

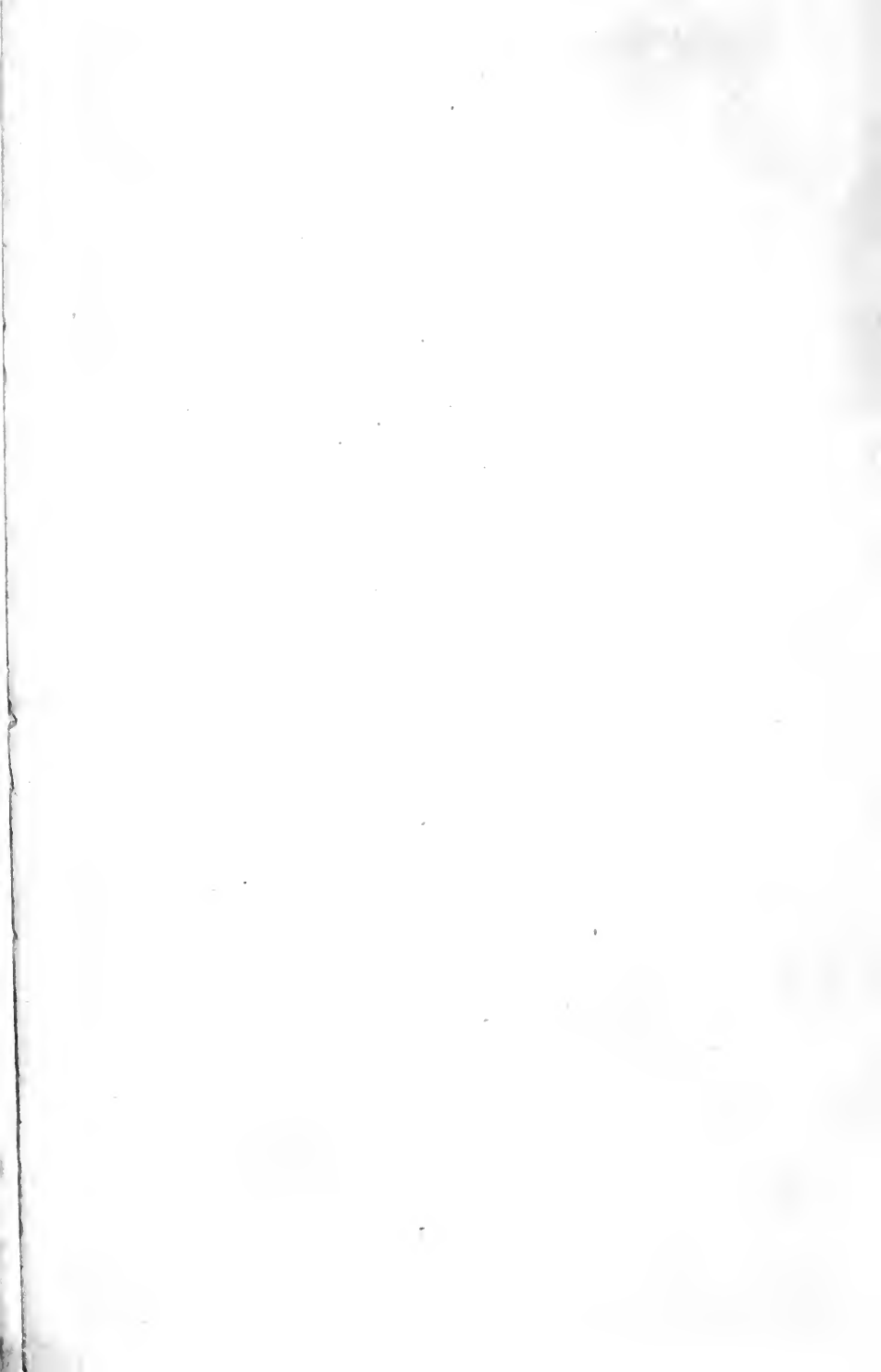
THE JUNGLE TRAPPERS





THE JUNGLE TRAPPERS.

A TALE OF THE INDIAN JUNGLE.



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“Sher Singh . . . remained in his crouching attitude.”

The
Jungle . . .
Trappers.

A Tale of the Indian Jungle.

By **W. MURRAY GRAYDON,**

Author of "Musketeers and Redskins."

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THE JUNGLE TRAPPERS.

CHAPTER I.

AGAINST MOSLEM AND HINDOO:

A DARK February night in the far East. It was the period of the monsoon, and that unpleasant trade wind, blowing with hot and clammy breath over the province of Bengal, over jungle and plain and stream, made life oppressive to the inhabitants of the great city of Calcutta, whether they dwelt in the fashionable neighbourhood of the Circular Road or in the squalid outlying suburbs. Between the two, in the densely-populated native quarter that was the Black Town of earlier days, a low hovel of bamboo and plastered mud stood midway along a narrow and unpaved street. It differed in no wise from hundreds of others in the vicinity, save that the door had been strengthened with extra beams. It contained two small rooms, both on the same floor, and in the outer one of these an English lad of eighteen, tall and vigorous for his age, was sitting with his elbows propped on a table and his chin supported by his hands. A book lay open before him, and a lamp filled with cocoanut oil shed a dim and flickering light. He appeared to be reading, but his thoughts had gone astray from the printed pages, which were blurred and meaningless to him.

For hours Maurice—he knew no other name—had

been keeping an anxious and weary vigil. His bronzed and clean-cut features, the handsome, intelligent face, that seemed misplaced amid such dingy surroundings, wore a look of strained expectancy. His thick brown hair was dishevelled, and his hazel eyes were struggling against drowsiness. He started eagerly up at every passing footstep, every slight noise without, only to drop back each time with a murmur of disappointment. Presently he rose and opened a small window to one side of the door. He thrust his head out and glanced right and left along the dismal street, but no one was visible except a native policeman, who was slowly receding in the gloom. Closing and bolting the wooden shutter, the lad stood for a few moments in hesitation.

“No use to wait any longer,” he told himself. “He won’t return till morning, so I may as well go to bed. The same old story. Tom has broken another promise, in spite of his word. It was an hour before dark when he took the rifle away to sell, and instead of bringing the money home he has squandered it on drink. No doubt he is lying now in some foul hole, stupid with liquor. And not a rupee in the house. What is going to become of us I don’t know. The business has gone to wreck and ruin, and I am not fit for anything else, or I should have tried long ago to find employment.”

The outer room bore witness to dire, strenuous poverty. The walls were quite bare, and the floor of hard-trodden earth was covered with coarse and well-worn matting. The chairs were falling to pieces, the dishes piled on a bench were cracked and empty, and except for a half loaf of bread there was no sign of food. Picking up the lamp, Maurice opened the door leading to the tiny apartment in the rear. A ray of

light, streaming ahead of him, showed two charpoys, or native beds, a small teak-wood chest, and a shelf on which were a dozen volumes. He crossed the threshold, and then stopped in sudden alarm as a confused uproar, swelling nearer and louder, was heard at a distance. His face grew pale, and hastily putting the lamp on the chest, he ran to the street door and threw it open.

Here the tumult was more distinct. Off to the left, hoarse, angry cries and the patter of many feet were rising on the night air. Excited Hindoos, roused from sleep, swarmed out of the neighbouring houses. The clamour drew rapidly near, increasing in volume, and now, at the end of the street, a bunch of torches flashed into view. Behind the lurid jets of fire came a frenzied, maddened crowd, packing the narrow space from wall to wall. They surged forward with fierce yells.

“What can it mean?”

As the lad's trembling lips uttered the words, a sickening dread, a premonition of disaster to the only friend he had in the world, struck to his heart. And the next instant his worst fears were realized, for the object of the mob's fury and pursuit was seen to be an Englishman, whose long legs were keeping him well in advance of his enemies. He wore a faded blue coat and linen trousers that were ragged and soiled. He was bare-headed and empty-handed, and his grey hair and beard streamed to the wind. His once attractive features, now bloated and discoloured by drink, were stamped with abject despair and terror. He tore madly on, blood dripping from a number of wounds, and stones and spears whizzing about him. With his fist he levelled a couple of natives who attempted to block the way. A

few more strides brought him opposite to Maurice, and swerving to one side he staggered into the hovel. The lad, following instantly, hurled the door shut and dropped a heavy bar across it.

"Tom, is it really you?" he cried, in a tone of anguish. "Tell me, what's wrong? What have you done? You are wounded and bleeding."

"Only stone cuts," panted the other, breathlessly. "But—but I'm a dead man, Maurice. A weapon, for Heaven's sake! Here they come! Don't you hear the devils howling? They're after my life blood."

"They'll not harm you in your own house, surely."

"They'll kill us both. Both, you understand. There's no hope. God forgive me for bringing you to this. I had no right to seek refuge here. I should have turned off in another direction, gone anywhere else. But I lost my head, and now you've got to suffer for my sins. No, that shan't be, my boy. I'll make a bolt for it again—"

"Stop! it's too late," Maurice interrupted; and his voice was almost drowned by the deafening clamour outside.

"Too late," echoed his companion. "You're right --there's only one thing left to do. Listen! The murderous wretches are at the back as well as in front, so it's useless to try to escape by the compound. They'll spare you, perhaps, after they've glutted their vengeance on me. You must hide from them, that's the thing."

His face was grey with fright as he dragged the lad into the adjoining room and closed the frail door. In a trice the two beds and the chest were stacked against it. Out in the street the ravenous mob, with unerring scent, had gathered before the house. Shouts

of "Din ! Din !" the Mohammedan battle-cry for the faith, rose loud and shrill.

"A weapon, my boy," screeched the man. "There ought to be one left."

His bloodshot eyes roved about the room. Maurice shook his head sadly. "You pawned the last pistol three days ago," he said, "and the rifle—"

"Ah, the rifle," interrupted the other. "That's been my undoing, lad. I got thirty rupees for it from a gunsmith in the Bhurra Bazaar. Then thirst, and the jingle of coin in my pocket, made me a demon. I drank and drank, until I was mad. And this is the end of poor old Tom Dayleford. It's a just penalty. I deserve it. Hark ! they are attacking. I won't go under till I've spitted a couple of the dogs."

As the house shook under a rain of furious blows, Dayleford broke an iron bar from one of the charpoys and stood on the defensive.

"Don't talk like that, Tom," pleaded Maurice, with tears in his eyes. "The mob won't dare to break in. The police will soon arrive—or soldiers from the nearest barracks."

"Not in time to save me," Dayleford cried fiercely. "I tell you I'm a dead man."

"But what have you done, Tom ? Nothing to deserve death ?"

"Ay, a thousand times over, according to native law. Listen, my boy, and you shall know for yourself. I'll spin the tale in a few words. After visiting pretty near every rum-shop in Calcutta to-night, and drinking till I was stupid and my money was spent or stolen, I set off for home. Naturally enough I blundered from the right track, and my cursed ill-luck led me to a Mohammedan mosque—"

He paused an instant as the shouts and pounding rose to a higher pitch. The lad's face blanched with terror, for already he guessed how the story was to end, and realized his friend's desperate plight.

"I sailed into the mosque as if I owned the place," huskily resumed Dayleford, "and when the priests came at me, making a rare hullabaloo, I lost my senses and saw red. I snatched a weapon from one old grey-bearded chap and ran him through with it. Two others I pitched into a corner, upsetting the sacred lamp. I knocked a big idol down, and jumped on it, and smashed the jewels out of its eyes. Then the liquor suddenly left my brain, and I knew what I had done. Away I went for dear life, with the mob howling at my heels. I was sober then, and I'm sober now. I'll die sober, lad."

"Don't talk of dying," cried Maurice. "There must be some means of escape, Tom. Quick! before it is too late."

His voice was stifled by a rending, splitting sound, by the snapping of beams and the fall of plaster, as the street door and the frail wall surrounding it yielded to the attack. The fanatics had broken into the house, and were in possession of the front room, whence came a rush of feet and yells of triumph and rage. The next instant the mob were beating against the inner door.

"The time is short now," exclaimed Dayleford. "If I had a quarter of an hour's grace I would tell you a secret that concerns yourself, that I should have told you long ago. I've been doing you a bitter wrong, my boy, all these years. Heaven forgive me! I meant to confess some day, but kept putting it off. My lips were tied—sealed with hush money, ashamed as I am to say it. And there was another reason,

another temptation. After I learned to care for you as if you had been my own son—”

“Then you know who my parents were,” Maurice eagerly interrupted,

“No, I don’t know that. I might have helped you to find them, perhaps. But it’s no use wishing for what can’t be. Fool that I was, I never thought to put down a statement in writing. You remember Captain Bonnick and the ‘Mary Shannon’?”

“Yes, Tom, clearly.”

“Well, don’t forget those two names. There’s your clue, and if you stick to it—” The man broke off with a groan of agony. During the short interval, while he was speaking, the clamouring mob in the next room had rained blows without cessation. Wall and door were fast yielding.

“Where are the police?” cried Maurice.

“No hope from them,” exclaimed Dayleford. “Lad, pull out that top mattress,” he added, in a voice that rang above the tumult. “Throw it in yonder corner, and creep under it. Ten to one they’ll overlook you. Quick! quick!”

“No, I’m going to stand by you,” vowed Maurice. He tore the bookshelf from the wall, scattering the volumes right and left, and ran to his companion’s side.

There was no time for more futile words. Crash! crash! With a sickening, grinding noise in fell the splintered door, ripped from its fastenings and hinges. Down toppled chest and charpoys, and the glare of torches filled the little room. On and over the *débris* leapt the maddened natives, Moslems and Hindoos fraternizing in common cause, brandishing weapons and shouting the watchwords of their religions.

Dayleford’s iron missile, swinging unerringly, split

the skull of the foremost ruffian. As he let drive again a stone whizzed by his shoulder, and Maurice, who had been borne back a pace or two by the rush, received a hard but glancing blow on the temple. The bookshelf dropped from his nerveless grasp. Lights flashed before his eyes, all grew swiftly dark, and he reeled heavily to the floor, where he lay apparently lifeless.

Dayleford, seeing the lad go down, uttered a cry of rage and grief. He struck at another of his foes, a big Moslem, smashing the fellow's arm from wrist to elbow. Again he swung his weapon, and just then a keen-pointed knife, launched with great force, sank deeply into his chest. He staggered, throwing up his hands. As quickly the infuriated fanatics were upon him with spears and daggers, and in less time than it takes to tell a brave but misspent life had ended.

Maurice, still lying motionless on the floor, was at the mercy of the assassins, who, although they believed him to be dead, were worked up to such a pitch of religious wrath that they would probably have plunged their weapons into his body. But fortunately intervention was near, and it came in time to save the unconscious lad. Already the affray had turned to a formidable riot, spreading in different directions, and rousing the authorities to action. Alarm bells could be heard clanging, and the cries without of "Din ! Din ! Kill the Feringhees !" turned to "The police ! The soldiers !"

The invaders, their fury glutted, hastily withdrew from Dayleford's house, to find the narrow street crowded with scores of Moslems, Hindoos, and outcast Eurasians. Without regard to race or caste this mixed mob offered eager battle to the police, who had by now arrived on the scene. Fighting was fierce and

continuous until two companies of sepoy infantry, commanded by English officers, approached from a neighbouring barracks. This turned the tide. The mob had no inclination to face volleys of musketry, and as they sullenly and slowly retreated, a fire, started either by accident or design, broke out in one of the native dwellings. Fanned by the wind, the flames were quickly beyond control.

When the morning dawned a few minutes later the Calcutta fire-department were engaged with the stubborn conflagration, and the sepoys and police were chasing the dismembered body of rioters from street to street.

CHAPTER II.

MAURICE BEGINS A NEW LIFE.

STUNNED by the blow the stone had struck him, but otherwise uninjured, Maurice did not long remain in a state of unconsciousness. His senses returned as the chill, grey light of dawn was streaming through the shattered walls of the house and lighting up the ghastly scene of bloodshed and destruction. Sitting erect with an effort, he pressed a hand to his swollen and throbbing forehead while he stared about him in half-incredulous amazement and alarm. He shuddered with horror to see a brown, partly-naked corpse lying across the teak-wood chest. In the doorway huddled a sorely-wounded Moslem, gasping his life away, and groaning in piteous tones.

Then the memory of the night's terrible deeds came to the lad in a flash, and at the same instant he discovered Tom Dayleford. Creeping over to the disfigured body of the man who had been his only friend in the world, he called him vainly by name. Knowing that the pallid lips were sealed for ever, he sobbed bitterly between hoarse threats of vengeance on the murderers. He was so dazed by grief that he scarcely heard the noise and clamour outside, nor perceived the smoke that was drifting into the room.

“ My boy ! ”

The words, accompanied by the touch of a hand, woke Maurice from his stupor. He looked up to find himself in the presence of a young English officer and and three sepoys.

"You've come too late," he muttered reproachfully.

"I'm afraid so," the officer replied. "The man is dead, that's certain. Dayleford is the name, I believe. Are you any relation of his?"

"None, sir," the lad admitted, "but he has been the same as a father to me—And now."

The next instant, before more could be said, two fresh arrivals climbed over the *debris* by the fallen door. They were Englishmen, at a glance, and one was a tall, spare-limbed man of about forty-five, with sharp, shrewd features, and eyes as keen as a hawk's. He was wiry of movement, and his brown hair and moustache were slightly grizzled. His companion was several inches shorter and of heavier build, clean-shaven, and with a good-humoured face. Both were attired in clean white linen and sola-topees.

With an exclamation of sorrow the taller man bent over Dayleford.

"The report was only too true, Carruthers," he cried. "Here lies the poor fellow, dead and mutilated."

"A victim of his own folly," interposed the officer. "I've got to the bottom of the matter, and it seems that while intoxicated he wandered into a Moham-medan mosque and committed various outrages. You'll understand what was bound to follow after that. It's an ugly affair, and had best be kept quiet. No arrests have been made, nor are the assassins likely to be identified. They had plenty of provocation, it must be admitted. But you are intruding here," he added. "May I ask your business? And your names?"

"Certainly," replied the tall stranger, in a dry tone.

"I am Dermot Tearle, agent for Carl Hamrach and Company, of London and Hamburg. This is my assistant, Luke Carruthers. Hamrach and Company deal in wild animals, and we trap and export them for the firm."

"Ah, something in his line," suggested the officer, glancing towards the dead man.

"Exactly," said Tearle. "Our business with Dayleford was professional. We have known him for years, and intended to have paid him a visit to-day."

"He was a good fellow—when not in drink," declared Carruthers.

Maurice had meanwhile been looking closely at the two strangers, with dawning recognition. The veil of the past was lifting.

"Don't you remember me, my lad?" asked Tearle. "I saw you six or seven years ago, when poor Dayleford was in very different circumstances, and on several occasions since. I have been in other countries for a long period, and only yesterday landed at Calcutta."

"Yes, I remember you," said Maurice. His voice broke, and his eyes filled with tears. "Tom, Tom," he sobbed piteously. "How I wish I could bring you back! You were the only friend I had. The only one. You were always good to me." He had not forgotten Dayleford's last words, his partial confession of wrongdoing and his vain regrets; but his sorrow was none the less sincere on that account, nor did he cherish the slightest resentment.

Carruthers blinked suspiciously, and turned aside.

"Have you no friends or relatives in Calcutta?" inquired Tearle. "In India?"

"None anywhere," Maurice told him. "I am alone in the world now."

"Cheer up, my boy," said the officer, kindly. "Come, we must be moving. The quarter is on fire and the flames are rapidly sweeping this way."

He was right. The roaring and hissing of the conflagration could be distinctly heard, and smoke was pouring faster into the house. Maurice looked about him helplessly.

"I'll take care of you for the present," the officer added, while Tearle and Carruthers whispered together. "The magistrates will require you to give evidence. There appears to be nothing here worth saving. Did the murdered man have any papers?"

"Not a scrap," Maurice replied. "Those few books are the only things of any value left."

"The pawnshop swallowed the rest," muttered the officer, in an undertone—he had known something of Dayleford's habits. He examined the teak-wood chest, which contained worn-out clothing, and peered briefly into the wrecked front room. Then, perceiving a door at the rear of the house, he threw it open and entered a small courtyard surrounded by high walls. They bristled at the top with formidable iron spikes, set closely in rows, so that escape from the mob by this means would have been impossible, as Dayleford knew at the time.

"Stop! stop!" cried Maurice, who did not immediately see where the officer had gone. "Be careful! There's danger."

The warning was too late. With a rattling noise and a savage snarl a great tawny leopard, that was fastened to the wall at one side, bounded to the end of his chain, and leaping upon the officer's breast bore him heavily to the ground. With great presence of mind the man did not stir. He uttered a low, urgent

appeal for help. The beast's open jaws were within several inches of his face, as one of the sepoy sprang forward and levelled his rifle, but before he could fire Maurice threw himself in front of him.

"Stand aside," he shouted. "I'll get the leopard away. Don't shoot."

The sepoy obeyed reluctantly when Tearle interfered in behalf of the lad, who was swift to seize the opportunity. He boldly advanced, and struck the crouching animal a smart blow on the nose.

"Back, Lachme!" he cried, sternly. "How dare you misbehave? Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

For an instant the beautiful brute hesitated, and then, growling sullenly, it left its victim and retreated against the wall.

"Well done!" approved Tearle.

"The lad is a born trainer," exclaimed Carruthers.

The officer rose quickly to his feet, unhurt save for a couple of scratches.

"Shoot that beast," he directed; and up went the sepoy's rifle.

"Stop! stop! don't kill Lachme," begged Maurice. "We are fond of each other, and that is why Tom never sold him."

The officer hesitated, the sepoy waiting stolidly.

"The lad's courage probably saved your life," said Tearle. "Moreover, the leopard represents a part of the dead man's property, and is worth money."

This statement cooled the officer's wrath, and having countermanded his order he re-entered the house, leaving Maurice to put a wire muzzle on Lachme and unfasten his chain. Meanwhile an inspector of police and two of his men had arrived, and the task of removing Dayleford's few effects and the dead bodies—

the Moslem in the doorway had breathed his last—was turned over to them. Without further delay the officer's little party, which included Tearle and his companion, set off to the barracks, making a detour to avoid the burning area. Quite a crowd followed, attracted by the curious spectacle of the leopard and its young master.

Lachme was chained up in the barracks yard, and after promising to see the lad again, Tearle departed with Carruthers. In spite of his grief Maurice was able to enjoy a hearty breakfast, and then, worn out by what he had gone through, he went to bed and slept soundly for the greater part of the day. He was awakened by a fanfare of bugles, and from his his window—he was in the officers' quarters—he could see the white-clad sepoy's passing to and fro in the court below him. The sun was sinking in the west, and over the scene of the destructive fire a few wisps of smoke were lazily floating.

At nine o'clock the next morning Maurice was taken before the civil authorities, represented by a bench of magistrates, who had met to hold an inquiry into the cause of Dayleford's death and the subsequent rioting. Dermot Tearle, true to his word, was present with Carruthers, and there were other witnesses as well. The first part of the proceedings dealt with the sacrilege committed in the mosque, the flight of the intoxicated Englishman, and his death at the hands of the enraged mob. The comments of the magistrates, though not to Maurice's liking, were founded on precedent and justice. The validity of native law was acknowledged by the government of India, and it was well understood that the arrest of the Mohammedan priests, whose holy place had been outraged and defiled, would

lead to serious trouble, such as had recently occurred, with much bloodshed and loss of life, at Allahabad and Benares. So the question of taking steps to punish the guilty parties—there was not a chance in a thousand of identifying any of them—was discreetly waived for the time being and the inquiry was resumed on other lines.

The meagre facts concerning the murdered man were soon established. As far as could be ascertained he had no relatives, and, indeed, very little was known of him. According to Dermot Tearle's testimony, Tom Dayleford had begun business in Calcutta twelve or thirteen years before, as a dealer in wild beasts. He was accustomed to trap them himself in the Bengal jungles, with the aid of native hunters, and he disposed of them to Hamrach and Company and to similar firms. He was a man of considerable education, but he had never spoken of his early life.

"I may be wrong," Tearle concluded, "but I have an idea that he had been a soldier, and that he deserted from his regiment, soon after it was ordered to India, owing to a quarrel with an officer who misused him."

Maurice was called up next, and his pathetic story, reluctantly drawn from him by a series of questions, was listened to with close attention and interest.

"I have no other name," he said, "and I don't know who my parents were. I can recollect scarcely anything about my childhood, and even that little seems like a dream. When I was very small I used to travel through the country—it was in England—with a circus and menagerie. I think my father was with me, though I am not sure. There were caravans, and wild animals, and people who performed in a

ring. Then, one day, a strange man with a black moustache, whom I was afraid of, took me with him on a railway train. We came to a great city, which I believe was London, and there I was put aboard a ship. It was called the 'Mary Shannon,' and the captain's name was Bonnick."

"How long were you on this vessel?" asked one of the magistrates.

"Four years, sir, as nearly as I can remember. Captain Bonnick treated me cruelly, and would never tell me anything about myself, or let me ask any questions. Whenever the ship was in port I was locked up below until we had put to sea again. It went on like that until the 'Mary Shannon' sailed up the Hooghly—it was her third or fourth trip to India. A couple of nights later, when we were anchored off Calcutta, the captain said that he had a new master for me. He took me ashore and left me with Tom Dayleford."

"When was this, my boy?"

"Eight years ago," Maurice replied. "A different life began then. Tom told me I must not ask any questions, and neither of us talked of our past lives. He was as kind as a father to me. He taught me to read and write, and to handle a rifle, and showed me how to trap wild beasts and birds and serpents. For five years I went with him on every trip he made to the jungles, until he—he started to drink hard. He had to sell his cages and animals and discharge the native hunters. We moved to a mean part of Calcutta, and got poorer and poorer. Only Lachme was left, and Tom wouldn't sell him on my account. Then, last evening, he went away—"

At this point Maurice's voice broke, and his eyes

filled with tears. He was compelled to stop, and gladly sat down. He hoped that the interrogation was finished, for he meant to be unselfishly loyal to his dead friend, and was determined to say nothing of Dayleford's last words.

The magistrates spent a brief time in considering what should be done with the young waif, but before they had come to any conclusion the problem was unexpectedly solved. Tearle and his companion approached Maurice, and the former, putting a hand on his shoulder, said kindly :

“ My lad, I am going to make you an offer, and I trust you won't refuse it. If you spent eight years with poor Dayleford, and accompanied him on his trips to the jungle, you must have picked up ample and valuable experience.”

“ Tom often told me,” Maurice modestly admitted, “ that I knew as much about the business as himself.”

“ Good ! Then you are just the chap we're looking for. We need an extra man, and you shall enter Hamrach and Company's employment at once, and have a small salary to start with.”

“ It is a fine life, though it means hard work sometimes, and plenty of risk,” put in Carruthers. “ But you are used to it, and know what to expect. He will go up-country with us immediately, eh, Dermot ? ”

“ Yes, in a few days. You shall keep Lachme, my boy—we will take good care of the beast. And furthermore, since I'm interested in your story, at the first opportunity I'll help you to trace the mystery of your birth—to discover your parents if they are still alive. Come, what is your answer ? ”

“ The answer is yes,” Maurice cried, his face brightening. “ How can I thank you ? I will serve

you faithfully and work hard. It would please Tom to know that I am provided for."

He ratified the bargain by shaking hands with his new friends, who did not conceal the satisfaction the lad's decision gave them.

The matter was speedily arranged with the magistrates, and the three left the court. They proceeded first to the sepoy barracks, where they stopped to get the leopard, and then went on to the suburb of Kidderpore, by the Hooghly River. Here, close to the water, was a large warehouse belonging to the famous firm of animal dealers. In this wild beasts were stored, preparatory to shipping them to London and Hamburg. Tearle and Carruthers, with a corps of native employees, had quarters in an adjoining building.

That evening poor Dayleford was buried, and now Maurice fully realized that a new life had opened before him,

CHAPTER III.

THE INTERFERENCE OF ANTONIO SILVA.

OF the few men who act as head agents for the great European wild animal dealers, who pursue that unique and dangerous calling to the uttermost ends of the earth, Dermot Tearle was at this time an easy first. He had no equal, and feared none. The wild life of four continents had tanned and grizzled him, from the scorching suns of the Terai and the Soudan to the biting winds of the Sierras and Siberia. For twenty-five years he had studied the book of nature, learning the habits of beasts, birds, and reptiles, the while he trapped them in their lonely haunts, watched the fluctuating market-prices, and guided his caravans through savage places. He was shrewd at a bargain, whether with a dusky negro king or a manager of transport, and often he outwitted the agents of rival firms; by which it will be readily understood that he had made a few enemies.

Within forty-eight hours after Tom Dayleford was laid to rest, Tearle and Carruthers left Calcutta, taking Maurice with them, and also their two favourite Hindoo shikarees, Sher Singh and Fazl Khan, who had been in Hamrach and Company's employ for several years. The native servants remained at the warehouse, in charge of a small number of animals that were awaiting shipment.

The railway journey up-country, a matter of between five and six hundred miles, was broken at Mahdpur and thence resumed to Hazarabad, the

terminus of a branch line. The party were now in the Multanpur district of the Northwest Provinces—in a neighbourhood of hills and dense jungles that stretched to the distant slopes of the Himalayas, and were known to be infested with wild beasts. Tearle had a large order to fill—including at least one brace of tigers—and he lost no time in setting to work. Native assistants were hired at Hararabad, and the village carpenters began to build strong wooden cages. As soon as these were ready, and supplied with spans of oxen, the hunters moved a dozen miles to the south and established a camp in the heart of the jungle. Neither Maurice nor his two friends having been in this particular part of India before, they were unaware of the fact—it was one of little or no importance under ordinary circumstances—that they had crossed the border-line of the small native state of Seranghur, ruled, with the usual limitations, by the Raja of that name.

Here commenced the actual labours. Within a radius of eight miles deep pitfalls were dug and large traps constructed, the former being covered over with brush and leaves, while the latter, shaped somewhat like a mouse-trap, acted on the same principle. At the end of a fortnight half of the wooden cages were occupied. The pitfalls had yielded a young elephant and a pair of buffaloes, and a panther and a leopard had been taken in the traps. The animals were driven singly into the cages and hauled to camp by strings of oxen, which was, as may be imagined, a tedious and difficult task, in some instances a road having to be cut through the jungle. To Tearle's disappointment tigers were apparently scarce, and as yet none had been seen. But he was determined to

succeed, and kept the shikarees scouring the surrounding country; himself, with Maurice and Carruthers, meanwhile looking after the captives and providing them with the green stuff and flesh that they required for their food.

In the evenings, when work was done and the toilers were gathered about the camp-fire, Maurice had many a long chat with his friends, and the feelings of mutual good comradeship steadily ripened. The conversation often turned on the lad's early life, but he could recall little more than he had told the magistrates, and even that was beginning to fade from his mind.

During this comparatively uneventful period, there occurred an incident which Maurice had good cause never to forget. Among the cages was one that had been specially fitted up for the reception of reptiles, and on a certain day a snake-hunt was planned. The spot chosen was a sandy, open space in the jungle, not far off, covered with tall, parched grass and clumps of rock. Tearle posted his companions about this, and the grass having been set fire to at one side, it was not long until a swarm of ugly serpents came hissing and wriggling from their lairs. There was great excitement and scurrying to and fro. The natives, carrying long poles to which were attached hoops and bags, like huge butterfly nets, skilfully pursued and caught the many coloured snakes.

In the midst of the sport Sher Singh let fall his net, and as he sank to one knee to recover it a great cobra shot out of a rock cleft, rising erect from its coils. That the Hindoo was not immediately bitten was nothing short of miraculous. But the reptile, possessed by some strange freak, did not strike. Its reared head was less than a foot from the man's face. Its beady

eyes sparkled, its fangs darted in and out, and its spotted head swelled with anger. Sher Singh, with wonderful presence of mind, remained in his crouching attitude, motionless as a graven image. Not a muscle quivered, though his face turned the hue of ashes. Knowing that the slightest move would mean death, his mental agony must have been terrible.

Thus man and reptile confronted each other for perhaps a quarter of a minute, until Maurice, who was ten feet to the left, suddenly discovered the Hindoo's peril. He dare not step an inch closer. He had just one chance, and that a slim one. His net was in one hand, and with the other he drew a revolver from his belt, cocked it, and taking a careful aim fired.

The report rang sharply, and simultaneously the cobra dropped in a writhing mass, shot through the head. Sher Singh's muscles relaxed and he toppled over backward, to rise the next instant as cool and impassive as ever.

"You saved my life, Maurice Sahib," said he. "Sher Singh will not forget. He will always be your friend and protector."

"That's good of you," Maurice replied carelessly, "but I don't see that I've done anything to earn your eternal gratitude. It was an easy shot, and I should have been ashamed of myself had I missed."

With a shrug of the shoulders the Hindoo picked up his net, and the sport went on as if nothing had happened. Others had witnessed the episode, however, and that same evening it was the talk of the camp-fire.

Nearly a score of serpents were taken, and within a day or two they were packed carefully in sacks, between layers of matting, and sent down to Calcutta.

In the course of the week that followed Sher Singh stuck to Maurice's heels like a faithful hound, keeping constantly on the alert to guard him against possible harm, and rarely letting him out of sight.

The tigers still eluded capture, and Tearle, finally, growing weary of such prolonged ill-luck, set off one morning on an expedition to a wilder region in the north. He took Sher Singh and half a dozen natives with him, but Maurice, to his keen disappointment, was left behind to look after Carruthers, who was suffering from a mild attack of jungle fever.

Early the next day a Hindoo came into camp with stirring news. He was the head man of a village five miles to the south east, and he declared that a man-eating tiger was ravaging that neighbourhood, which Tearle's shikarees had omitted to visit. The beast had frequently been seen, and was a splendid specimen, full-grown and in the prime of life. It had killed several persons, besides cattle and goats.

"I knew that you were encamped here, Sahibs, the Hindoo concluded, "and on learning that you wished to take a tiger alive I started at once to bring the news."

Maurice's suggestion to despatch a messenger in search of Tearle was firmly opposed by Carruthers.

"No, I have a better plan," he said. "There is no time to waste, for the brute may go elsewhere. You know perfectly well what to do, so you must accompany this fellow to his village and capture the tiger yourself. It is hard luck, this fever, which ties me to my bed. But I am much better, and you need not fear to leave me."

Maurice hesitated at first, and then, secretly delighted, he accepted the task and vowed that he

would do his best to succeed. He chose Fazl Khan and three natives to assist him, and with as little delay as possible they set off, taking with them a cage filled with tools and other material, and drawn by four bullocks. The guide, whose name was Ramput, conducted them by a rugged and circuitous way, and on reaching their destination at sunset they found the village in a state of terror. Twenty-four hours earlier the tiger had carried off and devoured a poor grass-cutter, and for fear that it would return to seek a fresh victim, the people dared not venture outside their doors.

The head man assigned a hut to his guests, and they slept through the night without alarm. Rising at break of day, Maurice hired extra natives, loading some with the tools and instructing others to fell a number of young trees. Ramput led the party to the spot where the grass-cutter had been seized—a small jungle-glade, half a mile from the village. Dried blood was visible amid the grass, and near by was a nullah or water-course. There was every reason to believe that the man-eater was sleeping somewhere in the vicinity of his latest exploit.

For hours, under Maurice's supervision, the natives worked hard, while Fazl Khan kept constant vigil with a loaded rifle. The logs were cut at a distance—on the farther side of the village—and carried as noiselessly as possible to the place where they were required. By the close of the afternoon the trap was finished, and to the lad's satisfaction. The heavy door was lifted, and so arranged that it would crash down through the grooves directly the mechanism below was sprung. Then, having fastened a bleating goat inside the doorway, and a couple of yards

back, Maurice and his companions returned to the village.

Another night passed quietly, and at the first streak of dawn—the lad had been astir even before that—a motley procession might have been seen wending its way through the jungle, led by Maurice and the head man. Some of the natives, too impatient to wait, quickened their pace and disappeared in front, and soon afterwards they begun to clamour and cheer. .

“The tiger is caught!” exclaimed Ramput. “We have him! The wicked man-eater will trouble us no more.”

“It must be true, Sahib,” cried Fazl Khan, as the rest of the party came in sight of the glade. “The door has fallen.”

Maurice ran forward, shouting for joy, and out-distancing the others he marched boldly up to the trap, which nobody had as yet dared to inspect at close range. He heard a rasping snarl, and then a deep, angry roar, as he stooped down and put his eyes to a crevice of the logs. There was the mangled carcass of the goat, half-devoured—Ah! and there, sure enough, was the tiger, securely caught. He was bounding from side to side, vainly seeking to escape. A prize indeed! A monstrous fellow, plump and shapely, with superb stripes. The Hindoos crowded about the spot, their dusky faces reflecting the lad’s pleasure.

With an air of importance and pride Maurice gave instructions.

“Fetch the cage here as quickly as you can,” he said to the head man. “Take your people with you, Ramput, and don’t let them come back—except as many as you need to help you. They will only scare

the tiger, and make it harder to transfer him. All shall have a look at him in good time. Fazl Khan," he added, "you and I, with our own men, will remain to watch the trap."

Ramput and his followers obediently took themselves off, and in considerably less than an hour they returned—the head man and six companions—bringing the cage and the bullocks.

"Now then, get to work," directed Maurice.

A fire had meanwhile been started, in which to heat the irons that might be required. The movable part of the cage was lifted from the trucks and put in position against the front end of the trap, and a little later, just as the heavy door was about to be raised from above, an unpleasant interruption occurred.

Two men stepped quietly out of the thickets surrounding the glade. One was a lean, elderly native and the other, whose swarthy features proclaimed him to be a Portuguese, was tall, powerful, and sinister-looking, clad in blue flannels and hunting boots, and wearing his dark beard cut to a point. He carried a rifle and pistols, and a large leather wallet was slung over his shoulder.

A brief glance told the new arrivals what was taking place, and the Portuguese scowled with vexation.

"Have you the man-eater there?" he demanded, approaching Maurice.

"Yes," the lad replied. "I trapped him last night."

"He is my property," angrily declared the Portuguese, "and I claim him. This fellow," indicating his companion, "brought news of the

tiger to my camp yesterday. I set off with him at once, and we have been travelling through the night. Am I to have my trouble for nothing? No. The beast is mine."

"But we heard of him two days ago," exclaimed Maurice, trying to keep cool at this threatening crisis.

"It is impossible that you can have the slightest claim to the tiger. You must admit that, Senor Antonio Silva. The animal's real owner is Dermot Tearle."

At the mention of Tearle's name the Portuguese started, and his eyes flashed dangerously for an instant.

"You know me?" he muttered. "Ah, yes, you are the lad who lived with Tom Dayleford in Calcutta, I have seen you there. And now that Dayleford is dead, it appears that you are in the employ of Hamrach and Company. How is that?"

Maurice offered a brief explanation, and all the while he was quaking inwardly, for he knew the Portuguese to be a most unscrupulous rascal.

Antonio Silva listened with an evil smile.

"You deserve your good fortune," he said, "but I can do better for you. I am the agent, as you know, of Richter and Moss, the great firm of New York and Liverpool. My headquarters are at Madras, and my temporary camp is a few miles from here. If you join me you shall have a large salary, for I believe you are worth it. The matter is easily settled. We take the tiger and be off. Come, what do you say?"

"I am no traitor," Maurice replied. "That is my answer."

The Portuguese, with a harsh laugh, opened his leather wallet and showed that it was filled with coin.

“One hundred rupees, cash down,” he said, “if you accept.”

“Put up your money,” Maurice told him contemptuously. “I am not to be bought.”

Silva shrugged his shoulders, implying that he would waste no more breath on the lad. His keen eyes scanned the group for a moment, and then, shrewdly selecting Fazl Khan, he turned to him with his hands full of silver.

“Fifty rupees for you, and ten each for the others,” he said. “There’s a chance for you. I want the tiger, and all you need do is to haul him to my camp—the cage will be returned to its owner. But as many of you as are working for Dermot Tearle can remain with me, if you wish. I will pay you well.”

Fazl Khan, treacherous dog that he was, promptly yielded to the temptation and opened his palms for the promised reward. This was too much for Maurice. His anger roused beyond control, he sprang forward and threw himself between the two, dealing the greedy shikaree a blow that sent the coins flying out of his hands.

“You scoundrel,” he cried, confronting Silva, “leave my men alone.”

CHAPTER IV.

PERILS OF THE JUNGLE.

AN instant of silence followed the lad's daring interference. Fazl Khan, after spinning half-round in the effort to save his balance, had measured his length on the ground. His first thought was for the scattered coins, and he began to clutch at them here and there as he rose to his knees.

"The bantam cock crows loudly," said Antonio Silva, with a sneer, "but we'll see who wins in the end. The tiger is mine, and since you won't be reasonable, I'll have to make sure that you don't carry any tales back to Dermot Tearle. I'll give you a last chance, you obstinate dog, and if you still refuse I'll slit your throat as I would a—"

"Coward!" exclaimed Maurice, perceiving the other's hand dropping stealthily to his side; and with that, in his hot anger, he struck him a blow on the mouth. It was a mad thing to do, and as swiftly he realized the folly of it.

But the sober impulse came too late. Silva snarled like a wild beast and uttered a fearful oath. With blood oozing to his cut lips, his features hideous and distorted, he whipped a long-bladed hunting knife from his belt. Maurice quickly withdrew several paces and swung his rifle over his shoulder, ready to meet the threatened attack.

"Keep off," he cried. "I warn you in time."

He had no sooner spoken than the rifle was jerked

from his grasp by Fazl Khan, who had treacherously crept up behind the lad. Maurice was now defenceless, and the Portuguese, with murder in his eyes, was about to leap at him. He threw one glance towards the perfidious natives, and instantly abandoned all hope of aid from that quarter. There was but a single chance left, and he took it. He turned, dodging a blow from Fazl Khan, and darted at full speed across the glade.

“Stop him! Catch him!” roared Silva. “Twenty rupees to the man that brings him back.”

The loud offer, and the greedy cries that followed, spurred Maurice to harder efforts. A rifle cracked, and the ball whistled close to his head. A pistol began to bark at him, and the rapidly-fired chambers punctuated every stride that he made towards freedom and safety. None of the shots struck him, however, and soon he plunged into the green leafy shelter of the jungle.

Fortunately for the lad, his adventurous experiences during the past years had taught him some knowledge of scientific running. He sped on and on as fast as the tangled vegetation would permit, bearing frequently to right or left. At intervals he heard the trampling and shouting of his pursuers, now in one direction and now in another, until he was convinced that they had quite surrounded him. Still hopeful of escape, with courage undaunted, he crept on his stomach into a clump of dense grass and found a safe hiding-place between two stones.

Here the young fugitive lay for three or four hours, while his determined enemies scoured the neighbourhood, and frequently drew near the spot. Once the Portuguese and Fazl Khan passed close to the thicket

in which he was concealed, and he feared lest the loud beating of his heart should betray him.

“I’m as good as dead if I fall into Silva’s hands,” he told himself, “for rather than let me get back to camp, and report what has happened, the ruffian would kill me without mercy.”

The sounds of pursuit gradually faded away, and at the end of another hour, when all was quiet, Maurice ventured forth from his shelter. His situation was deplorable. He was in the midst of a dark and tangled jungle that was infested with wild beasts and serpents. He lacked food and weapons, having lost his rifle during his flight. But his inborn pluck kept him in good heart; and indeed he was too indignant to think of anything but how to turn the tables on his foes.

“We’ll see who gets the tiger in the end,” he muttered. “By this time Silva and his hired traitors have doubtless made off with the cage and the animal, so I’ll strike a bee-line for camp. I know what Dermot Tearle will do. Silva and that scoundrel Fazl Khan will feel pretty sore before we’ve finished with them.”

He started off, hesitated, and stopped. To head for camp in a bee-line was easier said than done. How was he to find the way? The gloom of the jungle was like twilight, and overhead was an unbroken sheet of intermatted foliage. A grey glimmer filtered through—that was all. However, after wandering aimlessly for twenty minutes, he came upon a wide-girthed tree, into which he climbed high, until he could catch a glimpse of the sun. Its position indicated several hours past noon-day.

Maurice had his bearings now, and knew that time was too precious to be wasted. Descending from the

tree he set off briskly in the proper direction, and for hours plodded the mazy recesses of the jungle, guided by an occasional peep at the sun. But the distance was far, and he perforce made slow progress. As evening approached, perceptibly deepening the shadows, he realized that it was impossible for him to reach the camp that night. He shuddered at the thought of the perils that encompassed him—perils at which the bravest of men in like circumstances must have quailed.

Twilight roused the savage guardians of the jungle and brought them forth from their lairs. Far and near they woke the sleeping echoes. A tiger roared thunderously, and a leopard answered with a plaintive wail. A great serpent wriggled through the grass with a hissing noise. The earth shook as a troop of elephants went crashing and trumpeting across the lad's front on their way to a drinking pool.

With a fast-beating heart, glancing fearfully to right and left, Maurice stumbled on his course, trying to keep his wits about him. His only hope, he knew well, was to find a tree large and stout enough to afford him shelter until morning. In vain he sought for one; all were undersized saplings that would have swayed down with his weight. A dry twig snapped behind him, and fancying that he heard stealthy, pattering footsteps, he began to run.

It was a blind, mad race, for sheer terror had robbed him of his self-possession. Stones bruised his ankles. Thorny bushes lacerated his hands and face, and blades of sword-grass cut like knives into his flesh. Twice he fell headlong, but rose and staggered forward. Suddenly his feet encountered something soft and yielding, and he felt himself to be sinking. He flung up his

arms with a shrill cry, and then down he plunged—down through empty space—to land heavily on his head and shoulders. His brain reeled, and he remembered no more.

Consciousness returned to Maurice as to one waking from a troubled sleep. He stirred, sat up with an effort, and looked about him. He recalled his terror, and the subsequent flight through the jungle, but could not tell how long a time had elapsed since his as yet mysterious accident, though he judged that it might be as much as half an hour, from the fact that the moon was casting a bright glimmer on the tree-tops high above him.

His back was sore, and his limbs and head ached. He was keenly alive to the pangs of thirst and hunger, which were beyond his power to assuage. But fortunately no bones were broken, as he thankfully realized when he rose to his feet. The next thing was to investigate his present whereabouts, and in a few moments, his eyes growing accustomed to the gloom, he solved the problem, uttering an exclamation of astonishment as he discovered that he had stumbled into a native pitfall built for the purpose of catching tigers. It was probably an old and neglected one, since it was not baited, as was the custom, with a live goat or kid.

“That’s all the better for me,” thought Maurice.

Here and there lay loose brush and bamboo poles, part of the covering that he had brought down with him in his blind descent. The pit was ten feet deep, by perhaps twelve in width and twenty in length, and on the bottom were planted a dozen upright and sharp-pointed stakes, the meaning of which was obvious. That the lad had escaped being impaled on one of these

was little short of miraculous. He made several futile attempts to climb the smooth, sheer walls of his prison, and then concluded that he was better off where he was.

"It's not such a bad place to spend the night," he reflected. "Wild animals are not likely to molest me here."

He had gathered a double armful of brush for bedding, and was about to carry it to one corner of the pit, when he heard a wheezing, shuffling noise. Frightened, he dropped his burden and looked up. A bar of moonlight was filtering through the jungle, and the silvery glow revealed a terrifying sight. On the brink of the pit stood a monstrous tiger, as immovable as though carved out of brass. Its eyes, like living coals, stared into the lad's own.

A fraction of a minute passed, neither uttering a sound, until the tiger opened its great jaws and gave a roar that echoed far through the jungle. Maurice dashed in fright to the opposite side of the pit, and as quickly the beast circled around after him. It was plainly ravenous with hunger and in search of a meal. For a time this grimly-sportive game continued, the lad dodging in all directions among the stakes, the tiger following tenaciously and with frequent roars.

It seemed that there could be but one ending to the contest, and Maurice shivered at the thought of it. He was losing strength and courage, and in vain he uttered shout upon shout; his voice merely inflamed the passions of his foe. Suddenly the brute crouched for a spring, its long body violently agitated, and as the lad leapt blindly, desperately away he saw over his shoulder the shadow of a flying form, and heard a sickening, crunching noise. Recoiling from contact with the nearest wall of earth, he turned to behold a welcome

sight—his ferocious enemy fast on the jagged stakes, impaled through fore and hind quarters.

“Thank Heaven!” he murmured.

For a few moments the beast struggled in the throes of its death agony, biting and bending the stakes and roaring with pain till the jungle re-echoed, while Maurice looked on with a dreadful fascination. Then the majestic head dropped limply, and as the last scream died out in a moan, a second tiger, huge and striped, appeared on the edge of the pitfall.

This was evidently the mate of the dead animal, and without doubt the tigress understood what had happened to her lord, and was determined to wreak vengeance. She fixed her burning eyes on the lad, and roared with grief and rage; then pattered round and round the brink, seeking a place to descend.

CHAPTER V.

MERVANJI THE THUG.

MAURICE now thoroughly believed that he was lost, and came near yielding to utter despair.

He had successfully rid himself of one hungry tiger, but what chance was there of eluding the other? The female was more cunning and crafty than the male, and would probably find a way to reach her intended victim and at the same time to avoid the peril of the stakes.

As the moon rose higher the silvery glow brightened around the verge of the pit. The tigress was a large and beautiful creature, and the lad could not help but admire her savage charms, hard pressed though he was to keep at the farthest possible distance from her monstrous head and paws. He slipped from side to side, taking care that several of the stakes were always between him and his enemy. He tried to pull one of them out of the ground, thinking that it might serve as a useful weapon, but it was planted too deeply to be moved. Meanwhile the brute's rage increased, and she roared long and often, waking a chorus of frightened snarls and cries from the prowling animals of the jungle.

Maurice still retained his presence of mind. He watched every movement of the foe, and now and then he fashioned a trumpet of his hands and shouted as loudly as he could; for he had a faint hope that a native village might be within hearing.

Presently, growing weary of futile trotting from

point to point, the tigress paused for a moment. She squatted on her hind-quarters, and thrust her head and fore-paws over the edge of the hole—just like a great cat. She quivered in every limb, and lashed her splendid tail; her eyes flashed fire, and her double rows of ivories shone white in the moon's rays. Now she crept a little closer, preparing to drop lightly into the pit.

Maurice retreated behind the farthest stakes, and there, trembling with ghastly fear, he awaited the end. An irresistible fascination held his gaze on the animal, on the huge jaws which he believed would shortly rend his body apart. A few seconds passed, and to the doomed lad they seemed as many minutes.

But just as the tigress was ready for the leap, when fate was trembling in the balance, the borders of the jungle rustled and snapped and a yellow light suddenly shone forth. Maurice, dazed for an instant, could scarcely credit his good luck. He saw the tawny beast wheel round and vanish. He heard hoarse shouting and a rifle-shot, blended with a ferocious, blood-curdling roar. Fire-arms rang twice. There was another roar, a brief scuffle, and all was still.

The flickering light approached the pit, and a hand appeared grasping a flaming torch. Two dusky faces looked down at the lad, and recognizing Fazl Khan and the evil-eyed servant of the Portuguese, he uttered a cry of joy. He was their prisoner, perhaps, but they had saved him from a horrible death. At the moment the sight of even Antonio Silva himself would have been welcome.

Fazl Khan took off his kummerbund, and lowered the silken folds into the pit, when Maurice tied a noose under his arms and was drawn to the top. He

saw the corpse of the tigress lying near, then turned to his rescuers, and noted with uneasiness their sinister expressions.

"I had a close shave of it," he said. "You got here just in the nick of time. Are you coming back to camp with me, Fazl Khan?"

The Hindoo scowled, and glanced at his companion.

"I will make your peace with Tearle," Maurice added. "He will forgive all when he learns how you saved my life."

"The young Sahib must die," declared Fazl Khan, with brutal frankness. "The Portuguese Sahib has said it. I am his servant now. And I hate Tearle Sahib, for once he beat me."

His eyes flashed at the recollection.

Realizing his awful plight, Maurice felt a sickening chill of horror course through his veins. He saw no chance of escape. Both of his captors were armed, and they would shoot him if he attempted to dash into the jungle. For an instant his brain was busy and fertile. At all hazards he must gain time.

"How did you find me?" he asked with forced composure.

"Mervanji is a jungle fellow," replied the shikaree, indicating his tawny comrade. "He has the scent of a jackal and the sight of a serpent. The Portuguese Sahib sent us on your trail. He bade us kill you, and bring him your head as a proof."

"Dead men betray not the living," croaked Mervanji, in a sepulchral voice. "It is written that you must perish, Sahib."

He looked intently at Fazl Khan, as if expecting a signal.

The lad's courage was ebbing fast. He knew that

the ruffians would do anything for greed of gold. But life was sweet, and he hated to yield it up to this pair of hired assassins.

“If you murder me the crime will be discovered,” he said hoarsely. “Fazl Khan, save my life. I have never done you an injury. Take me to my friends, and I swear that you shall have as many rupees as you may demand.”

The Hindoo obstinately shook his head, and Maurice saw that further pleading would be useless. He drew a deep breath, glanced at the surrounding jungle, and nerved himself for a rapid dash. But Fazl Khan, shrewdly divining the lad's purpose, suddenly seized him from behind, pinning his arms together. A brief struggle, noisy and desperate, ensued. It availed Maurice nothing, for he was like a child in the grip of the powerful shikaree.

“The rope,” cried Fazl Khan. “Be quick, Mervanji.”

From the folds of his tunic the native produced a thin, silken lariat, with a running noose at one end. The lad cried out with horror, and renewed his puny efforts to break away. He had recognized Mervanji, by a peculiar daub of red ochre on his breast, as a Thug—as one of that terrible sect of stranglers who have plied their nefarious vocation in India for centuries.

A hideous, gloating smile illumined Mervanji's evil countenance as, thrusting his torch into the ground, he approached with the rope. In vain Maurice made a last, frantic attempt to escape. The noose was slipped deftly over his head and he felt it tightening about his throat. He tried to shout, but only a choking sound came from his lips. Lights flashed before his eyes.

“Harder,” said Fazl Khan. “Finish him quickly.”

Crack ! There was a jet of flame and smoke, and a sharp report, from a thicket close to the right.

Mervanji dropped the end of the silken rope on which he was pulling, and with a gasping cry he bounded in air, clutching at his chest. Again he leapt, clearing the brink of the pit and toppling into space. Two of the sharpened stakes instantly spitted the Thug’s body, but he was dead before they touched him.

Terrified by the fate of his companion, Fazl Khan glanced in the direction whence the shot had come. He thrust the lad from him and took to his heels, not even waiting to snatch his rifle. A bullet whistled after him as he ran like a madman and vanished in the gloomy shadows.

The next moment, while Maurice stood swaying on his feet, dizzy and half-suffocated, a tall, dusky figure in white turban and waist-cloth, holding a smoking weapon, sprang into the glare of the torch. It was Sher Singh, and in a frenzy of delight he embraced the lad and tore the noose from his throat.

“Thank God !” Maurice exclaimed huskily. “And you, Sher Singh ! Why, I can hardly believe that I am alive. What a night I’ve had ! Are the others with you ? Where are they ?”

“Encamped in the jungle, at no great distance from here,” replied the faithful Hindoo. “I will tell you how it happened, Maurice Sahib. We returned from our expedition at midday, having met with no luck, and on learning that you had set off in search of a tiger, Tearle Sahib prepared to follow. We started shortly and travelled until sundown, when I was reluctant to stop. Fearing that you might encounter

danger and be in need of help, I pressed on alone—”

“You faced the night perils of the jungle for my sake?” interrupted Maurice.

“Why not, Sahib? Something seemed to bid me come. I was led as if by an invisible hand, until, at last, I heard your cries. Then I extinguished my torch and hastened to the spot, just as the assassins were about to murder you.”

“Your faithfulness saved my life,” said Maurice.

“Does the Sahib forget the cobra?” quietly replied Sher Singh. “I am always your slave. My life belongs to you.”

Maurice was not a little touched by this devotion; he was beginning to realize how far he had sounded the depths of an Oriental's gratitude. He described his thrilling adventures, and Sher Singh's usual stolidity gave way to unmeasured indignation. He invoked the wrath of his gods on the Portuguese and the perfidious natives.

After a glance at the dead tigers and the body of Mervanji the Thug, the lad and his rescuer set off for the distant camp, Maurice taking possession of Fazl Khan's rifle. It was a long and weary tramp, though not a dangerous one, since they carried firearms and blazing torches. About midnight they reached their destination, where they found Dermot Tearle and a force of eight natives. Carruthers was mending rapidly, but he had been left behind in charge of the main camp. The lad eagerly ate and drank, the while he told his story, and then he threw himself in a corner of the tent and slept like a log. Tearle's placid nature was roused to a pitch of fury, and it did not take him long to decide on a plan of action, which

he communicated to his companions at early day-break. A little later the party were travelling through the jungle, bound on an expedition to recover the stolen tiger and to punish Antonio Silva and his treacherous allies. They pressed on as fast as possible, since it was expected that Fazl Khan had already reached Silva's camp and put him on his guard.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FIGHT IN THE RAVINE.

THE village whose people had treated Maurice so perfidiously was reached two hours after day-break, and here a search was made for Ramput and his rascally companions ; for Tearle's blood was up, and he wanted to punish everyone. But none of the natives who had assisted Silva could be found. All were missing, including the head man, and it was reasonably certain that they had taken service with the Portuguese. Matters began to look serious, since Tearle's force numbered only eleven. However, by dint of perseverance and by a free display of silver, a man was presently discovered who swore he knew the way to Silva's camp and offered to act as guide. Moreover, in a short time he recruited a dozen fellow-Hindoos, armed with matchlocks and spears, and promised that they would fight like tigers for a rupee apiece.

This welcome addition raised Tearle's party to twenty-two. Of his own natives four carried rifles, as did himself, Maurice, and Sher Singh. He eagerly gave the word to start, and wrath had so blinded him to prudence that he forgot the consequences which might result from taking the law into his own hands ; nor did he remember that he was within the territory and jurisdiction of the Raja of Seranghur.

In very unmilitary fashion the savage band straggled out of the village, and made a brief halt at

the scene of Maurice's late adventure, where the tiger trap lay in ruins. From this point the wheel-ruts of the stolen cage were easily followed, and the guide led the way at a rapid pace.

The march was steadily kept up for three hours and more, along a tangled and rugged path, and then, the jungle-growth becoming thinner, the trail of the robbers emerged suddenly on a large open space that was trampled by many feet and scarred with recent fires. It was Antonio Silva's deserted camp-ground.

"What horrible luck!" cried Tearle. "The ruffian has fled."

"Yes, we're a little too late," assented Maurice, "but they can't be far ahead."

Sher Singh made a thorough examination of the clearing. "They have been gone two hours—not so much perhaps, he reported. "Behold, Tearle Sahib, the ashes of the fire are quite warm."

"Good!" exclaimed Tearle. "I was afraid they had left at sunrise. Luck is with us, my boy. On with you, men," he added. "Two rupees each if we overhaul and capture the Portuguese."

For such a sum the natives would brave anything. They picked up the continuation of the trail, and pushed forward with quick strides, oblivious to heat and fatigue. Tearle and Maurice grew more hopeful at every step, for the freshly-beaten path indicated that Silva's party were burdened with quite a number of cages. Surely they could not much longer hold the lead.

Mid-day came and passed, and between one and two o'clock, as Tearle and the guide were marching at the head of the band, they caught a glimpse of a

turbaned head moving some twenty yards beyond them. Tearle lifted his rifle and fired, and with the report a half-naked Hindoo, terrified by his narrow escape from death, leapt recklessly into the path. As swiftly he sprang back to cover and vanished.

"I didn't mean to kill the fellow," said Tearle. "I merely wanted him to show himself. A spy, I suppose."

"Without doubt, Sahib," exclaimed Sher Singh. "He was put here to watch. The Portuguese must be close by."

"He will know by the shot that we are in pursuit, before the spy can overtake him," declared Maurice.

The news spread from mouth to mouth, and excitement rose to fever-heat. The little band hurried on at an increased speed, each man preparing for a possible fight. Sher Singh, slipping alongside of Maurice, begged him not to expose himself needlessly.

"I'm not going to skulk at the rear, if that is what you mean," the lad replied, a trifle indignantly. "Every rifle may be needed, and I know how to use mine."

"Beware of the Portuguese and Fazl Khan," urged the shikaree. "They are to be feared, Sahib."

"They are just the chaps I want to meet," vowed Maurice. "Don't worry, Sher Singh, I shall be careful."

Five minutes later the jungle ended on the verge of a grassy, level plain that was perhaps a half-mile across. On the farther side was a range of low, densely-timbered foothills, with high peaks towering beyond them. And in the middle of the open stretch, thrilling sight! was the quarry that had inspired such a determined chase. No less than seven stout

wooden cages, mounted on solid wheels, were jolting heavily over the soft ground, the bullocks now breaking into a gallop, now relaxing to a sullen trot, as the drivers ran alongside and plied their whips unsparingly. Right and left were a score or so of natives, and Silva's figure was to be recognized in front, astride of a dark horse; with him were several white companions, probably Portuguese.

"Faster! faster!" cried Tearle. "The scoundrels are pushing for yonder hills, and they'll give us serious trouble unless we can catch them up in the open."

With loud clamour the pursuers dashed over the plain and perceptibly gained on the enemy, who were making desperate efforts to escape. Some of the fleeing natives turned occasionally to discharge their matchlocks, and at this Tearle bade his own men fire high, hoping that the robbers might be induced to pull up and stand at bay. The spluttering fusillade increased. Bullets sang like bees through the air, and puffs of bluish smoke went wreathing towards the burning sky.

However, Tearle had incorrectly gauged the temper of his implacable foe. The procession of cages, instead of coming to a halt, rumbled forward with undiminished speed. They were now left entirely to the care of the drivers, for Silva, with nearly the whole of his force, had fallen a few yards behind, as if to guard the rear. But such was their intention only in part. Silva and his white companions were seen to dismount and give their horses in charge, and the next instant, wheeling suddenly round, they led an obstinate rush towards their pursuers, firing as they advanced in open order.

“Steady, men, steady!” beseeched Tearle.

The daring attack was unexpected, and the sight of the on-rushing foe, and the angry whistle of bullets, proved too much for the Englishman’s supporters, who lost courage and began to retreat in confusion. One was shot dead. A ball carried away Maurice’s cap, and another grazed Sher Singh’s shoulder. Tearle, hit in the fleshy part of the left arm, hastily bound up the wound and shouting to them wrathfully tried to rally his scattered followers.

Maurice and Sher Singh did good work by getting around both flanks and threatening to shoot the skulkers, and the result was that the panic was soon allayed. The natives rose from the grass, where they had sought safety, and with valorous shouts came forward. But by this time the enemy had swiftly fallen back, having gained the advantage that had prompted the rush. They overtook the caravan, and the maddened bullocks swept at full-speed in the direction of the near-lying hills.

“Three rupees each if you check them on the plain,” roared Tearle. “Three rupees, men! Let me see how you can fight.”

Their greed thus appealed to, the motley herd pressed after their three leaders, not delaying to pick up the dead man. Slowly but surely they gained on the robbers.

Rifles began to crack again. On tore the clumsy, wheeled boxes, careening from side to side of the path, and the shelter of the hills was very close when all at once the rearmost cage struck a stone and went over with a crash. The timbers burst apart and out leapt a huge panther. Instantly the

animal seized a native by the throat, bit him horribly, and then disappeared in the tall grass.

Naturally the accident caused delay and confusion, and while the bullocks were being cut loose from the broken cage the band of pursuers made a considerable gain.

"We've got them now," cried Tearle. "A bold dash will scatter the rascals like sheep. Don't waste your powder, men."

But another bitter disappointment was in store. At a few words of command from Silva a line of natives, a dozen or more in number, spread quickly to right and left. What they meant to do was soon alarmingly apparent. From various points rose curls of thick, yellowish smoke, and a moment later the flames, united in a lurid sheet, were rolling towards the Englishman's party. The enemy, half-hidden in the rear, uttered savage yells of triumph.

A fairly stiff breeze was blowing from the hills, and it furiously fanned the conflagration in three directions, driving it forward and spreading it on both flanks. The roaring red line, a leaping wave of fire, advanced like a devouring monster, consuming the dry, parched grass with amazing rapidity. At first there threatened to be no escape, and for a brief instant Tearle's natives huddled together in helpless, stupid panic. To advance was impossible, and they must speedily be overtaken by the flames if they tried to flee back to the jungle.

Maurice's stout heart quailed in the presence of so terrible a fate, and Tearle's face was stamped with grim despair. Thus the leader stood for a moment, and then, with a ringing shout and a gesture, he drew his companions about him. He pointed to the left,

where the curving line of fire could be seen to terminate in a yellow veil of smoke.

"Our only chance," he cried. "Follow me, and don't lose your courage or your weapons. We must circle around the flames. I believe we'll get Silva yet, my lad."

His words inspired hope and confidence, and every man was at his heels as he started off through the clumps of grass. Sher Singh took hold of Maurice's arm, and assisted his flight. A desperate race for life ensued, and the issue was uncertain till the very end. Clouds of smoke drifted past the plucky fellows, and they breathed scorching air and sparks. But they plunged on, guided by Tearle's tall figure, and just when an agonizing death seemed inevitable they staggered out from the lurid, smoky curtain, and splashed knee-deep across a pool of water.

On the farther side they paused for breath, watching the flames race by, and then turned with one impulse to scan the plain with their smarting eyes. It was quite empty. The last of the cages was in the act of vanishing into a narrow defile between two of the foothills.

"Too late!" Maurice cried angrily. "It will take an army to drive them from that position."

"Not so, lad," vowed Tearle. "We have the strength to do it, and do it we will, or my name's not Dermot Tearle. But we must set about the task at once, and take the dogs by surprise. They will hardly be expecting an attack now. What think you, Sher Singh?"

"As the Sahib thinks," replied the shikaree. "It is a bad place, and there will be danger, but if all can be relied upon—"

"I will see to that," Tearle interrupted. "We are going to continue the chase into the mountains," he added to the natives, "and I expect you to show courage and earn your rupees. If you stand up to these robber *budmashes* they will run like jackals."

He was answered by approving shouts, and a glance at the earnest, eager faces of the Hindoos satisfied him that they were to be trusted.

There was a hasty loading of weapons and looking to small arms, after which the score of smoke-grimed figures moved forward over the charred and smouldering plain, giving little thought to the whirlwind of flames behind them. They reached the foothills within a few yards of the pass that had swallowed the enemy, and were soon swarming up the narrow, rugged defile, between towering walls of rock and serried vegetation. What road there was twisted right and left, and was at no point visible for more than a short distance, owing to many jutting angles.

"This is the sort of thing that tries one's nerves," said Maurice.

"Ay, that's right," assented Tearle. "The crack of a rifle would be a relief, eh? But I don't believe we are near the scoundrels yet."

"Be assured, Sahib," declared Sher Singh, "that sharp eyes are watching us."

Amid ominous silence they advanced, and had gone a thousand yards, when suddenly, from the next turn above, the roar of a matchlock woke the echoes and was followed by a flight of spears. One of the natives dropped, but before the others could lose heart Tearle's command to charge rang loud and shrill. Straight up the road swept the whole band, yelling

and firing, and directly they were around the curve they found themselves face to face with the robbers, among whom neither Silva nor Fazl Khan was to be seen.

Here instantly began a struggle at close quarters, a hand-to-hand fight. Cries of pain and fury blended with the thud of hog-spears and rifle-locks and the swish of rusty tulwars. Tearle and Maurice were in the thick of it, and the lad struck out vigorously, his every movement observed by the faithful Sher Singh.

“No pistols if we can do without them,” shouted Tearle.

Cold lead was not needed—as yet. The outnumbered wavered, drew back, and fled in confusion, leaving behind them two dead and two wounded. The victors noisily pushed their advantage, inflamed by passion and bloodshed, and a couple of minutes later a sharp bend brought them into full view of the cages, which were drawn up in a line at the base of the steep cliff on the left. On the opposite side of the narrow road yawned a dizzy precipice, and sixty feet below a mountain torrent brawled and foamed.

At this perilous spot occurred the worst of the fighting, for the fleeing Hindoos, turning at bay, were promptly reinforced by the rest of the band, including Fazl Khan, Silva, and two other Portuguese. Rifles and revolvers cracked, and a mist of powder-smoke overhung the scene. Maurice and Sher Singh were hemmed in by a circle of foes, and the lad, having felled one of them and broken his weapon by the force of the blow, was about to use his pistol when a stone knocked it out of his grasp.

"Take this, Sahib," cried the shikaree, thrusting a short, curved sword into his companion's hand. At the same instant he tore a spear from one of his assailants, and immediately ran the fellow through the chest.

Maurice had his work cut out for him. He slashed right and left, drawing blood, and then swung his weapon for a stroke at a new enemy who had just appeared on the scene, and was none other than the treacherous Fazl Khan. His evil face blazed with hatred.

"Die, pig of a Sahib," he snarled, as he took aim with a pistol.

Quick as lightning the lad's sword flashed, knocking the firearm upward, so that it was harmlessly discharged in the air. The keen blade went even farther, and laid Fazl Khan's cheek open to the bone. With a cry of rage the Hindoo leapt at Maurice and seized him in his muscular arms. They fell together, the lad making a desperate struggle to free himself.

Unconsciously they rolled to the outer edge of the path, and before either could realize the danger they had plunged into space,

CHAPTER VII.

THE LAST OF FAZL KHAN.

THE spot at which the disaster had occurred was dangerous to life and limb. The cliff fell sheerly down for twenty feet, below which was a hardly less precipitous slope of rock, undergrowth, and young timber, reaching to the brink of the torrent.

Swift as an arrow Maurice and Fazl Khan cleft the air, and skimming the surface of the rock-wall, their descent was first checked by a protruding thicket. They crashed into it with great force, and Fazl Khan, who happened to be the undermost, bore the brunt of the shock. But both were stunned, and very little consciousness was left between them as they recoiled from the bushes and whirled on to the bottom of the cliff, still locked in a tight embrace. Bruised and bleeding, they plunged with a tremendous splash into a deep, circular pool of icy water, above and below which a fierce current roared and foamed amid jagged boulders.

The effect of the cold bath was to immediately revive the combatants. A brief struggle freed Maurice from the grip of his enemy, and up he bobbed to the surface, gasping for breath. An instant later Fazl Khan's head and shoulders rose a little to the left. The wound on his cheek lent him a horrible appearance, and there was murder in the frenzied glare that flashed from his eyes.

"Dog of a Sahib, I'll have your life," he cried :

and with that he swam vigorously towards the lad, leaving crimson stains in his wake.

Maurice himself was a good swimmer, and at once he struck out for the nearest edge of the pool, hoping to scramble ashore in time to elude his determined foe. However, neither had reckoned with the unseen force that lurked beneath the placid waters. A sucking undertow suddenly clutched its victims with a grasp from which there was no escape, and first the lad was drawn through a narrow aperture at the lower end of the pool, the Hindoo following at a slower pace, since his powers of resistance were greater. Then, battling wildly and vainly to stem the current, both were tossed about like corks, flung from wave-crest to wave-crest, as they shot down the spumy stretch of the torrent.

At this critical moment Sher Singh, who had been hard-pressed in the thick of the strife, gained an opportune breathing-spell and looked anxiously round him to see what had become of Maurice. He missed the lad, and fearing that he had been killed he sought for him among the fallen, heedless of the risks to which he was exposing himself. Then he hastened to the verge of the cliff, and casting his eyes far down into the ravine, he perceived two figures battling for life in the boiling cascades of the mountain stream. The distance was too great for positive recognition, but he was satisfied that Maurice was one of the two.

Forgetting his duty to his employers and the help that was expected of him, the devoted shikaree turned his back on the fighting and ran fleetly along the sloping path for thirty yards. He soon discovered what he was in search of—a spot where the cliff fell at a slight angle, and was broken by projecting crags

and tufts of stout grass. With a long spear grasped in one hand, he made his way down the dizzy incline, clutching at everything that offered the least support. Having safely reached the lower slope of stones and undergrowth, he increased his speed and gained the verge of the torrent.

Meanwhile, to go back a little, what had become of Maurice and Fazl Khan? The lad forgot for the moment the enemy behind him, and had all that he could do to save himself from drowning, as he was whirled on and on, now high on the crest of the pitching waves, now deep under the green waters. His frantic struggles were futile. He was as helpless as an infant. Again and again he collided with submerged rocks, and each second promised to be his last. He was bruised and half-choked, in the throes of suffocation, when, as he was lifted on the swell, he saw a jagged boulder close ahead. As quickly he reached blindly for it, and seized it in both arms.

For an instant he held fast in spite of the angry buffeting of the waves. Then, his strength returning a little, he was in act of drawing himself to a safer position when Fazl Khan came swinging alongside. The Hindoo saw and caught the rock, and while he clung tight with one hand he raised the other and struck the lad brutally in the face.

“Drown, you dog!” he shrieked. “Drown!”

At the third blow Maurice lost his grip, and with a cry of despair on his lips, with Fazl Khan’s mocking laughter ringing in his ears, he was borne away by the merciless tide. Again he battled for life, tossing like a shuttlecock amid foam and spray, while the torrent seemed to grow wilder and swifter; and again, the current doing him a good turn, his mad flight to

destruction was checked by another jagged crag that rose a short distance to the right of mid-channel. He embraced it with both arms, and gradually gained a securer hold with his knees. He now had a fair chance, for between the rock and the bank of the stream lay a comparatively quiet eddy.

"As soon as I am a little stronger," he thought, "I can swim or wade to shore."

But suddenly he remembered Fazl Khan, and glancing swiftly about him, he was horrified to perceive the Hindoo in the very act of scrambling out of the water. He had safely fought across the strip of raging billows that intervened. Before the lad could make an effort to swim the eddy his blood-thirsty foe was limping towards him with eager strides, carrying a stone of some pounds' weight which he had stopped to pick up.

An icy shiver coursed through Maurice's veins. He was face to face with death; apparently not a ray of hope was left. A few yards below the stream plunged down a slanting ledge of rocks, and lost itself in a boiling, funnel-shaped whirlpool. To release his hold, and trust himself once more to the current, would be nothing short of suicide.

Already Fazl Khan had reached a point on the rugged shore that was directly opposite to his intended victim. His dusky, lacerated countenance was distorted with vindictive triumph.

"Fig of a Sahib!" he hissed, as he lifted the stone in his hands. "Naught can save you this time. your body shall go to feed yonder whirlpool."

"Have mercy," begged Maurice, though he knew that it was useless to ask. "don't kill me in cold blood."

“A lakh of rupees would not purchase your life,” snarled the ruffian. “The spirit of Mervanji the Thug calls for vengeance.”

For a moment, with gloating enjoyment of his victim's torture, the Hindoo held the engine of death poised in air. He waited a second too long, and that brief respite saved Maurice. A spear, cast with unerring aim from a clump of bushes, penetrated Fazl Khan's back and emerged between his ribs. The stone fell from his nerveless grip, and with a horrid, gurgling cry he toppled headforemost into the water. The current rolled the mangled body to the edge of the whirlpool, where it was instantly sucked down into the churning depths.

The tragedy was so quickly done and over that Maurice had scarcely realized his good fortune when Sher Singh came leaping among the rocks to the brink of the torrent. With a cry of joy the faithful shikaree plunged into the eddy, breasted his way to the rock, and dragged the lad to the bank. His eyes flashed as he looked at the furious waves which had exultantly swallowed the corpse of Fazl Khan.

“Sahib, speak to me,” he implored.

For a minute or two Maurice lay silent, helpless, on a patch of soft grass, glancing with mute gratitude at his preserver. Then his strength slowly rallying, he was able to sit erect.

“I owe you my life twice over, Sher Singh,” he said huskily. “I was so near death that I can hardly believe I am alive. How shall I ever repay you—”

“Waste not your breath, Sahib,” the Hindoo interrupted, “for you will need it. There may be great perils to face. Listen! they are still fighting savagely.”

Sher Singh was right. Down the rocky gorge

floated hoarse yells and the clanging sounds of strife. There was nothing to indicate a victory for either side.

"We must hasten to our friends," said Maurice, as he rose unsteadily to his feet. "If they are in straits they will require our assistance. I suppose there can be no doubt that Fazl Khan is dead?" he added.

"The traitor's body is tossing from rock to rock," replied Sher Singh, pointing to the torrent. "His fate was more merciful than he deserved. Come Sahib, your words are wise. We must gain the road above."

"How are we going to do that?" asked Maurice, looking in despair at the sheer precipice.

"Farther down the valley the slope grows less rugged," the Hindoo answered, "and, moreover, there will be the less danger of meeting any of the foe. My arms are strong. I will carry you."

"No, I can manage well enough," protested Maurice. "I feel all right, except for a few bruises and a headache."

He proved the assertion by vigorously shaking the water from his clothes and walking a few paces over the rough stones. Sher Singh was satisfied, and without comment he led his companion along the bank of the stream. They were soon a couple of hundreds yards below the scene of Fazl Khan's death, and the sounds of battle from the distance rang fainter and fainter. A little farther on the steep sides of the valley fell away to timbered slopes, and here the two began the ascent.

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW THE FIGHT ENDED.

EXCITING scenes had been taking place on the arrow path, high above the torrent while Maurice was facing death below. So fierce was the hand-to-hand struggle that the disappearance of the lad, and later that of Sher Singh, went unheeded. The situation almost precluding the possibility of flight, Silva's party fought with grim desperation, and Tearle's personal bravery and pluck inspired his handful of followers. For a time the contest was waged stubbornly and unyieldingly on both sides.

At length, extricating himself from a tangle of foes, Tearle swung his rifle round him and cleared a wide swath. His face was bloody and powder-grimed, and he was a formidable figure to his enemies.

"Come on, my brave fellows," he shouted. "At them again. They are giving way."

The natives responded willingly, and their cries nearly drowned the clash and thud of weapons. The two Portuguese belonging to Silva's party were craven cowards at heart. They were poorly armed, and, moreover, they foresaw the certainty of defeat. Breaking suddenly from the circle they dashed up the path, and in less time than it takes to tell they had vanished beyond the cages. No pursuit was thought of or attempted.

"Let the dogs go," exclaimed Tearle, as he struck right and left with untiring energy. "We are well rid of them. The fight is ours. One more rush, my lads."

It was given eagerly, and now, the dusky forms closing in, the end was seen to be near. The desertion of his trusted allies had brought a flash of anger to Silva's eyes, and for an instant he too had meditated flight; but while he hesitated the opportunity was lost, and he and the remnant of his band were forced back against the cliff. Here was a brief and bitter struggle, blood flowing freely, until Tearle cleared his way to the front and found himself face to face with Silva. The two leaders were armed with rifles, and using these as if they had been cudgels they parried each other's blows for a moment. Then, Silva's weapon parting at the stock, he reeled back against the rocky wall, expecting his death blow to follow. An impulse of mercy, however, withheld Tearle from striking.

"The law shall deal with you as you deserve," he vowed. "The game is up—surrender, and spare your men."

"Never!" hissed Silva. "Malediction on you!"

With that, snatching a short spear from a native, he hurled it straight at his enemy. Tearle, though unprepared for such a treacherous deed, dodged swiftly to one side and thereby narrowly escaped instant death. The weapon passed under his right arm, and whizzing on with undiminished force, it buried itself in the fore-flank of one of the bullocks that were harnessed to the nearest cage.

Immediately happened a strange thing, and it was so swift and unexpected that Tearle had no chance of stretching the Portuguese lifeless on the ground, as he had intended to do. Maddened by pain the bullock swung half-round, dragging his mates with him. The cage was thrown over, and it struck the hard path with

a force that jarred the timbers apart. From between them at once squeezed a hairy head and a pair of wicked-looking horns, which were followed, after a further rending of wood, by the huge body of a wild buffalo.

In all India there is no beast more to be dreaded at close quarters or when in a rage, and this particular specimen had been worked into a perfect frenzy by the noise of the fighting. He caught sight of his natural enemies, sniffed the air, and bellowed hoarsely. Then, with lowered head, he charged like a hurricane down the narrow path.

It was ludicrous to see how quickly the fight came to an end. There was a general scramble in various directions, the men of both parties jostling one another. Some ran to the verge of the precipice and swung dangling in space, and others, Tearle among them—he was the first to set the example—scrambled like cats up the rugged face of the cliff.

For a brief moment, dazed and maddened by his defeat, Silva stood still, and when he realized his peril it was too late to gain safe shelter. He turned down the path and fled at his topmost speed. The buffalo whirled by, ruthlessly trampling the bodies that lay in its course. Bellowing and snorting it sped on in pursuit of the Portuguese, while Tearle, with some of the natives, hastened along in the rear, fascinated by the excitement of the chase. The remainder of the foe, seizing this ripe opportunity, disappeared up the gorge without waste of time.

Silva was in a bad plight, though for more than a hundred yards he managed to keep ahead of his determined enemy. Then his strength began to fail him and he rapidly lost ground, encumbered as he was by boots and clothing.

“Jump into the ravine,” shouted Tearle, “or try to climb the hill on the other side.”

Either the Portuguese did not hear, or he was too frightened and confused to understand; he wheeled suddenly round, and as quickly the infuriated brute was upon him with lowered horns and bloodshot eyes. The man, tossed in air, was thrown to the right, so that he came down on the timbered slope, half a dozen feet above the level. He clutched at the undergrowth and held fast for an instant, then crawled slowly and painfully into the thick foliage and vanished from sight.

The buffalo stamped and snorted, glaring this way and that in search of his victim. For a moment he had thoughts of charging the little party in his rear, and turned to shake his shaggy head at them; but instead he went pounding down the path, a curve of which soon hid him from view.

It was now that Tearle, for the first time, missed Sher Singh and Maurice, and the discovery naturally banished all else from his mind. Before he could conjecture what had become of them, however, the absent ones appeared over the brink of the gorge, twenty yards below. The others hurried to meet them, and Maurice, who was exhausted by the steep climb, clung limply to the shikaree's arm as he related his thrilling adventures and timely rescue,

“Fazl Khan got no more than he deserved,” was Tearle's comment. “I shan't forget what you've done, Sher Singh. Thank God that you are safe, my lad. I could not have spared you.” He briefly told his side of the story. “That scoundrel of a Portuguese must not escape,” he concluded, turning to the natives. “He was undoubtedly injured by the buffalo's horns, and can't have crawled very far, I should think.

Search the hill, men. Look closely among the stones and bushes. I'll divide fifty rupees among you if you capture Silva."

Incited by the generous offer the natives swarmed up the bluff, to straggle back, in twos and threes, within a quarter of an hour. Out of their mixed stories was gleaned one conclusive fact; namely, that Antonio Silva, who could not have been badly hurt after all, had reached the dense line of timber that stretched along the base of the hills.

"Well, that is the end of the fellow, for the present," said Tearle. "It would be useless to pursue him. Come, we are wasting time here;" and he led the way up the path.

On arriving at the scene of the late fight half a dozen of Silva's party, who had boldly crept back to recover the cages, were taken by surprise. Four succeeded in escaping and two surrendered, though the latter were subsequently set at liberty. The victory was a dearly-bought one, Tearle having lost two men killed and Silva three, while several severely wounded natives of both parties were lying about. It was a matter for regret that the treacherous Ramput was among the missing.

Everything possible was promptly done. The path was cleared and the injured were placed on litters made of boughs and tenderly cared for; their wounds were bandaged and water was brought for them from the ravine, Sher Singh volunteering for that task. By Tearle's orders the dead and wounded foemen were put in a shady spot by the base of the cliff.

"No doubt their friends will return and carry them off," he said. "Our own dead we will take back to the village where they belong."

“And what is to be done with Silva’s animals ?” inquired Maurice. “Can we regard them as the spoils of war ?”

“I’m afraid not, my lad,” Tearle replied. “But the wisest course will be to take them with us, and then, in case any trouble grows out of this affair, we can turn them over to the proper authorities.”

“Trouble !” Maurice asked uneasily.

“That’s what I said. And trouble it is likely to be, sooner or later. We have taken the law into our own hands, you know, and we may be called to account for it.”

“There was no other way,” declared Maurice, indignantly. “Where would our tiger be now if we had waited to appeal to the nearest magistrate instead of going in pursuit of Silva ?”

“True enough,” assented Tearle, “and that is precisely why I acted as I did. I admit that I did not anticipate any loss of life. However, we must make the best of it. Don’t worry, lad, we’ll pull through all right. But come, we’ll have a look at the *casus belli*, if that’s good Latin.”

Maurice followed him to the cage containing the tiger, who was indeed a magnificent brute. He glared at his visitors from between the stout bars, and snarled ferociously.

“Such a prize is well worth all we have gone through,” said Tearle. “I don’t wonder that Silva wanted the animal. And it was you did the trapping, lad. You are getting on famously.”

Maurice thrilled with pride that was tempered by a note of sadness.

“Poor Tom taught me,” he reflected. “I wish he was alive.”

Altogether five cages remained intact. The tiger occupied one, and another was half-filled with camping paraphernalia. The other three contained respectively a black panther, a leopard, and a pair of hyenas. Their combined value represented no small amount of money, a loss which the Portuguese was not likely to bear with equanimity or inaction.

When twilight fell that evening the gorge and the surrounding forests were miles behind, and Tearle and his companions, with the string of cages, were in camp on the opposite-lying side of the plain which they had traversed earlier the same day, in pursuit of the marauders. Sentries were posted here and there, and huge fires were built, these precautions being deemed necessary lest Silva should collect a force of wild hill-men in the vicinity and make a night attack.

The dreaded hours of darkness passed without alarm, however, though there was little sleep for any one, owing to the groans of the suffering natives and the cries of the imprisoned animals. The bullocks, deprived of sufficient food and water, bellowed incessantly. With the first flush of dawn a start was made, and Tearle, in spite of the feverish conditions caused by his wound, marched at the head of the convoy. The village was reached by noon, and here there was an anxious scene, with loud lamentations, when the dead and injured were brought in. But the people were in a reasonable mood, and were easily pacified by the rupees that Tearle shared among them, their wrath being directed against Silva and his allies, especially the perfidious Ramput, who would have fared badly indeed had he happened to appear at that time.

Within an hour, having paid off his hired fighting-men, Tearle was pressing on with the handful of companions that were left to him. The sorely-taxed bullocks crawled slowly through the tangle of miry paths, making another night in the jungle imperative, so that the following day was half spent when the weary travellers arrived at their camp, where they found Carruthers quite well again, and with only good news to report.

He rejoiced at the capture of the tiger, but looked grave when he heard the complete story of the expedition. He and Tearle shut themselves up in the tent for several hours, holding a secret consultation, and meanwhile Maurice and Sher Singh attended to the placing of the new cages and to the feeding and watering of the bullocks and wild beasts.

Whatever conclusion Tearle and Carruthers may have reached, they were in cheerful enough spirits that night, when, the evening meal finished, they lounged by the camp-fire and enjoyed the solace of tobacco; nor did they drop a single word as to the possibility of future trouble, preferring to hold the conversation on pleasanter subjects.

"This life seems to suit you, my boy," said Carruthers.

"I love it," Maurice frankly admitted.

"And you are well-fitted for it. Poor Dayleford has taught you pretty much all he knew himself. It's a pity, though, that he died without revealing what knowledge he had of your past, without telling how you came into his hands."

"He meant to tell me," Maurice said, in a husky voice, "but—but he never got the chance."

Tearle, puffing hard at his pipe, looked out from

the cloud of tobacco-smoke with a sudden show of interest.

“Is your memory any clearer, my lad,” he asked, “than it was the day the magistrates questioned you? Do you recall no more than you did then?”

“Nothing more,” replied Maurice. “The travelling circus, the dark man who took me to London, the years on ship-board with Captain Bonnick, the beginning of the new life with Tom—that is all. He hesitated for a moment. “But there is something—I haven’t spoken of it before—that keeps coming into my mind,” he added. “The night Tom was murdered he told me that he had wronged me, and that his lips were sealed by hush-money; and he said he might have helped me to find my parents, but that he didn’t know who they were.”

“Did Dayleford tell you all that?” asked Carruthers, with a significant glance at Tearle.

“Yes, those were almost his very words,” declared the lad.

A disturbance among the bullocks interrupted the discussion, and a little later, after Maurice had sought his bed and was sleeping soundly, Tearle and Carruthers picked up the broken thread over their last pipes.

“It’s a mysterious case, and a mighty deep one,” said the former.

“With a crime back of it,” hinted Carruthers.

“I shouldn’t wonder. This is a wicked world, old man. It is certain, to my mind, that the boy comes of good stock—his face shows that plainly enough.”

“And his pluck and manners,” assented Carruthers. “Breeding counts every time. Suppose we try to

get to the bottom of this affair, while we are knocking about the globe."

"With all my heart," Tearle answered. "We'll do what we can. And I'll tell you one thing straight, once we've found Captain Bonnick, it won't be necessary to inquire much further."

CHAPTER IX.

A MARVELLOUS GIFT.

THE better part of a week went by quietly and uneventfully, so far as those words can be applied to the daily duties of the wild beast hunters. There was no reason to fear that Antonio Silva had sworn any complaint before the local authorities, or that he was planning reprisals on his own responsibility; in the former case, however, since the neighbourhood was so wild and lonely, a lengthy period might elapse before the nearest magistrate or military commandant could take action.

The trapping operations had been more successful and remunerative of late, and most of the cages were filled. It would soon be time to return to Calcutta, whence the animals would be shipped to Hamburg or London, and meanwhile fresh instructions were certain to be received from the firm.

To what quarter of the globe the agents would be ordered next was a question that offered a wide range of surmise, and one baking, scorching afternoon it came up for discussion in camp. Tearle and Carruthers were stretched full length beneath a tent-flap, gasping and perspiring, and at their feet sat Maurice, looking rather more comfortable. Close by squatted Sher Singh, as calm and impassive as a bronze idol.

“Hamrach never knows his own mind till the last minute,” Carruthers was saying. “He may order us to the Rocky mountains, or to the Himalayas, or

the Terai, or the forests of the Congo, or to the desert beyond Suakim—”

“It is more likely that we shall sail with the animals for Hamburg,” interrupted Tearle. “I am glad, at all events, that we are shortly going down to Calcutta.”

“You are still worrying about Silva, then?” asked Carruthers.

“Yes, a little. He can easily trump up a black and damaging charge and lay it before the authorities. And his beasts and cages are in our possession. It would have been the wiser plan, I begin to think, to have abandoned them in the mountains. I hardly know what to do with them now.”

“They are valuable, too,” said Maurice. “That black panther in particular ought to be worth—”

“They really ought to belong to the house that Silva represents, Richter and Moss,” broke in Carruthers. “They have an agency in Madras, and Jules Vanberg looks after their interests in Calcutta. We might turn the lot over to him.”

“A good idea!” approved Tearle. “That solves the difficulty. A few more days will see our work here finished, and then—”

The end of the sentence was inaudible, for his voice was stifled by a noise of shouting from the outskirts of the camp. Tearle and his three companions were instantly on their feet, and going forward they soon learned the cause of the excitement. Two of the native hunters, whose business it was to scour the jungles, had just arrived from different directions. And each, it seemed, had an interesting story to tell.

“A tiger, Sahibs,” exclaimed Chandar. “I have discovered a big fellow. He is sleeping in a bed of

reeds two miles to the south, and I have men watching the spot. It is a fine chance to use the nets."

"I also have been fortunate," cried Sri Das. "Listen, Sahibs. I passed by the pits that we dug to the eastward three days ago, and in one of them is a rhinoceros—a fat, full-grown beast."

"You have both done well," said Tearle, handing to each the customary rupee. "If we can capture these animals they will complete the order," he added. We will set off at once, hot as it is. Carruthers, you and I will accompany Chandar, and try to bag the sleeping tiger."

"Very good, Dermot. And the rhinoceros—"

"Maurice will attend to that," directed Tearle, "with Sri Das and Sher Singh to assist him. We will both take other helpers, of course."

"Mine will be the easier task," said the lad, "but all the same I wish I was going after the tiger."

"You may have a stiffer contract than you expect," replied Carruthers, little thinking that he was uttering a prophecy. "A rhinoceros in a cage is worth three in a pit."

The necessary preparations were speedily made, and within an hour, as the heat of the afternoon was beginning to lose its intensity, the two parties started out in nearly opposite directions. In the rear of each a cage followed slowly, drawn by lagging bullocks in charge of natives.

With his rifle strapped to his back, and a solatopee on his head, Maurice pushed eastward with his two chief helpers. A sort of a rough road, previously broken, led to the pits, which were about three and a half miles distant from the camp. Sri Das and Sher Singh carried spades and coils of rope. Their task

was one of labour and skill rather than of peril, since they had to dig a narrow, sloping passage into the steep-walled excavation, and by this means drag or drive the rhinoceros to the cage.

The three travelled at a steady and easy pace, and they had covered close upon two miles when Maurice discovered that his hunting-knife had dropped from his belt. As the weapon was a gift from Tom Dayleford he prized it highly, and at once announced his intention of returning to look for it.

“Shall I come with you, Sahib?” asked Sher Singh.

“No, I will go alone,” the lad answered firmly. “You had better push on, without delay, for not many hours of daylight are left. I shall probably overtake you before you reach the pits.”

Sher Singh assented with evident reluctance, and strode ahead with his companion, while Maurice turned and retraced his steps along the path, moving slowly and watchfully. He had gone five hundred yards or so, passing the bullocks and cage about half-way, when the missing knife—which he had begun to despair of finding—caught his eye. He eagerly picked it up, and at the same instant discovered, on a patch of soft ground, the print of a naked, human foot. The toes pointed straight across the path, beyond which, within three or four yards, several other footprints were visible.

“This looks queer, to say the least,” the lad told himself. “There can be no strange natives in the vicinity, so I shouldn’t wonder if the fellow who makes these marks was a spy sent by Antonio Silva.”

Tempted by the wish to prove or disprove his suspicions, yet intending to proceed but a short distance in any event, Maurice came to a hasty

decision, and one that was to result in as strange an adventure as ever befell traveller or explorer. Leaving the beaten road he struck due north, and was immediately plunged into a semi-gloom caused by matted foliage overhead. The ground was comparatively open, and the prints of the naked feet, stamped here and there on a sandy spot, led him on and on, until he had gone much farther than he had dreamed was the fact. He carried the knife in one hand, but he carelessly did not unstrap his rifle, since he had frequently to squeeze between the trunks of trees and pull obstructing undergrowth apart. Moreover, at the worst, he expected to find nothing more formidable than a cowardly, unarmed native, who would flee at the sight of him.

He had seen no footprints for fifty yards or so, and was in the mind to turn back, when he emerged from the gloom on a tiny nullah, or ravine, that was bordered by dense jungle and lofty trees. A shallow pool lay in the middle of it, and suddenly, from a clump of reeds by the water's edge, a great panther rose up and confronted the terrified lad. The two were scarcely six feet apart, and thus they stood for a moment in silence, Maurice helpless except for the feeble knife, the tawny beast quivering with rage and switching its tail.

"I'm done for," thought the lad; and just then, as he saw that the creature was about to spring, a story that Tom Dayleford had once told him flashed into his mind.

"I'll try it," he vowed quickly, as a drowning man clutches at a straw.

Drawing himself to his full height, and making his limbs as rigid as possible, he stared tensely, with

fearless menace, at his enraged foe. Immediately the panther, meeting the lad's steady, fixed glance, betrayed signs of uneasiness, as if it must perforce quail and tremble before the power of the human eye. Its crouching attitude relaxed, and its flattened ears rose a little. It snarled and whimpered more in distress than anger, and then, having cowered low like a whipped hound, it was obviously on the point of crawling away when a harsh, peculiar cry came from the left. As swiftly the beast was transformed, and wheeling with a blood-curdling scream it leapt at Maurice.

CHAPTER X.

BOBBILI OF THE JUNGLE.

CLOSE upon that strange, half-human sound, which had turned the panther's cowardice instantly to bold fury, came a second cry, louder and sharper. Its effect was as marked as the first, though in a vastly different way. The animal, having landed almost at the feet of its intended victim—the lad was for the moment stupefied with terror—swung partly round instead of making another spring, and with pricked up ears, with a throaty whine, fixed its blazing eyes on a spot to the left. Here, an instant later, a slit opened in the green wall of the jungle; and Maurice, who had been drawn by curiosity to glance in that direction, saw a nondescript and alarming object dart forth into the glade. His blood ran cold at the uncanny sight, and he gasped with astonishment.

“What can it be?” he thought, wishing that he had the power to take to his heels.

Again that peculiar cry. The thing advanced on all fours, like a big monkey, apparently a mixture of brute and human being. Then, rising suddenly to an erect attitude, it revealed itself unmistakably as a young Hindoo boy of perhaps fourteen or fifteen years of age. Just as evidently he was a child of the forest, a half-savage creature whose bed was the ground and his roof the canopy of stars, who had probably been cast adrift by his parents in the time of famine, to live or die as the issue might be.

He carried a short bamboo spear sharpened at one end, and was naked except for a waist covering fashioned from the skin of a spotted deer. His limbs were well-formed and he was as agile and graceful as a cat, while masses of neglected hair, thick and matted, dangled over his back and chest and shoulders, nearly hiding his features, yet not able to conceal a pair of large dark eyes, as keen and piercing as a falcon-hawk's.

If Maurice was surprised at these details, which he noted at a swift look, he was more than startled by what happened next; for at once the panther crawled over to the feet of the native boy, with whom it seemed to be on the most friendly terms, and settled itself there in a crouching position, purring with pleasure. Clearly the first cry from the jungle had been a sign to the beast that the young Hindoo was near, and the second had been a warning to it not to harm the English lad.

"Am I awake or dreaming?" Maurice asked himself. "No, it's all real enough, and I've had about the narrowest escape of my life. I should like to slip off, and I would do so this minute if I thought that precious couple yonder would attend to their own affairs and leave me to look after mine."

Before he could seize the opportunity of vanishing, however, it was too late. The Hindoo youth approached, followed by his hideous pet. He came close up to Maurice, and after regarding him curiously for a few seconds, he touched him on the eyelids and at the same time pointed to the panther. Then, clapping his hands on his breast and laughing, he began to talk rapidly.

"I've no doubt you mean well," Maurice inter-

jected politely, "but I'm sorry to say that I can't understand you."

The strange creature laughed again, and a torrent of thick, uncouth language continued to flow from his lips. Mixed with it, however, were several familiar native phrases and an occasional English word; and it gradually dawned upon Maurice that his display of will-power over the panther had been seen by his companion, and that by virtue of this peculiar gift, which the jungle-child also shared, the latter was laying claim to a sort of blood brotherhood.

"Things are getting a bit awkward," concluded Maurice. "I hope he won't want me to go off to the forest and live with him and the panther."

An impulse to unstrap his rifle was prudently resisted. He shook his head, and pointed behind him.

"Bobbili, kutchi dar Bobbili," said the Hindoo lad.

With that he dropped to one knee, and taking Maurice's two hands he pressed them briefly upon his mop of tangled hair. Then rising, he struck across the glade with the panther trotting at his heels. At the farther edge both turned, and the lad made inviting gestures.

"Bobbili, Bobbili," he exclaimed earnestly.

"If Bobbili is your name," said Maurice, "I'm glad to know it. But I can't come with you, and it's no use to ask."

An interval of silence, which was prolonged to perhaps twenty seconds, was broken suddenly by an angry snarl from the panther, who lashed his tail and stiffened to a threatening attitude. The young Hindoo craned his neck to listen, and tapped the

beast lightly with his spear. The next instant both had disappeared, quickly and noiselessly, behind the leafy screen of the jungle.

“Well, of all amazing things this beats the record,” vowed Maurice, aloud. “I shouldn’t wonder if that chap hadn’t been suckled by some wild animal, like Romulus and Remus. But what could have started them off in such a hurry?”

A rustling noise fell on his ear, and into the glade stalked Sher Singh, providing a sufficient answer to the lad’s question.

“Will the Sahib be graciously pleased to pardon my disobedience?” said the faithful shikaree. “I returned lest harm should befall. And indeed you have wandered far from the path.”

“I followed the naked footprints,” explained Maurice. “You saw them?”

“They guided me hither,” was the reply.

“If you had come a little sooner, Sher Singh, you would have seen a strange sight. I’ve had an adventure with a panther—and with a half-savage thing that walked on two legs and spoke three tongues, though one of them must have been a wild beast dialect, from its sound.”

He went on to describe his experience, and the shikaree listened with grave attention.

“I have heard such a tale before, Sahib,” he declared. “It is not uncommon. It happens once in a while that a child is abandoned by its parents, or is lost in the jungle; and sometimes the animals of the forest, more merciful than mankind, will nurture and care for the helpless one. It will be wise, Sahib,” he added, “if we make haste to our appointed task. You would not wish to lose the rhinoceros.”

“I should say not,” exclaimed Maurice. “You are right, Sher Singh. We will hurry on as fast as possible.” As he started, keeping pace with the Hindoo’s long strides, he looked back once at the glade. “Good-bye, Bobbili, old chap,” he said to himself. “I wonder if I shall ever see you again.”

Without difficulty the two retraced their steps to the beaten path, and when they had followed it for a mile they had come upon the wheeled cage, which had been delayed by a fallen tree. Sri Das had stopped here to assist the natives, and as the obstruction was now all but removed, he desisted from the task and pressed on with Maurice and Sher Singh. They soon passed the first of the pits, its covering of grass and bamboo undisturbed, and several minutes later a dull, pounding noise made itself heard, mingled with angry snorting.

“Yonder is the spot,” exclaimed Sri Das, “and the brute appears to be in an ugly temper.”

“Let me go in advance,” said Sher Singh. “There may be danger. Keep back, Sahib.”

“There can be danger only from one source,” replied Maurice, “and I don’t believe there is much chance of that. The pits were carefully dug.”

He ran on at the heels of the two shikarees, and the intervening strip of jungle was quickly crossed, while the menacing sounds grew louder and nearer.

Here was the place at last, and what Sher Singh had feared, but not expressed in words, proved to be a reality. The rhinoceros was almost free. With his pointed snout and horn he had undermined an end-wall of his prison, causing the soil to cave in. He was busily engaged in beating and tramping the

loose earth, and the slope thus formed reached already to within a few feet of the top of the pit.

"We are just in time," said Sri Das.

The captive, who was a splendid, full-grown animal, stopped operations long enough to snort savagely, and to glare at the intruders out of his wicked little eyes. Then he went strenuously on with the fight for freedom.

"I fear we shall lose him, Sahib," declared Sher Singh. "It was a bad spot that was selected for digging. Behold, the soil is loose and rotten."

"I'm not going to lose such a fine brute if I can help it," vowed Maurice. "Quick, let us throw a noosed rope over his head, and try to haul him to this end of the pit. That will give us a chance to straighten the wall."

"A wise plan, Sahib, if we can carry it out," approved Sher Singh. "Doubtless the cage will be here shortly."

The rope was deftly adjusted, and at the third or fourth cast the noose dropped over the head of the rhinoceros. The three pulled on it with all their strength, and after a number of frantic lunges to right and left, the great beast permitted himself to be forced slowly backward, yielding inch by inch.

"Now hold him fast," cried Maurice as he unstrapped his rifle and threw it to the ground. He picked up a spade, and lustily attacked the ruined wall.

"Be careful, Sahib," warned Sher Singh.

At that very instant the treacherous edge crumbled, and down the lad went. He was caught and tightly gripped by the loose soil, which covered him to his knees, and before he could extricate himself the

rhinoceros made a desperate lunge forward. Sher Singh let go of the rope in time, but Sri Das was jerked bodily into the pit.

With a snort of passion the brute charged up the sloping wall of earth, straight at Maurice, who felt that his last moment had come as he struggled vainly to escape.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SOWARS OF SERANGHUR.

THE shrill, terrified cries of his companions rang in the lad's ears, and then he was struck like a catapult by the tough snout of the rhinoceros, though luckily the sharp horn did not touch him. He soared up from the clogging earth, described a semi-circle, and landed on hands and knees a few feet clear of the pit. Stunned and bruised, but otherwise uninjured, he pulled himself erect and looked back just as the animal, by a tremendous effort, surmounted the crumbling top of the wall.

"Dodge him, Sahib," yelled Sher Singh. "Run this way."

But Maurice did not have his full wits about him, and was still too dazed to take advantage of the slim chance of escape that offered. Instead of doubling to one side or the other he sped straight forward, with the vicious and enraged brute in hot pursuit. He felt its warm steamy breath, heard its puffing snorts and the clumsy trample of its hoofs. The branches of a tree, hanging over his course just ahead, inspired him with a desperate ray of hope. He leapt high at the lowest bough, clutched it, and secured a weak hold with his finger-tips. For a fraction of a second he swung in air, and then was hurled upward and wrenched violently from his frail support.

At first Maurice was stupefied and half-blinded. The heated atmosphere surged violently against his face. There was a warm hard surface under him

and when he threw out his hands in fright at the dizzy, swaying motion, they clutched something rough and wrinkled. He heard vague, husky shouts at a distance, and suddenly he realized the almost incredible truth. The rhinoceros had swept him free of the limb, and now, perched on the animal's broad back, he was being whirled at headlong speed through the jungle. It was indeed a unique situation, and not without a grave element of peril. But at least it was better than being at the mercy of the brute's hoofs and horn, as the lad told himself.

Having straddled his leathery seat as flatly as possible, and taken a firmer hold of the tough folds of skin on the neck, he crouched low and tried to think calmly; which was not an easy thing to do in such circumstances. The rhinoceros was by far the more frightened of the two. It was a new experience to find itself turned into a beast of burden, and it was naturally panic-stricken by the living, breathing weight that clung to its back. So, breaking into furious flight, tearing along an aimless course, it quickly out-distanced Sher Singh and Sri Das, who attempted to follow.

Maurice held tight, though buffeted and scratched by the overhanging foliage. He wondered how long the amazing ride would last, and how and where it would end. He was afraid to roll off, lest the maddened quadruped should turn on him and rend him to pieces. Though fear and suspense magnified the few minutes which he spent astride of his novel steed, it was really but a short time until the two parted company, and the lad's precarious position was exchanged for another even less to be desired. Faster and faster he was borne through the jungle, cleaving

the gloomy thickets with the speed of a galloping horse, and then, of a sudden, scrub and forest melted away, and all around him was a flood of light that was dazzling by contrast with the recent shadows.

Crunch! crunch! Splash! Splash! Splash! Fresh, cool water spurted over Maurice's face and hands. He lifted his head and looked about. The rhinoceros was fording a swift and narrow river, perhaps two hundred yards broad. The dusky glow that precedes the twilight was just fading from the horizon. Still urged on by fear, the huge animal went splashing and pounding across the stream, now belly-deep, now submerged so far that the lad was wet to the hips.

In mid-channel was a bit of an island—a mere mud-bank—that gave existence to an eddy off its lower end. Here the circling currents had scooped out the bottom, and directly the rhinoceros reached the edge of this hole, a crocodile poked its bony snout from the depths. The quadruped snorted with terror, and swerved round so unexpectedly that the lad lost his grip and was shot head foremost into the river.

He retained his presence of mind, and on reaching the surface, and finding himself in the clutches of a swift current, he splashed and kicked vigorously as it swept him clear of the perilous eddy and carried him on at a rapid pace. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the rhinoceros beating its way up-stream, its tail lashing like the paddle of a stern-wheel steamer. The crocodile had vanished entirely.

“I ought to be thankful to that scaly mugger,” reflected Maurice, “but come to think of it, I don't know that I'm much better off than I was before. Crocodiles don't grow singly, and there may be half a score of them watching me at this very minute.”

Frightened by the bare idea of such a thing, the lad splashed more noisily than ever, while he swam with hard and steady strokes. He attempted to gain the eastern bank of the river, but he was rather nearer to opposite shore, and, to increase the odds against him, the current was setting strongly in that direction. So, contrary to choice, he finally crawled out on the bank of the stream that was farthest from camp and friends. Exhausted by his struggle he dropped, panting and dripping wet, on the narrow strip of sand; and there he lay for a time, while the shadows of the night gathered, until a confused medley of sounds—he could not tell from what direction they came—startled him with their suggestion of some new peril.

The next instant a lively pattering and jingling swelled nearer, blending with a murmur of voices, and out from the gloom of the forest, into the dusky open, cantered, by twos and threes, a little squadron of cavalry. The thud of hoofs and tinkle of accoutrements was all around Maurice before he realized the situation. He sprang to his feet with a shrill cry, and dropped as quickly beneath the legs of the foremost horse.

“Halt!” rang an authoritative voice. “Back, men, back.”

The speaker, who was the officer in command, swung from his saddle and lifted Maurice in his strong arms. Others pressed closely, amazed and curious.

“An English lad!” exclaimed one.

“And soaking wet and unconscious,” added a second. “A bit of a mystery, this.”

“It appears so,” assented Captain Rogers. “There is no time to fathom it now. The fellow must have crawled from the river just as my horse struck him

and knocked him down. I don't believe he is much hurt. He seems to be breathing regularly."

"The hoofs never touched him, that I'll swear to," vowed a bronzed trooper with a gigantic moustache, who wore a sergeant's uniform. He dismounted and came forward. "Not a sign of an injury," he added after making a brief examination. "He is only stunned, and will be all right presently. I'm thinking he may be one of those named in the warrant, captain."

"Not likely; he is a mere boy, as far as I can tell," was the reply. "Here, Campbell, you take charge of him. We must be off without further delay."

Accordingly, Sergeant Campbell having remounted, the unconscious lad was hoisted on to the saddle in front of him. Captain Rogers held a short conversation with a gray-bearded native astride of a lean horse, who was evidently present in the capacity of guide. Then the latter ignited a torch, and the next moment the command to start was given. The score and ten of troopers turned north and rode their steeds along the bank of the river until the old native, who was in front with the leader, designated a fording-place, when all spurred recklessly across—heedless of crocodiles—and filed into the jungle behind the wavering glow of the torch.

The return of consciousness to Maurice, not long afterwards, brought with it a gradual but clear recollection of all that had happened. It was true that he had escaped injury from the hoofs of the captain's horse; the blow that had stunned him—a sharp one over the temple—was caused by a stone on which he fell. With aching head and limbs he rested loosely against Sergeant Campbell's broad chest, and from half-

open lids his eyes furtively watched the torchlight flashing on steeds and riders, and gleaming right and left into the depths of the forest. He had not spent so many years of his life in India for nothing, and from the fact that half of the troopers were swarthy Hindoo sowars in silver-grey uniform faced with orange and blue, while the others were irregular fighting-men of the same colour, armed and attired with Oriental splendour, he knew them to be in the service of some powerful native potentate ; in whose pay also, without a doubt, were Captain Rogers and three more Englishmen of the party.

“ Indian sowars don’t ride at night for pleasure,” thought Maurice. “ There is something unusual in the wind, and I mean to find out what it is. I could make a close guess at it, I’ll be bound.”

His suspicions were soon verified, and that in a most alarming manner. By listened intently, and relaxing his attitude so as to feign insensibility the better, he heard and understood much of the conversation that was freely carried on around him. For a time his brain was planning shrewdly and actively.

“ Silva’s work just as I imagined,” he said to himself. “ He has laid a complaint before the Raja of Seranghur—all the trouble seems to have occurred inside of his territory—and now is sending these fellows to arrest Tearle and Carruthers. Perhaps they want me as well. Luckily, however, they don’t know as yet who I am. If I could only manage to slip away, and warn my friends in time ! I must do it—I *must*. But how ? ”

The question was speedily answered, for a little later a familiar clump of rocks was passed, and by these the lad got his bearings instantly and correctly. The

troopers were following what had been originally a mere elephant-path. It would lead to Tearle's camp, but by a very roundabout way, while straight across the forest the distance was less by almost one half.

Maurice's plan was formed, though to carry it out successfully was a different matter. The knowledge of what depended on him, as he believed, made him cool and clear-headed. He watched and waited until presently chance favoured him. The trail becoming suddenly narrow, and dipping between serried walls of brake, the lad slipped limply and quickly down from beneath Sergeant Campbell's arms. He landed on his feet, and the next instant he had plunged into the jungle and was running blindly and at full speed.

Pursuit would have been utterly useless, as Captain Rogers well knew. The troopers pulled up for a moment, but not a man dismounted. There was some grumbling and swearing, with loud complaints of the lad's trickery, and then the squadron reluctantly rode on.

Though the muffled tramp of hoofs soon died away in the distance, to Maurice's vast relief, he continued his flight at a rapid pace, keeping his bearings as best he could. Thorns and spear-grass tore his clothing and scratched his flesh, and now and then, with considerable uneasiness, he heard the howling of wild beasts.

CHAPTER XII.

GRAVE CHARGES.

WHEN the brave lad had gone a half-mile or so from the scene of his escape, and was beginning to fear that he would not be able to hold the proper course, he was surprised and startled by a voice from behind him. It sounded as if somebody was calling him by name, though at first he was inclined to think that his ears were deceiving him. However, he ventured to utter a low shout, and the reply was instantaneous. Pausing, he waited with ill-concealed nervousness, while audible footsteps approached nearer and nearer.

The suspense was quickly at an end, and it may be imagined with what joy Maurice discovered the unknown ones to be Sher Singh and Sri Das. The faithful Hindoos were no less delighted, and in a few words Sher Singh gave an explanation.

“We pursued the rhinoceros,” he said, “dreading lest we should find your mangled body. Darkness fell upon us, and as we were returning to camp, with heavy hearts, we heard the coming of the horsemen and hid by the path. We saw you slip to the ground and run, and as quickly as possible we followed after you. But tell me, Sahib, why are these native sowars, with Feringhee officers, abroad to-night?”

The answer to Sher Singh's question, which Maurice briefly stated, caused his companions to share his keen anxiety. Precious time had already been lost, and without further delay the three resumed their journey through the dark and lonely jungle.

The natives were preparing the evening meal over blazing fires, and Tearle and Carruthers were lounging and smoking by the tent, when the absent ones arrived in safety and burst impetuously into the cleared space that was hemmed around by the circle of cages.

"Where have you been?" demanded Carruthers. "We were just thinking of starting out to look for you. The cage returned long ago, and the driver and his companions declared that you were not at the pits, which were all empty."

"I hope you've not been as unfortunate as we were," said Tearle. "The tiger gave us the slip, and—"

He paused, suddenly observing Maurice's white agitated face.

"Lad, what's wrong?" he questioned. "Speak quickly."

"A troop of cavalry—the Raja's sowars with English officers," panted Maurice. "They are coming to arrest you—be here in a few minutes—don't wait for them—better hide in the jungle."

"Troopers coming—to arrest us?" gasped Tearle.

"By heavens, we'll give them a warm reception," cried Carruthers.

"Antonio Silva is at the bottom of this, of course."

"He is, that's right," assented the lad. "From what I overheard—"

Both men dashed into the tent, and emerged with rifles in their hands.

"Don't you mean to get out of the way?" Maurice asked in surprise.

"Not a bit of it, my lad," vowed Tearle. "We have done nothing wrong, so why should we slip off and abandon our property? I intend to face the music."

“And I’m with you, Dermot,” exclaimed Carruthers. “It’s an ugly scrape, but we’ll see it through.”

“You can count on me, whatever happens,” declared Maurice, who was rather pleased than otherwise by the decision. “I was a fool to think that you would desert the camp. I lost my head when I heard those fellows talking of what they were going to do.”

Inspired by the example of his companions, he possessed himself of a rifle.

“I want to know more about this business,” said Tearle. “Let us have the whole story, my lad.”

Maurice began to describe his adventures, and, without interruption, he got as far as the point where the horse knocked him down. Then a crashing noise rose from the jungle, and the shrill notes of a bugle quivered on the night air. Consternation seized the natives, and they sought shelter beneath the cages, between which, here and there, was had a glimpse of a silver-gray uniform. Evidently the camp was already surrounded. Maurice and his employers stood their ground, for the moment undecided how to act, and the two shikarees remained with them.

“Here they are,” muttered Carruthers, with an oath.

“Be careful,” warned Tearle.

“Offer no resistance; I come in the name of the Government,” shouted a stern voice; and with that Captain Rogers spurred into the enclosure, half a dozen sowars riding at his heels. He glanced curiously about him, and then, dismounting, he approached the little group before the tent.

“I am in search of two persons,” he said quietly, “Dermot Tearle and Luke Carruthers by name. I have a warrant for their arrest—a warrant signed by a judge of the High Court of Calcutta.”

Tearle stepped forward. His face was flushed and angry, and he handled his rifle in such a threatening manner that several of the troopers instinctively lifted their weapons to cover him.

"I am one of the two you have named," he said, "and this is Luke Carruthers. But I assure you that the affair is a mistake, and one that can be easily explained. It is we who should have sworn out the warrant—"

"That's true enough," broke in Carruthers, indignantly. "We have been badly treated from beginning to end, and if ever I get hold of that scoundrel of a Portuguese I'll wring his yellow neck."

"I don't want to hear your story," replied Captain Rogers. "The time for that will come later. Indeed, it is my duty to advise you to say nothing. You must prepare to accompany me at once, as I can't spend the night in your camp."

"I should like to know, sir, on what charges the warrant is based," persisted Tearle.

"There is more than one," was the reply. "You are accused of murder, of highway robbery with violence, and of recruiting armed men for unlawful purposes in His Majesty's tributary state of Seranghur;" and with that he read the warrant aloud.

The string of pompous and solemn legal phrases, and the seals attached to the document, had a subduing effect on Maurice and the shikarces, while Carruthers scowled and bit hard on the stem of his pipe.

"A string of lies," he declared.

"This is preposterous," said Tearle to the officer. "It would be laughable if it were not likely to entail serious consequences before the truth can be reached. But of course, sir, you are only doing your duty, and

we shall be ready to accompany you in a short time. First, however, I beg permission to ask a few questions."

"They must be very brief, then," said Captain Rogers, looking at his watch. "we have a night ride of fourteen miles before us. Go ahead."

"Thank you. Will you tell me the name of our accuser?"

"There are two of them," was the reply. "Antonio Silva, a Portuguese, and a Hindoo by the name of Ramput. The latter is from the village of Dowla."

"Exactly; I thought so. When was the charge preferred?"

"Some few days ago."

"And where?"

"It was laid before the proper person, the Raja Gopal Mirza, who consulted the British Resident at his Court of Seranghur. The information sworn to, being of a serious nature, was forwarded to Calcutta. The warrant was issued there, and I am here to serve it, acting under civil authority."

"And where are our accusers at the present moment?" asked Tearle.

"I can't tell you that, for I don't know," the officer replied impatiently. "They have probably left the Court of Seranghur, but you will have a chance to confront them at the preliminary hearing in Calcutta."

"Calcutta?" gasped Tearle. "Are we to be taken down there?"

"Certainly. The case is beyond the jurisdiction of the Seranghur magistrates."

There was a moment of silence. Tearle and Caruthers exchanged uneasy, significant glances.

"Come, we must be off," said the officer, curtly.

“Wait,” implored Tearle, “I have a request to make. Our arrest is a piece of sheer malice, I assure you; and not only that, but there is a dastardly plot of some sort back of this charge. I’ll swear to it, though I can offer no proof. If you take us down to Calcutta, our property will be in danger. Will you leave an escort here?”

“Nonsense!” laughed Captain Rogers. “To hear you talk, one would think we were in a hostile country. The peril exists only in your imagination. I have no men to spare. If anything goes wrong, your servants can send word to the cantonments at Seranghur.”

“You refuse my request, then?” Tearle said bitterly. “Well, sir, remember that I shall hold you personally responsible for whatever happens. Mark my word, our accusers will *not* appear at the hearing in Calcutta—or anywhere else.”

The officer hesitated thoughtfully for an instant, and tugged at his drooping moustache.

“My instructions are plain,” he replied. “I can waste no more time in fruitless talking. In five minutes we start.”

He signalled to his bugler, who blew a couple of notes that brought the remainder of the sowars into the enclosure. At first, terrified by the near presence of the wild beasts, the horses did some lively kicking and plunging. Tearle and Carruthers, accepting the inevitable with the gloomiest of apprehensions, prepared hurriedly for the journey; and meanwhile Captain Rogers sat stiffly in the saddle, with torches flaring about him and lighting up the scene. He glanced frequently at Maurice, but if he recognized the lad—as he must have done—he gave no sign to that effect.

“By-the-by, I must leave somebody here,” he said, as Tearle came out of the tent. “The Portuguese claims several of the animals.”

“You had better leave half of your force,” Tearle told him.

The officer, ignoring the remark, turned to the sergeant.

“Campbell,” said he, “I put the camp in your charge; see that nothing is removed. That will be your duty until further orders.”

Sergeant Campbell dismounted, his face clouded with discontent, and proceeded to picket his horse near the bullocks.

“Listen, my boy,” whispered Tearle, as he drew Maurice aside. “Be vigilant while Luke and I are gone, and keep watch by day and night. It is a ruse on Silva’s part—our arrest. I am satisfied that he is plotting mischief, and means to attack the camp.”

“Why was I not included in the warrant?” asked Maurice.

“Ah, that’s the worst of it,” was the reply. “It looks as if Silva wanted to find you here. He has a grudge against you, you know. So be careful, lad. May Heaven preserve you from harm! We shall not be detained long in Calcutta, and as soon as—”

A gruff summons from the officer interrupted the conversation. A minute later, after hasty farewells had been spoken, a bugle sounded and the whole troop rode forth in the jungle path. Tearle and Carruthers, each mounted behind a stalwart sowar, turned to wave their hands. Then they had vanished, and the glimmer of the guide’s torch faded from sight.

As calmly as if nothing had happened the native employees crept back to their culinary duties and

heaped fresh wood on the neglected fires, while Sergeant Campbell, sauntering near by, cast hungry eyes at the untasted food. Maurice had slipped off unperceived, wishing to have an interval of quiet reflection, and he was sitting on a box at the far end of the camp, depressed and troubled by the onerous weight of responsibility that had fallen upon him, when he suddenly caught sight of a dusky object stealing towards him from between two of the nearest cages.

CHAPTER XIII.

A CRY IN THE NIGHT.

THE lad's first impulse, to spring up with a cry of alarm, was checked before he could carry it out ; for, dark as the spot was, he believed that he recognized the crawling, half-naked body and the eyes that shone with a dull light through a drooping mop of unkempt hair.

"Why, it's Bobbili!" he muttered aloud.

He was not mistaken ; the intruder was the jungle-child whose acquaintance he had made the same afternoon. The next instant the strange creature had wriggled to Maurice's feet, where, rising to his haunches like a monkey, he pressed one hand to his lips and pointed with the other towards the fires.

"All right," whispered Maurice. "But what are you doing here, Bobbili? I hope you haven't brought the panther with you. Oh, I forgot—you can't understand."

However, Bobbili's errand was not one that called for speech, though a few incoherent words fell softly from his lips. Having fumbled briefly at his girdle, he placed in Maurice's hand something that felt like a tiny round stone. Then, turning and dropping to all fours, he swiftly glided away as he had come. He vanished at the edge of the forest, outside the circle of cages, and a mewling, purring noise, together with a fleeting glimpse of a pair of fiery orbs, told that his savage pet, the panther, had been waiting for him there. A rustling among the trees was followed by utter silence.

“Well, that *was* a surprise visit,” thought Maurice. “It’s like living in a real fairy-tale. I wonder what’s up now. The next thing, I suppose, will be a lamp that I’m to rub whenever I want Bobbili and his panther to obey my commands. Or perhaps that was a magic stone he just brought me. I had better have a look at it.”

He started across the enclosure, impatient to examine his strange gift, and was met half-way by Sher Singh, who had come in search of him.

“My heart was troubled by your absence, Sahib,” explained the devoted shikaree.

“I wasn’t far off,” replied Maurice. “The jungle-boy has been here, Sher Singh, and he gave me this.”

Opening his clenched hand he displayed, not a rounded stone, but a button of smooth and polished brass. The shikaree, with a grave expression, touched it and turned it over.

“I have seen others like it,” he declared. “Antonio Silva wears them on his linen tunic.”

“So he does, that’s a fact,” exclaimed Maurice. “I remember now. But how did Bobbili get this, and why did he fetch it to me.”

“It means danger, Sahib,” said Sher Singh, “and it was brought to you as a warning.”

“I believe you are right,” assented Maurice.

It was the only theory, he had to admit, that the peculiar nature and circumstances of the gift would warrant. For a time he remained in earnest conversation with Sher Singh, and while neither suggested by what means the jungle-child had obtained the button or how he could have known that danger threatened the camp, both were agreed that Antonio Silva was somewhere in the vicinity and that the

warning was not one to be disregarded. Clearly the peril was very real.

"I didn't expect trouble so soon," said Maurice, "but when it comes we'll be ready for it. We'll lose no time in putting everything in shape for a siege."

"Our force is weak," replied Sher Singh in a gloomy tone.

"It is strong enough to beat off the Portuguese, if he comes," the lad said hopefully. "Unless he has too many at his back," he added to himself.

The two rejoined their companions—not many minutes had elapsed since the departure of Tearle and Carruthers—and they found supper waiting for them. The meal began in constraint and silence, for the presence of the bronzed, long-limbed cavalryman was resented as an intrusion. Sher Singh and Sri Das watched him furtively, and the other natives scowled at him behind his back.

But Sergeant Campbell was not a person with whom one could be on unfriendly terms. Jollity and good-humour beamed from his eyes, and lurked under his shaggy moustache, which nearly concealed his mouth.

"Cheer up, comrades," he cried with a mellow laugh. "Though I'm here against your wishes and mine, why not make the best of it and be happy? Your friends will return before many suns rise and set, I'm thinking, and meanwhile I'll gladly take a hand if there's to be any fighting. And between you and me, I'm hoping there will be. I saw the yellow-faced Portuguese at Seranghur, and I wouldn't have trusted him any more than a serpent."

"I wish you had told the captain that," said Maurice.

“Bless you, he’d never have believed me,” was the reply, “and it wouldn’t have made any difference if he had. Orders are orders.”

The sergeant soon had the entire confidence of Maurice and the two shikarees, and of the rest as well. He spoke freely of the charges preferred by Silva and Ramput, and offered some valuable suggestions in the way of preparation for an attack.

After supper all hands set to work, and under Maurice’s supervision the entire arrangement of the camp was altered. The cages were drawn so close as to contract the circle by one-half, and, for the protection of the animals, the outer sides were stoutly boarded up. A single, narrow opening was left for the bullocks to reach the water-hole, which was forty or fifty yards distant, and near this exit was the brush lean-to where the natives slept. The tent was at the opposite side of the enclosure. Then a more formidable task was undertaken and finished. Large quantities of thorn-bushes were cut, and formed into a zareba outside the cordon of cages—an extra barrier which was not easily to be penetrated by a foeman.

The beasts—wild and domestic—had been fed and watered before the arrival of the troopers, and needed no further attention. At a late hour the final touches were added. The force in camp numbered ten, and Maurice divided these into two watches, who were to go on duty alternately. He took personal charge of one, and gave the other to Sergeant Campbell.

Contrary to expectation, the night passed by without alarm, and the approach of dawn was eagerly welcomed. However, this was no sign that the danger was lessened, and sunset was looked forward

to with feelings of dread. There was employment for everybody during the day, the bullocks and wild animals having to be fed and watered, and the cages to be cleaned. Sher Singh and Sri Das ventured into the jungle to obtain fresh meat and returned with a couple of spotted deer. They had exercised their knowledge of woodcraft to the utmost, but without finding any trace of human beings in the vicinity.

“There is plenty of time yet,” said Maurice. “Silva is probably lying low and waiting his chance, or else he has gone off to recruit more followers. When he plans to do anything he does it well.”

“Trust a Portuguese for that,” replied Campbell. “And the rascal knows that your friends can’t get back from Calcutta in less than a week or ten days.”

“Sahibs, would it not be wise to hire a small force from the village of Dowla?” spoke up Sher Singh.

Maurice caught eagerly at the suggestion.

“That’s what I’ll do to-morrow,” he declared. “I’m glad you thought of it.”

By now the afternoon was drawing to a close. Soon the shades of evening settled down on the camp, and the fires were lighted. Until nearly midnight Maurice and Campbell sat by the tent, keeping up their spirits by cheerful conversation. The sergeant, puffing the while at a blackened briar-wood, chatted for hours of his adventurous life in the service, and finally rose and stretched his stiffened limbs.

“Time for sentry-go,” he remarked, as he refilled his pipe. “My fellows are ready for me, and I see yours have already turned in. You had better join them, lad, and get some sleep.”

“I will,” said Maurice. “I don’t believe we shall

be disturbed to-night. And the first thing in the morning I am going to the village of Dowla with a bag filled with rupees. I'm sure that is what Tearle would wish me to do."

"Ay, that he would," assented Campbell, "Pleasant dreams, my boy. I'll rouse you when you are needed."

Striding across the enclosure he sent his men to their respective posts of duty, and for an hour he paid frequent visits to them and kept the fires in a constant blaze.

Maurice had long since fallen into a heavy slumber within the tent, and at his feet lay Sher Singh, wrapped in a blanket. Suddenly a shrill, gurgling cry rang on the silence of the night. A deep groan followed, and all was as still as before. The shikaree slept on, but the lad sprang up, seized his rifle, and dashed outside. At first inclined to believe himself the victim of a bad dream, he knew better when he saw Sergeant Campbell drop an armful of wood, and stare wildly about him.

"You heard it too?" demanded the trooper. "It was an ugly sound—one to curdle the blood. And I'll take my oath it was a death-cry."

"It came from beyond the camp," said Maurice. "I'm afraid we are going to be attacked. Shall I rouse my men?"

"No, not yet. Hold on a bit."

They waited a full minute, scarcely daring to breathe. But there was no further alarm, nor did the sentries rush in. A dusky figure crept up to the two, and the voice of Sher Singh asked,

"Is there danger, Sahibs?"

Campbell briefly explained, and the shikaree's face clouded with perplexity.

"I must take a look around the camp," added the sergeant. "Be ready in case anything happens."

"I will go with you," declared Maurice.

Sher Singh followed them, and Campbell lighted the way with a blazing brand. The first sentry was found at his post, just outside the camp. It was clear that he had recently wakened from sleep, for he denied all knowledge of the mysterious sound. They pushed on to the second sentry, who was in a pitiable state of fright. He had heard the shrill cry and declared that it came from a short distance away.

"Be quick," said Campbell.

The little party hastened forward, taking the man with them, and when a semicircle of the camp had been almost completed the glow of the torch, flaring ahead, shone on the tiny cleared space in the jungle where the third sentinel had been stationed. The post was empty.

Campbell was first on the scene, and a sharp exclamation escaped his lips as he raised the brand high and let the flames shine on the trampled grass—on dabs and spatters of blood.

"Murder has been done," he gasped hoarsely. "Foul murder."

"Perhaps a tiger pounced on the poor fellow and carried him off," suggested Maurice, peering anxiously about as he cocked his rifle.

"A human tiger," said Sher Singh, who had stepped over the blood-stains and parted the surrounding screen of bushes, "Behold, Sahibs."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE ESCAPE OF THE PANTHER.

THE others were instantly beside the Hindoo, and staring with horrified eyes into the thicket.

There lay the sentry, his lifeless face upturned, his rifle and cartridge-belt were missing. Campbell turned the body over, and revealed a short dagger which had been buried to the hilt from behind, and had evidently penetrated the heart.

"The work of some prowling jungle-thief," he vowed. "I would give the assassin a mighty short shrift if I had him."

"I fear he was more than a jungle-thief, Sahib," said Sher Singh.

"That's right," vowed Maurice. "Depend on it, Silva is not far away, and the murderer is one of his spies."

"It sounds likely," admitted Campbell. "If that's the case, we're running a big risk in stopping here."

"We must return and rouse the whole force," said Maurice. "The camp is certainly in danger. But we ought to pay a visit to the last post."

"We'll go back that way," replied the sergeant.

Sher Singh released his grip of the bushes, which swung together and hid the ghastly sight of the dead man. Then, with fast-beating hearts, the little group crept along the outside of the camp. They were half-way to the spot where Chandar, the fourth sentry, was stationed, when Campbell halted abruptly. He spoke no word, but reached the torch down by

his side. A narrow gap was seen in the hedge of thorn-bushes that were stacked against the cages.

"It is freshly made," whispered Sher Singh. "The assassin is within the camp."

"What luck!" said Maurice. "Quick! let us hurry round to the entrance."

"There is a better and surer way," replied the sergeant. "I'll show you."

Having dropped his torch and ground it under heel until every spark was extinguished, he crept on hands and knees into the gap.

"Follow me," he whispered, "and keep your mouths shut. Don't utter a sound."

It was a daring venture, since the exact whereabouts of the intruder, who might even be Silva himself, were unknown. Maurice followed Campbell, and Sher Singh and the relieved sentry brought up the rear. Singly they issued from the hedge, and were now beneath one of the cages. The tent, staked a few yards away, prevented a clear view of the enclosure.

"We'll have the rascal if he is still lurking about," muttered the sergeant.

He stood erect and went cautiously forward, the rest of the party slipping after him. Maurice, diverging slightly to one side, failed to observe a dark blot, cunningly interwoven with the trampled grass, until he had tripped upon it and fallen headlong. He felt a warm, squirming body under him, heard a savage snarl, and was immediately gripped by a pair of sinewy arms. Realizing that he was in the clutches of the assassin, he fought desperately for life, shouting as he rolled over and over.

Before anyone could interfere, however, the lad's antagonist—he was as slippery as an eel—had twisted

himself free. He darted off like a streak and when Maurice rose dizzily to his feet he saw the dusky figure speeding towards the exit of the camp.

"Out of the way there," cried Campbell. "I'll stop him."

His rifle went to his shoulder, and the report crashed on the night air. The ball sped true, and the fleeing enemy, with a convulsive leap, tumbled at the edge of the fire.

An instant later a very pandemonium raged. The frightened bullocks stamped and bellowed, tugging at their ropes, while the wild animals roared and screeched and dashed against the bars of their cages. The natives burst out of their sleeping-quarters in a state of panic and terror, and just as the sergeant and his companions reached the fire the two sentries who were out hastened into the enclosure, drawn thither by the shot.

All gathered about the victim, who was stone dead. The spy, if such he was, had paid dearly for his crime and his temerity. He was a most repulsive-looking fellow, small of stature, but tough and wiry. Except for a waist-cloth and a kummerbund he was stark naked. His features were brutal and depraved, and his long black hair was matted and unkempt.

"A just end, if ever there was one," muttered Campbell. "I don't regret killing him. Look, the wretch has the stolen cartridge-belt."

"He dropped the rifle when I fell over him," said Maurice. "He is a queer-looking chap, and I don't believe he belongs to these parts."

"You are right, Sahib," Sher Singh answered solemnly. "The presence of this man here means grave peril. He is one of the half-civilized tribesmen

who dwell among the hills to the north—beyond where we had the battle. They are cruel and blood-thirsty, and many of them are Thugs.”

“I’ve heard tell of them,” said Campbell. “They are regular fanatics at fighting—don’t care a hang for man or beast.”

“Then Antonio Silva must have hired a lot of them,” replied Maurice. “Things are worse than I thought they were. We seem to be in a bad scrape.”

“Which we will do our best to get out of,” vowed Campbell. “If there are any final preparations to be made let us tackle them now, for we don’t want to be caught napping. An attack may begin at any minute.”

The sergeant’s words increased the sense of impending danger which his companions felt, but no sign of fear was shown, since Dermot Tearle had been careful to hire only brave and experienced men. All were provided with rifles, and some of the weapons were repeaters. More ammunition was needed, and Maurice and Sher Singh hurried to the tent to fill that want, while Campbell issued brief instructions to the force, posting two of them at the exit of the camp. Then, followed by Chandar, he ran to the rear of the enclosure and stopped the gap in the hedge.

He returned just as Maurice and the shikaree arrived at the fire with a box of cartridges. The others swarmed about them, eager to stuff their belts, and just at this unguarded moment a straggling volley of rifle shots rang on the still air. One of the sentries without fell dead, and the other escaped by an agile dash into the camp, which appeared to be already surrounded by the foe, to judge from the shrill, blood-curdling yells that were poured from a score of throats.

The attack coming thus swiftly, and without the

least warning, annihilation and defeat at first threatened the little band. But Maurice and Sergeant Campbell were happily equal to the emergency, and at once, as the order was given, the men scattered. They withdrew from the fire, and sought safety in the deep shadows to right and left.

“Down with you,” shouted the sergeant. “Flat on the ground.”

The command was no sooner obeyed than a second volley of musketry—not a heavy one—whistled overhead. The greater part of the enemy, however, were very fortunately armed only with spears, which they rapidly hurled as they pushed on doggedly.

“Unless we can drive them back, Sahib, we are lost,” declared Sher Singh.

“Look sharp,” urged Campbell. “We are going to have things our own way—for a time at least.”

In that he was right. Now was a splendid opportunity for the besieged, and they took the utmost advantage of it. The exit of the camp and the space outside was alive with hideous, half-naked wretches, who as yet were darting aimlessly to and fro. The assailants were indeed the fanatical hill-men from the northern forests, though if Antonio Silva was in command of them he discreetly kept himself well concealed.

“Fire!” cried Maurice. “Don’t waste a shot.”

His followers—they lay deep in the grass on both sides of the enclosure—heard and understood, and waited with cool nerves, as steady as old soldiers. The next instant, as the attack began in earnest, the cluster of rifle-barrels, focussed on the mouth of the passage, belched flame and lead with telling effect. Through the drifting smoke the foremost of the foe, well within

the camp, could be seen to reel and tumble, clutching at the ground in their agonies. Those behind pressed on unchecked, trampling the fallen, yelling like fiends and brandishing their spears.

Maurice and the sergeant continued to shout to their companions, but could scarcely be heard for the deafening din and tumult. The wild beasts were raging and roaring in their cages, and the bullocks, who had succeeded in freeing themselves, were bellowing madly as they galloped to and fro. The plucky fighters aimed and pulled until the weapons grew hot in their grasp, and still the savage tribesmen repeatedly charged the enclosure, hoping to come to close quarters and end the fray by sheer weight of numbers. As yet the blazing fire and a shroud of pungent powder-smoke was between them and the besieged.

But valour and determination were of little account against such a fanatical horde, as Campbell, with rage and grief, soon had to admit.

"It's no use, my brave fellows," he cried in a ringing voice. "One more volley, and then we'll run for our lives. We must break out by the hedge at the rear of the camp."

"I won't run," Maurice vowed fiercely. "I'll die first. I mean to stick to my trust, whatever happens."

"It will be folly to do that, Sahib," entreated Sher Singh, who was at the lad's elbow. "Be wise, and escape while you may. No mercy is to be expected from these human fiends."

Maurice's reply was a frenzied shout, as with a steady hand he aimed and fired across the flame-lit canopy of smoke. For a few seconds the rifles spluttered, drawing several harmless shots in reply, but that final volley, ordered by the sergeant, was as futile as

the first to stem the wild rush. A bunch of the foe had gained the farther edge of the fire, and dusky forms were advancing from the rear, thirsting for pillage and slaughter.

"Back with you," yelled Campbell, springing to his feet. "It's a race for life now, men. Come, lad, we'll stick together. Are you mad?" he cried, as Maurice stubbornly held his ground. "It's our last chance."

But even as he spoke, at this fateful crisis, a truly providential thing happened in almost less time than it takes to tell, swiftly altering and saving the situation. A rasping succession of snarls rang from the nearest cage, and above the noise of strife was heard the rending and splintering of wooden bars. The black panther was free. With a scream the infuriated beast leapt blindly from its broken cage and landed in the very midst of the clustered bullocks, who, thrown into maddening terror, instantly stampeded for the exit of the camp.

Bellowing and bawling and tossing their horned heads, the maddened little herd pounded past the startled defenders, narrowly missing them. They tore on, struck and overthrew the leading line of foemen, and went thundering into the passage, which they completely filled. It was too much for the courage of the fanatical tribesmen, and as many as were able to do so turned and fled, abandoned to helpless panic. For a moment or two hoarse cries mingled with the bawling and snorting of the horned animals. Then the space was clear, save for the dead and maimed, and the frightened bullocks were dispersing widely into the jungle.

Three of the hill-men, who had dodged the charge,

remained within the enclosure. One made his escape, and the other two were shot by Campbell and Sri Das. Meanwhile such of the wounded as could move crawled painfully away, and several more, who were in a worse plight, were dragged into the thickets by their friends.

The delight and amazement of the besieged—with Maurice joy was tempered by the loss of the bullocks and the black panther—can be easier imagined than described. Their satisfaction was short-lived, however, since it stood to reason that they had gained only a breathing-spell. Doubtless the foe—they were clearly in strong force—would soon rally and again press the attack. A gap nearly through the hedge, which was immediately repaired, showed what mischief the wily hill-men had been plotting when the bullocks created such a fortunate diversion.

“Now is your chance,” urged Campbell. “There is no hope whatever of holding out. The end is certain, sooner or later. Come, I’ll take the lead.”

He started towards the rear of the camp, but Chandar touched his arm and detained him.

“Be careful, Sahib,” he warned. “The panther is lurking yonder in the darkness. He will spring upon you.”

CHAPTER XV.

FRESH HOPES.

AT this point Maurice, who had listened with rising anger, interfered.

“What do you mean by such advice, Sergeant Campbell?” he demanded sharply. “Have you turned coward? Just when the enemy are beaten off, hard hit and demoralized, you want to escape to the jungle. Our chances are better than ever, and I will save the camp yet if you will all stand by me.”

There was a moment of fateful indecision. Sher Singh, and others as well, kept anxious and watchful eyes on the passage. The sergeant’s face flushed and he clenched his fist.

“Coward is a hard name, lad,” he muttered, with a scowl. “No man calls me that at his pleasure—I’ll settle with you at a more suitable time. Look here, you know well enough that if we wait for another attack we are lost.”

“I don’t know anything of the sort,” Maurice answered scornfully. “I won’t abandon the camp. Besides, I’m master here, and you have no right to interfere with my authority, nor will I allow it. Come, sergeant, help me with this cage, and then we’ll see if we can’t stand the scoundrels off.”

The cage referred to formed the left wall of the passage and contained Silva’s spare luggage, which, since its capture, had been only superficially examined. Campbell’s sullen face cleared, and he forgot his resentment, as he saw what

the lad meant to do. He hastened with the others to lend a hand.

The cage was quickly hauled around broadside, so that it completely blocked the exit with the exception of a very narrow gap to the left. While this extra barricade was being put in position, the enemy, strange to say, made no sign. Either they were disheartened by their heavy losses, or were planning fresh devilry.

"Your scheme is not half a bad one, lad," said the sergeant, approvingly. "This is what we should have done in the first place. With twice as many men I should feel reasonably sure of holding the camp. However, I'll stick by you, come what may."

"I hope you won't regret it," Maurice replied. "For my part, I believe the odds are in our favour. The only weak spot in the circle is this slit here."

"We'll soon fix that," vowed Campbell. "Come, men, all hands. Tear down the lean-to yonder."

The little shed was quickly demolished, and the timber was used to stop up the crevice and otherwise strengthen the barricade. Scarcely was this work finished when the foe assembled outside. For a few minutes they yelled ferociously, wasting powder and ball and hurling spears over the tops of the cages. But nobody was hurt, and presently the hill-men drew off again. A deep silence ensued that was fraught with ominous meaning.

"The rascals have discovered that the passage is barred to them," said Maurice. "I wonder what they will try next."

"I daresay they will go spying about in search of a weak point," Campbell answered in a low voice. "The siege won't be raised before daylight at the earliest, that's certain."

“Not if Silva commands them,” assented Maurice, “and of course he does.”

“No doubt of it, Sahib,” declared Sher Singh. “The Portuguese is bent on revenge, and he will not be easily discouraged. He has many fighting men with him, and they are as fearless and savage as the wild beasts of their native hills.”

“We had better put out the fire,” wisely suggested the sergeant. “Then we can move about freely and with less risk, and our eyes will soon grow accustomed to the darkness. At present we can’t stir without more or less danger of being shot.”

Chandar volunteered for this perilous duty, and the brave fellow succeeded in extinguishing the flames without drawing a bullet or a missile from the enemy. The camp was now shrouded in gloom—not so thick, however, but that the outlines of the cages and of human figures could be discerned. The loss of the two sentries had reduced the garrison to eight, and a small enough force it was to keep at bay such a horde of fanatical tribesmen.

Another consultation was held, and all agreed that in constant and unremitting vigilance lay the one and only hope.

“We have reliable guns and plenty of reserve ammunition,” said Maurice, “which means much. The best thing we can do is to scatter about the camp, and depend more on our ears than on our eyes. At the first sign of danger give a low whistle. That will summon the rest of us to the spot.”

No better plan of defence could have been adopted, for the barricading of the exit left the camp equally protected on all sides, and the enemy might attempt to break through the cordon at any point. Sergeant

Campbell undertook the charge of one side of the enclosure, and Maurice worked his way along the other. He had assigned two men to their posts of duty, and was counting off the distance for the third, when a dusky form rose at his very feet and bounded across the circle. The fellow had a good chance of escape, for, in their surprise, none fired at him. But just as he reached the middle of the camp he was pounced upon by the black panther, who had been lying concealed in the grass.

The blood-curdling screech of the animal mingled with the man's death-cry. There was a rush towards the spot, and Maurice, outdistancing the others, dropped to one knee and aimed at the pair of fiery eyes. The hammer fell with a click—the cartridge had missed fire. There was a rasping squall, a flying shadow, as the panther sprang at and over the daring lad, who was struck to the ground by a blow on the shoulder. And the next instant, when the beast was about to fasten teeth and claws in Maurice's body, a swift and remarkable thing happened.

A second panther, sprung apparently from nowhere, suddenly attacked the first one. They fought savagely and with shrill outcry, rolling from place to place, and then the brief combat—it lasted only a few seconds—was terminated by a peculiar whistle. The two animals fell apart, bolting in opposite directions, and Maurice, who got to his feet just at that time, could have sworn that he saw for an instant, ere it vanished in the gloom, a childish figure with a bushy head of hair.

The entire occurrence was quickly done and over. Amid noisy clamour several rifles were discharged at the fleeing panthers, but without visible effect. They escaped either by leaping over or between the cages.

"You had a close call, lad," said Campbell. "Are you hurt?"

"Not a bit," replied Maurice, who was astounded and a little dazed by his marvellous adventure. "I thought it was all up with me, though, when the cartridge missed fire."

"And where did the other panther come from?"

"I can't tell you, sergeant."

"It's a queer thing. I don't understand it."

The panther's victim—he had been forgotten for the moment—was now remembered. He lay where he had been pulled down, quite dead, and by the dim light his bitten and mangled throat could be seen.

"One of the hill-men," declared Maurice, stooping over the body; "I suppose he was with the attacking party, and ran in this direction when the bullocks stampeded."

"Yes, that's right," assented Campbell. "He was watching his chance to slip away. Well, the black panther won't trouble us any more—or the other one either. Back to your posts, men. We are giving the enemy too good an opportunity."

"Sahib, did you see the jungle child?" whispered Sher Singh, as he furtively sidled near to the lad.

"He was here," Maurice answered in a low voice. "Bobbili saved my life by sending his savage pet to the rescue. He must have wriggled under the hedge like a snake, and gone out in the same manner. Don't say a word about it to any one else, Sher Singh," he added. "They would only laugh at the story."

"I shall be silent, Sahib," promised the Hindoo.

The dead man was left where he had met his fate, and the tragedy soon lost its interest, for there were

more portentous things to be thought of. Maurice, having made sure that the men were properly posted, took his own position close to Campbell. The caged animals, who had been stirred to a high pitch of excitement by the shooting, presently became quiet again, except for an occasional wheeze or howl.

The surrounding jungle seemed to be deserted and not a sound could be heard. Thus nearly an hour slipped by, and to the little band of eight, shut in by bloodthirsty foes, the period was one of constant and trying suspense. They listened with keen ears for the expected signal, straining their eyes through the murky gloom. At frequent intervals either Maurice or the sergeant paced around the enclosure, and as time went on, the hope that the enemy had retreated, very faint at first, began to grow stronger.

It was a mistake, however, to hope at all, and the lad's heart would have filled with anguish could he have foreseen the result of his refusal to escape when the chance had been open.

To Sher Singh fell the credit of discovering the next attack. The brave shikaree was posted on the left of the camp, where, hearing guttural voices and a rustling in the bushes, he promptly gave the signal—a sharp, clear whistle. It was quickly responded to, and as his comrades reached the spot a number of half-naked savages, reckless of thorns, impetuously forced a gap in the hedge and burst through.

“Down!” cried Maurice. “Now let them have it. Aim low.”

The volley that ensued did some execution, and took the foe by surprise. With shrieks of agony they fled back to the shelter of the jungle, and when the defenders ceased fire, after continuing to blaze away

for a few seconds, all was quiet. Beneath the cages several bodies could be perceived.

"That was well done," said Campbell. "The wretches have had two severe lessons to-night."

"And we'll teach them as many more as they want," replied Maurice. "This is a dangerous spot, and will require careful watching. Look after it well, Sher Singh. I'll leave Chandar here to keep you company. Lie flat on the ground, so that the enemy will have the less chance of shooting or spearing you."

The gap in the hedge was hastily built up, and then, the men having gone back to their places, Maurice and the sergeant tramped round and round the camp. They felt that it would be risky to put too much reliance on signals, since the wild beasts were again in a state of panic and making considerable noise.

Not five minutes later came a third attack, from the opposite side of the enclosure. This time, however, the savages did not succeed in breaking through the hedge. A well-delivered volley caught them while they were entangled in the meshes of the thorn-bushes, and another volley dispersed them.

"They mean to keep it up," said Campbell.

"It looks that way," Maurice assented.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE FLAG OF TRUCE.

BACK went the men to their respective posts of duty, and Maurice and the sergeant, now more confident than ever, proceeded as before to patrol the camp. This peaceful occupation was soon interrupted by the sentry at the upper end of the enclosure, who, with a loud cry, discharged his rifle. The whole force arrived at the spot—it was where the exit had formerly been—just in time to encounter a desperate attack. Half a dozen of the foe had already wormed through the crevices to right and left. They carried no fire-arms, and ere they could do any damage two were shot dead, the others instantly retreating. Spears and bullets whistled harmlessly over the defenders as they threw themselves to the ground, and after that they enjoyed a brief lull.

Maurice ordered Sher Singh and Chandar to return to their old position, lest the enemy, knowing the weakness of the place, should make a counter assault there.

“That’s right, lad,” commented the sergeant. “It leaves only six of us here, but we’ll give a good account of ourselves. Watch sharp! they’re coming.”

A burst of ear-splitting yells from without the camp, and the report of several muskets, was followed by a sudden deafening crash. The heavy cage that blocked the passage, pushed on from behind, had been toppled clear off the truck. Its position was not materially altered, though the barricade was now three or four

feet lower. At once the fanatical tribesmen clambered to the top of the fallen cage, ready to leap down on the inner side, and as quickly the rifle-fire, Maurice giving the word, dropped them as a scythe cuts ripened corn.

Some fell backward, striking those who were attempting to scramble up, and others reeled forward to the ground, to lie squirming and shrieking in agony. A few desperate fellows leapt into the camp, full of life and mischief, and advanced into the teeth of the leaden hail until all had been hit. At intervals, as the volleying slackened, the splutter of rifles could be heard in the rear, telling that Sher Singh and Chandar were also in straits. No relief could be spared them at present, for the hill-men were still hotly storming the barricade.

“Keep it up, men,” shouted Campbell.

“Faster! don’t waste a shot,” cried Maurice.

“They can’t stand much more of it.”

Crack! crack! crack! The murky night blazed with jets of red fire, and a pall of smoke hid the heavens. The roaring of wild animals blended with the howling of tigerish and infuriated men. At last the barricade was clear, and none were trying to mount the cage. One lonely savage, who had toppled into the camp, went down before Maurice’s unerring aim.

That was the final shot. The bloodthirsty foe retreated, beaten off for the fourth time, and slunk away to the jungle. Seven or eight dead bodies were strewn at the base of the defences, and no doubt as many more lay on the other side. It was a severe loss to the enemy.

Comparative silence followed, and it was held to be a good sign that the rifles of Sher Singh and

Chandar were quiet, though no message came from the two Hindoos. The plucky victors stretched their cramped limbs, and looked at one another in the smoky gloom. They promptly reloaded their weapons, and filled their cartridge-belts from the ammunition box, which was close by.

"Any one hurt?" Maurice asked, in a husky almost inaudible voice.

"Not seriously, lad," replied the trooper. "Sri Das here has a spear prick in the thigh, and a bullet clipped my left ear. The rascals had very little chance to fire at us. I believe we have settled them for good and all this time."

Maurice made a hoarse attempt to laugh. His head was throbbing and dizzy, and crawling to the water-bucket he took a deep long draught, the others gladly imitating his example. Meanwhile Sergeant Campbell hastened up the camp, and returned a minute later with favourable news.

"All snug in that direction," he announced. "The enemy tried to get in by the weak part of the hedge, but the Hindoos forced them to retreat."

"Is Sher Singh wounded," inquired Maurice.

"Not a scratch on either of them," was the reply. "One of the hyenas in yonder cage is dead though. It must have been right in the line of fire."

"It is not our loss," said Maurice. "The hyenas belonged to Silva. I think it would be best to move the tiger's cage to one side. You see—hullo! what does that mean?"

As he spoke the lad pointed eagerly to a white object, faintly fluttering in the breeze, that had suddenly appeared over the top of the barricade.

"I'm blest if I know *what* it is," muttered

Campbell. "Some devilry or other, I'll bet a rupee. It must be—"

"Flag of truce," interrupted a loud voice in fair English from beyond the barricade, thus completing the sergeant's sentence.

The white object rose a little higher. It was a native kummerbund attached to the head of a spear.

"Don't shoot, you there," the voice went on. "If you are civilized you will recognize the flag."

"That sounds well from such a pack of scoundrels, doesn't it?" growled Campbell. "What do you want, anyway?"

"I want to talk to you," was the reply. "Will you grant me an interview?"

"I've nothing to do with it," the sergeant called back. "What is your answer, lad?" he added, in an undertone.

"Shall I talk to him?" asked Maurice.

"I think I should," advised Campbell. "It can do no harm, and it might lead to some good."

"That's the way I feel about it," said Maurice; and raising his voice he shouted; "I am willing to give you a brief interview. Show yourself without fear."

There was a moment of silence, and then the head and shoulders of a man slowly rose above the barricade. The light, though dim, was amply sufficient to reveal the crafty features of the Senor Antonio Silva,

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CAGE OF SERPENTS.

THE appearance of the Portuguese was not entirely unexpected, for Maurice had fathomed a familiar ring in the voice. Some one else had done the same, and from a greater distance; Sher Singh stood behind the little group with a look of intense interest on his swarthy face.

“Chandar will keep safe watch, Sahib,” he whispered in the lad’s ear. “I came because I am anxious to hear what this treacherous dog will say.”

Silva held up both hands to show that they were empty.

“I wish to talk to your leader,” he began, in his sleek and oily voice, “a lad named Maurice. My business is with him alone.”

“I’ll speak for him, you scoundrel,” Campbell exclaimed impulsively, as he fingered his rifle. “I am Sergeant Campbell of the Fusileers, stationed at Seranghur, and I know all about the dirty trick you have played on the Raja and the magistrates. Nothing you can say is going to help you any. You’ll be sorry enough when His Majesty’s government gets hold of you, and I only hope I may be with the troopers who run you and your hired assassins down.”

Silva laughed—an insolent, mocking laugh that stung his hearers to the quick.

“My friend, you speak boldly for a rat in a trap,”

he said. "I must see the English lad, Maurice, and none other. He has the lives of all of you in his power, and you are lost if he refuses me an interview."

"Pay no attention to him, Sahib," entreated Sher Singh. "He is not to be trusted."

"No more than a hooded cobra," added the sergeant. "His brain is plotting treachery, I'll swear."

"But it may be to our advantage," protested Maurice, "and besides, there is no danger while the truce lasts."

With that he separated from his companions and advanced a few feet towards the barricade, holding his rifle carelessly in one hand. The others kept a vigilant watch on the Portuguese, ready to fire at the first sign of knavery.

"Well, here I am," said Maurice. "What do you want?"

"The surrender of the camp," replied Silva, "and the return of my animals, cages, and other property. If you will agree to this I promise to spare the lives of all, and to take nothing that is not my own. Also I will forgive the personal wrong you have done me."

"Forgive?" Maurice cried wrathfully. "Senor Silva, you are the most impudent rascal that ever drew breath. The interview is at an end. I shall hold the camp at any cost. If you want your possessions, appeal to the proper authorities—if you dare."

"Wait, lad," exclaimed the Portuguese. "Do you understand what a refusal of my terms will mean? I have three score of desperate savages left. After each attack to-night I withdrew them. I was

merely testing your strength. Now I shall unleash them—bid them do their worst. They will make one rush upon the camp, and, at the most, perhaps you will shoot down a score. The rest will have you at their mercy. And such mercy! It will be a great revenge. Do you still refuse my offer?"

"Yes, I refuse," declared Maurice. "You can't frighten me with such talk. And now—"

Crack! With lightning like rapidity the Portuguese had whipped out a pistol and fired at the lad, the ball passing within an inch of his head, and narrowly missing his companions. Campbell and Sher Singh instantly returned the fire, but Silva had dropped behind the cage. The kummerbund fluttered for a moment, and then disappeared.

"Are you hit, Sahib?" Sher Singh demanded anxiously of Maurice.

"No, but I had a near thing of it," the lad replied. "I wasn't looking for such treachery."

"The yellow ruffian shall pay dearly for it," vowed Campbell. "Back all of you. This is a dangerous spot just now."

The sergeant's warning was timely, for the little group had barely moved aside and taken shelter, when a discharge of musketry, accompanied by a shower of spears, was directed at the spot where they had been standing. These hostile demonstrations quickly ceased, however, and the jungle beyond the barricade became silent.

"Silva's threats about rushing the camp were only bluster, of course," said Maurice, rather uneasily.

"That's all," replied Campbell, "else he would not have been thrown into such a rage by your refusal to surrender."

“But he will try hard to do what he threatened,” put in Sher Singh. “There is very grave peril, Sahibs. Moreover, if the Portuguese has three-score of men left—”

“I’m a little doubtful myself, I admit,” interrupted the sergeant. “If they had only made one more charge during that last attack, I’m afraid we should have been snowed under. Suppose we despatch a messenger to the cantonments at Seranghur. There is a chance for one to slip out of camp now, and if he gets through all right we’ll have a squad of troopers here by noon to-morrow.”

The suggestion called for no argument. It was immediately approved.

“Silva will be neatly trapped if he keeps the siege up long enough,” exclaimed Maurice.

“If he continues to attack us as he has been doing,” muttered Campbell, in an undertone, “the sowars will not be likely to find us alive when they come.”

Sher Singh nodded meaningly, and there was an expression of alarm on his face as he glanced at Maurice.

“If it wasn’t for the cages and the wild beasts—which he means to get possession of—Silva could have routed us out at any time by means of fire,” the sergeant added. “But what about that messenger?”

Two of the Hindoos volunteered for the perilous journey, and no doubt both were mainly actuated by a desire to escape from the doomed camp, as they believed it to be. The choice fell to Tara Mir, the younger. He was a fleet runner, and, moreover, was familiar with the road to the cantonments.

Having received his instructions he slipped

noiselessly away in the darkness, towards the rear end of the camp. A slight rustling and scratching was heard as he squeezed through the hedge, and not a half-minute later a terrible shriek rang on the air, followed by a couple of exultant yells. Words could not have told the story plainer. The luckless messenger had been butchered by the foe.

His friends, powerless to avenge his death, were at first struck dumb with horror, then thrown into a bloodthirsty rage.

"Just wait," cried Campbell. "We'll have a chance to pay them for this."

"I wish it would come now," vowed Maurice, "and I hope Silva will lead the next attack."

"Speak not rashly, Sahibs," urged Sher Singh. "Since Tara Mir has been slain, there is no aid to be expected from Seranghur. We must hold out till the enemy are wearied of the siege—"

"Or until the worst happens," added the sergeant bitterly.

A few minutes passed silently, in harrowing suspense. Of the bold little garrison but seven remained—seven against three score. The five had been sent to their posts, and Maurice and Campbell were patrolling opposite sides of the camp, with all their senses on the alert, when the lad paused briefly before a long, shallow cage that was not mounted on trucks like the others. It stood about seven feet from the ground.

"Here is a weak place," he told himself. "The savages could swarm over it in force without much difficulty. I wonder that they have not discovered it."

The inner side was covered with close wire-netting and the interior was divided into three compartments,

in which, amid grass and sand, dwelt a colony of serpents. A score of venomous cobras occupied one of the compartments, and in the next were various other reptiles, almost equally poisonous. The third contained a large and very ill-natured python.

It was a strange coincidence that just then, as Maurice moved slowly on, the neighbouring jungle should have echoed to the rustling tread of many feet. As quickly the thorn hedge was torn apart, and the savages came with a dash against the serpent cage. Failing to move it, or turn it over, since heavy stakes had been driven in front of it, they leapt to the top of it with fiendish cries, some hurling spears and some discharging muskets.

The defenders were promptly on the spot, and a deadly rifle-fire greeted the foe. Meanwhile a keen watch was kept on the entrance to the camp, and several of the party were ready to speed in that direction at the first sign of a counter-attack. But Silva appeared to have concentrated all his men at one place, as he had sworn to do. With utter contempt for the hail of bullets, the fanatical wretches surged over the low cage and jumped down into the camp.

"Drive them back," shouted Maurice. "They are coming faster."

The defenders themselves, however, were compelled to fall back a few paces, still firing incessantly. With rage and dismay they saw half a dozen of the savages looming near, almost face to face. Others were dropping from the cage, to trample their dead and dying comrades.

A number of spears were hurled, and the Hindoo next to Maurice, pierced from breast to backbone, fell with a gurgling cry. Only six were left now.

Campbell's voice rang hoarsely above the tumult ;
" Give them another volley ! If more get in we're done for. Fire, men, fire ! "

The rifles vomited flame and lead. Here and there dusky wretches fell, biting the ground in their death agonies. But they were instantly replaced. It was impossible to stem the rush.

At this critical and desperate moment, when all seemed to be lost, a frightful disaster befell the assailants. The top of the cage, which was of thin planking, suddenly gave way with a crash and precipitated eight or ten of the foe among the serpents. Promptly discovering their horrible position, they fought and scuffled like madmen, with blood-curdling screams, to escape the certain doom. In their frantic struggles the cage was overturned, and reptiles and savages swarmed out together among the half-score of hill-men who had gained a foothold within the camp.

No tongue or pen can describe the ghastly, awful scenes that followed. The bravest of human beings are likely to meet, some day, with a peril that will turn their oft-tried courage to wax. And so it was now. The fight for the camp was forgotten, ignored, in the presence of the horde of hissing, venomous creatures.

The snakes, roused to anger and terribly active, sprang and bit right and left at the half-naked bodies of the savages. Every nip of the sharp, poisoned fangs meant speedy and certain death. Wails of agony, and shrill cries of panic, rang on the night air. One by one the victims fell, clutching at their bitten limbs, through which the venom was swiftly coursing. Some staggered away from the fatal spot before they reeled down, and a very few

escaped entirely, fleeing unmolested across the camp and climbing over the barricade. The alarm spread to those who lurked in the jungle behind the upset cage, and fearing for their own lives, they scurried in haste from the infected neighbourhood.

The worst was at an end in a very short time. The moans of the dying grew feebler and fainter, and there was less movement in the squirming heap of bodies, from which, here and there, a trembling form could be seen crawling painfully and slowly over the ground. One poor wretch, with a cobra fastened to his naked arm, bit the reptile in the throat and then dropped dead. Another, about whose leg was twined a thick, green snake, leapt by a desperate effort almost to Maurice's feet, and lay there screaming with agony.

Help for any was out of the question. The little handful of brave men—they had withdrawn to a safe distance—had their own safety to look after; and, amid all the sickening horrors, their first thought was for the preservation of the camp.

The serpents were now spreading. In every direction the hideous, scintillating creatures went hissing and gliding through the trampled grass. A cobra reared its head within three feet of Maurice, and was struck lifeless by a blow from Sher Singh's rifle. A second was, at the same instant, ground to death under Campbell's booted heel.

"Back with you," cried the sergeant. "We can't stop here any longer. Death lurks at every step."

"We've got to take our chances with the reptiles," exclaimed Maurice. "The camp must be protected, for it may be attacked again at any minute."

"And at least two score of the tribesmen are left, Sahib," reminded Sher Singh.

Cautiously the group retreated for a short distance, and then, pausing in anxious indecision, they watched all sides of the enclosure. No one observed the python dragging its thick coils over the heap of dead and dying savages; indeed, the existence of the big snake was for the time being forgotten. He had just crept out of the cage, where he had been lying stupidly during the whole scene, and now, thoroughly aroused, he was hungry and ill-tempered. His wicked eyes sparkled as he glided towards the unsuspecting party of men.

Suddenly there was an awful yell from Chandar, and his horrified companions scattered right and left as they saw him caught in the embrace of the slimy monster. Two coils encircled the unfortunate Hindoo. His bones cracked with a sickening sound, and his screams ended in a throaty wail. The python's head darted to and fro, hissing and spitting.

With an exclamation of rage Maurice reversed his rifle and sprang forward, watching a chance to strike.

"Back, Sahib, for your life!" warned Sher Singh.

"It's too late to do any good," cried Campbell.

"Out of the way, lad, and give me a chance to fire."

Maurice was confused by the shouting of his friends, which threw him for a moment off his guard. Then quickly the python's tail slid alongside of him and whipped about his legs, at once jerking him to the ground. He uttered a frightful cry, and realizing what had happened, he gave himself up for lost.

"Help! help!" he intreated, as he struggled vainly to escape from the merciless coils that were tightening on his limbs.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

GOADED to desperate fury and valour by the sight of the lad's peril, Sher Singh cocked his rifle and fearlessly advanced to the python's swaying head. He thrust the muzzle into the yawning jaws and fired twice. Both balls penetrated a vital part, and the reptile began to writhe and squirm in its death agonies, thumping the ground with its ponderous coils. Its blazing eyes seemed to emit sparks, and it hissed like a steam-valve. Chandar was silent, but Maurice's screams chilled every heart. Sher Singh continued to send lead into the snake.

Meanwhile Sergeant Campbell had dashed to the tent, whence he promptly returned carrying an axe. Approaching the python, he attacked the thick body midway between the two victims. Thud! thud! Each stroke told in spite of the fearful contortions. The axe fell faster and faster, until finally the monster dropped apart, cleft fairly in twain. Its vitality was destroyed, though its two bodies were still feebly agitated.

With a cry of satisfaction the sergeant staggered back, panting and exhausted, and with eager hands Sher Singh tore Maurice free. With the exception of a few bruises the lad was absolutely unhurt, for the snake's muscular power had been mostly concentrated on the luckless Hindoo. Chandar had already breathed his last, and was so tightly wrapped in the coils that he could not be liberated.

With one or two inarticulate words of gratitude Maurice swooned away, but a dash of water on his head, and a sip of brandy to follow, speedily pulled him round. He felt better at once, and soon was quite recovered, though his nerves were badly shaken by what he had gone through.

All were depressed by the tragedy, and the black, sultry night seemed to whisper of worse misfortunes to come.

“Five of us left,” Campbell said huskily. “We’re no match for that fiend of a Portuguese. I’ve little heart, lad, to fight on against such overwhelming odds.”

“But the luck has really been on our side,” protested Maurice, with a show of cheerfulness. “The savages have been compelled to retreat every time, and they will scarcely muster up enough courage to attack us again.”

“Not of their own free will, perhaps,” assented the sergeant. “I grant you that. But as long as they are in the mind to obey Silva’s orders there is no telling—”

“Look, Sahibs!” shrilly interrupted Sher Singh. “There—at the end of the camp.”

All eyes followed the Hindoo’s outstretched arm, and they beheld an ominous and alarming sight. A ruddy glare danced above the barricade, and it was evident that dry grass had been piled against the far side of the cage and set on fire.

“We must put it out,” cried Maurice, dashing towards the spot. “Quick! there are several pails of water left.”

“It’s no use, lad,” declared Campbell; but nevertheless he ran with the others.

They secured the pails, and fearlessly approached the barricade. Just then a mass of forked flame leapt out of the dense yellow smoke, hissing and crackling about the woodwork of the doomed cage.

"It would take a reservoir to put that out," cried the sergeant. "It's all up with the camp now. And it's more than doubtful if we'll be able to save our lives."

"I'm afraid you're right," said Maurice. "The camp is surrounded, of course. Well, it's hard to die like rats in a trap. And all my fault, too."

"If it comes to the worst we'll sell our lives dearly," vowed Campbell. "But a bold, determined rush may carry us safely to the jungle. Are you ready to try it?"

There was no reply, No one stirred. They stood for a moment in dazed and bitter despair, reckless of their exposed position; for all around them was a lurid, red glare.

The roaring flames spread, dancing higher. The poor beasts, imprisoned in their cages, screamed with fright as they sniffed and saw the oncoming death. But as yet, strange to say, the enemy had fired no shot, hurled no spear, at the clearly-defined little group. Nor was there any sign of life outside; apparently the jungle beyond the barricade was deserted.

"By heavens, I know why the rascals are so quiet!" Maurice suddenly cried, in a voice of alarm and consternation. "They are keeping at a safe distance, and no wonder, either. That burning cage belonged to Silva, and among the contents are two large tins of powder—"

"Powder?" shouted Campbell. "Are you sure?"

"Yes; because I opened one of the tins. I had

forgotten all about them. But Silva remembered, you may be certain, and that is why he started the fire."

"His object is to blow the passage free," added Sher Singh. "That accomplished, they will rush in."

"God help us!" cried the sergeant. "The cage is now wrapped in flames. At any moment they may reach the powder. Back—back for your lives. It is death to linger here."

At that instant, and before the warning could be heeded, there came a tremendous explosion that seemed to rend the very earth asunder. A sheet of fire and flame-lit smoke rose heavenward, and as quickly the air was filled with shattered timber and wheels, iron bolts, clods of earth, and a shower of smaller *debris*.

The force of the explosion dashed the occupants of the camp to the ground, where they lay, stunned and bewildered, while the wreckage dropped around them and the fumes of smoke were drawn into their lungs.

Fortunately, however, the little band had been far enough away to escape serious injury. A vague sense of peril impressed itself on their reeling brains, and rising dizzily they stared about them, at first scarcely comprehending what had happened.

Where the barricade had been was now a huge black rent in the ground. The cages immediately to right and left of the passage had been destroyed—or partially so. In one a mangled leopard was screeching with agony, and from the shattered timbers of the other protruded the dead bodies of the two hyenas; one of them had been killed before the catastrophe. The inmates of the remaining cages were making a fearful

din, and the whole scene was radiantly illumined by fragments of burning wood.

The space of time during which Maurice and his companions stood gazing stupidly about them was in reality very brief, though to their minds it seemed long. They were roused from their stupefaction by a burst of angry yells, and through the demolished barricade streamed a horde of savages. Silva's figure, lean and bearded, towered among the foremost.

A single glimpse showed the impossibility of resisting such a charge.

"Run for your lives!" exclaimed Campbell, setting the example.

He made off towards the rear of the camp, the others following as rapidly as their staggering limbs would take them. Hot in pursuit pressed the hillmen, merciless and bloodthirsty, hurling spears and firing a few shots that failed to have any effect.

"Faster! faster!" panted the sergeant. "We've a bit of a chance, maybe."

The fugitives were now in deeper gloom, and if they could hold out a little longer they would be safe, provided no foes were lurking ahead to cut them off. Campbell, Maurice, and Sher Singh were slightly in advance of Sri Das and the remaining native, whose name was Gunput.

Suddenly Sri Das uttered a piercing yell. A cobra had fastened upon his ankle, and as the stricken man reeled with agony, a musket-ball penetrated his brain and mercifully ended his sufferings. As Sri Das fell Maurice imprudently slackened his speed to glance behind him, and at the same instant Gunput, by a swift spurt, gained the lad's former place between the sergeant and Sher Singh.

Seeing that Sri Das was beyond help, and that the clamorous savages were very near, Maurice lost no time in speeding after his companions. But he had not made three strides when his foot caught in a patch of tangled grass, and down he went, striking his head so violently on a knotty root as to partly deprive him of consciousness.

In the murky darkness and the excitement of the moment Campbell and Sher Singh naturally did not discover the substitution of Gunput for the lad. They pushed on at full speed, fearful of being overtaken and butchered, and reaching the verge of the camp they tore the hedge apart and crawled under the nearest cage. They fought ahead through thorns and scrub, bleeding and lacerated, until, when they were some distance within the jungle, they for the first time became aware that the lad was not with them.

Meanwhile, having been roused from his semi-stupor by naked feet trampling ruthlessly over him, Maurice found himself in a most unenviable plight. Smarting with pain, he struggled to rise, and had barely succeeded in doing so when his arms were firmly pinned to his sides from behind. Twisting around he discovered to his horror—a couple of torches shed a strong light—that he was in the grasp of Antonio Silva himself.

The lad promptly realized that he was lost, and the thought of what his fate might be gave him a cold shiver. Weakened by his bruises, unable to offer any resistance, he was like a child in his captor's grip.

“Ah! this is unexpected good fortune,” snarled the Portuguese. “I have kept my word, boy—you are in my power. It was you I chiefly wished for,

and I am glad now that my pistol-shot failed to kill you. I will settle old scores in a much better fashion."

"You will be sorry if you do," said Maurice, as he looked vainly for his friends. "Would you dare to murder me?"

"Dare?" sneered Silva, with an evil laugh. "Back, you dogs!" he shouted at the fiendish savages, a number of whom were swarming about the two. "Leave the prisoner to me. I will glut your thirst for vengeance soon enough."

The hillmen doubtless did not understand a word, but they sullenly withdrew and went yelling across the enclosure after their comrades. An instant later Silva was joined by two other Portuguese—the same who had been present when Tearle's party had the fight in the ravine. These ruffians, Castro and Pereira by name, were every whit as sinister-looking as their leader. They fixed ferocious glances on Maurice.

"You see I have the lad," said Silva. "That satisfies me. His companions have escaped to the jungle, and it is useless to seek for them."

"It is a pity," replied Castro. "They will hasten to the cantonment at Seranghur, and put the sowars on our track."

"That is true," Pereira assented, uneasily. "We had better get away from here as quickly as possible."

"Cowards!" exclaimed Silva. "However, you are right. But first I will have my revenge. Call back the savages, if they have been stupid enough to chase the fugitives beyond the camp. And be quick, for I need your help."

CHAPTER XIX.

SILVA AND THE TIGER.

SILVA'S instructions proved to be unnecessary, since the tribesmen had gone no farther in pursuit of Sergeant Campbell and his companions than to the edge of the enclosure. Their lust for bloodshed baffled, they turned their thoughts to plunder. Some, lighting torches, groped here and there, with wailing cries, among the bodies of the slain. Others crowded into the tent, and fell to quarrelling over the contents. Discovering several bottles of whisky and quinine—provided by Tearle for medicinal purposes—they broke the necks off and began to drink greedily. Castro and Pereira endeavoured to restore order, but with little or no success, and then returned to their leader, who was waiting impatiently while he kept a tight hold on Maurice.

“The wretches are beyond control,” they declared. “They won't listen to us.”

“Never mind them now,” Silva cried angrily. “I'll wake them up when I've finished with the business I have on hand. Here, take the lad. It will cost you your lives if you let him give you the slip.”

Turning Maurice over to the two Portuguese, he snatched a torch from one of the savages and hastened across the camp.

“This way,” he shouted a moment later.

Castro and Pereira promptly took the prisoner to Silva, who was standing before the cage that contained the tiger. The great animal was moving restlessly

up and down, growling in a low key. He was clearly in a bad temper, and this was aggravated by the clamour of the other beasts and the glare of the torches.

On Silva's face was a smile of venomous hatred and satisfaction; his white teeth gleamed through his parted lips.

"What do you think of my revenge?" he asked of Maurice.

The lad, suddenly realizing the awful fate in store for him, was chilled and stupefied with horror. Beyond a doubt the Portuguese meant to throw him into the tiger's cage. He first made a desperate and futile effort to escape, then hoarsely begged for mercy, appealing to each of his captors in turn. His courage was unequal to such a fearful test, and little wonder.

From dread of possible consequences, and nothing else, Castro and Pereira glanced doubtfully at their leader. But Silva had no difficulty in allaying their scruples.

"It will quickly be over," he said. "And there is no one to tell the tale. Who would believe any statement made by those uncivilized wretches yonder?"

"If you are determined to kill me," implored Maurice, "let it be in some other way. Why do you wish to torture me?"

The lad appealed to deaf ears and merciless hearts.

"Ah, you shudder!" cried Silva. "You quake with fear. This is a sweet revenge, indeed. You will be a dainty morsel for the hungry brute. Behold, his jaws are open and waiting. The great teeth will slowly crunch your bones and devour your flesh."

Beckoning to the two Portuguese to draw nearer, he stepped close up to the bars. Half a score of the

savages approached, and gathered about the spot with fiendish and noisy delight. The tiger backed to the rear of the cage, where, dropping to his haunches, he snarled incessantly and ominously. His eyes were balls of fire, and his tongue dangled from his blood-red chops.

“Be quick,” urged Silva, with an oath.

Rapidly, in spite of his frantic struggles and pitiful cries, Castro and Pereira forced the lad on. With one hand Silva fumbled at the fastenings of the cage and in the other he held a blazing torch, with which he menaced the animal and kept it at bay. Inch by inch he drew the sliding door open.

“Now!” he cried. “Throw the lad in.”

As Maurice was lifted off his feet by the two Portuguese he uttered a loud scream, and by a desperate effort wrested himself partly from their grasp. Silva swore fiercely, and in his rage and consternation he let the torch fall to the ground. As quickly the tiger seized his opportunity, and leaping forward with a thunderous roar got half-way through the narrow door, where he became wedged fast for a moment, struggling and twisting for liberty.

The disaster was so startling, so unexpected, that all lost their presence of mind. Silva sprang to one side and tripped over backward, while Castro and Pereira, promptly dropping the lad, started to run for their lives.

A smashing, ripping noise, a clatter of splintered woodwork, and the enraged tiger was free. With a deep roar the beast bounded over and beyond Maurice, and pounced upon Pereira. Shaking the luckless man as a terrier shakes a rat, he dashed lightly across the camp with him and disappeared.



“With one hand Silva fumbled at the fastenings of the cage.”

Confusion and clamour followed. Maurice rose to his feet, dazed and trembling, and immediately Silva's evil eyes were fixed on the lad. He reached to his belt, whipped out a revolver, and levelled it with deadly aim. But just at this critical moment there was a shout close by, and then, from underneath the tiger's empty cage, burst Sergeant Campbell, Gunput, and Sher Singh. The latter instantly seized Maurice and pulled him down in time to escape Silva's bullet, while the other two opened fire on the Portuguese and the frightened savages. Castro was the first to fall, shot in the chest, and a second or two later Silva was seen to drop, though whether purposely or from a wound it was impossible to tell.

The heroic little handful of rescuers stopped short of imprudence. Directly they perceived that the tribesmen were rallying for an attack, Campbell gave the word to his companions to retreat. They dived beneath the cage and back through the broken hedge, taking Maurice with them, and safely reaching the jungle they sped on in the friendly darkness. Sher Singh's faithful arms lent strength and support to the lad, whose courage ebbed back as he listened, with overpowering joy and gratitude, to the husky clamour of the foe growing fainter and fainter in the distance. That he had been preserved from such an awful death seemed too good to be true.

CHAPTER XX.

A SWIM FOR LIFE.

THE lost camp was a mile behind when a halt was made at a shallow water-hole, which Sergeant Campbell discovered by accidentally plunging into it. The locality was a dangerous one, since wild beasts could be heard in several directions. Maurice eagerly quenched his thirst and bathed his fevered cheeks and forehead. He was still painfully nervous from his frightful experience with Silva, and a shudder convulsed him now and then as he listened silently to the account of his rescue, modestly told by Sher Singh.

"That's enough about the past," said Campbell, when the shikaree had finished. "I don't like to think of it—it makes my blood boil. It's the future that we've got to reckon with, and unless we hurry a bit those murderous wretches will slip ahead and lie in wait for us at the river ford. Gunput, what sort of a hand are you at junglecraft? Can you guide us straight to Seranghur?"

"Yes, Sahib, I can do it," vowed the Hindoo. "I need neither sun, moon, nor stars."

"Off with you, then, and we'll follow. I'm fairly itching to start the Raja's sowars after Silva and his band before they escape to the hills. And I want to see Silva caught and punished—unless he's dead, which I doubt."

"What about the camp?" Maurice suggested anxiously.

“There won’t be much left there worth saving,” replied the sergeant. “The scoundrels will likely burn everything. Though I trust for your sake that they won’t, lad.”

Maurice’s heart was heavy as he trudged with his companions through the jungle. He knew that he was not in the least to blame for the disasters that had happened—that he had stuck to his duty even beyond the limits of discretion ; but nevertheless he looked forward with dread and dismay to the news that he must break to Tearle and Carruthers.

These feelings wore off after a time. There was too much else to be thought of, for the fugitives were by no means out of danger yet. With weapons ready for use, clinging to one another for fear of becoming separated in the darkness, they crept along in single file, with Gunput at their head. It was not an easy task to pick a course through the fastnesses of the jungle by night. The Hindoo made frequent halts, in spite of his boasted assurance, and twice he branched off in the wrong direction, being recalled to the right path by catching a glimpse of the stars between the matted foliage.

Thus precious minutes were lost, and the flight had lasted for an hour and a half, at the least, when finally the gloomy coverts dropped away and the misty river was seen swirling towards the sea. The little group stopped in perplexity at the water’s edge.

“I don’t recognize the spot,” declared Campbell. “This is surely not where Captain Rogers brought us across.”

“The ford is a quarter of a mile farther up stream,” replied Gunput, pointing to the north. “Come, Sahibs, I will take you to it.”

“Hold on,” said the sergeant. “It is just as well, perhaps, that we’ve struck the river here. We had better not venture above, for as likely as not our wily foes have reached the fording and are watching it.”

“But the water is deeper here,” protested Maurice. “We shall have to swim in places.”

“And there are crocodiles,” added Sher Singh.

“I’m not afraid of your old muggers,” vowed Campbell. “Besides, we stand a better chance of keeping them off by swimming. We can splash and kick with our feet, and scare them. If we wade, that is impossible.”

“The Sahib speaks wisely,” said Gunput. “And look! yonder log will serve to support our arms while we swim.”

He pointed to the bare and whitened trunk of a tree, about eight feet in length, that lay near the edge of the shore.

“Right you are,” approved the sergeant. “That will be a considerable help to us in crossing. Once on the other side, and we’ll be safe. Daylight can’t be far off now.”

He was dragging the log to the water, with Gunput’s assistance, when Maurice uttered a hasty exclamation.

“Wait; I have just thought of something,” he cried. “There should be a boat concealed in the bushes about twenty yards above the ford. Tearle bought it from some natives for the use of Chandar and Gunput, when they wished to cross the river.”

“It should still be there, Sahib,” Gunput reluctantly admitted. “I had forgotten it.”

Evidently from his manner, the Hindoo was not anxious to remember.

“A boat?” exclaimed Campbell. “That alters the situation. No use to run the risk of muggers when we can cross in safety. And there *is* a risk, I suppose?”

“A grave one, Sahib,” replied Sher Singh. “At times the crocodiles are very hungry and bold.”

There was a brief interval of hesitation and uncertainty. The danger of falling into an ambushade was not imaginary, for there was sound reason to fear that Silva and his bloodthirsty allies might be hiding by the ford. Gunput flatly refused to stir, and urged the others to swim over by means of the log.

“I will fetch the boat,” Maurice finally declared. “It will be easy to slip up-stream without making any noise, and when I get near the ford I will make a detour around it.”

“I will go with you, Sahib,” said Sher Singh, in a tone of quiet determination.

Campbell gave a dubious assent to the plan.

“I don’t like it,” he said. “I am as clumsy as an elephant, or I would go with you myself. But the savages would hear me fifty yards away. However, be off with you. Gunput and I will wait here.”

“We shan’t be long,” promised Maurice. “We will paddle out into the stream, and then lie flat in the bottom while the boat drifts down. In the darkness it will look like a log. It is only a clumsy dug-out, anyway.”

Without further delay the two intrepid volunteers slipped noiselessly up the shore, keeping under cover of the reeds and bushes. They made good use of eyes and ears, and were prepared to fire at the first sign of an enemy. Maurice knew the exact spot where the boat was moored by a tree.

The jungle back of the river was intensely quiet, and there was no sound of bird or beast, which to Sher Singh's experienced mind were ominous auguries. All went well until the fording-place was about twenty yards distant, when Maurice veered off at right angles.

"We must cut around now," he whispered. "I don't believe there is any danger, though."

"But it is not certain, Sahib," replied the shikaree. "Let us make no noise."

Side by side they crept through the strip of grass reeds, and scrub that extended half a dozen yards from the water's edge, and next came an upward slope of fairly open ground, on top of which began the jungle. Maurice was the first to mount the rise, and just as he planted his feet on the level above, a dusky figure started up in front of him, not three yards away.

Frightened out of his self-possession—thereby his life was probably saved—the lad lost his balance, and slipping backward rolled down the slope; while at the same time, colliding with Sher Singh, he bowled that individual clean over. In hot pursuit sprang the savage, brandishing a long spear. He bounded past the prostrate Hindoo, and sped after Maurice, who had promptly leapt to his feet on reaching the bottom of the incline. As he had dropped his rifle, and dared not pause to look for it, he dashed straight towards the river.

At this critical moment, when the savage was about to cast his spear with unerring aim at the lad, a shadowy thing flitted out of a patch of reeds and was as quickly launched against his naked chest. Maurice, hearing at his ears the cry of terror and the deeper sound that blended with it, stopped and looked back. The man was down, feebly kicking underneath a huge, tawny animal that snarled ferociously as he bit and mauled his victim.

“A panther!” hoarsely exclaimed the lad, who was standing knee-deep in the river. “He’ll be turning his attention to me next.”

Meanwhile, Sher Singh having risen to his feet,—only a few seconds had elapsed—he was confronted by a crisis that gave him no opportunity to think of his companion; for two more savages had suddenly appeared at the top of the slope, and were in the act of plunging down upon him. The Hindoo’s rifle cracked, and he had one foe less to deal with. At such close quarters it was impossible to fire again, so, with a lightning-like movement, he timely knocked up the second man’s spear, and then let him have it with the butt of the firearm. The wretch dropped with a shattered skull, and lay quivering at the shikaree’s feet.

His foes thus disposed of, and no others being in sight, Sher Singh hastened towards Maurice just as the panther bounded away and vanished, leaving the savage to all appearance dead, for he neither moved nor made any sound. At the same instant, a few yards to the left, loomed indistinctly a boyish shape that Maurice immediately recognized.

“Bobbili!” he cried.

There was an incoherent response, and then the slight figure ran off and was lost to sight.

“Did you see him, Sher Singh?” exclaimed Maurice.

“I saw nothing, Sahib—only the beast.”

“It was Bobbili’s panther, and I saw the jungle-child plainly. This makes the third time he has come to warn or to aid me.”

“You are greatly in his debt, Sahib,” said the Hindoo. “He must have followed us from the camp. But it is unwise to linger here, in such a dangerous

spot," he added. "I have slain two savages," pointing towards the slope, "and others must be near at hand."

The words recalled Maurice to a sense of peril, and Bobilli and the panther were for the present forgotten. He ventured forward to recover his rifle, and for a moment the two stood watching and listening alertly. At first they heard nothing, and concluded that the three dead men had been posted as sentries, occupying an isolated position. It quickly became evident, however, that many more of the tribesmen were lurking in the vicinity of the ford, and that the report of the rifle had roused them. The night rang with blood-thirsty shouts and yells that rapidly approached.

"Run, Sahib," urged Sher Singh. "The boat is lost to us. We must hasten back to our comrades and swim across the river."

With that they sped along the shore, leaping like deer over grass and scrub. The tumult behind seemed to keep pace with them, telling of a dogged pursuit. When more than half the distance had been covered the fugitives were met by Gunput and the sergeant, who had pluckily started to the rescue. Brief explanations were given while the four hurried on to the former rendezvous, where they delayed no longer than was necessary to discard their heavier articles of clothing.

"Ready?" said Campbell. "Here we go."

They waded eagerly into the water, pushing the log in front of them. Its top was partly flat, and afforded a doubtful resting-place for their rifles. Soon they were swimming diagonally across the current, clinging with both hands to the half-sunken mass of wood, and kicking vigorously with their legs to frighten off the crocodiles.

The next instant, with fierce cries, a number of

savages swarmed down to the shore. Afraid to venture into the water, they sought vent for their rage by hurling spears and discharging matchlocks.

The fugitives swam on unharmed, growing more confident of safety and escape with each second, until they were close to mid-channel. Then, pointing suddenly up-stream, Gunput uttered a shrill exclamation.

“Look, Sahibs!” he cried.

Though the night was dark and moonless, the gloom that rested on the river was not so opaque but that Maurice and his companions could pierce it for a considerable radius. All turned their eyes in the direction indicated by the Hindoo, and above them, at a distance of perhaps a quarter of a mile, they vaguely distinguished a bulky, black object on the water.

“Driftwood; that’s about all it is,” vowed Sergeant Campbell. “There was no occasion to give us a fright, Gunput.”

“It is more than driftwood, Sahibs,” calmly asserted Sher Singh. “It is the boat that we failed to reach. The savages have discovered it—they must have done so while we were in the vicinity of the ford—and now warned by the noise of our escape, they are paddling in search of us.”

“I won’t believe it,” said Maurice.

Yet as he spoke a chill of terror struck to his heart, and Gunput and the sergeant lost their doubts as quickly, for just then was had absolute proof that Sher Singh was right. A burst of cries from the savages on shore was lustily and promptly answered by their comrades on the water. The boat was seen to increase its speed, and the dip and splash of paddles could be faintly heard.

“Courage,” exhorted Campbell. “It’s a bad

scrape, but we needn't despair of outwitting these scoundrels again, as we have done before. Don't stop splashing, though, or the muggers may grow bolder and make short work of us."

"The sound will bring the foe straight upon us," protested Gunput.

"I'm sure they have seen us already," replied Maurice. "We can't expect to remain invisible. Our only hope is in speed."

The fugitives swam on and on with the log, kicking and splashing more vigorously than ever; but unfortunately, owing to the strong current, they drifted four or five yards down stream for every one that they gained in the direction of the opposite shore. They were now beyond the middle of the river, and consequently safe from the tribesmen on the rear bank. These, however, ran along at a pace that held them parallel with the log, and continued to yell fiercely, to throw spears and to fire their clumsy matchlocks.

By this time the boat was straight up-stream from the fugitives, and was drawing steadily nearer through the murky gloom. The hoarse, bloodthirsty cries of its occupants told that they had sighted their intended victims and were ravenous for slaughter.

"They are bound to overtake us very soon," exclaimed Maurice. "I don't see any hope."

"Shall we abandon the log and swim, Sahib?" suggested Sher Singh.

"No use," replied Maurice, with a despairing glance at the yet distant shore. "The current is so swift that we wouldn't make any better headway than we are doing now. The wretches probably have no weapons except spears," he added, "unless Silva is with them."

“And we have four good rifles between us,” exclaimed Campbell, divining the lad’s thoughts. “Lucky we kept them dry. Suppose you and I climb out on this clumsy float and straddle it, and open a lively fire on the rascals before they can get near enough to use their spears. I’ll warrant you they will sheer off in a hurry—as many as we don’t send to the bottom.”

The sergeant’s timely suggestion revived hope and courage.

“Will the log bear us in that position?” Maurice inquired anxiously.

“Yes, the two of us,” assured Campbell. “Sher Singh and Gunput will swim alongside and support it, so that it can’t turn over with our weight.”

The plan was feasible enough, but, as ill-luck would have it, it was destined to be shattered by an unforeseen disaster. A crocodile suddenly thrust its ugly snout above the surface of the water, twenty feet distant, and Gunput pointed to it with a shrill cry of fright.

“A mugger!” shouted the sergeant. “Splash! Splash for your lives!”

In the wild panic and kicking that ensued, the stream becoming violently agitated, too much one-sided weight was put upon the log; and all of a sudden, without warning, it rolled entirely over. The four were compelled to let go, and the next instant, when they had regained their holds and were splashing furiously again, the ominous result of the catastrophe dawned upon them.

“We have lost our rifles,” Maurice cried bitterly. “They have gone to the bottom—every one. And now we are at the mercy of the savages.”

CHAPTER XXI.

A FRIGHTFUL RETRIBUTION.

THE lad's despairing words were only too true—the last ray of hope had been destroyed. Dazed and struck dumb by their loss, forgetting their fear of the crocodile—which did not again appear—the fugitives drifted on for a dozen yards, their efforts relaxed.

"The boat is coming, Sahibs," said Sher Singh. "It is gaining on us fast."

As he spoke triumphant yells floated over the water, and were caught up exultantly by the savages who were still racing along the shore; the vengeance they thirsted for was nearly within their grasp.

"Hark to them," muttered Campbell. "They know it's all up with us—that we are tight in the toils. It's bitterly hard to be butchered like helpless dogs, unable to strike a blow in defence."

"It is fate, Sahib," Sher Singh told him, with the quiet resignation of the Oriental. "There is no chance of reaching the shore, since we are less than two-thirds of the way across. We must speedily face the end."

Gunput's fortitude deserted him, and he uttered howls of terror as he clung frantically to the log. For a moment or two none spoke. They continued to kick and splash—they could not have told why—as they swam slowly on towards the shore that they would never reach.

The fiendish yells rang louder on the night air, and

the pursuing boat was now within thirty yards. It was long and narrow, and rudely constructed. Its gunwales rested low on the water, and little wonder that they should, for the craft held eight half-naked savages. Three were paddling from the stern and the others crouched well forward towards the bow, armed both with spears and matchlocks.

The intervening distance lessened to twenty-five yards—to twenty. The doomed four still kept on swimming, and in the presence of this greater peril, giving no thought to the crocodiles, they used their legs for powerful understrokes instead of splashing.

“They will be opening fire on us directly,” said Campbell. “They are surely within range already. Another five minutes and we could reach the shore yonder.”

“What wouldn’t I give for a rifle, and a chance to use it,” groaned Maurice.

An instant later, from the excited and watchful group on the rear bank of the stream, came a shout and a loud command ;

“Kill all but the lad. A hundred rupees if you take him alive and unhurt. Spare none of the rest.”

The fugitives recognized Silva’s voice, and it stung them to impotent fury to learn that he had not perished at the camp, as they had hoped.

A reply was speedily sent over the water ;

“It shall be done as you wish, Sahib. The dogs are in our power, and we will slay all but the lad.”

This speaker was also identified. The voice was that of the treacherous native Ramput, and he could be dimly seen crouched in the bow of the boat.

“Heaven help us !” said Campbell.

There was a brief interval of silence. The log

drifted on with its human freight, and from overhead the stars shone coldly and pitilessly down on the scene. A look of grim determination, of desperate and fixed resolve, suddenly appeared on Maurice's face. His eyes flashed and he clenched his teeth. His companions did not observe the change in the lad, for it was too dark to read his features.

The boat, driven by the swiftly-beating paddles, swung within ten yards of its prey. It slipped nearer and nearer, a vague, shapeless monster in the gloom. Gunput, whimpering with fear, splashed to the farthest end of the log.

"Why, what blind fools we are," Sergeant Campbell cried eagerly, at this critical moment. "We have a chance, comrades—more than a chance—and I wonder we didn't think of it before. Quick! let us abandon the log and swim each of us in a different direction. The boat can pursue but one at a time, and three of us will probably escape."

"They are wise words, Sahibs," exclaimed Sher Singh. "I will draw the savages after me—thus;" and he snatched off Maurice's cap and put it on his own head. "They will believe that I am the young Sahib," he added. "I will swim down-stream while you—"

"Stop!" interrupted Maurice. "I won't allow you to sacrifice yourself for me, Sher Singh. It is my fault that we are all in such sore peril. Had I listened to Sergeant Campbell's advice it might have been different. I have an idea in my head, and if I perish in trying to carry it out, that is no more than just. But if possible I will save your lives."

As he spoke, before the Hindoo or the others could realize what he meant to do, Maurice had let go of

the log and dived under water. It was so deftly and quickly done that the foe perceived nothing of it. The sergeant and his companions, half-persuaded that the lad had committed suicide, stared in mute horror at the spot where he had been only a second before. Sher Singh uttered a cry of grief, and would have slipped from the log had not Campbell seized hold of him.

In the meantime Maurice—nothing was farther from his purpose than self-destruction—was swimming straight up-stream at a depth of two or three feet beneath the surface. It was an accomplishment in which he excelled, being long-winded. When his breath was nearly spent he struck lightly upward until his eyes and nose were out of the water. To his surprise and chagrin the boat was not visible, and turning partly round he saw it several yards below him. He instantly dived again, and swam hard with the current.

When next he came to the top the stern of the boat was directly over his head. He reached with one hand for an upper hold, and with the other he gripped the low-lying gunwale. Now, setting his teeth, the daring lad threw all his power into a swift, strenuous jerk.

The heavily-laden craft lunged and dipped, letting in a rush of water. Then, without warning, it completely capsized, and the surface of the river was strewn with frightened, howling, splashing savages. Maurice had already dived, quick as a flash, and he swam some distance to the left before he ventured to rise, when, with lusty hand-over-hand strokes, he glided down the current and gained the log, to which his companions were still holding. What a

welcome he received! Sher Singh and Gunput lavishly poured out their praise and gratitude, and Campbell gave him a hearty clap on the back as he hauled him to a place of safety.

"It was a brave deed, lad," he cried. "I don't know that I've ever seen a braver. You ought to be in the service."

"It was nothing," modestly vowed Maurice. "I am a good diver and swimmer—and the rest was easy."

But all the danger was not yet over. At a distance of no more than twenty feet the savages were floundering about the capsized boat, which was so heavy that it barely showed above the surface. All were able to swim, apparently, and they were trying hard to turn the craft right side up. Few, if any, had succeeded in retaining their weapons. Those on shore were of course aware of the disaster by this time, though they were ignorant of its cause. Above the frenzied tumult Silva's voice rang in shrill and unintelligible commands.

For the better part of a minute, while Maurice recovered breath after his exhausting effort, the fugitives drifted on at an even distance from their enemies. Then the latter abandoned their futile attempt to right the boat, and while three clung to it the other five started to swim in pursuit of the log. They progressed with slow, determined strokes, uttering bloodthirsty threats. The traitorous Ramput was a yard in the lead, bent on earning the hundred rupees offered by Silva. His greedy eyes sparkled, and between his teeth was a long-bladed knife. Three of his companions carried spears in one hand as they swam, and the fourth was provided with a paddle.

It was a critical moment for the fugitives, and with undisguised alarm they watched the stealthy advance of the five savages.

"Are you all right, lad?" Campbell anxiously inquired. "Fit for another swim?"

"Quite fit—as far as you like," Maurice declared.

"Then we'll abandon the log and strike for the shore," said the sergeant. "That offers the only chance of outwitting these wretches. Quick! they are nearly upon us."

But just then a terrible thing happened. Ramput, now within ten feet of the log, uttered an agonizing scream and for a second or two fought desperately, his arms threshing the air. Then he swiftly vanished from sight, and the spot where he had been struggling was slapped into bloody foam and waves by the tail of a monstrous crocodile.

Maurice and his companions were horrified by the well-deserved fate of the traitor—and not a little alarmed for themselves as well—while the four swimming savages who were left naturally fell into a panic. Fearful of meeting the same end as Ramput, they turned about and struck with might and main towards the furthest shore, where their friends were gathered. The three clinging to the drifting boat released their hold and swam in the same direction.

However, the band of would-be assassins were not to escape so easily; for other crocodiles were hovering in the vicinity, and the scaly monsters, made ferocious and bold by the taste and smell of blood, promptly seized the opportunity of gorging themselves.

Here and there among the swimming men a pointed snout broke the surface or a sharp-toothed jaw opened

wide. Two victims were seized at once, their death cries ringing on the air, and the next instant a third was dragged under and mangled. Truly a ghastly retribution had descended upon the blood-thirsty wretches.

Meanwhile the fugitives had wisely abandoned the log—which only retarded their speed—and were taking long, fast strokes towards the near-looming and friendly shore.

“We’ll soon reach it,” cried Sergeant Campbell. “Don’t lose heart, comrades. And keep on splashing for all you’re worth—it will scare the muggers off.”

“They like the taste of dark meat better, Sahib,” said Sher Singh. “They won’t touch a white man when they can have a native.”

“That’s jolly lucky for us—if it’s true,” exclaimed Maurice.

Side by side the four swam on with desperate energy, Gunput assisted by the others, and behind them rang the piercing screams of the surviving savages who were still battling for life with the swift river and the hungry crocodiles. Presently, in spite of Sher Singh’s assurance, Maurice glanced over his shoulder to see two ominous black objects within a dozen feet of him. His lusty shout warned the rest of the danger.

Campbell immediately altered his course and swam down the stream with the current. Sher Singh and Maurice followed him, but Gunput, losing his presence of mind, fell behind his companions and kept to his original course. One of the two crocodiles turned clumsily and struck after the sergeant and those with him, while the second reptile headed straight for the Hindoo.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE CAMP BY THE NULLAH.

THERE was no hope for Gunput. The poor fellow's time had come, and well he knew it as he looked back at his hideous pursuer. He was fairly paralyzed with fright. Yell after yell burst from his lips, and in his struggles to escape he churned the water into a white froth. Then, with a last gurgling scream the crocodile seized him, he disappeared for ever, and as quickly the white froth was crimsoned.

The awful sounds were not to be mistaken, and the end of the luckless Hindoo presented itself as vividly to the eyes of Maurice and his companions as if they had actually witnessed the disaster. The same fate strongly threatened them, for the second mugger was giving them hot chase.

"Gunput is under," the lad said huskily, in the comparative silence that followed the stifled death cry.

"Don't waste—your breath," panted Campbell. "You'll need it, my boy."

The survivors—they were reduced to three now—ceased to take advantage of the current. Turning a little, they headed diagonally for the shore and swam with hard, overhand strokes. Faster and faster approached the hungry reptile, his jaws rippling the surface of the river. He drew steadily, relentlessly nearer until, when the shore was yet thirty feet off, he was less than half that distance from his prey. A few more seconds would decide the issue. Would it be life or death ?

“Thank Heaven!” Maurice exclaimed fervently.

“Hurra! we’ll do it,” shouted the sergeant.

The three had, at the same instant, found footing on the firm, sandy bottom. By a last effort, hope lending them strength, they splashed forward submerged to the waist. The stream shallowed at every step—hip-deep, knee-deep, ankle-deep. Then, panting and exhausted, scarcely comprehending that they were indeed saved, they staggered out upon the reedy bank, and wheeling round, they saw the baffled mugger retreating in sullen rage to deep waters.

With thankful hearts the fugitives crept farther up the shore, and threw their trembling limbs down by the edge of the jungle. They were nervous and unstrung, overcome by the memory of the horrors that had been crowded into brief space since the previous evening’s sunset, and for a time speech was unthought of and impossible. It was the darkest hour of the night that always precedes the dawn, and not a sound could be heard on the river or from the opposite bank. It was very doubtful if a single one of the boat’s crew had escaped, and as for the Portuguese and his murderous allies, it was certain in any event that Silva must believe that those whom he wished to slay had perished by drowning or by the jaws of the crocodiles.

The interval of silence was broken by Sergeant Campbell.

“We are perfectly safe here,” said he, reading what was in the minds of his companions, “and can rest as long as we like. To try to cross the river is the last thing those wretches will think of doing, after what has happened. You may be sure they are on the move already, bent on getting out of reach of the cavalry they know will be sent in pursuit of them.”

“I shouldn’t so much mind the rest escaping, if only Silva is caught,” replied Maurice. “I wonder what he will do.”

“He will probably take refuge with the tribesmen, Sahib,” suggested Sher Singh; “in one of their rock villages, high up among the crags.”

“Not a bit of it,” disagreed Campbell. “To my way of thinking, the Portuguese will disguise himself and hide in one of the big towns, Bombay or Calcutta for choice. That is, if he gets the chance to do so; which I hope he won’t.”

“Well, in any event, his capture will be only a question of time,” said Maurice. “What a night this has been!” he added. “I can’t realize it all. It seems like a hideous, bloody dream. To think that you and I, Sher Singh, are the sole survivors. I mean of those who were in the employ of Tearle and Caruthers.”

“Sahib, it is truly sad,” replied the shikaree. “And, may I be forgiven if I am unjust, it is entirely the fault of the cavalry officer, Rogers Sahib. He laughed at Tearle Sahib’s tale of danger, and refused to leave a force of sowars to guard the camp.”

“Yes, I know that,” assented Maurice. “The blame is his.”

“You’re drawing it a bit strong, you two,” Campbell protested mildly, as in duty bound, “though I admit that you’ve got ground for complaint. But just wait. I’ll warrant Captain Rogers wipes out the score when he gets on the trail of the murderers.”

“Will that bring the dead to life?” Maurice cried bitterly, “or compensate Tearle for the loss of all his property? Poor Gunput! it is hard that he had to die when he was so near to safety.”

“Ay, bitterly hard,” assented the sergeant. “Mark you, though, the dead shall be avenged, lad. Why, I would gladly part with an arm to see that yellow fiend of a Portuguese blown to fragments from the muzzle of a cannon—as our fellows properly served the Sepoys in the Great Mutiny.”

“Then let us be off, Campbell Sahib,” chimed in Sher Singh, “so that we can start the work of vengeance without delay. Be assured that the tribesmen will lose no time in hastening back to their mountain fastnesses.”

“And Seranghur is some miles distant,” added Maurice. “We must travel rapidly.”

The sergeant was in hearty accord with the proposal—all felt the better for the interval of rest—and a few moments later found them pushing at a brisk pace through the jungle. They had landed a mile or so below the ford, and thus had no alternative, unless they were willing to waste more time, but to guess at the proper direction. It was a dismal, trying journey for the three. They were unarmed and in wet clothing, suffering from hunger and exhaustion and mental strain, while they were in no slight peril from wild animals. One thing was never absent from their minds, was a constant spur to their weary limbs—the thought that with every minute Antonio Silva and his band of hired allies were speeding farther on the way to safety.

Fortunately the little party were not long hampered by the cloak of darkness, for soon after they had left the river the eastern sky began to brighten, and the Indian dawn gradually broke in a wealth of saffron and primrose colouring. The sun crept higher and higher, serving as a guide, until its fierce rays streamed through

the matted foliage and made themselves uncomfortably felt.

“What a wild place this is,” said Maurice. “We seem to be going farther from civilization.”

“We’re not, lad, though one might think so,” replied Sergeant Campbell. “We are now in the great forest of Soonput, as it is called, and it is a part of the Raja of Seranghur’s dominions. The cultivated territory lies half a dozen miles beyond.”

It was truly a wonderful and fascinating place, the forest of Soonput, and the beauties around them continually stirred the travellers, heartsick and tired as they were, to interest and admiration. The air was scented with the rich fragrance of tube-roses, and orange-blossoms and many another gorgeous flower. From branch to branch, with noisy chattering and murmurous cooing, flitted blue-jays, doves and parakeets. Here were mango-topes and dense plantations of bamboo, there groves of oleander trees, lemon and citron, while far above towered wide-girthed giants that formed a vault of greenish-blue shade.

“Sure you’re taking us all right?” Campbell presently inquired of Sher Singh, who was acting as guide and had been given the correct course by the sergeant.

“As well as I can, Sahib,” the shikaree replied. “But I must depend on the sun alone, since I have never before been in this part of the country.”

“Ay, that handicaps you, of course,” assented Campbell. “I’m not much better posted myself, but I asked the question because, if we were travelling in the right direction, we should long ago have struck the path by which Captain Rogers and the sowars rode several days back.”

“Was it a very plain one?” inquired Maurice.

“No, I can’t say that it was, lad.”

“Then we may have crossed it already.”

“I don’t believe we have,” vowed Campbell, “for I have been keeping a sharp lookout. Why, what ——” he added in surprise.

The exclamation was checked on his lips by a warning gesture—made without looking back—from Sher Singh, who had, unperceived, already pushed several yards in advance. He crept on carefully, with the stealth of a cat, and mounting to the crest of some rising ground, he paused by a thicket of oleanders.

“I wonder what’s wrong,” muttered the sergeant, stopping short. “What does the fellow see? If it was a wild beast he would hardly——”

“I’m certain I can smell wood-smoke,” interrupted Maurice. “Who can be near us?”

The question was speedily answered, for just then the shikaree turned and beckoned to his companions. They at once joined him, and the three, gazing between the parted foliage, looked down upon a welcome and pleasing sight—a camp of harmless hunters. There was a nullah beyond the high ground, and on the farther side of it two little white tents were staked, close to a water-pool. In front of them, seated on camp chairs, three Englishmen in linen shooting suits and sola-topees, were smoking and chatting. Two shikarees were overhauling the guns for the day’s sport, and several native servants were preparing breakfast over a fire, from which arose most appetizing odours. The carcass of a spotted deer hanging from the limb of a tree, and a splendid tiger skin stretched over a rock, completed the picture.

“Those chaps are all right,” whispered Sergeant

Campbell. "I have seen them before—an English baronet and his friends. They're doing India, and recently they were the guests of the Raja of Seranghur. He gave them permission to kill what they liked in the forest of Soonput, which is his private shooting-ground. Come along, we're just in time for breakfast."

With that the sergeant advanced into view, and began to descend the slope of the nullah, followed by Maurice and Sher Singh. The weary and bedrugged three, bearing plain evidence of the hardships they had undergone, roused no little curiosity as they limped into the camp. As much of their story as they cared to tell—they did not wish to be detained by lengthy explanations and questioning—won them a warm welcome, and they were promptly supplied with food and drink by the sympathetic sportsmen.

"You look ready to drop over," said Sir James Duckworth, as his guests were breakfasting. "You can't go on till you've slept, that's certain. Yonder tent is at your service, and I'll see that you are wakened in a couple of hours."

"You are very kind, sir, but we must reach Seranghur without delay," Campbell answered firmly.

"I might send one of my servants with a message."

"That wouldn't do, sir, thanking you all the same."

"Very well, you know best," said the baronet, yielding the point. "Since you are determined to push on, I'll not try to keep you against your will. But I must tell you that you have lost your bearings, though not to any serious extent. I shall be glad to put you right, and will lend you a guide as far as the nearest jungle road, which will take you straight to Seranghur."

The offer was gratefully accepted, and a few minutes

later, after a stay of less than half an hour in the hunters' camp, Maurice and his companions were traversing a mere elephant track through the forest. Gurga Nath, the guide, marched confidently at their head, and they had gone a quarter of a mile when the report of a gun was heard close by.

"Hullo! what does that mean?" exclaimed Campbell.

"One of my party, Sahibs," replied Gurga Nath. "He rose early in order to shoot before breakfast."

The next instant, from the thicket a few yards ahead, the sportsman stepped into view. He was a tall, middle-aged Englishman of handsome but rather sinister appearance, with a black moustache and close-cropped beard. His shooting attire was of the most expensive kind, and his sola-topee was wreathed with blue silk. He carried his gun in one hand, and a brace of jungle fowl in the other.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A JUNGLE MYSTERY.

THE bearded stranger, on catching sight of the approaching little group, stood to one side of the path to let them go by; and as Maurice, in passing, looked straight up into the Englishman's face, he stopped open-mouthed—so abruptly that Sher Singh jostled against him.

“What is the matter, Sahib?” anxiously inquired the Hindoo. “Are you ill?”

The lad made no reply. His lips tightened—he had been about to speak—and he stumbled on his way with such a bewildered expression that Sergeant Campbell, who had observed the incident, glanced at him in amazement.

The Englishman had also been on the point of speaking, but when he encountered Maurice's keen, penetrating gaze his own features flushed and then turned pallid beneath the bronzed skin. He bit his lip nervously, and a sinister light crept into his eyes. As motionless and rigid as a graven image, he watched the travellers intently until they had vanished between the green walls of the jungle.

“Incredible!” he muttered. “I can hardly believe it. But I am not mistaken. It was the lad himself, alive and in the flesh. I have been deceived by a greedy, blackmailing scoundrel. To think that we should meet under such circumstances! And worst of all, he remembered me after all these years, or else I was—no, he knew me right enough. I wish I had

kept away from India. Exposure is quite on the cards now—when least expected the blow threatens to fall—and I shall have to take prompt measures to secure myself. Yes, safety at any price.”

With an oath he swung round, and walked slowly and thoughtfully towards the camp of his friends.

“It shall go hard with that double-tongued traitor,” he said to himself, “the first time I’ve the luck to run across him.”

Meanwhile, having recovered his self-possession, Maurice was marching on with steady stride and an impassive face. He led his companions to believe that he had felt a sudden faintness, due to fatigue or the heat of the sun, but such was not the case. His brain was in a whirl of strange emotions, for he had indeed recognized the bearded stranger—or at least was pretty nearly convinced to that effect. The eyes and features—remembered after long years—were those of the dark man who had been his escort on the fateful railway journey to London; the man who had presumably shipped him on board Captain Bonnick’s vessel—who must then have known, and must know now, the secret of his birth and early life.

It is little wonder that Maurice was both puzzled and alarmed by the discovery, not to speak of the possibilities that it suggested. He had not noticed the Englishman’s agitation, however, and the more he pondered over the matter the less certain he became that he was right. Before he had gone a half-mile he was inclined to think that he had made a mistake.

“It may have been only an accidental resemblance,” he reflected. “The face was the same, and yet not the same. And what could that man be doing here, in an Indian jungle?”

“How do you feel?” asked Campbell, breaking into the lad’s musings. “Want to rest a bit?”

“No, we’ll push on,” was the reply. “I’m as fit as ever.”

When the road was reached, a little later, the guide turned back with a word or two; and as Maurice continued the journey towards Seranghur with his companions, he dismissed the problem of identity from his mind and thought only of the punitive expedition that he was anxious to see despatched against Silva and his evil crew.

About the middle of the morning the great forest of Soonput, which had been growing thinner and thinner, fell away to right and left, and in front was seen a stretch of cultivated fields and isolated groups of trees. Here and there, at short intervals, they passed villages, each larger than the last, where fat, prosperous zemindars lounged in the shade of their fruit trees while their ryots toiled amid the grain; and as they drew nearer to the capital of the Raja’s dominions they began to meet people on the road, which was growing broader and whiter—Parsee merchants, laden with shawls and silks, sellers of bang and sherbet, matchlock men, bartering Afghans, wealthy Hindoos mounted on gorgeously-caparisoned horses and elephants, half-naked fakirs smeared with red ochre, smart soubahdurs and havildars of the guard, natives leading tame cheetahs in leash, and many other picturesque types of the East.

By this time, as may be guessed, the travellers were threading the outer suburbs of the city, whose stately domes and minarets rose before them, etched in rose and pearl against the burning, steel-blue sky. Regarded inquisitively by all, but accosted by none,

the dusty, weary-limbed three pressed on their way ; and just as a sentry was striking the hour of noon on a brazen ghurry at the main gate of Seranghur, a couple of hundred yards ahead, they slackened their pace at the entrance to the white-washed barracks, over which floated the British flag and the standard of the Raja.

An officer in spotless linen, who was riding out on a Cabul pony with a detachment of sowars, drew rein to stare at the group with quick and surprised recognition.

“ Campbell ! ” he cried sternly. “ Why, what does this mean ? ”

“ It means the worst, sir, ” was the sergeant’s grim reply. “ We’ve a black and bloody story for your ears—and a long one. ”

“ And the sooner it is told the better, ” put in Maurice.

Captain Rogers, for it was he, at once dismounted and dismissed his escort. Two minutes later, in the seclusion of one of the guard-rooms, he was listening to the tale of disaster that the three intrepid messengers had brought so many miles. It was related mainly by Maurice, who claimed the right of spokesman, and corroborated at every point by Campbell and Sher Singh. The whole, terrible truth was disclosed at last, and for a moment the officer was fairly speechless, overcome by rage and consternation—and perhaps self-reproach as well.

“ It is monstrous, incredible, that such outrages should be perpetrated in this part of India, ” he said, with forced control. “ I will act at once, and nothing shall be left undone to punish the bloodthirsty scoundrels and capture the Portuguese, who is responsible for it all. ”

“It need not have happened,” Maurice began indignantly, “had you believed the warnings——”

“Be careful what you say,” Captain Rogers interrupted sharply. “I acted under strict orders, and merely did my duty. I could not have done otherwise even had I been convinced that the danger your employers spoke of was more real than imaginary. The blame for the sad affair cannot be laid at any one’s door—unless it is Silva’s.”

“The captain is right, lad,” whispered Sergeant Campbell.

“Do you mean that no one is liable for compensation,” persisted Maurice.

“I have nothing to do with such issues,” replied the officer. “Come, all of you. It is important that we lose no time. His Highness must hear your story, so that he may give the necessary orders.”

“Will you tell me, sir, what news there is about my friends?” Maurice inquired, as he and his companions left the guard-room.

“They were promptly sent down to Calcutta,” was the answer, “and they can hardly be released before the day after to-morrow, when they will be brought up for a hearing. But you may be sure that a full report of the matter will be forwarded to the authorities by post to-day.”

With this statement Maurice had to be content. Captain Rogers hurried the three from the barracks to the neighbouring British Residency, and then, accompanied by the Resident himself, they entered the inner town of Seranghur, climbed the hilly street, and were shortly admitted to an audience within the palace, amid luxury and magnificence as only an Eastern potentate can boast. His Highness Gopal

Mirza listened to the tale with Oriental stolidity. He asked a question or two, approved the Resident's suggestions, and without delay dictated to his secretary a brief order on parchment, which was put in the hands of Captain Rogers. This terminated the interview, and the party returned to the barracks, where the exhausted travellers sat down to food and drink.

The afternoon was yet young when three troops of sowars, commanded by Captain Rogers and several other English officers in the Raja's service, rode away from Seranghur in the direction of the forest of Soonput, bound on a punitive errand. Maurice and his two companions were not able, as may be supposed, to accompany the expedition, much as they wished to do so. In fact, now that the strain was over, all three partly broke down, and were ordered into hospital by the military surgeon at the cantonments. On the third morning they were up and about, quite restored by two days of sleep and rest, and the same evening a bugle announced the return of the troopers, who clanked into the barrack compound with a dejected air that told of bad news. And bad news it was. They had found and taken up the trail of the savages, it appeared, and followed them as far as the foothills.

"There the wretches scattered in every direction," said Captain Rogers, in telling the tale, "and it would have been worse than useless to pursue them further. We came back by way of the camp, and discovered only a circle of ashes. The cages and all other property had been destroyed. As for the animals, if any survived they were likely set at liberty."

"And Silva?" Maurice eagerly inquired.

"There was nothing to show," declared the officer,

“whether he shared the flight of his murderous allies or took off by himself. However, his apprehension is only a question of time. The police will be instructed to keep a look out for him in every town and village in India.”

Sorely distressed by the ill-tidings, Maurice resolved to hasten to Calcutta, which plan was frustrated by the unexpected arrival at Seranghur of Tearle and Carruthers, who had been discharged through the non-appearance of prosecutors and witnesses. Their worst fears were realized when they learned what had happened during their absence, but instead of being inclined to blame the lad, they were unstinted with their praise and gratitude, which was extended also to Sher Singh and Sergeant Campbell.

“I’m only too glad to find you alive, my boy,” said Tearle, with a ring of emotion in his voice. “It was the pluckiest, the most daring thing I’ve ever heard of. You did your best, and that was as much as Carruthers and I could have done. So don’t worry. And let me tell you that Hamrach and Company shall know of your faithfulness and heroism.”

Nor, on reflection, did the deeply injured men decide to press any charge against Captain Rogers, whose seemingly harsh action had been simply in accord with his duty. Moreover, the officer was sincerely distressed, and promised to urge upon the Government authorities the necessity of capturing Antonio Silva, and despatching a large military force to punish the turbulent hillmen,

CHAPTER XXIV.

ORDERS FOR ASSAM.

WITH no little regret Sergeant Campbell parted from Maurice and Sher Singh, who, with Tearle and Carruthers, rode away from Seranghur early one morning, bound for the nearest railway station, whence they travelled tediously down to Calcutta, and on arriving there at once cabled full tidings of the great disaster to Hamrach and Company's head office in London.

Karl Hamrach was a man of energy and ambition, prompt to recognize true merit, and his peculiar line of business had trained him years ago to regard with equanimity either large gains or heavy losses. His answer, speedily cabled back in cipher, was terse and to the point. Having the utmost faith and confidence in Tearle and Carruthers, he entirely exonerated them from blame. He instructed them to keep Maurice on at an increased salary, to purchase new outfits, and to start as soon as possible for the rugged and distant province of Assam. Here, they were to trap a certain number of wild animals of various kinds, regardless of expense, and bring the convoy personally to England.

The agents were delighted, and Maurice to a considerable extent shared their feelings, though it was some disappointment to him not to be able to return as soon as he had expected to his native country and seek out the mystery of his parentage. He was

easily consoled, however, by the thought that the delay would be only for a few months.

A week or ten days sufficed for such preparations as could be made in Calcutta, and so far no clue had been found to Antonio Silva's whereabouts, though the authorities were zealously on the watch for him at Madras and elsewhere; he was supposed to have taken refuge with the fanatical tribesmen of the northern hills. Meanwhile, a day or so after the party had settled down to humdrum life at their quarters in the suburb of Kidderpore, Maurice had told his friends of his strange encounter in the forest of Soonput, concerning which, having reflected often and long, he was beginning to veer round to his former opinion. He also gave an account of his meeting and subsequent experience with Bobilli, but that tale was superseded in interest—and perhaps belief—by the other. In fact, Carruthers hinted none too delicately that he had his doubts.

“Might not the fellow have been just an ordinary wandering native,” he suggested, “with a young panther that he had tamed?”

“And are you certain,” put in Tearle, “that you saw the same person and the same animal on those different occasions?”

“It all happened exactly as I have described it to you,” vowed Maurice, who was a little nettled.

“Then we ought to be convinced,” said Tearle. “It is most extraordinary, though. As for your power of subduing wild beasts with the eye, which you claim to have discovered, perhaps we'll be able to test that when we are back in the jungles again. But about this Englishman who was in camp near Seranghur—I would rather talk of him. It is easy

to make a mistake in such cases, lad. There are plenty of people in the world who look alike. Every one has his double, you know."

"Yes, I know that," assented Maurice. "I thought I *was* mistaken, afterwards."

"And now you believe him to have been the man of your childhood days, of your earliest memories?" asked Carruthers.

The lad nodded. "The more I think of it," he replied, "the more certain I am that he is the same dark man who took me to London and put me on board Captain Bonnick's vessel."

"It's a queer business," said Tearle. "I wish you had told me all this before we left Seranghur. You are sure the man was with the camping party?"

"Oh, yes; the guide told us so."

"Well, that settles it. I know Sir James Duckworth by repute. He is wealthy and popular, and a mighty Nimrod of a hunter. Look here, lad, I shall write to the British Resident at Seranghur, and ask for the names of those four sportsmen. That will be a sound clue to start with, and we'll proceed to work it here directly we've returned from Assam, and pursue it further in England. Give me a couple of months free-handed, and I'll warrant I clear up the mystery of your birth."

"What a pity," said Carruthers, "that poor Tom Dayleford didn't speak before he died."

"He meant to," replied Maurice, whose loyalty to his dead protector was not to be shaken.

The next morning, true to his word, Tearle wrote to the British Resident at the Court of Seranghur; but no answer had been received up to the day when the wild animal trappers left Calcutta on the first

stage of their journey. As yet no additions had been made to the party, which consisted of Maurice, Sher Singh, and the two agents. They travelled by rail as far as Rangamati, on the western border of Assam, and from that point steamed fifty miles up the great Bramahputra River to Goalpara. Here native carpenters were set to work building cages, and when these were finished, and Tearle had hired a dozen skilled natives, a camp was located among the rugged hills and jungles to the south of the village.

Wild creatures of all kinds were fairly numerous, and day by day the quest for them was steadily and successfully pursued. At the end of the first fortnight, when Saturday evening came, the total yield was a rhinoceros, two leopards, a panther, a box of serpents, and a number of rare birds of gorgeous plumage. Sunday was observed as a day of rest, most welcome to all, and Monday morning found the hunters hard at work again. That day—its close was to be marked by a dual adventure of a thrilling and mysterious character—passed by uneventfully until the middle of the afternoon, when Maurice and several natives, who had been digging a pitfall to the eastward, returned to camp. Tearle was not visible, but Carruthers, with a pipe in his mouth and a tall glass in one hand, was lounging before the tent.

“What luck?” inquired Maurice, referring to an expedition on which his employers had set forth after breakfast.

“We went half a dozen miles into the great forest that stretches to the south west,” replied Carruthers, “and found a couple of likely places for traps. I left Dermot about three miles back—he saw signs of spotted deer, and vowed that we should have venison

steaks for supper. I came on alone, for the heat was intense, and I was beginning to feel a bit knocked out. I am easily fatigued since that last attack of fever. You needn't worry about Dermot," he added. "This is his third or fourth trip to Assam, and he knows the country like a book, especially hereabouts." "How soon do you expect him?" asked Maurice.

"Well, inside of an hour, I should say," was the response. "The deer tracks were fresh, and wouldn't have taken him far."

But when two hours had gone by without bringing the absent man, and the day was very near its close, Maurice and Carruthers could no longer conceal from each other their growing apprehensions. Openly anxious both were, though deeper than anxiety was the fear—neither was willing to put it into words—that some evil had befallen Tearle.

"We might set out to meet him," proposed the lad.

"Yes, that would be better than hanging about the camp," assented Carruthers. "I suppose he killed a deer, and has stopped to cut it up. Or he may have wandered farther than he meant to; he is thoughtless when on the chase."

With a few assuring words to Sher Singh—who did not relish the idea of being left behind—Maurice and Carruthers started off towards the south west, their rifles on their shoulders. With the help of the slanting rays of the sun, which was low on the horizon, they were able to keep to the path—if a clump of high grass recently disturbed or a remembered tree or stone can be called a path—by which Carruthers had gone and come earlier in the day.

"Will Tearle hold this course in returning?"

Maurice inquired, when the camp was nearly a mile to the rear.

“He is pretty certain to,” said Carruthers. “It is the most open part of the jungle—though that’s not saying much. And just ahead, within a half mile or so, is a stream bridged by a fallen tree. We crossed it this morning, and Dermot is sure to make for it on his way back. He knows that the channel is deep and swift, and not easily forded.”

“He may be within ear-shot now,” suggested the lad.

“Shall we have a try?” replied Carruthers.

At the moment they were traversing an extremely wild and tangled locality, and having pushed on for a dozen yards, treading lightly and noiselessly with their habitual care, they stopped with one accord and shouted as loudly as they could. They paused to listen, and as quickly, to their amazement, a pair of monstrous grey ears flapped into view from the dense foliage thirty feet in front, and was followed by a tapering trunk that sniffed the air as it was reared high. Then, showing its bulk for a brief second, a huge bull elephant wheeled round and fled with shrill trumpeting.

“What a thumping big fellow!” exclaimed Maurice, when he had recovered from his surprise. “We were to windward of him, or he would never have kept on feeding so long.”

“I must get a shot at him, if possible,” cried Carruthers. “What do you say, lad?”

Maurice was more than willing, and at once, temporarily forgetting Tearle, the two hastened in pursuit of the great quadruped, whose flight was in a southerly direction. But they had acted on the sudden

impulse of the moment, with scant forethought, and before they had gone a half mile they were of one mind to abandon the chase, which they reluctantly did. The undergrowth was so thickset that they could scarcely part it; and, moreover—since but the single spoor had been seen and there was nothing to indicate the presence of a herd in the vicinity—there was a strong likelihood that the elephant might be a solitary, or “rogue;” which means an elephant that for some reason is shunned by his kind.

“If that is the case,” said Carruthers, “we are in a position of danger. The old rascal, instead of going far, would lie in wait somewhere to rush out upon us.”

“We had better turn back,” Maurice replied un-
easily. “Can you find the way?”

“That won’t be difficult,” vowed Carruthers, with a glance that sought vainly for a guiding glimmer of sunlight. “We’ll strike a course for that bridge I spoke of. Come along.”

As he spoke, startled by the snapping of a twig he turned to look suspiciously behind him. At the same instant, at a spot no more than fifty feet away, the leafy screen of the forest was violently agitated, as quickly cleft asunder by a monstrous shape, and forthwith appeared the rogue elephant. Trumpeting with rage, his wicked eyes flashing and his tusks uplifted, he bore thunderously down upon the two puny beings who had defied him and whom he meant to pound to a jelly.

CHAPTER XXV.

A CHAIN OF ADVENTURE.

IN that desperate moment of peril, as Maurice and Carruthers stood with blanched faces and trembling limbs directly in the track of the great, galloping quadruped, it seemed that they were surely lost, and they themselves believed that their time had come. That they averted the danger and lived to tell the tale, was due as much to the courage and nerve that instantly succeeded the first paralyzing shock, as it was to the fact that they carried large-bore weapons with charges to match. These might have been heavier—they were not elephant-guns—but they served the purpose nevertheless.

“Don’t run, lad,” shouted Carruthers, in a voice that was audible above the trumpeting notes of wrath. “Let drive! Give it to him true—aim between the eyes! Quick! or we are dead men.”

Maurice, though horribly frightened, held his ground unflinchingly, and lifted and steadied his rifle. A couple of seconds, perhaps three—they seemed each like a minute—and then both firearms crashed simultaneously, with flame and smoke, waking a thousand echoes in the depths of the jungle.

“Back!” yelled Carruthers. “Out of the way, for your life!”

Back they sprang to one side, barely in time to escape the monstrous form that thundered by them with a tread that shook the earth. Had they inflicted mortal injury, or was a dreadful death imminent?

As soon as possible, the elephant, baffled and still trumpeting with passion, turned his unwieldy bulk in a half-circle and sought for his intended victims. But he had been hit in the right spot, for a thin stream of blood was trickling down his bony forehead. Ah ! and now he staggered, his knees tottered and swayed. Yet there was plenty of life left in him, plenty of gigantic strength, as he spied the crouching figures and came pounding towards them with trunk sniffing the wind and tusks in air.

“Again, lad !” cried Carruthers.

“I’m ready,” Maurice shouted.

They stood up, fearlessly erect, and the two shots rang as one as they pulled trigger. Through the powder-smoke they saw the mouse-coloured body towering over them, they felt a rush of fleet air, and then, as they dived headlong into a clump of low bushes, there was a terrific crash that jarred the very ground.

“Hurra ! we’ve done it,” exclaimed Carruthers, as he looked back.

Timidly, wet with perspiration, they retraced the half-dozen steps they had made. But there was nothing to be afraid of. The mighty elephant was down, lying on his left side ; he was quite still except for a barely perceptible twitching of his trunk and fore-limbs. A couple of leaden pellets, sent to the right spot, had indeed slain the herculean monarch of the forest.

“Is he dead ?” asked Maurice.

“Ay, the breath is out of him,” Carruthers replied. “Three balls of the four must have penetrated the brain. He was a determined rogue, and died hard. I wouldn’t want to go through with that again, lad.”

"Nor I," assented Maurice, with a shudder. "It was a near thing for both of us—I thought we would surely be under the brute's feet before our shots could disable him. What a fine, big fellow he is! And look at the tusks."

"We'll have them cut out in the morning," said Carruthers. "It's worth a tidy sum, that ivory. But what we've got to do at present is to go ahead and search for Tearle, in case he has landed himself in trouble of some sort. As likely as not he has returned to camp by this time, but we'll push on as far as the tree-bridge I spoke of, anyway."

"Can you find your way back to the path?" Maurice inquired uneasily.

"I think so," Carruthers answered, with a glance that sought vainly for a guiding glimmer of sunlight.

The words had no more than left his lips when a rifle-shot was heard at no great distance to the right, and immediately afterwards a single shout, loud and shrill, echoed through the jungle.

"That's Tearle," vowed Maurice, "and he's in danger."

"Not a doubt of it, lad," cried Carruthers. "Come along."

The slain elephant was forgotten, and away they dashed at a rapid pace, in the direction of the alarm. Carruthers led, and not a hundred yards from the start, as he plunged into a patch of high reeds and bushes, he suddenly disappeared with a splash. Maurice, unable to check himself in time, had no sooner felt the ground yielding beneath his feet than he followed his companion, and was soused over head and ears in water. They came to the surface, gasping and spluttering, and at once realized that they had fallen into the

stream, which at this point was well screened from view and was deep and sluggish.

“Strike out, lad,” exclaimed Carruthers. “On with you. It’s no use to turn back, for Tearle is somewhere yonder.”

With that he shouted twice, and the hail quickly brought a response. It came from startlingly near at hand, and was a plain appeal for help, the desperate need of which was emphasized, the next instant, by a savage, bloodcurdling roar.

“Is that a tiger?” gasped the lad.

“I’m afraid so; poor Dermot must be in sore straits,” replied Carruthers. “Hold on, we’re coming,” he called lustily.

“Help! help!” entreated Tearle’s voice; and again the beast uttered an angry roar.

Fortunately the stream was narrow, and the two swimmers, eager to get to the rescue, were not long in ploughing across the stagnant water; they managed to keep the barrels of their rifles above the surface, forgetting at the time that the weapons had already been entirely submerged. They waded the last couple of yards, and scrambling out on the opposite shore, they literally hurled themselves through a fringe of reeds and high grass.

They were prepared for a scene of deadly peril, and such immediately confronted them. From the thickets that bordered the stream to the farther edge of the jungle was a strip of open soil, a hundred feet wide, sparsely dotted with scrub and stones. In the middle of this stood a tree of slender girth, and here Dermot Tearle had taken refuge. His weight was dragging the bushy top slowly but surely towards the ground, and he seemed to be on the point of falling

into the clutches of a huge tiger, who was waiting beneath him with open jaws.

“Look!” said Carruthers in a low voice. “Don’t miss, lad, else it’s all up with him.”

Heedless of their own danger, the rescuers advanced several paces, then paused to take swift and steady aim. The hammers fell on the cartridges, and two sharp clicks followed, instead of the expected reports with their death-dealing lead.

“Both rifles are wet and useless,” Maurice whispered bitterly. “I forgot they had been under water.”

At this critical instant the tiger, alarmed by the slight noise, looked round and saw his discomfited enemies. With a furious roar he sprang ten feet towards them, and as he did so one of the boughs to which Tearle was clinging snapped off short, and the luckless man dropped heavily to the ground.

Carruthers uttered a cry of horror, for the tiger promptly turned half round, as if to leap back and pounce upon Tearle. But in the nick of time Maurice shouted fiercely, with all the strength of his lungs, and so surprised was the tawny brute that he abandoned his intention and remained where he was, in a crouching attitude, facing the intrepid youth.

For a few seconds there was a breathless, terrible silence—a little eternity it seemed to the three who were at the mercy of a ravenous foe. Maurice held his ground, and Tearle lay as he had fallen, apparently stunned and bruised, though he was keenly alive to what was going on. Carruthers had edged back towards the stream, and for the moment he was almost bereft of his courage and presence of mind.

“Slip away if you get the chance, Dermot,” he cried hoarsely. “Lad, you had better make a run for it,

or the beast will spring. Are you mad? What do you mean to do?"

Until now—he had acted on a swift impulse to save Tearle—Maurice had no idea what he was going to do; he could not have answered that question. But as the words fell on his ear, and he remembered a previous adventure similar to the present one, an inspiration flashed to his brain and he was quick to act upon it.

"If I was able to subdue a panther, why should I fear to test my powers again?" he thought. "Don't move or speak, either of you," he added aloud, in a low voice.

With that, letting his useless rifle slip to the ground, he went boldly forward, up the sandy slope, until he was within fifteen feet of the crouching animal, into whose fiery eyeballs he stared fixedly and menacingly. He was by no means as calm and courageous as his actions suggested, for he had grave doubts as to whether he would succeed or not. Fortunately, though the sun had sunk below the horizon and the opalescent glow that precedes the twilight was in the air, enough light still remained to give the experiment a fair chance.

Silence at first, except for the lad's deep, rapid breathing. A throaty snarl mingled with it, rising to a higher and angrier pitch. The tiger, flattened to the earth, with body quivering and tail lashing to and fro, seemed twice to be on the point of springing and twice thought better of it. The creature was evidently ill at ease and timid, unable to conquer its dread of the human eye, the magic of which it had never known before.

With a fast-beating heart—it felt as if it was up in his throat—the lad made two steps nearer, without ceasing to stare into the tiger's blazing orbs. The great beast whimpered and whined, began to crawl backward inch by inch; and then, turning tail as the lad advanced

still closer, it glided swiftly across the open, bounded into the dense cover of the jungle, and was lost to sight.

"I thought I should do it," gasped Maurice.

His face grew suddenly white as his tense nerves relaxed, but he required no assistance from Carruthers, who sprang at once to his side and produced a small flask of brandy.

"Put this to your lips, lad," he urged.

"No, Tearle needs it more than I do," protested Maurice. "I'm all right now, though I felt a bit staggy for a couple of seconds."

"No wonder, after such a strain," said Carruthers. "It was amazing what you did. I never saw anything like it before. I shouldn't have believed it possible, if any one had told me that——"

"Well, since you've seen this with your own eyes," Maurice interrupted, good-naturedly, "perhaps you no longer doubt my story of the panther and the jungle child."

With that he hastened over to Tearle, who was sitting upright with his hands pressed to his forehead, and staring about him in a dazed manner. Carruthers followed slowly, with a crestfallen air.

"I hope you're not hurt, Dermot," he said anxiously. "Can you get on your feet, do you think? Here, put some brandy down your throat as quickly as possible."

"Ah! that's better," vowed Tearle, as, with returning colour and a steadier hand, he gave the flask back. "I can feel the strength ebbing into my veins. I'll be able to walk presently, when this dizziness passes off. There are no bones broken, though there might have been. The tumble from that tree pretty nearly shook me to pieces. Keep your eyes open for the tiger," he added, glancing apprehensively around.

"He won't trouble us again," replied Carruthers. "Did you see how our young hero tamed him and sent him flying to cover?"

"I was watching all the time," said Tearle. "It was a fascinating sight, and I couldn't have moved or spoken if I had wanted to. Directly the brute turned tail there was a mist in front of my eyes, and I felt like keeling over. My boy, I trust you'll forgive me for being a little incredulous about what you told us before. I spoke half jokingly of putting your powers to the test when we got to Assam, never dreaming that the chance would come, and in such a manner."

"I, too, owe you an apology," said Carruthers. "I was as bad as Tearle, if not worse. That's a marvellous gift you possess, and worth knowing."

"I wish I had it," declared Tearle. "It could be used to the greatest advantage in such a profession as ours. I advise you to cultivate it at every opportunity, lad. See what it has done for you at one stroke. You saved not only your own life, but mine and Carruthers' as well."

"I shouldn't want to try that sort of thing very often," Maurice answered modestly. "I was badly frightened while I stood looking into the tiger's eyes, and the result would have been different had I shown that I was afraid."

Content to have vindicated himself, and embarrassed by the praise of his companions, he slipped away to the stream and returned with his pith helmet half full of water. Tearle bathed his face with a wet handkerchief and then bound it across his temples, after which he felt much better, though he was content to sit still until the effects of his shaking had further passed off.

"It was lucky for me that you were in the neigh-

bourhood," he said, when he had listened to the account Maurice and Carruthers gave him of their adventure with the rogue elephant and their subsequent dash to the rescue. "I couldn't come up with those spotted deer, though I followed them for a mile or more, and in trying to hold a straight course for camp—I was aiming for that tree bridge—I naturally blundered a little out of the way. I finally reached the stream, and was standing down by that rock, in half a mind to swim across, when up jumped the tiger from the rushes, not twenty feet distant. As ill-luck would have it, there was only one cartridge in my rifle at the time. I let drive at the brute, but clean missed him in my flurry and excitement. Then I did a sprint for the tree, and you'll believe I wasn't a second too soon in climbing into the branches. The tiger leapt at me twice, and I had to go higher up, until the top began to bend with my weight. The rifle had stuck fast in a forked limb, and I couldn't have used it anyway. That is my story, and if you had arrived a minute later I shouldn't be telling it to you now."

"It has a moral to it," said Carruthers, "which is that a man ought never to wander about the jungle by himself. However, all's well that ends well. Suppose we make a start for supper. Do you feel up to it, Dermot?"

"Yes, I'll be able to manage," Tearle replied.

He was helped to his feet, and without assistance—Maurice offered him an arm—he walked several yards.

"We won't need torches to return by," said the lad.

He was right, for although the brief period of twilight had already passed, the full disc of the moon

was creeping above the horizon, and the open glade was swimming in the pale, silvery glow.

“Hold on : I must have my rifle,” said Tearle.

“I’ll get it for you,” replied Carruthers, as he pulled himself into the lower branches of the tree.

He easily found the weapon, and just as he dropped to the ground with it there was a rustling noise near by, at the edge of the jungle.

“The tiger !” exclaimed Maurice. “Watch sharp.”

As he spoke a dusky creature leapt into view, and crouched down motionless about ten yards from the startled little group.

“That’s too big and too black for a tiger,” vowed Carruthers.

He thrust a cartridge into the empty rifle, and quickly aimed and fired. A shrill, peculiar sound somewhat like a whistle, preceded the loud report ; and the unknown animal, hit in the act of turning round as if to retreat, uttered a yelping snarl and bounded into the thicket.

“I believe it was a panther,” said Maurice. “But did you hear that——”

“Hark !” interrupted Tearle.

A wailing, high-pitched noise rose on the air, and the next instant, in the patch of moonlight where the animal had crouched, appeared a shadowy figure. It was either a native man or boy, with naked limbs and a mop of streaming hair. For a moment he was visible, waving his arms and crying loudly in tones of grief and rage, and then he vanished as suddenly as he had come, leaving the spectators almost persuaded that what they had seen was but an apparition.

“This is a most uncanny spot,” said Carruthers, wiping a drop of cold perspiration from his forehead.

“It was the forest child we saw,” exclaimed Maurice. “Bobbili and his tame panther. He is angry because we have shot the beast.”

He twisted a bunch of dried grass into a torch and put a match to it, and with some difficulty prevailed upon his companions to follow him to the upper edge of the glade, when they discovered a few drops of blood. But the jungle was dark and silent, and though Maurice shouted several times, and called Bobbili by name, no response came back.

“I’m off,” said Carruthers.

“So am I,” muttered Tearle. “There are queer things abroad to-night.”

“It was Bobbili,” persisted the lad. “I am certain of it. You both saw him as plainly as I did.”

“Yes, that’s right enough,” assented Carruthers.

Silently, at a steady pace, the three pushed along the verge of the stream, crossed it by the fallen tree, and soon reached the camp, much to the delight of Sher Singh and the others. After supper, in the cheerful glow of the fire, the mystery was the sole topic of conversation. Tearle and Carruthers, though not openly sceptical, were loth to believe what Maurice insisted upon—that the jungle child, having by some unaccountable means learned of his whereabouts and desiring to be near him, had traversed the vast tract of country that separates Assam from the Seranghur district.

“He will go back to his old haunts now,” the lad thought regretfully. “He is offended because we have wounded his panther. I am sorry Carruthers fired that shot.”

Twice, in the middle of the night, Maurice woke with a sad, mournful cry ringing in his ears from a distance. But that was the last of Bobbili. He was never seen or heard of again.

CHAPTER XXVI.

AMBUSHED BY NAGAS.

TIME passes swiftly, and nearly a month has gone by since the string of adventures, crowded into so brief a space, that began with the death of the rogue elephant and ended with the strange apparition in the forest glade. The dawn was breaking one morning over the dense jungles and mountains of Assam, and as the sun climbed above the horizon and began to stream through the matted foliage, the creaking of wheels and the murmur of men's voices mingled with the chattering of curious monkeys and parrots. Early as was the hour, the camp of the animal hunters presented a dilapidated and ruined appearance. The tents and huts were down, and canvas, poles, chests and boxes lay scattered about in confusion.

The expedition had been in every way a success, for even more than the required number and variety of wild beasts had been secured. Dermot Tearle and his companions were in the best of spirits, and within forty-eight hours they hoped to be travelling down the mighty Brahmaputra, *en route* for the far-distant Bay of Bengal, in the big barge that they had previously hired at Goalpara from the Assam Navigation Company. Steam power would not be needed until the mouth of the river was reached, since the barge was fitted with great stern-oars or sweeps, by means of which it could be easily steered through the vast depth and breadth of water.

Seven cages had been sent down to Goalpara the

day before, and seven others, hitched to spans of bullocks, were now ready to start. One by one they wheeled into the rugged jungle road, the native drivers walking alongside, goad in hand. Amid creaking and shouting they slowly vanished from sight. With the last three went Carruthers and Tearle, and the latter lingered behind for a moment to give Maurice some final instructions.

“You should be ready to follow us in an hour or less,” he said. “Don’t lose the way, lad. You ought to overtake us before long, for these heavy cages crawl at a snail’s pace.

Tearle’s departure left only Maurice and Sher Singh at the camp. Their duty was to load the remaining luggage in a cart, and push after the convoy as quickly as possible. The vehicle was a rude concern, with solid wooden wheels, and drawn by two fat bullocks.

The Hindoo and the lad toiled with rapid and busy fingers. They were glad to see the last of the camp, though their stay there had been, on the whole, a pleasant and enjoyable one, unmarred by losses or disaster. Both looked forward to the future with happy anticipations; Maurice, because he was going shortly to England, and Sher Singh because he was to accompany the lad to that strange and distant land. The Hindoo’s devotion was like that of a faithful hound, unselfish and disinterested.

‘ In rather less than an hour the work was finished, and a circle of trampled grass, strewn with wood ashes, was all that marked the site of the camp. The two climbed upon the fore-end of the cart, and Sher Singh pricked the oxen with a long goad. The sturdy animals lumbered into the narrow path, and the luxuriant undergrowth, swinging shut behind the vehicle

and its occupants, soon hid the spot they were leaving.

For a mile the way led through dense and level jungle, and then mounted gradually up the side of a steep hill, on the summit of which Maurice urged that the bullocks be halted for a brief rest. Here the view was magnificent, beyond the power of words to describe. But for a haziness in the atmosphere Goalpara could have been seen, miles away. The great mountains on the farther shore of the Brahmaputra were distinctly visible, their tall peaks glistening in the sun.

The Hindoo applied the goad, and the cart rumbled and jolted down the hill. It reached the bottom, narrowly escaping mishap, and crept into a jungle where the gloom was like that of eventide. Broken rocks and serried walls of foliage rose from both sides of the path.

"This is about the gloomiest place I've ever seen," said Maurice. "I wish we were well out of it. It gives me the cold shivers—and yet I don't know why it should. We are as safe as if we were in Goalpara."

"There is indeed nothing to fear, Sahib," replied Sher Singh, "unless it be a prowling tiger or some other beast. The Naga tribesmen, who dwell in the fastnesses of the hills far to the south, have been quiet and peaceable since a column of British soldiers fought them and burnt their villages five years ago. Before that they made many murderous raids, and more than one English planter—"

The sentence was cut short on the Hindoo's lips, and turned to a cry of alarm, by the sudden appearance of a half-score of brawny, half-naked savages, who sprang up, as if by magic, to right and left of the trail. They were armed with spears and knotted clubs, and their attack was as swift and silent as their approach.

The lad and his companion had no chance to defend themselves—no time even to snatch their rifles. The cart was seized and overturned, and the bullocks, breaking loose from the shaft, fled in mad panic. A blow from a cudgel stretched Sher Singh senseless on the sprawling heap of luggage, and Maurice, as he attempted to rise, was gripped by three pairs of muscular hands.

The Nagas—for to those wild people of Assam the attacking party clearly belonged—were careful to make no more noise than was necessary. With the exception of a guttural word or two not a sound passed their lips. Maurice, in the first moment of surprise, was less frightened than wrathful and indignant. He struggled desperately to escape, kicking and striking, and managed to utter one loud shout, when he was immediately choked with such violence that he partially lost consciousness.

His mind was a blank for a certain interval—he did not know how long—and when next he was able to observe anything the path and the cart had disappeared and he was being hurried at a rapid pace through thick jungle. Two of the savages were supporting him, one on each side, while the others marched in front and behind. There was no sign of a path. Captors and captive wound amid the tangled vegetation with the sinuous and noiseless ease of a great serpent. The leader of the party was a stalwart fellow, smeared with blue woad, and wearing a leopard skin girdle and a necklace of tigers' teeth. Seeing that Maurice had recovered from his stupor, he wheeled about and intimated to him by gestures that he would kill him if he made any sound.

The lad had no intention of disobeying the command,

for his rash temper had by this time cooled off, and his brain was actively at work, seeking a plan by which he might outwit the savages. He feigned weakness as much as possible, in order to delay the march, though he had little hope of being rescued. He knew that the rearmost of the cages must have been a mile or so ahead at the moment of the attack, and that the whole convoy was doubtless pressing on to Goalpara in serene ignorance of what had happened behind.

He was in the blackest of spirits, oppressed by sad and bitter thoughts, as he was forced still deeper into the jungle solitudes. He naturally feared that Sher Singh had been killed by the cruel blow, and his heart ached for the faithful Hindoo to whom he owed so much. He was at a loss to know why he had been ambushed and carried off, but finally, after reviewing the circumstances, he concluded that he was to be held for the purpose of ransom, which the savages meant to demand from the local authorities of the province. Had he been better acquainted with the Nagas, however, he would have recognized the folly of such a theory.

“My life is safe, anyway,” he reflected. “Everything points to that. And there is just a chance—not a very bright one, I admit—that Tearle and Carruthers, when they learn of the disaster, will be able to collect a party and overtake these wretches before they can reach their almost inaccessible villages in the hills.”

It was poor consolation for Maurice, but it had the effect of slightly raising his spirits. For another hour the Nagas pursued their course steadily, and then, emerging suddenly from the forest, the lad beheld a sight that made his head swim with dizziness.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE SKIPPER OF THE "MARY SHANNON."

WE will take the present opportunity, with the reader's permission, to go back both in time and distance, in order to pick up several threads that have an important bearing on the future. Late one afternoon, during the week in which Dermot Tearle and his companions had come down country from Seranghur, a tall, dark-bearded Englishman in shooting attire arrived at Calcutta—the identical stranger, in fact, belonging to Sir James Duckworth's party, whom Maurice had encountered in the forest of Soonput.

From the station of the Bengal Railway he went straight to a native barber-shop, from which he presently reappeared minus his beard and with his hair and moustache closely trimmed. In a neighbouring street he purchased a pair of blue spectacles, such as are worn for protection against the fierce rays of the Indian sun, and when he had adjusted these his features were so altered that his late fellow-sportsmen assuredly would not have recognized him. Satisfied with the result of his shrewd precautions, he now made his way to the Great Eastern Hotel, requested the clerk to send to the railway station for his luggage, and registered under a name that he had never borne before, that of Miles Hamilton.

To all outward appearance it might have been supposed that Mr. Miles Hamilton was in Calcutta merely for the sake of pleasure and sight-seeing,

like numerous other travellers who were quartered in the same big hotel. He spent money freely, enjoyed a drive each evening, and strolled among the bazaars and in the principal thoroughfares, dressed in the height of fashion. More than once, with a boldness that was justified by his disguise, he calmly rubbed shoulders with some former friend or acquaintance. But his seeming idleness was a cloak for a deeper purpose, and in a quiet way, as if the matter was of no personal importance to him, he was making inquiries concerning the tragic death of Tom Dayleford, the trapper of wild animals. He had read an account of the riot at the time it occurred, and a faint recollection of it, flashing upon his mind soon after the meeting with Maurice in the forest of Soonput, had, in conjunction with another and older memory, given him the present clue.

Mr. Hamilton's investigations offered little or no difficulty. He readily learned what had become of Dayleford's adopted son after the former's death, and he was informed of the lad's presence in the city by the Calcutta papers, which devoted columns to the thrilling story of Antonio Silva's crimes. He did not encounter Maurice during his wanderings, nor, at this stage of affairs, did he have any inclination to run across him. He was anxiously waiting events, fearing the future and as yet unable to decide what he should do in case the threatened blow were to fall. Each day added to his apprehensions and unrest, for he could not rid himself of the conviction that the lad had recognized him in the jungle and that he possessed a dangerous knowledge of the past.

This belief, haunting the man hourly, by degrees sapped his scruples and conscience and gave birth to

an impulse from which he at first recoiled with horror, but which nevertheless grew upon him. He began to regard the thought with less aversion, to wonder how the evil plan could best be carried out. All that made life worth living to him was at stake, and at any cost, he told himself, he must not lose.

The days slipped by, and one night, long after dark, Hamilton was strolling by the bank of the Hooghly River, where of late he had been spending much time in the evenings. He was prudently attired in rough clothing, and was without his glasses. He was in a desperate and wicked frame of mind, since for several hours he had been prowling fruitlessly about Hamrach and Company's warehouse, at the adjacent suburb of Kidderpore. He had seen nothing of Maurice, nor was he aware of the fact that the lad and his companions had left Calcutta for Assam that same morning.

He had come forth with another purpose as well, however, on this particular night, and his eyes were very active as he sauntered along. The locality was by no means a safe one, and he carried a loaded revolver in his pocket.

"It looks as if I should have to make inquiries, which I don't want to do," he muttered, as he quickened his pace. "I might as easily find a needle in a hay-rick."

To the right were rows of factories, warehouses, and rope-walks, gloomy and deserted, with here and there a dim light burning. Close to the left flowed the great river, dotted in mid-stream by anchored vessels, while along the shore were the interminable docks, marked against the sky by a tangled forest of spars and rigging.

Suddenly the figure of a man loomed out of the darkness, and drawing near with a staggering, swaying gait, he pulled up directly in front of Hamilton. His age was perhaps fifty, and his nautical garb proclaimed him to be a sailor. A lamp-post stood not far off, and the light from it revealed his purplish, bloated face.

"Hello, stranger," he cried, thickly and unsteadily. "Hanged if I haven't lost my bearings in this beastly place. I'll be obliged to you if you can tell me where to find the ship 'Mary Shannon.' She's lying at Government dock number ten."

Hamilton bent forward and scrutinized the man keenly.

"I thought I knew the voice," he exclaimed, with a short, unpleasant laugh. "As for the features, they are so saturated with rum that they might belong to any drunken sot, though they still bear a faint likeness to Captain Bonnick—"

"That's me—Captain Bonnick," interrupted the man. "But you'd better be careful of your talk. A drunken sot, am I? By the blue peter! I've killed a man for less. Who in thunder are you, anyway?"

"I'll tell you," replied Hamilton; and he whispered two words in the other's ear.

"John Ravenhurst?" gasped the sailor, with an oath.

"Be quiet, you fool," Hamilton fiercely bade him. "Not that name aloud—you know better."

Captain Bonnick stared silently for an instant; comprehension was dawning on his fuddled brain.

"What are you doing in Calcutta?" he asked hoarsely, as if he dreaded to put the question.

“Looking for you, for one thing,” was the curt answer. “I saw by the papers that the ‘Mary Shannon’ had been sighted in the bay. When did you come up the river?”

“I’ve been in port twenty-four hours,” the sailor replied, “and I’ve had wretched luck in that short time. I’m dead broke to-night. I’ve been drinking and gambling—I don’t deny it—and a couple of those yellow niggers ashore robbed me of eighty pounds.”

“It serves you right, you drunken idiot,” said Hamilton. “Look here, Bonnick, I’ve got an account to settle with you. You are a scoundrel and a black-mailer, and I was a fool to have had anything to do with you. You promised to keep me posted about the lad, and when you swore that he was dead, that he had been drowned at sea, I believed you, I gave you the sum of money that you demanded. But it was all a dastardly lie—”

“Easy, go easy,” warned the sailor. “I’m not in a mood for hard words.”

“But I am, and you’ll listen to what I want to say,” cried Hamilton. “You have put me in a hole by your treachery. The boy is not dead—I’ve seen him with my own eyes. You turned him over to an acquaintance of yours in Calcutta and he found new friends after the man Dayleford died.”

“Is Tom Dayleford dead?”

“Yes, murdered by Hindoos. And the boy—”

“He’s nothing to me now,” interrupted Captain Bonnick, whose usual prudence was steeped in drink. I did what I promised to do—more than your dirty money was worth. The score is on the other side, my fine gentleman, and I want

a hundred pounds down on the nail. Be quick about it. Fork over."

Hamilton's face turned livid with rage.

"You ruffian," he cried, "I warn you not to try any of your blackmailing games. I've given you too much money as it is. Not another penny will you get."

"Won't I?" sneered the angry sailor. "I'll bet you the 'Mary Shannon' I do. It's two hundred pounds I want now—not a hundred. Unless you give it to me I'll blow the whole thing. I'll lift anchor tomorrow and sail for London. Once there I'll soon find the lad's friends, and then—"

"Hush!" cautioned Hamilton, in a whisper. "You fool, don't you see that some one is listening?"

Hamilton was right. He had that instant discovered a figure leaning against a post within five yards of the spot—a native in turban and white linen. The fellow must have heard every word of the altercation.

"One of those dirty yellow niggers," muttered Captain Bonnick, with a careless glance. "Hand over the money," he added, loudly and wrathfully. "Quick! or I swear I'll blow on you, John Raven—"

There was the sound of a blow as Hamilton, maddened to desperation, struck the sailor between the eyes. Bonnick reeled, recovered his balance. With an oath he whipped his revolver from his pocket, aimed and fired,

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DEEDS OF DARKNESS.

IT is ten to one that an intoxicated man will aim too high when shooting. Captain Bonnick did so, fortunately for Hamilton, and the bullet whistled by the latter's head. He made a rush for his assailant, but the projecting edge of a cobble-stone tripped him up and he measured his length on the quay.

Meanwhile the sailor had staggered backward several yards, almost to the water's edge. He was half-insane with rage and liquor, and cocking the weapon a second time, he aimed as steadily as he could at Hamilton's prostrate body.

In all likelihood, the shot would have proved fatal but for the prompt intervention of the native who was leaning in such a careless attitude against the post. With a rapid movement, with a stealthy whipping of his hand to his waist, he threw himself in front of the sailor. There was the flash and gleam of steel, the report of a pistol exploding on the ground. Then, with a husky cry that ended in a gurgle, Captain Bonnick tumbled heavily over the raised embankment of the river, and disappeared with a resounding splash.

Hamilton, before whose eyes the tragedy had swiftly passed, rose slowly to his feet, trembling in every limb. He glanced fearfully at the blood-stained knife—a ray of light shone on it from the lamp post—which the native held in his hand.

“Assassin!” he exclaimed, in tones of horror.
“What have you done?”

"Is this your gratitude?" was the calm reply. "Sahib, I have saved your life at the risk of my own. There was not an instant to lose. But for me you would be lying yonder, bleeding from your death-wound. The other Sahib meant to kill you, surely."

"He did," Hamilton admitted, hoarsely. "He was a bad man. It is true, as you say, that I owe you my life. And yet—and yet bloodshed might have been averted. It is a pity."

He walked to the edge of the river and stared down at the black, sluggish waters. Scarcely a ripple was visible on their smooth, unbroken surface. He shuddered violently as he turned away.

"The body has gone to the bottom," said the native. Picking up the sailor's revolver he flung it far out into the stream, and threw the knife after it.

"Yes, it has sunk," murmured Hamilton, with an effort. He wiped cold beads of perspiration from his forehead, and glanced keenly and uneasily at his strange companion. From a distance the bustle of the great city echoed faintly on the night air, and it seemed at first that no one could have heard the pistol shots. But a moment later, as the two stood in awkward silence, voices and footsteps became audible to the left. Several persons were approaching, drawn thither by the alarm.

"We must not be found here, Sahib," said the native.

"We have waited too long as it is," replied Hamilton. "Come; follow me. Make no noise."

They glided quickly and silently away from the fatal spot, the lean native dogging the Englishman's heels like a shadow. The noise they had heard soon faded behind them, but they pushed on for a quarter

of a mile, straight up the river, until they reached Hamrach and Company's warehouse. Hamilton paused at an angle of the big, gloomy building, and listened intently for a minute.

"We are safe here," he said. "There is no outcry yonder. Even if they have found the right place, they would hardly discover the blood-stains—if there are any—without a lantern."

"There is no blood," declared the native. "The sailor-sahib went into the river too swiftly for that. We need fear nothing."

The Englishman drew a deep breath of relief.

"You are not a Hindoo?" he said abruptly to his companion.

"The Sahib has no reason to think so," was the calm reply.

"You do not speak like one," said Hamilton. "However, that is no concern of mine. This is a bad business," he added, "and it might cause serious trouble for both of us. But it won't do any good to talk about it. I am not ungrateful for your aid, I assure you, and if you will come with me I will see that you are suitably rewarded."

"I wish for no reward, Sahib," replied the native in a scornful tone, "I do not befriend people for gold. It is possible, indeed, that I can be of assistance to you in yet another way. That I heard your conversation with the sailor was not my fault. I listened to it with more than ordinary interest because it related to a former acquaintance of mine—an English lad named Maurice, who used to live with a wild animal dealer in Calcutta."

Hamilton turned pale, and for an instant, as suspicion flashed into his mind, he lost his self-possession.

“How much do—do you know?” he asked, in a frightened tone.

The man laughed softly.

“Nothing, Sahib, so far as you are concerned,” he replied. “Merely that you are interested, for personal reasons, in this lad. I saw you lurking about Hamrach and Company’s warehouse, where we are now, at twilight this evening. But the English boy is not here. He left the city this morning.”

The last words were uttered with a hissing sound that denoted suppressed rage.

“He has left Calcutta?” exclaimed Hamilton, who felt compelled to speak in spite of the growing realization of his peril. “Where has he gone?”

“Far to the north east—to the wild and distant province of Assam,” the native answered. “He is with Hamrach and Company’s agents, who have orders to trap a number of wild beasts. But he will come down country in a month or so, when the work is finished, and then he means to sail for England.”

“For England?” echoed Hamilton, and his lips and throat were dry as he spoke.

“Yes, for the port of London. These friends of his, it seems, intend to help him find his parents, from whom he was separated many years ago.”

Hamilton stifled an oath. It was too dark to see the stormy expression of his face.

“There are often slips in the affairs of men, Sahib,” the native continued craftily. “Who knows? The lad may never return from the jungles of Assam. There are numerous perils to be encountered.”

A sudden light dawned on Hamilton’s comprehension as he detected, or fancied he detected, the native’s subtle meaning as well as the note of bitter-

ness in his speech. Several other things struck him at the same instant, and then, in a flash, he was convinced that he had made a real and thrilling discovery.

"I think you and I will understand each other," he said, in a complacent tone. "But wait—I wish to tell you something first. Listen, my friend. I am a man of the world, I have travelled extensively, I have resided in Portugal—in Lisbon. And I have closely read the Calcutta papers of the past few days."

He paused to look straight at his companion, who calmly returned the glance.

"Go on, Sahib," said the native. "I am listening."

"It is perfectly clear to me," resumed Hamilton, "that you are a Portuguese cunningly disguised as a Hindoo. I cannot mistake the features and the accent. I am satisfied, also, that you bitterly hate this English lad Maurice. These two things are easily explained—if perchance you are the Senor Antonia Silva."

The unmasked native bowed with a courtly grace. There was a mocking gleam in his eyes, but no trace of fear or anger.

"Sir, I admire your penetration," he replied boldly. "Suppose I admit the truth of your statements? I am not in the least afraid of you. If I have a secret to preserve, you, too, have one. In a bitter tone he added; "I am a poor and hunted man, senor. I have lost my all. I need money badly, that I may escape from this accursed country. If the lad stands in your way, and your purse is a long one—"

"Hush!" Hamilton interrupted sharply. "This is no place to talk. We have lingered here far longer than was wise. Elsewhere I may have something

to say that will prove to the advantage of both of us. I can trust you ? ”

“ Absolutely ; I swear it,” vowed the disguised Portuguese.

“ You are a magnificent villain,” said the English man, “ if all accounts of you are true.”

Side by side they hastened away from the vicinity of the warehouse, and the darkness, which is ever ready to cloak evil, quickly swallowed the two birds of prey from sight.

It may be said, in dismissing the incident, that the body of Captain Bonnick was not found. In fact, the papers merely recorded him as missing, and after a vain search of more than three weeks, the ship “ Mary Shannon ” lifted anchor and sailed down the Hooghly under the command of her first mate.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE BRIDGE OF VINES.

HAVING thrown some light on the nefarious compact between Miles Hamilton and Antonio Silva, and the circumstances that gave rise to the same, it is time to return to Maurice. Little wonder that the lad was dismayed when his captors dragged him from the gloom of the forest into a strip of open ground, for just in front of him yawned a dizzy, forbidding-looking chasm—a ravine that was at least a hundred feet in width and nearly twice that in depth. At first, failing to observe that there was any means of crossing, he believed that he had been brought to the spot to be put to a horrible death.

But the next instant, to his relief, he saw otherwise. The rocky banks dropped sheer down, with an occasional ledge to which stunted trees and bushes were clinging, and across the gulf ran a bridge of thick lianas, or vines, that trembled in the morning breeze and were secured to great boulders on either side. A dozen of these cable-like strands, twisted together formed a footway, and a little higher up were two more woven ropes that served for hand-rails. Far, far below, at the bottom of the chasm, a mountain stream roared and thundered.

“I would rather fight all these scoundrels single-handed, than trust myself to a thing like that,” thought Maurice, with an inward shiver. “But I suppose there’s no help for it.”

There was none indeed. The ravine had to be

crossed—the band seemed feverishly anxious to put it in their rear—and without delay two of the Nagas began the perilous venture. The lad was compelled to follow immediately after them, and two others came close behind him.

Each one had all that he could do to look after his own safety, and Maurice, knowing that no assistance could be given to him and that he must take care of himself, gripped a supporting-cable in each hand, and trusted to luck to plant his feet accurately on the narrow pathway. It was a terrible ordeal and more than once he despaired of coming through it alive. The frail structure rocked and swayed in the most alarming manner, repeatedly threatening to pitch him in mid-air. Time and again he believed that he must drop into the seething waters below and be dashed to pieces on the sharp-pointed rocks that split the current. But his stout courage sustained him. Inch by inch, foot by foot, he crept on, until at last he gained the opposite bank.

“I wouldn’t go back again for a hundred pounds,” he vowed, little dreaming what worse things the future held in store for him.

The rest of the party crossed without mishap, and then the Nagas hacked at the main cable until it was severed, when it swung against the opposite wall of the ravine. They did not molest the hand-rests, evidently dreaming that to be an unnecessary precaution.

From now on the savages proceeded at a more leisurely pace through the jungle, and Maurice was half-dragged, half-carried, by a couple of stalwart fellows who were apparently deceived by his well-simulated feebleness, though they had witnessed his

activity on the bridge. The march continued for nearly a mile, and then a halt was made by a slab-shaped rock that towered high in the air. Here, it seemed, the Nagas expected to meet someone. The leader of the band placed his hand to his mouth and uttered a shrill, peculiar cry, which he twice repeated.

Meanwhile, the lad's two guards had put him down against the base of a tree, where he sat huddled limply with drooping head and half-closed eyes, still feigning weakness. It was so well done, indeed, that he looked to be in a state of extreme exhaustion. But his brain was working actively, and his supple strength had never been more ready to serve him. Anxiously he watched and waited.

"I'll show them something," he vowed desperately, "if they will only give me a chance."

Several minutes slipped by without bringing the wished-for opportunity, and then a response to the leader's signal came from a distance. It rang nearer at hand, and again nearer, until a crashing noise was heard close by, when at once every man of the party turned his gaze in the direction of the approaching sound.

Maurice was curious to learn who was coming, but he dared not delay for an instant. He sprang to his feet, catching a brief glimpse of a pith helmet beyond the towering rock, and as quickly he had wheeled round and plunged into the dense undergrowth back towards the ravine.

"Now for a race—a race for life," he muttered.

He sped on blindly and swiftly, urged by the clamour of pursuit, by the fierce bloodthirsty cries, that were already ringing behind him on the still air. At first, remembering the broken bridge, he steered a little to the left, hoping to strike the chasm at a spot where

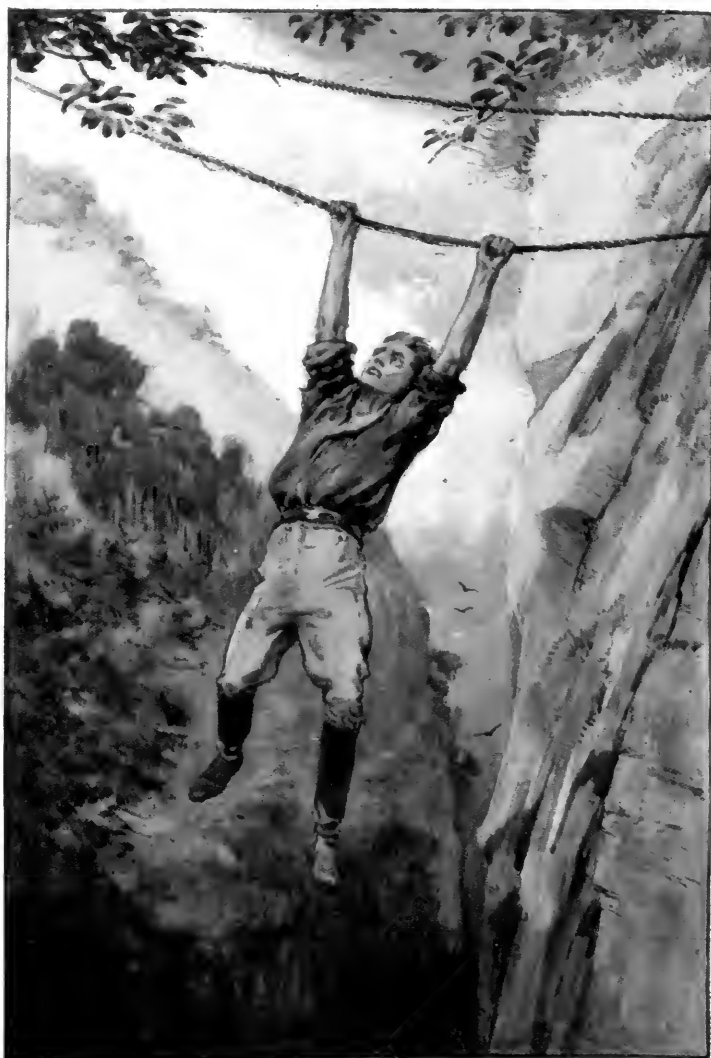
the banks would be less precipitous and might possibly be scaled. But on second thoughts, the very thought that a bridge existed warning him that his expectation was vain, he reverted to his original course.

It was a stern, relentless chase, and the odds were heavily against the brave lad from the first. He was far from confident of being able to escape, but nevertheless he was hopeful, and he meant to spare no efforts or risk. Fortunately he was a splendid runner, even by comparison with the wiry and fleet-footed Nagas, and it was somewhat to the disadvantage of the latter, perhaps, that they could not be absolutely sure what direction the fugitive would take unless they followed his trail.

Under such circumstances, when death is dogging one's heels, a mile is a long distance. It seemed doubly long to Maurice as he dashed on and on, keeping his bearings as well as he could, and trying to husband breath and strength for what final ordeal he might have to meet. Yet speed was an important factor from the beginning, and he dared not run too slowly. As agile as a deer, he leapt over fallen trees and stones, tore headlong through coppice and spear-grass, and doubled round the impenetrable jungle-hooks that cropped up in his path, while ever behind him rang the vengeful yelling and shouting of the savages, who were scattered to right and left. And twice he was surprised to hear a deeper and more ominous voice, like that of a European, calling angry commands.

"I believe I shall do it," he told himself. "I must be half-way now."

He sped on, not relaxing his efforts, and he was further comforted and cheered by the discovery that the noise of pursuit, though it kept even pace with him,



“With swimming brain . . . he worked his way along
hand over hand.”



apparently did not draw any nearer. These favourable conditions continued, and there was an actual gain to his credit—the Nagas must have paused in hesitation more than once—when he finally staggered out of the forest and found himself on the brink of the ravine. He had blundered a little to the left. In that direction was a sheer-dropping precipice as far as the eye could reach, and in the other direction, at a distance of fifty yards, he saw what remained of the severed bridge of vines.

There was not an instant to lose. He had but a single chance, and that such a slim and desperate one, so frightfully perilous, that his heart quailed at the thought of it, though he had known all along that he would have to face it.

“It is life or death,” he reflected, as he turned and sped to the right. “After what I’ve seen and heard, it is pretty clear why those fiends want to get hold of me again, though it’s a hard thing to believe. I might as well be smashed on the rocks as killed by slow torture. But I’m not dead yet. Heaven help me to get safely across.”

He ran fleetly along the narrow edge of the ravine, which was closely bordered by trees and vegetation, and when he reached the end of the ruined bridge, panting and exhausted, the jungle behind him was ringing with savage cries. He was faint for a moment, and had to pause for breath and strength. Then the weakness passed, and he felt ready for the ordeal.

He chose the thickest of the two cables that remained, and taking a firm grip of it he launched himself boldly into space. With swimming brain, with a prayer on his lips, he worked his way along, hand over hand. He did not trust himself to look down

into the dizzy gulf, whence rose the ceaseless thunder of the torrent. At first it was comparatively easy, for the cable sagged with his weight, and he slipped rapidly along, with increasing confidence, until he had reached the middle of the chasm and a little more than that.

“It’s half over,” he thought. “Will they give me a chance to finish?”

But now, where the twisted rope of vines began to incline upward and to resist his progress, was the hardest and most trying part. He fought on, a few inches at a time, mounting gradually higher towards the opposite bank, on the crest of which he fixed his eyes. The strain on the muscles was agonizing, and he wondered if he would be able to endure it. To and fro he swayed in his slow advance, like the pendulum of a clock, and more than once he must have lost his hold and fallen but for the other cable, over which he managed to throw one knee, and thus obtained a slight and welcome relief.

Maurice had undertaken a quite impossible task—impossible even to a man of herculean strength—but he fortunately did not know this. Each second was like a minute, and it seemed a quarter of an hour to him—it was really a very brief interval—until the danger that he had forgotten to reckon with burst upon him from the rear. The slide down to the lowest point of the cable had been swift, but he had gained no more than three yards on the upward journey, and had still a disheartening distance to climb, when he heard a shrill clamour behind him, and venturing a backward glance he was alarmed by the sight of a half-dozen Nagas grouped on the spot from which he had started.

“They have no firearms,” he thought, hopeful as yet.

Whirr! came a spear. Another and another. But the incessant swaying of the vines saved Maurice, and the weapons, leaving him unscathed, struck the rocks and fell clattering below. He struggled on, hauling himself slowly up the oscillating strands, until a greater peril than the whizzing spears sent a throb of despair to his heart. The Nagas, as the devilish impulse occurred to them, had begun an attack with their weapons on the two cables, at the point where they were coiled around the boulder. The frailer one parted, and sliding from under the lad's knee it fluttered down to the water, leaving him suspended in a perpendicular position over the abyss.

He gave himself up for lost, as well he might, for he knew that the second rope must soon follow the first. The instinct of life, however, urged him to continue his plucky flight. He flung one knee over the cable, struggled along for a few inches his teeth set hard. But he had ten yards yet to climb—an impossible distance. He paused, breath and strength almost at their last ebb. Behind him he could hear the hacking noise made by the spears and clubs.

“I've got to drop,” he told himself. “I wonder if I shall fall on the rocks or in the water.”

The thought stimulated him to another effort. His head swam as he stretched his aching arms and gained a paltry half-foot. He glanced back, to see what the savages were doing, and just at that instant came the sharp, angry bark of firearms. One of the Nagas spun round and toppled into the gorge, and another dropped among his companions, squirming in the agonies of death.

“Hold tight, my boy,” cried a lusty voice. “Don’t despair—we’ll save you.”

Never had words sounded sweeter to Maurice. He recognized the voice, and lifting his eyes to the nearer bank of the ravine, he saw a little group gathered there—Tearle, Carruthers, and four of their native servants. They were kneeling by the brink, and firing in rapid succession.

“Faster, lad!” shouted Carruthers.

Maurice attempted to reply, but a husky whisper was the only result. The rifles continued to splutter while he dragged himself an inch—two inches—higher. Then, as he realised that further progress was impossible, he felt a quivering, relaxing motion of the taut cable. He instantly divined what was coming, and with a cry of despair he tightened his grip on the frail support that was about to fail him and drop him to certain death—as he believed.

As quickly the strand parted from the rear bank, and down the lad shot at dizzy speed, swinging across the intervening stretch of the chasm. It seemed a long interval, though it was really little more than a second, until he was dashed violently against—not the hard and cruel wall of granite—but a clump of bushes that grew out from the face of the cliff, nearly thirty feet below the brink. There he dangled in space, faint and giddy, but quite unhurt, listening to the bloodthirsty yells of the savages and the cracking of firearms. A projecting knob of stone gave him a support for one foot, and this relieved the strain on his wrists.

“All right, lad?” came a voice from above.

“Yes,” he replied hoarsely.

“Ready, then. Hold fast.”

CHAPTER XXXI

ALARMING SUSPICIONS.

IT was Tearle who spoke last, and of what happened immediately afterwards, of the brief ascent through the air while he clung with a grip of death to the swaying cable, Maurice retained but a vague recollection. He was unable to stand when his friends hauled him over the brink of the abyss, and he would have gone off in a swoon, so fearful was the strain he had endured, but for the prompt application of a brandy flask to his lips. The stimulant, however, soon pulled him round and brought a touch of colour to his cheeks. He looked up gratefully at Tearle and Carruthers, and then glanced across the ravine. The Nagas had disappeared, leaving four dead bodies behind.

“Our fire was too hot for them,” said Carruthers. “They made off directly their devilish plan failed. I never saw such a chap as you are for having narrow escapes,” he added. “And this was the worst—it was a nervy thing to do. You wouldn’t have had a chance, though, but for our timely arrival.”

“And none then—not the slightest,” declared Tearle, “but for the happy fact that the Nagas succeeded in cutting the cable. Otherwise, my boy, you must have swung to and fro in mid-air until you dropped, for you could not have dragged yourself a foot nearer to us.”

“Not an inch,” Maurice assented with a shudder. “That’s right. I was completely fagged out. And

of course you couldn't have pulled me up, or given any help as long as the cable was fast on the other side. If the Nagas know that they saved my life, they must be feeling pretty sore about it."

"They have something else to be sore about," said Carruthers. "We taught them a lesson they won't forget in a hurry. You're none the worse for your terrible experience, my lad?"

"Not a bit, except for a sort of shaky feeling all over," Maurice assured him. "It is passing off, though, and I'll be all right presently. But tell me—what of Sher Singh? Is—is he dead?"

"Dead?" exclaimed Carruthers. "No fear. Don't worry about your devoted shikaree. He got an ugly rap on the skull, but barring a headache for a couple of days, he won't suffer any inconvenience from it. He insisted on coming along with us, but we made him stop behind, at the spot where the disaster occurred."

"It was by sheer luck that we reached here in time to save you," said Tearle. "Bad luck we were inclined to call it, when the rear cage broke down, owing to a defective axle. Carruthers and these trusty fellows came back from the front to help me, and we had barely started repairs when your runaway span of bullocks came tearing by like mad. I jumped out and caught them, and then—"

"Then we hurried up the road," broke in Carruthers. "and found the cart upset, yourself missing, and Sher Singh just coming to his senses. Our Hindoos tumbled to the trail of the savages, and away we went like a pack of hounds on the scent."

"It was a fortunate break-down for me," said Maurice, with a reminiscent glance at the gorge. "I'm all right now," he added. "Shall we be off?"

“Without delay, if you are fit to march,” replied Tearle. “I want to hear an account of your adventures, but that will keep until a better opportunity. I am in a hurry to get back to the convoy, which is scattered along the Goalpara road, almost unprotected.”

“I don’t believe it is in any danger,” declared Carruthers. “There are no Nagas in that direction.”

“Was anybody else with the savages—I mean with the party that cut the bridge?” Maurice asked, in a hesitating voice.

“Anybody else?” muttered Tearle. “Not that I saw. Why do you inquire, lad?”

Maurice returned an evasive answer, and Carruthers just then calling attention to a strange bird, the question was not repeated. A few moments later the little party were retracing their steps through the tangled forest, and in less than an hour they reached the road, when an affecting and joyous meeting took place between the lad and Sher Singh. The runaway bullocks had been brought to the spot by one of the servants, and the cart was speedily righted and re-filled. It was driven ahead to where the string of cages were waiting, and after a brief delay here the convoy proceeded towards Goalpara. Three armed natives formed a rear-guard, and Tearle and Carruthers walked alongside of the cart, in which rode Maurice and Sher Singh.

“Now, my lad,” said Tearle, as the vehicle rumbled slowly on its way, “suppose you spin us the yarn. I’m anxious to hear it.”

Maurice was less ready, for the simple reason that he had not yet decided how much he intended to tell, though he had been considering that point since he

left the ravine. It was a question with him whether his imagination might have carried him astray. Had his eyes and ears deceived him, he wondered, by inventing things that had no existence? He plunged into the narrative, however, and described his abduction, and his subsequent adventures, in a graphic style. His companions were deeply interested, and for a short time they discussed the mystery from every conceivable standpoint, but without arriving at a satisfactory solution.

“Well, I give it up,” exclaimed Carruthers, finally. “It’s a queer business. I never knew the Nagas to carry any one off for ransom. They always kill, and jolly quick, too.”

“Yes, that’s right,” said Tearle. “If this had happened in any other part of the country, lad, I should think there was a personal enemy at the bottom of it. But up here in the wilds of Assam, hundreds of miles from Calcutta—”

The sentence ended in a low, expressive whistle, and Tearle shook his head. A moment later he was listening with a grave countenance, in speechless astonishment; for Maurice, at the suggestion of a personal foe, had reluctantly started to tell what he had hitherto concealed from his friends.

“Lad, are you certain of this?” demanded Tearle.

“No, I’m not certain,” Maurice replied. “That’s just it. I fancied I saw a helmet moving between the leaves, but I may easily have been mistaken. And the same with the voice, afterwards, when I was running for my life. I couldn’t be sure that I heard it, because the Nagas were yelling like fiends behind me.”

“But whose voice do you *think* it was?” asked Carruthers.

“It sounded like Antonio Silva’s,” Maurice admitted ; and his face changed colour as he spoke.

Tearle and Carruthers expected this answer. They both laughed, a little uneasily.

“You are on the wrong track, my boy,” declared the former. “I am satisfied that Silva has left India—he would be a fool to stop in the country any longer than he could help. That he could have followed you up to Assam, and trusted himself among these blood-thirsty Nagas, and bribed them to carry you off to serve his own evil ends—why, it is too incredible for belief.”

“Preposterous, indeed,” assented Carruthers.

“To gratify a thirst for vengeance, Sahibs, a man will stop at nothing—he will go as the devil drives,” gloomily remarked Sher Singh ; which was his sole contribution, then or afterwards, to the discussion.

“Tearle is right, my lad—the Portuguese can’t be in these parts,” repeated Carruthers. “As for the motive of the Nagas, perhaps they wanted an English hostage to hold. Come to think of it, I remember they carried off an English magistrate once, just before they raided the tea plantations, and on the strength of their captive they got easy terms from the Government.”

“It may have been the same in this case,” said Tearle, though he spoke doubtfully. “However, if Silva *is* in the neighbourhood, he certainly won’t venture near Goalpara. We will inform the authorities this evening, and they will probably set their native intelligence department in motion at once, if they think there is any likelihood of trouble with the Nagas. Have you got a match about you, lad ?” he added carelessly. “I want to light my pipe.”

The conversation flagged, and the subject of Antonio Silva seemed by tacit consent to be avoided. But it was not forgotten—at least for the remainder of the day; though what Tearle, or Carruthers, or Maurice himself, really believed, whether or not they gave the Portuguese credit for having had a hand in the mysterious business, were questions which not one of the three could have answered. As for Sher Singh, he was either wrapt in sober reflections, or was depressed by the headache consequent on his cracked skull.

Slowly the line of cages jolted along, threading the jungle fastnesses, climbing hills and wading across streams, and late in the afternoon the valuable convoy entered Goalpara. Here was a pleasing taste of civilization of a kind, welcome as a change—this little town in the Brahmaputra valley, with its native houses and temples and European dwellings, its warehouses, shops, and cantonment, shipping and landing-wharf, and motley types of people, from English to Afghan.

The cages were stored in a great covered shed belonging to Hamrach and Company, and the agent of the firm promptly appeared and offered the hospitality of his roof to the two Englishmen and the lad. He was a German named Scholl, who traded in tobacco and bottled ales, and incidentally purchased any wild animals or reptiles that were brought into Goalpara.

“Is everything in readiness?” Tearle inquired of him.

“Very nearly,” the man replied. “The Navigation Company sent the barge here a week ago, but it required some repairs and special fittings, which are nearly

completed. The stores are on board, and you can load your cargo by to-morrow afternoon."

"And the pilot?"

"I have one engaged for you, Mr. Tearle—a trusty Hindoo who has spent his life on the Brahmaputra. He is somewhere in the town now, no doubt, for I saw him this morning."

Tearle expressed his satisfaction, and later in the evening, accompanied by Maurice, he called upon the local administrator and informed him of the outrage committed by the Nagas. The official promised an investigation, but scouted the idea of impending trouble with the predatory hillmen. No mention was made to him of Antonio Silva, or of the lad's suspicions, and he would have laughed the suggestion to scorn, as Tearle knew.

Whether or not the administrator kept his promise, or concerned himself further in the matter, Tearle and his companions did not learn, nor did they very much care; for on the morrow they discovered two vexatious things that for the time being threatened to interfere with their plans for departure. In the first place it was found that the barge, the "Star of Assam," required more repairs and fittings than Scholl had stated, and that the work could not be finished for another day and a half, at least. In the second place—this was a more serious hitch—the pilot engaged by the agent had mysteriously disappeared. No one remembered seeing him since the previous morning. All parts of the little town and the outlying suburbs, as well as the vessels in port, were thoroughly but vainly searched for him. In short—barring the remote possibility of foul play—the fellow had clearly repented of his bargain and left the neighbourhood, though for what reason none could surmise.

It was doubtful if a substitute could be obtained at such short notice, and the quest for one had proved fruitless up to that same evening, when, towards sunset, Tearle came ashore from the barge with Maurice and Sher Singh, leaving Carruthers to give some instructions to the workmen.

They met Scholl on the bank, and as they stopped to talk to him, in the vicinity of an idle throng of natives and planters, merchants and soldiers, a man approached the little group and made a low, cringing bow. His attire was half-Hindoo, half-European. He wore cast-off cavalry trousers, a greasy kummerbund and tunic of blue cloth, and a dingy turban. His head and coppery face were covered with a matted growth of coarse black hair.

"Salaam, Sahib," he began. "You are going down the river in yonder big boat?"

"Yes; what of it?" said Tearle.

"Perhaps you want a pilot?" was the reply.

"Sahib, do not trust this fellow," Sher Singh whispered quickly, as he touched Tearle on the arm.

CHAPTER XXXI.

GUNGA RA THE PILOT.

THE warning nudge, and the low words that accompanied it, were not lost on Tearle, though for the time being he gave no sign that he understood or that he would be guided accordingly.

“Yes, I do need a pilot, as it happens,” he replied, with a keen glance at the applicant, whose appearance was certainly against him, “but it is doubtful if you will suit me.”

“I am at the Sahib’s service,” said the Hindoo, “and to be hired cheap. You will not repent of your bargain. I know every mile of the river from here to the sea.”

“The boatmen that I have previously engaged have always told me the same thing,” Tearle answered, reflectively, “but their statements usually proved false. You tell me you are a trained pilot. What is your name, and how often have you been down the Brahmaputra?”

“Many more times than I can count, Sahib,” declared the fellow, holding up his hands and opening and shutting them rapidly, “on budgerows, dinghees, steamers, and tea-barges, and I have never been wrecked. As for my name, I am called Gunga Ra.”

“And your papers? Of course those are indispensable.”

“I have them, Sahib;” and with a quiet smile the Hindoo produced from the folds of his kummerbund a small, flat parcel tied with green muslin.

"I will look into them," said Tearle, "and will confer with my companions. Meanwhile do you remain here."

With that he drew Maurice and Sher Singh a few paces to one side, and at the same instant the three were joined by Carruthers. Scholl, who had been called away by an acquaintance in the passing crowd also came up to the group.

"What did that queer-looking chap want?" asked Carruthers. "I saw him palavering with you just now."

"He wants a berth as pilot," said Tearle, "and he seems to be all right, but Sher Singh is of the opinion that he is not to be trusted."

"Then you know something to his discredit?" Carruthers inquired of the shikaree.

"I know nothing, Sahib," Sher Singh replied. "I never saw him before. Yet a tiny voice here," he patted his breast, "tells me that you will be wise to refuse this offer. A pilot he may be, but he has the face of a rogue and a budmash."

"And you suspect him on that account?" exclaimed Tearle, contemptuously. "A man is not always to be judged by his looks."

"And we must have a pilot," put in Maurice.

"The fellow is fair-spoken," Tearle went on. "But he has given me his papers—they ought to settle the question."

He opened the packet, and having examined the half dozen or so of credentials that it contained, he handed them to Carruthers.

"Nothing wrong with these," said the latter, after a brief inspection. "They are all in good order—I know a couple of the signatures—and they are written in terms of the highest praise."

Scholl passed a similar opinion, and declared, moreover, that he remembered having seen the Hindoo come ashore from several vessels that touched at Goalpara, though not very recently.

"I have no doubt," he added, "that the man is what he professes to be."

"Then we will take him," promptly decided Tearle. "It would be foolish to reject such a chance." He stepped over to the Hindoo. "Here are your papers," he said. "We have found no fault with them. Be on hand early to-morrow morning to help us load. I will pay you a rupee a day. Is that sufficient?"

"The Sahib is generous," replied Gunga Ra; and with a servile bow he took himself off.

"He is a rascally-looking fellow, that's a fact," said Maurice.

"I don't care a hang for his looks, as long as he proves a good pilot," laughed Tearle, "and I fancy he will. It's a relief to get that difficulty off my mind."

Sher Singh said nothing, nor was he aggrieved by the rejection of his unfounded advice; but his face was grave and troubled, and his eyes mistrustfully followed Gunga Ra's figure until it was lost to sight.

"May Brahma decree," he said to himself, "that these Sahibs do not repent of their confidence! The secret voice within me is not to be stilled."

By daybreak the next morning—the workmen had been persuaded to continue their labours through the greater part of the night—the repairs were so nearly finished that the loading of the barge was commenced. Gunga Ra turned up on time, and worked with a zeal that placed him high in the estimation of all, excepting, perhaps, Sher Singh. By noon everything was on

board and in its place—cages, bullocks for the carnivorous animals to be fed upon, bales of hay, luggage, and various supplies for man and beast. Tearle paid off some of his helpers, and settled accounts with the native merchants to whom he was indebted.

Mid-afternoon saw the mooring-ropes cast loose, and the "Star of Assam" started on its momentous journey, drifting slowly out to the buoyed channel and down stream, while the thatched houses and white-walled cantonments of Goalpara faded in the distance, and Scholl, conspicuous amid a group of onlookers, waved his hand from the bank.

The barge, on account of its length and breadth, had the appearance of being lower in the water than it really was. Its general outlines resembled the great ferry-boats that ply on some of the American and English rivers. In the middle of the deck, running fore and aft, were the movable hatches that covered the deep and spacious hold, where the wild beasts and cattle—the latter partitioned off by themselves—were snugly quartered. From the fore-deck rose an airy little cabin, occupied by Maurice, Sher Singh, and their employers.

Near by a ladder descended to the store-room, and here, among other supplies, were cases of ammunition and a fifty-pound cask of powder, which had been brought up from Calcutta for bartering purposes with the natives, but had proved not to be needed. A large portion of the deck was roofed over with sheets of rice matting. On one side of the hatches were the sleeping-quarters of the crew, and the other side was used for cooking and eating.

The barge was guided from the stern by two monstrous sweeps, like the oar-blades of a raft. Two men

were required to each sweep, and there were two relays—eight men in all. The cook, the pilot, and six natives whom Tearle had retained to look after the animals, swelled the number of Hindoos on board to sixteen, exclusive of Sher Singh.

Across the deck and a little forward, high above hatches and awnings, was the bridge where sat Gunga Ra, with his earthen water-bowl beside him swathed in a damp cloth. He commanded a clear view of the river ahead, and could, at the same time, give instructions to the men at the sweeps by word and signal.

The current of the Brahmaputra was rather sluggish and even at this great distance from the sea the channel was from one to two miles broad. There were no snags or shoals, apparently, and this fact caused Tearle to wonder if a pilot was a necessity. Gunga Ra had little or nothing to do, though he showed his authority by issuing an occasional order.

Through the sultry hours of the afternoon the "Star of Assam" swung leisurely down the murky waterway keeping well to mid-stream. To right and left were low, jungle-covered shores, the haunts of innumerable wild beasts and reptiles. Here and there, on a cleared hillside, stood the bungalow and factories of a tea or indigo planter. To the north the blue spurs of the Himalayas could be faintly seen, sixty miles distant. A few craft were encountered bound upwards to Goalpara—a native trader's boat, a steam launch flying the French flag, a passenger barge, and a troop-steamer crowded to the rail with helmetted British soldiers.

At sunset the barge was guided to the left bank of the river, and moored fast to trees; for Tearle was not inclined to run the risk of navigating in the dark. Guards were posted at different parts of the deck, and the

night passed without alarm, though one incident occurred to which a special significance afterwards attached.

About two o'clock in the morning, while lying half-asleep and half-awake in his bunk, Maurice imagined that he heard a creaking of the ladder which led down to the store-room ; he rose and looked out of the cabin but seeing one of the sentries pacing by he returned to bed. In the morning he spoke lightly of the matter to Tearle, who, on descending to the store-room with a lantern, found evidence that a box of biscuits had been tampered with.

"It must have been that sentry," he said. "I suppose he got hungry in the night. I shan't say anything about it this time, but I don't want it to happen again. Goodness knows, I give these fellows plenty to eat."

"They are a greedy lot," replied the lad ; and ceased to think of the affair.

The second day's journey was uneventful, except that the town of Rangamati was passed. The "Star of Assam" floated on for mile after mile, under the burning Indian sun, and amid scenery of the most gorgeous description. Frequently Maurice, while walking the deck, glanced up at the bridge to find Gunga Ra's piercing black eyes fixed upon him with what he fancied was a fierce and malevolent stare. Each time the Hindoo turned quickly away. The lad could not shake off the delusion, though he was convinced that it was nothing more than that. It gave him a vague feeling of uneasiness.

Others on board, notably Tearle and Sher Singh, were, unknown to themselves, regarded with that same evil scrutiny. Meanwhile the pilot had fallen under suspicion with the men at the sweeps, who considered his post to be a mere sinecure, and found fault with

his Hindustani. They agreed among themselves that he was not what he claimed to be—that his knowledge of the river was limited, and that he did not hail from Assam. No whisper of this reached Tearle and his companions, else the course of events might have been decidedly changed.

The third day of the journey dawned. Noon came and went, and the sun dropped slowly towards the west. An hour before twilight Gunga Ra hopped nimbly down from the bridge, and came forward to where Tearle was sitting with Carruthers and Maurice.

“If it is the Sahib’s pleasure,” he said, “the barge can float through the night with safety; we are thirty miles below Rangamati, and from here on, for a long distance, the channel is free from obstructions and shoals, deep from bank to bank.”

Tearle at first shook his head. “No,” he replied, “we will tie up as usual.”

“I am the Sahib’s willing servant,” persisted Gunga Ra, “but we will surely save much time. I am accustomed to go without sleep for many hours, and will keep watch on the bridge until daylight.”

Tearle hesitated. Any device that would shorten the journey was worthy of consideration.

“It sounds fair,” said Carruthers. “We can’t come to any harm if we stick to mid-channel. Of course I don’t advise it as a regular thing. But in this case, if the part of the river we are on is known to be unobstructed—”

“It is,” broke in Maurice. “Don’t you remember, when we came up from Calcutta, and were travelling by steamer, what the captain told us one evening. He said that for sixty miles below Rangamati it was safe running by day or by night.”

“True; I had forgotten that for the moment,” exclaimed Tearle. “Well, we’ll risk it for once. Go back to your post, my good fellow,” he added to the pilot. “You shall have an extra rupee to make up for the loss of sleep.”

A little later Gunga Ra was perched on the bridge, peering alertly ahead. The night fell swiftly, and when semi-darkness shrouded the river, great lanterns were lighted and hung at bow and stern, and the second relay of men went to the sweeps. While the barge glided down mid-stream between the faintly-visible shores, supper was eaten, and pipes were smoked, and the bullocks and wild animals were made snug for the night.

At one o’clock in the morning all were asleep except those on whom devolved the safe guidance of the “Star of Assam.” Not a sound was to be heard but the monotonous splash and creak of the oar-blades as the men shuffled their naked feet to and fro over the rear-deck, or an occasional grunt or whine from the hold. Blind and unquestioning obedience to the commands of the pilot was imperative, for the glare of the lanterns prevented the sweepmen from seeing much farther than the rail.

Gunga Ra, perched aloft, had the barge at his mercy. He alone knew whither it was drifting. From time to time he shouted a curt word of instruction.

An hour slipped by, and shortly after two o’clock there was a tremendous crash—a grinding, quivering jar that sent a shudder through the stout framework of the “Star of Assam,” that pitched the occupants of the cabin out of their bunks and sprawled them in a tangled heap upon the floor.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A CRASH IN THE NIGHT.

MAURICE was the first to regain his feet, and as he darted from the cabin he was followed by his faithful shadow, Sher Singh. They stood on deck for a few seconds, too dazed and startled to understand what had happened. All was in darkness round about them, for the forward lanterns had been immediately extinguished by the crash. It was the same towards the stern, and out of the murky gloom came a babel of yells and screams from human throats, the bawling and pounding of bullocks, and the frightened roaring and snarling of the wild beasts. The clamour increased, though apparently no cause existed for fear and panic. There had been no repetition of the first stunning crash. The barge was perfectly level, and, if it was in motion at all, was drifting along serenely.

“Sahib, we must be sinking,” exclaimed Sher Singh, when he could find his voice.

“It is possible, though I don’t believe it,” Maurice replied. “But we have had an awful collision with something or other.”

As he spoke Tearle and Carruthers, who had wisely delayed to light a lantern, joined the other two on the fore-deck.

“We are not sinking, lad,” vowed Tearle. “I am sure of that. I know the feel of it too well, having been twice wrecked at sea.”

“Then the bow is fast aground, and we are swinging round broadside,” declared Maurice, as he stepped to the rail and looked over.

He had no sooner spoken than the statement was confirmed. There was a scraping noise, followed by succession of quivering jars and jerks. With that the barge held tight, and the only perceptible motion was a gentle swaying to and fro.

Tearle ran to the opposite side of the deck and stared across the water, shading his eyes with his hands.

"Yes, we've swung clear round," he shouted. "The barge is tight on a shoal, with the bow pointing up stream. But that's not the worst of it. Look yonder. What do you make of that?"

Now, for the first time, all eyes discerned the outline of the shore within a distance of fifty yards. Its murky reflection stained the river almost as far as the side of the barge.

"We're aground on the shallows," cried Carruthers. "Is this devilry or accident?"

"Gunga Ra can tell you that," replied Maurice. "Either he ran us purposely ashore, or he fell asleep at his post of duty."

"I'll wring the scoundrel's neck when I get hold of him," muttered Tearle, with an oath.

He snatched the lantern from Carruthers and started along the deck, his companions at his heels.

"I warned the Sahibs," declared Sher Singh, excitedly. "I knew that the budmash of a pilot was not to be trusted. He has betrayed us."

"If that's true he dies for it," swore Carruthers.

Though a very brief time had elapsed since the crash, the tumult was now subsiding. Here and there a lantern, ignited by some ready witted fellow, was flaming towards the stern and shedding light on a motley scene. The natives were running to and fro, talking hoarsely and confusedly, and an occasional roar floated up from the hold.

Tearle swung his lantern high, and searched the bridge. It was empty. He glanced round in vain for the missing pilot.

“Where is Gunga Ra?” he demanded angrily. “Who has seen him?”

There was a jabbering of voices in reply, but none could answer the questions. The men who had been at the sweeps were promptly examined, but they easily exonerated themselves from blame. They had merely obeyed orders, they declared, and the glare of the lights had prevented them from seeing any distance beyond the rail. Their evidence, however, brought out one important and damaging fact. Gunga Ra had not been sleeping at his post, for up to the very moment of the disaster he had issued instructions.

“That settles it,” Tearle cried in a passion. “There is some devilry brewing. The barge was grounded by design. Find the scoundrel, men. He must be still on board. He can’t escape us.”

Just then a dusky and bleeding figure emerged from the depths of the hold and crawled painfully and slowly over the hatch-combing. It was the shikaree Jafar, who had been acting as night-watch over the animals. He stood to his feet with difficulty, and his breath came in short, quick gasps.

“Hello! what’s wrong here?” demanded Tearle. “Are you hurt?”

“Truly I am, Sahib,” was the reply. “That pig of a Gunga Ra, that son of a burnt grandfather—when the bump came—he fell down—he fell down through the awning and into the hold—he fell upon me with much heaviness. See—I am hurt here—and here;” and he patted his ribs and nose.

Tearle grimly repressed an inclination to laugh.

“Where is the rascal now?” he exclaimed. “Did he climb back upon the deck?”

“He rolled away in the darkness, over and over, Sahib,” replied Jafar, pointing to the hold. “He must be still in hiding down there.”

“Then we’ve got him all right, eh?” cried Carruthers. “Search for him and bring him up. I want to hear what he has to say for himself.”

“No, no, Sahib—wait,” Jafar interposed. “I forgot to tell you—the cage with the big rhinoceros has upset. It will be dangerous to venture down below. The beast may break loose at any moment. Hark! do you hear him pounding his horn against the planks?”

“I hear him plainly enough, if that’s what it is,” said Tearle. “Gunga Ra will keep for the present. The rhinoceros must be attended to, and at once. Come along, all hands are needed for this business.”

“We had better look for the pilot at the same time,” suggested Maurice, “or he will give us the slip. It’s an easy swim to shore.”

“I’ll see that the fellow don’t escape,” vowed Carruthers, as he stuffed the chambers of a revolver with cartridges.

A stout gate barred the entrance to the hold, which was a sloping gangway, eight or nine feet wide, that opened on to one of the side decks of the barge. Tearle swung the gate on its hinges, and then, a sudden thought occurring to him, he stopped. Selecting four of the natives, he bade them stand aside.

“Put these fellows on guard at the hatches,” he said to Maurice. “They won’t need any weapons. And you had better stay up here with them yourself. There’s a chance that the scoundrel may slip out of the hold; or perhaps he is already out, and lurking

somewhere on deck. I wouldn't lose him for a good bit."

"Right you are," Maurice assented. "I'll keep a sharp look out."

"Lively now, men," exclaimed Tearle; and holding the lantern high he led the party through the gate and down into the hold, where the ill-tempered rhinoceros was still jabbing and prodding, to the accompaniment of snarls and whimpers from the other animals. Sher Singh lingered for an instant, wavering between duty and inclination, then reluctantly vanished below.

Maurice lost not a minute in disposing his four men where he thought they were most needed. He left the fore-deck unguarded, since the hatch at this end of the hold was tightly battened down. It was the natural and proper course to take, under the circumstances, yet the lad was shortly to wish that he had posted at least one of the natives in the vicinity.

"And now," he told himself, when he had completed his arrangements, "I mean to search the whole deck for Mr. Gunga Ra. I have an idea that he climbed out of the hold some time before Jafar did. I only hope he hasn't dropped over the rail and swum ashore."

As he sauntered forward, peering right and left into the gloom, he recalled with a feeling of uneasiness the malevolent glances which he had so often received from the pilot.

"I shouldn't care to meet the fellow empty-handed," he reflected. "I had better arm myself."

He hastened to the cabin and took his rifle from the hooks—a light-weight weapon to which he was much attached. But his cartridge-belt was empty and he remembered that the cartridges of the required size were all in the store-room.

"It's no fun lugging one of those weapons around," he muttered, glancing at the heavier rifles of Tearle and Carruthers. "I can put my hand on the box in the dark and it won't take a minute."

He returned to the deck and paused for a few seconds in the glare of the big lantern—it had been relit—that was swinging above him. From the hold came various discordant sounds mingled with the excited jabbering of voices.

He stepped to the ladder and began to descend. When he was half-way down the rungs he fancied he saw a flash of yellow light below him. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. The bright streak had disappeared, and all was dark.

"It was a reflection from the deck," he assured himself.

Maurice reached the bottom. The door opened inwards, and he pushed it slowly back on its hinges. He still felt a little anxious about the visionary light, so he took a match from his pocket, and scraped it on the wall as he strode from the narrow passage into the store-room.

For a brief instant, while the vesta flamed between his fingers, he stood trembling and speechless—petrified by the discovery that was revealed to him. Many of the cases and boxes had been moved away from the middle of the floor, and that space was now occupied by the fifty-pound cask of gunpowder. From the hole in the top—it had been unscrewed—dangled a fuse two feet in length, the end of it charred and burnt. Several partly-consumed matches lay near, and a couple of yards off was a dark-lantern with the shade drawn.

All this the lad saw at a quick, sweeping glance

and then, almost before he could grasp the terrible meaning of the preparations, or realize his own imminent danger, a pair of bony hands fastened on his throat from behind. There was no opportunity to cry out—no chance for a struggle on anything like equal terms. The rifle and the match dropped, and Maurice was flung heavily down on top of them, thus plunging the store-room in total darkness.

In the fall his head struck the floor, and the stunning pain helped to disable him. He fought desperately to rid himself of his unseen foe, but his struggles were in vain. The muscular fingers only clutched him the tighter. He grew rapidly weaker, and throes of suffocation began to torture him. His brain seemed to be splitting in two; he was on the verge of unconsciousness.

But suddenly, when his strength was quite gone, and his senses nearly so, the grip on his throat was relaxed. He lay still, breathing in painful gasps, and unable to utter a sound. As he revived a little he found, with impotent rage and fear, that his captor was binding his ankles together, and tying his wrists behind his back. He could feel the ruffian's hot breath on his neck.

When it came to the gagging process the lad again offered, or attempted to offer, resistance; but a wad of cloth was quickly and easily forced into his mouth. Then the man's kneeling weight was lifted from his body, and he lay there prone, as helpless as a log of wood. He heard the door of the store room close softly—heard muffled foot-steps crossing the floor, and then a creaking, sliding noise. With that a strong beam of light from the partly-opened shutter of the dark lantern shone full upon him.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE MAN WITH THE YELLOW FACE.

AT first, his eyes being dazzled by the strong and sudden glare, Maurice could see almost nothing.

But when the man had opened the lantern wide and held it up a little so that it shone on both, the lad made a discovery that for the moment caused him to forget all else save curiosity and amazement. He had fully believed that his assailant was Gunga Ra and with good reason. He was wrong, however. Instead of the Hindoo pilot, he saw a lean, wiry figure, clad in worn and dirty khaki, and surmounted by a yellow, parchment-like face that had recently been clean-shaven, but testified, by a starting crop of black bristles, to the absence of a razor for at least a week.

Scowling and venomous, full of triumphant hatred, was the ruffian's countenance, which was as yet unfamiliar to Maurice. He shuddered with terror and, maddened by the thought of his helplessness he strained at his fetters.

"It *must* be Gunga Ra," he told himself. "He was disguised before."

The man stepped nearer, and looked down upon the lad as a tigress might glare at the slayer of her cubs.

"Ah! I could have wished for no better fortune," he muttered. "You are as good as dead, so I need not fear to unmask. How cleverly I deceived you all, with the help of my good friend Gunga Ra! What! You do not know me! But how could you, with this stubbly growth of beard—in these rags? Listen! I am Antonio Silva."

Maurice started, and turned pale. He recognized

the voice—knew the cast of the features. The revelation brought a hopeless, frightened look to his eyes.

“Time is precious, but I can spare a minute for you,” the Portuguese went on. “The game is in my hands, and at one stroke I shall have a complete and glorious revenge—not only on you, but on those others as well who have wronged me. You baffled me in the jungles of Seranghur; escape now if you can. Ha! ha! how easily the dogs of Englishmen were deceived! I have been hidden in yonder corner, among the cases and boxes, since you started down the river. Gunga Ra smuggled me aboard at Goalpara. He hates you and the others even as I do, lad, because you killed his brother during the fight at the camp. It was Gunga Ra, my cunning servant, who bribed the Naga hillmen to carry you off; who decoyed into the jungle, and there slew, the native pilot who was to have taken his place. The rest was easy. As for Gunga Ra’s papers, I forged them before I came to Assam. From the first, whether the Naga plot failed or succeeded, I swore that the Englishmen’s barge should never reach the Bay of Bengal.”

Maurice forced a groan from his parched and swollen lips, as he writhed impotently. Silva bent over the lad, lifted him by the shoulders, and propped him in an upright position against a box.

“Gunga Ra should be here with me,” he resumed. “I trust that he has escaped to the shore, where I shall speedily join him. He made a little mistake to-night, and ran the boat aground before I was ready. But it is an easy matter to drop into the river. I am a good swimmer, and a better diver. And your friends—they will not miss you until it is too late. Hark! they are still busy in the hold.”

He listened for a few seconds to the dull, muffled noise that came through the wooden walls, and then scraped a match, which he held for a moment between his fingers.

“Your fate is certain,” he said smilingly. “You can expect no help from your companions. Do you see that fuse? You shall sit here and watch it burning its way to the top of the cask. Directly the spark touches the powder the barge and all on board will be blown to fragments. Dead men tell no tales, and none will ever know that Antonio Silva and Gunga Ra thus wiped out a debt of vengeance. I will leave the lantern,” he added, “so that you may measure your remaining span of life. I wish you pleasant thoughts during the next two minutes. After that—oblivion. Farewell, my young friend Maurice.”

With a truly satanic grin Silva put the match to the fuse, which began to spit fire. He quietly left the store-room, closing the door behind him. The rungs of the ladder creaked, and all was still. Maurice, helplessly bound and gagged, was abandoned to such mental torments as only a fiend could have devised.

Let us, for a brief interval—it must be very brief indeed while that deadly fuse is burning below—follow the Portuguese. Coolly and cautiously he climbed to the fore-deck, and a swift glance showed him that the coast was clear, that there was no danger of any person either preventing his escape or frustrating his devilish designs. He crept to the rail and swung over. By the aid of a dangling rope he let himself farther down, then dropped into the water with scarcely a splash and swam noiselessly towards the near by shore.

At that very moment, as it happened, a diversion occurred in the hold. While Tearle and a number of others were working hard to right the overturned cage

that held the rhinoceros, Carruthers and several natives were searching zealously for the missing pilot, whom they believed to be hidden close by. They had entered the space that was walled off for the bullocks, and Carruthers was flashing a lantern here and there, when what appeared to be a bundle of straw, suddenly endowed with life, rose from the gloom of the farthest corner.

Down went the straw, revealing the half-naked figure of Gunga Ra. As quickly he sprang to the top of the partition—even before Carruthers could fire—and a second leap landed him on the sloping gangway. He darted forward, struck down a native who tried to stop him, and the next instant had gained the side of the barge and vaulted into the river.

“Shoot him! shoot him!” yelled frantic voices.

There was a lusty hue and cry as Tearle and Carruthers, followed by every man that was below, rushed to the deck. They crowded along the rail, gazing anxiously shorewards, but as the fugitive pilot had immediately dived, he was of course invisible. For the same reason, and also because he was much nearer to the bank, nothing was seen of Silva.

“Look, Sahibs!” shouted Sher Singh, when a few seconds had elapsed.

A head rose to the surface, to vanish as quickly. Rifles and pistols cracked, and a shower of lead rained about the spot where Gunga Ra had so briefly appeared. Beyond were shadows too deep for the watchful eyes to penetrate; a black, sluggish current that rippled inland to the overhanging trees and vegetation.

“We couldn’t have hit him,” exclaimed Carruthers. “He was too quick. He can swim and dive like a duck.”

“I’ll give fifty rupees for the scoundrel, dead or alive,” cried Tearle. He scanned the murky waters,

then lowered his rifle in despair. "It's no use," he muttered.

"Sahib, let me go after him," spoke up Jafar, the shikaree. "I'll take a boat—paddle hard!

"You can try it," Tearle assented, indifferently, "but you will come back empty-handed. The fellow is too cunning to be caught."

However, the boat was lowered—a couple of light craft were swung over the rear-deck—and it swiftly receded in the gloom, propelled by Jafar and four other natives. Tearle and Carruthers stood looking towards the shore, and listening to the faint dip and splash of the paddles, though they well knew that the quest would be a fruitless one. It had occurred to neither of them, as yet, that they had seen nothing of Maurice since they left the hold.

To return to the store-room. What Maurice felt when the door softly closed, and Silva's footsteps died away up the ladder, no tongue or pen can describe. His head seemed to be on fire with seething agony. He strained every nerve and muscle to break his bonds, to eject the gag from his mouth; but his efforts were vain, and weakness speedily compelled him to desist. He sat still, propped against the box, in a fever of suffering, with his eyes fixed on the cask of powder and the speck of hissing, spitting fire that was creeping closer and closer.

With incredible rapidity one mental picture after another glided through his mind. He saw in imagination the natives standing about the deck, his friends working away in the hold, all indifferently ignorant of his whereabouts. Then—frightful scene!—he saw the barge burst to fragments with an awful explosion, and strew the river with charred wood and mangled

bodies. He saw Silva's evil face, lit with intense joy, peering from the shelter of the jungle.

Again the lad struggled desperately, with purpling cheeks, to free his arms and tongue. If he could only cry out! The fuse was now half-consumed, and was burning up the side of the cask.

Suddenly his attention was distracted by hoarse shouts overhead. He heard a rush of footsteps across the deck, then angry voices and the sharp crack of rifles. He knew what this meant.

"Silva has been discovered while leaping overboard," he thought. "Oh, I hope they will shoot him—I hope they will!"

The tumult and firing continued, but no one came near the store-room. The brief hope that had cheered Maurice died away. He looked at the spitting fuse, and the sight maddened him. Persistently he strained his aching muscles, but it was useless to try to break the cords that bound him. At last, attacking the gag with teeth and tongue, it flew out of his mouth.

For an instant he was faint with joy. When he tried to shout, however, he was dismayed to find that he could utter only a wheezing sound. The noise still continued, and he realized the hopelessness of making himself heard.

Death was very near—the explosion must soon take place. Already the end of the fuse was six inches off the floor. The fire was steadily, relentlessly, devouring its way up the side of the cask to the open tap-hole. A few seconds passed, fraught with unspeakable agony to the doomed lad. A quivering moan escaped his lips, and he shuddered in every limb.

"To die like this—it is too horrible!" he whispered. "God help me!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE RAMPAGIOUS RHINOCEROS.

“**G**OD help me !”

As Maurice repeated the fervent prayer there flashed into his mind, as if in answer, a slim ray of hope—a desperate opportunity of saving his life. As quickly he regained his self-control, was calm and clear-headed. He was utterly weak, but strength came to him with the need of it.

Throwing himself over on his side, he began to roll across the floor, and by tacking several times he gained the position that he wanted. His head rested against the powder-cask, and the burning end of the fuse was just above him. The sparks dropped upon his face, in a little shower.

Would it be success or failure ? He answered the question by a straining, muscular effort that raised his head from the floor. He opened his mouth, and literally snapped at the spot of fire. He caught it, and closed his lips tightly, regardless of the burning pain. Then his head sank back, and he lost consciousness.

The lad knew nothing more until he opened his eyes to find himself in his own berth in the cabin, with friendly faces about him. Sher Singh was rubbing his burnt lips and tongue with some healing ointment.

“Lie still, my brave fellow,” said Tearle. “You are not able to rise yet.”

“Yes, I am,” vowed Maurice, sitting up as he spoke. “Did I put it out ?” he asked eagerly. “Oh, how it

stung ! Are you all safe ? Where is the Portuguese ? It was Antonio Silva who did it. Have you shot him ? ”

“ The boy’s mind is wandering,” said Carruthers in an undertone. “ Yes, you put the fuse out,” he added. “ The charred end was still clenched between your teeth when we found you in the store-room ten minutes ago. Your lips and tongue are scorched, but the pain won’t last very long.”

“ We all owe our lives to you, my young hero,” said Tearle. “ Your wits and courage saved the barge from destruction. But Gunga Ra has escaped us, worse luck. He leapt out of the hold and over the rail, almost before we could give the alarm. We fired at the scoundrel, but it was no use, for he dived like an otter. Jafar and four others have gone after him in a small boat——”

“ What I can’t understand, lad,” broke in Carruthers, “ is why Gunga Ra should have crept back to hide in the hold, after he had trussed you up in the storeroom like a helpless fowl and fired the mine that was to have blown us to bits.”

“ Gunga Ra ? ” exclaimed Maurice. “ Why, he wasn’t near the store-room—I know nothing of him. It was Antonio Silva who knocked me down and bound me, and put the fuse to the powder. Do you mean to say you’ve let him escape ? ”

“ The Portuguese here ? ” Tearle and Carruthers cried incredulously, in one breath.

“ Yes, here in disguise. He has been on board all the time, since we left Goalpara.”

When the excitement caused by his revelation had subsided a little, the lad went on to tell the whole story, briefly and rapidly. The consternation and amazement of his hearers were beyond words. Tearle

grew purple with rage, was speechless for a moment.

“I would give every penny I own to get my hand on the yellow wretch,” he blurted out, with a string of oaths. “I would tear him limb from limb. Only to think that Silva was actually among us !”

“He must be a tremendous hater,” said Carruthers, “to judge from the trouble he took, following the lad up here into Assam, and hiring the Nagas to carry him off. And then, when that plan failed, to take us in with a false pilot and smuggle himself aboard the barge ! He is a fiend in human guise.”

Sher Singh said nothing, but the flash of his dark eyes showed that he shared his companions' wrath and indignation.

At this point the splash of paddles was heard, and a half-minute later, as the four left the cabin, the boat swung alongside the barge. Its occupants climbed silently to the deck and hauled the light craft after them.

“I thought so,” growled Tearle. “No luck, eh ?”

“None, Tearle Sahib,” replied Jafar. “The rogue is safe within the thick jungle, where there is scarcely a trail even for beasts.”

“We are well rid of both of them, if you ask me,” declared Carruthers. “I don't believe they will trouble us again in a hurry ; they will probably cut up to Rangamati, and leave this part of the country by rail.”

“Very likely,” assented Tearle. “But I sincerely hope Silva will cross our path again before we depart from India. And now to get the barge off the shoals. There is but one way, I fear—to fly a signal of distress and wait till some steamer comes along.”

“Which won’t be until daylight, at least,” said Carruthers. “It is no more than two o’clock now. Shall we turn in for a few hours of sleep?”

“The Sahibs surely forget the rhinoceros,” interposed Sher Singh. “We left the hold in great haste.”

“So we did!” cried Tearle. “We got the cage right side up, but it is too much strained for safety.”

“It was ready to fall apart,” added Carruthers. “It must be strengthened at once—better lose no time about it. I can hear the beast prodding at the planks. He has been in an awful temper for the past two days.”

“Come along, then,” said Tearle, as he picked up the lantern. “Jafar, go to the rear-deck and fetch some of that teakwood planking.”

The Hindoo set off on his errand, but had taken only a dozen strides when there was a ripping, crashing noise from the depths of the barge, mingled with angry snorting and grunting.

“Too late!” cried Tearle. “There! he’s done it. Old Terrible is loose. Nets and ropes, quick!”

Old Terrible, it may be explained, was the name that had been given to the rhinoceros at the time of his capture, on account of his fierce and surly disposition, and his present performance showed that he meant to deserve his title.

A few seconds after the first alarm there was a repetition of the crashing, rending sounds, followed by a pandemonium of grunts and squeals, roaring and yowling. The commotion rose to a high and deafening pitch, and all the beasts and bullocks joined in lustily

till you would have thought they were engaging in a pitched battle.

There was hurried running to and fro on the deck, as Tearle rapidly shouted his orders. Maurice was as active as the rest, his burns forgotten in the excitement.

"Lively, men," urged Carruthers. "Old Terrible seems to be smashing the other cages out of sheer spite. But he is not to be harmed, remember, unless it becomes absolutely necessary. You can try your magic power on the brute, lad," he added with a grin.

"I'll think about that," Maurice told him. "It is doubtful if I could do anything with a rhinoceros."

"I was only jesting," said Carruthers. "Keep out of danger."

Brown bodies tumbled over one another in the scramble for guns, nets, and ropes, most of which supplies had been stacked within convenient reach. There were no cowards aboard the barge, and every man was at Tearle's heels as he led the way forward. They might well have quailed, however, at the awful babel of sound rising from below.

Tearle and two shikarees were carrying a large, thick-meshed net, and as they drew near to the entrance of the hold two spotted tigers, with eyes aflame leapt out of the black space,

"Grab them," cried Tearle.

The shikarees flung the net, but it fell short of the little animals, who turned tail, shrieking hideously, and fled towards the rear-deck.

"Let them go," exclaimed Carruthers. "No time to waste now."

The delay, brief though it was, proved most unfortunate. The next instant, before the attacking party



“Away they went with shrill clamour . . . hotly pursued
by the ill-tempered beast.”

could recover from their temporary confusion, the situation had changed and the initiative was taken out of their hands.

Old Terrible, scenting mischief, came snorting and pounding up the gangway leading from the hold. He struck the closed gate at the top like a ton of stones from a catapult, shattered it to fragments, and plunged on with the impetus. He narrowly missed striking the rail and going into the river, but wheeled about in time, and charged full-tilt at the men.

None stopped to toy with rope or net. Away they went with shrill clamour, in the direction of the fore-deck, hotly pursued by the ill-tempered beast. Maurice dashed into the cabin, followed by Carruthers and Sher Singh. Tearle and the shikarees tumbled down the ladder to the store-room, while the rest of the party circled round the hatch and fled towards the rear-deck.

Old Terrible naturally pursued the bent of his lowered horn, which brought him in violent contact with the side wall of the cabin. Crash! his head and shoulders went through the frail planking as if it had been an egg-shell. He stuck fast for an instant, and then, pressing on, he squeezed his great bulk entirely into the cabin just as Maurice and his terrified companions bolted by the door.

“Run, Sahibs,” cried Sher Singh. “Faster! He is after us—he gallops with the speed of a horse.”

“Ho—hold on,” panted Carruthers, who was out of breath, “help me—or—or—I’m done for.”

Maurice and the Hindoo took hold of him, and thus they sped along the side of the deck, thoroughly convinced, by the sounds in their rear, that Old Terrible was in close pursuit. They were relieved to find

otherwise when they gained the rear-deck, where eight or ten of the natives were assembled.

“I believe the brute is trapped in the cabin,” suggested Maurice. “Shall we go back and see?”

“He is kicking up a tremendous row,” said Carruthers, doubtfully. “But where is Tearle? Didn’t he double round in this direction?”

“No, Sahib,” replied Sher Singh, “he and the shikarees—”

An angry screech drowned the Hindoo’s voice, and out from the shadow of the hatch combing slid the pair of tiger-cats. The little animals—they were by no means tiny—were disposed to show fight. They crept slowly towards the group of men, snarling and spitting.

“Wait; they won’t harm us,” exclaimed Maurice. He tried to cow them by a steady glance, but it had no visible effect, probably because of the poor light, “The net, quick!” he cried.

Sher Singh had one under his arm, and the lad helped him to unroll it. They advanced several steps and made a rapid cast. One of the animals escaped by darting out of the way and leaping to the rail, whence it sprang to the nearest sweep and began to crawl towards the water. The other, neatly caught by the descending net, squalled and scratched with fury, and was speedily entangled in the stout meshes.

Among the sweep-men was a stalwart fellow, with muscles of iron. He ran forward and fastened both hands in the scruff of the tiger-cat’s neck. Lifting the animal, net and all, he carried it to the hold and dropped it down—a feat that was witnessed with admiration.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A STATE OF SIEGE.

MEANWHILE, to return to the front end of the barge, the rest of the party were enjoying equally lively experiences, and attended with considerably more danger. Tearle and the two shikarees, having ventured to climb to the top of the store-room ladder, saw Old Terrible shaking his horned head at them from the cabin doorway.

“We’ve got him all right,” cried Tearle. “The rascal has trapped himself. Wait till I noose the rope and drop it over his neck. Then you and I will hold him, Jafar, while Pershad slips in by the rear and throws the net over him.”

It was a very simple plan, provided the sanction of the fourth party was obtained. At first the rhinoceros offered no objections. Seemingly pleased with his new quarters, he looked about with his wicked little eyes and grunted softly. But as the rope dangled before him, ready for the cast, Old Terrible snorted with rage and shot forward. Crack! rattle! went the door frame, and in less time than it takes to tell the brute was outside the cabin.

“Run!” cried Tearle, as he hastily flung the noose and missed his aim.

He barely saved his life by an agile spring to one side, and dashing to the covered hatch, which was close by and was fortunately of some height, he leapt upon it. Jafar did the same, but bolted round the cabin, hotly pursued by the vengeful quadruped,

and it was not until the second lap that he succeeded in joining his companions.

Thus baffled, Old Terrible was now in a worse temper than ever. He jabbed the side of the hold several times so that Tearle was able to cast the noose over his head, then backed away with a jerk that robbed the three men of the rope before they could get a tight grip of it. He took a turn or two, and was about to charge the empty cabin when he suddenly pricked up his ears and went thundering aft down the barge.

The advent of the pugnacious rhinoceros at the rear deck was a few seconds after the tiger-cat had been dropped into the hold. He loomed monstrously in the light of the stern lanterns, and the sweep-men, as they were charged, scattered right and left. Five of them, in fear and desperation, crawled out on the great oar-blades, three on one and two on the other. Of course the sweeps dipped low, and at the first touch of the water the fugitive tiger-cat, which had sought refuge here, gained the rail by a flying leap over the heads of the men. The little animal slipped by the rhinoceros and raced into the gloom.

This diversion afforded Maurice and his companions a welcome opportunity, and darting round the corner of the hold, they fled to the fore-deck, with Old Terrible grunting after them. Carruthers climbed to the low roof of the cabin, followed by Sher Singh and the lad, and of the others some mounted to the hatch and some swung themselves to the shelter of the bridge.

Old Terrible arrived on the scene a little too late. Seeing that his enemies were at present beyond reach he ambled leisurely to the rail and peered down at the rippling water. He was perhaps thirsty after his exertions.

“Well, this is pleasant, I must say,” grumbled Tearle. “It’s a nice mess. We’re in a regular state of siege. I don’t know what’s to be done.”

“Hadn’t we better shoot the creature before he does any more damage?” Carruthers called across from the roof. “Now is a good chance.”

“Shoot him?—not a bit of it,” declared Tearle, emphatically. “That rhinoceros is too valuable to lose. Wait till his temper cools off, and then we’ll try to get a net over him.”

“If we had another rope about his neck,” suggested Maurice, “we might all make a rush and pull on him together from both sides. I have a rope with me,” he added.

“Wait,” replied Tearle. “Have patience.”

Of that admirable quality Old Terrible had a full share, combined with devilish cunning. Several minutes passed before he turned from the rail. He plainly understood that he was master of the barge, and his beady eyes twinkled with malicious enjoyment. Hearing a sound from the stern, he wheeled about and trotted in that direction; and the watchers on hatch and cabin and bridge could follow his progress by the glow of the lanterns that were strung about the barge. They saw the sweep-men, who had meanwhile climbed back to the deck, hurriedly retreat to the oar-blades again as the brute lunged at them again.

Old Terrible, still monarch of all he surveyed, now shuffled leisurely forward. He paused near the cabin and Maurice hastily cast a rope. The brute escaped it by swinging his head, and then moved towards the hatch, when the shikarees enflamed his wrath anew by flinging a net partly over him. He shook it off

and trampled it under his hoofs, soon rending it to shreds.

"He is more than a match for the whole of us," Tearle vowed angrily.

At this luckless moment the tiger-cat appeared, slinking round the corner of the hold. The little animal was uneasy and frightened, bewildered by liberty under such strange conditions. It whined in a low, quavering tone, and fixed its fiery gaze on the little group who occupied the hatch covering.

There was a sudden rush, a chorus of grunts and squeals, and the tiger-cat lay lifeless on the deck. Not yet satisfied, Old Terrible trampled the body and mangled it with his curved horn, and the sight and smell of blood seemed to rouse him to a pitch of insane fury.

He glared about him, charged full tilt at the hatch and recoiled from the stout timbers.

He snorted, wheeled round and charged the cabin. There was a splintering crash that caused the structure to reel, and down tumbled Maurice fairly upon the hind-quarters of the rhinoceros.

It was a thrilling and perilous moment, and almost before the lad had rolled off the animal's back to the deck, his companions, from cabin-roof and hatch, were shouting confused instructions to him. Several rifles were pointed at the brute, but, at a command from Tearle, none were discharged.

"Speed will save him," he cried. "Don't fire—yet. This way, lad."

Springing to his feet with a nimbleness that showed him to be uninjured, Maurice turned and ran. Old Terrible wheeled as quickly, in a fine rage, and the brief race that ensued was nip and tuck. The snorting and trampling behind him magnified the danger to

the lad's ears, and leaping upon the hatch in such hot haste that he could not check himself, he tripped over Jafar's crouching figure, missed Tearle's outstretched hand, and plunged head first into the yawning depths of an opening in the hold.

A burst of startled cries greeted the disaster, and the rhinoceros, somewhat cowed by the noise and not knowing what to make of it, pulled up short in his charge. Maurice had happily alighted upon a bale of hay.

"I'm all right," he promptly called to his companions. "Not hurt a bit."

"Be careful, lad," warned Tearle. "Stop where you are. It is unsafe to venture out now. Wait until the brute goes to the rear again."

"We had better end the siege with a volley of rifle-balls," exclaimed Carruthers. "Things are getting too serious. Stop! no, you don't," he added, as he seized Sher Singh's arm.

The Hindoo desired to creep round to the gangway and join the lad in the hold, and it was with difficulty that Carruthers persuaded him to abandon his rash intention. It would have been simple suicide, indeed, for Old Terrible was now prancing between hatch and cabin, alternately prodding at both.

"Are any more of the animals loose down there?" asked Tearle.

"I don't think so," Maurice replied uneasily.

Without loss of time he made sure that he was right. It was a weird and uncanny place, the hold, and he felt rather nervous as he looked about in the semi-darkness. The wild beasts in the surrounding cages were uttering all sorts of blood-curdling cries, and of the bullocks, which were divided off by themselves,

some had broken loose and all were bellowing loudly. A step forward brought Maurice in contact with something soft, and a ferocious yell made him spring clear off his feet, badly frightened. Then he laughed as the little tiger-cat, still tangled in the net, rolled away from him, snarling and spitting.

"I say, lad," shouted Tearle. "I'm coming down there. I want to see if we can't block the entrance to the hold. If Old Terrible gets in again he'll play ducks and drakes with our cargo."

"That's true; he might," assented Maurice. "There are some planks here, and an empty cage we can make use of."

Having told several of the others to be ready to follow him if they should be needed, Tearle lowered himself over the opening, and dropped lightly beside the lad. Had they started the proposed task at once they would have been spared some very troublesome and exciting times, but their attention was drawn instead to the tiger cat, and by the aid of a strip of canvas they grabbed the animal at both ends and dumped it into its cage, which they strengthened by nailing a couple of strips of wood over it.

Meanwhile Old Terrible had been prowling about the fore-deck in a sullen humour, which found vent in occasional assaults on the hatch and the cabin. Presently, hearing sounds from below, he concluded to investigate, and off he trotted to the entrance of the hold. What Tearle had feared might happen was really imminent.

"Look out!" shouted Carruthers.

Knowing that his friends were in a position of deadly peril, he risked a hasty shot. He meant and hoped to kill, but the bullet merely grazed Old Terrible's

fore-shoulder, and added fuel to his wrath. The report of the rifle and the clamour of their comrades gave Tearle and the lad all too brief a warning of what was wrong, and the next instant the rhinoceros came clattering down the gangway into the hold, with murder gleaming in his eyes.

“Dodge him!” cried Maurice. “Watch sharp.”

“Here you are, quick!” Tearle yelled.

He climbed upon the empty cage—it was close by—and helped the lad to mount beside him. Almost immediately the charging brute struck the refuge with his horny snout, and the fugitives, reeling from the shock, lost no time in springing to the top of the adjoining cage, which held a very large black panther. From this vantage, the edge of the hold being fortunately within reach overhead, they managed with a little dexterity to gain the deck.

“What is the brute doing?” exclaimed Carruthers, as he descended from the cabin-roof to join his friends.

“He’ll be up to some devilry,” replied Tearle.

“Look—he’s at it now.”

A startling scene was witnessed by the row of faces that lined the hatch combing. The rhinoceros, his passion diverted to another channel by the escape of his intended victims, charged with terrific force at the cage containing the black panther. There was a thumping clatter as the big box fell from the wheeled truck, and for an instant the noise of splitting timbers and ferocious cries was deafening, a snort of triumph rising above it all.

CHAPTER XXXVI

A BATTLE ROYAL.

“THE panther is out!” yelled Tearle.
“He will be up here directly,” shouted Maurice. “Be careful.”

As the warning was uttered the magnificent black beast, delivered from the ruins of its cage, leapt from the hold and landed on deck near the gangway, just as the five sweep-men, who had profited by Old Terrible’s absence to seek better quarters, ran forward and joined their companions. There was a lively scramble for safety. Carruthers and Sher Singh had returned to the cabin roof, and they made room here for Tearle and Maurice. The sweep-men climbed hastily upon the already overcrowded hatch.

The situation had thus changed in less time than it takes to tell, and the next act of the impromptu drama was destined to be a thrilling one. The black panther, having stealthily advanced, was now squatting on deck mid-way between hatch and cabin. It was in a frightful rage, which meant something considerable for an animal of such thick, muscular dimensions. The restless tail thumped the hard boards, and the flaming malevolent eyes, turned from side to side as though searching where best to attack.

“The fun is going to begin,” said Tearle. “We are all right up here, but I don’t envy those fellows on the hatch if the beast takes a notion to leap among them.”

“Which he is pretty certain to do,” declared Carruthers.

Some of the natives were of the same mind, and

realising their peril they begged earnestly for help and for permission to use their firearms. They were caught in a trap, as it were, and none of them dared venture off the hatch in order to get to the bridge, where several of their comrades were perched in safety. Nor was the cabin roof as sound a refuge as those on the top of it could have wished.

“I value that beast more than I do the rhinoceros,” vowed Tearle, “but, upon my word, I’m afraid I shall have to shoot him. Otherwise there will be bloodshed.”

He reluctantly lifted his rifle, then lowered it slowly. The panther, apparently awed by the clamour of the natives, showed no immediate desire to attack, it crawled in a half-circle, snarling deep in its throat and glaring furtively on all sides. Without doubt it would gladly have escaped from the barge had an opportunity offered.

“It would be a pity to shoot the creature, after all the trouble we had in trapping him,” said Maurice. “Of course it will have to be done, rather than let him kill anybody. But there is a net up here. Suppose we try that first, while we have the chance.”

“Do you think we can make a successful cast?” asked Tearle, as he measured the distance with his eye.

“I believe it,” exclaimed Carruthers. “I’ll help you, Dermot.”

He stood to his feet, Tearle doing the same, and taking the net between them they hurriedly gathered the ends in their hands.

“Wait,” interposed Maurice. “I’ll throw a couple of cartridges at the brute, and that may draw him nearer.”

“Right you are,” said Tearle. “Be quick.”

But just then, before the lad could carry out his inten-

tion, a short spear was hurled from the hatch by one of the natives, whom terror had driven to this imprudent act. The weapon roughly grazed the animal's back, sped on, and whizzed over the rail into the river.

"What fool did that?" growled Carruthers.

Instantly, with a rasping scream of rage, the panther wheeled round. It crouched flat, with open jaws and lashing tail, quivering for a spring that would land it in the midst of the huddled group of natives.

"Here goes—it can't be helped," exclaimed Tearle, throwing his rifle to his shoulder.

"Stop! stop! don't fire yet," cried Maurice, as he struck the barrel up. "I'll try what I can do first, and if I fail then you can blaze away and cover my retreat."

"Sahib, be not so mad," appealed Sher Singh. "You will be slain."

"No folly of that sort now—it is too dark," commanded Tearle; and as he spoke he and Carruthers clutched at the lad.

But Maurice, eluding them both, as quickly swung over the edge of the roof and dropped. He ran boldly forward, empty-handed, uttering a shout that was probably the salvation of one or more of the Hindoos; for the panther, startled by the noise and by the daring of the intruder, hesitated in the very act of leaping upon the hatch. It faced about with a blood-curdling screech, and crawled a little nearer, as if to launch itself at the defiant, boyish figure.

Ere his rifle went to his shoulder, to be ready if needed, he made a frantic gesture of silence that was seen and understood by all. Not a man spoke; breathlessly they watched the thrilling, fascinating scene. A few seconds passed while lad and beast confronted each other, separated by less than ten feet.

Fortunately for Maurice a lantern swung close overhead, and threw a broad yellow glare of yellow light full on his face. His eyes, fixed steadily, intensely on the panther, reflected the sparkle of the flame. The savage animal remained flat on the deck, mewling like an angry cat, its limbs and tail twitching. It was manifestly ill at ease, yet it gave no sign of retreating.

Thus, for an interval that was magnified by suspense, the two held their ground, eye to eye. But what the outcome would have been, whether the panther would ultimately have slunk away or have gathered courage to attack the lad, was fated never to be known. For of a sudden—a very brief interval had elapsed since the exit of the one beast and the appearance of the other—a clattering sound which all understood was heard from the direction of the hold, where meanwhile, the rhinoceros had been tramping about restlessly in the gloom, though for some reason he had done no damage.

“Run, lad!” Tearle and Carruthers shouted together.

The panther twisting its head just then in the direction of the commotion, Maurice turned and darted back, and swung himself quickly to the cabin roof to receive the fervent congratulations of his friends.

“Don’t try that again,” cried Tearle. “It’s too risky. I was ready with the rifle, but it is doubtful if I could have saved you.”

“Better kill the brute, and have done with it,” urged Carruthers.

Tearle made no reply, and at that instant Old Terrible swung round the hold and came snorting and pounding on the scene, ready for any diversion

that offered, and particularly keen to try conclusions with the crouching black creature that was watching him with eyes of fire.

“There is going to be a fight,” exclaimed Maurice.

“And one worth seeing,” vowed Tearle.

The battle opened without the slightest delay, and the spectators clinging to the hatch, forgetful of their exposed position, looked on as raptly as did those on the cabin roof. The rhinoceros grunted viciously and charged, and was not a little surprised when he struck only the rail of the barge; for the panther, with a rasping screech, had sprung timely to one side.

In quick succession the larger animal made three more charges, all equally futile, until its rage waxed to boiling point. The panther, just as angry and as hot for the fray, had no intention of yielding. In cunning and agility it was at least a match for its foe. Round and round it crept, dodging rush after rush, and at last it found the opportunity it sought. The black form flashed through the air, and landed on Old Terrible’s hind-quarters, its sharp claws and teeth drawing blood from the leathery hide.

The big quadruped plunged and pranced, snorting with wrath and pain, and finally succeeding in dislodging its assailant, who slipped to the deck and rolled out of reach. The panther was uninjured, still undaunted, and for several minutes the drawn game continued—the one charging and the other as persistently evading. The men watched eagerly and silently indifferent to all but the excitement of the combat. ~

The end was near at hand, however. Old Terrible by a shrewder and fleetier rush than usual, drove his foe against the wall of the cabin, and the panther, thus cornered, narrowly escaped impalement by leaping

upon the head and shoulders of the rhinoceros. There was a moment of frightful squealing and grunting and struggling, while drops of blood trickled down on the planks; and then, by a vigorous, tossing effort, Old Terrible freed himself of his burden. The panther struck the deck with a thump, rolled over twice, and pitched head first into the opening that led to the store-room. A couple of wailing cries were followed by silence. Either the creature had been hurt by falling to the bottom of the ladder, or it had no inclination to renew the fight.

"That was the finest thing I've ever seen," declared Tearle.

"It was magnificent," said Maurice. "They're a plucky pair."

"But we are no better off than we were before," growled Carruthers. "I don't know what's going to become of us."

Old Terrible stared about him with blinking eyes, evidently puzzled by the unexpected disappearance of his enemy, until it seemed to dawn upon him that he was the victor. Anxious for another conquest, and realizing that his human foes were not to be got at, he shook his clumsy body, spattering the deck with blood, and moved deliberately towards the entrance of the hold.

"That will never do," cried Carruthers. "He means to smash the cages."

"I believe it," exclaimed Tearle. "I'll have to shoot the rascal—for sure this time."

But again, as a daring thought occurred to him, Maurice swiftly interfered to prevent the deed and the consequent monetary loss.

"Don't fire," he begged. "Perhaps I can save the

rhinoceros for you, and end the siege as well. There is shallow water all around us, you know. You needn't be afraid—I'll show you."

Before any one could check him he had lowered himself from the roof to the deck. He tore loose the cabin door, which was hanging by one hinge to the shattered frame, and placed it over the ladder way leading to the store-room, thus securely imprisoning the panther below. Then, heedless of the entreaties of his companions that he should return, he darted after the rhinoceros, who had nearly reached the entrance to the hold.

He stopped within a dozen feet, shouted loudly, and waved his hands. Old Terrible wheeled about, and changing his mind at the sight of the daring lad, he charged him with an angry snort. Maurice turned and sped to the end of the fore-deck, where he paused within a foot of the rail to confront his prisoner, who was lunging straight forward.

Simultaneous cries of horror rose from the spectators on hatch and cabin, and with good reason. But Maurice had his wits about him and had never been more cool and collected than now. He had taken a lesson from the recent fight, and knew just what he was doing. He waited and watched alertly, and when the rhinoceros was but five feet distant from him he jumped nimbly to one side.

The ruse was a splendid success. Old Terrible could more easily have taken wings and flown than checked his headlong, impetuous rush at such short range. With a dismal snort he smashed into the rail, swept it away as if it had been pasteboard, and went plunging down to the muddy waters of the Bramahputra. The splash that followed fairly shook the barge.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

ON BROAD WATERS.

HURRA! there you are," cried Maurice, with pardonable pride. "I thought I could do it."

His friends dropped off the cabin roof to the deck, enthusiastic and delighted, and the Hindoos swarmed noisily to the spot from hatch and bridge.

"Yes, you have ended the siege," declared Tearle, when he had spoken his gratitude in no mild terms.

"And jolly near put an end to yourself," said Carruthers. "It was a most perilous thing to attempt."

"I wasn't a bit afraid," replied Maurice. "I remembered how the panther dodged. And now for the rhinoceros. We don't want to lose him."

"By no means," assented Tearle. "You have at least saved the brute's life, and if we capture him again, Hamrach and Company shall reward you as you deserve."

All crowded to the rail and looked over. By the dim light they could see Old Terrible swimming slowly and clumsily towards the shore. He was grunting and splashing, and appeared to be in no wise injured by his fall. At a distance of some fifteen feet from the bow of the barge he struck shallow water and began to wade, his huge body emerging higher and higher from the surface.

"If we are quick we shall get him," cried Tearle, "Launch the two boats. Lively, men; there is no time to waste."

The boats were hastily lowered, and a crew of six

dropped into each. Tearle and Carruthers were in charge of one, and Maurice and Sher Singh of the other. Both parties had plenty of ropes, and lanterns were taken as well. By Tearle's orders the two boats were soon pulled into position on opposite sides of the sluggishly-moving rhinoceros, and so near to him that in a short time he was securely and doubly lassoed. The cold bath had tamed his spirit, and he submitted to recapture with sullen indifference.

Three natives from each craft now sprang out into the shallow water, and while they kept the ropes drawn taut the boats were rowed back to the barge. The entrance to the hold fortunately faced towards the shore, and the gangway—which was long and heavy—was hauled across the deck and let down to the river. Several of the sweep-men walked out upon it until it dipped deep enough to touch bottom. Meanwhile, as Carruthers was supervising this work, Tearle and Maurice speedily repaired the big brute's cage and wheeled it into the required position.

The next step proved less difficult than was anticipated. The six natives in the river, aided by others in the boats, headed Old Terrible around and urged him foot by foot to the barge, when he was guided into the gangway and thence to the deck. A few minutes later he was safe behind the bars of his cage, and munching grass as calmly as if nothing had happened.

“Well done, that,” exclaimed Tearle, in a tone of great relief. “The worst is over. And now for the black panther.”

He directed irons to be heated and the empty cage to be made ready, as the animal's former quarters were too badly smashed for use. The necessary pre-

parations having been completed, the door was removed from the opening to the store-room, and the panther was seen crouching at the foot of the ladder. It was immediately noosed by Sher Singh, and a dozen arms hauled it to the deck, where a stout net was thrown over it. Hot irons were not required, the panther being too nearly suffocated by the rope to make much of a struggle as it was dragged into its cage.

No one feeling disposed to go back to bed, the task of putting the barge into ship-shape condition again was proceeded with at once. The mangled body of the tiger-cat was thrown overboard, and a squad of natives fell to and scrubbed the deck. Maurice and Sher Singh repaired the broken railing and the gate leading to the hold, while Tearle and Carruthers tinkered at the shattered cabin until it showed little trace of Old Terrible's forcible entry.

Dawn broke shortly after the weary men ceased work to prepare breakfast. Not a sail was in sight up or down stream, however, and Tearle, losing his temper at the prospect of further delay, made use of language that was anything but complimentary to Antonio Silva and Gunga Ra.

"There's no telling how long we may be stuck here," he declared angrily. "Several days, perhaps. We can't get off without assistance, that's certain."

The outlook was indeed a gloomy one, but, in spite of Tearle's prophecy, an unexpected stroke of luck turned vexation to rejoicing. The muddy waters of the Brahmaputra assumed a deeper yellow tinge, and it was seen that the current was flowing more swiftly. Owing to the sudden swelling of the tributary mountain streams—a common occurrence at this season of the year—the river was on the rise,

"It couldn't have happened at a better time," exclaimed Carruthers. "We shall soon be free."

"Don't be too sure of it," replied Tearle. "The flood may not rise high enough to lift us clear."

"The Sahibs need not worry," confidently declared Sher Singh. "I know the signs. This is only the beginning."

It was even so. The Hindoo's words came true. Higher and higher crept the saffron waters, and their increase could be plainly noted on the sides of the barge and along the jungle-clad shore—the shore that had swallowed Antonia Silva and Gunga Ra from righteous vengeance. An hour after daylight, the big vessel began to creak and quiver, to groan with distress, and five minutes later it slid off the bottom with a crunching noise and drifted rapidly down stream.

Amid the glad confusion and cheering, Tearle's voice rang distinctly as he shouted words of command. The sweep-men ran to the oar-blades and worked with a will, swinging the "Star of Assam" around, and driving it south by west, until it was well out on the broad bosom of the Brahmaputra. Then an interval for breakfast, and when the hungry men were fed the beasts and bullocks had to be cared for.

"I don't suppose we can pick up a pilot anywhere," said Tearle.

"I will serve if the Sahib wishes," volunteered Sher Singh, to the surprise of his companions.

"You?" cried Maurice.

"I am not a pilot," the shikaree answered modestly, "but I know something of these waters, and I will do my best. I have frequently travelled up and down with English sportsmen, by whom I was hired,"

“Well, that’s a sort of a qualification,” said Tearle. “I think you’ll do. Go ahead.”

So Sher Singh proudly assumed his new duties, and mounted the bridge where Gunga Ra had planned his diabolical treachery. There was little occasion for a pilot just now, however, for the river was broad and deep, and passing vessels were few and far between.

Towards noon the little settlement of Kymansing hove in sight, and the barge was run in and moored off a rickety wharf. Tearle and Carruthers went ashore to purchase some supplies, and also to pay a visit to the local authorities, whom they warned to be on the look out for Silva and his confederate. The English inspector promised to do all in his power, but he was of the opinion—which his visitors shared—that the fugitives would make their way to Rangamati and attempt to get down country by rail.

By two o’clock in the afternoon the “Star of Assam” was again adrift, and before evening it had passed the right angular bend of the Brahmaputra, and was holding a southern course on the turbid yellow flood. For nearly a week—the interval may be dismissed with brief mention—there was little to break the monotony of the journey, save the tie-ups at night along shore and a glimpse of what craft were abroad. Sher Singh performed his duties well and cleverly, and was at times relieved by Maurice and Carruthers, who were quick to “learn the ropes.” The wild beasts gave no trouble, and Old Terrible and the panther were none the worse for their slight injuries.

This portion of the Brahmaputra was wild and lonely, and flowed through dense jungle that stretched as far as the eye could reach. In a space of a hundred miles there were only one or two squalid settlements

inhabited by half savage peoples. Meanwhile the channel had been growing wider and wider, and on the sixth day the barge entered that lower part of the mighty river which here assumes a different name and is called the Megua. Now, the current being stronger, much better speed was made. Instead of tying up at night the "Star of Assam" boldly pursued her course, displaying warning lights fore and aft.

On the ninth day out from Goalpara the barge was drifting down midstream. The Megua was fully twenty miles broad, and the shores to right and left, each ten miles away, were but dimly visible. Here and there on the waste of waters was the white sail of a budgerow, or the smoking funnel of a steamer.

The hour was two o'clock of the afternoon, and on the fore-deck sat Maurice and his three friends. For the time being there was no pilot on the bridge. A well thumbed chart was spread on Tearle's knees, and it was evident that a consultation of a serious nature had been taking place. A greater or less degree of perplexity was stamped on every countenance.

"As I understand it, then," said Carruthers, "we are within forty miles of the Bay of Bengal, and that forty-mile stretch is attended with a certain amount of danger."

"Dangerous unless we are taken in tow by a steamer," suggested Maurice.

"Exactly," replied Tearle. "We should require the services of a steamer anyway, since there is a sea voyage before us of nearly two hundred miles, from the mouth of the Megua to Calcutta. But I did not think we should need it so soon, I admit."

"You will, Sahibs," declared Sher Singh. "I do not warn you idly. The river is far more perilous

below than above. Frightful storms are common, and a very bad one might wreck the barge upon the shore or against a shoal, or drive it far out into the Bay, where the tremendous seas would make an end of it."

"It is difficult to believe in sudden tempests under such a sky," said Maurice.

"True ; and yet one is coming," replied the Hindoo. "I can feel it, even as I was able to foretell Gunga Ra's treachery, though you would not listen. The air tells of it—this strange, breathless calm. And look, Sahibs, not a vessel is in sight. The native pilots are wise, and read the signs."

"Then we will push for the left shore at once," answered Tearle, decidedly, "and find a safe harbour where we can lie in wait for one of the tug steamers that come up from the bay."

"Yes, we had better," assented Carruthers. "But it will be a labour of hours to swing across ten miles of current. Shall we be able to beat the storm ?"

"Who knows, Sahib ?" replied Sher Singh, as he strode to the rear-deck to issue instructions to the sweep-men.

A minute later he was perched aloft on the bridge.

CHAPTER XXXVI..

FURIES SET LOOSE.

IT was indeed, as Carruthers had said, a most laborious task to propel such an unwieldy craft as the "Star of Assam" diagonally across ten miles of rapidly flowing water—for the current of the Megua had greatly increased in strength and speed during the last few days. For every half-mile that was gained in the direction of the shore, the barge slipped a couple of miles downstream. Moreover the river was constantly widening its channel as it drew nearer to the Bay of Bengal.

Three o'clock found the vast expanse of water still deserted. There was still the shuddering calm in the air, and the sun was terribly oppressive—even under the awnings. An hour later, the distant, low-lying land was enveloped in a murky, pearl-coloured haze, and the sky had a strange, weird look, a leaden hue, that was reflected on the tide. That these signs meant something ominous could not be doubted. Down in the hold the cattle were bawling hoarsely and kicking, and the wild animals were uttering restless cries. The sweep-men jabbered uncouthly among themselves as they shuffled to and fro at the oars. Sher Singh, squatted on the bridge like a splendid piece of bronze statuary, rarely moved except to glance up at the sky.

Tearle and his companions anxiously paced the deck, from bow to stern. There was nothing that they could do but to watch and wait. They realized

the peril and helplessness of the situation, and were more troubled than they cared to admit.

“Do you think we shall reach the shore in time?” asked Maurice.

“It is doubtful,” Tearle replied. “We may, if the weather holds as it is long enough. If not, then be ready for the worst.”

“After all we have gone through, and wriggled out of by the skin of our teeth,” Carruthers said bitterly, “it would be hard luck if we foundered out here on this big, smooth mill-pond.”

Another hour passed serenely, giving rise to hopes that were vain; for just at sunset the great change came—so swiftly and so violently as to strike terror to every heart. A purplish-black darkness blotted out the shores and the sky, and strode rapidly over the water like a pall. The gloom of midnight wrapped the barge, and the very lanterns seemed to shed a bluish glare. These conditions prevailed for less than a minute, and next fell a rattling shower of rain, mingled with flashes of forked lightnings.

“The wind, Sahibs—it is coming,” Sher Singh shouted from the bridge. “Prepare for it.”

So Tearle collected all hands, except the men at the sweeps, and led them down into the hold, where they hastily lifted the cages off the trucks, and did what was possible to secure their stability. Returning to the deck, they fastened all the hatch covers and stretched oil-skins and canvas over the entrance to the hold.

“Where are we now?” exclaimed Tearle, as he peered into the darkness.

“Half a dozen miles from shore, at the least,” declared Carruthers. “It’s no use hoping to reach land. We must trust to—”

The finish of his sentence was drowned in an awful roar, and as quickly the hurricane—for such it was—struck the barge. At the first blast all who were on the fore-deck threw themselves flat, else they would have been blown away. Sher Singh, who had lingered too long above, leapt from his perch to the hatches just as the ruins of the bridge fell clattering about his ears. He gained the deck, and crawled over to Tearle and his companions.

“Stick tight, Sahibs,” he shouted. “This is a fearful storm, and it may last for many hours. One of the sweep-men has been blown overboard. I saw him go by that flash of lightning.”

The news was received with less horror than it would have been under other circumstances. The barge was pitching and reeling dizzily, and monstrous waves were slapping its stout sides. It was a sickening thing to lie there on the exposed deck, not daring to move, and listen to the creaking, whistling fury of the destructive gale. Rip! rip! away went the awnings, whirled aloft like so many huge, flapping birds. Crash! jingle! one by one the lanterns were hurled into the river or smashed to fragments against hatch and rail. Not a light was left burning. In the purple gloom the outlines of the vessel could be faintly perceived.

The rain still poured, and the lightning flashed an accompaniment to the shrieking of the hurricane. There was suddenly a terrific thud and bang, and the cabin, rent to fragments, vanished from the deck, carrying a section of the rail with it. The native cook had foolishly taken refuge within, and his pale, agonized face was visible for a second in a flash of lightning, before he disappeared for ever.

Tearle uttered a loud cry, and warned his companions not to stir. His voice was scarcely heard, for the roar of the tempest was blended with a terribly shrill noise from the poor beasts confined in the hold.

“This surely can’t last long,” shouted Carruthers.

“It may continue until the morning,” Sher Singh shouted in reply, “though such violent storms often pass in an hour. But the worst peril is yet to come, and we must be prepared for it. The river will be lashed into mighty waves. They will rise higher and higher, and possibly they will sweep over the barge.”

“That’s a pleasant prospect,” cried Tearle. “There are life-preservers in the store-room—I don’t know why I stowed them down there. We ought to have them, by all means.”

He started to crawl forward, but Maurice, who was nearest the opening, bade him remain where he was.

“I will fetch them,” he shouted.

With considerable difficulty the plucky lad wriggled to the ladder, and the moment he was below deck and out of the gale, the feeling of relief was like a tonic. He easily found the life-preservers, and having girded one about himself he carried three successive loads to the top of the ladder and tossed them to his companions, then returned to his place beside Sher Singh.

For a few minutes the hurricane perceptibly increased in violence, blowing the two boats away, but finally it seemed to abate a little. Tearle crept about the barge, along both decks, and distributed a number of life-preservers to the scattered crew.

“It looks as if the worst might be really over,” he told his companions when he came back. “We have lost two men, and the cook. Both sweeps are gone so we can’t do any more steering.”

“That don’t make much difference,” said Carruthers. “We may be glad that we are out towards mid-channel, for if we struck bottom we should soon go to pieces. The main thing now is to weather the waves.”

“I hope we can,” replied Tearle; he still had to shout to be heard. “I don’t want to lose this convoy of animals, let alone our lives. But the “Star of Assam” is a staunch craft. I believe we shall pull through.”

“The waves will grow larger, Sahibs,” declared Sher Singh, who was evidently far from confident.

For a time, however, the Hindoo’s prophecy came to naught. During the next hour the force of the wind slightly abated, while the surging waters at least did not wax more violent. They were bad enough as it was, the barge plunging and dipping in every direction. Tearle and his companions presently made their way to the hold, and clinging there upright they could see at each flash of lightning the dusky figures of the crew in similiar attitudes along the hatch combing.

Once a piercing whistle and a puffing noise were heard close by, telling that some large vessel was in the vicinity. Nothing could be seen of it through the inky darkness, no lights were shown, and several minutes of harrowing suspense were endured. All listened anxiously, expecting a deadly collision, and at Tearle’s suggestion they shouted half a dozen times. But the crash did not come, and after a while the whistle sounded again at a distance.

“She has gone by!” exclaimed Maurice.

“Yes, fortunately,” replied Carruthers. “I wish it had been possible for her to have taken us in tow.”

“We can do without any help,” Tearle said cheerfully.

The chances now looked brighter, it is true, but the lull proved to be deceptive, and to be the forerunner of the perils that Sher Singh had predicted. The tempest suddenly burst afresh, and cyclonic winds shrieked on all sides, spinning the barge about in half-circles. The billows mounted higher, and their white crests broke over the vessel in swirling cascades and pools of foam. Then furious torrents of rain crashed down, and forked lightning blazed incessantly across the black heavens.

Nor had the storm yet reached its limit of power, for each ravenous wave was larger and stronger than the last. Piccemeal, with sharp, crackling noises, the rails were demolished. Water rolled over the deck, gurgled and poured below, and the wretched men, clinging fast to hold and hatches, were waist-deep half the time, at the mercy of showers of spray that slapped their faces with stinging force.

“We can’t stand much more of this,” Maurice cried hoarsely.

“Are you weary, Sahib?” Sher Singh’s voice spoke at his ear; and the exhausted lad felt a strong arm encircle him.

Of a sudden the fore-end of the barge leapt high in air, and at the same instant a grinding, splashing sound rose from the stern, accompanied by frightful cries.

“Look! look!” yelled Carruthers, as a vivid purple flash lighted the scene. “A great wave has swept over the rear-deck and washed some of the poor fellows away.”

“Heaven help us!” shouted Tearle. “It will be our turn next!”

He was right. A moment later the position of the barge was reversed, the bow settling deep in the trough of the river, and before it could rise again a veritable mountain of water was seen rolling towards it.

“Here it comes!” Carruthers warned shrilly. “Hold tight for your lives.”

Fearing lest he and Maurice should be torn away, the devoted Sher Singh, who had one arm about the lad’s waist, tried to get a safer grip with the other.

It was a fatal attempt. The monstrous wave surged clear across the deck, and when its fury was spent Tearle and Carruthers found themselves alone. A cry of despair rose to their ears from out in the darkness and the storm.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

SHOT AND FLAME.

IN that awful moment when the mountain of water swept the barge, Maurice and Sher Singh tightened their grip of each other, and were thus torn loose together and washed off the deck. The receding wave carried them far, far out, and then, with a roaring in their ears, they seemed to be going deep down to the bottom of the river, from which neither expected to come up alive. But they had merely been submerged by a second wave following the first, and when that had spent its fury they found themselves on the surface of the storm-lashed river, breathless, chilled with cold, and half-suffocated.

“Don’t hang on to me so hard,” gasped Maurice. “I can swim.”

“Only so we are not separated, Sahib,” replied the Hindoo, as he shifted his hold to the lad’s arm. “Look ! look !” he shouted.

As he spoke, by a flash of lightning that rent the heavens, the bulky mass of the barge was seen at a distance of several hundred feet. As quickly the black, impenetrable darkness settled again on the water.

“Tearle and Carruthers are still there,” exclaimed Maurice. “I saw them clinging to the hold. But they can do nothing for us.”

“Truly nothing,” assented Sher Singh. “If we are to live, Sahib, it must be by our own efforts.”

But for the life-preservers that encircled them the

two luckless castaways must have succumbed at once, and for some minutes, indeed, they waged a desperate and unequal fight with the angry waves. Though they shouted occasionally, when they could spare breath, their voices were weak in comparison with the howling of the tempest; they doubted if they had made themselves heard, for no response was audible from their friends on the barge.

Meanwhile, still held together by the Hindoo's grip, they were spun round and round like chips, now tossed high up on the crest of the billows, now sucked down into the hollow of a watery trough. They were soon bruised from head to foot, but after the first chill they felt the cold less, for the heavy showers were turning the water warm.

"Have courage, Sahib," Sher Singh said presently. "The worst is over."

There was reason to believe that he was right. The shriek of the hurricane had become a mournful wail. Gradually the fury of the waves abated, though the difference was scarcely perceptible, and then a thick choppy rain fell with stinging force.

"It can't matter much whether the storm increases or passes off," Maurice said despondently. "We are out near mid-channel, miles from land, and sooner or later we must be drowned. I am completely knocked up already. There is a feeling of numbness creeping over me."

"Struggle against it, Sahib," urged the Hindoo. "Trust to me, and I will save you. I will keep tight hold of you, and support your head, and thus we shall float until morning, when surely there will be vessels in sight—perhaps the 'Star of Assam.'"

"Till the morning," Maurice faintly murmured.

“ Ah, that is—hours—off yet. It is no use—no use—”

He paused drowsily, with a groan, and closing his eyes he swayed limply on the Hindoo's breast. Sher Singh threw an arm about him, and thus they drifted on and on in the darkness, at the sport of the rolling waves that still pitched them at will and lashed them savagely. The lightning played at intervals over the river, but the barge could no longer be seen ; either it had foundered and taken all hands to the bottom or the gale had blown it widely apart from the castaways.

The minutes wore on, fraught with weariness and suspense to the devoted Hindoo, and he had lost all account of time, and was himself beginning to suffer from exhaustion, when a purple bolt of lightning revealed close by an object that was scarcely less welcome to him than a glimpse of the barge would have been—a small boat tossing bottom up among the waves. He waited eagerly for the next flash, which, as it came, showed him the craft within a dozen feet.

Sher Singh plunged forward, hauling his burden along while he swam with one hand, and more by chance than skill he succeeded in clutching the bow of the boat, where by good fortune he found a ring that gave him a splendid purchase for his fingers. In this position he remained for a few moments, recruiting his flagging strength, and from time to time calling vainly upon Maurice to speak to him.

The boat plainly did not belong to the “ Star of Assam,” but had been lost from some other vessel, most probably the steamer that had threatened to collide with the barge. It was a long craft, and fairly wide, with a flat bottom that offered a place of better security

for Maurice, whose unconscious body Sher Singh managed to hoist upon it, with the assistance of a wave that flung both upward.

There was room for the Hindoo as well, but the heroic fellow did not avail himself of it. He remained in the water, so that he might more easily steer the boat through the turbulent billows; and during the perilous ride that followed, for the space of at least two hours, he held the lad fast with one hand and gripped the iron ring with the other. Meanwhile the rain had ceased and the wind had dropped to a sighing breeze, though the night was still black and the river still rolling high.

But in spite of these altered conditions the situation was little less critical, for Sher Singh, who was by no means made of steel, was very near the end of his endurance. He forgot his distress, however—and a ghastly fear that had begun to haunt him—when Maurice suddenly sighed, stirred, and raised himself on one elbow.

“Where am I?” the lad muttered. “What has happened? Are you there, Sher Singh?”

“Yes, Sahib, I am here,” the Hindoo joyfully assured him. “Have no fear. We are safe, and the storm has passed away.”

“And what is this that I am on?”

“A boat, Sahib. Be careful, lest you slip off. Do not try to move.”

In a few words Sher Singh described the finding of the craft, and his subsequent proceedings, though he modestly concealed how much the lad owed to him, and hid as well the exhaustion to which he knew he must soon yield.

“It was a streak of luck, your falling in with such

a refuge," said Maurice, whose senses were fast reviving. "The last thing I remember is a sharp pain in my forehead while you were supporting me among the waves, and then everything seemed to whirl round. No wonder my head ached," he added, putting his hand to it. "There is a big, swollen bruise over my left eye."

"You must have struck the rail when we were washed off the deck," suggested the Hindoo.

"That's about it. I didn't feel the blow until afterwards, when it made me weak all of a sudden. But where do you suppose we are? Near the shore?"

"We can see nothing for the darkness," Sher Singh answered. "We may be close to land, or the storm may have blown us out to mid-channel. When the dawn breaks—"

"Hello! what's that?" Maurice interrupted.

As he spoke the boat lurched forward on the crest of a great wave, and the next instant it struck with a grinding, jarring crash, throwing the lad over the Hindoo's head. Both were submerged, and as quickly they felt hard bottom underfoot. Rising with difficulty, one clinging to the other, they saw a dark blot within a few yards of them.

"An island!" cried Maurice.

"An island!" echoed Sher Singh. "Sahib, we are saved!"

Hope infused strength into his feeble limbs. He hastily dragged the lad ashore and dropped him there, then sprang back into the shallow water for the boat, which he hauled far out of the reach of the waves.

"We shall need it again," he said.

The two were numbed and exhausted, and for a time, with thankful hearts, they lay stretched side by side

on the wet sands, heedless of the surf that was breaking angrily at their feet. Their lassitude presently passed off, and when they had gone forward, and had examined their surroundings as well as the gloom would permit, they discovered that the spot on which they had providentially run aground was indeed, as they had surmised, an island lying somewhere out on the channel of the Megua.

“I knew it couldn’t be the mainland,” said Maurice. “I took it for a mere sand-bar, but it is better than that.”

“At least the river cannot sweep over it, Sahib,” replied Sher Singh.

At the normal state of the tide the island was clearly of considerable extent, for as far as they could see to right and left were partly submerged trees and bushes, the tops of which swayed and bent to the wash of the current. A ridge of some steepness—the crest of the island—rose well above the surrounding flood, comprising an oblong space of about a thousand square yards. It was mostly covered with tangled undergrowth and loose stones, sprinkled with a few trees, and in the middle of it towered a mass of boulders and stunted timber. Here, in between the nest of rocks, the castaways found to their satisfaction a triangular crevice, a sort of cavern, that was large enough to give roomy shelter to both.

“This will protect us if the storm breaks again,” said Sher Singh. “We shall be dry and warm until morning.”

“I don’t see how you figure that out,” replied Maurice, “when we are both drenched to the skin. The place is all right, but it would be a jolly sight more comfortable with a roaring fire. In India one bakes

by day and freezes by night. Even if our clothes were dry we should suffer from the cold."

"But a fire is impossible, Sahib."

"I hope not. I have some matches, though the water may have spoilt them."

Maurice took from his pocket a little metal box, containing a number of wax vestas. He anxiously scraped one on the lid, and at once it burst into flame, lighting the cavern from floor to roof, and revealing against the farther wall a heap of drift wood that had lodged there in time of former and more severe floods.

"Hurra! fuel in plenty," cried the lad. "Dry as tinder, too. Get a lot of it, Sher Singh, before the match burns out. And give me some of the smaller twigs to start the fire with."

The Hindoo hastened to obey, and thereby narrowly escaped a horrible death; for a spotted snake of a poisonous variety, uncoiling itself from a cranny of the rocks, hissed vengefully in his face. He sprang back, simultaneously with the lad's shout of alarm, and, picking up a heavy stone, he crushed the reptile before it could leap forward to strike.

"There may be others about," cried Maurice, as he lighted a second match.

"We will look, Sahib," Sher Singh calmly replied.

A thorough search was made, but it failed to disclose any more serpents. Satisfied that none were in the immediate vicinity, the castaways resumed their preparations to spend a comfortable night. A spot at one side, which possessed the advantages of a natural chimney, was chosen for the fire-place. Sher Singh gathered an armful of wood and piled it here, and Maurice, having stuffed a bunch of twigs underneath, was about to ignite them when three sharp reports

were heard in rapid succession. They came apparently from up the river, and died away in dull, lingering echoes.

Maurice was so startled that he let the match fall, and the two were plunged in darkness.

“What was that?” he asked hoarsely.

“Gun-shots, Sahib,” declared the Hindoo. “One two, three—they went off quickly.”

“And not far above the island.”

“Farther than you would think, Sahib. What wind there is now blows down-stream, and sound travels loudly over the water.”

“Who can be shooting?—there is something wrong,” muttered the lad, as he groped with his companion to the mouth of the cavern; and he had no more than spoken when a jet of lurid red flame shone suddenly out of the blackness of the night,

CHAPTER XL.

BIRDS OF PREY.

FOR a moment, too startled for words, the castaways gazed from their refuge at the flaring pillar of fire, which grew rapidly before their eyes. Sher Singh's usual stolidity vanished at the sight, and he clutched the lad's arm with convulsive grip.

"A ship on fire, Sahib," he cried. "It is three or four miles up the river, and lies over towards the left shore."

"I hope it is not the 'Star of Assam,'" Maurice exclaimed anxiously.

"No, Sahib, that cannot well be. The barge should be somewhere down yonder, below the island, and no doubt our friends are safe."

"You are right about that," assented Maurice. "The storm would have blown the barge along faster than it did us. But what puzzles me is the shooting. That's the queer part of it—the fire is more easily accounted for."

"Strange and terrible deeds are sometimes done on the lower reaches of this river," the Hindoo replied gloomily. "More than one vessel has been captured and sunk by piratical natives, who hide in the jungle creeks."

"And do you believe that is what is going on now?"

"Who knows, Sahib? It is possible. But see, the flames are sinking down."

"They are and rapidly at that." Fainter and fainter dwindled the ruddy, wavering glow in spite of the

tongues of fire that occasionally shot up as though loth to abandon their prey. At last the glare died away to a tiny red dot, and then was snuffed out altogether, leaving not a trace on the dark curtain of the night.

“That is the end,” said Sher Singh. “The vessel must have foundered quickly and gone to the bottom.”

“Or else they were able to extinguish the fire with the pumps,” Maurice suggested.

“I fear not, Sahib.”

“Well, if your view of the matter is the right one, some of the crew have probably escaped in boats. If we build a rousing fire it will guide them here.”

“They will find the mainland much nearer, from the position in which the ship lay,” replied Sher Singh. “As for the fire, we have need of that ourselves. And it will shine both up and down the river.”

“That’s true,” exclaimed Maurice. “Our friends will be certain to see it, and in the morning we will take the boat and paddle after them.”

Several minutes later the fire had been lighted, and was roaring and crackling merrily at the mouth of the cavern, from which it shone forth to stream redly across the swift waters. For fear of a further rise of the tide Sher Singh drew the boat to a higher position among the bushes, while Maurice gathered a lot of the driftwood and piled it within reach. Then they stretched themselves comfortably on the earthen floor, with their shoulders against the rocky wall, listening to the splash of the waves on the shore of the island, and to the moaning and whistling of the breeze. The hurricane had wreaked its fury and departed, and here and there the stars were breaking through the clouds.

"We ought to be thankful for such snug quarters," said Maurice. "I would feel better if I had something to eat, but there's no use wishing for that. We shall have a good breakfast—if the 'Star of Assam' is still afloat."

"Be sure that she is, Sahib," declared the Hindoo. "You need have no fear for your friends."

"I'm not worrying much about them," Maurice replied. "The last glimpse we had of the barge she was all right, and I saw Tearle and Carruthers plainly. The worst of the storm was then over—it was at no time afterwards so bad as when that great wave swept us off the deck."

For a half-hour they talked of the events of the night, and gradually, as the warmth of the fire dried their clothing, a feeling of drowsiness stole upon both. They fought against it in vain, and Maurice was the first to succumb. His eyes closed, and his head dropped to one side; he was sound asleep. Sher Singh roused himself to heap wood on the sinking fire, then crouched beside the lad. A moment later he, too, was wrapped in slumber.

No premonition of danger disturbed the castaways as they slept on peacefully; little did they dream to what ill-omened voyagers their blazing fire was proving a beacon of refuge and an incentive to bloody deeds. From a point a mile or two up the river a boat was moving steadily towards the ruddy speck of light—a small, graceful craft painted white, and bearing in blue letters the name "Mogul Emperor." Squatted in the bow, with eyes fixed ahead, was the lean, ill-clad figure of Gunga Ra. And the yellow-faced, unshaven man who sat in the stern, paddling alternately from right to left with a single oar, was none other than Antonio Silva.

The Portuguese was ragged and half-naked. A steel bracelet was locked to each wrist, and from each bracelet dangled several inches of chain. His left eye was swollen, nearly shut, and down his right cheek was a raw, bleeding wound which looked as if it had recently been ploughed by a rifle-ball. He shivered in his drenched, blood-stained garments—a shiver that may have meant cold or fear. Probably both, for often he glanced over his shoulder into the impenetrable darkness behind him.

“I am nervous, and yet there is nothing to fear,” he muttered aloud, heedless of his companion. “A couple of miles of water between us. There is no danger of pursuit now. I gave them the slip neatly—the fire drew their attention and kept them busy. But, how did they manage to put it out so easily? The water must have reached the engines, for they dropped anchor before I was beyond ear-shot. I have well-earned my freedom, and I had better make the most of this last chance, for if I am caught again it means—”

He ended with an oath, and turned for another look behind him.

“Murder!” he continued in a lower tone, shuddering. “And an ugly one at that. But there was no help for it. The fool refused to submit. Bah! what are fifty lives to mine?” He paddled on for a few minutes keeping in line with the distant goal. “Wake up—speak—do something, you silent dog,” he cried harshly to his companion. “Don’t crouch there like a mummy. Has the bleeding stopped?”

“Very nearly, Sahib,” replied Gunga Ra, who had a bullet in the fleshy part of his thigh. “I have plugged the wound with linen, but it causes me great pain;” and he poured out a string of imprecations,

in heathenish language, on those who had thus injured him.

“Pain?” laughed Silva. “You’ll have to get used to it, my friend, if you want to escape the gallows. Will that be the shore yonder?—the mainland?”

“I think so, Sahib,” was the sullen reply.

“And the light—”

“It comes from a fire. A native hut on the bank, perhaps.”

“Why not a party of English hunters? Or men escaped from some craft that perished in the storm?”

“True, Sahib. Why not?”

“You take it coolly.”

“If there is danger, let us avoid the spot.”

“Yes, we can run in below,” assented Silva; and he fell to paddling with quicker strokes. “Once ashore,” he said to himself, “once safe in the jungle and I’ll defy them to capture me, though I’ve no food or firearms, no drink or tobacco. Ay, and I’ll have my revenge yet, come what may, and earn the money that was bargained for. Then to slip way from this accursed land. But I’ll take good care not to lose sight of my rich benefactor. He shall be my banker, and a generous one.”

For a quarter of an hour neither of the two spoke, and by then, the voyagers having approached to within a hundred yards of the yellow glare, the Portuguese could perceive the dark outlines of the half-immersed trees and bushes, and the flood that stretched far to the right and left of them.

“An island!” he muttered with an oath, disappointed by the discovery. “My cursed luck! And who can be there? Shall I stop or go on?”

“Will the Sahib land?” whispered Gunga Ra.

“Wait ; and be quiet.”

A moment of hesitation, and Silva slightly altered the boat's course, dipping the oar with noiseless strokes. Making a prudent detour, he paddled slowly past and beyond the firelight, and swung in at the lower end of the island.

“Don't stir from here,” he said, as he grounded the craft between two stones and stepped ashore.

“Be careful, Sahib,” urged Gunga Ra.

“Fool ! I know what I'm doing,” whispered Silva and with that he crept off in the direction of the clump of rocks.

CHAPTER XLI.

VILLAINY TRIUMPHANT.

SHER SINGH, worn out by his heroic struggle with the storm and the waves, slept the deep dreamless slumber of utter exhaustion. It was otherwise with Maurice. He was feverish and fidgety, and the bruise on his forehead throbbed with pain. One after another ghastly visions disturbed his rest, until, damp with perspiration, and with a fast-beating heart, he suddenly opened his eyes and sat up.

He glanced from the sleeping Hindoo to the fire, and was about to throw some fresh wood on the still-blazing embers when he caught a sharp sound outside the cavern, as if a dry twig had snapped under foot. He was at once alert and watchful, not a little alarmed ; and on the first impulse, wishing to discover what the threatened peril might be, he foolishly resolved not to awaken Sher Singh for fear the intruder should be frightened off.

There was a moment of silence, and then a faint rustling noise came closer and closer, though whether made by man or beast, it was as yet impossible to judge. Rising softly to his feet, the lad slipped behind a projecting rock at the side of the cavern whence he could command a good view of the opening without being seen himself. He was barely in time, for the stealthy, creeping footsteps had drawn very near, and it was now evident that the unwelcome visitor was human.

Maurice felt a chill of terror. He and Sher Singh

were absolutely unarmed, with not even a pocket-knife between them. A stone as large as his two fists lay within reach, and stooping swiftly he picked it up. The next instant a shadow darkened the mouth of the cavern, and the glow of the blazing wood shone on the stooping form and evil yellow countenance of the last person the lad had expected to see—Senor Antonio Silva. The blood turned to ice in the watcher's veins, and for the moment he was powerless to move or act.

As the Portuguese advanced with wary and noiseless steps, peering keenly into the flame-lit space behind the fire he slid a long, keen-bladed knife from his belt. The ruffian had perceived and recognised the Hindoo, his old enemy, and hatred and murder were stamped on his ferocious face. He passed the fire, and bent over the slumbering man. The steel rose for the deadly stroke, clutched in his right hand, and another second must have seen it plunged deeply into Sher Singh's exposed breast.

But just then, roused from his horrid stupor, Maurice uttered a loud cry and let drive the stone. His aim was as sure as his purpose, for the missile struck the knife and knocked it out of Silva's hand. Stone and weapon flew against the wall and bounded back, and with that, startled and unnerved by the unexpected attack, the Portuguese lost his head and bolted from the cavern with a yell.

Shouting lustily to Sher Singh, Maurice immediately dashed in pursuit of the ruffian, not even delaying long enough—as he should have done—to pick up the knife. His blood was up, and he was reckless with anger; too reckless, indeed, for he had gone no more than half a dozen yards when he ran almost into the arms of Silva, who had turned to lie in wait for him.

The knowledge that his foe was unarmed encouraged the lad, and he offered a sturdy resistance; but, as on previous occasions, the wiry Portuguese proved himself much the stronger of the two. His tactics were swift and merciless. Having partly throttled the lad, and beaten him on the face, he seized him by the collar and began to hurry him over the rough ground. His intention was to put the one enemy *hors du combat*, so that he might be free to encounter the other, and in this he succeeded admirably.

The boat belonging to the castaways was close by, and into this Maurice was flung head first, with such force that he struck his injured temple on the farther gunwale and split the bruise open. As he tried to rise, well-nigh helpless with pain and dizziness, he was pounced upon by Gunga Ra, who had hastened forward from the other boat at the first sound of trouble. Though he was lame and wounded, and the plug had come out of the bullet hole, he was yet a formidable antagonist in a scuffle.

“Keep the fellow there,” Silva shouted to his confederate, “but for your life don’t hurt him.”

It had all happened in a very brief space—in less time than it requires to tell—and Silva had no more than swung round, expectant of an attack from the Hindoo shikaree, when that sharply-awakened individual burst savagely from the cavern. He had lingered just long enough to light a billet of wood at the fire, and as he held it above him the streaming flame showed Maurice and Gunga Ra struggling beside the boat, out of which they had fallen.

The sight had much the same effect on Sher Singh as a red rag has when flaunted before the eyes of a vicious bull. Unfortunately he too had failed to

pick up Silva's knife—he did not know it was there—and so he was quite unarmed. He dropped the torch, and with a hoarse cry rushed at the Portuguese who, not daring to close with a man so much larger and stronger than himself, promptly resorted to cunning, and at the right moment slipped down on his hands and knees.

It was a risky trick, and one that fails as often as it succeeds; but in this instance it worked the mischief that was intended, for Sher Singh tripped heavily over the kneeling body, and the impetus sent him sprawling half a dozen feet away. As quickly the ruffian was up, and speeding like a deer towards the cavern. He vanished between the rocks, and emerged a second or two later with the knife in his grasp and an evil smile of satisfaction on his face.

By now Sher Singh—he realized that for the present he must let Maurice look after himself—had also risen and followed in hot and vengeful chase of his crafty foe. He saw the knife in Silva's hand, and a prudent impulse checked the rash attack that he meditated. Instead, he turned and ran towards the water, looking vainly about in search of stones, or of anything else that might serve as a weapon of defence. The Portuguese followed swiftly and warily.

Maurice, who was still showing fight and resisting Gunga Ra's efforts to hold him to the ground, called faintly to the shikaree as he sped past him.

“He means to kill you. Don't give him the chance.”

Sher Singh threw an anxious glance at the lad, and ran on. He splashed into the shallows, near the end of the island, and there his eye caught what he was seeking for—a stone three or four times as large as his

head, partly buried in the soil at the water's edge. It was very heavy, but it was that or nothing, for there was no time to delay. He quickly stooped, and forced the stone from its bed; then, lifting it in both hands straight above his head, he faced around. Silva was within eight or ten feet, brandishing his knife.

"Drop that," he snarled.

"I shall drop it on your skull—nowhere else," cried Sher Singh, with a triumphant laugh. "Yield, assassin, or I will surely crush you."

The Portuguese answered with a yell of rage that might have come from the throat of a wild beast. He paused for an instant, uttering threats and curses, and began to sidle forward slowly and watchfully. He was determined not to be baulked of his prey by the Hindoo's missile, which he hoped to draw and elude.

Meanwhile, crippled though he was, Gunga Ra had overpowered the lad and jammed him into the bow of the boat, where he held him fast. The torch was still burning on the ground, and it cast a flickering light upon Sher Singh and Silva as they confronted each other at close range, one waiting and one creeping to the attack. They were only a few yards from Maurice, who could see them plainly. He was feeble with pain and dizziness, and his brain was swimming, but he realized that the issue of the contest would decide his own fate. Was it to be life or death?

The suspense was of brief duration. The advantage was with the Hindoo, but he was destined to lose it, and thus turn the odds against him, in a sudden and unexpected manner. He was about to throw the big stone with a force and aim that would have brained his enemy, when the heavy weight overbalanced him

and jerked his arms behind his head. He sought vainly to recover his balance, then reeled backward, and stone and man came down together with a splash in the shallow water.

Sher Singh was a little farther out as he rose to his feet, submerged to the waist, and quickly Silva was upon him with a bound like a tiger's. There was a short and desperate struggle in the river ; there were yells, and curses, and the flash of steel.

"Die—die, you dog," hissed the Portuguese.

The knife rose and fell, finding lodgment in flesh and bone. Sorely wounded, Sher Singh tossed up his arms with a pitiful cry, and dropped back among the waves. The current snatched him, and whirled him swiftly along the shore of the island. Silva waded to land, sheathing his reeking blade. With a hasty glance towards Gunga Ra and the lad, he ran parallel with the water's edge, following with his eyes the drifting body of his victim until he saw it sink beneath the tide, when he turned back with a shout of triumph.

Maurice was spared the final scene, and was by this time mercifully oblivious to the fate that was in store for him. He had swooned away after witnessing with horror and anguish, by the lurid glare of the torch, the murder of his faithful friend.

The respite was a short one. When the lad returned to consciousness, a few minutes later, he was propped in a half-upright position with his back against the rear wall of the cavern, to which his captors had borne him. His limbs were bound with strips torn from Gunga Ra's filthy kummerbund, and his wrists were drawn behind him and secured to a projection of rock. A large slab of stone rested on his feet and ankles, pressing them heavily to the floor.

Worse still, a quantity of the inflammable drift-wood—all that was to be had—was piled around both sides of him and on the slab. Worst of all, Silva and Gunga Ra squatted in front of him, leering at him horribly, and nodding their heads towards the glowing embers of the fire with a significance that was not to be mistaken.

What these preparations foretold Maurice knew only too well. Though he was stupid with dizziness and pain, his senses benumbed, he realised that his fiendish foes meant to burn him alive. He made an attempt to break loose, and found that he was powerless to move.

“Tug and strain, pull till your eyes burst if you like,” cried Silva, with a mocking laugh. “It will do no good. Nothing can save you. Presently, when you feel the flames, you will shriek like a whipped cur. And you and I will listen, eh, Gunga Ra?”

“We will watch him slowly roast, Sahib,” gleefully replied the Hindoo.

“You are devils, not men,” Maurice said hoarsely. “Why do you hate me so bitterly? Have you no pity or mercy?”

“Mercy?” echoed the Portuguese. “That is a word I do not understand. I have never shown mercy to those who injured me, nor shall I begin now. Why did you oppose me, months ago, in the jungle of Seranghur, for the sake of a paltry tiger that would not have been missed? I gave you your chance, offered you a position with my own firm, but you laughed me to scorn. And since then ill-luck has followed me, all through you, until I am a beggar and an outcast, a fugitive with a price on my head.” His voice rose to a higher pitch of fury. “And you

plead for mercy ? ” he went on. “ You ask me to forgive and forget ? No, no, boy, you must die, and by the torments of fire.”

“ You will live to wish you had spared me,” said Maurice, shuddering at the venomous expression on the ruffian’s mutilated face.

“ I shall live,” replied Silva, with a veiled meaning, “ to profit by your death. Had I missed this opportunity, and gone by the island, I would have tracked you across India if need be.”

He was silent for a space, apparently absorbed in his evil thoughts, and perhaps feeling already a premonition of the doom that was nearer than he believed. Gunga Ra watched his master with ill-concealed impatience, waiting as a vampire waits for a feast of blood, and occasionally he writhed with the pain of his wounded thigh. Robbed utterly of hope, confronted by death in its most awful form, Maurice endeavoured to summon courage to meet his fate. But he was young, and life was sweet and dear. To move the hearts of these ghoulish scoundrels was, he knew well, an impossibility ; yet he pleaded with them piteously, frantically, begging first for freedom and then for a knife thrust to end his misery, until, exhausted and faint, his eyes closed and his chin sank on his breast.

When he lifted his head, roused by a sudden stir, Silva was on his feet and staring out into the night.

“ What was that ? ” he muttered nervously.

“ I heard nothing, Sahib,” replied Gunga Ra.

“ It was a rustling noise—the breeze, no doubt,” said the Portuguese, as he stepped nearer the opening.

“ The rains must have been heavier up the river,” he added, in a sharp tone, “ for the tide has risen in

the last half-hour. Make haste, Gunga Ra, and draw our boat to a place of safety. See, the other boat lies partly in the water. You had better pull that up, too, as you return."

"And then, Sahib—" began the Hindoo.

"Then we will finish and be off," broke in Silva.

"It is not far from dawn."

CHAPTER XLII.

SNATCHED FROM THE FLAMES.

GUNGA RA had little inclination for his errand, since every movement caused him pain. But he did not dare to protest, or to urge that Silva should go in his stead. He rose, limped out of the cavern—and went straight to his doom. He had taken no more than half a dozen steps when a tawny, spotted animal leapt upon him from the shadows, and bore him heavily to the ground. There was a brief, writhing scuffle, and a fearful cry of agony from the man and a snarling yell from the beast; then a shriek stifled, and a crunching of strong jaws.

Maurice and Silva had plainly witnessed the tragedy, for it occurred on the broad pathway of yellow light which, cast by the blazing fire, streamed down over the stony slope to and beyond the edge of the flooding waters. For a moment both were silent from sheer horror, watching the death struggle that passed before their eyes, and Maurice was the first to find voice.

“A leopard!” he cried. “It will be our turn next.”

“Yes, a leopard,” assented the Portuguese. “And I have no firearms. “The Hindoo must die.”

“Drive the brute away, quick!” exclaimed Maurice who, in the face of this new peril, had forgotten the worse one. “If it gets in here it will make short work of us.”

“What can I do with only a knife?” demanded Silva, in a voice that was shrill with fright.

“Cut me loose, and give me a torch,” begged the lad, “and I will show you—”

“Set you free?” sneered the Portuguese. “I am not such a fool as that, boy. But your suggestion is good. I shall try it.”

He promptly snatched a thick brand from the fire, and with that in one hand and the knife in the other, he crept reluctantly out of the cavern and advanced to the rescue, though it was doubtful if Gunga Ra were still alive.

From his uncomfortable seat Maurice looked on breathlessly, longing for a moment of freedom. The leopard, as the flaming torch approached, seemed at first indisposed to yield; but, like all animals, it dreaded fire more than anything else. Silva hesitated and stopped, moved on slowly, and with that the snarling beast left the body of its victim and retreated a couple of yards. Taking courage, Silva shouted and pressed closer, waving the brand. For an instant the leopard blinked with wrathful eyes at the circle of flame, and then, turning tail with a screech of baffled fury, it bounded into the boat which Sher Singh had drawn up among the bushes, and squatted on the stern seat.

Again the Portuguese shouted, and there was a ring of delighted triumph in his voice, as well there might be. An unexpected thing had happened, for the boat—the rising waters had by this time nearly surrounded it—was gliding slowly but surely away from the shore. It had begun to move, torn from its frail hold, directly the sudden weight at the stern caused the bow to lift. It went on, gathering speed, until it was caught in the suck of the current and dragged farther out. It swung round, and shot swiftly on with the flood.

The leopard was visible for a few seconds, whining and whimpering as it paced restlessly about the tossing craft, and then it was swallowed from sight by the impenetrable darkness. Out of the night came a wailing cry of distress.

Maurice, meanwhile, had seen the whole affair, and now that it was ended, and he was again at the mercy of his enemy, he waited in helpless despair for the fate that he knew to be inevitable. When the boat and its strange passenger had quite vanished, and he was satisfied that nothing more was to be feared from the leopard, Silva approached the motionless form of Gunga Ra, and bent over him for a moment, holding the torch low. He straightened up with a shrug of his shoulders, and disappeared in the direction of the lower point of the island, evidently for the purpose of drawing the other boat to a place of safety. He soon returned and entered the cavern. His evil face was gloomy and troubled, his eyes bloodshot, and apparently from his first words, he was thinking less of his act of vengeance than of what had recently occurred.

"I am rid of the leopard," he muttered, half to himself. "I don't know where it came from, unless it drifted here on a log or a tree. But the brute has killed the only comrade I had left," he added, with an oath. "I am alone and friendless—every man's hand is against me."

"Is Gunga Ra dead?" asked Maurice.

"Yes, bitten through the throat," was the sullen reply; and he shuddered as he glanced towards the mangled body of the Hindoo.

Maurice, watching the Portuguese with close and furtive scrutiny, gathered a ray of comfort from a sudden theory that suggested itself to him.

“He is worried about something,” he reflected. “Perhaps the remaining boat has been carried away. If such is the case—and I pray Heaven it is—he will not dare to kill me, because he has no means of escaping from the island. He must know that my friends will find him here in the morning.”

But the next instant Silva turned abruptly to the lad, and, as if reading his secret thoughts, made haste to crush his hopes.

“The boat is all right,” he said with a mocking smile. “So you imagined that I was a prisoner, marooned in mid-river—that I must needs show mercy on that account. Not so. I will make a speedy end of you, boy, and then to reach the mainland, and the dense jungles, where I shall be safe from pursuit.”

“Leave me here bound if you like, to take my chances of rescue,” Maurice begged hoarsely. “At least spare my life. Is there not bloodshed enough on your soul?”

“Not yet,” cried the ruffian, with a fiendish laugh. “Your friends, should they come, will find only a heap of charred bones.”

Loth to abandon hope, Maurice continued to plead pitifully, but to no avail; he might as well have tried to move a stone to mercy. Silva, bent on his devilish purpose, seized a stick and raked burning embers from the fire around the wood that covered the lower part of the lad’s body. He knelt down and blew hard upon the coals, fanning them with his breath, until little tongues of flame leapt up, crackling and hissing, in half a dozen places.

Maurice felt the heat and the smoke. His mental sufferings were terrible beyond words, and life had never seemed so sweet to him before. He strove to cry out, to

utter a last appeal, but his tongue seemed to cleave fast to the roof of his mouth. Morning was now at hand, and a pale, grey streak was flushing the outer darkness. Silva discovered this, and it warned him not to linger. He drew the wood closer together, and satisfied himself that the flames had gained a good headway.

“You dog,” he snarled, “I must leave you to burn by inches. May your torments endure till the rising of the sun.”

His voice choked with rage, and casting a final look of hatred at his miserable victim, he left the cavern and disappeared.

Maurice saw the flames creeping nearer and nearer, and felt their scorching breath. He shouted as loudly as he could, though he knew the uselessness of it, and made desperate but futile efforts to free his limbs. Strength failed him, and letting his head drop on his breast, he remained for a moment in a stupor, from which he was roused by a scuffling, scratching noise. He looked up, and fixing his eyes on a narrow fissure at one side of the cavern, he saw a man's head and shoulders come in sight, followed by a brown, half-naked body.

“Sher Singh !” he cried incredulously.

“I am here, Sahib,” was the husky answer.

It was indeed Sher Singh, alive and in the flesh. His face was colourless, and his tunic was saturated with clotted blood. He uttered a low exclamation of joy, crawled feebly over the floor, and with his hands tore away the burning sticks and scattered them right and left. Then he perceived a knife lying within reach—the Portuguese had ignorantly left the weapon behind—and with a few quick strokes he severed the

thongs that bound Maurice's wrists and ankles. It was his last effort. He sank on his right side, faintly muttering the lad's name, and a crimson stream flowed from his wound, which had broken out afresh.

Maurice sat up, stretching his cramped limbs, and in spite of pain and dizziness he found that he was able to stand and walk. He dropped to his knees beside the faithful Hindoo.

"Thank God!" he cried. "You came just in time. I never dreamed that you were alive. How did you escape? Where is Silva? Have you seen him?"

"No, Sahib," was the scarcely audible reply, "but beware—he cannot be far off. His boat lies behind the rocks. I floated down with the current—and swam up the eddy—to the island. I lay there helpless—until I was able to crawl up—through the bushes."

"Don't talk any more. You are badly wounded."

"I am dying, Sahib. All grows—dark—"

His voice fluttered to a groan, and his eyes closed. His head fell back, and he lay as one dead. The lad burst into tears.

"Speak to me," he begged, calling the Hindoo by name. "One word, Sher Singh—only one word to tell me that you are alive."

That word was not spoken, but Maurice heard instead a light footstep without the cavern, and glancing up he saw, to his horror, the swarthy face of Antonio Silva peering in at him with a savage scowl; the sound of voices had attracted the ruffian's attention, or else he had returned in quest of his forgotten knife.

"You see, I am back," he exclaimed, with an oath. "It is not so easy to cheat me. Who has cut you loose? Ah, that Hindoo dog."

At one instant Maurice was pale with fear, the next he had snatched the knife from Sher Singh's limp fingers and sprung to his feet. He looked formidable enough as he stood planted in the middle of the floor, among the burning fragments of the fire, brandishing the long-bladed weapon.

"Keep off, you devil," he cried hotly. "Keep off. I am ready for you this time. It is my turn now. Come a step nearer, and I will plunge the steel into your black heart."

The Portuguese laughed, but it was a very hollow and sickly laugh indeed. The odds were heavily against him, and he knew it; he was cowed by the lad's valour and rage, and dared not for his life press an attack. He dodged from side to side of the opening watching for a chance to slip in, and finally he retreated a few paces towards the water, keeping his eyes fixed on Maurice. He evidently meant to arm himself with stones, as soon as he could get to a safe distance.

Just then, however, a splashing noise was heard up the river, and there was no mistaking the origin of the sound. It was the regular, creaking dip of oars. Silva shot a swift glance over his shoulder, and by the grey light of the dawn he saw a dark object moving straight in the direction of the island. His face blanched with terror, and for a moment he stood undecided.

"Help! help!" shouted Maurice, who also saw and heard.

He answered by a lusty hail, and the oars dipped faster. The Portuguese, realizing that the game was up, and that he must be quick if he would escape, turned and fled.

CHAPTER XLIII.

STRANGE RESCUERS.

THE flight of his vindictive enemy, and the certain assurance that help was at hand, thrilled Maurice with gratitude and joy ; but stronger than these emotions was a burning eagerness to avenge the murder of Sher Singh, for he believed the Hindoo to be dead. He started at once in pursuit, swaying with weakness as he strode over the rough ground. It was a useless chase, however. By the time the lad reached the point of stones and bushes below the cavern, Silva had leapt into the boat and cast it adrift, and was half a dozen yards away. He sped on, paddling furiously with the single oar, and once he glanced over his shoulder—not at, but beyond, Maurice—with features that plainly showed the stamp of fear. Then he swiftly faded into the murky gloom that overhung the lower reaches of the river.

“ He shan’t escape,” vowed Maurice, shaking a fist in the direction of the fugitive.

Throwing himself flat at the water’s edge, he drank until his feverish thirst was quenched. He rose feeling refreshed and strengthened, and with a steadier gait he made his way back to the upper end of the island. The strange craft was looming very near, and in less than a minute it ran ashore with a force that drove the bow deep into the soft earth. Two men sprang out, armed with rifles. To all appearance they were Englishmen. One was short and thick-set, with a clean-shaven face, and the other was a tall, bearded

man, wearing the blue jacket and gold-laced cap of a ship's officer. In a trice they had covered the lad with their weapons, which the next instant they slowly and reluctantly lowered.

"Why, this is only a boy!" exclaimed the big man, in a tone of keen disappointment. "I hoped for better luck."

"There was somebody with him," declared the other, "for I saw two figures running. I believe the Portuguese is not far off."

"Are you looking for Antonio Silva?" Maurice asked excitedly.

"That we are, lad," cried the first speaker, "and for a native as well, Gunga Ra by name. Have you seen them?"

"I've seen more of them than I wanted to," Maurice replied. "They were both here, and you'll find Gunga Ra's body lying yonder. He is dead, killed by a leopard. As for Silva, he has just escaped in a boat, and is barely out of sight!"

"Good! we'll have him yet," said the short man. "And who are you, my lad? How did you get on the island?"

Maurice answered briefly, telling as much of his story as was necessary to explain his present situation, and including a graphic account of his adventures with the two ruffians.

"A more desperate and bloody-minded pair of scoundrels never drew breath," vowed the bearded man. "You have had a terrible time of it, my lad, and I am glad you lived to tell the tale. So you belong to the 'Star of Assam'—that's the barge Silva and his confederate ran aground and tried to blow up. I am Captain Wragg, of the passenger steamer 'Mogul

Emperor.' What is to be done with this young castaway, Bicknell?" he added to his companion. "Shall we take him with us?"

"We can't leave him here," was the reply.

"I want to be in at the finish—when you capture the Portuguese," Maurice said eagerly. "But first I beg that you will come and look at Sher Singh, the faithful Hindoo to whom I owe my life. He may not be dead, though I am afraid he is. It won't take long, and you can soon make up for lost time."

"Yes, that's true," assented Captain Wragg. "The river is a score of miles wide hereabouts, and it will soon be broad daylight now. The Portuguese has but one oar, so he can't possibly escape us. We'll spare ten minutes, eh, Bicknell?"

"It's queer," muttered the short man, absently.

"What's queer? What are you looking at, man, as if you saw a ghost?"

"I've been wondering where I've seen this lad before," replied Bicknell. "It was somewhere and sometime, I'll swear. And yet it can't be. No, it is only a resemblance—a mighty odd one, though."

"I was thinking the same about you," said Maurice. "Directly you spoke your voice sounded familiar, and I imagined I had met you before. If I did, it was long ago."

"Perhaps we'll hit on it by and by," replied Bicknell. "Come, let us see this friend of yours."

The mention of the Hindoo banished all else from the lad's mind, and he led his companions forward. They paused for a moment by the mutilated body of Gunga Ra, which was already growing stiff, and then passed on to the cavern, where the blazing remnants of the fire shed sufficient light. Captain Wragg knelt

by the still unconscious form of Sher Singh, and closely examined him.

“Dead ? not a bit of it,” he cried, to Maurice’s intense relief. “Silva’s knife gave him an ugly dig between the ribs, but I should say he has a fair chance of recovery. We’ll take him with us—that will be the best plan—and before many hours he shall have proper attention from a surgeon ; there is one aboard my vessel. Meanwhile he’ll do well enough. I have a few drops of brandy,” producing a flask, “but you’ll need that yourself. What with the bruise on your forehead, and all you have gone through since you were blown off the barge last night, you look ready to drop.”

“I can hold out,” protested Maurice. “Give the brandy to Sher Singh—he wants it more than I do. And don’t waste any further time, or Silva may get away.”

The men had no intention of lingering. The brandy was divided, Maurice assenting to that, and his share of the fiery stimulant infused fresh vigour into his tired limbs. The portion that was forced down the Hindoo’s throat caused him to stir and to open his eyes ; he glanced gratefully at the faces bending over him, and his lips moved.

“Don’t try to speak,” the lad told him. “Everything is all right, and we are going to pull you through.”

Sher Singh was tenderly carried to the water and placed in the boat, where a bed of grass and bushes was quickly made for him on the bottom, Bicknel, providing his jacket for a pillow. Maurice’s wound was bathed and bandaged, greatly to his comfort and soon the little party were adrift, bent on the pursuit and capture of the desperado who was guilty

of so many deeds of blood. The boat swung out from the island of evil memories, as it was ever to be regarded by the lad, and began to move rapidly down stream.

It was now quite daylight, and overhead was a clear and cloudless sky, though as yet, the sun not having risen, the broad flood of turbid waters was in many places shrouded by white mists. This was gradually breaking and rolling away, and presently Bicknell, glancing round while he tugged at the oars, uttered an exclamation of pleasure.

"There's our craft," he said.

"Yes, yonder lies the 'Mogul Emperor,'" assented Captain Wragg; and he pointed up the river to the dark bulk of a vessel that was indistinctly visible about four miles distant.

"She is not moving?" inquired Maurice.

"No, she is swinging at anchor," replied Bicknell.

He would have said more, but just then, the freshening wind having blown a wide gap in the mist on the lower reaches of the stream, the fugitive Portuguese loomed suddenly into view. He was about a mile away, and was evidently holding to mid-channel for the sake of the stronger current, instead of attempting to gain one or the other of the remote-lying shores.

"The scoundrel!" cried Captain Wragg. "He is as good as caught. He hasn't a ghost of a chance."

"I'll bet you a sovereign you don't take him alive," said Bicknell.

"Alive or dead—it won't make much difference," muttered the captain; and he looked to the loading of his rifle. "But you would lose your bet," he added, "for the fellow is unarmed, and can't offer resistance. He might commit suicide by drowning; that is the only way he can cheat us and the hangman."

"I hope he won't get off so easily," said Maurice, his face darkening as he remembered the ruffian's long roll of crimes. "But how did you come to be searching for him? You haven't told me that."

"Why, no more we have," exclaimed Captain Wragg. "That was stupid of us, to be sure. We had too much else on our minds, lad, I suppose. The tale is not a long one. Silva and Gunga Ra were captured at the riverside settlement of Kolapur, while sleeping soundly in a native hut—the authorities had been notified to be on the watch for them, and their hiding-place was betrayed by a coolie. This happened two days ago, and the same afternoon our steamer touched at Kolapur and the two prisoners were brought on board in charge of an officer, who meant to take them to Calcutta. But last night, when the worst of the storm was over, Silva broke his handcuffs, murdered his guard, and liberated Gunga Ra. Then they set fire to the vessel, and in the confusion that followed they heaved a small boat over the rail and jumped into it, leaving one of the oars behind. We fired at the precious pair, but they got away in the darkness—"

"But not unhurt," said Maurice. "You shot Gunga Ra in the thigh, and Silva has a wound in the face."

"Ah, I thought we couldn't have missed them altogether," exclaimed Captain Wragg. "So they were both hit. The fire kept us busy," he went on, "and when we got it out the engines were damaged, and we had to drop anchor. But by now they ought to be in working order again."

"Towards morning," interjected Bicknell, "the captain and I lowered a boat and pushed on to look

for the fugitives, though we hadn't much hope of overhauling them. It was a bit of luck, their stopping at the island."

"It came mighty near to costing this brave lad his life," Captain Wragg said grimly.

The conversation lapsed, and for twenty minutes the boat went steadily on its course, with Bicknell at the oars. Silva was doing wonders with his one blade, though the intervening stretch was perceptibly lessening; there was no doubt that he had discovered his pursuers and was fully aware of his precarious position. Sher Singh was neither better nor worse. He lay in a stupor, occasionally stirring or uttering a moan of pain; his eyes opened once or twice, but there was no recognition or intelligence in them.

"He's not going to die," said Captain Wragg, who perceived Maurice's unspoken anxiety. "Don't you worry."

A little later the sun rose, a dull-red globe on the horizon, and as it mounted higher, dissolving and penetrating the banks of mist that still lingered on the broad bosom of the Megna, Maurice started suddenly from his seat.

"Look!" he cried, extending a shaking arm. "Look there! Do you see?"

Bicknell and Captain Wragg strained their eyes, supposing that the lad's eager shout had something to do with Silva. What they saw, however, as it took better shape, was a large object resting on the water as a considerable distance down stream and to the left,

CHAPTER XLIV.

A HOT CHASE.

“**L**OOKS like a house,” declared Bicknell. “But no, it can’t be—”

“That’s just what it is,” Maurice interrupted joyfully. “The ‘Star of Assam,’ as sure as fate. Hurra! my friends are safe.”

“I believe you are right, my lad,” said the captain. “It answers to the description of your craft, anyway. Is there a small boat on board?”

“Not one,” replied Maurice. “They were blown away last night.”

“Then Silva has nothing to fear from that source, especially as the barge appears to be fast aground on some shoal or bar.”

“I’ll bet the ruffian sheers off to one side,” predicted Bicknell. “He won’t be fool enough to hold his present course.”

It was quickly evident, however, that this was exactly what Silva meant to do, nor was a sound reason lacking; for a small vessel with bare masts had now come in view off to the right. It lay a half-mile opposite to the barge, and the fugitive was equally distant from the two, and perhaps a quarter of a mile above them. He must have realized the situation, and formed a plan, some time before Maurice made his discovery.

“He intends to slip between them,” said Captain Wragg.

“It is a big risk,” replied Bicknell, “but he knows

that it is the safest thing to do, under the circumstances. He hopes to creep by without attracting suspicion, as he must have done had he suddenly altered his course. He didn't discover the danger in time to avoid it."

"Perhaps there are other vessels, not yet visible to us, nearer both shores," Maurice suggested.

The comments of the lad and his companions were mere conjecture, though probably they were not far wrong. At all events, Silva held to a straight course, and he appeared to be almost in line with the two vessels by the time the pursuing boat, still gaining by degrees, was within a half-mile of him. Moving figures could be discerned on the deck of the barge.

"I wonder if your friends could stop the scoundrel with a bullet," said Captain Wragg. "It would be worth a trial."

"Tearle and Carruthers are both fine shots," replied Maurice, "but the difficulty is they don't understand what is going on."

"Then I'll give them an idea of the situation," vowed Bicknell.

He dropped the oars, picked up his rifle, and fired three shots in the air. They conveyed some sort of a meaning, and that promptly. The echoes had scarcely died away when those on the barge opened a lively fusillade, and for several minutes the firearms barked angrily. But the Portuguese, who was by no means within such short range as he looked to be, ran the gauntlet unscathed.

"He is out of reach now," Captain Wragg declared finally. "I hardly believed they would hit him."

"More fun for us, in the end," said Bicknell. "Look here, Captain, what do you say to stopping at

the barge long enough to hoist the Hindoo aboard ? The poor fellow needs attention badly."

"It is a good idea," was the reply. "Our surgeon can visit him later. Five minutes' delay, more or less, won't matter to us. It is impossible for Silva to give us the slip on this vast stretch of open water."

So, much to Maurice's satisfaction, a course was immediately steered for the "Star of Assam," for such it undoubtedly was. The boat drew rapidly near, and now a taut chain, running downward from the rear deck, showed that the barge was at anchor, and not aground. Soon the lad was recognised by Tearle and Carruthers, who hailed him with lusty shouts, and it was a happy moment when he slipped alongside the big craft and called greetings to the friends whom he had never expected to see again, and who had in turn given him up for dead.

It was no time for sentiment or many words, however. Brief explanations were made, and then Sher Singh was lifted to the deck. Carruthers, who had a fair knowledge of surgery, bustled about in quest of brandy, and bandages, and sponges. Tearle, having picked up a rifle, lowered himself to the boat and shared the stern seat with Maurice.

"I wouldn't miss taking a hand in that yellow fellow's capture for a good bit," he said. "But you ought not to be here, lad," he added. "A snug berth, with hot blankets, is your proper place."

"I'm going along, anyway," replied Maurice. "I am good for a few hours yet."

"Plucky as ever," Tearle muttered, in a tone of admiration. "I might have known you would pull through somehow last night, though I admit we feared the worst. After the storm was over we anchored here,

intending to signal some passing vessel, and then—”

“Ready?” interrupted Bicknell, who was impatiently handling the oars.

“Yes,” said Tearle. “Hello! Carruthers,” he shouted, “raise the anchor and drift along behind us.”

“All right,” came the response from above.

“Push off,” cried Captain Wragg; and an instant later the boat was skimming swiftly away from the barge, bound on its stern and terrible mission of retribution.

Though the delay had been brief, Silva was now a good mile distant and still trusting to the current of mid-channel. Unenviable must have been his thoughts, bitter his rage and consternation, as, looking back from time to time over the dancing waves, he saw that his relentless foes were again in grim pursuit. He could not escape them—he must have known that, even as he knew that if caught his life would surely be forfeit to the hangman.

Higher and higher rose the sun into the pearl and blue of the Eastern sky, and the far-off shores began to stand out more distinctly. As yet the morning air was cool after the hurricane, sweet and fragrant with the breath of dawn, and the wide waste of water glistened like burnished silver. Several large craft were in sight, but they were miles to right and left, pale smudges on the horizon, and they seemed to only add to the loneliness of the seascape.

The radiant beauty and freshness of the day were in ill-accord with thoughts of bloodshed and human passions. Under the circumstances, however, Maurice and his companions were impervious to the spell of Nature, to her subtle influences. They had a stern task to fulfil, and they heeded nothing else. The

boat forged rapidly ahead, its course followed eagerly by those aboard the barge, which had begun to drift with the tide. Dark faces, belonging to a native crew, were also gazing from the little vessel anchored to the right.

"Lad, we are gaining fast," declared Tearle.

"Yes, Silva is much nearer," said Maurice. "If he had two oars, though, they would tell a different tale."

"It won't be long until we're within rifle-shot of the scoundrel," remarked Bicknell. "That murdered officer was an old pal of mine," he added gloomily.

"This is no occasion for private grudges," hinted Captain Wragg. "Remember that we represent the authority of law and justice."

"That's true, sir," assented Tearle, "and I say it who have the heaviest score against the Portuguese. But we'll take him alive if we can."

The chase continued in silence, and slowly and surely, yard by yard, the avengers overhauled the fleeing wretch, who was straining every nerve to prolong his dwindling lease of freedom. An unforeseen element, however, was shortly to be introduced, to the chagrin and anxiety of the pursuers.

A heavy, widespread sheet of mist still lay in front like a white carpet, on the bosom of the Megna. This began to break in two, under the action of the wind and sun, and as it rolled apart, disclosing the watery gap between, a mass of bright green vegetation loomed out of mid-river.

Captain Wragg, who was sitting in the bow, glanced forward over his shoulder in response to an exclamation of surprise from Maurice.

"Serpent Island!" he cried. "I had forgotten that we were in this neighbourhood."

"I've heard of Serpent Island before," said Bicknell. "It's a good bit of land, too, I believe."

"Eight miles long, and at least three wide in the middle," replied the captain, significantly. "It is infested with serpents and tigers, and covered with dense jungle and scrub that is almost impenetrable."

"Then it's good-bye to Silva, as far as we are concerned, if he manages to reach that place of refuge," exclaimed Tearle. "We might as well hunt for a needle in a hay-rick as hope to find him."

"He won't reach it," cried Bicknell. "He must not. We are only half a mile behind him now, and the island is three times that far from here."

"Yes, about a mile and a half, perhaps a little less," agreed Captain Wragg. "The scoundrel's boat is considerably lighter than ours, but we will do our best. Pull hard, Bicknell. What on earth made us forget to bring another set of oars?"

The dripping blades rose and fell rapidly, without a second's interval between the strokes, and a palpitating wake of foam and ripples gathered astern of the scudding craft.

"Should Silva once get to the island," added the captain, "it will indeed be the last of him, I fear. If he is not killed by tigers or snakes—as ten to one he will be—he will find it a very simple matter to escape at night, and drift with a cross current to the mainland, either on a log or a raft. There is plenty of wreckage to be had, in the way of timber and trees."

"And we can't patrol sixteen miles of shore," said Tearle, despondently. "No use to try."

The Portuguese was evidently shrewd enough to

take a similar view of the situation, and the prospect of a safe hiding-place, with a chance of ultimate escape to follow, urged him to redouble his efforts. He plied his one oar desperately, and at frequent intervals glanced back to note how the race was progressing.

A quarter of an hour slipped by, and each minute was fraught with keenest suspense and anxiety to all concerned. During that time scarcely a word was spoken; every eye watched the steadily decreasing space between the two boats. Who would win in the end? It was a question that none as yet had confidence to answer.

"It is sickening to see the fellow drawing nearer and nearer," cried Maurice. "Oh! why can't we overtake him?"

"I am doing my level best," vowed Bicknell. "It is going to be a mighty close shave, or else—" he hesitated.

"Or else we lose," said Tearle, fiercely. "But anything but that! Rather than let him gain the shelter of the jungle, a bullet must cut him short in his sins."

"Yes, a bullet as the last resort," assented Captain Wragg. "If we can get within gunshot of him," he added doubtfully.

There was room for doubt, and the issue was just as uncertain a little later, when the island was half a mile away and the Portuguese was more than half that distance from his pursuers. Tearle, too impatient to sit still, rose and crept forward to the bow of the boat. He stood there, towering above Captain Wragg, and waited with rifle in hand.

"That's hardly fair, comrade," growled Bicknell.

"I ought to have the first shot. It was my friend Jack Masters, whom Silva killed."

"My score is the heavier, by far," replied Tearle, "However, if you wish it, I will take the oars and yield you my place. But don't miss."

"No; go ahead," said Bicknell. "You're the better shot, perhaps."

Two minutes passed, and the boat had swept nearer to the fugitive and to the island. Crack! rang Tearle's rifle. Crack! crack!

The bullets fell short of the mark. Another interval, bringing the chase nearer to its end, and then a fourth shot, which struck with a splash a little ahead of the Portuguese.

"Now you've got him," Maurice cried excitedly. "Quick!"

"The next shot will plug the scoundrel," exclaimed Captain Wragg. "But first, don't you think we ought to give him a chance to surrender?"

"It will be only a waste of breath," vowed Bicknell.

Just then, finding that he was in range, Silva had recourse to a cunning ruse, and one that bade fair to succeed. Having made three vigorous strokes that sent the boat straight and swift for the point of the island, he dropped the oar and suddenly vanished. He had thrown himself flat on the bottom of the craft, and not an inch of his body showed above the gunwales.

"By Heavens, he'll cheat us yet!" cried Captain Wragg.

"Wait!" Tearle said calmly.

He watched, keen-eyed, with his rifle still at his shoulder. The island, in the next minute, drew within four hundred feet. The fugitive was but a

dozen yards from the thick jungle coverts, which reached almost to the water's edge. Bicknell pulled like a madman, and the faces of the others were strained with mingled hope and fear.

Crunch! the sound was plainly heard as the bow of the assassin's boat cut deep into the sand and pebbles. As quickly the Portuguese bounded to his feet, sprang ashore, and leapt towards the friendly thickets.

For a brief instant his figure was in view, and in that instant retribution overtook him. Tearle's rifle barked vengefully, and as the smoke lifted Silva was seen to reel and toss up his arms. Then, with an imprecation on his lips, the guilty wretch fell like a dog.

CHAPTER XLV.

A THRILLING DISCOVERY

IN awestruck silence, their fierce passions subdued by the tragedy they had just witnessed, Maurice and his companions gazed at the prostrate form which did not show any visible movement. Bicknell eased the oars and with a few more strokes ran the boat aground on the Isle of Serpents.

The little group stepped out and approached the Portuguese, who, though mortally wounded beyond a doubt, was far from dead. He was breathing in painful gasps, and his strong vitality promised to keep him alive for some time. He glared up at his enemies, a frenzy of hatred in his burning eyes, and cursed them between throat spasms until blood oozed to his lips, when he became half-unconscious.

“He has not long to live,” said Maurice.

“An hour or two, perhaps,” replied Tearle. “It is not easy to kill fellows of this sort. See, the ball passed clean through him, entering at the back and emerging under the ribs. It is not a pleasant thing to do—to shoot a man down in cold blood. But it was that or lose him.”

“There is no need to feel any remorse about it,” said Bicknell, in a hard tone. “The ruffian richly deserves his fate. It is far too good for him, in fact—the hangman should have had his dues. However, we can afford to be merciful now. Shall we take him aboard the barge, and let him die in peace?”

“It is the least we can do,” assented Captain Wragg.

"There's a chance, I'm thinking, that the surgeon will be able to patch him up."

Tearle shook his head. "Not a hundred surgeons could save him, more's the pity," he declared. "I know the signs."

They lifted the wounded man and bore him to the boat, then pulled gladly away from the Isle of Serpents, towing astern of them the smaller craft belonging to the passenger steamer. The journey was a short one, and twenty minutes later all were aboard the "Star of Assam," which had meanwhile been drifting slowly down the river. Silva, his condition unchanged, was made comfortable on deck under the awning, and the crew pressed round the spot, curious for a glimpse of the dreaded outlaw. When the excitement had somewhat subsided, Maurice's first inquiry was for Sher Singh, who had been put to bed in the cabin.

"He is doing as well as can be expected," declared Carruthers. "While there's life there's hope. But unless you turn in and get some rest, my lad, I shall have two patients on my hands."

"There is nothing much the matter with me," said Maurice, "except that I am as hungry as a bear. And little wonder."

He did not have to wait long for his breakfast, and by the time that was finished—the "Star of Assam" had meanwhile dropped anchor again—the "Mogul Emperor" was in plain sight, beating its way down mid-channel under half-steam. Tearle and Captain Wragg held a brief consultation, and the latter agreed, for a certain sum of money, to tow the barge down to the Bay of Bengal and across to the delta of the Hooghly. Therefore, as soon as the big passenger steamer came within hailing distance, she eased her

speed and backed up in front of the barge, to which she was promptly secured by half a dozen stout cables. Then the huge side-paddles of the "Mogul Emperor" lashed the water into foam, and the two vessels ploughed on their way together.

The steamer's passengers, when they learned what had occurred, were all eager to go aboard the barge, but Captain Wragg gave permission to only two. The favoured couple were Englishmen, and one was a Calcutta surgeon, a lean, brusque, elderly man, who was returning from a professional visit to a wealthy planter of Assam; for which service he must have received an enormous fee. The other was a handsome, distinguished-looking gentleman of perhaps fifty years of age, with keen brown eyes and a tawny drooping moustache. His dress and manner, his languid, well-modulated voice, clearly indicated that he belonged to the upper classes.

"There is work for you here, Dr. Sawton; this way, sir," said the captain. "I'm afraid you won't find your surroundings very agreeable," he added, in a tone of great respect, to the surgeon's companion. "The barge is in a state of disorder, Mr. Carfax, and is hardly a fit place for a gentleman."

"Never mind about that," replied Mr. Carfax. "I have a curiosity to see—"

He broke off to stare fixedly and with sudden interest at Maurice, who, unaware of the stranger's scrutiny, turned to follow the surgeon. The latter went straight to Sher Singh, and after a lengthy examination he declared that with careful nursing the Hindoo would have more than a chance of recovery. He then stepped across the deck to the Portuguese, and at the first glance he shook his head.

“I can do nothing here,” he said. “The fellow is past help, and will surely cheat the hangman. He has not long to live.”

Maurice, stirred by an impulse of pity—or as near to pity as it could be under the circumstances, knelt beside the dying man and moistened his lips with a sponge.

“Come, this won’t do, my boy,” remonstrated the surgeon. “You appear to be in need of attention yourself. You are wounded and exhausted, and ought to be in bed.”

At that moment Silva opened his eyes, and they rested on Maurice with a glance of fiery hatred, which, to the amazement of all quickly turned to a softer expression. Knowing that his end was fast approaching the assassin was beginning to yield, as the most evil natures frequently do at the last, to the terrifying touch of conscience and remorse.

“Brandy! brandy!” he begged in a hoarse whisper.

They brought a wine-glass full of the strong stimulant and poured it down his throat, and it promptly revived him. He motioned to be lifted up, and when that had been done, and he was supported in Carruthers’ arms, his glazing eyes turned to Maurice with a look of mingled horror and penitence.

“I’m going—I know that,” he muttered faintly. “I thought I should be game to the finish, and if any one had told me that I would forgive a wrong, or soften my heart to a foe, I’d have laughed him to scorn. But it’s different, somehow, when you see the grave waiting. All my sins are crowding into my mind—they’re dragging me down, shoving me into the darkness. Are you still there, my lad? I can’t see you. I’m glad I didn’t kill you, and I want to do

you a service before I go. You have a cruel and determined enemy. Beware of him. He hired me to murder you, and I was to have been paid five hundred pounds. The man's real name is—Ravenhurst—and—and you'll find—him—at—Calcutta. Go to—the—”

A gurgling, choking sound ended the sentence, and there was a rush of blood to Silva's lips. He struggled, tried to raise himself, and fell limply back—dead. He had gone to the great judgment seat to answer for his crimes.

“The world is well rid of him,” said Tearle, in a hard voice, “but he went out of it too easily.”

The sun shone gloriously down on the deck. Caruthers drew the blanket over the body of the Portuguese, and the little group of men moved away from the spot. Maurice stood by the rail, looking over the wide waters with puzzled eyes and confused thoughts. He pressed his hand in bewilderment to his brow.

“What does it mean?” he exclaimed aloud. “Ravenhurst! Ravenhurst! I have heard the name before. But when? Where?”

“What have you got to do with John Ravenhurst, my boy?” demanded an eager voice behind him. “There's a mystery here, and between the two of us we ought to—”

Maurice, turning quickly round, came face to face with Bicknell, and immediately he fancied he recognized him. The veil of the past was lifted at least in part, and his mind was back in the years of his childhood. A clearer light dawned on Bicknell at the same instant, and he was the more agitated of the two. He threw his arms about the lad and embraced him exuberantly.

“Why, I know you now!” he cried. “I must

have been blind before. I'd take my oath that I'm right. You're little Dick Forrest, my old pal, straight enough. To think that we should meet again like this, here in India! It's wonderful! I was not wrong, then, in suspecting that scoundrel Ravenhurst. I was satisfied from the first that he meant to play some wicked game. Surely, my boy, you've not forgotten me. Don't you remember the circus, and the menagerie, and how we travelled about the country together?"

"Yes, I do remember," declared Maurice. "It all comes back to me—it is growing clearer. My father died and this man Ravenhurst took me away and put me on board of Captain Bonnick's vessel. I have seen him once since then—in the forest of Soonput, not long ago. But why did he hate me, and why did he hire Antonio Silva to kill me? And you—didn't I used to call you Bick?"

"That's right, lad. It was short for Bicknell. Well well, this is a queer world we live in. And it's a strange tale I have to tell you—"

Just then the English gentleman, who had been standing near enough to catch a fragment of the conversation, came up to the two and touched Bicknell on the shoulder.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "but may I have a word with you?"

CHAPTER XLVI.

LIGHT ON DARKNESS.

SURPRISED by the interruption and resenting it a little at such a time, Bicknell glanced up at the stranger, who, without waiting for an answer to his question, continued in a tone of suppressed excitement.

“I heard you call yourself Bicknell just now, and that is a name which means something to me. Are you by any chance George Bicknell, formerly of Norwich in England, and of late years the owner of a small tea plantation, thirty miles north of Goalpara?”

“I’m the man,” Bicknell admitted. “You’ve read me off correctly, sir. But if you wish to buy the plantation you’re a little too late. I sold it a month ago to—”

“I don’t want the plantation,” impatiently broke in the gentleman. “I want you, and I have come all the way from England to find you. I travelled up-country to your place, and the new owner told me you had gone to Calcutta—”

“I started for there by water, sir, but I stopped off for a time at Rangamati, and took passage later on the ‘Mogul Emperor,’ when she touched on her down trip.”

“Then we have been fellow-passengers for some days. I wish I had known that before. Now, by mere chance, I have found you out. My name, I suppose, will tell you nothing. I am Mr. Philip Carfax of the Towers, in Essex—that is my English home.”

“You’ve got the advantage of me, sir,” Bicknell

replied, shaking his head. He glanced at Maurice and then towards the others standing near, who were looking curiously on.

“Some years ago you were travelling about England with a circus and menagerie, were you not?” asked Mr. Carfax, growing visibly more excited.

“I was, sir; that’s right,” Bicknell admitted.

“And with the same circus were two persons, Gilbert Forrest and his son Richard, with whom you were on friendly terms?”

“Right again. Why, I was talking of those days not two minutes ago. But did you know Gilbert Forrest?”

“Did I know him?” echoed Mr. Carfax, hoarsely.

“Yes, from childhood. I may as well tell you the whole truth—there is no reason for concealing it. Gilbert Forrest, as he called himself, was my brother.”

“You don’t mean it, sir?” gasped Bicknell. “If that is the case, then—”

“He was my own brother,” repeated Mr. Carfax. “Poor fellow! what would I not give to bring him back to life? And now for the next question—I fear to ask it, and I dread the answer. Where is my nephew, the little lad who was known as Richard Forrest? You alone can tell me.”

It was Bicknell’s turn to show excitement. He stared in open-mouthed wonder for a moment, and then, putting a hand on Maurice, he drew him forward.

“He wants you, lad,” he said. “Why this beats everything.”

“I—I don’t understand,” stammered Maurice, on whose face was dawning the light of a great revelation. “Am I Richard Forrest? Was that my name when I was with the circus?”

“Of course it was—I told you so,” declared Bicknell. “Mr. Carfax, here is your nephew. This gentleman claims to be your uncle, my boy, and I’ve no doubt that he is.”

A brief searching glance satisfied Mr. Carfax that Bicknell was speaking the truth, and the next instant, overcome by emotion, he had opened his arms and gathered Maurice into them.

“Yes, you are Horace’s son,” he cried. “You have his features, his eyes. At last, thank Heaven! I have found you.”

“Am I awake or am I dreaming?” muttered Bicknell. “This is a day of surprises, and no mistake.”

The scene was a thrilling and affecting one, and Maurice, thus suddenly embraced by a stranger, was too bewildered for speech. Some little time passed and some further explanation was needed, before he could fully grasp the situation, which, when the meaning of it had been made clear to him, brought a lump to his throat and a look of happiness to his face. He realized that the puzzling mystery of the past was a mystery no longer, and that a new life had begun for him.

Others gathered about the spot, impelled by curiosity and the first to offer congratulations to Maurice were Tearle and Carruthers, who had overheard a part of the conversation, and were not slow to understand what had happened. The honest fellows were as pleased as Bicknell.

“You have found a nephew who is worthy of you, Mr. Carfax,” said Tearle. “You may well be proud of him. You deserve your good luck, my lad, and I say it who know. We meant to help you to clear up

the mystery of your birth as soon as we reached England, but there is no need of that now."

"I am heartily glad for your sake," vowed Carruthers as he wrung Maurice's hand, "but I hope we are not going to lose you."

"I am afraid you will," declared Philip Carfax. "I cannot part with my nephew."

There were several points on which he desired to be enlightened, and, moreover, there was much that still called for explanation; so Maurice, in reply to the questions of his newly-found relative, spoke of the vague recollections of his early years, and went on to tell at length of his life in India, from the time he had been left in Tom Dayleford's care.

"You have indeed suffered many hardships and perils, my boy," said his uncle, when the narrative was finished, "and that you came safely through them is due to those who stood by you so faithfully. But your troubles are over, and as far as possible the future shall atone for the past. I have a sad story to tell, and it is only right that your kind friends should listen to it. Before I begin, however, I should like to hear what Mr. Bicknell knows. It may not be much, yet nevertheless—"

"It is very little, Mr. Carfax," Bicknell interrupted, "but such as it is you're welcome to it, if you'll excuse my blunt way of speaking. To start the yarn proper, I joined Santley's circus and menagerie about the year 1880, and Gilbert Forrest was then attached to it as lion-tamer. He was a rare one for animals, and they all seemed fond of him. Living with him was his son Dick—this same lad—who was then a tiny chap four or five years old. Forrest and I became thick friends, and more than that, but he never spoke of

his past life except to say that his wife was dead. I knew there was some mystery about him, and I didn't need to be told that he was a gentleman born and bred.

“ Well, sir, to go on, I had been with the circus for a while, and we were performing in the town of Preston, when Forrest got a letter that took him to London for a couple of days. He went off, leaving the boy in my care, and not twenty-four hours after he came back he was knocked down and fatally trampled upon by a loose elephant. He lingered nearly a week, and before he died he told me that his father had bequeathed him a legacy, and that he was going to appoint an old friend of his, named Ravenhurst, as guardian for his boy. The man turned up in company with a lawyer just before Forrest breathed his last, and I believe they got the proper papers written and signed. I mistrusted Ravenhurst's looks at the time, but I didn't dare say anything. He took little Dick away with him the next morning, and that was the last I saw or heard of either until to-day. The following spring a distant relative of mine died in Assam, and left me a bit of a plantation. I took it into my head to run the place myself, so I came out on the first steamer, and I've been here ever since. Then I got tired and sold out, and now I'm on the way back to England. That's my story, Mr. Carfax, and I hope there will be a better ending to it before long. I want to see that scoundrel Ravenhurst caught and punished. It makes my blood boil to think that he has been spending Dick's money all these years.”

CHAPTER XLVII.

CONCLUSION.

THE Isle of Serpents, where fell the tragic end of the race that Antonio Silva had all but won, dropped leagues astern that day, as for mile after mile the "Mogul Emperor" forged on her course. The "Star of Assam" slipped along behind her, held in leash by short hawsers, wallowing and dipping to the creamy swell that was churned up by the larger vessel's paddles; and with every hour the vast waste of waters grew wider and wider, until at the eventide, when the sun was a dull red ball of fire on the horizon, neither to right nor left could a trace of the Megna's shores be seen. The pale glow faded into the purple shadows of the night, and as the stars flashed out brilliantly in the heavens, and lantern began to wink at lantern from the scattered river craft, a little group sat on the fore-deck of the barge, waiting to hear the final narrative which would have been told that morning had not Maurice, much against his will, been sent off to bed by the surgeon. The lad had turned up now, refreshed by a long sleep, and he looked none the worse as he stood leaning on the rail by his uncle's side. Bicknell and Tearle were also there, and Carruthers presently joined them from the cabin with the welcome news that Sher Singh was sleeping quietly and that his condition was as favourable as could be expected. As for Antonio Silva, he was lying somewhere on the bottom of the river; for during the day—the hot climate left no alternative—the body

had been dropped overboard, sewn in canvas and weighted with lead.

“My story is a comparatively short one,” began Philip Carfax, “and I may say by way of introduction that I come of an old family who have been large and wealthy landowners in Essex for three centuries. My ancestors were soldiers and sailors in the days of Elizabeth, fighting-men in the reign of the Stuarts, and from time to time in later generations—as often happens—one of our race has developed a wild and reckless strain in the blood. Indeed, it has been inherent more or less with all of us, and I mention the fact because it occurs in what I am about to tell you. My brother Horace and myself were the only children of Godfrey Carfax, who was in the diplomatic service for some years, and retired at the age of forty to his country-place. We were born at the Towers, and there we spent the most of our youth, a happy period that was clouded by the death of our mother. My brother was two years my junior, and we were devotedly attached to each other; but while I had quiet and studious tastes, and perhaps an exaggerated idea of the dignity of my position, Horace was of a restless and impulsive nature, light-hearted and careless. He was fond of all sports, of horses and dogs, and had an aversion to books. He made friends of gipsies and poachers, and was constantly getting into trouble with his tutor, and with our father as well, who did not understand how to deal with him. Nothing serious happened, however, until we went up to Oxford together, and then, at the beginning of his second year, Horace was led by dissolute companions into a scrape that caused him to be sent down. He came home, and after a bitter quarrel with his father,

in which both lost their tempers, he left in anger vowing that he would never return. A long time passed without any word or knowledge of my brother—I was forbidden to make any search for him—and then we had a letter from Horace in which he stated that he was married to a friendless orphan girl, whose father had been the proprietor of a travelling caravan of wild animals. Considering this piece of news to be an indelible blot on the family name and honour, my father wrote to Horace at once, absolutely disowning and disinheriting him. No answer was received, and for half a dozen years there was unbroken silence, until we discovered quite by accident that Horace's wife was dead, and that he and his child were touring about England with a circus, under the assumed name of Forrest.

“Another interval followed, and within a year or so my father, stricken by a mortal illness, repented of his harshness at the last, and bequeathed to my younger brother the sum of £40,000. That legacy was claimed a month later, as soon as Horace learned of his good fortune. He came in person to London, and a cheque for the amount was handed to him by our family solicitor. At about this time I had a severe attack of fever, and directly I was convalescent I was ordered aboard to regain my health. I meant to search for my brother when I returned, but meanwhile he met his death by an accident, and the sad tidings reached me in Egypt. Doubly bereaved, I was now a lonely man indeed. Not caring to reside in solitary state at the Towers, with its haunting memories of the dead, I sought distraction in foreign travel. For years I was a restless, discontented exile, wandering from city to city, from country to

country, and by way of occupation collecting rare books and prints, antique weapons and armour. Finally I returned home, twelve months ago, and remembering Horace's child—my only living kinsman—I determined to find and claim him.

“I should but weary you if I were to describe in detail that long and exhaustive search. Santley's circus was broken up, and many of its old employees were dead. In the end, however, my patience was partly rewarded, and I stumbled upon the clue that brought me to India and thence up the Brahmaputra to Assam in quest of George Bicknell. The rest I need not relate; you witnessed this morning the consummation of my hopes. Of John Ravenhurst I know little or nothing, except that he was a chum of my brother's at Oxford, where he belonged to a fast and unprincipled set. For his heinous crimes, and the base betrayal of his trust, he shall assuredly be punished as he deserves. And in conclusion let me say that I shall devote my future to the welfare and happiness of my dear nephew, whom by the mercy of Providence I have been enabled to find.”

Philip Carfax paused, and laid a hand affectionately on Maurice's shoulder.

* * * * *

A week later the “Star of Assam” and the “Mogul Emperor,” still joined together by hawsers, swung up the Hooghly river with the tide and dropped anchor off the Calcutta docks, not far from Hamrach and Company's warehouse. A statement of Antonio Silva's death and burial was furnished without delay to the proper authorities, and as neither Tearle nor any of his companions would accept the reward that had been offered for the fugitive, it was ultimately given

to the family of the murdered police-officer. Thanks to his strong constitution, and the care he had received, Sher Singh was mending rapidly, and in a fortnight after his removal to a hospital he was hobbling about.

On coming ashore Mr. Carfax and Maurice—to give the lad the familiar name that was no longer his—drove straight to the Great Eastern Hotel, little dreaming that John Ravenhurst, *alias* Miles Hamilton, had hastily left there not two hours before, having read in the papers an account of the arrival of the two vessels and the stirring adventures they had encountered during their voyage down the Brahmaputra—By the same evening he was on board a P. and O. liner, bound for England.

As there were various matters that required attention, nearly a month passed before our friends were ready to leave Calcutta. In the first place Tearle and Carruthers were anxious to wait until Sher Singh had entirely recovered, as they wanted him to assist in caring for the wild animals on the long voyage to London, for which purpose they also engaged Bicknell. In the meantime Philip Carfax made every endeavour to find Ravenhurst, but since he had been known by a false name while in India the task proved a futile one, no trace of him being discovered.

Acting under cabled instructions from the firm, Dermot Tearle chartered a portion of a comparatively fast steamer for the shipment of his animals, and as Maurice was anxious to be with his friends as long as possible, the same vessel carried Mr. Carfax and his nephew away from the shores of India. They had a quick and prosperous journey home, and their surprise can be better imagined than described when,

on entering the Thames and landing below the Tower, they found the newspapers of the day full of sensational stories of the rascality of the very man whom they had vainly sought for in Calcutta. John Ravenhurst had been arrested and charged, it appeared, and had then been released from custody under heavy bonds for trial.

The explanation of the mystery was very simple. Captain Bonnick had been pulled out of the Hooghly River by some native boatmen, and taken to a hospital, where he hovered between life and death for many weeks, unable to give any information concerning himself. When he at length recovered he returned to England to find and join his ship, and in London he came across Ravenhurst, who had arrived a few weeks before. He at once handed the villain over to the police, and the dastardly plot to which the sailor had lent himself was made public.

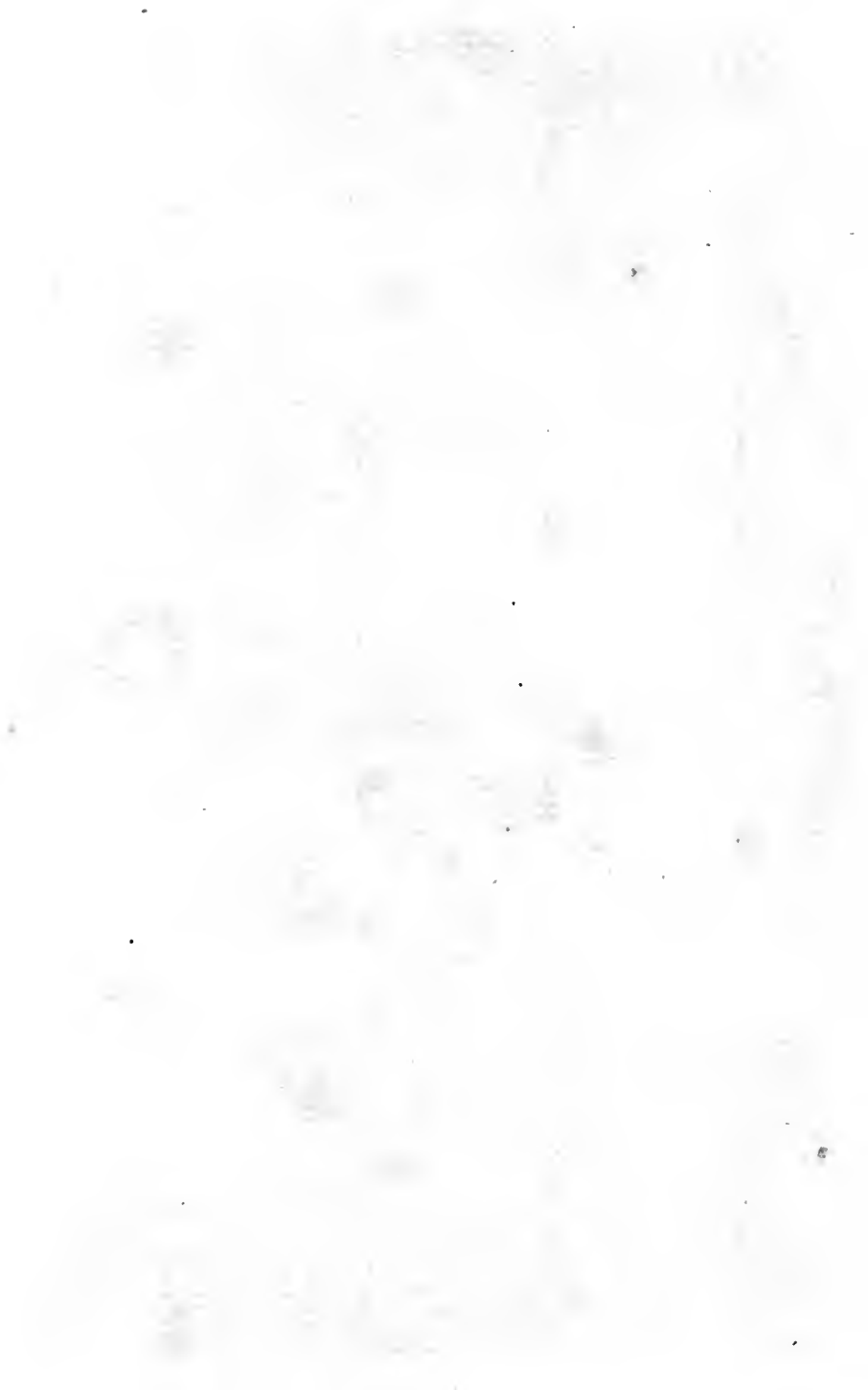
Unfortunately the law—to dismiss an unpleasant episode briefly—did not receive its just dues; for John Ravenhurst forfeited his bail and fled to a South American state, where, for want of an extradition treaty, he will probably drag out a miserable existence to the end of his days. He left property behind him which, when legally attached, yielded to Maurice nearly one-half the equivalent of his stolen fortune. Since he showed himself to be truly penitent for his share in the plot, Captain Bonnick escaped prosecution. He made a full confession to Mr. Carfax, admitting that he had received money from Ravenhurst from time to time, during the years when Maurice was on board the "Mary Shannon" and while he was in Tom Dayleford's care at Calcutta. Dayleford and the sailor, it may be added, had been friends of long standing,

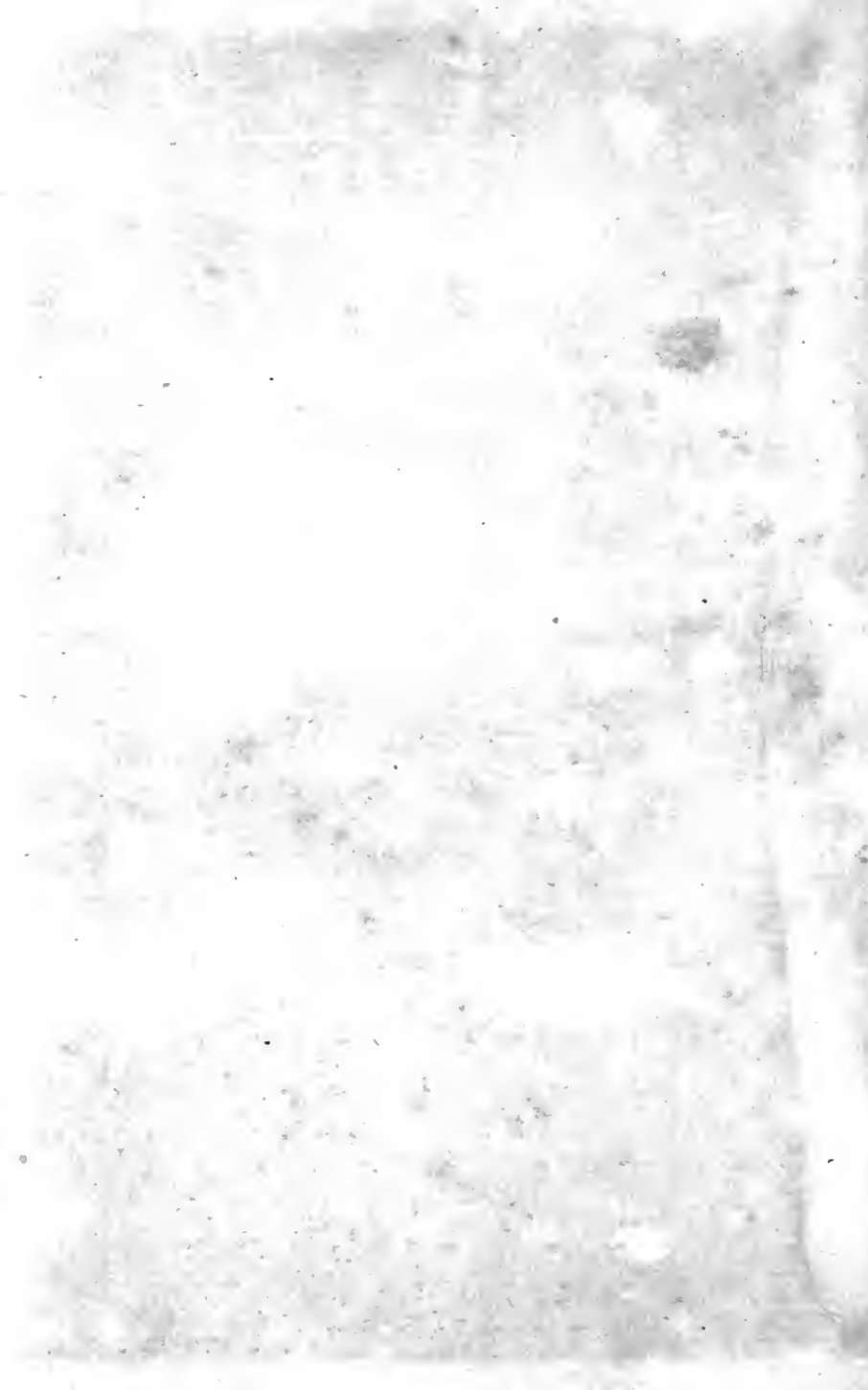
and the fact that the former was a deserter from the army was well known to Captain Bonnick.

George Bicknell, having conceived a strong liking for Tearle and Carruthers, and for their perilous trade as well, decided to permanently enter the employment of Hamrach and Company. Sher Singh had other prospects, and he severed his connection with the firm in order to accompany Mr. Carfax and Maurice to their country home in Essex, where the services of the devoted Hindoo will always be prized as they deserve.

And now we must reluctantly bid farewell to our young hero, and leave him on the threshold of the new and happy life that has opened before him. His first aim is a thorough education, and no money will be spared to obtain it. In after years, when he comes to young manhood, he and his uncle will probably spend much time in travel, visiting strange and wild lands as well as European countries. You may believe that Sher Singh will go with them, and perhaps, in the course of their wanderings, they will some day chance upon the friends of Maurice's eventful youth —the intrepid wild beast hunters of the Indian jungles.

THE END.





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