Title: Gil the Gunner: The Youngest Officer in the East

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George Manville Fenn

"Gil the Gunner"

Chapter One.

"You're another."

"So are you."

"I am, am I?"

"Yes; a cocky overbearing bully. You want your comb cut, Gil Vincent."

"Cut it, then, you miserable humbug. Take that." *Crack—thud*!

My fist went home on Morton's cheek, and almost simultaneously his flew out and struck me in the ribs. *Crack—thud*! Morton's return sounding like an echo of my blow.

There was a buzz of excitement. Coats flew off; two of our fellows eagerly pressed forward to act as seconds; my shirt-sleeves were rolled up over my thin arms, and in another instant we two fellow-pupils were squaring at each other, and I was gathering myself up to deliver as hard a blow as I could when—

"Stop! halt!" came in a sharp harsh voice, and General Crucie, with the great scar upon his white forehead looking red and inflamed as it always did when he was angry, strode up, thumped down his thick malacca cane, so that the ferule went into the grass and it stood alone, while he looked from one to the other fiercely.

"Upon my word!" he cried. "Very pretty! Two gentlemen flying at each others' throats like a couple of street boys. A regular blackguardly fight. I'm ashamed of you, gentlemen. What does it all mean?"

"Well, sir, it was like this," began Hendry, my second.

"Silence, sir! I will not hear a word. I pretty well know what it all means. You, Vincent, as usual; that nasty overbearing temper of yours again. Is it utterly impossible for you to live in unity with your fellow-students?"

"No, sir; not if they would let me be, and not fasten quarrels on me," I cried in an ill-used tone.

"Stuff, sir! rubbish, sir! nonsense, sir!" cried the general. "I know you better than you know yourself; and, mark my words, you will never succeed in your profession until you learn to behave like a gentleman. How can you expect to command men if you cannot command yourself. There, I'll hear no more, for I'm sure you have been in the wrong."

The general pointed in *so* unmistakable a manner that I walked off with my uniform jacket half on, slowly thrusting my arm into the vacant sleeve, and thinking bitterly, with my head bent and my forehead wrinkled up like that of an old man.

I was not long in reaching my little room, a favourite one amongst our fellows; and as I shut myself in, and locked the door, my conscience reproached me with certain passages in the past which led to my having that room, when a fellow-student gave way in my favour, and I don't think it was from kindly feeling towards me.

"I'm a miserable, unhappy wretch," I said, as I threw myself in a chair which resented the rough usage by creaking violently and threatening to break one leg. "Nobody likes me. I'm always getting into trouble, and every one will be glad when I am gone to Calcutta, Madras, or Bombay."

I sat scowling down at the floor, thinking of how the others made friends and were regular companions, while I was

almost avoided—at any rate, not sought out.

“Is it all my fault?” I thought; and that day I had a very long think as I wondered why I was so different from other fellows of my age. I believed I was affectionate, for I felt very miserable when I saw my father off with his regiment four years before, and he sailed for the Madras Presidency, and I went back home with my mind made up to work hard at my studies; to look well after my mother and Grace; and always to be a gentleman in every act and thought.

And as I sat there in the silence of my own room, I asked myself whether I had done exactly as my father had wished.

“I might have worked harder,” I owned. “I might have been more of a gentleman. But I did try.”

Then I began thinking that I had given my mother a good deal of trouble before she and Grace went out to join my father at Madras.

“But mamma did not mind,” I said to myself, for nothing could have been more loving than our parting, when I was so miserable at being left that I felt as if everything were at an end.

“The fellows don’t understand me,” I said at last. “And now if I try to be extra civil to any one of them, they all laugh and think I mean something—want to borrow money, or get another favour.”

This had been at the bottom of the quarrel that morning, and as I sat there thinking, I grew more and more roused, giving myself the credit of being shamefully ill-used by every one, from General Crucie and the professors, down to the newest comer, while the governor seemed to me to be the greatest offender.

“Boasts about understanding boys and young men,” I said bitterly, “and does not know how to be just. I wish I was out of it all, and could go away, so that I could be where people understood me, and—”

There was a sharp tap at the door, but I was too savage and sulky to answer, and there was a fresh tapping on the panel.

“Vincent, why don’t you answer? I know you are in there.”

It was the voice of my fellow-pupil with whom I had been about to fight, when the general came upon us.

“Well, what do you want?” I said sourly.

“The governor has sent me for you. Come along, look sharp. He wants you in his room.”

My temper bubbled up like the carbonic acid gas in a chemical experiment, and my fists involuntarily clenched.

“To go there and be rowed,” I thought; “and all through Morton. He might have let me off now after bullying me before the chaps. And then to send Morton!”

I stood quite still, frowning and angry, but all was still outside, and it was evident that, after delivering his message, Morton had run down again.

“A prig!” I muttered. “Lucky for him he didn’t stop. I’d have punched his head if I’d been expelled for it.”

I crossed the room, and threw open the door to go down, for, amiable as the governor always was to us, he was most stern and exacting in having all his orders obeyed with military promptitude, and there stood Morton waiting with, as I thought, a derisive smile on his face.

But I altered my opinion directly, for he held out his hand.

“I say, Gil, old chap,” he said, “I’m sorry we fell out, and I’m jolly glad the old boy came and stopped us. Pretty pair of fools we should have looked by this time, with black eyes and swollen noses.—I was wrong. Shake hands.”

A few moments before I could have struck him; but now I was so utterly overset by his frank manner, that it was not my nose which swelled up, but my throat, so that I could hardly speak as I caught hold of his hand and held it with all my force.

“No,” I said huskily, “it wasn’t your fault. Mine. I’ve got such a beastly temper.”

“Tchah! not you. Come on down; it’s all right now.”

“Not quite,” I said grimly. “I’ve got to face the gov., and have another dose. Has he given you yours?”

“No! ’Tisn’t that Post’s in, and he has had despatches or something. He had a great sealed paper in his hand when he told me to fetch you.”

“What?” I cried excitedly. “’Tisn’t—?”

“I’m not sure, but I think it is,” he said. “Come on.”

I felt as if all my breath had been taken away. The blood flushed right up to my temples; there was a singing in my ears, and my hands grew moist in their palms with excitement; but I could not speak as we hurried down.

“You are a lucky one,” continued Morton. “I say, you do know some one in the India House, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I said. “Uncle Joe’s on the board.”

“That’s it, then. You’ve got your commission, as safe as wheat, as our old coachman used to say. I salute you, sir. You’ll be a Lord Clive one of these days, before I get my captaincy.”

“Oh, nonsense!” I cried, and then all seemed to be one buzz of confusion, till I reached General Crude’s study, and found him walking up and down the room. He had left his table with his gold snuff-box in one hand, his pinched-together finger and thumb of the other holding a tiny modicum of snuff, which he applied to his nose as I entered, and he stopped short before me.

“Oh, there you are, Vincent,” he said in his prompt military way, and I noticed that the trouble of a short time before was all put aside. “You know what I want, I suppose?”

“I can’t help guessing, sir.”

“No, I suppose not. You must have plenty of interest, my dear lad, and I congratulate you. Here you are appointed to the artillery. Calcutta.”

“Ah!” I ejaculated; and in those busy moments as I stood looking right ahead out of the study into my future, I felt as if young, slight, and youthful as I was, boyhood was dropping away, and I was going to be a man to command men.

“It’s too early, Vincent,” he said, shaking his head, and tapping his snuff-box; “much too early. You are such a boy. Why, you’ll be the youngest officer in the service, though you do look old. I should have liked you to stay with us a couple of years longer.”

“Yes, sir,” I faltered. “I’m afraid I’ve got on very badly.”

“No,” he said sharply, “that’s it; you have not got on badly with your studies. From every professor I have had the same report, that your papers are excellent. That’s where it is. You were nearly at the head of the list in the artillery, and it was only just that you should be appointed. But, all the same, you dog, you’ve influential people at your back. That old uncle the director. I hope one of these days both services will give their promotions and appointments by merit alone.”

“Then you think it unjust, sir, that one so young as I am should get his commission?” I said warmly.

“No, I do not, Vincent. Don’t be so peppery. What a temper you have, sir. You must master that. I think, in this instance, the interest has been well exercised. I have had plenty of inquiries about you, and I’ve been obliged to speak well of you always.”

I coloured a little.

“You’re too young, but they want officers badly, and you’ll soon get older, and I have no doubt will make a good soldier, if you command your temper. You ought to have been in the engineers, though.”

“Oh no, sir,” I said eagerly. “I want to be a gunner. Is the commission for the Horse Artillery?”

He laughed and took snuff.

“Why, you conceited young greenhorn!” he said good-humouredly. “Has all the teaching of the Honourable the East India Company’s profession been so poor here at Brandscombe, that you have not learned that it is quite a promotion to get into the Horse Brigade. That they are picked men from the foot—men full of dash—who can afford to keep the best of horses, and who are ready to ride at anything.”

“My uncle would let me have any horses I want, sir,” I said; “and I can ride.”

“Like a gentleman in the park,” he said contemptuously.

“No, sir,” I said warmly. “My father is a splendid horseman, and I’ve hunted a great deal. Why, he used to put me on a pony when I was only six, and whenever I was at home he made me hunt with him, and go straight across country.”

“Humph! Wonder he did not break your neck!”

“Oh no, sir,” I replied; “but I have broken my arm, and had some falls.”

“Ah, well; be content with your commission in the foot. Some day, perhaps, you may get into the horse, especially if you ride well, and have some interest to back you up. Well, I congratulate you, Vincent, my lad, and I am well satisfied with your progress.”

“Satisfied, sir?” I said, as I recalled the scolding of an hour earlier.

“Oh yes, on the whole, my boy. You’ve got the makings of a good soldier in you. Little too fond of fighting. Ought to be in your favour, eh? But it isn’t. A good officer never fights if he can help it; but when he does, why, of course, he fights skilfully, and lets the enemy know that he is in earnest. But seriously, Vincent, you have one great failing.”

“More than one, sir, I’m afraid,” I said dolefully.

“Never mind the others; perhaps they’ll cure themselves. But you must keep a strict watch over that temper of yours, eh?”

“Yes, sir,” I said penitently; “I have a horrible temper.”

“A temper, Vincent, not a horrible temper. And I don’t know that you need regret it so long as you learn to subdue it. Tight-curb, that’s all. Make a better soldier of you. It means spirit and decision, properly schooled. Oh, you’ll do, boy. I should like to turn out another hundred of you.”

I stared at him in surprise, for I had been working under my military tutor always troubled by the impression that I was the most troublesome pupil he had, and that I was getting on worse than any fellow there.

“I mean it, boy,” he said, smiling and taking another tiny pinch of snuff. “Well, Vincent, my lad, I congratulate you. An hour ago you were my student and pupil; this despatch tells me that you are now my brother-officer. So good speed to you, and God bless you!”

His eyes looked a little moist as he shook hands with me warmly, and, though my own eyes felt a little misty from emotion, a cloud seemed to pass from them, and I began to realise that I had been fancying all kinds of things which were not true.

“Sit down, my dear lad, and let’s have a bit of a chat,” continued the general. “This is a short notice.”

“Short, sir?” I said wonderingly.

“Oh yes; very. You are to go out in the *Jumna* on the twenty-ninth. There’s just three weeks for preparation and the good-byes.”

“So soon, sir?” I cried excitedly.

“Yes, so soon. There’s a Captain Brace going out in charge of a draft of men from Warley—recruits, of course. You go under his charge; so you will have to be brisk in ordering your outfit.”

“Yes, sir,” I said. “I must write to my father to-day about money.”

“By all means,” said the general, smiling; and I saw what a stupid thing I had said. “You sail in three weeks, long before your father could get your letter, eh?”

“Yes, sir, of course,” I said confusedly.

“But that’s all right, my boy. Your father authorised me in his last letters to see that you had a proper military outfit, and draw upon him; so you need be under no apprehension. You will have to run the colonel up a pretty good bill; so be careful not to get superfluous things. By the way, there’s a letter for you. Have you got it?”

“No, sir,” I said; “I’ve been in my room. I’ll go and—”

“No, no; sit still,” said the general, ringing. “I’ll have it brought here.”

He told the servant to fetch the letter, and sat chatting pleasantly till the man returned with an old-fashioned-looking missive, ornamented with a great red seal.

“From my uncle, sir!” I said excitedly.

“Well, open and read it, boy. It may be more news.”

I opened the letter with trembling fingers, and read as follows:—

> “119, Queen’s Square,—
>
> “May 8th, 18—.
>
> “Dear Nephew,—
>
> “I hear that you have your commission. I stirred up some old friends. You go out with the next draft. Be a good boy, act like a gentleman, and keep up the honour of your family. You’ll find it very hot. I did when I was out there. Don’t eat too much, and don’t drink, or you’ll come home with a bad liver, like your affectionate uncle,
>
> “Joseph Vincent.
>
> “Gilbert Vincent, Esq.
>
> “P.S.—I mean Lieutenant Vincent. Don’t come to see me, for I’m off to-night to Carlsbad to drink rusty waters instead of port. Remember me to your father and mother, if you meet them, and Miss Grace. By the way, boy, you’ll want some clothes and a sword. I’ve told Ferries and Harquars to honour your cheques up to two hundred and fifty pounds, so that you need not draw on your father. You don’t deserve it, because you have such a bad temper; but if ever you can get promoted into the Horse Artillery, I’ll buy you a horse. Mind and get an Arab; they suit the country. I always rode one; but not in your break-neck way. I tried to get them to let you have a commission in the horse, but they wouldn’t stand it. Said it was a feather in a man’s cap to get that; so look sharp and grow, and make yourself fit to wear that feather. You’ll get it if you deserve it. I’ll see that you do. My postscript is longer than my letter. So with compliments to General Crucie, I am, etc.”

I handed the letter to the general, who read it through and nodded.

“Hah! that’s right,” he said, handing it back. “Nothing like having an uncle rich, and a director at the India House. You’ll get into the horse by-and-by. Let’s see, what was your uncle?”

“An indigo-planter, sir.”

“Hah! that means money, Vincent. Well, I shall not have to draw on your father. So much the better. There, you had better begin making your preparations at once, and if there is anything I can do in the way of help or advice, come to me without scruple. Seems only the other day that I was ordering my own kit, Vincent, previous to sailing for Bombay. There, off with you. I’m sure you want to digest the news.”

I did—badly, but I could not do it, for the news had already leaked out, and there was Morton at the head of all the other fellows, ready to raise a hearty cheer for the new officer about to depart from their midst.

The cheering was followed by a chairing, and when at last I escaped, I hurried off to my room with the whirl of confusion greater than ever, so that I began to wonder whether it was not all a dream.

Chapter Two.

I was horribly suspicious about that military tailor in Saint James’s Street. Over and over again I felt that he must be laughing at me, as he passed his tape round my chest and waist.

But he was a pattern of smooth politeness, and as serious as a judge, while I sought for little bits of encouragement, painfully conscious as I was about my physique.

He was so quiet and confidential, and took such pains to suggest the various articles I should require, that I felt bound to place myself in his hands, and to a certain extent he won my confidence sufficiently to make me ask a *few* questions, to set myself a little at my ease.

“Don’t often have any one so thin and young as I am to measure for a uniform, do you?” I said.

He looked at me with astonishment—real or assumed.

“Thin as you, sir! Oh, you are nothing to some gentlemen—I mean,” he added hastily, “as to being slender. Why, some officers who come here are little better than schoolboys.”

“But I am thin,” I said.

“Slight, sir,” he said reprovingly—“slight. I should hardly call you thin. You’d look a little thin in evening-dress, but in uniform only slight. You see, we are obliged to pad a little in the chest, and to square the shoulders a little, and, one way and another, sir, when we have finished you, you will be surprised.”

I was. But just then I only coughed, and felt glad that I was not the youngest and thinnest officer the tailor had fitted out. “Oh, by the way,” I said as indifferently as I could, “what about swords?”

I felt proud of my nonchalantly easy way of dealing so familiarly with the *arme blanche*, as the French call it, in the plural number.

“Oh, we shall supply your sword, sir; everything, if you entrust us with your commands. There are some gentlemen who advise that you should not go to a military tailor, but to a sword-cutler; and, of course, every gentleman has a right to go where he pleases, but if you will trust me, sir, you shall have a proved blade, of which you will be proud.”

“Oh, of course I shall trust you,” I said hurriedly. “But about size. I think I should like, er—a light, rather smaller-sized sword.”

“Oh no; excuse me, sir,” said the tailor apologetically. “Speaking from experience, sir, no. There was Lieutenant Verney, sir, younger and lighter than you sir, and not so big-boned—Major Verney he is now, a regular customer—said just the same as you did, sir, and we gave way. Consequently he was greatly dissatisfied. He grew, but the sword did not, and he soon had to have another. Now, if I might advise, I should say have a full-size regulation weapon, well balanced with a good heavy hilt. You’ll be surprised, big-boned as you are, sir, how soon you will put on muscle and spread out.”

Of course I gave way, being naturally proud of being considered capable of wielding a full-sized sword, and in due time, though not until I had fretted myself into a great state of excitement, the accoutrements were sent home.

It was hard work to assume that indifference which I did not feel, and I’m afraid that I did not deceive anybody save myself.

I knew when the things came, for one of the servants came and told me, and I said in a tone suggestive of the idea that I was in the habit of having uniforms sent home, “Have the things placed in my room.”

The servant stared at me, and I turned away, feeling furiously hot as I longed to run up and tear open the packages and tin boxes to gloat over their contents. But I taught myself to feel that I could not do that now—it would be too boyish, so I suffered tortures as I went out into the grounds to talk to some of our fellows, and try to keep my mind to what was being said.

Then came relief in the shape of Morton, who hurried up to the group where I stood. “Hi! Gil Vincent,” he cried excitedly. “What’s the matter?” I said in what was intended to be a cool way, but decidedly was not.

“What’s the matter, indeed! They’re taking your gorgeous array up into your room. Tin cases and swords, and goodness knows what. Come on!”

“Come on?” I said coolly; “what do you mean?”

“Hark at him!” cried Morton. “Here he is, as cool as a fish. Don’t you want to tog out?”

“No. What nonsense!” I said; but I can remember feeling excited as he spoke.

“Get out! Don’t be a humbug. You’re red hot to get into them.”

“Absurd! Why, I shall be always wearing that sort of thing soon.”

“Gammon!” cried Morton. “Oh, I say, what a jolly impostor you are, Gil. Come on, lads, let’s have him in, and make him paint himself up for our glorification.”

“Oh, if you all particularly wish it,” I said, “I don’t mind.”

There was a roar of laughter at this; and to hide my annoyance, I joined in, and was soon after spreading out jacket and coatee, striped trousers, belts, and slings, all of which, after being duly admired, were donned and exhibited in their proper places.

“Talk about pomp and vanity!” cried Morton.

“Don’t be jealous,” I replied, as I began to feel excited.

“I’m not a bit, Gil; but you might own to being proud as a peacock of your togs. Come, you are—aren’t you?”

“I suppose so,” I said, as I involuntarily glanced at myself in the glass; and then I felt hotter than ever, for I saw my fellow-pupils laughing, and this was the signal for me to hurry out of the stiff embroidered uniform as rapidly as I could.

But that night, when I went up to bed!

Well, I was very young then; and I suppose any boy of my age would have been just as proud of his new uniform, all suggestive as it was of sword and flashing steel, trampling horses, and spirit-stirring trumpet and band.

My candle was a long time before it went out that night, but even then I tried to salve my conscience—to make myself believe that it was not all vanity, for I said that the things wanted trying on, and the buttons and buttonholes were stiff. But at last everything was neatly folded up again and put away, and I lay down to sleep and dream of my new career. Somehow I only saw one side of a soldier’s life just then. Perhaps if I could have had the slightest idea of the horrors and dangers through which I should have to pass, I might have shrunk away appalled, and been glad to have taken to some more peaceful career.

Chapter Three.

The good-byes were said, and I was sent off with a ringing cheer by my old companions. My luggage had gone to the ship days before, and I had only a couple of tin cases to take with me in the cab when I reached London and was driven to the docks. Here, after going astray several times, I at last found the great towering-sided *Jumna*, and went on board with my belongings.

Everything was in confusion, for provisions were still being taken on board along with passengers’ luggage; and it was some time before I could find any one in the busy crowd which thronged the deck, to show me my cabin, which, to my disgust, I found contained a second berth and several articles of luggage labelled, “Captain Brace, Calcutta,” and in smaller letters, “Cabin; wanted on voyage.”

“Not much room for two,” I thought, as my own luggage was brought in, and I found by the number of my berth that I was to sleep on the shelf-like bed above that on which a portion of the captain’s luggage lay.

Then, wondering what he would be like; whether he would be agreeable, or disposed to look down upon me as a boy, I went back on deck, and stood about watching the busy scene, and learning which was the quarter-deck, steerage, forecastle, and the like. By virtue of being an officer, I found myself at liberty to go where I pleased, and noted which were passengers and which were leave-taking friends.

Then I had a good look at the officers and sailors, many of whom were yellow-faced lascars with dark oily-looking eyes, whose whites seemed to have an opalescent tinge.

Every one was busy, and a good many of the dock-men were up aloft giving the finishing touches to the rigging, a great deal of which seemed to be new. But somehow, as an idler, I seemed to be in everybody’s way, and was constantly being requested to make way, or stand aside, or my leave was requested in tones rather insulting, as I thought then.

Suddenly I remembered that General Crucie had said that a draft of men was going out in the vessel, in charge of Captain Brace.

“I wonder where the men are,” I said to myself; and at last, as I had looked in vain for red or blue uniforms, I asked one of the sailors.

“Swaddies?” he said. “Oh yes. Forrard. There they are.”

He pointed toward the head of the vessel as he hurried off in answer to a shout from a red-faced man who was directing a gang of sailors hauling at something up aloft which he called a yard, and I went forward to have a look at the smart detachment of soldiers I was to help to command.

The illusion was soon swept away, for the detachment was composed of about fifty unhappy, thin-looking men in white flannel jackets, sitting about or leaning over the bulwarks, smoking and watching the dock quay where stood a group of slatternly-looking women, staring wearily at the ship; and now and then one of them would wave a hand or a handkerchief to the men in white flannel, a salute as often as not evoking no response, though sometimes a man would take off his ugly blue woollen forage-cap by the red worsted tuft at the top, give it a twist, and put it on again.

“This cannot be the detachment,” I thought, and then, thinking that the best way to know was to ask, I said to the nearest man—

“Would you mind telling me whether you belong to Captain Brace’s detachment?”

“What?”

A surly, half-insolent question in reply to mine, which I repeated.

“I dunno nothing about no ’tachments,” he growled.

“Well, are you in the service, and going out to India?” I said.

“I’ve took the shilling, and I’m going out to cholera borgus, if that’s what you mean. Don’t bother!”

“You’ll get yourself in for it directly, mate,” growled another of the men. “Can’t you see the gent’s a horficer?”

I felt better at this, but I was damped down directly, for my man I had spoken to growled out—

“Horficer? Well, all I can say is as he don’t look it.”

As the man turned away to rest his arms on the bulwark and refill his pipe, the second man saluted me.

“Yes, it’s all right, sir. We’re just down from Warley barracks, and we are going out as part of Captain Brace’s draft.”

I saluted and walked away, feeling in no wise proud of the men who would be partly under my charge. Physically, they were well-made fellows enough, but there was neither romance nor sentiment about them, and in the midst of all the bustle and confusion on board, with the decks literally swarming, I began to feel horribly lonely and depressed, and a sensation of home-sickness was coming on fast, till I told myself it was all nonsense, the home for which I was sickening was only the kind of school which for many months past I had been longing to leave, and that I should in all probability soon meet father, mother, and sister, as well as begin my career as a man.

Just then my attention was taken up by an angry encounter. Three men were brought on board, almost dragged, and thrown down, and it did not need a second thought to grasp the fact that they were sailors who had been spending their advance-money at one of the public-houses which swarmed about the docks.

All at once one of them, as he lay upon the deck, began to sing, and this brought out a smart-looking officer in uniform.

“Here, get these pigs below,” he cried angrily; and half a dozen of the sailors crossed to one side, returned with a coil of rope, fastened it round the waist of one of the last-comers, and then seizing him, trotted forward, dragging him along the deck to an open hatchway, where he was unceremoniously lowered down; one sailor followed to unfasten the rope, which was hauled up, and the other men were hauled to the hatchway and lowered in turn.

“That’s the way to serve them,” said the officer to me sharply. “Some time before they get drunk again.”

He nodded shortly and went aft, while, feeling disgusted with the rough scene, I made my way aft too, and came upon quite a crowd of people, evidently friends of the passengers, bidding good-bye, many of them with tears.

“This is cheerful,” I thought, and then by an absurd change of feeling, I was hurt because there was no one to bid good-bye to me.

“Confound it all, sir, do get out of the way, please!” said another officer sharply.

I gave him a resentful look, and backed out of his way into somebody else’s, sending a man who was carrying part of a passenger’s luggage staggering, so that he caught the corner of a trunk sharply against an officer’s shoulder, with anything but a pleasant result for the burdened man, who recovered himself, and hurried to the cabin stairs, while, after apologising to the officer, I followed the man, meaning to go up on the poop deck.

But the staircase was full of people, and I dived under to go below and find my cabin, which I now resentfully remembered was not mine.

“Never mind, I’ll go and sit down till dinnertime,” I thought. “I suppose there will be some dinner some time.”

I went along by the row of cabin doors, and found that I was on the port instead of the starboard side; and, crossing over, I found the right cabin at last, seized the handle sharply, for a man was coming along with more luggage, and, turning the fastening, I was about to dive in, but the door was fast, and a quick, authoritative voice cried from within —

“Well, what is it?”

“Open this door,” I said as sharply, for I felt irritated at being shut out of my place of refuge from the noise and misery of the deck.

There was the sound of a bolt shooting back, the door was thrown open, and I was face to face in the dim light with a tall, dark, youngish man, whose expression was stern and severe in the extreme.

“Well, sir,” he said shortly, “what is it?”

“What is it?” I cried angrily, with a sharp look at my luggage. “What are you doing here? Why is this door fastened?”

He looked at me quite fiercely for a few moments, and then his face softened a little, and he smiled, but it was a cold, wintry sort of facial sunshine.

“Ah, I see,” he said, “you are Mr Vincent, I suppose?”

“Yes, I am, sir, and that is my luggage. What then?”

“Only that my name is Brace, and I suppose we are to be fellow-passengers.”

“I—I—beg your pardon,” I stammered, with my face turning scarlet.

“There is no need,” he said coldly. “Perhaps it was my fault for fastening the door.”

He turned away, stooped down to a trunk in which glistened a bunch of keys, turned the lock, and then altered his mind and unlocked the trunk, and took out his keys.

“No,” he said rising, “there will be no need for that.”

He turned coldly, and went out of the cabin, leaving me with the sensation that I had behaved rudely and insolently to an officer who was my superior, and under whose orders I supposed I was to be.

“Nice beginning,” I said to myself, and I sat down on one of my own trunks, feeling anything but comfortable, as I came to the conclusion that I had made an enemy who would pay me handsomely during the voyage.

“This is a happy sort of place,” I muttered, as I sat listening to the banging of cabin doors and shouting of people for stewards and others, and angry complaints about being kept waiting; and all the time there was a stamping, tramping, and rattling going on overhead that was maddening.

And there I sat, gazing dreamily at the little round pane of glass which lit the cabin, till I grew so hot and weary of the stuffy little cupboard of a place, that I got up and went on deck again, to find that the great vessel had been cast loose, and that hawsers and capstans were being used to work us out of the dock.

We were already some little distance from the dock wall, which was crowded with the friends of the soldiers and sailors on board, those of the passengers for the most part remaining to go down the river, while the men thronged the bulwarks, and climbed to every point of vantage, to respond, with shouts and cheers, to waving of hands and, bonnets and the shrill good-byes.

“Everybody seems to have some one to say good-bye to him but me,” I thought again; and half pitying, half contemptuously, I leaned over the side watching the little crowd of excited women and old men who hurried along the dock quay so as to keep abreast of the vessel.

“A sad thing, too—saying good-bye,” I thought. “Perhaps they’ll never come back and meet again, and—”

My heart seemed to stand still, and I clutched the edge of the bulwark spasmodically, for all at once as I watched the women pressing along the edge of the stone quay, their faces turned toward us as they cried out to the men on board, I saw one young-looking thing wave her handkerchief and then press it to her eyes, and in imagination I heard her sobbing as she hurried on with the rest. But next instant I saw that she had caught her foot in one of the ropes strained from the great ship to the edge of the quay, and plunged forward headlong to strike the water twenty feet below, and disappear.

A wild shriek from the quay was mingled with the excited shouts of the men on board. Then orders were rapidly given, men ran here and there, and amidst a great deal of shouting, preparations were made for lowering down the nearest boat.

But all the time the huge East Indiaman, now steadily in motion, was gliding slowly toward the dock entrance, and the unfortunate woman had risen to the surface, and was beating the water slowly with her hand.

“She’ll be drowned long before that boat’s down,” said a gruff voice behind me, plainly heard in the shouting and excitement. “Why don’t they throw her a life-buoy?”

As whoever it was spoke a yellow ring fell from the vessel, splashed, and floated on the surface, but nowhere near the drowning woman. Two men ran along the quay to throw ropes. Other ropes were sent flying in rings from the

Jumna's stern; but I could see that the woman was too helpless to reach them, even if she saw them, which was doubtful, and the watching and waiting grew horrible.

The woman was now many yards away from where I stood, and I had seen her wild eyes gazing up as if into mine as we glided by her, the look seeming in my excitement to appeal specially to me, and at last I could bear it no longer.

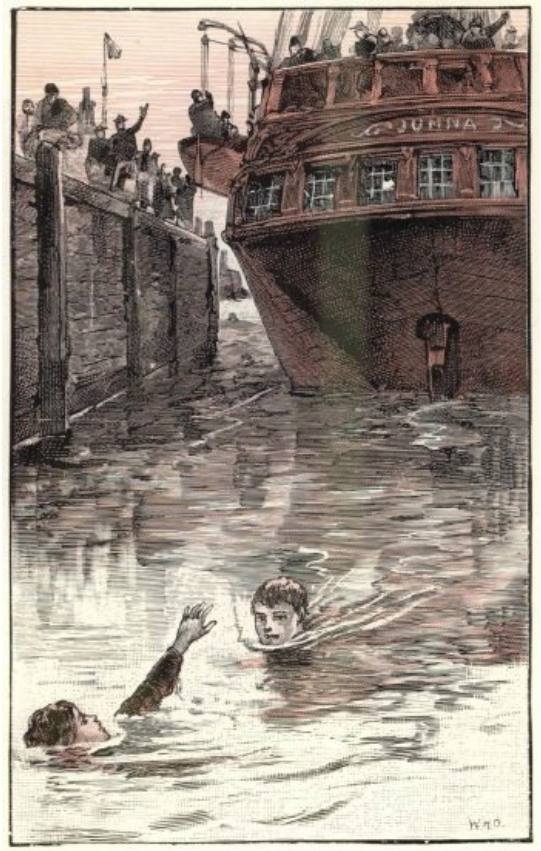
I drew myself up on to the bulwark, and looked round.

The boat stuck with something wrong about one of the davits; no other boat was visible; no one had leaped and swum to save the woman, whose clothes, after sustaining her for some moments, were gradually sinking out of sight, and the motion of her hand grew slower.

"Yes; she'll be drowned long before they can save her," I said, I believe aloud, for I seemed to hear the words; and then, without calculating the consequences, I dived from the high side of the great East Indiaman, struck the surface, and went on down, down, into the black muddy water, till I felt as if I should never rise.

Then there was light once again, and I struck out, dimly conscious of shouts and cheering, but fully awake to the fact that I was swimming there with the ship gliding away, and the steep forbidding wall of the dock about a score or two of yards distant, looking slippery, and as if it would afford no hold if I swam there, as for the moment I felt urged to do.

For I had forgotten the object which made me plunge into the dock, and the long immersion had



I SWAM AS HARD AS I COULD FOR THE SPOT. P 27

Gil the Gunner. *Frontispiece.*

confused me for the time being, as I tried vainly to make out what people were shouting to me from the quay.

All at once, away to my right, I saw a hand appear above the surface, and like a flash it came back, and, amidst shrieks and cheers, I swam as hard as I could for the spot, to reach it just as the hand disappeared.

For the moment I thought all was over, but, thrusting my hands down, they touched something, and the snatch I gave made the woman's shoulder roll up above the surface, then her face appeared, and, knowing the imminent danger, I tried to swerve aside to avoid the clutch of the poor creature's hand.

I was too late. The fingers seized me with a death-grip, and as I was thrown off my balance, I struggled to free myself, went under, made a desperate effort which brought me up again, and recovering myself a little, I tried hard to swim now and keep both afloat.

It was a time of confused effort and excitement I don't know that I felt much fear, only that I was getting weaker and weaker, and in a dull, half-stupefied fashion, I thought that if help did not come soon I should not be able to save the poor woman.

Then all was black again; there was a thundering in my ears, a scalding sensation in my throat, and my arms seemed to be turning to lead. But I was striving hard all the time, and once more in a dim way I saw the light, and struck out blindly enough, my only aim being to keep afloat.

I was conscious of shouting. Some one close by cried, "Hold her!" but the water was rising over my eyes again as I felt a sharp shock; hands clutched me directly after, and I was hauled into a boat, where I lay panting, my heart

throbbing, and a sensation at the back of my neck as if I had received a sharp blow.

“Oh, he’s all right,” said a familiar voice. “Give way, my lads, and let’s land her. I dare say they’ll bring her to. Better chance than we shall have.”

In a dreamy way I saw the dock wall above me, and people looking down; then we reached some steps, and the dripping figure of the woman was lifted out of the boat, and taken by other hands.

“Get her into a room, and fetch a doctor directly,” said a voice close to me, which I now recognised as that of the officer I had run against. “Now, my lads, give way.—I say, how are you?”

I looked up, feeling dull and confused, and saw the officer was bending down over me. “That’s better,” he said. “We’ll soon have you on board, and the surgeon will put you right in no time.”

In a few minutes the great stern of the *Jumna* was looming over us, and a tremendous burst of cheering rose as we were pulled alongside; but it did not strike me then what it all meant. I looked up, and could see white faces looking down at us, and handkerchiefs were being waved because the woman was saved, I supposed, but I was too weak and exhausted to trouble much. I was conscious of the hooks being made fast, of the creaking of the blocks as the boat was run up to the davits, and then of being lifted out on to the deck, all wet and cold, with the water streaming from me. There was a crowd of excited people around, but all dimly seen, and a loud humming of voices and an order or two, but the faces were swimming round me, and the voices sounded distant, all but one, which seemed to belong to my cabin, and it said—

“My gallant lad!”

Almost at the same moment, as it appeared to me, a rough hand caught mine, and gripped it so that it would have been painful if all I was passing through had not been confused and misty, as if it were part of a dream. There was a face, too, looking down in mine with a woollen cap and a red tuft, and a suggestion of a white flannel jacket, and a hoarse voice said—

“Bless you for that, sir. She’s my dear lass.”

Then everything was dark again, as if my head had gone under water, and when I saw clearly once more I was in the cabin and two gentlemen were standing by my berth.

Chapter Four.

“Better, my lad?” said one of the gentlemen, smiling; but I was looking at the other, who was Captain Brace, as I said in a puzzled way—

“Better? What’s the matter? Have I been ill?”

“Only nearly drowned. I hope you haven’t swallowed much of that filthy dock water.”

“Drowned? Dock water?” I said in a puzzled way; and then “Oh!” and I started up, but lay down and said “Oh!” again in a different tone of voice, for I had given my head a sounding rap against the beam above my berth.

“Hurt yourself?” said Captain Brace.

“Not very much,” I cried, “but I recollect now. That woman—was she saved?”

“Ask yourself,” said the first speaker. “You saved her, and it was a precious plucky thing to do. Oh yes, they’d soon bring her round. There, you don’t want me,” he continued, as he felt my pulse, and then laid his hand upon my forehead. “Lie still a bit, and have a nap.”

He nodded in a friendly way, and then went out of the cabin, leaving me with Captain Brace, whose dark stern face did not look half so repellent now, for it was lit up by a grave sad smile.

“Head ache?” he said gently.

“No—yes—a little. Who was that?”

“The ship’s doctor.”

“Oh. Did I go off in a faint?”

“Well, hardly that. You were nearly drowned.”

“I couldn’t keep up,” I said excitedly. “She clung to me so.”

“Yes, of course; we could see that. But be calm. Don’t get excited.”

“No,” I said. “I’m no worse for it, only I ought to have managed better. I should have swum behind her, and held her up by the hair.”

“Yes,” said my companion, smiling, “that is one theory; but it is very hard to put theory into practice at such a time.”

I lay looking at him searchingly for a few minutes, and thinking I should never like him, for he was cold and sad and

stern in his manner. He smiled at me when he caught my eye, but the smile kept fading away again directly, like wintry sunshine, and I was thinking that I would ask if I could not have another berth in a cabin to myself, however small, when another thought occurred to me, and I turned to him sharply.

“I say, that dirty water will spoil all my clothes!”

“Never mind your clothes, my lad,” he said smiling. “A *few* pounds will put that right. They are as nothing compared to a human life. Besides, it was not the brand-new uniform in that case.”

I felt the blood come into my cheeks, for he was smiling rather contemptuously.

“I’m not so proud of my uniform as all that,” I said hurriedly.

“Don’t be a humbug, my dear fellow,” he replied quietly. “You would not be natural if you were not proud of it. I was very proud of mine, I know. Stop; what are you going to do?”

“Get up,” I said quickly.

“Nonsense; not yet. What about your clothes?”

“My clothes?”

“Yes; you have no other suit unpacked. I gave your wet things to the steward to get dry.”

“I can soon unpack another suit,” I said, “if—if you will go.”

“Oh, I’ll go, if you like, my lad,” he replied with a smile; “but as we are to be chums through this voyage, we cannot afford to be very particular, especially as the accommodation is so limited. There, I will be your valet now; you shall be mine if I am ill. Here are your keys, purse, and pocket-book. I took everything out of your wet things. There,” he continued, “tell me which is the key, and I will get out clean linen and another suit. Then I’ll tell my servant to see that a bath is prepared; and, by the way, you have no servant yet, I suppose?”

I shook my head, as I lay wondering whether I liked this stern, cold, dark man, or whether I did not.

“Ah, well, we will soon pick out a man from the draft. This looks like the key.”

It was the right one, and in a quiet matter-of-fact way, and with very little help from me, he selected the necessary articles; and an hour later I went on deck, saving a slight headache, very little the worse.

I was eager to see how far we had dropped down the river; but at the end of ten minutes I was back in the cabin, flushed, hot, and excited, to find the door unfastened this time, and Captain Brace unpacking and arranging such articles as he wanted on the voyage.

“Hullo!” he cried; “not so well?”

“Oh, it’s horrid!” I cried excitedly. “How can people be so stupid!”

“Why, what is the matter?”

“I felt quite ashamed of myself,” I cried. “I had no sooner got on deck than the men began to cheer. I did not know then that it was meant for me, but directly after the captain came up and shook hands with me.”

“Very civil of him,” said my brother-officer, drily.

“Oh yes, if he had only meant it civilly; but then the chief officer came up, and a lot of passengers, and they all shook hands, and there was quite a crowd, and before I knew what was going to happen, I found a pack of ladies had come up, and one, a very stout little woman, called me her dear boy, and kissed me, and two others took out their handkerchiefs and began to cry.”

Captain Brace laughed unpleasantly, and I grew hotter.

“Why, you are quite the hero of the day, Vincent,” he said grimly.

“It’s horrid!” I cried pettishly. “I declare I wouldn’t have done it if I had known what they meant to do. Such nonsense!”

“Ah, you are talking nonsense, boy. Bah! take no notice. They’ll forget it all in a few hours. People soon get over these hysterical displays.”

I sat down sulkily on one of my cases, while he went on coolly arranging his shaving tackle, night things, and the boots and shoes.

“I like him less and less,” I said to myself, as I sat and watched him, while, as I fancied, he treated me in the most cavalier of ways, only speaking now and then; but when he did speak it was to ask me some question about myself, and each time he made me think how young and inexperienced I was, for he appeared to be getting to know everything, while he was still quite a stranger to me.

“Yes,” he said at last, “I have heard of Colonel Vincent—a brother-officer of mine once met him at dinner somewhere up the country. I was in quite a different part.”

“Then you have been out in India before?” I cried eagerly.

“I?” he said, with a faint smile. “Oh yes. I was out there seven years—quite an apprenticeship. I was just such a griffin as you when I went out first, but a couple of years older.”

“Griffin!” I thought; and I felt I disliked him more and more; just, too, as I was warming up to him a little, and thinking he was improving.

We were silent for a time, and I waited for him to speak, which he did at last, but in a forced, half-bantering way.

“You’ll find it pretty hot, squire,” he said; “and sometimes you’ll wish your uniform back at the tailor’s. It is terribly hot at times.”

“Yes, I’ve heard so,” I said, with my curiosity getting the better of my annoyance. “Tell me something about the country.”

“Eh? About the country? Ah! Of course you, in your young enthusiasm, are full of romantic fancies.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I replied haughtily.

“Yes, you are,” he said laughing. “All boys going out are. I was. But don’t expect too much, my lad,” he continued coldly. “There are grand and lovely bits of scenery, and times when the place looks too beautiful for earth; but, to balance this, deserts and storms, terrible rains, and dust borne on winds that seem as if they had come from the mouth of a furnace. There are times, too, when the state of the atmosphere affects your nerves, and life seems to be unendurable.”

“It doesn’t sound very cheerful,” I said bitterly.

“No; and I am acting like a wet blanket to you,” he said, with a sad smile. “But you will do your duty, and make friends, and it is not such a bad life after all.”

There was another silence, and I waited in vain for him to speak.

“What regiment are you in, sir?” I said at last, as he stood with his back to me, as if wrapped in thought.

“I?” he said, starting, and looking round. “Oh, I am in the artillery—the horse artillery. I thought you would know.”

I shook my head.

“We may run against each other sometimes out yonder; but it is a great country, and you may be stationed hundreds of miles away.”

“I hope so,” I thought.

“Rather a rough time to come for you, my lad,” he said, with what I took to be a cynical smile; “but you will soon get used to the noise of the guns.”

“Of course,” I said coldly. “Tell me more about the country. There are plenty of tigers, I suppose?”

“Oh yes, but far more mosquitoes.”

“Well, I know that,” I said.

“You have never seen one, I suppose?”

“No.”

“Then don’t make the same mistake as the Irish private’s wife at Madras.”

“What was that?” I said.

“It is an old story that you may not have heard. She was on shipboard, and eagerly listening to an old sergeant’s wife who had been there before; and this woman told her that one of the great troubles of the country was the mosquito. ‘An’ what’s a moskayto?’ said the Irishwoman. ‘Oh, a horrid creature with a long trunk, and it plunges it into you, and sucks your blood.’ At last they reached the coast, and the young Irishwoman was eagerly watching the shore with its troops of turbaned natives, palanquins, and mounted men, till suddenly a train of elephants came in sight, steadily nodding their heads and waving their trunks. The young Irishwoman drew a long deep breath, and looked as if she would never see home again, and the old sergeant’s wife asked her what was the matter. ‘Oh,’ she said, in a hoarse whisper, ‘is thim moskaytoes?’”

Captain Brace appeared so different as he told me this little old anecdote, that I felt as if I should like him after all; but the light died out of his face again, and he looked at me in a troubled way, as if vexed with himself for having been so frivolous.

“How long have you been back home?” I said, so as to keep up the conversation, for it was miserable to sit there in the silence.

“Six months,” he said gravely.

“That’s a good long holiday,” I said merrily.

“Holiday, boy?” he cried, in so wild and passionate a tone that I was startled, and looked at him wonderingly as he turned away.

“I—I beg your pardon,” I said apologetically. “I’m afraid I have blurted out something which I ought not to have said.”

“Never mind—never mind,” he said, with his head averted; “of course you could not know.”

He sank down on the edge of his berth with so sad and dejected a look that I rose and went to him.

“Pray forgive me,” I said. “I did not know.”

He looked up at me with his face drawn and old.

“Thank you,” he said, taking my hand. “There is nothing to forgive, my lad. You may as well know, though. Brother-officers ought to be brotherly, even if they are a little strange. It was a case of illness. I took some one home—to save her life, and—”

He was silent for some moments, and I could feel his hand tremble as he pressed mine very hard, and seemed to be making a desperate effort to be calm, and master the emotion which evidently thrilled him.

“God knows best,” I heard him whisper, hardly above his breath. And then aloud, “I am going back to my duties, you see—alone.”

The painful silence which followed was broken by the sound of a bell, and he started up quite a changed man.

“There!” he said, in a strange tone, “soldiers have no time for sorrow. It is the dead march, Vincent. Then a volley over the grave, and a march back to quarters to a lively quick-step. Come, brother-officer, we are abreast of Gravesend: as far as we shall go to-night, and there’s the dinner-bell. Right shoulder forward. March!”

“No,” I said to myself. “I am sorry for him, but he is too strange. I shall never like Captain Brace.”

Chapter Five.

Rough weather as soon as we were out of the mouth of the Thames gave me something else to think about, and I did not spend much time in calculating whether I liked Captain Brace or not; but I suppose I behaved pretty well, for in two days I went on deck feeling a little faint, and as if the great ship was playing at pretending to sink beneath my feet.

“Come, that’s good,” said a familiar voice; and I found Captain Brace had crossed over to where I was holding on by the bulwark, looking at the distant shore. “Why, Vincent, you are a better sailor than I am.”

I smiled at him in rather a feeble manner.

“Oh, I mean it,” he said. “It has been very rough for the past forty-eight hours, and I have been, as you know, pretty queer, but I forced myself to get up this morning, and it has done me no end of good. I have been down to see the men, thinking I would rouse them up, but, poor fellows, they are all so utterly miserable that I think I’ll leave them alone to-day.”

Human nature is curious; for I was so glad that the men were worse than the officers, that I felt quite cheerful, and after breakfast—to which I went down feeling as if I could not touch a bit, but did touch a good many bits and drops—I found myself walking up and down the deck with Captain Brace, taking an interest in the towering masts with their press of sail, and the flashing, sparkling water, which came with a bump every now and then against the side of the great ship, and scattered a fine shower of spray over the bows.

For the wind was brisk, and the ship heeled over pretty well as she sped down Channel.

In the course of the day, during which I began to be acquainted with the officers, a passenger or two slowly made his appearance. I say “his,” because not a lady showed on deck during the week. Then, as the weather fell calm, they all came up nearly at once; and when I caught sight of the stout elderly lady who had been so affectionate to me in the docks, I felt disposed to go down. But there was no occasion. The week’s confinement below, and their miserable state of illness, had pretty well swept away the recollection of the drowning scene, and beyond one or two looks and a whisper passed on from one to the other, which I felt were about me, there was nothing to make me feel nervous and red.

I am not going to give a description of our long voyage round by the Cape, for that was our course in those days; let it suffice if I say that we sailed south into warmer seas, with the torrid sun beating down upon us in a way which Captain Brace said would prepare us for what was to come. We had storms in rounding the Cape, and then we sailed on again north and east.

It was a long, slow, monotonous voyage, during which I went on learning a good deal of my profession, for there was drilling every morning on deck, and the draft of men were marched and countermarched till the rough body of recruits began to fall correctly into the various movements, while I supplemented the knowledge I had acquired as a cadet, and more than once obtained a few words of praise from the sergeant with the draft, and what were to me high eulogies from Captain Brace.

“Nothing like mastering the infantry drill, Vincent,” he said to me one day. “Young officers know, as a rule, far too little of foot drill. It will save you a good deal of trouble when we get there.”

It was monotonous but not unpleasant, that voyage out. We had the customary sports on crossing the line; we fished and caught very little, though the men captured the inevitable shark with the lump of salt pork; and used the grains, as they called the three-pronged fork, to harpoon dolphins. I had my first sight of flying fish, and made friends with the officers. Then there was music and dancing on the hot moonlit nights; deck quoits under the awning by day; a good deal more sleep than we took at home; and at last we reached Ceylon and touched at Colombo, where everything struck me as being wonderfully unlike what I had pictured in my own mind.

“Well,” said Captain Brace one evening, after we had had a run together on the shore, “what do you think of the Cingalese?”

“That they look so effeminate,” I said.

“Exactly,” he replied, nodding his head as I went on.

“They are not bad looking; but it looks so absurd to see those elderly men dressed in muslins, with drawers and clothes that put me in mind of little girls about to go to a children’s party or a dance.”

He looked amused, and I continued—

“And then the ordinary people, with their oily black hair all done up in a knot behind and held by a comb. It does look so womanish.”

“Yes; to us,” said Captain Brace. “But their clothes are comfortable for the hot climate, and that is more than you will be able to say of ours when you get out in the plains in full uniform some day.”

“And it will not be long first now,” I thought; and I did not look forward to my first appearance in full uniform under a hot sun with any degree of dread.

Then we were once more at sea, sailing on and on through fine weather and foul, till I learned that we were sailing up through the Sunderbunds, and on up the Hooghly, passing outward-bound vessels with great towering East Indiamen among them. Then the shore began to draw in, and I learned from one that there was good tiger-shooting in that district, beyond where I could see a fringe of palms, and from another that it would not be safe to bathe where we were.

“On account of sharks,” I said, with an assumption of knowledge.

“No, sir; muggers.”

And when I stared inquiringly, he added—

“Crocodiles; and higher up the river, sir, great turtles, which will snap a man, or a horse, or a dood to pieces in no time.”

It was the same evening that I was standing looking at the low, far-off shore, with Captain Brace, and I said quietly—

“I say, that little stout Mr Binns—”

“Mr Commissioner Binns,” said the Captain. “Give him his full title. What about him?”

“Was he telling me travellers’ tales about the crocodiles—muggers, as he called them—and the risk of bathing?”

“Oh no; they swarm in this muddy river. I wonder they have let that come down.”

He pointed to something floating at a short distance from the ship, and I looked at it with curiosity.

“Some dead animal?” I said.

“A dead man, Vincent. We are going up the estuary of the sacred river, you know, and it is the burial-place of the great cities which are upon its bank.”

I turned away from the floating object with a shudder of horror, and was silent for some minutes, but broke out with—

“But the great turtles—will they drag a man or a horse under water, and eat him?”

“I have never seen it,” he replied; “but I have seen them attack a dood.”

“What is a dood?”

“A camel; one of a troop fording the river. It had plunged into a deep hole, and before it could struggle back into the shallow it was pulled under, and never rose again.”

“Ugh!” I shuddered; “how horrid!”

“Yes. You will know the danger if ever you have to take your men across a ford.”

A couple of days later we were anchored in the great stream in front of the city of palaces, and I was gazing with

eyes full of wonder and eagerness at the noble buildings, the great flights of steps leading down to the water, the constant procession of people to and fro, with huge elephants gaily caparisoned and bearing temple-like howdahs, some filled with Europeans, more often with turbaned chiefs or people of importance. The white garments and turbans of the natives gave a light and varied look in the bright sunshine, while amongst them were the carriages of the English residents, the handsome horses of officers, and the gay uniforms of the English and native troops, from whose weapons the dazzling sunshine flashed.

“Yes; plenty of the military element,” said Captain Brace, pointing out different figures in the busy scene. “Take my glass,” he continued. “That’s a sepoy regiment. You can see their dark faces.”

“Yes, I see,” I cried eagerly.

“Do you see those two mounted men in white, with lances?”

“Yes; who are they?”

“Sowars of the native cavalry; and that little half troop behind—you can tell what they are?”

“They look like English hussars,” I said.

“Right. Part of the eighth, I should say. They are stationed here.”

“But they are not the East India Company’s men.”

“No. Part of the regular army. Those sowars are some of ours, and— Ah, you are in luck,” he cried, taking back the glass and using it quickly, before lending it again. “Look: there are some of the horse brigade.”

“Artillery?” I cried excitedly.

“Yes; and in review order. A troop of our horse artillery with their guns.”

My hands trembled so that I could hardly bring the glass to bear upon the long line of men, but at last I had it correct, and excitedly saw them file by at a distance, the sun glancing on their polished brass helmets with long trailing plumes of red horsehair; their blue heavily braided jackets looking as if suddenly cut off by the men’s white breeches, and then again by their heavy black boots.

It was to me a gallant show, and I drew a long, deep breath as I counted the guns with the men mounted upon the limbers, and watched attentively till they passed out of sight.

“Well,” said my companion, “what do you think of our brigade?”

“Oh!” I ejaculated, “I wish I belonged.”

A very brief reply, but the tone made my sad-looking companion smile sadly.

“Ah, Vincent,” he said, “you can only see the parade and show. Yes; it is very bright and fresh to you, but the time will come when all that pomp will be very irksome to you, and you will wish that the Company would let you dress simply and sensibly in a uniform suited to this terrible climate, and in which you could use your limbs freely without distressing yourself and your horse.”

“But they look magnificent,” I said.

“Yes, brilliant, my lad, brilliant; but there is another side to soldiering besides the show. There! all this sounds as if I were trying to damp and discourage you, but I have had seven years’ hard work out here in India, Vincent; perhaps, when you have been here as long, you may talk as I do.”

“I shall not,” I muttered to myself. “I should be a poor soldier if I did. What did you say?” I said aloud.

“I said that to-morrow morning we go ashore, and I can introduce you at head-quarters when I go to report myself. But, Vincent, my lad, what luck it would be if you had been in the horse brigade, and found yourself appointed to my troop.”

“Yes,” I said, rather non-enthusiastically, for my hopes went in quite a contrary direction.

“You would rather not,” he said, gazing at me sadly, and I coloured up like a girl, for I felt that he had read my thoughts. “I’m afraid you don’t like me, my lad.”

My face burned as I said, “I’ve tried hard to like you ever since we met.”

“Tried,” he said, smiling, as he raised his brows. “Ah, well! that is frankly spoken, after all,” and he walked away, leaving me feeling that I had hurt his feelings by showing that I did not like him in the least.

We met next day, and I went with him to report myself, the officers I saw making more than one jocular allusion to my being so much of a boy, but good-humouredly telling me that I should soon correct that. Then followed my introduction to my company in the artillery, where with my Brandscombe knowledge I was soon able to hold my own, and obtained some little notoriety from the interest I took in the horses which drew our heavy guns. I never let slip a chance either of being present at the parades of the horse artillery, visiting Captain Brace often; and I am afraid very selfishly, for I felt little warmth for him as a man, though a great deal for him as an officer, as I admired his bearing and the way in which he handled his men.

And so a year passed away, and then came a day when I had to appear at head-quarters, where I showed myself, feeling that I was in disgrace for some reason or another.

I was kept waiting for some little time before an orderly bade me follow him, and directly after, I found myself in the presence of four stern-looking officers, who began to question me severely, one beginning as soon as another ceased.

I suppose my replies were satisfactory, all being on technical matters connected with field-gunnery, but what it all meant, unless I was to be promoted, I could not tell.

At last the officer who seemed to be the head, turned to me.

“Look here, Lieutenant Vincent,” he said; “this sharp examination is due to the fact that some pressure has been brought to bear, to have you transferred to the horse artillery.”

I turned scarlet with excitement. “Well, sir, we naturally resent this, as we are proud of our horse service, and do not want some lout with interest to back him, foisted upon us. It would be degrading, but I tell you frankly that we are favourably impressed.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said.

“We have carefully gone into your antecedents. We find that you are the son of a distinguished officer in the Queen’s service; that your career at Brandscombe was excellent, and we learn nothing but good of you in connection with your year’s work here.”

I bowed.

“Of course, we push you forward reluctantly, for it is a great honour to such a youth as you are. Why, you will be the youngest officer in the horse artillery.”

“I am young, sir,” I said, humbly, but with my heart beating fast.

“And there is another thing before this is settled. What about riding?”

“I can ride anything, sir,” I said eagerly.

“Indeed!”

“I have hunted a great deal at home.”

“Ah, well, I suppose we must give way, and I hope you will prove worthy of your promotion to so gallant a corps. By the way, you know Captain Brace?”

“Oh yes, sir,” I replied.

“Yes; he speaks very highly of you. So you shall go on probation with his troop at Rambagh.”

I tried to speak, but no words came.

“Which means, Mr Vincent,” said another of the old officers, “that if you prove yourself a soldier of spirit you will stay.”

I hardly knew what followed, and soon after I was dismissed, to go and find Brace, who welcomed me with outstretched hands.

“I am very glad, Vincent,” he said, “very glad indeed. Come along with me, and I’ll introduce you to Major Lacey, and the other officers of your new corps.”

Chapter Six.

“You miserable, ugly, lazy nigger, take that, and that, and that.”

There was the sound of blows at each *that*, and then a volley of abuse as I neared the officers’ quarters, and every word and blow came through the open windows.

“Confound you! do you think I keep you to do nothing but sleep? I’ll have my horses look better than any one else’s, and they look worse,” came clearly; and there were more blows, while a group of white-clothed syces, two of whom held horses, looked at one another, and I saw that their faces wore a troubled aspect, as they whispered as soon as the English sentry on guard by the gateway turned his back to march steadily in the shade to the end of his beat, but as soon as he faced round they stood like bronze statues.

Then came more blows, and it was evident to me that the trouble, or whatever it might be, was taking place in the quarters to which I had been directed; but I wanted to make sure, and I turned out of my way to meet the sentry, who halted and saluted as I drew near.

“Which are Lieutenant Barton’s quarters?” I said.

“Straight in front, sir. Through that door where the horses stand.”

“Is there something the matter?”

The man grinned. “Lieutenant’s licking his syce, sir, for being dirty.”

“Oh!” I said; and I was about to turn away, when the man said respectfully—

“Beg pardon, sir; you don’t know me again.”

“No,” I said, looking at the man in a puzzled way. “Yes, of course; you are Denny. I did not expect to find you here. How are you?”

“Nicely, sir, thank ye. I was picked with two more to enter this troop. Very glad, sir, you are appointed to it.”

“Thank you, Denny,” I said. “It is pleasant to see the same faces.”

“Beg pardon, sir,” continued the man eagerly. “I oughtn’t to talk like this, perhaps, but I got a letter from London yesterday, and she’s all right, and ain’t no worse for being pretty nigh drowned; and she said if ever I see the young gent as saved her life, as she’d always pray for him that he might live long and die happy.”

“Oh, don’t talk about it, Denny,” I said hastily. “Thank you. That door where the syces are with the horses?”

“Don’t stand sulking there, you black-looking scoundrel. It won’t do with me; I’ll cut it out of you.”

There was the sound of more blows, and then, as I nearly reached the doorway, where the native servants made way respectfully, I heard what was evidently the final blow, and the words, “Now get out.”

Directly after, a tall native in white came out, with his face convulsed and the blood streaming down one cheek from a cut on the left temple, and staining his white cotton garment; but as he came upon me, his countenance suddenly grew unnaturally calm, and he drew up on one side and saluted, as if nothing was the matter, though I could see that he was trembling like a leaf.

Discipline had already taught me that I had no right to interfere with the actions of my superior officers, but human nature had made me already resent the way in which overbearing Englishmen bullied and ill-used the patient, long-suffering natives; and as I had heard the sounds of abuse and blows coming across the compound, a curious sensation of shame and annoyance made me feel hot and uncomfortable; and now as I came suddenly face to face with the good-looking, dark-faced man, with his bleeding temple, I hurriedly drew out a clean white handkerchief, doubled it into a bandage, and signing to the man to bend down, tied it tightly, bandage fashion, over what was a very severe cut.

The man shrank from me for a moment, as if my action repelled him, but the next he had crossed his hands humbly over his breast, and bent forward.

The act on my part was very quickly done, and then he raised his head, and his eyes met mine with a look that I could not read, but I could see that his lips were quivering, and the side of his head left uncovered was full of lines.

The next moment I had remembered that I was an officer, and drew myself up stiffly.

“Is Lieutenant Barton in his rooms?” I said, in what I meant to be sharp, authoritative tones.

“Yes; what do you want?” came out through the window; and I stepped forward, catching one peculiar look from the injured man again, and noticing that the other syces salaamed to me as I passed out of the glare of sunshine, into the comparative darkness of a mat-hung passage, and from thence into a comfortable room well-furnished with cane chairs, gay Indian rugs, and curtains, and with a light table, on which stood a cigar-box, a bottle or two, and glasses. Between them lay a stout, silver-topped malacca cane, evidently the instrument with which the native groom had been chastised.

But the principal object in the room was a fair-haired, supercilious-looking young man of seven or eight and twenty, in the lightest of pyjamas, and with a scarlet sash about his waist.

He was lolling back in a reclining-chair as I entered, and he wrinkled his face, half-closing his eyes, and drawing his heavy moustache close up under his nose in a very unpleasant way, as he stared at me.

“Oh, you’re our new fire-eater,” he said, in a bantering tone. “I heard you had come while I was away. How are you? Sit down and have a cigar. Here, hi!”

He clapped his hands, and a grave-looking native in white entered, salaamed, and said softly—

“Sahib?”

“Mix two cool drinks, and put in plenty of ice. Look sharp!”

“Don’t order anything for me,” I said, as the man bowed and left the room.

“Don’t object to my having one, do you?” was said sneeringly, as I sat down; and then the officer laughed. “Take a cigar.”

“Thank you. I don’t smoke.”

“Don’t drink—don’t smoke? Ah, well, I dare say we can teach you before we’ve done. Well, how do you like

Rambagh?”

“I haven’t been here long enough to tell yet. It is very hot.”

“Pooh! this is nothing. Ninety. Wait a bit, and we’ll give it to you up to twenty.”

“No, that’s too cold,” I said, laughing.

“Is it? Wait till you try.”

“Oh, you mean a hundred and twenty.”

“I do. You will not be so ready to use a lot of words when one will do, after you’ve been here a while.”

“I suppose it does make you languid.”

“Yes, and you can’t get a thing done by the lazy hounds you have for servants. The more you keep, the less there is done. I had to thrash my new syce this morning to bring him to his senses.”

“Yes, I heard you,” I said. “Are you allowed to knock people about like that?”

He opened his eyes, and then squeezed them up again, as he stared at me wonderingly.

“Allowed? Who’s to prevent it?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m new to the place.”

Just then the native servant brought in two glasses of some cool-looking drink, and handed them to his master.

“Now, idiot! how often am I to tell you to go to the visitors first?”

“Ask pardon, master,” said the man; and he brought the brass tray to me, but the lieutenant took his own first.

“Health,” he said shortly, and half drained his glass. I sipped mine, and set it down as the man left the room.

“Let’s see; you came over with Brace, didn’t you?”

“Yes; in the *Jumna*. He advised me to call and see you this morning, as you were out when we came.”

“Much obliged to him. Fond of shooting?”

“I dare say I should be. I have had no opportunity so far.”

“Fishing, then?”

“Oh yes. I have had a little trout and bottom fishing.”

“Ah! we can give you some mahseer fishing here. Trying after big ones that can pull you in.”

“Thank you. I shall be very glad.”

“But you will not have much time yet. Nice grind you’ve got before you to master your drill.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” I replied.

“Don’t drink, don’t smoke, and I suppose you can’t ride?”

“Yes, I can ride,” I said quickly.

“I suppose so—in a riding-school. Wait till you are going at full gallop over the plain, with six or eight guns bumping and jumping after you; you’ll find out then whether you can ride. Well, how do you like Brace?”

The question startled me.

“I—I hardly know yet,” I said.

“With him long enough, anyhow!”

“I thought him very gentlemanly and kind.”

“Bah! You don’t want a man to be gentlemanly and kind. You have got to learn to be a soldier—an artilleryman, not a molly. But, there, don’t you be uneasy about that. I’ll see that you are not spoiled. Got your servants yet?”

“No; there is nothing settled. I have only just come.”

“No horses, I suppose?”

“No. Captain Brace said he would help me to get a couple.”

“Hum! Deal he knows about horses. Better let me buy them for you. I know just the thing for you: plenty of speed, showy, and grand action—sort of a charger that wouldn’t do for me. Not up to my weight, but it would carry you

splendidly. Brace always was the worst mounted man in the brigade. Better try a cigar."

I declined again, and sat chatting to my brother-officer till I thought I had been with him long enough, when I rose to go.

"What! off already?" he said. "Oh, well, if you can't stay. But you haven't swallowed your drink."

I declined that too, feeling that he must be looking down upon me with the most utter contempt; but he said nothing till I had shaken hands.

"Then I shall look out for a charger for you?"

"Please no; not till I have spoken to Captain Brace."

"What for? Oh, he'll be glad to be saved the trouble. That will be all right. You stick to me, and I'll see you through."

I left my brother-officer's quarters soon afterwards, feeling very glad to get away, and certainly under the impression that he thought me very stupid and boyish.

"I suppose I've been keeping him in," I thought, for outside I found the syces still waiting with the horses I had noticed on entering, and there, too, was the man who had been punished by the lieutenant; but my handkerchief was not tied round his head now, his wound having been bathed and covered with a scrap of plaister. I observed, too, that he must have changed the slight white garments he wore, for the ugly stains were gone.

He salaamed as I passed and went back to my own quarters, thinking that I should have to alter a good deal if I used the native servants as I had seen the man treated that day.

Chapter Seven.

I felt bound to tell Captain Brace of Lieutenant Barton's proposal respecting my horses, and he looked at me sharply. "Do you wish him to manage that for you?" he said.

"Certainly not," I replied quickly; "he is quite a stranger, and I have known you from leaving England."

"He has not a very high opinion of my knowledge of horses, I know; but I think I can save your father some money in the transaction; and I promise you that you shall be well-mounted. And, by the way, Vincent, I don't want to worry you with advice, but I must tell you one thing. The climate here is very trying to an English constitution, and if a man —"

I looked up sharply, and I saw a faint smile on his lip as he went on—

"—wishes to keep in health, he must be careful, and very abstemious as to what he drinks. Do you understand?"

I said I did, and thought of the table in Lieutenant Barton's quarters; feeling sure it was meant as a hint to me not to follow my brother-officer's example.

I was so busy during those early days drilling, and learning my various duties, that the time went very fast. I had my servants engaged, and felt rather ashamed to have so many; but the captain said that they were absolutely necessary, and the lieutenant that there were not half enough. He found terrible fault, too, with my horse the first day I was mounted, and on parade; and this, too, after I had tried the handsome dark arched-necked creature several times, and found that it carried me delightfully, being one of those elastic short-stepping animals, whose pace suited so well with the military style of riding.

"Well," said Barton, sourly, "I gave you my advice, and offered to help you. Don't blame me if you get ridden over one of these days."

I was nervous enough before he spoke that morning, and naturally felt a good deal more so afterwards; and during the evolutions in which I took part for the first time, with a stern-looking sergeant close by me to help me through, it seemed to me as if my brother-officer's words were about to be fulfilled. For in my confusion during a gallop I managed to get where I had no business to be, and turned sharply round to see that the men with the gun were pretty close to me before they reined in. To complete my misery, the major in charge of the battery rode up, and delivered a few pretty sharp adjurations to me and to the sergeant.

I did not feel very comfortable that morning as I rode up to the quarters, dismounted, covered with perspiration and dust, and saw my horse led away; neither did I feel much better after my bath and change, as I hesitated whether I should go over to Captain Brace's rooms, he having invited me to breakfast.

"I shall never manage it," I thought. Every one was laughing at me, and it was dreadful to be rowed like that by the major.

I threw myself despondently in my chair, and had quite given up going, when Captain Brace's servant came round to say that his master was waiting breakfast.

There was nothing else for it but to go, and I followed the man to the bright-looking, cool room where Brace was seated.

"Come, my lad," he cried, "I should have thought you would be ravenous. Hallo! What's wrong?"

I looked at him with my face all in wrinkles, and sank down despondently in the seat to which he pointed.

“Tired out?” he said.

I shook my head.

“Then, pray, what’s the matter?”

“Matter?” I cried bitterly. “You saw what a fool I made of myself this morning.”

His face wore a peculiar look as he shook his head.

“No,” he said; “I was not there that time. What did you do?”

“Not there! Why, you saw me get all wrong, and the men nearly ride me down, as Barton said they would, with that horse.”

“I thought so,” said Brace drily. “How curious it is that a prophecy of evil always makes more impression than one of good.”

“I don’t understand you,” I said.

“My words were simple, my lad. Barton ran that horse down because he did not buy it for you. Now, naturally enough, I kept my eye upon you all through the drill, so as to see how you would get on. Your horse behaved admirably; and I should be ready to give you a couple of hundred rupees more for it than it cost; while, for a beginner, I thought you did remarkably well. Here: have some coffee.”

“Well!” I cried, excitedly, “when I was nearly ridden over!”

“You were not nearly ridden over; nothing of the kind.”

“But you heard what the major said.”

“Yes. He shouts pretty sharply sometimes. You were out of your place, of course.”

“Oh yes; I was out of my place, of course,” I said bitterly. “I feel completely disgraced.”

“Go on with your breakfast, boy,” cried Brace, with a good-humoured laugh. “Disgraced! You, a mere calf in just learning your drill. If you had been in the troop for four or five years, and made such a blunder, why, it would have been rather disgraceful; but for you! Why, we are quite proud of the rapid way you are picking up the evolutions.”

“No: you are saying that to comfort me,” I cried bitterly.

“I have a good many faults, Vincent,” he said quietly; “but I don’t think insincerity is one of them. If I say a thing to you, my lad, pleasant or unpleasant, you may take it for granted that I believe it to be honest and true.”

“But the major? What he said to me before all the men was dreadful.”

“Not at all. He was bound to say it. He might have spoken less harshly; but—wonderful!—here he is.”

For just then I nearly jumped out of my chair on hearing the major’s voice asking for Captain Brace, and the next moment he had stridden into the room.

“How nice and cool you are here,” he said. “Ah, Vincent, my lad, feel a bit sore after our gallop?”

“Yes, sir,” I replied, gloomily, as the major seated himself at the table, helped himself to coffee and curry, and began to eat.

“You’ll soon get over that. It’s rough work at first; but use is second nature. I say, that’s a very pretty little nag of yours; rather slight, but quite up to your weight. She gallops splendidly. Here, I’m regularly breakfasting. I wanted to have a few words with you, so I came over, as my wife was not down.”

“Shall I go, sir?” I said, rising.

“No, no, my dear boy; sit still.”

I stared. Not an hour before he was bullying me fiercely before the whole troop.

Brace saw my face, and laughed.

“Vincent is in the doldrums,” he said.

“What about?” grumbled the major, with his mouth full of curry.

“You asked him if he was sore. He is: about the thrashing you gave him this morning.”

“Bah! nonsense! Good lesson for you, boy. You won’t make that mistake again. You are getting on capitally. Wish we had a couple more of your breed.”

“There, Vincent,” said Brace; “what do you say now?”

I could not say anything, only feel as if the morning had suddenly become bright and joyous; and I began to make a wonderful breakfast; while the major chatted over a few matters connected with the discipline of the troop and the behaviour of some of the men.

“Well,” said Brace, as soon as the major had gone; for he jumped up suddenly on receiving a message from his own quarters, leaving his half-eaten curry and a newly filled cup of coffee.

“The general down,” he cried. “Bring Vincent over this evening for an hour or two.”

“Well,” said Brace, “how are the spirits now?”

“Oh, better,” I said, smiling; “but I do wish I was more clever.”

“Rubbish! Don’t be impatient. A soldier can’t learn his duties in a month; and when he has learned them, it requires incessant practice to keep up to the mark; and will need,” he continued sadly, “to work hard; and, by the way, pay all the attention you can to your sword practice and fencing. I would not miss any of the pistol practice either.”

I looked at him curiously, for there seemed to be a meaning underlying his words.

“You need not worry about the riding-school; you can’t help getting on well in that. What are you looking at?”

“You don’t think there is going to be war, do you?”

“I think a soldier ought always to be ready in case there is,” he replied evasively.

“Yes; but not war out here. You don’t think Russia means—”

“Hallo! Who has been talking to you about Russia? No, Vincent, my boy, I do not; but I should not be surprised if we have a bit of trouble in one of the provinces before long. I hope not; but we are always having a little affair with some native prince. However, if we do, it may not affect us. Our troop may be a thousand miles away. India is a big place.”

“Yes, and isn’t it wonderful that so few Englishmen should keep so many millions of the natives in subjection?”

“In some respects, yes, my lad; in others, no. The great power comes from the fact that India embraces many nations who do not all think alike, neither are they of the same religion; and hence if we had trouble with one nation, the possibility is that we could bring some of the others to fight upon our side. But matters are not as they should be, Vincent; and I cannot help having forebodings now and then. We do not treat the people as we should. There is a little too much of the iron heel of the despot on their necks.”

I thought of Barton’s treatment of the syce, and of many similar incidents wherever I had been since I came out, and then forgot every one but the fact that the post had come in, and with it a letter from my father, enclosing two others from my mother and sister.

“Where are they now?” asked Brace.

“In the north-west provinces,” I said eagerly, “at Nussoor.”

“Some hundred miles away, Vincent. You are not likely to meet them for some time to come. You will have to introduce me to your people when you do.”

Chapter Eight.

My work was hard at Rambagh, for I had no measured hours. I was ambitious too; eager to master my profession, and in constant dread of exciting derision by making some mistake.

Perhaps some lads of my age would not have worked so hard, but would have contented themselves by acquiring the necessary knowledge slowly; but that did not accord with my ideas, and I eagerly attended all the early morning drills, and though the sergeant sourly said that I wanted a deal of setting up, and the riding-master laughingly told me that I looked like a tailor on horseback, I suppose I got on pretty well. At any rate, I was able to keep my place without making many outrageous blunders.

I suppose it was a good deal due to the petting bestowed upon him, but I found my charger—the Sheik—as I called him, at Captain Brace’s suggestion, grew quite attached to me, and would follow me like a dog.

And in spite of the intense heat, it was a pleasant life when I grew more used to my work, and less conscious and afraid of ridicule. I had my servants, who were very obedient and servile, but not at all attentive. I was too easy with them, Barton said, and he told me that a good kicking would do them good. Certainly his men flew to obey every word, and shrank at every look.

“And hate him like poison,” Captain Brace said bitterly.

But they did not show their hatred, if Brace was right; and no officer rode out to parade in better trim than Barton.

One hot day, as I was seated panting at my shuttered window, I saw that Barton’s way of treating the syces was imitated by his subordinates, for one of the Serjeants, for some reason or another, raised his hand to strike a white-clothed figure across the enclosure, but altered his mind, and kicked him instead, with the result that the man shrank away, but made no sign, and I could not help thinking what a tyrant the white man was to the conquered black.

I don't know how it was, but as I lay back in my chair weary after a heavy morning drill, and drowsy from the effects of a good breakfast, I kept my eyes on the white-clothed figure whom the serjeant had kicked. He had stood like a statue till the serjeant had gone into the barracks, but as soon as the officer's back was turned, I saw him glance round sharply, and then he appeared to be speaking to the natives near him in a quick excited way.

From where I lay back, it was like looking at some photograph, every figure stood out so sharply in the bright sunshine, and I was just thinking that I did not feel so indignant at what had taken place as I had when I had first witnessed such a thing, when I half sleepily noticed that the native had left the group of syces by the open doorway which looked black on the white walls. Then he appeared to be crossing the great barrack square, and passed out of my sight, while my eyes closed, and I was dropping off to sleep, when I started wide-awake again listening.

The sound which had aroused me was repeated close to the open window, and it was a sharp hissing drawing in of the breath, as of one in pain; and directly after the *syce* who had crossed over to my side of the square, passed my window, halting slightly, and with a strange expression on his face, which impressed me even then. As I watched him it passed away, and he drew himself up, walking as usual, and salaaming to some one approaching in the opposite direction, and Major Lacey and Captain Brace sauntered by, while I lay thinking about the syce's expression, and the patient way in which he had hidden the pain from which he was suffering. I had recognised him, too, as the tall, handsome native who had been struck by Barton—a man who, ever since, had saluted me with a grave, gentle smile.

"It's too bad," I was saying to myself; and then, in my listless weariness, I was dropping off to sleep again, as I generally did after a hard drill, when my black servant entered silently, and presented me with a little packet.

"What is it?" I said lazily.

"No know, sahib. Ny Deen bring, and say tell master dhoby man keep it and couldn't get back."

I opened the packet, which smelt most fragrantly, and found first some white flowers, and beneath them, very carefully washed, ironed, and scented, a pocket-handkerchief.

"Mine," I said half wonderingly, and then I grasped what it meant. "Did that syce, Lieutenant Barton's man, bring this just now?"

"Yes, sahib. Ny Deen."

"That will do," I said; and I lay back thinking of the morning when I saw the man come out of Barton's quarters bleeding, and bound up the cut.

"A set of black scoundrels, are they," I said to myself. "Well, some of them have feeling, and a way of showing their gratitude."

I took up and smelt the fragrant white blossoms thoughtfully; and then I remember saying to myself, for those events were stamped pretty deeply in my memory—

"An Englishman would never have dreamed of sending flowers like that. I dare say it means something, if one only knew."

A few days after, when I had almost forgotten the incident, save that I always politely returned Ny Deen's salute when I passed him, I was returning to my quarters one evening, when—not at all an uncommon thing—I heard loud voices in front, and saw that three of our men were going unsteadily along, evidently after too long a stay at one of the wretched places where they were supplied with the poisonous arrack which was answerable for the miserable death of so many British soldiers. One of the men in particular was in that noisy, excited state when reason seems to have run riot, and folly and madness have been taken for companions.

The man's two companions were greatly under the influence of drink, but they had sense enough left to try and control their drunken friend; and as I kept back unseen in the darkness, I saw them check the fellow when an insane desire had come upon him to kick and hammer at the officers' quarters; and later on they engaged in a struggle, when he swore that he would go and let loose every horse in the troop.

All this made me so indignant with the idiot that I was several times on the point of interfering, but I thought that nature would punish the fellow enough the next day, and kept back, waiting to see the others get him to his quarters.

But, in spite of my determination, I found myself unexpectedly dragged into the affair; for, just as they were near Lieutenant Barton's quarters, two of the syces' wives came by, and with a shout the man escaped from his comrades' grasp, made a rush at the two frightened women, and caught one of them in his arms.

She cried aloud for help, and a couple of the native servants rushed out; one of them seizing the drunken gunner, and, in the brief struggle which ensued, I saw the two women run away, while their assailant held on to one of the white-clothed men, and, steadying himself, began striking him savagely, while the syce made no resistance, but passively received the blows.

"The fool!" I said to myself, as I hurried up, thinking that if it had been an Englishman instead of a native, our drunken gunner would have received a severe thrashing. I did not pause to consider any consequences, but just watched my opportunity, and as the Englishman struck the syce heavily with his right hand, as he held the poor fellow with his left, I, too, delivered a stinging blow, as I ran in, right in the gunner's ear, and then stood astonished at what I had done. For the next moment the fellow had gone down heavily, his head striking against a stone, and then he rolled over and lay still, with the syce standing close by looking on.

"You've killed him, sir," said one of the man's comrades, as he went down on one knee by his side and raised his

head.

“Serve the brute right,” I said passionately.

“Yes; he’s pretty bad,” growled the other, as he, too, bent down over his comrade, the affair having pretty well sobered them, as it had sobered me, too; for a chill of horror ran through me at the very thought of the man’s words being true.

“Here, you,” I said roughly; “go and tell the sergeant of the guard. What, you in trouble again, Ny Deen?”

“Yes, sahib,” said the syce softly, for I had recognised Barton’s groom.

He ran off quickly, and the sergeant and a couple of men came up just as Barton was returning to his quarters.

“Hillo! what’s up?” he said; “an accident?”

“No,” I said shortly; “this drunken fellow was insulting our women, and then ill-using your syce for protecting them, and I knocked him down.”

“And you have done it, sir,” grumbled the sergeant. “I’m afraid he isn’t going to come to.”

Barton bent down over the man, who, I now saw, by a stable-lantern, was bleeding from the head, and the chill of horror increased as the lieutenant rose.

“Here,” he said; “carry him into hospital. Be smart. You, sergeant, go and rouse up the doctor.”

“Yes, sir;” and the men hurried off.

“He’ll be pleased,” said Barton to me, with a cynical laugh. “He has had nothing but cholera cases and a broken arm to see to for months. But, I say, Don Quixote, you’ve put your foot in it this time.”

“Enough to make me.” I cried petulantly. “I can’t stand by and see men such brutes.”

We stopped and saw the insensible man carried into the building used as an infirmary, and by that time the doctor, who had been dining with Major Lacey—Brace being of the party—came into the building, and was followed by the above-named officers, who looked on in silence till the surgeon made his report.

“Concussion of the brain, I’m afraid,” he said shortly. “Bad for a man in his state. This fellow is always on the drink. He must have fallen very heavily. Was he fighting?”

“Yes—no,” I said, rather confusedly.

“Not very clear, Vincent,” said the major. “Which was he doing?”

“The fact is, sir, he was brutally ill-using one of the syces, who did not dare to defend himself, and I knocked the fellow down.”

“Oh!” said the major, coldly; and he walked away, but turned back.

“You had better go to your quarters, sir,” he said. “I suppose we can do you no good, Danby?”

“No; thanks. Only let me have the nurse. Place will be cooler without company.”

I went to my quarters, feeling as if the whole of my military career had come to an end through my passionate, quixotic behaviour; and yet somehow I could not deeply regret my action.

I was sitting in my dim room, watching the moths and flies circling round the shaded lamp, when I received a summons to go to the major’s quarters, and on going across I found Brace there, and the doctor.

“This is a serious matter, Vincent,” said the major. “Dr Danby gives a very bad account of this man’s state. How did it all happen? Tell me everything.”

I explained all the circumstances, and then there was a pause. I glanced at Brace, who sat there in the shade, so that I could not see his face, and a curious sensation of misery attacked me as I began to think of court-martials, and dismissal, or resignation, if there were no worse punishment, and my brain had already pictured the man’s death, with the following military funeral, and volleys fired over the grave, when the major said—

“We must wait and see how this matter turns out, Vincent. It will be a most painful thing for me to report at head-quarters. But I will say no more to-night, only to warn you that you are too quixotic.”

That word again! How I did loathe it then.

“I have a great objection myself to seeing the natives beaten, and I have more than once punished men for it; but it will not do for a junior officer like you to take upon yourself the defence of every black whom you consider ill-used. There, sir; you can return to your quarters. No, no, don’t say anything to-night. Go back, and think of what I have said. Going, Brace?”

“Yes,” said the captain, rising. “I’ll walk back with Vincent: you don’t want me any longer. I’ll see Danby again to-night, and hear how the man is going on.”

A minute later I was walking across in the darkness, with Brace, waiting for him to speak, and listening to the regular tramp of the sentry near us, and the softer sound of another at a distance, like an echo of the one by the officers' quarters.

But we had reached my quarters, and still Brace did not speak.

"Good night," I said, coldly.

"I am very sorry, Vincent," he said, ignoring my extended hand; and I felt, more than ever, that we never could be friends.

"Then you think I have done very wrong?" I said bitterly.

"Yes, very wrong. As an officer, you had no right to strike one of the men."

"Then you would have me stand by and see the poor fellows about us struck, kicked, and insulted, until it is beyond bearing," I cried passionately. "I declare I wonder sometimes that they don't rise up against us, and put an end to the cruel oppression from which they suffer."

"Hush!" he said gravely. "You are letting your tongue get the better of your discretion, Vincent. You, a young officer, can only amend these ways by your example. You must see, when you are cooler, that you have been guilty of a grave breach of discipline. I am speaking as your brother-officer, who sincerely wishes to see you rise in the profession you have chosen. We have been thrown together, and I hoped, by my experience, to help you—one so much younger—living, as you are, among strangers. It is not a pleasant task, Vincent, for I cannot help seeing that you resent my interference often, and think me cold, hard, and unsympathetic. There, good night for the present. I will come on later, and report how the man is."

He turned on his heel, and I stood listening to the tramp of his feet till he turned in to his own quarters, while I sat down to think, after telling the servants to go to bed.

It was a miserable night for me. The window was open, and the hot wind came in, making me feel so low and depressed, that life was almost unbearable. There was the *ping, ping, ping*, of the mosquitoes, and the piteous wailing shriek of the jackals as they hunted in a pack, and there, too, was the monotonous tramp of the sentry, hour after hour.

"Asleep, Vincent?"

I started from a nap to see the open window a little darker.

"No. I have been dozing. How is he?"

"I have just come from the hospital. There is no concealing the fact, my lad, that he is very bad; but let us hope it will not come to the worst. Good night."

"Good night," I said, as he walked away; "however can it be a good night for me again?"

Then, after a weary time, I rose, and began to walk up and down my quarters with the question always before me—

"Suppose that man dies, what will you do?"

Very little sleep came to me that night, and at dawn I sent a man for news, and my servant came back looking horrified.

"Oh, mastah!" he whispered, "dey say Private Smith going to die."

Chapter Nine.

Private Smith did not die, but he had a month in hospital for his punishment, while mine was confined to a severe reprimand.

I was not happy at Rambagh, for though the other officers were pleasant enough with me, Barton always seemed to be sneering at my efforts, and was ready to utter some disparaging remark. There was one consolation, however: the others did not seem to like him, so that it did not look as if it were all my fault. I noticed one thing, though, and it was this: Barton was always ready to say disparaging things about Brace; but the latter never retaliated, and always refrained from mentioning, save in the most general way, his brother-officer's name.

I was getting on fast, I suppose, for I felt less nervous and more at home with the troop. The various words of command had ceased to be a puzzle, and when I had orders to give, I was beginning to be able to use my voice in a penetrating, decisive way, and did not feel ashamed of it when I heard my words ring out clearly, and not as if they were jerked or bumped out by the motion of my horse.

Then, too, I had got on so far that I did not mind standing close to the brass field-pieces when they were fired, and the discharge had ceased to make my ears ring for hours after, and feel deaf. At the first shots I heard, I could not help wondering whether the piece I stood by would burst, and kill or wound us with a jagged fragment of brass. While now the dashing gallop, with the guns leaping and bounding over the plain, and the men on the limbers holding on with both hands to keep from being jerked off, had grown exhilarating and full of excitement. There was always the feeling that one must have a bad fall, and sometimes a horse would go down, and a man be hurt more or less

seriously; but somehow I always escaped. And one morning I went back to breakfast after a heavy gallop, tired, but prouder than I had ever before felt in my life, for I had heard one of the men whisper to another as we drew up into line after a fierce gallop—

“How the young beggar can ride!”

And, to make matters better, Brace came alongside of me, and uttered the one word, “Capital,” as he passed.

I felt the colour come into my cheeks, and a sense of delight such as I had not experienced for months; and then I gave my horse’s sides a nip with my knees, which made it start, for I caught sight of Barton smiling superciliously, and supplying the drop of bitterness which kept me from growing conceited.

I must hurry through these early days, a full account of which would sound dull and uninteresting, but during which I had grown to be quite at home on the Sheik, and on another horse which Brace purchased for me, and which, from his speed, I called Hurricane. For though I found that I belonged to the fastest and best-trained troop of horse artillery in the service, from being so light a weight, I had to keep a pretty tight rein on my new horse, so as to hold him in his place.

Barton laughed at it, and called it a wretched screw; but I did not mind, for I found out before I had been attached to the corps long that everything in which Brace had a hand was wrong, and that he bore anything but a friendly feeling toward me, dubbing me Brace’s Jackal, though all the time I felt that I was no nearer being friends than on the day I joined.

I had learned from Barton why Brace had been over to England. It was to take his young wife, to whom he had only been married a year, in the hope of saving her life; and if I had felt any repugnance to the lieutenant before, it was redoubled now by the cynically brutal way in which he spoke.

“She died, of course,” he said. “We all knew she would—a poor, feeble kind of creature—and a good job for him. A soldier don’t want an invalid wife.”

These words explained a good deal about Brace that I had not grasped before, and as I thought of his quiet, subdued ways, and the serious aspect of his face, I could not help feeling how fond he must have been of the companion he had lost, and how it had influenced his life.

At the end of a year, we received the route, and were off, to march by easy stages, to Rajgunge, where we were to be stationed, and a glorious change it seemed to me, for I was as weary of the ugly town, with its dirty river and crowded bazaars, as I was of our hot, low barracks and the dusty plain which formed our training-ground. Rajgunge, Brace told me, was quite a small place, in a beautifully wooded, mountainous country, where there was jungle and cane-brake, with plenty of sport for those who cared for it, the rajah being ready enough to get up shooting-parties and find elephants and beaters for a grand tiger battue from time to time.

It was quite a new experience to me, all the preparations for the evacuation of the barracks, and I stared with astonishment at the size of the baggage-train, with the following of servants, grooms, tentmen, elephants, and camels, deemed necessary to accompany our marches. It was like the exodus of some warlike tribe; but, as Brace told me, it was quite the regular thing.

“You see, everything is done to spare our men labour. Their profession is to fight, and as long as they do that well, John Company is willing that they should have plenty of assistance to clean their horses, guns, and accoutrements.”

Our marches were always made in the very early morning, many of our starts being soon after midnight, and a curious scene it was in the moonlight, as the long train, with its elephants laden with tents, and camels moaning and grumbling at the weight of the necessaries they were doomed to carry, the light flashing from the guns or the accoutrements of the mounted men, and all on and on, over the sandy dust, till I grew drowsy, and nodded over my horse’s neck, rousing myself from time to time with a start to ask whether it was not all some dream.

Just as the sun was getting unpleasantly hot, and the horses caked with sweat and dust, a halt would be called in some shady tope, where the tents rose as if by magic, fires were rapidly lighted by the attendants, and, amidst quite a babel of tongues, breakfast was prepared, while parroquets of a vivid green shrieked at us from the trees, squirrels leaped and ran, and twice over we arrived at a grove to find it tenanted by a troop of chattering monkeys, which mouthed and scolded at us till our men drove them far into the depths of the jungle with stones.

Here, with our tents set up in the shade of the trees, we passed the hot days, with the sun pouring down with such violence that I have often thought it might be possible for a loaded gun to get heated enough to ignite the powder. There would be plenty of sleeping, of course, with the sentries looking longingly on, and wishing it was their turn; and then, soon after midnight, the column would be *en route* again, to continue its march till seven, eight, or nine o’clock, according to the distance of the camping-place, the same spots being used by the different regiments year after year.

There was very little variety, save that we had more or less dust, according to the character of the road material over which we travelled; and I heard the news, after many days, that the next would be the last, as eagerly as I had of the one which had been nominated for our start.

It was a brilliant morning when we came in sight of a sparkling river, beyond which were the white walls and gilded minarets of Rajgunge, with squat temples and ghauts down at the riverside, and everywhere dotted about tall waving palms, groves of trees, and again, beyond these, the rich green of cultivated lands, rising up to mountains blue in the distance, where the wild jungle filled up the valleys and gorges which seamed their sides.

“Lovely!” I ejaculated, as I feasted my eyes on the glorious scene.

“Eh? What?” said Barton, who heard me. “Bah! what a gushing girl you are, Gil Vincent! Does look, though, as if we might get a bit of shooting.”

He rode on, and I hung back till Brace came abreast of me, and looked at me inquiringly.

“Well, Vincent,” he said, “you wanted some beautiful country to look at. I have not exaggerated, have I?”

“No; it is glorious!” I cried.

“Yes; beautiful indeed, and the more lovely to us who have been so long in the plains.”

We rode on in silence for a time till we neared the head of the bridge of boats we had to cross—a structure which looked too frail to bear our guns and the ponderous elephants in our baggage-train; but the leading men advanced; the first gun was drawn over by its six horses, and the rest followed, while, as I passed over with the Sheik snorting and looking rather wild-eyed at the rushing water, I was only conscious of an elastic motion of the plank roadway, as a hollow sound came up at the trampling of the horses’ feet, and before long we were winding through that densely-populated city, and then right through to our quarters, high up on a slope, where the wind came down fresh and sweet from the hills.

“How long shall we stay here?” I asked Brace, that evening, after mess, as we stood at the edge of our parade-ground, looking down at the city with the level rays of the setting sun lighting up the gilded minarets, and glorifying the palm-trees that spread their great feathery leaves against the amber sky.

“How long shall we stay here?” said Brace, sadly, as he repeated my question. “Who can tell? Perhaps for a year—perhaps for a month. Till we are wanted to crush out some mad attempt on the part of a chief to assert his independence, or to put down a quarrel between a couple of rajahs hungry for each other’s lands.”

Chapter Ten.

It was a delightful change, for the country was grand, the English society pleasant and hospitable, and the chief of the district most eager to be on friendly terms with the officers of our troop, and of the foot regiment stationed in the lower part of the town, so that the months soon glided by, and whenever any of us could be spared from duty, we were off on some expedition.

Brace cared little for sport, but he used to join the shooting-parties got up by the nawab; and gloriously exciting beats we had through the jungle; those when Brace was my companion being far more enjoyable than when Barton had leave. For the latter’s sole idea was to slay everything; while Brace, who was a dead shot, and who laid low several tigers during our stay, always seemed to be fonder of studying the habits of the birds and smaller animals that we came across. As for myself, I believe I shared to some extent the tastes of both; but to me the whole expedition, with its elephant-ride and train of picturesque servants, and the tiffin in the tent set up by the nawab’s people, was the great attraction.

It was a merry life we all led, with some festivity always on the way, from hunting-parties down to lunches at the different civilians’, and then up again to dinner-parties and balls, given by the mess of the artillery, or the sepoy regiment, which had an excellent band.

The officers of this black regiment were as pleasant and sociable a’s could be, and the colonel as fine a specimen of an English country gentleman as could be found. There was quite an emulation as to which corps should be the most soldierly and perfect in their evolutions.

The colonel took to me, and we were the best of friends. He told me why.

“Because of your seat in the saddle, boy. I used to be passionately fond of hunting at home, and my heart warmed to you the first day I watched you in a gallop. However did you learn to ride like that?”

“I suppose it came almost naturally to me,” I said, laughing. “My father always insisted upon my having a pony, and spending several hours a day in the saddle.”

“Your father was a wise man, sir; and you ride capitally.”

“Our riding-master said my seat was everything that was bad.”

“Bah! He is a mechanic, and wants every man to ride like a pair of compasses slung across a rail. Don’t you spoil your seat to please any of them. I like to see a man sit a horse as if he belonged to it. Then he can use his sword.”

How proud he was of his regiment. “Look at them,” he would say; “only that they are a little curved in the upper leg, they are as fine a set of men as you will find in any English regiment; and if it was not for their black faces, they would pass for Guards.”

He was very kind to them, and set a splendid example to his officers, but, unfortunately, they did not follow his example. In fact, the whole of the English people at the station treated the black race as if they were inferior beings; and though every one in Rajgunge was humble and servile to the whites, it always seemed to me as if they were civil only because they were obliged.

I used to talk to Brace about it sometimes, and he would agree.

“But what can you expect?” he said. “They are a conquered race, and of a different religion. I question whether, with the kindest treatment, we should ever make them like us; but we never try.”

I did not say anything, but thought that the black servants were always ready and eager to attend to him, and I never had any difficulty in getting things done; and often after that I used to wonder that a man like Ny Deen should patiently put up with the brutal insult and ill-usage he met with from Barton, who treated him like a dog, while like a dog the Indian used to patiently bear all his abuse and blows.

“Does him good,” Barton said to me one day, with an ugly grin, because it annoyed me. “See what a good servant it makes him. You’re jealous, Vincent. You want him yourself.”

“Yes,” I said, “I should like to have him, and show him that all English officers are not alike.”

“Do you mean that as an insult, sir?” he cried.

“I meant it more as a reproach,” I replied coolly.

“Look here, Vincent,” he said hotly, “I have put up with a good deal from you since you have been in the troop, and I don’t mean to stand much more from such a boy.”

“Really, Barton—” I began.

“Stop, sir, please, and hear me out. Ever since I joined, and as far back as I can hear of, it has been considered a feather in a man’s cap to belong to the horse artillery. Many a fine fellow has put down his name and wanted to be transferred from the foot, and want has been his master. But nowadays the service is going to the dogs.”

“I don’t want to—”

“Stop! you are going to hear me out,” he cried, interposing between me and the door. “I’ve long wanted to come to an understanding with you, but you have always sneaked behind your nurse.”

“I don’t understand you,” I said angrily; but it was not true.

“Then I’ll tell you what I mean. You have always hung on the apron-string of Mr Brace, and a nice pair there are of you. The troop’s going to ruin, and I shall tell Lacey so. I’m not going to stand it. Here, you came out, a mere schoolboy, and before you’ve been two years in the foot, you are selected to come into what used to be the smartest troop in the Company’s service. I’m not blind. It’s all grossly unfair. You’ve got relatives on the board, and it’s all money and interest. It’s a disgrace to the service.”

“Do you mean I am a disgrace to the troop?” I said hotly.

“Yes, I do,” he cried savagely; “and I know well enough one of these days how it will be. There will be some excuse made, and you will be promoted over me; and if you are, I warn you I won’t rest until the whole miserable bit of trickery has been exposed.”

“You would be clever if you did expose anything, for there is nothing for you to expose. My uncle did write to head-quarters, I know, but I read his letter first.”

“What did it say?”

“And he only asked for my wishes to be acceded to, if I was found worthy.”

“Found worthy!” he cried, with a mocking laugh, which made my cheeks burn. “Found worthy! It’s a disgrace to the service!”

“Oh, there, I’m not going to quarrel with you,” I said, fighting down my annoyance.

“No, and I am not going to quarrel with you, but for a couple of annas I’d give you a downright horsewhipping.”

I started up from my seat, but a hand was laid upon my arm, and I was pressed down as I swung my head round and gazed up in Brace’s stern face.

“Be quiet,” he said, grimly; and then—“May I ask, Mr Barton, what this means?”

“No, you may not,” cried Barton, offensively.

“But I do ask, sir. I heard you threaten to horse-whip your junior officer as I entered the room.”

“And most creditable for an officer and a gentleman to stand at the door listening,” cried Barton, in a mocking tone. “Eavesdropping.”

Brace’s pale sallow face changed colour, but he spoke very calmly, for he realised that Barton had made up his mind to quarrel with him.

“What has been the matter, Vincent?”

“Mr Barton has thought proper to accuse my friends of gross favouritism, and he tells me that I have no business in the horse brigade.”

“Lieutenant Barton is not the judge of what officers are suitable for our troop; and you may take it for granted that if you had not proved yourself worthy of the selection made, you would very soon have been transferred back.”

“Don’t you believe it, Vincent,” cried Barton, whose face was flushed, and whose manner indicated that he had been drinking overnight, with the consequence that he was irritable and bitter with every one about him. “The whole service is being neglected, or else there would very soon be a weeding out in this troop.”

Brace had been very grave and calm so far. Again and again he had turned aside the sneers and innuendoes of Barton, who for months had grown more and more offensive as he found that he could insult Brace with impunity; but now he was startled by the change which came over his brother-officer, for Brace flushed up, his eyes glittered, and in a voice that I did not recognise as his own, he said—

“Yes, sir, and Lieutenant Barton would be removed, perhaps disgraced, for insolence to his brother-officers, brutality to the people under him, and conduct generally unworthy of an officer and a gentleman.”

“What?” cried Barton.

“You understand my words, sir,” said Brace. “You have forced me by your treatment to turn at last, and tell you that I will submit to your insults no longer, neither will I allow you to annoy Vincent.”

“You will not allow me!”

“I will not. Do you think I am a child because I have been forbearing? Your insolence has been beyond bounds.”

“Then why did you bear it?” cried Barton.

“For the honour of the service, sir. Because I would not degrade myself and you in the eyes of our men by descending to a quarrel.”

“How brave!” cried Barton, mockingly; but Brace paid no heed, and went on.

“Because, sir, I would not be your boon companion, and drink and generally conduct myself in a way unworthy of an English officer in the high position I hold in this country, I have been constantly marked out as the butt for your offensive sarcasm, even as far back as the time when, if you had possessed a spark of manliness or feeling, you would have respected me and shown consideration for one who was passing through such an ordeal as I pray Heaven you may be spared.”

“Bah! A parade of your sufferings,” said Barton, mockingly.

Brace winced, but he went on calmly.

“I have seen all and borne all, and even now I should not have spoken but for your insult to Vincent, whom I heard you threaten to horse-whip.”

“Which he daren’t do,” I cried angrily.

“Silence!” cried Brace sternly. “You are no longer a boy, and this is not a school.”

“Indeed!” said Barton, looking me up and down with an offensive laugh. “I thought it was.”

I winced now in my turn, and then looked wonderingly at Brace, who uttered the word—

“Contemptible!”

Barton took a step forward angrily.

“Keep your bullying looks and words, sir, for the poor Hindoos, whom you have so disgracefully trampled down. They are wasted upon me, for I know your nature now only too well. I am not going to quarrel, though I have easy excuse.”

“Then what will you do?” said Barton. “Fight?”

“Yes, when my duty renders it necessary, sir. As matters stand, I feel bound to report what has taken place to Major Lacey, and to leave it in his hands to reprimand you, and call upon you to apologise.”

Barton sank back into a chair, uttering a forced laugh that made Brace turn pale.

“‘And out crept a mouse!’” cried the lieutenant. “Is that all, my brave, fire-eating captain? Report all to Major Lacey! By Jingo, sir, I’ll spare you the trouble. I’ll go and tell him what a miserable, contemptible, beggarly coward he has in his troop, and that he is allowing you to drag down your wretched pupil to your own level. There, stand out of my way.”

He thrust Captain Brace aside, as he strode toward the door—a thrust that was almost a blow, and then aloud, “Here you: open that door—quickly. Do you hear?”

I looked across sharply, and saw that a couple of the native servants had entered the room, and felt that they must have heard every word.

They opened the door, Barton passed out, and the two white-robed men turned to look at us wonderingly before hurrying out, and the door fell to.

“They must have heard,” I said to myself; “and they’ll go and tell the others. It will be all round the station directly that Captain Brace is a coward.” For a few moments I felt as if I dared not raise my eyes, but it was as if something was dragging me to look up, and as I did, I saw that Brace was looking at me fixedly, and there was something very singular in his gaze; but for some time he did not speak, and there was so strange a tumult in my breast that no words would come.

“Well,” he said at last. “What are you thinking?”

“Of all this,” I said huskily.

“And that as an officer and a gentleman I ought to have knocked Barton down?”

“Something of the kind,” I replied.

“Of course; and then, according to the code of honour among gentlemen, I ought to fight him at daybreak to-morrow morning.”

I was silent.

“Yes,” he said passionately; “that is what you are thinking.”

“I can’t help it,” I cried angrily. “He almost struck you, and the khansamah saw it, and that other man too. It will be all over the place. You must fight him now.”

He looked at me very strangely, and I saw his brows contract as he said gravely—

“Duelling is a thing of the past, Vincent; a cowardly, savage practice in which the life of a man is at the mercy of his skilful adversary. Life is too valuable to throw away in a quarrel. I do not feel as if I had done all my work yet.”

“But what can you do?” I said excitedly, for my brain was in a turmoil. I loved him, but his conduct frightened me; it was so unlike anything I could have expected from a gallant soldier; and there was a singularly cold sensation of dread creeping over me. I felt afraid that I was going to dislike him as one unworthy to be known, as I cried angrily, “But what can you do?”

He looked at me as if he could read me through and through, and his face grew very sad as he replied—

“There is the proper course open to me, Vincent, and that I am about to do.”

“Fight him?” I cried eagerly, and the miserable sensation of dread began to pass off.

“No, boy; I am going to explain everything to Major Lacey, who will report to head-quarters if he considers it right.”

He passed slowly out of the room, and I heard his step echoing beneath the broad verandah, as he went in the direction of Major Lacey’s, while, unable to restrain myself in my bitterness and contempt, I too got up and hurried out.

“He is a coward!” I muttered; “a coward!”—for I could not see the bravery of the man’s self-control; “and I have been gradually growing to like him, and think of him always as being patient and manly and noble. Why, I would have tried to knock Barton down, if he had killed me for it.”

“Gone to report,” I thought again, after a pause; “gone to tell, like a little schoolboy who has been pushed down. Him a soldier; and a coward like that!”

Chapter Eleven.

Joined to the love of a military life, I had all a boy’s ideal notions of bravery and chivalry. By which I mean the frank, natural, outside ideas, full of the show and glitter, and I could not see beneath the surface. I did not know then that it might take more courage to refuse to fight and face the looks and scorn of some people than to go and meet an adversary in the field, after the braggart fashion of some of our French neighbours, whose grand idea of honour is to go out early some morning to meet an enemy about some petty, contemptible quarrel, fence for a few moments till one or the other is pricked or scratched, and then cry, “*Ah, mon ami! mon ami*!” embrace, and go home to breakfast together.

Very beautiful, no doubt, to a certain class of Frenchman, but to a nineteenth-century Englishman—fluff.

I’m afraid that I was very Gallic in my ideas in more ways, so that when next morning I knew that both Brace and Barton had had long interviews separately with Major Lacey, and then met him together in the presence of the doctor, and found that a peace had been patched up, my feelings toward Brace were very much cooled, and I was ready to become fast friends with Barton—at least, I could have been if he had been a different kind of man. As it was, I was thrown a great deal on the society of the doctor and the other officers, while Brace, who rightly interpreted my coolness, held himself aloof at mess.

I found myself near the major that evening, and after a time he began chatting to me in a low tone.

“Let’s see; you were in the squabble yesterday,” he said. “Great pity. We don’t want any references to head-quarters, Vincent, nor court-martial; and as for their fighting, that sort of thing’s as dead as Queen Anne. We’ve got to keep our fighting for the Queen’s enemies, eh?”

“I suppose so, sir.”

“Of course you suppose so,” he said sharply. “Why, you did not want them to fight, did you?”

“That, it seems to me, would have been the most honourable course, sir,” I said stiffly.

He turned his head and stared in my face.

“You’re a young goose—gander, I mean. No: gosling,” he said. “There, I’ve made them shake hands, after Barton had apologised. I’m not going to have any of that nonsense. And look here, you’ve got to be friends with Barton too. Why, hang it, boy, a handful of Englishmen here, as we are, in the midst of enemies, can’t afford to quarrel among ourselves; we must hold together like—like—well, like Britons. Here, I’ve something else for you to think about. I’ve had a messenger over from the nawab. A couple of man-eaters have been doing a lot of mischief a few miles from his place, and he wants some of us to go over very early to-morrow to rid the country of the brutes. Perhaps I shall go too.”

The thoughts of such an exciting expedition soon drove away those of the trouble, and upon the major making the announcement, it was at once discussed, while in imagination I pictured the whole scene, ending with the slaughter of the monsters, and their being brought home in triumph upon a pad elephant.

“I thought so,” the major whispered to me with a chuckle; “that has put them both in a good temper. I did think of going, but I shall send them.”

I went across the square to my bed that night, full of thoughts of the expedition, and not far from my quarters came upon three figures in white, talking eagerly together, but ready to start apart when they caught sight of me, and salaam profoundly. “Ah, Ny Deen,” I said. “Fine night.”

“Yes, sahib,” he said in his soft low voice. “Does the sahib go to the hunt to-morrow?”

“How did you know there was to be a hunt to-morrow?” I said sharply.

“There are orders to have the buggies ready, sahib, before day.”

“Oh,” I said. “Then your master is going?”

“No, sahib; he stays with the men.”

“I don’t think he does,” I said to myself, as I went into my quarters, where I gave orders for all my shooting things to be put out; and then, after making sure that I should be called in time, I dived in behind the mosquito curtains, so as to get all the rest I could, and in half a minute was sleeping heavily, but not until I had repented leaving the mess-room without saying “good night” to Brace, Barton having gone some time before, as he was on duty that evening.

I scarcely seemed to have fallen asleep before a hand was laid upon my shoulder.

“Master’s bath and coffee ready,” said a voice; and I looked up to see by the light of a lamp that my man Dost was gazing down at me, with the curtains held aside, and a curiously troubled fixed look in his face.

“Time to get up already?” I said.

“Yes, sahib,” he said hurriedly. “All the other gentlemen call and get up.”

“All right,” I said; and springing out, I stepped into my tiled bath-room, and had myself refreshed with some chatties of cold water poured over my head, after which, feeling elastic as steel, I towelled, and began to dress.

“Why, hallo, Dost,” I said, as I saw that the man was trembling, “what’s the matter? Not ill?”

“No, no, sahib; quite well, quite well!” he cried hastily.

“But you are not,” I cried. “You are all of a shiver. Let me give you something.”

He shook his head violently, and kept on reiterating that he was quite well.

“Come, out with it, Dost,” I said. “You are not deceiving me. What is the matter?”

He looked round quickly, and I could see that the poor fellow evidently was in great alarm about something.

“Master always good to Dost,” he said.

“Of course I am, when you are good and attentive to me. Is my rifle ready?”

“Yes, sahib. Dost afraid for his lord.”

I laughed at him, though I felt touched, as I grasped what he seemed to mean.

“You coward!” I said. “Do you think the first tiger I see will get into my howdah and maul me?”

He nodded his head, and looked more nervous than before.

“And that I shall be a job for Dr Danby, and you will have to nurse me?”

He bowed his head again.

“Then you would like me to stop, and not go to the tiger-hunt?”

“No, no, sahib,” he cried excitedly, and I smiled again at him, as I thought that it was very doubtful whether Ny Deen and his other men were in such anxiety about Barton.

Dost hung about me with the greatest of solicitude as, fully equipped at last, I made my way to where the buggies and their attendants were in waiting. It was very dark, and it was only by the light of the lanterns that I made out who was there, and saw Brace, the doctor, and a quiet gentlemanly lieutenant of ours named Haynes.

Just then the major came bustling up, his genial nature having urged him to leave his comfortable bed, and come to see us off.

“All here?” he cried. “You’ll have a glorious day. Needn’t have taken rifles; the rajah would have everything for you, and better pieces than your own, I dare say. Wish I was going with you.”

“Why not come?” said Brace.

“No, no! Don’t tempt me; I’ve quite work enough. Some one ought to stay.”

“I will stop with pleasure,” cried Brace.

“No, no, my dear boy; we settled that you should go. I’ll have my turn another time.”

“But really—” began Brace.

“Be quiet, man!” cried the major. “You are going. Keep an eye on Vincent here, and don’t let a tiger get him. He can’t be spared.”

“I dare say we shall be in the same howdah,” replied Brace; and somehow I did not feel pleased any more than I did at the major taking such pains to have me looked after like a little boy.

“These young chaps are so thoughtless,” continued the major. “They run into danger before they know where they are, and then, when they are in the midst of it, they forget to be cool.”

“Oh, I shall be careful, sir,” I said pettishly.

“You think so, of course,” said the major. “I suppose you will not be back till quite late. Like an escort to meet you?”

“Oh no, it is not necessary,” said Brace.

“Hullo! Where’s Barton?” cried the doctor. “Any one seen him?”

“Not coming,” said the major quietly.

“Not coming?”

“No; he sent me a line last thing to say he preferred not to go.”

I heard Brace draw his breath in a hissing way, and then he hesitated and descended from the buggy to speak to the major, who said aloud—

“No, no! If he likes to turn disagreeable, let him. There, be off, and a good day’s sport to you. Here, Vincent, try if you can’t manage a skin rug for yourself this time, and don’t any of you waste your charges on small game. You are sure to scare the big away.”

We promised, and five minutes after were going at a pretty good pace along the main road, each vehicle with a native driver, and a man running at the horses’ heads as well.

We had about fifteen miles to go along the road to a point where elephants or horses would be in waiting for us, sent by the rajah from his jungle palace. Then we should leave the buggies and the main road, to follow a track leading up to the rajah’s place, where he often went, to be out of the heat and dust of the city, in which every pair of feet was kicking up the dust all day long, till it was as if the lower part of the town was shrouded in a dense stratum of fog twelve or fourteen feet thick.

We had been riding for some time at a rapid rate before we began to note a change in the surroundings. First a tree would stand out in a pale grey ghostly way; then a clump of high cane-like grass would loom out like something solid, and then, on turning round, I could see a pale grey light in the sky, which rapidly turned to pale crimson, and then to deep ruddy gold, as up came the sun almost at once, the change from night to day being rapid there.

For some little time now we had been ascending; and getting into a part clear of trees, we were suddenly aware of a tent pitched in the shade of a mango tope, and close by, quietly picking up freshly cut green food, and tucking it into their mouths with their trunks, were half a dozen elephants, three of which bore handsome trappings and howdahs, while the others had only the ordinary pads.

A couple of handsomely dressed servants came forward to meet us as we dismounted, and we were ushered into the open-sided tent, where breakfast was waiting, spread on a soft Indian carpet, while the rajah’s men waited upon us with the greatest of attention.

But, as the doctor said, we had not come to eat, and very soon expressed our readiness to start, when the elephants were guided to the front of the tent, and we mounted, after giving orders to the drivers of the vehicles in which we had come, to be in waiting for us just at dusk. Then the huge animal on which I was mounted with the doctor moved slowly on apparently, but covering a good deal of ground in his shuffling stride.

A shout from Brace on the next elephant arrested us, though, and, on turning, we found that he was pointing back.

The scene was worth stopping to contemplate, for there, miles away behind us, lay Rajgunge, with its mosques and temples glittering in the morning sun, and the dust which often shrouded the place now visible only as a faint haze, while the sparkling river looked a very band of silver curving round it like the fold of some wondrous serpent undulating over the plain. The city lay in a hollow, from which the land sloped away on one side, while, on the other, hill and valley alternated, with the country rising higher and higher to where we stood, and then rose more and more into a wild of jungle and mountain, whose more distant eminences died into a soft blue mist.

“I never saw a more beautiful view,” said the doctor to me. “Grand place to send patients to. Sight of the country would do them more good than my physic. Make much of it, Vincent,” he said; “you may never see the city look so beautiful again.”

I looked at him so wonderingly that he laughed.

“Well, next time it may be dark or cloudy, or raining, or at a different time of year.”

The elephants were again in motion, and, leaving the well-beaten dâk road behind us, we were now following an elephant’s track, going at every step more and more into scenery such as I had pictured to myself when thinking about India as my future home.

“Look!” I cried excitedly, as, from the edge of a patch of jungle, a couple of peacocks ran along for a few yards, and then took flight, one blaze of bright colour for a few moments, as I caught flashes of vivid blue and green, and metallic gold.

My hand went mechanically to the rifle behind me in the howdah, and the doctor laughed.

“Well done, Englishman!” he cried. “Something beautiful, and wild. Let’s kill it!”

“We’ve come out shooting,” I said, half sulkily.

“Yes—tigers!” said the doctor. “What a curious fate mine is—to live always with you soldiers, who think of nothing but killing, while my trade is to save life! There goes another peacock,” he cried, as one of the lovely birds, with an enormous train, ran out into the open, rose, and went skimming away before us.

“I wonder such beautiful birds don’t attract the common people; they’re grand eating. Why don’t they get shot?”

“Sacred to everybody but to us Englishmen,” he replied. “We are the only savages out here who kill peafowl.”

“Then the Hindoos don’t like it?”

“Of course not; but they have to put up with it, all the same. And we do rid them of the great cats which kill their cows—and themselves, sometimes. Why, they will not even kill their poisonous snakes, and thousands die of the bites every year.”

“How lovely!” I said, as my eyes wandered round.

“What! To be killed by a snake?”

“No, no; this scenery.”

“Oh yes; and Brace seems to be enjoying it too. I say, you don’t seem so thick with him as you were, squire.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said indifferently.

“Well, I do, and I think you are foolish. Brace is a thorough good fellow. Better stick to him, even if he does stir you up. He’ll make a man of you, without winning your money at cards.”

Snork!

The elephant we were on trumpeted, and those behind threw up their trunks, and seemed to echo the huge beast’s cry.

“Look out!” said the doctor. “Rifles!”

For, about a hundred yards in front, there was something moving among the trees, and soon after a couple of the huge Indian buffaloes walked out into the open track in front, threw up their heads, one touching the other with his wide-spreading horns, and stood staring at us, as if puzzled at what he saw.

“Hold fast. Our elephant may spin round, and go off at a gallop,” said the doctor.

But the huge beast stood firm, only lowering its head, and swinging it right and left, as it kept its little sagacious-looking eyes fixed upon the great bulls in front, while its great tusks were ready to meet the bulls’ wide-spreading horns.

It was my first experience of being face to face with any of the large game of India; and, as I grasped the idea of what a formidable creature the buffalo was—certainly nearly double the size of one of our ordinary oxen, my heart began to beat rather heavily.

“Shall I fire?” I whispered to the doctor; for I had my rifle resting on the front of the howdah, ready to take aim.

“No,” said a familiar voice on my right; and I found that Brace’s elephant had been urged forward until it was now close abreast of ours. “If you fired at this distance, you would only be wasting a shot. You could not bring either of the brutes down, and it would be only wounding them for nothing.”

“Going to charge, aren’t they?” said the doctor.

“I hope not. They may think better of it, and go back into the jungle.”

Brace was right, for, after standing staring stupidly at the elephants for some moments, the great slaty-black creatures slowly moved off into the dense growth on our left.

I suppose that I showed my disappointment, for Brace said quietly—

“It is not considered wise to spend time in firing at everything one meets, when bound to beat up tiger.”

He addressed a word or two in Hindustanee to the mahouts, and the elephants, freed now from apprehension, shuffled onward till we came upon an open park-like space, at the end of which, on a slope, was the rajah’s shooting-box. Here half a dozen more elephants were standing, with a number of well-mounted men armed with spears, shields, and tulwars, and quite a host of lightly clad Hindoos were lying about, waiting to commence their task—that of beating for game, and driving it toward where the sportsmen were stationed.

Upon our appearance, the rajah came out of the large verandah in front of the house, and saluted us cordially.

He was a young, active-looking man, dressed like an ordinary English sportsman bound for a day’s shooting on the moors; and, after pressing us to enter the house and partake of refreshment, which we declined, he at once called up a couple of hard, muscular-looking men, gave them an order or two, and the result was that these two shouldered their long, clumsy-looking old matchlocks. They signed to the crowd of beaters, who had all sprung to their feet as the rajah came out, and marched them all off, so that they could make for the head of a valley where a tiger had had a kill, and up which valley we were to slowly progress, after taking a circuit, so as to reach its mouth about the same time as the beaters reached the head.

We had a much greater distance to go than the men on foot, and after a few preliminaries, the rajah mounted to the howdah of one of the waiting elephants, followed by his chief huntsman, well provided with quite a battery of English rifles. Two or three of his officers took their places on other elephants, and the mounted men and a party of foot marched at our side, as the imposing little procession started.

The rajah spoke very good English, and there were moments when I forgot his smooth oily manner and dark countenance, and could almost feel that he was some swarthy sportsman who had invited us to his place for a day’s shooting.

He was as eager as any of us, and, as we marched off, he told us that his shikaree had marked down two tigers of exceptional size—beasts that had done a great deal of mischief in the district; and he was confident that we should have an excellent day’s sport.

The sun was now tremendously powerful, but the motion of the huge beasts we rode produced a certain amount of air, and the excitement made us forget everything but the object of our visit.

Our course was toward a spur of a range of hills, and on rounding this, we found ourselves at the entrance of a narrow valley, across which we were formed up, the rajah’s huntsman giving us a few words of instruction as to keeping as nearly as possible in a line, and warning us to have a watchful eye upon every patch of bushes and tall, sun-dried grass.

A move was made as soon as we were in line, and with the valley gradually contracting in width, and the hills over our side growing higher and more steep, our prospects of seeing game grew brighter each moment; in fact, it was almost a certainty, as the head of the valley was occupied by the beaters, who would soon begin to move down in our direction.

Certain enough, but very tantalising, for every now and then there was a sharp rustle or breaking of twigs and something bounded from its lair to dash up the valley without giving us a chance of seeing its flank.

“Never mind,” said the doctor. “Not what we want; and we shall have a chance at them, perhaps, by-and-by, when they are turned back.”

As we went on, from my elevated position I began to have better fortune, seeing now a deer dart up the valley, and directly after, from some yellow dried-up grass, there was a loud rush and a scramble.

“Pig,” said the doctor unconcernedly; and as I watched the grass I could see it undulate and wave where the little herd of wild swine was making its way onward.

“No sign of a tiger,” I said aloud; and, to my surprise, a reply came from Brace, whose elephant was shuffling along not many yards away, and I could, as he spoke, just see his face through the tops of the tall reedy grass.

“No,” he said; “but very likely one of them is creeping and gliding along just ahead of us, so keep a sharp look-out.”

Just then I began thinking of Brace instead of the tigers, for it seemed so painful to be at odds with him, and to go on in the distant way we had kept up lately, because I looked upon him as a coward. I cannot explain my feelings. All I know is that I felt that I did not like him a bit, and all the time I was drawn towards him and was hurt when I spoke coldly to him, and more hurt when he gave me one of his half-sad, penetrating looks, and then spoke distantly.

“I think I could like him,” I said to myself, “if he had not proved such a coward.” And then I thought that under the circumstances I should have had no hesitation in going out and fighting Barton. As I arrived at this pitch, I felt uncomfortable, for something within me seemed to ask the question—

“Wouldn’t you?”

Just then an elephant again uttered his harsh grunting squeal known as “trumpeting,” and an electric thrill ran through me, for I had learned enough of tiger-shooting to know that the great animal had scented his enemy, and the strange cry was taken up by another of the elephants.

Orders were passed along to right and left for us to keep in a steady line, and the men between the elephants grew every moment more excited. For the action of the animals proved that it was no false alarm, and in the momentary glances I had from right to left, I saw that the rajah and Brace were waiting, with finger on trigger, for a shot at the striped monster creeping on up the valley.

“Keep cool,” said the doctor to me in a whisper; “and if you get a good chance at him, fire at the shoulder, but don’t throw away a shot. A slight wound may do more harm than good—make the brute break back through the line, perhaps, and we should lose him.”

“I’ll be careful,” I said huskily.

“That’s right. I want for us to get one tiger, and not the rajah. He has plenty of chances.”

“Keep a sharp look out, doctor,” came from Brace, in a loud voice, which told that he was evidently excited.

In a few minutes we were through the dense thicket of grass, and in a rocky bottom, dotted sparely with tufts of bush and loose stones; and, as I ran my eye over this, I turned to the doctor despairingly.

“There is nothing to hide him here,” I said. “We must have passed him in the thick grass.”

“Nothing to hide him!” cried the doctor; “why, the gorge is full of hiding-places. I call this good cover.”

“Is that something moving?” I said suddenly; and I pointed to some thin yellowish-brown grass, about fifty yards ahead.

“Eh, where? By George!”

His rifle was to his shoulder in a moment, there was a flash, a sharp echoing report, and the mahout shouted “*Bagh! Bagh*!” while, as the smoke rose, I had a faint glimpse of a great striped animal bounding out of sight, a hundred and fifty yards ahead.

“Clever miss,” said the doctor, reloading, as inquiries came from right and left. “No doubt about the tigers now, Vincent,” he added to me.

“I thought I saw something moving, but I could hardly tell it from the stems of the dry grass.”

“I suppose not Nature has been pretty kind to tigers that way. It is almost impossible to see them amongst grass or reeds, so long as they keep still. Bah! that was a wretched shot. But it’s easier to miss than hit, Vincent.”

“I wish I had seen him,” I said, in a disappointed tone.

“Why, you did see him, lad, and missed a good chance. Your rifle ought to have been up to your shoulder the moment he moved.”

“But I thought it was grass,” I said.

“Ah, you will not think it was grass again. Capital practice this in decision, my lad. You’ve had a splendid lesson.”

We pressed on as fast as the roughness of the ground would allow, for it was so open now that, in all probability, the tiger would have gone on some distance, and with the elephants plainly in view and the mounted and dismounted men between them, we made quite a goodly show. But the heat was terrific. It seemed as if the rocks were glowing and reflecting the sun’s rays, so that at any other time we should have declared it unbearable, but now excitement kept us going.

As we passed the spot where we had seen the tiger disappear, our ranks were closed up, and we went on watchfully. In my eagerness now, I was ready to turn tufts of grass and blocks of stone into tigers; and had taken aim at one with my ears singing with excitement, when the doctor laid his hand on mine.

“What are you doing?” he said.

I pointed, for I could not speak, and he laughed, and then raised his own piece to his shoulder, as a shot rang out from Brace’s howdah, followed by one from the rajah’s.

“A hit,” cried the doctor. “Did you see him?”

I shook my head.

“I got one glimpse of him.”

“That shot was home, doctor, I think,” said Brace.

“Not a doubt about it. Steady; keep on.”

The elephants advanced slowly, with their trunks thrown up in the air, and as, in the midst of intense excitement, we neared the spot where the tiger had been seen slinking from one stone to the other, one of the men uttered an exclamation and pointed down at a spot of blood upon the hot stone at our feet; and then at another and another at intervals, on dry grass and leaf.

“Take care,” said the rajah; “he will be very savage now.”

The warning was hardly needed, for every one was on the alert, expecting at any moment to find the tiger lying dead, or to see it bound out defiantly and ready to spring at the nearest elephant.

“Mind how you shoot, Vincent,” said the doctor, meaningly. “I came out for a day’s sport, and don’t want it spoiled by professional pursuits.”

“I don’t understand you,” I said.

“Well, if I must put it plainly, don’t shoot a beater instead of a tiger.”

“*Bagh! bagh*!” came from one of the men on foot; and this time the rajah led off with a shot, but it seemed that he had only obtained a glimpse of the great cat-like beast sneaking round a tuft of bushes, as it made its way onward.

The brute was evidently severely wounded, for blood-stains were found again and again, several together, showing where the tiger had halted to watch or listen for his enemies; but still we could not get close enough for a decisive shot, and over and over again the line of elephants was halted in the belief that we must have passed the beast crouching down among the grass.

At the last of these halts, when, in spite of careful search, no more traces of the fierce man-eater could be seen, a council of war was held, and the question was raised whether we should go back, when the distant sound of shouts and the beating of tom-toms came faintly toward us, and this decided the line of action, for the rajah at once proposed that we should go and meet the beaters, for there was another tiger in the valley, and then we could beat out the one wounded on our return.

This was decided on, and the word was given to advance again; but hardly had the elephants moved, when there was a terrific roar, and a monstrous tiger bounded out toward us, lashing his tail from side to side, baring his white teeth, and laying down his ears as his eyes literally blazed at us in the sun.

Brace’s rifle rang out on the instant, and, with a snarling roar, the beautifully striped beast swung his head round, made a snap at his shoulder, then turned and charged straight at the rajah’s elephant, which uttered a shriek of dread, spun round, and dashed back at a mad pace.

The tiger did not pursue, but, evidently untouched by a couple more shots fired at it, came bounding toward us.

The doctor fired, but it did not check the onslaught, and the brute bounded right on to the elephant’s shoulder and tried to claw its way into our howdah, as the mahout yelled with horror.

But the savage brute did not get quite up to us, for the doctor snatched my rifle from my hand, held it with the barrel resting on the edge of the howdah just as one would a pistol, fired, and the tiger dropped quite dead upon the scorched earth.

An eager shout arose, and there was a round of congratulations as a pad elephant was brought up from the rear, and the monster hauled across the creature’s back, and securely fastened with ropes.

But we did not stop to finish this, for the shouting and tomtoming was growing plainer, and already a deer had trotted out of the tender growth a hundred yards ahead, stood listening to the sounds behind, and then, catching sight of us, darted down the valley at a tremendous pace.

A minute or two later, as we advanced, another deer appeared, turned, and trotted back; while soon after, a huge boar dashed out, charged through us, and was followed by a mother pig and her progeny, all of which dashed downward for their liberty.

And as we pushed on, with the valley still narrowing, and the noise made by the beaters increasing, animal after animal dashed past us, or, seeing the line of elephants, crept back, but only to appear again, and find that it could escape unmolested.

“No sign of another tiger, rajah,” I heard Brace say.

“Yes, yes. There is another,” he cried. “My people have seen him twice.”

“Perhaps so,” said the doctor to me, in a low voice; “but he would have shown before now, with all that noise in front.”

He was wrong, though; for five minutes later, and when the beaters could not have been above a couple of hundred yards away, another magnificent beast dashed out of the cover with a roar, and charged down upon us, putting the line of elephants into such confusion that the aims of those who had a chance were disarranged. Then there came a wild scream from somewhere to our right, and we knew directly after that the tiger had broken through the line, striking down one of the rajah's men as he passed, and the poor fellow had to be bandaged by the doctor before he was lifted on to one of the elephants, fainting from loss of blood.

"Will it kill him?" I said huskily, as we returned to our own howdah.

"Oh no," replied the doctor. "A nasty clawing; but these men get over far worse wounds than that. There, keep your eyes open; we must try and take revenge. I never feel any compunction in shooting a tiger. There isn't room for them in a civilised land."

We were returning over the same ground now, with the beaters far behind, and every bush, and tuft, and patch of dry grass was carefully searched as hour after hour went by, and there was talk about a halt for lunch; but with such a monster known to be somewhere in the gorge no one felt disposed for anything but a refreshing cup of water, and downward we went again.

The feeling was fast growing upon us that the tiger had gone right on and out of the valley into the open country, when once more an elephant trumpeted, and told of our being near the object of our search.

Heat and fatigue were forgotten directly, the elephants were urged on by the mahouts, and cane-brake and reed-flat were searched, long grass was ridden through, and for a couple of hours more we were on the tiptoe of expectation, but found no tiger, till just as we were growing thoroughly dispirited, and felt that we must be driving it lower and lower, and helping it to escape, the monster bounded out from a cluster of loose rocks, faced us, and rolled over at a shot from the doctor's rifle.

It sprang up again with a tremendous roar, and stood open-jawed, glaring at us as if considering which it should attack, when the rajah and Brace fired at the same time, and the monster rolled over again to struggle feebly, and then stretched itself out—dead.

"Never mind, Vincent," said the doctor, clapping me on the shoulder; and then addressing the others with us: "Your turn next; and you have been in at the death."

"Look! look!" I cried suddenly.

"What is it?"

"On that little elephant coming up the valley; isn't it one of our men?"

Brace heard me, and took out the little glass slung from his shoulder.

"Yes," he said. "It must be a message from the major. Good Heavens! I hope there is nothing wrong."

A word or two in Hindustani from the doctor to the mahout, and our elephant began to shuffle toward the one coming, for Brace had gone on at once.

Our elephant made a good circuit to avoid the dead tiger, holding his trunk high, and evidently in doubt as to whether the beast was feigning death; and directly after we were close up to the messenger, whom I saw to be Denny, the man who had come over in the *Jumna*, and whose sweetheart I had jumped overboard to save.

"What is it, Denny? Anything wrong?" cried Brace.

The man gave him a wild look, and nodded his head, as he held on by one hand to the rope which secured the elephant's pad.

"Well, well!" cried Brace, excitedly; "what is it? Speak."

The man's lips parted, and one hand went up towards his head, while the mahout who had brought him looked back with his face full of horror. Then, as our elephant was urged up on the other side, the doctor reached over from the howdah, and by a quick movement caught the poor fellow's arm just as his hold had given way, and he was about to pitch off the pad to the ground.

"I thought so," cried the doctor, helping to lower him down. "He was fainting. The poor fellow has been wounded—badly, too!"

"What is this? How did he get hurt?" cried Brace to the mahout in Hindustani.

"My lord, I don't know. He came on a poor horse, and ordered me to come to you. My lord, he is very bad."

Just then the rajah came up, and I fancied there was a peculiar look in his face. He had changed colour, and seemed wild and strange, and when Brace fixed his eyes upon him he averted his gaze.

Chapter Twelve.

I noticed all this, but our attention was taken up by the wounded man, to whose side we had rapidly descended, all

thought of tigers being now at an end.

“The poor fellow has been set upon by budmashes as he was on his way here with a despatch,” said Brace. “Let me come a minute, doctor, and search his pockets.”

“Hang the despatch, man!” said the doctor sternly. “I want to save the lad’s life.”

He was down on his knees by Denny’s side, and had taken out his pocket-book and thrown it open, displaying surgical instruments, needles, silk, and bandages.

“Here, Vincent, come and help me,” he said. “Some of you cut a branch or two and shade us from this awful sun. Now, Vincent, slit open that sleeve; never mind damages. Hah! I thought so. That’s one exhauster.”

As the man’s arm was bared, the doctor caught my hand, and made me seize and press upon an artery high up in the limb; for from a terrible gash the blood was pumping out in regular pulsations, and as this act checked the bleeding a little, the doctor rapidly found and tied the divided artery, and then bandaged the wound.

“That was the most dangerous,” he said. “Now, then, what next? Cut on shoulder, not serious—ugly gash on head, bad—stab in thigh—must have been mounted—bullet in muscles of shoulder, fired evidently as the man was escaping. Hah! enough for one poor fellow. Now, Vincent, we’ll stop the bleeding, and then we must have him carried on a litter under shelter.”

“Couldn’t he bear the motion of the elephant?” said Brace.

“No! Yes,” said the doctor; “perhaps it would be best. While we are waiting for a litter we could get him to the rajah’s. There, I think he will not hurt. You may try for your despatch now.”

Brace and I tried the man’s pockets, and the doctor thrust his hand into the breast, but the result was *nil*.

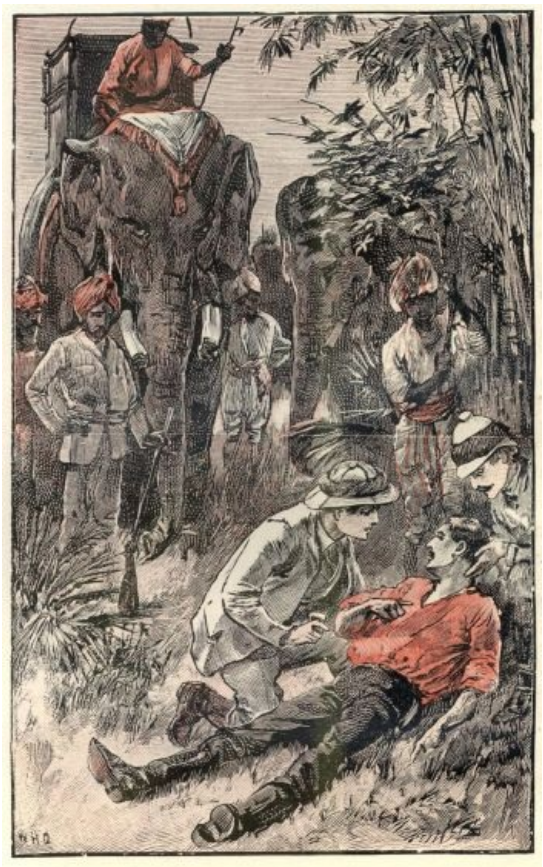
“No despatch,” said Brace, uneasily; and I saw his face wrinkle up, as if he were puzzled and anxious. “Let’s get him on the little pad elephant; it will be easier.”

“Now,” said the doctor, who had been bathing the poor fellow’s forehead and trickling water between his parched lips, “he’s coming to. Don’t question him; leave it to me.”

For at that moment the man’s face twitched a little, and he began to mutter excitedly; his words being plain enough to those near.

“Cowards!” he said. “Treachery—you dog—it’s murder! Look out, boys! Ah—sentry—the gate!”

He uttered a low groan and was silent.



“Mutiny,” he panted; “don’t go back.” p. 115.

Gil the Gunner.

“Not attacked on the road,” said Brace, excitedly.

“No,” said the rajah, hastily; “my people would not attack him.”

“There’s something wrong at the barracks,” cried Brace, excitedly. “He said treachery.”

I felt the blood thrill through my veins at these words; and then I stepped closer to Gunner Denny, whose eyes had now opened widely, and he was staring wildly round, till his gaze rested on me, and he made a sign to me to bend down.

“Look out, sir,” he said, in a faint voice. “Ah! Water!”

His eyes seemed to film over, but as water was trickled between his lips, he swallowed a little with difficulty, and revived, while we leant over him, listening intently for his next words.

“Mutiny,” he panted; “don’t go back.”

“What!” cried Brace; and I saw a movement amongst the rajah’s people, and they gathered round him.

“This morning,” said Denny, faintly. “Quarters seized; Major and Mr Barton cut down.”

“Great Heavens!” cried Brace.

“Masters of the barracks—Sepoy regiment—down town—murdered their officers—I—got away—came on, and—”

He uttered a low sigh and fainted.

“Dr Danby! You hear?”

“Yes,” said the doctor, in a low voice. “What I always feared. They’ve risen against us at last.”

“But both regiments? Absurd!”

“No; of course our men wouldn’t. And they’ve seized the barracks, I gather. Brace, old fellow, we’re in for it. The storm has broken.”

“I don’t understand you. There is trouble with the native infantry regiment, I suppose, and some of the men have gone up and seized our barracks. Oh, why was I not there?”

“Because you’ve other work to do, man,” whispered the doctor. “Look at the rajah. Brace, old fellow, we shall have to fight for our lives. This is the first flash of the fire; the whole country is rising in revolt.”

“No, no; impossible!” said Brace. Then, turning to the rajah, he saw that in his face which made him flash into a tempest of passion, and he seized the double rifle he had thrown on the ground, cocked both barrels, and advanced furiously toward the chief, while at his first menace the men advanced, drew their tulwars, slung their shields round from where they hung over their shoulders, or presented spears.

“You dog!” roared Brace, whose manner had completely changed. “You knew of all this!”

The rajah waved one hand to his men, who stopped short, scowling angrily, and with their dark eyes flashing, as, following my captain’s example, I cocked my own piece.

“Captain Brace will not fire on his host,” he said, in very good English, and I saw his nostrils quivering as he spoke and stepped forward. “We have eaten salt and are brothers.”

Brace lowered his piece and I did the same.

“Yes, I knew of it,” said the rajah, quietly.

“That the men of the native regiment meant to mutiny,” cried Brace, “and did not warn us?”

“I knew and did not warn you,” said the rajah, quietly.

“What treachery!”

“No,” said the rajah, “not treachery. I have held my hand. I would not join, but I could not go against the people.”

“But why—why have the men mutinied?” cried Brace, as the doctor and my companions listened excitedly.

“Because they were told,” replied the rajah. “Can you not see? The storm has been gathering for years, and now it is spreading fast. The great Koompanni is no more, and their people are being scattered like the dust.”

“What I have always feared,” muttered the doctor.

“And you call yourself my friend—the friend of the officers who have welcomed you at our mess, whose hands you have pressed a hundred times.”

“Yes,” said the rajah, with a grave, sad smile, “and I have proved that I am your friend.”

“But you owned that you knew of the mutiny.”

“Yes, and asked you and the other English officers here to-day.”

“To enable the men to seize the barracks.”

“No; to save your lives,” said the rajah. “Those who came lived; those who stayed away are dead.”

Brace looked at him coldly, and then turned to us.

“Quick!” he said, “let’s mount and get back. Help the wounded man. Doctor, you will ride with him?”

“Of course.”

“What are you going to do?” said the rajah, quickly.

“Go back to Rajgunge,” said Brace, sternly.

“To certain death?”

“To bring these madmen to their senses. Rajah, you will let the hathees bear us back?”

“To my place? Yes. No further.”

“What?”

“I have saved your lives, and must try and keep you from harm. I cannot let you have the hathees. I will not fight against the Koompanni. It has always been just to me, but I cannot, I dare not, fight against the people of my country.”

“Then we shall take them,” said Brace, sternly. “Quick, make ready. Doctor, mount that small beast with the wounded man, and go first. We will cover your retreat, if any one dares to stop us.”

The doctor prepared to mount without a word, and we pressed up to the huge elephant that the doctor and I had ridden; but the rajah passed his rifle to one of his men and came to us.

“Don’t be so mad, Captain Brace,” he said quietly, “I tell you I am your friend.”

“No. You are with the enemy, sir. Stand back.”

“No. I will not see you go straight to your death like that; neither will I give my life by supplying you with my hathees. It would be death to me and mine.”

“Stand back, sir.”

“Speak to him, Vincent,” said the rajah. “Tell him I must order my people to stop you. It is madness—death; you against all my people.”

Brace stopped short.

“You will order your men to fight,” he said; “in other words, you join in the revolt against your Queen.”

The rajah smiled, and, with true Eastern cunning, paid—

“I shall order my men to protect their chiefs property. Those are my hathees. They shall not go and show the men who have risen that I have helped you. Come, be wise. Stop here, and I will give you refuge. Where can you flee better?”

“To where men are faithful to their Queen.”

“It is of no use, Brace,” said the doctor. “Make a virtue of necessity, man.” Then, turning to the rajah, “You will give us safe conduct down to your place?”

“Yes,” said the rajah, quickly; “and if there is danger, my people shall hide my old friends. It is war now, not against men we know, but against the Koompanni.”

“Let’s ride back to the rajah’s place,” said the doctor, in a whisper; “we may make some terms with him on the way.”

“Can we trust him?” replied Brace. “There is a look about him I hardly like.”

“Help the sahibs,” said the rajah; and then he made a sign, with the result that the mahouts made their elephants kneel down again, and, after a little hesitation, Brace mounted, and I followed him, while, after orders had been given for the second tiger to be placed on the pad elephant, we set off down the valley, the rajah riding abreast, while his armed men came behind, leading the pad elephant with the shikaree and the beaters.

The sun shone brightly as ever; the jungle growth away to right and left was glorious to behold, and the sky was of as vivid a blue as the edge of the forest was green; but it was as if a terrible black cloud had come down over us, and all were changed. We had ridden up that gorge full of excitement, and in the eager anticipation of a day’s sport; now we knew that we were on our way to face death and terrors that I shrank from contemplating.

From time to time Brace gave an order to our mahout, and he went on abreast of the little elephant which bore the doctor and the wounded man, when a short eager conversation took place; Brace being of opinion that the outbreak was only local, and that our course would be to send messengers at once east and west to the nearest stations for

help; but the doctor took a more serious view of the case.

“Perhaps I’m wrong,” he said, “but I fear we have been growing this trouble for years past.”

“What do you mean?” cried Brace, impatiently.

“You ask me that?” said the doctor. “Well, I mean that your Bartons, of whom there are thousands through the country—as officers, magistrates, collectors, and the like—have been trampling down and insulting these people, till they have been crushed in the dust, till they could bear no more, and they have risen. Now do you ask me what I mean?”

Brace glanced at me as I was thinking of the handsome, patient syce at the barracks, and the treatment I had often seen him meet with; and then, as if reading my thoughts, he turned away with a look of despair.

“There is no hiding the fact, Brace,” continued the doctor. “I only hope I am exaggerating the troubles. But if I am right, I say, God help the wives and daughters of those who have them here, and may He spread his hands over the unfortunate children!”

His words seemed to cut through me with an agonising pain, as I mentally repeated his words—wives and daughters; and then I felt giddy, and as if I should fall from the howdah. “Wives and daughters!” I said aloud, and then, with a horrible feeling of despair, I pictured trouble at Nussoor, where my father’s regiment was stationed, and thought of my mother and sister face to face with the horrors of a revolt.

“Hold up, Vincent,” said Brace, in a sharp whisper. “What’s the matter? Feel the sun too much? Take some water, lad. I want your help. You must not break down.”

“No, no,” I said quickly; “I’m better now.”

“That’s right! We must get back and learn the full extent of the mischief. Yon poor fellow was excited, and he may have exaggerated the affair. He is as bad as can be, and perhaps he imagines that the rest were the same. Cheer up, lad! Lacey is too clever and experienced an officer to have been cut up like that. I dare say we shall find him looking out for us anxiously. Perhaps we shall meet an escort sent to meet us.”

Just then the rajah’s elephant came abreast, and its master reached out his hand with refreshments, which Brace declined, but the next moment took eagerly.

“Thank you,” he said quickly. “Eat, drink, Vincent,” he half whispered; “we shall want all our strength.”

“And you?” I said.

“Oh, I shall do the same,” he said bitterly; and then he held out his hand, and whispered softly, “We have been very poor friends lately, my lad, but shake hands now, for perhaps we are very near the end of life’s journey.”

“Brace,” I gasped as I snatched at his hand and gripped it hard.

“I hope not, for your sake, boy,” he said in a low voice; “for you have your young life before you. I hope not for my own. I may be very useful now. There may be a great deal to do, and if there is, my lad,” he said, smiling, “I am going to try not to be such a coward as to shrink from that duty; though you thought me one, because I would not fight the man who, perhaps, has had much to do with the rising.”

“Oh, Brace,” I faltered, “I don’t think I ever thought you a coward.”

“You did,” he said quietly. “Most people in your place, and educated as you have been, would have judged me in the same hard way. Perhaps I am one, Gil; but I shall not show it, and I shall not shrink from anything I have to do.”

“You think, then, that there is a wider trouble than that at the station?”

“I am obliged to think so. The doctor is right. I fought against it, telling myself I was panic-stricken, but I felt the same. You see the rajah knew of it, and—I am speaking plainly now—if matters turn out very bad, and I am not near you, try to get a horse and make for Nussoor. It is a very long journey, but the way may be open, and the trouble not spreading in that direction. At present your white face may command help and shelter, but don’t tarry on the way—the great north-west road, mind, and—”

“I shall keep with you,” I said quietly. “Let’s wait and know the worst.”

In another couple of hours we were at the rajah’s, and as the elephants halted and knelt down, Brace turned to their owner, who was conversing with a couple of horsemen.

“Now, sir,” he said, “I am not addressing the enemy, but the old friend and companion. You will let us have these two elephants as far as Rajgunge?”

“It is impossible, Captain Brace. I would help you, but I should bring down destruction on myself and people.”

“Then you will lend us a dhooly for this man, and people to carry him?”

“No. They would not carry him, or, if they did, they would halt on the road and attack you when you were not prepared. An evil spirit for you and yours has been going through the land for months, and now the fire has sprung up all round.”

Brace turned from him, and his face looked fixed and stern.

“Listen,” said the rajah, laying a hand upon his arm; “it would be madness to move that man. Ask the doctor. The man would be dead before you were half-way there.”

“I’m afraid so,” said the doctor, sadly.

“Leave him, then, with me. I give you my word that I will protect him. I sent for you all to come here, so that you might be safe. Stay.”

Brace was silent for a few moments, and then he held out his hand to the rajah.

“Thank you,” he said. “Forgive me for doubting you, but I cannot stay.”

“I tell you that you are going to your death,” whispered the rajah, earnestly. “The whole city is in revolt against your people; the sepoy regiment has slain all its officers, and your own men are scattered Heaven knows where.”

“How do you know?” said Brace, fiercely.

“Those men I was speaking with have ridden over from the town. They just gave me the news.”

Brace looked at the fierce-looking fellows, and knew that they were watching us intently.

“I will gladly take your offer for my man,” said Brace at last.

“And you yourselves?” said the rajah, eagerly.

Brace turned to us.

“What do you say?” he said.

“I shall follow my captain,” replied Haynes.

“Doctor?”

“I am an Englishman,” he said quietly.

Brace looked at me.

“Vincent!” he said, in a low hurried voice. “We have a painful tramp before us, and in all probability the buggies will not come to meet us. You are young and not used to such work as we have before us. The doctor will give you a few instructions, so you shall stop and look after Denny.”

I don’t know how it was—I make no professions of being brave, but a strange feeling of exaltation came over me then, and I said quickly—

“Don’t make me feel like a coward. I cannot stay; I must go with you.”

He looked at me fixedly for a few moments, and then turned to the rajah.

“Give us bread and wine,” he said.

The rajah pointed toward his house, but Brace refused to turn, and, in obedience to a command, a couple of men were sent in, and directly after three of the chiefs servants hurried out with refreshments and handed them to us.

We partook sparingly, and as we ate and drank Brace whispered—

“See, all of you, that you have plenty of ball cartridges.”

The order was needless, for we were all well supplied; and, five minutes later, a brief and distant leave-taking followed, and, shouldering our pieces, we set off, through the hot afternoon sunshine, to try and follow the track to the road. This reached, it would be one steady descent to Rajgunge, but, as we afterwards owned, not one of us believed that we should reach it alive.

Note 1. Budmashes are outlaws, footpads.

Note 2. Hathees are elephants.

Chapter Thirteen.

“Seems too bad to leave my patient,” said the doctor. “Am I doing right?”

“You have dressed his wounds, and we are going to get help for him,” replied Brace.

“I hope so,” muttered the doctor. And then we toiled on and on, under the blazing sun, with our pieces growing so hot that they scorched our shoulders, but he man made a complaint, and two and two we tramped on, keeping a sharp look-out for the danger that might spring up at any moment.

“We must chance an ambuscade,” said Brace, quietly. “If we are attacked, and there is cover to be had, follow me to it at once. We four, with these rifles, ought to keep a pretty good party at bay. By the way, always hold your left hand barrels in reserve. We may want them to stop a rush.”

My recollection of that march is as that of some feverish dream; the sun came down with terrible power, and that which had been beautiful in the morning, from the howdah of an elephant, was now gloomy, painful, and apparently endless. Twice over we found that we had strayed from the track, and I had to turn and go watchfully back till we could see the great circular impressions of the elephants’ feet, and at last we reached the spot from whence we had started in the morning. There was the litter left by the rajah’s men when they had struck the shelter-tent, and followed us; there were the elephants’ footprints, and the marks of the stakes. But there was no sign of that which I had fondly hoped, in my parched and footsore state, might be in waiting—a couple of vehicles, ready to take us back. All was silent save the cry of a hawk soaring round and round in the blue sky, and once there came the sharp shriek of a jay.

We had now reached the road along whose dusty side we steadily trudged on, till we came in sight of Rajgunge, far away below us, and now bathed in the warm, ruddy glow of the setting sun.

We involuntarily halted, and, after a sharp look round for danger, stood gazing at the beautiful city, so calm and peaceful, with the golden riband-like river curving round in the evening glow, that it was impossible to think that anything could be wrong.

In fear of such a catastrophe, we looked forward to seeing the smoke rising from a conflagration. But no; there was the faint haze caused by the dust trampled up by many thousand feet, and softening the outline of some of the dazzling white buildings. That was all.

“Can it be possible?” said the doctor at last, after he had gazed through the little field-glass handed to him by Brace. “One could fancy it was all a false alarm, and that poor Denny’s injuries were the result of some troubles in the bazaar.”

“Hist! quick!” I said sharply; and I pointed to a cloud of dust far away before us.

“Our men!”

But as the words were spoken, we caught sight of the glint of steel just above the dust cloud; and knowing, as we did, that they were lance-points, we obeyed a sign from Brace, and took refuge among the trees by the roadside.

We were none too soon, for the cloud swept nearer, and, headed by a splendidly mounted man in a yellow caftan, belted with a rich cashmere shawl, about a couple of dozen white-clothed troopers swept by, and disappeared as they had come, in a cloud of dust.

“What are they?” said the doctor, inquiringly.

“Soldiers of some irregular regiment,” replied Brace, looking after the horsemen thoughtfully.

“Then there is no reason why they may not be friends,” I said.

“Where is their regular officer, then?” said Brace, drily. “They would not be led by a man like the one we saw.”

The opinion was unanswerable, and we tramped on along the dusty road, wearied out, but kept going by the excitement; till, coming upon a group of people, whose appearance suggested that they had journeyed from the city, Brace stopped them to question them about the state of the place.

For answer they rushed by us, and pursued their way, an action telling pretty plainly that some great change must have taken place, or these people would have been obsequious to a degree.

The sun went down, but the heat was as great as ever; and feeling at times as if I must drop, I kept on that weary tramp. Then darkness fell, the great stars came out, and feeling that our prospects would be better of getting unnoticed into the city, now not very distant, we took heart, and tramped forward in regular military time, the swing of the march seeming to help us forward.

Group after group of people were passed, but none heeded us, and no further efforts were made to stay and question them.

“No,” said Brace; “we will get our answer at head-quarters.”

Then, calling a halt for ten minutes, we sank down by the roadside to rest before starting for the finishing stage of our painful journey.

But we had no sooner thrown ourselves down, than from the darkness ahead came the murmur of voices and the tramp of feet, very low and distant, but peculiar enough to make Brace spring up, while my heart began to beat heavily.

“Draw farther back,” he whispered; “they are not country people.”

Just then there was a click familiar enough to us all, and then another.

“It must be some of our lads,” whispered Brace; and the next minute, as a little body of men came by, in regular military step, I heard him mutter, “Must be;” and he cried, “Halt!”

“Draw—swords!” rang out in answer, and there was the peculiar grating rattle of sabres being drawn from steel scabbards.

“Who is that? Sergeant Craig?” cried Brace.

“Captain!” shouted a familiar voice. “Thank God, we’ve found you at last!” and a faint cheer rose up.

“Quick! tell me,” cried Brace, as we pressed up to the men—“is it all true?”

“You’ve heard, then, sir?” said the sergeant, with a groan.

“Yes; Denny escaped and reached us.”

“Poor lad! I thought he was one of the goners.”

“How was it?” said Brace, sternly.

“I hardly know, sir. A surprise. Everything was as usual, just at the hottest time, when they were down upon us like a thunder clap. One party made for the officers’ quarters, another for the guard, and shot down the sentries; another made the men fast in their quarters, and before we could grasp it, they had seized the whole place, and we were helpless.”

“But the major—Lieutenant Barton?”

“Don’t ask me, sir,” said the man, hoarsely.

“Speak, man.”

“I saw the major run out, sword in hand, followed by a dozen of the scoundrels, and he was shouting for the trumpeter; but before Dick Dobbs could get out, the poor major was cut down, and we were locked in, could hear the lieutenant crying for help, and there was firing going on in his quarters, and then the scoundrels came out, shouting wildly.”

“Killed?”

The sergeant uttered a low groan.

“The wretches! the cowardly, traitorous wretches!” cried Brace. “They had murdered their own officers, and then came up to the barracks.”

“Beg pardon, sir.”

Brace repeated his words.

“What! were the niggers mutinied too?”

“Yes; did you not know?”

“Not a word, sir. We were like being in prison till we managed to creep out; and then after a bit of a talk among us non-coms, as were left, we determined, as our officers were gone, to come and try and find you, sir.”

“Then you were kept locked in the barracks?”

“Yes, sir; and if any of us showed a head, it was made a mark for a bullet. But we could hear all that was going on. One of them sounded boot and saddle as well ’most as little Dick.”

“Nay!” cried a boyish voice from the darkness.

“Well, tidy enough; and then we could hear them bringing out the horses, and limbering up and forming up in the barrack yard, sir, till I could bear it no longer, and I risked the bullets so as to get a peep now and then; and I did till, with everything in order, and the ammunition chests and waggons crammed, they rode out of the yard, with the people yelling and tom-tomming like mad.”

“But who—who did all this? The sepoys of the native regiment?”

“No, sir,” cried the sergeant.

“Then who did?”

“The syces, sir.”

“What?”

“The whole gang of them, sir; led by Ny Deen.”

“What?” said Brace again.

“It has been a plot, sir, all slowly worked out. That Ny Deen is some big chief, from his ways to-day; and others with him are somebodies. They’ve been watching our drill, and quietly learning everything, till the time came, and then, at some word of command, they rushed in, carried all before them; and, after a way, they’ve gone off with guns,

ammunition, and every horse except the officers', which somehow they overlooked."

"Is this some horrible dream?" panted Brace.

"No, sir; but horrid wide-awake truth," said the sergeant, sadly. "Twenty-two of our men cut up, and as fine a troop of horses and battery of guns gone as there is in the army; and as for me, sir, I feel as if I was that disgraced, that if I'd had a carbine, I believe I should have gone up in some corner, said a bit of a prayer, and then—good-bye to it all, and shot myself dead."

"But the sentries?" said Brace, after an interval, during which we had stood as if utterly crushed by the news. "They could not have been doing their duty."

"Nay, sir, but they were," said the sergeant, speaking with energy now, the last words he had uttered having been in a hoarse, broken voice, which told of his sorrow and despair. "Poor chaps! they saw a party of syces coming toward them in white—men they knew well enough. Was it likely, sir, that they'd think them enemies?"

"No," said Brace, sadly. "Poor lads! poor lads!"

"God save the Queen, sir!" cried the sergeant, hysterically, for the poor fellow was utterly broken down, "and long life to one's officers, whom I for one would follow anywhere, even to certain death. Yes; I'd have followed him, poor chap. But it was his doing, sir, and the likes of him; and I'll say it now, even if I'm court-martialled for it. Lieutenant Barton brought it on us. The niggers 'll bear a deal, but it's only natural that they'd turn some time; and quiet as Ny Deen was, I've seen his eyes flash sometimes when Mr Barton was rating him, and not because he deserved it, for a better groom and a man more proud of turning out a horse well, never came into cantonments."

"Silence in the ranks," said Brace, shortly. "Lie down all of you and rest. Gentlemen," he continued, turning to us, "this way, please. We must consider what is to be done."

We followed him a few yards into the darkness, and Brace whispered to us to sit down, setting the example himself; but though we waited he did not speak, and at last the doctor whispered to me to say something to the captain.

He heard the whispering and spoke at once, hurriedly.

"I beg your pardon," he said; "I was thinking hard about our position."

"Yes? Well?" said the lieutenant with us.

"What have you decided?" whispered the doctor.

"To act," said Brace, with decision. "This mutinous rising may be one that is extending, or merely a local trouble here, at Rajgunge; but that is no affair of ours, gentlemen. We were away from our duties, on our own pleasure. We allowed ourselves to be inveigled—"

"No, no," said the doctor. "Poor Lacey gave us leave after accepting the invitation."

"The major kept to his post, and died defending it, sir," said Brace, sternly. "We were away, and the position in which we find ourselves is a disgrace which we must wipe off."

"How?" cried my brother-officers.

"As men should," replied Brace, sternly. "As I have said, the rising is nothing to us, whether great or small. We have only one thing to study."

"To get back the guns!" I cried excitedly.

Brace's hand gripped my arm with all his force.

"Yes," he cried. "Right. To get back those guns and horses at any cost."

"Impossible!" muttered the doctor.

"Tell me that, doctor," cried Brace, "when I am wounded to the death, and you press my hand, tell me you can do no more, and say 'Good-bye.' There is no such word as impossible in a British soldier's thoughts when he has to charge. Duty says forward! and he advances with a cheer. Now, gentlemen, are you with me? I am going to get back those guns. Doctor, you are a non-combatant; I am not speaking to you. Haynes, will you follow me?"

"As long as I can lift an arm."

"I don't ask you, Vincent. You are a soldier's son, and I know that I can depend on you. There, I see my way now. Let us go back to the men."

We rose and followed him, the doctor whispering sharply, "Am I a non-combatant, Brace? This is a case of emergency, and perhaps I can use a sword as well as I can use a rifle. At any rate, I am going to try."

"'Tention!" said Brace, in a low quick voice, and the men sprang to their feet and formed in line, their figures looking weird and strange in the darkness. "Can you all hear me?"

The silence which followed his question was proof that his words were heard, and he stepped back a few yards and stood listening intently before returning to face the men.

“Now, my lads,” he said, “we are a mere handful in the midst, perhaps, of thousands of enemies; but we are Englishmen.”

There was a loud murmur like the precursor of a shout.

“Silence! Not a sound, my lads. Listen. We have been taken by surprise, and our comrades have many of them met their death through treachery, while the officers and men are disgraced by our position.”

There was another murmur, but it was in protest.

“Yes; I say disgraced. Ours, the smartest troop in the Company’s army, has been disarmed, and there are two courses open to us—to fly for our lives and try to make our way to the nearest station, tramping, and without our guns; or to make a bold dash, like the men you are, to get our guns and horses back. Those are the two courses open, and I am not going to insult my brave lads by asking them which course we shall take. Sergeant—men, I’m going to have those guns back. If I go down, here is Lieutenant Haynes to carry on the work. After him Mr Vincent, and after him the doctor. If we all break down, there’s Sergeant Craig. Plenty to lead you, and there isn’t a man among you who will not follow, I know.”

“Not a man, sir,” said Sergeant Craig. “I’ll answer for them all.”

“Please, sir, mayn’t we cheer?” said a voice in the ranks.

“No, my lads,” said Brace. “I can feel your hearts are throbbing beat for beat with mine. When we get back our guns and horses you shall cheer; till then, you must work with me in silence, and with the cunning of the natives, for it is only by scheming that we can win. I know how you feel. That is all.”

There was a low murmur like a thrill, and a sound as of men tightening their belts and loosening their swords. The next minute, as if it were a parade, Brace was walking along the front of the rank, and returning by the rear, followed by the sergeant and me.

“A short muster, but enough,” said Brace. “Now, my lads, I propose to rest here for a couple of hours, then to march back to Rajgunge and reconnoitre the barracks when all is quiet. We may pick up one or two of our men, and, if fortunate, get the officers’ horses. Break off. We are out of sight here. Mr Haynes, post sentries. The others will try to get a couple of hours’ sleep. Silence!”

In five minutes the sentries were posted and the officers lay down near the men, while we three talked in whispers about our chances of success, Brace having left us to begin steadily pacing up and down as if working out his plans.

Chapter Fourteen.

At the appointed time the men fell in, rested a little, no doubt, but not one had slept, and after a few words respecting the importance of silence, Brace placed himself at their head, whispered to me to come to his side, and the word was given—*March*!

It was a strange, weird tramp along the deserted road, for not a soul was encountered; but as we drew nearer, the lights in the city were many, and from the noise and drumming it was evident that there were festivities in progress, possibly rejoicings among the natives at the fall of the British rule.

But as we got on to lower ground the illuminations disappeared, and Brace pointed out that the part in the direction of our barracks seemed to be all dark.

But we could, of course, make out little at that distance, and as we neared the river, Brace struck off to the right, so as to avoid the houses as much as possible, his intention being, he said, to get round till we were about opposite to our quarters, and then march boldly and silently on.

“The probabilities are,” he said, “that at this hour of the night we shall not meet a soul.”

About this time he called up the sergeant and questioned him, but there was little more to be communicated. Apparently there had been very little plundering; the party led by Ny Deen having its one important object in view—the capture of the horses, guns, and ammunition; and after cutting down those who resisted, and securing the rest in their quarters, they had busied themselves over their task, and marched out in triumph.

“But I’m expecting, sir, that when we get back we shall find that the mob from the bazaar has been busy, and plundered and burned the whole place; and if so—”

He stopped short.

“Well, speak up, man. What do you mean—the wounded?”

“No, sir,” replied the sergeant, as I shuddered at the horrors these words suggested; “I don’t think there were any wounded left; they did their work too well. I was thinking of the poor chargers.”

“Oh!” I ejaculated, as I thought of my noble-looking Arab and its companion, and I involuntarily quickened my pace.

“Steady, Vincent,” whispered the captain; and I checked myself. “Let’s hope it is not so.” Then, turning to the sergeant—“You feel sure that the officers’ horses are not gone?”

“I can’t say that, sir. Only that the mutineers did not take them. They wanted to get the gun-horses and the others; that was all they seemed to be thinking about.”

“Yes, that would be all,” assented Brace.

“The mob may have carried off the poor creatures since, sir; I don’t know.”

As we approached the outskirts, all was as anticipated, quite still, and after another whisper to the men to keep as silent as possible, we marched boldly in through the narrow lanes, threading our way for some time without hardly seeing a soul, and those whom we encountered only looked at us with curiosity or else fled at once.

Twice over we became confused, losing our way, but our good luck aided us, for we recognised places which we had passed through before, and resumed our march, getting nearer and nearer to our barracks, and now hearing shouting, drumming, with the clash of music, but right away from us; and at last it was left well behind to our right.

From time to time the captain halted and let the men pass by him, so as to keep a sharp look-out, and see whether we were followed.

But that did not seem to enter into the thoughts of any of the natives we had passed. They were apparently thinking solely of their own safety, and at last, trembling with eagerness, we approached the gateway that we had left so short a time before; and a painful sensation of sorrow smote me as I recalled the genial face of the major and his words wishing us success as he saw us off on our pleasant expedition.

“And now dead!—cruelly murdered by treachery,” I said to myself; while the painful feeling was succeeded by one of rage, accompanied by a desire to take vengeance on the men who had cut him down.

But I had something else to think of now, for Brace halted the men and took me to examine the gateway, where all was silent and black. There was no armed sentry on duty, no lights in the guard-room, and a chill struck through me, and I searched the ground with my eyes in dread lest I should trip over the remains of some man by whose side I had ridden during many a parade or drill.

Brace stepped forward boldly, and we passed through the gateway into the yard when, suddenly, and as silently as if barefooted, a white figure started up near us, and would have fled had not Brace caught it by the arm.

“Silence!” he said in Hindustani.

“Don’t kill me, master,” came in a low supplicating whisper.

“Dost!” I exclaimed, for I recognised the voice.

“Yes, master,” he cried, turning to me.

“What were you doing here?” said Brace, sternly.

“I came up when all was dark and the budmashes were all gone, master,” said the man with trembling accents. “I have been to master’s quarters.”

“To plunder?” said Brace, sternly.

“Master’s servant is honest and never steals,” said Dost, quickly. “Master can search and see.”

“I think—I’m sure he is honest,” I said hastily. “Tell us, Dost. Who is in the barracks now?”

“The dead men, master,” said the Hindu solemnly. “There is no one living there. Yes,” he added quickly, “I did hear sounds, but I could find nobody. And the mem sahib is gone.”

“Where did you hear the sounds?” I asked.

“By the stables, my lord. If the budmashes had not taken away all the horses I should have thought the horses were there still.”

“And they are,” I whispered to Brace.

“Be cautious,” he whispered back. “We must not trust this man. Dost, tell me; the major—where is he?”

The man sighed, and said softly—

“The burra major is dead. I have laid his body inside the mess-room. The mem sahib must have escaped or been carried off.”

“You did this, Dost?” I cried, after a pause.

“Yes, sahib. It was dreadful for him to lie there.”

“Take us where you have laid him,” said Brace, sternly; “but mind, if you attempt to escape, I shall fire.”

“Why should thy servant try to escape?” said the man simply. “This way.”

“You do not trust him?” I said to Brace.

“Trust?” he replied bitterly. “Who can ever trust a Hindu again?”

We followed Dost across the compound, to where the blank windows of the mess-room loomed out of the darkness, and we saw that they and the door were carefully closed.

“I have misjudged him, Gil,” whispered Brace; “he has been here.”

As the Hindu began to open the door, we glanced sharply about the place, each holding his double rifle, ready for immediate action against human tigers, as I told myself. But all was silent and deserted, and as I looked toward the major’s quarters and thought of the pleasant English lady who had so often made me welcome in the little drawing-room she fitted up so charmingly wherever we stayed, and whose soft carpets, purdahs, and screens came back to my memory in the soft light of the shaded lamps, I shivered, and wondered what had been her fate.

“I could not find the lieutenant, sahib,” said Dost, as he threw open the door.

“Be on your guard, Gil,” whispered Brace to me in French; “it may be a trap after all. Hush! Look out. I thought so,” he cried; and I swung round the muzzle of my rifle, as four figures suddenly came upon us from out of the darkness at our back.

The alarm was momentary, for a familiar voice said, as the point of a sword gritted in the sand at the speaker’s feet—

“All right. I was growing uneasy about you, and brought three of the boys in case of accident.”

“Thank you, doctor,” said Brace. “We are going in here. The major—”

“Hush!” said the doctor, drawing in a hissing breath. “Stand fast, my lads.”

“If you hear anything wrong,” said Brace to the three men who stood sword in hand, “you know what to do.”

There was a low hiss, more than a murmur, and then we were in the darkness of the mess-room.

“I’ll shut the door,” said Dost, softly.

“Why?” said the doctor, quickly.

“The sahib doctor can trust me,” said the man, quietly. “It is dark. I am going to light a candle. I think the barracks are quite empty, but some of the budmashes might be about seeking to rob, and they would see the light.”

He closed the door, and the darkness for the moment was intense, while my heart beat with a heavy throb as I wondered whether, after all, there was treachery intended, and Brace’s words rang in my ears—“Who can ever trust a Hindu again?”

The silence was awful in the moments which followed the closing of the door. There was a faint rustling sound followed by a sharp click click, which I knew was the cocking of a rifle or pistol; then came a scraping sound as of a sword-edge touching the wall—sounds which told me that my suspicions were shared; but, directly after, they were dispelled, for there was a crackling noise and a faint line of light; a repetition of the scratching, accompanied by a few sparks, and, at the third repetition, there was a flash which lit up the dark face of Dost and his white turban; then the match began to burn, and we could see his fingers look transparent as he sheltered the flame and held it to a piece of candle, which directly after lit up the mess-room, one wreck now of broken glass, shattered chairs, and ragged curtain and cloth.

I saw all that at a glance, but as my eyes wandered about the room, they rested upon a couch at the side, upon which lay something covered completely by a tablecloth, whose whiteness was horribly stained.

I shuddered, and tried to turn my eyes away, but I could not, and involuntarily I followed Brace and the doctor, as Dost went to the couch.

“Better keep away, Gil, lad,” said Brace, in a low voice, full of emotion. “You will have enough horrors forced upon you without seeking them out.”

I made no answer, but I did not retire, as Brace softly raised the cloth from the face of our commanding officer, and I saw that, though disfigured by a couple of terrible cuts, it was quite placid; and my heart warmed—in my sorrow for my poor friend—toward the Hindu servant who had so reverently treated his remains.

Then a thrill ran through me, for as Brace stood holding the cloth raised, and Dost held the candle for us to see, the doctor uttered an ejaculation, pushed Brace rudely aside, and then laid his rifle on the ground, and began to tear open the light cotton garment the major wore, while his busy hands played, in the dim light, about his breast.

“Here, Dost,” he whispered, “put down the light. Tear this cloth into narrow bandages. Vincent, lad, take out my pocket-book from my breast, and open it.”

“Great heavens, Danby!” began Brace.

“Thank Heaven, you mean,” said the doctor, in his quick, business-like way. “Good job I’m here. Dost, you fool, you shouldn’t be in such a hurry. Why, you might have buried him. The man’s not dead.”

No word was uttered, but there was a quick expiration of the breath, and then a busy silence, only broken by the rustling movements of the doctor, who kept on examining and bandaging.

At last he began to speak.

“Wonderful how nature stops bleeding,” he whispered. “He has cuts and stabs enough to have bled any one to death, but there’s a spark left yet.”

“Hist! what’s that?” said Brace, as a sound came from the door.

“Right, sir,” said a voice, which I knew to be Sergeant Craig’s. “Mr Haynes is getting uneasy.”

“Go and tell him,” said Brace, who was kneeling and holding one end of a bandage.

I crossed to the door.

“We’ve found the major,” I whispered, “desperately wounded, but alive.”

“Oh!” came in one burst from the men.

“Go and tell Mr Haynes.”

“Best news I’ve heard to-day, sir,” whispered the sergeant, who turned and went off at the double while I stepped outside, and closed the door to satisfy myself that the light could not be seen.

“No, sir,” said one of the men, “we couldn’t see a speck of it.”

I hurried back to report in a whisper that all was safe, and for the next quarter of an hour I looked on till the doctor had finished his task.

“There,” he said, rising, “he’s as bad as can be, but I may bring him round if we can get him to a place of safety.”

“Dost can help us, perhaps,” I whispered.

“Try and manage it with him, Danby,” said Brace, “while I go and see if the horses are safe. Dost, I ask your pardon for my unjust suspicions. Forgive me!”

“The captain sahib did not know my heart,” was the reply; and before leaving, I caught and pressed the Hindu’s hand.

Outside in the black night, where the hot wind was sighing, and the great stars blinking down, we left one man on guard at the mess-room door, and hurried round to the stables, where, to our great delight, we were saluted by a low whinnying from the horses, my two and Brace’s being safe and eagerly waiting for their supply of food. Leaving the men to feed them, we hurried to the next stables, where the major’s horses should have been, in company with the doctor’s, but the place was empty; and on continuing our quest, Barton’s and Haynes’s were all missing, while the men’s troopers were gone, and a glance at the sheds showed that not a gun or limber was left.

“Back to the mess-room,” said Brace, after we had come upon several of our dead men, but had seen no trace of either of the women attached to the corps. “Heard anything?” he whispered to the sentry.

“Woman scream, sir.”

“No, no.”

“Yes, sir; I swear to it. Heard it twice quite plain.”

“Jackals on the prowl, man,” said Brace.

“Must have been a female jackal, then,” I heard the man mutter, as I passed in and found the doctor and my Hindu servant by the couch.

“How is he?” whispered Brace.

“Well, he’s alive, and that’s all,” replied the doctor. “Dost here says that if we have him carried to a house in the town about a quarter of a mile away, he knows people who will nurse him. Will you give orders. There are plenty of light dhoolies.”

“Will he be safe?” said Brace, quickly.

“My life upon it, sahib,” said Dost. “I can attend him too when the master does not want me. But I can be useful to him still.”

“This is no time for wanting servants,” said Brace, shortly. “Let it be as he proposes. I will get the men and the dhooly at once.”

“Where will the master be when I want to follow him?”

Brace hesitated for a few moments, and seemed to be about to speak out, but he altered his mind, and said slowly:

“I cannot say yet. But we will keep communicating with you where the major is.”

“But the master had better take me,” said Dost, quickly. “The place will be full of budmashes, and the people all

about will be enemies now. How are the sahibs to know where to get food or shelter, or to get news without me? I can go anywhere—you nowhere."

"Not yet," said Brace, meaningly; "but you are right, Dost, you shall go with us, and keep open our communications."

We went out and across to the gate, where Haynes was fretting with anxiety, but a thrill ran through the men as they found there was work on hand. The orders were given, and a corporal and four men were told off to carry the dhooly, which was found at once, and borne to the mess-room. Then the major was carefully lifted in, and with the doctor in charge and Dost as guide, the little party sallied forth with the understanding that they were to return as quickly as possible.

The interval was spent in a search for food; then arms were hunted out, we officers finding that our quarters had not been plundered, and hurriedly changing our hunting garments for service uniform; and somehow as I stepped out again into the dark night, with sword belted on, and pistols ready to place in my saddle holsters, the helpless despairing feeling began to wear off.

By this time the horses had been saddled and bridled, and all were ready for the next move, but the doctor did not return, and while we were waiting a faint shouting arose from below in the city.

We had been well over the barracks and learned the worst, Brace sharing my surprise that so little plundering had been going on; and whilst we were standing once more in the court with the men drawn up, a picket at the gate, and one of the horses laden with provisions and ammunition, Haynes turned to me.

"It's terribly un-English," he said; "but they would have no mercy on us."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"They have declared war on us, and they ought to take the consequences."

"Explain yourself," I said, as I felt as if I were listening to him with one ear, and for the return of our absent men with the other.

"Well," he said, "I feel as if I should like to give the scoundrels a lesson. The magazine is half full of powder, and to-morrow the wretches will be up here plundering and destroying."

"Well, what then?"

"It would be so easy to lay a trap for them. Plant all the powder behind the gates, after carefully barricading them; lay a train; wait till they were all crowded together, and trying to get in, and then fire the train and blow them all to destruction."

"And who would fire the train, Haynes?" said Brace, who, unnoticed by us, had heard every word.

"I feel as if I could enjoy staying behind on purpose," said Haynes.

"Hah! I've better work on hand for you," said Brace, quietly. "It would do no good, and only be destroying a mob of the greatest ruffians in Rajgunge. Hah, there is the challenge at last."

In effect the doctor and the men with the dhooly came back just then.

"Where's Dost—staying with the major?" cried Brace.

"No, sahib, I am here," came from the interior of the dhooly, out of which Dost stepped as the men set it down.

"What does this mean?" said Brace, angrily.

"His ruse to save us," said the doctor. "We got poor Lacey safe into comfortable quarters at the house of two of the women who washed for the men, and they are to be trusted, I think. I can do no more for him, but see to his wounds to-morrow. As soon as I had seen him right, we were coming back, when, as luck had it, we got into a narrow lane, and half-way along it, heard a noisy party coming shouting along from some festivity. Retreat was impossible, and I gave the orders to the men to draw and cut our way through, but Dost here stopped us by proposing to get in the dhooly."

"Why?" said Brace, angrily.

"I'll tell you. It was a last resource; and though the men grumbled, they lifted the dhooly, and I marched by the side. The next minute we were stopped."

"Well?"

"Hang him!" cried the doctor; "he began to curse them in Hindustani for stopping his gharry, ordered them to let his servants go by, and the idiots took it that a complete change had come over the state of affairs; that Dost must have turned rajah, and was using the English as his slaves. So they all shouted with delight, let us pass, and here we are, thanks to Rajah Dost."

"Then, now for our start," said Brace, "unless it would be wiser to stay here till morning, Dost must go out and try and obtain news of the women."

"No, no, sahib," cried the Hindu, excitedly. "By daylight all the budmashes of the city will be up here to plunder and

burn.”

“Do you hear, Haynes?” said Brace, bitterly. “They may bring the punishment upon themselves.”

“I have thought of the mem sahib, master,” continued Dost, “and one of the women will try and learn news for us. She will find it better than I could.”

“You are right,” said Brace; and giving orders for the horses to be led in the rear, he placed himself at the head of our little column, gave the word march, and we filed out of the gate, Dost leading through the silent lanes of the city, and then round below its walls to the bridge of boats, which was passed without our having encountered a soul.

In our helpless state it was felt that we could do no better than to go by Dost’s advice, for he knew the country round, and suggested that we should go on as rapidly as possible, so as to reach one of the patches of forest which clothed the slopes of the valley side opposite the city before daybreak.

“And when we are there?” asked Brace.

“We shall be within reach of the major sahib, and I can take the doctor sahib over to him when it is night again.”

“Very well,” said Brace, thoughtfully.

Then, as if remembering the great aim he had in view—

“Did the scoundrels go up the valley toward the rajah’s?”

“No, sahib; they brought the guns over the bridge, and some say they have gone to Ramul.”

“That is only a few miles away,” said Brace, quickly, “and beyond the hills. Forward, my lads. No speaking in the ranks.”

We tramped on silently for a couple of hours with the night growing darker as we went onward, the men literally reeling at times from weariness and exhaustion after the terrible day.

All at once, one man fell out, and dropped upon the road side.

“Halt!” cried Brace, in a low voice.

“No, no, captain; keep on,” said the man. “I’m dead beat. Never mind me.”

“We have no dhooly, my lad, to carry you, so we must wait till you can walk, for we must hold together now to the last. Who is it?”

“Sergeant Craig, sir,” said one of the men; and Brace hurried to his side.

“Why, Craig, my poor fellow, this will not do.”

As he spoke, the man who had thrown himself on the ground struggled to his knees.

“Some one give me a drink of water,” he cried hoarsely; and a canteen having been handed to him, he drank deeply, and then tried to rise, but failed.

“You’ll have to go on, captain,” he said hoarsely. “I’ve got a bit of a hurt. I did not think it was so much as it is. Makes me a bit faint. If some one took my arm perhaps I could struggle on.”

“We are close to the jungle, sahib,” whispered Dost.

“Two of you support the sergeant,” cried the captain; and a couple of men being detailed for the duty, the sergeant struggled on again for about a couple of hundred yards, the last hundred being in the deep shadows of the trees; and none too soon, for a few bird notes were heard announcing the coming day. Ten minutes later sentries were posted, the horses picketed, and the men were lying down to drop asleep directly, while the doctor busily examined the sergeant’s wound.

“A big and ugly one,” he said, “but nothing to mind. Made you faint, of course. There, it isn’t your sword arm.”

“’Tisn’t your sword arm” rung in my ears again and again, mingled with the whistling and singing of birds; and to me the bird song had something to do with the dressing of the wound; and then all was blank, and I was plunged in a deep sleep which after some time grew disturbed, and I seemed to be back at the college, drilling, and studying under General Crucie. Then I was getting into difficulties with my fellow cadets and being sent to Coventry, as the most ill-humoured fellow they knew; and then I was awake, gazing up at the trees whose boughs shaded us from the sun, bathed in perspiration, and smelling tobacco smoke.

Note 1. Dhoolies are light ambulances.

Note 2. Purdahs, curtains or hangings.

Chapter Fifteen.

“Awake, Gil?” said a voice by me, and I started up to see that Brace was seated close by me, with his elbow upon his knee and his chin resting in his hand.

“Yes,” I said. “Have I been asleep long?”

“About seven or eight hours, my lad.”

“Oh, why didn’t you rouse me?” I cried.

“Because there was no work for you to do, and it was better for you to have a good long rest ready for when I want you. Come and have some breakfast—such as it is.”

“Can’t I wash first?” I asked.

He laughed.

“No, my lad. There is the river below us yonder, and you can see the barracks, what is left of them.”

“Left of them?”

“Yes. They were set on fire about nine o’clock, and the smoke is rising thickly still.”

I uttered an angry ejaculation.

“Bah! never mind them. We can soon have better ones built.”

He led me to where there was some bread and a little meat, and as I went among the trees I could see that we had sentries stationed, while the rest of the men lay about resting or smoking, while the doctor was seated by Sergeant Craig, whose arm lay upon a folded coat.

I felt no appetite. The heat beneath the trees was terrible, and I was stiff and sore with the previous day’s exertions; but I ate a little in obedience to Brace’s wish, and he sat watching me.

“Go on, my lad,” he said.

“I cannot,” I replied.

“You must. You will want all your strength for to-night’s work. Eat.”

I went on again with the bread tasting like chaff, and the meat tainted, but at last I turned away in utter disgust.

“It will do me harm, not good,” I said. “Now tell me, what are we going to do?”

“Wait till dark,” he said, “and then try and reconnoitre the village over yonder. As far as I can make out the rebels are making it their quarters for the day. I want to see whether it will be possible to do anything by a night surprise, but whether I shall attempt it must depend on the position they have taken up.”

“Where is the village?” I asked.

He led me to the edge of the patch of forest in which we were hidden, and pointed out a cluster of mud-houses about a couple of miles away, right in an open part of the plain which spread away from us for miles.

“Keep back behind the leaves,” he said, “in case watchful eyes might be directed this way.”

I obeyed, and tried to make out the glint of steel or the white garments of the rebels. But nothing was to be seen but the glaring sunshine bathing the trees which overhung the cottages. Not a soul was in sight.

“They can’t be there,” I said, after watching for some time.

“They are there,” replied Brace, quietly. “Look under that tree, the one with a couple more standing out from it at intervals. Tell me what you can see.”

I looked as well as the glare of the sun and the distance would allow me.

“I can only see a cottage,” I said.

“It is not a cottage; it is a tent.”

“But surely they would not stop at a place like that.”

“Why not?” he replied. “They have something to do now that they have seized the guns—to manage them.”

“Then you think they have stopped there to drill?” I cried.

“I fancy so; but we shall see after the reconnaissance to-night.”

“Whom shall you send?” I cried eagerly. “Let me go.”

“It is too important a task to trust to another,” he replied. “I am going myself. You can go with me if you like.”

I eagerly snatched at the opportunity, and then sat down with him near the edge of the jungle patch to watch the village and note everything that passed. In the course of conversation Brace told me that the doctor would also start on his expedition at dark, Dost accompanying him to the lane in the city, where he could attend to the major's wounds and learn whether there was any news of the women.

Brace kept on chatting to me; but I soon found out that it was to keep down his excitement, and his mind employed, so that he should not dwell upon the terrible enforced delay; for quite a fever was consuming him, his eyes looked unnaturally bright, and his fingers kept twitching and playing with the handle of his sword.

That night seemed as if it would never come, and I never suffered so from the heat; but it came at last, and, almost before I realised it, Brace was giving the doctor his final instructions and a message for the major.

"Tell him," said Brace, in a low voice, "that I shall never rest till I have retrieved our disgrace. Tell him to be of a good heart, for I will get back the guns."

"My dear Brace," said the doctor coldly, "our poor friend is not likely to understand anything for some days to come, perhaps weeks. Your message is all in vain. Now, Dost—ready?"

The white figure of my servant glided up to us, and the next minute the pair had disappeared, while, after a few words had been addressed to Haynes as to keeping the men well under cover, we two stepped out of the shelter of the jungle, and the darkness swallowed us from the sight of the sentry.

We had carefully mapped our way that afternoon, and I saw it all in my mind; how we must go down that nullah, along by those trees, and make straight for the cultivated land, which spread out around the village, evidently one whose inhabitants cultivated largely for the benefit of the city. And in all our discussions as to our course, Brace and I had thoroughly agreed, for the task was, or seemed to be, simplicity itself; but in the intense darkness of the Indian night it proved to be very different in character.

As we started we could see the distant lights of the city across the river, and, keeping them on our right, they formed sometimes a guide for a few minutes; but they were soon hidden from us by the trees, and, with the darkness growing more intense, we had literally to feel our way along.

"Are we going straight?" I said, after we had been walking for about a quarter of an hour. "We ought to have reached the cultivated land before now. We are still among the trees."

"Distances are deceptive in the sunshine," replied my companion. "Keep close behind me."

"As close as I can," I whispered, as it struck me that distances seemed to be more deceptive in the darkness.

Brace had drawn his sword, and was using it as a guide, to keep from walking into some bush or against a tree; and as I followed him I could hear the blade rustle amongst the bushes, and tap against small tree trunks; but, though it saved him, I was not so guarded, for I tripped twice, and once went down headlong through getting my foot caught in some kind of wild vine.

At last, after what had seemed to be a tremendous while, we found ourselves brought up by an irrigation ditch; but we managed to clear it, and alighted at once upon soft earth, which we knew was cultivated ground, and stepped out more freely.

It seemed to me a mad venture, but, without daring almost to madness, it was not likely that we could rescue our guns from the enemy's hands, though how we were going to reconnoitre that night, or gain any information as to the movements of the enemy, I could not see. Still I was on duty; my superior officer was leading, and I felt no other inclination than to blindly obey.

Whenever I recall that expedition now, I begin somehow to think about blind men and their feelings; for we might almost as well have been thus. Our eyes were not of the slightest use to us, the stars being blotted out as it were by the thick mist into which we had plunged, and through which we slowly groped our way.

"Keep tight hold of my hand," said Brace, in a whisper.

"We shall never find the village," I said.

"We must find it, Gil," he said, as he gripped my hand hard. And on we went, with my companion feeling his way step by step, still using his sword as guide, and for the peaceful object of guarding us from such enemies as trees, against which we might run, and ditches into which we might fall.

The heat was terrible—a hot, steamy, misty heat, which helped to saturate us—as we slowly struggled on, pausing every now and then to listen, knowing, as we did, that almost at any minute now we might hear a voice challenging us out of the darkness, and see the flash of a musket or rifle as it sent a leaden messenger in our direction.

But all was still as death for a time, and then I stopped short with a horrible feeling of dread; for from a short distance in front there suddenly rang out the terrible cry as of one in mortal peril. Some one was being killed I was sure; and to hear that sound in the pitchy darkness, overwrought as I was by exertion and nervous excitement, robbed me for the moment of the power to move or speak.

"What is it?" said Brace at last, as he tugged at my hand to get me forward.

"That—that horrible cry!" I whispered.

“Bah!” he replied. “You ought by this time to know a jackal.”

I hurried on at once with a sense of shame that was painful, for I felt that Brace would despise me for my cowardice; but we spoke no more for some time, and then he halted as if puzzled and confused.

“We ought to have reached the place before now,” he whispered. “We must have borne off too much to the right or left.”

“What shall we do?” I said, with my lips close to his ear.

“Wait! Listen!”

We stood there with our feet sinking in the soft mud of what I fancied must be a rice-ground; but, save our laboured breathing, there was not a sound. It was a stillness like death.

“I’m a poor guide, Gil,” he said at last; “but we must find it. Shall we try to the right or the left?”

“Better wait a little longer,” I replied. “We must hear some one speak if the place is near.”

“If only one of the horses would whinny,” he muttered.

But the silence was unbroken, and, with the feeling upon me that we might be going farther and farther from the place we sought, I followed him again, still holding tightly by his hand.

For the next hour we struggled on, now wading through mud and water, now feeling some kind of growth brushing against our legs; but when, at the end of that time, we stopped short for a further consideration of our position, it seemed to be hopeless in the extreme.

We listened, but there was not a sound, and at last Brace uttered an impatient ejaculation.

“An utter failure!” he whispered.

“I’m afraid so,” I replied. “We must have wandered off to left or right. Had we not better go back and make a fresh start?”

“How?”

Before he had said that word bitterly, I felt how foolish my remark was, and remained silent.

“My good Gil,” he continued, “I wish we could; it is terrible. I have not the most remote idea which way to turn, and the next thing will be that we shall be found hopelessly bogged at daybreak, and become prisoners, or—”

A shiver ran through me, for there was no need for him to finish his sentence; but there was a feeling of reaction directly.

“Not so bad as that,” I said. “We must find the place somehow. It can’t be so very far away.”

Cock-a-doodle-doo!

The crowing was so close to us that I gave quite a jump, and then stood fast, as from almost above our heads there was the rustle and beating of wings and the querulous cry of a hen, as if fowls were fidgeting somewhere upon a perch, no doubt disturbed by our being so near.

Cock-a-doodle-doo came from a short distance off to our left, and directly after, in response to the challenge, there came the beating of wings from somewhere away in front, and another deeper-voiced crow came through the denser darkness.

“Gil,” whispered Brace—and I felt his hot breath in my ear—“we are close up to the village.”

We stood there with beating hearts, and a feeling of excitement that was almost unbearable growing upon us as, after a little more rustling, the fowls quieted down, and carefully feeling his way with his sword, Brace took a few steps in the direction of the first crowing. Then his sword tapped against wood, and there was a loud cackling from several fowls above our head.

“Hist,” I said.

“No danger,” he said; “they will think it is a jackal disturbing the birds.”

As he spoke, he felt about with his sword, and whispered to me—

“We are in a rough kind of shed supported on bamboo poles. Come on.”

He led the way again past the place that he had first touched with his sword, and we could feel that we were passing over hard beaten ground. Directly after, Brace touched another building, and went on, carefully feeling about, while I fully expected from moment to moment that I should hear a challenge followed by the flash of a piece and its loud report.

“Cottage—door open—empty,” whispered Brace; and he crept on cautiously, to find another place directly, and so on, one after the other, cottage after cottage, the beaten path telling us that we were in a well-frequented place; but the

silence was profound, and it soon became evident that we were on the site of the village—if village it was—that was quite deserted.

Brace stopped short, his sword having encountered what he found was a tree trunk, and a little further investigation proved that several more were dotted about.

“We must bear off to the right,” he whispered. “The people deserted the place when the rebels came, and they are quartered on the other side. Come along.”

The words were at my lips to implore him to be careful, but I thought he would think me cowardly, so I followed him as we crept slowly on, passing house after house—mere hovels, most of them, but all open and empty. As we paused before one of these, I whispered—

“Suppose we come upon them suddenly?”

“Keep fast hold of my hand and retreat; the darkness is on our side.”

I said no more, and we kept slowly on past dozens of houses all in the same condition, and either deserted, or with their occupants asleep. Then the buildings ceased as far as we could make out in the darkness, for we came upon trees.

“We must have come right through the village,” whispered Brace. “It is very strange. They would have been sure to set sentries, and we ought to hear the horses stamping or whinnying.”

“Brace!”

“Well?”

“We’ve come to the wrong village.”

“Impossible. There was no other village for many miles,” he whispered angrily. “This is the place, and I saw them here. We’ll follow the houses round from the outside. Forward.”

I followed him, and our previous experience was repeated, with the difference that we kicked against a basket that had been dropped or thrown away as worthless, and soon after, on leaving one of the houses which was larger than those we had before examined, but as utterly silent, there was a click which I took to be the cocking of a musket, and imitated Brace’s movement, for he stooped down, but rose again sharply.

“Feel here,” he whispered, as he let his sword hang from his wrist by the knot, and pressed something into my hand. “What is this?”

“A cavalry sabre,” I said directly, in an excited tone.

“Yes; one of ours. Now am I right, lad? They must be here, and we are pretty close to their quarters. Can you hear the horses?”

I listened attentively, but there was not a sound, and once more we proceeded till one of my feet went down. I stumbled and nearly fell.

“Hurt?” whispered Brace.

“No. I only stepped in a deep rut.”

“Rut?” he said sharply; “where?”

He was down on his knees instantly, feeling with his hands, and I heard him breathe hard.

“Yes, I am right,” he whispered. “That rut was made by the wheels of one of our guns; the cart-marks are distinct. No native cart would have cut into the ground like that. Forward.”

He stepped down with one foot in the crack, and, keeping it there, walked slowly on, making it our guide, while I followed suit with another rut, or series of ruts, a short distance from the first.

“Only to follow them,” he whispered; “and they will lead us right to the wasps’ nest.”

We went on easily enough now, and very cautiously, with the soil growing softer and the ruts more deeply cut, as if several guns had passed along our way. Then I stopped, and went down on one knee to feel the ground.

“What is it?”

“The hoof-marks. They are very deep here,” I said excitedly, as my fingers traced the deep impressions one after the other, and close enough together for me to divine that many horses had passed.

“Well, yes,” he said impatiently; “they are here, of course. I noticed that some were crushed out by the wheel-tracks.”

“Yes,” I cried; “but we are going wrong; the hoof-marks are all coming this way.”

Chapter Sixteen.

“What?” cried Brace, excitedly; and he raised his voice, so that I sprang to my feet, and snatched my sword from its scabbard with the edge grating in an ominous way as it left the steel sheath.

My companion also stood upon his guard, and we stood there in the darkness listening, but there was not a sound, though we were within a few feet of houses at each side.

“No challenge,” he whispered, and going down on one knee, he felt about the wet earth for a few moments.

“Yes,” he said, drawing in his breath with an angry hiss; “we are going wrong.” Then, after a pause, as he stood behind me—“Never mind; we’ll trace them this way first, and find where the ruts enter the village. It will be a guide.”

We resumed our steady progress, walking with one foot in the wheel-tracks for about twenty yards further, and then Brace’s sword suddenly struck something, either tree or upright. It proved to be the latter, being the support of a great shed, and here I found that the ruts suddenly became confused—branching off, and directly after I found traces of horses having been picketed about where we stood.

“Yes,” said Brace quickly, “here’s where they have been tethered. They must have altered their position. Quick! let’s follow them up.”

We went off at once, finding no difficulty in keeping to the trail, which, as far as we could tell in the darkness, swept round the outside of the village, for every now and then we tried off to right and left, to find cottages on the latter side, what seemed to be cultivated fields on the other.

Then, all at once, the houses ceased, and the tracks grew deeper with the wheel-ruts half filled with water, and it was evident that the horses had struggled hard to drag the guns through soft ploughed fields.

“Brace,” I said, after we had tramped on through the heavy ground for about a quarter of a mile.

“Yes.”

“I hope I’m wrong, but I’m very much afraid—”

“That settles it, Gil, lad,” he said quickly. “You are thinking as I have been for the last quarter of an hour, are you not? That we are too late?”

“Yes. They have deserted the place.”

“Undoubtedly. I ought to have grasped the notion at once. We could not have got into this village unchallenged. We have not been drilling before these men so many years for them to occupy a place like this without sentries.”

“Can we have failed?” I said despondently.

“Oh no; say we have not succeeded yet,” he cried cheerily, as he clapped me on the shoulder. “You and I are going to recapture those guns, Gil, my lad. We must; we must.”

“But what are you going to do now?” I asked.

“Practise patience, lad. We have spent many hours over this vain struggle, and it is madness to go wandering about in the darkness, so let’s get back to the village and pick out the best house we can, and rest till daylight. It is the only course open to us. There, we need not whisper now.”

“I wish I was stronger,” I said rather despondently.

“Bah! you are tired. So am I. Cheer up, lad. You’ll feel like a new man when you’ve lain down for an hour. Nothing like it. Flat down on your back. It is the most refreshing thing there is.”

As he was speaking, we were following the track back toward the village, and as there was no need now to practise caution, the distance did not seem great before we were abreast of the houses again, and after passing his hands over the entrances of one or two, Brace entered the third cautiously, stood within; there was a rustling noise, a sharp crackling, and the match he had struck blazed up and spread what appeared to me quite a brilliant glare around.

“No,” he said sharply, “we are not dogs, to rest in such a kennel as this. There must be a decent house somewhere.”

But for a long time it seemed as if there was not, and I was ready to say, “Anything will do,” when we cautiously entered another door; a light was struck, and though the place was deplorable enough, it did not look so desolate, and it had evidently lately been occupied, for there was a half-burned candle standing on a rough stool, and to this candle Brace applied his match.

“Officers’ quarters, I should say,” he cried cheerily. “Why, Gil, this is the very thing; three charpoys, and there has been eating and drinking going on. But, look out!”

He raised the candle with one hand, and with his sword advanced, made for a ragged purdah or curtain hanging from the roof just beyond the farthest native bedstead.

“Here, Gil,” he said sharply, “I’ll defend you; come and snatch away this piece of hangings.”

I did as he told me, with my heart beating heavily the while, and, holding my sword ready, I snatched the purdah aside, when the light fell upon the thin, deeply lined face of an extremely old-looking Hindu, whose white beard seemed to quiver as he threw up his arms and fell down before us.

“My lord will not slay his servant,” he cried in a trembling voice in his own tongue. “He has done no harm.”

“Come out,” cried Brace in Hindustani. “Why were you hiding there?”

“Thy servant was afraid that the white sahib would slay him.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Thy servant was too old to go when the budmashes came, and all the others fled away.”

“Where are the budmashes now?”

“Thy servant knoweth not. They all rode off with the great guns directly it began to grow dark to-night.”

“Put up your sword, Gil,” said Brace. “The poor old fellow is frightened out of his wits.”

Then, turning to the old Hindu—

“Is there no one left in the village?”

“No, sahib. They have all fled but me.”

Brace was silent for a few minutes, and then he said sharply—

“Look here, old man, you can walk?”

“Yes, sahib, a little way; not very far.”

“Gil,” said Brace, thoughtfully, “he could walk well enough to guide us back to the tope. The doctor will be back by now, and anxious. Shall I make him do it?”

“No,” I said excitedly. “He may see some of the mutineers afterwards, and tell them we are following.”

“Of course. No, he must not know; and I suppose we must not kill him in cold blood to keep him from telling tales.”

“Brace!” I cried, but he only smiled, and, turning to the Hindu—

“Get water,” he said. “We are thirsty.”

The old man went to a corner of the room, trembling in every limb, and taking a brass lotah from where it was hidden, he went out of the place into the darkness.

“Do you think he is treacherous?” I whispered, “and will bring back others?”

“No. The old man is honest enough, Gil. There, lie down on that charpoy.”

“But you?” I said.

“I shall lie down too. Go to sleep after you have had some water. I will keep watch till daybreak.”

Just then the old man came back with the brass vessel full of clear, cold water, and handed to Brace.

“I hope the old fellow has not poisoned it,” he said. “I’ll taste it first, Gil,” and he raised the vessel to his lips, took a hearty draught, and then handed it to me.

“Pure water,” he said; and I gladly partook of the refreshing draught, while Brace felt in his pocket for a coin.

“There,” he said, taking out a rupee, “that’s as much as his lotah is worth. I don’t know for certain, but I expect he will consider that we have denied his vessel, and will throw it away when we are gone.”

“Then why doesn’t he think the rupee is defiled?” I said, as the old man received the coin with a salaam, and then hid it in the folds of his turban.

“Can’t say,” replied Brace, making the bamboo bedstead creak as he threw himself down. “Here, grandfather,” he continued in the old man’s native tongue, “keep watch, and warn us if there is any danger. Your caste will not let you betray those within your house.”

“The sahibs are quite safe here,” he replied. “There is no one in the village but their servant. But I will watch.”

“Stop!” said Brace, sharply, as the old man moved toward the door. “Stay here; don’t try to leave.”

The old man bowed.

“Where are the budmashes gone?”

“Thy servant cannot tell.”

I could just understand enough of the colloquial language to grasp all this.

“Well,” said Brace, “stop and keep watch, so as to give us warning if they come.”

The old man salaamed again, and then stood with his arms folded near the door, while I lay back on the charpoy with my eyes half-closed, watching him by the faint light of the candle, and thinking how miserably thin the old man was, and how his bones showed through the slight cotton garment he wore. His hollow cheeks and eyes looked dark, and strange shadows were cast over his features, but from time to time I could see his deeply sunken eyes flash, and a sensation of dread came over me as I thought how easy it would be for him, weak old man though he was, to wait till we were both asleep, and then seize us one after the other by the throat with his long, thin, bony fingers, and hold us till we had ceased to breathe. And as this idea strengthened, I told myself that it would be madness to close my eyes. I would lie there and watch him, I thought; and in this intent I lay thinking how wet my feet were, how coated my legs were with mud, and how, in spite of the drenching I had had with perspiration, I was now growing rapidly dry.

But oh, how weary I felt, and how my back and legs ached! It would be *so* restful, I thought, to go soundly off to sleep, if for only five minutes, and then resume my watch.

I could not go off, though. It would have been like inviting the old Hindu to rid himself of two enemies of his people and of his religion; and as I watched him I saw, or thought I did, an ugly evil look in his eyes: the shadows played about his face, and his lips seemed to be pressed together in a thin, malignant-looking smile, as if he were quite satisfied that in a few more minutes we should be both at his mercy.

For Brace had no sooner thrown himself back on the charpoy, with his arms crossed upon his breast, than his head sank on one side so that his face was toward me, while one arm slowly began to give way, and glided from his chest down by the side of the charpoy, and hung at last at full length, with the back of his hand resting upon the earthen floor.

With Brace fast asleep, I felt that it was my duty to watch, and after carefully scrutinising the Hindu’s face, which now looked malignant to a degree, I determined to hold myself in readiness to cut the old wretch down the moment he approached and tried to attack Brace.

My sword was so near that I could let my hand rest upon it, and planning carefully how I could in one movement spring up, and with one swing round of my arm drag out my blade and cut him down, I waited.

The candle burned more dimly, but the Hindu’s eye grew more bright, while his face and that of my brother-officer darkened in the shade. Now and then the wretched light flickered and danced, and as the little flame played about, the smile upon the old man’s lips grew more ghastly, till it broadened into a laugh that sent a shiver through me.

The light grew more dim and the shadows deeper, then darker still, and rapidly darker, till the room was quite black, and the old Hindu’s face was completely blotted out, but I knew he was creeping nearer and nearer, and felt that he had by slow degrees reached the side of Brace’s charpoy, and was bending himself down, till his fingers, now spread out like the long ugly talons of some horrible bird of prey, were within a few inches of poor Brace’s throat, then nearer and nearer till he seized his prey, and as a dull, low sound of painful breathing rose in the dark room, I knew that it was time to swing my arm round, snatching the sword from the scabbard, and laying the horrible old miscreant lifeless upon the floor.

The time had come, my right arm was across my chest, my hand tightly holding my sword-hilt, but that arm was now heavy as lead, and I tried in vain as I lay there upon my back to drag out that blade.

But it was impossible. I was as if turned to stone, and the horrible gurgling breathing went on, heard quite plainly as I lay in that terrible state.

How I tried to struggle, and how helpless I felt, while the mental agony was terrible, as I seemed to see the old wretch’s features distorted with a horrible joy at his success, and I knew that as soon as poor Brace was dead, he would come over and find me an easy victim, and then I should never see the light of another day; I should never meet father, mother, sister again out on the hot plains of India; and the guns would never be recaptured; and yet they seemed so near, with the wheels sinking deeper, and ploughing those deep ruts which I was walking in with one foot, so as to keep to the track, for poor Brace was so set upon recovering them; and now he was dead, it was ten times my duty to keep on and get them, if the old Hindu would only spare my life. Poor old Brace! and I had thought him a coward, and yet how brave and determined he was, but yet how helpless now that the tiger had crept up closely and sprung into the howdah to force him back and plant its talons in his throat. No, it was not the tiger, it was the Hindu, the old old-looking man with the bony fingers. No, the tiger, and it was not Brace who was making a horrible, strangling noise, but the elephant snorting and gurgling and moving its trunk in the air, instead of snatching out its bright sword and with one stroke cutting off the tiger’s—the Hindu’s—the tiger’s head, because it had left its sword in its quarters when it went out shooting that morning, and it had all grown so dark, and its arm was as heavy as lead, because I was turned into an elephant and the tiger had leaped on to me, and then into the howdah to attack poor Brace, while we were trying to find the guns of our troop, and it was too dark to see them, and how long the Hindu was killing him, and I could not help, and—

“Asleep, Gil?”

A pause, and then again, as I lay panting on my back, streaming with perspiration, and with my arm feeling numb as I listened to the horrible, strangulated breathing once more—

“Asleep, Gil?”

“No—yes—not now;” and I was all of a tremble.

“Cheerful style of watchman that, lad. Hear him? Any one would think he was being strangled. What shall I do to wake him? Prick him with the point of my sword?”

“No, no; don’t do that,” I whispered, as I tried hard to realise that I was awake, and had been dreaming.

“Well, I’m too tired to get up. I’ve had a nap too, and you’ve been breathing pretty hard, but not snorting and gurgling like that old wretch. Here, hi! you, sir,” he cried in Hindustani.

“The sahib wants his servant?”

“Yes—no,” cried Brace. “What are you doing?”

“Thy servant was keeping watch over his masters, and smoking his chillum.”

Brace’s charpoy creaked, and he uttered a curious laugh even in Hindustani.

“That’s right; go on. I did not know what it was in the dark.” Then to me: “Did you understand what he said?”

“Only partly. Didn’t he say he was smoking?”

“Yes; puffing away at his old hubble-bubble. There he goes again.”

For the snorting, gurgling sound recommenced, and I knew that the candle had burned out, while I was struggling in the horrors of a nightmare-like dream.

“Is it near morning, Brace?” I said.

“It must be; but try and go to sleep again, lad. If it is only for one hour, it will do you good, and make you fresher for the day’s work.”

“You think I need not mind sleeping?”

“Not in the least, lad. There is no danger till daybreak, and I am afraid not then, for our enemies are miles away by now.”

He was silent, and I lay listening to the old man’s hubble-bubble for a time, till a delicious feeling of repose stole over me, and the next thing I heard was the chattering song of minahs—the Indian starlings—in the trees somewhere outside of the hovel where I lay, and, on opening my eyes, they rested on the ancient face of the old man, squatting down on his heels at a short distance from the foot of my bedstead, the level rays of the sun pleasantly lighting up his calm old face; and as he saw that I was looking at him, he rose to his feet and salaamed to me.

“It is morning, sahib,” he said in Hindustani.

“Eh, morning?” cried Brace, springing up. “Thank Heaven! Now, Gil, lad, for the work of another day.”

Chapter Seventeen.

The place did not seem so desolate and horrible in the bright morning light; and after we had bathed our faces in water brought for us by our host, who also produced some homely cakes, and the lotah full of clear water for us to drink, I felt refreshed and bright, and so, I thought, did Brace; but the stern, hard look came into his face again as soon as he had recompensed our host and we stood outside the house, seeing above the mist the tops of the trees of the tope where our men lay, and as I saw them standing up apparently so near, I wondered how we could have had so much difficulty in finding our way, and said so.

“No cause for wonder, Gil,” said Brace, quietly. “Once you go astray in the dark or in a mist, every struggle makes you more confused. Why, Gil, lad, I once got out of bed in the dark, and lost myself in my own room.”

I looked at him wonderingly, for his face once more looked pleasant and smiling, but it was dark the moment after, as we crossed the track of the guns, and, trying to make out our past night’s course, started at once for the tope.

“They will think us prisoners or dead, Gil. Let’s get back.”

“And what next?” I said.

He turned and pointed to the deep marks made by our horses and guns, and I had no occasion to ask more.

We both agreed that it was no wonder that we had lost our way in the black darkness of the night, and been wandering about in the most erratic manner, for it was difficult enough to keep in a straight line for the tope where the mist was most dense in the lower ground.

But we reached our temporary shelter at last, were challenged by the sentries, and before we had gone many steps among the trees, the doctor rushed at us, closely followed by Dost.

“My dear Brace!” he cried; “my dear boy!” and he wrung our hands warmly. “I thought—oh, I don’t know what I did not think.”

“Why, doctor,” said Brace, warmly, “I did not think we were of so much consequence to you.”

“Of course not; and I’m a donkey to make so much fuss over you,” said the doctor, changing his manner directly, and speaking in his customary snappish, decisive manner. “But I object to anybody else killing you both. That’s my business. Am I not your surgeon?”

Dost said nothing; but I saw the tears in his eyes as he followed close behind me and took hold of the lapel of my jacket as he whispered softly—

“Oh, sahib!”

“Well,” cried Brace, after a few explanations, “how is the major? how did you get on?”

“Our friend Dost took me safely there, and I stayed with the poor fellow for hours. He is terribly cut about, but far better than I expected, and I believe that those women will nurse him round.”

“Thank God!” said Brace, earnestly; “and I hope we shall be able to give him comfort before long by our news.”

“I hope so,” said the doctor, bluntly. “You are not upset, then, by your night’s experience? You mean to go on?”

“I mean to go on. Yes, doctor, at once. But about you and the major?”

“I am sorry to say that the poor fellow must take his chance now. Dost was of opinion that we could not get in and out again safely, and I did not need to be told. We had a very narrow escape of being made prisoners.”

“But, Lacey, the nursing?”

“He has that, and there is no disease, my dear boy. Those two women will do all that I could. It is only a question of seeing to his bandages, and cleanliness. I could say I’ll go and stay with him; but if I did, the chances are that I should not get there; and if I did, I make the risk of his being murdered ten times greater. On the other hand, you and the lads here will want my help. My duty is with you.”

Dost was consulted, and said warmly that it was impossible to get back into the city, and that two foot regiments and one of cavalry had marched into and occupied the place.

“And their English officers?” said Brace, excitedly.

“Don’t ask me, sahib,” said Dost, sadly. “It is too terrible; the people have gone mad against our masters, and the fire is spreading through the land.”

The peculiarly stern look in Brace’s countenance deepened as my Hindu servant went on.

“If the doctor sahib tried to get into the city again, he would be taken, and the budmashes of the bazaar would murder him. Lacey sahib will be quite safe and get well. We must not go again; it means death.”

“There,” said the doctor, “and I’m too busy to die yet, Brace; but pray go on eating and drinking, my dear boys; you must both be horridly faint. I prescribe food and rest.”

“Right, doctor; we’ll take your first remedy. But there is no rest. We start in an hour or less. We must make a short march before the sun gets too hot.”

“You mean to keep to that mad idea of yours, then, about recapturing the guns?”

“Yes, mad as it is.”

“Better try and join some of our men, where they are holding out, my dear boy. This is going to be a terrible business, and we must all row together and help one another.”

“Yes,” said Brace, “I am going to help; but I must have my guns first, and remount my men.”

Then hastily finishing his rough breakfast, he rose and went off to give orders for an immediate start.

“Vincent, my lad,” said the doctor, “we shall all be cut to pieces, I’m afraid.”

“Our chances look very bad, I’m afraid,” I replied.

“Hold your tongue, sir,” cried the doctor. “You are not afraid of anything. I said I was, but I’m not a fighting man. We’re in for it, and are going to do our duty. My great trouble is about poor Craig. That man’s a gentleman.”

“Hist!” came from close by among the trees.

“Eh? who was that?”

“Only me, doctor—Craig.”

“Bah! I had forgotten him. You heard?”

“Yes, sir,” said the wounded sergeant faintly, as we went to his side, and he smiled up at me. “I heard you blacking my character behind my back. Never mind about the past. What about Sergeant Craig?”

“Well, what about him, sir? He’s going to get better.”

“Afraid not, doctor. I heard the captain say that we march directly. I couldn’t even ride if I had a horse. Hadn’t you better put me out of my misery at once?”

“If you talk nonsense like that to me, sir,” cried the doctor, “I’ll give you the nastiest dose you ever had in your life.”

“But I can’t walk.”

“Of course not; but there are plenty of good men and true to carry you, so hold your tongue, and get better as fast as you can.”

“But—”

“Silence, sir! or I’ll put a bandage on your mouth, as well as on your arm.”

Poor Craig smiled at me, and closed his eyes.

Half an hour after our men were found all refreshed and rested, and looking ready to do any deed of valour, or follow their leader to the death. The order was given, and in the lightest of light marching-order, save that there was the litter to carry, on which poor Craig had been laid, when one of the sentries still on guard, but with orders to fall in on the rear when we marched, reported the approach of a party of the people of the city.

Brace ordered the men to lie down while he focussed his glass, and examined the men from the edge of the tope, afterwards handing the glass to me as I watched the white-clothed party about a quarter of a mile away, evidently making straight for the wood.

“What do you make of them, Gil?”

“Sepoys,” I said; “nine of them, all with muskets and bayonets, evidently coming to occupy this place.”

“Yes,” he said; “we must repulse them. Gil, this is a godsend. I want every man I have to fight. These are scoundrels from one of the revolted regiments.”

“And this is to be a bit of practice for our men?”

“No, boy; we can trap the dogs without fighting. Can’t you see what I want?”

“No.”

“Bearers for poor Craig’s dhooly. Here they are—two sets; one for relief.”

I uttered a cry of delight, and then after making sure by which track the sepoys would come up to the tope, a dozen men were placed in ambush with orders not to move till the native soldiers had passed them, and then to cut off their retreat when they found enemies in front.

The arrangements were cleverly made, our men lying down among the bushes; and, in perfect ignorance of the reception awaiting them, the sepoys came on with their muskets shouldered; and in a careless, easy-going way, as they came on talking loudly, they drew and fixed bayonets.

“They think some poor creatures have taken refuge here,” whispered Brace. “The bloodhounds!”

I lay there with my sword drawn, and the knot tight about my wrist, my heart beating, and a curious sensation of dread troubling me, for I was going to face armed men for the first time in my life.

But I had no time for thinking; the sepoys were close at hand, and as they reached the edge of the tope, one, who seemed to be their leader, gave the order, and the men lowered their bayonets, and were about to open out to search the tope, when Brace sprang up right in their way.

What followed did not take a minute. The first movement of the mutineers was to turn and flee, but their leader yelled at them savagely, and dashed at us with his levelled bayonet, when a shot from Brace’s pistol rang out, and the man threw up his piece, bent back, fell, and clutched at the broken twigs upon which he had fallen, while, uttering a fierce yell of rage, the others came on.

But Brace was equal to the occasion. He shouted an order to our lads, and then one in Hindustani to the sepoys, who, on seeing a party of our men spring up behind us, stopped short, and then turned to flee, but only to find themselves face to face with the dozen men by whom they had passed.

“Down with your arms!” roared Brace, rushing at them. And with a sullen growl, seven of them threw down their muskets, but the eighth made a fierce thrust at Brace, which would have been deadly, had he not deftly turned it aside to his left with his sabre, and then striking upward with the hilt, he caught the man a terrible blow in the cheek, and rolled him over stunned.

Our men gave a cheer as they closed in round the sepoys, and the next minute two stout gunners were breaking the bayonets from the muzzles, snapping some off, and doubling the others completely back before taking the muskets by the barrels; and then *crash, crash, crash*, the stocks were splintered off by blows against the largest trees, while the sepoys stood together closely guarded, their faces turning of a horrible drab tint, as their eyes rolled in anxious quest from face to face, for they evidently expected moment by moment to hear the order for their execution.

One poor wretch, with his lips ashy, glanced up at the trees, and then wildly round, as I interpreted it, to see if any one was bringing ropes; and a shudder ran through him, and he closed his eyes, but opened them widely, showing a

ring of white about the iris as the doctor strode up.

“Soon got a job ready for me, then, Brace?” he said.

“Poor wretch!” was the reply. “I am sorry I shot him.”

“I’m not,” said the doctor, going down on one knee. “Why, man, his bayonet was getting close to your breast, and I hate a bayonet wound; it generally beats me. Humph!” he added coolly, after a brief examination of the fallen man, who was lying motionless, “so does this,” and he rose.

“Dead?” said Brace, with a look of pain in his face.

“Quite. Come, soldier, it was in self-defence.”

“Yes,” said Brace slowly; “but I never killed a man before, doctor, even in self-defence.”

Then, drawing himself up, he turned to the sepoys, and giving the regular orders, they obeyed, took a few steps, and then, as if moved by the same spirit, halted, and threw themselves upon their knees with their hands outstretched for mercy, the man whom Brace had temporarily stunned by his blow, uttering a loud appeal, for all thought their end was near.

“Stand!” cried Brace, sternly; and then he told them that if they were faithful and obedient their lives should be spared.

They were grovelling at his feet on the instant, and a driver behind me laughed.

“Well, I don’t think I’d kiss the captain’s boots like that to save myself,” he said. For one of the men was actually kissing the muddy boots Brace wore.

At a second command, they sprung to their feet, and, obeying orders with alacrity, they were drawn up in line, where Brace once more addressed them, announcing that they would be treated without mercy if they attempted to escape.

Then poor Craig’s litter was pointed out to them, and four raised the handles to their shoulders, while the others were placed in front. A guard was detailed to keep watch over them, and armed with carbines, with orders to shoot down the first man who tried to escape.

A minute later our men were in their places; the order was given, and we left the tope on the side farthest from the city, and descended toward the low, cultivated ground, marched steadily toward the village where Brace and I had passed the night, there to take up the track made by the wheels of our limbers, guns, and tumbrils, a long, wearisome task we felt; for the enemy had many hours’ start, and they were mounted, while we were on foot.

Chapter Eighteen.

My toilsome marches through a country that was generally deserted, we came to village after village in following the track of those guns; and generally it seemed as if the force of mutineers frightened the simpler ryots away from their tiny farms and rice-grounds; for the villages were generally empty. When they were not, our appearance was sufficient to send man, woman, and child flying; for already the land was being delivered up to the horrors of war. Ny Deen’s men plundered as they went, and helped themselves to all they required; while we, in turn, were forced to follow their example; and where food was not given, we were obliged to take it.

Our marches ought to have been made by night, so as to avoid the heat of the sun; but this was impossible, for the track of the guns would have been lost, and hence we had to journey on by daylight, rarely finding any difficulty, for the wheels made distinctive marks in the dusty roads; while in the open country, where Ny Deen made short cuts, the deep ruts were so plain that, had we been mounted, we could have galloped after them.

It was very rarely that we could get any information from a native; but when we did, it was invariably to learn that the enemy was a full day ahead; and, in spite of our efforts, he always keep that distance.

I remember that terrible broiling march with a shudder, for our men suffered horribly from heat and thirst, often from want of food, while our constant dread was lest any of the poor fellows should go down with sunstroke.

But we were spared that, though every night, when we halted, the doctor confided to me his opinion that it was miraculous.

Craig was very weak and ill, and more than once he asked Brace to have him laid down under a shady tree to die, so that better use might be made of the bearers.

“Impossible, my good fellow,” Brace used to say. “I can’t spare you—the smartest sergeant in the troop.”

“Smartest, sir?” repeated Craig, with a piteous smile. “A helpless invalid, too weak to lift a sword, let alone use it, or sit a horse.”

“Wait, Craig, and you will sit a horse yet, and help me to redeem this terrible reverse.”

The days wore slowly on, and we seemed no nearer; and, but for the energy and knowledge of Dost, we should have starved; but his knowledge of the natives of the country people enabled him somehow or another to provide for our

commissariat, and we marched on with the sepoys always bearing poor Craig's dhooly, and making no attempt to escape.

I said something about it one night to Brace.

"Wait," he said, "and then we shall have to be doubly watchful. They will try to escape when we have overtaken the enemy; and our great peril will be their betraying our presence; for we cannot play the lion now, Gil; we must play the fox."

It was a wonder to me that we did not come upon any stragglers from the force we were pursuing; but we did not overtake any; neither did we come upon a broken-down horse.

"Plain proof," said Brace, "that they are taking care of them. Gil, my lad, if we do not recapture those guns, they will prove to be deadly in their injury to our side; for, depend upon it, those daring fellows will train themselves to use them, and they will be terrible weapons in an enemy's hands."

"More need for us to get them back," I said. "You don't despair of overtaking them?"

"I will not," he said firmly; and then, to change the subject, "How did you think our horses looked?"

"Very well. Why don't you ride?"

"Why don't you?" he retorted.

"Because all our poor fellows have to walk."

"Exactly, Gil; my reason. Wait a bit, and we'll mount them all. Ah, if that time would only come!"

It did not then, nor yet for many days, during which we had steadily followed the track, never once losing it; but I could note how weary both Haynes and Brace grew.

"You see," said the former, "they must be making for some trysting-place—one of the big towns, perhaps; and if they reach it, our chance has gone."

"Don't let Brace hear you say that," I whispered; but from hints the captain dropped that night, I was certain that he was thinking something of the kind.

It was toward evening, after a fearfully hot day, during part of which we had been forced to rest, while Dost had gone on in advance to investigate, that we were toiling on through a very beautiful part of the country—all green, and a succession of park-like patches and plains, that were wonderfully refreshing after weary tramps over brown deserts of dust, that we were suddenly checked by our advance men announcing a native some distance ahead.

But as we reached the front, the distant figure held up its turban in a peculiar way, and I exclaimed—

"Dost!"

The order was given to advance; and before we had gone far, the man, who was hurrying to meet us, signed to us to bear off to the left; and five minutes later, when we met, he pointed to a beautiful patch of forest, into which we filed.

"Well, Dost, what now?" said Brace, gloomily.

"They are halting, sahib, only a short distance in front."

"Is there a town there?"

"No, sahib; only a large village at the end of a wide plain. We can get round to the end, and perhaps see them."

"But are you sure it is the party we are tracking?" I cried excitedly.

"Oh yes, sahib. There are all the horses and guns. They were drawn up in front when I came away."

"Ready to start once more," said Brace, eagerly. "Let's get on and see if anything can be done."

Leaving Haynes in charge of the men who were allowed to rest in the grateful shade of the forest edge, Brace called to me to accompany him, and with Dost for our guide, we threaded our way among the trees for nearly an hour, when Dost suddenly stopped short, as a shout fell upon our ears, followed by a familiar trampling sound, with the jingle of accoutrements, and rattle of gun and limber.

"They are going," said Brace, quickly; and hurrying forward, he made for a spot where the forest looked lighter; and in another minute we had to stoop down and shelter ourselves, for where we were the trees ended, and a wide plain spread out far as eye could reach, while on the right was a large village with a temple just on the banks of a river, whose bright waters looked welcome in that thirsty land.

But we had no eyes for river or plain with such a scene between us and the village as greeted us; for there, in very fair order, thanks to our highly trained horses, was our little battery of six six-pounders, with their limbers and mounted men complete; but, in place of the English gunners and drivers in their laced jackets, breeches and boots, brass helmets, and long scarlet horsehair plumes, the battery was manned by dark-faced men in white, with turbans to match, and under the command of a noble-looking chief in a turban that flashed in the sunlight with gold or gems; while, even at the distance we were, we could make out that the man in gay shawls and rich stuffs, who waved his

sword as he cantered along upon a magnificent arab, was Barton's old syce, Ny Deen.

"The scoundrel!" muttered Brace, whose hand played with the hilt of his pistol as we crouched there, and I felt that if ever he came within range, a bullet would lay him low.

As the troop went along at a trot, a thrill ran through me, and I felt an intense longing to be mounted once more in my place; and from that moment shared more intensely Brace's longing to recover the guns.

"They are on the march again," my companion whispered, as he used his glass and went on making comments. "The guns look bright and clean; the scoundrels, they know their value to them. But they cannot manage them like our lads. Oh, Gil, boy, it is maddening to see them going off under our eyes, and we able to do nothing."

"No," I said sadly; "it must be a surprise. We could do nothing even if our men were here."

"Nothing," he replied as the rattle and tramp grew fainter, and horse after horse that I recognised, from some peculiarity of colour or mark, became merged in the crowd. "There must be a road through the village and along by the river. Oh, Gil, if they had been going to stay there for the night, I should have risked a surprise. Yes. There they go. Well, we can see at last the direction they take, and if there is a road, we'll risk a night's march, and try to come up with them. Our horses—our guns—in the hands of that wretched crew! And look at the groom dressed out in all that finery—plunder, I suppose. But only wait."

At that moment I clutched at Brace's arm, and he gave quite a gasp of relief, for all at once we saw Ny Deen turn his horse, gallop to our left, and then pull up and face round while the troop wheeled to the left, trotted steadily along past the village, wheeled again, and then advanced parallel to the course we had seen them taking, but of course in the reverse direction, so that if they went on far enough, they would pass us about half a mile away.

"They're drilling," I whispered excitedly.

"Yes, drilling," cried Brace, and turning as he spoke. "Gil, lad, they will halt here for the night."

He caught my hand in a tremendous grip, and his face lit up and his eyes flashed with excitement as he uttered a curious laugh.

"Sit down, lad, and let's watch them," he cried mockingly. "We shall have some lessons on the management of a troop. By George, look at the dear old horses! They know the work so well that they are taking the men with them. Look, Gil, there's poor Craig's grey Arab. There they go. He wants to gallop, and that fellow has hard work to hold him in."

The troop was kept at a steady trot, and as it reached the part of the plain facing us, we saw Ny Deen dash in front, wave his sword—a flashing curved tulwar—and the horses were reined in, halted, and then, after a minute's interval, during which we could hear the voice of the leader giving orders, they advanced again, but this time at a walk, while Ny Deen galloped on in advance, as if to map out the course he meant the troop to take.

"The scoundrel rides well," muttered Brace, as we saw Ny Deen rein up and throw his horse back almost on its haunches. "Pretty good that, for a syce."

"It is the Maharajah of Ahdenpore, sahib," said Dost, who had crouched behind us unnoticed, looking on and hearing every word we said.

"What!" cried Brace, harshly. "I can see. I know the man; Lieutenant Barton's syce."

"Yes, sahib; but it is the great Maharajah. He came and worked as a syce all that time, so that he might learn all about the drilling and training of the guns. It was a plot—a cunning plot, sahib, and he was waiting his time."

"Hah!" ejaculated Brace. "Yes. Too clever for us; but we may have our day yet. Yes; they are drilling," he continued, as the troop wheeled again, and began advancing toward the forest at whose edge we crouched in hiding; but when they were about half-way toward us from the spot where they had turned, there was another order, the troop wheeled into line, and the men sprang down, unlimbered, the guns were trained, and we saw slowly, but with fair regularity, the pieces brought into action, the white-robed gunners going through the loading and firing drill, ramming, sponging, firing, till about ten rounds had been discharged in blank, when the order rang out again, and the guns were limbered up, and retired three or four hundred yards before halt was again called, the same performance gone through and repeated then in the advance, as if they were sheltering the village, each halt being at the end of some three hundred yards.

In this way they passed us, not two hundred yards distant, and we had to lie close for fear of being seen.

Then a fresh movement was gone through, the troop was formed into column again, and as we watched, the men were halted just in front of the village, where they were dismissed, and the horses were trotted off to various parts where there were sheds beneath the trees, the guns being left in line, in front of the principal house of the place.

"They stay here for the night, Gil," said Brace excitedly.

"Yes, sahib, and they slept here last night."

"Ah," cried Brace; "you know?"

"Yes, sahib, I have been right through the village where the people are staying. No one took me for a spy; it was there I learned that Ny Deen was the Rajah of Ahdenpore. He is going to stay here—it is one of his villages—and drill

the men till they can gallop and fire quickly, then he is going to join Shah Rogan's army, fifty miles to the north, and they are to sweep all the white sahibs out of our land."

"*L'homme propose, et Dieu dispose*, Gil," said Brace, quietly. "So we have run the rajah to earth, eh? Then the next best thing is to keep our men out of sight, Gil, eh?" he continued cheerily. "Dost, you will be faithful to us, I know. Perhaps we shall not all be swept out of the country. Now then, cautiously," he said. "Hah, yes, they have sentries placed. Rajah Syce is no fool. It was a clever, well-contrived scheme, but he will have to work hard to keep those guns, Gil. Now, three hours for rest and food; we must get strength, if we are to succeed."

"Have you a plan yet?" I said as we walked on in the shade of the trees.

"None as yet. The only thing I have been planning is to make sure those sepoy prisoners do not betray us. The rest will come."

Half an hour later we were back in our little camp, where Haynes had sentries placed, and our evening meal ready.

"Any luck?" he said, in a tired voice.

"Yes," said Brace; "we have been watching a review of our troop. We have run the enemy to his lair."

"And what next?"

"Hah! we must settle that after a sleep," said Brace, and I stared at him in astonishment, he seemed so cheerful and calm.

Chapter Nineteen.

I sat talking to Craig that evening as the poor fellow was indulged by the doctor with his pipe.

"Are you in much pain?" I said.

"Yes, sir; horrible—in my head."

"I'll soak my handkerchief, and lay it across your forehead," I said, rising.

"No, no, sir; that will do no good," he replied, laughing. "It's mental pain, because I'm so helpless. I want to be on my legs again, and then on a horse. It's horrible being carried about as I am, and in every one's way."

"Be patient," I said. "You're a hale, hearty man, and will soon recover."

"I should, sir, if I could be of any use," he said sadly.

To divert his attention, poor fellow, I told him of the scene we had witnessed, and he listened to it all eagerly, sometimes giving vent to an angry ejaculation, sometimes laughing, and then looking at me apologetically.

"I beg your pardon, sit," he said; "but I couldn't help laughing to hear of their blundering about like that."

"But it's no joke, Craig."

"No, sir; but it all goes to show that this business has been a long time hatching, and it means more trouble than you gentlemen think for, sir."

"You think so—that the mutiny is widespread?"

"I think, sir, and I've often thought so before, that if the native princes ever had a chance, they would make a fight for the country. I may be wrong, but I believe that they've been plotting all this for years, and now the fire has begun, it's running all through the country, and unless the English look sharp, the land of India is gone for ever."

"And we are so helpless here," I said; "unable to do anything."

"Don't you talk like that, sir; you and Mr Brace are doing your best. The captain is following the enemy up to get back the guns and horses, of course?"

I nodded.

"And the job is how to get them," he continued, thoughtfully.

I nodded again.

"I've got nothing to do but lie here and think. I'll see if I can't scheme a way. It can only be done by a trick."

"I'm afraid not," I said.

"Only to think of Ny Deen turning out to be a big rajah, sir. Well, he always seemed a curious sort of fellow to me. He's a clever one, that's certain and the captain has his work cut out to deal with a fox of that kind. He will not fight, and he will be off if you show yourselves. He'll wait till he has drilled his fellows into being smart with the guns and till then you'll get no fight out of him. Why, Mr Vincent, that man will do no end of mischief by-and-by with the guns. How would it be to—"

“Eh? Come, come, my man, this will not do,” said the doctor, walking up. “You’re getting hot and feverish. There, put away that pipe, and have a good long sleep.”

“Let me say one word, sir, please,” pleaded Craig.

“Quick, then. What is it?” and as I leaned eagerly forward to hear what plan he had to propose, Craig said quietly—

“I’m a bit in doubt about my bearers, sir. There’s a good deal of whispering going on. They know that we are near their friends, and if they communicate it may mean mischief, or else another long weary tramp, for the enemy will retreat.”

“Yes, I’ll tell Captain Brace,” I said; and I went away meaning to ask Craig his plan the next day.

As I went across to where our quarters were, under a tree, I came upon young Dick Dobbs, our trumpeter, busy with a bit of rag and some powder, polishing away at his bugle, and I nodded to the happy-looking bright-faced lad.

“That’s right,” I said; “keep it bright.”

“I will, sir,” he said, raising the instrument to his lips. “Oh, I should like to have a good blow.”

“And blow all poor Brace’s schemes to the winds,” I said to myself. “I wonder what Craig’s plan is.”

The next minute I was telling Brace of Craig’s suspicions.

“Hum, yes,” he cried. “That’s a good man, Craig. I’d give something for him to be well and strong again. I’ll go and speak to the bearers, and double their guard. It would be ruin if they communicated with the enemy now.”

He went and gave the necessary orders, returned, and after making arrangements for our bivouac that night, Dost was summoned to a consultation, the result being that the Hindu stole off as soon as it was dark, and did not return for some hours.

Haynes was sleeping, and after lying down for a time enjoying the comparative coolness of the air, and listening to the peculiar noises in the forest, wondering the while whether any stray tiger might be on the prowl, I rose and went to where Brace was sitting.

“You!” he said. “Why are you not asleep?”

“I can’t go off,” I replied. “I’m uneasy about Dost.”

“So am I,” replied Brace. “He does not come back. I hope he is faithful.”

“I feel sure he is,” I cried.

“Not so loud, my lad,” he whispered. “We are deep in the forest, but sound passes far on a night like this. Yes, I think he is faithful; but he belongs to another people, and if he thinks that his people are about to get the upper hand, it is too much to expect him to stand fast by an alien race.”

Just then one of our men uttered a deep sigh, and as I looked in the direction from which the sound had come, I could not help thinking how dependent we were upon our posts at a time like that, with our poor weary fellows lying about fast asleep, and the thought had hardly occurred to me, when I sprang up, for there was a challenge from our sentry out in the direction of the rajah’s town.

Brace was on the *qui vive* at once, and we stood there listening and trying to pierce the gloom when a dimly seen white figure stole up; and I was thinking how easily a daring party of natives might rush in amongst us, and, in a few minutes of surprise, cut us up, when the figure spoke, and I recognised Dost’s voice.

“What news?” cried Brace, eagerly.

“I got right in among the people,” said Dost, quietly. “They hardly noticed that I was a stranger, most of them taking me for one of the rajah’s followers.”

“And what have you learned?” said Brace, eagerly—“that they march to-morrow!”

“No, sahib, they stay here to drill till the maharajah is satisfied, and then they go to join the other chief.”

“Yes, yes,” said Brace. “But you are sure they stand fast here for the present?”

“As sure as man can be, sahib,” replied Dost. “The rajah says that he will stay; but if he learns that you are here he will either attack you, or go at once.”

Brace remained very thoughtful as soon as Dost was dismissed, and quite a little council of war was held, to which Haynes was summoned, and after much talking, we could only come to the conclusion that an attack would be full of the risk of failure. Such an attempt would be unsatisfactory, Brace said, unless we could thoroughly scotch the rajah’s power by carrying off all the horses and guns, and to do this seemed impossible in the face of such strong odds and the careful watch kept by the enemy.

“Can any one suggest a ruse by which we could capture them?”

“What about a night attack with lights and plenty of shouting?” said the doctor.

“We have no lights,” replied Brace; “and if we had, we should scare the horses as well as the enemy, and send them galloping over the plains.”

“Better keep to my own profession,” said the doctor grimly.

“Haynes, can you suggest anything?” said Brace.

“No; I leave that to you. But what you ask me to do I’ll do with all my might.”

“I know that, old fellow; but I want some suggestion. You, Vincent, can you propose anything?”

“Only for us to steal up to their quarters, cast loose the horses, and then carry them off some night—to-night, if you like. The guns would be of no use to them without horses, and, once mounted, we could cut them up.”

“Good!” said Brace, patting me on the shoulder. “But how are we to get at the horses without being discovered?”

“By the help of Dost and his spying.”

“Yes, it must be somehow in that way; but I cannot see the scheme yet in a successful form. Well, we shall do nothing to-night. Let’s rest, those of us who can. But about rations; how long can we hold out?”

“Till to-morrow night,” said Haynes.

“By that time, sahib, I shall be able to get a donkey load or two of food. I know this country, and to-morrow I can go to the villages away to the east, and buy rice and cakes.”

“About water?”

“There is a good spring a hundred yards away,” said the doctor quickly; and at rest on this point, careful watch was set, silence enjoined, and soon after the little camp was asleep.

I was so utterly wearied out, that I believe I was one of the first to drop off, and the next thing I remember is lying on my back gazing up at the bright golden shafts of sunlight which penetrated the dense leafage overhead.

It was morning once more, and I immediately began to think about our guns.

Chapter Twenty.

That day passed slowly away, with the heat increasing till the afternoon, and then slowly declining again towards evening. The greatest care was taken of the sepoy prisoners, and the men had the most stringent orders not to go anywhere near the edge of the wood, lest they should be seen by any of the natives at the rajah’s camp, and nothing could have been better than their conduct—all, to a man, busying themselves in polishing up their accoutrements and waiting patiently until their services were wanted, for the discipline of our troop was perfection.

Quite early in the day I went to Sergeant Craig, but the doctor was by him.

“A little irritable this morning,” said the latter. “Wounds going on all right; but they pain him, and I’ve given him something to make him sleep. Don’t disturb him, poor fellow.”

“Is he worse?” I whispered.

“Worse? No; better. I’m making a splendid job of him. He’ll be about again before long.”

I had to come away disappointed, but I soon had something else to take up my attention; for, as I was wondering what sort of a plan Craig’s would be for seizing the guns, Dost came up to me.

“Going to the captain, sahib,” he said. “He will give me rupees, and I can go, and buy food.”

“But you’ll be careful not to betray our hiding-place, Dost.”

“The sahib may trust me,” he said, proudly. “They will only think me one who buys to sell again.”

I walked with him to where Brace was standing, watching the changing guard over our prisoners, and he turned to us sharply.

“Ready to start, Dost?”

“Yes, sahib,” replied the man, holding out his hand for the rupees. “I will try all I can to get plenty, but it will be poor food for the sahib.”

“Never mind. Now, be careful.”

“Yes, sahib,” said Dost, taking the rupees given to him, hiding them in a fold of his turban, and then salaaming and going off amongst the trees, while after satisfying himself about the safety of his prisoners, Brace laid his hand upon my shoulder, and led me toward the edge of the deep forest, which we approached carefully, going down on our hands and knees before peering out, and seeing a long line of men, with their laden donkeys, each bearing a heavy yellowish-green pile.

“The grass-cutters,” I whispered, as the men led their animals up toward the little flat, which looked bright and cheerful in the morning sunshine.

“I’m glad to see that, Gil, my lad,” said the captain. “It shows that they are taking good care of the poor horses.” As we watched, the line of grass-cutters disappeared in a hollow, and we could then see the sentries, with their drawn swords, slowly marching up and down, while a couple more at a distance gave a hint of the care Ny Deen was taking to guard against surprise.

As we had half expected, quite early in the morning the troop rode slowly out, the men in white, looking fairly soldierly, and the horses, as far as we could judge at that distance, in excellent condition, and carefully groomed.

“Gil,” said Brace, suddenly, “go back and send three men with the horses a good half-mile further into the forest. Let them stay there till I send for them back. If they are within hearing here, one of them is sure to hear the jingle of the accoutrements, and neigh out a challenge.”

“Of course; it would be ruinous,” I said, “unless we use it as a lure to bring them near to us, and then made a sudden dash.”

“It would not bring them near, Gil,” said Brace, smiling, “but send them farther away. Ny Deen did not plot and plan and suffer, as he has suffered, to get those guns, and make himself master of a dashing troop of horse artillery, to run any risk of losing it again.”

“No,” I said, thoughtfully; and I hurried away, feeling how right he was.

The task did not take me many minutes; I only stopped to see three men leading off our three beautiful chargers, and gratified myself with a few pats on their glossy necks, before hurrying back and creeping down by Brace’s side, where I watched with him the drilling and training of the native gunners, who, under the orders of Ny Deen, whose clothes glittered in the sun, went slowly and fairly through the gun-drill, making believe to carry cartridges to the gun muzzle, ram them home, fire, and then sponge out the bores, and all in a way which went to prove that, after a few months, they would be clever enough gunners to do a great deal of mischief to a foe.

The proceedings were very similar to those we had seen on the previous day, only that the troop marched by us much more closely, and I had a better view of Ny Deen, unmistakably our syce at the barracks, but now transformed into a gorgeously dressed, princely looking chief, mounted on his graceful-looking Arab, whose hoofs hardly seemed to touch the ground, so beautifully elastic was every bound as it cantered by.

I was admiring the group before me, and had turned to whisper something to Brace, but I saw such a fixed look of misery and despair in his face that I was silent, and felt for him, knowing, too, that I ought to have been as much hurt at the loss of our horses and guns as he.

We crouched there, watching and listening to the dull trample of the horses over the plain, the jingle of the swords, and the peculiar unmistakable rattle of gun-carriage and limber. Now they halted, and pretended to fire; now they limbered up, and advanced and retreated, and finally, in capital order, marched down to their quarters, the guns being parked, as before; and not till then did Brace give any sign of his presence by giving vent to a low, deep sigh.

“If I could only think of some scheme!” I kept on saying to myself, as I walked back with him to our little camp; but the more I tried to invent some plan, the more hopeless it all seemed. The only idea I had was to gather our men together in two bodies, to be hidden among the trees, half on one side of the plain, half on the other, and one of those parties to attack and try to surprise the troop when they came near, when, if they took alarm and galloped off to the other side, they would be running into the arms of another little ambuscade, whom we could go over to help.

I had just got to this point, when Brace turned to me sharply.

“You have just thought out some plan,” he said. “What is it?”

I told him, and he listened patiently to the end.

“What do you think of it now?” he said, gravely.

“I think it’s as bad and stupid as ever it can be,” I cried, pettishly.

“You are right, Gil,” he said; “it is. Absolutely hopeless, my dear boy. No; men on foot cannot catch Arab horses. They would be off at a very different pace to that we have seen, directly we showed ourselves. It would not do, Gil—it would not do.”

I sighed now, partly from vexation, and we joined our companions in the miserable meal, of which we were badly in want. Then the horses were fetched back, and we anxiously awaited the return of Dost, who joined us just at dusk, driving two donkeys before him, so laden with provisions that our prospects looked ten times as hopeful.

“Why, Dost, man,” said Brace, smiling at him, “I was thinking ten minutes ago that it would be impossible for us to hold this position for want of food. You have given us two or three days more. Quick! let’s give the poor lads a good supper, Gil; they want it badly.”

That night, just at watch-setting, I went again to see Craig, but with no great hope of his having any plan worth listening to, for the whole business seemed to be impossible. There is only one way, I said to myself: a dash at them by night, sword in hand. But when I reached the place where the poor fellow lay, he was sleeping easily, and it was quite out of the question to waken a wounded man.

All was quiet in the camp at last, and, fortunately for us, the weather lovely. We had our quiet talk after watch-setting, and it fell to my lot that night to have to make the rounds, so that I had plenty of time for thought, as I leaned against a tree, and tried once more to make some plan, but tried in vain.

Then I listened to faint distant sounds in the rajah's village, and to the howling of the jackals, with the croakings, whisperings, and mutterings which came out of the black forest, all sounding so weird and strange that I was glad to keep going from post to post, to chat in a whisper with the men, and make sure that no attempt at evasion was being made by our prisoners, who all appeared to be asleep.

And so my part of the uneasy night watch passed away, and I was relieved by Brace.

"Thought out anything?" I said.

"No," he replied. "Have you?"

I shook my head, and went and lay down to drop asleep on the instant, and wake up at daybreak according to my custom.

I had hardly risen when the doctor came to me.

"Vincent, my lad," he said, "I don't think Craig is any worse, but he is uneasy. He has got something on his mind, and wants to speak to you."

"To me?" I said eagerly. "I'll go."

I hurried to where the poor fellow lay, and he signed to me to kneel down by him.

"Why, Craig, man," I said, "what is it?"

"What is it?" he said angrily. "That doctor has been giving me stuff to keep me asleep just at a time when I could help you all so."

"Help us? How? With that plan of yours for getting the guns and horses back?"

"Yes," he whispered eagerly. "I wouldn't say a word to any one else as I spoke to you first."

I looked at him curiously.

"Oh no," he said, as he interpreted my look. "I'm not feverish or delirious. Quite calm and cool, sir. Listen!"

I bent down, and he began talking in a low whisper, full of earnestness, as he unrolled his plan, and as he went on my heart began to beat, and my cheeks to flush.

"That makes your eyes sparkle, sir, doesn't it?" he said. "That will do, won't it?"

"Do, Craig!" I whispered. "It's glorious. If it succeeds, they ought to give you a commission."

"Think so?" he said. "Ah, well, perhaps I shan't live to want it. But what are you going to do?"

"Go and tell the captain, of course," I cried.

"That's right; go and tell him, sir," whispered the wounded man; "and good luck to you. Oh, if I could only have been in the game!"

"I wish from my heart you could have been, Craig," I said, pressing his hand.

"And you won't leave me behind, sir, to the crows?"

"If you are left behind, Craig, I shall be left behind too," I said. "But left! Why, you'll be riding on a limber or in the waggon, man. There, I must go and tell him. Hurrah! Oh, Craig, if I had only been born with a brain like yours!"

"Perhaps you would have only wasted your life, sir, as I did. But go along and tell him, and God bless your efforts, for it may mean saving thousands of innocent lives, and preventing the pandies from running riot over the country, and marking their track in blood."

The next minute I was seeking Brace, feeling that I had the guns under my hands; and so occupied that I did not notice a peculiar fact.

Our prisoners were not in their customary places, though the sentries were on guard!

Chapter Twenty One.

Bubbling over with excitement, I was not long in finding Brace, whom I took aside and told of the plan.

He stood with knitted brows in perfect silence, hearing me to the very end, and then, feeling chilled and disappointed, I looked into his stern face, and said—

"Then you don't think it will do?"

He did not speak for a few moments. Then he gripped my wrist with all his might.

“Gil,” he said huskily, “it almost stunned me. The idea is as grand as it is simple. It is certain of success. My dear boy, what a brain you have!”

“Oh no,” I said hastily; “it was not I. It was poor Craig. He thought of it the day before yesterday, but I only got to know of it this morning.”

“I wish it had been you,” said Brace. “But never mind; it is glorious. Craig will have saved us and our reputation far more than he thinks for.”

“Then he ought to be rewarded,” I said.

“Of course!”

“Then you will put the plan in force?”

“Directly, my dear fellow,” cried Brace, excitedly. “There, I must be calm, and make my plans.”

He stood thinking for a few minutes, and then turned to me.

“Yes,” he said, “that will do. Now then; you will take the men, and—”

“Oh no,” I cried, “don’t send me away. I must be in it, Brace.”

He looked at me searchingly.

“It’s a daring thing to do,” he said. “And you are very young yet, my lad.”

“But I brought you the idea.”

“Yes; but carrying it out is another thing. Mr Haynes must come.”

“Oh no,” I cried passionately. “It wouldn’t be fair to me. Besides, it would be with my horses.”

“The Queen’s horses for the time being, my boy. Don’t you see that it will require strength and dash?”

“Yes; and I feel as if I could dash into it.”

“But the risk?”

“Never mind the risk, Brace,” I cried excitedly. “Pray, pray, let me be in it.”

“Very well,” he said—and my heart leaped. “You shall go; but follow my orders to the smallest point, and don’t let your excitement get the better of you.”

“No; I’ll be calm,” I said.

“Then there is no time to lose; they will be out soon, this cool pleasant morning.”

He took a few steps to one side, and gave the order to the men to fall in.

The men saw that something was on the way, and sprang to their places, when Brace ordered the three horses to be saddled and bridled.

This was quickly done, and by that time, and while they were being tethered to the nearest trees, the men had buckled on their belts, and taken the carbines from their rustic stand among the undergrowth.

Then there was a dead silence, and Brace signed to me, and then marched off Haynes towards the edge of the forest, while I followed.

When we got to the border, and stood by the plain with the rajah’s town on our right, and the level extending to the left, till the forest swept round about a mile away, Brace pointed out a spot in the curve of verdure, where some half-dozen large trees towered up.

“You see those, Haynes?” said Brace.

“Yes.”

“March all the men to that spot, and form an ambush at the foot of those trees. Be quite ready for us when we join you.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Silence, and listen to my orders,” said Brace sternly. “You will march the men there in single file by keeping just at the edge of the forest, where it is more open; but the greatest care will be necessary so that you are not seen from the town. If you are, the plan is spoiled.”

“Right; I’ll be careful. I understand. When am I to attack?”

“When I or Vincent give the word. You ought to be at that spot in less than an hour, in spite of dense growth.”

“Yes; I’ll be there.”

“Keep your men hidden, and whatever you see take place, don’t stir, even if we are taken prisoners.”

“Well— I’ll obey orders, sir.”

“That is good. Now then, back to your men; and, mind, it is of vital importance that you carry out my orders to the smallest item.”

“You may trust me,” said Haynes, quietly; and it was the soldier speaking now to his superior. The friendly, easy-going ways of brother-officers were gone, and we stood together watching him till he disappeared among the trees.

For a few moments Brace made no movement, but stood as if plunged in thought. Then, turning suddenly, he moved to the very edge of the forest, and leaning forward gazed intently at the town, whose houses looked bright in the morning sun, and among which were throngs of white-clothed people emerging here and there. We could see the guns too glistening in the sun, but no sign of armed men excepting the sentries, whose swords glittered as they walked to and fro.

“Why, Gil,” said Brace, drawing a long breath, “how satisfied they seem of their safety; a squadron of lancers would capture those guns with ease.”

“And we are going to capture them without,” I said.

“Hist! what was that?”

“Haynes giving an order to march,” I said.

“No; some one coming this way! Well, what is it?” he cried to a man who came on at the double, and saluted.

“The lieutenant, sir,” replied the man. “Will you come at once?”

“Something wrong,” I heard Brace mutter, as he strode back through the trees to where the men were drawn up with Haynes in front.

“Now, what is it?” said Brace, sharply. “Why are you not gone, sir?”

“I thought it my duty to stop and see if you would change your plans,” replied Haynes. “The prisoners have escaped.”

“What?” cried Brace, excitedly, as he ran his eyes along the men. “Who were on duty?”

“The men were *all* ordered to fall in,” said Haynes.

“Yes; quite right. Oh, what a blunder!” added Brace, excitedly, beneath his breath. Then turning to me—“Gil,” he murmured, “our plan is thwarted.”

“Don’t give up yet,” I whispered.

“But they will have gone to the town and given warning of our presence.”

“They may have fled in another direction.”

Brace was silent for a few moments, and then he said quickly—

“Well, it need not interfere; we should be obliged to move off, but must alter our plans a little.”

He spoke to Haynes, who gave the orders for four men to fall out. The litter was seized, Sergeant Craig carefully lifted upon it, the doctor looking on wonderingly; and then, as the men raised the handles, Brace spoke again.

“Dobbs,” he said sharply, “fall out and take charge of the horses.”

The lad stepped back, and as he did so a gleam of sunshine through the trees made his trumpet flash for a moment. The next he was standing by the beautiful animals which were impatiently champing their bits and pawing the ground.

Then Brace made Haynes a sign, and the men turned right face, and with Haynes at their head, filed off, the bearers falling in with their load, and the doctor looking undecided.

“Follow the wounded man, sir,” said Brace, and the doctor immediately took his place at the end of the little column, while we stood watching them till they had disappeared among the trees.

“We may succeed even now, Gil,” said my companion; “but once more, while there is time, speak out frankly to me as if I were your brother; the trumpeter cannot hear. Do you feel—well, to be plain—frightened?”

“I suppose so,” I said. “It’s a curious nervous sensation.”

“Then give up, and follow the men, and I’ll go alone.”

“You said I was to speak to you as if you were my brother,” I said.

“Yes.”

“Then I will speak,” I said through my teeth. “It is to my brother, and not to my commanding-officer. I won’t. I’ll go with you now if I die for it.”

And all the time the feeling of dread I felt was horrible, and worse than all was that the feeling grew.

Brace caught my hand and wrung it.

“Well done!” he said in a low voice. “I can see. I know the sensation; but that’s the way. Fight it down.”

“I’m trying,” I said, huskily; “but I wish I was not such a coward.”

“I don’t, Gil,” he said, smiling, “There, now we have a horrible task before us to wait nearly an hour. Dobbs, follow us with the horses, and keep about twenty yards behind.”

He advanced to the three noble beasts, and began to examine their bridles, and then tightened their girths himself, before saying shortly, “Now forward,” and, carrying the scabbard of his sword, he led the way once more to the edge of the wood, where, after taking care that we were carefully screened, he swept the plain with his eyes, and then took out his glass.

“Yes, that will do,” he said to the trumpeter, who had stopped with the bridles of the horses in his hands and a look of eager excitement in his eyes, as he evidently anticipated riding that day instead of a long weary tramp.

Brace used his glass and watched the town, making comments to me from time to time.

“All very quiet,” he said. “Our lads must have an hour, for they may find the tangle very hard to get through.”

There was a long pause, during which he was almost constantly watching the place with his glass. And how that scene is imprinted in my mind; the beautiful fringe of green trees, where we stood in the shade, and before us the broad plain bright in the fresh morning sunshine, and wreaths of mist still floating over it, but being rapidly dispelled by the sun, though the distance still looked hazy and of a delicious blue. There on the right was the village or town, dotted with the figures of the white-robed Hindus, whose arms flashed now and then, as they moved here and there.

“If they will only give us a full hour, Gil,” said Brace. “How long have our men been gone?”

“Not a quarter yet,” I said.

He uttered an ejaculation full of impatience, and began watching again.

“I’m between two fires,” he said at last. “I am eager for them to come out before those scoundrelly sepoys give the rajah warning; and I am longing for them to stay for a full three-quarters of an hour yet. What a dilemma. It is terrible.”

Just then there was the sound of a horse plunging and squealing, and we turned to where the trumpeter held the three.

“That would ruin us if they were passing,” muttered Brace. Then aloud, “Keep them quiet, my lad. What are you doing?”

“Beg pardon, sir; did not move. Mr Vincent’s horse, sir, a bit playful. They’re all so fresh.”

We patted and quieted the beautiful animals, and left them again to resume our old place, to find that all remained still. There was no excitement, and we could see nothing to suggest that there had been an alarm, and men were coming out to attack us or a retreat had been ordered. But as we watched, we suddenly saw a man in white riding the beautiful gaily caparisoned Arab, which even at that distance I recognised as the rajah’s charger. He was passing along in front of some buildings, and my heart beat faster as I felt that at last the time was rapidly approaching for action.

“How long do you think it is now since they started?” said Brace, in a hoarse voice.

“Half an hour,” I replied; and I did not recognise my own voice, it sounded so husky.

“Hah!” sighed Brace, still using his glass.

Then, after a few minutes—

“They’re turning out,” he said. “Yes; and there is no sign of hurry;” and he kept on telling me as, by the help of the glass, the confusion I could see was cleared; and the leading out of horses, and falling in of men, was described, “They’re going through it all exactly as if they were our troop,” said Brace, bitterly. “We’ve let them see our training, and trained them, too, to some purpose. Hasn’t another quarter of an hour gone yet?”

“No,” I said; “not more than ten minutes.”

“It seems like ten hours. Hah! Trumpeter, keep those horses quiet, on your life.”

There was a neighing and stamping and trampling mingled with the breaking of bushes, and then all was quiet again; while I felt an intense longing to mount my Arab, and gallop as hard as that beautiful creature could go.

“You can see them plainly now?” said Brace.

“Oh yes; quite plainly,” I replied, as I saw the limbers brought out, each by its six horses, and the men drawn up ready, some on foot, the rest mounted, and holding the horses of the dismounted gunners, two of whom, however, would in each case mount to their seats on the limber.

“Where is the rajah?” said Brace, impatiently. “I can’t see him. Can you?”

“No.”

“Then those scoundrels of sepoys must have reached the place, and, instead of their coming out to drill to-day, they will retreat once more.”

Just then came the squealing and trampling of the horses again, and I had to run back and help poor Dobbs, whose face was scarlet.

“I can hardly hold them, sir. The flies are beginning to worry them, too.”

“Only a little longer, Dobbs,” I said. “Pray—pray try and keep them quiet.”

I tried hard to soothe my restive charger, which whinnied after me impatiently as I went away again, just as if the poor brute felt disappointed because I had not mounted and ridden him off.

But they were pretty quiet when I left them, and I rejoined Brace, who was trembling with excitement.

“It must be nearly an hour now,” he said to me appealingly.

“Yes, it must be,” I replied.

“And Haynes ought to be ready. It will take a few minutes, too, which will all be in their favour. But the scoundrels don’t come out; and, though I can see the rajah’s Arab, I can’t see him. Take the glass and try yourself.”

I caught the glass from his hand, and swept the ground, to see that the six guns were all out in front, the long line of horses ready with their riders, and the drivers already seated, waiting for the limbering up, each team of glossy creatures breaking up the regularity of the line.

“No,” I said, returning the glass. “I can’t see him.”

“But you could make out his horse?”

“Yes, plainly.”

“Gil,” said Brace, after a pause, “our hour must be up; and we could act at once if they came out. But there is something wrong.”

“I hope not.”

“And I; but I’m afraid. Is your pistol charged?”

“No,” I said.

“Then load, man, load. Heaven knows I don’t want to destroy life; but we are fighting for our queen and country, and for the thousands of women and children who may soon be at the mercy of these men.”

I hastily dragged my cartouche-box round, and charged my pistol, and when this was done, looked at Brace, as if asking for further commands.

“Is your sword sharp?”

“Yes, very,” I replied.

“Good. Recollect, lad, that you may have to use it; and then you must strike or give point—do so with vigour. Your life or mine may depend upon it.”

“I’ll try, and do my best,” I said huskily.

“I know you will, Gil; and may God help us!”

There was another long period of watching before he spoke again.

“It is of no use, lad,” he said. “My fault; and I have upset as splendid a plan as was ever conceived, by letting those prisoners escape. They must have reached the place, and are giving the rajah the information of danger to him and his being so near. It’s all over; they will not drill to-day.”

“But we can follow them up, and get another chance,” I said soothingly.

“No, lad,” he replied, “never again. Knowing that he is pursued, he will be too watchful. Our chance is gone.”

“Look there,” I said, steadying my eyes with my hand; “isn’t that the rajah mounting? I can’t see, but I saw something flashing in the sun.”

“Yes,” cried Brace, in a trembling voice. “It is—it is; and he is riding out to the front. Look, there is the order. The men have limbered up, and mounted. There, again. Hurrah! they are in motion. Do you see? they are coming out into the plain. Gil, lad, your hand. He cannot have got the warning, or they would follow the road. Now, may Heaven help our good cause, bring us safely through to-day’s peril, and help us to acquit ourselves like British soldiers and like men.”

Chapter Twenty Two.

My heart beat faster than ever at his words, and as the troop advanced at a walk, wheeled, and then came along towards us, I felt that the time had nearly come, and offered up a short prayer for help, strength, and protection; for never before had the world seemed to me so beautiful, or life so sweet. For the moment, I felt as if I should certainly be killed in the encounter so near; and in a desperate mood I told myself that it did not matter, so long as the honour of our troop was redeemed by the rescue of the guns from the mutineers. Then, with the quickness of thought, I dwelt on my father getting the news, and quietly breaking it to my mother and sister, who would bitterly weep for me; and I thought of their wearing mourning, and I hoped that my father would feel proud of what I had done, and have a marble tablet put up to my memory in the old Devon church, near which I was born. In fact, so vividly picturesque were those thoughts which flashed through me, that I could see in imagination the bent, mourning figures of my mother and sister standing before the marble tablet.

I was just building up some more sentimental nonsense about myself—for I’m afraid that just at that period I was very romantic, and fond of thinking too much of Gil Vincent—when I was brought back to the present by Brace.

“Look at them,” he cried. “They are going through that movement remarkably well. Be careful, and don’t show yourself.”

I shrank back a little among the trees, and for a few minutes we watched the troop go through some of the regular evolutions, passing us on their way down the plain, at a distance of about two hundred yards, and I trembled lest our horses should select that moment for whinnying or trying to break away. But they were quiet, and the cavalcade went slowly on at a walk towards where our men ought to be in ambush.

Then I turned to look at Brace, whose left hand was fidgeting with the hilt of his sword, lifting it nervously, and dropping it again as he watched the guns; and I could see the veins in his temples throbbing heavily.

“Why does he not act?” I said to myself. “We shall lose our chance.”

And on went the troop till they were nearly half a mile to our left, and I was in despair.

“If all has gone right, they will soon be abreast of our men,” said Brace, as if thinking to himself. “I hope they are all well hidden.”

“And so do I,” I thought. “But why have you let the chance go by?”

“Look at them, Gil, lad,” he said, more loudly. “Doesn’t it make your heart beat to hear the rattle of the wheels and the snorting of the horses? Bah! it seems an insult to the poor brutes to have them mounted by that cowardly mutinous crew.”

Just then we heard an order given, and could we see the rajah seated alone with his sword flashing as he held it high in air; and I was obliged to own myself that he looked a noble specimen of a barbaric chief, sitting his horse as he did to perfection.

Then, as we watched, the troop wheeled to the right, went forward for a hundred yards, and then wheeled again, and advanced at a trot, their course taking them back in a line parallel to that they had followed in passing us at first.

The trotting fell far short of the walk past; and, as they were abreast, on their way back toward the town, Brace muttered, but so that I could hear—

“If they would only leave the horses alone, they would keep the line far better!”

I looked at him in astonishment, for his conduct seemed in dead opposition to our plans, and still he made no sign; and at last, flushed, excited, and angry with him for losing what I looked upon as splendid opportunities, I said aloud —

“Isn’t it time to act?”

“Eh?” he exclaimed, with a start. “No; not yet. Wait! They’ll wheel again directly, and form a line in front of the houses. Yes; there they go. That will be our time. Yes; there goes the order.”

He was right; the troop was wheeled, and in another minute or two they were half across the plain, with the third gun about level with the centre of the village, when the rajah rode out into the front, raised his sword in the air, and the troop halted. Then, faintly heard, came another order, and men and guns came to the front, ready for a second advance down the plain and past us, probably at a trot.

“Hah!” ejaculated Brace, drawing back quickly. “Ready, Gil?”

“Yes,” I cried hoarsely.

“Now, my lad, the horses,” he said sharply, and there was a movement among the beautiful creatures as if his words had inspired them with excitement.

It was only a few yards to where they stood, and the next minute we each had a rein. Brace gave the order to mount, and we sprang into our saddles, a thrill running through me, as my knees once more gripped the elastic animal's sides, and he uttered a snort of satisfaction.

"Now," cried Brace, firmly. "I depend on you, Dobbs, my boy. Keep close behind me, and obey my orders instantly."

The lad raised his hand to his helmet, and then loosened the trumpet slung over his shoulder, took it in hand with the bell mouth resting on his right thigh, and sat as firm as a statue.

"You, Vincent, on my right. As soon as we are out of the edge of the forest, we advance at a trot. Leave everything to me. Don't draw till I give the order. Let them think first that we come peaceably."

We advanced to the edge of the wood, and were just passing out, when I saw something which made me say—

"Look!—look!"

"Ah, just in time!" said Brace, for now out to the right of the village we could see a little crowd, and in front of them a party of sepoys, marching towards where the guns were drawn up. "Yes," he repeated; "just in time. Forward! we shall be first."

We took our places instantly, and rode out in the formation ordered, and as we advanced, with my Arab dancing beneath me, all excitement to be off, it appeared to me that we were not seen, and that the attention of the rajah was taken up by the advancing party of sepoys, evidently our late prisoners.

But the distance was still too great for me to be sure, and I had no time for thinking.

Then, all at once, I heard a shout, followed by others, and the rajah, who had had his back to us, reined round, and sat looking at us. There was a movement, too, all along the troop, as if men were in a disorderly way drawing their swords without waiting for an order, for there was a flash here and a flash there, the men evidently expecting an attack.

But, as the rajah realised that we were only three, he turned his horse and rode along the front of the troop shouting to his men, who all sat firm, and he turned then, and sat there looking haughty and calm, waiting evidently for what he must have taken as some envoy from his enemies.

And all this time we were rapidly lessening the distance; so were the sepoys, followed by quite a crowd; but they were advancing from the left, and the rajah had ridden to the extreme right, so that the sepoys had a greater distance to go; but they were getting excited now, and had commenced to run.

"You are too late with your news, you black-hearted scoundrels!" cried Brace, loudly, though his words would be heard only by us; and just then my Arab burst out with a loud challenge, followed by one from Brace's horse, and it was loudly answered by first one and then another of their old friends in the troop, several of which became uneasy and excited.

"Well done, brave lads; neigh again," cried Brace, excitedly, as we were now not two hundred yards from the row of black faces, while at the end, and twenty yards away, sat the rajah, with a couple more gallantly-dressed officers who had ridden out to him.

"They are waiting for our message, Gil," cried Brace, wildly. "They shall have it directly. Ready, my lad—steady, horses. Right for the centre; never mind the rajah. Let him wait. Forward!"

We rode right for the centre of the troop drawn up there in the brilliant sunshine, and there it all is now vividly before my eyes as I write, and see myself riding on Brace's left, and Dobbs the trumpeter just behind him on his right, ever growing nearer at our steady trot, with the opal of the Hindus' eyes plainer each moment and a wondering expression clearly seen now upon their faces, as if they were asking what it meant.

There were the sepoys, too, on our right, running fast and shouting, but we reached the centre long before they, and the mob following, could attain to the end of the line nearest to them; and just then, as I glanced to my left, I saw the rajah clap spurs to his horse, as if to ride up, but he reined instantly, and his two companions followed his example; dignity forbade this. We must go to him.

But we did not.

As we reached the centre at our steady trot, but with our horses bearing hard on the bit, Brace shouted—

"Halt!"

Without a touch, our horses stopped short, and there was an uneasy movement of those facing us, the beautiful animals tossing their heads, snorting, and seemed to know what was coming.

Then in another instant Brace said to us softly—

"Right about face!" and we turned, and sat to the wonder of the sowars the rajah was training, while I felt how easily they might rush out and cut us down from behind.

But there was not time, for Brace thundered out—

"Draw—swords!" and then, "The troop will advance at a walk."

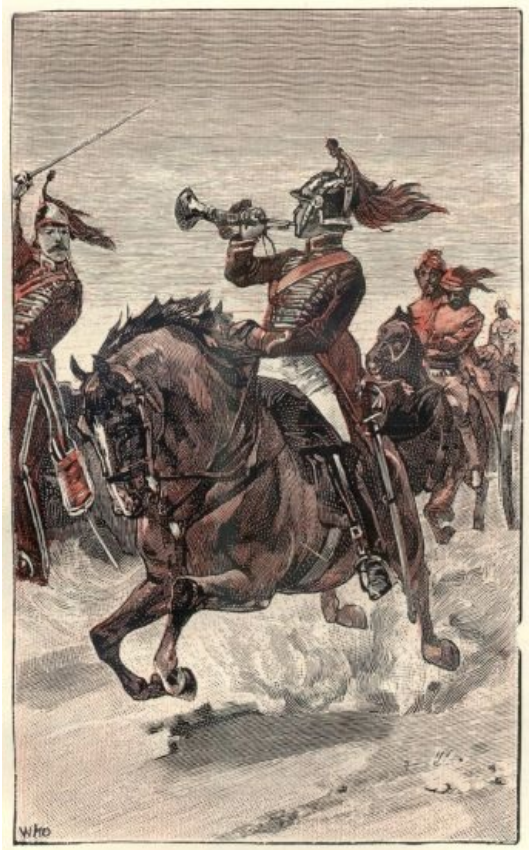
There was a flash in the sunlight as our sabres leapt from their scabbards, and another as Dobbs raised his trumpet to his lips and his note rang out.

In an instant the whole line was in motion, advancing slowly, with the heavy dull trampling of the horses, loudly heard by me above the tumultuous beating of my heart.

I glanced to the right, and then at the rajah and his two officers glittering with gold and gems, motionless, and as if astounded. It must have struck him and his men that we were volunteers, renegades come to join them, and drill the little force. But as we came abreast of them, with the sowars all steadily in their places, and taking everything as a matter of course, Brace's voice rose again—

"Trot!"

Again Dobbs's trumpet rang out, and the splendid horses, all trained to the notes of that bugle, broke at once into a steady trot. The gun wheels and limbers rattled, and an exciting yell ran along the line, men beginning to drag frantically at their reins as the rajah and his officers now awoke to the position of affairs, and roared out orders. But,



DOBBS BLEW FORTH A TRIUMPHANT CHARGE. p. 218.
Gil the Gunner.

above the noise and the confusion in the line, Brace's voice rose clear and loud—"Gallop!"

Then, clear ringing, and given with all his might, Dobbs blew forth a triumphant charge, and the sowars might as well have pulled at rocks as against the bits of the excited horses, as they broke into the swift race to which they had been trained, gathering excitement from the rattle of the wheels as, in a quarter of a minute, we were thundering away down the plain, our speed increasing, the guns leaping and bounding over the uneven ground; and as I gave one glance back, I saw the white-robed gunners leaping off the limbers, their men frantically trying to check their horses, and ending by throwing themselves off—one or two, then half a dozen, then more, till the track in our rear was dotted with white spots, till fully half the sowars had dropped off, and the horses dashed on in the wild exciting gallop that was almost terrific in its speed.

I saw, too, the rajah and his officers shouting and striving hard on our right, and trying to cut in before us, to stop the movement. Again, they might as well have tried to check the wind, and all they could do was to fall in the line, galloping with us, and striking at their men with their glittering tulwars, as gunners and riders sat watching for opportunities to throw themselves from their horses without being trampled to death.

It was all a matter of minutes; and by the time we had galloped a mile, half the men had dropped off and were left behind, while on we tore with a rush like a whirlwind; till all at once from the wood some hundreds of yards to the front and left, there was a rush, the flash of helmets; and, led by Haynes, our men dashed out at the double, as if to take up ground right on our front.

The effect was magical.

A great yell rose from behind us, and the sowars rolled or tumbled off their horses to a man, while as we thundered on, and left them behind, dotting the plain with white spots and patches, many of the poor wretches being unable to rise again, the rajah and his two followers reined up and sat fast, while a couple of hundred yards further on we three, riding at the head of a troop of horse and our six guns, prepared to halt. Brace threw up his sword, the trumpet rang out; and the horses, no longer in an even line, but in a regular drove, obeyed the call on the instant, while from

our men in front rose a frantic cheer of excitement.

They tore over the ground to, meet us, literally yelling with delight. Formation there was none; it was a little crowd of armed men, each trying to be first to reach and find his horse, of to get to the gun to which he belonged; while at the word of command, the horses now pressed together in something approaching a line.

Then orders rang out quick and sharp, and so good was the training that in a very short time men were getting well in their places, a couple of guns were unlimbered, and shot after shot was fired, the grape sweeping the plain, and sending the rajah and his officers back at a gallop, while those dismounted ran or limped after them, some poor wretches being merely able to crawl, and about a dozen lay quite still.

Then discipline was for the moment at an end.

The order was given, “Cease firing!” and the men broke their ranks to run in a crowd round Brace, shouting, cheering, waving their helmets, swords, sponges, and rammers, and literally dancing with delight, while Haynes and the doctor were shaking his hands as if they would drag him off his horse.

The next minute they were at me, and, to my astonishment, the doctor was literally crying.

“Ah, God bless you, my boy!” he cried. “I never thought I could be such a fool.—Hi! hooray! hooray! cheer, my lads, cheer!” he shouted, as he waved his sun helmet. But the men were cheering, and they had now collected round Dicky Dobbs, two leading his horse, others hanging on to the saddle, and actually holding by the horse’s tail, as they marched him round in a kind of procession, one stalwart gunner shouting—

“Blow, you beggar, blow!”

Dobbs, ready to fall off his horse with laughter and excitement, gave one feeble blast, and then was silent again.

It was merely a matter of a few minutes—Brace letting the gallant fellows have their way. Then, after warmly pressing Haynes’s hand, he rode toward the excited mob, and held up his sword.

Then Dobbs blew a blast, and every man rushed to his horse and gun.

“Fall in!” rang out; and in an incredibly short space of time the line was reformed, men giving a grunt of satisfaction as they rapidly altered the length of their stirrups, and sat at ease upon some favourite horse.

Chapter Twenty Three.

The excitement was still high, as we all sat in our places about a couple of hundred yards from the forest, and then Brace cried—

“Attention!”

Save the champing of bits by the horses, there was not a sound.

“There, my lads,” he cried, “I feel now as if I can look you all once more in the face, for the dear old troop is itself again.”

“God bless you, sir!” shouted the oldest corporal we had. “The bravest act ever done in the British army.”

“Silence!” cried Brace, but not angrily. “You must not thank me, my lads, but Mr Vincent and Sergeant Craig.”

I wanted to say, “Yes, Craig; let me fetch him;” but discipline forbade, and I knew that Brace would do him justice.

“Then three cheers for Sergeant Craig, if I lose my stripes for it,” shouted the corporal again, who was as intoxicated with excitement as if he had partaken of drink—the vile arrack that ruins so many of our men.

But Brace was lenient then.

“Yes,” he cried, “three cheers for Sergeant Craig,” and they were given with a will.

Then, to my great delight, he gave orders; four men reined back, and sprang from their horses, with the corporal, and went off at the double toward the wood, from where they soon reappeared, bearing the litter with poor Craig.

Brace rode forward to meet him, and leaned over the litter to shake hands, when a low murmur of satisfaction rose from the line, but I did not hear what he said, though I longed to ride up and thank him too. To my great delight, though, they brought him close up to me, and we exchanged a nod and smile.

“I thought that would do it, sir,” he said feebly.

“What do you say, doctor? Do you think we could safely take him on the ammunition-waggon?”

“So long as you don’t blow it up,” said the doctor, shortly. “You think you could sit up now?”

“I will sit up, sir,” said Craig, firmly.

“But the jolting and shaking, my man?”

Craig laughed.

“Why, sir, I’m used to all that; I’ve ridden so many times on the limbers of gun-carriages, that being knocked about’s natural to me.”

“Let him try,” said Brace, sharply. “Watch him, doctor, and he must take to the dhooly again if he cannot bear it. Quick! I must advance at once.”

I looked at him wonderingly, having been under the impression that now we had succeeded in the object we had in view we should retire.

Brace’s words quite overset that notion. It was evident that he meant to give the rajah a severe lesson, for the troop was in motion directly after, and as we advanced, we could see that the town was in a state of the most intense excitement, people running here and there. But before we had gone far, Brace halted, the guns were unlimbered, loaded, and then as we stood ready for action, scouts were sent out to right and left; the former soon returning, while a minute later, those sent off to the left came galloping in to announce that the rajah and his men were in rapid retreat along the bank of the river.

This was a fresh move in the game of war, for in expectation of firing from the town, the gunners stood ready to send shot and shell crashing into the defences. So orders were given, guns were limbered up again, and away we went at a gallop in full pursuit.

“We must capture the rajah,” Brace cried to Haynes, as we followed on, soon coming within range of quite a mob of hurrying men, who, for the most part, threw away their arms, made for the patches of wood which bordered the river, and hid among the trees unnoticed by our men, for, in the distance, we could see in full flight, about forty well-mounted men, among whom the rajah was conspicuous by his brilliant costume; and as we tore on, we saw them ride down a slope leading to the river, and directly after take to the water, swimming their horses as soon as it grew deep, for the opposite bank.

I saw at a glance that the guns could not follow, and knew directly that Brace had come to the same conclusion, for he halted the troop, and unlimbering a couple of the guns, began to scatter grape shot with terrible effect amongst the escaping fugitives, horse after horse being struck and swept away by the rushing stream.

Those were exciting moments, mingled, to me, with horror, as at every discharge and puff of white smoke, I saw the water torn up by the grape, and some horse make a frantic plunge, rear up, fall over, and horse and man disappear.

It was only a matter of a few minutes, though, before we saw the rajah and the greater part of his followers mounting the opposite bank, and then galloping off to disappear beyond the trees that came down nearly to the water’s edge.

“Let me pursue, with twenty or thirty men,” said Haynes, excitedly. “We’ll take him.”

But Brace shook his head.

“What I should like to do myself,” he said; “but I cannot. No; they are well-mounted; they know the country, and they have the start. Besides, we are too weak as it is, and I can’t afford to risk losing the guns again by sending half of my force away. We don’t know yet what reception we may meet with in the town.”

Very soon after we were trotting back toward the place in full expectation of being fired upon; but we did not receive a shot, and as we rode boldly in, we did not encounter a single military-looking man, those who crowded the streets being the ordinary traders and work-people, who treated us with a quiet cold stare.

The first task was to scout through the place with a couple of pickets, while our guns were drawn up on an open space in the middle of the town, where some of the principle people came with offerings of sweets and chupatties, beside more substantial food and offerings.

The place was so small that our men were not long in bringing in a report that there was not an armed man visible, the whole of the fighting element having retreated with the rajah, as soon as it was seen that the guns were retaken. But our numbers were so small, and the position so precarious, that Brace used every precaution, throwing out posts in the two directions from which danger was likely to approach, while the men were rested and refreshed, and a search made for ammunition, of which there was none too much in the boxes.

This was for a time in vain, but as soon as Dost was taken into consultation, he salaamed, started off, and in a quarter of an hour was back again to announce that he had discovered two ammunition-waggons in a kind of shed, and upon my following him with half a dozen men and a couple of teams of horses, he led us to the spot where I found that the rajah and his men had brought away as many cartridges, with ball, grape, and canister, as the two waggons would hold.

These were drawn out at once, and taken to the halting-place, where the gunners gave a cheer as they saw that for some time to come their six-pounders would not want for food.

The heat was intense, but we could not afford to study that; and after a little council of war, in which I felt proud to be allowed to participate, it was debated as to what should be our next move.

Haynes was still eager to go on in pursuit of the rajah, and the doctor expressed his opinion that it would give him profound satisfaction to make him prisoner, while to me the excitement of such a chase sounded very tempting, although somehow I could not help feeling that the rajah had had some cause for the steps he had taken. Then Brace spoke.

“My feelings go with all of you,” he said, “but I am obliged to oppose you. Our chase would be a long one, and into country about which we know scarcely anything. Consequently we should have very little prospect of success. As it is, we have crippled him almost completely, and our troop would be invaluable to any officer who is coming down from Calcutta or Barrackpore with a regiment or two.”

“But is any one coming down?” said Haynes.

“For certain. The news of the rising at Rajgunge must have reached there, and the mutiny of other regiments. Depend upon it, the Government is straining every nerve to check the wildfire from spreading far.”

“Then what do you propose doing?” said Haynes.

“Starting at once back to Rajgunge, and finding out the state of affairs there as we pick up the major. Possibly we shall find a European regiment or two there already. If not, we can continue our way. I don’t think we need fear meeting any of the enemy.”

“Fear?” said the doctor. “I only wish we may. If we do, depend upon it they will give us a wide berth. Then we move east at once?”

“At once,” said Brace. “Yes; what is it?” he cried, as Dost once more made his appearance, this time to announce that he had found the stables of the rajah’s elephants—three huge beasts, with their howdahs, pads, and mahouts.

“We don’t want them now,” said Haynes. “No time for tigers.”

“We do want them now,” said Brace, eagerly. “They will carry a quantity of provisions, and one of them can take Sergeant Craig as well. It will be better than pressing bearers into our service, more than we absolutely want for grass-cutters. We must keep our train as small as possible now.”

So the elephants were brought out, and the mahouts duly admonished upon the dangers they would run if they attempted any treachery. Loads were adjusted, and just at midday, when the sun was hottest, our little column was set in motion, and we marched out of the little town that we had watched so intently, hardly able to realise how successful we had been.

There were plenty of people about, old men and boys, and there was a sullen, lowering look in their amber eyes as we rode by, but no voice was raised against us, so wholesome a dread had they of the guns, of whose power they had all more or less heard—a power which might at any moment be directed against their homes.

To the delight of all, the horses proved to be in admirable condition, and in their excitement and glee, the men never seemed to trouble about the heat, but rode on, chatting together and discussing the morning’s feat and the value of the long, careful drilling, whose results had been shown in the way in which the horses had behaved.

The road was dusty, but fairly good; and as the three elephants shuffled slowly along, I ventured to approach the one which bore Craig, time after time, but generally to find that he was sleeping, and upon calling the doctor’s attention to the fact, he said abruptly—

“Best thing for him. Nature goes on best with her mending when a man is asleep. Phew! how hot it is.”

“Worse walking,” I said.

“Yes. Thank goodness, we are all well-mounted again. What a fish out of water one does feel without a horse.”

We were not destined to reach Rajgunge without adventure, for that same evening we were thinking it time for a halt when the advance-guard galloped back to announce the coming of what seemed to be a regiment of native lancers.

The elephants were sent into the rear instantly, with a guard to ensure us against flight on the part of the mahouts; and, quick as thought, the guns were unlimbered and loaded, while we anxiously waited to see whether these were friends or enemies. But we were not kept long in doubt, for their confused, disorderly advance proved that they were without English officers, and they came on at a gallop, evidently in chase of our advance-guard, their lance-points glittering as they were brought down to the charge, the dust in front raised by our men partly hiding us till they were well within range, and one shot would have torn through their line and littered the dusty road with struggling men and horses.

But the word was not given, for no sooner did the front men grasp the peril into which they were galloping, than they raised a loud yell of warning, wheeled off to right and left, wheeled again, and scattered in wild flight, leaving us to pursue our way in peace, for there was nothing to be gained by pursuit, a duty reserved for the light cavalry.

It was another warning, though, of the state of the country, this being evidently one of the native cavalry regiments which had mutinied, and, perhaps, slain their European officers, though of course we could not be sure; and to have fired upon them when they first advanced might have been a grievous error.

Chapter Twenty Four.

Bajgunge proved to be strongly occupied by the enemy, and after due reconnoitring, Brace felt that nothing could be done there, and determined to strike off across country for Arbagh, a town where one of the queen’s foot regiments was stationed, so as to form a junction with the infantry, and co-operate in holding the place, or marching with them to one of the larger towns, or to some place where help might be required.

Five days were taken up in hot, weary marches, but the men were all full of eagerness, and looking longingly forward to having a brush with the enemy.

We passed village after village, sometimes to be well received, at others meeting with heavy, sullen looks, which told too plainly of the disaffection spreading everywhere, and the knowledge in the country that an attempt was being made to throw off the English rule.

It was toward the evening of the fifth day that we suddenly came upon a party of dusty, weary-looking natives, who at a glance were seen not to be villagers, for they wore the aspect of being domestic servants, and, as we approached, they made no attempt to imitate the action of the villagers on our route by taking flight, but drew up on one side to let us pass.

Brace halted, and signed to Dost to approach and act as interpreter.

But there was no need, for one of the party, a venerable-looking, grey-headed man in a white turban, salaamed, and then waited with crossed arms to be questioned.

“Salaam, sahib,” he said humbly.

“Where are you from?” said Brace.

“Arbagh, sahib. You come too late.”

“Too late? What is their trouble, then?”

“Trouble, sahib? The mem sahibs, and the little children and their fathers—”

He did not finish, but groaned.

“Speak out. What is it?”

“All slain.”

“But there was a regiment there—a whole regiment of foot.”

“Yes, sahib; but they were called away to fight the budmashes, and the evildoers from the bazaar at Miapore; and when they had marched away the budmashes came. The sahibs strengthened one of the houses, and fought bravely for two days, but they were only few in number, and there was neither food nor water at last.”

“And then?”

The old man shook his head, and uttered a low groan.

“And the wretches who have done all this?” cried Brace.

“They are there, sahib, with two regiments who have risen up against their officers. It is not safe to go. The white sahibs have marched to Miapore, away yonder to the west.”

“And where are you going?” asked Brace, who looked suspiciously at the people behind their spokesman.

But they were unarmed, and carried no plunder. The words of the old man were evidently the truth, as he said—

“To be at peace, and away from those who rob and slay. To Rajgunge, sahib.”

“Turn back,” said Brace. “You are going to where there are worse troubles, man. Better follow us.”

There was a low moan from the little group, for Brace’s words filled them with consternation.

“But you will not go on to Arbagh, sahib?” said the old man, who seemed to have been the native butler to some family.

“Yes; to drive these wretches out,” was the reply; and the march was resumed. “Yes, we must drive these scoundrels out, Gil,” he said again. “We need have no compunction about firing now. Likely enough our friends the sowars may be there. They headed for the south. Now, if we could send a message on to Miapore.”

I turned round soon afterwards, and found that the weary, footsore party were tramping back with us, close to the elephants, apparently trusting in Brace’s power to protect them, and restore peace in the place that had been their home.

Dost came alongside soon after to tell me more of these people’s experience, for they had all been servants to the European residents at Arbagh. It was a terrible experience, but very similar to our own at Rajgunge. The English residents and officers had been in utter ignorance of the impending peril. They had heard rumours of troubles in connection with cartridges being issued to the men greased, so that they might pass more easily down the rifle barrels, the Mahommedan soldiers considering that they would be defiled by touching paper moistened with the fat of the pig; and the Hindus, jumping at the conclusion that the fat used was that of the cow—an animal held sacred in their religion; while, in all probability, the fat used would be prepared from neither of these animals, the whole being an excuse for the irruption in which Mahommedans and Brahmins made common cause.

“It has all been hatching for a long time, sahib,” Dost said to me; “and the men have been waiting for an excuse. You

English officers and gentlemen have known nothing; but the sepoys and sowars have been prepared."

"And you knew this?" I said sternly.

"I? No, sahib; not till after the men broke out. The soldiers had their message sent round to be prepared to rise, and slay every white man, woman, and child, to destroy all Nazarenes, and restore the great king again at Delhi."

"At Delhi?" I said. "Then there are troubles there too?"

"There are troubles all through the country by now, sahib. Of course they did not trust us, who were our lord's servants, and not fighting men. They said to themselves, these men have blood now like water; they live amongst the white people, and have defiled themselves by eating their food and drinking out of their vessels—they will go and betray us to their lords. We know nothing, sahib; but they, the men of the native regiments, had the lotus flower sent round to them."

"The lotus flower?" I said, wonderingly.

"Yes, sahib. It was a secret way of communication. A man came to a regiment bearing a lotus flower, and this was passed on from man to man right through the regiment, till the last had the blossom, and he had to take it to the next regiment."

"But what did it mean?" I asked.

"I can tell you no more, sahib. It was their secret sign. And then, after a time, the chupatties were sent round to the villages."

"Chupatties? The little cakes?"

"Yes, sahib, and that was a sign. A messenger went to the head man of a village, and gave him six little cakes of Indian corn. 'These are for you,' he said. 'You will make six more, and send them on to the next village.' This the head man did, and the cakes passed on from village to village, as a sign that the rising was to take place, and all were to be ready when the time came."

"But it seems so stupid," I said. "Why not have sent a messenger?"

"The cause was too great to risk anything. It was more mysterious to send like that. They knew what it meant; but if the collector or the police heard, and said, 'What is this?—ye are plotting against your lords;' they could reply, 'No, it is nothing; the head man of the next village has only sent me a few chupatties.' Who else would think it was a secret sign?"

I knew comparatively little about the people then, and the question seemed to me unanswerable.

I rode on, depressed and thoughtful, for a terrible idea had taken root in my breast. These people of Arbagh had been surprised, and, saving a few who had escaped, murdered without mercy, and with horrible indignities. Suppose there had been such a sudden rising at Nussoor, where my father's regiment was stationed, what of my mother and my sister Grace?

A cold perspiration broke out all over me, and a mist rose before my eyes, through which the horrors that had taken place at Arbagh rose out, at first dimly, and then clearer and clearer; but with those I loved as victims, and I was shuddering with horror, and so wrapped up in my own thoughts, that I did not notice that Brace had ridden up alongside, and he had gripped my arm before I knew he was there.

"Why, Gil, lad," he said sharply, "what is it? The sun? Come, I can't afford to have you ill."

"Ill?" I gasped. "No, I'm not ill."

"Then why do you look so strange?"

I made an effort to recover myself, and told him as calmly as I could all that Dost had said to me.

"Yes," he said, after hearing me patiently to the end, "the man is honest enough; and there must have been some such mystic message sent round. These people are believers in symbolism and parable. It is bad news, Gil, and I am afraid too true. The rebellion is widespread; but what of that? We must put it down. England is not going to have her great conquests wrenched from her hands like this."

"Put it down?" I faltered.

"Yes, man. If you and I and a trumpeter could do such a thing as we did at a hint from our brave sergeant yonder, don't you think that the many regiments of Englishmen here in India, with all our magnificent troops of horse artillery, moved by the combined brain-power of our most gallant officers, will be able to restore order through the country?"

"Yes, I suppose so," I said, but in an unconvinced tone of voice.

"You are getting hungry, Gil, my lad," he said merrily. "You will not be depressed like this when we have halted at Arbagh, scattered those dogs, and had a good meal. For we must fight first," he cried fiercely. "Gil," he said, sinking his voice, "I was never meant for a soldier—this blood-shedding is abhorrent to me. I shrink from using my sword; but since I have heard the horrors these wretches are perpetrating—slaying English ladies, murdering sweet innocent children, my nerves thrill as I grasp my blade, and I feel as if I would gladly aim every gun, and send the grape and

canister hurtling amongst the hounds—no, it is an insult to a dog to call them so—these savage, bloodthirsty tigers. Come, lad, you must set aside compunction, and be ready to strike—for you can."

"You do not understand me," I said sadly.

"Oh yes, I think I do, Gil. I have studied you pretty well. You were thinking that we shall be beaten, after listening to Dost's account of the rising at this town. Ah, if I had only known of this when we met that regiment of sowars! Why, Gil, they *must* be the scoundrels who murdered their European officers here."

"I'm afraid so," I said.

"Then we must strike, and strike hard now, Gil. I am not unmerciful, but for the sake of home, and our English kindred, we must be stern as well as just. Come, you are better already."

"No," I said gloomily, "I am horribly troubled."

"About what?"

"Nussoor."

"Ah! where your father's regiment is stationed?"

"Yes. My mother and sister are there. Oh, Brace, if my father has been surprised as these people were here, and—"

I stopped short—the words choked me.

"My dear Gil!" cried Brace, gently, "I see now. Yes; such thoughts are enough to chill any one. I had not thought of them. But come, come; we have enough to do to fight with real troubles. You must not build up imaginary ones. Your father is a good soldier, I have heard, and his regiment is noted for its discipline. Let us trust that he has not been surprised, but had warnings of the trouble to come, and has placed your mother and sister and the other ladies of his station in safety."

"Thank you," I said quietly, for his words were comforting; and I knew that my trouble was imaginary.

"Hah, that's better!" he cried. "Come, we must be getting near the town."

We were passing through a wooded part of the country now, the road being cut in several places through patches of forest; and scouts and flankers were sent out to make sure against surprise, as we were getting so near the enemy's lair.

Ten minutes later there was an alarm in front, shouts and the clashing of swords, and in a wonderfully short time a couple of guns were unlimbered and ready for action, while Haynes was sent forward to support our men as they were out of sight beyond the trees, and did not return.

But before Haynes had gone far, he met them coming back, to report that they had surprised a picket of half a dozen sowars who were watching our road.

"And you let them gallop off," cried Brace, angrily, "to alarm their comrades?"

"No, sir," said the corporal, who was at the head of the advance; "we went at 'em directly."

"How many got back?"

"None on 'em, sir."

"Anybody hurt?"

"No, sir. Scratch or two on the horses' heads and necks; that's all."

The orders were given to limber up again, and we advanced once more, as soon as the farriers had roughly seen to the injuries the horses had received; and as we went on, I caught a glimpse or two of the white uniforms and puggrees of the sowars in amongst the trees to right and left, the broken-down twigs and herbage showing where the running fight had taken place.

Brace reined up by one of the dead men.

"Why, Gil," he said, "this must be the same regiment as the one we met."

I was thinking the same, and said so.

"The scoundrels! If we could only surprise them. We are so weak in numbers, I hardly dare leave my guns; otherwise, with a troop of our lads to act as cavalry, I could pretty well cut them up, and scatter the rest, so that they would not do much more mischief for months to come."

"Hush!" I whispered, as I caught his arm. "What's that?"

"The first gun bumping over bad ground and rattling."

"No; it's firing," I whispered, though the sound must have been a mile away.

“Yes; you are right. What is going on now? some fresh outrage?”

Our pace was increased, and orders given to the advance-guard to increase their distance ahead.

The firing grew fiercer, and a halt was called, the guns took up position, and we waited full of anxiety for news from the scouts sent out.

We had not long to wait in our uncertainty, for one of our men galloped back with the information that the firing was on this side of the town, and, directly after, a second man dashed up with the news that a regiment of cavalry in white coats was in full retreat toward us.

“Then they are being driven out by the foot regiment, which must have returned. Stand fast, my lads, if they charge us; but I doubt whether they will come right up to the guns.”

A few exciting minutes passed, and then, as the running, trampling noise of a large body of horse came nearer, Brace rode from gun to gun, giving his order that no shot should be fired till he was certain these were not friends, and then the fire was to be concentrated on the advancing column.

The sun had gone down, and night was coming on fast, but as the head of the regiment came into sight, the firing having ceased beyond them, Brace’s glass satisfied him as to whom these were.

“The sowar regiment!” he cried. “Fire!”

One after the other rapidly the six guns thundered forth a terrible reception, just as, in fairly good order, the regiment in full retreat came on at a gallop, and in perfect ignorance of our proximity.

It was the work of a moment; I saw the white column galloping toward us looking dim and strange, like some strange body rushing along beneath a cloud of dust; then it was rent and torn and thrown into confusion, as round shot and canister hurtled through the rank; and at the sixth report the road was littered with struggling horses, and then the fields on either side dotted with galloping fugitives, and the sowar regiment that had been tearing across the road towards us was non-existent.

Six shots; no more. By the time another one had reloaded, there were only flying individuals to aim at as they galloped over the plain, and Brace looked in vain for a rallying point, and the gathering together of a troop at which a round shot could be aimed.

“*Sauve qui peut*!” cried Brace, as orders were given for a fresh advance. “We cannot pursue them. Now forward for the town.”

“Some one coming,” I said, as the galloping of a horse was heard.

“Their last man,” said Brace. “Open out, my lads, and capture him.”

The horseman came on at a swinging gallop, and made straight for us, checking his charger as he drew near, and we saw that the face of the rider was white.

“Where’s your officer?” he cried hoarsely, as he reined up, with his sword hanging by the knot from his wrist.

“Here,” replied Brace.

“Thank God!” cried the new-comer. “I’m Mason—Captain Mason, 04th Highlanders. You fired on those bloodthirsty scoundrels.”

“And scattered the regiment. I could do no more.”

“Ah, if you could have shot them to a man! We were called away to help at Miapore, where a sepoy regiment mutinied. It was a long march, and as soon as we had gone—the European officers of that cursed regiment answering for their men’s fidelity—they rose and murdered the poor fellows who trusted them, and then—”

He stopped there and groaned.

“My wife—her sister—two of my little children—the whole of the English residents, and— Oh, why don’t you pursue? Hah!”

“Take care!” I roared, as I snatched sword from sheath, pistol from holster, and fired, for, from out of the gathering darkness, a dozen of the sowars, men who had recovered their horses, or those of slain men, dashed down upon us like a whirlwind right for where Brace stood talking to the Highland officer.

As I fired into the thick of them, I saw one man throw up his sword, but I also saw a fierce-looking savage charge right at Brace, who was unprepared; the sowar’s sword was raised, and he made a tremendous cut at our captain, one which must have ended his career; but, quick with the quickness begotten by practice and peril, our new friend caught and raised the point of his sword; and in the act of delivering his cut, the man was literally transfixed. He fell back over the cantrel of his saddle, and as his horse dashed on, he was dragged out of the saddle by Captain Mason’s jerk to withdraw his sword.

I saw all this, and almost at the same moment was conscious of a crushing blow on the head, accompanied by a terrible shock, and then I was looking stupidly at the doctor, who was kneeling by me in the road.

“Here, what is it?” I cried angrily. “Who was it rode me down? Is my horse hurt?”

“Never mind your horse, Gil. Speak, lad. Doctor. His head?”

“Oh, his head’s right enough,” said the doctor, as I struggled into a sitting position, and felt very sick and giddy. “I say, Vincent, my lad, you will have to send the accoutrement-maker a testimonial. Here’s a tremendous dint in your helmet, but it has saved your life.”

“Then he isn’t killed, sir?” cried a familiar voice.

“No, my lad; only a bit stunned,” said the doctor.

“Hooray!” rose in a tremendous cheer, in which every man in the troop seemed to join.

“Nice to be a favourite,” I heard Haynes say.

“But, look here,” I cried in an irritated way, “I don’t quite understand it. My head’s all—I— Why, some one must have knocked me down. Did I pitch on to my helmet, then?”

“My dear boy, you were struck down by a sowar, and your helmet saved your life.”

“The savage brute!” I cried pettishly. “It couldn’t have been the one who rode at you, because— Yes, I remember. Then the man who rode at me got off free.”

“Humph!” ejaculated the doctor, turning round and looking off to our right.

I followed his eyes, and saw a white figure lying face downward among some green corn.

“Yes,” said the doctor, “that is he; and you may thank Haynes for saving your life.”

“Oh, nonsense!” cried my brother-officer hastily. “We can’t be talking about that sort of thing; it’s nonsense. I only did what any one else would have done. Steady there, my lads. Silence in the ranks.”

The word was given to advance directly after, and in a few minutes there was a burst of cheers from on in front, where a skirmishing party of Captain Mason’s regiment had come upon our advance-guard.

This was answered by our troop, and directly after the officers were eagerly talking together as we marched into the outskirts of the little town, and soon after were congratulating ourselves on the excellent quarters we had found, the foot regiment being most eager in showing us where we could obtain provisions, and the necessaries for a restful night.

About an hour after, when the sentinels and outposts had been visited, and the round made of the horses, I was one of a party in one of the ruined rooms of the residency, where the officers were debating what steps should be taken at daylight the next morning, and matters were still in doubt as to whether we should march east or west when a prisoner was brought in. This was a shivering non-combatant, who eagerly gave every information he knew about the movements of the rebels, and was able to inform us, by way of buying his own life, as he thought, that the sowars were going to join the rajah, Ny Deen, the next morning, when their arrangements were suddenly upset by the return of the foot regiment which, on finding out that it had been deluded, came back by a forced march, but too late to save those at the station.

“Then the relics of the regiment will still seek to join this revolted rajah,” said the colonel of the foot regiment. “But his power has been broken up,” said Brace. “We put him to flight.”

“They’ll try to join him, all the same,” cried the colonel.

“The only hope of these men,” he continued, “is in co-operation. Depend upon it, the scoundrels will move west, and I say we ought to follow. Our march must be on Badhpore, and from thence in the direction of Nussoor. What do you say?”

“I say,” cried Brace, “that we are weak without infantry, and you are feeble without guns. It is a question of expediency, sir, and our force may prove to be the nucleus of a little army strong enough to sweep the mutineers from the land.”

Chapter Twenty Five.

A thrill ran through me at the colonel’s mention of Nussoor, and I listened eagerly to Brace’s reply, for I had felt in a dread lest he should oppose the plan of marching on that city, though I was obliged to own that it was quite possible that my father’s regiment might have left there in these disturbed times, and of course he would have placed my mother and sister where they would be safe.

After a little discussion, it was decided that we should stay twenty-four hours where we were, to recruit the men and horses, for, though the men all declared their readiness to go on at once, the infantry had had a very severe forced march or two, and required rest.

It was a terrible experience—a walk or two I had about the town with Brace during that halt, one which was utilised for collecting an ample supply of provisions and recruiting followers for our little camp, and I remember asking Brace whether he thought it wise to trust the natives.

“Yes and no, Gil,” he said. “I am not blind; I can see that every one here in this place humbles himself to the dust before us as the conquerors, and is ready to obey our slightest command; but, if we met with a reverse, they would rise and trample on us to a man, and glory in murdering such a set of unclean, infidel dogs as we are. But it is a necessity, my lad. We want our lads to fight, and they must be always ready for action. We cannot have them exhausted in this terrible climate, carrying loads, cutting grass for the horses, foraging for the elephants, and cooking. We must have hewers of wood and drawers of water, my dear boy, and keep a strict watch over these modern children of Gibeon. We cannot trust them, but we must have their services.”

“Yes, I see,” I replied.

“And there is this advantage: we are journeying through a strange country, which they know. We must eat, so must they. We should not be able to forage; they are, and in finding food for themselves they are compelled to find it for us. No, we cannot trust them. Look here. For aught we know, the men who are bowing down before us, and calling us sahibs, had a hand in this.”

We had reached a large bungalow, which, we afterwards learned, had been the commissioner’s house, and as I went with my companion from room to room, which at one time must have been furnished in exquisite taste, there were traces of the wanton destruction of a savage mob. Furniture had been smashed, the floor was littered with the remains of mirrors and ornaments; curtains and carpets were torn to shreds, and everything that could be battered and destroyed was in pieces.

It was so in the next room, and we were about to pass on to others, with the picture rising to my mind of what this place must have been before the rising, when Brace suddenly stepped before me, swung me round hastily, and gave me a push.

“Here, let’s get out of the miserable place, Gil,” he said hastily.

“You were too late,” I said. “I saw it the same moment. It’s of no use; I may as well get accustomed to such things, even if I am a mere boy.”

For, in one corner of the once handsome room, there were spots and splashes on the white wall, and terrible stains on the floor. The plaster of the sides, too, was scarred and dotted with bullet holes, and we could grasp the terrible fact that some one, probably more than one, had made a desperate defence in that corner, for there was a sword, broken in two pieces, lying behind a shattered piano, in whose woodwork were dozens of cuts, such as might have been given by savage men trying to get at those behind who had made it their breastwork; and as I saw all this, I could not refrain from going close—Brace making no opposition now—to see other terrible traces of the desperate fight of which this place must have been the scene.

One of the first things I saw behind the broken piano was a white handkerchief, horribly stained. It had been apparently hastily folded into a bandage, and tied round some one’s head, the knots being still there, and the kerchief lying on the floor, forming a rough circle. Close by were pieces of a woman’s dress, one fragment being a sleeve, evidently torn off in a desperate struggle. But the most horrible traces were those which told in simple language the result of the desperate defence that must have taken place; for, at the far end of the piano, where it stood about three feet from the wall, there lay a double rifle, broken off at the stock, a bayonet snapped at the socket, and between them, marks which showed only too plainly that the defenders of that corner of the room had been dragged out by the feet, and out through a farther door.

“Come away, Gil,” said Brace, hoarsely; “it only makes me feel mad against these wretches; and at a time when, with the work I have in hand, I want to be calm and cool as a judge.”

At that moment there was a furious roar from somewhere at the back of the house, and Brace’s hand went to his sword on the instant, mine naturally following suit.

“Draw, lad!” he cried. “We had no business to come without an escort. Keep close to me.”

But a second burst of shouting reassured us. No one but Englishmen could raise an indignant cry such as we heard.

“What does it mean?” I said, as we hurried out through the door, out of which the poor creatures who had defended themselves had been dragged, and we came directly upon about a dozen of our men, with some of the foot regiment.

“This way, sir—this way!” cried one of the men, who was in a terrible state of excitement; and unable to grasp more than that the men had been foraging about, and had made some discovery, they hurried us on to what must have been a kind of summer-house in a pleasant garden with a goldfish tank, and various other proofs of the taste of the late occupants of the place.

In this tank were various objects, apparently thrown in by the fierce mob which had plundered the house; while, as we drew near, there was just before us a heap of furniture and household goods, which had been piled up in front of the summer-house entrance, and fired, evidently to blaze furiously for a time, and with the object of burning down the summer-house as well.

A number of the half-burnt and charred things had been dragged away by the soldiers so as to clear the doorway, prompted, no doubt, by curiosity to see what was in the place the mob had tried to burn down; and, as we neared the spot, and the men, who were half mad with excitement, made way for us to look in, I felt for the moment as if turned to stone, and then the tears started to my eyes, weak as it may sound to say so, and formed a veil which shut out the horrors of the scene before me.

Shall I describe it? Yes; from no morbid wish to dwell upon the frightful scenes which, alas! grew too common, but as

some palliation of the acts of our men, against whom charges were plentiful about their want of mercy.

Twelve poor creatures lay there, but only two were men in the prime of life, and who, hacked almost to pieces, had died bravely in the defence of their wives, sisters, and the helpless children, who lay in a heap with them—nine white women and children; and, holding it tightly to her breast even in death, a black woman, the faithful ayah or nurse of the infant she held, in protecting and trying to save which she had died.

I will try to describe no more, save that the funeral pyre, which the murderers had raised to hide their crime, had not reached them, not a garment being singed.

The men stood back, panting as if after a hard run, watching us now, as if to see what effect it would have upon us, and the silence after their fierce oaths and shouting was terrible.

As we drew back, one of our corporals cried fiercely—

“We don’t want no more rest, sir. Take us on at once.”

“Oh,” shouted another, “how can we hold our hands after this, sir?”

“Ay,” cried an Irish gunner, who was one of the party, “we were ready to foight the mutineers as min again min; but it isn’t min, lads—it’s savage bastes. And, hurrah! boys, come and take a last look of the poor darlins, to harden your hearts!”

“Halt!” cried Brace, sternly. “Joliffe,—Brian, advance; draw! Stand sentry at this door. No one is to profane the resting-place of our dead. Go back, my lads; you want no such sight to nerve your arms for the work we have to do.”

The men uttered a low murmur of acquiescence, and, without orders, fell in and marched behind us to the spot we had made our head-quarters. Here there was a short consultation between the officers, and directly a party of men was marched out to the foot of a clump of trees, where one great shallow grave was dug, and an hour afterwards, every man under arms, and the infantry lining the road to keep back the crowd of natives gathered from all parts of the town, the remains of the unfortunate people were borne, reverently draped, on the guns and tumbrils of our troop, to the open grave, laid therein carefully, the colonel said a short prayer, a volley was fired, the last resting-place of the two civil officials and their families was filled in, and a cross carved upon the nearest tree.

Long before the little ceremony was over, I saw that the natives, of whom a great crowd had collected, were beginning to steal away, till scarcely a soul was left; but I thought very little of this, for supposing that their curiosity was satisfied, it did not appear strange to me that they should go back to their homes. Perhaps, I thought, they may think we shall take vengeance upon them.

But this fact suddenly took Brace’s attention, just as the final duties were being paid to the dead; and, turning sharply to the colonel of the foot regiment, he said sharply—

“The people are drawing off; there must be some reason.”

Hardly had he spoken, when a shot was fired at a distance, followed by another and another; and in an instant our men sprang to their places, while half a mile down the road we could see the infantry, which had lined the sides, running back as hard as they could, men from each flank joining them, and the road growing full of a retreating detachment, toward which a couple of officers ran, giving orders as they went, with the result that the men nearer to us fell in and took position, line behind line, across the road, while those retreating in the extreme distance suddenly halted in the same formation.

The next minute the cause was evident, for a strong body of mounted men dashed into sight far down the road, and tore along as if to ride over the little line of men, and then sweep the place.

But their shouting and yelling did not scare the men in the least. They stood firm, waiting in double line, till the sowars were close upon them, and then delivered a sharp volley, the front rank going down on one knee directly, with their bayonets sloping upward, while the rear rank formed a second bristling line of sharp points on a level with their shoulders.

We had a glimpse of this as the smoke rose, and, to use the familiar expression, my heart was in my mouth, as I strained my eyes to pierce the cloud, expecting to see the poor fellows who kept the road ridden over, and the sowars come tearing on to where the next line was now drawn up a hundred and fifty yards nearer.

But as the smoke lifted, to my great delight I saw the sowars all in confusion, and cantering away, while the little line of infantry was doubling back towards their supporting line, through which they passed, and formed up again nearer to us.

There was another yelling, and a fresh body of sowars came tearing down the road, but only to be sent to the rightabout in the same way, for the volley they received emptied several saddles, and they dared not face the double line of bayonets, but turned and cantered back.

Then the same evolution was gone through again by the line of foot, and this was repeated twice with the effect of drawing in the straggling force, till the foot regiment was condensed, and our position strengthened.

“I don’t think much of their charging,” I said to Brace. “Why, our men wouldn’t have turned back like that. We should have gone through them, guns and all.”

Brace smiled, as we stood close beside a couple of our pieces, all there was room for in that narrow road, waiting for

an opportunity to bring them into action, which, so far, we had been unable to do for fear of injuring our own men. Two of our guns were planted further back, facing in the other direction, in case of an attack in our rear, while, right and left, the men of the foot regiment held the houses which lined the road.

For a few minutes after the repulse of the last charge by the sowars, the enemy made no sign, and a quick consultation was held between the colonel of the foot regiment and Brace, in which it was decided to advance at once further into the town to where we had made our head-quarters, and where our provisions and ammunition were stored, so as to occupy that much stronger position, in case the enemy was in force, as only a small guard had been left. For that was a good central position selected for its opportunities for defence, and an advance was made at once.

We only had about a quarter of a mile to go, and as the men sent in front were about half-way along the road toward where we should have to turn off at right angles, we suddenly became aware of the advance of a stronger body of cavalry, and this time the guns were brought into action, a couple of shots checking their advance, and giving us time to reach the open square, and the large buildings which we had occupied for quarters in conjunction with the foot regiment.

The men left as baggage-guard over the stores and elephants gave a loud cheer as we trotted into the square with the guns, the foot regiment following at the double, to occupy the roof and windows of the big buildings, while our guns were planted so as to command the approaches, outposts being placed all round.

We were none too soon, for hardly had the position been occupied, than from the outposts and from the top of the building we had reports of the enemy’s approach from the west, a second regiment of native cavalry being in advance, while a cloud of dust gradually resolved itself into quite a little army of native infantry, followed by a huge crowd of camp-followers with horses, donkeys, elephants, and camels.

The colonel was on the roof, making good use of his glass, and he shouted down to where Brace was standing with the two reserve guns—

“Lucky we got back,” he said. “Their fighting men must be about three or four thousand strong.”

In spite of their numbers, the inclination was to advance at once and attack them, before they had time to get in order or into a strong position, Brace being naturally strongly in favour of this course, his branch of the service being, of course, adapted for field duty; but the colonel of the foot regiment was more cautious. His men were, opposed to so great a force, strongest behind walls defending such a building as that they occupied, and Brace had to give way. And there we waited, while the mutineers marched into the place. From where I was stationed with two of the guns I had an uninterrupted view before me, for about half a mile, of the scouting parties, mounted and on foot, which came to spy out our position, some of them going so far as to begin firing, the balls stirring up the dust in front of us, and the practice getting warmer, till one of the balls struck and glanced off from the gun nearest to me, while the carriage was struck directly after, the sound being like a sharp rap.

But about half a dozen pretty good marksmen replied from our side, and the firing was soon silenced.

After this a knot of sowars rode down into sight from time to time, offering our men a tempting mark for a discharge of grape, but there was no firing, for such shots could do no good, and they were reserved for a time when they could have a demoralising and scattering effect upon some attacking party.

All at once, as I stood there, hot and weary in the scorching sun, I saw another party ride up reconnoitring, one evidently composed of the leaders of the little army that was now closing us in, for scouts had brought us word how the enemy had occupied positions all around.

They were evidently examining us carefully; and I could not help admiring the daring of the well-mounted, gaily-dressed men who had halted about a couple of hundred yards away, right in front of our guns, which, at a word, would have belched forth a shower of grape.

There was not much for them to see, only the gunners with their linstocks, and the heads of the support of infantry, sheltering for the most part in the houses on either side of the road, the limbers and horses of each gun, and those of the gunners being back in an opening a few yards away, and completely hidden from the party in front.

And as I watched them, I could not help thinking that a clever officer who was not sparing of his men, might easily take our guns, for if one party made a dash at them, and drew our fire, a reserve party might dash in, and sabre the gunners before they had time to reload.

Just then I was conscious of a curious movement among our men, eyes being turned to me appealingly, while every gunner was on the *qui vive*, and I could see that at a word the guns would be rapidly discharged.

But I had no orders to commence hostilities, unless an attack was made, and I stood as eager as the men, watching the scouting party, as there was a sudden movement among them. They opened out, and one whom I had not before seen rode through them quite to the front, and just then a voice behind me whispered—

“Look, Gil! Do you see?”

Yes, I had seen; and I had been so taken up by the sight that I had not heard Brace come up to the guns.

“I could fetch that dandy chap down, and a dozen more,” I heard a man whisper.

“Silence there,” said Brace, sternly. Then to me, “Why, Gil, I thought he must be miles and miles away from here.”

“Then it is Ny Deen,” I said excitedly. “I thought I must be wrong.”

“Yes, it is he,” replied Brace. “And I feel as if I ought to fire, and sweep the whole gang away; but it seems such a cowardly thing to do.”

The temptation to fire was removed directly after, for the party drew back and disappeared, while all was still in the blazing sunshine, saving a dull humming sound of many voices, telling that the little town was densely thronged by the new-comers. And once more Brace drew back as if to go, but stopped short, for the colonel and major of the foot regiment appeared, and Brace signed to me to come to his side.

“I think I should have given him the two charges,” the colonel was saying as I came up; and then, soon after, “Well, perhaps you are right.”

“I am sure I am,” Brace said eagerly. “If my men were a company or two of infantry like your own, I should say, by all means let us strengthen the residency, and after getting together all the provisions we could, stand fast till more help came; but with my guns and horses cooped up here in these streets, I am almost useless. We can fire a *few* times, and then, if the enemy makes a bold dash, there will be a short struggle, and they must capture the guns again. You see, my horses are in the way here, where there is no room to manoeuvre.”

“Yes; that is quite right. But we might get them in the compound, and turn your guns into pieces for our little fort.”

“Yes,” said Brace; “and how are you going to feed the poor beasts when you have them in the compound? There is no begging the question, sir; I can make my troop invaluable, and act as cavalry as well, out in the open; but here we cannot develop our strength.”

“He’s quite right,” said the major.

“Then what would you propose?” said the colonel.

“We have abundance of ammunition, and our waggons and elephants. Moving out as soon as it is dark.”

“They will not let us move; and it would be murderous for my poor lads to carry on a hand-to-hand fight in these narrow lanes.”

“More murderous to be shut up in that residency, to be attacked day after day by a force that will always be increasing, while we grow weaker.”

“Unless help comes.—But you would move out?”

“Yes.”

“And what then? Retreat and leave these scoundrels in possession?”

“No; they will think we are retreating, and follow us. We can keep on retiring till you have got into a good position, when I can literally mow them down from a distance.”

“Unless their cavalry take your guns.”

“I am not afraid of that, sir,” said Brace, with a laugh.

“And they will be six or seven to one,” said the colonel.

“The odds were greater at Plassy,” said Brace, quietly. “Depend upon it, if we get them out on fair ground—which we will—they will receive a tremendous check.”

“What do you say?” said the colonel, turning to his brother-officer, the major.

“I side with Captain Brace, decidedly. If we shut ourselves up, we are crippling a dashing troop of artillery; and, worse still, letting the scoundrels think they are our masters. That they must never think. No: retreat, but as a ruse. We are their masters still, and we will show them we are.”

“Yes,” said the colonel, firmly. “I shrink from it, as being a very grave responsibility, weak as we are; but I quite agree with you both. We shall be stronger in the field; and if we are not attacked before night, we will march out.”

“Why wait for the darkness, and the confusion it will cause?” said Brace. “I was of the opinion that we might retreat under cover of the darkness, but I think now it would be best to dash out and give battle at once.”

“Yes,” said the colonel, drily; “that’s easy enough for you and your troop. You can rattle out at full gallop; but we have got to march, and fight our way step by step.”

“Exactly. But I can take up a position at once and cover you; and I will.”

The colonel bowed and stood frowning and thoughtful for a few moments. Then I saw his face clear, and he held out his hand.

“It is good advice,” he said; “and I shall look for your co-operation to its fullest extent. Ah! what’s this?”

For at that moment a bugle rang out; and, as I turned, I saw a sowar officer advancing with a trumpeter, and one of his men beside him, bearing a white flag on his lance, while several followers rode behind.

Chapter Twenty Six.

Brace and the infantry officers passed between the guns, and took a few steps forward to meet the bearer of the flag of truce, who came forward alone and saluted them, but with a haughty, contemptuous look.

“Well, sir,” said the colonel, “have you a despatch or message?”

As the colonel spoke, I saw that a larger party of cavalry had collected behind the little group which accompanied the officer, and one of the infantry men at a window above my head whispered down to me that there were more behind.

This put me on the watch; and I spoke to my men not to make the slightest movement, but to be ready.

All this was almost momentary, and the next instant, as I kept a keen eye on the enemy, I was listening to the sowar officer speaking.

“His Highness the Maharajah Ny Deen, who has with him now an army, many as the sands of the holy river, surrounding you on all sides, bids you lay down your arms and surrender.”

“Yes; and what then?”

“His highness will treat you as prisoners, but kindly; and your lives will be spared. But you must lay down your arms at once, and march out.”

“For his bloodthirsty band of cut-throats to fall upon us, and treat us as they do all unarmed men.”

“His Highness the Maharajah gives you his word that your lives will be spared.”

“And if we refuse to surrender, what then?”

“Your bodies will be given to the crows and vultures,” said the officer. “For by sundown nothing of you will be left alive.”

“Look here, sir,” said the colonel; “have you ever read the Bible?”

“No; I read the Koran,” said the native officer, whose haughty, overbearing way seemed to be humbled before the stern Englishman who addressed him.

“Read in the Bible, too, and you will find there about how one Rabshakeh came summoning a people to surrender. He boasted, and so do you.”

“Do you surrender?” said the officer, with an attempt to resume his haughty tone of supremacy.

“No. Go and tell your mutinous master that we are ready to meet and punish him and his treacherous following of traitors, who are false to the queen they swore to serve. Tell him that if he will lay down his arms, and surrender to her Majesty’s and the great Company’s troops, he will have justice done, and to send no more messages here. They are insults to honourable gentlemen and their followers.”

“Then you refuse his highness’s mercy?” said the officer, haughtily.

“Back, sir, and deliver your message,” cried the colonel; “and tell his highness that if he dares to send any of his insolent mutinous scoundrels here again, I shall fire upon them. A flag of truce is not to protect traitors.”

The man scowled, and seemed to writhe at the contemptuous manner in which he had been treated. Then, in obedience to long habit, he saluted and rode back with his men.

“Yes, we must act at once,” said the colonel; “and take the initiative.”

“In, quick!” I shouted, as I caught sight of a movement in front; and so cleverly and quickly was the manoeuvre carried out, that as the three officers passed between the guns, a column of mounted men came tearing along the street.

But I was ready, and one gun thundered out its defiance, the shot sending the column into confusion; but they dashed on, and were within forty yards of us when the second gun bellowed with such dire effect that the foremost men turned and fled, throwing those who still advanced into confusion, and giving our men time to reload; while the infantry commenced firing from the windows on either side, and a company waiting a hundred yards away in reserve came up at the double, and, with fixed bayonets, took up their position, ready to protect the guns.

It was my first responsible piece of action, in charge of the guns alone, and as I saw the dire havoc my orders had caused, a curious sickening sensation attacked me, and for a few moments all seemed dim.

Just then our Irish gunner Brian exclaimed, forgetful of discipline in his excitement—

“Look at that now! Murther! what would my poor ould mother say, if she saw what I’ve done?”

He had fired the second gun, and he stood scratching his ear with a curiously perplexed look on his droll countenance. Then he brightened up, and shook his head at the poor wretches who were crawling from among the injured horses to get into shelter of the houses to right and left.

“Bedad!” he cried, fiercely, “I don’t moind a bit. Come on, and I’ll do it again. I’d forgotten about the summer-house and the fire.”

“’Tention!”

“Yis, sor. I beg pardon. It was me excitement.”

But the enemy did not come on again; the lesson had been too terrible, and we all stood there, hot with excitement and fretting against the inaction; while preparations were being rapidly made behind us for evacuating the residency, the infantry now manned the roof, keeping down observations by a shot or two now and then at any of the enemy who appeared at the windows of the houses near.

But I knew that before long they must know of our intention to retreat, and I stood there with my men on the strain, and watching the people who came to the help of the wounded and carried them away.

“Oh, murther!” muttered Brian, at last, as if his tongue would not rest without speaking; “if Oi were a fut-artilleryman, I should desart. I couldn’t stand much of this.”

“Will you be silent, sir!” I cried sternly.

“Sure, sor, it isn’t me; it’s me tongue, bad luck to it. But, beggin’ your hanner’s pardon, would ye order one of the naygers to bring round a dhrink o’ wather.”

I ordered a bucketful to be fetched, for we were all suffering from thirst and from the unnecessary heat produced by our clothes, which, like those provided for the British soldier, were utterly unsuited for our work, everything being sacrificed for show.

The men drank the cool water with avidity, Brian looking at me with twinkling eyes as he helped himself to a second pannikin.

“Talk about yer port wines and champagnes, sor,” he said; “there’s ownly two things fit to dhrink, and one’s whiskey, and the other’s wather.”

“Why, you said the other day there was nothing like *tay*,” cried one of the men.

“Sure an’ I did, for ould women,” retorted Brian; “but even they put a dhrop o’ whiskey in it sometimes.”

“Silence!” I cried, very much against my will; and the men were back in their places as stiff as if on parade, till I heard orders given. There was the clattering of hoofs; the horses came up, the guns were hooked on to the limbers, and the next minute we were mounted, leaving the company of foot holding the street.

I was not long kept in doubt as to the arrangements, for, as we were moved into the square, there was the rest of our troop with the four guns, and I saw that the ammunition and baggage-waggons, water-tubs, and provender, were, along with the elephants, ready to come out with the foot regiment, leaving us free to dash out and clear the way, acting as cavalry or artillery as the need arose.

When all was quite ready, it had been arranged that we should make for the open country down the street which Haynes had been holding, and where a company of foot were now stationed to replace the two guns.

As I glanced up at the residency, I could see that about half a dozen soldiers were still on the roof, otherwise the place was completely evacuated, and the men waiting eagerly for the advance.

Then I heard the final arrangements made with the colonel, who was to put his column in motion directly, and follow us with the elephants and waggons, it being left to Brace to occupy the best position he could.

At this time a shot or two from a distance was being aimed by the enemy’s matchlock men, at the sentries on the residency roof, but no harm was done, and, saving the dull distant hum of many people swarming in the town, all was so still that our evacuation of the place promised to be a very simple and easy affair.

And there we sat watching the various companies of the foot regiment ranged up; that occupying the street Haynes had held being the advance; that by us was the main body and baggage-guard; whilst the company who had been with us was to form the rear.

Then orders were given, and a message brought back that the road we were to take seemed clear; and we waited a few minutes more, while Brace sent out an advance-guard of three of our mounted men, to go on by the infantry picket straight for the plain.

These were anxious moments. There was a pause, and then we waited for the order to advance.

How vividly it all comes back; the dazzling sunshine flashing from arms and accoutrements; the stern, sun-browned, determined faces of the men; and, with their shadows looking dwarfed and strange, there were the three huge elephants nodding their heads and swinging them from side to side, as they writhed and curled their trunks, lifting first one foot and then the other, impatient to be on the move.

At last the word was given, and as the foot regiment stepped out toward the opening in the main street, along which we were to pass, our advance was on the way, in a quick walk, which, as we entered the street held by the foot company, which opened and stood back on either side to let us pass, became a trot with the horses’ hoofs clattering and the guns and limber wheels rattling loudly.

There was a disposition on the part of the men to give us a cheer as we passed, but a stern command stayed them; and on we went, feeling that we had, after all, an easy task to perform, for everything was so still.

I was with the two centre guns, and I glanced back to see that, as our last man passed, the company of foot marched after us. Then Brace gave a sharp order, the trumpet rang out, and we thundered on at a gallop, for he had seen the meaning of the silence; the enemy had either received a hint from one of the native followers, who must have deserted, or have divined our probable course of action, for suddenly men appeared on the tops of the houses on either side of the road, and began firing, while right in front a body of sepoys, followed by a squadron of horse, occupied the street from side turnings to block our way.

I expected to hear the halt called for the guns to be unlimbered, so as to clear the road before us, but Brace kept to the plans laid down for his guidance. Passing almost unscathed among the bullets which pattered around, we increased our pace, dashing straight at the natives in front with such a roar of horse hoof and wheel, accompanied by so fierce a cheer, that before we reached them the mutineers broke and fled into the shelter of the side streets, and we thundered by, our advance cutting up the stragglers who could not escape, and soon reaching the suburbs, and then the open plain. Here Brace halted upon a mound, from which there was a good view of the road by which we had come, while just behind was a dense tope or patch of forest that would give our infantry a tremendously strong position, and from which they were not easily to be dislodged by an enemy not provided with guns.

The fight had begun, for, as we unlimbered, we could see quite a mob of the enemy closing in from right and left to check the advance of the foot regiment, which they knew could only come on slowly, while probably they looked upon us as out of the engagement, having made good our retreat.

As we loaded, the steady rattle of musketry began to increase, telling us that our friends were having to fight their way, and ours was the task to help them, and to undeceive the enemy, whose ranks thickened, and about whom had hovered two large bodies of sowars, waiting their turn to attack as soon as the foot regiment began to file into the open.

“Now is our time,” said Brace, excitedly; and then, suddenly growing calm, “Don’t waste a shot, my lads. Good careful aim.”

There was a few moments’ pause while Brace examined the gathering groups with his glass, and gave us a few final instructions. Then the guns came into action with a steady, regular fire from right to left, shot following shot, so that at the second round the effect had been almost magical. One minute body after body of men were crowding up toward the road, the next they were scattering and seeking the shelter of the houses, while our attention was now directed toward the two columns of cavalry.

Meanwhile the rattle of the musketry came fiercer and louder, telling that our friends had not been checked, but were steadily advancing through a terrible fire; but I knew that the heavy boom of our guns must encourage them, and I looked on with a strange eagerness as my two guns were sponged and loaded, giving directions to the men for their next aims.

These were, as I have said, at the white squadron of native cavalry, the men whom our people had so carefully trained, with the result that their English officers were slain, and the native officers in command.

I could see for myself that there was very little of the guiding spirit of our generals at work, each commander of a regiment acting according to his own ideas, and I was thinking, young soldier as I was, that if I had had command, I should have sent forward one of the native regiments in skirmishing order to attack us while the two sowar regiments had been sent off right and left to try and cut us off, the result being, I thought, the almost certain routing and capture of our own troops.

But nothing of the kind was done; the officers in command of the cavalry sat watching the sepoy ranks being ploughed up by our grape and canister, till they scattered to shelter, and commenced a useless fire upon us, and then seemed utterly astounded as round shot after round shot plunged in among their squadrons, making terrible gaps, and throwing them into utter confusion.

But they closed up again as well as they could, and sat fast in spite of dozens of the men taking fright and galloping off with riderless horses over the plain; but half a dozen more shots scattered them again, and now for the first time the idea seemed to enter the brains of their leaders that they must act in concert, and after a trooper had dashed across the road from one side to the other, the new columns advanced, and we directed our fire right at the thick masses in which they were formed.

To my mind we had time for one shot, and then I expected the call to limber up and gallop off, but it did not come; and as we loaded again, then, with a roar like that of a tempest, the sowars came on till, as we fired again, we could see their gleaming eyes and the savage rage and hate in their countenances.

I knew that we should have no time to retreat after those six shots, and felt that in a few seconds I should be in the midst of a terrible *mêlée*.

But our men fired grape and canister now, and as gun after gun sent out its puff of smoke, a perfect tempest of bullets surged through the columns, while as I sat fast, panting and awaiting their charge, I found that Brace knew the enemy better than I, for as the shot tore among them they broke off to right and left, scattering as they went back toward the spots from which they had started on their desperate charge, leaving scores of their men about upon the plain.

“Risky,” said Brace to me, as the men ceased firing, and waited for fresh orders; “but I knew our lads would be steady, and that the scoundrels would never hold together after those last charges of grape.”

“And if they had kept together?”

“If,” he said, smiling. “Well, then they would have cut us all down with their tulwars; but they could not keep together—no sowars could bear such a tempest as that. Some of them were sure to turn tail, and then force of example upsets more, and the rest followed them in such a retreat as you see.”

“Look! they are gathering again on each side of the road. Round shot.”

Two guns dispersed them this time, for they were evidently preparing to revenge themselves upon our friends, who had by this time reached the outskirts of the place, as we could see by the dotted puffs of smoke rising whitely here and there among the houses.

Just then, though, we saw a fresh body of sepoys, many hundreds strong, debouching from a road some fifty yards from that by which we had issued from the place, evidently to intercept our friends. There was very little order among them in spite of their being, as their uniform showed, men of sepoy regiments, and their confusion was our opportunity.

There was a slight alteration of the guns, so that their fire might be concentrated; and just as they were tearing along, and we saw the skirmishers of our party issuing from among the houses, we opened a terrible fire of grape.

The effect was wonderful. At the first shot, the sepoys halted; at the second they wavered, and by the time the sixth had sent in its deadly storm, their survivors were in full flight, while, cheering loudly, our column marched out into sight, and now for the first time, and just as the waggons and elephants came full in view, we heard, instead of the rattle of scattered firing, the heavy roar of a volley in the rear.

Then the order was given to double, and the column came on with a couple of companies in the rear now in sight, taking it in turns to halt, kneel, and fire a volley before turning and doubling past their comrades waiting to hold the enemy in check and fire a volley in turn.

For the enemy were in force behind them, and came pouring out in pursuit till nearly a couple of thousand men must have rushed out of the wide road, and as they opened out to right and left, firing on the retreating regiment, the position of our friends was growing perilous in the extreme. Men were dropping fast, and it was evident that the two rear companies wanted support.

The support was coming, for our guns were run off to our right, took up fresh position where we could fire clear of our own men, and rapidly as they could be served, and the heated vents would permit, a terrific fire was brought to bear upon the sepoys, crushing them so effectually that ten minutes after, and only followed by a scattered fire, the infantry regiment reached the patch of wood, the elephants, ammunition-waggons, and native followers were placed in safety, and the colonel found time to canter up to Brace and warmly wring his hand.

“Splendid!” he cried. “We have lost wonderfully few.” Then aloud to our troop, “Thank you, my lads, thank you.”

“Oh, it’s all right, colonel dear,” I heard Brian say in a loud voice; “we shall be wanting ye to hilp us before long.”

Chapter Twenty Seven.

The colonel was delighted with the position, knowing that, if the ammunition held out, he could, with Brace’s help, make it a centre from which he could thrash twice as many of the enemy.

But it seemed to me, as I noted how many poor fellows were wounded, that we did not want any more fighting that day; and for a time it did not look as if we were to be troubled.

I was wrong, though, for in about half an hour the enemy’s leaders were showing front again, and it was evident that Ny Deen did not mean us to escape, for strong bodies of cavalry filed off to right and left, exactly as I had planned in my own mind, while his foot were mustered in great strength, their numbers being rapidly added to by men from out of the town. To add to the peril of our position, we made out a whole line coming along from the west which soon showed itself to be a fresh regiment of native cavalry coming to join Ny Deen’s standard and help drive the infidel out of the land.

In the consultation which took place, with the men all at ease, and bread and water being partaken of eagerly, the colonel said calmly—

“I’m not a bit alarmed for myself. My lads will fight to the last. We’ve plenty of ammunition, and I know we can make our square smaller and smaller, till they are sick of it, as they soon will be, for they cannot rush us. They will not face the bayonet. What about you? There’s my fear.”

“I’ll help you all I can,” said Brace, “and I don’t think you need fear for us. We can manoeuvre and keep them at a distance. We fight best at a pretty good range,” he said laughingly.

Our men had escaped without a scratch, so that our doctor was able to devote himself to the help of his brother in the profession at the temporary hospital made under a huge tree, well out of range of any firing that might arise. The foot regiment had suffered very heavily, for the fighting had been most severe through the narrow street, enemies springing up constantly in the most unexpected places; and, as I heard from the officers, to have halted for a minute to repel the attacks would have been fatal. In fact, from the time we left them, the poor fellows had literally to run the gauntlet of a fierce fire, and all confessed that it was wonderful that the casualties had been so few.

The moments of rest and refreshment now being enjoyed were most needful, and it was wonderful to see how restorative the simple draught of water and handful of bread seemed, the men brightening up and looking ready directly after.

Meanwhile scouts were sent out, and skirmishers took advantage of every depression to hold ready for the enemy's advance, though, after a time, this looked doubtful, for, after drawing up his men, as if for an immediate attack, Ny Deen had halted and waited the advance of the fresh corps of cavalry to strengthen his hand in that direction.

It meant an addition of about three hundred men to his forces; but it gave us little cause for anxiety, the general opinion being that the sowars would not face us; the only cause for alarm being in the event of the foot giving way, when their pursuit might prove terrible.

While we waited, the ammunition-waggon was brought up, and our ammunition chests refilled, to make up for the vast waste, Brace taking care that an extra supply of grape and canister should be placed in the boxes, both on the gun-carriages and the limbers. The cartridge-boxes of the men in the foot regiment, too, had been repacked, and now, rested, refreshed, and ready for action, all waited for the attack which was still delayed.

We were drawn up at a little distance from the patch of trees, our troop having, of course, a perfectly free hand to advance, retire, or harass the enemy, as seemed best to our leader; and Brace sat watching anxiously the sowars lying between us and the town, while Haynes kept sweeping the plain on the other side of the tope for the enemy's cavalry, but without avail, a patch or two of forest effectually screening their advance.

All at once the colonel cantered up to Brace.

"Do you see what they mean?" he cried, and, as Brace looked at him wonderingly, he continued, "There's some one at the head of affairs there with his head screwed on the right way. He is waiting for night before attacking."

"So as to make my guns of half the service," said Brace, quickly.

"Exactly!"

They were both silent for a few moments, and sat gazing at the rajah's forces.

"Then we must take the initiative," said Brace, sharply.

"That is what I have come to say," cried the colonel, quickly. "It seems," he added in a lower tone, "daring, half mad; but we have right on our side, and the scoundrels, with all their hatred, fear us horribly. The odds are very great; but if we can scatter them, it will be a lesson that will bear fruit greater than we can imagine. It will teach them how terrible the wrath of England can be, and how hopeless their attempt is likely to prove, no matter how many men they bring into the field. You agree with me?"

"Thoroughly," said Brace, "for my men are at their worst when placed in a fixed battery."

"At once, then," said the colonel.

"At once," replied Brace, "before their cavalry come in sight. Don't think me impertinent."

"No; go on."

"You will fight in square."

"Trust me," was the reply, with a nod and a smile, and the colonel cantered off to join his men, and beginning to manoeuvre them at once, after leaving a strong rear guard among the trees in case the sowars should make a sudden dash, for they had nothing to fear from the sepoys; any attempt on their part being for a long time to come impossible, for the colonel could fall back and protect his rear and baggage-guard long before the infantry could get near.

A low murmur of satisfaction ran through our little troop as orders were given which they knew meant immediate action. We went off at a trot, as if going right away, the object being to get upon the enemy's flank, and long before they grasped our object we had changed to a gallop, wheeled round, the men sprang from horse and limber, and in less than a minute round shot were ploughing through their ranks, sending them into confusion, and doing a vast deal of mischief before they had changed their formation, and skirmishers were sent out in advance of a regiment, the firing growing after a while somewhat annoying, when quick almost as it can be described, we limbered up and went out of range, taking up a fresh position, from which fresh confusion was thrown into their ranks, the regiment sent out against us being left far on our left.

By this time our infantry friends were steadily marching in close formation as if to aid us in our attack, when our scouts came in at a gallop, and we saw the cause, one of the sowar regiments was coming down upon us over the plain, the other being in all probability advancing too, but hidden from us by the tope.

Will the colonel see them? I wondered as, at a word, the limbers were drawn round, and we changed front, slewing about the guns, and sending round shot at the sowars now approaching rapidly, while I wondered whether Brace would stand fast and brave them.

But there was in those exciting moments no time for thought. Shot after shot was sent at the advancing regulars, which began to leave horses and men struggling on the plain, while their formation was broken up. But onward they came now in what more resembled a drove than the line of a regiment, and into this the grape shot was poured with such terrible effect, that they broke, turned, and swept away, never coming within fifty yards of us.

Our men sent up a cheer, but we had to canter off, and take up a fresh position, for the sepoy skirmishers were close upon us, and shots began to whizz by our heads.

Hardly were our men mounted again, and we were moving off, before my heart leaped to my throat, for from the other side of the tope I saw the second sowar regiment dash into sight and race down to attack our foot regiment.

“Look, look!” cried Brace, excitedly; “they’ll be through them. What is he about?”

But almost as the words left his lips, the double line of infantry, advancing toward the rajah’s main force, folded back, as it were, upon itself, and by the time the horsemen were getting close, they were faced by a triple line of bayonets, and a sputtering line of fire curled out, emptying saddles and checking the advance, the sowars sweeping round and galloping away.

“I knew they would not face the bayonets,” cried Brace. “Gallop,” he shouted; and he led us toward a bit of an eminence, where he evidently meant to take up position, and rake the retreating enemy in their flight.

But they were not retreating. Quick in their action nearly as we were, they wheeled round, and instantly it was evident that their leader was about to try and capture the guns.

I saw it all at a glance, so did every man in the troop, as we galloped on toward the eminence which it would be impossible to reach before they were upon us, while it was equally impossible for us to halt, unlimber, and bring the guns into action. The infantry regiment was too far off to help us, and our only chance appeared to me to be to wheel off to the right, and race for our lives.

Brace rightly saw the position differently.

“Draw—swords!” he roared; then changing our form of advance by a rapid movement taken at the gallop, the trumpet rang out, and I felt for the moment as if I was at the head of the mutineers once more, when we recaptured the guns; then, with sword on guard, I was gazing full at the long line of sowars charging us as we tore on at a frantic gallop, the guns now in echelon, leaping and bounding over the ground, the men on the limbers, sword in hand, holding on with the other, and every driver of the three to each gun holding his sabre at the charge.

One moment it must have seemed to the leaders of the native regiment that they had an easy capture, their line overlapping ours by far on either wing; the next, that an English horse artillery troop is no plaything, for there was a tremendous collision, horses and men went down headlong, and our troop swept on, their echelon formation causing shock after shock, as the tremendous momentum of the six horses of each gun was too great to be withstood by the light-armed sowars, and the guns were saved.

I was conscious of a sharp volley, then of another and another, as we galloped on, the man beside me sinking lower and lower over his horse’s neck; then, in what was to me like a nightmare, I saw him drop headlong from his horse, and had a glimpse of his face as his helmet fell off.

Then, growing more and more composed, I wondered why the English regiment should be firing volleys at us, their friends; and all this time the blinding perspiration seemed to be pouring from my head, and I was not seeing clearly. Then, raising my empty right hand, I swept it across my eyes, and as I did so grasped the fact that my sword was hanging by its knot from my wrist, as I saw clearly for a moment that I was alone, and yet not alone, for fierce-looking men in their white garb were galloping by me.

Then I knew that in the dashing charge I had been separated from my troop; that I was bleeding horribly from a wound; and one thought came like lightning across my brain—no; two thoughts, and they were these.

“It is all over; but have I done my duty like a man?”

The next minute a sowar turned and made a cut at me; but his blow fell upon steel, which flashed. Something else glittered and flashed too, and a fierce voice roared an order in Hindustani as we tore on, with a nervous hand grasping my arm, just as it suddenly seemed to turn to night, and I knew no more.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

I felt that if whoever it was would only have left me alone, I would not have cared; but to be bothered like that, when I was so sleepy, and when I had been so hard at work all day, and done my rounds at night, was too bad.

Yes; I knew it was after sunrise, and that in an ordinary way I ought to have jumped up, but the sleepy, stupid feeling was too much for me, and I only lay there and grumbled.

“Don’t!” I remember crying, “you hurt me;” but whoever it was kept on all the same, doing something to my head, and then he began dragging my arm about, and then I went off fast asleep.

I remembered all that when I opened my eyes again. It was my first thought, and I lay wondering in a puzzled sort of way whether it was Haynes, for he was the only one likely to play any trick with me, and unlikely enough too. Brace was too stern, thoughtful, and serious, so I thought it could not have been he.

“Hullo!” I exclaimed. No: it could hardly be called an exclamation, for it was said in a very low tone of voice, as I stared about me, and grew confused. For I felt that I ought to be lying in one of the shattered rooms of the residency. No: we had left the residency, and I ought to be lying under a tree in the tope.

It was very puzzling, and I could not make it out at all. In fact, the more I tried, the more perplexing it grew, and while I was trying to get my head to think properly, everything grew dull and misty, and I went off to sleep once more.

But the next time I awoke and ran over my position, I found that I was able to think well, and I did, though the puzzle was great still, why it was that I was lying on cushions with handsome purdahs or curtains hung about the sides of what was evidently a tent, with handsome Indian carpets spread on the floor, and a punkah over my head, waving gently to and fro to cool the air.

As I was trying to pierce the cloud that closed me in, I at last got a gleam of light through it as if the cloud had opened a little, and I recollected distinctly standing by my two guns in the glaring hot street. Yes; I could recollect that clearly, but no more. Then came a period of confusion, but that passed off, and I remembered our trot and then gallop out of the town, down the long road, and out into the country-like plain, where we took up position, and brought the guns into action.

After a time I recalled the whole of the particulars of the engagement right on to our halt beside the tope, within whose shades the waggons, elephants, and wounded men were placed. And now a feeling of trouble and worry came over me, for I recollected that I had been so busy that I had not been to see Serjeant Craig.

It looked hard, for he had done so much for us, but I hoped that Brace had been to him, and that he would not think it unkind of me, knowing as he would that I had been heavily on duty. But, all the same, it was hard for the poor fellow lying wounded.

I paused there, and then repeated the words in a strange, puzzled way—“Poor fellow lying wounded—poor fellow lying wounded.”

And then, with the intention of sitting up, I moved my arm.

No; I only tried to move it, and felt a horrible twinge of pain. Then I tried to raise my head, but it felt like so much lead, and the effort made me feel sick.

But my mind was active now, and as I said in a whisper, “Why, I must be wounded,” the scene of our last gallop came back to my mind with vivid force, and I saw it all, and even, as it were, felt the sensation of the mad gallop, and the shock of our collision with the sowars, even to the curious sensation of galloping along with our men firing at us, and then awakening to the fact that I had fierce-looking troopers on either side, and then of one cutting at me, and another interposing to save my life.

Yes; I could recollect that clearly, and I recalled, too, the poor fellow falling headlong from his horse.

Was that I?

It seemed as if it must have been; but in a confused way I argued that, if it had, I could not have sat on horseback and seen him fall.

I was still puzzling about it with a *feeling* upon me that my brain would not work properly, when a purdah was thrust on one side, and a tall, grave, grey-bearded man in white and gold came slowly in. His voluminous turban was of white muslin, and his long snowy garment descended almost to his feet.

I felt, as he gravely fixed his eyes upon me, and advanced to where I lay, that this must be a kind of dream, and that possibly the sun had beat so hotly upon my helmet that it had had some effect upon my brain. Consequently, all I had to do was to be still, and then all would come clear.

But the dream became to me wonderfully real as the tall grave Mussulman went down on one knee and laid his hand upon my head, the touch feeling cool and pleasant, while, as he saw my eyes fixed upon his inquiringly, he said in very good English—

“The young sahib is better?”

“Better?” I replied in a curiously faint voice—“better? Have I been ill?”

“Don’t try to talk. Not ill, sahib—wounded.”

“Oh!” I ejaculated. “Then I was hurt in that charge. Where is Captain Brace?”

“Don’t talk; you are weak. Let me look at your wound.”

As he spoke he laid his hand upon my left arm, but changed his mind, and his hands were busy about my head, which I found now was confined by a bandage.

This being removed, he gave me a little pain by touching one spot just above my temple, which was extremely tender, and then, taking out a pair of scissors, he snipped away a little hair closely; after this he drew a piece of fine white cloth from his pocket, he poured some brown strongly scented fluid from a little flask to moisten it, and laid the little wet patch on my head, with the result that it tingled sharply.

“Hurt?” he said quietly.

“Yes; a little.”

“It will soon go off.”

As he spoke he very carefully bound the linen bandage he had removed back in its place.

“Is it a sword-cut?” I asked.

“No, sahib; a bullet struck your helmet, and made a bad place within. It is not very serious, and if you are quiet, it will soon be well.”

“But where is Dr Danby? Why does he not come?” I asked; then, in a startled way, “He is not killed?”

The grey-bearded old fellow merely shook his head and repeated his injunction that I should not talk, and now began examining my left arm, which was firmly bandaged, and began to pain me severely at his touch.

“Is that a bullet wound?” I said in a whisper, for I felt that I must resign myself to my position, and, after the first shock, I began to feel rather proud that I had been wounded, for I felt not the slightest inclination to stir.

“No,” he said, as he removed bandage after bandage, “a cut from a tulwar just below the shoulder. You will be brave, and bear what I do without being faint? Yes,” he added, with a grave smile, “you English sahibs are brave. Hurt?”

“Hurt? Yes,” I said, with a wince. “Is it a big cut?”

“Yes,” he said softly; “a big cut—a bad cut, but it is beautiful, and will soon grow up again.”

“Are you going to put any of that smarting stuff on?” I asked.

“Oh no. It wants nothing but to be left to grow well with bandages round it. These fresh bandages. Young healthy flesh soon heals.”

“Are you a surgeon?” I asked.

“Yes; and learned to be one in London,” he continued, with a smile. “But now you must be still and not talk.”

I was not sorry to be forbidden to speak, for it was an effort, and I lay watching him, feeling very sick and faint, while he dressed my wound; and then I felt nothing till I found myself staring at the grave face of the eastern surgeon, as he lightly passed a moistened finger beneath my nostrils, and then touched the neck of a bottle which he turned upside down, and proceeded to moisten my temples, while a peculiar cool pungent odour filled the tent.

“Better?” he said.

“Yes,” I said dreamily; and then as I realised what had passed—“Did I faint?”

He bowed gravely.

“It was natural, sahib. I hurt you very greatly; but the wound looks well. Ah, your colour is coming back to your lips.”

“Thank you,” I said feebly. “I am sorry I was so cowardly. Now ask Captain Brace to come.”

He shook his head.

“Well, then, Mr Haynes.”

He shook his head again.

“They are far away,” he said.

“Then what place is this? a hospital?”

He shook his head again.

“I am only the doctor,” he said, with a smile. “My duty is to dress your wounds, and it is done.”

“But tell me this—the fight yesterday?”

“I cannot,” he replied. “There was no fight yesterday.”

“Nonsense! There was; and I remember now coming off my horse. I thought it was some one else; but I recall it now.”

“The sahib talks too much,” said the grave, patient-looking doctor.

“I will hold my tongue directly,” I cried; “but tell me this—were you at the fight?”

“Oh no; I was far away, and the rajah summoned me here to attend on you.”

“Rajah? What rajah?”

“His highness, my master.”

“What!” I cried excitedly. “Then I am a prisoner?”

“Yes, sahib. You were cut down in the battle a week ago.”

A low expiration of the breath, which sounded like a sigh, was the only sound I uttered as I lay back, weak, faint, utterly astounded by the news. A prisoner—cut down a week ago. Then the troop; where was the troop? If I was made a prisoner, had the guns been taken?

A cold chill of despair ran through me as those crushing thoughts occurred, and in imagination I saw our men surrounded and slaughtered, perhaps mutilated, the guns taken, and the fight of that day a tremendous victory for the enemy.

But after a time a better way of thinking came over me when I was alone; for, after a grave smile, the doctor had bowed and left the tent.

It was a daring, desperate charge I felt, but the only thing Brace could do under the circumstances; and he must have cut his way through. He could not turn and retreat, for it would have looked like being afraid of the sowars; and surely, I thought, it was not in them to overcome our brave little troop even if they were ten times the number.

Then, as I lay there, confused and troubled, a fresh thought struck me—the firing? Yes, of course there was sharp firing; and I remembered now pretty clearly I was galloping away with troopers on each side. I must have been separated from my men in the desperate shock, and borne off by the foe as they retreated. Yes, of course, I thought, with growing excitement; they must have been retreating; and it was the colonel's regiment that was firing upon us as we fled.

With these thoughts hope came back, and I could think no more, but dropped off into a deep sleep that was greatly like a swoon.

My next recollection is of lying in that heated tent, feverish and thirsty, and the tall, grey-bearded doctor coming in to busy himself about me, and at every touch of his hand seeming to give me ease.

Then I slept again, and slept—ah, how I must have slept, and dreamed of Brace being safe, and coming sooner or later to rescue me from that silent tent where I saw no one but the doctor and a couple of Hindu servants, who never answered any questions, only salaamed and left the tent if I spoke!

Neither could I get any information from the doctor. All I knew grew from my own calculations, and these taught me that I was the prisoner of some great chief who seemed to be reserving me to exchange for some other prisoner, perhaps to act as a hostage in case he should happen to be captured. I could come to no other conclusion; for so far the custom had been for the revolted people to murder and mutilate every one who fell into their hands.

I was lying there one afternoon, wondering where the tent could be, and why it was that everything was so silent about me. It was puzzling now that I was not quite so weak and feverish; for this could hardly be a camp in which I was a prisoner. If it had been, I should have heard the trampling of horses and the coming and going of armed men. Then I seldom heard voices, save those of the servants who came to attend upon me by the doctor's orders. But I knew one thing—the tent in which I was sheltered had been pitched under a great tree; for at certain times, when the sun was low, I saw the shadows of leaves and boughs upon the canvas; and when the wind blew sometimes at night, I had heard the rushing sound through the branches.

Feeling a little better as I did that afternoon, I had quite made up my mind to attack the doctor when he came, as I knew he would later on, and try hard to get some particulars about where we were, and what had happened after the fight; for it seemed strange and I shrank at times from the thought that Brace and the colonel had not followed up their success. But had it been a success?

The question was terrible; for their long silence suggested that it might equally have been a failure; and this was the more likely from the odds they had to engage.

I lay there very patiently, for I was not in much pain now; but that afternoon the doctor did not come, and my patience was rapidly fading away; for it was growing late, and it appeared hard, now that I had come to such a determination, for my attendant to stay away. That he must come from a distance, I knew; and more than once I had detected little things which showed me that he had been attending wounded men—a fact which of course told me that there was trouble going on somewhere near at hand.

Perhaps there was trouble that day, I thought, and he was detained in consequence.

This thought made me listen intently for the sound of guns; but all was still, and my impatience began to get the mastery, and the feeling that I had taken up the wrong idea to make itself clear; for there could be no serious fighting such as would keep the doctor away, or else I must have heard the firing.

Still the doctor did not come, and in consequence I began to think that my wound was hot and fretful; and this brought up the fight on that eventful day about which I had lost count, save that it must be going on for three weeks since it occurred; and all that time I had been lying there, a miserable, wounded prisoner. So I was proceeding to silently bemoan my fate, when my common sense stepped in to point out that the enemy who had captured me evidently respected the British, and that no one could have been better treated than I.

But I wanted news. I was burning to hear what had taken place since I had been cut down; whether the fire of revolt had been checked, but was still holding its own, or spreading—and I knew nothing.

"But I will know," I said, as my ear, grown quick by constant listening, detected distant sounds, followed by a hurried rustling, as of people leaving the adjoining tent.

"They heard the doctor coming," I said to myself. "I'll make him speak somehow; and, by the way, I've never asked

him where they have put my uniform and sword."

I strained my ears and listened, for the sound was drawing nearer, and a feeling of disappointment stole over me as I made out that it was the trampling of horses; and I had never heard that when the doctor came before. I had always believed that he came in a palanquin; while these certainly were horses' feet—yes, and the jingling of accoutrements.

"Why, it must be our troop," I thought, but crushed the delightful thought on the instant, for there was none of the peculiar rattle made by the guns and limbers. Could it be a body of sowars? If softly thoughts went back to the wild gallop I had had in their company, and one hand stole to my wounded arm, which was there as a reminder of what I might expect from them.

No wonder my heart beat fast as recollections of their merciless treatment of their officers came flooding my brain, and I felt that if they behaved like this to their officers, whom they had sworn to obey, there would be scant mercy for a prisoner.

The trampling and jingling came nearer, and there was the familiar snorting of horses, while I was now experienced enough to be able to say that there was a body of forty or fifty mounted men approaching nearer, nearer, till a loud order rang out, such as would be given by a native cavalry officer; a sudden halt; a fresh order, and then one for the men to dismount, and I was listening for the next ordering the men to draw swords, when I felt with beating heart that it need not come, for the men would be lancers. "I'll try and meet it like a man," I said to myself, "for father's sake, and that of my mother and sister;" but I could not feel brave, and my eyes were fixed upon the purdah which screened the entrance to the tent, and, in spite of my weakness, I struggled up on one arm looking wildly round for a weapon that I could not have used.

Then there was a quick footstep. The doctor's? No; that of an armed man. The purdah was swept aside, and a gorgeously dressed chief, robed in white muslin and shawls of the most delicate fabric, and richly ornamented with gold, strode into the tent. His white turban glittered with pearls and diamonds, while his breast and sword-belt and slings were also encrusted with the same rich gems, so that at every movement some cluster of precious stones scintillated in the subdued light.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

He crossed at once to my couch, and stood looking down at me, his handsome, thoughtful face, with its dark eyes, being wonderfully familiar, as he bent over me; and as he gazed, a smile crossed his lips, and there was a look of sympathy in his countenance which was unmistakable.

But there was no smile on mine, for as I met his eyes I saw in him, in spite of his gallant bearing and gorgeous dress, the bloodthirsty traitor and schemer who had risen against us and headed the mad savages who had cut down my brother-officers and friends. He was the man, too, who held me prisoner, and my resentment was growing when, in an indistinct dreamy way, the scene in the desperate charge came back, and those moments when, half-stunned by the bullet which had struck my helmet, and of which I was not conscious then, I had been galloping away surrounded by sowars, one of whom was about to cut me down, giving me a second blow sufficient to destroy the little life left in me. And I saw it clearly now; it was this man who bent over me—this chief, all gorgeous in gold and gems, whose arm had been stretched out to save me, and had undoubtedly brought me where I was, and had me carefully tended back to life.

And with these thoughts filling my mind, I lay looking up at him angry, and yet grateful, wondering, too, at the change from the slightly clothed syce whom I had so often seen ill-used by his master, Barton; and as he watched me, I shuddered slightly, for I seemed to know that he had taken deadly vengeance upon my brother-officer in return for months of harsh treatment, insult, and wrong.

We neither of us spoke, he evidently contenting himself with watching me, and enjoying the surprise I felt at recognising him as the disguised chief—the groom no longer, but as the powerful leader of a large native force; I, in my weak state, fascinated by his peculiar smiling eyes, that were one moment haughty and fierce and full of triumph, the next beaming with friendliness.

At last he bent down on one knee, and as he did so his magnificently jewelled tulwar fell forward naturally enough from the point of the scabbard touching the carpet right between us, and he started as if the sword between us had come as a strange portent to show that we were enemies, always to be kept apart by the deadly blade.

I saw that he changed colour and hesitated, influenced by his superstitious eastern nature and education; but the next moment he laughed contemptuously, and unbuckled his jewelled belt, and threw it and the sword two or three yards away, before going down on one knee by my pillow, laying his hand upon my head and gazing intently in my eyes.

"Hah!" he ejaculated, speaking for the first time, and in excellent English. "You are getting well fast now. You are weak, but you will live and soon be well. I thought once you would die. You know me?" he added, with a smile.

I spoke now for the first time, and my voice sounded feeble, I felt, compared to his.

"Yes, I know you again, Ny Deen."

His eyes flashed, and his face lit up strangely as he exclaimed—

"Yes; Ny Deen, the syce, beaten, kicked, trampled upon; Ny Deen, the dog—the—"

He paused for a moment or two, and then with an emphasis that would have made the term of reproach sound absurd, but for the fierce revengeful look in his countenance, he added—

“Nigger!”

There was an intensity of scorn in his utterance of the word that was tragic; and as I lay back there on my cushion I read in it the fierce turning at last of the trampled worm—the worm as represented by the venomous serpent of the conquered land, and I knew from my own experience what endless cases there were of patient, humbled, and crushed-down men, no higher in position than slaves, ill-used, and treated with contempt by my insolent, overbearing countrymen of that self-assertive class who cannot hold power without turning it to abuse.

The silence in the tent as my captor knelt by me was intense, and I could hear his hard breathing, and see how he was striving to master the fierce emotion in his breast. His eyes were mostly fixed on me with a savage scowl, and for a moment or so I fancied that he must have saved my life so as to take it himself in some way which would add torture and throw dismay amongst the English ranks.

But I was ready to smile at my own vanity as I thought to myself of what a little consequence the life of a young artillery subaltern would be in the great revolt now in progress.

Then I felt a strong desire to speak, to make some great utterance such as would impress him and raise me in his estimation sufficiently to make him treat me with the respect due to an English officer; but no such utterance would come. I felt that I was only a poor, weak, wounded lad, lying there at the mercy of this fierce rajah, and when at last my lips parted, as if forced to say something in answer to his searching gaze, I writhed within myself and felt ashamed of the contemptible words. For his utterance of that term of contumely so liberally used toward one of a race of people who had been for countless generations great chiefs in their own land, and whose cities were centres of a civilisation, barbaric, perhaps, but whose products we were only too glad to welcome in England.

“Nigger” still seemed to ring in my ears, as I gazed still as if fascinated in the handsome pale-brown eastern face, and I said feebly, just about in the tone of voice in which some contemptible young found-out sneak of a schoolboy, who was trying to hide a fault with a miserable lie, might say, “Please, sir, it wasn’t me—”

“I never insulted you, or called you so.”

His face changed like magic, and he bent low over my pillow, as he cried excitedly, and with a passionate fervour in his voice, which almost startled me—

“Never! never, sahib.”

He paused, frowned, and then his face lit up again, and he uttered a merry laugh.

“You see,” he cried, “I am one of the conquered race. You have been our masters so long that it comes natural to say *sahib*. But that is at an end now; we are the masters, and the reign of the great Koompanni is at an end.”

A pang of misery ran through me at these words, which were uttered with so much conviction that I felt they must be true.

After a few moments, and from a desire to say something less weak than my last poor feeble utterance, I said—

“Was it not you who saved my life when that sowar was going to cut me down?”

“Yes,” he cried excitedly. “If he had killed you, he should not have lived another hour.”

“Why?” I said, with a smile. “I was his enemy fighting against him.”

“But you were my friend,” he said, in a soft low voice, full of emotion; “almost the only one who treated me as if I were something more than a pariah dog. Yes, always my friend, who softened those bitter hours of misery and despair when I was suffering for my people, that some day we might cast off the heel which held us crushed down into the earth. My friend, whom I would have died to save.”

“Ny Deen!” I cried, for his words moved me, and I stretched out my hand to him.

“Hah!” he cried, seizing it tightly between his own. “I could not ask you to give me the hand of friendship, but it has come from you.”

“And yet how can I shake hands with you, rajah?” I said sadly; “we are enemies.”

His eyes flashed with pride as I called him rajah, and he retained my hand firmly.

"We can be friends, and eat salt together."

Gil the Gunner. p. 307.

"Enemies?" he said. "Yes, in the field, when face to face; but you are wounded, and there is a truce between you and me. We can be friends, and eat salt together. You are my guest, my honoured guest. This tent is yours; the servants are yours; order them, and they will obey you. As soon as you are well enough, there is a palanquin waiting with willing men to bear you. When you are better still, there is your elephant and a horse."

"My horse, my Arab?" I cried. "Is he safe?"

He smiled.

"Yes, quite safe, with two syces to care for him; the horse of their rajah's friend. What can I get you? Ask for anything. I am *very* rich, and it shall be yours."

"You can only give me one thing," I cried. "No; two things."

"The first, then?" he said, smiling.

"News of my troop, of Captain Brace, and our men; of the officers of the foot regiment. Tell me," I cried excitedly, "how did the fight end?"

"How could it end?" he replied, with a smile full of pride. "What could that poor handful of men do against my thousands?"

"Defeated?" I cried excitedly.

"Yes; they were defeated; they fled."

My countenance fell, and there must have been a look of despair in my eyes, which he read, for he said more quietly —

"Captain Brace is a brave man, and he did everything he could; but he had to flee—and you were left in my hands a prisoner," he added, with a smile.

"He had to flee," I said to myself; and that means that he had escaped uninjured from a desperate encounter. There was something consoling in that; and I wanted to ask a score of questions about Haynes and the infantry officers, but I could not. For one thing, I felt that it would be like writing a long account of a list of disasters; for another, I was not sure that I could trust an enemy's account of the engagement. So I remained silent, and the rajah asked me a few questions about my symptoms, and whether there was anything he could get for me.

I shook my head, for, though gratified by the warm liking and esteem he had displayed, my spirits had sunk very low indeed, and I wanted to be alone to think.

Seeing that I was weak and troubled, the rajah soon after rose, and moved to the doorway of the tent, where he summoned one of the attendants, and uttered a few words, the result being that a few minutes after the tall, grave, eastern physician appeared at the doorway, and salaamed in the most lowly way before his prince.

“Go to him,” said the rajah in their own tongue, and the doctor came across to me and began examining my injuries, while the rajah stood looking on, watching everything attentively.

I could not help noticing how nervous and troubled the doctor seemed, performing his task with trembling hands, as if in great awe of the chief his master. He ended by rising and salaaming again.

“Well?” said the rajah quickly; and I knew enough Hindustani now to be able to snatch at the meaning of their words. “You must make him well quickly.”

“I will try, your highness.”

“No, sir; you will do,” said the rajah, sternly.

“He must be made strong and well soon. I want him; he is my friend.”

He turned from the doctor, who took this as his dismissal, and bowed and left the tent, while the rajah seated himself on the carpet by his sword, and stayed there in one position as if deep in thought, making probably more plans.

I lay watching him wonderingly, asking myself whether he had ever grasped the fact of how much I had had to do with the recovery of the guns, and if he did not, what would be his feelings toward one who had utterly baulked him, and robbed him of the prize he went through so much to win.

I certainly did not feel disposed to enlighten him, but by watching his troubled face, and thinking of how valuable, if he had succeeded in well training his men, a troop of horse artillery would be, and how different our position would have been during that encounter if he had had half a dozen six-pounders well-served.

“But he has no guns,” I ended by saying to myself; “and we—I mean our people—have, and I cannot believe in our—I mean their—being swept away, so long as they hold such a supremacy as the guns afford to them.”

I was stopped short by the rajah re-buckling his sword-belt, and a minute later he was bending over me.

“Make haste,” he said in Hindustani. “I shall not be at peace till you are well once more.”

He pressed my hand warmly, and bade me order anything I wished, for I was in my own tent, and then, after smiling at me, and telling me to grow strong, he strode to the purdah, drew it aside, turned to look back, and then the curtain fell between us, and I was alone once more.

I lay listening to the stamping and plunging of horses, and in imagination could picture the whole scene with the restless, excitable animals, shrinking from being backed, and pretending to bite, but calming down the moment they felt a strong hand at the bit.

Then came an order, followed by the jingling of weapons and the snorting of the horses and their heavy trampling upon the soft earth, the sound gradually growing fainter, till it was like a distant murmur, one which had the effect of sending me, tired as I was, off into a heavy sleep.

Chapter Thirty.

It was night when I awoke, refreshed and ready to ask myself whether it was a dream, one of the many vivid sleep scenes which I had conjured up since I had been there, wounded and a prisoner.

But I knew directly that it was no dream, and I began thinking of how sadly some of the natives must have been treated for the simple civilities which I had bestowed upon Ny Deen to be appreciated as they were.

From that I began thinking of Brace and Haynes, about the colonel of the foot regiment, and of Ny Deen’s words that they were beaten and had fled.

“I don’t believe it,” I said, half aloud. There may have been thousands against our hundreds; but our fellows would not study that. It would only make them fight the more fiercely. I suppose that was his idea of it; but I felt sure that it would not be Brace’s, or that of his brother in arms. I thought then of our tremendous charge with the guns, and I could not keep from smiling.

“That does not seem to be the work of a man who wants to retreat,” I said to myself. “If Brace has retired, it is only to act like a wave of the sea, so that he can come back with greater force, and sweep everything before him.”

Yes; I was sure of that, as I lay there gazing at the lamp, whose soft light seemed to look dreamy and pleasant. I was in better spirits, and the old depression and feeling of misery had gone.

Then I began to plan what I should do as I grew stronger. I would make use of the palanquin and the elephant’s howdah; but at the first opportunity I decided that I would escape. I did not want to be ungrateful to Ny Deen, and it was very pleasant to feel that he liked me; but I must get back to my own people, I felt, and he would know that it was quite reasonable.

A faint rustling sound drew my attention just then, somewhere near the head of my bed; but it ceased directly, and I attributed it to the servants.

To prove this, I made up my mind to clap my hands, but at the first movement such a keen pain shot through my shoulder that I contented myself by calling, “Who waits?”

There was a quick rustling sound at once, and the purdah was drawn aside by a shadowy figure, and held while three men in white entered with trays so quickly and silently that I felt as if I were going through some scene from the “Arabian Nights,” when the four men came up to my couch, and the chief attendant pointed out places on the carpet for the various things to be placed, and then signed to the men to go, which they did without word or look.

“I suppose I shall not be allowed to eat and drink what I like,” I thought, and I laughed to myself, for it was such a good sign even to think about food at all. Directly after I found I was right, for my attendant poured me out something warm which smelt savoury, and as he raised me carefully and propped me up with cushions, I smiled again, for I felt as if I were a baby about to be fed.

My amusement was quite justified, for I was as weak as an infant, and was glad to let the calm, silent man supply my wants, holding me so that I could drink what tasted like a strong preparation of chicken; after which he gave me a very delicious and sweet preparation which I recognised as cocoanut cream. Lastly, he gave me some curious-looking *bonbons*, helping me to lie back first, so that I need not grow weary while I partook of the preparations, which were nice, but possessed a peculiar aromatic taste, which was new to me.

I had eaten three of these, and then half uneasily told myself that, without doubt, the doctor ordered these preparations because they contained the medicines he wished me to take.

I think so now; for in a short time a pleasant drowsiness stole over me, and I fell asleep to awake with a start, as it seemed to me; but it must have been only a slight one, for I could not have moved more than my eyes, which were at once directed to the lamp on its stand, some ten or a dozen feet from me, and I wondered why my breath came so short, and grasped at once the fact that I had a heavy weight upon my chest.

It appeared simple enough. I had hardly taken anything of late, and my meal on the previous night had been fairly liberal. Consequently, being a sick or delicate man, I was suffering from the consequences—that of a heavy weight at my chest.

I lay thinking that I had not taken much, and that it was very hard that I should suffer so much inconvenience for so trivial a meal, when the weight on my chest moved, and I felt something cool touch my neck.

I was still not clearly awake, and I did not feel any very great surprise at this; for during what must have been my delirium, I had in imagination had stranger adventures than this, and consequently I lay perfectly still, waiting for the sensation to pass off before closing my eyes and enjoying another pleasant, restful, strength-giving sleep.

I had just arrived at this pitch of reasoning, and I was considering how long it would be before the sensation passed away, when, as I stared with half-closed eyes at the lamp, I fancied that I saw something gleam only a short distance before me; and this exciting my curiosity, I looked again, felt startled, my heart began to beat painfully, and a cold chill ran through me, as I realised the horrible fact that, consequent upon my bed being made up on the ground, instead of upon the native bedstead known as a charpoy, a serpent had crept in beneath the side of the tent—the rustle I had heard—and, attracted by the warmth, coiled itself upon my chest, where it now lay with its cool head upon my neck.

I was awake now fully, and, above all, to the terror of my situation. What shall I do? I asked myself, as the icy feeling of horror increased. I dared not move or attempt to call, for the reptile’s head was close to my chin, and the slightest stir might cause it to bite; for at the first alarm I felt certain that it must be one of the poisonous cobras which infested the land.

As I lay there, I could feel the perspiration streaming out of my pores, and the weight upon my chest increasing rapidly, till I began to fancy that if I were not soon relieved I should be suffocated.

How long I lay like this I cannot say; but it felt to me almost an eternity, and the more painful from the fact that there was help close at hand, so near that a call would bring in one if not more of the servants instantly.

One moment my lips parted ready to utter a cry; but that cry, in spite of several attempts, was not uttered. For the idea of being bitten, of receiving the two sharp fangs of the monster in my flesh, was so horrible that, cowardly or no, I could not call. I had heard too much of the results of a cobra bite, and the thought of the insidious poison making its way rapidly through the veins, and ending one’s life by arresting the pulsations of the heart in a few minutes, or at most hours, was too terrible for me to run any risk.

I think I must have nearly fainted away, for I was very weak; but I never quite lost my senses, but lay looking with misty eyes across the gleaming scaly skin there upon my heart, and feeling from time to time a peculiar movement, as if one coil were passing over another.

Then I tried hard to call up my courage, and wondered whether by a sharp movement I could heave the reptile from me, while I tried to roll myself off on the other side of the bed. But I knew that it was impossible, for I was weak as a child, and, setting aside the pain such a movement would have caused, it was in my then state impossible.

At last, when the stress upon my mind was enough to make me feel that, at any cost, I must try and call for help, I heard a movement outside the tent, and my lips parted once more to speak, but no sound came. I could only lie in expectancy, with my eyes fixed upon the gleaming scales, which were now certainly in motion.

There was another faint noise outside, and I felt that help was coming—one of the men, to see whether I required anything. But, no; it ceased once more; hope died out of my breast, and at all costs I was going to utter a hoarse cry, for I could bear the suspense no longer, when there was a louder rustle outside, and this time my flesh seemed to creep, for the serpent was all in motion, and it had raised its head to look in the direction of the sound, and I could see its bent, spade-like shape, and the bright gleaming eyes.

Suddenly the purdah was softly drawn aside; and as I strained my eyes sidewise to try and catch a glimpse of the man who entered, I saw him approach silently, till he was near my couch, when he suddenly caught sight of the serpent, uttered a faint cry, and fled.

I shuddered in my despair as I saw him sweep back the purdah and dart through, and then I mentally called him a coward for not coming to my help.

But I was premature in judging him, for all at once he darted back, armed with a stout bamboo, and came cautiously toward where I lay now nearly freed from my burden; for, at the sight of the men who came swiftly in, the serpent's coils began to pass one over the other till it was all in motion; and it was evidently gliding off me, to retreat to the hole beneath the canvas through which it had found its way.

But it had not made sufficient haste. Just before it had reached the canvas, the man was upon it, bringing the bamboo down with so terrible a blow that the serpent twisted itself up, writhing and struggling in a perfect knot, the tail flogging the carpet, and the head rising and falling convulsively, till the man struck at it again and again, crippling the tail with one blow; and, after watching his opportunity, succeeded in delivering so fierce a cut at the head that the neck was broken, and it fell back upon the writhing knot perfectly inert, a few more blows making the body as helpless as the head and neck.

This done, the man seized the creature by the tail, and drew it out to its full length, which seemed to me to be eight or nine feet; but the creature was very thick.

The man had turned to me with a scared face, and spoke almost for the first time since he had been my attendant, saying in Hindustani—

"I pray that my lord will not tell my master the maharajah!"

"Not tell him you killed the snake?"

"No, my lord. He would say thy servant did right to slay the serpent; but he would punish him for not keeping guard, and seeing that no serpent came."

"Would it have bitten and poisoned me?" I asked.

"No, my lord. This kind does not bite and poison, only twists round and crushes. It is very strong."

"How did it come in?" I said.

He went down on his hands and knees and examined the edge of the tent, looking for a hole where the creature could have crept under; but every part was secure, and the man rose, and his face wore a puzzled look.

"Thy servants have done their work well," he said. "There is no hole where the serpent could have crept under. I do not know."

He was peering about in silence, while I lay gradually recovering my equanimity, and congratulating myself on the fact that my nocturnal visitor had been a serpent of the boa kind, and not a deadly cobra, when the man suddenly held up his finger, and pointed to a spot beyond the lamp, where the roof and canvas wall of the tent joined.

As I tried to penetrate the dim, warm twilight of the room, I could hear a faint rustling sound, and I saw my attendant stoop cautiously and go, without making a sound, toward the spot where his stick lay on the carpet, not far from the still heaving body of the reptile he had slain.

As I gazed hard at the place whence the rustling came, I suddenly caught sight of something behind the lamp, something shadowy or misty, swaying gently to any fro, and I at once grasped the fact that it was another serpent entering the tent by the way in which the first must have found its way.

I had hardly arrived at this point when my attention was taken up by the action of my attendant, who was stealing round like a black shadow close to the side of the tent, and the next minute he raised his stick, and made a sharp blow at the intruder.

There was a sharp crack, a loud rustling, and the man darted back with only half his staff in his hand, to run out of the tent, and leave me alone with the body of the first serpent, which I half fancied was moving slowly toward where I lay helpless, if it happened to have still vitality enough left in its shattered length to come and wreak its vengeance on one who could not defend himself.

But while I was watching the slowly writhing creature, which in the dim light looked of far greater proportion than before, I could hear trampling and voices outside, then loud rustling as if men were hurrying about through bushes, and at last, to my great relief, the man came back.

"Thy servant struck the snake," he said, "and broke the staff; but so much of it was outside that it darted back and crawled away before we could get to the spot and find it. The creature has gone away to die."

"And now others will come, and that one too, if you have not killed it."

"No, my lord," he said. "That was the mate of the snake I killed. They go two together, and there is no fear. I struck it so hard that it will die, and the hole up there shall be fastened tightly."

To my great satisfaction, he bent down and took the serpent by the tail and drew it out of the tent, and I heard him

give orders to his companions to drag it right away into the forest, and to bury it as soon as it was day.

As he was talking, I was conscious of a peculiar, slightly musky odour pervading the tent, and I was wondering what it could be, when the man returned with two or three burning splints of some aromatic wood, which gave forth a great deal of smoke, and he walked about the tent, waving the pieces and holding them low down near the carpet where the serpent had lain, and also along a track leading past the lamp to the side of the tent where I had seen the shadowy form of the second serpent.

He busied himself in this way till the matches were pretty well burned down, and then placed the ends in a little brass vessel, which he stood on the carpet not far from my couch.

Then approaching me, he said humbly, and with a low reverence—

“Will my lord grant his servant’s prayer?”

“What do you mean?” I said, rather testily, for his excessive humility worried me. I hated to be worshipped like that. “Not tell the rajah about the snakes?”

“If my master the rajah knows, thy servant may be slain.”

“What! for that?” I said.

“Yes, my lord. His highness bade me take as great care of your life as I would of my own. Thy servant has tried to do his duty, and serve my lord. He has done everything the great physician, the rajah’s own doctor, bade him do, and cared for my lord as if he had been thy servant’s own son. It would be hard to die because a serpent of the forest came in after seeing the light.”

“Hard? Yes,” I said quietly. “There, mind no more of the brutes get in. I shall not say a word to the rajah or any one else.”

“Ah,” he cried joyfully. And before I could remove it, he had gone down on his knees and kissed my hand. “Thy servant goes back with joy in his heart. He did not love to serve him, for the white sahibs are cruel to their servants, and are hated; but they are not all so, and thy servant seeth now why his master the rajah loveth my lord, and careth for him as one who is very dear.”

“How I do hate for any one to fawn upon me like that!” I said to myself as soon as I was alone and I lay thinking about all my troubles, and being a prisoner, wondering how long it would be before I was strong again and able to escape; for I meant to do that. It was very pleasant to find that Ny Deen liked me, and recalled my civility to him sufficiently to make him wish to save my life; but all the same, I felt that I did not like him, for there was the treachery of a man who had come under false pretences to our cantonments, waiting, with others in his secret, for the time when they could throw off the British yoke.

And as I lay thinking, though I felt ready to acquit him of the atrocities that had been committed, I felt that he had opened the awful door and let loose the tide of miscreants who had raged through the cities, murdering every one whose skin was white.

“No,” I thought, “whatever cause Ny Deen and his people might have had for retaliation, it had not been by an open declaration of war, but by treachery.” And then I went to sleep, to dream about snakes.

Chapter Thirty One.

I suppose it was through being weak, and having passed through a feverish state, which made me dream to such a tremendous extent, with everything so real and vivid that it was horrible. It comes natural to a man to dread snakes. It is as part of his education, and the dread was upon me terribly that night.

For I was pursued by them in all kinds of grotesque shapes: now they were all sowars in white, but with serpents’ heads, galloping down upon me in a mad charge; now they were slimy monsters, creeping round my tent, trying to crawl in and murder me because the rajah had taken me under his protection. Then Ny Deen himself came to me, all glittering with gold and gems, but in a confused way. He did not seem to be any longer a man, for his face looked serpent-like and treacherous, and one moment there were glittering jewels, the next it was the light shimmering upon his brilliant scales.

And so on for the rest of the night, till I dreamed that the serpent slain by the attendant had revived, and crept back through the hole between the two portions of the canvas, after heaving off the earth and sand in which it had been buried. And then it came gliding and writhing its way over the carpet, nearer and nearer to where I lay, not with the graceful, gliding motion of an ordinary serpent, but clumsily, with its neck broken and a portion of its tail bent almost at right angles. But, all the same, as I lay there, it came on nearer and nearer, till it was close to my couch in the full light of the lamp, and then, to my horror, it raised itself up, bent its broken neck over me, and glared down with its horrible eyes threatening to strike.

I awoke then, and it was quite time, for the agony was greater than I seemed to be able to bear. And there was the bright glow of light, and the eyes gazing down into mine, not with the malignant glare of a serpent, but in a pleasant, friendly way.

It was morning, and on one side the tent wall had been lifted, so that the place was flooded with the clear, soft, early sunshine, and the place was sweet with the fresh, cool air which came with the dawn even in that hot land.

It was my attendant bending over me, and he said quietly—

“My lord was restless, and sleeping ill. The tent was hot, and the great drops were on his face, so I opened the side to let in the light.”

He ceased speaking, and I uttered a sigh of relief as all the feverish vision of the night passed away, the sensation of rest and comfort growing stronger as he clapped his hands, and the other men came in bearing a large brass basin full of cool fresh water, with which my face was bathed with all the care and solicitude that would have been shown by a woman.

Then followed my medicine, and, soon after, coffee and sweet cakes, preparatory to a real breakfast later on, to which I found that I could pay greater attention, eating so that the man smiled with satisfaction.

“My lord is getting well,” he said. And I gave my head a feeble nod.

“Tell me whereabouts we are,” I said at last.

He shook his head. “I am only to tell you that you are in my lord the rajah’s care,” he replied.

“Well, I can guess,” I replied. “I can hear nothing of people; there is no town near; and I know from the noises made by birds and beasts, and by the coming of those serpents, that we must be in the forest. I am at some hunting-station, I suppose. Look here,” I continued, as the man remained silent, “tell me where the English soldiers are.”

“I cannot, my lord. I do not know,” he replied.

“It is of no use to ask you anything,” I cried pettishly. “Yes, it is; you can tell me this—what is your name?”

“Salaman, my lord,” he replied, with a smile.

“Humph!” I said sourly, for I was getting into an invalid’s tetchy, weary state. “Salaman! why couldn’t they call you Solomon? That’s the proper way to pronounce it.”

“My lord can call me Solomon,” he said quietly.

“Of course I can,” I said, “and I will. Then look here, Solomon, did you bury that great snake?”

“Yes, my lord, as soon as it was light, and the others found and killed its mate. They are now dead, and covered with the earth.”

“That’s right. No fear of their getting out?” I added, as I remembered my dream.

He laughed and shook his head.

“Tell me this too; the rajah, will he be here to-day?”

“Who can say, my lord? His highness is master, and he goes and comes as he pleases. Perhaps he will come, perhaps he will not. I never know.”

“The doctor, then; will he be here?”

“Oh yes, my lord, and soon.”

He left the tent, and I lay thinking again, ready to quarrel with everything, for my arm pained me, and my head felt stiff and sore.

“I wish he’d speak in a plain, matter-of-fact way,” I grumbled to myself. “I’m sick of being ‘my lorded’ and bowed down to. I always feel as if I could kick a fellow over when he bows down to me as if I were one of their precious idols.”

Then I laughed to myself long and heartily, for I knew that I must be getting better by my irritable ways. And now I forced myself into thinking about our position as English rulers of the land, and wondered whether it would be possible for our power to be overthrown. Then came on a feverish desire to know where Brace was, and in what kind of condition his men were, and those of the colonel.

“It seems hard that they do not come and try to rescue me,” I thought. “Brace would come fast enough,” I added spitefully, “if I were a gun.”

This idea seemed so comic in its disagreeable tone, and so thoroughly due to my state of weakness and unreason, that I laughed silently.

“How precious ill-tempered I am!” I said to myself.

A moment later I was wondering about the fate of those dear to me at Nussoor—whether my father was still there, and whether there had been any rising in his neighbourhood.

Directly after I came to the conclusion that his regiment would certainly have been called away, and I hoped that he had made arrangements for my mother and sister to go back to England; and then I was marvelling at the rapid way in which my thoughts ran excitedly from one subject to the other.

“It is all through being so weak, I suppose,” I said to myself; and then I began eagerly to listen, for I could hear trampling.

Feeling certain that it was the rajah, and making up my mind to speak quietly to him, and ask him to try and exchange me for some other prisoner, I lay with my eyes fixed upon the open side of the tent, to see directly after the tall, stately figure of the grey-bearded physician, who came to my side in his customary sedate fashion, and knelt down to examine and dress my injuries, which he declared to be in a perfectly satisfactory state. But, all the same, they pained me a great deal during the time he was unbandaging and covering them afresh.

I plied him with questions all the time—as to how long it would be before I was well; how soon I might sit up; how soon I might go out in a palanquin, and the like; all of which he answered in the same grave way, but when I turned the question to the state of the country, and asked for information about our troop, and the late battle, he shook his head and smiled gravely.

“I am the rajah’s physician,” he said, “and my duties are with the sick. I can tell you no more.”

“But tell me this,” I said eagerly; “where are our people now?”

“I only know about my own people,” he replied, with a smile. “You are one of them, and you are troubling your brain about matters that you cannot deal with now, so be at rest.”

I made an impatient gesture, and he laid his hand upon my brow, saying gently—

“Be at rest. You will learn all these things in time. You have but one duty now—to get well.”

There was only one other resource left to me—to get an answer somehow from the rajah when he came; and upon the doctor leaving, I lay there impatiently listening for the visitor who would, I was sure, come before long, though whether I should get my information appeared doubtful indeed.

Chapter Thirty Two.

The days passed slowly by, and one hour I was horribly dejected by the dulness of my existence, the next cheery and in high spirits, as I felt that I was getting stronger, and in less pain. It was very lonely lying there, but many things put me in mind of the “Arabian Nights”—the fine tent, with the shadows of the trees upon its roof; the silent servants who might very well have been slaves, so eager were they to respond to the slightest call, and so silent in their obedience; the soft glow of the lamp on the rich curtain and carpets; and the pleasant little banquets which were spread for me with silver vessels to drink from, and gilded baskets full of rare fruits or flowers.

At times, as I sat propped up, able now to feed myself, I used to begin by enjoying the meal, but before I had half finished the flowers looked dull, and the fruit tasted flat, for I told myself that, after all, I was only a prisoner, a bird in a gilded cage, broken winged and helpless.

The doctor came nearly every day, and told me that I was to ask for everything I wished for, as he preferred that I should wait until the rajah had been again before I went out.

“And when is he coming again?” I asked impatiently.

“I can only say when his highness pleases,” replied the doctor, with a grave smile. “But I will give orders for something to be done to please you; to-morrow a couch shall be made for you outside the tent.”

That was something, and only one who has been wounded and lain hot and restless upon a couch alone can judge of the eagerness with which I looked forward to the next day.

It came at last, and after trying very hard to comport myself with the dignity becoming a British officer, the fact that I was almost the youngest in the Company’s service would come out, and I suddenly burst out with—

“I say, Salaman, when is this couch outside to be ready?”

“It is ready, my lord,” he said. “I was awaiting your commands.”

“Oh!” I mentally exclaimed, “what a fool I am! Why don’t I act like a real ‘my lord,’ and order these people about more?”

Then aloud, with importance—

“Is it shady where you have placed it?”

He shook his head.

“What!” I cried angrily. “You have put it in the sun?”

“No, my lord; it is under a great tree.”

“Why, I asked you if it was shady,” I cried; and then it occurred to me that, in spite of my studies at Brandscombe and out here, my Hindustani was very imperfect, for the man smiled in a deprecatory way which seemed to mean that he hoped my lord would not be angry with him for not understanding his words.

“Take me out now,” I said.

Salaman clapped his hands softly, and the two men I knew by sight entered at once, followed by two more whom I had not previously seen. These four, at a word from my attendant, advanced to stand two at the head, two at the foot of my couch.

“Tell them to be very careful how they lift me,” I said; “and have some water ready in case I turn faint.”

For I had a painful recollection of the horrible sensation of sickness which attacked me sometimes when the doctor was moving me a little in dressing my wounded arm; and, eager as I was to go out in the open air, I could not help shrinking at the thought of being moved, so as the four men stooped I involuntarily set my teeth and shut my eyes, with a determination not to show the pain I should be in.

To my astonishment and delight, instead of taking hold of me, the four men at a word softly rolled over the sides of the rug upon which my couch was made, until it was pretty close to my side, when they seized the firm roll, lifted together, and I was borne out through the open side of the tent, so lightly and with such elasticity of arm and hand, that instead of being a pain it was a pleasure, and I opened my eyes at once.

I was very eager to see where I was, and what the country was like all round. In fact, I had a slight hope that I should be able to recognise some point or another, even if it were only one of the mountains.

But my hopes sank at once, for as we passed from out of the shadow of the tent and into the beautiful morning sunshine I could see trees, and trees only, shutting me in on every side, the tents being pitched partly under a small banyan, or baobab tree, and standing in an irregular opening of about a couple of acres in extent, while the dense verdure rose like a wall all around.

I could not help sighing with disappointment; and, at a sign from Salaman, the bearers stopped while he held the cup he had taken from a stand to my lips.

“No, no,” I said; “not now. Let them go on.”

He signed to the bearers, and they stepped off again all together, and the next moment almost they stopped in a delightful spot beneath the spreading boughs of a tree, where carpets were spread and pillows already so arranged that the men had only to lower down the rug they bore, and I was reclining where the soft wind blew, and flowers and fresh fruits were waiting ready to my hand.

In spite of my disappointment, there was a delightful feeling of satisfaction in resting down there on the soft cushions, able to see the bright sky and drink in the fresh air which seemed a hundred times better than that which floated in through the side of the tent; and when Salaman bent over me anxiously with the cup of cool water in his hand, the smile I gave him quieted his dread lest I should faint.

The four men glided away into the shadow of the trees, but after a minute I saw them reappear in front and glide silently into a long, low tent, standing at a little distance from the one I had left, and beyond which I could see another.

But my eyes did not rest long on the tents, for there were the glistening leaves of the trees and the clustering flowers which hung in wreaths and tangles of vines from their spreading boughs, all giving me plenty of objects of attraction without counting the brightly plumaged birds, which flitted here and there at will; while just then a flock of brilliant little parrots flew into the largest tree, and began climbing and hanging about the twigs, as if for my special recreation.

I had seen such places scores of times, but they never attracted my attention so before, neither had I given much consideration to the brilliant scarlet passion flowers that dotted the edge of the forest, or the beautiful soft lilac-pink cloud of blossoms, where a bougainvillea draped a low tree.

So lovely everything seemed that I felt my eyes grow moist and then half close in a dreamy ecstasy, so delicious was that silence, only broken by the cries of the birds.

I must have lain there for some time, drinking in strength from the soft air, now rapidly growing warmer, when I started out of my dreamy state, for I heard a familiar sound which set my heart beating, bringing me back as it did to my position—that of a prisoner of a war so horrible that I shuddered as I recalled all I had seen and heard.

The sound was coming closer fast, and hope rose like a bright gleam to chase away the clouds, as I thought it possible that the trampling I heard might be from the horses of friends; but as quickly came a sense of dread lest it might be a squadron of bloodthirsty sowars, and if so my minutes were numbered.

“What folly!” I said to myself, with a sigh; “it is the rajah’s escort.” And a few minutes later the advance rode in through an opening among the trees at the far end, bringing the blood rushing to my heart as I recognised the long white dress of a native cavalry regiment, one that had joined the mutineers, and, as I fancied then, that which had been stationed at Rajgunge. Immediately after, as they drew off to right and left, the rajah himself rode in, turning his horse toward the tent, dismounting and throwing the rein to one of his escort, he was about to enter, but Salaman and the four bearers stepped up salaaming profoundly, and the chief turned in my direction, to stride across the opening, with the sun flashing from the jewels and brilliant arms he wore.

By the time he reached my couch, the men, horse and foot, had withdrawn, so that we were alone as he bent down, offering his hand, but without any response from me, and the smile on his handsome face died out to give way to a frown.

That passed away as quickly, and with his countenance quite calm, he said in excellent English—

“Not to the enemy, but to your host.”

“I beg your pardon, rajah,” I said; and I could feel the colour coming into my cheeks as I felt how ungrateful I was to the man who had saved my life, and was sparing nothing to restore me to health.

My hand was stretched out as I spoke, but it remained untouched for a few moments.

“It will not be a friendly grasp,” he said coldly.

“Indeed it will,” I cried; “for you have saved those who love me from a terrible time of sorrow.”

“Those who love you?” he said, taking my hand and holding it.

“Yes; mother, father, sister.”

“Ah, yes,” he said; “of course. You have friends at home in England?”

“No: here,” I said.

He did not speak for a few moments, and still retaining my hand, sank down cross-legged on the carpet close to my pillow, gazing at me thoughtfully.

Then, with the smile coming back to light up his face in a way which made me forget he was a deadly enemy, he said cheerfully—

“I am glad to see this. I knew you were better, and now you must grow strong quickly.”

He held my hand still, and let the other glide on my arm, shaking his head the while.

“This will not do,” he continued. “You always were slight and boyish, but the strength has gone from your arm, and your cheeks are all sunken and white.”

“Yes, I am very weak,” I said faintly, and with a bitter feeling of misery at my helplessness.

“Of course. Such wounds as yours would have killed many strong men. It was a terribly keen cut. The wonder is that it did not take off your arm. As it is, you nearly bled to death.”

“Don’t talk about it,” I said, with a slight shudder; “it is healing now, and after lying so long thinking, I want to forget my wounds.”

“Of course. Let us talk about something else. Tell me,” he said gently, “do your servants attend you well?”

“Yes; they do everything I could wish for.”

“Is there anything you want? I have been a long time without coming.”

“Yes,” I said; but hesitated to make the request that rose to my lips, and deferred it for the moment; “where have you been?”

His eyes brightened, and he gave me a curious look. Then, gravely—

“Fighting.”

I winced, for his manner suggested that he had been successful, and I knew what that meant.

“Don’t look like that,” he said kindly. “You are a soldier, and know that only one side can win. You and yours have carried all before you for many years; it is our turn now.”

“But only for a little while,” I said quietly. “You must be beaten in the end.”

“Indeed!” he said, frowning, but turning it off with a laugh. “Oh no; we carry everything before us now, and we shall be free once more.”

My brows knit, and I tried to say something, but only words which I felt would anger him seemed to come to my lips, and after watching me, he smiled.

“You do not agree with me, of course?” he said. “How could you? But you did not tell me if there was anything you wanted,” he continued pleasantly.

I looked in his eyes, then my own wandered over him and his dress; and as he sat there by my pillow, looking every inch an Eastern king, the scene once more suggested some passage out of the “Arabian Nights,” and there was an unreality about it that closed my lips.

Just then my eyes rested upon the beautiful tulwar that he had drawn across his knees when he sat down. It was a magnificent weapon, such as a cunning Indian or Persian cutler and jeweller would devote months of his life in making; for the hilt was of richly chased silver inlaid with gold, while costly jewels were set wherever a place could be found, and the golden sheath was completely encrusted with pearls. It must have been worth a little fortune; and,

while my eyes rested upon the gorgeous weapon, he smiled, and drew it nearly from the sheath, when I could see the beautifully damascened and inlaid blade, upon which there was an inscription in Sanscrit characters.

“There is no better nor truer steel,” he said, turning it over, so that I could see the other side of the blade. “Get strength back in your arm, and you could kill an enemy with that at a blow. You like it?”

“It is magnificent.”

He quickly unfastened the splendid belt, twisted it round the weapon, and held it to me.

“It is yours, then,” he said. “You are weak from your wound, but you are still a soldier at heart. I give it gladly to my dear friend.”

“No, no,” I cried excitedly, surprised now at the strength of my voice, as startled by the richness of the gift, and ashamed that he should think I wanted it, I thrust it back, and he frowned.

“You refuse it?” he said. “Is it not enough?”

“You do not understand me,” I said. “I could not take such a rich present.”

“Not from your friend?” he cried, interrupting me.

“Well, yes, if he had thought of giving it to me,” I said; “but you fancied I wanted it, and I did not. It was not that; it was something else.”

“Ah,” he cried eagerly, “something else. Well, ask. I am very rich; I am a prince now, not your brother-officer’s syce. Tell me, and it is yours.”

I was silent, and after a few moments’ thought, he continued—

“I know; it is my horse. Well, I love him, but I give him gladly. He is yours. Get well quickly, and you shall ride.”

“No, no, rajah,” I cried, unable to repress a feeling of emotion at his generosity, which was indeed princely; “indeed it was not that.”

He looked at me gently, and said slowly—

“Name what you wish;” and he passed his hand over the great emeralds and diamonds sparkling about his throat, breast, and turban.

I involuntarily followed his hand as it played about the gems, conscious the while that, in spite of his gentle smile, he was watching me very keenly.

“Is it any or all of these?” he said. “I will give them freely to my friend.”

“No,” I cried eagerly; “it is something greater to me than all you have offered.”

“And what is that?” he said, with his eyes half-closed.

“Give me my liberty, and let me go to my friends.”

He took my extended hand and held it, as he said softly—

“I have been told that some of you English are great and good. Men who cannot be tempted by riches; who would not take from another any gift unless it was some little token—a ring of silver or plain gold; but I never met one before. I called you my friend; I felt from the first that you were noble and great of heart; now I know it ten times more, and I am glad. I should have given you everything I wear if it would have pleased you; but I should have felt sorry, for my friend would not have been so great as I wished.”

“Then you will give me what I ask?”

“Your liberty?” he said, smiling. “My poor brave boy, you do not know what you ask.”

“Yes,” I cried. “As soon as I am strong. I am grateful, and will never think of you as an enemy; always as a friend. You will let me go?”

“No,” he said gravely, “I could not lose my friend.”

“No?” I cried passionately. “Is this your friendship?”

“Yes,” he said, holding the hand firmly which I tried to snatch away, but with a poor feeble effort. “Say I gave you leave to go. Where would you make for? The country is all changed. Our men scour it in all directions, and your freedom would mean your death.”

“Is this true?” I cried piteously, as his words told me that our cause was lost.

“I could not lie to my friend,” he said. “Yes, it is true. The Company’s and the English Queen’s troops are driven back, while our rajahs and maharajahs are gathering their forces all through the land. No; I cannot give you liberty. It means sending you to your death; for I am, perhaps, the only chief in this great country who would take you by the

hand and call you friend."

He ceased speaking, and I lay back, feeling that his words must be true, and that hope was indeed dead now.

"There," he said, "I have done. Your bearers are coming. I will go now, and return soon. Come, you are a soldier, and must not repine at your fate. Give me your hand, and accept your fall as a soldier should. Rest and be patient. Good-bye, more than ever my friend."

I believe I pressed his hand in return as he held it in his, and laid his left upon my brow, smiling down at me. Then in a low whisper he said, as softly as a woman could have spoken—

"You are weak, and need sleep." He drew his hand over my eyes, and they closed at his touch, a feeling of exhaustion made me yield, my will seeming to be gone, and when I opened them again, Salaman was kneeling by me, waiting with two of the attendants standing near holding trays of food. "Have I been asleep?" I said. "Yes, my lord. Long hours."

"And the rajah? Did he come, or was it a dream?" I added to myself.

"The great rajah came, and went while my lord slept. It is time he ate and drank, for he is still weak."

"Yes," I replied, as I recalled all that had passed—"so weak, so very weak, that this man seems to master even my very will."

Chapter Thirty Three.

The doctor came the next day, and did not seem satisfied; the fact being that, on awakening, my mind was all on the fret. For I was always face to face with the thought of what had become of my mother and sister at Nussoor. Of course I sorrowed, too, about my father's fate; but I was not so anxious about him. He was a soldier, with some hundreds of trusty Englishmen at his back, and I knew that he would be ready to meet any difficulties.

Then there was Brace to fidget about, and my other friends of the troop. I wanted to know whether they had been scattered, as Ny Deen had assured me, and whether the English rule really was coming to an end.

"He thinks so," I said; "but I will not believe it yet."

Then I worried about being a prisoner, and with no prospect of getting free. It was very pleasant to be waited on, and treated as the rajah's friend, and there were times when I almost wondered at myself for refusing the costly gifts he had offered. But I soon ceased wondering, and began to feel that jewelled swords and magnificent horses were worthless to one who was a prisoner.

The days passed drearily by in spite of bright sunshine and breezes and delicious fruits, with every attention a convalescent could wish for. By degrees I reached the stage when I was borne out through the shady edge of the forest in a palanquin, plenty of bearers being forthcoming when needed, and then disappearing again, leaving me wondering whence they came, and how far away the rajah's principal city might be.

Everything I asked for was obtained directly; but I was a prisoner, and not the slightest information could I get. The only inkling I had of my whereabouts was obtained one day when I was being borne along in the shade by my bearers, with Salaman at my side. They halted at the edge of what was almost a precipice, to give me a view through an opening of a far-spreading plain at a considerable depth below; and this taught me at once that I had been placed, of course by the rajah's command, in the shady forest somewhere on a mountain slope, where the air was comparatively cool, and where I was far more likely to recover than in some crowded city in the broiling plains.

That was all that the view down the precipitous slope taught me. I could not recognise a single landmark, and returned to my prison-tent as low-spirited as ever.

It must have been a day or two after, when I was making my first essays in walking, that, unexpectedly as usual, the rajah came riding in among the trees quite alone, and as he drew rein, smiling, close to where I was standing, I could not help envying him the strength and ease with which he managed his splendid charger.

He was quite simply dressed on this occasion, and his appearance indicated that he must have ridden far.

As we shook hands, I was wondering that he should have come without any escort, but just then I heard the snort of a horse at some distance, which made the beautiful arab by my side throw up his head and challenge loudly, when two more horses answered, and I felt that I had been premature in thinking the country so peaceful and free from troops that the rajah could ride alone.

He swung himself down, and a man sprang forward to lead away the horse, while, taking my arm, the rajah led me to the cushioned carpets spread beneath the tree, looking at me smilingly the while.

"Come," he said; "this is better; up and walking. You look different, too. Why, I might venture to send your horse over for you to try and mount, but not yet."

"Why not yet?" I said, as we sat down among the cushions.

"For several reasons," he replied, smiling at me. "I want to see you stronger."

"But I think I could mount now; and, at a gentle walk, the exercise would do me good."

“Perhaps,” he said; “but we must see.”

He clapped his hands, and Salaman glided up.

“Bring coffee and a pipe,” he said.

Salaman bowed and retired.

“I have ridden far,” he said to me, “and am tired.”

“Tell me about the state of the country,” I said eagerly, after we had sat some moments in silence.

“It is not peaceful yet,” he replied. “The English are making a little struggle here and there. They do not like to give up the land they have held so long.”

We were silent again, and Salaman and the two servants I had seen most often, came up, bearing a tray with coffee, a long snake pipe, and a little pan of burning charcoal. A minute after the pipe was lit, and the great amber mouthpiece handed to the rajah, who took it after sipping his coffee, and the men retired as he began to smoke, gazing at me the while.

“It is useless,” he said at last. “A lost cause.”

I sat frowning and thinking that he did not understand Englishmen yet, or he would not talk of our cause being lost.

“Well,” he said at last, “I am very glad to see you getting so strong. In another fortnight you will be well enough to come back to the city.”

“What city?” I asked.

“Mine. To my palace,” he replied proudly; but he turned off his haughty manner directly, and continued. “I have had rooms set apart for you, and a certain number of servants, so that you will be quite free, and not dependent upon me.”

“Free!” I cried, catching that one word; it had such a delightful ring. “Then you will let me go as soon as I have visited you at your palace.”

“To be cut down—slain, after I have taken such pains to save your life?” he said, with a smile.

“Oh, I am very grateful for all that,” I cried hastily; “but you must feel that even if they are unfortunate, my place is with my own people.”

“No,” he said quietly, as he went on smoking and gazing straight away at the densely foliaged trees. “I cannot feel that. For I know that it would be folly for you to return to meet your death. It would be impossible for you to get across the plains to the nearest place where your people are trying to hold out. Even if you could get there, the army besieging them would take you, and no one there could save your life.”

“Let me try,” I said.

He shook his head.

“It would be madness. If I let you have your horse now, you would try some such folly.”

“You call it a folly,” I replied. “I call it my duty.”

“To rush on your death? Look here, my friend; why do you want to get back? To take up your old position as a junior officer?”

“Yes, of course!”

“I thought so,” he said, with animation, and his eyes flashed as he went on. “You are young and ardent. You wish to rise and become the chief of a troop of artillery?”

“Of course,” I said.

“And some day a general, to command others?”

“I hope so—a long way ahead,” I replied, smiling.

“Of course. I knew it,” he said, as he let fall the tube of his pipe, and grasped my arm. “It would be long years before you could command a troop?”

“Oh yes—long, long years.”

“And you would be quite an old man before you became a general?”

“Perhaps never,” I said, wondering at his eagerness, and yet feeling something akin to a suspicion of his aim.

“Then why wish to go?” he said, with a smile.

“Why wish to go?” I replied. “I do not understand you.”

“I say, why wish to go and compete with hundreds of others who would not understand you, and any one of whom might carry off the prize—when you can stay with me?”

“Stay with you! What for?” I faltered.

“I will make you a general, now—at once,” he said excitedly, “and ten thousand men shall bend down before their Moslem rajah’s friend, who, from this time forward, will lead and direct my artillery.”

“Rajah!” I exclaimed, surprised but not surprised, for I had half expected some such proposal, but of course only in a very minor form.

“Look here, Vincent,” he continued, bending forward, and speaking excitedly. “When I came to your barracks as a humble syce, it was to learn everything about your guns, and the way in which the horse artillery was trained. In those days, beaten, kicked, trampled upon, I always had you in my mind, and I watched you, how quick, how clever, and how brave you were. My heart warmed to you even then; but as I have grown to know you better and seen what you are in the field in action with your men, I have said again and again that there could be no one better for my trusted friend and general.”

I laughed, though a curious feeling came over me that the man who would make me such a proposal must be mad.

“Why do you laugh?” he said. “Are you pleased at what I propose?”

“Pleased? No,” I said frankly. “You are laughing at me—making fun of me.”

He frowned.

“Is it so trifling a thing, that I should laugh over it?”

“No, it is not a trifling matter; but it seems to be trifling with me to propose such a thing. You cannot be in earnest.”

“I am in earnest, and it is wise,” he said sternly.

“But it is an appointment for an old, experienced man, and I suppose that I am a mere boy.”

“The great Company thought you old enough to take charge of their guns,” he said gravely.

“Yes, but with older officers over me.”

“Well; I shall be over you; but you will have full charge of all my cannons. You understand them thoroughly.”

“Of course I know a little about them.”

“Little!” he cried. “It is magnificent. Have I not seen you often? Did I not see you carry them off after I had captured them, and was training my men? but slowly—oh, so slowly.”

“You forget that I was only a junior officer acting under my captain’s orders. It is nonsense, and you are saying all this to make me vain, to flatter me.”

“I never stoop to flatter,” he said coldly. “It is the truth. Yes, you are young, but you will soon grow older and more experienced, and train my men till they have all the speed of yours. Do you tell me that you could not drill and teach my soldiers?”

“Oh no, I do not tell you that,” I said frankly, “because I could.”

“Yes; of course you could, and it will be a proud position for you.”

“What! as a British officer in the service of a rajah?”

“Yes; I could tell you of a dozen cases where an English soldier has drilled his master’s forces as you will drill them, for I must have large troops of horse artillery like you had. You shall be in command.”

I looked hard at him, for even then I felt that he must be joking with me, the proposal seemed to be so out of all reason, and I had so small an estimate of my own powers, that there were moments when I felt ready to laugh, and felt sure that if Brace, serious as he was, had heard it, he would have burst into a hearty fit of mirth.

But the rajah’s face was grave and stern, and his words were full of the calm conviction that I was the very person to take the command of his men and train them as he wished.

As he sat gazing at me, waiting for me to accept his proposal, I tried to treat it in all seriousness, as if quietly discussing the matter with him.

“Do I understand you rightly?” I said; “that you wish me to be your chief artillery officer?”

“Yes, that is it,” he said, “to arrange everything, and above all to get up as quickly as possible three or four troops of horse artillery. You know exactly how it should be done, and could teach the men till they were as quick and dashing as your own.”

“It would require Englishmen then,” I thought, for I could not see that it was possible with Indians.

“Would it take very long?” he said. “You could start with men from the cavalry, and so only have to teach them gun-drill.”

“Yes, it would take very long,” I said.

“Never mind; they would get better every day. I should be satisfied, for I know what you can do.”

“Why do you wish to have these troops?” I said, more for the sake of keeping back my reply than for anything else.

“Why? To make me strong,” he cried excitedly. “With men like that, and the quick-firing guns, I shall be more powerful than any of the rajahs near. But you hesitate; you do not say yes.”

I looked at him sadly.

“Come,” he continued, “at your age there should not be any hanging back. Have you thought what it means?”

“You have taken me so by surprise,” I replied.

“Oh yes; but can you not see that I make you at once a great man? one whom I trust in everything, and who will be next in my country to myself? Come, speak. You will accept?”

His eyes were fixed upon me searchingly, and I felt that I must speak now, though I trembled for the effect my words would have upon such a determined, relentless man, accustomed to have his will in all things.

“There are plenty of men more suited to the task than I am,” I said with a last attempt to put off the final words.

“Where?” he said, coldly. “Bring me a thousand older and more experienced than you, and I should refuse them all.”

“Why?”

“Because I like and trust you, and know that you would be faithful.”

“Then,” I cried, snatching at the chance of escape, “if you knew I should be faithful, why did you propose such a thing?”

“I do not understand you,” he said coldly.

“I am one of the Company’s officers, sworn to be true to my duties. How can I break my oath? I should be a traitor, and worthy of death.”

“You have been faithful,” he said quietly. “I knew you would say that. But the tie is broken now.”

“No; not while I am in their service.”

“You are no longer in their service,” he said, watching me intently the while. “The great Company is dead; its troops are defeated, scattered, and in a short time there will hardly be a white man left in the land over which they have tyrannised so long.”

I sank back staring at him wildly, for his words carried conviction, and setting aside the horrors that such a state of affairs suggested, and the terrible degradation for England, I began thinking of myself cut off from all I knew, separated from my people, perhaps for ever, asked to identify myself with the enemies of my country—become, in short, a renegade.

“It sounds terrible to you,” he said gravely; “but you must accept it, and be content. It is your fate.”

“No,” I cried passionately, “it is impossible. I cannot.”

“Why?” he said coldly. “Have I not promised you enough?”

“Yes, more than enough,” I cried; and nerved myself with recollections of all my old teachings, and my duty as an officer and a gentleman. “It is not a question of rewards, but of honour. You ask me to train your men, who have risen up against their rulers, to fight against my people.”

“No,” he said; “your people are conquered. It is more to strengthen me against those who will be jealous of my power—to make me strong.”

“Oh, I could do that.”

“Then you accept?” he said eagerly.

“No; I could not, unless it was by the command of those whose commission I hold.”

“Wait. Think about it,” he said gravely, as he rose with an impatient gesture, and a heavy frown upon his brow.

But it passed off quickly, and he turned and offered me his hand.

“Good-bye,” he said quietly. “I am not angry; I like you the more. If you had said ‘yes’ quickly, and been dazzled by the thoughts of becoming a great officer, with show, and grand horses, and attendants, I should have shrunk within myself, and said, ‘You are wrong. He is only mean and vain like others. He is not worthy of your trust.’ I know now

that you are worthy, and you must come to me and be more than friend—my brother and chief counsellor. For I mean to be great among my people here, and raise up a grand nation from those who have been trampled down so long. This is a mighty country, Vincent, and should be ruled over by one who can make himself great."

He shook hands and left the shelter of the tree, while as he stepped out into the sunshine the man who had been holding his horse ran forward quickly as if he had been on the watch, and the rajah mounted and rode away, the trampling I heard directly after telling my educated ears that he must have a pretty good escort after all.

Chapter Thirty Four.

I went back to my tent directly after, glad to lie down and think of my position, and to try and work out some course to follow when the rajah came back, as I felt convinced he would in a very few days.

I felt that he must like me. His manners proved that; but the liking might be very shallow, while beneath it all the reasons—the true reasons—were very deep.

This, then, was why he had brought me here, and had me so carefully nursed back to life. It was because I was young, and could easily weld myself into the life of those about me, and with my knowledge, and whatever adaptability and knowledge I possessed as a gunner, I was to be henceforth devoted to his service—to use his expression—to make him strong.

I don't think I was vain, for my thoughts had agreed here, as I said to myself that I was clever as an artilleryman. No, it was not vanity, for I was strong in my drill, for the simple reason that I was ready to ride anywhere at anything, when I joined, and because I was so devoted to my profession, and thoroughly gloried in keeping those with whom I had to do perfect in every evolution they had to perform.

And as I lay there—a mere boy, suddenly called upon to undertake such a tremendous task, I calmly said to myself—

"Yes; I suppose I could drill up a lot of his men, who can ride, into decent gunners in time; and it would be very pleasant to be a great man, and the rajah's favourite; but it is impossible. I could not undertake it. I should deserve to have the lace stripped from my uniform before all the men, and then to be kicked out of the service.

"What shall I do?" I said, as I lay there. "He will try first to persuade me; then he will threaten, in spite of his smooth way, for he can be fierce enough, that's plain. If he does, shall I have strength enough to hold out, and refuse to promise; or shall I, at last, quite in despair, give way and act as he wishes?"

I lay, going over it all, for a long while, and at last came to the despairing conclusion that there was only one way out of the difficulty, for, in my position, I doubted my powers of holding out—only one way, and that was to escape.

This idea roused me for a few minutes, but I felt despondent again very soon, as I recalled all that he had said about the white man being driven from the land; and I asked myself, as I thought of escaping, "Where to?"

Hope came directly after, and I knew enough of the eastern character to say that these people exaggerated and talked in flowery language; and why should not the rajah, Ny Deen, be acting in the same way?

"It isn't true," I said half aloud. "He thinks it is, or wishes it may be; but England will not give up like that. She is too strong, and has too much at stake. He cannot tell. For aught he knows, poor Brace may be a few miles away with our brave lads ready to knock his palace about his ears, and make him prisoner in turn."

I was just thinking that I should not like him to be made prisoner in turn, for I knew that it meant death, and I was beginning to plan how I should set about making my escape as soon as I felt sufficiently strong, when the heat and my weakness combined to send me off into a heavy sleep, one of the many that I indulged in during those days, not from idleness, for I suppose it was natural while my nerves and muscles were slowly building themselves up once more.

Chapter Thirty Five.

I worried and fretted a great deal about that proposal of the rajah's, but I firmly declared that it was quite impossible, however tempting to my vanity. How could I become officer over a set of cowardly, mutinous, murderous scoundrels, even if I had been set free to undertake the task; and in my most bitter times I told myself that I would far rather turn the guns upon such a crew than teach them to work them.

I fully expected the rajah to come to me the next day, but he did not, and a week had gone by, during which time, although I was growing stronger, it was not so fast as it would have been had I felt free.

And then came a night when I was very low indeed. The monotony of my life in that solitary place affected my spirits terribly. They were already weak enough, consequent upon my hurts; but that time I was so depressed that I prayed that the rajah might not come, lest I should accept his proposal as a means of escape from a life which, in spite of the constant attention I received, had grown unbearable. It made me so irritable to the attendants that they shrank from coming near more often than they could help, and I saw Salaman look at me sometimes as if he thought that I should develop into a tyrant also, or would be a danger to those who served.

"I know what it is," I muttered to myself that night. "He is waiting on purpose so as to catch me in some weak moment, when I am utterly tired out of this wretched prison, and ready to say yes."

My wretched prison, be it remembered, was a luxurious tent, with men who were like so many slaves about me ready to obey my slightest wish; but I was miserable, of course, all the same.

It had grown dark rapidly that evening, and there was a curious sensation of heat in the air, great puffs coming as if from off heated metal. Then there were distant flashes of lightning, and faint mutterings which I knew portended a storm; and, as it drew near, I felt a kind of satisfaction in wishing that it would be very bad, for I was just in the frame of mind, no doubt from being weak and easily affected by the electricity in the atmosphere, to welcome anything for a change.

“I hope it will come a regular roarer,” I said to myself as I lay on my back with my wounds aching, and the faint blue of the lightning making my lamp look dim.

“Wish it would blow the tents all down, and scare the black scoundrels right away.”

A sensible wish, for in my weak state it meant exposure, a drenching, and probably a feverish attack; but I was in an unreasoning fit, and ready for anything absurd just then.

After a time, there was the rush of wind through the trees, and the side of the tent flapped like a filling sail on board ship.

“It’s coming,” I said, with a laugh; and then I thought of the torrents of rain that would now begin to fall, and called to mind that twice over there had been very heavy rains, but that the double canvas roof had turned it all away.

Then there was a lull, followed by a pattering of rain, and I heard the men go round and tighten the cords, while Salaman came in and secured the tent door, pausing to ask me if he should bring me anything, but I was too ill-tempered to answer him, and I suppose he thought I was asleep, for he went out very softly.

Then, with a rush, down came the storm, with the water rushing in sheets, and beating against the tent, off which I could hear it streaming, while it was lit up almost constantly by the blue glare of the lightning. Next came the thunder, deafening roar after roar, to which I listened with satisfaction, for it was a change.

But the change soon grew as monotonous as my prison life. The rain poured down, there were fierce rushes of wind, blinding flashes of lightning, and deafening peals of thunder; but the tents were not blown down, they were too well sheltered by the huge trees around, and as the rain brought a feeling of coolness, I began to grow more sensible, and to feel glad that no catastrophe had happened. I must have dropped asleep, to wake up with a start and the recollection of my visitation from the serpents. I could see nothing, and my heart seemed to cease beating as I recalled the habits of the creatures, how, drowned out of their holes by such a storm, they would seek shelter in houses, and here was one wet, cold creature with its head playing over my face, and from there gliding down my arm to my hand, which it seized, the jaws closing upon my fingers while I lay, unable in my horror to call for help.

Then my confusion and horror mingled passed off, and a curious sensation of exultation came over me, for it was all fancy about the serpent. The lamp was out, the tent in total darkness, and that which I had felt was a hand gliding over my face, and from thence to my hand, into which it had pressed something.

At that moment I heard a rustling to my left, and sounds to my right, the tent door was thrown open, and I could just make out the figure of Salaman, as he uttered an ejaculation at the darkness, and hurried across to the stand, where he paused to strike a light, the lamp having by some accident gone out.

The light of the match he had struck illuminated the tent, and I glanced sharply round, but no one else was visible; and as I lay wondering, and ready to believe it all fancy, there was what felt like a note crushed in my hand, and Salaman was busy about the tent.

“Is my lord asleep?” he said softly.

“No,” I replied.

“When my lord wishes the lamp to be turned out, so that he may look at the lightning, if he calls his servant will come.”

“Yes; thank you,” I said. And then I lay thinking, my heart thumping heavily the while.

Somebody—a friend, then—had crept into the tent and turned out the lamp, before trying to give me the note.

But was it a note?

It felt like it, as I held it tightly in my hand, longing now for the man to go, but afraid to say a word to send him away, for fear I should raise his suspicions in the slightest degree, and induce him to rouse his companions and watch, or go round the tent at a time when I felt sure that the bearer of the note was hiding just outside.

Oh, how long it seemed, and what a number of petty, trifling little things Salaman did before he moved toward the doorway of the tent!

I do not think he did more than was his custom; but this time I fancied he suspected something wrong, and was watching me.

I was quite right. He was watching me intently; and I turned hot and trembled, for it would be horrible, I felt, if help was near, to have it discovered by this man, who was thoroughly devoted to the rajah’s interests, and who would, I felt sure, have to answer with his head if I escaped through his neglect.

He came nearer to me, and I was afraid he would read the anxiety in my face; and yet I dared not turn it round and away from him, for fear of making him suspect me more, so I lay gazing straight at him.

“Would my lord like a cool drink?” he asked.

“No,” I replied; “not now.”

“My lord’s voice is changed!” he cried excitedly. “He is not worse?”

“Oh no;—better,” I said.

“But my lord speaks strangely—as he did that night when the serpent crawled into the room. He has not been alarmed? Yes, I know—by the terrible storm.”

“Think—think it was that?” I faltered.

“Yes, my lord,” he said eagerly; “but it is gone now. Can I get anything for my lord?”

“No; not now,” I said. And at last he left the tent.

I was lord and master, according to Salaman; but I felt quite a slave as I lay there, afraid to move lest he should come back. And as I listened, I heard him go round the tent to try all the ropes, two others being with him, as I judged by the voices. While they went quietly round, I listened with eager ear, fully expecting some alarm to be raised, and my messenger, whoever he was, to be discovered.

But I heard the men go right round, and return to their own tent; and then, as soon as I felt it to be safe, I crawled from my couch and made my way to the lamp, trembling with eagerness to read the message that had been sent, I hoped, by Brace.

The paper was a mere scrap doubled up quite small, and, as I opened it, and held it close to the light, my eyes fell on these characters, scrawled in a very feeble hand, with some kind of pencil which left a very uncertain mark—

There were faint traces of similar lines above and below, but they were so rubbed as to be undecipherable; while, as to the above, fancy my chagrin and disappointment as I turned the paper over, then back, and scanned the crabbed shorthand-like characters over and over again, but only to grow more and more confused, for I could make no sense of it whatever. Even if the upper and lower lines had been plain, I am afraid that I should have been no wiser. Certainly I had gone through a long study of the Eastern languages, and this bore a strong resemblance to some of the characters; but what it meant, I had no more idea than a babe.

I remained by the lamp, puzzling over that scrap of paper till my brain began to swim; and at last, wearied out, and in utter despair, I went back to my couch and threw myself down, to lie and think. And all the time I knew that this might be a message bidding me be quite ready, for an effort was to be made, perhaps that very night, to rescue me and restore me to my friends.

That it must be something of the kind, I had no doubt; but how foolish it seemed to be of Brace to trust another to write his message! He might have anticipated that it would be badly written.

But perhaps it was not Brace’s doing, and it might be a communication from some friendly chief.

At any rate, I could not make it out, and there was nothing to be done but keep on the *qui vive*, and wait for what was to come. For that something would result from the missive I was sure, but what it would be I could only imagine; and my mind played strange pranks, possibly because I was still so weak.

Chapter Thirty Six.

The rajah came upon me suddenly the next day, just when I was most disturbed, and had been lying down here and there, poring over that note with the strange characters till my head ached, and yet I was no nearer a solution. It was, I knew, a warning to be ready to escape, or to tell me that my friends were near, but not a bit nearer could I get.

I was under the big tree, still puzzling it out, and abusing the Brandscombe professors for not teaching me better, and making me able to decide whether this was modern Hindustani, Sanscrit, or Persian. I felt that I ought to know, but not a word could I make out, so as to be sure, when all at once I heard the familiar trampling of horses in the distance, and hurriedly thrust the scrap of paper into my pocket, before leisurely changing my position; for I always felt that some one was watching me.

This was a fact; for whenever Salaman was off that duty, one or other of his men took it up, though, to do them justice, it was as much to be on the alert to see whether I wanted anything as to mind that I did not escape.

There was a good deal more noise and jingling of accoutrements this time; and as I listened eagerly, but assuming perfect unconcern, the trampling increased to such an extent that, from thinking first that it was a troop which formed the rajah’s escort, my estimate rose to a squadron, a regiment, two regiments; and then I gave it up, wondering and in doubt whether my captor had come to make one of his calls.

At this I began to feel a little excited. Perhaps this was, after all, the meaning of the message I had received, and friends were coming. This idea was strengthened by a show of excitement among my attendants, who were hurrying here and there. But it was an excitement which calmed down directly, for they stood ready to receive the visitor, who was preceded by a party of about a dozen fierce-looking mounted men on splendid horses. They were well set up

military-looking fellows, fully armed, and having lances, but were evidently not ordinary soldiers, their turbans being of rich stuff, and one and all wearing handsome shawls.

They formed up on either side of the opening among the trees, through which they had ridden, reining back their horses so as to allow room for their leader to ride into the place; and as he cantered quickly in, and threw himself lightly from his horse, I stared at him in amazement, he looked such a magnificent object glittering in the sun.

Upon one other occasion he had been splendidly dressed, and the precious stones he wore must have been of great value; but now the display was wonderful, and at every movement the rays of light flashed from him, and I could not help thinking that he must be a prince of vast wealth.

Directly after, though, it struck me that all this show was to impress me, and I smiled to myself as I thought that he could not have chosen a worse time for trying to convert me. For the piece of paper was within touch, and, though I could not read it, I felt sure that it meant help and freedom.

He dismissed his followers before coming up to me smiling, and as I advanced to meet him I could not, suspicious as I was, doubt for a moment the look of pleasure that came into his face as he took my hand and held it firmly.

“Hah!” he cried; “this is more like my young officer. What a great change for the better! You feel much stronger?”

“Oh yes,” I said. “I think I could ride now.”

“I am sure you could—a little; but you must not try much yet. We must not have the wound reopened by too much exertion. Let us sit down. It is hot.”

We went to the temporary divan beneath the tree, and as soon as he was seated he said, smiling—

“It is time you dressed better, more like my officer. You must not play the sick man any longer.”

My cheeks felt a little warm for the moment. Up to that time I had not given a thought to my costume, which was simple—a shirt and trousers, the former clean and white enough, thanks to Salaman; but I must have looked a very pitiable object by the side of the gorgeous prince at my side.

He was keen-witted enough to see the effect of his words, and he laid his hand on my arm.

“It is not this I mind,” he said quietly. “I do not judge one by his dress. I know you; but I want to see my friend, who is henceforth to be a great chief, held in reverence by the people. My subjects are not like your English, who care so little for show; they judge a man by his appearance.”

“Yes; I know that,” I said, warming toward him, for his words were kindly meant.

“I don’t care for all these that I wear. They are tiresome, hot, and in the way. But I am the maharajah, and if I did not impress my subjects by my dress and grandeur, as well as by the strength of my arm and the sharpness of my sword, they would despise me.”

“I can quite understand that,” I said eagerly; for I was anxious to keep him conversing about everything but the one subject which I feared.

“Well,” he said gravely, “have you no questions to ask—about your fellow-countrymen?”

“No,” I said.

“That is right. I am glad you are growing so wise and sensible. It is useless to regret the past. They had their reign. They are conquered, and all is at an end.”

I crushed the paper in my pocket with almost feverish joy.

“And now,” he continued, “I hope that a brighter and better day is rising for my land.”

I looked at him, and saw that his face was lighted up, and that he was in thorough earnest.

“But we’ll talk about that another time, Gil,” he said.

I stared at this familiar usage of my name, and he smiled.

“Yes, Gil,” he said; “my friend Gil, who will be my counsellor, and help me to rule over my people with strength and justice.”

“But—”

“No, no,” he said; “don’t speak yet. You are going to decide hastily, and a great judge is slow, and thinks much before he speaks. We were talking about your dress. I did think of taking you back with me to my city.”

“No, no,” I cried excitedly, and completely thrown off my guard; “not yet.”

I felt that I had made a mistake, for I saw his eyes flash, and a curious watchful look in his face.

“Very well,” he said; “there is no need for haste. You find that you are steadily growing strong up here?”

“Yes; fast,” I replied. “It is cooler than it would be in a town.”

“Quite right. Then I will not hurry you away to-day. Perhaps to-morrow. Let us talk about your dress. I want you to help me think out a suitable uniform for my gun regiment. Not like yours. It is too hot and wearisome for the men. The helmet is too heavy, and shines too much. What do you think of a little steel cap, something like mine, with a white puggaree round it, and a little plume in front?”

“It would be excellent,” I said.

He looked pleased.

“Then a white tunic, with gold binding across the chest. Light, not heavy, like yours.”

“That would be quite right,” I said.

“And then they shall wear boots like your men. They are heavy, but a man rides so much better in boots.”

“Yes; you are quite correct,” I said eagerly. “It gives him firmness in the saddle, and he never notices their weight. The tunic, too, should be fairly loose and light, so that the men have perfect freedom for their arms. Our lads were too tightly trussed up, and stiff. A man wants to be so that every muscle is free to play.”

“Quite right,” he said; and in imagination I saw a troop of men uniformed as he proposed, and thought how admirably suited the dress would be.

“Then, for their arms,” he continued, “a long light lance, without pennon.”

“Nonsense!” I cried. “They must not carry lances.”

“Well, then,” he continued, “short guns—carbines.”

“No, no,” I said impetuously, for he had led me on so that I was thoroughly interested. “The carbine would only be in the men’s way.”

“Ah! What, then—pistol?”

“No,” I said; “artillerymen want no pistols. They have their guns, which can deal with their enemies a mile away.”

“Then you would not give them any arms but the cannon?”

“Yes,” I cried, “certainly; swords.”

“Ah, yes; swords,” he said quietly; “like your men had.”

“No!” I said emphatically; “not those heavy, clumsy, blunt sabres, but well-made, keen-edged cutting and thrusting swords, something like your tulwars, but with a better hilt and grip. I would make the men perfect with their blades—thorough swordsmen. Let them use them well, and be clever with their guns; that is all that a horse artilleryman needs—except, of course, the power to ride anywhere at full speed, and stop at nothing.”

“But I like the lance,” said the rajah, thoughtfully. “It is a grand weapon well managed.”

“Of course,” I said; “but you must keep that for your light horse regiment; well trained, mounted, and officered, they would be a most valuable force.”

“I think you are right,” he said thoughtfully.

“I am sure I am,” I cried. “The mounted artilleryman must be light and active, a good horseman, perfectly daring; and as to the dress, such a one as you proposed might be made to look smart and handsome, while it gave the men freedom to move.”

“Yes,” he said thoughtfully; “and the officers’ uniforms might be made very striking with gold ornaments and silver caps.”

I was silent, for it had suddenly occurred to me that I had allowed my enthusiasm for military matters to carry me away.

He smiled. “It is of no use to draw back,” he said; “your heart is in it, and you know that you must accept the position.”

“Must?” I said sharply.

“Oh, we will not talk about ‘must,’” he replied, laughing; “we are friends, and you have been showing me what a thorough soldier you are, with bright original thoughts of your own. Why, even if you could go back to your people, you would never have such an opportunity as this. Gil, you must make me an army that shall carry everything before it.”

“No,” I said gravely; “it is impossible.”

He frowned slightly, but his face was calm directly.

“Oh no, it is not impossible; you have shown me that your heart is in it, but you naturally shrink from so great a work, and feel, too, that you must not forsake your people. But it will not be so. If anything, they will have forsaken you. Come, Gil,” he continued, with a smile, “you have held out as you should, but it is now time to give way, and take my hand, meaning to be my faithful friend and follower to the last.”

“No,” I said firmly, “I cannot.”

“Suppose I tell you that you must?” he said.

“It would make no difference,” I replied. “I must do my duty as a soldier.”

“You have done it, boy. Now come and do your duty by me.”

I shook my head.

“It is of no use for you to try and tempt me,” I said.

“I am not tempting you, only trying to show you that your fate has thrown you with me, and that you can do good here.”

“As a renegade,” I said hotly.

“No,” he rejoined; “I have not asked you to change your religion. But we will say no more to-day. You are angry, and an angry man makes more. I should be sorry to say harsh things to one who is weak, and whom I have made my friend.”

He smiled, and held out his hand.

“I must go, Gil,” he said. “I have much to do. I have to fight with enemies, and to see to the ruling of my house. I could sit down and let things go, but I wish mine to be a country of which a man may be proud, and that means work for us.”

I made no reply, and he looked at me gravely.

“Good-bye; I am not angry. You are behaving very well, boy. I respect and esteem you the more. But be reasonable; try and see what is before you, and do not trifle with the great opportunity of your life.”

He nodded pleasantly to me, and we walked on together to where his horse had been led.

“I will send you some clothes,” he said. “I cannot send you an English uniform; but, whenever you like, men shall come to make that of my horse artillery according to your wish.” I made a quick gesture.

“When you like,” he said quietly. “I am not hurrying you, for you’re still too weak. When would you like your horse?”

“Directly,” I said, so eagerly that he smiled. “To try and escape,” he said sadly. I started and drew back.

“Yes,” I said firmly. “I shall try to escape, and as soon as I possibly can.”

He held out his hand again, and I gave mine reluctantly to be held in a firm grip.

“You make me like you, Gil,” he said, “even when you cause me most anger. I like that; it is so frank and honest. You must come to me. I shall never meet with another whom I can trust as I do you.”

I shook my head, but he smiled. “It is your fate,” he said. “Now come and see some of my men. They are drawn up outside. You shall see then what stuff there is for making good regiments when you begin.”

He glanced at my dress and saw that I noted it. “It does not matter,” he said; “you are my friend. They will not think of your dress. Englishmen are careless, and do not mind how they look. Come.”

I hesitated, but his will was stronger than mine, and I gave way, following him through the opening, and passing the twelve fierce-looking troopers who had formed the advance, and one of the men who was holding the beautiful Arab, which looked so perfect in its rich trappings that, lover of a horse as I was, I could not help going up to caress it, and pat its graceful arched neck, and pass my hand over its velvety nose.

“Mount,” said the rajah, who had followed me. “You will like his paces.”

“You wish it?” I said eagerly.

“And so do you,” he said, smiling. “Mount; and as a gentleman, I ask you to remember your honour to your host. You will not run away. It would be useless. You would surely be captured again.”

“I give you my word,” I said coldly.

“Then mount.”

I hesitated for a moment or two, and then mounted, for a thrill of delight to run through me as I felt the quivering muscles of the beautiful beast, and its eagerness to be off.

“Now try a short canter,” he said; and at a touch the graceful, thoroughly docile beast moved off, and my pulses

began to bound as the wind played round my cheeks; for it was glorious. There was the open country before me, and I had but to slacken the rein, and the spirited Arab would have borne me off, far beyond pursuit; but I had given my word, and I turned just as we were increasing our speed, and I saw that the rajah was watching me intently.

“Wondering whether he can trust me,” I said to myself, as we rapidly approached.

Then, all at once, I found that I had overtaxed my strength. There was a curious mistiness before my eyes which blotted out the rajah and his men, and two companies of troops which I saw off to my left. Then I felt that I was falling, and made a clutch or two at vacancy. The next moment my sound arm was caught in a strong grip, and I heard the rajah’s voice say—

“Help him down. Too ill and weak yet for so much exertion.”

Then all was blank, and when I came to, the doctor was with me.

“Only beginning a little too soon,” he said pleasantly. “It takes long to grow strong.”

He left me after a short time to the care of Salaman, from whom I learned that the rajah had been very anxious about me, and had given orders that every care was to be taken, and that I was to be told how sorry he was that he could not stay.

“I am glad he is gone,” I said to myself; and then I turned cold with the thought which struck me.

“Suppose my note had been found!”

For a few moments I was afraid to try whether it was still where I had placed it, lest it should have been taken; but in thrusting my hand down into my pocket, there it was quite safe, and I drew a long deep breath full of satisfaction. For though I could not make it out, the rajah or the doctor would probably have guessed its meaning in an instant.

As I lay there I half determined to destroy it at once, but I gave up the idea, thinking that perhaps, after all, I might yet read it with ease.

“Did the rajah say when he was coming again?” I said to Salaman, as he was about to go.

“No, my lord; he—”

“Don’t say ‘my lord’ to me,” I cried pettishly. “I am only an English officer.”

Salaman smiled.

“I will obey in everything; but you are his highness’s greatest friend, and he said I was to treat you as if you were his brother. How can I call you less than ‘my lord’?”

“Well, what did he say?”

“That he would be back soon, and that I was to make you strong enough to ride away with him upon your horse.”

Chapter Thirty Seven.

That night passed away slowly as I lay listening, expecting at any moment to have some visitation before morning, and three times over I heard faint footsteps outside the tent, but they only proved to be those of my watchful attendants; and once more, sick at heart, I began to think that my case was hopeless, because I had not grasped the meaning of the message, which, for aught I knew, might mean that I was to leave my tent as soon as it was dark, to trust my would-be rescuers.

The next night I determined to put this plan in force; and soon after dark I left the tent, and began to stroll up and down, as if enjoying the cool night air, ending by walking slowly, straight for the opening by which the rajah always entered the forest glade.

I was just thinking that I had nothing to do but quietly walk away at any time I chose, when I suddenly came upon a white-robed figure, bearing shield and naked sword.

The sentry was standing directly in my way, but he moved instantly to let me pass, and, so as not to excite suspicion by showing any alarm, I walked on by him; but the next minute there was another armed sentry just ahead, and on glancing back, there, dimly seen, was the first sentry, and with him another man, who I fancied was Salaman.

“Hopeless,” I thought to myself; and after walking as far as the second sentry, I quietly turned and began to walk slowly back, coming directly upon Salaman, who, I now saw, was armed with curved sword and shield like the others.

He drew half to one side of the path, the first sentry to the other, for me to pass between them.

“A fine night, Salaman,” I said.

He salaamed at my condescension, and I went on.

“There’s no occasion to attend upon me so closely.”

“My lord must forgive his servant, but there is need. My lord is weak and unarmed, and there are tigers sometimes in

the forest. Should one spring upon my lord, I should pray that he would then spring upon me, for I could never face his highness again. Hark! That is six times I have heard one cry these last few days. And there are budmashes, too, journeying about, evil men who have been robbing and murdering after the fights. If they saw my lord's white face, they would fall upon him, and then when his highness came and said, 'Where is my lord?' how could I face his fierce wrath?"

I made no reply, but strolled back to the wide opening in front of my tent, passed it, and found myself face to face with another sentry, to whom I paid not the slightest heed, but bore off to the right, to find another and another.

After this, pretty well satisfied that I was well guarded, and seeing here the reason why I had had no visitor again, I returned to my tent, encountering Salaman on the way.

"Why, Salaman," I said, "you keep pretty good guard."

"It is his highness's orders, my lord."

"How many men have you on sentry?"

"Twenty, my lord; and there are forty in the guard-tent, waiting to go on duty in turn."

"What?" I cried. "I thought you only had about six men here."

"Only six by day, my lord; these others march over every night to go on duty."

"Then there is no one on guard in the day?"

"Oh yes, my lord; but they are mounted men with lances; they watch the roads here for a mile round."

I went into the tent, just as a low distant cry told of the proximity of a tiger somewhere on the border of the forest.

I was vexed with myself, for my conduct was, I felt, so transparent that my guardian must be sure to see that I was meditating escape.

"How carefully he guards me!" I thought, as I threw myself on my couch. "No wonder the bearer of the letter has not been here again."

And there I lay thinking of my position—of the rajah's offer, and, tempting as it seemed, the more I thought, the more I felt how impossible it was to turn from my duty as an English officer, to become the servant and *aide* of one of our deadliest enemies.

"It can't be," I muttered. "I would sooner die."

And, as I said this, I thought of how likely it would be that this would be my fate; for, under the smooth velvety ways of the rajah, I could see that there were sharp feline claws, and that, however great his liking for me might be if I yielded and acted as he wished, there was all the fierceness of the Eastern semi-savage, ready to spring out with volcanic fury if I persisted in thwarting him to the end.

I could not help pitying myself as I lay there, for I was growing stronger again, and that mounting of the horse had, short as the enjoyment was, revived in me all my love of exciting action; and was I—so young as I was—a mere boy, to give up all this when forced, as it were, by circumstances? I had but to say "yes," and become the greatest man in the rajah's domains.

"But I can't do it. I won't do it," I said passionately. "I was not trained in a military school by brave, honourable gentlemen, to give up and become a renegade. And I will not believe, either, that England is so beaten that the native rajahs are going to have all their own way."

Somehow, in spite of my desperate position, fully expecting that, at my next refusal, the rajah would flash out and try force to bring me to his way, I felt after my calm, quiet, nightly prayer, out there in the silence of that forest, more at rest and full of hope.

"Things generally mend when they come to the worst," I said, with a sigh; and now, giving up all expectation of any visitor making his way to my couch that night, I lay listening to the faint calling of the huge cat that was prowling about, gazing the while at my shaded lamp, round which quite a dozen moths were circling, and finally dropped off to sleep.

It was late in the morning when I opened my eyes, to find the white figure of Salaman patiently in attendance, waiting for me to get up.

He smiled as soon as he saw that I was awake, and threw open the folds of the tent door to admit the sunshine. Then, with all the skill and cleverness of the native valet, he carefully waited on me, relieving me of all difficulties due to my wounded arm, which was painful in the extreme if I attempted to move it, and when I was nearly dressed, turned silently to the door to signal to his men to be ready with my early coffee.

"The morning is *very* hot, my lord," he said; "and I have told them to place the breakfast under the tree. It is a fresh spot, which I hope my lord will like."

At that moment there was a low moaning cry, as of some one in pain, hurried steps, loud voices, and then a dull thud, as if some one had fallen.

Salaman ran out of the tent, and I followed, to find that, some twenty yards away, a figure in ragged white garments was lying on the ground, his face covered with blood, which literally dyed his garments; and as he lay there upon his breast with his arms extended, one hand held a little round shield, the other grasped a bloody sword.

“What is it?” cried Salaman to four of his men, who were standing about the prostrate figure.

“As we live, we do not know,” said one of them. “He came running up, crying for help, and when we spoke, he looked back as if frightened, and struggled on till he fell, as you see.”

“He has been attacked by budmashes,” said another.

“No,” said the first. “Look at his long beard; he is a holy man—a fakir.”

At that moment the poor fellow tried to raise himself, and groaned out the words, “Bagh, bagh!”

“Ah!” cried Salaman, bending down over him.

“Quick! some cotton—some water,” I said; “the poor fellow has been attacked and mauled by a tiger.”

“Bagh, bagh!” groaned the man again, and he struggled up now to rest upon his shield-hand, gazing wildly round, and, shuddering before seeming satisfied that the danger was passed, he raised his curved sword and looked at it.

By this time one of the men had fetched some strips of cotton, and another brought fresh water, a portion of which the fakir drank heartily, but resented the attendant’s action, as he sought to bathe his face, but submitted willingly to having his arm washed and the wounds tied up.

They proved to be only superficial; but, all the same, they were four ugly scratches down the fleshy part of the man’s left arm, while over his right shoulder there were three more marks, which had bled pretty freely; and now, as I stood by helpless myself, I listened as he told the attendants how he was slowly journeying, thinking of staying by the first well, as the sun was growing hot, the tiger suddenly sprang out at him, alighting upon his back, and sending him down insensible. That he had come to, struggled up, and was on his way again, sick, but eager to get away from the edge of the forest, when the tiger had appeared again, creeping from tuft of grass to bush, tracking him, he said, as a cat does a mouse, and always threatening to spring.

For long enough this continued, till at last it sprang, after the poor fellow had suffered that most intense agony of dread. As the tiger sprang, he in turn had involuntarily crouched, holding the sword before him, so that the savage beast leaped right upon it, as it struck him down, deluging him with blood, and then uttering a snorting yell as it bounded away again amongst the low growth of the forest-side.

He rose and continued his retreat, but the beast appeared again, still skulking along near the track, and threatening to spring, but with a rush back it had plunged into some dry grass; and had not reappeared as he staggered on, faint with terror, till he had caught sight of one of my attendants, and run on here, to fall completely exhausted.

They led the poor fellow away as, after seeing that he was out of danger, I turned from him in disgust, and soon after was seated at my morning meal.

“How is the old man?” I asked Salaman. “Have you given him a bath?”

“Oh no, my lord.”

“A few chatties thrown over him ought to do him good.”

“But he is a holy man, my lord. He would be ready to curse us, if we did so. He has not washed for years.”

“He looked it,” I said. “But why?”

“Who knows, my lord? Perhaps he had sworn an oath. He is one of the blessed.”

“Will he go on to-day?”

“No, my lord. He will stay till he is strong enough to go. It is a blessing on our camp for him to be here, and the tiger must have been possessed of the evil spirit to dare to attack a fakir.”

“Well, don’t let him come near me,” I said. “I believe that cleanliness is next to godliness, Salaman. You are strange people: if I, a Christian, drink out of one of your vessels, you would say it was defiled, and break it. But you go and handle that nasty, dirty old man, and say it is a blessing for him to come.”

“Yes, my lord; he is a fakir.”

“Very good,” I said; “but, I repeat, don’t let him come near me.”

“He will not, my lord. We could not have it. He might curse my lord, because he is an unbeliever.”

“Well, never mind that,” I said. “He knows no better. I trust he was more frightened than hurt.”

“Yes, my lord; but those are ugly wounds.”

“Yes,” I said. “But what would the rajah say at your having people so near?”

“His highness may not know. He would be angry if he knew that the fakir was here. But if he does know—well, it was fate.”

“Will he come to-day?”

“Thy servant knoweth not. It would be better that he stayed till the holy man has gone his way.”

Chapter Thirty Eight.

The rajah did not come that day, nor the next, and it troubled me sadly, for it made me feel that he thought he was sure of me, and the more I led that solitary life, and satisfied myself that I was most carefully watched, the more I dreaded my firmness.

For, in my greatest fits of despondency, I began asking myself why I should hold out. If the English were driven out of India, who would know or care anything about me?

But I always came back to the dirty slip of paper with the characters on that I could not read. They meant hope to me, and friends coming to help me, and this gave me strength.

The second day after the dirty old fakir came, I went for a walk, for my horse had not arrived; and, as I expected, the sentries were at hand, but they did not follow me, and I soon found out the reason. About a quarter of a mile from my tent, I came upon a fierce-looking man, sitting like a statue upon his horse, grasping his lance, and, whichever way I went, there were others.

To test this, I turned in several directions—in amongst the trees, and out toward the slope leading to the plain; but everywhere there were these mounted sentries ready to start out quietly from behind some tree, and change their position so as to be a hundred yards ahead of me wherever I went; and it was all done so quietly that, to a casual observer, it would have appeared as if they had nothing whatever to do with me, but were simply watching the country for advancing foes, an idea strengthened by the way in which signals were made with their tall lances.

They took no notice of me, and apparently, as in their case, I took no notice of them, but finished my stroll, after gathering in all I could of the aspect of the beautiful slope, the forest at its head, and the far-spreading plain below, thinking what a splendid domain the rajah owned, and then made for my tent, with the mounted men slowly closing in again.

I could only escape by night, I remember thinking, and I was getting close up to the trees that hid our little camp, dolefully pondering over my position and the hopelessness of succour from without, when all at once a hideous figure rose up from beneath a tree and confronted me; and as I stopped short, startled by the foul appearance of the man, with his long tangled hair and wild grey beard, I saw Salaman and two of his helpers come running toward us, just as the old fakir—for it was he—raised his hands, and in a denunciatory way poured forth a torrent of wild abuse. His eyes looked as if starting out of his head; he bared his arms, and, as it seemed to me, cursed and reviled me savagely as an infidel dog whom he would deliver over to the crows and jackals, while he hoped that the graves of my father, mother, and all our ancestors, might be defiled in every possible way.

And all the time he looked as if he would spring upon me, but I did not much fear that, for he was very old, and as weak as could be from his wounds. This and his passion, which increased as Salaman and the men came up, forced him to cling to a tree for support, but his tongue was strong enough, though his throat grew hoarse, and his voice at last became a husky whisper, while Salaman and the others tried to calm him, though evidently fearing to bring the curses down upon their own heads, and shrinking from the old wretch whenever he turned angrily upon them, as they tried to coax him away.

These efforts were all in vain, and as I stood there quite firm, not liking to appear afraid, and caring very little for his curses, his voice grew inaudible, and he began to spit upon the ground.

“I pray my lord to go,” said Salaman at last.

“Why should I go?” I said pettishly. “Drive the reviling old rascal away.”

“No, no, my lord,” he whispered; “we dare not.”

“Then I shall complain to the rajah. I am sure he would not have me annoyed in this way if he knew.”

“No, my lord,” said Salaman, humbly; “but what can thy servant do?”

“Do? Send the dirty old madman off.”

“Oh, hush, my lord, pray,” whispered Salaman. “Thy servant loves to serve thee, and his highness is thy friend. If aught befel my lord from the holy man’s curses, what should I do?”

“Do?” I repeated. “Send him about his business.”

“But he will not go, my lord, until he pleases.”

“Then I shall send one of the sowars with a message to the rajah,” I said firmly. “I am not going to be insulted by that old dog.”

“My lord, I pray,” said Salaman, imploringly. “His highness would punish me, and my lord knows it is no fault of mine

his coming."

"Look here, Salaman," I said; "if you call me 'my lord' again, instead of 'sahib,' I will send to his highness. There, get rid of the old fellow as soon as you can. We should have such a man put in prison in England. Come and give me some food, and let him curse his voice back again. I don't wonder that the tiger wanted to kill him."

Salaman shrugged his shoulders.

"Do you know why the fierce beast did not eat him?"

"Because he found out that he had made a mistake in striking down a holy man, my—"

"Ah!"

"Sahib," cried Salaman, hurriedly.

"That's better," I said. "No! The tiger did not touch him afterwards, because he was so dirty."

I walked away, hearing the fakir whispering wishes of evil against me to the attendants, and spitting on the ground from time to time, while Salaman followed me to my dinner under the tree, and brought me a cool, pleasant draught of lemon and water and some fresh fruit, leaving me afterwards to moralise on the difference between my religion and his, and afterwards to sit dejectedly waiting for my wound to heal, and to hope that the rajah would not come.

He did not come, and as I sat thinking, I was obliged to confess that I was too weak to make any attempt at escape for some time yet; and even when I grew stronger, the chances appeared to be very small.

"Never mind," I said at last, trying to be cheerful. "Some chance may come yet."

But my spirits did not rise, for there was always the black cloud which I could not pierce, behind which was hidden the fate of my friends, and all that were dear to me.

The next day I heard that the old fakir had not gone. His wounds were bad, and he had taken up his abode about a hundred yards away, amongst the roots of a large tree.

"Have you doctored his scratches?" I asked.

"No, my lor—sahib," said Salaman; "he will not have them bathed, and he has torn off all the bandages, and he made me guide his finger along them."

"Dirty finger?"

"Yes, sahib, it is a very dirty finger. At least it would be if it was mine; but his fingers are holy. They cannot be unclean, and he says that the touch will heal the wounds."

"I hope it will," I said; "but, I say, look here, Salaman, have you washed your hands since you touched him?"

"Oh yes, sahib, many times," he cried eagerly.

I laughed heartily for the first time for long enough, and Salaman looked puzzled, and then smiled.

"I know why, my—sahib laughs," he said. "These things are a puzzle. I cannot make them out."

"Never mind; only don't let the old fakir come near me."

That day passed as the others had gone. Everything about me was beautiful, and I was treated like a prince, but the word "renegade" was always in my mind's eye, and I went to my rest at last as despondent as ever, after another attempt to decipher the writing, but all in vain.

It was a very hot night, and for a long time I could not sleep; but at last I was dozing lightly, when I woke with a start to listen.

But all was still for a time. The lamp burned with its soft shaded light, and there was not a sign of anything startling, but, all the same, I had awakened suddenly, in a fright, and with an instinctive feeling that something was wrong.

All at once, from the back of the tent, there was a low, sharp hiss, and I felt that my enemies, the snakes, were about again, trying to get in, and I wondered at my folly in not insisting upon having some weapon at hand, though I knew it was doubtful whether I should have been so favoured.

I lay listening, and then rose up quickly, meaning to rush to the tent opening, and call for whoever was on the watch, when a soft voice whispered—"Hist, sahib!"

"Ah!" I ejaculated, with my heart beating as if I had been running.

"Hist! Friends near."

I was on my way to the side of the tent whence the voice came, when I heard hurried steps, and had just time to throw myself back on my couch, as the tent door was thrown open and Salaman appeared.

"The sahib called," he said.

I was nearly speechless with emotion, which I dared not show, and I knew that my duty was to keep the man there, and engage him in conversation so as to give my nocturnal visitor a chance of escape. Mastering myself as well as I could, I said in a fretful, angry way—

“Come here.”

He was at my side in an instant.

“Take off these bandages. They hurt my arm.”

“My lord, no. The doctor would be angry.”

“So shall I be, if you do not take them off,” I cried. “My arm is like fire.”

It was quite true, for the excitement at my sudden movement had started the wound stinging and aching.

“It might bleed horribly,” said Salaman, humbly. “Let me loosen the bandage, sahib.”

“Very well,” I replied sulkily, quite satisfied now that whoever had been outside the canvas had had plenty of opportunity to get away; and I lay patiently enough, while my attendant loosened and re-tied my bandages before leaving me once more to lie wondering whether I should have another visitation that night, and fervently hoping that whoever it was would take care not to be seen.

I lay awake for hours, but there was not another sound; and at last exhaustion had its way, and I slept till quite late, angry with myself for my drowsiness, and determined not to close my eyes that night.

In the course of the day I sought an opportunity to examine the tent in the direction from which the sound had come, and had there been any doubt in my mind as to whether I had dreamed I had heard a voice, it was now dispersed, for about the height of my shoulder there was a slit about an inch long just sufficient for any one to apply his lips to the opening and speak.

No rajah that day, which was, I think, the longest I ever spent. Toward afternoon I summoned Salaman.

“Look here,” I said. “I am sure the rajah does not wish me to be treated as a prisoner.”

“No, sahib.”

“Then give me my sword again.”

“Thy servant has it not,” replied Salaman.

“Then fetch me another.”

“His highness gave me no commands.”

“But I do,” I said simply. “Let me have one at once.”

“Thy servant grieves that he must disobey my lord,” said the man humbly. “He cannot do this thing.”

“Go!” I said angrily, though I knew the man was not to blame.

“My lord is angry with his servant,” he said humbly. “If he brought him a sword, he might cut his servant down, and try to escape; but it would be vain, for every part is strictly watched.”

I turned away in misery, for, with the place so firmly watched, how were my friends to reach me?

Toward evening, when it was cooler, I went for a stroll, but soon turned back, for the loathsome figure of the filthy old fakir rose from among some bushes with his hands raised, cursing me volubly, and I was glad to get back to my tent and lie down to have a good rest before night, ready to keep awake for the visitor who might come.

Salaman now came to say that my dinner was ready, and had been waiting two hours, but my appetite was very poor, and I got on badly. Still I ate, feeling that I needed all the strength I could get up, and at last my regular retiring hour came, and I lay down once more to listen to the trampling of my attendants and their low murmuring voices; then to the noises in the forest, and twice over I heard in the distance the low howl of a tiger.

But how slowly the time passed before all was silent in the camp, and I waited for the whispering voice at the canvas! The moment it came I meant to creep to the side silently, and then I could hear the news of the friends who were near, and what they proposed to do.

Can you imagine the misery and weariness of waiting hour after hour in the midst of this silence, broken only by the calls of the wild beasts and nightbirds, the slightest sound being turned into a footstep or voice? A hundred times over I must have thought that I heard Salaman or his men listening, and I grew hot with anxiety as I wondered whether they suspected anything.

Then I turned cold as ice and shivered, for a shriek rang out from somewhere among the trees, and immediately I pictured the messenger transfixed by the lance of one of the sowars on guard.

But I heard no further sound, and by degrees grew calmer, as I recalled hearing such a cry before, and knew that it was made by a night-bird.

There, stretched out on the cushions upon my back, gazing at the lamp, and with my ears all attent for the slightest sound—the right for danger, the left for my friends—thus I lay listening, till the lamp grew dim. The sounds of the forest were distant; and then I was at Brandscombe, busy with the notes of lectures, and in great trouble about something, but what I could not tell, only that the old professor of Sanscrit, with a long grey beard and much tangled hair, was leaning over me, his eyes wild and strange, his cheeks hollow, and a horrible look of fierce anger in his voice as he whispered hoarsely, evidently in disgust with my knowledge of the subject he taught. But what it was he whispered I could not tell, only that it chilled me and paralysed me when I wanted to struggle and get away from him. I tried hard, I knew, but it was all in vain, and an interminable time passed on, during which I lay helpless there, with the old professor whispering to me, and his face growing more and more terrible, till, to my terror, I saw that it was not the professor of Sanscrit, but the old fakir who had taken such a dislike to me; and, fully awake now, I found myself gazing up in his fierce eyes.

For the nightmare had passed off, and in the reality I was gazing up at my enemy, who had evidently stolen into my tent, knife-armed—for there it was, gleaming in his hand—to rid himself and his country of an enemy of his religion and his race.

And I could not move, even when I felt his left hand steal once into my breast, which hardly heaved, so utterly paralysed was I by my nightmare dream; ten times it seemed to me more terrible than the serpent I had found where the fakir’s hand now lay.

Chapter Thirty Nine.

In my horror, as I saw the knife flash, and as my senses became under my control, I was about to cry aloud for help, but grasping this, the hideous-looking being clapped his hand over my mouth, pressing it down tightly, while he quickly bent down his head till he could place his lips close to my ear, and whisper in English—

“Not a word, sahib! Don’t you know me! I am Dost.”

I uttered a low sigh, and then gazed at him, sick and dizzy, but with my heart beginning to beat wildly with a strange delight.

For at last help had come, and my task now was first to warn my faithful follower of the peril he had incurred, as I lay in mute admiration of the skill with which he had played his part, and, after struggling in vain to reach my well-watched tent, had by his ruse contrived to have himself brought to my side by my guards. The rest he had managed by himself.

I could not speak for some minutes. I dared not even try, lest he should hear how my voice trembled. At last, though, after lying quite still, holding my faithful follower’s hand, I whispered—

“How did you get here?”

“Cut the bottom of the tent, sahib,” he said in the same hard tone, “with this knife, and scrambled through.”

“But they will see the opening, and you will be taken.”

“Yes; they will see it,” he replied, “but you must make the hole larger, and fasten it open. They will think you have cut the tent to make it cool. You are the master here, and can do as you please.”

“Yes; but tell me—Captain Brace?”

“Quite well, sahib.”

“Then he was not beaten and driven away?”

“No, sahib; but the fight went against him and the white colonel. They were obliged to draw back. Their enemies were too many. As fast as they killed, others came to take their place.”

“And Lieutenant Haynes, the doctor, and Sergeant Craig?”

“All well when I left them, sahib. I came away many days ago, and reached here, finding you, after a long, long search. Then I gave you a letter, telling you to be hopeful, for your friends were near, and went away again to tell the captain sahib, and ask him what I should do, for he was waiting to find out whether you were alive, and how we could help you.”

“Yes; and what did he say?” I asked.

“Nothing, sahib.”

“Nothing?”

“I could not find him. I had been away so long that he must have supposed that I was killed, and he had gone.”

“But where?”

“How can I tell, sahib? He was gone, and, as I could not find him, I said I would come back and help you to escape without, but I could not get near you. There were men watching everywhere at night, and all day there were evil-minded budmashes of sowars for miles round. Oh, sahib, they take great care that you shall not escape.”

“Yes; I am watched in every direction.”

“Yes, sahib, and I was in despair till a few days ago I was in a village where a tiger sprang on a man, and mauled him, and then let him go, and hunted him again till he got away at last. And then I said I would be that man, and come here as soon as the tiger let me go.”

“What! you ran that risk on purpose?” I said excitedly.

“Hush! not a word, sahib,” said the man laughing. “I meant a sham tiger to fly at me and claw me. They would not know that it was not a real one.”

“But the wounds—the clawings?”

“I made those, sahib, with a hook fastened in a tree.”

“Dost!”

“Oh, it hurt a little, sahib; but there was no other way to come. And even then, when I was ready to tear and wound, I stopped, for I said to myself, ‘If I run there for help and refuge, they will not let me stay, and I was ready to pull my hair and bewail myself.’ But that would not help me, and I sat down and thought all one day and all the next night, and no help came, till it was gaining light, when I jumped up and shouted, for I could see the way.”

“To disguise yourself as a fakir?”

“Yes, sahib, for I said that no one would dare to say no to a holy man. And you see I am here, and can stay, and—”

“Hist!” I said; and in a few moments he was lying beside my couch with the light coverlid and two of the cushions tossed over him, effectually hiding him as he lay on the side of the tent farthest from the lamp.

It was only just in time, for the tent door opened, and Salaman came in softly, peering in my direction as I lay pretending to be asleep, but I jumped up on the instant.

“Yes? What is it?” I cried. “Ah, Salaman, is it morning?”

“No, my lord. Thy servant came to see if he could bring anything.”

“No,” I said with a yawn; “nothing. But call me quite early, as soon as it is light. I shall walk while it is cool.”

Salaman bowed and drew back softly, whilst, after waiting till he had been gone some time, I turned to Dost, and was about to speak, but his hand was laid upon my lips by way of warning.

For at that moment, unheard by me at first, there was a light step outside, followed by one that was heavier, and I knew, though I could not see, that some one was making the rounds of the little camp, and anything I might have said would have been heard.

There was no time to lose when the rounds had been made, and after listening patiently for some minutes, I urged Dost to go, though I would gladly have kept him.

“There is no need for haste,” he replied. “If I can get out of the tent, it will not matter much if I am met. They would not stop me, and they will never think that we are friends.”

“But I could not bear for you to be found out,” I said. “It would be like depriving me of all hope.”

“Leave it to me, sahib,” he replied. “You shall not be deprived of hope. I have no plan ready yet, but very soon I shall have made one, and you and I will return to the troop and gladden the captain sahib’s heart.”

“Then you must make haste, Dost,” I said, “for the rajah will soon be taking me away to his town.”

“Ah!” he said, “I am glad you told me that. But you have been wounded. Are you strong enough to walk or run with me many days?”

I was silent, for I could not say “yes.”

“No, you are not, sahib. Then we must wait. For the land is full of enemies. Troops of budmashes roam everywhere robbing and slaying. We might have to fight. Who knows, and the young sahib must be able to use a sword.”

“Dost,” I whispered, “my horse will soon be here.”

“Ah? Then we must wait and take that—wait until the sahib is quite strong.”

“And suppose the rajah takes me away?”

“I shall follow you, sahib; never fear.”

“But tell me this,” I whispered. “I hear that the English are being driven out of the country, and that the rajahs and begums are going to call the land their own once more.”

Dost laughed silently.

“Yes; they may call the land their own once more, but it never will be again.”

“You believe that, Dost?” I said.

“Yes, I believe that, sahib, for the rajahs will never hold together, and fight as one man. The English will. The budmashes have won some fights where they were many against few, but the English will come again and drive them back, as you know. No; the rajahs will never hold the land again. Now I must go.”

“But when will you come again?”

“Soon, sahib, but when I cannot tell. We must wait and see. I shall be near you even when you do not know it, and sooner or later I shall set my master free.”

“But let it be soon, Dost,” I said, “for the rajah is trying to make me promise to enter his service, and drill his men.”

“But you are not strong and well yet.”

“No, but he is trying to make me give my word, and he promises me great rewards.”

“But the young sahib does not want his great rewards?”

“No, of course not; but I expect him directly to ask me again.”

“Well, you must promise him, sahib, to gain time.”

“What?” I cried indignantly.

He made no reply, and I repeated my question, but still he was silent.

“Do you think an English gentleman would make such a false promise, knowing that he could not keep it?”

He was silent.

“Do you hear me, Dost?” I said indignantly.

He still made no reply, and feeling that he was repentant for having made so base a proposal, I went on whispering.

“It is impossible, Dost,” I said. “You are a good, brave fellow, but you do not understand these things as an English officer would. If I gave my word to the rajah, I should be obliged to keep it, and it would be a disgrace. I might have a grand position in the rajah’s army, but I should be degraded from my own, and be a traitor in training men to fight against our flag. No; I cannot promise the rajah, and I shall have to refuse him again. The next thing will be that he is fiercely angry, and I shall be imprisoned—if he spares my life,” I said sadly. “You will have a harder task to set me at liberty then. Better wait till my horse comes, and then we can both make a rush for liberty, and try and find out the captain. If the horse comes to-morrow, shall we try and escape at night?”

He did not answer.

“Dost! Shall we try and escape to-morrow night?”

There was no answer, and I stretched out my hand to touch him as a curious suspicion flashed through me.

I touched carpet, cushion, the coverlid. That was all, and hurriedly creeping to the canvas opening, I found that it hung loose, so that a man could easily pass through.

While I had been trying to teach my faithful follower the value of an English gentleman’s word, he had glided silently out of the tent, leaving me to wonder at his skill, and to fasten open the canvas wall, so as to make it seem as if I had done it for ventilation. But I could not do that till morning.

To have opened it now was to invite some savage beast of the forest to enter therein, so I left it as it was, and returned to my couch to wonder when it was that Dost had gone.

Chapter Forty.

“The tent is cut, my lord,” cried Salaman, as I awoke the next morning.

“Fasten it up,” I said sharply. “No, no, not close it. Open it so that I can get air. The tent is too hot.”

He looked at me searchingly, and I made an effort to throw him off the scent by effrontery.

“Well,” I said, “do you hear me? Quick, or get somebody else.”

He turned sharply and went for help while I congratulated myself on my power there. For it seemed that in most things I really only had to order to be implicitly obeyed.

Then, as the tent was pinned open, I wondered whether they would suspect *me*, and whether the rajah would come that day, not fearing his coming much, for I felt that I had help now at hand.

The doctor came, and looked quite pleased at my condition. He said it was a sign that his management of my

“terrible” wound, as he called it now, had been excellent. He little thought of how great an impetus to my recovery the coming of the dirty old fakir had been. For as soon as the learned doctor had gone, I went back into my tent, so that I might indulge in something that had now grown quite strange—that is to say, as soon as I was quite out of sight, I indulged in a good hearty laugh, and then revelled in the thought that however bad some of the Hindus might be, here was one as faithful to his master as man could wish, and risking his life to come to my help.

Then I laughed again, as I recalled the scene when the ragged-looking old saint had reviled and cursed and spat at me, thinking, too, of how wonderfully he had carried out the disguise, and what pain he must have suffered from his wounds.

Then I began to think more seriously of Dost’s risk, for if he were discovered it would mean instant death at the hands of the rajah’s men.

“He’ll come to-night,” I thought, and I waited patiently. But the night had nearly passed as I sat watching by the opening cut in my tent, before my heart began to beat, and I felt that he was near, for there was a low rustling sound, a short distance off, beneath the great tree.

“Poor old Dost!” I said to myself; “he is a brave, true fellow;” and then it was on my lips to say in a whisper, “Quick! this way,” when I turned cold, for there was a low muttering, and I awoke to the fact that Salaman was talking to some one away there in the darkness.

Acting on the impulse of the moment, I said aloud, “What’s that? Who’s there?”

“It is I, my lord,” came in Salaman’s voice.

“Is there anything wrong?” I said hastily, vexed with myself now for speaking.

“No, my lord;” he would call me my lord; “but I dared not leave the new opening to the tent unwatched. There might be serpents or a leopard or tiger prowling near.”

“Poor Dost!” I said to myself, and I might have added, “poor me!” for mine seemed to be a very pitiable case, and after a minute or two’s thought, I called to Salaman, who came at once to the freshly cut opening.

“It is cooler to-night,” I said sharply, as I turned now upon my couch, to which I had crept silently. “Fasten up the place.”

“Yes, my lord,” he said eagerly, and summoning his people, he soon had the hole closed up.

“It does not matter,” I said to myself, “a sharp knife would soon make another way out or in.”

I felt that it was of no use to expect Dost that night, or rather early morning, and so I went to sleep, awaking fairly refreshed and ready to turn my thoughts to the invention of a plan to get into conversation with Dost.

But try as I would, no ideas came, and the day had nearly gone by, when, as I sat beneath my canopy tree where the divan had been formed, expecting at any moment to hear the trampling of horses heralding the coming of the rajah, to my astonishment I saw Dost coming across the opening, straight for where I sat.

He was stalking toward me slowly, and using a stout bamboo, about six feet long, to support his steps, while in his left hand he carried a bowl formed of a gourd, and this he tapped against his stick at every stride, while he went on half shouting, half singing, a kind of chant, and turning his head, and swaying it from side to side.

“How well he acts his part,” I thought, but I shivered at his daring, as I saw Salaman come from behind my tent watching him, and following closely as he saw the fakir making for where I was seated.

“He will be found out,” I thought, but directly after it struck me that Salaman was coming for my protection, and I sat watching the progress of the scene.

Dost came on mumbling and shouting his wild song, thumping down his staff and swaying his body from side to side while Salaman followed close up now; but, in his character of fakir, Dost ignored his presence entirely, and came on till he was not above a couple of yards from where I sat. Here he stopped short, scowling at me fiercely for some time before raising his staff and waving it in the air, as he burst forth into a fierce tirade against the English usurpers of the land, and me in particular, while I sat as if on my guard, but keeping a keener watch on Salaman, whose face was a study, I could not catch a tenth of what Dost said, far it was delivered in a peculiar way in a low, muttering tone for a long sentence, whose last two or three words he shouted, bringing down his staff with a bang, and then beginning again; but I found there was a great deal of repetition and comparison of my relatives to pigs and pariah dogs, and there were threats of what he would do, I think, to my great-great-grandfather if ever he came into his hands.

But he did not come a step nearer, only grew fiercer in his final utterances; and at last Salaman stepped forward, just as I was trying hard to keep from laughing, and plucked the supposed fakir by the garment.

Dost swung round and raised his staff threateningly, as if to strike, but contented himself with waving my attendant away, and turned and went on with his abuse.

“Let him be, Salaman,” I said quietly. “I’m not afraid of the old fellow. He will not hurt me.”

“I do not think his curses will hurt, my lord,” he replied, “but he might strike.”

“He had better not,” I said sharply, in Hindustani, as if for the fakir to hear. “If he does, holy man or no, I’ll knock him

over. I'm growing stronger now."

Salaman came close behind me, and whispered, "No, no, my lord, don't strike him; push him away, he is very old and mad; but he must not be hurt."

At that moment Dost began in a very low voice and went on, with his declamation growing louder, till it was a roar, when he suddenly ceased, and dropped down on the ground with his legs under him in the position of an Indian idol, and, with his chin upon his breast, sat there perfectly silent, and as if in rapt contemplation.

Salaman seemed puzzled, and Dost looked like a statue that had been very much knocked about.

"What shall I do, my lord?" he whispered. "I do not like to touch him; he would begin to curse again."

"Then pray don't touch him," I said testily. "He will go to sleep now; he is tired."

"It is not sleep," whispered Salaman. "He goes into a state that may last for hours or days. Will my lord come to his tent?"

"No," I said emphatically; "if I move, perhaps it will set him off again. Let him stay and curse the rajah when he comes."

"I pray he may not," said Salaman hurriedly; "his highness is soon angry. But, no: he would not curse him."

"Never mind," I said; "get me a melon. I am thirsty."

Salaman glanced at the motionless figure with its head bent down, and then hurried away to obey my command.

Dost did not stir, but sat there staring hard at the ground, and I saw his ears twitch. Then, in a quick whisper, he said —

"I could not come near your tent. Watched, sahib. Was obliged to do this. Turn your head away, and do not look at me, but hiss, hiss, like a snake, when you see him coming."

"Yes," I said, as I threw myself sidewise on the pillows. "Tell me what you propose doing."

"Going away to-day to find the captain, and tell him all. He may come to your help at once. If he does not, it is because the country is full of enemies."

"Can't you take me with you, Dost?"

"No, sahib, you are growing stronger, but you could not sit a horse for long enough yet, and you have not strength enough to fight and defend us both. I am not a fighting man."

Hiss!

Salaman was on his way back with a silver dish, on which lay a melon and knife, while one of the bearers carried a plate and sugar.

The former glanced at Dost, as he paused, and then placed the melon before me.

"It is beautifully ripe, my lord," he said, "and will quench your thirst."

I laughed.

"It is good to see my lord smile," said Salaman, "he is better, and it makes my heart glad."

"I was laughing," I said, "because the old fakir must be thirstier than I. All those hot words must have burned his throat."

Salaman smiled, but became solemn again directly.

"Truly his words were hot, my lord," he said.

"Then cut him a big piece of the melon, and give him, before I touch it, and he thinks it is defiled."

Salaman looked pleased, and obeyed my words, placing the melon in Dost's lap; but the latter did not move or unclose his eyes, but sat there perfectly motionless, with the piece of the fruit in his lap, while I partook of mine, which was delicious in the extreme, and I enjoyed it as I saw how completely the people about me were deceived.

Salaman and the bearer stood humbly close at hand till I had finished, and then took plate and tray with the remains of the melon.

"Will my lord return to the tent?" asked Salaman.

"Oh, I don't know," I said indifferently.

"But my lord might be sleeping when the holy man comes back to himself. You see, he is not there now. It is only his body."

"How these old impostors of fakirs do deceive the people," I thought, as I glanced at Dost; then aloud—

“Well, suppose I were sleeping?”

“The holy man might harm my lord.”

“Not he,” I said, in a voice full of contempt. “Words do no harm whatsoever.”

Salaman bowed and went his way, and I took up a palm-leaf fan, and began to use it, not as a wafter of cool wind, but as a screen to hide my face when I spoke to Dost, and from behind which I could keep an eye on the tents, and see when any one was coming.

As soon as I gave him a signal, Dost began again, but without stirring a muscle; in fact, so rigid did he look that it would have puzzled any one to make out whence the low muffled voice came with such a peculiar whispered hiss, caused by its passing through the thick beard which muffled his lips.

“You understand, sahib,” he said. “I shall be gone before morning, and if you do not hear anything, be not afraid, for if I get safely to the captain sahib, he will be making plans to come and save you as soon as he can.”

“Tell me one thing,” I said quickly. “What about Major Lacey?”

“Ah! at Rajgunge, sahib. I do not know. I was not able to go there again, but he will be well. Those with whom he was placed would not let him come to harm.”

“And Sergeant Craig?”

“His wounds were healing fast, sahib. But now listen. When I come back to you to get you away to your friends, who will be waiting close by, I shall let you know I am there by making a hiss like a snake—so—in a quick way, twice.”

He gave the imitation, but so softly that it could not have been heard.

“Now,” he said, “go, and take no more notice of me. If the servants suspect anything, my work must be begun all over again, and it is hard to deceive them.”

“But have you nothing more to say?”

“Nothing, sahib; there is no time, and this is not the place. Be patient, and grow strong. The captain sahib will save you, and all will be well. Go.”

I hesitated for a few minutes, being reluctant to leave, but satisfied at last that Dost’s advice was right, and that I must wait patiently for my release, I covered my face with the great palm fan, and said in a low tone—

“Mind and tell Captain Brace that the rajah may have taken me to his city.”

“Yes, yes; but go, sahib, pray. I must wake up now. It is too hot here to bear it much longer.”

In spite of my trouble, I wanted to laugh, but I managed to control it, and rising slowly, I said in a low voice—

“Good-bye, old friend. I trust you, for you are a true, brave man. Tell Captain Brace I will be patient, and that I am nearly well.”

I could say no more, but sauntered slowly away under the shade of the trees, to find that my guards sprang into sight, ready to follow me, the first one so near that I was startled. I had not known of his proximity, and I trembled for Dost’s safety. This man might have heard us talking, and he would of course repeat it to his head.

But I could only go on hoping and trying to be patient, and when at last I slowly started back to the tent, and glanced over toward the divan, my excitement increased, for the fakir was no longer seated in the hot sunshine.

Where was he? Back in his place by the great tree, or a captive taken away and condemned at once as a spy?

I could not tell; I must wait, and my brain was so active that my fears hourly increased.

Chapter Forty One.

I was spared one trouble to add to my others that day, for the rajah did not come. If he had, I fear that he would have noticed my manner as being peculiar and strange. I dreaded, too, his encountering Dost, for, though Salaman and his companions had been easily imposed upon, now that I was in the secret, I forgot all about my having also been deceived, and felt that the rajah would see through the disguise at once.

It was then with a feeling of the most intense relief that I saw the nightfall, and felt now that he would not visit me that day.

Of course I lay listening that night in the tent, wondering whether Dost would make an attempt to visit me again, and then whether he was making his way back to where he expected to meet my troop, and “Oh!” I mentally ejaculated, “if I could only have been with him.”

The desire brought with it a despondent feeling and weary loneliness. I was very weak and miserable, thinking that perhaps I should never grow strong again, never mount my beautiful horse as of old. And then I fell a wondering for the first time in my life at myself; thinking what a weak, helpless creature a human being was, if he received a

wound, for there seemed to be little reason for my long illness. I had had a blow on the head, and a cut on the arm—that was all. It never occurred to me then that my injuries were such as would have killed many men, and that it was my youth and vigorous health alone which had enabled me to bear all I had gone through.

The morning broke dull and lowering. My spirits were quite in the same key, and I trembled when I first encountered Salaman, looking at him sharply, to see if his eyes told tales of any particular excitement.

And they did; there was no mistaking their import; he was evidently in high glee, and that, I felt, could only mean one thing—the discovery and making prisoner of poor Dost, whose fate must be sealed.

But still Salaman made no communication; he only busied himself about his work, waiting on me, seeing to my tent, and then adjusting the sling for my wounded arm.

My breakfast was ready beneath the tree; and I walked to it feeling certainly stronger, while every day I passed I could not help noticing how beautifully clean and well prepared everything was, and how pleasant the life beneath the tent would have been, if my mind had only been at peace.

Salaman waited upon me with more than his usual ease, and twice over I saw him smiling, as if with greater satisfaction than ever; but still he did not speak, but appeared to avoid my eye, till I could bear it no longer. Feeling that something had occurred—a something which could only mean the discovery of Dost, and the credit he would get with the rajah—I at last asked him sharply what he was laughing at.

“I have good news for my lord,” he said eagerly; and to me his manner seemed to be full of sneering triumph.

“Well, what is it?” I said huskily.

“The holy man has gone?”

“To prison!” I exclaimed involuntarily, for that was my first thought.

“Oh no, my lord; away upon his long journey.”

“Dead!” I ejaculated.

Salaman looked at me wonderingly.

“Oh no, my Lord; that kind of old man very seldom dies. They live on and on and on, they are so hard and strange. I have seen many fakirs so thin and dry that they hardly seemed to be alive, but they were, and they went on living. I never saw a fakir die.”

“Then you mean that he has gone away on his travels—pilgrimage, we call it?”

“Yes, my lord, and he will not be here to curse you again.”

“When—when did he go?” I asked, taking up my coffee, so as to seem indifferent.

“Who knows, my lord? No one saw him leave. They come and they go, and some of them are always coming and going. They have no home. Perhaps he went in the night, perhaps as soon as it was day. And with all those wounds not healed, it is wonderful.”

I was already beginning to enjoy my breakfast at this glorious news, for Dost had evidently got away in safety, and his disguise would no doubt enable him to pass easily through the land.

“Well,” I said, speaking cheerfully now, “what is your other news?”

“Ah, that coffee has done my lord good,” said Salaman. “He smiles and looks brighter and better for his highness to see. I made that coffee myself, and it is fresh and good.”

“Beautiful, Salaman,” I said, emptying my cup, and longing for some good honest English milk; “but your news—your other news.”

“His highness is coming to-day.”

“How do you know?” I cried, the aroma departing from my coffee, and the chupatties beginning to taste bitter.

“A horseman rode over to bid me have refreshments ready for his highness this afternoon, which he will partake of with you, and afterwards the tents are to be taken down, bullock-waggons will come, and we shall sleep at the palace to-night. But my lord does not seem glad.”

“Glad?” I said bitterly. “Why, this means that I, too, am to go.”

“Yes, my lord; thy servant said so, and it is right. The great doctor spoke to me, and said that you wanted a change from here.”

“Oh no,” I cried.

“But the great doctor said so, my lord. He knows. My lord was nearly dead when he was brought here, but the good medicine brought him back to life, and now he is nearly strong. This place is good, and it was made ready for my lord, but it is very lonely, and the wild beasts are always about the tents at night.”

Salaman said no more, but walked away. He had already said too much.

I was in agony, and could think no more, for it appeared as if my chance had been thrown away. Only a few hours back, and Dost was talking to me, there, where my meal was spread, and I, his master, had let him go, instead of ordering him to take me away with him.

I bitterly reproached myself for what I looked upon as my weakness in giving way, though I know now that I did quite right, for of course I could not foresee so sudden a change. I had expected it, and we had discussed its probability, but I had hoped that there would be time for my rescue first.

“Once inside the city, Brace will not have much chance of getting me away,” I said to myself despondently; and then, as I sat thinking over my unhappy lot, and of the coming interview with the rajah, there was only one way in which I felt that I could help myself, and that was to seem worse instead of better when my captor came.

But I threw that idea aside directly; it was too contemptible.

“I must act like an English officer,” I said. “It would be despicable to sham, and he would see through it all at once.”

Like many another one in such a position, I gave up thinking at last, and prepared myself for the inevitable.

“After all,” I mused, “he may not think me well enough, and then there will be a respite. If he does say I am to go, well, I suppose it will be to a prison.”

I could not help feeling low-spirited, and the more so that on the other hand there was the temptation offered to me of going straight to a palace, and taking up at once my position, boy as I was, as the rajah’s most trusted leader of his troops.

The time went slowly on, and I sat expecting to hear the jingling of the escort’s accoutrements; but hour after hour passed, it would soon be sundown, and then there would be another day’s respite.

Salaman had made great preparations, and I was astonished at their extent, for I had not thought it possible so elaborate a meal could be prepared out there in the forest; but when I made some remark thereon, he only smiled and said—

“I have only to give orders, my lord, and messengers bring everything I want; but it is all in vain, the sun will sink directly, and his highness has given up coming to-day.”

Almost as he spoke, my heart beat, for in the distance there was the sound of a horse galloping.

“A messenger,” cried Salaman, excitedly, “to say his highness cannot come.”

I felt that he must be right, for, though I listened, I could hear no more. It was evidently only one horse. He was not coming that day.

I uttered a sigh of relief, and strained my eyes to watch the opening between the trees, through which directly after a handsomely dressed horseman cantered, sprang from his steed, and threw the rein to an attendant, after which he marched up to me, and bowed low as he approached, to say only two words, which drove away all the hopes I had been nursing.

“His highness!” he said, and I knew then that he was the avant-courier who had galloped on to announce his lord’s coming. After which he stepped on one side and drew his sword, to stand on guard waiting for the rajah’s entry.

For a time, as I strove hard to be firm and ready to meet the greatest enemy I had, I listened vainly for some sign of his drawing near, but for a long space there was nothing but the customary bird-cries from the forest. At last, though, there was the unmistakable sound of approaching cavalry, and feeling firmer, I still sat with my eyes fixed upon the narrow opening, schooling my lips to utter the final word, “No,” when he should come and repeat his offer.

“He will not kill me,” I said to myself, “only put me in prison to make me weary and glad to accept his offer; but he does not know how obstinate I can be.”

The open space surrounded by trees was now flooded with the rich orange light of sundown, and as I listened to the approach of horse, and saw a troop of showily dressed men ride in, I could not help a lingering sensation coming over me, and the temptation would, I felt, be a hard one to battle.

But first one and then another party rode in, till quite a hundred men had formed up, with their dress looking brilliant in the sun’s horizontal rays. But there was no rajah, and I had begun to wonder at his non-appearance on his favourite Arab.

The wonder passed away directly after, for all at once there was a peculiar soft tread and rustling that was very familiar, sounding quite distinct from the heavy sharp trampling of horse, and directly I saw the painted head and gilded tusks of an enormous elephant come from among the trees. Its head was covered with a scarlet cloth, heavily fringed with gold, upon which sat its white-robed mahout, and the rest of the housings were also of the same brilliant red, embroidered and fringed most heavily with gold, the trappings completely hiding the huge animal’s sides, while the ropes which secured the massive silver howdah were also twisted and tasselled with the rich yellow metal, much of which was used to compose the rails and front of the canopied structure in which the rajah was seated, completing what was a dazzling object towering far above the magnificently dressed spearmen who marched by the elephant’s side, and the army of richly uniformed bodyguards who rode behind.

The rajah had been lavish enough in his dress before, but on this occasion he far outshone all previous display. Pearls and diamonds encrusted his breast, and his draped helmet, with its flowing white aigrette, was a perfect blaze of jewels, from whose many facets the setting sun flashed in a way wonderful to behold at every movement of the ponderous beast he rode.

But the gorgeous procession was not yet complete, for, as the rajah advanced, two more splendidly caparisoned elephants appeared, bearing a couple of venerable-looking officials simply dressed in white, their marks of distinction being their noble presence, and what seemed to be stars of emeralds and diamonds in the front of their large white turbans.

I at once supposed these grey-bearded old men to be a couple of the rajah's counsellors, but I had no time for further examination of the gorgeous retinue, for, with the exception of the rajah and his nearest attendants, all halted, while the great elephant came forward, till, at a word from its sedate-looking mahout, it stopped just before where I stood, curled up its trunk, uttered a loud trumpeting sound, and then softly knelt down.

As it subsided, and rested there, motionless, with its gorgeous trappings now touching the ground, there was a quick movement amongst the spearmen, who formed up on either side, four of them raising their arms to enable their august master to descend.

But he did not avail himself of their help. Stepping lightly out of the howdah, and slowly placing one foot on a kind of step, suspended by gold cords, he sprang to the ground, and then advanced towards me with a grave smile, his followers prostrating themselves on either side of the noble-looking figure, while I alone stood erect, and gave him my hand, thinking the while how plain and shabby I looked in the face of all this grand display.

Chapter Forty Two.

I remember feeling a kind of angry contempt for the magnificently dressed men who bowed down before this eastern potentate, and I believe I drew myself up stiffly in face of all this abject humility. I suppose it was pride—the pride of race; of one who knew that these were a conquered people, men of an old-world, barbaric civilisation, which had had to bow before the culture and advance of England; and in the midst of all the gorgeous display of show and wealth, I could not help, as I clasped hands with the rajah, thinking of the syce, Ny Deen, standing patient and humble by our barracks at Rajgunge, ready to spring forward obediently at Lieutenant Barton's call.

As the rajah grasped my hand with friendly warmth, I glanced round at his followers, expecting to see looks of contempt directed at me; but every face was fixed in one solemn, respectful stare, and all drew back, so as to form a half-circle before us, while the rajah led me to the tent, making way for me to enter first, and then following.

I could feel my face flush a little, and it was impossible to help a kind of self-consciousness at the honour paid me; for it was plain enough that the rajah was not only treating me before his followers as his friend, but as one whom he was seeking to place next him in authority.

"Hah!" he said, smiling, as he seated himself, after making a sign that I should follow his example; "I am glad there are refreshments. I am hungry after a long, tiring day. You are better?"

"Yes," I said; "much better and stronger."

"Your face tells it before your lips," he said, as we began our meal, with half a dozen attendants gliding rapidly about us, but so silently that we hardly realised their presence till they handed curry, or some other carefully prepared dish.

For some time scarcely anything was said beyond matters relative to the dinner, the journey he had made, and the elephant he had ridden; but I was holding myself ready for what I knew must follow as soon as the servants had left the tent; and as soon as we were alone it came, as I anticipated.

"Well, Gil," he said familiarly, as he leaned back and began to smoke from the great pipe Salaman had ignited and placed ready to his hand, "what do you think of those of my people whom you saw this evening?"

"They make a good display," I replied, "and seem to hold you in great reverence."

"They do," he said, without a shadow of conceit. "They believe in me because they know that for their sakes I suffered a kind of martyrdom, going, as I did, amongst your people to serve in the lowest state, and all to help free my country."

I was silent.

"You do not share their admiration," he said, with a laugh.

"How can I?" was my reply. "You tried to rise by the downfall of me and mine."

"And I have risen, and they have fallen," he said firmly. "But you have not—you rise with me."

I was silent.

"I am going to present you to my people this evening, by-and-by, when they have eaten and rested. My servants are waiting for you in the little tent at the back."

"Waiting? What for?" I said in surprise.

“You will see,” he said, smiling. “Oh, well, there need be no reserve or form between us. You have been badly wounded, and you are dressed as one who has suffered. I have had more worthy garments brought for the great chief and brave young warrior, my friend.”

“My own uniform?” I said sharply.

“Yes; of your own design,” he said quietly.

“No, no; I mean my own—the Company’s uniform.”

“A noble uniform,” he said warmly; “because it is stained with a brave swordsman’s blood. I have it still, but it is cut, torn, and spoiled, Gil. It is something to have—to treasure up as one would a good weapon that has done its duty.”

“I must wear that or none,” I said firmly.

“No,” he replied gravely, as he leaned toward me; “you will never wear the Company’s uniform again. The great Company has passed away, as other great powers have passed before.”

The fierce words rose to my lips to say that this was nothing, for my people were; fighting hard to recover lost ground, but I checked myself. I did not want to insult a brave man who was my friend, neither did I wish to show that I had had news of the state of the country, so I said quietly—

“I told you last time that what you wish is impossible.”

He frowned, but smiled again directly.

“Yes, when you were weak and suffering. You are stronger now, and have thought better of my proposal.”

“I have thought it a great honour, Ny Deen—rajah—your highness, I mean.”

“No, no; Ny Deen always to you, Gil Vincent,” he said warmly. “I am a maharajah, but only a man. I have not forgotten.”

His words, and the way in which they were uttered, moved me, and I held out my hand, which he grasped and held as I went on excitedly—

“Yes, I know you are my friend,” I cried. “You love me, and you are great and noble and chivalrous. You would not wish to see me degrade myself?”

“By becoming my greatest officer?” he said, in a low, reproachful voice.

“No,” I cried; “that would be a great honour, far too great for such a boy as I am.”

He shook his head.

“You are only a boy yet, but you have had the training of a man, and you have the knowledge of a great soldier growing in you rapidly. The boyhood is going fast, Gil, and life is very short. You will make a great soldier, and I hold you in honour for that, as I love you for a brave, true gentleman—my friend.”

“Then you would not wish me to degrade myself by becoming false to my oaths—to see me, for the sake of promotion, turn from my duty to those I have sworn to serve—see me become a renegade. You would never believe in me or trust me again. No, rajah—no, Ny Deen—my friend; you think so now, but by-and-by, in some time of danger, you would say, ‘No; I cannot trust him. He has been false to his people—he will be false to me.’”

“No,” he said, looking at me earnestly, “I shall never doubt you, Gil, and it is vain to resist. Every word you say, boy—every brave piece of opposition makes me more determined. You are proving more and more how worthy you are of the great honours I offer you. Come, you have fought enough. You are conquered. Give up your English sword, and take the tulwar I will place in your hands.”

“No,” I cried passionately. “I am the Company’s officer.”

“There is no Company,” he cried. “You have fought to crush down a conquered people; now fight to raise them up into a great nation; to make me into one of the greatest kings who ever ruled in Hindustan. It will be a great work.”

“I cannot,” I said passionately.

He turned a furious look upon me, and dashed away my hand.

“Ungrateful!” he cried fiercely.

“No,” I retorted. “I must do my duty to my Queen.”

“I tell you that you are mine now,” he cried furiously. “You must obey me. I am your maharajah and your king.”

“No; you are the great chief who has made me his prisoner, sir. I am English, and you will have to give account to my people for my life.”

“Pish! Your life! What are you among so many? I tell you my purpose is fixed. You are my officer, and—”

“You will have me killed?”

“Killed!—imprisoned till you grow wiser. I should not kill you yet.”

“Very well,” I said, trying to speak calmly; but a crowd of faces seemed to come before my eyes, and I believe my voice shook.

“What?” he raged out.

“I said ‘Very well,’” I replied. “I am ready.”

My words only drove away his anger; and he sat gazing at me for some moments before bursting out into a merry laugh.

“My dear Gil!” he cried, rising and coming closer to plant his hands upon my shoulders, giving me such pain that I felt faint, for one was over my wound, “it is of no use to fight. I tell you that everything you say makes you more mine. Come, my brave, true lad, accept your fate. Go into the next tent, and come back my chief. I have brought many of my best officers over to be presented to you—noble men who will place their swords at your feet, for they know what you have done, and they are eager to receive you as their brave young leader. There, I cannot be angry with you, boy. You master even me, and make me quite your slave. Kill, imprison you! It is impossible. You accept?”

I shook my head.

I thought he was going to flash cut again in his anger; but though his brow wrinkled up, it was only with a puzzled look; and then he looked alarmed, for I sank back half fainting, and for a few moments everything before me was misty.

But it passed off as I felt a vessel of cold water at my lips; and directly after I came quite to myself.

“What is it?” he said anxiously. “You are ill.”

“Your hand was pressing my wounded shoulder,” I said rather faintly.

“My dear Gil!” he cried, as he took and pressed my hand, “I did not know.”

“Of course not,” I said, smiling. “It is long healing. I’m better now. It was very weak and cowardly of me to turn so. There,” I cried, with an attempt at being merry; “you see what a poor officer I should make.”

“You cowardly!” he cried. “It is wonderful how you have recovered so quickly. But, come, it is getting late, and we have a long journey back. Go and put on your uniform.”

“I cannot,” I said sadly.

“I am not asking you to say ‘Yes’ now,” he continued calmly. “I only wish you to appear before my people worthily dressed as my friend, and ready to enter my city.”

“You want to take me with you?” I said quickly.

“Yes; you will share my howdah. It is you I care for as my friend. I do not care for your clothes; but my people would think it strange.”

I sat frowning and thinking of Dost and Brace, but I was helpless.

“If I put on the uniform you have brought, it is accepting your proposal and promising to serve you.”

“No, I shall want a better promise than that, Gil. I shall wait. You do not know Ny Deen yet. Some day you will come to me and say ‘Yes. I know you now as a brave, good man, who is seeking to do what is right.’ You think of me now, and judge me by what savage men have done everywhere at a time when I only wished that they should fight as soldiers. When you know me well, you will place your sword at my service. I am going to wait.”

“Then leave me here,” I said eagerly.

“I cannot. You must come with me to-night; and I promise you that at present you shall only be my guest.”

“You promise this?” I said.

“I do. You do not wish for my guest to look—there as you do now?”

“No,” I said, for I felt that I must yield.

“Go, then, and come back, not as my officer, but as the friend in whom my people’s rajah delights.”

He held out his hand again, and weakly, or diplomatically, whichever it may have been, I grasped his hand, rose, and went into the outer tent, to find Salaman and one of my attendants patiently awaiting my arrival.

Chapter Forty Three.

As I saw the two attendants waiting there, and by the light of a lamp caught sight of a glittering uniform wonderfully

like my ideas as given to the rajah in conversation, I felt as if I must retreat and go back to the other tent and announce my determination, but I had several thoughts to combat now—shame and inclination among others, for I felt as if I could go back to the rajah and argue with him again; and I tried to convince myself that wearing the clothes spread out before me need make no difference. I should no doubt be armed, and that would help me in my escape; besides, he had promised me that I should go with him only as a friend.

To sum up, I was compelled to own that resistance was out of the question, and I had better appear before these people dressed in a way worthy of a British officer than reduced to the slight, well-worn shirt and trousers I had persisted in wearing all through my sojourn in the tent.

“It’s of no use,” I muttered; “and I must make a virtue of necessity.”

As I said this, I turned to Salaman, who eagerly began to hand me the various articles of attire; and in spite of my determination to be calm and stoical, I could not help feeling a glow of satisfaction as my eyes lit upon Russia leather boots, with gold spurs, a handsomely braided and corded tunic, helmet with handsome plume and puggaree of glittering gold-embroidered muslin wound lightly round, after the fashion of a slight turban.

And as I put on article after article, I began to marvel at the accuracy of the fit until I felt that the rajah must have given instructions for the clothes to be made exactly like the cut and torn uniform I had worn when I was made prisoner.

I could not help it, for I was still a boy, and one of the youngest officers in the Company’s service: a warm glow of satisfaction ran through me. I forgot the pain in my arm as I passed it through the sleeve of the loose tunic, and buttoned it across my breast, which seemed to swell as I drew myself up, feeling as if, in spite of the Eastern cut of my uniform, I was an English officer once more.

I had turned to the second man, who was holding my gauntlet gloves and helmet, when Salaman produced something I had not before seen, and I flushed a little more with pleasure, for it was a magnificent cartouch-box and cross-belt, which I felt must have belonged to the rajah; and while I was hesitating about passing the belt over my head, Salaman forestalled me, and then drew back as if to admire me. Then, looking at me with a peculiar smile, he passed his hands behind a purdah, and produced the gorgeously jewelled tulwar and sheath which the rajah had offered me before.

I COULD NOT REFRAIN FROM DRAWING THE FLASHING BLADE. p. 427.
Gil the Gunner.

I shrank from it, for it seemed like a bond to link me to the rajah’s service, but Salaman fastened the magnificent belt, and, for the life of me, I could not refrain from drawing the flashing blade from its sheath, and holding it quivering in my trembling hand, from which it sent a thrill right to my heart.

“If it is a bond between us forced upon me,” I thought, “this can cut us apart;” and at this I thrust it back into its sheath, allowed Salaman to alter the buckle a little, and then took the helmet and gloves, putting both on, and involuntarily turning to see if there was a looking-glass.

Vanity? Well, perhaps so; but what lad of my years would not have done the same?

But there was no glass. I had to be contented by seeing myself in imagination with my attendants’ eyes as they drew back and gazed at me as proudly as if my appearance was entirely their work.

“Ah!” exclaimed Salaman. “Now my lord looks indeed my lord. Who could call him sahib when he is like that?”

I winced at the man’s flattery, and yet it was hardly that, and I laughed to myself as I felt that it was the clothes they were admiring and not the wearer.

“If the holy man could see my lord now,” said Salaman, in a whisper, lest his words should be heard in the next tent, “he would not dare to curse again.”

These words made me wince once more; and in imagination I saw poor Dost in his ragged fakir’s garb staring at me wildly in disappointment because I was going away. Worse still, that busy imagination called up the face of Brace, pointing scornfully at my gay unspecked attire, and asking me whether it would not have been more honourable to have clung to the torn and stained uniform which was mine by right.

But these musings were cut short by Salaman and his assistant drawing back the curtains over the tent door and admitting a flood of light, which half startled me, and I turned to Salaman, asking if one of the tents was blazing.

“No, my lord; it is the light of the torches the men carry.”

The next minute I entered the other tent, determined to carry myself erect, and to be firm in spite of my ambiguous position; and before I had taken a couple of steps forward in the well-lit scene of our last conversation, the rajah rose quickly, scanned me from top to toe, and then his eyes flashed with satisfaction as he strode to meet me with extended hands.

“Hah!” he ejaculated; “my people will be proud of their lord’s friend.”

I was silent as I stood there, proud and pleased, and yet full of mental pain, while he scanned me once more, and ended by buckling on his own sword, placing his helmet upon his head, and offering me his hand as the curtains were thrown back, and he led me forth into a blaze of light, spread by at least a couple of hundred torches, which flashed from the weapons of horse and foot, and poured on the gorgeous housings of the three elephants, two of which stood near bearing the occupants of their howdahs, while behind was the dense shadowy leafage of the trees, throwing up the wonderful scene with its vivid play of colour, and then looking black as night beneath the boughs.

A wild shout greeted us as we advanced slowly; and then, at a sign, the huge elephant was led forward to go down upon its knees before its master, who led me to its side.

“Go first, Gil,” he said.

“No,” I replied quietly; and I drew back for him to lead the way.

Another wild shout broke forth at this, and I saw that the rajah looked pleased as he stepped lightly up; and as soon as he was in the howdah, bent down and held out his hand.

“Don’t forget your wound,” he said, and I was glad to grasp his hand as I mounted, and the next minute I was by his side.

Then for the moment, as I felt the huge elephant heave itself up, it was like starting upon a tiger-hunt, but the likeness ceased directly, as, preceded by about fifty horsemen, and a score of torch-bearers in their front, and another score between the advance-guard and our elephant’s head, we moved out of the opening, the other two elephants following, with torch-bearers on either side, and the rest of the horsemen of the great escort taking their places as the glittering procession wound among the trees, and then meandered toward the plain which I had so often sadly watched, longing for strength and liberty.

The rajah was very silent for a time, and it struck me that he was leaving me to my own thoughts, so that I might be impressed by the martial spectacle, as I looked back from time to time at the wild barbaric pageant, with the torches in a long train, lighting up the dark faces of the rajah’s followers, flashing from their arms, and sending back a ruddy cloud of smoke which formed like a canopy above our heads. It was impossible to keep down a feeling of proud exultation, and I could not for the time being think of anything else but the night march across what spread out like an endless plain, while the stars above us spangled what looked like a vast dome of purple black.

I was used to the motion of an elephant, and, after my long inaction, enjoyed the swaying of the howdah as the monster of his kind shuffled along at a great rate, keeping the footmen at a sharp run, and the horses at a gentle trot; and, as I listened to the jingle of the accoutrements, I could not help wishing that I had been mounted on my Arab, gripping the saddle between my knees, instead of being seated there.

About this I asked myself what I should have done.

The only answer that would come was: clap my spurs to his sides, and make him fly over the plain; and in imagination I saw myself tearing over the wide space, pursued by a cloud of sowars and mounted chiefs.

And then I sighed, for I knew that escape would have been impossible, and also that I was too weak even then to sit a horse for long.

“Tired, Gil?” said the rajah, as he heard my sigh.

“Yes,” I said; “I suppose so. It is an exciting time, after being a prisoner so long.”

“Hardly a prisoner,” he said, with a little laugh. “Only a wounded man.”

“Have we very far to go?” I asked.

“We shall be nearly two hours yet, but the people expect us; and after we have passed through the forest that lies right before us, you will be able to see the lights of the city. We are rather late.”

There was another silence, broken at last by another inquiry from the rajah as to my being weary.

“Shall I make them walk?” he said, showing his sympathy and consideration.

“Oh no,” I said in protest. “I am not so weary as that.”

I forced myself to talk to him, and he seemed pleased, conversing eagerly, sometimes in excellent English, and at others in Hindustani, and so the time passed on, till I found by the darkness and the blotting out of the stars that we were going along a forest path.

The ride had seemed peculiar before, now it was far more strange, from peculiar shadows cast upon the tree trunks, and the various effects of light and shade as the smoky torches played about us, and formed a long line of light both in front and rear.

At last the excitement of the evening and the unwonted exercise in my weak state began to tell, and I was very silent. The journey had now lost its interest, the motion of the elephant became almost intolerable, and I was beginning to feel that I would give anything to go to my couch in the tent and lie down and sleep, when, just as I noticed that the stars were out again overhead, the rajah suddenly exclaimed—

“There is your future home, Gil;” and, as I followed the direction of his pointing hand, I saw a light glow in the distance as of a fire, out of which a flash suddenly rose, and then ended in a burst of stars, the tiny sparks showing that they were at a considerable distance yet.

“Signs of rejoicing,” he said to me, with a smile.

Then, evidently noticing how exhausted I looked, he said quickly—

“We shall not be long, and you can go to your room directly we reach my palace.”

“His palace!” I thought bitterly; “the palace of a syce.” And I was thinking of it all contemptuously when my hand fell upon the gems which encrusted my sword-hilt, and I felt that Ny Deen must be one of the wealthiest of the native chiefs.

The distance that we had to traverse was not great, and I saw emissaries in the form of sowars dashing forward to announce our coming; but I felt very weak as I sat back watching the glare of light get brighter and brighter till I could see that it was rising from among houses, and that in front of them was a kind of gate hung with lanthorns, while others kept coming into sight and growing more clear as we approached. Then I could see the tops of temples and minarets standing up full in the increasing glare, which made plain at last that we were approaching a city of considerable size, one that was evidently illuminated in the rajah’s honour, so that the place to which he had taken the guns, and where we had recovered them, could only have been one of his villages.

In spite of my weariness, the increasing brilliancy of the scene roused me a little, so that I was sitting up watching eagerly as we drew nearer, and I could hear the peculiar buzzing roar of a great crowd. Then fireworks began to rush up skyward rapidly, and the rockets scattered their blazing stars; the lights of the illumination increased in number, and at last, as we reached the edge of a crowd which had surged out through the great gates, there was a sudden burst of wild, barbaric music, trumpets sent out their brazen clangour, drums were beaten, and as the band took its place in front, and marched before us, we went slowly in beneath the great illuminated gate, and then on along a wide road whose houses were one blaze of light, and sides thronged with the white-robed people, their eyes glittering curiously as we passed.

It was a wonderful scene, but I could not appreciate it, for, after the first few minutes of our triumphal progress, my weariness returned in greater force, and it all became a blurred dream of lights and glitter, trampling horses, the swaying elephants, and the deafening clamour of trumpet and drum.

And all the time I knew that I ought to feel very proud and glad, because all this preparation and display was got up in my honour; but I felt neither, for under all was the knowledge that it was for the rajah’s friend, for the one who was to help him by drilling his forces and making them able to fight and conquer the infidel; and I was one of the infidels, and one who would not fight against his people to save his life.

The place was very large, and the light and show appeared as if it would never end; but at last we turned an angle, and crossed a bridge, beyond which I could see the white walls of some great building, and trees, and more lights. There were soldiers there too, and a noble-looking gateway through which we passed, leaving the crowd behind, and with it the music and display. For here all seemed peaceful and beautiful, with the lights glistening among the trees, and I did not need the rajah’s touch upon the arm, nor his word, to tell me that I had reached his home.

“Welcome,” he said quietly, and with a pleasant smile. “But, poor boy, how weary and ill you look.”

For I was completely exhausted, and glad of the assistance of the servants, who supported me into an enclosed court with white marble paving, and whose centre was a square tank, in which a fountain played among the glistening leaves of lilies.

I heard the rajah give some order, and directly after the grave old doctor appeared, and gave me a cup of some cool drink, but it revived me very little, and the next thing I remember is being carried to a couch, and uttering a sigh of

relief as my helmet and uniform were removed. Then I dimly saw the face of the rajah looking down at me, and he said something, but I could not answer, for all was growing misty and strange, and I dropped at once into a heavy sleep.

Chapter Forty Four.

It was only exhaustion, and I woke the next morning very little the worse, and half expecting to find myself back in my tent and the journey part of a fevered dream. But the first things my eyes lighted upon were rich cushions and curtains, flowers, a shaded window looking out on an inner court, full of verdant trees, and, standing silent and watchful by one of the curtains, there was Salaman waiting to show me my bath, and summon two more to assist.

People nowadays boast about their baths, some having endless praise to give to those they call Turkish, but to thoroughly know what a good bath is, they must have been on the hot plains of India, and known the luxury of having porous chatties of cool, delicious water dashed over them, and sending, as it were, life rushing through their enervated limbs.

I felt a different being in a few minutes after Salaman and the others had finished their duties with all the assiduity of Hindu servants; and then as I sat in the handsome apartment arranged in its simple, rich, Eastern luxury, a feeling of wretchedness and misery came over me. I looked round at the rich carpets, soft cushions, and costly curtains; and then at my magnificent uniform, and began thinking of the old, old fable I had read as a child, of the jackdaw in borrowed plumes, and felt that I thoroughly deserved to share the vain daw’s fate.

I know now that I was rather hard upon myself, and that circumstances had forced me into this position, but I am not sorry that I felt so strongly then.

What was to be done? I did not want to be ungrateful to a man who evidently liked me for myself as well as for the use I might prove to be, but help him I would not, I was determined, and I said I would sooner die, though, even as I made that declaration mentally, I wondered whether I was composed of the kind of stuff that would prove so staunch when put to the test. At any rate, I was firm enough then, and began to think out the possibilities of escape.

They seemed very remote. I was now in a strong town, surrounded by thousands of people; and, unless Brace came in company with quite a little army, there was not much prospect of his setting me free. I had no doubt about Dost tracking me out. After finding me in the tiny camp in the forest, he would not have much difficulty in tracking me here.

But what to do? How could I hold back? I was certainly growing stronger every hour, and in spite of my breakdown on the previous night, I felt that it would be absurd to pretend that I was an invalid.

I could not assume weakness, and I was not going to play a deceitful part. I should have, I knew, to dare the rajah’s anger, for, in spite of his words, I knew enough of the Hindu race, and had seen enough of his volcanic character, to feel that he would, sooner or later, change his manner, and threaten force.

Consequently, I could only come to one conclusion—I must escape, and the sooner the better. The question was, how could it be done?

I went to the open window and looked out, to find below me the beautiful court, with its trees, marble tank, and fountain of brilliantly clear water, in whose depths swam scores of great gold and silver fish, to which I could not help comparing myself as a fellow-prisoner in bright armour.

I looked round the court, which was surrounded by handsome erections, but I did not see a single face at any window. At a gateway, though, were half a dozen armed men, showing me that the palace was carefully guarded.

I went to another window, but it gave precisely the same view, except that I could see partly through the gateway, a place which at once had a great interest for me, as it might be the only path to liberty.

Salaman entered the room just then, and I asked him if I was at liberty to go into the next room.

“Oh yes,” he replied; “my lord is free to go where he likes. It was not safe out there on the forest hill. Here he is in a great city, surrounded by his friends.”

“His enemies,” I muttered.

“There are five rooms set apart for my lord. Will he come and see?”

I nodded, and followed him from the room in which I had slept, across a little hall or entry, out of which was the place with tiled floor in which I had had my bath, and then with a smile he drew back a curtain and I entered a handsome room, with a divan in the centre, and others about the walls. Then into another, evidently intended for smoking, and from that into one which was set apart for my meals, as a very English-looking breakfast was spread, and a couple of white-robed servants stood waiting to receive my orders.

My first move was in each case to the windows, to find that my apartments were in a corner of the court, and that all looked out on the goldfish-tank, but of course in different directions. But there was no tree near the walls big enough to be of use in an escape, and the tank, though it looked deep enough, was too far distant for a dive.

“Will my lord have food?” said Salaman, humbly.

“Not yet. Wait,” I replied; and I continued my inspection of my prison, for such it was to me, admiring most of all the curtains, which were of rich soft fabric, and Salaman smiled as he saw me pass them through my hand.

“Beautiful!” I said to myself, and I felt in better spirits, for I saw those curtains cut down, slit up, twisted and knotted together, with one end secured to the side of a window ready for me to slide down the night I made my escape.

“That’s step the first,” I said to myself; and then I looked hard at the two servants standing with folded arms motionless as bronze statues.

They were, as I have said, dressed in white, and I saw now, as I examined them more closely, that the stuff was white muslin, both robe and turban, the latter being ornamented with a fine cord of gold twist.

They were not very different to scores of men of their class, such as I had seen in good houses at Calcutta, or at the messes of the regiments where I had dined, but they attracted me greatly now, and my eyes rested searchingly on their brown faces, thick beards, bare legs, and feet partly hidden by red slippers.

It was a neat, becoming dress, and I kept up my scrutiny, noting everything, including, of course, the cummerbund or broad cotton scarf or belt about the men’s waists.

As for them, they did not even raise their eyes, but stood gazing down at the floor while I made a mental picture of their appearance, and oddly enough, I began thinking about walnuts, and wishing I had some.

A curious wish, you will say, for a prisoner who had only to give the word, and a delicious breakfast would be placed before him, with curries and fruits, and sweets with his coffee.

But I did not want any of them; I wanted walnuts.

Ah! you will say, and a pair of nutcrackers, and some salt into which I could dip the ivory-white corrugated scraps when I had peeled them, and possibly then a glass of fine old port wine, making together—the one indigestible, the other heating—about as bad a mixture as a weak convalescent could partake of in India.

But then, you see, you are perfectly wrong, for I was not thinking of eating and drinking, but wishing I could have a dozen or so of the big green walnuts I remembered growing on a great tree down in Surrey.

What for?

Why, to beat up into a kind of dark juice, in which I could wash my hands, neck, and face, my head, too, and then my feet and legs, till I had stained myself as dark as the darkest Hindu I had ever met.

The windows, with the gateway to be reached by means of the twisted curtains; the dress of one of those men, and my skin darkened. So far as this already on the first morning of my gilded captivity!

“I am getting on,” I said to myself, with a smile on my face, and then I grew rigid; for I turned and saw that Salaman was watching me keenly, as if he could read every thought.

“Let not my lord be angry,” he said humbly. “I could not help seeing that he was pleased. Yes, they are two good servants; the best I could find. His highness said I was to do everything to make my lord happy. But will he not eat?”

“Yes,” I cried eagerly, for I felt that he could not have read my thoughts, but had interpreted my looks to have meant satisfaction with the servants.

And then I took my place, feeling all at once hungry and ready for my meal.

“I must eat and grow strong,” I said. “Dost cannot get to me here, even if he dared use the same disguise. I must get out of the palace, and away into the country, and then all will be well.”

My hopes were a little dashed directly after, for I felt that I had been too sanguine. But I brightened up again, for I knew that I could not succeed all at once, and that I had done wonders towards getting my liberty by making a beginning.

I quite enjoyed the delicious breakfast they gave me, and felt in high spirits thinking such a life as the rajah offered me would be glorious if it could have been accepted with honour, and one could have made sure that his enemies would not be of his own race.

The meal removed, Salaman informed me that the rajah had sent to know how I was; and, as I heard his words, there was the excuse ready to gain time. I might say I was weak and ill. But I did not. I sent word that I was rested and better.

Salaman sent off his messenger, and then returned to say that a palanquin and bearers were waiting if I wished to go out about the gardens and park.

But I declined, preferring to rest for the day, and think. I really was tired, and a seat in the shade by an open window would, I felt, be far preferable, so I seated myself, and tried to follow up my early success with some fresh idea that would help my escape.

I looked down into the court, and watched the goldfish and those of a deep orange; then I looked down at the men on guard, and wondered whether they would stop one of the servants of the palace if they saw him walking steadily out, for that seemed to me the task before me.

I was watching the gate, and picturing myself walking boldly up to the sentries, when I heard a familiar sound, and leaned out, as there was a loud trampling of horses, and I knew that a regiment must be passing by.

But I could see nothing, only mentally picture what was going on as I listened, making out that it must be a very strong body to take so long in passing, while hardly had they gone before there came the dull regular tramp of foot, and regiment after regiment went past I wondered what for, and wished that my window looked right upon the road by which they passed, knowing full well that a request to that effect would be eagerly granted by one who would be pleased to see me taking so much interest in his troops.

So of course I could not ask, only content myself by thinking out what was going on—whether the men were going to some drill, or whether an attack was imminent.

My cheeks tingled at this, and my imagination grew busy as I began to picture the advance of some of our force. All I had been told by the rajah vanished like mist, and with patriotic fervour I mentally declared that England could not be beaten so easily as he supposed.

But time wore away, and as the day glided by I grew dull and low-spirited, for I began to dread a visit.

“He has been busy with his troops,” I said; “and to-night he will come to talk to me.”

I was quite right; just at dark the rajah came to greet me smilingly, and sat down to smoke and chat as freely as if such a question as my joining his army were quite out of the question. He seemed pleased to find me so well, and begged me to ask for anything I wished—except liberty—and ended by telling me how hard he had been at work all day drilling and reviewing troops.

“They want a great deal of teaching,” he said gloomily. “There is everything in them to make good soldiers, and they are willing to learn, but there is no one to drill them properly, and make them smart and quick like the whites.”

We were getting on to dangerous ground, and he felt it too, and as if not to break his word about treating me as a friend, he changed his position directly, and began to ask my opinion about certain manoeuvres made by foot regiments, and whether I did not think them a great mistake.

From that we drifted into the manufacture of powder, and the casting of shot and shell.

“I mean to have all that done by my people,” he said—“in time. By-and-by I shall cast my own cannon. No, no,” he cried merrily; “we must not talk about guns.”

“No; please don’t,” I said.

“I’ll keep my word, Gil,” he cried; and as he spoke he looked one of the most noble gentlemen I ever saw. “Oh yes, I’ll keep my word to you, Gil; but we can talk about soldiering, even if you are not in my service.”

And he went on talking upon that subject with all the keen interest of a man who was a soldier at heart, and who meant to gather round him an army which he meant to be invincible.

I am sorry to say that I was very ignorant of the history of India; but still I had read and studied it a great deal, and I felt that Ny Deen was of the same type of men as the old warriors who rose from time to time, petty chiefs at first, but who by their indomitable energy conquered all around, and grew into men whose names were known in history, and would never die.

“I tire you,” he said at last, after talking eagerly for some time about raising a regiment of light horse—all picked men, with the swiftest and best Arab troopers that could be obtained. “Mount them for speed,” he said, “and to harass the advance of an enemy, and keep him engaged when he is in retreat. Such men, if I can get them drilled and trained to the perfection I want, will be invaluable. You see, I have plenty of schemes,” he added, with a laugh. “All ambition, I suppose. No, not all,” he continued, earnestly; “for I want my nation to be great, and my people prosperous and well governed. It is not from the greed of conquest, Gil, nor the love of blood. I hope it is something better; but this rising of the peoples of Hindustan is my opportunity. Once the English are driven out of the country, the rest will be easy.”

“Then the English are not driven out?” I said sharply.

“Not quite, boy; but they are at their last gasp. There, Gil, I have placed myself in your hands. If you betray what I have said to-night, every one of the chiefs who now help me, and are my allies, would turn against me, and I should stand alone.”

“You have no fear of that,” I said quietly. “You would not have trusted me if you had.”

“No,” he said, rising, “I should not. So you see what confidence I have in you. There, I shall leave you now. Go to rest, man, and get stronger. You are beginning to look weary already.”

He held out his hand as I walked with him to the door, and as I gave him mine, not without a feeling of compunction, for I was playing a double part, and letting him, as I thought, believe I was settling down, when he laughed merrily.

“It is of no use,” he said.

“I don’t understand,” I said, colouring like a girl.

“Then I’ll explain. You are thinking of nothing else but escaping. Well, try to get away. There are only curtains before

the doors; but you will find my plans stronger than locks and bolts. Try and grow contented with your lot, Gil—with the great future that is before you; for it is greater than you can grasp, boy. There, good night."

He passed through the doorway, and the purdah dropped behind him, while I stood thinking of his words, and ended by going to one of the windows and leaning out to gaze at the great stars.

"That is not my fate," I said to myself; and as the cool night-breeze came softly over my heated forehead, I saw better things in store than becoming the servant of a conquering tyrant, and I went to my couch more strongly determined than ever to scheme some way of escape.

Chapter Forty Five.

I suppose it was the returning flush of strength which made my rest so pleasant during my stay in the rajah's palace, for my sleep was dreamless and delicious, and I awoke every morning in spirits so buoyant that I felt ashamed of them as unsuitable for a prisoner.

Five days passed over now, during which I had been out twice in a palanquin, but only in the extensive gardens about the palace. I had not been idle, though; for I had, while apparently sitting back listlessly, made myself thoroughly acquainted with the shape and position of the place, knowing now that one side was protected by a swiftly flowing river. It was only about a hundred and fifty feet across, but deep, and its waters looked suggestive of crocodiles, so that one thought of attempting to cross by swimming with a shudder.

I had by degrees pretty well got the plan of the place in my mind, but at the same time woke to the fact that the rajah's was no empty boast, for the palace was surrounded by sentries, who were changed as regularly as in our service. Besides, I felt that every servant was a sentry over my actions, and that any attempt at evasion for some time to come was out of the question.

And so the days glided by with no news from outside, and for aught I knew, the war might be over, and the country entirely in the hands of the mutineers.

Once or twice I tried to get a little information from Salaman, but he either did not know or would not speak.

I tried him again and then again, and at last, in a fit of temper, I cried—

"You do know, and you will not speak."

"I am to attend on my lord," he said deprecatingly, "not to bear news. If I told my lord all I knew to-day, I should have no head to tell him anything to-morrow."

I was in the territory of a rajah who did as he pleased with his people, and I did not wonder at Salaman's obstinate silence any more.

So there I was with my plans almost in the same state as on my first day at the palace. There were the curtains waiting to be turned into ropes; there were the servants with their white garments; but I had no walnuts, and I knew of nothing that would stain my skin; and I was beginning to despair, when a trifling thing sent a flash of hope through me, and told me that I was not forsaken.

It was one hot day when everything was still but the flies, which were tormenting in the extreme; and, after trying first one room and then the other, I was about to go and lie down in the place set apart for my bath as being the coolest spot there was, when I heard a dull thud apparently in the next room where I had been sitting at the window, and I was about to go and see what it was, but stooped down first to pick up my handkerchief which had fallen.

I was in the act of recovering it, when I heard a faint rustling sound, and knew what that was directly—Salaman looking in from behind the curtain to see if anything was wrong.

Apparently satisfied, he drew back, and a splashing sound drew me to the window.

That sound was explained directly, for just below me a couple of bheesties, as they are called, were bending low beneath the great water-skins they carried upon their backs, while each held one of the legs of the animal's skin, which had been formed into a huge water-bladder, and was directing from it a tiny spout which flashed in the sun as he gave it a circular motion by a turn of his wrist, and watered the heated marble floor of the court, forming a ring or chain-like pattern as he went on.

It was something to look at, and the smell of the water on the stones was pleasant; so I stayed there watching the two men, one of whom took the side of the court beyond the fountain, the other coming almost beneath my window.

The weight of the water-skin must have been great at first, but it grew lighter as the man went on; and one moment I was thinking of what strength there was in his thin sinewy legs and arms, the next of the clever way in which the pattern was formed upon the pavement, and lastly of what a clumsy mode it was of watering the place, and how much pleasanter it would be if there were greater power in the fountain, and it sent up a great spray to come curving over like the branches of a weeping-willow. And by that time the skin was empty, hanging flaccid and collapsed upon the bheestie's back, as he went slowly out by the guarded gate, still bent down as if the load was heavy even yet. "What a life for a man!" I thought, as, yawning again—I yawned very much during those hot days—I went slowly into the next room and felt startled, for just in front of the window lay a little packet, one which had evidently been thrown in, and it was that which had made the noise when it fell.

It was hard work to refrain from stooping to pick up what I felt almost sure was a message of some kind, but I dared not for fear of being seen. There were curtains over every door, and I never knew but one of the native servants might be behind it; and after what Salaman had said about the safety of his head if he talked, I felt sure that the reason why the rajah's servants were so watchful was that they feared danger to themselves if they were not careful of my safety.

However, there was the little packet waiting—just a little packet not much larger than a seidlitz-powder, tied up with grass; and, beginning to walk up and down the room, I contrived to give it a kick now and then, till at last I sent it right into the purdah which hung in front of my chamber.

This done, I went to the window, looked out, saw that the two bheesties were back watering the court again, the former sprinkling having nearly dried up; and then, turning, I walked right into my room, let the curtain fall back, to find, to my vexation, that the packet was still outside; but by kneeling down and passing my hand under, I was able to secure it, though I trembled all the while for fear my hand should have been seen.

For fear of this, I thrust the packet into my breast, and lay down on my couch, listening. All was still, so I took out the packet quickly, noting that it was slightly heavy, but I attributed this to a stone put in with a note to make it easy for throwing in at the window.

"Oh!" I ejaculated, as my trembling fingers undid the string, "if this is another of Dost's letters!"

But it was not, and there was no scrap of writing inside the dirty piece of paper. Instead, there was another tiny packet, and something rolled in a scrap of paper.

I opened this first, and found a piece of steel about an inch and a half long, and after staring at it for a few moments, I thrust it into my pocket, and began to open the tiny packet which evidently contained some kind of seed.

"Not meant for me," I said to myself, sadly, as I opened the stiff paper, and—

I lay there staring at the fine black seed, and ended by moistening a finger, and taking up a grain to apply to my tongue.

The result was unmistakable. I needed no teaching there, for I had had a long education in such matters.

It was gunpowder, and I laughed at myself for thinking that it was a kind of seed, though seed it really might be called—of destruction.

"Yes; it's meant for some one else," I thought, as I carefully refolded the black grains in their envelope, and took out the piece of steel again, to turn it over in my hands, and notice that one end was fairly sharp, while the other was broken, and showed the peculiar crystalline surface of a silvery grey peculiar to good steel.

"Why, it's the point of a bayonet," I said to myself; and then I sat thinking, regularly puzzled at the care taken to wrap up that bit of steel and the powder.

"What does it mean?" I said, or does it mean anything? "Some children playing at keeping shop, perhaps," I said; "and when they were tired, they threw the packet in at the first window they saw. Just the things soldiers' children would get hold of to play with."

"But there are no children here," I said to myself, as I began to grow more excited, and the more so I grew, the less able I was to make out that which later on appeared to be simplicity itself.

"The point of a bayonet in one, and some grains of powder in another," I said to myself. "Oh, it must be the result of some children at play; they cannot possibly be meant for me;" and in disgust, I tossed the powder out of the window, and directly after, flung out the piece of steel with the result that, almost simultaneously, I heard what sounded like a grunt, and the jingling of the metal on the marble paving.

I ran to the window, and looked out from behind the hanging which I held before me, suspecting that I had inadvertently hit one of the bheesties. And so it proved, for I saw the man nearest to me stoop to pick up the piece of bayonet, and then nearly go down on his nose, for the water-skin shifted, and it was only by an effort that he recovered himself, and shook it back into its place on his loins.

Just then the other water-bearer came up to him, and said something in a low tone—I could not hear what, for he and his companion conversed almost in whispers, as if overawed by the sanctity of the place in which they stood. But it was all evident enough, as I could make out by their gestures: the second bheestie asked the first what was the matter, and this man told him that some one had taken aim with a piece of steel, which he passed on, and struck him on the back. The second man examined the piece, passed it back, and evidently said, "Some one is having a game with you," for he laughed, and they both looked up at the windows, as if to see who threw the piece.

Just then I saw a fierce-looking man come from the gateway, sword in hand; the two bheesties went on with their watering, and I heard him speaking angrily, and he gave force to his abuse by striking each man sharply with the flat of his sword. But the blows were harmless, for they fell on the water-skins, and, as soon as he had marched off, I saw the men look at each other and grin.

I drew back, and began to pace my room like a wild beast in a cage, for the idea had come strongly upon me that, after all, those packets were meant for me, and the more I told myself that it was folly, the stronger the conviction grew, and I found myself muttering, "Powder and bayonet—powder and bayonet—what can it mean?"

"Declaration of war," I said to myself at last; but I gave that idea up, for war had been declared long enough ago. No.

It could not mean that. And yet it seemed as if it might be a symbolical message, such as these unseen people would send.

“A message—a message—a message,” I muttered; and then the light came, or what I thought was the light, and I exclaimed joyfully, “Then it was meant for me!” Yes; a symbolical message, because whoever sent it was afraid to write lest it should fall into other hands.

I was so excited by my next thought that I threw myself face downward on my couch, and laid my head on my folded arms for fear my face should be seen. For I had just been interpreting the message to mean: bayonet—powder—fighting going on near, when I felt that no one but Dost could have sent that message, and its full meaning must be: bayonet, infantry; powder, artillery; and help must be at hand.

I heard Salaman come softly into the room, but I did not stir, and after a minute he passed out again, and I breathed more freely. I was afraid that he might read my thoughts, for I was in so great a state of excitement and exaltation that I imagined a score of impossible things, and it was with the greatest difficulty that I could contain myself sufficiently to look anything like calm, and keep my position on the bed.

For, after the first glance of light, the rest came quickly enough. I was right, I felt sure, about the troops coming, and the sender of the message must be Dost, who evidently would not trust himself to write again after the way in which his last letter had puzzled me. He it was, then, who had thrown the packet through the window, and consequently I felt that he must be somewhere about the palace, if he had not trusted his packet to some one else.

“No,” I thought. “He would not do that. He must be near me in disguise. The old fakir is somewhere about;” and I went to the window to look round, for I could lie no longer.

But there was no sign of the old fakir in the courtyard, and my heart sank as I felt how impossible it would be for him to get there. The guards would never let him pass, and I was wondering more and more how he had managed to send me such hopeful news, when I suddenly caught sight of the men coming back heavily laden with their full skins to continue pouring cold water on the marble paving of the heated court, and I shrank away at once, so as to conceal my joy, for I knew now.

One of the bheesties must be Dost!

Chapter Forty Six.

I dared not go to the window now, for I knew I was right; and it was impossible for me to be aware of how much I might be watched, while a look might be sufficient, if exchanged between me and the bheestie, to draw suspicion to him, and cause his immediate death.

So I kept away, hoping that he would take the blow he had received, although accidentally given, as an answer to his communication.

But suppose the wrong man received the blow?

It did not matter, I thought. One told the other, and perhaps they were confederates.

That was enough. Help was at hand. I had but to wait; and it was evidently not some furtive kind of help—some attempt at an escape, but a bold attack to be made on the place, and the message was to put me on my guard.

I was in such a state of joyous excitement that I could hardly bear myself. I wanted to laugh aloud at Dost’s cleverness. Only the other day playing the part of fakir, and completely deceiving me, when he stood reviling, and now so transformed that I might have passed the humble water-carrier a hundred times without having the slightest suspicion as to his being genuine.

“He is not a fighting man,” I thought, “but quite as brave in his way; for nothing could be more daring than for him to march into the enemy’s camp with his life in his hand like this.”

Then I began to wonder how long it would be before an attack was made upon the town, and what Ny Deen would do. It would be a surprise—of that I felt sure; for the rajah was completely satisfied of his safety—at least, so he seemed, and ready to treat the British power as completely broken.

Then, feeling that I must be perfectly calm and self-contained, and being fully convinced that there might be an attack almost at any moment, I began to wonder whether I could find some place to hide, in case Ny Deen wanted to make me the sharer of his flight, for I had not the slightest doubt about the result of an engagement.

“Yes,” I said; “I must be cool, and not seem bubbling over with delight.” In fact, I felt just then so elated, partly by the news, partly by the returning health beginning to course through my veins, that I went straight to a mirror, to see if there was anything in my countenance likely to betray my state of mind, and, as soon as I reached it, I stood staring. Then I turned away, and went and sat down, thinking that mine was a very uncomfortable position; for, if any of our troops came rushing through the palace and saw me, looking in my present dress, exactly like some Hindu chief, my chances of escape would be very small.

“Why, they would bayonet me before I had time to explain; the fellows don’t wait for explanations,” I said dismally. And I walked at once into my sleeping-chamber, to see if the remains of my old uniform were by any chance left, though I was certain that they were not.

And then a feeling of anger rose against Ny Deen. “It is all his doing,” I said. “He has been trying to make me look as much like a Hindu as possible. I wonder that he did not want me to stain my skin!”

“No need,” I muttered, after a glance at the mirror. “I’m sunburnt enough to look like a Sikh.” And a feeling of bitter resentment was growing against him now, stronger than I had felt before, knowing as I did that in spite of his kindness, and the friendly feeling he professed, he was moved by the strong motive of making me his most useful follower.

I had just arrived at this pitch, when Salaman came in quickly.

“My lord, his highness is here,” he whispered, and then ran out I would have given anything not to have stood before him that day, but there was no help for it; and, forcing myself to look calm and unconcerned, I went into the principal room, just as the rajah entered by the farther doorway, very plainly dressed, and quite alone.

“Hah!” he exclaimed, with a friendly nod, “there is no need to ask. I can see. Better and better! So you shall have a change.—Well?”

He paused for me to speak, and I could not dissimulate.

“Oh, thank you,” I said; “I do not want a change.”

“The doctor says that you do, and I say that you do,” he continued, smiling; but there was no mistaking his tone. “So you shall go out. We will go out together. You are a great hunter, I know.”

“Oh no,” I said hastily.

“Well, you are fond of hunting.”

“I liked shooting,” I said, as I thought of the end of my last expedition.

“I know you do,” he continued, with a meaning smile. “There is a tiger at the village a little way toward the hills, and he has been taking the poor people’s cows. Yesterday he struck down a woman, and carried her off into the forest. I have had him tracked by the shikaris, and ordered the elephants and beaters to be ready. You shall take me with you, Gil, and give me a lesson in shooting tiger.”

“Then he has not a suspicion,” I thought. And then I asked myself whether I should go or refuse.

“If I go,” I thought, “I shall be serving Brace, for the attack may be made in our absence, and, without their leader, the troops will give way. But if I go with him, knowing what I do, I shall be acting treacherously to the man who saved my life.”

It was a difficult point to decide, and I said hastily—

“I would rather not go.”

“Why?” he asked, with a quick, suspicious look.

“Because I am not strong yet, and the sun is hot.”

“It will give you strength,” he said quietly. “You have stayed in till you are fretful, and dislike going out. As soon as we are started, you will be glad.”

I felt that it was useless to oppose him, and said no more. In fact, I had no time, for he turned to me with a smile.

“I meant it quite as a surprise for you,” he said; “and I have given all the men a rest from duty to-day, so that I am free. There, get your puggaree; the elephants are waiting, and the guns are in the howdahs.”

I obeyed him with beating heart, and stood ready before him the next minute, wondering whether an attack would be made in our absence, and if there was, what Ny Deen would do. If he fled, I felt that he would take me with him, and that there would be another weary time before Dost could find me out.

“But no,” I said; “he will not go. He will hurry back to lead his people. He has too much at stake to flee.”

“Well,” he said, “are you counting the tigers?”

I started back into the present, and followed him out through chamber after chamber, and along passages till we descended into a court something like the one upon which I looked down, but larger; and here I found three elephants, a strong party of horsemen, and two little bullock-waggons, in which were a couple of hunting leopards, each carefully chained, and with its attendant.

In spite of my excitement, I looked with some little curiosity on the two long-legged graceful-looking spotted creatures, each with a peculiar far-off look in its eyes, as if it were trying to pierce the walls and catch sight of the antelopes it was to chase.

Ny Deen saw my look, and smiled.

“The tiger may have gone,” he said. “If he has, we’ll hunt for the deer.”

He pointed to his elephant, and signed to me to mount the great kneeling creature, which was fitted with quite a

plain howdah, open, and suitable for the purpose in hand. As I took my place, I found that there were two double rifles on either side, and as soon as the rajah had mounted, a quick-looking beater climbed up behind us, to kneel behind our seats. The other elephants were made to kneel as we moved onward a few paces, and four of the rajah's followers climbed into the howdahs. Then the word was given, six horsemen rode to the gate as advance-guard, and we were following toward the entrance, when the rajah turned to me with a grave smile.

"You *are* better," he said reproachfully. "Come, we will not even think of military matters to-day, but make it all pleasure."

He had hardly finished the words when I saw him give a quick look and seize one of the guns, for the six horsemen had suddenly ridden back, to make for the rajah's elephant, followed by a mounted sowar, who passed between them as they opened out, and came close up to the side of the elephant.

"Well?" cried the rajah, fiercely, and speaking in Hindustani. "News?"

My heart gave a bound as the sowar announced the approach of the enemy, and I glanced at Ny Deen, in whose face I saw astonishment and disbelief for the moment. But it was only for the moment. Directly after, he gave several orders in a quick, decisive manner, and the officer to whom he spoke dashed off to obey his instructions.

Then he turned to me. "You heard?" he said.

I bowed.

"Will you help me—will you take charge of the guns at once?"

I looked full in the fierce, questioning face, and in those anxious moments I could not help feeling the danger of my position; but I had to speak. To refuse, now that he was driven to bay, might mean an order for immediate execution, and, cowardly or no, I could not speak. I suppose that I ought to have been brave, and exclaimed boldly, "Kill me, if you like; I will not fight against my countrymen." But I was very young; I had been badly wounded, and was just recovering and beginning to feel how beautiful, in spite of all my sufferings, life was, so I remained silent.

"You refuse, then?" he cried fiercely.

I was still silent, and he turned from me in a rage, making a fierce motion for me to descend from the elephant, which I obeyed, while Ny Deen gave a short, sharp order in an angry tone, whose result was that one of his men seized me on either side, and I was more a prisoner than ever, with six men in front and six behind, fresh summoned from the guard-house, to march me away.

It was to my death, so it seemed in those terrible moments; while I had but to raise my voice and give my promise to the rajah, to be at once his honoured and trusted friend, commissioned with great power.

But I could not say the necessary words, any more than I could speak a minute before, and in the silence of despair I walked as firmly as I could in the direction taken by the men, feeling giddy with excitement, and as if all this were not real, but part of some terrible trouble befallen another.

I did not see what was about to happen, and was so wrapped up in my position, that I did not hear the huge elephant from which I had just descended shuffling after me, till the rajah's voice called to my guard to halt. Then, leaning down from the howdah, he said to me—

"This is blind obstinacy. Come, say you will be my friend, and help me now that I want your services."

"I cannot," I said huskily.

Ny Deen uttered a fierce command to the mahout, the elephant swung round, and I set my teeth hard to keep from shouting to him to stop and take me with him. But I mastered my cowardly feeling, and marched on to what I felt was my execution, giving Ny Deen the credit of treating me as a soldier, though all the while it was in a curious, half-stupefied way, as if the shock had terrorised me, though after the first sensation of horror, I do not recall feeling any great amount of dread.

It was then with something approaching wonder that I saw the leading men of the guard wheel to the left through the entrance, and up the broad staircase, and along the passages, at the end of which were my rooms.

Here they drew back for me to enter, and the door was closed, the rattle of the men's muskets announcing that they remained on guard.

I felt so faint on being left alone that I was glad to fly to the great cool vessel of water always standing in one of the rooms, after which I sank down on one of the piles of cushions, and wiped the cold perspiration from my forehead.

I was still half-stunned, and wondering whether this was only a respite; but Hope soon began to be busy, and I felt that, after all, the being led off to instant death was the work of my own imagination, and that Ny Deen had probably never even had such a thought beyond holding it up as a threat.

As I recovered myself, I rose and walked to the farther door, where, there could be no doubt, the twelve men were stationed, and from thence I hurried to one of the open windows, and looked out to see that there was a guard still at the gateway, and beyond it I could hear a dull, hoarse murmur, and the heavy tramp, tramp of marching men, which was followed by the rush of a body of horse going by at a gallop.

This last revived me more than the water, for it sent a thrill through me, suggesting as it did preparations to meet our

forces, which must be pretty close at hand, but whether in sufficient strength to attack this great town I would have given anything to know.

The beating of the horses' hoofs passed away, but the steady tramp of infantry went on for some time before it had died out, and the dull, distant roar as of many people in a crowd, did not cease. I fancied that it was on the increase, while below me in the court, the fountain played and sparkled in the sunshine, the great goldfish sailed about in the tank, and the green leaves trembled and glistened in the bright light. For whatever might be going on in the town, here everything was perfectly peaceful and still.

I was just wishing that I could have been at liberty to mount a horse, and, only as a spectator, go about the town and see what arrangements were being made for its defence, wondering whether it was strongly walled, my recollections on the night of our entry only extending to the great gate through which we had passed, and thinking that if the force advancing were only small, Ny Deen might decide to go out and attack it, when I saw a couple of dark figures in the gateway, which were not those of the guard, and directly after, bending low beneath the weight of their loads, my old friends, the two bheesties, walked slowly across to the other side of the court, where they separated as before, one going round by the far side of the tank, the other coming in my direction.

"It cannot be a very serious alarm," I thought, "or matters would not be going on so calmly here."

Then I stopped short to watch the actions of the nearest man, wondering whether my ideas were right, or it was only fancy.

"It can't be Dost," I said to myself, as the man diligently directed the thin tube of leather formed by the leg of the animal from which it had been stripped, sending the water round and round to form chains of circles on the marble paving.

"No. It can't be Dost," I thought, with the feeling of sadness of one who was suffering terribly from his solitary position. "It was all imagination."

But then I felt that it could not have been imagination about the message, for there were the forces approaching. Still, that heavy-looking man's sole aim in life seemed to be to make the rings of water on the pavement perfectly exact, and I was wondering at myself for being so ready to jump at conclusions as I watched him come slowly nearer and nearer, his back bent, his head and neck forward, and his shadow cast by the sun on the white pavement—exactly that of a laden camel.

On he came, nearer and nearer, but so well-drilled in his work that he seemed to see nothing but the pavement, which glistened in the bright sunshine, as he spread the water in ring after ring, splashing his brown feet and legs at every turn.

At last he was right beneath me without there appearing to be the most remote possibility of his being Dost; and in spite of the cleverness of his disguise as the fakir, I gave up my idea, when a voice in a whisper said—

"Be of good cheer, master; there is help coming."

"Dost!" I ejaculated aloud, and as the man started violently, I stepped back from the window, feeling sure that my voice would bring some one into the room.

I was quite right, for I had hardly left the window when the curtain was drawn aside, and Salaman entered.

"Yes. Quick; bring me something to eat."

He salaamed, and passed behind the curtain, while I followed, and saw him draw aside the purdah at the next doorway, the momentary glimpse I had showing me a group of armed men on guard, so that, if I had any doubts before, there was room for none now.

I went back and glanced through the window again, just in time to see the two bheesties join again, and slowly march out with their empty skins to fetch more water.

I was in the act of turning away wondering whether by any possibility Dost would be able to make his way to me when it was dark, and with my heart beating fast, hoping that he would have designed some way of escape, when my heart gave another bound, and I ran to the window to thrust out my head and listen, for unmistakably, although at some distance off, came the quick dull thud of a cannon.

"Hah!" I ejaculated, as I saw in my imagination the men serving the guns, and in my own mind making certain that it was one of Brace's six-pounders.

"How glorious!" I cried; "one of the pieces he carried off turned upon him now."

"My lord is glad there is fighting?" said a voice behind me; and I saw that Salaman had come quickly up behind, and he now pointed to where the meal I had asked for had been placed upon the matting.

I frowned, but made no answer, as I walked to the spot where the repast was spread, and I had hardly seated myself, with the two attendants who had brought in the food standing before me, when I heard another report, and then, slowly and steadily the whole of the guns were brought into action, keeping up a regular steady fire, one which told me that an advance was being made by infantry, which the firing was to cover.

I began to eat, trying to be perfectly calm, but at the first mouthful I broke down. It was impossible, and, jumping, up I went and sat down by the window, to listen to the firing, and try to picture to myself what was going on.

It was weary work. All imagination, and I knew it; but still I could not keep from picturing the scene, especially when the firing suddenly ceased. My cheeks grew flushed then, and I seemed to hear the order, see the men trot up with the limbers, the gunners hook on the trail of the gun-carriage, and then spring to their seats on horse or limber, and go off at a gallop.

“No,” I muttered, “come on at a gallop,” to take up a fresh position.

I could have sworn that the next minute I should hear them open again, and I seemed to see the swift horses going along at full speed to come to a sudden halt, the men spring down, unhook, and bring the guns into action again. But that minute passed, then another, and another—long, weary minutes—till quite ten must have gone by before I heard the familiar dull report again, and now, to my misery, I acknowledged to myself that it must be from fully a mile further away.

Four guns were fired, or two twice over, I could not, of course, tell which. Then the firing ceased, and a dull feeling of misery came over me, for it meant retiring. They must be driven back by the superior force of the rajah’s army.

I turned away from the window with a feeling of depression that was terrible, and, try how I would, to keep from thinking, I kept on seeing the fierce-looking lancers of Ny Deen making furious charges at perhaps a mere skeleton of a regiment of foot, which grew gradually less and less, till the men scattered, and were ridden down.

Oh how vivid that all seemed, till I saw that which was real, and not imaginary. Salaman and the two attendants patiently watching me, as I began once more to walk up and down.

Chapter Forty Seven.

I passed the whole of the day in misery, thirsting for news with a very great thirst, but none came. The servants about the palace evidently knew nothing though, if they had, they would not have dared to speak.

It was quite plain, from the noise, that the town was crowded, and in a state of excitement, but the sounds were at a distance, and they kept on. Had the noise gradually died out, I should have been hopeful, for I should have thought that they were leaving the place because the English were advancing. But though I sat at the window and strained my ears, there was no distant sound of firing, and I was getting into a very despairing mood, when my spirits revived again just before sunset, for all at once there was the sound of a gun; faint, distant, but unmistakably the report of a field-piece; and as I held my breath and listened, there was another and then another.

I knew the sound at once as coming from a troop of horse artillery, for the firing was regular; and I was so sanguine that I immediately set it down to Brace’s troop.

“Oh, if I could only escape!” I thought; and my ideas went at once to the disguise and the hangings to be used as a rope. If I could only get down into the court, I trusted to my good fortune to find a way through some other window, and thence to an unwatched opening.

How to manage it? I was so conspicuous a figure in the uniform I wore that I felt that I dared not go like that, while to obtain the dress of one of the servants was impossible.

“I shall have to escape as I am,” I thought, and I went down into the sleeping-room, and laid the sword ready. It was the magnificent tulwar the rajah had given me, and as I looked at the flashing jewels upon the hilt, I felt some compunction in taking it; but making up my mind to return it after I had escaped, feeling, as I did, the necessity for possessing a weapon, I laid it behind a purdah, where I could quickly catch it up.

The next thing was to select one of the silken curtains, which I could divide longwise, and tie the ends together. They would be quite enough to enable me to reach the ground; and there was a ring on one side of the window strong enough to bear my weight, I felt.

It was nearly dark by the time I had made those plans, which were interrupted by pauses, to listen to the distant firing away toward where the sun set. That was to be my direction, if I could get out of the town, and I was calculating my chances of escape when a happy thought struck me—to drape myself in a light curtain, and loosen the pugaree about my helmet.

But the next minute I felt that there was no need, for my uniform would be sufficient to command respect among the rajah’s troops, if I backed it up with plenty of coolness and decision. The people, as a rule, knew that I was the rajah’s friend, and expected that I should take some command. They could not all know, I argued, that I had refused to turn renegade; and gathering confidence now, as the darkness increased, I felt that if once I could get out of the palace, all I had to do was to be haughty and overbearing with the people; to assume for the time the position the rajah had offered, and trust to my confidence to carry all before me.

I had reached this point, and was still listening to the firing, when it occurred to me that I had better try and throw Salaman off his guard.

To do this I went into the room where I partook of my meals, and summoned him.

He entered so quickly that I knew he must have been close to the curtain, and I looked at him curiously to try and make out whether his face displayed any alarm or anxiety respecting the advance of the English force, but he looked perfectly calm.

“Bring a light, and some more fruit,” I said; and as soon as I had spoken I thought of how foolish my last request was,

for I was not in the habit of eating much fruit.

He bowed, and was leaving, when I stopped him.

“Is there any news of the fight going on?” I said, as carelessly as I could.

“Yes, my lord; messengers have come in. His highness is driving the English sahibs right away into the far country.”

I should have liked to say I did not believe it, but I could not, for the gradual dying away of the firing agreed with his words. Then, as I said no more, he left the room, to return directly with a lamp, and some fruit was borne in by one of the attendants.

I waited till they had gone, and then slowly went to the curtain-covered opening, and looked through to see that Salaman was sitting down talking to the officer of the guard; and satisfied that now was my time, I walked quickly back and secured the curtain which I bore into my sleeping-room, where it was all dark, having determined to descend from there if I could find a place to secure the end of the curtain-rope.

But previous to twisting it up, I cautiously looked out of the window, and drew back in despair; for there, just beneath me, were the men of the guard slowly pacing the place, each bearing a lanthorn, as if to take special care that I did not escape that way, and I saw at a glance that, even if I could descend the rope, it would be impossible to cross the court, and in my despair I seated myself upon my couch to think.

This way was impossible. It was just as impossible to try and get out by the door, for it was strongly guarded.

“There is only one way,” I said to myself, angrily. “I must get the dress of one of the men. But how?”

I could see no way, for I had no money to offer a bribe, and the possibility of escaping grew more and more hopeless.

“It is of no use to try,” I said, half aloud. “I may just as well accept my fate. Ny Deen will never let me go.”

But the idea of giving way irritated me to such an extent, and was so bitterly contemptible that I leaped up, seized and buckled on the sword, and for the minute had some wild idea of getting down into the court, and cutting my way through the guards.

I could take them by surprise, I thought; but the next minute I was forced to grant the fact that directly after they would recover and take me by surprise in a way that might quite put an end to further ventures on my part. As soon as I had reached this point of reasoning, I went once more to the window, and looked down to see if the guards were still there.

I had full evidence directly, for there they all were, and as fully on the alert as men would be who knew that their heads would answer for a prisoner’s escape.

“I must wait my opportunity,” I said bitterly, as I turned away, after seeing one of the guards go by beneath my window, when there was a faint, rustling noise, which made me turn in time to see something dark at the window, whose feet rested for a moment lightly on the window-sill before it sprang into the room, and darted behind one of the curtains.

I was so much startled that I half-drew my sword as I gazed at the curtain, which was barely visible, the only light being that which came from the lamps in the next room, and a trifle from the window as the lanthorns, carried by the guard in the court, moved here and there.

“No, no, sahib,” came in a faint whisper, which relieved me, for at that moment I had been ready to fancy it was some curious wild beast.

“Dost!” I whispered back, as I crept softly to the curtain.

“Yes, sahib. But look! Did the men see me come in?”

I peered out of the window, and saw that the guard were marching slowly to and fro, with their lanthorns swinging.

“No; they have seen nothing,” I whispered; and then I passed through into the next room, crossed it, and made sure that Salaman was not coming.

“It is all safe,” I said, as I returned. “How did you manage to get up?”

“It was impossible, sahib,” he said, hardly above his breath. “I could not get near for the guard.”

“Then how did you manage?” I said.

“I came over the roof, sahib, and let myself down by a cord.”

“Then we can escape that way,” I whispered.

“Is the sahib strong enough to climb the rope?”

A pang of misery shot through me as I involuntarily applied my right hand to my wounded arm.

“No,” I said.

“Then I must pull the sahib up,” said Dost, calmly. “We ought to go soon.”

“Pst!” I whispered, and I stepped to the window, leaned out, and seemed to be studying the sounds outside, for there was the faint rustle of a curtain, and a light step crossing the next room.

Directly after I heard Salaman’s voice.

“Did my lord call?”

“Eh? Call? No,” I said, coming from the window, and trying to command my voice, as I walked toward where he stood in the open doorway. “I can’t hear any firing now.”

“No, my lord; the battle must be over, and at any time his highness will be back.”

I made some remark, but what it was I cannot tell now, and went on into the lighted room, noticing that he glanced suspiciously at my sword, but I appeared not to notice it, and went to the window of that room, while Salaman went back.

“He has had strict orders to keep on watching me,” I said to myself; and I had hardly thought this, than, to my horror, I heard the regular tramp of feet, and the officer and four men marched into the next room, where I heard them moving about.

I was going to rush into the sleeping-room to warn Dost, when Salaman appeared.

“My lord will not be angry with his servant,” he said. “It is his highness’s commands that you should be watched carefully, and they are searching the rooms.”

“Searching the rooms?” I said aloud.

“Yes, my lord. I am not to blame.”

Just then the officer entered bearing a lanthorn, and his four men came behind.

He bowed to me respectfully, and then made a sign to his followers, who carefully searched the room—a simple task, for all that was needed was to look behind the hangings.

My heart felt in my mouth, as people say, for the officer led the way now to my bed and the bath-room, where poor Dost was certain to be discovered if he had not succeeded in making his escape.

Salaman followed the guard, and I sat listening for the first cry of excitement, but none arose, and I breathed freely as the officer came back, lanthorn in hand, followed by his men, to salaam to me again, and pass out to his station by the far door while Salaman hung back. “My lord has offended his highness, who is angry. That is why the search is made.”

I did not answer—I could not; and the man bowed and went out, while I stepped quickly to the window of the bedroom, at which Dost appeared directly after—a dark shadowy figure, and leaped down.

“We must go at once, sahib,” he whispered. “It is so dark up here that the guard in the court can see nothing. I shall go up on to the roof, and lower the rope. The sahib will make it quite fast round beneath his arms, and then tug once, and step on to the window-sill. He will then trust to me, and I shall draw him up.”

“But can you, Dost?” I said nervously.

“The sahib may believe me. I am very strong.”

As he spoke, he placed his hands on my waist, and lifted me up with the greatest ease, setting me down again lightly.

“Now, sahib; ready?”

I could just dimly see him step to the window, and I felt that he must have seized a rope, up which he passed with the activity of a monkey, and I saw plainly enough now why he had not been discovered. The next minute, after a faint grating noise, I felt the rope swinging backward and forward. I caught it, and secured it firmly about my waist, climbed on to the window-sill, jerked the rope, and felt it tighten slowly, then more and more, till it lifted me from where I stood, and I felt myself gliding slowly upward, my heart beating violently the while, for I was utterly helpless, and as I was not exerting myself, I suffered the more mentally, wondering whether the rope would hold—whether Dost would have strength enough to haul me right up—whether the guards pacing the court would hear us, and look up and see us by the light of their lanthorns, and give the alarm—whether Salaman would enter the room and miss me.

These thoughts rushed like lightning through my brain as I felt the jerk, jerk of the rope, and gazed skyward. I suppose I must have been about half-way to the roof when I heard a faint click and shivered.

My scabbard had struck against the wall, and I looked wildly down at the guards, but to my great surprise they had not heard it, and were continuing their walk.

Dost paused for a few moments as he heard the sound, and I did not stir, but hung close to the wall, with my heart beating painfully, before I dared to seize the scabbard with one hand and hold on.

Then the jerking motion was begun again, and once more I suffered a kind of martyrdom as I fully expected to find that the rope would slacken, and that I should be precipitated on to the marble flags of the court.

Oh, how long it seemed. For it was a minute of gold drawn out into a wire of what seemed to be endless length.

Then I was at the top, and passed my right hand over to seize the parapet, while Dost's hands were busy about my chest, and the next thing I remember is being dragged down on to the flat, Eastern roof, where I lay panting with Dost lying by my side, but with his eyes level with the parapet, as he listened for tokens of alarm.

There was not a sound, and satisfied that all was right so far, Dost whispered to me to sit up, when he rapidly twisted the rope round my breast, and turned in one end, while I looked about me, to try and make out the kind of place we were on. But it was too dark to see much, and I waited for my companion's next order, contenting myself to leave everything in his hands.

"Now, sahib," he whispered, with his lips to my ear, "take my hand, keep in a stooping attitude, and walk with me."

I should have liked to ask, "What are you going to do?" but he was commanding-officer for the moment, and all I had to do was to obey.

I rose, and, bending down as I grasped his hand, walked softly to where we reached the end of that side of the court—the roof seeming perfectly flat—and then we turned off at right angles and walked along till we had reached the end of the building which formed another side. Here the process was repeated till we were about opposite to the spot where I had been drawn up.

Here Dost stopped.

"We must get down here!" he whispered.

"Into the court?"

"No; down into the gardens," he said. "The next side would be best, but there is a guard in the gateway, and sentries walking up and down."

"Are there sentries in the gardens?" I whispered.

"I think so. We'll look."

Crossing softly to the side of the palace furthest from the court, we peered cautiously down into what looked intensely black, but dotted with points of soft light which I knew at once to be lanthorns carried by guards.

"Can we get across?" I whispered.

"We must, sahib. There is no other way. There are plenty of bushes to hide us. What's that?"

I listened, and from a little distance off I could hear the trampling of horses, which suddenly ceased, apparently somewhere on the other side of the court.

"Cavalry," I whispered, and then listened as Dost went on.

"I shall lower you down here first," he whispered, "for I think there is a place to which I can hook on the rope, and draw it down afterward. Yes; here it is. I found it to-night."

He had been on his knees feeling about, and, evidently satisfied, began to unwind the rope from my chest.

"Did you make the end quite fast?" he whispered, just as I was wondering how he had found the window from up here on the roof.

"Yes."

"Don't stop to untie it," he said, "but slip it over your arms and head as soon as you are down. No; it is long enough; hold it fast till I join you. I'll pass it round this post and slide down the other end."

"What's that?" I whispered, as a shout arose; and involuntarily we both crossed the roof again to look.

But we did not look down into the court, but across the fountain in the centre to where lights shone brightly from three windows opposite, while at one of them, open, I could see two figures, one of which held up a shaded lamp above his head, while the other, who I could plainly see was the rajah, without his voice endorsing the fact, roared forth his commands to the guards in the court and at the gate—orders which were followed by hurrying feet, and shouts could be heard, answered in all directions.

"Rajah—come back—too soon," said Dost, hurriedly. "Quick, sahib."

"But they will be all on the watch."

"So shall we be, sahib," he whispered eagerly, as he pressed me toward the outer parapet close by the low stone projection. "Quick! Go down."

I was obliged to let him help me over the parapet, so as to get my arm clear, and then, with the lamps moving about in all directions, and every now and then meeting and gliding away again, Dost began to lower me rapidly.

To my horror, when I was some distance down, I could see two lanthorns approaching, as if their bearers had seen me, and were coming to meet exactly where I should touch the ground. Dost could not see them, evidently, and to call to him meant betraying us both, so I gave myself up for lost. But all at once the rope stopped, and I hung there motionless, just as a door about ten feet below me opened, and some one came out.

It was to meet the two lamp-bearers coming in different directions, and directly after the man from the doorway had stopped, they came up to him.

“Keep a strict look-out,” the man said. “A prisoner is trying to escape. He must be found.”

The men briefly said that they would watch, and that no one had been in the grounds; after which they went off, leaving me breathless, as I hung there, listening for the departure of the first man, who seemed to be watching me.

So silent was everything that I felt that he must be just beneath me, and my fingers crisped up, ready to seize my sword. But the moments glided by, and he still did not move, my suspense, in both senses of the word, being brought to an end by Dost lowering me down quickly.

By the time I reached the ground, I had drawn my sword, ready to resist attack; but, to my utter surprise, I found that the door was closed, the man having retired so silently that I had not heard a sound.

The moment I had convinced myself that I had no attack to fear, I lay down, turning myself into a counterpoise as Dost threw down the other end of his rope, and began rapidly to descend.

As I felt the rope give jerk after jerk, I listened to the sounds within the palace. Men being apparently running in all directions, as if searching for me; and Dost muttered something to the same effect, as he dropped lightly by my side, after I had been wondering whether the rustling noise he made in his descent would be heard.

The noise he made, though, was greater as he drew the rope round the projection which held it above, and I caught his wrist in horror as we stood there in the darkness, he pulling and I twisting the rope round and round my chest.

“Don’t,” I whispered; “some one will hear.”

“But we must have the rope, sahib, to get down from the top of the wall,” he said; and he pulled away at the line more quickly, the end falling directly after with a sharp crushing sound among the bushes. This had evidently been heard, for a lanthorn rapidly approached us out of the darkness, and as we crouched down, the face of a man could be seen at last, with the eyes flashing as he held up his light.

But, as is the case on a dark night, the man who bears a light is far easier to see than the one who watches or hides, and I crouched there, wondering at last, as the man held up his lanthorn nearly over me, why it was that he could not detect my presence.

But he did not, and after looking carefully round, he turned and walked away, just where, had he taken a couple or so steps nearer to the palace, he would have come in contact with one of us.

“Saved!” I breathed to myself, as he walked away, and his light disappeared among the trees.

“The rope, sahib,” whispered Dost; and I rapidly drew it up and twisted it round me.

“Now your hand,” he said; and as I gave it to him, he led me cautiously in and out among the trees, avoiding the men easily enough, for their lanthorns showed exactly the direction in which they were going, though, had a few been about without lights, we must have been taken! It was slow work, and, as we crept along, the moving lights behind the windows and the shouts and commands that came made me aware that a careful search was being made for me, and, moment by moment, our chance of escape appeared more hopeless.

But Dost did not seem to be in the slightest degree troubled. He kept on right through the grounds toward where lights flitted about in the window of a building, and he whispered—

“They are searching it, sahib. When they have done, we will go there.”

I felt hopeless, but kept on close to his side, thinking all the time that we must be taken before long.

Just now the capture was imminent, for men approached us, but in every case something took off their attention, and we reached the great building, to find it now all dark, as if the search there was at an end, and the place deserted.

Dost uttered a low grunt of satisfaction, and crept softly along beneath the windows; but we came upon no door, only reaching a blank stone wall at the end of the building, and having to retrace our steps to where we started, and then go in the other direction.

Here we were more fortunate, coming upon a door, and entering the building, which was evidently a kind of summer-house, but of a very substantial character.

It was perfectly empty, but lights flashed in through the windows on the opposite side to that by which we had entered, and as we went cautiously forward, it was to see scores of armed men with torches, their task evidently being, as shown by their actions, to seek me out.

I say me, because I felt that they must be in profound ignorance of the existence of Dost.

The light which shone in was enough to show his anxious, eager face, and as his eyes met mine, he gave his head a

nod in the direction of the window.

“Not that way,” he said, with a little laugh; “this.”

We hunted about some moments, with the cries of the men outside sounding wonderfully close to my ears, and then found the way to the upper floor, which, though well-furnished, was utterly deserted.

Here we made at once for the end, to find a way on to the roof, but it was at the other end, and proved to be, as we reached it, exactly like that of the palace—flat, and with a parapet all round.

Dost signed to me to stoop, for I was a striking object with my bright uniform, and the reflection from the lanthorns and torches down below was sufficient to make us visible to each other.

Bending low, we approached the side whence the light came, and, taking off my helmet, I cautiously peered down, to see the great court beneath crowded with soldiers, all standing to their arms, as if expecting instant orders to join in the search.

“No go down there, sahib,” said Dost, softly.

I shook my head, and followed him to the end, where a stronger light shone up, and on looking down there, we found that the officers were collected, as if waiting for orders.

Dost shook his head again, and walked back along the roof, with the grounds on our left, the well-filled square on the right, and the dark end of the large summer-house before us.

There everything was black, and we had no need for caution in looking over.

I could not help shuddering as I drew back my head, on hearing a loud slapping noise below me, and a peculiar whishing, rushing sound.

“No,” said Dost. “No boat. Muggers. Can’t go that way.”

For the swift river was gliding by just beneath the walls of the summer-house; whose windows looked down upon what by day would be doubtless a lovely scene, but which now was gloomy and repulsive in the extreme.

“What shall we do, then?” I asked.

“Wait,” said Dost, quietly, and he unwound the rope from me, and carefully made it into a coil, which he passed over his left arm.

“Wouldn’t it be better to stop till later? They will not search this place again.”

“I don’t know, sahib. They may come up here, and there is nowhere to hide.”

“Shall we go back into the garden, and try some other way.”

“There is no other way,” he replied. “The river shuts off all one side, sahib, and the other is full of Ny Deen’s soldiers.”

“Tell me,” I whispered. “What about the fighting? Our people were not beaten?”

“I don’t know, sahib. I can’t understand. The rajah drove all before him, and they retreated far away.”

That was piteous news, and I drew a long breath as I felt how hopeless my condition was growing. It had seemed so easy to escape when once I was out of the palace, but on putting it to the test, the difficulties had increased with every step.

“Let’s look down into that great court again, Dost,” I said softly. “There may be a part that is not watched.”

We looked over, and Dost drew back shaking his head.

“No, sahib,” he said; “we have done that twice. Once I hung down over the guards’ heads. We must not try again. It might mean death.”

He was quite right, and I remained silent for a few moments. He spoke at last.

“If we could only get among the houses, sahib,” he said, “and walked quietly—you like that, I like this. No one would speak to us. Come, we must try the garden again.”

It seemed to be the only way, and I followed him down from the roof to the first floor, and then down to the bottom, where our position was very precarious, for the men outside had only to reach up to the windows, raise their torches, and gaze in to see us in one or other of the great rooms.

But as they had thoroughly searched the place, this was not done, and we reached the door in safety, and stood looking out into the extensive grounds, with their walks, great trees, and clumps of shrubs.

The place seemed to be just the same as before; intensely dark, surrounded as it was by high buildings, and the moving lanthorns looked in the distance like sparks in tinder, gliding here and there.

“Where shall we make for, Dost?” I said.

“The big house in the corner, sahib,” he whispered back. “It is close to the river; but we may be able to get through there, and into a part not watched. If we cannot get away then, we must wait till morning.”

I could do nothing but obey, and following him closely, we began our dangerous walk through the great gardens, always on the point of being seen by one of the guards; but, thanks to the darkness, and the effect the lights had on the men’s own eyes, escaping, though often enough it was by the merest chance.

We had passed about half-way toward the building at the right-hand corner, its lights in the windows acting as our guide, and were crouching down among some bushes while a couple of the guards went by, when, all at once, there was a light flashed up from behind us, one which grew brighter every moment, and, looking back, we made out that the men we had seen were coming into the grounds through the great summer-house, and were spreading across, evidently to thoroughly search the grounds again.

Dost uttered a low murmur of dismay, as, by the distribution of the lights, he saw that there was to be a regular hunt of the gardens, after the fashion of beating up a tiger.

“Come, quick!” he whispered. “The rajah must be there.”

He snatched my hand, and led me on toward the far end of the garden, but only to stop short, for, to my horror, I saw a door open, a blaze of light flash out, and a body of men bearing torches troop down some steps and spread across that end where they were quickly marshalled by some one in authority, and began to advance toward us.

Our position was hopeless, for now the two lines of men advancing from either end were making the place as light as day, and gradually narrowing the ground in which we could be free. It was only a matter of minutes before we should be caught between them.

Dost pressed my hand hard as he looked wildly about him.

“No trees, sahib, no trees to climb,” he whispered. “I did try so hard to save you, but I have failed. Good-bye, sahib. I was thy faithful servant. Good-bye!”

“Why do you say that?” I said huskily.

“Why?” He uttered a little laugh, and passed his hands about his neck. “They will make short work of me.”

“No,” I said; “you are my servant, and no one shall harm you. I will appeal to the rajah myself.”

I drew my sword, and thrust my injured arm through poor Dost’s, meaning to defend him; but before I could even think of what I should do next, there was a sharp rustle, a rush, and half a dozen of the original searchers, with their lanthorns, urged by their position to make a capture before the two lines of men came up and shut us in, pounced upon us, drawn there by our voices, and then in the midst of a scuffle, I saw two men go down while I was pinioned from behind. Then my captors shouted for lanthorns, there was the heavy beat of feet, and in a blaze of light, I saw Ny Deen advance, and stand before me smiling in his triumph, but making me shrink with anger and mortification, for there was a good deal of contempt in his look, as he signed to me to approach, and to the man who held me to remove my sword.

Chapter Forty Eight.

As soon as I could drag my eyes from Ny Deen’s mocking gaze, I looked round sharply for Dost, and a chill ran through me as I failed to see him. For the moment I hesitated to speak, in the hope that he might have escaped, and inquiries might only lead to his pursuit; but it was such a forlorn hope that I gave it up at once, and turned to speak to the rajah.

“Where is my servant?” I said. “Salaman?” he replied. “No, no; my old servant, Dost.”

“The man who was with you just now?”

“Yes,” I cried.

“I do not know,” replied Ny Deen. “I suppose killed, as the result of his rashness.”

I gave him a glance full of horror, and then looked round at the crowd of armed men so fiercely, that the rajah spoke.

“Where is the man,” he said. There was a dead silence, which I interpreted to mean that he had been killed.

The rajah took a step or two forward, glaring round so savagely that one of the men who had seized us prostrated himself.

“You have killed him?” said Ny Deen, in a low guttural voice, which made me shiver.

“My lord, no. The man was seized, and in the fight he fell, and we thought him dead, for he was bleeding. Then we held the English lord here, and when we went to pick up the man, he was gone.”

“Then he has escaped?”

The man remained silent, and Ny Deen turned to me with his eyes full of mockery and a strange light, as they flashed in the glare of the torches.

“Well,” he said, “are you satisfied?”

“Yes,” I replied, “if it is true.”

“It is true enough,” he said carelessly. “Come.”

He signed to me to approach his side, and to my surprise, instead of my being led off as a prisoner, the rajah laid his hand upon my shoulder, and walked by me as if nothing had happened, right back to my room, when he threw himself upon the cushions and laughed.

“You foolish boy!” he said good-humouredly; “how could you be so weak as to commit such a folly. I am angry with you, not for offending me, for I suppose it was natural, but for lowering yourself so before my people, forcing me to have you—the man I meant to be my chief officer—hunted like an escaping prisoner. You might have been killed in your mad climbing, or by my people by accident in a struggle. That man came and tempted you to go?”

“I wanted no tempting,” I replied.

“It is a pity,” he said, after a moment’s pause. “You degraded yourself, and you lowered me before my people.”

“I want my liberty,” I cried angrily.

“Well, boy, I offer you liberty,” he said quietly; “liberty and honour. I only stand in your way when I see that, in a blind madness, you are going to rush headlong to destruction. You do not know; I do.”

I was silent.

“Where would you have gone to-night,” he said, “supposing that you had not fallen and killed yourself, or been cut down by my guards?”

“To my friends.”

“You have no friends,” he said sternly. “You would have escaped, perhaps, to the wild country or the forest to starve, or to be killed by the wild beasts. No one would give you food, and you would scarcely have found one who would not have sought to slay you as an enemy. You say you would, have fled to your friends. Where are they?”

“You should know best,” I said sullenly. “You have been fighting with them.”

“Yes,” he cried, with his eyes flashing. “I have been fighting with enemies of my country. I have nothing to hide from you. I will tell you all, so that you may know, and see how mad it is for you to fight against the decrees of fate. Yes, I fought with those you call your friends to-day, and drove them before me till after sundown. My men are following them now to complete the pursuit, scattering them like dead leaves before the blast which heralds the monsoon. You heard the firing?”

“Yes,” I said sadly.

“And know that it grew more distant as they were beaten off, till they turned and fled. I came back then. I cannot fight with flying foes. It was a mad attempt, a last desperate struggle, just a little flashing up of an expiring fire. By now it is dead, and you will hear of them no more.”

We both sprang to our feet, for, as he spoke, there was a crashing volley not far away—a volley such as would be fired only by well-drilled troops—and directly after there was another, followed by a scattered firing, and shouts rising up to a perfect roar.

Ny Deen, who looked astounded, made for the door, and in my excitement I followed him; but he thrust me back, and turned to the guard standing beyond the hangings.

“Your lives for his!” he thundered to them. “He does not leave this place.”

The curtain was thrown between us, and I ran to the open window, to find the court full of troops hurrying here and there, while lights were flashing, and in the midst of the excitement the rattle of distant musketry was on the increase.

“Crushed—scattered—where are my friends?” I said aloud. “Why, they are here. It is an attack upon the town!”

I felt a little doubt as soon as I had uttered these words; but the longer I listened the more convinced I felt that this must be a surprise, and by degrees matters took their shape in my mind, thus accounting for the apparent ease with which the rajah had scattered his enemies.

“It has all been a ruse—a piece of strategy,” I thought. “They have retreated, and drawn Ny Deen’s men right away, so as to weaken him, and now they have got back first, or this is another force.”

As I stood at that window, I, for the moment, thought of throwing myself down, but the attempt would have been madness, for the moon was now up nearly full, and helping the torches to flood the place with light which flashed from the tank, and made the fountain resemble molten silver.

I gave up the thought at once, for I could see a strong guard were watching my windows, and that I was carefully

observed as I sat down and listened to the increasing roar away to my right, where the shouting, cheering, and yelling were mingled strangely with the bursts of firing which grew nearer.

I seemed to see the fight going on, and grew more excited moment by moment, as I knew by the sounds exactly how matters progressed. For, as I judged, a body of infantry was fighting its way along a street, and every now and then a sharp volley was heard, followed by a tremendous cheer, which suggested to me that the men fired, and then made a rush forward, driving their enemies back; and then after a short space another volley was fired, followed by a fresh rush, and so on, the fusillade sounding each time nearer.

“They are carrying everything before them,” I thought; for though there was plenty of firing in return, it was scattered and desultory, and, even if I could see nothing, I was perfectly sure that the defenders of the town were giving way, though perhaps only to make a more desperate stand as they were driven together.

Then all at once my heart leaped, for there was the sound of a gun to my left, in the direction where I believed the great gate stood through which we had entered the town that night.

Then another heavy thud came, and another as the guns were brought into action, and their point must be, I felt sure, to batter down the gate, to admit a fresh attacking force, whose duty would be to take the defenders in the rear.

The effect on the guards in the court was startling. Several ran to the gateway to question the sentry there eagerly, and then return to their companions.

Then came the rattle of musketry from the left, evidently in answer to the firing of the heavy guns which were battering the gates; but it had no effect, for the pieces were being served with the greatest regularity, and I listened eagerly, wondering whether it could be Brace’s troop, and how soon they would open a way for the infantry which I felt sure would be in support.

At last I went away from the window, and began to walk excitedly about the room, but only to rush back again, as I heard a fresh volley of musketry in the distance, and on looking out saw a dull glow out over the walls of the palace, a light which grew brighter, and, as it increased, I knew that attackers or defenders had fired some house, the beginning of a work whose end it was impossible to foretell.

I shuddered slightly, for I was a prisoner.

“Suppose,” I thought, “this place should catch, and I found myself hemmed in!”

I looked down at the depth below, and my eyes once more sought the hangings, as I recalled how I had thought of contriving a rope.

The fire was increasing fast, the dull glow becoming each minute more vivid, till, when I reached out of the window, I could see orange-tinted clouds rolling up from the direction of the volley firing, whilst the shouting was certainly coming nearer.

I felt as if it was impossible to bear this confinement longer, and it was only by forcing myself to dwell upon the varying fortunes of the fight that I was able to contain myself. There, on the one hand, was the attack upon the gate; there, on the other, the advance of the troops through the town, to which they must have obtained entrance by a surprise. And now I longed to be where I could see the varying fortunes of the fight, which at times I thought must be going in another direction.

That was only a passing thought, for all at once the firing of the artillery ceased; so did that of the musketry opposed to it, and I listened breathlessly, wondering what was the cause.

Had they failed to batter down the gate? and had they limbered up and retired?

No; for, as the thought came, there was a sudden crash of musketry, volley after volley, and the incessant scattered firing of the defenders. Then, as I listened, a faint sound of cheering, increasing in loudness, reached my ears, and directly after I felt certain that the gate had been taken.

A minute later there was no doubt about it, for I could hear the fighting right and left, and to my great joy, I knew that it must be going against the rajah’s men, who were retiring, and I soon found that the palace was the place for which they were making.

First of all, there was a great deal of excitement in the court. Then a sowar came riding in to give orders to the officer in command, and while it was being executed, a gallantly-dressed chief dashed in, shouted some fresh orders, and directly after, quite in confusion, a regiment of sepoys doubled in through the gateway, and were then hurried in at an open doorway, opposite to where I stood watching.

They had hardly disappeared before another regiment in better order marched in; and they too passed in through the same door, my doubts as to their object being soon at an end, for I heard them doubling along the roof, evidently manning it as a rampart; while, from a glimpse I caught through an open window, it was evident that the floor on a level with mine was also occupied by troops who were stationed at windows looking out upon the road.

Another regiment, and directly after quite a mob of armed men came hurrying through the gateway to occupy every room and window looking outwards, while a strong force partially filled the court, the numbers being rapidly increased as the firing and cheering came nearer.

It was all plain enough now; the rajah’s troops were being driven back, and were ordered to make a stand here at the

palace, which lent itself well for the purpose, one side being protected by the river, while, as far as I knew, the entrance was only through the gateway, which could easily be blocked and held.

“Till Brace came with the guns,” I thought.

I had wished to see something of the fight; now I regretted my desire, for I foresaw that there was going to be a desperate struggle. The light of the fire was rapidly increasing, and a very short time had elapsed before there was a sudden rush, and a disorderly mob of fighting men came tearing through the gateway, wild, excited, torn, and yelling furiously.

Then, as another volley was fired, I knew that the rajah’s men had been driven in, for a tremendous fire was opened from the roof away to my right, and I could see the smoke rising in a dense cloud.

As this firing was kept up, the court gradually grew more packed. I could see mounted men come in, and before long I was able to make out the rajah, as he seemed to be giving orders, which resulted in a body of men rushing into the palace and returning bearing loads, which they piled up within the gateway, forming a breastwork, from behind which the men kept up a furious fire.

Outside, the replies had quite ceased, and I found what it meant; the infantry were under cover, and the guns had been ordered up to batter in the gateway, and send its defenders flying before a rush was made.

As I gazed down at the dense crowd of fighting men in the court, I shuddered, for, driven to bay as the sepoys were, and with no means of escape when the attack was made, the carnage would be frightful, and all the worse from the fact that the men would rush in and occupy the windows that looked upon the court from whence a sustained fire could be kept up on our men, one which would be frightful.

All at once it struck me that perhaps now the doors of my apartments would be unguarded, and I ran to look; but, on drawing aside the hangings, there sat Salaman and four attendants, while behind them were at least twenty well-armed men.

I went back, feeling that, whatever happened, these men would be faithful to their duty, though how I was to have got out of the palace and past the crowd of soldiers at every window and door, I had not stopped to think.

I again returned to the window from which I had watched before, and stood gazing out at the crowded court where the men had now been reduced to something more like military order, and it was a wonderful sight to see the swarthy faces with their gleaming eyes, and the flashing weapons the men carried. The moon poured down its silver light to mingle strangely with the glare of the torches many of the men bore; while away to my right the burning houses sent a glow of orange so strong that the broad end of the court opposite to me gleamed as if the fire was there as well.

It was a terrible pause that, and I knew that before long the attack would come, when the place would either be carried at once or its defenders starved into submission; for, though there was water in abundance, I did not believe there could be food to provide for a garrison.

I was thinking all this when a voice behind me made me start, and face round to the speaker.

“It is long hours since my lord has eaten,” said Salaman. “Shall I bring in some food?”

“Who can eat at a time like this?” I cried; and I signed to him to go, turning back directly after, for I could hear a peculiar rattling sound in the distance which I knew well enough.

It was what I had anticipated; they were bringing up the guns.

Almost at that moment the firing from the roof recommenced, and was answered from different directions; but it ceased as quickly as it had begun, for all at once there was the dull echoing thud of a six-pounder, and a rush of men from the barricade in the gateway, through which a round shot plunged, striking the edge of the stonework arch, sending down a shower of fragments, in the midst of whose falling the shot struck the wall of the palace on my left, shivering the stonework there.

No one attempted to man the barricades again, the task was too perilous, for gun after gun sent its iron messenger ploughing through the archway.

As I stood there midway between the gateway and the wall on my left, at right angles to my window, I did not stir, for I knew that though the balls came by within ten feet from where I stood, none was likely to injure me. There was a kind of fascination in listening to the heavy report, and then instantly for the whistling of the ball as, after demolishing a portion of the barricade, it struck the wall with a heavy crash, and sent the splinters of stone flying.

Opposite to me were the soldiers, densely packed, forming one side of the lane, down which the balls came plunging. Now and then one was deflected by the part of the barricade it struck, and it flew higher against the wall, or lower so as to touch the paving, and then ricochet; but the work was being thoroughly well done; and as I saw the great gaps made, and the clearance in the gateway, I knew the final attack must come before long.

It was much sooner than I expected, for the firing from the roof suddenly blazed out furiously, and it was as if shots were being poured from every window, as a fierce roar literally followed the next shot—a roar of men’s voices, and beating feet, and my heart seemed for a moment to stand still, but then began to bound as I leaned out to watch the struggle, from which I could not have torn myself even to save my life.

I could see nothing outside, only hear the coming of men, whose cheering was mingled with many a shriek and

groan, as poor fellows dropped under the terrible fire poured down upon them. Then I saw the men within the court running round to defend the gateway; but ere they could fire a shot, there was the flashing of steel, and a little ridge of bristling bayonets appeared; their banners changed hands; the sepoys broke and rushed for the doorway and windows of the inner court; and in a wonderfully short time, so rapidly flowed in the stream of glittering bayonets through the archway, the court was cleared, and the firing came now, as I had expected, from the inner windows and the roof.

I heard the orders ring out. “No firing! In with you, lads; the bayonet!” and with a rush, our men leaped in at the door, climbed in at the windows, and as the stream still flowed in through the gateway, the fighting was going on in room after room, and our foot regiment chased the flying sepoys from floor to floor, to finish the deadly strife upon the roof.

It was horrible, but through it all there would come the remembrance of the horrors perpetrated by the savage mob and the brutal soldiery. There was a wild fascination about it, too, and I could not turn away, but stood with staring eyes and stunned ears, noting how the fire rapidly ceased, and wild cheering rose as room and roof were cleared.

I was standing by the window full of exultation, triumphing in the bravery and daring of the Englishmen, who must have been outnumbered by six to one, when I heard shots close at hand, yells, shouts, and the rush of feet; and the next minute my attendants and guards came backing in, fighting desperately as much in my defence as for their own lives, for they were driven from room to room by half a dozen men of the foot regiment that had stormed the place, and then for the first time I recalled that I was standing there in turbaned helmet and regular Eastern uniform, girt with jewelled belts, and with a magnificent tulwar at my side.

“They’ll take me for a Hindu chief,” I thought as, quick as lightning, I snatched out the blade.

I was just in time.

Half my defenders were down, the others had dropped from the windows in spite of the depth, and two men with levelled bayonets dashed at me.

I did not think I could have done it, but I had worked hard at sword practice, and with a parry I turned one bayonet aside, avoided the other with a bound, and sent the man who would have run me through, down on his knees, with a terrible cut across the ear.

The others turned upon me, but I had found my tongue.

“Halt! Back, you idiots!” I roared. “I am a friend.”

“Oh, bedad, an’ I don’t belave ye,” cried one of the party, as the others hesitated; and he held his bayonet to my breast. “Give up yez sword, or I’ll make a cockchafer of ye.”

I turned his point, and cut at another man frantically, for they were too much excited to listen to explanations. But in another instant I believe I should have been bayoneted, if there had not been a wild cry, and a dark figure rushed between me and my dangerous friends.

“Stop, he’s a sahib,” roared the new-comer, and I saw it was Dost.

“Then he’s me prisoner, and that sword’s me loot,” cried the Irishman.

“Stand back!” I roared. “I am Lieutenant Vincent, of Captain Brace’s troop.”

I took off my helmet as I spoke, and the men were convinced.

“Look at that now,” said the Irishman; “jest, too, when I thought I’d got a bit of lovely shpoil.”

At that moment there was a rush of feet, and a tall grey officer hurried in, followed by another, and quite a crowd of men.

“Have you found him?” cried the tall officer.

“Oh, bedad, yis, colonel,” cried the Irishman.

“What! the rajah?”

“Yis, sor. There he is, only he shwears he’s a liftinant in a troop.”

“That!” cried the officer; and then, in a choking voice, “Why, Gil, my boy, is this you?”

I could not speak, only cling to him who had a thousand times nursed me in his arms.

“Hold up, boy, be a man,” he whispered; but his arms tightened round me. “I thought you were dead, Gil,” he cried excitedly. “But why are you like this?”

“I am a prisoner, father,” I said.

“But the rajah?” he said excitedly. “Where is he?”

“He left here an hour ago to head his men,” I said. “But, father, if you take him, defend him; he has been very good to me.”

“Let’s take him first,” cried my father. “Now, my lads, forward! He must be somewhere in the place.”

“Three cheers for the colonel’s boy!” cried the Irishman. “Your hanner should have been here a bit sooner to see him foight. Hi, Sam Raggett, get up and show the colonel your ear. You’re not half killed yet.”

“Forward!” cried the colonel. Then to the officer with him. “Smith, take charge of my son. A sergeant’s guard, Gil,” he cried from the door. “Take off some of those things. You look like a sepoy chief. It is not safe with the lads like this.”

He hurried after his men, and the young officer held out his hand.

“Tell me,” I said quickly; “Captain Brace—my troop?”

“Yonder, not a hundred yards away,” he said. “Didn’t you hear him speak?”

“Yes,” I cried. “Thank Heaven, then, it was he.”

“Let’s get out of here,” said my new friend; “but hadn’t you better change your clothes?”

“He cannot, sahib,” said a voice behind me. “He has none here.”

“Hallo! who are you?” cried the officer.

“My servant,” I cried, as I laid my hand on his arm. “Dost, you saved my life.”

“And he’ll have to save it again,” cried my new friend, “if we stay here. Come along, and let’s get among our men, for this palace swarms with the enemy yet.”

Even as he spoke, a couple of shots rang out, and as they were aimed at us, we rapidly beat a retreat.

Chapter Forty Nine.

My appearance excited plenty of surprise as we reached the front of the palace, where a portion of my father’s regiment had now fallen in, the enemy having taken flight, and a couple of squadrons of lancers were in full pursuit. But in a very short time it was whispered through the regiment that I was the colonel’s son, and I was saluted with a cheer.

Just then there was the clattering of hoofs, and an officer galloped up, “Where’s Colonel Vincent?” he cried; and I looked at him wildly.

“Scouring the palace with a couple of companies of men.”

“But the people are pouring out of the town, and only those lancers after them.”

“He’s trying to catch the rajah.”

“Got away safe,” cried the officer. “I want orders to pursue; I can’t stay here. Whom have you got there—the rajah’s son?”

“Brace, don’t you know me?” I cried, in a choking voice.

“Gil!” he shouted, and he swung himself off his horse, and rushed at me. “I thought I should never see you again. A prisoner?”

“Yes, yes,” I cried.

“But—”

He loosened my hands.

“You haven’t—? Oh, Gil, my lad!”

That seemed the unkindest cut of all—to be suspected after what I had gone through; and I half turned away.

Brace saw it as a confession that I had turned renegade, and his face was growing very dark as my father strode up.

“Pursuit, Captain Brace,” he said; “the rascal has escaped.”

Brace sprang into his saddle, and galloped away, while, in spite of my father being at hand, my heart sank, and I felt more miserable than I had been for days.

Chapter Fifty.

I stayed by my father, who, in the intervals of giving orders for the occupation of the palace by the troops, the planting of sentries and pickets, and the stoppage of all pillaging, told me how he, with his regiment and two squadrons of lancers, had joined the other foot regiment and Brace’s horse artillery. That plans had been made for the attack on Ahdenpore, the Maharajah Ny Deen’s chief city, and this had been carried out by one regiment of foot, half the horse artillery battery, and two troops of light horse, the rest, the larger part of the force, remaining at a

distance quite out of sight.

The object had been to make a bold attack, and if the rajah's people gave way, to advance and send for help from the hidden force. But, if they fought stubbornly, to retire, and keep on making so sturdy a defence as should lure the rajah's army on to a long pursuit, leading them right away from the town, which was then to be attacked by Colonel Vincent's force while the greater part of the rajah's men were away.

This had all been carried out. The retreating party would be by this time retiring or holding its ground, and as soon as it was day, if the rajah's men had not heard of the defeat through the fugitives from the town, they would be attacked, and taken between two fires.

"But ought you not to advance at once, father?" I said. "Your men are flushed with success, and you are sure of meeting the enemy as he comes back."

He clapped me on the shoulder.

"Good!" he said, looking at me proudly. "Quite right, if the men were fresh, but they are worn out with marching, fighting, and want of food. They must have a few hours' rest."

"But if the rajah, with his fugitives, meets the returning force, and they come back and attack us?"

"Let them," said my father drily. "I wish they would, and save us a long march to-morrow morning."

"But," I said, hesitating, and afraid to hear the news, in case it should be very bad, "mother and sister Grace?"

We had by this time entered the palace, and naturally I had led my father to the room I had occupied.

He looked very hard and stern as he drew a long deep breath.

"They are in God's hands," he said.

"Not dead, father?" I cried wildly.

"Heaven forbid, boy!" he said excitedly. "I was summoned away with all who could be spared, to form a junction with the —nth and Brace's troop. My orders were to take command, break up any bands which were collecting, and to keep an eye on Ny Deen, who has been a perfect firebrand through the country. I left as strong a garrison as I could at Nussoor, the place fairly provisioned and armed, and all the women and children are shut up in the Residency. But since I have been away with my little force I have had no communication with the place. We have been completely cut off, and it has been impossible to send or bring news."

"Then you know nothing of Nussoor?"

"Nothing."

"But have you sent messengers?"

"At least a dozen, Gil, my boy."

"How far is it?"

"About sixty miles from here—perhaps seventy. Once this maharajah is taken, we shall go to the relief of the place."

Just then there was a loud shouting, and my father sent an orderly for news; but the cause of the noise was announced directly.

The fire was gaining ground, and there was a possibility of its reaching the palace.

My father, who had thrown himself upon the cushions to snatch a few minutes' rest, sprang up.

"Come, Gil," he said, "you had better keep by me now, till your troop comes back. But have you no other clothes?"

"None," I said, "and I look like a enemy."

"No, no. A friendly native," said my father, laughing, as he hurried out to where a number of buildings were blazing furiously, and a company of the regiment were busily engaged in trying to extinguish the flames.

A few short, sharp orders were given, the men ceased their hopeless toil, and a sapper sergeant and a dozen men set to work to finish the task.

This they did by making a way amongst the people who had not fled. A quantity of powder was obtained from the rajah's magazine, and in less than half an hour, bags were planted here and there, several houses blown up, and all chance of the fire spreading was at an end.

As the night wore on, with every one but the pickets snatching some rest, there were different little incidents full of excitement, officer after officer coming in to make his report to my father. First there was the lancer officer who had not succeeded in capturing Ny Deen, who, with a very strong body of men, had entered a forest many miles away, and so evaded further pursuit.

Next came Brace, to announce that he had been too late to do any good in the darkness; but he had the news to

impart that Ny Deen and his flying men had formed a conjunction with the little army which had been in pursuit of our men when the sham flight had been carried out.

Toward morning, this information was endorsed by the arrival of the foot regiment with the half of our horse artillery troop, and the lancers, who had all performed their duty with very little loss.

“Lie down and sleep, Gil,” said my father. “We shall have hard work to-morrow.”

“But suppose the rajah comes back to-night to try and surprise us?”

“He will not,” said my father quietly. “He would, but he will not get his men up to the work. Hallo! what’s this?”

For at that moment a white figure entered the room, looking perfectly clean and neat.

“Dost!” I exclaimed.

“Who is Dost?” said my father.

“My servant.”

He had come to announce that a supper was spread in the outer room, and upon our going, there stood Salaman and three of his assistants, all of whom Dost had hunted out, and ordered to set to work.

“Very tempting,” said my father; “but is all this safe?”

“On my head be it, sahib,” said Dost, respectfully. “There is no poison in the meat.”

The supper, which was partaken of by a dozen officers as well, being finished, we returned, after going the rounds, to my sleeping-chamber.

“Go to sleep, Gil, boy,” said my father. “Our pickets will give plenty of notice if Ny Deen comes.”

But I could not sleep for thinking of Brace, who had not been to the supper, and I wanted to make my position clear before my mind would be at rest.

Chapter Fifty One.

The strange silence that reigned in the palace, the dying out of the fierce glare of the fire, and utter exhaustion, at last weighed down my eyelids, and I dropped into an uneasy sleep, but only to dream about escaping over the roofs with Dost, being captured, and then watching the terrible assault and carrying of the rajah’s house. From that I wandered into the meeting with my father, and fancied that I was going with him to Nussoor, where my mother and sister would not recognise me because Brace had been there first and told them I was a miserable renegade who had gone over to the rebels, and slain women and children with a tulwar whose hilt and sheath were covered with jewels.

Oh dear, what nonsense one does dream when one’s brain gets into a fevered state.

I was calling Ny Deen to witness to my perfect innocence, for he was somehow there at Nussoor, when my father suddenly said—

“It is of no use, Gil. You may as well get up.”

I started awake to see that his grey, worn face was bent down over me, and found that he was holding my hand.

“You had better rouse up, and have a bath, lad,” he said kindly. “Your sleep is doing you no good.”

“Oh, what a horrible muddle of a dream,” I exclaimed, as I sprang to my feet.

“You should have undressed, my lad. You are bathed in perspiration.”

Dost came in just then with coffee borne by Salaman, and I turned to him directly.

“How did you escape?” I cried.

“I was beaten down, sahib, and I managed to crawl away. I was not much hurt,” he added, with a smile.

“I am glad,” I cried; and ten minutes later I was out in the court with my father, listening to the arrangements being made; and soon after I was audience to a little council of war in the rajah’s principal room, where it was arranged that two strong companies of the other foot regiment should garrison the palace, and hold it while a troop of lancers stayed back to help preserve order in the town.

An hour later, they were forming a marching column to go out and give battle to the rajah and his force, which lay, according to spies, ten miles away, holding a patch of forest beyond the swift river which ran from there to this town.

“Which will you do, Gil?” said my father; “come with me, or stay with the major who is in command here?”

“I want to go back to my troop,” I said sharply; and as I spoke, Brace, who had before met me that morning, came in looking very careworn, and with his uniform almost in rags.

“Ah, well,” said my father; “here is your captain.”

I hesitated for a moment, and then walked across to Brace, who moved away to one of the windows.

“You wish to speak to me, sir?” he said coldly.

“Of course I do,” I cried passionately; “why are you so ready to condemn me unheard?”

“Say what you wish to say; we march in five minutes,” he replied.

I could not speak, for the hot sensation of indignation which burned within me.

“You are silent,” he said, with a contemptuous shrug of his shoulders. “Well, I am not surprised. I was making every effort possible, as soon as I heard through spies that you were alive, to rescue you; but when—”

“Well, when what?” I said indignantly.

“Since you take that tone, sir,” he retorted, “when I had the news brought to me that you were perfectly unhurt, and had accepted service with the rajah as his chief officer of artillery, why then of course I gave you up.”

“Who told you that?” I said hotly.

“One of the spies I sent in,” he replied coldly.

“It was not true.”

“Not true?” said Brace, bitterly. “Your appearance belies your words, sir. Why, were you not occupying rooms in the rajah’s palace?”

“Yes; as a prisoner,” I said angrily.

Brace laughed mockingly.

“A prisoner in a newly designed artillery uniform, and wearing a magnificent sword and belts, evidently presented by the rajah, I did not know Ny Deen treated his prisoners so well; I thought he murdered them at once.”

I tried to speak, but for some moments no words would come, and it was he who spoke first.

“Well,” he said, “have you anything to say?”

“Yes,” I said; “I want to come back into the troop. Can I have a horse?”

“I have no means of looking after prisoners, sir,” he said. “You can only join your troop as a captured rebel against your queen.”

I turned away, and found myself directly after face to face with Haynes and Doctor Danby; but as I went up, the former turned his back and walked away, while the doctor blew out his cheeks and looked very fierce at me.

“Doctor,” I said, holding out my hand, but he did not take it.

I laughed bitterly, thinking that they would all apologise to me some day.

“Brace thinks I have not been wounded,” I said, signing to him to accompany me into another room.

His whole manner changed in the instant, and he was looking at me with interest.

“Eh? wounded?” he cried. “Let’s see. Ah, head. Humph! Only a bad crack. Healing all right. Put on your iron pot again, and don’t let it fret the place.”

“Oh yes; that’s all right,” I said; “but my arm: shall I ever get the full use of it again?”

“Arm? Let’s see.”

I removed the loose tunic, and he turned up the delicate silk shirt I wore, to become wrapt at once in the interest of his profession, as he examined the wound carefully.

“Brace says you have not been hurt, does he?” cried the doctor. “Tell him to mind his guns, and not talk about what he does not understand. Why, it’s a beautiful wound, my dear boy—a splendid cut. A little more draw in the cut, and the budmash who did it would have lopped it clean off. Here, who was your surgeon?”

I told him.

“Then he is a precious clever fellow, Vincent, and I should like to know him. By George, sir, he has saved your limb. Get back it’s use? Oh yes, with care. Why, my dear fellow, I should have been proud of saving an arm like that. Here, let me help you on with your dandy jacket. So you would be Ny Deen’s artillery general, eh?”

I only gave him a look.

“Not right, boy; but I suppose you could not help yourself. There, I must go.”

We went back into the other room, where Brace, and nearly all the officers, had left.

“Father,” I said, “Captain Brace will not have me back. Can I come with you as a sort of aide-de-camp?”

“Of course. Yes, my boy; but try and keep out of danger.”

The next minute we were following the column out over the bridge, the head wing already raising a long cloud of dust, the horse artillery rattling away in front, and the lancers off scouting in front, and sending out flankers, to take care that no approach was made on either side of the flying column.

By my father’s orders, a magnificent horse had been brought from the rajah’s stables, and, mounted upon this, though I felt very sore about the treatment I had received, I was getting into excellent spirits; and as I was not to be a gunner, I was quite content to ride on in my dashing uniform, though I saw the cavalry and infantry officers exchange smiles.

It was very early yet, and the plain was quite deserted, while the hot sun formed a haze that the eyes could only penetrate to a certain distance.

Every one was on the look-out for the shimmering river and the patch of forest beyond, where we knew, from our spies, that the rajah had halted to gather his men together in as strong a position as he could find; and here my father expected that he would hold out while efforts were made to dislodge him from a place where our cavalry would be of no service. They would have to wait until the ranks were driven from among the trees, when the sharp charges of the lancers would scatter them in all directions.

At last, river and green woods were in view, both welcome sights, with their promises of shade and bathing, to men parched by the torrid sunshine, and half choked by the dust turned up by elephant, camel, horse, and men’s trampling feet.

I watched my father’s actions with all the interest of a young soldier, and saw how he divided his little force of cavalry, sending them forward, where they would be out of musket shot, but ready to slip like greyhounds on their swift Arab troopers, as soon as the mutineers broke out and tried to flee.

Then he sent forward the horse artillery—and how I longed to be with them—and company after company of foot, to act as supports to save the guns from capture; and as soon as the troop had taken up position, we waited for the order to fire to be sent.

But it was not despatched, for scores of the lancers came riding in, after galloping by the edge of the forest, to announce that the enemy was not there.

The rajah seemed to have shrunk from fighting; and I wondered, as we advanced once more, and saw how strong the position had been, and how easily he could have beaten a force not a fourth of his number.

We were not long in finding out the direction he had taken. A miserable-looking peasant announcing the way; and there it was plainly enough. There could be no doubt of it, for the dust was trampled, and plenty of traces lay about, showing that the little army must have been in rather a demoralised state.

“Well, we must give him no rest,” said my father; and, in spite of the heat, the march was resumed, with halts wherever a village promised water. But, fortunately, a great part of our way was near the river, whose bends offered refreshment to the thirsty horses, camels, and elephants.

Then on again till evening, when a halt was called at a good-sized village, once evidently a place of some importance, but now utterly desolate; the lands and gardens around trampled, and the traces of a large body of men having passed quite plain.

Here there was nothing for it but to bivouac, and after the customary precautions had been taken, the men were ordered to eat their food quickly, and then lie down and get all the rest they could.

The officers off duty followed their example, and I was asleep, too, when the bugle-call roused us in the middle of the cool moonlit night, and about half an hour after, we were all on the march again, a couple of natives having undertaken to act as guides as far as following the trail of the rajah’s army was concerned. The consequence was, that by the time the sun began to make its presence felt, we were many miles on our road.

“How far shall you follow them?” I heard Brace ask the colonel.

“Till I overtake them,” said my father, rather coldly. And I could see a determined look in his eyes which made me think of Ny Deen, and something like a hope that he might escape would come into my mind.

On again, after a brief halt for refreshment, and about an hour before midday advantage was taken of a great mango tope for another halt; but as soon as the sun began to decline we were off again, with the track plain before us.

Ah, it is slow work marching under a hot Indian sun; but no one complained, tramping steadily on with scouts well out in front, till it was dark, when there was another rest till midnight; and on again in the cool moonlight, with the men on the gun-limbers asleep, and those mounted nodding and swaying in their saddles, as if ready to come down. But no one fell, and the march seemed to me part of some strange dream, till the stars paled, and the orange sun came up, growing hotter and hotter, till we were all anxiously looking out for our next halting-place, and wondering how many more days must elapse before we should overtake Ny Deen.

It was sooner than we expected, for somewhere about nine o’clock there was a little excitement on in front. There

was a cloud of dust, and another, and a few minutes after we could see a native horseman, sword in hand, and with his round shield banging against his shoulders, where it was hung from his neck. He was splendidly mounted, and appeared to be galloping for his life to escape from half a dozen of our lancers, the scouts, who had evidently cut him off and turned him in our direction.

He came straight for us, turning neither to the right nor the left, though there was plenty of room; and as he came nearer, we could see that his horse was sadly blown, so that it appeared as if the rider would be overtaken, and run through by the men in chase.

“The fools! They must make him a prisoner. You, Gil, you are well-mounted, gallop out, and call to him to surrender. We may gain valuable information. Take care, and—”

So spoke my father, and before he had finished, I was off at a gallop, glad of the excitement.

I was only just in time, for one too-enthusiastic lancer was closing up, and would have given point had I not struck his lance aside and seized the sowar’s rein.

“Surrender!” I shouted in Hindustani, and I pointed my sword at the blackened, dust-grimed fellow’s throat.

“Surrender! Yes, of course,” he panted. “Take me to an English officer. I am an Englishman.”

“Don’t you believe the treacherous dog, sir,” cried the foremost lancer. “He tried that on with us.”

“Yes, you thick-headed idiot,” panted my prisoner angrily. “This is only a disguise. I know where the niggers are, if you want to kill some one.”

I looked at him in wonder. “Why are you like this?” I said.

“I have brought a message from Nussoor.”

“Where?” I cried excitedly.

“Nussoor. Who is in command here?”

“Colonel Vincent,” I said.

“Thank Heaven!” he cried; and he reeled in his saddle, but recovered directly. “I’m beaten,” he said. “A terrible long round to avoid the enemy. I had to go out the other side. It was a forlorn hope.”

By this time my father and several officers had ridden up, and I exclaimed excitedly—

“This is a messenger from Nussoor.”

“Yes,” said my prisoner. “I was obliged to assume this disguise. Colonel Vincent, don’t you know me?”

“Brooke! Ah, my dear fellow, what news?”

“Bad; terrible. We were at the end nearly of our ammunition. Closely invested for many days past. People fighting like heroes; but they can hold out no longer. And, to make matters worse, that fiend, Ny Deen, is advancing on the place with a powerful force. I was nearly taken by his men.”

“How far is Nussoor from here?” said my father hoarsely.

“About fourteen miles, I should say.”

“Then that is where he has been making for,” muttered my father. “And I not to know that it was so near.”

It was all plain enough now. Knowing from spies that Nussoor was weakly guarded, and having lost his own city, Ny Deen was hurrying on to seize and entrench himself in another; one which would form a centre where his adherents might flee.

Just then I caught my father’s eyes, and saw in them a terrible look of agony, which made me think of the horrors which had been perpetrated at these places where the mutineers had gained the upper hand.

It had been horrible enough in the past; but now the rajah’s men were smarting from a sharp defeat. And I felt that they would make fierce reprisals on the hard-pressed garrison, all of whom would certainly be put to the sword.

Chapter Fifty Two.

In the eagerness of pursuit but small heed had been paid to the rajah’s course, and hence it was that my father, who knew little of this side of the city, had been so taken by surprise as to its being so near. And now, when every pulse was throbbing with agony, and one wish only was in his breast, he was forced to call a halt, and wait for three or four hours till the heat of the day was past, and the men had rested and refreshed their horses by a huge tank covered with lotus, and whose cool dark waters were evidently deep.

He had kept on for a long time, but the halt was forced upon him by the terrible heat. Men were staggering in the ranks, one poor fellow dropped from his horse, and he unwillingly gave the word as we reached the tank where the men threw themselves down, while others schemed all kinds of contrivances to keep off the scorching heat. “We

must rest for a few hours," said my father.

"It would be like courting defeat to throw the poor fellows against the rajah's mob utterly exhausted by a twelve-miles' walk through this fearful sun."

It was agreed that it would be madness for the infantry; but Brace proposed at a little council that was held, that he should hurry on with his troop, and that the officer in command of the cavalry should go with him in support.

I saw my father hesitate for a few moments, while all eyes were turned upon him, and then he rose.

"Yes," he said; "it will create a diversion, and give hope to the poor creatures who are making so brave a struggle. What do you say, Brooke?"

Mr Brooke, who was the commissioner of the place, exclaimed eagerly—

"In Heaven's name, send them! It will show them that help is near."

"An hour's rest first," said my father, "and then go."

"But the men, sir—" protested Brace.

"I am not thinking of the brave fellows," said my father, "but of their poor dumb beasts."

"Yes," said Brace, "you are right;" and he went to see that the horses were being carefully tended—almost an unnecessary task, for our men were very proud of their mounts, and I followed him silently till he heard my step, and faced round to look at me angrily.

"What do you want?" he said.

"To ride with the old guns again," I faltered in a choking voice.

"It is impossible," he said coldly. "The men would rise against you after what they know."

A flush of anger rose to my brow, and I felt my throat hot, as I cried angrily—

"They would not. There is not a man amongst them who would believe me such a scoundrel as you and Haynes do."

Then my voice broke, and I turned to him appealingly.

"Brace," I cried; "indeed you are wrong. I would not stoop to beg of you like this, but you are going to their help. My mother and my sister are there, and I seem to see them holding out their hands to us to come and help them. I must come with you. If you say no, I shall gallop on by myself, and if they cut me down, well, I shall have tried to help those I love."

He had turned from me, but as my words, which I suppose were full of passionate excitement, fell upon his ears, he faced round and stared at me fixedly, as he raised his hand, hesitated, and then dropped it again.

"Gil," he cried, "swear to me on your honour as a soldier and a gentleman that you had not joined the rajah's men."

The moment before I was humble and pleading, but these words, this tone of doubt, this demand for an oath drove humility to the winds, and I felt as if I would die sooner than degrade myself as he wished.

"I will not," I cried hotly. "I'll swear nothing. I don't want you to believe me. I thought you were a gentleman, and my friend."

"Then tell me as a brother-officer that I am really wrong."

"I tell you that you are a coward and blind," I cried; "and sooner than humble myself, I'd do as I said, and die."

"Gil," he said hoarsely, "you are right. I can't go down on my knees to you here, but I do believe you, lad. I was blind and miserable, and disappointment made me doubt you more and more. Forgive me, lad; I own it. You couldn't have been such a miserable hound."

I wanted to speak, but the words would not come for long enough. When they did, I could only whisper huskily—

"May I go to my guns?"

He nodded, for he could not speak either for a time.

"Like this?" I said, making a sign towards my uniform.

"Anyhow, as long as it is the lad I believed in from the first," he half whispered; and then, in quite his old tone, "but we must ride and fire as we never rode and fired before. Now then, come and have a few words with the men."

I went with him, and he spoke three words, the men answering with a cheer, and I saw Dick Dobbs raise the trumpet, and Sergeant Craig take a run toward his horse, while Denny seemed to try and catch my eye.

Then Haynes and Danby came up, and both shook hands, or, rather, asked me to shake hands with them, in a deprecating way, and soon after, as if it were once more a dream, I was in the saddle by the guns, listening to my

father's advice to Brace. He was to try and hold the rajah's people engaged with the help of the cavalry, harassing them till the infantry could come up, but he was not to risk losing the guns.

Just then, still in the costume of an ordinary budmash, but with his face washed clear of his black disguise, Mr Brooke rode up, and asked leave to join the advance.

"Why?" said my father, abruptly.

"I know every inch of the country for miles round, and I can land them close up to the Residency by the forest gate at the back," said Mr Brooke, earnestly. "Besides, I should like to make a dash in and tell the poor shivering creatures I have brought them help."

"Go," said my father, abruptly; and a minute later the dust was rising, the lance-points glittering, and the wheels of the guns and limbers were giving forth their peculiar dull, clattering rattle as we advanced at a trot across the burning plain.

This pace was soon reduced to a walk, of necessity, so as to have the horses as fresh as possible when we went into action, and after a time the lancer captain reined back and joined Brace and Haynes, who were riding close by me, and Mr Brooke rode to us at a sign from Brace.

"Now, gentlemen," said the latter, "the question is, how our attack is to be made. Of course we can say nothing decisive till we find out whether the rajah's troops are inside or outside the town."

"May I speak?" said Brooke.

"Of course. You know the place," replied Brace.

"I am not a soldier, but I have had a severe lesson in fighting lately, and it seems to me that the only course open for you is to approach the town gates, or one of them, without letting your approach be seen, and then make a bold dash right into the little quarter defended by the Europeans."

"You forget that we are not infantry, sir," said Brace. "We cannot fight our way through streets where every window and roof would be manned by mutineers. We should be all shot down, or in hopeless confusion before we were half-way there."

Brooke smiled.

"I know the place, sir," he said. "It is a walled and fortified city with gates, and the European quarter, where we have been besieged, is surrounded by open gardens, and there are wide roads from the north-west gate. You will find no enemy in the plain; they will have marched in by the north-east gate, the nearest to here. I can take you round unseen to the north-west, where, by a sudden dash of the lancers, the gate could be surprised, and they could charge right down the open road, followed by you and your guns right up to the Residency entrenchments, and obtain admittance with the guns before the scoundrels had recovered from their surprise. Of course they would come on again by hundreds or thousands; but your well-served guns can hold them at bay till the colonel comes up with his men."

Brace remained thoughtful for a few minutes.

"This is quite opposed to the colonel's ideas," he said at last; "but it certainly sounds feasible, if we can pass the gate, and the road is open for the horse to charge."

"I guarantee that," said Mr Brooke; "and if the manoeuvre is executed with spirit, it cannot fail."

"Then it cannot fail," said Brace, with a smile. "What do you say, sir?" he continued, appealing to the lancer captain.

"I say it is the wisest thing to do, always supposing the enemy is not outside. Then we ought to try to harass him only, and keep him engaged."

"But the rajah is clever enough to find out our weakness, and we shall be driven back further and further, till we can do comparatively little, I am afraid, but encourage our friends by the sound of our guns. The surprise is the plan—if it can be carried out. We will try."

Very little more was said as we advanced, keeping a bright look-out forward for cavalry, who would gallop back and announce our approach. Of people on foot we had no fear, for we could reach Nussoor long before them; and at last the broad track in the dusty plain left by the rajah's force was quitted, Mr Brooke leading us off at an angle, and making for higher ground with patches of forest trees.

Among these he made his way till, at the densest part, he pointed south, and announced that we were passing the city, which lay in a hollow about a mile away.

But as he spoke, there was a sudden burst of firing, and, thrilled by this, we increased our pace as fast as the bad ground would allow, till we reached the edge of the open, park-like ground, where a halt was called, and the officers advanced cautiously to an eminence, where we dismounted and peered down to where, in a bowl-like depression a mile away, lay, with its beautiful white marble mosque and dome-shaped tombs of former kings, the city of Nussoor. Wall, gates, minarets, gardens with their trees both inside and outside the walls, all were before us as on a map; while, half a mile before us, a white, dusty-looking road wound across the plain toward a great gate.

We were now on the opposite side to that by which Ny Deen would have entered with his troops; and as the smoke

hung more heavily over the side of the town nearest to us, and the firing grew louder, we did not need Mr Brooke's words to tell us that a fierce attack was going on against the brave handful of Europeans who were making a desperate endeavour to hold their own, in the hope that help might come; if not, to die fighting, and not trust to the cruel mercies of the mutineers.

"We are still in time," said Mr Brooke, hoarsely. "See, I can lead you round there by those trees, so that you can reach the road half a mile from the gate. Then a score of your swiftest men could dash up to the gate and hold it till the rest come up, but the place looks so utterly unoccupied that I feel sure the attention of all is upon the fight going on in the European quarter, and a bold dash will take you in."

"Yes," said Brace, decisively; "we'll try it."

"If I go down," said Brooke, "for I shall go with the first men—take the broad road off to the left the moment you are through the gate. It is clear and good, and there will be nothing but an earthwork, with some guns planted by the enemy to play upon the houses. That is so low, that it will not stop you. If it is too high, you can pass it by going into the gardens to the right."

"You hear, Captain," said Brace; "and you will select twenty men for the first advance."

"Yes," he replied.

The order was given to lower the lance-points, and we turned off to the right, and, following Brooke's guidance, the twenty selected men led the advance, keeping well under cover till the dusty road was reached, both cavalry and artillery advancing as nearly in line as the rough ground would allow; then, as we faced to the left, and formed a column, the little troop went off at a trot, then at a gallop, and then raced for the gate, raising a cloud of dust sufficiently thick to hide our advance, the lancers first, four abreast, the guns last, at such a headlong gallop that the half-mile seemed nothing.

In the midst of the wild excitement, the firing ahead sounded louder, and there were yells and shrieks which literally fired my blood; then I heard a few scattered shots and some yelling close at hand, which meant the lancers riding down the feeble opposition at the gate, which we seemed to reach a few moments later; and as we wheeled slightly to the left, along we tore down a wide, open road. Next there was a leaping and bounding of the guns and limbers over the low earthwork, and we were on our way again at a gallop toward a cloud of smoke, and the next minute the clash of arms, the yelling of men, the shouts and cheers of our lancers as they tore on, sweeping all before them, rang in my ears, while my brain swam in the giddiness produced by excitement. Amidst it all the trumpet sounded a halt, the men leaped from horse and limber, the guns were at once unhooked, and loaded with grape where we stood, close up to some walls and barricades, from beyond which came shouts and cheers which almost maddened us. Then, dominating these sounds, there came the beat of hoofs, as the lancers rode back, after forcing their charge as far they could, passed between the guns, and faced round, to form up behind us ready for a fresh charge on the wave of fierce enemies, beaten back for the moment, but now recoiling and coming back to the attack on the barricade, behind which our fellow-countrymen had been desperately trying to hold their own.

I had a full view of this huge wave of savage humanity—inhumanity, I ought to say—as they came on at a rush, with eyes and weapons gleaming, their wildest passions roused, one vast mob of fighting men, a hundred yards—eighty—fifty yards away, when Brace's order rang out, heard above the roar as of a storm raging on a rocky coast.

Then *thud*, and like the slow pulse-beats of doom, *thud—thud*—each gun spoke out from our little line, and at every flash there was a white puff of smoke, which slowly rose, and we saw beneath the vapour, how at each discharge of grape an open lane was torn through the savage crowd.

But these closed up, and they still came on, those behind forcing those in front, till they were within twenty yards.

Never had those guns been served with such rapidity before, nor with such regular motion. The men worked like machines, and as calmly, but our case was becoming desperate. Round after round tore through them, but with fanatical rage the survivors came on, and in another few moments we knew that they would be among us with their keen tulwars and sheltering shield.

But not a man shrank. I knew it was hopeless to think of limbering up, and carrying off the guns; we should have been cut down at once; and rendered desperate by our position, every man at liberty pressed forward to try and defend the gunners, who still toiled on.

"Why don't the lancers charge again?" I thought, as I thrust savagely at a man who was making a cut at a gunner, and a cold feeling of despair began to attack me, as I thought of mother and sister behind the barricade over our heads, and that Brace's gallant troop would be utterly cut to pieces, and the guns turned against my father when he advanced.

"Ny Deen will get his wish," I thought, as I thrust again with all my force and saved the life of the man who was ramming the gun beside me.

"The lancers—where are the lancers?" I thought again; and at that moment a line of men came in among us, and formed a slight hedge of lance-points which darted rapidly out between the gunners whenever one was threatened. Half the men had been dismounted, and while they helped to keep the enemy at bay, a ragged volley suddenly roared above our heads where the brave defenders of the place had collected to give us their little aid.

That volley was so fresh and unexpected that, blazing out as it did, close to the enemy, they fell back for a few moments. Only a few, but long enough to enable the men of one of the most crowded-up guns to send its charge tearing through the foe. Then another spoke, and, with yells of despair, the wave swung back a little. Another volley

from the barricade staggered them more, and the fire of the guns increased in regularity, while all at once I found that we had more room; the lancers had been withdrawn. A few more shots into the mass made them waver. “Cease firing!” rang out, and the trampling of horses began once more, as the lancers passed through us, and hurled themselves at full gallop against the crowd.

That finished the attack, for the enemy turned and fled, throwing into disorder reinforcements coming up; and as the lancers retired in single file, right and left, we played round shot between them, and finished the discomfiture of the attacking force, which rolled back into shelter among the houses at the back.

Then, amidst frantic cheers, a portion of the nearest wall was thrown down, and the guns were dragged into the enclosure, the lancers followed into the shelter; and, as a part of our men repaired the breach, and the guns were mounted ready for the next advance, such a scene of weeping, shouting, and embracing took place as is beyond description, and can only be recalled with a choking sensation of the throat.

I looked wildly round for the faces dear to me, but it was some time before I could make them out in the little crowd of haggard ragged ladies who had been obliged to crowd together in a mere cellar, so as to avoid the shot poured into the enclosure night and day.

But there was no time for sorrow or joy. I had hardly embraced those dear to me when there was a cry raised that the enemy were coming on again, and as I was literally obliged to drag myself away from my sister, she, in her faintness from want of food, staggered, and would have fallen, had not an officer suddenly caught her in his arms.

“Thank you, Brace,” I said, as he helped her to the door of the house from whence she had come. “My sister must have suffered horribly.”

“Your sister, Gil!” he said; “that lady? Ah!”

He twisted himself violently round as he uttered a sharp cry, and it was my turn to catch him in my arms as he was falling.

“Not hit?” cried a familiar voice, and Danby hurried up as two of our men helped me to bear our leader to the door through which my sister had just passed; and there, sheltered from the bullets which had now begun to fly fast from a tall building a short distance away, the doctor made a rapid examination.

“Well?” I said excitedly, “is he wounded?”

“Badly,” whispered the doctor, “through the lungs, I’m afraid.”

I could stay to hear no more, as I had to hurry off to the guns, for threatening shouts told me that the enemy were coming on again, and were heralding their approach by a terrific fire prior to the next assault.

Fortunately there was ample shelter for the horses among the buildings, which had been fortified and enclosed by a strong earthwork and barricade under my father’s orders; and here, with the women and children for the most part in the partially underground cellarage of the Residency, the gallant little garrison had still held out after Brooke’s departure, in spite of their thirst, and the constant harassing attacks kept up by the enemy. They had again and again felt that all was over, but still kept up the struggle till a sudden commotion in the city, and the sight of fresh troops pouring in, seemed completely to crush out their last hopes. For they had clung to the belief that Mr Brooke would succeed in making their position known, and bring reinforcements, but these had come to the other side. There had seemed to be nothing left but to fight to the last, and, when the enemy mastered the barricades, to retreat to the building beside that where the women and children were, and apply a match to the magazine—finding death, but avenging it upon their cowardly foes, who must have perished by hundreds in the explosion, so large was the store of powder in the place.

Our arrival had been in the nick of time, and a scene of frantic joy had ensued; but it was soon at an end, for the guns had to be worked again after a very brief period utilised in getting them into position.

Still, small as was the reinforcement, it placed the powder-blackened, ragged, haggard men—soldiers and civilians—in a far better position, and they rushed to the batteries and loopholes, to help pour a rain of bullets on the advancing enemy, while the dismounted lancers worked guns which had been silent for want of help, and our six-pounders grew hot with the rapidity of the fire.

“How long will the colonel be?” said Haynes, coming to my side for a few moments, our men needing no encouragement, but fighting the guns with a look of suppressed rage in their eyes, as if they were seeking to avenge the blow which had fallen upon their captain.

“I cannot say,” I replied. “Certainly not till dark.”

“Then he will be too late,” said Haynes, gloomily. “We shall never be able to hold out till then. Danby is getting busier every moment.”

“Yes; it’s those black wretches on that big building,” I said, pointing at a place a little over a hundred yards away; and as I spoke, a bullet whistled by my ear. “They have some of their best marksmen there. Never mind; let’s show them we have good marksmen too.”

He did as I suggested, and three of our guns were trained and shotted, two being aimed by Sergeant Craig and Denny, whom Brace had made corporal, during the past few days.

“Quickly as you can,” I said, as shot after shot was fired from the roof of the building.

It meant exposure for our men, but they did not heed it, and in ten minutes the top of the building was crumbling about its occupants' ears, while a couple of cleverly sent shell completed their discomfiture, and they rapidly evacuated the place.

It was only a temporary success, but it relieved us for the time, and enabled us to direct our attention to other dangers.

The rest of that day is one horrible scene of confusion to me, as we worked on, burned by the sun, faint with the sickening smell of powder, and many falling beneath the rushing hail of bullets poured into the enclosure; but there was no sign of shrinking. The men had long before cast off their jackets, and worked on in shirt and trousers, always preserving their discipline, and trying their best to make their shot tell.

Twice over I saw a figure on horseback appear directing the men—a figure I could not mistake, and man after man tried to bring him down, but he seemed to bear a charmed life. He was most prominent at an attempt to storm the place when, mad with fury, a column rushed forward bearing ladders and poles under one arm, whilst they waved their gleaming swords with the other. But as soon as we were certain of their approach, our light guns were slewed round, and such a condensed hail of grape was sent into them that when close up they reeled, wavered, and retreated again.

Then, without cessation, the firing was resumed from every sheltered spot within range, and we waited for the night attack, one we were sure would come; and as we waited, the sun went down, the darkness began to approach rapidly, and there was not a man there, as he slowly ate his scraps of food, and drank the water brought round by the ladies, who did not feel that it would be our last night on earth.

I was leaning against the wheel of the nearest gun, eating mechanically, and thinking that my father would be too late, for in the distance I could see sepoys gathering and marching forward as if for another assault, when a lady approached me with a cup and a vessel of water.

"Will you drink, sir?" she said faintly.

"Grace!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, Gil, dear brother," she sobbed; "must we all be killed?"

"No," I cried passionately; "there are too many brave fellows here. And cheer up; father must be close at hand. There, give me some water. How is poor Captain Brace?"

"Don't ask me," she said, in a faint whisper. "I never thought to meet the brave friend you wrote of like this."

I had just drunk the water, and was handing back the cup, when Sergeant Craig, who was at the other gun, shouted—

"Look out! They're stealing up in the dark."

"Quick! Under cover!" I cried to Grace; and I ran her up to the shelter, and started back to the guns, which were already sending flash after flash into the growing darkness, but all in vain. Ny Deen had been preparing for an assault which he meant to be final and, heading his men himself, he brought them on in such force that I saw our case must be hopeless, and that in another minute they would be over the earthworks, cutting us down.

"Quicker, boys! Quicker!" I cried, as the men fired. "Now rammers and swords. They're on to us."

I felt a boy no longer, but as fierce a man as any there, for mother and sister were not twenty yards away, and I used the rajah's sword with all my strength, saving poor Sergeant Craig from instant death by a sharp thrust.

Then we were being borne back, and the sepoys and armed rabble were over the earthworks in several directions.

"All over! Keep together!" yelled Haynes.

"Old England for ever!" shouted Craig, still weak from his wounds, but fighting like the brave man he was, when *crash*! and then *crash*! and again *crash*! volley after volley, such as could only be fired by a well-drilled English regiment, not two hundred yards away; and, encouraged by the sounds, our little garrison sent up a tremendous cheer, and, instead of giving way, beat their enemies back, while volley after volley came again. Then there was the sound of a bugle, a rattling British cheer, and we knew that our friends were coming on at the double, with bayonets at the charge.

Taken in the rear, in spite of their numbers, this was too much for the mutineers, who turned and leaped back over the earthworks, seeking flight in a wild panic; while, a minute later, there was a glittering line of bayonets in the darkness, and our brave fellows came clambering over into the enclosure.

I saw them coming, but I was sick and fainting, held up by Craig and Denny, as a bronzed face was thrust close up to mine.

"Gil!—your mother—your sister?" cried my father wildly.

"Safe! safe!" I said faintly.

"Thank God we were in time!" cried my father. "But my boy—wounded?"

"I—don't know, father," I gasped, as everything seemed to turn round, and then something blacker than the night

came over me, and I knew no more for some time.

Chapter Fifty Three.

“His old wound, colonel. Broken out with the exertion, perhaps from a blow,” some one was saying when I opened my eyes, and saw the softly glittering stars over my head. Then all came back with a flash, and I tried to rise, but a hand was pressed on my chest.

“How’s Brace?” I said quickly.

“Bad; but I have hopes,” said Danby. “Lie still.”

“But, father,” I said excitedly; “you can hold the place now?”

“Oh yes; they’re in full retreat; the town will be empty by daybreak. Oh for light now, to let loose your troop, and the lancers after them.”

“Better let the poor lads rest,” grumbled Danby.

“Is Colonel Vincent there?” said a voice.

“Yes; what is it?” cried my father, striding in the direction of the voice.

“They found the rajah, sir, under quite a heap of slain.”

“Hah!” cried my father, and he hurried away.

It was true enough, as I soon heard. Ny Deen had fallen when trying to make his followers face my father’s charge, and somehow a feeling of bitterness and sorrow came over me, for, in my sight, he was a brave man, and I felt that he was justified in his struggle to cast off his allegiance to our race.

It was as my father had said: the next day the city was emptied of all but the peaceably disposed inhabitants, who made no secret of their delight at the scattering of Ny Deen’s forces. The best homes were taken possession of for our sick and wounded; food was plentiful, and those who had toiled like slaves in the enclosure had found servants enough willing to attend upon them.

For the remnants of the rajah’s forces had gone far away in utter disbandment now their chief was no more, seeking to fight under some other rebel leader, and the tide of war ebbed farther and farther from Nussoor, where the wounded and sick lay in peace and comfort, tended by loving hands.

My father insisted upon Brace being carried to the house we occupied, and my mother and Grace were unremitting in their attention during the next few weeks, in which I rapidly grew stronger, though Brace mended more slowly.

It was wonderful to me to see how rapidly Grace and my mother changed. The terribly anxious look died out of their faces, but in both there was a saddened aspect which grew stronger daily; and it was most marked when they talked of the perils of the past, and my mother offered up a prayer that those she loved might not be called upon again to face the perils of the fight.

Her prayer was heard, for the horrors of war swept farther and farther away. Others had the task of crushing it out, while we remained to garrison Nussoor; and the various civil officers toiled hard to restore order and remove the horrible traces of the war of desperate fights for life.

It was during these days, when I was busy with Haynes—Captain Haynes now—trying to work up the draft of new men—who had come to fill up the gaps made in our troop in action—to something like the form of our old, that we had a surprise in the coming of Major Lacey, still rather weak, but who had made a wonderful recovery. He was full of anecdotes of his narrow escapes during the time he was being nursed back to health by the two faithful dhoby women, and he gave us a terrible account of the surprise that day when Barton was slain—for he was killed—the major saw him fall. But the old officer never referred to the death of his wife, that was too sacred a subject, and we dared not ask.

It was about two months after that awful night, and the cool season had come. My mother had had a few friends to dinner, and I was out on the verandah with the doctor, as he smoked his cigar.

“Humph! so you want to get on active service again, eh?” he said, after a long chat. “Well, after what you went through, I think you might wait for a few years.”

“You misunderstand me,” I said. “I don’t want that kind of active service, but something more to do.”

“It’ll come,” he said; and then he laughed.

“What are you laughing at?” I said.

“At you.”

“Why?”

“At the idea of their promoting such a boy as you.”

“What? promoted?” I cried.

“Yes; but I oughtn’t to have let it out. It was told me as a secret.”

“Oh, I am glad,” I cried. “But I say, doctor, I can’t help being such a boy.”

“Don’t try, Gil,” he said; “you don’t grasp it, but to be a boy, sir, is the grandest thing in the world. Never be discontented because you have no moustache. It will come.”

“I am not discontented,” I said maliciously, “only because we have such a bad doctor in the troop.”

“Bad! Why, what do you mean?”

“My arm pained me horribly this morning, and poor old Dost nearly cried as he bathed it, I was in such agony.”

“Bah! stuff!”

“And, then, look at poor Brace,” I said. “You don’t cure him a bit.”

“Ha, ha! Ho, ho!” laughed the doctor. “I like that. Why, between you and me, Gil, old man,” he whispered, “Brace is a sham. He could be well enough, at least nearly, if he liked.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Go and tell him I say he’s to be promoted to major, and he’ll grow strong at once. No, he will not. Can’t you see what’s going on?” he added jocosely, as he took my arm, for of late the doctor and I had grown quite chums, and Brace had drifted away.

“No,” I said; “only that he keeps very low-spirited.”

“Not a bit of it, boy. You’re too young to understand these things. But poor Brace once lost his fair young wife.”

“Yes, I know that,” I said.

“Well, he is waiting till he is quite well again, and then he is going to ask a certain beautiful young lady, who is about as near an angel of mercy among wounded soldiers as a woman can be; and I ought to know.”

“Ask a certain beautiful young lady what?” I said.

“To shed light on his dark life, boy, and be his wife.”

“Why, you don’t mean to say that he loves our Grace?” I said.

“Look there, then.”

He pointed to the window through which, by the light of the shaded lamp, I could see that in both their eyes that made me exclaim—

“Oh, doctor, I am glad!”

And so was every one else, when it was fully known. Brace became, in fact, a true brother to me, and in later days, when I had long ceased to be the youngest subaltern in the horse artillery, we two saw some service, though none so full of danger and horrors as we passed through in the struggle wherein England nearly lost her proudest possessions in the East.

The End.

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