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Assaye and Laswaree, by F. S. Brereton**

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JONES OF THE
64TH



LT-COL. F. S. BRERETON

Cover

Jones of the 64th

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SUDDENLY THE MAHRATTA TWISTED IN
HIS SADDLE, AIMED AT HIS HEAD, AND
FIRED

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Frontispiece

Jones of the 64th

A Tale of the Battles of Assaye and Laswaree

BY
COLONEL F. S. BRERETON

Author of
"Roger the Bold"
"The Great Airship"
"Colin the Scout"
"A Knight of St. John"
&c.

Illustrated by W. Rainey, R.I.

By Colonel F. S. Brereton

On the Field of Waterloo.
The Great Airship.
With the Allies to the Rhine.
Under French's Command.
Colin the Scout.
With Allenby in Palestine.
A Hero of Panama.
Foes of the Red Cockade.
Under the Chinese Dragon.
A Sturdy Young Canadian.
How Canada was Won.
John Bargreave's Gold.
With Shield and Assegai.
With Rifle and Bayonet.
In the King's Service.
The Dragon of Peking.
One of the Fighting Scouts.
A Knight of St. John.
Roger the Bold.
The Rough Riders of the Pampas.
Indian and Scout.
The Great Aeroplane.
Tom Stapleton.
A Boy of the Dominion.

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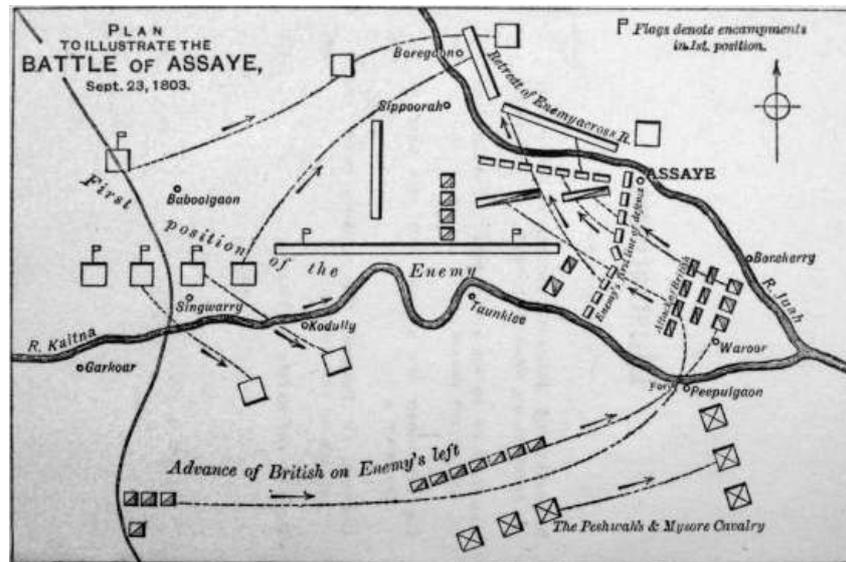
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SUDDENLY THE MAHRATTA TWISTED IN HIS SADDLE, AIMED AT HIS HEAD, AND FIRED
REACHING UP TO HIS FULL HEIGHT HE STRUCK THE MAN ON THE BREAST
HE STRETCHED OUT A HUGE PAW AND DRAGGED OWEN UP
COLONEL LE POURTON WAS STARING DOWN THE MUZZLE OF THE WEAPON
PLAN OF THE BATTLE OF ASSAYE

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PLAN TO ILLUSTRATE THE BATTLE OF ASSAYE, Sept. 23, 1803

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CHAPTER I

Mr. Benjamin Halbut Interferes

It was late in the afternoon of a lovely summer's day in the year of grace 1798, and all the world and his wife were abroad, taking advantage of the brilliant weather, for it had rained heavily for a week past, and the countryside had been flooded. But another cause had brought the people from their homes to the town of Winchester, for it was market day, the weekly day for sales, when farmers gathered at the square, having driven in their sheep or cattle from miles around, while the horse-breeders had come in with their droves of animals, many of them having spent the previous night on the road. And in consequence the pleasant town of Winchester wore a gay appearance. The market square was thronged to overflowing, while within the space of a few yards one could see such a medley of beings that the sight caused any stranger to pause and wonder. Standing there perhaps in some retired corner watching the crowd, he could tell at a glance that the rough fellow who had just passed, with tattered coat and breeches, odd-coloured hose and shock head of hair, was a cattle-drover, who had more than likely slept last night in some wayside ditch within hearing of his beasts. Then would come a burly farmer, stout and strong, a patron of good English beef and ale, red of face and round of limb, jolly and hearty as a sand-boy. And if his face failed to tell of his calling, his clothing was a sure criterion, for your farmer has had his own particular dress for many a century, and in the year of which we speak, providing prosperity had come to him, the man who rented or owned his farm, and employed his hands, turned out on market days in a manner which was distinctive. And very well and prosperous did they look in their grey beaver hats, their tailed jackets of broadcloth, with a cravat of ample dimensions about their necks. And down below perhaps a pair of silken hose, as this was market day, or, if they had ridden in, boots and spurs, the former well blacked and polished.

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But all were not farmers and drovers. Women sat huddled in the corners, some with baskets of sweets and cakes, others selling combs, handkerchiefs, and fancy articles likely to attract the maids who patronised the spot. Horsy-looking men tramped the pavements, or stood opposite the Black Bull, chewing the inevitable piece of straw, discussing the prices of the day and the business which they had done. Boys, for the most part barefooted and in tatters, rushed here and there, seeking to earn an odd copper by carrying a bag or holding a horse. And lurking in the crowd one caught sight of furtive-looking individuals, whose slouch hats were pulled well over their eyes, and who stood, with hands deep in their pockets, surveying the scene idly, waiting for the night to come. For then it would be their turn to hustle the tired marketers, to pick the pockets of the women as they looked on at some outdoor fair, and to lure the revellers to some dark corner where they might easily rob them of the results of their marketing.

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It was all very interesting and very entertaining to one of thoughtful mind, and Mr. Benjamin Halbut, of the celebrated East India Company, found ample food for thought as he wandered amidst the booths and cattle-pens. He was a gentleman of more than middle age, moderately tall, and practically clean shaven, as was the custom of the day. He was elegantly dressed in the height of the fashion, and wore a high stock. But there was nothing frivolous about his appearance, for his features told a tale of study, of a peaceful and thoughtful mind, and of a nature which was the reverse of unfriendly. And there was something distinguished about him too, something which his refined features enhanced, and which caused many a farmer to glance at him with approval. Some, in fact, raised their beavers to him and smiled, a salutation which he instantly responded to, tucking his malacca under his arm in military style, and lifting his hat with a grace which was captivating. And at such times he showed a splendid head of hair, continuous with short and bushy whiskers which were then commonly worn by those who belonged to the quality.

"A proper gentleman, and one as it's a pleasure to rent from," said young Farmer Smiles, as Mr. Benjamin passed before the Black Bull. "I reckon as he's the best landlord this side o' London Town."

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"And for many a mile round, lad," added a rotund individual, as he wiped the perspiration from his brow with a brilliant bandana handkerchief, and replaced his beaver with great care, giving it that rakish list to one side which many a farmer practised. "And to think as he's a bachelor, and at his time o' life," he went on. "They say as there's many a lass from the fine houses as would willingly look over his age and take him as a husband. But, bless yer, he don't see it. He's too busy a man for marriage. What with sailin' to India every other year, and posting backwards and forwards between this and town, he ain't got the time. Well, Simon, it's main hot to-day, and so we'll have another tankard to drink his health in. Hi, lass! another full to the brim, and as cold as you can draw it from the cellar."

It seemed, indeed, as if all in the market square were cheerful and contented on this day, and as Mr. Benjamin sauntered along his thoughtful face wore a smile of pleased approval. He stopped at this booth and at that, lifting his hat to the farmers' wives and daughters, nodding to the drovers whom he knew by sight, and acknowledging the salutations of the smaller fry, unknown to him personally, but who knew well who this fine gentleman was. And presently, as he gained the farther side of the market, a gathering crowd attracted his attention, and, being curious, he allowed himself to be carried by the people in that direction. It was the portion of the square given over to the carts and teams of the marketers. Here all who drove in from the surrounding country brought their conveyances, and taking the horses out tied them to the wheel. Some brought large tarpaulins with them, and rigged up a shelter for the use of their women folk, and a peep beneath some of these improvised tents disclosed chairs and a box or two upon which the occupants ate their meals. This was, in fact, the quarter where the smaller farmers came, those who could not afford to take their conveyances to the ample yard of the Black Bull.

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In the far corner of this portion the crowd had collected round a rough square, in the centre of which stood a farmer's cart, with the horse harnessed to the shafts, and a woman seated in the vehicle, holding a child in her arms. At the horse's head stood a burly fellow, a small farmer of rough and brutal appearance, who was engaged in examining the broken knees of the animal, and mopping the blood which poured from them.

"Thirty guineas lost! Not a penny less," he shouted with an oath, as he looked at the wounds. "Here have I been tending the beast as if he were a child, and then this rascal lets him down. I tell you he did it on purpose!"

He flung the last words at his wife, who sat in the vehicle, and glared at her maliciously as if he dared her to deny the fact. Then his eyes sought one corner of the square about which stood the crowd of marketers, composed of the rougher element, and for the most part consisting of touts and drovers, though there was a small sprinkling of farmers, and in one part a tall sergeant from the regiment stationed in the town. His gaze fixed itself upon a lad some fourteen years of age, down at heel and shabbily dressed. In fact, his clothes hung grotesquely about him, for they were the cast-off garments of the farmer, and had had but little alteration. He was bareheaded, his cap lying at the farmer's feet, showing that the latter had struck him already. The little fellow stood there looking fearfully at his master, waiting for the thrashing which he knew would be given him as soon as the horse's injuries had been seen to. But if he feared his master's blows there was an air of desperation about the lad now, and his clenched fists seemed to argue that he would not suffer without offering some opposition.

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"Broken the knees of the best horse in the stable and lost me thirty guineas," growled the man. "Come here and take your whipping!"

"Leave the lad alone, George," cried his wife, looking fearfully at her husband. "He couldn't help it. The horse slipped on the cobbles. Ask any one who stood near at hand."

"And all because you'd save his skin from a hiding. Hold your tongue, woman," retorted the farmer, snapping the words at her.

He was a nasty-tempered fellow, as any one could see, and the opposition offered by his wife hardly helped to smooth his anger. He wrapped a piece of linen about the animal's knees, and then calmly unstrapped the leather belt which was about his waist. And all the while the crowd looked on expectantly, while the lad cowered in his corner, trembling with apprehension. A moment or two later the ruffianly farmer stepped towards him, and as he stretched out a hand to take him by the shoulder struck the boy a cruel blow across the face with his strap. Next second

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a tiny fist flew out, and the knuckles struck the brute full in the mouth. At once there was intense silence in the crowd. All held their breath while they awaited the result of such audacity, craning their heads to obtain a better view. As for the farmer he staggered back, spitting blood from his mouth, and growling out curses at the boy. Then his anger got the better of his discretion, and he threw himself furiously at the boy, his eyes blazing with rage, and his strap held well aloft, prepared to deal a stinging blow. But it was never delivered, for just as Mr. Benjamin Halbut pressed his way to the front, and stepped into the square with the intention of putting a stop to the contest, the sergeant who had been a spectator of the scene ran from his corner and faced the man.

"Fair play!" he cried. "The lad's too small. Strike one of your own size and weight."

If there had been five sergeants there it would have made no difference, for George Ransom, the farmer, was blind with anger. Always a self-willed man he was noted for his brutality, and many a time had the lad whom he now attacked suffered a severe thrashing at his hands. He knew his strength and weight, and with a shout of fury he flung himself upon the sergeant, bringing his belt down with a thud on his shoulder. Then a strange thing happened. The sergeant, a man of some forty years of age, leapt to one side, and in a trice George Ransom was met with a terrific blow beneath the jaw, which sent him flying back on to the ground.

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"Straight from the shoulder! A fine blow! A very fine knock-out indeed!"

It was Mr. Benjamin who spoke, and at the sound of his voice the interest of the spectators was for the moment distracted from the combatants. A moment later George Ransom had all their attention, for he rose slowly to his feet, his face scarlet with rage and his fists clenched tightly. Then he slowly divested himself of his coat and rolled his sleeves to the elbow. And as he did so the news that a fight was about to take place spread with the rapidity of a fire, bringing the people crowding to that end of the market square.

"A fight! A fight! Stand back and give 'em room," they shouted.

"You've taken it into your thick head to stick up for the shaver," growled George Ransom, as he made the final preparations. "Well, you've got to fight for him, and you've got to take punishment for that blow. Best get that red jacket off, unless you'll keep it on to hold up your courage."

"Nay, I'll take it off to keep it clear of your fingers. Think I'd have it soiled by the hands of a man like you, a big hulking brute who strikes children! That coat, my friend, has been on the shoulders of a better man than you, as I'll try to show you. Who'll take charge of it for me?"

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Very quietly and coolly the sergeant had begun to do as George Ransom was doing. He had already unbuttoned his tailed tunic, and slung his belt and sabre or side-arm from his shoulders. And now, as he turned to the mob he called for some one to take his part. Then his eye fell on the lad standing beside him, his cheeks flushed with excitement and his eyes shining.

"You're the man," he said. "Here, my lad, take charge, and stand in the corner out of harm's way."

"Silence for a moment, my friends," suddenly rang out another voice, as Mr. Benjamin Halbut moved to the centre of the circle. "Ah, Mr. Joseph Romwell and Mr. Tasker, you have come in good time. This gentleman, who wears his Majesty's uniform, has been challenged to fight by this—er—this fellow here, whom I witnessed myself striking the lad. We will see fair play. I am an old hand at the game, and with your pleasure will keep the rounds. Let us have a couple of chairs, and with a few more of these friends of ours we will keep a circle. One moment, sir"—he turned upon the farmer who was now fully prepared and was moving towards his opponent—"one moment till all is ready. Ah, here are others, and we shall soon be prepared for you. Gentlemen, I wager fifty guineas on the sergeant, and if he loses I will give this fellow here the same and twenty for the boy. If the sergeant wins I will pay twenty guineas for the boy, and so take him off his hands. Is that a bargain?"

"I'd give him away," answered George Ransom. "But if you're fool enough to bet on a match like this, all the better. Fifty guineas to me if I win, and twenty also for the boy. I'm ready."

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He spat on his hands and doubled his fists, bringing both in front of his massive chest. And to look at him there seemed every prospect of his proving the victor; for he was at least two stones heavier than the sergeant, while his arms, now that they were bared, proved to be of as massive proportions as were his thighs and calves. But Mr. Benjamin Halbut seemed to have no uneasiness as to the results of the conflict, and it was very clear to all that he at least was well able to judge. The manner in which he held his watch, his authoritative tones, and the precision with which he placed the opponents and the judges, showed that he was not unused to pugilistic encounters. And in fact, like large numbers of gentlemen of that day, he was keenly in favour of the art of fighting. True, as viewed nowadays, prize-fighting is and was a barbarous sport, but it had many adherents in the old days, and was not always conducted on barbarous lines. And Mr. Halbut had done his utmost to foster the art, feeling that it helped to make men of his countrymen. He had attended many a bout, and was considered as good a judge of pugilists as any in the country. At the very first he had noticed the wiry, active proportions of the sergeant, his keen eye, and the cool manner in which he made his preparations. And now that he saw him stripped, the hardness of his muscles, his pose as he stepped into the ring, and the poise of his head, told that here was a man who had practised the game.

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"A champion, if I am not mistaken," thought Mr. Halbut. "Game to fight to a finish, and has science. Well, he will want it, for this big bully will strike with the power of a giant. All the better; if he is beaten it will mean that my friend the sergeant will have obtained a finer victory."

By now the news had filtered to every portion of the square, and a big concourse of people was

gathered in the corner; in fact, all who could possibly leave their stalls or their animals had come across, while the hall of the Black Bull was emptied. And thanks to this fact, there were now numbers of better-class farmers and breeders close at hand, and these, at a sign from Mr. Halbut, took up a position within the circle so as to keep the crowd back.

"We are ready, I think," said Mr. Halbut. "Corners, please. Break away when time is called. Now, time!"

The two opponents at once approached one another, the farmer burning to beat down the sergeant, and confident that his strength and superior weight would help him to do so; while the latter came up with a quiet and intent little smile, wary and watchful, knowing that for a time at least he would have his hands very full. Nor was it long before his enemy showed the tactics he was prepared to follow. For a moment or two he stood to the utmost of his height, his fists moving to and fro like a couple of enormous sledge-hammers. Then, dropping his head suddenly he rushed at the sergeant, swinging both arms about his head. And in this manner he reached the opposite corner, only to find that his opponent had slipped past him and was waiting for him to turn and renew the combat. There was a shout of applause from the crowd, and then a cheer as George Ransom again rushed to the attack. When time was called the farmer was breathing heavily, while he had so far failed to touch his opponent. His anger now had risen, if that were possible, and when Mr. Halbut again called the combatants into the circle the farmer came forward without a pause, and with a shout rushed at his enemy. He was met this time with a terrific blow beneath the guard, and staggered back, spitting teeth from his mouth. But the blow was nothing to a man of his size and strength, and in a little while he had closed with the sergeant and the two were striking at one another, the farmer with blind fury, and the sergeant with skill and coolness. Once, in the third round, the latter failed to check a rush, and a blow from George Ransom laid him on the ground, where he lay for a time half stunned, while Mr. Halbut slowly counted out the seconds. Was he to be beaten after all? for by the rules of the science of pugilism, if he failed to come up when time was called he was defeated. But a little later he rose on his elbow, looked about him as if bewildered, and then sprang to his feet. And the blow seemed to have increased his activity. For in the three rounds which followed he struck the farmer many a blow, while the latter expended his powers on the air, and rapidly became more and more exhausted as his more active opponent escaped his rushes. Finally, in the eighth round the climax came. The sergeant, seeing that his man was at the end of his tether and no longer so dangerous, struck him unmercifully, driving him round the circle and then into one corner, where he retained him till the man was ready to drop. He escaped, however, and the two faced one another. But it was only for a moment. As George Ransom advanced again he was met with a blow on the point of the chin which threw him from his feet, and in an instant he lay unconscious on the ground.

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"One, two, three, four," Mr. Halbut began to count. "Stand away there. Keep the circle, my friends. He has a quarter of a minute yet. Time!"

A shout went up from all who were present as the sergeant went back to his corner and took his coat from the lad. Mr. Halbut and the others went to the farmer and ascertained that he was merely stunned. Indeed, in a few minutes he was conscious again and being supported on his feet, where he remained looking sourly at the group about him. Then he stumbled blindly towards his cart, and with the aid of his wife managed to scramble into his coat.

"One moment," said Mr. Halbut, as he was about to climb into the cart. "The wager was that if you lost I should pay twenty guineas for the boy. Give me your name and address and I will bring the money and have the lad legally handed over. Wait, though, here is half the sum down. I will look after the boy, and the rest shall be paid through an attorney."

He pulled a long purse from his pocket and told out the guineas. Then with a sympathetic nod to the farmer's wife he turned on his heel and went to the sergeant.

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"You are a fine fellow, and I thank you," he said. "You are a little shaken, as is natural, and a glass and something to eat at the inn will do you no harm. Bring the lad with you and follow."

Ten minutes later they were gathered in the hall of the famous Black Bull, waiting while the victuals were put before them.

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CHAPTER II

A Protégé

Mine host of the Black Bull was a man who prided himself upon the welcome his house provided, and on such an occasion, when Mr. Benjamin Halbut was the guest, there was extra need for haste. And so it happened that within a very few minutes a meal was announced as being ready.

"In the parlour, your honour," said the maid. "The best parlour, sir, along the passage to the left. My!" she went on, as she passed the lad for whom the sergeant had just fought so handsomely, "but you've found friends to-day! Never mind, laddie; you look a nice little fellow."

"This way, sergeant. Come, my lad," said Mr. Benjamin. "We'll eat and talk. We've much to arrange. Now, seat yourselves, and may this meal not be the last that we may share for many a day to come."

He was so quiet and affable, so friendly, that even the lad who had so strangely come into his company was far from abashed. Not that he felt at his ease, for all this was so strange to him. In the first place, he had never even stepped within the doors of the Black Bull, though many a time, on market days, he had looked within, bashfully and wondering, at the warmth and comfort, and the massive old dressers and chairs, and at the stags' heads hung round the walls. It had never occurred to him that one day he might have the right to enter. And here he was now, seated at a board which groaned beneath the weight of a massive joint of beef, while other dainties to which he was an entire stranger stood on the table! And how he admired the fine gentleman opposite, and envied the coolness of the sergeant!

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"If I were only he," he thought. "He is as used to this as to fighting, while I am so strange. My feet hit against every chair I get near, and—oh dear!"

"Come, lad, sit down beside me and let us commence," said Mr. Benjamin, taking him by the hand and drawing him towards a chair. "A fine lad, sergeant, and growing, or he would not be so thin."

"He struck a plucky blow, sir. But he is thin, and no doubt the feeding provided by the farmer was not of the best."

"Where does this farmer come from?" asked Mr. Benjamin, as he carved a slice of beef and placed it before the lad. "Tell me who he is and something about him. And first of all, who are you? What is your name, lad?"

He was so nice and courteous, so thoughtful, that in a little while the lad had forgotten his rags, his dirty hands and smudged face, and was seated chatting easily, and eating the good things provided with a gusto which there was no mistaking.

"Now, your name?" asked Mr. Benjamin, when he saw that the lad was well engaged and feeling more at home.

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"Jones, sir—at least that is what they call me," answered the little fellow bravely.

"That is what they call you? How is that? Had you another name?"

"I think so, sir. I was found when I was smaller and taken to the poorhouse, as I was an orphan with no one to claim me."

"Found! That is strange. And the lad speaks well, too."

Mr. Benjamin exchanged glances with the sergeant and became silent and thoughtful. For he had noticed something strange about this protégé of his from the moment when the lad opened his lips. He spoke with a slight Hampshire accent, which had evidently been recently acquired. But there was something refined about the little fellow's voice, so much so that it was difficult to imagine that he was merely a farmer's boy.

"You were found," he said. "Where? Tell us all about it, and how you came to be working for this hulking bully. The fellow looked as if he had thrashed you many a time."

"He has, sir. He said he would kill me some day. None dared to live with him, except his wife and I, and I would have gone long ago had I not been his apprentice. Yes, sir, I was found, they tell me, when I was about five years of age, and a cottager and his wife, of the name of Jones, took me in and cared for me till they died. Then I went to the poorhouse in this town, and from there to the farmer. That is all I know, sir, but perhaps Mrs. Towers, at the poorhouse, could tell you more."

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"A foundling, with a mysterious tale behind him, and of late a little slave!"

Mr. Benjamin looked at the lad closely, noting his fair curly hair, now all in disorder, his fine eyes, and the cast of his features.

"A fine little fellow," he thought aloud, "and I'll warrant he has had few friends so far. The farmer's wife, perhaps, for she looked as if she cared for him; and this Mrs. Towers."

"Yes, indeed, sir, they were very good to me," burst in the boy eagerly, loyally supporting the two who had been mentioned. "Mrs. Towers says that she was a mother to me, while Mrs. Ransom was very kind and good when her husband could not see us. Am I to go back to him, sir?"

"Never! I have made a bargain with him, and your articles of apprenticeship are to be cancelled. An attorney will get it done in a couple of weeks. You will have to be taken before a magistrate, and the facts sworn to. Then as soon as the money is paid you will be free from that ruffian. Yes, ruffian, sergeant, and I fear that there are many others like him, who obtain the services of lads such as this and make drudges of them. But your other name, lad?"

"Owen M., sir."

"Owen M.! M.? What does that refer to, and where did you get the name of Owen?"

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"It is my right name, sir," answered the boy proudly, as he looked his questioner in the eyes. "When I was left near the cottage of the Joneses I was wrapped in a rug, and was fully dressed in old clothes. They thought that my own had been removed, so as to make it impossible to trace who I was, or where I came from, and had it not been for a jersey I was wearing next to my body nothing would have been known. Owen M. was worked on the jersey, and that is why I have the name of Owen."

"And the M. may be your Christian name or surname. These Joneses are dead?"

With his usual interest in life Mr. Benjamin asked the question sharply and waited impatiently for the answer, giving an exclamation of satisfaction when the lad replied that the clothing was now in the hands of Mrs. Towers at the poorhouse, and that the Joneses were dead.

"Then we will go there. Come, sergeant, what do you say to helping me in the matter?" he said eagerly. "You took up the cudgels on behalf of this lad Owen, and will like to see the matter through. We will give him a fresh start and make a man of him. What do you say?"

"Ready and willing, sir. He has pluck, by the way in which he struck the bully, and he'll do with a proper training and discipline. In the army, sir, we'd make a fine soldier of him."

The sergeant sat up to his full height; while it was clear from the open admiration with which Owen regarded his defender that service in the army would not be unpleasant to him.

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"And you like the idea?" smiled Mr. Benjamin, turning to him. "We will see. He shall have the best. But, first, we will get him some fitting clothing. Come, another cut of beef and a tankard to wash it down, sergeant. You have had a struggle and need some refreshment."

He rose and went to the bell, giving it a lusty tug. When the maid arrived he requested mine host to be sent to him.

"Do me the favour of sending across to the nearest tailor's," he said when the good man appeared, "and tell him to come here at once with clothing suited to this lad."

Half an hour later a hackney coach drew up at the door of the Black Bull, and the three who had refreshed themselves in the famous hostelry stepped into it and were driven away, Mr. Benjamin giving the poorhouse as the address to which they were to be taken. And if Owen Jones had felt strange before when he had been bidden to accompany this fine gentleman, he felt even more so now, while his whole frame was filled with a sense of elation. For he was transformed. The kind lady at the Black Bull had helped to polish him with hot water and a plentiful supply of soap, while the tailor and a haberdasher, who had also been called in to help, had rigged him out in a suit of simple stuff which fitted him well, and in which he looked a little gentleman.

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"My, who would have thought as he wasn't a little gentleman!" exclaimed the maid at the Black Bull, as she saw him descend to the hall, hat in hand, his hair well brushed, and his eager little face shining with the application of good Windsor soap. "Don't you look fine!"

Owen greeted her with a bashful smile, and then walked quietly into the room where Mr. Benjamin and the sergeant awaited him. And there his appearance caused more pleasure.

"He will do us credit, never fear," exclaimed the kindly gentleman. "But the coach is here and we will leave."

Paying the bill, and adding something to it for the welcome and help given, he pushed Owen into the coach before him and they drove off. Owen could hardly believe that it was really he. Who could have guessed that he would have ever ridden in a coach! And behind postillion-ridden horses! And was it true that he was not to return to Farmer Ransom? There were to be no more beatings and no more scoldings! No need to creep to bed amidst the sacks in a cold barn, and lie there shivering of a cold night, and awake perhaps stiff with the cold, and hungry because supper had been denied him on the previous night out of pure spite! It was too much to believe. He sat forward in the coach, now looking up at Mr. Benjamin and then out of the windows at the houses and streets, at the boys playing there and at the pedestrians. Why, there was Johnny Banks, a lad who had been at the poorhouse with him, and was now apprenticed to the local baker. He at any rate had had plenty to eat, and Owen had been in the habit of envying him. Now! "I can't believe it!" he said to himself. "And if only they would make me a soldier!"

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"Here we are. Tumble out and let us see this good lady. Ring the bell, sergeant. And, postillion, wait here for us."

A few moments later an individual appeared within the ample gate of the poorhouse, dressed in the official uniform of the place, and showing a portly figure and a face indicative of good temper. To the inquiry for Mrs. Towers he responded that she was within, and at once bustled off, impressed by the coach and by the unusually fine appearance of Mr. Benjamin. And in a little while the trio found themselves closeted with the matron, a stout old lady, who hugged Owen with affection, and lifted her fat hands in amazement at finding him in such fine company.

"Lor!" she said, "to think that you should have such friends! Little Owen, as came to the house without a single one, and well-nigh starved!"

"Let us have the tale, my good woman," said Mr. Benjamin, as he bowed to the old dame's curtsy, and sat on a chair. "This lad here has made friends with the sergeant and myself, and we are desirous of finding out a little about him. He tells us that his name is Owen M. Jones."

"As near as we know, sir," was the answer. "But, bless yer, begging your pardon for so doing, sir, he's better than a Jones. That's the name of the poor folk who first found him. It was a dark night—let me see, yes, it will be nine years ago—when they heard a coach passing along the road, which runs some yards from their cottage. That wasn't anything out of the common, for fifty and more pass by perhaps in the day. But it stopped for a while and then went on again at a gallop. Mrs. Jones told me that herself. It drove on as if there were soldiers or some one of that sort behind, and it was soon gone out of hearing. Then there came the cry of a child who is frightened at being left all alone, and when they ran out to see who it was, there was young Owen, a tiny little fellow then, seated on the roadside, with his knuckles in his eyes."

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"And like the kind-hearted folks they were they brought him in and fed him, I suppose?" said Mr. Benjamin.

"That they did, sir. They weren't that well off, neither. But they had none of their own, and they took the boy in and cared for him. Then Mr. Jones walked in here as soon as it was day, and came to the house. The guardians heard his tale and saw the boy, but they never learned anything about the coach that had brought him, nor where he came from. And as the Joneses said they were willing to adopt him, why Owen stayed with them till the old couple died, and that would be six years ago."

"And nothing was learned about his coming?"

"Nothing, sir. Foundlings are common enough, and I don't suppose as the guardians would spend much in making inquiries. Besides, the boy seemed to be the child of common parents, for his clothes were rough. But Mrs. Jones knew better, and so do I. I'll show you, sir."

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She went off into another room, where they heard her pulling open the doors of a cupboard; and finally she returned, bringing a tiny little undervest which she handed to Mr. Benjamin.

"Made in India," he said at once, "and of the finest material. This garment was in all probability made for the boy, and if so, then he was born out there. Yes, I am sure of it, for look at this, sergeant. Those letters, Owen M., were stitched by a native woman. The work is characteristic. I am perfectly sure of what I say."

All stared at the tiny garment, which was redolent of lavender, while Owen, who had never regarded it with any importance before now, looked at the letters stitched in one corner with great interest.

"Perhaps the lad can help us," suggested the sergeant. "Tell us, boy, whether you remember the coach."

"Of course he does!" exclaimed Mrs. Towers. "Why, I asked him many a time. Tell the gentlemen, Owen."

"I remember the coach well, and being left beside the road," said Owen promptly; "and I recollect the journey. I am sure that I was strange to the country, and I can see now the ship in which I came. How long we were at sea I do not know, but it was for a long while. And all that time I was tended by a black woman, who was very kind. I seem to remember places so different from these here. A bright sun, many trees, and very big houses. There were soldiers, too, and one big soldier who often threw me on his shoulder. But it may be a dream. I may have imagined it all."

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"One minute, Owen," interrupted Mrs. Towers, whose interest was fully aroused. "Mrs. Jones said that when you came you could speak well, but that whenever you cried you called out in a tongue which was strange to her. You did it here too, that I remember, though bless me if I know what the words meant. Have you forgotten?"

"Tell me," said Mr. Benjamin encouragingly, shifting a little farther on to his chair and looking closely at Owen. "What were the words?"

Owen repeated them as well as he was able, and though they were but childish expressions, which he had learned when beginning to speak, they were pronounced as undoubtedly hailing from India.

"Which proves that he actually came from India," said the sergeant.

"Exactly so. He probably landed and was kidnapped, for some purpose of which we are ignorant. There is something very interesting about this, sergeant. I know the country well, and I say without hesitation that no child but those belonging to Englishmen in high places would have been dressed in such a garment. Probably our little friend is the son of an Englishman employed in India, and was sent home because of the death of his mother, or more likely because of the climate. Beyond that one cannot go. There is some dark secret attached to his capture. But the fact remains that he was kidnapped, and brought away from his guardians. Then his identity was hidden. I should say that he may very well have come from Bristol or some other port, and it is not to be wondered at that his loss did not occasion very much disturbance. If his parents were abroad, considering how slowly news travels, it is not at all wonderful that no rumour of his having been found in this locality failed to reach his guardians. Perhaps he was sent home to relatives, who may themselves have had something to do with the kidnapping. There have been cases quite as disgraceful before. But the important thing is that one little garment is left as a clue, and that the lad can speak a few words of the Indian tongue, and remembers places which may without a great stretch of imagination be allowed to correspond with some Indian city—Bombay or Calcutta, for instance."

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"Lor'! To think that he may be a gentleman!" exclaimed Mrs. Towers, lifting her hands. "Well, I always said as much. He speaks different from other lads, and he's better behaved. There's always been something queer about little Owen. And I've tried to keep it up too, sir. I've encouraged him to speak well, to address his betters as he should, and to be gentle in his play."

"And you've succeeded well, ma'am," exclaimed the sergeant with enthusiasm.

"Very well indeed, madam," agreed Mr. Benjamin. "Is there nothing more to tell us?"

"Nothing, sir. He stayed here till a year ago, when the guardians apprenticed him to Mr. George Ransom, a farmer that's not the best-loved of all living about Winchester."

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"A thorough ruffian," exclaimed Mr. Benjamin indignantly. "Well, madam, our friend the sergeant

here very pluckily interfered when this farmer was about to ill-use the boy to-day, and beat him handsomely in the fight which followed. Now I propose to have the boy's apprenticeship cancelled, and shall look to his future. But we must do more than that. I will send here for you to-morrow, and will have you taken in a coach to my attorney's, where I will ask you to make a plain statement of all the facts you have already mentioned. If you can remember more, all the better. We will hunt up others who may have known him, and the sergeant and I will add our evidence. I can swear that he can speak some words of Hindustani, for instance, and that may, one of these days, be valuable evidence. When the statement is completed we will have it attested before a magistrate, and then carefully locked away with this garment. Then, supposing one day we happen to hear of these parents, we shall be able to help in proving that Owen is actually their missing son. And I promise you that I shall leave no stone unturned to effect that end. Now, sergeant, we will drive on to the barracks. Owen, for the time being, shall wear the uniform of a soldier."

He felt in his pocket for a guinea, which he placed in Mrs. Towers's fat hand, and then led the way to the coach. An hour later he was with the Colonel of the local detachment, and when he left that evening it had been arranged that Owen should enlist as a band boy, and should be instructed in the playing of the fife.

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"And at the same time I can put him up to the use of his fists, as well as side-arms and a pike," said the sergeant heartily. "And remember this, youngster, there's many a lad who has stepped it at first behind the drum-major, and who afterwards has shouldered a sergeant's pike and done fine service. Never fear, sir, I'll keep an eye on the lad."

"Turn him out a man, that is what I want," said Mr. Benjamin. "I might have put him on a stool in an office in London, or have found some other work for him; but the lad interests me, and I want to see how he gets on. There is nothing like the rough life of the army for that. He will rub shoulders with every sort, and you will be able to keep an eye upon him. Don't interfere, sergeant. Let him fight his own battles till he shows that he is unable to do so, and don't help him at all. Let him rise by his own exertions. When the time comes I shall have a fit post for him."

And so, when a week had passed, Owen Jones was a full-fledged soldier, Jones of the 64th, and his name had been borne on the regimental strength. By then his apprenticeship with the farmer had been cancelled, while twenty guineas had been paid to his late master. Then a full statement of his history had been made before a magistrate and had been signed, the document having afterwards been deposited with the attorney.

Owen looked a fine little fellow in his red-tailed tunic, his red waistcoat and pantaloons, and felt a proud lad when he first donned them. There is no need to tell how he became introduced to his comrades of the regiment; how he met with and accepted with good temper all their good-natured chaff; and how, when a few days had passed, he endeavoured to take a leaf from the sergeant's book, and attacked a lad of greater proportions who had attempted to bully him, and how, despite the greatest perseverance, he had been ultimately worsted, and had retired to his quarters with swollen eyes. He showed his grit and pluck, even if he were defeated, and thereafter was respected. And as the days and weeks passed, and the latter grew into months, Owen filled out wonderfully. A heavy sack which was suspended from the beams of the quarters given to his friend the sergeant kept his muscles in good play, for every day he spent an hour hammering at it with his fists, while the sergeant afterwards gave him instruction in boxing. And so, what with playing the fife, skylarking, and becoming an expert in the use of every kind of fire-arm and weapon of defence, Owen passed three years with the detachment, at first at Winchester and afterwards in other places. When he was seventeen years of age, as near as could be guessed, Mr. Benjamin Halbut again put in an appearance, and our hero found that a new life was about to be opened for him.

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CHAPTER III

Facing a Difficulty

"Here you are, my lad," said the sergeant, when he brought the news of the impending change to Owen. "A good friend we have both got, that I can tell you, for ever since the fight, when I stuck up for you and beat that ruffian, this Mr. Benjamin has never forgotten us. What's he done for me?"

He put the question to the youthful corporal, who stood at attention before him, as if he expected the lad to be able to answer. Then he struck the calf of his leg a sounding thwack with his cane and gave the information which he had asked for.

"Of course you wouldn't know," he said, "because I was told not to say. But I can speak now, and you had best listen. It's this. Mr. Benjamin has no children of his own, as you know, and ever since he heard the tale of your being found, he has looked after your education as if you were his son. 'Let him rough it,' is what he said to me. 'Let him fight his own battles and find his own place. He's well able to do that.' And that, lad, is why I have never interfered. That is why you fought young Jackson with never a word from me, and took your licking handsomely. Yes, yes, I

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know," he went on, as Owen was about to interrupt, "he was a bully, and I knew that well. You had to knuckle under, and did so for a time."

"Till I was bigger and stronger, sergeant. Then——"

"You gave him the drubbing he had been asking for so long. That's what comes of not interfering. Things levelled themselves. You were beaten at first, and the fellow never allowed you to forget your hiding. If you'd been a meek kind of lad, he'd have crowed it over you for ever. But you've a little pride, my boy, and you waited till you were able to take him in hand again. That wasn't long either, though he's two stone heavier than you are, and taller by half a head. But you've had training, and that's the secret, if only you happen to have pluck as well. But I am getting away from my yarn."

"You were about to tell me what Mr. Halbut has done for you and for me, sir," said Owen.

"Ah, yes, I was. Well, he took a fancy to me and to you, and he put me in charge of you, as it were. 'I could take him in hand at once, and have him sent to a good school,' he said to me when first we talked it over, 'but I won't. The lad shall rise from a rougher school. Teach him manners, sergeant. Let him see that a lad with respect for his elders will get on, and, above all, turn him out a man. When the time comes I will take him in hand myself, and I have a place for him already decided on.' That's what he's done. Every quarter I have received a handsome sum from him for my work, and, my lad, let him see that I have earned it. He knows that you can hold your own with others here, and that there isn't another lad in the regiment who can handle the gloves as you can, or who can use a weapon with the science that you have learned. Let him see that there's more. They call you the gentleman corporal here. Let Mr. Halbut see that they have reason for that."

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"I will, sergeant," answered Owen earnestly. "As you say, I have learned a lot since I came to the regiment, and thanks to your teaching I shall have no fear, but a great deal of confidence, should it ever come to my lot to take part in a hand-to-hand contest. And that I hope to have the fortune to do before very long, or else what's the good of being a soldier?"

"You're likely to meet with that in other walks of life," was the answer. "Soldiering isn't everything, and you'll learn that Mr. Halbut thinks so too."

"At any rate I have learned the use of my fists and other weapons," went on Owen, "and thanks to the opportunities which have been given me I believe my manners are a little different from those of the other fellows. I don't say that boastfully, sergeant. It is a fact, I believe."

"And you've to thank Mr. Tasker for that," was the sergeant's comment. "He took up the work willingly, and he's done well. He himself says he is more than pleased."

Mr. Tasker was a gentleman who lived in a small house in the town, and who had once been the principal of a school for the sons of gentlemen. He had, owing to ill-health, to give up his school, and had eagerly undertaken to educate Owen Jones whenever his duties would allow him to attend at his house. And so, at the direction of Mr. Halbut, Owen had spent a couple of hours with Mr. Tasker every day, and it was thanks to the teaching of this quiet and courtly gentleman that the young corporal of the 64th had a polish about him which was lacking in his comrades.

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"It will all help you to take the place Mr. Halbut has selected for you," said the sergeant. "You know he's one of the powerful directors of the East India Company—John Company as it's often called. As such he is able to find a place for any protégé, and he is sending you out to India by the next boat to take a commission in the native horse or infantry. There, lad, that's the news, and you can get further particulars from him yourself. You'll be formally discharged from the regiment to-morrow, and will go to London at the end of the week. After that I fancy you'll have a day or more to prepare for the passage out."

The news came as a great surprise to Owen, for he had never even imagined that he would rise to the commissioned ranks, and the statement that he was now to prepare to sail for India, there to join a regiment as an ensign, filled him with huge excitement and delight. The prospect of going to India at all was sufficiently pleasant, for the older he got the more had he cogitated over the mystery of his birth, and the more sure had he become that his recollection of early events was correct, and that he had actually been born abroad, in India most likely, and had been sent home for some reason.

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"And promptly abducted and left on the road," he had often said to himself. "Some one must have had a huge interest in getting rid of me, and he did it effectually. However, if Mr. Halbut has been unsuccessful in tracing the mystery so far, I may have better fortune and succeed in the end."

"Now, lad, we'll get to work, if you please," said the sergeant, with a pretence to be light-hearted, though the gallant fellow felt no great joy at the prospect of separation from Owen.

"He's been like a son to me," he often said to his friends. "He's as true as possible, and as game to learn as one could wish. And see what I've made of him! A pluckier youngster does not exist, and no one can call him conceited."

And now he was to part with Owen. The sergeant was an unmarried man, a rarity in the service in those days, as in these, for he was now forty years of age, and he knew well that he would miss the young fellow. However, he was a sensible man, far better educated than the majority of his rank, and he saw that the new move would be advantageous to Owen.

"We've a deal to do, Owen," he said. "There are the clothes to be got ready, for instance. Your uniform will be made in India, but you are to have some sort of undress to wear on the ship. I

have instructions to take you to the best tailor in the town."

Two days later our hero said good-bye to all his old comrades and walked out of the barrack square, feeling sad at heart at the parting. There was a big lump in his throat as he passed through the gate and looked back to the sentry, and for a few moments he longed to return, and would have almost sacrificed his prospects in India for the old life. Then he threw off the feeling, and as the sergeant tucked his cane under his arm and commenced to whistle Owen fell in beside him, his head in air, and joined in the tune bravely, though it was as much as his trembling lips could do.

"A good heart is nothing to be ashamed of, lad," said the sergeant heartily, some minutes later, as they walked into the town. "You're all the better for remembering old friends, and parting with them in sorrow. The day will come, never fear, when you'll look back to these times with the old 64th as the jolliest and happiest days in your life, perhaps, and you'll think of the times we've had, of the parades, when we've fallen in together, and of the boxing bouts at the back of the barracks. But here we are. From Mr. Benjamin Halbut, sir."

The tailor showed unusual interest when he heard the name, and at once commenced to take Owen's measurements. Then he wrote down a list of clothing, including boots, hats, and underthings, which he considered necessary, till Owen was ashamed to think that his kind friend would have to pay for them. However, Mr. Halbut had given directions, and there was an end of the matter. A week later, when Owen mounted the stagecoach and took his place for London, he appeared as an altogether different individual. He was dressed in the undress uniform of an ensign, and very smart and gentlemanly he looked, too. Nor had those who had looked to his upbringing any need to be ashamed of him. Old Mrs. Towers had wept that very morning when he went to take farewell of her.

"I always thought that you were a gentleman, Owen Jones," she said, as she mopped her eyes with her apron, "and here you are, as fine a young fellow as ever I saw. Well, well, to be sure, but the strangest things happen."

Having given vent to this ambiguous statement she hugged Owen very heartily, and then plumped down in her chair, with her apron thrown over her face to hide her tears.

Five hours after leaving Winchester the coach rattled over the cobbles of the London streets, and for the very first time in his life Owen saw the great city, with its thronging population, its huge buildings, its endless rows of houses and streets, and its vast army of coaches and flies. What would his amazement have been could he have seen the London of to-day, extending its arms like a gigantic octopus in every direction, absorbing the country around; its teeming millions, each bent on his or her own business or pleasure, going to and fro through the vast widened streets, or being carried there in swift mechanically propelled vehicles! What if he could have imagined that the horse would one of these days become almost a rarity in the streets of Mighty London!

But he had little time for thoughts. He descended from the coach at the Half Moon, in the Borough, and took a fly to Chelsea, where Mr. Halbut lived. A week later he was aboard one of the East Indiamen, bound for India, with the coast of England fast fading from sight.

"Here are letters which you will present when you arrive at Calcutta," Mr. Halbut had said to him as he was about to depart. "You will go to see the Governor, and you will be gazetted to one of the native regiments. On the way out you will apply yourself to such matters as Mr. Parkins, who sails with you, shall decide, and I need hardly urge you to work hard. Your progress in the future must depend on yourself. I will help no one who will not help himself."

Owen made up his mind to do credit to his friend, and once he had settled down on the ship, and had overcome his first attack of sea-sickness, he began the close study of Hindustani.

"You will find it invaluable," said Mr. Parkins, a gentleman of middle age, a servant of the great John Company, who was returning to India from leave. "When I first went to India I found myself constantly hampered by my ignorance, and, in fact, did not rise as quickly as I might have done. We shall take three months to reach Calcutta, and by then you should have made fine progress."

To Owen's amazement, and to the delight of Mr. Parkins, he made even more rapid advancement than could have been expected. The language came to him not so much as an entirely strange tongue, but as one which he had partially known before, and which he had forgotten.

"Which proves Mr. Halbut's assertion that you have been in India, and were born there," said Mr. Parkins. "No one else could pick up Hindustani so rapidly. We have been at our studies for barely three weeks, and here you are able to converse a little. Now I will give you a piece of advice. There are numbers of natives amongst this crew, and if I were you I would spend some time amongst them every day, chatting with them. Perhaps you will find one who is a little more intelligent than his fellows, and from him you may be able to learn some dialect which is not very different from the language you are studying, but which may be of very great advantage to you."

Owen took the advice seriously, and thereafter went every morning forward to the quarters of the crew. Nor was it long before he came upon one of the men who was of very different character from his comrades. He could speak English tolerably, and soon told his story.

"I am not like these other lascars, who are men of low caste," he said, with every sign of disdain. "I come from Bhurtpore, and am a Mahratta by birth. There I lived with my father till ten years ago, when I fled for my life. It is a little tale, which is of no great interest, sahib, but here it is. It happened that there was a girl, the daughter of a neighbouring farmer, to whom I was to be married, and should have been but for my half-brother. He acted like a cur. He stole her from me, and then killed her with his cruelty. In a fit of rage one day I slew him, and fled from the

punishment which would have followed. That is why I am here now. Some day, perhaps, I shall return to my home."

"And in the meanwhile I want you to talk to me every day, Mulha," answered Owen. "One of these days I may find it useful, and if you have the time to spare I shall be glad. I will pay you a rupee a week for the service."

"I gladly accept, sahib," was the answer.

Thereafter Owen spent many hours forward in the early morning, while in the later part of the day he and Mr. Parkins tramped the narrow deck, or lay under the awnings, talking in Hindustani, till our hero was really very proficient.

"You are remembering my rules well," said his instructor, when they had been at sea for six weeks. "After the first week I said that whenever you spoke to me out of the saloon it must be in Hindustani. If you forgot, you were fined a trifle, which went to the box set aside for the help of the sailors' orphans. There is nothing like a penalty to make one sharp of memory, and the result is that you have got on even more rapidly. When you land you will be able to take up your duties at once. That will be an eye-opener to the authorities, who generally allow six months for learning the language."

Altogether Owen enjoyed his trip out immensely. He was a steady young fellow, and he had set out with keen determination to get on. His work made the hours run away, while to the numerous other young fellows going out time hung on their hands, till they became quarrelsome and discontented. And it so happened that amongst these youths, some of whom were to take up commissions like his own, while others were going out as clerks to the East India Company, was a young man, some twenty years of age, who seemed to have taken a great dislike to our hero. He had quickly asserted his position as the leader of all the young men aboard, and when he found that Owen took little notice of him, and was so busy that he had little time to spare for his company, he commenced upon an irritating course intended to humiliate our hero. Every time Owen passed him and his comrades he would make some loud remark, and finally came to openly scoffing. Owen stood it for a long while till his patience was exhausted, then he turned upon the bully.

"You spoke of me, I think," he said suddenly, swinging round and approaching the group, whom he had been about to pass on his way to the lower deck. "Repeat what you said."

"Certainly, with the greatest pleasure. I said that it was bad form for an ensign to spend his time with the deck-hands and the lascars, and that it was only to be expected from one who I happen to know was a corporal some few weeks ago, and who, in his earlier days, came from a poorhouse. That's what I said, and I know I'm right, for Dandy here happens to come from the neighbourhood of Winchester."

"And recognised you at once," burst in that worthy from the background.

"Which is all the more flattering to me," answered Owen calmly, though it was as much as he could do to curb his anger. "I freely admit the truth of what has been said. I have come from a poorhouse, and I was a corporal. But as to the bad form, well, I hardly fancy one would go to Mr. Hargreaves for a decision on that matter."

He looked the bully squarely in the face, while the latter flushed red. Perhaps there was very good reason. It may have been that his own antecedents were not of the best. He became flurried, and began to bluster.

"You wouldn't!" he exclaimed. "Why? If you're impertinent I shall have something more to say."

"You will have more to say in any case," blurted out Owen, now letting himself go. "For days you have openly scoffed at me, Mr. Hargreaves, and now you have to stop promptly. You talk of impertinence after what you have said! I reply that I am proud of what I have been in the past, and that if the truth were known it is possible that you who crow so loud, and are so ready to sit upon one who is new to the position of officer, would not have such a fine tale to tell."

Whether the shot went home it would be impossible to state, but something stung the bully to the quick. He started forward, and stepping to within a foot of Owen stared into his face and challenged him to repeat the statement. Owen complied by instantly knocking him down with a blow between the eyes. Then he calmly divested himself of his coat and neckerchief, while the bully and a few of his companions stood about him in a threatening attitude.

"Steady on there! We'll have the matter settled squarely, gentlemen. From what I have seen—and I have had my eyes and ears open—Mr. Jones here has been very studious, while you others have been hanging about doing nothing. Mr. Hargreaves has considered himself a much finer individual than our young friend Mr. Jones, and he has not been over pleasant. Oh yes, it is useless to deny that. I have seen it. We have all seen, and we have wondered how long our studious friend would put up with such treatment. Now he has brought the thing to a head he shall have fair play. Remember, we are Englishmen, and fair play is everything."

The group swung round to find that a passenger of some forty years of age, a gentleman known to be of some importance, and therefore to be duly respected, had suddenly come amongst them. The threatening looks of a few of Hargreaves' partisans at once vanished.

"Fair play, you understand," said the newcomer. "I will not interfere, but I am sure there are some here who will take Mr. Jones's part."

He was right there, for not all aboard the ship were of Hargreaves' way of thinking. There were

some of the young men going out to the army or as clerks who secretly or openly admired Owen because of the efforts he was making; and now that they had heard him so candidly acknowledge his former position, and the fact that he had come from a poorhouse, they admired him the more, and came forward to support him at once.

"I'll hold your coat, Jones," said one of them, a young man of nineteen. "By Jove! it was pluckily done. I have often thought it was a shame to treat you so badly, and I think you have shown pluck. Give me your things and I'll look after you."

"Then I am ready," said Owen promptly. "Thank you, Simpson, I shall be glad if you will act as second. Now, Mr. Hargreaves, I am ready to give you satisfaction for the blow I have dealt you."

"And I shall take it to the full," was the surly answer. "If we had been in India I would have called you out with a pistol, I can tell you; but here we shall have to fight it out with fists."

"Either would please me," answered Owen calmly, knowing well that his practice already with pistols under the tuition of the sergeant would act in his favour. Still, he had a horror of bloodshed, and far preferred to have matters as they were. But in those days an insult or an injury meant inevitably a duel.

"Then we will go to the lower deck," said Simpson, leading the way.

The group made their way down the companions to the lower deck, where they found that a number of sailors had already collected. A couple of midshipmen, of the East India service, were also there, and in one corner Owen caught sight of his Mahratta friend.

"I'll bet yer a pound of bacca on the little 'un," growled one of the sailors, as he leaned against a bulkhead. "He'll fight as he works, and blest if he ain't a glutton for work. See 'im a learnin' the lingo from this darkie here, when he might be takin' it easy on deck."

"Done with yer," was the answer. "It'll be a toss up. This is a-goin' ter be a fight."

Evidently others were of the same opinion, for the news had already spread through the ship, and while those in authority purposely kept out of the way, others, whose official duties could not interfere, found their way to the lower deck to watch the encounter. For Hargreaves had given umbrage all round. His high-handedness, his want of respect for men older than himself, and his treatment of Owen Jones, had won him many enemies. They came, therefore, hoping to see him worsted, but fearing the reverse.

"I'll give you a chance to take back what you have said and apologise for the blow," said Hargreaves, as, divested of his coat and neckerchief, and with sleeves rolled to the elbow, he entered the circle formed between the supporting bulkheads.

Owen hardly deigned to reply. After his long practice with the sergeant he felt the greatest confidence in himself, and was not afraid of the superior weight or height of his antagonist. But there was more reason than that why he should fight. He was never a quarrelsome fellow, and this trouble had been forced upon him. If he were to back out now the tale of his having been a pauper would hang to him all his life, and Hargreaves and his friends would have occasion for many a sneer. No, it was essentially a time for blows. As his opponent spoke Owen walked calmly into the centre of the square and rolled his sleeves to a nicety. Then he put up his fists in a manner which showed that it was not for the first time, and faced his antagonist.

"It is your quarrel," he said quietly, "and I am the one who has suffered. We will fight, if you please."

"Bravo, bravo, young 'un!" shouted one of the sailors in the background.

"Then look to yourself," cried Hargreaves, as he swung his fists. "I'll show you whether a youngster from the poorhouse can do as he likes aboard ship."

He came at our hero warily, for there was something about the latter's attitude which spoke of good training in the art of self-defence. Then, as Owen did nothing more than keep him at a distance, he mistook his caution for fear and temerity. He rushed in with big swinging blows, only to retire with stars flashing before his eyes, and a severely cut lip. After that he lost his temper, and for a time Owen had his hands very full. Twice he was caught by a rush and knocked to the ground. But he was on his feet in a moment, facing Hargreaves. When four rounds had been fought the latter was almost exhausted, while his younger and more active antagonist was comparatively fresh.

"You have him now," said Simpson, as Owen sat at his corner waiting for the call of time. "Go in and win this time. Give him a good beating, and you will never need to fear trouble from any one again."

Our hero followed the instructions to the letter. Hitherto he had allowed his opponent to prance round him, and had only struck when he was sure of being able to reach his antagonist. But now he closed with him, and for a minute beat him round and round the circle, getting in beneath his guard and finally sending him with a crash amidst the audience.

"Time!" shouted Simpson. "Dandy, is your man beaten? Does he give in?"

There was a sulky nod from the other side, and then a roar of cheering which could be heard on the upper deck. Owen rose from his seat, wiped his face with a towel, and went across to his enemy.

"We have had a fair fight and I have won," he said in friendly tones. "You did not understand me before, and perhaps I did not like you. Let this settle our differences, and be friends."

There was another shout at that, while Hargreaves lifted his head and smiled. At heart he was a very good fellow, and he was man enough to own that he was beaten.

"I behaved badly, Jones," he said, "and you have beaten me handsomely for my treatment of you. I apologise for what I have done, and I will gladly be friends."

They shook hands, and then went off to their cabins to clean themselves and remove all traces of the combat. And that evening Owen once more took up his Hindustani, as if nothing out of the way had occurred. But he had made his place in the ship and amongst his comrades, and the tale of his prowess and of his pluck was bound to reach India and there act in his favour. More than that, an inkling of his history, of the mystery hanging about his birth, of his friend, the powerful director of the Company, leaked out, and the discussion which followed raised him vastly in the estimation of all on board. They found it a fine thing to follow his example, and that week quite a number set themselves to make the most of their opportunities and to learn the language. However, they had very little time before them, for within a few days the even tenor of the voyage was rudely upset, and the passengers and crew found themselves face to face with a difficulty and danger which none had foreseen.

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CHAPTER IV

A Hunting Expedition

"Great guns!" shouted Simpson in Owen's ear, as they clung to the rail on the poop of the huge East Indiaman, and faced the gale. "And how suddenly it came on!"

"We are lucky to have an experienced captain," shouted back our hero, as he struggled to gather a breath, for the wind tore past him at hurricane speed. "We were lying practically becalmed, with a cloudless sky overhead, and, so far as I could see, no signs of a storm."

"Yes, and we were having a quiet sleep, all of us, for the heat was terrific."

"When we were suddenly disturbed. As a matter of fact, I was just awake, and as I lay in my chair I happened to see the captain coming up the companion from his cabin, which is just beneath us. He looked about him, as he always does, and then glanced at the barometer. Then his face changed, and I thought he had gone mad. He raced up here, three rungs at a time, and seized his trumpet. Then the officers appeared and the crew, while his orders sounded through the ship. My word! I never saw men work harder! They threw themselves into the rigging and fairly tore the sails off her. I saw them cut through many of the ropes so as to save time. Then down they came, and with them the gale. Didn't it howl?"

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"It was terrific," agreed Simpson. "Who would have thought that with only that small piece of rag showing this big ship would have heeled right over as she did? But you are right. We are fortunate in our captain. I own I was angry at first when they disturbed us, and threw our chairs overboard without rhyme or reason. I saw why a minute later, for had we been in them we should have gone overboard, while had the chairs been left they would have slid and fallen here and there and done some mischief. Where are we heading?"

Neither could answer the question, for in the excitement of the moment, when the gale had struck the ship, they had only noticed that she had heeled over on to her beam ends, and that then had followed an interval of a few seconds, which to more than one aboard felt like an eternity. Then she had righted with a jerk which threw many from their feet, and, sheering off from her course, had gone racing away towards the east, at a pace which was furious. That was an hour ago, and ever since the passengers had clung to their positions, drenched by the spray which blew aboard, and so filled with amazement at the huge seas which so suddenly surrounded them that they had little thought for anything else. Simpson and Owen had been together, for ever since the event of the fight they had become close acquaintances, and they had clung to the same length of rail.

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Two hours later the ship was a little steadier, and the passengers found their way with great difficulty to the saloon.

"You must make allowances for the gale, gentlemen, please," said the purser, as they took their seats and clung to the tables. "The galley fires have been drawn, for with this sea, and the ship tossing and rolling as she is, it would not be safe to keep them in. So there is water or wine to drink, and cold meat and bread only to eat. I should advise you all afterwards to turn in, as it is so wet on deck and generally uncomfortable."

The ship had indeed encountered a typhoon, one of those sudden upsets in the atmosphere common to eastern seas, and much to be dreaded. And as she was unable to show more than a stay-sail at the most, and could not face the gale, she had to turn her stern to it and run from her course. Indeed, for three days she continued to do so, till the faces of the captain and his officers assumed serious expressions.

"I have never known a gale to last as this one has done," the captain confided to one of the passengers. "When the hurricane struck us, you yourself will remember that it was a furious

blow. I thought that, like typhoons in general, it had appeared in full strength, to test our seamanship perhaps, and would then rapidly blow itself out. But it hasn't. It has continued to blow, and blow harder too, so that we haven't been able even to think of heading up to the wind. We're three hundred miles at least out of our course, and completely out of our reckoning. I shall be glad when the wind drops."

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Some hours later there were signs that at last the gale had expended its fury, and when the passengers turned in that evening it was with the feeling that increased comfort was before them. Indeed, the ship rocked far less, and the motion was smoother altogether. And on the following morning they awoke to find the ship almost on an even keel, while overhead was a hot sun, reminding them that they were in the tropics. When they sauntered up on deck they found the officers at their posts, anxiously gazing at a dim line of blue which lay almost directly before them.

"Land, gentlemen," said the captain, coming towards the passengers, "and if I am not mistaken it is the coast of Sumatra. We have worked out the position of the ship, and checked one another's findings, so that I feel sure that we are right. We are at least five hundred miles out of our course."

The information caused the utmost excitement amongst the passengers at once, for there were some aboard who had made many trips to and from India, and not one had ever met with other than a smooth and uneventful voyage before. And on this occasion weeks had passed smoothly since they had left England. They had sailed down the coast of Africa, had rounded the Cape, and had set their course for Calcutta. When the storm broke they were well into the Indian Ocean, and heading for the Bay of Bengal. And here was the information that they were close to Sumatra, in the neighbourhood of the Malay Peninsula.

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"We are looking for some quiet bay in which to anchor," said the captain after a time, when he was sure that the land was indeed Sumatra. "We have had our spars sadly knocked about, and our sails want refitting. Then the carpenter tells me that she has been strained, probably when the typhoon struck her, and is leaking somewhere well below the water-line. All things considered, I think it well to run into some bay for a time and lie up. We will careen the ship for a day or so, so as to let the carpenter and his mates get at the leak. Meanwhile some of you may care to have a run ashore, though it will be well to make sure that there are no unfriendly natives about."

All were delighted at the news, for the ship had now been at sea for a long while, and the passengers and crew were all feeling the need of fresh water and fruit and vegetables, and also for an expedition on shore. It was therefore with the greatest interest that they watched the pale blue line of coast gradually develop into wooded heights, with mountain peaks in rear, while the line of beach showed itself as a streak of golden sand, bathed in the seething white foam cast upon it by the surf which ran continuously. They steered into a narrow bay, the leadsman all the while sounding so that they should not run upon the shallows, and finally brought to and dropped their anchor within a mile of the shore, and within hearing of the surf. At once a hundred glasses were directed at the coast, and an hour later boats were dropped and the passengers prepared to land.

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"I can only spare a crew of four to each boat, gentlemen," said the captain, "and perhaps some of you will not object to taking an oar yourselves. I will fire a gun an hour before dusk, when all must return. If natives appear I must ask you to return at once till they have shown that they are friendly."

"And so as to be prepared I shall take a brace of pistols," said Jack Simpson in Owen's ear. "Can you shoot, Owen?"

"A little. The sergeant of whom I have told you was a good hand at most things. He was a splendid man with the gloves, as you know, for I have told you how he fought for me when the farmer was going to give me a thrashing. He was also an adept with the pike, sword and cutlass, and he kept me at practice with the pistols till I could hit an apple perched on a rail at twenty paces."

"By Jove! An apple at twenty paces! That is a mark! How often had you to hit it?"

"Every time," answered Owen with a quiet smile. "And it came wonderfully easy before I had left the regiment. I used to place the muzzle across my left forearm and aim carefully at first. Afterwards I used to make a rapid shot, just as if I were duelling. I would be placed with my back to the fence; then the sergeant would say, 'One, two, three, fire!' and round I would swing, lifting the pistol as I came, and fire the instant I sighted the mark. I could do it now after half an hour's practice."

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"No wonder, then, that you so easily agreed to fight our friend with fists or pistols," laughed Jack. "Upon my word, Owen, you are a fellow to be avoided. You admit you could hit an apple at twenty paces, every time. And we know that you can fight. By Jove, you showed us real science! And there is the Hindustani too, and the other lingo you have been swatting at. I wish to goodness I had not been so idle. But there! fetch your pistols and let us get ashore."

They ran to their cabin, for since the fight the two had arranged an exchange, Jack leaving the cabin in which he had been with two other passengers and joining Owen. Then they appeared on deck again, and dropped into one of the boats which was just putting off. Already two had left the ship, while one had actually landed her passengers and was returning.

"It looks a little risky, one would have thought," said Owen, as they dropped into the boat. "For

all we know there may be unfriendly natives ashore. But I confess I know nothing of the country."

"And need feel no alarm," said one of the passengers who sat beside him. "The people are fierce and warlike, but this is the northern end of the coast, and there are none here. Think of the fresh fruit we shall gather."

A quarter of an hour later they were ashore, and within a few minutes the whole party had separated, breaking up into couples.

"It is quite safe," said one of the passengers who had landed in the first boat. "There is not a village nor a hut to be seen anywhere, though I have been to the top of the hill yonder. But I advise that none go too far from this spot."

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Meanwhile the big ship was run in a little closer and slowly careened. And as she lay, with her spars slanting at a sharp angle, the carpenter and his mates looked to the leak, while the crew set to work to refit the canvas. And in this manner, the passengers ashore for the most part, and the crew hard at work, two days passed serenely; each evening seeing the passengers return with an abundant store of fruit, while those who had guns found wild pig and a few deer to reward their efforts.

"We shall leave in two days," said the captain that night, as they sat down to the evening meal, congratulating themselves on the fact that the ship was now again on an even keel, for it had been difficult to manage to get about or even to sleep while she was careened. "In three weeks we should be at Calcutta."

"Barring storms and other little pleasantries," laughed one of the passengers. "Well, I shall be glad. I have had my run ashore and want to be moving on."

On the following day, when Jack Simpson and Owen dropped into one of the boats, only a dozen other passengers made their appearance, for it was very hot ashore, and there was little to do but ramble along the coast. Our young friends, however, had managed to borrow a gun apiece, and were intent on obtaining a little sport. Indeed, an hour later found them a couple of miles inland, threading their way through a forest of small proportions which had attracted them as being a likely place for game. Mulha accompanied them, for Owen had asked permission of the captain, much to the native's delight.

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"There will be pig here, sahibs," he said, as they entered the forest. "And we shall find it cooler. If my masters will take my advice they will take their station at the end of the first open glade, and let me beat the forest on either side. Then if there is any beast within it may run to the clearing."

A little later they struck upon a long narrow clearing, where the ground was somewhat rocky, and where a tiny stream trickled through the stones.

"Plenty of beasts come here," Mulha pronounced, as he stepped along the glade. "You can see their marks between the stones. If the sahibs take post here they should have sport. I will go to the right first, and afterwards to the left. Thus you will know my position, and will not fire in my direction when the beasts bolt."

It took but a few moments to arrange their positions; then Mulha disappeared. Owen threw himself down behind a huge boulder, over which a cool shade was thrown by a tree near at hand. Jack posted himself behind another boulder, on a level with the one where his friend was stationed. Both looked up the full length of the grove, with their guns turned to that side to which the game, should there prove to be any, would be driven, and away from the forest where Mulha was beating.

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Crash! They heard his stick as he beat the underwood in the distance, and waited expectantly, their hearts pulsating a trifle faster, for neither had had an opportunity of shooting before. There was another crash in the distance, a streak of brown bounded into the grove from the trees, alighted on all four feet, and leaped high again with such swiftness and with such momentum that it was across the glade before either could have thought it possible. Owen's gun went to his shoulder with the rapidity of lightning. His training with the pistol helped him to sight the disappearing mark, and long before Jack had gathered his wits, or had awakened to the fact that an antelope of large proportions was on the point of disappearing, the weapon cracked, and the animal fell huddled up at the very edge of the clearing. Owen turned to his friend with a gleam of excitement and triumph in his eye, while he hastily rammed down another charge, ran a wad upon it, and dropped in his bullet.

"One," he said quietly. "Look out for others."

"My word!" gasped Jack, "that was a lightning shot."

"Look out!" shouted Owen.

This time he held his fire as a wild pig scampered into the clearing, and coming to a sudden halt lifted its head and stared in their direction while it listened to the sound of the beater behind. It was Jack's turn, and he levelled his weapon with unsteady hands, for excitement told upon him.

"Steady," said Owen in low tones. "He's standing for you. Take him full, half-way along the body."

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A shout of triumph filled the air and set the forest ringing a second after the gun had sent out its bullet, for Jack had hit his mark. At his friend's words he had waited, steadying himself, and then, when he felt that he was full on his mark, he had taken a deep breath, wedged himself closer to the rock, and had firmly pulled the trigger. And now he was dancing with delight, for the pig, as the sound of the shot crashed out, had started forward at a gallop, till Owen covered it, fearing that it had escaped the bullet. Then it suddenly toppled over, and rolling amidst the stones came

to rest with its feet in the air.

"Shut up! There may be more," commanded Owen. "There!"

Another of the animals darted into the clearing, heard the sounds beyond, and raced toward the forest. But he ran only a few feet, for Owen proved to be as dead a shot with the gun as with the pistol. A minute later Mulha appeared, within a few feet of them, and advanced with smiles of pleasure.

"The sahib is a fine shot," he said. "I am no shikaree, but the first beast was hardly in the glade before it had darted out. And see where the bullet struck. It is hit through the chest, and on the very edge of the forest. In another instant it would have been gone. Now let the sahibs take their places again, and I will beat on the far side."

He plunged into the forest again and was lost to sight. But after a few minutes had passed they heard his blows again, as he beat the underwood, and gun in hand waited for another shot. On this occasion, however, they were not so fortunate. A few birds broke from the wood and went screaming aloft, while a little later a troop of monkeys, disturbed by the intruder, went chattering across the glade, running on all fours, and some swinging themselves from branch to branch.

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"We will move on to another part, then, sahibs," said Mulha, as he appeared again. "There is plenty of game here, both big and small, and you may hope to make an even finer bag. Tread carefully now, and make no noise, for these beasts hear at a great distance."

Putting their weapons at half-cock, so that there might be no accidents, they followed their native shikaree through the forest, ascending as they went, for in this corner of Sumatra the land rose swiftly and steeply from the coast. And presently they emerged into another clearing, some two miles in extent, which was almost bare of trees and undergrowth. Here and there there was a tree of huge proportions, outgrowing its fellows of the forest, for the simple reason that here it had an abundance of light which was denied to them, and in consequence had shot up with greater strength and had made far bigger growth. Then, too, there were some large patches of grass, towering some eight feet in the air, and waving gently to and fro in the breeze. Owen and his friend had never seen the like of it before, and looked with amazement at the huge green stems and the broad blades which overtopped their heads. And in amongst the sparse trees and patches of grass were rocks and scattered green patches of sweet grass, where the marks plainly told that many animals were in the habit of grazing. Now, however, the place was deserted, though they pried into every corner.

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"There may be some hidden beast yet, sahibs," said Mulha, as they toiled across the space, for the heat was very great, and they were unused to much walking. "We will go quietly still, and keep a careful watch."

"Steady! I thought I saw something over there," exclaimed Owen suddenly.

All looked in the direction to which he pointed, but there was not a movement, not a sign that there existed anything but a knotted tree, which had the appearance of having been blasted by lightning, and a wide patch of waving grass.

"Still, I am sure that I saw something which looked like the tail and hind quarters of some beast. We will go carefully, and it will be as well to have our guns ready."

All three advanced on tiptoe, the native a few feet in front, and the two young sahibs side by side. They reached the tree and the edge of the grass, but without seeing anything. Then Mulha slipped upon hands and knees, and crept round the edge. Scarcely a second passed ere the tall grass which hid him from Owen's eyes parted suddenly, some few feet to the right, while a huge beast burst its way through, its head low down close to the ground, and its evil eyes fixed upon the intruders. There was not a sound but that made by the grass as it was swept aside, that and the deep gasping breaths of the animal. But though there was no warning noise, Owen and Jack guessed the unfriendly intentions of the animal in an instant, for its rolling eyes were fixed upon them while it charged in their direction.

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"Jump aside, sahibs!" they heard Mulha shout. "Jump for your lives! It is a rhino!"

"Leap!" repeated Owen at the top of his voice, at the same instant hurling himself as far to one side as he was able. Then he turned for one instant to see whether Jack had done the same. But his comrade was less active, perhaps, than he, and more than that, he lacked the training which Owen had had. In a hundred little ways he had shown already that he was slower to obey an order or to follow out an idea than our hero, and now, at the most critical moment in his life, he hesitated for a second. The onrushing beast fascinated him. He paused, gave vent to a cry of dismay, and then attempted to leap aside. Owen shouted and lifted his gun, for what he saw brought his heart into his mouth. Jack's hesitation had proved his undoing. His foot slipped as he leaped, and in an instant he was flat on his face on the ground, while a dull thud told that his head had struck heavily against a small boulder lying on the grass. And within a few seconds the rhinoceros had reached him. Owen saw the beast's head drop a little lower, while a squeal of rage escaped from it. Then it galloped over the prostrate figure like a whirlwind, missing its mark by a happy chance, and failing to get its horn beneath the young fellow who lay so helpless. Carried on by the impetus of its charge it tore along some half-dozen yards, and finally was brought up with a jerk, its horns having become entangled in the root of a small tree growing at that spot. It was an opportunity, and Owen made the most of it.

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"Get me the other gun, Mulha," he shouted. "Bring it as quick as you can, as I may miss him with this."

Dropping on to one knee he put his gun at full cock and levelled it at the beast, which was struggling frantically to disengage itself. Aiming just behind the shoulder, he waited for a few moments till it stood still to gather its energies, then he pressed the trigger. A fierce squeal rewarded him, and as soon as the smoke had cleared away he saw that the beast was still far from dead, and that its rage had been increased. Worse than that, the horn was now almost freed from the root, and at any instant the charge might be repeated.

"Into the tree!" he shouted. "Quick, Mulha, up you get. I will hand up my friend. Don't argue. Up you get."

There was no time for the native to remonstrate with his young English friend, though he would have liked to have done so. Instead, therefore, he slung the gun across his shoulders in a flash and swung himself into the lower branches of the tree, which had the appearance of having been struck by lightning. Owen meanwhile ran to Jack's side, and bending over him lifted him in his arms. Then he half carried, half dragged him to the tree, and as Mulha leaned over, helped the native to haul him up.

"Take him higher," he called out, "and then get the gun ready. I must have mine."

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He had left it where Jack had fallen, and turning at once he ran back to the spot. There was little time to be lost, that he could see for himself, for the horn was all but disengaged now. Still, without a weapon, where would he be? Without hesitation, therefore, he picked up the gun and ran back to the tree. Clasping the lowest bough, he was in the act of swinging himself up when Mulha gave a warning shout.

"He is free, sahib!" he called out "You will not have time. Drop to the ground, and put the tree between you."

It was excellent advice, and Owen made the most of it. He leaped to the ground, and ran to the far side of the tree. And he was just in time. Maddened with rage and pain the rhinoceros charged full at his disappearing figure, and heedless of the tree dashed headlong into it. But even such a terrific blow failed to stun the beast. It backed a few paces, snorting and squealing, while its wicked-looking eyes searched for its enemy. Then Owen did a plucky thing.

"Climb now, sahib. Drop the gun and climb. There is time. Come, I beg you!" called out Mulha.

For answer Owen raised his weapon swiftly and pushed it round the side of the tree. Then his arm and shoulder followed, till the gun was pointed at the rhinoceros. Its head went down, with a hideous squeal of rage, as it caught sight of him, and considering his youth and inexperience it was wonderful that he did not follow the native's advice promptly. But our hero had shown before that he was made of the right stuff, and was not given to panic. He moved the weapon ever so little, and was just about to pull the trigger when another shout stopped him.

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"It is empty, sahib! You have fired already."

In the excitement of the moment he had forgotten that, and for the brief space of a second Owen was disconcerted.

"Drop yours down, then," he said hoarsely. "That's the way. I'll catch it as it comes."

It took very few moments to make the exchange, and during that time the beast stood its ground, for it had again lost sight of its enemy. But very soon a squeal told that it had spied him again. The head went down, and it moved forward to charge. Owen aimed for a spot at the root of the neck and pressed his trigger firmly. Then he swung the gun over his shoulders, did the same with the weapon lying at his feet, and ere the smoke had cleared away was clambering into the tree.

"Look at his heels, sahib," cried Mulha triumphantly, a minute later, as he pointed below. "He is in his death-struggle. It was a bold shot. You stood fast to your post like a tried hunter. It is true what they say on the ship, that Sahib Owen Jones will make a fine officer. Truly it was boldly done, and the young sahib has abundant courage."

"And he will want it, too," answered Owen, with a reckless laugh, "for look there, Mulha!"

He pointed to the patch of grass through which the rhinoceros had burst its way, and there, filing through the gap which he had made, came three more of the beasts, trampling and pawing the grass, shaking their heads and sniffing angrily.

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"A siege, I think," said Owen quietly, "and very well for us that we have found such a castle."

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CHAPTER V

The East Indiaman Attacked

"A strange position to find ourselves in, sahib! We are cut off from our friends."

"As surely as if they were a hundred miles away, Mulha," answered Owen with a laugh, as he looked down at the animals sniffing the air beneath them. "It really is too funny. I can laugh now, you know, for we have come out of it all right. But it was a ticklish business, and my friend had a

very narrow shave."

"And you too, sahib. I trembled when I saw you run to pick him up; and when you dared to stand below, and the beast charged, I shut my eyes, for I thought that he would run round the tree and catch you. They are cunning beasts, I have heard. I would rather fight a tiger. The squeal of rage which these animals give upsets one's nerves."

It was, indeed, a curious position in which to find themselves, and Owen, as he stared down at the beasts, and then at his friend, laughed again, a careless, jolly laugh. For, now that the danger was lessened, a huge feeling of relief had come over him. He was sincerely attached to Jack Simpson and to Mulha, and the sight of the former exposed to the charge of the rhinoceros had filled him with terrible misgivings. And now they were safe, while he felt, as he reviewed the events of the past few minutes, that he had behaved as the sergeant would have had him do.

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"Always try to keep your head, my lad," he had said over and over again, and had done all in his power to train his young charge to decide swiftly in emergencies. As Owen thought of this he remembered the many occasions when the faithful fellow had created sudden difficulties, all with this object in view.

"I wouldn't do it again, I think," said Owen aloud, as Mulha remarked on his action. "It was all so sudden, you see. There was Jack Sahib lying helpless, and the beast had got caught in the root of that tree. It was a piece of sheer, unexpected good fortune, and I made the most of it. I felt awfully inclined to bolt up here though, I admit. But I am thankful I didn't. Ah, he's coming round. Let us look at his head."

"There is a large swelling and a small wound," said Mulha, who all this while had had one arm about the unconscious figure of Jack Simpson. "He will be well within a week, and this bruise will soon disappear. If the sahib will help me I will bind up the head."

Owen happened to have a spirit-flask with him, and he dragged this out of his pocket. Then, having forced a few drops between the pallid lips of his friend, he helped the native to bandage up the wound in the head. And very soon afterwards Jack opened his eyes, shivered violently, and closed them once again. When he looked about him once more it was with the utmost amazement, while his lips framed the questions which as yet he was too weak to ask.

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"It's all right, old fellow," said Owen quietly. "You're up a tree—literally up a tree, I can tell you; but there is absolutely no more to fear. The beast that charged at you is dead, and has made a fine addition to our bag."

That brought his friend into a sitting position, but as he looked down at the ground some yards beneath, and at the animals which still remained at the foot of the tree, the height perhaps, the sight of these fierce beasts and the memory of their attack, and more than all, the blow which he had received, turned him dizzy and sick, and for a time he suffered from horrible nausea. However, within a quarter of an hour he was better and taking an intelligent interest in his surroundings.

"My word, my head does ache!" he groaned. "It feels like a pumpkin and—hullo! what's this?"

"My handkerchief. You bumped your head against that stone over there and the blow knocked you silly. And a good thing too, Jack, or else I fancy you would not be here. Had you tried to rise, and lifted yourself from the ground at all, that ugly beast would have had you. As it was you went down so suddenly and completely that he missed you, and went with a rush clear over your body."

It was news to Jack, and now that the nausea had left him, and he could look down without feeling giddy, he stared at the unwieldy carcass of the rhinoceros thoughtfully, and then at the others, now engaged in sniffing about their fallen comrade.

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"A fine mess he would have made of me," he said at length. "I suppose a brute like that would kill you if he trampled over you. And look at his wicked horns! He has two, and either would be sufficient to gore one to death. How did it happen, Owen? I mean, what kept the beast from returning in time? You see, I was down there. I'm up here now, and the brute is dead. How did you manage it all?"

"I will answer, if the sahib will permit," said Mulha. "This is what occurred, for I watched all that happened. You owe your life to the sahib here."

Very quietly and accurately he described all that had occurred, showing how Owen had fired at the beast, and had then given orders to Mulha to carry his friend to safety. And afterwards how he had stood and killed the rhinoceros. Jack listened to the tale thoughtfully, and looked down at the beasts below. He was a youth possessed of fine spirit, and a most unselfish fellow, and it was clear that his gratitude was too great for words. He turned his head away and felt for Owen's hand. Then he gave it a squeeze.

"Some day, old chap," he said very solemnly, "I shall hope to do something for you, for I do most undoubtedly owe you my life. But it seems quite natural that I should do so. I don't know when it was that I first began to watch you—I expect from the first hour we came aboard—but I remember thinking that you looked like a fellow well able to take care of himself, and of others. There was such a quiet way about you. You were so jolly with the others, and yet something seemed to show that you had gone through a little more, and had had experiences which few of the subalterns or clerks could boast of. Then came your swatting at Hindustani, the remarks made about it, and the fight. Yes, it all seems quite natural. You have a knack of finding a way out of difficulties, and you've brought us through this one well."

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"That's all right, then," said Owen with a smile, blushing furiously red at the compliments paid him. "Now to decide how to get clear of this place. It is early in the day yet, but we shall have to get down to the shore before very long."

"And while these gentlemen are down below, why, it is a little difficult," answered Jack with a laugh, for Owen's light-heartedness was infectious. "They won't move on, I suppose, for the mere asking?"

"Hardly. But we might speak to them in a manner which would be understood. Supposing we try a shot or two."

Owen unslung his gun and calmly loaded the weapon, perching himself securely in the tree meanwhile, for to have tumbled out would have been to have courted a speedy death. For the two-horned rhinoceros of Sumatra is not a beast to trifle with, and when his anger is aroused, as on this occasion, he is, indeed, a terrible foe to have anything to do with. More than that, a fact which surprised all three, and caused them to alter their opinions, was the unexpected agility of these ponderous animals. They had only to recollect the rapidity of the charge which the dead beast had made to know that a rhinoceros, however unwieldy he might appear, was in fact capable of extremely rapid action. And in addition, as many a hunter has learned ere now, the rhinoceros is an animal possessed of an irascible temper, which makes him an extremely difficult and dangerous enemy to attack. However, the tree in which they had found refuge, though it had been blasted by lightning, was still sufficiently strong to protect them from the beasts below, and Owen made the most of the position.

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"Take him at the point of the shoulder, sahib," said Mulha, as Owen put the weapon to his shoulder and aimed at one of them. "They are so close that you should have every chance of killing them."

"And they stand conveniently quiet. I will do my best with them."

Owen had secured his position in the tree by straddling a bough and passing an arm round the trunk. It was not of great girth, so that he was still able to grasp his weapon with that hand, and by bending out a little was able to take aim. He selected the nearest beast and waited till it dropped its head to sniff at its dead comrade. Then he pressed the trigger gently. The shot was followed by a most unearthly squeal, and when the smoke blew aside there was the beast down on his side, kicking and squealing violently. The others lifted their heads, for the sudden shot had startled them. Then as Owen moved, preparatory to loading his weapon again, they took fright and galloped away into the patch of grass from which they had come.

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"Watch them, sahib," shouted Mulha, starting to clamber still higher. "Watch the top of the grass, and you will be able to follow the course they are taking. It would never do to descend and meet them again in the open."

"Rather not," chimed in Jack, with unusual feeling. "We—that is to say, I, personally, have had enough of these meetings with such beasts. But it was a fine shot, Owen. A thundering good shot!"

Following the native to the very top of the tree our hero watched the course taken by the beasts. The waving grass told where they were clearly, and very soon they had galloped through it. Then they took to the open for a while, finally disappearing in some low-lying grass and undergrowth, from which, in all probability, they had first emerged that morning. It was a huge relief to see them go, and the three promptly slid to the ground, Owen with the agility of a cat, and Jack somewhat stiffly, and with unusual care, for he still felt the effects of his fall and the stunning blow on his head. However, he declared that he was perfectly fit for the march down to the shore.

"But what about our bag," he said with a laugh, as he stood over the two huge carcasses, inspecting the horns and the scaly hide which covered the animals. "Supposing we get aboard and tell our tale, who is going to believe us? A precious joke there would be at our expense. They'd say that I had dreamed it all after getting a crack over the head. No, we must do something to convince them."

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"We cannot possibly manage to take the beasts with us," laughed Owen; "and I suppose if we leave them here they will have disappeared by to-morrow morning. Besides, the ship sails to-night, I believe. But I'd like very much to take something just to remind me of my first experience of big-game shooting."

"And of the narrow escape which you and I had. Let's ask Mulha."

They gathered round the two huge animals and discussed the question. For though none had ever set foot in Sumatra before, and all were very ignorant of the animals to be found there, yet they rightly guessed that there would be many carnivorous beasts sheltering in the forests whose instinct or sense of smell would bring them to the food so easily to be obtained, and which ere the morning came would tear the carcasses to pieces. Owen scratched his head, Jack placed his foot on one of the beasts and then clambered on to the massive ribs, while Mulha looked at the rhinos thoughtfully.

"If we were elsewhere, and had others to help us, sahibs, we would skin the beasts and remove the skulls. As it is, we can take the ears and tails, and the feet too if my masters wish it."

"And what about the head and horns?" asked Owen quickly. "That is what I should like. Have you a knife, Mulha?"

The native, who was wearing a rough pair of trousers, shirt and coat, felt for the sheath in his belt, and produced a heavy knife such as is carried by sailors.

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"We could sever the head," he said, "and then perhaps the sahib and I could carry it. But it will be very heavy."

"Let us try it. The trophy would be a fine one, and once we get it on board, no doubt we could have it properly preserved. Give me the knife, Mulha."

However, the native would not agree to this, and at once set to work to sever the head of one of the beasts. It was not such an easy task as one might have expected, for the skin was wonderfully tough. However, he finally decapitated the animal. Then he gathered a bundle of the grass, and having found some creeper amongst the forest trees near at hand, he tied the trophy up, suspending it from a straight length of bough which he cut down from the tree in which they had taken refuge. A stroke of the blade of his knife then divested both carcasses of the tails, which he pushed into his pockets.

"Then we are ready," said Owen, who was delighted with their work. "It is high time that we were on our way back. Lead us to the glade, Mulha, and we will see what we can do with the other beasts. We might even be able to drag one of the pigs away, or take the head of the deer. Now, up with your end of the stick."

He grasped the other end, and lifting the stick each placed one end on his shoulder. Jack carried one of the guns, declaring that he was now perfectly well again, while Owen had already slung the second over his shoulder. Then they set out through the forest, Jack bringing up the rear, till they reached the glade in which their first shots had been made. And here a few minutes sufficed to sling a portion of the deer to their stick.

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"I hate to have to leave the pigs," said Owen, as they prepared to move off again. "But it cannot be helped. Still, it seems so cruel to kill animals when one does not even intend to carry them away. We will see what the captain says. Perhaps he will allow us to return with some of the men, for fresh meat is always wanted."

The additional burden told heavily upon Owen and Mulha, for the head of a full-grown rhinoceros is no light weight. But the quarters of the deer happened to be of small proportions, so that they were able to stagger along, streaming with perspiration as they went, for the heat was great, even beneath the shadow cast by the trees of the forest. Indeed, so close was the atmosphere that they were forced to rest after a while, and came to a halt beside a stream which gushed out from the undergrowth, and trickled away between the grass and stones at their feet.

"I am thirsty, sahibs," said Mulha. "Shall we rest here for a time?"

He lowered his end of the pole as Owen did the same, and then went down on hands and knees beside a pool of the clear running water. Then, having satisfied his thirst, he strode off into the forest, returning with a huge bunch of bananas, which he offered to his companions.

"I had forgotten food," he said. "There has been so much to do and so much excitement that I did not desire any. But the work we have been doing has made me hungry. Will the sahibs eat?"

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Owen and his friend Jack Simpson were growing lads, and had had nothing since breakfast. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that they eagerly agreed to such a proposal, and having slaked their thirst took the fruit and ate it with the utmost pleasure.

Then Owen and Mulha took up their burden again, and the party moved off through the trees, their road leading them all the time downhill towards the low-lying coast. Occasionally as they went through the forest a troop of monkeys would cross their path, just as one had done when they were in the glade, and would disappear amidst the trees, chattering and screaming, and hurling defiance in their own tongue at the heads of the intruders. Another wild pig scampered across the path, and once, to the astonishment and dismay of the party, they suddenly sighted the flank of an enormous animal, apparently almost asleep beneath the shade cast by the trees.

"Rhino again!" exclaimed Owen, as he lowered the stick. "Get your gun ready, Jack, and what about a tree?"

He rapidly selected a likely one, and at his order the whole party ran towards it. They were in the act of climbing into the lower branches when the beast, hearing their movements, strode from beneath the shade, and disclosed the gigantic proportions of an elephant. He stared at them with suspicious eyes, while he swayed slowly from side to side. Then, as Owen lifted his weapon, the huge beast turned and went off at a trot, smashing the boughs and smaller trees which lay in his path, and crashing through the underwood and tenacious creepers as if they were merely dried sticks which would break at a touch. It was with a feeling of relief that the three hunters listened as he plunged on his way.

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"One would prefer his room to his company," laughed Owen, as he turned a somewhat scared face to his comrades. "A rhino was bad enough, but an elephant might be worse. You see, if he had chosen to turn nasty and we had clambered into the tree he might have rammed it down with his head. I have heard of such things happening. Then, where should we have been?"

"It would have been better to have given in to the rhinos," smiled Jack. "We've had an escape and are lucky. Let's push on again. I shall be glad when we are aboard."

There was no doubt that all had had enough of adventures and would welcome the sight of the ship. And for this reason Owen and Mulha picked up their burden with eagerness, and strode on through the forest, Jack following, gun in hand, while he searched on every side for signs of the beast or of others which might happen to be in the vicinity. Once he gave vent to a shout, which brought them all to a halt. But it was a false alarm, and no doubt the condition of his nerves was responsible for it.

"The narrow escape I have had and that crack over the head have put me out," he said, by way of excuse. "I'll be honest. I have got the jumps this afternoon, and imagine I see a rhino or an elephant in every shadow. Push on. Take no notice of me. I am a regular girl to be so scared."

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"Hark! That was a gun surely!" suddenly remarked Mulha, lifting his head in a listening attitude. "I even fancied I heard one an hour ago, as we were clambering out of the tree. Why should they fire from the ship?"

"Perhaps they have completed their preparations for sailing and want to get away," Owen ventured. "Or a favourable breeze has sprung up, and the captain wants to make the most of it. Listen! You can hear the wind as it strikes the tops of the trees."

"And there goes another gun!"

Jack Simpson looked at his comrades, who stared back at him doubtfully. All had heard the gun, and had wondered what it could mean. Nor were their difficulties lessened, for as they gathered up their trophy again and pressed downhill towards the shore, a salvo of artillery burst from the ship, while firing seemed to come occasionally from another point away to their left. Worse than that; as they decreased the distance between themselves and the shore, and came to a part where the forest was not quite so thick, they imagined that they caught the far-off sounds of shouting, while Owen declared that he could hear musketry firing, as though men were engaged in warfare.

"I feel sure of it," he said doggedly, as his companions argued that this could not be the case. "I have heard it so often before at home, and it sounded just like that. I tell you we are not the only ones who have met with trouble. Those on the ship have been attacked."

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"Then supposing they are forced to sail away?"

Jack asked the question and looked at his companions in dismay, while the faces of Owen and Mulha showed that the same fear had occurred to them and that they were uneasy.

"We should be in a hole, that is all," said Owen quietly, after a long silence, during which the firing continued. "But I am sure the captain would never desert us. He would lie off the land, hoping to pick us up later. But what is the use of wondering, when by pushing on we can see what is actually happening. My advice is that we get to the shore as soon as possible, and that we take good care as we get to the edge of the forest that we are not seen, and that we do not expose ourselves. It might, and probably would, make all the difference to our safety and to our escape, supposing the ship has been attacked. Pick up the stick, Mulha, and be careful not to let that gun go off, Jack, or we too might be attacked."

At his words the native seized his end of the stick and they lifted their trophies. Then, with Owen in advance and Jack in rear, they walked on towards the shore, till the forest became far less dense, and they caught a glimpse of the ocean.

"Halt!" cried Owen, who took command for the simple reason that Jack did not venture to do so. "Now wait here while I push on a little and see what is happening. There is a bit of high ground just in front, and from there I shall be able to see the ship. There go more guns, and—hark!"

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"An enemy without doubt," exclaimed Mulha with assurance. "Sahib, I know what is happening. I have not sailed so often across the seas between this and England without learning who are to be avoided. In these parts, within sail of the Malaccan Straits, there are pirates, recruited from India and the Malay States, who waylay the biggest ships. They have attacked East Indiamen very often, and have even matched their strength against war vessels. They must have gained information of the arrival of our ship, and have sailed here hoping to capture her while she was refitting. But push on, sahib. If these pirates are indeed within sight our plight is very serious."

Owen nodded curtly to him, and strode on at once. Little by little, as they had plunged on through the forest toward the sea, and the sound of heavy firing had continued, he had gathered the fact that the ship was being attacked. Then he remembered a warning which Mr. Halbut had given him, and felt sure after Mulha's words that the attackers must indeed be pirates.

"And of the worst sort," he said to himself as he ran forward. "They are the worst lot of cut-throats in existence, so Mr. Halbut said, and are a perfect pest. In fact, something will have to be done soon, for they prey upon the shipping in these parts, and are so bold that they even run up into the path of the Indiamen and make some their victims. Here I am."

He threw himself on hands and knees as he came nearly to the top of the rising ground, and slowly crawled to the very summit. Then, selecting a low bush he wedged his way into it, and struggling on, regardless of the thorns, finally obtained a clear view through the leaves which clothed the farther side. What he saw brought a low cry of astonishment from him, for the East Indiaman was under sail, and was firing rapidly at a number of large native craft which hovered about her. Then he turned, and backing from the bush waved to his companions. And very soon they, too, were gathered on the rising ground, and were watching from the security offered by the bush.

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"It is as you said, Mulha," said Owen at length. "Those ruffians must have discovered the ship by accident, or, seeing their strength, must have gained information of our coming and set out with the fixed intention of making an attack. In either case, they are here, and we are in a pretty plight. As for the ship, she seems to be holding her own. Probably she caught sight of them the instant they appeared, and made preparations."

"And did her best to bring us off, sahibs," added Mulha, pushing his long arm through the bush and pointing to the shore below. "Watch there, sahibs."

All eyes were turned to the point he indicated, and another sound escaped Owen's lips. For he caught sight of the ship's boat, by which they were to have returned, dragged some few feet up on to the sand; while pushing away from the spot, and just then free of the surf, was a huge native boat, filled with men who were shouting excitedly and brandishing their weapons.

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"Poor fellows! They must have been too late, and unable either to return to the ship or escape the enemy," exclaimed Owen, as he caught sight of three limp figures stretched on the sand. "These ruffians must have crept along the coast and come upon them unawares. And now they are off to help the main attack."

"Leaving the boat for our use, perhaps, sahibs," whispered Mulha. "All is not lost for us yet. We might put off as the night comes."

Whether this would be possible it was hopeless to decide at that moment. For the ship upon which they had sailed from England might not make good her own escape. But it looked as if she would; for as the three stared out to sea they saw her, with sails fully set, steering out of the bay. And as she went smoke belched from her sides, for she carried a dozen guns, the shot sometimes striking the water and ricocheting, while some few crashed into the four native craft which hovered about her, drawing excited cries of approval from Owen and his friends. It looked, indeed, as if she would make good her escape, for within half an hour she had drawn away from the enemy, while one of the native craft lay well in rear, her mast having been knocked down by one of the shots.

"She will stand out till she has shaken them off," said Owen at length, "then she will make all ready for a renewal of the battle, and will wait on the chance of our returning. It's getting dusk, Jack. We shall have to make the most of the evening."

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CHAPTER VI

A Trap for a Trap

That Owen and his companions would indeed have to make the most of the coming darkness was abundantly clear to all. But how to make the most of the time, was a question they asked one another. What could they do? What course could they take? As they lay there beneath the shadow of the bush, following the movements of the Indiaman and of the four native craft, the one idea filled their minds—they must escape. They must leave the shore that very night if ever they were to do so.

"But how? That is the question," blurted out Owen, as if thinking aloud, as he stared first at Jack Simpson, and then into the thoughtful eyes of Mulha. "That is what bothers me. There is the boat below, I know, but——"

"She is heavy, and the labour would be great, sahib," ventured Mulha. "Still, when it is a matter of life men can do much, even to pulling a heavy boat far out to sea, for the ship will never dare to lie close in to the bay."

"And I own that I feel done up. Completely played out," said Jack, dropping his aching head on his arms. Indeed, a glance at his pale face showed that he was feeling the effects of the stunning blow which he had received, and that he told but the truth when he said that he was done up and of little service where more effort was required.

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"Then we shall have to make use of one of the native craft," exclaimed Owen, some minutes later, having meanwhile fixed his eyes upon the scene below. "I agree that for three men, one of whom at least is unused to much pulling, the feat of rowing a heavy boat like that far out to sea is out of the question, and, besides, one of the two is a youngster."

"With plenty of pluck, Owen. Don't forget to add that," burst in Jack. "But you wouldn't. I never came across such a modest fellow. You come aboard, and hide away in odd corners, working like a horse at languages which are as dry as dust. Every one thinks you are a timid fellow—a bit of a johnny, you know—and some begin to take advantage of the thought. You put up with a lot, and then one day you select the very biggest of your tormentors and give him a jolly good hiding. Afterwards you go on just the same, still swatting up languages, still unobtrusive, till this day comes along. And now what sort of a tale have I to tell?"

Jack lifted his pale face from his hands and looked his friend full in the face, with a quaint little smile on his lips which meant much, which spoke of the gratitude in his heart, and of more than that—of the faith he had in Owen, of a regard for him which was fast nearing the point of genuine admiration.

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"You don't reply," he went on earnestly. "But I will tell you. I say that you have shown pluck, and that I swear you behaved nobly when that beast charged me. More than that. You have taken up this matter in a curiously business-like way all your own, and I shall be surprised if you don't contrive to get us out of this mess. As for the boat. It is heavy, I know, but if you say that we must row it out till we are in the open sea, why, we'll do it. I feel better already since I heard the suggestion."

But his looks belied the words, for he was still very pale, with black lines beneath his eyes, and a tired look in the latter which told of his condition.

"We could do it if we set our hands to the job," admitted Owen sturdily. "But there is another question. Supposing we were followed. We should be nowhere, for those beggars carry sweeps. Didn't you see them in use as the boat left the shore below and ran through the surf?"

A nod from Jack showed that he remembered, while Mulha gave an exclamation of assent.

"The sahib has sharp eyes, which seem to take in everything," he said, dipping his face into his hands in a salaam, a custom which he had when addressing Owen. "My master spoke of a native vessel, and perhaps he can say of which he speaks and how he would use her?"

For a little while there was silence again, all three staring out at the bay, Jack listlessly and with half-hearted interest, for he felt thoroughly ill, while his head, as he had said some two hours before, ached till it seemed to be on the point of bursting. Mulha squatted on his heels, in the position loved by the native, and viewed the scene thoughtfully, his eyes every now and again seeking Owen's face as if he expected to receive help from him. And this in fact was the case. The native of India often finds a subtle attraction about the white man, and once he has cause for devotion is never tired of showing his loyalty and good feeling. It matters not what is the age of the white man, so long as he displays parts which are attractive to the native and rouse his admiration. And Owen had already done that in the case of Mulha. He had honoured the Mahrattan exile by chatting with him every day as if he were a friend and an equal, thereby bringing many hours of unexpected happiness. For Mulha's heart was far away in his own country, and he sighed to be back. Then Owen had undoubtedly shown that he was possessed of resource and pluck, and that entirely clinched the matter. He was a born leader, so said Mulha to himself, and to be obeyed and followed blindly.

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"The sahib spoke of a native craft," he ventured again, after a long pause. "What passed in his mind? To me there is but one way out of this difficulty, and that even may depart as the darkness falls. There is the boat, and if it remains we can use it. On the other hand, it may well happen that the enemy will be before us. In which case—"

"We shall be in a mess," laughed Owen, showing of a sudden unwonted good spirits. "But I'm hungry. A man fights and struggles better when well fed than he does when suffering the pangs of hunger. We've plenty of meat, and fruit is close at hand. What is to prevent our having a meal? And while it is cooking we can still keep watch. As to the native craft—I have my eye on it, Mulha, and I fancy that very soon we shall want to make the acquaintance of those aboard her. No. I have no plan fixed yet, but this I will say, that I mean to reach the ship to-night if that is possible. Now, what about the grub?"

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"There is the deer, sahib, while for me fruit will be sufficient. If you will remain where you are I will light a fire behind the bushes, and in such a way that not even the sharpest eyes shall detect it. Then I will bring you a steak and some fruit, which should appease your appetite."

He crawled away through the bush, and Owen watched him as he descended the landward side of the rise and walked towards the forest. But he took little note of his movements, for his thoughts were on other matters and other men; and presently his face turned towards the sea once more, and he stared out at the Indiaman and at the native craft with deeply furrowed brows, and with every appearance of perplexity. And as he watched, the firing of guns ceased altogether, while the native craft, one by one, hauled in their sails and steered back towards the coast.

"Disappointed," he thought. "They must have had information that a big ship had put in here after the storm, and hoped to come upon her unawares. Lucky for all of us that they did not arrive when we were careened. As it is they have failed, and I should fancy that they will give up all thoughts of further attack. The question is, do they know that there are still some of the ship's company ashore?"

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It was a knotty question to solve, and for a long while he pondered over it.

"It looks as though they did not suspect our presence," he thought, "for would they have left the boat otherwise? On the other hand, they must have asked themselves why there was a boat ashore at all, and with only three men in her. On second thoughts I believe they know that some one is ashore, and have left the boat, hoping we shall come down and put out towards the ship, when they will make an easy capture."

"What on earth are you chattering about, old chap?" suddenly exclaimed Jack, lifting his head from his arms and staring at his friend. "You've been talking aloud for the last ten minutes, asking all sorts of questions, and going on without waiting for a reply. What's it all about? Look here, I'm lots better. Half an hour ago my head felt as if it would burst, and I was giddy and almost sick. But the rest has done me good. What's happening?"

As a matter of fact he had fallen asleep very soon after reaching the top of the rise, and Mulha and Owen had taken good care to leave him undisturbed. His face was still pale, but there was a brighter look about his eyes, the sleep, short though it was, evidently having done him a world of good.

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"I was arguing with myself about those beggars down below. It's a way I have," responded Owen apologetically. "I've come to the conclusion that they know that some one is still ashore, and that they left the boat below to act as a trap. The question arises, then, whether the flies should walk into the trap and be taken, or whether they should lay a little trap of their own? But look at the ship!"

"She's hove-to, and that's a signal, I am sure."

Jack was evidently far brighter and more wide awake, for his arm shot out and he pointed to the Indiaman, lying rocking to and fro some two miles from the entrance to the bay, and flying a long stream of brilliant flags, with a Jack at the top, all seen distinctly, even at that distance, owing to the wonderfully clear atmosphere.

"If we belonged to the navy we might be able to read the message," said Owen as he stared at the flags, "but as it is, we can't. I fancy we should do well to sit quietly where we are and take no notice. You see, they know that we are ashore, for they will have seen the boat attacked and the men in her killed. They will guess that we have kept out of the way, and common sense will tell them that we shall make an effort to get away from Sumatra. That being so, we can safely leave the signal unanswered. Take note of that little native vessel over there, Jack."

It was his turn to point, and he did so at the very craft which had left the shore below, her hands having dragged the ship's boat on to the sand after killing her crew. "She is the one to suit us. She has one sail, as you can see for yourself, and there are barely a dozen men aboard her."

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Jack sat up on his elbow and stared at his friend as if he could barely believe his ears. Then he scrambled on to hands and knees and crawled close up to him.

"What game are you after?" he asked in a whisper, as if he feared that the enemy below would hear. "You don't intend to make a dash,—by George! if you do, I'm with you. I don't care if you don't explain. If you think that that will help us, why, I'm in with you and will help all I know."

"Dinner," said Owen with a laugh. "Can you eat anything now? I'm as hungry as a hunter. We'll sit here, and watch the boats as we eat. That's grand, Mulha."

He smiled in Jack's face, refusing to answer one of his questions, for as yet his plans were not matured. He had an idea, that was all, and he meant to ponder on it for a time. The sergeant had taught him to think where there was time to do so, before taking action, to look, in fact, before making a leap; and in such a serious position as this was he determined to do nothing that was rash or would lead to disaster. It was, therefore, with a light-hearted laugh that he turned to Mulha as the native came towards them, and eagerly looked at the food he brought with him. This native seemed to have a thousand virtues, and one of those was concerned with the art of cooking. He had retired to the forest, some hundred yards behind the spot where they were lying, and there, with the aid of flint and steel, he had soon set fire to a handful of brittle wood. Dried sticks piled on that had soon burst into flame, and within a few minutes the good fellow had had a couple of fine steaks, cut from the deer, skewered on his ramrod and frizzling over the embers. And now he brought the meal, on a fresh palm-leaf, smoking and hot, and wonderfully appetising. Then he had filled Owen's flask with water, and had not forgotten to bring a bunch of bananas. Our hero's mouth watered, for the unwonted exercise, the excitement of their hunting adventures, and of the scene which they had been watching, had given him a healthy appetite. Even Jack was so far recovered by the rest as to declare himself ready. They sat down close together, with a boulder only intervening, and on this the palm-leaf dish was placed. Each had a good-sized pocket-knife, and with these they cut up the slices, transferring the pieces to their mouths with their fingers.

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"Made before forks, you know," laughed Jack, looking a comical object as he sat there in front of his friend, a faint tinge of pink in his cheeks now, but with his head still swathed in Owen's coloured handkerchief.

"This is a picnic. Who would have thought that we should have had such a time! But I was forgetting those poor fellows down there. They have had little cause to bless the pirates."

"And we may have still less," Owen reminded him. "But we're alive, and we're going to win through. You asked me what I meant when I pointed to the boat down yonder."

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Jack leaned towards him eagerly, while Mulha went down on his heels and stared into the white youth's face.

"Yes. Go on. What were you thinking of? How could her capture help us?" Jack asked eagerly.

"There will be a moon late to-night," said Owen thoughtfully. "If we could get aboard that craft in time, and without much noise, we could easily make out to sea and so fall in with the ship. I've been calculating. I had forgotten the moon till a little while ago, and then I reflected that if we started directly it was dark the chances were that we should get out of the bay before the light came. I reckon it to be an eight miles' pull. Well, supposing we reached the edge of the bay when the moon got up—"

"We might still fall into the hands of the enemy, sahib," interrupted Mulha. "These robbers below, if they have left the boat to tempt us, will think, perhaps, that it will take us a little while to gather courage for the attempt. They will rely upon the moon rising before we are near our friends. They would pounce down upon us, and then—"

"You need not go on," said Jack with a shudder and a comical grimace; "we can guess. Cut-throats have many ways of dealing with their enemies, but they all lead to the same end. I see the drift of Owen Sahib's argument. The chances are that we should be taken, for the boat is very heavy and the ship far out now."

"While the attempt to reach her would be a natural one on our part, and it is more than likely that these rogues will expect us to make it," went on Owen. "That being so, a little surprise might help us. There are three of us, and we are armed. I propose that we cut three stout cudgels or bludgeons before the light goes, and that we slip down to the boat the instant it is dark. We will

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push her into the water as quietly as we can, and paddle gently towards that craft I have selected. Her consorts are at least four miles away, and if there is a rumpus the noise may not be heard. Of course we must beat these fellows and get possession. After that we'll up anchor and away."

The scheme had much to recommend it, but not a single one of the three, however sanguine he might be, could hide the fact from himself or his friends that the enterprise was a desperate one. There were perhaps a dozen cut-throats aboard the native craft, and they themselves numbered three.

"But we shall have the advantage of surprise," said Jack, as they discussed the matter; "and after all, we have no other choice. I follow your arguments entirely now. The boat is out of the question. We should nearly certainly be discovered and killed."

They sat down beneath the bush again and watched, while the light waned, slowly at first and then more rapidly. And meanwhile Mulha slipped away into the forest, and returned before it was dark with three fine cudgels. He made a second trip, and came staggering back with their trophies, which he placed at their feet.

"In case we are detained aboard, sahibs," he said, with a grave smile. "There is the deer for you, while there are bananas here for me. We will fill the flask also."

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Just before it got dark a movement was noticed aboard the smaller of the craft, the one which Owen had selected for their expedition. A tiny skiff dropped from her side, and three men lowered themselves into her, and taking up the paddles went away out to the three larger craft, which still stood backwards and forwards some miles from the shore. Then a second skiff left her side, with four men aboard, who at once rowed for the shore.

"They have to make farther along the coast," said Owen as he watched their movements. "They intend to land, and cannot do so here as the surf is too rough for them. They will come along later to the boat, and if we have put out they will signal. That is their object, I should say, and it raises another difficulty. As for the others, I suspect that they have gone to the captain of these ships to tell him of the plans they have made. We shall have to be very cunning and very quick if we are to get out of this mess."

The sight of the second skiff had indeed damped their hopes and ambitions considerably, for the arrival of men ashore would considerably upset the plans they had made.

"All depends on the time it takes them to get ashore and along to the boat," said Jack, with something approaching a groan, for he had had sufficient dangers and difficulties to contend with that day.

"And also upon the time we take to launch the boat below and get out to the pirate. If we are there before these beggars send their signal, all the better, and remember there can be only five or six aboard her now. If we're still on our way things will not be so prosperous nor nearly so rosy as we had hoped. Still, our chances will not be spoiled."

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"Unless the men ashore hear the noise of the conflict, sahibs," ventured Mulha. "Then their signals would be sent to the ships, and our task would be even harder. We should have to run the gauntlet of three fast-sailing craft, armed with guns. The fourth does not count, for she lies at anchor, her masts having been shot away."

"Then we'll have to make a small alteration," exclaimed Owen quietly. "You will both back me up, I know."

"Through thick and thin. Give the order, old chap, and I will certainly follow."

"And I too, sahib. You can trust in Mulha."

"We'll make a move, then. Pick up the stick, Mulha, and come along down to the beach. Wait, though; are the guns loaded?"

"Both are fully charged," answered the native.

"Then draw the bullets and powder. This job must be managed silently. There must be no accidental letting off of guns or intentional shooting. We'll use our cudgels. If a fellow runs at you, Jack, catch him a crack across the shins and then give him one over the head. Don't shout. Our game is to make as little noise as possible."

They waited a few minutes longer while Mulha drew the charges from the guns. And even then Owen stood still, listening to the boom of the surf below, and trying vainly to discover the whereabouts of the men who had last set off from the native craft. But Sumatra was buried in darkness, which blotted out the forest behind, the ships, and the water. A thousand stars shone out from the heavens, and their reflections could be watched in the water. But they gave little light, and in any case insufficient to show the whereabouts of any of the enemy.

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"As good for us as for them," said Owen at last. "But there's just one other matter that has occurred to me. It will be pitch dark aboard that boat. How are we to avoid striking one another?"

Mulha made no reply, but as they stood there in the darkness they heard the sharp sound of ripping linen, and guessed that he was tearing some part of his clothing. Then he came to each in turn and bound a strip of white material about the left arm.

"One moment, sahibs, while I step away from you," he said. "It will do well," he went on, as he returned. "I can see the strips at a few yards, and that should be amply sufficient. Now, Owen

Sahib, I will help with the load."

They set off for the shore, our hero in advance, and Jack following closely on the steps of the native. And presently they were trudging across the sand, here loose and soft, into which they sank almost to their ankles. Owen had so far kept his face directed to the sea, to the spot where he imagined the ship's boat to lie. But now that the sand was reached he turned abruptly to the right and struck off along the bay. It was a strange manœuvre, and at once brought low-voiced exclamations from his companions.

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"Are you not leading us far to one side?" whispered Jack, hastening forward and laying a warning hand on his friend's sleeve. "We should have marched straight on, to get to the boat."

"And now the sahib will need to turn about and search carefully. I had marked the exact spot in my mind's eye, but the turn has put me out of my reckoning."

"And I went this way on purpose," answered Owen, dropping his end of the stick for the moment "Look here, I've been thinking about this little business, and I don't like the idea of our leaving being signalled to the ships by the rascals who have come ashore; for I take it that they have just about landed by now. I wondered whether it wouldn't be wise to leave the ship's boat lying where they dragged her and make along up the coast. Then they'll find her, and will imagine that we have funked it and are still here."

"But how on earth can that help us?" gasped Jack, his tones lowered to a whisper. "What are we to do along the coast? We want to reach the ship, and the boat seems to be the only way of getting there."

"Hardly," replied Owen calmly. "There's another boat. What's to prevent our making along and letting these gentlemen pass us? They have come ashore as we did. Their skiff will be lying on the sands. Why shouldn't we borrow it? It would come in very handy, and then, when we got out to the native craft we should just be returning friends, you know, not escaping Englishmen landed from the Indiaman. It strikes me as being a good idea."

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"Good! By George! it's splendid! The very thing for us."

Jack tossed his cap in the air and would have shouted had not Mulha given vent to a warning word.

"Let us be careful, sahib," he said, betraying little astonishment at the news of their altered plans. "Remember that these men may now be near at hand. Let all be silent save Owen Sahib, who only shall give orders. What next, sahib? The plan reads well. To lay a trap for a trap is but fair dealing."

"Then forward," said Owen, "and listen. In a little while we will creep aside into the forest."

Some ten minutes later they crept quietly into the fringe of the forest, which here grew close down to the water, and threw themselves on their faces. And presently some stealthy figures crept past, on their way to the boat, never suspecting that the men for whom they searched were watching them. Then the trio rose to their feet, and striking out on to the sandy beach again cut straight along it, their eyes searching the dull white line, where the surf broke upon the sand, for signs of the skiff by means of which the enemy had landed.

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CHAPTER VII

Touch and Go

It was densely dark beneath the trees where the three walked, so dark, in fact, that Owen, who was leading, struck his forehead heavily against the trunk of a tree, and staggered back, dropping his end of the stick as he did so.

"Let us change the order, sahib," said Mulha, when his master had recovered from the blow, which had been a severe one. "I am used to finding my way at night, and should have seen or felt that tree. Take this end of the stick, and let Jack Sahib cling to your sleeve."

Had it been possible they would have kept clear of the wood, but it happened that at this part a collection of palm-trees struggled right down to the line of the sea, their trunks being moistened by the spray cast by the surf. And these were sufficient to delay them, so that many minutes had elapsed before the party came upon a narrow inlet, cutting zigzag in from the sea, into which the water ran smoothly. It was situated round a rocky bend, and had been invisible from the position they had occupied earlier, overlooking the bay.

"Here we shall find their skiff," exclaimed Owen, in tones of satisfaction, "and very soon we shall be under way. One moment. Isn't that the boat?"

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"It is a boulder, sahib," answered the native without hesitation, his eyes seeming to be able to pierce the darkness with ease. "The boat for which we are searching is higher up. I think I see it already. It is pulled up on to the mud."

It turned out to be as he had declared, for as the party turned inland, their onward progress

being barred by the inlet, they came upon the craft some hundred feet higher up, stranded on the mud, with paddles laid carelessly in the bottom.

"All in readiness, in fact," exclaimed Owen with a chuckle. "This is a good omen, Jack. All is smooth at first, and the rest is what we care to make it. Those aboard the native craft will hardly be expecting us. If we don't manage to drive them overboard within a minute, well, my name's not Owen!"

"Nor mine Jack. Any special orders before we embark?"

"None. We have our badges, by which we shall know each other. We have only to clamber aboard and go for them."

"And supposing they should suspect?" asked the native suddenly. "Would it not be wise, sahibs, in a case like that to approach them differently? For instance, if they think that we are enemies I could slip into the water as we came close, and while they follow the movements of the boat I would clamber aboard. Then, as I fell upon them, you two might rush in and board the vessel."

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"Bravo! A good suggestion, and you shall carry it out," answered Owen readily. "Is there anything else?"

No one answered. They had done all that was possible by way of preparation, and could think of nothing more.

"Then dump this load aboard and let us shove her out. Mulha, can you paddle a boat?"

"I have been at sea for many years, sahib," was the quiet answer.

"Then you will paddle us to the ship. I will take on the task if you have to slip overboard. Down she goes! Now, into her, Jack."

They placed their load and their guns carefully in the bottom of the native skiff, and then lifted her clear of the mud, for she was very light, and carried her bodily into the water. Jack stepped gingerly in and took his seat in the bows, Owen followed, picking up a paddle as he did so, while the native placed himself in the stern and plunged his paddle into the water. They were afloat, and at the very first stroke the little craft shot out into the centre of the inlet.

"Trim her as well as you can, sahibs," whispered Mulha, "and depend on me entirely. The surf is not very rough at the entrance, but any unusual movement might lead to a capsize. I will paddle her gently through, and then strike to the left. That is where the vessel lies, and all eyes must search for her."

His paddle dipped regularly now, and the little craft shot down the inlet. Indeed, it was abundantly clear by the pace she attained that a stream fell into the bay at this point, and that the current helped the efforts of the paddler. And before any could have believed it they had reached the coast-line, and were in the surf, here a gentle swell only, for had it been like that which broke upon the beach higher up, the boat would have foundered. She was of far too light a build to have lived there for a moment. As it was she rocked, till Owen and Jack were forced to hold to the gunwale, while they bent their bodies as low down as possible. Meanwhile Mulha seemed to take little heed of the commotion; but his piercing eyes watched every wave, and the strokes of his paddle came now at irregular moments, sometimes strong, and sometimes just a gentle touch which turned the boat's head aside to avoid some breaker. Spray blew over the three and drenched them, but they hardly heeded it. All had their thoughts fixed upon the pirates' ship, and upon the coming struggle.

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"I wonder what it will be like," Owen said to himself. "I have fired a gun and pistols at a target many a time, but till to-day I have never killed anything. It was all right, of course, to kill those pigs and the deer; that was sport; while the killing of the rhinos was a matter of self-preservation. But these natives are different. They are human beings, and I hesitate even to strike them with the cudgels which we have prepared."

"There she is! I saw her against the stars," suddenly exclaimed Jack, interrupting Owen's train of thought. "We shall be alongside in a quarter of an hour. Then there'll be a tussle. Owen, these beggars would kill us without a scruple and without mercy, wouldn't they?"

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Our hero stared in the direction in which Jack pointed, for his comrade caught his arm and turned it out to sea to the left, so that the darkness could lead to no mistakes. And there, without any doubt, was the pirate vessel, looming large and formidable against the starlight, and rocking gently on the swell.

"Wouldn't they? They'd cut our throats without hesitation!"

Then his friend had been thinking of the same thing. It was all very well to fight wild beasts, but when it came to an endeavour to kill their own fellows, dark-skinned pirates though they were, it was a very different matter.

"I would not trust my life in their hands for an instant," was his answer. "Look here, Jack. It's a question of self-preservation all over again. Those rhinos wanted to kill us, and we were forced to shoot them. It's the same here. While there are bad men in the world there will be murders and hangings. Lives will be taken, and robberies and violence committed, till those who desire to lead a quiet life rebel. Finding that words and warnings are insufficient they will take to killing the bad men simply for the reason that if they did not do so the latter would become too strong in time, and would do pretty well as they liked with other people's lives and property. That's the way with these pirates. They wanted to capture the ship, and they would like to take us, just to revenge their defeat. I object. I want to get to India. I will hit as hard as possible, and if a man

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attempts to stand up to me, well, the better of the two shall survive."

He gripped the stout cudgel which Mulha had cut for him, and balanced it nicely in his hand. Then his eyes went across to the native boat again, and he watched to see whether there were any figures on her deck. But she was still too far away, and, in fact, only her spars were visible, showing up against the bright stars. Mulha paddled on without a pause and without a sound. Those in the skiff could just hear the dip, dip of his blade, but that was all. There was not sufficient noise there to attract the attention of the pirates, and it was hardly likely that the latter would be listening.

"Most likely they have turned in by now," said Owen to himself, as he listened for any other sound than that of the paddle. "With a little luck we should be able to get alongside without discovery."



REACHING UP TO HIS FULL HEIGHT HE
STRUCK THE MAN ON THE BREAST

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He crouched in the bottom of the skiff for some ten minutes, staring out across the water. And as the seconds passed his hopes rose higher and higher, while the uncertainty of their position, the inevitable struggle, and the fact that it would be the very first in which he had ever taken part, helped to increase his excitement. He could hear and feel his heart beating. His teeth were clenched, while his hand gripped the cudgel with a purpose. Owen Jones had forgotten his thoughts of a few moments ago. He no longer had scruples. There was to be a rough-and-tumble struggle, and his side was to succeed.

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"Halloo! Aboard the boat there!"

The hail, in a foreign tongue which none of the three could understand, came from the shore from the exact point where they had put off, and was followed by the flash of a pistol and by a sharp report. Then came confused noises, shouts, and cries of anger, answered within a few seconds from the very ship for which Mulha was steering.

"The game has been discovered," said Owen hastily, as the truth dawned upon him. "We have been too slow, and those fellows who landed and passed us must have slipped back to find their own craft gone. Push on! Rush them! Get ready, Jack!"

"Steer out beyond the boat," suddenly whispered Mulha. "Hush, sahibs. We are not discovered yet. They will know aboard the ship that we have stolen from the shore, and they will scarcely guess our object. Swing to the right, for they will be looking perhaps to the spot well to our left. We will slide up beside them and make a rush. I will slip overboard if we are discovered."

It was not a time for words, and at once Owen dropped his cudgel and thrust his paddle deep into the water. But dark though the night was they could hardly hope to avoid detection, and within a minute they knew that the pirates aboard the ship for which they were aiming had their eyes upon them. Shouts answered the fierce cries from the shore, and some one suddenly appeared on the rail of the vessel, a stick in his hand, and at its extremity, held well aloft, a mass of flaming material, which acted as a flare and lit up the scene. In a minute, in fact, the tables were turned, and all the plans and hopes of the three were shattered utterly.

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"Charge!" shouted Jack, turning upon his friends. "Charge! We're done for if we don't. They will pick us off easily."

"And shoot us like birds. There goes their first weapon. Paddle, Mulha!"

Owen backed his friend up with a will, and seeing in the space of a second that to remain there, within the circle of light, was to court death, and that to attempt to escape would in all probability prove equally fatal, for it would be a little while before they could withdraw out of the light, and even did they do so, there were enemies between them and the Indiaman, and ruffians ashore waiting for them to land, he plunged his paddle in with a will, and, helped by the native, sent the skiff surging on through the water. A weapon exploded a few feet from them, and our hero experienced the curious sensation of being hit. He felt as if some one had taken a hammer and struck him a violent blow on the thigh. The shock was followed by a burning sensation, and then—they were close alongside. A burly, naked individual leaned over the rail and threw something into the skiff, knocking her bottom boards to pieces and almost sinking her. She was leaking badly, and looked as if she would founder.

Then another of the pirates leaned over, following the example of his leader, and would have repeated the process of shattering the boat. But Owen was too quick for him. Suddenly rising to his feet he swung his cudgel round his head, and reaching up to his full height struck the man on the breast. The thud could be heard all over the ship, and was followed by a shriek of anger and pain.

"Now at them!" he called out at the top of his voice. "Come along, Jack. Charge them!"

Fortunately the sides of the small native craft which they were attacking were not very lofty, and thanks to the diversion which his sudden blow had caused, Owen was able to grip the rail and clamber aboard. Jack followed as quickly as possible, gaining the deck as three men, armed with sword or knife, threw themselves upon him. Owen did not wait for them. Dashing forward he struck out blindly with his stick, while Jack followed him up swiftly. But the odds were against them. They had counted on finding perhaps six men aboard, whereas the flare which was still held aloft disclosed the presence of at least nine pirates, all scantily dressed, and every one wearing an expression which boded ill for the attackers. More than that, they were dumfounded at the audacity of the white men, and as Owen beat them back, and the two parties halted for a moment to stare at one another, the pirates could hardly believe their eyes. Then the huge ruffian who had tossed a weight into the skiff pushed his way to the front of the others and began to laugh.

"Did ever game walk into the net so nicely?" he asked in the Malay tongue. "In which way shall we kill them?"

For a moment it seemed as if he would choose a summary method, for he dragged a huge bell-mouthed pistol from his belt and aimed at Owen. Then another thought struck him and he turned to consult with his men. Meanwhile Owen and Jack stood still; petrified at finding such unexpected numbers. They looked round for Mulha, but he was nowhere to be seen. They were alone, and had but themselves to depend upon.

"Then we'll go for them," said Owen hastily. "Strike at their shins. Remember that. Guard their blows and whack them across the legs. A nigger cannot stand that. I've been told so by men who have been out in the East. Take that chap on the right. I'm going for the big man in the centre."

Without another word, but with a shout to encourage one another, they charged down the deck, swinging their clubs. And as they came the enemy prepared to meet them. The big man swept a clear patch about him, and drew a dagger, while the others lined across the deck, some armed with daggers, and others with native swords. Two had guns which they fired as the two white men approached, missing them narrowly.

Owen kept his club aloft till he was close to the big man. Then all of a sudden he ducked his head and shoulders, and as the man lifted his knife, thinking to ward off a blow made at his head, our hero's cudgel came with terrific force against his shins and knees. There was a howl of pain, and the man dropped like an ox which has been felled; then he crawled away, rubbing his limbs and evidently suffering considerably.

The sudden fall of their leader disconcerted the crowd for a few seconds, and they drew back. Then one of them raised a sudden shout, and those in rear turned round. Owen grasped the meaning of their action instantly.

"Mulha has carried out his plan," he shouted. "At them, Jack. Strike as hard as you can."

There followed a desperate struggle, during which sticks rose and fell, while the gleaming blades held by the pirates darted this way and that. But the length of the cudgels proved an enormous advantage, and when to that was added the sudden appearance of Mulha, and the need for defending themselves in front and rear, it was not wonderful that the rascals aboard gave way. In a few moments four of them lay stretched senseless on the deck, while beneath the rail grovelled the huge ruffian whom Owen had brought down, still hugging his shins, for one was broken. Numbers were more evenly divided now, and the efforts of all three soon ended the matter. Mulha lifted his club as a man dashed in upon him, and leaping aside to avoid the blow, brought the heavy stake with a terrific crash down on the pirate's back, breaking it instantly. Then Jack and Owen rushed at the others, their clubs whirling, and, struck with terror at the lot which had fallen to their comrades, these remaining pirates raced away for their lives and leaped over the side.

"Dowse that flare," commanded Owen instantly. "But wait. Look at these fellows, Mulha."

"This man is dead, sahib. I hit with all my might, and struck him on the broad of the back. He is no further use to us or to his own comrades. He shall join those who have just left us."

Very calmly Mulha stood over the native and carefully inspected him, to make sure that he was

dead. Then as Jack picked up the flare, which had fallen to the deck and lay there spluttering, he gripped the body with both hands and tossed it overboard; for this native was a powerful fellow, tall and supple, with wiry limbs which would have tired the muscles of many a man of finer development.

"The others are alive, but helpless for the moment, sahib," he went on, turning to Owen. "Shall they follow? In the sea they will be out of harm's way, and if we take them they will surely be hanged."

"Leave them. Perhaps the information to be obtained from them will prove valuable. Now, douse the light."

Mulha took the stick upon which it was supported and tossed it over the side. Then for one second he disappeared, swarming over the rail, to reappear within a minute.

"The boat may still be required, sahibs," he said, with a grave smile. "There is water in the bottom, but not sufficient to matter. The sea is calm, and therefore I have only made the rope fast. She can tow as we sail. Shall we hoist the sails?"

It was the only possible course for them to take, and fortunately on this craft there was no great difficulty; for she carried but one huge triangular sheet, the strangely shaped stretch of canvas with which so many Eastern boats are provided, and on this occasion the canvas had not been lowered but had been furled about the yard, the latter being left in position. Mulha went swarming up to it with the agility of a cat, and soon the folds were trailing near the deck. Owen took hold of the tiller, leaning heavily upon it, for his leg was strangely weak. As for Jack, he stood aside, leaving the sail to Mulha, well knowing that he himself would be in the way. And in a very short space of time, when the active Mulha had severed the hawser, they were moving, the wind had caught the sail, and the boat had listed to one side.

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"Better get ready for the bombardment," laughed Jack some minutes later, as they stole silently through the water. "I'll load, and then if any of those beggars fire at us we shall be able to answer. I suppose she does not carry a cannon?"

He went off along the deck, while the thoughtful Mulha dived down below, returning shortly with some muskets, which, following Jack's example, he commenced to load. Then he went to the unconscious figures lying on the deck and dragged them to the foot of the mast.

"What if that big fellow with the broken shins chooses to give a shout?" asked Owen suddenly. "Of course, the pirates on shore and those at sea know or guess what has happened. That flare will have made everything as plain as possible. They'll be cruising up and down to catch us, and if that fellow cared he could bring them alongside."

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"I will speak to him, Sahib," answered Mulha grimly. "He shall understand. Give me one of the guns."

He took the weapon from Jack, who stood near at hand. Then he went to the side of the wounded man and grasped him roughly by the shoulder. There was just sufficient light to see him, and out here on the water, where they were well away from overhanging trees, they could see far better than when on the land. As he stared at the two, Jack saw Mulha shake the man, and then raise his finger to his lips, at which the wounded pirate ceased his groans. Then very deliberately Mulha raised the musket, thrust the cold muzzle into the man's ear, causing him to sit transfixed with terror, and then lifted up a warning finger again. It was enough. The fellow groveled in the scuppers, and from that moment not a sound escaped him. As for the others, they showed as yet no signs of returning consciousness, so well and truly had the blows fallen.

"In an hour and a half we shall be clear of the bay," said Owen, who still clung to the tiller, for he had little fears of his powers of being able to sail the vessel. The wind happened to be in the right quarter, and he had handled a tiller before in Old England.

"What if some of those other craft get alongside and blaze at us?" he asked.

"We'll give them something back," answered Jack defiantly. "Run us in close to them, and Mulha and I will pepper them with the muskets."

"If we are not meanwhile blown to pieces with their guns," laughed Owen. "Keep a bright lookout, that's the best course, and run as far from them as possible. How's the time, do you think?"

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"Couldn't say," responded his friend. "We might have put off hours ago. I've lost count of the time altogether."

So much had happened that it was not wonderful that it seemed to all three that they had left the shore some long while ago. But, as a matter of fact, it still wanted quite a little while before the moon would rise. And meanwhile they steered on their course, their bows pointed to the wide opening of the bay, and all eyes engaged in watching for the enemy. And presently the creak of a yard was heard, and some distance to their right, and nearer in shore, a huge indefinite shape swirled by and was gone, the creak, creak of the yard melting into silence as she increased her distance and ran on into the night. An hour passed, while the little vessel pressed on, the water churned to froth at her bows.

"We are in the open sea, or just at the mouth of the bay, Sahib," said Mulha. "I am sure of that, for there is a little roll, and in the bay there was none, only the wind listed us to one side. We must be very careful. At any moment we may run into the enemy. Then the moon will be up before very long."

A few minutes later, indeed, she came up from behind the high lands running parallel with the

coast, and flooded bay and open sea. Almost instantly there was a shout from the three who manned the stolen vessel, a shout answered by a loud hail not far away. It was the Indiaman, under sail, and standing silently and very slowly across the mouth of the bay. They could see her very plainly, for the rays fell full upon her, and she was within an easy shot. At the shout they saw men rushing down the deck, and figures, strangely ghost-like in the silvery light, appeared from her hatches. Then a dull red flash spurted from her side, a puff of smoke belched into the night, and a ball, directed by no unskilled hand, hurtled across the water and hulled the little craft which was standing out of the bay. It was a fine shot, and brought a wild cheer from the deck of the Indiaman; but it had disastrous consequences, for it knocked a wide hole in the planks of the native vessel, through which the water poured in torrents.

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"Ahoy! You're firing at friends! Ahoy there!"

Owen clambered with difficulty into the rigging, till he reached a spot where his figure stood sharply silhouetted against the moon behind. And there he waved his arms, while he hailed at the top of his voice. And evidently those aboard the Indiaman were not slow to discover their mistake. Another cheer rose from her deck, and a stout figure leapt on to the rail, and ascending a few rungs of the ladder hailed back in stentorian tones. Then came the splash of a boat, and within five minutes the ship's gig was pulling towards them.

"It will be touch and go yet," said Owen. "We'd better get aboard the skiff. These poor fellows here must take their chance. Give me a hand, Mulha."

A few minutes before he had been able to clamber into the rigging with wonderful agility, considering his wound; but now that the danger was passed, and help and friends were at hand, Owen collapsed utterly. He held out his hand to Mulha, and then fell on his face on the deck. And in this unconscious condition he was lifted aboard the skiff, which was half full of water, and from her was transferred to the gig. A quarter of an hour later the Indiaman was standing out of the bay, while her deck hands were hoisting the gig back to the davits. Owen lay pale and motionless in the sick-bay, while Jack was closeted with the captain. As for the native craft, she had sunk beneath the water, the five wounded pirates who had been upon her being barely rescued by the gig. It was a tragic ending to a day's hunting, but it provided the garrulous Jack Simpson with a theme, and at that moment he was breathlessly detailing all that had happened. And had there been any doubt as to the truth of their meeting with the rhinos, there was the head of the beast, and a portion of a deer, now brought aboard, indisputable evidence of their prowess.

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CHAPTER VIII

The City of Palaces

Three uneventful weeks passed after Owen and his two companions made their escape from Sumatra and rejoined the ship ere the pilot boat, cruising off the sand-heads of Saugar, was sighted. And during those days the two friends had been the heroes of the ship. Not that Owen could enjoy much of the congratulation which was due to him, for the wound he had received kept him in the sick-berth for a week. It was a nasty flesh wound, and to add to the trouble the bullet had remained in the limb.

"A fellow who can stand his ground and shoot a rhino will laugh at this little task," said the surgeon who was aboard, when he came into the bay on the following morning, a servant carrying a large case of instruments for him. "There's a bullet still in that thigh, and as I imagine you are not very anxious to keep it there, I will remove it. Now the water, some clean basins, and—ah, here are the things."

He chatted and laughed pleasantly as he made his preparations, and still smiling exposed the wound and probed for the bullet. Owen found it an ordeal, but bore it manfully. He clenched his teeth firmly, and smiled back at the surgeon whenever the latter looked at him. And finally, when the bullet was extracted, he fell back on his pillow thoroughly exhausted.

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"Just a little troublesome to get hold of, I admit," said the surgeon, "but you will thank me later. There was a piece of cloth too, carried in by the bullet, and that alone would certainly have delayed healing. Now, with a healthy, powerful young fellow, such as you are, the wound will close so quickly that you will be surprised."

He gave Owen a restorative, and dressed the wound, and at the end of the week our hero was on deck, lounging in a chair, his leg and thigh elevated, and a company of admiring civilians and soldiers about him.

"I'd rather have the task of shooting another rhino any day," he admitted, "than have a bullet probed for. It's worse than being wounded."

"As many a soldier has found before," exclaimed one of the passengers, Major Alexander by name. "I have been hit half a dozen times, and I know a little about it. But it's a fine training, Jones—a good beginning. Now you can say, when you land, that you have indeed smelt powder and met with a bullet. But seriously, I feel that, as the senior officer aboard, it will be my duty to

make a report of all that has occurred, and of your behaviour, your gallant behaviour, Mr. Jones. I consider that the way in which you brought off the party was skilful, and displayed sagacity and courage. Not a word! I say it, and I mean it thoroughly. These gentlemen here approve of my words."

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"Hear, hear! A regular young fire-eater. He will make a good soldier," exclaimed the passenger who had once before interfered on the eve of the fight. "Jones has pluck, Major, and he deserves some commendation from those into whose command he is going."

"He will have it," was the answer. "I will make it my business to report, as I have already said, and if Jones will allow me I will see to his comfort when we get ashore. No! Again, not a word, my lad. I am an old soldier, and you have a few years' service. We are of the same cloth, and if we cannot help one another, why——"

"Bravo, Major! There is nothing like being clannish. Besides, he'll want help. The surgeon says he will not have the full use of his leg for a month at least, and in a fortnight or less we should be at Calcutta."

Owen was not allowed even to whisper his thanks, for his gallant conduct had won him friends throughout the vessel. Jack had not been slow to tell of his pluck, of his strange determination and skill, while Mulha, now a person of some importance, made the lower deck and fo'castle ring with his name. Jones, late corporal of the 64th, was a hero aboard the Indiaman.

"I could not have believed it. Honestly, it never occurred to my thick head that you had it all in you," said Hargreaves one day, very quietly, taking a seat beside him. "I now see why it was that you put up with our vulgar abuse and sneers, and why you thrashed me so soundly. It has done me a world of good, for now I think a little more of others. I used to imagine that because a fellow was quiet and studious, and somewhat retiring, he had little spirit, but, my word, Jones, you have opened my eyes!"

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Perched high up in his chair, and now, though strictly against the surgeon's orders, able to hop on one leg with some nimbleness, Owen watched the pilot drop a boat and send aboard. Then his eager gaze sought for the town of Calcutta. But it was some time before it came into sight. They steered their way up the wide Hooghly against a powerful stream, and, once they had passed Fultah, feasted their eyes on the delightful views on either hand. Then they rounded the projecting spit of land, with its beautiful botanical gardens, and caught their first glimpse of Fort William. A little later the shipping of Calcutta was in sight, a vista of masts which seemed to pierce the sky. There were short and stout vessels with slanting yards covered with brown native canvas, rakish-looking native vessels, ships of war, and merchantmen with tall spars and square yards, and in between them numbers of rowing craft busily plying to and fro. And there was Calcutta, the city of palaces, radiant beneath the sun. No wonder that all crowded to the rails, that Owen staggered from his chair and, conscious that the surgeon was right for'ard, hopped to the bulwarks. And what a cheer they all gave as the uniforms of soldiers were seen over the battlements of the fort and a welcoming shout reached them. They had been more than three months at sea, but for their break at Sumatra, and what wonder that all aboard, from the youngest upward, felt gay at heart and jolly!

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Late that afternoon Owen took up his quarters in one of the houses on the outskirts of the city, having been carried there in a litter provided by the Major. Jack was with him too, and very thoroughly had the two enjoyed themselves.

"It is very strange and queer," said Owen, as he sat back in his chair. "It is so new, and yet so very familiar. I could lay a wager that I have lived here before. I seemed to know the Esplanade Ghaut where we disembarked, and I am sure I have time and again watched these busy fellows one passes hurrying through the streets. Then there were those in the bazaar, the women and children, all strangely old and familiar to me, and yet so new."

He looked through the wide window with a puzzled expression on his face, and fell to thinking deeply. Indeed, he might have remained in this brown study for a long while had not Jack interrupted him.

"Then you may take it for certain that a portion of your history is connected with Calcutta or some other Indian port," he said. "You've told me a good deal, and you said that it was certain that you could speak a few words of the language. A chap couldn't imagine all this. To me it is utterly strange. The bright streets, the dust, the water-carriers, the stall-holders in the bazaar, elephants and horses with their bright saddlery. It is totally different from England. To my mind it is certain that you were born out here. It was natural for you to forget a great deal when you were absent from the country, but the first sight of old familiar scenes brings back recollections."

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Could it be so? Did he really and truly remember Calcutta in some vague uncertain way? Owen asked himself that question again and again. He shut his eyes and let his mind carry him back to the days, not so very long ago, when he was a child of four or five.

"I can see a big house, something like this," he said to himself, "with native servants all about, and a white lady. There was a black woman too, an ayah or nurse, I suppose, and an officer who was very tall. They ran to me and lifted me in their arms. Then there was a ship—yes, yes, I can see it here. It tossed up and down and I was ill. Then—I can only recall the postchaise galloping along the road, and old Mrs. Jones's honest face."

He gave vent to a sigh, a somewhat unusual thing with Owen, and opened his eyes to find the Major standing over him.

"In pain?" he asked curtly.

"No, sir. Thinking only."

"What! Tired of India already? Wanting to get home again?"

He smiled in a bantering manner as he stared at our hero.

"No, sir. But—well, I was thinking of the time when I was a youngster—I mean when I was about five years of age. You may have heard my story, sir?"

The Major nodded sympathetically.

"We all knew it," he said gravely. "We believe that you were sent home, and that some rascal had a reason for disposing of you. Some day, never fear, the mystery will be cleared up. Wicked tricks like that fail very often."

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"Then I was thinking of that time, and I swear that this town, or a very similar one, is familiar to me. I think I can, very vaguely, remember my mother and father, and certainly I can recollect the house. When I am able to walk I shall search for it."

"Then you will have little time," came the prompt answer, "for soldiers have to put their private business aside, my boy, and you will be no exception. His Majesty and the Honourable Company, otherwise John Company, will require your services. In fact they need them now. You must get well as rapidly as possible."

Owen and Jack both expressed astonishment, for they had heard no rumour of expected or impending trouble. But then they had only been ashore a very few hours.

"The news is old here," said the Major, as he lit a cheroot. "There's war before us, boys, and a fine thing it will be too. It will give you both an insight into Indian character, and will make men and soldiers of you far sooner than would the peace régime, with its drills and manœuvres, its dances and its picnics."

Owen looked somewhat disconsolately down at his leg, and then up at the Major.

"The sergeant told me that war brought a soldier's chance," he said. "Whom are we to fight, Major, and when and where?"

"Steady. Three questions all in one, when you don't even know what corps you are to belong to! Now I will tell you. I have been to see the Governor, who tells me that he will be riding round here to-morrow, and will make a point of calling. It seems that he has had some intimation of your coming. I fancy you will both go to the native cavalry, but cannot say at present. How long will it be before you are fit to ride?"

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"I could almost manage now, sir," responded Owen eagerly, so eagerly indeed that his words brought a hearty laugh from Jack and his questioner.

"A regular young fire-eater!" exclaimed the Major. "But you know very well that that would be out of the question. If you mounted now the wound would open at once, and then your condition would be a sad one. But can you ride at all?"

Owen was bound to confess, very ruefully, that he was no great artist when mounted on a horse.

"Of course I have ridden a little, sir," he said. "I had a chance now and again when at the poorhouse, and when I was employed on the farm I often had a ride, sometimes as far as the town. But I cannot honestly say that I am a horseman."

"Still you have ridden, and that is everything, and when you were young too, which is a great advantage. I should say that you would pick up the art very quickly. It may be, then, that you will be able to come up country in a cart, and have your schooling when you reach your corps. Yes, that would be a way out of the difficulty. And now to answer your questions. The war is to be with the Mahrattas, old enemies of ours, who have threatened British power in India for many a year. They are freebooters for the most part, who have been a thorn in our flesh, and who must be exterminated some day or other if we are to enjoy our possessions tranquilly. I will tell you something about them soon. As to when, why, there have been skirmishes already, they tell me, so that the actual war will commence at once, hostilities being begun as soon as our armies collect. As to where, that is asking a lot. The rendezvous may be at Agra for all I know. But we were speaking of your joining the army. I shall be going, and Jack also. Troops will be marching from here very soon, and we shall ride with them. You will both want servants on the road, and of course can have a native soldier detailed to you from the ranks. When you join your respective corps you will draw a man from them, and will pay off those who have been with you on the journey. And speaking of servants, Jones, reminds me. There is a man outside, a Mahratta, I believe, who was aboard the ship. He called here some minutes ago and is waiting. Do you wish to see him?"

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Our hero signified his desire to do so, and smiled as Mulha entered, for he had grown very fond of the native, while Mulha had become a most faithful follower. He entered, dressed in native costume on this occasion, and salaamed to the Major, and then to the two younger men.

"What is it, Mulha?" asked Owen, as the native salaamed again to him. "Speak in English so that we can all understand."

"You are to join the army, sahib, and they say in the bazaar that there is to be war against the Mahrattas. I am one, but I am not a robber, like those in arms now. My family is a peaceful one, and we have long wished for the security given by British rule, and the enjoyment and peace which the natives have here and in other British settlements. I am returning home. It is some time since I left, and the anger of the people will have died down. Besides, I have saved money,

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and can pay for what I did. In a country inhabited by such freebooters money will settle any matter, and there will be peace between me and my enemies. That being so I shall want employment, and I have come to ask the sahib if he is looking for a servant?"

Once more the fellow salaamed, putting his forehead to his hands, and then stood erect, looking at Owen calmly, with the complacency of the East, and yet showing by the faint twitching of his beard that the answer would mean much to him.

"I will take you, and be glad to be able to do so," answered Owen readily. "It is a load off my mind. When will you be free of the ship?"

"I was paid off this afternoon. I am my own master now, sahib."

"Then I will engage you, and we will settle your wages."

It took only a couple of minutes to do that, for the Major was well used to Indian matters, and Mulha seemed to be careless as to what he received, so long as he could be with Owen. He salaamed gravely again, and departed to the servants' quarters, where he settled down at once, as if he had been used to the work all his days.

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"You are in luck," said the Major, when he had gone, "for there is no doubt that the fellow is attached to you. You speak his tongue, too, and there again you are fortunate, though you owe it entirely to your own energy. There are billets—special billets, mind you—for the fellow who can speak the tongue of the men we are about to fight."

At this moment servants brought in tea and cakes, and served them to all three, passing from one to another in that silence which is such a feature of Indian waiting. There were no clattering dishes, no clinking spoons and cups, and no creaking boots or heavy footfalls. They passed silently behind the chairs of the sahibs, and disappeared as quickly as they had come.

"What about the war, Major?" asked Jack suddenly, as he lit a cheroot, and sat up choking and spluttering, for he was as yet a novice, and cheroots were not always of the mildest.

"Try another, my lad," laughed the Major. "That is too strong, perhaps. No? Very well. Stick to it. You'll really enjoy it before very long. Ah yes, this war! Well, I happen to have a few minutes, and I know the country. I'll tell you. We fight the Mahrattas, and will give them a hiding if we can, for they deserve it. They are cantankerous beggars, and are always causing trouble. We've had rows with them before, and just now their power has become very dangerous. You see, it isn't altogether the Mahrattas. There are the French, with their eternal schemes against British power in this country. We are as fearful of their growing power as we are of that of the Mahrattas. In fact, it has been a race between us and the French for a long while, and it is still a toss up as to who will hold India in the end. John Company has had many ups and downs, and has been very near to extinction. But Clive gave the company a splendid fillip, and now, thanks to him and to other heroes, we are very strong and able to make a big effort. But, mind you, it isn't at all certain who will succeed."

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"I confess that the Company and its affairs is a mystery to me," burst in Jack, endeavouring to look at ease as he puffed smoke from his lips. "As soon as one lands in India—indeed, as soon as one embarks upon an Indiaman and gets free of the London docks, one hears of nothing but the Company. We know that it exists. But how and why? Half, and more than half, the fellows have not more than a vague notion."

There was no doubt that Jack Simpson was perfectly right. A great number of the young fellows who went out at this period to join the Company's service knew very little of its history and its origin. And to-day there are many who have heard little more than its name, while numbers who know of events which have passed in America, in Africa, in Spain and other countries, where British forces have fought, are somewhat hazy as to events which have passed in India since England first sent her sons there. To them India is a British possession, teeming with millions of dark-skinned subjects, and for ever attracting some slight attention because of oft-recurring frontier wars. They know little of the early struggles, of the days when British, Dutch, and French strove for supremacy, and of the endless fighting and sacrifice by which our country finally gained the proud title of conqueror of India, and won for its ruler the title of Emperor of this huge country across the seas.

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"Come, come," laughed the friendly Major. "You should have learned that at school. Every young fellow should know of it, and be proud to think that he is a descendant of the fine men who fought here before us. But if you really wish it I will outline the life of the old Company, though I must trust to my memory for dates. Still, you know, when an officer has been a servant of the Company for twenty years, as I have, he naturally knows a little about his employers. Let me see. We'll start at the beginning."

"The very beginning, Major, please," said Jack.

"Which would take us back to the days of Alexander, if you ask me to give a history of India. No! You must get a book and look that up. I am going to tell you of the Company, and in doing so I must naturally speak of India. Still, I'll say as much more as I can. To begin with, this India is even vaster than many of us imagine. Roughly, it extends for some nineteen hundred miles from north to south, that is from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin, and is inhabited by a good many more than a hundred million souls, natives I mean, and exclusive of Europeans, who are a mere drop in that vast human ocean. Just think of that. Here are we, a mere handful, attempting to impose our will upon a vast people, and doing it successfully too. The audacity of such a venture is really astounding!"

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"Then how is it that we succeed, Major?" Owen ventured to ask. "If we are so few, why don't they come down upon us and exterminate us?"

"Precisely! Why don't they? Why haven't they in the past? Because there is no combined movement amongst them. Because the country is for ever disturbed by jealousies and strife between the various races inhabiting it. That is one of the reasons, and the greatest. England, represented by the Company, has taken advantage of this condition of affairs, and while these struggles have gone on she has slowly and steadily increased her power and standing. Not that she was always prosperous. There have been times when the Company has been in very low water. But I will tell you how British pluck and determination, aided by jealousies of the natives, have succeeded, and how the Company which was formed in England on the 31st of December 1599 finally arrived at its present opulence.

"That Company was sanctioned by Queen Elizabeth, and it owed its origin to many facts which are of interest. We hear that India was but a word to the West; that few had ideas of the enormous wealth of the East, and still vaguer knowledge of the vast countries there, with their teeming workers. It was never even suspected that in this India, of which tales had reached our country, there were riches beyond the dreams of westerners, that there were gorgeous courts and palaces beside which the palace of Queen Bess was little better than a hovel. And that ignorance might have persisted had it not been for the energy and enterprise of a few, and those not always of our blood.

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"That brings me to deal with the men who first invaded this land, and my memory has to carry me back to my school days for that. Very many years before Alexander made his famous invasion the Greeks knew India, and travelled here in search of knowledge. Then came Alexander, with his hordes, marching through the passes in the north (Candahar Route), across the Punjab as far as the Hydaspes, a tributary of the Indus. That was in B.C. 327. He retired to Persia, and doubtless after he had gone the peoples in the north enjoyed some tranquillity.

"That the East was not entirely severed from the West in the earlier years of the Christian era is evident, for spices were to be had even in England, while it is said that missionaries went out to the East. But this India was but a vague name till Vasco Da Gama made his wonderful voyage round the Cape in 1498, and found his way to India. After that trade developed to a huge degree, and the Portuguese enjoyed its full benefits during the sixteenth century. And now we come, I think, to that period when England can be said to have taken some interest in the East, an interest, I fear, which was supported more by the hope of gain than by any other reason. In 1588 Cavendish discovered that the natives in the East would as willingly trade with us as with the Portuguese, while Sir Francis Drake, that fine old sea-wolf, captured five large Portuguese caravels, all laden with rich eastern stuffs. One had aboard also documents showing what immense trading possibilities there were in this country, and in addition the manner in which that trade could be carried on. Well, England is not always the first in an enterprise. She often waits till other nations have obtained a foothold, and then she stirs, and the history of her conquests and of her increasing possessions shows that she has done more than well. She waited till the Dutch, stirred by tales of wealth, despatched an expedition to India. Then certain gentlemen in England put their heads and their money together and created a Company. There, young fellows, you have the commencement of the Company."

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"And did they start trade in India at once?" asked Jack. "I suppose they had rows with the Portuguese and Dutch from the very commencement."

"You seem to think that I am a mine of information," grumbled the Major pleasantly. "I think that the first expedition left Woolwich in 1601, and touched the island of Sumatra, where we have so recently been. In the neighbourhood a Portuguese ship was captured, filled with eastern goods which were sufficient to load all the ships of the expedition, which numbered four. Thus the success of the venture was assured, and after sailing for Java—where agents were left, the very first trading representatives of the Company—the expedition returned home.

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"That was the beginning, and for many years the progress of the affair was but small. Certain privileges were obtained for trade from the Mogul Emperor, and before 1612 the ships of the Company had each made eight voyages to the East, realising fine profits. Still, their possessions were nil. See what they are now! Compare the condition of the Company then with its opulence at this moment. However, to continue, a factory was built at Surat, while an ambassador was sent to the court of the powerful Mogul Emperor of India at Delhi. At this period the Portuguese and Dutch were very prosperous, and exceedingly antagonistic to England and to each other. But a fortunate chance increased the holding of the Company. A certain Dr. Boughton had performed a service for some native ruler, who as a reward gave permission for a settlement on the Hooghly, while a fort was built at Madras, named Fort St. George, the land being obtained from some native prince. Thus you will see that the Company was making headway. But during the great Civil War in England its fortunes declined, till Cromwell reconfirmed its privileges. An agreement was come to with Bengal for the purposes of trade, and finally the island of Bombay was acquired, and thither the Company removed its quarters from Surat. And about these trading posts, for they were little else in those days, the natives gathered with their merchandise, making trading an easy matter.

"But circumstances occurred from time to time to disorganise the affairs of the Company, for there were always native wars, very often fomented by the scheming of the Portuguese and Dutch. In fact, the Company was so often in danger that at length, from being a purely trading concern, it became a body with some military power, and its peaceful policy was changed. It began to look for more land and more factories from which to conduct its business. And it was

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well that it did make preparations, for the Mogul Emperor was on a tottering throne, and the French were soon to come into the field. But steady, my lads. A cup of tea, if you please. Much talking makes one thirsty."

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CHAPTER IX

John Company

Major Alexander was not the man to be hurried, and moreover, though a soldier, he was a studious gentleman, and having accepted the task of enlightening his two young protégés, he was not the one to do it in a half-hearted manner. He sipped his tea with deliberation, and afterwards lay back in his chair, apparently more concerned with the rings of smoke which he blew from his lips than with India, the affairs of the Company, whose servant he was, and the war which he had intimated was about to take place. Then he yawned, sat up briskly, and gazed at Owen.

"That's what happened," he said. "This peaceful trading Company became pugnacious, not of its own freewill perhaps, but because it was for ever being harassed by others, and was for ever made to feel the effect of unfair competition on the part of the Portuguese and the Dutch. Moreover, its properties had increased, and military and sea power were necessary to protect not only the trading ports but the vessels and their cargoes as they went to England. Had they confined their energies to protection they would have done well, but they commenced upon the unwise policy of attacking the Mogul Emperor, and were badly worsted, Surat being wrested from them. However, it is stated that the treasury of the Emperor was low, and the combatants came to friendly relations again, so that Surat was restored to the Company. Meanwhile, however, the French had secured a footing, and had obtained a strip of land at Pondicherry, where they fortified themselves. This, as you may imagine, was a blow to the Company, and it became more than ever necessary to consolidate their power and prepare for eventualities. They obtained another concession, and some few years later built Fort William, here in Calcutta, and set up their trading post. Indeed, Calcutta was made the presidency of all the Company's possessions, and rapidly rose in importance. At this stage, if you have followed me carefully, you find the traders, whose servants we are, in possession of posts in Bengal, Madras, and Bombay.

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"And now I have brought the Company to a point in its history when matters became very critical for it," went on the Major, after he had paused for breath. "Their successes, the profits they had made, and the noise which their condition caused in England, led others to venture into the same region, bent on trading enterprises, and we find that a second company was formed, and then a third. This was a blow indeed to the old Corporation, but in the end the three bodies were united, and in 1708 they became 'The United Company of Merchants of England trading to the East Indies.' As you may imagine, such a settlement resulted in an enormous increase in the power and opulence of the Company, and, in fact, it is from this period that we find it really beginning to control the affairs of a portion of India. Its fortunes were consolidated, its military power increasing, and its sea power no small item when compared with former years. In fact, we can turn from it for a moment to consider the affairs of India itself, and thereby lead up to the war in which I trust we shall all three win honour and promotion."

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"And what of the Mogul Emperor?" asked Owen, as the Major stopped for a moment. "I don't pretend to know who is the ruler now, but I have heard that there is more than one."

"You shall hear. Even the mightiest emperor must die, and this man joined the great majority, and his son Azim was proclaimed emperor in his stead. It was a fine opportunity for the firebrands of the country to draw their swords, and Bahadur Shah seized the throne of Cabul, and followed by a horde of Afghans, Khyberees, and many other fanatical northern tribes, marched down to Agra. There they defeated Azim, slaying him and two of his sons, and capturing another son who was an infant at that time.

"But if these men sought to settle down in their possessions they were mistaken, for an example once set can be followed. A revolt broke out in the South, known as the Deccan, that part of India which lies south of the Nerbudda river. The leader was defeated and slain, and the men who followed him dispersed. But even this signal victory did not secure the throne of the man who had won the title of Emperor. Others were anxious to throw off his yoke, and we find that he was forced to make terms with the Rajpoots and with the Mahrattas, then as now a plundering race of freebooters. Nor were his troubles ended when these treaties had been made, for the Sikhs came upon him in their thousands, and ravaged his country to Lahore on one side, and as far as Delhi on the other. In the end Bahadur drove them back to the mountains, and there was peace. But he did not enjoy it long. He died in 1712, and left his throne more tottering than ever. For he left us no fewer than four sons who each desired to fill the post of Emperor.

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"Zehander triumphed over the other three, and held his post for a time, ruthlessly murdering or torturing all princes upon whom he could lay his hands. Then he was dethroned by his nephew, who had reigned but a few years when the Sikhs came down again and raided him, being helped by the Mahrattas.

"Was there ever such a condition of affairs? The country was for ever being upset, while the

peoples of Hindustan could settle to nothing. But if their affairs were disturbed, the constant troubles helped the Company of whom I have been telling you. They took every advantage of the strife to increase their hold, and it may interest you to hear that the humble efforts of another doctor aided them considerably, he having won favour by his skilful treatment of the Mogul. I will not tell you how this strife continued. It will be sufficient if I say emperor followed emperor with some rapidity, assassination and poison accounting for more than one, till Mohammed Shah occupied the throne, when the power of the Mogul declined very sensibly. Then came a split, the Deccan being seized by revolters, while the Northern Provinces fell to the arms of the Rohillas. Following this the great Nadir Shah invaded India from Persia, with a host amounting to 80,000, and overran the country, sacking Delhi and many another town, and reducing the land to poverty, for plunder was his sole aim. When he retired the Emperor was penniless and utterly cast down, while Mahrattas and Afghans for ever menaced him. Adventurers and rebels cropped up on every side, and by force of arms lopped off some portion of the Mogul's territories.

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"If the Emperor had his troubles, so also had the Company, for certain pirates preyed upon them. Then the French East India Company was becoming more and more a thorn in the flesh, and indeed laid siege to and captured Madras. And amongst their captives was that young man Clive, whose name is now so well known in and out of India. There followed many attempts on Fort St. David, situated on the Coromandel coast about one hundred miles from Madras, and only fourteen from Pondicherry, and for a time the fortunes of the Company were desperate. But recruits were gathered and the fort made completely safe. Then the spirit of the English led them to retaliate, and Pondicherry was besieged, but with little success. Finally, the peace of Aix-la-Chapelle settled the enmity of the two nations for a time, and Madras was handed back to us.

"But was it possible for two opposing companies, each seeking for the mastery, to be on friendly terms?"

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The Major appealed to his two listeners as he waved his hands deprecatingly. "Just so; national ambitions are apt to cause hostilities, and in a little while French and English were at war again, despite the peace of Aix-la-Chapelle. But meanwhile the Company espoused the cause of Sivaji, Prince of Tanjore, an extensive district in the Carnatic, who had been deposed by his brother, Pretauab Sing. In return the Company was to have Devi-Cottah and the surrounding district. I need not go farther into that matter; but our interference was not too successful, though we obtained the post we wanted. But we were not to enjoy it tranquilly, for here the French appeared again, aiding various princes in the Carnatic, and stirring up rebellion. Indeed, for many years the Company had to struggle against them, with varying fortune, till Clive came prominently on the scene. Then our luck turned, while that of the French began to decline. Troubles with French and natives alternated; Calcutta was captured by the newly throned Nabob of Bengal, and was taken again and avenged by Clive, who, proceeding on his ever-victorious way, finally defeated the Nabob at Plassey, and set Meer Jaffier on the throne, at the same time signing a treaty with him which was eminently satisfactory to the Company. There followed a long series of conflicts with the French under Lally, in which Fort St. David and Devi-Cottah were taken. But our fortunes revived, and in the end Pondicherry was captured from our enemies. To tell all that followed, in which Clive had any dealings, would be to ask you to listen to an endless succession of struggles, successes, and failures. I will merely say that this great man having returned to England, the affairs of the Company in Bengal fell into a bad way, and he was persuaded to return. He became Governor-General and Dictator, and under his able managership the affairs of the corporation rose to a secure footing.

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"If you have followed me you will have gathered that the fortunes of the Company had fluctuated, but that on the whole they had vastly risen since those first years when the enterprise was commenced. Fighting and conflicts had become the order of the day, and were still to continue, for now, my lads, we meet with another character, Hyder Ali, a freebooter and adventurer, who, with wonderful success, gathered men to his banner, and finally became ruler of huge tracts in Mysore and elsewhere. With him we went to war, but with ill success. Then followed a treaty with him, and that had barely been signed when the Peishwa attacked him with his Mahrattas, and humbled the pride of this marvellous land-pirate.

"And now I am getting to the close of my little lecture," said the Major, turning away from his listeners for a few moments while he stared out through the wide-open windows. "I arrive at a time when others came forward to interfere with the Company. Hitherto none had had their say as to the actions of the great and wealthy corporation. But the English Government had been itching to have a finger in this very rich and appetising pie, and while this conflict raged between Mahrattas and Hyder Ali, the Commons insisted on having a representative in India, and on controlling the working of the Company. There followed a war with Tanjore and its conquest, and afterwards a reduction of the Rohilla country, the great Warren Hastings being Governor-General.

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"Meanwhile the Mogul was but a name, a name to be scoffed at and to be openly derided. The days had passed when men trembled in his presence or at mention of his power, for on every side powerful princes and upstart adventurers defied the ruler of Hindustan, and carved out new fortunes and new possessions for themselves. It was not now a case of fighting against the Mogul, but a campaign for obtaining the largest possessions, the greatest riches and the utmost territory. And this ambitious policy led to war on every hand. India was continuously the scene of native intrigue and hostility, hostility which, as it raised some obscure individual to power and opulence, threatened the rule of the Company. Then, too, the Company's ambitious policy, and their constant desire to increase their own territories and power, did not make for peace, and we find them at war with the Mahrattas, their desire being to obtain possession of the island of

Salsette. A little later their equanimity was upset by the uprising of a Scottish East India Company, which, however, did not survive for long.

"And now we come to another stage in the history of this wonderful company. The French again appear upon the scene, in the person of the Chevalier St. Lubin, who took up his residence at Poonah, and began to have great influence with the Mahrattas. Pondicherry had been restored to France, and the two nations were at peace, though at this period there were many eminent Frenchmen aiding the Americans in their war of independence. Then followed a war with the Mahrattas, terminated by a peace which gained little if anything for the Company; and shortly afterwards Hyder Ali again appeared upon the scene, and we went to war with him. He died, and his son, the famous Tippoo Sahib, succeeded him. And against this young chieftain we waged three campaigns, in the second of which our troops were joined by our old enemies, the Mahrattas. Finally Tippoo was beaten and humbled, and in the end sued for peace. Thus the war with Mysore was ended for a time. In following years we find the Mahrattas again on the war-path, this time engaged with the Nizam. Then come the reduction of the Dutch settlements, many a battle with the French, for the main part at sea, a military charter granted to the Company, and once more the intrusion of our old opponents the French. They united with Tippoo, and in a final campaign this prince was slain, the whole of Mysore being conquered.

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"Then followed a settlement of Indian territory. The lands which Hyder Ali had brought beneath the sway of his sword were divided up, a fragment of its previous belongings was restored to the old Mogul Empire, 20,000 square miles of territory were annexed by the Company, and alliances made where possible. Nor did progress cease there, for our power increased in every part of India whither the Company turned its attention. Ceylon called for the despatch of troops, while a little later there came news that the French had other designs on India and had sent their troops to Egypt, hoping to take ship from Suez and invade our possessions. That is a tale of yesterday, and you will recollect how the attempt was utterly and completely frustrated. But their aims and ambitions were not thereby completely wrecked, for they had been for long steadily engaged in helping the Mahrattas, and the military efficiency of the latter has come to a dangerous height. That brings us to the present time, my lads, and leads to the cause of this war in which we are about to take part.

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"Perron, a Frenchman, has trained the battalions of Scindia, a great and overbearing Mahratta prince, and this ruler openly derided the Peishwa, his chief. At the same time he quarrelled with Holkar, another powerful Mahratta chief, and being defeated, left the Peishwa open to attack. The latter fled to us for protection, with the result that we have made a treaty with him and finally replaced him on his throne. This treaty, which aimed at the overthrow of the Mahratta confederation of chiefs, met with fierce opposition from Scindia, who promptly rallied his armies and showed an unmistakable desire to be hostile. That is how the matter rests at this moment so far as I know. Scindia may have withdrawn his men at our request, or he may have declined to do so. That is more likely, and to protect ourselves we are bound to fight him. There is known to exist a confederation of powerful Mahratta chiefs, and, as I have said, we have information that Perron and his lieutenants have organised and trained thousands of fighting men. It is time to move if we are not to meet with still fiercer opposition. If we fight now we have a prospect of victory, while if we wait the power of the Mahrattas increases. Moreover, while Buonaparte lives, and the French have ships, India may at any moment be invaded by the legions of the Emperor. But we all have hopes of Nelson. Some day I trust he may smash the sea power of France as surely as I trust we shall crush the battalions of the Mahrattas.

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"Thus you will see our cause for war. We must crush these battalions trained by Perron, or our own existence will be imperilled; and we must curb for ever the high ambitions and growing power of Scindia and the coterie of princes who have joined their fortunes with his. Soon, very soon, I hope, we shall march for the front, and then, my lads, honour and promotion."

He sank back in his chair and smiled at his listeners, pleased to have been able to satisfy their longing for knowledge, and not a little proud that he had been able to hold their close attention. Owen stared down at his leg, after having thanked the Major, and wondered when he would be fit to travel, and whether after all he would be lucky enough to take his share in the coming campaign. However, on the following day his spirits rose, for the surgeon who had been called in to attend to him held out hopes of a speedier recovery than had been promised.

"The country seems to agree with you, or perhaps it is the thought of this war which has made matters mend a little," he smiled. "This wound is healthy, and is closing fast. There is no bullet or other matter in it now, and therefore I fancy you will be about before long. Oh yes, you will be in time to go up country and test the bullets of the enemy."

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As it proved, however, there was no violent hurry, for the difficulties of commissariat and transport, the besetting difficulty of all armies when on the move, kept the troops in Calcutta for another six weeks, and ere that time had passed Owen was himself again. The wound was located in a part where horse exercise gave little strain, and before the troops left he had been able to mount.

"But you must on no account venture to trot or canter yet," said the surgeon, as he lifted a warning finger. "Get your limb used to the exercise by gentle degrees, so that by the time the march is ended you will be fit for anything."

The weeks as they went by brought abundant interest to the two friends, for Jack and Owen were close companions now, and the Major had taken a great fancy to both of them. As to our hero's affairs, they had settled themselves very nicely. Mr. Halbut, with his usual consideration and thought, had taken steps to see that his protégé lacked nothing, and though generous, did not

spoil his friend. In accordance with his promise the Governor called, and congratulated Owen.

"My great friend, Mr. Halbut, has written me about you," he said, as he sat down beside our hero, "and I am very pleased to think that I am able to send him such an excellent report. But let me tell you of the arrangements made for your service. You will be gazetted in the course of a few days to the 7th native cavalry, and will join that regiment up country. The appointment will be antedated, so that you will draw pay and allowances from the day on which you sailed from England. I have also made arrangements with one of our English banking firms to pay you a hundred rupees per month. This will continue during Mr. Halbut's pleasure, and until you are promoted. There is also a sum set aside for your uniforms, and for horses. My young friend, you have found a generous benefactor, and from what I can hear he has at length discovered a subject of absorbing interest. He has his own views on the ways of educating our young men, and you are the test which will prove or disprove his views. You have the right stuff in you. You have come to the front already by your own efforts. That is a good beginning. I shall not favour you. You must rely upon yourself and your own exertions. Still, your commanding officers will always be fair and just. A report will go forward that you have seen service, and have behaved well. Also that you are fitted for the post of interpreter, as you speak Hindustani and Mahratti fluently. That reminds me, I must have an example of your powers. I speak a little Mahratti, and Hindustani well enough to get along. Call some one who is good at both."

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Owen was delighted, and flushed to the roots of his hair. His pleasure at his appointment was very great, and deep down in his generous young heart was a full sense of gratitude to his good friend in England. In his silent and quiet way he then and there, not for the first time by any means, registered a vow to prosper, to push on, to face all risks and hazards if by doing so he could rise. He would push on up the ladder, rung by rung, for his own sake, but more than all so that he might do credit to Mr. Halbut and the sergeant.

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When six weeks had passed there was an evident stir in Calcutta; sepoy and white troops patrolled the thoroughfares, and cannon rumbled over the roughly paved streets. Officers cantered here and there, dressed in the most elegant and becoming uniform, and one which has never been surpassed since. And amongst these officers were occasionally to be seen two young men, Owen and Jack, the latter an ensign in a sepoy regiment. Both were bronzed by the sun, while our hero, if he happened to dismount, limped ever so slightly. They were filled to the very brim with high spirits and good temper, and as they came and went were for ever saluting the friends they had made. For their adventures in Sumatra had brought them to prominence.

"To-morrow we start," said the Major with a sigh of satisfaction. "The tents have gone ahead, and when we come up to the end of the day's march we shall find all in readiness. That is luxury, and is the way to travel in this country. But it will not last for ever. We shall soon have to have flanking guards, and a strong force in advance, with a rear-guard to cover us in that direction. There will be a dozen of us going up to join our regiments, and we have arranged to stick together."

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Before the dawn broke on the following morning the movement was commenced, and thereafter, for many a day, the white troops and the sepoy regiments continued to march, often during the hours of night, to avoid the midday heat. Their faces were set towards Poonah, some thousand miles across India, where they were to fall in with other troops. They lived well, and spent the time merrily, for the thought of war was pleasant to all. And in time they arrived within three hundred miles of Poonah, in a country where Mahratta horse had already ravaged the villages, and had gone, leaving nothing but death and starvation behind them. It was here, one early morning, that Owen met with another adventure. Their commissariat was low, and he and Mulha had ridden out to see what could be found.

"We have seen none but villagers, and they have been half-starved, poor people!" said Owen, as he and the native trotted along, the latter looking a very fine specimen of humanity, for now that he was dressed in Mahratta costume, his lithe figure was seen to advantage, while he sat his horse as only a Mahratta can, with that easy seat seen amongst the Boers in South Africa, and yet with the grip a British cavalryman adopts. But the Mahratta carries himself so gracefully erect that the difference between all three, though so small and so subtle, is easy to detect.

"And the sahib will find it difficult to get food," observed Mulha. "But there is a castle yonder on the hill, and there we might gather provisions."

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"I had my eye upon it," answered Owen. "Who would live there?"

"Perhaps a small chief, sahib. Possibly a well-to-do farmer. Who can say? It may be poor, like these villages, and the walls may be but a shell surrounding the burned interior. These freebooters who fight for Scindia would spy that place miles away, and would hardly leave it."

"Still they may have passed by it, and in these days when grub is so scarce——"

"And the officer sahibs do not receive rations——"

"Just so. We buy our own, till we reach our regiments—that's why we have to forage about for ourselves. There's a chance of food, Mulha, and we'll look into the matter."

They shook their bridles and cantered across country towards the small castle, talking as they went. Hundreds of times already had Owen congratulated himself on the fact that he had obtained the services of the native, for on the road he had proved invaluable. Then, too, thanks to the fact that they often rode side by side, Owen's Mahratti had become almost perfect. On this occasion they talked in that language, and were still chatting when they arrived within two hundred yards of the castle. No one was to be seen, though there were indications that men and

horses had been about.

"You can see the hoof-marks of the horses even without dismounting," said Mulha. "See there, sahib. It rained during the night, and those beasts passed in some two hours ago. There are many. Can it be that they are the animals ridden by troops?"

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They halted to discuss the matter, while Owen, now active again, and almost without a limp, dropped lightly out of his saddle and inspected the track.

"The hoof-marks are small and distinct," he said at length. "Some are pointing to the castle, and some to the plain. The horses were walking."

"Then they are probably beasts owned by the man who lives here. The sahib has a keen eye. He notes the small things which make for safety, and which the careless officer overlooks. Shall we advance, sahib?"

Owen nodded. Food was urgently required, and each day one of the officers who were travelling through with the troops was sent out to gather what he could. It was Owen's turn to-day, and self-respect demanded that he should not return empty-handed. He swung himself into his saddle and put his heels into his horse's flanks, setting him at a canter along the track, Mulha being just behind. They had arrived within a few yards of the castle, a very small affair as it proved, when there was a shout, a dozen loud reports, and as many bullets came screaming about their ears. Then to their amazement a troop of wild horsemen burst from a thick cover of trees some three hundred yards away, and with tulwars brandished above their heads came dashing towards them. At the same instant a loud call was blown upon some instrument within the castle, and a dishevelled figure appeared above the gateway.

"We were attacked early this morning, and only saw you a moment before," the man called out in Mahratti. "Will you enter? You will be cut to pieces if you attempt to ride away."

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Owen did not hesitate. As the bullets sang about his ears, and the horsemen thundered out from behind the top of trees, he stood up in his stirrups and surveyed them with every sign of amazement. But the man's voice and the weird call from the castle roused him. Digging spurs into the animal he rode, he galloped right up to the door and thundered upon it with the butt of his pistol.

"Open!" he shouted. "Quick, or we shall be taken!"

They heard the rasping of bolts, low voices, and the excited shouts of the native above. Then one of the massive doors was dragged back and they rode in. A glance showed a hollow square, with a residence of small proportions built against one wall. There was a path constructed around the summit of the walls, and on this and in the square were some thirty peons, or husbandmen, all armed with swords or matchlocks. Owen swung himself from his saddle and raced up a flight of open steps to the wall above. The advancing horsemen were close upon them, dashing pell-mell against the still open gate.

"Close it quietly," he shouted. "Let all those not engaged with the gate come up here. Now, the men who have guns must get ready to fire. But not a shot till I give the word. Bear that in mind. Not a shot!"

The few weeks during which he had been in India had given him a wonderful air of authority, and had accustomed him to the natives. And the surprise of the peons and their ruler was immense as he quietly took the command and addressed them in their own language. A moment before there had been every sign of impending panic. But as Owen drew his pistol again and leaned over the parapet, and Mulha followed suit, the peons came racing up to the walls, priming their weapons as they ran, and stood there awaiting the word from the young white leader who had so suddenly and unexpectedly appeared.

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CHAPTER X

A Mahratta Stronghold

Owen stood to his full height on the summit of the wall, just over the gateway, and a gallant figure he looked too; for the uniform he wore set off his straight limbs, his broad shoulders and slim waist, while his fair hair, his flashing eyes, and his bronzed face enhanced the whole. He was a young officer who attracted attention, and there was little wonder that the natives obeyed him without demur. Encouraged by Mulha they had already taken their stations along the wall, some armed with old matchlocks which looked as though they might be of greater danger to themselves and their comrades than to the enemy, and others with huge stones.

"Hold your fire!" Owen shouted again. "There are at least a hundred of those fellows, and they think they are going to burst in. We'll give them a lesson."

By now the advancing horsemen were within a few yards of the castle, and emerging upon an open space, where no doubt the cattle and horses of the owner were congregated in times of peace, they broadened their front, reined back into line, showing a wonderful mastery over their

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horses, and then galloped forward, setting up a deafening shout as they came. Up went their tulwars again, the blades scintillating in the brilliant sun over their heads. Altogether they were a formidable party, and Owen might have been excused had he experienced a feeling of indecision and fear at their appearance. But he was not the one to flinch. This was his first independent command, and he was determined to make the most of it. He leaned over the wall till the Mahratta horse who were charging down upon the gate saw him, and set up a defiant shout, while their leader, a young man of fine appearance, waved his tulwar and called out to him. Then he lifted his hand.

"Fire!" he shouted. "Now, load again."

Setting the peons an example he aimed with his pistol and pulled the trigger, his bullet striking one of the horses, and causing it to rear and paw the air. Then followed a scattered discharge, while a dozen missiles were cast at the horsemen. Evidently such a volley was unexpected, and when it was seen that five of the horsemen had fallen from their saddles, the remainder suddenly halted, and turning their horses with the rapidity of lightning rode off at a furious gallop.

"They will not rest till we are all taken and cut to pieces, sahib," said Mulha, as he came to Owen's side, a strange gleam in his eyes. "We were fortunate in that we were so close when the alarm was given, but I fear that it will help us little. There are more than a hundred of the enemy."

"And about thirty here, Mulha. It's a nasty business, I admit, but we must make the most of it. Bring the old fellow to me, so that I may learn what has happened."

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A minute later the aged native stood in front of Owen, salaaming with the utmost deference.

"The sahib is great," he said. "But for him these robbers would have battered the gate in and cut us to pieces."

"When did they come?" asked our hero. "Tell me all about them, and how it is that you and your men live in comparative comfort while all round here the villages have been burned."

"It is soon told, sahib. Years ago I built this place, for the land here favours me, and farming brings plenty of gain. But there were always robbers eager to despoil me, and having suffered once I made preparations to beat off other attacks. I gathered arms, the same that you see here, and erected this fort. Then I stationed a look-out on yonder tower, and a man has kept watch there ever since. At night the beasts are driven into the square and the gates shut. We have never been surprised, and those who have come in the night have been beaten off. These men, however, came in the early hours, when we were busy with the beasts, driving them out, and they nearly rushed the place. Allah be praised, they failed by a little!"

"And will try again," said Owen calmly. "There are quite a hundred of the fellows, and we are thirty. How much ammunition have you?"

"Plenty, sahib. I have always kept a good store."

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"And food and water?"

"Enough for a week. Had the beasts been here there would have been even more food. As to water, there is a well in yonder corner."

"Then things are not so bad," smiled Owen. "We have the advantage of walls round us, and no need to worry about provisions. That leaves us every chance of arranging the defence. What of the troops, Mulha?"

"They are seven miles away, sahib, and yonder ridge lies between us and them. They are not likely to hear the heaviest firing, and cannot possibly see us from their line of march."

"Then we will put them aside as unlikely to be of use to us," said Owen promptly. "But bear in mind the fact that a man might manage to get away as the evening comes, and with a good horse underneath him could reach our friends."

It was a point not to be neglected, but for the moment there was little use in considering the matter, for the Mahratta horse were in strength before the small castle, and their movements showed that they were firmly determined to capture the place without delay. Owen stared out at their retreating figures, and then ran lightly down the steps which led to the courtyard. Mulha followed him, and together they inspected the gates.

"Strong enough for ordinary purposes, but would not stand a long battering," observed Owen. "We must arrange for something to block up the opening should they beat the gates down. Call the farmer again."

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The old man came running to them, and having heard their request, nodded his head eagerly.

"There are barrels beneath the house, and abundant supplies of stones," he said. "I will give orders at once."

"And have the things piled in a circle just inside the gates. Now we will divide the men up for the defence of the castle, and those who are building the barrels and stones into position can act as a reserve. That will leave them free to complete the task."

Some few minutes later they had ascertained the fact that the garrison of the little fort amounted to thirty-four, including themselves and the aged farmer, while within the house were four of his family, all women. The men were at once divided into two parties; the first consisting of twenty men, all of whom were armed with matchlocks, were told off to man the wall on that face of the fort where the gate was situated. The remainder, now occupied in building up the barrels, were

to act as a reserve, and were to be prepared to take post wherever the castle was in danger. They were armed with rusty old tulwars, for the arsenal of the farmer was somewhat limited and very much dilapidated.

"They will have, in particular, to be ready in case the gates are beaten in," said Owen, "and perhaps it would be as well if you took post with them, Mulha. The old man and I will be above, and will come down if need be. Now, can you suggest anything more? We have a store of stones above, and our marksmen have been cautioned to fire carefully. What else is there to do?"

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Mulha shook his head and stared round at the top of the wall. "Nothing that I can think of, sahib," he said. "Should a thought come to me I will let you know. Had we not better take some notice of the enemy?"

In their eagerness to have all in readiness they had almost forgotten the existence of the Mahratta horse, but now Owen hurried to the top of the wall. He found the peons stationed there eagerly staring out at the tops of trees.

"They are preparing to move, sahib," one of them said, as he salaamed. "I have seen horsemen canter out into the open and then ride back. It will not be long before they come."

This indeed proved to be true, for when half an hour had passed some thirty of the wild horsemen rode forth, while behind them followed the remainder, for the most part on foot. It was obvious at once that this force was an irregular one, a point which none had noted before in the excitement of the attack. The men wore no regular uniform, but were dressed in any sort of costume. Some were decked in the gaudiest apparel, and the fineness of their saddlery and fittings showed that they had found plunder somewhere. Others looked as if fortune had hardly been so kind to them. But all possessed the very best of horses, and had strung to the saddle a number of bags, in which their loot and valuables were doubtless contained. Mulha, who had now rejoined Owen, pointed to the horses.

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"It would be well if my master had one or more of those beasts," he said. "They are bred in this country, and trained here, and when you have ridden them as I have, the beasts which brought us here do not compare with them. The sahib spoke of sending for help. Were one of us to attempt to gallop away it would be throwing a life to these brigands, for their horses are fleetier than ours. Also, they are so well trained that they will turn at a touch, even when galloping fast. The animals we ride find it difficult to pull up even when at a canter, and before they could turn these Mahratta horse would be round and away. Watch how the men manage them."

It was very fine indeed to see such horsemanship, and many a time did Owen long for one of the beasts ridden by the enemy. Later he was able to note too the appearance of these Mahratta freebooters. They were all tall, clean-limbed men, fierce and independent of mien. The majority carried tulwars, while all seemed to have pistols in their belts. A few had matchlocks, and these were dismounted on this occasion. Following the horsemen they ran forward till within some two hundred yards of the castle, when they each sought for cover, and Owen could see them crawling closer and closer, hardly exposing their bodies as they came.

"We can do nothing to them," he said to himself. "Our fellows are so poorly armed, and are evidently so ill accustomed to the use of weapons, that it would only be a chance shot which would hit. We will let them get to closer quarters. What can the horsemen be doing?"

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Had there been a company of British soldiers there, armed with respectable weapons, Owen would have been able very speedily to cause the enemy to move. But as it was, the matchlocks with which his men were supplied were so very old and inferior in range that it was useless to attempt to open fire till the enemy were close. And the latter seemed to be fully alive to this fact, for they came on with the greatest unconcern, till they were within a hundred and fifty yards. Then there was a shout, and their leader detached himself from their number. Riding forward, while his companions halted, he cantered to within fifty yards of the fort, and then held his hand above his head.

"He wishes to speak," said Mulha. "It will lead to nothing, but perhaps the sahib had better sign to him."

"Then order our men to hold their fire and on no account to show themselves," answered Owen.

He stood on the top of the wall and waved to the horseman, who at once cantered forward with an air of jauntiness and unconcern which matched well with his fine handsome features and the gaudy clothing in which he was dressed. He drew rein within ten yards of the gate and looked up at the figure above. Saluting Owen with his tulwar, he let the weapon dangle from his wrist by a silken cord, and grasping the reins with both hands stood up in his stirrups.

"Where is the old fox who owns and commands the place?" he demanded. "Let him stand above so that I may speak with him."

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"He is below," Owen answered promptly, in Mahratti, much to the astonishment of the native. "He was in command. I have taken his place. What do you want?"

"This morning, as we rode hither, our object was to raid the fort and capture the wealth which this old fox is said to possess. But our aims are altered, Englishman. We will spare the fort and the money if you are handed over to us. Let all hear that. There is life and freedom to all if the Englishman be given up. Refuse, and we will sack the place and tear you to pieces."

He shouted the words so that all could hear, and smiled grimly as he gave vent to his threat. And there was little doubt that his statement had an instant and wonderful effect. The humble peons who stood on the wall had little love for these freebooters, and desired only to be allowed to live

and work in peace. Life was dear to them, and here it was offered on one small condition. If they handed over the Englishman they were free. And what claims had he on their generosity?

Owen looked round at them, and could almost read their thoughts, while Mulha hastily rejoined his master.

"Shall I shoot the dog below who dares to attempt to suborn our men?" he asked, as he drew his pistol. "They will give us up. We are at war with their people, and they have no reason to be kind to us. You can hear them murmuring."

There was little doubt that more than one of the peons was in favour of accepting the terms offered. A group of them gathered in the yard below and discussed the question volubly, while those on the wall above looked at one another, not daring to speak as Owen and his servant were so near. It was a critical moment, and if more time were given for discussion there was little doubt that the decision of the peons would go against the young leader who had so suddenly appeared amongst them. Life was dear to all, and at the prospect held out to them they forgot in an instant the service which he had done them. But Owen was not the lad to give in without a struggle. He saw at a glance that immediate action was necessary, and his decision was taken in a moment. He stood to his full height on the wall, and drawing a pistol presented it at the horseman below.

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"I will give you five seconds to move away," he said curtly. "If you are not gone then I will shoot you like a dog. I have commenced to count."

Utter amazement was written on the face of the Mahratta. He knew his countrymen well, and he had taken it for granted that his terms would be accepted, and that the Englishman would be handed over without a struggle. And here, almost before the words had left his lips, his promise was rejected, and he was ordered away. He sat down on his saddle and stared up at Owen. Then with a touch of knee and rein he swung his horse round and rode away, jaunty as ever, but in his heart of hearts somewhat disconcerted by the rapid action taken by the white commander of the garrison.

"By my tulwar," he growled, "but these sons of sheitan have a way with them that convinces! The words had scarce left my lips when he had the pistol at my head, and who could stand and face that? The dog! I will snatch him out of the fort, and then he shall be done to as has happened to some of the refractory villagers. As to the peons and the old fox—well, it will be the same. Had they handed this white dog over they would have lived but a few minutes; for a commander can promise, but who can control Mahratta horse?"

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Well might he ask that question, for the men under his rule were as ugly a set of rogues as could well be met with. There was not the slightest doubt that they belonged to those irregular bands who, while fighting for some chief, preyed upon any one who possessed goods, and who was sufficiently helpless. And was it likely, considering their numbers, and the helplessness of the peons who manned the fort, that they would be content with the life of the Englishman?

Owen swung round upon the natives, and singling out a group where the men were engaged in discussing the question, casting their eyes up at the white youth and at Mulha every second, he slowly descended and approached them. Mulha followed closely at his heels, marvelling at the coolness of his leader and wondering what he would do.

"Those two are the ringleaders," exclaimed Owen suddenly, selecting two of the peons who obviously sought to persuade their comrades, and who at his approach had scowled at him, murmuring under their breath. "Bring them out, Mulha, and place them against that wall. They will be shot at once. You have a pistol. Execute them for me, but wait while I look for others."

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He turned his eyes from the group, and without concerning himself with them further looked round the fort. A few of the men who had been engaged with the barrels at the gate had their heads together, but as he gave his orders to Mulha in loud tones they separated a little, and stood there undecided. But they did not deceive Owen.

"In a few seconds they would have had the gate open, and would have shouted to the enemy to come in," he said to himself. Then, speaking in loud tones so that all could hear, he cried, "Let all within the fort watch the punishment I am about to give to these two men, and remember that I will shoot others, too, at the first sign of mutiny. You invited me here, and I have helped you so far. You must stand by me to the end."

Meanwhile the faithful Mulha had carried his master's orders out to the very letter. Careless of the scowls and oaths of the men gathered in the yard he drew his pistol and advanced towards them, and as one of the party, taking courage at the smallness of the numbers opposed to them, and at the words of his comrades, attempted to arrest his progress, he struck him over the head with the butt of his pistol, causing him to fall insensible. Then he ordered the two who had been acting as ringleaders to emerge from the group.

"Disobey me and I will blow your brains out now and here," he said sternly, raising the weapon to the face of the nearest.

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The threat instantly brought the peons to their senses. The group melted as if by magic, and the two who had been selected for execution were forced to turn and walk to the opposite wall, where they stood looking piteously at Owen, their limbs shaking, and all thought of opposition or mutiny now gone from their minds. These men were accustomed to obey, and the resolute attitude of the newcomers, the rapidity with which they had acted, and the firmness of their decision, had nipped the mutiny in the bud. All round the fort, as Owen sought each one of the defenders, he saw stupefaction and fear. The men looked shamefaced and beaten, and they

turned their eyes away as he glanced at them, ashamed of their unworthy thoughts, and trembling lest they too should be selected for punishment. On Owen's open features there was a grim and determined expression. He pushed his pistol back into his belt and beckoned to the old man who was in command.

"You may go to them," he said, pointing to the two natives trembling beside the wall. "Perhaps they will have some messages to give you for their friends and relatives. They will be shot in five minutes."

An ominous hush came over the fort as Mulha saw to the priming of his pistol, and came across to borrow his master's, while the two unhappy wretches, who undoubtedly deserved their fate, for they would have sacrificed our hero willingly, fell on their knees and then grovelled at full length on the ground. As for the old man, he was too thunderstruck to speak at first. However, with an effort, he managed to address his men.

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"The white sahib does justice, pure justice," he said solemnly, as he caressed his grizzled beard. "You have brought this upon yourselves, and but for his action you would have brought worse. Fools, all of you!"—he swung round, and shouted his words of scorn so that all could hear—"Fools! to imagine that the tigers outside who have set the country aflame, who have fired villages by the score, so that the sky was lit up at night, and who have slain men, women, and children on every side, would spare you when there was loot to be had! Are you mad that you believe in such empty promises? These robbers would but save the English sahib for the torture, and having taken his guiding hand from you would have battered in the gate and cut the throats of every one. Fools and dogs! You deserve to die, every one of you, and his highness, the sahib, is merciful when he selects but two. Give me the pistols, and I will carry out this execution, that all may see and believe that I too have no pity for such as these."

He staggered up to Mulha and reached out his hand for the weapon, and there was little doubt that he would have shot his two servants without hesitation. However, the lesson had gone home, and Owen felt that he could now with safety to himself show a little clemency. The men were cowed, and of all the garrison the two poor wretches grovelling on the ground were the least likely to prove mutinous in the future.

"They have had their lesson, and I think we might spare them," he said to Mulha in English. "Besides, we want every man for the defence. I will speak to them."

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Walking slowly across the square, with Mulha and the old native at his heels, he halted a few feet from the unhappy couple and ordered them to rise.

"An Englishman does not love useless bloodshed," he said sternly, "and though your lives are forfeit, and I should be justified in shooting you, I will show you that men of my race are merciful. I suspend the sentence till this action is over, and it will depend on yourselves as to whether I spare you then. Fight well and you shall live. Show sign of wavering and I will execute you without mercy. As to you others," he turned and addressed the men on the walls and in the yard, "you have had your warning, and your chief has shown you the folly of listening to robbers who have no conscience, and to whom a vow is nothing. Go to your posts, and remember that death awaits us all if the horsemen break in."

There was a loud murmur of applause on all sides, while the peons salaamed abjectly to him. Then they took up their weapons and went back to their places, a different light shining in their eyes.

"They will fight to the bitter end now, sahib," said the old man. "They are but humble creatures, apt to be easily led astray. But they are grateful for your mercy, and they respect men such as you, who can face odds so calmly. Give your orders, sahib. There will no longer be any thought of mutiny."

Five minutes later there was a shout from one of the men above, and Owen at once ran up to the top of the wall. He was greeted with a shower of bullets, while the crackle of musketry broke out all along that face of the fort. Standing on the parapet he looked down at the enemy, to find that those who had advanced on foot had crept to within less than a hundred yards, where they had placed themselves under cover, some paces separating each of the men. And from this position they were able to command the gateway and the top of the wall. Indeed, hardly had he appeared when the shots rang out more frequently, and some dozen bullets crashed against the dried mud wall at his feet, or hurtled past him with the loud hum made by a missile of large calibre. One went a little aside of its mark, and striking a peon who had ventured to look over the wall, killed him instantly. Owen at once leaped on to the pathway below, and bent low to obtain shelter.

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"They have placed themselves cleverly," he said to Mulha, "and will shoot our men if they venture to return the fire. We must have cover. Send the peons from below up here with as many large stones as they can carry, and let every man erect a little wall before him."

The eagerness of the garrison now was wonderful, and those below at once commenced to carry out the order. In a few minutes, indeed, each one of the marksmen had cover behind which he could fire, while an aperture had been left between the boulders for the musket.

"Pick off those you can see easily," shouted Owen, taking his station behind one of the covers. "Don't fire unless you are certain, and if there is a rush, let some of you cast stones down upon them. There are the horsemen. They are going to make a rush."

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It was difficult to understand how the Mahrattas hoped to succeed, or how they expected to beat in the doorway, for they advanced at a gallop, as if they expected to dash against the obstacle and thrust it aside in that manner. In a little while, however, Owen and Mulha saw their design,

and stretching over the parapet emptied their pistols repeatedly amongst the horsemen. For the Mahratta chief who led these freebooters had a head upon his shoulders, and, from his method of procedure, had attacked similar posts before. Cleverly placing his marksmen close to the fort where their fire could keep down that of the peons, he led some forty of his horsemen forward at a rush which startled the defenders, and caused many to emerge from their shelters so as to obtain a clear shot, thus exposing themselves to the men below. When within twenty yards of the gates he raised his tulwar in the air, and at the signal six men detached themselves from the party and raced on, while the remainder wheeled and galloped along the face of the fort. Those who had advanced drew rein at the very foot of the walls, and secure now from the shots of the defenders—for to fire down upon them a man must lean right over the parapet and fall an almost certain victim to the marksmen under cover below—two dismounted and busied themselves with something which one of them carried lashed to his saddle. There were a couple of loud thuds, as if a nail had been driven into the woodwork. Something was lifted up and attached to the gate, and then the men were in their saddles again and, accompanied by their fellows, were racing along beneath the walls of the fort.

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Careless of the consequences Owen hung over the parapet and watched the men, though he was helpless to interfere. Then he drew back, just in time to avoid a storm of bullets aimed at him.

"The gate will go," he said in tones of apprehension. "They have driven a wooden peg into the keyhole, and have slung a big bag of powder to it. It will be off in an instant. Call the men away, and let all up here run below for their lives."

Shouts resounded through the air till the walls of the fort rang again, while the men rushed for the courtyard, tumbling over one another as they fought for places on the flight of steps. Owen followed more leisurely, and had just reached the ground below when there was a deafening explosion, and flame and smoke leaped into the air and through the gateway, while planks, portions of woodwork, strips of iron, and a hundred odds and ends were hurled into the yard. A hoarse shout was heard from outside, and when a puff of wind had blown the smoke aside those who held the place looked upon a scene which would have awed the boldest. The gates were gone. A huge rent had been torn in that wall of the courtyard, and but for a heap of debris and portions of splintered barrels, nothing stood between them and the enemy.

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CHAPTER XI

An Old Man's Ruse

Had some terrible earthquake suddenly occurred, and set the walls of the fort and the house attached to them tottering and swaying, those within the courtyard could not have been more dismayed. The explosion which had smashed the gates to splinters, the flash of the powder, and the tremendous roar of the upheaval, followed by the clatter of falling wood and masonry, brought consternation to the defenders, and in a moment they were transformed into cravens, some of whom stared at the open space in the wall, with its ragged edges still clad in a mantle of thin smoke, as if they were fascinated, while others crouched on the ground, their faces in their hands, dreading another explosion. Only Mulha, Owen, and the aged owner of the fort kept their senses.

"They have beaten us, sahib," said the old man sadly, as he stood beside our hero, and listened to the hoarse shouts of triumph which the enemy sent up. "They will break in now without a doubt, and we shall be killed. For myself, I shall not grieve, for I have seen the best of life and am tired of the endless struggle against these lawless people. For you and for these peons here I am sorry. You are young. The world was before you. Doubtless you have friends over the water who will grieve. All whom I love are within the house, and lest they should fall victims to these robbers I will slay them myself. Yes, they shall die easily rather than incur the ferocity of the horsemen."

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"Steady! we must not be in a hurry," exclaimed Owen suddenly. "If they are sure to kill us I at any rate will make a fight first. No giving in to be peacefully slaughtered, thank you. Mulha, we'll line the gateway, and show these fellows that we are not beaten. Now listen!"

He swung round upon the old man, who stood quietly beside him, evidently resigned to his fate, and spoke as rapidly as possible, giving his orders in a tone which told that he required them to be carried out without question and without delay.

"Take half a dozen of the men and send them to us with more barrels, with stones, anything you like. We will hold the gateway if possible while they bring the things. They are to pile them in front of us. See to it immediately. Now, Mulha, collect the bravest of the men and come to the gate."

They ran across the narrow courtyard, gathering men as they went. They shouted at the top of their voices to encourage the peons, and it was not long before half a dozen of the natives had joined them, armed with tulwars or muskets, while the remainder looked on in doubt. A minute later, however, they stirred and came running forward, for Owen let them feel no doubt as to what would be their fate if the enemy broke in.

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"Choose for yourselves," he cried, so that all could hear. "Do you think that those ruffians outside will spare a single one of you if you crouch and offer no resistance. They will kill you in their own particular manner. Fight while you have the opportunity. Come to the gateway, and stand shoulder to shoulder with us. We can still keep them out, and in a little while we shall have a barrier behind which we can fight."

It was very fortunate for the defenders that the Mahratta horsemen outside did not dash forward at once to capture the place, for had they come on the instant the explosion had occurred they would have burst their way in without encountering any but the feeblest opposition. But the men outside chose a very different course. While not lacking in dash at other times, they were notoriously more venturesome when attacking helpless villagers than when engaged with an enemy able to return hard knocks for those which were given. Indeed, our former campaigns with the Mahrattas had proved that this race of freebooters were as a whole somewhat deficient in courage, and it was this very deficiency which proved the salvation of those within the fort. The Mahrattas held back, for the prowess of a single Englishman was sufficient to cool their ardour, and Owen had already proved to them that he could fight. They galloped backwards and forwards before the gateway, shouting defiantly and waving their tulwars above their heads, while those who had dismounted earlier contented themselves with a desultory fire, their bullets sweeping in through the opening. Owen and Mulha made the most of the delay. By dint of setting a gallant example, by persuasion and almost by compulsion, they gathered the peons about them, and bidding them lie flat on the ground urged them to push what remained of their barrier into position. Then the men, whom the aged owner of the place had taken with him, came running from the house with bales of cloth, sacks of grain and rice, and any bulky package which would serve the purpose.

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"Let them run over to the side wall, and then come along at the foot of the wall in which the rent is," Owen shouted. "They will escape the bullets by doing so. Ah, those fellows outside are troublesome!" he exclaimed, as one of the unfortunate peons, emerging into the courtyard with a sack of rice on his shoulders, suddenly pitched forward on to his face and lay there with arms and legs outstretched. "We must keep their fire down. Mulha, send four of the men whom you judge to be cool and the best shots to the top of the wall. They can fire from behind the defences we built up. Hurry, now! They are collecting to attack us. We must have everything in readiness."

He looked anxiously through the opening in the wall, now wide enough to admit ten men side by side, and sheltering behind a couple of bags of rice stared out at the enemy. It was clear that they were gathering for the assault, for their leader had already led the horsemen to a spot some two hundred yards away, where all had dismounted. And now they were returning on foot, leaving a small guard with their animals, and he noticed that every man carried a formidable tulwar in his hand, while not a few had pistols, and some daggers of eastern shape and manufacture. Owen turned his eyes towards his own command, and a thrill of misgiving went through him, for against the well-armed host outside, many of whom were clad in clothing capable of resisting a stout blow from a sword, he had but a handful of almost naked peons, whose rolling eyes and side glances showed that they were none too sure of themselves. And some of these poor fellows were armed with ponderous muskets, from which at the most only a couple of shots could be fired in a minute, while others gripped rusty tulwars. One even carried a bow and a sheath full of arrows; but very soon showed that he was possibly destined to be more dangerous to the enemy than any of his comrades. As the Mahrattas advanced he fitted an arrow to the string and peered out from behind the barricade which was fast becoming of respectable proportions. Then Owen saw him rise to his feet, take a hurried aim, and send his shaft at one of the Mahratta marksmen who had risen from his cover to cheer on his comrades.

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"A good shot! Bravely done!" Owen called out, while he stood up and pointed to the man. "He is closer in than any of his fellows, and that is why you managed to reach him. A brave shot! He will be more careful next time."

Indeed, when next he peeped in that direction he saw the man slowly and laboriously crawling back; for he had advanced till very close to the gateway, and until the sharp eye of the peon had detected him. And now he was retiring, a sadder and a wiser man, with a shaft transfixing his shoulder.

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"Sahib, there are eight men here who have some knowledge of their weapons," said Mulha suddenly, coming to Owen's side. "I have posted four above, and here are the others. If placed within the house, where they could send their bullets over our heads, they would perhaps compel the enemy to withdraw. In any case they would cause trouble."

He pointed to the rickety-looking native house, built against the wall opposite to that in which was the gateway, and indicated with a movement of his finger a window which occupied the central post. Owen gave a start of surprise, and putting his hand to his mouth, for the shouting outside was becoming deafening, called loudly for the old man. A moment later the four peons who had been selected by Mulha were racing for the house, following in the wake of the figure of the owner, whose grey beard streamed in the wind, while his thin legs cut across the ground at a pace and in a manner which at another time would have brought a shout of laughter from the onlookers. For this native was well advanced in years, and a thriving farm, increasing wealth and possessions, and some amount of power, had engrafted on him a degree of dignity which forbade all such active movements. He was wont to pass quietly and majestically amongst his peons, not to race across the yard with his beard and turban flying in the wind, and his thin shanks exposed far above the knee. However, necessity is the cause of many a change. In less than a minute his anxious face appeared at the window, with the four men beside him.

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"We can fire well from here, my lord," he called down in his high-pitched, squeaky tones. "There is no danger of our hitting you at the gate, though I am warning the men. Look, sahib, they are coming!"

His tones rose to a shriek, and as Owen stared through the gateway he realised at once the reason for his sudden excitement. The Mahrattas were coming. Gathered in a close mass they had advanced till just within shot of the walls, and had halted while their leader harangued them, walking up and down before them and waving his tulwar. But now they were advancing once more, and on this occasion at a run, their eyes fixed eagerly upon the heads of the defenders which now appeared above the barricade erected within. Owen turned to his men and pointed to the enemy.

"You see them for yourselves," he said in significant tones. "Let them enter, and not a single man here will live to tell the story. Hold to your posts, beat them back, and slay as many as you can, and you will be proud men to the end of your days, and more than that, the news of your success will keep others from coming. Now, let each act coolly. Not a shot is to be fired from here till I give the word. Stand beside the barricade, and do not allow a single one to climb over it."

By now, thanks to the enemy for the respite which they had given, and to the frenzied labours of the men who had been carrying bags to the barricade, the circle so hurriedly erected within the gateway was of considerable dimensions. It was composed of every sort of material, of fractured barrels, piled up masonry, bales, sacks and boxes, all heaped haphazard one upon another, but for all that in such a manner as to construct a wall some four feet in height. But, though it gave excellent cover, it had one fatal fault. A resolute enemy, attacking from the other side, could, if they tried, tear the wall to pieces within a few minutes, or might with one vigorous rush overthrow it and come pouring into the yard. Everything depended on the temper of the defenders, and upon the courage which they showed.

"I will stand in the centre, Mulha, and do you take post a little on one side," said Owen. "The others will close up to us. Remember, men, there can be no turning back. I myself will shoot the first who ventures to retire."

He looked grimly round at the peons, his pistol in his left hand, while his sabre was firmly grasped in his right. There was an air of easy assurance about him, the air which he had worn when fighting Hargreaves on the ship. But in his heart he could not feel that assurance, for the result of the contest was more than doubtful. It promised to end in utter defeat and in the death of the defenders. Mulha thought that too, for as the Mahrattas charged in at the gateway the faithful native edged closer to his master, and catching his eye for the space of one second salaamed to him gravely, as if bidding farewell. There was no time for more, for like a stream which has overflowed its banks the dismounted Mahrattas, each struggling to enter the gateway, struck in a long wave against the wall, and those who happened to be opposite the entrance came struggling and stumbling through the rent. Owen lifted his hand and shouted to his men. Then as the report of their muskets broke out, and shouts of excitement began to come from the peons in answer to those of the enemy, he leaned his pistol on the top of the barricade and took careful aim at the Mahratta leader, who, seeing his design, held back for an instant. But his own men pressed him on. In a moment he was well within the gateway, and seeing the impossibility of retiring, he summoned all his courage and sprang at the white officer behind the barricade. Click! The hammer fell, but there was no answering flash. The weapon had missed, and the Mahratta had escaped. But it was only for an instant. An example was required to put heart into the peons, and Owen set it. With a shout of anger at the failure of his weapon he sprang on the top of the barricade, and shifting the pistol into his right hand threw it with all his force at the leader. There was a dull crash as the loaded butt struck his head, and then a rousing shout of triumph.

"He is down! Fight! Beat them back! Drive them from the wall!"

It was Mulha who voiced the words, and a shout of defiance and triumph burst from the peons. Desperation had hitherto helped to keep their courage up, though the numbers opposed to them brought dismay to the majority. But as Owen struck the Mahratta leader to the ground, their determination to hold the place was suddenly increased. Like a flash they saw that what he had done might be accomplished by others. They had a wall in front of them, and a white man to lead them. All was not hopelessly lost, and at the thought they threw themselves upon the Mahrattas fiercely. The struggle which followed was carried on with the utmost determination, and for a little while it seemed as if Owen and his men would drive the enemy clear of the gateway. Tulwars clashed against tulwars, muskets and pistols flashed, while the air was rent with deafening shouts, with the shriek of the wounded, and with the loud reports of fire-arms. From the wall above stones were tossed down upon the Mahrattas, while the four men posted in the window of the house kept up a steady fire. Indeed, the defenders did their utmost. But numbers were beginning to tell, while some five of the peons had already been killed or severely wounded. Owen still held his place in the centre, and standing on the barricade thrust and cut savagely at the enemy. Mulha had edged still closer, and his keen blade rose and fell, guarding a cut here, and returning it with lightning-like rapidity, or darting over there to parry a cut made at the white sahib. If bravery and determination could have brought the victory, it would have been theirs. But the Mahrattas were far too many for them, and their anger and hate had been raised to a high pitch by the losses they had already sustained. By now they were pressing against the barricade, which in one part was almost levelled. In a minute they would probably sweep the obstacle aside and force their way in. The end was close at hand, and as Owen unconsciously noticed how matters were going, and sought for a remedy as he struck with his sabre, he could think of nothing. He must stand there fighting to the last till some of the robbers threw

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themselves upon him and cut him to pieces.

But there was one within the fort who had a remedy, and he came to the rescue with a shriek of excitement which rose above the shouts of the combatants and the roar of the muskets. It was the old man who had first induced Owen and Mulha to enter, offering them a haven when the Mahrattas galloped out to surround them. Suddenly emerging from the house he raced across the courtyard at his topmost speed, and arriving at the stone stairway, ascended it with a succession of agile leaps, four steps at a time. Then he sped along the narrow pathway on the wall till he reached the very edge where the masonry had been blown away. No one seemed to notice him, for all were engaged in the deadly contest below, while those of the Mahrattas who still remained outside for the reason that there was no room for them within the gateway, pressed against their comrades, hoping by sheer force to drive them through the barricade. And as they pressed they watched the contest with eager eyes, failing to note the figure of the old man above.

For a few seconds he stood there, bending over a bundle which he carried beneath his arm. Then he threw off the rag which formed the outside covering, and disclosed a cask of small dimensions, to the top of which he held a smoking brand. Not till then did the enemy catch sight of him, and when they did they were helpless to interfere. Some shouted at the top of their voices to warn their comrades, while others, on the outskirts of the attacking crowd, took to their heels without a moment's hesitation. And meanwhile the old man held his small brand to the cask, till the fuse which emerged from an auger-hole began to splutter. Then he threw the brand behind him, and looking down sought for the best spot in which to toss the barrel. A moment later he had it poised above his head, and seemed to be in the very act of throwing it. And all the while the fuse spluttered, sending out a cloud of thin sulphurous smoke.

"Throw it! Blow them to atoms! Send it now, or you will be killed!"

Mulha had caught sight of the figure above, and realising in a flash what he was about to do shouted to the old man. But he did not stir, or attempt to throw his missile. He stood there, poisoning the barrel, looking from the struggling mass below to the spluttering fuse, as if he were fascinated; and while he waited the train which he had fired swept down the fuse with appalling rapidity. It was barely an inch from the auger-hole now, and in less than a minute it would disappear within. And then—

"Is the man mad? Throw it!" shouted Mulha, while the men stationed in the window behind repeated the warning, bellowing the words at the top of their voices, and with all the force of their lungs.

"Throw it, master! You will be blown to atoms. Toss it into the robbers and send them to the sky!"

And if they wondered why he still clung to his bomb, as if seeking his death, the Mahrattas marvelled even more. The shouts of warning had reached their ears, and not a man but had turned his eyes upon the figure above. Instantly they were thrown into a panic, and forgetful of the white officer and his peons they turned in desperate haste, and mindful only of the bomb and of the figure above they struggled to get out of the gateway with more desperation than they had shown when making the attack. There came a shriek of triumph from the old man, a shriek which set the enemy quaking.

"Forward!" he shouted, waving the barrel as if to attract Owen's attention. "Forward, sahib, and cut them up!"

"Back! Run in here well behind the wall!" cried Owen. "The poor fellow has gone mad. If we were to charge we should be blown to pieces when the powder explodes. Lie down, men, close to the wall, and wait till it is over."

"Sahib, I think he is right. Let us charge," gasped Mulha, coming suddenly to his side. "The old man has played a cunning trick upon the enemy. He has no bomb. The cask is probably empty."

If there had been any doubt about the matter the native set it at rest on the instant. Realising that the white sahib and his men were as fearful of the expected explosion as were the enemy, and that what was clear to him was not so to them, he bent down so that the enemy could not see him, and brought the cask against the side of the wall with a bang which broke it to pieces.

"Empty! See!" he shouted. "Forward! Do not delay an instant! By Allah, they will escape us!"

Then it was all a ruse! After all, the old man who owned the fort had snatched his peons and the white sahib from disaster. It was almost incredible, but none the less true. Owen grasped the meaning of the antics of the native, and at once leapt to his feet.

"After them!" he shouted. "Keep together, and do not go far from the walls. We will teach them to leave us alone in future."

Waving his sabre aloft he put himself at the head of the peons, who were now overflowing with courage and eagerness, and vaulted over the barricade. The Mahrattas were almost clear of the gateway, and as our hero rushed at them the last of the attackers fled from between the shattered walls. But they were not to escape so lightly, and had yet to receive punishment for the injury they had done. Owen saw that panic had got a firm grip of them, and emboldened by that he led his men far from the walls. Gathered in a close knot they dashed out, cutting down all who stood in their way, and did not halt till they were at least fifty yards from the walls. By then they had slain a number of the stragglers, while the rest were in full flight.

"Now, halt and pepper them with your muskets," shouted Owen at the top of his voice, for the din was tremendous, and the excitement of the peons beyond description. "Lie down here and send your bullets into them as they mount."

A few of the men happened to have their weapons loaded, and at that moment the four marksmen who had been posted on top of the wall, together with those who had been in the window, came up with their comrades, and adding their fire caused a considerable amount of execution in the ranks of the enemy, who meanwhile had rushed to their horses and were engaged in mounting them. For a little while there was a scene of the utmost confusion, for some men took any horse which happened to be nearest, while others, finding their own mounts gone, went in search of them. Finally, galled by the fire of the muskets, and filled with an unaccountable panic, the whole mass of Mahratta horse galloped away, leaving some thirty of their fellows on the ground. And long ere Owen or Mulha could inspect the wounded or interfere they were dead, slain by the infuriated defenders; for this was war to the knife, and any of the freebooters who had brought such misery to the country, and who might chance to fall into the hands of the people, could expect no mercy at all.

"That is the last that we shall see of the gang," said Owen, when they were out of sight "But in case they should take heart and return we will make ready for them. Set the men to work to rebuild the barricade, and let us have double as many sacks."

"They will not dare to come near this part of the country again," exclaimed the old native, with an emphatic shake of his head as he came up to Owen. "Still, we will be prepared. They have had a lesson, sahib, and thanks to you, they have lost their leader. But for the arrival of the white lord we should all have been slain by now."

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"Thank yourself," answered Owen heartily. "We were cornered. The attack was going against us when you ran up with your bomb. To you alone we owe our safety and deliverance."

"Nay, sahib, that is not the whole truth. It is a fact that when matters were going badly for us an old man's wit saved the situation. It came as a flash to me. There was the barrel, empty as it happened, and near at hand was a piece of rag. I wetted it with a few drops of water and made a fuse while the struggle was at its height. Then I bored a hole with an instrument which happened to be handy, and seizing a brand ran to the walls. I know these marauders. Death has no favours for them. They are bold where there is no danger to themselves, and cruel to a degree; but they will not stand when such a fate awaits them. See how they ran! But though it was I who brought about their flight, I do not disguise from myself the fact that it is to the sahib that we owe our lives. The peons would have handed you over to the enemy but for your courage and opposition. Then they would surely have flinched and given in had you not set an example. Let us not argue, my lord. I who own this place am beholden to you, and I thank Allah that you rode hither this morning."

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The old man almost swept the ground with his beard as he salaamed, and as Owen looked at him he knew that he was grateful.

"How many men are killed?" he asked suddenly, turning to Mulha.

"Seven, sahib, and eight are wounded. But what of my master? See here!"

He pointed to Owen's riding-boot, which had been cut right through at one spot just above the ankle by a blow from a tulwar. The blade, as sharp as a razor, had severed the leather, and had then cut to the bone. Owen laughed gaily as he looked down at the boot, for his heart was light, a huge weight was taken from his mind, and the wound was of no consequence.

"I had forgotten," he said, as Mulha bent to inspect the injury, a look of anxiety on his face. "A fellow cut at me when I was engaging a second, and I had only time to ward off the blow partially. Otherwise I fancy it would have lopped the leg off. We'll take the boot off and empty the blood out. Then a handkerchief will set the matter right. One moment, though. While these Mahrattas are galloping away let us search the bags and the pockets of those who have fallen. There are some poor fellows here, chief, who have been killed or who are wounded. It would be a fine thing to divide the spoil amongst them or their families."

"The sahib has a generous mind. We will do as he says."

The old man went off to superintend the matter, while Mulha bound up his master's injury. An hour later the look-out from the tower above announced the fact that the enemy had ridden out of sight.

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"Then we will ride away," said Owen. "Bring the horses, Mulha."

Some minutes later, when the native came forward, he was leading the two animals which they had ridden that morning, and in addition four others, all of which still carried their handsome native saddles.

"This is our portion of the loot taken from the enemy, sahib," he said, with a movement of his eyes which Owen knew so well, and which showed without doubt that he was delighted. "There were thirty stray horses to choose from, and these are the pick. This belonged to their chief. The sahib will find that he is the best-mounted officer in his regiment."

A few minutes later they bade farewell to the old man and his peons, and followed by their blessings rode out from the fort, a hole being made in the barricade to enable them to do so. They were laden with provisions, which were tied to the saddles of the Mahratta horses, while Owen himself bestrode the fine animal which had belonged to their chief. Turning their faces to the hills they rode on at a steady trot, and arrived just as night was falling at the spot where the troops were camped. They were greeted with shouts of welcome, and hurriedly told their tale. Then the Major was able to impart a little information to our hero.

"Perhaps you'll not be interested," he said, with his bantering smile, "for you seem always to have

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some little adventure of your own afoot, but we're close to the army—Wellesley's, I mean. The news was brought in soon after you left us, and to-morrow we shall be up with the main body. There is work ahead, for we hear that some big place is about to be attacked. Make ready, Owen, for very soon, if things turn out properly, you will be one of the assaulting party, and will have an opportunity of fighting your way in through the breach made by our guns."

He forgot that this young officer belonged to the cavalry, and would hardly be engaged in such a duty. But the news roused Owen to a high pitch of enthusiasm, and when he turned in that night, and the tingling of the slight wound he had received would allow him to sleep, he dreamed that the position of affairs that day had been changed, that the Mahrattas held the gateway in the wall of the fort, and that he and the peons were engaged in a fierce attack. It was not till the figure of the chief of the Mahrattas appeared above, ready to toss a bomb upon them, that he awoke, to find the dull gleam of dawn stealing into his tent, while he himself lay shivering, his nightmare having resulted in the covering in which he was wrapped having been kicked aside. With a grumble he rolled himself in it again and fell asleep, oblivious of past and future.

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CHAPTER XII

The First Assault

The great Major-General Arthur Wellesley, the famous Duke of Wellington of after days, was the centre of all eyes as the force with which Owen and his friends had marched came into camp and joined the main party. He sat his horse immovable as a rock, and answered salute with salute with such composure and in such a soldierly manner that all were impressed. Once only did he deign to smile as a hoarse voice from the passing ranks called for three cheers for their leader, and when the echo of the tumultuous shouting had died down he showed his appreciation by lifting his embroidered hat. That was all, and yet in all ranks there was satisfaction, for from commanding-officer to drummer-boy he was the idol of the soldiers.

"A very keen commander who knows his men and can get the very utmost out of them," said the Major, as the men were dismissed. "Now, Owen, and you too, Jack, I shall introduce you to your regiments. From this time we shall see less of one another. But whenever you have a spare half-hour come across to my tent."

A little later our hero was seated in a tent owned by the 7th native cavalry, where he found himself a stranger amongst many officers. He felt ill at ease, and somewhat bashful for a little while, but soon settled down, and on the following day took up his duties. Three days later the army got in motion and set off in the direction of Ahmednuggur. Long before then rumours of his adventures had come to the ears of his brother officers, and he was requested to give the details. Nor did he omit to say how he had come to be sent to India, and how, in his younger days, he had been a corporal in the 64th, and earlier a waif in charge of the matron at the poorhouse.

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"With a mystery attached to your going there, Jones, I think," said the Colonel heartily. "Well, my boy, I admire the open manner in which you have told the tale of your early days. There are heaps of young fellows, and older men too, who would keep the matter dark, and feel very chary of mentioning it. And so you have two wounds to boast of?"

Owen acknowledged the fact with heightened colour, as if he were ashamed, at which there was a roar of laughter.

"And have had a couple of good tussles, besides a little affray aboard ship? Very good! Before you have finished you will bring some credit on this regiment."

There was another roar of laughter, which set his blood tingling, and his colour mounting to his cheeks. But it was all good-natured chaff, and like the sensible fellow he was, he showed no resentment. More than that, he was glad now that he had fought Hargreaves; for he began to learn that tales fly in a country like India, and that it is everything for a youngster to come to his regiment with a good recommendation.

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"We heard that you were coming a week ago," said one of the younger officers with whom he shared a tent. "Some fellows came in from another column, and it seems that they had sailed from Calcutta to Bombay, beating you by some weeks. They had come out in the same ship, and that is how we heard of the fight, of the pirates, and your escape. And there is a yarn in camp about this other affair at the native fort. You must tell me all about that. I mean, you must give me full details, for by what you said in the mess tent the whole affair might have lasted only a few minutes."

Owen had indeed been very modest when describing the contest at the native fort, and it was only when Mulha was appealed to that the full details became known. And as they filtered from mess to mess, they came in time to the headquarters' mess, and the General heard the tale.

"Send for him," he said abruptly. "A little affair of that sort is often more difficult to arrange than one of greater magnitude. I wish to question this officer."

Very hot and uneasy did Owen feel when, dressed in his cavalry uniform, belted, and with his

sabre on, he was ushered before the General. He was still a little hampered by the wound he had received in the affray with the pirates, while the slash he had received across his ankle in the affair of the fort, though a trifling affair, was sufficient to increase the limp. He drew himself up to attention and saluted stiffly, keeping his eyes steadily on the General. Then he dropped his hand, retaining his position at attention. The leader of the troops stood in front of his tent, with two other officers beside him, and for the space of a few seconds he returned the glance of this cavalry ensign, his sharp eyes seeming to pierce to the back of Owen's head. It was an ordeal at which many an old soldier would have flinched, and do what he would Owen could hardly contain himself. A moment later the tension was broken.

"Mr. Jones, sir," said one of the officers. "You wished to see him."

"Yes. How old are you, please?"

Owen gave his age as correctly as was possible, considering the fact that the unusual circumstances surrounding his birth made a precise answer impossible.

"Tell me about this fort. Who was with you?"

"My servant, sir. A Mahratta."

"How many helped in the defence?"

One after another the General shot off his questions, demanding the size of the place, the number of the enemy, and the dispositions taken for defence.

"If you had had twenty-five English troops to help you, how long could you have held out?"

"I should have tried to beat them off altogether, sir," came the prompt reply. "If not, I should have contented myself with holding the place. There was food and water enough to last for a week at least."

"You discovered that? When?"

"Within a few minutes of entering the fort, sir."

"And how would you have attempted to carry out the first part of the programme, Mr. Jones? Be precise, please. How would you have beaten them off?"

"I should have held the walls till night came, sir," Owen answered without hesitation, "and then I should have made a sortie. Those roving bands consist of the roughest characters, and they seldom set a watch at night. Often enough they are almost overcome with the opium or bhong they have taken. I should have driven off their horses and attacked them in the early hours."

"A bold programme," said the General, with a lift of his eyes. "Success would much depend upon your information. Is it a fact, for instance, that they take opium? How do you know it?"

Owen at once told his questioner how Mulha had taught him all that seemed of interest with regard to the Mahrattas, and how in their daily discussions he had mentioned this fact.

"Then you speak Mahratti? Sufficiently well to understand, or better?"

This time the General looked at our hero with awakening interest, while he waited eagerly for his answer.

"I can, I am told, speak like a native, sir," answered Owen modestly. "I can also speak Hindustani."

It was evident that General Wellesley was not the one to allow the possibility of a mistake. He turned to one of the officers and gave a short order. A little later a Mahratta advanced and salaamed.

"This is one of the Mahratta friendly chiefs," he said. "I have instructed him to converse with you."

Had our hero told anything but the strict and accurate truth, he would then and there have been confounded. But he was sure of himself, and a minute later found the Mahratta salaaming to him and conversing at a pace which utterly forbade those who had a smattering of the language following the conversation.

"My lord," said the native, turning to the General, "the sahib tells me that he believes that he lived in this country when a babe, and learned Hindustani, and mayhap some of our tongue even before he was taught his own. Truly, I can believe it. But for his colour and his dress he is a Mahratta."

"And here is a report to that effect, received from Calcutta, sir," said one of the officers, abstracting a parchment from a leather satchel. "This came through with the column with which Mr. Jones marched."

"I will see it. Put this officer's name down for special service, in connection with interpreting or otherwise. He has shown great energy and courage. Good-morning, Mr. Jones."

He acknowledged Owen's salute and stood looking after him as he limped away.

"We shall see him again, I think," he said very quietly. "It is something to have a youngster amongst us who can speak like a native and has the pluck to carry out the part."

Marching across the plain watered by the Soona, the force under General Wellesley at length came in sight of Ahmednuggur, having passed numerous villages *en route* which had been fired by the lawless Mahrattas. And here they found a city and fortress which promised to tax their

powers, for the pettah boasted a lofty wall, flanked with towers, though it had no battlements. In addition it had an excellent ditch, and, according to the General, was the strongest fort which he had seen, saving only Vellore, in the Carnatic. The place was garrisoned by a body of Arabs, aided by one of Scindia's regular battalions, trained no doubt by some French officer, while between it and the fortress lay a column of horse.

The little army sat down before the place in a business-like manner, and Owen very soon had an opportunity of seeing how troops conducted the affairs of a siege. Having accompanied his own troop of horse round the stronghold, he found himself free for a time, and with Jack Simpson beside him, now an ensign in a native foot battalion, for he had been unfortunate enough not to attain to the cavalry, he watched as the gunners prepared their batteries. They broke ground that very night at an easy range, and it was not long before the thunder of the guns awoke the echoes. Then there were other matters of interest to see and admire. There were the hundreds of bullock-carts, the slow-moving yet very trusty transport of our armies in India, and there were the lines of tents erected for the men, the hospital tents, the orderly groups of canvas shelters for the officers, and the numerous hucksters and small merchants who hovered in the lines. Further, there were the native servants, hurrying about their masters' business, leading ponies and horses to water, cleaning saddlery, brushing travel-stained uniforms, and performing the hundred and one duties which fall to the lot of servants. Not that a native will do the tithe of work that one can expect from a European servant, for in India caste rules far and wide, and the man who will sweep the compound and perform other menial offices is looked down upon by the grass-cutter or the syce who tends the ponies. It was all most interesting, and it was long before the two young fellows had made a round of the camp.

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And now, while the gunners are bombarding the walls of Ahmednuggur, let us halt for a while to learn what had actually been the course of events from the commencement of this Mahratta trouble. And perhaps it would be as well to mention to the reader the forces to which we were to be opposed. The Mahratta chiefs, controlling a turbulent population, and ever eager for war, and delighting in the clatter of arms, had united for the time being, a somewhat unusual occurrence, considering the jealousies and rivalries which existed amongst them. They had, in the first instance, marked the Nizam for their prey, and were deeply offended because the Company had taken him under their wing. And now the Peishwa, whom Holkar, the most powerful, perhaps, of Mahratta chiefs, had driven from his throne, had become an ally of ours, and we were pledged to support him. Backed by his trained battalions, officered by Frenchmen, Scindia openly threatened the British, and it was abundantly clear that if left to himself he would rapidly increase in power, and would one day become a serious menace to our hopes in India. War was, in fact, imminent and would be undertaken on our part with the object of humbling this native ruler's power, and, perhaps with a greater object still, that of ridding the country for ever of the French and the native battalions they trained. Our success would bring about in natural course a third object, that of securing the Peishwa on his throne.

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General Wellesley had the command of our troops, and these prior to the commencement of the campaign were separated. Colonel Stevenson, with two regiments of native cavalry, and the Nizam's subsidiary force, amounting in all to 8000 men, took up his position at Parinda, on the Peishwa's frontier, where he was accompanied by 15,000 of the troops of the Deccan. He was therefore about a hundred miles east of Poonah, the Peishwa's seat of government, then in the hands of Holkar.

A second force, that commanded in person by Arthur Wellesley, and to which Owen was now attached, commenced operations at the northern frontier of Mysore, and numbered 8000 infantry and 1700 horse. They showed the energy of their leader at once, for they marched with all their baggage and heavy guns upon Poonah, accomplishing a journey of some six hundred miles at the average rate of thirteen and a half miles a day, and that without losing a single draught animal, though the country had been swept by Holkar, a powerful chief in command of a host of freebooters, and it was the worst season of the year. Poonah was taken without encountering opposition, though Holkar's freebooters only fled as the British force came into sight, and the dethroned Peishwa was again brought to his capital and safely installed there, with the help of our bayonets. At this stage Colonel Stevenson moved towards the Godavery, there to overlook Holkar and his freebooters, his co-operation being no longer necessary; while Wellesley prepared for further eventualities should the Mahratta chiefs prove troublesome.

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The reader will have noticed the mention of Holkar, and it may be as well to state here who this chieftain was, for his name is destined to appear again in the narrative. Jeswunt Rao Holkar, to give him his full title, was the descendant of a family which had had a meteoric career, rising from humble circumstances to great power and wealth. Originally they were members of the Dungar shepherd tribe, located some fifty miles from Poonah, and it was one of these shepherds who first carved fame and fortune for his house with the keen edge of his tulwar. Indeed, he obtained much power and wealth, and became virtual ruler of eighty-two districts north of the Nerbudda. It is unnecessary to follow the doings of his family, but it will suffice if we state that, according to the almost universal custom, his successors did not always come to their rights peacefully, and this Holkar, an illegitimate descendant, found himself in his younger days a fugitive. But he possessed the spirit of that forebear of his, for with a tiny following he carved his fortune anew, gathered adherents at every stride, and finally became the terror of the Peishwa and of Scindia. He hung on their frontiers, ravaged their territories, and plundered friend and foe alike. And at this stage, when Britain may be said to have entered into war with Scindia, to whom were allied other Mahratta chiefs, this Holkar hung like a cloud on the frontiers, with a horde of ruffians and freebooters, scowling at both parties and threatening the peace of our other

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possessions.

Information had reached General Wellesley that Scindia and the Rajah of Berar had joined forces and had taken up a hostile position. He requested them to withdraw, and meeting with refusal made ready for active operations. The troops marched for Ahmednuggur, meeting with the column which had accomplished the enormous land journey from Calcutta. And now they were before the town, which was of great importance. For it covered Poonah and the Peishwa's frontier, while the possession of this place would give our troops an excellent depot, would cut Scindia off from his southern supporters, and would give into our hands his territories south of the Godavery.

While referring to Scindia, it is of interest to mention that he had an immense force of irregular cavalry, a large number of well-trained infantry battalions, and marched light. That is, he carried no magazines, but subsisted on the country, plundering whenever and wherever he could, like Holkar on the frontier. He had a marked awe of the British regulars, and in this campaign he did his utmost to carry on a predatory warfare, attacking when in overwhelming force, hanging on our flanks, and marching swiftly and incessantly whenever our troops became too troublesome. However, we shall see how he succeeded.



HE STRETCHED OUT A HUGE PAW AND DRAGGED OWEN UP

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"We shall be marching to the assault soon, lads," said the Major that evening, as the boom of the cannon died down. "It will require very little bombarding to make an effective breach, and then you'll see how we'll turn the beggars out. How'd you like to be one of the boys?"

Owen's eyes glistened, while he looked across the narrow camp-table at the Major, who was faintly discernible by the aid of a smoky native lamp.

"Ha, ha! This time you will look on," laughed the Major. "Jack and I are the boys who will try for honour and glory. The cavalry will be watching the enemy's horsemen and will be foraging outside the lines."

"I'd like to go though, sir," answered Owen. "I shall ask my commanding officer."

He said nothing more then, but on the following day, when the call sounded for the troop to fall in, he rode up to the Colonel.

"Well, Mr. Jones," said the latter, "what can I do for you? You have your orders, or rather the troop commander has. You are to ride well in rear of that fort and keep a careful watch. Not that you are likely to have much to report, for our spies tell us that there are none of the enemy within miles."

"Then could you excuse me, sir?" asked our hero. "You see, sir, I wanted to know what it would be like attacking a wall, and—"

"Why, you know. What about that rickety native fort? Bless me!"

The Colonel swung round in his saddle, while the adjutant grinned.

"A regular young fire-eater, sir," he whispered.

"And what if all my cornets made the same request?" demanded the Colonel. "But there. We can spare you. I'll see one of the staff and ask him to manufacture some orders for you, for you can't

accompany the storming party unless there is good excuse. Now be careful, and if you get a crack over the head, or get killed, why, don't blame me."

He acknowledged Owen's salute somewhat surlily, and rode off with the adjutant, while Owen, his spirits raised to a high pitch, clapped heels to the fine Mahratta horse he rode and went furiously off the parade ground. However, within some fifty yards he was brought up with a shout, and checking his mount, turned him with an easy swerve. There was a native orderly beside him by now, and his lance went to the salute.

"The Colonel Sahib desires you to return."

"To tell me I cannot go," groaned Owen, as he set his beast in motion. However, he little guessed the cause. He pulled up within a horse's length of the commanding officer and saluted.

"Mr. Jones, will you please to remember that you are not to gallop off the parade ground unless carrying an order. There is no need for such haste. Bear that in mind in future."

With a swing the Colonel and his adjutant pulled their animals round and trotted away, leaving our hero somewhat crestfallen. But the two who rode away wore a smile of evident amusement.

"Will do him good! Some of these youngsters think they know everything. Jones doesn't, but he might, don't you see," said the Colonel, "so I've pulled him up and dressed him down. He'll make a capital officer."

Owen saluted the Colonel's back as the latter rode away, and then walked his horse from the parade ground. And presently the adjutant came up to him.

"Got into hot water that time, my boy," he laughed. "But the Colonel is right. You mustn't allow excitement to carry you away. It's a standing order that about galloping off the parade ground, though I fancy we let it drop when on service. But I have your orders. You are to go with the storming party, not to lead it, you understand, and are to interview any prisoners who may happen to be taken. Now for a bit of advice. When you pass an enemy who is down just make sure that he is really hit. More than a few of our poor fellows have been sabred or bayoneted by men who have made pretence to be killed."

Owen was delighted, and his spirits again soared up. He rode off to his tent and dismounted. Then he fell in in rear of the storming party, and sat down beside the officers while the guns thundered against the wall. They watched the balls strike against the mud and masonry, sending clouds of dust into the air, and often bringing down such a pile of material that the crash could be heard at that distance. And in a little while the bugles sounded, the men fell in, and the order to advance was given.

Only those who have experienced the feeling can know what it is to be one of a storming party, or the curious sensations with which men are filled. Happily for Owen he was a high-spirited, merry youngster, and had been in tight places before. He allowed nothing to damp his ardour, and when the men broke into a trot, crushed well towards the front. Very soon he found himself beside the ranks of one of the two Highland regiments which were with this force, and just in front of a Sepoy battalion. There was a shout, bayonets came down to the charge, while the kilts of the men swung out still wider. There was a hoarse growl of excitement, and then a roar from the throats of the gallant fellows. They were in the ditch. Owen caught his foot on a piece of masonry at the very summit and pitched head foremost to the bottom, alighting on the shoulders of a brawny Highlander, who shook him off with an oath, recognised an officer, and helped him to his feet. Then, side by side, Owen sabre in hand, and the kilted soldier armed with his fearsome bayonet, they scrambled up the steep slope and into the breach.

"Hang on, sir. Give me your hand!" shouted the fine fellow as Owen was forced back. "Hah! that's as muckle as ye'll want."

He stretched out a huge paw and dragged Owen up, turning just in time to ward off a thrust made by one of the enemy. Then he lifted his weapon and brought the butt with terrific force against the man's chest, dashing him to the ground so suddenly that the unfortunate native split his head against a portion of tumbled masonry. Then there was a fierce mêlée for a few seconds, a mêlée in which bayonets crossed, and tulwars and swords flashed in the sun. The air was filled with the shouts of the Mahratta foot, and with the guttural exclamations of the Arabs. Blows fell thick and fast, while from attackers and attacked there came the sound of deep-drawn breathing. Then a shout was heard. "Forward! into the town!" A fierce excited cheer answered the summons, and in a moment the Highlanders flung the enemy aside as if they had been but spray from the ocean, and won their way through the breach.

"Charge! Don't give them time to get to the houses, men," called out the commanding officer.

At once the ranks, which were already broken, divided altogether, and the Highlanders charged against the houses clustered near at hand. But the enemy were before them, and for some little while Owen and his new comrades had tough work to carry through.

"Sahib, come here, where you can shelter," said one of the Sepoys, with whom he now found himself fighting. "You have no musket and can do nothing. Presently we will charge and then you can lead."

The enemy had taken refuge in the houses on either side of the street, and for a while their fire made progress almost impossible. But the attackers answered with the utmost spirit, sheltering wherever they could, while some, reckless of the consequences, dashed forward, burst in the doors, and fell upon the enemy. It was a most exciting time, and there is no wonder that Owen forgot all else but the fighting. He caught sight of the brawny Highlander again, his kilt all adrift

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in the wind, and showing unmistakable signs of the conflict. He was charging down the street with some dozen of his comrades, while three or four of the Sepoys were with the gang. Owen could not resist the temptation. He burst from his cover and dashed after them. Shots struck the ground at his feet, kicking dust into his eyes. A man thrust a musket between the lattice of a ground-floor window and fired in his face, so that the flash singed his hair. But he hardly noticed the incident. He was whole, uninjured, and there were deeds still to be done. With a shout he joined the little party, and threw himself against the doors of a house of large size. They gave with a crash, and the men were in. With a shout they flung themselves upon the enemy and then

"Pull yourself together, man. We're in and the place is ours. Here, take a sip."

Owen sat up, giddy and confused. All he could grasp at present was the fact that Jack Simpson was beside him. Stars whirled before his eyes, the walls, the floor, the figure of an Arab and a Sepoy were strangely jumbled up with the large form of a Highlander, who lay full length, looking quietly at him, while an officer bandaged his wounded leg. There was a terrible din outside. What had happened?

"Shut your eyes and hold your tongue. Now, sip that. Right, I'll get some water."

Ten minutes later he was standing up, somewhat unsteadily, while Jack Simpson detailed the events which had just passed.

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"They fought stubbornly," he said, "and we lost fairly heavily, for this street fighting is very nasty work. However, we turned them all out, and here we are, masters of the town. The guns are getting into position to bombard the fort. Now about you, old fellow! The Highlander tells me that just as you burst into the house an Arab hit you over the head with a sponging rod, and brought you down like a ninepin. My word! You are a fellow for go and dash! I saw you in the breach and afterwards as you made your rush."

Owen had indeed displayed not a little of that daring and pluck which have made our soldiers famous. The excitement of the attack had carried him away, and the sudden friendship of the Highlander had served to feed the fire. Fighting together, as if they were of equal rank and had known each other for years, the two had struggled on till they were separated. And then Owen had again joined his friend, only to be beaten to the ground, while the Highlander had a bullet through his leg. However, it was not till an hour later when he emerged from the house, walking beside the litter of the gallant Scot, that he gathered that his conduct had attracted attention. The General and his staff were standing beside the breach, while within a few yards the Highland regiment was drawn up, standing there at ease, till orders came for another advance. As Owen stumbled along, for he was still very giddy, a murmur went down the ranks, and men nudged one another. Then one of the lads tore off his bonnet and threw it into the air, catching it upon the point of his bayonet.

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"Three cheers for Cornet Jones and Andrew Macnalty!"

The hoarse roar which followed might have been heard a mile away, and, as may be imagined, attracted the attention of the General and his staff. He turned, saw the bonnets in the air, and Owen and the Scot passing between himself and the ranks.

"Our friend of the fort again, I think," he said with a quaint little smile. "Did I not say that we should see more of this young officer?"

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CHAPTER XIII

Special Service

"The English are truly a wonderful people, and their General is a wonderful general," wrote Scindia, when referring to the action at Ahmednuggur. "They came, looked at the pettah, walked over it, slew the garrison, and returned to breakfast. Who can withstand them?"

That was the reputation which General Wellesley and his small force obtained for themselves, a reputation which was before very long to be considerably enhanced. They took the town of Ahmednuggur, and then at once put their guns in position to bombard the fort, opening with such effect that the commander volunteered to capitulate. Thus was the initial action of the campaign rendered successful.

"We shall leave a garrison and march on at once," said the Major that evening, when he came to see our hero in his tent, for Owen was confined to his camp-bed for a few days, the blow having resulted in a slight fever, for which he had already been freely bled. "It will never do to allow Scindia and the Rajah of Berar to march up and down the country gathering supplies and recruits. At the present moment all the robbers and ruffians who have not attached themselves to Holkar are hurrying to join the enemy, and the longer we delay the more there will be of them. Our General has a reputation for hurry and dash, and you will see that he will stir them up."

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However, circumstances alter the plans even of generals, and it was not till the 24th of August that the force crossed the Godavery, while Colonel Stevenson moved in the direction of

Aurungabad. Then came tidings that Scindia and his ally had issued through the Adjuntah pass and had seized Jaulna in the Deccan, wheeling at once to the south-east as if about to march on the city of Hyderabad, for he had discovered that Wellesley was within forty miles of Jaulna, and the object of the Mahratta chiefs was to keep free of his force and in any case to avoid a general action.

The indefatigable Wellesley followed them, and finally compelled them to take up a position at Jaulna. On the 21st of September the whole of the Mahratta army was encamped at Jefferabad, twenty-two miles south of Jaulna, while our forces, consisting of the troops under Wellesley and Stevenson, were ten miles to the west, at Budnapore. There seemed at last every opportunity of a general engagement, and hope rose high in the two united divisions. An attack was to be made, and according to the plans of the General the troops, divided into their original divisions, were to throw themselves upon the enemy on the morning of the 24th. For this purpose they separated two days earlier, Colonel Stevenson taking the western route to the rendezvous, while Wellesley and his force went to the east.

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"I shall be surprised if they do not manage to escape us," said the adjutant of the 7th cavalry, on the evening before the divisions said farewell to each other and moved off. "You see, Jones, these united attacks are most difficult to time. Everything depends on the two forces arriving on the ground practically at the same moment, and the smallest circumstance may delay one or other commander. There may be a wide and deep stream to cross, the ground encountered may be far too rough for guns, and that would mean a wide detour, or the enemy might themselves overthrow our plans by moving into another position. However, we shall do our best, and our spies will keep us informed. That brings me to your orders. A note was sent in to the C.O. after that affair at Ahmednuggur. One of the staff officers brought it, and so I expect it came direct from the General. As a reward for your conduct in the storming of the breach you were to be given opportunities of accompanying outposts and advance parties. This is an opportunity, and the C.O. has asked me to tell you off for the duty. You will take six men to-morrow, and will leave camp before daybreak. Draw rations to-night, so that you may be free of the column altogether, and be sure to send us back due information of what you find. Here is a map. On it I have drawn the route we are to follow, and have sketched in the position of the enemy. Call at the orderly tent and ask for a pocket-book for your despatches, for you will have to send back your observations in writing. My boy, you have a chance. Make the most of it."

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When the adjutant had departed Owen threw his cap in the air, and would have given vent to a whoop of delight had he not been occupying a tent within the lines, while the General was situated within fifty yards. For he was to be employed upon a duty for which he had longed ever since he had joined the division. He liked his work as a cornet of cavalry immensely, but the post of advance-guard or scout fascinated him, and here he was detailed for the work. He called for Mulha, and having given him directions as to his horse, he went across to choose his men and draw the rations. Then he visited the orderly-room tent, and that done, gathered about him the dozen or so harcarrahs, or spies, who were attached to the division.

When the sun got up on the following morning it found him and his little party some five miles from the camp, dismounted beneath a tope of trees, and cooking a hasty breakfast.

"We will send the harcarrahs ahead as soon as possible, Mulha," he said, as he paced restlessly up and down, for, to tell the truth, Owen had not yet acquired the great virtue of patience which comes to men of maturer age. Any delay fretted him, and on this occasion he would gladly have neglected the meal and pushed on.

"And what of the men, sahib?" asked Mulha, when he had expressed this intention. "They will soon become fatigued if you do not study their wants. It would be wise to halt, so that man and beast may feed. Then it will matter little if no other opportunity occurs before the night comes."

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And so a halt had been called, and the men had eased the girths of their saddles. And now they sat on their heels, in the accustomed position of the East, discussing their boiled rice, while they chatted quietly together. Owen was bound to confess that they were likely-looking men, these six whom he had chosen. Their uniforms were handsome and showed off their figures, while their turbans gave them an imposing appearance, which their fine horses and the lances they carried set off beautifully. At length, however, the meal was finished, girths were tightened, and the men threw themselves into their saddles. Then the harcarrahs scattered and rode off, their tats or small ponies looking very quaint beside the bigger animals of the native cavalry.

"They will go miles without showing fatigue, sahib," observed Mulha as the men rode off. "They will bring you news, and you will send it to the General."

"I shall do my best to discover something for myself," was the answer. "After all, that is what I am sent out for, though, of course, I cannot be supposed to see as much as all the spies. Still, if possible I shall get in touch with the enemy."

But an hour or more passed without incident, and it was not till it was approaching ten o'clock that our hero saw anything to attract his attention. He was riding at the head of his men, and as the sun was very hot, was taking advantage of every atom of shade to be found. In consequence the little party walked their horses at the edge of a long stretch of jungle which offered a grateful shelter. Suddenly one of the men gave an exclamation of surprise and wheeled his horse.

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"Sahib, look there!" he said, lifting his lance to point across the plain towards a long eminence. "There are horsemen, and they belong to the enemy."

Owen was off his horse in an instant, and had his eye glued to the spy-glass with which he was

provided. And by its aid he was able to make out that the horsemen were undoubtedly the enemy.

"There are eight of them," he said, "and they are armed with lances like ourselves. They are riding this way."

"Then perhaps, sahib——" began Mulha.

"We must capture them. They may be able to give valuable information. Let us watch them for a time, and then we will charge."

Thanks to the fact that Owen and his party were riding in the shade, they had remained completely hidden from the enemy, while the latter being out on the plain were distinctly visible. Taking advantage of this the little party reined their horses still farther back in amongst the trees and waited eagerly for the moment when they might attack. Owen hitched his sabre a little farther to the front and eased the blade, while his hand sought the butt of his pistol. As for the troopers, they fidgeted in their saddles, lifting their lances now and again, and staring from the enemy towards their young leader. Suspense is always more trying than action, and all found the waiting telling upon their patience.

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"What is that?" suddenly demanded Owen. "There is a commotion amongst the horsemen, and ——"

"It is one of the harcarrahs whom they have seen and are about to follow," suddenly exclaimed Mulha, pointing across the plain. "He came round the angle of the jungle, sahib, and then saw the enemy for the first time. He knows that we are here, and has turned this way."

"What are his chances?" demanded Owen quietly, as he stared out from the shadow.

"He will keep well ahead of the enemy for two miles perhaps, sahib. After that they will come up with him swiftly, for they are well mounted. They will overtake him just before he reaches us."

"Then we will interfere. Now, my men, stay quietly where you are till I give the command. Then ride out into the open, and form single line behind me. We will go through those men and scatter immediately, with the object of capturing a few."

Once more there was a restless movement amongst the troopers, while all eyes went to the native harcarrah who had so unexpectedly come upon the scene. Too late he had noticed the enemy, and now came spurring along the edge of the jungle at his utmost pace. And the Mahratta horse, seeing his object, galloped madly after him, their direction taking them diagonally across the plain. It became abundantly evident, when some five minutes had passed, that the harcarrah's pony could not live with the beasts ridden by the Mahrattas. They were gaining on him faster even than Mulha had imagined possible, and long before Owen had intended to give the order he found it necessary to emerge from the shelter of the forest.

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"Walk!" he commanded. "Trot! Gallop! Now, keep your horses in hand till I give the word. Then at them!"

His sabre came out of its sheath with a hiss and went to his shoulder. He gripped his reins in his left hand, and set his feet home in the stirrups. And as he did so the pace of the little troop increased from a gentle canter to a gallop. They were sweeping along across the plain at a pace which brought a gleam of excitement to his eyes, and as yet the enemy had not seen them. But within a few seconds there was a shout and the Mahrattas drew rein suddenly.

"Do not stop, sahib. Push on! They will see that we are few and may wait for the attack."

For a few moments it seemed as if the enemy would turn tail and fly, but seeing that only a few were riding towards them, and that there was only one white man amongst them, for the turbans and dress of the troopers were distinct at that distance, they faced Owen and his men and set their horses at a trot. In a moment they were galloping, and as Owen watched them, their long lances, a formidable weapon for which they were famous, came down to the horizontal, while their pace developed into a charge. Owen stood in his stirrups and turned to his men with a smile. Then he waved them on with his sabre, and swinging round in his saddle set his horse galloping at his fastest pace. The dust flew up in columns behind him, while the hoarse shouts of the enemy came to his ears. He leaned forward, sinking low in his seat, while his eye sought for the leader of the enemy. Before it appeared possible the two parties were within a few yards of each other, and it seemed that they would meet with a terrible crash. But, almost as the lances of the contending parties crossed, the Mahrattas lost heart. Owen could see them pulling at their horses, and in a second they would have cut out to his right and so avoided the charge.

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"To the right! To the right!" he shouted, while he turned his own horse in that direction. The troopers, riding almost level with him now, obeyed the order instantly, and catching the Mahrattas on the flank hurled them to the ground like ninepins. Two of the enemy were transfixed with the lances, while four who were farthest on the left managed to elude the troopers and were not upset. But Owen dashed after them without delay, while four of his men followed. The chase was a short and sharp one. Thanks to the fine horse he rode Owen quickly overhauled the nearest of the enemy, and standing in his stirrups prepared to cut the man down if he would not draw rein. Then suddenly the Mahratta twisted in his saddle, aimed a pistol at his head and fired. There was a thud as the bullet, missing the mark by half an inch, struck the saddle of the trooper behind. Then Owen's sabre came down with a crash, and the man dropped out of his saddle, stunned by the blow, the full force of which had been broken by the thick turban he was wearing. A minute later the remainder had surrendered, and Owen found himself in possession of prisoners.

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"One of our men has a lance wound in the thigh, sahib," said Mulha, coming to his master, and

looking at him searchingly lest he, too, should be wounded. "Three of the enemy are killed, and two slightly hurt. What are your orders?"

For answer our hero drew his handkerchief from his coat and mopped his forehead, while he looked back at Mulha. He was gasping for breath, and as yet was hardly prepared to issue orders.

"There are many hours before the darkness comes, sahib," went on Mulha. "These men have not ridden far to-day, that I feel sure of, for their horses, in spite of the charge, are fresh, and not travel-stained. It may be that the camp of these Mahrattas is near, and if that were so——"

"We must see it, and locate the position. But how can we be sure? Can the harcarrah say?"

"He may be able, sahib, but if he cannot, the prisoners will speak. Remember the ruffian aboard the pirate ship which we captured. There are ways of making men speak. I will see what can be done."

He went off to the troopers, who had now gathered the prisoners together, and had dismounted, while Owen interviewed the harcarrah, discovering that he had failed to locate the enemy. Calling two of them aside, Mulha selected one of the Mahrattas, who appeared to be the leader of the party which had been captured, and with the troopers following brought the man to Owen.

"Say where you have come from, and where the forces of Scindia and his ally are camped," he demanded sternly, as the troopers ranged themselves up beside the prisoner. "So! You cannot remember? Then we will help you. Get your carbines."

He sent the men back for their weapons, while he faced the prisoner, looking at him unconcernedly, as if his action were one of the commonest. And as Owen watched the scene, not caring to interfere, for it was important to have information, though he hardly liked to obtain it by means of threats, he noticed that the Mahratta's courage was melting. Out of the corners of his eyes the prisoner watched the troopers go to their horses and lift their carbines from the buckets in which they were carried. He heard the metallic click as the locks were drawn back, and his heart weakened. He looked pleadingly at Owen and then back at the troopers.

"I will speak, sahib. The white lord shall know. Listen, my lord, this is where Scindia and his friend, the Rajah of Berar, lie."

A trembling hand went out towards the highland from which the Mahratta horse had first appeared.

"Sahib, they are encamped on the river Kaitna, on its north bank, and only a half-hour's ride from here. We were out foraging, for provisions are scarce. Will my lord offer protection to me? These native troopers would slay me without mercy."

"Silence! This Scindia is within half an hour's ride. What troops has he?"

Mulha interrupted the man, and coolly ranged his two troopers up before him, so that their carbines might be in full evidence.

"I will tell all that I know," answered the prisoner in piteous tones. "Scindia has all his battalions with him, and there are ten thousand at least of the troops trained by the French sahibs. Of other troops, there are as many again in the foot regiments, but these are irregulars. The cavalry number perhaps thirty thousand, while we have a hundred guns. That is the full total, on my lance and tulwar, sahib."

"And quite enough I should say," burst in Owen. "Fifty thousand men and a hundred guns!"

"And within four miles, sahib," added Mulha.

"While our troops must be quite as far behind us, if not more. This is very important information, for if the enemy are so near us, and in such force, it would seem as if the combination of our two divisions would be impossible. Perhaps the Mahrattas intend to attack the divisions separately. I will ask this prisoner."

He slipped from his horse and went towards the man. Mulha accompanied him, and stepping to within a foot of the unhappy Mahratta looked into his eyes with such a sinister expression that the man quailed. "He will speak at once, sahib. Ask him the questions, and listen, dog! See that you reply on the instant, and correctly."

Mulha had little love for the class of Mahratta who had sided with Scindia, and in addition he made pretence of anger which he did not feel. Every day Owen was learning that, besides being a faithful fellow, he was an astute native, who knew his countrymen well. Had our hero been left to extract information it is more than probable that his training would have made him hesitate and decline to use threats to gain what he wanted. However, Mulha had no scruples. He knew well that the natives of the country were as prone to dissemble and give false news as they were to pilfer and murder, and he knew that stern measures were required. And how well those measures had succeeded! As the prisoner looked at Mulha and then at the troopers, with their loaded carbines, any returning courage that he may have felt oozed from his finger-tips, or through the sandals he wore. His colour changed to a sickly hue, the pallor of the East, and his lips trembled.

"Tell me more of this army," demanded Owen. "Are they now encamped, or are they preparing to march against the English?"

He waited anxiously for the answer, knowing that a great deal depended on it, and heaved a sigh of relief when the man had spoken.

"My lord can rest easy on that point. The troops of Scindia are in position for the day. They will not move till to-morrow, and not even then perhaps. They know that the British are advancing,

and it is said in the camp that Scindia will attack each division in turn."

"That will do. Set a watch over the prisoners, and get ready to accompany me, Mulha," exclaimed Owen at once, his tone changing. "We must not delay an instant longer than is necessary."

His hand went to his leather pouch and he abstracted the note-book which he had obtained from the orderly-room. Then he hastily scrawled an account of his meeting with the Mahrattas, and of the information given him. Tearing the sheet out of the book, he enclosed the map, marking on it the position which he then occupied and that where the prisoner stated the enemy to be.

"I am advancing at speed to ascertain the truth of this," he wrote, "and will report at the first opportunity."

"Now, Mulha, I will select two of the men. The others must escort the prisoners back to camp. Tie their hands, and put a noose round their feet beneath the horse's belly. They must submit to that seeing that we have so few to guard them."

A few moments later he had selected one of the troopers to carry his note, and at a sharp order the man swung himself into his saddle, saluted, and galloped off at furious speed, intent on getting the note to General Wellesley in as short a time as possible. The prisoners and their escort followed, while Owen, Mulha, and the remaining trooper set their faces to the highland, and cantered toward it.

"Time is the main object," said our hero as they went along. "We will not push our horses yet, but once we have seen the position of the enemy we will send them back towards the division at a pace which will soon take us there. Keep a sharp eye open, and as we get near to the top of the rising ground, halt and dismount."

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There was silence after that as the three rode on towards the hills. Owen occupied the central place, with Mulha and the trooper on either side. And presently they were breasting the rise. Selecting a tope of trees Owen rode into it, and throwing one leg over the saddle slipped quietly to the ground. Mulha was at his side in an instant, and caught his rein as he let it drop. Then he ran on up the hill, keeping in the shelter of the trees, and finally halted on the very summit, where he lay down, partly to recover his breath, and partly so that he should not be seen by the enemy. But he could not be still, with the thought that the enemy was so close at hand. Grasping his sabre in one hand to keep it out of his way and from clattering against the ground or the trees, he crawled on some yards till a sudden opening and a falling of the ground gave him a clear view of the country beyond. Then indeed he came to a halt with a gasp of amazement and delight. For beneath him ran the Kaitna, a deep and strong stream, supposed by the enemy to be unfordable, while its course was east and west. To his right was another river, the Juah, joining with the Kaitna, and cutting off a strip of land between the two rivers which, commencing as an acute-angled piece, widened out till it was of large proportions. And it was here, with his front facing the north bank of the Kaitna and looking towards Owen, that our hero discovered the army of Scindia comfortably encamped, with its guns parked and its lines filled with a multitude of soldiers and hucksters. Not a scout or sentry was to be seen beyond the river, though there were sentries on the outskirts of the camp, and on the right a strong outpost of horsemen. Indeed, a glance showed Owen that it was there that the 30,000 horsemen were stationed. At once his pocket-book came out, and as he lay there he rapidly sketched in the position of the rivers, their junction, and the disposition of the various arms. That done, he crawled away again and ran to the horses. Swinging himself into the saddle, he turned to see that the others were ready.

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"Is the news true, sahib?" Mulha ventured to ask him. Then, when he had heard the few details which Owen could give him, he shook his head vigorously.

"Well as I know the English and their great courage, they will never dare to attack now, before the divisions are joined," he said. "Remember, there are perhaps twenty thousand troops there who have been trained by French officers, and they have done well with the men. Besides, there is the river. How can it be crossed? Who can say that it is fordable?"

"The very thing! The most important thing!" burst in Owen. "We must make inquiries. There is a village over there, and perhaps it would be possible to get one of the inhabitants to help us."

They discussed the matter for a few moments, and then turning their horses galloped down to the village. It was almost empty, all the men being away in the camp, disposing of their various possessions. But as the trio drew up at the biggest hut a woman came out, and eagerly answered their questions.

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"A ford, my lords?" she said. "Would that I could say that there was not one! But there is, and it is by that that my man has gone, together with all the others from this place. They have been selling goods to the soldiers, and spending their time gambling and smoking. There! Look at the bank, where the trees crop up together. The ford is within a few feet on the right, and any one can find it, for there are wheel-marks. Had I command of the men yonder I would never have encamped in such a spot. But they are all the same. This Scindia thinks that he is secure, and has not troubled to look for himself with his own eyes, or he would have seen this ford."

It was evident that Scindia and his men were no friends of hers, and Owen felt confident that her information was all the more correct. He tossed her a piece of money and rode down the street. Once out of the village, he set spurs to his horse, and did not draw rein till he had covered six miles. At that distance he found the division, which he had left before daybreak, weary and tired after a fourteen-mile march, and just about to encamp for the night. But there was to be no rest for the soldiers, for within half an hour of Owen's arrival the bugles were going, and the order was, "Boot and saddle! Stand to your arms!"

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"Fall in with your company, Mr. Jones," said the General, when Owen had handed him his sketch and explained the positions and strength of the enemy. "I am obliged to you for the news you bring. It is of importance."

Nothing more. Just a curt acknowledgment of his work. But General Wellesley was a soldier who never wasted his breath, and more especially when there was important work before him. Calling for his horse, he gave orders that the division should march for the highland ahead, and then rode on to reconnoitre with his staff. It was very obvious that he had made up his mind to attack, and had there been any doubt on this matter it was instantly set at rest when he had himself seen the position of the enemy. "They cannot escape me!" he cried with the utmost confidence.

It was approaching one o'clock before the division had come up and marched into position, but there was no halting. Leading the men along to the east, past the right of the enemy, there composed solely of cavalry, and of course camped on the opposite bank of the river Kaitna, Wellesley marched down the front of the Mahrattas till he had passed Scindia's left. Then he swept to the left, opposite the village of Assaye, situated on the strip of land between the two rivers at their junction, and taking the path pointed out by Owen had no difficulty in finding the ford. A little later his infantry were across the stream, facing the guns and infantry of the enemy, this arm having been faced round to oppose them. And thus, in the early afternoon the two forces made ready for a battle which was to prove decisive. Let the reader think of the audacity of the British. Here was a force of Mahrattas estimated at 55,000 horse and foot, of whom a large number were trained and seasoned battalions. There were in addition 100 guns. Truly a formidable armament. And against this host marched the British, their General at their head, numbering, according to one authority, 1200 cavalry, 2000 sepoy, and 1300 European infantry, consisting of the 74th and 78th Highland regiments, a host in themselves. In addition we had a few guns and some 3000 native cavalry from the Peishwa, who were known to be on the eve of mutiny. No wonder that Scindia and his host stood amazed at the very audacity of such an undertaking.

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CHAPTER XIV

A Glorious Victory

Jogging along on his fine Mahratta horse, now showing some trace of the hard work it had done on this eventful day, with the troopers of his regiment behind him and Mulha somewhere near at hand, Owen passed with the army of Wellesley, if such a term could be given to the handful of men who formed the command, down the face of the Mahratta army. And like all his comrades, whether of the non-commissioned ranks or otherwise, he was filled with an indescribable feeling of elation. The chances of victory were small. Utter defeat seemed to face the gallant division marching to the banks of the Kaitna, and but for the stalwart figure of Wellesley at the head of the line confidence might well have been shaken. But not a man hung back. The soldiers in the ranks of the two Highland regiments following in the wake of the General displayed the utmost courage and coolness. They might have been marching to take their position on a parade ground, and not to hurl themselves against fifty-five thousand of the enemy. They joked, called loudly to one another, and laughed as they watched the hurried movements of Scindia's battalions.

"See you later, I hope," sang out Jack Simpson jovially as his Sepoy battalion filed past our hero.

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"We've got a nut to crack to-day, old fellow, and we shall be lucky if we manage it. Look at the General!"

He laughed aloud as he pointed with his drawn sword to the figure of the commander, then in the very act of guiding his horse down the bank and into the river. "Ah! There go the guns! Well, good-bye for the present, and mind you and those boys of yours make the most of your horses."

He was gone with another wave of his sword and a shout of farewell, and very soon Owen saw the gallant young fellow wading through the river. By then the guns of the enemy had opened with a rapid and fierce fire which began to have its effect, for men and animals were falling. Some of the shot even reached the ranks of the cavalry where they were drawn up beside the entrance to the ford, and Owen felt a sudden thrill of fear and pity as a trooper a few paces to his right tottered and fell, a shapeless mass, from his saddle.

"War! That's war, my lad," said the Adjutant, who happened to ride up to him a moment before. "You or I might have the same happen to us at any moment. A soldier has to expect such things. It is part of his life and his duty. Look at Scindia's men. They are changing front and making ready to oppose us. 'Pon my word, if we win to-day it will be the greatest battle ever fought in India. We are a mere handful compared with those battalions over there. Hah! That's better. There go the guns!"

It was indeed a glad sound to listen to when the British guns, some seventeen in number, having been dragged into position by their bullock-teams, opened against the enemy, vainly attempting to keep down the storm of shot issuing from the hundred huge brass pieces owned by Scindia. Owen fixed his eyes upon the guns, watching the flashes belching from the muzzles, the recoil of

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the weapons, and the fervid and furious haste of the gunners as they threw themselves upon the discharged piece, sponged it out, and ran in another charge.

"It's our turn now, Jones," said the Adjutant. "Bear in mind the fact that our infantry are the backbone of this little army, but that victory can hardly be complete without a force of cavalry. When we charge, charge home, through and through them. Lead your men at any number. Take no notice of odds, and you will find that the troopers will follow. They believe in their officers, and will ride with you anywhere. There! In a few hours perhaps we shall be rejoicing."

He jerked his rein and went off down the front of the cavalry, merry and confident. But the very fate which had befallen one of the troopers was soon to be his, for as the cavalry arm of the division trotted down to the ford, to the accompaniment of the booming of cannon, there was a crash at his feet, a blinding flash, and when the dense smoke had blown away, the jovial Adjutant of the 7th native cavalry lay dead, mangled by the shot of the enemy. Owen felt sad as he passed, and reverently uncovered his head. But his thoughts were soon distracted, for shot passed him every minute, and ere he had gained the far bank four of his men had fallen.

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"Now we shall be in the middle of it," he thought. "The General has placed his men, and, hurrah! they are advancing!"

Was there ever such a bold venture undertaken by a British force! Wellesley had very coolly placed his force in two lines, the first comprising the 78th Highlanders and two Sepoy battalions, with advanced pickets to the right, while his second line comprised the 74th Highlanders and also two Sepoy battalions, while in rear of all were the 19th Light Dragoons and three slender cavalry regiments, of which Owen's corps formed one. As for the guns, they had by now practically ceased fire, for the enemy's pieces dominated the place, and had already shot down the majority of the draught teams. In addition, they were plying our thin lines with shell and grape, which were having a terrible effect. It looked as if all would be swept away. Then, too, Scindia had made arrangements to meet the move of his opponents. Seeing that it was his left which was threatened, he swung his battalions and guns round till they faced in a line drawn south and north, looking towards the junction of the two rivers, while a second line was at right angles to this and took up position on the south bank of the river Juah.

And now our first line was advancing, with the great Wellesley at its head—advancing against a force more than five times its own strength, for this portion of the Mahratta army was at least of that number. It was an amazing sight, and it is not to be wondered at that the French-trained battalions of Scindia gasped, that their officers were thunder-struck at such audacity, while Scindia felt sudden doubts. But whatever their thoughts, our men gave them little time to indulge in them. There was a flash along that stubborn little line as the bayonets came down to the charge. It was to be war this time with the cold steel, and the ominous sight caused a disturbance in the ranks of the enemy. The little force of attackers looked weirdly dangerous—its silence, the grim coolness of its leader and his men, struck dismay now into the hearts of the dusky Mahrattas. But for very shame they could not flee. They stood their ground, then hesitated ere the bayonets reached them, and gave way; this finely disciplined French-trained army shuddered at the sight of a kilted line of born fighters with their Sepoy comrades, and fled! And after them, plunging in amongst them with many a wild Highland yell, or with the high-pitched bellow of excitement to which the native gives vent, went the gallant fellows, slaying, dashing defiant groups aside, pouring with irresistible impetus over guns and crumpling up the advanced lines of the enemy. Not then did they pause, for there was still work to be done and they were eager for it. The fierce hail of cannon-shot and grape to which they had been subjected, and under which they had suffered severely, had left its sting in the ranks, and our men fought to conquer, laughing at the enormous odds—fought perhaps as they never fought before. They drove the first line back upon the second, stationed along the south bank of the Juah, and, heedless of the fact that their opponents were now increased, hurled themselves upon the doubled line, smashing it, sending it in utter rout across the river, where later our slender cavalry came upon the fleeing troops and completed the work. It was magnificent, if terrible. Chaos now reigned supreme in the neighbourhood of Assaye, and on every hand were fleeing men, cavalry and foot, stampeding horses and camels, bellowing oxen, and the thunder of guns. For the latter had opened again. All that had been accomplished had not been achieved in the space of a minute. Some time had passed since our men threw themselves upon the Mahratta main body; and as they swept on and drove the whole of the infantry force over the Juah, the gunners on the Mahratta side, practising a favourite trick, had thrown themselves beneath their guns as if they were slain. Once the troops had passed on, however, they sprang to their feet, and slewing the cannon round poured shot and shell into the victors. It was as if the contest had begun all over again, and the sight brought consternation for a moment to the minds of the British. Not for long, however. Wellesley, who seemed to be everywhere, placed himself at the head of the Ross-shire Highlanders, while Owen and his regiment galloped up to help. Then they retraced their steps under a murderous fire, and after a great struggle captured the guns. It was here perhaps that they met with the fiercest opposition, for the gunners and the infantry attached as their escort clung to their pieces manfully, while the former showed themselves to be skilled artillerymen. However, they were swept aside, and the field was ours. The battle of Assaye was fought and won, and once again was British pluck and endurance successful.

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When the whole tale came to be unfolded, it was hard to say which arm of our service had behaved the best. But that each had done their duty there could be little doubt. In any case, the cavalry came out of the conflict with added glory, for the 19th Dragoons, finding a huge force of Mahratta cavalry about to charge down upon the second line, composed of the 74th and Sepoys, who had suffered very severely under the fire of the enemy, hurled themselves headlong against

the mass, turned the ranks of the horsemen, and drove the whole force into the river with frightful slaughter.

We had been engaged in deadly strife for upwards of three hours, and after the march which they had previously accomplished, one of twenty miles, in the heat of the sun too, it can be imagined that our fine fellows were exhausted. But they had much to compensate them, for they had thrashed a magnificent force greatly outnumbering them, and equipped in a manner which aroused the envy of all our officers. They had captured ninety-eight guns, the camp of the enemy, and numerous animals, not to mention seven standards and a huge mass of stores. And this victory had cost us more than a third of our force in killed and wounded, while the enemy left almost as many dead on the field, the countryside being covered in all directions with their wounded. Thus was Scindia's power checked, and the reader will not feel surprise to read that this chief soon showed a wish to make peace with the British.

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Cornet Jones of the 7th native cavalry bore his part manfully in the various phases of the strenuous fight, and for the first time in his life learned what it was to charge home with a handful of men into the clustered ranks of a mounted enemy charging in the opposite direction. At an early hour in the struggle he and his troopers, following the other troops of the regiment, had splashed through the Juah and had spread out into line, when they had dashed through and through the fleeing foot-soldiers of Scindia. That had been simple work, though it wanted a good horseman to sit his animal and use his weapon effectively; and on one occasion the charge of the troop to which our hero was attached had almost proved its last, for of a sudden, having burst through a mass of footmen, it found itself confronted by a battalion of soldiers which had faced round and, encouraged by their officers and helped by their French training, were preparing to mow them down with their fire. There was not an instant to be lost, and the captain of the troop rode on without hesitation.

"Charge!" he shouted in Hindustani. "Don't give them the opportunity to get loaded. Charge home with the lance."

Owen jammed his hat well down on his head, gripped his sabre, and edged his horse a little in advance, so as to line up with his leader, for he rode in front of the left half of the troop. There was a fierce shout, in which he joined, standing high in his stirrups, and then the pace of the horsemen increased suddenly. Spurs went to the flanks of the panting beasts, and the line, solid, swarthy, and unbroken, bore down upon the enemy like a tornado. Owen saw the flash as the bayonets of the men of the French-trained battalion came down to the charge, he watched the officers turn and address their men encouragingly, and noted that they slipped into the ranks, for to have stayed in front would have been to be killed to a certainty. Then there was a sudden silence, while a line of dusky faces and gleaming Mahratta eyes seemed to stare into his. A flash and a rolling volley followed, while bullets swept through the air, screeching past his ear. There was a thud near at hand, and turning he was just in time to see his captain pitch forward on his head and lie doubled up in the grass, with his horse, half-killed, lying partially on him.

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"The captain sahib is down!" shouted the native officer attached to the troop. "Sahib, you command!"

Owen was the leader. The troop depended upon him for its actions. All eyes followed his figure. In a flash he realised his responsibilities, and took them with unbounded eagerness. The bayonets were almost touching him now. He rose in his stirrups again, waved his sabre, and then plunging spurs into the flanks of his Mahratta horse he burst into the ranks of the enemy—cutting, cutting, cutting and slashing to right and left; never parrying, so far as he could remember, but always cutting and slashing, dashing here and there, and ever moving forward. They were through! The battalion had disappeared almost completely, and on every hand Mahratta enemies were bolting for their lives. Guns and accoutrements strewed the ground, there was a horse here and there plunging madly, and as Owen pulled at his rein and holding up his sabre brought the troop, or what remained of it, to a halt, a horse came thundering past them, its rider dragging at the end of the stirrup, bumping over the grass and rough ground, frantically endeavouring to free himself. How often has such a thing occurred on the field of battle! How many gallant fellows have lost their lives in such a manner! Crash! A Highlander who sat on his knees some little way off, evidently wounded, lifted his weapon and fired at the animal, bringing it to the ground.

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"That is one of the French officers," said Owen. "Send two men to release him from the stirrup and bring him here. And send back four men for our officer. What are our losses?"

He beckoned to the native officer, and spoke to him sharply.

"There are six down," was the answer, "and the captain sahib is badly hurt. He is stunned, perhaps worse, by the fall, for his horse was hit. What will your movements be now, sahib? You are in full command."

Owen looked about him, for he could not forget that he belonged to the 7th regiment of cavalry, and his duty was to rejoin at the first opportunity. And very soon he was trotting away towards them, at the head of his men, while his late leader was being conveyed back to the lines of the British. It was then that the troop, now with diminished numbers, learned that a mass of horsemen, fully a thousand strong, was bearing down upon them, sent to revenge the defeat of the battalion which Owen and his men had just broken. There was no escaping. To flee would be to set the worst example. Owen's mind was made up in a minute.

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"Shout and bring your lances down when I lift my sabre," he called out, as he trotted up and down the lines of his troop. "Mind! Shout, and bring the pennons down with a swing."

An old cavalry soldier had given him that piece of advice some weeks before, and in the hour of difficulty he remembered it. Placing himself at the head of the troop, he set out to meet the advancing horsemen at a trot, which soon increased to a steady canter. And as he advanced it was clear that the courage of this small force was already having its effect upon the horsemen of Scindia. There was an air of irresolution about them, and men on the flanks broke away, and, turning, galloped out into the plain, while their leader, a swarthy native, dressed in brilliant uniform and turban, pulled his own animal back a little closer to the leading rank, sure sign that he too was not as eager as he had been.

"They will break if we charge! Shout!"

Owen swung his sabre over his head and bellowed at the top of his voice. Then singling out the Mahratta leader he put his horse full at him, and meeting him end on rode over him, throwing horse and rider to one side as if they were as light as a feather. And after him swarmed the troopers, infected with the fire and dash of their young leader, their eyes flashing and their nostrils distended. Excellent masters of their horses, they kept their seats steadily, and sitting very low, plunged into the already disheartened ranks of the enemy with a crash and a shout which could be heard afar off. And once more they were successful. The horsemen melted away, and when five minutes had gone the field was clear and the troop was lined up again, standing at their horses' heads to give the animals a breather.

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"Mr. Jones, I think? Gallantly led, Mr. Jones. I watched you break up the Mahratta battalion and the cavalry. Go and report to your commander, and say that the General has discovered that the guns are still in the hands of the enemy, and that he is about to lead the Highlanders back to capture them. Your commanding officer is to support with his cavalry. Ride now, and fast."

It was one of the staff officers, and Owen hardly waited to salute with his sabre. He swung himself into his saddle and shouted the order to mount. Then, nicely gathered together, in case of unforeseen attack, he took his troop over to the spot where the 7th were now collecting, and delivered his message.

"Truly a young fire-eater," said the staff officer as he rode on. "There is stuff behind that young officer. He allows his excitement to work him up to a point where he would charge an army with a handful, and yet he does not neglect method and due precaution. On a field like this, where caution must not be practised, where dash is the only element likely to succeed, and where loss of success means annihilation that young chap is just the man. A regular young fighter!"

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He pencilled a note in his despatch-book and turned his horse to the spot where the Highlanders were gathering. And very soon the General and he were leading the men back against the guns. As for Owen, he fell in with his regiment, and rode back with them to the field, their beasts all white with heat after their exertions. And in the hour that followed he faced as murderous a fire of shot and grape as ever in his after-life, and when the action ceased and the enemy were beaten, found himself still the junior cornet of his regiment, but promoted to a higher place for all that, for some of the officers had perished.

"And I prophesy promotion to higher rank, Mr. Jones," said the Colonel, drawing him aside that evening, as the troop dismounted in the lines assigned to them. "The staff officer who witnessed your charge has been over to ask about you and report your conduct. I am pleased. More than pleased, Mr. Jones. It is seldom that I have seen a young officer rise to distinction so rapidly. These are the times for action, when a young fellow who has courage and go and who has discretion also can carve a way for himself in the world. It would not surprise me to hear that the General was about to reward your very gallant services."

Never before in his life had our hero been able even to imagine a battlefield after hostilities had ceased, and on this evening, as he carried out the duties assigned to him, this time in the absence of all fervour and excitement, his kindly young heart was rent many a time. For war cannot be waged without misery—misery on the field of conflict, and perhaps worse misery and destitution in the homes of those who have fallen. On the battlefield, however, the sights are so numerous that in time the old campaigner becomes accustomed to them, though none the less pitiful. And here was Owen, surrounded by wounded and killed, helping to bring in the men of his own regiment, and carrying water and cheerful messages to any man upon whom his search-party happened to stumble. It was dark by now, and they worked with the aid of torches or any lamp obtainable. The stretcher-bearers of the various companies had long since proved too few, while some had been shot down. And the regimental surgeons had so many upon their hands that long lines of wounded awaited their offices. There were groaning soldiers beneath each waggon and tent, and here and there they encountered some wretched Mahratta, dragging himself along painfully, in the vain hope of getting beyond the camp, little thinking or believing that the British succoured friend and foe alike. Yes, it was all very sad and heart-rending, and very very impressive to a young fellow like our hero. And in time he and his search-party came to a group of Highlanders, all in their shirt sleeves, engaged in burying comrades who had fallen some four hours before under the murderous fire of the French-trained gunners. Owen looked into the trench, saw the poor fellows laid out side by side, and turned sick and faint. For with all his dash he was but a young soldier, who loved the fight but was horrified by the sight that followed; whose heart was tender, and who in his softer and ordinary moods would have shrunk from causing pain to any one.

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"Come over and have something to eat," said one of his brother officers, meeting the party at that moment and seeing at a glance the condition of the last-joined cornet. "A dram of spirit and something to fill your stomach will make you look on matters differently in a little while. Wait though. We will stay till the end of the service."

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They stood beside the rough trench while an officer of the Highlanders, his bonnet beneath his arm, and his voice all shaky, read the service for the dead. Then they went back to their lines, the officer talking cheerfully all the way and speaking of the victory. He took Owen by the shoulder and made him sit down on the edge of an ammunition-box, and there watched as he drank the spirit and ate some of the rations which had been issued.

"No one is likely to want you after this, youngster," he said, "and so you will turn in. No? No argument, if you please. That is an order. Your servant will see to you."

He was led off by Mulha, and thoroughly worn out with all that had happened—with his adventurous morning ride, his fortunate discovery of the enemy, and the fierce conflict which had been waged—he very soon fell into a deep sleep. As for the kindly officer who had taken him in hand, when he and the other officers were gathered round the camp-fire that night there was no name more often on his lips than that of Owen Jones.

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"I found him almost fainting as he saw those gallant Highlanders laid in their grave," said the officer, "and I can tell you it did me good to watch the lad. You've all heard how he charged right home to-day, how he found the enemy, and practically gave us the opportunity for which we have so long sought. Well, isn't it a good thing to know that behind all the lad's courage and dash there is a finer feeling still, and that he is man enough not to be ashamed to show it?"

"He is a credit to us," was the Colonel's answer. "Owen Jones is a capital fellow."

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CHAPTER XV

Holkar the Treacherous

"The sahib's coffee. In an hour it will be light."

Mulha, the faithful Mahratta who acted as servant to Owen, knelt at the feet of the figure rolled in a blanket beside the fire, and wakened his master with a gentle touch of the hand. "Chota hazree, sahib," he said. "Rise and warm yourself before the fire. In a little while it will be time to be starting."

Owen yawned and sat up lazily. Then he opened his eyes with a start, and remembering where he was, leaped to his feet, throwing off the blanket which covered him.

"I had forgotten. I was dreaming," he said. "Are the men up?"

"See them, sahib. They have groomed and fed the horses. They are now eating, and within half an hour will be ready to mount. It will still be dark then."

"And we must be off again as soon as we can see. Good coffee, Mulha. You're a capital fellow! One wants something really hot on a morning like this, for it must be nearly freezing."

Owen paced up and down as he ate his little breakfast, the cup of coffee and the piece of cake or toast with which Europeans in the East are wont to commence the day. He stamped his feet to restore the circulation, and shivered, for the chill air before the rising of the sun bit keenly. And as he paced to and fro his eye went ever and anon to the busy scene about him. Some twenty native troopers, for the most part still swathed in their blankets, for the native feels the chill air even more than does the European, were bustling round and about the half-dozen fires which blazed amongst the trees. Some were grooming their horses, while others had already performed that duty and were settling saddles and kit in right position. Stalwart and soldierly-looking were these men, and as our hero inspected them he felt proud—proud that he was part of the regiment to which they belonged, and prouder still that he, Cornet Jones, of the 7th native cavalry, was in full command of them. It was a red-letter day in his life, and he was determined to make the most of his opportunity. For reward had come his way, as the colonel of his corps had prophesied, and a special mission, of some gravity, had been entrusted to him. It was on the second morning following the magnificent victory at Assaye, when the camp and surroundings were beginning to assume an orderly appearance, that a trooper, one of the General's bodyguard, rode over to the lines of the 7th, and wending his way in amongst the horses and the tents, finally drew up in front of the tent allocated for orderly-room work.

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"From the General," he said, as he handed in a note.

The Colonel tore it open as he lifted his eyebrows in surprise, for it was somewhat early for a message from headquarters, and there was little stirring after the victory, Scindia and his men having taken themselves away. Then he called loudly for his own orderly and gave him a message.

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"Call the sahib, Cornet Jones," he said shortly, "and send him to me." Ten minutes later our hero found himself outside the tent occupied by General Wellesley, standing before that redoubtable officer and two members of his staff. And once again Owen was filled with that indescribable feeling approaching fear. For the General seemed to read him as if he were a book, and before this man, whose name was destined to become a household one throughout the civilised world, a humble cornet, however high his spirits, was apt to feel immeasurably small and insignificant.

However, he managed to return the glance of the General with his accustomed frankness, and a moment later was listening to his words.

"We have to thank you, Mr. Jones, for the very valuable discovery which you and your men made for us in locating Scindia," said the General slowly. "But for that information, reaching me as it did in convenient time, this campaign might have been greatly extended in this area. I am informed also that you handled a troop of the 7th very well. In fact, that you took them through one of the French-trained battalions, and afterwards against a large force of horsemen. I note those acts while telling you that such behaviour is only what I expect of every officer, and indeed there is little doubt that at Assaye all under my command behaved nobly. But your name has now been brought to me on more than one occasion, and I must take some notice of that. You are young, but, I understand, quite an old soldier now. It is too early for you to receive the promotion which is your due, and I have therefore sent your name forward in my despatches, recommending that you be gazetted to the rank of captain, such gazette to date from the time when the despatch reaches the Governor-General."

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Owen breathed heavily. A mist rose in front of his eyes, while one of his legs would insist on twitching, so that he had the utmost difficulty in remaining strictly at attention. The General and his officers, as they looked keenly at him, noticed that Cornet Jones's colour had suddenly heightened, and that there was a little movement at the corner of his sensitive mouth. They guessed that the information just imparted had somewhat upset our hero. But they did not know that in the mist still hanging before his eyes appeared the figure of the fine sergeant who had fought for him when a boy, stalwart and gallant, the upholder of all that was right, manly, and honourable, and beside his red tunic the elegant form of Mr. Halbut, the powerful Director, his friend, who had lifted him from the gutter, and who, standing aside to watch how he fared, was ever ready with his encouragement. In a flash his words occurred to Owen: "Let the lad rise by his own exertions. I will use no personal interest, sergeant. If there is stuff in him, let him prove it to us."

"I was saying that the gazette would date from the time of the despatches reaching the Governor," said the General, after a little pause, for he saw that Owen was distressed. "I also added that if His Excellency were so minded—and I fully recommended the course—the gazette might with fairness be antedated to the very day of Assaye. It will be a matter of some three months perhaps before we have an answer, and by then, Mr. Jones, you will be more experienced and able to bear promotion. And now, I have something else to say."

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He turned to his staff officer and took a map from him, which he placed so that Owen could see it plainly. "This is Indore, Mr. Jones," he continued. "That is where Holkar has his headquarters. No doubt you have heard of him as a powerful chieftain, and robber, I might almost add. We have fears that he will raid the possessions of the Company at any time, and we desire to have information of his movements. You will obtain a despatch from this office, and will ride to Indore. There you will see this Mahratta chief, and amplify what I have said in the despatches. You will be able to tell all that there is to say about the battle of Assaye, and the sweeping defeat suffered by Scindia. When that task is done you will ride on to General Lake, who is in the neighbourhood of the city of Delhi, and will acquaint him with the progress of these operations. That will do, thank you, Mr. Jones."

Owen followed the course of his journey on the map, saluted, and was about to turn when the General arrested him with a movement of his hand.

"You will understand that the mission is a difficult and delicate one," he said, still in the same even tones, as if speaking of an everyday occurrence. "This Holkar is not to be trusted. He might murder an envoy instead of welcoming him, and you will therefore carry your life in your hands. I have chosen you for certain reasons, and because you speak the Mahratta tongue. You may decline the task if you wish, for I could not give a definite order for such a dangerous mission."

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He turned on his heel, curtly acknowledging Owen's salute. But this kind-hearted and brilliant general was an astute leader, as he had already proved, and he knew to a nicety the gallant feelings which filled Cornet Jones's breast, ay, and that of every officer in his command. The mission was a dangerous one, and Owen had been selected partly because of the reputation he had so early won and partly because of his facility with the language. The General knew well enough that this young officer, overrunning with zeal and enthusiasm, would have accepted the most forlorn of forlorn hopes with eagerness.

"You say that the lad has shown shrewdness?" he asked his staff officer as they entered the tent. "You have heard that said of him?"

"I have, sir," was the answer. "The Major who came out from home with him told me of his little adventure in Sumatra, and of his well-devised plan of escape. The lad started young, sir, and has seen much for his age. A hard life when he was a mere boy sharpened his wits, and now there is something more to spur him on and keep him up to the mark. He has a friend at home whose commendation is more to him even than yours, and you will see his object is to rise."

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That was why Owen was away from the camp, and why the fires which he and his men had lit were now out of sight of the army at Assaye. He had twenty men and Mulha, and they were already beyond the reach of their friends and traversing a country which was undoubtedly still occupied by large bodies of the enemy. And their destination was Indore in the first place, and afterwards the army under General Lake.

"Time to move," he said at last, as he walked to the edge of the wide tope of trees and looked out into the open. "There comes the light, and we want to make the utmost of it. To horse there."

Mount!"

In a compact little body, their lances carried in the rest and their pennons blowing out bravely in the breeze, the little force kept on its way all that day, trotting a few miles and then walking their horses, and halting to slacken girths every three hours, for to obtain the best work from a horse he needs as much and more consideration than does the rider. Owen was as yet somewhat strange to the management of horses, but his men were masters with the animals, and thanks to their teaching he had already commenced to learn that a careful rider is as mindful of his mount's comfort as of his own. He will see that the bit fits well, neither too tight nor too loose, that the saddle sits well down and does not rest upon the prominent portions of the back, and if possible that some sort of ventilation is obtained beneath the saddle. In a hot country, too, where linings are apt to become saturated with use, and where ridges and lumps are prone to form in consequence, the horseman does well to inspect such matters constantly.

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"It will take us a week to get to Indore, I calculate," said Owen that evening as they made their camp in another convenient tope of trees, for it was their aim and object to avoid observation. "That is, of course, if we are not molested. I believe the General is of opinion that Scindia will be anxious to make a truce. In fact, some of his vakeels were in the camp the day after Assaye. But meanwhile we might be pounced upon, and then we should be in a sorry plight if the enemy were very numerous."

And so each night, as darkness closed down upon them, sentries were posted at the edge of the trees, and Owen made a point of visiting them twice at least during the night. At length, however, they arrived within a few miles of Indore, and now that concealment was no longer necessary they rode well in the open, and gaining a side road, turned from it into a main thoroughfare which led to the city.

"There are horsemen, sahib," said Mulha suddenly, pointing towards the city. "They are issuing from one of the gates, and I do not like their manners. They would seem to be prepared to give us trouble."

"Then we shall have to ride on the alert," was Owen's answer. "I have an important message for this Holkar, and it is very necessary that there should be no blows between the horsemen and ourselves; for though they are Mahrattas, they are not yet at war with us. We will tie a cloth to one of the lances, and raise it as they get nearer."

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Mulha at once went to the troopers, and very soon a huge white turban was attached to one of the lances in place of the usual pennon.

"Now we will ride in close order," said Owen; for on the march discipline had been relaxed, and the ranks were broken at times, men jogging up beside one another to chat, and then on to another companion. Now, however, they closed in, and, with Owen at their head and the man with the white-pennoned lance just in rear of him, trotted on to Indore. Meanwhile the horsemen who had appeared were joined by others who could be seen streaming out through the gates of the city, and presently there were a thousand at least of them.

"A dangerous-looking lot," thought Owen as he rode along. "They seem to me to be the class of soldiers who ask few questions before commencing an attack, and leave explanation till afterwards. However, I will see that there is no room for error."

He beckoned to the man with the white pennon, and directed him to ride a few paces in advance.

"You will hoist your flag now," he said, "and if they do not heed it you will retire to the men and fall into your place."

A quarter of an hour later the body of Mahratta horse had approached to close quarters, and when within some three hundred yards a shout burst from their ranks and they flourished their arms in the air. Then smoke belched from the mass, and a score of bullets swept over the heads of Owen's troopers.

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"Wave the flag," shouted our hero, beginning to feel a little anxious, for the firing still continued, and one of the horses pawed the air and rose on his hind legs, having been struck by one of the missiles. "Unslung your carbines, men, but do not fire. If they push us we will answer, but I wish to enter the town in friendship. Ah, there is their officer!"

The firing ceased as the troopers drew their carbines from the buckets, and a horseman was seen to canter out from the ranks of the Mahrattas. He raised his hand in the air, and then waved it to either side, shouting an order the meaning of which could not be ascertained at that distance. At once there was a movement amongst the Mahrattas and they broke into two parties, those on the flanks galloping off with many a shout, waving their arms in the air, and looking altogether very formidable.

"Going to surround us," said Owen to Mulha as the latter came up beside him. "They look an ugly lot of fellows, and could easily cut us to pieces."

"And no doubt would do so if they were not to distinguish a white sahib amongst us," was the answer. "These men and their ruler have caused tales to spread throughout the land. They are fierce and treacherous, and it is said that they will rob and slay friend and foe alike. Also, sahib, it is said that no Mahratta's word is of more weight than is a feather. I fear this Holkar, and shall be glad when we are out of his territories."

Holding up his hand, our hero brought his little party to a halt, while the Mahrattas, galloping like the wind, surrounded them, and then came to a halt within some hundred yards. And a very forbidding and formidable lot they looked. As Owen gazed at them anxiously, for it appeared as if

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at any time they might ride over his small command, he could not help admiring the easy seat of these robbers, for Holkar's horse were little better. The men seemed to be a part of the animals they rode, while they had added to their appearance by the richness of their dress. There was no standard uniform amongst these troopers. They wore what they wished, and in consequence the ring about Owen and his party displayed many a brilliant colour. In many cases turbans were discarded for metal head-pieces of Eastern design and workmanship, while not a few wore chain-mail over their necks and shoulders. Then, too, their arms were of every pattern, some having the carbine, a great number lances, while all may be said to have carried tulwars.

"Truly a formidable host, sahib," whispered Mulha as he looked askance at the Mahrattas. "And yet they are no more in numbers than those horsemen against whom you and your troop charged at Assaye. Look at your men. They are uneasy, and yet they bear themselves proudly. They are commanded by Jones Sahib, and they are content."

Indeed, it needed but a glance at the troopers to show that, although they were not entirely sanguine as to the result of this encounter, yet they had confidence in their youthful leader; for, as the shouts of the Mahrattas rose and some few slipped from their horses with the evident intention of firing at the central party, the eyes of the troopers went to Owen's face and figure, and then back again, with undaunted mien, to the surrounding horsemen. Such is the power which a European of Owen's stamp, and however youthful, has over the native. But matters were again approaching a critical stage, and as the strangers seemed to take but little notice of the white pennon, Owen without hesitation rode out from amongst his men and trotted towards the officer who had given the order which had caused the Mahrattas to divide. He was a magnificently dressed native, swarthy as any, and wearing a glittering aigrette in his turban. The hilt of his tulwar flashed as he turned to Owen, while ever and again there was a scintillation from some portion of his dress as the sun's rays struck there. He halted and watched Owen as if in uncertain mind. Then he called out an order, and at his command a dozen of his men galloped up beside him, and the whole party advanced to meet the white officer.

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"Greeting," said Owen in the Mahratta tongue. "I come from His Excellency to your chief. What means this firing? Is not the flag of peace easily seen, and are we not on friendly terms with your ruler? Answer. What means the firing?"

For answer the leader of the horsemen shot his tulwar back into its sheath with a click, and then advanced still nearer.

"Holkar makes no explanation of what seems good to him," he said haughtily. "He sent me here to kill or capture. You are prisoners. You will return with me."

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"On certain terms," answered Owen curtly, "and see that you consider them well, for what has befallen Scindia and his hosts may yet befall you and your men. I am no prisoner. I came as His Excellency the General's vakeel, and I and my men will ride into the city, escorted if you will, but free, carrying our arms, and at liberty to depart when our business is done."

"High tones for one who has so few to back his wishes," sneered the native, casting his eye in the direction of the troopers. "What if we who are so many as to be able to eat you up, to ride over you and leave no trace of your having been, decide to conduct you to the city as prisoners? That were a great fall for the pride of a white officer."

Owen shrugged his shoulders, and made a movement to turn his horse.

"We have met and vanquished almost as many before," he said with as much coolness as he could muster, "and we will try again. If one shot rings out from your ranks I will charge, and you will see who is the better able to ride over the other. As for you, if you decide to carry out this threat I promise that even your chieftain shall not protect you, for, remember, I am an envoy, and I come in peace, beneath the white flag, which is sacred to us all."

Without deigning to turn his head he trotted back to his men, and at his order the carbines were slipped into their buckets and the lances came down in readiness for a charge.

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"I do not greatly fear trouble," he said shortly, so that they alone could hear. "But these fellows may wish to take us prisoners. In that case you will charge, and divide when you are through them. Then you will return and repeat the charge. It would never do to flee, for we should all be cut down for a certainty."

For five minutes the two bodies faced one another, Owen's troopers staring back at the Mahrattas with a calmness which was wonderful. And as they looked they edged their horses into line and selected a likely place for their charge.

To Owen the minutes went like hours, for he had a mission to carry out, and to come to blows with Holkar's men thus early was hardly conducting his task in a successful manner. To oppose these men was madness, and yet if he submitted to be taken a prisoner into Indore he knew very well that he would in all probability be thrown into a cell and there left, without opportunity of seeing Holkar. His hand went to his sabre, and he drew it, resting the blade against his shoulder. And while he and his men made their preparations, the native officer consulted with some of his men. Noisy shouts broke from their midst, and weapons were flourished. However, the threat of retaliation to which Owen had given vent evidently had its effect, for presently the officer advanced and called to our hero.

"Holkar shall decide," he said haughtily. "We might eat you up here, but there may be information to be obtained. We will escort you into the city."

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"To the palace?" demanded Owen.

"To the palace. There you shall be seen by His Highness."

A few minutes later the whole cavalcade was in motion, Owen and his men riding in a compact body, while the Mahratta horse, still divided, marched in front and in rear, completely enclosing them. And in this order they came to the city of Indore, the capital of Holkar, and passed through the streets to the palace. Arrived there, Owen and his men dismounted in the courtyard.

"I like not the arrangement, sahib," whispered Mulha. "They have us in the hollow of their hands, for how can we escape from this city? See the guards which they have set."

"We are virtually prisoners, but I have no fears for the future, Mulha. This fellow, Holkar, must respect the General's messenger and the escort sent with him. I know he has none too good a name, but then he would hardly dare to offer violence to us. In any case, we are here, and can take no more precautions than we have done. But keep a careful watch and be alert, whatever happens."

A moment or two later the officer who had escorted Owen into the city emerged from the palace with a gleam of malice on his face, and beckoned to him.

"Follow me," he said curtly. "His Highness will see you. Take care that you salaam to him."

"And see that you look to your own affairs, my friend," answered Owen. "Now lead the way."

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They traversed a number of passages and sumptuous apartments, and finally came to one which was gorgeously decorated. And here, surrounded by servants, pillowed in the lap of luxury, and reclining upon a divan, was Holkar, showing upon his scarred and seamed face the effects of the changing fortunes which had been his. He had but one eye, but that served him to some purpose, for he fixed it upon his visitor and gave him the benefit of a piercing gaze. Owen bowed, and at once handed the despatch he had brought.

"From His Excellency General Wellesley, in command of the army in the field," he said. "He begs me to give you his greetings, and to convey to you this despatch."

Holkar acknowledged his bow coldly, and then tore open the despatch, which was written in Mahratti. Owen saw him give a violent start of surprise as he read of the victory of Assaye. He looked up sharply, pondered for a minute, and then smiled scornfully.

"This great victory your general writes of," he said at length, when the despatch was ended, "these were Scindia's troops who were beaten, cowards whom I have swept from before my path on many an occasion. Had they been the men whom I command there would have been a different tale. What does your general desire? Why does he trouble me by sending an envoy?"

Owen noted his haughty tones, and felt even more apprehension. But he had had very complete instructions, and he endeavoured to carry them out, showing that the victory had been indeed a very real one, and that General Wellesley was anxious to assure a friendship with Holkar. It was a case for diplomacy, and Owen did his utmost. But though this powerful chieftain answered politely, his tones were of the haughtiest, and as Owen withdrew he felt sure that the friendship then existing between Holkar and the British was but a thing of straw, and that this chieftain only awaited a favourable day for breaking it. A few minutes later he was equally certain of another matter. As he came to the door of the palace Mulha met him, with consternation written on his face.

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"It is as I said, sahib," he cried. "No sooner had you passed in when a force of foot-soldiers marched into this square, and when they parted there were guns fully loaded and trained on the troopers. They were forced to dismount, their horses were led away, and they themselves were disarmed and marched out of the courtyard by the soldiers."

Owen was flabbergasted. He had hardly expected such high-handed action, though every minute had increased his anxiety as to the safety of his little command. He swung round without a word, with the intention of forcing his way to Holkar's presence. But as he did so some thirty soldiers issued from a door close at hand and rushed at him. Resistance was useless, and folding his arms he allowed the men to take him. Ten minutes later he was thrust into a cell high up in one of the wings of the palace, and heard the bolts shot to after him. He was a prisoner. Holkar, the treacherous and cruel chieftain, had him in his power, and with an involuntary shudder our hero realised the gravity of his position.

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CHAPTER XVI

A Dangerous Frenchman

"One hundred and forty steps up," thought Owen, as the door banged to after him, and he listened to the grating of the bolts, and then to the steps of the men who had conducted him to his prison now growing faint in the distance. He could hear the shuffle of Eastern sandals as they slid down the stone stairs, the metallic ring of a tulwar striking the wall, and then silence—silence save for the medley of sound, dulled by distance, coming to him from the outside world.

"Four stone walls and a flat ceiling," he said as he surveyed the apartment. "I fancy I must be in

the highest apartment in one of the flanking towers. Then the roof is just overhead, and if——"

He broke off suddenly and stamped his foot with vexation.

"What use is it to think of the roof!" he exclaimed angrily. "It is altogether out of my reach, and the ground below as well. The door is the only means of exit."

But he was not the lad to give up hope without proper investigation, and for an hour he busied himself with inspecting every corner of his prison. He went to the window, which was at a convenient level, and craned his head through it, for it was unglazed, and wide enough to admit a man of far larger proportions than his. Below, at a distance which made him feel dizzy, was the courtyard, and outside that the street, buzzing with Eastern life. He watched the thousands of the city of Indore passing, and noted the martial appearance of almost all. There were the usual artisans, the pedlars, the bullock-drivers with their quaint carts, and the bheesties. But amongst them all, passing to and fro with an arrogant swagger which matched their fine appearance well, were hundreds of foot and horse soldiers, armed to the teeth, fierce-looking and pugnacious.

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"Holkar is evidently well prepared for a war with any one," thought Owen. "There are his guns, too, and a fine collection he has. If we come to blows with him we shall have to be very wary, for they say that he has even better-trained troops than Scindia has. I heard that he had one or more Englishmen in his employ, and there are certainly Frenchmen. Well, it's no good breaking my neck with craning it out of this window, for escape is out of the question either way, to the roof above or to the ground beneath. But I am armed, and if the worst comes I could throw myself upon the jailer. We'll see. Perhaps Holkar will repent of his action, for surely it is scandalous."

There could be no doubt of that fact, and yet the history of the Mahrattas shows that on more than one occasion the powerful chieftains did not hesitate to stoop to the most odious acts of treachery. And Holkar's name figured in those acts prominently. As he sat on his divan below, his single eye passing from one to another of his servitors and causing them to cringe, his best and most enthusiastic friend could not but admit that this powerful Mahratta chieftain looked capable of any villainy.

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"This victory," he said, turning to a man beside him, by colour a European, but dressed as a Mahratta, "do you think that the details are true? Or has the tale been sent to us by this youth to induce us to hold our hands? I would that I knew, for if in truth this general, known as Wellesley, has conquered Scindia with but a handful, what would be our fortune were we to commence a war with the English?"

He fixed the white man with his eye and waited eagerly for his answer.

"Come, Colonel Sahib," he said. "You who love not the English, but who have every interest in my affairs and prosperity, what prospect have I if I go to war? You know my wishes. I would sweep these arrogant whites from the land, and then——"

"Scindia and his power would be crushed to the very earth, my lord," was the answer, given in Mahratti, but with an accent which was undoubtedly French. "Why believe all that one hears, and particularly of these British? This Scindia, what is he compared with you?"

The French colonel in the employ of Holkar swung round with flashing eye and stared at his chieftain. "He is but as the wolf compared with the tiger. Time and again he has conciliated you when trouble between you threatened, and we know—he knows that your troops could eat him and his up without trouble. He is defeated by a handful. What of that? His men fled, so we are told, ere the bayonets had crossed. Would that be the case with our troops? They would hold their ground, for they pride themselves upon being invincible. Ask this white officer more questions as to the battle. He will tell you that Scindia's men ran like sheep."

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He finished with a scornful toss of his head, and it was abundantly clear that he had the utmost faith in the men under the command of Holkar, and more than that, that his aim was to bring about hostilities with the British.

"Send for this youth again," he cried, "and we will gather all the facts; and remember this, my lord—for the man who dares much there is much reward. Holkar is now a powerful chieftain, and the Peishwa and Scindia tremble when his name is breathed. But what if Holkar conquered the white invaders?"

Holkar's one eye gleamed with enthusiasm, while his hand went involuntarily to his tulwar.

"There indeed would be power," he exclaimed. "It shall be. I will not be frightened by this despatch, by the tales brought by a boy, and by a victory won after an action which was never severely contested. Send for this prisoner. I will interrogate him, and then he shall go."

"Go! My lord, think what cause there is here for war. Keep him. Hang him if you will, and then throw yourself upon the British. They are scattered at this moment, while their hands are full to overflowing. Now is the time to strike. Send your troops against them while they are divided, and annihilate each one of the scattered divisions. Strike now, and let this youth be the cause of war."

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The Frenchman's eyes blazed with excitement, while he rose from the seat he had been occupying and stalked up and down in front of his chief. And there was no denying that this officer was as fine a specimen of humanity as one could well meet with. Tall, and handsome to a certain degree, he bore himself proudly. His moustaches bristled, while his whole mien betokened the utmost confidence in himself and in the wisdom of the course he advocated. True, there was a certain air of treachery about the man, and despite his fine appearance he was hardly the one to attract the confidence or friendship of a stranger. One would have thought him cruel and unscrupulous perhaps, and certainly the advice he had just given led one to believe

that he was.

"Send for this white officer," he said. "Let me see him and question him. Then deal with him in the manner I have advised."

Holkar clapped his hands, and having attracted the attention of one of his native officers, ordered him to send for the prisoner. That done, he continued to converse with the French colonel in confidential whispers. There was not the smallest doubt this white officer had the command of the troops under the Mahratta chieftain and was a power in the land. Also he was deeply antagonistic to the British, for the simple reason that he was a Frenchman, and perhaps for some other reason. For those who knew him could tell the tale that the name of an Englishman was hateful to this white officer, and that whenever he mentioned those of that nationality his lip curled, while his teeth showed as if he were about to snarl. Indeed, there were some who said that Colonel Le Pourton had some particular cause for hatred—a cause which he kept very closely to himself.

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Ten minutes later Owen was ushered into the room.

"A bold dog," said the Colonel, beneath his breath, as our hero entered, his head in air and a look of indignation on his face. "He must have known the danger of coming to the capital of Holkar, and yet he means now to beard the chieftain. Truly these British are impossible!"

A moment later, as he obtained a full view of Owen's face, he started and changed colour.

"Mon dieu! How like!" he exclaimed, while his colour went and he became deathly pale. "If it could be——"

"Who are you? Your name?" he demanded fiercely in Mahratti.

"Owen Jones, Cornet in His Majesty's 7th native cavalry. And you?"

The Colonel gave a gasp of relief.

"How like to him!" he murmured again. "If it were not for the name I could have thought that it was his son. Pshaw! How could it be? He is lost. Lost for ever!"

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He ground his teeth and snarled at Owen, who returned his glances boldly and advanced to within a couple of yards of the Mahratta chieftain, his eyes blazing, ready to denounce him for his act of treachery. For, though young as yet, Owen had learned many things since he joined the army. And one was that humility before a chieftain of Holkar's class was not profitable. Underneath all the arrogance of these native princes there lurked a wholesome dread of the British, and Owen knew that mild remonstrance would be of little service to him. He must let this chieftain know that his act would not go unpunished, and that if he continued his violence all his troops would be insufficient to protect him. He was in the very act of launching forth when Colonel Le Pourton again interrupted him.

"You say that you are Cornet Owen Jones," he said in breathless and excited tones. "Tell us where you come from in England. Speak, and let it be the truth."

"The truth!" Owen swung round upon him, his face flushing. "Please remember that an Englishman boasts that he always tells the truth. Who are you who ask these questions?"

For a moment the Colonel was staggered by his boldness, while the single eye of Holkar flashed ominously and he was in the act of speaking when the Colonel held up his hand to arrest the words.

"My lord," he said, "let me deal with this youth. I have grave cause to ask these questions, for years ago—but that is a story which could not interest you. My name? Colonel Le Pourton, in command of some portion of Holkar's forces. Your answer."

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Owen thought for a moment before replying. There was something about this Frenchman which repelled him, while the sneer on his face when he spoke told at once that here was a man who was hardly likely to befriend him. What object could he have in asking this question?

"From Winchester," he said at length. "That is my native city."

"And you were born there? Your parents lived there?"

The Frenchman sprang to his feet and strode up and down again in extraordinary excitement while he waited breathlessly for the answer. As for Owen, he was amazed at the questions and hardly knew whether to reply or not. He could see no reason for not gratifying what would seem to be idle curiosity on the part of this white officer, and yet there was something forbidding about the Frenchman, something which warned him to hold his tongue. If only he had known how eagerly the Colonel awaited his information! If only he could have guessed what that information would lead to!

"Ah well, I don't see why he should not know," he said to himself. "Unless——"

Suddenly the thought came to him that this man might in some extraordinary manner be connected with his earlier history—might even have known his parents. Like a flash the idea swept across his mind, and with it the determination to tell all that he knew.

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"I was not born in Winchester," he answered. "I believe I was born in India, and sailed for England when I was some four or five years of age. After that I can only say that it would appear as if I had been stolen and then deserted. I was brought up at the poorhouse, and finally entered the army, when——"

He came to a sudden stop, for Colonel Le Pourton had collapsed into his seat, where he lay rather

than sat, a huddled heap, his face the colour of crimson, his eyes bloodshot and staring, and his breath coming in short, sharp gasps. He was evidently ill, and at the sight Owen looked at him in amazement, while Holkar leaped to his feet with an oath. A minute later, however, the Colonel recovered and sat upright, his baneful eyes fixed on our hero.

"Let us talk with him another time, my lord," he said feebly. "Take him away. See that he is secured. Put chains upon him if necessary. Warn the jailer that he will be executed if this officer contrives to escape. Do you hear? Take him away!"

His voice rose as he went on till it became almost a scream, while he pointed a finger at Owen. His eyes flashed and blazed like those of a maniac, he frothed at the mouth, while the lips and moustaches curled back from the teeth in a hideous snarl, which was more than disconcerting. Owen recoiled from the man and backed into the centre of the room, while his hand went to the hilt of his sabre. Then the guard which had escorted him to the presence of the Mahratta chief surrounded him and hastened him away into the corridor, up the endless flight of steps, and then into the large bare cell again. There was a crash as the door swung to, the rasping of bolts and rusty bars, and the slither of departing sandals, the slip, slip, slip of men descending the stairs, the metallic clink of a striking weapon, now so wonderfully familiar, for such small sounds seize upon the attention of a prisoner, and then silence again—silence and the busy hum of the Oriental city, the call of the bullock-drovers, the cry of the mendicant, and the sharp, arrogant shout of the soldiers to clear a passage for them.

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"The man is mad! He must be! What on earth can my history be to him—to a Frenchman out here in India!"

Owen passed his fingers through his hair and then mopped his forehead, for the scene which had just passed was amazing. It was filled with the most astonishing incidents—incidents which defied his powers to decipher.

And yet, was the Frenchman mad? Was there an undercurrent of meaning? Surely there must have been reasons for his questions; and his illness, the sudden collapse as the information was given him, were convincing arguments that Colonel Le Pourton had reasons for asking his questions, and that the answers, simple as they undoubtedly were, had brought some dread to his mind which was sufficiently great to upset him. But though Owen pondered on the matter for many hours he arrived at no solution, and finally was compelled to give the mystery up as unfathomable. Of this, however, he was certain: whatever interest the Frenchman might have in him, it was not a friendly one. Something told him that the Colonel was a bitter enemy, and that he would do well to escape from his power as rapidly as possible. Had he had any doubts on this matter they were set at rest that very night.

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As the sun was sinking the door of his prison was thrown open. "You will eat in a room along this passage. There are other prisoners." The Mahratta jailer motioned to him to pass along the corridor, and ushered him into a room in which there was a small table with three chairs set to it. On these were seated three British officers, evidently in the service of Holkar, for they wore Mahratta uniforms. They rose as he entered and welcomed him as only Britishers can welcome their own countrymen abroad.

"Here is another chair. Sit down, please," said one, a pleasant-looking fellow. "Now, it is hardly worth asking what you will have, seeing that very little is allowed. But make the most of the time, for they give us only a few minutes. That's it. Now you have something, and we can talk. We know all about you, and how you were taken. This Holkar is a treacherous fellow, and his French adviser does not help matters. We are in the same box, for we have been serving in his army for some time, and should be now, we fancy, but for the Colonel. He has become very powerful, and, being a Frenchman, hates all English officers. Holkar is about to quarrel with the British, and as we could not possibly fight against our own people we asked to leave him. That is why we are here, and—but there, we won't think of the future."

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"We'll make the most of our time," burst in another; "but there's no denying the fact that things are ugly. This Holkar is capable of murdering us."

There was a nod from the third, while Owen stared at his new acquaintances in astonishment. Later he learned their names. They were Captains Vickers, Todd, and Ryan, all three in the service of Holkar, as many other British officers were in that of other chieftains; and these unfortunate and gallant men, because they refused to fight their own kith and kin, were prisoners. It was another illustration of the treachery of Holkar.

But however hard the fortune which had come to the prisoners, for this brief half-hour, when they were allowed to be together, they banished care and became happy in one another's company. In a very little while Owen learned all about them, while he rapidly told his own history and all about the campaign which had been waged. A little later the door was thrown open and the jailer ordered them back to their cells.

"Good-bye till to-morrow, Owen," said one of the officers, "and take my advice. Beware of that fellow Le Pourton. We are not such close prisoners here that our servants cannot bring us news, and we have learned enough already to know that the Frenchman will have you killed if possible. Look out. The jailer may have picked up a little of our language."

"Then I must get away, whatever the difficulty," thought our hero as the door of his cell was slammed to again and he found himself alone. "Even if there were only the chief to be considered, I should go, for I could not trust my life to him for an instant. And now that this Frenchman has appeared upon the scene it becomes doubly necessary. But how?"

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When night had fallen and the stars had come out in their myriads, shining down upon the city of Indore, Owen stared up at them from the window, puzzling how to make good his escape. Down below he could hear the drowsy chant of some religious enthusiasts, while ever and anon the flash of the fire which burned in a stove before them came to his eyes, some one in the circle of natives about it having changed his position. All manner of strange cries came up to him from the streets of this Eastern city—the neighing of horses, the clatter of human beings, and the bellow of oxen. But as the night passed on all these ceased, and save for the bark of an occasional cur there was not a sound. In the corridor outside, and in other parts of the tower in which he was a prisoner, there was not so much as a murmur. He was alone, helpless, a prisoner in the hands of two men as ruthless and as cruel as could well be found.

And while he is there, groping round the walls, vainly endeavouring to discover some hidden outlet, or thrusting his head out of the window as if he were likely there to find some help, we will leave him for a while to return to the British forces in the field. This Mahratta campaign, which had opened so brilliantly, and which in the quarter where General Wellesley had command had been waged so successfully and had culminated in the victory of Assaye, is already familiar to the reader. But the country ruled over by the Mahrattas was very extensive, and, as has already been narrated, there was more than one chieftain who had thrown down the gage to England, and in consequence there were other forces to be encountered in addition to that under the command of Scindia in person.

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It will be remembered that negotiations for peace had commenced after Assaye, and crushing though the defeat was which had been inflicted there, it will be realised that in itself that was insufficient to bring about such an event, considering the other forces in the field against us—forces which so far have not been mentioned. Some 55,000 men, European and native, had been collected in different parts by the Governor-General of India, and these were divided into various brigades with a view to carrying on a number of campaigns at one and the same time. The areas detailed to these forces were the Deccan, Hindustan, Goojerat, and Cuttack; and the operations resulting in the first-named area have already been outlined, General Wellesley having there already brought the enemy to a condition of humbleness. This brilliant general could not possibly direct armies so widely separated, therefore other commanders had to be selected, and in consequence some 7000 men were placed under the orders of Colonel Murray in Goojerat.

The Rajah of Berar had rashly thrown in his lot with Scindia, and against this chieftain marched another force of European and native troops. The movements of this part of our army resulted on the 14th of September in the storming of the fort of Barahuttee, one mile from Cuttack, and in the conquest of the province—another strong inducement to Scindia to lay down his arms.

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And now we come to the operations in Hindustan proper—operations which may be said to have been the most important of all, for the force allocated to this area, under the command of General Lake, afterwards Lord Lake, was to be opposed to General Perron's battalions, and it was expected that the French element would lead to very great difficulties. For these battalions, nominally in the service of Scindia, were wholly devoted to the interests of France, and were in consequence a thorn in the side of the British. They had assigned to them a considerable territory, the income of which was devoted to their maintenance and pay, and this territory they ruled despotically. There were some 43,650 trained men with 464 guns, and of these it is said that some 23,650 were with Scindia in the Deccan, where General Wellesley had overthrown them; while the remainder, 20,000, were in Hindustan, opposed to General Lake. This last-named general had under his command 10,500 men of all arms. He set out from Cawnpore on the 7th of August, and by 4th September had captured the fortress of Allyghur, which was of the utmost importance to General Perron, and which, having had all the skill of his engineers devoted to it, was of incredible strength. It fell into our hands with a huge quantity of military stores and 281 guns, and its capture must have been a very serious loss to the enemy. It was followed by the resignation of General Perron, who passed through our lines to Lucknow. He had been informed that he was to be superseded, and in addition had little confidence in the ultimate success of Scindia, or in his European officers. His place was taken by Louis Bourquin, about whom gathered the battalions formerly under the command of General Perron. But the effect of Allyghur and of the general's submission were felt on the way to Delhi, for many places were handed to our troops without a shot being fired. On our arrival within sight of Delhi, however, Louis Bourquin attacked the camp, having some thirteen battalions of infantry with him and 5000 cavalry. Our men were tired out with their long march in the sun and hardly fit for strenuous battle; but in spite of their condition they faced the enemy staunchly, made a counter attack, and finally drove the Mahrattas in wild flight from the field, after a very severely contested action in which we lost heavily, while the enemy left 3000 killed and wounded on the field, besides numbers of guns, ammunition, and two tumbrils laden with treasure. The occupation of Delhi followed as a natural course, while Louis Bourquin and four other French officers, using a wise discretion, forsook the service of Scindia and surrendered to General Lake.

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No sooner had this general won the ancient city of Delhi than he placed Colonel Ochterlony in command of its garrison, and turning his back upon it set out for Agra on the 24th of September, the very day following that on which General Wellesley had defeated Scindia and his force at Assaye. This brings events up to the moment when Owen was despatched to Indore, to the court of the redoubtable Holkar. Now let us return to that young officer, whom we left a close prisoner in the tower of the palace.

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Owen makes an Effort

Two days passed slowly for Owen in his prison, and during that time the tedious hours were broken only by the half-hour when he was marched to an adjoining room and ate his meal in the presence of the three other imprisoned officers. However, on the third afternoon after his arrival at Indore an event occurred which roused him from the lethargy which was beginning to come over him. All was still in the noonday heat, and the city of Indore seemed to be asleep. The clatter and hum of the populace had died down, for the people were following a custom in favour with the Spaniards and were indulging in a siesta. In the palace there was not a sound to be heard, while in the tower in which he was a prisoner nothing occurred to break the silence. Owen stood at the window listless and dispirited, and if the truth be told, almost asleep, when suddenly the faint sound of a distant footstep attracted his attention.

"The jailer," he thought; "but why is he coming now? It is his custom to bring me food and water just before the sun goes down. It is strange that he should be here now. Perhaps he is about to make a surprise visit, for he is creeping up the stairs."

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He tiptoed across to the door of his cell and listened eagerly. He could hear the almost silent footfall as the man ascended the stairs, and presently the hollow noise given out by the corridor outside as people came along it.

"He is sneaking along by the wall. I don't like this visit," thought Owen. "I wonder what he wants?"

A minute later it was clear that the man outside was within a foot of his door, and as he listened Owen could hear his deep and hurried breathing, which made it appear as if he had come up the long flight of steps two at a time. Then there was a movement of a shoe, a hand went to the lock and tried it, and then the door was shaken ever so gently. Owen eased his sabre in its scabbard, for he had even now not been disarmed. Then he dropped on hands and knees and placed his ear close to the floor. Next second he leaped to his feet with a cry of joy, for a voice called to him.

"Sahib! Sahib! Is the sahib Cornet Jones there?"

"Here! I am here, Mulha!"

The breathing was even deeper and quicker outside, and Owen heard a sigh of relief. Then the voice came even more distinctly, for Mulha, his faithful servant, had placed his lips close to the crack where the door closed.

"Master, master," he said in eager, trembling tones, "they have brought the troopers together again. They and their horses are quartered just outside the courtyard, and they have orders to move to-morrow. Yes, on the morrow they are to ride back to the General. I have seen the message which they are to carry. Holkar will make war with the British, and will kill you first so that there shall be good cause. I have seen it, sahib, I say."

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The poor fellow could hardly continue, for the very mention of such a fact unmanned him. His voice trembled even more, and Owen heard a sound as of a man who has only just succeeded in choking down a sob.

"Hush!" he whispered through the narrow crevice. "I'm still alive, and will give some trouble before I am killed, Mulha. Tell me more, and look carefully at the bolts. Can you loosen them?"

"Alas! sahib, there are two locks, and I have no implements. More than that, the approach to the tower is so carefully watched that I have obtained admission by the merest chance. The man on duty fell asleep as he watched, and I slipped past him. But I will try later as the evening comes, though there is little hope. Sahib, what can we do?"

"Nothing. You cannot help me. I must escape by my own efforts, and I will do so. Tell me, Mulha, where are you quartered, so that I can find you if I manage to break out?"

"I am with the troopers, minding your horse and mine," came the answer. "It is a long, low building to the right, just outside the courtyard. Sahib, the door is double-locked, and how can you escape? To-night they will murder you. I have made sure of that. These miscreants will kill you, and so make cause for war."

At that the poor fellow who was so attached to Owen broke down, and the prisoner could hear his sobs. He tapped on the door to arrest the noise, and whispered again.

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"Tell the men to be ready at any time," he said quietly. "If it is possible I will escape. Let them wait and be ready. Where are the guards stationed?"

"At the foot of the stairs, sahib, at the main entrance and at the exit from the courtyard. As for the troopers, they are free to move about in their quarters, but they are watched. We have seen men hovering about. This white officer too,"—Owen heard his servant grind his teeth as he spoke of the French colonel,—"sahib, I tell you that he watches every movement and every one of the guards. I have seen him in the courtyard, and I have heard him threaten death to any who allowed his prisoner to escape. Beware, sahib! This man bears you but evil friendship, and would slay you. Who knows, it may be his doing that these orders have been given to the troopers, for here in Indore he commands. Holkar is beneath his thumb, and an order from this white fiend is obeyed as if he were an emperor indeed. Hush! I hear some one moving. We will wait, sahib!"

Even Owen behind his prison door could hear the far-off sound of a step, and therefore could not feel surprise when the sounds outside told him that Mulha had moved away. However, in a moment or two he was back, and his voice was heard again.

"Farewell, sahib," he whispered. "We will wait. I believe that you will escape. If not, rest assured, we will avenge you."

He was gone. Owen could hear his faint footfall as he slipped down the stairs. Then followed silence, complete silence, broken after a little while by the awakening noises from the city outside.

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"Forewarned!" said Owen as calmly as he could, though his heart beat more forcibly now that he had heard Mulha's news. "So they will murder me, and make that a cause for war, as if there was not enough already! Ah! I know whom I have to thank for this! It is the Frenchman; but why? Why?"

Why indeed? Had our hero devoted himself to elucidating the reason for such display of malice for a week or even more he would have been no nearer the answer. The fact remained that Colonel Le Pourton had taken a sudden and none too friendly interest in him, and, moreover, appeared to be in some manner connected with his earlier history. What was there which could possibly make this English youth—a poorhouse boy, a beggar almost till friends came forward to help him—an enemy to be feared by one in such high command as this French colonel? And yet

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"He fears me, and he knows something of my earlier history. His conscience hurts him perhaps. Who knows, he may have been the very one who arranged for my abduction, for I was certainly stolen when I was a child. But a Frenchman! It seems impossible."

Owen looked at the matter from all sides, and could not fail to see the unlikelihood of this man having had anything to do with him in former days; for, as he had just said, Colonel Le Pourton was a Frenchman, and we had been at war with his country for a long while. True, there had been a truce every now and again, even in India, where the two nations had been struggling the one against the other. English possessions had been captured and handed back again at the end of hostilities, and the same could be said of Pondicherry and other French holdings. It was possible that this Frenchman had known, in times of peace, some of the British officers, and then

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"What is the good of worrying about the matter?" thought Owen peevishly. "My life is of far more value to me than is this matter, and I will leave it. Now, how to escape? I will get away if it is possible. But how?"

He went over to the window again and stood there, leaning against the wall and staring down at the streets beneath. And as he did so he noted the surroundings of the palace, the courtyard below with its outer gates, the sentries stationed there, magnificent men of Holkar's bodyguard. And outside the very building to which Mulha had alluded. Yes, and as he looked there was the figure of the faithful servant entering the quarters allotted to his comrades. Owen waved his hand to him, and Mulha, happening to look up at his window, as he had done many a time in the last few hours without doubt, wondering behind which his master lay a prisoner, saw the signal and answered it. Then he disappeared, and our hero saw no more of him. He followed the courtyard round to its limits, and then traced the walls which surrounded the palace. They were evidently part of the defences of the town, and were armed with heavy guns, some of brass and some of iron, and all of large proportions.

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"That is certainly the largest I have ever seen in my life," thought Owen as his eye lit on one piece of gigantic size which towered over the others. "Its muzzle must be a couple of feet across."

This, in fact, was the case, and the gun in question almost rivalled in size another which was captured later in this campaign in Agra—a gun so huge that a man could easily slide into the barrel. But Owen's attention was soon taken up by other matters, and for a long while he stood there, unmindful of what he saw, planning an escape. The sun sank, the last which he was to see if Colonel Le Pourton could have his way, and the short twilight lit up the city of Indore, its palace, its minarets, and its squalid hovels. The sounds in its streets died down, while close to the gates the gathering throng showed that the country-folk were about to return to their homes. They were filing through the massive entrance to Indore, and he could see a thin stream of carts and pedestrians moving away into the distance. And gradually the gloom deepened, the light disappeared, and night fell with characteristic suddenness—perhaps Owen's last. The hour approached for his assassination, and at the thought he shuddered. Then his courage revived, and the very imminence of his danger spurred him on and made him reckless of danger and difficulty, willing to attempt anything.

"We shall see," he said, as his teeth closed together. "This Holkar and his French friend shall see. They have not killed me yet, and—"

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He broke off suddenly and once more tiptoed across to the door, for away down below came the slither of a sandal and the well-known step of the jailer. He was coming up the stairs, and very soon he was close to the prisoner's door. He stopped, and Owen heard the clink of the platter which carried his evening meal against the stone chatti containing his allowance of water.

"My evening meal," he thought. "He will come in and place the things on the floor, and then leave at once without a word, and with only a shake of his ugly head and an oath if I ask a question. A pleasant fellow indeed, and just the one to carry out this assassination of which I have been warned. He'll go, and that is the last time I shall be disturbed till he or others come on behalf of

the Frenchman."

Suddenly his breath came faster and deeper, for a thought had struck him, and he realised that, since to break out of his prison was impossible, then the only way now was to throw himself upon his keeper; and that individual was now about to pay his last evening visit. It was now or never, and in an instant his determination was taken. He changed his position slightly, and stood so that when the door opened he would be behind it. The locks grated; he heard the man swear as he struggled with the key, for one hand was filled. But in a moment the fastening was undone and the door swung open, while the jailer, taking the platter in one hand and bearing the chatti in the other, stepped into the cell. A cry escaped him, for up to now Owen had always stationed himself at the window.

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"What! Gone! Escaped!"

The man's jaws opened in his consternation, while the chatti dropped from his hand and crashed to the floor, splintering there and scattering the contents. Then his wits returned, and he suddenly remembered to look behind the door. In an instant his mouth opened wide to give vent to a shout of rage and astonishment, for the prisoner stood there with drawn sabre in his hand. But the sound never left his lips, for as his eye fell upon the figure of the prisoner Owen leaped forward and, putting all his force into the blow, struck the man full in the face with the hilt of his weapon. There was a sickening crash, and then the clatter of the plate as it smashed on the floor. As for the Mahratta guard, he fell like an ox struck true and sure with a pole-axe, and lay stunned and helpless on the floor.

"The first step towards liberty," said Owen grimly, sheathing his sabre. "And now to get away. I must not delay, and yet I must not spoil all by undue hurry. Of course the only sensible thing to do is to take this fellow's clothes."

That such a course was advisable could not be gainsaid, and he set to work to carry out the change without delay or hesitation. And presently he was a Mahratta in appearance and dress, save that his skin was too light. However, a handful of dust from the floor remedied that defect, and with his sabre hooked to his belt and his pistol beneath his quilted jacket he was ready. He stooped and looked carefully at the jailer.

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"A broken nose at any rate," he said, as he observed the man's injuries, "and for my part I have no hesitation in saying that he richly deserves it. He is stunned, and I fancy will lie insensible for some little while. I'll lash his hands behind him and make him fast to that ring in the wall."

He set to work on a portion of the jailer's waist-cloth, and tore it into long shreds which he knotted together. When he had a piece of sufficient length he turned the man on his face and lashed his hands firmly, afterwards dragging him to the ring and making the tail end of the improvised rope fast there. He had now done all that was possible, and therefore, taking the bunch of keys which the Mahratta carried at his belt when he entered, Owen coolly left the cell, carefully shut and bolted the door after him, and having shot the locks stood in the passage thinking and listening.

"What of the other prisoners?" he said to himself. "They are somewhere in this tower, though I believe on another story. No. They say that they are in no immediate danger, while their imprisonment is no affair of mine. Had they been taken with me it would have been a different matter. I must leave them, for to attempt their rescue would be to throw away all chance of escape. Here goes!"

Never before had he been in disguise, but he was a lad who took the trouble to observe, and whose interest in life and people was so great that he was not content to think of himself and his own appearance alone, as is the case with some smaller minds, but noted the ways and appearance of all strangers, seeing the difference between their actions, their walk, their manner of sitting, and a thousand and one other matters which might have escaped the eye of one less wide awake. And now, thanks to that very power of observation, he fell into the characteristic light step of a Mahratta unconsciously, holding himself proudly erect as was the wont of the soldiers and servants of the mighty Holkar. He jingled the keys in his hand, and since it was useless to stand there at the top of the stairs, he descended, two steps at a time, as his jailer was accustomed to do. And very soon he was at the foot, in the big hall which gave access to the courtyard, and at his elbow was the sentry, a tall fellow wearing a steel head-piece. In the distance, suspended from the roof, was a lamp of Eastern manufacture, which shed a faint light over the place, and for an instant fear of recognition caused Owen to hesitate. But it happened that a strong night breeze had got up, and this playing into the hall and upon the lamp caused the flame to flicker and cast fitful shadows on the walls. The sentry turned to face Owen, stared at him intently, and then shouldered his pike, giving a nod of recognition.

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"You will be making another journey, brother," he said in low tones, for it was well for Holkar's guards to refrain from disturbing him. "I heard the chatti and the platter fall to the ground, and I suppose you will be returning. It is the last meal which he will ever take. He is well, I hope; but did you strike him? I thought I heard the sound of a blow also."

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Owen stamped his foot as the man spoke, and swore in Mahratti. Turning his head, he placed his hand to his ear and growled out a reply.

"Speak not to me of the dog," he said angrily. "The fellow commanded me to set him free, and struck me to make me let him pass. That was the cause of the breakage. But he will be careful next time. I dealt him a blow in return which will keep him silent till——"

"Till his hour comes, comrade. Hah! hah! These Feringhee dogs will all pay the price for their

arrogance. But, hus-s-sh! Holkar is within."

"Then I will go. Heed not the noise upstairs should the prisoner call. Let the dog lie and hunger till to-night."

Owen went across the hall holding his hand to his ear, and boldly stepped down into the courtyard. It was empty save for the sentry standing erect and alert at the gate, and Owen was in the very act of crossing to him to bid him open when a thought struck him.

"If this fellow, the French colonel, is so anxious about my safety in the cell it is just possible that he has given orders that none are to leave the palace," he thought. "This man might then suspect, for as the jailer I ought to know all about the order. Hm! That is an unpleasant thought."

While he pondered on the matter he wandered away across the courtyard, and presently found himself on the wide ledge which ran along behind the wall defending the palace. It was in semi-darkness, for though a small crescent of the moon was up, clouds filled the sky and obscured the light. And here he remained for some minutes, thinking deeply and starting nervously at every sound. Suddenly a door opened at the side of the palace, some thirty yards behind him, and a flood of light poured out, illuminating a portion of one of Holkar's gardens. Owen crouched beneath one of the brass cannon beside which he happened to have been standing, and then lay flat on his face, for the figure which emerged was that of Colonel Le Pourton. He stood silhouetted against the brightly illuminated archway of the door for some few seconds, and then he strode across to the courtyard with the step of a man who has a matter of some importance to carry out. Owen followed carefully, his body close to the wall, shrouded in the dense darkness which existed there. And very fortunate for him was it that he did so; for as the Colonel came to the main entrance of the palace Owen heard him call to the sentry.

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"It is time the jailer took food to the prisoner," he cried. "Bid him come to me ere he does so, for I desire to go to the cell and speak with the white man. I will return to my quarters now. Bid him come there to summon me."

And faintly the answer came back, "My lord, the prisoner is fed, and the man you ask for gone some little time. He went into the courtyard, and I have not seen him since."

The Frenchman growled out at the reply, and swinging round went to the man stationed at the outer gate, of whom he demanded whether he had seen the jailer.

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"I did, some little while ago now, my lord," came the answer, while the courtyard rang with the sound of the man's pike as he grounded it on the flags. "He went across this place and on to the wall yonder, where he is now without doubt, for there is no way out and he has not returned. Unless he slipped past against the far wall, when the sentry within will have seen him."

Once more the Colonel swung round, and Owen realised with a sickening feeling of dread that he was coming across to the spot where he was in hiding. Terror of discovery and what would follow almost rooted him to the spot, and it was fortunate for him that his enemy, happening to think of some other matter, returned to question the sentry again. Owen took full advantage of the respite. Darting along the wall, he did not halt till he came to the farther end, where a flanking tower was erected preventing farther progress. There he halted, looking about him like a hunted animal, while his ears caught the approaching step of the Colonel in the distance. His danger was imminent, and discovery seemed more than certain. He drew his sabre, and then thrust it back with a sharp cry of delight. For danger sharpens men's wits at times, and Owen's mind had suddenly returned to what he had seen that day. He ran towards the approaching step, tiptoeing over the grass which bordered the wall, and halted beside the big gun which had caught his eye. There was not an instant to be lost, and therefore without hesitation he unhooked his sabre and thrust it into the muzzle, lest it should strike later and attract attention. Then he sprang on to the wall, and thrust one leg into the gun. Leaning all his weight on his hands, he did the same with the other, and in less time than it takes to tell he was out of sight, swallowed by the gigantic weapon.

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What if it were loaded! What if this Colonel discovered him, and taking advantage of his position fired the gun!

"It would come to the same in the end," thought Owen. "Anyhow, I am sure that I could not have found a finer hiding-place, while as for room, in here there is heaps. It is as I thought. The calibre is very much greater than one usually comes across, and the muzzle must measure quite two feet—ample room for a youngster like me. Hark! There he comes."

He held his breath, for the sound of a footstep near at hand came distinctly to his ears. He heard the Colonel move along past the gun to the wall of the flanking tower, and then his steps as he returned. Evidently he was a little uncertain of the sentry's tale, for he stepped to the wall, and leaning his hand on the muzzle of the giant gun within which his prisoner lay he leaned over and peered into the darkness of the street below.

"Not there. It is a good jump, and the fellow knows that I have given strict orders that none are to leave the palace," Owen heard him say. Then he raised his voice and called angrily to the sentry.

"Over there!" he shouted; "the jailer is not here, and doubtless you have never seen him. Pass the word in that he is to be found and is to come to me without delay. See that the order is given."

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He leaped to the ground and went off in the darkness, while Owen, waiting till his steps had ceased to reach his ears, dragged himself to the edge of the muzzle, and craning his head over it stared after him. The figure of the French colonel had disappeared in the gathering darkness, but within a minute it appeared again at the entrance to his quarters, where his tall frame was again

silhouetted against the light within. Then he was gone again, and there was only the light, streaming out from the opening.

"He wants the jailer, and the orders are that none leave the palace," said Owen. "Very well. He shall be obeyed. I will go to him."

He swung himself out of the gun, hitched on his sabre, and crossed to the opening. A minute later he disappeared within, bent on interviewing his enemy.

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CHAPTER XVIII

Colonel Le Pourton's Legacy

"An order from this white fiend is obeyed as if he were an emperor indeed!" Owen repeated the very words to which Mulha had given utterance that same afternoon when referring to the Colonel, and boldly entered the archway through which Colonel Le Pourton had disappeared. There was a grim and determined look on his dust-smeared face which betokened recklessness, for our hero was in a corner.

"Of what use is it to me to be free of my cell and yet unable to leave the precincts of the palace?" he murmured. "Besides, there are the troopers. They cannot leave till to-morrow without an order from this man, and, well, he will have to give it. The risk is worth the attempt, and if this Colonel was so staggered at my answers to his questions, perhaps he will be even more so at my sudden appearance. If not, I will shoot him like a dog."

He moistened his lips as he drew out his pistol, and taking advantage of the light saw that the weapon was primed and ready. Within the archway he could see a long corridor, lit by a second swinging Eastern lamp of perforated metal-work, and in the distance another opening. The aroma of tobacco filled his nostrils, while he distinctly saw that thin wisps of smoke were issuing from this far room. Then the French colonel was indulging in a smoke, and that pointed to the fact that he had no fears as to the security of his prisoner. Owen took heart at the sight and pushed on without hesitation, determined to get the better of his opponent. He thrust his hand beneath his coat, and treading lightly, advanced to the door.

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"Who is there? Speak at once," called the Colonel.

"Your servant, sahib, come at the word of the sentry. The prisoner is fed and has settled for the night. I am told that you desire to speak with him."

"Enter. Come into the room, and listen to what I have to say. Later, we will go to his cell."



COLONEL LE POURTON WAS STARING
DOWN THE MUZZLE OF THE WEAPON

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At the words Owen advanced again and stepped into the room, to find it brilliantly illuminated,

while the lamp hung over a central table at which the long figure of his enemy lounged. Colonel Le Pourton had as yet no suspicion of the intention of his visitor or of his disguise, for as the escaping prisoner entered he barely glanced at him, and then returned to the work he had in hand. There were plans and maps before him, and on one of the latter he was tracing out the positions of the various British forces then in the field. At his elbow stood a massive gold box, in which was his store of tobacco, while he held between his thin lips the stem of an English clay pipe, so much beloved of our forefathers. Smoke issued in thin puffs from his lips and from his nose and billowed into the room, almost hiding him from view, and obscuring some portion of the decorated ceiling, the limp Eastern hangings, and the rich mats which lay on the floor. Owen salaamed, with one hand to his forehead, while he still concealed his pistol.

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"You called, my lord," he said. "I am here."

Had he cared he could have shot the Frenchman where he stood with the greatest ease and security, for Colonel Le Pourton was wont to treat all natives as if they were dust beneath his feet. It was not his custom to interrupt any matter upon which he might be engaged because a servant happened to enter his room; and so, for a minute at least, he stood there, lounging over the table, making dots upon the map with a pencil and puffing clouds of smoke into the air. At length he dropped the pencil, smoothed out the map, and slowly swung round to interview his visitor. His eyes fell first upon the stranger's elaborate turban, and then travelled to his face. He opened his lips to speak, taking the pipe out as he did so, and then his jaw dropped, his eyes seemed to start from his head, while his moustaches bristled. He staggered back to the table, and leaned one hand upon it. Then his eyes went to his sabre, which stood against the far side, a growl escaping his lips as he saw that it was out of reach. But he could shout. He could call and give warning to the sentries at the gate. Owen could almost read his thoughts, and saw his lips open again for the purpose of calling. But he had a means within his hand to silence his enemy, and at the sight his pistol flashed out from beneath his coat and in less than a second Colonel Le Pourton was staring with protruding eyes down the muzzle of the weapon.

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"It is much the same to me, Colonel," said Owen in the Mahratta language, wonderfully cool now that the time for action had arrived. "I was to have been murdered to-night. If you call out or attempt opposition I will fire, and will at least have the pleasure of seeing you die first. Silence, sir! Sit down!"

There was no mistaking the tone of the order, nor the fact that Colonel Le Pourton in his own apartments, looking down the muzzle of a loaded pistol, was a different individual from the proud and overbearing white officer when in front of Holkar's troops. He weakened. A cold perspiration broke out on his forehead and trickled down his temples. His nervous hands gripped the edge of the table, while what colour he had had disappeared entirely. He became a child, and feebly whined for mercy.

"I would have rescued you," he said. "It was all Holkar's doing. But you would have gone free. I myself would have seen to that."

"Silence!" Owen strode a pace nearer and placed the muzzle against his forehead.

"Another lie such as that and I will blow out your brains," he said sternly, though his heart fluttered now with excitement. "You would have set me free! You will do so. There is paper there. Here is a pen. Prepare to write."

Obedient to every command, the servile Frenchman did as he was told, and scrawled the words which Owen dictated, tracing them across the paper in feeble letters which jostled one another, for his hands were trembling.

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"From Colonel Le Pourton, to the officer on guard, and to those stationed at the gates. Holkar bids you pass these twenty troopers, their officer and his servant, in safety, without molestation, from the city."

"That is right, and now we can proceed," said Owen, becoming calmer as the moments passed. "Now look at me. You asked me certain questions. How did they interest you?"

He had no intention of sparing his enemy, and as the Frenchman turned a pair of shifty eyes upon his, the pistol again went to his forehead.

"I cannot say," was the trembling answer. "It was merely curiosity. I know nothing of you or yours."

Owen could see that the man was not telling the truth, and would have pushed the question. Then he frowned at his prisoner, while he still kept the weapon at his head.

"Pshaw!" he thought. "Important though the answer may be, it cannot be of such moment as is the question of escape. Some day we may meet again, and then I will find time to force him to answer. Listen," he went on. "I believe that your questions were prompted by something more than curiosity, and that you are lying to me. We may meet again, and then I will learn what you know. For the present, I have more for you to do. Stand in the corner there and strip your clothing."

By now the small store of courage possessed by the Colonel was beginning to return, and he flashed back a look of defiance at our hero. But Owen gave him little opportunity of going farther. Within a moment he buffeted his enemy across the face, striking him with his open hand.

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"Obey me instantly!" he commanded in stern tones. "I give you five seconds."

The Frenchman's courage was not proof against such an attack, and he collapsed immediately.

Rising from his chair, he tottered to the far corner and slowly began to divest himself of his clothing, till Owen hastened him with a glance which threatened further violence. A minute later the Colonel stood naked but for a thin under-garment.

"What is in the smaller room beyond?" demanded Owen, for his eye had seen another door, wide open, and a space beyond. "But I will see for myself. Take that lamp. Now walk before me, and recollect that I will shoot you with pleasure."

Following his prisoner, he entered the chamber beyond, to ascertain that it was merely a storeroom filled with maps and other documents, and entirely devoid of windows.

"The very place for him," thought Owen. "I will have two strings to my bow on this occasion—the pass which he has signed, and the disguise which he has so kindly provided. Give me the lamp," he went on. "You will stay here while I arrange matters in the other room. I warn you that if you attempt to give an alarm I will enter and shoot you. You would have murdered me to-night in cold blood, and you must not mind if I feel disposed to kill you on the smallest pretext."

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He carried the lamp to the table, keeping his face to his prisoner, then he banged the door of the inner room and secured it with the key which was in the lock. Tucking the pistol into his belt, he then wrestled with a chest which stood in one corner, and by using all his strength moved it over against the door. That done, he wasted no further time on his prisoner, but rapidly donned his clothing. He was ready within a few minutes, and stood looking at himself in a fine glass of European manufacture set in a gilded frame of Mahratta workmanship.

"A little short, and distinctly youngish," he said. "But the impersonation is fairly good, and with something over my mouth will do. I'll risk it."

He was still examining his figure with some satisfaction when a step outside called his attention, and he sprang to the door and stepped into the passage. Some one was entering, and in a moment he recognised the sentry who had been stationed at the foot of the stairway leading to his prison. The man salaamed as Owen appeared, remaining with his head to the tips of his fingers, in abject humility. Owen swung round at once, so as to hide his face, while he appeared to be engaged in looking at something in the room.

"What is it?" he demanded curtly, attempting to imitate the accent of his prisoner.

"The jailer, my lord. I have searched for him—we have all searched every corner of the palace, and without success. There are groans coming from the cell where the prisoner is, and we fancy that he may be there."

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"Then you can ease your minds, dolts that you all are," answered Owen in rasping tones. "The man is here, engaged with me, and will remain till—till the time comes for him to visit his prisoner. Go back to your post, and bid the man at the gate make ready to pass me out. I am going without the palace for a little while."

He turned to watch the Mahratta salaaming, and then stared after his retreating figure, his heart palpitating, for discovery had been narrowly averted. When he was gone, he took the lamp again and inspected the door behind which the Frenchman was secured, and finding nothing there to disturb his mind, he slung the Colonel's sword to his belt, picked up his pistol, and drawing a silk scarf which happened to be in the room about his mouth went into the passage. Closing the door, he locked it, doing the same with the one which led into the garden. Then he tossed the keys into the bushes, flinging after them those which opened the door of the cell in which he had been quartered.

"And now for the gate and freedom," he said. "If the fellow on duty dares to stop me——"

He eased the sabre and strode on, the weapon clanking at his heels. And presently he was before the gates, to find three of the Mahrattas standing there, their pikes across their shoulders, while the gates stood wide open. Nodding curtly in acknowledgment of their salute, he passed into the street and turned in the direction opposite to that in which he knew his comrades to be quartered. Then he swung into the first side street, and again to the right, till he came to the back of the building in which Mulha had told him he would find his troopers. Lights were burning within, and some feet above his head there was an open window. Owen picked up a stone and threw it in, sending a second after it. A head suddenly appeared, there was a sharp cry, and within a couple of seconds a lithe and active form had slipped through the window, dropped to the ground, and was weeping and kneeling at his feet, grasping his ankles and legs as if begging life itself from the escaped prisoner.

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"Sahib, we have a ladder here. Mount and tell us all that has happened."

The native officer, whose head and shoulders now protruded from the window, lowered a light and flimsy ladder made of sacking, and sternly bade Mulha leave the officer.

"Silence!" he whispered hoarsely. "Would you that the sahib should now be taken when he has made good his escape? Silence!"

"Steady, Mulha. I'm glad to see you. Now, up we go."

In less than a minute he was standing on the floor of a loft, lit by a couple of smoky native lamps, and on which his twenty troopers had been reclining. Now, however, they stood about him exclaiming, giving vent to their joy.

"To-morrow we were to have marched, and this night——"

"I know the tale," said Owen, interrupting the native officer. "The orders are reversed. To-night

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we march. To-morrow—well, we may be killed. Are the horses saddled?"

"All is in readiness according to your orders, sahib."

"And is there a door by which we can get out without leading into the main street?"

"There is, sahib. The locks are opened already."

"Then listen. My jailer is lying stunned in my cell. The Frenchman who influences Holkar, and who would have killed me to-night, is a prisoner in his own apartments, and is no doubt making frantic efforts to escape or sound the alarm. I am in his place for the moment, for I have taken his clothes. The ruse may or may not succeed. If not, and the guards at the gates refuse to pass us, draw and cut them down at once. For we must not delay. We shall have to ride yet for our lives."

"Silence!" There was a buzz of excitement as Owen rapidly sketched his tale, but the native officer quelled it on the instant. He lifted his hand, and at once all became silent.

"To your horses and mount," he said. "The sahib leads, and you will follow in your order. I claim the post of honour."

There was a flash in his eye as the gallant fellow claimed to pass last out of the city, and then the troopers scattered. Running lightly over the floor, they went to the stables below, and in less than three minutes all were mounted—Owen on his favourite Mahratta horse, Mulha just at his elbow, and the troopers in file behind them. It was very dark down there, but not so dark that they could not make out the outlines of the building. But in any case the horses knew where they were, and wanted only directing. At a touch from Owen's heel the party set out, and rapidly passed through the door of the building. Closing up as they gained the street, they rode in a compact body, their horses' hoofs clattering now and again as they passed over stony ground. But there had been recent rain, and thanks to that their progress was for the most part silent. At length they arrived within a hundred yards of the gate of Indore, and halted to reconnoitre.

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"Hark! A horse galloping!"

Mulha lifted his hand and touched Owen's elbow, while all sat still, listening intently. And soon there could be no doubt that a horse was thundering down a neighbouring street and was coming towards the gates. More than that, the man who rode this unseen animal shouted at the top of his voice, and even at that distance Owen could see that the sentries at the gate had come together and were discussing the matter.

"The Colonel must have got free, or the jailer has been discovered," he said suddenly. "Trot! Gallop!"

He set his heels to his horse, and followed by his troopers dashed down upon the gate, drawing his sabre as he rode. And when within some fifteen yards of the gate the horse which had first roused their suspicion burst from a street close beside them, and turning to the gate crashed on towards it, its hoofs striking sparks from the stones. Mounted upon the beast was a strange figure; for, if Owen could believe his eyes, there was the white leader of Holkar's forces, naked but for a light under-garment, his bare legs and arms showing and his moustaches blowing in the wind.

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"Treachery! Keep the gates closed and turn out the guard. Treachery!" he shouted.

Owen waved his sabre over his head and again set his heels to his horse. It was a race, and the Colonel had barely the best of it. Dashing up to the astonished sentries, he pulled in his horse with such a jerk that the animal slid some four yards on its heels, scattering stones and sparks. Then he fell from the saddle, and leaping to his feet, rushed into the guard-house. A musket flashed, and a ball flew past the troopers. Shouts filled the air, while armed men appeared from all directions, seeming almost to rise from the ground. Then another musket flashed from the window of the guard-house, and the bullet struck Owen's sabre with a sharp metallic sound, glancing from it and hitting the wall behind.

"Hold them while I open the gate," shouted our hero, flinging himself from the saddle—an example which Mulha and two of the troopers followed, while the remainder, some with their lances, but the majority with their sabres, charged at the enemy, scattering them.

"Here is the bar. Up with it! Now pull!"

Fortunately there was no lock, and therefore little difficulty in opening the gates. In little more than a minute one was thrown back, and the way was open. Owen climbed into his saddle, gave the word to his men, and was in the very act of departing when the figure of the Colonel appeared at the door of the guard-house. He was beside himself with rage, and could barely control his actions. But now was his opportunity, for the attention of the troopers was taken from the guard-house. He levelled a musket which he snatched from one of the soldiers, took as careful aim as his excitement would allow, and pressed the trigger.

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"To Cornet Owen Jones," he shouted, as the bullet struck. "A legacy from Colonel Le Pourton."

He stood there at the door, clutching the woodwork and eagerly watching to see what effect his shot would have. His eyes started from his head, so great was his eagerness, and when Owen tottered and fell from his saddle the inhuman Frenchman gave vent to a shriek of joy which could be heard at the palace.

"Down! Mon dieu! He is killed! At last this matter is settled!"

There was a shout of rage from the troopers, two of them slipping from their saddles and lifting their officer. Then as they raised him to the arms of Mulha there was a fierce cry from the native

officer.

"See how he gloats over the death of the sahib," he cried, his eyes blazing with wrath. "This for the French leader of Holkar's army. This for all who serve the false and treacherous chief."

He spurred towards the guard-house, mounted the steps, and cut the Colonel down with a terrific blow from his sabre. Then he turned the weapon upon the other soldiers standing near, and so great was the terror that he inspired that within two minutes the guard-house, the gates, and their surroundings were cleared.

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"Is the sahib lifted and cared for?" he demanded. "Tell me not that he is dead! If that be so, then I swear that we will turn and rout out more of these traitors, for I care not to live while the sahib falls."

"Come," said Mulha shortly. "He lives. The bullet has struck him hardly, but he will recover with care. Ride on, or we shall all be taken."

They galloped through the gates, one of the troopers leading Owen's horse, and did not draw rein till they had covered some five miles.

"What are the injuries? Let us see to them now while we are halted."

The officer dropped from his saddle and took Owen from Mulha. Then, with the light of the moon to help them, they exposed the wound in his side and dressed it as well as they were able.

"With care, he will recover," said Mulha with authority. "But he must have rest. To ride far will be to kill him."

"While to halt will lead to his death with equal certainty. We must ride, but not in this direction. We will make for Agra."

Turning their horses, they trotted on into the night, and, managing to elude the swarms of horsemen sent to pursue them, finally came to a halt in a shady wood some twenty miles away.

"He shall ride in a litter," said Mulha, as he and the native officer discussed the question. "The journey will do no harm if taken slowly, for the injury is not so grave as appeared at first. We will construct a stretcher to be borne by two of the horses."

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Two days later when they set out, Owen, now quite conscious, lay snugly in a long litter made of bamboos, the side members of which were fastened in front and behind to a saddle in such manner that even if the troopers who rode the two horses happened to let their beasts get somewhat far from one another the stretcher could not fall. And in this way they came at length to Agra and fell in with the division under command of the famous General Lake. Owen was at once transferred to the hospital.

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CHAPTER XIX

The Deccan Invincibles

"Bedad, now, if it wasn't that ye've the thickest hide and the sthrongest bones of enny Oi iver come across, me bhoy, ye'd be dead! 'Tis mighty lucky ye are, so ye are, and ye'll never meet wid the same again. Ye'll be dead, as dead as a donkey."

The Irish doctor who stood over the litter on which Owen reclined wagged his head knowingly while he lifted an admonishing finger.

"As dead as enny donkey, me bhoy, so ye will, and jest ye take the warnin'. 'Tis said you're a fire-eater, and that ye've seen as much of the campaign or of the fightin' as enny. Oi believe it. Where did ye start?"

"At Ahmednuggur, sir. Then we went on to Assaye."

"And from there, me bhoy? Ye've not been idle since?"

"I was sent to Holkar with a despatch, and afterwards came through here with more despatches for General Lake."

"Thin ye've been busy, because Assaye and Indore are miles from here. Bedad, it must have taken days to cover the country. And what kept ye at Indore? Some fascinating beauty in Holkar's court? Ah, hah! me bhoy, don't tell me it was duty. 'Tis a little flirtation of your own ye've been looking afther, and sure that's why Holkar put ye in the jug, so it is."

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The doctor roared at Owen's obvious indignation, while our hero soon joined in the laughter, for he saw that this new friend of his was only making fun. He sat up in his litter and addressed him eagerly.

"That's it, sir, and I'm dreadfully anxious to get up and out of this. When shall I be fit? I feel well and strong now, and am sure I shall be able to return to duty within a day or so."

"Ye will, will ye? Thin ye'll have to learn that ye've to stay where ye are for a week. Ha! ha! A week, me bhoy, and even thin Oi may keep ye. And jist remimber. Ye're lucky to be alive at all, so

ye are, for that bit of a bullet gave ye a nasty clip. Now if it had happened to hit thrue and straight, why——"

"I shouldn't have been bothering you, sir."

"Bedad, ye would not. If it had sthruck ye true, and ye'd not had the hide ye've got, ye'd be dead, as Oi've told ye. Now lie down and sleep, or else Oi'll be havin' to place ye on dry biscuit and wather."

He was a merry soul this doctor, and for all his fun a capable and painstaking attendant on those who were sick or injured. No sooner had Owen been brought into the camp than he appeared at the tent, and having given him some broth at once attended to his wound. That was a week ago, and he had been able to pronounce the injury severe, but not dangerous by any means, and likely to heal rapidly. Indeed, when another week was gone he declared that Owen might return to light duty.

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"Though 'tis little lightness there'll be about it," he said, with a laugh. "Ye know it's against the ordhers to send men or officers back to anything but full duty. But what will ye have? There's some, and they're mighty few I can tell ye, who haven't that love for the work. But whin there's fightin' and heads to be broken, why, thin's the toime the soldier bhoy is keen for duty and the ranks. Sure Oi know it well affther all these years' service. If it's times of peace, and there's nothin' doin' but dhrills and barrack fatigues, field-days and guards, why, thin, there's many who would shirk if they was able, and who'd be willin' to find the right excuse. But here, whin it's war, why, bedad, there's no keepin' the bhoys. They're for duty again before their wounds are closed, so they are, good luck to thim!"

And this might be said to be the case with all our armies in the field in those days, and even till more recent times, though it is not the custom now to return men to duty before their wounds are entirely healed. In the days of the Mahratta campaign, however, European troops were few and very valuable, while actions crowded so closely upon one another that it was difficult to make good our losses. Thus the demand for men to return to the ranks from the hospitals was great, and the keenness of the soldiers to get back to their duty and to take up their arms again was a matter of congratulation to their commanders. It is not to be wondered at that Owen longed to don uniform again, and fretted at the necessity which kept him in hospital. Every day he could hear the roar of guns, while the dust kicked up by passing battalions filled his tent. He begged to be sent out, and in due course obtained permission.

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"But ye'll have to go gintly for a time. No gallopin' and chargin'," said the doctor. "However, there's not much fear for ye for a week or more, for I hear to-day that there is to be peace in these parts. Sit down, me bhoy. Ye're always wantin' to be standin' when ye've had ordhers to rest. Now Oi'll tell ye how matters have been goin'. Ye've heard of Delhi, and that we left Ochterlony there and marched sthrait for Agra. Well, we're here, and so's the enemy, but they're showing little spirit. 'Tis said that the city will be surrendered to us, and if that's the case, why, ye'll have a quiet time in camp for some days perhaps, and by thin ye should be fit and well. Mind, ye're to wear a bandage about the wound, and when ye turn, turn slowly, or the wound will open again."

The following day, in fact, found Owen out and about, though he did not venture to mount his horse. Long ago his dispatches had been taken to General Lake, and that officer had been to see him and interrogate him. Then, also, an officer with a strong escort had been sent back to General Wellesley to tell him of the infamous treatment meeted out to his messenger, and of the undoubted hostility of Holkar.

Meanwhile General Lake and his command had obtained further successes, as the doctor had hinted. He and his force had arrived at and had invested the stately city of Agra, the key of Western India, on the 7th of October, and within two days had concluded a treaty with the Rajah of Bhurtpore, who at once supplied reinforcements. The city of Agra was defended by Scindia's men, who in former times had been under the command of British officers, for it was the custom then to permit officers to take service with foreign contingents. And no doubt this was done with a view in some small measure to counteract the influence of the many French officers who were in the service and employ of chieftains. To this day, indeed, many officers find employment with native contingents. However, the officers who had formerly commanded at Agra were now lying prisoners in the dungeons, and the defenders were in such a condition of chaos that when General Lake sent in a request that the city should be surrendered there was no one in command to reply.

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Seven of Scindia's regular battalions were encamped in the glacis, and held the city of Agra and some deep sandy ravines to the south and west of the city's fort, and it became necessary to dislodge these as a preliminary to attacking the place. On the 10th of October a force was sent against them, and after meeting with stern resistance defeated them, driving them off and capturing the stately city, while the survivors of Scindia's troops, some 2500 strong, surrendered to General Lake. Our attention was now turned to the city's fort, and a battery of 18-pounders was brought to bear. These were the guns which Owen heard hammering at the walls, and it was not long before their well-directed shot had made a breach which was almost practicable. At this stage the garrison surrendered, being influenced to do so by one of the imprisoned British officers. Five thousand five hundred of the enemy fell into our hands as prisoners of war, thus further reducing Scindia's power, while more than £200,000 worth of treasure was taken—a fine haul for the conquerors and for the Company. One hundred and sixty-four cannon were taken, and amongst these one of similar proportions to that at Indore, which had offered such friendly shelter to Owen. It measured 14 feet 2 inches in length, had a calibre of 23 inches, and weighed

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over 38 tons—a monster indeed!

The capture of Agra gave us the control of the navigation of the Jumna, and enabled several independent chiefs in that quarter, hitherto debarred from joining us owing to Scindia's power, to throw in their lot with the British.

However, we were not to have matters altogether in our own hands, for it was ascertained that Scindia had detached seven of his regular and trained battalions some little time before, and had placed them under the command of a French officer. There was also another battalion composed of fugitives from Agra, making in all 9000 infantry and 5000 cavalry, all of whom had now to fight for their pay, and who were hourly being reinforced by other stragglers, who joined the force as their only means of livelihood, hoping to be able to make up for loss of pay by wholesale robberies. Very soon their French leader lost heart and surrendered, when the force was taken over by a Mahratta. For a time they hovered in the neighbourhood of Agra and then made off towards Delhi, their intention being to attack that weakly garrisoned city. They were, in fact, a menace, and a serious one, to the peace and tranquillity of the country General Lake had conquered so far, and he at once marched after them, determined to bring them to battle, finally arriving at Futtehpoore with men, guns, and baggage. Owen rode with the army on this occasion, his wound being now almost healed, though his side was very stiff and at times painful.

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"'Twill be all right if ye'll jest remimber all about it, me bhoy," said the friendly doctor as he watched him mount. "The ball jest cracked a couple of ribs and gave ye a nasty wound over thim. But you're right so long as you keep that plaster tight over the chest and don't exert yourself too much. Mind, no charges. No dashin' into the middle of the inemy as at Assaye. Hah! hah! We've heard. There's tales in the camp about Cornet Owen Jones—Captain Jones, perhaps, when the despatches arrive. Good-bye, me lad. Look me up when ye return to camp."

On the very evening on which the army arrived at Futtehpoore a native came into camp with a chit (note) and searched for the quarters of Cornet Owen Jones. Mulha brought him to his master, standing over the man as if he expected him at any moment to throw himself upon the British officer and assassinate him.

"This fellow came to the camp an hour ago, sahib," he said, watching the native as he salaamed. "He is the bearer of a note, and will say neither from whom it comes nor from what quarter. He is a stubborn fool!"

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"Perhaps he has orders to keep his lips closed," said Owen. "Give me the note. Where do you come from?"

"From Catumbo, where Scindia's forces were encamped yesterday, sahib," was the answer. "I am but a humble Mahratta shepherd, and was with my flock when the army passed. They saw me and dragged me to their camp, where they questioned me. But I had seen nothing of the British, and they set me free again. As I was leaving, a messenger detained me and I was taken to the tent of a French officer. He was tall, and wore a bandage about his head and beneath his turban. I judged him to have great power."

"Colonel Le Pourton, without a doubt!" exclaimed Owen. "Then he has joined the enemy, or perhaps he has gone to them with a purpose."

"Sahib, in Indore while you were prisoner we learned many things," said Mulha. "We knew that the men of Holkar had but little love for these soldiers of Scindia, and despised them, having defeated them in battle. But they have less love for the British, and the tale was whispered in the streets that Holkar would become friendly with Scindia, and that the two together would make war against your people. May it not be that this French colonel is with the enemy with that object?"

"More than probable," admitted Owen. "But go on with your tale. This man was tall, and was a powerful sahib."

"He was, sahib. He had a hundred servants to wait upon him, and an army of horsemen as escort. I saw them encamped about his tent. He is without doubt a powerful leader. He handed me a bag of silver, and bade me carry this note to you. That is all. If I refused, or failed to do his bidding, he promised to come down upon my house and slay me and mine. There is the chit."

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Owen opened the note slowly and glanced at the contents. Then a contemptuous smile wreathed his lips, and he looked up at Mulha.

"As before," he said calmly; "threats, nothing but threats. Listen to this. Here is Colonel Le Pourton's message. 'To Cornet Owen Jones, greeting from Colonel Le Pourton, commander of Holkar's forces. This is to inform you that I will give due reward for the trick you practised upon me at Indore, and for the blow that was given I will return a hundred. Think not that because Agra has fallen you and yours will conquer. Holkar will hound you out of these territories, and you and your comrades will not escape. I am a fair man, and will deal fairly with you. I give you warning that I will follow and slay you at the first opportunity.'"

It was written in Mahratti, and Owen recognised the writing to be the same as that on the pass he had obtained at Indore; but on this occasion the letters were better formed, and there was more firmness about the writing.

"You may go," he said, turning to the native. "Here is a reward for bringing the chit."

He watched the man depart, and then turned to Mulha.

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"Keep an eye open for strangers, Mulha," he said quietly. "This Frenchman has some great

interest in my destruction, and would have me assassinated. Were I to meet him I should have little fear, for a man who threatens is a coward."

"The sahib may count upon my watchfulness," was the answer. "Your troopers and I will set a constant watch, and any stranger who comes will be closely followed. Rest easy, sahib. You will be protected."

He went off to the men, and from that hour, whenever Owen emerged from his quarters, there was a swarthy trooper lounging up and down, his eyes carefully scrutinising all who passed, while with a warning finger and an air of authority he waved all natives away who happened to be in the vicinity. However, it was not long before the camp was struck and the troops were in motion again.

"There will be a dash. We have had information of the position of the enemy," said one of the officers, "and the orders for marching are out. We leave guns and baggage."

Indeed, very little later the force was at Catumbo, from which the enemy had only just fallen back. There was a growl of disappointment from the men, for it was hard work marching in the sun. However, the orders which were issued at once set their minds at rest, and showed them that if they were eager for the fray so also was their leader.

"We leave camp at eleven to-night," said the same officer, one of the cavalry. "General Lake knows that the beggars will slip away unless he can surprise and hold them. For that reason the horse march to-night, while the foot follow at dawn. There is fun ahead of us. You'll ride with us, my boy."

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Owen had, in fact, been told off to the 29th Light Dragoons, with which regiment he and his troopers mustered that very evening. Beside them rode the 8th Royal Irish and the 27th Light Dragoons, a fine body of cavalry, strongly reinforced by five native regiments. It was pitch dark when they filed out of the camp, and for six hours they rode on in silence, following the track of the enemy. Soon after dawn had broken, and while it was still barely light, there was a thrill of excitement through the ranks, and the word was passed that the enemy were in sight.

"And in order of retreat," said Owen's new friend. "Look at them, making away as fast as they can. Put your feet well home, my lad, and get a grip of your saddle, for if I know the General only a very little, I am as sure that he will go right at them as I am that—that—well, that I'm here talking to you."

His face flushed while he rose in the saddle to peer over the heads of the troopers riding in advance and get a view of the enemy. Our hero, too, was infected with the same excitement. He felt as he had done on that memorable afternoon at Assaye. Before him, trailing along the track in full retreat, he saw Scindia's last hope, some seventeen battalions of infantry, for the most part as highly trained as any European force could be, and officered by experienced men, though all their French trainers had departed. And in rear of them fully 5000 cavalry, the cream of the Mahratta horse, bold-looking if not actually very courageous soldiers. In their midst the teams struggled with no fewer than 72 pieces of cannon, beside which marched the trained gunners, men second to none even amongst white troops. That was not all, for amidst the curling clouds of dust which encircled the fleeing army, filling the mouths and nostrils of men and animals till they almost choked, were elephants in large numbers, bullock-carts, laden horses, and huge numbers of camp followers, the curse of Eastern armies, the incubus which, hanging about the neck of moving forces, has more than once brought ruin and defeat to the commander, and death or imprisonment to all attached to it.

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It was a mighty gathering, and Lake could well have been excused had he decided to wait for his infantry, now well on the road, for they were to set out at three in the morning. But he knew the risks attached to a postponement of hostilities, and feared that Scindia's forces might escape him. He decided then and there to attack with his sabres, and rapidly made his plans. Meanwhile the enemy, seeing that a conflict was imminent, took up a strong position.

To give themselves time to do this they cleverly cut a large tank, thus hindering our troopers, and allowing their own men to occupy the posts assigned to the various arms, all in close proximity to the village of Laswaree. In their rear ran a rivulet, with steep and awkward banks, while their right flank lay in front of the village. Their left rested on the village of Mohulpore, and their centre took up a position behind a formidable barrier of high grass, formidable because it hid their exact positions, and made it extremely difficult for cavalry to approach. And here were stationed their guns, all chained together, so as to prevent horsemen charging through them. Truly, as the reader will admit, a formidable array. Indeed, it soon became evident that the cavalry alone were insufficient for the task, and after incurring some loss Lake drew off to wait for his infantry. And presently these were in position, having made a very fine forced march. The 76th regiment, with six battalions of sepoy, were near the village of Laswaree, while the cavalry were posted to watch the enemy and to cover the advance of the attacking force with the light galloper guns which in those days accompanied our cavalry.

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"They will weaken and offer to surrender," said the officer who sat his horse beside Owen. "You can see, now that the dust has settled down, that there is a good deal of commotion behind their lines, and that a number of the leaders are gathered at a council. Bet you a pair of boots there's no fight."

He heaved a sigh of disappointment and sat wearily back in his saddle, for the cavalry had worked very hard, and excitement alone had kept up their energies. Soon Owen saw that a messenger was coming from the lines of the enemy.

"They'll fight. I'll take the bet," he said. "That force will never give in to us. They have too many trained troops to do that, and remember what they call themselves. They boast that they are the Deccan Invincibles. Done with you! The boots are mine."

He grinned at the officer, a grin which denoted little merriment, but a good deal of anxiety, for Owen himself was none too sure that the enemy would not surrender. However, an hour later Lake himself went to the front of the British lines, the enemy having failed to come to terms, and advanced against the Mahrattas. Instantly the enemy's pieces opened, and a murderous hail of shot and shell tore through the long grass and into the ranks of the British, causing the native infantry to hang back. The 76th held on boldly, though their ranks were sadly torn by the fire.

"Twenty-ninth, make ready to charge!"

The command rang out in stentorian tones, and at the words each one of the troopers settled himself in his saddle and gripped his weapon.

"Twenty-ninth, keep well together and pick up all wounded and stragglers. Trot!"

The same strange feeling of elation which had filled Owen's breast on a former occasion came to him again, and he drew his sabre with an exclamation which told of delight, of relief at the end of a trying suspense. He formed his troopers up on the left flank of the regiment and rode in front of them, a horse's length in rear of the commander of the gallant 29th, who was now of junior rank, for Major Griffiths had fallen five minutes before. Very soon they were in the zone of fire, canister and cannon-balls hurtling about them.

"Halt!" The commander faced about and lined up his men. Then he pointed to the enemy.

"The enemy's horse have charged our infantry and have been beaten off. The 29th will break them up and drive them off the field. Afterwards they will attack the infantry."

His sabre came out of its sheath with a swish as a roar of cheering came from the throats of the men. Even the placid, imperturbable troopers of the 7th, under Owen's command, were infected with the general excitement. They shouted their war cry and tossed their lance pennons into the air. "Trot! Gallop! Charge!"

In quick succession the orders came, the last being almost drowned by the roar of the conflict, by the deafening report of the enemy's guns, by the bark of muskets, and by the hum of the projectiles. There were the Mahratta horse hovering about the infantry, and straight at them went Owen and his comrades. Oh, it was mad, tremendous work, and there is little wonder that few of those who rode knew ought of the incidents which passed. Lances rose and fell, sabres cut this way and that, and guns and muskets flashed in their faces. The Mahratta horse, in their wild Eastern uniform, went down before the troopers almost as easily as did the long feathery grass through which the 29th rode, and in their place, as if they had risen from the earth, were two stolid lines of trained Mahratta infantry, their gleaming bayonets almost at the necks of the horses.

"Charge!" The Commander, Owen, every officer, stood in his stirrups and bellowed the order with frantic eagerness, while the troopers responded with a deafening cheer which drowned the report of the muskets. The pace increased, there was a wild *mêlée*, in which men fell or were violently thrown to the ground. Here and there a horse came down with a dull thud, the rider being instantly bayoneted. But they were through. The enemy was broken, and as the gallant troopers rode on they left a wide gap, a gap filled with the bodies of the fallen Mahrattas. It was breathless work, but there was no rest to be found yet, for there was a second line of infantry, a line which went beneath the hoofs of the horses as if they had never existed, and gave place to the cavalry.

"Halt! Halt and reform!"

The officer in command lifted his sabre, and at the signal troopers gathered their reins and pulled in their horses. What a sight the men were! The regiment had ridden into action as neat and as good-looking a force as could be found, and see the troopers now! Torn tunics, broken weapons, caps gone, faces covered with dust, hair dishevelled, and blood on many a face and jacket. But the faces! A grim, jaunty air was set on every man's features, an air of indescribable triumph, of excitement which, though great, still left them with ample common sense. As for courage, it could be seen in each keen pair of eyes, and as the Colonel passed down the ranks, with difficulty holding in his charger, he felt satisfied.

"Well done, 29th! Well done, indeed! But there is more. By sections wheel to the right."

Perfectly disciplined and composed of gallant fellows, the fine regiment wheeled round to the other flank and reformed the sections into line. And there, facing them, was the cavalry, a fine body of Mahratta horse, the cream of the mounted regiments in support of Scindia.

The 29th were in motion again, their pace gathered way, and soon they were pushing on at a gallop. Then the tale of a few minutes ago was repeated—they were charging the enemy. And these boastful Deccan Invincibles, these horsemen whose appearance was so magnificent, turned and fled, and were driven like a herd of frantic sheep from the field of battle. The lances and blades of the troopers cut into them, covering the ground with their corpses, and in a miraculously small space of time the cavalry were gone, utterly routed by one regiment of British horse.

What need to tell more? This battle of Laswaree rivalled that at Assaye, and ended in a pronounced victory, though on this occasion the French-trained battalions were worthy of their reputation and stood and fought to the end. The men who served the enemy's guns stood to their

pieces till they were disposed of by the bayonet, proving themselves to be courageous in the extreme. Laswaree, in fact, was no easily-won victory. There was stubborn material to deal with, and our men on that eventful day proved, if proof were ever necessary, that Britishers could fight, that native regiments officered by British officers were staunch to the backbone, and that our forces in India were as fine, as brave, and as disciplined and full of dash as any we have possessed.

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With the victory we captured a magnificent camp equipage, elephants, oxen and horses, treasure, guns, men, and ammunition, and arms and standards innumerable. We lost about 1000 in killed and wounded, while such was the stubbornness of the enemy and the dash of our infantry and cavalry, that 7000 of the Mahrattas were slain and a numerous host wounded.

When the day was finished and our troops had broken from their ranks to seek rest after their exertions, there were still cavalry in the field pursuing the enemy, and Owen was amongst them.

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CHAPTER XX

An End to Mystery

The moon was up and the stars out in their thousands as Owen and the small band of troopers, native and white, who had ridden at his knee during the pursuit, turned their weary horses towards Laswaree. The enemy was routed. Far and wide the plain was scattered with the fallen, and on every hand knots and sections of the cavalry force which had helped in that great day were straggling back to the division. Owen rode at the head of his men, his sabre sheathed, his head sunk deep between his shoulders, and his eyes almost closed. Every now and again he actually fell asleep in the saddle, till a snort from one of the jaded horses or a touch from Mulha's hand awakened him. Suddenly the native servant leaned across and took him by the elbow.

"Sahib," he said, "there is more work, I think, for yonder there is a collection of the enemy. But mayhap you would leave them now to pass to their own homes peacefully. They are utterly crushed and beaten."

He pointed to a low tope of peepul-trees some distance away, where, in the full light of the moon, a number of men were gathered, their dress showing them to be Mahrattas. Owen roused himself with an effort and stared at the enemy.

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"My orders were precise," he said. "I was to break up all gatherings and scatter the enemy. We must ride against those men. Wheel to the left. Now trot!"

It was as much as the horses could do to increase their pace, but the willing animals responded to the appeal and hurried their riders towards the tope. And presently, when within some two hundred yards, a horseman was seen to break from the group gathered there and advance towards Owen. He unsheathed his tulwar, and when within some twenty paces lowered the point.

"We surrender," he said. "Let the white lord take my word that there are none there who will offer further opposition. The British have won a magnificent victory and Scindia is conquered. Will the sahib accept my tulwar?"

"Replace it and wear it till I reach your comrades," answered Owen. "Return to them and bid them lay their arms on the ground at once. They will dismount and rein their horses together. Warn them that I will charge if there is a sign of treachery."

The soldier salaamed humbly and turned to obey, when our hero again called to him.

"What is your regiment? And how many are there of you?"

"There are forty, my lord, and we were not of Scindia's force. We have ridden from Indore."

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The mention of that city roused Owen still more, and he sat up in his saddle, wide awake and fully alert now.

"From Indore? What brought you here?"

"We came as escort to the white officer who commanded Holkar's forces, the Colonel sahib, Le Pourton. He lies yonder, my lord."

Then the tables were turned, and the very man who had so nearly brought death to Owen was a prisoner, humbled, fallen from his high position, the sport of a cruel fate. He who had threatened assassination was helpless.

"Lead me to him," commanded our hero, "and, Mulha, bring some of the troopers close to me. I do not forget this officer or his threats. A desperate man may attempt anything, and I will neglect no precaution. We will advance."

They followed the Mahratta horseman, and, having reached the group, surrounded them. Then, at the order of the messenger, those of the enemy who were still mounted threw themselves from their saddles and tossed their arms to the ground. But Owen took little notice of them, for in their midst, unseen till this moment, was the figure of their leader, dressed in his Mahratta finery,

ghastly pale, and stretched on the ground, with his head supported on the flank of a fallen horse. His eyes were closed, and that, with the deathly pallor of his face and the bandage about his head, gave him such a ghastly appearance that all thought he was dead. But he opened his eyes feebly as Owen and Mulha advanced on foot, and smiled at them. Then, with an obvious effort, he lifted a hand and signalled to them to come quite close.

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"Have no fear," he said faintly. "The man who sent a threatening note is past performing violence. His course is run, and even a bitter enemy would not care to triumph over him. Come closer, Owen Marshall."

Owen Marshall! The name startled our hero, and he stood for more than a minute staring at the figure of the fallen Colonel. Then pity for the unfortunate officer took the place of the dislike he had formerly felt, and he kneeled beside him, taking his hand and looking into his face.

"Bring some spirit, Mulha," he said. "There is a flask in my holster, and it may do some good. Get it quickly."

"It will give me strength, but not life," was the answer, as the Colonel again smiled at him. "That is for ever forfeited, for no man can suffer such a wound as I have and live. Listen, Owen Marshall; yes, that is your name, Owen Marshall, son of Captain Marshall, once of the Company's service. Listen. I will speak in Mahratti, for I know little English. This Captain Marshall——"

A violent fit of coughing arrested his words and shook his frame so much that Owen thought that life itself would have departed. Blood flecked his lips and cheek, while his pallor became even more pronounced. Beneath the sickly beams cast by the moon Colonel Le Pourton looked as if he had breathed his last, as if his troubles, his hatreds, and his intrigues were ended for ever. But Mulha arrived at that instant, and Owen contrived to force a few drops of spirit between the dying man's lips.

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"No man can suffer such a hurt and live," repeated the Colonel with a sigh, and a sad smile, as he placed his feeble hand against his side. "Your British horses are magnificent. Their lances are terrible! Truly there is little wonder that you conquer. But I must not waste time, for my hours are few and my breath comes shorter. Closer! Closer, so that you can hear my whisper."

"Stand on the far side," said Owen to Mulha in English. "The Colonel is dying, and I think is about to confess something which has to do with my earlier life. Listen and remember what you hear. It is important that there should be a witness. Now, Colonel," he went on, taking the fallen officer's hand gently in his own, "speak. Tell me all you know. Tell me everything that may concern my early life."

There was a long pause while the unfortunate man gathered strength and breath, lying there with closed eyes and one hand resting on his breast. Then he slowly looked up at Owen, gently returned the pressure of his hand, and smiled.

"I have done an evil thing and am repaid with bitterness," he whispered. "Mon dieu! What misery I have caused! What suffering to that good man. And to you—what a bar I have been to progress. But for me and this wicked scheme you would have been wealthy, titled perhaps, and brought up amongst those who would have cared for and loved you. Yes, for when you lay in that poorhouse there were those living in England who would have given all their wealth, even their right hands, to have discovered you. My scheme was terribly successful."

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Once more he paused for breath, while Owen leaned over him and gave him another sip of the spirit.

"Tell me about the scheme and about these relatives of mine," he said gently. "I can forgive you for all that you may have done, if you will make amends now while you are able. You say that my name is Owen Marshall. Speak of my father, of my mother, and of others whom you may have known."

"Listen, then. Fifteen years ago, more or less, I came to this country, and was quartered with the native troops at Pondicherry, where the French are settled. We fought the English constantly, and when two years had passed it happened that I was taken prisoner and carried to Calcutta, where I was placed on my parole. The English are good. Their soldiers are brave and jovial, and their officers the best of fellows. They fight an enemy with courage and dash. They make friends with equal readiness. They were good to me. They fed me, housed me, invited me to their homes, and made the hours pass as a pleasant dream to a poor captive Frenchman. I came to like them, to forget all the old hatred and prejudice, and—ah, there was another reason—your father was there, Captain Thomas Marshall of the 22nd regiment, temporarily in the service of the Company, and he it was who made Calcutta what it was for me; for listen, Owen——"

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Silence fell over the group once more, our hero holding his breath as he waited for the next words, while Mulha stood like a statue over the dying man. Above them the moon stared down upon a scene as strange and as tragic as could be imagined, for here was a man who had erred, stricken to his death and with little of life remaining, while kneeling beside him was a youth whose future fortunes depended largely upon the information which was locked in the Colonel's breast. No wonder that Owen trembled, no wonder that he stared at the mute lips of Colonel Le Pourton with a longing which he could not express. But this Frenchman had the courage of despair and the tenacity of purpose which helps a man to carry out a task, however arduous. Talking was difficult. His breath came shorter and quicker, and a thin stream of blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. But still he forced himself to complete the tale, and, gathering all his strength, once more proceeded with it.

"Listen carefully, for now I come to your parents. Your father, this Captain Marshall, a fine and

gallant officer, had by some strange fortune met and married my cousin when in London. She, poor girl, had gone to England with her father, who was a wealthy merchant, and who died about the time of my imprisonment, leaving this girl a fine fortune. You were there, Owen, the apple of a proud father and mother's eyes, and fortune smiled on you and on them. Mon dieu! What a tale of ignominy for a dying man to tell! Would that I had never thought of this ghastly scheme. But gold, with all the useful purposes to which it may be put, is a fatal magnet which draws many to ill-doing. This cousin, your dear mother, had in earlier days been my dear friend, and at one time it seemed that we might be married. She had cared for me, and now she felt pity for my condition. She made a will. I saw it, Owen. All was left to your father, and then to you. If those two lives failed, the fortune she had inherited was to go to me. Yes, for the wealth was entrusted to others for her benefit, and was administered by relatives in England. Otherwise, from all I know of the English law, it would have gone to your father on the marriage. But no matter. Facts were as I have stated, and I found myself poor and a captive with those three lives between me and a fortune. Your mother died, and your miserable father went up country on some military expedition, leaving me to send you home. You sailed on an Indiaman, and with you, in addition to an ayah, went one who was my agent. He it was who abducted you, and then, fearing to go to extremes, left you on the roadside. Your father was slain in that expedition, and I was left, as I thought, sole survivor."

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"And my relatives? How is it that they did not discover me?"

Owen asked the question eagerly as he bent over the Colonel.

"They had no word of your coming. They thought you safe in India, and it was not till a year later that they learned that your mother was dead and your father slain. Also that you had been sent to England and had landed there. The ayah was able to report how you had been abducted, and afterwards—there is little marvel in the fact that search failed to reveal you. More than a year had passed, and you were lost."

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"And you were the heir?"

"I thought so, but was disappointed. Your English courts are precise and particular. The trustees of this fortune handed the money over to these courts, and though I tried to prove your death I was unable to do so. My scheme had succeeded too well where you were concerned, but had failed to better my fortunes. I took service with Holkar, and a month ago, when you arrived at the palace and I recognised you by your likeness to my one-time friend, I thought still to retrieve this fortune, to obtain that for which I had so long intrigued. But there is a God above us, and surely it is true that He watches over the widow and the orphan. You escaped where another would have remained, fearful of discovery and of the difficulties which had to be faced. That British dash and daring, that promptness in great danger for which your race is so justly famed, took you safely from Indore, and left me with rage and disappointment in my heart, and with every intention of pursuing you. I left Indore mainly for that purpose, for our spies learned that you had ridden to Agra, and that you had joined General Lake's division. I had you watched, and—ah, how cruel is the thought to me now!—there were those in your camp who were hired to slay you. But you were guarded. Those faithful natives who look up to you as if they were children watched over you, so that my men were helpless. The armies met, and——"

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"The day went with us," said Owen gently.

"Scindia's hosts were broken, as will be those of Holkar, for who can strive against such men as yours are? I fell, pierced by a lance, and I am now your prisoner, and very near the grave. Forgive me! Let a dying man who has wronged you hear that you can forgive and forget."

The unhappy Colonel sat up on his elbow with a huge effort and stared at Owen with bloodshot eyes. There was a look of desperate earnestness on his pallid features. Deep lines of pain marked his face, while his cheeks were pale and sunken.

"Forgive and forget!"

"I do. I forgive freely, and will forget. Calm yourself, and tell me what little there is left. There, lie down again and be calm. You have had your punishment. It is not for me to add to it. We are none of us perfect, and if you have made a sad mistake, so may I on some future occasion. There! Lie down!"

Very gently and tenderly Owen lowered him back into his position, and seeing that he was extremely weak pressed more spirit upon him, causing a little colour to return to his wan cheeks. Then he took the poor fellow's hand again and pressed it.

"Who were these relatives to whom I was sent?" he asked, placing his lips to the Colonel's ear, for the wounded man seemed to be almost unconscious. "One more effort I beg of you. Who were these people?"

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At the sound of his voice the Colonel turned his eyes in his direction and groped with his hand.

"It is dark, and I cannot see you. Get a light, and I will speak. Quick! There is little time left to me."

A minute later a smoking torch was brought and placed in Mulha's hand, whereupon the officer opened his eyes again and smiled at Owen.

"May blessings for ever rest on you," he said, gently returning the pressure of his hand. "I am forgiven, and though that does not excuse the act, yet I can die the easier for it. And now I will end the matter by speaking of the others. Sail for England as soon as you can and present yourself to Sir Owen Marshall, your grandfather, who still lives. You will find him in the county of

Cheshire, though I forget the town in which he resides. But he is one of those trustees who administered the funds bequeathed to your dear mother, and he will welcome you. That is all. Let me lie quietly here till the end, and Owen—bury me beneath the tope of trees which lies behind us."

It was a sad, sad scene, and Owen's eyes were filled with tears before the interview was over. All thought of his parentage, of his dead father and mother, were banished for the time, and he thought of this unhappy man, alone, steeped to the eyes in infamy, and yet repentant and forgiven at the last. He lowered the Colonel's head on to a cushion of soft grass covered with a cloth, and sat down beside him to wait for help, for one of the troopers had ridden for a surgeon. And within an hour one arrived and bent over the patient.

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"He will live an hour, two perhaps," he said sadly. "I can do nothing for him. Keep him as he is, and he will be quite easy."

"Then there is more for me to do," whispered the Colonel, when he had heard what had been said. "Send for an officer, for two if possible, and let them bring paper and writing materials. I will make the fullest amends I can, and will repeat my tale to witnesses, and will sign what is written. Hasten, Owen, or it will be too late."

That night, ere the moon went down, the spirit of this unfortunate French colonel departed, and his body was buried close beneath the tope of peepul-trees, a couple of flaming torches lighting the workers. Then Owen mounted and returned sadly to camp, his mind filled with the scene through which he had passed. But it was long before he had an opportunity of returning home to meet his long-lost relatives, for ere the Mahratta war ended Bundelcund was conquered, the important battle of Argaun fought and won, and Gwalighur stormed. In four months an amazing amount of fighting had been accomplished: four general battles had been fought and won in brilliant manner, while eight fortresses had been stormed and captured. In addition, large provinces had been added to the possessions of the Government; and, more important than all, the French-trained force which had for so long been a menace to our existence in India had been utterly crushed, while some 250,000 troops of all arms had been swept from the different fields by a British force numbering under 60,000—a feat of arms of which we may well be proud.

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But there still remained Holkar, and the following year found us at war with him. The evil advice he had had, his own ambitions, and a hatred of the British led him to try his fortunes against us, and had he not made the first move in this matter we ourselves should have done so, for this miscreant treacherously murdered those three officers whom Owen had met at Indore, thus making it imperative that we should attack him. There is no need to tell how a disastrous affair at first marred our fortunes, and how in the end our troops were victorious. Holkar was completely humbled, though it cost us much to bring that end about. Indeed, our troops made four glorious but unsuccessful assaults on the fortress of Bhurtapore, and were still without the walls when a truce was come to. But they were not disheartened, and it was their persistence, their determination to continue the siege that finally brought Holkar to reason.

In this last campaign Owen lost his right arm, and was at once despatched to England. He had already written home to Mr. Halbut and the Sergeant, and had communicated with his grandfather, Sir Owen Marshall, so that on his arrival he had friends and relatives to meet him. He was received with open arms, and when all legal formalities had been completed found himself the possessor of a very fine fortune. His grandfather died in the following year, and Captain Marshall became Sir Owen. Badly maimed by his wounds, he decided to retire from the service, and took up his residence in Cheshire, where he married.

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For many a long year after there was a gathering of friends at his mansion to celebrate the anniversary of that eventful day when the Sergeant had fought the farmer for him. Trim and well dressed as of yore, Mr. Halbut was always a prominent figure at the table; while at Owen's right hand would be seen the Sergeant, getting somewhat stout and unwieldy now, no figure for a military tunic; the same Sergeant, however, with his kind heart, his steady strength, and his courtesy. And at the far end of the table sat as comely a lady as could well be found, nodding her dancing curls at our hero.

"To my dear friends, Mr. Halbut and the Sergeant," Owen would say as he lifted his glass. "My dear, join me in this toast."

And when they were seated Mr. Halbut would rise up, stately, and with that frank smile on his lips by which all knew him. "My dear Sergeant, my old friend and helper," he would say in smooth, courtly tones, "on this day of days we lift our glasses to that lad whom we met many years ago. Fill up, my friend. I drink good health, long life, and prosperity to Owen—to Jones of the 64th."

Transcriber's Note:

Punctuation has been corrected.

Obvious typographical errors have been corrected.

Variations in hyphenation and compound words have been preserved.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JONES OF THE 64TH: A TALE OF THE BATTLES OF ASSAYE AND LASWAREE ***

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