a thud to the bottom of the hole, the body quivered for a few moments and then sunk slowly to the ground again.

"I don't know much about the habits of snakes," said Murray, "but although that fellow's head is cut off I shouldn't care to go down into the well just yet. I propose that we let the thing rest undisturbed for an hour or so, and in the meantime we had better busy ourselves in lengthening that ladder. It won't reach to the bottom of the cell, as it is. By the by, how would the dacoits get to the treasure when they wanted to if that serpent were there?"

"A snake-charmer probably placed it there," Cameron explained, "and the same man would, if required, charm it away."

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In a few minutes the Englishmen had ascended the ladder and drawn it up after them. Johnson was at once told off to discover some suitable wood with which they might lengthen the ladder.

"Well, old fellow," Murray said to his friend directly they were alone, "I fancy we shall find something very valuable in that hole. If we do, I suppose you'll cut Burma and return to England with me."

"Not until I have rescued Miss Clarence or discovered her fate," Cameron replied emphatically.

Murray smiled.

"I have a confession to make," he said. "When you were down with fever I discovered that you were in love with Miss Clarence. You never took me into your confidence, so I kept my discovery a secret. Apparently you still love her."

"I do," Cameron admitted.

"Then why in the name of goodness didn't you tell her so? Why didn't you

propose to her when we were escaping from Bah Wah's village?"

"I had an idea she might think I was taking a mean advantage of her in proposing at a time when she was, to a certain extent, under an obligation to me. If I had been confident that she loved me it would have been different; but I hadn't the faintest idea whether she did, and have not now."

"Set your mind at rest, my dear fellow. She does. As you can't expect her to tell you unasked, I will. Mah Noo is my authority."

Cameron grew quite excited. He plied Murray with questions, which were answered to his complete satisfaction.

"It appears to me," he said, "that I have been a confounded idiot."

Murray did not contradict him.

"And now," he continued excitedly, "what shall we do? How can we rescue her?"

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“If I knew, I assure you I should not be sitting here. You seem to forget that I am anxious for the ladies' welfare—that I am engaged to Mah Noo.”

Cameron was about to reply when Johnson returned with an armful of wood, which he had collected from among the sea of ashes. It answered the purpose required, and in about an hour and a half the treasure-seekers again descended into the cave. The ladder was lowered immediately into the second hole. Johnson went down with a rope, which he looped round the snake. With considerable difficulty the huge reptile was at last drawn up. Then Johnson again descended, accompanied this time by Murray. Cameron stood at the top, holding a torch in each hand. Ten large boxes were discovered, fastened only by catches. The top one was opened and found to be more than half full of rupees. Murray and Johnson filled their pockets and helmets with the money, for it was impossible for them to

hoist up the boxes. Many descents were made by all three before the first box was emptied. The next five boxes were full to the brim of similar coin. The seventh box contained hundreds of peacock rupees, the coin issued by the King of Burma. The two remaining boxes, enormously large ones, contained no money, but nevertheless their contents were more valuable than rupees. There were six or seven hundred splendid rubies, gold ear-tubes, gold bracelets and anklets, jewelled betel-cutters, pearl necklace, gold and silver betel boxes, jewelled tweezers, and even two gold repeaters. Moreover, there was a large number of beautiful gold chains, which had evidently belonged to some of King Theebaw's ministers.

When at length the whole of the treasure had been brought up and piled on the floor of the upper cave Cameron, Murray, and Johnson sat down to rest.

“What is the value of it?” Murray asked,

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after they had gazed for some time at their magnificent pile of treasure.

“£20,000 at the very least,” Cameron answered in a tone of conviction.

“Then,” said Murray, “we can certainly afford some tea.”

Johnson opened the parcel of provisions which Po Se had generously given them, and in a short time the Englishmen were enjoying a mug of fragrant tea. Then they lit their cheroots and discussed what should be their next step. Finally they decided to pass the night in the cave and pack the treasure the following day. Over the entrance they artfully placed a number of half-burnt branches, which concealed it without interfering with the ventilation. Then they hauled up from the lower cave several boxes to sleep on. They were far from being comfortable when they lay down, but nevertheless managed to sleep soundly. Johnson was the first to awake. He was aroused by a crash of thunder. He sat up on his box and

listened. The sound of water puzzled him, for he could not at first remember where he was. Then a flash of lightning illuminated the cave and revealed to him a tremendous torrent of water pouring in at the entrance. He jumped from his box and shook Cameron and Murray roughly. They awoke instantly, wondering what had happened. Johnson speedily lighted a torch. When he raised it aloft a cry of astonishment escaped each of the Englishmen, for the treasure for which they had run such risks had disappeared! Near where they had left it was a big hole. The water rushed through the cave and streamed out at this opening, through which the treasure had evidently been washed away. And this hole opened into the side of the precipice.

CHAPTER XIX

A SHEAF OF SURPRISES

FOR a minute or so Cameron, Murray, and Johnson gazed helplessly at the hole in the corner of the cave. But to lose the treasure in such an undreamed-of manner was a misfortune calculated to excite the most phlegmatic of mortals, and the Englishmen were soon relieving their feelings by growling, with true British fervour, at their tremendously bad luck.

“What I can’t understand,” said Murray, a little later, “is how it was we did not notice that blessed hole yesterday.”

“It must have been a very small one,” Cameron answered, “until the torrent enlarged it. As a matter of fact I suppose we

ought to be very thankful that the hole was there. Had it not been we should, in all probability, have been drowned."

Murray and Johnson evidently considered that was very poor consolation. Johnson candidly declared that he wished their lives had been in danger. "If," said he, "we had suddenly found ourselves in the water we could have struggled for our lives and got away in safety. The treasure in this cave full of water would have been more use to us than at the bottom of the precipice."

"Perhaps," said Murray, "it is not yet too late to save a few of the things. Let us wade in and see if we can discover anything."

Climbing down from their boxes, they groped about in the water for nearly a quarter of an hour, but all they rescued was one or two idols. Murray and Johnson were anxious to prolong the search, but Cameron strongly protested against such folly, declaring that already they had been

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in the water long enough to get a stiff dose of fever. So they returned to the top of their boxes and sat in silence listening to the storm. The thunder was terrific, the lightning unusually vivid, and the amount of water in the cave increased so rapidly that the Englishmen's position began to look somewhat perilous. But just when things were getting desperate the storm suddenly ceased, and in a short time the stream pouring into the cave began slowly to decrease in volume. Then the weary and dispirited travellers lay down once more on their rough beds and fell asleep.

It was nearly nine o'clock in the morning when Cameron awoke and aroused his companions. The sun was shining fiercely into the cave, and a line of mud, already dry, was all that remained of the deluge. Hurriedly jumping from their boxes, the Englishmen commenced another search, and discovered embedded in the mud eleven rubies and about fifty rupees. These, with a few idols,

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bells, and other cumbersome articles, were all that remained of the huge and valuable pile of treasure which had rejoiced their hearts on the previous day. It was some consolation, however, to find that their provisions, which had been placed on one of the boxes, were safe. In a spirit of recklessness they prepared the most luxurious breakfast their provisions would permit. The meal had an excellent effect upon the travellers. Their drooping spirits revived, and with fresh energy they began to discuss the possibility of being able to recover some of the treasure. Cameron suggested that they should return to Po Se's native village and travel along at the foot of the precipice until they came to the spot where the treasure had fallen. But Johnson reminded him that there was a deep and rapid river running at the bottom of the precipice, and the treasure must have fallen into it.

Convinced at last of the unlikelihood of being able to recover any more of the trea-

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sure, they discussed for some time what their next move should be. Finally they decided to remain at the Sunrise Pagoda until the military force arrived. Soon after they had come to that decision they made a discovery. Strolling along near the edge of the precipice Cameron stumbled over a big iron chain. It was attached to a stake, and at the other end was a large hook. Ashes had been placed over the length of the chain, evidently to conceal it.

“This,” said Murray, “must be the chain by which the people of Po Se’s village lower food to the hermit. I had quite forgotten that interesting individual. I mean to see if I can’t catch a glimpse of the old boy.”

He went down on his hands and knees and crawled to the edge of the precipice. After gazing over for a few moments he turned slightly round and beckoned excitedly to Cameron and Johnson. They promptly crawled to the brink, and, peeping over, saw what they little expected. On a ledge about

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two hundred feet below them stood Edith Clarence and Mah Noo!

Murray called Mah Noo by name. The girls looked up instantly, and, seeing the three faces, waved their hands delightedly.

“Are you alone?” Murray shouted.

“Quite,” Mah Noo replied.

“How did you get there?”

“We were put here at Po Thaw’s order. His men lowered us by ropes and chains. Do, please, rescue us quickly, for we’ve been here for several days, and it is horribly dull.”

“We will haul you up as quickly as possible.”

“Can’t one of you come down to us,” Edith Clarence joined in. “We have a most wonderful sight to show you. The ground further on is covered with rubies, money, and all kinds of valuable jewellery. It wasn’t there when we went to sleep last night, but when we came out this morning there was a big hole in the side of the

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precipice, and I think the rain must have washed the things out of it."

Cameron, Murray, and Johnson could scarcely restrain a cheer.

Cameron called out, "It is the *phoongyee's* treasure that we told you about. We discovered it, but the rain washed it away last night, and we thought we had lost it. How far is the hole from where you are standing?"

"About twelve feet."

"In that case," Murray said to Cameron and Johnson, "it will be safer for us to enlarge the hole in the cave and get them up that way."

"Perhaps the ladies would feel safer, sir, if one of us was down there," Johnson said. "I'll go if you'll lower me and send a ladder after me. I'll start enlarging the hole and working towards you in the cave."

"A good idea," said Murray, and Cameron fully agreed with him.

So, after the chain had been subjected to

some severe tests, Johnson was lowered in safety, and hurried at once to see the hole. In a few minutes he returned and called up, "It is smaller this side than in the cave, but I don't think you'll have any difficulty in breaking through. I've just had a look at the treasure; and I believe it's all there."

A little later a ladder and a matchlock were lowered to Johnson, who quickly set to work to enlarge the hole, using the butt end of his musket for that purpose. In the cave Cameron and Murray worked with desperate energy, and in a little over an hour they were able to crawl through and climb down to the ladies. After a general hand-shaking and a glance at the treasure laying scattered about the ledge, Murray asked Mah Noo if she had any idea why Po Thaw placed them in such an out-of-the-way place."

"For safety, he told us," she replied; "but it was not at all the kind of safety we appreciated. He wanted to prevent our being

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rescued by the troops sent to defeat him. An hour or two after he had promised not to crucify you he came to Edith and me and declared that he had given all three of you your liberty. I very much doubted the truth of that, especially as he concluded the tale of his clemency by urging Edith and me to become his wives. Our indignant refusal aroused his anger. Fortunately for us the news of the rapid advance of the British troops reached him almost at the same time. He gave the order for immediate flight. Edith and I were placed in doolies and carried quickly through the jungle. When we had travelled some miles Po Thaw came to us and again asked us to become his wives. He used threats this time, but still we treated him with scorn. Then he grew half mad with rage, and said that we should never marry white men. He also said that all three of you had Burmese wives. We smiled, and he vowed we should see for ourselves. The following morning we were

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carried to a leper village, and the poor afflicted people hobbled or crawled away in terror when they saw Po Thaw. He asked where the white men were, and when he heard that you had escaped he behaved like a demon. He burned the village to the ground, and every one of the lepers perished in the flames. A few hours later Po Thaw told us that as he had to drive back the white soldiers who had dared to come after him, he would put us in a place of safety until he had defeated them. He explained that we should live in a hermit's cave, where we would be well fed by the pious Buddhists, if we did not show ourselves. If, however, we were seen to be living in the hermit's cave they would certainly kill us. The hermit had been dead many years—slain by his hand—but the people still thought he lived. Po Thaw also declared that he himself had stayed there for months at a time when hiding from his enemies. So we were lowered down here and a stock of food given

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us. Po Thaw's last words were that directly he had defeated the *kalas* he would return and compel us to be his wives. Every day food has been lowered to us. To-day we decided to make ourselves known to the person who provided it, believing, in spite of what Po Thaw had told us, that such a charitable individual would hardly treat us badly. At any rate, our prospects could scarcely be made more hopeless."

Murray was considerably relieved to find that Mah Noo knew nothing of the terrible ordeal to which Po Thaw had subjected him and his comrades while in the leper village. For fear that she might, however, ask some questions about their horrible captivity, he cleverly changed the conversation from the gloomy events of the past to rose-tinted plans for the future.

A few yards away were Edith Clarence and Cameron. They were supremely happy, for Cameron had without the slightest preamble told Edith that he loved her, and that

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his one great desire was that she would promise to be his wife, and she had given the promise without the least hesitation.

The good news was promptly communicated to Mah Noo and Murray, who received it with expressions of surprise and delight, the latter as genuine as the former was feigned. Johnson, feeling that under the circumstances his presence might be embarrassing, suggested that he should get some of the boxes from the cave and pack up the treasure.

“We mustn’t forget the treasure on any account,” Mah Noo exclaimed, cutting short Murray’s poetical description of what their future life was to be. “Not that I am particularly mercenary,” she explained, “but I consider it would be positively wicked not to secure the treasure after all your adventures in search of it.”

“We’ve found far greater treasures than ever we expected,” Cameron declared, looking sentimentally at Edith.

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At the moment Murray uttered almost exactly the same words, but of course his gaze was directed to Mah Noo.

Cameron and Murray each felt that the compliment was completely spoilt by the other man uttering it and making it appear so horribly unoriginal. It sounded so much as if they had purloined a compliment from a book they had both recently read.

Edith and Mah Noo laughed good-humouredly, and then made a move towards the treasure. A rapid inspection of it convinced Cameron and Murray that little, if any, of their valuables had been lost, the ledge, sloping upwards from the precipice, having prevented the treasure from being washed away.

The boxes were speedily drawn out, and the work of filling them commenced immediately. In a quarter of an hour the energy of the lady packers began to palpably diminish. Johnson therefore suggested that he should finish the packing while the other

"SPRANG TOWARDS THE ANIMAL AND DEALT IT A TREMENDOUS CUT."





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four rested. After some demur Cameron and Murray acted on the suggestion, and left Johnson to finish the task unaided. He worked away admirably, and had already filled seven boxes when he heard a falling of stones. He looked round quickly just as a tiger sprang from the hole in the cave on to the ledge between him and the rest of the party. Cameron, Murray, and the ladies neither saw nor heard the animal. Their backs were towards it. But the tiger saw them, and stood motionless, glaring at them. Johnson, who was behind it, was unnoticed. For a moment he was at a loss what to do, as a *dah* was the only weapon he had. The tiger moved a step. Johnson sprang towards the animal and dealt it a tremendous cut on the neck.

In a moment the wounded animal was facing him. It was about to spring when suddenly its strength failed, it fell forward, rolled over the ledge, and hung to the brink by its fore claws. Johnson dealt it another

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fearful cut, whereupon it released its hold and disappeared into space.

Everything occurred so quickly that Cameron, Murray, and the ladies only saw the final incident. Johnson, in answer to their eager inquiries, told them what had happened, modestly omitting, however, anything that would acquaint them with the fact that he had in all probability saved the life of at least one of them. Nevertheless, they warmly praised him for what they had seen him do. Praise from two such charming ladies as Edith Clarence and Mah Noo made him very happy. He felt, however, that he was blushing, and hurriedly returned to the packing. Cameron and Murray assisted him, while the ladies busied themselves in preparing a meal. By the time it was ready all the treasure, with the exception of some large articles, had been packed and the boxes firmly secured with the big iron chain formerly used for lowering food to the hermit.

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The meal was the best that the men had tasted for some considerable time, and their praises of the ladies' culinary skill were many and sincere. Murray commenced to make a speech, but it came to an abrupt conclusion on their hearing a noise in the cave. The men sprang to their feet *dah* in hand. Edith and Mah Noo trembled but did not utter a word. They expected another tiger to appear, but to their astonishment an English officer scrambled out of the hole and dropped on to the ledge. Rapidly drawing his sword he glanced around him, but his surprise was considerable on seeing the party of five. In a moment his face beamed with pleasure. He saluted the ladies, returned the sword to its scabbard, and ordered the men who had closely followed him to retire. Then he held out his hand to Cameron.

“How are you?” he asked. “I gave you and Mr. Murray up for lost long ago.”

Directly the officer spoke Cameron and Murray recognised Lieutenant Brown. He

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had grown a big black beard, which vastly altered his appearance.

“Haven’t had a chance to shave for an age,” he declared, as he shook hands with Cameron and Murray. “We’ve been dashing after that fellow Po Thaw night and day for I don’t know how long. I made sure that I had run the scoundrel to ground here.”

Cameron introduced him to Edith Clarence and Mah Noo. He hadn’t spoken to, or even seen a European lady for nearly a year, but he was soon quite at his ease and deeply interested in all they told him about Po Thaw.

Suddenly he turned to Cameron and Murray. “How about the treasure?” he asked. “Have you seen anything of it yet?”

“We have found it,” Cameron replied. “It is packed away in those boxes.”

Brown was evidently greatly surprised. “You’re wonderfully lucky fellows,” he

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declared a minute or two later. "You have escaped numerous deaths of a particularly awful description to which you were sentenced ; you have discovered treasure whose existence sounded to me very much like a cock-and-bull story ; and, finally, you enjoy ladies' society when your fellow-countrymen are firmly convinced that a lady is rarer in these parts than a white elephant. But I'm not going to let you fellows, especially as you have ladies in your charge, run any more risks. You must come with me. Leave your treasure where it is, and when Po Thaw is in our hands you will be able to remove it at your leisure. We have a very strong force now, and Po Thaw's career is as good as ended."

Cameron and Murray readily accepted Mr. Brown's invitation to put themselves under his protection. Without wasting any time they ascended into the cave and up again into the open. The soldiers were wonderfully surprised when they saw the

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ladies, and plied Johnson with questions directly they had an opportunity. He related all their adventures since he last saw them, and saddened them by his account of how they were separated from Tha Bu and Mah Shway O. And in return the soldiers told Johnson of their rapid night marches, of their brushes with the dacoits, of the men they had sewn up in their blankets and buried in the jungle, and of the various brave deeds performed by their officers and comrades.

CHAPTER XX

RETRIBUTION

“I SHOULD advise you,” said Brown to Cameron and Murray as the advance was resumed, “not to say anything about the treasure you have found. I don’t know, but I have a faint idea that there is some order concerning treasure-trove which might prove a confounded nuisance to you.”

“You forgot,” Murray pointed out, “that this treasure was given to us and is not, in the general acceptation of the term, treasure-trove. I maintain that we have a perfect right to accept the *phoongyee’s* present, and I would contest to the bitter end any endeavours to deprive us of it. However, to save all possible bother, I will take care that nothing

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is said about it to your brother officers or men."

Murray therefore immediately asked Edith Clarence, Mah Noo, and Johnson to keep the treasure a profound secret.

Mr. Brown's little force was now pushing on rapidly. They had traversed some distance of fire-devastated ground, and were just approaching the untouched jungle, when they heard the dacoits' war-cry. The next moment a horde of men rushed out of the jungle to meet the soldiers. At their head, and waving them forward, was a diminutive *bo*, who seemed determined to win or die. It was very evident that he was responsible for the unwise change in the dacoits' tactics. He was a perfect little fury, and his men appeared to have caught some of his recklessness. Regardless of the volley that thinned their crowd, they dashed madly to their doom. Hastily forming a strong guard round Edith Clarence and Mah Noo, Brown rushed to the front of his men and led a

charge. The dacoits fought desperately, but the result of the fight was never for a moment in doubt. The plucky little *bo* fell wounded and was taken prisoner. Seeing this his followers at once sought their own safety in flight.

The prisoner's wound was immediately attended to. The rank and file were loud in their praises of the little fellow's courage. They crowded round to have a look at him, but their admiration turned to horror and pity when they discovered that the valiant little leader was a woman dressed in man's clothes. Many of the English soldiers who had fired at her burst into tears, each fearing that it was his bullet which had laid her low.

The very moment Edith and Mah Noo heard the news they hurried to the little prisoner and did all they could for her. She was very grateful for their attention, and told Mah Noo not to be so sad because she was dying. She was very happy ; she had led a

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meritorious life, and possibly in her next existence she would be a man.

Then Mah Noo asked her why she had dressed as a man and fought the soldiers of the Good White Queen.

She smiled pleasantly and said: "I will tell you gladly, so that you may not consider me a miserable woman who wished to make people think she was as brave as a man. When I was a little girl my playfellow was Po Thaw. Our huts stood side by side, and from daybreak to sunset we romped together in the dusty road. I was very proud of Po Thaw, for his kites were the best in our village, and no boy could equal him at football or boxing. Then he went to the monastery, and for many months I did not see him. But when he returned he was the biggest and strongest man in the village. And he said that I was the prettiest girl he had ever seen and that he loved me. I was very happy; every evening we sat together on the pagoda steps and talked of the days

when we should have a hut of our own to live in. We used to sit there until the evening breeze made the pagoda bells tinkle sweetly, and the fireflies sparkled in every bush. But at last Po Thaw went to Mandalay, and I did not see him again for more than a year. When he returned he said he would soon be a great man and that I should be the happiest lady in Burma. He gave me beautiful bracelets and anklets to wear, and valuable ear-tubes for my mother. I asked him how he earned the money to buy all these things. He laughed and said he was a dacoit *bo*. I fell to the ground and for many minutes knew nothing. But when I recovered I begged Po Thaw to cease from being a dacoit and become a farmer. He would not, and although I loved him my heart was very sad. I would not wear the jewellery he gave me, and made him promise not to send me any more. After many months I told Po Thaw that the village people said he was not very eager to marry.

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me. He told me not to heed what they said. Directly he was famous and rich he would tell my father to send out the packets of pickled tea. Again Po Thaw went away for many months. People told me that he was very cruel and killed women and children, but I heeded them not. Later, they said he loved a woman in whose veins the blood of Alompra flowed, and that she was to be his wife. I laughed at them, but my heart was, oh, so sad. At last even I thought Po Thaw had quite forgotten me, but I was wrong. A day or two ago a messenger came to me. He said: 'The brave Po Thaw is for a time sorely pressed by the white *kalas*. His followers, foolishly thinking that his days of power are drawing to an end, are disheartened and wish to retreat quickly. But Po Thaw is determined to drive the white dogs from the land, and if he had more men with him he could easily exterminate the soldiers that are pursuing him. If they were killed, all the white men

would quickly leave Mandalay and Rangoon in terror, and Po Thaw would become King of Burma. To bring about these things and to make you his Queen, he begs you to urge all the men of your village to join him and share in the plunder of the white *kalas'* houses.' And the messenger told me that Po Thaw longed to see me again, for I was in his thoughts day and night. I repeated to the village lads what the messenger had said, but they were not anxious to join Po Thaw. They disliked him because I loved him. Then I said, 'Give me a man's *lungyi*, a turban, and a *dah* and I will start at once to join Po Thaw.' They made no reply, but as I quitted the village they quietly picked up their *dahs*, brought their rifles from their hiding-places, and followed me. I did not expect to meet Po Thaw's enemies until after I had joined the *bo*, but, when I heard that they were near, I thought it would be an excellent thing to suddenly fall upon them and destroy them and thereby win Po Thaw's

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gratitude. But now I shall never see him again, and when he has driven the white *kalas* from the land he will marry the girl in whose veins the blood of Alompra flows."

"No," Mah Noo declared soothingly, "he will never marry her," but the wounded girl did not hear her; she had become unconscious. A quarter of an hour later she died. She was buried near where she had fallen, and the sympathetic soldiers marked the spot with a large cross of stones. Her story, re-told by Mah Noo, increased the men's hatred for Po Thaw.

After marching for little more than an hour, Mr. Brown's party joined the main body. The arrival of the ladies created considerable excitement and interest, which increased when it became known that they had been prisoners of Po Thaw. The officer in command congratulated them on their escape, and publicly thanked Mah Noo for having, at great risk to herself, sent notices to Lieutenants Brown and

Mills of the *bo's* movements. Cameron, Murray, and Johnson were, at their own desire, attached to Brown's company.

The force continued to advance cautiously for a mile or so, until reaching an open space near a rapid river, where they bivouacked. An hour before daybreak a comforting meal was hastily served out, the last which many of the men would ever taste. Then the advance began. For nearly half an hour nothing was heard but the tramp of the men. Occasionally the sound of a long-drawn breath would escape some young soldier unable to conceal his intense excitement. At last the order to lie down was given; Po Thaw's stronghold was only a few hundred yards away. It was the most formidable stockade in the land. It was built on the top of a steep hill, and composed of huge logs of wood piled up in two lines. At the foot of the hill was a swollen stream. A narrow, winding path

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led from the water to the stockade. A dense jungle, utterly impenetrable except by the few paths known only to the dacoits, protected the stockade at the rear. It was decided to attempt to carry the place at the point of the bayonet. The command was given, and the attacking party crept rapidly but quietly towards the stream, taking advantage of every bit of cover. In complete ignorance of the depth of the stream, the officers, closely followed by their men, dashed into it and struggled through. A fierce fire was poured into them, and several were killed on the spot. Others were wounded and, falling back into the stream, were drowned. But their comrades never hesitated for a moment. Every man was anxious for the honour of being first into the stockade. Lieutenant Mills, who had led the dash up the winding path, gained the distinction, but a few moments later he was flung back, mortally wounded, among his

men. The dacoits defended that point admirably, and for a time every man who scaled the stockade was instantly killed. On the other two sides of the stronghold the attackers were endeavouring to enter the enclosure by means of bamboo ladders. Almost simultaneously Brown, Johnson, and two privates jumped down among the dacoits. A rush was made upon them, but Brown emptied his revolver with deadly effect; and his companions in danger fought desperately. Murray, Cameron, and a score of regulars soon came to their assistance, but still the defenders numbered about ten to every one of the attackers. The fight was a most stubborn one, and had the dacoits not fired erratically in their great excitement, the Englishmen inside the stockade would certainly have fared badly. The scaling ladders had been rendered useless by the defenders, and for a time it seemed as if no more Englishmen would effect an entry. But suddenly there

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was an explosion. A dragon-shaped cannon, which formerly belonged to King Theebaw, had exploded, killing the dacoits who were working it, and making a large hole in the stockade. With a ringing cheer, the British soldiers scrambled through the opening, and promptly brought their bayonets into play. Johnson, even when hard pressed, was on the look out for Po Thaw. He saw him two or three times, but could not get near him. Now that they were relieved, he again looked out for him. He saw him stealthily advancing to attack Murray in the back. Ignoring the other dacoits, Johnson rushed to defend his master. Po Thaw turned to meet him. Both were armed with *dahs*, and for a minute or so neither could gain an advantage. Po Thaw dealt some terrific slashes, but Johnson coolly warded them off. The longer the fight continued, the more desperate the *bo* became, but finally Johnson saw his opportunity, and took advantage of it. With a

quick back cut he wounded Po Thaw on the shoulder. To Johnson's intense disgust, the infamous dacoit dashed away towards the jungle. It was probably the fear of being taken prisoner that caused him to run away.

"Shoot that man!" Johnson shouted. "He's Po Thaw!" But in the uproar no one heard or noticed him, and the *bo* escaped. Johnson could not follow him, as the blood was gushing from a wound in his leg that he received directly he got into the stockade.

A minute or two later the dacoits, with one accord, rushed for the jungle. Some reached it, but a large proportion were killed. The almost impenetrable nature of the jungle at the rear of the stockade made pursuit impossible, so the work of completely destroying the captured stronghold was at once commenced, and expeditiously carried out. The wounded were promptly attended to, and the dead buried.

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It was a gallant victory the soldiers had won, but England had lost many noble sons. Their real worth and brave deeds were little known beyond Rangoon.

Edith and Mah Noo rendered the surgeon great assistance, and many rough fellows blessed them with their dying breath.

Po Thaw's escape was greatly deplored by all ranks. Every man longed for his death, for they had seen so many victims of his fiendish cruelty. An hour after the last of the killed had been buried, the force retraced its steps towards the Sunrise Pagoda, where the officer in command had decided to bivouac. The whole of the inhabitants of Po Se's village were awaiting the soldiers. They had heard of the dacoits' defeat, and had climbed up the precipice to express their delight to the victors. They fraternised with the soldiers and the women recommended various extraordinary concoctions for the cure of wounded arms and legs. The same medicine, they

explained, wouldn't cure both, so the soldiers thanked them for their kind offer, but decided to put their trust in the regimental doctor.

To celebrate their victory, and to dispel all gloomy thoughts, the commanding officer issued orders for a smoking-concert, and invited the villagers to be present. They accepted the invitation with alacrity, and promptly despatched several of their number to fetch their band instruments. The soldiers were delighted at the prospect of a merry evening, and made great preparations for it. A canopy was erected over the spot where the performers were to stand, and comfortable seats, fashioned out of biscuit tins, were made for Edith and Mah Noo. The commanding officer took the chair at five o'clock, and song followed song in rapid succession. Then a soldier recited an exceedingly sentimental piece. The songs had all been accompanied by the regimental band, and the Burmese were astonished that no music was being played

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while the reciter performed. Evidently they considered that he was being treated unfairly, as they suddenly started their own energetic, but unmelodious music. The soldiers roared with laughter. The Burmese took it as a compliment and played all the louder, whereupon the reciter beat a hasty retreat.

The concert had continued for two hours, and there was every prospect of its lasting for another two, when a sentry announced the approach of a stranger. Every one looked in the direction indicated, and saw an excited Burman running quickly towards them, holding in one hand a dirty bundle. He was evidently disposed to ignore the sentry's challenge and proceed straight to the merry-making crowd, but the soldiers barred his way. The new comer was very indignant, and astonished all within reach of his voice by declaring, in excellent English, "Insignificant men, possessed of trivial authority, delight in exercising it on every possible occasion."

“It’s Tha Bu!” Johnson exclaimed, springing to his feet.

In a moment or two he was grasping his old friend’s hand. It would be hard to say which was the more delighted at the meeting, the Englishman or the Burman. Then the soldiers who knew the guide crowded round and warmly welcomed him. Presently one of them asked, “Where is Mah Shway O?”

Tha Bu’s face clouded. “She is dead,” he replied sadly. “She died four hours after the cowardly Po Thaw left us in the jungle. She was a good wife, and dearer to me than twenty sons and sixty daughters. My own wound was very painful, but the hope of revenge gave me strength to bear it. I said to myself: ‘The tree struck by lightning will regain its vigour and flourish long after the stronger tree has been blown to the ground and utterly destroyed.’ And I spoke words of wisdom, for I am alive and Po Thaw is dead.”

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“Dead?” a score of voices echoed.

“Yes,” Tha Bu answered—“dead.” And as he spoke he rapidly untied his dirty bundle, and the livid head of Po Thaw rolled out. He seized it by the hair and held it aloft, so that all might see it.

The soldiers, directly they were assured that it was Po Thaw's head, burst into a hearty cheer. The peaceful villagers beamed with delight and capered about for joy.

“Perhaps,” Tha Bu said, in a loud voice, “the white lords would like to hear how I killed this vile creature.”

“We should,” Cameron answered, whereupon the Burman continued, “When I had buried my good Mah Shway O, I started off to find Po Thaw. My wound prevented me from travelling very quickly; nevertheless, I discovered, after four or five days' search, where he was. From then I watched him day and night, seeking a favourable opportunity to kill him. This morning I stood

hidden away in the jungle at the rear of the stockade watching the fight, and fearing that one of my honoured friends, the white lords, would rob me of my vengeance. When Po Thaw fled from the warm-hearted Mr. Johnson I followed him. The blood poured from his shoulder, but, like a wounded elephant, he went rushing on and on. None of his men were near him, and I was the only person who saw him disappear beneath a big bush. In the centre of that bush was a little hut completely hidden from view. The vile dog, no doubt, had many such hiding-places. When I was certain that Po Thaw was asleep I entered and cut off his head. I did not do it with one blow, for I wanted him to see who it was that was bringing his vile life to an end. The first cut I gave him was a slight one. He opened his eyes and recognised me ; he tried to rise, but I used my *dah* with all the strength that hatred could give, and the next moment he was dead. And now I have brought his vile head to

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the white lords, so that I may receive the reward of Rs5000 offered for it. With the money I shall erect on the spot where my sweet Mah Shway O died a beautiful pagoda."

When the officer in command had satisfied himself that the grim object before him was indeed the head of Po Thaw, he gave Tha Bu a receipt for it, which could be converted into cash at Rangoon or Mandalay. The head was immediately buried.

There was great rejoicing in the camp at the death of the infamous dacoit *bo*, but Tha Bu, much to his surprise, did not receive great praise for his deed. Some of the soldiers told him plainly that he had killed the *bo* in a cowardly fashion. He was very indignant.

"Men possessed of wisdom," he replied haughtily, "consider their words before uttering them, but fools speak instantly, whether their words be just or not. Po Thaw was a crafty man, and to bring about

his death it was necessary that I should be crafty also. I am very proud of my action, and in the days to come the poets will sing of Tha Bu, the slayer of Po Thaw."

From his critics Tha Bu proceeded to Cameron. "My lord," he said, "my engagement with you does not expire until you are back in Mandalay. I regret that I have been absent from my duties, but the time has been well spent, for I have removed from your path an obstacle that was greater than thirty precipices and sixty mighty rivers."

Cameron bestowed some praise upon him, and the worthy Burman returned to the soldiers in excellent spirits.

For six days the force remained near the Sunrise Pagoda. Every day the jungle was scoured for miles, and many dacoits were torn from their hiding-places. One of Po Thaw's scarred lieutenants, anxious to save his own life, divulged the place where most of the dacoits' plunder was concealed. It

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was promptly seized, and found to be very valuable.

Cameron and Murray took Tha Bu and Po Se into their confidence concerning their own treasure. The two Burmans soon hit upon a way to remove it. Po Se's villagers bore it to the river and stowed it away safely in a large barge. Then Johnson, Po Se, and Tha Bu, went aboard and started for Rangoon. Twenty sturdy coolies rowed the barge.

Murray, Cameron, and the ladies remained with the expeditionary force for two weeks longer. They greatly appreciated the change from anxiety and privation to peace of mind and comfort, but nevertheless were highly pleased when room was found for them on a dispatch-boat, and they steamed away to Mandalay. After staying for a day or two in that city they proceeded to Rangoon. The story of their adventures had already reached the capital, and hundreds of people flocked to the riverside to see

them land. They received quite an ovation, for it was esteemed something wonderful to have escaped unharmed from the clutches of Po Thaw.

In due course Johnson, Tha Bü, and Po Se arrived with the treasure, after a comparatively uneventful voyage. Murray divided the treasure, which proved to be more valuable than they expected, with a generous hand. He gave Johnson one-fifth, Cameron two-fifths, and retained two-fifths for himself. Tha Bu received a handsome present in excess of his wages. He thanked Cameron and Murray in particularly high-flown language, and expressed his firm opinion that the success of the expedition was to be attributed to its being accompanied by a guide possessed of wisdom and experience. Then he departed up country to build his pagoda. Po Se was also generously rewarded by Murray. He, too, immediately set to work to erect an elaborate pagoda, and became so enamoured of

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the work that he spent every *pice* he possessed on it, and became so poor that he was compelled to live in a miserable little hut, more suited for a coolie than an ex-prime minister. But he was perfectly happy.

When all the affairs concerning the expedition had been settled Cameron and Murray were married quietly at the Pro-cathedral to Edith Clarence and Mah Noo. A few days before they left Burma for England they met the old *phoongyee* near the Shway Dagon Pagoda. The aged priest recognised Cameron and Murray, but dropped his eyes and walked quickly in a direction that their carriage could not follow.

THE END.

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