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RALPH DENHAM'S ADVENTURES IN BURMA

A groan burst from the white lips of the men as the seething ruin that had been their home for so many weeks disappeared slowly from view (*p. 43*).

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Ralph Denham's Adventures in Burma

A TALE OF THE BURMESE JUNGLE

BY

G. NORWAY

AUTHOR OF "TREGARTHEN," "A DANGEROUS CONSPIRATOR," "LOSS OF JOHN HUMBLE," ETC.

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RALPH DENHAM'S ADVENTURES IN BURMA

CHAPTER I
RALPH STARTS UPON HIS VOYAGE

Mrs. Denham sat in her parlour, a two years old baby boy asleep upon her lap, and an anxious, mournful expression upon her face. She wore the dress of a widow,—a dress so new in its folds that it was evidently but a short time since the Dread Messenger had paused at her threshold to bear away its master and bread-winner.

The room was a shabby one; the fire but a handful of dusty ashes; rain fell without in the dreary street; it was growing dusk, and a soul-depressing cry of "Want chee-e-ep? Do ye want chee-e-eps?" arose ever and anon, as the ragged Irish chip boy wandered up and down.

It was a street of cheap houses in the suburbs of Liverpool, where the misery of poor gentility is perhaps more without alloy than in any other town.

But the door burst open, and a bright-faced, rosy, blue-eyed boy entered, with the freshness of out-of-doors upon him.

"All alone, mother?" said he. "Where's Agnes? Where are the little ones? Why, what a scurvy fire you have! let me cheer it up a little."

He began piling lumps of coal upon the embers in a scientific manner, to which a blaze quickly responded; when he swept up the hearth, and uttered an exclamation of satisfaction as he bent to kiss his mother's face. [Pg 8]

"It requires a man to make up a fire," said he. "Where are all the others?"

"Agnes is giving the little ones their tea in the kitchen," replied Mrs. Denham. "I asked her to keep them out of the way for a while, because I want to talk to you, Ralph dear."

"All right, mother mine, fire away," said the boy, throwing himself down on the hearthrug, and resting one arm upon her knee.

"Ralph dear," resumed she, "your uncle Sam has come home; he has been here this afternoon."

"Uncle Sam? How jolly! When did the *Pelican* come in, mother? I did not know that she was even off Holyhead."

"The *Pelican* was docked last night, dear, upon the evening tide," said she; "and your uncle has been here a long time this afternoon."

"Was he not very sorry to hear about father?" asked Ralph in a low voice.

"Yes, dear; but he was prepared for the news by my last letter. He is a very kind brother; he has been giving my affairs his careful consideration all the way home, and has already offered some prospect of help; but this depends upon you, Ralph."

"Upon *me*, mother? I would be so proud to help. You may reckon upon me; but what can I do?"

"What it is a bitter pill for me to swallow, my boy, yet it would be such a help that I do not know how to refuse it."

"What is it, mother?"

"It is for you to go out to Burma, dear. When my last letter reached him, and he knew of your father's hopeless state of health, Uncle Sam secured for you the chance of a situation in a rice firm in Rangoon. He says that there would be a salary at once, upon which you could live with care, and which would soon improve into something much better, and into a position from which, in a few years, you might help one of your brothers. It is not in the house of Herford Brothers,—I wish it were,—but, as he sails for them, he will often see you, and bring us home news of you. It would not be as if you went to quite a strange place, where you would know nobody; and, Ralph, it would be an immense relief even to have your keep off my hands just at present. Dear Agnes maintains herself by her teaching; Lisa's scholarship provides for her education; and if you, my darling boy, were not here we might double up closer and spare another room for a second lodger, which would be a great help to me. But I do not know how to part with you, Ralph, my boy,—my dear, dear boy!" [Pg 9]

The poor lady bent her face down upon the curly, tousled head at her knee, and wept sorrowfully.

Ralph passed his arm round her neck in silence, for tumultuous emotion choked him, and he could not speak at first. There had been a time, not so long before, when he would have been wild with delight at the thought of leaving school, going abroad, seeing new countries, being independent. But recent events had sobered his spirits and made him more thoughtful.

He pondered the scheme now without excitement or selfish pleasure; he tried to think whether it would be well for his mother were he to leave her. It seemed to him that it would be so.

"Mother," said he, "it is not as if Agnes were not older than I. Agnes is seventeen, and a companion to you, while I am not old enough to take father's place with Jack and Reggie. They would not attend to me nor obey me." [Pg 10]

"No, dear."

"Then when father was dying he bade me do my best to help you, and I promised that I would. If this is the best for you, mother, I *must* do it."

There was a manly ring in his voice as he said this, echoing so plainly the sound of the voice that

was gone, that his mother almost felt as if it were her husband speaking to her in her son.

They sat silent for a long time, hand clasped in hand; then the sleeping child awoke, and recalled Mrs. Denham to her busy life.

"Uncle Sam is coming back to supper, and wants to talk to you about this," said she.

"I will go out for a walk, to think it all over, if you don't mind, mother; I will come in again by supper time," said the boy.

"Do, dear; it is not a plan that should be carried out in a hurry," said she. And Ralph took up his cap and went out.

He strolled aimlessly up one street, down another, his hands in his pockets and eyes fixed on the ground; then, with sudden determination, he changed his purposeless steps towards the town, and steadily pursued his road to meet his uncle.

So rapidly did he walk now, that he reached the lodging to which Captain Rogers always repaired when on shore just as he was emerging from the door.

"Halloa, my son!" called out the sailor in Cornish accents, "whither so fast?"

"I came to meet you, uncle. Mother has been telling me of your plan for me, and I wanted to talk to you about it while we could be alone."

"Ay, that's right. Men can settle things between themselves better than when there is a lot of soft-hearted women by, to cry over the Lord knows what. You are 'most a man now, Ralph. How you have grown since I've been away! How old are you now?" [Pg 11]

"Fifteen, uncle. Fifteen and a half."

"Too old to be lopping about at your mother's apron strings. Old enough to be of some use and good, are you not?"

"Is this plan of use, uncle? Do you really think it would be good for mother?"

"Well, sonnie, to speak the plain truth I don't see no other way in which you are half as likely to keep off her hands. They are full enough, Ralph, without a great hearty fellow like you to be eating her out of house and home."

"That is so, uncle."

"I think that the Herfords would give you a free voyage out. I believe that I could work it so that they would. If they will, you cost her nothing more from this time. Agnes is a sensible maid, she can look after your mother better than you can. I will pay her rent for her, and take Jack to sea with me as soon as he is old enough; and then with a lodger or two, and the bit of money that she has, she may do fairly well. Be a man, Ralph, and do your part."

"I will, uncle, God helping me."

"Well said. But now, look here, there must be no chopping and changing; no crying out that you are homesick, or don't like it, and want to come back again. If you make up your mind to go, there must be some expense incurred for your outfit; and I'll not help unless you give me your word of honour that this shall be *all* that you mean to cost us. If I launch you, you must sail away on your own account, and make the best of matters however they may turn out. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, uncle. Is it necessary to give my answer now, this evening, or may I sleep upon it?" [Pg 12]

"I don't mind your sleeping upon it, as you call it, but I must have your answer almost at once, because I must see Mr. Herford about your passage, and your kit must be got ready."

"I will tell you to-morrow, uncle."

"Mind you do. Mr. Herford goes from home at the end of the week, and I don't know how long he may be away. It would hurry everything up too closely to wait till he returns, when all the *Pelican's* cargo will be in course of loading, and everything else to settle."

Captain Rogers had intended to make the evening pleasant to his sister and her young folks, but fate was too strong for him on that occasion. Mrs. Denham's eyes were full of tears, and she kept silence as the only way to prevent their overflow. Agnes was little better, and the repressed agitation of their elders checked all the younger ones' chatter.

He went away early; but Ralph would not talk to any of them even when his uncle had left them. He went to his room, and spent the night in thinking, thinking, thinking; trying to make out what his father would have wished,—what was best for his mother,—where his strongest duty lay.

At last he took to prayer; and, for the first time in his young life, really sought help and counsel from his Father in heaven. Such seeking is never unanswered; he slept, woke up clear in his mind as to what he ought to do, and told his uncle that he would go.

"You decide rightly," said his uncle. "People cannot very often do just what they would like best. If I could, I would have got you a start in life nearer home, so that your mother might keep you to be a comfort to her; but she will not mind so much when you are once gone, and you will sooner be of real use to her and to your brothers in this way than in any other which any of us can command. But, remember, you must take life as it comes, and work hard for yourself once you are started." [Pg 13]

"I will, uncle, God helping me."

"Well said, my boy."

After that, all was hurry to prepare him for this important change in his life; his mother cried incessantly; his sister Agnes went about with red eyes, which could scarcely see the stitches that she set in his clothes; his uncle drove him about hither and thither; there was no time to think until the adieux were all made, and they had been towed out of dock.

The *Pelican of the North* was a barque-rigged, three-masted vessel, laden with coal for Moulmein; and the day was bright when she dropped down the river Mersey. The crew were in good spirits, for the weather, which had been extremely dull and wet for some weeks, cleared up suddenly on the day of sailing. The chilly wind had veered into a balmy quarter, the drenching rain ceased, the sun broke out, and all the little tossing waves seemed to be dancing with joy to see its beams sparkling upon their crests. Great masses of clouds were driving away, farther and farther, overhead, losing their heavy grey colour, and fast becoming soft and snowy white; while the flocks of seagulls, swooping about upon widespread pinions high in the air, might be imagined to be fleecy morsels detached from them on their course, so pure and silvery was their plumage.

Ralph stood by the capstan, looking back to the fort and lighthouse on the New Brighton Point with mixed feelings.

He had never been farther away from home than this before; he was now setting off for an unknown life in a new country, among strangers, to make his own way as best he could. [Pg 14]

He was pleased with his independence, with the thought that he was thus helping his mother; but he had not imagined how love for his home would tug at his heart-strings. It was not until he had felt his mother's farewell kiss, and heard her choked voice blessing him for the last time; it was not until his dearly-loved companion-sister Agnes had sobbed her good-bye on his shoulder; not till he had put the pretty baby back into his nurse's arms, and thought what a great boy he would be before he should, in all probability, see him again,—that he realised how far away he was going, and going alone.

But Ralph owned plenty of pluck; he meant to be brave, and to get on in his new career, so he gulped down these thoughts, and turned to brighter considerations.

His uncle had secured for him a free passage out to Rangoon by entering him as apprentice upon the ship's books.

This is an arrangement occasionally made, by favour, in merchant ships not registered for carrying passengers. The so-called apprentice would hold rather an anomalous position, being expected to do a little light work, particularly while in port, but messing with the captain at sea.

A hardy lad would have little of which to complain in the light of the great pecuniary advantage to himself, but it would depend largely upon his own tact, and also much upon the characters of the regular apprentices and the mates, as to whether he were, or were not, thoroughly comfortable upon a long voyage.

Captain Rogers had another passenger upon this occasion, a Mr. Gilchrist.

Mr. Augustus Herford, the head of the firm of Herford Brothers, to which the *Pelican of the North* belonged, was devoted to his garden; and orchids were his reigning hobby. The craze for these flowers was then in its infancy, many varieties being unknown at that time which have since become common. Burma was comparatively little explored, nor were its forests and jungles haunted by collectors as they have been of late years. [Pg 15]

Mr. Gilchrist was a self-made man, an enthusiast in his profession as gardener, but more capable than rich. He had educated himself, studied at Kew, mastered much of the science of horticulture,—but lacked capital, and wanted to marry. When, therefore, Mr. Augustus Herford offered him advantageous terms if he would go to Burma and collect orchids for him, he accepted the commission with eagerness, knowing well that, if he succeeded, his prosperity upon his return would be assured.

Mr. Herford was rich; he spared no expense over microscopes, books, collecting boxes, and all the properties for the expedition, and gave him a free passage out.

The *Pelican of the North* was bound for Moulmein with coal,—would then go to Rangoon in ballast, and return laden with rice. She was towed as far as to the floating lightship; there the steam-tug cast off, and the voyage was fairly begun.

By that time Mr. Gilchrist was down upon his marrow-bones, most horribly sick. He was a delicate man, and suffered terribly. Ralph was also ill, but his uncle encouraged him to struggle against the malady, and the other apprentices ridiculed him so unmercifully as a land-lubber, that he made every effort to keep up, and this with good effect, for he was soon upon his feet again, with a furious appetite even for salt junk and fat pork.

Then, in his good-nature, feeling heartily for a fellow-sufferer, he began to wait upon Mr. Gilchrist, nursing him and tending him well.

It would have been better for this gentleman had he possessed the same strong reasons for exertion as his young companion; he would perhaps have suffered less. As it was, he was ill for nearly a fortnight; and, the weather being uncertain, Captain Rogers and the mates were glad to be relieved from the necessity of attending upon him, having quite enough to do with sailing the ship. [Pg 16]

By degrees Mr. Gilchrist recovered; and, grateful for Ralph's care of him, he then lent him books,

talked to him about them, encouraging him to learn many things and improve himself.

Captain Rogers was pleased that his nephew should receive such notice from so clever a man. He had not much education himself outside of his own business, but was shrewd, and entertained a great respect for what he called "book learning."

"It is very kind of you, Gilchrist," said he one evening, sitting with his passenger over their coffee, —"It is very kind of you to indoctrinate that lad as you are doing. It has been hard upon him to be cast upon his beam ends so early in life. His father was a well-read man, and might have given him good schooling had he lived, but my poor sister could not afford it when she was left with so many of them."

"It is an amusement," replied Mr. Gilchrist. "It helps me to pass the time pleasantly, I assure you. I like the boy much, he is very intelligent."

"He is a good sort of fellow," said the captain. "I hope he will get on. But we must be careful not to set him up too much, so as to make the other apprentices jealous of him. I have my doubts of that Kirke. I hate your gentlemen apprentices; they are always more trouble than profit. That one is not worth his salt."

"Is he a gentleman's son, then?"

"Aye. His father is a friend of my boss; the lad is sent to sea because they can do nothing with him at home, but I wish they had put him in any other ship than this one." [Pg 17]

"Is it usual for a gentleman to send his son to sea in the merchant service?" asked Mr. Gilchrist.

"I wish it either were more usual or less," replied the captain. "I hate having them. It always means stupidity, idleness or scampishness; and, whichever it may be, they are no good. If a lad cannot keep his own natural position in life it does not prevent him from having big ideas of himself after coming down to another; and if he gets into ugly scrapes as a gentleman, he will get into uglier ones when the restraint upon him is less."

"You have much experience in boys and men, Rogers."

"Ah! I have—with a certain class of boys and men. Now and then one finds a lad who can work with his hands when he cannot with his head, and who tries to do his best; but good seamen need to use their brains as well as other folks if they are to get on. Such youngsters come to us too late. Their friends don't send them until they have tried everything else and failed. The hardships of our life fall five times as heavily upon them as upon a lad who belongs to a hardier class and has begun earlier. Kirke is not one of that sort; I misdoubt me but what there will be trouble with him before this voyage is over."

"Well, the weather seems to have taken up a better humour at last. We seem to have got out of that circle of squalls through which we have been making our way."

"Yes," said the captain. "We are coming in for a quieter season, if it only lasts. I wish the voyage was over, though. My wife took up a superstitious notion that we should have trouble over it. She had a dream or something which impressed her with that idea; and though I laughed at her, I cannot forget it altogether. Do you believe in warnings and presentiments?"

"I suppose there are few men who could say with truth that they disbelieve in them entirely, but I have seen so many come to nought that I do not entertain much faith in them." [Pg 18]

"Ah! well," said the captain, finishing his cup, and rising to leave the cabin, "I suppose I am an old fool to heed such things. I don't see where mischief is to crop up unless through that lad, and he may turn out better than I fear. Good-night, Mr. Gilchrist."

"Good-night."

CHAPTER II [Pg 19]

A GALE

It was of little use for Captain Rogers to trouble himself in the hope of avoiding jealousy of Ralph on the part of the other apprentices, for the feeling was already rife on the part of Kirke.

That ill-conditioned young man despised everyone on board for not being men of good family, as he himself was, though he was more conscious of his good birth than careful to prove himself a gentleman by his conduct. He could not see why he should be made to work, and the son of a merchant's book-keeper, a lad whose mother let lodgings for her support, should be cockered up in the captain's cabin, reading and writing at his ease, practically exempt from hard toil.

Ralph had not enjoyed a tenth part of the educational advantages which Kirke had thrown away, and was anxious to improve himself now that a chance of doing so was presented.

Mr. Gilchrist was teaching him mathematics and French, lending him books upon botany and natural history, especially such as treated of the country for which he was bound, and also a few volumes of history and travels. He taught him much by conversation upon these subjects; and Ralph, feeling that he had one foot planted upon the social ladder, earnestly desiring to rise higher, flung himself enthusiastically into these studies as a means for so doing. His uncle did not [Pg 20]

demand much manual labour from him; he performed that cheerfully, but saw no reason why, his allotted task being done, he should occupy his own time in saving Kirke from doing his share of duty.

There was no great good-feeling between these lads; and Harry Jackson, the third apprentice, was a weak, ordinary sort of boy, who admired Kirke for his adventitious graces, and had become completely his tool.

The three boys all slept in part of a deckhouse amidships, a place divided between the galley and the apprentices' cabin. The ship being an old one, there were no berths for the youngsters, who slept in hammocks slung up at night, and taken down in the morning, rolled up, and stowed away to make room for their meals and accommodation through the day.

Ralph breakfasted with the other two apprentices, their hours being earlier than those of his uncle's cabin. After this meal, he did what work was expected from him, and liked to be clean and ready by the time when Mr. Gilchrist could attend to him in the poop, where chiefly he spent the remainder of the day.

One morning Ralph awoke suddenly, experiencing a very disagreeable shock. The time-honoured joke of letting his hammock down at the head had been played upon him, and Kirke lay comfortably on his own bed squirting water all over him.

"Have done, Kirke!" he cried angrily. "How would you like to be served so?"

"Try it on if you dare," retorted Kirke, aiming a stream of water right into his face. "I only wish you would try it on, just once, and you would see. Get up! You must swab the decks to-day, I did it yesterday."

"Drop that squirt, I tell you!" roared Ralph, as his shirt was made dripping wet, and a fresh supply of water was drawn into the tube from the basin which Kirke held between his knees. [Pg 21]

Kirke's only reply was another jet, which streamed down Ralph's back.

Ralph sprang upon his tormentor, and a struggle took place for possession of the squirt. The tin basin was upset all over the bedclothes, but Denham flung it away and seized hold of the squirt.

Indignation gave him superior strength, he wrenched the instrument out of Kirke's hands, and Kirke drove his clenched fist, straight from his shoulder, into Ralph's face and hit him in the eye.

Fireworks flashed before his vision, and he proceeded to revenge himself in a fair fight; but Jackson ran screaming out of the cabin upon seeing Ralph pitch Kirke out of his hammock as a preliminary, and called to the mate on the watch.

"Mr. Denham is fighting Mr. Kirke," cried he, "and has upset a basin of water all over him in his hammock."

The mate came in.

"Now, my lads," commanded he, "just you understand that I'll allow no rowdy work of that sort. Shut up at once, both of you."

It was the voice of authority, and Ralph scorned to tell tales, so he desisted, pulled a dry shirt out of his chest, and went on deck as soon as he could.

Being a good-natured lad, his anger had then cooled down, and he began to swab the deck, thinking that it would act as a peace-offering to give Kirke the help voluntarily.

Kirke came out slowly and moodily, but did not begin to work on his part. He stood with his hands in his pockets, a sneer conquering the lowering gloom on his face.

"I am glad you know your place at last," said he, as Ralph came near him. "I'll teach you a little more before I have done with you." [Pg 22]

Ralph bit his lip to force down an angry reply. He did not want to quarrel with anyone, as that might give his uncle trouble, but it was as much as he could do to keep silence.

At this moment the captain himself stepped out.

"Ralph!" shouted he. "Have you seen my three-foot rule? I can't find it."

"I know where it is," replied he. "I'll fetch it."

"What are you swabbing the deck for?" asked his uncle. "Why are you not doing your own work, Kirke? I'll have no shirking. Set to at once! Ralph, I want you in my cabin."

Kirke had no option but to take up the bucket and begin the menial work which he hated so fiercely.

"Mr. Gilchrist is not well," said the captain. "I hope he is not in for an attack of dysentery, but he is certainly very poorly. I have persuaded him to lie still, and I wish you would put yourself tidy and come and attend to him. Go to the storehouse and get out some brandy for him. Here are the keys. I am wanted on deck to see about twenty things all at once."

Ralph hastened to obey. The ship was victualled upon teetotal principles, but a little spirit was kept for cases of emergency or illness. None had been used hitherto upon this voyage, and the decanters were empty.

Ralph opened the locker where the bottles were stored, took out some brandy, filled one of the little decanters which stood in a silver case, and hurried with it to the invalid's cabin, leaving everything open in the storeroom, for the moment, from his haste to relieve his friend.

Mr. Gilchrist was very unwell indeed. He said that he was subject to these attacks at times; he did not believe that this was dysentery, he had taken a chill and should be better soon. [Pg 23]

Ralph procured some hot water and prepared the cordial for him, but he was sick at once after taking it; he shivered violently, his teeth chattering in his head. This frightened his young nurse very much, for they were now in latitudes where the heat was great; no doctor was on board, and he knew little about illness.

However, the patient was better after a time, the sickness ceased, the headache was lessened, a gentle perspiration broke out, and he fell asleep.

Ralph ventured to steal softly away, and went to lock up the spirit bottles in the storeroom. There he found, to his surprise, that not only the one which he had opened was quite empty, but one of brandy and one of rum were missing.

He called his uncle, who, holding strong opinions upon the subject of temperance, was very angry. He made a strict investigation into the matter, but failed to discover the culprit. The bottles were gone—vanished; nobody would confess to knowing anything about them.

Captain Rogers was very uneasy in his secret mind, for appearances were against Ralph. No one else had been trusted with the keys, and the spirit could not have gone without hands. He knew very little personally about his nephew, being so much at sea himself. He only saw him at long intervals, and in the presence of others; he seemed a steady boy then, and Rogers liked him, but this was the first chance he had met with upon which he could have gone wrong, in this manner, to his uncle's knowledge. With this doubt about him, the captain spoke very sharply to Ralph as to his carelessness in leaving the locker open.

Mr. Gilchrist took Ralph's part. He said that he must have smelt the liquor upon the boy's breath had he drunk it, but the captain knew that about Ralph's family history which he did not choose to talk about. [Pg 24]

Ralph called himself a strict teetotaler, which the captain was not; but the elder Denham had been a drunkard, and had died from the consequence of his excesses. Had the madness broken out in his son? Did he inherit it in his blood? Had it taken that worst of all forms—secret drinking? He knew what his sister had suffered from her husband's conduct; was the same thing to begin all over again in the person of her son?

For two days the captain was miserable from this unspoken fear. Ralph had all the appearance of truth and honesty; Mr. Gilchrist was strongly in favour of his innocence; but the mate remarked that nobody but Mr. Denham had been trusted with the keys of the locker, not even the cook or the cook's mate, who, between them, discharged the functions of steward.

For two wretched, suspicious, anxious days did this doubt cark at the captain's heart. Then was little Harry Jackson found drunk—drunk as a lord—late one evening when off his watch.

Fresh investigations were set on foot, and it appeared that Kirke had given the boy some liquor as a bribe for silence regarding his own potations, of which Jackson could not fail to know as they shared the same cabin. Denham had not slept there since Mr. Gilchrist's illness, for he was still unwell, though better; and Ralph had begged to be allowed a bed upon the floor of his cabin, so as to attend upon him if necessary through the night.

Taking advantage of his absence, Kirke had been enjoying himself, after his own fashion, with the stolen spirits, and inducing Harry to join him so as to ensure his silence.

The elder lad's head could already stand copious libations, but that of the younger one could not, and the very means adopted to secure safety led to detection. [Pg 25]

The captain, deeply annoyed with himself for suspecting his own nephew, highly wrathful for the trouble thus caused to him, punished Kirke all the more severely, to give him, as he said, "a lesson which he would not forget in a hurry." Ralph tried to beg him off, but his uncle was in a rage and refused to listen to him.

Kirke might have had all the blood of all the Howards running in his veins so great was his anger at his punishment, and he vowed to himself to abscond from the ship as soon as it touched shore, nor ever to run the risk of such ignominy again.

Things were very uncomfortable after this event for Denham. His annoyance while it was pending had been great, it had made him positively unhappy. He felt himself to blame for carelessness in leaving the locker open; he was indignant that the real culprit should cast the onus upon him, knowing him to be perfectly innocent; and he thought that his uncle should have trusted him better. At least he should have spared his own nephew from the charge of dishonesty.

He could not be as friendly as before with either Kirke or Jackson, and felt very lonely.

Mr. Gilchrist continued to be very unwell, unable to talk to him as usual. He had to pursue his studies without help; difficulties beset him; and the other apprentices made themselves extremely disagreeable, keeping up a constant system of petty persecution which rendered life in their cabin almost unendurable, yet of which he scorned to complain to the captain, each separate annoyance being so trivial.

Besides this, the wind increased in strength, and so severe a gale from the westward set in that the *Pelican* had to scud before it under bare poles. [Pg 26]

For two days there was cause for considerable anxiety, then the mercury rose, a calm clear night succeeded, followed by a bright sunny morning.

"I hope the gale is over," said Ralph, coming into the deckhouse and greeting the other lads cheerfully.

"I daresay you do," growled Kirke. "Counter-jumpers and land-lubbers funk a capful of wind mightily."

"I think we have had rather more than a capful these last two days," replied Ralph, ignoring the insulting language.

"You manage to shirk all the trouble it causes, anyway. I don't see that you need complain," said Kirke with a sneer.

Ralph was silent. He finished his breakfast quickly and went out.

The men were letting all the reefs out of the topsails, and getting the top-gallant yards across, in hopes of a fine day in which to make the most of the favourable gale.

It was a bright, bustling scene, and Ralph was amused by looking on.

The old carpenter stood by him. This man and the sailmaker both came from the same country village in Cornwall where Captain Rogers and Ralph's mother had been born. They always sailed with the captain, if possible, from clannish attachment to him; and loved a chat with Ralph from the same feeling.

"Nice day, Wills," said the boy.

"'Ees, zur, but it won't last," said the carpenter.

> "'Lamb's wool skies, and filley's tails,
> Make lofty ships carry low sails,'"

and he pointed to the drifting clouds.

"That is it, is it?" said Ralph. "Are we not having rather a bad voyage, Wills? Do ships always have so much bad weather as we are meeting with?" [Pg 27]

"No, zur, but uz sailed on a Vriday."

"What could that have to do with it, Wills? Why should that bring bad luck?"

"Can't zay, zur, but it du."

"You Cornishmen are always superstitious, aren't you?"

"Doan't knaw, your honour, as we'm more so than others. 'Tis no use to fly in the face of Providence ef He've given we the gumption to zee more'n other volks."

"Did you ever see the Flying Dutchman in these latitudes, Wills?"

"No, zur, I can't zay as I have zeed 'un, but 'tain't given to every chield to do so. I've zeed Jack Harry's Lights, though, and we wor wrecked then, too."

"Where was that?" asked Ralph with interest.

"Close to home, it wor. We heerd the bells of the old church-tower a-calling the volks to evening service all the time we was clinging to the maintop, and the gear flying in ribbons about our faces, a-lashing uz like whips, and all of uz as worn't fast tied to the mast swept away by the sea that awful Sunday night. Jim Pascoe wor lashed aside of me, and 'Sam,' zays he, 'I wonder whether my old mawther be a-praying for me at this minute, up to church.' It didn't save he even ef she wor, for a big sea rose up, and came thundering down on uz, and he got the full heft of it right upon him, so that it beat the last spunk of life out of him then and there. There wor but six of uz, out of twenty-one, brought ashore that time alive; and there wor but life, and that wor all, among some of we."

"How dreadful!" cried Ralph. "What did you think about while you stood there all that time?"

"I doan't knaw as I did think much, at all. Zemmed as ef all thought wor beat out of uz. But they there seamen as wor drownded then answer to their names still on a stormy night when the wind blows strong from the west upon thiccee rocks." [Pg 28]

"Answer to their names?"

"Ay. You may hear the roll called out, and they men answer 'Here' as plain as you can wish, at midnight, in the heft of a storm."

"Do you really believe that? Did you ever hear it, Wills?"

"Well I can't zay as ever I actually heerd 'un call them, but I knaws they as has; and why for no', Maister Ralph. Perhaps 'ee'll believe I, and find that I speak truth, when I tell 'ee this voyage is doomed to be unfortunate because we set sail on a Vriday. I telled captain it would be, but he wouldn't wait for Sunday though I did beg and pray 'un to do so."

"I can't see what difference two days could make. It would not have saved us the weather we had two days since, nor will it make any difference in whatever may come two days hence."

"Theer's a-many things as 'ee be too young to onnerstand yet, Maister Denham."

"But 'ee did ought to pay heed to 'un, maister," put in Osborn, "because 'ee be Cornish the same as we."

"I have never been in Cornwall, though, Osborn."

"No, I du knaw thiccee, more's the pity," replied the man. "But uz du mind your ma, when hur wor a mighty pretty little maid, a-dancing and a-singing about 'long shore, and a-chattering so gay. Uz du all come from the same place, zur, and we'm proud to knaw 'ee, and to have 'ee on board, ef it be but for the trip. 'Tis one and all to home, 'ee knaweth, zur."

"Yes," laughed Ralph. "I am proud enough of my Cornish blood, and would like to know more of [Pg 29] the good old county, though I fear it will be long before I shall have the chance. You know I am going to Rangoon, to push my way and try to help my mother. She does not dance nor sing much in these days. She has a lot of trouble."

"So we've heerd, zur. Poor little Miss Amy, we be main sorry to think of it. Ef Wills or me can ever be of any service to 'ee, zur, 'ee must look out for uz when the *Pelican* comes to Rangoon. We shall always stick to cap'n, zur, as we've done for many a day. Uz b'ain't likely to leave 'un to be sarved by any old trade picked up out of the slums."

"That is well; and if I can help either of you at any time, you may depend upon me. It is a bargain between us," said Ralph, laughing.

The appearance of fine weather was delusive, for the bright sunshine changed within a few hours to fog and rain. The wind sprang up again, and the captain was forced to order the mainsail to be hauled in, the topsails close reefed, and the top-gallant yards struck.

The mercury fell, the gale increased in force, and the sea ran extremely high. There was a sharp frost in the night, with snow, and the storm was as furious as ever next morning.

The hatches had to be battened down, and it was dreadful for Mr. Gilchrist and Ralph, wholly inexperienced in nautical matters, unable to see or understand what was going on, or what degree of danger there was, to hear the raging of the elements, while they were in the dark with nothing to distract their thoughts.

There they were, Mr. Gilchrist in his berth, coughing incessantly, and Ralph sitting beside him, listening to the tramp of hurried feet and the shouting voices overhead. The great sea would [Pg 30] strike the poor labouring vessel with a force that caused it to shudder in every straining timber; it would seem to be tossed on high, and then plunge into fathomless deeps, as if sinking to the very bottom of the sea. Tons of water came, ever and anon, rushing overhead. Did this mean that their last hour had arrived? Were they to be drowned in this awful darkness, like rats in a hole? Were they never to see God's light of day again, or look once more over the fair expanse of sea and sky?

They grasped each other's hands at these times, for touch was the only comfort which companionship could give. They could not talk,—awe paralysed speech.

Then the volumes of water seemed to drain off in descending streams through the scupper-holes, and voices would be heard again, and a few sentences of prayer would break from Mr. Gilchrist's lips.

This lasted for two days, awful days for these poor prisoners; but the wind was in their favour, and blew them on their way, though a little too far southwards, and it moderated in course of time.

The captain had the dead-lights removed, the hatches raised, and came down to see how his passengers had fared.

"I never could have believed that light and air would be so welcome," said Ralph; "and it is but a Scotch mist yet, no pleasant sunshine."

"No," replied the captain, "but you will soon have enough of sunshine now. Perhaps you may even have too much of it one of these days. We have lost poor little Jackson," continued he, turning to Mr. Gilchrist.

"What! the boy apprentice?" asked he.

"Ay, poor child! Washed overboard in the night, and one of the seamen yesterday morning. We could not help either of them, the sea was running so high. Would you like to come up for a bit [Pg 31] and see the waves for yourself now?"

But Mr. Gilchrist declined. He dreaded bringing on one of his paroxysms of cough more than the closeness and confinement of the cabin; but Ralph, shocked by his uncle's announcement, was eager to go on deck.

He was not used to death, and it was very awful to him to think that, while he sat in comparative safety below, yet fearing for his own death every moment, this boy, so much younger than himself, had passed suddenly through a watery grave to the portals of that unknown world where he must meet his God.

Where was he now? What could he be doing? He seemed as unfit for a spiritual life as anyone whom Ralph had ever met. A mere troublesome naughty boy, of the most ordinary type; rough, dirty, hungry,—a boy who could laugh at a coarse joke, use bad words, shirk his work whenever he had the chance, and who did nothing except idle play in his leisure time.

What could he be doing among white-robed angels, among the spirits of good men made perfect, among cherubim and seraphim, with their pure eyes, around the Father's throne? Yet had God taken him.

The mysteries of life and death came home, in a vivid light, to Ralph's soul, as he stood holding on to a rope, and gazing down on that boiling sea, whence he dreaded, every moment, to see his

young companion's white face looking up at him.

Kirke came by, and Denham's good heart prompted him to turn round and offer him his hand. Little Jackson had run after Kirke like a dog, admired, followed, idolised him, and Ralph thought he must be as much impressed as himself by this awful event.

So he put out his hand, saying— [Pg 32]

"Oh, Kirke, I am so sorry to hear about Jackson!"

"Bother you and your sorrow! I wish it had been you," replied Kirke rudely.

Ralph turned away in silence. He, too, almost wished it had been himself, not that he felt more fit to go, but that the heartlessness of this fellow struck a chill to his heart.

But Kirke was not so heedless of the event as he tried to seem, nor so wholly ungrateful for Ralph's sympathy as he chose to appear. This was the first blow which had struck home to him, and in his pride and sullen humour he was trying to resist its softening influence. Not for the world would he have displayed any better feeling at that time, though it was not altogether absent from his heart.

CHAPTER III [Pg 33]

FIRE AT SEA

After this painful episode was over, amidst a succession of calms, varied by light south-west breezes, changing gradually more and more to the east, the *Pelican of the North* crossed the line, and proceeded upon her way in pleasant weather.

Ralph would have enjoyed this time much but for the pest of cockroaches which now swarmed over them and their belongings. These disgusting insects were of two sorts, one of which had always been troublesome from the first, but were now supplemented by a second, not seen much except by night, but which crawled about then in such immense numbers, through the hours of darkness, as to do great damage. They ran over the cabin floors, up the walls, were shaken out in showers from the rigging when a sail was unfurled; they honeycombed the biscuit, they were found in the boots and shoes, and made life a burden to young Denham, who entertained a particular aversion to creeping insects.

"How I wish we could find anything which would rid us of these beastly things?" sighed he one day to Mr. Gilchrist, when the vermin had been seized with a literary fureur, and eaten out the ink from some notes which he had been at considerable pains to compile from a book of natural history. "Last night I thought we must have some spiritualist on board, or ghosts, or something [Pg 34] uncanny. I was wakened up by the noise as if everything in the cabin had taken to dancing about in a frolic, till I discovered it was nothing but thousands of these horrid creatures crawling and rustling about. Some nights I verily believe that they will eat us up bodily."

Mr. Gilchrist laughed.

"Never mind," said he, "we shall be in cooler latitudes soon, and they will become more torpid, and go back to their holes again. We are nearing the Cape."

"Shall we touch at the Cape? Shall we see the Table Mountain, sir, do you think?"

"I rather fancy not. From what the captain said the other day, I believe that there are currents there which are apt to be trying to a heavily-laden ship such as ours. Squalls are very prevalent in rounding the Cape, and I think he will give it a wide berth. We do not need water, nor have we any particular reason for delaying the voyage by putting in at Cape Town."

"We must be near land, I should think, for there are so many birds about now. Some of them are birds that I never saw before."

"Albatrosses to wit? You do not want to shoot one, do you, and share the fate of the Ancient Mariner?"

"No, not quite that, though if everyone who had done so were to be exposed to a similar fate there would be a good many phantom ships careering about the high-seas. Lots of the ships that come into Liverpool have their skins, or their bills, or something on board. I have an albatross' bill at home that a sailor gave me. I have a lot of things fastened up about the walls of my room. It is easy to get foreign curiosities in Liverpool, but I left all mine as a legacy to my sister Agnes, and promised to look out for more when I got to Rangoon, and met with any chance of sending [Pg 35] them home to her."

"It will be a good plan. If you have any ready in time I will take them back for you, and call to see your mother to tell her how you are getting on, what sort of lodgings you have, and all about you."

"That will be very kind, sir. In that case I will try to shoot one of those birds, for they are quite new to me. They are of a blue colour in part, with a black streak across the top of the wings."

"Those are blue petrels, I believe; birds which are only found in southern seas. We will try to preserve the skins of one or two with carbolic powder, though I fear that your friends the

cockroaches will get at them."

"Ugh! Don't call them my friends! You should have seen the third mate, Mr. Kershaw, teasing the cook yesterday. Cook came up in the evening for a breath of air, and was leaning over the side looking down at the 'sea on fire' as they call it—it was splendid late last night. Mr. Kershaw came up to him and looked at him very earnestly, first on one side and then on the other, as if he saw something queer about him. Cook began to squirm about uncomfortably.

"'What is it, Mr. Kershaw?' asked he. 'Is there anything wrong about me?'

"'Oh no, my good fellow, no,' said the mate. 'It only struck me that cockroaches are a peculiar kind of pets, but it is every man's own business if he chooses to let them sleep in the folds of his shirt. Do you always keep them there?'

"'Where, where?' called out the cook, all in a hurry. 'Cockroaches on my shirt? Where?'

"He was trying to see over his shoulder in an impossible kind of way; he put his hands up to his neck and down to his waist at the back; he shuddered, and shook himself, but could not find [Pg 36] them; and it was not likely that he could, for there were none there to be found.

"Mr. Kershaw was pretending to help him, poking at him up and down his back.

"'Oh, I thought I had them then!—there, under your arm,—no, down your leg. Dear me! how very active they are. What remarkably fine specimens! They seem to be quite tame; how much you must know about them to live with them like this, quite in the style of a happy family. They really seem to love you. I should not like to keep them about myself though, in this manner. Do you *always* have them upon your own person, my friend?'

"At last the cook twigged the joke, for we were all laughing so, but he was quite cross about it, and flung away muttering something about fools, and wishing to knock Mr. Kershaw's head off for him."

Ralph could not help laughing again at the remembrance of the scene, and Mr. Gilchrist joined in his merriment.

But soon there was no more time for jokes or laughter, stern reality claimed all their attention.

Mr. Gilchrist was sitting one day upon a lounging-chair, beneath the shade of an awning, when the captain approached him with anxiety plainly imprinted on his face.

"How now, Rogers?" said he; "your face is as long as from here to there!"

"And with good reason too," replied the captain; "I fear that a terrible calamity has come upon us."

"Why, my good fellow, what can be going to happen now?" cried Gilchrist, alarmed in his turn.

"Fire," said Rogers laconically, but with grave emphasis.

"Fire!" exclaimed both Gilchrist and Ralph at the same instant, staring around them in perplexity upon the placid sea, the sunny sky, the swelling sails, the pennon idly fluttering on the breeze. [Pg 37] "Fire! Where? How?"

For all answer the captain pointed to a few slender spiral coils of smoke, issuing from the seams of the deck where the caulking had worn away.

Mr. Gilchrist looked aghast.

"Do you mean the cargo?" he asked fearfully.

"Even so," said the captain. "It may be only heating from water reaching it during the storm. We are going to open the hatches and see if we can put it out, but I fear that the mischief was done when we loaded the coal. It was such wet weather while we were taking it on board. Gilchrist," said he, lowering his voice, "if there is anything particularly valuable among your things, put it up in small compass, and be ready for the worst in case we have to take to the boats."

"Do you anticipate such a thing?"

"It is always well to be prepared."

Mr. Gilchrist had many things—books, maps, scientific instruments, collecting cases, a costly binocular microscope with all its appliances, and other articles, nothing having been spared for his equipment; but in the shock of this surprise he forgot them all, and, springing from his chair, hurried to the scene of action.

The whole crew gathered hastily around to know the worst, and gazed with blanched faces at each other as the hatches were carefully raised.

A universal cry of horror escaped them, when such a cloud of steam and smoke, with so sulphureous a stench, rushed out, upon vent being given to the hold, that they were driven back gasping for air.

"Good Heavens!" cried Mr. Gilchrist, "there are two thousand tons of coal down there! The Lord have mercy upon us!"

"How far are we from land?" asked Ralph. [Pg 38]

"I do not know. I suppose that it depends greatly on the wind for calculating the length of time it will take us to reach it. I believe the captain hoped to make Moulmein in about a week or ten days more."

"Where is that hose?" thundered the captain. "Bring it here at once. Douche the hold well. Mellish, we must try to jettison the cargo, and make room for water enough to reach down the hold."

"Right you are, sir!" cried the first mate. "Who volunteers?"

The hardiest men among the crew pressed forward. Two parties were quickly told off, one to relieve the other. The men flew to the pumps and hose; all was excitement and hurry—not a soul of them flinched.

"Here, give me hold of a bucket," cried Mr. Gilchrist, taking his place in a line of men hauling up sea-water to supplement the volumes from the hose.

Ralph rushed to assist at the pumps. Streams of water poured down the hold; volumes of steam arose, hissing, through the hatchways. It was long before the bravest of the men could descend, no one could have breathed in such an atmosphere; and when two leapt into the chasm at last, they had immediately to be drawn up again, fainting, scorched, choked with the sulphureous fumes.

They were laid on the deck, buckets of water dashed upon them, and they came, gasping, to themselves.

"'Tis of no use, mates," said they. "The mouth of hell itself could be no fiercer."

It was indeed like looking down the crater of a volcano to glance into that awful depth—the fire had got complete hold of the coal.

"We must take to the boats, sir," said Mellish.

"Not yet," replied the captain. "We have no security yet from that cyclone,—did boats fall into its [Pg 39] clutches, there is no chance for them. We may skirt it in the barque by God's providence; it blows from the west'ard quarter, and its tail may help us towards the mainland quicker than boats would take us. Batten down the hatches, but leave the hose room for entrance, and keep up the water as much as we can. Provision the boats, and have everything ready to man them quickly when all hope is over; but we stick to the old girl to the last gasp."

There were two large boats, both capable of holding ten or twelve men; two smaller ones, which could accommodate six or eight each; and the captain's gig, usually manned by a similar number.

It would require the whole five to receive all the crew, for it consisted of twenty seamen, an apprentice, Ralph, a cook, sailmaker, carpenter, boatswain, three mates and the captain,—thirty souls besides Mr. Gilchrist. Even with all the five boats there would be but little space to save much of their possessions, but there was the less demand for this as the men, taking fright at the state of the cargo, refused to go below even for their own kits. Indeed, the stench of sulphur, and rapid spread of the smother, justified them in their fears.

The cook's galley and the storehouses were on deck, the latter in the poop, close by the captain's cabin, and the former amidships; it was therefore easy to store the boats with a sufficiency of provision and water, and Captain Rogers proceeded to tell off the men for each.

He himself must be the last to leave the ship; and equally, of course, must Mr. Gilchrist be considered among the first. He must go in the first boat, commanded by Mellish; eight seamen, Kirke, and the carpenter would form its complement. But Mr. Gilchrist refused.

"No," said he. "I am an interloper here, it is right that I should come last, and leave these poor [Pg 40] fellows to have first chance of their lives. Put a married man in my place, there is no one dependent upon me at home."

"Nay," said Captain Rogers, "you are my charge, I must see you safe first."

"My good fellow," replied Mr. Gilchrist with determination, "do not waste time in arguing; I go with you."

"And I too, uncle," said Ralph. "Do not ask me to part from you."

"For you, boy," replied the captain, "right and good, you are as my own, and ought to take risks with me; but for you, Gilchrist, think better of it."

"Now, Rogers," said Mr. Gilchrist, "why waste time? Don't you know when a man has made up his mind?"

There was indeed a general perception that time was short, the men worked with all their might, and the boats were stored rapidly. The three mates and the boatswain were each to command one; the coxswains were selected from the best of the seamen, and every man was given his place, to which he was at once to repair upon a given signal.

Was it wise to wait longer before embarking in them? A dead calm had fallen, an ominous stillness pervaded the atmosphere, no breeze, not the faintest sigh, was there to swell the sails, and a brassy sky in the west received the sinking sun.

And the little coils of smoke grew larger, they writhed up from crack and cranny like snakes, and span and twisted, puffed and swelled, with horrible sportiveness.

The men worked in silence, casting fearful glances on this side and that, as they trod those decks which formed so slight a protection for them from the fiery chasm beneath. They gathered in groups as the night fell with the rapidity of those latitudes, but they did not talk.

In the quiet they could hear little slippings of the coal, little reports now and then, and they [Pg 41]

fancied that a sullen roar might be distinguished, now gathering volume, then dying away.

The night was very dark,—was it the looming storm or the furnace beneath them which made the air so oppressive and close? Nothing could be done without light, and the suspense was horrible. Every now and then the captain, holding a lantern low, swept the decks, examining to see whether the smoke had increased or lessened. There appeared to be but little difference, but such change as there was lay in the direction of increase.

Thicker and thicker grew the gloom, blacker and blacker the night, heavier and heavier the sultry air. Then a faint moaning was heard among the shrouds, a hissing on the surface of the water, and the cyclone broke upon them with a cry as of demons rejoicing over their prey.

The vessel gave a shudder like a living creature, then bounded forwards, heeling over from force of the wind in the most perilous manner; every cord straining, every sail swollen to its utmost tension.

It was but the edge of the cyclone, but even that gave them enough to do. The sea boiled around them; great waves tossed the devoted ship on their crests, and buried it in their trough, driving it onward with fury all but unmanageable.

Then rose up a wall of water above their heads, it dashed down upon the decks, and rushed out from the scuppers in foaming streams; and in the next instant the mainsail was torn from its holdings, the mast gave way with an awful rending and crash, and beat about to this side and that, to the peril of all around.

"The boats! the boats!" shrieked the men.

"Take to the boats!" shouted Rogers.

They sprang to the davits to loosen the boats, and the howling wind took the gear in its teeth and wrenched its supports from their hold, whirling the two first boats away as if they had been feathers. [Pg 42]

Floods of water poured over the decks, making their way plentifully down into the hold through a thousand clefts opened by the straining timbers, and the steam rose in thicker and hotter clouds as they washed away.

Then a lull came,—were they out of the line of the cyclone?

"Cut the ropes of the starboard boats," cried the captain. "We can hold out no longer. 'Tis life or death."

Again was the effort made,—again did failure greet the devoted men; the smaller boat was swamped at once. Better fortune served them over the others; the large one and the captain's gig were lowered safely, and the men crowded into them with headlong speed, many throwing themselves into the seething water in their haste, some to be hauled on board by their comrades, and more than one to be swept out of sight for ever.

Hardly could the united efforts of the captain, mates, and Mr. Gilchrist control the panic: they stood, silent and firm, with set teeth and blanched faces, as the seamen crushed past them and dropped over the side, only endeavouring to withhold them so as to give each his fair chance of escape. Minutes were like hours; the crowd lessened,—cries and shouts for haste rose up from the thronged boats. Captain Rogers turned, caught Ralph by the arm and swung him over the side; Mr. Gilchrist slipped down a rope and was hauled in; Mellish leapt; the captain stood alone, the last of all.

He looked hurriedly around—all were gone, his duty done, and he too threw himself into the gig.

So hampered were the rowers by the mass of living creatures crushed into so small a space, that they could hardly manage their oars; the boats were weighted down to the water's edge, and had not the storm spent its fury in that last awful burst, all hope of living in such a sea would have been futile. [Pg 43]

But the hand of Providence was over them; they shook down into something like order, and rowed away from the doomed ship with all the expedition they could raise; and not one moment too soon; for, hardly were they at a safe distance, when, with an awful roar,—a splitting and crashing of timbers,—an explosion like the crack of doom itself,—the deck was forced upwards, its planks tossed high in air, as if they were chips, by the pillar of white steam that rose exultingly into the sky; great tongues of flame shot rapidly up through it, crimson and orange among rolling volumes of smoke; and the rising sun paled before the glowing fiery mass that reddened the waters far and wide ere it sank into their bosom, leaving its débris of burnt and blackened wastry floating idly on its surface.

A groan burst from the white lips of the men as the seething ruin that had been their home for so many weeks disappeared slowly from their gaze.

CHAPTER IV [Pg 44]

THE RAFT

What were the occupants of the boats to do? What would become of them? Twenty-six men in

boats only meant to accommodate eighteen at most, and these with but little food or water, no change of clothes, few comforts of any kind, an insufficiency even of necessaries,—and they were within the tropics.

The sun rose up in fierce majesty, and blazed down upon them like fire itself. Some had no hats, and suffered terribly from this cause. The sea was like molten metal heaving close around them; the crowd impeded all proper use of the oars or sailing gear. Of this last the captain's gig had none.

The men looked at each other with haggard eyes, despair in their faces. It would require but a slight touch to make them abandon themselves to hopelessness, losing heart altogether, and becoming demoralised.

They must be induced to do something, to strike a blow for their own salvation, or all would be lost.

Rogers was the right man in the right place here. Out broke his cheerful voice—

"Three cheers for the last of the old *Pelican*, my boys! She dies gloriously after all. No ship-breaker's yard for the gallant old girl!"

He led the cheers, which were echoed but faintly.

"'Tis well," pursued he; "'tis a crowning mercy that we are in the current which sets into the Barogna Flats. It will bear us along softly and well, barring any more cyclones, but it is not likely that we shall have another of those wild customers now. It has swept over for the time, anyhow." [Pg 45]

"Will you not make for Diamond Island, sir?" asked Mellish, the first mate.

"By all means," said the captain, "if we are able to *make for* anything. But, my good fellow," dropping his voice, "we must take our chance of getting *anywhere*. In this crowd we cannot hold out long, neither can we pick and choose our course. We can practically only drift, and keep up our hearts."

"We are nearly sure to be met by some ship going into Rangoon," said Mellish, speaking with more certainty than he felt.

"There is a light on the Krishna Shoal, if we could reach that," said Kershaw, the third mate. "I was in Rangoon on my first voyage, and remember it; a thing like the devil on three sticks instead of two."

A laugh followed this description of the lighthouse which all the old salts knew.

"Ay, my lad," said the captain cheerily, "we'll make for your three-legged devil, and let him take the hindmost."

"Zur," said old Wills, touching his forelock, "there'm a lot of spars and timbers afloat, would it not be best to try and draw enough in to make a catamaran, like az we used to be teached to make for a pinch when I wor in the navy?"

"A catamaran!" exclaimed young Kershaw. "Why, man, what good would that be so far to sea? You may see them by the dozen off shore, but how do you propose to make one here?"

"From timber-heads and greenhorn, zur," replied the old fellow very demurely. [Pg 46]

"Do you think you can?" asked Rogers, who was thinking too intently to have noticed this byplay. "The boats are of such different sizes."

"'Twon't be a fust-class affair, your honour," replied Wills. "Not az if we had her blessed Majesty's resources to hand; but Osborn here, he du knaw what I mean so well az any, and I daresay there's others too."

"Ay!" cried two or three.

"'Twould give more elbow-room d'ye zee, zur."

"It would," said the captain; "but you could not do it unless the boats were nearer of a size, I am convinced."

"Maybe not, sir," said Mr. Mellish, "but there seem to be a lot of casks among the wreckage. If we could haul in half a dozen oil hogsheads, and put them three of a side, we might contrive what would relieve both boats considerably. Then we might leave the big boat to keep that company, and push ahead with the gig to fetch help."

"Right you be, zur," said Wills.

There was a coil of rope in the large boat, they made a running noose in it, and endeavoured to fling it over some of the coveted casks; but the difficulty was enormous, partly from want of room in which to work, and partly from the danger that floating wreckage might swamp their boat, and so destroy their only chance of life.

Some spars and staves were collected, suitable to the purpose, but the sea was much agitated from the recent cyclone, and the difficulty of approaching the hogsheads was apparently insurmountable. The things might have been alive and spiteful, so persistently did they elude every wile.

Just when the men, utterly disheartened, were inclined to abandon the effort as hopeless, the noose caught, apparently more by haphazard than by skill, and a hogshead of oil was drawn alongside. [Pg 47]

In their excitement the men nearly upset the boat, and Rogers had to repress them sternly.

"Have a care, men, have a care! look at the sharks all about us. You don't want to fatten them, do ye?"

"Broach that cask," cried one among them. "Let the ile out, 'twill calm the sea."

"Ay!" said Rogers, "let it out."

Another hogshead was brought in now, and, strange to say, the oil being emptied did make the water smoother as far as it reached around them.

While the men in one boat redoubled their efforts to obtain more of these casks, old Wills and his mate Osborn connected the two empty ones by a spar laid across and firmly affixed to each end. They did this at the imminent risk of their lives, for it was necessary to get upon the spar, in a kneeling position, so as to secure the ropes firmly, and any slip into the sea would probably have been followed by a rush of white light to the spot, and the disappearance of the man, or at least of one of his members.

Those in the boats watched anxiously the while, crying out now and then, "'Ware shark!"

As these alarms were half of them false ones, the old fellows became too well accustomed to them for more than a passing glance from their work, which became safer for them as the casks were firmly fastened.

In the meantime a third cask was obtained, but it seemed all but impossible to attach a fourth. There was one within approachable distance, but it bobbed a little farther off with each effort to cast the noose over it. Seeing the impunity which had attended the efforts of Wills and Osborn, a man called Whittingham, a strong active young daredevil, got upon the spar, and made his careful way out to its far end, rope in hand, coiled up, ready for a cast. [Pg 48]

He worked himself astride the spar with considerable difficulty, for the thing was up in the air at one moment, so that the lookers-on expected to see him flung backwards into the sea; then down the length would plunge, as if about to bury itself in some great green cavern, into which he must go headlong.

It was like riding a kicking horse, but the hardy fellow kept his hold, reached the hogshead farthest from the boat, flung the coil, and it fell short though actually touching the cask.

Reclaiming the length of cord, Whittingham, in defiance of all prudence, flung himself into the boiling sea and swam towards the coveted object.

"Come back, man! Come back!" shouted the captain.

"A shark! A shark!" roared the sailors.

Whittingham paid no heed, he reached the cask and got the rope around it. He had a cord passed round his waist, and prepared to be hauled back by it, when his awful shriek rent the air, and a groan burst from the white lips of his comrades.

A huge shark had rushed swiftly up, and taken the poor fellow's legs off at his middle. The sea was crimsoned with his blood, as his head was seen turned, with an agonised expression, at sight of the certain death come upon him. In another minute the tension of the strong hands relaxed, and the man's upper half also disappeared from sight.

Ralph hid his face, trembling with horror.

But the men knew well that this was the fate which awaited them all did the boats capsize before rescue arrived, and they redoubled their efforts to help themselves.

The fatal cask was drawn in, reddened still with the lifeblood of poor Whittingham, which had splashed all over it, and it enabled Wills and his assistants to construct a sort of oblong frame, supported at each corner by the buoyant empty vessels. Pieces of wood were laid athwart, the short way of the raft, which became safer with each fresh plank as it was affixed. [Pg 49]

The chief difficulty was to obtain the wherewithal for making these planks and timbers secure. There was but very little rope, and only such nails as clung to the riven timbers, with a few which Wills, like all carpenters, happened to have in his pocket. The spars and planks were irregular in length and thickness, neither was it possible to rig up even a cord run around the raft, or any manner of bulwark wherewith to increase its safety.

It could not be navigated by any means, but it could be towed at the stern of the larger boat, and serve to reduce the crush of people there, so as give free scope either to step the mast and sail her, or for the men to use their oars.

Both boats being thus relieved, the captain's gig would then row away, with a light complement of men, and try to make Diamond Island, upon which a pilot station was well known to exist; or the Krishna Shoal, where it was probable that help might be either obtained or signalled for by those in the lightship.

With help of the current this was possible, provided the weather remained calm.

The question now arose as to who should be transferred to the raft,—who could best be spared from the boats.

Mellish must remain in command of the large boat, with Kershaw. The second mate must go with the captain. The four officers must be thus divided to ensure a head in case of accident to either one among them.

The crew of the captain's gig must also be retained. They were picked men, and the most likely to hold out in case of long-continued exertion or another gale of wind.

"Uncle," said Ralph, "I will go on the raft. I cannot help in the boat, I do not know enough, but I can make room for a better man." [Pg 50]

"You are right, my boy," said the captain a little huskily. "You are a plucky chap, and your mother shall hear of this if any of us live."

"I go on the raft, equally of course," said Mr. Gilchrist firmly.

"Let we go, maister," proposed Wills, usually spokesman for himself and Osborn. "Uz will keep an eye on the young 'un, ef it be only because he'm Miss Amy's chield."

The captain grasped the old fellow's hand in silence, and two of the ordinary seamen, of less use than the A.B.'s, were added to the little gimcrack craft's crew.

The biscuit was apportioned out to each as far as it went, and the gig parted company from its fellows. When nearly out of sight, the men lifted their oars in the air as a farewell greeting, and the fast gathering shades of night engulfed them.

Their companions, both in the boat and on the raft, watched their disappearance in silence. They were exhausted with the emotions of the last few days, and the heavy work of the last twenty-four hours. Little could be done through the night but wait for the dawn. They set a watch, and each tried to get some rest in turn.

There had been a question as to whether Kirke should not have gone on the raft. It would have been fitter for him to have done so than for Mr. Gilchrist, who, always delicate, had recently been so ill. He was a guest, if not a passenger, and should have had the best place.

He had, however, settled the question for himself, allowing no demur, and the men were grateful to him for so doing. Most of them were married men, with young children or other helpless ones dependent upon them. The safety of the raft was bound up in the safety of the boat. If anything [Pg 51] happened to swamp the boat, the raft was doomed to share the same fate; whereas, were the raft lost, those in the boat still had a chance. Those who could work the oars and sails best were the right men to remain in it.

But Kirke was not one of these; neither his strength nor his knowledge made him as useful as an O.S. would have been, but he claimed his place in the boat as an officer, and there was no time for debate. Captain Rogers let it pass,—perhaps he had his own private reasons for so doing.

The men owned no reasons, public or private, for keeping this much disliked young man among them; they would far rather have had Ralph of the two; and thought that Mr. Gilchrist should have been kept in the best place.

They murmured; they made remarks to each other aimed at the selfish apprentice, and which he perfectly understood; while Kershaw openly taunted him with selfishness and cowardice.

Kirke maintained a dogged silence, but his brow became more lowering, and his mouth more set in a kind of vicious sullenness every moment.

So night fell.

CHAPTER V [Pg 52]

ADRIFT ON THE OCEAN

Night fell over the shipwrecked men, a strange one for the denizens of the raft.

There, at least, was peace, and a hearty determination to make the best of their position.

They had some sailcloth and a boat cloak. The men arranged the packages, which had been turned out to disencumber the boat, so as to make a tolerably comfortable back; they laid down a couple of planks close together, rolled up the sailcloth into a kind of cushion above them, and placed Mr. Gilchrist upon it, wrapped in the cloak.

That gentleman would gladly have shared these accommodations among some of them, but the men would not hear of it.

"Lord love you, zur," said Osborn, "there's enough for one, but two wouldn't zay thank'ee for a part. We'm used to roughing it. 'Tis fine and cool after all the heat and pother to-day."

Ralph, upon whom his friend urged his wishes more strongly, only laughed. He seated himself upon one leg on a packing-case, the other foot dangling; he crossed his arms on the head of the biscuit-barrel against which Mr. Gilchrist leaned, half-sitting, and, burying his face upon them, said he should sleep like a top there, for he was so tired he could not keep his eyes open.

The sailors squatted down, finding such ease as was possible, and quiet fell over all. The night [Pg 53] was a dark one, and very still; there was not a breath of wind to fill the sail in the boat, half the men there were getting what repose they could, and the others trusted more to the current than to their oars through the darkness. Silence had fallen upon all there as well as on the raft.

But Mr. Gilchrist could not sleep. He was a nervous, excitable man, and the new and excessively

perilous position in which he found himself precluded all possibility of sleep. His senses seemed rather to be preternaturally acute, and he could not even close his eyes.

The lapping of the sea against the raft, the occasional gleam of something swiftly passing, and which he believed to be a shark accompanying the crazy little craft,—for what purpose he shuddered to think,—the occasional sounds which reached him from the boat, all kept him awake.

He lay, half-reclining, with his face towards the boat, which was full in his view. He could faintly see the oars dipping into the water, keeping way on the boat, and Kershaw's slim figure holding the tiller ropes. Presently he saw the one set of men relieved by the other, he smiled to observe the mate's long arms tossed out, evidently accompanying a portentous yawn, and then he was replaced by a shorter, broader back, which Mr. Gilchrist knew must belong to Kirke.

A sort of half-doze succeeded for a short time, then Ralph changed his position, which startled him into wakefulness once more, and discontented tones reached him from the boat.

"What are you about? Steer straight. You will tip us all over. What's the fellow doing?"

"Dropped my cap overboard. I was not going to lose it. Shut up!"

A few more murmurs, then all was still again; but, was he mistaken? did his eyes, unaccustomed to judge of objects in the darkness, deceive him, or were they farther from the boat than before? [Pg 54]

He peered anxiously into the gloom, and felt certain that the motion of the raft was changed. There was less ripple against its prow.

"Wills," said he softly to the old carpenter, who lay full length within reach of his hand,—"Wills, there is something wrong."

The man was on the alert instantaneously.

"Zur?" he asked.

"I fear we have parted the towline," said Mr Gilchrist.

Wills cautiously moved to where the rope had been fastened—it hung loose, there was no tension upon it, and he hauled it in hand over hand.

"My God!" he cried, "we are lost!"

They shouted to the men in the boat, but the distance was widening every moment between them. Kirke did not seem to hear, to understand. The men clamoured, the first mate arose, took the helm, and tried to turn her head so as to row back, but the darkness was greater than ever. Those in the raft could no longer distinguish the boat, what chance therefore existed of those in the boat seeing the raft, which lay so much lower in the water?

They raised a shout, hoping to direct their friends by means of sound, but that hope failed them. They kept it up till they were exhausted, till a long line of faint light illumined the east, till daylight leapt out of the sea and all was bright about them. A little breeze sprang up with the dawn, the water had not yet quite calmed down from the disturbance caused by the tornado; they looked north, south, east, and west, but saw the boat nowhere.

They were alone upon the sea, with but a plank between them and death; with no means of helping themselves, with only enough food for one day, and the sharks swimming around them in sure certainty of their meal sooner or later. [Pg 55]

One of the seamen took hold of the end of the towline, and held it up for the rest to see.

It had been severed with a knife! It had not been so rotten as to give of its own accord from the strain put upon it; it had not frayed itself, or broken at any weak spot, it *had been cut*.

They had been cast adrift by their own companions, of malice prepense.

"God forgive him!" ejaculated Mr. Gilchrist.

"Who?" gasped Ralph.

"The unhappy wretch who did this."

Ralph made no further remark; there was but one among the boat's crew who was malicious enough to be even suspected of such a crime, and the boy could not bear to think it of him. But that *somebody* had severed the rope, was beyond doubt.

The fierce sun blazed down upon the waste of water, there was nothing to be done but to sit still and bear it. Their limbs were cramped from their inability to change their positions, there was no help for that. Raging headache came on; there was a small tin pail, and Wills tried to dip up sea-water and cast it over Mr. Gilchrist's fevered brow. With the first movement such a rush of sharks was made to the place as caused them all to shudder. What had they expected that they snapped so eagerly at the pail?

The men were hungry, but thirst overpowered hunger, and they must economise their little stock of biscuit and water. For how many days would it avail to keep life in them were they not picked up?

About noon, as well as they could judge, Wills served out a biscuit each, and about a half-pint of water. [Pg 56]

Ralph sickened at thought of eating, and laid the biscuit down.

"That won't do, Ralph," said Mr. Gilchrist. "You must take what means are in your power to keep your life, it is your plain duty. Your life is not your own, you are only placed in charge of it, and

will have to render up an account of your stewardship. How can you tell for what your Master wants you? He may be preparing you by this terrible trial for the work He created you to do."

"Lord, zur, 'ee du spit it out like a buke," said Osborn admiringly. "Eat it now, Maister Ralph, do 'ee now, like a good chield."

Ralph was fain to smile, and took up the biscuit again, feeling less sick when he had swallowed it.

At nightfall another was given round, and a few mouthfuls more water; then the long hours of darkness fell again upon them, only more endurable in that they were cooler. They knew that but one more meal remained, the pangs of starvation must then be theirs. It was no wonder that they had not much to say to each other, although none slept.

They were in the track of ships going to Rangoon, that was their only hope; but so low were they in the water, so impossible was it to raise a signal in any manner, that even in broad daylight fifty ships might pass within sight of them and never perceive their extremity. But there were no ships to be seen, nothing to break the skyline, nothing of any sort *upon* that wide expanse of heaving water but themselves, while—the sharks—the sharks were *beneath* its surface.

Towards morning, when the light breeze brought something of coolness and refreshment even to them, a little oblivion, a temporary half-forgetfulness of all around came over most of them, deepening into real sleep with some. [Pg 57]

Ralph slept, and dreamed happily. He thought he saw his mother and sisters walking together. He did not think it strange that they should be walking on the sea; they were talking earnestly to each other, when his youngest sister, a pretty flaxen-headed child of three years old, popped a rosy face out of the waves at their feet, and bubbled over into such merry laughter that he laughed too, and woke himself.

"Why, Ralph!" exclaimed Mr. Gilchrist, aroused by so unexpected a sound.

"Christ Jesus!" shrieked Wills at the same moment, awakened also. "Christ Jesus! What is here?"

His yell was echoed by all the others, for a huge black mass reared itself almost above their heads, and was bearing down upon them.

With the desperation of men at their last gasp they shrieked out, "Hoi, hoi! Hallo! Hallo!"

Their voices seemed to make no noise, they raised them impotently to their own ears; but that was only the fancy of despair, they had a proper volume of sound in reality. They were heard, answered with an English cheer; English faces rushed to look over the top of that great thing; English voices clamoured; chains rattled; word of command was given; paddles splashed; a boat was lowered; men dropped into it over the side; a few strokes brought it to them; and they were taken on board, among exclamations of wonder and welcome.

So stiff and spent were they that they had almost to be lifted into the boat, and were assisted up from it into the steamer which had rescued them; but movement eased them, and the joyous excitement of all around helped to restore them.

Crew, firemen, officers, passengers, swarmed around them, to congratulate them, to shake them by the hand, to clap them upon the back. Hot coffee was brought as if by magic, and proved a wonderful restorer; wine, food, fruit, were lavished upon them; dry, comfortable clothes and beds were ready for their repose. [Pg 58]

Oh, how exquisite to feel the cool, clean linen around them, to bathe their scorched, blistered faces in fair water, to remove the dirt of days' accumulation, to be revived with food so delicious to their palates, to feel the sweetest sleep stealing over them as they laid their heads down in security once more!

Until they had been fed, clothed, and rested, they were unable to give or understand information as to their whereabouts; but so completely had they lost their bearings, so utterly miscalculated the strength of the current, that though they had hoped to make Diamond Island, they had really passed that place, and missed all indications as to the entrance of the Rangoon river.

The Krishna Shoal had been passed unseen, the Barogna Flats unheeded. They had never perceived the lighthouse, or been aware that they were near it, but were drifting aimlessly about just beyond that place.

The steamer was taking passengers from Rangoon to Moulmein, where they were landed in the course of the next day, and carried straight into hospital in high fever.

The seamen were tough fellows, and soon recovered. Mr. Gilchrist, though considered so delicate a man, also suffered less than Ralph, who, having kept up so bravely through the whole of their trials, now proved to have received a severe shock to his constitution. His brain was violently affected, and delirium was most distressing and persistent.

For some days the doctors feared whether he would ever recover his reason even were his life spared to him; and, when the fever left him, his prostration was great. [Pg 59]

Youth and natural good health conquered at last, and he recovered. Then he learnt that the news of their rescue had been sent to Rangoon, and joyfully received by his uncle and shipmates. Rogers had made the pilot station on Diamond Island, and been helped into Rangoon, where he was cordially received by the friends of his owners, and business connections.

The *Pelican of the North* had been insured, though the cargo was not. The Liverpool firm of Herford Brothers was a wealthy and liberal one, Rogers and the other officers were to return home in another of its ships then unloading in Rangoon; the seamen could obtain berths in any

homeward-bound vessel.

But there was bad news for Ralph. The firm of rice merchants to which he was going had failed, and his hope of a situation in it doomed to disappointment.

For some time the fate of the boat remained uncertain.

CHAPTER VI
THE DENHAMS AT HOME

[Pg 60]

While the *Pelican of the North* was making this disastrous voyage, troubles had fallen thick and plenty upon the Denhams at home.

With Ralph's departure Mrs. Denham had felt herself able to take a second lodger. Mr. Benson, head book-keeper in the firm of Messrs. Herford Brothers, for whom Captain Rogers sailed, had lodged with her for some years. He was a quiet retiring man, an old bachelor, who gave very little trouble, being regular in his habits, which were simple. He occupied the breakfast-room, in front of the house, downstairs, and a bedroom, also in front, at the top of the house.

There was a good-sized room in the front of the house, above the breakfast-room, originally meant for a drawing-room, and a bedroom behind it. Mrs. Denham had occupied the latter herself, hitherto, and made a nursery of the larger apartment. These she now proposed to let; she and all the children doubling up at night in two very moderate-sized bedrooms at the top of the house, and only retaining one parlour, the large dining-room on the groundfloor.

To make the new set of apartments sufficiently comfortable to accommodate a lodger, the best furniture from all her own part of the house was collected in them; they were repapered, repainted, and new carpets and curtains bought. [Pg 61]

Captain Rogers had made his sister a present of money to assist her in these arrangements, but the greatest economy was necessary to make it cover these unavoidable expenses, and those of Ralph's outfit.

Jack and Reggie stained the floors brown; Agnes and her mother toiled over the upholstery and little adornments; all looked very nice when finished; but, beneath the surface, things were not comfortable. The family was too much cramped for room. A lodger was quickly found, but the work of the house was greatly increased; and the tempers of both Jack and Lisa were difficult, and caused much unpleasantness.

Mrs. Denham was glad that it was a lady who took the rooms, for she would not have liked either of her pretty daughters to help in waiting upon a gentleman except Mr. Benson, whom they knew so well; and, as her profits would not allow the keeping of a second servant, it was indispensable that they should do so.

She superintended the cooking herself, as the maid-of-all-work was but a cheap willing drudge, unequal to the preparation of any but the simplest dishes.

Mr. Benson only dined at home on Sundays, but supper was wanted for him, or chops with a late tea. The new inmate, Miss Mason, an elderly single lady, took all her meals in the house, dined in the middle of the day, and liked her food daintily served. It made heavy work, though comfort in the family household was sacrificed.

Agnes had a situation as daily governess. She went to her pupils after breakfast, dined with them, walked with them, and did not return till nearly five o'clock, except on Saturdays, when she came back earlier.

Lisa was at school. She was clever and ambitious, eager to pass examinations so as to rise in the world. She was fourteen, and her studies took up all her time. [Pg 62]

Jack came next to her in age; but there was a gap in the family, where one had died between him and Reggie; and a wider one, where two had died between Reggie and little Cicely, who was but three years old. The baby was nearly two, a very delicate child, a great anxiety to his mother.

Agnes came in one evening in October. It had been a pouring wet day, and was already growing dark, for she had a long walk to and from her pupils' residence.

"My dear," said her mother, who sat by a mere handful of fire, with the baby whining on her lap, —"My dear, how wet you are! You will take cold."

"It is only outside wet, mother," said she brightly; "I will change my shoes and stockings, and soon be dry."

"I am so sorry to ask it, dear," continued Mrs. Denham, "but Mr. Benson has sent up an office boy to say that he is bringing a gentleman home with him, and could he have dinner at seven instead of tea. I had a dish of rissoles for him, which will not be enough, but there is nothing else in the house. Would you mind stepping as far as the shops, and bringing in something which we could get ready in time?"

"Oh no, I can run along very quickly, mamma. What shall I bring? A fowl to roast? That could be cooked best, I suppose; and a few sausages. Any vegetables?"

"Yes, please dear, and some coffee; he will like a cup of coffee after dinner. And some tinned soup; there is no time to make any, and Monday is such a bad day on which to get fish. Will you mind bringing it all back with you, for Maria is trying to finish the washing, and the shop-people are so tiresome about sending to this distance?"

"No, mamma, I'll bring it all home."

"And a little something for dessert, Agnes." [Pg 63]

"Could you not open some of that ginger which uncle brought home? I'll bring some nice biscuits."

"A good thought, dear."

Agnes stepped along as quickly as she could, but these errands took her a long time. The nearest poulterer had no fowls left, and the next one lived quite a mile off. The omnibuses did not help her, because only a short part of her way lay along the main road; and her gown, which she thought safely pinned up beneath her cloak, came loose, hung down behind in a festoon, which held the rain and beat around her ankles at every step which she took. Contending with a heavy umbrella through blustering wind and driving rain, laden with a cumbersome basket, it was of no use to pick her way, or try to keep herself dry, so she splashed through all the mud and puddles, and returned home, drenched, cold and wretched.

Hurrying up to put herself into dry clothes, she found Lisa in their bedroom, with books and papers all round her.

"Oh, Agnes, don't put your wet gloves down there! That is my German paper, just written. How wet you are! Where have you been? I have wanted you so badly, just to hear me say these syntax rules. And do tell me what is the passive form of"—

"Don't keep me now, Lisa, I am in such a hurry. Mamma wants me. Could you not take baby for an hour? Mr. Benson has somebody coming to dinner, and nothing is ready. There is Miss Mason's tea to be got too, and Maria not dressed, and baby poorly. Mamma is driven every way at once."

"I can't take baby, I have heaps of lessons to do. I should lose my place if they are not done. How can you ask me, Agnes?"

"Well, I must run down, don't hinder me." [Pg 64]

"You might just stop one minute to hear me these rules."

"I really can't, Lisa."

"Ill-natured thing," began Lisa fretfully, but Agnes could not stay to hear her.

Downstairs was chaos. The washtubs and wet clothes were everywhere; the two boys clamouring for their evening meal, and stumping about in their dirty boots; Miss Mason was ringing for coals; Mrs. Denham had sent Maria up to dress, and was trying to prepare the fowl with the baby in her lap.

"Jack," cried Agnes, "you might just take up some coals to Miss Mason, to help us."

"I'm not a footboy," said Jack ill-naturedly. "Where's Maria?"

"We are particularly busy; do help," pleaded Agnes.

"Help yourself," said Jack rudely.

"I am helping all I can," replied Agnes.

"Jack," said Mrs. Denham, "do what your sister asks."

Jack did not exactly disobey his mother, but flounced off to fetch the coal-scuttle as sulkily as he could, and filled it with a tremendous clatter.

"Here, Reggie, you lazy beggar, you can carry it up; you are doing nothing."

Reggie took up the scuttle, which, being too heavy for him, upset upon the stairs, all the coals falling down with an appalling noise and dreadful mess.

"I'm so sorry," said he, looking frightened.

"Butter fingers!" cried Jack contemptuously.

Agnes set herself to sweep the stairs and hall clean, drove the boys into the parlour and shut the door on them; then hurried to set Miss Mason's tea-tray, and send it up by Maria, who now appeared in her tidy apron and cap. Then she laid the cloth in Mr. Benson's room, and ran down [Pg 65] to help her mother.

"My dear," exclaimed Mrs. Denham in dismay, "I forgot all about a pudding, and I don't know what we can do!"

"I brought some tarts in, mamma; and I thought we could toss up a sweet omelette while they are having their soup and meat."

"But eggs?" said Mrs. Denham in despair.

"I bought six pennyworth."

"What should I do without you, love?" sighed her mother.

By dint of great exertion the little dinner was cooked, and served to Mr. Benson's satisfaction.

He, manlike, had not the slightest idea of the difficulties which had beset his obliging landlady; or that, though the hunger of Lisa and the boys had been assuaged with thick bread and butter in the intervals of work, Mrs. Denham and Agnes had not been able to spare time for food, and were sinking for want of it at nine o'clock.

"You must have a nice cup of coffee now, mamma," said Agnes. "I made enough when I sent it up to the gentlemen. And here is a bit of fowl which I slipped into the oven to keep hot."

"You must take some too, Agnes."

"I'll have mine when I come down. Cicely has never been put to bed, she is asleep on the parlour floor."

She set her mother down by the kitchen fire to take her supper, and carried off the baby, now asleep, as well as the little girl.

Coming down from putting them to bed, she remembered that Miss Mason's tea-tray had never been removed, and stepped in to take it down.

"I am so sorry," said she, "that you should have been neglected, Miss Mason. Mr. Benson has company, and gave us very short notice of what he wanted, so we have been rather busy." [Pg 66]

"My dear," said the kind-hearted Miss Mason, "you look fit to drop."

"I'm rather tired," said Agnes; "but I am going to have some supper now."

But before she sat down to it a telegram from the office was brought in.

"Something's wrong, miss," said Maria, seeking Agnes. "Mr. Benson, he guv' a sort of a screech when he read it,—nasty thing,—and he says, says he, 'Send Miss Denham to me,' says he. I can't think why folks ever go sending them ugly yellow telegrams about, frightening people."

Agnes did not listen to this tirade, she never imagined that a telegram for Mr. Benson could affect her. Strangely enough she did not think of Ralph, she was so tired, and her evening had been so full of pressing trivialities.

But upon her entering Mr. Benson's room, that gentleman came towards her, telegram in hand, looking so full of sorrowful compassion that a cold thrill ran through her at once.

"What is it, sir?" she faltered.

"My dear young lady, there is some very sad news come. I want you to help me in breaking it to your poor mother. I am deeply grieved to tell you that the *Pelican of the North* has been burnt at sea."

"Oh, Mr. Benson! And Ralph?"

Her white lips could hardly utter the words.

"The crew and passengers left her safely, but the boat in which Ralph was is missing."

Agnes swayed, turned deathly sick, felt as if she were going blind, caught hold of the nearest support, missed it, and sank upon the floor insensible.

Neither Mr. Benson nor his friend had ever seen a girl faint before, and were terribly frightened. [Pg 67] They tore the bell down in their agitation; they called for help in tones which brought everyone around them in consternation; nobody had their wits at command except Miss Mason.

"Go downstairs, Lisa," she commanded. "Take away the boys. Maria, go downstairs; Miss Denham has only fainted, her mother and I are enough to help her."

She assisted Mrs. Denham to lay the poor girl flat, to loosen her dress and sprinkle her face with water, as she spoke. She fetched salts; and when consciousness returned, she directed the gentlemen to carry her up to her own bed.

None of them, for the moment, thought of asking what had caused the swoon. Mrs. Denham naturally considered it the result of over-exertion, and the wetting which Agnes had undergone; she was much concerned, but not alarmed.

Miss Mason, not knowing of these predisposing causes, and seeing the telegram in Mr. Benson's hand, guessed more. She was also much struck with the lack of comfort in the scantily-furnished bedroom, crowded with two beds, and littered with Lisa's books in every direction.

Leaving her mother to undress Agnes, she went downstairs with the gentlemen, and, entering Mr. Benson's parlour, she closed the door and asked—

"What caused this sudden faintness, Mr. Benson? Had that telegram anything to do with it?"

"Indeed, I am sorry to say that it had, ma'am," and Mr. Benson handed it to the old lady.

"Humph!" said she. "If you had any sense you would have sent for me, not that poor girl."

"I'm awfully sorry," stammered out Mr. Benson, while his friend could hardly repress a smile at witnessing the autocrat of "Herford Brothers," before whom twenty clerks trembled when he frowned, being scolded and scorned by a neat little woman in a shabby silk gown and white curls.

There was wine on the table. [Pg 68]

"Before you half kill the mother, as well as the daughter, you had better bring her down here and give her a glass of that sherry if it is decent wine," proceeded Miss Mason.

"It is, ma'am,—it is very fair sherry," said the crestfallen Mr. Benson. "You don't think that she

will faint too, do you?"

Miss Mason's only answer was, "I will fetch her myself," and she walked off.

Mrs. Denham did not faint, but it was a most distressing scene, and Miss Mason took command of the whole family.

CHAPTER VII
MOULMEIN

[Pg 69]

Ralph was sitting, languid and feeble, in a long chair in front of the hospital, where he had lain ill for some weeks.

The hospital was a mile or two inland from Moulmein; a comfortable place, but Ralph was weary of it. Everything had a parched, burnt-up appearance; the little pagodas, to be seen on the surrounding hills, were all alike; the punkah was working, yet there seemed to be no air to breathe; nothing suggested freshness, or gave him a start towards recovery.

A grove of palm trees rose majestically on one hand, interspersed with tamarinds, and trees of strange form covered with brilliant flowers.

Along the road came a girl in native dress, carrying a huge basket of roses, on her way to sell them in the bazaar. She had the flowers of a white, purple-striped orchid nestled coquettishly in the coils of her hair; and was smoking a huge green cheroot.

Then a long procession of yellow-robed "phoongyees," or monks, came by; each clasping his lacquered begging-bowl, and staring before him into vacancy, with rapt concentration of thought.

An open carriage appeared. "Come along, Denham," cried Mr. Gilchrist from it, "the doctor orders a drive for you, and we will go out to the Battery Point, to see whether there is not a breath of air to be met with there."

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"It will be very nice if there is," said Ralph; "this place is like a furnace. Is it always as hot as this here, Mr. Gilchrist?"

"Not always. The rains are at hand; after that it will be cooler."

They drove out to the Point, watching the native boats, light, square-sailed, fitted with thatched houses, rowed with great difficulty against the stream, by men standing, instead of sitting, to row.

They looked out over Washing Head Island, with its pagoda mounting guard over the Holy Well, whence, it is said, is drawn the water in which the king once a year cleanses his sacred head.

It was a pleasant evening, and Ralph felt its refreshment.

"I am very anxious," he said presently,—"I am very anxious to get quite well; for, unless I can get something to do, it will be 'up a tree' for me. I don't know how I am to pay all the expenses I am costing now, or to get a new outfit, or earn my living at all. I lie and fret dreadfully about this."

"You have not been yet in a fit state to bear much talking," replied Mr. Gilchrist, "or I would have relieved your mind. Your uncle wrote to me before he sailed for home, desiring me to let you want for nothing. Herford Brothers are disposed to be very liberal; and the captain's possessions, at least, were insured. Compensation will, I believe, be made to you; and there is little doubt but what this will take the form of a clerkship in the Rangoon house—a much better thing than the place you have lost. Your luck will be great if you get a berth in that house, for it is quite the first in the trade. But, Ralph, this must await letters from England. I also must await the replies from home, for all my scientific apparatus must be replaced there, and sent out to me; in the meantime the Rangoon house makes itself responsible for our expenses."

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"It is very liberal of the Messrs. Herford," said Ralph. "I have no claim whatever on them."

"That I dispute," replied his friend. "You did your share of work for your passage, and did it so well and willingly that it quite entitled you to a claim upon them, for they made the agreement to let you go on those terms. You have suffered nobly; never a complaint whatever the hardships, for which you never bargained. You have lost everything you possess in their ship; and, besides all this, what can we not say of your attention to me, nursing me day and night, as you have done so kindly, and which was certainly not in the letter of your agreement. I am not ungrateful, my boy."

"You have been so kind to me, sir, teaching me, and all that. One would have been a brute to do less."

"Well, that is your way of putting it; mine is not exactly the same. But, Ralph, I am feeling better than I have done for years. This climate suits me, and will, I hope, suit you now that you have taken the turn. I will tell you what my plan is for you. I want you to go with me upon my orchid-hunting expedition. It will give your brain a rest, and set you up after this illness. The best time for the plants will come on when the rains are over, and the season be at its coolest. I mean to get what appliances I can here, and make a short expedition into the jungle around this place; then sending what I can collect to Rangoon to be shipped home. And by that time, having

received better appliances from England, also having learnt to speak the language a little better,—we must study *that*, Ralph,—I shall make my way to Rangoon around the head of the bay; [Pg 72] searching the various likely habitations for rare plants, at different elevations and in different kinds of soil. The weather will then be growing very hot, but we shall be seasoned to it. I hope thus to obtain an extremely valuable collection,—perhaps of insects as well as of flowers,—for we shall be collecting in every variety of weather and locality. Mr. Augustus Herford will not grudge money to this end; he gave me, virtually, *carte blanche* to make what arrangements I found desirable when I got here; and if we do well, *there* is your claim upon him."

"I should like it of all things," cried Ralph, with sparkling eyes.

"Well, you must be my assistant; and, as we shall need hands as well as heads, I have spoken to the rest of our poor raft's crew, and we have determined to keep together, hoping that our bad luck there will follow us no further. We feel that we all showed pluck enough over that affair to be able to trust each other in the future."

"I am sure, sir, that I would trust you anywhere, and should look upon it as a very jolly thing to go with you. I like the men, too; we should be ever such a comfortable party of us. But, Mr. Gilchrist, I don't see that we had *all* bad luck with that raft. I am sure it was very good luck that it never upset. Those sharks swimming about us, like silent death waiting for us, have bothered me dreadfully since I was ill. And it was very good luck to be picked up when we were. Has anything been heard of the boat, sir?"

"Not yet, but the very absence of news is some hope. No wreck of it has been seen, no vestige at all. Ralph, when I think that we were cut adrift on purpose, from malice, I think sometimes it may be as well if that boat's crew never turns up."

"Oh, don't say so, don't say so! It was the doing of one only, and he might have been half mad at [Pg 73] the time. Perhaps—most probably—he has been very sorry since."

"You are a good fellow, Denham, but it would never do to put more lives at the mercy of a person who could have doomed six unoffending people to all but certain death to gratify his own wicked spite. What the Commissioner may do were he to appear here, I cannot say. If they do turn up, I wish it might be anywhere else than here. I do not want to appear against him, yet it would be my duty to do so. The Commissioner is aware of the fact, and the severed line is in his keeping. If I had not spoken of it, old Wills and Osborn would have done so. They are very faithful to 'Miss Amy's chield,' Ralph. But see, there is the steamer from the Andamans in the offing."

A long slender line of grey smoke was plainly visible upon the horizon, becoming more distinct each minute; and all the European officers and gentlemen in the place were congregating, in their white garments, upon the quay to see the vessel come in. Amusement was not too plentiful for such people in Moulmein in those days; an arrival of any sort was interesting.

Mr. Gilchrist left the carriage to take Ralph home, and sauntered down to join the groups that were forming. Ralph was glad to be alone for a time, he was fatigued by the conversation, and much excited by the thought of making this expedition with his friends. The prospect was delightful to him, and on reaching home he resumed his former seat, thinking of all he might see, until thought became dreamy, and dreaminess sleep.

He was aroused by a familiar cheery voice.

"Hurrah! There he is! He has only left half of himself in the bay!"

It was Kershaw. Ralph sprang up to seize him by both hands in eager welcome. [Pg 74]

"Oh, Kershaw! How glad I am, how very, very glad to see you again! How were you saved?"

"The steamer for the Andamans, with passengers from Rangoon, picked us up, and carried us straight on there. It had some sort of big bug on board who could not be hindered on his way for such a trifle as the announcement of our safety, and we have been brought back here as fast as our own news could have flown. So, like the clown in the circus, 'Here we are again.' But, Denham, I'll go back to the Andamans, if they expect us *all* to practise Banting here. What have you done to yourself? You are as thin as a whipping-post, and your face is all eyes."

"Oh, I've been ill! but I shall pick up fast enough now. People are so kind to us. It is a very good world, after all, that we live in, Kershaw, in spite of what some folks say."

> "'It is a very good world that we live in,
> To lend, or to spend, or to give in;
> But to beg or to borrow, or get a man's own,
> 'Tis the very worst world that ever was known,'"

sang Kershaw.

"Oh, most wise and sapient third mate," cried Ralph, "you are easily hoisted with your own petard! If folks lend, spend, and give, do not other folks receive?"

"Let me be among the other folks then. I have lost all the locks of hair of all the young ladies,—the dear creatures who adored me. There's a loss, Denham! Black, brown, golden, grey,—they have all gone to disagree with the sharks."

"Ugh! don't talk of sharks, they haunt me in my dreams yet."

"They use them for policemen in the Andamans. Fact!—the blue ones, because of the colour like [Pg 75] the uniform, you know. They loaf about, round and round, just like bobbies on their beat; and if

any poor devil of a prisoner tries to escape, and swim to the mainland,—hey, presto! they nip him up, and have him in a tight place in no time!"

"Your experience of life has been enlarged since I saw you, evidently."

"Yes, sir; nothing like foreign travel for enlarging the mind and perfecting the manners. Perfecting even the most charming natural manners, sir," said the mate, drawing himself up, and saluting with one finger.

It was good for Ralph to have this atmosphere of boyish nonsense restored to him. Between its bright influence, and the relief of finding his friends alive and well, he improved wonderfully fast.

All the officers and men of the *Pelican* came to see him, and all appeared to be drawn more closely together from remembrance of the hardships through which they had struggled. There was but one exception, that of Kirke, and why he did not form one of that friendly group must be explained later.

The friends went to walk in the bazaar, amused to see the shops, or booths, so simply arranged by throwing upwards the side of the house, and propping it up with a pole; and the odd conglomeration of articles exposed for sale beneath this primitive awning.

Here, in a hole simply dug in the ground before the houses, were Burmese women cooking rice in the joints of the bamboo.

There were others selling "pickled tea," and other abominations, by means of weights fashioned after the semblance of the sacred duck.

Silver trinkets, lacquer ware, earthen jars and pots of native manufacture, were oddly mixed up with the commonest glass and earthenware from Staffordshire and St. Helens; stuffs of Oriental make and pattern lay beside Manchester coloured handkerchiefs and Madras muslin jackets; images of Guadama wore a suspiciously Brummagem air, and might be seen—though never sold—side by side with lamps of native pottery with distinctly classical shape, in the establishment of some Chinaman, over whose booth the picture of his patron saint presided. Mats, baskets, cylinders of gold, ornamented more or less, and worn by the ladies as earrings poked through the universal hole in the ear, were on every side,—together with Peak and Frean's biscuits and Bryant and May's matches,—looking oddly out of place. [Pg 76]

The people who bought and sold were as mixed a lot, and as queer to the unsophisticated boy's eyes, as the goods in which they trafficked.

Burmese men and lads, whose close-fitting blue-patterned garments turned out to be their own skins tattooed; women, their abundant tresses dressed with exquisite roses or orchids, but displaying one leg bare to the knee beneath their gracefully-draped "tameins"; children, even babies in arms, smoking cheroots; bullock-carts, saffron-robed priests, officials; half-naked children everywhere, under everybody's feet; gongs sounding, bells tinkling, laughter echoing, strange calls and cries and speech on all sides,—formed a never-ending entertainment for Ralph, who had not previously seen more of the world than the rather dull and prosaic streets of mercantile Liverpool. All was new to him, all amusing, nothing more so than the idleness and merry temper of the natives, coming so suddenly upon him after so stern an early struggle with the grave realities of civilised life.

The rains were now over, and the pious Burmese, with great tenderness for the little fishes left behind in many pools, collected them in jars, and carried them in procession down to the river, that they might be thus carefully restored to their native element. [Pg 77]

The fish would doubtless have proved to be as grateful for this humanity as the fish was to the queen in the old fairy story, did it not happen that they were nearly all dead before they reached the water.

Their would-be saviours then ate them, and all ends were secured. Piety and hunger were equally satisfied, and both "nats" and men pleased.

CHAPTER VIII [Pg 78]

KIRKE ESCAPES

Kirke's jealousy of Ralph Denham had dated from the earliest commencement of their ill-fated voyage; and Ralph had not been as way-wise as an older person might have wished him to be in avoiding occasions for arousing it. His own dislike to Kirke's character; his scarcely concealed contempt of him for throwing away the chances in life which he himself longed so ardently to possess; the notice taken of him by Mr. Gilchrist, and of which he was so proud,—all tended to inflame Kirke's ill-will towards him.

Ralph had tried, unavailingly but persistently, to draw little Jackson from his influence, and Jackson's services were useful to Kirke.

The two old Cornish seamen kept aloof from the elder apprentice, and did many little things for their countryman, as they regarded Denham; and Kershaw, just a trifle older and higher in the service than Kirke, took to Denham, laughed and joked with him, sought his society, and made of him a companion.

Kirke felt his seclusion, and resented it upon Denham. Such feelings feed upon themselves, and grow apace.

Little Jackson's sudden death was a shock; and, somewhat softened at heart, though too proud to confess to the fact, Kirke would have been glad of comfort and sympathy Ralph had no idea of [Pg 79] this, but, repulsed on his first evidence of kindly feeling, made no further attempt at consolation; and Kirke, in his loneliness, raged the more bitterly in secret because Denham had not found out that he wanted him.

So one thing acted and reacted upon another, and culminated upon the unhappy night in the boats.

Envying Ralph's pluck and heroism, admiring him for it; emulous of their comrades' appreciation of his gallant daring, he yet could not bring himself to imitate it, for he felt so afraid to die,—he dreaded so terribly what came after death, which he considered certain upon that raft.

He knew that he was not fit to die,—his whole ill-spent life rose up, in one instant, with awful clearness before his mental vision, and he dared not face its consequences. He believed in spite of himself, and his faith brought him nothing but fear.

He hung back, and then resented the plainly-expressed scorn of Kershaw and the sailors. Mellish, with the authority of captain delegated to him, stopped their taunts with a high hand, but was powerless to alter the expression of contempt upon their faces. Accustomed through all his early life to the surface respect paid to him as a gentleman's son, he could not bear the lack of deference now displayed by the men whom he regarded as his inferiors; and, when the watch was changed, and Kershaw yielded to him the tiller, saying, "Here, take the ropes, I suppose you aren't afraid of *them*," the climax was reached.

Half-frenzied with pride, anger, jealousy and fear, he drew out his knife, severed the rope without thought of anyone but his rival, saw in one flash that he had practically murdered six helpless and inoffensive fellow-creatures, and remorse seized him for a prey instantaneously.

No one in the boat suspected him, it was supposed that the rope was weak or rotten, and gave of [Pg 80] itself from the strain upon it. A shark might have bitten it; no one knew what had happened exactly. Kirke, in horror at his own deed, called upon the others in the boat to turn her head, to row back, to search for the raft.

His agitation, the frantic energy with which he worked, redeemed him somewhat in his shipmates' eyes, but may have caused him to steer unequally, injudiciously, wide of his mark. However it happened, they could find no trace of the raft, and, though they did for a time hear the voices of the castaways raised on the breeze, the direction of the wind made their whereabouts uncertain, and the sound gradually ceased altogether.

Did that mean that they were gone? Drowned? Fled before God's judgment-seat, to be for ever witnesses against him? God knew that he did not mean this! But would He pardon?—could He pardon?

Still did the unhappy wretch maintain a sullen silence as to his deed. He could not confess, and those around him were kinder to him than usual, perceiving his sorrow, but ignorant as to its source.

Next day they were picked up by the steamer, and carried on to the Andamans. Everyone at Port Blair was kind to them, but the word "murder" seemed to be on the air.

"What! are you a convict?" someone would ask of butler, washerwoman, syce, coxswain or coolie. "What are you in for?"

"Murder, Thakin" (Englishman, sir), would be the calm reply, with a polite gesture and fascinating smile.

The convicts seemed to think no more of such a crime than of crushing heaps of cockroaches. Oh, that he could be equally dense!

They were detained at Port Blair but a very short time, when they once more embarked for [Pg 81] Moulmein. Upon nearing the port, the first figure which he descried among the groups on shore was that of Mr. Gilchrist. He stared as if he had seen a ghost,—but it was an avenging spectre. Within the first five minutes of their landing, Mr. Gilchrist accused him of the crime of cutting the raft adrift; all shrank from him with detestation, no one stood forth to say "I do not believe the charge."

Wills and Osborn confirmed Mr. Gilchrist's accusation; the two ordinary seamen, Price and Simpson, gave testimony against him; even Ralph, upon whose forgiving nature he fastened hope, said, "Oh, Kirke, how could you have done such a thing!"

He was put into the police guardroom, and a watch set over him.

What could be done to him he had no idea, and imagination played strange pranks with his fears. Should he be sent back to England, in irons, to be tried there, where his father would be broken-hearted, his sisters disgraced; where all would appear in the papers; and, whatever the event, he could never hold up his head again?

Would they send him back to the Andamans, to herd with those half-savage convicts, mutineers from Delhi, the scum of Rangoon?

Would they shoot him, or hang him, or flog him?

Image after image of terror succeeded each other, while the guard gossipped, laughed, and

dozed. These men were careless of their charge. Where should a European go if he did escape? They paid little heed to him, and he began to perceive that escape was possible.

Where he should go troubled him not; how he should live, how travel, without knowledge or help, in an unknown country where his European face would make him a marked man. He had some vague misty idea of ruby mines; and, in his ignorance, supposed these to be scattered about all [Pg 82] over the country. That rubies were to be picked up by anyone, as nuggets had been streamed out of the sand in Ballarat by the earliest adventurers, was a fixed notion of his. He would make his way to such a place, lose his identity among the rough miners, find some splendid jewels, make his way to some other port a rich man, and return to England to lead a better life.

Opportunity presented itself at last. It was the feast of the "Tawadehutha," the most joyous of all the Burmese festivals.

Feasting and merriment lasted for three days, and holiday was observed everywhere. Even the Commissioner was forced to keep business in abeyance, and leave Kirke in his easy durance; perhaps the more willingly as, his offence being so unusual a one, and his family known to be so respectable in England, that gentleman himself was in perplexity as to what course he ought to pursue.

So in the guardroom the offender remained, under the care of the Burmese guard, who cared nothing for his crime, though they were afraid of displeasing the Commissioner.

It was hard upon them that they should not be allowed to take part in the jollity which they would have enjoyed so greatly, and their black scowls and grumbling tones were comprehended by Kirke, although their actual words were not understood.

The festival was a religious one, and the *raison d'être* was that of presenting gifts to the various pagodas, of which there are so many in all parts of Burma.

It is regarded as a highly meritorious thing to build a pagoda, although the erection is practically of no use. It is not a church, or temple, in which religious services of prayer or praise are held, or any charitable work carried on. Their very structure forbids that, for they are solid blocks of [Pg 83] masonry, upon which graceful cupolas and spires are erected, painted, gilt, and decorated with many bells. These bells are gifts, and are sometimes very costly, formed from pure gold or silver, and set with jewels.

It is good for the soul to present these gifts; but any repairs done to the building as it suffers from age or weather, counts to the merit of the original constructor alone. Therefore, when any rich Burmese wishes to make his salvation secure, he builds a new pagoda, large or small, all by himself,—he does not care for another person's eternal welfare. Let every man look out for himself in the kingdom of the "nats."

But gifts are another matter, *they* are offered to the priests, and make plenty of show both in this world and the next; so the pagoda festival is a particularly brilliant affair, and a very picturesque one.

Long processions streamed through the street, attended by boys and girls dancing, and bearing in their midst long bamboo poles decorated with spires covered with tinsel paper, gilt balls, and all manner of toys, which gave them the air of gigantic Christmas trees.

Some bore aloft pasteboard images of "nats," or beatified spirits, who bring good luck to men, acting as guardian angels. Some carried huge, frightful representations of "beloos," or demons, who must be alternately conciliated and treated with every indignity to frighten them away.

Kirke's guard rushed out to exclaim at each fresh group that trooped past the guardhouse. Many an "Ameh!" was ejaculated, and this one was admired, that one despised;—now great delight was manifested, then contempt expressed in voluble jabber, and with no reference to their prisoner.

He cared for none of these exhibitions, so childish in his eyes—which were fatigued by the glare and noise.

White umbrellas, decorated with frills of paper lace; gold umbrellas; long bamboos, gilt or [Pg 84] silvered; the constant stream of gay moving figures; the flash of tinsel in the sun; the beating of drums, carried in carts whose wheels creaked and groaned in unison; the clashing of bells great and small; the songs and cries of the thousands of people,—all wearied and oppressed his brain almost beyond endurance. The screams of delight which the guard constantly uttered, ran through his ears with great distress; and then the climax arrived, in the sight of a huge "silver tree," attended by prancing hobby-horses, and from the trembling boughs of which hundreds of rupees hung quivering, each wrapped in coloured tinsel paper, and followed by the inhabitants of the whole country village which had furnished it, and who danced like mad around it to the music (?) of their own voices.

Kirke could bear no more; hoping to be left alone for a little while, he produced such silver as he had in his pocket, and presented it to the guard, who seized it with delighted gratitude, and rushed out in vast excitement to expend it in pickled tea, leh-pet, cheroots, and sweetmeats of strange fashion.

They offered some on their return to their benefactor, all their sour looks changed into smiles, but he shook his head and motioned to them to leave him alone.

Surprised and compassionate, they seated themselves on their haunches outside the door in the verandah, and gabbled and feasted happily while watching the constantly passing crowds.

A pasteboard cow is drawn by oxen in the midst of richly and gaudily dressed people; a cart

bearing a huge gilded pot in which the milk sacred to Guadama is to be cooked; a gorgeously-attired maiden, laden with jewels, represents the milkmaid; still more and more crowds yet; more drums, more bells, more songs, more cries, more colour and noise and flashing lights, more beloos, more nats, more hobby-horses. [Pg 85]

Night fell, and the revel was still maintained. Torches and fires cast a strange and lurid light over the motley scene.

What is this terrible figure advancing? A huge snow-white serpent, a hundred feet long, fierce fiery red eyes glaring from out the voluminous coils of its luminous body, as it writhes on its slow onward course in pursuance of a great rolling ball of light.

The Burmese excitement could stand no more. Springing from their heels, they rushed down from the verandah to greet the apparition with dance and shout like the rest. They ran, shrieking with admiration, along with the multitude, and Kirke was left alone.

It was an opportunity not to be missed. All Moulmein and the country side about it were in the streets, his figure would be unnoticed among the rest; he arose hastily, and ran out from the guardhouse into the town, where the brilliancy of lights in some parts made the obscurity deeper than ever in others.

No one observed him, no one spoke to him; he hastened along at his greatest speed, at first mixing with the people, then choosing the quieter places, fearing lest any English should see him and recognise him. Everyone was, however, attracted by the gay sights around; the English residents were chiefly in their own bungalows, watching the processions from their own verandahs, and distributing gifts as the various groups paused before each house to display themselves. No one thought of him, and he stole along in the darkness out into the vast misty unknown country beyond the town, unperceived.

When the processions had all reached the great pagoda; when the mystery play was over; when the old legend of Guadama being nourished by the sacred milk was acted out; when all were tired, the lights out, the crowds dispersed, the fun over,—the guards bethought them of their trust, and returned to take it up again. [Pg 86]

In dismay unutterable they found their bird was flown, nor could he be found anywhere. In great alarm they made up the best story they could for the Commissioner's ears; and, to their wonder, found him strangely lenient to their misdemeanour. In truth, the great man was thus relieved from a dilemma; he pretended as much wrath as the carelessness of the guard deserved, but was almost grateful to them in his heart.

A search was instituted for the prisoner; but not very vigorously prosecuted, and soon abandoned when no signs of him could be discovered.

CHAPTER IX [Pg 87]

NEWS FROM RALPH

"Oh, that I had never allowed him to go!" wailed Mrs. Denham, the morning after the alarming telegram arrived, rocking herself to and fro in her misery, tears streaming down her face. "My dear, dear boy! He went to help me, and this is the end of it. The best, the dearest, the most unselfish boy in the world! How can I bear it! how can I bear it!"

But Agnes, when she recovered, showed much sense and strength of mind.

"Mother," said she, "it only says that the boat is missing, it does not say it is lost. Those seas are full of vessels, please God some ship has picked them up, and dear Ralph is safe yet. Do not despair, God is good."

"You are my only comfort, Agnes," sobbed Mrs. Denham; "but, oh, if I had only refused to let him go!"

"Agnes is right," said the sensible Miss Mason. "Your son did his duty in taking the chance offered to him, and God is merciful. You must trust to Him, Mrs. Denham. Agnes, my dear, you are not fit to go to your pupils to-day. I have written a note, and Jack can take it before he goes to school."

"No, thank you, ma'am," said Agnes. "Mrs. Dallas is particular. I am quite well enough this morning; the walk will do me good. I mean to be brave, and keep up heart."

She smiled, but it was a wan smile. [Pg 88]

"Perhaps you are right," replied the little old lady, with secret admiration of the girl's resolution. "Duty and work are a real help in trouble."

Miss Mason became a firm friend to Agnes from that time. She was a lonely woman. Death had lately robbed her of all who were near and dear to her; it had lessened her means, and taken her home from her; but she had an affectionate heart, into which she took her young acquaintance from that time, and found an unexpected source of happiness in so doing.

Many were the little ways of relieving the strain upon Agnes which she found. She allowed Lisa to bring her school-work into her parlour for preparation; and the quiet harbour of refuge proved to

be an immense boon, and lessened the constant irritation of the girl's temper.

She often took Cicely to walk with her; she taught her to read, and quite took her off her mother's hands.

In another week, a second telegram assured the family of Ralph's safe arrival at Moulmein; but all particulars had to be sent by post, and before they arrived all the children were down with measles.

Lisa and the baby were excessively ill. Lisa's lungs were much affected, she had been growing very fast, and the time of year was against her; while the complaint seemed to bring out latent mischief in the baby's constitution: spinal disease asserted itself, and the medical man pronounced that, if he lived, he must be a hopeless cripple.

Agnes, who had taken the measles in the first instance from her pupils, was left with a cough which every east wind aggravated, and she became thin and pale.

The assurance of Ralph's safety was a great cordial, but the letters which arrived by post, in due course of time, brought with them renewed anxiety. They related only the bare facts of the escape from the ship, and that of Ralph's severe illness. [Pg 89]

Captain Rogers had sailed from Rangoon so quickly as to have missed Mr. Gilchrist's account of particulars, addressed to him there and reposted to him in Liverpool. Thus, though he himself arrived very soon after his own letter to the firm, he knew little or nothing further.

The Messrs. Herford wished him to go out again as soon as possible. They had every confidence in him, attributing no blame whatever to him for the loss of his ship; but an official inquiry into the circumstances was inevitable, and all the appliances for Gilchrist's orchid hunting had to be renewed, besides the usual business of loading his new ship. He ran down to Cornwall to see his wife, and was obliged to be in London about the business, so could scarcely spare time to see his sister.

As soon, however, as Mr. Gilchrist's letter arrived, a copy of it was sent to Mrs. Denham; and the same post brought one to her saying that her son was out of danger, and relating details of his recovery.

These letters did more than relieve the terrible suspense of Mrs. Denham and her family, they aroused the deepest interest in the minds of all in the office of Messrs. Herford Brothers.

Mr. Augustus Herford, talking over the matter with the captain, complimented him highly upon the conduct of his nephew.

"He must be a lad worth helping," said he; "and the mother, for whose sake he has plunged into so much danger, shall not be forgotten. What other family has she, Rogers?"

"Two more sons, sir, younger, and whose education is difficult to accomplish,—a crippled infant, who must always be a burden,—and three daughters." [Pg 90]

"Six young children!" exclaimed Mr. Herford. "Poor soul, poor soul!"

He was a rich and liberal man, and acted upon his impulse. A situation was offered to Ralph in the house at Rangoon, where he might rise more rapidly than in England. Reginald was put into Christ's Hospital; and Jack should be apprenticed to his uncle as soon as he was fourteen. This would not be for nearly a year; but Reginald went soon, which relieved the crowd in the house,—and Ralph's heroism, the illness at home, and the dreadful suspense as to his brothers fate, had exerted a very favourable influence over the boy's character.

He saw how Ralph was respected and admired; he witnessed how much he was beloved and missed at home, and determined to win the same regard if possible. At anyrate, he would not disgrace his brother. The hope of soon entering upon a manly career added to his improvement; his last few months at home should be useful in leaving a good impression behind him, and little annoyances which would so soon be over were more easily borne.

Ralph would have been more surprised than anyone had he realised how widespread the consequences of his own simple adherence to duty had become, or how his own dear ones benefited through it.

Time passed on, the invalids improved in health; spring advanced, and a letter arrived from Ralph himself, saying little of his troubles, but full of the kindness he had received, and the pleasure with which he was anticipating his journey with Mr. Gilchrist.

"Kershaw, my friend, is on his way home," he wrote in conclusion. "He has promised to call and see you, dear mother. I have sent a few trifles for you from the bazaar here, and he will tell you much which I am hardly strong enough yet to write about." [Pg 91]

It was not long after receipt of this letter before a tall, good-looking, sunburnt, and extremely grave young man called one evening. He proved to be Ralph's friend, the mate Kershaw, and he was received with effusion. Tea was just ready, and he was at once invited to remain to partake of it.

Miss Mason was fetched down, and questions about the dear absent one poured out upon him. He replied to everyone with the most demure politeness, but it was not long before Agnes, as well as some of the others, observed a twinkle in the bright eyes, not exactly in accordance with the gravity of his manner. Also some of his calm observations were, to say the least of them, startling.

There was home-made saffron-cake on the table, and Mrs. Denham offered him the plate.

"Ah!" said he, "no wonder that Denham is a little dissatisfied with Burmese cookery, when he gets such cake as this at home."

"I am glad that you like it, for it is a kind of cake which we Cornish people particularly affect. Do you happen to have Cornish connections, Mr. Kershaw?"

"No, madam, I am of Irish extraction."

"Irish!" cried Lisa. "I should so like to visit Ireland. I want to see Fingal's Cave and the Giant's Causeway."

"I suppose you know, Miss Lisa, that the Causeway is supposed not to be a freak of nature but of man's manufacture."

"No, I never heard that," said Lisa. "What ground is there for supposing such a thing?"

"There are so many sham rocks in Ireland," said he sadly.

"Stuff!" said Lisa rudely. The others laughed.

"I suppose you heard that Ralph is to go up into the jungle, orchid hunting, with Mr. Gilchrist?" [Pg 92]
said Mrs. Denham.

"Yes; it will be a most interesting expedition. I could have wished to have joined it, only it was necessary to come home and pass my examination for master. Without my master's certificate I cannot take a berth as first mate, you know. Otherwise I should have liked to have gone with them, natural history is my great forte,—particularly Burmese natural history. I should have liked to have seen the Kain-no-ree, which inhabit lonely parts of the jungle."

"What sort of creature is that?" asked Jack.

"It is the missing link between birds and men, which Mr. Darwin failed to discover. It has the body of a bird, and the face of a man, and can talk away like anything."

"What a strange creature! I never heard of such a thing before. Are they pretty?"

"No, rather queer old birds, but conscientious. They have tongues which never told a lie. Then the links between the monkeys and the orchids are as much a question of degree, only upon one side, as those between monkeys and natives on the other."

"I believe," said Miss Mason quietly, "that we occasionally see the latter peculiarity at home. I have observed it in sailors."

Mr. Kershaw looked up at her. "Present company always excepted, of course," said he.

"Oh, certainly so! particularly when the company present is of Irish extraction," she replied.

"Miss Denham," appealed the young man, in injured innocence, "this lady is very severe upon me. Will you not take my part?"

"But, Mr. Kershaw, you did take even me in for a minute. How can I believe you again?" [Pg 93]

"Even you? Was it so? I cry, *Peccavi*. *Even* you."

"And now you are laughing at me."

"I? I would not laugh for the world, not even at you."

"I wish I could be even with you, Mr. Kershaw."

"And I wish that I could be evened to you, Miss Denham."

All laughed there; then Mr. Kershaw's accounts of Burma began again, in a curious medley of truth and fiction difficult to separate.

"The Burmese are a very strictly religious sort of folks. They kick off their shoes to pray, and sit upon their heels. They must not take life, not even kill their fleas or their black-beetles; yet they are the most determined murderers on the face of the earth. There is no country in which human life is less considered where offence has been offered."

"But does the English Government allow this?" asked Mrs. Denham.

"Well, madam, the murderers make such good and cheap servants, you see. Of course they must not kill the English."

"I do not know how to believe you, Mr. Kershaw."

"Other ladies have the same difficulty at times, ma'am, but I may assure you that it is a fact. English people are perfectly safe from them. Other customs are peculiar. Whenever they wish for a wet day, they send a white elephant out to take his walks abroad, and the rain is sure to come."

"Now, Mr. Kershaw!"

"It is quite true, madam. It would be done more frequently were there more white elephants, but there are very few, and it does not answer to whitewash them. Unfortunately it is one of those [Pg 94]
cases where the converse of a fact does not work in an opposite manner. There would not be six months of rain at a stretch if sending out a black elephant would stop it."

"I daresay not," remarked Miss Mason drily. "Will you take some honey, Mr. Kershaw?"

"No, I thank you, ma'am. Burma has cured me from a boyish taste for honey. They embalm their dead with honey there; and, after a time, tap the mummies, in a spirit of true economy, and sell the honey in the bazaars to Englishmen unsuspecting of guile. Such honey is said to be peculiarly

nourishing,—to eat it from the tomb of your fathers is to taste all the sweetness of friendship with your venerated ancestors. It is a poetical idea."

"Mr. Kershaw! How can you talk so? Have you no pleasanter or really beautiful things about which to tell us?"

"The most beautiful idea of which I have heard there, is the notion that people's souls are like butterflies, and that when you dream of an absent friend, it is really because your butterfly and his have escaped, for a time, from their prison-houses, and meet in dreamland for a chat."

"Oh," sighed Agnes, "I wish that my brother's butterfly would escape this very night, and tell me what he is doing at this moment!"

"Don't wish that, Agnes dear," said Miss Mason. "Should he be in pain or difficulty, and you could not help him, it would be better for you not to know of it."

"How can you say so!" cried Agnes. "I should always know when he is happy, and if troubles came I could give him my sympathy."

"Suppose you give it to me, Miss Denham, to keep for him. I would take great care of it."

They were examining his clothes with grins of delight (*p. 193*).

"I fear that you would put it away so carefully that you would not know where to find it at need," said Agnes. [Pg 95]

So they chatted on, now in joke, now in earnest, and an atmosphere of youthful brightness came into the house with the sailor and dispersed much of its gloom.

He often called to spend a few hours with them, for he had few friends in Liverpool, and liked all the family. To Jack he became very useful; and Mrs. Denham grew to regard him almost in the light of another son.

[Pg 96]

CHAPTER X
THE LEOPARD

It was a great relief to Ralph, as well as to some others, when he learned that Kirke had escaped; but the men were very wrathful, and Mr. Gilchrist both dissatisfied that he should have avoided punishment, and more than anxious as to his safety. What, he thought, could such a young man do in the jungle, or among the half-civilised Burmese natives, without being able to speak their language at all, or help himself in any way.

All the weeks which he himself had spent in Moulmein, and during which he had worked hard to master the language, only resulted in enabling him to make himself imperfectly understood.

Ralph, indeed, succeeded better, though by ear rather than from book lore. With the happy effrontery of boyhood, he made the most astounding shots at Burmese; and, though the Burman lads laughed at his mistakes till they were fain to roll upon the ground from merriment, they, somehow, appeared to comprehend his meaning.

But nothing availed to make the two old Cornishmen speak anything but their own tongue.

Kirke had received no lessons, gained no experience, what could he do?

"My good sir," said the Chief Commissioner, to whom Mr. Gilchrist imparted his doubts—"My good sir, the lad is certain to be discovered, and brought back here. He is a marked man among [Pg 97] the Burmese, and they will not feed him for nothing. A reward will cause him to be brought in before long."

"Drat him!" said Wills. "Good-for-nothing never comes to harm. I hope they there black fellows will read him a good lesson."

None of them were aware that the apprentice had with him a considerable sum of money in English sovereigns, and time passed on, during which nothing was heard about him.

Meanwhile, the mates and seamen proceeded to join their captain in Rangoon; Price and Simpson, the two sailors who had also been upon the raft, electing to go with their shipmates when they had once more met with them. Wills and Osborn adhered to their agreement to join Mr. Gilchrist's party; and that gentleman willingly parted with the others, considering that Indian coolies, Tamil or Telegu natives, would be of more use to him.

It was time to start upon the expedition now, and preparations were soon made. The Rangoon branch of Herford Brothers' house of business franked all expenses; and a bullock-gharrie, or native cart, was purchased, furnished with an awning to protect the travellers from sun and rain, and drawn by a couple of stout buffaloes.

Light baskets and other means for packing orchids were prepared; and stores of various kinds were added, as coffee, tinned meats and biscuits; but they hoped to obtain some provisions as they went through Burmese villages.

The gharrie was packed, the buffaloes harnessed, and the travellers were taking their seats, when suddenly a distant roar was heard.

"Hark!" cried the coolie in charge of the animals, holding up his finger.

The sound distinctly approached, and shouting some unintelligible words, the fellow goaded the [Pg 98] buffaloes into as rapid movement as possible, hurrying the whole concern back into its original shelter in the compound.

The reason was quickly made apparent, for black clouds drove up from the weather-quarter, and sheets of rain descended upon the hot baked earth, which, unable to absorb anything like the deluge, allowed it to run off, in every direction, in plentiful streams.

It did not last long. Before two hours were over the ground showed but slight traces of damp, the gharrie was brought out again, and the party set off down the Mapoon road, following the course of the stream upon the way to Amherst.

"What did the fellow tie that bunch of plantains up to the front of the gharrie for?" asked Ralph. "We don't want fruit all covered with dust and flies."

"That is not fruit for us," replied Mr. Gilchrist, laughing. "That is an offering for any spirit whom we may chance to meet wandering about. It might be unfortunate if we should offend such gentry."

"Is it to warn them of our approach that they let our wheels make such a creaking? Cannot we oil them, or something, to stop it? And must we be deafened by those ugly square bells tied to the buffaloes' throats?"

"I believe that it will be best to try and put up with the customs of the country in which we find ourselves, Ralph; at least until we are quite certain that altering them to please ourselves may not be giving the natives unnecessary offence. We shall soon become used to such trifles as that. See, we are approaching the great timber works."

Huge trunks of teak, and other valuable trees suitable for ship building, were floated down as rafts from the dense forests up the river, and here cut into suitable form and size for being transported to England.

It was wonderful to observe the skill and judgment displayed by the elephants employed in [Pg 99] moving these immense hulks from the river-banks up to the spot where machinery awaited them. They were no less skilful in perceiving the best way for pushing, lifting, or driving the timber, than wary in avoiding the machinery if obliged to pass near it. Ralph was immensely diverted to observe how each animal, in making his way by the place where a circular saw was at work, invariably moved his own tail to the farther side, so as to preserve his cherished appendage

scathless from injury. He was told that at one time many elephants had their tails cut off by accident here, until they learnt caution to this extent.

So much interested and amused were the travellers by all which they saw in this place, that they proceeded no farther that day, it having been late when they started; but the next morning saw them early on their route; and that day, leaving the high roads, they plunged into forest paths, and began to make their way through the jungle in earnest.

They proposed driving to a small Karen village to which a native had offered to guide them, and which was situated in a locality where many orchids were reported to grow.

The native hired to show them the way promised that they should arrive there in "the boiling of two pots of rice." This was understood to be in about half an hour, but the little journey really occupied thrice that length of time, for rain again poured down in a perfect sheet, and the bullocks could hardly make their way through it.

All were glad when they arrived, and were able to procure shelter. The houses were raised upon high posts, comfortably built of wood, and thatched. Whether this elevation was intended to preserve the family from the damp, or from wild animals, they could not discover. Mr. Gilchrist [Pg 100] thought the form of erection partook of each reason.

The lower part had a verandah around it, and was floored a little above the ground with bamboos. The gharrie was accommodated in a portion of this lower place, and arranged for the travellers' accommodation at night.

The women of the house prepared them some rice while this was being done, and served it, with fish upon a separate platter.

The rain was over for the time when they were rested and refreshed, so they started for an expedition into the jungle, with which the village was closely surrounded.

They soon found plenty of orchids, and became so much interested in the selection of the rarest specimens, that the light failed them, and they could scarcely "distinguish the veins in a man's hand," which their Burmese guide seemed to consider a felicitous method of describing the hour.

They remounted the gharrie, and were proceeding on their way with the slow deliberation which formed the bullocks' greatest speed, when Ralph perceived a huge, dark mass of something lying right across their path, with two points of living fire gleaming sullenly from it.

It was an enormous leopard, taking its rest, but with watchful eyes.

The bullocks, perceiving the danger in the same moment as the men, made a sudden lurch to one side, nearly upsetting the gharrie, and causing the wheels on one side to sink into a mud-hole, half filled with water from the recent rain.

They stuck fast in this, and the terrified beasts could not drag them out. They plunged, snorted, and laboured desperately; while the beautiful sleek brute rose, stretched himself, and prepared to spring.

Ralph thought his last hour had arrived, but firearms were at hand. [Pg 101]

Mr. Gilchrist snatched up a loaded gun, fired, but with too uncertain an aim, for he could not control the trembling of his nerves at this first and sudden sight of so terrible an animal in his native jungle.

The driver of the gharrie, with a howl, abandoned his seat in front, and crept into the recesses within to hide. The leopard made his spring, and fastened upon the nearest bullock. Ralph uttered a cry as desperate as that of the native, and discharged a pistol full at the creature.

So close upon them as he was, it was impossible to miss hitting it somewhere; the bullet entered its shoulder, and a trickle of blood bore witness to the fact.

The pistol was a revolver, and Ralph shot again and again, for all the chambers were loaded; but his hand shook, and several bullets went wide of the mark, though he hit the leopard in the ear and in the side.

The creature abandoned its work of mangling the poor bullock, when it suffered the first shot, raised its proud head and looked the boy full in the face; crouched again, and, lashing its tail with fury, was on the point of leaping straight into the waggon, when, his arm steadied by the emergency, Mr. Gilchrist discharged his second barrel in its face, and shot it straight through the head.

Osborn at the same moment, having withheld his shot until it was certain to take effect, hit it in the neck, and the animal rolled over in its dying agonies.

The Burmese bullock-driver now emerged from his retirement, very glorious over the defeat of the enemy; he danced round it with joy, and lauded "*our* courage," "*our* success," "*our* bravery," until old Wills was obliged literally to spit out his contempt.

"Shut up!" he growled. "Hold your ridiculous jaw! Much good you were, you coward! Next time [Pg 102] we will throw you out for the cat to set his talons in those absurd blue breeches of yourn. Better you than our poor buffalo. Here, hand me that knife, and let me put the poor wretch out of its sufferings."

For the buffalo was not dead, though paralysed by the leopard's teeth and claws in its spine, at the back of its throat. It turned a pathetic eye upon its friends, as it asking for help, but there was nothing to be done but to put it out of its misery.

Ralph shuddered, and felt very sick; Mr. Gilchrist also was faint when the pressure of excitement passed away, and Wills made both of them take some cordial to steady their nerves.

Osborn meantime lit their lamps, and set some flaring torches into the ground, preparatory to skinning the leopard, which was a splendid beast.

Ralph collected wood, and built up a fire with some difficulty, as the rain was coming down again almost like a waterspout. However, it stopped after a while, the boy was lavish with his kerosene oil, poured over the damp branches, and a bonfire rewarded his exertions, drying their garments, illuminating the wild scene, and enabling him to boil some coffee, of which they all gladly partook, with biscuits and other comestibles from their tinned stores.

It was late before the leopard was safely and carefully skinned. The buffalo was not worth the trouble, being too much mangled, but the men cut off its head, as the skull and horns were worth preserving. It would soon be reduced to bare bones if left to the mercy of the white ants. To preserve the fine hide of the leopard from them was a greater difficulty.

The party camped down in their gharrie, with fires set around them, for the short night, when all was done; and proceeded in the cool of the morning to the Karen village. Here they were [Pg 103] received with great delight when the driver announced the event of the night. The villagers immediately started to bring in the carcase of the leopard upon hurdles. Part of its flesh was dried and pounded, to be used as medicine; but they feasted upon the remains of the bullock; and tried hard, both by fair means and foul, to induce Mr. Gilchrist to part with the leopard's claws, to be used as charms, but he refused all overtures of this kind.

In spite of this, the poor people were very kind to our friends, and they made up their minds to remain there for a few days until they could find a suitable buffalo wherewith to replace their loss, which did not seem to be easy in this place, the people being very poor.

CHAPTER XI [Pg 104]

WHAT BEFELL KIRKE AFTER HIS ESCAPE

Kirke had hurried away from Moulmein as fast as he could walk. He knew that he must make his way northward but there all his knowledge ceased.

He had plenty of English gold with him, for he carried his money in a belt round his waist, and thus had saved it when he lost all else in his haste to leave the burning ship.

But though he had gold, he had nothing else, nor could he speak a word of the language.

So great was his desperation, however, that he cared nothing for this. He walked on and on, till he arrived at a small village, where, though it was in the middle of the night, the people were all out and about still.

Some girls were squatting behind a lamp blazing in an earthen vessel raised upon three pieces of bamboo. They were smoking—like everyone else—and selling sweetmeats and rice.

Kirke made signs that he wished to buy some, and offered a George IV. coin.

The girls stared at him and his money, jabbered together, and shook their heads. He did not understand them; but, supposing that they made some mistake as to the value of the coin, not recognising it as gold, produced another piece. He was naturally reckless of money, and now wanted food, and silver change with which to proceed on his way.

The girls laughed, nodded, took the second coin, which had the Queen's head on it, and gave him [Pg 105] Indian silver change in profusion for it, besides rice in a red bowl, fruit, and sweetmeats, for which they reserved a small amount; but they would not have the coin with the man's head.

Kirke could not comprehend their objection to it, which really was their idea that only "woman coins" fructify and increase, but he was satisfied with the result of his shopping, and proceeded on his way.

His road seemed to lie between a chain of villages; and, fearful of being overtaken upon it, where he would be so easily recognised and caught, he turned off towards the coast again, soon coming to a stream, across which a man in a canoe took him.

The sun was now high, and he tried to find a place where he might lie down and sleep. With some difficulty he made the boatman understand what he wanted, and take him to a hut, where they spread a mat for him with a rug, and he took a long rest.

He could purchase nothing except rice and fruit upon awaking, but the owner of the hut offered oil and salt with the former, and some unutterable abomination of putrid fish, which he called "ngapé," and which he seemed surprised to find rejected with disgust.

When the heat of the day was over, his host offered milk and more rice, from which Kirke made a second meal. He would have liked stronger liquor, but could not make himself understood. He then obtained a seat in a native bullock-cart, neither knowing nor caring where it was going, so that it was still northwards, and not to any English station.

So he wandered for some days, aimlessly and drearily, with no object before him, no one to speak

[Pg 106]

to, no settled plan of action. By degrees he became used to this existence; youth restored his energies, he became less afraid of pursuit, learnt a few Burmese words, and liked this life so full of new sights and sounds. He came to a large river, the course of which he followed upwards for several days, for the rapids in it caused all the people to shake their heads when he tried to get ferried across.

He succeeded at last, and congratulated himself now upon being safe, but here his luck deserted him.

He found that there was gold to be got in this place; and from the contemptuous air with which the people turned over his coin, and the few flat flakes which they showed him in return, chiefly worn as amulets, he gathered that their gold was considered much purer than his, but he did not seem able to find any of it for himself.

The people also evidently endeavoured to dissuade him from wandering about alone, making him understand that there was danger from wild beasts in so doing. This was a hindrance which had never before occurred to him, but was a very sufficient obstacle.

The weather was extremely sultry now, and there had been several violent thunderstorms. The place was mountainous, and the valleys between the hills grew very wet. To his surprise the ground never seemed to dry up; though after a tremendous storm, when the sun blazed out again, it positively steamed, as a pot of water might steam over a fire.

The storms became more frequent, the deluges of rain heavier and more constant, the valleys fuller and fuller of water. All wandering was at an end perforce, except in canoes. The people expressed no surprise, they appeared to be prepared for such a state of things. They all had boats of some kind or other; old and young, men and women, were evidently familiar with their management. The huts were raised upon piles, in some places twelve feet high; even their [Pg 107] bullocks and other live stock were stabled aloft, and the stench from their close accommodation was all but insufferable.

The children fished through holes in the floors of the huts; every foul refuse was simply upset through them; all objects were damp and ill-smelling.

The poor people were very hospitable and kind. They gave Kirke of their best, charging him incredibly small sums for his keep. There was no getting away until the floods abated, but life under such unhealthy conditions was what none but a native could withstand; and in spite of incessantly smoking, as they did, Kirke had not been two months in the village where the rains had surprised him, before he was down in a raging fever.

There he lay, in that secluded Burmese village, struggling between life and death for a long time. His constitution had been severely tried by his early excesses, and had he not passed some months upon enforced abstinence from alcohol on board the poor *Pelican of the North*, so that he had, in some measure, been restored to a more healthy state of body, it is doubtful whether it would have been possible for him to have fought through the terrible fever, which had been induced by hardship and exposure to malaria.

His chief chance of life lay in the continuance of the impossibility of obtaining stimulants where he was. The Burmese are a water drinking race; and although they do distil a pernicious fiery liquor from rice, it is not much used, or easily procured, in such out-of-the-way places as those into which he had wandered.

Medical science is very imperfectly understood among this people; and when his host fetched a native doctor for the sick stranger, he brought with him such strange-looking compounds in gaily-painted joints of bamboo canes, that Kirke could not bring himself to trust them any more than [Pg 108] the charms, in which the village Galen evidently possessed more faith himself. Perhaps this was well for him, but he was brought to the verge of the grave before the constantly recurring attacks of ague and fever gradually subsided. And oh, how lonely he felt as he lay on his bed of sickness now!

God seemed to have forsaken him; left him to his own stubborn, hard heart, and allowed him to take his own way.

But not in reality. Lonely, suffering, weak, with no one to speak to, none to care for him, none to help him, his hour had come at last. Broken in spirit, he repented his evil courses, he sought his God in prayer, and his Father did not despise his humble and contrite heart.

Exhausted by the struggle through the morning's rigor which attended his complaint, he lay prone one day, in what was half sleep, half unconsciousness, on his mat.

A pleasant breeze had sprung up, which rustled the branches of the trees, and wafted towards him the scent of flowers, overpowering that of rotting vegetation which always seemed to pervade everything. It brought with it also the gentle tinkle of bells from a pagoda upon a rising ground in this valley. In his half awake state, he fancied he smelt the Gloire de Dijon roses that grew round the drawing-room bay window in his father's rectory, and heard the church bells ringing afar off, calling the villagers to the Sabbath service.

He remembered how, as a little child, he had been led by his gentle mother's hand through the pleasant garden and shrubbery, to the gate which opened thence into the churchyard heaped with grassy mounds. Among them was a little white marble cross, over the grave of his baby sister who had died. His mother stayed her feet at this place, and laid before it the pure white [Pg 109] rosebud which she had plucked as they went over the lawn. A tear ran down her cheek as she did so.

"Jamie," said she, "little Leonora would have been five years old to-day if God had spared her to us. Oh, my dear little girl, my dear little lost one!"

His father had come up to them. "Not lost, wifey," said he,—"not lost, but gone before."

Why did he recall all this now, when he had never thought about the scene for so long. His mother had gone before too, ten years ago. He had despised his father's simple piety because he was not intellectual. He had scoffed at his attempts to teach him, scorned his affectionate nature, neglected him for pleasures and friends which had brought him to this.

What had he done with his stronger mind, his superior talents? His father was beloved, respected, a welcome visitor beside many a dying sinner's bed. He himself was a fugitive, an outcast, alone in the world.

Pondering these thoughts, he fell asleep, for he was very weak. His slumber was not lengthy, nor did he seem to have dreamed through it; but he started up from it suddenly, as at the call of a trumpet voice, shouting with triumph—

"Not lost, but found!"

Bewildered, confused, this voice seemed to him real. What did it mean?

All at once the barriers of pride gave way; there was no one to see him, and he turned his face to the wall, weeping bitterly.

A softer, better mood succeeded, and a stronger feeling of peace than he had felt for long. He determined to remain in this place until he was quite well; and did so, his health gradually returning to him.

Kirke's illness, and long residence among them, had been to these people as good as a wreck to the Cornish seaside population of old,—it had brought unusual prosperity to them. Small as their charges had appeared to him, they were really four times as high as the true value of the goods supplied to him had been to them. The simple villager was no simpleton when matters of trade and finance were in question; and, if they prayed at all, their petitions to Guadama, for years afterwards, would have been that the Lord of the White Elephant would be pleased to send them another sick stranger. [Pg 110]

He had paid royally for the medicines in those red and yellow bamboo bottles, which the doctor had carried away again as full as he brought them. He had paid handsomely for the rice, the ngapé, the pickled tea which he could not eat, and over which his entertainers had enjoyed a high old time while their guest's butterfly soul was wandering about the world, at sport with other butterfly spirits, leaving its lawful owner unconscious upon his mat.

They were now reaping an abundant harvest, doubtless a part of the luck which their hospitality to the stranger had brought to them, and they were rich. They did not want to be rid of their invalid,—not they. No hospitality was more genuine than theirs.

If they could only conceal their riches from the knowledge of the dacoit chief,—who commanded his band of scoundrels from a neighbouring village among the hills at a little distance,—they might, should their treasure of a sick man recover,—and after all his money was spent, not before,—conduct him to the nearest English military station, and be paid all over again by the innocent white-faced Thakins there for their kindness to their countryman.

So the virtuous Burman sang and laughed over his work, in his simple *gaité du coeur*; and gathered the jungle flowers and fruit which cost him nothing at all, but which the Thakin would doubtless be so grateful to them for bringing to him. [Pg 111]

And Kirke lay pondering as to what course he must pursue when he should recover.

In the first instance he must write to his father, confess his sense of the sins which he had committed, and ask pardon for his conduct.

But, after that, what? Would it be necessary to give himself up to English justice, and to permit the law to take its way with him for his attempt to lose the raft? That would be a very bitter pill to him,—must it be swallowed? At anyrate, moving was impossible at present, though he was recovering fast; that question must wait, but he could write to his father and keep the letter by him, waiting for some chance of sending it. He would be more at peace with himself were the confession made on paper, even were no one ever to read it. He would feel more in earnest as to his repentance.

Many days were spent over that letter, and it was a very pathetic one when finished, for it was simple and manly in its tone. In it he confessed his sorrow for his past life, and his hope that he might be spared to redeem it, in some measure, by his future career. "If I can," he wrote, "I would wish to get something to do here, rather than return home. I would like to prove to you that I can and will work hard at some honest employment before asking you to receive me into your presence again. I am recovering from a severe attack of jungle fever, and I cannot say where I shall go, or what I must do when I can move; but if you forgive me, please write to the Herfords' house in Rangoon, from whence I will endeavour to obtain letters as soon as may be. I hope that God will give me a fresh chance; but if I die, will you try to believe that I am truly sorry for the past." [Pg 112]

He wrote and rewrote this letter, now fearing that it did not express enough humility and contrition, then dreading lest it should seem servile; but he completed it at last, and laid it carefully aside.

CHAPTER XII
THE KAREN VILLAGE

[Pg 113]

Whilst detained in the Karen village, Mr. Gilchrist and Ralph were invited to the christening feast given by the principal man in the place.

They were surprised one morning by a visit from five young ladies, dressed in their best silk "tameins" of rich pattern, with white muslin jackets drawn on above them, and very gay silk handkerchiefs thrown loosely over their shoulders.

They were bedizened with a quantity of jewels, roses nestled in their splendid black hair, cheroots were in their mouths, and each carried a handsome lacquered tray, heaped with little parcels done up in gilt paper.

They advanced to the verandah, where the gentlemen were sitting—very much to their own comfort—in free and easy costume suitable to the intense heat. Ralph coloured scarlet, conscious of his shirt sleeves, bare feet thrust into slippers, and generally loosened attire; but, the girls having come upon them suddenly, nothing could be done except a frantic effort to button his shirt at the throat, which resulted in dropping the stud, and seeing it maliciously roll out of reach.

"Never heed them, maister," whispered Wills, who was in attendance. "They'm used to wuss, you may take your davy. Ef 'ee don't take no notice, they maids won't nother."

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An overpowering desire to laugh took possession of the boy at this, the more impossible to control as all the girls advanced giggling and smiling at each other.

Mr. Gilchrist was vexed. "Behave yourself, Ralph," said he sternly, very anxious to maintain his dignity.

He rose, took off his hat with a flourish, and bowed low. Ralph tried to imitate him; and one of the girls became spokeswoman for the rest.

"My little sister's head is washed to-morrow, at sky shutting-in time," said she. "Will the royal selfs lords be good enough to join the feast?"

"We shall be pleased to do so, Mah——?" replied Mr. Gilchrist interrogatively.

"Mah Ngway Khine" (Miss Silver Spring), said she, understanding perfectly that he meant to ask her name. The other girls all laughed, and each gave her own name, pointing each to her own face to indicate that this meant herself. Miss Pretty, Miss Naughty, Miss Loveable, Miss Beyond Compare.

Mr. Gilchrist bowed to each; then, pointing to Ralph, introduced themselves.

"Moung Ralph Denham,—Moung Alexander Bruce Gilchrist."

The girls thought this an excellent joke, and laughed heartily, trying to pronounce the names as hopelessly as ever Wills himself had failed in mastering Burmese.

Mr. Gilchrist then handed to each girl a cigar from the box lying beside him, which seemed to give great pleasure.

"I am going," said Miss Silver Spring, after that. "Be pleased to eat this pickled tea," and she handed to each one of the little packets upon her tray. The party then went gaily off to give their invitations further.

[Pg 115]

"Ralph," said Mr. Gilchrist, "we must see what we can find for presents to our hosts to-morrow. We had better visit the bazaar."

"Lord, zur," quoth Osborn, "they du knaw the cost of all the old trade there better nor we. They can get all that whenever they want. Give 'em sommut what they doan't zee every day."

"But what have we to give of that sort, Osborn?"

"English money, zur,—more particularly ef 'ee will stand goold. English things at after. 'Ee've got tin canisters painted up smart, haven't 'ee, with coffee and thiccee like in 'em; and pots, with picturs a-top of the lids, with potted meat?"

Mr. Gilchrist thought this good advice, he purchased some gay silk handkerchiefs of native make in the bazaar, a silver betel-box or two; looked out the newest sovereign in his possession for the infant, polished it up till it glittered finely; and then searched his stores.

There was not much of the ornamental among them; nor was he willing to part with a great deal of his potted meat; for he could buy so little animal food of other descriptions in these country parts, where the people objected even to selling them live poultry for their own eating, or even eggs for them to cook.

The Burmese will devour raw the eggs of any creature, fowls, turtles, crocodiles, or iguanas,—but they will cook none.

A little fish was to be got at times, but in such small quantities as to be very unsatisfying; nor was milk to be procured, as the people neither kept cows nor used milk themselves.

Our friends were growing very tired of vegetable diet, and were obliged to trust to their own stores for everything else.

However, a tin canister of coffee, decorated with gay paper, was selected; and a pair of earthenware pots full of potted meat, on one of which was a representation, in bright colours, of Jack Sprat and his wife, sitting on either side of a table, with the joint of roast beef on the platter between them; while the other displayed the time-honoured portraits of Uncle Toby and the widow. [Pg 116]

Happy in the hope that pleasure was to be the meed of these gifts, Mr. Gilchrist and Ralph dressed themselves in clean white suits, and set off for the entertainment at the hour specified.

The baby was a very small one, only about a fortnight old. Ralph thought it looked like a little goblin changeling, with its dark skin, lean body, and twinkling black eyes; but it was displayed with great pride.

"A very—very—nice little girl," pronounced the bachelor Scotsman, with sudden inspiration succeeding his utter ignorance as to what he ought to say.

"Very like his father, ma'am," said Ralph with great solemnity. "Has it any teeth yet?"

Wills, marching behind his masters, with the presents arranged among flowers upon a tray, burst into a great guffaw at this moment, and tried to cover his misdemeanour by a most unnatural cough. Mr. Gilchrist looked daggers at him over his shoulder.

"'Ee should have stopped at half-way, Maister Ralph," whispered Osborn, on the broad grin.

"Don't Burmese babies get teeth?" inquired Ralph innocently. "I am sure that I have heard dozens of old women ask my mother that question when they used to come and see our babies at home. I thought I was all right there."

"This little maid be too young, zur," said the sailor, who had his own quiver full at home.

"Oh! that's it, is it?" cried Ralph.

Perhaps he had not been understood, for none of the Burmans appeared to be surprised; but they were all much taken up with the pride of the company of these distinguished foreigners at their feast. [Pg 117]

The father related to them that the child was born on a Thursday, so she would prove to be of a mild, gentle disposition; also that Thursday was the day represented by the elephant without tusks; and he pointed to some red and yellow waxen effigies of this animal, prepared for offerings to be presented on his daughter's behalf upon the steps of the nearest pagoda.

The astrologer, an old phoongyee, had cast the infant's horoscope, which was a most favourable one.

Mr. Gilchrist listened to all this with gravity, and then presented their offerings, laying the bright sovereign upon the baby's breast.

This evidently gave great delight; as did the packet of choice cigars to the father, the silken kerchiefs to the elder daughters, the betel-boxes and sweetmeats to the sons and younger children; but something was noticeably wrong about the jars of potted meat brought for the mother, nor could the Englishmen understand what was the matter.

That offence was taken was evident; and Mr. Gilchrist, seeing one of the pots hurried out of sight, begged, in much distress, to be told what he had done wrong, assuring the head of the house that no offence was intended; he had hoped that the English jars might, when empty, be useful to the lady for holding betel nut.

After some difficulty, it appeared that Uncle Toby's attitude, with regard to the fair widow, was not considered proper.

"No Burmese gentleman would smell his wife's cheek in public," explained the phoongyee, scandalised; but willing to overlook the ignorance of foreigners who made such handsome presents. [Pg 118]

To "smell a lady's cheek" is Burmese for kissing her; and Mr. Gilchrist, a most punctilious man in his deference to all the fair sex, coloured highly, as he explained that the gentleman in the picture was only removing from the lady's eye a bit of some extraneous matter which had blown into it.

This being perfectly understood, harmony was once more established.

Miss Silver Spring and her sisters handed round cheroots; all seated themselves, and began to discuss a suitable name for the child; while the nurse washed the little one's head in a decoction of the pods and bark of the soap acacia tree; which was afterwards carried to each guest in turn, with an invitation to lave his hands in the same lather.

Many were the names suggested for the child; some being discarded as not beginning with the same letter of the alphabet as that of the day of the week upon which it had been born. Others met with disfavour from different reasons. But at last, with an evident desire to honour Mr. Gilchrist, and make up for the misunderstanding which had taken place, he was entreated to propose a name—an English name.

"Madam," said he, "I think there is no name ever borne by an English lady so sweet as that of Lily."

He took a beautiful lily from among the flowers heaped on every side, and laid it in the tiny hand, which closed upon it. All regarded this as a favourable omen,—the child's butterfly spirit had accepted the flower, and Lily must be her name.

More cheroots—more betel for chewing—more fruit—more sweetmeats—then a grand feast—after that a pwé, or theatrical play. Money was given to the nurse, to the phoongyee, and all went merry as a wedding bell. [Pg 119]

Ralph soon made friends with the boys of this village, a set of merry fellows, who taught him to play at ball in their way, and were much impressed by his accounts of the games played in England. He showed them how to play at hockey, and delighted in their skittles, played with the great flat seeds of a jungle creeper.

Wills instructed the blacksmith in the art of making quoits, to the throwing of which both men and boys took very kindly, and many a merry hour was thus passed among them.

Osborn whistled melodiously, and considered himself a dab at singing "The Death of Nelson," "The Bay of Biscay," and other sea-songs, with which he often favoured his new friends; and Mr. Gilchrist, who was musical, gave them songs of a different type.

Ralph knew one air, and one only, which he sang for ever, and which the Burmese boys soon caught up from him, so that it became quite popular. It was—

"I'll hang my harp on a willow tree,

I'll off to the wars again," etc.

On the Sunday evenings, Mr. Gilchrist gathered his own party around him, and conducted the evening service, which amazed the villagers greatly. They would gather around the worshippers in a ring, listening, and trying to join in when they sang the evening hymn, or "Abide with Me," but never interrupted the prayers.

Mr. Gilchrist was particular in giving alms to the begging monks every morning, and the phoongyee became fond of talking to him, and asking about his religion, relating to him pious sentences and precepts which often contained great beauty. He, on his side, liked to hear the Englishman repeat the beatitudes, the Lord's Prayer, and various texts, which he could understand, but evidently linked on to the sayings of the lord Guadama in some strange fashion. [Pg 120]

Mr. Gilchrist often wished that he possessed more teaching power; but he was a wise man, and thought it best to offer a little, chiefly of simple Bible words and broad principles, which might sink in if repeated frequently, rather than attempt what he did not feel qualified to explain thoroughly. He likened himself to Apollos watering the good seed extracted from the Christian's safe storehouse—the Word of God. He would give the increase in His own time and way.

So they lived for several weeks among these poor simple people, in great harmony; collecting many rare and valuable plants, some insects, and much experience in the language.

When the people learnt what was wanted, they would go themselves into places of which they knew, sometimes at great distances, and bring them plants; for which liberal payment was always offered, but in many cases the flowers were insisted upon as gifts,—expressions of goodwill.

After waiting for some time, and despairing at last of finding a suitable buffalo with which to pursue their journey farther, Mr. Gilchrist made up his mind to return to Moulmein by the route he had come. His store of provisions was much lessened, he had very little left, and his gharrie was pretty well laden with jungle spoils.

Teak shingles, with orchids nailed upon them, were fastened all round the head of the vehicle—or what the sailors insisted upon terming "the prow." The bamboos which supported the awning were festooned with slight baskets, in which were planted other specimens. It was hopeless to think of preserving their skins, feathers, or insects from the ants and beetles without better appliances than they had at command there, for all which they had brought of carbolic soap, Keating's powder, and camphor, was used up. So they made presents of all the tins and jars which remained, bid their friends farewell, and set off upon their return journey, accompanied for the first stage by many men and boys upon forest ponies, and followed by lamentations from a crowd of women and girls who went no farther than the village boundary. [Pg 121]

CHAPTER XIII [Pg 122]

THE MAN-EATER

During the orchid hunter's stay in this village, the whole party had improved their skill as marksmen. The difficulty of procuring any animal food except by their own exertions, and the excellence of the wild pea-fowl, jungle-fowl, and deer, made Ralph, in particular, very keen after them; and, with the delight of a boy who had never before had the command of firearms, he missed no chance of familiarising himself with their use.

Mr. Gilchrist could give him no instruction in the art, but old Wills knew more, and was persuaded that it was necessary for some among the party to be fair shots, as otherwise their lives might be in terrible danger one day upon these wild adventurous journeys.

He therefore encouraged Ralph to seek sport upon every occasion, and the lad was fast becoming practised in the art, which pleased him much.

Although the village people would not kill for their own food, they entertained no objection whatever to profit by the peril into which, in their estimation, these strangers brought their own salvation; and fresh meat was much nicer than the half-rotten flesh, and that of animals which had died of disease, upon which they would greedily feed, and which entail upon them leprosy and other dreadful disorders. They gratefully accepted all the Englishmen's benefactions [Pg 123] therefore, and Denham went out shooting nearly every day.

The fame of the liberal-handed Englishmen, and their absurd fancy for out-of-the-way plants from the jungle, had spread during their stay in this village, and on the day before Mr. Gilchrist had determined to start upon his return to Moulmein, a man arrived from a remote hamlet, bringing with him an orchid of such beauty and rarity as to throw him into a state of the greatest excitement.

"Denham," he said, "we must secure a good supply of this at any cost; it is a perfectly new one. To send this home will be to secure my fame, and be the ground-work of my fortunes. It is worth all that we have got before put together, but the fellow has mangled it terribly in bringing it as he has done. I must find the place where it grows, and take the specimens properly myself, or they would never reach England alive."

"All right, sir," said Ralph; "I'm game."

They made their preparations with all possible speed, retaining the Karen who had brought the plant for the purpose of conducting them to the spot where it grew.

This man declared that it would be impossible to take the bullock-gharrie with them under any circumstances; the jungle tracks were too much overgrown and tangled to admit of so large a vehicle making its way through them. Ponies were therefore hired for the purpose, little vicious creatures, which were used to scrambling and to the hilly country for which they were bound. One of these carried such equipments as Mr. Gilchrist considered necessary.

"I wish," said he sighing, as he added a couple of guns to the other preparations,—"I wish that I could have foreseen, in my youth, that I should ever be likely to find myself wandering about in places so wild as these in which we are now. I would have made myself a good shot in time. As it [Pg 124] is, I fear, Denham, that we must trust Providence not to let our lives depend upon the accuracy of our aim at any time."

"We are improving, sir," said Denham. "We cannot call ourselves crack sportsmen, I suppose, but I don't feel as much at sea as I used to do, and we have managed to bring in a good deal of game lately."

"You and Wills have, not I," replied Mr. Gilchrist.

"We've got it, at anyrate," said the boy.

Osborn was to remain behind with the driver of the bullock-gharrie. He did not mind being left alone among the natives now, for he felt as if he knew them all, and was among friends.

The others were soon ready to start, and pursued their way among giant trees and matted underwood, through marshy spots, ankle deep in water, and over stony ground where little rivulets of water streamed among broken rocks. The damp hollows steamed with moisture, heavy clouds hung low over the jagged hilltops. Now they had to cleave their way through walls of climbing plants that cast out great tendrils, or branches; taking root in crevices and crannies, to start afresh into luxuriant life. Then they emerged upon some long defile where exquisite trees were budding out into every shade of green among dark cliffs and boulders; or upon some forest glade where flowers of gorgeous hue clung to the trunks of palm and peepul tree, clothing them in purple majesty, or hanging curtains of crimson, orange, golden yellow or snowy white, across the misty vista.

Birds of radiant hues flitted from bough to bough, chattering and screaming; occasionally a deer might be seen, or a small sambhur, standing to gaze at the intruders, then bounding away into shady solitudes where he felt secure.

Once a creature of the wild cat species was observed slinking along among the undergrowth; and [Pg 125] many lizards were feeding upon white ants and other insects in the coarse grass.

They were approaching the hamlet, when, in some soft ground near to a pool of water, their guide uttered a horrified exclamation as he stooped to examine the pug of some animal very freshly made in the mud.

"What beast's footmarks are those?" asked Ralph.

"Big tiger, paya," replied the man. "He has been here last night."

"Do you consider that there is any danger of our meeting it in the jungle?"

"Well, paya, they wander very far sometimes in the night, but these marks are fresh. It is not long since he was here."

"I suppose," said Denham, "that if we do not disturb him, either in eating or sleeping, he would take no notice of us? If we 'nothing say to him, he'll nothing say to me,' eh?"

"Perhaps not, paya," said the man, "but there is no knowing. He may be hungry, we must be very careful."

"Pleasant," murmured Mr. Gilchrist.

"All in the day's work, sir," said Ralph cheerfully. "Hi, there!—orchids, orchids!"

"And the very ones we want!" cried Mr. Gilchrist, so delighted that he forgot the tiger forthwith.

It was not a particularly good specimen of the orchid, but the native said that there was plenty of it, as well as of other varieties, in the jungle around; they would not have to go far for them.

"There is a lot of what they call tiger-grass here, zur," said Wills; "will it be safe when we know that there is one of those gentry near at hand?"

"It may be miles away now," replied Mr. Gilchrist. "We may have passed near to him, or to another, as we have come through the jungle already. Don't let us die several deaths in fearing one." [Pg 126]

"Just as you please, zur," said the old man.

"Are the guns loaded?"

"Ay, zur, all right."

"Keep a wary lookout then; but if we were to come across the creature, ten to one it would rather slink away than attack us."

"It won't do that," said the Karen; "this is a man-eater."

"What do you mean?" asked Mr. Gilchrist quickly, turning upon the native.

"Man-eater tiger, paya,—tiger that roams about alone, and eats nothing but human flesh. There was one about the village a little while ago, but we thought it had gone, for we have not seen it lately. It has eaten five or six men that I know of. It is an old beast, very large, very fierce, and very cunning. Nobody can kill it."

This description fired Denham's ambition at once—he longed to kill that tiger. What a feather in his cap could he but contrive to do so! He was just about to exclaim in his eagerness, when Mr. Gilchrist expressed an opposite desire, so he thought it best to hold his tongue.

"I hope we shall not come across it," said the more pacific elder man. "Do your best to keep us out of its way. How shall you know whether it is the man-eater if we should be so unlucky as to fall across it?"

"Man-eater dark coloured, paya. Mangy about its head, fur worn off in patches,—man flesh bad for him, not agree, you know."

"I have heard something about that before," said Mr. Gilchrist. "I believe that it is a question as to whether the creature is diseased from improper food, or whether it be too old to chase its natural prey as nimbly as would be necessary to secure enough, so is driven to entrap men, who are more unwary. But, see, there is a very choice clump of the orchids, let us set to work." [Pg 127]

They were busily engaged in selecting orchids, when a rare and beautiful butterfly came sailing along on widespread painted wings, and Denham, who collected these insects with ardour, gave chase. He followed it somewhat deeper into the jungle, unheeding of the distance from his party to which it was leading him; but Wills cast an uneasy eye in the direction which he had taken, and presently moved to follow him.

Just as he had done so, he saw the boy's light figure come tearing back at headlong speed.

"The tiger! the tiger!" he cried. "It is there, it was asleep, but lifted its head and looked towards where I was, as I stepped among some branches. It could not see me, for there was a big tree between us; I saw part of its back and tail first, then hid myself and peeped. Give me a gun, Wills, quick! Come along."

"Massa paya will be breakfast for tiger if he go along like that," said the Karen. "He must climb a tree, and watch till it pass him. Keep quiet, no get excited, keep steady hand."

The man knew what he was about, it was not the first time that he had assisted upon a similar occasion. He selected a tree, up which Mr. Gilchrist climbed; then posted Ralph in another at a short distance, commanding a somewhat open glade, into which a track from the jungle led, and passed out of it again towards a large pool of water.

Wills joined the Karen and the coolies, who proposed, in two parties, to move from opposite directions round by a detour, and try to drive the animal down this path, where each gentleman might have a chance of shooting it from the safe elevation of his tree.

They had pistols, and moved off to right and left as quietly as possible at first, but as soon as they had attained to suitable positions, they began to fire into the jungle, to utter loud cries, to throw stones among the bushes, and do all in their power to disturb the animal, and to perplex him as to whence the assault proceeded. [Pg 128]

They did not succeed in catching any glimpse of the beast, however; and but for Ralph's certainty that he had seen it, would have doubted whether there had not been some mistake. The Karen climbed a tree, which gave him a sort of bird's-eye view of the surrounding jungle, but if the tiger were there it was well concealed. He descended the tree, and recommenced beating round the circle agreed upon.

Hardly had he done so, when one of the two coolies with him suddenly caught hold of him, and pointed with his long skinny arm in silent excitement.

A crackling of twigs might be heard, a long line of tawny yellow colour seen gliding among the scrub, and, as an open place intervened, a magnificent creature appeared, half concealed as it slunk along, its head depressed till it was in one line with its body, and its tail drooping at the

other end.

It walked a little lame, and presently lay down and licked one of its paws, which seemed to be sore.

The beaters held their breath, and it did not seem to be aware of their vicinity; the air, such as there was of it, leading their scent away from them; but the other party was drawing nearer, and the tiger evidently was more alive to danger approaching from that side, for it lifted its head, pricked up its ears, and listened. Then it resumed its trot in the direction of the pool; and the beaters, allowing it to gain a little way ahead, recommenced to drive it forwards by every means in their power.

The other party was drawing near to them, also acting on the offensive, and the tiger increased its pace, though evidently inconvenienced by the injury to its paw. [Pg 129]

Both parties now coalesced; and, forming a wedge-shaped cohort, followed upon the animal's track, driving it forward by all sorts of annoyance.

The distance was not great, it soon reached the tree in which Ralph was perched, eagerly looking out for it, with his gun commanding the path upon which it was heard crashing heavily along. The fierce, striped face, and angry eyes, emerged from the jungle; one cruel, strong paw protruded, the beast looked warily round, then emerged wholly, and proceeded on its way.

Ralph waited till he considered his aim secure,—he covered the creature's head, nerved his arm—fired!—and nearly fell out of the tree from the terror induced by the awe-inspiring, wrathful howl of pain which resounded through the air. He had hit the tiger, certainly wounded it, but by no means had he administered its death-blow. It paused, staggered, and bounded forwards.

Mr. Gilchrist fired hastily and injudiciously, missed his aim, and the tiger abandoned its former intention of making for the water, and, hurriedly turning to the right, was lost sight of once more among the scrub.

Ralph and Mr. Gilchrist set themselves to reload their guns with all speed; and as they did so, the beaters came up.

"This is unlucky," said the Karen. "It has gone off to the bed of a stream among the rocks, in a defile there. It will have a den or lair among the caves there, from which we should find it almost impossible to dislodge it; but it is wounded certainly, and was lame before; it may stop to drink at the stream before seeking its hiding-place. See, here is blood, it is hard hit, let us make haste."

Only pausing to complete the reloading of their weapons, the whole party proceeded *en masse* upon the trail. The path was difficult, for a stream carried off the rains from a height at a short distance, and brought stones of a considerable size with it after a heavy downpour, emptying itself into the large pool or lake before mentioned. [Pg 130]

There was not much water in the bed of the stream yet, but sufficient to make the stones slippery, and fill many hollows between them with half-liquid mud. It was not easy to proceed with caution, yet never had caution been more desirable. Silently, slipping, scrambling, holding their guns aloft, reaching a helping hand from one to another, they proceeded for a couple of hundred yards; then caught sight of the magnificent brute, extended at full length upon its stomach beside a basin-shaped pool, lapping eagerly, yet crimsoning the limpid water with its blood the while.

Ralph sprang upon a rock which commanded his prey, fired again, hit the tiger in the neck, behind the ear, and it rolled over, faintly kicking for a minute, then becoming still in death.

They could hardly believe, at first, that the danger was over,—Ralph himself least of all. Mr. Gilchrist fired again at the animal as it lay, to make its death quite certain; and, after all, approached it cautiously. It then appeared that Ralph's first shot had taken effect in its shoulder, the bone of which was splintered, and from the wound a quantity of blood had flowed. But the poor creature had previously injured its foot, in the cushion beneath which a large thorn had become embedded, and caused a gathering, or abscess, to form. This was the reason why it had been lame, for it must have been very painful to tread upon it. Without this accident it might not have been so easy a prey, for it was a huge fellow, measuring nine feet from tip to tail.

Wills set himself to skin it immediately, and they camped out for the night, as it was far too late to return to the village then, but the ovation with which they were greeted next morning was very great. [Pg 131]

The villagers had become superstitious with regard to this tiger, and could not sufficiently praise their deliverers.

CHAPTER XIV

[Pg 132]

TATTOOING

The spoils from this expedition now amounted to such a quantity that it was desirable that the explorers should return to Moulmein, and ship them off to England.

They had the skins of many deer, sambhurs, wild cats, and various smaller animals, as well as

those of the leopard and tiger. There were many orchids, some beautiful butterflies, and the skins of rare birds; curios had been picked up in the native villages, and specimens of the ornamental woods which grew in the forests.

Ralph had a famous supply of gay feathers, and other articles, for his mother and sister; and sundry small things which he knew would give pleasure to them and the younger children, though he had no money wherewith to purchase articles of much use or value.

Their load was more cumbersome than heavy, but it filled up the bullock-gharrie so completely that they determined to stop nowhere on the road. They would return as fast as possible to Moulmein.

They jogged along therefore very cheerily, talking over their adventures, and planning what they would do upon their longer journey.

"How odd it seems," said Ralph, "to think that this time last year I was only going about the town in Liverpool, backwards and forwards to school, and never thinking about all the strange sights I [Pg 133] was to see so soon. And now, it seems as if I had always known these places. Things I never knew of then, surprise me now no longer. This tattooing, for instance. How queer I thought it at first, and now I never think about it."

He pointed, as he spoke, to a Burman who passed them, gorgeously tattooed.

"Tattooing is not uncommon among seamen in England," said Mr. Gilchrist. "Is it, Wills?"

"No, no, zur, it b'ain't. 'Tis a very useful thing too, to hev' a mark set upon a chield so as he can be telled, dead or alive, at any time."

"Ah! it be so," said Osborn. "I mind when I wor a boy hearing tell about a young gentleman as were a midshipman in the navy, Danby his name was. He was in a frigate, cruising about in the South Seas; and going in command of a boat's crew one day to get water and fruit from one of those cannibal islands, the beggars set upon them, and murdered them all, as 'twas said. The frigate sailed away, after revenging the murders by a broadside poured in on the island, and reported the whole boat's crew dead.

"Twenty year passed away, and the affair was nigh about forgotten, when an English merchantman was sailing near the same island again, and a man leaped into the water, off a rock, and struck out, swimming for dear life towards the ship.

"They lowered a boat, and took him on board.

"'Who be you?' asked the captain.

"'Charles Danby,' said he, speaking good English, for all that he was tattooed all over his face like a native.

"'How did 'ee get theer?' asked the skipper.

"'I wor a midshipman on board His Majesty's frigate *Achilles*,' saith he. 'I wor sent in command of [Pg 134] a boat's crew to get water, and they set upon us, and killed all but me. One of the women took a fancy to me, and hid me. She would have me marry her, but I didn't seem to care about it, and stuck out so long as I could.'"

"Poor soul," said Mr. Gilchrist.

Ralph laughed. "I'd like to see the dusky bride who would wed *me* against my will," cried he. "She'd soon find that she had caught a tartar."

"It worn't no laughing matter for *he*," said Osborn. "They there savages, they showed him his comrades, brought up one by one, and forced him to look on while they murdered them, roasted them, and *eat* them. They'd ha' served him the same but for the woman protecting him, and she threatened him that if he wouldn't have her she'd hand him over to the cannibals, who were always coming to look at him, and saying what a nice tender morsel he'd be, for he was so young and fair and rosy."

"I've heard of a *man*," said the incorrigible Ralph, still laughing, "who said, when he was first married, that he was so fond of his wife that he could have eaten her; and, afterwards, that he often wished he had."

"You go along, Maister Ralph," quoth old Wills. "What should a babe, the likes of you, know about such things."

Ralph made a face at his old friend, and begged Osborn to tell him the end of the midshipman.

"Well, 'ee doan't deserve as I should," said Osborn; "but, howsomever, the boy gave in. He wor but a babe hisself,—only fourteen,—and life was sweet to him even at that cost; so he took the woman, and tried to do his best with her, though it was sorry work. They tattooed him all over, face and all, to make him look as like themselves as they could; and he wore no clothes, but lived [Pg 135] just like them. He got to do so exactly like them that he could pick up a fishhook from the ground with his toes, just like they could; and he had some children, and was looked upon in time just like the rest.

"He lived twenty years like this, and never saw a British ship, nor a white face, nor a sign of home all that time, for the island was an out-of-the-way one. Then, one day, all to once he saw that there merchantman in the offing. He wor a-fishing by himself, and he watched the vessel sailing nearer and nearer, old half-forgotten thoughts of home, and friends, and old England, cropping up clearer and clearer every minute; and with them a yearning for them, tearing at his heart like,

till he could bear it no longer. He just jumped into the sea, and swam off to the ship.

"The poor fellow was so afraid of being caught and claimed again by his family in the island, that the skipper changed his tack, and sailed away from it, so he was brought home in safety.

"Then came the difficulty of proving himself to be Charles Danby, for nobody could recognise him. He'd left home a rosy-faced, curly-haired lad of thirteen; he came back looking like a South-Sea islander of thirty-four.

"His father was dead, but his mother was still living, and she did not know him all to once, nor none of his friends.

"But it wor no such tale as Tichborne's. He remembered all sorts of things that none but he could know,—people's names, old jokes, old stories, people in the village dead and gone, things that had happened at school.

"It was for ever, 'Where is the old cabinet that did stand here?' 'What has become of the gamekeeper's boy, Jack?' and so on.

"He soon satisfied his mother, his old nurse, and such like; but there was some money to come to him, and it was necessary to prove to the law that he was the right man to have it, and that was a harder matter. [Pg 136]

"'Had he no mark upon him?' asked the lawyer of his mother.

"'Ay,' said she, 'he had a small mole on his cheek.'

"But that was either gone, or covered up with the tattooing, and could not be seen, nor could they think of anything else.

"'I was tattooed C. D. on my right arm,' saith he, 'first time I went to sea. C. D. it were, and the Union Jack, but it wore out. The natives didn't tattoo my arm there, because it wor done already, but it has not lasted like their marks have done. See, here is the bare spot.'

"Sure enough, there was a bare round place among the marks on his arm, but no flag nor letters wor to be seen. He hunted up the very shipmate as had done it, and who swore to having done it, and showed the fellow-mark on his own arm, only with the letters different, for each had taken the initials of his own name, though the pattern they said was the same in both.

"'Ay!' saith Mr. Danby, 'I mind what an arm I gave you, and how you swore at me for going so deep. You mocked at me for holloing out while you did me, and I vowed I'd make you holloa too.'

"'So 'ee did,' said the other officer. 'What did 'ee do it with?'

"'With three big darning-needles out from a red-leather huswife that my poor dear sister Mary gave me for a keep-sake when I went away. It had a looking-glass in it, and little blue flowers worked inside. She told me to mend my stockings when I was at sea, but it's not many stockings as I've worn.' [Pg 137]

"'I have the huswife now,' said his mother; 'it came back among his things. Many a time did poor Mary cry over it before she died. She used to say, "He minded what I told him about his stockings, mother, for the darning needles are gone."'

"'We lashed them together, threaded through the eyes with a bit of wire,' said Mr. Danby.

"'So we did,' said his friend.

"Well, this was all very good, but the marks wor gone, you see, so no proof in law. Just then the doctor came in, and 'What are you saying?' asked he. So they told him.

"'Show me your arm,' said he; and Danby put it out.

"The doctor took and rubbed it hard, till it wor red as a lobster.

"'Hold hard, doctor! you'll rub down to the bone.'

"But the doctor knew what he was doing, and when the place was well scrubbed, 'What do 'ee call *that*?' saith he, pointing for the lawyer to see.

"There was, quite plain, the Jack and C. D., inside a circle of little dots, all in white marks upon the reddened skin. It was exactly like the blue marks upon the other man's arm, except for the initials being different, but hadn't been done so deep, so the gunpowder had worn out by degrees.

"They gave him his money, but he didn't live long to enjoy it. He was quite unfitted to live like a Christian after so many years of savage life, and civilisation killed him."

"Poor fellow," sighed Mr. Gilchrist; "it is a strange story."

Wills then began to relate some of his reminiscences. He never liked to be out-done by Osborn. [Pg 138]

"Two or three voyages ago," said he, "we had a black cook on board; and when we were at the office, being shipped, some talk went on about tattooing. One of the young gentlemen was entering our names in the ship's register, and a sailor was showing his arms and chest the while. He was beautifully tattooed with red and blue both. He had the royal arms on his chest, and a girl, skipping, with a wreath of flowers round her; and his arms were all over letters and anchors and crosses, and what not.

"'Is any other of you so grand as this?' asked the young gentleman.

"Two or three had marks, but none so good, and he turned to the nigger.

"'You don't need mark of mouth, Sambo, I suppose?' said he.

"'Me marked though, massa,' said the darkie, grinning from ear to ear,—'me marked. Me fall in fire when boy, and the mark of burn never gone. Scored, massa, me was,—branded by hot bar. Golly! it were bad.'

"And he rolled up his sleeve, and showed the scars of a terrible burn.

"Well, we sailed in bad weather, and met with an awful storm two days after. The ship was pooped, the name-board washed away, and much damage done. We managed to put it to rights though, and went on our way; but others were less lucky. It was off the coast of Wicklow, and in that same storm, another ship went down with all hands; and some of the drowned men were washed up among the wreckage, *and our name-board*, with '*Osprey*, Liverpool' painted on it quite plain.

"Of course the word reached 'Herfords' that it was we that was lost, but the rig of some of the [Pg 139]
spars washed up, and the colour of the paint, did not agree. One of the dead seamen was a negro, but another of them was reported to have had two fingers of his left hand gone at some former time; and though there was a negro among us, and both were reported fine, tall, big fellows, we had none among our jack-tars maimed in the hand.

"So the young gentleman that shipped the crew was sent over, with Lloyd's agent, to the Wicklow coast, to see if he could identify the corpses. Some two or three days had passed, while letters had been written backwards and forwards, and as the poor fellows had been sadly knocked about among the wreckage, there was no chance of recognising them, and they'd all been buried before the young clerk came.

"'Tis a pity as it's so,' said he, talking to Lloyd's man. 'If he were not underground, I'd have known the negro, because he had the big scar from an old burn on the inside of his left arm, reaching nearly from his elbow to his wrist.'

"'Say you so,' said Lloyd's agent, 'then we'll have him dug up again.'

"The young gentleman did not half like that, but it was done, and he had to be there, with result that the dead negro had no mark at all on his arm, so could not be the same man.

"Captain Rogers was chief mate on that voyage; and your ma, zur, was prettily relieved when she heard this, for it was a long time before we was able to report ourselves. News did not fly so soon in thiccee times as now."

"Well," said Ralph, "the outcome of all this is that I had better get tattooed as soon as I can. Will you do it for me, Wills?"

"Better wait till 'ee du get to Rangoon, maister, for 'twill make your arm very sore for some days." [Pg 140]

"No, no, Denham; don't be foolish," said Mr. Gilchrist.

Ralph laughed, and the party stopped for their mid-day meal, which changed the conversation.

CHAPTER XV [Pg 141]
THE OLD MEN'S FAITH

The journey back to Moulmein offered no further adventures worthy of mention; and, when arrived there, Mr. Gilchrist remained in that place quietly until after the New Year.

The floods had then subsided, and the articles for which he had sent to England arrived.

He sent off to Mr. Herford all that he had collected during his first expedition; and received advices from Rangoon, with money, and full credentials for making every possible preparation whilst he was waiting.

Ralph and the two Cornish seamen were regularly engaged, at liberal salaries; and Captain Rogers wrote to his nephew of the situation reserved for him in the Rangoon house of business,—a situation which, if he were assiduous and steady, would assure his fortune for life, and enable him to forward the interests of his younger brothers.

Ralph also received letters from home, and from Kershaw, relating how kindly he had been received by Mrs. Denham. He mentioned his determination to pass for his master's certificate before again going to sea; and assured his friend that he would often call upon his mother and sister, to tell them all particulars about Ralph himself, which he might omit when writing.

"I daresay he will," thought Ralph; "and a pretty farrago of rubbish they will hear from him, too."

Letters arriving faster than the heavy goods that were sent round the Cape, one from Mrs. [Pg 142]
Denham, giving the account of the mate's second visit, reached Ralph before he again left Moulmein.

"Your good-looking young friend, Mr. Kershaw, called again last night," she wrote, "and was most amusing. I do not think I have laughed for many years more than I did to hear him relating your imaginary love-affair with a Burmese belle. With the gravest face, and pretended sympathy for us, he went on piling up the agony, while Agnes believed every word, and her big blue eyes dilated with horror. 'She is a very charming thing in natives, from a Shan district,' he said, with a

sly glance at her; 'she is dressed chiefly with a tablecloth and a rose; she carries a green cheroot in her ear, and she and Denham smoke it by turns. She sells Burmese cats in the bazaar, and has a fascinating way of sitting upon her heels, which leaves nothing to be desired as to grace. She will be able to teach you much in the way of cooking, Miss Denham; this cake, which I understand is made by yourself from a Cornish receipt, is delicious to *me*, but Denham has quite taken to Burmese ways now. You should see him devouring rotten fish. He is very partial to it, with rice; and finishes his light and wholesome meal with Chinese patties made of sugar and fat pork.'

"'Mr. Kershaw!' she cried. She could really say no more, her horror was so great.

"He turned to her with the kindest air. 'It is sad, Miss Denham, is it not? Your dear brother seemed made for better things; but, after all, an early attachment is often the saving of a man. I think that I could draw a sketch of the lady if you would favour me with a pencil.' Then he drew the most awful-looking picture which you could imagine; and Agnes watched every line with her whole soul in her face, and heaved the deepest sigh when it was finished. 'It is a pretty face, is it not?' asked he politely. 'Perhaps I have favoured her a little, she may not be quite so sweet-looking in reality, but she really is a charming girl.' [Pg 143]

"He has just walked in again, and brought Agnes the present of what he calls a Burmese cat, and declares that your *fiancée* sold it to him for twopence three farthings, and a dish of fried maggots. It is a thing upon wires, or joints of some kind, like a perfect demon, sprawling and jerking about, and has already frightened baby nearly into a fit."

"I would like to punch his head for him," soliloquised Ralph. "What an idiot he is!"

But this is somewhat out of place.

Mr. Gilchrist was not desirous of remaining long in Moulmein after his stores had arrived from England. The sooner he started, the cooler would be the weather, and the more time there would be for his journey before the rains set in.

Their friends, however, would not part with them until they had passed Christmas in company; and Ralph was a little disappointed to find that the merry water-festival was not to take place upon the English New Year's Day, but on that sacred to Burma. He found that this day fell about the beginning of April, so he must wait to see the images washed, and to share in the sport of throwing water at everyone, until that time, when he would probably have arrived in Rangoon.

Mr. Gilchrist knew that many orchids could not be found in bloom before February; but, as the jungles around Moulmein had been pretty well investigated, he wished to reach fresh fields and pastures new by that time; and travelling was slow work in Burma, where the people resolutely refuse to proceed on their way if they consider the day unlucky,—if a snake cross their path at the outset of their journey,—or if the white witch of any district, who is always consulted *en passant*, pronounce that the nats are adverse. [Pg 144]

Upon the whole, the chances for this new expedition were considered to be favourable, as a very fortunate day was selected in the first instance, and the scouts of the party lighted upon a magnificent bed of mushrooms before the sun was well up.

With great delight they collected a goodly supply of this delicacy; Mr. Gilchrist produced a tin of gravy soup in which to stew them, and they feasted upon them for breakfast. Even the Englishmen were cheered by the satisfaction apparent on the faces of their attendants at this favorable omen.

"Well," said Wills, "ef it be an omen, 'tis no manner of use to set oneself up against 'un. 'Tis well az it be a good 'un, for there be a pesky lot more of whisht 'uns than of 'tother zooart."

"Ah! there be," said Osborn; "and of spreets too."

"Did you ever see a spirit, Osborn?" asked Ralph.

"I did, my son," said Osborn.

"Tell us all about it," pleaded the boy.

"Well, it wor when I was a young shaver, nineteen or twenty, or theerabout, to age; and I'd gone down St. Minver way to stay with my old granfer, who lived in thiccee parish. There wor an awful storm came, fust week in December, and the breakers were mountain high against the cliffs. Word went az how a big three-masted ship of foreign rig had been zeen trying to make for Padstow Harbour when night came, but never a stick of it wor zeen again. 'Twor supposed az it ran on the Doom Bar theer, at mouth of the harbour. I must needs go down to Hell Bay, az they do call 'un, next day, to zee the waves, az was foaming out for miles; and a fine sight it wor, though the tide had turned, and wor roaring out then. I walked along the head of the cliff so az to get out amongst 'em; and az I went, I zeed an old man, with a long grizzled beard and moustache, like a forriner, a-leaning hisself against a stile. [Pg 145]

"'Good-marnin', zur,' saith I; but he only turned his great sorrowful eyes upon me, with dark fire blazing out of 'em, and never spoke a word.

"'You'm an unmannerly chield,' thought I to myself, but I made to pass him without no more to zay. But he stood in my road, and lifted his hand, and beckoned, like a chield az was used to be obeyed.

"Then I did zee as how his hair was wet, dripping with watter down over his cloathes, and zayweed and little crabs stuck to it, and his hands and face wor all battered and bruised and torn,

and he wor soaked through and through with watter. He moved on, making signs for me to follow of 'un, and the watter squelched in his shoes az he went, and I didn't dare to hang back.

"He led me out right to point of the cliff, and down over the rocks to a little cove behind, where a great broken mass reared up in front of a cavern, and theer, a-lyin' on the strip of sand, beside the great pool of watter, lay a lady, and she had a little child held tight in her arms, with its face cuddled down on her neck, as ef 'twor asleep. When he pointed to thiccee, he gave a dreadful great wailing cry, and wor gone.

"I thought the lady was alive at first; for the wind lifted up her long black hair, az ef 'twor playing with it; and for all that her white gown were torn, and a great rag of lace fluttered from it, it wor decently folded round her, but she wor dead and cold enough when I come to touch her.

"I got help, and she wor carried round, and buried up in the churchyard, with her little 'un in the same coffin, but neither I nor any living chield ever saw the forriner more." [Pg 146]

"Osborn!" cried Ralph. "Do you really mean to tell me that you saw that yourself?"

"I did, Maister Ralph."

"That Hell Bay be a quare place, zur," said Wills. "I du knaw she well. Ef there du be sech things az spreets, thiccee be the spot for 'un. Many and many a good ship have gone to pieces there; never a winter passes but three or four du go. I mind me of one awful gale when a big ship were seen there, throwing up lights and firing guns for help, but no help could drae near to 'un. Next day one little baby's shoe wor washed up,—a purty little blue kid shoe, with a silver button to it, but never a sign more of who or what the volks might be that had all gone in the dead hours of the night."

"Ay," began Osborn, once more resuming his reminiscences. "That wor the gale—I mind it well—when a brig rode safely into Padstow Harbour, and wor saved, with never a living soul aboard of her. The crew had been scared, and took to their boats, when ef they'd stuck to the brig they'd have been saved. Never a one wor zeed, but the clock were ticking away when the brig was boarded, a-telling the time for the dead men; and the fried bacon and tetties wor a-keeping hot over the galley fire for them az would never eat a meal more."

"Don't you think of these things when a storm comes while you are at sea?" asked Ralph. "Do they not make you nervous?"

"No, maister, I dunna knaw az it du. Men must die sometime, and the Lord's will must be followed. He du be so near to uz on zea az on land."

Ralph was silent, but he thought much. The old men's simple trust in their God struck him forcibly in all its truth and beauty. It was not ignorance of the risks which they ran, it was not heedlessness, it was not fatalism,—it was faith. Were he called upon to face death—instantaneous death—while life was still strong and lusty within him, could he meet it in the same steady spirit? [Pg 147]

He feared not. Then he remembered a passage in the Bible, where men persecuted were counselled not to perplex themselves by wondering what they should say in hypothetical circumstances, for it should be given to them, in that same hour, what they should say. Perhaps it would also be given to others what they should do. He prayed inwardly that it might be so. Life was teaching this lad many lessons, though unconsciously to himself.

Also the simple straightforwardness with which he was performing his duty, under such untoward claims upon it, was influencing those whom he loved, at home, in a manner of which he little thought.

He had gone out to Burma, because he wished to relieve his mother of his keep, and this was the only manner in which he saw the possibility of so doing at once. He had thus been the means of introducing into his mother's household a lady who proved to be a most valued and valuable friend to the whole family.

By his conduct during the voyage, he had secured the attachment of several important friends for himself; opened for himself excellent prospects for prosperity in life; and earned the advantages of seeing a new country in a manner which few succeed in doing even after long residence in it. This, in after years, proved to be of material service to his career.

The accounts of his heroism in the fire at sea, and the esteem for his character which that aroused, called out all that was best in his brother's heart; and made the favourable turning-point in his life at a critical and dangerous age.

Finally, this same heroism induced Mr. Herford to take great notice of his mother and the whole family. He befriended them in many ways,—assisting in the children's education, securing for them many cheerful pleasures, and making them valuable presents from time to time. [Pg 148]

None of these advantages would have accrued to himself, or to those he loved, had Ralph been idle, selfish, or neglectful of his duty; but now he was destined to go through a yet greater trial of endurance than any before.

Little did he think, when he set out so gaily upon his second expedition, of all the dangers which were about to beset his path while pursuing it.

CHAPTER XVI
BIG GAME

When the New Year had come, all preparations being satisfactorily completed, our friends set forth upon their second journey; feeling themselves so much better equipped, and so much more experienced in both travelling, and speaking the necessary languages, that they started in the highest spirits.

Mr. Gilchrist enforced various strict regulations, with regard to the safety of his party.

None were to wander alone, far from the rest; none to start off upon independent explorations; all were to carry upon their persons, at all times, suitable firearms, always ready for use; ample supply of charges for them; hunting-knives in good order; and a small supply of food, in case of accident.

Native villages were plentifully scattered upon their road,—English stations not unfrequent. The weather was agreeable, and all promised well.

The party was successful in finding many rare orchids; so that, though their progress was slow, they were content.

They did not cross the river Salween, preferring to proceed along its banks northwards, and to search the rocky country upon its eastern side for some distance first, as the plants seemed to be of a different character there from those which they had already collected; and the cessation of [Pg 150] traffic upon the river, in consequence of the frequent rapids in it, rendered a passage across it difficult.

Mr. Gilchrist perceived that, from the solitary character of this district, it was one in which they might possibly meet with danger from wild beasts; but he thought it unlikely that any such creatures would attack so large a number of people, or could not easily be beaten off if they did.

At first the whole party was wary; but, seeing no big game, they became less apprehensive of danger.

Many peacocks and other birds were met with, and Ralph became quite an adept in shooting them. Their flesh made a welcome variety in the commissariat department.

One day his gun was heard popping at a short distance; and Wills began to prepare a peeled wand, to serve as spit upon which to roast the expected treat, when the lad burst through the bushes in great excitement, his blue eyes blazing from his sunburnt, flushed face, beneath his dark waves of hair.

"Come quickly!" he shouted. "Come at once! Here is a whole herd of elephants crossing the river! Such a sight!"

All hurried after him. It was a fine sight. There must have been twenty or thirty elephants, with their trunks uplifted in air, swimming across where the water was tolerably quiet and still. One old female had a baby elephant with her, and encouraged the little one as she went with sounds that the young one might consider words of advice or caution.

"Oh, see, see!" cried Ralph. "There are more young ones, but bigger. How carefully the old ones guard them. I wonder why they are going across! I am glad they are not coming this way."

"They go over to feed on big tree, paya," said one of the Burmese. "Elephant like juicy branches of trees like those."

In effect, the whole herd began to feed at once upon reaching the farther shore. They could reach [Pg 151] the tender boughs at the tops of the largest trees by stretching their trunks. They tore them down, and ate them with vast relish.

None of the Englishmen had ever before seen wild elephants in a natural state, and were deeply interested in watching them.

Suddenly a terrible noise was heard approaching them from behind; an angry, surly "Hunf, Hunf," which struck terror into their hearts, even before they saw a huge infuriated elephant coming, crashing and tearing its sullen way through the undergrowth.

"Fly! fly!" cried Mr. Gilchrist.

"Ameh! ameh!" shrieked the Burmans.

"Lord defend us!" exclaimed Osborn.

"Maister Ralph, Maister Ralph! Thee'rt just in his road!" vociferated Wills. The old man rushed forward and fired at the monstrous creature.

The elephant turned and charged down upon his assailant.

"Run, run; I'm all right!" he cried. "Run, my son, run!"

Ralph fled. He was standing a little apart from the rest, and escaped up a gulley or defile among the rocks, in a different direction from that taken by the others. They made for a group of rocks a little separated from the range among which they were orchid hunting; a few trees grew in a clump hard by. Wills alone was left at the mercy of the raging creature.

The trees formed his only chance of shelter, and he doubled, flying back towards them. Panting, labouring for breath, he just reached the tiny grove, and concealed himself behind a mighty bole.

Hidden from immediate view there, he slipped backwards, and doubled again behind another, just as the elephant, with a tramp that shook the earth beneath him, ran full tilt at the first tree, set his shoulder against it, and levelled it to the ground. [Pg 152]

At the same moment, above the crashing and rending of timber, the splitting of branches, and the trumpeting of the mad brute, came the clear ping! ping! of two rifles, as Mr. Gilchrist and Osborn both took aim, and hit the creature in the shoulder. Wills fired, at the same moment, from behind his shelter upon the other side, and a trickle of red blood upon the elephant's flapping ear bore witness to the justness of his aim.

In the next moment, Gilchrist's and Osborn's second barrels rang out; and a volley of small shot from the rest of the party peppered the great mass, which, at such near quarters, it would have been difficult to miss.

It seemed to be too hot a place for the intruder. With an awful cry of anger and pain it shambled heavily to the river's bank, plunged into the stream, and swam down it.

The distant echo of a gun was heard at the same moment, up the defile, but no one attended to it, for the form of old Wills was seen to sway, to totter, and to sink upon the ground.

Had he been injured? Had he trod upon a snake? Had some other poisonous reptile or insect attacked him? His friends, in the greatest anxiety, hurried up to him, raised his prostrate figure, and found him in a deep swoon.

Osborn ran for water; Mr. Gilchrist supported him in his arms, and called to the chief coolie to fetch his brandy flask.

The Burman implored the master not to arouse the insensible man until his "butterfly spirit" returned to its mortal prison-house, but no heed was paid to him; and presently Wills opened his eyes, with a bewildered expression, and looked around.

"Where is the boy?" he asked. "Is the boy safe?"

No one could answer him, for Denham was not there. What had become of him? [Pg 153]

It was no time for seeking him then, however; none of the men supposed that he was very far off, or in further danger now that the solitary elephant had gone down the river.

"He is all right," said Mr. Gilchrist soothingly. "He'll be here in a minute. Let us take you back to the bullock-gharrie, you must lie down in the shade."

Wills offered no resistance, but he could not stand; he was trembling from head to foot. The men constructed a hasty litter with their rifles, some branches, and grass; they laid Wills upon it, and carried him back to the spot where their gharrie was in waiting for them.

Though certainly clear-headed, and quite himself for a few minutes after he first came out of his swoon, a confusion seemed to overpower his mind again, and his speech was not distinct. Mr. Gilchrist felt very uneasy, as he feared that the sudden shock had induced some form of a stroke; and he knew himself wholly unfit to deal with a matter so serious.

He called up the Burman, and asked him where the nearest doctor was likely to live.

"At English station, paya," replied the man; "one only half-day's journey, or a little more, from here. The royal self's lord may reach it by sky shutting-in time, if make haste."

"Is there an English doctor there?"

"Good doctor, paya; half-caste,—wise man."

There seemed nothing to do but to take Wills on to this station without loss of time, and Mr. Gilchrist gave orders to prepare.

The day was now far advanced, no more time ought to be lost; but it suddenly occurred to them all that Ralph was not with them. What had become of the boy?

He had been seen flying from the elephant up the defile, as Wills had turned the charge of the mad creature upon himself. Some of them remembered now that the discharge of a gun had been heard afterwards up this defile; but why had the boy not returned? [Pg 154]

Mr. Gilchrist sent the chief Burman and some coolies to search for him. Osborn would not leave his friend, over whom either sleep or stupor seemed to be creeping. Gilchrist himself went, with the rest of the men in another direction, ascending a hill which promised to afford a view up that defile; but nothing could be seen from the thickness of the jungle below.

They shouted, called, fired off blank cartridge,—but no response came. Slowly, and much perplexed, they returned to the gharrie, to find Wills growing rapidly worse. The search party came back with no news. Not a trace of the lad could they discover; but they brought in two young tiger cubs, that they had found lying asleep, to all appearance alone.

It was not to be supposed that two such very young cubs could have been there, and their mother be far away; but though there was evidently a lair there, no vestige of the parent animal was to be seen. The certainty of such creatures being in the neighbourhood, however, hastened the men's return. They had killed the cubs with their hunting-knives, lest the sound of guns should have brought down the female tiger upon them, and then they had hurried back, as fast as possible, from desire to secure their own safety.

Had Ralph fallen a victim to these creatures? Was the absence of the mother from her cubs due to the destruction of the poor young fellow? Mr. Gilchrist shuddered, as he recognised the

probability of this explanation.

But one shot had been heard, and no further sound,—no cry for help, no call, no other report of firearms. What could this mean except one thing? [Pg 155]

And what must he do now? Was it of any use to wait, to search further for Ralph? To save Wills they must push on to the English station. It would be best to do so, and return to search for the boy.

There could be little doubt but what he had fallen a victim to the tigress; but at least some evidence to this effect might be found,—his gun, some portion of his clothing, at least, might be there.

If he had escaped, he could have come back. He had ammunition with him, though it might not be much, for he had shot a good supply of birds that day. He had some biscuits with him. Finally, Mr. Gilchrist ordered a little tent to be pitched for him, a large fire to be built up, which would serve to mark the place from a distance, and would identify it to himself when he returned to it. He wrote a few lines upon a piece of paper, affixing it to the tent-pole, to desire Ralph to wait there until he came back to join him, which should be done as soon as possible.

He would have left some of the men there, but the near neighbourhood of tigers had terrified them out of all discipline, and every one of them utterly refused to remain unless the royal lord stayed himself to protect them. There was no help for it, therefore; and the party set forth with sad and anxious hearts; the day being so far spent as to place themselves in some peril from the possible attack of wild beasts, coming down from their rocky fastnesses to drink at the river.

They had to keep near the banks of the stream, too; for the road was more open there, and they could not take the bullock-gharrie through narrow or tangled paths. As it was, poor Wills was terribly jolted very often, but remained in a state of semi-consciousness, wandering in his mind when aroused. [Pg 156]

Mr. Gilchrist walked, to leave more room for Osborn to tend his friend; but he kept near the head of the gharrie, where he could hear and see all that went on in it. The attendants surrounded or followed, bearing flaring torches after the darkness fell, and the anxious hours passed on.

CHAPTER XVII [Pg 157]
THE JUNGLE FIRE

Mr. Gilchrist supposed that they might be drawing near the English settlement, which he found, upon conversation with the chief Burman, to be a police-station; when on the farther side of a small tributary to the river, which it would be necessary to ford, a bright glare of light flashed upon them suddenly as they rounded a spur of rock.

"What is that?" asked he anxiously.

"Paya, it is the jungle on fire," said the man. "It is the first jungle fire I have heard of this year, but it happens frequently in the heat every season."

"Good God!" exclaimed the gentleman, "what a sight! Are we safe here?"

"From the fire? yes, certainly," said the Burman. "See, my royal lord, there is a strip of clear ground on the farther bank of the stream, and the water would quench anything that is likely to reach it. But form up closely, for wild beasts may burst through here, being accustomed to drink at this place, and cross the ford where it is shallow."

"Load the guns," cried Mr. Gilchrist "Close round the gharrie; take out the bullocks, and fasten them to the wheels,—we can surround them better so. Set your backs to the cart, and keep your weapons ready."

He would have had Osborn remain in the gharrie, beneath shelter, with Wills, but the old man was out at the first hint of danger. He laid his friend's head upon a cushion, renewed the wet rags that lay upon his fevered brow, gave him some cool drink, and was ready to help his master in five minutes. [Pg 158]

He was needed. Gilchrist looked round, his numbers were short. Had the uncertain light deceived him? Surely there should have been enough men to surround the gharrie and bullocks; also the two tats, or ponies, and the larger horse, that were now brought into such close space, and fastened to the cart. He counted heads. Three Burmans were missing.

A very short search discovered them,—they were crouched upon the ground, beneath the gharrie, hiding, in an agony of fear.

"Come out, you cowardly rascals!" thundered he. "Come out, or I will shoot you all as you lie there! Come out this instant!"

The men crept out, shaking with fright, and imploring the royal lord's self to pardon them. They did not know whether to be most afraid of him, or the fire, or the possible wild beasts. They were not likely to be of much use whichever danger arose first.

Mr. Gilchrist posted them between the coolies, Osborn, and himself, with orders that the first one

who abandoned his post should be shot without mercy.

Meantime, animals were flying by, now by one or two at a time, then in herds. Sambhurs, with terrified eyes, bounded along at headlong speed; peacocks flew past, screaming; water-fowl rose in air. Monkeys jabbered and leapt by, wild cats scurried across. Then a great roar was heard, and a pair of leopards sprang out of their covers, and stood glaring at the little band, every hair upon their beautiful spotted skins seeming to bristle with wrath. [Pg 159]

Out rang Mr. Gilchrist's rifle; out rang Osborn's,—the female fell; the male, hardly braver than the Burmans, though more ferocious, turned tail and fled. The leopard was not dead, her leg was broken by one shot, her side entered by the other; but the contents of the second barrels despatched her.

Hardly had she been dead ten minutes, when, with a heavy flapping of dark wings, many vultures were seen sweeping past and settling upon the nearest trees. The branches were weighed down with the black mass of these ill-omened birds.

Meantime the fire wound along among the jungle-grass in brilliantly sinuous lines; and ever as it ran hither and thither, a screaming, fluttering, shrieking rush of animal life followed it, though not always taking the direction of our friends.

After the first, though clouds of birds and bats flew over their heads, deer, and larger beasts, hurrying to places of safety, turned aside upon perceiving them, and scampered farther down the stream. Rats and small fry ran in the shallow water along its banks; and monkeys swung themselves, hand over hand, among the trees.

By degrees the fire burnt itself out upon their road, and swept farther away; but it was broad daylight before the travellers dared to relax their vigilance, or breathe freely once more. Mr. Gilchrist served out a modicum of brandy to each man, and some biscuits. The refreshment was much needed, and gave them heart.

In the cool early morning, Wills was better; his temperature went down, his mind appeared clearer, and his speech less confused. Then, too, rising above the blackened jungle, perched high upon a hillside, appeared the police-station; and a group of horsemen might be seen, in fresh linen garments, riding down in their direction. A lady was one of the party as well; she cantered along in her easy grey habit, with long curls blowing back beneath a shady black hat, a pleasant sight to all. She proved to be a girl of nineteen, just come out from home, the bride of the young police officer; a bonnie, slender thing, with smiling lips, frank blue eyes, English roses still upon her cheeks, Burmese roses fastened into the bosom of her jacket. [Pg 160]

So short a time had elapsed since her marriage, that she still gave a little involuntary start of remembrance when anyone called her Mrs. Brudenel, the name which she had been accustomed to hear only as that of her husband's mother, while at his "wifey," a flush of colour would suddenly mantle upon her fair young face.

Mr. Gilchrist had his own private hopes, which caused him to watch these little signs with secret interest, though he betrayed no outward symptom of his pleasure in them, and maintained a formal show of deep respect towards her.

She was kindness itself to poor Wills, and treated him with a skill which showed her familiarity with illness. No sooner did she receive him into her house, than she directed her ayah to prepare her one spare room for him,—a cool pleasant apartment; she bathed his brow with a fragrant lotion, applied mustard poultices to the back of his head behind his ears; she supplied all other things desirable, and devised means for throwing out a profuse perspiration upon his body.

Wills gradually recovered his full senses under this treatment, but was very weak.

The doctor soon arrived, and so played his skilful part, that, upon bringing to him a basin of such soup as he had seldom enjoyed, Wills looked up anxiously in Mrs. Brudenel's face. [Pg 161]

"The boy?" he asked. "Is he safe?"

"We hope so," replied she gently.

"Only *hope*, miss?"

"Only hope at present, but my husband has taken his men to bring him in. We shall soon have good news for you, please God."

"Ay, please God," said the old man. "The cheild has come to be like the apple of my eye,—the best fruit from a fine old stock, lady. Please God, please God."

"Would you like me to pray with you for his safety?" asked the lady.

"Ay, ef 'ee will," replied he.

Mrs. Brudenel knelt by the old seaman's bed, took his horny hand in her soft white one, and poured out a supplication to the God and Father of them both, that He would keep this boy safely beneath the shadow of His everlasting wings, and restore him to his friends without injury.

As she rose from her knees, the old man's lips moved again. "Amen, amen," he muttered. "Please God, please God."

He fell into a sleep, still murmuring these words, and holding the lady's hand.

She did not try to release it, but sat patiently by the bedside until his fingers relaxed of their own accord, as his sleep deepened; then leaving the ayah to fan him, and be ready to give him more nourishment when he should awake, she stole away in search of her husband.

Mr. Brudenel, having helped his other guests to refresh themselves after their night's strain of anxiety, having placed baths and refreshment before them, had now gathered his own men together, and, with Mr. Gilchrist and Osborn, was proceeding to search for Ralph. [Pg 162]

"How is your patient, wifey?" asked he, as he observed his wife's approach.

"Better," said she in a cheerful voice. "He was quite clear in mind for a short time, and is now asleep. I hope you will find your young friend safe and well," she added, turning to Mr. Gilchrist.

"Thank you, madam," replied he. "If not, I shall feel guilty of his loss to my dying day, for I took him from comparative safety, chiefly for my own pleasure in the company of his bright boyhood."

"Pooh, pooh!" cried Mr. Brudenel. "We will have him all right in a couple of hours. Lads like he take a deal of killing. I have been in queer places dozens of times myself, but always turned up again like a bad shilling. Forward, my friends!"

They rode down the hillside; a turn in the path hid them from sight; then they reappeared upon the plain through which the stream flowed, and picked their careful way across the ford, the horses throwing up the sparkling water at each step as they splashed through. Then they slowly mounted the rocky track on the farther side, and disappeared from sight.

Mrs. Brudenel watched the cavalcade to this spot, and then returned to the invalid.

"We will go to the tent first," said Mr. Gilchrist. They did so. The fire which they had built up was burned down to a handful of smouldering ashes; the little white note was still there upon the tree, plainly in sight; the tent was deserted, no sign was there of any person having visited it. The silence and solitude was significant and oppressive.

With a gloomy brow, Gilchrist turned his horse's head towards the defile up which Ralph had fled. [Pg 163]

This led away from the direction of the river, back into the jungle through which they had come, but farther east. No word was spoken among the searchers as they rode up the pass. It was very narrow, probably but the bed of a mountain stream when the rains had fallen plentifully, and now dry. The jungle closed in thickly upon it, and became more and more dense as they mounted the hill. The natives who accompanied the party pointed out the spot where the two tiger cubs had lain, and been killed. It was marked by the bleached and scattered bones of various deer, some sambhurs' horns, and remains of other creatures, which had formed the prey of the parent animals.

With a sick heart, Gilchrist nerved himself to examine this débris. He turned over leg bones, skulls, and all which he could find, not leaving one unnoticed, but none were human remains. Not the slightest sign appeared to show that Ralph had been there, nor that the full-grown beasts had revisited the spot.

They pursued their way with difficulty, so thick was the tangle of the underwood. Huge ferns reared gigantic fronds among shrubs of a hundred different kinds; orchids hung pendant from lofty trees; creepers of many sorts, with blossoms of every colour, drooped from heights, clung to branches, wound their devious way from trunk to trunk, cast curtains of foliage and flower around monarchs of the forest and humble scrub, touched the fertile virgin earth, took fresh root, and started upon new complications in other directions.

But what was this? Dark vultures concealed a massive form stretched upon the ground in a little glade, comparatively open. What were they devouring?

At the approach of the searchers they rose, heavily flapping their ill-omened pinions, among hoarse cries, and awaited the completion of their meal from short distances. [Pg 164]

Mr. Gilchrist turned very faint, he could not proceed, he leant against the trunk of a tree while the rest cut their way through the intervening vines, and a jackal sneaked away at their approach.

A cry of surprise and relief broke from Mr. Brudenel's lips.

"It is a female tiger's remains, nothing worse!" shouted he. "She has been killed by a magnificent shot, here in the neck! A single bullet did for her! Your man has been this way, without doubt; and does he not know how to handle his rifle! *He* is no bungler, that's certain."

Mr. Gilchrist took fresh heart, and approached the spot. The tiger's bones were picked nearly clean already; the foul birds of prey had wasted no time. Little but the skeleton remained of what had, only twenty-four hours earlier, been so fearsome and so splendid a brute; and which had been done to death by one little piece of lead buried in its spine.

The eyes which had glared with yellow fire were picked clean from the head, the jaws which had uttered many a dreadful cry were lying wide open in ghastly mockery of rage, and the tongue was torn from behind them.

"We will keep this skull," exclaimed Brudenel with triumph. "There is little else worth carrying off, but this will be a trophy worth keeping. Your friend has got safely away from *this* peril, at anyrate, Gilchrist; we will find him yet, you will see. He's no fool to have shot like this!"

Gilchrist smiled. A faint ray of hope pierced into his heart at the cheery words. It certainly must have been Denham who had killed that tiger,—that must have been the shot which had been heard. But why had he not returned? Where was he now? [Pg 165]

CHAPTER XVIII
THE DACOIT'S HEAD

[Pg 166]

The search now proceeded with fresh spirit. Taking the spot where lay the tiger's carcase as a centre, the party closely examined every exit from it, but quite fruitlessly. It was tolerably easy to perceive from which side the shot had been fired,—where Denham must have been standing at that moment,—they proceeded first in that direction.

A little breakage among some succulent plants betrayed a slight farther progress there; then this trace ceased wholly. A wall of thick foliage interposed,—a purple flower bedecking it with rare beauty, but it turned them back. A long stalk of *Amherstia* lay on the ground at a short distance, as if it might have been broken off short in an attempt to mount a tree by its aid, but this clue also failed them.

The glade narrowed at one side to a tiny track, possible to penetrate. They advanced along it in single file, now climbing over fallen tree-trunks all smothered in ferns, then stooping beneath loops and trails of *Dendrobiums*, and a variety of plants, matted together with convolvuli, and tendrils of many kinds.

It opened out upon a blackened vista over which the jungle fire had swept, burning away every trace of animal life; a desolate track of waste and ruin, among such super-abundant life, as was strange to see.

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Stranger still to observe a glorious butterfly—a fragile, delicate creature, just emerged from its chrysalis tomb—spreading its painted wings, yet damp from its new birth, in the warmth of the sun as it streamed down upon the scorched grass. It was a living allegory of Life after Death which could not fail to strike every soul.

"It is your friend's 'leyp bya,'" said one of the Burmans. "It must have been out upon a ramble when the fire overtook him in his sleep, and it cannot now find its home again in him."

The charred scrub no longer presented further difficulties in the way of search. It was comparatively easy to penetrate in almost any direction; and the party separated, scattering themselves over the cleared space, and closely examining every rood of ground. Not a sign of man was to be found. Would any such exist after so fierce a flame had swept over it? Could it have been expected?

Mr. Brudenel laid his hand upon Gilchrist's shoulder.

"It is useless, my friend," said he. "The boy has gone, and left no trace. You must bear it like a man. If he yet should have escaped both fire and wild beast, he will be heard of in time. He can find us, but we cannot find him."

"Oh, do not say that I must abandon hope!" cried Gilchrist in agonised tones. "There must be something yet to be done."

"Offer a reward to any Burman who may bring in the smallest trace," suggested Osborn. "Those fellows have their network of connections all over the land. Make it worth their while to bring in anything that they may find. The stock of his rifle might be burnt, but the barrel must be there in some form. So must his hunting-knife, and many little things, as buttons, buckles, and such like, on his clothes. No wild beast could eat up thiccee neither."

"I will give any reward which Mr. Brudenel thinks likely to succeed," cried Gilchrist eagerly.

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"Not too fast," remonstrated the police officer. "Offer too liberal a sum, and, should he live, some of our worthy neighbours will murder him for sake of it. Leave that to me, I will manage that."

He had really no hope whatever that Denham lived, but was too kindly at heart to say so in plain words.

"Stay with me awhile, till we feel that we have turned every stone to find the lad," he suggested. "You will have every facility for search with us, and a rest will do yourself no harm after all you have gone through. Your old man will not be fit to move yet, either. Let my wife coddle him up into good health again first, and I can give you some sport the while."

Mr. Gilchrist readily accepted the invitation, for he could not bear the idea of relinquishing all hope of Ralph.

They returned sadly and silently to the station, where every comfort awaited them, but which they could not enjoy from a haunting dread of what Ralph might be suffering in some lonely spot,—perhaps burned and bruised, yet living, and beyond help. The nice dinner choked Mr. Gilchrist, he could not swallow the dainties which Mrs. Brudenel, in the pride of her young housekeeping, had laid before them; sleep forsook his pillow; he had no apparent answer to his prayers; gloom took possession of his soul.

With gentle wile did Mrs. Brudenel try to cheer her visitor, and distract his thoughts from constant brooding over the inevitable.

She succeeded with him better than her husband did, though he was as kind as he knew how to be; but he was accustomed to rougher experiences, and used to losing his comrades by death under many phases. His wife walked in the verandah with her afflicted guest; she told him of Wills' state, which steadily improved. She consulted him as to the garden, which she was anxious

to make very beautiful, and how to grow the plants which she admired most, and which were all new to her experience. Gilchrist tried, for sake of her kindness, to take interest in her pleasures, despite his heavy heart. [Pg 169]

"I fear," said he to her, "that we give you much trouble, and are sadly in your way."

"Oh no, no! far from that!" cried she eagerly. "You are such pleasant company for my husband, to whom it is such a treat to have English faces about him; and you tell me so nicely how to manage the orchids, of which I am anxious to have a good collection. Yours is just the help I wanted; and if you want any drawings of specimens, I may be of some assistance to you, for I am fond of drawing."

"Fetch some of your pictures, wifey," said Mr. Brudenel. "See, Gilchrist, is not that thing nice, it looks just as if it were growing there. I have ordered a carved frame for it, from a fellow here who does that sort of thing admirably."

"It is indeed an excellent drawing of the specimen," said Gilchrist; "but, excuse me, madam, you have copied the blossom from one plant and the foliage from another."

"I did," said Mrs. Brudenel, surprised. "I only had the flower, which was brought to me cut from its stem, so I put in the leaves from that one which grows in the verandah."

"And that one, which is not yet in bloom, will bear a blossom of white and lemon colour, whereas this is purple streaked."

"Oh, Mr. Gilchrist!" cried she, in pretty dismay, "what can be done? Can I alter it and put it right?"

"It would be best to do so, certainly," said he, unpacking a tin case of his own sketches; which, though less finished than the lady's drawings, were far more accurate as botanical specimens. But among them were some of Ralph's hasty schoolboy productions; one done in a merry mood, when he had contrived to introduce the semblance of a grotesque human face among the convolutions of the plant. Mr. Gilchrist came upon this unexpectedly, in his search for the one which he wanted, and broke down completely over it, as it brought so forcibly before him the boy's laughing eyes and bright expression as he had held it up for inspection, with some harmless nonsense. [Pg 170]

Oh, Ralph! Was that smiling face cold and set in death already? Were those pleasant eyes closed for ever, those jocund lips pale and grim? Was that dear brave boy lying scorched and blackened by the jungle flame, or torn limb from limb by the tiger? Had he gone through so much by sea and land, for his fate to remain an unsolved mystery for evermore; a secret—a dreadful haunting secret—only to be divulged on the last day?

Mrs. Brudenel put her kind hand upon Gilchrist's shoulder.

"Do not despair, my friend," said she gently; "do not abandon yourself to despair. God is very good,—very merciful. Perhaps Ralph is safe yet. No sign of him has been found, and had the tiger killed him there surely would have been some. Let us seek for faith."

"I do not know how to have faith, dear lady," groaned Mr. Gilchrist. "There seems no ground for faith."

"Ah, my dear sir," was her innocent reply, "faith would not be faith were there ground for it. It is simple trust in our Father's goodness."

Gilchrist could not reply. He knew that she was right; he knew that she was nearer to God than he; he felt rebuked, though she was far from having intended to administer rebuke,—it did not occur to her that she had done so.

There was silence for a few minutes, then she began again.

"Tell me about Ralph, he must be about the age of my brother Sydney." [Pg 171]

"Not seventeen," replied Mr. Gilchrist.

"And what a hero he is! how much bravery he has shown! Sydney would be so envious of him. He is very high-spirited and daring too. He is going to be a soldier,—papa is a soldier, you know."

"Yes, madam?"

"I have heard papa say that the hardest thing soldiers have to do is to *wait* until they are wanted. When they are charging down upon an enemy, and fighting, they are carried on by the excitement, and forget everything but the work in hand. When they are standing still, doing nothing but keeping steady, and seeing the battle carried on by others on every hand, it is a very hard thing for them to hold themselves in."

"Waiting is always hard," said Mr. Gilchrist, sighing.

"Yes. Papa had to do it the very first time when he was in an engagement. It was in some Indian skirmish with native troops, and papa's company was one held in reserve to pour in fresh when the rebels were tired, and meantime to hold a pass and prevent them from moving round to the rear of the English. I believe," continued she, with a smile, "that I am expressing myself badly, like an ignorant girl, but perhaps you understand what I mean?"

"Yes, madam, your meaning is perfectly clear to me."

"Well, papa found it so hard to stand still, with nothing to do, that he took up a bit of stick and whittled it to keep himself steady. When the call to charge was sounded, he put the half-peeled

stick and the handful of chips into his pocket; he never knew why, or even that he had done so, until mamma found them there long afterwards, and asked him why he kept such things. Then the sight of them called up the whole scene to him more plainly than anything else, he said: the [Pg 172] dark-faced rebels, with evil looks and angry eyes; the glare and flashing guns and smother of smoke; and the poor creatures shot down before his face, and lying howling and bleeding on the ground, among plunging horses and shouting men; and some lying still who had been so raging just before, and the set determined look upon the Englishmen.

"Mamma has those chips now, put away among her treasures, and shows them to us sometimes on a Sunday evening, when we have been reading the Bible to her, and talking about being resolute, and such things."

"Your story reminds me of the poet's words, 'Those also serve, who only stand and wait,'" said Mr. Gilchrist.

"Yes, does it not," cried she, her sweet face kindling. "I do so like those lines."

Mr. Brudenel here returned from his morning duties, and invited Gilchrist to take a turn in the verandah with him.

"No news yet, I am sorry to say," said he.

Mr. Gilchrist turned to Mrs. Brudenel, "I will try to 'stand and wait,' patiently," said he.

Some excitement was here observed among the natives and servants. A man had arrived, carrying something large and round, tied up in a gaily-coloured handkerchief, which he swung carelessly in his hand as he approached.

The little crowd pressed closely about him, all eagerly talking at once. Some words attracted Mr. Brudenel's ear, that of "dacoit" prominent among them. He rose hastily, and marched down to the excited group.

"Oh," cried Mrs. Brudenel, "perhaps the man has brought news of your friend! let us hasten to hear what he says. What can he have in that handkerchief?"

She rose, and almost ran through the compound; in her eagerness quite outstripping Mr. [Pg 173] Gilchrist, who longed, yet dreaded, to hear the news which he felt had come at last.

Mr. Brudenel lifted his hand in warning to his wife, but she did not perceive his caution; nor, in the babble of Burmese tongues, catch his desire that she should not be present.

"What have you there?" asked she in her excitement, airing one of the few phrases of the language which had been so recently taught to her.

Quite proud to be addressed by the English lady, and pleased with himself, his burden, and the news which he had to impart, the Burman untied his bundle with an amiable grin of delight, and out rolled, to the horrified girl's feet, the ghastly, gory, head of a dacoit chief, with its fierce expression set in death upon the parted blackened lips, and in the deep lines around the sunken eyes.

With blanched face, she recoiled in terror; and her husband, hurrying forward, passed his stalwart arm around her for protection, while she hid her face on his breast.

The Burman, meantime, was pouring out a flood of explanations, and the history of his having watched the robber, seen him possessed of English things, followed, tracked him from place to place, and, finally, set upon him in a lonely spot, killed him, searched him, and found upon him—this!—holding up a silver watch.

It was Ralph Denham's watch, Mr. Gilchrist knew it well. Moreover, it had R. D. engraved upon it on the back. It had been a present to him from his mother before he sailed, he valued it extremely, and had it upon him when the *Pelican* was abandoned, being almost the only thing of value which he had saved. Indeed, it was nearly the only trinket which he had ever possessed.

How it had fallen into the robber's hands could not now be ever known, for the man was dead. [Pg 174] Had poor Denham escaped the tiger, been spared from the fire, to fall a prey at last to a fellow-man? Had he been the victim of other perils, and had the dacoit only found the watch in the jungle and appropriated it? Was the fellow even venturing to bring it in for the reward, and could he have told more of the gallant lad's fate? Who could say now?

Mr. Brudenel questioned the Burman closely, seeking confirmation of the story in its every detail of place and time. The man knew nothing of Denham, nor as to how the watch had fallen into the hands of the dacoit, who was one of a band of robbers that was harrying the mountain villages at a little distance. The watch was useless to him evidently. It had run down, and was silent. Either he had not possessed the key, or did not understand how to use it; and he had worn it round his neck as an ornament in a conspicuous manner, which had attracted the Burman's notice.

Mr. Gilchrist paid the offered reward in silence, carried the watch into the house, and, laying it down, broke into a passion of grief which, for a time, admitted of no consolation.

CHAPTER XIX [Pg 175]

LOST IN THE JUNGLE

Ralph, upon flying from the infuriated elephant, had followed the defile before described, rushing up its tortuous windings with little heed beyond that of his own safety. If he thought at all, he believed that the others were following him at no great distance; attracted, as he had been, by the rough stones lying in the bed of the stream; where, after the rains, it tumbled headlong down the pass, a mountain torrent of double its present width. The loose boulders, and jagged fragments of rock, would, he considered, cut the pads in the elephant's feet and deter the animal's pursuit. In this he was mistaken, but the idea guided his flight at the time.

He did not pause for reflection; it was instinct more than deliberation which impelled his flight. On he ran; his active, well-trained young limbs covering the ground rapidly; leaping from rock to boulder, springing over pool and marshy hollow, and instinctively taking advantage of every soft grassy slope.

All at once his heedless progress was arrested by summary disaster. He stepped upon something soft, which turned beneath his foot instead of proving to be a rounded hard stone. A fearful screech was heard, curdling the very marrow in his bones, and bringing his heart to his mouth as he fell, measuring his length prone upon the sward. An unearthly spitting and growling assailed [Pg 176] him, which, as he quickly came to himself after the shock of his fall, he first thought emanated from an enraged cat; but the next moment, was, he perceived, the token of something far worse.

He had tumbled over two young tiger cubs, and their dam was hurrying up to their rescue, from the pool where she had been drinking.

He saw the rich colour of her soft fur; he marked the beautiful dark waving lines crossing the yellow body; the graceful power of her strong limbs was impressed upon his mind in the moment's view which he had of her, lifting her head from the water at the cry of her offspring, and bounding back to their lair.

Then she crouched for her spring upon him, the sun lighting up her splendid eyes, contracted as they were from the intentness with which they glared at him, her tail lashing itself to and fro, as she warily crept two steps nearer, with fell purpose apparent in her every curve.

That pause for her spring saved him. How he took his aim he never knew; he could not have done it had he stayed to consider, it was an accuracy born of desperation. He seized his gun, as he rose to his feet, pointed it, fired, and saw her drop. The shot had entered the creature's neck, near the shoulders, and pierced directly to its heart. She rolled over with a faint struggle, and was still for evermore.

Oblivious of the death of their dam, the two cubs, replete with food, were already curling themselves around to resume their disturbed sleep.

Ralph could not believe in his own deliverance. He dropped his arms, and stood for a moment dumbfounded, expecting to see that agile sinuous mass of beautiful peril move again.

He gazed at it in silent, fixed horror, till, gradually realising that he was saved from it as by a [Pg 177] miracle, he drew a long breath.

At the very same moment he became aware of two brilliant points of topaz-hued light fixed upon him from the jungle.

They were the eyes of the male tiger, stealthily advancing upon him from another side.

It was too much for the boy. Terror seized upon him, and he fled precipitately in the reverse direction; tearing his way through creeper and jungle-grass, breaking through bush and bramble, panting, gasping and sick with fear, till, perceiving a gnarled tree easy to climb, he flung down his gun and swung himself upwards, from branch to branch, till he could seat himself upon a point of safety.

The tiger leapt, and leapt short of his prey. With a roar of baffled rage it bounded up to the tree where the boy sat with blanched cheeks and horror-distended eyes, and, rearing itself upon its hind legs, stretched a strong paw upwards in endeavour to reach its enemy and pull him from his refuge. Up went Ralph's legs with an instinctive spasm. He crouched closer to the branch where he sat, and clung faster to the boughs and cord-like creepers around him.

The tiger, with ferocious growls, snuffed at the gun, prowled round the tree, and cast baleful glances upwards to the place where the boy was plainly visible; but it made no attempt to climb the trunk, which Ralph feared it would do. He did not know enough about the habits or power of these creatures to be sure what it would attempt; and was alternately divided between this dread and that of being no longer able to maintain his hold, but of falling headlong from his perch into the grasp of those cruel fangs and terrible paws.

But though every minute seemed to be an hour, the time was not really very long before the [Pg 178] creature gave up its pursuit, and made off with head drooping and a long stealthy stride of its supple limbs.

Ralph could not at first believe himself to be safe. He thought that the tiger might return; he thought that it was watching him from some secret lair; he was not certain that his shot had proved fatal to the female tiger; and the more he thought about it, the less probable did he consider it that she was dead. He glanced this way and that, expecting to see a gleam of golden colour creeping among the undergrowth of deep green scrub; he strained his ears to hear soft footsteps crash among the brushwood, or low-muttered growls uttered beneath him.

He was cramped and stiff from his attitude and the rigidity of his hold; he grew very cold as the sun went down; he was hungry and very, very thirsty; his lips were parched, his mouth fevered,—

yet he dared not descend the tree.

After a long time, he ventured to change his position to one of greater ease. He shifted his place to a mighty branch, upon which he might recline at full length, or sit with his back against the bole. Then he began to wonder what had become of his companions. He could see none of them, nor hear a sound which could proceed from human lips.

Where were they? What were they doing? Why did they not come to seek him? Had any of them been trampled under foot by that mad elephant, or devoured by the tigers? Surely some dreadful thing must have befallen them, or they would have come to his assistance.

Mr. Gilchrist—Wills—Osborn—why did none of them come?

By degrees his thoughts concentrated themselves upon his gun. It must not be there in the long grass, dark and wet with heavy dew. He must go down and take it up, but dreaded the descent. [Pg 179] Still, his gun must not become rusted and useless, or what would become of him. Slowly, silently, he crept down, swinging himself from bough to bough, pausing and listening every moment for the tiger's low growl. Now he thought that he heard it; then he believed that it was but his imagination. Under one idea, he hung poised in air; under the other, he ventured a little farther. All at once a treacherous branch, to which he had trusted his weight, gave way beneath him; and, with a sudden jerk, he fell crashing down to the ground.

His fall was broken by the thick tangle of the undergrowth, so that he fractured no bones, but he was terribly shaken, cut and scratched, and one foot sprained.

For a few moments he lay stunned; then pulled himself together, reached out for the gun, and having possessed himself of it, tried to mount the tree again. But he could not succeed. His arms felt as if they had been all but pulled out of their sockets; blood trickled into his eyes from a deep scratch on his brow, and blinded him.

But he dared not remain upon the ground, so he moved on a little to seek a tree which might be easier to climb. The moon had risen in radiant beauty, and there was plenty of light, but no tree suitable to his purpose grew about that spot, and he moved deeper into the jungle, as he thought that now here, now there, he had found one.

He did discover one at last, made his painful ascent of it, and, when he thought that he had mounted sufficiently high, he found a tolerably easy seat, and determined to await the dawn there.

He was extremely tired, but was afraid to sleep lest some snake or noxious insect should coil around him or sting him. He had enough to do to ward off the attacks of myriads of creatures as it was. Mosquitoes hummed gaily over their feast upon him; huge beetles flopped in his face, [Pg 180] smaller ones ran up his trousers and sleeves, and tried to penetrate down his back.

Ants got into his boots, and slimy things crawled over his hands and endeavoured to fix themselves on his face or neck, or cling to his hair. Would the tardy day never begin to break?

What was that red glow upon the sky to the eastward? It was not like the dawn, it was not in the right place,—but what could it be? It was like the reflection, upon the sky, of a mighty fire,—but where was the fire? He could see none.

Ralph was not aware how far he had run up the defile, or noticed the direction which he had taken in escaping from the tiger. In reality he had skirted round the farther base of the hill upon which the police-station was situated, and was wandering in the jungle at its base.

The tardy sun rose at last; much of the terror of the night was swept away under its beneficent influence. Ralph pulled himself together, determined to walk off his stiffness and soreness; shouldered his gun, and set off—down quite a new gulley, under the idea that he was returning down the same through which he had come on the previous afternoon; and limped resolutely forward, away from his friends, away from the station, away from all help and succour.

He walked for a long time before he found that he was not going rightly, for the defile came to an end. Its close was completed by a wide shallow pool, fringed with bamboo canes, and upon which many water-fowl were disporting themselves, while more were preening their plumage upon its banks.

The sight made him feel how hungry he was, and he argued to himself that the sound of his gun would betray his whereabouts to his friends, who would answer the signal by another to let him [Pg 181] know in which direction to turn. He fired, therefore, upon the covey nearest to him, and two plump birds fell.

Forgetting his fatigue and his lame foot in the excitement, he splashed through the muddy shallows and pools, picked up his game, and brought it back to *terra firma*.

"Well," said he to himself, "there is nothing to be gained by rambling farther away. I may as well stay here and cook my breakfast, for I don't know which way to go, and it is as likely that I should go wrongly as in the right way. If they don't hear my gun, they will perhaps see the smoke of a fire, which will guide them."

He therefore gathered some dry fuel in a heap, and, having the good fortune to discover some cutchwood trees, collected the withered branches lying scattered around, and soon had a splendid fire. The flames emitted from the cutchwood were, however, too fierce for his cookery, so he piled on some greener wood, and sat down to pluck his birds, while the blaze was dying down to a nice glowing bed of red ashes.

We say "pluck his birds," but Ralph was no gourmand; nor was he cook to a first-class gentleman's club. Plucking was too lengthy an operation for him; he cut the skin of his game down the back, and pulled it off, inside out, like a stocking from a foot, having first chopped off the heads and legs.

This operation was completed before his fire was ready; so he took a plunge into a clear pool, reclothed himself, and then broiled his breakfast, having split his birds open like spatch-cocks.

"They are not bad," thought he, as he devoured them, tearing their limbs apart by help of fingers and knife, like a young ogre. "They are not bad, though they would have been more savoury if I [Pg 182] had had some pepper and salt, with a dab of butter. How Agnes would have jeered at me as man-cook. I wonder what the dear old girl is doing now. She little thinks where I am. Lost in a Burmese jungle! What a pretty kettle of fish it is. I know no more than the man in the moon which way to go, or what to do. Well, no predicament is so bad that it can't be mended. If I walk straight on, I must come somewhere, sooner or later. Those fellows don't mean to join me here, that's plain. So Ralph Denham, Esq., marching orders are yours. Forward!"

He knew that he must regain the main stream of the Salween River, up the eastern bank of which his party had come; but where was the Salween? He must climb one of these mountain-spurs,—one sufficiently lofty to command a bird's-eye view of the country, so that he could take its bearings. He therefore set himself to the ascent of the most lofty hill which he could perceive.

The ascent was, however, no joke. His foot was very painful. He had dipped his handkerchief in water, and bound it tightly round the ankle, but the heat rapidly dried it, nor could he constantly find means of rewetting it to keep it cool.

The jungle grew thicker and thicker, more and more impenetrable, with every step. He had to cut his way with his knife through the tangle of creepers, linked and bound together in impenetrable masses, and his knife soon became wholly inadequate to the task.

To proceed straight forward was utterly impossible, for the thickness of the interlacing stems quite baffled his strength. He found an easier place to the right, and essayed that; but after a few steps he was pulled up again. He discovered a slighter barrier to the left, again to be baffled wholly.

After hours of work, he had advanced but a dozen yards, and made up his mind that to penetrate [Pg 183] such a jungle as this, with no better appliances than he possessed, and with no help, was a completely hopeless task.

He sat down to rest, and consider what would be his next best plan.

CHAPTER XX [Pg 184]
JUNGLE THIEVES

It was easy to sit down, and easy to ponder the question, but any decision at all was another matter. All the thinking in the world would not tell him either where he was or which way he ought to go; and the more he deliberated, the more puzzled he became.

To mount the hills was impossible, from the impenetrability of the jungle; to follow a stream was to expose himself to the attacks of wild beasts coming to the water to drink. How then could he proceed? But to remain still was quite as unsafe, for he had but a small quantity of powder and shot; and when this was expended, would be wholly at the mercy of savage animals.

To follow the windings of a stream must lead him, in process of time, to some large river; and the danger of this course was no greater than that of any other. He determined to adopt this plan, and prepared for a start; first recommending his safety, by prayer, to Divine mercy, and imploring for help and guidance from on high.

Forlorn enough did he feel as he resumed his gun and other accoutrements, preparatory for so hopeless a task, but he tried to be brave, and once more set himself, as a preliminary, to "hang his harp on a willow tree."

It would not do, his voice sounded thin and poor, there was no volume in it; the silence around him seemed yet more awful in contrast to it; the words struck him as most intensely foolish in [Pg 185] face of the majesty of nature which surrounded him.

He gave it up, and tried the Old Hundredth Psalm. This brought up, to his mental vision, the picture of his home, and the dreary old hand-organ man who droned out that psalm tune in the street regularly every Friday morning.

He could see Agnes in the shabby little parlour, and his mother's sweet, sad face, in her widow's cap, with the crippled baby in her arms. A great lump rose in his throat, and he dashed his hand across his eyes.

But it would never do to become sentimental, as he termed it, so he set himself vigorously to finding a suitable stream to follow. Now, the difficulty became that of finding any at all.

The jungle surrounded him on every side, he could not free himself from it. Every now and then he found what he thought a free glade or opening pathway, which he would pursue for a short

distance, only to be again brought up in front of a tangle of creepers, glorious in colour, rich in purple or yellow festoons of exquisite flowers; snowed over with pure white blossoms, long wreaths of beauty pendant from the branches of the trees, and wholly preventing any progress.

Exquisite as the orchids and other plants were, he became weary of them and their sameness. Their perfume sickened him, their glory palled upon his sight. They were the same kinds—now common to him—over and over again. Oh, for a clump of English primroses nestled among moss and last year's brown leaves! Oh, for a bush of pink wild-roses, with golden hearts and delicate faint fragrance wafted upon a light breeze! Here everything was heavy and oppressive; too brilliant, too much, too unfamiliar, too unlike home.

Insect and reptile life troubled him greatly. The weather was growing very hot, and the density of [Pg 186] the trees impeded every current of cool air. This was doubtless the cause of the difficulty in finding water, it was drying up so fast everywhere. Leeches got upon his legs, fixing themselves upon him with far too affectionate a tenacity; ants ran up his trousers, got into his boots; a thousand and one flying and crawling plagues assailed him.

Snakes and serpents wound their tails round trees, dropped coils in his path, and lifted flat heads from their meditations, to gaze on him with malevolent eyes. He did not know which were harmless and which were deadly, so suffered the same qualms alike from all.

He had a vague idea that a dark-coloured snake was more perilous than a yellow or green one, and never suffered more terror than when, sitting down to rest, and having fallen asleep, he perceived, upon waking, a long black thing reared on end, with pendant head bent over him.

For one moment he felt sick with horror, then perceived that it was the stem of a flower which he had never seen before, and which he had either overlooked from his fatigue when he sat down, or which had shot up its bloom with the most marvellous celerity while he was unconscious.

He had, indeed, slept for hours, having been quite worn out; and a special Providence must have guarded him during this long somnolence, or some noxious insect would certainly have attacked him the while.

It was late in the day, the dews were falling thickly after the heat of the noontide; and a quantity of hares were hopping about, feeding upon the grass around him. They did not seem to be afraid of him, and he shot one without difficulty, and looked forward to making a good supper upon him, for he was hungry.

He laid it at the foot of the tree beneath which he had reposed, and began to collect wood with which to make a fire. Whilst doing this, he lost sight of the hare for a few minutes; and, on [Pg 187] returning to the spot where he had laid it, he found a couple of huge crows tugging away at it to make it their own; and the burying beetles already digging a grave beneath it. An army of ants was swarming over it, and so persistent in their attentions that they would not leave it even when Ralph tore the skin off its back, and set it down to cook by his fire, wrapped thickly up in leaves.

However, he was too hungry to be very particular, although nothing had ever yet brought him to eat fried caterpillars or maggots, as a Burman will. He scraped off the ants to the best of his ability, and sought, while his meal was preparing, for some fruits, of which to make an agreeable conclusion to it.

He had the good fortune to discover some, of which he immediately partook, being parched and feverish. They refreshed him; and it was perhaps partly from this cause, and partly from his long sleep, that, his senses being perfectly alert, he chanced to notice a small orchid blooming upon a tree which he was convinced was one quite new to Mr. Gilchrist's collection. It differed in several material points from all which he had yet seen, but was certainly an orchid.

He carefully cut away the piece of bark upon which it grew, and looked about for more of it. He found another very small plant, which he secured, but the evening was becoming too dark for him to seek farther. He therefore returned to his fire, and made himself as comfortable beside it as circumstances permitted.

He did not sleep much that night, but dozed and woke again many times,—piling green wood upon the embers every time, so that the smoke thus engendered should keep off the mosquitoes from him.

At a little distance, beneath the trees, the fireflies swarmed, flashing about hither and thither, [Pg 188] and making light in shady places. This light was caught and returned by the shining backs of a thousand beetles,—green, blue, crimson, and copper-hued. Flying foxes flitted by in search of guavas and other fruits; and bats of every size and description swarmed around, hawking on the wing for their suppers.

Ralph watched all these creatures dreamily, seeing, but too drowsy to think about them actively. The heavy scent of night-perfumed flowers overpowered his faculties, and confused his powers of mind, almost as much as if he had partaken of a narcotic.

Was it only a dream, or a dream-like fancy then, or did he really hear the faint ripple of flowing water? His senses became all at once preternaturally acute. He sprang up from his reclining position, and listened intently. No, it was not a mistake,—it was not a trick of the imagination; a little rill of water was running over stones hard by. In the comparative silence of the night the gentle sound made itself plainly audible.

He did not dare to leave the friendly protection of his fire in the dark, the jungle was too full of danger for that, but he laid a long branch, torn from a bush, in the direction from which the sound proceeded, and anxiously awaited the dawn.

It came at last,—dank and chilly even in that tropical climate; he rose, and perceived not far from him a slender thread of water slipping gaily along beneath ferns and grass and reeds; now breaking into a laugh over a few scattered stones and branches, then spreading into a tiny pool looking deep from brown shadows cast by overhanging growth.

Ralph laved his brow in it, cast its refreshing coolness over head and neck, drank of it, bathed his orchids in it, and knelt down to thank God for having at last found the clue by which he might [Pg 189] possibly escape from the horrors of death in this lonely jungle. If die he must, he might now, at anyrate, die in the open country, with the sun of heaven above him.

Not even Arethusa herself, "shepherding her bright fountains," slipping down the rocks "with her golden locks, streaming among the streams," in the land of poesy, on the other side of the world, could have been so lovely in his eyes as this little unheard of, unnamed, unknown streamlet, in the heart of a Burmese forest.

The wild cat lapped it, and slunk away; a magnificent, many-hued dragon-fly, just burst from the sheath of its chrysalis upon the stem of a reed, was drying its gauzy wings in the level beams of the rising sun, as they shot through the trees just above the flower-enamelled grass, that sparkled with dew as if besprinkled with gems of every colour. A thousand little birds, awakened by the recurring daylight, chirped and sang and preened their feathers in the freshness of those early hours. Ralph's spirits also arose from the depression which had overcome them, and he sang once more as he arranged his dress, and reloaded himself with his accoutrements.

He now found more of the new orchid; and, still further impressed by a conviction of its rarity, he possessed himself of all that he could carry safely. This did not overburden him, for it was not plentiful; and, having packed it up, carefully swathed in damp grass, bound over that with liana stems, and protected by bark, he set himself to follow the course of the stream.

The water bubbled along in a very tortuous course, marking its way everywhere by a line of brighter, more tender emerald; and doubtless fed by hidden springs, for it grew wider in process of time, spreading out into a large pool whereon water-lilies reposed.

The blossoms had mostly gone to seed, which stood up from the stems like acorns, but a few late [Pg 190] ones still floated on the bosom of the lake,—blue, pink, and white.

The edges of the water were fringed with flowering reeds; passion-flowers tossed clinging tendrils from tree to tree on its margin, and long wreaths of bud and blossom hung pendant from them.

Myriads of new-born butterflies flitted sportively among them, and bright birds skimmed over the quiet water. It was a most lovely sight,—one which Ralph never afterwards forgot. He rested upon the shore of this lake through the hottest part of the day; breakfasting upon some plantains which he had found, and upon the lily seeds and sprouts.

When a little air sprang up towards evening, he resumed his course.

The jungle closed around him again; but he now held the thread of the maze, and lost heart no more. He passed the night in a tree, and his evening orisons were heartfelt.

Day by day he plodded on. The stream grew wider, but wound so much that his progress through the country was very slow. When it grew sufficiently broad to admit of the navigation of any kind of craft, Ralph made up his mind to try whether he could not proceed faster upon a raft; and pondered much upon the means of constructing one which, though rudely fashioned, might serve his purpose.

His thoughts reverted at first to the coracles of ancient Britain, which he had heard were of basket-work covered with skins. Canes for basket-work abounded, but he did not see how to procure skins of a sufficiently large size, or how to cut them into shape or join them together.

He then thought of the North-American Indian's birch-bark canoe. But he had no means of felling [Pg 191] a suitable tree, or of peeling the bark off in large sheets.

His mind reverted again to the wicker-work. He could cut down bamboos, and they grew plentifully everywhere. Could he tie them together by means of the cord-like lianas which bound the jungle so closely together into impenetrable masses? If not, he might weave them together with split cane or supple reeds.

Another consideration puzzled him. The stream was narrow; his raft must be no wider than necessary,—but what ought its length to be? It would not be manageable if very long; but how much surface should there be to support his weight on the water. He had no data upon which to go that could enable him to decide this point; experiment alone could do so. He would try making it as long as his own height; and, if that did not suffice, he could then enlarge it.

He cleared a space upon the borders of the stream, laid down upon it, and marked out his own proportions. Then he narrowed each end to a point beyond these limits, so that he might work the raft either way; drove short stakes into the ground all around the enclosure, laid stout bamboos athwart the centre of it, and bound them to the stakes. He tied together a bundle of long bamboos at each end, laid them lengthways upon those firmly affixed to the points, and spreading them out in the middle, began to weave all together with split canes, which had been steeping in water, to make them pliant, while everything else was being prepared.

When this was made as firm as lay in his power, he perceived that, though it might float and bear his weight, that burden would sink it a little below the surface of the water, so that he would always be wet. The stakes with which he had begun his contrivance were about two feet long— [Pg 192]

perhaps nearer three feet; and though not very regular in height, were all driven into the ground about equally far. It was above the ground that they were uneven.

He therefore began again, weaving a second floor about six inches above the first one. This had also the effect of making all steadier; and upon noticing this, he once more set to work, and wove a narrow bulwark above what he called his upper deck.

He cut a couple of bundles of long bamboos, which he tied along the bulwarks, to use in case of need; fashioned rude rowlocks in the centre; cut a quantity of grass, which he spread as a carpet for his feet; bound up a sheaf of the same to serve for a pillow at night; provided a store of liana twigs and split cane for repairs, if necessary; made his packet of orchids secure to stakes; and, finally, began to lay in a small store of fruit for food.

The stream was drying up so fast upon its shallow borders that fish were left flapping about in holes, or on the mud, every day; and, not sharing in the Burman's superstition as to taking life, he had made many a meal upon them,—for the construction of his raft had occupied several days. So few charges of powder and shot had he left, that he would not use his gun, thinking that he might want it for self-preservation before he could reach civilised regions.

When fish was not to be got, he had eaten fruit when he could find it; he had knocked down a bird or two by throwing sticks at them, for they were very tame at first, but were now becoming more afraid of him; and once he had been fortunate enough to come across some jungle-fowl's eggs.

Such a piece of luck had not befallen him again, however; and he had cleared his immediate neighbourhood of plantains, so he must go farther afield for stores.

The weather was very hot, and he had worked about his boat building, all these days, in his shirt and linen drawers. His other garments, with his gun and other small possessions, were neatly laid together on the low-growing branch of a shrub, in a place where he could easily see them; and now, taking up his knife, which he carried with a lanyard about his neck, and with a coil of grass-rope in his hand, he pulled on his boots, and set off into the jungle. [Pg 193]

He was tolerably successful in his quest, but had to roam about for some time first. As the sun was preparing to set, he returned to the place that had begun to feel almost like a home to him,—that natural clearance among the trees; the clump of bushes on the little promontory jutting out into the stream; the huge *Amherstia* crowning the many-tinted scrub, with the white *Dendrobium Formosum* hanging down from it in such rich masses.

What were those parti-coloured figures at the foot of the tree where his garments hung? Men? Burmese? *Not dacoits?* But what else could they be? The ragged gaudy "putsoes," the white fillets around the heads, the gaunt frames, the fierce yet sly faces, all told their own tale. Ralph had heard of these robbers, and slipt stealthily back into the jungle, where, himself concealed, he could watch their proceedings.

They were examining his clothes with grins of delight. One had his beloved watch hung round his neck, and dangling about with every movement. One was cutting buttons off with great glee; and one was investigating the gun.

Now this gun was not a very good one; it had been purchased in the bazaar of Moulmein, in preparation for Ralph's first expedition with Mr. Gilchrist, when money was short with them both, while awaiting their better equipments from home.

But it was lighter than the fine new ones sent out from England, and was a favourite one with its young owner, though Wills often told him that he would meet with some accident with it one of these days, the weapon being so worn. [Pg 194]

The Burman who held it was ramming in powder and shot most liberally; driving in more and more with the greatest delight, laughing and joking the while with more merriment than discretion.

Suddenly, in the middle of the fun, the old thing exploded—burst!—with a mighty report, and all the Burmese thieves were prostrate immediately.

Ralph thought at first that they were all killed, and was on the point of rushing forward to see the extent of the injuries received, when one raised himself, and then another. With the most rueful faces they wagged their heads to each other, each looking solemnly at his neighbour for a moment.

The third was hurt and bleeding, but whether seriously injured Ralph could not tell. His companions rose, seized him by the feet, and drew him, on his back, by that means to some distance from the scene of the disaster; and, passing near enough to Ralph's hiding-place, he heard them jabbering together about the "beloo" which had thus revenged itself upon them. They seemed shy of approaching the place where the shattered gun lay, and Denham thought that it would do them good to hear a little more of the "beloo."

Accordingly, he began to moan, upon which the fellows gave a great start, and gazed around with terrified faces. Seeing this, and being himself concealed behind a large tree, the boy increased his moan to a howl,—a yell,—the most unearthly screeches which he could raise. It was too much for the dacoits, they sprang to their feet and ran off as fast as their legs could take them, becoming quickly lost in the shadows of night.

Rightly judging that their dwellings could not be very far off, and that they might return by daylight, Ralph hastened to loose his raft, and push it off from its moorings down the stream, [Pg 195]

determining to pursue his way as far as possible before morning.

The raft floated well, to his joyful surprise; he punted it along successfully, and was far away before the day star rose.

CHAPTER XXI [Pg 196]
THE RAPIDS

Had Ralph known it, he was now not so very far from his friends. The stream, down which he was floating, was a tributary of that on the banks of which he had become separated from them, flowing down the next valley between the hills, and becoming merged in the larger one some five or six miles below the police-station.

The range of hills between them was higher and more abrupt than that upon which the police-station was situated, concealing it from view; but the density of the forest and jungle made its inhabitants widely dispersed. They were wholly composed of small scattered remnants of wild Karens, constantly fighting with each other, split up into small numbers, of which half a dozen families would suffice to stock a village, and incessantly changing their abode.

They would come to a jungle-covered hill, and set it on fire. When a sufficient space for their wants was burnt out, they planted rice upon the ground manured by the ashes, ran up a few hovels with bamboos and palm leaves, and awaited their harvest. This gathered, the same land would not bear a second crop; and, space being unlimited, the remedy was simple. They only moved to another hillside, and repeated the fire and farming manoeuvres.

When their own rice failed them, they helped themselves to that belonging to other villages or tribes, provided these were weaker than themselves. Sometimes they made a mistake on this [Pg 197] point, and became wiped off the face of the land. If this did not happen, they generally wiped out the others; for, if anyone escaped, he was bound to slay as many of his enemies as he had lost of friends. This species of vendetta was a religion to them all, and a curious comment upon the idea that, to take life of any description, was to shut the gates of the highest heaven upon the slayer.

The Burman will not destroy the principle of life even in noxious animals, but murder is his commonest crime, and his murders are often accompanied with great atrocity.

The dacoits who plundered Ralph fell into the power of an enemy's tribe, and the chief's head was carried to the police-station for sake of the reward paid for all such tribute; and while Mr. Gilchrist was sadly mourning over what he considered the certain proof of his young friend's death, in the discovery of his watch, Denham had passed the junction of the two rivulets, and was prosperously pursuing his voyage towards the Salween River.

We say "prosperously," though, in good sooth, the voyage was carried on with many vicissitudes. The stream narrowed day by day, as the extreme heat dried up its margins. Now the frail barque stuck helplessly in the mud, which was yet too soft to bear walking upon.

Ralph would sink up to his knees as he pulled and hauled his little craft out of the shallows, and set it once more afloat.

Then he would become entangled in débris of the forest,—sticks, rotten stumps, masses of leaves, etc., all stuck together in one jumble, and caught by a little promontory, wafted into some tiny bay, or even detained by the drooping boughs of some tree or shrub dipping into the water, to coagulate and solidify into a floating island.

Poor Ralph's garments were of the slightest description, for he had left all which he had [Pg 198] possessed at first—little enough at the best—when he fled from the dacoits. It was well for him that he had retained his knife; but at least his clothes, such as they were, dried easily in the sun, which was a good thing, as they were wetted through and through every day.

"I wish I were an Israelite in the desert," thought he, as his only button came off, and he cut a hole in his waistband and tied a loop of twisted grass into it. "How I am ever to get into a suit of broadcloth again passes me to imagine. But it is well for me that folks are not very particular hereabouts."

On the fifth day of his voyage he saw the vista open before him, and a wide expanse of water appeared to his sight. This must be, he thought, the Salween River; and he hoped that his troubles were now approaching their end.

"I shall soon come to an English settlement, or a missionary station, or at least to some Burmese village," he thought; "and some good Christian will help me on my way. What a pretty place this is!"

The river upon which he had now emerged wound very much, and almost took the appearance of a succession of lakes. Hills clothed with jungle shut it in, and stretches of rocky land jutted out from either side at irregular distances.

Protected from the force of the deeper current by one of these little promontories, the rapidity of the stream down which he had come shot him well out into the wider river with a velocity which surprised him; though, in his ignorance of what it meant, he considered it "very jolly" at first to be cleared of all the impedimenta which had hitherto encumbered him so sadly.

But this was only a momentary joy, as his frail barque was caught in a power beyond his control, and whirled about in a manner which even he saw meant mischief. He had but one thing to save [Pg 199] —his orchids. He had prepared for a catastrophe of some sort previously, and had them merely slung by a long cord to a cane. He caught this off, throwing the loop around his neck, and in five minutes more was battling with rapids for his life, his raft beaten into a thousand pieces.

He had clutched, with the energy of despair, the stout bamboo which he had used to punt his raft; and, clinging instinctively to this, was tossed down some two or three feet; plunged overhead in a pool, floated up again; washed violently against rough stones; felt his feet, lost them again, was rolled over; dashed down another little cascade; and brought up, finally, breathless, bruised, battered and bleeding, upon a tiny ait in the centre of the stream, where his bamboo had become entangled between some small bushes.

He had but strength enough to catch at a firmer support, and draw himself up upon the islet, where he lay, utterly spent, for a long time.

Everything darkened before his eyes, the earth seemed to reel beneath him, all the heavens to be unsteady above him, and he became unconscious.

He must have remained so for long; as, when he slowly came to himself again, the stars were jewelling the purple vault above him, and the full moon casting a long silvery highway over the rippling water around.

Where was he? What had happened to him? He tried to sit up, and felt very sick, stiff, and sore, utterly confused and helpless. He did not seem to care for his condition, or even to wonder at it. Existence alone was enough for him. Enough?—too much, for hysteria overcame him; he hid his face and cried like a child.

Baffled on every side, everything lost but life—even that imperilled in the most desperate manner; surely God must be against him, it was of no use to fight longer against the pricks; [Pg 200] better to lie there and die, rather than struggle any more. Despair made of him its puppet at last. Was it any good to pray?—did God hear him? Would God answer his supplications? Was there a God of love and mercy at all, when he was beaten back at every point like this, however bravely he tried to bear up against misfortune?

He was ashamed of weeping, even though there was no one to observe him; and it did but exhaust him further, yet it was a relief too. His tears were soon spent, and he sat, forlorn and dejected, gazing in a purposeless way before him, taking no heed to what he saw.

But gradually the extreme beauty of the scene forced itself upon his mental vision. The hills, covered with rich masses of woods, were black against the clear opal sky, where the moon reigned in her pure loveliness. The shadows of these hills lay deep on the translucent waters, except where the broken rocks stood picturesquely above them, and changed their duskiness to pearly foam. The stars were reflected on the bosom of the river wherever it was sufficiently still; and a herd of hog-deer issued from a clearing of the jungle, and stooped their graceful heads to drink just where the moonlight fell on them.

The clear whistle of some night-bird was heard and answered from a neighbouring thicket, "Did you do it? Did you do it?" they cried in turn, and the rippling water made a gentle accompaniment to their song.

"I will lift up mine eyes to the hills, whence cometh my help," was borne in upon Ralph's heart, and his longdrawn sobs ceased.

Up sprang the sun, and touched the tops of the hills with golden glory. Colour and warmth flashed over the landscape, and brought comfort to his chilled frame. What was that something [Pg 201] glittering brightly between the trees? It was no natural object—the outline was too regular, too hard; it was the work of man's hand, for it was gilt,—it was, yes, it was a pagoda! Man had erected that building,—his fellow-men must be near at hand. Thank God! thank God!

He rose, and sought to unstiffen his cramped limbs with exercise, and the sun warmed him.

On the narrow strip of shingle where he had been cast up, a human waif and stray, lay a small bundle. Ralph looked at it, stooped over it, and lifted it from the wet stones. It was his little package of orchids, safely bound up as he had arranged it; which, slight thing as it was, had safely stood the wreck of all else, and lay stranded at his feet none the worse for its immersion.

Ralph almost laughed to see it. "You foolish things," thought he, "could nothing of greater value to me have been spared for me. Can *you* feed me, clothe me, save me, take me to my friends, do *anything* for me?"

He spurned them with his foot in irritation. Even his knife, his one precious possession, was gone; his garments hung in shreds upon him; there was nothing to eat upon the islet; and this ridiculous bundle of plants, good for nothing but to gratify the whimsical taste of a rich man, was intact.

Then his mood changed, and he took it up in his hands again. Between the crevices of the bark and moss he saw one tiny delicate floweret pushing its fragile head out, and seeming to smile at him.

"Good Lord," he said, "just to think of this! Come, then, if God so made the grass of the field, shall He not much more care for you, oh ye of little faith?" He readjusted the loop of string, and passed it again round his neck.

Then he tried to think how he might reach the mainland, where that pagoda glimmered like a [Pg 202]

hand beckoning to him, but he could not devise any plan.

He was too weary and spent to attempt swimming in that powerful current; he had no means of making a second raft, or helping himself in any way; there were neither bamboos nor lianas on this scrap of land.

He sat down close to the edge of the water, and rested his chin in his hands, gazing straight before him. He must sit there till he died; what else remained for him to do? He thought of his mother, of Agnes, of his brothers and little sisters. How grieved they all would be when the news went home to them. But would it ever go home? No, not one of his friends would know how he had struggled, how he had failed, where he had died. No one would visit his grave, or weep over his remains. The crows and the vultures would fight over his carcase, and leave his bones to blanch there, unburied. For him no funeral service, no hallowed ground, no holy hymn.

"Oh, my God!" he cried aloud, "have I deserved this? If this is the end of my short life, am I fit to go before Thee on Thy judgment throne, and confidently crave for mercy? What have I done so wicked as to merit this? Tell me, oh my Father, and let me repent."

So he sat, until, his eyes gazing mournfully straight before him, he became aware of some objects moving through the jungle on the mainland. They came in single file, carrying some large burden. Then one ran from the rear, past the others, and gave directions, waving a long lean arm and gesticulating.

No animals would conduct themselves so, they must be men! Gracious Providence grant that they be men!

They moved steadily forward among the thinning trees to the very margin of the river, and were plainly to be perceived. Native Burmese! Fishermen, bearing a large net, which they were preparing to cast into the water, and draw up stream. [Pg 203]

Ralph's voice failed him from revulse of feeling, he thought that he should choke. He sprang to his feet, tore off the last rags upon him, twisted them round a stick, and waved them in the air.

They were not perceived,—no notice was taken. He stooped to the water, drank from the hollow of his hand, his tongue was unloosed, he cast water precipitately over head and face, stood erect once more, clear from the undergrowth, in the plashy shallows, waved his flag with the energy of despair, and shouted with all his might—"Ahoy! Ahoy! Ahoy!"

CHAPTER XXII [Pg 204]

KIRKE AND DENHAM MEET

Ralph forgot every language but his native English in the desperate excitement of the moment.

"Halloa! Ahoy!" he vociferated, without knowing what he called; but, to his great astonishment, the reply was no Burmese "Ameh!" (mother) the universal exclamation among the natives of that country upon every occasion.

No, one figure started violently, turned sharply round, lifted a hand to shade its eyes, with a gesture strangely familiar, and an English voice, equally strange and equally familiar, responded, "Halloa! Ahoy!" to his cry.

A great bustle was apparent, immediately, among the little party of fishermen. Some ran off by the path which had brought them there, evidently under direction from the leader of the party; some busied themselves in launching a little canoe, which Ralph had not previously discerned, being hid by overhanging bushes; and two men, putting off in it, prepared to ferry it across to the island.

Well was it that Ralph had not attempted to swim across that stream. These were lusty fellows, but all their strength was needed to row against it. The man who had answered Denham's call in English words, was one of the two; and Ralph stared hard at him as the canoe drew near.

There was something familiar in the attitude and movements, but the head was covered with a mass of curly black hair, while a forest of dark whisker, beard, and moustache concealed the lower part of the face, and flowed over the hairy breast. The dress was made of the same material as that of the natives,—a dark blue cloth, patterned with wavy black lines; but it differed in shape, consisting of a pair of loose trousers gathered into a waistband, and confined there with a coloured handkerchief, just such as young men in England tie over their cricketing flannels. A loose cotton jacket, open at the chest, and leaving the arms bare, was worn above this,—an outlandish costume, yet manly, and not unbecoming. It was also of European fashion, clearly betraying that its wearer was no native of that country. [Pg 205]

"I never saw that fellow before," thought Ralph, "yet somehow I seem to know him."

The canoe drew nearer, the rower looked back over his shoulder, uttered a loud cry, and, flinging down his oar, sprang to his feet with the exclamation—

"Good God! Denham! Is it possible?"

Recognition came in the same instant.

"Kirke!" cried Ralph.

Nearly a year had elapsed since the two had met, but Ralph, being two or three years younger than Kirke, and of fairer complexion, had not altered so much, neither had he been living so long in the wilds out of reach of barber and other civilised influences.

Overjoyed on each side to meet with an Englishman, an accustomed face, they clasped each other's hands with eager greeting at the first impulse, forgetful of all ill-will, but Kirke drew back the next minute and hung his head.

"It is good of you to take my hand, Denham," said he. "Can you forgive me all I did and tried to do to you."

"I do not properly know what that was," said Ralph joyously. "I have never understood why you did not like me, nor believed half the others wanted to make out; but I am ever so glad to see you now." [Pg 206]

"And you can forgive me?"

"Anything, everything, if you will only help me to get out of this place."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes, quite alone. I missed my party, and am lost. I have been wandering in the jungle for many days, and was starving."

"And in *that* state? A literal Baresarker costume."

"Even so."

"Come along, I can do something to remedy *that*, at anyrate."

He hurried Ralph into the canoe, spoke a few words to his companion, and began to pull back to the mainland with great energy.

Arrived upon the shore, he despatched one of the Burmans for assistance, and the man scuttled off, grinning with immense goodwill; while the rest jabbered around the two strangers as they proceeded towards the village, where half the inhabitants were bustling about in eager hospitality.

Rice and fish were brought, plantains, pickled tea, cocoanuts and green ginger. Kirke mounted into his dwelling, and produced a garb similar to his own; and offered cheroots, which however Ralph did not accept.

He devoured the food with the appetite of a growing boy who had not tasted food for twenty-four hours; and Kirke piled up the bowl from which he ate whenever its contents shrank beneath the rim.

"Hold hard!" cried Ralph at last, "even I am gorged and can eat no more."

"Then tell me how you came here, and all that you have done since I saw you," said Kirke. [Pg 207]

"As to all that I have been doing, that would be a long tale to tell," replied Ralph; "but, shortly put, I have been going about the country with Mr. Gilchrist, getting plants for Mr. Herford—orchids chiefly. We have not only got the things bodily to send home, but made drawings, whenever we could, of anything rare or special. About a fortnight ago we fell in with some wild elephants in a lonely place, and, in escaping from an old bull that had been turned out of the herd, as we fancied, I got separated from the rest of them, and met with a family party of tigers—papa, mamma, and offspring. I had to cut my lucky again; and, somehow, between the two adventures, lost my way, and could not find any of the fellows I was with. After roaming about, up hill and down dale, till I found that I was really befogged in the wilderness, it seemed the best thing I could do was to follow down the first water-course I could find, in hopes of coming somewhere in time. So I managed to knock up a gimcrack sort of a kind of raft, that served my turn as well as a better, till the rapids here broke it all to smithereens, and landed me yonder; where I must have died if you had not picked me off."

"I should think you had about enough of rafts by this time," said Kirke sadly.

"I have not had enough of friends in need," replied Ralph.

"You are a real good fellow, Denham," said the other, reaching out his hand to him. "I have wanted this long time to tell you how sorry I am for all that took place in the poor old *Pelican*, and to ask your forgiveness for my conduct to you. I was a bad messmate, a bad man in every way; but I see things differently now, and would do anything I knew of to redeem the past, if only I could see how. I did cut that rope, in a fit of mad jealousy, and repented of it as soon as it was done. I have suffered much from remorse since." [Pg 208]

"That you repented as soon as you had done it, showed that you were not wholly bad at heart," said Ralph. "Don't say any more to me about it, Kirke. If you have made your peace with God, there is no need for me to preach, you know. Let us be friends in the future."

The two young men shook hands heartily, and Kirke felt happier than he had hoped ever to be again. He took Denham into the hut where he lived, and found him a mat to lie upon, the most luxurious bed upon which Ralph had stretched himself for many days. He was soon wrapped in the sweetest of slumbers thereon.

Sleep lasted till far into the next day, for he was quite worn out, and his quarters were fairly comfortable. When he awoke, he found Kirke watching him with grave earnest eyes, which

brightened into a smile in response to Ralph's joyous greeting.

A good wash was Denham's first demand that morning; and when he had thus refreshed himself, he was indued into a suit of light garments such as Kirke wore, of European fashion, though constructed from native cloth; and then attacked the cold breakfast awaiting him.

"It is ever so good of you to provide me like this, Kirke," said he. "A fellow must have been reduced as low as I was to appreciate properly the comfort of being 'clothed and in one's right mind.' But how you come to be living here like this, is a mystery to me."

"You need have no scruples," replied Kirke. "My people at home are well-to-do folks, and I always had plenty of money. I had it in a belt that I always wore, and this helped me to get off from Moulmein, for it was chiefly in gold, and the Burmese understand English gold. I have some shots [Pg 209] in the locker yet, for living is cheap in these wilds, and I have been ill, so have not wanted a great deal. I made up my mind to stay here till the rice harvest is gathered, for it might then be possible to get a passage to Rangoon, when they take it to market there. Once in Rangoon, I can always get supplies from home again; and, indeed, have a couple of English banknotes that will take me along for a time. Don't have any scruples as to having a little from me. You are safe to fall in with your people again in Rangoon, or the Herford's branch there would advance to you, even if you do not believe that I owe to you a debt that money will never replace."

"You are very generous," said Ralph, "and I am thankful to meet with anyone who both can and will help me. I know that I should be able to repay you in Rangoon, if we ever reach that place; so, meantime, thank you kindly. How long do you reckon it will be before the harvest will be ready?"

"Well, the rice is growing ripe. Look there, they have stuck up those beautiful erections all about lately."

In effect, there were three or four stages, fixed about fifteen feet above the ground, in different places. Each of these erections was of a size to accommodate a squatting Burman, smoking happily, with a bowl of rice and a jar of water by his side. Every now and then he gave a tug at a string, which communicated with a machinery of simple nature, consisting of bamboos, feathers and twine in endless ramifications, all set fluttering by the pull. This, and an unearthly screech uttered at the same moment, aroused a cloud of little green parrots that were feeding upon the rice. They fluttered and squalled in unison with the fluttering and squalling of the native, and all creation was lively. Then the Burman sank again into meditation upon the life of Guadama, or into slumber, or whatever he pleased to call it; the parrots went back to their feast, and all [Pg 210] proceeded quietly until the watchman's sense of duty once more impelled him to exertion.

"We shall cut all that the birds condescend to leave us soon now," said Kirke. "In the meantime the fishery is going on, and the preparation of 'ngapé'! Can't you smell the stinking stuff on the breeze? Faugh!"

"I hope we may get a passage in a boat which carries rice alone," said Ralph, with a face of disgust. "How can the Burmese eat that disgusting stuff!"

The preparation of this favourite dainty in the Burmese commissariat, which is manufactured chiefly from rotten fish pounded up into a paste with various condiments, poisoned the air. Prawns are the favourite fish used, but there were none in this place.

Such secluded valleys as that into which Kirke had strayed, are great homes of this industry, for the fish come up into them in huge swarms to spawn, and are left behind, in the lakes and pools, when the hot season dries up much of the super-abundant water. To catch them is then easy, and the trade a profitable one.

"Oh," cried Kirke, "we won't go in one of those boats! Trust Jamie Kirke for that. Sooner than be stunk out of life like that, we will imitate the Welsh young lady's forefathers in the Flood, and have a boat of our own. We could sell it again in Rangoon. I don't know whether, now that you are here to help me, it would not be as well to cross these plains, and get a boat for ourselves on the Sittoung River. We could navigate it easily between us if we were careful about the bore."

"That would be very jolly," said Ralph. "I and my cargo," pointing to his precious bundle of orchids. "My cargo will not overburden you, I should be loath to part with it now, having brought it through so much peril that I almost have a superstitious feeling that it consists of my 'luck.' We [Pg 211] should be more help than hindrance to you."

"You talk of superstitious feelings, Denham, but there is only a slight boundary between faith and superstition. I should not call it *superstition* on my own part to believe that you had been sent by Providence to me, in answer to prayer for forgiveness and help."

"I know what you mean," replied Ralph gravely. "God does lead us in mysterious ways, and it is among these wonderful places that one learns to believe in what He can perform. We have seen strange things, both of us, since we left the humdrum Liverpool streets."

"Perhaps He was as plainly to be met with there, if we had but opened our eyes to note His footprints. Here we are shaken out of our own common jogtrot ways,—waked up,—have had our everyday husks peeled off, and are brought face to face with nature in its marvellous sublimity and simplicity."

The two young men sat silently after this, watching the movements of a couple of girls, whose occupation had suggested Kirke's simile.

They crouched upon their heels, one on either side of a handmill, in which they were husking

"paddy," or rice in the original state, for the next family meal.

The handmill consisted of two hollow wooden receptacles, the upper one furnished with two handles, by which the girls worked it half round to the right and back to the left. This threw the grain through the grooved sides into the lower vessel, grinding the chaff off on its way. From the lower bowl it escaped to the floor through a hole in the bottom.

From the heap thus accumulated, a child emptied the rice into baskets, pouring it from one into another until the husk was fairly well winnowed from it; and then threw it into a mortar, sunk into the ground, and in which a heavy pestle worked by means of a long lever affixed to it, upon the end of which a graceful maiden was balancing herself, thus working it up and down to the time of a monotonous song which she chanted to herself— [Pg 212]

"Oh! rice ka la! come!
Oh! rice ka la! come!
Mee Meht calls you, come, come!"

The rice grain gleamed white as pearls from among the dusky chaff as she worked; and ever and anon, with some joke from one or the other, the girlish voices bubbled over into a merry laugh.

"They seem happy," said Ralph.

"Ay, they do," Kirke replied, "but they are like animals,—*they* do not 'look before and after.'"

CHAPTER XXIII [Pg 213]
FIGHT WITH DACOITS

Neither a boat in which to descend the river, nor a bullock-cart in which to reach its banks, were to be hired until the harvest was ready, so there was nothing for it but patience.

Neither Kirke nor Ralph felt themselves quite strong enough to be inclined for excessive haste. Kirke's illness, and Denham's sufferings in the jungle, made a little further rest still desirable before running the risk of more danger and new fatigues. They therefore remained quietly in the village contentedly enough, learning to know each other and like each other better every day.

They had long conversations, discussions of every subject which occurred to them. Each had undergone a training so different from the other that they never saw any matter in exactly the same light, and their opposite experiences were mutually valuable. Kirke's deep and dark knowledge of life was a warning to Denham; his own boyish lightness and gaiety were encouraging to his friend.

Meantime the rice ripened, was cut, and put up in stooks, ready for the threshing floor, in true scriptural fashion; for the manner of husking it by hand, as before described, was too slow and costly to be practised upon large quantities; neither was the paddy grained at all for mercantile purposes, as machinery was so much more convenient for the purpose.

Much rice, indeed, is brought to England in the form of paddy; and cleaned there by steam mills, of which there are many in Liverpool and elsewhere. [Pg 214]

In the valley where Ralph and Kirke found themselves, it was a prosperous year. The people had been able to buy a sufficiency of excellent young plants, the weather had been favourable to their growth, the yield was good—the strangers had brought them luck.

But was it good or bad luck that the report of their riches should have gone forth over the land, and created envy in the hearts of some among their neighbours—idler, poorer, less fortunate than they?

But so it was. Down from the wild hillside came a party of four or five men from a neighbouring outlying village, armed with guns and pistols. They crept along, hidden by boulder and rock; crawling through gulley, and channels of dried-up streamlets, to reconnoitre; to judge of the wealth in the village, and the exact moment when it could be seized upon to the greatest advantage.

Dacoity, as it is called, is the great curse of the hill and jungle parts of Burma. The Burman hates hard work—it is so much easier to help himself to his neighbour's rice than to grow it for himself. If his crop fails, why should another man have more than he wants? Down he comes in the night, sets the village on fire, kills the men, carries off the maidens, and appropriates the property.

The English law is severe upon the dacoit, but, at the time when Ralph Denham was wandering about in these wild regions, British Burma consisted only of a long strip of seaboard, backed by a mountain-range which divided it from Siam, and of the rice-growing lands in Pegu, formed by the widespread delta of the Irriwaddy River.

It was very easy for ill-doers to escape over the borders of the British possessions either to the east or north, and English law could not reach them. Law and order elsewhere was conspicuous by its absence, therefore the dacoit flourished. [Pg 215]

The English authorities set a price upon these robbers' heads, so it was short shrift for them if caught. To avoid this unpleasantness, they killed their enemies whenever they found that this

procedure suited their convenience; and, in order to deter pursuit, they endeavoured to strike terror into the hearts of those who might seek to apprehend them, by a peculiar refinement of cruelty in the manner of killing them. Thus they were not nice people to meet with—far from it.

The two young men were sitting together, in the cool of the evening, upon the raised platform which ran round their hut, and formed a verandah, roofed with thekkee,—a kind of dried grass,—but open on every side to the air. There had been a magnificent sunset, whose gorgeousness had yet hardly faded from the western sky. They had been talking, but the soothing influence of the hour was upon them and they were silent now.

Soft curls of smoke wafted away from Kirke's cheroot; and Ralph sat on a mat, leaning against the bamboo support of the verandah, gazing dreamily over the landscape before him.

Ralph's vision was very keen, and he now became aware of three or four men, dimly perceptible among the gathering shadows, creeping along the river-bank, stooping low to be thus better concealed by the reeds which grew upon it.

Their movements were suspicious, and he quietly called Kirke's attention to them. Kirke could not see them, and thought that Ralph had imagined their presence.

"No," said Denham, "it is not imagination; they move a short way, and then keep quite still for a full minute or more. It is that which makes me think that they are up to mischief. Fix your eye upon that clump of reeds the farthest to the left of four. Now, there, don't you see something come out from behind it?" [Pg 216]

"Ah! I do," exclaimed Kirke. "One, two, three, four, five things. They are men's heads, as sure as a gun! Ralph, it strikes me that this means dacoity."

"I believe it does," replied Ralph. "There is a large sledge there laden with paddy. The beggars are after that to a certainty."

"Have at them!" cried Kirke. "Don't let us allow their knavish tricks to succeed."

"Halt," replied Ralph. "Those fellows have guns, and long swords or daggers. There are other things stuck into their waistbelts, which are either pistols or knives, perhaps both. Have we weapons at hand? There are five of them, we two could do little against them alone; we had better call up old Shway Poh, and some of the villagers, to help."

"Moung Shway Poh won't be of much use. He will talk resignedly of those scamps being the 'five enemies,' or the 'five duties,' or the 'five great acts of sacrifice.' That rice is not his, he will be perfectly resigned to the thieves annexing it."

"We must use a little gentle force then, to persuade him that one of the ten precepts is to preserve your neighbour's goods when you accept authority over him. Shway Poh did not get this village to eat just to keep his own rice safe, or his own skin either. But, Kirke, it is not only that lot of rice which the beggars want. They may be short of food, and mean to have that, but what they are *really* after is the village wealth, the ornaments which the women wear, the money in the monastery, the valuables generally. The important thing is to beat them off there, before they creep into the village to find out what the people have."

"Perhaps you are right. Some of those girls wear really magnificent jewellery at their festivals; and it seems to me that they sport more and more of late. Even that little Sunshine child came out the other day in a pair of ruby earrings that might make a duchess' mouth water. So here goes. I bought these guns only last week for our journey. They are not first-rate ones, but serviceable. And here is a good bowie-knife for you, and one for me. Now for Mr. Golden Grandfather." [Pg 217]

They found the head man of the village, who rejoiced in that lovely name, squatted with his family around a huge tray of rice and chillies, flavoured with oil and salt. He was shovelling his supper into his mouth with vast relish, and was extremely averse to exertion, having already gobbled up so much as to make movement inconvenient.

"The Englishman mistakes," he said. "Dacoits never come here. They know well that I am a Friday's child, fierce and passionate as the tusked elephant which protects my soul. They dare not incur my wrath. The village is safe as long as I am its chief."

"*You* fierce and passionate?" cried his wife contemptuously. "So you may be, but your fierceness is like the flame of a chaff fire, it flares up easily and is out again in one minute. Did we slave and labour for our beautiful jewels simply to give them to the thief? No indeed. Show me, golden[1] youth, where the dacoits are to be seen. Will they be content with one sledge full if they are down upon us, Poh Pyin?[2] Answer me that."

She went out into the verandah, but the house was situated behind a grove of trees which hid the rice-sledge from her sight.

"We must go in the boats," said she.

"Then go armed," implored Ralph, "for the robbers are armed to the teeth." [Pg 218]

"You are sure?" asked she.

"Quite sure," said Ralph.

She called up some of the men; and the village chief having now plucked up a little energy, a boat was prepared, and put off across the stream.

So much time was lost, however, that the robbers had already linked two sledges together, and

were punting them away with all speed. Upon seeing the villagers' boat, which was impelled by six men, gaining rapidly upon them, and followed by two more, they pointed their guns at the foremost.

"Stand back!" they cried, "or we fire."

"We had better return," whispered the fat old Shway Poh.

"Coward!" hissed out Kirke, thirsting for the fray. "What! they are but five."

"They are desperate men," whined Shway Poh.

"If we lose our rice, there is nothing but dacoity before us, ourselves, next winter," said one of the men.

The boat shot ahead, and tried to run athwart the first sledge. The dacoits fired. Had five guns really been able to kill six men? There were five rowers, and Shway Poh steering. Ralph had the sixth oar, and Kirke's gun rang out in response to the attack, but only he and Denham remained steady at their posts. All the Burmans were bowled over. Strange that the dacoits' shots should have hit them all, and missed Kirke's broad figure standing erect in the bows. Did he bear a charmed life?

There was another explanation of the mystery. He who fights and runs away, may always live to fight another day. The six Burmans were all prostrate at the bottom of the boat, and the shots had passed harmlessly above them. Neither had they been taken with very true aim, for all had gone wide of the mark.

A kick from Kirke aroused the man nearest to him. [Pg 219]

"Get up, you scoundrel!" thundered the young man. "What are you funking there for? Seize them before they can reload!"

He threw himself out of the boat, which had now crossed the stream, and tore the pole from the hands of one dacoit. Ralph followed, and seized another by the throat, but the fellow's body was thickly besmeared with cocoanut oil, rendering him so slippery that he actually slid through his hands, and Denham's foot slipped, throwing him down.

Up he sprang in an instant, and tried to grasp the fellow's garments; but, with a wriggle and a twist, he was out of the coiled cloth in one moment, leaving it in Ralph's hands, while he stood for the space of a second, free of all impedimenta, then bounded into the jungle.

Ralph gave chase, but had no chance against the lithe limbs of the Burman, well used to such encounters, and almost as supple as a snake. After a short pursuit, he turned back to assist his friends, seeing the undesirability of separating their party into single units.

He found himself needed. Upon the report of firearms, the natives in the other two boats held aloof, and were now returning to the village, towing, however, the rice sledges with them; and the valorous Mr. Golden Grandfather was in the act of stepping into their own, with evident purpose of following in their wake.

Kirke had knocked down one of the dacoits, who was either killed or lay senseless on the ground. Using his long pole as a quarter-staff, and whirling it round his head in true old English style, he was making play against another, who, wholly unused to this style of thing, was defenceless in his hands.

But the fourth was in the act of coming up behind Kirke with a knife in his muscular hands,—a long curved knife of deadly power—and actually had it raised in air, ready to plunge into the young man's back, beneath the shoulderblade. Ralph caught his own dagger from his cummerbund, and dashed upon the enemy's rear, with a cry of "'Ware, Kirke!" [Pg 220]

Kirke turned, saw his danger, and faced it. Ralph plunged his dagger at the dacoit, who raised his arm to protect his head, and received the blow in the fleshy part of it. The fifth robber crawled up through the long grass, and wounded Ralph in the leg, bringing him to the ground; but Ralph caught his first opponent by the ankle as he lay, holding him there with a grasp of iron, and brought him down over him.

Kirke's guns had been left in the boat, unfortunately; but the two English lads had given the dacoits no time to reload theirs, so that the fight was pretty equal. Now, however, Mr. Grandfather, regarding himself as tolerably safe, began to blaze away from the boat to the assistance of his guests, and the tide of battle turned.

The dacoits evidently thought this too long odds, and fled, leaving one of their number behind. Kirke turned him over with his foot, as the others disappeared, and found him quite dead,—an ugly sight, with his dark, evil, scowling face set in the ashy hue of death.

"Pah!" cried Kirke. "What carrion!"

"Poor wretch," said the gentler Denham, "I am very sorry for him."

"Dacoit will revenge this upon some of us," said Mr. Golden Grandfather. "This is a bad job for us."

"Nonsense, old fellow," said Kirke lightly. "The dacoits have had enough of us for one while, and we will be prepared for them before they come again. The rice is safe at anyrate, that is one good thing. You must get it down to the creek with all speed. It would be the best way to set off to-morrow with morning light." [Pg 221]

"Yes, paya, you speak truth; but this bad job," reiterated Moung Shway Poh.

The party returned silently to the village, there was no exultation over their victory, all were exhausted now the excitement was over, several had been more or less knocked about, and Ralph had lost a good deal of blood from a flesh wound in his leg.

One of the women dressed it with some healing leaves, binding it up, and they all retired to rest, but the women as well as the men were inclined to look darkly upon the transactions of the evening, under the belief that though their treasures were the original inducement for the dacoits' arrival, those scoundrels would now never rest until they had avenged blood by blood.

CHAPTER XXIV

[Pg 222]

THE DACOITS BURN THE VILLAGE

Moung Shway Poh retired to his virtuous sleeping-mat, and sought peaceful oblivion among his family. The other villagers also separated, each to his place, and the two English lads went to their hut.

"Do you think there is anything in what the grandfather says, Kirke?" asked Ralph anxiously.

"I have no doubt but what the dear old sinner's experience of his kind is exhaustive, and the ladies seem to echo his idea," replied Kirke. "But I should think that the beggars had got enough for to-night. They will want to pull themselves a little together before they make a fresh attack. We may sleep the sleep of the just for a few hours, my boy."

"It would be just as well to load the guns, and see that our other things are all to hand, though," said Ralph.

"Careful and provident youth! Perhaps you are right," quoth Kirke.

Accordingly they examined their weapons, prepared and laid them to hand, ate their suppers, and stretched themselves on their mats. Kirke was asleep in five minutes, but Ralph's wound began to throb and ache, and the distress from it kept him awake. He was feverish too, and twisted and turned on his bed, unable to find ease in any posture. Now he thought he heard stealthy movements around him; then he lost consciousness for a few moments, and awoke with a start, [Pg 223] fancying that a snake was crawling over him, or that he was once again confronted by a leopard's glaring eyes.

He told himself over and over again that the sounds were but the soft rustling of bats' wings, the scramble of rats along the rafters of the hut, or the whirr of mosquitoes in the damp night air.

It was of no use, sleep forsook his eyes, although he was so tired that he longed for its balminess. Instead of finding its refreshment, he was haunted by all the stories of dacoits which he had heard at Moulmein and elsewhere.

He thought of one young lady who was said to have been gently lifted from her bed, the mattress removed from beneath her and appropriated, while she was replaced upon the framework without being awakened.

He remembered how a gentleman, fancying he heard sounds in the house, got up, and entangled his feet in garments belonging to his wife lying about on the floor.

"What is that untidy ayah of yours about, to leave your things scattered on the ground like this?" scolded he.

"She did not throw them down," said the lady; "I saw her lay that habit on the chest of drawers, ready for me to put on in the morning."

Her husband by this time had struck a light, and found the whole chest of drawers gone. The servants were called up, a search instituted, and the piece of furniture discovered in the compound, rifled of all its contents.

He laughed to himself, for the fiftieth time, over the remembrance of the doctor's wife, who awoke in the night to see a dusky figure stooping over a nice, carefully-locked mahogany box, in the act of lifting it to carry it away.

Being a brave woman, she sprang up into a sitting posture, clapping her hands with a sudden sharp sound. The robber dropped his booty, leapt over the verandah, swarmed down one of the [Pg 224] posts which supported it, and vanished in a moment. By this act of presence of mind, she saved her husband's stomach-pump.

Other more gruesome anecdotes recurred to his memory in wearisome procession, and murdered sleep as effectually as Macbeth had ever done.

Hour passed after hour in this manner, but yet surely it could not be daylight already? The sun was given to springing rapidly up in these regions, but not with so sudden a glow as this, nor with so brilliantly red a colour. What was it?

Conviction flashed upon him at once, there was fire somewhere.

"Kirke! Kirke!" he cried. "Up, man, the dacoits are firing the village!"

Up sprang Kirke, and the two rushed out of their hut, to see half a dozen of the pretty slight houses around them blazing like torches, while demon figures leapt and howled around, flinging

burning brands upon the inflammable roofs of palmy thekkee leaves, and in at the open doorways of the slender bamboo and matted walls.

The wretched villagers, caught like rats in so many traps, must either be burnt with their houses, or be chopped down by the dahs carried by the merciless robbers. Man, woman, and child,—all alike murdered in cold blood by their unsparing hands.

The assassins were but a gang of four, therefore, probably, was the same band as that which the villagers had beaten off in the evening, with the loss of one; for the dacoit generally works in parties of five.

It might well be supposed that a whole village, consisting perhaps of fifty men, with women and young people, could easily have repelled an attack from so small a party as that; but it must be understood that, to preserve the people from the floods in the wet season, and the fear of wild animals at all times, the houses were raised upon high piles; each, therefore, being isolated completely from its neighbour. [Pg 225]

When the floods were out, one lady would take her boat even to borrow a cheroot from her nearest friend; the population lived in boats almost wholly; their houses were little more than shelters in which to eat and sleep. They contained no effects to induce a love for "home," in the Englishman's understanding of the word,—few appliances for occupation or pleasure. A chest or box for containing the best clothes and ornaments; a sufficiency of mats and rugs for beds; a "byat," or wooden dish, lacquered, from which they eat their rice; a few little bowls to hold small quantities of more tasty articles for flavouring the tasteless staple of their food; and half a dozen earthen pots or jars,—these form the sum total of a Burman's Lares and Penates; and there is nothing among them to create "house-pride" among the ladies, or a love for home-keeping in the gentlemen. All their amusements and pleasures are taken out of doors, in public.

But the family retires, at "sky shutting-in time," for sleep; and the dacoit who means mischief can take them practically one by one, burning the edifice, and destroying, or watching, the means of descent from the little platform upon which it is erected.

As Kirke and Ralph rushed out from their hut, they saw the ground at the foot of the next one strewn with the bleeding corpses of the father and three sons who dwelt there, while the aged grandmother crouched shuddering among the blazing rafters, and pretty little Miss Sunshine, the gay, merry child who had played a hundred tricks upon them, and laughed with them so often, clung to the kingpost, shrieking with terror, while the dacoits chopped and mangled the bodies of her nearest and dearest friends, and leapt up howling to reach her, and sweep her into the same holocaust. [Pg 226]

"Oh, paya, paya, save me!" she implored, stretching her little hands towards them, the tears coursing down her painted cheeks.

"My God!" cried Kirke; "the bloodthirsty scoundrels!"

He caught up his gun and fired, but the dacoits were never still; they danced from place to place; they seemed to be ubiquitous, there was no taking aim at any one of them.

Well was it for the English lads that Ralph had loaded the guns, and laid their pistols to hand. The steady fire maintained by Kirke kept the dacoits at bay, they retired to a little distance; and Ralph descended from their verandah on the dark side, and put up a rough ladder for the girl and old woman to come down.

Sunshine sprang quickly to it, but the old woman was paralysed by fear and could not move.

"Escape, my pretty, into the jungle," whispered the boy hurriedly to his little playmate, who needed no second bidding to disappear into the darkness; while he ascended the ladder, protected by Kirke's gun, took the aged crone on his back, and essayed to return by the same means.

The charred bamboos crashed down as he seized the woman; the burning thekkee on the roof set her clothes on fire; she was a burden too heavy for his strength, he could not carry her. The dacoits came running and howling up once more,—once more did Kirke's gun roar out its protecting voice, and a robber fell.

His companions rushed forward, and drew him back,—he was hit in the thigh, and could not stand; the others raged at a safe distance.

All this took but a few minutes of time, and some of the villagers now hurried up, and formed a circle around the supports of Kirke's house; while one, another son of the old woman, rushed up the ladder, and helped Ralph to bring his mother down and seat her on the damp ground beneath the verandah. [Pg 227]

Several other women were brought in there also, the ring of men encircling the place, prepared to fire or strike at the dacoits if they ventured within reach. The long dahs,—sharp-edged swords,—worn by the dacoits down their backs, and drawn by both hands over the right shoulders, proved to be deadly weapons, and the battle raged long, with horrid outcry, and many a gaping wound; but the enemy was beaten off at last, bleeding, baffled and exhausted, scorched, maimed, and yet howling with rage and pain.

A second man of their party had been killed.

Ralph had forgotten his wounded leg in the recent excitement; it was but a flesh wound, though a deep one. With care and rest it would have been quite healed in a few days, but the exertion which he had taken inflamed it much.

It might be that the weapon with which he received the hurt had rust, or some deleterious matter upon its blade; but, however that might be, the place assumed a very ugly appearance, and suppurated.

Kirke washed it well with warm water, applied fresh leaves and bandages—what else to do he did not know, but felt very uneasy, for in spite of the large quantity of blood which his friend had lost, he grew so feverish at night.

The villagers who had been burnt out were dispersed among the huts left standing. Kirke set a watch, and went round from time to time to see that the watchmen did not sleep at their posts. He had taken the command of the hamlet, all appearing willing to submit to the leader who had [Pg 228] shown so much daring and courage; but his own heart was heavy within him. Except Denham, he had no trust in any one of his followers. The Burmese can be fierce by spasmodic fits, but their natural temper is easy, pleasure-loving, inert. There is in them none of the elements which constitute a good soldier. They would rather fly than fight at any time. If Denham were going to be seriously ill, he had no reliance upon anyone, no friend to back him up.

He believed that the dacoits would certainly return for vengeance, if not for the treasures. What would be the end of it all?

He went his rounds, having to awaken one or two of his watchers every time; he returned, to bathe Ralph's brow, change the healing leaves, give him drink, and observe him anxiously; then he went his rounds again. What a weary, weary day it was, he could not keep up the strain long; and, oh horror! suppose that Denham had been wounded by a *poisoned* sword.

It was dark again; every hour full of danger. How could he meet it? how overcome it?

However, about dawn Ralph's fever lessened, his skin became cool and moist, and he fell asleep. That fear was off his mind for the time, but the peril in which they stood had by no means lessened.

CHAPTER XXV [Pg 229]
DESPERATION

No, the peril was none the less to any of the villagers, and greatly increased to the Englishmen, for the natives began to look darkly at them.

Kirke had made them all leave their inflammable houses, perched like dovecots high upon poles, and had encamped in a little clearance at the edge of the jungle.

This he insisted upon enlarging to the best of their ability, cutting down all cover beneath which the dacoits could steal upon them unperceived. So dense was the scrub that this was hard work, and the Burman hates hard work.

Kirke, with British energy, set the example himself, hacking, hewing, and felling, with promptitude which was far from being seconded. He caused the débris to be built up around a circle, within which he entrenched the women and children, with all the household effects that could be gathered together, and would fain have thrown up earthworks to the best of his ability, but the Burmans would not dig them out.

He insisted upon the houses which remained being cut down from their elevations, lest the dacoits should succeed in mounting to them, and firing down upon the camp; and this annoyed the short-sighted owners more than anything else.

"Why should we destroy our houses?" they said. "The dacoits are gone now. We have given them [Pg 230] the fire to eat, and they have had enough of it. We wear the charm against fire and sword, the blessed nats will protect us, ours are stronger than theirs; and the houses must be put up again before the next flood-time comes."

"True," argued Kirke, "but meantime you may be all killed. The dacoits are certain to return, perhaps in much greater force. They will come determined to avenge the deaths of their friends, and they also wear charms. You must take measures for your own safety. Cannot you get help from any neighbours strong enough to protect you? Is there no English station within reach? Could no scout be sent to any British police-station, to tell them of our need and beg assistance? There must be some such place. Cannot we send word to Rangoon?"

The Burmans looked at each other. They knew well enough that there was a police-station within twenty miles of them, but they had concealed the fact from Kirke because they wanted his money. He had brought prosperity to them, and they did not want to lose him. He had proved to be a perfect godsend to them hitherto; but it was plain to them that the reputation of this very prosperity had partly caused the dacoits to assail them.

Would it be best for them now to keep the Englishmen with them longer, and fight the robbers themselves, or to make capital out of helping them to return to their friends, who, out of gratitude, would come and kill the dacoits for them?

The question was hotly debated in the village conclave.

Moung Shway Poh was jealous of Kirke's ascendency. He felt his authority tottering on its throne.

Kirke spoke to him in a dictatorial tone, and ordered him about just as if he had been the veriest child, still untattooed; and the old man hated him.

"We have the strangers with us," said he, "just as much as if we sent to the station and had the officers, who would bring good guns, big guns, kill the thieves, and save our houses. They would give us rewards for helping their countrymen; pay for the dacoits' heads—be a revenue to us for all next year. We should have plenty of rice, plenty of smoke, plenty of everything from them. This man has spent all he has now, he cannot have much left; and the boy has nothing at all, though he must eat and be clothed." [Pg 231]

But the other side was represented by the sons of the man who was cut down and mutilated by the cruel dahs of the dacoits,—by the children of the poor woman who, with her infant, had shared in her husband's fate, and whose grandmother and little sister had been saved by Ralph.

Other victims had also fallen, and their relations thirsted to avenge blood by blood. They were eager to kill the dacoits themselves. To them, in that case, would belong the glory; to them would the butterfly spirits of the victims be grateful; to them would the price of the dacoits' heads be paid, which would be lost to them if the police shot them instead.

Kirke, having superintended all the defences which he could prevail upon the Burmans to make, sat by the side of Ralph, who was sleeping profoundly on his mat, and watched the council—debating at a little distance—with great anxiety.

He knew well what issues were under discussion; he had gauged the characters of these men accurately during his residence with them, and was convinced that they would treat him like an orange which had been sucked dry, and of which the rind was only flung away.

He could have escaped by himself, and his resources, though nearly exhausted, were not yet quite at an end. He had enough left to hire or purchase a tat,[3] or pay for a passage in the big rice boat, and so make his way to an English settlement, where he could take his chance of punishment for his conduct on board the *Pelican*, and await remittances from home. [Pg 232]

Since meeting with Denham, his apprehensions of the consequences of his crime had dwindled down. No lives had been lost, much time had elapsed, and he had been of material service to Ralph. He was assured by Ralph that Mr. Gilchrist wished him no harm, and would prove placable.

But it would be better for him to give himself up, rather than to be taken prisoner by English police; he would much prefer making his own way to Rangoon to being sent there as a captive.

Yet he could not abandon Ralph, who was in no state for a hurried journey taken under the difficulties which must attend an escape. Even now the boy was muttering and rambling in his sleep, the fever was rising higher with the approach of nightfall, and the wound in his leg was terribly inflamed. Kirke changed the dressing, bathed it and Ralph's head and face with cool water, and changed his hot pillow. Ralph looked gratefully up at him as he woke up completely.

"You are very good to me, old fellow," said he. "I am sorry to be such a nuisance; but, somehow, I feel very stiff and queer, and my head rages."

"All right," said Kirke, a lump rising in his throat as he gazed upon his friend, so dear to him now. "All right, we will win through this worry soon. You are better."

"Yes, I'm better," said Ralph, with a mighty effort at cheerfulness.

"Drink this," said Kirke, offering some water to him; "go to sleep again, there is nothing else to be done, and I'm watching." [Pg 233]

Ralph drank the water, and soon fell into a calmer, more refreshing, slumber.

Kirke went to examine his store of ammunition, and became graver than ever, for he found that it was running extremely short. There was no method by which he might replenish his powder; but the dacoits, with the whole country behind them, could get practically inexhaustible supplies.

Kirke heaved a sigh, and sat down once more by the sleeping boy.

It was growing dark, but the council still argued and disputed at a little distance from the circle entrenched, and words were running high among its members.

All at once a shot was heard, and a bullet tore its way from the gloom of the trees, crashed through Kirke's stockade, and buried itself in the ground.

"Ameh!" shrieked the women, springing to the farthest corners.

The men leapt from their haunches, upon which they were crouching, and jumped over into the circle, glad enough now of the protection afforded them by Kirke's foresight, and once more willing to accept his gallant leadership.

Whiz!—ping!—went a second shot; followed by a third—a fourth. Kirke caught up his gun, and blazed back a return fire, aimed in the direction from which the assault came. "But," thought he, "this is of little avail, for we cannot take aim at the wretches, whereas the blaze of our lamps makes us so many marks to them."

But the firm resistance offered had an effect; the dacoits' shots lessened, then ceased. What did this mean? They must have some new scheme on foot.

The besieged stood in line, facing the jungle, with the women and children behind. Suddenly, wild shrieks from them announced danger. Two of the dacoits had crept around, under cover of [Pg 234]

the long grass, crawling like snakes close to the ground, and were prepared to leap into the fence, dahs in hand.

With one bound, Kirke sprang to that side with clubbed gun, and struck one man down from a swinging blow on the head. Ralph was at his side in the same instant, with a native spear in his hand, the first weapon which he could catch up. One of the women, who was engaged in cooking the supper, flung the pot of boiling rice at the intruders in the same moment of time. It hit another fellow right in his face, and the scalding contents ran down all his naked body, at which he uttered a demoniacal howl of pain.

"Bravo, Miss Pretty!" called out Kirke. "Have at them! There's a plucky girl."

Were it not for the women, who came gallantly to the aid of the men, the fight would have been a short and hopeless one, for the dacoits evidently had been reinforced in numbers. They assailed the little camp on all sides,—there was no spot from which a terrible face did not gleam and disappear. They tore at the defences with their hands,—they tugged at the stakes with feet and teeth,—they hurled darts, they fired shots,—now from this side, now from that. The villagers fought like wild animals,—both they and the dacoits uttering fierce yells and shrieks; only the two young Englishmen set their teeth, and silently struggled, side by side, with their doom. One—two dacoits more fell dead, but the rest were fiercer than ever.

The ammunition was exhausted, their strength failing them, it was but desperation which enabled them to maintain the combat, but they fought on and on.

Daylight broke at last; the short night was over, and the assailants retreated once more beneath the cover of the jungle. Kirke reckoned up his men. [Pg 235]

Two of them were wounded seriously, one by a cut on the head from a dah, the other by a gun-shot in the chest. One of the girls was thrust through the shoulder by a spear, and a child had been killed.

All the powder was gone, but there were spears, dahs, and clubs in sufficient quantity,—also food,—and there were a good many musket balls still left.

Moung Shway Poh had found a shelter beneath the thickest part of the stockade, where he was found, squatted on his heels, under the shade of the strongest umbrella that had been saved.

"You old coward!" cried Kirke. "I missed you in the night, and wasted compassion upon you, fearing you were wounded or killed. Have you been hiding there all this time, while we others have been fighting for you?"

"Don't be rude, Englishman," said the old sinner, with all the dignity which he could assume; "what would have become of my people if their grandfather were hurt. It was for their sake that I took care of myself; the royal self's lord should think what would become of all without the experience of my years to guide them."

"Bosh!" cried the irreverent Kirke. But perhaps the ancient Burman did not understand English vernacular language.

There was one missing whose disappearance caused both the young men much concern. Little Miss Sunshine, the pretty little village belle, the merry child of whom both had made such a pet, was nowhere to be found.

They searched up and down, they called, they questioned everyone, but all fruitlessly. No one had seen her since Ralph had helped her to escape from the blazing hut. So imminent had been the peril, so hot the fighting, so much had there been to do in the intervals, so anxious was Kirke about Ralph, that it was not until he put the people into a sort of review, and counted them over, that the little girl was missed. [Pg 236]

It was Ralph who thought of her then. "Where is Miss Sunshine?" asked he.

No one knew, no one had seen her, no one had thought about her. That she had fallen a victim to the dacoits in their ambush among the jungle was the most likely fate to have befallen her. She was gone, and had left no sign.

With heavy hearts Kirke and Ralph set themselves to prepare for the inevitable renewal of the enemy's attack when darkness once more covered their approach.

Kirke sharpened the spears and knives, and Ralph caused the women to tie up musket balls at either end of long pieces of cloth, such as they wore girded around their loins for clothing. These made excellent weapons, and the Burmese quickly mastered the knack of using them.

Rice was prepared, water-pots refilled, fuel brought in, stones piled in heaps,—some of the people slept while others watched. All was put into the best order possible.

A sorrowful event occurred in the course of the day, which fired the English breasts with indignation.

One of the children in the village owned a pretty cat, which was the beloved of her heart, and responded to the petting which it received with all the love a cat can feel and show.

The house in which this child lived was one of those destroyed by fire, and, though the inhabitants had escaped the intended massacre, no one had thought of the household pet. Little Golden-leaf had sobbed herself to sleep, fretting for its loss the night before; and her mother consoled her by saying that pussie had gone mousing into the jungle, and would come home when she had caught enough.

About the middle of the day, a prolonged feline wail was heard, and the little one called out, "My puss, my puss, I hear her crying for me!" [Pg 237]

In another moment the poor cat was seen limping painfully along, leaving a track of blood along its path. Each of her four paws was cut off, and the wretched creature was trying to crawl back to its friends upon its stumps of legs, with the fillet from a dacoit's head tied to its neck, to which a sharp stone was attached. It made its tortured way through a tiny gap in the stockade, and tried to rub itself against its little mistress's legs in the old affectionate manner, in joy at having found her again.

Little Golden-leaf burst into pitiful grief.

"Your father will put it out of its pain," said her mother.

"No, no, no!" sobbed the child, "he shall not put his soul in danger for me or my puss. The good Englishman will cure my puss, and its little paws shall grow again. Won't they?" cried she, turning to Ralph.

"No, my pretty; it would be kinder to kill poor pussie at once," said he.

"No, no!" reiterated the tender-hearted little girl,—"No, no! I cannot bear it. Make pussie well, good kind man."

Ralph had not the heart to distress her further. He felt very sick as he looked at the maimed animal, and thought what the message with which it had been sent might mean.

What had been the fate of pretty Little Miss Sunshine, when the wretches could have exercised such cruelty upon a helpless dumb animal! He tied up the mangled legs of the poor cat, and it tried to purr as it lay in its little friend's arms while the operation went on. The child then carried it to the fire, and sat down to nurse and cuddle it, while Kirke built up a sort of rampart over and around her, to serve as a shelter as well as possible.

"They meant that as a hint of what they will do to any of us if they catch us alive," said he to Ralph. [Pg 238]

"They *must* catch none of us alive," replied Denham.

"May God help us all," sighed Kirke.

"In Him do I put my trust," replied Ralph firmly.

"If anything goes wrong with me," resumed Kirke, after a few moments, "you will send word to my father, won't you, Denham? and tell him I wish I had been a better son to him, and a better man, which I would have tried to be had I been spared."

"I will," said Ralph, "if I am spared myself, but there is little chance for either of us."

"I fear not," said Kirke; and neither of them spoke more for a long time.

CHAPTER XXVI [Pg 239]

SUNSHINE'S HEROISM

Kirke insisted upon Ralph's wound being redressed at intervals all through that dreadful day, whatever else was being done.

"What's the use?" said Ralph, with a quaint smile.

"I don't mean to leave a stone unturned," replied Kirke. "Somehow, I feel as if *you* had a future before you whatever comes to the rest of us. You have nine lives, like that poor cat, which really seems content in the little one's lap after all its suffering."

Ralph gave a short laugh, with a ring of bitterness in it. "While there is life there is hope, you think," said he.

"Just so," replied Kirke.

Again the day wore on, and the sun sank in the west.

"It must soon be decided now," said Kirke. "Shake hands, old fellow, I am glad we met here, whatever befalls."

"God for the right!" exclaimed Ralph, as their hands met. They then separated, for they had agreed each to command at one edge of the circle, and it was time to assume their places.

None too soon, either, for, directly that the dusk made all things obscure, the attack once more began.

It was probable that the dacoits themselves had run short of powder on the previous evening, and had utilised the day by going to their homes to fetch more, for again they commenced by blazing away at long range. [Pg 240]

But Kirke made the people crouch low, and had, through the day, considerably strengthened his defences, so that the firing caused few casualties for a long time. The besieged could only have returned the attack by stone throwing, which would have been of little use as long as the enemy

remained under cover, and at a distance, while it would have betrayed the exhaustion of their ammunition.

He therefore counselled a passive endurance of the firing, hoping by this means to lure the dacoits out of their cover into closer quarters; and this subterfuge took effect.

The dusky figures crept out from behind the trees, and advanced stealthily.

Kirke waited until they were within a couple of yards of the stockade, then sprang suddenly to his feet, and shouted—

"Now, my friends!"

A pelting shower of stones seconded his cry; the enemy's advance was checked, the line wavered, broke, and began to retreat, when a shot rang out from the jungle,—a fatal, too well-directed shot, aimed at Kirke's tall commanding figure, and he fell.

With a cry of dismay, Ralph sprang to the side of his friend, but the dacoits took fresh courage, and dashed at the defences in a body, like a dark wave pouring over a rocky shore.

The flimsy barriers rocked and gave way before them, and all were inextricably mixed up at once in a deadly hand-to-hand warfare.

Ralph, standing astride the body of his friend, fought like a madman. The ground beneath his feet grew slippery with blood; one—two dacoits fell beneath the desperate blows of his clubbed gun, [Pg 241] over which he found that his hands took a better purchase than over the shaft of a spear; but his strength was deserting him, his adherents were falling around him, his head reeled, his sight began to fail him, and the sickness of a fainting fit nearly overpowered him. He believed his last moment was come, when—what sound met his ear? He must be delirious, mad—it could not be an English cheer! It could never be the gallop of horses' feet—many horses, tearing madly along the forest path?

But again it came, nearer and nearer. "Hallo! hallo! Hurrah! There they are!" and a party of horsemen in white uniform dashed upon the scene.

The tide of battle was turned, the dacoits tried to fly; the English police officers rode them down, shot them down, struck them down;—no mercy was shown. The robbers fought like demons, desperate in their turn, but all were killed or taken prisoners in half an hour, bound, cowed, conquered, and the fray was over.

The English officer came up to shake his rescued countrymen by the hand, with frank, hearty greeting on his lip, but Ralph had thrown himself down on the ground, his face buried on the breast of his dead friend, choking with sobs.

Mr. Brudenel, for it was he, felt a moisture arise to his own eyes at the sight. He turned aside, and brushed his hand across them, then knelt by Ralph's side, and laid a kindly hand upon his shoulder.

"I am very sorry," said he; "would to God that I had been here but one hour sooner."

"But one hour, but one little hour," moaned the boy. "Oh, my friend! my dear, true friend!"

"It was the fortune of war, sir," said the officer. "It was the will of God. Be a man, sir; your friend [Pg 242] did not suffer."

"No," said Ralph, rising, "it was all in one minute. Oh, Kirke, Kirke! I cannot yet believe it that you are gone."

He sank down again, for he could really not stand. The excitement which had given him fictitious strength was over, and all his powers were exhausted.

Brudenel signed to his men to lift and carry him to a short distance, where they laid him down upon a mat, cast water on his face, and poured some drops of stimulant into his mouth.

Some of the Burmese women drew round and fanned him, others brought all they had which they fancied might be of service.

Leaving him to the best among these, Mr. Brudenel turned to his other duties. The wounded must be attended to, the dead buried, the surviving dacoits marched off to prison.

Moung Shway Poh, who seemed to bear a charmed life, for he had come out of the affray unharmed, was clamouring a farrago of boastful explanations, servile gratitude, and accounts of his own great bravery in defending the countrymen of his royal lord's self. Fatigued by the clamour, of which he believed nothing, Mr. Brudenel swore at him for a noisy nuisance, and Mr. Grandfather turned to bestow his eloquence upon one of the native policemen, whose politeness was greater.

All was done at last, some sort of order restored, the dead were buried, and Brudenel engaged to send assistance to the villagers in rebuilding their houses. Two or three of his men were left as a guard, with plenty of powder and shot, and the little encampment made as comfortable as [Pg 243] circumstances permitted for the present.

A hasty litter was prepared for Ralph, and carried by four of the villagers, hired for the purpose; and the horsemen mounted for their return journey.

"By the bye," said Mr. Brudenel, turning back in the saddle as he prepared to start,—"By the bye, my wife has taken good care of that brave child, and she shall return in the bullock-bandy which will bring you the things I have promised to send you, along with your friends here who are

carrying this gentleman."

"Child,—brave child? Who do you mean, paya?"

"Why, the brave little maid who came alone through the jungle to send us to your assistance. You must make much of her, for it was the deed of a heroine. You would not find many, much older than she, who would have done so brave a thing."

Ralph raised himself upon his elbow. "Oh!" cried he, "was it Sunshine, the little maid whom we missed?"

"I did not ask her name," replied Brudenel. "She said that the white boy had saved her life, and that of her grandmother; and she had walked twenty miles, over mountains and through jungle paths, to fetch us. She was quite exhausted on her arrival, and Mrs. Brudenel kept her to rest and recruit. You all owe your lives to her."

"God bless her!" murmured Ralph.

Yes, it was little Miss Sunshine to whom they had all owed their rescue. She knew of what the dacoits were capable; she was very fond of both Kirke and Ralph, who had petted her, taught her many things, given her many little treasures, ingeniously contrived after English fashion.

They had played with her, and been always courteous to her—as gentlemen should ever be. No sooner had Ralph fetched her down from the blazing hut, than she hid herself in the jungle to watch the course of events. She saw the repulse of the dacoits, and tracked them to their lair in the jungle afterwards. [Pg 244]

There, understanding their speech so thoroughly, she discovered that the leader was the terrible Moung Nay Nya, the tiger, the terrible robber who was tattooed by the "Bandee-tha," and carried a ghastly "beloo" upon his chest, inoculated with a preparation compounded of dead men's flesh, which he had also chewed during the whole time that the operation had lasted.

The "beloo" nature had thus entered into him, and given him the strength and ferocity of a wild beast itself. Sunshine had often heard of him, and shuddered, from the place of her concealment, to observe the marks which she had so often heard described.

There was the horrible demon face on the man's broad muscular chest, with tail wound in voluminous folds around it, and claws extended beneath. There were the square-shaped charmed indentations which prevented bullet or sword-thrust from injuring the tiger-man, tattooed in both red and blue; there was a row of charmed stones let in beneath the skin of his neck, each of which endowed him with some wizard power or ensured him safety in combats.

She noticed the long lean arms, the powerful hands, the muscular body, the sunken cheeks and cruel determined mouth, and trembled in every limb to think of his seizing her. She softly slipped farther and farther back under the shadow of the trees, and thought.

Did this terrible tiger-man succeed in capturing her dear English boy, what tortures might he not inflict upon him were the ransom which he would certainly demand not paid! She could not bear to think of it. The tales which she had been told might have been exaggerated, but many of them were too true, nor did the appearance of the man belie them. Sunshine believed them all. [Pg 245]

While she hesitated, uncertain what to do, little Golden-leaf's pet cat came crying up to her, telling, in its own fashion, its story of fright and trouble, and glad to meet with a well-known friend. But, fearful lest the little creature should betray her whereabouts to the dacoits, she turned and fled, followed for a little way by the cat, but soon beyond the boundaries familiar to it, and it turned back to meet with the cruelty which the girl escaped.

She ran and ran till she was tired, then sat down to rest, and cry. All at once, a resolution entered her mind. She would make her way to the police-station, where she would be safe, and whence aid for her friends would certainly be sent to them.

She wished that she had thought of it before. The day was bright now, she knew in which direction the station lay, but she did not know how far off it was.

Bravely did she set out, walking on, on, on; climbing steep hills, wading through marshy places, cutting her bare feet with stones,—hungry, tired, and disheartened, but persistent. She had to rest many times, and the day wore away and night fell.

She struggled on to a pagoda which she saw on the side of a hill, and where she thought that she would pass the dark hours safely. She did not expect to find shelter there, for she knew that these erections were solid blocks of bricks, not buildings with chambers and apartments in which people lived. This one was deserted and ruinous. It had been a pious work to build it, but, the original founder having long been dead, it was not the business of anyone else to repair it as it became dilapidated under the influence of wind and weather. The piety which might have induced such a proceeding would not be counted to the score of the man who repaired, but to that of the first builder, in the other world. [Pg 246]

"Let everyone take care of himself," the Burman says, and leaves his father's good deeds to fall into decay, while he ensures his own salvation by putting up another showy building.

Sunshine made her way to this place, holy in her simple eyes; and there, climbing up a pile of fallen bricks, found a fairly comfortable and sheltered seat, where she crouched all night long.

At first she clasped her arms around her knees, and looked out upon the dim landscape, the winding stream shining in the valley beneath her, the brilliant stars in the deep blue sky above,—seeing nothing of the beauty of nature, but deeply impressed by its mystery, gazing straight

before her with wide-open eyes of awe and distrust. But gradually fatigue overpowered her, and, leaning her head back against the stones, she fell asleep.

Her sleep lasted long, and she woke when the sun was already high; arising stiff, hungry, and thirsty, to another toiling journey. First she would go down to the stream and drink. As she stooped, she saw a troop of horsemen cantering along the farther bank, taking their morning exercise. She knew the British dress—these were the people whom she was seeking; she stumbled through the stream, limped up to Mr. Brudenel, and implored him to ride fast to the rescue of her friends.

"Oh, paya! paya!" she cried, "the dacoits burn our village, they murder all,—ride quickly and save my father. There are Englishmen there, they will murder them too,—ride fast, fast to save them!"

Mr. Brudenel put quick questions to her; eliminated the chief features of the case; ordered one of the men to take the poor weary girl up to the station, and ask Mrs. Brudenel to look after her; galloped back for arms and reinforcements; and, on fresh horses, headed his troop for the rapid ride to the scene of action; arriving, as we have seen, when the besieged had come to their last gasp, and not in time to save all. [Pg 247]

CHAPTER XXVII [Pg 248]
CONCLUSION

Mr. Brudenel, as has been said, met Sunshine while on his morning ride, and returned in desperate haste to gather up his men, and the ammunition, etc., necessary for the skirmish which he knew was in store for them.

He met his wife, who, perceiving that some unusual event had happened, came anxiously to meet him.

"What is it, my dear?" asked she.

"Don't delay me, wifey," said he in violent hurry. "A girl has brought in an account of a daring outbreak of dacoity. From her story I hope to catch the fellow I have been looking out for this long time. Don't be frightened if I don't come home to-night, the place is some way off, and there will be a scrimmage; but all will go well, I hope."

"A scrimmage!" exclaimed Mrs. Brudenel in terror. "Oh, Harry!"

"Don't be a little goose, my dear; such things must come sometimes. There, kiss me,—don't worry yourself, good-bye. Take care of the girl till I come back," shouted he at the last moment, mounting his pony, and calling back over his shoulder, preparing to follow his men out of the compound.

He was gone, and his wife's eyes were so full of tears that she could not see him to the very last. The clatter of the ponies' feet faded away, and she re-entered the house. Mr. Gilchrist, who had been taking an early ramble, met her. "What is all the excitement about?" asked he. [Pg 249]

"I hardly know," replied she; "some Burmese girl has brought news of dacoits, and Harry has gone to see about it. He expects to fight, and I am so frightened."

The tears gathered again, and rolled down her white cheeks.

"Don't alarm yourself, my dear young lady," said Mr. Gilchrist kindly. "Your husband has gone through such things a dozen times before safely, and we will hope that all will be right again. Where is the girl? Shall I talk to her and find out all about it?"

"Oh, I would be *so* much obliged if you would! I cannot understand half that the people say yet."

Sunshine was in the cook's house, being fed and comforted by the servants. Mr. Gilchrist began to talk to her, and had not exchanged many sentences before his interest deepened into great excitement.

"Osborn!—Wills!" he cried, "come here and listen. This girl says that there are young Englishmen in the village, is it possible that one could be our dear Ralph? What did you say they are called, my dear?"

But the soft nature of the Burmese language utterly refused to accommodate itself to the harsh sounds of our friends' names. "Ralph" had always been pronounced "Yabé," and "Kirke" had been quite unmanageable, so he had proposed being called "Jamie," which was rendered "Yamie."

"Yabé" and "Yamie" puzzled Mr. Gilchrist, who did not know that Kirke was christened James. "What are the Englishmen like, girl?"

"Yamie is big, oh, so big!" said she. "He is good, but his eyes do not laugh like those of Yabé. They have dark fire in them, and he has hair all round," passing her hand about the lower part of her face. "It is like the jungle bushes." [Pg 250]

"What colour?" asked Wills.

"Like yours," said she.

Wills was black-haired and grizzled. His face fell. "He is old, then?" asked he.

"No, young," replied Sunshine. "Young as a father."

"It cannot be Ralph," said he.

"That is what he calls the other," said Sunshine; "Yabé, that is what he calls him. Moung Yabé, Moung Shway Yabé, I say, for he is good, oh, so good! He came for me when the *thok'kee* blazed, and all was on fire; he saved me, and took Me Poh on his back, and saved her from those beloos of thieves, and from the hot fire. Oh, Moung Yabé is strong and good, as gold—fine gold. My dear Moung Shway Paya Yabé."

"Is he like me, too?" asked old Wills.

Sunshine laughed out all over her face, her eyes danced with merriment. "Oh, no, no, no!" she cried. "Moung Yabé young, Moung Yabé beautiful! He laugh like Sunshine; he gay, he play with little Sunshine, throw roses at her, run after her—dance, sing. All the girls love Moung Yabé, my Moung Shway Yabé! Oh," she resumed, breaking down all at once into sorrow, "if the good soldiers are only in time to save my Moung Yabé from those beloos!"

The men looked at each other. "Can it be Ralph?" they asked, hope dawning upon each in turn.

"Is *his* hair like the jungle bushes?" inquired Gilchrist.

"No, no!" said Sunshine, cheering up again. "Moung Yabé is Shway Yabé, golden boy, white as the lady, no hair here," again passing her hand over her face.

Sudden inspiration seized upon Osborn, "Does he sing like this?" asked he, beginning Ralph's well-known "I'll bang my harp on a willow tree."

Sunshine laughed outright. "That is my Moung Yabé's music," said she; and, making it into a literal song without words, she finished the air with great glee. [Pg 251]

"My God!—my God is merciful!" ejaculated Mr. Gilchrist. "Osborn, my pony; quick, quick!"

"Oh! are you going to help Mr. Brudenel?" asked his wife. "How good of you! You will keep him safe, won't you, and bring him back unhurt?"

"Tell her, Wills!" shouted Mr. Gilchrist, forgetting his manners utterly as he rushed out to the stable.

Osborn was as excited as he; they snatched down their saddles, had them upon their ponies in three minutes, and were tearing out of the compound before Mrs. Brudenel comprehended anything of the matter.

Wills, indeed, forgot her interest, and the danger to her husband, in his wistful longing to accompany them. "I wish, I do wish I could ha' gone too," sighed he; but there was not a beast left in the stable now, all had gone, and only the servants of the house remained.

By degrees the lady's questions recalled him to the present, and he told her all. There was much mystery about Sunshine's story even now. Who the Englishman was who had so much gold, and who had arrived in the village alone, and been so ill there, was a great puzzle. Sunshine said that he knew Moung Yabé, they were brothers,—"Dohs,"—whether "thway-thouks" or blood-drinkers she did not know.

She here alluded to a peculiar custom among the Burmans, of two friends swearing to be brothers to each other, and in some cases cementing the alliance by drinking water mixed with drops of blood taken from each others' arms.

Yabé, Sunshine said, had come across the river, naked, and had nothing with him but a little packet of plants which must have been charmed, and protected him from wild beasts in the jungle. He could not have come naked through the wild jungle unless the "nats" had taken care of him. Where he came from Sunshine did not know. Yamie had paid her mother for making clothes for him such as he wore himself; made from native cloth, but not "putsoes." [Pg 252]

The plants seemed to point yet more directly to the stranger being identical with Denham, but who could "Yamie" be? And how did Denham arrive there, and in such a condition?

But Mrs. Brudenel was sure that it must be Ralph. She set herself to make every possible preparation, and the occupation helped her to pass that anxious day.

Sunshine, as soon as she had told all she knew, being well fed and made comfortable, fell sound asleep on a mat in the verandah, and rested from her fatigues.

Hour passed after hour, and none of the men returned. Mrs. Brudenel became sick with apprehension, nor was old Wills much better. Neither of them retired to rest that night, for they hoped that some of the party would return every moment. They sat together, each trying to keep up a brave face before the other, but neither of them much deceived.

Mrs. Brudenel went to her room, ever and anon, and sank on her knees to pray for the beloved of her heart. Then she brought her Bible, and read aloud to the old seaman soothing words of promise. It helped them both more than anything else could have done.

With the earliest dawn breakfast was prepared, but no one came to partake of it. The butler cleared it away, and laid tiffin, but no one could touch it.

Mrs. Brudenel's ayah, who was much attached to her kind young mistress, brought a glass of claret and a biscuit to her, and begged her to take it so earnestly that she would not refuse, and she persuaded Wills to have the same. [Pg 253]

Then the long waiting recommenced, and then a restless pacing of the verandah, the walks in the

compound, the house itself. They could settle to nothing.

At last a servant ran up to the drawing-room window, when Mrs. Brudenel's eyes were bent down upon her Bible, and, for the twentieth time, she was trying to calm her beating pulses with the words, "Let not your heart be troubled."

"They come, lady! They come, missie! Master is come!"

She sprang to her feet. Yes, there was Mr. Brudenel at the head of his men, crossing the ford in the valley beneath her feet. There was Mr. Gilchrist, waving his hat frantically. There was Osborn, hand to mouth, evidently yelling out "Hooray!" at the top of his voice, though still too far off to be heard.

And who else? Behind Mr. Gilchrist appeared a slim, fair-haired lad, in a loose dress of dark native cloth and a wide palm-leaf hat. He lifted his head at Osborn's wild gestures, and waved his hat to Wills.

"Oh, my God, I thank Thee, I humbly thank Thee!" ejaculated the old man fervently.

The servants almost tumbled over each other in their excited haste to see, to prepare, to welcome. Mrs. Brudenel and old Wills shook hands, with streaming eyes, under the relief from the intense strain upon their spirits through so many hours.

The troop entered the compound, and was surrounded by the eager household.

"We have him, Wills," was heard in Mr. Gilchrist's glad voice.

"My Yabé! My Moung Shway boy!" cried Sunshine.

"Oh, Harry! Harry!" sobbed Mrs. Brudenel, clinging to him. [Pg 254]

"My boy, my boy! My dear young master!" exclaimed old Wills.

"Where are the dacoits' heads?" asked the men-servants.

"Was anyone hurt?" asked the ayah, mother to one of the men.

All spoke at once, no one answered anybody else. Ralph nearly wrung Wills' hands off; Osborn thumped him on the back, and slapped his own thighs with triumphant joy; while Mr. Gilchrist's face, as he presented Ralph to Mrs. Brudenel, with his hand upon the lad's shoulder, was good to see.

There were fervent thanksgivings in that house before the inmates retired, but there was little explanation of all which had occurred until, after a quiet night's rest, they all reassembled in the early morning. Then Ralph, in a simple, straightforward manner, recounted his adventures,—told of Kirke's repentance, his goodness to himself, his bravery, and his gallant defence of the village.

"Oh, how well he redeemed the past!" mourned he. "What a fine fellow he was after all, and he has gone without anyone knowing of what he did! I loved him,—he earned the love of all, and the respect too."

The dacoits had been sent to Rangoon for trial, and were all hanged eventually, many crimes being traced to their score.

Ralph's adventures were now at an end; Mr. Gilchrist gave up his wanderings, and went down to Rangoon with him, under the escort of Mr. Brudenel, when that gentleman went to give evidence against the tiger dacoit. He went the more willingly inasmuch as Ralph's little orchids proved to be of a hitherto unknown species, and very valuable.

Sunshine, plentifully rewarded, was restored safely to her friends, and all the houses were rebuilt better and stronger than before. [Pg 255]

Great treasures of English manufacture reached the place from time to time; for Ralph never forgot the children with whom he had played, the women who had tended him, the men who had fought by his side, or the grave of him who had been his worst enemy and his greatest friend.

To that man's father he wrote, making light of his failings, but detailing his gallantry at every point.

In course of time he received an answer, which ran as follows:—

> "Sir,—I thank you for the comfort which you have given me regarding my dear son. Your letter, with his confession, and attempt to redeem his past, are an old man's greatest treasures, and shall lie on his breast when life shall be no more."

Ralph rose to wealth and repute in Rangoon, and was always a comfort to his mother, the joy of her heart.

Mr. Gilchrist became a great scientific botanist, and published many a volume upon the jungles of Burma.

JULES VERNE [Pg 256]

The romantic old French town of Nantes, near the estuary of the Loire, and only thirty-five miles

away from the sea, has the honour of having been the birthplace of Jules Verne, the author of bewitching stories that have now fascinated three generations of girls and boys.

Jules Verne was many years before he found where his strength lay. He was educated at Nantes, and then he went to Paris to study law. Next he began to write plays and comedies, some of which reached the stage; and it was not until the year 1863, when he was thirty-five years of age, that he went to a publisher in Paris, with a story entitled, *Five Weeks in a Balloon*, and so began that very long list of books by which he has become famous.

Jules Verne delighted to live in *Le Saint Michel*, a small yacht of eight or ten tons, in which was a large chest that contained the boat's library. On board this yacht Jules Verne thought out some of his wonderful romances. Usually his trips were from Crotoy to Harve; but at times he took in more provisions and fared forth to the coasts of Normandy, Brittany, and even of England.

Each reader will decide for himself which of Jules Verne's captivating stories he likes best; but the critics mention *Dropped from the Clouds* and *Around the World in Eighty Days* as the books which stand apart from the others. Some of our most attractive stories are about islands: *Robinson Crusoe* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, and Verne's *The Mysterious Island* is fit to rank with these. Under this one title we have a group of three separate volumes. First comes *Dropped from the Clouds*, then *Abandoned*, and the whole narrative is completed by *The Secret of the Island*. The boy who embarks upon the reading of these three books has a long period of excitement and delight stretching in front of him. The very numerous pictures, too, in these three memorable volumes are very arresting.

Jules Verne died on March 24, 1905, at Amiens when he was seventy-seven years of age, and he left a long list of books.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Golden is a term of approval or endearment.

[2] Pyin=lazy

[3] Native pony.

the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

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